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BOSS OF THE BORDER CLAN

Gunlaw he was, Gunfighter ...
Killer ... But he never harmed a
woman nor bushwhacked a man.

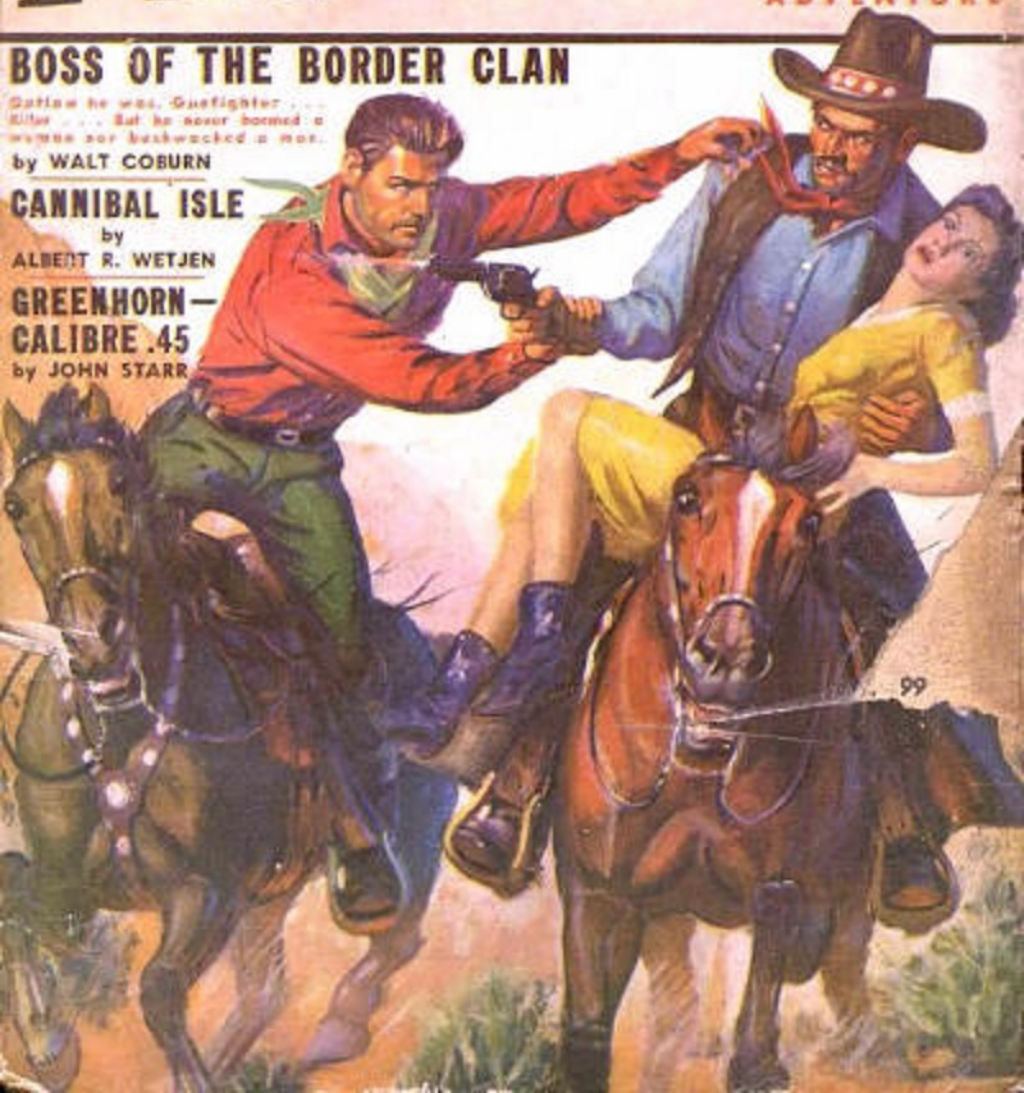
by WALT COBURN

CANNIBAL ISLE

by
ALBERT R. WETJEN

GREENHORN— CALIBRE .45

by JOHN STARR



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**JUNE
1941**

20c per copy
\$1.25 per year

Vol. XVI 52 No. 4

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

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A High-Powered Western Novel

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✓ **LEGION LAW** Charles Green 31

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Printed in U. S. A.



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THE GIRL FROM GOLDEN RIVER

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in the current

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On sale at all newsstands

RIDERS OF HELL CANYON

A HIGH-POWERED WESTERN NOVEL



By L. P. HOLMES

Went

RIDERS OF HELL CANYON

A hard man was Reb Wade, but flank-to-flank with that killer pack he rated just a greenhorn—hardly the hombre to snatch slim Doone Laird, million-acre heiress, from the lead-tipped clutch of the Hell Canyon gang!

THE surprise was mutual, but the odds were all on one side. Therefore, Reb Wade did nothing foolish. He merely set his weary bronc to a swift halt, then sat his saddle quietly and watchfully, a spare, lean figure in chaps, boots and broad hat.

Since noon had Reb Wade been following the twistings and windings of the sheer walled gulch, for it had seemed the likeliest way out of the savage purple depths toward the far off, loftily mocking rim of the mesa to the east. Gradually the gulch had bored deeper into the vast slope of the mesa and the hard sandstone underfoot lifted to the steady swell of the slope. Therefore, for the past two hours, Reb Wade knew that his guess had been right and that the gulch would lead him out finally to the slope. And now, just as the sheer and frowning walls on either hand had begun to fall away and lower, had come this meeting.

One moment Reb and his bronc had been completely alone in all the still and shadowy desolation. The next, a sudden twist in the gulch had him facing a full half dozen riders, which had brought a startled curse erupting from the bearded throat

"She's got a gun," Hutch blurted again. "There's only one person could have give it to her. That's you, you damn spy!"



By L. P. Holmes



of a huge, dark, burly man, and sent the hands of four other riders dropping toward the guns sagging at their hips. But Reb made no move toward his own weapons. Instead he deliberately placed one hand atop the other on his saddle horn, his keen eyes going quickly guarded and inscrutable, and resting in a long, surprised stare on the sixth rider.

This rider was a young woman, a girl in her early twenties, Reb's swift judgment informed him. Her head was bare, her sombrero having fallen back between her slim shoulders, held there by the beaded chin thong, which now pressed against a rounded, sun-browned throat.

Her hair was a blue-black glory, slightly disheveled and spreading in a rippling cascade between her hat and her shoulders. Her face was soft and sensitive in contour, startling in its beauty. And equally startling were her eyes, so clearly, deeply blue were they.

There was a haughty pride in those blue eyes, in the tilt to her soft chin. But there was also a great and guarded fear. For this girl's slim wrists were bound to her saddle horn and her trimly booted ankles were likewise bound to the cinch rings of her saddle. Had Reb Wade come face to face with a golden tower in this savage wilderness he could not have been more amazed.

As soon as it was evident that Reb intended no hostile move, the hulking, bearded man growled an order to the other four men, then sent his shaggy mount pacing up to within ten feet of Reb, where he leaned slightly forward, staring with hot, unruly eyes as though he would see clear

through the young rider and read his every thought.

"I don't know you," rasped the bearded man harshly. "Never saw you before. Where'd you come from, stranger?"

"Navajo Wells," answered Reb.

"Navajo Wells! You mean you've come clear across the badlands?"

"That's right—and they are. If I'd known how bad they were, I wouldn't have tackled them."

"Where you heading?"

Reb's face became completely wooden and expressionless. "Sometimes," he growled, "a man don't like questions. Because if he answers them, some of those answers may reach out along his back trail, when he's trying to keep that back trail covered."

"That's better," leered the bearded one. "Now I'm learning what I want to know. Had a hunch you might be covering up a back trail. Most hombres who come drifting into this country are. Maybe you'd be interested in tying in with a bunch of good men, working toward a good, fat stake. How about it?"

REB thumbed papers and a badly depleted muslin sack of tobacco from a pocket and built a precise cigarette. He stripped a match from a bunch of sulphurs, dragged it alight across his bull-hide chaps, cupped his hands before his face, puffed his cigarette aglow, then inhaled deeply.

"How fat a stake?" he drawled.

"Two thousand—maybe three thousand pesos."

Reb let his eyes widen in surprise. "You mean—that much for me, alone?"

"For every man who rides with me," said the bearded one. "It may run more than that. Interested?"

"Plenty!" snapped Reb. "Of course recognizin' the fact that I'm liable to stop a slug. That kind of money generally has thorns about it. But me, I'd tackle just about anything for that kind of velvet. Maybe you'd mind telling me just who I'll be riding for?"

The bearded one laughed harshly. "Not a damn bit. Me, I'm Pete Bordenave. I'm pretty well known in these parts. And you—?"

Reb Wade seemed to hesitate, then

shrugged. "You can call me Reb. And it's a deal. A better deal than I ever dreamed of running across when I hit a night trail into these badlands."

"All right," said Pete Bordenave with ominous harshness. "It's a deal. But remember, mister, it's a deal *all—the-way*. You play all your cards exactly as I tell you to play 'em. You take orders and execute them without talking back. And if you try anything smart with me, you'll be dead so damn quick you won't know what struck you."

Reb stared into Bordenave's hot, unruly eyes steadily. "When I sit into a game," he said coolly—"I play it plumb through to the end. Plumb to the end. Satisfied?"

"That's the way I want it," growled Bordenave. "And with that settled, we'll be drifting. It'll be dark now before we hit camp."

Bordenave whirled his bronc and rode back to the others, Reb following. "A new hand, boys," announced Bordenave—"to take the place of Rusty Conway. He answers to Reb. And these boys, from left to right are Chico, Snap, Flank and Red River. And the lady—aw, yeah, the lady—she is Miss Doone Laird. We expect to entertain her as our guest for quite some time." There was a leering mockery in Pete Bordenave's voice as he alluded to the girl.

Reb jerked curt nods to the other men as they were named, conscious of only flat, hostile stares in return. But when his glance reached the girl she flared into sudden speech.

"You don't realize what you are doing, stranger—signing up to ride with Pete Bordenave," she cried. "He's an outlaw—"

"Lady," cut in Reb coldly, "I ain't concerned. When any man mentions big money to me he's talking my language."

"I see!" flamed the girl. "Then you're of the same stripe he and the rest of his crowd are."

Reb grinned crookedly. "It's been claimed so."

At this Bordenave guffawed. "Guess that's telling her off, Reb. Now we ride."

"Wait a minute, Pete." The speaker was the one called Snap. He was a thin, medium sized fellow with a hatchet face and bitterly cruel eyes and mouth. "I

ain't exactly easy in my mind about this hombre. Ain't you kind of rushing things? Remember, you're just taking his word for this and that."

"Me," said the one called Chico—"I feel like Snap. For all we know he may be a spy. Maybe he—"

"What the hell!" snarled Bordenave. "I know what I'm doing. Either this juniper is what he says he is—or he ain't. If he is, we can damn well use him, and you know it. If he ain't, he won't fool me long and he'll stop a slug the first second I grow suspicious of him. He rides a horse and he packs two guns, which is what interests me mainly."

Snap spat between edged teeth. "I've seen 'em with two guns who couldn't do a fair job of handling one," he sneered.

Reb Wade stared into the fellow's cruel, lead-grey eyes. "If you figure it's that way with me, you got my permission to step out and make a little test of it, mister—now or any other time," he rasped coldly.

For a moment Snap did not answer. "Maybe we'll get around to that, one of these days—me and you," he said finally, the sneer still in his voice. "But if you suit Pete, then I reckon the rest of us will have to put up with you—like it or not."

"If you got the jawing out of yore systems, we'll drift," growled Bordenave. "Shake it up! The sun will be down in another hour."

THEY rode through a stark and forbidding world. Yet a stunningly beautiful world. All the way across the badlands from Navajo Wells, Reb Wade had marveled at the weird, incredible configuration and coloring of this country. Uncounted aeons of wind and rain and sun and storm had worked their remorseless way with sandstone wall and rim and battlement, eroding, carving, shaping. Every turn of the long and lonely trail had brought new and intriguing contours, planes and angles.

And then the coloring. Maroons, browns, yellows, blazing vermilion, savage ochres, slumbering purples and deep, intriguing, mysterious violets and pearl grays. It was as though some color-mad

god had been at work in some Jovian ecstasy.

The sun was far down now, touching only the far rim of the mesa high to the east, where the rim still blazed vermilion. But in the depths where they rode the shadows were laying veils of violet and purple, shading swiftly toward black.

The trail lay south and slightly east, following the tremendous slow curve of the mesa flank. The hulking figure of Pete Bordenave led the way, with Reb close at his heels. Behind were Flank and Red River. Then the girl. Then Snap and Chico.

Reb was wondering about that girl. He had been wondering about her from the first. What the story was behind her riding a captive of these men, Reb had no idea. Later he would find out about that. Right now the story did not matter. Sufficient that she was a captive, and sufficient that he had, at the first glimpse of that appeal in her eyes, aligned himself definitely with her interests.

Had it served in any way to benefit the girl, Reb would have taken his chances against the guns of Bordenave and his men. But such a move would have done no good at all. Better had it been to let things work out as they now were. Had he forced things to a gun play against such odds he must surely have been shot to rags, which certainly would have been of no aid to the girl. As it was, Bordenave's surprise offer had opened the way to some later chance to aid the girl. So Reb had played the part.

The fact that Bordenave had been so willing to accost a stranger and make him such an offer held significance of its own. It showed that whatever plan Bordenave might have for the future, the furtherance of that plan called for more men than Bordenave had on hand at the moment.

Purple dusk ran into black night swiftly in these depths. Stars, faint and far away, began to bud. The thin yapping of coyotes came down from the mesa slope and once the hoarse moan of a prowling lobo wolf shivered in the chilling night air.

Reb Wade marveled at the steady sureness of Pete Bordenave as the outlaw leader clung to a regular, shuffling jog, despite the inky blackness which shut them in. The man was like some huge and hairy

animal, moving through the well remembered confines of a den.

Reb became aware of someone pushing his bronc very close behind his own. And even as he wondered about this, the thin, cruel voice of Snap reached him.

"If yo're guessing, mister—don't. Yeah, it's me, Snap. And if yo're playing with any ideas, they wouldn't work. I'd have a slug into yore spine before you could think. A chore, by the way, I'm beginning to think I'd enjoy."

"You probably would," shot back Reb. "Be just about up yore alley, pumping lead into a man's back. Some coyotes are made that way."

Pete Bordenave had ears like a cat, as well as eyes. His heavy snarl came whipping back. "Lay off the jawing, I said. Snap, I ain't going to tell you again."

Reb heard Snap give a muttered curse, but after that the stillness was unbroken except for the steady rattle of hoofs on sandstone.

IN time the way dipped steadily downward, and the black walls on either hand towered higher and higher, until all about was complete, abysmal gloom. And the stars seemed to recede so far away as to be almost invisible.

Down, down they went and the chill of the air deepened and grew moist, while the sound of a far off rushing carried to Reb's ear. He identified the sound presently as that of running water.

The pace of the horses quickened and abruptly, with a gusty sigh of relief they straightened out on the level once more and the sharp ring of sandstone underfoot softened to the muffled clump of earth. Reb sensed, rather than saw tree branches over head. And then, ahead, the yellow gleam of light.

The pressure of towering walls on either side fell away. The breath of space came back. The growl of running water was louder, close at hand. The odor of hoof-crushed grass came up to Reb's nostrils. And then, without warning there were pole corrals at hand, the huddled bulk of buildings.

A voice sounded. "That you and the boys, Pete?"

Pete Bordenave's answer was choked with rage. "Lucky that it is us. And I'm

loaded with hell for the guard who was supposed to be along the trail back in the gorge. Why wasn't he there?"

The disembodied voice grew thin and worried. "I—I don't know, Pete. Honest I don't. I—"

"Whose shift was it?" cut in Bordenave. "That's something I want to know—quick! Whose shift was it?"

There was a moment of silence. Then, "I guess it must have been Pasquale's."

"That damn Mex!" snarled Bordenave. "I might have known it. He's not worth a hoot to me. I'll wring his greasy neck for that. All right—stir yoreself. Give a hand with these broncs. Snap, you and Chico take that girl over to my cabin and stay there as guards until I relieve you. Reb, you stay close with me. I want to show you what happens to any man in this gang who disobeys orders. It'll do you good, should you ever get any ideas."

While he unsaddled his bronc and turned it into the corral, Reb Wade was strangely aware of Snap and Chico untying the girl from her saddle and lifting her down. Once he heard her give a little whimper, and he had to set his jaw to bolster his attitude of seeming unconcern.

He knew what made her whimper. The returning agony of circulation to ankles and wrists which had been under the stricture of tight bonds. And Reb fairly gritted his teeth as Snap and Chico hustled her away, one on either side.

Red spread saddle blanket on the top rail of the corral, swung his saddle up beside it. "If you're ready, Bordenave," he said—"I am."

"This way," growled Bordenave, heading toward a light. "I might explain," he went on—"that this is the headquarters of Hell Canyon Ranch. On this ranch, men who side me faithfully get along. Them who don't, soon find out that Hell Canyon is a good name. You watch."

II

PETE BORDENAVE led the way into a long, low cookshack, where a good dozen men were eating. Reb Wade felt the impact of searching, instinctively hostile eyes. There was an uneasy shuffling of feet as Bordenave's hot eyes swept over the room.

"Pasquale!" The word erupted from him like an oath.

A squat, swarthy, pock-marked rider slithered off the end of a bench and faced Bordenave sullenly. "Yeah," he blurted. "What is it?"

Bordenave advanced down the room toward the Mexican. "This yore shift at trail guard?"

Pasquale nodded sullenly. "I just came in to eat," he muttered. "I'm going back, now."

"No!" purred Bordenave. "You're not."

He pounced, like some great, feral cat, his speed amazing in one of his bulk. The squat Mexican never had a chance. Bordenave grabbed him, swung him around and then hit him a terrific, smashing blow in the face. The blow flung Pasquale against the wall and as he bounced back Bordenave was upon him again.

And in the space of one short half minute, Reb Wade saw the Mexican beaten to a gory, whimpering hulk, to end up finally on the floor, sodden and helpless.

Bordenave swung around on the rest, lips peeled back to bare big, square brutal looking teeth. His eyes were pits of red hell now.

"Bogard!" he spat. "I left you in charge, didn't I? I did. You know my orders about guarding the trail. That a man be there, ever' damn minute, day and night. Why did you let Pasquale come off shift before his time was up?"

A tall man, thin to the point of emaciation, face beaked and bony, spoke with a high, nasal twang. "There's only one boss around here. That's you, Pete. They don't always answer to what I tell 'em."

Bordenave cursed. "We'll correct that in the future. For yore information, me and the boys with me had a great break of luck today. We caught that Laird girl riding alone on the edge of the mesa and brought her in. But who knows what may be coming down along the trail right now? Stark, get out on that trail right away, and don't come in until I send a relief. You know the warning signal. Get goin'."

A rider gulped the last of his coffee, caught his hat up off the floor and hurried out. Pasquale, the beaten man, was stirring and moaning a little. Bordenave looked down at him and spat. "Get that

fool outside, throw a bucket of water on him and herd him into the bunkhouse. He'll know better than to go careless on me, next time out. And before I forget—here's a new man riding with us. He answers to Reb."

Reb felt the impact of those hard, veiled eyes once more, and stared coldly back. Here was a band of as savage human wolves as he had ever met up with. And of them all, Pete Bordenave was the worst. Reb had looked into the leering face of death plenty of times before in his life, but never had cold, merciless threat laid such a blanket on him. He would have to play his cards with extreme care. One little slip, one mistake, one glimmer of suspicion and his life would not be worth a snap of the finger. No one knew that better than did Reb Wade.

He was not afraid. He was just coldly conscious of exactly where he stood in this picture. He knew there was just one way to establish himself with this crowd. And that was to act and be tougher than they.

Bogard, he of the skeleton build, spoke. "Runnin' off with that Laird girl is liable to bring a quick showdown with the Broken Wheel crowd, Pete. They'll raise hell and put a rock under it, over that."

Bordenave leered. "Ain't that what we're after? So far, we've had to go up onto the mesa after that crowd, which puts the advantage all with them. Now, they're going to have to come down here after us, which puts the shoe on the other foot. Once we get 'em down in this canyon we'll crucify 'em. This is the best break that ever came our way.

"Bogard, I'm holding you personally responsible to see that a wide awake guard is kept on that trail all the time. All the time, understand. From now on, if I find the trail unguarded for just one short minute, it's yore hide. Anybody who refuses to take any order from you, refer 'em to me. What Pasquale got is only a sample. All right, Reb—grab a seat and fall to."

THE others had left the cookshack before Reb and Bordenave finished eating. When they were alone, Reb spoke curtly. "You mentioned a big stake for me if I tied in with you, Bordenave. How about giving me a little more detail, now

we have the time? Where is that stake to come from, and what have I got to do to get it?"

"Figure you're in a position to ask?" growled Bordenave.

"Why not?" retorted Reb boldly, with an air of hard cynicism. "I don't trust nobody or anything, in this world."

Somewhat to Reb's surprise, Bordenave bellowed with laughter. "Fair enough, Reb. Can't blame you for feelin' the same as I do. So, I'll tell you about this stake of yores. It will be yore cut of the proceeds after we've taken over the Broken Wheel ranch, up on Thunder Mesa. Fat pickings, that spread—but up until now, a tough nut to crack. Now I got hold of that girl I got a trading point that puts all the aces in my hand. Maybe you'll earn yore share without firing a shot."

Reb dropped his eyes to his plate. "I wouldn't know," he mumbled. "Me being a stranger in these parts. The girl owns the Broken Wheel ranch, then?"

"Yeah. Left her by her father, old Angus Laird. I had hopes of pushing that ornery old devil to the wall before he died, but I wasn't strong enough to try. Different, now. Before I'm done I'll wipe every damn sign of that cussed ranch off Thunder Mesa. I'll give them just what Angus Laird gave me. Time was when I ran cattle on Thunder Mesa myself. That was a good many years ago. But Angus Laird figured he was the big mogul on Thunder Mesa and that nobody else had a right to run a single head of stock on it but himself. He set out to smash me. He did it, for I didn't have a strong enough layout to stand up to him. He was dead set on killing me. In the last big scrap he figured he had killed me, leaving me with a couple of slugs in me. But I don't kill easy. I got over the rim and hid out by a spring. I laid up there for weeks, two-thirds dead. But I managed to squeeze through. I'd have starved sure, if it hadn't been for a deer coming in to the spring to drink. I still had a six-gun with a round of loads and I managed to kill that deer. And deer meat and spring water kept me alive until my wounds had healed and I was able to walk. I headed down into Hell Canyon and run across a Navajo camp. They gave me a horse and I headed out of this country complete.

For five years I worked like a dog to get enough money ahead to come back here into Hell Canyon and set up this headquarters. Day and night I could think of just one thing—that was to get into position where I could do to Angus Laird what he did to me. But he up and died on me before I was ready to hit him.

"That didn't throw me off the trail, though. Broken Wheel ranch was still up on Thunder Mesa, rich and fat for the taking. And I'm taking it. And the men who help me take it, get a fat cut of the proceeds. Yore share will be at least what I promised you, maybe a lot more. Now you know. Satisfied?"

"Plumb," exclaimed Reb heartily. "Sounds good to me. From first glance, I'd say you'd scraped up a pretty tough crowd to back yore hand, Bordenave."

Bordenave shrugged. "A tough job calls for tough men. They're a flock of wolves, for a fact. And the only thing that keeps 'em faithful to me is promise of a fat cut of the profits. That and the fear of hell I've kicked into their tough hides."

Abruptly the confidential tone and attitude of Bordenave vanished and he was hard and brutal and distant again. "I noticed that you and Snap Lamont seem to sort of irritate each other. See that it don't go any further than that, mister. I hired both of you for another purpose than to shoot each other full of holes. Once I get set upon Thunder Mesa the way I intend to, then if you got any private grudges to settle, have at it and be damned to you both. Well, I'm going up to have a heart-to-heart talk with that Laird girl. And a sweet tidbit she is, even if she is a Laird. You can make yoreself at home in the bunkhouse."

WITHOUT another word or look, Pete Bordenave stamped out of the cookshack, leaving Reb Wade alone. Reb built a cigarette, sat smoking it over a final cup of coffee, face and eyes inscrutable. The crass leer that was in Bordenave's last words had set cold fires burning in Reb. Yet instinctively he knew the girl was in no particular danger from Bordenave, for a time at least.

Reb figured he had read Pete Bordenave just about correctly. Back of the fellow's hatred and dream of revenge against the

name of Laird was a consuming greed. Bordenave intended to possess this Broken Wheel ranch in its entirety and no doubt it was a rich spread. In the last analysis, Bordenave would do nothing to endanger his chance of getting control of the Broken Wheel. Therefore, the girl would be safe until Bordenave's primary ambition was accomplished. After that—well, there was no telling.

Reb was convinced that Pete Bordenave was all outlaw, all crook, a man who would break his word or a promise as easily as he gave it or made one. A man governed by greed first, and black passions secondly. A man who trusted none of his men and who was not trusted by them; holding his authority merely by the weight of his brutal fists and a readiness to kill at the slightest pretext.

Reb's thoughts were broken into by the entrance of Snap Lamont and the fellow Chico. Snap sneered, "Leadin' the life of Riley already, eh? Bordenave making a pet of you, is that it, guy?"

Reb stared at him coldly. "The time is coming when I'll take a heap of pleasure in shooting that sneer off yore face, mister."

Snap cursed thinly, started to get up. "About now will suit me," he spat. "I've had a heap of . . ."

Chico grabbed Snap by the arm and jerked him back to the bench. "Lay off, you damn' fool," Chico warned. "You know Bordenave's orders about fightin' among ourselves. Even if you did down this juniper, Bordenave would scalp you alive. Keep yore shirt on, Snap. There's a lot more days coming."

Snap seemed strung with indecision while his eyes rested savagely on Reb. Then he dropped back beside Chico. "That's right," he snarled. "My time will come later."

Reb finished his coffee and went out. He stood for a time in the darkness, finishing his cigarette. Towering blackness lay on every horizon, with the stars gleaming faintly high above. The voice of rushing water was deep and sonorous and the breath of it filled the night air with moistness. Not far away the flicker of several lights showed the bunkhouse and Reb went over there, found the door and entered.

The place was long and narrow, with a row of bunks against either wall. Some

men lounged on various bunks, others grouped about a card table, playing small stake poker. On one of the bunks lay Pasquale, the Mexican. He was flat on his back, bruised and beaten face turned upward, his little, beady eyes fixed in a steady stare upward. For a moment Reb thought the Mexican was dead until he saw him stir.

Bogard, the cadaverous rider, jerked a bony head toward an empty bunk in a far corner. "That will be yores, fella. Rusty Conway had it before you and before him Stony Mahon. They both died of the same thing, lead poisoning. Seems like that bunk puts a jinx on them who use it. But it's that one for you, or the floor. Take yore choice."

"I ain't superstitious," said Reb coldly.

He went to the bunk, rearranged the tumbled blankets, then stretched full length and at ease.

THOUGH the first sun rays were glinting on the rims of the towering walls on either side, in the depths of Hell Canyon it was still a dim and misty dawn. Along with the rest of the savage crew, Reb Wade shivered over a tin washbasin, towed his face with enthusiasm and joined the rush for the cookshack. Pete Bordenave was already present, at the head of the table. The outlaw leader waited until the hard-bitten riders had taken the first edge off their hunger, then rasped some orders.

"Bogard, you'll take Snap and Chico and a couple of others and pull out up the trail toward Thunder Mesa. Watch yore step, for you'll probably run into some of the Broken Wheel crowd. They're bound to be out searching for that girl. Give 'em a parley sign and if they agree to a talk, tell 'em we got the girl and tell 'em if they want to get her back safe and sound they better send a man down here for a talk with me. Tell 'em to send Buck Hardin and tell 'em to see that he comes alone. If you have to, to make contact with 'em, ride clear in to the Broken Wheel headquarters."

"The state of mind those hombres will be in, they'll prob'ly shoot first and talk after," growled Bogard. "In that case, what do we do?"

Bordenave slammed an impatient fist on

the table. "Use yore brains, if you got any. Soon as they see that parley sign, they'll guess what's in the wind. They'll be only too glad to talk, long as we got the girl. Get it through yore thick heads, all of you—that we hold the aces. Red River and Flank—you two take up the trail guard. Hutch, you guard my cabin where the girl is. Any questions?"

"Yeah," said Snap Lamont thinly. "How about this new jigger—this Reb? What's he here for anyhow—just a summer boarder, maybe?"

"He's here to do what I tell him to do, when I get ready to tell him," said Bordenave, his voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "Satisfied? If you ain't—say so once and for all. I'm getting a little weary of yore belly-aching, Snap."

"I just wanted to know," blurted Snap, sullenly.

"Well, you found out. Now finish yore grub and get moving."

Reb prowled over to the corrals where those detailed for riding duty were saddling up. The setting for the Hell Canyon ranch headquarters was an irregular spread of meadow land, reaching from the bank of the growling river over to a wall of sandstone on the east which lifted a full two thousand feet, sheer to the sky which had gone all glowing and golden in the morning sunlight. Across the river lifted the opposite wall of the canyon, just as grimly lofty and implacable as the other, and beginning to blaze with color now, as the climbing sun reached probing rays farther and farther into the depths. The river boiled and foamed right along the base of that west wall. Above and below the meadows, the canyon walls closed into a pair of gloomy gorges, the river snarling out of the upper one and plunging from sight into the lower. Here was a set-up which might very well be fortress or prison, hideout or death trap.

Pete Bordenave drew the cadaverous rider, Bogard, aside for some final instructions. Those who were to accompany Bogard were in their saddles. Red River and Flank, detailed for the trail guard, were already riding off and Hutch, a big, heavy brute of a man, with the blank, dull eyes of a beast, was plodding toward the rude cabin at the head of the flat, where the girl was held prisoner.

REB turned toward the bunkhouse, restless and edgy, sensing more and more the deadly danger he was moving in, should anything at all come up to awaken Bordenave to suspicion. And troubled deeply over that girl, too. It was hard to figure what the outcome of this thing would be. For the present, the girl was safe enough. Right now Bordenave was all afire with the advantage he held over the Broken Wheel outfit, far back and up on Thunder Mesa. And while that state of mind continued, Doone Laird would be safe enough. But should things come to a stalemate, there was no telling:

After all, Doone Laird was a highly personable young woman. And these outlaw riders were a savage and ungodly lot, ruthless and without conscience, full of the blacker passions. Like that fellow Hutch, just sent up to guard her. There was no telling what might happen to that girl, should anything occur to break the thread of Bordenave's authority. For the time at least, that authority was Doone Laird's greatest protection. Of course, in a showdown, here was only one part Reb could play. It might be hopeless, it might be futile, and fatal to himself. It probably would be. But Reb told himself that before one lecherous finger was laid on Doone Laird, he, Reb Wade, would spread all the death he could with flaming guns before he went down himself.

Thinking thus, Reb was within a short thirty yards of the bunkhouse, when a stir of movement at the door of the building jerked his eyes that way. And what he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. There was the barrel of a rifle jutting about the door post and behind that rifle was the bruised, swollen, swart face of the Mexican, Pasquale.

In moments of stress, a man's mind can function with startling speed. So it was with Reb Wade. Instinctively he knew where that rifle muzzle was lining up. Not at him, but to one side and past him. It was lining up with the heart of Pete Bordenave, out there still talking to Bogard. Pasquale, whipping himself to a hate-filled madness, was going to kill Pete Bordenave!

Reb's reaction was instantaneous. He whipped out a gun and fired, all in one split second move. His target was small,

just a portion of the Mexican's head above that threatening rifle barrel. It seemed to Reb that almost at the same instant that his gun bucked in recoil, the rifle snarled in report. And then Pasquale lunged full into sight, fell flat on his face on the earth, limp and moveless; his rifle clattered from his limp hands.

The flat was held in a momentary, ominous hush. Reb turned. He saw Pete Bordenave standing with spread feet, staring a little dazedly at a smear of wetness growing on the left sleeve of his shirt. And every man who sat a saddle, and the cadaverous one, Bogard, had a hand on a gun.

Bordenave's eyes jerked up, saw Reb with his bared and smoking gun, saw the sprawled figure of Pasquale outside the bunkhouse door.

"He was just pulling down on you, Bordenave," said Reb tonelessly. "I happened to see him. I didn't have time to yell a warning. All I could do was what I did, try and beat him to the shot."

Bordenave came toward him in that bearish, rolling walk. He passed Reb, went on and stood for a moment staring down at the dead Pasquale. He turned, came back to Reb. "Thanks," he said harshly. "I won't forget this."

He went on back to the uneasy, glowering riders. And he shot savage words at them, particularly Snap Lamont. "All right, Snap. You been barking around about my judgment in picking up this feller, Reb. You been half-inclined to stir up a ruckus with him. Jest in case you're still playing with that idea, go take a look at that damned Pasquale. See where Reb hit him. It will cool you off. And don't forget, all of you, I'm remembering that Reb saved my life. Any more questions?"

The riders said no word. Snap Lamont just shrugged. "All right, Bogard," rasped Bordenave. "You know what to do. Get going."

They rode away, disappearing in the upper gorge. Bordenave watched them out of sight, then turned again to Reb. "Wolves, every damned one of them," he growled. "And they ride with me only for what they can get out of it. And if they thought they could make an extra dollar by doing it, they'd turn on me in a second." He barked a harsh laugh. "But

for my purpose they're just what I want. You can put in a shift guarding that girl. Tell Hutch I want him down here."

III

REB WADE squatted on his heels on the low step of the cabin and watched the great hulking brute, Hutch, drag the body of Pasquale off beyond the corrals. He came back for a pick and shovel, then disappeared again.

When Reb had delivered Bordenave's order to Hutch, the fellow had shown a mouthful of yellow fangs in a snarl. "You kill 'em. I got to bury 'em. I know what Bordenave wants. I'm tired of doin' all the heavy work around here. Maybe you think you pulled a smart trick knockin' over the Mex and saving Bordenave's hide. Maybe. But it ain't going to put you in too strong with the rest of the boys. Speakin' personal, there's other prizes I'd rather have than money."

The unmistakable leer in the fellow's blank eyes sent a surge of cold hate through Reb, but Reb kept his expression inscrutable and his words toneless. "When I ride for a man I don't try and shoot him in the back. An' I got no damn' use for polecats who would. You, and the rest of the gang can take that any way you want, fella. If the shoe fits, wear it. I'm telling you what Bordenave told me to. He wants you down yonder."

To which Hutch had given a gusty snarl and plodded off, and Reb had stared after him heavily. For Reb had gotten the full meaning of Hutch's leer and words. Hutch was thinking about the clear beauty of Doone Laird and the implications of his attitude made Reb's flesh creep. Now he was more certain than ever that the most valuable shot he had ever thrown in his life was the one which had just cut down Pasquale, the Mexican.

Later on it was entirely possible that he himself might be called upon to turn his guns on Pete Bordenave. That was in the lap of the gods. But for the present at least, aside from himself, Pete Bordenave, alive and healthy, was the greatest barrier of protection standing between Doone Laird and this wolf pack of outlaws.

Reb relaxed in the first warmth of the welcome sun, now high enough to reach

the dank depths of the gorge. He let his shoulders drop back against the door of the cabin. There was not a sound from within. He wondered about the girl. Pretty fine youngster, that girl. He could guess what her terror must be. But she was keeping it all to herself. There was no wailing, no weeping. A thoroughbred, mused Reb, always suffered in silence.

A bearded, shaggy-haired, bent-legged old man with a greasy flour sack tied about his middle came up from the cookshack, bearing an armful of dishes. He also was grumbling profanely.

"Can't get away from that cussed stove a minute. Men coming in at all times and hours to feed. Now I got to feed this blasted girl. Kick that door open, mister."

Reb swung back the locking hasp, opened the door. He threw a swift glance in. It was gloomy in there, but he could see the girl, sitting on the edge of the bunk. In the shadows her face looked white and strained. The cook set the food on the floor, just inside the door.

"There it is," he snarled. "Not as fancy as you usually get it, I reckon. But you'll eat that or starve. I'll get the dishes later."

He limped off down the meadow and Reb made a show of closing the door, but left it, instead, slightly ajar. He squatted down again, built a cigarette, letting the cook get well away. Then he turned his head slightly and spoke in a quiet drawl.

"Keep yore chin up, ma'am. You got at least one friend in this cussed wolf's den."

For a moment there was no answer. Then he heard her stirring, heard her soft, eager steps. And her voice came, just from within the door.

"A friend? I don't believe it."

"You can, ma'am," said Reb. "Right here. Rebley Wade, at yore service. Listen close. I took on with Bordenave for two reasons. First was because I saw you, tied up and a helpless prisoner of his. Second, because he'd have ordered his men to open up on me if I'd played the game any other way. Don't you see he couldn't afford to let me go on, not after I'd seen you tied in that saddle? I played up to him, made out like I was one of his kind, on the drift and hideout. This morning I had a lucky break. One of Borden-

ave's men tried to kill him. I shot first and saved Bordenave's life. That puts me in strong with him, give's me more of a chance to help you. An' I aim to help you. I'm no outlaw. I'm just a drifting wild horse hunter. You got to believe me, if I'm going to help you out."

SHE was silent a moment, then her voice came again, soft and alive with a new hope. "I—I believe you, Rebley Wade. What are you going to try to do?"

"Don't know yet. Got to wait a while and see how things break. If we get a chance, I'll try and break you free and make a getaway. But that is going to be awful tough, what with a trail guard and all. But you be ready, all the time, for that chance. And just in case things don't work out like we hope, here's some little protection for you. I don't want to scare you needless, but there's some mighty savage brutes in this crowd. And—you're a very handsome girl."

"I—I understand," she said. "What—what protection?"

Reb slid a hand inside his shirt and from the shoulder holster hung under his left armpit, drew a stubby barreled hideout gun of heavy caliber. He thrust this through the opening of the door. Her smooth, firm fingers touched his as she took the weapon.

"That is for a last emergency," warned Reb bluntly. "Don't forget."

"I won't— Oh, I won't," she said huskily. "Rebley Wade, you've kept me sane. All night I prayed—and now the prayer is answered. And . . ."

"Quiet!" broke in Reb curtly. "Here comes Bordenave."

Reb stood up, back to the door, edged it closed and dropped the hasp in place. And he was leaning negligently against the door post as Pete Bordenave approached.

"How's the arm?" asked Reb carelessly. "Got a bandage on it?"

"Yeah," nodded Bordenave. "Just a scratch. How's the pretty prisoner?"

Reb shrugged. "Eating, I reckon. I heard her moving around after the cook brought her grub."

Bordenave looked at him intently. "Doone Laird is a mighty pretty girl, Reb. I hope you won't go getting ideas in yore head about her."

Reb laughed harshly. "Listen, Bordenave—get this once and for all. I joined up with you because you promised me a real stake. That's all I give a tinker's damn about—that stake of real money. I admit I'd rather fight men than women. And chances are, if you or anybody else set out to actually mistreat this Laird girl, I'd have something to say about it. I reckon that sort of answers things."

Bordenave's eyes narrowed. "Once or twice," he growled, "I've had the feeling you were aiming to put something over on me. I hope that ain't so, for I kind of like yore style and I owe you something for knocking off Pasquale like you did. Yet," and here the outlaw leader's growl became a snarl—"if you make one move toward double-crossing me, I'll shoot you down like a dog. I've spent too much of my life, too much hard work toward evening up with Angus Laird to let anything stop me now. Understand that—*anything!*"

Reb built a cigarette, shrugging. "Speaking personal," he said coldly—"I think this vengeance idea against a man already dead is kind of childish. On the other hand, moving to get hold of something worth real money—well, that's something else again. I can savvy that."

Bordenave did not answer, but unlocked the door and went into the cabin. Reb squatted down again in the sunshine, blue smoke curling up around the flat planes of his jaw and cheeks. Apparently he was unconcerned, but his ears were cocked alertly.

He heard the muffled growl of Bordenave's voice, the defiant retort of the girl. Her voice was clear enough for Reb to catch her words.

"Any part you take from the Broken Wheel, you'll have to fight to get, Pete Bordenave. When you say you were persecuted by my father, when he drove you off of Thunder Mesa, you lie. He drove you off the mesa because you were then exactly what you are now, an outlaw, a cattle rustler, a thief. And you'll never get hold of the Broken Wheel, no matter what you do. Never!"

Bordenave came stamping out, mumbling curses. "That's a high and mighty filly in there," he snarled. "She better come down off her high horse, or I might turn

her over to Hutch for a little taming."

"You try it," said Reb evenly—"and I'll kill that big hog too dead to skin. There are some things in my book that just don't go, Bordenave."

Again Bordenave stared at him with those narrowed, measuring eyes. "I wonder just how tough you are, *amigo*."

"There's one way you can find out—you or anybody else," said Reb.

Bordenave gave a short, harsh laugh. "Damned if I can help liking you, Reb. There's nothing wrong with yore nerve, anyhow." Then he tramped off.

THE balance of the morning Reb spent at ease, lazing in the sun at his post of guard over the imprisoned girl. He made no further attempt to converse with her. To do so, he would have to get closer to the door, a move which might be marked by some watching eye. He had to wait. He had already made a few moves in the game. And he couldn't afford to take any stronger stand just yet. At least, he thought, with grim satisfaction, he had done two things worth while. He had managed to smuggle the girl a weapon for last-ditch protection, and he had given Bordenave to understand that he wouldn't tolerate any deliberate mistreatment of the prisoner.

At mid-day the hulking Hutch came plodding up the low slope. "All right," he grunted. "You can go eat. I'll take over here."

Without answer, Reb prowled off and found Bordenave eating in the cookshack. The outlaw leader had a mood on him and was surly and uncommunicative. After he finished eating, Bordenave saddled a bronc and took the up-canyon trail. Reb, after his meal, went into the bunkhouse, but not until after a look around, marking the fact that Hutch sprawled at ease at a shady corner of the cabin.

Here, thought Reb, would have been a golden opportunity to make a break for escape with the girl, were it not for that trail guard up above. Whether there was any outlet at the lower gorge, Reb did not know. Later, he'd find out about that.

Yeah, but for the trail guard above, this would be as good a time as any for a break. He was supremely confident of his ability to handle Hutch and the old

cook, who were the only outlaws now about the headquarters. But that trail guard was something else again. That was a nut he had to find a way to crack. It would take some thought and planning.

The cook, through with his labors for a time at least, came limping into the bunkhouse, and sprawled on his bunk.

"How long has this gang been stuck down in this hole?" Reb asked casually.

"Too long," grunted the cook. "Too damn' long."

"I been here only a few hours," said Reb—"an' it's beginning to get on my nerves. Maybe Bordenave figures it's a snug enough hide-out. But it strikes me it could be a damned death trap, with only one way in and out."

"Why d'yuh think me an' the others are all edgy like we are?" blurted the cook. "Just for that reason. Down river the gorge shrinks in until the river is running sheer from wall to wall. Only a cussed fish could get out that way. Should that Broken Wheel outfit locate us in here and plug the up gorge trail, they could starve us out. All of us been trying to tell Bordenave that—that he should move out of here while he's got time and set up a headquarters somewhere else in the badlands where a man didn't feel like he was in a prison. But Pete Bordenave can see only one way—his own. But he better change, for the boys are getting fed up with the way things are going. We ain't a damn bit closer to hogtying that Broken Wheel crowd than we were six months ago. Me, if I don't get out of here pretty quick, I'll go loco."

Having cleared his chest of this broadside, the cook turned his back on Reb and began to snore.

Looking across at the man, Reb again thought how easy it would be to stick a gun against him, tie him up and go up after Hutch. Then, a pair of bronses saddled and he and Doone Laird could make a break for it—if there were only some other way out than up gorge. . . .

Reb prowled to the bunkhouse door and looked out. He drew up taut and alert. The hulking figure of Hutch was not in sight. Instantly Reb was racing up the slope. Coming closer to the cabin, he saw that the door was slightly ajar. Reb perked a gun as he ran, his veins flooded

with a cold, bitter fury. His first impulse was to crash the door open with headlong speed, but before he could reach it, it swung back and the gross, gorilla bulk of Hutch showed.

The animal-like outlaw was backing out, a stupid, incredulous look on his snarling features. "A gun!" he mumbled hoarsely—"you got a gun!"

"Yes," came the girl's voice. "A gun. And I'll shoot you dead with it if you don't get out of here!"

Her voice wasn't very steady. In fact, under the tight, straining surface of it, Reb thought he could detect a note of near hysteria. Reb rapped out his own challenge of Hutch.

"This way, you big hog! I told Bordenave what would happen if any polecat tried to molest that girl. This way!"

Hutch swung to face him, his blank eyes as red as those of a weasel. His heavy lips drew apart, showing that mouthful of fangs. "She's got a gun," he blurted. "There's only one person could have give it to her. That's you, you damn spy!"

And then, swept away in a gust of madened, thwarted ferocity, the gross outlaw snatched at his own weapons.

The thudding report of Reb's gun echoed heavily in the gorge, rolling back and forth from wall to wall. The impact of the slug shook Hutch all over, but he did not go down, for the life lay deep in this burly brute. A bawl of stricken ferocity burst from his lips, animal-like, madened. He got his guns out, stabbed them level, as Reb hammered a second, then a third slug into him.

The outlaw's guns sagged, he spun slowly in a complete circle, his yell fading to a mewling gurgle. He went down to his hands and knees, his head sagged and he rolled over, twitched once or twice and was still. And at that moment a group of riders came bursting out of the upper gorge and racing toward the cabin. In the lead was Pete Bordenave and right behind him was Bogard and Snap Lamont.

IV

DOONE LAIRD stood in the open door of the cabin, in one slim hand the gun Reb had given her, with the other clinging to the door post as though in sup-

port. Her face was dead white, her eyes enormous in their shocked relief.

"Bordenave and the others coming on the run, ma'am," growled Reb. "Get that gun out of sight. Nobody knows you have it but you and me—an' that dirty animal on the ground. An' he'll never tell. Quick! Get the gun out of sight!"

She nodded dazedly and turned back into the cabin, just as Bordenave and the others swept about the corner of the building. Reb's gun was still in his hand, still smoking. When he faced them his face was bleak and still, his eyes filled with a fathomless chill.

Bordenave set his horse to a rearing halt, left his saddle in mid-air, half running as he hit the ground to come to a halt not ten feet from Reb.

"What the hell goes on here?" he roared. "Hutch—did you gun him?"

"That's right," answered Reb thinly. "I did. I told you I would if he tried to molest that girl. Holding her prisoner is one thing. Letting a damned animal like him get his dirty paws on her is something else again. Yeah—I killed him."

A whining, feral snarl broke from Snap Lamont. "You see what I been telling you about this hombre, Pete. That's two of the boys he's rocked off since morning. First Pasquale, now Hutch. And you got only his story as to why he gunned Hutch. Hutch—he won't ever tell the other side. The quicker we wipe this Reb hombre off . . ."

"Shut up!" snarled Bordenave. Then he fixed his glance in savage intentness on Reb's face. "Suppose you give me *all* the particulars. And so help me—they better make sense!"

Reb shrugged. "Hutch took over the guard at noon. You sent him up yoreself. I ate, then went into the bunkhouse. Pretty soon the cook came in. Him and me talked for a little, then he stretched out for a little shut-eye. About that time I happened to look out. I couldn't see Hutch, but I could see that this cabin door was part open. I had a hunch and I came up at a run. Hutch had gone in there. I yelled at him and he came out, throwing his guns. I beat him to it. That's all."

"We'll see," purred Bordenave. "We'll see. Gimpy, what's yore story?"

Reb turned to see the cook come panting up the slope. "Goshalmighty!" gulped the cook. "Hutch is dead, ain't he?"

"Plenty! What do you know about it?"

"Not much. I'm finished cleaning up in the cookshack so I figgered on a jag of sleep. I went over to the bunkhouse and this Reb feller is there. Him and me talk a minute then I go after some shut-eye. This Reb, he goes to the door, makes a funny sound and leaves the bunkhouse on a dead run. For a minute or two I can't figure what's bitin' him. Then I hear him yell at Hutch. Right after that a gun begins to talk. Hutch, he bellers like a wounded grizzly, then shuts off kinda sudden. Time I got straightened out and on my way up here, it's all over and I see you and the other boys come ridin' in. What—what did he gun Hutch for, anyhow?"

Reb drew a deep breath. So far, so good. Bordenave did not answer the cook's last question. Instead he said—"Don't anybody move until I get back." And with that, he stamped into the cabin. There he saw a rude table overturned, a homemade stool upside down in one corner. And he saw Doone Laird standing in a far corner, her face still white, her eyes still wide with strain.

"What's yore story?" he rasped. "Did Hutch come in here?"

Her shudder, her jerky nod were not forced. "Yes," she said, her voice little more than a whisper—"yes, he did. He came in, half creeping, like some great, monstrous toad. I told him to—to get out—not dare come near me. He didn't say a word, just kept coming, reaching his filthy paws for me. I dodged around the table. He threw it aside and kicked the stool out of the way. I—I kept dodging him—and then—outside—someone yelled at him. And—and he jumped out the door, grabbing at his guns. There was shooting. That—that's all."

THERE was no mistaking the perturbation of the girl, the terror which was just beginning to fade from her eyes. Bordenave jerked around and went out. "Hutch disobeyed my orders," he rapped flatly. "I told him not to go into this cabin unless I told him to. He went in.

He had coming what he got, I reckon. But listen, Mister Reb—from now on you keep those guns of yores in the leather. Either you're luckier than hell, or you're the smoothest article I ever run across. I'll say you had good reason for the two times you've flashed yore guns today. But there won't be another reason that'll stand up, in my judgment. You listen to what I'm telling you if you want to stay healthy. Gimpy, you take the guard of the cabin for a while."

Other riders had come in by this time. Reb's eyes widened slightly as he saw what they had with them. He saw a man tied across his saddle—a dead man. He saw another with a bloody bandanna tied about his head. A third reeling in his saddle with a bloody shoulder. Obviously, the group that had gone out under the leadership of Bogard had bumped into some kind of a war. Reb needed no more than a single glance to tell that the survivors were in a highly sullen and dangerous humor.

Under Bordenave's order they went on down to the corrals, unsaddling, helping the wounded men into the bunkhouse, carrying the dead man from sight. As they gathered in the bunkhouse, their sullen, still anger heightened, filled the place like an electric storm about to break. Reb went in with the others, cool and inscrutable. But he was a man completely apart from the others now, and they showed it in their sullen ignoring of his presence, in the guarded, suspicious side glances they threw his way.

Bordenave himself gave crude medical attention to the wounded men, then went out. Immediately a stir ran through the place. "I'm fed up," snarled the man with the wounded head. "Bordenave is a fool. For months now he's been leading us on with the promise of heavy money once we throw and tie that damned Broken Wheel layout. We ain't a damn bit closer to getting what we want than in the first place. We go out today to locate some of the Broken Wheel gang and make *habla* with them. What do we do but ride into an ambush. They kill Booger. They smash Henley's shoulder. They crease me. We got that cussed girl, Bordenave tells us. So what? Especially when we got a free and easy gun gent in camp who fig-

gers he's her self-appointed guardian."

The fellow looked at Reb as he spoke, and all eyes followed.

"Yuh're right, Chick," bit out Snap Lamont. "An' I'm tellin' yuh the guy is a phony. *I know he is.* He ain't one of us. He never will be. Yet Bordenave seems to trust him ahead of us fellers who been ridin' with Pete for a long, long time. I don't like it. There's a showdown coming up in this camp, an' I aim to have a hand in it."

Reb, alert as a hawk, laughed coldly. "You talk a good fight, Lamont," he rasped. "Well, my original invite still stands. Any time, any place. Name it and ride yore wolf."

SNAP LAMONT came to his feet with a blistering curse, but Bogard pulled him back. "Lay off, Snap," he growled. "Plenty of time for that, later. Right now I'm for making Bordenave put *all* his cards on the table. I don't like the way things are going any better than the rest of you. I'm for calling a fresh shuffle myself. We'll see what Bordenave has got figured for the next move, before we tell him whether we like it or not. If we don't—we'll cook up our own play. As for you," and his beaked head swung toward Reb—"so far you been tangling guns with the slowest men in the crowd. We'll see how far you go when Snap and me decide it's time. That's a promise, mister."

"What I said to Lamont goes for you, Bogard," said Reb stonily.

This was dangerous talk, Reb knew. He had not a friend in the crowd. Yet he knew men enough to realize that there was just one shield behind which he could stand in comparative safety, at least for a time. That shield was an attitude of cold and reckless defiance. For regardless of whatever else they might think, there were two things these wolves knew. They knew he had shown no hesitation in cutting down the treacherous Pasquale and that he had shot it out with Hutch and that Hutch lay dead.

Just how far his deadliness with a gun reached, they could only guess. It was something they'd never know until they had seen him in action against one of their ace gun throwers. Therefore, until they knew, they would walk around him, held

in check by the only caution they knew, fear of their own lives.

For, hard and savage and godless as they were, they had only one possession left them, their lives. Long since had they lost such abstract qualities as principle, honor or conscience. They lived but to live, no more.

THE afternoon ran out swiftly, purple blue dusk, fading swiftly to blackness, filled the canyon. Bordenave stuck his head in the door, ordered a man up to the cabin to relieve the cook. An hour later the rattling of a spoon on a pan told them that supper was ready.

It was a sullen, silent meal. Bordenave was there, at the head of the table, in a glowering, truculent mood. In the way the outlaw chief's eyes flickered here and there along the table, as though he would read what lay behind the face of each man, Reb saw that Bordenave realized the dangerous temper of his men and was figuring some way to suppress it.

"We had some hard luck today," he said finally. "Our mistake was in sending too big a bunch out to meet up for a parley with the Broken Wheel outfit. Reckon they thought we were out for a raid and started right in shootin'. We should have sent no more than two men. Tomorrow we'll do that. Tomorrow we'll send . . ."

"Maybe," cut in Bogard coldly. "Maybe, and maybe not. You ain't got all the facts straight, Pete. *We* didn't figure this mess today. *You* did. You been doing all the figuring right from the first and I can't say you've made any great success at it. We ain't a damn bit closer to getting our hands on the Broken Wheel now than we were when we started. Fact is, the more figurin' you do, the worse things get. In the past nobody could tell you anything. You've run the whole shebang pretty high and mighty, refusing to listen to advice from any of us. And we're about fed up."

Bordenave's heavy face began to swell with a rising anger. "Maybe," he growled thickly—"maybe you're aiming to take over the leadership yoreself, Bogard."

"Not necessarily," answered Bogard curtly. "But I'm talking for all the boys when I say we don't like the way things are going. None of us are in this just for

our health. We're risking our skins. Fellers like Rusty Conway, Booger, and Henley here risked their skins, too. An' you see what happened to them. Then this Reb hombre chopped down Pasquale and Hutch. No, Bordenave—if you want to keep us interested you got to show us more for our money than just a skinful of lead."

"Them's my sentiments exactly," said Snap Lamont. A series of nods of confirmation ran down the table. There was no mistaking the temper of the crowd.

Pete Bordenave knew when he had to backtrack. He choked down his anger as best he could. "All right," he growled. "You all figure you're so damned wise, let's hear what you'd do—how you'd go about things. Speak up!"

"First off, I'd send one man to get a message to that Broken Wheel crowd, tell-in' that we got the girl. An' I'd send him at night, when he'd have a chance to sneak through. I'd write that message out and he could leave it somewhere they'd be shore to see it, come daylight the next day. I wouldn't give 'em a year to make up their minds, either. I'd tell 'em just what would happen to that girl if they didn't come to our terms, *muy pronto*. And I'd mean it. Long as you caught her and brought her in as something to trade with—why, get busy. Fact is, I'd send a man tonight. Somebody like Chico, here, who can slide around through the dark without anybody ever knowing he's there.

"Now either I'd do that, Pete," continued Bogard, "or I'd take the whole crowd and make a night raid on the Broken Wheel, an all-out raid, sink or swim. One thing is shore. If we keep on pussy-footing around like we been all along, we're going to end up nowhere. Now you know."

"I might add one more thing," cut in Snap Lamont again. "I'd nail up that Reb hombre's hide, jest to be shore."

Bordenave ignored Lamont. He was staring at Bogard. "All right," he spat. "We'll see how yore plan works. Chico, go saddle a bronc. I'll write out our terms, the girl safe and sound for the Broken Wheel ranch, lock, stock and barrel. If they don't come through according to the terms, it'll be just too bad for her. That satisfy you hombres?"

Surly nods ran up and down the table. "Win or lose, we'll be gettin' somewhere, anyhow," growled one of them.

Chico gulped the last of his food, hurried out. Bordenave yelled to the cook, who produced a sheet of rough paper and a pencil stub. Bordenave wrote slowly and laboriously, spelling out each word with silent movements of his lips. When he finished he handed the paper to Bogard, who read, then nodded. "That'll do it," he said.

Chico came back, ready to ride. He tucked the folded paper in a pocket and grinned evilly. "I'll leave it where they can't miss it," he promised. Reb, listening, heard the rattle of departing hoofs.

Bordenave looked up and down the table. "Got to relieve the trail guard," he growled. "All right, Reb—you're one of the relief. You've had an easy day of it. An' . . ."

"I'll be the other," said Snap Lamont, getting to his feet. "I'm not easy about yore pet, Bordenave. I want to be where I can keep an eye on him. I'll even miss out on a night's sleep for the privilege."

Bordenave stared at Lamont with narrowed eyes. "Hope you ain't packin' some smooth trick in yore mind, Snap. If you try one you may be in hell before you can kick. All right. Yuh asked for it. You and Reb take over the trail guard."

V

IT was black dark, so dark Reb Wade could barely make out the huddled bulk of the cabin where Doone Laird lay prisoner as he and Snap Lamont rode by on their way to relieve the trail guard. Reb's face wore a grim expression. The girl's only bulwark, besides himself, had crumpled. Pete Bordenave, faced with incipient mutiny on the part of his followers, had in effect backed down. It was inevitable that now they had once forced Bordenave to buckle under they would go to further lengths. His authority would no longer be what it had been. Ideas of taking over the leadership were bound to spring up in several of the renegades. At the present they would turn more and more to Bogard. At any moment a quarrel might flare, leading to a complete blow-up. It wasn't pleasant to think what

Doone Laird's fate would be in such an eventuality.

Such thoughts as these rode all the way with Reb Wade up the stygian gorge trail until, a full two miles or more above the headquarters, the trail wound through a jumble of rocks from which a surly challenge was growled out.

"All right! Who is it?"

"Snap, for one," said Lamont. "Keep yore shirt on, Curly. You and Red River can go on in. Me and that new hombre are taking over for the night."

"You mean that Reb feller?"

"Same guy," said Lamont. "Don't worry. I know you boys feel about him same as I do. But he won't put nothin' over on me. Should he try, he'll die before he can figure what hit him. Did Chico go by?"

"Yeah. Little bit ago. Where's he headin'?"

Lamont told them. Red River cursed. "About time Bordenave started usin' his head. Had Bogard been leadin' things in the first place, we'd have got somewhere by this time. Well, come on, Curly. I'm shore sick to hell an' gone layin' around in these rocks, froze and half starved."

Hoofs clattered briefly on the rocky trail as the men headed for food and warm blankets.

Snap Lamont's voice came at Reb, thin and cold. "You hole up against the inner wall, fella. I'm holding things on the outside. And just remember—my hunch is still working, like it did from the first, that you're a phony. And I'm almost anxious for you to make a break, so I can sift a slug into you."

Reb answered him with a low, cold laugh. "Yuh talk a tough gun, Lamont," he taunted. "My invite still goes. Bust yoreself any time, now, if you feel that way. Daylight or dark, it's all the same to me."

Lamont cursed viciously. "My time will come, hombre. An' I'm looking forward to it."

Silence settled in, a vast, oppressive silence, product of the night, of the towering, in-pressing walls. Across the trail, in the pocket of rocks where Lamont had holed up, a match flared and Lamont's thin, venomous features were outlined briefly as he lighted a cigarette. The fol-

lowing darkness seemed blacker than ever. Then, on the chill, moist air, the scent of tobacco smoke lay.

Reb was wondering if a revolver shot would echo as far as the swamp below, or if the twisting, towering walls of the gorge would smother the sound. For a conviction had come to Reb Wade, which grew stronger with every passing moment. Here was that chance of escape he had been searching for!

Escape for Doone Laird as well as himself. If he could get at Snap Lamont some way it would mean two things. He would have a horse for himself and one for Doone Laird. And the trail would be open!

Reb's mind raced along this line of thought. Cold determination rose in him. He'd make the try. He might never get a second chance. If he only knew how far the sound of a shot would carry!

But along with the risk of sending a warning to some alert ear in camp, the matter of principle rose up to nag Reb. It was one thing to face a man in open battle. It was something else to shoot him down from the dark, even such a man as Snap Lamont. Reb built and lighted a smoke to think things over—and got his answer immediately!

For he found, after the momentary flare of the match in his eyes, that for several long seconds he could see nothing at all until his eyes once more adjusted themselves to the thick gloom. That was it! If a flaring match close to his face temporarily blinded him, it would do the same to Snap Lamont!

REB wasted no further time. Moving with utter caution, he unbuckled his spurs, laid them noiselessly aside. Then he edged off his boots, unbuckled and laid aside his chaps. The rock felt cold and damp through his socks, but this way he was able to move without the slightest rustle of sound. He got into position and waited.

It was, he judged, as near as he could remember, perhaps twenty feet from where he crouched to where Snap Lamont was. Two or three quick strides and he would be close enough. With luck his scheme would work.

The chill of the night grew deeper, more

penetrating. He spoke casually. "Wish I'd brought along a blanket. We'll be froze stiff by morning, Lamont."

Snap Lamont grunted, but said nothing. Red caught the faint rustle of paper. Lamont was building another cigarette!

Reb was all ready when Lamont dragged a sulphur match along his chaps, nursed it from a spark to a flame and lifted it in cupped hands to his face. Reb was moving even as Lamont sucked his cigarette aglow.

Faintly the silhouette of Lamont's head and shoulders stood out. And then, as the match went out, Reb took two more noiseless strides and launched himself headlong. There was a startled curse a split second before Reb smashed into his target.

Reb had aimed with his hands for Lamont's throat, but Lamont, either sensing Reb's attack, or vaguely glimpsing Reb's hurtling bulk, started automatically to his feet. And while Reb's hands missed their target, his shoulder crashed into Lamont's chest, knocking him back and down among the rocks.

Having Lamont under him cushioned Reb's fall slightly, but his head bounced off a chunk of rock, leaving him momentarily half stunned. Under him, Lamont was cursing wildly and struggling with a wiry, savage strength. Reb clawed at him instinctively. He got hold of one of Lamont's wrists just in time to stop the renegade from dragging a gun. And then Reb, getting his senses back with a rush, aimed two smashing blows with his right fist. The first missed, but the second caught Lamont high on the side of the head, weakening Lamont enough to enable Reb to jerk Lamont's guns from him and toss them aside. Then, locating Lamont's face with his left hand, Reb smashed the renegade twice on the jaw with his right and felt the outlaw go limp.

Reb could feel blood trickling down his face. That rock had cut as well as jarred his head. But he wiped it away with an impatient hand and with whang strings cut from Lamont's own saddle tied him hand and foot and gagged him with his own neckerchief.

Cold exultation raced through Reb as he donned his boots, buckled on his chaps. Whatever the outcome now, the die was

cast. There could be no backing up. He had to go through with his plans, no matter what happened.

Leading Lamont's bronc behind his own, Reb rode down the black, savage gorge, trusting to the horses to keep to the trail. He rode as fast as the dark would allow, until, faintly gray under the stars, the open meadow of the outlaw headquarters loomed ahead. There was no light, no sound anywhere.

Reb dismounted, tied both horses securely to a scrub cottonwood, hung his spurs on his saddle horn and crept toward the cabin, a lean, wolfish, alert shadow.

There would be a guard at the cabin, the next obstacle in Reb's way. The guard, whoever he was, would be sure to be outside the door, so Reb came down on the cabin from the rear, stealthy as a stalking panther. From the rear of the cabin he edged around and along one side until he could look around still another corner and along the front. For a moment he thought that there was no guard. Everything seemed still and empty. And then, close to him and down against the ground, came a startled curse. The guard had been stretched full length, close to the cabin wall.

The fellow came up in a surge of alarm, spitting like a startled cat as Reb leaped for him. Reb had a gun out and he smashed savagely at the fellow's head with it. The outlaw ducked, took the blow on his shoulder and let out a wild yell of mingled pain and alarm. Reb smashed again and this time found his mark. The outlaw crumpled.

BUT the harm was done. That yell had found other ears. There was a mingled shouting down at the bunkhouse even as Reb dashed to the cabin door, and tore to loosen the hasp.

"Doone Laird!" he called. "Doone Laird! Quick! This is Reb Wade. We got a chance for a getaway if we're fast enough—but it's the last chance. Quick, girl—quick!"

The door slammed open and there she was, a slim shadow just touched by the reaching starlight. Reb caught her hand. "Run!" was all he said.

She flew along beside him, light and swift, as they sped for the horses. Be-

hind them men were out in the night now, shouting back and forth. Reb could hear the full-chested bellow of Pete Bordenave.

"The cabin!" bawled Bordenave. "Something is wrong at the cabin! Up there, everybody!"

The outlaws reached the cabin by the time Reb and the girl reached their horses. Reb tossed her into the saddle, swung into his own. Bordenave was yelling and cursing again. "She's gone! The girl's gone! They can't be far. Broncs—and ride like hell! We got to get her or we're washed up!"

Reb set the horses at the gorge trail on the run, and the pound of hoofs brought a hail of lead from the renegades. "Low in yore saddle, ma'am!" called Reb. "Low in the saddle—and ride!"

Lead spat and hissed all about them, but the outlaws were shooting at sound alone. Reb itched to empty a gun back at them, but he knew this would give the renegades some gun flashes to shoot at. He gritted his teeth and followed the same advice he had given the girl: low in the saddle and ride!

The speeding broncs stormed into the mouth of the gorge where a great shoulder of rock jutted to cut off all further danger of lead. Reb slowed their pace to one more consistent with safety.

"You're not hit?" he asked of the silent girl. "You're all right?"

"I'm—all right," she answered, panting a little from the run and excitement.

Reb led the way as far as the spot where the trail guard was usually placed. There he halted for a moment, dismounted, and with drawn gun felt his way through the blackness to the prone figure of Snap Lamont. Reb chanced a match, found Lamont staring up at him with hate-filled eyes. "We'll meet again some day, Lamont," said Reb. "Then we'll find out what we want to know."

Back at the horses, Reb directed the girl to lead the way. "You know these trails?" he asked.

"No," was the answer. "Not this far down into the gorge. I don't know any of this lower country very well."

"We'll have to leave it up to the broncs, I reckon," said Reb. "Let's go. They'll be coming up in back of us, but this dark-

ness is bound to slow 'em down some. Good luck!"

Bordenave and the outlaw crew came up faster than Reb figured. At the head of a long slope where the invisible trail had climbed steeply, Reb reined in to give the brones a breather. And immediately his alert ears picked up the muted clatter of hoofs pounding swiftly along the trail behind.

"We got to travel faster," growled Reb, harsh anxiety creeping into his voice. "It's chancing a down horse and a broken neck in this dark, but we have no choice. Afraid?"

"Only—only of what is behind," said the girl staunchly.

"Then, we ride."

In his time, Reb Wade had put a horse at speed over difficult terrain. But never had he experienced anything the equal of this. It was utterly blind riding, smashing forward into a wall of impenetrable blackness, trusting entirely to the instinct and sure-footedness of the ponies. In the saddle one had to be constantly alert, ready to swing right or left to sharp changes of direction as the laboring brones followed the cut back angles of the trail. Time and again Reb got the impression of sheer drop-offs at one hand or another. He had to fight down a surge of spine-tingling panic every now and then when it seemed his mount was about to plunge off headlong into space. Moist, cold faces of sheer sandstone brushed by, so close that Reb could feel the wind of passage recoil back from them with little buttering sounds. Once his bronc stumbled, but regained its feet in a mad scramble, and Reb's breath came back in a gust of relief.

He marveled at the girl by his side. She must be a superb rider! And the courage of her, driving at this breakneck pace along a savage, treacherous trail. He murmured a voiceless tribute to her.

LONG since the roar of tumultuous waters had faded away below and behind, and now the trail seemed to have leveled out perceptibly. And the gorge had widened, so that the walls no longer hung so oppressively close. Even the stars seemed closer now, more friendly. But these advantages meant nothing a moment later when Reb called to the girl to

rein in and give the horses another breather. For, echoing sharply through the night, came the ring and pound of racing hoofs behind, and closer now than before. At this rate, if he and the girl clung to the main trail, they couldn't keep from being overtaken before they could reach a place of safety. There was only one thing to do, and that was to race on until the gorge opened into the wild badlands somewhere up ahead and then try and elude the pursuit by some other route.

Their pursuers had ears, too. And when the pound of those fleeing hoofs came back to them this time, guns began to rumble and snarl in the blackness. It was all chance shooting, of course, for it was impossible for the renegades to pick out a target. Bordenave must have felt that a chance slug might find one of those fugitive brones. And so lead hissed and splattered and wailed in gruesome ricochet on barren rock face.

A surge of cold fury ran through Reb Wade. In this kind of shooting it was as likely that the girl would be hit as himself. Those riders behind knew this as well as he, yet they went on throwing lead regardless.

Abruptly the gorge was behind them. Now there were half a dozen directions a person could ride and Reb, moving up beside the girl, caught at her left arm. She understood and reined that way. They plunged down a short slope, across a rubble-filled gulch and up the point of a ridge beyond. And now Reb pulled to a halt once more.

"Quiet!" he warned.

To Reb, the gusty panting of the brones sounded like the rushing of a high wind through timber. It seemed that the sound must carry an incredible distance. Yet the sound was nothing to the clatter of hoofs as the renegades, beginning to bunch now that the narrow trail was behind, charged from the mouth of the gorge and roared by.

This was what Reb had hoped for, that they would overrun the trail. He knew it wouldn't be for long, yet it might be long enough. And hardly had the pound of hoofs crashed by than Reb had his bronc and the girl's in movement again, climbing the steep slant of the ridge at a walk.

Give him a few hundred yards, just

enough to drown all sound of the shuffling broncs and Bordenave and his crowd could be damned. They would never be able to pick up the trail until morning came and by that time Reb had figured on being a long way from there.

Bordenave was not fooled for long. Reb, one ear cocked to the rear, heard the renegades thunder back to the entrance of the gorge. Bordenave was smart enough to realize that it was here that he had overrun the fugitives. Reb could hear him shouting.

"Spread out! They slipped us somewhere about here. Try and pick up the sign!"

Curses of rage and disgust came echoing upward and Reb grinned thinly. Only a bloodhound could pick up a trail in that gloom. Slowly but steadily Reb edged the weary broncs upward. Abruptly a towering rock rim blocked all further progress, so Reb turned to the left once more and worked a cautious way around the base of it.

Deeper and deeper into the tangled badlands this course led. Fainter and fainter the sounds of the renegades below. Then that sound was gone entirely and Reb drew rein once more. His voice, drawling and whimsical, comforted the girl. "Well, ma'am—I don't know where we are now or where we're headed. But one thing—we've shore put those coyotes off our track. Reckon we can rest and sort of relax a little. My nerves are needing it, after that hell for leather run up that cussed gorge. I might add, you got yore share of sand. My hat's off to yore courage, ma'am."

Her voice came back to him, taut with what sounded suspiciously like a sob. "I—I don't know about that, Reb Wade. If—if I thought it would do any good, I'd c-cry for a week."

"I know how you feel," soothed Reb. "You've gone through a heap of strain in the last couple of days. But we're safe now, and come daylight, we'll figure some way back to yore home. Pretty chill, ain't it."

"Y-yes. I—I'm freezing." Reb heard her teeth chatter.

"Only one thing to do," he said gently. "Get off and lead the broncs. Traveling afoot will warm you up some."

And so they went on, side by side, leading their horses, stumbling, scrambling, floundering, while the black night ran its length and the stars glittered colder and colder in the wee hours of a new morning.

ABRUPTLY they moved out on to the level, where the horses hoofs became muffled, no longer ringing on solid rock. Here was earth and thin grass under foot. "Stay put right here," ordered Reb. "Hold the broncs while I take a little look around."

By gauging the black rim which encircled them against the stars, Reb judged they had stumbled into a little isolated basin of some kind. Here, with earth to grow it, there should be some sort of vegetation.

He found it, a sprawling thicket of brush, with dry twigs and branches crackling underfoot. Reb scooped a pile of this dry stuff together and touched a match to it. In complete thankfulness he saw the tiny flame grow and climb. "Over here, ma'am," he called. "Looks like we can keep from freezing to death."

She came plodding wearily up, the horses behind her. The brightening flames disclosed more fuel to Reb and further investigation was rewarded by a momentous discovery. Jammed in against the base of the rim, was a dense tangle of driftwood, product no doubt of some ancient freshet that had poured through the basin. The clear, thin air of the badlands had seasoned that wood to a tempered, polished dryness and when Reb, carrying huge armfuls, heaped it on the flames, the fire swelled and crackled.

Reb unsaddled both broncs, spread the saddle blankets beside the fire. "Take it easy right there, ma'am. We stay here till morning."

Reb picketed the horses with the riatas from each saddle, and brought more fuel. The girl looked up at him, a wan smile on her lips. "It's wonderful, the heat," she said. "I—I'm beginning to live again."

There was a weary droop to her slim shoulders and Reb brought her a saddle for a pillow. "You curl right up and get a little sleep," he ordered. "I'll keep the fire up so you'll be warm."

"How about you?" she objected. "You need rest, also."

Reb shrugged. "I'll catch a wink or two here and there."

The suggestion of sleep was over-powering. The girl curled up, her head on the saddle, one hand cushioning her soft cheek against the hard, cold leather. She drew a deep sigh like a tired child and was instantly asleep.

VI

DAWN stole in imperceptibly, laying a chill greyness over rim and rock, cliff and peak. Reb Wade awakened with a start, for a moment bewildered at his surroundings. Then he rose, flexed his stiffened muscles and looked down at the girl. She still slept, her gorgeous blue-black hair a dusky glory about her sleeping head. Her cheeks were slightly pink, shadowed by the long, dark lashes which caressed them.

Moving quietly and with care, Reb built up the fire again from the few remaining coals. At the head of the basin he made more momentous discoveries. Here was a tiny grove of cottonwoods with a little spring bubbling beneath them and when a slight flutter of wings sounded above him he looked up to see several grouse peering sleepily down at him. With a handful of rocks, Reb knocked two of the sleep numbed birds from their perch, before the rest winged away. The two he had secured, Reb picked, dressed and washed in the icy water of the spring. There was still a few pinches of salt in one of his saddle bags and when Doone Laird finally awoke the eastern rim was all ablaze with the glory of a rising sun and the air was savory with the odor of roasting grouse.

"You're an amazing man, Reb Wade," she said, hiding a yawn with one slim hand. "How do you do it?"

Reb grinned. "With a handful of rocks, ma'am. This is pretty fresh meat, so it'll be tough. But it's just a whole heap better than nothing at all. You'll find a spring over yonder under those cottonwoods."

Her cheeks were glowing when she returned, her hair twisted into a heavy knot at the nape of her neck. Reb handed her one of the roasted birds. "We'll have to eat them in sort of ham-bone fashion, I

reckon," he smiled. "You don't mind?"

"I mind nothing so long as it is food," she declared.

They picked the bones clean and Reb went for the horses. He watered them at the spring, then saddled swiftly. Doone Laird was watching him with fathomless blue eyes, marking the rawhide leanness of him, the square, hard planes of his face.

"I'm not much on mawkish sentiment, Reb Wade," she said gravely. "But I owe a very great deal to you and I don't want you to think I am unappreciative."

"Forget it," said Reb gruffly. "We're not out of this jack-pot, yet. As for the rest, I always did enjoy tying a knot in a coyote's tail. And, being a man, I couldn't have done less and still been able to live with myself. I think there is a way out at the upper end of the basin past those cottonwoods. I hope so, anyhow. We can't back-track. Bordenave and his crowd will be shore to be laying in wait. They might even be following our trail, now that it's light enough to see. We got to be moving."

There was a way out as Reb had hoped, steep and narrow and torturous at first, but opening beyond to the crest of a tiny plateau. Here the sun got its first direct shot at them and when they looked back into the path of that golden reach with shaded eyes, they could see the towering shoulders of Thunder Mesa looming against the eastern sky.

"That's it, I reckon," said Reb. "Our job is to find a way up yonder."

The horses, rested and strengthened by several hours of grazing on the sparse but nutritious grass of the little basin, stepped out briskly. With satisfaction, Reb had found a rifle scabbarded to Snap Lamont's saddle. Reb switched the gun from that saddle, which now carried Doone Laird, strapping it to his own hull. Examination had shown the magazine of the gun to be fully loaded. This did not allow him any too much leeway of ammunition in a possible shootout, but was much better than nothing at all. And he had his own six-guns, with plenty of ammunition for them. He was now in position to put up a pretty good scrap if occasion required.

They worked down off the northern end of the little plateau into depths which

the sun would not reach until nearly midday. And through this tangled, shadowy, misty world they looked for a way out toward the mocking heights of Thunder Mesa.

A dozen times they struck through little gulches or canyons, only to be blocked off by blind ends. Then it was a case of back track and try again. They were several miles farther north than the spot where they had eluded Bordenave and his crowd, and Reb knew that once they found a way through this maddening tangle to the base of Thunder Mesa they would be clear of all danger.

BUT it wasn't until after midday that they found this way. They had merely followed the twistings of another pygmy gorge, hoping against hope. And when they found that it really did break through the jumbled barrier of rim and cliff they knew breath-taking relief.

"Me," said Reb—"I like wild country. But darn me for a sheepherder if I want any more of this ring-around-the-rosy stuff. I was beginning to think we never would break through."

Down below them ran a long, broken slope, smeared with hardy brush clumps, spiked with gaunt and barren skeletons of rock. But the base of the slope, Reb observed thankfully, flowed into the massive flank of Thunder Mesa.

"Clear sailing from here on in," said Reb. "Let's go."

Reb was not optimist enough to think that Bordenave had completely given up hope of recapturing Doone Laird, not to mention wiping one Reb Wade off the face of the earth. But it was reasonable enough to feel that the renegade leader's main hope of coming up with them was to track them down. Therefore, as Reb saw it, the greater danger still lay along the back trail. He took to watching that back trail a little restlessly as he and the girl wove and twisted their way down the vast slope below, where sudden rims and rock shoulders, which he could not see from above, cropped up everywhere to head them off. These they had to ride around and prevented them from making the progress they had hoped for.

To be caught out on this broken slope would not be a very pleasant thing. For

Bordenave could throw a circle and attack from every side. And Bordenave was fully capable of destroying the daughter of his hated enemy, hoping thereby to gain possession of the wealth of range and cattle which was hers. No, Reb wouldn't feel thoroughly safe about this thing until he had seen Doone Laird safely to the door of the Broken Wheel ranchhouse.

Gradually they left much of the slope behind them, gradually the flank of Thunder Mesa loomed nearer. Then, without any warning at all, the attack came. It came in the form of a hissing slug which thudded home in the neck of Doone Laird's bronc, killing the luckless animal instantly and dropping it in its tracks.

Doone was riding ahead of Reb at the time and though she kicked free of the stirrups she was unable to get completely clear of the impetus of the falling horse. She was thrown hard against the rocky slope, and she lay motionless after the fall.

Reb left his saddle with a bound, dragging Snap Lamont's rifle clear as he went. The surge of savage rage which lifted in him left him momentarily dizzy. He threw a swift glance around, saw nothing, then knelt beside the girl. His heart was in his teeth as he felt for the pulse of one limp wrist, and the sob of relief which wrung from him was like the surcease of agony. Her heart was beating, strong and sure. There was a little cut in front of her ear, from which blood dripped. She had been knocked senseless by the fall.

Reb gathered her up in his arms, started back to his nervous horse. Then came another bullet hissing and Reb's horse reared, whirled, ran a staggering step or two and collapsed. It seemed to Reb that the echoes of that far away gun were the mocking laughter of demons.

Ahead of him some fifty yards a mass of broken rock humpbacked above some brush. It seemed as good a place as any. Reb started for it.

Now more lead came, from all across the slope beneath him. All about him it hissed and snarled. It was close, that lead. The men behind those guns were shooting to kill. The mound of rocks was a few yards distant, now. Reb gritted his teeth as he raced for it.

A terrific shock struck his left leg,

numbing it, knocking it from under him, sending him sprawling. Somehow he twisted before he hit, so that his own body cushioned that limp figure he was carrying.

For a moment he lay, fighting off a sudden, cold weakness. He looked down at his left leg, almost curiously. There was a hole in his chaps, with soggy red beginning to seep from it. So they had nailed him, after all! Well, he wasn't done yet, not by a jug-full.

Lurching, scrambling, floundering, he made it to the rocks, and got the girl there with him. Here was shelter, real shelter, and he laid her gently down where rocks on all sides protected her. Then he pulled himself up so he could see past his bulwark.

He saw movement in a dozen places along the slope. Men, on horses, coming up the slope, spreading out to get him from several different angles. Reb slid back, looked out at where his rifle lay. He had dropped it when the slug had taken him through the leg. He needed that rifle, needed it bad. And if he was going to get it, now was the time, while Bordenave and his crowd were still some ways off.

He went out like a snake, flat on his stomach. He got the rifle and slithered back to the rocks without a shot coming near him. Probably they hadn't seen him, being so busy in their own efforts to climb the slope. Reb glanced over the weapon. The fall hadn't hurt it any, or knocked the sights out of line.

HE set to work, dragging rocks from one place, putting them another, until he had a small, compact and fairly staunch fortress all about himself and the girl. Then he lifted to the place once more where he could look down the slope. Some of those riders were much closer now than when he had seen them last. But not close enough. He had to make that magazine full of shells count—make every one of them count.

The numbness was leaving his leg now and it was hurting like all hell. And his boot was soggy with blood. So he unbuckled and shed his chaps. All the lower part of one jean leg was soggy. Reb took his neckerchief and knotted it over the wound as tight as he could draw

it. Then, rifle in hand, he once more sought a place to watch.

He could see now how Bordenave had fooled him. Bordenave knew that he would try and get to Thunder Mesa with Doone Laird. What the outlaw chief had probably done was set one or two good trailers after him, then taken the rest of his men and spread them out along the base of the mesa slope to wait. When they had seen him start down this slope they had gathered to get him. Well, they hadn't got him yet, and wouldn't, long as his ammunition lasted.

The hot fury that had been in Reb quieted to something colder, deeper, more tenacious. He would have no mercy on any one of these huskies now. They might have killed Doone Laird. Maybe they had. Reb jerked around, looked down at her, but saw her still breathing regularly. Nothing he could do for her, he reflected dully. He had no water, nothing. All he could do was hope. He saw that the cut on her head wasn't bleeding any more.

Reb jerked his eyes to the slope again. And saw Pete Bordenave! Saw him plainly, straight below him, but a good four hundred yards distant. The outlaw leader was standing high in his stirrups, waving directions to a couple of riders swinging around to the north.

Reb pushed the rifle forward, cuddled it to a dead rest on the rocks, the sights freezing dead on the figure of Bordenave. If only that burly hellion down there was a little closer!

Never had a target looked more perfect, even though the distance was long. Should he try it? Should he risk wasting a precious shell? The distance was long, and shooting down hill a person generally shot a little high. But he couldn't afford to be finicky. Maybe he wouldn't have another such chance—

Reb cocked the rifle, let those sights freeze again. Then he pressed the trigger!

The snarl of the rifle spread across the slope and Reb, staring with straining eyes, as the weapon settled back after the recoil, saw Pete Bordenave driven far back over the cantle of his saddle as the bullet told with a solid *thock*. And then Bordenave was down and out of sight and his horse

running free across the slope, stirrups flopping, reins dragging.

Reb levered a fresh cartridge home. "One!" he muttered in savage satisfaction. "And the big one, too. How do you like some of yore own medicine, coyotes?"

They didn't like it. Yells of rage echoed across the slope and guns began to rumble angrily. A hail of lead whipped and crashed about the rocks. Reb Wade ducked low.

"Reb!" said a voice beside him. "Reb! Where am I? Wh-why does my head hurt so?"

She was sitting up, a dazed look about her. No use trying to mince matters, thought Reb.

"It's Bordenave," he said. "Only, now, it's just Bordenave's gang. They outfoxed us. They waited for us coming down the slope. They got both our broncs. When yores went down you hit yore head a larrup. I dragged you and myself over into these rocks. They're coming up the slope and aim to rush us—maybe. I still got seven shells left in this rifle. Keep down and take things as easy as you can. We ain't done for yet."

She saw the soggy stain on his jeans. "You—you're wounded?"

"Just a scratch," Reb grunted. "Forget it. Just you lay low. Now I got to take another look."

He squirmed up and peered out. At first he couldn't see a thing. Then he caught a movement off to the south and not over two hundred yards away. He had his rifle ready and aligned as that movement became a horse and rider, sliding from one outcrop to another.

Again Reb's rifle snarled and again the bullet told with a spat which was its own story. "Two!" muttered Reb with a tight grin. "This gun is a lulu. Shore shoots where you look."

A MOMENT later he shot again, at a third rider coming up the way Bordenave had tried. And again he got a bull's-eye. "Three!" he chortled happily. "They'll begin losing some of their sand for this job."

Some of them undoubtedly did. There was a lot of shooting that meant nothing and then some angry yelling and cursing. Reb grinned down at the girl who was

watching him with such a deep, soft mystery in her wide eyes. "Nothing a snake hates worse than to get bit, itself," drawled Reb. "Listen to 'em howl."

Her answer was as unexpected as a punch on the nose. "I thought, when my father died, there could never be another man like him in the world," she breathed. "I was wrong, Reb Wade. There was one more. You."

Reb felt considerably flustered. "Shucks!" he blurted. "I ain't nothin'. I'm just a wandering wild horse hunter. Don't get me wrong, ma'am. Right now I'm scared to death."

And he loved her because she laughed softly. Here was a girl for you! One who could laugh when all hell was creeping up. "You don't lie a bit convincingly," she said. "I can see it in your eyes, that cold, brilliant fire. You're not afraid of anything under the sky, Reb Wade."

Reb looked over the slope again. She was wrong there. He was afraid of something—of that cold weakness that was beginning to seep through him. That damn leg—! It was going to get him by and by, that leg was. If he could only hold out long enough. . . .

Long enough for what? Wasn't no chance of help coming. Not out in this barren wilderness, anyhow. He spoke to the girl without looking at her.

"You still got that gun I gave you down at the cabin, ma'am?"

"Yes. I have it. And I can use it if I have to. Do—do you figure things as hopeless as that?"

Reb shrugged. "I got three of that crowd out yonder. Pete Bordenave was one of 'em. But there are a lot left, though I'm thinking they ain't any too crazy for the chore, now. Howsomever, with a pair of wolves like Bogard and Snap Lamont, they'd like nothing better than to salt my skin. And they know you're here. Also, there's no use kidding ourselves. I don't know where any item of help could come from."

The girl's sober face was toward the east. Plainly she was thinking of Thunder Mesa and of the faithful men who rode for her father and for herself. She voiced her thought. "If only Buck Hardin and some of the boys could hear this shooting and ride to investigate. . . ."

Reb did not answer. No use basing your hopes on wishes. In a tight a smart man figured on nothing but his guns. Only, he wasn't a smart man. Had he been one, he'd never have let himself and the girl get caught in such a trap as this.

A chorus of wild yells sounded and lead began to zip and smash all about the rocks. Reb set his jaw, edged a way up along his bulwark so he could look over the slope again. It was as he thought. They were coming in on all sides, except from above, riding full out. They were coming in for the kill.

Hr-rang! It was tough shooting at those bobbing, madly spurring figures. Maybe if he hadn't been so cussed weak and his eyes a little clearer he could have done better. He wasted two of his precious rifle cartridges before in a savage burst of desperate will he pulled his waning faculties together and made the final three count in swift succession.

It was terrible punishment for any charging group to suffer. It was too much for Bordenave's riders. They turned tail and hurtled back down the slope to safety. But there were two who did not flee. They left their broncs and came on afoot, crouched and slinking and deadly. Bogard and Snap Lamont!

Reb did not see them. When the rifle clicked empty in his hands he dropped it and slumped down. He was almost done. The world was swirling crazily about him. Horizons turned dark, rolled threatening blackness in on him, retreated before the instinctive, bitter resolve which still flickered in him, then came creeping back, an almost relentless force.

Reb might have gone out under that blackness had he been alone. But he wasn't alone. A slim, lovely girl was beside him. She had an arm around him, shaking him, pleading in broken tones.

"Reb! Please, Reb—you can't leave me! There are two more. They're coming in, Reb. Bogard—and Snap Lamont. Reb, darling! Oh, my dear—my dear—can't you hear me? Reb—!"

HE thought he was dreaming. This girl—she had her arms around him. She had kissed him—was shaking him. She had called him—darling! Why, he'd never been called that in his life before.

And now, Doone Laird—the lovely one, was calling him that. And she'd said something about—Bogard, and Snap Lamont. . . .

Sure. Bogard. And Snap Lamont. They must have found Lamont and turned him loose. He'd made a mistake—there. He should have killed Lamont, like he would have stomped down a rattlesnake—What was this? Doone Laird—telling him that Bogard and Snap Lamont were coming for him. Coming to gun him!

Well, he'd thrown the challenge in their teeth often enough. And now they were going to take him up on it—

Somehow he got hold of his faltering consciousness. After a man had made his brags, he couldn't back down. When his hand was called he had to stand up to that call.

His arms felt heavy, his legs paralyzed and he put all his last desperate will into the effort. And then Doone Laird, cold tears running down her face, witnessed an amazing thing. A man who had fought savagely, heroically, while the red tide of his strength had flowed from a bad wound, a man who had been on the verge of unconsciousness, came back. She saw his head lift, saw the fog in his eyes clear to a remote, almost unearthly clearness, saw lean hands drop with practiced smoothness to the holstered guns at his wolf lean waist. Yet she felt, instinctively, that he still needed direction. She caught his arm, twisted him slightly.

"Over there, Reb—over there," she sobbed.

He saw them and they saw him. They had come in fast and were not over thirty yards away. Bogard and Snap Lamont, pushing through a waist deep sage clump. They were snarling and cold and merciless, with bared weapons in their hands.

Reb Wade laughed, a laugh which seemed disembodied and with the chill of the polar regions in it. "So!" he croaked hollowly. "Bogard and the great Snap Lamont. You—wouldn't believe me when I told you. All right—here it is!"

To Reb it seemed that his hands moved with incredible slowness. But not to the girl. Those lean hands held the flashing speed of a wolf snap. They lifted, bearing blue gun metal. And they chopped down, right and left and right.

The thunder of them was flat and rumbling. Bogard and Lamont had gone into action, too. But the thing they had not thought possible was happening. Lead was hammering them, burning through them, knocking them off balance, churning their lives away. And though they shot and shot again, it was the shooting of dying men and was desperate reflex, no more.

Bogard began to sink into the brush, until only his snarling face was visible. Then that was gone and the brush around him was still. Snap Lamont stayed up longer, borne up it seemed by a hatred so venomous, so savage, that he would not fall. Yet, when life itself goes, so also goes hatred, no matter how strong. And at the very edge of the brush clump Snap Lamont fell forward and died. And lay there half in, half out of the torn sage.

For a moment Reb Wade stood, reeking guns silent in his hands. Then he said, "It's over—and I'm tired." And with a little sigh he crumpled down among the rocks.

ON the far slope of Thunder Mesa a group of riders, headed by a gaunt, grizzled, stern eyed man, heard the last fading echoes of gunfire. And dropped down the slope to investigate. At the bottom of it they surprised several renegades, who scattered madly and raced away. The group from Thunder Mesa winged them on their way with slashing lead, and would have ran them into the ground had not a wrinkled old Navajo Indian whose eyes despite his years were still those of an eagle caught at the grizzled man's arm. The Navajo pointed, wordless.

Buck Hardin, foreman of the Broken Wheel ranch, looked along that pointing arm. Way up there on the west slope, atop a shoulder of rock, a slender figure was poised, waving.

Buck Hardin cursed in broken relief. "It's Doone, boys," he yelled. "Up yonder—it's Doone—our girl!"

They went up that slope at a smashing gallop and saw, here and there, dead men crumpled. They cursed in mighty wonder.

Doone Laird was laughing and crying when they finally reached her. She hugged Buck Hardin and was almost smothered in return.

"Girl! Girl!" rumbled the foreman. "Where—how—what—?"

"That can all come later," she cried. "Over here. Oh, handle him so gently—gently. We've got to get him home. And he must live—he must live— Never was there a more gallant— Oh, Buck—we can't let him die. Not my Reb—my Reb—"

They lifted him from the pocket of rocks, gently, as she asked. They cared for his wound anew, bound it securely. And swung a blanket litter between two horses to carry him. And Buck Hardin, wise in the ways of bullet wounds and strong men, smiled at the tearful girl.

"He'll live," he said gently. "His kind don't die that easy. Who he is and where he came from, I don't know. Nor the part he's played in you being here, instead of locked up in that Hell Canyon hole as we heard you were. But I reckon you know the answer. He'll probably stay with us quite a while?"

"Yes," breathed Doone Laird. "He'll stay—always. I know."

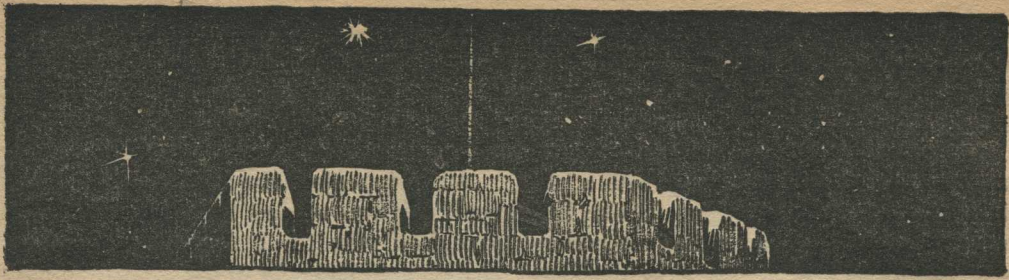
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*The Cat lunged forward. For an instant,
bright steel glittered in the moonlight.
The German made a sighing sound and
slowly slid along the wall.*



A DESERT night—mysterious, breathless, majestic in its utter stillness. A great yellow moon bathed the white sand. Shadows here and there. The sky ablaze with stars—blue-black velvet sprinkled with diamonds. In the south, the gorgeous Southern Cross!

The stark, harsh outlines of the stone fort—one of the scores the French have stationed throughout Morocco and for eight hundred miles south from El Harib to the sluggish waters of the Niger—clashed with the serene beauty of the night. Moonlight failed to soften them. The iron, mailed fist of France upon the desert; still the symbol of possession.

A six-foot wall, looped at two-foot intervals for the defending rifles, squared the roof of the outpost. Silent, yet grimly eloquent, the black snouts of swivel-mounted machine guns at each of the four corners looked out into the night—a stern warning to the sons of Allah who might covet the strong post of dog unbelievers.

Legionnaires Schmidt and La Brea were doing guard duty upon the rectangular roof. Schmidt had the north and east wall; Le Brea the south and west. They paced slowly, monotonously. The length of one wall, a turn, the length of the other. Here they would meet. Then back. And so minute after minute.

Legionnaire Schmidt, once of the Imperial German Army, held himself erectly,

and paced with a steady, military stride. He was thinking of the beer gardens in Leipzig, and one Hilda—blonde, red-cheeked, buxom.

Legionnaire La Brea's mind was also occupied, and he shuffled along with a peculiar crouching half-swagger. So he had roved once, with a ready knife, the underworld haunts of Paris—La Brea the Cat. It was of his triumphant return that he was thinking.

The Cat had served a year in the Legion. It was sufficient. By now the stench of the murder of that wealthy Englishman should have blown over. He could return. And he *would* return. He had enough of the cursed Legion. He would return to where the name of La Brea the Cat meant something. And he would return in perfect safety. For in thirty minutes, Legionnaire La Brea would be dead—officially.

"Probably taken captive," they would say, if they went to the trouble of looking for his body and failed to find it. Then they would pity him. The Cat laughed softly. They would *pity him!*

Minutes dragged. The stars began to fade. Dawn was nearing. Schmidt grunted gutturally, and crouched before one of the loopholes, peering out into the night. La Brea approached him quickly.

"What is it, *mon ami?*"

"I am not sure, but—I think I see something?"

The Cat's hand reached furtively beneath his tunic and closed upon the hilt of a slim, long-bladed knife—his personal, private contribution toward his equipment.

"Where?" he asked softly, edging closer.

"Wait! Yah, I see it now. Two of them. Three, four, five—"

He straightened, jerking up the rifle. The Cat lunged forward. For an instant, bright steel glittered in the moonlight. The German made a sighing sound and slowly slid along the wall. He would never see Leipzig and Hilda again.

THE Cat jerked out the nine-inch blade and wiped it on the dead man's tunic. The first step was successful. Schmidt had died without alarming the eighty men and officers asleep below. They would remain asleep while the desert wolves of Ali Ben Harim silently massed before the iron gates. And after La Brea opened

those gates—when with knives and long rifles Ali's warriors fell upon them—they would still be asleep. But this time it would be the final, permanent sleep of death.

All but Legionnaire La Brea, to whom treachery was second nature and honor a joke, and who for a thousand pounds of British gold had sold to the Arabs the lives of eighty of his comrades.

He now crouched over the loophole and combed the floor of the desert. For a while, he saw nothing. The German had had sharp eyes. Then La Brea distinguished a white patch that was not part of the desert. And another near it. And still another near that. The advance scouts of Ali Ben Harim, awaiting a signal from him.

The arranged signal was two swinging arcs with the glowing tip of a cigaret.

With fingers that trembled a bit, the Cat drew forth a bag of tobacco and a package of papers, and rolled a cigaret. His fingers trembled not from fear; whatever his faults, La Brea had courage. But he was possessed with a mad exultation.

Other men who sought emancipation from the Legion—had tried to desert—only to face, after terrible hardships, an almost certain capture and court-martial. But he, La Brea the Cat, would do nothing so stupid. In a few minutes Legionnaire La Brea would die with the others—officially. No hue and cry; freedom from the hated Legion without fear of court-martial. Officially dead. Then—Wadam, Rio de Oro on the west coast, where he could engage an Arab dhow to Rabat; and a modern liner to Marseilles. In a month, he would be sipping absinthe in Madame Capet's cellar in the Montmartre.

Nothing could go wrong now. Schmidt dead. The Arabs only awaiting his signal to mass before the iron gate. Once he opened it and that horde poured in, the Legionnaires, still drugged with sleep, outnumbered by at least five to one—they could be massacred to a man. And the Cat knew that Ali Ben Harim, the Arab chief, was a man of his word; he'd stick to his part of the agreement. Another five hundred pounds in British gold and safe-conduct.

The Cat passed his tongue over the

gummed edge of the cigaret paper, sealed the completed cigaret and expertly twirled one end. He placed his hand in the left pocket of his breeches. His fingers fumbled for his tin match box.

It wasn't there.

HE did not realize the loss immediately. So accustomed was he to reaching in that pocket for the tin box, so certain of it being there, that his fingers continued groping impatiently in the empty pocket. When he finally awakened to the fact that the match box was *not* there, he felt only a mild irritation. He must have left it on his cot before he went on watch.

Even now, the significance of his loss hadn't occurred to him. A match! What the devil was a match, anyway? Probably had a few in one of his other pockets. With impatience rather than concern, he hurriedly looked through every one of his pockets. . . . Again, but this time with more care. . . . For the third time, frowning now, a bit worried.

And then, bewilderment, with a sort of angry amazement he faced the blunt fact that he *hadn't* a match. A contingency he hadn't foreseen. A tiny, ridiculous insignificant detail—yet as the full significance of it dawned upon him, as he began to realize the position it placed him in, it assumed gigantic, vital proportions. No longer a detail now, but actually the difference between success and failure, between life and death.

Ali Ben Harim's men—one of those motionless figures out there on the sand was probably the chief himself—were patiently awaiting his signal; a signal which they had carefully agreed upon: two sweeping arcs with the glowing end of a cigaret. Nothing else would do. Would only arouse their suspicions. And without a match to light his cigaret he could not give the signal. It was simple—and terribly complicated.

For to obtain a match, he would have to go down into the barracks, pass among those scores of sleeping men. A frightful risk. If one should awaken—and the mathematical chances of that were decidedly better than even—there would follow instantly a fatal inquiry. And there was no logical excuse La Brea could give.

Everyone knew that he and Schmidt were supposed to be on duty until daylight. Under no circumstances was a man permitted to leave his post when on guard, for the lives of all others depended upon his vigilance. Even if he should suddenly be taken ill, he may shout for help, but he *may not* abandon his post until officially relieved by one of the commanding officers. Violation of this meant court-martial.

La Brea wetted his lips. Although it was a cool night, he began to perspire profusely. One match—the difference between life and death!

And if he should do nothing about it—there was an equally unpleasant murder charge to answer in the morning when Schmidt's body would be discovered. How could he explain *that*? He couldn't. Captain Berthold would make a brief case of it. Two men on sentry duty. One found stabbed. Dead. The explanation that Schmidt had suddenly gone mad—Schmidt, the steady, stolid old veteran—and attacked La Brea would be laughed at.

La Brea had killed Schmidt—offense number one. He had done so while he was supposed to be on sentry duty, devoting every moment of his time toward performance of that duty—offense number two. Captain Berthold was a cold martinet. Penal battalions for life—or, more likely, the firing squad. . . .

The Cat crouched against the wall, his fists clenched, his face distorted by a terrible indecision. What should he do? In the name of a name, what should he do? Risk going into the barracks for a match? Or—it was a new thought—open the gate, go out into the desert and explain to Ali Ben Harim exactly what had happened?

But then, while he was out, if someone should happen to discover the open gate and give alarm, the Arab, infuriated by the failure of his plans, would certainly leave him staked naked atop a red-ant hillock, or wriggling on a wooden stake. And if he didn't the French would promptly execute him.

One match! One single match! *Secret*!

The Cat whirled suddenly.

"Fool!" he whispered fiercely. "Imbecile! Idiot! Schmidt he is always sucking upon that filthy pipe of his. *He* has matches. In the secret pocket beneath his tunic—"

EXULTANTLY, he bent over the dead man, lying there, face downward, at the foot of the wall. He turned him over roughly. Too impatient to unhook the tunic, he wedged his fingers behind circular collar and ripped downward. Once more, farther down.

He frowned at the ingenious linen pocket the German had sewn to the inside of his tunic. Simply a little white sack. A double hole in it now, and it was no longer white. Crimson. La Brea's knife had gone through it near the left edge before entering Schmidt's body.

A cold premonition of failure gripped La Brea's bowels. It strengthened when he stuck his fingers within the bag. As it was directly over the wound, the little bag and its contents were saturated with blood.

The Cat straightened, holding four matches. He knew they would not light before he struck them. The softened sulphur head of the first came off instantly. The same thing happened with the second. The third spluttered faintly, and another try ruined it. The fourth was also useless. He flung it away with a curse.

Coldly desperate now, he whirled to the loophole again. Three hundred yards away, just before the ground dipped to come up again in a huge sand dune, were those motionless patches of white. More now than before. Perhaps a score of them. And many hundreds more behind the sand dune. Waiting patiently. Awaiting his signal to mass before the iron gate.

The Cat abruptly made up his mind. Only one thing left to do. That was to sneak down, open the gate and go out on the desert to the waiting Arabs. If Ali Ben Harim was one of them, the explanation should only take a few moments. And if the creaking of the great gate as he swung it open should awaken someone and alarm be given—well, it was a chance he had to take. It was not as great as venturing into the barracks for a match.

Perhaps it was all for the best anyway. In the carnage which would follow—the Legionnaires would put up a desperate fight—even the skin of a neutral bystander, the role he'd intended to play, was none too safe.

His mind now definitely made up, his confidence returned. Cat-like, living up to

his nickname, he moved toward the stone steps leading down into the courtyard. Two flights. At the foot of the first, were the officers' quarters: Captain Berthold's rooms, and those of the four platoon lieutenants. The Cat grinned as he slunk by the curtained doorway of the captain's bedroom. Ali Ben Harim had sworn to have Captain Berthold's head hanging at the entrance of his tent. The Cat could see it swinging now; and, hating the commanding officer with an animal-like, blind hatred, to him it was a pleasant picture. He traversed quickly the row of curtained doorways and began to descend the lower flight.

And then Fate intervened, sealing the remaining avenue of escape for La Brea, the traitor.

SERGEANT BILL HUNTER, a six-footed, brawny Texan, stepped out into the courtyard as the Cat reached the bottom of the steps. The temperature inside the barracks being that of the hot room of a Turkish bath, the sergeant was stark naked. He had the palm of his right hand clamped to his jaw, and the expression on his broad, tanned face was coldly murderous. Sergeant Hunter had a hellish toothache.

The Cat saw his long shadow and tried to draw back. Too late. They stared at each other. Instinctively, the Cat's hand crept toward his knife. The big American for a moment forgot even his toothache. He found his voice.

"What are you doing down here?" he roared. "Don't you know—"

The Cat thrust out his hands helplessly. "*Mon Dieu*, Sergeant—"

Hunter was a good-natured giant. He recalled that Captain Berthold's bedroom was immediately above them. If the captain should awaken and personally catch the Legionnaire away from his post, it meant court-martial. La Brea was in Hunter's platoon; and the big sergeant himself did not bear too great a love for Berthold. He lowered his voice, and repeated the question.

"I thought I heard somebody down here," the Cat replied quickly. "I wanted to borrow a match."

"A match?" Hunter repeated, angrily. "Why, you crazy fool, you know you aren't

allowed to smoke while on duty. Get back up there, before I kick you up those stairs."

"Yes, Sergeant," the Cat said humbly. He added sympathetically, as Hunter suddenly clamped his hand to his jaw again, "The sergeant has a toothache? If so, there's a full bottle of cognac under my pillow, to which the sergeant is welcome. It is most excellent for a toothache."

Hunter relented, and became interested. "Full bottle, eh? All right, I won't report you this time; but you better get up there, you fool, before someone else catches you." At the gratitude on La Brea's face, he relented further. "I'll come up there myself, soon as I get the bottle. Give you and Schmidt a drink. I won't be able to sleep tonight anyway."

The Cat's hopes crashed again. But he forced himself to say, "Thank you, Sergeant."

AS he ran up the steps, his brain was numb, paralyzed. One thought uppermost—that it would take Hunter less than two minutes to get the bottle and come up to the roof. There he would instantly see Schmidt's body. Stabbed. The big sergeant was no fool.

"I must kill him," the Cat said to himself. "Kill him without giving him a chance to cry out. But he is a devil, this American. It will not be easy."

Deep down in his heart, he had a miserable conviction that it was more than that. Almost impossible. No place where he could strike from ambush. Broad steps. And the giant would be carrying a heavy quart bottle of cognac. An excellent weapon of defense. The Cat had seen more than one skull crushed with one of those square bottles.

"No," he whispered, "I must think of something else. Quick!"

He looked down at Schmidt—and another idea struck him. No time now to weigh it pro and con. It was the last desperate hope. The only thing left to do.

He ran to the machine gun on his right. Slowly, he swung its black snout around. To the left, down a bit, now a fraction of an inch to the right. He gripped both handles firmly. The first of those white patches, which marked the line of Arabs waiting there prone upon the sand, was clearly within the sights. His forefinger

curled about the trigger. He took a deep breath. Gently, he squeezed the trigger.

Angrily, the hammering of the machine gun split the silence of the night. Red flashes stabbed from it. From the desert came a shrill scream of a man mortally wounded. No longer a need for silence, the hundreds behind the sand dune shrilled their war-cry. And the terrific volley of rifle fire which followed drowned out the machine gun.

Within the fort, instantly, rose an organized bedlam. Naked men poured out of the barracks, rushing with rifles and ammunition to their posts. Machine gunners to their guns. Grenade men, with their deadly sacks. Captain Berthold, in blue silk pajamas, bellowed orders to the lieutenants and non-commissioned officers.

In sixty seconds, every man was at his post. Two machine guns going now, the Cat shouldered out of the way by the man whose duty it was to operate that gun. From the desert, hundreds of flashes marked the strung-out line of Arab rifles.

It only lasted a few minutes. The Arabs spent some valuable ammunition, yelled a bit longer, and retreated with their dead and wounded. A direct attack in the face of the deadly sprays from those machine guns was too much even for the fearless desert wolves of Ali Ben Harim.

So the skirmish ended.

THE Cat, at his place at the wall, was sharply aware that Sergeant Hunter was standing behind him, watching him. He could also see, out of the corners of his eyes, the group of officers over the German's body. Calmly, he was rehearsing his story. He was not frightened. Being questioned upon a charge of murder was not a new experience to him. He was coolly confident.

Hunter touched his shoulder. "Come on," he said; "I think you have some explaining to do."

The Cat nodded. "I have."

Lieutenant Gomez, wearing lavender-striped shorts and a monocle, was saying incredulously, "But *stabbed*? How could he be *stabbed*?"

"With a knife, sir—that's how!" Captain Berthold explained brilliantly.

Hunter cut in quietly, "I beg your pardon, *mon Capitaine*."

"Yes?"

"I believe Legionnaire La Brea here can explain this, sir. I was the first to reach the roof after the alarm had been given. La Brea was at the machine gun and Schmidt in the position you see him now."

"Very well, Sergeant." The captain turned to La Brea. "Well? What have you got to say?"

The Cat did not hesitate. "Yes, I stabbed him, *mon Capitaine*. He was a traitor."

"A *what*?"

"A traitor, *mon Capitaine*," the Cat repeated coolly. "Maybe he went mad—I do not know. But all night he spoke to me about his two sons that the French have killed in the Great War. He said it was to revenge himself upon France that he had joined the Legion. I told him that he was mad and should not talk that way, but he persisted."

"How extraordinary!" cried Lieutenant Gomez.

Captain Berthold silenced him with a glance. "Continue," he said curtly. "What happened then?"

The Cat wanted to laugh. The stupid fools believed him. No question about that. It was easier than he imagined.

"Then, *mon Capitaine*, I saw something moving out on the desert. I crouched at the loophole to see better, when I suddenly felt the German's hands at my throat. 'You will not give alarm,' he said to me. 'You will die with the rest.' I drew my knife and stabbed him. Then I ran to the machine gun."

"He is lying, sir," Hunter drawled coolly.

The Cat glared at him. "I have spoken the truth, *mon Capitaine*."

"What makes you think the man is lying, Sergeant?" Berthold asked curiously.

"These, *mon Capitaine*." Hunter extended his hand.

"Matches!"

"Yes. Will the captain please observe that there is fresh blood on them? As we have suffered no casualties, it must be Schmidt's blood. I found them ten feet away from Schmidt's body. The captain will notice that someone has tried to strike them. It could not have been Schmidt, whose own blood is on these matches.

Hence it must have been Legionnaire La Brea, and he must have done it *after* he had killed Schmidt. Yet the Legionnaire claims that after he had stabbed Schmidt he immediately ran to the machine gun. I also wish to report that I caught Legionnaire La Brea at the foot of the steps about a minute before he had given the alarm. He had asked me for a match."

"That is not the truth," La Brea cried desperately.

"You will swear to that, Sergeant?" Captain Berthold asked sternly.

"Yes, *mon Capitaine*."

"Very well; we shall hold a formal investigation in the morning. Have Legionnaire La Brea placed under arrest." Then Captain Berthold had another brilliant thought. "If he left his post to go down for a match—a grave breach of discipline—one way of verifying the truth of your assertion, Sergeant, is to find out whether Legionnaire La Brea has matches in his possession. If he has, I see no reason why he should have asked you for one, or borrowed Schmidt's."

Primitive reasoning, but it had an unexpected effect.

"You will not search me," the Cat screamed suddenly. "I am innocent."

Whereupon, Captain Berthold, who had merely intended asking the Cat whether he had a match, promptly commanded to have him searched. And five hundred pounds of British gold in the money belt next to his skin, the price of treachery, came to light.

"If it may be permitted to offer an opinion, *mon Capitaine*," said Hunter, "Legionnaire La Brea's story is correct—so far as it may be applied to himself. He probably needed a match to signal the Arabs. Had none on himself; and the blood on Schmidt's matches rendered them useless."

"You talk too much, Sergeant," Berthold said curtly. "That is exactly the conclusion I have arrived at myself."

Hunter grinned faintly.

Two days later, at sunrise, La Brea the Cat saw a part of his plan materialize—at the rear wall of the fort. Lieutenant Gomez barked a short command. Twenty fingers touched the triggers of twenty rifles. And Legionnaire La Brea was officially dead.



GREENHORN—CALIBRE .45

By John Starr

"Don't pull rein this side of Wolftooth range!" Sheriff Hogan warned. But hammer-thumbed Buck Hansen, playing his greenhorn role, was snubbed burr-tight to a three-year blood-grudge.

MEN waited for death this day in the tough cowtown of Pyote. Dusty riders from nearby ranches stood at long bars and talked of it while they drank. Swaggering gun-slicks from the Wolftooth range laughed it loud as

they prowled the hot streets of the town. In the shade of the stores, in the courthouse square, ranchers and townsmen gathered in tight knots and whispered it grimly.

Buck Hansen saw them and knew how

their thoughts ran. His lips tightened in a thin and mirthless grin as he strode toward the door of the sheriff's office. Under his breath he rasped a single word: "Buzzards!"

Sheriff Hogan lifted haggard, fat-rimmed eyes from the papers on his desk to regard with a deliberate stare his unwelcome visitor. He saw a man whose raw-boned frame was dust-covered from the crown of white sombrero to the tips of long roweled Mexican spurs, whose lean waist was encircled by an ornate gunbelt with a black-stocked Colt in fancy etched holsters on each hip. A man of uncertain age, with blond hair above a freckled, sun-scorched face that was marred by deep-set lines about a thin-lipped, sardonic mouth. Buck Hansen's eyes were expressionless, the cold blue of a Northland lake.

The fat sheriff's voice was curt. "This is a hell of a time for you to show up, Hansen! What d'you want here?"

"Recognized," Hansen smiled quizzically, "but not welcomed! Don't get worried, sheriff—I'm just passin' through yore fair city. Maybe won't be here long. Fact is, I guess I've done quit my wicked ways o' livin'."

He fingered a lean jaw.

The sheriff grunted. "I knowed another feller what got salvation once, but it took six forty-four slugs and a hole in boothill to do it! I'm a busy man today, Hansen—what's yore business here?"

"Just passin' through, like I said, and thought I'd visit a while. Anything wrong in that?"

"Plenty! When *you* visit a sheriff's office, trouble ain't far off. And I've already got too much trouble. Plain hell's liable to pop and spew any minute now."

"What's the occasion?"

Sheriff Hogan's brow again clouded with worry. "Young Dave Worth's trial comes up today."

"What's the charge?"

"Cattle stealin'."

"Now, that's a serious charge."

"You ought to know," Hogan grunted.

Buck Hansen's freckled face hardened, but almost immediately became expressionless again. "Did he steal them cattle, sheriff?"

"How the hell should I know? Ain't

for me to say. But it looks bad for the kid. I like Worth, and so do most of the other honest folks on this range. But there's Bart Jorgensen's Scorpion brand crowd—and they don't!"

"Which maybe accounts for a lot," said Hansen lazily.

"Maybe. Anyway, Jorgensen's men are a mean lot, and they're all in town, braggin' and downin' bad whiskey, huntin' trouble. And they'll find it, for every cowman from the Wolftooth to the Saguaro is in town, all packin' guns. And now, like I ain't got plenty to worry about, you ride into town. Hell!"

"Just ridin' through," Buck Hansen repeated, and grinned.

"Then, damn it, keep ridin'!" the sheriff grunted savagely.

HANSEN gazed thoughtfully through the open window. Compact groups of ranchers and cowboys were gathered on the board sidewalks, in the dusty street, tense-faced, talking in low tones. Trouble like a sinister pall, hovered over the desert town. For there was a general liking for young Dave Worth, whom the setting sun would see a free man—or a man sentenced to spend a good many years of his life behind the gray walls of a penitentiary.

The charge had been brought by two men: Bart Jorgensen, the most powerful and most hated man in the county, owner of the great Scorpion brand spread and most of the town of Pyote—a landhog who by his ruthless and underhand methods was slowly bleeding the smaller ranchers of the Wolftooth range of their land and cattle, forcing them out of the country; and Jake Toombs, Jorgensen's gun-hound foreman, in reality a hired gunman who was lightning-fast, deadly as a tarantula.

Jorgensen and Toombs would this day swear that they had caught young Dave Worth, whose small spread adjoined the Scorpion brand, in the act of changing brands on some Scorpion steers. And although the charge was framed, they would offer almost irrefutable proof to back their words.

Frame-up! That was the silent if not expressed opinion of every honest man who stalked the dusty streets of Pyote this

summer day. Other methods had failed to force Worth and his pretty young wife to abandon their little spread and leave the country. Dave Worth had fought, tooth and nail, to hold on.

"SHERIFF," said the blond gunman abruptly, "I crave to see Dave Worth."

Hogan regarded him narrow-eyed. "You a friend o' his?"

"Maybe—maybe not! Is it yes or no?"

"Well, I don't see why not. But I'm tellin' you plain, Hansen, I've got my hands full here today, and I won't stand for no damn tomfoolery. You can talk to Worth five minutes, and I'll have yore guns while yo're doin' it. Take it or leave it."

Hansen's hesitation was barely perceptible. Then he slid the black guns from their holsters and handed them, butts first, to the rotund sheriff.

"Ain't many men I'd let hold my guns, sheriff," he said.

"Them five minutes are passin'!"

A tall, dark-haired, broad-shouldered young man rose from the dirty bunk as Sheriff Hogan unlocked the cell door. Hogan stared from one to the other suspiciously, grunted, turned and clumped back to his office, which was in the same building—a combination jail and courthouse.

Gradually the puzzled frown left Dave Worth's face.

"Know me, huh?" Hansen grinned.

"Could I ever forget that yellow hair and them freckles? You're the gun-slick hombre known as Buck Hansen."

"A man can't help his looks, nor the trouble he gets into. Hear trouble's been steppin' on yore heels lately?"

"That's all I've had, mornin', noon and night—trouble!"

"Brand-blottin'?"

"So they say."

"Framed?"

"I didn't say so."

"Didn't have to. Soon as I heard Jorgensen and Toombs had a finger in the pie, I knowed that pie was rotten."

"Oh, I was framed, all right—but there ain't much I can do about it. I guess we're licked at last, me and Joan."

"Licked? Ain't no such word. Listen,

I got just five minutes. Want to tell me about it?"

Dave Worth shrugged. "There's not much to tell. Jorgensen's dealin' the hand, and his gun-dog, Toombs, is backin' it. Three years ago I bought me a little spread, over on the western edge of Jorgensen's Scorpion brand. Jorgensen'd wanted the strip, and had been tryin' to force old Terry, who I bought from, out of the country. Terry got out—but he sold to me first. Then Jorgensen started in to roast me out, like he had Terry. He stole my cattle; his gunslingers bullied my riders, scared them off. But I hung on, knowin' they'd get me sooner or later."

Hansen nodded.

"Now they've got me," Dave Worth went on flatly. "One mornin' I found several Scorpion branded cows in my corral. As I was about to turn 'em out, Jorgensen and Toombs rode up. They stuck guns in my belly and brought me in to Sheriff Hogan. Later, I learned that some of the brands on the cows had been blotted, with my own run over 'em, to make it look like I'd been surprised in the act."

"Is that all the evidence they've got," Buck Hansen asked, "Jorgensen's and Toomb's words?"

"That'll be plenty," said young Worth bitterly. "They didn't think it necessary to have a whole bunch in on it. Damn 'em for a pair o' lousy snakes! Framed—with not a chance to fight back! I wouldn't care for myself so much, but there's Joan—"

"Joan?"

"We got married soon after I bought the spread," said Worth miserably. "It's been mighty hard for her—nothin' but work and trouble. Now we'll lose everything we've slaved for—and Joan, I don't know what'll become of her."

Hansen walked to the window and stood staring into the sun-drenched street, watching the grim-eyed men who paraded restlessly. In the blond gunman's own eyes was something of contempt; for it was such men as these who had made a wolf of him, doomed to brood over his wrongs in the furtive glows of hidden campfires.

For not many years ago Buck Hansen had been a cowman, and a good one, owning his own brand up in Utah. A cattle

war had smashed him, though his part in it had been little more than that of a spectator, had branded him unjustly as a thief and killer. Men whom he had thought his friends had banded together, throwing the blame for their black crimes on himself.

HANSEN turned abruptly from the window, and his cold blue eyes met Worth's.

"You remember what happened one day, a little over three years ago?"

Worth grinned reminiscently. "I got a good memory."

"You was ridin' for the U-Bar outfit then, and on this particular day was fixin' fence over under the shoulder of Big Boar Mountain. This same day I was settin' in a two-handed stud game with Doc Lowery, one of Jorgensen's men. In the course o' events I make the discovery that there's one too many aces in that deck for practical purposes, which when Doc refuses to make satisfactory explanation of same I fill his dirty carcass fulla lead. I leave town right sudden, with a bullet in my shoulder and a blood-thirsty posse yowlin' at my heels."

Worth was regarding him narrowly. "Well—" he began.

Hansen raised a big hand.

"I head for Big Boar, three jumps ahead o' the pack which, as it happens, is composed mostly of Jorgensen's riders and headed by Jake Toombs. I'm scarce able to stay atop my bronc, but I manage to reach the foothills and side-track the posse for a while. But I don't know it, for in the meantime I've tumbled from my nag. When I wake up, two days later, I find I'm fixed out high and dry in a cave up on the side of Big Boar. You got any idea how I got up to that cave?"

"I packed you up there," Worth said slowly. "It was plenty hot that day!"

"And you keep me there, nursin' me back to life, bringin' me grub and water, while Toombs' bunch combs the country for me. You cheated the buzzards outa my carcass."

Worth made a tired gesture. "I'd have done as much for anybody who plugged Doc Lowery. And that charge was dropped later, when Hogan was elected sheriff."

"Yeah, but I'd been just as dead then if you hadn't took care of me. You've

heard that I've killed a few men, Worth—and I have; but I ain't never killed one that didn't need killin'. I've been a wolf, livin' a wolf's life, with most guns against me. And durin' all these years very few men have treated me white when I needed it most. I needed help that day up on Big Boar, and you treated me like I was human."

Just then Sheriff Hogan waddled along the corridor to the cell door. "Five minutes is up!" he grunted.

As he left the cell, Buck Hansen looked back at the tall young rancher and grinned. "Maybe things'll pan out. I been pleadin' my own case a long time, and I've most always won."

"You ain't pleadin' this case," said the sheriff sourly.

BACK in his office, Sheriff Hogan returned the blond, reckless-eyed Hansen's guns with the terse warning: "Now I guess you'd better be ridin', feller. Maybe you're wanted in some parts, with a reward on that yellow topknot of yores; and I don't give a damn for that, for I've got plenty trouble right here. I've got nothin' against you, personal or official. But I'm warnin' you: ride, and don't stop ridin' till you get outa this country! You ain't no greenhorn. Take my advice."

Buck Hansen grinned, but there was no mirth in his eyes. "Thanks, sheriff." He turned and strode into the dusty street.

The fat sheriff grunted again, mopped his perspiring face vigorously, dropped into a chair. "That hellion ain't in town for nothin'," he muttered worriedly.

He sat there for a while, hunched like a toad over his desk, trying to figure it out. He thought of young Dave Worth, back there in his cell, who within an hour or two would go to trial for cattle stealing, and who faced almost certain conviction, for the sworn words of Jorgensen and his gun-slinging foreman would be sufficient to send him to the penitentiary. And Sheriff Hogan thought of pretty Joan Worth, doubtless here in town somewhere, waiting with leaden heart for the trial that would almost certainly take her man away from her.

Hogan cursed softly, got to his feet and waddled to the window. He stared out. A gray curtain of dust hovered over the

town, stirred by the feet of the men who tramped restlessly the one narrow street—hard-eyed, unsmiling men whose hands were never far from holstered guns.

Sheriff Hogan cursed again, jammed his hat over his bald head and himself went into the street.

It was as if he had stepped into a slow-flowing current of water, for every man in the street seemed to be moving in one direction. Then the sheriff was aware of an added tenseness about him, of a foreboding silence that chilled him with its intensity. Hogan quickened his step, moving with the human stream that was flowing toward a spot a block up the street, now conscious of low voices and a sudden swirl of excitement up there.

Abruptly the current about him stopped, and the sheriff stopped with it. He stood there on the board sidewalk, momentarily paralyzed by the stark drama of the scene before him.

Three men stood in the middle of the street. One stood alone, facing two others across thirty feet of space.

Gaunt Buck Hansen stood on wide-spread legs, white sombrero shoved back from his gleaming mass of blond hair, that contemptuous, sneering grin twitching his thin lips, fingers hooked in his ornate gun-belt. Hansen, the fat sheriff saw, was talking.

Facing Hansen were the two men who had brought the cattle stealing charge against young Dave Worth—Jorgensen, owner of the Scorpion brand, and his gun-slinging foreman, Toombs.

Jorgensen stood with burly body half-crouched, an evil sneer distorting his hawk-beaked, saturnine features, a glare of utter cruelty in his close-set little eyes as he stared at Hansen. Gradually his sullen features were darkening with rage as he listened to the blond man's words.

Toombs stood at Jorgensen's elbow, wiry body slouched carelessly, his hard-bitten countenance expressionless. But every man watching knew with what deadly speed that warped body could flame into action.

Still the paunchy sheriff could hear Buck Hansen's droning voice. . . . And now, in the sudden silence that gripped the town, he could understand the mock-

ing, vitriolic curses that fell from the blond man's lips—knew that Hansen was deliberately goading to fury the two men before him.

Suddenly Jorgensen's huge body jerked tense, a furious curse ripped from his lips, and he clawed for his gun, with Toombs only a second behind him. With the speed of striking rattlesnakes, Buck Hansen's hands slid to the guns on his lean hips, and the gun-muzzles came up flaming redly.

Abruptly Pyote's quiet street became a raging inferno of flaming guns, a pandemonium of yelling men and scampering feet as buckaroos dove for shelter from screaming bullets. Like drum-beats the gunfire rolled into the desert as blasting guns roared their deadly requiem.

Sheriff Hogan, watching, saw Jorgensen stagger, curse horribly, steady himself and raise the gun in his hand again, mingling its thunderous dirge with that from Toombs' spouting guns. Buck Hansen's gaunt figure, still standing with legs wide-spread, trembled like a leaf in the breeze. But steadily, inexorably, his twin guns belched their ropes of flame and lead.

Suddenly Jake Toombs dropped his guns, clutched at his stomach, unbelief in his cruel eyes; the sneer still on his greasy face, he writhed in the dust and lay still.

Hansen's two hogslegs still snarled.

Jorgensen, evil face blanched with dawning fear, triggered his hot guns furiously. A bullet bored through his stomach, another seared along his throat. With both stiffening arms he raised his gun and fired point-blank at the man before him, then wallowed like an enormous hog beside his henchman.

Cursing helplessly, Sheriff Hogan plowed into the street, eyes fastened on Buck Hansen, knowing that he was looking at a man already as good as dead.

Through pain-dimmed eyes that were no longer bitter, Hansen saw him coming. Swaying drunkenly, bare head glinting in the sunshine, he tossed his still-smoking guns into the dust.

"Sheriff," he grinned mockingly, "looks like I'm just a greenhorn after all—I plumb forgot to heed yore warnin'!"

Gently he slid to the ground beside his guns.



A black ran toward him, his rifle held over his head as a club. Cliff let him get close, so near he could smell the stench of his filth-caked body, then he jerked the trigger. . . .



BLACK DAWN

A Novelet of Revolt in the Jungle

By John MacDougal Murray

Deep in the heart of the jungle, there is one thing white men fear most: the tom-tom blood cry of Black Dawn!

THE station wagon, lurching drunkenly in the two crooked grooves, kicked up a cloud of gray dust at Kuruman behind it, the driver, sun-bronzed

hawk face filmed with dust, keeping heavy-lidded eyes on the road.

That to Cliff seemed unnecessary in the middle of a green hell. It'd be a relief if

another car came down the road from the mines. It might even be exciting. The man was as silent, as impenetrable as the damned jungle. Maybe that's the way it made you after a while—or maybe it was this threatening rebellion everyone was whispering about. An uprising of blacks. He'd look into that, the first authoritative person he met.

"Hell of a place, Africa," Cliff commented sourly.

The man licked his lips. Thin lips that closed tight like the edges of a clam shell.

"What's your name?" Cliff ventured again after a jolt that sent him against the roof of the cab. "Or don't they have names down here?"

"Me name's George, Mr. Randall." Again the tongue darted over the thin lips.

"You like this dust that well?" Cliff asked, grinning.

The driver started.

"Blimey, no, sir. But you gets used to it after a bit and don't give it a mind. You're a casual sort, sir, if you don't mind me sayin' so."

"I don't—so long as you talk. This silence is enough to deafen a man. How am I casual?"

"For the owner of a diamond mine, you are, sir. Sir William was a stiff one, 'e was. A proper gentleman, sir, not meanin' no offense. We like your kind better though. But it's a pity, it is, you 'ad to come down now, sir, right when old 'Arry 'imself is breakin' loose an' all."

Cliff sat back, gray eyes narrowing at the road, big shoulders sliding with each new lurch, a little quirk at the corners of his mouth. So Uncle William had been a stiff one, a proper gentleman. From what he'd heard, Sir William had been proper even the day he was born—before he'd ever thought of discovering a diamond mine, or heard of South Africa—or dreamt that some day he'd die and leave the whole satchel to a six-foot one, two-hundred-and-twenty-pound American nephew.

A row of small square white huts poked peaked roof through the green wall ahead, and beyond them the gray shimmer of the ten-foot-high charged wire enclosure around the diamond pit and the buildings of the mine company. George spat out of the window on his side, nodding toward the approaching clearing.

"'At's the works, sir, and a first-rate mine she is. I'll take you to the major soon's we get in. Major Coats 'is name is. 'E's been manager since Sir William discovered the first diamond. Mr. Patterson was with 'im when I left to pick you up. 'E's a first-class lad, Mr. Patterson is. Commissioner of these parts. Lives in Kuruman."

Swerving out of the ruts with one last violent convulsion that shook her to her body bolts, the car rolled across a flat piece of greasy land in through guarded gates, George nodded to the watchman as they passed—then the gates closed again.

The major jerked his feet off the top of his desk, but not before Cliff had a picture of him, huge bulk wedged into a swivel chair, boots, gray with dust, propped on the desk, florid face puffy and loose, fatty eyes closed.

"Mr. Randall!" he almost bellowed, jumping up and extending a fat hand. "Have a pleasant journey? Seems we've been waiting a deucedly long time."

"The trip was rotten, Major. I don't know when I had a worse one." Pulling a chair out from the wall with his foot Cliff sat down. "What's this talk about rebellion?"

"Talk?" Major Coats sputtered. "What talk? Don't tell me rumors are going around again!"

George set Cliff's bags in a corner. "'Ere's a bit of tension in Kuruman, Major. They expect it to break any minute."

"Leave the bags," the major said coldly.

"Yes, sir." And George backed out, his neck brick red.

"My dear Randall," murmured the major, coming around the desk to stand with his back to it facing Cliff, "in this beastly country there are always some sort of wild rumors. This is Africa. But I've muddled through for years—and expect to do so for many more. The jungle to me, too, is monotonous, but not so much so that I, like the rest, have taken to creating fancies to suck from them excitement that does not exist."

CLIFF got up. He was conscious that he towered over the major, but what the major lacked in height he had in girth. "Sorry to have bothered you with a fancy then, Major Coats, but just the same I'd

like to look into it myself. I'll go and wash up."

"Do that—and have a rest if possible. I'll have George show you to your rooms." He strode to the door. "George!"

"The major's all right," George murmured as he put the bags down again in Cliff's rooms. "A bit abrupt sometimes."

"So I gathered. I want you to take me around the property and through the natives' quarters."

"But they're in their blasted quarters, sir! They haven't worked for three days. Truth is, we couldn't trust 'em inside the fence." George wiped his hands off on his shirt nervously. "'Ere's trouble brewin'—we've never 'ad it like this before."

"Then what the devil is Coats talking about?" Cliff demanded.

George shrugged. "We'll muddle through, 'e says."

"Muddle through, hell! Get at the root of the trouble, if it isn't too late, and head it off!"

"Yes, sir. It's what I say, but I'm just a bloody bookkeeper, sir. The major won't take advice from the likes of us."

"Forget all that. We're beginning a new system right now! Show me the native quarters—then—"

"George!" It was the major's bellow. "George! Where the devil are you?"

Cliff stood listening a moment to the man's throaty roar, then shook his head sadly. "Go ahead—I'll see you at dinner."

The major was waiting at the window of the dining room, a thick black cigar between his stained teeth, his fat hands clasped behind him. Cliff nodded as he entered, then spotted George, his back to the smoke-blackened grate that was lighted in the rainy season.

"Evening, sir," George murmured. "The major was a bit worried."

With a guttural sound intended to clear his throat, the major swung around. "Will you be kind enough to keep that beastly mouth of yours shut, George! I'll do what telling I want told!"

Cliff dropped into a chair at the table. "Sit down, gentlemen. I was down to the native quarters. I must admit I don't like it."

"Indeed!" Major Coats stamped to the table, kicked his chair out, fell into it heavily and worked it up to the board

with a series of grunts that reddened his face. "It'll please me, Mr. Randall," he said ponderously, "if we have an understanding here and now. Your uncle, Sir William, left everything in my hands—everything. What I told him he accepted and that was the end of it. I haven't done so badly, considering."

"My uncle, Major Coats, is not me!" Cliff cut in coldly.

HIS thick-lipped mouth dropping open, Coats stared at Cliff, incredulity in his eyes. He coughed. "Very well, then! I will tender my resignation in the morning. We'll see what comes of the mine." Lifting a small bell from amongst his plates, he shook it violently for the servants. "Blasted American boors! Half civilized animals, that's what you all are! Indians and beasts and stinking hovels!"

"Gentlemen!" George pleaded. "It's bad enough with the blacks against us—"

"Which reminds me, George," Cliff said, ignoring the sputtering, grumbling major, "where do the natives get their arms? They're carrying old flint-lock muzzle loaders."

"A Belgian firm sends 'em down, sir. They're new guns, they are, an' it's legal trade so long's they stick to old-style muzzle loaders."

Big bucks padded in and out of the long room on naked feet, carrying trays, decanters, platters warmed over charcoal. George's eyes, Cliff noticed, glided watchfully from the servants to the major, fuming at the end of the table. He had noticed the major himself, the man's refusal to have any part of the food, his constant draining of his whiskey and soda glass. The fellow would have to be a tank to hold what he was taking.

It was possible, he thought, watching the man, that he had a reason for not wishing to acknowledge the rumors or a basis for them. A reason, perhaps, that involved a pretty scheme. It wouldn't be unheard of. A new heir, a stranger to the country and its ways— Maybe he could be frightened off, or bullied into selling at a sacrifice.

Stretching his long legs under the table, Cliff fingered the little fluted glass one of the blacks placed before him. Its red liquid caught the dusty light of the candles

on the table and threw it back in a million blood-colored shards. There were electric lights on the walls supplied by the mine's own power station, but evidently the major preferred the softer light of tal-low, the dancing shadows on the walls.

Abruptly cocking his head, Cliff listened. Beyond the windows the night pressed against the building. Here and there, an evil eye gleaming against the jungle, a single electric bulb shone in the sea of pitch. Then the sound Cliff had heard was repeated. A voice, pitched high as a leopard's scream of death, chanting. And over it, the hollow boom of drums.

"Natives in the quarter," George said bluntly, as if he had read the thought Cliff had been about to voice. "They've been doing 'at for a week, sir."

"Have they been mistreated?" Cliff asked. "What is it they're rebelling against?"

"'At we don't know, sir. The major 'ere says they're just in 'eat like, an' they'll get over it. But in all my years down 'ere, Mr. Randall, I ain't never seen 'em like this."

With a grunt the major sagged forward, his face amongst his plates.

"'E's out, sir," muttered George disgustedly. "'E does 'at every night, 'e does. Drinks 'imself into a stupor, 'e does."

Cliff listened again to the drums in the darkness. They were beating as a single drum, a great heart pulsating. *Boom-a-la-da-boom-a-la-da-boom-a-la-da-boom!* Drinking his wine down he pushed back his chair. *Boom-a-la-da-boom-a-la-da-boom-a-la-da-boom!*

"I'm going down there again," he muttered. "If necessary I'll wring their damned necks to get at the bottom of this!"

"It's mighty dangerous, sir. 'Ave you a gun?"

"A forty-five with six slugs in the chambers and twenty-four more in my belt, and I know how to use it!" Striding to the other end of the table, Cliff stared contemptuously down at the back of the major's head. "When he comes to, have him pack and get out! He's through!"

"If you're goin' down 'ere, sir," George said quietly, "I'm goin' along, if you've no objections. I know a bit of the lan-

guage, and I'm able to 'andle myself, if I do say it, sir."

Cliff nodded. "Thanks, George."

SQUATTING between two huts on the edge of the quarter, they watched. A fire blazed in the middle of the avenue. On all sides of it, back against the crowd, men sat cross-legged, slapping taut tops of small drums in their laps. Closer to the fire three blacks, daubed with white paint, danced back and forth, shaking spears tufted with brightly dyed feathers. Behind the drummers the whole quarter was assembled, packed together in a solid wall of sweating bodies, swaying to the hypnotic rhythm.

George shook his head in the shadows. "'At's bad, sir. 'At 'ere's a war meetin'. I saw one once back in the jungle."

"Listen to the chant," Cliff whispered. "What is it?"

"Just a war chant—a blood chant they calls it."

Suddenly a white man stepped out of the darkness between two huts down the avenue, whistled three times sharply and glided back into the shadows. Detaching himself from the group around the fire, a black walked swiftly toward the spot.

"Who was that?" Cliff hissed.

"Blast me, sir, I don't know. I'll wager the Bank of England 'e ain't 'ere for no good, though."

"We're working down that way. Come on!"

Creeping into the darkness behind the huts, Cliff felt his way cautiously through the rubble there. That the major had never inspected the quarter was obvious, or he wouldn't have permitted them to make a slum of it.

"'Ere's where we turn off, Mr. Randall. This'll bring us in behind 'em," George murmured.

The white man was gone, but the black stood looking down the row of huts toward the road. Gripping George's arm, Cliff motioned him to stand where he was. In the distance a car's motor coughed into activity and died away, swallowed up by the jungle.

Drawing his gun, Cliff slid into the avenue. The black jerked around, the cold muzzle pressed into his side. His lips moved, then closed tight when he saw

George standing alert in the background.

"We'll take him to the office, George," Cliff said. "You speak his language. Tell him to do as he's told and nothing will happen to his precious skin—but one bad move and this forty-five will blast it so full of holes he'll fall out of it!"

George spoke rapidly in Masai, making signs with his hands. Grunting, the black started to walk, shuffling his feet through the dust, Cliff a short step behind him.

"Now," Cliff said, facing the black in the little office, "you ask him who he was talking to between the buildings."

The man looked blank at George's questions.

"Bring that chair over here under the light," Cliff muttered. "Move the desk lamp closer so it shines in his eyes. That's it. Now shoot questions at him until you get the answer."

George wiped his hands on his shirt nervously. "If you'll excuse me sayin' so, Mr. Randall, these natives are so bloomin' tight mouthed we'll not get a thing out of 'im 'at way."

Cliff dropped into the swivel chair behind the desk. "Use whatever methods you think best then—but get the name of that man and what he was doing here!"

"Yes, sir." George swung on the black, talking in a swift scream of Masai, waving his arms and making faces. At last he stopped. "Watch 'im a minute, Mr. Randall. I'll be right back."

With the man staring sullenly across the desk at Cliff the room became as silent as the bottom of a well. Outside the light at the gate glared against the night. Beyond it the jungle rose, a black cliff pressing upwards to the stars. At last George came back with a handful of mud.

"Now we'll be seein' 'ow the brute answers to this!" He put the mud on the desk, shaped it roughly into a man with his fingers and took out his penknife. "This is the blasted funny part of these natives, sir."

Watching George's preparations, the man's eyes rolled in his head, his hands gripping his knees, the light glistening on the first starting of sweat on his forehead.

"This, you see, sir," George explained, "is 'is favorite wife or brother or 'oever 'e thinks most of. I'm goin' to torture 'im by proxy."

Then George went into his spell, chanting in Masai and a meaningless gibberish meant to be no more than mysterious, jerking his arms, passing his hands over his face and rolling his eyes, his face distorting into a mask of agony. The black, his eyes glued to those writhing features before him, took his hands from his knees to clutch the arms of his chair. Thick lips moving slowly, heavily, he shook his head, straining forward as if something bound him to the seat, his temples ridged with crowded blood vessels.

PENKNIFE in hand, George bent, mumbling over the little mud figure, a trickle of excess water running from it to the edge of the desk, dripping to the floor like blood. Suddenly standing upright, he stabbed wildly at it, missing by a hair's-breadth each time, the man in the chair groaning and squirming. At last the knife knicked one shoulder, then stuck into a leg.

A tortured scream wrenched from his throat, the black slid to the floor, convulsing. George whirled, howling gibberish, the penknife poised over his head. The man began to talk. He talked quickly, chokingly, his eyes rolling, spittle drooling out of the corner of his mouth, his flat nose dilating with each gasping breath. When he was done George put the knife down, helped him up, and pushed him into a closet, locking the door.

"Well?" Cliff asked, sliding his gun back into its holster.

"The man was Schweinfurt. They attack tomorrow at dawn. 'E came to tell 'em everything was arranged like, an' all their black brothers in Africa would rise at the same bloomin' time. It's down with England, it is, an' up with 'Itler!" George knocked the mud from the desk into the waste-basket.

"The old game of tag," Cliff said, tight lipped. "Keep them busy watching their back door and we can smash in the front. But this mine property happens to be American now. Who is Schweinfurt? What's he do besides promote unrest?"

"'E's one of the five Germans in the territory not under guard. 'E was in charge of Dobberson's last I 'eard. An old London 'ouse dealin' in copper or somethin'. 'E's an English citizen, 'e is.

'At's why the commissioner couldn't put 'im in detention as an enemy. 'E's down in Kuruman now."

Cliff got up. "Get out the station wagon then. We'll go in and visit Mr. Schweinfurt."

"Yes sir."

KURUMAN glittered with lights like a small jewel dropped on black velvet, her main street as deeply rutted as the road to the mines, ruts crossing and criss-crossing like rails in a train yard. Stopping the station wagon on the edge of town, they walked in over the board sidewalks, past the Haymarket Bar, the Casino, to where the light from the Monarch Bar pressed a golden square onto the road.

"'E 'angs out 'ere, generally," George said, and looked in. "But 'e ain't 'ere now."

"Where does he live?"

"Down to the Widow Fagan's. It's a piece down the road."

Outside the Widow Fagan's stood a car, its body smeared with mud, its fenders dented front and back. George crossed to it and felt the radiator.

"It's 'is car all right, and the motor's warm," he muttered.

Cliff looked at the house. A small frame building without paint or decoration, it exhaled the loneliness of a deserted farm but for a single light on the second floor behind a carefully drawn blind.

"'At's 'is room," George grunted.

No sound followed Cliff's knock. They stood looking at each other in the darkness, listening. At length, taking his gun, Cliff rapped with the butt of it, the sound chopping sharply into the silence of the street. There were slow, shuffling footsteps on the stairs, approaching the door, then it opened a crack to reveal a thin face, a long, pointed nose, and eyes blinking behind glasses.

"What is it?" the man asked.

"Open up, Schweinfurt," George growled, and kicked the door.

Cliff slipped into the hall. The light from the room above spread a soft candle-like glow over the stairs. Schweinfurt stood there blinking at them, his shirt off but still wearing his breeches and boots.

"We'll just go upstairs if you don't mind," George said, poking his gun into

the German's belly. "Get along with you now!"

"This is an outrage!" Schweinfurt spluttered. "I'll have the commissioner—"

"You'll 'ave nothin'," George muttered. "Mr. Randall 'ere'll take care of you proper."

"Take the gun out of his stomach, George," Cliff said slowly. "We'd just like a little talk with you, Mr. Schweinfurt. Will you lead the way up to your rooms?"

"Who are you, sir?" the man demanded.

"'E's the new owner of the mines," George grunted. "I'm tellin' you, Mr. Randall, you can't take this kind too easy."

Brushing past George, Schweinfurt mounted the stairs, Cliff following at his heels, one hand resting on the butt of the gun at his hip. George came along behind, stamping up the steps.

"Now please explain this forced entrance!" Schweinfurt fumed, facing them across his room.

"Certainly," Cliff smiled. "You have our apologies if we prove mistaken. What were you doing out at the mine property tonight?"

Pulling himself up stiffly the German looked down his nose at them. "I haven't stirred from this room—"

"'At's a lie!" George shouted. "I felt of your radiator before we come in, I did, and it was still warm!"

For a moment the man looked at George with pitying contempt, his thin lips curling, then smiling faintly he took out a cigarette. "May I remind you, I am a citizen of England. I have a right to go where, when and as I please."

"'En why'd you lie about it?" George demanded belligerently.

Schweinfurt turned appealing eyes on Cliff. "I must ask you, sir, to keep your friend under control. It is not enough that you force your way into a man's house, but you must also insult him!"

"George has the right slant," Cliff murmured. "Why did you say you hadn't left the room?"

"If I said I went to see a woman—would that satisfy you, or must you have still more details!" Schweinfurt barked.

"The commissioner'll make 'im talk, Mr. Randall. Just you go an' fetch 'im up 'ere. 'E lives over the Monarch Bar,"

George said softly " 'E 'as a way with 'im with these kind."

Cliff nodded but didn't go. "We had a black in the office, Schweinfurt—the same you spoke to between the huts an hour ago. You told him to attack tomorrow at dawn."

"You take the word of a negro to that of a white man?" the German asked, incredulous.

"If I thought he had reason to tell the truth—"

A black thunderhead of fury crossed Schweinfurt's thin face, then was gone. He smiled in open friendliness. "Just what reason would I have to do anything such as you suggest—me, a citizen of the British Empire. Not for Germany. I hate Germany! I gave up my allegiance to her with joy."

"That's what we'd like to know," Cliff murmured. "Thought maybe you'd be able to clear it up."

"Then put your mind at rest, Mr. Randall. I love England! I would not do her any harm by causing unrest here."

"You're a filthy liar, Schweinfurt!" George bellowed. "I arrest you as an enemy of the Crown an' the Dominion of South Africa—an' as a citizen I can!"

Schweinfurt looked at the gun in George's hand, at the lamp on the table, at Cliff, then the smile was gone from his mouth. The eyes behind the glasses hardened to chilled steel, the thin hands knotted into fists.

"Do you want to talk now," Cliff asked, "or shall I get the commissioner? Talk now and we might make a deal, providing you leave Africa."

"You go to hell, Mr. Randall! You have nothing on me—and this madman here—he shall pay dearly for his insulting manner and words. I personally will see to it if I die for it!"

"Watch him, George," Cliff said, and strode out.

THE barkeep in the Monarch was wiping glasses when Cliff walked in, the forty-five swinging against his leg, his eyes narrowed to shield them from the sudden bright light.

His eyes smiling as much as his mouth, the barkeep moved down the room. "Evenin', gove'nor," he said warmly. "Stranger

'ereabouts, ain't you? What'll it be?"

"The commissioner here?"

"Mr. Patterson? Yes, sir," and the man pointed at a table in the far corner. "'At's 'im."

Mr. Patterson glanced up at the mention of his name. A young man for the job, solidly built with a good pair of shoulders, a round face with a trim guardsman's mustache, the whole surmounted by a head of curly, almost black hair, he got up slowly and came across to Cliff.

"Mr. Randall, aren't you?" he asked, extending his hand. "We're glad to have you. Beastly shame you had to come just now, though. We've been expecting some sort of trouble, you know."

Cliff nodded. "We've got the trouble cornered. Schweinfurt. George is guarding him in his room."

"You have? I'm afraid I'm a bit slow on the uptake, sir. Just how do you mean?"

"I'll tell you while we're walking over there," Cliff said. "It's a plain case."

"Be back presently," Patterson flung at the barkeep where he stood directly behind them vaguely rubbing at a spot on the woodwork and straining his ears. Winking, he took Cliff's arm. "Let's trot then."

Mrs. Fagan's door stood wide open, the light from the upper room sifting into the hall. Cliff gripped the commissioner's arm impulsively. "Schweinfurt's car's is gone!" he muttered. "It was here—in front of the house!"

Mr. Patterson nodded, peering up and down the street.

Cliff went up the stairs two at a time, the panting commissioner at his heels. George lay sprawled on the floor, his gun gone, his head turned sideways, resting on his arm.

"A nasty crack on the head," Mr. Patterson murmured at last, kneeling beside him. "He'll be all right, though."

Crossing to the dresser, Cliff jerked open drawer after drawer looking for papers, anything that would make the man's connection with the unrest plainer. Getting up, Patterson dusted off his hands.

"I'll have to get right back to the Monarch. Wire Mafeking for troops. As it is they won't arrive before tomorrow evening, even by lorry. If there's trouble meantime give me a call. There are a

few men in town, not many, but perhaps enough to make a show. I'll put out an arrest warrant for Schweinfurt, too."

George stirred on the floor, groaning. His eyes opened and closed, blinking, then he pulled himself up, rubbing the side of his head. "'At blasted rat!" he muttered. "'E cracked me a good one, 'e did! I don't know 'ow 'e managed it even."

Smiling dimly, the commissioner nodded to Cliff and went out. They heard his feet descending the stairs, then the door below closed with a snap.

"Well," Cliff said disgustedly, "we might as well head back for the mine. Schweinfurt won't show here again tonight—though he'll probably sneak in some time to get his things. With a warrant out for him he'll be picked up when he does."

"When 'e is," George muttered, "I'd 'preciate just one blasted swing at 'is 'ead!"

They sped back to the mine.

As the station wagon rolled into its corrugated iron garage attached to the warehouse Cliff dropped to the concrete floor, shifted the holster at his hip so that it didn't rub him sore, and spat.

"Get all the white help up to the major's," he said. "We're not going to be caught napping if they do attack at dawn!"

"Yes, sir." George dropped down from the cab, banging the car door closed. "I'll give 'em three quick ones on the steam whistle. It's assembly 'ere."

"And come over right after," Cliff added. "While you're in the arresting mood I want you to take in the major."

George was open mouthed. "The major, sir? For what?"

"General suspicion! If he's not working with Schweinfurt and the blacks he'll have to prove it!"

"Yes, sir, an' maybe you're thinkin' I 'ad somethin' to do with it, too?"

Cliff smiled stiffly. "You, too—when I first came. Tonight I left you with a gun trained on Schweinfurt. I returned to find him gone and you knocked out. You didn't know how it had happened—so what should a person think?"

"Bless me, sir," George breathed, "if you ain't got it all figured. 'Ere's my gun" he held it out, "take it an' put a bullet in my 'ead, sir."

"Don't be foolish!"

"I'm not, sir." His eyes grew large, misty. "If I'm 'at stinkin' a dog, sir, you'd be doin' my people a favor."

Taking the gun, Cliff turned it around, handing the butt back. "Sound the assembly, George. You're all right."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," he murmured fervently.

THE candles, fitfully guttering in their sconces, threw dancing macabre shadows over the walls and ceilings of the long dining room. The major's place was empty. Cliff crossed the room, switched on the electric light and blew out the smoking wicks.

"Major Coats!" he called.

There was no answer, not even the soft pad of servants' feet on the polished wooden floors. Striding to the door of the major's bedroom, Cliff thrust it open. The place was in inky blackness. Outside the whistle of the steam plant screamed its signal at the stars, three quick blasts that shattered the silence, then left an even deeper silence behind. Cliff switched on the lights.

Stretched across his big bed lay the major, his eyes staring at the ceiling, one hand clutching the blanket, his mouth twisted into a half snarl, a crimson stain under his head. George came in, whistling.

"Look here," Cliff muttered without turning.

Crossing the room, George stood beside him in the doorway. His mouth dropping open, he swallowed twice, hard. "Damn me, sir—murdered!" he breathed. "'Is blasted throat slit!"

"One of the servants, I'd say—"

"I'll search the bloomin' place, sir!" George swung away from the door.

"No—" Cliff switched off the light and closed the door. "We haven't time for that! Are there any arms besides what we're carrying?"

"Ten rifles, sir, a brace or two of pistols and two boxes of ammunition—they're in the warehouse."

"Okay—now where's the help, and how many are there?" Crossing the room as he spoke, Cliff opened the door to look out. "Are there any women or children?"

"'Ere's some fifteen men, sir, ten of 'em married with their wives 'ere. 'Ere's

no children, the major never allowed 'em."

A man appeared in the doorway, peering in undecidedly. Behind him stood another, and between the door and the light at the gate were others, coming at a trot.

"We 'eard the whistle sir," the first man murmured. "Is somethin' wrong?" "Come in, come in," Cliff said.

The room seemed to be suddenly crowded with men, all of them with drawn, worried faces, murmuring to each other, looking inquiringly at Cliff. George crossed to stand behind the table. At a nod from Cliff he rapped the top with the handle of a knife.

"Boys," he cried, "quiet! This 'ere is Mr. Randall, the new owner of the mine. 'E's got somethin' to say."

Cliff went behind the table, nodded and moistened his lips. "It's too bad we've got to meet like this instead of more informally, men, but there's trouble. Major Coats has been murdered. Tomorrow at dawn there is to be an attack on the mine property. Probably the whole territory if their plans go through—but the natives formerly employed 'ere are after us. Kuruman is too far away. At a single blast on the whistle every man is to run for the warehouse. That clear?"

A loud volume of muttering rose from the gathering like a sudden swirling cloud of smoke. George rapped on the table again.

"We're not," Cliff added, "just trying to frighten you or your women. This trouble has been coming. Now go back to your cottages and break the news, but do it gently. If you hear the whistle come on the run with whatever you wish to save, and all the food you have. If you prefer to move into the warehouse tonight George will open it."

They went out in twos and threes, talking excitedly amongst themselves. Following to the door, George stood there looking after them. Finally, shaking his head, he turned back into the room.

"It's a filthy mess, sir. 'Ere's war in Europe, thousands of miles away, and it's got to reach a dirty arm even down into 'ere. Anyway the major cleared 'imself with 'is death, 'e did. I'm a bit glad 'e did, poor blighter."

Cliff tried a grin but gave it up. His pulse was thundering in his temples and

inside something was shaking. "Go over to the warehouse, George. Check the water supply, shells, guns and everything else we'll need."

"Yes sir."

WITH the first gray light of dawn Cliff was standing before the steam plant watching the edge of the jungle beyond the fence. Above him in an opened window sat George, one hand next to the steam whistle's trip cord, the other holding a smoking cigarette.

The gray light gave way to a rose-tinted pearl, a single widening ribbon over the tops of the distant trees. In the west the last of the stars fought for life, glittering coldly, determinedly. Then it came. A single black, smeared with white, rose up out of the grass just beyond the fence and, brandishing a long rifle over his fuzzy head, opened his mouth in a shrill war-cry.

Yanking down on the cord, George split the man's battle shout with the shriek of escaping steam. There was a shot from the edge of the jungle, another, then short, chopping volleys. Those who hadn't moved into the warehouse during the night tumbled out of the cottages, piled chin-high with possessions, and staggered toward the gray building near the pit.

Lugging a suitcase, a last-minute straggler burst from one of the furthest cottages at a run. Cliff shouted at him to zig-zag—and the next instant, his knees doubling under him, he was slumped over the bag.

George came out of the steam plant, pistol in hand, shouting. "Get into the warehouse, Mr. Randall! I'll fetch 'at lad!"

When he reached the man Cliff was on his heels. Between them they raised him, and ran for cover, the toes of his shoes dragging two crooked furrows in the dirt.

"All right," Cliff cried as George slammed the warehouse door and dropped the cross bar into place, "every man at a window! Keep out of sight and don't shoot unless you have a clear shot. We've only one box of rifle shells and one of pistol."

The women made a couch of blankets and boxes for the wounded man, then broke open the cartons of shells, loaded clips.

"I put the power on the fence," George murmured. "'At'll get a few if they try to climb over!"

There were no more shots. Nothing. The men at the windows grew restive, smoking and muttering amongst themselves, edging over every now and then to look out.

"Smart," Cliff murmured finally, watching through his slot, "very clever!"

George stood on his toes to peer out. "A bloomin' batterin' ram they've got," he cried. "A whole blasted tree!"

The gate went down before their drive. Dropping the ram on top of it they rushed forward toward the empty cottages, shaking their long rifles over their heads as they waved assagais for centuries. Others poured through the broken gate, a solid black stream of men, their sweating bodies smeared with white, their fuzy heads turning and bobbing.

Smoke curled up from the first cottage, then flames licked its white clapboard sides. Clothing and furniture, boxes and baskets were carried from the others, heaped as booty in the roadway, then smoke rose from another and another, until the entire street was burning briskly, vomiting a thick pall of smoke across the still jungle, a black cloud that hung almost motionless amongst the tree tops.

Screaming, waving their long guns, they came in a rush toward the warehouse. Wave on wave, their mouths open, their legs lifted high with each bounding step, their painted chests and faces glistening in the gray dawn.

"Wait until they're close!" Cliff shouted. "Every shell must count!"

Their round rifle balls chattered against the concrete sides of the building, chipping at the corners, around the windows, smashing into the door. George moved along the wall to a window, a pistol in each hand.

"Fire!" Cliff roared.

THE blacks were close enough to see the dust on their shoulders. Knocking the glass out of the narrow slot he had been peering through, Cliff leveled his pistol at the first wave and fired. A big buck, his mouth open in a war cry, spun when the forty-five crashed into his chest, threw his long gun into the air and dropped

in a heap. The man behind him jumped his fallen body to catch the second slug full in the face. He went over backward as cleanly as if someone had pushed him.

With a scream one of the men at the windows crumpled to the stone floor, his hands over his face, blood trickling between the fingers. Another snatched up his fallen rifle to stand over him, the muzzle jutting out of the window again, his cheek against the butt. Pulling the wounded fellow from between his legs, some of the women laid him on a bench. A bluish-gray cloud of acrid smoke hung still and stifling in the air. They loosened his collar.

Cliff turned back to his window. The blacks were retreating, leaping like rabbits over the fallen. Catching a following rifle bullet, one went to his knees, then slid forward on his face to lie still. Turning at the fence, they gathered in a knot, milling and churning like black lava, only to come on again in closed, solid ranks. The rifles bit into them viciously, rapidly, dropping a man flat here, sending one crawling toward the rear there, until they were fanned out with great gaps between them.

Once more they retreated to the fence. Cliff slipped the cylinder out of his pistol, knocked the empties from it and refilled with shells from his belt. George came over, watched him a moment, and returned to his station.

They didn't attack again until the sun had climbed high in the heavens. Its white rays, beating down on the corrugated iron roof of the warehouse, heated its interior to almost blast furnace temperature. Then they began firing from the ruins of the cottages, the windows of the steam plant, keeping under cover, aiming carefully, casually at the windows, firing slowly.

Glass splintered with a sharp tinkling and a man slid to the floor, a blue hole in the center of his forehead. Aiming his pistol for a long minute at a head jutting above a piece of charred furniture in the cottage section, George pulled the trigger. The head and shoulders of a black leaped into view and fell forward over the thing, arms dangling.

"Mr. Randall," a man shouted, "we've only a 'andful of shells each now!"

Leaving his window George approached the pile of cartons. Cliff went over, his

pistol in his hand. Lifting the empty boxes a woman let them fall in a significant shower.

"There should be help soon," Cliff said quietly. "If the troops left at dawn even over rutty roads, they ought to be close to Kuruman by now."

"We couldn't 'old out, sir," George murmured. "With a 'andful for each man we'd be done 'fore sundown."

Cliff looked around him. Every man was watching silently, even the women, grouped closely near the wounded, their eyes serious, intent, waiting. Striking a corner of the building a ball shrilled off, ricocheting into space. Running from his post at a window one of the men went into a corner and retched, then came back, his face greenish, his eyes sunken, dark.

"Okay." Cliff thrust his gun into its holster. "There's still a good chance. Keep them busy out there, but don't shoot needlessly. You, George, start the stationwagon. There's a door between the garage and this building, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir—but—"

"The hell with buts! Get the car started!"

"Yes, sir. We'll need a rifle." Pushing both his guns into his belt George started for the connecting door.

"I'll have my revolver. A rifle'd be clumsy to handle in a close play," Cliff said.

George stopped in his tracks. "You're not thinkin' of goin' it alone, sir?"

"Exactly!" Cliff said quietly. "You're needed here. I'm leaving you in charge, and it's a damned big job! Now get on!"

Shaking his head dubiously, George went through the door. In a minute the stationwagon's motor roared, throttle open, then quieted to a steady idle. Cliff glanced around him once more. The men turned slowly back to their windows, the women unclasped their hands and returned to the work before them. Cliff went out through the narrow connecting door.

GETTING in behind the wheel he stepped on the accelerator, listened to the motor, then shut it down again. George was standing beside the door, watching him. Reaching out, he slapped the back of his hand on his chest, grinning.

"Don't look so damned glum, George!" he cried. "You've got to keep them in there cheered up. I'll get through to Kuruman somehow, and if the troops aren't there maybe I can get some men—at least some shells."

"Yes, sir," George murmured, still looking disappointed.

"When I nod, open the doors, and keep out of the way. I'm going out as fast as this thing will move."

Sticking out his hand, George gave Cliff's a firm squeeze. "Good luck, sir." Swinging away abruptly he stood by the chain that would swing the doors overhead.

"Now!" Cliff shouted, nodding.

Slowly, at first, the doors moved upwards, then more quickly. Watching it, Cliff listened to the rattle of the chain impatiently, the rumble of the rollers on their tracks, then there was clearance enough and he gave the motor a stream of gas.

Roaring out of the garage at full throttle, he wrenched the wheel sharply, bounced across a flowerbed, shot between the warehouse and the office, one fender scraping against the warehouse wall, then ripped into the drive to the gates, hunched over the wheel to reduce whatever target he might make.

No shots crashed into the car. The natives were too startled to think. He had counted on that. Then a black leaped out of the ruins of a cottage, waving his rifle and shouting. Cliff looked at him, past him to where the fallen gate lay under the slim trunk of the tree they had used for a battering-ram. The car would just clear the pole with nothing to spare.

Suddenly going to one knee, the black brought the butt of his rifle to his shoulder. Cliff saw him then, saw the black muzzle leering at him through the windshield. Other blacks were pouring out of the ruins, bellowing at the top of their lungs, darting in to cut him off. With a jerk of the wheel he swung the car sharply. Leaping up, the first man threw his hands out before him to stop it, then it hit with a jolt that shook it to its wheel bolts, and he was gone, rolling in the dust.

Others leaped. Hands clawed the sides of the stationwagon and let go, some of them streaking its golden panels with

blood. One hung on near the door, his pegs of filed teeth bared, his little eyes gleaming like pin points of radium at the prospect of victory. He tried to crawl through the window, wriggling his head and shoulders inside. His hands tight on the jerking wheel, so tight the knuckles glared whitely against the tan, Cliff gritted his teeth.

There was one chance, just one, he told himself, and shot at the shattered fence. The black saw his plan and tried in a desperate lunge to tear out the side of the car to get in, then the mangled iron of the fence raked the front fender, slashed across the door and he was gone, ripped from his perch, his body broken and torn.

Beyond the gates Cliff swerved across the flat grass-land to the rutted road. With a sickening lurch the wheels smashed into the ruts, swayed drunkenly and went on, seemingly trying to shake off the body above them.

A single shot, ripping out of the cloud of dust rising behind the stationwagon, sent it leaping from the ruts like a startled horse. The rear-end, swinging in an arc, slid sideways, bounded back into the ruts and out again, while Cliff grimly fought the wheel. Abruptly, with the crack of shearing metal, it rolled onto its top, then crashed to its side, pressing against the crowding jungle.

His head throbbing, Cliff pulled himself through the window onto the ground. The fact he could move without stabbing pains that meant broken bones sent a feeling of relief surging through him, when an elated shout brought him up sharp. The black who had shot out his rear tire was running down the road. Dropping flat beside the car, Cliff eased his pistol from its holster and waited.

Coming up behind the car, the man looked at the broken axle, rubbed amazed, admiring hands over the splintered body and dented fenders—then rounding the corner of the body stood looking in utter astonishment at Cliff, at the blunt, hollow mouth of the forty-five pointing up at him.

The bullet thudding into his black body just above the belly bulge, he went down ridiculously slowly, a surprised, startled look on his loose face, mouth open, eyes turned back into his head. Rolling out of

his way, Cliff got up, rubbing his legs and arms to restore life to the bruised muscles.

Breaking into an easy run, he kept to the center of the road, between the ruts, the gun in its holster slapping against his leg, his lips parted to make breathing easier and to save a little lung power for a spurt if another black should bob out of the jungle.

A CAR appeared around a bend in the road, its front wheels wobbling violently in the ruts. Then he made out the face of Mr. Patterson behind the dusty windshield. Sprinting toward it, Cliff waved his arms.

"They've attacked!" he shouted, running up beside it. "The whites are locked in the warehouse—shells almost gone and outnumbered five to one!"

Mr. Patterson bit his lip nervously. "There's no one in Kuruman but women right now—the men are all out on their jobs—and the troops haven't arrived."

Cliff almost heard the crash of his hopes, then he spat and his jaw hardened. "Then, damn it, we'll meet them!"

"Turn around on this narrow road! If we go off the edge we're mired!"

"Back it up to a clearing!"

"All the way to Kuruman—in these ruts," said Mr. Patterson incredulously. "You're mad!"

Cliff was shaking with rage as he wrenched the door open. "I'll do it or rip her apart! Push over!"

"This is Government property, Mr. Randall!" the commissioner shouted.

Throwing her into reverse, Cliff cast a quick look at the man beside him, a quirk at the corner of his mouth. "And to hell with the government and its damned red tape!"

The gears meshed, growling into action, and the car shot down the road backward, jumping the ruts and falling back into them, Cliff leaning out of the door on his side, his shoulders twisted to look back, his neck aching. The road seemed endless and to possess a thousand tortuous turns he hadn't noticed before, then a small clearing showed on one side. He swung into it, whipped the wheels around and went for Kuruman frontward, the speedometer needle flirting with sixty, the

entire car leaping off the ground from time to time as the wheels roared out of the ruts.

"Blow the horn as we go through town," Mr. Patterson muttered, "and they'll sound the siren above my office to call the men in. And for Heaven's sake, don't kill us!"

Cliff grinned grimly. Kuruman came up fast, a few scattered buildings, then the town, its rutted, dusty main street. Cliff laid on the horn and kept it down. On the other side of town the road to Mafeking widened another car's width and aside from a hole here and there, was better surfaced. The speedometer needle crawled past sixty, played with seventy, then seventy-five.

"Mr. Randall!" the commissioner groaned.

His eyes glued on the road, Cliff kept his foot down, the air screaming past the side windows, the tires singing a shrill song to the heavens. And then abruptly a truck appeared on the road far ahead, behind it another, and behind that another, laden with men in khaki topees and uniforms, barrels of rifles jutting over their shoulders from behind. Cutting the motor, Cliff eased on the brakes and kept increasing the pressure until they slid to a stop across the road in front of the first truck.

Mr. Patterson got down slowly, weakly, walked toward the rear of his car, then stopped halfway there and threw up his lunch. Getting out of the cab of the first truck, an officer came across the road, a frown between his wide eyes, his brown face lean and hard. Cliff got out from behind the wheel.

"Mr. Patterson," he said to the officer, indicating the commissioner, "Commissioner stationed at Kuruman."

The officer nodded. "I'm Captain Thoms—"

Wiping his mouth the commissioner leaned weakly against the side of his car, his face as colorless as water. "Kuruman, Captain. My men are cornered in the mine company warehouse, running out of shells and outnumbered!"

Captain Thoms saluted. "The trucks are capable of speed, though it isn't the best thing for them on these roads—"

"The hell with that, Captain!" Cliff

snapped. "I'll buy them afterwards and replace them with new ones— There are women in that warehouse!"

Blinking against the sun, the captain swung on his heel and strode back to his place in the lead truck. Getting Mr. Patterson under the arm, Cliff almost lifted him into his seat in the car, climbed in himself and brought it around, facing back to Kuruman. As the truck behind them started with a roar of power, Cliff slipped the clutch into place.

WHEN they hit Kuruman every bar and verandah poured men into the street. A glance at the troops and they sprang into action. Before the last truck had cleared town it was tailed by a growing line of private cars and stationwagons, their drivers trying to keep on the road while they buckled on holsters at the same time.

A half mile short of the mine property Cliff stopped the car on Mr. Patterson's insistence, dropped to the road and strode back to the first truck. Captain Thoms got out, brushing dust off his face and blowing his nose.

"Mine's a half mile further on, Captain," Cliff said. "The gate's down. You can roll right in. I'd like to ride up with your men—the Commissioner hasn't a stomach for it."

"Right." Lifting a hand he called an order. Other men jumped down from the trucks, coming up at the double-quick. "Mine's a half mile on, gentlemen. Have the men in your trucks unlimber and load for action. We're going right into the property!"

Cliff climbed up into the truck, then they rumbled into motion, crawling slowly forward now, the men in them preparing for action, squatting below the steel sides, tipping their topees against the glaring sun. Cliff broke open his forty-five, flicked out the exploded shell, put in a new one and snapped it shut.

He saw the gates ahead, and beyond them the line of blackened ruins that had been trim white cottages. From the warehouse he saw occasional puffs of smoke, then heard the short bark of the guns. The blacks were scattered through the ruins, their entire attention on the warehouse. The truck turned, rumbled

smoothly over the grass. A black stood up, saw them, and leaped for the fence. Cliff dropped him halfway up the wire and saw him tumble back, writhing.

The men around Cliff were firing at will now, their brown cheeks crushed against the butts of their rifles, their eyes squinting. Another truck rolled in, passed them and stopped on the flank of the ruins. Cliff dropped down to the ground to squat near the rear wheels. A black ran toward him, his rifle held over his head as a club. Cliff let him get close, so near he could smell the stench of his filth-caked body, then he jerked the trigger and the man went down in a loose heap, his middle gouged out.

Men were dropping down out of the trucks now, running into the ruins. Blacks poured out of the other side and raced across the property toward the mine pit and the far fence. Cliff chopped at them as they ran. He saw one crumple and roll in the dust before his hammer clicked on empties.

CAPTAIN THOMS and the commissioner were in the warehouse when Cliff reached it. The commissioner was mopping his sweating face and spitting dust.

"How are things here, George?" he asked.

"Not bad, sir. We've five killed, including the major. 'E was murdered by one of 'em last night, 'e was. Me and Mr. Randall found 'im with 'is throat slit. Then 'ere's some five or six wounded a bit—three so they couldn't fight on. 'At's all."

The captain glanced out through the open door, "We've all Kuruman with us. By the way, Mr. Patterson, any idea who started this, or what it started over?"

"I've a warrant out for him—man by the name of Schweinfurt. British citizen, formerly German—and still German by his actions. It was to be a general uprising running through all Crown Colonies beginning at dawn this morning."

"Sort of agent," the captain muttered. "Fortunately most of their general riots fizzle. I remember once—"

Cliff snapped his fingers. "Commissioner," he cried, "there's no one in Kuruman now! This is Schweinfurt's chance

if he's been watching for it!" He darted through the door, across the drive, past the line of trucks and cars to where the commissioner's stood.

He saw George out of the corner of his eye, running toward the car, waving his arms and shouting for him to wait. Throwing it into gear he roared through the smashed gateway, across the level grass into the ruts, then bore down slowly on the accelerator until the needle touched fifty, the car bouncing so violently it took all his strength to hold her.

Outside the house George had called Widow Fagan's stood a car as he had expected, its motor idling, one of its doors open. Pulling up in front of it, Cliff leaped to the ground, bounded onto the verandah, kicked open the door and went up the stairs three at a time. Schweinfurt met him, his arms loaded with clothes, in the upper hall.

For a moment the German stood there, surprised, looking at him. Then, the things in his arms falling to the floor, he backed up until he was in his room. Cliff followed, and he backed across the room, putting the heavy table in the center between them.

"Not so fast, Mr. Schweinfurt," he murmured finally. "There's a few people would like to see you. They'll be here in the next few minutes."

The German's mouth worked silently, his eyes livid with hate, then he showed his teeth in a tight, thin-lipped grin. "You are smart, Mr. Randall—too smart!" he breathed.

Cliff found himself looking down a short automatic in the man's hand. How it had gotten there in that instant he hardly knew. The German had moved one hand swift as light flashing through space, and then it had been there, pointing across the table at his belly. He had a brief picture of some such lightning movement taking slow moving George off guard when he had been left alone with this man. But he didn't intend to be found as George had been, unconscious on the floor, his man gone.

"That won't do you any good," he said slowly. "Put it down and stop playing soldier!"

"I could say that to you, Mr. Randall! In Europe a war is being fought between

my country and England—it is not your war—”

“You’re a British citizen—”

Schweinfurt spat onto the table. “English pigs!” he thundered.

“All right then. But the mine properties happen to be mine. I’m American!” Cliff said. “If you want to war, okay—but leave my property alone or pay for the damage!”

“Now you are really being smart! You will be repaid, Mr. Randall. The transfer of the property was so recent—and it is one of the best mines in the world—well—” Schweinfurt shrugged, “as you agree, this is not your war—” he moved forward as if to come around the table.

“One minute, *hombre!*” Cliff cried. “There are dead men up there—you can’t pay for that!”

TAKING a step back, the German looked at Cliff an instant, the color draining from his face, his thin nostrils arched. “Mr. Randall,” he spoke very slowly, ponderously, like a judge pronouncing a dire sentence, “I will give you just three to get out of my way or suffer the consequences!”

“Count then, damn you!” Cliff roared.

“Very well. One!” he said, his eyes narrowing. “I do not like to do this. Two!”

Almost at the same moment he said “three” Cliff seized the heavy table between them and hurled it over against him. The gun went off close to the crashing edge, its flame biting across at Cliff, then Schweinfurt went down, thrown backwards as the table hit him at hip level.

Cliff felt a stab of pain in his left

shoulder, but it was too late to stop his rush. Hurtling over the fallen table, he came down on top of Schweinfurt before he could begin to rise. Cursing, the German tried to draw the automatic between them, the muzzle against Cliff’s head. His knees on the man’s chest and belly, Cliff knocked his arm back, bending the wrist until he was sure it would crack off, before the gun finally fell from his fingers.

Bringing a fist up from the floor, Schweinfurt caught Cliff under the chin, flush on the Adam’s apple, choking off his breath, filling his eyes with tears. Biting into his lip with the pain of his shoulder, Cliff forced his fingers down, inching them into the man’s indrawn neck, squirming them past the hunched, guarding shoulders, the lowered chin, until they closed on his windpipe, then he crushed with both thumbs, his eyes shut against the blows the man threw up at him, crashing against his chin and temples.

There were rapid footsteps on the stairs, loud voices, then George, backed by Captain Thoms and Commissioner Patterson, stood in the doorway. Looking up at them, Cliff tried to smile, but his lips were too swollen, one eye closed and his shoulder sticky with blood.

“I’m through!” George shouted in hurt anger, turning Schweinfurt over. “I quit! You went off and killed the bloody pig without even givin’ me a bloomin’ crack at ’is blasted ’ead! An’ it’s our own war too, an’ ’e’s probably the only stinkin’ buzzard I’ll ever be seein’ down ’ere!”

Cliff got up painfully. “Sorry, George. I’ll boot your salary up—give you the major’s post. I wasn’t thinking of your war—I had to do it. It was him or me—and I preferred it to be him.”



A Fiction House Magazine



CANNIBAL ISLE

By Albert Richard Wetjen

Gunman, pirate, killer—Stinger Seave was all of these. Yet, when a friend called for help, though it were half a world away, Seave came with roaring guns!

IF "Stinger" Seave was a terror to his enemies he was sometimes no less a terror to his friends because of the unreasonable lengths he would at times go to serve them. It was just one human trait in the otherwise iron little man.

He loved Big Bill Gunther as he might have loved a son or brother. Between the two there were twenty years and more of such a friendship as is seldom seen.

The first meeting of the two men was utterly dramatic. Gunther was entering Montague Bay on the coast of New Britain one hot afternoon, bent on a recruiting cruise for the Queensland plantations. In those days New Britain was sudden death for the unwise, and Montague Bay averaged two ships cut off a year. Gunther therefore was busily directing the rigging of barbed wire round his rails while his mate overhauled the whaleboats and stored dynamite capped and fused in the lockers, when all hands were astonished to see a ship's boat shoot out from behind a mangrove-covered headland and head for the sea. It altered its course apparently on seeing the schooner, and Gunther, snatching up his glasses, saw a frail figure in stained ducks balanced in the stern sheets and holding the tiller with one hand.

He called to his mate to stand by with a line as the whaleboat sheered alongside with a slatting of canvas and there clambered rather slowly to the ship's deck a slender, sandy-haired man with a ragged little mustache, very clear and light blue eyes, and a great red stain all down one side of his ducks.

He halted before Gunther, peered blinking up at the big, black-bearded sailor, and said, quite gently, "Can you oblige me, sir, with some .45 shells?"

Gunther almost dropped from astonishment. It is, you understand, rather amazing to have a perfect stranger board your

ship off a coast where you don't expect to see a white man at all and then ask you point blank for ammunition.

Gunther choked, "What?—Shells?"

The stranger stood, swaying a little, but perfectly cool and composed, though he was quite obviously badly wounded.

"Forty-fives," he repeated, nodding. "I will have to pay you later."

"Come aft!" snapped Gunther, turning and striding away. "You're crazy."

The two men went up on the poop and down to the main cabin, followed by the eyes of all the astonished crew. In the main cabin Gunther pulled open a drawer, took out a box of shells and tossed them on the table.

"What next?" he asked grimly.

"If I may suggest," the little man murmured, "perhaps some whiskey."

Without comment Gunther got a bottle and some glasses and poured drinks. The stranger finished his, poured another and finished that. He seemed to feel better, and producing a gun from under his left armpit proceeded to load it with a dexterity that bespoke long practice.

When he had finished he blinked up at the bearded sailor and said, "Thank you very much. I'll have to pay you later, I'm afraid."

Picking up the open box of shells he started quite coolly for the companion. It was too much for Gunther's patience and his teeming curiosity.

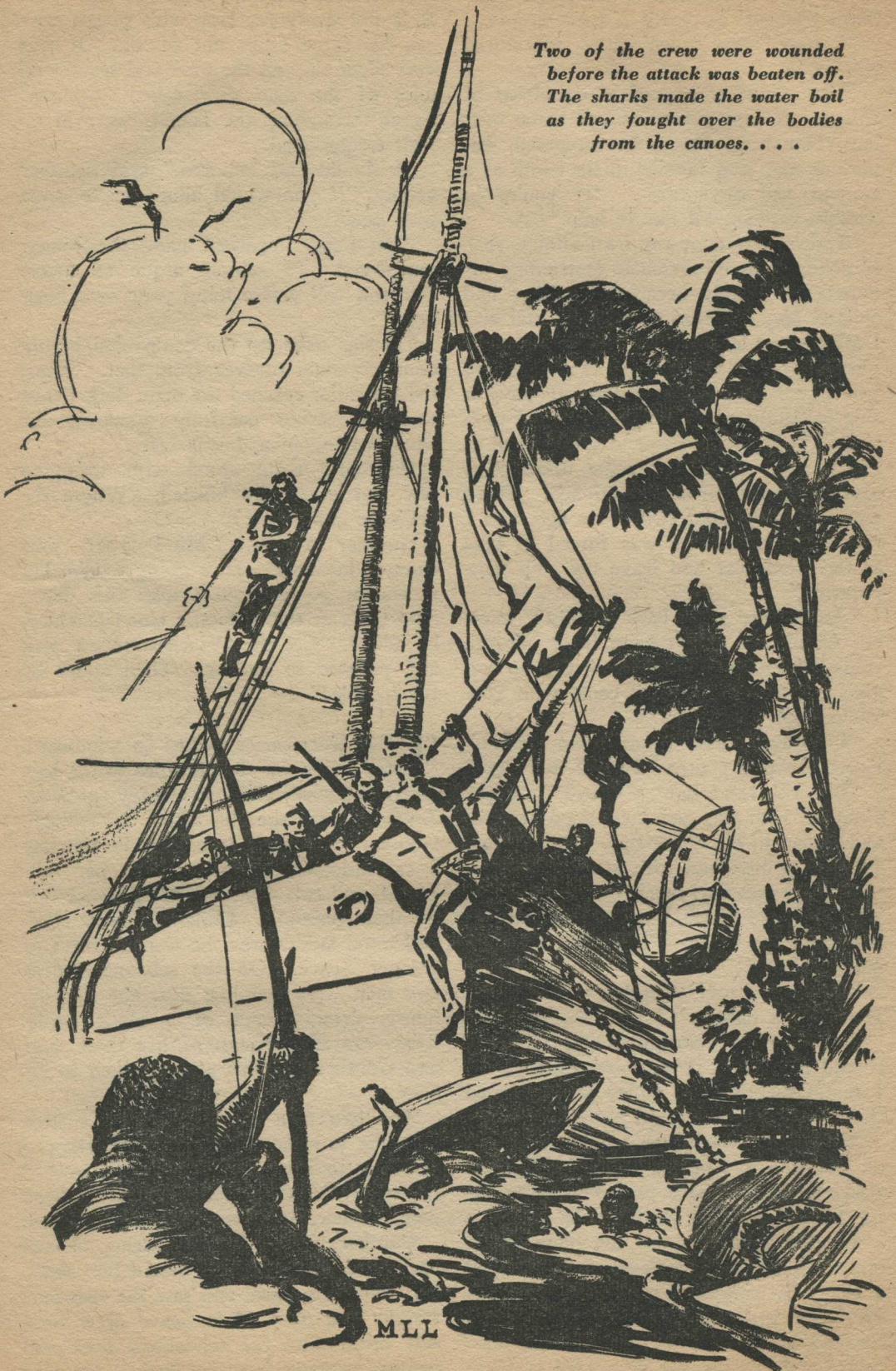
HE bellowed, "Hi! . . . Sit down and do some explaining. Who the hell are you?"

The stranger turned, very polite and apparently anxious to please.

"I'm in rather a hurry," he murmured. "You must excuse me. My name is Seave."

"Seave?" echoed Gunther in an altered

*Two of the crew were wounded
before the attack was beaten off.
The sharks made the water boil
as they fought over the bodies
from the canoes. . . .*



voice, and he seemed to shrink a little. "Not 'Stinger' Seave?"

"I have been called that," murmured his visitor.

"Oh." Gunther seemed at somewhat of a loss. A vast politeness had come over him, though he was a hot-tempered, imperious man and famous in the south as a seaman and adventurer. "If you're in trouble, captain, I'd like to help."

"I always arrange my own affairs, sir," responded Seave, obviously restraining his impatience merely because the other had obliged him. "From your beard and size I take it you are Captain Gunther, though I've never seen you before. I'm sure you will understand my position. I have a ship in Montague Bay with a crew I took aboard at Apia. I stripped a pearl bed at Pondo, and there was some disaffection over the shares to be apportioned. There was a mutiny about two hours ago, and I ran out of shells. I was forced to take to the whaleboat and leave my ship temporarily."

"And you're going back to fight?" burst out Gunther. "Don't be a fool! You're wounded, man! Let me patch you up and give you a feed, and I'll come with you. We're both sailors . . ."

"I always attend to my own affairs," Seave broke in gently. "I think that's all."

"But you can't fight a crowd!" choked Gunther, who was genuinely good-hearted, and a man to his finger-tips. "By Heaven, I'll send a boat-load with you. How many men were you carrying?"

"Ten," said Seave, unperturbed and still humoring the other. "But there are now only seven."

"You got three!" Gunther's face lit up. He loved a fighter.

"Just three," murmured Seave. "It should be six. I never miss, usually, but I might mention my coffee was drugged this morning and I could hardly see."

The gentle voice was troubled, for of all things Seave prided himself on, if he could be said to have pride, his astonishing accuracy with a gun was the chief.

Gunther strode across the main cabin, and without a word took down from a peg a heavy cartridge belt with a full holster. He began to buckle it on. When he had finished he poured out two more drinks. Seave took his because he needed it, Gun-

ther because he was shaken to the core. It is not everyone, sick with drugs, who can hit three times out of six. It was very clear that all the mad and wonderful tales of the man they called "Stinger" Seave throughout the Islands were in no whit exaggerated.

"I should feel honored," said Gunther grimly, "if you would allow me to come with you."

"I'm a very impatient man," the Stinger murmured. "I seldom argue so much. But you will please mind your own business."

He was gone up the companion before Gunther could recover from that. When the big sailor reached the main deck Seave was clambering painfully down to his whaleboat again and was off.

Gunther's mate stood with dropping jaw, but eventually blurted, "Where the hell's he going now?"

Gunther roared, "Mind your own damned business! He's going to die, but remember you've seen a man this day!" And then, as the mate still stood petrified, he added, "Get the Winchesters on deck and prepare to anchor. Then stand by for trouble!"

THE *Gottenheim* tacked to windward, and made for the entrance to the bay, where the whaleboat was already speeding. An hour later she slid round a headland. Gunther saw lying at anchor in the bay a rakish-looking schooner with her sails furled, and two whaleboats beside her fast by their painters. Climbing up a rope-and-wood ladder was the slender form of Stinger Seave. On the schooner's deck two men were standing near the midship house, drinking out of a black bottle. That was all the sign of life there was, and Gunther kept his glasses glued to his eyes.

The two men on the schooner's deck suddenly saw the *Gottenheim*, and stopped drinking to shout. They started toward the rail. At that moment Seave's head rose to view, and they stopped, stupefied.

Gunther, intent on the scene, choked back an excited oath. He heard two shots, followed by a third, and saw the two men stagger and drop while Seave drew himself upright on the schooner's deck and waited, swaying from weakness. Gunther

guessed his weakness was such he did not dare try to leave the support of the rail behind him and seek out the other mutineers.

The Stinger's reappearance with fresh ammunition must have been somewhat of a shock to men satisfied he had escaped to a quick death without provisions or shells, for Gunther saw three or four variously dressed figures rush on the poop from below, then halt to stare at their former captain.

Gunther's mate, a burly, black-mustached man with a thorough knowledge of the Islands and the sea, was standing behind him and getting restless. He had his own pair of glasses, and had watched everything that had transpired. Now he turned to Gunther with some hesitancy, for experience had taught him the temper of the big sailor. But he said, firmly enough, "Don't you think we ought to chip in, sir? One man against six or seven, and mutineers at that . . ."

Gunther swore. "Don't you know me well enough to know I'd be there if I could? That man's Stinger Seave! He'd kill me if I interfered."

"Stinger Seave?" stammered the mate, staring with all his eyes at the schooner. "Is *that* him. . . . But he's wounded, and we ought to . . ."

"It's none of your damned business!" roared Gunther, irritated and furious because he had the gun-itch himself. "Get ready to anchor!"

The mate shrugged and went for'ard. Gunther muttered to himself and kept the glasses screwed to his eyes. The *Gottenheim* was now scarcely a quarter of a mile from the schooner, and Gunther flung a curt order to the helmsman that altered her course to bring her abeam. Meanwhile the mutineers on the schooner's poop were advancing slowly along the main deck, and Gunther caught the glint of sun on steel.

There was a sudden volley of shots. Seave turned half around, as if something had plucked at his sleeve. One of the mutineers fell. Another reeled and caught at a backstay to steady himself. Gunther roared to his mate, and the *Gottenheim* dropped anchor scarce a cable's length off the schooner's beam. Descending to his main deck, her captain rested his arms on

the rail and settled impatiently to watch the rest of the tragedy. Even now he would have braved Seave's anger and gone to his aid, but he remembered the icy killer's glint in the little man's eyes when he had warned him to stay away, and he remembered also the many, many tales of Seave's eccentricities. He decided to wait. Perhaps the Stinger, magnificent shot that he was, would yet win.

The surviving mutineers, startled by the roaring of the *Gottenheim's* anchor cable, had halted again, and were alternately staring at the fuming Gunther and the drooping form of the swaying, defiant Seave. Eventually, after some consultation, they decided apparently that Gunther did not intend to interfere, and being desperate they charged.

SEAVE shot three times. It was a sign of his condition that he missed two shots completely and only wounded a man with the third. A knife caught him in one thigh and sent him to his knees, while a belaying pin numbed his left arm so it hung down useless.

Gunther tore at his beard, but still held back. Then he saw a legitimate excuse to take a hand. A man had climbed the main rigging on the side of the schooner away from Seave and was coming cautiously down over the Stinger's head, obviously intending to drop and knife him before he could turn. Seave was too far gone to notice this move, for though Gunther waited until the last minute, the little man did not shoot. He was intently watching the mutineers grouped near the break of the poop and talking together.

Gunther snatched a Winchester out of the hands of one of his crew and shot twice, hastily but accurately, so that from the main rigging there came a scream and a dark body suddenly curved down and plunged into the sea.

"He can shoot it out if he wants to," snapped Gunther, his patience at an end. "But I'm not standing for getting him from behind."

The mutineers fled. If the strange ship was going to take a hand after all, they were beaten. Seave clawed up until his bloody, drawn face was on a level with the schooner's rail. He called thickly, "You keep out of this, damn you!" and

then collapsed in a heap on the deck.

Gunther laughed. For some reason it struck him as very funny indeed. He roared to his mate, "There's a man after my own heart! . . . Get a boat clear. I'm shipping in on this, if he plugs me afterward!"

When Gunther finally landed on the schooner's deck with half a dozen men he found Seave lying on one side and quite unconscious. The deck under him was stained red. He was wounded in three places, beside the original wound in his side. He still held his gun in the hand that rested across his breast. His left arm was badly bruised and quite useless.

He revived for a moment as Gunther bent over him, and he muttered, "I didn't ask you to interfere. Get to hell out of here! I'll handle my own affairs."

Gunther took his gun away from him as easily as if he had been a child. He snarled protests and then lapsed into unconsciousness again. Gunther stood up and thumbed the hammer of his own gun.

"Carry him aft, two of you," he snapped. "I'm going hunting."

He strode toward the poop, followed by four men, and the mutineers, expecting to be hung if they were ever taken back to Apia, opened fire from the cover of the main cabin scuttle. Gunther charged them, utterly reckless, furious with himself for remaining neutral for so long, and roaring like a bull. He killed one man, wounded another, and the survivor gave in.

Then he spent an hour or more doctoring Stinger Seave.

Such was the beginning of the friendship. Seave was a man who was scrupulously exact in all his dealings. He never obligated himself to anyone unless he repaid in treble measure. He hated help from others. He was a lone wolf of the Islands, a shark, something of a pariah, and he handled his own affairs or went under. But as Gunther had come unbidden to his aid, undoubtedly saved his life, the Stinger was forced to recognize the bond. He did it unwillingly at first, but during the long days he was convalescing in Montague Bay under Gunther's care he discovered a genuine liking for the big, bearded adventurer, a liking which Gunther quite patently returned.

When at last the ships were ready for sea again and the men shook hands, Seave said, "Thanks for the men you've lent me. If you ever need me let me know. I'll come."

"Sure," answered Gunther, smiling and looking down good-humoredly at the notorious little man. "And maybe we can be partners some time. With your shooting and my beef we'd sure tear hell out of the Islands. S'long."

"S'long," said Seave, smiling his wintry little smile and with something of what might have been a twinkle in his eyes. He put to sea an hour after the *Gottenheim*, and for the first time felt a real regret at parting from a man.

Gunther told his mate that night, "He's a queer card. I like him a lot. He's a killer, but he shoots square. D'you know he really feels quite ashamed because he passed out before he could clean up that crew of his? Why the hell he should I don't know! If I could stand up, filled with drugs and wounded, and shoot it out with seven men, I'm damned sure I'd feel pretty chesty!"

IT was a year before Seave paid his debt to Gunther. He had not seen the big man since the Montague Bay affair. He had only heard of him at rare intervals, from traders, other schooner captains, planters and *beche-de-mer* fishers. But he had not forgotten. Seave never forgot anything.

He fully recovered from his wounds, and spent some months fretting about his shooting skill because he had missed so many shots during that mutiny. It was not until he creased the gun hands of three men who were making for him in a saloon on Woodlark some months later that he set his mind at rest. And then, like a bolt from the blue, he heard by devious channels that Big Bill Gunther had been cut off at Ysabel Island, and was presumably dead.

Seave was in Port Moresby when he heard the news. He was about to close an agreement to take some stores for the Administration to the police post at Cape Nelson. He called the deal off abruptly, hurriedly fitted out his ship, and set sail. The Assistant Resident Magistrate he had been dealing with was quite astonished,

and demanded some sort of explanation.

"Personal business," Seave said gently. "A friend of mine died quite unexpectedly, and I think there should be mourners at his funeral."

Which was quite mystifying to the A.R.M. He confided to his wife that evening that Seave was a little out of his head.

Be that as it may, the Stinger arrived off the coast of Ysabel some two months after the reported death of Gunther. He had with him this time a crew of men he had carefully picked from many ports. He had picked chiefly such as were on the bad books of the Administration, men who were hard fighters, hard workers, old in the Islands and not given to talking too much. It was often wondered why Seave kept this crew so long, why they did not pay off and go in other ships. The reason was that Seave paid them double wages and a share of any very profitable venture, for he needed desperate, faithful men in his acts of semi-piracy, seal and pearl poaching, and to aid him in the little private wars he frequently became involved in. Seave needed them now to further the unreasonable plan he had in mind.

He anchored his schooner in the mouth of the river where Gunther had died. The charred and ruined hulk of Gunther's *Gottenheim* lay on the mud of one shore, in plain view, and so at least verified the cutting-off. Thereafter, and for three days, Seave did nothing but doze in his big canvas chair on his poop under an awning, while two of the crew kept armed watch and the rest slept. No man could hope to find a native village in the tangle of jungle unless he had an army at his back, and the natives always took their own good time on that coast in showing themselves.

After three days, curiosity overcoming fear of any reprisal for the looting of the *Gottenheim*, several canoes appeared, paddling round the schooner at a great distance and cautiously drawing closer. This strange ship might not be off its guard as had been the other.

Presently a half-caste Fly River boy stood up on the schooner's rail and shouted friendly words, and the canoes drew closer still. Gifts were flung to them. They were given to understand

that the captain wished to see their chief. Two more days of this followed, and at last a chief appeared.

He was a monstrosously fat man. He had necklaces of sharks' teeth and babies' finger bones. He had a belt studded with brass, obviously from some murdered sailor, and he wore a long stick thrust through the cartilage of his nose, so that his heavy breathing made a whistling noise. He was coaxed aboard with half a dozen cans of salmon and a bottle of trade gin, though he insisted on bringing a dozen men with him.

This was against all common sense and Island lore in a place where a ship had only recently been cut-off, and where the natives were notoriously treacherous. The crew was a little worried, but Seave had placed them carefully, two men aloft with two Winchesters each and belts of cartridges, two on the top of the fo'c's'le house, two on top of the midship house, two on the poop, and two smoking lighted cigars by the open boxes of capped and fused dynamite on the main hatch. Seave himself received the chief sprawled in his canvas chair and with the half-caste interpreter behind him, for the Stinger had not yet mastered the various dialects.

The chief waddled up to Seave, smiling expansively, and squatted down on the deck with his attendants behind him, all armed and all very nervous. He was using his eyes to good advantage, picking out the weak spots in the barbed wire that covered the rails, estimating the value in women and heads of various treasures he saw.

SEAVE opened gin. He poured drinks for the chief alone, though the other natives seemed anxious to get some. He brought up more presents and he set the interpreter to work.

At first the chief was cautious. No, he had seen no other ship since the charred wreck had drifted in from the sea one day all afire. No, she had no crew. Yes, he would provide men for laboring on the plantations.

So the talk went. The chief grew drunker and drunker, and he began to boast. His escort grew more and more nervous when this stage was reached, for the chief began to talk of "long pig" and

of the crew the burned ship *had had*.

Seave opened gin for the natives, and they began to join their chief in his loud talking. It was then, as the story became clearer, the astonishing information was dropped, first as hints, then as boastings, that several of the looted ship's crew had been taken alive; that most of them had already been used at sacrifices at various ceremonials, but that the chief, Big Bill Gunther, the tall man with a beard, was being kept for the period of the full moon and a great "long pig" feast.

As the excited interpreter explained this to Seave the little sailor merely blinked and tiny hard lumps of muscle appeared each side of his jaw. He slid a hand gently inside his coat and caressed the butt of his gun. That was all the emotion he betrayed. But inwardly he was possessed of a calm feeling of satisfaction.

It had been his original intention to discover which of the natives had actually taken part in the killing of Gunther, capture them, and hang them, after the grim, iron custom and code of the Island men who lived outside the law most of the time and never bothered the Administration either for help or revenge. But this news that Gunther was still living made it possible for the Stinger fully to pay his debt, and he was grateful. His cold, clear mind snapped on the only possible plan immediately.

"Is Captain Gunther at this man's village?" he asked the interpreter, and the half-caste plied the natives with questions. Drunkenly and incautiously they replied.

"They traded him to the natives of the hills for twenty heads and ten young women, but they will go to the feast," said the interpreter at last.

Seave nodded. The fat chief was beginning to look dazed and his eyes closed sleepily. His followers were still in the boasting and hilarious stage when he finally flopped on one side and began to snore stertorously. Seave regarded the gross hulk for a long time, his clear blue eyes turning to ice and his thin lips shutting to a straight line.

"Go for'ard," said the Stinger finally to his interpreter. "Have the mate and two men patrol the rail and shoot anyone who tries to board us. Bring the rest of the men aft in a body and surround these

swine. When I nod take away their weapons. Stun any who resist. Then bring some small line and lash them fast."

"There will be war," announced the half-caste nervously. "The villages will come and attack. Besides, the government will say . . ."

The half-caste had not been with Seave very long. The little sailor blinked.

"I flogged you once for answering me back, Toto," he said metallically.

The half-caste took one look into the awful, icy eyes and fled. Fifteen minutes later every savage on board the *Sulu Pearl* was bound and unconscious, while the canoes that had been paddling idly about, waiting for their chief, began to circle ominously, while their occupants stood up and brandished weapons. They had seen the hubbub on the poop and thought their chief dead.

SEAVE called to his interpreter. "Tell them I have taken their chief and his men captive. Tell them they must bring back here Captain Gunther and any other white man they have on Ysabel. Each day that passes until this is done I will shoot a man."

The half-caste grinned. He could appreciate that. It appealed to his own savage sense of humor. Not that he thought any white man would kill a native in cold blood. He had seen enough of white men to know they were possessed of queer and unreasonable ideas of the preciousness of life. But still, it was a good bluff. So he stood on the rail and shouted, and some canoes came closer to listen. A long conversation ensued.

"They say," said the half-caste, "that they no longer have Captain Gunther or any white man. The captain they have traded away with another man, and the rest are dead. They offer gifts for their chief."

"Tell them they must get Gunther back," replied Seave, unperturbed.

"They say they will have to go to war. A trade in flesh cannot be unmade."

"That's their affair," said Seave and smiled his little wintry smile.

He called to a seaman. Buckets of water were flung over the unconscious chief until he stirred. Two seamen then lifted him upright with some effort, and punched

and pummeled him awake. He roared and struggled, but he was securely lashed. When this dawned upon him he went gray under his coat of dirt and brown, and was suddenly sobered.

"Explain to him!" snapped Seave, and the interpreter complied.

The chief broke out jabbering. It was impossible. A flesh trade could not be undone. And if he or any of his men were killed there would be war, and the ship looted as the other had been.

Seave merely smiled. "Throw him in the forehold with the rest. Two of you guard them and see they're fed. . . . Repeat my message to the canoes, Toto. The first man dies at sunrise."

CANOES circled the ship's all night, and torches burned in the mangroves. There was a vast amount of shouting and beating of drums. All that section of the coast seemed to be in an uproar. Seave was satisfied he had as a prisoner some quite important chief, and, from what the interpreter gathered while taking food and water to the captives, also some of the sons of the more important men of the villages.

Sunrise came and there was no trace of Gunther. Seave had his nervous captives brought up on the main deck and lined against the rail, facing the canoes, each man lashed to his neighbor, and the lot lashed to a dead-eye to prevent them flinging themselves overside. The crew stood by, heavily armed and smiling a little. To a man, hard cases as they were, they believed Seave was bluffing.

The little sailor, with the interpreter beside him, walked the poop smoking a cigar, apparently quite oblivious to all the excitement. When the sun was well up he hailed the canoes and gave the interpreter his instructions.

"They say," the half-caste reported, "that they have sent runners, and the hill villages will not undo a flesh trade. They would have to go to war to get Captain Gunther."

Seave shrugged. "That's their business."

He walked to the poop taffrail and stood for a moment looking down on the line of bound savages. They were brutal, depraved-looking men, wearing the em-

blems of many "long pig" feasts and of looted ships.

So abruptly no one saw the move Seave drew and fired. The native at the end of the line nearest him reeled and then sagged, a neat hole just above his right ear.

"Cut him loose," said Seave gently, "and throw him overside. Tell them tomorrow another one dies."

From the watching white men of the crew went up a long sigh, almost of horror. They had never for a moment believed Seave would do as he threatened. They had not been with the Stinger long enough to know his utter ruthlessness. For a moment they were appalled; then, as they cut the dead man loose and tossed him to the sharks, they remembered Captain Gunther a captive in the hills and destined for the "Long Pig" ovens. It would take an army to win him and achieve a rescue. Perhaps Seave knew what he was doing, after all.

The horror of the crew was nothing compared to that which swept the remainder of the captives, especially the chief. He bellowed and called savagely, threateningly, pleadingly to the canoes. Their occupants were silent, almost awed. The abrupt execution had bitten even under their calloused hides.

With a scream of rage the natives dug their paddles into the water, and the canoes charged.

Two men climbed hastily aloft and opened fire with their Winchesters. The others lined the rail and shot hard and fast. The mate and the interpreter lighted cigars, and as soon as the canoes came in range began tossing sticks of dynamite into them.

Seave lounged on the rail of the poop, firing slowly and deliberately with his stubby revolver, and every shot went to the mark.

The air whined with spears and showers of stones and arrows. Two of the crew were wounded before the attack was beaten off. The sharks made the water boil as they fought over the bodies from the canoes, some of which were sinking. The captive chief and his men continued to bellow.

Seave went below to his breakfast and ate well and with relish, though the stew-

ard eyed him askance and seemed almost afraid to set a dish before him. Why he was called Stinger Seave his crew now understood.

ALL day the drums hammered. All night they kept up the noise, and torches flamed in the mangrooves. Toward dawn another attack, in force, was tried against the schooner, and this time the savages actually got a foothold on the fo'c's'le-head. The slaughter was terrible. Seave lost two men, and had two others so badly wounded they had to be considered as non-combatants thereafter.

The survivors came aft in a body at dawn.

"We can't stay here, sir," said the spokesman. "A couple more attacks like that and we'll be finished. We ought to run north and see the officials about it. They could send a gunboat down and get Captain Gunther. . . ."

"I see," said Seave pleasantly, looking quite fresh and alert despite the fact that he had not slept for over three days, what with one thing and the other. "Now listen to me. We are staying here until Captain Gunther joins us. If you want to live you'd better raise the barbed wire along the rails and learn to shoot straighter and faster.

"If the natives get too much of a foothold on this ship, appear about to capture it, I've got enough dynamite stored below to blow the *Sulu Pearl* to smithereens, which is what will happen, because I shall save a shell for that purpose. I think that's all. Get for-ard and do as you're told."

There was no more talk from that crew, and no more suggestions, either on that venture or any other. They looked, each man, into the Stinger's icy eyes, and went for-ard without delay.

At the same time that morning as on the previous one, with an audience of perhaps twenty canoes, Seave deliberately shot another of his captives. Almost at once a canoe came forward to parley. This was something the savages could understand. The little white man meant what he said. Neither could he be destroyed, for twice they had tried it and risked his killing off all his captives out of hand.

"They say," said the interpreter when he had talked a while, "that they cannot make a great war for Captain Gunther unless they have their chief to follow. They offer to send his two sons as hostages if you will let him go."

"If they are his sons I don't mind," said Seave. "But how shall I know?"

The interpreter grinned. "They are like him, it is said."

Seave frowned. That was not much evidence.

The canoe surged fearfully alongside, its occupants scowling but very nervous. Two somewhat fleshy but lithe youths came timidly through the gap opened in the barbed wire, and stood looking round with wide eyes and quivering bodies ready for a leap overside at the first sign of danger.

"Tell them they must be bound," Seave directed.

There was some argument about this, but the chief bellowed, and at last the youths submitted to having their arms tied and linked to the line of the other captives. Then the chief, still bound, was freed from the line and held by two men while Seave walked slowly along the main deck, and, stopping behind one of the hostages, whipped out his gun and rammed it against the black back. The chief whimpered and cried out, and Seave smiled.

"It's his son, right enough," he said and put his gun away. "Tell him I give him three days. For three days no one dies, but on the fourth his first son shall die, on the fifth his second, and on the sixth the other man I hold."

The chief imbibed all this quietly enough, and was seemingly resigned. When he was freed he waddled with some dignity to the side, dropped to the waiting canoe and with a gesture directed the paddlers to push off. All the other canoes fell in line behind him and disappeared up the river. Two returned later, apparently to watch the schooner.

"He may be figuring on another attack," Seave told his mate. "As soon as it's dark you will light a flare every twenty minutes and set it adrift on a board, so we won't be surprised. We'll also rig some tar barrels to light as torches if a fight begins. It's shooting in the dark that causes us to be so hard pressed."

There was no attack that night. The new dawn came and the day passed uneventfully, except that the two watching canoes kept up a ceaseless circling of the ship.

The second day passed, and the drums that had throbbed continuously in the jungle suddenly stopped.

THE third day was half through when a seaman called from for'ard that a fleet of canoes was coming down the river.

Seave seized his glasses, and, carefully scanning the bigger and leading craft, saw Gunther. The chief sat behind him, and was apparently guarding him from all harm with as much care as he might have guarded a very hard-won head.

Gunther was dirty, unshaven and almost naked. His beard needed trimming very badly, and there were great pits under his eyes that told of fever. He was so weak he could hardly climb up to the *Sulu Pearl's* main deck, but he managed a smile as he saw Seave.

"How the devil you worked it I don't know!" he said. "I was due for a 'long pig' affair next week. The chief told me you were wiping out his young men, and my body alive and well was all that could save them. They had quite a fight get-

ting me. Surrounded the village I was in one night and ripped it open."

"Cut those natives loose," said Seave to his mate, and holding Gunther steady with a hand on his arm led him aft.

"I had to take some drastic steps," he admitted gently, as Gunther sank gratefully to a chair in the main cabin. "I take it none of your men survived at all. Too bad."

"You might have been wiped out yourself," said Gunther wearily, settling back and slowly pouring himself a drink. "I understand they've made two attacks. . . . I'm a sick man for a bit, Seave. And I'm hungry."

"You're my friend," said Seave, quite simply. "When I heard you had been cut off, I came to make your passing memorable along this coast. And then I discovered you were still alive. I don't allow my friends to be turned into long pig. . . . Dinner will be in half an hour."

"I can never thank you for this—" Gunther started to say.

"I should be much obliged," said Seave a little coldly, "if you would not mention that. There was a little debt outstanding from Montague Bay, when a man climbed in the rigging above me. . . . Will you have another drink?"

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of ACTION STORIES, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1940.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. T. Scott, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the ACTION STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Fiction House, Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City, N. Y.; Editor, Malcolm Reiss, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Fiction House, Inc., 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City, J. G. Scott, 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City.

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

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.)

T. T. SCOTT,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1940.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1942.)

TINHORN TALLY

By Harry F. Olmsted

Tinhorn Pitch Pollard, tired of rovin' and tired of livin', stacked his bob-tail flush against a beef-baron's Ace-King-Queen-Jack-Ten!

THEY sat on the veranda of the Painted Pony Saloon, in Fivetrails. One was the fat barroom proprietor, the other an angular gambler who had ridden in two days before on a sweat-streaked cayuse. Their eyes were on a dust cloud rolling in from the north.

"Lissen!" Chris Sarber sank warning fingers in the thin arm of the gambler. "Hear that, Pollard? Business fer the undertaker, shore pop!"

Pitch Pollard let the smoke trickle from his lungs.

"I don't hear nothin', Chris."

"That's it," said the saloonman.

"What's what?"

"Nothin': when yuh hear nothin' so plumb startlin' as now, it's business fer ol' Funeral Potts. Look! Yonder comes the Tied Circles riders! Guts an' holsters full uh iron. Somebody shore tipped 'em off that Rick Tuttle was in town."

Sarber had spoken only the truth when he mentioned the silence. In Fivetrails, spawned of violence, reared in gunsmoke and fed upon the manna of Cain, stark silence was but the forerunner of hell unleashed. And into such a silence rode the Tied Circles crew—twelve strong—led by their gaunt Texican segundo, Trip Tilbury. A loose-holstered, long-riding outfit. Tied-holster men, wary of mien, bleak of face, drawing fighting pay.

At the hitchbar just outside the Fivetrails Merc was a buckboard, four restless broncs and a little knot of men. Riders of Rick Tuttle of the Big-T. They, too, watched the Tied Circles riders sweep into town. And their faces were masks of mirthlessness, their hands trembly from gun-itch, their minds seething with the dangerous emotions of rising enmity.

For some time trouble had been brewing between the Tied Circles and the T. And

it had grown dangerously close to open warfare upon the granting of the Boxed-T iron to Trip Tilbury, by the Livestock Commission. Which act served glaringly to emphasize the growing political prestige of Tiger Gratton, Senator Tim Gratton of Johnson County if you please. Tiger owned Tied Circles and left the running of the spread to capable Trip Tilbury. A bad combination without added percentage. But with the Boxed-T as a whip, no Big-T critter was safe on the open range. It spelled ruin to old Rick Tuttle, one square cowman.

THE situation had smoldered with slanting looks and fighting words until Pony Thatcher Big-T ramrod, and another Big-T waddy caught Tiny Winslow slapping a box on a Big-T dogie's ribs. And poured lead into him when he went for his gun. Tiny really didn't belong with a tough spread like Tied Circles, being a heap faster with a rope an' runnin' iron than he was on the cut an' shoot. But he was as good a sticker as ever thrown leg over a cantle. That's how he came to hang onto life and the saddle horn long enough for his pony to fetch him home. And to live long enough to tell who'd drilled him.

No one knew better than Rick Tuttle what that shooting meant. Plant a seed in the ground, water and nurture it and, God willing, flower or fruit or grain results. But when you plant a leaden slug in a human body, what will the harvest be? That question troubled old Rick as he drove to Fivetrails with four of his riders. He reasoned he might likely need a supply of bacon and beans . . . and bullets. And the thought pained him.

For Rick kinda lived by the golden rule and was too conservative for his own good.



Striving to wheel his wagon brones, Rick lost control as a .45 slug smashed his left arm

As Bluejoint Charlie, saloon bum who camped in Fivetrails before ever the trails crossed there, put it. . . .

"If lettin' the other feller beat yuh from hocks tuh withers is godliness, Rick shore has got his loop on a gold harp."

Which shows how they misunderstood the old man who had laid aside his guns after the bloody Johnson County War, who gave preference to waddies who never got flush enough to reclaim their hawlegs from the loan sharks, who stayed out of saloons and gambling dives as an example to the wild young bloods that worked his cattle.

Now, with the clatter of Tied Circles hoofs loud in the town, Rick Tuttle stag-

gered out of the Merc loaded down with bundles and packages. His pale gray eyes flicked to Tilbury and his men and a wan smile of disappointment and disbelief came to his lips. It had suddenly occurred to him that some one of his own outfit was a spy for Tiger Gratton. He hurried his steps, a soft admonition dripping from his lips. . . .

"Git yore hands off them cutters, you T men! Fork yore hawsses an' bust fer the ranch! Them hootin'-shootin' leather pounders may be fetchin' fer tuh git organized with red-eye; or they may be faunchin' fer blood. In either case they're wuss'n a herd uh stompedin' cattle. What yuh waitin' fer? Straddle!"

"Rabbits is made fer runnin', Boss," protested Pony Thatcher sullenly. "You ain't scairt uh them uglies, are yuh?"

"Shut up! Do like I say or draw yore time!"

Cursing softly, the T ramrod and his three riders rose to their saddles and reined around to the south. Only to curb cruelly as five Tied Circles men shot their horses into the street from a side lane. Their manner was gloating, belligerent. Their guns glittered in the last rays of the setting sun.

A lone Tied Circles man had withdrawn from the main group just across from the Painted Pony, dismounted to stand fussing aimlessly at his latigoes. His fellows rode leisurely toward Rick Tuttle, who stood alone beside his buckboard . . . between two fires. Their faces were cracked with cold-eyed grins.

ACROSS from the Merc, Dace Cooley, town marshal, sat tilted back reading a last week's *Laramie News*. Jim Tedford, a deputy sheriff, sat below him on the stoop, idly sucking a querlie and viewing the quickening drama indifferently.

Down at the Painted Pony, Pitch Pollard muttered an inaudible curse. His strange black eyes were hard on the Big-T boss.

"Yuh shore called the turn, Sarber," he said softly. "It's business fer the undertaker. Odds about three tuh one." His hand slid inside his coat but he stiffened and withdrew it as his glance flickered to the Tied Circles man across the street. "A cold deck, Sarber . . . mighty cold."

"Damn Tiger Gratton fer a . . ." began the saloonman, then broke off with: "Wait till I git my scattergun."

"Wait!" Pitch Pollard, arms crossed grotesquely across his breast, halted him with hissed command. "Don't be a fool. Stay where yuh are an' never mind why!"

"I can't see why yuh don't want me tuh . . ."

"Shut up!"

Sarber looked narrowly at the gambler, shrugged. There was something shivery about the man, something that compelled obedience. And though the saloonman had killed three men in his own barroom, he shuddered a little as he caught the flare of Pitch's eyes.

The main group of Gratton riders had come to a halt. A yard in the lead, Trip Tilbury faced Rick Tuttle. Grinning. A hollow, mocking grimace.

"H'are yuh, Rick?" he asked. "Repeat what yuh said about Tied Circles tur Marshal Dace Cooley."

"Easy," smiled the old cowman whose failure to travel heeled was widely misunderstood. "Rick Tuttle never says behind a feller's back what he's scairt tuh say to his face. Tied Circles is a outfit uh rustlers an' hireling gunhawks, owned by a crooked politician an' roddeed by a killer. The hull passel of yuh are a stink in decent men's nostrils an' the T ain't got no use fer no part of yore cow-robbin' spread. What about it?"

Red anger flaunted its colors in Trip's saddle leather face and his hand jerked to his gun. At his stirrups sat a hunched giant—Carp Brado—and a wiry half-pint called Link Meline on Fivetrails range. In a dozen different communities Link was wanted for murder under as many different handles. The calling of that pair was hard stamped on them. They were eagerly expectant as Trip hurled his hate-packed retort.

"If I could roll wind off'n my belly thataway, feller, I'd git me a medicine show." He smiled back at his grinning fellows. "It's war, Tuttle! You've bin singin' psalms with one hand an' wide-loopin' Tied Circles beef with the other. Now you've drawed Tied Circles blood. Tiny Winslow is dead but he lasted tuh tell us how he ketched yuh slappin' iron on one uh Gratton's beefs. Yuh made yore mistake in not killin' him cold so he couldn't talk. You've cut the fust notch. We cut 'em from here out. Startin' tomorrow, we're circlin' the Bacon Rind, the T range an' the Piney Hills. A notch fer ever' lost dogie! We're burnin' powder on ever' trail from here tuh rail haid tuh fetch back all rustled Tied Circles an' Boxed-T critters. . . ."

"You've rid a heap uh trail an' burnt a kaig uh powder a'ready, Trip," grinned the T boss, unafraid. "If chin slobber was battles, you'd have this war plumb won a'ready. If Tied Circles has gotta have war, fly at it. Tiger Gratton never signed on these mule-jawed gunhawks fer what they knowed about the cow game. Their

stripes spell skunk. An' you . . . yo're lyin' about Tiny Winslow. He never told no story like that. For when a man's dyin' he tells the truth. The boot's on the other foot. Tiny was makin' a box around a Tuttle T an' made fight when ketched. He got his needin's. So, if yuh just gotta ride onto the T tuh smoke yore irons, don't squeal when yuh swaller lead."

THEIR voices rang through the fading light, came clearly to the ears of Marshal Cooley. His chair clumped down, his paper fluttered to the floor as he rose and stretched. He and Deputy Sheriff Jim Tedford matched glances. Tedford jerked erect and moved deliberately toward the two arguing cowmen. . . .

"Harsh words—them," his deep voice boomed across the stillness. "From a feller that's wanted fer murder. Rick Tuttle, I've got warrants here fer Pony Thatcher, yore foreman, fer John Doe an' Richard Roe, two of yore riders that were with him when he shot Winslow. An' fer Rick Tuttle, as accessory after the fact. In the name of the County of Johnson, I arrest yuh!"

"Yeah?" Rick Tuttle moved and an even half-dozen Colt's covered him. Nor did that fact bother the T boss. For in the cow country one simply didn't shoot an unarmed man. "An' who swore out them warrants?"

"Feller name uh Tiger Gratton. Know the gent?"

"Nothin' good about 'im." Rick's grizzled brows arched. "You got witnesses?"

"To the dyin' statement uh Tiny Winslow. Many a man's hung fer less. . . ."

"No T man is hangin' on perjured testimony," barked Rick. "Or roostin' in yore filthy jailhouse neither. I'm responsible fer Pony Thatcher an' I'll bring him in tuh the inquest an' trial. As fer John Doe an' Richard Roe . . . I never heard of em'. C'mon, you T boys. Git goin' . . .!"

He clambered into his buckboard, shook out the lines. The Tied Circles men rode the hooks, surged forward in obedience to Jim Tedford's barked . . .

"Heel 'em gunnies! I deputize yuh to jail 'em!"

To Pitch Pollard, back on the veranda of the Painted Pony, the thing seemed

overplayed. As if from the first there had been no honest intention to jail the Big-T men. The gambler's hands were folded across his breast in a strange huddled way and his black eyes were shiny.

"Business for boothill," he muttered, his glance never quite leaving that Tied Circles guard across the street.

"Lissen, feller!" Chris Sarber's voice was almost a wail. "They're aimin' tuh wipe out the squarest cowman that ever shook out a loop. An' it ain't fitten that we stand here an' let 'em git away with it. I'm gettin' my gun . . .!"

"Just a minute!" Again the gambler's knife-like command stayed the saloonman. "Look across the street!"

Chris' eyes flickered. The afterglow played along the blued barrel of a Winchester resting across a saddle seat, its muzzle fixed upon the front of the Painted Pony.

Chris Sarber's teeth clenched. "They've got us covered . . . me an' you!"

"Shore. That's why I said tuh wait till . . ."

A gunblast smeared silence from that hate-tormented street. Wailing like a banshee a bullet rocketed over the heads of the Tied Circles crew. Where it came from no man could be entirely sure, but assuredly not from the little group of harried T men. Yet Trip Tilbury bawled:

"Git 'em, gunnies! They're askin' fer it with lead. Let 'em have it!"

A stuttering blast of gunfire shuddered through Fivetrails in the last crimson ray of the sunset. Skittish horses curvetted. The high scream of a woman hung tremulously above the hell of screaming lead. The Fivetrails War was on.

ALL at once it seemed that everyone was firing . . . everyone save Rick Tuttle who hadn't felt the heft of a weapon for better than ten years. Pony Thatcher, T ramrod, gave a groan and toppled from the saddle, shot through the heart before he could thumb the hammer of his drawn Colt's. Trip Tilbury's horse went down screaming at the first blast and the Texican lit a-shooting . . . at helpless Rick Tuttle.

Striving to wheel his wagon bronses, Rick lost control as a .45 slug smashed his left arm. The frightened horses leaped,

lurching the rig and spilling Rick into the churning dust. Now he was up, his broken arm flopping grotesquely as he darted through that hail of lead for the sanctuary of the buildings. A ball smashed into his left shoulder, spinning him around and dumping him. Again he came up only to stagger as lead tunneled his calf. And reeling thus, he vanished in the dark lane between the Painted Pony and the Wyoming Stage Lines office.

Something about that grim dash seemed unreal. It was like a puppet, string-jerked across that bullet-swept street. Like some harmless game where the stakes were far removed from life and death. Could it be that men were dying out there? Nothing else. Three of the four T riders, were down, the fourth wounded and riding the spurs toward the Big-T.

At the first strident detonation, the Tied Circles guard across the street from the Painted Pony moved . . . quick. Shifting the barrel of his rifle. Turning it on that milling gunplay below. Pitch Pollard had waited for that. His arms unclasped his chest, came down with a jerk. Twin irons were in his hands, had been all along. Now those guns were jerking in his fingers. The guard's gun flung up—clattered to earth. His horse reared, sheered off. The man teetered back on his heels, spilled and lay unmoving beneath the hitch-rack. He'd never throw bushwhack lead again.

A triggering Tied Circles rider tumbled backward off his horse, caught squarely at the base of the brain by one of the gambler's bullets. Trip Tilbury jerked, stiffened, as lead burned along his hip. And when the Gratton crowd had whirled to discover the how-come of this lead barrage from behind, the veranda of the Painted Pony was deserted. Pitch was darting through the long barroom, stuffing shells in empty chambers, Sarber legging it for the bar, honing for the feel of his deadly buckshot gun.

Pollard darted out the rear of the saloon as Rick Tuttle reeled around a rear corner and skidded to a halt. Across that distance of a few yards the two men swapped glances. The gambler's face was ashen pale, that of the cowman flaming in swift and sudden anger.

"You . . . you . . . ?" began Rick but

a hollow cough choked him as he lurched dizzily.

Pitch darted to his side, saved him from falling.

"Come," he commanded tonelessly. "Come with me."

"I wouldn't be seen with you, Pollard," hissed the glassy-eyed cowman. "In the bottom cellar of hell!"

"Come," repeated the gambler, and though Rick had just looked on death, he quailed at the look in Pitch's jet eyes. He followed meekly enough until he noted that their way led into the Painted Pony.

"No!" he bawled, and his seamed face was awful. "Not in there, Pollard. I ain't bin in one uh them places in ten year."

"Yo're goin' now," snapped Pitch and led a bleeding, blubbing man inside and to a private cardroom where he eased him to the floor. "You hurt bad, Rick?"

"Not so bad as plenty," gritted the wounded man. "This shoulder an' arm hurts like billy-be-damned!"

PITCH darted outside, returned with a pint of whiskey and slats ripped from a case of bottles. Rick swallowed the hot likker like it was water, then gritted his teeth as the gambler washed and dressed the wounds and splinted up the broken arm.

"If ary jasper had uh told me that I'd be in the Painted Pony, shot full uh holes, drinkin' whiskey, wishin' fer the feel of a good ol' hawglaig an' lettin' Pitch Pollard paw over me, I'd uh shore told him how he lied in English, Crow, Cheyenne, 'Rapa-hoe an' plain cow talk. Where at's Addie?"

"Addie?" Pollard repeated the name, and that shuddery light flamed again in his opaque eyes. "What the hell do you care where she is? You cast her off, didn't yuh?"

"Pitch Pollard—" and if ever the threat of death lurked in a man's tone, it was in Rick's just then—"if you've run off an' left that gal some'ers, I'll kill yuh slow, so he'p me Gawd. I did cut her off fer splicin' with a damn' tinhorn gamblin' man. An' I done right. She ain't no kin tuh me. But if you've quit 'er . . ."

"Rick Tuttle," broke in the gambler icily, "three men have called me tinhorn. They're dead. You deserve killin' fer in-

ferrin' that I've ever played cards any other way than honest. But I'm takin' it from you 'cause yo're Addie's flesh an' blood . . . kin tuh me sorta. . . ."

"I'm no kin tuh you, yuh . . ."

"Shut up, yuh stubborn ol' mule head! It's that part of yuh talkin' now that killed Addie!"

"Killed . . .?" The old man's gray eyes stared and he struggled to rise. Pitch shoved him down. ". . . Addie daid?"

"Died with her first baby."

"Oh, my Lord!" His physical pain forgotten, the T boss stared into nothingness. "Addie daid! You killed her, damn yore soul!"

Pitch shook his head. "You broke her heart, Rick, when yuh disowned her. Robbed her of all her hone tuh live. Nothin' I could do could make up fer that. So she died. I come here to let yuh know but . . . but some why I couldn't force myself tuh tell a father that didn't care."

"Didn't care. . . ." Rick Tuttle echoed tonelessly.

RICK'S face was pinched with pain—heart pain that transcends the agony of torn muscles, of shattered bones. Gray eyes met black ones on the common ground of mutual woe. No trace now of the terrible enmity, the searing bitterness that had been theirs. A single phrase dripped from the cowman's lips, over and over. . . .

"You should orta told me! You should orta told me!"

And into the steel-hard eyes of the gambler crept a strangely softening glow. From behind the saloon came the turmoil of harsh voices.

"Lissen!" commanded Pitch Pollard.

Stillness gripped that room, gloomy with the gathering night, stillness accentuating the Cain cries outside. Killers seeking a victim. And Rick Tuttle was the object of their search.

"He come thisaway, shore," declared one. "I seen him plain. An' most fallin', he was, from eatin' lead."

"Mebby the ol' billygoat crawled inter the Painted Pony," suggested another, and at that the gambler came alive.

"Stiffen out, Rick," he whispered, crossing the cowman's hands on his chest. "Lie doggo, an' if they come in here, fer Gawd's

sake don't yuh so much as breathe."

He darted to the door. The corridor resounded to the tramp of boots. Pitch stepped out to face the killers, whipping off his flat black hat as he turned a sorrow-lined visage to them. . . .

"Another man gone to his Maker," came his white lie. "Where's Funeral Potts?"

Curious eyes peered across his shoulders at the still form laid out upon the card-room floor. Someone set up a cry for the undertaker. Funeral Potts, a rotund, smooth-shaven man, puffed up with clean laundered shrouds slung across his arm. He was fresh from having shrouded four corpses in the street.

"Don't tell me it's Rick Tuttle," he protested, ducking into the room. And at the sight of the cowman lying there, he halted a second, shaking his head. "Too bad! Too bad!"

"Too bad, hell!" rapped one of the Tied Circles crew, watching the undertaker spread the shroud. "Jest another cull cut inter the canners!"

They slogged out, heading for the Pigeon, owned by Tiger Gratton, named for the bird of peace, patronized by the combing of hell, by the sweepings of rangeland ruffianism. When they had gone, the professional manner of the undertaker dropped from him like a cloak.

"This," he said deliberately, "is the first live corpse ever I shrouded. And in a mighty good cause. It has saved him from those wolves for the moment. But if Tiger Gratton learns that he is still alive. . . ."

A N acrid chuckle broke from the "corpse" as the shroud flipped back.

"Damned if I run from Tiger Gratton," said Rick Tuttle. "I run from his gun yankers 'cause I wasn't heeled. I've bin a fool, fellers, a blamed fool in more'n one way. Narrer, that's what. Whiskey an' guns is only as bad as the feller's mind that uses 'em. No worse. That snort yuh give me, Pitch Pollard, eased my pain an' filled my guts with courage. Yeah, an' showed me things in a heap different light. When a man sheds his guns an' tries tuh live decent, it's a invitation to buzzards like Gratton tuh ring his carcass. It's time I buckled on the ol' hawglaig again.

Funeral, could yuh stir me up a .45?"

"He can, but won't," stated Pitch, firmly. "You ain't in no shape tuh go thumbin' no six-guns. Potts'll fetch a sawbones an' make shift tuh git yuh outa this hell town."

For an instant he stared into space, his black eyes like balls of obsidian, his long fingers toying with the polished butts of his two high-hung pistols. Then . . .

"Funeral, where at is this tiger man—Gratton?"

"Last I saw of him, he was lightin' down an' rollin' his spurs inter the Pigeon."

"Pigeon, eh? The Tiger an' his dove of peace. I wonder what fer a gamblin' man he calls hisself? Best way tuh find out, I reckon, is tuh poke over an' take a hand."

Their eyes flicked to his at the brittle hardness that had so swiftly crept into his voice.

"Don't you go a-slidin' inter hell with the skids greased," protested Rick Tuttle. "Them gunnies is on the kill. An' you ain't got no more business in that Pigeon than a blue-bottle fly in a pan uh clabber."

"Was a time," commented the gambler softly, "when you wasn't so solicitous uh my welfare. I've got a gnawin' curiosity to see what it is that makes this Gratton so tigerish. So I'm takin' cards in his game. I'll be seein' yuh both some more."

He turned his solemn gaze on Funeral Potts and the undertaker-coroner stiffened at what he saw in those lignite orbs. He had seen those lights before in this hell burg, the same cast of face, flare of nostril, corded neck. The red banner of a killer aroused. The deadly instinct to take life, flaring in a man like flame leaping to oil-soaked rags, consuming in its lethal heat all fear and doubt and curdling the milk of human kindness. And in that emblazoned page, the undertaker read an indomitable purpose.

"My friend," he said humbly, "men say of you that you play the cards straight, as they fall from the honest deal. You're taking cards in a crooked game and if you play it straight, your life will be forfeit. What I read in your eyes marks you as too fine metal to match their crookedness. And I admire raw courage too much to ante my puny protest. May God go with you and . . ." he patted the shroud on

his arm ". . . I'll be there or thereabouts with such service as I am qualified to dispense."

Pitch Pollard nodded, brushed past them and into the corridor. They heard the *clump-clump* of his boots slogging into the barroom. Like a soldier on drill he marched through the long hall where men were gathering to buzz in bated tones the events of the evening. Past staring Chris Sarber who caressed the stock of his buck-shot gun. Through the swing doors to pause with the breeze of night cooling his cheek.

BACK in the cardroom, Rick Tuttle found his feet, shakily, came close to the undertaker.

"Funeral," he said fiercely, "he's gone to the Pigeon tuh swaller Tiger's lead. You've got buryin's enough fer one day. We gotta stop him."

"Rick," Funeral Potts smiled solemnly, "how can puny man stop the wheeling of the sun? Or the direction of the wind? Neither can yuh stop what I saw shinin' in that gambler's eyes without shovin' death at him."

Rick nodded, the weight of the argument bowing his thick shoulders.

"I've did that feller a great wrong, Funeral. An' the least I kin do now, looks like, is tuh back his play . . . whatever it is."

His hand flicked out, fastened onto the coroner's pistol, jerked it from its sheath. And though Potts flung a restraining hand and surged after the retreating cowman, the threat of a loaded weapon checked him. Shrugging, he backed to the portal, placed himself athwart it.

"Checkers, Rick!" he hummed.

"Meanin' what?" queried the cowman, stiffly.

"It's yore move, feller. You can't leave here without crashin' this door. An' you'll have tuh be somethin' else than a damn' fool till I git Doc Hosper."

Two grizzled, stubborn old Westerners glared at each other. Checkmate! Rick's eyes were swimming with weakness. Funeral realized his friend's condition and didn't propose to let him sacrifice himself on the altar of Gratton's viciousness. And despite the tragedy of the moment, their seamed faces wrinkled in grim smiles.

"Yuh high-withered ol' crow-bait," whispered Rick. "Reminds me uh that time in Clear Crick, durin' the War."

"Yeah, yuh bench-laigged ol' badger. When the shoe was on the other foot an' you saved my wuthless carcass despite my stubborn augerments. If I'd uh stepped out uh the Silver Dollar Bar that night, they'd uh strung me high. Likewise, if you stir outa here, Gratton's uglies will lead weight yuh till yuh'd sink in bull gravy. Payin' yuh back in yore own coin, Rick. . . ."

"Is that so, yuh ring-tailed mossyhorn? Well, let me tell yuh somethin' . . ."

And so they settled down to one of their frequent arguments, punctuated by profane threats and meaningless personalities.

ON the veranda of the Painted Pony, Pitch Pollard stared at the twin windows of the Pigeon—baleful eyes reflecting the temper that boiled within the place. The gambler grinned into the darkness, rolling and lighting a querlie. And the flare of the cupped match lined a face as stiff and cold as a granite shaft.

Moonrise! Afar off a coyote assailed the sky with quavering, haunting wails. Precursor of evil. And the weird sound was echoed by the revelry in the Pigeon and by the deliberate tread of the gambler as he plodded leisurely across the street. A specter in the pale glow. Death and violence matching his stride, swinging with ghastly grins at his stiffened elbows.

The tiniest squeak announced Pitch Pollard's entry into the lair of the tiger. He swung his eyes in a defiant arc as he moved to the bar where hawss-an'-rope men jested over their drinks. At the rear, Trip Tilbury, Dace Cooley, Link Meline and a gambler named Fortin played poker with Tiger Gratton. Jim Tedford and brutish-jawed Carp Brado looked on.

Something in Pitch Pollard's stilted stride radiated a vague warning throughout that buzzing, smoke-drenched room. A silence fell and spread as a score of curious men watched Pitch order and down a small drink. And that score wondered at the queer lift to the corners of the gambler's mouth as he neared that poker table. A warning glance flashed from Tiger Gratton to Link Meline. The weasel-faced

killer rose, yawned and hitched up his guns. His voice rasped in the hush. . . .

"Seat for a gambler, gents. Yore poker is too fast fer my blood."

"Seat for a gamblin' man," intoned Pitch Pollard, and dropped into the empty place.

Their eyes fixed him and Tiger Gratton's icy voice sounded. . . .

"I admire yore nerve, tinhorn," he leered, "a heap more'n yore face . . . or yore company!"

Pitch's eyes batted slightly and the blood receded a little from his already wan face. He answered even as he had old Rick:

"Three men have called me tinhorn in the past, Gratton. They're dead. If there's a lesson in that, wrap it in brown paper an' smoke it!"

GRATTON'S eyes narrowed. . . . "Yuh may be drunk," he hummed, "or just plain crazy. Then again, yuh're mebbys just simple damn' fool. But whatever, you can't come into Pigeon an' horn into Tiger Gratton's game. I'm partic'lar who I gamble with."

"Oh!" there was a cutting edge to Pitch's sneer. "So you're a gamblin' man?"

"Not a tinhorn."

Pitch chuckled, whipped out a bale of currency. Link Meline whistled softly, observing that they were hundred-dollar bills.

"Cripes!" he murmured. "The feller stick up a bank somewheres?"

"Gratton," smiled Pitch, coldly ignoring the obscene laugh that ringed the board, "I didn't set in tuh buy chips. I come in here to show up yore real color. It begins with a Y an' rhymes with feller. Here's five thousand simoleons. Match the pile an' we'll cut the deck. High card takes the money."

A flush mantled the Tiger's florid cheeks. He stared at the money, then at the gambler as if trying to decide what this man's game might be, who he was. However, he made no move to cover the bet. But Fortin, the house gambler of the Pigeon, fished out his wallet.

"I'll see that bet, gamblin' man!"

"Sorry, Faro Fortin!" Pitch shook his head without removing his eyes from Gratton. "There's blood betwixt us. Yore brother, Sleeve Fortin, was one uh them

three that called me tinhorn. He's dead. When I show up this tiger, I'll let yuh proposition me. What yuh sayin', Tiger?"

"Pitch Pollard!" Fortin's awed whisper made Gratton's eyes dance strangely.

The cowman-politician was already bawling for cash from the safe, for a sealed deck. The sallow houseman brought them. The bet was made, the cards riffled, the deck parted. Pitch turned up a jack of spades. Gratton laid out the seven of clubs. Nor was there so much as the lift of an eyebrow as Pollard raked in the money. Why should there have been? The Tiger intended to have that money anyway. If not one way . . . another.

"**N**OW, Tigerman," grinned Pitch, "here's ten thousand smackers. I'm layin' even odds on a bet you don't fill yore flush from the stacked deck yo're usin' ag'in Rick Tuttle. Show the boys yore color begins with a Y an', like I said, rhymes with beller."

"Cocky bull, aint' yuh?" Gratton asked softly. His harried eyes flicked to Carp Brado's face. The big killer sidled behind Pitch, neck and elbows stiff like an enraged canine. A grin rippled Gratton's lips. . . .

"Where do you git cards in that game, Pollard? An' what fer?"

"Lissen, Tiger!" Pitch was suddenly fierce as anger swept him. "They've yessed you so long, you b'lieve this tiger stuff. I don't. Nobody dealt me cards in this game. I done picked up a hand from the discard. An' I'm playin' it . . . pat. Wild poker, gents, with bullets fer chips! I check the bet to yuh. What yuh doin'?"

Gratton straightened. Dace Cooley wet his lips and squirmed uncomfortably. Trip Tilbury, with the tejano love of battle, grinned and reached for his guns, lying beside his chip stacks. Fortin's nervous fingers went to his thatch for a scratching and Pitch knew that, like his brother, he carried a Mex knife in a sheath between his shoulder blades.

Thirty seconds ticked by. No man moved or spoke. All were keyed to the breaking point. No eye missed a move. Even Carp Brado's questing orbs met the steely glance of the hemmed gambler in the backbar mirror. Gratton's bluster broke the silence. . . .

"Yo're talkin' in lead lingo, Mister Tinhorn. We savvy same . . . plenty. No man kin horn into my game this-away an' live. You've got a hand. Play it! Git 'im, Carp!"

THEY still talk about that long gamble in Johnson County. Tiger Gratton, who had hewn to the top over the bodies of his foes. Two of his henchmen to whom he had entrusted administration of the law. Two merciless hireling killers. A wolf-hearted house gambler. A gun-slingin' tejano. All of these against as square a gambler as ever shoved a bet across the baize. Seven to one, if you ignore a houseman, bartender and twelve Gratton henchmen at the bar. And no force under heaven could prevent it now from being a test of flame and lead.

Low voices sounded before the Pigeon just as the huge hands of Carp Brado found his gun grips. But all other sounds were blotted out in the drum of gunfire.

Gunswift! The urge to kill struck every man in that room. Squeal of chairs shoved back . . . slap of leather . . . rasping gasps of men gone suddenly berserk. Gunhands moved blindly. Lethal irons swept from their pouches as thumbs brushed back hammers. Seven men crouched about that poker table. Pitch Pollard sitting hunched in his place. A dozen riders filling their hands at the bar. The barkeep lifting an ugly scattergun.

Pitch seemed only to crouch, to fold his arms about his belly as if to ward off lead. It was a deceptive movement, a bizarre draw perfected over long years of practice. The gambler's supple wrists had flicked beneath veiling lapels, down to the close-strapped guns at his hips. Simultaneously those holsters tipped on their swivel rivets, pouring lead through his coat and into the bodies of Carp Brado and Jim Tedford, before their guns had cleared leather.

Unhurriedly, yet fast as the rattle of a spur, Pitch Pollard's weapons flashed into view, vomiting flame, crossing each other's path as they blasted death into that hemming ring. Nothing magical, nothing superhuman. Just a situation made to order for the particular brand of gunslingin' peculiar to this black-eyed gambler.

Sound and fury filled the room—held it. And then—

Gunfire ceased startlingly, so abrupt in fact that three men who had burst into the Pigeon could scarce believe that a gunfight had been won. Brado and Tedford were on their knees in the grip of gutshot weakness. Trip Tilbury, reaching for his guns, had withdrawn his hands and clapped them to his drilled wishbone. Tiger Gratton writhed downward, his fingers jerking lead into the floor, a fast widening stain on his silk shirt front. Link Meline, fast as hell and treacherous as a wanton's kiss, tumbled backward, a smoking sleeve gun clattering from his numbing paw. Dace Cooley sat violently in his seat, reaching for his guns . . . reaching . . . reaching. Faro Fortin, his eyes begging the mercy he had ever denied others, stood reaching for the ceiling.

The trigger-fetching houseman had tumbled off his high stool, dead as he lit. The bartender flung his scattergun into the big mirror and crashed in a cascade of plate-glass. And Pitch, a ghastly smile upon his gaunt face, sat in his gambler's seat, his black eyes and the barrels of his twin guns leering at the twelve at the bar.

"Pitch!" His voice crackled strangely. "Pitch up an' quit! I've got four chips left . . . lead ones! Who feels like bettin'?"

NO one did. Their guns tumbled; their hands shot up. The thing was inconceivable save that they had seen it with their own eyes. And they wanted none of that shootin' fool's medicine. Eight shots fired . . . eight men dead. A deadly efficiency. Someone rasped a nervous laugh. . . .

"Some authority, gents! So-om-m-me authority!"

The three invaders at the door shook off their astonishment, darted forward into the smoke-coiled room. Face twitching dangerously, Chris Sarber covered the Tied Circles crew. Rick Tuttle, the coroner's six-shooter weaving circles before him, limped toward Pitch, looking for signs of bullet tally. And when he saw what he saw, he reeled giddily and slumped to the floor. Iron nerve that had held him

immune to bullet shock had failed him at last in this moment.

"Funeral," sighed Pollard softly, "fetch him a drink. An' bring me one while yo're at it."

As if shocked into inaction, Pitch sat there quietly until Potts brought him three fingers in a water glass. Not till then did he lay down his guns.

"Whiskey," he breathed, thanking the undertaker with a smile, "is shore a comfortin' thing sometimes, ain't it, Funeral?"

"Criminee!" ejaculated the still stunned undertaker. "Such shootin', I never saw the like. Yuh got eight, feller. Do yuh understand? Eight of 'em!"

Pitch's head nodded solemnly.

"Fair," he admitted. "I allus took a heap uh pride in my work."

"You taken a terrible chance, Pollard. Why'd yuh come in here alone tuh make a play like this? You'd jest as well had help."

Pitch smiled lazily as if he were tired. His words were slow, spaced queerly. "You mebbysy can't understand, Funeral. I'm a sentimental cuss what never had any kinfolks that I kin recall. Nobody tuh care fer me . . . until I married my wife—Rick's daughter. She died. That left me without kinfolks again . . . except ol' Rick, yonder. He's all I got, Funeral . . . all I got. So I'd be a mangy skunk if I didn't take a hand when they rung in a cold deck on the ol' codger. Wouldn't I?"

Funeral choked, dropped a sympathetic hand on Pitch's shoulder.

"I see it better, Pollard . . . much better. An' it strengthens my faith that God still is makin' men as well as beasts. Eight men! An' me here with only one shroud. I better shag out an' get seven more."

Pitch coughed, wiped a dark trickle from his ashen lips. Like a very tired man, he laid his head on his hands.

"Far . . . be it from me, Funeral . . . tuh tell a man . . . how tuh . . . tuh run his business," he mumbled sleepily. "But yuh better fetch . . . eight more."

His body quivered, seemed to settle a little lower in the chair. A square gambler had passed.



"Hello, Warden McConnell? This is Governor Danforth. . . . That's right. I am sending you a stay of sentence. . . ."

-S. MAXWELL-

whose footsteps were beating a brisk tattoo was not a guard—somebody from the outside.

The newcomer came into Ed Sheldon's line of vision. Short and plump, his pink jowls fresh from the barber's chair, he stopped in front of Big Ed's cell.

"Hello, Ed." His voice had a deep, pleasant timbre.

"You finally came, heh, Counsellor?" Big Ed Sheldon's voice was hoarse and rasping; seemed to come from down around his knees.

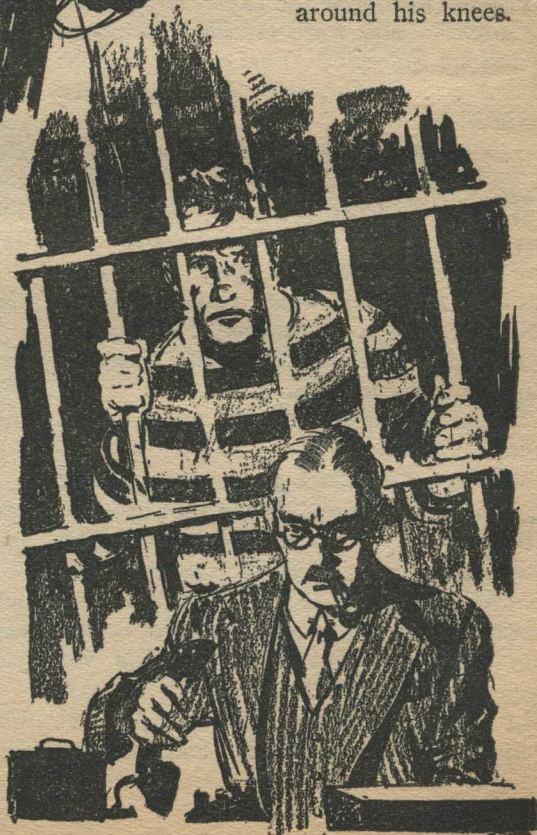
MURDER RAP

A Blazing Crime Novelet

By Pete Martin

Twelve hours stood between Big Ed Sheldon and that Long Walk. Yeah, Big Ed was due to burn . . . for the one murder the crime-boss had never committed!

BIG ED Sheldon's hairy paws were wrapped around the thick steel bars of his death-cell. Two little trickles of sweat ran down the metal below his tensed fists. He pressed his face against the bars and strained to look down the corridor in the direction of the sound of crisp heel-clicks. Guards wore rubber heels. The man



"Been running myself ragged, Ed," Counsellor Jeffery Link explained. He touched his moist brow and a diamond sparkled. "Worked every possible angle for an appeal. Slept on the Governor's doorstep, even flew down to Washington. They all turned me down, Ed, every one of them. They all say you've got to—" His head jerked toward the small green door at the far end of the corridor. His voice was sad syrup—"There's no out, Ed. You got to take it."

Big hands clenched against steel. Steel rattled. Haunted eyes rolled in red-rimmed sockets.

"I got to—"

A dull voice gasping.

Link spread plump fingers. "I've tried every angle, Ed. Every possible angle."

Ed Sheldon's hueless face was drawn. His wide mouth twisted, straightened, twisted. "I got to burn? I take the rap for a kill I didn't do?" His voice was hushed and hallow, unbelieving.

"They won't let me lift a finger, Ed," Link insisted. "Tell me where you got the money cached and I'll spend every dime of it getting square for you, Ed. I'll get the boys who framed you into this if it takes five years. They can't get away—"

"Sure," Ed Sheldon droned. "If it takes five years. But I fry in twelve hours."

It was chilly inside the death house and the air smelled strongly of chloride of lime, but the plump little lawyer kept mopping his brow as though he stood in the steam room of a Turkish bath. "Tell me where the dough is, Ed," he repeated. "I'll get even with every last one of them."

Bitter eyes stared out through the bars. Breath hissed between Ed Sheldon's teeth. Slowly his hands relaxed, dropped to his sides. Slowly his head shook.

"No, Counsellor—" And his voice was clear, distinct. "If I go, the dough is buried until the end of the world. That jack is for Ed Sheldon, see? If I don't get to use it, then it rots where it lays."

"Your brother and I will use it to avenge you, Ed," Link promised.

"My brother!" Sheldon grated. "That dope! You'd take it from him inside a week. What do I care what happens after I fry? Will it bring me back to life if

you get the guys who really done it? I want to live, hear me?" His voice grew louder, more impassioned. "I want to live! I don't want to sit in no seat and get burned for something I never done. I'd give a million bucks and my right arm to get out of here for twenty-four hours. I'd fix things—"

His voice drooled off. He stared at Link's plump face.

"What," the lawyer whispered. "What did you say, Ed?"

"My right arm and a million bucks. . . ." And Big Ed Sheldon, too, was whispering.

THEY stood close together—tall man, fat man—their faces touching the chill steel of the death-cell bars. Jeffrey Link wadded his moist silk handkerchief into a ball and stuck it inside his starched cuff; his black eyes shuttled restlessly up and down the corridor. Ed Sheldon's jaw was tight set, and beaded sweat was on his forehead.

Whispers harsh and rapid. . . .

"An idea while you were talking, Ed. What you said gave me the flash."

"Spill it."

"It's sure-fire, but I need heavy cash to swing it. Thirty—forty grand. And I got to put my hands on it fast. Tell me where I can get that much and I'll spring you."

"By law?"

A nervous tongue licked at Jeffery Link's fat lips. "Sure." His dark eyes shifted. Then he said quickly: "No. A break—but a real honey, Ed. A honey. Tell me where I can pick up forty gees—"

Steel shuddered beneath Ed Sheldon's gripping hands. He snarled between clenched teeth and turned away. He strode across the cell like a big cat pacing, came furiously back. His laugh was bitter, discordant.

"You rat!" he snarled. "You'd cross your mother for forty grand. You're a great mouthpiece, Link. You fix me up on two-bit indictments, beat the minor raps, but when the real tight comes you don't even get to first base." His voice rose to a higher pitch. "I didn't kill Cavetti, I tell you. I never done it. I was with Betty that night, like she testi-

fied—remember? At her flat. I never—”

“Listen—Ed—” the lawyer pleaded.

“If you’re a lawyer,” Sheldon rapped, “my silly brother ought to be a Supreme Court Judge. Put up your own jack if this stunt of yours is good. If I get clear I’ll double what you lay out. But I won’t—”

“There isn’t much time to haggle, Ed,” said Jeffery Link. And he glanced down the steel-barred corridor toward the green door at the end of it. “Twelve hours—and I need quick cash. It’s your only chance. I can’t put it up—haven’t got it—but you have your tin-box salted away. Tell me where I can get it and you live to be a hundred. You can go to Europe, South America, and live the life of Riley. It’s clean and safe and sure, Ed. I guarantee it.”

Sheldon’s blond handsome head was

Big Ed Sheldon’s bellow awoke sudden echoes in the death house. “A hell of a lawyer you are! I’m through with you, see?” His right hand let go of the bars, darted out suddenly and swept down with a vicious clip. Blood spurted from Counsellor Link’s button nose, cascaded down his pink chin and splashed on his starched shirt front and elegant cravat.

“Ow!” There was real agony in the lawyer’s cry.

A sudden uproar from inmates of other cells in the death house drowned out the lawyer’s next words.

“Sheldon smacked his mouthpiece!”

“Hit him again, Big Ed!”

“Kill the damn shyster!”

Two guards came racing down the corridor. Counsellor Link backed away from Sheldon’s cell. For a moment he and the man behind the bars glared at each other

If you enjoy reading about the Army and fighting men you’ll like the true-to-life story of young Matt Kilby, who gave up a blazing ring career to throw his punches for Uncle Sam. Don’t miss A SOCK FOR UNCLE SAM, by Bill Cook, in the current issue of FIGHT STORIES. On sale at all good newsstands!

swaying. His eyes stared and his lips moved soundlessly. “I didn’t kill him,” he whispered. “I gotta get out. I’d give my right arm—”

“Tell me where it is, Ed.” And as Sheldon’s big shoulders slumped Jeffery Link slid close to the bars again.

The tall man spoke dully, mumbling through stiff lips. Then he listened, face blank, to the rapid whisper of the lawyer. Link’s bright eyes kept guard as he talked, glancing restlessly. When he had finished Sheldon stared at him stupidly, rubbing his hands together.

“You mean—”

“It’s the only way.” Link clipped. “The sure way. Now pretend we’ve had an argument. Start talking loud. Shout that you’re through with me. Then reach through and smack me one, to make it look real.”

“You want me to pop you, now?”

“Sure, right now,” Link repeated. “We’ve got to work fast. You’re on the calendar to get it within the next twelve hours. I’ve got to get busy, but first we’ve got to have a quarrel, so it will look as though we were all washed up. Snap into it, now. Pretend to get sore.”

with unfeigned hate in their eyes.

“What’s the trouble, Counsellor?” The guard was holding the lawyer’s arm to steady him.

“That madman!” Link’s sparkler threw off points of light as he leveled a finger at Sheldon. “After all I’ve done to save him. The ungrateful pup slugged me. That’s what I get for trying to help him.”

The chorus of boos and verbal abuse from other cells broke out again.

“Quiet, you guys!” the guard thundered. “Come on, Counsellor. Can’t talk sense with a killer.”

“I wash my hands of him,” Link protested loudly.

BIG Ed Sheldon’s angry snarl followed them down the corridor to the barrel partition. The lawyer washed his face in the guards’ wash room and stopped the flow of blood with wet paper. He put on his overcoat and pulled the scarf high around his ears.

“Ungrateful lout,” he mumbled to the warden. He nodded to the keeper and went out.

The sun was setting and a chill wind was sighing in the bare branches of the

trees outside the prison, whistling mournful high notes in the electric wires. Link climbed into his limousine and told the driver:

"Back to the city—and step on it!"

A bulky figure in the far corner of the limousine stirred and touched a match to a long fat cigar. "What did Ed say, Counsellor? Did he ask about me, Counsellor?"

"Your brother is a great guy, Willie," the lawyer said. "He always asks for you and Betty and the boys. He wants you to still keep under cover for a while yet. Keep on making them believe you've gone to Chicago. In a week or so maybe—"

"Sure," the bulky man said. "I just seen the hearse roll in there. The guard says they got the box in it, ready to pack Ed in after he takes it. That's a lie, ain't it Counsellor?"

Jeffery Link smiled. "Of course, Willie." His dark eyes narrowed. "By the way, Willie, about that Cavetti kill. What kind of a sack was it they wrapped the body in?"

"A potato sack. Peerless Brand Idaho potatoes."

"And what was the number of the house they left him in?"

"On Front Street, in Riverville. It was the back room of a pool joint. And that a mess they made of him."

Jeffery Link nodded. "Your memory for detail is amazing, Willie. A man would almost think—"

"I guess I got one of them camera eyes," the bulky man said. He peered out the window of the speeding sedan. "This guy's certainly steppin' on it."

"We're in a hurry," said the plump little lawyer. "When we get back to town I want you to call on a friend of mine. I'll give you the address and you do what he tells you. Also, I want those keys of Ed's that you have."

The bulky man fumbled in hip pocket. "You ain't goin' to—"

"Of course not, Willie." The lawyer smiled. "You go right ahead using Ed's apartment and his car. Maybe I can even scare up some cash for you."

The bulky man grinned.

Jeffery Link leaned forward and pushed back the glass behind the driver's seat. His voice was crisp: "Stop at the first

phone, Gus. Then drive like hell back to the city. Wide open, understand?"

II

A BROAD-FACED, swarthy young man in pearl gray hat and belted overcoat stepped out of the service stairway on the third floor of the Midtown Hotel, walked quickly down the narrow, dingy hallway. He tried the door of room 318, then rapped sharply on the panel. A key grated and the door swung open. A thin man of about thirty-five stood inside, the knuckles of one hand trying to stuff back a yawn. He wore faded blue pajamas and his thin hair was disheveled.

The man with the gray hat and belted overcoat pushed into the room, closed the door behind him. "You George Fator?"

"That's me."

"You're on the Real News radio program, ain't you?"

"Yeah, I'm on the Real News broadcast." The little man in rumpled pajamas yawned again and ran fingers through his thin, touseled hair.

"Get dressed, and make it fast. I got a job for you."

"What kind of a job? Some kind of entertainment?"

"Yeah. Some kind of entertainment."

George Fator stretched sleepily. "I couldn't go with you now, brother, I got to be at the studio at nine-thirty, and I got to eat first. What kind of act you want?"

"That act you do. Get dressed."

"I can do a lot of stuff." The performer fished around on the bureau for cigarettes, lighted one and took a deep drag. "I used to do a barnyard act on the Keith circuit that was a pip. I can imitate a cow, a pig, a horse, ducks, chickens, a farmer and his wife, all at once."

The man with the belted overcoat scowled. "Leave me see you imitate a fireman and get dressed in ten seconds, or I'll smack you one in the kisser."

"What's the rush?"

The performer's visitor clamped a hand over Fator's skinny forearm. "Get dressed! If you ain't ready to go in ten seconds I take you like you are."

"Oh." Fator scrambled into his pants, pulled on a shirt and fumbled with his

shoelaces as his nervous fingers tried to knot them. "What is it, a smoker or something? Reason I want to know is I ain't been very busy lately, and I just got this spot with the Real News broadcast. If I don't show at the studio at nine-thirty I get the bounce, see?"

"Get your hat."

"All set, brother." Fator stood before the mirror and started to brush down his sparse locks. The man with the belted overcoat pushed him toward the door.

"Get going."

In the hall the stranger pulled Fator toward the service staircase, took a vise-like grip on the actor's arm and dragged him down the three flights at a fast trot. On the side street a closed car was standing, a long black sedan. A bullet-headed man with a cap was at the wheel. A thin young man with tan overcoat and black fedora was in the back seat.

The thin man in the black fedora leaned forward and swung open the door. "Sure this is the right guy?"

"Yeah, this is him. Hop in, mister."

A KNEE came up briskly and nudged Fator in the end of his back. The erstwhile vaudeville headliner scrambled into the sedan, sat between the thin man with the black fedora and the stranger in the belted overcoat who had hauled him out of bed. His high narrow forehead was a long series of puzzled ridges and his Adam's apple jerked up and down several times.

"Look, fellas." He twisted his head to look first at one, then the other. He lurched back in the seat as the car started with a sudden lunge and darted around a corner. "Look, fellas. I guess you know what you're doing all right. I wouldn't try to argue with you, but it's this way: I sleep daytimes because I'm on this night broadcast, and I save the price of two meals a day by sleeping late, see? That's why I was just getting up when you dropped around. I used to be in the chips, but I had a little tough luck, understand?"

"Who ast you for this song and dance?" The thin man's eyes were as black and dull as his hat.

"Just trying to explain, brother," Fator went on. "I didn't eat yet, and I got to be at the studio at nine-thirty sharp. Or

else I get the bounce." He grinned. "You know how it is, fellas: times is sort of tough. . . . Or maybe times is all right with you fellas. You don't look like you postponed many meals, and this is not a cheap looking hack, not by any means."

"What do I have to do," the thin man whined, "plant five on your lip to make you keep it shut?"

"This guy can imitate all kinds of animals," the stocky man in the belted overcoat said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Imitate some kind of animal for us."

"What kind—cow, rooster, hen, pig, duck, jack-ass?"

The broad, swarthy face of the man in the belted overcoat screwed up in a judicial frown.

"How about a steamboat on the river on a foggy night?" Fator offered.

"No, not no steamboat, some kind of animal. A jack-ass; leave me hear you imitate a jack-ass."

George Fator pursed his lips, contracted the throat muscles of his thin neck and uttered a loud, raucous braying sound with an ear-splitting wheeze of indrawn breath between each blast. The bullet-headed driver swerved, just missed a truck, stood up on his brakes and turned a startled face toward the rear seat. The thin man in the black hat leaped clear of his seat and came down shaking. His lips worked jerkily for a moment before he was able to speak.

"Cut that out, hear? You blast out like that any more and I'll split your skull!"

The broad-faced man in the belted overcoat laughed uproariously, doubled over in his seat and slapped his knees. "That was swell. You're pretty good, mister. What other animals can you imitate?"

"Listen to me, Goomie!" the thin man snapped. "I say no more of them noises, and I mean no more of them noises. Get it?"

"Aw, utsnay! This guy used to be a headliner on the Keith circuit. Leave him imitate some more—" Goomie stopped and started blankly at the thin man's tense, twitching features and dull black eyes. He shrugged. "All right; never mind no more noises for just now."

Fator looked from one to the other

again. "What's going on, fellas? What do you want me for, anyway?"

"A nice little easy job," Goomie told him.

"Yeah, but I'll lose this steady spot with the Real News broadcast. I can't go with you, fellas."

"Don't worry." The thin man spoke without turning his head. "After you do this little bit for us you'll never have to worry about a steady job again."

THE room was dark, and George Fator put his hands out instinctively as he walked through the door. Goomie was on one side of him, the thin nervous man on the other. A voice from the dark interior of the room said: "All right, stand there."

The trio stood still, just inside of the door of the darkened room. The voice spoke again. It was a rich, well modulated voice, with a deep, pleasant timbre.

"You are the man who imitated Governor Danforth on the Real News radio broadcast, are you not?"

"Yes, Fator said. "I imitated Governor Danforth."

"Let me hear you talk like him."

"I want the voters of this commonwealth to know—" Fator's voice was like that of a big, heavy man, a rumbling voice with a slightly husky drawl—"that I am working for them, nah!" The *nah* on the end of the sentence was a peculiar little snort with which the Governor emphasized a sentence he wished to stress.

"Excellent! I want you to make a telephone call. When the connection is made you will be told what to say. It must be in the voice of Governor Danforth, you understand?"

"Some kind of a joke?" Fator asked.

"No. Nothing funny about it. Better make it good. Take him up there, Utah. And make it fast!"

The thin man jerked Fator's sleeve. "Come with me."

They went out of the darkened room into the living room of the apartment. It was like hundreds of other medium priced furnished apartments. Utah, the thin, nervous man, lighted a buff colored cigaret with shaking fingers. "This better be the best act you ever done, mister."

"Who was the guy in the dark room?" Fator asked.

"If you were supposed to know," Goomie told him, "the room wouldn't of been dark."

A big, bulky man came out of the dark room. "Hello, Willie," Goomie greeted him. "We got a guy here who can imitate all kinds of animals."

"Yeah?" Willie handed Utah a folded slip of paper. "Tell him to do one."

"Hold it!" Utah snapped. He passed the slip of paper to George Fator. "Here's what you say, when we get you set on the phone. It's your part in tonight's show. Better learn it right."

Fator took it and read the single brief paragraph. His head snapped up and his eyes darted wildly from one face to the other. "Holy mackerel! I dassen't do this. I'd get twenty years. Who are you guys, anyway?"

"You'll do it," Utah said flatly. "You ain't got no choice."

Fator ran his tongue over dry lips. "My Lord!" he squawked, panic-stricken.

Utah took one arm and Goomie took the other. They rushed him out of the apartment. Over his shoulder Utah called. "You come too, Willie."

Big Ed Sheldon's brother followed, grinning vacantly. They ignored the elevator and went down the back stairs. Utah and Goomie pulled Fator along so that his feet barely touched the stair treads. They pushed him into the car at the curb. They were hardly settled in their seats before the car was rocketing through traffic.

UTAH and Goomie held Fator's two arms as they crossed a bridge. Then, out in more open country, the speedometer needle hovered around sixty-five while the clock beside it on the dashboard ticked off twenty-five minutes.

They roared along a well-paved country road, flanked by large estates. Suddenly Utah leaned forward. "Near it, now, Gus."

The speed of the car dropped to thirty miles an hour. Utah's eyes squinted out the window. He lighted another brown cigaret, took two deep inhales, then squashed it out with his toe on the floor of the car.

"Lights!"

The driver snapped off the car's headlights. A pair of stone gates appeared on the right. The car swung between gate

posts and came to a slow stop. A large man wearing a long overcoat was standing in the driveway.

"He know about it?" Goomie asked.

"Yeah, they all know up here," Utah said.

Goomie got out of the car, stepped close to the big man in the long overcoat. The man didn't raise his hands or say a word. Goomie swung his left hand. The man folded like an empty bag. Goomie rolled him off the driveway with his foot and slipped the black-jack in his sleeve.

The big house was quite dark. The driveway made a semi-circular bend before it went up and under the porte cochère.

"This will do," Utah said. The driver stopped the car behind the bend in the driveway and they all got out. Utah motioned them to follow him and walked along the grass border of the gravel drive. They made very little noise as they approached the big house in the gloom.

"W-what place is this?" Fator asked.

"It's just the Governor's summer home," Goomie told him. "If the Governor hadn't just got a call from a certain big shot, he'd be here now to say hello, instead of on his way to town."

"Shut up!" Utah snapped.

As they rounded the side of the house another figure stepped out of the shadows. He snapped on a flashlight for a second, held the beam of light on his hand so that it showed him holding a coil of clothes rope.

"All right, Goomie," Utah said. "Tie him up."

Goomie took the clothes line from the man, threw several loops around his wrists, elbows and knees, then tied the rope at the man's ankles. The man who was being tied said, "That's tight enough. It's the side door opening off the back porch."

Utah said, "All right."

Goomie clipped the man he had tied over the ear with his black-jack. The man fell forward on his face. He was still moaning as they went up the steps of the back porch.

"You don't need to clip these guys so hard, Goomie," Utah said.

Goomie made a derisive noise with his lips. "It's gotta look right, don't it?"

There was a shaded light in the service

hall of the big house, between the butler's pantry and the breakfast room. A thin young man with glasses was standing with his back to the wall. His eyes were wide and staring. He looked as if he was about to scream. Goomie stepped close to him and wrapped his fingers in the man's coat cuff.

"Which way?" Utah asked.

The thin man with the glasses jerked his head, led them through several dark rooms to a small den on the ground floor, behind the great central staircase. All the windows were heavily shaded. There were rows of locked filing cases along one wall. The other walls were filled with bookcases. They all looked shadowy in the single light burning in a green shaded desk lamp. There were five or six phones on the desk.

"Which one?" Utah tried to keep his hands from shaking as he lighted a brown cigaret.

The thin man with glasses pushed one of the phones across the desk.

"Get the connection," Utah told him.

The man with glasses stepped back a pace and shook his head. Utah slapped him across the mouth and the sound of the slap re-echoed in the small room. The thin man's glasses flew off and he and Utah both reached for them at once. Their heads banged as they stooped. Utah started to curse in a high, thin voice.

The young man sat down at the desk and picked up the receiver. "I'll do it," he said nervously. Goomie moved over behind him, lifted his black-jack.

"This is your cue, mister." Utah pushed George Fator forward to the phone. "Speak your piece."

THE thin young man's mouth was bleeding a little in one corner. He said over the phone, "Just a moment, Warden." He pushed the phone toward Utah. Utah stuck the instrument into Fator's hands, covered the transmitter with his palm for a second. "If you muff it, I'll spread your guts all over the room."

Fator's hands were trembling so that he had to rest both forearms on the desk. He put the slip of paper Utah had given him down in front of him:

"Hello, Warden McGonnell? This is Governor Danforth. . . . That's right. I am sending you a stay of sentence for

Edward C. Sheldon. The execution of Sheldon is to be postponed until I review some new evidence. I will send you the official order, Warden. Call me back here at Hollow Hills, right away."

Fator placed the instrument back on its cradle and looked fearfully from Utah to Goomie. "Boy, I could get plenty for this! I feel sick."

"Me, too," the thin young man with glasses said. Utah nodded to Goomie, and Goomie brought his black-jack down smartly on the thin young man's head. As the man sagged Goomie caught him and dragged him to the far corner of the room.

A buzzer sounded and a small red light flashed on the base of the Governor's private wire to the Warden. Utah motioned for Fator to pick up the receiver.

"Yes? Yes, Warden. Thank you Warden. Good-night, Warden, *nah!*"

He hung up once more.

"Did he believe you were the Governor?" Utah asked.

"Sure he did. When I give imitations it would fool the guy's own mother." Fator mopped his face. "But I wish you hadn't made me do it."

They went out the way they had entered and climbed back in the car, waiting in the driveway.

"Step on it, Gus!" Utah ordered. "We ain't got all day."

"My teeth feel funny," Willie Sheldon said. "That damn' dentist ruined me. I got to hurry back and get dressed. The boss told me to get all dressed up. I got to get a manicure, too."

"If Willie should get a manicure," Goomie said, "maybe I ought to stop and get me hair waved."

"He's got to be dressed up nice for Big Ed's coming out, ain't he?" Utah asked slowly.

"Sure," Willie said.

Goomie grinned. "You been wearing Big Ed's clothes ever since Ed's been in the can. Gettin' to be a dude, ain't you, Willie?"

Willie Sheldon grunted.

"Ed won't care this time." Utah lit another cigaret and drew deep breaths. "No, Big Ed won't care this time. It will be all right with him if Willie wears his clothes tonight."

III

TWO guards, members of the death watch, sat on wooden chairs in the aisle outside the cell. Big Ed Sheldon, sitting tense on the edge of his bunk, broke through the steady drone of the chaplain's voice:

"What time is it?"

"Do not think about it, my son," the chaplain said softly. "Tell yourself that this is not the end, but the beginning—"

Sheldon jumped to his feet. "It's almost time, ain't it?" he bellowed. "Quit mumbling and tell me. Any minute now they'll come for me, huh?"

The chaplain nodded. "It won't be long, my son. You must compose yourself."

There were footsteps coming down the corridor. The muttering mumble of the convicts in the other cells of the death house mounted to a roar like a storm surf as the warden and the keeper approached Sheldon's cell. It was the bestial howl of condemned men, watching one of their mates go before them. Big Ed's face was like putty. The warden stopped in front of Sheldon's cell. The chaplain stood up and opened his prayer book. The two guards on the death watch nodded to each other, pushed back their chairs.

"The Governor just telephoned, Sheldon," the warden said. "A temporary stay of sentence has been granted. A reprieve while he reviews new evidence."

"Yeah?" Sheldon sat down again, heavily, on the edge of his bunk.

"I'll leave you then, my son, the chaplain said.

"Wait a minute," Sheldon said quickly. "Stay here a little while, Father."

"Certainly." The chaplain sat down again on his little wooden stool. The warden turned away and walked back toward the barred partition at the inside of the death house cell block. The death watch guards shrugged, picked up their chairs and followed the warden.

"What did you want to talk about?" the chaplain asked.

"Anything at all," Sheldon said. "Read something out of the book."

Fifteen minutes later a guard walked slowly past Sheldon's cell. He slowed his pace for a moment. Sheldon looked out at him and nodded.

"That's enough, thanks," Sheldon interrupted the chaplain's measured syllables. He started to pull off his shoes, dropped one on the floor, held the other in his hand.

The chaplain stopped reading, stood up. He called to the guard. "Will you get the keeper, please?"

The guard walked to the grilled partition, called through to the keeper, sitting with feet propped up on his desk, "Chaplain wants Sheldon's cell unlocked."

The keeper started to get up, settled back, and tossed the keys to the guard. "You let him out. Big Ed doesn't get it tonight, did you hear?"

"Yeah, I heard." The guard caught the keys and went back to Sheldon's cell. He put the key in the lock, turned it, slid back the door.

"Good night, my son." The chaplain went out of the cell, turned slowly up the corridor, stopping for a moment to talk to first one condemned man, then another. The guard was sliding the door back.

"Got a reprieve, heh, Ed?"

"Yeah, the Governor called it off."

"That's good . . . Hey, you didn't stick anything in this lock, did you?"

"Me?" Sheldon asked. "No. Don't it work?"

"Not so good. It's like somebody stuck maybe the tongue of his shoe in it." The guard slid the door open again, stooped to peer down into the lock. Big Ed Sheldon's hand clamped around the guard's neck, yanked him savagely inside the cell.

"I don't know if you're in on this or not, screw!" His big right fist swished in a short arc and exploded under the guard's ear. The uniformed man went limp as a rag.

BIG Ed Sheldon slid out through the open grilled door. His bare feet made a light slapping noise as he ran down the corridor toward the small green door at the far end. From other cells glowed the whites of watching eyes. The other condemned men watched him sneak toward the death chamber without uttering a whisper. Sheldon paused for a second before the little green door, shivered, then pushed it open.

It was almost totally dark in the death chamber. A pale shaft of moonlight fell

upon the grim wooden armchair with its wires and electrodes. Ed Sheldon turned his head away and began to curse vehemently, softly. The door beyond led to the examination room, where the bodies were taken from the chair, examined, and placed in their coffins.

Sheldon pushed this door open slowly.

The room was lighted. Resting on a folding standard was a coffin, a cheap wooden box covered with dull black cloth. Its top was folded back, showing a lining of sleazy white satin. There was a man standing in the open outside door with his back to the room. He was a civilian, tall and thin, with patent leather shoes, black spats, a black overcoat and a derby. He looked like an undertaker.

Sheldon crept toward the open coffin. He scowled, mumbled to himself. "So this is the two-bit box them cheap lugs got to bury me in, huh?"

The man in the doorway didn't turn around. He spoke to somebody out in the yard. "Come on, Lou, give me a hand with this box."

Big Ed Sheldon opened the foot end of the box, crawled in and closed it again. He cursed hoarsely as his bare toes rasped against the cheap satin lining. He pulled the top shut, took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Another man wearing a chauffeur's cap came into the room. The tall spare undertaker said, "Grab that end."

"Geez, this is heavy for an empty box."

"Shut up and get going."

They carried the casket outside to the yard where a large black motor hearse was standing.

The casket was shoved into the back of the hearse. The yard was almost totally dark, except for a few uncertain shadows where the pale moon eluded the high stone walls. It was cold and the wind sighed and moaned through the wires running from the death house to the power plant.

The wires that carried the death current.

The two men went around and got in the front seat of the hearse. The motor roared and the hearse rolled around to the gate, stood there while the gate was opened, then shot out onto the broad white road, turned south and hummed along at an even fifty miles an hour. Less than five minutes from the prison wall a large black

sedan inched the hearse over to the side of the road, made the driver stand up on his brakes.

The hearse driver leaned out. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me, buddy." The sedan's driver rolled down the window and leaned out. Then he laughed. "I mistook you for somebody else. Go right ahead."

As the hearse gathered headway again Big Ed Sheldon sneaked from the shadows beside the road, jumped into the black sedan and flopped down on the floor. Counsellor Jeffery Link straightened up from the corner seat and reached out, handed Sheldon a flask.

"Take a swig of this. I said I could work it, didn't I?"

"We ain't in the clear yet," Sheldon growled. "I expect to hear that escape siren blast out any minute now. By the time the chaplain turns around to look for the guard and he ain't there, hell will start to pop."

"It cost thirty-eight grand to fix it," Link said. "We don't try to make it to the city. We've got a place in Riverville, a little town just south of here. Everything's all set. The doc is ready and waiting."

Ed Sheldon took another long swig at the flask. "Do we have to work it that way? Maybe—maybe I can get clear without that."

"Not a chance," Link told him. "It has to be this way. It's the only possible manner of throwing them off. You said you'd give a million bucks and your right arm to get out—well, I'm getting you out. You can't complain about that. You had to come through the room where the chair is, didn't you? Did you take a look at it?"

"All right," Sheldon's voice was hoarse. "If it's got to be that way, let's get it over with . . . What's the fall guy?"

"Some dumb lug. You don't care who it is, as long as you're in the clear, do you?"

"No," Sheldon growled. "I don't care who it is. I was damn near the fall guy myself. Does Betty know about it?"

Link shook his head. "She's the first one the police will watch. You've got to stay away from her."

"You got to tip her off, some way or other, Link."

"Positively not!" The lawyer's voice was firm. "We can't have a woman spilling things after we've worked it so far."

"Betty's smart," Sheldon insisted. "You can trust her."

"How do you know you can trust her?" Link asked. "How do you know what she's been doing while you were in the can?"

Sheldon's big hand clamped on the lapel of the lawyer's coat, jerked him close. His voice was harsh.

"What's she been doing while I was in there? Spill it!"

"I don't know," Link said placatingly. "I don't know what she's been doing. I merely said, how can you tell what she's been up to? You can't let a woman get wind of what we're doing, Ed. You can't trust them."

"She came to see me, just a few hours ago," Sheldon said. "She thought I was going to burn. I wasn't so sure myself, right then. I think I can trust her, and if I think so—"

"But they'll be watching her!"

"Not after we pull this little stunt of yours, they won't."

Link shrugged his plump shoulders. "If I thought you wouldn't leave everything in my hands I never would have become involved. I'm taking a terrific risk, getting mixed up in this."

"Yeah?" Sheldon grated. "Well, you don't stand a chance to burn—or you ain't giving up your right arm either, are you?"

IV

UTAH and Goomie were playing rummy in Utah's apartment. There was a heap of buff colored cigarette stubs in the ash tray at Utah's elbow. The buzzer hummed and Utah started nervously.

"See who it is, Goomie."

Goomie went out into the foyer, opened the door a crack and then swung it wide. His loud laugh was followed by, "It's Willie. And is he dressed up!"

Willie Sheldon came into the living-room on Goomie's heels. He wore an expensively tailored café-au-lait suit, striped shirt and apple green necktie. He beamed happily. "How do I look, huh?"

"Just like Clark Gable," Goomie assured him.

Willie held out both large hairy paws. "I got a manicure. Boy, that's fun. You sit there and a jane fiddles around with your fingers. I am getting plenty manicures from now on. Swell looking skirt done them. I'm going back often."

Utah lighted another buff colored cigarette. "Are you?"

"Yeah." Willie's grin stretched wider.

"You're as good looking as your brother Ed when you're dolled up," Goomie said. "How do you feel?"

"I feel swell. Only my teeth still feel funny and my feet hurt a little."

Goomie looked down at Willie's pointed, chocolate suede shoes. He jabbed his finger at them and roared with hysterical laughter. "You got 'em on the wrong feet, Willie, that's why they hurt."

"Yeah?" Willie looked from Goomie to Utah, Utah nodded gravely. Willie sat down on the floor and changed them.

"That feels better. I guess you were right, Goomie. Where's the guy who makes imitations like animals?"

"He's locked in the bathroom," Goomie said. "He was crying and making a fuss and he got Utah nervous, so we locked him in the bathroom," Goomie yawned.

"Why was he crying?" Willie asked.

"He wanted to go home."

"Why did he want to go home?"

Utah threw the pack of cards down on the table with a slap. "Shut up, will you, Willie? You can tell that guy if he'll shut up he can come out again, Goomie."

Goomie unlocked the bathroom door and George Fator came out. He was red-eyed and his face was frightened. He looked from one to the other and then sat down on the edge of a chair.

"Imitate something," Willie grinned.

Fator cleared his throat. "I don't—don't feel like it."

Willie stuck out his hands. "Ever get a manicure? I just got one. A swell looking dame worked on them."

Goomie laughed uproariously.

Utah started to pace the floor, back and forth, back and forth, limiting his path to about the size of a cell at the Big House. He kept looking at his wrist watch. He whirled suddenly as the door buzzer sounded again, jerked his thumb at

the door and nodded once to Goomie.

Goomie opened the door. "Oh, hello, Betty."

BETTY NAGEL pushed past Goomie and strode into the living room. She was tall and handsomely proportioned, carried herself like a showgirl. Her costume was smart and her fur piece expensive. There were deep circles under her large dark eyes and her lip rouge was put on a little crooked. At the sight of Willie she stopped and her hand flew to her mouth; then she walked straight to Utah and seized the lapel of his coat.

"Where is he?" Her voice was harsh. "Where's Big Ed?"

"Why," Utah said, "he's in stir."

"No, he's not. He made a break, and you know it. Where is he?"

"Listen," Utah whined, "if he did make a break the cops will be watching you. They'll follow you here, and that won't help any. I don't know where he is. You better beat it."

"If he isn't coming here," the girl demanded, "what's the difference if the cops follow me here or not? If he's here now, or if he's coming, I want to see him."

"I don't know where he is," Utah protested. "You go home, and as soon as I hear anything I'll get in touch with you. Swear to Heaven, I will."

"Give me a cigarette, Utah." Her hand shook a little when she held it out.

Utah offered her a paper package and she shook her head. "I want a reefer."

He produced his cigarette case and held out a buff colored cylinder. She took it, ignited it from his lighter and drew deep drags. She exhaled slowly and looked around at the others in the room. One side of her mouth curled up as she looked at Willie.

"Who do you think you are, all dressed up in Ed's clothes?"

Willie grinned and held out both hands. "I got a—"

"Shut up!" Utah snarled.

Goomie pointed to George Fator, balanced nervously on the edge of his chair. "Hey, Betty, here's a guy who can imitate—"

Utah took the girl's arm and pulled her out into the foyer. "Look, Betty, you go back to your place and I'll get in touch

with you, soon as I hear anything. You know Big Ed wants to see you, soon as he's in the clear. You go back, see? I don't want any cops following me in case I get a buzz from the boss."

"Who do you mean—the boss?"

"Why—why, you know—Big Ed, of course."

"You sure you mean Big Ed, Utah, not some other guy who thinks he's running things?"

Utah spread his thin hands. "You know me, Betty. Big Ed is the boss with me."

"I hope so," Betty drawled, "for your sake. You wouldn't go over his head and string along with a certain cheap mouth-piece, would you, Utah?"

"Not me, Betty. You go back home. 'I'll call you there.'"

The girl took another deep pull on the reefer and dropped it on the floor, ground it out with the toe of her neat, costly oxford. "If I don't hear from you soon, I start to look on my own hook."

"Sure, Betty, sure."

UTAH walked to the door with her. When he closed it behind her he went quickly back into the living room, snapping his fingers.

"Come on, you guys, get your bennies on. We got to crawl around over a couple of roofs because that dizzy skirt came busting up here. Let's go."

"Is it a party?" Willie grinned.

Goomie laughed. "Sure, it's a party, Willie, and you're all dressed for it."

"Listen," Fator said. "I don't want to go to any party. I got to get back and explain to them over at the radio station."

"Oh, you do, heh?" Utah's voice was edged with irony. "Ain't that nice? You go with us."

"Sure," Goomie laughed. "You can give some of them imitations at the party."

Fator's chin trembled. "Please, fellas."

Goomie took his arm. "Come on. Utah gets nervous if you start to cry again, and when Utah gets nervous he's mean. He's kind of high-strung, see?"

"Maybe I could get that skirt who give me the manicure and take her to the party," Willie offered. "She's a swell number."

"Shut up, dope!" Utah snapped. He looked at his wrist watch. "Let's go."

They went out into the hall, up the stairs to the roof, and out into the cold clear night air. The face of the moon was streaked with trailing clouds, pushed along before the wind. The rooftop was a dark cluster of radio aerials, chimney and water stacks, melting together in uncertain shadows.

Utah walked to the edge of the roof, looked across a thirty-six inch gap to the roof of the building next door, cursed nervously and jumped across the narrow space, landing on the other side with two feet to spare. Fator followed him, pulled the collar of his coat up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Goomie and Willie Sheldon stepped over the gap carelessly. They were both laughing and Goomie was still kidding Big Ed's brother about being a dude and being all dressed up for the party.

Half a block from Utah's apartment they waited while Goomie stuck a piece of wire through and opened a roof door that was hooked on the inside. They went down to the ground floor, out the back entrance, and through an alley to a public garage. Utah pressed the horn button of a long black sedan standing near the door. The driver came running out of the garage office pulling his cap down over his brows. Willie, Utah and Goomie took the back seat. Fator perched on the small auxiliary seat.

The driver stamped on the starter, spun the wheel, and shot out into the street. Utah barked directions, took out a buff-colored reefer and lighted it.

"Give us some imitations," Goomie said.

"—I don't feel like it." Fator's teeth were chattering.

"He's a hell of a guy to take on a party," Willie said. "He won't be no fun at all."

He started to laugh and Goomie joined him, slapped him on the back. "You're the guy whose going to have fun, though, huh, Willie?"

V

THE night was draining out of the sky, leaving it like a piece of smeared gray blotting paper. It was cold, with the bite in the air that precedes the sunrise. A taxi rolled along a side street of the town

of Riverville, halted in front of a store that displayed cigarette and ginger ale signs and a single box of cigars.

Betty Nagel got out of the cab, looked at the number over the door. "This is it, I guess."

"Want me to wait here?" the driver asked.

"No, never mind."

"That will be six dollars and eighty cents."

She opened her purse and gave the driver a five and three singles. He stuffed them in his pocket without bothering to make a pass at giving change and drove off. The girl pulled the fur collar of her coat up around her ears, looked up and down the street, then tried the door. It swung open as she threw her weight against it.

Inside, a single night light was burning over the bar near the cash register. There were half a dozen bare tables with chairs. An open door showed a back room beyond, quite dark.

"Anybody around?" There was a slight catch in the girl's voice as she called.

There was no answer. She walked to the entrance of the back room, felt along the wall and switched on the lights. She took two steps into the room, stopped and backed away slowly until her outflung hand touched the wall. She screamed—a thin shrill note of horror.

On the floor was a dark spreading pool that seeped away from a huddled thing wrapped in burlap. There was a blood-stained knife, a hatchet. . . .

She covered her face with gloved hands, backing away.

A heavy voice said behind her: "Find something, sister?"

She turned slowly, her mouth gaping open, fingers clawing down her face. Two husky men with soft hats, coat collars upturned, had entered the bar room. Each man had an automatic in his hand.

She stared at them—pointed to the thing beyond.

"We tailed you from the city, sister," the heavy voice said. One of the men walked past her. The other stood between her and the outer door.

"Holy mackerel!" the man from the back room called. "Hey, Linehan, come in here."

"They—they got him," Betty Nagel said. "Cavetti's mob—" She sagged into a battered chair and dropped her elbows on the table. She pulled off one glove, sank her teeth into it and closed her eyes. Her lips kept moving; her voice droned a senseless mumble.

ONE of the detectives came in from the back room and touched her shoulder. When she did not lift her head he pushed her back in the chair and jerked her chin up. He cuffed her with the palm of his hand.

"It's your turn to talk, baby." He cuffed her again. "Open your eyes. Stop that damn moaning."

She said: "Is it— Did they—"

"All wrapped up and ready for delivery," the detective said. "A potato sack—just like the one they put Cavetti in. They must of threw acid in his face before they caved his head in. Cigar burns on the soles of his feet, and one arm hacked clean off of him. Big Ed ain't no pretty picture now, sister."

The girl stared up at him. The color was drained from her face. Her eyes were dull and blank and stupid.

"How did you know where he was?" the detective clipped.

"I—" Her mouth sagged and she wiped crimson lips with the back of a gloved hand. She said slowly: "Somebody phoned. They didn't say he—was dead. Just said he was here."

"Who was it? Who phoned?"

Her eyes closed and she shook her head. "I don't know. A stranger. . . . Get me a drink—will you—copper. . . ."

The detective went over to a second table and picked up a half-filled bottle, a glass. The voice of the second man whirled him around.

"Hey—watch her—I!"

Betty Nagel was bending forward slowly. As they lunged toward her she crumpled and slid face-down to the floor. They sat her in the chair again and fed her whisky in sips. Linehan took the bottle and drank deeply from it.

He said, "*Whoosh!*" and made a wry face. "Get on the phone, Jerry, and call the local cops. What a mess. Just like Cavetti only worse. These lugs ain't got no conscience."

Jerry took the bottle and disappeared. He came back wiping sweat from his forehead. The girl was beginning to moan faintly again and her limp hands were clenching.

"Guess it's Big Ed all right," Jerry said. "His name's in that brown suit, and I found a pair of fancy mouse-skin shoes in a corner. Big Ed always wore 'em. Must of got a change of scenery after makin' his break, and then—"

The other nodded. "Yeah, a hell of a thing to run into. But he only got what he gave Cavetti."

Jerry said, "Hey, she's beginning to open her eyes. Pour me another slug of that brave-maker. . . . Here, sister, gargle this."

"You find any ax or anything in there?" Linehan asked.

"Nope." He tilted the girl's head back. "Let the local law worry about that. They'll be in here soon with their cameras and Bertillion outfit. All we got to do is wait till they get here and take the prints back to check 'em."

Linehan grunted. "This is pretty lousy rum. Look behind the bar and see if there's something that don't smell like formaldehyde. Big Ed was supposed to burn last night, but he didn't beat the rap after all."

"Yeah. The warden swears the Governor called him up personally, and the Governor said he didn't do no such thing. Pretty slick, however he worked it."

"But how much good did it do him? He's stretched out there in the next room, ain't he, all hacked up? . . . Woops, hold her. Hell, she's fainted again!"

VI

COUNSELLOR LINK looked across the table at Big Ed Sheldon. He rubbed his palms together and his diamond sparkled. "How do you feel, Ed?"

Big Ed Sheldon's face was paste gray, deeply lined. His eyes glowed dully as though his brain were dulled by drugs. He moistened dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

"All right." He was dressed in trousers and shirt. His right arm was bandaged from the shoulder to the elbow—and stopped right there. His arm was ampu-

tated at the elbow. He sat back in his chair, chewing his lip.

Goomie came in, carrying a tabloid newspaper. He laughed and threw it on the table. "There you are, Ed. They find your body after you escape. Your pan they can hardly make because the guy who killed you beat it and threw acid on you. Your left hand is all scraped. But they know it's you because they got the prints on your right hand."

"Didn't I tell you?" Link asked. "Didn't I say it would fool them?"

"Who was this guy who looks so much like me they take it for me, even with his pan beat in?" Sheldon growled.

Link and Goomie exchanged glances. Link shook his head. "Some dope that Goomie picked up. We been on the lookout for a guy to use for some time, Ed. We didn't do any slouch job. We dressed him in your clothes. So now pretty soon, you can take it on the lam. You said you'd give your right arm and a million bucks to beat the rap. You gave the right arm, Ed. Now how about the million bucks? Where is it, Ed?"

Big Ed Sheldon screwed up his face stupidly. "You—you want me to give you a million bucks?"

"That was the deal, wasn't it, Ed?" Link leaned across the table.

Sheldon laughed hoarsely. "You're crazy! I never promised a million bucks."

"You wouldn't try to welch, would you, Ed?" Link's low pleasant voice held a note of warning.

"Why, you cheap punk!" Big Ed Sheldon jumped to his feet. His right arm drew back, then he looked down at it. There wasn't any hard fist on the end of that arm any more; just a neatly bandaged stump that stopped at the elbow. He sat down again, slowly.

"How about this guy Fator?" Goomie asked. "He's upstairs with Utah, bawling his head off. He's got Utah nervous. How about him?"

"What do you think?" Link snapped.

"Yeah, all right." Goomie nodded. "When do I do it?"

"Soon as we get this other matter straightened out," Link purred. "Bring him down here and we'll show Ed all the trouble we went to, understand?"

Goomie went out and Link turned to Big

Ed Sheldon. "Well, Ed, what are you going to do about the pay-off?"

"I'm going to get out of here," Sheldon said slowly. "I'm leaving the country for good, see. Before I go I'm going to take care of all of you. I'm through and I'm going to pay off. But you don't get no million bucks. You get plenty, but no million—and while I'm still here, I run things, right up to the time I leave, see? Goomie and Utah are taking orders from you now, huh? You think I'm too groggy to notice it, huh? Well, I'm not, Link. I give them orders, and I give you orders, whether you like it or not. You do the way I say, or you're out."

"You were out, Ed," Link assured him softly, "when they indicted you for murder. I broke you out and it's time for the pay-off. You're not Big Ed Sheldon any more. He's dead; you see it in the paper. You pay me and I get you out of the country and you sneak off some place and take it easy. Big Ed Sheldon is dead."

"Yeah?"

"What's the matter?" Link said quickly. "You've got a million bucks, haven't you? You've got that much salted away, after all the time you've been sinking it?"

"Sure, I got that much, and I salted it for myself. I'll need it when I take a run-out powder."

Link shook his head slowly. "You're going to be lucky to get out alive. You don't take that roll with you, Ed. Just tell me where it's cached and I'll give you some get-away money. That's your split."

"Why, you greedy little punk!" Ed Sheldon moved suddenly, then winced and clutched the stump of his right arm with his left hand.

GOOMIE came back into the room with George Fator. The little vaudeville and radio performer was hollow-cheeked and red-eyed. His lips twitched and he pawed at them with lax fingers.

"Meet Governor Danforth!" Goomie laughed. "Talk like the Governor for Big Ed, mister."

Fator shook his head. "I—I don't feel like it. I'm sick." He stared at Big Ed's freshly bandaged stump with fascinated eyes.

Link jerked a plump thumb toward Fator. "Don't worry, Ed. We'll get rid of

that little bit of evidence. Goomie knows what to do."

"You taking orders from Link now, Goomie?" Big Ed asked.

"Well, you see—" Goomie hedged. "He's been running things while you were in the can—"

"Send Utah in here!" Sheldon growled.

Goomie nodded and said, "Sure."

"Where's my brother Willie?" Sheldon demanded.

Fator made a choking noise and slumped against the table, clawed his way to a chair.

"What's eating you?" Sheldon barked.

"Willie—" Fator made futile motions.

"Keep your trap shut!" Link barked.

"Quit crying."

Utah came into the room with a quick, nervous stride. "I couldn't stall off that dame, Betty, any longer. I been talking to her over the phone. If the cops had her wire tapped we better get out of here quick. She went out and called me back from a booth. They held her in the Riverville can four hours, then took her back to the city and worked on her again. She kept her mouth shut and identified the body as Big Ed's, but she's sore. She's coming out here. I couldn't stop her."

"They'll follow her," Link said softly.

"She says she'll dress like some old hag and try to throw them off. She's supposed to be in bed with a nervous breakdown."

"Hey, Utah," Big Ed Sheldon broke in. "Who you taking orders from, me—or this cheap little punk mouthpiece?" His stump motioned toward Link.

Utah shrugged, took out his case and lighted a buff-colored cigarette. "The Counsellor put over the whole thing, Ed. He says he's running things." He exhaled a cloud of smoke, turned to Link. "That dame will be here any minute. How about her?"

"That ought to make Big Ed snap out of it," Link purred. "If the cops follow her here Ed goes back to the hot seat and our smart stunt is wasted. Tough to lose your right arm, all your dough, and go to the chair anyway, isn't it, Ed?"

"So what?" Sheldon growled.

"Just snap out of it," Link told him quietly. "Tell us where your jack is cached. We'll get you out of here and safe on a boat or a plane. Keep stalling around and you're as good as burned, right now."

Big Ed Sheldon's haggard eye went from Goomie to Utah. "So you two birds are working for Link, now?"

Goomie grinned. "Yeah. You're through, Ed. We're with the Counsellor."

Utah nodded and looked at Link.

A fierce growl started deep in Sheldon's barrel chest. "Why you two-bit hoods, you'd have been planted long ago if it hadn't been for me. What can this bird do for you? He couldn't even defend me right when I'm pinched for a kill I didn't do!" He whirled on Fator, sitting white-faced on the edge of his chair. "That's what you get for trusting guys, mister. What do you think of three rats that I saved a hundred times, turning on me when I'm in a corner? What do you think of punks like that, huh?"

Fator ran a tongue over dry lips, shook his head wordlessly.

The doorbell rang, echoed loudly in the sudden hush. Utah jumped nervously and his right hand flew to his left armpit. Link cursed softly. He walked to the window, parted the curtains and looked out.

"See who that is, Goomie. If—it's somebody we don't want to see get them inside before you take care of them."

VII

GOOMIE opened the door a crack and looked out on the stoop of the quiet little house, one of a row of old three-story brick houses in Riverville's crowded tenement district. There was an old woman, stooped and poorly dressed, carrying a large basket.

He said: "We don't want none." The door closed in her face.

Goomie called up to the second floor landing where Utah was standing. "It was some guinea lady selling plaster statues."

The continued ringing of the doorbell stopped Utah's reply. Goomie opened the door again. "I told you we don't want—"

The stooped woman carrying the basket pushed her foot into the crack of the open door. "Snap out of it, Goomie. Let me in, dope."

Goomie stepped back. "Geez, Betty! Where did you get that outfit?"

Betty Nagel pushed into the hall, dropped her basket and straightened up. She whipped the shawl from her head, rolled it

into a ball and threw it into Goomie's gaping face. "Where are they? Where are Big Ed and Link?"

Goomie jerked his thumb toward the stairs. "Up there."

Betty Nagel ran up the stairs, two at a time, pushed Utah aside at the top and walked into the room where Link and Big Ed stood, poised ready for action. Little George Fator was slumped in a chair, arms and legs lax, face spiritless.

Her eyes flashed to Big Ed's freshly bandaged stump. "That's how you did it, huh? I was wondering how your right arm was found with Willie's body!"

"Willie!" Sheldon exploded. "That's who the fall guy was, huh? My silly brother!"

"Just as if you didn't know," Betty said scathingly.

"We had to use Willie," Link explained. "Nobody else would do. The cops wouldn't fall for some stranger. Same build, same coloring, same hair."

"You lousy scut!" Sheldon snarled.

"Wait, Ed," Link explained. "Willie helped frame you. He was no friend of yours, even if he was your brother. We're lucky to get rid of him."

"That's some more of your lies!" Sheldon growled. "Willie was dumb but he never helped frame me. Maybe he wouldn't care if I got bumped, but he wouldn't take any hand in it. So the fall guy was poor dumb Willie, huh?"

"Never mind that," the girl shrilled. "How about me? You birds fix this up, I have to make the identification, and what do I get out of it? You're all set to blow and leave me without a dime, aren't you?"

"You didn't have to identify him," Link said. "Big Ed's arm was enough for fingerprints. Where do you fit in?"

"I saw Willie just before he started out with Utah and Goomie and that little fellow who imitates animals. I saw him all dressed in Ed's clothes, and his hands all manicured like Ed's always are. I didn't tumble until I saw the body . . . I could go to the cops."

"They'd pick up Ed if you did," Link told her.

"Him!" The girl's voice was thin and edged. "Who cares about him now? He lets me think he's going to the chair when I was up to the can to see him. He lets

them knock off his silly brother so he can run out with all that jack. And I sit around crying, huh?"

"I couldn't tell you, Betty," Sheldon explained. "I didn't know it then. I was going to get in touch with you—"

"Yeah! The girl's face was drawn in ugly lines. "If you thought you were going to burn why didn't you tell me where your jack was parked? Or was I left out of it? Any guy who'd let his own brother get hacked up so's he could get a head start for a run-out would cross up anybody. Well, I'm here now. And I want plenty, cash on the barrel head."

"Maybe you were followed here," Link said. "If you were, we haven't got much time to talk."

"I wasn't followed. I know when I left the city they wouldn't spot me. I had Wilkie of the Playhouse make me up. Talk turkey, because—" She looked up as Utah and Goomie came into the room, hands bulging ominously in coat pockets—"I left a note with my maid, to be opened in twenty-four hours."

"Are you with me, Betty?" Sheldon asked. "Or are you with the mouthpiece, here?"

"I'm with the guy who pays off," Betty snarled. "I'm sick of the run-around."

"All right, Betty," Link said. "I'll take care of you."

BIG Ed Sheldon went over to the chair by the table, sat down and held his bandaged stump in his left hand. He stared stupidly at the girl several seconds. His face muscles twitched spasmodically with the pain of his throbbing right arm.

"You turning me down too, huh, Betty?" His voice was hoarse, rasping. "All of you think I'm through, because my right flipper is gone and I'm supposed to be knocked off, huh? The whole crowd playing me the chill."

"Sure," Link agreed. "Everybody's through with you, Ed. You're a has-been. You're dead, officially and every other way. Snap out of it and tell me where the jack is, or else—"

"Or else—what?" Sheldon husked. He looked around at Goomie's swarthy, flat face, set brutishly; at the smoldering dark eyes, the twisted scowl on the girl's red mouth; at Utah's nervous twitching fea-

tures and thin hand creeping toward gun holster.

"Or else," Link purred, "they find you like they found Willie, and I take a chance on digging up your jack by myself."

Big Ed motioned with his stump at Betty Nagel, Utah and Goomie. "Send these birds out of the room."

"You three go downstairs," Link ordered. "Goomie, get the car ready. Wait for us down there. If Big Ed happens to come down alone—you'll know somethin's wrong. Let him have it, and don't miss."

"Yeah," Goomie said. "We'll take care of him, boss."

"All right," Link purred. "Go downstairs and wait."

It was getting dusk. Link sat down across the table from Big Ed. He didn't bother to switch on the lights. Just sat there staring at Sheldon in the dusk. His bright brown eyes fixed intently on Sheldon's pale and pain-lined face. Sheldon glared back at him, his gray-blue eyes pin points, sunk deep in shadowy sockets.

Neither man paid any attention to little George Fator slumped in a chair in the corner; gave him no more notice than if he were a shivering, woe-begone puppy.

"Well," Link asked softly. "Where is it?"

"You fixed everything your own way, didn't you, Link?" Sheldon growled. "You went right ahead, knocked off Willie, bought out Goomie and Utah, even Betty. You figured I wouldn't have much fight left after this—"

He lifted his stump of a right arm, dropped it to his side again.

"Everything is set," Link said briskly. "You're out of it. I thought we'd settled all that. You said you'd give a million bucks and your right arm to get out. Tell me where the jack is and I'll give you five grand for get-away money, and get you out of the country. You've got no choice, and the longer you hold out, the tougher time you'll have. Spill it!"

Big Ed Sheldon hesitated.

"It won't do any good to try giving us a run-around," Link purred. "You stay here, with Goomie and Utah to watch you, until I get the dough and give them the word."

"Don't trust me, huh, Link?"

Link shook his head. "Quit stalling."

"Wait a minute!" Both men looked up quickly. Little George Fator, sparse hair disheveled, face twitching, stood beside the table.

"What are you doing here?" Link barked.

"Don't tell him," Fator said. He seemed to be gulping for air and his words came in gasps. "Don't tell him, Sheldon. They're going to kill you anyway." His shaking forefinger pointed at Link. "He fixed it to kill Cavetti and let you get the death penalty for it. I heard them say so. He told Goomie and Utah to bump you off soon as you told him where your pile was. They only got you out for that, see?"

LINK pushed the table back, started to scramble to his feet. His mouth opened to shout. Big Ed Sheldon's left arm shot across the table. The thick, hairy fingers clamped on Link's windpipe. The shout became a feeble little squeak. The table upset as Link tried to pull back. Big Ed swung the bandaged stump and smashed it across Link's face, below the left ear. Link went limp and Sheldon sunk his teeth in his own lip to choke back the cry of pain from the outraged nerves in his amputated arm.

He relaxed the grip of his left hand and Link sagged to the floor.

"Is that on the level?" Sheldon panted, stared across Link's prostrate body at Fator's scared face.

"Yes," Fator insisted. "They're going to kill you anyway. They killed Willie and they're going to bump you off as soon as you tell Link where the money is. They're waiting downstairs now and they're going to get you."

"Yeah?"

Link stirred, tried to get up from the floor. His fingers pawed at his bruised throat and the whites of his eyes showed animal-like in the dim light. Sheldon dropped on one knee beside him.

"Can you hear me, Link?" he said. "Can you hear what I'm saying?"

Link's round head bobbed jerkily. He clawed to loosen his collar.

"Then you know why you're getting it!" Sheldon's left hand closed around Link's fleshy neck again. He forced the plump man's head down against the floor. "I'm choking the life out of you, Link, like I

should have done a long time ago."

The pressure of the big hairy hand increased. Link's eyes bulged. Veins stood out in his cheeks and forehead. Fator watched for a moment, fascinated, then covered his face with his hands. In a few minutes Sheldon stood up slowly, wiping the palm of his left hand on his trousers.

"He had that coming to him for a long time," he said huskily.

Fator agreed with a mechanical nod of his head.

Big Ed walked to the door and listened. He crossed the room and looked out of the second floor window. Then he came back and sat down again in the chair by the table, his feet touching Link's sprawled figure on the floor.

"Only thing to do," he growled, "is wait for them babies to come up. If I had a gun I'd go down and shoot it out with them. Link never carried a rod or I'd be all set."

Fator pawed at his mouth, ran nervous hands through his sparse hair. "Maybe we can bluff them out of it."

Sheldon shook his head. "Those two babies will shoot on sight. I know them."

"Maybe." Fator nodded several times. "Maybe we can fool them."

"How?"

"P—put your coat on," Fator stammered. "I'll s-see if I can put on a real performance."

The little man's face was gaunt and pale, and his lips trembled. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Any—anyway," he said, "they can't kill us any deader for trying."

VIII

FATOR held Big Ed's coat while Sheldon slid his stump in carefully, then his good arm. The little ex-vaudeville performer opened the door and stepped out into the dimly lighted hall. He moistened his lips, took a deep breath, and leaned against the hand rail of the staircase.

"Utah, Goomie!" he called out. Big Ed Sheldon jumped back in alarm as Fator called out. He turned wildly toward the room they had just left. The voice was the soft, well-modulated tone of Counselor Link. Fator snapped his fingers, motioned for Big Ed to be quiet.

From the hall below came Goomie's

voice. "Yes, boss." Goomie came and stood in the dim hall at the foot of the stairs, looking up.

"Big Ed and the little fellow are coming down." The voice was still Link's trained courtroom drawl. "Goomie, you take Big Ed and the little fellow out to the flying field. Take care of the little fellow first, Goomie."

"Sure, boss, I know," Goomie answered.

"Tell Utah to stay down there, and send up the dame, Betty."

"Right, boss."

Fator went over and slammed the door of the room, took the cuff of Big Ed Sheldon's empty sleeve, pulled him toward the head of the stairs. Big Ed went down first, slowly. Fator was at his heels. Goomie, Utah and the girl stood in the lower hall and watched them descend.

"What are you going to do with me?" Fator's voice was his own again, trembling, on the verge of tears.

"You got nothing to worry about at all," Goomie grinned. "Not a thing. You're going to be turned loose so you can tell everybody how you called up the warden and talked like Governor Danforth. How you seen Big Ed after he was supposed to be dead." He winked broadly at Big Ed.

"I wouldn't say a word to anybody," Fator said.

"Ain't you right!" Goomie agreed. "You go with me, too, huh, Ed?"

"Yeah," Sheldon said hoarsely. "You know where to take me?"

"I know where to take you all right." Goomie spoke assuringly.

"Boss wants you upstairs, Betty," Goomie said. He started for the door with Sheldon and the little vaudeville performer. The girl threw one venomous look at Big Ed and started up the stairs as the front door closed behind them.

THE big black sedan was standing at the curb with motor running. The driver slipped the gears in second as Goomie pushed Big Ed and George Fator in before him. Goomie motioned for Sheldon to sit in the left corner. He sat next to him with Sheldon's half arm on his side. Fator huddled in the seat on Goomie's other side. The car slid away from the curb, was going fifty miles an hour by the

time it reached the next corner. Goomie pulled the curtains down.

Fator, looking back under the rear curtain, saw Utah run out of the house, stand hatless and coatless on the sidewalk, waving his arms wildly.

"You're taking me to some place where a plane is waiting, huh, Goomie?" Sheldon asked.

"That's right, Ed," Goomie assented. "But first we got to pay off our little friend here who imitates guys and animals." He jabbed Fator in the ribs with his elbow. "Give us some imitations, mister."

"I'm—I'm not in the mood for it," Fator said. "Maybe after a while."

"If it ain't pretty soon," Goomie told him, "you'll be imitating a guy with a harp."

Street lights were blinking on as the car sped past the outskirts of Riverville. The driver of the black sedan switched on his headlights and the big vehicle swayed gently to the increased speed.

"You taking me to some flying field?" Sheldon asked.

"Well, it ain't exactly a flying field, but it's where you take off." Goomie called to the driver: "Any place along this road up ahead is good enough for the first stop."

Fator sat up, looked past Goomie at Big Ed Sheldon. "So long, big boy."

"So long, mister," Sheldon answered. He was staring straight ahead.

The car swung into a side-road, slacked its pace, rolled along a dirt road for several hundred yards with motor throttled down.

Sheldon turned his head to look at Fator. "Will you do an imitation of any animal, if I get Goomie to wait a couple of minutes?"

Fator wet dry lips and nodded.

"All right, then. Imitate a rat."

Fator cleared his throat, pursed his lips and spoke in Counsellor Link's soft, pleasant tones. He said: "Goomie is a sucker. He is trying to cross everybody up and he's not smart enough."

Goomie jumped as if somebody had splashed the back of his neck with ice-water. He pawed with his hands and looked around wildly. Then his small eyes seemed to recede in his broad, swarthy face. He glared at Fator. "Wise guy, huh? You talked like Counsellor Link."

... Stop the car, Gus. This will do as good as any place."

"Wait, Goomie," Big Ed said. "That's not the first time this guy talked like Link. He talked like him when he told you to bring us out here. Link is dead, Goomie. I choked him myself, see? I squeezed his windpipe, until his eyes popped."

Goomie's hand inched toward his shoulder holster. His face was wrinkled in a puzzled frown. "You couldn't squeeze no windpipe with no one hand."

"No?"

Big Ed twisted in his seat as his left hand crossed and swished in a hard, lifting smash that rocked Goomie's head back and pulled him six inches off the seat. Goomie was still pawing dazedly for his gun when Sheldon hit him again, flush on the mouth. The back of Goomie's bullet head splintered the heavy plate-glass of the sedan's rear window. He lay flattened out, knees stiff, head wedged against the broken window; then the air seemed to go out of him and he folded over on his face, slumped to the floor.

GUS, the driver, turned around. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter, Gus," Big Ed said. "Everything is all right."

He pulled Goomie's shoulder back, jerked him over on his side. His fingers came out from under Goomie's coat wrapped around the butt of a .38 automatic.

"I never knew my left was so good," he told Fator. "I always used to depend on my right." He shook the blackjack out of Goomie's right sleeve. "This guy carries everything but a bow and arrow. Frisk him for a knife. Frisk him good, mister."

Fator leaned over and felt Goomie's pockets, waist and trouser legs with nervous fingers. He straightened up and shook his head.

"That's funny," Sheldon said. "Goomie ain't the guy to depend on just one gat and a black-jack. Guess he was getting over-confident."

"Doesn't your arm hurt?" Fator asked. "Where it was amputated?"

"Sure it hurts, but what of it? These birds seem to think because they got me to leave them cut off my right arm I'm

through and ready to fold up. They damn' near got away with it, too."

"What you going to do with him?" Fator pointed to Goomie. The man on the floor was groaning, trying to straighten himself up.

Sheldon nudged him with his foot. "Hey, Goomie!"

Goomie twisted around slowly, painfully. His broad, swarthy face turned toward Sheldon, eyes blinking stupidly. "What's the idea, Ed? Why did you have to slug me?"

"What's your guess?"

"I don't know, Ed. I was just taking the little guy out. You know we got to get rid of him, Ed." Goomie put his hand to the back of his head, then felt his jaw tenderly.

"That part of it is all right," Sheldon said. "You were fixing to bump me, too. I could see it in your face, Goomie. Link told you to bump me soon as he was ready. Well, Link's gone, and you're next."

"I swear, Ed," Goomie pleaded, "I was only going to bump the little guy."

"Let's get out, Goomie." Sheldon pushed Goomie with his foot. The sedan door swung open and Goomie sprawled out on the running board.

"For Lord's sake, Ed, I didn't cross you. Don't!"

Sheldon followed Goomie out. His left hand held Goomie's gun. He kept pushing it in Goomie's stomach, making him back farther and farther away from the car. Goomie's voice kept protesting, begging.

There were three shots, in rapid succession.

Big Ed came back and got into the car. He sat on the edge of the seat, looking at the gun in his left hand. "That's the first time I ever shot a guy in cold blood. Goomie used to make fun of guys who cried. He didn't act so tough himself. He whined like a woman."

"What now?" the driver asked.

"You just sit there and keep your trap shut," Sheldon snapped. "Or are you one of the guys who thinks I'm through?"

"No, sir. You're tops, boss. I always—"

"Shut up! I'm trying to think." Sheldon stared straight ahead, eased his stump of an arm several times, the guard of the automatic still hooked in the middle finger

of his left hand. Finally he nodded and told the driver, "Get back to the main road and hit north."

"Yes, sir."

IX

THE car backed and turned, its headlights showing the bare branches of trees and clumps of brown frosted underbrush. It straightened out and swung back toward the highway.

"What was your idea in helping me out, back there?" Big Ed asked Fator, suddenly. "Did you figure I'd let you go if we made it? What were you figuring on when you imitated Link's voice back there in that house?"

Fator wet his lips.

"It was the first time I ever took a real Brody in my life," he said slowly. "I figured my number was up as soon as they made me call the warden and talk like the Governor. I knew it, and I was sitting around crying about it. I always admired guys like you. I never would have had the nerve to let them cut off my arm. I never would have had the nerve to hold out against them like you did. They said you walked through the death chamber and escaped in a coffin and a hearse when you made your break. See? I wouldn't have been able to do it. I would just fold up."

"Well, I wasn't feeling any too good, at that," Sheldon admitted. "You were pretty good, back there. You stepped up and pulled a good act, yourself. That took moxie."

"Yeah," Fator admitted. "When I saw the dame turn you down I felt sorry for you. I thought dames only turned down guys like me, so I figured we were sort of in the same boat."

"You felt sorry for *me*?" Sheldon grated.

Fator nodded. "Yeah, for a while I did, that's a fact." He scratched his right ear.

The big sedan purred along in silence. Fator huddled in one corner staring down at the tips of his shoes. Big Ed Sheldon stared blankly at the dark gray vista that unrolled beyond the window,

"You know," he said softly, at length, "maybe you're right. I guess I ought to feel sorry for myself, maybe." His fingers touched the bandaged stump of his arm. "I thought I was a wise guy—a big shot—but I guess I wasn't so big after all."

"Sure," Fator said dully. "I know. I worked ten years on this voice act. I thought I was pretty good. I can do mules and goats and apes. I can do a whole farm yard and the farmer and his wife all at once. But I ain't a big-time act. I ain't got it in me."

"You were playin' big time back there in that house with them guns in your belly, mister," Sheldon told him. His big fingers clenched together and his fist pounded his knee.

The car slowed up, and the lights flashed for a moment on a cross-roads sign-post.

"Hey!" Fator cried. "This is the road to Canada."

Sheldon said, in a droning voice as if he talked to himself, "Big Ed was a wise guy. Big Ed had a million bucks socked away for a rainy day, had the world by the tail on a down-hill drag. But he said he'd give that million bucks and his right arm if a certain thing happened."

Fator was staring at him.

"Well, Big Ed is dead," Sheldon droned. "The law says so. Let his dough die with him. I'm still alive, still kickin', and a hell of a lot smarter guy than Big Ed ever was." He turned to the little man. "You can get out wherever you want to along here. Maybe Gus has got a few bucks that will get you back to the city."

They rode along in silence.

Fator touched Big Ed's shoulder and cleared his throat. "I haven't got a job back there any more," he said. "—I always thought I'd like to live in Canada. I can work my act up, maybe. . . ."

Big Ed did not look at him.

"Listen," Fator said. "I take that back what I said. I don't feel sorry for you now. Hell! I don't feel sorry for either of us."

The car purred silently on, into the north, into the dark that a new dawn was paling.



SPACE PIRATE

A Fantastic Story of the 22nd Century

By Harry Walton

Cannibal death awaited lovely Lana Wilson and the space-pirate—unless they could turn back Time on Jupiter's satellite!

THE *Errant Knight* was a dull silvery shadow against the neon-lighted sky behind. Lana Wilson stepped from her gyro-car and searched until she spied the man slouched against the hull.

"Marshal!" she called softly.

The man snapped erect, approached, saluted in recognition. "Evening, Miss Wilson. Everything's quiet. Don't you worry."

"Good." She was a little breathless. There was something clandestine and precarious about her trip to the spaceport. She had told herself it was merely to see that the ship was being guarded, but now she knew that she had wanted to see the *Errant Knight* for herself. The little ship had a broad-shouldered, sturdy look—like Jim Carhill, her mind made unwilling comparison.

She thought of the interview they had had that morning, Jim Carhill's eager words: "If I can deliver this stuff to Io—that's one of Jupe's moons, you know—I can repay the bank with interest and keep my ship. I planned to leave tonight—"

Lana had shaken her head decisively. "I wouldn't trust you," she said chillingly, "any more than I would a day-old infant. Your relations with this bank have been unsatisfactory from the beginning, and would only continue so if I were foolish enough to permit it. Frankly, Mr. Carhill, I'm already negotiating with Stellar Metals to buy the *Errant Knight* when the foreclosure is completed. I strongly suggest you find another means of livelihood. And now will you please go?"

"If that's your last word."

"It is. Oh, be sure it is!"

He had shrugged again, walked back the way he had come. She watched the unconscious swagger of his broad-shouldered frame, and her lips set in a determined little line. . . .

Now, the voice of the watchman broke across her reverie.

"Care to go aboard, Miss?" asked the deputy marshal. "I've the keys here."

She gasped. "I thought they'd hold the keys at the office." The opportunity to go aboard was unexpected, and exciting, although she couldn't have said why. Stellar Metals had been asking questions about the ship, questions her meager file description couldn't answer. It was an excellent reason to inspect the ship herself.

"Very well, I'll go aboard," she decided. "But keep a sharp guard, Marshal. This Carhill may be desperate."

"Aye, Miss. Don't you worry about him pirating this ship while I'm on watch."

The man unlocked and pulled open the thick-walled little door forward. "Light switch is on your left, Miss."

Her heart was beating hard. Instead of switching on the lights, which would have advertised her presence to the spaceport officials, she used the little flashlight she carried. The compact control room, its levers and instruments sealed with yards of official red tape, looked forlorn and ghostly. She nodded approval of its polished neatness and went aft, through the living quarters, galley, and cargo space, the latter empty but for a score of small metal cases.

She recognized the motor room, with its tiny, immensely capable atomic motor-generator, from photos of others she'd seen. It was far in the stern, where the hull narrowed to a blunt point. She turned and went forward again, through the almost empty cargo hold, and was about to step into the galley when a sharp, muffled clang froze her fingers upon the handle of the bulkhead door. Somewhere another door had slammed shut.

The thudding of her heart seemed to echo from enclosing darkness, for she had switched off her lamp at the first sound. Now there were others—and abruptly a shrill whine from aft. She whirled in fright. That was the motor-generator!

After the first moment of panic she was quickly in command of herself. But even as she again grasped the door handle the floor tilted underfoot, the lamp described a wild arc as she tried to keep her feet, she knew a dull shock of pain, and then no more.

"SO that's Io!" murmured Lana Wilson.

The man at the controls made no answer. She hadn't expected him to. People got to talking aloud to themselves in space; they had made it a rule to reply only if directly addressed. In fact, something like a state of feud had existed aboard the *Errant Knight* ever since Carhill had refused to put back to port with her. Few words had passed between them during the journey now completed, and none of them had been friendly ones. Carhill's bland good humor, and a little of his swagger, had vanished.

Her own temper was badly frayed. She

felt dowdy in the dress she was now wearing for the fifth day. There were no hair-dressing conveniences and she felt almost grateful for the clumsy bandage that he had applied to her cut scalp. Although the wound had healed two days ago, she felt the wearing of the bandage was a reproach to Jim Carhill.

He had, he swore, overcome the guard by stunning him with a paralysis gun—and because he had produced the gun itself she believed him. But he hadn't told her where he was heading. It was not for Tork Ama, certainly, for the capital had vanished to starboard an hour ago. The blue-and-gold little world rolling beneath now seemed utterly barren of human life or the works of man. The taut lines of Carhill's body bespoke anxiety. Again and again he consulted the chronometer, only to turn back to the induction compass and his endless scanning of the terrain.

From a great clump of blue vegetation came suddenly the glint of sunlight on metal. Carhill's hands moved; the ship angled cautiously toward the spot. Apparently he meant to fly over it slowly.

They had not quite reached it when the *Errant Knight* lurched forward and downward. For a moment the little ship tried to stand on its head, while meter needles shot hard over. Lana stifled a cry of fear, fastened her seat straps with trembling fingers. Carhill's lips were clamped; his hands flew over the controls and brought the ship to a level keel. But it was dropping fast.

"Batteries shorted out," he said. "Hang tight—maybe I can take the bump out of it."

From aft came the scream of the generator, tearing its heart out as it strove to load the repulsors unaided by the useless batteries. Again the ship angled sharply downward. At the last moment Carhill flung the bow up and grounded hard by the stern. Then the bow slammed down with a jarring crash—and there was a sudden and overwhelming stillness as the motor-generator droned to a stop.

"That was a Q-barrage projector hidden in the brush," he said after a pause. "Sorry I got you into this."

She could think of nothing to say.

"You shouldn't mind," he said bitterly. "The laugh really is on me now. This

winds up everything just fine—me, and the bank, and the ship. Just fine!"

Her heart contracted strangely at the look he gave her.

"Well, we may as well start," he went on gruffly. "It's a good fifty miles to Tork Ama—I hope your shoes are good."

She was suddenly and overwhelmingly afraid. "Leave the ship? I won't! I won't!"

"**B**UT you will," he returned grimly. "You don't know what it's all about yet. Ever heard of the Liberators?"

She shook her head.

"They're Earthmen, descendants of the early Ionian settlers, who never have been reconciled to the treaty that gave Io to Venus. Briefly, they're rebels. They have a string of underground forts here in the wilderness, a few stratosphere planes, and ambitions. Chiefly they want the right of unlimited colonization."

"Are you one of them?"

"No, but I have cargo for them—fulmarite, with which they plan to load bombs to destroy the Venusian Q-barrage projectors set up all over this moon. That was the cargo you didn't believe in—I couldn't very well explain, could I? Because fulmarite is bad stuff to handle, beyond a point—"

"I'm not interested in your illegal ventures," she murmured.

"But you are—vitality," he retorted. "Maybe you think we can lie here to repair the batteries, or even radio Tork Ama for help. Wrong on both counts. We're outside the legal travel channels, and if that weren't enough the presence of that fulmarite would clinch the death penalty for both of us—the Venusians are quite modern in making no allowances for the feminine sex. Repairing the batteries would take me at least three days. The fulmarite gives us eight hours."

"I don't understand."

"You will. Fulmarite is an atomic explosive—those twenty cases in the hold would tear all Tork Ama out by the roots. Its fairly insensitive to jar, but it's unstable. By rights it should be carried in a refrigerated hold, at about the temperature of solid carbon dioxide. Unrefrigerated fulmarite explodes spontaneously after about one hundred twenty-five hours.

And it's been aboard now a hundred and seventeen.

"Maybe you understand now that I couldn't let the *Errant Knight* lie under your foreclosure seal—the stuff would have wrecked the spaceport and half the city. But fulmarite is contraband and to tell the truth would have netted me a neat prison term, since officially Earth daren't admit sympathy with the Liberators. The only thing left was to steal my own ship.

"Of course, I planned to deliver the stuff within the time limit to the Liberators, who have cold storage facilities. But their welcoming committee missed us and the Q-barrage didn't. The Venusians have the whole moon covered with projectors to discourage traffic with the rebels, on the theory that if you're on legitimate business you'll head for Tork Ama and nowhere else. So here we are with the fulmarite in our laps and due to let go in eight hours."

"Well," she said after a pause, "why not carry it off where it can explode harmlessly, and then fix the batteries?"

"Several reasons. Each case of the stuff weighs a hundred pounds even here, and will kill anything within four miles by concussion alone. No Lox could be left closer than five miles to the ship, or nearer than five miles to any other box, otherwise an overlap wave would extend the range. Figure it out. I couldn't run the total distance involved in eight hours, let alone carry the stuff. If we didn't take it far enough concussion would kill us inside the ship as quickly as outside it. No, we've got to abandon ship. I have some friends just outside Tork Ama who'll help us."

There was a cold stone in her breast as she watched him gather marching equipment—proton blasters, food tablets, chocolate, two large water canteens, and spare batteries for the guns.

GOLDEN-BROWN soil and lush blue growth of Io spread before them like a fantastic carpet. Even in the pale sunlight it was comfortably cool; the opposite or night side of the little moon, basking in the glow of Jupiter light, was the warmer, but the great planet was as yet invisible from this hemisphere. At first Lana had found walking difficult, the feeble gravity rendering her footing insecure.

But, once mastered, the buoyancy of her steps helped revive her spirits, although the thin air left her a little breathless. Carhill led the way, slashing aside the tangle of creepers, puffy fungi, and blue thorn bush that hindered them at every step. Lana followed the trail he broke. In half an hour the stockings had been ripped from her legs and her tailored skirt was a kilt of rags.

Somewhat later Carhill sat down upon a boulder. "Better rest. We aren't letting up for any real sleep tonight."

She glared at him, took off her ridiculous little shoes to knock the sand out of them, and unscrewed the lid of her canteen. Carhill pushed it down just as she was about to drink.

"You aren't thirsty yet," he growled. "That water has to last."

"We passed two pools," she retorted, furiously. "There's plenty of water here and I'll drink when I please."

"Water, maybe, but it's all arsenic. Don't touch it. All Ionian water's poison."

"I don't believe it. What if I told you I tasted it, when you didn't notice—"

Her voice faltered. She came to her feet, aghast at the sight of him. Carhill's face was suddenly drained of color, his eyes narrowed to slits. One hand was on the blaster strapped to his side.

"Did you drink?" he rasped. "Answer me!"

"I—no," she faltered. "I only—I was lying."

He relaxed slowly. "So was I. It isn't arsenic—it's worse. A filtered virus, immune even to boiling. We've got to conserve our own water."

They sat quietly a bit longer, while she watched a green-gold grasshopper the size of a mouse slowly chew the leaves from a thorny stem. Finally Carhill got up without a word, and started off again.

Now the ground sloped into a grassy plain, and the going was easier. Occasionally a big-eyed little animal would pop out of a rocky burrow or sit chattering atop a bush. She missed the birds. Except for their absence this might have been a landscape of earth. A zephyr-soft breeze caressed her cheeks.

During the next rest period, after she had got her breath, she said: "It's strange there's so much unsettled land."

He flashed her a quick glance. "That's one of the Liberators' grievances. Venus keeps them starving on allocated land, while thousands of acres lie fallow. The fact is Venus is afraid a large and prosperous Earth colony would claim autonomy. But you wouldn't care about a mob of starving rebels—"

"I care only about getting out of here," she said hotly.

"I'll see that you do. You can drink a bit now if you like."

She would have liked. The very thought of water seemed to inflame her lips, but she was too resentful of his authority to obey. She glared while he swallowed from his own flask.

"Hello, strangers!"

Carhill dropped his canteen, whirled toward the voice, the snout of his blaster uplifted.

The man was tall, round shouldered, dressed in ragged shorts. He came toward them with a careless, catlike grace that belied the studious look his rimless glasses gave him. His smile was apologetic but his eyes were wary, although the rusty blaster he carried pointed negligently into the ground.

He stopped six feet from them.

"I thought I'd take a chance," he said. "It's been lonely, and you don't look like Anthrops to me."

"We aren't," said Carhill curtly. "Are you?"

The stranger's lips twitched. "I could have knocked you both over from ambush, you know. That answer your question?"

There was a silence.

"A Q-barrage grounded us a couple of hours ago," Carhill offered. "Are you a Liberator?"

THE man shook his head. "Biological survey—unofficial, to be frank. Tork Ama refused me a permit, so I came without one. My engine had a feedback that burnt out the catalyst target, and my batteries wouldn't take me any further. Then I found I hadn't enough juice to work my transmitter. Stuck around the ship a few days but this morning I set out for Tork Ama. We'll be safer if we travel together, of course."

"Thanks, we're going on alone," said Carhill coldly.

Lana stood up. "That's ridiculous. Even if there's no danger, it's sensible to go on together with—"

"Spand is my name," supplied the stranger. "Robert Spand. But there is danger, of course. The Anthrops—"

"Skip it," interrupted Carhill.

"We'll not!" Lana retorted. "That's the second time you've mentioned the Anthrops. What is it?"

The smile fled from Spand's face; he looked embarrassed.

"I haven't told her," said Carhill. "Go on, it's your show."

"I'm sorry," Spand murmured. "I thought everybody knew—the government issues strong warnings. They claimed it was one reason they refused all permits. It's the Anthropophagi—"

He paused, looked helplessly at Carhill.

"Man-eaters," amplified the latter. "Now you know."

Lana looked uncertainly at them both. "I don't understand—I'm sure Io has no dangerous animals."

"You asked for it!" growled Carhill. "The Anthrops are men—man-eating men. not savages, but anybody who's swallowed Ionian water. The virus absorbs protein from body tissues—including the brain—and generates an abnormal craving for protein, especially meat, as well as inhibiting any moral sense its victim ever had. He'll prey on his own kind, or anything animal or human he can kill."

"Horrible!" whispered Lana.

"Not from his standpoint," Spand explained. "Self-preservation impels him to drink Ionian water if he has no other—I imagine it's pretty hard to decide on suicide, even if you know what comes next. Once the virus develops, his sense of values changes completely. Only his need of flesh food seems important. Outwardly he seems normal, retaining intelligence, speech, and so forth. He will develop certain faculties useful in stalking prey, but these aren't obtrusive. For all I can tell, of course, you may both be infected—"

"Or you may be yourself," interrupted Carhill.

"Exactly. On the other hand, we may all be normal. I give you my word of honor that I am."

"Which is just what an Anthrop would do," Carhill said.

Spand shrugged, a half smile playing about his lips. "Even so, I bear the greater risk, since you're two to one. Besides, the three of us will be safer from the real Anthrops. Also, we can remove the catalyst target from your engine and install it in mine. A far better idea than covering three hundred miles afoot. I never really did expect to make it—"

Lana swung upon Carhill. "You told me it was fifty miles!"

It was Carhill's turn to shrug. "Spand's right—three hundred is nearer. All right, Spand, we'll try your way. But if you're lying or I find that you're an Anthrop, I'll kill you."

"That goes for me, too," murmured Spand. "I guess it's clear we don't trust each other."

Carhill opened his pack, drew forth a second blaster which he gave to Lana. Her hand trembled as she buckled it on.

"You lead," he ordered. "Spand and I will go abreast."

In that formation they marched steadily back over the trail two of them had left. When they halted to rest, Spand drank heavily from his canteen.

"No point in saving water now," he said, grinning. "We can refill from your ship's tanks."

Carhill frowned but said nothing, and for the first time Lana drank her fill.

Ten minutes later, as they were again afoot, Spand came to an abrupt halt. His face was flushed and he was breathing hard.

"We're being followed," he announced.

"How do you know?" snapped Carhill.

Spand's curious smile reappeared momentarily. "Same way I found you—part hunch, part training. I was a ranger in the conservation service once. Anyway, we aren't alone. Listen!"

THE silence was a living thing, a-whisper with the chirrup of insects and the rustle of leaves.

"I don't hear anything," Carhill growled.

Spand shrugged. "I did. If we can make those rocks we have a chance of standing them off."

"You mean—Anthrops?" asked Lana in a small voice.

Spand nodded. "More than one, I think. I've heard they'll hunt in packs if the vic-

tims are armed, and fight between themselves for the spoils afterwards."

"Jim!" shrieked Lana.

Carhill whirled and ducked. The thing flashed not a foot from his head, clipped twigs from a bush nearby, and hung there. It was a flat wooden disk with three knife blades inserted around the edge, and was evidently meant to be thrown horizontally, whirling as it flew, like the Pingah of the Niam-Niam.

"Run, Lana," Carhill ordered. "Up the hill." His blaster stabbed at a rustling bush, but there was no sign of a hit. Spand was helping the girl over the rocks, and Carhill followed. The other man stopped under an overhanging ledge of rock, a spot so ideal for defense it had probably witnessed such incidents before. The approach was steep and fairly open. Two immense boulders protected against a flank attack. The face of rock was hollowed into a shallow cave, and before it boulders had been rolled to form a crude parapet.

There was no sign of the attackers. Lana found herself tired rather than frightened, and thirsty again, either because of the dry atmosphere or some subtle psychological influence. She uncapped her canteen.

Carhill covered it with one hand. "We're not out of the woods yet. You may need it worse later."

Spand looked sympathetic. "I say—we're not that badly off, really. Here—help yourself." He offered the girl his own flask. Carhill knocked it aside, his eyes blazing.

"If you try that again, Spand, I'll knock you down."

Behind his rimless glasses Spand blinked. "My Heavens, man, the girl's thirsty."

"Not that thirsty," Carhill growled. "Keep your canteen to yourself."

Spand shrugged, turned away to peer over the parapet, and barely dodged a glinting missile that struck gratingly behind him. His shy smile returned as Carhill picked the thing up—a spear made of a four-foot length of reed with the blade of a pocket knife bound fast to one split end. He stared down the sunlit slope, snapped up his gun and fired, in one swift movement, at a darting figure. It vanished with a howl of pain. Spand's eyes burned strangely.

"Nicked one—but there are plenty more. They won't rush us yet—at sundown, maybe." His fingers drummed the stock of his weapon nervously. His coolness was gone. Carhill hoped he wouldn't go to pieces at a crucial moment.

THE next two hours were a trial of nerves. At times Carhill felt it would be blessed relief to dash out and meet whatever lurked below. The sun-splashed stillness was more ominous than the roar of beasts would have been. Silent shadows slowly lengthened, and, suddenly, doubled. The great white rim of Jupiter lifted above the plain. Upon the opposite horizon a fiery segment of sun shrank visibly. Spand's lean body tensed.

"Any time now. Watch them!"

Lana tugged Carhill's sleeve. "I want to help," she said quietly. "Tell me how."

It was on Carhill's tongue to tell her to take cover. He looked into her eyes and changed his mind. "Get back of that rock. Don't hurry or shoot wild—save your shots for a real target every time. Don't take chances—" Suddenly he bent over to plant a kiss full on her lips. She did not back away, but a flush spread up from her throat.

"Gallant Jim Carhill!" she whispered cuttingly.

He was furious with himself for what had happened. Spand's hoarse whisper cut across the angry confusion of his thoughts.

"Here they come—"

Jupiter-light flashed on steel. The hard-flung knife struck sparks from stone. Spand stooped, and the blade glinted in his hand as he hurled it back. A howl testified to his marksmanship. In the white sheen of planet-light ghostly, haggard figures scrambled up the slope. The blaster flashed and turned warm in Carhill's hand. Men dropped before his sights—men in rags, incredibly gaunt, bestial, armed only with sticks, stones, knives, javelins and a few crude bows. There must have been a score of the attackers.

An arrow harmlessly pierced one of Carhill's sleeves. The point of it was a bit of crudely shaped Uxide plate from some luckless ship. On his left Lana was firing slowly but coolly. Apparently Spand

had emptied his blaster, for he was using the enemy's own missiles to good effect. Carhill watched a bearded, filth-stained face lift slowly from behind cover twenty feet away, feral eyes blazing, teeth bared in an animal grimace. He blotted it out with a shot, then spun around and fell as a stone struck him on a shoulder. Lana cried out sharply.

When he had struggled to his feet the attackers were gone, dissolved into the mist-filled, luminous wilderness night from which they had come. Jupiter was fully risen, its famed red spot a raw wound upon the metallic sheen of its gigantic disc. Spand was gulping water from his canteen; he wiped his lips with a hand that trembled.

"Think they'll come back?" asked Carhill.

The other didn't look up. "Not now. We've killed too many—and they'll be feeding on the dead. Later, maybe."

Carhill turned to Lana. "You did fine. You aren't hurt?"

"No. But it was horrible—to kill them so. Horrible."

"We'll not wait for them to come back. Spand—"

THE place where Spand had been was, incredibly, empty. His canteen and his blaster remained. After a minute Carhill looked down the corpse-strewn slope. A few of the dead had been dragged away by the living. But Spand—?

One of the bodies, lying half within the shadow of a gigantic boulder, had twitched. Carhill watched intently, the Jupiter-light too strong in his eyes to discern shape or movement within the shadow itself. But he saw something else—a pair of eyes that did not belong to the corpse, glowing, disembodied—the eyes of an Anthrop. A normal man's eyes do not glow in the dark.

Carhill fired and the eyes vanished. He wondered again what had happened to Spand. If they were to escape it must be while the beast-men were engaged in their grisly feast.

Chillingly the answer came. Carhill picked up Spand's blaster, opened the battery compartment. It was jammed with the swollen, green-corroded shells of an outworn battery.

"Get up," he said in a grim voice. "We're leaving—now."

"Not without Robert Spand?" Lana protested.

Carhill hedged. "He'll catch up with us. The fulmarite is safe for only three hours more. We've got to hurry." He didn't add that Spand's desertion spelled the end of their hope of finding his undamaged ship—if that ship had ever existed. They could only travel as fast and far as possible before the fulmarite exploded. It would be a miracle if they escaped death.

Lana followed him down the slope. Despite himself Carhill glanced toward the spot where he had blotted out the eyes. There were two bodies visible now.

"Wait. Listen!"

An agonized whisper, so low that Lana had not heard. Carhill grasped her arm as the call was repeated. She came with him into the shadow.

Spand was close to death, a shoulder and part of his chest blasted to red ruin. His lips were horribly smeared, and Carhill quickly moved to hide from Lana the other body with its grisly evidence.

"Listen! My ship—six miles east, look for a conical hill—on the north slope." Spand's voice was a bubbling croak. "I told the truth—except—been here weeks. Ran out of water the third day—no use trying to reach Tork Ama then."

"Can we do anything?" Carhill asked.

"I guess—not. It was a nightmare—the pack was after me—I joined you to escape them. Planned to kill you afterward. Then the smell was too much for me—I was hungry. I came down here. You shot—"

A froth of blood came to Spand's lips; they gaped lifelessly.

"Was he—?"

"An Anthrop? Yes," returned Carhill. The encounter with Spand had decided him. Even if they escaped the fulmarite blast, their water would scarcely last three days. He shuddered at the thought of Lana feeding as Spand had fed.

"We have almost three hours," he said, more hopefully than he felt. "We'll get the engine target from my ship and head for Spand's. It's our best chance."

He did not add that it was a very slim one.

THE footing was more treacherous than by daylight. Any attempt to run quickly resulted in a shortness of breath from which it took minutes to recover. Silently Carhill calculated their chances. At two miles per hour it would take them three hours to reach Spand's ship. They'd have to better that to leave time for installing the target and boosting the dead batteries. Maybe Spand's ship was closer than he'd thought. Maybe the fulmarite would give them a slim margin of grace, although its unpleasant characteristics were of a clock-like regularity.

And then Lana stumbled. Carhill didn't know it at first; she hadn't cried out. But he suddenly knew she was no longer close behind. She was just getting to her feet when he reached her.

"Stepped into—a chuckhole or something," she explained with an odd little catch in her voice. "Silly of me."

It wasn't silly, he saw at once—it was tragic. Her face went white after two steps. "It's wrenched a little," she said. "You go ahead while I rest a moment. I'll catch up."

"Not with a sprained ankle," he said grimly, and picked her up in his arms. She weighed scarcely anything. But he couldn't see before his feet, and the Jupiter light was deceptive. Once he stepped into a hole and sent them both sprawling.

She backed away from him. "I won't have it. Neither of us has a chance this way. You go ahead and pick me up with the ship."

"Nothing doing," he retorted. "You won't find me hanging around at ground level once I'm aboard. Come along!"

He captured her despite her protests, and kept on. But an hour more had passed, and Jupiter hung enormous in the heavens, before they caught the first glint of the *Errant Knight's* hull above intervening brush. Carhill felt with every step, with every pulse-pound of his wounded shoulder, that not even hope remained. Even if Lana could walk, they couldn't reach Spand's ship, repair the engine, and get a lifting charge into the batteries within an hour and a half. Nor could they get far enough from the fulmarite to escape the concussion wave from those twenty cases—a wave effective not within four miles only, but more likely forty. Well, it would

take a clear toll of Anthrops, he reflected grimly.

He stared down into Lana's face, streaked with dirt and the stain of crushed leaves.

"We aren't going to make it, you know," he said gently.

Her smile quickened his heart oddly. "I didn't think we would. Will it—will it be—?"

"Very quick. There's nothing to be afraid of, but we may have to be patient for a bit—shall we go on?"

She nodded.

The *Errant Knight* was touched with magic, the prosaic little hull aglow with Jupiter's splendor. His mind took notice of tiny details now—the scratch left by a defective launching cradle on Mars, a pilot light visible through the observation port, the door half open as they had left it.

But it was blood-chilling to enter the doomed little vessel, to look upon the familiar interior he had never expected to see again. Lana sat shivering where he had deposited her. All the stories Carhill had heard of the vagaries of fulmarite spun endlessly through his mind—tales of frail glass left unbroken in its wake, while cast steel nearby was shattered—stories of straws driven through walls, and a canary that landed unharmed in its cage three miles from its leveled home. A man had no right to expect such miracles for himself. But for Lana—

"A cup of *Sondo*?" he asked, and when she nodded set about preparing the Martian beverage as though they were safe in port instead of waiting for annihilation.

THEY drank slowly, facing each other across the little galley table, in a new and warm companionship that almost obliterated the thought of what was to come.

"This is the devil of a time to tell you I love you," said Carhill.

"Tell me anyhow," she answered. "I've waited a long time."

"You—? But there on the hill—when I kissed you—"

"A woman doesn't like to be rushed—at the wrong time. Now it's different. I love you, Jim Carhill. First I couldn't un-

derstand you, then I didn't want to—but now I know that men and women haven't changed just because they passed the Equalization Act and—"

"*Reach for the roof, you two!*"

Carhill swung around, raised his hands slowly at sight of the blaster pointed at his chest. The man in the doorway was no ragged Anthrop; he wore gray whipcords and a green shirt with a blue-and-gold insignia upon the collar tabs.

"Stay put and don't move." He snapped the light switch, plunging the galley into darkness for a moment, then turned the lights on again.

"You aren't Anthrops. What's your story?"

Carhill told it. "You're a Liberator, I suppose," he concluded. "Well, there's your fulmarite, but I don't think it'll do you any good. You haven't got a fast speedster handy, have you?"

The man grinned. "I walked here, mister. Your fulmarite has been under refrigeration for the past four hours. We've got detectors on every Q-barrage projector within five hundred miles; if you'd stuck around you'd have met our unloading crew. We've been expecting you, of course. The Commandant's ready to pay you off any time you like. I'll be waiting outside to take you to headquarters."

He left them alone. With a sheepish grin Carhill turned to Lana. "You were right about quitting the ship—Lana!"

Her eyes were brimming. He pulled her close.

"Lana darling! It's all right—you're safe and nothing in the system is going to hurt you."

She blinked furiously, so that the tears rolled free and splashed his fingers. "Hurt me? It's you I'm worried about. Because we're going back among other people and—and I suppose we'll get married."

"Is that dangerous?" he asked, grinning.

"Very much so, my sweet idiot," she retorted, lifting her lips to his. "With your reputation and a wife like me you'll be in constant danger. Because if you so much as stare at another woman from now on, Jim Carhill—I'll break your neck."



Colorado's carbine dropped three of the renegades with the rapidity and precision of a machine gun.



BOSS OF THE BORDER CLAN

A Complete Novelet of Old Mexico

By Walt Coburn

A maverick past hounded the grim and handsome Atkinson—hounded him until the Mejico night when Fate and renegade lead wrote a blazing *finis* to the gun-gory saga of the Border Clan!

AS choice a bunch of unhung renegades as ever infested the Mexican border were those five who made their headquarters in the town of Chino, just below the Mexican line. There was Jaans, bull-necked, red-faced, heavy-

shouldered, whose speech was thick and surly and whose two Luger pistols were always well oiled and cleaned. Jaans, who could drink a quart of rum as easily as most men down a bottle of beer.

Black Nate, the half caste, who picked

his white teeth with the same knife that had killed more than a few men. A swarthy giant who grinned often but never laughed, and whose bloodshot negroid eyes showed like ugly brownish lights under battered brows. In his veins flowed the mixed blood of the negro, the Apache, and the Mexican. He had broken every man-made law, violated every one of God's commandments, and his tough hide was marked by a hundred scars made by knife and bullet.

Pete Lopez, who played a battered guitar and sang love songs to the stars. Pete Lopez, who knew how to laugh and cry and fight and dream of great adventures, even as a boy might dream. Tall, handsome, hot of temper, a true caballero. His songs reflected all the wild beauty, the laughter, the sadness of Old Mexico. He loved gay colors, a good horse, silver trappings, and his six-shooter with its fancy silver handle.

Then there was Colorado, who talked but little and was quiet of manner even when drunk. He could ride and rope and shoot with any man. Dangerous as a coiled rattler, Colorado, who led his companions into Mexico after wild cattle that were stolen and sold on this side of the line. Tow-headed, blue-eyed, muscular and lithe. He had a fondness for poker and roping wild cattle.

Lastly there was Captain Atkinson, who had once been a gentleman. Captain Atkinson had soldiered in Mexico in every revolution. A tall, well-made man of soldierly appearance, he was the brains, the leader of this odd assortment of border renegades. Utterly fearless, he had the polished manners of a gentleman and a code of honor all his own. His eyes and hair and closely cropped mustache were the color of ashes. What his real name might be, no man knew. Nor did he ever speak of his home or his past, except that, several times when he was drinking heavily, he had mentioned India and South Africa and Australia.

They had taken down a shipment of arms and ammunition to some rebel force below the border and had brought back some wet cattle. Now, in Chino, they separated, as was their habit, each man seeking his own haunts, following his own desires.

Captain Atkinson, well groomed, sat alone at a table in the ornate and exclusive Foreign Club, which was Chino's one respectable gambling place and saloon. The place also boasted of serving excellent meals.

On the table before him was a bottle of Scotch and a siphon bottle. He had been drinking steadily for hours. Alone, apart from the crowd of tourists grouped around the gambling tables and lined up at the bar, he watched the Mexican entertainers and listened to the music of the stringed orchestra. Yet his ash-gray eyes seemed to be seeing far beyond this place, brooding, remembering, looking back into that hidden past of his that had held better things than life now gave him. His deeply tanned, handsome face was set in rather grim lines. The old saber cut that ran from temple to chin was like a white chalk mark.

A FAT, sleek-haired, oily looking man in evening clothes took a seat at Captain Atkinson's table. The man looked like a Mexican save for the Oriental slant of his eyes.

"Alone, as always, Captain, no?"

"For lack of better company, yes." Captain Atkinson's voice was well modulated, polite, faintly contemptuous. He did not ask the other to join him in a drink.

"I have a little job for you and your evil companions. It will pay far better than gun running or cattle rustling or banditry." The man spoke without trace of any accent.

"I've told you before, Carlos, we won't handle aliens." He sipped his drink slowly.

"You jump at conclusions, Captain. I once approached you on the matter of smuggling aliens. I never make the same mistake twice. This is a little adventure more in your line. Dangerous, perhaps, but it is my understanding that you and your companions are not afraid of danger. Am I correct?"

"Quite." Captain Atkinson finished his drink and poured himself another. "Name your game."

"And then leave you to the enjoyment of your own company, no?"

"Exactly."

There was no hint of resentment in the other's oily smile, but for the fraction of an instant the man's dark eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Carlos, owner of the Foreign Club, hated this well-bred adventurer with all the well-concealed hatred of his mixed ancestry.

"You will notice at one of the roulette tables a young man in riding clothes. He is gambling heavily and is more than a little drunk. Do you know who he is?"

"No, and I care less."

"Nevertheless, I'll enlighten you. The chap is none other than Reginald Wentworth, son of the Wentworth that piled up quite a few millions in steel. Reggie Wentworth, the polo player and night-club spender. He and the crowd with him are from the Lazy K dude ranch across the line. I understand he's leased the place for the winter."

"All of which interests me not at all."

"No? Perhaps not. Yet, on the other hand, perhaps yes. Notice the large, heavy-set gentleman next to him? The one who looks like a prize-fighter? He's Spike Murphy, old-time fighter and now Reggie Wentworth's bodyguard. He is also, by the way, a member of the New York detective force. Does that interest you?"

"Why should it?"

Carlos shrugged his fat shoulders and smiled. "I was thinking of a certain incident that happened in New York some years ago. A very exclusive gambling club. The matter of a man being caught, or accused, of cheating at cards. A rather nasty fight and one of the men was killed. The blow that knocked him down threw the chap against an iron grille and fractured his skull. You may recall the fact that the winner of that brief but tragic fist fight fled New York. It is somewhat of a mystery why he did so. His whereabouts are unknown. But even though years have passed, relatives of the luckless chap who was killed still have a large reward posted for the apprehension of the missing man. Do I make my point sufficiently clear, Captain?"

"Quite." Captain Atkinson's ash-gray eyes met the black stare of the other man. "I take it that you are under the impression that the wanted man is here in the Foreign Club and that this New York detective might like to collar that reward."

"You follow my thoughts, Captain. But I have no intention of informing the law that I am aware of this man's identity. Quite the contrary."

"Glad you share my viewpoint on that question, Carlos. The move would be rather unfortunate for your state of health. Extremely unfortunate. Is that all you have to discuss with me?"

"I'm coming to the point, Captain, in my own manner. You also notice the tall young lady with the reddish hair?"

"I don't discuss women in places like this," was Captain Atkinson's cold reply, "not even with a white man."

The slanted eyes of the man Carlos narrowed to thin slits. One pudgy hand, wearing a huge diamond, slid in under the black dinner jacket.

CAPTAIN ATKINSON smiled faintly. "I wouldn't, if I were you. I'm ready for you. I could kill you before you could get that popgun of yours out. Frankly, I'd rather enjoy doing it, my blackmailing amigo. Even Black Nate is a gentleman alongside such parasites as you who fatten their bankrolls from the filthy sources you use. You've invited this, Carlos. Want your little ticket to hell?"

Captain Atkinson's voice had lost nothing of its cold calm. He sat there, immaculate in his white flannels, a half-filled glass in his left hand, his right hand hidden under the tailored white coat. He was smiling a little, but his eyes were cold, dangerous.

Carlos put both hands on the table. With a visible effort he regained his composure.

"It was my understanding, Captain Atkinson, that you and your men were in the market for dangerous jobs. My talk here is merely a business discussion. I'll come to the point. Kidnap young Reggie Wentworth and the young lady who is his fiancée. I'll arrange for the ransom. The split will be fifty-fifty. The deal should net us one hundred thousand apiece."

"That all, Carlos?"

"That's the proposition."

"I'll think it over. Now clear out and let me enjoy my drink."

"It will have to be pulled tonight," said Carlos, rising and adjusting the red sash

which he wore instead of a waistcoat.

"I'll need my answer inside of an hour."

"You'll get it."

Left alone once more, Captain Atkinson looked at the broad-shouldered back of young Reggie Wentworth. From the well-shaped, curly blond head to the polished English boots, he sized up the polo star. Yet his ash-colored eyes seemed to be looking not at the young spendthrift but at someone or something in the past. Then he looked at the girl. Tall, beautiful, well tailored. Her riding breeches and boots and tweed coat had come from England before the war. She wore them well. She wore no hat and her thick dark auburn hair was bobbed short, giving her the appearance of a tall, too handsome boy. She looked up from the game and Captain Atkinson met the cool, impersonal stare of her greenish eyes. For a long moment they looked at one another. Then she went back to her game. Neither had changed expression. Captain Atkinson's gaze again fastened itself upon young Reggie Wentworth. Then he finished his drink and left the table.

He had almost finished his second bottle of whiskey, yet his bearing was, in every respect, that of a sober man. He threaded his way leisurely through the crowd until he came to the private office occupied by Carlos. This office, where thousands of dollars in gold and currency were kept, was guarded by two Mexican special policemen. They nodded curtly to him as he halted.

"Tell Carlos I want to see him."

ONE of the policemen went into the small anteroom adjoining the office with its closed door. The policeman spoke to the Mexican girl who sat at a desk there. There was a delay of a few minutes while she went inside the private office of Chino's vice lord. Then she came out and spoke briefly to the guard. He, in turn, nodded to Captain Atkinson.

"Señor Carlos will see you."

Inside the office, behind the closed door, the tall American faced the oily half-caste.

"I'll take the job, Carlos."

The oily one grinned.

"I anticipated your acceptance, Captain Atkinson. Have a seat while I give you the outline of the plan."

"I'll stand."

"May I offer you a drink?"

"No. This is business, not a social visit."

Carlos smiled and shrugged. "As you wish. Some time before daylight a car will start for the dude ranch. In that car, besides the driver, will be Reggie Wentworth, Miss Jane Lawton, his fiancée, and Spike Murphy. The driver of the car is fixed. The car will break down just this side of Yaqui Pass. You and your men will carry on from there. No violence, understand. Take the prisoners to your camp. Treat them with every courtesy. Get in touch with me when you are located. I'll expect you to bring in a letter from each of them asking their relatives to pay over the ransom money. You know how to arrange that. I'll see to the collection of the ransom money. All you have to do is take care of the prisoners."

Atkinson laughed coldly.

"And in the end be taken by the Mexican soldiers, lined up against an adobe wall, and shot. While you sit back, take not one little chance, and collect half the proceeds. I'm going to ask one hundred thousand apiece for Wentworth and Miss Lawton. I'll hold the detective for five hundred dollars, which is about twice what he's worth. Out of that you will get just fifty thousand dollars, no more, no less. I'll split my share with my men. Take it or leave it."

Carlos lit a thick black cigar. When he had rolled it thoughtfully between his thick lips for some minutes, he smiled and nodded.

"Done, Captain Atkinson."

As the tall American was turning to leave, Carlos spoke again.

"By the way, Captain, recalling that unfortunate card game in New York some years ago, as I remember, the name of the man killed was Wentworth, was it not?"

"Such a retentive memory as yours, Carlos, needs no corroboration from me. Good night."

He slowly closed the door behind him.

Outside the Foreign Club he whistled a few bars of a Mexican ditty. From the black shadows appeared a Mexican boy of perhaps thirteen.

"Go down to Dutch's place and tell Jaans to meet me in half an hour. Find

Black Nate at Lottie's and give him the same message. Pete Lopez you will find at the Cantina Mexicano. Colorado will be playing poker at the Ace of Diamonds. Tell them each to meet me in half an hour."

"Where, Señor?"

"They will know where." He gave the boy a dollar, then walked on down the dark, dusty street.

II

IN the sand wash at the foot of Yaqui Pass a car was stalled. It was an open car of expensive make. The top was down. In the rear seat Reggie Wentworth and Jane Lawton sat none too patiently. Spike Murphy, up front, swore under his breath as the Mexican driver tried in vain to start the stalled motor. A white moon rode the star-filled sky above the black, ragged mountain skyline.

From somewhere down the wash, there came the strumming of a guitar and a rich baritone voice singing a Mexican love song.

"At least," said the girl sleepily, "we're to have entertainment while that stupid idiot finds out what ails the car."

"Some moonstruck ass serenading the stars. Can't say I care for Mexican music, even under more pleasant conditions. Spike, pass me back the bottle in the dash compartment."

The song and the singer came nearer. A few moments later Pete Lopez, resplendent, mounted on a handsome black gelding, came into view. He slid the battered guitar behind his back so that it hung by its sling without hampering the movement of either hand. He doffed his huge sombrero with a flourish.

"It is, perhaps, that I can be of some of the what you say, subsistence?"

"Can you fix a stalled car?" asked Reggie Wentworth, hopefully.

"Me, Pete Lopez, fix a car? You make the joke of extreme humorous, señor. How can one go about fixing a car on horseback? With the riata I am the Jacks of all the trades but when did ever a caballero learn how to manage a car? Mechanics are to me a puzzle. Once I try to ride a bicycle. I, Pete Lopez, who has ridden

the worst bucking horses in all Mexico, picked up himself from out of the dust."

"Can you spot this Mexican lingo?" growled Spike.

"Somewhat," smiled Pete Lopez.

"Then cuss this guy out for me, and there's a buck in it. He's dumber than a punch goofy fighter."

Now, from out of the night, appearing as if by magic, there came four riders. The shadows of the brush hid their faces as they pulled up. Gun barrels glittered in the moonlight.

"Please step out of the car and line up there where the headlights show. Wentworth, you and Murphy keep your hands in the air or you'll get treated rough."

"I say," called Wentworth, "you can't get away with this, you know."

"No? We'll see. Murphy, keep your hands high or you'll get hurt. We mean business."

"A stick-up, eh?" snarled the ex-pugilist.

"For heaven's sake," called the girl, "let's do as they want us to. They won't get much from us. Perhaps one of them can fix the car."

Reluctantly they obeyed Captain Atkinson's commands.

"Nate, you take care of Murphy. Jaans, frisk Reggie Wentworth. Pete will entertain the lady. Fetch their horses, Colorado."

"Horses!" gasped the girl.

"Horses. You're going for a little camping trip into the mountains. It's impossible to see this picturesque country from a car. We've made arrangements for a side trip. Nate, watch that big dick. If he makes a pass, slug him. . . . Watch him!"

SPIKE MURPHY was not one to submit easily, even with the odds stacked against him. He reached for his gun. Nate's huge black fist shot out, a terrific swing. That black paw seemed buried to the wrist in the paunch of the ex-fighter, for Spike, no longer in training, had let his taste for beer add to his waistline. Spike grunted, doubling up, gasping for wind. Nate snatched the detective's gun. His white teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

"Next time it'll be a knife," he promised the gasping Spike.

Reggie Wentworth stood there, his arms

in the air, a bewildered, scared look on his tanned face. The burly Jaans relieved him of his automatic and wallet.

"Put the wallet back, Jaans. We're not petty thieves."

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Jane Lawton, anger blazing in her green eyes.

"I'm going to hold you three for ransom. I give you my word of honor that no harm will come to any of you. You will be our guests until the negotiations for the ransom money are complete."

"Let the lady go," said Reggie Wentworth. "Take me and let her go. Send Spike with her. You don't need all three of us. For that matter, name your price and I'll write you out a check right now. How's that?"

"You'd stop payment on the check. Sorry, but Miss Lawton goes with us. The money will be paid more quickly if it's a woman who is being detained. I'm giving you my word of honor that she'll be well treated."

"Word of honor!" Jane Lawton's voice was heavy with contempt. "Honor? You?"

"I was expecting that. You'll have to take my word for it. You'll ride that chestnut sorrel. I don't think you've ever sat a better horse. Wentworth, try that bay. I'll bet any part of a thousand dollars he'll out-run and out-dodge the best polo pony you own. Nate, hoist Spike up on that gray mule. If the big flatfoot squawks, make him get off and walk. Let's get going."

"This is preposterous, ridiculous," protested the girl. "I won't consider it."

"Colorado, you and Pete help the lady mount. Wentworth, get on that bay or I'll boot you up into the saddle."

"Fight him, Reggie!" called the girl as she was gently but firmly lifted into the saddle. "There's a car coming. Fight him!"

But Captain Atkinson had already gotten a hammerlock on the luckless Reggie and was propelling him energetically toward his horse.

Now the headlights of the approaching car showed down the road. They were all mounted. Jane Lawton commenced screaming at the top of her voice but Pete gagged her with his neckscarf.

"Get going," said Captain Atkinson. "I'll follow later."

The car was coming at a rapid speed. As the others rode away, Captain Atkinson turned to the Mexican driver who had stood stupidly by.

"Get in that car and step on it," he snapped.

The man obeyed with an uneasy grin. He had just shifted to second when the other car came into sight. It was another car from the ranch carrying some of Reggie Wentworth's guests. Just in time, the driver of the second car slammed on his brakes and prevented a pile-up. In doing so, he stalled his motor. It was evident that he was half drunk. There were two couples in the car.

"That's Reggie's car," called one of the men excitedly. "It's empty. Something's wrong!"

"Quite so," called Captain Atkinson from where he sat his horse in the shadows. "Reggie Wentworth, Miss Lawton and Murphy are going to be my guests for a few days."

"What the devil do you mean, fellow?"

"I'm holding them for ransom."

A frightened gasp from the car.

"But you can't get away with that, man! He's Reginald Wentworth, and as for Jane Lawton, her father'll have you hung for this. You can't do it!"

"It's already done. Now roll right along before I shoot the air out of your tires and leave you stranded here."

"But I tell you, he's Reggie Wentworth. The New York Wentworths. Don't you see what I mean?"

"Because he is Reggie Wentworth, of the New York Wentworths, is my one reason for going into the kidnaping game. Tell your man to drive on and drive more slowly or he'll wreck you. Good night!"

CAPTAIN ATKINSON rode away into the night. He was smiling faintly, but there was a worried look in his ash-gray eyes. He was thinking of how the giant Black Nate had looked at Jane Lawton. He had seen the same look on the heavy, sensuous face of Jaans. And he knew that the chances for trouble were excellent. His hand passed across the butt of his .45 and he shrugged away his

fears, then rode on to overtake the others.

He had gone less than a mile when he pulled up suddenly. Now he pulled off the trail and into the brush. A few minutes later a score of horsemen showed against the skyline, not two hundred yards away. Captain Atkinson swore softly as he recognized them as being federal troops. The next instant he was riding at a reckless speed. The night's stillness was shattered abruptly by the crack of rifle fire. Bullets clipped the brush that hid the trail along which he rode.

He led them down the wash, off on a false trail. Now and then he took a snapshot at his pursuers, just to keep them coming. It was nearly two hours later when he rode out of a deep ravine, up a steep, twisting trail, and headed eastward toward the broken mountains where he and his men made their headquarters. He was no longer pursued by the soldiers. They would, he knew, still be riding hard along that false trail where he had led them, then lost them.

Well he knew that those soldiers should not have been riding near Yaqui Pass. He knew that someone had sent them there. And that someone could be no one but Carlos. Carlos, who hated Captain Atkinson and the four who followed his commands. Carlos had double-crossed him.

An hour or so later he caught up with the cavalcade. It was getting daylight. Captain Atkinson scowled as he saw Black Nate riding near the girl who rode, chin tilted defiantly, trying bravely to hide her fear of the mixed-breed renegade.

"Back where you belong, Nate," snapped Captain Atkinson, "and stay there. Your job is to guard Murphy. Don't forget it again or you'll have bad luck. Hear that?"

Black Nate's white teeth showed in a grimace that was more of a snarl than a grin. His bloodshot brownish eyes were sullen, ugly.

"I done no wrong, Cap'n." His tone was surly.

"Keep your distance from the lady or I'll put a bullet through your black skull. Jaans, that goes for you. Pete, you and Colorado are to take care of the lady. If either Jaans or Nate come near her or in any way insult her, kill 'em. Nate, you and Jaans ride ahead with the cop. Hit a faster gait. Carlos has double-crossed us

and there's a bunch of federal cavalry on our trail. Get going."

III

THE hidden camp was in the heart of the rough hills. It was well stocked with provisions and boasted a few comforts such as shade trees between which were swung Mexican hammocks. There were several tents. Magazines and books to read. An ideal camping spot.

Black Nate was on guard at the head of the pass which was the only way of entering this hidden pocket in the hills. Jaans and Colorado were busy with the Dutch ovens at the open fire. Pete Lopez lay in one of the hammocks strumming his guitar and singing softly to the orange sunset that bathed the ragged peaks in its colorful glow.

Captain Atkinson approached the tent where the three prisoners were playing cards. He had just ridden in from a high point from which he could sweep the surrounding country with his field-glasses.

"Hate to dampen your hopes," he told them, "but the cavalry has headed back for Chino. They lasted two days on the trail, then gave up. They're afraid of the Yaquis who sometimes use the hills as sort of headquarters. Changed your mind, Wentworth, about writing that note?"

"I'll see you in hell, first," was the quick reply.

"And you, Miss Lawton?"

"What Reggie told you goes for me. I hope to see you hung."

Reggie went on:

"I'll send you a wicked invitation to the execution. They shoot 'em down in Mexico. Sometimes, if the firing squad has had too much tequila, it takes several volleys to drop a man."

"Say," broke in Spike Murphy, "get back my badge from that big gorilla named Nate, will ya? Whenever I see that big smoke wearing my badge it takes away my appetite."

"And tell that Lopez idiot to quit his eternal singing," added Reggie Wentworth. "It's giving me the jitters."

"What you need, Wentworth, is a drink to take away the shakes. How'd you like a bottle?"

"I'll buy a quart from you but I wouldn't take one as a gift. It'd choke me. How much for a quart?"

"One hundred thousand dollars. Write out the note and you'll get all you can drink."

"I'd sooner die of delirium tremens."

"You may, at that. You've been on a bad one. In this climate, chopping off suddenly, it may very easily blow out your light."

"You're a cheerful blackguard, Atkinson. I think you'd like to see me die."

"I wouldn't mind the spectacle. But you won't. Tonight, when the last of your whiskey is dead inside you, you'll weaken. There's a bit of a yellow streak in you Wentworths. You're poor losers. You remind me a lot of your older brother, Herbert. He was a welsher of the rank-est sort."

Reggie Wentworth was on his feet, white with anger. He made a rush at Atkinson who dropped him neatly with a left to the jaw. Then, as big Spike Murphy charged like a bull, Captain Atkinson met the attack with a one-two that stopped the expugilist.

"Come on, Murphy. Come and get it. Take the fight up for that yellow baby. But don't forget, Spike, that I'll have you winded in five minutes and then I'll beat you up like you've beaten other, smaller, less scienced men. I've seen you when you used to do your barroom fighting. When you were the bully of your district. I've seen you beat up drunks and other men who weren't able to fight back. Now I'll give you some medicine from your own bottle. Step out, you big plug-ugly, and I'll trim your wick."

SPIKE accepted the challenge with a sudden rush that sent Captain Atkinson reeling. For all his bulk and the toll of age and dissipation, the old-time pug knew his game. With terrific lefts and rights he drove the younger man backward.

"Knock his damned block off, Spike!" snarled Reggie Wentworth. He did not see the contemptuous smile that twisted Jane Lawton's red mouth. Reggie, his mouth bleeding, was back on his feet. He had picked up an iron tent stake.

Jaans had laid down his pot hook and

his right hand slid in under his left armpit where reposed one of his Luger pistols. Murder was stamped in his pig-like eyes.

Pete Lopez finished his song. He laid aside his battered guitar and now his right hand was resting on the silver handle of his .45. He looked toward Colorado, who grinned faintly.

Reggie Wentworth, gripping the iron tent stake in his hand, circled the fighters, watching for a chance to hit Atkinson. Jaans crept closer, his hand on the holstered Luger.

Now the voice of Colorado, unhurried, deadly calm. "Git back where yuh belong, Wentworth, or else fight yore own fight."

"And tell the Señor Jaans, compadre," smiled Pete Lopez, without moving from his hammock, "that I am watching him with the extreme care and that I have always maintained that the single-action gon is faster than the Luger pistola if the gon is handle' in the proper manner. Tell the hombre Jaans that. Me, Pete Lopez, I do not talk to pig swines!"

Jaans, crouched like a wrestler, turned the head on his thick, short neck. Pete Lopez laughed a little. Colorado, a six-shooter in his hand now, spoke briefly to Jaans.

"Pete's been spoilin' to kill yuh for a long time. Better go slow, Jaans."

Spike had rushed Captain Atkinson into a clinch. They went down, rolling over and over. Atkinson felt the crushing grip of the gorilla arms. Now Spike's teeth were snapping at his face, trying to bite off his nose or ear. With the heel of his hand he shoved back the brutal face. His knee came up in a swift jerk. Spike grunted a little and swung a heavy fist into the captain's face. Then Captain Atkinson squirmed free. Just as Reggie Wentworth struck at him with the iron tent stake. The blow was a glancing one that cut his scalp.

The next instant his fists sent Reggie Wentworth sprawling into the open door of the tent where the girl, white-lipped, stood watching. Colorado came running up, but Atkinson, as he rushed Spike, called to the tow-haired cowboy:

"I'll handle 'em, Colorado. Watch Jaans—and Nate."

Nate. Black Nate. The big giant was spurring toward the camp, attracted by

the shouts and the fighting. A six-shooter in one hand, a big machete in the other, he spurred his horse to a run.

"Watch Jaans, Pete!" called Colorado, picking up his carbine.

"I am watching like the lion watch the wild pig."

Carefully, yet quickly, Colorado took aim. He shot three times with the rapidity of a machine gun. Each bullet ripped a hole through Black Nate's Stetson. The big mixed-blood pulled up suddenly.

"The next 'un will ketch yuh plumb square between the horns, big feller!" called the grinning Colorado. "Git back on guard."

Reggie Wentworth was back on his feet. Still stunned a little, he looked around for some weapon. Then, for the first time, he was aware of the contemptuous stare of his fiancée.

"I—Spike'll be killed! Jane, give me that little automatic you have. I'll get that Atkinson rotter. Jaans and Black Nate will help. I've bought 'em both."

Jane sniffed disdainfully.

"Don't be a fool as well as a coward. Let your plug-ugly do his stuff. I've heard him tell how he beats 'em up. If you want to fight, tackle Colorado. Don't double up on Atkinson."

AT that moment Captain Atkinson rushed the winded Spike back toward the tent. Ducking a wild swing, he let Spike have it. The big bruiser went down in a groaning heap at Reggie Wentworth's feet. The captain stood there, blood trickling from a bruised mouth, one eye closing. He smiled faintly at Wentworth and the girl.

"Sorry, Miss Lawton, that this had to happen. Wentworth, get your tent stake. I'll give you that much the best of it. A good whipping will no doubt do you good."

"Hasn't there been rather enough of this brawling?" said Jane Lawton. "It's really uninteresting and ugly. Reggie is no match for you, even with the tent stake. I'm fed up on all this nonsense. I'll write you out a check and a note to go with it. I happened to remember that I have a very important bridge-luncheon date with some people at the ranch. Reggie will

likewise make out a check for his ransom."

"We'll discuss that later." Captain Atkinson walked over to where Jaans was standing.

"Get back to your cooking, Jaans." Then he joined Colorado and Pete Lopez. Pete had again picked up his guitar.

"When I told Wentworth that the Mexican cavalry had turned back, I was bluffing. They're creeping into the hills from all sides. Somebody here at camp has signaled them somehow. I missed my shaving mirror yesterday. That was when Jaans was on the lookout point. Jaans was in the Boer war and understands heliograph. Unless we move quickly, we'll be trapped here."

Pete Lopez smiled and strummed very softly on his guitar.

"Within the hour's ride from here is a hiding place where all the soldiers in Mexico cannot find us. When the government confiscate the land and ranch of my father and the soldiers are hot on our trail, an old Yaqui take us there to this secret place. I am but a small boy then. With my mother and sisters I go there with the old Yaqui. For many months we live there while we wait for my father and older brothers. When they do not come back, ever, because they are kill', the old Yaqui guided us out of Mexico. And while I am a small boy then, I remember how to get into that valley. But Black Nate and Jaans must not know where is that secret valley. We had better kill them quietly and completely before we move camp. We will kill them quickly so as not to frighten too much the señorita." He smiled, humming softly. A life or two, more or less, to Pete Lopez, counted for little.

"If we have to," said Captain Atkinson, "we'll do away with Nate and Jaans. Up until now, they've been loyal."

Pete Lopez nodded. "The señorita is too beautiful for the comfort of any man. Even I, Pete Lopez, who have loved and have been loved by the most beautiful señoritas in all Mexico, I find that I am feeling something in my heart that I do not ever feel there before. For such a señorita I would fight, myself, all of Mexico and some Texans to boot."

DUSK gathered in the rough hills. Because it was impossible for man or beast to negotiate the tortuous trail to the hidden camp, once darkness fell, no man stood guard there at the top of the trail.

Captain Atkinson, Colorado and Pete Lopez sat back in the shadows beyond the rim of the firelight. Black Nate and Jaans sat apart, talking in low tones. Now and then Nate's white teeth showed as he grinned at something he and Jaans discussed.

Spike Murphy and Reggie Wentworth, at the command of Captain Atkinson, were cleaning up the supper dishes, much to their disgust and discomfiture. Spike's face was puffed and bruised. One eye was discolored, almost closed. Reggie's nose and jaw were swollen.

"Boss," said Colorado in a low tone to Captain Atkinson, "I don't like the way Nate keeps grinnin'. And Jaans is acting too doggoned good-natured. I seen 'em talkin' to Wentworth today. And another thing: the Wentworth gent is about half stewed. So is Spike. Nate or Jaans has bin slippin' 'em lick on the Q.T."

"And perhaps a gon," added Pete Lopez.

"Spike got his badge back from Nate," added Captain Atkinson with a faint smile. "Trouble's going to come tonight. The moon will be up in an hour. Pete, can you locate that hidden valley of yours by moonlight?"

"*Quien sabe?* I can try."

"Our horses are saddled. If trouble starts, you can take the girl and strike out for your valley. Colorado and I will handle these men. Your job is to take care of Miss Lawton."

Pete Lopez smiled, strumming his guitar. "It would give me the very great extreme pleasure to put a bullet in the belly of Black Nate, and one also likewise in the paunch of Jaans before I go. From where I am now sitting it would be a simple matter." His dark eyes glittered and he caressed the silver butt of his .45. Captain Atkinson shook his head, his ash-gray eyes smiling.

"Colorado and I will handle them. You take care of the lady, Pete. Here comes the lady, now."

Jane Lawton left her tent and walked over to where the three squatted on the

ground. She handed Captain Atkinson an unsealed envelope.

"Inside is a check for one thousand dollars and also a note telling the bank to honor the check and deliver the money to the bearer."

Captain Atkinson pocketed the envelope and its contents with a slight bow, for he had gotten to his feet at her approach.

"I want to leave in the morning."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. I haven't had any donation from Wentworth."

She seemed about to speak, then changed her mind. She looked toward the campfire where Reggie Wentworth was washing dishes. There was a worried, troubled look in her eyes.

"Are you armed, Miss Lawton?" the man asked quietly.

She turned, looked squarely into the eyes of Captain Atkinson, and nodded.

"I have a small automatic."

"Good. Miss Lawton, we expect trouble here tonight. Wentworth and Spike Murphy are half drunk. Black Nate and Jaans have been bought out by your fiancé. Did you know that?" Atkinson asked.

"I suspected it, yes. Reggie is a fool. Spike is 'his 'Man Friday.' I'm afraid of those two beasts sitting over there."

CAPTAIN ATKINSON nodded soberly. He said: "Glad you see it that way. Because otherwise it would make it inconvenient for me. In an hour, Miss Lawton, you are taking a ride with Pete Lopez. I must ask you to believe that Pete Lopez is a gentleman of honor. He will take good care of you until you are placed in safe hands. Here's your check and the note that goes with it. Reggie Wentworth will pay the expenses of this party. It will cost him two hundred thousand dollars to get out of Mexico. I'm sorry I've let you in for all this. I'll do my utmost to see that you return safely to your friends across the border. It's a lot to ask, but you'll have to trust me. Say nothing to anyone. Be ready to leave in an hour. You will take a little stroll in the moonlight. Pete will meet you."

"And if I prefer to stay?"

"In that case I'm afraid we'll have to use force. This is Mexico, not New York."

"If I should call out now, Captain At-

kinson, what would happen?" Her voice was a little defiant.

"What would happen? Something not exactly pleasant. Your fiancé might get hurt in the ruckus. I don't want anything serious to happen to Reggie Wentworth, much as I dislike him. I want him to live long enough to donate his two hundred thousand to a worthy cause. Pete and Colorado need a change of climate. It is my intention that Reggie Wentworth's money shall buy their tickets to a new country."

"And you?"

"I wouldn't touch a dollar of Wentworth money with a pitchfork."

She looked at the tall soldier of fortune who no longer smiled. His eyes had hardened and his mouth was a straight, grim line.

"May I ask why?"

"That's something I'll talk over with Wentworth later. Purely personal matter. Are you still thinking of calling out for help or screaming?"

"I hardly think that it would—"

"Go with Pete," he cut in, his voice a hard whisper. "Pronto, Pete. Get her out of here! That drunken fool, Wentworth, is going to start a row. Jaans has ribbed him. Take good care of the lady, Pete, old man. If anything happens to me, turn her over to the Mexican officer in charge of the troops—and pay off Carlos in lead."

"Pronto, Señorita!" Pete led her into the shadows. His voice low, a little tense, came back to Captain Atkinson and Colorado.

"The señorita shall be deliver safely. I will take the great extreme pleasure in caring for that hombre Carlos in the proper manner. *Adios, compadres!*"

IV

THERE came the pounding of shod hoofs as Pete Lopez and the girl rode away into the darkness. Reggie Wentworth, a bottle in one hand, an automatic in the other, approached Captain Atkinson and Colorado, his gait unsteady, his face white, bloodshot eyes glaring. Behind him strode Spike Murphy, muttering profanely, trying in vain to halt his whiskey-crazed employer. Black Nate and

Jaans had gotten to their feet and now started following Wentworth and Spike. The evil pair were grinning a little.

"Damn you, you blackguard," called Wentworth thickly. "Where's that greaser taking her? What the hell's going on here? We're four to two, you lousy thief. Your dirty game is up. I'm boss here, now, get that? I'm running the show. I've stood all that a man can stand and I'm going to—"

The split second before Wentworth's automatic spat fire, Colorado had, with a short, quick jerk, thrown a heavy mesquite stick. The stick caught the would-be killer across the face, sending him reeling and spoiling his aim. The next instant Captain Atkinson and the cowboy had leaped back into the brush. Wentworth, crazy with rage, emptied his gun wildly. Blood streamed from a cut mouth. He was screaming curses. Spike jerked him into the shelter of some boulders.

Black Nate and Jaans, disappointed because there had been no murder done, slipped into the shadows.

Colorado and Captain Atkinson made their way toward the little park where the hobbled horses grazed.

"Don't kill Wentworth or Spike," muttered Captain Atkinson, as they pushed their way through the brush. "It's Black Nate and Jaans that we want. They're—Listen!"

From somewhere not more than a half mile distant there came the sound of shooting. Captain Atkinson gripped his companion's arm.

"Look, man, somebody's stopping Pete. Who the devil?"

"Look, boss. There beyond the horses. Somethin' movin' in the brush. Men hid there. That damned Jaans let somebody up the trail."

"Soldiers, you think?"

"No. Them wasn't soldiers you seen slippin' into the hills, Cap. It was some uh that smugglin', dope-runnin' gang that works fer Carlos. Carlos might have 'em dressed like soldiers, but they're his gang. And like I always suspected, Jaans is one uh the Carlos gang. Cap, we can't make it to the horses without bein' plugged."

They crouched in behind some brush and rocks. No sooner had they reached their shelter when they heard Spike shout,

then curse, punctuating his profanity with shots.

"Hey, Atkinson, where in hell are you two guys? Wentworth's shot and— Take that, ya double-crossin' son of a heathen yegg. Atkinson! Help a guy!"

CAPTAIN ATKINSON and Colorado quit their shelter, risking the bullets that were coming now like hot deadly hail. The soldier of fortune grabbed the reeling bleeding Reggie and dragged him out of danger. Colorado and Spike were shooting at the moving shadows of a half-dozen men. Now the four of them were in the shelter.

The horses, hobbled, were milling in a frightened bunch. They could hear the shouted cursing of the thick-voiced Jaans, giving confused commands.

Reggie Wentworth, wounded in the leg, was gritting his teeth and groaning, whimpering drunkenly. Captain Atkinson slapped him across the mouth.

"Shut up, you yellow pup. Want 'em to swarm in on us? Quit that sniveling."

"I'm dyin'. Great Heavens, I'm shot!"

Captain Atkinson whispered something to the big ex-pugilist.

"I hate ta do it, mister."

"If you don't, I'll use a gun on him. He's making enough racket to bring—"

"Okay, mister."

Spike's left jab traveled a scant twelve inches, but it knocked Wentworth cold.

"He'll sleep for an hour, boss."

"He needed an anesthetic." Captain Atkinson, handicapped by the lack of light and proper equipment, nevertheless made a quick job of getting the bullet out of Wentworth's thigh. Whiskey cleansed the wound. Shirts and undershirts ripped into strips made a crude bandage. The first-aid task was done. Captain Atkinson picked up his Winchester and the fight became faster. Atkinson rocked the lever.

Jaans was still shouting to them to close in on the ambushed enemy. Black Nate's wild yells could be heard above the rattle of gun-fire. They rushed the three men in their rocky shelter and were driven back, leaving several wounded and two dead.

"I want that dinge," gritted Spike. "That black ape is my prize. Didn't I keep tellin' that punk, Reggie, he was

playin' a sucker's game, t'rowin' in with dem two bums. But he's a punk, mister, and screwy as hell after he gets a swaller uh panther juice. Say, boss, where's the dame?"

"Safe, I hope," said Captain Atkinson, though there was a gritty tone in his speech that betrayed his fear for her safety. He wondered how she and Pete Lopez had fared. Had they made that hidden valley? Or had the song-loving, fighting Pete been killed and the girl taken prisoner? He cursed the half-caste Carlos. Cursed himself for having ever gotten into this mess. All on account of Wentworth and something that had happened some years ago in a New York club.

Little time for thinking now. The Carlos renegades, mostly the worst sort of drug-crazed scum, were coming again. Colorado's carbine dropped three of the leaders with the rapidity and precision of a machine gun. Colorado was whistling through his teeth, shoving fresh cartridges into his Winchester as Captain Atkinson and Spike halted the onrush with a deadly hail.

"A man could kill 'em all," grinned Colorado, who seemed to be enjoying it, "and not git a real man outa the whole smear. Got a drink on yuh, anybody?"

Spike handed over a bottle and the cowboy took a swig. Reggie Wentworth groaned and sat up. Spike handed him a silver flask.

"Here's ya leopard milk, kid. Squawk any more and the Cap will rock ya to sleep wit' de barrel of a gat. Dis ain't no ice-cream party, remember. Save ya squawk-in' till we git home. Ya ain't hurt. Just a scratch."

"It hurts like hell, Spike," whined Reggie, tipping up his flask.

"Sure. So does a toot'ache. I don't wanna smack ya again, kid."

"You hit me?"

"Yeah. Me, Spike Murphy."

"You're canned."

The Irishman grinned broadly.

"Naw. Guess again, punk. I quit while ya was nappin', see? And de next time I take a job nursin' a bat-brained, whiskey-headed punk, I'll try the gigolo racket first. And—there's my black meat!"

Forgetting caution, big Spike Murphy quit the shelter. Black Nate, who had

BOSS OF THE

been slipping through some brush, creeping toward the shelter, was not more than ten feet away. Spike, with an ugly grin on his battered face, dropped his automatic. Bare-handed, snarling, he charged. In full view the two big men faced one another. Black Nate, the mixed-blood with a bloody machete in his hand, an ugly red gash across his huge black chest, stood grinning as Spike charged like a mad bull.

The heavy machete was raised. The shooting had suddenly halted. Black Nate, double-crossed by Jaans, who had killed three of the Carlos renegades who had tried to gang him, was now no man's ally. Jaans had given them orders to kill Black Nate. But the black giant had proved too tough. One ear and part of his cheek had been cut away by a razor-edged machete. There were three bullet wounds in his tough hide. He reeked of tequila and whiskey and marijuana. A horrible, black-red brute with grinning white teeth, a blood-reddened machete in his hand. Naked, save for his cotton pants, he was a terrible, awful sight.

But Spike Murphy did not see that. Spike Murphy was from the old Bowery. Spike, who would have been heavyweight champion of the world if he had not been too fond of the white lights, the women, and the whiskey he sold and gave away over his bar. Spike's softness of muscle seemed to have, by some miracle, hardened. Quick on his feet as some huge animal, he sprang. The bloody machete whistled past his head, clipping one cauliflower ear.

The swing of the huge machete had thrown the black giant off balance. Spike's terrible left caught the black man square on that side of his face that had been partly hacked away. Black Nate staggered drunkenly, his congested brownish eyes glazing. Spike was at him now, smashing lefts and rights into the bloody face and bullet-riddled torso of the big mixed-blood. Nate, reeling, tried with his last bit of strength to swing his wicked machete but those battering fists of the snarling Irishman were blinding him, driving him backward, knocking his brain whirling.

Spike Murphy, veteran of countless ring fights and rough-house brawls, did not know that Black Nate was dying. That his evil life was numbered by seconds. He

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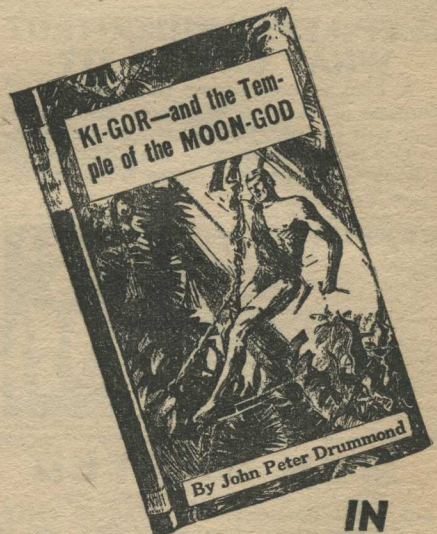
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thought only of killing the big black giant who had worn the shining detective badge which had, two years ago, been pinned to his vest by the mayor of New York himself.

"Ye'd be desp'ilin' me badge, ye black ape, would ye? Stainin' me honor as a copper, eh? Makin' fun av Spike Murphy as could lick a saloon full av the likes av such stinkin' heathen as you. Take this on the button. And this fer chaser!"

Spike swung a haymaker.

Black Nate went down. A mountain of black flesh, stained crimson, there in the white moonlight. Big Spike Murphy standing on wide-spread legs above the dead man who had gone down fighting, his wicked machete gripped in his big black paw.

Colorado it was who now went into action. For some reason he had carried along his catch rope. Now, with a deft flip, the noose snared Spike, jerking him prone—just as the enemy opened fire once more. Colorado and the captain dragged the big man back to the safety of the rocks. The fight went on.

V

THE moonlit hours dragged slowly. Carlos' renegades fought half-heartedly as the tequila died in them. Now and then could be heard the guttural, rasping voice of Jaans, cursing them into action.

Spike had been shot in the arm but made a jest of it. Reggie was whining and moaning, repeating over and over that he was dying, begging for more whiskey, for water, for dope to put him to sleep. Spike cursed him in a harsh monotone.

"There's a bottle of whiskey within easy reach, Wentworth," said Captain Atkinson; "it's yours if you tell a little story."

"Story?"

"I want to know the story of Herbert Wentworth's death. How did he die?"

"He was in a fist fight at the club. A rotter named Major Jack Atkins knocked him down. His head struck an iron grille as he fell. He died from the effects of the skull injury ten days later."

"I asked for a story, Wentworth. I want a true story. That crack on his head wouldn't have cracked an egg shell. I want

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the truth." Captain Atkinson produced a bottle and pulled the cork. He passed it to Spike and Colorado who each took a drink. He took one himself, then corked the bottle. Reggie Wentworth's bloodshot eyes were fastened on the bottle.

"The old man would disown me if I told how Herb died," whispered Reggie Wentworth huskily.

"You'll probably die anyhow," was the cold-blooded answer. There was a long silence, broken only by Reggie Wentworth's heavy breathing. Then the New Yorker spoke in a husky voice.

"Herb wasn't hurt in the fight. Just a bump on the head. Herb was a hop-head. He picked that fight with Major Atkins, a cashiered British cavalry officer. He hated Atkins because of a girl Herb had insulted. Herb was a rotter around women. Herb owned this gambling club. Every man there was his pal, indebted to him in some manner. Herb's plan was to shoot Major Atkins and one of the others would take the rap and be cleared on plea of self-defense. Atkins was too much for Herb. Took his gun away and knocked him down, then quit the place. They took Herb home and put him to bed. He got drunker than a lord. Stayed that way for ten days. Woozy. Bad shape. Took dope to straighten up. It was an overdose of the dope that killed him. The old man hushed it up. Disgrace and all that. Made Major Atkins the goat. That's the Lord's truth."

Captain Atkinson produced a fountain pen and writing pad. "Put that in writing, Wentworth. Spike and Colorado will witness it," was the curt command.

"What's it to you?"

"I happen to be Major Atkins, that's all. Spike, when he's through writing out that confession, give him his bottle."

IT was nearing dawn. Captain Atkinson spoke a few whispered words to Colorado, who protested in a low tone, then finally nodded. Captain Atkinson quit the shelter and crept silently through the darkness, making hardly a sound as he disappeared in the brush. The moon had vanished behind a heavy black storm cloud. With the stealth and caution of an Indian, this soldier who had been well trained in

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such warfare wormed his way along until he was in the same brushy boulder-strewn shelter that held the enemy. He could hear them moving about, hear their voices. But he had not yet heard the voice of the man he sought. Jaans. He crouched there in the darkness. Somewhere a man groaned, mortally wounded. A snatch of a half-forgotten prayer. Muttered curses. The gritted, crazed talk of a poor wretch deprived of marijuana.

Then, almost at his elbow, the voice of the traitor Jaans. Thick, broken, guttural, blasphemous. Trying to whip them into action with curses, promises of booty.

Captain Atkinson made out his bulky shadow now. A squat, heavy-shouldered blot against the dark sky. Standing on wide-spread legs, a Luger in each hand. Cursing the men who squatted there on the ground, afraid to attack this brute of a man who was half drunk and dangerous. Jaans faced his sullen pack, ready to kill if they tried to mob him.

Captain Atkinson inched his way toward Jaans, whose back was toward him. Now he was within arm's reach of the renegade. Swiftly he straightened up. The barrel of his single-action Colt six-shooter thudded against the thick skull of the renegade from the South African veldt. Jaans dropped like a beef hit with a sledge.

Now it was Captain Atkinson, once Major Atkins of the British army, who faced that pack of scurvy renegades. In each hand he gripped a big six-shooter. Tall, commanding, unafraid, he stood there. They looked at him in stunned silence. Their befuddled brains had not yet grasped the full significance of what they had witnessed. Perhaps they mistook him, in that black light, for one of their mangy pack. But his voice swiftly dispelled all doubt as to his identity.

"Jaans is out of the picture for an hour or so. I'll kill any man that makes a move. Surrender and I'll stuff your dirty carcasses full of tequila and feed you all the marijuana you can smoke. Make a gun-play and we'll fill you full of bullets and leave your rotting carcasses for the buzzards. What'll it be, you pack of jackals?"

"Give us tequila, boss!"

"Marijuana por me, señor."

"Then drop your guns and stand up with your hands in the air!"

"Good work, Cap," said Colorado, who now stood directly behind him.

Spike came plowing through the brush like some bulky animal. He was panting a little.

Securing the unconscious Jaans and the other prisoners was a matter of a few minutes. There were only about a half dozen. The campfire was lighted. Tequila was measured out to them as they sat, legs bound, under the watchful eye of Spike.

Colorado brought two saddled horses. Captain Atkinson spoke briefly to Spike who nodded. Then Atkinson and Colorado rode away into the first gray light of dawn.

They had gone a mile or so along the trail when Captain Atkinson's horse shied, halting abruptly, snorting at the body of a man that blocked the trail. The next moment Captain Atkinson bent over the dead body. He looked up at Colorado, a queer smile on his tanned face.

"It's Carlos."

Now the groaning of a man in pain. They found a wounded Mexican whom they at once recognized as the personal bodyguard of the vice lord of Chino. The man had been shot through the chest and was dying.

"We tried to take the señorita away from Pete Lopez," he explained in his own tongue. "Carlos wanted her. . . ." His voice ended in a rattle. The man was dead.

They rode on a hundred yards. Until they came to a sheer granite cliff. Here the creek came through a sort of tunnel. It looked like the end of the trail. Captain Atkinson took out his six-shooter and emptied it at the sky.

Two shots. . . . Two more. . . . Then one. The signal he had arranged with his men.

ATKINSON and Colorado waited for several minutes but there was no answer. The captain's face looked gray, haggard. What had become of Pete Lopez and Jane Lawton? Then, from the black maw of that tunnel through which the stream gurgled, there strode Pete Lopez. His white-toothed smile greeted them.

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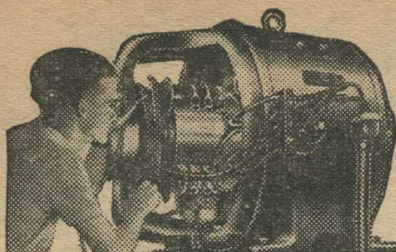
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IT was some days later when Captain Atkinson guided the Mexican army officers to the camp where Spike, the wounded Reggie Wentworth and Jane Lawton were camped. Colorado and Pete Lopez were getting dinner.

"Kidnaped?" laughed Jane Lawton. "Nonsense. Just a little practical joke we played on the other guests at the ranch. But we had not counted on the attack of Carlos and those others. Had it not been for Captain Atkinson, Colorado and Pete Lopez, we would have been murdered by those hoodlums. Am I not right, Reggie?"

Reggie Wentworth forced a smile and nodded. He was half drunk and in a not too unhappy mood despite the fact that the expensive engagement ring he had given Jane was now reposing in his wallet. And that the written truth concerning his older brother Herbert's death was now in the wallet of Captain Atkinson, once Major Atkins.

See
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TYPEWRITERS

As the cavalcade, after dinner, rode down the trail to Chino, Jane and Major Atkins lingered behind the others.

"We can be married at Tucson, Jane, then go on to New York, clear up things and travel on—to where?"

"California, Jack. Santa Barbara, perhaps. You're sure you won't miss all this? This soldier of fortune stuff?"

Major Jack laughed.

"If we feel the need of a whiff of air that's pungent with excitement, we'll visit Pete Lopez and Colorado down in the Argentine where they're going to start ranching. Say, what will your family think about your marrying the unknown Mr. Atkins?"

Jane Lawton said smilingly: "I'm free, white, and of age. My own boss. Free to marry the poor but handsome soldier of my dreams."

"Is a half million and a good paying gold mine and a big cattle outfit in Arizona considered being a pauper? Jane, take your money and give it to charity or something. You're the wife of Major Jack Atkins."

"Not yet."

"We'll be in Tucson Sunday."

"Sunday night, then, Major and Mrs. Jack Atkins will entertain a few guests at the Pioneer Hotel. Those guests will be Señor Pedro Lopez, caballero, Colorado, cowboy, Spike Murphy, one-time contender for the heavyweight crown, and Reggie Wentworth, glamour boy, providing the latter is in fit condition to be poured into the banquet room."

They laughed into each other's eyes. From down the trail came the strumming of a guitar and Pete Lopez' soft baritone voice singing an improvised love song.



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DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."



The young Englishman was amazed as he looked around the temple where he was believed to have lived and died. It seemed uncannily familiar, he appeared to know every nook and corner of it, yet—at least in this lifetime—he had never been there before. And mysterious was the set of circumstances that had brought him. Could it be a case of reincarnation, that strange belief of the East that souls return to earth again and again, living many lifetimes?

Because of their belief that he had formerly been a lama in the temple, the lamas welcomed the young man with open arms and taught him rare mysteries and long-hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which have enabled many to perform amazing feats. He says that the system often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, can be used to achieve brilliant business and professional success as well as great happiness. The young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps

and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

"There is in all men a sleeping giant of mindpower," he says. "When awakened, it can make man capable of surprising feats, from the prolonging of youth to success in many other worthy endeavors." The system is said by many to promote improvement in health; others tell of increased bodily strength, courage and poise.

"The time has come for this long-hidden system to be disclosed to the Western world," declares the author, and offers to send his amazing 9000 word treatise—which reveals many startling results—to sincere readers of this publication, free of cost or obligation. For your free copy, address the Institute of Mental-physics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 201N, Los Angeles, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free treatises have been printed.

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