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Contents for July 10th, 1923, Issue

**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off-the-Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

(Continued on next page)

(*Continued from preceding page*)

One Novel, Two Novelettes, Complete

IN THE West Virginian hills, the country of feuds, law-breakers of all sorts seemed to be immune from arrest. Not only were their headquarters hard to get at, but the sheriff and many minor county officials were hand in glove with them. Sure of their ground, they murdered one of *Larry McCrann's* pilots and *Larry* appealed to *Roj Berwick* —an Ace in the Big War—for aid. "THE AIRWAYMEN," a complete novel by Thomson Burtis, in the next issue.

THIS tenderfoot who said his name was *Eggleston* asked a lot of fool questions and did more prowling around by himself than *Gaines*, for reasons of his own, thought was proper. But when the foreman told the new cow-puncher to stop it, things started to happen around "MALAPAI RANCH," as Orville Leonard tells in his complete novelette in the next issue.

"MONKEYING with the sign of the Teeth and Tongue in China is the same thing as falling out of the window with a stick of dynamite in your hand!" *Steve Harper* warned his heedless companion as they strolled along the Bund of Shanghai. *Steve* knew, for he was Shanghai-born. And before many hours the two found *Steve's* warning well-founded indeed. "ONE CHINESE NIGHT," by Gordon Young, a novelette of two sailors on shore leave in the days of the Manchu Empire, complete in the next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are forecast on the last page of this one.

Adventure is out on the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month

Author of "Gambler's Prerogative," "Peaches," etc.

CHAPTER I

MURDER

REWARD!
$1,000 reward for the capture of "Nightbird" or for information leading to his apprehension.
Signed: CARRUTHERS, Sheriff.
New Court-House.

IT WAS morning—early morning. The damp mistiness of a heavy fog hung in the Fall atmosphere, billowing out from the Arkansas River and settling in a vast cloud over the sleeping Mecca of hard-drinking men—Lebanon, the prosperous cowtown of the nineties. The fog clung so tenaciously and so slowed the ascent of the sun that at seven o'clock it seemed but five.

Two figures, almost wraith-like in the murk, turned from their perusal of the placard tacked at eye-level on the frame building before them. Without comment the two men walked on to the foot of Main Street and turned to the right, making for the passenger and freight station which stood fifty or sixty yards north of Main Street.

Despite its general southeasterly direction, at the point where Lebanon had been born and had finally decided to continue to exist, the river ran north and south. Thus the railroad, paralleling the river, crossed the east foot of the town at the lower end of the main street.

The two men stepped upon the platform of the depot and found the freight-house and ticket-office closed. Impatiently they tried the door of the room which the railway company had fitted up for the housing of their local representative.

"C'mon, Myers," shouted one. "Slide outa th' covers an' open th' freight-house. It's after seven o'clock. 'Smatter?"

"I never knowed th' old man to be so

late," suggested the other. "Mebbe he's already up an' gone over to th' Greasy Spoon for chow, Hal."

"He's always opened up by seven, though. Here I gotta git somethin' o' th' woman's orderin', an' that's th' time I can't git in. Hi! Myers! Well, I guess we'll have to wait. Mebbe Myers is out ridin' with 'Nightbird.' "

The second man stepped to the window and shaded his eyes a bit as he stared into the room.

"It's purty dark," he muttered. "Don't see nothin'; they ain't no use waitin'; bet he's over to th' eatin'-hou— My Gawd! My Gawd, Hal!"

At his tone of voice the man called Hal jumped forward and joined his companion at the window. He stared until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and then he saw.

Myers, the station-agent, lay stretched out on the floor on his back, still in his nightshirt and a surprized, hurt expression upon his querulous old face. His arms were outflung, and a congealing, darkening little puddle heavily outlined one side of his torso and traced the curvature of the arm. The heavy iron safe in the far corner was open, and the money drawers were hanging half-out of their compartments, eloquently empty.

With one accord the two men smashed the window-pane and unlocked the sash. They clambered quickly in and knelt over the figure on the floor.

"Deader'n a doornail," said Hal succinctly. "Pore ol' Myers!"

"They've looted th' express company's safe," stated the other. "One of us is got to stay here, an' th' other had better git th' sheriff an' th' constable."

"I'll go, Zeke!" exclaimed Hal. "Don't let nobody in till we come back."

Hal rose to his feet and sprang to the door. Even as he turned the knob he remembered that it was locked. He felt for the key. It was missing. He faced Zeke, and their eyes met.

"It was somebody Myers knowed," commented Zeke slowly. "Winder locked on th' inside, door locked from th' outside, an' th' key missin'. They must of 'sprized him."

Hal nodded in agreement and ran to the window. Vaulting through, he nearly lit upon a skulking figure which was surprized by his sudden move. Startled though he himself was, Hal clutched at the man with both hands and fell heavily with the stranger to the platform. At the noise Zeke ran to the window and leaped out, narrowly missing the sprawled pair.

"Who th' —— are yuh?" grunted Hal to his captive.

"The under dog at present," wheezed the prisoner. "Get up, brother, and let's take stock."

The stranger proved to be a fairly young man, dark of hair and eyes, of pleasing and alert countenance, but dirty, ragged and begrimed from indulging in the railroad tramp's national outdoor sport—"riding the rods."

"Where'd yuh come from?" growled Zeke suspiciously.

"I was kicked off a freight-train last night by an irate brakeman," explained the captive pleasantly. "My name is McQuirey. I'm broke, out of a job and hungry. What did you say is your name?"

"How d'yuh happen to be hangin' round here?" demanded Hal.

"Ah, my friend, I have just answered that very question," replied McQuirey easily. "I forestalled you."

"Yuh was peerin' in th' winder an' yuh wasn't doin' no talkin'," accused Zeke. "Can yuh explain that?"

"This isn't fair," protested McQuirey. "You are two-timing me with questions. I can't slip a query in edgeways. Why not answer a few for me? Who is the dead man in there?"

"How d'yuh know he is dead?" crisped Hal quickly.

"There you go again. Now try and get this. I know he is dead because I heard one of you say so. Also his name is Myers and the express company's safe has been robbed. Further, one of you answers to the name of Zeke. Now can you do a little talking without sticking question marks at the end of every sentence? You have no idea how monotonous that gets. Now who is Myers?"

"Myers is th' station-agent," Zeke flung out grudgingly. "He lived here in this room at th' station. Hal, hunt up th' sheriff. I'll entertain our li'l visitor till yuh come back."

As Hal started toward Main Street on a run, Zeke produced an efficient-looking six-shooter and poked it menacingly into McQuirey's ribs.

"Climb in th' room, yuh with th' wabbly jaw, an' be careful. My finger shore is itchy."

"You quite win my heart," said McQuirey, smiling. "I simply can't refuse you."

He obediently climbed into the room and stood very quietly while awaiting the return of the second man; but his eyes began with the murdered man on the floor and took in every detail of the littered quarters of the old station-agent.

HAL shortly returned with a heavy-set individual whose most distinctive feature was a long and luxurious growth of chin-whiskers. They both climbed in through the window, and the pilose one glared about fiercely.

"Dead?" he asked.

Zeke nodded in confirmation.

"D'yuh touch anything?"

"Nothin'. Hal went fer yuh right away."

"Kee-rect," approved the sheriff, stroking his beard out with a military snap and precision. "Who's this?"

"Says his name's McQuirey. We caught him lookin' in th' winder."

"Uh-huh," intoned Sheriff Carruthers wisely. "Where'd yuh come from, young feller?"

"Nowhere in particular, sheriff."

McQuirey spoke respectfully.

"I was merely traveling for my health, and I missed connections with my train here last night."

"Last night?" snapped Carruthers quickly. "What time last night?"

McQuirey's eyes widened a trifle and then narrowed at the other's ugly tone.

"It was that freight-train," he drawled. "I don't know the exact time as I had given my platinum watch to the engineer. He needed it, I'll assure you. I'll bet he wasn't more than a week behind time."

"Huuumm," mumbled the sheriff in his beard, giving the begrimed figure before him a searching look. " 'Bout ten o'clock, I reckon. Search him, Zeke."

The traveler proved to be the possessor of two safety pins—one of them in use—one black button which belonged where the pin was now working, a few dirty-looking matches, a soiled bandanna and half a sack of smoking-tobacco. He was destitute of coin, papers or weapon.

"Be very careful of my tobacco-case, please," said McQuirey. "I have no more of my specially prepared blend at hand. By the way, I wouldn't mind having a smoke. Have one of you gentlemen a cigaret paper? I used my very last one to clean my diamond stud. How utterly thoughtless of me!"

"Don't git so funny," advised Zeke grimly. "This here is a case uh murder, an' it looks bad fer yuh."

"You can't be serious!" rejoined McQuirey, surprized. "How can I be implicated? I have no weapon; and if I knew anything about this matter, do you think I'd be hanging around here?"

"Kee-rect," agreed the frowning Carruthers quickly, making a neat slide with his hand upon his hairy appendage, evidently seeing the logic of the vagabond's reasoning. "He ain't got no knife on him, an' his pockets don't show no sag or wear that uh knife 'ud make."

"Knife?" asked Zeke and Hal together.

"Yeah. Myers was stabbed to death with uh knife."

"How do you know?" demanded McQuirey keenly. "You haven't looked him over."

A peculiar gleam came into the sheriff's eyes as he glanced quickly at the begrimed questioner. He twisted his beard into a veritable Gordian knot before he replied. Then:

"Yuh don't see no bullet-holes, d'yuh? Besides, a shot 'ud of been heard. Turn him over, Hal. I'll bet they's uh knife wound in his back. See there—that small slit in his shirt? What did I tell yuh?" he concluded triumphantly.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Hal, awe-struck. "It looks like it was a pocket knife too."

"You win, sheriff," agreed McQuirey admiringly. "Aren't you the cute little trick? I have no doubt you have already deduced that it was a complete surprize attack, judging from the look of amazement on the murdered man's face and the absence of any appearance of a struggle."

"Kee-rect," agreed Carruthers promptly, polishing his whiskers nicely.

"Further than that," went on McQuirey, "I'll venture to say that you have already surmised that the murderer was some one Myers knew pretty well—or thought he knew, because the safe has been opened by one who knew the combination. It was not blown open. Evidently Myers opened the safe himself for his slayer and received a

knife-thrust in the back for his pains. Now who was it that Myers knew had a package or a dummy of some kind in the safe and could get the station-agent to open if after office hours? Isn't that just what you mapped out as a basis to work from?"

"Kee-kee-rect," stammered Carruthers, almost missing the customary beard stroke.

The keen mind of the other and his clever analysis were carrying the worthy sheriff slightly beyond his depth.

The two men, Zeke and Hal, uttered exclamations of wonder as the likeliness of the hobo's suggestion appealed to them. They granted him a tithe more of respect. Carruthers noticed this immediately.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Yuh're purty quick at followin' my idees, young feller. Yuh're kinda smart. That'll do fer yuh. I guess I'll have to hold yuh for investigation."

"Look through th' safe, sheriff," commanded Hal. "That was uh good idee," and he turned to suit the action of the words.

"Hey!" yelped the sheriff. "Don't ye touch nothin'. I'll do th' lookin' when I git back, and I'll look good an' plenty too. C'mon, young feller; we better mosey on up to th' court-house an' then over to th' jail fer uh spell. Don't yuh two boys touch nothin' while I'm gone, an' don't let nobody in till I git back."

"Well, I'll be ——!" ejaculated McQuirey, his eyes widening. "That's gratitude for you."

"What d'yuh mean?" demanded Carruthers suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing. You wouldn't understand. Come on. I had just as soon register at the city hotel as any other."

CHAPTER II

A BONDED VAGABOND

COURT was in session in the new two-storied municipal and county building, and Judge Ryan was on the bench. In the early nineties the Southwest was just unfolding to the gentle but insistent touch of refinement; and the prosperous town of Lebanon was beginning to blossom with embryonic luxuries, of which the new courthouse was one.

Judge Michael Ryan was originally a product of the "ould sod;" but he had been transplanted at a very tender age and had taken root and thrived in the fertile valleys and sagebrush-covered plains of the Western country. Somehow he had wandered into Lebanon when the town was in its infancy, and he had remained. Whether he had foreseen the future of the place or whether the idea of a saloon to each of the other business enterprises appealed, it is hard to say.

The judge was a massive man, heavy and red of feature, clean-shaven and with a thatch of fiery hair in which the silver was beginning to show. His knowledge of law did not embrace memory quotations from Blackstone or from the various statutes; rather, it was crude but effective. He had a fair grounding in law and a fair sense of humor. Thus he tempered law with justice, which was fortunate for all culprits as he was the supreme legal authority in Lebanon, county seat of Richelieu County.

This morning he was in rather a touchy mood. His coffee had been cold, his pipe distasteful and the docket of the city court was full of irritating liquor charges.

"Next case," he called irascibly, striking his battered, high desk with his gavel and dexterously shooting a stream of his favorite "chewin' an' spittin' " at the court cuspidor for a bull's-eye.

"Owens' Bright Star accused of sellin' whisky on Sunday," droned the melancholy-faced clerk at his side.

" 'Horsehead' Owens," snapped the judge, "ye're charged wid sellin' booze on th' Sabbath. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, your honor," clipped a long-faced, sardonic individual, arising and folding his arms. "And I want these fool constables——"

"What's that?" the judge gurgled.

"I said, 'Not guilty,' and I want——"

"Court's adjourned," interrupted Judge Ryan, an ominous frown gathering upon his brow. "Horsehead, ye're a —— liar by th' clock. I've bought it from ye meself. Court's in session. Mr. Owens, due to *sub-rosa* evidence which can not be ignored th' court finds ye guilty. Fine, fifty dollars. An' ye want to stop that Sunday business. Pay th' clerk before ye go. Shut up. Next case."

"John Doe," read the clerk. "Charged with th' three D's."

"John Doe," rapped out the judge. "Th' last time I saw yer name 'twas on a

promissory note. Let's have a peep at yer face."

A bleary-looking figure arose and eyed the man with the gavel doubtfully.

"Ah-ha! John Doe! Sure an' if I'm not mistaken ye was here last week under an alias. 'Twas Harry Taylor, I believe. Ye're charged wid th' same offense too—bein' drunk, dirty an' disorderly. What have ye to say?"

"Not guilty, please your honor," quavered the drunkard.

" 'Twas th' same original excuse ye had last week. Ain't ye proud o' yer strikin' excuses? Five dollars. An' next week it'll be ten, mind ye. Next."

"Tim Kelly," droned the clerk. "Charged with wife-beating and disturbing th' peace."

Ryan looked inquiringly down at a wizened, undersized man who eyed him belligerently out of a pair of beautifully blackened eyes. The judge's own twinkled.

"Tim," he said, "ye're charged wid disturbin' th' peace by beatin' up that poor little two-hundred-pound wife o' yours. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Oi guess Oi'm guilty, yer honor," responded the culprit with an air of unrepentance. "Sure an' Oi knocked th' breath from th' ould gal before she laid me out this toime."

There was a roar of approval at the little Irishman's statement, for the whole of Lebanon was interested in the matrimonial venture of fiery little Tim Kelly with his equally fiery and dominant spouse, who, it was said, had married Tim when he was under the influence of Bacchus.

"Case dismissed," chuckled the judge. "Ye're improvin,' Tim. Here's a dollar. Go out an' have a big drink on me. Next."

"Joe Bleeker, cow-puncher. Three D's," intoned the clerk.

The judge singled out the victim and spoke.

"All right, Joe. Stand up an' make yer little speech."

"I guess I'm guilty, yore honor," grinned a lanky cow-puncher, having noted the efficacy of Tim Kelly's plea and deciding to try the same racket.

"Ye're —— whistlin' ye're guilty," snapped Ryan, and the puncher's grin faded into a foolish smile. "I saw ye last night meself. I noticed ye was gettin' all tuned up. Five dollars fine. An' listen to me, Joe Bleeker. Ye b'ys'll have to start usin' blank cartridges if ye can't stay sober. Next."

There was a commotion at the door. An overmellow voice was querulously arguing and pleading eloquently with some inexorable executioner.

"Silence! Order! Silence!" roared the judge. "What brings ye off yer bate, Jack Sills?"

"Please, yore honor," the constable replied, "this drunk insisted on throwing his hat out into th' mud on Main Street an' then rollin' off th' sidewalk after it. He looks uh fright an' smells worse."

"Halt!" thundered the judge in genuine alarm. "Don't ye bring anything th' likes o' that into this clane, dacent courtroom. Have ye no respect for th' law? We'll try th' prisoner in th' strate."

Judge Ryan arose and strode to the door. He looked scornfully at the bedraggled but highly dignified and insulted wreck in the grip of the constable.

"Yuh—hic—know, shudge, uh rollin' stone gashers no—hic—moss," wagged the inebriated one wisely. " 'Sfact. 'Swhat I tried—hic—to——"

"But ye've accumulated plenty o' soil," interrupted the judge bitingly. "So ye're guilty o' bein' drunk an' rapidly gettin' dirty an' disorderly, ye spalpeen. Shut up. Don't interrupt th' judge. What d'ye mean by tryin' to swim in that —— cesspool they call Main Street? I fine meself ten dollars for disrespect to our fair city. Fine remitted. I say, what d'ye mean?

"Niver mind yer explanation. That bit o' festive sportin' will cost ye ten dollars, me lad, an' they won't be no remittin'. Throw him in a horse-trough, Jack. 'Twill clane him an' sober him at one an' th' same time.

"Nex— What th' ——'s broke loose now? Here comes th' sheriff wid a prisoner. What's happened, sheriff?"

"Lots," said the newly arrived Carruthers quickly. "Myers has been killed an' th' safe robbed. This here fellow was hangin' round an' he was purty slick with his tongue, so I brought him up for investigation."

"Myers has been killed!" exclaimed the judge. "Go on an' talk. I'm listenin'."

Ryan studied the prisoner attentively while the sheriff quickly gave in his hastily acquired evidence.

"An' what have ye to offer, young man?"

he asked gravely after the officer concluded.

"Nothing that is any proof. I am not guilty, your honor."

"Uumm—perhaps not. However, ye can readily see that it looks black for ye at present. I'm thinkin' we'll be havin' to lock ye up until there is further developments in th' matter."

"Kee-rect," endorsed Carruthers, making his beard snap with electrical friction by the speed of his stroking hand. "Let's go over to th' jail, young feller. I gotta git back to th' station."

"Your honor," said the prisoner appealingly, "may I not stay in your court under guard until the sheriff returns? I assure you I am innocent. Even the sheriff thinks so if he will but admit it."

But the sheriff looked blank and noncommittal.

"What's yer name again?" queried Ryan not unkindly.

"McQuirey, sir. Walter McQuirey."

"McQuirey, eh? Another one o' them French names. Well, well. I like yer looks, McQuirey—that is, what I can see o' ye. Run along, sheriff, an' continue yer investigation. Ye'll see Jack Sills out by th' horse-trough. Send him in to guard th' prisoner. Next."

THE docket was cleared and the regular habitués of the morning courts were unwillingly dragging themselves away when the sheriff returned. At the look of satisfaction upon the visible portion of his face the loafers made as if to stay.

"Be off wid ye," waved Ryan. "Jack, clear th' room, an' ye may return to yer bate. McQuirey, come into me office in th' adjoinin' room. Now what, sheriff?"

Carruthers very dramatically placed upon the table a parcel drawn from his pocket and unwrapped it. A blood-stained handkerchief was exposed to view. Slowly he unfolded it before the interested eyes of Ryan and McQuirey. An open knife, stained with blood, of long and keen blade, of the type known as a "crab-apple switch" lay before them. Cut in the stag handle were the two initials "W. M."

"I found this here knife in one o' th' empty drawers in th' safe," stated Carruthers. "Th' murderer must of left it in his hurry. Now who round Lebanon knowed Myers well enough to git in that carried uh knife like this?"

"Have ye any idea yeself?" demanded Ryan bluntly.

The sheriff smiled affirmatively.

"Then you followed up the clew of a dummy package in the safe?" put in McQuirey quickly.

Carruthers turned on him with a wolf-like expression.

"Yes, I did. It wasted uh good half-hour o' my time. They wasn't nothin' there, an' yuh'll do well to keep yore trap closed."

"Ye gods!"

McQuirey flung up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Bungled in the first inning," he groaned.

Carruthers' angry retort was prevented by the opening of the door. An ordinary-looking man with pale blue eyes entered, closing the door behind him. A deputy's star was pinned to his suspenders.

"Mornin,' judge. Mornin,' sheriff," murmured the newcomer. "What's all this -'bout murderin' th' station-agent?"

"Kee-rect," nodded the sheriff. "I left word for yuh to join me here in th' judge's office. Lemme tell yuh 'bout it, Higgs, an' then yuh better run down an' take charge at th' depot."

Rapidly the sheriff outlined matters to his deputy and repeated his question as to the probable owner of the knife. Higgs' eyes bulged, and he stared at the tramp curiously. At the sheriff's query he emitted a long, soft whistle, and his brows went up.

"By gosh, I saw, uh knife somethin' like that in Young Bill Montague's possession last week," he stated.

"He had?" asked Carruthers quickly. "W. M. Willyum Montague," he mused. "Kee-rect," he endorsed, fairly jerking his beard out perpendicular to his body.

"Kee-nawthin'," snorted the irate but suddenly apprehensive judge. "That's plumb ridiculous. Where's yer motive? Bill's a rich young man. Don't be makin' an ass o' yerself, Carruthers."

"I gotta do my duty, jedge," stated the sheriff heavily.

Judge Ryan cocked his head at the officer like an inquisitive bull.

"——'s bills, how zealous ye've become overnight! Ye better be watchin' yer tracks, me b'y. Old man Montague ain't one to be trifled wid. If ye want somethin'

easy, go out an' find this here raidin' Nightbird."

"Anyhow I guess this acquits me," suggested McQuirey gently. "Do you mind if I go in search of breakfast? It's nearly noon."

"I guess yuh can—" began the sheriff.

"——'s bills!" the judge roared. "Acquits you? Wid yer name Walter McQuirey, wid yer initials W. M., wid ye hangin' round th' station? I guess not, me little laddie. Into th' jug wid ye. What's th' matter wid ye, Carruthers?"

"Kee-rect, kee-rect," saluted the sheriff vigorously, and the smile he turned on the luckless vagabond was filled with impish delight. "Yuh first an' then fer young Montague."

"Judge Ryan, you are not going to let Santa Claus lock me up in the cold, damp and unsympathetic jail with no recourse, are you?" cried McQuirey. "Surely this is not justice."

Judge Ryan forced himself to consider the matter from the tramp's viewpoint despite his own resolve to protect Montague. Truly, McQuirey's was an unenviable position.

"Well," stated his honor, "due to lack o' sufficient an' incriminatin' evidence I fix th' bond o' Walter McQuirey at—say, ten thousand dollars. Sure an' that's as fair as I can be, me b'y. Don't eye me so reproachfully. Ye'd be doin' th' same under th' circumstances. Lock him up, Higgs, feed him an' let him see any one he wishes to for a bondsman."

"I guess so," murmured McQuirey almost wearily. "I am at your service, Mr. Higgs."

THE afternoon shadows were lengthening when a gaunt, tanned stranger carrying a battered, sawed-off but highly effective-looking shotgun tucked under his arm rode up to the courthouse and sought out the sheriff's office.

Carruthers was out, but Deputy Sheriff Higgs laid aside a volume marked "How to Detect" and looked calmly and condescendingly upon the visitor.

"Howdy," said the stranger. "Yuh th' sheriff?"

"Nope. Deputy. What's on yore mind?"

"Th' sheriff hisself?"

"Is out."

"Yuh'll do. Can't wait," jerked the stranger, purposely imitating the deputy's clipped speech. "Yuh've uh prisoner, McQuirey by name, suspected o' murder?"

"We has," admitted the deputy, frowning in a most legal manner.

"An' his bond is fixed at ten thousand dollars?"

"Uh-huh," agreed Higgs, yawning boredly as if ten thousand were a trifling sum to force him to consider.

"Waal, I've come to put up cash bond," stated the stranger calmly, and he drew a great roll of bills from his pocket.

Deputy Higgs' yawn ended so abruptly that he bit his tongue. With popping eyes he watched the lean hands begin to count out fifty-dollar bills on the table.

"Wait uh minute—wait uh *minute!*" gasped the staggered deputy.

"What's th' matter?" asked the surprized stranger. "These here bills is good."

"Nothin' like this ever happened to me before," admitted the deputy frankly. "I dunno what to do."

"Yuh ain't got no choice," responded the gaunt stranger. "I puts up th' required bond, an' yuh turn McQuirey loose—now."

"But—but I dunno how," wailed Mr. Higgs. "Hol' on while I git th' judge."

He bolted for the door opening upon the corridor, and the stranger sat down stoically, his gun across his lap.

The judge proved to be as surprized as the deputy, but he proceeded to arrange matters satisfactorily.

"Yer name an' address, please," he demanded as he made ready to give receipt for the bond.

"Win Martin, an' yuh can jes' put down general delivery, Lebanon. I jes' come from beyond th' Canadian. I'm figurin' on bein' here quite uh spell."

Judge Ryan wrote steadily.

"Ye ever been in these parts before, Mr. Martin?" he inquired without looking up.

"Never before," rejoined the stranger.

"Ye are a relative o' th' accused?"

"No relation," returned Martin noncommittally. "I can depend on yuh turnin' McQuirey loose right now, can I?" he added as he accepted the tendered receipt.

"Ye can," replied the disgruntled judge shortly. "Higgs, go git McQuirey. Ye can leave together, Mr. Martin."

"Tain't necessary," rejoined the bondsman serenely. "I'll be goin' now. Good evenin'."

"But—but don't ye want to see him again?"

"Nope. 'Tain't necessary. Evenin', men, an' thanks."

Wordlessly the judge waved Deputy Higgs after the released McQuirey as he watched the lanky form of Martin stride out through the door. When the vagabond stood before him he studied the still begrimed figure for a moment before he spoke. Then:

"Sure an' ye are a fast worker, me b'y," he said. "Yer friend Martin has come an' bonded ye—*in cash*."

"I beg your pardon. I haven't a friend by the name of Martin."

"D'ye mean to be tellin' me that ye don't know who bonded ye?" thundered the judge.

"I haven't seen a soul but the jailer since you detained me this morning. I don't know a single person in Lebanon—or a married one either," was the surprizing answer.

"What? D'ye mean to stand there an' tell me that ye know nothin' o' yer bondsman?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about. You say I have been bonded?"

Judge Ryan could only point to the pile of greenbacks before him. He was beyond coherent speech.

"Fine," said McQuirey. "I always knew I was worth ten thousand dollars, but I never knew any one else agreed with me. I thank you for your various courtesies, gentlemen. Perhaps you can tell me if anybody around here needs an expert cowhand? No? Very well, I'll go and look. I'll notify you as to where I can be found, judge, as soon as I locate. Good afternoon. Give my regrets to Santa Claus."

"Now what th' —— d'ye know about that?" snorted Judge Ryan as soon as he could speak.

Almost angrily he watched the slender form of the erstwhile prisoner stroll as nonchalantly down the street as if his dirty rags had been velvet and silk.

"A man puts up ten thousand dollars cash bond for a tramp. He rides away widout seein' th' man he is bondin', not even once. An' th' prisoner denies all acquaintanceship wid his bondsman an' takes it just as calmly as a two-finger drink. Now what th' ——?"

But Mr. Higgs could offer no solution. And when, upon his return, the matter was placed before Sheriff Carruthers, he didn't know. He clutched his beard and worried it fiercely. Twice he had Higgs describe the bondsman, while Judge Ryan mused to himself.

"Win Martin—general delivery—Canadian River—ten thousand dollars—Win, Win, W. M., W— Bejabbers! Carruthers, listen once. Why should a stranger bond a stranger widout a motive? An' what would be th' motive here? Look once at th' spalpeen's name. Win Martin. There's yer W. M. again. Now what d'ye make o' it?"

Again Sheriff Carruthers didn't know. The initials "W. M." seemed to be whirling all about him. He worried his beard feverishly as if by this method to steady his whirling brain. He felt the need of advice, of superior advice—of immediate advice.

CHAPTER III

TARGET PRACTISE AND LAME HORSES

THE pleasing aroma of strong coffee and crisp bacon hung in the air and Sing Li, cook and house-man of the DZX ranch, came to the door of the chuck-house and set up a hideous clamor on the evening air with his battered old cow-bell. The dusty-looking stranger grinned appreciatively over his shoulder and continued on his way to the bunk-house.

Peering in, he saw two punchers seated on the floor drawing on new and fancy boots. One was a blond, curly-haired fellow with a wide, smiling mouth. The other was a brown-haired individual with laughing, dancing eyes. They both looked capable. Other than these two the long room was empty; the bunks were vacant.

"Howdy," grinned the newcomer.

"Hullo," responded both punchers promptly. "Yuh're jes' in time for chow," continued the curly-haired one. "Wash up out there at the bench. Dang these here tight boots anyhow," he grunted. "Frank, I jes' know these is yore shoes. Yuh got mine."

"Hurry, stranger," added the man called Frank. "They's twenty-seven hungry hyenas runnin' toward that bell right now from th' corrals. We makes thirty, an' we gotta move. Yuh had ought of poured uh li'l vaseline in them 'gloves,' Curly. They'd slide on easier. That's what yuh git for

tryin' to stop th' natural expanse o' yore stirrup-pushers."

The dusty stranger smiled pleasantly and turned to wash his face and hands.

"You boys going sparking this evening? Those boots are the hot stuff."

"Nope," replied Curly. "We're jes' goin' to town."

The stranger's eyebrows raised behind the towel.

"I believe I'm going to like it here," he said at length. "Do you need horse and cow artists around here?"

"We got several specialists, but they might be room for one more," admitted Frank.

"Who owns this ranch?"

"Montague," stated both punchers, studying the stranger who dared to ask such a question.

"Is he a hard man to work for? Does his help all like him?"

"Stranger," said Curly earnestly, "if yuh find one party on these here holdin's, from th' cook up to Young Bill, who wouldn't go off an' die for th' ol' man—we'll poison him."

"Lookit that gang storm th' chuck-house," interrupted Frank. "C'mon cow-boys."

At the supper-table the newcomer introduced himself.

"Boys, my name is Walt McQuirey. I can saddle a horse and throw a steer. I have seen worse shots. I want a job. How about it?"

A leathery-looking individual about halfway of the table looked at the speaker appraisingly.

"Yuh got any duffel? Where's yore hoss?"

"Brother, you see me in my all and alls. I've a pretty strong hunch that I'll be starting at the bottom with you. Do you require any demonstrations? I can wrestle a few cows for you."

"Nope, guess not. I'm Jim Harrison, foreman uh this outfit, which same is th' DZX. We're ridin' a purty complete bunch uh punchers——"

He broke off and glanced toward the head of the table.

"McQuirey?" spoke a well-modulated and pleasing young voice from the head of the table. "Stranger, are you the man that was detained for the murder of the station-agent yesterday?"

"The very same. And you are young Bill Montague?"

"I am."

The two men eyed each other frankly, their gazes meeting squarely. Then young Montague made a slight sign at Harrison.

"But I guess we can take on one more puncher for th' Fall round-up," finished the foreman.

"Fine!" exclaimed McQuirey. "And say, while we're all corralled here let me say that I want to speak to you, Mr. Montague, after supper. And, Frank and Curly, if you'll not go to town tonight I'll tell you a lot of funny stories and show you a new deal in poker."

After the meal was over young Bill suggested that McQuirey stroll up to the ranch-house and meet the elder Montague. The new hand acquiesced, and as they walked along he worked carefully up to a certain subject, beginning with the fact that he had absolutely nothing in the way of equipment.

"Er—do you carry a knife, Mr. Montague?" he finally asked.

"Yes," responded the younger Montague promptly.

He swiftly produced a pocket-knife and offered it to McQuirey.

As they entered the hallway of the house McQuirey gazed curiously at the knife. He almost started as he recognized in it the exact counterpart of the blood-stained knife Sheriff Carruthers had laid on the judge's table the day before. He said nothing until they stood in the presence of Montague, senior, in the great living-room.

McQuirey found the elder Montague to be a calm, blue-eyed man in the very prime of life and radiating an air of resourcefulness and efficiency. He liked him at once as he had liked the son.

"Gentlemen," said McQuirey, holding up the knife, "I was detained as a suspect because of an exact duplicate of this knife that was found in the express company's safe. My initials are the same two, you know. Now, Bill, tell me, where did you get this knife?"

The elder man's face grew grave at McQuirey's statement. Bill looked puzzled for a moment, and then he laughed.

"Why, man, I was so fond of that particular pattern that I ordered a quarter of a dozen at one time from a cutlery house in St. Louis," he explained easily.

"Ah!" breathed McQuirey. "Think hard now, Bill. Have you lost or misplaced a knife recently?"

"Yes," stated the young man promptly. "Don't you notice that this is a new knife? I lost one that I hadn't used more than ten days about a week ago."

"I see. Well, don't lose this one.' And, by the way, does any one else know how you buy your knives?"

"I don't think so," smiled young Bill.

"Fine. Don't mention it to any one."

And he went out, leaving the two Montagues gazing at each other speculatively.

DURING the days that followed McQuirey slipped smoothly into the ranch work. He could wrangle horses and steers with the best of them, and he wasn't afraid of work. The boys had taken to his breezy and friendly personality and had contributed bits of wearing-apparel until he looked quite presentable.

Beyond the talking he had done at the table and at the ranch-house the first night he had closed his mouth about himself. Aside from making one trip to town and one other trip of nearly two days' duration he was continually on the ranch and at work.

The matter of the murder itself and of the mysterious bondsman whom McQuirey had not known became of paramount interest. Montague discussed the matter with his foreman.

"Jim, do you have any idea as to who killed Myers?"

"Yep, I have," rejoined Harrison laconically, gazing off into space.

"Do you find any reason for it?" demanded Montague quietly.

The foreman's eyes came down and fastened on the blue ones of his employer and friend.

"Th' same reason you're thinking of," he responded promptly. "Myers exposed that peach peal last Summer."

The owner of the DZX nodded slowly.

"That's the answer, Jim. But I'm not satisfied with it. There is a deeper motive behind it than mere revenge on poor Myers."

"Mebbeso. Where does this new cowhand fit in? He guilty of anything?"

"No. As to where he fits in—you are not the only puzzled one. I think he's got all of Lebanon pretty well puzzled by now. I expect Carruthers' brain is whirling like a humming top."

The foreman scowled at mention of the sheriff's name.

"I'm kinda uneasy 'bout things, Bill. That —— Jackson ain't gonna forget th' lickin' Li'l Bill gave him. I'm thinkin' I had ought of let Li'l Bill kill him."

Montague laughed slightly.

"Mister, you ain't takin' this serious enough," protested the foreman instantly. "I meant it. I know you laid th' law down to that bunch of crooks; you laid it down cold an' you didn't make no bones 'bout tellin' 'em what was what. But will anybody's *talk* stop men like Owens an' his sheriff pet, or Jackson, or Carter, or Tilby? 'Specially when Jackson is packin' a man-size grudge?"

"It might stop Tilby. He had better stuff in him once. And it had better stop the others," rejoined Montague grimly. "At least until we get this rustling Nightbird affair cleared up. But there's nothing wrong with your reasoning, Jim. So keep your eyes open, old man, especially as I must go to town today to see Owens about shipping facilities for our market beef."

Harrison stared at his employer aghast. Was Montague losing his mind? Had he lost his grip? After practically agreeing with his foreman he makes ready to go right in and dicker with one of the arch crooks!

"Why, Bill, you ain't gonna ship with Owens after that trouble last Summer, are you?"

"He controls all of the stock-pens and also all freight shipments that touch Lebanon by rail," Montague reminded him. "You know it isn't practical to consider shipping by steamboat. Memphis is no market."

"We don't have to ship outa Lebanon," argued Harrison. "We can drive 'em on th' hoof over to Pelton on th' Canadian an' ship to Kansas City from there."

"Yes, and lose ten dollars the head by running off the beef," pointed out the rancher.

"We'll lose twenty dollars th' head, or more, by foolin' with Owens," returned Harrison bitingly.

"That's what you're to keep your eyes open about," responded Montague coolly. "I'll be back shortly."

Harrison made a gesture of exasperation. He looked after his friend peculiarly. That Montague's actions puzzled him was not surprizing. During the Summer Owens, the wealthiest man and largest investor in

Lebanon, the shipper, the real-estate king, the owner of saloons and stores, had entered into a scheme with Jackson, Carter and Tilby—disgruntled gamblers—to ruin Henry Blaine, a fruit-grower just south of Lebanon. Harrison had been shot by Jackson, and there was a blood feud between the two men. Bill had shown up to disadvantage in Patricia Blaine's eyes because he had promised Harrison to keep his hands off of Jackson.

The plotters were at length frustrated by the Montagues, and young Bill had thrashed the gambler Jackson, who had engineered the scheme. Harrison had explained matters to the fruit-grower's daughter, and she had been the first to sue young Bill for pardon for her impulsiveness.

The DZX ranch was one of the largest holdings in the Southwest, and the elder Montague was a respected figure in the cattle lands. Now after such an open rift Montague was calmly going back into business negotiations with Owens—and right on top of the suspicious death of Myers, the harmless old station-agent.

Seemingly unaware of his foolhardiness, Montague rode calmly into Lebanon and hunted up Owens. The stock-shipper was not at all surprized to see the rancher, due to the fact that he monopolized the shipping industry. Montague could not have avoided dealing with him save at great expense.

No mention was made of the trouble between them in the previous Summer, and a contract for cattle-cars was entered into. Owens, habitually tight-mouthed, had little beyond business to offer; and it was not until Montague went over to the court-house one block south of Main Street to chat with Judge Ryan that he heard the latest lawless development.

There was a hum of excitement in the room where the judge presided as justice of the peace.

"Howdy, boys," greeted the rancher. "What's up?"

"Howdy, Mr. Montague," returned one of the group. "Haven't yuh heard? Th' bank at Licker-up was looted last night an' two men shot."

"What!"

" 'Sfact. Six men headed by a feller in th' usual ridin'-cloak—I guess it was Nightbird—rode into th' town at three o'clock and robbed th' bank. They was interrupted by two men who come 'long goin' home, an' they shot 'em both. They rode off with seven thousand dollars."

"Last night? The twenty-seventh? I presume the majority of the Licker-up men were in Lebanon for their monthly spree," spoke Montague.

"That's th' reason we figured Nightbird pulled th' trick," returned the other. "Th' bandits knowed th' town was short uh men."

Licker-up was a settlement somewhat north of Lebanon and across the river. The male inhabitants found four saloons rather tame when there were forty within ten miles. Hence had come the custom of "month-ends" at Lebanon.

Nightbird was a new star in the firmament of rogues in which the old Southwest abounded. He was an unknown quantity who always raided at night, who invariably wore a black riding-cloak, who never failed in a raid.

Montague rode homeward in a very thoughtful mood. He was a man of great vision, and he foresaw a splendid future for this country. He realized that this particular section was just about the only part of the United States that could build a fence about itself and manage to live comfortably upon its own. He was a hard fighter for law and order, and these increasing outbreaks troubled him greatly.

The gradual public consensus had laid the murder of the station-agent at the door of Nightbird. Montague did not think so for reasons of his own. Nevertheless, he admitted Nightbird as a real problem and one that must be solved.

HE was riding through Hawkins' Draw, a spot hardly more than a slight buckle in the prairie with Dallas Road running through it, when his hat whipped suddenly from his head, and he heard the vicious whine of a bullet.

Instantly he fell forward on his horse's neck, spurring the animal into a reckless gallop as he glanced back under his arm. A dark figure stood against a young tree on the right-hand knoll. The sunlight glinted upon a rifle-barrel as the snipe-shooter lowered the weapon.

"You know, hoss, bushwhacking always makes me mad," Montague admitted to his mount. "Besides, it is a decidedly uncomfortable feeling to realize that you are the clay pigeon at the trap. Now I wonder just *who* the —— that was?"

He passed Blaine's farm without stopping, a rather unwonted procedure as there was a friendly feeling between the two men. When he reached the ranch Harrison had further news for him.

"Bill, McQuirey was out all night last night, so th' boys tell me, an' stove up Blackie with a lame forefoot."

"Where is he now?" asked Montague crisply.

"S'posed to be out ridin' herd."

"When he comes in, send him to me."

"Uh-huh. Where's yore hat?"

"Lost it in Hawkins' Draw," said the rancher laconically.

"Uh-huh," grunted Harrison. "That's nice. Which one d'yuh tag?"

"Nobody. Rifle practise," the rancher explained briefly.

"Huh?"

"Uh-huh," responded Montague shortly and turned toward the ranch-house.

"My ——!" groaned the foreman. "Batty! Plumb nutty! I see I gotta go to town an' make it safe for th' innocent to roam around. Hey, Frank! Whoopee! C'mere, cowboy."

The puncher came loping easily up against the wind. Drawing rein, he made a deep, mocking salaam.

"Ah-ha! Der kink uf Swaden."

"Umph!" the foreman grunted. "Round up McQuirey an' tell him th' boss is at th' house an' wants to see him. Tell him to rub more liniment on Blackie's leg tonight sure. I'm goin' in. Be back 'fore sundown."

"Hey! Wait!" shouted Frank. "Don't yuh want uh li'l comp'ny?"

"Nope."

"Aw, gwan then, smarty."

Regretfully Frank turned and rode out eastward on the range. On the grassy and sunny slope of a tiny hillock he came across the new cowhand stretched out, snoring peaceably, having located him by his horse, which stood near the top of the knoll grazing lazily on the swiftly turning grass.

With arms akimbo the puncher gazed down at the recumbent form with hat drawn over face. A well-directed shot would spin the hat away and rudely awaken the slumbering man. Then he grinned as he reached toward his holster. Abruptly the snores ceased.

"Get thee behind him, Satan," spoke McQuirey in measured tones from under his hat. "Don't do anything funny, cowboy, or I'll chase you clear across the county."

"Yuh ain't got no business with windows in yore hat," complained Frank. "Yuh gotta do yore sleepin' at night time anyhow. Uh rustler could move th' whole ranch an' yuh'd never know it."

"Is that so? You didn't have much luck slipping up on me, did you?" drawled McQuirey, sitting up and sliding his hat back on his head at the same time. "Roll me a cigaret."

"My gosh, what a crust!" gasped Frank. "Git up, Mucilage. Mr. Montague wants to see yuh. An' Jim says not to forget to rub Blackie's leg again tonight."

"Oh, he did, eh? And since when did Jim get the idea I would neglect the stock—particularly an animal I had lamed?"

His tone was casual enough, but Frank sensed the hurt behind it.

"I don't reckon as how Jim figures that-away atall," he drawled. "But he's foreman an' he's gotta do some talkin' to make believe he's holdin' down his job."

"Kee-rect," grinned McQuirey, stroking an imaginary beard.

He sprang lithely on to his surprized horse's back, probably shattering a day-dream of evergreen pastures and clear sparkling water, afar from the disturbing element of man.

"Hot dog!" cried Frank. "Yuh ain't forgot him yet."

"Nor soon," flung McQuirey as he rode toward the ranch-house.

He found Montague at his desk in the big living-room looking over a sheaf of papers. The puncher shoved his hat to the back of his head and waited respectfully before the desk. The rancher did not look up.

"McQuirey?" he said, turning a paper to peruse the reverse side.

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you last night?"

"Oh, riding around to blow the cow smell off of me."

"Weren't over near Licker-up, were you?"

"Can't say that I was—exactly. Why?"

"The bank was looted and two men were shot."

McQuirey's brows went up.

"Nightbird?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"Anybody blaming the unsuspecting by-stander again?"

"No. Not yet. How did you lame Blackie?"

Montague suddenly raised his eyes and looked straight into the other's face as he plied this question.

The puncher met his gaze squarely.

"Running away from a gang of mounted men I wasn't prepared to and didn't want to meet," he admitted frankly.

The ranchman pursed his lips and meditated for a moment.

"Is there anything further you wish to say?" he asked at length.

"I believe not, sir," responded McQuirey slowly. "I trust I have not offended you in acting so independently with DZX stock."

Montague waved an impatient hand and turned back to his desk.

"Will that be all, sir?" asked the puncher softly.

"For the present, yes."

McQuirey swung on his heel and left the house, frowning slightly.

CHAPTER IV

HARRISON PRECIPITATES ACTION

HARRISON cantered into Lebanon, turned toward the river at Dallas Corner and rode down to the Texas Hotel. Tossing the reins over his pony's head, shifting his holster forward and spitting out his wad of chewing-tobacco, he stepped, for the first time since the gambler had wounded him, into the lobby of the building.

The Texas Hotel was really a pretentious place, a substantial structure of four stories, of fairly clean rooms and boasting of a real chef in the kitchen who could please healthy appetites. Unfortunately the place was the stronghold of the crooked element of the cow-town, the haven of card specialists and branding experts. Ostensibly the property of one Mr. Grenville and under that same management, if the truth be known it was really another link in the chain of iniquitous investments of one Mr. "Horsehead" Owens.

To carry out the color design and the symmetry of the suave establishment practically all of the force had been handpicked from hotels of larger cities in the East. The day clerk was an importation from Kansas City. He had labored in the wilds of the cow country for nearly a year. As a hotel clerk in a rough town such as Lebanon he was a perfect lady. He had seen enough uncouthness and brutality. He was deathly tired of cows, punchers and ponies, and he longed for cable-cars and telephones.

At sight of the dusty, grim figure of the DZX foreman the clerk's lower jaw sagged. His mind flashed back to that day in early Summer when he had seen this man carried out through the lobby, a bullet-hole in his shoulder. Revenge—cattle feud—trouble—death—more shooting crowded through his mind as he watched Harrison advance. His fingers played a veritable solo on the various buzzers that rested beneath his hands. It was later reported that he sounded the fire alarm, the raid warning, the dinner-bell, the manager's buzzer and the janitor's button and called all of the bell hops.

A dampening silence fell over the entire lobby as every eye turned toward the DZX foreman. No one moved. The denizens of the Texas Hotel had found it quite an advantageous rule never to start anything with a newcomer before finding out who or what he wanted. This method saved mistakes.

"Yuh oughta have th' sheriff here to accompany yuh on his chin trombone," suggested Harrison to the clerk as he balanced himself before the desk, his hands resting lightly on his waist. "What yuh playin'? 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'?"

There was a ripple of merriment about the room, and the growing tension was relieved. The clerk's relief was pitiful.

"Is Mr. Jackson in?" inquired the foreman gently.

"Yes, sir—no, sir—that is, I mean—I don't know, sir," stammered the uncertain clerk.

"Thanks," said Harrison dryly. "Yore explanation is very lucid."

"In th' barroom," called a voice from behind him.

Harrison inclined his head in acknowledgment of this direction and walked on to the entrance into the hotel's saloon. He glanced entirely around the befogged room and then in two strides stepped through and to one side of the door, placing a solid wall between him and the men in the lobby behind him. Almost subconsciously he felt to see whether his gun was there, because it had been missing upon the occasion of his last visit to this place.

He singled out a medium-sized, neatly-built man of rather handsome features and

cold, sneering blue eyes. There was the merest hint of squareness to the contour of his head; the point of his jaw had a faint right-angled bulge, and his lips were thin and cruel. "Hard-head" was written all over him. Harrison walked slowly toward him and planted himself exactly before the gambler.

Just how every one in a crowded, noisy place becomes aware of anything unusual or inimical so instantaneously is a matter of speculation, but that pending or anticipant dramatic action silences the uproar is nearly always true. Almost magically a semi-circle about the two men, with the bar as the bisecting chord, became devoid of human life. The man who had been conferring with Jackson dropped back without the slightest hesitation. The bartender sighed as he glanced at the plate-glass mirror behind Jackson and then shrugged resignedly.

The gambler eyed the DZX foreman calmly. His nerve was under superb control. It was really an effort for him to meet the gaze of the man he had shot once before and on nearly the same spot, but Jackson managed it nicely. He eyed Harrison critically up and down as one examines an inanimate curiosity or a new bug. Then he calmly turned his back on his enemy and with a steady hand poured a neat peg of whisky into his glass. With a deftly synchronized motion of his hand and head he tossed the liquor down his throat and shoved the bottle and glass away from him.

Harrison's face was expressionless. He did not appear to notice the bit of consummate acting. He ignored the insult.

"Mr. Jackson," he said softly, "I craves to ask yuh one question—jes' one li'l question. That's all I want."

The gambler did not reply. He merely turned his hard gaze on to Harrison as if seeing him for the first time. He leaned away from the bar, allowing himself more freedom.

"I jes' want to know can yuh tell me anything 'bout th' shootin' at Bill Montague in Hawkins' Draw 'long noon this mornin'?"

The long room was completely still as every one strained to hear the gambler's response. This was news indeed. Some one shooting at Montague of the DZX?

"What do you mean—" Jackson spoke at length in a silky voice—"the shooting at Montague?"

"Just what I said. Somebody has been indulgin' in a li'l target practise with Montague's back for a target. I came in to warn somebody that it ain't safe to continue."

Jackson's eyes flickered in genuine surprize.

"How interesting! Did they kill him?" he inquired calmly.

"Nope. They missed—if you haven't heard."

There was an almost audible gasp from the various groups of watchers at Harrison's direct insinuation. The painfully tense audience braced themselves and strained their ears, for the crash of .45s. But the silence remained unbroken.

"No. I hadn't heard," replied the gambler disinterestedly as he flicked an imaginary speck from the sleeve of his coat.

"Then I am to understand that you don't know anything 'bout it?" pursued Harrison.

"I am sure that I can not enlighten you as to what you are to understand," returned Jackson, and his voice was low and studiedly insulting. "If you are clumsily inquiring if *I* fired at Montague's back the only satisfactory answer I can give you is—if I had I wouldn't have missed."

The foreman drew and expelled a long breath.

"Thanks," he stated. "I'm glad it wasn't you. They ain't no fun in that kind of sport. Also I'm happy to see we both admits you ain't above doin' th' shootin'."

With this he turned and walked out of the barroom.

Jackson watched him to the door, moving nothing but his eyes. Then he turned and reached once more for the bottle and glass. His face a mask, he poured a stiff libation.

At this juncture his composure gave way. His hand trembled, and he spilled his whisky. A gaze of such profound, burning hatred leaped into his eyes that no one present even dreamed of smiling at his pallor or his ague.

There was ample reason for his ardent hatred, perverted though it might have been. Jackson had originally been a Chicagoan. He had come to Lebanon the preceding Fall to play poker with the wealthy cattle men. Fate had thrown the Montagues into his path, and twice now they

had foiled him in his machinations. He had shot Harrison and had been soundly thrashed in the presence of his cronies by young Montague.

Instead of learning a lesson such as would chasten an ordinarily disagreeable being, Jackson learned to hate with all of his capable heart. Strangely enough, this was one of the very few admirable traits about the man. He was so frank, so whole-souled, so honest in his hatred.

His was that stubborn, fearless and indomitable nature that simply refuses to accept an unfavorable verdict or decision as final. Reverses and defeat but stung him into renewed and more lethal activity. Some hard-heads are like that, irrespective of their walk or niche in life. It takes the Grim Reaper in person to get them, to win the final toss of the coin.

AFTER the DZX foreman had been gone several minutes and he could again trust his face to mask his emotions Jackson followed to the street. He crossed diagonally to the opposite corner where stood Owens' General Store, cursing the mud-holes and the thicker mud to come when the Fall rains grew heavier.

He went up-stairs to Owens' office, the headquarters for all of Owens' business activities, upon the third floor. Walking in, he slammed the door behind him and stood staring moodily at the three men he saw before him.

Owens himself, the uncommunicative and saturnine, the man of few words and many thoughts, sat behind his desk. Carter the sardonic, a gambler of extremely fastidious dress and really snake-like grace, sat in a tilted chair—a characteristic pose. Tilby, a lanky ex-Kentuckian with still discernible traces of former refinement, was a living example of that Kentucky quip regarding the reason so many Kentuckians left the blue-grass country and went West; they were so frequent that the customary greeting between two natives from Kentucky assumed the form of a ritual:

"'Why, howdy cunnel. Who'd evah expec' to see yo' 'way out heah, suh? What did *yo'* do back home?'"

The seated men blinked at the noise and looked curiously at the newcomer's gloomy face.

"Well?" clipped Owens.

"Who shot at Montague this morning?" demanded Jackson. "You, Carter?"

Carter looked up.

"Why me? Am I the official executioner?"

"I want to know," rejoined his questioner as his gaze sought Tilby's face.

The Kentuckian flushed slightly under Jackson's inquiring glance.

"You know that I never shoot or stab anybody from behind," he stated distinctly.

"That'll do, Tilby," rapped Owens.

"So you knew it was from behind, eh?" remarked Jackson.

"What about it?" demanded Carter.

"Why the —— did he miss? That's what I want to know," hissed Jackson furiously, his rage at last overwhelming his self-restraint. "The fool—risking his own position, not to mention tipping off our hand by such a stunt—and then missing! Did you give orders for this, Horsehead?"

Owens only grunted.

"What do you mean, 'tipping off our hand'?" asked Tilby.

"You know I wanted things to quiet down before we did anything else; you know I wanted to be certain of success the next time. Now after this shot at Montague that long-legged jack-knife Harrison rode all the way to town to accuse me. He just left the Texas Hotel—after staying until he made me ache all over."

"You didn't give him any satisfaction, did you?" drawled Carter.

"How could I? I wanted to kill him. Owens, I can't stand this passiveness much longer. Why the —— hasn't young Montague been arrested for the murder of the station-agent? You know —— well that was his knife the old man was killed with. What's Carruthers doing? Running around sticking up placards about this rustler Nightbird?"

"That's right," endorsed Carter. "What's the matter, Horsehead?"

"Plenty," stated Owens succinctly. "That tramp, McQuirey, stumbled into town at exactly the wrong time. Nearly scared Carruthers to death when he suggested that the man who killed Myers prob'bly had package in safe for excuse. Also his initials were W.M. too. Then he was bonded by a stranger he didn't even know, or said he didn't know, and th' stranger's initials were W.M. also. The deal is crabbed."

"I don't see how it is," commented

Carter. "More than one person can identify the knife as young Montague's."

"If something doesn't develop shortly you can't expect me to keep my hands off," grated Jackson. "What difference does it make if everybody's initials are W. M.? Even if this charge against young Montague falls through it'll cause them unpleasantness. Besides, Carruthers had better be making a showing of some kind and arrest somebody. If he don't get busy and satisfy people with some kind of work you won't be dictating to a sheriff next term," he concluded pointedly.

Owens was silent a moment, a slight scowl on his otherwise wooden-like countenance giving a hint of the flying, racing thoughts locked within the bony prison of his skull.

"Why not arrest all three of them?" suggested Carter. McQuirey and Montague are at the same place, I understand."

"All three!" exclaimed Tilby. "But you have nothing on the bondsman, and McQuirey is out on bond."

"That's a good idea, Carter," endorsed Jackson. "This smart tramp is an unknown quantity around here. It won't hurt him to board with the county indefinitely. What if he is out on bond? Lock him up without bond, this time. If his bondsman shows up to complain, lock him up too."

"But is such an action legal?" objected Tilby.

"You are so obtuse, Tilby," declared Jackson impatiently. "It makes no difference. Carruthers is taking his orders from Owens, not from the county. What do you say, Horsehead?"

Owens' expression at last denoted a stimulated mental activity. He pondered a bit. Then:

"All right," he jerked out. "Send Carruthers to me."

And Jackson and Carter smiled unpleasantly.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN FROM ROCKHOUSE CAÑON

THREE days before the murder of the station-agent at Lebanon, at dusk a lean, tired-looking man rode into the farmyard of Blaine's fruit-ranch just south of the town. He carried an ancient-looking sawed-off shotgun which he handled affectionately as he dismounted from his nag, an animal of no apparent parts but of prominent bones. The horse was as weary-looking as its master.

Henry Blaine, a well set up, clean-shaven man of middle age, came forth to meet the stranger.

"Evening," he said.

"Howdy," returned the rider wearily. "Can yuh put me up fer th' night?"

"Yes, indeed," returned the fruit-grower. "You've come a long way since morning, I take it. Lead your mount right on into the barn."

"Thanks. I come from quite a ways th' other side uh th' Canadian."

"You don't say. I dare say the rest will be welcome to your horse."

"I guess 'twon't hurt none. Me an' Hercules has covered lots uh territory together. This ain't th' fust time we been tired. My name's Martin."

"And mine is Blaine. Glad to have you, Mr. Martin. Just turn Hercules into that stall. There's a feeding already there, and hay above in the rack. He can get water at the trough out here in the barnyard."

They walked together to the house, where the farmer introduced Martin to his daughter Patricia, a very pretty and capable young woman who presided over the household. They sat down to supper with the two regular hired hands at a bountiful table.

Martin fell under the spell of the girl's vivacious chatter and admired her shrewd common sense in his awkward way. Despite the obvious culture of the Blaines, Martin felt a sort of kinship, a slight bond of sympathy of some kind between them and himself. He smoked a pipe or two in lazy contentment with the fruit-grower after supper; but as weariness overtook him he soon evinced a desire to go to bed, and Blaine showed him to a spare room.

The stranger had a brighter look the next morning; his homely, lined face looked less tired, and a kindly expression shone from his eyes despite the stern, set expression of his features. He eyed everything about the place carefully, taking in things one at a time, as if passing upon one item before allowing his mental vision to accept another image. It was after breakfast that he broached the matter he had evidently been mulling over to himself.

"Yuh got uh likely place here, Mr.

.Blaine," he said. "It looks like uh real good farm. Where I come from they ain't fifty acres in one spot no place, an' th' soil is pore an' stony."

"Is that so? Where are you from, if that is a fair question?" Blaine inquired, seeing that Martin had practically invited such a query.

"Down in th' Kimish Mountings in southwestern Arkansas. I ain't been home in more'n two years now, an' I'm kinda homesick for farmin'. I ain't no cow-puncher. I'm jes' uh plain farmer, an' yore place sure looks good to me. I wonder could yuh use uh extry hand for uh spell?"

"Well, I have done very little on the farm proper, having spent most of my time this year on peaches. And Fall is here now. There won't be much to do except care for the stock. I really don't need any more help."

"I'd be willin' to work for my board an' keep an' Hercules," suggested Martin hopefully. "An' I wouldn't want to saddle myself on yuh for always. I jes' wanna look around here for uh spell, an' I gotta work while I look. An' everybody else round here's ranchin', ain't they?"

"That's true. I've the only farm around Lebanon. Well, you're welcome to stay under those conditions, friend. I'm sorry I haven't anything better to offer you, but I am just getting on my feet here."

"Yuh been mighty kind, an' that's all I kin expect."

Martin proved to be a willing worker, and he possessed quaint bits of knowledge regarding farming, some of which Blaine found instructive, others highly amusing. Except for one trip to town on the afternoon of the twentieth, four days later, he stayed fairly close to the farm. Aside from the fact that he subjected every one who passed or stopped to a close scrutiny there was nothing peculiar in his actions.

Bit by bit he revealed his life and his past to the ex-Mississippian, and in return he learned somewhat of Blaine's former struggles with a poor farm in the red hills of northern Mississippi. He was interested in the fruit-grower's account; it was like turning an unsuspected page in the bleak chapter of discouraging farming. Perhaps he saw in Blaine a kindred soul, a bond brother in the fraternity of unceasing toil and barren returns. Perhaps it was his need of human understanding and sympathy.

Whatever the cause, he gradually lost his reticence and talked, and Blaine was not surprized one day while they rested on their pitchforks in the barn and were alone together to find Martin telling him the main incentive of his life.

"So th' next day Jed was drivin' back from th' railroad, which was nigh on to forty mile distant," Martin was saying, "an' he was drivin' through Li'l Windy Gap on his way back to Rockhouse when he 'spied this here stranger walkin' 'long like he was powerful tired. 'Course Jed give him uh lift, 'cause down our way nobody never does pass up no walkers.

"Waal, th' feller said his name was Thompson an' he was on his way to Texas. They rode on for two or three mile, an' all th' time Thompson was admirin' th' hosses. Then when they dipped down in th' wooded valley jes' 'fore yuh come to Piny Ridge, this here Thompson reaches quiet-like behind him an' catches Jed's shotgun. 'Fore Jed could more'n wonder what Thompson was doin' th' cur shot my brother right in th' head, blowin' th' right side plumb off."

Martin ceased and clenched his hands as he recalled that brief but ghastly and grim little tragedy. Blaine's eyes grew kindly and sympathetic.

"He went through Jed's clothes an' tumbled him over into th' road farther on an' threw out th' shotgun an' drove on. Jes' think of it! Killin' uh man jes' for uh pair of hosses an' five or ten dollars mebbe!" concluded the mountaineer bitterly.

"But, Martin, how did you find out just how the murder was committed?"

"Th' road warn't traveled much," replied Martin simply. "When we set out to look for Jed four days later 'cause he didn't show up an' we knowed he wouldn't of stayed in at th' railroad that long, they hadn't nobody else been along th' road. We found th' gun, an' we found th' spot where Thompson had throwed Jed into th' road. 'Bout twenty yards back we seen th' tracks where th' hosses jumped when he fired th' gun. An' back in Li'l Windy Gap was th' stranger's footprints where he'd been walkin'. We could tell he was uh purty big man."

"And you found Jed?" prompted Blaine gently.

"Yep, we found Jed," replied Martin queerly, "but not layin' there in th' road. He had come to hisself some time later an'

was thirsty, 'course. He knowed where he was an' he dragged hisself *two hundred yards* down through th' timber to Deer-Lick Spring after water. God only knows how long it tuck him. An' when he got there——"

Martin's voice broke, and his face twitched spasmodically.

"When he got there, Mr. Blaine, th' —— spring was dry.

"That's where we found him, his head all open an' bloody and' hundreds of flies buzzin' an' crawlin' round on him. When I seen him I knowed he was dead. I run down to him, my heart in my boots. I was cussin' out loud, I guess, 'cause jes' as I got to him he opened his eyes an' looked up, smilin' at me.

" 'That yuh, Win?' he said. 'I been waitin' for yuh.'

"Yuh can't never know how I felt, Mr. Blaine, when I heard him say that. Th' goose-bumps stood out all over me an' I thought my heart 'ud bust. He'd been there four days 'thout even water an' was still alive an' sufferin', an' I didn't know it all that time till his woman come over to my cabin on th' other side of Rockhouse Cañon an' told me he hadn't come back from th' railroad.

"We never would of thought of anything like that 'cause uh mountaineer knows his mountings. Jes' think of that! He was there all that time, an' I didn't know, I didn't know. If I'd ud been there I could of helped him; mebbe I could of got him to uh doctor; anyway I could of got him water an' been comp'ny. There he was, still in his right mind, a-knowin' he was gonna die, sufferin'—an' somewhere four days ahead of me was his murderer jes' drivin' off peaceable. Oh, my God!"

After a silence he continued:

"We give Jed uh drink an' made him comf'table, but he died 'fore we could git uh wagon there to move him. That was more'n two year ago. I ain't caught up with Thompson yit," concluded Martin with such grim finality and absolute confidence in the ultimate justice of kismet that Blaine almost felt pity for the man who had been just "four days ahead" when the blood trail was taken up.

"How are you going to find him?" questioned the fruit-grower gently. "According to your story you've never seen him."

"I'll never miss him if he's alive," stated Martin positively. "Jed lived long enough to say that he had uh rabbit mouth that quivered an' close-set eyes an' uh square kinda scar 'bout th' size of uh half-dollar in th' middle of his recedin' chin."

Blaine shook his head slowly.

"There's no one of that description around these parts that I know of," he said at length.

"I ain't in no hurry," declared the Arkansan. "I been chasin' down fellers that seemed to tally with that description for two an' uh half year now an' they wasn't th' men. Mebbe I'll find him when I least expect to. Anyhow I'll find him some day, an' we'll both know it when I do."

Blaine clasped his hands over the top of his fork and gazed out over the rolling country with retrospective eyes. He had received a glimpse of a life behind that curtain which blankets all human souls. He could appreciate, because of his own bleak existence, a life-story of soul-searing toil as barren of all that made life worth while as a sun-scorched rock in the desert.

Martin had been born and reared in the Kimish Mountains, a southward flung tendril of the more northerly Ozarks. According to his description of his homeland every little stream, every little gully, each valley, each hilltop had an individual name, although there were miles and miles of wild mountains and forests that no white man had yet climbed or penetrated and probably few red men of the past.

The first white settlers who had penetrated into this aboriginal country had probably been emigrating westward and had paused in despair in the heart of the region, unable to proceed and doubting their ability to retrace their steps. They had remained, almost forgetting the rest of the world and likewise being forgotten.

The soil was stony and unproductive in many spots. Nowhere in the country closer than the first foot-hills leading into the mountains could fifty acres of ground fit for cultivation be found in one spot. The principal occupations were farming indifferently, hunting, trapping, fishing, moonshining and feuding. The houses were log-hewn shacks of uneven and unbeautiful construction, chinked with clay and barren of all comforts.

Wild game claimed the country. One could ride—where horseback riding was possible—for miles and miles without striking a human habitation.

No season brought more than bare necessaries to the mountaineers, and a poor season left them all but destitute. During the period following the Civil War, times had been so terrible and weather conditions so bad that the mountaineers had had to follow the Government teams which drove through the foot-hills and pick out the undigested grain left along the trail by the animals in order to have seed for the next season's planting.

Blaine visualized the barrenness of all this through the medium of the lanky Arkansan's voice. He could see the cabins perched crazily and crudely on rocky hillsides, the drab women with their one-pattern dresses and bare feet, with their faded bonnets and colorless lives.

He saw the old mountaineers who dimly remembered another world than this, a world of less sterility from which they had been taken as children. He saw the unhappy, barren childhood of those born in the mountains like Martin, robbed before the cradle of their rightful heritage of happiness and love.

Thank God for the slight blessing that their suffering was not as acute as it might be, because they did not know what was lacking; their mental growth, their imagination, their chance for comparison had fortunately been dwarfed and unrealized.

The meditating farmer could see the bleak ideals, the individual passions, the leaping play of the flames of primitive love and hate, the unyielding code of honesty and of a life for a life, a law and a cycle of existence as mighty to them as a merger on Wall Street or a war to the rest of the world.

He could see a weeping woman, stirred at last out of her spiritless calm, crying in her patched calico apron, two or three half-clad children clinging to her knees in fearful and uncomprehending wonderment as the limp form of the husband and father was tenderly carried into the cabin and laid on the harsh corn-shuck mattress—a victim of the deadly feuds of the mountains.

Blaine sighed and shuddered.

"*This* is certainly God's country, Martin," he murmured.

"Yep. I guess it is, but uh mountaineer loves th' mountings. I reckon we better git to movin' this here hay," replied Martin, resuming his customary tone.

CHAPTER VI

MISSING—ONE COW-PUNCHER

"CARRUTHERS," said Owens heavily, "go get young Montague and McQuirey."

"H-huh?"

The worthy sheriff was astounded.

"How's that? Git Montague *now?* After that tramp mix——"

Carruthers halted of his own volition. Horsehead Owens did not speak. He glared steadily into the beady orbs of the sheriff.

"But—but how about McQuirey's bond—Judge Ryan?" faltered the official.

"Leave that to me," clipped Owens briefly. "There'll be reasons for detention. Go get 'em. Also, find that bondsman."

Carruthers gulped noisily in his uncertainty and bewilderment. Later he was so physically uncomfortable also that he became of the firm opinion that in that instant he had swallowed his tobacco. At least he couldn't remember spitting it out, and he had heartburn for an hour.

"Kee-rect," he managed to quaver, and he turned to go.

For some reason Sheriff Carruthers was troubled. He did not anticipate a very pleasant journey nor a very delectable reception at the predetermined destination. There were various reasons—about thirty of them. Hence an hour later found a posse of forty men, hard-faced and silent, turning out along Dallas Road and heading south.

Perhaps the less said about the men deputized to ride with the sheriff the better. "Water seeks its own level," goes the axiom. The opinion of the better citizens of Richelieu County might be summed up in the remark of "Curly" Matthews as, pausing on the step of the chuck-house, he made out the identity of the riders through the dusk.

"My gosh!" he exclaimed. "Somebody must of hung th' high sign on th' Texas Hotel. Looky what's on th' move."

The punchers turned from the alluring doorway and peered out at the oncoming visitors. Almost as one man they deployed and drew their guns as, creaking and jingling, the sheriff's posse turned from the road and rode up toward the DZX corrals.

"Hey! This is me," shouted Carruthers hastily. "No fireworks now, boys. This

here is uh posse. We come to talk peaceable an' to ask yuh for that feller McQuirey."

"Oh, is *that* what yuh call yore bunch!" offered Frank. "Much obliged for th' explanation. We was figurin' th' posse about half uh mile behind."

The sheriff's reply was very indistinct, his anger and his caution struggling with each other. He must have stuffed his beard into his mouth to prevent ugly words.

"McQuirey?" repeated Curly. "What's he gone an' done now?"

"Where *is* McQuirey?" whispered one of the punchers suddenly. "I don't see him."

"He was here jes' 'fore we sighted th' posse," said one. "I felt him shovin'."

A murmur of surprize ran around the ring of DZX men. The members of the posse milled their horses impatiently.

"What's wrong here?" asked the cool, even voice of Montague as he came from the direction of the ranch-house with his son and Harrison.

"Mr. Montague," called Carruthers in evident relief, "this here is uh posse. We come to git two men accused o' Myers' murder. Don't resist th' law. Be peaceful now. Make yore punchers put up their hardware an' let us git this here business over with 'fore our men git away—that is, if they was a mind to."

"Golly, th' quota's growin'," put in Curly, aghast. "At first he only wanted McQuirey. We better hurry an' fix him up or he'll want us all."

"What two men are you after?" asked the rancher crisply.

"There's been developments," stated the sheriff, "an' I gotta take that new puncher o' yourn for one an'—an' I reckon I'll hafta ask yore son to come along till we git things straight."

The punchers surged forward with a roar, the frightened horses of the posse reared backward and Harrison sprang quickly before the angered DZX men. Young Bill, still standing beside his father, looked thunderstruck.

"Careful, boys," cautioned Montague calmly. "Sing Li! Bring a light out here. Sheriff, we have no intention of resisting the law. However, you might explain matters a bit. I understood that McQuirey had been arrested and bailed already in this matter. As for my son, just how do your developments concern him?"

"I ain't at liberty to tell yuh all 'bout it, but th' clew lays suspicion on both o' them."

"What do you mean?" grated young Bill, tensing himself. "Suspicion of what, you——"

"Now, Bill, easy there, son," admonished his father. "Let's get this straight. McQuirey! Step forward."

"He ain't here, Mr. Montague," spoke up Frank.

"What's that?" fairly howled Carruthers. "I knowed yuh was wastin' time for uh purpose. Dismount, men, an' surround th' chuck-house first."

"There's no use," broke in the foreman in a dangerous, flat-toned voice. "We don't double-deal *out here*. McQuirey ain't here, I can tell yuh without lookin'. If he was, he'd step up for Mr. Montague."

"He was here uh li'l while ago," offered Curly. "He must of seen yuh comin', sheriff, an' went off for uh li'l fresh air. Yuh understand how I mean this."

Carruthers exploded in angry exasperation.

"Don't talk like that, sheriff," protested Frank. "You'll teach our hosses bad habits an' make th' meat on th' steers tough."

"He can't be far away," snarled Carruthers, his former reluctance burned away at Montague's seeming complaisance and as the dormant lust of the man-hunt which lies in every human bosom, a surviving instinct of primordial ages, welled up within him. "He's likely on th' place. Hunt for him. Mr. Montague, yuh ain't gonna object to that?"

"Not at all," responded the rancher shortly. "My men will help you."

The search was short-lived.

Before the members of the posse could bark up their shins in the darkness and swear feelingly for the entertainment of the delighted cow-punchers two of them approached the bunk-house door and espied a square of gleaming white pinned to the door. One of them struck a match and cupped it in his hands before the paper. They saw marks upon its surface.

"Hey, sheriff!" one called. "C'mere quick!"

The entire group of deputized men and cow-punchers mingled together before the closed door, animosity engulfed in their common curiosity. The ranchman, the sheriff and Harrison crowded forward to

decipher the find. It was a message, brief and cryptic:

DEAR SHERIFF:

It is the cream of several curdled jests that you should be hunting me. Finding out I was worth ten thousand dollars makes you think I ought to be safely locked up at night? Sorry I couldn't stay to bid you good-by again. I trust it doesn't happen a third time. I have learned much from you, particularly a well-rounded lesson on gratitude. Perhaps I may be allowed to explain some day.

Until we meet again,
W. M.

"——!" ejaculated Carruthers uglily. "I dunno what he means by all this gingerbread, but I can tell yuh that we've let that Nightbird git away from us."

This statement caused a distinct reaction. Cries of unbelief, of wonder, of demand rang out. Even the members of the posse were astounded at the sheriff's infuriated words.

"Gosh! How clumsy!" sympathized Curly.

"Have you proof of your statement?" demanded Montague quickly.

"Not jes' yit," reluctantly admitted Carruthers, fumbling with his beard. "But that's th' theory I'm followin', an' it seems to be showin' results."

"But what has all this to do with me?" said young Bill ominously, stepping forward and facing Carruthers.

"Yuh?" exclaimed the sheriff, raising his head and peering down along his whiskers at his confronter. "Oh, yeah, yuh. Well, where was yuh on th' night o' th' nineteenth, th' night th' station-agent was murdered, huh?"

"I was—let me see, I was—in Lebanon that night until twelve o'clock."

"Kee-rect," smiled the sheriff, stroking his beard triumphantly. "Yuh was in town, Myers was killed that night, an' yuh knife was found with th' initials W. M. on it in th' cash-box o' th' express comp'ny's safe. Can yuh see any connection now, young feller?"

"No," stated young Bill; but his mind flashed back to McQuirey's warning about knives upon the occasion of the first night of his arrival.

"I gotta explain it, have I? Well, what's yore initials an' where's yore knife?" concluded the official dramatically.

"Here," said the young man swiftly, and he produced his knife and held it up in the rays of the lantern Sing Li brought closer.

"——!" cried Carruthers, his eyes taking on a beautiful glassy cast as he stared at the knife before him. "Didn't yuh lose— I mean, that's uh different knife, ain't it?"

"What are yuh talking 'bout?" asked Harrison keenly.

"—— if I know," shouted Carruthers furiously. "I got uh knife jes' like that, an'——"

"Why don't yuh arrest yoreself on suspicion then?" suggested Curly innocently.

The sheriff glared.

"I got uh knife jes' like that, initials an' all, in my office, holdin' it for evidence; an' Myers was killed with it. I don't care nothin' 'bout this here knife. Young feller, yuh gotta go back to town with me."

"Gotta go?" exclaimed Harrison softly. "*Gotta* go? Have yuh brought enough men to take him?"

"Now, now, Harrison," cried the officer hastily, "don't git r'iled. I'm jes' doin' my duty."

"As a sheriff," stated young Bill succinctly, "I think you are an ass. I don't see that I should go," he added coldly.

"I fear it is best for you to go, son," said Montague slowly. "If a man is under just suspicion—whether he be guilty or not—no man in this country is too big to be arrested. Come with me to the house for a moment, Bill."

"Say—" began Carruthers, reaching forth a hand.

"I was speaking to my son only," stated the ranchman, and his gaze was so steely that the sheriff stepped back in some confusion. "In just a minute Bill will be ready to ride with you."

"But, dad—" remonstrated the young man vehemently; but the elder man interrupted him by throwing an arm tenderly about his shoulders and drawing him along.

After a brief interval they returned and Bill, unarmed and docile, saddled his horse and mounted without a word.

"Carruthers, hear me," stated Montague as the posse turned to go; and the sheriff halted, one hand on his saddle-horn. "My son goes with you, alone and unarmed, of his own volition. He is obeying the law and is under the law's protection. You know me fairly well. See that he arrives in Lebanon safely and remains safe until he returns to this ranch. Understand?"

Carruthers nodded vigorously and swung himself into his saddle. The posse swung

out into the open road and headed toward town.

Eloquently silent, the entire body of punchers turned to Montague for an explanation. Even Sing Li's inscrutable face seemed to voice a question. The rancher vouchsafed them nothing.

"Bill," said Harrison piteously at length, "yuh ain't gonna let Li'l Bill spend uh night in jail, are you? You wasn't meanin' that now, was you? Jes' say th' word an' we'll go git him right now. Jes' say you're jokin'."

"He won't be the first DZX puncher to stay overnight in jail."

"Nope, not for bein' drunk or something like that. But this is for murder, Bill. This is for *murder*."

"Let's get to the table," said Montague abruptly. "From Sing Li's expression I judge he is quite out of patience. Every blessed one of you punchers hit it for the chuck-house. *Pronto*."

With faces averted the men filed into the long room that served as a dining-hall, Montague following. Eyes were downcast, and the usually boisterous punchers were quiet and low-voiced. Expressionlessly the rancher seated himself at the head of the table, not even glancing at the mutely vacant seat at his side.

As Sing Li began pouring the coffee Harrison dropped his head on his arms.

"An' he sent him off without any supper!" he cried brokenly. "Li'l Bill!"

A suspicious moisture appeared in the ranchman's eyes as he glanced at the back of Harrison's graying hair. But his lips tightened and his lean face became stern and formidable-looking.

"——!" whispered Frank to Curly as he glanced covertly into that bleak, capable-looking face. "He thinks Bill is guilty or somethin'."

AS THE last of the punchers entered the chuck-house the bunk-house door slowly opened. Out of the dark entrance stepped McQuirey, the missing cow-puncher. He smiled a faint little smile as he stood for an instant looking toward the lighted chuck-house.

Then he shrugged resignedly, regretfully, as he slipped silently to the nearest corral and unerringly sought and found the excellent black horse that he lamed before. The animal had completely recovered from his strained tendon, and he nosed the man affectionately as he was being saddled.

Leading the gelding cautiously out to the road, McQuirey vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"*Adios*, DZX," he murmured, raising his hat in the darkness. "You're a pretty decent bunch, but I can't say the same for your friends in Lebanon. I'll be sending Blackie home in a day or two. I can't have horse-thieving added to the list of my alleged crimes to worry the worthy sheriff."

He spurred the responsive animal into a mile-eating canter as he rode south toward Texas.

CHAPTER VII

JUDGE RYAN CALLS

HIS HONOR, JUDGE RYAN, was angry. He was distinctly out of temper. In fact one might almost call his state of mind choleric. And when the legal oracle of Lebanon was really aroused it meant an unpleasant time for some one—for any one. For Judge Ryan had that pleasing trait of letting his righteous, or what he at least considered his righteous, wrath find and fall upon its victim, faltering not before friend and failing not before foe.

He ran through the charges on the docket this morning with a burst of speed which outrivaled all of his previous records and which dazzled and awed his overworked clerk. The ears of more than one minor offender smarted neatly before the judge closed his book with a bang and declared court adjourned completely, individually and collectively. He left a dazed clerk behind him writing furiously to catch up with the verbal decisions and went home for his riding-horse.

Shortly thereafter he rode out along Dallas Road on his big, raw-boned mare, his rusty coat-tails flapping dictatorially over and behind the cantle of his saddle. For Judge Ryan was making a call on one William Montague, Esquire, ranchman and cattle king. He was making a visit that practically amounted to a legal call too. True, the legal authority of Lebanon, county seat of Richelieu County, had no business being so openly indiscreet; but then this legal authority usually did just what Judge Ryan wanted to do.

He rode up to the pair of cow-punchers who leaned and talked so earnestly together

against the side of one of the DZX corrals. They proved so engrossed that they failed to look up. This did not improve the judge's humor exactly. He stared down at them heavily.

"Say, ye two spalpeens," he boomed out at length, "shake yer legs an' act int'rested at seein' some distinguished company. Where th' —— is yer boss?"

"Howdy, judge," said the pair together gravely as they looked up. "I think he's up at th' house," added one of them woodenly.

"Bejabbers, but 'tis an animated bunch! Where's th' funeral to be held?"

"Dunno, judge. As soon as we can git hold of a certain Irishman, though."

The judge tried to look startled.

"Nothin' personal in that statement, sure now, was they?"

"Nope."

"S'pose ye spill yer grievances to me?" suggested Ryan mildly.

The two punchers looked at each other.

"Yuh tell him, Frank," urged one.

"It's thisaway, judge," complied the other. "They come after Bill an' McQuirey last night on some kind uh fishy charge regardin' th' murder uh Myers. McQuirey seen 'em comin', an' he slipped off. Th' sheriff took Bill in, an' Mr. Montague wouldn't let us put up no resistance. McQuirey's gone with uh good hoss an' saddle while Bill's in jail. We didn't figger McQuirey guilty uh nothin', and he shouldn't of run off an' left Bill to face th' music. We kinda liked McQuirey, but we don't like this way uh doin'. An'—an'——"

"An' we don't want Bill in jail," concluded Curly with a growl. "Dang, but I'm mad."

"Th' verdict is unanimous," declared the judge. "Nayther do I. But just ye rest easy, b'ys, an' we'll be fixin' things right away in spite o' th' gang what's pesterin' Billy. An' mebbe before th' case o' th' murder comes to trial we can find out enough to release Billy from any implication whatsoever."

WITH that Judge Ryan wheeled his horse and rode up to the wide porch of the ranch-house. He grunted heavily as he heaved his formidable bulk out of the saddle. As he set foot to the ground the big mare lowered her head and wheezed in relief.

"Ye're a —— liar, Maggie," bellowed the indignant judge, shaking his fist at the stolidly gazing and innocent-looking horse. "I don't weigh a pound over two-fifty. Montague! Montague! Where th' —— are ye?"

"Here, judge, in the living-room," answered the ranchman's steady voice, in which there was a hint of repressed laughter. "Come right in."

"William Montague, what th' ——'s wrong wid ye? What d'ye mean by lettin' Billy stay in jail? What's th' big idee o' lettin' him go to jail at all, at all? An' why haven't ye come right in to put up bond, outrage though 'tis? Ye knew I'd see that bond was not denied to ye. Ye waitin' for th' mysterious bondsman to bail him out?" flung the judge with a crescendo of rage and sarcasm as he approached the tall form of the ranchman.

"Now that's not such a bad idea—if we wait for him," agreed Montague, winking pleasantly at the red-faced man before him. "Wouldn't Carruthers' head buzz then, like a mad hornet under a tumbler? You know, judge, this bailing philanthropist might do it if we wait for him."

"If they didn't grab him an' slap him into jail," rejoined Ryan pointedly. "Remember, his initials are W. M. too. Besides, waitin' be ——," he snorted impatiently. "What's wrong wid ye? I'll bail Billy out meself. An' I'm ashamed o' ye, Montague, plumb ashamed. I can't make ye out. Ye act like Billy might be Nightbird himself."

"Now you are getting down to something tangible," the rancher commented quietly. "Rumor is a hellish thing, judge. Some folks doubtless have that very idea. And you know how hard it is to root out a false idea once it has taken hold. It still persists and crops up again and again in years to come."

The judge reddened. His chair protested creakingly as he fairly flung himself up and out of it. Leaning over the desk beside which Montague stood, he opened and closed his lips soundlessly, the very eagerness of his stinging, eloquent phrases blocking each other before they could tumble in sarcastic cascades from his mouth.

"Rumor besmirch th' name o' Billy Montague? While I live? An' me havin' known his mither, a foine gentlewoman if they ever was wan, God rest her soul.

An' knowin' his dodderin' auld faythér right now, a man respected an' looked up to in th' cattle lands. Montague, ye talk like a jackass."

The rancher smiled and raised his hand.

"Don't ye interrupt," thundered Ryan, pounding on the desk with his clenched fist. "Shut up an' listen. Tell me how in th' —— can Billy be taken for Nightbird wan instant? Ye will be admittin' that he was locked up last night, won't ye? Well, last night John Perth, west o' ye here, lost two hundred head o' choice cattle to Mr. Nightbird wid his ridin'-cloak an' his gang; an' wan o' his punchers was killed. Does this squelch yer Nightbirdin' theory an jailbirdin' for Billy?"

Unknowingly the judge had lost the entire force of his personal tirade in his mention of the cattle theft. Immediately the rancher's interest became grave and acute.

"Cow-puncher *killed?* Are you sure? Unless one or both of the men shot at Licker-up have died, this is the first killing to be accredited to Nightbird, isn't it? That is, outside of the murder of the station-agent too, if any one lays that to the bandit."

Ryan looked blank for an instant, his flow of eloquence neatly derailed.

"Uumm—yes. 'Tis th' first killin' to come to my attention. Now what th' —— are ye drivin' at?"

"Are you sure that Nightbird was implicated in last night's work?" demanded Montague, spreading his feet apart and pointing his finger straight at the judge's nose.

The transition from defensive to offensive, from questioned to questioner, was so sudden that the judge blinked. Involuntarily he raised his hand to his organ of smell, so hypnotic was that pointing, unwavering finger.

"Ye know 'tis said that Nightbird never makes a raid unless he himself is present to direct it. He figures that will eliminate mistakes."

"All right," Montague conceded. "Maybe so. But that doesn't clear my son of the station-agent's murder and the initialed knife that was found."

"——'s bills an' sivin ——!" roared the judge, asssuming the aggressive once more. "Ye are worse than an endless chain o' kind-thought-great-happiness letters. No, it don't clear Billy o' Myers' murder. It don't clear him o' bein' a white man, or bein' an American, or bein' yer son naythér. But what th' —— difference does that make? What I want to know is why ye haven't bonded th' b'y? Where'd this young smart McQuirey go?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. He took French leave last night."

"Not that I believe him guilty o' th' murder meself; but he might be mixed up in this Nightbird business. We don't know much about him," added Ryan.

"I am beginning to think that very likely."

"All right. To —— wid him for th' present. His bond is up, an' Carruthers is runnin' himself in circles huntin' for th' bondsman.

"Here ye are. Sign this paper for Billy, making ye liable for one thousand dollars. I made it as light as I could an' keep it lookin' right. Gimme Billy's gun an' I'll be takin' it to him. I'll send him home this evenin'.

"Shut up an' sign. Sure an' I've wasted quite sufficient time. 'Twill look better for his own father to be on his bond instead o' th' judge before whom he was arraigned."

Montague sat down and glanced over the paper. Wordlessly he signed and returned it to the judge who pocketed it and bowed very politely.

"Good mornin', sorr," he said in a honeyed voice. "Ye are very gracious an' kind, ye —— hard-head," and he had to chuckle to himself as he heard Montague's laughter follow him out to the veranda.

He met the foreman of the ranch coming up the steps. Harrison's eyes widened the merest trifle as he saw the judge.

"Mornin', judge," he greeted.

"Top o' th' mornin', Jim," Ryan responded, glancing down toward the corrals.

The two glum and dissatisfied cow-punchers were gone. Instantly the judge turned and glanced quickly up and down the road. The legal eye caught sight of two minute trails of dust down Dallas Road toward the south. He turned a questioning gaze on the foreman.

"Where in —— are those two young fire-eaters goin', Jim?" he asked calmly.

"Danged if I know, judge. They jes' stopped me as I come by th' corrals an' told me I could give 'em a week's lay-off, takin' effect immediate, or I could fire 'em."

He scratched the stubble on his chin reflectively.

"They're purty good cow-punchers, judge," he drawled.

"Humph', D'ye think McQuirey'll be glad to see 'em?"

Harrison started and eyed the judge almost guiltily. Then he grinned slightly.

"I dunno. But they'll be powerful glad to see him."

"They was in too big a hurry," stated the judge. "Sure an' Billy is comin' home as soon as I can coax Maggie back to Lebanon," and the quick light of happiness that leaped to the foreman's eyes amply repaid the judge for all his trouble and warmed his old Irish heart all the way back to town.

CHAPTER VIII

AND SO DOES ANOTHER

THE moon had taken her station in the east and was on the wane, the upper right section having been eclipsed in almost a straight line, giving the impression of the brim of a hat placed on her head at a devilish, rakish angle.

The rolling, undulating open country surrounding the DZX ranch with its heavy carpeting of grass and occasional thick stands of trees and its swelling knolls, and the distant circle of mountains lay like a ghostly fairyland in the half-light.

The west and front sides of the various DZX buildings were in purple shadow; and night reigned supreme over the country, which bared its face to the half-revealing and half-concealing light of the mistress of the skies. Hence it was not surprizing that the presence of a nocturnal visitor who exercised great care and secrecy should be unsuspected.

The man had left his horse in the gloom against the northwestern edge of the ranch-house, he himself creeping stealthily across the shaded front veranda, hugging the wall of the house for greater secrecy. He gained the front door and crept a little farther toward the windows of the living-room.

The heavy shades here were drawn, and only upon close inspection could the faint glow of a light within be detected. The prowler returned to the door and tried the handle gently. The door was barred on the inside. He scratched lightly on one of the panels. There was no response, and he listened intently for sounds from within and without.

Then he flung back his riding-cloak and drew a long, slim-barreled six-shooter from its holster. With the muzzle, from which the sight had been carefully filed away, he tapped upon the glass.

At length there came a soft shuffling of feet, and Sing Li opened the door. He blocked the entrance as solidly as his slight figure could and held up his lantern to peer calmly into the visitor's face.

He saw a slender, swarthy-complexioned man with brilliant and snapping black eyes. A saucy pair of crisply waxed mustachios pointed arrogantly upward. The stranger was attired in the fanciful dress of a Mexican fop; bell-bottomed trousers with neat "V's" laced with gold, fancy vest laced with the same cord, short jacket and riding-cloak, all of rich material. A high-crowned, ornamented sombrero, with engraved *chapa* and chin-straps, sat roguishly on the back of his head. His cloak partially concealed his wide cartridge-belt with slender knife-sheath on the left and tied-down gun-holster on the right.

The visitor smiled politely at the unblinking and inscrutable Oriental, a row of even white teeth contrasting strongly with his dark face and mustache.

"W'en one look through key hole an' weesh to be unobserve' eet ees best to put out light," he advised.

"No makee diff to Sing Li," informed the Chinaman calmly. "Me see. You know me see. Velly fine."

The visitor nodded and smiled again.

"Ees Señor Monteegue still arise?" he asked softly.

Sing Li bowed his head gravely.

"*Bueno*. Put down thee light, pleese. I weesh to spik wit' heem."

The Oriental merely glanced down at the Mexican's gun. The latter smiled again understandingly and replaced his gun in its sheath.

"To knock on thee door," he explained.

"Velly fine," finally endorsed the Oriental. "Slip 'longside flont loom, me follow."

The Mexican quickly entered and closed and barred the door behind him. Walking ahead of Sing Li, he paused at the door opening into Montague's living-room and office. He tapped lightly.

"Sing Li?" came the rancher's voice.

"You catchee Mexican man. Allee same come in?" answered the celestial over the cloaked figure's shoulder.

"Very well."

The Mexican turned the knob and entered closely followed by Sing Li with one arm tucked into the other sleeve.

For a change the rancher was not at his desk but sat in an armchair before the fireplace studying a relief map of the surrounding country. He half-turned and looked up.

For a brief space he looked into the newcomer's eyes. Then his gaze traveled over the other's fastidious costume from sombrero to trim riding-boots. His eyes widened the merest trifle as they took in the black cloak which hung from the Mexican's shoulders.

"Señor Monteegue?" said the man with a rising inflection.

"Humph!"

The rancher cleared his throat slowly. Then:

"*Sí, señor. Es Vd. mejicano?*" (Are you Mexican?)

"*Sí, sí, señor,*" responded the other quickly. "*Hablas español?*" (You speak Spanish?)

"I do," replied Montague in English. "You wish to see me? Won't you sit down?"

"*Sí, señor.* I weesh to spik wit' you in private," and he jerked his head slightly toward the immobile Oriental, who had not removed his eyes from the newcomer since entering the room.

"You may proceed. Sing Li has been with me for years, and we understand each other perfectly. That is the reason he has stood within arm's reach of you with one hand up his sleeve. Sing Li, place another chair before the fire. *Señor*, will you remove your cloak?"

The visitor made a gesture of declination as he took the proffered seat.

"Shall I speak in Spanish?" he asked in that language.

"You may. Sing Li understands Spanish, however."

"I weel spik Inglees," announced the caller resignedly. "My name, *señor*, eet ees Pancho Diaz. My occupation—" he shrugged gracefully—"she ees making *dinero*. I have come to talk wit you on a bueesness of importance to you."

"Well?"

"You have eet ees a cowboy and a son who have arrest' for murder, *sí?* Thee sheriff he have possession of thee knife which she use, *sí?*"

"Well?"

"You weesh thee public to know who really keel thee station-agent, *sí?* You weesh thee matter cleared up?"

"Well?"

"Pancho Diaz can help you. And, *señor*, ees eet you can say something besides, 'Well?' "

"Why do you come to me? Have you any proof for me to buy? I have a pretty strong suspicion as to what bunch of shorthorns were in on the damnable deal; but I can use some actual, concrete proof."

"Alas, *señor!* We have no proof by your honorable court-house standards, but I have eet ees a way. You weesh to free your son."

"For your benefit, *Señor* Diaz," returned Montague coldly, "let me inform you that my son is up-stairs in bed right now."

The Mexican arched his brows in surprize.

"They allow you to make bail?"

"I still possess some influence," said the rancher shortly.

"Ah, *bueno*. But thee stigma, *señor*. Shee steel remain, *sí?*"

"Well? What do you know?"

"I know who keel Myers, and I know why," said the Mexican suddenly. "Eet was for revenge on Myers and for revenge on thee Monteegues."

"Correct. I know that much. Continue."

"Thee man who struck thee blow had a dummy—what you call—package in thee safe, and he call on thee agent at ten o'clock at night. Thee agent knew thee caller and he admit heem and open thee safe heemself. Then—*pfsstl* He ees keel' wit' knife your son have lose, thee safe ees rifled mostly to leave knife. I admit, *señor*, thee charge ees weak; but thee evidence—she ees strong."

Montague nodded thoughtfully.

"I had figured some such method of perpetrating the deed. Now, who was it? Which one was it? And how can you prove it?"

"I have no proof like I say, *señor*, but I have very *buen* eyes. I have make guess. I have observe'. I know. I am right."

"All right. *Who?*"

"You know a certain Señor Carter?"

"Ah! Did *he* do it?"

"Alas, *señor*. I can not say yes. I do not see thee murder commit'. But I have figure' well. You trap heem and ask heem."

Montague was silent for a few moments. Then he looked up at his visitor.

"Is this all?"

The Mexican nodded.

"How do you know anything about it? You haven't been in this part of the country long—at least during the daytime."

Diaz shrugged and lit a cigaret.

"I haven't been here a thousand year, no."

"Your information is very unsatisfactory. Are you sure you can not tell me something about a more important matter to this country and to me?"

"You mean, *señor?*" Diaz paused with his cigaret half-way to his lips and eyed the ranchman expectantly.

"I mean Nightbird," shot the rancher.

The Mexican lazily finished the interrupted puff, blowing the smoke out slowly through pursed lips.

"No," he said at length; "I have nothing to say about thee gentleman."

"Can you tell me anything about yourself?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Diaz softly; but he looked hard at Montague. "The *señor* grows personal."

"Can you blame me? You come to me unsolicited and offer me very meager information, if information it can be called. In truth you have actually told me absolutely nothing. Just what is your motive? To urge me into taking a step that I would regret as hasty later on?"

A heavy frown crossed the swarthy face; the little mustachios seemed almost to bristle with rage and indignation.

"*Carramba!*" he ejaculated, his rolling r's sounding like a snare-drum. "You would ask a Latin thees question?"

He folded his arms and glared fiercely at the American.

"Motive? A Latin may have many motives; but they are all of one sex."

Montague looked apologetic.

"I am sorry, Señor Diaz. I appreciate your attempt at kindness; but you have been very indefinite and can give me no positive proof. I fear you have wasted your time as I can not possibly act on your suggestion. You know we do abide by the law occasionally in this country."

"*Es lástima!*" (What a shame!) "You, *amigo*, are thee loser. A scoundrel always has thees advantage—he goes ahead where thee hones' man hesitate. One thing I tell you. Study well your map. I mus' go."

"Suppose I detain you on suspicion?" suggested the ranchman.

"Detain *me?*"

The Mexican threw back his head and laughed lightly.

"Why not? Surely you would furnish quite a tidbit for certain officials in Lebanon, I should say."

"Undoubtedly," admitted the cloaked dandy easily, and his black eyes lighted up devilishly. "But thee *señor* jests. He would not deesarrange hees study and wake hees men just to detain poor Pancho Diaz, surely."

"No," admitted Montague slowly, "I don't believe I would. I wouldn't know what to do with you if I had you except turn you over to the sheriff in place of the cowboy who escaped him last night. That would be comical, but I have other things on my hands."

"Ah, *mil gracias, señor.* I weel go. You weel not settle matters wit Señor Carter?"

"It is impossible."

"Alas! *Buenos noches.*"

"Good night. Sing Li, show Señor Diaz to the door—and let him go."

"Your pardon, *señor,*" murmured Diaz politely. "I come *in* thee door. Eef you will put out thee lights for one moment I weel go *out* thees window here."

Wordlessly Montague made a sign to the expressionless Chinaman. At once Sing Li put the lamps out, and with only the soft glow from the fireplace to show his departure the midnight visitor slipped lithely through the end window and was gone.

MONTAGUE turned back and followed Sing Li's figure idly with his eyes as the yellow man relighted the lamps. He ruminated over the brief and intangible interview. The Mexican, while singling out one of the crooks whom Montague suspected, had offered no proof and no basic suggestion. In fact it was an open question as to who was guilty.

The ranchman frowned into the inscrutable face.

"Diaz made a call for nothing, Sing Li," he stated. "He gave me nothing to work from. The situation is not bettered a bit."

"Velly fine," nodded the Chinaman in sage agreement. "Bimeby mebbe business pick up."

CHAPTER IX

MACGREGOR GAP

THE county of Richelieu could be roughly designated as that wide fertile valley lying within the almost perfect circle of mountains—mountains that were to play havoc with the charts of the weather bureaus in the years to come, that so broke up and deflected the air-currents as to render weather forecasting as uncertain as prophecy. The valley itself was probably sixty to seventy miles in diameter, Lebanon lying toward the northern edge close to the eastern rim. The DZX holdings were about ten miles south of the town, and the lowlands south and west were dotted with other ranches.

Perhaps forty miles due south of the DZX ranch a wide cleft in the circling rim of mountains furnished a natural gateway to Texas for Dallas Road. There was a pleasantly high, wide plateau here from which one could look southward toward the Texas border or northward into one of the richest and most diversely productive lands in the world.

The entire site of this high, wide place in the road was owned by a red-faced, red-haired, fishy blue-eyed, broken-nosed individual who went by the name of Sandy MacGregor. The man had settled down on this natural pass like a buzzard to his roost, and in time the place had assumed his name.

MacGregor Gap consisted of a good spring, plenty of shade, one well-stocked saloon and two long sheds behind the building—one for two-legged and one for four-legged animals to use as sleeping-quarters. Besides owning the property and running a saloon of unenviable reputation Sandy MacGregor was noted for his cultivated Scotch burr and his fierce pride in the "bonnie hielands acr-r-ross th' sea," although he had never been any closer to Scotland than MacIntosh, Missouri.

There was a natural stone bench at the top of the rise looking northward, and after MacGregor's place became fairly well established as a resort of a type it became the custom for a keen-eyed watcher to sit here with his back against unyielding rock, a spyglass to his eye and gaze out on the wide expanse of country toward Lebanon and especially the mile or two of Dallas Road just below. Needless to say, the country on the other side of the hills needed no watching as MacGregor Gap was comfortably on the north side of the State line.

It must have been four o'clock in the afternoon three days after Frank and Curly had headed south on a hunting-vacation that the solitary watcher gazed long at an approaching dust-cloud. He raised his glass and focused it down upon the disturbance.

After a long study he slowly arose and strolled lazily toward "Sandy's Tavern." He entered the long low room, which, for a saloon, was singularly clear of reek and smoke. This was due perhaps to the altitude and the open windows.

Leaning against the foremost end of the bar, he rapped loudly for attention. Almost instantly the noisy place grew silent, and several villainous-faced patrons looked at him anxiously.

If the Mexican Dollar Saloon could assay a high test of vicious human nuggets, Sandy's Tavern could easily have made affidavit to ownership of the mother lode of viciousness. A careful observer would have immediately checked off not less than five professional killers, nine horse-thieves and three murderers, not to mention the fact that they were all lusty villains and MacGregor the most lusty of all.

"Anybody here wanna dodge two cattle-punchers that looks kinda like gunmen?" inquired the lookout nonchalantly.

"Wher-r-re they fr-r-om, 'Slim?'" demanded MacGregor.

"Lebanon. Headin' south. Travelin' light. Be here in half a hour."

No one moved, but two or three men glanced at each other.

"Guess they can coom along, Slim, lad. Dinna fash yersel'. Ye'll see mor-r-re o' th' Richelieu puncher-r-rs in days to come. They might come lookin' for-r-r a lost coo bar-r-rn or-r somethin'. D'ye ken?"

Slim "kenned" with a slight shrug of his shoulders and returned to his post. It was none of his business. He was paid to watch the roads and report. This he did and here his obligations ceased.

It was all of a half-hour later when the two horsemen topped the last rise and jogged into MacGregor Gap proper. The observer was not in sight as they rode past the rock bench—being safely ensconced in a great crevice on the side of the stone away

from the road—but their observing eyes noted the seat and the wide expanse of country it commanded.

"Have uh peep at th' unfoldin' glories o' th' range, Mr. Matthews," said Frank, making a congressional flourish with his arm. "Observe th' panee-ram-mic vistas fadin' into th' distance. Yuh can even pick out th' site o' Lebanon, an' that's close on to fifty miles."

"Not to mention uh sweet view o' th' trail jes' below us," added the other dryly. "I reckon they're expectin' us at th' tavern. Let's go an' be received, cowboy."

"They oughta be able to tell us somethin' at that," suggested Frank thoughtfully as they rode on to the saloon and tied their horses at the well-lined hitching-rack. "I'll say holdin' uh reception for us."

They halted in the doorway and gazed carefully about at the pleasant company.

"Frank," murmured Curly out of the corner of his mouth, "if we was on th' road to ——, I'd say this was th' half-way house."

"I think we've come more'n half-way," replied Frank soberly. "McQuirey wouldn't of never stopped here. He couldn't of been that tough."

"Then if he went south through here yuh think it must of been at night?"

"*If* he come through a-tall."

"But he must of gone through some place," argued Curly. "We've done beat all th' trails along here, an' they ain't nobody seen him. He must of gone through, an' he must of been goin' fast."

"Well, this ain't no place to talk. They're eyin' us wall-eyed now. Le's sit down an' moisten up uh li'l."

"I'd rather stand up. I believe it's healthier," Curly said, and led the way to the near end of the bar, casually getting out of direct line with the open door.

HALF-WAY down the bar was a fair-complexioned, blue-eyed boy who was perhaps eighteen years of age. His features were almost classical in their regularity, and his hands were slim and girlish. This gentle-appearing product of the Southwest, this seeming child in the midst of such raw, quivering wickedness, this mere baby, was "the Cherub."

The Cherub was a very precocious youngster, being the most deadly gunman among those present. It was rumored that he was one of the lieutenants of Nightbird and that he had a strong craving for the leadership itself, and, were it not for the extreme youth of himself and the organization, he would have shot his way to its head ere now.

Whether this was true or not no one knew. In this at least Nightbird was good. He had established and maintained a fair amount of secrecy. If true, it is doubtful whether the Cherub could have lasted thirty days as a leader, for beyond his cold-blooded six-gun propensities he was a callow, inexperienced youth. Then generally a regular killer has no real capabilities for leadership because of his utter incompatibility, not to speak of his lack of vision and imagination.

Due to his very lack of reasoning and bull-headed disregard for any and all consequences, the Cherub had established a very pronounced reputation for touchiness and suffered acutely from aggravated megalomania. It is probable that Nightbird, if rumor were true, foresaw a use for such an irresponsible lieutenant because of his phenomenal speed with a gun. Ordinarily such a man makes a useless tool.

As the bartender set a bottle and two glasses before the newcomers at a significant motion from Curly, the Cherub sauntered easily forward. A dead hush came over the room as he halted several paces from the two conversing punchers and planted his feet squarely, hands swinging easily and lightly at his sides.

Calmly Frank reached for the bottle, still conversing with Curly but acutely feeling the proximity of the man behind his back. He ignored the footsteps, depending on Curly, who was at the end of the counter, to watch.

"When strangers comes in here it's uh general custom to set 'em up to th' house," drawled the Cherub softly and ominously, piqued because his approach had caused no furor.

Frank turned in surprize at the youthful voice, still clutching the neck of the bottle. Curly did not have to turn.

"Why hullo," said the former. "'Scuse me, sonny. I didn't see yuh. Barkeep, yuh got any sody pop for my boy here?"

"Haw!" shouted a delirious soul seated at a crude table between two windows.

Even in his cups this jovial one could appreciate a good jest.

A vivid flush dyed the Cherub's beardless cheeks. Besides all that he was and was

not, being a youth, ridicule bit into his soul like acid. It seemed that he merely pointed his hand, so rapidly did he draw and fire, and the hilarious one lurched heavily forward, knocking bottles and glasses from the table to the floor in a series of tinkling crashes.

"Ah!" breathed Curly ecstatically. "A killer! Go on an' do yore stuff, cowboy; I got him covered. A even break wouldn't do yuh no good here a-tall."

The back of Frank's head moved as he nodded slightly, while Curly never took his eyes off of the surprizing youth before him. The Cherub merely flashed a burning glance about the room as if daring any one else to laugh and again turned his gaze to the man before him, shoving his gun back into its holster with an effortless flip.

"I begs yore pardon, mister," stated Frank softly, a half-smile on his lips yet with hard, cold eyes.

For careless, jovial, easy-going Frank was facing a type of being for whom he had no sympathy or mercy—a soulless killer.

"I begs yore pardon," he repeated. "I sure made a *hi-ah* mistake. You ain't no innocent infant. Huh-uh! Yuh takes uh strong drink. Barkeep, trot out uh shot uh carbolic acid for this warm baby."

The Cherub seemed to twitch all over at this deadly insult. Before he could move, in fact almost before the DZX puncher ceased speaking, a cold, rasping voice came from the far end of the bar.

"Dinna stir-r-r, Cherub, or-r ye ar-r-re a dead mon. Bide a wee till yon laddie at th' end o' th' counter-r-r lays his six-shooter-r-r up on th' bar-r-r."

CHAPTER X

A MEXICAN INTERLUDE

WITHOUT moving a muscle or by any means betraying the agitation he felt, Curly realized his helplessness with a sinking heart. Without looking down the length of the bar, he knew that he was covered by Sandy MacGregor himself and perhaps by the bartender also. It turned him sick to think that he had failed Frank, that he was forced to abandon him to the mercy of that young, smooth-faced killer.

In the stillness that ensued, while at least three minds were racing furiously, Curly slowly turned his head and met the fishy, close-set gaze of MacGregor. The ugly features of that villainous face burned themselves into the retina of his eyes. He read utter ruthlessness in the saloonkeeper's hard stare. They were trapped.

It was at this rather stressful moment that the slight jingle of spurs was heard, and an immaculately dressed stranger stepped upon the threshold. He took in the situation at a glance, and at sight of the two punchers a wide smile of slowly dawning recognition and delight crossed his lips. He swept his high-crowned sombrero from his head and took a quick step forward, placing himself almost in line between the motionless killer and the tense cow-puncher.

"Ah!" he exclaimed in joyous surprize. "Eet ees my *buen amigos*, Frank Henson and Curly Matthews. *Señores*, your frien' Pancho Diaz salutes you. Never have I seen you since that gala day in Vera Cruz. Where you have been all thees times? Do you live in thees country now? How long you have been here? Ah! Eet seems but a day since——

"Your pardon, *señores*. Thees ees my frien' thee Cherub. He ees thee best and queeckest shot in thee entire Southwest. Cherub, thees are my so good friends, Señores Henson and Matthews."

Curly relaxed gently and leaned against the bar. The strain had been great and the sudden release found him curiously weak. He took in the newcomer without moving his head. He saw a slim and graceful Mexican—a Mexican that he had never seen before in his life.

Frank was undergoing the same bewilderment, but he faced the new arrival without batting an eye. A delighted smile—a smile unforced—appeared upon his face, and he simply radiated surprized pleasure.

"Pancho Diaz? How glad I am to see you!"

"Ah!"

The Mexican returned the smile.

"I knew you would never forget your poor frien'," he beamed. "*Señores*, let us drink. What are you doing, my frien's? Where you go from here?"

"We're workin' for th' DZX outfit up near Lebanon," said Frank. "We're ridin' south just now——"

"On th' trail of uh hoss-thief," added Curly.

"Ah! A horse-thief! And he ees going to the Texas?"

"We don't find a trace of him so far."

"I see. What a grand pitee! Let us drink, *señores*. Eet weel help us to think," and he linked arms companionably with that of the Cherub and of Frank, drawing them up to the bar.

The very outrageous brazenness of his action, coupled with the lack of rapid mental action on the part of the Cherub, carried over the lethalness in the atmosphere. The Cherub faced the bar reluctantly; but he faced it, and slowly the rough denizens in the background came forward, all save that one still figure sprawled so grotesquely and so quietly over the table.

"Yeah," grunted Curly. "Belly up, men. Th' drinks is on us. Let's all drink carbolic acid. Barkeep, bring out yore strongest he-man poison. Who'd 'a' thought of meetin' Pancho here? We though yuh was still down in Mexico. Yuh remember that night th' three of us beat up th' police force, Pancho?"

"Ah! The *señor* has thee very good memory," laughed Diaz reminiscently, loosening his riding-cloak and letting it fall behind him, then catching it dexterously with one hand.

He raised his glass quickly and pounded on the bar for attention.

"*Señores!* A toast to my frien's here and in honor of another. To all good fighters, to many reunions and to one who ees not wit' us in daylight."

"Uc-oh!" murmured Frank. "Night-bird."

"Shut up an' drink," whispered Curly tersely.

The toast electrified even the smoldering Cherub. Every arm was raised, and raw spirits trickled down leather-lined gullets. Curly set his glass down and clutched at the bar, fighting for breath.

"Wow!" he managed to gasp.

"What's th' matter-r-r, laddie?" inquired MacGregor solicitously. "Would ye like to weaken it a wee bit?"

"Weaken it? Brother, th' Pacific Ocean couldn't. I need relinin' with fire-clay."

This sally brought forth rude shouts of laughter. Good humor was completely restored. Tears came even to Frank's eyes as he set his glass down, and the Cherub managed to smile.

"Now, about your fugeetive, *señores*," resumed Diaz conversationally, not allowing too long a silence. "I fear that I am thee only newcomer here. Suppose you deescribe your man?"

Frank complied with a careful description of McQuirey. From the various effects his words produced Frank knew that several of the men present had seen or heard of McQuirey at one time or another—probably the affair of his arrest for murder.

"He was ridin' uh black hoss with th' DZX brand," he concluded.

The Mexican's lean, dark face radiated sympathy. He turned to MacGregor with an eloquent gesture of his hands.

"No mon o' that descr-r-ription ha' passed thr-r-rough MacGr-r-regor-r-r Gap," the saloonkeeper stated positively. "An' fur-r-r-ther-r-mor-r-re, we ha' not seen a black hor-r-rse for-r-r weeks."

"*Tck! Tck!*"

Diaz clicked with his tongue.

"Eet ees thee great pitee. Weel you go on, *señores*, or weel you be going back?"

The two punchers looked at each other. MacGregor might or might not be lying. But if McQuirey had gone on, they would never catch him north of the Texas line. If he had not passed through the Gap, there were miles and miles of country within the circle of the mountains that the two punchers had not covered and where the fugitive could still be hiding. There were also many other and less frequented roads and trails over the mountains.

"I reckon we'll be siftin' on back," said Frank slowly. "Yuh ain't ridin' our way, are yuh, Pancho?"

"I have thee great sorrow, but I can not. Perhaps—" and he winked broadly— "I weel come and see you before thee long time and maybe we ride together like before, si? Don't forget Vera Cruz, *señores*. Come! I weel go wit' you to thee horses."

"Here, barkeep," called Curly, spinning a twenty-dollar gold-piece down the bar to the stolid attendant. "Take yore change outa that, an' if they's enough left set 'em up to th' house again. Gents, howdy. We might come back for uh longer spell with yuh some time," and he too winked meaningly, having taken his cue from the insinuating Mexican.

Sandy MacGregor motioned a couple of men to the still figure by the table, and as they went out through the door the punchers noticed the two men preparing to carry the unfortunate fellow out through the back entrance.

PANCHO DIAZ walked beside their horses to the rock bench, which as before was vacant, this time because of the descending dusk. Here the punchers made as if to pull up their ponies and ask their debonair protector a flood of questions that fairly burst their skins with curiosity.

"Don't stop, *señores*," the Mexican forestalled them coldly. "I reesk my life and my standing wit' MacGregor to save you. I must do some *muy pronto* explaining when I go back. Ride fast, ride queeck, and I stay here unteel thee night she protect your backs."

"But—say—" began Frank.

"But nothing, *señores*," interrupted Diaz shortly. "If you owe me thee obligation for my so poor assistance, you weel repay me by going now."

Wordlessly the two punchers spurred their mounts downward into the gathering night. Twice they glanced back, and after the Mexican's figure was obscured in the darkness they saw the calm glow of his cigaret staring unwinkingly down at them.

"Pancho Diaz!" exploded Frank at length. "Vera Cruz! Vera ——! I never seen that greaser dude before in all my whole put-together."

"He knowed *us*," snorted Curly in reply. "He knowed lots uh things, an' he made uh funny toast, an' he wore uh black ridin'-cloak. All uh which is food for two or three thoughts."

"Vera Cruz!" reiterated Frank disgustedly. "Th' only Vera I can remember had red hair. Curly, they is somethin' fishy 'bout th' whole business. 'Course I'm glad this here Diaz stuck his snoot in jes' when he did, but I don't understand it.

"First, where'd he come from? We know he wasn't followin' us. Did he come from th' Texas side? Who is he? Is he——?"

"Cowboy," responded Curly promptly, "git goin'. I stepped off plumb over my head three or four miles back."

CHAPTER XI

A CHINESE SOLUTION

IT ALWAYS afforded the DZX punchers great merriment when Sing Li dressed to go marketing. Although the DZX ranch boasted a provision storeroom that rivaled many a retail store's stock there were occasional shorts on the want list that were purchased in smaller quantities than flour and sugar. Hence, it was the steward's custom to make bi-monthly trips to Lebanon for delicacies.

He invariably wore his loose-fitting jacket of yellow. His cue, which he wore in a long, hanging braid on the ranch, he always wound tightly upon his head and covered with an old battered Stetson hat. His soft, heelless house slippers he would regretfully change for a pair of rubber overshoes. He topped the whole attire with an old opera-cloak that had been discarded by Montague's wife many years before, after finding out the status of the Muses here in the Southwest.

Because of confectionery favors one or two of the punchers would promptly hitch a team to the buckboard set aside for Sing Li's use, whenever he appeared in such a garb. Then, however, they would all form a critical line to the buggy; and, walking through a perfect barrage of pointed comments and suggestions, the Chinaman would calmly take his seat behind the horses and go bobbing off down the road, looking for all the world like an anachronistic nightmare.

On the morning following the visit of the Mexican to Montague Sing Li surprized the men by appearing before them in his official regalia at breakfast.

"When catchee bleakfas' some good lilly boy wantee cakee? Velly fine. Hitchee team flo Sing Li. Eatee cold lunch, Sing Li fixee good suppee. You likee? Yes. Velly fine," conversed the Oriental blandly.

Montague had already finished breakfast and had gone up to the ranch-house. Young Bill, who was rising from the table in company with the foreman, turned to eye the yellow man.

"You just went to town last week," he commented suspiciously. "What are you going in for?"

"Havee implotant business. Catchee gleen gloc'lies flo cowboys. No can gettee scluvy. You savvy? Velly fine."

"Now see here, yuh crazy chink," stated Harrison, swinging the slight form around and gazing into those polished and uncommunicative mirrors of jet, "if yuh go and get your danged yeller hide in some kind of Oriental trouble on top of what's goin' on now, and we have to come in for yuh, I'll be pretty danged mad. *You* savvy?"

"Velly fine," smiled Sing Li blandly. "You want hitchee team?"

"That beats me," said Harrison wearily as he watched the bobbing heads of the team going along the road. "First one and then another has uh streak of insanity. Now th' yeller chatterbox is off his base. I won't be surprized if I see th' cows flyin' round th' treetops by mornin.' "

Young Montague smiled sympathetically. "Come on up to th' house, Jim," he said. "We can at least tell you why I went back to Lebanon with th' posse night before last."

THE first stop Sing Li made in Lebanon was at the court-house. He tied his team with an intricate knot to the nearest hitching-rack and went shuffling up the short flight of steps to the first floor. He found Judge Ryan just closing morning court. He stood at the door until he caught the judge's eye and then bowed gravely, pointing toward Ryan's adjoining office. Withdrawing, he shuffled down the corridor to the room in question.

"Why, hello, Sing Li," greeted the legal arbiter of Lebanon when he came upon the patient Oriental. "Sure an' what brings ye in today? Ye want to import a dozen wives?"

"No, thankee, judge. Catchee plenty tlouble alleady. Clooks bad. No needee clooks. Mebbeso Judge Lyan wantee catchee clook who kill station-agent? You makee Sing Li think so when you talk Missee Montague."

"Ye're —— whistlin,' me b'y," concurred the judge heartily. "I'm layin' to get me hands on that gintleman."

"Velly fine. If Sing Li catchee, you takee?"

"Ye unconverted haythen, ye! What's goin' on behind them black eyes, I wanta know. So ye've decided to take a hand in th' game yerself, eh? Sing Li to th' rescue. Sure an' I'll slap th' spalpeen in jail an' have him hanged for good measure. What's yer idea, Sing Li?"

"Sing Li pletty well know who killee agent. No ploof. Sing Li makee mad. Fight. If Sing Li light, makee confession. If Sing Li long—" he shrugged "—po' China boy."

"What d'ye mean exactly?" frowned Ryan.

"All kind of talk-talk, some thinkee this, some thinkee that, mebbeso somebody *know*. No can plove. Sing Li know too. What do? Makee ploof. You savvy? Yes. Velly fine," stated the DZX cook complacently.

The judge turned his gaze up to the ceiling, a startled expression on his features as understanding grew upon him. He looked back at the Chinaman in admiration.

"I'm ——!" he exclaimed. "Who is it? And how did ye figure it out?"

"Judge Lyan no wolly. Sing Li thinkee. Pletty soon findee smalt man thinkee allee same Sing Li. Then Sing Li know. Now catchee."

"All right," smiled the piqued judge sweetly. "If ye are so —— smart, go 'catchee,' an' I'll take charge o' th' culprit."

"Judge no get angly with Sing Li," soothed the Oriental. "Sing Li tellee. You know Missee Caltel? Findee at Texas Hotel, at Mexican Dolla' Saloon mebbe. You savvy him?"

"Caltel? Calt— Oh, ye mean Carter? The gambler? Is he——?"

Sing Li nodded, and the judge pursed his lips thoughtfully, frowning as his mind went back over the past few weeks, seeking to dovetail unconnected bits.

"Judge Lyan findee and sittee in back of saloon. No wolly, Sing Li findee too. Then Sing Li come in and—Judge Lyan see evelything. Judge bettee go now. You savvy? Yes. Velly fine."

And without further parley he turned and shuffled out.

"Sure an' I'm ——!" ejaculated the dumfounded judge. "What's all this poppycock I hear about th' circumlocution o' th' East in comparison wid th' direct methods o' th' Occident? Sure an' that man didn't know Sing Li. An' since when did ye start takin' orders from a yeller haythen, Michael Ryan?

"Sure an' this amounts to nothin' more nor less than bein' accessory before th' fact. Sure an' what th' —— do I know about that?"

THE Mexican Dollar Saloon had two bids to make for fame and fortune. First, it was the first wet spot just off of Dallas Corner and therefore drew a goodly number of patrons from among the punchers, prospectors and floaters who housed their mounts in the sheds and corrals which occupied the corner site

and extended out along Dallas Road for several hundred yards. In short, it had first chance at their money.

Second, The Mexican Dollar shared with the Bright Star the distinction of being the only two saloons solely and admittedly owned by Mr. Horsehead Owens. That he may have held controlling stock in other like establishments was easily probable; but these two places were his particular pets. They differed in management, in appearance, in operation. They were designed to do so. The Bright Star was operated luxuriously for the élite; the Mexican Dollar for the *bourgeois*.

Because of its location the Mexican Dollar was never quiet, was never empty. Life, mankind, rough and ugly, crude and humorous, cruel and gentle, flowed constantly between its doors. Because of the continuous uproar a head bartender of perfect imperturbability was a prime requisite. Such a one was "Dutch Pete," stolid, impenetrable, emotionless.

Mr. Carter, the gentleman of sinuous grace—both mental and physical—stood at the rear end of the bar, facing the front of the saloon. There was a quart bottle and a small glass beside him.

And he was doing that which no gambler, and particularly Mr. Carter, should do. He was getting drunk.

His was that temperament which plunged into the depths of despondency under the influence of too much liquor. He became utterly silent and still; an unshakable melancholy would claim him. In this condition, with his habitual steady nerves and reptilian grace, he seemed more like a snake than ever—like a rattler that has just shed its old skin and is viciously irritable because the scales still cover its eyes.

Carter was drinking neat whiskies with the precision of clockwork and watching the service of Dutch Pete with gloomy eyes. He was oblivious to the jeers, the noise, the raucous laughter of the place. He heard nothing. The only things that lived about him were his whisky hand and his eyes. A Cherokee Indian was relating an experience of his with such painful lack of humor that his story brought shouts of hoarse laughter which left him unmoved and which Carter did not even notice.

"Huh? Accident?" the buck was saying. "Heap queer. No unnerstan.' Johnny Roastin'-Ears buyem bike-cycle. Takum long time mebbeso learn not fall off. Johnny learn. One day take big bottle hooch, one quart, I dunno, mebbeso half-gallon. Takum big drink. Ugh! Johnny feel good.

"Go takum long ride. Hop on bike-cycle an' push on stirrup. Run jes' as smooth. Heap fine. Ride long time down road. Stoppem. Takum drink firewater. Jump on bike-cycle. Ugh! Heap fine. Run like lopin' pony. Johnny Roastin'-Ears feel fine.

" 'Long mebbeso pretty soon stoppem 'gain. Takum big drink firewater. —— good hooch. Climb on two-leg machine an' go. Ugh! Ugh! Heap wonderful. Jes' as smooth. Fly like bird. Pretty soon Johnny *see big bridge come runnin' uppum road.* Johnny no lettum bridge run over him. Turn out quick. Ugh! Get jes' as wet. Wakum up in hospital."

During the slapping of backs, shouts and poundings on the bar that followed the grave-faced Cherokee's dénouement, a weird-appearing little figure in battered old hat and antique opera-cloak convulsed with laughter and backed into the gambler at the end of the bar just as Carter was raising his brimming whisky-glass. The liquid spilled all down the front of the man's immaculate shirt, the glass shattering on the floor.

It needed but such a trifle to cause the snake to strike.

Without even a curse Carter reached forward and clutched the clumsy one's cloak-collar. His eyes glittered evilly, and his slender fingers crooked like talons as he swung the other around, lifting the small figure completely off its feet by bracing himself against the counter. A flicker of surprize, of inimical joy, crossed his eyes as he recognized the timid and apologetic features of Sing Li, steward of the DZX ranch.

"You!" he whispered hoarsely. "You dirty yellow chink, you ruined my silk shirt. —— you, take your own jumper off, wet it and clean my shirt. Quick! D'you hear?"

And he assisted in preparing the Chinaman for the menial duty by ripping the cloak from the narrow shoulders and flinging it to the sputum-covered floor.

"No can do. No can do. Missee Caltel 'scuse Sing Li," moaned the Oriental. "No mean luin clothes. Sing Li buy shilt flo Missee Caltel."

"I said to take off that jacket and clean my shirt," hissed Carter. "*Prontol*"

The place grew suddenly quiet as the little drama unfolded. A bulky but inconspicuous individual hidden behind his paper at one of the rear tables quietly put down the news sheet and leaned forward intently.

"No can do. No can do," wailed the Chinaman. "Sing Li no washeewoman. Sing Li velly solly. Missee Caltel 'scuse China boy. Sing Li buy new shi——"

The gambler reached forward and snatched the old hat from the Oriental's head. Sing Li's cue tumbled down in a long, thick braid.

"Take off your hat when you address me, you yellow nigger," snarled Carter furiously. "Now take off that shirt and get busy."

The Chinaman stood still, wringing his hands together helplessly. The poison of the whisky mingled with the poison at the gambler's heart's core; and that horrible desire to hurt, to torture, possessed Carter's soul. With a swift motion he leaned forward and slapped the cringing figure across the face with his hand, a stinging, biting blow that snapped the Oriental's head back.

An instant change came over the yellow man. His figure straightened and his arms folded across his chest, one hand in each sleeve. An air of dignity mantled him and his black eyes bored into the inflamed and narrowed pools of cruelty set in Carter's face. He spoke, choosing his words carefully.

"To think Sing Li, son of so many honolable ancesto's, live to see the day a white dog lay hands on him. White man, you be dog and son of dog. You claven clook."

Instantly the killer flame leaped high in Carter's eyes. His face drained white at the acid insult. He licked his lips as if to moisten them for speech that would not come.

"Son of pig ancestors," he stated in a hoarse, insulting voice, summoning his neglected education to phrase an insult more deadly to an Oriental than mere Occidental curses, "you are going to die. Is there anything you want before the buzzards pick your filthy bones and coyotes howl over your dishonorable grave?"

The white man had all of the advantage, and no one knew it better than the Chinaman. Any negro, Indian or Asiatic who dared to lift a finger against a white man without being half-killed first and having ample reason besides even then, could assure himself of a pleasant necktie party. Sing Li realized all this. He had known beforehand that he would need a white protector, regardless of right or wrong.

In deliberately crossing Carter there was a decided peril for the Oriental. Carter was exactly like a snake. He was not one of the physically brutal type who like to mutilate before killing, thereby giving their victim a chance to strike back. The gambler would not play with Sing Li. When he decided to strike, he would shoot once. He would shoot to kill—and Sing Li had to let him take the offensive.

As calmly as if he were watching frying batter Sing Li stared steadily into the cruel, exultant eyes before him. He did not open his lips until he saw that Carter was tensed and about to draw. The East had not taught her sons to think, to observe and to calculate for naught.

There was a complete hush; no one seemed to breathe as the men waited for the Oriental to precipitate his own demise. Then Sing Li spoke suddenly.

"Yes," he announced clearly, his voice carrying to every corner of the saloon. "I want to know *why* you kill the station-agent."

Carter started violently. The movement which he had intended should line his gun upon the yellow man's heart was false. His revolver barked, and an ugly red streak appeared as if by magic upon Sing Li's left cheek, and scarlet blood began to trickle slowly down his face.

The Chinaman's right hand flipped out of his left sleeve and pointed at the other's breast in an imperious gesture. Every one gazed at the dignified form of the celestial and waited for the second shot from the gun of the accused gambler. It never came.

Carter gasped and caught at his throat convulsively. He swayed and clutched at the bar with one futile hand. Gurgling horribly, he fell heavily to the sawdust-covered floor, falling, fittingly enough, upon the Oriental's cloak. A keen stiletto quivered in the little hollow at the base of his neck, having pierced both bow tie and collar in its passage.

As realization dawned upon the stunned crowd they set up a mad, sullen roar.

"Git uh rope! Git uh rope!" was the predominating cry as they surged forward.

Dutch Pete froze in the act of pouring a libation of whisky, the liquid running out of the overflowing glass and spreading in a golden pool over the bar, his astounded eyes on the Chinaman—he could not see the stilettoed gambler on the floor. The yellow heathen had worked some Chinese magic. And for once Pete's placid equanimity was shaken.

There was a bull-like bellow, and the bulky figure at the table heaved itself up and sprang forward.

"Not wan single step farther, ye —— spalpeens, or I'll give ye thirty days for riotin.' Sure an' I saw th' whole shebang, an' right here an' now I'll pronounce this Chinaman not guilty."

The bottle dropped with a crash from Dutch Pete's paralyzed grasp.

"*Gott im himmtel!*" he gutturaled. "Der yudge!"

The fiery old Irishman faced the potential mob angrily, his unquestioned authority holding them back where guns could not.

"Sing Li, me b'y," he said, turning to the Oriental, "th' back door is unlocked. Ye better haul yer freight on out to th' ranch an' stay hauled till I make these idjuts see a little reason."

"Missee Caltel wishee speak," rejoined Sing Li imperturbably, pointing down to the dying man.

With a quick exclamation Judge Ryan knelt over the gambler. He made as if to reach for the knife.

"No—don't pull out. It'll drown—me. About Myers—" whispered Carter, and the judge and Sing Li bent close to catch the words. "About Myers—chink guessed—right. I killed him—left Young—Montague's knife as clew. It—is—big—deal. Whisky—got me. Makes—mean. About scheme——"

He ceased, gurgling horribly.

A man had leaned swiftly over and jerked the knife-blade from the confessor's throat. Carter jerked convulsively, and the blood gushed forth in a regular jet. His eyes rolled wildly. He opened his mouth widely to speak, and he strangled on his own blood.

"——'s bills an' sivin ——!" roared the judge, starting up. "What misbegotten imp grabbed that knife?"

There was no response save for a surly shifting of feet as he glared around the close semicircle of faces.

"Hal Brewer an' Horsehead Owens, ye heard th' dead man's confession," he spoke aggressively to the first men he readily recognized.

The man called Brewer nodded silently, and Owens spoke.

"Just came in. Didn't see it all. Carter admitted killing agent all right."

"Then ye seen enough," snapped the judge immediately. "Wid me an' Sing Li here that makes four. Don't any o' th' balance o' ye roughnecks ever try to swear any different in my court—if ye want to live long in Lebanon. I'll be goin' wid ye now, Sing Li."

CHAPTER XII

TO CAPTURE NIGHTBIRD

IT WAS two nights later that a pair of weary cow-punchers rode up to the DZX corrals and dispiritedly flung themselves from their saddles. A hubbub of noise from the chuck-house beckoned them to a hot supper.

"Dang, but I'm tired, dusty an' hungry," grunted Frank. "We been gone five or six days for nothin'. We ain't done nobody any good. Le's go eat."

"Wait. They's uh light up at th' house. Le's go see if Mr. Montague is up there. Mebbe he's seen th' light uh understandin' by now. If he ain't, mebbe we can do some good yet."

They went up to the quarters of the Montagues and entered. The rancher was alone in the big living-room, standing back to fireplace, an intense and thoughtful frown on his face, a square of paper in his hand. His eyes lighted up at the appearance of the weary punchers.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted. "Have any luck?"

Naw," responded Curly disgustedly. "That slim cow-puncher sure must of burned uh hole in th' horizon gittin' away from here."

Montague smiled slightly.

"Mr. Montague, what we has come to see yuh about," began Frank slowly, hesitantly, "before we goes to supper is——"

"Haven't you been to the chuck-house yet?" interrupted the rancher.

"Naw, sir."

"Good. Go ahead."

"What we come to see yuh about," faltered Frank again, "is why yuh thinks

Bill might be guilty uh any such doin's in Lebanon as Carruthers was claimin'. Yuh oughta knowed he ain't even remotely connected with th' killin' o' Myers. Isn't they somethin' we can do to prove it to yuh?"

The puncher fell silent under the rancher's steady gaze. He shifted his feet uncomfortably and twirled his hat unhappily. Curly's face assumed a set expression as he stared vacantly at a spot two feet above the ranchman's head.

"Who gave you the impression that I considered my son guilty of anything?" at length asked Montague in a cool, level tone.

"Nobody, nobody," gulped the miserable puncher hastily. "But yuh talked so funny that night, an' yuh made Bill go to town with th' sheriff even after he'd done showed his knife."

"Yuh see how it was, Mr. Montague," interposed Curly soothingly. "We didn't want yuh to do no misjudgin', an' so we went huntin' for McQuirey."

"Do you hot-heads realize that if I hadn't done something that night that there would have been gun-play? And that, regardless of what we think of Carruthers, we'd have been resisting the law and Judge Ryan would have been hard put to help us?"

The two punchers considered this for a space.

"Why hunt McQuirey?" continued Montague relentlessly. "Do you consider him guilty of the murder? Do you think I'd have kept him if I had thought so?"

"Huh-uh," they admitted.

"Well?" said the rancher sourly.

Curly squared his jaw and looked his employer straight in the eye.

"Well! We didn't see no use in him slippin' off an' leavin' Bill to face th' music."

"I see," grunted Montague, but he smiled. "You boys left too hastily, though. Bill came home the evening you set out on your Quixotic pilgrimage. I bonded him, of course. Why, even Judge Ryan didn't wait until I went to town to do it but brought the bond out here for me to sign. Two days later Sing Li had a clash with Carter the gambler and killed him in self-defense. The fellow confessed to the murder just before dying.

"Now you want to know if you can do something. Bill is completely exonerated and so is McQuirey. But you can help. Late this afternoon Jim found three stray unbranded yearlings out on our range afflicted with blackleg and running with our herds. And here in my hands I hold a brief note warning that the Lebanon National Bank is to be looted tonight."

"My gosh!" whispered Curly, awe-stricken. "We ain't been nowhere, an' we ain't seen nothin'."

"Ain't it jes' our luck?" moaned Frank.

"Don't feel so sorry for yourselves. You haven't missed it all by a whole lot. You say that none of the boys know you have returned as yet?"

They shook their heads in unison, indicating that Montague was right.

"Good. Wait here while I go tell Sing Li to bring your suppers up here quickly and quietly."

The ranchman stepped out, and the two punchers sat down eying each other like inquisitive roosters. When he returned they swung to face him like two manikins on the same string.

"Now then, boys, listen attentively to me," Montague began seriously. "You know what blackleg means if it takes hold in our stock, besides which it will pollute the ground permanently. We've removed the sick calves, but there may be more. Somebody may be *bringing* in more. We've got to stop the trouble before it begins.

"Tomorrow we will begin to inspect the entire herd. Tonight we start night herding. That this is an attempt—a rotten attempt of some agency—to wipe out the DZX herd and ruin the ground I do not doubt. We must guard against this on one hand and against Nightbird on the other. By the way, the rustlers killed one of Perth's punchers in a raid last week.

"Because of all this we simply can not go to Lebanon on the strength of this note. I have reason to believe it is genuine, but it might be a ruse itself. Now if I send some of the boys they'll all want to go. I can't spare them. Do you get the idea?"

"You betcha," beamed Frank, his weariness completely forgotten. "Yuh want us to go to town an' see 'bout this bank-robbin' business."

"Precisely. You two boys will ride straight to Judge Ryan's and present the judge with this note and an explanatory letter I shall write, and hold yourselves

under his instructions. Further than this, don't talk to any one about anything, and report to me tomorrow to tell me if this robbery is attempted, if Nightbird heads it, and if you capture him. Is this clear? Very well.

"And one thing more. Don't stop at Blaine's as you go in. Bill is eating supper there tonight—testing his intended wife's cooking—and he will want to go with you if he sees you. I have other work for him to do."

The soft-footed Sing Li entered, bent nearly double under a great tray, and placed it on the table before the two ravenous punchers. They looked up at him enviously, and he solemnly winked at them.

For a space there were but the sound of hungry men putting away food and the scratch of a pen from Montague's desk. At length the rancher arose and folded the two papers together.

"I'll go down and saddle two fresh horses for you while the boys are still in the chuck-house," he said, placing the notes on the table before them.

The two punchers wasted no time, and scarcely an hour had elapsed before Judge Ryan was reading Montague's letter. He grew almost apoplectic.

"—— bills an' sivin ——!" he ejaculated. "Wait till I git me coat, ye spalpeens. We'll shake together a private posse in no time."

The quaint trio quietly made the rounds of the homes the judge selected, and very shortly a conclave of men assembled at the big wholesale house which stood diagonally across the street from the bank and which, it might be added in passing, was one of the few big buildings that Owens, the aggressive realtor, did not own or was not interested in.

BRIEFLY Judge Ryan explained the situation, assuming full responsibility for their collective action.

The men deployed around the dark bank building quickly, to the intense relief of President Klein. Three of them took up their stations at the front windows of Fielding's Wholesale Company's second floor in company with the owner of the business. Two men were told off to watch from the side windows of the retail store directly across the street from the wholesale house and therefore across the side street from the bank itself.

Three men hid themselves in the alley behind the banking institute. Three more of the posse were detailed to conceal themselves amid the rubbish heaps behind the saloon on the west side of the bank. Curly, Frank, the judge and the bank president quietly entered the building itself through the rear entrance, locking and barring it behind them.

The plan agreed upon was for the four men within the bank to surprize the looters while the cordon of citizens without drew closer in, capturing any bandits posted outside and preventing escape on the part of any who might elude the guard awaiting them in the bank. To cover all possible contingencies Judge Ryan had given emphatic instructions anent certain well-known advice—if necessary, to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

"Sure an' now then we're ready for th' haythens," grunted Ryan as he settled himself heavily in a front corner, his overloaded shotgun across his knees.

"Let 'er buck," Curly rejoined happily.

The president said nothing. He felt that he had very little say coming. He appreciated all that was being done, but he felt somehow as if he were a sort of bait for the trap. He sat within the paying teller's cage, the end of a long cord in his nervous hand, the other end of which was attached to the low-turned gas-jet. At the judge's given word he was to pull the string, lighting up the long room, and then drop flat on the floor for certain metallic reasons about which he had asked for no detailed instructions.

He glanced several times at the massive iron safe which stood so calmly, so stolidly at his back, so completely irregardful of its impending ravagement. He wondered how even the cold metal could stand so passive, so indifferent under the stimulus of the various thrills he himself was experiencing.

Curly and Frank sat cross-legged on the floor, one on each side of the house, below window level. Thus, not considering the partition before Klein, they made a rude square a trifle elongated at the bank president's position.

The rear door was somewhat to one side of the center, allowing greater cage room for the workers of the establishment. Should

the expected looters enter by the front door and the three watchers crowd them back along the corridor toward the rear, they would be cornered before they could open the way to the alley. Should they come in the rear way, they would have to walk forward for a distance before reaching the door opening into the grilled compartment wherein stood the safe. If this method were tried they would face three men before them and the three men from the alley, who would close their exit behind them. Frank and Curly were watching for attempts on the windows.

Silence fell, and the four men settled themselves according to their own fancy and own particular mental attitudes for a long vigil.

Until midnight the hilarious uproar from the various saloons in the vicinity continued unabated, and the noise of many riders and walkers flowing past the bank in an endless stream came clearly to their ears.

"I think we can smoke uh li'l," announced Frank in a loud whisper. "They won't be nothin' doin' for uh coupla hours yet anyway."

"Silence," rasped the judge's voice. "Ye don't know who might be around listenin'.

"An' don't ye smoke. Th' —— would smell it on comin' in out o' th' fresh air."

Gradually the sounds from without died away. They made no further comments and no noise beyond a cautious shifting from a tiring position now and then.

It must have been three o'clock, and their patience was worn thin, when a faint tinkle was heard at the back door. Some one was fitting a key into the lock. There was a soft clicking, and the tumblers turned smoothly.

The key fitted the door. Nothing remained to withhold the intruders save the bar across the entrance.

The straining listeners heard the slithering sound of metal against the metal. At length there came the sliding of wood as the bar across the door was being lifted from its iron brackets.

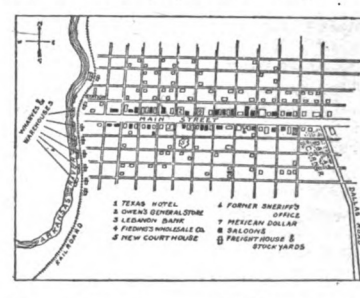
"The smart ——!" thought President Klein to himself. "There is certainly a smart and cunning mind behind this. A perfect-fitting skeleton key; and now they're raising the bar with a strip of metal thrust in between the door and the casing. That's no ordinary ruffian's trick. No wonder they can't catch Nightbird."

There was no further sound; but a draft of fresh air was felt by the waiting men, and they could visualize a form sliding in through the lower aperture of the partly opened door and removing the bar completely.

The judge waited five paralyzing minutes. He gradually discerned three figures as they slowly approached the door leading into the grilled apartment.

"Now!" he cried sharply and leveled his gun upon the hazily outlined figures. "Stick 'em up, ye imps o' Satan!"

The lights flared up, the mantles almost falling from their positions, so violently had the worthy president obeyed his



instructions. The two DZX men sprang several steps forward, their guns at the ready.

The three new arrivals sprang apart with curses of consternation, disobeying the judge's admonition by firing immediately. The rearmost man, a slender, masked figure in a black riding-cloak, whirled swiftly and sprang for the unlocked door. The shotgun of the judge roared, and a heavy charge of buckshot ruined the oaken finish of the barrier as it slammed shut behind the fleeing raider.

Almost instantly there sounded answering shots from the alley and from the front of the building. There was a thudding of many feet, the clattering of hoofs and mingled shouts and cries. Then came the sound of horses in rapid gallop.

"Bungled!" announced Frank disgustedly at the sound, looking down at the man who had not shot at him quick enough.

Curly cursed neatly and held his left arm tightly. One of the bandits had shot

more true. Unfortunately, however, this man had stood somewhat in the line of the judge's charge of buckshot, and he also was down.

The rear door was flung open, and two men ran into the building. President Klein managed to overcome his abhorrence of flying lead and stuck his head cautiously out through the teller's cage.

"—— bills! Wot's wrong?" bellowed the judge. "Where's th' cavalier o' th' trailin' nightshirt?"

"—— it, he got away," howled one of the wild-eyed newcomers. "He's as quick as uh fox. Ted an' Jawn are chasin' him. Yuh see, he run out before we was quite up to th' door. He fell at our first shots, an' we run up to him. He jumped right out from under our hands an' run across th' alley towards th' court-house. All we got was his ridin'-cloak."

Words actually failed the judge. He almost choked with disappointed rage.

"Le's see th' cloak," said Frank quickly, shoving his gun back into its holster.

He and Curly examined the article. Slowly their eyes met above the garment. It looked very familiar. In fact, they had thought it familiar as they glimpsed it about the fleeting form of the man who had escaped.

"Well?" growled Ryan.

"Er—it looked kinda like Sing Li's ol' operee-cloak," stated Frank. "That is, it did at first. But I see it ain't now."

"Ye're a —— liar," contradicted Ryan belligerently. "It don't look remotely like yer yeller opera queen's cloak; besides which, Sing Li's cloak ain't any longer in use since Carter messed it up. So talk. Where'd ye see that cloak before?"

"Judge, this here bird yuh perforated is still existin'," Curly broke in. "Mebbe he can tell us somethin'. They's somebody beatin' on th' front doors, an' my arm is bleedin' to beat ——."

"—— ye for—" began Ryan; then he nodded. "I guess we've lost Nightbird himself. Sure an' I can readily see why he always superintends a job to keep it from bein' bungled," he snorted. "Yes, ye better let 'em in, Mr. Klein. It'll be our boys too. Curly, git th' —— outa here an' hunt up Doc Sawyer. Bring him back wid ye too to patch up this varmint. How's th' other one, Frank? Dead? Huumm!"

A MINGLED gathering of citizens, gamblers and members of the posse poured into the long room. They were brimming over with questions and demands, and President Klein had to tell the story of the attempted robbery again and again. Conspicuous among the crowd were Sheriff Carruthers in his shirt sleeves and Jackson the gambler, hatless and with a green eye-shade in one hand.

"We nailed one uh them out here in front, jedge," called a man with a rifle. "Th' rest got away an' took th' extra hosses."

"What's goin' on here?" thundered Carruthers heavily, catching a half-Nelson on his beard and shoving his authoritative way forward.

Judge Ryan seemed to gain two inches in height as he glared down on the slightly shorter sheriff.

"Nivir ye mind, laddie b'y. Sure an' th' auld judge himself is runnin' this shebang. Ye can see thot we've nipped a bank-robbery in th' blossom. Now corral these inquisitive mavericks an' git 'em outa here."

"Kee-rect," agreed the sheriff more mildly, glancing at the DZX puncher out of the corner of his eye. "Shall I handcuff him, jedge?" and he nodded toward Frank.

Judge Ryan made such an impatient motion that Carruthers fell back precipitately. His eyes fell upon the riding-cloak the judge held, and he started slightly.

"Look familiar to *yuh* too, mister?" drawled Frank softly.

"They say Nightbird wears one," Carruthers growled in response. "D'ye git him? Where is he?"

"What?" cried out Jackson quickly from where he stood. "Did you get McQuirey? So he was Nightbird, eh?"

Although the gambler's query concerned a man for whom he had no particular love, still it irritated Frank to hear Jackson implicate the missing cow-puncher by publicly coupling his name with that of Nightbird. And that the gambler was wrong he had more than a faint suspicion. In fact Frank had a fairly clear idea as to the identity of Nightbird.

"We didn't git him," snapped Judge Ryan irritably. "Now git out."

As the gathering crowd reluctantly departed Frank bent over the outlaw who had stopped several of the judge's slugs. The man's eyelids fluttered weakly.

One of the men who had guarded the alley rolled up the cloak in question and placed it under the wounded man's head. The bank president himself brought a glass of water.

The DZX puncher made a perfunctory examination. Apparently the fellow suffered most severely from a creased mark on the side of his head. His other wounds appeared to be trifling flesh wounds.

The man was a stranger to every one present—a sandy-haired individual with a stubble of tow-colored hair on his ugly face. He looked more like a disgraceful, disreputable tramp cow-puncher than a bad-man.

After a glance into the fellow's visage Frank winked broadly at the men about him and knelt beside the stricken raider. Taking the proffered glass of water, he held it to the outlaw's lips. The water revived the bandit, and he opened his eyes.

"Quick!" Frank said tersely to one of the two men leaning over the head of the fallen man. "Slap th' bandage to that terrible hole in his head before he moves, George."

George, being fairly quick of wit, caught up a fold of the cloak and jammed it quickly against the side of the outlaw's head. The man raised his hand instinctively but Frank quickly caught it and pulled it down.

"Lay still," he commanded in a serious voice. "Yuh mustn't exert yoreself. Yuh're sinkin' fast. Is they anything yuh want to confess to th' judge here 'fore yuh cross th' line? This here is Judge Ryan."

A hopeless expression entered the fellow's face.

"I—I'm not a-goin' tuh—tuh die, be I?" he whispered helplessly.

"I'm afraid yuh are—some day if yuh don't hang first," murmured Frank softly, as if in awe at the near presence of the grim reaper. "We all gotta go, yuh know," he added sympathetically.

"Sure an' 'tis a shame, me b'y," added the red-faced judge as he kneeled beside the victim, drawing a pencil and an old envelop from his pocket. "Come, tell me anything ye might be wantin' to say before yer strength leaves ye. Was that Nightbird here wid ye?"

The wretched fellow gulped miserably.

"Yessir," he whispered.

"An' what's his real name?"

"I dunno. I ain't never heard. I ain't never even seen him 'thout his mask. None uh us does. I don't wanna die. Don't let me die. My Gawd, I ain't fit to die! Help! Help!"

"There, there," soothed Frank gently, all but overcome by the touching scene. "They ain't no use hollerin' for help. We'll do our best for yuh. We done sent for th' doctor. Go on an' tell th' judge some more."

"Yuh already sent for th' doctor? Then I ain't gonna die? I ain't gonna die! I don't know nothin'."

"Th' doctor ain't here yet," rejoined Frank promptly and meaningly. "Hold th' bandage tighter, George. My knees is gettin' all wet with blood."

This time he had to exert some strength to hold down the hands of the panic-stricken man.

"Ye say ye've never seen him?" pursued the judge gently.

"Oh my Gawd!" moaned the victim. "Nawsir. He don't never show up till night, an' then he always wears his mask an' cloak. I don't wanna——"

"Where does he meet ye?" interrupted Ryan calmly.

"He tells us every time where he'll meet us next time. He's always along when we makes uh raid."

"Don't ye have no special meetin'-place?"

"If anything happens so's we don't meet or somethin' we hang out round MacGregor Gap."

"Uumm. MacGregor Gap. Th' dear lad from Scotland. We're gittin' on. An' ye have no idea a-tall, a-tall, who Nightbird is?"

"Some uh us thinks he might be one uh his own lieutenants; but we dunno nothin' 'bout him fer sure, an' it ain't healthy to inquire."

"What lieutenant? Ye haven't named any lieutenant yet. D'ye know which one?"

"We kinda suspects uh Mex who j'ined us a coupla weeks ago."

"Ah!" breathed Frank to himself.

"How many are there in yer congenial band?" continued the judge boringly.

"I dunno. It's growin' ev'ry day. T'night's th' fust time Nightbird ever miscalculated too."

"Sure an' misfortunes come to us all. So MacGregor Gap is yer lodge-room. Don't ye have a regular headquarters for th' gang, a central stronghold?"

"They's uh place in th' mountains over toward——"

"Here's th' doctor," bawled Carruthers loudly, striding in, immediately followed by the rabble.

"Over towards where?" bored the judge, ignoring the reappearance of the sheriff.

But the wounded man's ear, attuned for the welcome footfall of a medical savior, heard Carruther's words above the noise of the crowd.

"Lemme have th' doctor," he shouted desperately. "Don't lemme die. Lemme see th' doctor fust off. Quick!"

"—— bills an' sivin ——," growled Ryan, shooting an angry glance at the sheriff. "Doc, patch up this buck's scalp wid some stickin'-plaster. Carruthers, ye're so —— anxious to work, put handcuffs on this specimen an' take him to jail, —— yer skin."

George dropped the edge of the cloak, and the wounded man reached quickly toward his injured head. When he felt the bullet-crease, sore and painful but only a bullet-crease, he struggled to his feet furiously, mouthing foul curses upon his tricksters.

Fairly roaring with laughter, Frank promptly squelched the other's anger by neatly tripping him. Carruthers slowly snapped a pair of handcuffs about the struggling man's wrists, almost viciously it seemed to the watching Curly.

CHAPTER XIII

MCQUIREY'S MISSING BONDSMAN

MR. CLARENCE HIGGS, deputy sheriff, County of Richelieu, had occasional flashes of what he was pleased to call "detectional inspiration." Not inferring that Mr. Higgs suffered very violently with that too prevalent disease known as inflated ego; but Mr. Higgs had undoubtedly heard of that bewhiskered axiom regarding the blowing of one's own trumpet.

Hence since his immediate superior emphatically demanded the apprehension and further cross-examination of the mysterious bondsman for one Walter McQuirey, tramp cow-puncher, and recently departed for parts unknown, Mr. Higgs felt it behooved him to redouble his activities and thereby locate the elusive gentleman of the ready cash. It stood to reason, to everything about which Mr. Higgs had ever heard, that no man would put up that much money on anything without an excellent reason.

Hence if McQuirey were worth ten thousand dollars he must be Nightbird himself; and therefore the bondsman whose initials were W. M. was a confederate. The murder charge was cleared now—therefore why didn't the bondsman come to demand his money? But supposing the bondsman were Nightbird himself?

This striking possibility brought Mr. Higgs out of his chair. Why—why, if true, and he could lay his duly deputized hands upon him, especially after Judge Ryan and his posse had let the man get away the other night, it would mean a distinct ostrich plume in the head-covering of Mr. Higgs and roseate visions of the sheriff's office itself next term—providing he didn't let Sheriff Carruthers steal his thunder. And Mr. Higgs would be entirely too astute for that. In short, if Mr. Win Martin, bondsman *de luxe*, were still visible to the naked eye in daylight and within fifty miles of Lebanon, Mr. Higgs proposed to find him.

As to the *modus operandi*, that should be simple enough to a man of Clarence Higgs' cleverness. He marshaled and arrayed the points in his favor before him. Mr. Bondsman had a face that reminded Mr. Higgs of a lean and grim turkey buzzard, a face that had forcibly impressed Mr. Higgs at the time. In private, Mr. Higgs' personal opinion was that Mr. Win Martin would not have carried off even the booby prize at a beauty show.

Now then, he knew the man by sight and could recognize him, whereas Sheriff Carruthers didn't know for whom he was looking as he had failed to see the bondsman. As Martin was a stranger to Lebanon, as the murder charge was cleared and as he would not credit Mr. Higgs with such clever analysis as to identify him with Nightbird, he would still be running around loose on the prairie. Therefore there remained but one thing to do—go find the man.

Just how long Deputy Sheriff Higgs' theory would have held water or just how far his mental processes would have allowed him to expand and ramify his deductions without destroying his hypothesis is unknown and of not the slightest interest. Let it suffice that with the new zeal which fired him he found his man the very first thing and proudly returned to Lebanon,

his charge riding peacefully along at his side.

There was but one insect in Mr. Higgs' ointment of bliss. The stranger was too willing and too docile. There was something rotten, and one didn't have to go as far as Denmark to understand it; Nova Scotia was far enough.

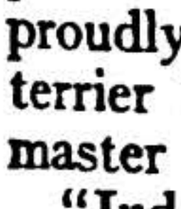
In brief, the stranger could not be Nightbird himself. He looked too gawky, too honest. At best he could be only a confederate. Nevertheless he was the man Sheriff Carruthers had been trying to lay his hands on.

Mr. Higgs had employed the simple expedient of describing his man to all he met and at every little house and shack over the sparsely settled country surrounding Lebanon, figuring that the unknown must live, exist or hide himself somewhere. Right or wrong in his supposition, his enthusiasm had not had sufficient time to die down before he espied the wanted man himself pitching hay in Blaine's farmyard just four miles south of town.

When one's theory is substantiated, regardless of how, why or where, a slight rise in the stock of self-esteem is permissible and pardonable. Thus Mr. Higgs marched proudly into Judge Ryan's office and like a terrier laying a succulent bone before his master presented his companion.

"Judge Ryan, this here is Mr. Win Martin, our missin' bondsman. He works for Blaine, an' *I* found him. He didn't know we was huntin' for him or he would of come in before. Yuh remember him? Well, while yuh talk I'll run down an' git th' sheriff."

Which effective little arrangement with Judge Ryan as a witness was Mr. Higgs' method of preventing Mr. Carruthers from making any personal claims as to the discovery of the bondsman, should anything develop from this meeting.



WHEN the sheriff entered he looked the gaunt stranger over curiously, puzzledly.

"So this is th' mysterious bondsman, eh? Where'd yuh come from, mister? Where yuh been all this time?"

The insulting tone of the sheriff's voice fairly made Martin's muscles harden. He disliked the officer immediately.

"I didn't know ye was a-lookin' for me," he stated quietly. "I been workin' for Mr. Blaine."

"Humph!" sneered Carruthers. "How long yuh been uh member uh Nightbird's gang, Martin?"

The Arkansan stiffened.

"What d'yuh mean?" he demanded.

"I'm speakin' 'bout McQuirey."

"Well, what about him?"

"Well," ruminated the sheriff, his fingers gathering in his beard like a regular tucker on a sewing-machine, "didja know that yore man has run off an' that yore ten thousand dollars is forfeited?"

"I heerd somethin' 'bout that," drawled Martin. "But how d'yuh figger th' money is forfeited? He wasn't guilty uh th' murder, 'cordin' to this feller Carter's confession."

"Sure an' that's true," endorsed Judge Ryan. "Carter's confession cleared th' atmosphere all around."

"But he's suspected o' bein' Nightbird now," put in Carruthers quickly, almost viciously it seemed to Martin. "He's suspected o' robbery an' cattle-rustling, an' there's one death to his credit besides lots uh shootin's."

Martin's eyes twinkled.

"That's uh diff'rent case," he objected.

"Mebbeso," snapped the sheriff before Judge Ryan could speak; "but we got yore money, an' we're gonna keep it unless yuh can produce McQuirey."

"How can I produce somebody I don't know nothin' 'bout?"

"Don't know nothin' 'bout?" put in Higgs dazedly. "An' yuh put up ten thousand dollars on uh man yuh didn't know nothin' 'bout?"

"Sure did. An' ye can keep th' money. 'Tain't worryin' me none. It ain't mine," he finished calmly.

This was the last straw for Mr. Higgs. He could no longer keep his jaws together, and his mouth hung open.

"What?"

The exclamation came from Ryan and Carruthers.

" 'Sfact."

Martin was enjoying the consternation.

"Sure an' we've had enough o' this ping-ponging," decided Ryan. "Suppose ye be tellin' us th' entire story, Mr. Martin?"

"Be this uh legal 'xamination?" demanded the mountaineer.

"Ye may safely consider it wan," nodded the judge.

"All right, then. I was a-sittin' in the

door o' Blaine's barn when I heard uh noise an' looked up. I saw uh masked man in uh black ridin'-cloak standin' jes' as close to me as we-uns is now. 'Fore I could faint or reach for uh pitchfork he spoke.

"'D'ye want to earn five hundred dollars?' he says."

"When was this?" demanded Ryan quickly.

"Th' twentieth uh last month."

"What time?"

" 'Bout noon, I reckon."

"Go on," commanded Ryan while Carruthers succeeded in getting a death grip on his whiskers.

Higgs, somewhat recovered from his shock, was enjoying the dramatic turn of the situation, and he rolled a cigaret with an air which he strove with all his might to make nonchalant.

"They was only one answer," continued Martin laconically. "I said, 'Yes.' At that he pulled uh big wad uh bills outa his pocket an' counted off ten thousand an' five hundred dollars.

" 'Go to Lebanon right now,' he says, 'an' put up ten thousand as bond for uh man named McQuirey who is now bein' held in jail. Then come straight back without doin' no talkin' to no one an' th' five hundred is yores to keep.'

"I couldn't see nothin' criminal in that. So I done it. That's all."

"Can—can yuh describe th' m-masked man?" stuttered Carruthers uncertainly.

"Waal," drawled Martin meditatively, "he was 'bout fair to middlin' in stature an' slim an' quick."

"Did he have—did he have uh mustache or any kind uh distinguishin' marks?" pursued the sheriff. "Yuh know we ain't never been able to git uh good description uh th' man."

"I dunno," Martin replied slowly. "He had uh black mask all over his face, I done told yuh."

The sheriff sank weakly into a chair and clutched his beard fiercely with both hands. The worthy official seemed to be acutely bewildered. Higgs eyed his superior curiously.

"I'm thinkin' this story kinda tears —— outa th' theory o' McQuirey bein' Nightbird," rumbled the judge thoughtfully.

"If this man ain't lyin'," added Carruthers uglily.

Martin flushed, and he swung quickly toward the seated man.

"Sheriff or no sheriff, yuh eat them words or——"

"He meant if th' party who called on yuh wasn't lyin'," threw in Higgs quickly at this juncture. "He might of been substitutin' as Nightbird till McQuirey got out o' jail; that is, if McQuirey is Nightbird."

"Sure an' that's possible," said Ryan approvingly. "Th' whole thing's a —— muddle. Did any wán else see th' masked man, Mr. Martin?"

"Nope. An' I didn't git to see him leave. He made me go on to town first. They warn't no disturbance when I got back, an' nobody didn't ask me no questions, so I kept still like he said to."

"How long ye been workin' for Blaine? When ye come in ye said somethin' about general delivery in Lebanon for yer mail."

"I'd been thar 'bout three days 'fore th' masked man come up to me in th' barn door. I didn't know an' don't know how long I'll stay. That's why I said general delivery at Lebanon."

"Where'd ye come from?"

"West o' here. Over beyond th' Canadian. Yuh can find folks all along over there what knows me."

There was a pregnant silence. The Arkansan waited patiently. Finally—

"Be they anything else?" he queried.

"Do yuh know anything else?" fiercely demanded Carruthers, looking up.

Martin studied the sheriff for a long breath. He restrained his temper with an effort.

"Nope," he stated at length. "Nothin' that yuh'd understand. Leastways 'bout this McQuirey - bond - Nightbird - cattle - stealin'-murder-Carter business," he concluded subtly, enumerating the points carefully that seemed to bewilder the officer.

"All right. Git out!" growled Carruthers irritably.

The Arkansan's brow darkened and he clenched his fist.

"Nivir mind, Martin, me lad," Ryan soothed him quickly. "Sure an' th' sheriff has lots on his mind, y'know. Don't be takin' offense at th' distracted b'y. Can we be findin' ye at Blaine's place whenever we might be wantin' ye?"

The mountaineer relaxed.

"For th' present, judge," he said respectfully. "Leastways till I gits th' urge to move on."

CHAPTER XIV

THE OUTRAGE

SING LI, Frank and Curly were at once the admiration and envy of the DZX outfit.

"Lookit th' three pesky misquitoes," derided the disgruntled foreman over the supper-table. "All swelled up 'bout their rantin' round an' Curly nursin' uh scratch on his forearm. Aw, ——! An' I went to town an' couldn't even stir up no excitement a-tall, no place."

Which goes to show how little one knows of the results of one's little acts.

"Shucks, Jim!" grinned Frank cheerfully, gulping hastily to clear his vocal decks for action. "Yuh ain't got no kick comin'. Yuh're such uh bad man they all shy off from yuh. Yuh're so tough we could make buckskin boot-laces outa yore whiskers."

"There yuh are," sagely endorsed Curly with an I-told-you-so air. "See."

"Aw, shut up," growled Harrison disgustedly.

"Now that you mention it, you haven't the biggest kick comin', Jim," said young Bill quietly. "Look at me. I spent a night in jail, an' I haven't anything to show for it. Sing Li goes hikin' off to town an' takes charge of my case for me. He mixed with th' murderer, for which I'm duly thankful, but I oughta had some pleasure."

"Yuh two growlers ud kick if yuh was bein' hung," jeered Curly unsympathetically. "C'mon over to th' bunk-house. My arm ain't so nursed I can't deal a wicked hand uh poker."

"I don't want you boys so dissatisfied," remarked Montague, senior. "One would think that blood and thunder is your meat and drink. Didn't you discover three stray calves that had blackleg in the DZX herd and which we know had been maliciously introduced to infect our stock? Haven't we been on tiptoes ever since, especially as cattle-running has become so popular? If we go off adventuring and allow rustlers to drive off our stock there won't be a job to come back to."

"Yeah," remarked the foreman in mock sarcasm. "Stick yore oar in now an' th' circle is complete. Watchin' is all we been doin'. Even *yuh* had to go have some private fun an' git shot at."

"I figure we will all have lots of fun before this business is cleared up," returned the rancher grimly. "And by the way, if I remember correctly you were shot at yourself last Summer. However, since you boys all want fun, since you crave fun, since you are frantic to do something, we'll start night-herding in dead earnest tonight on the DZX. In place of two or three night riders we'll divide into regular shifts."

A chorus of groans went up from around the table.

"There, now see what yuh bellyachers done, jawin' thataway," bitterly complained "Sleepy" Stearns, a puncher who heartily enjoyed his nightly arrangement with Morpheus.

"Let's see, there are thirty-two of us not counting Sing Li, able-bodied and healthy," continued Montague, unheeding the various protests. "We start branding next week if nothing happens, and we start shipping our Fall market steers right away. However, I guess we can manage to makeshift with sixteen day hands for a spell. That leaves sixteen of us for night duty. As it isn't the most pleasant duty in the world we can take it week and week about. Now——"

"I suggests Sleepy Stearns for foreman uh th' first night shift," shouted a round-faced little puncher, arising and grinning maliciously at the sleep-loving cowboy across the table.

He promptly received a response in the form of a squat, brown molasses jug hurled unerringly at the pit of his stomach.

"Here! Here!" called Harrison peremptorily. "This ain't no girls' boardin' school. Lay offa th' sweet li'l souvenirs."

The door of the chuck-house was flung violently open, and a hatless, gaunt stranger staggered rather than ran in. He glared wildly around until his eyes fell upon the elder Montague. A look flashed between them, and then the newcomer slowly drew himself together.

"Men, Mr. Montague, all uh yuh, listen. Blaine's place has been raided, an' Blaine is shot. Th' rustlers fired th' place an' took Blaine's gal. Me an' Hercules come for help."

An uproar resulted. Chairs were overturned as excited punchers leaped to their feet. His face gone pale, young Bill sprang to the speaker's side and grasped his shoulders tightly.

"Say that again," he demanded crisply. "Speak, Martin; speak!"

Harrison and the elder Montague, as one, grabbed heavy dishes and pounded on the table for order and silence.

"About a hour ago while we was sittin' at supper th' farm house was surrounded an' five or six men led by uh slim feller in uh ridin'-cloak an' uh black mask come crowdin' into th' room. They grabbed Miss Patty up right out uh her chair.

"We was completely surprized an' didn't have no chance. Blaine resisted anyhow. Th' leader shot him down 'fore he could more'n half git up.

"They locked me an' th' other two hands in th' house an' left in uh bunch. We got out an' saw 'em headin' for th' Canadian. Then we found th' devils had fired th' outhouses. While th' two men started to save th' stock I jumped on Hercules an' hit it straight for here," stated Martin, pausing for breath.

"Nightbird!" chorused the punchers.

"Did he kill Blaine?" asked the elder Montague tersely.

"He warn't dead when I left. I jes' took time to put him in bed."

"Let's go, boys!" cried young Bill sharply. "You coming, dad?"

"You know it, Bill. But somebody must remain here. Jim, will you see that——"

"Not me. Not me," began denying each and every puncher vehemently.

"Silence, you young fools!" roared the rancher, surprizing them into silence by his unwonted tone and volume of voice. "You'll all stay here but five or six of you, and while you wait you can overhaul your guns and saddlery. Most of us will probably be in the saddle before morning. Jim, you will see that these instructions are carried out.

"Bill, Sleepy, Frank, Harry, Pete and Jerry! You boys saddle up and we'll go back with Martin here. Frank, you and Harry will ride on to Lebanon without stopping, get the doctor and notify Judge Ryan and the sheriff. The remainder of you wait for your orders here and see that you are ready to ride."

"Git yore slickers out, everybody," added Martin. "She's drizzlin' now, an' she's gonna rain down pitchforks an' nigger babies 'fore mornin'."

"—— broke loose—uh storm comin' up—an' me with uh bum arm," soliloquized Curly. "Out across th' open country—in th' rain. They ain't gonna be no trail to follow."

"Here's some real action at last," grumbled one of the punchers left behind. "But Bill slips in an' grabs it on account uh his girl. Ain't it —— to be only uh pore li'l cow-puncher?"

"That'll do for you," silenced the foreman. "There'll be more action than Li'l Bill an' Big Bill both can handle. Get busy."

MIDNIGHT found a big gathering of grim and armed men at the Blaine farm. They looked weird and fantastic in the red glare of the dying fire of what had once been a well-filled barn, a corn-crib and several sheds. Blaine was still unconscious, but Dr. Sawyer had stopped the bleeding and thought there was a chance for the fruit-grower, the bullet having missed his heart very neatly.

Judge Ryan, the two Montagues, Perth, Rankins and Spaulding were holding a conference in the parlor, the latter three being the closest ranchers. The sheriff had come out with the judge and doctor, and he was busily deputizing all of the cattlemen and punchers who were intending to ride after the raiders.

The storm was still gathering. It was inky black, and ugly mutterings and sullen flashes all around the horizon forewarned of the fury of the elements when the rain did come.

"They'll make for the free ferry on the Canadian River if they are really riding west," said Montague. "Unfortunately the judge was unable to learn from the captured bandit just where the stronghold is. This may be a false lead. Nightbird is as cunning as Satan himself.

"We can't trail them in this kind of darkness and rain, so I suggest that we send out, not one but two or three posses, each with a capable leader. For instance, suppose we send a posse straight to Free Ferry to overtake or intercept them there in the early morning? The rest of us can form smaller posses and ride out from here in all directions. Whoever runs across the marauders or their trail, can send back a rider and we can all follow."

"And lynch 'em on the spot," gritted Perth, a big, iron-gray appearing man. "When they start on our women I'm for not even givin' 'em a trial."

"They killed one uh yore punchers too, didn't they?" said Rankins. "I guess we've all lost steers. All right, I'm with you. We'll exterminate 'em."

"Are yuh takin' uh vote on their disposal?" drawled Spaulding. "If so, let's wait till we catch 'em."

"Has any one a better plan?" asked Montague.

The men slowly shook their heads. Frank Henson strolled in and took his station near young Bill. Learning in a few crisp sentences from the young rancher what was being done, he whispered earnestly into Bill's ear. The young man nodded slowly.

Another form stepped through the half-opened door. Montague looked up quickly. He recognized Martin.

"Close the door please, Martin."

He spoke with a slight smile.

"We don't need any further aid in arranging our campaign."

As the Arkansan turned to comply, the elder Montague spoke to his son.

"All right, Bill. I guess you have first choice of territory and direction as you are the most vitally concerned. Which posse do you want to head?"

"I'll take the country south of here along Dallas Road," he said.

"Very well," agreed Montague, eying the two young men closely. "Now, who wants to make Free Ferry? Speak up, men. Is there any choice here or upon any direction?"

"I'll be goin' that way," put in Martin, his quiet voice ominous in its calmness.

Montague turned to the mountaineer, a friendly beam in his eye.

"No, old man," he said kindly. "Much as you want to go, you'll do far more good by staying here and assuming charge of Blaine's property. Some one has to watch things, you know."

Martin nodded reluctantly.

"How is Mr. Blaine?" asked young Bill anxiously.

"Jes' th' same. No change," stated Martin.

"Well, I'll take my gang uh punchers an' make for Free Ferry," stated Perth. "It's over beyond my stretch of land anyhow."

"Good," declared Montague. "That's a good idea all the way around. Suppose you patrol your land and beyond that way also, Spaulding. And you, Rankins. That will pretty well cover the country west of here and keep each man near his own stock.

"I will ride north with some of the men from here. With Bill going south, that cuts the raiders off from the east completely. Bill, you and Frank can pick up half the boys as you go by the ranch. Leave Jim there with the other half. Sleepy and the others here now can ride with me."

"An' if nothin' develops by sunset tomorrow ye will meet at th' DZX for consultation," concluded Judge Ryan, tying up the loose end in the hasty arrangements.

"Let's ride, Frank," said young Bill briefly.

And they set an example which quickly cleared the grounds of restless, angry men.

On their way back to the ranch Frank repeated the story of his and Curly's adventure at MacGregor Gap. After speaking of the opportune arrival of the Mexican, he then reluctantly voiced his suspicion of the man's identity.

"Surely it can't be he," said Bill slowly. "A wanton murderer like Nightbird wouldn't lift his finger to save two cowpunchers from a quarrel, do you think?"

"Nope. I been worryin' 'bout that. But, mebbe, Bill, he'd of rather helped two li'l cowboys git away than have th' DZX come bustin' down to investigate MacGregor Gap."

"Maybe so. Don't count too strongly on your theory though. Remember, Nightbird never appears among his men in daytime."

"As Nightbird," added Frank. "Why, even his men suspect that he an' th' Mex are th' same."

Young Montague shrugged.

"I wonder if Martin has ever been to MacGregor Gap," he said.

"Martin? Why Martin?" puzzled the puncher.

"They might be somebody there could tell him something."

"What d'yuh mean?"

"Oh, some private business of Martin's. I just thought the gap might be a likely place," replied Bill. "Listen to that thunder."

At the ranch they nearly caused an exodus with their news, an exodus which would have been complete despite Montague's instructions had not Harrison quickly named ten men, including himself and Curly, to remain behind and dared them to make for the corrals.

Just after the others had ridden off the storm broke in all its expected fury, and the disappointed men consoled themselves with the meager satisfaction that they were not facing the wind-driven rain and that, due to the other activities of Nightbird, they wouldn't have to venture out on the DZX range tonight.

The night passed, also the next morning, and they heard nothing from the various posses and nothing from the Blaine farm. It was late in the afternoon when they rode out over the muddy range to round up the herds, which had wandered far back into the draws and coulées for shelter against the weather, that they made a startling discovery. *More than three thousand head of choicest steers had disappeared during the night, and the terrific rain had washed out all traces of possible trails!*

They could have gone east across the State line, north toward the Arkansas or south toward the Red River. It was barely possible that they could have been driven west toward the Canadian River, right between the watchful posses, so brazen and colossal was the steal.

A mind as keen as a whip had planned the entire raid. Blaine's daughter had been abducted and his buildings fired to draw the DZX punchers and all other cattlemen westward. Then, under cover of the rain, the main band of Nightbird had cut out the best steers of Montague's herd while the cow-punchers were chasing the decoying vandals westward.

Ten men could do nothing. Besides, there was the vast remainder of the herd to guard and care for. Chagrined and cursing heartily, Harrison directed the work of the remaining punchers. Curly set out northward in search of Montague.

CHAPTER XV

COWMEN RIDE

THE lamps were lighted and turned high in the great room that Montague used for his living-quarters and his office. More than twenty-four hours had elapsed since the wanton and ruthless raid on the Blaine homestead. All of the minor posses had returned empty-handed and were gathered on the DZX. Perth, upon whom was pinned the last fading hope, had not returned, nor had he been heard from.

The big room was almost crowded with serious-faced men, ranchers, citizens, homesteaders, punchers, prospectors, many of them well-known in the annals of the Southwest. The news of the outrage had spread as rapidly as a prairie fire, and instead of five range-holders at this prearranged meeting there were fifty. Numerous punchers thronged about the place, invaded the corrals, demolished the provisions and nearly drove the flying Sing Li frantic by their frenzied demands for more food.

Montague, senior, sat with Judge Ryan and Sheriff Carruthers at his desk and faced a circle of hard-eyed cattlemen.

"Boys," he said. "I'm mighty glad to see you are here tonight. On the surface it looks like a game to recover Blaine's daughter and my cattle only. I know that you are all with me, gun and saddle, for this alone, and I thank you.

"But in reality it is a showdown between this highly organized and growing gang of crooks and the cattlemen of this country. It is the decisive clash between the keen brain of this unknown but knowing Nightbird and ours. And that he is not asleep we have been having ample demonstration. Are we going to stamp out this evil now or wait until it outgrows us?"

"Now!" came the rumbling growl from half a hundred throats.

"I wrote to th' Cattlemen's Association a coupla months ago 'bout this here Nightbird an' his rustlin'," stated a man named Waymire, whose ranch lay somewhat north of Lebanon. "They come back with uh letter sayin' th' matter would be investigated in due course uh time. An' th' sheriff ain't showin' no results."

Carruthers cleared his throat and stood up.

"It's true I ain't caught Nightbird," he said. "But I been workin' hard, an' I been tryin' to git him; but I ain't had th' loyal support uh th' big men hereabouts. I've done th' best I could."

"Do you think you deserve loyal support?" demanded Montague earnestly. "You've been playing politics in Lebanon with a crooked bunch, if I must speak plainly, and I for one have not seen fit to offer you my aid. However, I have not hindered you in the least, and if you have anything to say now we'll listen."

"In uh matter like this, I do deserve support," declared Carruthers fiercely, passing over the rancher's comment on his politics.

"All right. I am ready to help you capture Nightbird," stated Montague. "The association is always slow in these matters, Waymire, so we must make the best of it at present. I have been watching this growing trouble for some time, and in a way I thought I was prepared for it; but this unexpected blow at Blaine was so devilish and so entirely unanticipated that Nightbird has drawn blood again and I have lost over three thousand steers at the same time. It was a fiendishly clever and well-timed attack, and even the very elements seemed in league against us.

"Most of us present have felt the touch of Nightbird's hand at one time or another. Perth lost a choice little herd a short time ago. What puzzles me is, what do they do with the cattle? And by the way have any of you heard from Perth? He's overdue now."

"Here's some one coming down th' hall now," stated a man near the door.

The newcomer proved to be Martin, the Arkansan. He entered the crowded room and made his way forward.

"Hello, Martin," greeted Montague. "How is Blaine? Any change?"

"He jes' come to uh li'l while ago, an' he's callin' for his gal," replied Martin. "Doc Sawyer says he thinks he'll pull through 'less he starts frettin' too much for his daughter."

"Have you heard from Perth?"

"Yep. I jes' got some sense into th' two hired hands an' Miss' Perth jes' come over to take charge. That's why I'm ready to ride. She said Perth an' his punchers jes' got back without no luck 'fore she left home. They'll be right over here as soon as they eat an' change hosses."

There arose a murmur of conversation as the cattlemen discussed matters generally. After a few moments the judge began speaking to everybody collectively.

"Sure an' th' identity o' this scalawag they call Nightbird is very puzzlin'," stated he. "Iverything points, so far as we can see, to wan o' two men; McQuirey, th' spalpeen who was first held for Myers' murder an' a certain Mexican smart who is ostentatiously a lieutenant o' Nightbird accordin' to th' testimony o' th' ruffian we captured in th' attempted bank-robbery in Lebanon.

"Th' sheriff seems to favor th' first idea. Personally I'm thinkin' it's th' second man we're after. Sure an' it might be another person from th' both o' them entirely. Can any wan offer any information here atall, atall? Now is th' time to talk."

He glared meaningly at Curly, who was leaning against the mantel. The puncher swallowed embarrassedly once or twice at the sudden attention and then cleared his throat. Every one turned expectantly, and Carruthers gained a good purchase on his beard to listen.

"Well, men, I guess mebbe they is somethin' I oughta say here, but I dunno. I ain't real sure uh nothin' yet, but here goes. Me an' Frank was out lookin' for McQuirey, an' we got as far south as MacGregor Gap. We had uh run-in with that bunch what roosts up there, an' before we knowed it we was in kinda deep. Jes' then uh Jim Dandy Mexican comes in jes' in time to save our earthly envelops. We takes him in pretty well, an' principal he wears uh black ridin'-cloak.

"Now I ain't makin' no mar-vee-lous deductions, but th' cloak George Taylor captured from Nightbird in Lebanon last week looked mighty familiar. I never heard o' this Mexican who calls hisself Pancho Diaz before, but he made uh toast to some one who didn't ride with 'em in daylight, an' he knowed th' country hereabouts an' th' people purty well to be uh stranger. It jes' looks kinda funny, that's all. An' then yuh all know what kind uh outfits is 'sposed to hang out down there. Well, they're there, all right."

A murmur arose as the men began to comment. Above the noise Montague spoke.

"But if Nightbird maintains his secrecy he would hardly show himself so plainly during the day. I hardly suspect a Mexican anyway."

"I dunno," ventured the sheriff. "To handle uh gang uh crooks yuh got to be with 'em more'n jes' nights or they'll git away from yuh. But it might not be th' Mexican either."

"Anyway the thing to do is to get him. Then we'll soon find out who he is," said Montague.

"Kee-rect," endorsed Carruthers approvingly, not forgetting to iron out all

possible kinks in his appendage. "Now then, which way shall we go? It'll all be guesswork at first. I figger they headed west, kinda south uh th' Canadian. That's why Perth must of missed 'em."

"Here's Perth now," said Spaulding. "What news, neighbor?"

"None," stated Perth heavily. "They didn't go that way."

While the newcomer greeted a number of the men present Montague took his map of the surrounding country out of one of the drawers in his desk and spread it out flat before the gaze of the nearest cattlemen.

"Here's a relief map of this country. Look at it. What do the rest of you men think about it?" he invited.

A veritable war consultation and campaign discussion took place, Carruthers doggedly holding to his original theory.

"For the love of God," implored young Bill, entering the room, "come to some decision, gentlemen! The DZX men and all of the others are ready to go. While you argue here time is flying, and nobody knows what might be happening. I can assure you that the rustlers did not pass through MacGregor Gap last night or this morning. We covered the country thoroughly."

Montague smiled sympathetically upon the tense face of his son. Harrison patted the young man gently on the shouler.

"This ain't idle sympathy, Bill," he said. "Remember they can't do any chariot-racin' with three thousand cattle. We'd lose time by goin' wrong now."

THERE was a slight commotion at the door, and Sing Li came quickly into the room leading a half-grown, raw-boned youth.

"Young man cally message flo Missee Montague," announced the Chinaman. "You catchee boss sittee at desk," he added to the boy, pointing at the owner of the DZX.

"Come forward, young man," said Montague, rising and eying the almost shrinking youth kindly. "You have something for me?"

"Yuh Mr. Montague hisself?" demanded the lad cautiously.

"In the very flesh," smiled the rancher winningly. "You say you have a message for me?"

"Yessir. Yuh see, me an' paw is homesteadin' down near Poplar Grove, an' us ain' botherin' nobody 'cause we-uns knows that settlers ain't welcome on range land. Us is got uh purty good well on our land, an' this morning' 'fore noon 'bout fifty men come 'long drivin' uh million cows. They stopped to git water, an' me an' Paw purty near pulled th' well dry waterin' 'em. We never coulda watered th' cows. After they went on, us went back to th' cabin for a spell, an' it was on th' table we-uns found two pieces uh paper helt down by uh big gold-piece. I cain't read, but paw he spellt out that we was to bring th' folded paper to Mr. Montague hisself uh th' DZX ranch right away. So here I be."

Having delivered himself of this lengthy speech the boy fished around in one of his pockets and finally brought to light a torn and hastily folded scrap of paper. Montague took it quickly and perused the writing upon one side.

"Nightbird!" shouted several. "They're headin' southeast."

"Boy," cried young Bill, "did you notice whether there was a lady with them?"

"I dunno," studied the youth. "I believe they was."

"Was there one fellow with uh mask over his face?" demanded Perth and Rankins together.

"Was there uh Mexican in th' bunch?" shouted Curly.

"How many men, did you say?" queried Harrison.

"I dunno. I dunno. I dunno," cried the bewildered lad. "They wouldn't let us go close to them at all. We drawed th' water, an' four men carried hit around to 'em all."

"Here, boys!" called Montague loudly. "Listen to this:

"Have girl and cattle safe. All O. K. but punishing beef badly in forced marching. Headed for central stronghold in Kimish on Arkansas side. Entrance through narrow valley between Pot and Kettle."

"Well!" snorted Judge Ryan impatiently. "Who in —— wrote it?"

"Uh traitor! Now we'll get 'em," shouted some one.

"There is no signature; but it is from the same unsigned hand that forewarned me of the intended bank-robbery. That it is reliable I'll take an oath."

"Ah!" exclaimed Carruthers thoughtfully.

"Where an' what in —— is th' Pot an' Kettle? Some wan's kitchen?" demanded Ryan.

"Th' Pot an' Kettle is two big stones what look like uh big ol' pot an' uh big kettle," said Martin, the Arkansan. "They is at th' end uh a narrow valley an' at th' mouth uh a short cañon. Yuh go through th' narrow valley, pass 'tween th' Pot an' Kettle, go through Devil's Hole—that's th' name uh th' cañon 'cause they's uh big hole in th' bare rock in one side—an' yuh come out in uh widenin' fertile valley. They's lots uh grazin'-ground after yuh once git there, an' they's uh way out to th' south."

The sheriff eyed Martin quickly.

"What d'yuh know about it?" he demanded.

"It's my country down there," Martin stated simply.

"I thought yuh come from west uh th' Canadian," sneered the sheriff.

"I did—recently. Th' Kimish Mountings is my home though."

"This is prob'bly uh ruse," objected Carruthers. "I don't want to make no mistake."

"We'll take a chance," decided Montague. "I rely on this note. If my judgment does not coincide with yours, suppose you organize a posse and take any steps you deem necessary."

"Yuh're plumb certain uh yore ground?" demanded Carruthers.

"Absolutely."

"Kee-rect then. Let's go."

"How far is Devil's Hole from here?" one of the cattlemen asked of Martin.

" 'Bout uh hundred to uh hundred an' fifty mile southeast uh here, I should judge," calculated the Arkansas mountaineer.

"Then the rustlers passed us in the night," said young Bill quickly. "They passed us 'way over to the east—they had never been west of Dallas Road at all. The part of the gang that—that went after Patty circled around before Spaulding could get his men going and cut eastward across Dallas Road to join the main bunch right behind my posse, which had already started south. The rain helped to blanket the whole move."

"That is exactly what took place," decided the elder Montague. "Everybody prepare for a long, grilling ride. Sing Li will supply us with grub to hold us forty-eight hours. Anything on the place is yours. We'll start in thirty minutes, all of us that can go. Now then, young man, what's your name?"

The messenger, who had been endeavoring to answer query after query put to him, turned to face the rancher. He looked up wordlessly. Montague waited patiently. Then—

"Yuh know Dan'l Thorston?"

"I believe not," frowned the ranchman slowly. "What about him?"

"He I daddy," enlightened the youth.

"Oh. All right, son. I'll not forget you. Now——"

"What shall we do when we git to th' State line?" asked Carruthers, who had been studying the map. "My authority stops there."

"If necessary we'll follow them to the Gulf of Mexico," retorted Montague grimly.

"*Whoopee-e-e-ee!*" shouted Curly, leading with a wild yell; and the rafters shook with the roar of lusty voices.

ONE hour later found the troop in the saddle and headed for the southeast corner of the DZX range land. Without figuring stops for rest, as neither pursued nor pursuers would waste any time, and allowing the rustlers a full twenty-four hours' start with the cattle, it would take forty-eight hours to overtake them. They based this estimate on the theory that they would be able to travel approximately twice as fast as the bandits, hampered with a great herd.

They rode hard despite the sheriff's continual insistence that they save their mounts. As the hours passed and they penetrated deep into the country, fording streams and crossing lands that even Harrison had never traversed before in a lifetime spent in the Southwest; as they entered the broken country unknown to them where even the plainsman's sense of direction deserted them, they saw the wisdom of having Martin the mountaineer to head the expedition. Thus dawn found them a number of miles closer to the mountains.

"Gosh! Th' goin' must of been great 'long here with uh bunch uh cattle," grunted Frank as his horse slid down the crumbling side of a torrent-washed gully.

They passed out of the rain belt and neared the homestead of the Thorstons and

the State line. They had picked up the wide cattle trail in the mud; but here they ran across the first traces of laboring cattle. A dead steer lay at the bottom of a little draw.

"——!" swore Harrison at the sight.

Montague merely compressed his lips and glanced at the other grim-jawed cattlemen riding near him. Bill rode with his eyes fastened on the rising hills before him. Martin glanced at the dead animal and carefully shifted his battered shotgun so that it rested more comfortably along the bony side of Hercules. He spat non-committally and glanced at the silent young rancher beside him.

"Looks like a herd o' elephants passed along here," remarked Judge Ryan.

"How about it now, sheriff?" queried Perth heavily of Carruthers. "D'yuh at last concede that th' rustlers drove them cows this way?"

"Kee-rect," the sheriff admitted promptly. "An' we're gainin' on th' scoundrels too."

It was shortly after noon that young Thorston dropped out and the posse crossed the line. Before night they were far up in the foot-hills. Dead steers became more and more numerous, and that the living animals were suffering was apparent from the condition of those they were finding along the way.

Being now in the wild and hilly country of the Kimish Mountains proper, they were forced to stop for the night. The only consolation they had was that they had gained on the rustlers considerably and that the bandits themselves would have to stop also or else abandon the cattle.

The grilling pace was beginning to tell on their mounts, and they were slow in hitting a fast gait the next morning. Aside from this they were none the worse off for their eighteen-hour ride of the day before. All but born in the saddle, the riders of yesterday were as tough as jerked venison.

The trail led through a natural rift in the hills, ever mounting, however, and Martin began to twist in his saddle and gaze lovingly from left to right. Even Hercules nickered slightly, a flare of his long-gone colthood blazing up. The two wanderers were home again.

"Yonder's Buck Knob," said Martin once, pointing to a round summit that was barely visible through the blue haze about the hills toward the east. "They's more deer round that mounting than yuh can find moonshiners in th' whole mountings."

"The going is getting worse, boys," remarked Montague later. "Have any of you been counting the fallen steers?"

"One hundred and seventeen so far," responded the DZX foreman immediately. "Oh, jes' wait till I get my hands on them beef-murderers."

They rode on in silence for a space, a silence of creaking leather and blowing horses as the cavalcade of some hundred-odd riders wound up into the hills.

Martin had just opened his mouth to say something when the silence of the mountains was shattered by the echo of two shots which were fired so close together as to seem almost as one.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHORTCUT

"BUSINESS is pickin' up with somebody," declared Perth, drawing rein and holding up his hand. "I guess we're closer to th' rustlers then we 'lowed, Montague."

"Have yuh figured out just how we're goin' to tackle 'em?" queried Rankins.

Montague shook his head and glanced toward Martin.

"Hadn't we better call a halt and send a scout or two ahead, Martin?"

"Not yit," the mountaineer returned. "Them shots was two mile up in th' mountings if they was uh yard. Th' echoin' fools yuh in th' hills. I'll tell yuh when to draw rein."

"Describe the country hereabouts a bit. Where are we now?"

"Ten miles ahead is th' Pot an' Kettle, but them is sure some mean miles."

"Then how an' why th' —— do th' spalpeens go there?" demanded Judge Ryan irritably.

He was feeling the terrific strain of the journey and making it heavily felt by the big mare he rode.

"Devil's Hole Cañon is deep an' narrow. They could hold it for uh long time, gradually fallin' back if they had to. They could hold it plenty long enough for 'em to rebrand an' rest up th' cattle in th' valley behind 'em. Then they can leave out th'

south end an' make for th' level lowlands uh south Arkansas."

"It seems to me that we are playing a losing game, according to your statement," said Montague. "That is, if they beat us to Devil's Hole."

"That's jes' it," responded the Arkansan. "If they beat us thar. I didn't see no use tellin' yuh that if they beat us thar we would lose an' lettin' yuh worry 'bout that all th' way too. But they won't beat us now. They's uh fork in the trail two or three mile along, an' right thar we can talk."

"Kee-rect," said Carruthers. "Now yuh're shoutin'."

The promise of quick action stimulated the entire posse, and they pushed forward rapidly. It was at the fork in the trail, where a slowly rising ridge divided the two roads that they also found the answer to the revolver-shots. As they rode up Martin was talking.

"Now then, yuh see they took th' right-hand road 'cause that one leads right down into th' narrow valley. Yuh see it's pointin' south now. It curves around towards east again an' runs even with this left-hand fork with th' mounting here between 'em. Th' ridge startin' here is Backbone Ridge, an' it gits steeper an' wilder as th' roads separate. Th'——"

"*Whoa!* What's laying there in th' trail?" interrupted Perth, pointing ahead with his rifle.

"Another steer," gritted Harrison. "They've gone to shootin' em when they slow up."

"Steer me legal diploma," snorted Ryan. "Ye're steer, crazy, Jim Harrison. That's a——"

"*Man!*" several of the vanguard chorused with the judge.

The troop pulled up, and Frank and Curly sprang to the ground beside the still figure in riding-boots that lay face downward almost in the fork of the trails.

"Everybody else stay mounted," called Harrison quickly, wise old Indian-fighter that he was. "Mr. Perth, yuh better take five or six men an' ride a hundred yards up one fork. Mr. Spaulding, yuh better do th' same for th' other one. Mr. Waymire, watch th' back trail. This'll block any surprize that might be, although I don't imagine they know we are this close—unless our informant has betrayed himself. Bill, is this him?"

The detailed men rode quickly up the trails. Carruthers in his office as sheriff started to swing off of his horse just as Frank rolled the inert form over.

"Tilby! The Kentucky gambler!" exclaimed the surrounding circle of horsemen who could crowd close.

Carruthers nearly fell from his horse in his violent surprize.

"Wh-what's that?" he faltered. "Tilby? Th' son-of-a-gun!"

Frank placed his ear to the gambler's chest.

"He's still alive," stated the puncher. "Jim, hand me down yore flask. Mebbe we can revive him."

The sheriff remained rigid in his saddle, looking like the equestrian statue of a Russian general, while the two Montagues, the judge and the DZX foreman quickly dismounted and leaned over the stricken Kentuckian.

A breathless and tense moment passed while Curly poured a stiff peg of raw whisky down the throat of Tilby and Frank gently propped up his head At length the gambler's eyelids fluttered, and a very faint color came back to his lips.

"They ain't no fake 'bout this death, judge," said Frank soberly. "Th' bullet jes' missed his heart. He's bleedin' to death internally."

"Tilby!" called Montague softly. "Can you hear me, Tilby?"

The man's eyes slowly opened. Unseeingly he stared at the faces above him. Finally his gaze settled on the rancher. A faint flicker of recognition glowed in his glazing eyes.

"Montague," he whispered. "I told them you'd come a-helling."

"We hardly expected to find you here, Tilby," said Montague sadly. "Are all of the Lebanon gamblers in on this affair?"

"Not all," whispered Tilby, his eyes dropping for an instant.

Then he gazed into the compassionate blue eyes above him.

"The raiding—the rustling—robbing—all been done by this gang," he murmured. "The main gang is but a little ways ahead of you—but you'll have to clean up a place called MacGregor Gap—daytime quarters of the gang. I've never been there, but I know."

"The girl?" crisped young Bill, and the gambler's eyes rested for a brief space on

the tense young man, an odd expression in their depths.

"That's how I got mine," he whispered. "She's all right—so far. She was taken as a ruse, but Nightbird has become infatuated with her. I objected to that part of deal—said it would arouse countryside—he wouldn't listen. Then one of them began making advances to her—she was frightened—appealed to me. That was yesterday.

"Today—at the fork here—the Mexican—I could see no better place—I took stand against the chief here—the gang didn't care—they wanted the cattle. I demanded girl's return. We fought—I lost. Tried to get off of fence, Montague, but was too late—was too late," he finished piteously, his eyes pleading with those of the ranchman

"Sure an' I don't quite get th' hang o' this," rumbled the judge. "Do I follow you, Tilby, that th' Mexican is or is not Nightbird?"

"Is *not*," whispered the gambler.

"What!" demanded every one but the Montagues.

"Ask him does he know who Nightbird is," suggested the sheriff.

"D'yuh know who Nightbird is?" questioned Curly, enunciating the words clearly.

The Kentuckian nodded weakly. He slumped down, and Curly quickly plied the flask.

"It was a good—scheme, but didn't work out—somehow," came Tilby's voice in labored accents, faint and barely distinct. "I was—afraid—McQuirey—Nightbird——."

His voice trailed off indistinctly.

"Ah! Sure an' it was McQuirey after all," breathed Ryan. "Th' dirty spalpeen! How completely he took me in, t'h reprobate."

"Kee-rect," endorsed Carruthers wisely, fondling his beard in the customary manner.

Tilby's head drooped slowly forward on to his chest.

"I'm—sleepy."

His voice came all but inaudibly, whisperingly.

"I tried—to—get—off—fence, Montague. I—tried——"

His form quivered slightly, and he sagged, limp.

"It's dangerous to leave uh wounded man what ain't dead on th' trail behind yuh," remarked Martin cryptically.

"Kee-rect," agreed Carruthers heartily. "Let's git to goin'."

"You two boys go call Perth and Spaulding back," Montague directed crisply to Frank and Curly. "Now then, Martin, explain the country and your plan."

THE mountaineer squatted in the dust of the trail.

"If we split an' part uh us rides ahead an' beats 'em *through* Devil's Hole Cañon, we kin bottle 'em up *in* th' cañon instead uh them holdin' us out at one end. Lemme show yuh how I mean," and he drew a crude outline in the trail with his forefinger.

"How far are we from Devil's Hole right now?" demanded young Bill.

"By follerin' th' rustlers, 'bout eight mile. By goin' up this left trail towards th' settlement uh Rocky Ridge an' cuttin' across Backbone at Cinnamon Gap it's all uh

seven mile, an' th' goin' is turrible. But we kin make it."

"How far ahead do you figure the rustlers to be?" asked the elder Montague.

"Not more'n three mile."

"That leaves five miles for them to go while we have seven. I believe the DZX horses are a bit the freshest because they've come the shortest distance by several miles," Montague declared with confidence. "We had better use them. Now, how will we divide? A smaller posse to ride ahead and the main body to follow."

"Your boys can go on," said Spaulding. "We'll trail."

"Sure," concurred Rankins. "It'll save time by not having to make no changes."

Montague looked at the other cattlemen near. They nodded in full agreement.

"All right. The DZX boys will cut them off from their stronghold. But you men ride hard and be sure to overtake them just as they reach the cañon, or when they find the lower end blocked they'll be liable to back out and go out through Cinnamon Gap—the way we go in. They would lose the cattle, but we would lose them—and Patty Blaine."

"But what are we going to do with them after we bottle them up?" demanded young Bill. "How are we going to get Patty away from them without losing them?"

Montague smiled ruefully.

"I've been considering that. We'll see when we corner them. Remember, everybody, no unnecessary firing before we make further decisions."

"Devil's Hole itself touches th' cañon by jes' uh li'l rift 'bout half-way through," stated Martin slowly as he strove to repicture the spot. "Th' hole is purty near uh circle which jes' touches th' cañon at th' rift. If they's much fightin' th' rustlers'll prob'bly put th' gal in there. They won't want her to git hurt none neither, 'cause she's their best card."

"But how are we gonna hold further discussions with th' DZX bunch at one end uh th' cañon, us at another, an' uh gang uh rustlers an' cattle between us?" demanded Waymire, who had ridden up from the rear to enter into the discussion.

"They won't be no cattle there," stated Martin. "Th' posse ahead will have to let them on through an' then close the mouth uh th' cañon. As for further decisions an' gittin' together, leave that to me."

"Fine!" cried Harrison. "Let's ride."

"Kee-rect," saluted the sheriff. "We'll ride ahead. Which way yuh goin,' jedge?"

"Sure an' I guess I'll be bringin' up th' rear," said Ryan to the company in general. "Maggie can say she's tired today an' I'll not be disputin.' "

The two posses split and rode rapidly along the dividing forks, Judge Ryan urging his protesting mare in the wake of the larger and pursuing posse.

The mountaincraft of Martin came into evidence as the DZX punchers turned from the trail and rode up Backbone Ridge toward the rift he had called Cinnamon Gap. He led them over land that had never felt a horse's hoof before, over rocky woodlands that they could never have traversed had not the mountaineer been there to judge and to choose the way. Cinnamon Gap proved to be very little except a name.

As is quite often true in the mountains, when they passed out of Cinnamon Gap and gazed down on the narrow valley below them, although they had gone forward continuously, the land looked so identical with that on the other side of the ridge that they could easily have imagined they were facing north instead of south.

The shadows were lengthening and their time-limit was growing short. Pausing only long enough to breathe the winded horses, Martin led the way down the mountain slope, finding a path where there was none.

He gazed toward the west along the wooded side of Backbone Ridge and held up his hand for silence as he listened. A faint rumble was audible.

Then he pointed to the eastern end of the valley, where at a distance of several hundred yards Backbone Ridge rose sharply and the mountain slope on the other side of the valley leaned closer as if to whisper a momentous secret, giving the basin the appearance of a lop-sided bottle. The neck of the bottle was the narrow cleft between the two great hills that Martin had called Devil's Hole.

On each side of the narrow gorge rose a lone, gigantic rock, somehow separated from the mountain slope behind and bearing a misshapen resemblance, one to a great pot and the other to a kettle. In the mountain stillness with nothing but that omnious rumble, in the growing gloom of the narrow passway they looked in very truth like infernal cooking-vessels.

"Well, we beat 'em here," grinned Martin. "Now that cañon is 'bout uh hundred yards long, an' it opens into uh real purty valley where Backbone an' Smoky over there spread apart again. We better git thar."

"We'll hurry through and take up positions to be out of the way of the cattle," said Montague. "Then as soon as the steers run, we'll blockade the end of the cañon. I want to see how it looks on the other side."

"Kee-rect," nodded the sheriff. "So do I."

CHAPTER XVII

RETRIBUTION

BACKBONE RIDGE proved to be very uncompromising and continued on in nearly a straight line along the second valley. Smoky Ridge was the mountain that drew back and allowed a wider basin at its feet, drew back from Backbone Ridge as if to watch the effect on its neighbor of the secret it had told. Smoky Ridge proved to be the gentler mountain in appearance also, its height at this point not being over three hundred feet above the valley floor, and its summit seemed smooth as a meadow in comparison with its wilder neighbor.

The DZX riders spent several precious minutes grouping themselves out of the way of the wildly running cattle, yet close enough to block the cañon when the last steers had run. The thunder of thousands of hoofs swelled in volume and echoed weirdly down through the pass.

"Where's Carruthers?" said Montague suddenly.

They looked around, startled. The sheriff had disappeared.

"Could he have slipped in to look at that peculiar hole at th' rift in the cañon as we come through?" asked Harrison quickly.

"Hardly," vetoed Montague. "It would be too dangerous. Some foolish steer might veer and take a notion to tun in there, and in half a minute there would be a deadly crush."

"An' Martin. Martin's gone too," bawled Frank. "Where's Martin?"

Without a word young Bill started for his horse.

"Where are you going?" demanded the ranchman immediately.

"There's something crooked here," replied his son. "I was suspicious of the sheriff's good intentions all along. I'm going after him. Do you realize what he's figuring on doing? No wonder he wanted to ride with us."

The rancher was silent as he realized the import of Carruthers' absence.

"What?" demanded Curly.

"He's going to warn the rustlers and turn them out through the gap we came through," replied young Bill. "Right here and now I accuse him of being hand in hand with Nightbird. I——

"Dad! And I know who Nightbird is now. I see it all. Why didn't we suspect his money-grabbing mind behind all this? Everything points to it. It dovetails completely. And I've seen him ogle Patty more than once when we've gone to town together."

"Who? Who?" shouted the excited punchers.

"Owens!" cried young Bill. "And that's why Carruthers couldn't catch him."

"You're right, son; you're right," said Montague. "The puzzle picture is perfect now."

"Owens is th' bird, Owens is th' bird. 'Course he is. It's as simple as one-two-three when yuh get th' hang of it," declared Harrison. "We got him now."

"But it's too late now to attempt to go back and hunt the sheriff," added Montague quietly. "It means death to be caught in Devil's Hole by the steers."

"Yep. We gotta wait," spoke Harrison. "Here come th' cows. Don't startle 'em, boys, an' start 'em to milling or we'll have a jam started an' Devil's Hole will be full of deviled ham."

TRUE it was that Sheriff Carruthers had been in a terrible quandary since the determined pursuit had been undertaken. That the message of the Thorston boy had saved the posse many hours and correspondingly lost the same number for the raiders, making a double total in favor of the posse, could not be denied. He had been taken quite unawares and unprepared and had not had time to go anywhere for advice or instructions.

And who had it been who had tipped Montague off? That puzzling question had worried the sheriff until they had come upon Tilby. Of course it had been Tilby, although Montague had refused to say so. —— Tilby for a white-livered skunk, and also that Thorston brat!

Personally Sheriff Carruthers was in quite a predicament. He had been forced to ride as if he meant it, and his futile attempts to slow the posse by sparing the horses had met with no success.

His nervousness and uncertainty had gradually been increasing and he had been nearly frantic until the posse split and he rode ahead with the DZX outfit. Then, as with the others he gazed at the mouth of Devil's Hole Cañon, had come inspiration.

In that moment he rose to the height of his mental capabilities and saw the solution to his problem.

He had realized for some time that the cattle were lost to the rustlers as was the girl as well. The bandits could hardly hope to escape with whole skins now that they were caught between two fires.

Humanlike he cursed them for making such a big play. Why hadn't they foreseen that they would lose? They might have known just what would happen. The pleased satisfaction that would have come with success was completely absent. And if the rustlers were captured—they knew too much about him.

There remained but one thing to do, and it was a last, betraying chance for him if he failed. He must drop out of the posse, warn the outlaws of the trap ahead of them and while the steers blocked the pass between the Pot and Kettle, lead or direct the bandits out through Cinnamon Gap just ahead of the pursuing posse. This would allow them to escape both factions of the posse and get safely away to country where they could disband and scatter.

Whether or not he himself could return and mingle with the posse soon enough to resume his duty as sheriff depended on circumstances and luck. Anyhow this way he had a chance. The other way he had none.

Reasoning thus, he dropped slowly back toward the rear; and as the last man entered the narrow cañon, intent on hurrying forward, Carruthers jerked his surprized horse to the left and passed before the great pillar of rock that resembled a pot and pulled up his mount. Waiting an instant to see whether he would be missed and whether they would return to look for him, he pretended to be looking and listening for the oncoming cattle.

Somehow this wasted play-acting with no one but himself to see, soothed the tumultuous beating of his heart and made him feel as if his deception could not be observed or termed as such as long as he pretended to think he was watching for the steers.

He began riding up the valley, searching feverishly for the spot where the posse had come down Backbone Ridge. Every place looked alike to him, and there seemed to be dozens of spots where cow-ponies had descended. At length he found a point which seemed to offer more than a bare foothold and which appeared to allow space to ride up toward the mountain crest. Forcing his gasping horse up, he made in a long diagonal for the wooded point which concealed Cinnamon Gap from below.

He had barely gained his objective before the first of the hard-run steers came lumbering into the little valley from the trail toward the west. Carruthers dismounted and clutched his beard, muttering nervously to himself as he anxiously waited for the cattle to enter and block the narrow cañon.

The steers—and steers in such a condition as to make a cattleman cry—began milling and turning uncertainly at the neck of the little valley, shying away from the forbidding cleft before them. But as the hundreds and hundreds behind them pressed forward, literally filling the valley from slope to slope with a sea of tossing horns and restless bodies, with more steers yet to enter the little vale, the very weight and momentum forced the leaders into the neck of the bottle.

"Ah!"

Carruthers breathed aloud, almost sobbing in his relief. It would be only ten or twelve minutes before the rustlers themselves came into sight. Now he twisted his beard ecstatically. He reached nervously into a breast pocket for one of his long black stogies.

"SO! YUH are uh dirty traitor jes' like I figgered, huh?"

The guilty Carruthers whirled so quickly that his tired horse jumped. He stared in heart-gripping anguish up the slope. At a point a few paces above him, leaning calmly against a blackjack pine, his short shotgun pointing unpleasantly toward the sheriff, stood Martin. Martin the mountaineer, who by all rights should now be penned up on the other side of Devil's Hole.

Carruthers remembered his words about taking care of discussions between the two posses, but to do that he would have to go over the mountain, and he couldn't have made it over the mountain under several hours.

The sheriff was petrified. He could not find words to speak. He stared stupidly at his accuser, round and glazed of eye as a stunned ox. The Arkansan must have dropped out of the posse while he himself was still thinking about it.

"Mebbe yuh jes' was comin' up here to keep th' rustlers from goin' out through Cinnamon Gap," suggested Martin helpfully.

"Kee-kee-rect," stammered the sheriff. "I reckoned as how—seein' th' gap was open—mebbe they might try—prob'bly they would of——"

"Yuh already got enough on yore mind. Yuh didn't need to bother none. I done moved th' gap," interrupted Martin derisively.

Carruthers tried to appear at ease. He tried to think of something to say that would divert Martin's suspicions. He could not. He was growing more and more self-conscious, and the seconds were flying.

He reached carefully in his pocket for a match. He dropped his stogie and awkwardly retrieved it. The mountaineer sneered in silent contempt as he watched the other's clumsy dissembling. Tremulously the sheriff struck the match, preparatory to holding it to his cigar. Then—

"Yuh're uh —— pore liar, yuh cattle-runnin' sheriff, yuh," stated Martin scornfully.

The surprized sheriff—at least he simulated surprize—started and looked up anxiously, one eye on the shotgun. His long whiskers swept across the lighted pine sliver in his hand.

There was a quick flare; and Mr. Carruther's beard, his beloved appendage, his inseparable saxophone, became a veritable pillar of fire. He yelped wildly and beat fiercely at the stifling flames with frenzied hands. The inspiration came to him to slide his hands down his beard as was his custom, thereby extinguishing the flames.

The rather awe-inspiring sight of a little valley completely filled with bellowing and running steers in a setting of picturesque mountains was lost on the men on the hillside. The sullen roar of the passing cattle filled the air, and a great dust-cloud hung in the evening light.

Martin threw back his head and leaned almost helplessly against the bole of the tree as he shook with hearty laughter. The clumsy sheriff reminded him of a great bear raiding a honey-tree and finding the bees too many for him.

Severely burned and surrounded by the pleasing aroma of singed hair, Carruthers succeeded in putting out the fire and saving a mere remnant of his luxurious foliage. The Arkansan glanced at the rueful man below him before going into another gale of laughter.

The laughter died in his throat; the mirth went out of his eyes and an incredulous expression came into his face. His brows drew down, and he took a quick step forward. He saw an absolutely bare and glazed spot, nearly square in its outline, almost in the center of the sheriff's receding chin.

"*Thompson!*" he cried. "*Thompson!*"

And the veins corded on his forehead.

"Kee-ristmas!" gasped Carruthers, attempting to stroke together the beard which was no longer there to cover and hide the scar.

Martin's face worked spasmodically. His breath came in short jerks. He seemed to have forgotten the gun, which hung loosely in the crook of his right arm.

"Thompson," he said, "yuh left him layin' there. Yuh thought he was dead. He lived for four days 'thout no water. He suffered worse'n I kin make yuh suffer. Yuh left his babies 'thout no pappy. Yuh—yuh——"

"Huh?" demanded the amazed sheriff as awful fear gripped his vitals.

"Yuh *murderer!*" gritted Martin. "Yuh killed my brother Jed Martin."

"Jed *Martin?*" screamed the sheriff. "I thought he said his name was Morgan."

Vivid, raw, leaping fear suddenly vitalized his muscles, and his revolver seemed to jump from his holster. But he had overlooked the fact that the Arkansas mountaineer is deadly effective with a rifle or a shotgun.

The muzzle of Martin's gun swung up in a perfect arc.

"It's th' same gun, Thompson," he said as he pulled both triggers, and the rustlers entered the valley just in time to hear the two-noted bellow of a shotgun.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEVIL'S HOLE

SCARCELY had the echo of the shots rolled away into silence when the rustlers were fairly in the valley and peering upward at both mountains with guns drawn. But nothing remotely human was visible to their straining eyes. Martin had withdrawn behind the scrubby growth that masked the mouth of Cinnamon Gap, taking the riderless horse with him.

In the van of the hard-riding gang, upon a horse between a lithe and graceful Mexican and a fair-haired youth of classical features and pale-blue eyes, rode Patty Blaine. Her face was drawn and wan, still showing the trace of tears. Her hair was tumbled, and her form drooped with weariness.

There were forty-nine riders in the band, including the girl. Bringing up the rear rode a slender, athletic form which, like the Mexican in the lead, was covered with a black riding-cloak. In addition this form, which sat its horse like a centaur, was completely masked by a close-fitting black domino. He radiated an air of dominant ruthlessness and lethal efficiency which was felt by those about him.

A floundering heifer caught his eye, and he unslung his carbine to shoot. As soon as he noticed that the animal's leg was broken he lowered his gun. Why shoot anything that would die anyway? Why cut short its suffering?

As the sullen roar of hoofs lessened in the valley because of the blanketing effect of Devil's Hole Cañon a new sound broke upon their ears, the sound of horses' hoofs *behind* them. The man with the carbine whirled in his saddle and strained his eye through the thick haze of dust and gathering gloom. He could distinguish nothing, but the sound grew plainer.

"We are followed," he called in a penetrating, keen, unpleasant voice. "Through the cañon and deploy, half to the left and half to the right. Diaz, take charge there. Cherub, take the girl. Ten men halt at this end to hold the cañon with me. Ride, you —— —— ——," he finished with a string of horrible, nasally intoned curses.

They thundered in between the Pot and Kettle, and Nightbird halted with the ten men he had ordered to remain. They could see the indistinct forms of the pursuers now, and they laid rifles across saddles and began firing at the vague figures.

Nightbird smiled cruelly beneath his mask as he heard the agonized scream of a horse and the hearty curse of a man.

"We've beat the —— —— ——," he whined in his high voice. "Get to building a barricade here, five of you men—the other five fire at anything that moves. We'll hold 'em here till doomsday."

The pursuit seemed to have ceased, and the rustlers began hurriedly rolling stones together to block the cañon. Night was coming on with a rush, and Nightbird mounted his horse to ride forward.

"Send for me if anything develops," he said. "Otherwise you'll be relieved at midnight."

A sudden outburst of firing from the other end of the gorge startled him, and he spurred his horse cruelly to a reckless gallop down the gloomy cañon. He had just passed the four-foot opening of the rift in the cañon's right wall and had glanced keenly within, surprized at the amount of space he saw there, when a panic-stricken bandit came back to meet him in a shambling run.

"Nightbird, we're caught," the man sobbed. "Th' cattle went through th' cañon, but when we was follerin', there was uh bunch uh shots met us. Grant was killed an' three uh us was wounded. They's uh big posse ahead uh us. We're caught like rats. What'll we do? What'll we do?"

"Fight," snarled the leader as he jabbed his spurs home to his spent horse, which cruelly galvanized the tortured animal to one supreme effort.

He galloped down toward his trapped men. He found them behind a barricade hastily formed of their horses. One burly ruffian stood over the girl, who was somewhat in the rear of the impromptu breastwork. The Cherub was calmly directing the firing while the Mexican was on his way to meet his superior.

"Señor Nightbird," he said rapidly, "thee cañon shee ees too straight to defend, don't you think? They weel rake eet wit' lead from end to end before daylight. How about thee rift in thee wall? Where shee lead to?"

"We'll find out now," rejoined Nightbird, and he whirled his mount to ride back.

But the willing animal had given its all, and it fell within its own length. The rider cursed horribly as he narrowly missed an ugly fall among the boulders of the cañon bed. Scrambling to his feet, he ran with the Mexican to the opening on Smoky Ridge's side. They halted almost in fear as they gazed into the place.

The *cul-de-sac* was of a peculiar formation. It was evident that Backbone Ridge and Smoky Ridge had once been solidly joined together where Devil's Hole Cañon now was. In the pangs of some distant cataclysm the mountains had split apart, leaving a narrow, deep cleft between them.

On Smoky Ridge's side, about midway of the gorge, Nature had further experimented

by scooping out a perpendicular and cylindrical hole from the top of the mountain to the floor of the cañon as one would core an apple—a circular hole that just intersected the line of the gorge, thus forming the scant four-foot rift.

The hole thus formed was an almost perfect amphitheater; nay, rather a prison. For the sides were almost vertical, exposing naught but sheer, solid rock, the seams and strata of which showed plainly.

It was almost night at the bottom of this natural dungeon, which was some two hundred feet across; but the sinking sun gilded the scrubby growth of bushes around the lip at the top with scarlet fire. Devil's Hole was a fitting name for this barren cut and shaft lost in the mountains.

"What a hellish place!" whined Nightbird. "But we can hold it against an army. Only a few can approach at a time, even from both ends of the cañon."

"But how do we get out?" queried the Mexican pointedly.

"There are many fissures in the rock, and we've plenty of rope and nerve. If we can't make it, we can shoot our way out—or bargain. Remember, Diaz, we still have our trump card, the card that weak gambler Tilby didn't want dealt into this game. Where'd we be now without the girl?"

"Mebbe we would steel have thee cattle and be far ahead of thee posse," said the Mexican.

"Don't fool yourself," snarled the other. "There's no cattleman in the entire Southwest that would stand still and see three thousand cattle lifted without a big scrap. I know them. This is phenomenal pursuit though. I can't understand it.

"Go take command at the Pot and Kettle," he concluded abruptly. I'll go back to the lower end and leave the Cherub on guard. When I give the signal you both fall back to this spot."

The Mexican saluted and slipped quickly out and up the cañon. He found the rear-guard in a nervous state. The lack of offensiveness on the part of the pursuers worried them. His presence steadied the men, and they waited eagerly for the call to fall back.

When it came they all but ran through the darkness, that incipient panic which possesses even the bravest man's soul when he gives himself to terror urging them to greater speed. The Mexican actually grinned as he more slowly followed them, pausing now and then to listen for any sounds of stealthy pursuit.

SEVERAL small fires had been made out of driftwood from the cañon, and groups of tired and hungry men were preparing to eat. Four men were busily building a fairly solid barricade across the mouth of the rift. Others were examining the horses.

Where one fire was built close to the wall sat the girl, leaning wearily against the hard rock behind her, utterly unmindful of the masked figure that stood across the fire from her and studied her so intently.

Ever since her abduction a constant fighting of wills had been going on between these two. Patty hated this man as she had never dreamed she could hate any person. The very nearness of his presence filled her with horror and loathing, this wanton pistoler of her father and then murderer of the one man who had attempted to protect her, the man Tilby. She had steadfastly refused to speak to him, to recognize his presence whenever he drew near.

This studied indifference and silent scorn stung the naturally egoistic man to the quick. She had carried herself so confidently when she knew there was no hope that now, when rescue seemed so near, the man knew what triumphant thoughts were behind those closed eyes, and he wanted to hurt, to crush, to beat down that tired but dauntless spirit which opposed him.

If there were no chance to gain the top of Devil's Hole he knew that he must surrender the girl in the morning. And because of that Patty feared him tonight as much as she hated him.

Her mind was going over and over the acute danger she was in and casting about for a buffer to use against the demon who gazed down at her so steadily. She thought of the Cherub. That he was ambitious for leadership and without fear she knew. But could she get him to clash with Nightbird while they were in such a predicament? And if so what should she do if his blood became inflamed? What would be her position with him?

There was the Mexican. But he had been smirking at her all the day before until she had felt ready to scream. She couldn't trust him.

The rest of the men were far too fearful

to try conclusions with three such men over them unless they acted in a body. And how could she even attempt to make the rounds of all those brutal, filthy male animals?

"Will you partake of our peasant's fare, charming princess?" whined the man in his horribly unpleasant voice, a voice that was used to mask his natural tones. "I regret we can not lay before you a sumptuous fare; but the disturbing element of awkward louts without prevents greater freedom at present," he concluded mockingly.

The girl did not reply, but she quivered under his voice.

"Answer me, you stubborn chit."

She did not respond. Angrily he stepped across the fire and caught her crushingly under the chin with one hand.

"I've had enough of this foolishness," he snarled uglily. "Now you talk or I'll ram this gun-barrel down your throat."

She opened her lips.

"Help!" she screamed faintly.

Instantly he clamped his free hand roughly across her mouth. Without the slightest hesitation she bit down, her sharp little teeth cutting into the flesh like a knife.

Nightbird released her with a curse, banging her head cruelly back against the rock to release his hand.

"—— you!" he shrilled, wrapping a silk handkerchief about his injured left member.

"Ritchie! Come and watch this she-devil until I relieve you. Cherub, hunt for a cave or a crevice of some kind in this damnable wall where we can put this tigress. If she moves, Ritchie, lay her out. Diaz! Oh, Diaz! Take charge at the rift until relieved."

The circular pit became the scene of bustling activity as variously assigned duties were performed. The growing ill-humor of the men at their plight was stayed for a time.

The Cherub found a hole which answered for a cave, fortunately out of direct line of fire from the rift, and Patty was rudely told to go there and to stay there. The man Ritchie sat cross-legged at the mouth of the opening to guard her, and the stench from his unwashed person made her weak with nausea.

She felt cautiously about her, examining her quarters, and found that the crevice extended back several feet and had a fairly level floor. Somewhat fearfully she crouched down at the farthest end, and wide-eyed she watched the activities of the rough men who passed to and fro.

She knew she could not sleep in the presence of such danger. Besides, the stony floor was hard and unyielding. So she sat rigid, arms wrapped about her knees, and thought.

She started violently at the sound of shots from the rift. There was an answering volley from the rustlers stationed there, and others ran up to reenforce them.

From that moment on there was rifle and revolver fire, an occasional slug of lead *spatting* dully against the wall somewhere near her. There seemed to be no lull in the firing, which at times grew hotter.

Several men with torches began making the round of the pit, carrying ropes and talking together. Patty could distinguish sounds of climbing, and sometimes the voices came from a number of feet above the floor of the shaft. But always they returned to the ground, cursing and hopeless.

She knew that she could not sleep with all of this going on. She did not want to sleep. Who knew just when she might have need of wide-awake faculties?

But overstrained Nature asserted herself. Slowly, in spite of her determination to remain awake, the girl's head nodded. Her tumbled hair swept forward, furnishing a veil before her trim little ankles and she slept, lulled by the very shots she had thought would keep her eyes open.

AFTER the first burst of firing at the mouth of the cañon and the surprized rustlers had withdrawn and formed a breastwork of their horses, the DZX men, sprawled behind boulders and scrubby trees, began edging carefully forward. They were afraid to fire in volleys again as Blaine's daughter might be anywhere within range of their bullets.

At length the bandits had quietly withdrawn farther into the gorge, and after a stealthy reconnaissance by Harrison the punchers closed in on the mouth of Devil's Hole Cañon.

"Now then, what?" demanded the foreman.

"They're corked in the bottle," said Montague. "We'll wait for the present."

"Can they git out?" asked one of the men.

"Only into Devil's Hole, and you heard Martin describe that."

"I wonder if Carruthers is with 'em?" said Curly.

"If he is, he'll wish he ain't," stated Frank grimly.

"No smoking, boys," said Montague suddenly. "It's nearly dark, and they can see the glow of your cigarets. There'll be no fires either. We eat what remains in our saddle-bags if anything remains."

"Are we just to sit here and do nothin'?" demanded young Bill impatiently.

"For the present; for the present," repeated his father. "We can do nothing but get shot by butting in there with no definite plan of action."

For a time there was silence save for the munching of numerous jaws and the occasional gurgle of a tilted canteen.

"I'm goin' to slip up th' cañon a piece," said Harrison after a bit, his form looming vague in the starlight.

"Yuh can all slip up there now," said a voice out of the night. "Th' rustlers is all inside uh Devil's Hole an' guardin' th' rift."

"Martin!" called the ranchman quietly.

"Here I be," stated the Arkansan calmly.

"You son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Harrison. "How'd you slip up on us thataway?"

"All yore punchers was making noises like mules in uh corn-field, an' yuh didn't hear me," Martin laughed. "I jes' come down th' mounting. I been watchin' 'em from th' edge uh Devil's Hole. They jes' found uh li'l cave to one side uh th' rift, an' they put th' gal in there. Yuh can git close now an' pepper 'em for all yuh're worth. She won't git hurt none."

"There's nothing definite in that," objected young Bill. "We can keep that up until we finally starve 'em out, and that'll take too long."

"Yep. Yuh're right," admitted Martin calmly. "But I'd advise yuh to do some purty heavy firin' an' keep 'em *all* busy."

Several punchers sucked in their breath audibly as this idea went home. Then:

"C'mon, cowboys," said Frank tersely. "We'll keep 'em so busy loadin' it'll wear off th' ends un their fingers."

"Say, Martin," asked Curly, "did yuh know th' sheriff has disappeared?"

"Yep," rejoined the mountaineer cryptically.

"You didn't see him with the rustlers, did you?" queried Montague. "Or were you able to make out? I presume they have a fire in there."

"Nope. He ain't there. Yuh don't need to worry none 'bout him."

"I'm afraid we may have to bargain somewhat," regretfully spoke the rancher.

"I want to capture the villains," cut in young Bill fiercely.

"An' so yuh can," agreed Martin. "Listen once while I tell yuh how yuh can."

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROUND-UP

PATTY BLAINE came to herself with a start to find that she was cold and numb and that a cramp was in her neck. It was dawn, and a thick white mist filled Devil's Hole so that she could not see five feet beyond the cave entrance. There was still occasional rifle fire from the direction of the cañon.

Massaging her neck, she crawled to the opening of the cave and peered out. Her outstretched hand rested upon something soft and yielding. It was a human body, and she drew back, thinking of the unclean Ritchie with a qualm of disgust.

Instantly the form of a man arose from across the opening of her little cave and smiled down at her in the half-light.

"Ah! Good morning, *señorita*," he greeted. "You sleep well? Ah! You are cold. Plees take my cloak. *Tck! Tck!* How utterly thoughtless of me! You weel excuse? I have so many things on my mind I forget. *Sí*, take eet. I insist. Eet weel be a slight protection unteel thee fog shee lift."

The Mexican had quickly removed his cloak, and now he tossed it over her shoulders as she kneeled in the cave mouth and looked doubtfully up at him. Turning his back upon her, he seated himself squarely in the mouth of the opening.

Patty shrank involuntarily from contact with the rich cloth; but its folds were gratefully warm, and she reluctantly wrapped it closely about her chilled frame, wondering all the time how long Pancho Diaz had been there and why. She studied the lithe back before her with its short, braided jacket as the light grew stronger and speculated deeply.

On his right side she observed the slim, graceful handle of the long-barreled pistol that rested in the tied-down holster. On the left was the keen, slender knife in its

case. She couldn't help thinking how everything about this man seemed to take on his own characteristic of grace.

The handle of the gun riveted her attention. Could she creep forward unheard and snatch it from its holster? If she did, what should she do with the Mexican? And with him disposed of, could she escape all the others? She did not know, but she would at least be armed. Even as she considered such a move Diaz turned his head and smiled pleasantly.

"For last two days I no have chance to talk. Eet ees not thee chance now. But I say to you, don't you be 'freed, *señorita*. Whatever happen, you stay in here, far back in corner. I weel try to keep you here.

"I think much weel happen now. Take thees knife so eef anything shee happen," and he flipped back at the surprized girl's feet the long, keen stiletto from his belt.

She eyed him, dumfounded.

"Pick eet up. Queeck!" he commanded sharply, and she slowly grasped the knife and drew it under her cloak.

Calmly he turned his back to her again, placing his life in her hands. Patty felt that she had made some kind of an error in her judgment of this man, just which way she was not yet sure. And what had he meant, about something going to happen right soon?

The posse had been attempting a passage all night. It surely wasn't that they were about to win through? There would have been more confusion and excitement on the inside had that been the case. Were the rustlers then going to surrender?

The sun was rising and was rapidly drawing up the low-hanging blanket of cold, damp white. As the fog climbed the walls of the shaft the Mexican raised his eyes and followed it appraisingly. He leaned out and craned his neck upward. As the obscuring vapor of white neared the top of the shaft he smiled a trifle and turned to look expectantly toward the rift.

Curiously Patty crept forward and gazed upward. As the white billow became translucent and she could see far up the vertical walls, the meaning of the Mexican's words smote her full force. Of course! How simple it was! Part of the posse had climbed the mountain during the night and were even now rimming the lip of the shaft far overhead waiting for the fog to lift.

With her back in a crevice and out of harm's way the cattlemen could control the situation and capture every one of Nightbird's gang, holding them with their rifles from above while those out in the cañon could come in and disarm them. She was saved. The rustlers were trapped.

Then her hopes fell flat. A figure came running across the uneven floor of Devil's Hole even as there was a cessation of firing.

"All right, Diaz!" came the Cherub's voice. "We can't make it, so Nightbird is signalin' to th' posse outside to bargain for our freedom. We gotta play th' girl. Bring her on quick."

The Mexican rose to his feet and faced the youth calmly. Patty clutched the stiletto convulsively. Oh, what could she do to remain here until the man who had shot her father should be apprehended, before he had the opportunity to bargain his way out with her as the price?

The beating of her heart swelled to a tumultuous thundering. As from a distance she heard the surprizing words of the Mexican.

"Señor Cherub, I'm ver' sorry, but eet ees impossseeble," said Diaz in a soft voice.

"Huh?"

The Cherub was astounded at the other's statement. He looked blankly for an instant. Then suspicion flared up in his pale-blue eyes.

"Oh, ho!" he drawled. "Double-crossin', eh? MacGregor suspected yuh before, but I wouldn't believe him. Haul that —— female out here where we can shoot her if they try to take us," he concluded with a sudden, ominous scowl.

"The *señorita* remain in thee shelter you find so kindly for her last night," replied Diaz gently. "Go back and tell Nightbird eet ees best he surrender. You see? Look up. Eet ees too late."

"Cherub!" came the awful nasal whine of Nightbird. "Bring the girl quick," and he concluded with a foul string of oaths.

The Cherub seemed to twitch only, and a .45 appeared in his hand. Patty did not have much time to scream before the shot came. Despairingly she clutched at her throat as she waited for her newly found protector to fall, waited with an agony that lasted for ages.

But Diaz did not stagger from the impact of a bullet. Instead, a puzzled, almost a pitiful, expression crossed the Cherub's

handsome, girlish face. He quivered convulsively and then crumbled to the ground in a sprawled attitude.

And then it was that Patty noticed that the Mexican had drawn his gun and held it clamped to his hip. As is the way with most killers, the Cherub had at last met a faster man.

At sound of the shot a number of the rustlers turned toward the little cave in surprize. A glance told the story, and they started forward with angry shouts.

"Hands up, down there!" bellowed a voice from the heights above. "Ivery mother's son o' ye. Ivery —— one o' ye is covered."

A ray of sunlight struck the top of the western wall, and the Mexican slowly replaced his gun in its holster before elevating his hands.

An utter silence fell as every rustler grew rigid in the position in which he had been caught. Then a swarm of DZX punchers, headed by the two Montagues and Harrison, scrambled over the half-demolished barrier at the cañon.

"Billy! Billy! Billy!" screamed the girl hysterically at sight of the young man, and she went off into a gale of nervous laughter alternating with sobs and tears.

"Patty girl!" cried the younger Montague tenderly; and he started across the amphitheater at a run, oblivious to punchers, rustlers and horses alike.

Montague made a lightning-like grab at his son to hold him back from mingling with the outlaws until they had been disarmed, but he missed. His attempt carried him a pace or two out among the nearest bandits and closer to Nightbird.

Instantly the masked man lowered his hands and pointed the gun which he held straight at the rancher's head.

"—— you, Montague!" he whined in a horrible shriek. "You're going with me to the place I couldn't send you. If it hadn't been for you——"

There was a sharp report from behind the powerless cattleman's back, and Nightbird shuddered convulsively. He fired twice; but the shock of the bullet he had received had spun him around, and his shots went wild, striking the face of the wall far above them.

"Freeze! Freeze!" shouted Judge Ryan's voice warningly to the remainder of the rustlers, and the incipient resistance was quelled.

Harrison calmly blew the smoke from the barrel of his weapon and glanced coldly at the undecided rustlers.

"I guess that concludes Nightbird. All you cow-runners form a lock-step gang over against the far wall," he commanded. "Keep away from th' hosses an' keep your hands raised—unless you want your earthly sentence punctuated.

"Boys, take their guns off and stack th' rifles. We're gonna make 'em *carry* every —— cow back to th' DZX."

Montague said nothing, but he flashed a look full of regard at his grizzled foreman.

"Thee game shee ees played," remarked Diaz wearily, glancing at the embracing lovers at his side. "*Viva la Deezy X.*"

Young Bill lifted his head and held out his hand to the Mexican. The swarthy-complexioned man grasped it.

"McQuirey," said young Montague, "let me be the first to congratulate and to thank you."

"McQuirey!" shouted Frank and Curly in unison. "Th' son-of-a-gun!"

"Now I begin to git th' drift uh some uh this," added Frank slowly.

"Who th' dickens is McQuirey?" demanded Waymire from up above.

"The best detective on the staff of the Cattlemen's Association," replied Montague, senior. "And that's the reason you didn't get a more satisfactory answer when you wrote. McQuirey was already on the job."

"Hurry, ye spalpeens, an' tie up them rapscallions," shouted Judge Ryan. "There's wan bit of explainin' that I'm wantin' meself."

There were but forty-two men to bind, the others having been wounded beyond repair. Had it not been for the presence of the girl there would probably have been a more sanguinary total.

"I guess this'll conclude our li'l entertainment," said one of the DZX punchers who was not scatheless himself, having a bloody bandage about his head.

"Just about," said McQuirey. "I've gathered enough evidence to convict every man Jack of the crooks from Horsehead Owens on down to the rogue who is in jail, including all of the dead ones."

TWO hours later found the rustlers neatly tied in pairs and the entire posse gathered around the Montagues and the man in Mexican garb.

"Now what do you want to know?" asked

Montague, smiling at the gathering about him.

"Th' whole story," demanded Harrison. "An' don't you leave out nothin'."

"Where shall I begin?"

"At th' beginnin'," suggested Curly.

"All right. You see, I had been expecting some such outbreak since that peach deal last Summer, and at the very first hint of rustling and robbing I sent for McQuirey. He didn't arrive until the night of the nineteenth of last month, the night the station-agent was killed.

"His initials being the same as my son's, his hanging around the station the next morning just to see and hear what he could find absolutely mussed up the deal for the frame-up on Bill. His reasoning was a little too acute for Carruthers, too. So they locked him up for a homeless tramp.

"But I had been notified of his coming, and I was expecting him. That's what Bill was doing in town on the night of the murder. He met McQuirey. Then when McQuirey failed to show up the next morning as a tramp puncher looking for work I immediately found out why, and to keep from tipping off my hand I sent Martin in from Blaine's place to bail him."

"Then th' story Martin was tellin' in me office after Higgs brought him in—th' story o' a masked man comin' to him—was a fairy tale, eh?" said Judge Ryan.

"Yes, judge, it was," admitted the rancher. "It was told merely to puzzle the crooks more. I wasn't quite sure for a long time whether there was any connection between the Lebanon gang and the Nightbird gang. But there was, and they knew that Nightbird didn't do it. They didn't know who did it. Pancho Diaz came in for a very heavy grilling, I suspect, when Martin's story got around to him, but he could easily prove that he wasn't in the country—being actually in jail at the time."

"But, Bill, why did you keep me in th' dark?" spoke Harrison reproachfully. "You had me worryin' to death for a while."

"Forgive me, Jim. I don't know a soul in the world that I would trust any sooner than you; but nobody in this country knew who McQuirey was except Li'l Bill and me.

"You see, he was joining the gang at the first opportunity, either as McQuirey or as some one else, depending on circumstances. And had they known or heard the least thing about him his life wouldn't have been worth a snap. So because a good man's life hung in the balance I took no one into my confidence."

"I see now why Li'l Bill went back to town with th' posse!" cried Curly. "It was to allow McQuirey plenty uh time to git away an' turn into Pancho Diaz."

The Montagues nodded.

"But why did Nightbird let him wear uh black cloak too?" demanded Frank. "That made about fifteen more complications."

"It was for that very reason," stated McQuirey. "It protected him."

"An' it was from this same Irish spalpeen, was it, Montague, that ye learned o' th' intended bank-robbery? An' it was McQuirey too who left th' note at th' Thorstons'?"

The rancher nodded and smiled. McQuirey bowed, his white teeth showing faintly behind his little mustachios.

"I have thee honair, Señor Judge," he said. "Eet was I."

"Which scoundrel shot at you in Hawkins' Draw?" demanded Perth of Montague. "I heard all about that."

"I believe Martin can answer you that question," said Montague softly. "His brother was far less fortunate than I."

"Well, it was a smart trick ye played on me," rumbled Judge Ryan. "Here I run me legs off—that is, I run Maggie's legs off—goin' out to get ye to make bond an' a-sweatin' blood for th' b'y, an' there ye sat at yer desk laughin' up yer sleeve wid th' whole shebang cut an' dried. Ain't ye a pretty wan to do the auld judge thataway?"

"Yes, judge, I am," admitted Montague frankly. "I felt like a cur about it, but I couldn't help it."

"Aw, g'wan wid ye, ye —— hard-head," snorted Ryan hastily.

"In the whole case there is but one thing I really regret," said McQuirey softly. "It was at the forks where Tilby threw his life away against Nightbird in a forlorn attempt to take Miss Blaine away from the gang. I didn't suspect him of so much honorableness. I didn't know that Miss Blaine had appealed to him. When he drew rein and demanded the return of the lady, I could do absolutely nothing but sit there and see him throw his life away. I could neither help nor hinder him."

Patty sobbed at the recollection and buried her face on her fiancé's shoulder.

"Never you mind, little girl," spoke the

elder Montague gently. "He merely made amends there for many past misdeeds. He knew his danger when he made his stand. And rest assured that he passed out happily and contentedly. We got to him before he died, and I know."

"Well, what I want to know is, who is this here Nightbird?," demanded Martin, who had been listening closely to the explanations. "I jes' can't place him."

"Owens, th' big crook from Lebanon," chorused the DZX-ers together.

"*Who?*" shot McQuirey quickly at the shouting punchers.

"Owens. They said Owens," answered young Bill for them. "Horsehead Owens of Lebanon."

"Take a look," suggested McQuirey, pointing to the still figure over near the mouth of the rift.

In a body the entire posse attempted to crowd forward, wonderment mounting in their minds. Frank and Curly outstripped the others and were first to kneel beside the picturesque figure mantled in the renowned black riding-cloak.

When the Montagues were looking down on the fallen man Frank caught one of the lower ends of the black, close-fitting domino and ripped the mask off. The features of—Jackson the gambler mutely faced the sky.

"Sure, an' I'm ——!" exploded Judge Ryan in genuine surprize. "Sure an'—B'jabbers! Listen once. If Jackson was Nightbird all th' time, sure an' how could he be robbin' th' Lebanon bank an' then come runnin' in th' front door wid th' crowd at th' same time?"

"That is an easy one," answered McQuirey. "As he escaped through the back door, he purposely loosened his cloak. At the first shot at him in the alley he realized that he was practically cornered. He fell quickly.

"When the men drew near enough to grab him, he left his cloak in their hands and darted straight across the alley toward the court-house. Doubling around the block toward the Texas Hotel, he tossed his hat aside, hid the silk domino in his pocket and drew forth a green eye-shade. Then he calmly walked right back into the bank with the crowd."

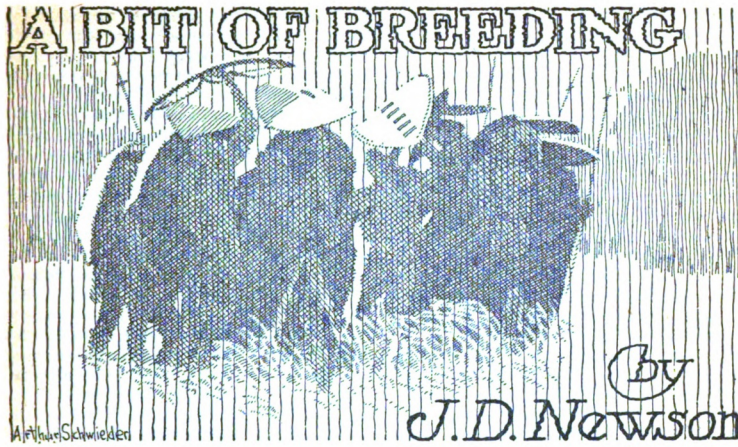
"I guess there is a little joker in this deck for us all," announced Montague, senior. "I was fooled about Nightbird."

" 'Tis a fittin' end," declared Ryan as he gazed down at the dead man's features.

As they made ready to go, a small shadow sped across the floor of the amphitheater, and every one looked up. High in the light of the morning sun dipped and circled one of the many vultures that had been collecting over the cattle trail to hold a requiem for the dead steers.

"Ah, yes," repeated Judge Ryan soberly. " 'Tis a fittin' end."

A BIT OF BREEDING



Author of "The Blunderer," "Tapu," etc.

MARTINDALE saw the *Bellona* go down with all hands on board in a hurricane that ripped the rotten plates out of the schooner's hull. One minute she was rolling in the tearing seas, the next she was gone—smothered beneath a great, green wave that drove her down and beat her to fragments.

Martindale had troubles of his own, for the *Thutmose III* was wallowing half-swamped, her tiny engine-room flooded and her jib-boom smashed. Two of the Kanaka crew had been washed away, the others were far too busy throwing gifts to the spirits of the ocean to pay much attention to their immediate salvation.

Against every law of probability the *Thutmose III* weathered the storm and late that night when the wind died down she was still afloat, swinging crazily to the lift of the hurrying rollers.

In the distance, vaguely outlined against the blackness of the cloudy night, hills loomed enormous, and the sound of thundering surf reached Martindale. His mate, a broad-shouldered native, naked but for a strip of red cloth about his waist and a peaked sailor's cap, crawled over the wreckage to his side.

"Make for Vila?" he inquired.

Martindale looked reprovingly at the speaker.

"No," he answered gravely. "We're not going to Vila yet. First of all, we can't; secondly I don't want to."

"Ship finish soon," suggested the Kanaka.

"Quite so. You're a talkative ——, aren't you? See that island over there? Guess that's Tongoa. Good harbor. We'll patch up the ship right there. Stand by until morning. Send a man to take the wheel and get busy with the hand-pumps."

Later Martindale found a can of corned beef in the sodden refuse on the galley floor and ate for the first time in twenty-four hours, sitting cross-legged on the deck, his back propped against a coil of damp rope.

He was a tall, slightly stooping man with long, loose arms. His face was hollow and sunken, harsh, with deep lines running from the thin nostrils to the corners of his wide mouth. Slate-gray eyes, cold and still, peered out from beneath bushy brows. When he spoke in a singsong, drawling voice only his lips moved.

He finished the corned beef, digging it out of the can with his thumb, and lighted a pipe.

"Walui," he called out. "Ho! Walui!"

An old man, a Banks Islander, shriveled and loose-skinned, whose left leg was bloated and swollen with elephantiasis, wormed his way out of the forecastle. Martindale had saved him from the wrath of a native chief-

tain and kept him on board as a mascot and a confidant, for the old man knew the islands as well as he knew his own village.

"You saw the end of the *Bellona*," said Martindale and waited, puffing at his pipe.

"See him, yes," nodded Walui. "Know him plenty, too. Got tobacco?"

A sticky length of trade tobacco changed hands.

"Simoni, him boss gone dead," Walui went on. "Make trade up Banks. He come an' go. Fetch boys for work."

"Blackbirding——"

"Yes, mebbe," Walui shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "Simoni make trade with Efate, Malikolo, Tongoa——"

"That's what I wondered."

Martindale pointed across the surging black waters with the stem of his pipe.

"Tongoa's over there."

"Mebbe. You catch trade quick, eh?" The old man grinned toothlessly and scratched his head. "Walui savvy."

"Mebbe," Martindale mimicked him solemnly. "We'll see in the morning."

With the first streak of dawn, when the ocean lay smooth and glassy, the *Thutmose III* made her way toward Tongoa. It was a small island crowned with abrupt hills where clumps of trees clung precariously to the thin soil. The foreshore was green beneath a thick growth of shrub and jungly undergrowth overtopped by rows of ragged coconut-trees. The schooner at last anchored in a deep inlet where at the far end, a short distance from the beach, stood a bungalow, invitingly peaceful in its setting of shade-palms and mango-trees.

A white man came out in a motor-launch and clambered up on to the schooner's deck. He was a self-confident young man, clean-shaven, ruddy, with a smiling, not unpleasant countenance. He was dressed in a bright patterned silk kimono, red leather slippers and a white sun helmet with a scarlet pugaree. His name was George Cranford and he had been to Oxford, which was chiefly noticeable by his skill in the mispronunciation of the simplest vowels. His family had sent him to the New Hebrides, hoping that he might forget Piccadilly Circus and, in adversity, acquire wisdom.

He shook hands with Martindale as if he were grasping a dead cat, but his speech was cheerful.

"So glad to see you, old top," he exclaimed. "Jolly old mariner blown out of his course seeking refuge in an unknown harbor. How do you do! How do you do? I haven't seen a white man for—let me see—three months. Even your glum visage is welcome. Martindale, I love you even if you did refuse to drink with me that time at Vila. You are forgiven, my dear old bird."

Martindale folded his long arms behind his back and looked mournfully at Cranford.

"The *Bellona* went down," he announced. "Couldn't help 'em at all. Guess there's nobody left."

Cranford's face clouded over.

"Hang it!" he grumbled, his cheerfulness suddenly deserting him. "Just my putrid luck."

"What about letting me handle your stuff?" suggested Martindale. "I can——"

"Oh, you! Hm—" Cranford paused. "Look here, come ashore with me—I want to talk to you. This *is* a mess!"

Once in his own house, with a brandy and soda at his elbow his enthusiasm revived.

"Well, old Simons is under water," he remarked. "And do you know—" his voice dropped to a whisper—"how many men went down with him?"

"Half a dozen or so, I suppose. He couldn't have carried more than that."

"Let me tell you the sad news. He had forty beautiful Kanakas on board—for me."

Martindale whistled softly.

"Blackbirding for you, was he? In that leaky old tub of his! You might have the decency to choose——"

"Now, now," admonished Cranford, "don't be disagreeable, old bean. It doesn't pay, particularly as you are here soliciting my business." He smiled brightly. "Moral indignation is the privilege of employers, in employes it is called unrest. Very bad. I am amoral, if you know what I mean."

"Your morals," Martindale drawled sadly, "don't interest me. What do you want to talk about?"

"Oh, yes. I've had dreadful bad luck. Influenza simply played havoc with my people. You should see my graveyard—it is monumental, I assure you. Then a shed full of crates burnt to the ground. All sorts of beastly happenings, in fact.

"Now it so happens that my cotton will be ready to pick in another six weeks and I'm frightfully short of labor. Vint, my jolly old half-breed of an overseer, goes about the place weeping. I felt so sorry for

him that I told Simons to get me forty boys—and they're all drowned you tell me! It's the last blow. Vint will never recover."

"You've still got Vint?" mused Martindale. "Weren't you told he was the biggest brute in the islands? He kills his men——"

"Please! Don't bother about my private affairs," snapped Cranford. "I don't need advice. Vint suits *me*, that's the important point."

He stood up and marched up and down the room, his kimono flapping about his ankles.

"This is what I propose: Go up and get me another forty recruits. You can pick 'em up easily. The blacks trust you. Land 'em here before the end of next month and you can handle all my trade until—" he grinned slyly—"until further notice."

Martindale slowly filled his pipe and sat for a long time meditatively gazing about the room whose walls were covered with a varied collection of native weapons. His silence exasperated Cranford.

"Why don't you say something?" the latter inquired testily.

"There's not much to be said. I'm not a blackbirder. That's all there is to it."

"No? Well then, you're no good to me. Just clear out of the harbor as fast as you can."

"My ship's out of commission," sighed Martindale. "We got knocked about a good bit last night. We'll be here for at least a week before she's seaworthy."

"I won't have you here!" declared Cranford. "You *must* get out."

"What's the hurry?"

"Oh, you fool with your 'what's the hurry.' Can't you understand, I'm in a tight corner—and what use are you to me? If you can't put to sea at least have the decency not to come mooning about my place. I'm expecting some visitors—" his complacency momentarily overcame his temper and he went on jovially— "the jolly old Traplings, the Traplings of Sydney are coming on their yacht. They've been cruising through the Solomons. Frightfully rich people. I expect them here any day. Perhaps you've heard of them?"

"No," admitted Martindale, "I haven't. But I feel sorry for 'em. You make a nice genial host with that —— Vint lurking in the background."

Cranford laughed in his face.

"Why not mind your own business? The Traplings are my friends—not beggars cadging cargoes. I'll give you one more chance, will you or will you not get those niggers for me?"

"Sonny——"

"Sonny, be ——! Cranford is my name."

He shook his fist at Martindale.

"Don't take any such liberties with me, or I'll have you pitched out."

"I dare say," Martindale agreed mournfully. "It would be quite easy, I guess. But before I go——"

A figure loomed in the sunlit doorway; a strapping giant of a man. His head was too small for his body, it was set on a short bull neck nearly flush with his bulging shoulders. The eyes beneath drooping lids were full of cruel cunning, the mouth was thick, coarse-lipped, surmounted by tufts of stiff black hair, and his lower jaw was enormously developed giving his countenance a massive, square appearance. His skin seen through the ragged holes of his singlet was a light golden brown.

"Well," demanded Cranford. "What is it, Vint?"

"Boat's comen in, crossen bar now."

"——! What kind of boat?"

"Steam. All white. Got brass funnel."

"That must be the *Spangler* with the Traplings! Look here, Martindale, clear out, will you? Oh, I brought you ashore. I'll have to take you back, but mind—don't come barging in while these people are here. They're not your kind, and as I said I'm through with you."

"Of course not. They couldn't be my kind," drawled Martindale. "But, come to think of it, I ought to warn them——"

Cranford stamped his foot impatiently.

"I must dress. Vint, keep an eye on this man. Take him down to the launch; if he tries to start anything—break him."

Vint laughed mirthlessly.

"C'mon," he grunted, taking a step into the room.

"But I really should tell them—" began Martindale, thinking aloud.

"Go on, Vint," ordered Cranford. "Take him away, there's a good fellow. I simply must dress."

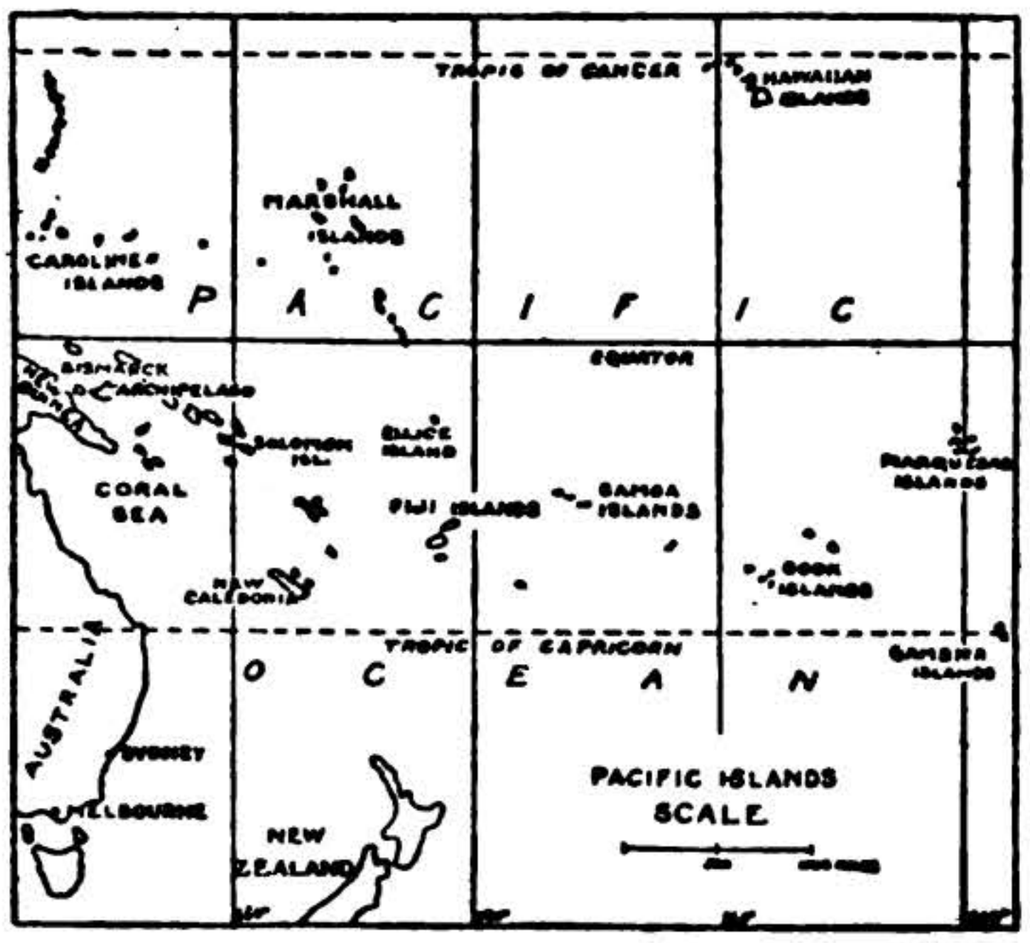
As the half-breed came forward crouching, ready to spring, Martindale suddenly gave way abjectly.

"All right, all right," he said hastily, stuffing his pipe into his pocket. "I'm going."

"I thought so," sneered Cranford. "Let this be a lesson to you. *I* mean what I say. Wait for me on the beach."

"Sure," agreed Martindale. "Now, Vint, keep quiet. Don't start smashing the furniture. It's hard to replace. Let's stroll down quietly."

"The decline and fall of Mr. Martindale," Cranford laughed from the next room as he hurried into a suit of white



drill. "Don't set foot on Tongoa again and clear out of the harbor as fast as you can. Otherwise Vint will take care of you. I like men."

"C'mon," savagely repeated Vint. "Hop 'long."

Martindale went sadly from the house, his arms folded behind his back, his head bent in thought, followed by the half-breed strutting and crowing at his easy victory.

MR. HARMON TRAPLING, who had made his money in jams—"They trap the full flavor of the fruit for you," was lecturing George Cranford on the sins of Melanesian colonists. Having amassed a considerable fortune selling food-products, he labored under the impression that his opinion on every conceivable subject must carry weight. He had very definite views on religion, economics, working class morality and socialism. He believed in the inequality of Mankind and the semi-divinity conferred by success. Because he could manage a large factory he was convinced that he could manage the affairs of the earth. He was a sententious, slow-moving man of sixty with close cropped iron-gray hair and mustache. He frowned, even when he laughed, and his eyes, set wide apart astride a thin, hooked nose, wore a defiant look as if he were always anticipating surprize attacks upon his position.

George Cranford listened and murmured polite nothings, for he sold chutney mangoes to Trapling and, priding himself on his aristocratic lineage, he knew how to be as servile toward his superiors as he was arrogant with those whom he considered beneath him socially.

They were dining on the poop-deck of the *Spangler* at anchor in Tangoa Bay. A gentle wind made the awning overhead flap lazily, little waves lisped against the yacht's smooth sides; beyond the glow of the electric lights the night was warm and scented. Everything conspired to make the Pacific seem infinitely remote, a smudge half-seen over the polished railing.

Across the table sat Mrs. Trapling and their daughter in elaborate gowns, listening dutifully to the head of the family.

"Yes," the latter was saying, "you saw that ambergris, Cranford. We found it floating in the water off Treasury Island. And what do you think—one of the crew, a man called Mullins, had the audacity to say it was his!"

"Haw, haw!" laughed Cranford, the perfect sycophant.

"Exactly. Mullins claimed that he spotted the ambergris. But of course I pay his wages, this is *my* yacht—when I found out what the stuff was I demanded it."

"The man was impossible," added Mrs. Trapling, a gray lady of austere carriage and compelling voice whose loose throat was encircled by a band of black velvet where a single diamond gleamed no more brightly than her shrewd eyes. "Actually, he was *rough*."

"He tried to resort to physical force," her husband went on contemptuously, "the only argument of such people. But he is quiet now. Discipline, that's what they need."

"Of course," agreed Cranford. "They're always talking about their rights—no sense of obligation. That's the blight of half-educating them. It's a nuisance. Teach a man to read and he forgets his position—wants to assert himself. We can't all assert ourselves; it upsets things."

"Oh, do look! There's a light!"

Miss Elizabeth Trapling pointed across the black waters of the bay toward the *Thutmose III.*

"How romantic!"

She was a large, blonde girl with eloquent shoulders and hands. She had the ambitious eyes of her mother and her father's important manner, otherwise she was pleasant, rather pretty in a pink-and-white way.

"Not at all romantic, I assure you," purred Cranford. "A trader— A Yankee called Martindale. Impossible person. He was caught in the hurricane three nights ago and put in here for repairs. I was civil, naturally—even went so far as to offer him a cargo, but he made the most absurd demands. Tried to bully me. Threatened me! I turned him out, of course."

"Quite right," assented Trapling. "Teach 'em manners."

"And did he resist?" breathed his daughter.

"Fight?" laughed Cranford. "No! He scuttled away like a frightened crab when he saw that I was in earnest. I told him not to come ashore again and to leave Tongoa as soon as he has finished his repairs. I didn't mention him before because—well, he's insignificant. He's a case in point—he's dissatisfied, sulky, dangerous when you least expect it. He's called 'the undertaker.' Quite a good nickname for him.

"Ah," he sighed deeply. "If only such men were like the natives; as obedient, honest, simple, uneducated, it would be a pleasant world. You'll see tomorrow. I'll take you inland and show you one of the tribes. Such happy fellows!"

"Are you quite sure it will be safe?" demanded Mrs. Trapling.

"My dear lady!" beamed Cranford. "With *me?* They eat out of my hand. They look dangerous, but treated properly they are positive lambs—really."

"That man over there," Miss Trapling nodded toward Martindale's schooner, "won't cause trouble while we are away?"

"He will not," stoutly asserted her father. "I'll have Captain Rankin post double watches. If this 'undertaker' so much as approaches he'll be clapped in irons." He liked the phrase and repeated it fiercely, "Clapped in irons, I say!"

"Tomorrow, then, at five o'clock," suggested Cranford preparing to make his farewells. "We must leave before the heat of the day."

They watched his launch speed shorewards and Trapling grunted:

"Nice boy that. Clean, reliable fellow. Knows his place. Nothing like a bit of breeding."

He stamped up and down the deck, a cigar between his teeth, his hands in his pockets, until his daughter remarked—

"It does seem a shame that poor trader should have to stay over on his boat all by himself."

"Stuff and nonsense," he boomed. "Do him good. Thoroughly endorse what young Cranford said. Man's not fit company——"

Then a sound of voices raised in expostulation came to them from amidships and a breathless steward ran aft to the poop-deck.

"If you please, sir, there's a person called Martindale, sir, from that schooner, wants to see you. I hargued, sir, and Captain Rankin's keeping him at the foot of the ladder, sir——"

"Wants to see me!" growled Trapling. "Wants to see me! Send him here. Ask Captain Rankin to be ready with half a dozen men. I'll deal with Mr. Martindale."

"The ambergris," protested his wife. "That's what he is after, I'm sure."

"This is thrill-ing," gurgled their daughter. "A real pirate!"

"Rot, I'll——"

The words died on his lips for Martindale stood before them, silent, chilling, quite out of place in his ill-fitting suit and big black boots. His impassive face stood out sharply in the bright light, his arms were folded behind his back, his feet were planted wide apart. Apparently he had come to stay and seemed wholly indifferent to the threatening group of sailors gathered around him.

"If you think you can get the ambergris," spluttered Trapling, taken aback, "you are mistaken. We are prepared!"

"Ambergris?" drawled Martindale. "Didn't know you had any. Guess you can keep it."

"What do you want? Your presence frightens these ladies. We have heard about you. Explain your business."

Martindale shook his head mournfully.

"Somebody's been telling you ghost stories," he murmured. "If you've picked up some ambergris you'd better look out or Cranford will get at it. That's not my pidjin. I came over to ask your skipper for

the loan of a Stilson wrench and he received me nearly as nicely as you are doing. That's why I asked for the owner."

"You crept over at this time of night on any such errand? Stuff and nonsense, sir! Off with you, and learn not to slander better men than yourself."

"It's this way," said Martindale, not stirring an inch. "I only discovered an hour ago that the feed-pipe of my engine is rusted through and I can't get it loose."

"Working at this time of night?" inquired Trapling, suddenly interested.

"Why, sure. And when I saw your lights blazing——"

"I would let you have the wrench," Trapling interrupted him gruffly, "but for your remark about Mr. Cranford. If you will apologize——"

"Let's put it this way: You know more about Cranford when he's using his dinner-coat manners than I do, but I know more about him on work-days."

"You do! I have entire confidence in Mr. Cranford. In fact, we are going ashore under his guidance tomorrow to visit the native tribes."

"Native tribes!" Martindale almost grinned. "Native tribes!"

"Now will you apologize?"

"Native tribes," repeated Martindale. "Why——"

"Oh, lend him the wrench, captain," snorted Trapling. "Good night to you."

"Thanks, and keep your eyes open tomorrow. You ought to see something interesting."

"Of all things!" Mrs. Trapling summed up the situation when they were left alone once again. "No wonder George would have nothing to do with such an odious man. Did you see that face—a mask! He never moved a muscle even when he was saying the worst things! Now we must go to bed if we mean to get up on time tomorrow."

THEY started out early the next day, tramping light-heartedly across the fields where a handful of laborers were bent over weeding between the long rows of pineapple-plants.

Ahead with George Cranford went Elizabeth Trapling all in white, a camera slung over her shoulder, a stout walking-stick in her hand. They were followed by Mrs. Trapling gripping her skirts about her ankles in fear of nonexistent snakes, and her husband, his hands in his coat pockets, feeling very colonial in his solar helmet which he had cocked over one eye thus leaving the nape of his neck exposed to the rays of the sun. But the sun had not as yet cleared the mountain-tops; the morning was fresh and cool. Behind the party toiled two able seamen, bearing lunch-baskets, camp-stools and rifles—in case of emergency as Cranford had suggested with an amused smile.

Soon they forded a stream, and on reaching the far bank, left behind the last vestige of civilization. The track wound in semi-darkness beneath gloomy trees between the trunks of which grew an impenetrable mass of thorny bushes and vines.

"Very much like Aurora," said Trapling as they threaded their way between the roots of a banyan-tree.

"Yes, and the harbor reminds me of San Cristoval," remarked his wife, very bored with her surroundings. "Really, these islands are *so* much alike."

"Wait until you see the aborigines," called back Cranford who had been allowed to overhear these comments. "Most interesting people. Jolly old warriors—not a bit sophisticated, but they'll do anything for me."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Trapling replied in her superior manner. "We have seen *so* many tribes. They stare at one. That's all they seem to know how to do."

"Have we far to go?" her daughter inquired a little later as they plodded up a stiff incline and entered a gorge between somber hills.

"No, no," Cranford hastened to answer. "They're in this very valley. You'll love 'em. Jolly old savages. They'll be falling over themselves to please you."

The heat of the day increased, the sun beat down through the branches, splashing the shady path with patches of bright light. They emerged at last, abruptly, into a wide clearing walled in by dense forest-growth. Above the tree-tops a strip of clear blue sky hung as if imprisoned between the upflung pinnacles of rock.

"Nearly there now," declared Cranford. "Sorry to make you tramp like this. Jolly primitive, ain't it?"

"On Guadalcanar the natives were brought before us," explained Mrs. Trapling, gazing disapprovingly at the rank underbrush. "We sat on a piazza and—— Oh!"

Her startled scream was echoed by her

daughter, for out of the jungle there had crept without sound thirty-odd natives, all armed, all daubed with white paint, with great headgears of feathers and cowrie shells which accentuated their height and made them seem unreal, terrible.

"Are these your people?" demanded Harmon Trapling.

Cranford stood motionless, staring at the ring of tribesmen who were creeping in upon them.

"No," he stammered. "Something's happened."

He pawed at his face.

"I don't understand——"

"Speak, man! What are they trying to do?"

"Oh," Cranford blurted out, recovering something of his poise. "They're from the other side of the island—somewhere. Must have wiped out the village. They're in their war-paint."

"Rifles!" bellowed Trapling.

The two sailors were frantically endeavoring to disentangle the weapons from their other burdens when Cranford called out:

"Don't! Too late! Wait!"

They huddled together in the middle of the clearing while the natives closed in upon them, hedging them in with leveled spear-points. The leader, an evil-looking, massive fellow, whose face was coated with red ocher stepped forward, leering at the group.

"Give gun," he ordered, and the rifles were dropped at his feet.

"Outrage!" barked Trapling. "What do you want?"

"Let me deal with them," whispered Cranford. "You've heard of me," he went on, addressing the chieftain. "If you harm these people you'll get into trouble. More rifles will come and exterminate your people."

The man grinned and nursed one of the guns in the hollow of his arm.

"No can touch—live there." He pointed upward at the hills.

"Well, what are you doing down here?"

"Make war. Village finish. Now take you. You finish too."

"Filthy luck," complained Cranford, turning helplessly to the unnerved party. "They've been raiding the village I wanted you to see."

"But we simply must get back," insisted Mrs. Trapling, a hysterical catch in her throat. "You must do something."

"Of course, of course," began Cranford.

"No make war on white people," said the chief. "Me let go, what you give?"

An immense sigh came simultaneously from the whole party.

"We'll give nothing!" Trapling exploded. "Do you understand that?"

"Then me kill," the chief answered and half-turned toward his followers who swayed a step closer.

"Not good enough, not arf good enough," growled one of the able seamen. "What d'you want, ducky?"

"Got money?"

"Money be blowed," bellowed Trapling. "Ransom! Who ever heard of such stuff and——"

The native raised the rifle to his shoulder. Cranford bravely jumped in front of his guest.

"You'll have to kill me first. How much do you want?" he asked desperately.

"How much you got?"

"Me? Why——"

He fumbled in his pockets, crestfallen. "I haven't a thing. Don't carry money. No need for it."

"Harmon," exclaimed Mrs. Trapling, who was clutching at her daughter's arm, "think of us. You have principles, but——"

"Principles be 'anged," the talkative seaman declared with emphasis. "I want to live."

"Be still, Bodger," snapped Trapling. "Thank you, Cranford, for covering me, please move aside. I'll see what I can do.

"Now, my man," this to the sullen native, "speak up. Fix your price. But remember that you will not go unpunished."

"How much you got?" stolidly repeated the chief.

"Nothing here, of course. On board ship I have some silver coins."

"How much?"

"Good Lord, you rascal, d'you think I carry thousands around with me?" He turned to Cranford. "As if we had any money! Never have any. Check-book has always been good enough."

"How much?"

"Oh, I don't know—ten pounds, twenty pounds at the utmost."

"No go."

"That's not enough! What do you mean——"

"Money is no good to you," put in Cranford. "Suppose you keep the rifles and go back to the hills."

"Money plenty good," chuckled the native. "Make buy tobacco, make buy——"

"There's that there ambergris," suggested Bodger. "Ever 'eard of ambergris, matey?"

The chief's eyes sparkled. He came close and tapped Trapling pleasantly on the chest.

"Got ambergris? Me take. Give—I let you go."

"Just what I was going to suggest," said Cranford. "It's just what he'd like. He can barter it easily. He'll be robbed by the traders as usual."

Trapling wavered.

"Wouldn't you like some pretty mirrors, a phonograph, a suit of clothes—something like that?" he asked.

"No. Ambergris. Give!"

"Do let him have it, Harmon," urged Mrs. Trapling. "It's no good to us. We don't need it, you know that. Do hurry up."

"But I haven't got it in my pockets," Trapling said wearily. "It's on the yacht."

"Not got?" the chief half-raised the weapon and his people closed in forming a compact ring about the party.

"On ship," Cranford hastened to explain. "You know me—keep my word. I go fetch it."

"Good," grunted the native. "You go quick. No bring more gun—or I kill quick, savvy?"

"And we must stay here—really!" Mrs. Trapling exclaimed tensely.

"It's the only solution. Jolly old—I mean the chief has heard of me. He trusts me. I shan't be long."

"Hurry," urged Trapling, "this has gone too far."

"Well, will you write a message to Captain Rankin so that I shan't have to waste time? I'm awfully sorry——"

"Not your fault, my boy, not your fault. Unforeseen incident. You've shown pluck," mumbled Trapling, scribbling furiously. "There."

He tore a slip of paper from his notebook.

"Off you go and good luck."

"Three men go 'long," said the chief. "Carry ambergris. Watch on beach. You bring *one* man back—I kill 'um."

"Oh, tell Captain Rankin to keep away," begged Mrs. Trapling. "Nothing matters if only we can get back on the *Spangler*."

"Dear lady," Cranford bowed gallantly, "I shall be very careful indeed. I promise nothing more will happen to you. I'm so awfully sorry—had I imagined——"

"Hop 'long," ordered the chief.

"What—" Cranford began angrily.

"Hop 'long," repeated the chief, and Cranford hurried away with the three warriors to vanish down the bush-track beneath the trees.

The others settled down to wait in the blinding sunlight, but the chief was restless, fidgety.

"What got there?" he inquired, pointing at the hampers.

"That? Oh, food," Trapling answered vaguely.

"Give."

"I could not eat a thing," said Mrs. Trapling. "Could you, Elizabeth?"

The latter shook her head negatively, and the hampers changed hands.

The native rummaged through the baskets chuckling with glee at the sight of several bottles. To his warriors he tossed a decanter of whisky retaining, with rare discrimination, a bottle of champagne and a vacuum jug of ready-mixed cocktails for his own consumption.

"This is too good to miss," Elizabeth Trapling said quietly. "We're quite safe I'm sure. I must take a picture of this."

She opened her camera, and the chief at her request obligingly posed for her, a bottle in each hand. He offered her a drink from the smashed neck of the champagne bottle, which she declined, furiously turning her back upon him.

Having drained the wine the native became insistent and offered the vacuum jug to each of his prisoners in turn.

"Good," he urged. "Make feel fine."

They refused, which amused him enormously. Once more, regaining confidence when he laughed, Miss Trapling photographed him with his head thrown back, pouring the contents of the jug down his throat. Most of the liquid, however, was missing its mark and running down his neck and chest.

"Stop it," whispered her mother. "Leave him alone; he's losing his senses."

"He's so primitive," she answered. "He's

wonderful. See how light the color of his skin is."

The decanter had passed from hand to hand along the ranks of squatting warriors whose silence was now broken by bursts of laughter and snatches of song. Their chief, however, had retained the lion's share and whereas they were merely made merry by the sip they had each had he was already maudlin.

"Struth," murmured Bodger to his mate. "That bird's going to get fresh in a minute and if 'e don't get what 'e wants 'e'll rock us to sleep wiv 'is club. I don't like the looks of this."

The chief came close to his prisoners and after a contemplative silence, suddenly asked—

"You sell woman?"

"What's that?" gasped Trapling. "What's that?"

"Sell girl?" he jerked his thumb at Elizabeth.

"Confound your disgusting impudence! Confound——"

"Nuff," grunted the chief, his eyes alight. "Keep ambergris, give girl. Good?"

"You filthy creature, you," shouted Trapling jumping to his feet. "How dare you——"

"You no sell?" the native paused, waiting for an answer. "*I take.*"

Trapling struck at him, but his blow had no more effect on the chief's great jaw than a feather would have had. Like lightning, with one sweep of his arm the latter sent him rolling over dazed and sickened—finished.

The chief stood over him, roaring, laughing, thumping his deep chest with both fists.

"Now then, ducky," Bodger ambled forward with his mate beside him, "you done enough damage. The ambergris 's comin' soon. Just sit down and be sociable."

"Keep quiet, missis—" this as Mrs. Trapling screamed. "I seen bunches of 'em go this way."

The native glared at the two men.

"Keep ambergris—want girl," he said thickly.

"Don't be so 'asty. Let's talk it over. Now me and this 'ere lad what's named Sleepy Gullick——"

He talked on, loudly, unendingly, without pause or break, holding back the drunken chieftain with a flow of words. He told long and intricate stories of Portsmouth harbor, about what Bill said to Bert and what Bert answered back. One of his involved yarns dealt with the doings of a ship's cook ashore at Port Said and Miss Trapling, losing all sense of danger, rapped out sharply:

"That's enough, Bodger. You are——"

The spell was broken.

The native hurled himself at the two men, seized them by the throat and flung them at his followers who pinned them to the ground after a desperate struggle.

Mrs. Trapling, in tears, unable to move, knelt by her husband's side.

"Don't come any nearer," ordered Elizabeth, white to the lips. She raised her walking-stick and the savage leered at her.

"Fine girl," he chuckled. "Fine——"

Then George Cranford forced his way through the throng followed by the escort bearing the ambergris, three great lumps of the wax-like substance, wrapped in oil-cloth. He paused dumfounded, incredulous, his eyes wide open.

"What the —— are you doing?" he shouted. "Stop that at once. Stop, I say!"

The ring of black faces laughed at him, laughed at his helplessness.

"Keep ambergris," hiccuped the chief. "Me take girl."

He caught and shook Cranford, held him aloft with arms of steel.

"Strong!" he bellowed. "Strong! Me chief of all Tongoa!"

And his men, brandishing their weapons, cheered and cheered while Elizabeth Trapling looked on aghast at the sight of Cranford dangling at the end of those bulging arms.

A GUST of madness swept through the sunlit clearing. The last shred of decency snapped in the minds of the savages. Strand by strand their age-long awe of the white man gave way. From their wet, distended mouths rose a long-forgotten song, a song of war and blood-lust whose rhythm interpreted all the things they could not say, all the things they wished to do. Their feet pounded the hard ground in time to the chant, they clashed their weapons together drawing ever nearer to the time when, blind to all consequences, in an ecstasy of killing, they would butcher their victims.

In their midst, towering above them,

stood their chief at whose feet lay Cranford, choking weakly.

Only Elizabeth Trapling stood before the great Kanaka. He moved slowly toward her, his feet sliding along the ground, his small head thrust forward, eyes aflame.

She waited fascinated, until his outstretched fingers brushed her arm, then she brought down her walking-stick, raining blows at him. He parried them with his bare forearm and grinned at her.

The stick cracked, she flung it at his head and waited, helpless, for the last attack.

"Oho!" chuckled the native. "Fine, strong like me, eh? "We—" he moved a step closer— "we have whole island." Another step. "We—" his fingers touched her again— "we make——"

A silence fell over the clearing, the song caught in the warrior's throats, their feet ceased to stamp.

The chief looked up, startled by the abrupt, breathless pause—looked up full into the eyes of Martindale who stood motionless just inside the row of tribesmen. Beside him was Walui, all bent over, his old eyes snapping with anger.

Elizabeth Trapling sprang back out of reach, sobbing hysterically.

"Kill!" yelled the chief. "Kill!"

But Walui rapped out a command in his thin, high voice and the tribesmen cowered back. Again Walui spoke; they let their weapons fall to the ground and stood bunched together, beaten by the lash of the old man's tongue.

The chief's great jaw set hard. Cat-like he crept toward Martindale who stood his ground, his feel planted wide apart, arms behind his back, his lean face rigid and mournful.

"You no good," whispered the chief. "You run 'way, savvy?"

"Sometimes," Martindale admitted sadly. "Yes, sometimes I do."

"No go now—I kill 'um."

"I don't want to fight," sighed Martindale. "You're drunk."

"Ho! What that old fool say to my men, eh?" the chief suddenly demanded, becoming aware of his people's terror-stricken collapse.

"Better ask him. Now, I told you I don't want to fight. Will you let the party go——"

"No!" roared the Kanaka, leaping at his prey.

Martindale's lethargy vanished as if by enchantment; his left fist crashed full on the chief's jaw. It rocked him back on his heels and before he could regain his balance another blow caught him just below the heart.

"Didn't want to scrap," he heard the drawling voice murmur. "Unfair advantage—drunken man——"

Martindale's long arms worked like pistons, keeping his antagonist out of striking range. Time and again the native hurled himself forward, always to be smashed back by well-aimed blows. At last when his strength began to wane he found Martindale following him up, battering him with slow deliberation, chopping here, chopping there, aiming more and more often at his opponent's heart. The man fell to his knees, sobbing for breath. The fumes of the wine had left his brain, he was aware of a growing fear which made him doubly strong. He threw himself at Martindale's knees and went flat on his face for the knees shifted just out of reach.

"Get up," came the order. "We'll make a job of this."

Like a flash the chief rolled over, seized a spear dropped by one of his men and jumped to his feet.

"Finish!" he snarled.

"Yes," agreed Martindale, "this is too strenuous."

The spear ripped open his shirt sleeve as he closed in. He landed one stinging blow on the native's throat, caught him in his arms—and squeezed. The Kanaka gasped as the pressure tightened, he felt his ribs crackle, his lungs burst, his muscles give way like rotten strings. Foam flecked with blood trickled from his open mouth.

"You'll do."

Martindale relaxed his pressure and the native crumpled up as a rag-doll does when the sawdust runs out.

The various members of the party were recovering from the nightmare, each after the fashion of his kind.

Mrs. Trapling was choking back tears as she leaned on her daughter's shoulder. Her husband, one hand pressed against his bruised cheek was beginning to talk. The two able seamen, battered and torn, were furtively collecting souvenirs from the heap of weapons, and George Cranford, his chin resting on his knees, watched Martindale with frightened eyes. Close to where he

squatted lay the bulky packages of ambergris.

Somewhere in the background old Walui was still haranguing the dejected warriors.

"Mr. Martindale," began Trapling, "we can not thank you enough. Without your timely intervention——"

"Thank Walui," suggested Martindale dragging a pipe from his pocket. "He handled this show."

"That old man?" exclaimed Elizabeth. "How did he——"

"Suppose we go back to my place?" hastily interposed Cranford, staggering to his feet. "We all appreciate what Martindale has done. I am ghastly sorry——"

"Now, my boy, you did your best. Very plucky of you," declared Trapling. "Not your fault at all. They got at the wine while you were away. You can not be blamed."

"So that's it!" Martindale murmured. "We'll have a show-down right here, I guess, Cranford."

"We're ever so grateful," gushed Mrs. Trapling, "but please don't annoy Mr. Cranford. I can assure you that he did——"

"Ma'am," Martindale held up his pipe, pointing its stem at her. "You might as well get this straight once and for all. That big chief in his war-paint is Mr. Tom Vint, our friend Cranford's overseer. Yes, ma'am. And those terrible warriors are his laborers. They were recruited, most of 'em, on Motlowa in the Banks Islands. That's where old Walui comes from. He's a big gun around his neck of the woods—priest. They don't yet understand how he found them out. If it hadn't been for the wine——"

"I can not believe," broke in Trapling.

"You beast!" said Cranford.

"Wait," Martindale went on mournfully. "I haven't finished. Here's how I figure it out:

"Cranford dressed his people up in the ornaments he had in his rooms. Ever see such a collection of weapons? Stone-headed clubs from Fiji, bird's heads from New Caledonia, bone-tipped spears from Rorotonga, axes from New Guinea. Some cosmopolitan tribe!

"Well, he—stand still, Cranford—he got you out here in the bush. Vint held you up. You offered him the ambergris. Cranford, the hero, goes and gets it. If it hadn't been for the wine, if things had gone smoothly when you got back on board ship the terrible savages would have gone back to work and Vint would have handed over the ambergris to his boss. It's quite simple.

"But something went wrong, didn't it, Cranford? Something always does go wrong. You didn't expect Vint to pinch the liquor, did you? Made him a real chief that stuff did. You're a sweet pair of young things," he concluded thoughtfully.

"Is this so?" demanded Trapling. "Speak up, sir, speak up!"

Cranford moistened his lips, but Martindale silenced him.

"Captain Rankin rushed over and told me Cranford had come back for the ambergris. Then I understood what had happened. I know Vint, so I just thought——"

"It's wonderful of you," admitted Trapling, "but why did you come at all?"

"Why?" Martindale's eyes sparkled, but his voice was expressionless. "Why? Because I knew darn well Cranford was up to some little game. There ain't no native tribe on the whole of Tongoa. Got that straight for another time, Cranford? Not one. The last of 'em were wiped out by measles 'way back thirty years ago.

"And now if you've seen enough of this island, suppose I see you back on board?"

" 'Ere," burst out able seaman Bodger, "what about this 'ere ambergris? Leavin' it 'ere after orl?"

Trapling turned impulsively to Martindale:

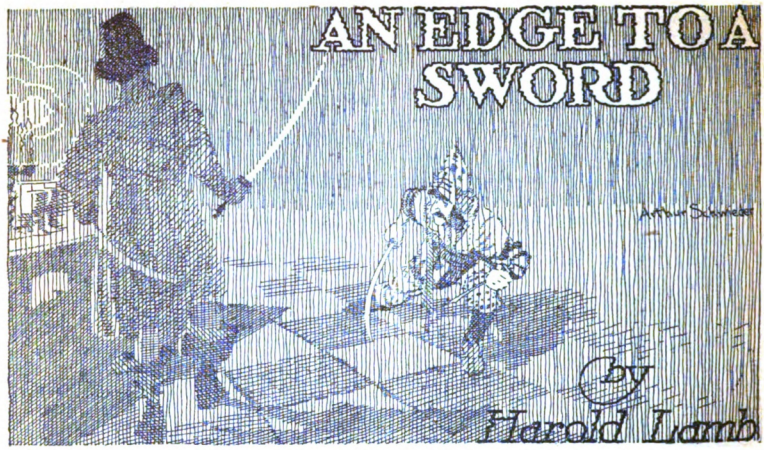
"Take it," he begged, "as a favor to us, as an—an apology if you like. We are very sorry——"

They were still arguing when they reached the beach.

"Tell you what," said Martindale, "if you really mean it, I'll accept half—give the rest to your crew. They deserve it."

"So good of you," declared Mrs. Trapling. "And what," her expression changed as she glared at Cranford who stood between the two sailors, "and what can we do with that—er—person?"

"Leave him here," suggested Martindale. "Vint will be coming round soon. They ought to have quite a cheerful time together."



Author of "Sangar," "The Road of the Giants," etc.

OLD GOLOTO, my uncle, has made many swords. Even, sometimes for the gentry that lie a night or so at our hamlet of Rusk when they are journeying along the highway. And my uncle has a saying that every sword he makes grows to resemble its owner.

I do not know. But upon our rare visits to the manor house, where the *boyar* Sayanski—the nobleman, our landowner—has a collection of rarities, my uncle has taken up various weapons and said—

"This belonged to an out-at-heels adventurer who served the devil more than God." Or, "This was cared for, once, by a khan of the Turks."

Why specks of rust along the blade, and a gilded hand guard should make him say the first, or the glint of blue in a simitar's steel, and the faint lines of chasing that once had been inlaid with gold should hint to him the second, is hard to say. But, whether or no, old Goloto's words often proved true.

Certainly, he was a plain smith, a God-fearing man, who held no intercourse with the evil spirits. He alone of the good men of Rusk knows the truth of the bewitched sword of Ayub.

But of this weapon and what befell at the manor house on that Winter night in the year 1610 of Our Lord he has not spoken, save to me.

What my eyes beheld and what Old Goloto told me I shall set down in few words, being no clerk or even *bandura* player, like Blind Foma, who was Ayub's friend.

WE WERE taking our ease on the bench in front of the tavern—that is, Sayanski, the landowner, sat at one end and my uncle and Foma at the other, while I—the lad Gregory—teased the innkeeper's wolfhound.

It was the quiet hour before sunset, a warm day in early Summer. The drone of the locusts out on the steppe, and the rustle of the reeds along the Dnieper's bank were louder than the low voices of the men. By the whipping post across the highway the girls were giggling and Ima, my young cousin was the worst of them.

But I heard the *boyar*, Sayanski say that he only sat at the tavern to watch for the coming of his relative, who was an officer in the Moscow guards. He had said the same thing for a month; still, he always drank a good deal of the tavern's best mead. He wore a soiled neckcloth, and his eyes were never still; some said he kept his hands in his pockets so much because his sleeves had no lace, others argued that his fingers were counting over his monies.

I was wondering whether he really looked for his relative, the officer, or whether he

liked the smack of the mead, when my uncle spoke up.

"Might that be him?"

Old Goloto never called Sayanski "my lord" like Foma and the rest. We all looked up and saw a rider entering the *sloboda* with a led horse.

Now those were uncertain times, and Rusk is in the open steppe country on the highway that runs from Moscow south, along the Dnieper to the Black Sea. We were on the frontier kept by the armies of the Empire, and in our time we saw many an affray between river pirates and the barges of Greek and Armenian merchants, and many a raid by the Tatars from the steppe. So we looked twice at every stranger.

This one, however, was not the landowner's relative, because he approached from the south. He was a man big around the barrel as a wine keg, with his long sheepskin coat thrown back, for the heat, and his high, black sheepskin hat on the back of his head. So we saw that the front part of his head was bald and sunburned.

"That's a good horse," said my uncle.

The stranger rode a black stallion, massive in the chest, but with good length of limb and a fine head. Well that it was so, for the rider must have weighed more than two hundred pounds.

"Pig of an innkeeper!" he roared, when he reined in. "Don't you know when a Cossack is thirsty?"

At this summons the tavern keeper came out, promptly enough, with a mug of corn brandy, but he hung back when he noticed that the stranger had no coins ready. Nor did he have sword or purse hanging from his broad leather girdle.

"Dog of the ——!" growled the Cossack, his black eyes seeking us out. "Good sirs, did you ever see the like? Here a Christian knight who has smoked his pipe in the mosques of Constantinople must go with a dry gullet at the pleasure of this mid-wife!"

At this Blind Foma smiled adown one side of his greasy face. From eye to chin on the other side his cheek had been ripped up by a wild boar's tusk: this eye had been torn out, and the other was feeble. The children were afraid of him, and I always crossed my fingers when I met him o' nights near the Witches' Wood on the river bank.

The tavern keeper rubbed his chin and stood first on one foot, then on the other. Sometimes the Cossacks heaped good coins upon him, and spoil taken from the Turks and Tatars. At other times they gutted his cellar and whipped him to square the reckoning.

They were a wild folk from the southern steppe, who were always riding to a war, or from one. My uncle did a deal of work for them, sharpening their swords, or mending their cuirasses or shoeing their beasts with good leather. He never complained when he lacked of pay, because he said that if it were not for the knights of Kazakdom the Turks and Tatars would come over the steppe and burn our villages.

Ima, Goloto's devilkin of a daughter, always liked to see the Cossacks come along the highway, for at such times there would be dancing and music. Just now she was standing at the stallion's head, twisting her toes in the dust and shaking back her long, black locks as she did when she wanted to be noticed.

Ayub, as the Cossack was called, reached into the pack of the led horse and pulled out a silver goblet, throwing it at the tavern keeper by way of paying his score for the mead. After the innkeeper had examined the goblet he fell to rubbing his hands and called Ayub a noble knight. But the Cossack grunted and asked Ima to fetch him the mead. She looked at my uncle.

"Give the Cossack his drink," said Goloto in his slow fashion, and she did so.

Ayub chuckled and took one of her locks in his big paw admiringly but without trying to kiss her as most men did.

"Have you any more trinkets like that, Cossack?" Sayanski, the *boyar*, spoke up, pointing at the goblet, although his eyes were studying the big stallion.

When Ayub emptied his sack in the road and a fine Moslem helmet rolled out, with a pearl-studded girdle and a dagger shaped like one of our sickles, Syanaski went over and picked them up and said he would give Ayub two gold sequins for the lot and then he would have money for whatever he wanted.

"As you like," responded the Cossack, dismounting—for our mead was famous.

And the tavern keeper muttered under his breath as Sayanski paid over the coins. The sequins did not amount to a fourth the value of the things, and if the landowner had let Ayub alone the tavern would have been the gainer.

"I see that you have borne yourself like a *bogatyr*—a hero—in the wars, my fine fellow," went on Sayanski and this time his eyes dwelt on the stallion. "How is it that you lack a sword?"

Ayub, who was taking the saddle off the black made no response.

"Doubtless," said Sayanski again, raising his voice, "you broke your sword on the thigh bone of a Moslem. Why should a knight like you trouble to care for two horses? I will give you a fine sword and a score of bright *byzants* for the stallion. Come, will you sell him?"

"Not for a piece of the true Cross," answered the Cossack.

"For thirty *byzants?*"

For the first time Ayub looked at Sayanski carefully, and for some reason my uncle took his clay pipe from his lips and leaned forward, although he is not at all hard of hearing and the landowner had spoken in a high, clear voice.

But the Cossack only said that he was hungry, and that the innkeeper should roast the quarter of a sheep and bring him a cask of corn brandy. After feeding and bedding down the stallion and the led horse himself in the stable, he came back and swore that things were dull in our village. He sat down on his saddle and smoked a pipe of my uncle's tobacco, and shouted for the *bandura* players to strike up a measure and the girls to dance.

Ah, it was a fine feast we had that evening when Ayub spent his two sequins and even the dogs were fat. Blind Foma played, but he could never play fast enough for the Cossack, who jumped in among the villagers and began to leap and shout, striking his silver heels on the earth in the wild dance of the South.

"Eh—eh! That is how it should be done, you sluggards! —— take you; what dolts you are!"

It made my blood throb. And Ima began to show off, as usual, spinning around in the dance like a sprite whirling up a chimney's smoke. When she danced that night her eyes were dark and her cheeks paled. The moon had come up over the osiers behind the inn, at the river bank, and the people looked like shadows. Ayub had eyes only for my cousin, when she danced, and thereafter he cherished her in his heart, although I did not know this until the time came when he first used the bewitched sword.

It was long, long ago. Who can forget a night like that? The warm breath of the hay fields was about us, but even when the good people were merriest the chill breath of the river came up, through the Witches' Wood, and Blind Foma lifted his head and shivered as if some one had touched him on the cheek.

THE next morning after I had watched Ima drive off the two cows to the fields, I ran around to the inn, keeping out of sight of Goloto's forge, because I wanted to see what Ayub was up to.

He was not in the tavern. In the middle of the road he lay, his booted feet stretched wide, his scalp lock stretched out above his head in the dust, snoring louder than a dozen wolfhounds. So I waited until the sun should stir him up from his sleep. And presently Sayanski came along, riding his brown mare on business of his own. Seeing Ayub, the *boyar* tickled his bald forehead none too gently with a whip, and the Cossack sat up snorting.

"I hear, Ayub, that you have squandered all your money in carousing. Tck! Tck! Well, a man like you must have his fling, I suppose. You'll want some money to go on with, of course."

As Ayub did nothing but yawn and spit, Sayanski continued.

"What do you say to twenty-five gold *byzants* for that stallion?"

A man who has looked long on the pot is a dour fellow to prod out of his sleep, as I have come to know when Old Goloto was wakened on the morn after a Christian feast day.

Ayub looked up, his heavy brows drawn down.

"Have you really twenty-five gold pieces?"

Sayanski actually laughed and began to count them out, quickly enough, from his pouch. To make sure he counted them back again into his other fist.

"There my fine fellow, you can see them."

"Aye, you have them. Well, if you were to offer me twenty-five thousand *byzants* and a talisman that would make Satan himself turn tail you couldn't have my stallion."

And then Ayub stretched himself out again with his arm across his eyes to keep out the sun and began to snore. Sayanski thrust the coins back into his pouch as if

they were hot, and his thin face grew red. He raised his whip to beat the Cossack, but seeing that I was watching from the hedge, he rode off saying under his breath that Ayub was a ditch-born dolt.

But before he went he spoke to the tavern keeper, saying that the Cossack should have neither bed nor board without paying down for it, and the tavern keeper promised because he feared the landowner. In the village of Rusk were many who feared Sayanski's visits, and the reckoning of his interest books. Still, my uncle said, who ever heard of a village without an owner, or a serf without a master?

So that morning the Cossack took his beasts out of stable and went off toward the river. We thought he had crossed Father Dnieper and gone off on the Tatar side of the river, perhaps to steal horses.

That night, however, Blind Foma said Ayub had cleared a patch of land not far from the village, at the edge of the wood.

He built himself a hut of osiers, woven together, and plastered it over with wet clay that hardened when it dried. Then he made a low, flat stove of stones, covered with the clay, for a bed when the frost came.

Foma went to live with him, as the *bandura* player was accustomed to do when his company was welcomed and there was food to be shared. Together they made nets for bird snares and other woven nets for fish. Ayub added a wattle shed to the open end of the hut, for his horses, so that they could be near the stove in Winter, and worked hard for a while with one of my uncle's scythes cutting hay which he stacked behind the hut.

In the evenings, when they were most apt to be awake at the same time, I went often to the hut by the river, to listen to their stories.

Ayub, when I brought some of my uncle's tobacco, would tell me how the Cossacks of the Siech—the war encampments—made great skiffs to row down the river to the Black Sea and tackle the Sultan's fine craft. And how the comrades of his *kuren* had died, one by one—some nailed to a cross by the Poles, some burnt alive by the Moslems; others drowned in a tempest on the water, others with their brains scattered by their foes' pistolettes. Fine tales they were.

Best of them, however, was the account of how Ayub had chased a Tatar over the steppe through the tall grass as high as the riders' heads, until the black stallion gained on the Tatar horse, and their hoofs struck fire so mightily that the whole steppe was soon in flames, whereupon the Tatar's horse began to fly through the air with its tail aflame, going higher and higher until it was galloping around the stars like a streak of red fire. Ayub asked me if I had never seen a star shooting down to earth with a flaming tail. To be sure, such things were!

But Ayub was very anxious to know if I ever saw such an event near Rusk, because he wanted very much to mount the black stallion and rush to where the Tatar landed on earth again and put an end to him.

"Eh—eh!" Ayub would chuckle when he had finished this tale. "You are a good lad, Gregory, and some day you will have a horse like mine, and chase a Tatar all the way to Cathay. —— take me if you won't!"

When harvest time came he went into the fields with our people and for a few days did the work of three men. He was stronger, even than Old Goloto in his prime, when my uncle could thrash any two men in the district.

After that he and Foma had a grand carouse at the inn, and when the first snow came down on the steppe, instead of riding south to the wars, Ayub took to sitting in my uncle's smithy, helping him at times mending saddles, or with the bellows when Old Goloto had a tough piece of work in hand. So he managed to be at the forge when the girl Ima came in at noon with our barley cakes and cheese and *varenukha*—corn brandy.

Then Ayub would follow her with his eyes, and chuckle when she teased him. When she sat in the doorway combing her hair or trying on a new cap, he said sometimes that she would make a pretty handful for a husband.

"Well," Ima would say, tossing her head, "I won't marry you, anyway, Ayub. Why, you would take your black horse and go off somewhere or other and then the Tatars would send back your head in a basket!"

"True, as God is my witness," Ayub would answer. And he never laughed when he said that.

"I hear," Goloto would put in, "that the Moslems are tearing the robes off the holy *batkos*, the good Christian priests in the South. Why don't you mount and ride across the border and teach them a thing or two, Ayub? You could break the sultan across your knee—*crack*, like that!"

"The —— take the sultan and all the Moslems, too!" And the Cossack, chin on fist, would sit and look at my cousin.

At such times, however, Ayub was moody. His eyes would grow heavy and he would sit without moving. Then he would be restless as a fish out of water, and take out the big black horse, to ride him down the highway and back, the stallion tearing over the hard-packed snow with arched neck and flying mane. Horse and rider would be steaming like mad when they came back. I thought perhaps Ayub was looking for his enemy, up among the stars, to come down to earth near Rusk.

Whenever he passed Sayanski, who was always about his business on the brown mare, the landowner would rein in and gaze after the stallion as if Ayub owed him rent monies that Sayanski would one day collect.

But when Christmas drew near, his excellency's temper changed for the better. At least he gave Ayub the sword that was bewitched.

Sayanski said it was a pity that Ayub should lack a sword, while he had so many in his collection. The weapon he bestowed on the Cossack was a heavy one with a long hilt and a splendid scabbard of leather in which was an insription inlaid in gilt. Sayanski said this inscription was a charm.

Whoever wielded the sword could cut through the body of an enemy as easily as through a tallow candle. An iron shield or a shirt of Turkish mail would fall apart at the touch of the heavy brand.

Now Sayanski knew this for two reasons. He had the weapon from a wandering gipsy in the Astrakan market place, and the gipsy had stolen it from the tomb of a Turkish khan, where splendid things were kept, among them the magic sword that the Moslems feared to handle after the death of its owner. We, along the border, had heard the tale.

Also, Foma, who recked a little of Moslem script, said that the writing on the scabbard was the legend

Steel will not turn aside the edge of this sword when the right hand wields it.

Only, Sayanski warned Ayub that he must not tamper with the weapon, or take it from scabbard to hew wood or quarter a sheep, or the edge would be dulled. Ayub tended it carefully, too, because once I saw him studying the blade and tapping it with his great fingers as if he feared it might break in his hands.

Truly, a fine gift. And Sayanski asked not a *kopeck* in return. The people of Rusk stared mightily when Ayub appeared among them with the sword slung from his girdle, but the Cossack was pleased.

"Eh—eh! This sword will match the magic of the Tatar who is chasing around among the stars. Gregory, my lad, when he comes down we'll soon finish him off!"

I thought perhaps on Christmas eve when the spirits, as every one knows, are up and about, Ayub's enemy might ride down into Rusk in flames. God willed otherwise, as I shall relate.

THE man who came to Rusk several days before Christmas was not the Tatar, but a splendid nobleman, Varslan. A sledge drew up at the smithy one day when Ima had just brought our noon bite, and Ayub was in his hut sleeping on his stove.

A runner of the sledge was broken and Varslan ordered my uncle to mend it. He was a tall man, wrapped up in a sable coat that came to the tops of his polished boots. A heyduke waited on him—a fine officer's servant in a red *kaftan*.

"Is this the *sloboda* of Rusk, fellow?" The gentleman asked of my uncle. "Then direct me to the estate of the landowner, and be quick about it!"

When Old Goloto had pointed out the roof of the manor house near the edge of the wood, the nobleman swore that he'd be roasted in a brazen ox if he would lie here in such a sheep's trough a night after the sledge was mended. He tapped his snuff box and flicked the lace at his throat, scowling until his glance fell on Ima, who had drawn herself off into a corner, instead of hanging around as usual. Then the *boyar* saluted her politely and asked her name. When he would have taken her hand she slipped away.

"Go to the manor house," he ordered his heyduke, "and inform the worthy Sayanski

that the Cornet Varslan, his cousin, is arrived. I will follow at once."

After he had given some more directions about the sledge, he looked around for Ima, but she had vanished. He took out his painted snuff box again, and walked off. His long saber, hung upon a low baldric, slapping against his boots—a tall man, quick moving, a fine weapon at his side.

So the officer, Sayanski's cousin, came to Rusk.

And that very evening he visited the tavern of the landowner, although Sayanski had not been there for a month. They sat down at the table next to Ayub and Blind Foma, where I was—for already the excitement of the coming festival was upon us children, and I wanted to see all that was going on.

We all bowed when the two nobles came in, but Sayanski took no notice of us, as he was whispering to his cousin. The Cornet ordered wine and cursed the innkeeper because it was not better. He sat back on his stool as if it had been a lord's chair, and drank half a bottle, pulling at his mustache in silence the while, his sable coat thrown back, showing the lace and fine blue cloth of his uniform. No one presumed to speak aloud, except Ayub who was trying to persuade Foma to play a piece.

So it happened that every one was sitting looking at them, and Sayanski was fingering his neckcloth restlessly, when the officer leaned back too far and lost his balance. He fell against Ayub, and got to his feet without assistance.

"A pox on you, for a clumsy lout! Can't you keep from bumping into a man like me!" The gray eyes of the Cornet were cold.

"Health to you, excellency. Indeed I didn't move from my seat," answered Ayub, without growing angry.

We all thought that the officer was provoked at his own clumsiness and wanted to make out that Ayub had jostled him.

"I say that you did! A fine *ataman*, by all the saints, to sit guzzling in a village!"

Not until then had we known that Ayub was captain of a *kuren* of Cossacks. Perhaps the Cornet Varslan had noticed some mark of his rank, or had heard of him. I do not know. Anyway, the officer was working himself into a magnificent rage.

Ayub merely chuckled and looked around as if it were a good joke.

"Mother of God!" cried Varslan. "Do you laugh at me?"

"Why should I? When a fellow has a bottle of wine inside his skin like you, he feels like joking sure enough."

"Ah, you call me fellow—you, a lick-spittle ruffian!"

Varslan laid his hand on the hilt of his saber and aimed a kick at the stool on which Ayub sat. The big Cossack, however, rose to his feet so quickly that the stool spun away from under him. As he moved his fingers touched the hand guard of the weapon Sayanski had given him, and he shook his head from side to side like a bear confronted by one of the wolfhounds.

We all sat very quiet, and the landowner went over to a corner of the narrow room as if his boots would make too much noise. I was wondering if the Cossack would cut Varslan in two pieces with his magic sword, but Ayub drank the rest of the mead that was in his tankard and wiped his mustache lazily.

"Eh, Cornet," he muttered, "this tavern is very small. Still it is much better than a box of a room six feet by two by three—the kind a fellow lives in after he is dead."

Varslan frowned, as if puzzled by this, and Ayub took Foma by the arm and moved to the door, stopping to pay his score and bid us good-night. It seemed to me that the officer was more angry than before, for some reason or other. Before long he went out, leaving the reckoning to Sayanski, who tramped along at his heels. I waited a moment and followed, pulling up my coat, for the night was bitter without.

The two men from the manor house were standing in the highway, talking and, after pretending to walk around the tavern, I tiptoed up to the hedge, glad that the moon was behind clouds just then.

Varslan was saying that the Cossack was a coward, and he could not make him stand his ground—whatever he meant by that. Then Sayanski pulled at his sleeve and said—

"Hush!"

But as they moved off I heard Varslan answer.

"It will be simpler, you confounded dog, to take the horse another way. You will gain nothing from the sword, after all. Without doubt my dear cousin— I'll find amusement enough to pass the time."

Then they released their horses and rode

away. I wasted no time in circling the village in running to my uncle's cottage, because it looked as if the two gentlemen had meant to quarrel with Ayub, so that Sayanski could get his hand on the black stallion, in some way or other. The thought troubled me, the more so that I found my uncle and Ayub together in the smithy, although it was then late at night.

Old Goloto would listen to no words from me, but thrust me out of the door, shutting it tight and barring it from within. I lingered outside, shivering, because Ayub ought to know what I had heard.

The two talked within a long time, and when the bellows began to hiss and my uncle's hammer to strike on the anvil, I knew that they would not come out for a long time. Enough of their speech had reached me to show that Ayub had come to my uncle to have an edge put on his sword—the bewitched weapon that Sayanski had given him.

So I crossed over to our cottage and warmed myself by the stove where Ima was busy sewing the last silver threads on a kind of tinsel cap. She put it on and looked at me saucily, saying that she would get more cakes and pennies thrown to her tomorrow night—Christmas eve—than I would, when we went to the manor house to sing carols.

"I am too old to go around with the children," I answered proudly. "Ayub says that soon I will have a horse and ride off to the wars."

"Pah! Ayub is too lazy to move off his stove!"

Still, she kissed me good-night without pinching me, and I heard her singing by the stove.

CHRISTMAS eve was cold. Ice had formed along the banks of Father Dnieper—solid, snow-coated ice at the shore, thin, gray ice farther out. Only in mid-river did the black current run past us without a coating.

When the full moon came up over the bare branches of the Witches' Wood, by the river bank, we children gathered together and went from cottage to cottage, singing carols and scrambling for the tid-bits thrown to us by the good people.

The Witches' Wood we shunned, perhaps because the chill breath of the river was to be felt under the skeletons of trees, perhaps because it was the night that the river spirits were apt to climb ashore and snatch away goats or babies. Especially the folk of Rusk maintained that a *data-baba*, a woman hob-gob, lived in the wood. Many people had seen the hob-gob o' nights, so she was surely there.

You may be sure we skirted the trees when we went to sing at Ayub's hut. The Cossack chuckled at us and gave us a fine mess of warm sausages that we ate as we tramped away toward the manor house, on the other side of the wood. I could see Ayub looking after us, his eyes following Ima like a dog's. It struck me then what a pretty thing she was, in her silver cap, like a fine princess. Perhaps because she had not teased me the night before—

At the manor house, which was splendidly lighted with real candles, we sang "Come, Holy Spirit," and Varslan came to one of the doors and joined in with a strong, mellow voice. Then he scattered kopecks with both hands, as if he had been drinking, and we were soon shouting, over having money—actually money—in our fists. Going back to the village, some one dared us to go around by the river, through the Witches' Wood.

We began by taking hands and running as hard as we could, skipping and shouting. But before long the uneven ground and the thickets separated us, and I heard some of the girls crying. I shivered—it was so quiet under the tall trees where little clods of snow and bits of ice fall down on the snow crust with a strange rattling, and the shadows of the thickets all looked like old women waiting to jump out on us. A girl screamed aloud behind me and I started to go back out of the wood.

It was a frightful, whimpering cry, as if one of the children had seen the evil hob-gob.

I heard it again, nearer as I went through the last fringe of bushes and saw the river in front of me. Then I stopped, surprized.

None of the other children were around, except Ima—I knew her silver cap in the bright moonlight, and her flying black hair. She was running away from two men, and they were the Cornet Varslan, and his heyduke. And she was passing out from the bank to the snow-coated ice.

It was a strange, new game, I thought, as I watched them. The men overtook Ima, who struggled in their hands like a wild pony of the steppe caught for the first time.

It was when she cried out again that I understood she was afraid.

For she broke away from them and ran, as if the Evil One were after her, her shining black boots flying over the thin, gray ice out from shore. I heard Varslan laugh as he tried to catch her; then he stopped and called out angrily. She looked over her shoulder, just as the ice at the current's edge gave way and she dropped into the black water.

Ah, that is a thing my mind's eye can see even now—the rush of the dark water, Ima's glittering cap floating down-stream, and the two men standing looking out from where the ice was still safe. I must have been running then, toward them, for presently I was shouting at Varslan and weeping at the same time.

"Go, and bring her back, excellency. See, there she is! Hurry, hurry and swim after her."

I was tugging at his sleeve the while, but the two stared out at the current and looked at each other. The heyduke shrugged his broad shoulders and shook his head. Varslan was repeating under his breath:

"Mother of God—how cold it must be! What a fool—what a fool!"

Then he noticed me and drew his arm away with a frown.

"Excellency," said the heyduke, "it's that brat of the smith's."

"Gregory," Varslan spoke evenly now as if nothing had happened at all. "Your sister, or cousin, or whatever she was, slipped on the ice, and it broke under her. Hm, yes. We were playing a game, d'ye understand?"

But I could not take my eyes from the black water, where Ima's cap was no longer to be seen.

"D'ye understand? We could not aid her—it was not safe."

My knees were trembling and my throat seemed to be stuffed with something. By the time I reached the men Ima was beyond any help of mine. They spoke together in a low tone and moved off toward the manor house. By and by I felt that my hands were numb and the tears frozen on my cheeks. I hated Varslan, yet could not understand why.

Reaching the shore I looked back, just on the point of calling to Ima to come after me. Then for the first time I realized that she was dead and began to run through the wood.

In front of me a dark figure stepped from a shadow, but I was not frightened. It was Blind Foma, the moonlight gleaming on the scar on his cheek. He said he had heard Ima scream.

When I told him what had happened at the river his lips drew back from his teeth on the side of his face away from the scar, and he started to feel his way through the trees toward Ayub's hut. I ran on, thinking of nothing but of finding Old Goloto.

MY UNCLE never moved hand or eye while he listened to my tale. Then I heard him muttering and saw that both his hands were gripped in his beard. He did not take his hands away nor did his lips stop moving. Once he looked up and asked if Blind Foma had surely said that it was Ima's voice. Then his brown face grew pale and he reached up one hand toward the sword he kept over the mantle.

"Will you go to the manor house and punish Varslan?" I cried. "I hate him! It was an evil game that he played, and Ima was frightened."

Old Goloto looked at his hand, in the firelight, and commenced shaking his head from side to side.

"*Ai-al* They are the *boyars*—gentlefolk. Nay, nay, Gregory——"

Never before or since have I heard my uncle curse a man. His eyes were set and his hands shook. Then he stumbled out of the cottage, without cap or coat; yet he did not take his sword and he went toward the river.

I could not abide in the cottage, nor would my thoughts turn from Varslan and his heyduke. I walked over the snow, following the beaten paths until I came to the manor house, which was still glowing with candles. Below the house the chimes in the church were sounding the midnight carol. The door stood open, and I entered the long hall, going into the dining chamber.

Here a fine fire was crackling away on the hearth, and Varslan and Sayanski were sitting near it with steaming glasses of *varenukha*. The officer heard my step, but, seeing that I was alone sat back in his chair, holding the long saber over his knees.

"Give him some money," said Sayanski after a while.

Now I remembered that, all the time, I had held some of Varslan's *kopecks* clutched in my fist. I threw them down at his feet, and he looked at me curiously.

"The ——!" said Sayanski. "We can't have any doings like that. Come, imp, haven't you told your uncle that Ima was drowned—" he coughed—"an accident, mind you? Well, it's high time you were about it——"

He stopped and both of the men rose. A board creaked behind me, and I saw that Ayub stood in the door of the dining-room. Just then the heyduke entered with a tray and a pitcher of the smoking brandy, and he set the things down with a clatter when he saw the Cossack smiling at him.

Ayub did not seem to be restless or moody this night. He took off his high, sheepskin hat and bowed, his scalp lock wiggling on his shaven head.

"Health to you, good sirs," he said in his slow voice. "I am the *ataman* Ayub of the Ural encampment, whom you called hard names at the tavern a while ago. I hope, by the saints, you haven't forgotten! Nay, finish your glass, Cornet Varslan."

He strode toward the table, the loose boards squeaking under his weight, and clanked his new sword, scabbard and all, down beside the tray so that the pitcher and the heyduke, too, jumped.

"Dog," he growled at the attendant, "don't you know when a Cossack is thirsty?"

The heyduke grinned under his mustache and backed away, looking at his master, so Ayub filled himself a glass and emptied it down his throat, and then told me to run along to my uncle. But I did not go further than the door, because Varslan spoke up, staring the while at Ayub as if he were a stranger.

"——ed if I wasn't drunk at the inn. You spoke of it yourself, *ataman*, at the time, I think. Will you take another glass with me?"

For some reason the officer had changed. He did not seem to want to quarrel with Ayub now.

The Cossack shook his head. "Nay, Cornet Varslan, you will not drink another mug of this brandy."

The officer frowned, pulling at his mustache as he watched Ayub. I saw that Sayanski was rubbing his hands together, looking from one to the other as if well satisfied.

"You were pleased to try to kill me, Cornet," smiled Ayub, "to have the black stallion for your cousin. That is a small matter. But now, by the Cross, you have the blood of a young girl on your hands. So if you don't take up your saber I'll have to clip your mustachios and mark you for a murderer——"

In a trice the Cossack's brows drew down and his teeth gleamed. Varslan had whipped out his sword and stepped toward him. Ayub had his weapon clear of the scabbard Sayanski had given him, and parried as the officer slashed wide. The two blades struck fire with a great clash. Ayub warded the saber by simply stiffening his massive right arm, although Varslan had put all his height and weight into the blow.

Then Varslan stepped back, biting his lip. And Sayanski's eyes seemed to pop out of his head of a sudden, and he swore as if greatly puzzled by what had happened. But the Cossack advanced eagerly, cutting and thrusting, crying—

"To one of us life: to the other death!"

I wondered why, if Ayub's sword was bewitched, he had not slashed the saber in two, and ended Varslan right there.

But the air was humming with the vibrating steel and the two fighters were ringed in flashes of light, where the candle glow caught the steel of the blades.

Clash—cling: clang—clang! It was a brave sight!

Ayub stepped aside suddenly and cut down, but not at his foe. The heyduke had been stealing toward him, thrusting a chair at his legs. A drawn saber was in the man's hand, yet it did not serve in the least to check the Cossack's stroke that shore through coat and flesh severing the heyduke's body in two—save for the spine.

Groaning, the man fell on his knees, clutching at his entrails that were slipping out of the great gash. Then the two swordsmen were at it again, *cling—clang—cling!*

Sayanski went white, and felt with one hand along the mantel against which he stood. I saw a long pistol gleam in the firelight, and cried a warning to Ayub.

" 'Ware of Sayanski!"

To this day I know not if it was an accident or not, but the flying tip of Ayub's blade caught the face of the landowner, under the nose. Sayanski cried out and dropped the pistol. Most of his upper lip and some of his teeth had been cut out by

the sweep of the heavy blade. Pressing both hands to his mouth, he commenced to walk up and down, staggering against the chairs.

Varslan was not a coward. His mouth set and his eyes gleamed under beads of sweat. He was a match for Ayub in skill, but he had seen the Cossack's sword slice through flesh and bone and gristle as if through the tallow of a candle, and he gave ground continually, biding his time to strike inside the swinging blade of Ayub.

It so happened that he backed against the hearth, and felt the pistol strike against his foot. After a swift thrust, he reached down with his left hand and raised the weapon. His hand held it out in front of him for the time that a man could count five slowly. Then Varslan's body toppled over on the hearth.

His head had been slashed from his shoulders.

IN OUR village of Rusk the good people tell wayfarers of the bewitched sword of Ayub, and how the servants of Sayanski, coming up from church after the midnight mass, found two men dead in the dining chamber, one with his body cut in twain, the other with no head to his body, and Sayanski voiceless.

Surely, our people will say, the sword was enchanted that did this. And they look at me askance, sometimes, because I ride the pony of Ayub—the one he had used for a pack animal—that the Cossack gave me when he rode away to the wars that same night.

Sayanski himself never uttered a word concerning what happened at the manor house, because he left Rusk to live in Moscow—going off in a closed carriage. And it is true that our village is the gainer by his leaving.

Only once did my uncle speak of the sword. This was one noon, when we were sitting on the stools that had been Ayub's and Ima's, in the days when the Cossack was one of us and the girl had brought us all a bite at midday.

"Gregory," he said, "the sword that Sayanski gave to Ayub was not bewitched. But it was accursed of an evil mind. The stem of the blade, the part that fitted into the long hilt had been filed almost through where the flaw could not be seen. A blow would have broken it off."

I thought of the dismay of the three men who had watched the fight in the manor house, when Varslan's first stroke failed to take effect: yet I thought, too, of the great cuts that had killed two of the men.

"The ways of Providence are past finding out," my uncle went on meditatively. "Ayub was angered, and he was one of the strongest of men. As for the weapon he used—he suspected that the sword given him was not right, and brought it to me the night before the fight. I discovered the flaw, and fitted a new blade upon the old hilt—a blade tempered and edged to the taste of a christian warrior."

"CHEROKEE BILL"—BAD-MAN

by E. A. Brininstool

THE most notable of all the bad-men of the border since the killing of "Billy the Kid" in New Mexico in 1881, was Crawford Goldsby, alias "Cherokee Bill," a youth but twenty years of age when executed at Fort Smith, Ark., but the most notorious of all the desperadoes who infested the Indian Territory.

Cherokee Bill was born in Texas in 1876. His parents were of mixed white, negro and Indian blood. At ten years of age he attended the Carlisle Indian School, and at that time was not considered a bad boy at all. His parents separated when he was about twelve, and the boy drifted into bad associations until at eighteen he was a big husky youth with a liking for bad whisky and tough companions.

His first serious trouble followed a fistic encounter with a negro. Bill was beaten. Two days later he shot the negro and fled to the Creek and Seminole Nations, where he met Jim and Bill Cook, later noted outlaws. In a fight with officers at Fourteen-Mile Creek one of the officials was

killed. This was Bill's real baptismal gun-fight.

With a pal he next held up a store at Lenopah, near the Indian Territory line. Here Bill shot and killed an innocent paper-hanger, at work in the building, because the man happened to look through the window to see what the noise in the store was about. A reward of one thousand three hundred dollars, dead or alive, was now put on Bill's head.

Train-robberies, store hold-ups and several murders followed at the hands of this youthful desperado. He finally became infatuated with a half-breed girl named Maggie Glass, and a plot was hatched whereby the outlaw was prevailed upon to pay the girl a visit at the home of a deputy marshal.

He came armed to the teeth, and all the time he was there his Winchester never left his hand. He slept in the same bed with the deputy, each watchful of the other and ready to kill at the first opportunity.

The next morning Bill rolled a cigaret and bent over the fireplace for a lighted splinter. The deputy hit him on the head with a stick of wood and knocked him down. After a desperate fight he was overpowered and taken to Fort Smith, where he was tried, found guilty of murder and sentenced to hang June 25. An appeal to the Supreme Court resulted in the decision of the lower court being sustained, and he was resentenced to hang March 17, 1896.

Months had been consumed by Cherokee Bill's attorneys in an attempt to delay the law. Meantime Bill fretted in his cell. On the tenth of July, 1895, two forty-five-caliber revolvers were smuggled into the jail. One of them was discovered, but the other was hidden by Bill in a hole in the wall of his cell, made by removing a brick. Bill later stated that the guns were smuggled in to him by an escaped prisoner named Ben Howell. After the finding of one of the revolvers it was freely predicted that "Cherokee Bill will yet kill somebody."

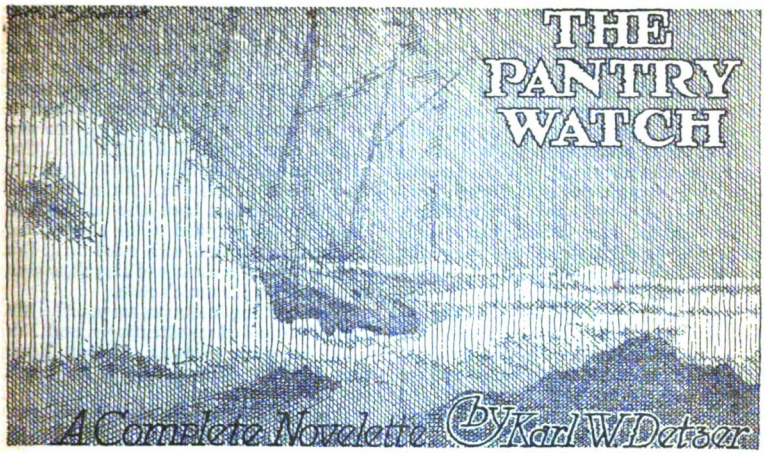
About seven o'clock on the night of July 26 the opportunity for which the bandit had been waiting arrived. Because of warm weather the prisoners had been allowed to remain in the corridors until nearly seven o'clock. Among the guards composing the night watch was Lawrence Keating, one of the best-loved citizens of Fort Smith.

Cherokee Bill was in his cell, but owing to some tampering with the lever locking all the cells simultaneously, Bill's cell was unfastened with the others. Keating and a turnkey were examining the cells when the outlaw suddenly sprang out, revolver in hand, ordering, "Hands up!" Keating tried to draw his gun, but was instantly shot twice and mortally wounded. A terrific battle ensued within the jail between the outlaw and the other guards, but Bill soon exhausted his ammunition and surrendered.

Tremendous excitement prevailed when it was learned that the desperado had added another victim to his already long list, and it was with difficulty that the prison officials saved him from mob violence and a lynching.

As there was yet one case pending in the Supreme Court against the bandit, doubts were expressed if he could be tried for his latest crime, but Judge Parker stated that the grand jury could take up the case at once. He was accordingly tried, found guilty and hanged on the date already set for his execution.

A peculiar feature of this case is the number of times the figure thirteen occurs. It is said Cherokee Bill had murdered thirteen persons; a reward of thirteen hundred dollars was offered for his capture; he fired thirteen shots in his last fight; the judge took thirteen minutes in charging the jury; the actual hours consumed in the trial were thirteen; the jury were thirteen minutes in reaching a verdict; there were thirteen witnesses for the prosecution, and the jurymen and deputy guarding them numbered thirteen.



IT WAS an old, old belief, in the days when sailormen knew only seven seas, that the salt wind puts blood into the bloodless and courage into cowards. But that was before the Great Lakes added five tempestuous sisters to the seven who lured those earlier sailors.

Great Lakes gales are saltless, but their winds are as sharp as the teeth of their elder sisters. Theirs is the same subtle witchery, the same ironic laugh. Michigan, the crafty, watches with narrow, coaxing eyes. Superior is mighty, even as the ocean, and she revels in her power. Huron is a pitiless harpy; Erie is treacherous. Little Ontario blusters, or scolds, or sobs.

And each Spring, when the ice is breaking, and gulls sit in solemn rows upon the rotted piling of lost wharves, mothers on the shore kiss their sons good-by; and sons face the fresh, charging waters, to seek what youth seeks, where the horizons are.

There was Eric Anderson, whose hair was yellow and whose eyes were blue and who was eighteen, which is the age when boys go down to the Lakes for their schooling. A firmly knit lad he was that morning in April. The gate rattled as he ran through it, and he swung into a manly pace on the road that leads to Glen Arbor piers. As the highway tilted over the hill, Eric stopped and looked at Pyramid Point, lifting beyond Good Harbor Bay.

Lake Michigan was blue and green, with yellow stripes of sand bars. The sight of it was a spur.

His legs were young, and his name was Eric. What more, to be a sailor? For the sea always claims its own, and Eric's father, and father's father and all the other Erics had lived by the tides and died by them. This time a shore wind had tried to blow away the smell of the sea. There were eighteen years on a farm, and a landsman uncle. But his name was enough; the sea reached in and took him.

Ships were riding the horizon that morning between the low blue islands called the Manitous. On the southermost point of the southern island the light-house stood tall and proper and white in a new-washed sun. You could see it plainly from the upland road, and Eric lagged, with his eyes full of the dim, far sights that youth sees, and his ears humming with youth's song.

Then he remembered his legs and ran again. It was twelve sandy miles to Glen Arbor piers, and Mr. Henderson, the dock-master, was an exacting man. You could guess it from the letter which he had written to Eric's uncle, telling of the schooner *Ransom*, laden with shingles and needing a stout boy. She was due to sail that afternoon. Eric had been pulled out of bed before the first gray lines of dawn, quietly, so as not to stir up his two younger brothers. His mother had breakfasted him against

all future hunger. She had set down the coffee pot to kiss him.

He passed Traverse Lake House, under the pine-clad rim of Sugar Loaf Hill, and the road turned west. Now it lay in a sandy hollow, in a country spotted by naked dunes, with here and there an intrepid birch or cottonwood tree. Then south again, and once more west, and this time the lake shone through the trees, nearer, with the yellow stripes wider and the blue dulled.

Eric whistled and walked faster, with many things to think about. He was sailing on a schooner; that much he knew. It was a kind of sailing-vessel, his uncle had told him, an awkward American ship with at least two masts. The *Ransom* might have three; he wondered. It might be a ship as large as the ones his father sailed on, the clippers and barks and brigs and tall square-riggers that were the lacy background in the stories his mother told.

The road slid down to the beach, and just around the next point spread the docks and the red mill-roofs of Glen Arbor. A vessel lay at one of the piers, a black, short schooner with three stubby masts. A narrow-gage railroad wound drunkenly along the beach, and Eric followed it and the smell of sawdust down to the first long wharf.

Across the stern of the vessel in dirty white paint were the letters, "*Ransom*, of Duluth." Eric looked unbelievingly. His head went light; he purposely rattled the planks as he walked out on the pier. Noise helps drown disappointment.

For the schooner *Ransom* was not a pretty ship. Under her stacks of bright shingles she looked old and dirty and foul. The white paint was blistering; hatch tarpaulins were torn and flapping; paunches of tar overlaid the seams; a disreputable stove-pipe poked its cap at a makeshift angle through the roof of the forecastle.

Boys' eyes do not vision old ships. A schooner like this—she was outside of dreams. She was worn out, battered. Eric thought uncertainly of the weather and winds she must have known. The idea helped reconcile him, and he looked less critically. She swung from the creaking pile by new, three-inch hawsers. At least they were seamanlike, and inside the wheelhouse were brass-trimmed sprockets and shining oak.

A figure in a dockmaster's cap leaned on the rail. Eric judged he was Mr. Henderson, but he was inconspicuous beside the man with him. The other was short and too thick for his clothes; with a loose blue seaman's cap pushed back on his head and a white scar running down from his hair to the left corner of his lip. He wore suspenders over a tight, faded blue shirt, that was stretched with difficulty to meet the top of his tight trousers. An unbuttoned collar stuck out at both sides of his face. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, and his forearms streaked with dried tar. Eric took off his hat, conscious of his yellow hair, and presented his uncle's note.

"You're young Anderson, are you?" Mr. Henderson looked up attentively, and Eric found his voice pleasant. "Well, here's your captain. Minton, this is the boy I was telling you about."

The man in the tight clothes showed a set of tobacco-scarred teeth.

"He ain't very firm for the work, I'm thinking," he commented with a wheeze in his throat.

He prodded Eric with his thumb as if he were a sack of meal.

"But he'll do," he added. "Anything in a pinch."

He turned to Eric, who was watching him covertly.

"Never been to sea?" he asked. "Never aboard ship? Then there's sights afore you, young fellow, and a world of places."

He turned abruptly and shouted for one Wiley. There was a windy note in his voice that made Eric shiver. And the white scar under the hair on his cheek; that, too, was unpleasant. Nothing less than a whale could have made it; or a shingle-mill saw.

The man who pushed his head from a forward hatch had the face of a beef, red, pock-marked, puffed. Below, as he emerged from the hood, was a mass of a body, with a sooty white apron tied around it.

"Aye," he answered.

"Here's your boy, Wiley," Captain Minton said. "Anderson's his name. Break him in in the pantry, show him round a bit." He lowered his tone and spoke over his shoulder to Eric. "I'll take your guardian papers now. He's Wiley, steward. He'll give you your orders till we're under way. He's a good man, seaman and cook. Watch him, and you'll learn a lot about this shipping business."

The interview was done. Captain Minton and Mr. Henderson again were talking. With a rocky sensation in his chest, Eric climbed over the rail and pulled his canvas bag down after him. He turned to thank Mr. Henderson, but that gentleman already had forgotten him.

Wiley waited, with only his head, shoulders and a meat fork showing above the companionway.

"You're a new one," he said, and made a noise in his throat that was too harsh for a chuckle.

"I'm going to learn to sail," Eric answered defensively.

"That's part of every lad's edication," Wiley said, with more good humor. "But first you're going to learn to cook, which is most important. Tumble down."

"Yes, sir."

Eric clutched his bag in front of him, for the steps were narrow; he followed the steward into a tight, airless cubicle. It was dark, and its smell more disagreeable than his uncle's sheep-fold.

"This here pantry," Wiley said, "ain't exactly what I'd like it to be, seein's as we're short-handed a bit and I got to take watches with the rest of them. But with you to give it a hand, it'll be in shape in a jiffy. Now there's the table as needs setting."

He shook his fork toward an obscure passage that led into another small compartment. Eric walked to the doorway. Dim, dusty light shone through a port-hole at the end, illuminating a greasy pine table and two wooden benches.

"There's the mess gear," Wiley's voice came after him. "Behind them brackets, cups hanging on the hooks."

Eric swallowed. So this was the glory of the sea! This uncivil man with the beefy face and his dirty apron. How his mother would have spunked up if she had seen it! And the smells!

SOMEHOW the day passed, and Eric still lived at the end of it. He had been below decks when the *Ransom* cast off, but he had heard the screaming of the winches, the puffing of the little donkey engines, the shouts of the crew and the dock hands. The deck had sagged as the ship heeled over, and the fat steward had laughed at his unsteady legs.

For all Wiley's ugliness, for all his blasphemous tongue, Eric found himself at night seeking out his company. He was villainous, but less so than his crew mates. Eric counted six seamen. He handed them their pork and potatoes after he had served Captain Minton and the mate, a sour, dark man with a cough, who was called Mr. Burdick. The captain and the mate dined in their cabin, and Eric carried their steaming pots of coffee and greasy platters across the deck, through a narrow aisle between the stacks of shingles.

He had looked up hurriedly then, and had seen the sails, and had marveled at the crazy pattern of patches. The smell of the fresh cedar shingles was clean and sharp, after the dead, oily odors of the pantry; he was tempted to dawdle there, and not go back to the galley.

Evening came, and Eric washed dishes in thick, gray water. He set them away in moldy racks. There were rapid scurryings as his hand approached the shelf.

"Ants," he said, and skewed his face wryly.

"Seaman Cockroach," Wiley answered. "You're a dainty gal, aint you? Something else they don't have in a farm-house. They're smart critters; they never get seasick. Well, when you're rid up, come up on deck to the wheel-house, and I'll show you things."

He threw his apron into a corner and from the same recess caught up his blue cap. He looked less forbidding with his head covered. His face no longer offended, at least not so much, and Eric, wiping up grease from the oil stove, said over his shoulder—

"I'll be up in a jiffy, Mr. Wiley."

He worked as fast as his wabbling feet would let him. The ship was rolling a little now, and nodding into the wind. He blew out the yellow flame in the hanging lamp and stumbled up the companion-ladder just as the brass clock hit seven bells.

It was still quite light. The wheel-house set well over the stern, squat, with patched windows that looked like eyes lifted above the deck. Eric dodged under the boom that hummed in the fresh evening wind and thrust his head through an opening.

The room was dark, but it smelled clean. Through one slit in the hood of a kerosene lamp a thin light fell upon the compass. Its glow spread narrowly, enough for Eric to see that Wiley sat at one side of the

house, looking out at the lake through the glass in front, with the wheel behind him. It was kicking nervously with every lunge of the ship. The ropes that lashed it jerked back and forth, across the spokes to the rings in the floor. Eric was surprized; he had thought a wheelman held the wheel. He watched silently for several minutes.

By and by Wiley put down his pipe and turned, as if he had been aware since the first of Eric's arrival.

"Come in," he said.

Eric felt for the step with his foot. He could not see Wiley's face; the shadows hid its pock marks.

"We're off South Manitou," the steward explained pleasantly enough. "See that light over starboard bow? Now its red; it'll be white again in a minute. That's the North Island light. Over port there—look—that white light is South Island."

Eric watched the flashing light-houses. Night was coming on. Here it was fresh, and the lake churned into something living and full of power. He felt suddenly clean from the greasy pantry and dirty dish-water. The thought sent his mind back home; his mother, he supposed, was just finishing supper dishes herself.

"How did we come?" he asked bewilderedly. "Where's Glen Arbor?"

"It's over the stern," Wiley answered. "See them little dim lights back there where the coast is lowest? That's where we come from. We was tacking out the bay all afternoon. We're running pretty close under the lee of North Island now. We'll round her tonight. That gives us clear deep sailing down the center of the lake to Milwaukee."

The last pale stripe of sunset afterglow dissolved into a night sky over the wooded top of North Manitou. A passenger steamer from Charlevoix bore down from the north, glittering, and crawling over the water like a long, colored caterpillar.

"She's the *Puritan*," Wiley explained, "bound for Chicago."

That night, and many others Eric climbed into the shadowy wheel-house, after his last nauseating labors in the unclean pantry. He learned early to avoid the sailors. They were an unwholesome crew, half-blood Indians, Slavs and sons of Norsemen, old men for the most part, who objected to the passing of sails and who held all things steam in ragged disdain.

Eric kept his feet out of their way, on the rim of their tobacco smoke. Sometimes he helped them spread their bedding; once he sewed a blue patch on Little Ole's jacket. Little Ole had round blue baby eyes and swore at every half-word. Eric fled their turmoil.

There was left for entertainment the blasphemous tongue of Wiley as he watched the wheel. Night after star-spattered night Eric listened, and heard of the ways of men and ships, of the sea below and the sky above the ships.

He learned how to find the pole star, and to hold a course by it.

He learned the names of the bulging canvas sails, from mizzen to flying jib.

He learned the knots that are a sailor's tricks, and why a couple of half-hitches thrown over a pole will hold against all the winds that blow, and how to splice a three-inch hawser into a pair of two-inch hemps.

He learned the seven ropes and the hundred and seven lines, each by name, from the two-rope to the tiller-rope, from bow stay to mizzen ratline.

He learned that steam is a filthy-winged monster, despised of men with blood in their veins; that a sailing wind is the breath of angels; that masters are hard and their hearts leather, on all five lakes and all the seven seas; that stewards are overworked and treated mercilessly.

He learned that the wharves are traps, set by women, and that every sailor falls into them.

He acquired knowledge of all these things and a thousand more, on nights in the cramped wheel-house of the schooner *Ransom*, in a cruise that doubled back across Lake Michigan from Kenosha to the Straits of Mackinac.

"The master's got a whole lot to do with it," Wiley said one night while Eric helped him loosen the ropes and ease the wheel over a point to starboard. "Some masters is all O. K. Some ain't. There's Minton. He'd throw us all in for fish biscuits 'fore he'd give up any leaky old tub.

"You think it's all one long heave-ho? No; seaman's life ain't that, and don't you think it. It may be to the folks as sits on shore, peeking out the window. But aboard ship—well, some ships is comfortable, some ain't. Some is like a sieve and like as not you'll end the last three minutes peaceful in the water.

"It's the master, like I said. Minton's all right. But a cargo's a cargo. And he ain't ashamed of nothing. Not even heaving the cuspidor at some plain, low-down dirty seaman if it's goin' to help get the stuff on the dock in time.

"Mates is better, usual run. But this Burdick's mad. You heard him—coughing 'round like he's swallowed all his tabac.' Taint that. He's got a gritty liver, that's what makes him cough. One word out of you, and he rips his shirt off. Take it from Wiley.

"Come right down to it, masters and mates and seamen, they ain't much dif'rent."

II

SPRING passed, with its copious winds, and Summer hung listlessly. The sails flapped through clear, blue days and tepid nights, when the rows of fir-trees on shore arched up their backs to the sky, almost within reach of the stars. The schooner *Ransom* drifted into harbor and out, laden with shingles or undressed lumber, bark for the tanneries and fish. Tins for the canning factories were slammed off empty, and a week later stevedores trundled them back on, filled with cherries and consigned to cities in the south.

So August pattered out, and September blew across the Lakes, with a chilly tongue and a bucket of spray in her teeth. Days and nights took twelve hours each. The *Ransom* of Duluth, stacked with lumber, puffed along one morning under a swollen breeze, south of the White Shoals light, when Captain Minton called all hands on deck.

The men assembled aft, and the captain descended from the wheel-house, with tar on his breeches and his jacket buttoned tight across his chest. His shoulders bulged; and his hips. Eric watched for bursting buttons; to no purpose, for there never was one. Captain Minton out-fitted his clothes, but they stayed on him.

"Equinox is like to come tomorrow," he said, looking westward. "We'll be pretty far out to the lake when she breaks. It'll be safe enough riding, but this here deck cargo might shift. Tumble into the chain bulkhead, you men, and get up all the loose line.

"Mr. Burdick, you see that this here lumber is all lashed down, fast and firm, every foot of it. We ain't going to lose none overside."

Mr. Burdick coughed in an affirmative fashion that seemed to mean obedience. Steward Wiley grumbled, and then dropped down with a thud into the chain-room, sidewise, because his fat body was too big to go through the door straight. He passed the coils of light line out to the crew, and the men shuffled noisily across the deck. Some one started a snatch of song, and "Dogface Charley" picked it up. He was a half-breed whose flat nose told of a darker strain. He stamped now as he sang, swinging his arms while he threw the lines and tied them, jumping heavily over the ring-bolts.

"Old sailors never dies,
They simply blows away."

"Stop it!" Mr. Burdick interrupted sharply. "Lay back on the lines."

Eric worked on the top of the rail. Because he was light, and younger than the rest, he had been taught to run the coaming. He clutched the gunwale now with his bent legs, to have both hands free, and made fast the lines to the cleats beyond the low rail. He did it quickly; still, he could hear his heart beat.

It was an hour's labor. By that time the men were panting, but the stacked lumber was lashed to the deck and coaming, with extra twists about the deck cargo posts. Mr. Burdick leaned over the piles, coughed, and pronounced the job finished. The lumber was safe, come equinox, norther' or a gale off the Upper Peninsula.

Eric tumbled back to his pantry. There were hateful tasks to finish, the brass lamps to fill, the scrubbing, more pork to fry.

At noon the wind had slowed. By mid-afternoon the *Ransom* slipped up and down, lifeless, on the breathing swells that heel a wind. Her gaffs danced crazily to the motion, her booms under empty canvas flopped with a ponderous dignity.

"She's coming," said Captain Minton.

"With the dark," answered Mr. Burdick.

The sun lay down on the horizon, and narrow clouds, like fingers of the night, spread black across it. The lake stained green, a poisonous color touched with purple. Lake Michigan is not so treacherous as Lake Erie; she warns sailormen of her tantrums.

"Reef up mains'l; strike the tops'ls," ordered Captain Minton.

Eric and the steward jumped with the men, over the lumber to the halyards.

"Quick work there," cried Mr. Burdick. "Don't lay down. Cast off them lines, strike."

"Haul the jibs," commanded the captain, adding, "not the stays'l, we'll need her."

The equinox, as seamen call a gale that roars three days each Fall and Spring, is the hilarious devil of the Inland Seas. Fair weather ushers it in, fairer weather follows. Ships hug the safe ports. Steamers warp to their docks in the river mouths; fish-boats and freighters jam the passage to the Soo, the lee of Manitou and Beaver Islands, the inlets of Huron, and the St. Clair River.

The storm slipped down with a cat-squall, a loose flutter of curling waves across the surface. A wind broke with it, in a sharp gasp of air. Then stillness, and sick, uneasy water.

The clouds that had cut bars across the setting sun ran out now with low-hanging streamers and the night dropped black. The first gust was high in the air. It passed with a sighing at the mast-heads. Then another, and another. The sheet-lines snapped tight, the canvas crackled, the gaffs rattled and the booms swung over and held firm.

Captain Minton kept the wheel-house under his own eyes, vigilantly, with Mr. Burdick on watch in the bow. Fat Wiley had waddled out of the forecastle hatch and braced himself against a windlass.

"Gloves," he shouted when he saw Eric, "and your oilskins. Look out for yourself young fellow. There's going to be a racket, 'fore you see daylight."

Eric ran down to his bunk and rooted his muffler from under the blankets where he had hidden it. He bundled himself into his jacket and pulled his trousers down over his boots. That done, he wriggled back across the lumber.

"I'm getting back on job," Wiley said, and shoved past him. "There's no rest for nobody this night. And you—mind what you're told and no questions."

Eric remained alone, with a windy beat in his ears and his eyes misty. Seamen lurched around him. Little Ole was complaining with fast oaths.

"Put your head in a sack," Dogface Charley sounded in answer. "There's trouble enough. What kind of sailor are you?"

Their voices were murmurs in a fury of weather. Eric tried to follow them. But his feet slipped. A gust tore at the end of his muffler. It flared out against an iron link and caught, tightening. His fingers shook as he loosened it. Once the ship lay still after a wild uproar, and his heart beat at the quietness. Then there was confusion again, noisier than ever, and darkness and wind and Eric's own soaked clothes were all there was in the world.

He clung to a capstan, where he could see the clouds, twisted low through the darkness, with specks of light on their lower edges.

On the starboard side was a thump, and he heard the oaths of Little Ole as he picked himself up to his feet. Eric sank down in a coil of rope and wound its end around his arm. He tried to think, but it was no time for thinking. His head only hummed with one wish; he pushed it away; it came back—the wish to be out of it. Spray hit him aslant. Could it be fear, or just misery in his arms and legs? He remembered his father who had died on the Newfoundland Banks.

The schooner *Ransom* tilted and swayed and bucked the gale. Cold wind struck faster. The main mast creaked and the sails drummed, fluttering as they spilled. The lake broke into boulders; the ship lunged as she hit them, heaved and lunged again.

Eric braced his back against the capstan. Wiley hobbled past him and dodging a white wave, disappeared into the wheel-house at the stern. Eric could see clouds of foam flattening against the bow. He crouched down, watching for Wiley.

Out of the darkness on the windward side spilled a choking, twisting roller; it toppled on board and slapped against the lumber. A rope parted, and the air was full of flying planks. Mr. Burdick ran out of the dark, gripping a line made fast to the windlass. He shouted; and a pair of seamen crawled from the shelter of the cabin companion hood.

"Where's that boy," Eric heard him cry. "Boy!"

"Here," Eric answered.

"You cherry-picker!" the mate screamed. "You landsman cherry-picker!"

He swung at Eric's ears, boxing them until the effort exhausted him.

"Out with you," he ordered. "Out

and pull your lines fast—this time, fast! And if the lake gets you, so much good riddance."

The ship kicked. Eric found foot-hold. His knees went watery, his teeth ached from Mr. Burdick's blows. He fell upon his stomach and held to the lumber with smarting hands, closing his eyes to keep out the dizziness.

"Out with you," the voice came from behind, "you little rat, out with you."

Eric wrapped one arm about a line that hung loosely over the stack of spilled lumber. He heard the other men banging the boards together; they were trying to repile, even in the storm. The *Ransom* trembled, and plunged her nose under a wave. A heap of chill water covered Eric, the fishy stuff filled his mouth and he swallowed it, gasping.

He crawled ahead, clutching at the ends of the wind-whipped rope. He ran his hand blindly over the cold, dripping side. There was the cleat. Jerking the lines into place once more, he twisted them and threw a hitch across; back he crawled; with another wave splitting on top of him.

Mr. Burdick cuffed him as he slid past, and he ran with terror at his back for the forecastle companion. In his bunk he rolled into his blanket and wound his muffler up around his head to shut out the noise.

He forgot that his name was Eric, that his father had sailed the seas, that there was a seaman's part. His head ached, and his legs—the deck was sickening and he could not go back to it. Sounds of scraping feet came down to him, and of Mr. Burdick calling for the steward. The *Ransom* gave a new wicked lurch that threw Eric against the bulkhead. He fell back into the refuge of his blankets and found that there were tears in his eyes.

IT WAS morning when he awakened, with a weak gray light working obscurely through the skylight. Morning. He had slept—all night. The *Ransom* swam awkwardly, and Eric felt a great sickness. He stumbled to the deck and looked out at the cold, windy dawn. Another lumber-pile had broken; there were boards across the deck and Captain Minton stood by in his oil-skins while Dog-face Charley and a man called "Rainy" again piled wet boards into stacks.

In the wheel-house at the stern Eric saw the lean, dark face of Mr. Burdick. Eric turned the other way and blundered down to the pantry. The high pot of coffee already was set over the oil flame and in the farther compartment Wiley was throwing out of the port-hole the cups broken in the night's toss.

"Where was you?" he asked.

"In my bunk—I was sick—Mr. Burdick hit me."

"You ain't a man yet, not by a long ways," the steward commented. "You're a dumb baby, with no backbone. Well, well, so that's what you are! In your bunk!"

He slammed the port shut and, turning around, faced Eric contemptuously.

"I suppose you think that's the way to keep her canvas up—in your bunk? Maybe you ain't never been out in rain before, or a wind storm. You're a poor 'un!"

"Mr. Burdick hit me," Eric repeated.

"Ain't you never been hit? Well, believe me, you won't be wearin' any sea legs ten years from now. You'll be a broken-down farmer, pickin' corn and cherries——

"He hit you!" he continued.

"Can I get started on this?" Eric asked.

"Coffee's breakfast," the steward answered. "That's all there's time for. I tell you this much—if you wasn't a coward last night you could've seen some real seamanship."

Mr. Burdick came down for his coffee; he looked at Eric coldly.

"Where was you?" he asked.

"Below, sir," Eric answered.

"Right place for you." The mate laughed, even more derisively than the steward had. "You ain't for the sea. Aboard ship six months and can't throw a hitch!"

He took his coffee, which Eric poured for him.

"I suppose you was down in your bunk bawl-babying," he added.

That was all. For the remaining two days and nights of the equinox, while the gale twisted and howled and grasped at the ship, the *Ransom* sailed on short tacks, gaining, dropping back, making headway, washing to lee. Eric stayed on his feet, carrying the coffee pot. Drenched seamen walked sleepily at their duties. Captain Minton and Mr. Burdick served turns at the wheel and on lookout.

The fourth morning lifted clear, with a

knife-like afterwind. The schooner *Ransom* stood up clean, and Captain Minton ordered the topsails hoisted and the reefs broken out. Landmarks showed the ship forty miles off course. She must work back to Green Bay and lay in.

In harbor, all hands were busy for a week, clearing up and patching. Calkers came down from the shipyards, with their spindle-legged furnaces and irons. The air was malodorous with tar and singed oakum, and waited a fresh wind to clear it. Captain Minton stayed ashore, but his white scar popped overside each morning, and he held whispered consultation with Mr. Burdick in the wheel-house.

Eric went on shore leave the sixth day. He came back early, after walking the wharves and looking at other ships, all of which were cleaner than the *Ransom*. Captain Minton stood in the center of the deck, with one booted foot on a hatch-cover, watching Dogface Charley lash spare spars to the deck-house roof. When Eric came overside the captain called him.

"You want to stay with us?" he asked.

Eric had expected it; but the question, when it came, shook him. He waited. Captain Minton waited.

"Yes, sir," Eric answered, after his lips found warmth enough to open.

"I'd a mind to drop you here," Captain Minton said. "It's a short crew I have. Every one of 'em's got to be a man."

Eric felt the captain's eyes. He was two inches shorter than Eric, and now as he stood with his thick body swollen in a reefer, Eric perceived that some day he himself would be a bigger man. He wondered anxiously what he could say for himself. Water sucked in the piling, and a cat that belonged on the wharf nosed along the deck where the two stood. Captain Minton spoke.

"I've been a master twenty years," he said. "I been on all kinds of ships. But I never had a kid that was yellow. I've had lots of 'em, dumb little brats who didn't know enough to tie a marlin-hitch. They go back to land, and the good ones stay on. You're not dumb, but I guess land's the place for you. The little blow we had out there," he waved his hand toward the mouth of the harbor, "how about the cry-baby stuff?"

"I was afraid," Eric answered.

"So I saw. You're eighteen?"

Eric nodded.

"When I was eighteen, I was flying up aloft with the best of them. Them was the days of full-rigged ships out of Hull, schooners from Gloucester, brigs and barkentines. In them days boys was men. If you don't have sand in your guts long 'fore that age, you'd better pray your ma for skirts and sit home in the parlor."

Eric started to speak and then stopped. His eyes smarted as if he had smoke in them.

"Well, there's jobs on land," Captain Minton said, "and roofs, so's a man can run for cover when the wind blows."

"I wouldn't run again," Eric ventured.

"No?" Captain Minton seemed to be thinking. "Well," he said, "if you run once, I don't reckon there's much fire in you. You've got to have fire to run around these lakes. Else the first rainstorm'll put out the sailor in you."

"I'm not afraid now," Eric said with sudden spirit. "I mean to be a sailor, I'd like to stay on, sir."

Captain Minton's eyes met his for one moment, and Eric kept the gaze.

"I never run when I was a youngster. I can't think there's much sea in you."

"I'm all sea," Eric answered brokenly. "I'd like to stay, sir."

"It's weather we'll be up against from now on till the season closes, weather and lots of it, day and night. You think you can hold up your end?"

Eric promised. He suddenly realized that he liked Captain Minton. He might order him into the lake, and he would not mind.

III

IT WAS late October before the schooner *Ransom* was again temporarily seaworthy. This time her cargo was barrels for the fishing towns on the northern Peninsula, for Biddle Point and Engentine and Epoufette.

The winds were walking as she set sail, winds boastful and blatant. They stamped across the Green Bay dock-house and whistled in the piling of the wharves. The *Ransom* listened as she skirted the reefs with their white water on the northern coast. At Biddle Point a squall screeched across the lake, and the schooner anchored out three days, until the sea was reasonable and the fishermen could cross in covered gasoline boats and pick up the barrels.

At Engentine the ship was leaking badly. Eric spent three more days with wet, cold fingers, trying to calk open seams, while Mr. Burdick called with harsh words from his drier perch on the plank swung overside. Mr. Burdick and the weather became colder together. Never pleasant, his dark face blackened, lost whatever color it had in sunshine; his sharp eyes bobbed, his thin, blue lips repeated unspeakable things, and he coughed.

He struck at Eric a second time, one day when a chilly wind pulled a wad of packing from the boy's fingers into the lake. Eric braced his spine and tightened his teeth.

"You're learning," said Wiley, who stood by the gunwale. "Take it. Makes your dinner set better."

He waited until the Mate was out of sight.

"He's getting squeezed himself these days. Captain Minton knows how. You take it from Wiley. Whose ship is this? The mate's? No. Minton's. What's a mate to the owner? Nothing. No more'n a boy to the mate."

That night as the *Ransom* warped away from the soggy piers at Epoufette, the forecastle went to sleep noisily. One lamp smoked, making black streaks of soot against the beams. Rainy sat with his face to the light, turning up cards with Dogface Charley. Little Ole crouched beside them, swearing at the cold. Eric lay in his bunk. Awkward flashes of light flew from the tilting lantern into the dim corners of the compartment, warring with the livelier shadows of the beams, that grew fat and thin by turns as the lamp moved.

"I don't like that —— idea," Rainy was complaining. "Why for we go through to Cheboygan? Eh? I ask it."

"Christmas trees, like I said coming up," Dogface Charley answered. "It's too late for the steamers; no owner'd risk it 'cept the old man. There'll be one last leg back to Chicago with them, he done it last year. You wait. See if I ain't right."

"Three more week, and there's ice out here," Little Ole put in bitterly. "This is—November what?"

"Fourteen, ain't it? No, I guess it's eighteenth. We'll go into Cheboygan tomorrow night—you'll see it. We'll load for a couple of days. Then the old man'll come around, rampin' full o' talk about making Chicago by the first week in December."

Charley changed his tone.

"This old gal won't stand it. She ain't in no shape for cruising in the middle of the Winter."

Eric listened, with his blankets under his chin. The game continued. Charley lost; Rainy lost; Little Ole took a hand. Eric went to sleep with the dull sound of knuckles hitting on the blanket, the chink of small coins, and the beat of the lake against the side.

Dogface Charley was right. The next cargo was the evergreen load most feared by the sailormen. It is the cargo that goes out last, when saner ships have put up for the Winter and only old schooners and 'fore-and-afters stay out to risk it.

"It's the ships that don't care as does it," fat Wiley told Eric. "Old tubs that don't mind a chance. Look at the big fellows! D'you think they'd monkey with a batch of trees? Say, they wouldn't sail home with salvation for their own kids if the ice was thickening."

"Why do we?" asked Eric.

"We? We don't. The captain does. He always does it, never peeping a word until we sail into harbor and the rubbish is strewed all over the dock. Christmas trees! That's a blooming job for a man to risk his life on, ain't it?"

"There's money in it."

"Victuals for us, two hundred for the captain."

Eric shook his head.

"Wouldn't you rather carry trees than shingles?" he asked.

Wiley grunted.

"No, I can't say as I would, little boy," he said offensively.

Eric flushed. Wiley had not been contemptuous since the night of the equinox. He changed from cook to seaman now and made ready to waddle up the companionway.

"I'll tell you, kid," he said in parting. "If worst comes to worst, you do like the rest of us tells you."

Hand-cars with fresh-cut fir stood on the dock the second morning afterward when the schooner *Ransom* blew into Cheboygan. Indians in plaid jackets stamped their feet in the shelter of the dock-house while they waited the order to start loading. The sky was gray, with a Winter pallor; the land was foggy.

All day the men pulled trees into the ship.

They filled the holds; branches were pushed in or torn off before the hatch covers could be battened down; and a thousand more were to be piled on the decks.

"They take up a lot of room, but they're light freight," Captain Minton explained as he ordered the decks cleared. "Stack them so high—there—just that the boom can ease over them."

The fresh, peppery smell of fir and spruce reminded Eric of the farm and of Christmas on land. The resin gummed his mittens and stuck to his muffler. It made the seamen growl, and they tied the trees recklessly.

"You're breaking branches," Mr. Burdick cried once, after sundown, when he came upon Rainy and Little Ole in a rough quarrel over which one had let the ropes slip.

"And they're breakin' the ship," Rainy muttered. "Why for we take all the stuff?"

Mr. Burdick turned around sharply and then went on without a word. He wore a red sweater over his officer's coat; it made Eric think of his uncle in a red undershirt, that symbol of Winter in the back country of Michigan.

"It's the home trip," Little Ole said when the mate had passed. "Or he'd knock you blind."

"Let him," Rainy retorted.

The *Ransom* cast off in the morning with an apathetic farewell from the Indians. A rough wind pulled down from the north; the little schooner sidled into it and made again for the Straits of Mackinac. Out of the South Channel she leaned in under Bois Blanc light. It was foggy, and the white tower was wrapped like a ghost in many folds of mist.

Eric looked at it from the wheel-house, and then over at Mackinac Island, with its stone walls running down the hillsides near the mission church. Farther north a car ferry crawled toward St. Ignace; somewhere behind the fog there were railroad piers.

Down in the pantry the crew was sullen and drank the coffee angrily. Wiley spoke with a surly tongue whenever Eric addressed him.

"It's a bad bet," he complained as he flung the garbage out of the port to the seagulls.

"Shake your fist at the angels, and down you go. Think Captain Minton don't know it? 'Do as I say,' I heard him tell Mr. Burdick last night. I was going in to take the watch for him. 'Your hind legs must be dead. Move them like I tell you.'

"It's bad business, young fellow, bosses falling out. It means your berth will be leaking 'fore the trip's over."

"We've a light load," Eric argued.

"Too light," Wiley responded significantly.

The wind thickened as the day passed, and flurries of snow feathered the air. The *Ransom* blew about like a toy with her light cargo, along a difficult course between Hog Island and the White Shoals, with the hunched back of Big Beaver at the south. The tacks were short, the turns quick, and all day long seamen were called on deck, to be on hand when the *Ransom* heeled over.

WINTER came that night, as it arrives on the north lakes, quickly, out of the dark. The forecastle light showed white breath when the men off watch came down to roll into their blankets. They shivered on deck at dawn. Captain Minton held the wheel-house alone; Mr. Burdick was not in sight.

Beaver Island lay overside, so close that the short light-house at the town of St. James stood clear, like a white shrine against the pine-trees.

"We been making too much leeway," Wiley explained, "losing distance all night. They's a wrong wind. It's got it in for us, that's what. No sooner we're in one tack and it turns over, and we drift off course trying to make the new one."

"Why don't we run down under the Island?" Eric asked.

"That's what Mr. Burdick's been asking. They was arguing again, the captain and him last night. You could've heard 'em at Cross Village, if you'd wanted. Mr. Burdick's went back to his cabin."

The gale swelled through the forenoon, spouting volleys of sea up the deck and straining the canvas. The head of Mr. Burdick protruded once from the hold. He leaned against the wind, looking at the coast line, and then crawled back to the cabin companion without glancing at the wheel-house. Eric watched him from the pantry ladder; his face was blacker, and he was gritting his pipe-stem. The men who were crouched under the cover of heaped trees stopped talking when they saw him coming, and waited until he was once more below before they muttered again among themselves.

The *Ransom* bucked and fell back, leaped ahead, and again tumbled west and south. She stood opposite the narrows of Beaver Harbor now, and even through the racing snow Eric made out the still water between the protecting points of land. Men were down on the shore watching the schooner.

"It's a fine thing to be aboard her," Eric told himself resolutely.

But she lost all day, drifting down behind the island, where the gale was broken by cross winds. The booms pounded, and the gaffs fanned.

"We ought to reef," Dogface Charley grumbled.

His mates took up the complaint. Their murmur reached the captain through the glass, and he turned around; his face was purple.

The hours of the night passed sleeplessly with all hands on deck. Captain Minton stood behind the wheel as if tied to it, moving only when it did. Now and then he dropped the window in front of him and yelled an order forward. His face and lips were stiff with cold; he only nodded when Mr. Burdick stirred into sight, long after sundown, and reported for duty in the bow.

Down on the deck the men beat the boards with their hands and stopped talking because of chattering teeth. On the starboard side they watched the white glare of the light-house on Beaver Head flash nearer; the fixed light at the harbor mouth had already drifted away in snow.

Eric boiled coffee in the pantry. When the bell tapped eight at midnight Wiley stumbled down, with his face redder than usual and his pockmarks whiter. He leaned toward the stove and warmed his hands on the coffee pot.

"They's trouble," he said; "stand by for trouble."

Eric exclaimed.

"What kind?"

"Water in the hold, six foot of it. Mr. Burdick just come up and told the boys. He's gone in now to tell the captain, Lord help him. He wants to duck into Grand Traverse Bay and take shelter under Northport Point."

"Will Captain Minton do it?"

"Not if us wants him to, you can believe me on that. This is his tub, not our'n, and he knows it. But the crew's mad, and they's a chance. Mr. Burdick knows a few things hisself, and he's got his shirt off."

"I think the captain's right," Eric answered.

"And you do? Well, ain't that nice! Wouldn't the old man like to know that the one farm-hand aboard is with him!"

"I think you are afraid," Eric said solemnly.

"Afraid, eh? Well, I never got caught with blankets round my head when it was blowing a little!"

Eric moved around, his face was flushing.

"That was once," he retorted, "and that's over."

Wiley laughed derisively.

"How about next time? Next time maybe you'll like nice old Wiley to hold your hand? Wiley won't let the waves get you!"

"Hold my hand!" Eric shouted. His tongue tripped. "Hold my hand, will you?" he stammered excitedly.

His arm shot out with a blow that caught Wiley in the point of the jaw. The fat steward bounced backward from the jar and pawed toward Eric with both his hands.

"I'll show you!" Eric was shrieking. "Take that talk out the door there! I ain't a kid!"

He struck again, first right, then left; Wiley's pudgy fists made a soft echo as he tried to ward off the blows. Eric guarded, and pushed the steward ahead of him. His massy form was plugging the pantry door when a hoarse voice yelled down the companionway:

"Get out of the way here, what you men doing?"

Captain Minton knocked Wiley aside and pulled Eric's hands away from him.

"What's this?" he demanded.

He dropped down on his knees without waiting an answer.

"Help me here," he ordered.

Both men obeyed. While the trap in the pantry floor lifted, Captain Minton looked down through it.

"She's filling," he said, as if to himself.

There was a murmur of water splashing against wood. Captain Minton jumped to his feet, stuffed his hands back into mittens and pulled his cap down farther over his ears.

"Get up on deck, you men," he commanded. "Start the bilge pump—double up, quick!"

He climbed the companionway, with his voice coming down after him:

"Got to fight for exercise, have you? Pump now, till I tell ye to stop it."

Wiley wiped away blood where a nail in the doorway had scratched his face. Without looking at Eric, he went above. This time as Eric followed, he begrudged the steward his knowledge of seamanship. The other lurched across the deck to the pump, between the cabin and pantry companion.

"Take a-holt here," he ordered surlily. "Learn from a good man how to do something."

Wiley pushed down on the handle; Eric up. The long rod rose and fell, like a seesaw, creaking. There was the sound of forced water running in the flattened yellow hose through the scuppers.

"Keep that up," the captain cried as he ran past them toward the wheel house. "Both of ye!"

Eric pumped silently. Wiley shuffled his feet and cleared his throat intermittently, as if he would speak.

"He's afraid himself," Eric thought.

The idea made him angry again, and at the same time pleased him. Here was Wiley, afraid of him—Eric—and of the sea.

At two o'clock Little Ole pitched across the deck.

"She's drifting," he said, "down toward Cathead."

"Where's the old man going?" Wiley demanded.

"Chicago!" Little Ole growled. "That's all he thinks about, Chicago. Mr. Burdick's got the right idee. He say to go into Traverse and ride this out under Northport Point. He's a seaman."

The wind buffeted Little Ole back into the night. Eric and Wiley bent over the pump. Snow was blowing in gusts and their mittens froze to the handle.

"Not so hard," Wiley growled once. "No use breaking your back."

Suddenly he let go his end of the lever and laughed when the opposite end hit Eric in the stomach. Other men of the crew came by; they, too, were growling. At daybreak Wiley let the pump seesaw jerkily and jumped back out of the wind, to the protection of a stack of evergreens.

"There's torn sheets," he said, looking upward.

He knocked his hands together to get them warm, and after a moment slipped away into the dark. When he returned, he was blustering.

"You hit me, but I'm willing to do the right thing," he said to Eric. "It's a good chanst to make a get-away here. We're off North Manitou—it's safe a place as any. You be ready. If they's a chanst we'll have a boat overside before watch changes."

"Is he giving up?" Eric cried.

"Who?"

"Captain Minton. Where's the captain?"

"Blast the captain!" Wiley answered.

"Where's he at?" Eric repeated.

"In the house, hanging over a dead wheel. What good does that do? Mr. Burdick's a seaman."

"You mean——"

"I mean when Mr. Burdick says go, we go—quick. Get me?"

"Mr. Burdick is going?"

Eric stood at the center of the pump, where he had tried to man it alone. He stopped now, and Wiley moved away, his voice dwarfed in the wind.

"She'll like to bust up if it gets any heavier," Wiley was saying. "We lost most the canvas an hour ago. We're running under fore stays'l, fores'l, mains'l, and a couple of rags that's left of the tops'ls. All the rest's overside."

Wiley's voice was lower, Eric's own arose energetically above it.

"You ain't that kind?" he screamed.

He ran past the steward toward the wheel-house. Mr. Burdick, and a boat overside—Through the cold, slow dawn Eric could see Captain Minton, stooping now, his hands tight on the wheel, the flappers of his cap loose and jerking in the wind like infant sails. Between the after-hatch and the cabin-companion Eric stumbled on a ring-bolt and slipped to the deck.

SNOW was pounding in sheets and a long bar of blue ice coated the coaming. Lashed to the hatches, the Christmas trees gleamed under a premature tinsel. As he lurched to his side Eric caught a glance of masts bent like paper bows. He grasped a fir branch for support and started to crawl on to the wheel-house.

At the moment a new wind broke with fury. The main-gallant-mast ripped from its splicing. The main sheet burst like a drum and split away from the boom. It floated banner-like for a second; then mast, gaff and sheet wrenched free and sailed overside. A net of broken lines and rope twisted across the deck. With a heave that rolled Eric into the scuppers, the *Ransom*

turned and ran with the wind, prancing like a horse, with only her new white staysail holding.

The wind dropped for a moment, almost to a hum. Another sound vied with it, a scraping on the forward deck above the forecastle. Eric scrambled to his feet. A group of men were huddled about the squat, gray life-boat, men who looked like wet bundles of sacking. They had tipped the boat right side up; with a great lunge it slipped overside, and the sailors tugged at the line, making it fast to the upper workings.

Mr. Burdick stepped into the light. He delayed for a minute, looking back at the wheel-house; then he wrapped his arm about the rope and slid downward. Fat Wiley followed him.

In the wheel-house, Captain Minton stood by the useless wheel. Eric looked forward again, with fear lodged in his throat; the last of the crew was sliding. He stumbled, and pulled himself ahead by his hands on the gunwale.

"Come on," Wiley shouted to him. "Slide for it—quick!"

Eric felt the perspiration freeze on his forehead. The *Ransom* was lost—that was sure—her canvas was gone, the staysail held her nose straight for the shore of Michigan.

"Coming?" Wiley cried again. "Coming?"

Mr. Burdick crouched in the stern, bailing. He turned, and Eric saw that he, too, was shouting, but his words were lost in a pocket of wind. Furiously Eric cried back and shook his fist.

"Cherry-pickers!" he screamed.

It was the mate's own epithet, and he hurled it crazily.

"Cherry-pickers, landsman cherry pickers!"

In the bow Wiley cut the line with his knife; four seamen lay to the oars, pulling away from the *Ransom* and pointing the craft toward North Manitou Island.

Eric stood with his boot-heels braced, beating his hands against the icy coaming, bellowing, crying out taunts at the lifeboat; raging, fearing.

A hand pulled at his jacket. He struck around blindly. It was Captain Minton.

"They'll never sail again, not one of 'em."

Wind had broken the older man's voice. His face was as white as a clean sail, with the ugly scar cold-blue across it. There was pain around his mouth, weariness; it seemed his eyes were burned empty; he had grown old suddenly.

Eric remembered the last time the captain had addressed him alone. He had promised to be a seaman.

"We're going ashore," the captain said, with gasps between the words. "We can't handle canvas, the two of us——"

He paused and rubbed his hands.

"Is there coffee?" he asked abruptly. "I'm kind of stiff-like."

They braced themselves by the ice-polished rail and climbed over the tangled wreckage of the main mast; past the mad, flopping boom of the mizzen. Twisted ropes were everywhere, knotted lines, pieces of wood from the shattered main top mast, chains and rings and iron pins, broken branches of Christmas trees. The staysail was straining; its lines snapped as the schooner *Ransom* bucked and leaped.

In the dark pantry Eric unsteadily poured a tin cup of coffee. Captain Minton swayed in the center of the floor, with his hands limp at his sides.

"Drink it," Eric ordered, with an unaccustomed tone of command; he added, "sir," hastily.

Captain Minton held the cup to his lips.

"That's better," he commented, "that'll hold us a bit."

"We got two hours, two more hours on the *Ransom*." He talked slowly to himself as he climbed the companionway. "Pyramid Point's sandy—we'll go ashore there, like as not, or north a little—if the wind don't shift."

Pyramid Point—only ten miles from the farm!

Eric strained his eyes from the companionway, but the snow had hung a white, whipping curtain. It shut out even Manitou Island now, and the waves were slapping higher against the black sides of the *Ransom*.

"She's not so like to break on sand, is she?" Eric asked.

"They's a chanst, young fellow. Maybe she won't. But it's most like she will. Seas are pretty high over there, unless this here blow drops off a bit." He staggered aft. "I'm going back to the wheel-house. That's where a master belongs, ain't it?"

Eric set down the coffee pot and filled his own cup. Then he moved forward to the bow, where the fore-staysail was flapping. Tatters of canvas blew like rags from

the fore and mizzen masts. Across the decks crusts of ice packed the Christmas trees.

Eric slid down to the forecastle and came back with a blouse that held his belongings swinging from his neck. He clung to a post by the bowsprit shoulders, and watched the snow lift and part, playing at drop curtain. There were breakers, close in, for a moment. White water warned of a shallow bar. Eric sang out, as he had heard seamen on watch—

"Bar off port bow!"

The wind snatched his cry. Captain Minton sat in the wheel-house, his eyes straight before him; and the *Ransom* pounded over the bar, which was deep enough, for all its curling breakers.

Writhing water lay within it, back-wash from some beach that the snow hid. The *Ransom* beat forward, straight as a string under the pull of her single, straining sail.

Once again the snow lifted. Just ahead were breakers and a beach piled with blue ice. Then, louder than the wind, came the rumble of broken rollers. Eric glanced over his shoulder once more. Captain Minton still sat motionless.

"She's going," Eric yelled.

A gasp and a shiver struck through the uproar, the moan of parting seams, the thunder of cracked ribs, and in the same instant the *Ransom* smashed on the sand.

Eric felt the soles of his boots slip on ice and his body turn over; he felt space and wind about him and the blows of water as he hit it. His bundle was gone. He scraped a ragged bottom and arose, with his arms reached out and the gale stinging through wet garments. Once more a wave played ten pins; he swallowed water, and the lake rolled him up the beach.

He sprawled on the sandy ice; his head split; his teeth chattered; cold blinded his eyes; below his knees he had no feeling.

IV

WHEN he awakened it was in a heavy atmosphere of heat. A red stove glowed in the room, which was familiar because it was like others he had known. There was sunlight, and somewhere near by the lake pounded a vigorous tattoo.

A man in a red shirt sat near the bed where Eric lay. He had fallen asleep in his chair, and he did not stir until the door opened softly and a woman entered, a woman who was old, with gray hair pulled tight to her head. On her arm was Eric's sea-jacket. He saw that it was dry, and that she had been mending it.

"The boy's awake," she said softly.

Eric tried to speak; he tried again; there was an extraordinary tightness in his throat.

"Is the captain here?" he asked.

"The old man?"

The wearer of the red shirt came to the bedside and stooped, a tall, gaunt fellow with heavy muscles.

"He's a better man than you are, son," he said. "He's up two days ago."

"Two days?"

"Six hours after we brung you both in, he got up, and asked for his breeches."

"And he's here?"

"Somewheres."

Eric lifted his shoulders and looked about.

"Where we at?" he asked weakly.

"Good Harbor," the man answered.

Good Harbor. Home was back twenty miles—twenty miles, but where was the captain?

"We'll fetch him," the woman said when he asked her.

Through the door, a voice sounded, halloing, and then the scrape of feet. A third person came from outdoors and into the bed-room.

Eric guessed it was the captain; but his eyes were wet and he could not see.

"I been down watching her break up."

It was Captain Minton's voice, speaking abruptly.

Eric cleared his eyes. The captain had seated himself in the chair by the base-burner and was propping a lame leg upon the nickel foot-rest.

"You feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Eric answered him.

"What's the matter with ye? Why you so slow getting up?"

"Wasn't you hurt?" the boy replied with his own question.

Captain Minton laughed.

"Me?"

He rose jerkily from the chair and crossed to the bed with his left foot dragging stiffly. He was unshaven; there was court-plaster on his chin, and his shrunken clothes were more tight than ever—that was all; otherwise he might just have come from a hard tussle in the wheel-house.

"It takes a lot to wet me down," he said hoarsely.

"Wasn't you hurt?" Eric repeated.

"Me hurt? Say!"

He snorted.

"Me as has been four times round the Horn and eighteen times 'cross the line, wrecked on Land's End—that's where I picked up my beauty mark!" He touched the scar on his face. "Hurt? Huh! It's the *Ransom* that got the worst of it, lad. She's done."

Eric sat up. His eyes burned, but he held his head erect.

"I'll be fit in a day or two," he said. "I ain't much hurt myself. How about a berth——"

He stopped with the request unfinished. Captain Minton had limped across to the window.

"There's three pieces of hull in now," he said, as if it were shame to speak of them, "and more'n a thousand Christmas trees."

"The tree's what saved him," the man in the red shirt explained to Eric. "They floated in, with the wheel-house and him on top."

Captain Minton turned around.

"A berth?" he asked, as if he had just heard, "a berth? Why, I got a friend, a shipmaster in Ashtabula. I'll give you seaman's papers and a recommend to him. He'll be out early in the Spring."

Eric gulped. He had failed, then. Captain Minton was not offering to take him on next time himself. He ventured to ask,

"You ain't satisfied—you don't think I'm a seaman, that's why you wont take me?"

"Seaman!" Captain Minton shouted. "By the jumpin' whales of Biscay Bay, I say you're a seaman, every plank and spar of you. That's why I'll give you a recommend. Me? I ain't touching wheel or tiller for a year. I'm going to set on the shore and watch you other seamen work while I rest."

You other seamen! Eric's heart thumped in his ears.

THE mellow strumming of a guitar swelled with passionate appeal as a sudden flood of moonlight swept the patio. A youth in the uniform of the Peruvian cavalry had flung his cap and cloak upon a low stone bench. His great, dark eyes gazed upward with a fervent longing.

"Asomate a la ventana
para que mi alma no pene!"

His voice rang clear. A shutter opened cautiously, then a woman that would have caused a Cæsar to forget his empire, strode forth upon the balcony. Her hair, coiled low, was blacker than Egyptian skies; her eyes—twin stars reflected in great wells of

night. Her warm, red lips were parted with a smile of welcome. She took a rose from her breast and tossed it to the singer. He clutched it greedily and smothered it with kisses.

"Empress of my happiness! Breath of love!" he whispered. "The day is sunless and the night a dreary pool of desolation when I am exiled from your smiles!"

"The balcony is high!" she tempted.

He laid down his guitar. He scaled the trellis of the lower window and by the heavy vine swung nimbly to the balustrade. Kneeling, he kissed the petal fingers she extended.

"My heart is burning on the altar of my love!" he murmured. "Ah, glorious one, queen where the Graces dare not hold the mirror to reflect your charms, I love you!"

"And you have brought the ring?" she purled.

He dropped the hand and rose.

"Do not torture me! Diamonds, pearls, emeralds will I bring you——"

She turned away.

"Pizarro's ring—" she faltered.

"Be merciful, my love. You, who rule my heart with absolute dominion, could you be better crowned than with the laurels of sweet clemency? You know the pride—the superstitions of my people. Should Pizarro's ring be taken then Peru will be oppressed, harassed by foes, humiliated by her enemies! And you, who are of Chile—But come. We shall take our love to Spain, to Switzerland, to Rome!"

She stamped her tiny foot.

"You do not love me!"

"Better than my life, or fame, or fortune, better even than the country that I serve! But do not drive me to dishonor. You would not make my love a curse!"

The woman's lips grew livid. Her eyes flashed darting flames.

"Go!" she commanded. "And do not let me look upon your face until you bring Pizarro's ring!"

She stalked within, and darkness reigned.

An hour passed. Before the door of a cathedral the same youth stood. A cunningness possessed him, and he dodged within the shelter of protecting shadows. He entered by a secret passage beneath the chancel. He faltered—the place seemed tenanted with leering ghosts! He kneeled before the altar, but he could not pray.

Down the aisle he fled to dart into the sacred alcove and there confront the crystal casket where Pizarro lay. He tore a curtain from its hangings and wrapped it close about his hand. There was a muffled sound of breaking glass. He closed his eyes and grappled with the leathery fingers. He wrenched the ring and fled.

Again within the shelter of the patio the soldier staggered from fatigue. He took up his guitar, and trembling fingers touched the vibrant strings. There, in the stillness of the night, he played and sang as tortured souls in hell may chant their litany. A movement of the shutters, and a white gown fluttered on the balcony.

"Empress of my happiness! Breath of love!" he whispered.

He held the ring aloft—a broken crown upon a heart that had a sword pierced through. A moon ray shivered into sparks against the facets of its diamonds.

The woman clasped her hands.

"My hero! But, the balcony is high?"

He sprang upon the bench and gripped the vine. Up, up he mounted, but his right hand failed to clutch the balustrade. The vine tore from its moorings, and the man pitched back upon the flag-stone pavement of the court.

The woman fled. A moment later she stole cautiously into the patio. She knelt beside the youth.

"*Muerto! Muerto!*" she choked.

Then even as the soldier's hand had wrenched the treasure from the frozen fingers of Pizarro, she wrung it from his grasp. She sprang erect.

"For Chile!" she cried.

Drawing her mantilla close, she fled into the street.

II

THE *West Wind* completed loading cargo at New Orleans. A heterogeneous mass of nondescript humanity formed slowly in an uncertain row beside the forward hatches. They listened with blasé indifference as the metallic voice of the deputy commissioner raced through the wordy clauses of the sailing articles. A scratch of the pen, "Get aft!" and each man cast his lot with destiny, a member of the crew of the huge steel freighter—for better or for worse.

On the deck above the master watched

and waited. From beneath his shaggy brows his penetrating gaze swept critically along the shifting line. At the far end, gaunt, black and final like an exclamation point, stood one familiar figure. The captain started. He blinked, smiled, squinted to adjust his focus.

"Aye gad, it's him! Hey—you there, Caleb! Come here to me!"

Caleb Washington Bolivar grinned. He shambled loosely toward the ladder.

"Mawnin' t' you, cap'n, suh. I sees you ain't forgot."

The master frowned. "What's the big idea? You can't sign on. You see this is an all-white crew."

"Tha's it! Tha's jes' how come I'se heah, Mistuh Cap'n, suh. Passel o' whi' folks needs a niggah 'roun' 'em som'ers. Sho' do!"

The skipper nodded. "But I thought you'd quit the sea, thought you and Turpentena——"

"Us is! Done unify our int'est. Tuck out mah life insu'ance pol'cy an' make fust paymint on a used-up Fowd."

"But only four months, Caleb—why, your honeymoon's not over!"

"You's tawkin' whi' folks langwich. Niggah honeymoon gits oveh whin his wife goes back t' wuck. 'Sides——"

The black man found a sudden interest in his pointed yellow shoe. He looked up quizzically.

"This heah's confidenshum, cap'n, suh. Stan's jes' 'tween I an' you. I knows I'se or'nary, but I ain't thet sorry thet I tawks 'bout mah home folks. You see, it's this-a-way. I stan's it long's I'se able. Tawkin'ist woman! 'Fo' ——, cap'n, you ain't neveh heah no conversashum 'til you stan's up 'fo' thet Turpentena woman whin she busts loose!"

The master raised his brows and nodded. Perhaps the secret of his ready understanding had its genesis in his own dim past.

"I see. I see. Here, Stewart!" he called. "Let this man here sign on as extra messboy."

He turned to the black man. "Caleb, we're carrying a special shipment of thirty head of cattle down to Lima. They're in No. 1 'tweendeck. You see that they're fed and watered. After that's tended to, well—" the captain chuckled. "Guess you can wait on me."

III

IT WAS an uneventful passage; the Gulf, the Yucatan, two choppy days in the Caribbean, the heat of the canal and then the long ground-swells of the Pacific. It was when the *West Wind* nosed lazily into the broad, smooth bay at Callao that things began to happen. Captain Lawrence had thrown her in the stern bell to pick up a pilot when there was a jolt and rumble and the main-shaft whirled like a weaver's spindle. The propeller was gone and there was neither hub nor extra blade on board.

They were finally towed in and made fast to the mooring buoys in the inner harbor. Divers went down and engineers and agents held their consultations. The final gloomy verdict was that, with the poor facilities of the port, it would be a month, at least, before the vessel could get under way.

Captain Lawrence waxed glum. Not so his crew. The port of Callao was there at hand, and beyond, within trollying distance, all white and shining like sugar poured over an apple-dumpling, the city of Lima capped a low, brown hill.

And it was here in Lima, on the rim of the central plaza and before the door of the great cathedral that fate stepped out in the guise of adventure and took the reins from Caleb Washington Bolivar's hands.

It was the day following their arrival. For an hour Caleb had been riding pompously about the city in an antiquated *coche* that constantly maintained a hazardous list to port. Along the smooth paved boulevards a loose hind shoe of the blind gray horse clanked its apathetic measure. On his stilted perch a brigandish *cochero* turned his owl head like a swivel chair as he brought the lean horse to a sudden standstill and pointed with his broken whip to the brown cathedral.

"*El señor* no see Pizarro?" he inquired.

"Drive on, Spanish man, I'se goin' t' pay y'."

Caleb Washington shifted once more to the high side of the vehicle and gripped the arm rest with a determined air.

"Sho' loves mah ridin'. 'Specks whin I gits rich I'll buy me a Fowd wis a baid attachmint."

The *cochero* waved his arms with the eloquence of dumb futility.

"I knows you c'n swim," Caleb interjected.

"Pizarro! Pizarro!" the hard-pressed driver peristently repeated.

"Piz-who?"

The puzzled passenger stared aimlessly about him. "Reckons the man wants me to 'tend the church-house. This heah ain't Sunday! 'Sides—" his dubious gaze was held by a brown-robed priest who passed the entrance—"I'se Baptist. Men-folks doan weah no sich gyarmints whah I consecrates——"

He broke off suddenly as he saw the chief mate and the radio operator of the *West Wind* descending the broad stone steps.

"Heah comes mah whi' folks. Set up there straight, drivah!"

Caleb sat back stiffly against a one-time padded seat.

"Jes' takin' mah mawnin' exercise, thank y', Mistuh Mate, suh. Wish you-all'd tell ol' bat-eye theh t' drive on. Seem lak he's 'sistent I git out an' ten' th' worship."

"Pizarro! Pizarro!" the *cochero* frantically appealed.

"Ah, yes—Pizarro!" Sparks eagerly cut in. "You must get out, Caleb, and see Pizarro. You can't be going back to New Orleans and admit you were in Lima and hadn't seen the great discoverer of Peru!"

"Co'se, now, tha's diff'ent," Caleb warmed. "But sho'ly, he ain't goin' t' be 'ceivin' no cullud folks—whah th' back do' at—Mistuh Sparks, suh?"

"But you see, he's dead, Olie!"

"Uh-huh! Drive on, coachman. I ain't contempulatin' viewin' no cawpses!"

"Oh, that's all right, he's been dead for several hundred years," the mate spoke soothingly. "You see, Caleb, he's mummified."

"Done which?"

"Go in and see."

"Dried up," Sparks prompted. "You know, preserved—just like he was when he died."

"You means he's dummyfied? Oh, well, tha's diff'ent. Dummyfied!" The negro's boisterous laughter almost stirred the gray horse from its lethargy. "We's got a-plenty of them back in N'Orleans. Stan's 'em up in th' windahs t' show off th' raimints!"

The white men laughed.

"That's the idea, Caleb. But this is better still. Come along, we'll go back with you."

Caleb bounded lightly to the pavement. The trio mounted the broad stone steps.

In the nave they were met by a tottering guide whose age and sallowness suggested that he might have survived the years since the great crusader set his iron heel upon the Inca's brow.

The functionary bowed and beckoned. He led the way to an alcove where there was an ancient altar. A mellow glow filtered through the colored window where a long box perched, shrouded by a winding sheet.

The attendant solemnly removed the covering and disclosed a plain glass casket. Within lay the yellow, wasted form of what was once a domineering, ruthless conqueror.

For a silent moment Caleb stood and looked down upon the face of the dead hero. Then a rusty pallor stole across the black man's features. "Lawd Gawd," he breathed, "thet thing ain't human!"

Impressive stillness followed. Caleb Washington gulped. He turned and would have fled but the long-armed mate caught the flying coat-tails. The wizened guide looked on in wide-eyed wonder, but Sparks began in a chanting tone:

"Look closely, Caleb, there's the hole in his head where the bullet entered. Notice the hair, how natural! And the teeth, how perfectly preserved!"

He pointed to the hands that were folded on the dead man's breast.

"You can even see where he used to wear his ring!"

"Ring? Yassuh," Caleb gulped. His tone betrayed a nervous tremor. He gulped again.

The old guide squinted at the black man with a calculating stare.

"But don't you think it's wonderful?" Sparks challenged.

"I reckons it's all thet, Mistuh Sparks, suh. Point is, I ain't 'zackly int'ested in no daid man's rings!"

"Reeng? Ah, *sortija!* Reeng! Reeng!" The wily guide seemed to shrink even deeper within the cocoon of his withered body. "You like see?"

He opened an inlaid box on the pedestal at the mummy's feet.

"No reeng," he explained. "Ees steal! Rob! Sacrilege! Now, five year past!" He vented his emotion with a fluent outburst in his native tongue.

He unrolled a sheepskin parchment showing the drawing of a ring, an odd design—a

broken crown upon a heart that had a sword pierced through.

The old guide turned abruptly. His stern gaze stabbed its burning focus into the black man's eyes. He extended the drawing.

"You like see?"

"Go 'way, Spanish man! Doan be playin' wid me thet-a-way. I doan lak this heah place, nohow."

Sparks took the scroll. But even as he looked he started. He gripped the negro's arm.

"Did that hand move?"

He pointed to the casket.

" 'Fo' Gawd!"

A pinchback coat fluttered recklessly as its owner disappeared through the cathedral archway. Caleb Washington was gone.

IV

FOR several days that followed Caleb managed to discover many tasks that kept him close on board. But the tropic sun shone bright and cheering and he gradually lived down his scruples and renewed his visits to the shore.

It was Sunday morning. Caleb brought a steaming breakfast to the master's cabin. He was unsusually attentive.

"This heah alligatah peah I picks out special! Takes care of mah whi' folks. 'Sides, you sutt'nly has been mighty kine t' Caleb, Mistuh Cap'n, suh. Sho' has!"

"All right Caleb, what do you want?"

"How come you knows I wants somethin'? I 'clares, you's the turrubl'ist man!"

Caleb brushed an imaginary crumb from the skipper's table.

"You see, cap'n, it's jes' this-a-way. This sho'ly is one mighty fine place, this Lima. Powerful fine folks. I wuz jes' wonderin' effin you'd min' payin' Caleb off so he cud stay asho' for a w'ile an' sorter res' up f'm his labah?"

The skipper stared accusingly.

"Found a *señorita*, eh?" he challenged.

"No suh, cap'n. No s-u-h! Reckons you done forgot 'bout Turpentena! Co'se, I 'mits they's a cullud gal oveh theh in thet Lima city whut tawks some sorter langwich foolishnus I kain't understan'. But 'tain't thet, Mistuh Cap'n, suh. Sho' nuf—I ain't lyin' t' y'. Man oveh theh done offert me a job asho' as valley boy t' one of these heah humido's."

"Humidors?" Captain Lawrence stuttered. "You mean *matadors*," he solemnly corrected.

"Tha's it! Tha's it! I knowed they wuz some sorter do' or otheh. One of these heah Spanish men what has raid breeches!"

"You're not going to be a bull fighter, Caleb?"

"Well, suh, no suh. Not 'zackly, suh. I'se jes' goin' t' sort of 'sist him 'roun' the stable, you understan's, an' polish up his swo'd. Circus days I weahs them fancy trousahs lak mah boss man. He sorter let on lak he might learn me t' bull fight. Sez how 'tain't so hawd, all you got t' do is t' sorter ben' this-heah-a-way an' let the bull run pas'."

In demonstration Caleb almost poured a cup of coffee in the master's shoe.

"Don't let anybody make a fool of you, Caleb."

"No, suh. I-I-I sorter 'lowed you'd feel thet way 'bout it, suh, knowin' me pussonal lak you does."

"Trouble is, you're too susceptible, Caleb. Anything anybody suggests you're right there ready to give it a try."

"Yassuh. I knows I'se 'flicted sorter temp'rary in mah disposition, 'ceptible, lak you sez. But them—them suttn'ly is powerful han'some pants, Mistuh Cap'n, suh! 'Sides, Mistuh Sparks done promis' t' tek his koderac out an' snap mah pitcher whin I gits mah fightin' raimints on. Sez I kin sen' mah pitcher back fo' Turpentena t' show them homefolks niggahs. Mistuh Sparks he say afteh one of them bulls is done daid—you know, done been kilt by one of them 'fessional butchers—I c'n sorter ease up an plan' mah foot on his haid lak, w'ilst Mistuh Sparks he snaps mah pitcher. You know them Louisiana niggahs ain't goin' to know no diff'ence but whut I kilt thet bull mahse'f!"

Caleb paused to gulp, and Captain Lawrence took advantage of the moment's hesitation.

"So it's Sparks that's been putting you up to this bull-fighting program, is it?"

"Wèll, suh, no suh. Not 'zackly, suh—'ceptin' as it wuz him whut introduces me to thet gent'man whut's goin' to gimme the job as valley boy."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do, Caleb. We'll be here three weeks more, at least. You take the job ashore and see how you like it. When it comes time to sail if you want to go along it will be all right with me.

Now get out, for I've got to write some letters. And if you get a brindle horn hung up in your short ribs while you're monkeying around with those red trousers—remember, I warned you!"

V

LIMA was tense with bated interest. There had been bull fights and bull fights; matadors and *diestros* had shone and faded into tarnished glory, but here was a fight that pricked the interest deeper than the callow thrill of sportsmanship. It was a national affair.

The crux of the situation was that a mere Chilean, an *hombre* from the spoon-fed land where there are no bull rings, had dared to flaunt his claims of superiority as a matador in the very faces of the brave *diestros* of Peru! He had come to Lima fresh from victories in Madrid. He aired his clippings and displayed his photos and bragged openly that Peruvians had better wrestle with calves and milch cows, while he, a Chilean, would show them how to fight!

So the very fiercest bulls were brought, great sturdy beasts that had been trained from calfhood to despise the very sight of man. For three full weeks these bulls were fed and exercised and tortured. Secretly their horns were whetted to a spear-point sharpness. Their hoofs were corrugated so that their footing might be sure.

The day dawned clear. All Lima was at the bull ring when the trumpet sounded across that ghastly, blood-drenched circle in the shadow of a barren, towering hill. The band played gaily. The place was draped in gaudy colors. Fair ladies with great languid eyes adorned the boxes. Brave men grew hoarse with cheering as they rapped their gold-knobbed canes in gluttonous eagerness for the slaughter to begin.

At last the band set forth to make the circuit of the gay arena. *Picadors* and *banderilleros* followed. *Toreros* came next—just mediocre men who killed their bulls with two, three, four but seldom one thrust to the vital organs. At last, the Chilean *diestro*—the mighty star!

A hush fell upon the crowded amphitheatre. How proudly he strode—how pompous! There was the faintest sneer in the curl of his thin-drawn lips. His scarlet trousers, his purple-bangled jacket seemed actually to catch and hold the sunlight. Around his neck there swung a great gold chain, and on this dangled a most potent charm. Lima had heard of that! But what it was or where he got it no man knew—and no man dared to question. It was carefully encased in a tiny silken bag, embroidered, it was whispered, by some famous Chilean beauty!

But out he strode, followed by his special lackey—a giant black man in a suit of gorgeous yellow satin. The follower was carrying the great *diestro's* cape and sword.

A murmur of approval swept the audience.

"Ah, the North American!"

Lima had heard of him! Some one applauded. Then a cheer arose that would have made it rain in any city except Lima. The Chilean strode on haughtily, but Caleb Washington Bolivar stopped and bowed.

He bowed again, then bowed some more as hats, canes, handkerchiefs went skyward. The arrogant Chilean had strutted fully halfway around the great arena before he realized that the cheers were not for him.

The *diestro* flushed with violent anger. He whirled on his heel and strode back where his man was bowing. With an impetuous gesture he snatched his cloak and sword. He stamped his foot and pointed to the exit.

A jeer went up, hoots, howls, boos, hisses. Caleb ceased his calisthenics. He grinned then sobered.

"You don't mean you wants me to——"

The Chilean's eyes flashed fire.

"Awright, ol' Chile boy! Done 'sult me ri' heah 'fo' the public. That ain't no way to treat yo' mascot. Wa'ch out, now, I doan rub mah rabbit foot on yo' bull!"

As Caleb left the field the trumpet sounded. The game was on. Out they came, bull after bull to rage and bellow and then to crumple in inglorious defeat. Horse after horse was disemboweled and dragged away. Spectators howled with mad hilarity.

The great gong sounded for the feature play.

Galloping into the dusty ring, blinded with hate, stung by the lash of torturers, tingling from the final jab of the hypodermic needle that set his veins on fire, came a mighty animal—the huge black bull that had been picked to test the prowess of the boastful Chilean matador.

The brass band blared and silenced. Out

into the arena swarmed an army of tormentors to tease and dodge and do the stunts that would enrage the beast. They finished and grim *picadors* rode in, supposed to wear the great bull down, to fret and weaken him through loss of blood. But it was prearranged—the job was poorly done. Six horses died upon the gory horns. Out came the *banderilleros*, and finally the clarion call for death!

Cool, calm and sanguine the Chilean conqueror strode into the ring. He dodged, he vaulted, he swayed so that by an inch, no more, he would escape the greedy horns. He laughed and tripped the animal. He sneered and slapped it in the face. He met the charge on bended knees. The zero hour came, and with unerring skill he thrust his gleaming sword between the shoulder blades, true to the heart.

A faint ripple of applause responded, the venting of irrepressible admiration—deeper than the patriotic prejudice. The Chilean would have left the ring, but from here and there, like the random kernels of popcorn that first explode in the heated basket, came taunts and jeers.

"*Rotol*" they shouted. "No bull but a sickly cow!" "Just luck!" "More! More!" "Another!" rose the cries.

The smirking Chilean wiped his bloody sword upon a scarlet cloth. He was open to all comers. Bulls? Bah! To him the bulls of Christendom were but as glittering bangles to be worn upon his coat! He waited.

From the sheltered haven where Caleb Washington had watched the bloody duel the negro slipped away unnoticed. He made his way to the corral where the supply of bulls was waiting. The band struck up a gay air for an intermission. It ceased. Again the great gong sounded and the gates swung wide.

All eyes were on that entrance, eager to catch the first glimpse of the fresh animal that would meet the Chilean's sword. But a huge black cat darted frantically into the arena. A tittering arose, like the sound of a surf. This was smothered by impressive "Ohs!" and "Ahs!"

It was an ill omen. Spectators exchanged significant glances. The mighty *matador* was seen to clutch his amulet. The chain that held it broke and the charm fell in the dust at the fighter's feet. The Chilean stepped backward and would have picked it up, but he tripped on his cape and his sword, bending beneath the weight of his body, snapped with a sharp report.

"Oh!" "Ah!" once more swept round the huge arena. "Bad! Very bad!"

It had been rumored, too, that this morning at early mass the great *diestro's* candle had gone out half-burned! The silence grew oppressive.

Out rushed the bull, as snow white except for an odd black mark that seemed to split its forehead. It came in prancing, then wheeled to face whoever might dispute its sovereignty. It pawed the earth.

Alone in the center of the arena the matador was seen to cross himself. He stood transfixed and stared. On came the bull. The fighter did not budge, but rubbed his eyes as though he disbelieved his vision. The huge brute paused for the final charge—but faced no enemy, for the great *diestro* had fled!

A thundering bellow and the bull took up the chase. On came the bull! On went the man—sans heart, sans sword, sans amulet, sans everything! They reached the shelter as though they had been one. There was a thud and rattle and when the gleaming horns came up they bore a scarlet pennant that had been the seat of the *diestro's* pants.

The crowd went mad. Hats, canes, fans handkerchiefs went high into the air. Spectators hissed, they laughed, they wept. The hated rival, the proud Chilean *matador* had met his Waterloo!

The hilarity was interrupted. Sauntering carelessly across the ring with bland indifference to impending danger came a gorgeous yellow figure. He picked up the broken sword and began to scrape the dust.

"Ah, the amulet! He seeks the amulet!"

A great hush fell. The black man stooped. He had found it! Some one applauded—and Caleb bowed.

The cheers of the spectators quickened into frightened shrieks of warning. The bull had turned and was headed for the center of the ring. But "*Tenga cuidado!*" "*Huigal*" "*Corral*" registered the same as "Bravo!" in Caleb's ears. He bowed and bowed again.

Ten feet astern the bull came to a sudden standstill. He stretched his neck and sniffed. The crowd had risen to its feet. Ten thousand throats were choked with terror as the white bull sniffed and shook its savage head.

But he did not charge. He wheeled impetuously and trotted back to where the great *diestro* was still held prisoner behind the barricade.

Caleb straightened slowly, his interest fixed upon the contents of the embroidered bag. He undid the fastenings and from the soft silk wrappings finally disclosed a ring. It was an odd design—two diamonds in a broken crown upon a heart that had a sword pierced through.

" 'Fo' Gawd!" Caleb Washington muttered.

Before his eyes there passed a vision of a wasted figure in a huge glass casket, and then the drawing of a ring. Holding the *diestro's* charm as though it might have been a viper, he strode directly to the box where the president of the republic sat. Caleb handed up his find and the official's eyes grew wide with wonder. It was Pizarro's ring! The news swept the arena like a wind-blown flame. Fresh cheers arose. What the band played seemed like "Dixie."

VI

IT WAS the following morning that engineers pronounced the *West Wind* once more seaworthy. The sailing hour arrived, but there was still no word from Caleb. Captain Lawrence mounted to the bridge and gave the "stand by" signal to the engine-room. He caught the sound of music from the shore. Taking his glasses he saw a gay procession wending slowly into view.

There was a brief ceremony at the landing place. A motor launch, brilliantly bedecked with flags, set out from shore and steered a course directly toward the *West Wind*. The Peruvian navy, both vessels, anchored down Chorrillos way, let forth a deafening salvo. Captain Lawrence chuckled as he made out a familiar figure seated in the stern of the tiny craft. He gave the whistle cord three vigorous pulls.

The launch came sputtering alongside and Caleb scrambled to the steamer's deck. Beneath his arm he hugged a package. A yellow satin sleeve hung down behind. As a badge of honor, fastened with a safety pin upon his coat lapel, was the rescued fragment of the Chilean's red trousers.

Captain Lawrence called the black man to the bridge.

"What's the matter, Caleb—didn't like your job?"

The "valley boy" to the great Chilean *diestro* shook a solemn head.

"Neveh cud stomick-tol'rate no slawtah house!" he emphasized. "Los' mah taste fo' thet Chile man whin I seed 'em mawtahfyin' them po' blin'fold hosses. 'Sides, thet man onsult me—ri' out 'fo' the public limelight whin I wuz doin' mah bowin'!"

"But how did you manage, Caleb? What made the great *diestro* turn and run?"

The black man grinned.

"You see, it wuz jes' this-a-way, Cap'n, suh. Them theh ign'ant bull fighters is mos' turruble superstitious. I knowed thet black cat whut I scatted out theh in the circus 'rena wuz boun' to have his beahin'. Then too, thet Chile man done tol' me how a Spanish fo'tune-tellin' woman say as how he ain't neveh goin' to be konkered 'til a white-haired bull wid a black mawk down its nose trots 'crost his path.

"Whin I seed them hosses kilt I 'cided 'twuzn't no even contes', so I smudges up mah rabbit foot an' leans oveh in the bull pin an' puts thet streakity mawk down thet white bull's nose."

"Get down below before I use your wishbone for a weather prophet!"

"I'se tellin' you ri', Mistuh Cap'n, suh!"

The skipper chuckled. "What I can't undertand, Caleb, is why the bull didn't charge you when you were there in the arena picking up Pizarro's ring."

"Ain't you recognized thet animal?" Caleb doubled with volcanic laughter. " 'Fo' ——, Cap'n, I been feedin' thet white-haired cow brute eveh since we lef' N' Orleans! I 'clares, I thought all the time you knowed!"

SLANTS ON LIFE

A Parable

by Bill Adams

MAN is a discontented sort of party, even at his best, and I fear that there are many times when I am a good specimen of man at his worst. I will endeavor to be a more contented mortal. Humph! It is a long lesson, and a mighty hard one.

I have been working of late in an orchard that runs beside a road beyond which is a railway. This morning while I was at work on the edge of the grove, I heard, far away, the rumble of an approaching train and, stepping from my ladder to the ground, stood to listen to the peculiar music of the engine and the rolling wheels. To me there is often a strange fascination in the noise of a train. It seems to bring before me the sight of all the big and little railway stations I have, at one time and another, known.

I stood beneath the limbs of a tall olive-tree—the orchard is bordered by a row of olive-trees—and listened. The air was silent, save for the increasing roar and rumble. The olive-blossoms lay in a soft and scenty carpet at my feet, and over the mountains the sun of early morning shone through a haze. A bird sang in a tree close by.

As the train drew nearer I felt the old indescribable urge that comes to me at times, the great longing, to be up and going—just to be going. It is the spirit of the pioneer and the adventurer that is native in the souls of many of us. The train almost in view, I took off my hat, as one might when enthralled by the strains of wonderful music.

I was quite entranced. Against the yellow background of the foot-hills the locomotive rattled into my view. A catch took my breath, and a surge of desire flooded through me. Car by car the train sped by.

I longed to leap upon one of the box-cars and to go with it wherever it might be going. I saw cities, and plains, and valleys through the hills, and bridges over rivers, hearing bells, and many voices, seeing smoke and tall chimneys, and spires of many a town. There were ports and havens. The world lay before me in that moment of time while the first few cars went by. Then there came a flat-car laden with large blocks of granite and behind it was another similarly laden. Then, in fancy, I saw men who work with chisels and hammers, carving granite—and I saw the tombs of the dead.

Here was a lesson for one who would go, restless footed, to the ends of the earth.

There came into view a car followed by four more like to it.

Against the lazy background of distant pasture hills, where cattle wander contentedly, all the year, I saw the cattle-cars go by, bearing doomed creatures to the distant markets.

I thought, the soul of a man must wander forever till it comes to the appointed haven, finding peace after many perplexities. The gray granite, upright above the sleeper, will be of but a slight significance. The spirit must seek on.

It matters not too much, then, that one may not now follow the bent of one's earthly desire, since the spirit will not perish.

Man may be imprisoned—a temporary affair. The cattle die.

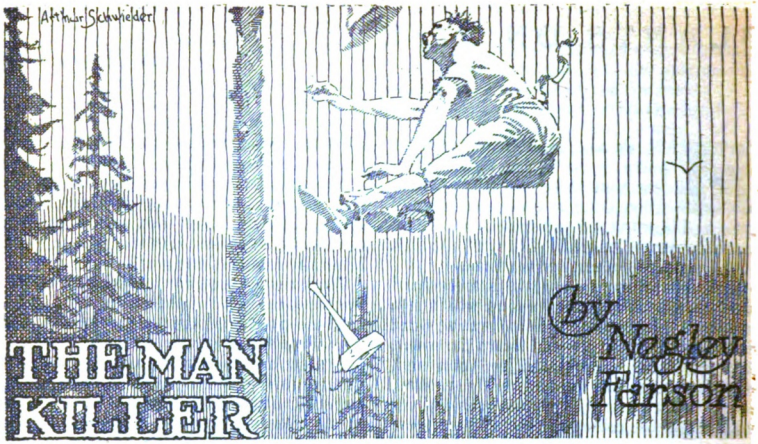
The train passed from my sight, a man in the caboose waved a cheery hand to me, wishing, no doubt, that he too might stand in the scent of blossoms beneath green trees upon a sunny morning.

What do you make of this, my parable?

I think that a man must be content, but not too contented. I think that one must be restless, but not too restless. I think that one must draw from the present beauty all that he may of this present beauty's sweetness. I think, perchance, there may come another day—some day when the spirit will travel to ports surpassing in beauty all the harbors and cities and havens of the earth for which the pioneering mind of man forever craves.

Man's mind perchance is but as the wild growth in the nursery, upon which there may yet be grafted the bud of full fruition.

What do you think?



Author of "It's Only a Question of Time," "Jones Thompson and ——"

HE STUCK a knife in the ribs of the mate—and skipped ship.

That was his start in this New World of ours. A rotten one, too, you'll admit. He didn't try to improve it; whenever Pavel felt peeved or offended some one got hurt. Boots, fists, knives, bottles; anything handy was called into use. He was terrible. One night, in a brawl on the waterfront, he hit a man with a bottle, hit him just a little too hard—and the man didn't recover. In fact, he croaked on the spot. Pavel cleared out.

On an island, off the coast of B. C., he and another Finn started hand-logging. They were falling boom-poles into the sea, making over twenty dollars a day. Easy money. But they were there by themselves, face to face, shut up through the long winter nights. They fell to hating each other, picking fights over nothing—quarreled over the cat. Pavel wanted it put out at nights; the other Finlander wanted it in—he used it as a hot-water bottle in bed—and one evening he told Pavel that if the cat didn't please him he could go out and jump in the sea.

Pavel saw red. He had a stick of stove-wood in his hand. He raised it to strike—and saw the face of the man he had hit with the bottle. Just a little flash in his memory, staying his arm— Then something knocked his memory *skewiff*——

The other Finn had got home with the poker.

Pavel was sick a long time. A couple of days. After that he walked about like a wild man, trying to discover some way to get off the island. The other Finn had gone off with their skiff. He'd taken provisions as well. Pavel was starved. When the tug came to pick up their boom, Pavel danced on the beach like a maniac. But on the mainland he was given six hundred dollars, the full price of the boom. Whopee! He'd take another crack on the head for six hundred dollars.

HE BLEW it all in a fortnight. Women, spongers, and dives. With a head that ached worse than ever he tramped Railway Street, in Vancouver, looking for work.

He got it, in a camp on Vancouver Island, Bull Cook, at three dollars and sixty cents a day. He bucked the wood for the big Comox stoves, for the galley, for the timekeeper's shack, cleaned the bunk-houses, helped wash the dishes—when the flunkies were off—was the last man to turn in at night and the first up in the morning. Five o'clock. The worst job in the woods.

Inside of two weeks he was holding the best, dragging down twelve dollars a day!

The high-rigger had cut himself down, dropped from the top of a two-hundred foot

gin-pole. Dead as mutton. The camp was upset; work had to be stopped in the hook-tender's gang until some one could be found to finish the job.

"You want a feller to go up dat tree?"

The push said he did.

"Well, gimme them spurs—I'm a sailor."

And a sailor he was, as much at home in the cross-trees as on the deck of a ship. He had a good head for height, knew how to handle wire rope. The loggers looked on and admired. Pavel went up a menial, and came down a king!

And just as kings are sometimes crazed by their power so was Pavel. He became a terror among the camps of the coast. Men hated the sound of his name. That affair with the hand-logging Finn had only deepened his resentment toward mankind in general. Also, it had taught him the value of strategy, the secret of unexpected attack. Where, in the old days, he would have charged head down—blind as a bull—he now bided his time. Used his head. Sprang like a panther. He was twice as terrible now that he was cunning.

So he ranged, from camp to camp, the length of the coast. Getting good jobs, a high-rigger always, making small fortunes out in the woods, and flinging the lot to the harlots and scum of the cities. Leaving a trail of battered humanity wherever he passed. At one camp he came upon his old hand-logging partner. When Pavel had finished the doctors declared that the man would always walk with a limp. This was an evil affair, almost a killing; and Pavel's boss, with a gun in his hand, told him to clear out of that part of the woods. Pavel looked at the gun, at the man, and departed forthwith.

This tale was still in the air, going the rounds of the coast, when Pavel came to No. 3 Camp. Men grinned when they passed him. Smug little grins; not big enough to hit a man for. Besides, Pavel was broke. He decided to give them a lesson.

Now a gin-pole is nothing but a gigantic fir with its head cut off. But this cutting a top is a delicate task; it usually weighs a couple of tons; and two tons, falling some two hundred feet, is going to smash anything that it hits. The spot where it should land is selected beforehand; and a good high-rigger, taking count of the wind, can drop a top so accurately that it would drive a peg in the ground. It's merely a question of placing his cuts.

Today Pavel grinned as he worked—he'd show 'em what a high-rigger was!

"W—a—y be—low!"

He clung to the tree. The great top sighed in the wind; the wood cracked, like the ripping of fabric——

A group, splicing cables on a log down below, looked up and almost screamed its amazement—the top was directly over their heads! It is said that one never knows what one can do till one tries; certain it is that some of those loggers cleared twenty feet between jumps. A frantic stampede——

"You ——!"

With a shower of earth, rocks, and branches falling around him, the donkey man screamed up his rage—

"Swanson'll tear your face off for this!"

Pavel, clinging like some gigantic monkey-on-the-stick, jeered down his contempt—

"Guess I mak you fellers yump lak de devil!" He gave them a burst of brass-colored laughter.

Pavel climbed to the top, pulled himself over the edge, snapped open his belt—and stood up! Two hundred feet in the air on a platform not over two feet across! Swaying, he leaned into the wind.

"If Swanson gets funny wid me," he called down to the open-mouthed loggers, "he won't have no face left——"

This said, Pavel fished some Old Chum and wheat-straws from his pocket, and rolled him a smoke.

It was the apex of disdain, this god-like posture of his. The men below were admiring in spite of themselves. This was some Finn!

He was. That's why Carl Swanson was not at all pleased when the donkey man told him what Pavel had said—and what *he* had said to Pavel. Two hundred and twenty pounds of hatchet-faced Finn had made a name for itself—a horrible name.

"Yust you keep your mout' shut," Swanson told that astonished wet-nurse of machinery; "I ain't hunting no fight wid dat Finn! I got a wife and two kids to keep——"

But it came; it began over cards in the bunk-house. Pavel was looking on, making remarks on the hands—

"By golly, dis feller's got four aces!"

The little man of the skid roads roared his dismay; he had just set himself for a killing——

"For ——'s sake!" he pleaded with Pavel. "Go 'way and leave us alone!"

Pavel's answer was a slap in the face.

The little man of the skid roads sobbed and hit at him blindly. Pavel smashed his fist into the small, frightened face——

"Dot'll learn you!" he growled, feeling his lip where a chance blow had landed.

"Looka here!" Swanson called down from the bunk almost overhead. "You leaf dot little feller alone—you big, stinkin' stockfish!"

"By golly—" Pavel rose to his feet—"dat's de way I lak to hear a man talk. You come down here an' I'll break your t'ick —— neck!"

The bunk-house has no time for subtleties—either a man fights or he doesn't. And it missed altogether the tone in Swanson's voice when he answered—

"You can try dat on in the mornin'!"

The bunk-house was horribly mortified—Swanson was yellow! He was going to wiggle out of a fight. Pavel chuckled; and the men in the game cashed in their stacks, and crawled into their bunks, leaving Pavel still growling his threats.

NEXT day, on the skid road, Swanson stopped Pavel:

"You was looking for a fight las' night," he said, tapping the Finn on the chest, "well, I'm right wid yer—boots an' all. Step up!"

The men coming down to the cook-house thought it must be a couple of bears, having a fight in the brush. Loggers ran in from every direction. The whirlwind of mud and snow cleared away, and Swanson stood up. He leered like a bloody-faced gargoyle.

"By ——!" he reeled through the astounded group of the men. "By ——, I fix *him!*"

There is a girl in this story—not much of a girl—and, as she was of so little importance, it doesn't make any difference whether she was pretty or not. Anyway, to Pavel she was; and when, on an evening walk out from the store, she began to taunt him about the beating he had received from the hook tender, Pavel saw all shades of crimson:

"Dot was all a mistake," he explained, "he yumped on me when I didn't know he was dere!"

"Oh?" the girl smiled to cheer him. "I thought it must be something like that. Why, he can't fight—he's *married!*"

She pronounced the last word with rising inflection. Though why she should say that a benedick could no longer fight is something that only she, and her knowledge of logging-camp lovers, could make clear. But Pavel wasn't questioning comfort—this girl was like fire in his blood.

"Sure!" he smiled back at her proudly. "You watch me! I put a kink in him next time for fair!"

The pale green eyes of the girl narrowed, thoughtfully.

When Swanson felt the hot bite of that knife—which seemed born of the dark—he went berserk. Perhaps he sensed that this was a fight to a finish. Even then, had his hand not chanced to come on an old rusty saw-set, Pavel would have got home his thrust. But Swanson's hand clutched the rod, and he struck furiously at the white face above him. The "kink", therefore, was delivered to Pavel.

In the city Swanson would have called in the police. As it was the thought never entered his head. He was the best man of the two. Well and good! He gave the Finn another kick in the face and walked off.

A week later Pavel stopped the girl on the trail.

"Wass matter?" he wanted to know.

She tried to get past him.

"Wass matter?" he insisted. "Ain't I good enough to spik wid you? You tell me wass matter! See!"

"You ain't no good!" she told him flatly. "He's gone and beat you up all over again. I thought you said you could fight?"

"I slip—I make a mistake."

"That's what you said the first time—'made a mistake'! Well, I guess it wasn't no mistake *this* time. *Gee!* What a face you've got!"

The skin seemed to fall away under Pavel's sharp cheek bones; he looked like a wolf. He yanked the girl toward him—shook her, like a dog shakes a rat——

"Dis time I fix him for good! I kill a man before dis!"

The girl's thick lips drew away from her teeth:

"Aw, tell that sort of stuff to my kid sister. You couldn't fix a sick headache!"

In the bunk-house Pavel was left strictly alone. And that worthy courted no friendship. He never spoke—unless one counted

his eyes. And these followed Swanson about whenever he came within sight. Loggers, who had caught the malevolent flames of that glare, warned Swanson to discharge him at once.

"He's bad," a bucker argued with Swanson. "I tell you, Swanson, he's going to get you some day! Better tell him to ask for his time."

But Swanson refused; he'd fire him when he got ready. Perhaps, when they finished this set——

"Anyway, I can take care o' myself!"

The set neared its end, buckers and fallers working full draft. And, at last, they finished their work; the woods lay thick with big sticks, forty and sixty foot lengths. It had been back-breaking toil. The fallers and buckers, who were working on contract, drew their pay and pushed off. But here, although it was Sunday—with a warm kiss of Spring in the air—Swanson told Pavel to cut a new gin-pole. The hook-tender's crew was told to stand by to rig a skidder that afternoon to the head tree. The men groused; but Swanson wanted to get the big sticks out before the high water left.

After breakfast he went up with Pavel to pick out the tree. The two men walked silently into the woods. And as they walked Pavel, with the little round whetstone in the palm of his hand, sharpened his ax to razor-like fineness.

"This'll do," the hook tender placed his hand on a lofty, straight fir.

Without deigning to answer Pavel swung his life rope around the base of the tree, and snapped the two hooked ends in his belt.

"I go up now, an' make de undercut," he commented; and kicking the leg spurs into the tree he began slowly to climb.

"All right," Swanson agreed, "I yust splice these two hailyards. Pretty high pole."

He walked over and set down on a forty-foot stick.

Like some Gargantuan bug Pavel ascended the tree until he came to the branches, some two hundred feet above the floor of the forest. Here, after fixing his spurs, he began making the cut.

Hugh! Hwap!—Hugh! Hwap! the bright blade cut deep toward the heart of the tree. Great, yellow-white chips spun out, hovered, and then planed down to pitch into the brush.

Then—no longer pale—came chips of a dull mottled brown. At the second of these Pavel stopped, peered into the cut, and swore horribly. Dozy! There were the tell-tale white rings—the tree was no good for a spar tree—its heart was as rotten as punk!

He looked down to call out the bad news to Swanson, and was angered to see that individual asleep on the log. There he was, just as he had sat down to splice hailyards in the warm April sun. Only he had canted over a little—his head lay on the crook of his arm. Asleep!

"——!"

Pavel's mouth opened to hurl down some abuse—here he was two hundred feet up a soft, dozy tree——

A thought jumped into his brain; then it filled it completely; and Pavel's face became a mirror of sin.

He shifted quietly around, so as to make the undercut the falling cut, and began cutting below it on the side nearest Swanson. It would be a cinch for a high-rigger like him. If only Swanson would not get awake——

Pavel drove his ax like a demon. And straining there against his slim rope, his sweating face agleam in the sun—he looked like a fiend.

Hugh! Hwap! Hugh! Hwap! the ax entered the dozy.

A puff of wind cooled his cheek. Fine! Nothing could have been better. He put all his great strength into his blows—that girl! He swung the sharp blade in a frenzy. Far down, on the edge of the water he glimpsed the long line of bunk-houses, pictured himself explaining the "accident"——

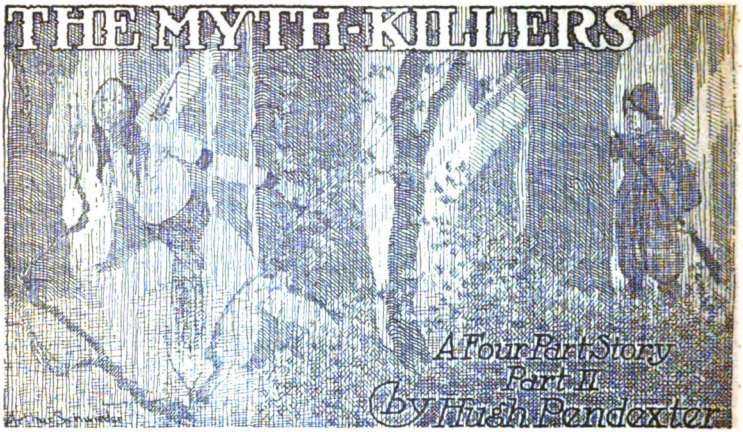
"Dozy!" he rehearsed the scene in his mind. "Dozy—the top came right over on him! Dozy, and——"

He was just about to say "wind" when that thing itself moved the branches above him—a low bough flicked the face of the ax, deflected it—and three and one half pounds of bright metal bit through the strands of the life-belt.

"Ai!" Pavel's scream shot into the woods.

Swanson rubbed his eyes, yawned in the sun. An echo died away in the forest.

He couldn't understand what had happened—until he saw Pavel.



Author of "Long Rifles," "Red Autumn," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

I WAS making my way slowly down the Mississippi in the Summer of 1720 when John Law's tales of riches in the new world and his finance schemes had set all France mad with gold-fever. Quite by accident I discovered along the banks an Indian sign which told me that the Natchez were preparing to declare war against the French in the Month of Peaches.

Later when I met Joe Labrador, my loyal friend, I felt no hesitation about continuing although he warned me that Governor de Bienville suspected me of being an English spy. English I certainly was, but the French believed I had been obliged to flee from Virginia and, with the information I had obtained regarding the threatened war I felt that I could convince Monsieur de Bienville of my integrity.

As I approached Biloxi two French trappers joined me, and I was sure from their manner that my name had already been published as a spy. The town was in a turmoil. A ship from France had just landed, filled with settlers and a large number of women destined to become the wives of the Louisiana planters. It mattered little to these men that most of the women were the scourings of Paris. Among them I noticed one girl of such evident refinement that I wondered how she could be a member of this low crew. To my questions she said that her name was Claire Dahlsgaarde and that she was in great distress. Impulsively I offered to help her get to New Orleans although I knew it lessened my own chances of escape.

Monsieur de Bienville approached.

"Monsieur William Brampton," he said formally, "I charge you with being a spy in English employ. While the information you have given me may be correct I am obliged to hold you here until I am assured of your loyalty. You may have the freedom of the town, and I trust you will dine with me tonight."

He bowed again. De Bienville was always a great gentleman.

"How long must I remain?" I questioned, confident that he had no proof.

"Until I hear from my agent, Damoan the Fox, who is now on his way from Virginia," he answered.

My heart sank, for the Fox was the one man to whom I had confided all my plans, believing him to be trustworthy. That night I began making plans to escape, not forgetting *Mademoiselle;* her danger for some reason was as great as my own.

THAT morning I simulated cunning in my way of questioning different men about Pensacola, the time it took to make the port, and the like. I ended by putting a few careless queries to Sergeant Suarez, and was rewarded by the narrowing of his dark eyes. Having sown this seed I visited the magazine office when it was empty, and studied the wall-maps as if wishing to refresh my recollection. My coming and going was carefully noted, I observed. Finishing there, I returned to the shore and talked with a fellow who owned a small vessel called a *flute.* I asked him if he ever made Pensacola in his little craft. He was noncommittal and acted frightened, and in the background I saw the sergeant glaring

at us. As I left the shore I located the packet of the Mattors', and later saw them hanging about the bark houses where the women colonists were lodged.

I must have a boat to take me to Pontchartrain. It was necessary that I escape under cover of night, leaving Bienville to believe I was making for Pensacola. But these women, now crying out boldly to the grinning garrison, would require all the available craft for their passage to New Orleans. It would be no hardship for me to strike into the back country and follow along one of the rivers. But I had informed *mademoiselle* that I would call for her, or send for her; and I intended to keep my word. Aside from this there were the Choctaws, whom Bienville would set on my trail if it was not believed I had departed in a boat.

Between the fear the boats would be used for transporting the women, and the greater fear that Damoan might arrive at any hour, I spent a miserable day. It was not until mid-afternoon that I learned why the women were being held—one of them was ill and it was possible she was coming down with the fever.

I stuck close to the shore, sprawling on the sand, with Suarez or one of his men always in the middle distance, keeping watch. Toward sunset Bienville came hurrying down to the boats and accosted me, saying:

"Monsieur Brampton, I'm off for the island. Another ship comes in. It's a —— of a case! A sick woman here—and she may have the plague—and no place to keep this new lot either here or out there. I go to see they are kept on the ship until I can arrange for them."

He paused, and I knew what he would say next, and I rubbed my head and stomach and groaned slightly.

"Touched by the sun? Are you ill?" he asked, not unkindly.

"Only a queer dizziness. Something of a pain in my vitals," I answered, making a face as some imaginary twinge of pain shot through me. "Something I have eaten has poisoned me. I think it must have been the fish. I shall be all right after a dram of brandy and a night indoors out of the dew."

He bit his lip and hesitated, his brows perplexed. His intention of compelling my company was being replaced by another safeguard. He expressed his regret and turned toward Suarez and beckoned him to approach, and at the same time walking to meet him. He spoke briefly to the sergeant, then hastened down to the shore and went aboard a sailing vessel.

Suarez walked to me and with a smirk said:

"His Excellency's compliments to Monsieur Brampton, who is indisposed. *Monsieur* is advised to go to his Excellency's quarters, take a stiff drink of brandy and lie down."

I rose and with unsteady steps walked with him toward the fort. As we advanced the fellow took more time to study my features—now screwed up in an expression of pain. His aplomb deserted him and he walked farther apart from me. He had no desire to catch the fever, and the moment I entered the living-room of the governor's house he hurriedly left me. Standing my musket beside the small window I watched him give orders to two soldiers, who left the gate and took up positions closer to the house. They were reluctant to do this as they had been enjoying the badinage of the women. Now I was confined and under guard. It must be this night or not at all. Bienville's trip to Ship Island gave me my one chance of escaping.

I watched and waited while the night more snugly tucked its dark robes about the settlement. At last the monotony of the women's witticisms, screamed at the soldiers lounging at the gate, was varied by the sound of angry voices. At first I thought the men were quarreling, but after a bit it was plain they were complaining against some injustice. Other voices under a pretense of sympathy egged the discontented ones on.

"*Messieurs*, I thank you." Now I recognized the speaker as old Jules Mattor. His voice creaked with resentment. "His Excellency is a just man, a good man. But these women in the bark-houses? They have no fever. Bah! I have lived here long enough and have seen enough of them die to know the fever."

"And if they have the fever we can not catch it, for we've been through it," spoke up Basile Mattor. "It would be much better if two of them were given to us. We would take them away from here and make more room for the others."

"You both waste your breath," growled a heavy voice. "The women stay here

until his Excellency returns. Then you can talk to him. You make my ears ache."

"They already have Indian women. His Excellency will not give them white wives, Sergeant Suarez," cried another. "They want to steal white wives and get away from here before his Excellency returns."

"So that's the trick, eh?" growled the sergeant. "If you two go near the women's quarters you'll run into a musket ball weighing eight hundred grains. It will be bad for your digestion."

Both the Mattors violently insisted on the purity of all their motives, and vowed it required no threats to keep them inside his Excellency's commands. Much laughing and bantering among the soldiers followed; and I slipped into the doorway with a robe over my shoulders. My scheme of escape was now stretching forth its tentacles like a devil-fish and seeking to embrace the Mattors among its requirements.

"Is Jules Mattor there? Do I hear Jules Mattor's voice," I called out. "This is Monsieur Brampton. I have a chill. Have you had the fever? Would it be dangerous for you to come nearer so I may question you?"

"There is no danger. I laugh at the fever, *monsieur*," he cried, glad to escape from the gibes of the soldiers; and he ran toward me through the dusk, closely followed by Basile.

"And your son? Has he had it?"

"Also the boy," he replied, halting before me. "Permit me to place my hand on *monsieur's* head."

His hand found my forehead and found it cool and damp, but before he could speak I had seized his hand and was pressing it for silence. The sergeant was at the gate, not suspicious but very watchful. The soldiers, too, were silent, waiting for the verdict.

"Say you are not sure. I have money for you. Hard money!" I whispered.

As quick as a weasel he was babbling:

"It is hard to tell, *monsieur*. In a short time, yes. For a certainty."

"I ate fish last evening. It may be that," I hopefully suggested, giving his hand another squeeze.

"Ah, those fish! Who knows? Then again it may be the fever."

The conversation at the gate was being resumed. The shrill voices of the women were being answered with broad retorts. To Jules I murmured:

"His Excellency refuses you two men wives, because you have Indian wives. Yet his soldiers are quartered among the Indians, and their wives do not count against their taking white ones. It is unfair."

"It is execrable!" groaned Jules.

"I must be at Pascagoula Bay sometime tomorrow——"

"——! What does that have to do with white wives and——"

"I must leave there and go somewhere else as quickly as possible."

"Ehe! It must be the fever stewing your brains, *monsieur!*"

"Softly, you fool! Here are five pistoles in my hand. Feel of them. They are for you if you do as I say."

"You wish to leave here. His Excellency forbids your going!"

"I have not asked him. I am not under arrest. I must leave before he returns from the island."

"Five pistoles! Permit me to be blessed by touching them! *Nom de Dieu!* It is true."

"Then you will take them and help me?"

"God pity poor fishermen! We do not dare. Blood for blood!" And he shivered.

"I will try the hot drink and the sweat." Then under my breath, "Who is to know? You have been refused women. You go aboard your packet and start for Pontchartrain——"

"But *monsieur* said Pascagoula——"

"You start for Pontchartrain. When beyond the island you turn and make for Pascagoula Bay."

"But *monsieur* will be seen entering my boat and leaving with us. Else that dog of a sergeant will shoot us all before we can raise the sail," mumbled Mattor, his fingers jerking convulsively as they touched the pistoles.

"I shall not go with you. You will enter your boat alone."

"God is good, my father! He has the fever and is crazy. Grab the gold and run for it!" whispered Basile.

"I have pistols as well as pistoles," I warned.

"We are all crazy like the ragged Frenchman!" helplessly sighed Jules.

"You are free to go when and where you

will. They will see you start back to Lake Pontchartrain. When out of sight you will go to Pascagoula. You will carry these five pistoles with you."

"Ah, *le bon Dieu!*"

"And you will fish in the bay until sunset tomorrow, waiting for me to come overland and join you. You will watch for my smoke on the shore and come in close. I will hold both arms high above my head. I will steal a canoe or swim for it. If you see my smoke but do not see me you will know you can wait until dark before taking me off, thus avoiding any risk of being seen helping me."

"Then to Pensacola!" whispered Mattor. "My soul is frightened. An eye for an eye, says his——"

"Then you will receive ten more pistoles."

"Plunge me into —— if that much hard money is to be found there!" he gasped. "They refuse me a wife. Good! Then I will take this money. We will go to Pensacola with you. The priests will protect us. Our Indian wives are making trouble because we will not feed all their lazy men relations. *Monsieur* will bring the rest of the money?"

"I have it with me now. Remember your sailing directions; make for the west, then double back and go to fishing in Pascagoula Bay. Watch for me to come before sundown."

"*Mais ouil* And if you do not come by sundown?"

"Then sail back here with your fish and keep the money. You will hear news of me here if I do not show up at the bay before the sun goes down."

"*Monsieur* has won my heart. I speak for my son as for myself. I tell you again, *monsieur*, it is not for me to say if you have fever, or are sick from eating poisoned fish. It is no use to talk about it. You are better off in the house. We must go. They refuse us the sweet company of women. They have a house filled with women, and they refuse one for Jules Mattor, a brave pioneer for France——"

"And one for Basile Mattor, his father's brave son," interpolated the youth.

"And refuse one for my son, who is willing to die for France, yes. It is very sad. I go to the Mississippi. I will go to Canada, where brave men are rewarded——"

"No more of that talk, you old ——. You and your worthless son must leave the fort. Remember, if you are seen near the women's house you will get a brace of musket balls," broke in Sergeant Suarez's voice; and I realized the Mattors were cunning as foxes and had sensed his silent approach and had shifted the conversation to blind him. And at that, the sergeant did not care to come too close.

"*Sacré!*" hissed Jules, turning and stamping to the gate.

As he and his son departed the soldiers called unwholesome phrases after them. All to the detriment of the Company of the Indies and the Empire of France. Mumbling and grumbling father and son gained the shore. For some time after they had vanished from sight I caught fragments of their oaths, and their solemn vows never to enter the Gulf again.

Satisfied with this first step toward freedom I reentered the house, still hugging a robe about me as if suffering from a chill. Suarez came and stood in the door, but did not care to enter.

"Perhaps it is only the fish," he remarked.

"Oh, that is all, I am sure," I assured him between chattering teeth. "I will sleep. Sleep will mend me."

HE WITHDREW quickly, and extinguishing the candle I threw myself on my robes in the corner and waited. Outside the soldiers chatted lazily, and speaking with much freedom now that the governor was not present to overhear. Almost all of them were voicing their envy of the troops quartered among the Indians, and I deduced they were not entirely contented with conditions along the desolate Biloxi coast. Some even hinted at the superior life to be found by soldiers in Havana, that breeding-place of the fever.

Gradually those not on guard surrendered to the claims of sleep and went to the barracks. I crawled to the window and peered out. The torch at the gate was extinguished. Within a rod of my window was the figure of a man. Near the door was another. As they occasionally moved about I heard the rattle of their accouterments, and knew that despite my claim of being ill the sergeant had posted guards. Down by the gate was another sentinel; and the three exchanged low-voiced comments at times. I was wondering if the back of the house was also under surveillance when a new note caused the two men

outside to steal toward each other, whispering excitedly. A woman had laughed outside the gate.

"She has left the house, Gaston," chuckled the fellow nearest my window.

"*Morbleu!* They have all left the house! Hear the magpies! What fools! Suarez will be hearing them. Take a look at *monsieur* through the window while I run to quiet them."

"But we may get the fever unless they go back."

"We'll die of something anyway. Rather the fever than a Chickasaw arrow."

I stole back to my corner and threw myself on my robes and began an excellent imitation of a man muttering in his sleep, or while slightly delirious. As I mumbled and tossed about I could discern a vague shape at the window and knew the fellow was listening greedily. He withdrew, and I crossed the room. His mate was back from quieting the women, and I was in time to hear the sentinel say:

"Fever or fish, the devil has him in a black spell. He needs a guard no more than a dead Natchez. You spoke to them?"

"Can you hear them now? Oh, they are very cunning, these Paris wenches. There are a dozen of them. We must get them away from the gate. Come on!"

If the sentinel had any scruples about quitting his post the darkness concealed it and his voice made no protest. The two stole toward the gate together. There was some muffled laughter and a guard's sibilant warning for prudence, then the telltale sounds grew fainter and I knew they had withdrawn from the gate. Here was my chance to escape from the fort and make for the rendezvous at Pascagoula Bay. I leaned from the window and listened for further sounds, then ducked back as a figure stole through the gate. Cursing the sentinel for not staying with his mates I hastily withdrew to my robes and threw myself down.

I waited to hear steps in the sand outside the window, and heard nothing. For several minutes I waited, wondering where the —— he could have gone to, and was concluding his errand had been to filch brandy rather than to spy on me, when a soft step sounded outside the door. I loosened a pistol and lay on my back and through half-closed lids gazed toward the closed door. The room suddenly became illumined as the heavy door, with scarcely a sound, swung open. There was a stealth about this newcomer that was never practised by a soldier.

A lighted candle was advancing over the threshold. I closed my lids to mere slits. With soft padding steps a man swept across the room and seated himself at the table. I heard him sigh deeply, as if contented. I turned my head ever so little until my gaze rested on his moccasins. They were of Shawano make. His leggings, I next observed, were much travel-stained. I increased the field of vision until I was staring at the fringed skirts of his hunting-shirt, then the sleeves, much worn; and the long brown hands idly resting on the table.

My heart tightened as I watched the hands and noticed their peculiar trick of interlocking the fingers and pulling them apart. I was face to face with fate. The coming of Bienville was all that was needed to complete the situation. My ears ached in listening for his Excellency's confident tread. Not even the impudent cackle of the women was to be heard. Only the buzz and hum of insect life came through the window. My lids popped wide open and I was gazing on the sardonic profile of Damoan the Fox.

CHAPTER V

THE FALSE TRAIL

HE SHIFTED his position so as almost to face me, and, supposing I was about to be discovered, I began drawing a pistol. He had seen nothing in my dark corner, however, and was merely uneasy. His face, now affording me a three-quarters view, lost its expression of content and was drawn into a scowl; and his beak of a nose suggested a hawk rather than a fox. As for that, I called him Damoan the Devil as I lay there in the shadows and realized how he had tricked me into making me believe he was my friend.

Once more he twisted nervously in his chair and darted his keen gaze about the room, taking time with the window and closed door. Next he drew from his belt his *cassetête à pique*, or iron tomahawk, and threw it on the table with a bang. It had interfered with his comfort. Then he slumped back and folded his arms and

became motionless as an Indian in ambush. This bearing, while most natural to him, did not last for more than half a minute, when the white man's nature showed itself, and he was squirming about again.

As I watched for an opportunity to take him unawares he suddenly leaped to his feet and snatching up the ax and candle glided to the door opening into his Excellency's sleeping-room and threw it open and peered inside. Obviously his woods instinct was urging him to be on guard, and he was puzzled that the warning should be so strong and insistent here in the home of the governor. He walked back to the table slowly, his dark face drawn into ferocious lines, and clattered the ax on the board, and repeated his trick of continually darting side-glances—a trick learned in the forest when any tree might conceal a foe. His attitude proved he was conscious of being watched and that the affair must soon come to a head. I dared not move a muscle, not so much for fear of making a sound, but because I knew he would detect the slightest movement even in my obscure corner.

Setting the candle on the table, he yawned elaborately, then wheeled with incredible quickness and glared at the window. Disgusted with his suspicious mood, or else reckless of results, he gave voice to a curse and strode to a shelf and took down a jug. After an appreciative sniff he lifted it to his lips, holding it back-handed over his arm like a Carolina mountain man. He was now standing with his back to me, and I came to my feet noiselessly and stole to the table. I think it must have been some tremor in the puncheon floor that warned him he was no longer alone; for he ceased guzzling the brandy, and for a second stood motionless. Then he faced about, swinging the jug above his head, his other hand at his belt where his ax had hung.

For half a minute we stood there, staring at each other; I with my fingers resting on the table and touching the handle of the French ax, and he with the jug held high, and with one hand clutching the empty ax-loop. I will always give him credit for being a most consummate actor. As if he had just recognized me he dropped the jug with a crash and came forward, both slim, dark hands outstretched, and his mellow voice joyously crying:

"My friend! My friend! Ah, what good luck! My old comrade here in Biloxi. But my medicine is strong!"

My empty hands met his, and we stood there, smiling into each other's faces.

"Damoan! How anxiously I have waited for your coming. I was asleep in the corner," I cried.

"And how much swifter I would have come had I known you were here!" he fondly replied. "I reached the gate. The soldiers were at one side, too busy with some women to see me. I stop to call to them, but kept still when I heard one say his Excellency is away. I come here and find a candle, and enter. I feel the spirit of my friend. Then, behold! Like some apparition you are standing behind me!"

My eyes were staring at the right breast of his hunting-shirt, where a slight bulge suggested a packet of papers. The forced cordiality of his black eyes could not be sustained. Deep in the depths of his gaze twinkled murderous little devils. Do his best he could not prevent his eyes from gloating over me. Also there was something in my tense staring that caused his gaze to drop, to see if his hunting-shirt was open. And I sensed a slight tightening of his iron-like fingers, and I increased my own pressure. I was the heavier, but he possessed a panther's quickness which I never saw equaled in any man. With a scream of rage he threw aside all pretense and attempted to jerk me to my knees. I tore my left hand free and smeared his cap down over his mouth, at the same time thrusting my foot behind his heel and hurling him back across the table. The cap smothered his voice and half-blinded him, but his free hand instead of trying to dash it aside grabbed for my throat. Butting my head into his chest I got the neck of his shirt between my teeth and tore it open. Then he knew what I was after and seized my left wrist and wrenched it clear of his face. Down went my head again, this time hitting him under the chin and driving his jaws together with a snap, and my fumbling lips found the papers and my teeth closed upon them.

With a muffled howl of rage, he released my wrist and snatched for the papers and took away a handful of my beard instead. His hand followed as I jerked up my head, but now I had him by the wrist. I straightened up a bit and dropped the papers on the floor and kicked them toward the

window. He twisted like a snake the instant the pressure was removed, and before I knew it he was face down on the table with his right hand closing about the handle of the tomahawk. I fell on his back and stuffed the cap into his face and tried to catch his right hand and secure the ax.

Avoiding my clutching fingers, he swung the heavy ax up over his shoulder in an attempt to brain me. I dug my head down into the hollow of his left shoulder and received the length of the ax-handle across my back, and secured his wrist. As I shifted my hold to seize the ax he turned on his side and came up facing me and would have swung around until behind me had I not driven my elbow into his mouth.

From the gate came excited cries. From the barracks Suarez was shouting in the name of the evil one to know what was the trouble.

"The Englishman is mad with the fever!" yelled a soldier.

Once more I sent the Fox against the table, this time knocking the candle to the floor. I stepped on it, plunging the room into darkness, and wrenching the ax from him struck where his head should have been. I hit him, but with the flat side only. Down he went into the upturned table. I dropped on all fours and as my foot hit the papers I secured them and tucked them into my shirt. A streak of fire, and he had used one of his pistols. I leaped toward the window and hurled the ax in his direction. A snapping of wood told me the ax had smashed a table-leg or the chair. He fired his second pistol, but I was now against the wall, taking care not to pass before the window. I had located my musket and was making ready to fire when the door burst open.

"In here, you cowardly pigs!" yelled the sergeant's voice; and I heard him rush across the floor to where Damoan should be standing.

"Keep the fools back! Watch the window, and shoot!" Damoan hoarsely cried.

He spoke too late; rather, he should have prefaced his orders with something of an explanation. The sergeant must have grappled with him, thinking he was I, and a madman to boot, for there was a stamping and strangled outcry, and the Fox was screaming:

"Watch the window! Don't let the English spy escape!"

By this time several soldiers had crowded into the room, all shouting excitedly. I threw a leg over the window-sill. A soldier bumped into me and I gave him my elbow in the throat and sent him down groaning. As I leaped to the ground and ducked and dodged from side to side a gun crashed in the room behind me; and the clear voice of the Fox was raised in orders for the men to give chase. I reached the gate and there was no one there to oppose my going, which was well, for I passed through with the butt of my musket poised ready for a drive against the first head I could find.

The fort was situated on a gentle slope of some four acres with a deep ravine between me and the woods to the east. The huts of those settlers who were trying to raise crops at Biloxi were grouped near the fort and to the west of it. When I crawled up the east slope of the ravine I could tell by the shouting that nearly all the soldiers were searching the shore expecting to find me trying to escape in some boat. Above their foolish confusion rose the mellow voice of the Fox, this time in a peculiar cry, a signal. It was answered from the forest north of the settlement by a long drawn out war-whoop, which I attributed to some Choctaw. If Damoan had come to Biloxi with a band of Choctaw warriors, and could he set them on my trail, my flight might easily end in a tragedy. In other times and places I had, with pleasure, heard his peculiar forest-call. Now it was the baying of a death-hound on my track.

I worked back from the shore to avoid the marsh and held my course through an intuitive sense of direction. The sounds behind me dropped lower and lower, until I knew I was beyond earshot of the settlement. I relaxed and concluded I had nothing to fear until daylight revealed my trail. Even Damoan the Fox could not follow me through the night unless he could keep near enough to locate me by sound. Naturally I was startled when I heard a noise behind me which was never made by any woods creature. It was as if some one had stepped on a wet root and had slipped, and all but fallen. Animals do not carry themselves in any such clumsy fashion. My careless tread instantly became cunning, the moccasin feeling out the ground before being allowed to rest.

Several times I halted and lay in wait, but whoever was behind me held back. When the first early light permitted me to

distinguish objects near at hand I was in a noble grove of oak and close to the bay. Above my position, but cut off from my view by the timber, was a village of the Pascagoulas. They were a peaceful people, and I had heard it told that a Spanish priest established a mission in their village, coming there after De Soto's fight with the Indians at Mauville. But now the bay and the Indians were under French control and I could make no appeals to Spain.

Had it not been for Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde I easily could have made Pensacola, and thence traveled north to Savannah. As it would be dangerous to leave the grove until ready to make the Mattors' packet, I came to a halt and devoted my attention to crying needs—to learn if the careless walker of the night was still on my track, and to find something to eat. A visit to the Indian village was out of the question, although I would have been most welcome; for there I would be sure to find French soldiers. While these would have interfered with me in no way—not knowing I was a fugitive from his Excellency's wrath—some would have stuck closely for the sake of gossip, and either would have frightened the Mattors away, or else have observed that I sailed in the packet. In either of these events I would have been compelled to journey to Pensacola.

As I had the whole day before me, and as from the grove I could keep watch for Mattor's sail on the bay, I began looking about in hopes of finding some squirrels to knock over with my ax. Many a time in the wood I had remained motionless at the foot of a tree until squirrels and other small creatures mistook me for a stump and played and quarreled about my feet. I seated myself at the foot of an ancient oak to repeat the ruse. Fifteen or twenty minutes I had remained there, motionless; then something as noiseless as a shadow passed by the opposite side of the tree. I began moving around the bole until behind the newcomer.

To my great relief it was an Indian, a Choctaw. I rather despised these fellows, as they were less courageous than the other red men of the lower valley, certainly more filthy than the Chickasaws or Natchez. Yet I must credit them with one great virtue, in which, I believe, they surpassed their neighbors—their love for truth. And who shall say this fundamental honesty did not outweigh the animal courage of the warrior and make up for the want of habits of personal cleanliness?

Perhaps I should not cast any reflection on their courage as a fighting nation, and simply say they waged most of their battles in defensive rather than offensive warfare. If territory be any token of a nation's power then their broad domains, extending at one time from the Mississippi to points east of the Tombecbee, from the mouth of the river to the frontiers of the Natchez and Chickasaws, would indicate great strength.

The Indian ahead would be going to the Pascagoulas' village and would be sure to report any white man he saw. I might be gone before any French soldiers came to look me up, and I might not. This thought sent me back to cover. I remembered that his corn-pouch seemed to be well-filled. Hunger won over discretion, and I stepped from behind the tree and called out to him—"*Alel* Halloo."

It was amazing to observe how quickly the fellow vanished from sight before I had barely finished my call.

"Come out here. What are you afraid of?" I cried.

He reappeared and stared at me stolidly.

"The White Indian," he said.

I did not recognize him, although I scrutinized him sharply. There were always Indians, strangers to me, coming and going at the French posts, who would remember every white man they saw.

"I am the White Indian, and I am hungry," I said, approaching him. "I will buy your corn."

"It is very good. Melted bear's fat is poured over it," he said, promptly removing the pouch and handing to me.

I was searching my pocket for something to give him, but he waved his hand in dissent, and said:

"To meet the White Indian is enough. The corn cost me nothing. Why should I trade it? Keep it, white man, and grow very strong and wise."

There were few Indians in the lower valley—or in the north, if one would wish to make a thorough statement—who would refuse a gift.

I dipped into the pouch and found the parched corn excellent and the bear's fat fresh. After my hard travel it was most palatable. I sat down and began eating. The Choctaw squatted on his heels before me, an expression almost indicating

amusement lighting his eyes. Except for the breech-clout, woven from the inner bark of the mulberry after the Natchez fashion, he wore no clothing. On his back was a bow and a quiver of reed arrows. From a loop on his right wrist hung a French ax.

"What is your mark?" I asked, meaning his clan.

He stared over my head at the green branches for fully a minute; then answered—

"Long Claw comes from the Panthers."

As he spoke he stretched out a hand and proudly displayed long finger-nails, each pared to a point. His eyes lighted wickedly as he admired his terrible digits.

"You are the White Indian from Biloxi."

This startled me, and put me on my guard, although I gave no sign as I nodded a careless affirmative. It would appear that the news of my flight had kept up with me. "You are *Minkilish hatak* (an Englishman) All white men about here are *Filanchi hatak* (Frenchmen). When you came down to Biloxi our hunters heard about you. You have come from Biloxi. *Alhpesa.* (Enough.)"

His explanation was logical. I had met a Choctaw on Pontchartrain. I had seen several others in Biloxi—but not this fellow, or I would have remembered his long nails—And yet he impressed me as being too ready to explain how he knew me.

"You also come from Biloxi?" I asked, thinking to trap him if he replied in the affirmative. But he shook his head, saying:

"From a hunter's camp north of Biloxi. Two of my brothers live here with the Bread-Eaters."

He pointed in the direction of the Pascagoulas' village.

"One was killed seven sleeps ago while hunting. The dead man's wife makes the Last Cry. I come to help them place the pole and hang up the wreaths and flowers so his spirit may climb high in the sky."

This volunteered information sounded all wrong. I knew something of the Choctaw ceremony known as the Last Cry. The widow, the principal mourner, visits the grave daily for one moon from the date of death. This period of wailing and mourning on her part—if her husband was seven days dead—would not end until nearly the middle of July; and it was not customary for any other member of the family or clan to interrupt their routine to aid in the mourning. On the last day of the period, however, the friends and relatives would gather for a feast, when the widow would literally make her 'last cry,' and then join in the eating and dancing. Sharp Claw was too far ahead of the feast date. Even if he came to help the widow wail for the dead it was not yet time for the last cry. And he knew I was from Biloxi, and even a Choctaw would lie when he wished to deceive an enemy; and some one had slipped and almost fallen in the woods behind me during the night.

"Did you see the Frenchman they call the Fox pass your village on his way to Biloxi yesterday?" I asked.

There was an almost imperceptible flicker in his small eyes; and without waiting for the proper pause he immediately shook his head.

"You walk softly like the panther, but sometimes you slip," I said. For the life of him he could not refrain from darting a glance down at his moccasins, and on the inside of the right one was a scar where he had raked it in slipping on a root.

"The White Indian sees everything," he remarked.

"I see I have eaten nearly all your corn, and now I must pay for it," I insisted.

"There will be a big feast for the dead man's ghost tonight and I shall have much to eat," he answered, teetering back and forth on his heels.

He was clumsy liar. It is a characteristic of many red men I have met to be as obvious as children when they try to deceive. Why should he carry a pouch full of corn if his journey from Biloxi was to end with a feast at Pascagoula Bay? He had not suffered from hunger while on the way, for he had eaten none of it. When he filled his pouch with corn and bear's fat he had expected to follow a trail which might take him to Pensacola. In saying the feast would be held that night he did not, of course, give me credit for knowing the funeral custom of the Choctaws. With a man seven days dead the funeral feast and Last Cry would not be due for three more weeks.

I abruptly said:

"My medicine tells me you stand in the shadow of death. Is there any one to make a Last Cry for you?"

His eyes nearly closed and the powerful chest rose and fell quickly. When he spoke, however, his voice was composed, and he quietly said:

"I am of the Panther clan. I am a hunter. When I die my spirit will be very happy. My people plant corn and melons. I live by hunting, and the white man is spoiling the hunting. My ghost will be happy even if I have no wife to make the last cry. Does the White Indian's medicine tell him any more?"

"It tells that the path to Pensacola is very bad for you."

"I go to the village where they make the Last Cry over my brother. I do not go to the ancient home of the Hair-people."

"I do. I must cross the bay and take the path to the Spaniards," I said, rising to my feet.

His lips tightened. My departure was hurrying his plans and he did not like it. Suddenly he raised a hand for silence; it was a squirrel scampering through the foliage overhead.

"The White Indian shall take a little meat with him," he whispered, staring up into the green branches while he plucked his bow from his shoulder and strung it.

Without removing his gaze from the leafy canopy he drew a reed arrow from the quiver and placed it on the string. Then he commenced circling the tree, his head tilted far back. I could trace the movements of the squirrel by the slight stirring of the leaves. It began descending the trunk, and as it did so the Indian's head slowly reverted to a more normal position, and his outstretched hands holding the drawn bow gradually ceased pointing toward the zenith and swept forward to follow the telltale rustling down the tree-trunk. Triumph flashed in his eye, and my medicine warned me I was a fool to stand there and be butchered, that the squirrel had given Sharp Claw his chance to strike.

He gave a quick, low cry, and shifted his aim, and I went down on my face and felt my fur cap snatched from my head by the passing arrow. With a scream a panther might have sounded he leaped forward with his ax, while I tugged at my pistol. The thing stuck for a fraction of a moment; and he might have done for me had he not lost two or three precious seconds in attempting to hurl the ax without first removing the loop from his wrist. It was only a false move, as the first tug of the thong reminded him he must come to close quarters. His bit of hesitation would not have been noticed by an onlooker, but it sufficed for me to tear my fine French pistol loose and let drive at his chest. Had it missed fire, as it sometimes did, my chances would have been practically worthless. Down he went with both hands outstretched and nearly touching me, and for a bit we two lay there, the quick and the dead. A bloody business but entirely necessary once the Claw refused to profit by my warning.

I rolled to one side and waited to see if the shot had attracted any attention. It could not be heard in the village and the hour was rather early for the Pascagoula hunters and fishermen to be abroad. As for the lazy soldiers I knew they would not be stirring for hours. My first thought was to make the shore of the bay and signal for the packet to take me off. Common sense stepped in and told me to hide the dead man, as it might be the greater part of the day before the Mattors came inshore.

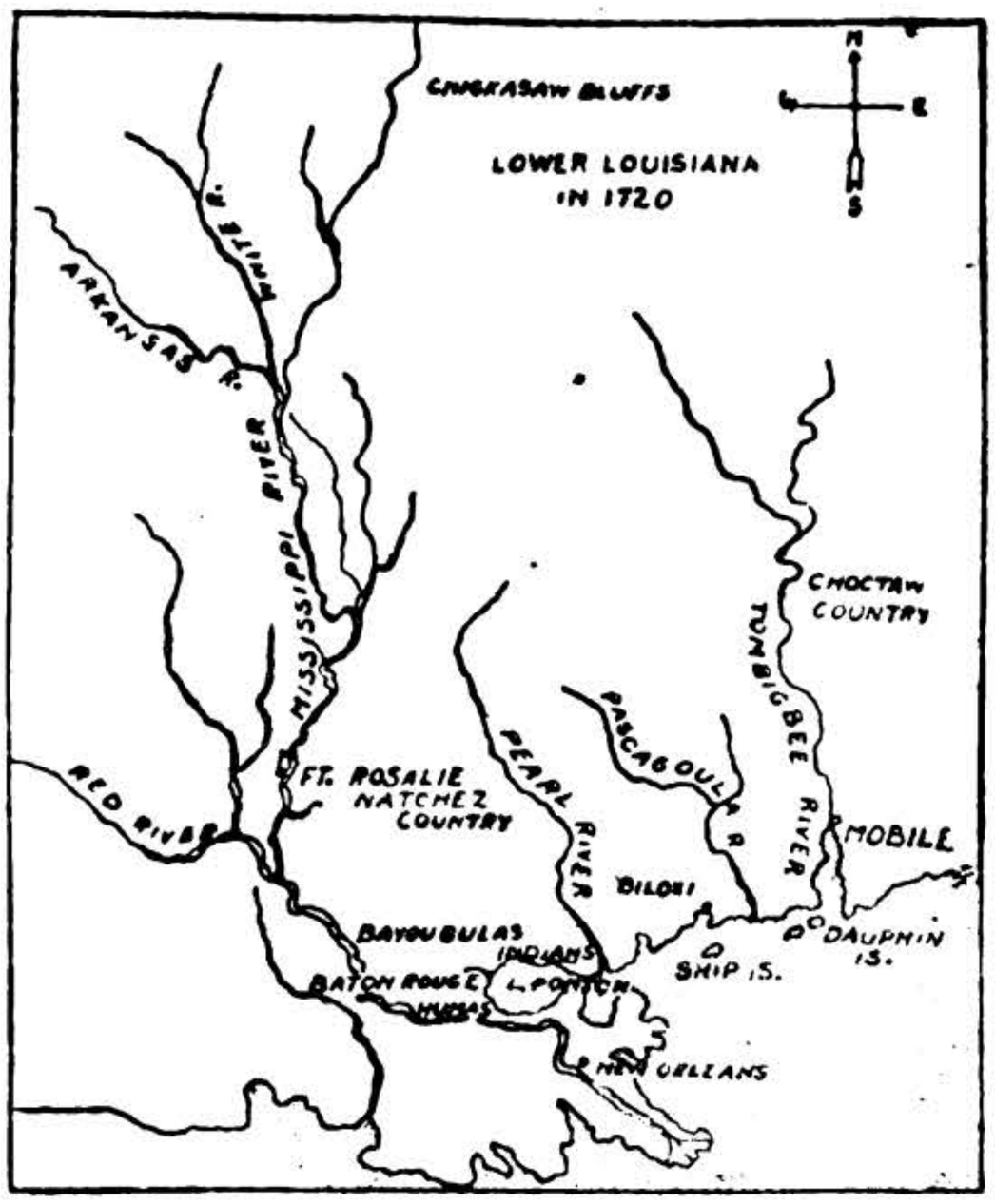
I cast about and found a hole, where the roots of an upturned oak had lifted the soil; and therein I placed the man of the Panther clan, who died because of his treachery; also because he was a clumsy liar. Once this disagreeable task was finished I found I was anxious to extract some profit from the tragedy. The Claw had been one of the Indians Damoan the Fox had summoned and sent to follow me. This meant others would follow the double trail once the light came. Even now they were coming after me, losing no time because of the signs the Claw had purposely left.

Working swiftly I carefully obliterated all signs of the killing. Fortunately we had not grappled and disturbed the turf. A cunning rearrangement of moss and forest mold hid the dark stains left by the Claw when he fell on his face with the heavy pistol ball through his heart.

MAKING north from the scene of the fight I bent over a branch of a bay-bush to mark direction. I repeated this sign several times, knowing the Fox or his Indian allies would accept it as a token from the dead man. Then I blazed a section of bark from a moss-hung pine, and with a piece of charcoal from my pipe-bag drew on the wet surface a crude profile. I purposely left out the eye and mouth, and barely indicated a nose, and all this to accentuate the mass of hair around the head. Next an arrow was drawn, pointing toward the profile, and

underneath I sketched a claw. Any woodsman, or Indian, among my pursuers would read it at a glance. Pensacola is from the Choctaw and means "hair-people," a people who were exterminated by tribal wars before the coming of the Spaniards. So my picture read that some one was going to Pensacola and was being followed by Sharp Claw.

Having done this much to mislead the enemy, I stole back to the shore and concealed myself. I dared not make a smoke for fear those on my track, or some of the Pascagoulas, would investigate it; not did I care risk taking the boat until sundown, for we must pass out between Isle au Aigle—



Horn Island—and the Dauphine, and I would need all my luck to escape the curious eyes of the Frenchmen posted on the latter. A boat was flapping its wings in the lee of the Isle Ronde, but it was not the Mattors' packet.

Now that I had a breathing spell I made myself comfortable in the underbrush at the edge of the timber and opened up the package of papers Damoan the Fox had carried inside his hunting-shirt. The first one I opened was badly stained and worn despite its outer covering of oiled silk. It was my Canadian report, the data I had so foolishly entrusted to Damoan for delivery. Putting it in my pocket I gave my attention to the other papers. There were three of them, all from men high in the affairs of the colonies, and each directing my attention to a different branch of inquiry. Much of the material I already had collected, such as the nature and number of the colonists, the currency system of the lower river, the trade laws and the like.

In one I was directed to observe the growth of New Orleans, and I decided to obtain these facts from Joe Labrador and Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde was I fortunate enough to double back to the river. Any one of the four papers would have proven my occupation beyond a shadow of doubt and sent me to dangle in a noose. How Damoan had ingratiated himself into the good graces of my correspondents to the extent of making them believe he was a firm friend of mine and could be trusted to bring me instructions was a mystery. Had he delivered my Canadian report that act alone would have gone far to establish him as a good friend of the colonies. But he had obtained his evidence without surrendering my report.

I went over the list of inquiries, mentally checking off those I already had made, and memorized the others. Then I dug a hole deep under the bole of a white oak and buried all but my report on the French north of the Ohio. That document I risked on my person for a while longer. And, accustomed to snatching my rest when I could, I stretched out and went to sleep.

Voices were sounding close by when I opened my eyes. The sun hung low. Three pirogues had put in to allow four Pascagoulas to land. Nearly a dozen Indians remained in the dugouts, up to their knees in fish. What the four coming ashore were after puzzled me until I saw two of them carrying a net, and making for a sand-spit directly below my position, while the other two made for the grove with their bows and arrows in their hands. Their companions pushed off and continued with the fish up the bay and toward the village. The two on the beach emptied a quantity of clams on the sand and began gathering dry driftwood.

The men disappearing in the timber were after squirrels, or any other small game. Roasted clams and broiled squirrels! My mouth watered and I watched them enviously as they built their fire. Gradually a wisp of smoke climbed into the brassy heavens, increasing in volume as the clams, wrapped in seaweed, were thrown on the coals. What at first I took to be a gull,

caught in the level sunbeams, became a sail. The boat drew nearer, practically running before the wind. Already the two Indians were ripping open the clams and gobbling them down.

Here was an unforeseen dilemma. The Mattors had observed the smoke and had accepted it as my signal, and were coming in to take me off. Did I fail to show myself they would become frightened and put back to open sea and go about their business. If I showed myself I would startle the Pascagoulas, who would at once report the incident, and Biloxi would soon learn the truth. While I was willing the whole coast should think me safe in Pensacola I did not wish to bring punishment on the Mattors.

The boat lost the wind as it drew inside the bay and made slow progress toward the smoke. The Indians paid no attention to it, as the French were coming and going between the Dauphine and the bay quite frequently. While scouring my wits for a way to avoid the clam-eaters and make the packet, a shrill cry rang out in the oaks behind me. It was a yelp of astonishment, possibly fear. The Indians on the sand leaped to their feet and started wildly toward the timber. The cry was repeated, this time in a signal, and the men below me gave an answering whoop and rushed for the grove. The men in the pirogues also had caught the alarm, for their faint response came to my ears. This second cry was one of discovery, and I believed the hunters had found the body of Sharp Claw.

Dismay was quickly replaced by a sense of satisfaction; the dead man had drawn the Pascagoulas from the shore. I only asked that Damoan and his red allies had found my picture on the pine and had hurried on toward Pensacola while I was asleep. Should they be at hand to witness the exhumation of the Choctaw they would know my picture was a decoy and that I was not bound for the Spanish settlement. However, I had slept for hours and there had been more than enough time for my pursuers to pass through the oaks and push their quest toward the east.

I ran down to the beach and scooped up half a dozen roasted clams. The packet was now near enough for me to recognize the two Mattors. I had expected to swim for it, and if not for my musket it would have been simple enough. But before taking to the water I glanced up and down the shore and discovered a small pirogue. Running the risk of being seen I ran to this and pushed it into the water and paddled for the boat. A glance over my shoulder failed to reveal any protesting red men, while my ears told me they were still preoccupied with the dead man.

"Feet of the ——! Why did you not wait!" groaned Mattor *père*, as I climbed aboard and kicked the pirogue free to drift ashore with the incoming tide.

I threw myself flat in the boat and Basile growled—

"The eyes of the world are watching us."

"Enough talk!" I commanded. "There is no one on shore but some Indians. And they are in the timber and too busy hunting to notice us. You must work the boat between Isle au Aigle and the Dauphine and sail for Pensacola."

"For Pensacola!" exclaimed Jules.

"When the sun goes down we'll change our course for Pontchartrain. There you will drop me and I will pick up a canoe."

"It's a bad business. I was angry about the women, or I would have thought twice before making the bargain," said Jules.

"If *monsieur* should tell of all this—*pstl* Two dead Mattors," said Basile grimly.

"I shall not tell. Have no fears on my account. I have the pistoles I promised you."

"Bah! What is a little risk!" cried Jules, spitting on his hands. "What good is a neck that won't run a risk for fifteen beautiful pistoles?"

"*Monsieur* is a gentleman. It is right we should help him," declared Basile. "Ho! ho! See how red the sun is!"

It was standing on the edge of the west, huge and red, and its last rays stained the way ahead a deep scarlet. Mattor the elder crossed himself, and I heard him muttering—

"There is blood on it!"

I wondered if it were an ill-omen for me. I hoped it was the blood of Sharp Claw, the Choctaw.

CHAPTER VI

I KEEP AN APPOINTMENT

THERE was nothing to indicate that the pursuit had shifted back to the westward, and without incidents of interest the packet anchored at sundown in the

mouth of the little Bayou St. Jean, or Tchoupic, as it still was known to many settlers. The Mattors had completed their bargain, but so happy were they over earning their pistoles without being brought to book by Sieur de Bienville they were loath to leave me in the swamps and marshes without a canoe; and Jules Mattor frankly said:

"It not only would offend my heart to leave you stranded in this muck, *monsieur*, but it would endanger my head. Without a canoe you will be found; then his excellency would surely ask how you get here. You did not swim here. He would know ours was the only boat to come this way since you escaped from Biloxi. Enough. Basile, have the kind heart to find a log canoe for *monsieur*."

Basile was gone but a short time when he returned with a small pirogue, which he said he had "borrowed" from some of Le Page du Pratz's people. Entering this with my gun and a bag of smoked meat, I paddled into the swamp growth, while the Mattors lost no time in putting about and working the packet into a light breeze and sailing south, doubtless to hide up in Lake Borgne for a while. Their alibi, if I were discovered by my enemies, would be of a geographical nature. Nor was I sorry to see them hurrying from Pontchartrain; my gold had bought them, but their fear of Bienville might influence them into betraying me. So I worked through the swamp-grasses, scaring many a monster frog into a desperate plunge, and finally entered the bayou a dozen rods above its mouth. There was need of great caution, for some of the men employed on the du Pratz's estate along the bayou might observe me, and a stranger was a matter of lively interest.

Keeping close to the bank and under shelter of the overhanging willows, I worked along slowly until the splash of a paddle ahead sent me into hiding. It was quite dark under the arching trees and I could not have told whether it was a white, red or black man approaching had not the fellow started a song popular on the St. Lawrence. As he drew abreast of my hiding place I softly called—

"Joe Labrador!"

"The good saints!" he ejaculated, swerving his canoe with a swirl of his paddle and making toward me. "Halloa! Who calls to me from the dark in the voice of a white man?"

"The White Indian," I cautiously replied.

"*Diable!* Monsieur Brampton! What terrible folly! Where are you, my friend?" and he edged deeper into the thick shadows.

"Here. Under the willows."

"And with the whole Gulf-Pensacola-the upper river, to travel you come *here?*" he growled. "And *monsieur* did me the honor to call me *tête de bois!* Are you indeed mad, my friend?"

"Why shouldn't I come here?" I asked as his canoe slid against mine and we grasped hands.

"Because word has been brought to *la Nouvelle* Orleans this very morning for the people to watch out for you, to take you prisoner and return you to Biloxi. Why did you not make up the Iberville and hide among the Natchez until you could steal farther north?"

"We waste words. Why are you paddling down the bayou to the lake at the edge of night?"

"Oh, I go to the mouth of the bayou each night. Perhaps I am curious to know who enters the bayou."

"You have been watching for me to come!"

"Such is my weakness, my friend. Yes. Now we have met you must paddle back to the lake and up the Iberville. If you lack anything you shall stay here until I can bring it."

"What I lack must come from *la Nouvelle* Orleans," I whispered. "You and I will go there together."

"This is a madman! He should be locked up in a stout house! He should have a keeper!" despaired the honest fellow, softly smiting a hand gainst his head.

"No one will see us. I will stop outside the settlement. You shall go inside and find a certain person and say a word from me. The person will come with you to me, I think."

He laughed without any amusement.

"Oh, there are quite a few persons who would be glad to come with me to you. It is impossible, *monsieur*."

"Then I must push on alone. Good-by."

"Hold! I turn my canoe about. Follow me, madman! *Tonnerre!* Let his Excellency hang us both and have done."

He was paddling up the bayou, and I followed him. As we advanced I heard the voices of some of du Pratz's people. My liberty hung on a slim chance when we passed

du Pratz's pleasant house and found the lights throwing spying rays across the bayou. Labrador was piqued because my "good-by" evidenced a belief he would permit me to go through my hazards alone. I closed in with him and endeavored to talk, but he would have none of me, except to continue a rumbling fire of oaths and exclamations, all directed against false friends.

Not even after we had quit the canoes and were creeping toward a deserted Indian village north of the settlement would he condescend to exchange words with me. When we halted within the village the straggling lights of New Orleans—that *la Nouvelle* Orleans which so many immigrants had been led to believe was another Paris—seemed very near. I was on familiar ground, for had I not seen the axmen clear away the tangled growth and forest so that the thatched huts might find breathing-room between the chocolate-colored river and the dense woods stretching away to Pontchartrain?

Sieur Pauger was yet to publish his map, showing it to be a handsome city, "with fair, square sides, straight streets," meekly named after royalty. We were standing in a sparse growth of willows and *bois blanc* and palmetto. The ground was still miry from the last overflowing of the river. Between us and the lights were the outlines of a building larger than the cabins, and this, Joe told me, was a new warehouse. Ten feet below us rushed the Mississippi on its eternal mysterious business.

Ten rods ahead was the warehouse, and beyond that the lights showing from cabins made of slabs, and having roofs of bark, and equipped with clay chimneys. I concluded the place had grown quite a bit from its seventy people in 1718.

From just beyond the warehouse came the thin, sweet notes of a flute.

"Are Rouge and his people still here? There were six in his family two years ago. One of them played the flute," I said.

"Some will be here now, but their cabin is farther down. And they are all devoted to his Excllency's interests," was the significant reply.

"The three Orillant brothers? Can I trust them?"

"Two are here now. They are loyal to France," was the discouraging answer.

"Then there is no one I can approach under the seal of secrecy?"

"No one, *monsieur*. I must do your errand. Who is the man you wish word taken to?"

"You are to find Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde, but just arrived from Biloxi. No one is to know you come to find her. You will say to her the three words,'The White Indian.' Then lead her here if she is still inclined to go with me."

"A woman from the wife-ship! One of those women!" he groaned. "God of the white man! But you will make faces through a noose. With a price on your head——"

"I see I must do my own errand," I broke in. "When my friend believes evil of me he does evil in doing my business."

"Be still, my friend. You annoy me! I will find this woman with the outlandish name. I will speak the words. If she is fool enough to come with me I will bring her here to this dead village."

"She will come. Remember the need of secrecy. She had best wander to the edge of the settlement before you join her. There are those who would follow her. Even now there is one there, perhaps, a man with two fingers gone."

"Ha! The squat beast! He has been to the bayou."

"And one François Narbonne——"

"The crazy one, who says he is the first Mississippian! But you do not name him along with the buccaneer?"

"No. Nevertheless neither he, nor any one, must know of the girl's departure. Now good luck and much speed, as the morning must see us far on our way."

"Holy saints! To come this far for a dram of love. It will be but a 'French glass' I fear."

His allusion was based on the Indians' dislike for the meager measure used by the French in dealing out brandy to the aborigines.

"Dolt! I come not to make love. I would help an unfortunate woman. She is a stranger to me."

"But yes. *La! La!* It is like the White Indian to break his neck to help a French wench. He could find no woman to help in all his years on the river until now. Very good. God in his wisdom sees fit to let *monsieur* play the fool. Why should I try to stop you? I go."

And he had faded into the darkness before I could give him a fitting reply.

Cursing all fools in general, and Joe Labrador in particular, I squatted on my heels in the wet grass and waited. Of course there was something of madness in my project from the Canadian's unenlightened point of view. I was reluctant to admit to myself even this much, but after reviewing the happenings of the last few days and remembering how few words I had spoken to *mademoiselle*, and how entirely ignorant I was of her antecedents—unless I retain my first estimate based on her soft hands and obvious poverty—I agreed that my old friend had cause to be displeased with me.

But what could I do after she had written that she surely would die unless I could help her make the coast? Refuse because she had made mistakes? Then how many of us would be licensed to ask for help? Pass her by because, very possibly, she had been frail in her virtues while living in an environment where virtue would find it most difficult to thrive? Then what *manito* would be lenient enough to listen to poor mortals' agonizing pleas? She had intimated she was on the point of destroying herself unless she could escape from the valley. I, with a price on my head, was the instrument she had selected to further her plans. Strumpet or virgin, she was entitled to her chance.

The flute ceased its plaintive melody, and after a few moments of silence a roar of laughter rocked the night. It came from the cabin beyond the warehouse and put an end to my brooding. It contained two familiar notes, one rasping and hoarse and coming from an English throat; another of shrill timber and holding a suggestion of hysteria. I advanced to the warehouse and decided I had time to go farther. I approached the end of the cabin where there was no opening, and if not for the loud hilarity I should have betrayed my presence by tumbling over a mound of gourds, hollowed out to hold water.

Drawing to one side until I could see through the window I learned it was a trader's cabin, for there were shelves filled with trade-goods. Two shaggy *coureurs de bois* were sprawling on the floor, pipes and mugs filling their hands. The trader, a stranger to me, sat on a short counter, his heels kicking enthusiastically at some jest. I shifted my angle of vision to include the rest of the room, and next beheld old Six Fingers perched on a three-legged stool, one claw clutching a huge measure of strong drink. All were gazing appreciatively at Narbonne, who stood by the fireplace. That he had been addressing them along humorous lines was evident from their boisterous applause. Even Narbonne found his own wit amusing and laughed hysterically and spilled some brandy from the pannikin held in his left hand.

"Monsieur Bright Wit, you will make me die of laughing!" gasped the trader.

"Yes, yes. It is the marvelous climate that works on me. It transmutes my bile into diamonds of mirth. They should have kept me in Paris to make the people in rue Quincampoix die of laughing instead of leaping into the Seine when their stocks shall tumble back to earth," said Narbonnne.

The trader became very grave at this heresy, and protested:

"Bah! Monsiegneur L'as will never let his stocks tumble! They fly up like birds."

"What will keep them flying when their wings grow weary?" asked Narbonne in a mocking voice.

"The trade of Louisiana!" loudly replied the trader.

"So? And here are our two friends, who trade in furs." And Narbonne bowed low to the grinning *coureurs de bois*. "They come with the price of many bottles of your brandy at fifty livres a bottle—but they do not bring furs. They give you money for drink. I wonder if it is English money! If so, then surely their trade will not keep the little wings from growing weary."

The *coureurs de bois* tugged at their long hair and gaped at him blankly, not decided as to how they should receive his remarks. In a nasal singsong Narbonne began chanting the printed promise on every bill of the Banque Royale:

"'*La Banque promet payer au Porteur à viie Cent livres Tournois en Espèces d' Argent, valeur receiie. A Paris le premier.*'"

"Drink! drink!" cried the trader, extending a jug.

"Aye, aye! Drink, and stop this cursed monkey talk!" growled Six Fingers. "With plenty of rum and an open hatch let us laugh. Be funny! My sides are ready to ache again."

Narbonne threw back his head and laughed and might have resumed his made mirth if not for the *coureurs de bois*. They had finished weighing his last remarks and

their thick wits were nursing resentment. As they stared belligerently at the Frenchman one of them growled:

"Just what does *monsieur* mean by his talk about English money? We also have French money—such as it is—and Spanish money."

"I mean that La Compagnie des Indies will never prosper on the Louisiana trade so long as the English get the furs," quickly retorted Narbonne, rocking from heels to toes, his pale face flushed with drink. "You can turn the night dew of a single flower into a flawless diamond, but you'll never grow rich by allowing your enemies to secure all the products of your country after your trade-laws have given you that privilege. These woods-runners come here to drink and make merry, but where are the furs which would help to make Louisiana great?"

"None of your cursed business!" roared one of the *coureurs de bois*. "You've drunk of our brandy, and now you would spit in our faces, like a *loupcervier* caught in a trap. *Sacré!*"

And in spite of his potations he was on his feet like a cat, his hand whipping out a long knife from the red sash he wore for a belt.

"So our intemperance leads to this?" laughed Narbonne, flashing his sword and stamping a foot on the floor as he threw himself into a fencing pose.

The trader yelped in alarm and disappeared by falling behind his counter.

Old Six Fingers snarled and came to his feet, a short, curved blade in his withered hand. The woods-runner on the floor hurled his ax at the old man, and, as the latter dodged, followed it up with his heavy drinking-mug. The mug caught Six Fingers between the eyes and knocked him prostrate. As this was happening the other trapper began edging toward the counter, taking care to keep outside the long blade. Before Narbonne—or I—could guess the fellow's motive he had seized a stroud from the counter and had dexteriously flung it over the Frenchman's head. With a terrific warwhoop, learned among the lake Indians, he rushed in to finish the business. Narbonne clawed at the coarse blanket and thrust at random. By luck one lunge caused the woodsman to give ground.

I leaped toward the end of the cabin and scooped up an armful of the tough gourds and was back at the window just as the woodsman closed for the second time. My first gourd caught him under the ear and threw him off his balance long enough for Narbonne to tear the blanket free of his head. The Canadian spun about, and my second caught him full between the eyes. He tripped over Six Fingers and crashed to the floor. Narbonne theatrically placed a foot upon him and saluted an imaginary galley and then sheathed his weapon. Old Six Fingers crawled to his feet and blinked at the Canadians and at the gourds, then howled:

"——! It's raining punk'ins!"

"*Monsieur*, I surrender," cried the Canadian in a quavering voice, and making no effort to rise. "My medicine is weak. I bought it of the Nadouessi a long time ago. It has lost its strength. It can not help me fight against vegetables that fly in from the night and strike me down."

Narbonne folded his arms and stared curiously at the window. Six Fingers too, was gathering his wits. Stepping high to avoid the gourds I began retreating, pleased at having been of service to the crazy fellow, but worried for the effect of the adventure on my own affairs. Once clear of the gourds I ran swiftly for the willows and had covered half the distance by the time the men in the store emerged from the cabin to learn how gourds could take wings. As it was night and the woods-runners were addled with drink I did not fear they would pick up my trail. Of course the morning and sobriety would tell them the whole story.

"Is it you, *monsieur*?" hissed Labrador's anxious voice as I halted at the edge of the Indian village.

"It is I. We must step fast and softly. Where is the girl?"

"At your elbow, Mr. Brampton," came the answer in excellent English, and a soft hand touched mine. "Those men outside the cabin with lights! Are they looking for me?"

"No, *mademoiselle*. But it's well we were going. Lead the way, Joe."

"But you are traveling away from the river, *monsieur!*" she protested, dropping back into French.

"Only to swing back into it a few leagues above here. If you are to come with me you must trust to my judgment absolutely. I will say I think you are foolish to come."

"But not foolish to trust to you, *monsieur*," she murmured.

"Good heavens, no! If you have the slightest doubt about your perfect safety with me—except we fall victims to a common danger—go back to your cabin at once."

"I have no doubts."

Then with much misery in her voice she lamented: "But what right have I to bring more danger to you? Governor Bienville hunts you. The people of this wretched settlement have received orders to take you dead or alive. The Indians are to be sent after you—Chactaws, I believe they call them. You need all your strength to escape them, and I come, bringing you more pursuers."

"You must save your breath, *mademoiselle*," I advised. "We have a bit of hard traveling before we take to the water. It makes small difference whether a full pack, or half a pack, gives chase. I will take you up the river and to the English towns. Whether I'm doing you a kindness or a hurt you know better than I."

"You are saving me from destroying myself, *monsieur*," she whispered; and next she confounded me by beginning to sob.

"You'll betray both of us before we are a league from this spot," I warned. "Say your prayers! Make vows! Do something to hush your weeping! Faster, Joe!"

The good fellow quickened his pace, and I took the girl's hand in mine and we fairly ran for it until we came to the hidden canoes. Then Labrador said:

"I will go ahead. If you hear a nightbird call twice you will know I have met danger and then you must hide by the shore until the bird calls but once, meaning the trail is open again."

With this understanding he drew some distance ahead and led the way down the bayou. The girl crouched low in the pirogue behind me. We heard but few voices on the shore, and only a candle or two twinkled in the du Pratz house. Once below the house I nearly ran Labrador down as he was waiting for me to come up.

"You will have a clear path to the lake," he encouraged. "Yet I will go with you, but first wait for me a few minutes."

He was ashore and off before I could question him. It seemed many minutes before he returned. When his canoe grazed mine he dropped a bundle into the pirogue and murmured:

"Just some blankets and smoked meat. *Mademoiselle* could not bring much with her."

"I brought nothing," she corrected, "except a gown. I only thought of getting away."

"All is well. Perfectly well," I assured her. And Labrador again took the lead.

We moved slowly along the black water, and between lazy thrusts of the paddle I tried to talk with her.

"Why must you go to the English settlements? Have you friends there?"

"I have no friends anywhere, except that you be my friend," she whispered.

"But why to Virginia, or the Carolinas instead of Canada?"

"This country, it is terrible, *monsieur*," she muttered evasively.

"You did not tell Sieur de Bienville that you were picked up in a raid."

I thought she did not intend to answer, but after a long pause she slowly said—

"What would be the good?"

And now she was speaking in English with only the faintest of accent. I began to believe she was bi-lingual and used either tongue without being conscious of shifting.

"But if you could prove that you are a gentlewoman——"

First she laughed, then she sobbed, like one hysterical.

"Low born and gentle are picked up in their police raids," she muttered.

"But if you could prove to his Excellency——"

"I can prove nothing," she passionately hissed. "I have told you I have no friends. Shout the name of Dahlsgaarde from one end of France to the other, and none would be interested."

"Pardon; no one except your people."

"I am alone. An orphan."

"But your friends—at least those with whom you worked."

My voice became confused. I felt her soft hand rest for a moment on my hand as I held the paddle motionless.

"No, it is not the hand of a girl who has worked," I sorrowfully admitted.

With a jeering little laugh she said—

"Monsieur Brampton would prefer doing good deeds for the good."

"You are in trouble. I wish you well for your own sake. I will help you if I can.

But one can not help without wishing to know something. I could help you more intelligently if I could understand something of the nature of your trouble."

"There is nothing to learn. I came over on the immigrant ship. I am Claire Dahlsgaarde, as homeless and friendless as if I had dropped from another planet."

"You are refined and well-spoken," I mused.

"Adversity sharpens one's wits, and one can always copy."

"Tell me this, did you protest when the police seized you and bundled you aboard the *Maire?*"

She astounded me by sadly confessing:

"I wanted to come. I lied when I told you I was taken in a raid. I went alone to the ship just before it was to sail and asked to be taken along."

"Good heavens! If you only had known——"

"I should do exactly the same if it were to be lived through again tomorrow, *monsieur*. You must either set me ashore, to make my own way, or accept me as you find me—nameless, friendless, a waif."

Why nameless when she was Claire Dahlsgaarde, I asked myself. But I did not ask her.

She continued:

"Think evil of me, if you will; make a mystery out of me, if you prefer. But do not think there is anything to learn about me."

This speech smacked of the ungracious. It intimated that I was searching into her affairs. Over my shoulder I told her:

"I will not think evil of you. I wrote you from Biloxi—when it was doubtful if I could even save myself—that I would take you to the seaboard! I only hope your troubles will end when you get there."

"That was nicely said," she murmured, pausing between the words as if fighting to control herself. "If we get to the English towns I will find some work. I will be a servant—anything."

I thought of her soft hands; I already appreciated the refinement of her manner. No; I did not believe her troubles would be ended when she reached the English towns and she would be forced to make her own way. Our servants were supplied from the blacks, or ner'erdowells shipped to the plantations from England. As a servant she must abide with her class, and her very softeness and her mental qualities would make her an object of scorn among her mates.

On the other hand how could she live without means, or friends, or antecedents? While we of Richmond, or Charles Town, or Savanah, were not as strict and straight-laced as our New England brethren, one could automatically imagine the worst for a beautiful girl in any of our towns when she came as a mystery, with nothing known of her past.

Between two dips of the paddle I wondered if she would not have fared better to have remained in the valley and accepted a husband from among the women-hungry. This alternative was abhorrent to me almost as soon as I had considered it. I had told myself on the sands at Biloxi that she was entitled to her chance; and certainly a lonely cabin in some miserable lagoon, with a shaggy creature who lacked even the stability of an Indian hunter for a mate, constituted no "chance." Yet for the life of me I could see only a squalid outlook for her did we win across the eastern mountains.

The whole business discouraged analysis, and when Labrador gave his night-bird signal from the darkness ahead, and repeated it, I found my mental reaction to be refreshing. It meant danger, but that was more or less tangible. With a thrust of the paddle I had the pirogue snugly under the willows and was cautioning my passenger to be very quiet.

"*Tonnerre!* But who are you to treat me like this?" loudly demanded Labrador's voice.

I stepped ashore and helped the girl to land. Labrador spoke so I might hear. His indignant demand must have been answered although I did not catch the reply; for he further protested:

"Take your dirty hands from my face. To see if you know me? And who the black —— are you?"

This time I heard the murmur of a response and Labrador called out no more. The peril was obvious. Again I warned the girl to make no sound. We were kneeling on the marshy ground, and my hands held the pirogue from rustling against the reeds if the newcomers passed close enough to agitate it with their paddle strokes. Now they were sending little ripples into the swamp-grass, and by ear alone I told when the first craft passed our position.

It moved slowly, the bayou being so much ink, and I heard a low exclamation in Choctaw. From the number of paddles I judged it to be a long pirogue. Now it was above us and I was preparing to embark when there came the sound of other paddles, two of them. When directly opposite me a man spoke, and had I had my musket by my side I should have been tempted to shoot at him through the darkness, for there was no mistaking the voice of Damoan the Fox.

CHAPTER VII

UP THE RIVER

SO THE chase had turned from east to west and the Fox was hot on my trail. I thanked my medicine I had lost no time in meeting the girl. Until the Fox could reach New Orleans and make sure I was not hiding there the pursuit would be indirect. Would he return by the bayou, suspecting I might be secreted along the shores of Pontchartrain, or Lake Borgne; or would he proceed with all haste up the river, thinking I had crossed the portage and taken that course? Knowing the man as I did, I believed he would strike up-stream without bothering with the back-track, thus making it a race between us to where the Iberville flowed from the Mississippi.

Taking the girl by the arm I assisted her into the pirogue and pushed off. We barely more than drifted with the sluggish current until I heard the soft dip of a paddle ahead. Then I allowed my own blade to betray me, and Labrador's low voice was calling —

"Good evening, *messieurs*."

"It is I," I whispered as the pirogue grated against his canoe. "I saw them and *him*."

"*Sacré!* He held a pistol to my throat while he pawed over my face with his dirty paw to see if it was you. A pistol with a bell-mouth—may it be accursed!" hoarsely muttered Labrador.

"Did he call me by name?"

"By name, my friend? He called you by many names, some that *mademoiselle's* polite ears should not hear. He made it a song, a chant. But my talk satisfied him I knew nothing. He goes to *la Nouvelle* Orleans."

"He thinks I am there. Did he say anything to show how sure he is?"

"Nothing, except to tell his pirogue of Choctaws that the trail would be picked up when they left the bayou."

"He'll find no trail," I said.

"He'll find a woman is missing. And there will be some signs left," declared Joe, now using the Choctaw trade jargon that the girl might not understand.

But I did not fear for any such results. There was nothing known in New Orleans to connect me with the girl's disappearance. The settlers would testify that the girl was very sad, that she stepped out of a cabin and did not return. It would be believed that she had wandered away and fallen into the river, or become lost. She would not be the first women to drop out of sight on the lower Mississippi.

As for finding any signs of our passing to and from the Indian village the chances were his Choctaws would destroy any traces in tracking back and forth during the night. But the long river-road was the logical one for an escaping English spy to take, once it was known he had not made for Pensacola; and I believed the Fox would make haste to cut me off from gaining the mouth of the Ohio.

"You are worried, *monsieur*, about those men in the dark," she sharply whispered as we floated on behind Labrador.

"They travel in a direction opposite to ours," I assured her. "There is nothing about their coming to worry us."

"Then you are worried about having me along with you," she persisted, her woman's instinct permitting her to discern my uneasiness even though she could not see me.

"You are too sensible not to do as I say. You will cause me no trouble," I answered.

The close air of the bayou was being freshened by a breeze from the lake. It was like emerging from a hot tunnel. The blackness ahead and overhead was bleaching out a tone or two, and stars were showing. Labrador's canoe slithered among the brakes, and came to a stop, and as I drew abreast of him he announced—

"I return to *la Nouvelle* Orleans, my friends."

In the Choctaw jargon he added, "If they go north I shall trail them."

"They will go north," I assured him.

With that we parted, he to paddle up the bayou, while I took the girl into whatever

dangers Fate had stored up for us once we quit the Iberville for the Mississippi.

I COULD not get used to *mademoiselle*. If she had impressed me as being slight and frail of physique on Ship Island she now seemed little more than a child. For she had followed my advice, and had shifted from her funereal black gown to a garb more suitable for rough travel. From an Indian crone she had purchased some boot-leggings, a short skirt of fiber bark, stained white and red—the sacred colors of the Natchez—and completed her attire with a blouse of linen she had brought overseas. Her yellow hair was drawn back and arranged in two braids. Her face would have been boyish if not for the sensitive mouth and the sadness of her big eyes.

She shyly attempted to make herself useful and was quick to heed my directions. She embarrassed me by interpreting the simplest request, or suggestion, as a command. During our passage of the lakes I told her something of my plight, freely admitting I was being pursued in the belief I was an English spy. I made no bones about telling her that Damoan the Fox was a most dangerous man to have on one's trail. I decided to make these confidences so that she would be quick to realize our danger did the Fox close in on us.

Learning he was a Frenchman, she wrinkled her small nose in a sneer and expressed her firm belief that my knowledge of woodcraft would easily defeat his schemes. But she displayed no contempt when I mentioned the Choctaws—Chactaws, she always termed them. It was useless for me to belittle the Indians, and denounce them as being faint of heart unless led by a white man. To her they typed the extreme in savagery and cunning; and she could not mention them without wincing and shivering, and catching her red lips between her small teeth.

I could never make her comprehend that there was more to be feared from one Damoan than a hundred of the corn-planting Choctaws. Nor could she understand how there could be any difference among the red men, as I learned when I attempted to describe the greater courage of the Chickasaws while claiming them to be friends of the English, therefore our friends.

"And this river flows from the great river?" she asked for the tenth time as we made our way up the Iberville.

"It is merely a mouth of the Mississippi at high water. It flows into Lake Maurepas, where we camped and I showed you the cross cut by Iberville a score of years ago."

She was silent for some time, and then proved she was observing by saying:

"*Monsieur* does not look behind him. Now I look back every few minutes, thinking to behold the *sauvages*."

"There is nothing behind us to fear, little one. It is when we strike into the Mississippi that we shall keep our eyes very wide open."

"It is terrible, this great river that we seek," she murmured.

She was behind me on the bundle of blankets which Labrador had so thoughtfully provided. I heard a suspicious sound and glanced back to find her striving to muffle a sudden outburst of sobs by lying face down on the blankets.

"Hush!" I sternly commanded. "The great river is our good friend. It is so big and wide we can hide from our enemies without leaving it."

"I hate it!" she fiercely whipped back, lifting her head and glaring angrily at me through her tears. "I hated it while at the cabin of Marlot and his family. I wish we could travel afoot, overland, to the coast."

It would have been laughable, her wish, if she had not been such a child and so pathetic in her griefs and fears.

I thought to remove her fears by reminding her of the highly colored tales told of the country in France.

"There are other stories being told now," she said.

"But Monsiegneur L'as would not allow that," I said.

"Monsiegneur L'as is still a god to France, but there are those who hate him and say he is the devil," she said quietly. "These few are telling black stories of the country—may the good God send they are not true!"

She clinched her hands and stared morosely at the gaunt pines and their dismal trappings of moss. I was interested and urged her to explain further.

"They say there is nothing here but swamps and marshes, an unfinished world," she murmured. "They say the Mississippi

is filled with poisonous things and that to drink its waters means a horrible death. *Monsieur*, isn't it true that once every year the river drowns out the country so the people have to live in tree-tops like apes?"

I smiled and shook my head. She rested her round chin on her hand and studied me intently, endeavoring to appraise my truthfulness, I believed.

"I have heard women quiet their children by telling them to stop weeping, or they would be sent to the Mississippi," she continued. "I did not believe the story that the frogs grow so big they swallow children and that insects were so thick one could not escape breathing them into the lungs. Nor did I believe what one man told on Quincampoix until he was locked up in prison, that white men over here shrink away until they are no larger than small monkeys. But it would not surprize me to learn the *sauvages* are cannibals. Surely this is the devil's country, and God will have none of it!"

If this antithesis of the golden fairy-stories came to be believed in France it would serve to check colonization, and because of that it was worth carrying home to my superiors. It mattered little to the English whether the land was pictured as Eden or Hades; either description would defeat Beau Law's scheme for peopling the valley. Her revelations, however, were somewhat disconcerting, for in them I supposed I had discovered the cause of her panic. She must reach the English towns because of her foolish belief in impossible terror tales. I was playing knight errant to a young woman who was a victim to her silly fears.

"And this is the reason why you must escape to Virginia, or the Carolinas?" I asked.

"No!" she tremulously replied, leaning toward me. "If this was the fairest and sweetest land in the world I must leave it and make the coast. Why must we go the long way around when we could travel overland?"

"To save time," I told her with a smile. "We haven't time to go the shortest way. There are more than ten thousand warriors between the river and Carolina. There are a scant four thousand of these who will admit any feeling of friendship for the English. We must go nearly to the coast before we will be free from the red danger; for there are no settlements in the valley of Virginia. In the valley of the Shenandoah the Catawbas and Cherokees go north on the Great War Path against the Five Nations, while down that path come the Iroquois of the Five Nations to take southern scalps. I do not say these things to add to your uneasiness, Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde, but to indicate how widespread is the danger-zone, and to show the need of traveling by water as far as possible."

"Forgive me. You are very wise," she sighed, raising her big eyes to stare into mine. "I have seen so little of life. I am so ignorant."

I faced to the front and scowled at the bend ahead. For the time I had fallen beneath a spell and had forgotten she was not an unsophisticated child. Her plea of ignorance did not harmonize with the mystery behind her, nor with the disturbing testimony of her soft hands coupled to poverty.

"I have said something which displeases *monsieur?*" she timidly asked.

I flashed a mechanical smile over my shoulder, shook my head, and explained:

"We now come to the great river, the Mississippi. I am positive the man Damoan and his Indians are coming up the river to look for me. I have paddled hard to make the big river ahead of them. Now I am wondering if it is wise to go ahead of them."

"But how can we flee from them unless we be ahead?" she exclaimed.

Now she was on knees, one hand on the side of the pirogue where my hand, in grasping the paddle, brushed against it each time I dug the blade into the water.

"If they are ahead and we can follow them I should like it better," I replied.

"Oh, La! La! To think of that!"

And for the moment she was an entirely new and most tantalizing young woman. She laughed softly and with such zest that I was amazed and thrilled.

"Oh, *monsieur!* Now I do feel safe when you can plan so shrewdly," she cried. "To be sure! They seek us ahead of them, their eyes are all to the front, and we come softly after them, like a mouse walking after the cat! The big river? Pooh! I will not be afraid of it any more. I did well by myself, Monsieur Brampton, to overcome my embarrassment and shame and ask your help."

"How old are you?" I shot over my shoulder.

"Nineteen. Twenty in December," she promptly replied.

"Have you paused to think what people may say when they are told you traveled with me from the Mississippi to the coast?"

Her grave eyes stared at me in deep perplexity, and I could have kicked myself for putting the question.

"What will they say?" she slowly repeated, with a little frown wrinkling her brows. "Certainly they will say Monsieur Brampton is a most kind and compassionate gentleman to help a poor girl find a place of safety."

I was glad to be out of it thus easily, and to prevent her taking time to analyze the query and arrive at a more worldly-wise conclusion, I spoke of Six Fingers, and described the scene in the trader's post, when I bombarded the *coureurs de bois* with the gourds. I endeavored to tell it humorously, to make her laugh, but her face reflected only terror, and she whispered:

"That man is the devil, or the devil's man! It is because of him I wear this."

And from her blouse she pulled a small dirk in a sheath and secured by a string around her slim neck.

"He bothered you in New Orleans?"

"The French gentleman, the one who gave me your note and who went away before I could thank him, kept very close to the bad one. But I do not think the bad one wished to talk with me in New Orleans. However, he will follow me if he can."

"He came over on the *Maire* with you. Did he bother you on the voyage?"

She shook her head; and I next asked:

"But what has he to do with you? How long have you known him?"

"Known him, *monsieur?*" she gasped, eying me in amazement. "One does not know such cattle."

As she finished the scarlet of confusion suffused her face, and she turned her head, and said:

"He did not bother me on the ship. But over here, in this country, if a man is strong and has a black heart——"

"And has been a pirate," I suggested.

"Yes, yes! He has been a pirate! Terrible stories he told on the voyage over! Horrible songs he sang, songs that will echo for years in my ears. It is that, Monsieur Brampton, that makes me atraid. He has been a pirate. He has done monstrous things. He is still a pirate in his evil heart!"

This perfervid explanation deceived me none; she had not thought of him as a pirate until I gave her the idea. And what righteous indignation when I assumed she had known him in the past! It was all most bewildering. My estimates of her had ranged from a guttersnipe to a fine lady; from a street gamin to a refined and worldly-ignorant child. If appearances and speech went for anything she possessed the hauteur of the lady and the ignorance of the child. If her conflicting stories of how she came to be on the *Maire*, her obvious poverty, and her useless hands were to be considered, there could remain only the hateful conclusion that she was a product of the streets, and that life had been horribly unfair to her.

"We land here, *mademoiselle*," I announced, drawing up to the right-hand bank where a clump of sassafras broke up the hot sunbeams. "The river is just ahead. I must ask you to stay here while I look about a bit."

"Stay here alone?" she exclaimed, glancing about as if expecting to find danger in her innocent surroundings.

"You will be safe. I would not leave you if there was any danger. Here is my pistol. If you feel very much afraid you can fire it."

"It is all so strange, you will have the good heart to excuse. I do not care for the weapon. Go."

This was delivered with the poise and composure of a mature woman. And yet when I reached the bend and stole a backward glance and saw her standing where I had left her, her hands clasped before her, her head bent in mournful attitude, she became a child again. I suddenly was loath to leave her there disconsolate, thinking she might be frightened during my absence.

I pushed forward rapidly and at last stood on the shore of the Mississippi, that enigma which could make and unmake empires. I stood for a moment looking across its broad expanse and noting the wreckage its tide was ruthlessly carrying to the Gulf. Then I was on my hands and knees among the bushes, watching the two pirogues now turning the bend below. Both were hugging the dead water under the eastern bank.

The one ahead was large and filled with Indians. In the second were three men, two of whom were white men. The river had fallen until there were but a few inches of water flowing into the Iberville, and as the newcomers would have no need of swinging out to avoid a swift cross current and would soon be passing close to my hiding-place I hastily retreated a considerable distance.

Secure in my new position I waited for the pirogues to cross my line of vision; and as I watched I was startled by a light step behind me. Wheeling apprehensively, I was in time to detect a slight motion in the bushes. I crawled toward the bushes to investigate but before I could reach them Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde stepped into view; into view, also, of any one on the river passing the Iberville. I grabbed one of her be-legginged ankles and yanked her to the ground and glared savagely as she would have opened her mouth to scream. Then toward the Mississippi I turned to learn the worst.

The Choctaws were gazing up-stream. None were looking in our direction. But in the other canoe one of the white men was touching the Indian on the shoulder. The Indian ceased paddling and stood up and peered under his hand toward our hiding-place. Then he dropped on his knees and resumed paddling. The white man, who had been suspicious, gesticulated with the other white man, who gazed toward our hiding-place, then sank back as if observing nothing.

His companion, not yet satisfied, stood up and fed his hawk-like gaze on the thick growth; hawk-like, because he was Damoan the Fox. And he thought he had seen something. His companion wore a blanket over his shoulders and had his hat pulled low, and I could not make out his features. The Fox reluctantly resumed his paddling, but so long as the Iberville was in sight he looked back.

The two pirogues passed from view. I remained motionless for some twenty minutes, waiting to see if they were playing a ruse, and, after making us believe they had gone, would be stealing back to surprize us. At last I was satisfied that Damoan at the most had caught only a suggestion of motion from the corner of his eye. Doubtless he decided it was some animal. I rose and turned to reproach *mademoiselle* for her indiscretion. What I saw held me tongue-tied. It was an entirely new phase of her. Rage flamed in her eyes like war-beacons. Her breath came fast and furious, and the ivory of her face was stained a vivid scarlet. She was glaring at me like a madwoman, and the small dirk was drawn back for a drive.

"You *canaille!*" this amazing creature hissed at me, as I stood there with my mouth open, like an expiring fish. "You dare lay a hand on me in anger! Don't lie! I read your eyes. You were angry with me, and you dared lay a hand on me while so base!"

I could only think of a panther's whelp, spitting and clawing. She was such a tiny tornado that I must have smiled a trifle. Certainly there was something in my face that caused her to leap forward. Then I was ashamed of myself, and felt only pity for her. I dropped my arms to my side and awaited her pleasure. She pressed close, her gaze baleful and vengeful, meeting mine squarely. Just as I believed she was going to strike she staggered back with a wild little cry, dropped the weapon and sank on her knees and hid her face in her hands.

It was horribly pathetic; and I wished Joe Labrador, or any other thick-headed *voyageur* could have been there to give me some of the kicks I felt I deserved. There can be nothing more grueling to the conscience than for six feet plus of beef and bone to realize he has aroused a helpless rage in a child or woman. It is a tragedy which leaves the offender miserable long after God has forgotten and the victim has magnificently forgiven. True, I had done nothing more than to show some amusement at her anger, but there was nothing amusing in this bent head and the two yellow braids trailing on the wet ground on either side of the small face.

I scooped her up and stood her on her feet, replaced the dirk in the sheath outside the blouse, and patting her awkwardly on the shoulder said:

"There, there, child. I am sorry."

With her hands still pressed to her face she managed to repeat—

"You laid a hand on me in anger!"

"I'm sorry," I simply reiterated. "We creatures of the woods lose all sense of fineness. We are crude. My only thought was that the Fox would see you; then we

would be hard put to escape him and his Choctaws. I meant well."

She turned and walked back to the pirogue, her braids over her shoulders and hanging down in front like an Indian woman's. In truth, I had been extremely provoked at her blunder; and I feared my grip on her small ankle had been unconsciously severe. I watched her as she walked away with small head bowed to see if she limped, and I rejoiced when she showed no signs of hurt from her rough tumble. And what a fine-spun, sensitive nature! With perhaps her life in peril she took exception to my mode of preserving it. Autocracy implies superiority.

On what did she base her autocratic resentment of my style of making her duck from view of Damoan the Fox? Under similar conditions I would not have hesitated to have tripped up any queen or empress in Christendom; and although I saved her life the lady would promptly demand mine, that I might not continue to live and gloat over my familiarity. But this little forlorn sparrow from the streets of Paris—it all was completely beyond me. And yet the pain at having caused her grief was none the less poignant. Taking my time I also returned to the pirogue, and seated myself apart from her and lighted my pipe.

"Why do we not proceed?" she asked without looking at me.

"Damoan and his red butchers must be given time to draw ahead," I told her.

For nearly half an hour neither of us spoke. She continued gazing at the dark river, her bosom occasionally heaving with a quick intake of breath, as, childlike, she lived over my abrupt behavior. I felt mean, and yet the little fool was old enough to realize I had had no time courteously to request her to make herself less conspicuous.

"Now, *mademoiselle*, we will go," I at last announced.

"I think, Monsieur Brampton, you had best take me back to the Bayou St. Jean, where I can make my way to *la Nouvelle* Orleans. If that be too much bother, hollow a log like this and I will make my own way. Or a raft."

I was most careful to maintain my gravity as I listened to her absurd request. I took some time to think it over, apparently. Then I gently replied:

"You are your own mistress. I only wish you to act wisely. If you really desire to go back of course I will take you."

"That is impossible. I had forgotten there is a price on your head. I must go alone."

I bowed and turned my head aside that she should not see my scowling eyes. Whoever would have imagined her to be such a wayward vixen? I visualized the long journey ahead with all its dangers, and I began to dread it worse than I dreaded Sieur de Bienville's vengeance.

"I can take you back without any danger to myself. All my danger is now ascending the Mississippi. Do you care to tell me your reason for returning? Is it because you can not trust yourself longer to my protection?"

My question worked the last effect I could have desired. It reduced her to humility. Her transition from the tone of the *grande dame* afire with indignation to that of a girl humbly supplicant made me feel like a zany. She was kneeling before me and stretching up her small hands and, like a pentitent child, begging me to overlook her behavior.

"For God's sake, don't!" I cried in English, catching her wrists and pulling her to her feet.

"But—I raised—raised a mortal weapon—against you," she sobbed.

Luckily my impulse to ridicule the tiny dirk was checked in time to permit my expression of gravity to remain.

"It was but your way of showing resentment," I said soothingly. "It was perfectly natural. One does not like to be mauled about unless one knows it's for one's own best good. Now that you know that, it is as if it never happened."

"Oh, it was nothing—nothing! Strike me, and I will thank you. That I should let my insane pride conquer my common sense! But what burns and hurts is to think—I raised——"

And the repetition was smothered with another burst of tears.

"You are nervous, Mademoiselle Dahlsgaarde. You are not yourself. You have suffered much mentally. Let us say no more about it. It is nothing after one has slept and rested. So, shall we fare north again? It is not wise to let our pursuers get too far *ahead*."

Without a word she entered the pirogue and seated herself on the blankets. I

placed my musket in the bow, ready for my hand, and paddled slowly around the last bend, my eyes impatient to search the upper reaches of the river. There was no sign of the two pirogues. Only the dead argosies, Gulf-bound, dotted the broad expanse. Stunted spruce of the Sioux country rode bole and bole with moss-draped sassafras freshly torn from some near-by swamp land; a strange hobnobbing of north and south, and strange stories they could exchange.

"Monsieur Brampton," she softly said as I drove the pirogue against the bank to allow her to land while I dragged it through the shallows into the great river; "I can go no farther until I know the truth."

Here was another enigma cropping out of this small bundle of puzzles. She was harder to read than a Shawano war-trail.

"*Mademoiselle*, I listen," I politely told her.

She stood with one foot on the side of the canoe, waiting for me to speak before she would even step ashore. "I must know I'm forgiven—that your heart holds no resentment against me," she said.

I resisted a temptation to dismiss the matter lightly, as that was sure to embroil us in further misunderstandings. It would have been more simple if she would remain on one plane, that of child, or woman. So I made my mien very serious as I stood there holding her hand, and earnestly declared:

"There was never anything to forgive. But if you must have it so, then you are forgiven. I have never held resentment against you and never can. Now do you believe me?"

The sudden radiance of her face astounded me. One would have thought I had granted her some rare boon. She bobbed her head in place of words and sprang ashore. I waded through the shallows, pretending not to observe her fight for self-control, and prolonged the task of dragging the log canoe through the ripples. At last I had the pirogue in deep water, and she, quite composed, took her place and I swung into the river. As the full force of the tremendous scene burst upon her she gave a little cry of alarm, and I heard her mutter:

"Mary, save us! *Mon Dieu!* It fairly tumbles down on us like an ocean!"

From that moment the spell of the river, as it must come to one who is breasting its mighty flood, was upon her. The feeling of fear passed from her and she sat with wide eyes, benumbed with the awe of it all. I kept inshore to find easy water, but when it was necessary to swing out toward mid-channel in order to round some huge accumulation of drift, I could hear her softly exclaiming in fresh amazement. She had seen the river from the ten-foot bank at New Orleans, but her view had been merely a cross-section.

Looking up the river from our pirogue was like gazing on an eternity of rushing waters. The effect was accumulative. The more one gazed the more one could realize the awful power of this monster of rivers. The French called it the "jugular vein" of the continent and contended they could hold the valley by controlling it. If they did not dream their fairy-tales too long they might control the commercial destiny of the valley, but as for controlling the river that task might cause annoyance to a god. For I had seen the Mississippi when it threw off the restraint of banks and channels to run wild.

There was no sign of Damoan and his companions ahead. As the sun was now close to the western forest-crown I began to fear they had gone into camp and that I might be approaching too close. A short distance ahead was a high bank and on this stood a tall pole, painted red, *baton rouge*, marking the boundary between the Bayogoulas and the Humas, *ou les rouges*. We had been passing through the territory of the Bayogoulas and had not seen an Indian. I suspected that the war threatened by the Natchez had sent the hunters back to their temples to make new medicine to the Oppossum, their chief deity, before joining with the Choctaws as allies of the French.

If the Choctaws came into the fight then their hereditary enemies the fierce Chickasaws would stand by the English; and Sieur de Bienville would find the fighting not to his liking. It was most curious how this primeval country with its mysterious river would reflect the plottings of the white world. Let a king stub his toe in Europe, and axes were stuck deep in the Warrior Posts up and down the valley, and grim tragedies would be enacted in the somber glades of the forest long after the white men had patched up their misunderstandings. I said nothing about Indians to the

girl as I made for the high bank; and she, simple one, assumed it was natural for none of the aborigines to frequent the river.

"Why do we go ashore?" she whispered over my shoulder, as if fearing the river would overhear us and betray our presence.

"To camp for the night, *mademoiselle*. The darkness will rush quickly through this lane in the forest. Here we have high ground and good water."

I got the canoe ashore and helped her out and packed the blankets and musket and smoked-beef up the bluff. While she sat under a tall pine, with her braids over her shoulders, I gathered bark and made her a shelter with the opening toward the spot where I would build the fire. I knew of a spring back a bit from the bluff and from this I procured a gourd of water. Then I gathered dry wood and started a small blaze and instructed her how to feed it so we would have a bed of coals for cooking our supper. Then taking a hook and line I informed her she was perfectly safe and that I would soon return from trying for a fish in the river.

I lighted the fire and descended to the river without her having spoken a word. For twenty minutes I patiently sought my fish without success. In straightening up I was surprized to behold her slim form on a log behind me.

"You here!" I exclaimed. "But I thought you were to remain and feed the fire?"

"I did not care for the loneliness, *monsieur*," she calmly informed me.

Her disregard of my wishes—in my mind I called it orders—annoyed me. However I managed to smile and remind her—

"We will have lost much time in making coals for broiling the fish."

"One must catch the fish first," was the quiet response. "Besides, I placed the wood on the blaze *monsieur* started. The coals will be ready."

"All the wood?" I sharply demanded.

She bridled at my tone. A tug at my line demanded my attention. After a brief fight I landed a catfish.

She waited until I had secured my hook and had coiled my line; then she said—

"The wood was to burn?"

"Yes, yes. But not all at once. A little at a time."

"I was not to know that without being told," she said with much dignity. "If *monsieur* will be explicit another time perhaps I will do better. But wood! La! La! There is nothing but wood. Surely one does not have to be sparing of wood in this land!"

I hesitated whether to explain the danger of big fires and much smoke being seen by an enemy, or to wait and after acting as my own fire-tender for a while, see if she did not learn her lesson by observation.

"If we have finished with the matter of the fire," she quietly resumed, "I would like to ask *monsieur* the meaning of that object which floats up-stream across the dying patch of sunlight."

I darted my gaze on the river. I discovered nothing until she stood close at my side and pointed a finger; then I saw it, a canoe, far out and presumably hunting for dead water on the opposite shore.

"Indians. Probably Humas. We are in their country," I told her.

"Are they wicked? Will they trouble us?" she demanded, glancing up into my face.

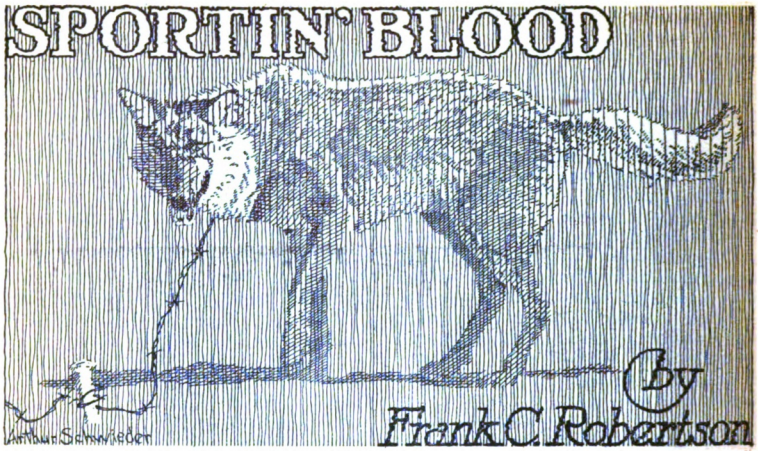
"Not a bit." Nor was I afraid of Indians, for I had many friends among the river-people, including the Humas. Returning my gaze to the river I was troubled to observe the canoe was making no progress toward the opposite shore. And only white men, ignorant of the river, would skirt the edge of the mighty current and barely hold their own, when easy paddling was to be enjoyed along the shore.

"Now one can hardly see them," she cried.

"We'll go back and cook our fish," I said. The canoe was heading toward us, thus making it appear to be a speck. And I had no doubt the smoke from our generous fire had attracted the *voyageurs'* attention. If Damoan and his companions were on the same side with us the intervening forest would prevent his seeing the smoke. It was his *manito* against mine, and I was hampered by an irresponsible girl-woman.

TO BE CONTINUED

SPORTIN' BLOOD



Author of "Denny," "The Mad Commanders," etc.

IT'S commonly said that there ain't no such animal as luck—said quality bein' composed entirely of brains, energy, an' that still scarcer commodity known as "guts." An' all coupled up with the ability to grab opportunity by the tail at the opportune moment, an' not git a holt of somethin' else by mistake. For, as ole Doc Emmett, the foreman o' the O X cow outfit often orates—

"Fer every feller that gits it in the neck by failin' to seize his opportunity, there's a dozen plumb ruined by grabbin' on to somethin' they think is opportunity but ain't."

That's why, on a gamblin' proposition, one man's opportunity, or his luck, is always the ruination of somebody else that's mebbe got a whole lot more reason fer thinkin' that Dame Opportunity is a-holdin' out both arms fer him. Which is why this question o' luck, with all its trimmin's, sometimes gits so plumb serious; an' brings us back to the original discussion, an' the specific instance o' young Andrew Hemenway which weaves itself into our midst one bright Autumn mornin'; grabs opportunity by the tail, an' hangs on till he has her corralled, roped, throwed, an' hog-tied.

The Fall round-up is supposed to start off that mornin', an' ole Doc has a thousan' things on his mind besides his hair an' his hat. Fer one thing there's a couple o' dozen farmers come driftin' in after their dogeys on work-horses, an' wind-broke skates that's jest capable o' gittin to the first rodeer, an' after that they figure on the O X furnishin' 'em a string o' horses apiece. An' us short on good mounts ourselves!

Then there's the problem of ole Peg Woster, our ole one-legged cook, who's about as sociable as this here Diogenes, an' more melancholy than Hamlet. Just that mornin' at breakfast the Galoot representin' the D B outfit remarks jokin'ly to Peg, with a pleasant grin—

"Pass th' toothpicks, Peg." The same bein' a luxury no cow camp ever affords.

"There's yer —— toothpick," Peg howls, lettin' drive with a stick o' stove wood that ketches the rep on the knee, an' so we loses the services fer a couple o' days of one o' the few extra men that's worth his salt.

That's only two o' Doc's problems, an' there's others a pilin' up fast. It'ud seem that durin' such a time o' stress an' strain anybody would know enough not to come aroun' Doc with vain an' futile braggin's. But wisdom, in all its various branches, don't seem to have no part ner parcel in the make-up of this Andrew person.

It's gittin' along toward ten o'clock, an' nobody can seem to git started. Ole Doc is boilin' aroun' the corral, an' fairly

exudin' sweat, orders, an' foul language when Andrew rides up on a calico fan-tail, an' plants himself squarely in front o' Doc.

"Well, I'm here," he announces his presence.

He's a slim mild-lookin' youngster of about nineteen with a mop o' yaller hair that he combs straight back, an' plasters to his head till it looks like a sheet o' brass, an' from that, mebbe, you git the impression that he's all brass—an' circumstances demonstrate that he purty near all is.

"You don't say," Doc answers him witherin'ly, without lookin' up. "Can it be possible?"

Who he is, or where he come from we ain't no idee.

"Yep, I'm here to rep fer the Flinch Creek outfit," he says.

"Bilious," Doc says to me, "d'ye reckon it's serious?"

"Naw," I says, "the Flinch Creek outfit ain't had a critter on this range fer years. What for would they send a rep?"

"You aimin' to dispute my credentials?" the young feller asks sort o' mild. "Listen: My dad is the president o' the Flinch Creek Cattle Company. An' you needn't be thinkin' I'm a chee-ka-ko an' can't ride. I've put in the whole Summer at the cow camp."

"Then naturally you know all there is to be knowed," Doc says sarcastic.

"I always manage to hold my own—an' then some," says Andy.

"This," Doc says, addressin' me, but loud enough fer Andrew to hear, "is a mean, dirty, petty, low-down scheme o' them Flinch Creekers to unload their surplus troubles onto us."

He turns an' scans Andrew up one side an' down the other.

"Where's yer string o' horses?" he demands.

"The foreman says they always had to furnish your rep with a string, an' he expects you to recipercate. If this bunch o' pin-headed mustangs is yer cavy I'll pick out my string. About ten o' the best ones'll do me," says Andrew without turnin' a hair.

"Y' sure that'll be enough?" demands Doc in sarcasm.

"Quite sure, thank ye," Andrew allows.

"See here, young feller me lad, any time the O X wastes a perfec'ly good horse on a perfec'ly no-account, dead-to-the-world outfit as the Flinch Creekers, the moon will be composed entirely of green cheese, an' cigarets'll grow on bushes," Doc opines.

"That's about what the boys allowed you'd remark," Andrew says gently.

"It shouldn't have been hard fer 'em to discern it."

"Yet it's goin' to cost 'em a bunch o' jack," Andrew says complacent, throwin' his leg over the saddle horn. "One hundred an' forty-one berries to be exact—an' it's a pity there wasn't more loose change in the camp. Not that I need the money, but it 'ud give us more excitement."

"What'd ye mean?" Doc clamors.

"I mean that I bet 'em that before I'd been here three days you'd give me the pick o' yer cavy up to ten head," Andrew states calmly.

Doc jumps up in the air with a whoop like a froze pine-tree explodin'.

"If you stick around here three days you'll be ridin' in a hearse," he hollers.

"Now about layin' a little wager on that—" Andrew begins, but just then "Bluebell" Scott, who's been out after stray horses, comes a siftin' in on his fan-tail, with his eyes bulgin' out like boils on a sore neck.

"What you think?" he squawks. "Ole Whitey is back on the range! There's two dead calves on Willer Creek, an' a dead steer at the foot o' Craig's Knob that I've run across already."

Then an' there ole Doc loses control of hisself an' goes into a regular fit, which, considerin' his high an' glorious callin' as foreman, ain't to be wondered at. Ole Whitey is a big ole he-wolf, big as any yearlin' on the range, an' fer ten years he's been the terror o' the Grave Creek range. In the Winter he sweeps down out o' the Bitter Roots at the head of a pack, makin' every feed-ground fer miles aroun' a bloody scene o' carnage.

There ain't no trapper foxy enough to git him, though there's a special standin' reward fer him that's plumb luscious, an' he can smell gunpowder further than any bullet kin travel. Lots of his pack git took in, but ole Whitey don't lose so much as a hair off his ornery ole carcass.

All o' which ain't so bad if he'd leave be in the Summer time like a self-respectin' wolf should. But instead he comes out on a high lonesome hunt ev'ry Summer when the cattle are scattered, an' the trouble he raises is plumb sinful.

"This time we got to git that ole varmint!" Doc bellers when he runs outa profanity. "There's a hundred bucks in it fer the man that first hangs a rope onto him an' takes his dallies!"

Since I've heard the same remark from the same source, Summer an' Winter, I ain't overly impressed. Hangin' a rope on to ole Whitey seems just as easy an' feasible as makin' angel Moroni or the Mormon Temple in Salt Lake dance the shimmy.

We're all just ready to straddle our unrespected respective bronks when Andrew pipes up ag'in—

"About that wager I'm mentionin'—do I hear any takers?"

"You wantin' to bet I'll let you have the pick o' the cavy to ride, you poor fish?" Doc bawls.

"In three days," Andrew qualifies.

Doc turns his pockets inside out an' begins countin' change. When he's handed me the las' cent he snorts a challenge at Andrew to cover it. The boy lugs out a roll o' bills that'ud choke a horse, an' passes over the same amount that Doc has.

"Say, Santy Claws, any more o' that jack you want to dispose of?" Bluebell asks.

"I strive to please," Andrew allows.

With that there's a rush fer pocketbooks, an' soon ev'ry cent in camp except what belongs to me an' the cook is up. Doc gives the signal to start ridin', but Andrew stops him.

"Are you open to a—er—another little sportin' proposition?"

"What now?" Doc demands peevishly.

"If my memory ain't sprained its ankle," says Andrew, "there was some report of a certain wolf that you'd like to have caught. Now wolves is my special meat. I'll bet you the rest o' my roll against the right to pick ten horses out of yer cavy that I can bring in the aforesaid wolf."

A sportin' proposition! It sure was. That was just as much of a cinch fer Doc as robbin' the treasury of an old ladies home. However, Doc is knowed fur an' wide fer caution, an' now he equivocates—

"I'll take the bet, but you're not to pick the horses till the three days is up."

That sure is exactin' hard terms, fer it don't permit Andrew to win his first bet with our boys, not to mention the one with his own outfit, even if ole Whitey should come an' foller him plumb into camp fer sheer love of him, which is a heap unlikely. An', moreover, there's a dozen punchers willin' an' anxious to make it so hot fer Andrew that he can't stick the three days out. I sorta take a likin' to Andrew when he calls Doc right off the bat, an' forks over the rest of his wad. But the rest of 'em, havin' money up that way, ain't amenable to any admiration of Andrew whatever.

Andrew plugged along with us the rest of the day on his calico ki-ann, with a smile on that thin face o' his that made you wonder what was behind it—sawdust or brains. At the rodeer in the afternoon he demonstrates to the satisfaction of all that he can make a noose in his rope, swing it over his head, an' let it go. But where it's foreordained to land he ain't the least inklin', though generally its around his ears. In one hour he shatters all records fer poor ropin', standin' or runnin'.

WHEN the boys amble in to supper I can hear 'em makin' plans fer a general massacre of Andrew that night. But Fate takes a hand just before we eat, an' all the boys have to do is set back an' grin. It's Andrew hisself that lets loose, all unmeanin', the bolt that seems destined to destroy him.

As aforesaid, the only real, genuine, blowed-in-the-bottle, Class A crank in captivity is Peg Woster, this one-legged cook of ours. The first time any puncher commits the least breach of decorum as Peg sees it said puncher usually acknowledges the receipt of a stick of wood, a butcher knife, or a stove lid, dependin' on which Peg happens to have in his hand at the time, an' if he don't go elsewhere he gits all three.

Now Peg owns but one real friend in the world on whom he lavishes his affections, an' that is a yaller pot-licker he calls "Jimmy." An' Jimmy has just the sort of a disposition you'd imagine a friend of Peg's would have. If anybody reaches out a hand to pet him he'll lay back his lips an' snarl—providin' he don't decide to make out a lunch on the hand that's offered him in frien'ship.

It so happens that Jimmy is prowlin' along the path when we files up to the chuck-wagon fer our beans an' coffee that night, an' all unsuspectin' Andrew reaches out a hand to give him a frien'ly pat on the head. Jimmy lets out a snarl, an' the nex' second he's danglin' in the air by his teeth which is stuck into Andrew's thumb.

"Ouch!" yells Andy, an' he makes a grab fer Jimmy's tail with the other hand, an' captures it just as Jimmy lets go with his teeth.

Andrew swings Jimmy over his head a couple of times, an' it becomes apparent that his throwin' is a heap more accurate than his ropin', fer he lets go at the right moment. Jimmy sails a ki-yi-in' through the air, an' sets down ker-plop right in the middle of a kettle of hot gravy, right off the stove, which splashes over an' roundabout Peg an' the rest o' the vittles. Jimmy emerges instanter, leavin' the gravy enriched by a generous portion o' dog hair, an' sets out on high fer the creek.

Peg, in the mean time, is busy clawin' the gravy out of his hair an' eyes, an' by the time that's accomplished his first impulse to throw somethin' has give way to a plan of revenge that is plumb sinister in comparison.

"Y' can't eat none o' my cookin'," he screams at Andrew.

An' as he has sole custody over the eatin' tools, an' stan's guard over the grub-pile with a stick o' wood in one hand an' a butcher knife in the other there's no denyin' him his way.

"Aw—I say—" Andrew deprecates like a man will when he ain't got nothin' on his stomach but his shirt an' his hands.

Bingo! Here comes that stick of wood which Andrew side-steps by an eighth of an inch. The butcher knife is hoverin' in the air, an' seein' that everybody is applaudin' Peg, Andrew grins like a sick sheep an' beats it away from there. He shore goes to bed supperless that night.

He's unmolested that night except that Bluebell comes in from night-herdin' along about midnight, slips his rope aroun' Andrew's bed, an' drags him through the creek, which is just beginnin' to form a thin crust o' ice. Andrew crawls out, constructs himself a fire, an' shivers over it till mornin'.

He lines up with the rest of us fer breakfast, but Peg is still unforgivin'. In fact every time he looks at Jimmy, 'specially when Jimmy's goin' away from him, he gits madder an' madder.

"Y' can't eat here," he yells at Andrew, wavin' a stove poker menacin'ly.

Andrew fetches a grin like he sees the joke, but his face is a sort of gray color. He goes out an' ketches his calico cayuse, an' is ready to ride with the rest of us.

"Say, sporty guy, when d'ye figure on eatin' ag'in—or have y' give up the habit?" Clem Davis asks with a grin.

"Say, I know where y' kin git a reg'lar Injun dinner plumb cheap," Bluebell informs him serious. "Right over the ridge here. Y' can git a drink o' water an' a long breath."

"I may take that in," Andrew says, good natured, "but no streak o' bad luck ever lasts me over twenty-four hours. I'll bet you my outfit—horse, saddle, chaps, spurs, rope—ag'in what you own o' the same description, that I eat Peg's cookin' before night, an' without stealin' it."

Bluebell was inclined to balk, fer he was the dude of the range, an' owned a outfit that was nothin' less than gorgeous. It was worth no less'n ten times what Andrew's outfit was. But when a man has as much sportin' blood as Andrew's got it's hard to back down before him.

"Take him up," Peg advises grimly. "He'll never eat none o' my chuck."

"You're took," Bluebell agrees.

DOC gives the signal to ride, an' we all drifts up the country about ten miles to the startin' point o' the circle, an' Doc pairs us off, two by two, to comb the country toward where the rodeer is goin' to be that afternoon. It so happens that I'm paired off with Andrew to ride the inside circle.

We rides along fer a mile or so till we're well away from ev'rybody, an' I says in as fatherly a tone as I can command:

"There's a trail through that Pass yonder that leads straight to the Flinch Creek range. I'm plumb able to cope with any cattle I'm liable to jump up, so I'll just bid you a tearful good-by, Andrew. Bluebell can come over there some day an' claim yer outfit if he wants it."

Andrew grins at me an' says:

"Bilious, ole boy, I like you fine, an' I wouldn't do you no sort o' harm on earth; but I'll bet you ev'ry rag I've got on ag'in ev'ry one you're wearin' that I win ev'ry bet."

"I crawfish," I says solemnly.

We jaunts along another mile or so, an' then we hears a couple o' yells 'way off to the right toward where Bluebell an' Clem is ridin' the outside circle. The yells git closer an' is taken up by the other riders until it sounds like a pack o' Bannack Injuns on the war-path.

We waits where we are to see what the commotion's about, an' all at once a streak o' white busts outa the brush an' heads straight fer us.. It's ole Whitey! Right behind that wolf is a dozen frenzied cow-punchers wavin' hats an' slingin' ropes. Not a one of 'em has got a gun, an' I see right there that old Whitey is just as safe as if he was in his mother's arms. The ole feller is twistin' an' dodgin', an' plumb enjoyin' the sport if y' can judge by the grin on his face. Just then I hears more yells, an' here comes Doc an' the rest o' the boys from the other direction to head 'im off.

"Wake up, Bilious," yells Doc. "These other yellin' Siwashes couldn't ketch a cold. It's up to us."

I uncoils my string an' gits ready fer action. The two bunches o' punchers come together with ole Whitey in the middle. A couple o' dozen ropes tangle up like a Chinese puzzle as ev'ry puncher makes a wild throw fer that hundred dollars. A second more an' the horses gits themselves in the mesh, an' most of 'em begins to buck. You see punchers' feet a wavin' wildly in the air one minute, an' the next you hears dull thuds as some of 'em hits the ground plumb careless as to location.

Meantime ole Whitey comes outa the mess grinnin' from ear to ear. I spurs my horse to head him between me an' Doc, an' as he goes by I make a perfec' throw. I'm reflectin' what for will I spend that hundred before the rope settles. Outa the corner o' my eye I sees Andrew unfurl his rope an' make a wild cast, an' I grins as his string tangles up in the brush plumb opposite to the direction he aimed it to go.

That rope o' mine settles over ole Whitey as purty as anythin' you ever see; but before I can pull up on him the ole cuss goes straight into the air like a wild cat, an' all I jerks up is a noose-full o' empty space.

He's headin' straight fer Doc now, an' I see ole Doc's eyes glitterin' as he measures the distance while he twirls his twine. He calculates on just how fur ole Whitey'll travel while the rope is fallin', an' lets drive accordin'ly. But jest as he lets go his coils—when its too late to change matters—ole Whitey enlarges his grin, spins on his hind legs like a top, an' makes a drive fer the brush an' a clean gitaway.

"You blankety-blank, imitation, bucket-fed cow-punchers have let him git away ag'in," Doc howls in his wrath.

I turns to give ol' Whitey a farewell glance, an' my eyes must have bulged out a foot as I see him dive right square into Andrew's noose just when the boy gives a final, vicious yank to git it loose from the brush where it's been tangled. The rope gives loose, tightens hard around ole Whitey's belly, an' that ole marauder lets out a squall that can be heard fer miles as Andrew takes his dallies an' starts away with him, tumblin' him end over end promisc'us.

Bets or no bets nobody kin take chances on that wolf gittin' loose ag'in. In a couple o' minutes me an' Doc has our twine on him, an' we sure stretches him out proper. Doc gits down to kill him with a club, but Andrew holds up a warnin' hand.

"This wolf belongs to me, gents," he reminds us. "I'm takin' him to camp alive."

"You don't git no reward, ner win no bet if he gits loose," Doc yowls.

"You hold him about a minute an' he won't git loose," Andrew promises, leapin' from his horse.

Well, we dassn't let him loose, so we has to hold him while Andrew contrives to muzzle him with his belt, which renders ole Whitey as harmless as a suckin' dove. Then he rigs up a sort o' hackamore with his rope so he won't choke his wolf to death, an' climbs back on his horse after invitin' us to take off our strings. Forthwith he proceeds to learn ole Whitey to lead or drag, jest as he prefers.

"I reckon I git to pick ten horses don't I?" he sings out as he goes away.

"Not fer three days," Doc reminds him with a snicker.

Ole Doc was one pop'lar foreman right then. If he hadn't named that time limit, right then there woulda been one poverty-stricken bunch o' punchers. So when he yells at 'em to git busy they tore in joyfully, leavin' Andrew to conduct his wolf to camp in peace.

WHEN we gits into camp fer a late dinner we finds Andrew has ole Whitey picketed out right close to camp. He has rustled a long piece o' barb wire to stake his wolf with, an' has loosened the muzzle till ole Whitey can relieve his feelin's somewhat by gnashin' his teeth. That wolf sure looks dangerous, an' nobody has any hankerin' to mix things with him, except Jimmy—who is

plumb confident an' convinced that he kin lick the tar outa him. Peg is holdin' Jimmy in his arms to keep him outa danger, an' cussin' the air blue in the mean time.

"Say, Peg, do I eat?" Andrew questions.

"Eat! Not on yer tintype! You—you—you——"

Peg is never good at repartee unless he kin do his talkin' by hand, an' he drops Jimmy to pick up a stick o' wood to hurl at Andrew. Instantly Jimmie makes a dive fer ole Whitey, an' Peg drops his club an' dashes to the rescue.

Ole Whitey waits until Jimmy is right in front of him before he decides to take him in. He reaches fer Jimmy just as Peg does, but his muzzle don't let him git a good holt. Peg starts away with Jimmy, but Whitey says, "Woof!" an' reaches out with one paw which hooks into Peg's belt as he turns to go. Somethin' has to give, an' it's Peg's belt an' trousers. That wooden leg is fairly twinklin' as Peg crosses the line he thinks means safety.

"Look out, Peg!" somebody yells as he slows up, fer Andrew has slipped up an' is givin' Whitey more wire.

Peg starts to put on more speed, but he stubs that wooden leg, an' him, Jimmy, an' ole Whitey goes into one gran' mix-up. Jimmy gits out first, an' he tucks his tail an' goes a ki-yi-in' straight fer the tallest timber he kin think of on such short notice. Peg finally gits to his feet, but in some way ole Whitey has got most of Peg's remainin' raiment tucked under that muzzle an he jerks him back. But there's no stoppin' Peg longer in that vicinity. He makes one tremendous effort an' heaves loose, but he's wearin' nothin' but his boots an' the collar of his shirt. He heads fer the sleepin' tent.

Andrew strolls over to the grub-pile as though nothin' outa the way had happened, an' says—

"Seein' as it's all ready I reckon I'll eat—an' incidentally bet another bet."

He grabs a plate an tears into the beans. Bluebell Scott sheds scaldin' tears over the loss o' that proud outfit of his'n, but it's the unwritten law o' the range that ev'rybody kin eat at a cow-camp if the cook'll let him.

We're all jest finishin' up our meal when Peg sticks his head outa the sleepin' tent.

"Doc," he quavers, "if y' don't kill that —— wolf I'll never cook another meal fer the O X."

Doc looks at Andrew, an' then he looks at me. It's a dead certainty that no round-up kin prosper without a cook, an' time is fleetin'.

"That there wolf belongs to me, an' he stays right there till I pick ten horses outa that cavy," Andrew says firmly.

"That's accordin' to Hoyle," I says, "an' a sportin' proposition."

Much as ole Doc hates to lose a bet he's a slave to duty.

"Pick yer horses," he says, heavin' a sigh. "An' somebody rustle a gun."

The nex' day a automobile drives up, an' there's a big guy in broadcloth in it who introduces hisself as the President o' the Flinch Creek Cattle Comp'ny, an' the dad of Andrew. Andrew is all decked out in Bluebell's gorgeous outfit, an' is ridin' ole "Sunday," Doc's top saddle horse. He points all this out pridefully to his dad an' tells him it's a reward fer ropin' a wolf that nobody else kin ketch.

Before he leaves the ole man corners me an' Doc.

"Gents," he confides, "there's nothin' like punchin' cows away out here in the wild to make a man outa a boy. This Andrew boy o' mine fer instance: Why, d'ye know, I sent that boy out here because he was goin' to the dogs in town, gamblin', an' that sorta truck. Now look at him—clean an' fresh as these very mountains."

"Clean! Clean, did he say?" mumbles Doc as we amble away.

"Yeah," I assures him, "Andrew is a clean sport, an' the remainder o' this bunch is cleaned."

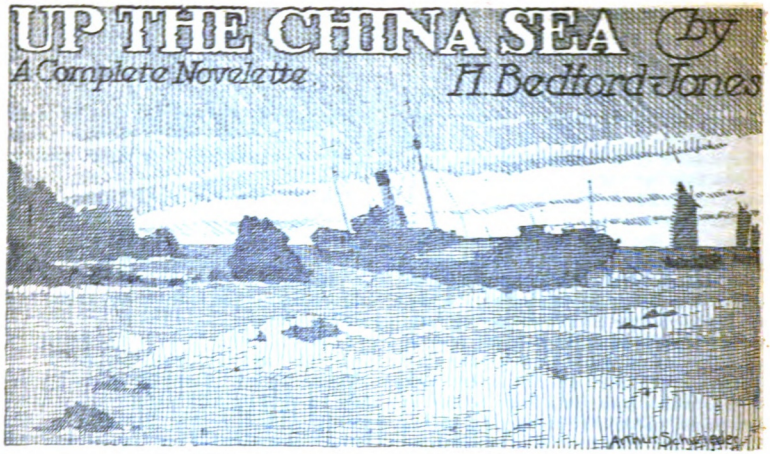
"It looked like we couldn't lose," Doc moans. "Why every darn bet he offered to make looked like a cinch for us to win."

" 'Fer ev'ry feller that gits it in the neck fer failin' to grab his opportunity, there's a dozen plumb ruined by grabbin' a holt o' somethin' they think is opportunity but ain't,' " I quotes.

UP THE CHINA SEA

A Complete Novelette

By H. Bedford-Jones



Author of "Pirates' Gold," "The Seal of Jenghis Khan," etc.

SWANN, senior partner of Swann & Smythe, Ltd., was a fussy and important little man, proud of himself and his business and his office in Innes Street; in his own ferrety eyes he was the most important man in Singapore, and certainly the most important shipping man. Now he fingered his grayish-red sideburns and glared across his desk at Bracken. Being astonished and startled, he strongly resented the fact, and displayed his resentment in an assumption of outraged dignity.

"I never heard of such a thing! My dear Mr. Bracken, I'm afraid you don't realize what you're saying," he exclaimed testily. "Why, my dear sir, Captain Isaiah Combs is a most trusted master, of an impeccable record, known all over the Southern Pacific!"

"Sure," returned Bracken, and smiled slightly. "I sailed as second with him, two years ago, in the *Emma Arnold*—Manila Company Line, you know. See here, Mr. Swann! The reason I'm tattling to you, is the story you've told me, and the display of caution you made in signing me on. You said flatly that everything aboard this craft of yours must be exactly right in every particular, above the faintest shadow of a suspicion!"

"Quite so, quite so," assented Swann, then flashed up angrily. "But, sir, you do not say anything definite! You have the impudence to sit here and inform me that Cap'n Combs is not to be trusted—after I have satisfied myself about him, mind you! —and then you can not make out the least case against him! I don't like the looks of it, sir."

Bracken, despite his own irritation, regarded Swann with amused toleration.

"Look here; I'm signed on as first officer, and I'll go with him or any other man. So far as I'm concerned, I don't give a tinker's dam what happens! You were good enough to confide in me regarding the *Fengshui*. You told me she was going up to the Loshu group—the worst part of the whole coast between here and Canton—on a salvage trip. You told me you'd bought the wreck of the *He Lung*, supposed to be a total loss, and that the stuff aboard her might run into a huge sum——"

"Not so loud, sir," interjected Swann, his crafty little eyes darting to the door.

"—and that the officers would receive handsome shares of the big money," went on Bracken. He was earnest now; the sincerity in his sun-darkened, high-boned features impressed the older man. "I'm giving you confidence for confidence, that's all. You hinted there might be a race for the wreck, possibly a fight for her; the law's

behind you, so that's all right. You said every man aboard the *Fengshui* must be a picked man. What's happened? You've picked the officers yourself, but Combs is picking the men for'ard——"

"I trust him to do so," snapped Swann. "If he wants honest Malays, he can have them."

"Then you look out for him!" concluded Bracken. "I say it because you've trusted me and because I'm working for you. I know nothing definite against Mr. Combs, but I know him. His record is good. He's a fine chap, a splendid seaman, a first-rate officer. Nothing about him to suspect. But I've sailed with him! I tell you that under the surface he's one of these sly beggars, full of tricks against his best friend, capable of knifing his owners in the back if he can profit by it and not be caught. That's all, Mr. Swann."

"I—ah—I'm sure it's very good of you," said Swann, without conviction. "Any trouble between you and Mr. Combs?"

"Oh, ——!" said Bracken wearily. "No, we've had no trouble. Can't you make yourself believe that I'm only warning you for your own good? Can't you see that this is one case in ten thousand—that I'm thinking only of your interests? Since you think the warning unnecessary, just let the matter drop; forget it! Combs and I will get along all right. If I've been too officious in this matter, lay it to my good intentions."

Swann did not get the faint sarcasm. He rose, pulled at his whiskers, came beside Bracken, and patted him on the shoulder.

"I begin to appreciate your motives, Mr. Bracken, and I beg to tender you my thanks. At the same time, I do not regard the warning as essential. Mr. Combs is extremely devoted to his duty. However, I'll request him to consult you in regard to the crew——"

"Too late," said Bracken. "He's got 'em signed on; Malay serang and quartermaster, Malays for'ard and in the black gang. Anyway, keep me out of it. Here's hoping we have no trouble and a quick passage north. Forget all I've said."

"Yes, yes," assented Swann, and shook hands heartily. "Luck to you, sir! Good day."

Bracken walked out into Innes Street, and started for Johnson's Pier, where the *Fengshui* was berthed. He was half-minded to throw up the voyage altogether.

"Yes, yes," he repeated ironically, watching the busy thoroughfare of New Bridge Road with gloomy and stormy eyes. "That old sawnee will spill the beans to Combs in a minute, blast his red whiskers! I can hear him at it: 'First officer thought fit to say a word to me, sir; excellent young man, but a trifle impulsive.' The old fool! I can't afford to risk my ticket on such a salvage job as this one, with Combs in command. I can feel inside of me that the man's crooked somewhere, or would be if he had the chance."

He had just turned into South Boat Quay, when a rickishaw coolie rammed squarely into him and sent him staggering. Bracken recovered, gripped the coolie angrily, then checked himself; the yellow man was an automaton, opium-sodden, glazed of eye, hardly knowing what he did. Then a voice reached him, and he turned to the speaker—a woman who occupied the 'rickisha.

"Will you be good enough to beat it into that ass that I want to reach the boat waiting for me below Cavanagh Bridge? He's been wandering over the place——"

Bracken began to shake the coolie, but none too roughly, since a lordly Sikh policeman was indulgently watching the scene. He looked again at the woman. She was clad in black, appeared to be in her late thirties, so far as he could tell for the veil that obscured her features, and he was aware of a forceful personality emanating from her.

A vestige of life and comprehension came into the saffron features of the coolie, who took fresh hold on his shafts. Bracken stepped back and touched his cap. The woman thanked him with a word as she was carried away. Her voice was very rich and full; it suggested self-restraint, poise, surety, friendship. Sometimes a lonely man senses queer things in the voices of women.

Bracken continued in the wake of the 'rickisha, forced his mind back to his own problem, decided to see the game through. He might be risking his ticket, but better that than to get a reputation as a fool and a coward. As he made the decision, a hand touched his arm, and he turned to look into a wrinkled, smiling brown face.

"*Tuan*, that woman was the wife of Cap'n Nash."

"Oh, hello, Tuwak! Eh? Cap'n Nash's widow, was she? Hm!"

Bracken glanced after the 'rickisha, then his eyes came back to the Malay. A good man, Tuwak; a quartermaster and signed on as such aboard the *Fengshui*. Bracken had twice sailed with him, and knew his exceptional ability, though the man looked a wrinkled monkey.

"It's no use at all, Tuwak," said Bracken. "He wouldn't listen to a word, and the effort did me more harm than good, so I didn't draw you into it. It's a queer job, Tuwak! I suspect the master, you the men, and neither of us has any proof. I don't suppose you've learned anything about those fellows?"

The wrinkled brown face grinned.

"Aye, *tuan!* The serang, who is to be the other quartermaster, is one of the lascars from that wrecked ship to which we go seeking salvage. No one else knows this, but I was aboard the *He Lung* before she sailed, and I saw the man there. And Cap'n Nash's wife."

Bracken's eyes narrowed, then he shook his head.

"No use, Tuwak. We'd better keep quiet. Most of the lascars for'ard are all right, I expect."

"They are not good men, *tuan*," was the quiet response. "But good seamen, I think."

"Well—" and Bracken shrugged resignedly—"we've done our best. Keep your wits sharp."

He passed on to the pier ahead. So that woman was Mrs. Nash! Odd, his meeting her. And going to a boat—what ship was she going aboard? Her husband had gone when the *He Lung* smashed up; that's why she was in black, of course. She must have some money, too, for Nash had been part owner of his ship.

THUS thinking, Bracken reached his own craft. The *Fengshui* was a typical Swann & Smythe ship—little about her good except the engines and officers' cabins. She was in ballast, was due to sail with the tide, and quite a crowd of curious loafers were watching her idly. Every one knew that she was going after salvage from the wreck of the *He Lung*, though nobody knew just what salvage she expected to bring back to Singapore. That was a state secret, known only to Swann & Smythe and the men to whom they had confided it. How ferrety old Swann of the grayish-red sideburns had learned the secret, was immaterial; he was not a fool, despite Bracken's pronouncement. He had promptly bid in the wreck from the underwriters, and stood to make a rich thing of it.

As Bracken came aboard, he was met by the second officer. Simmons was all agrin, and a grin with him was no sign of amusement. Simmons was an elderly, sour-eyed man who had twice left the sea to become a farmer, each time failing dismally. Though misfortune had warped him, his honesty and ability were above question. Yet, whenever he laughed, other men took in sail and made all taut.

"Hello! Storm signals?" said Bracken. "Where's the old man?"

"Harbor master's office, getting his papers," said Simmons in his dreary voice. "Won't he be hopping wild when he hears about it!"

"About what?"

"Waterfront news. The *Eastern Star* is h'isting her hook for Haifong. Gossip says she's on the same course with us. Chinese owned, chink crew. Australian named Jenkins in command—new man hereabouts. What's more, Nash's widow is aboard her."

"Is she running the outfit?"

"Nobody knows. Oh, there's a sweet round of yarns! Did you bring them log forms and other owners' papers?"

Bracken nodded.

"Everything O. K. So the *Eastern Star* is the one to look out for, eh? Fair enough. But we've bought the wreck legally. What's the idea?"

"Don't ask me." Simmons grinned again. "One good thing, Jenkins don't know these waters any too well. Fresh from the south, I hear."

Bracken nodded and passed on. So that was where the Nash woman had been going! The news foreboded trouble—perhaps a legal mixup, perhaps physical stress. Nash had died when his ship piled up, and things are not always what they seem from manifests and freight lists as handled between owners and underwriters.

"Swann bought the wreck, all right, but he's a sharp old bird," reflected Bracken. "He'll skin as close as he can to the law without breaking it. Looks to me as the stuff aboard the wreck had belonged to Nash himself—a private venture

not entered on the manifest, perhaps taken aboard at one of the gulf ports. That might explain why his widow and some Singapore Chinese were after it; might explain a lot of things! Old Swann's no stickler for what's done, just so long as his legal skirts are clear. He's running blamed close with his officer list, too! Blamed close. It's a wonder he'd risk it. Confound him, why couldn't he put a real wireless man aboard?"

There was some excuse for Bracken's irritation. The *Fengshui* was of course wireless equipped, but the officer shipped to handle the outfit was blissfully ignorant of the whole affair. He was a silent, hulking man named Watkins; how he had obtained his wireless ticket was a mystery, and so was the man himself. Bracken understood that his real qualification for the voyage was a knowledge of the upper Tongking gulf—a rare thing, since even the charts were none too reliable. This, however, looked fishy to Bracken. Moreover, Watkins had convoyed aboard a heavy case, which by the shape and weight might contain rifles. All in all, Bracken conjectured that Watkins was a special agent, a watchdog shipped to look after the interests of Swann & Smythe, Ltd.

The other officers were regular enough for a small barge on a special voyage like this—no third officer, and two engineers with a smart young Chinese assistant. The black gang and hands forward were all Malays; as were the quartermaster Tuwak and the lascar serang, Kelapa, who also held a quartermaster's ticket. It was this same Kelapa who, as Bracken now knew, had been one of the few survivors of the *He Lung*. Did Combs know this? Why was it kept secret, as Tuwak had hinted?

It was noon when Captain Israel Combs came aboard and went straight to the mess cabin. Bracken was there alone, and one glance at the skipper told him the worst had happened. Combs ordered the old Chinese steward to fetch his dinner in a hurry, then sat down and looked at Bracken. Instead of an explosion, however, he gave vent to a quiet question:

"Old Swann gave me a hint that you'd been running around with your tongue hanging out. What's the lay?"

Bracken, who had expected a row, took his time about responding. Combs was a large, floridly handsome man, with a hard and direct eye, a frank manner, and a way of coming directly to the point in any matter under discussion. Bracken suspected that this blunt manner was an affectation, and now met it with similar coin.

"True enough," he said, leaning back and meeting the challenging gaze of Combs with a cool shrug. "I started out to play the game on the square, but the old fool wouldn't meet me half-way. I'm through, and I hope he loses a wad on the venture! Owners are shysters, and I'm through." Combs studied him for a moment.

"I didn't know you were a tattler," he said, but quite without heat. "Just what did you tell about me?"

"Nothing particular," said Bracken. "General warning. It was pooh-poohed."

"Oh," said Combs, and smiled. "General warning, eh? Think I'm a bad 'un, do you?"

"Not at all," returned Bracken calmly. "My private opinion is that you'd go into a game against owners if it paid well. Lots of men would. I don't say but what I would myself, after my experience of this morning."

"Hm!" Combs gave him a shrewd look. "Well, Bracken you did your duty as you saw it, I suppose. Can't say I like it, but never mind. We'll forget the matter. Won't do to have any trouble aboard."

"That's white of you," said Bracken. "We'll do it. You've heard of the *Eastern Star?*"

Combs nodded. His light blue eyes flamed suddenly.

"Yes. We're off as soon as the papers are cleared—they'll be sent over in twenty minutes. I'm going to shave ——'s edges on the up-trip; inside passage. That fool Jenkins won't dare do it, and we'll get in ahead of him. If you're through, suppose you see that all's cleared to jerk the hook."

Bracken rose and left the mess cabin. Outside, he grinned to himself.

"You're a sly puss, all right!" he muttered. "Forget the matter, eh? You took the bait, too. I'll hear from you, never fear! Wonder just what your little game is? Hm! Between you and that Nash woman, Malays and chinks, Swann and others, there's going to be —— raised before we see Keppel Harbor again!"

Bracken could understand why Simmons grinned so cheerfully.

II

COMBS was as good as his word. As soon as the *Fengshui* had cleared Singapore Strait, he bore up past the Anamba Islands, cleared the Pulo Manki light by midnight, and then held straight for the Catwicks off Saigon. Whether or not Jenkins and the *Eastern Star* had taken this direct route, could not be told; she would naturally take the same general course, but Combs was gambling to win by miles and half-miles. Since he would hit the Catwicks at night, he figured on taking chances and making several miles at one stroke—if he did not pile up the ship.

Morning saw a clear course across the Gulf of Siam, and brought some inkling of more devious ways to Bracken. Toward noon he was standing beside the wheel, which was held by the serang, Kelapa, when Captain Combs and Watkins, the nominal wireless officer, came to the bridge and paused outside the open starboard door.

"Not hard to see how Nash piled her up," Watkins was saying, in his usual heavy and glowering manner. Watkins was a surly man. "He'd been into Port Wallut, see? Came out by the Kwaishin Mun channel; always gusty winds and heavy tide-runs along there. He missed his reckoning on the tides—the *He Lung* drew twenty-six—and struck a four-and-a-half fathom shoal at low tide, southwest monsoon to boot. Engines disabled. He drifted out, tried to make the Rat Point shelter on Loshu Island, missed it, and went on the ledges off the southeast point. That's the way I figure it, by the tides and the reports. Those ledges are dry in spots and his ship ought to be in good shape for rummaging."

Happening to glance at the helmsman, Bracken saw that the serang was gaping at the two men. He spoke quickly:

"You're a point off, Kelapa. North by east it is."

"Aye, *tuan*," murmured the Malay.

He corrected his course, then glanced at Bracken.

"Was that the way she piled up?" demanded the latter softly.

Kelapa shot him a startled look.

"Yes, *tuan*," he said.

A moment later Combs came into the pilot-house and beckoned to his mate.

"Let's have a look at that chart, Mr. Bracken."

Bracken accompanied him to the chart-house and sat down across the table from him. Combs brought out his charts, searching through them impatiently.

"Where is the —— thing? Ah, B. A. 3163—right we are! Here's the Loshu group——"

Bracken leaned forward, as the master spread out the chart under his strong brown hands. He knew there was some purpose in this conference; in the glances from those steely blue eyes he read a warning that behooved him to tread cautiously. Combs was no fool, and he was no weak sister either. Whoever bucked him would play a man's game.

"You heard the yarn Swann told, of course?" demanded Combs abruptly.

Bracken nodded.

"It looked queer, until I heard you and Watkins discussing it a few minutes ago. According to Swann's story, Nash had been making several small ports northeast of Haifong, and was cast away in a blow on the Loshu group, off the Tongking coast. By the way, what's the position?"

Combs glanced at the chart, on which were penciled markings.

"Bang up in the Tongking gulf,—twenty-one, fourteen, thirty north by one-o-seven, fifty-six thirty east. Nothing but French surveys on that coast. Did Swann mention the cargo to you?"

Bracken laughed.

"Of course! He bought the wreck as a total loss, though from Watkins' remarks I gather she won't be broken up. He said that she had a large amount of silk aboard in water-tight bales, stowed in the bridge deck. The weight cargo was zinc and teak, with rice for trim, and salt fish in No. 4 hold. There was five hundred ton of cement from Haifong distributed among the for'ard holds."

"Stevedore's report," grunted Combs, then grinned. "Cement! I'd forgotten that. She'll have a solid bottom by this time—broken plates filled in with cement! Bracken, where did you suppose the rich cargo was to come from?"

"Silk," said Bracken. "And two chests of opium in the lazaret. I understood from Swann that we were to dispose of the chests before coming back to Singapore."

Combs grinned, filled and lighted his pipe,

and leaned back. His blue eyes dwelt sharply on Bracken.

"Likely story—and true enough," he said. "But there was something Swann didn't know for sure; suspected it, however. That's why Watkins is aboard us. Swann heard that Nash had made a private deal with a Chinese syndicate in Haifong—and that syndicate has a head office in Singapore. Now can you smell the rat?"

"He isn't dead enough." Bracken shook his head. "Where's the corpse?"

"In Nash's cabin. You heard Nash's widow was on the *Eastern Star?*"

Bracken assented with a nod. The other continued evenly:

"She heard Swann had bought the wreck, came to him, spilled the beans; she was fool enough to think Swann would help her. It seems that Nash had taken aboard somewhere, probably at Port Wallut, a box of stones. They were mostly rubies that the Chinese syndicate had smuggled down country from the Tonking mines, or had run through from Burma. Delivery was to be made to the head office of the syndicate in Singapore. That's why Nash left Port Wallut in a howling hurry. Somewhere in Nash's cabin is a hiding-place and the stones are there this blessed minute. There's papers and things the woman wants, too. She didn't get far enough to give away where the hiding-place was, because old Swann, like the fool he is, went up into the air and began to prate of his legal rights. She got wise to him, interviewed the Chinese syndicate, and they sent her out with the *Eastern Star*. That's the whole game."

Bracken whistled. Smuggled rubies out of French or British territory!

"Lawful loot for any one who can get away with it," he said thoughtfully.

"Sure," and Combs nodded, his blue eyes agleam. "Swann had to trust me, but he put Watkins aboard to make sure. Watkins is —— honest—regular surly bulldog. No one else aboard knows of the stones."

Bracken met his gaze squarely.

"Then why tell me?"

Combs studied him for a moment, rolled up the chart, and rose.

"You're no fool," was his cryptic reply as he departed.

Bracken heard eight bells sounded, turned over the course and deck to Simmons, and went below in thoughtful mood. He was now certain that Combs had taken the bait. He was to be let in on the skipper's game. But why? There must be some reason. Combs was a deep one; why had he chosen this particular time to give Bracken a hint?

Legally, Swann owned the wreck of the *He Lung* and everything in her. Holding to this legal thread, he wanted to grab not only his lawful salvage, but the opium and smuggled stones to boot. The opium aside, the ownership of those smuggled stones might be construed as vested in the Chinese syndicate; in actual fact they were smuggled, and whoever grabbed first might keep them. Nash, risking his ship, must have undertaken their delivery for a large price; his wife, who doubtless knew the secret of their hiding-place, had undertaken to complete delivery, and the syndicate had accordingly sent her out with the *Eastern Star*.

"And now—shall I warn Watkins?" mused Bracken.

He studied this question at length. That he had trapped Combs was certain; at the same time, he had no evidence against the master. In the light of what he had learned, he could realize that Watkins was deliberately maintaining that surly manner, and was suspicious of every one. An indefinite warning would not help Watkins at this stage. Later, when Combs revealed his hand, would be the time to convey it. So for the present Bracken decided to keep quiet.

It was not hard to guess what the skipper's game might be. Combs, with the smuggled jewels representing a fortune, could well afford to bid his sea career a long farewell. The lonely and only partially charted islands were close to Chinese territory; with the Malays he had shipped, Combs probably planned to lay the *Fengshui* ashore, reach the port of Pakhoi, and separate. He could get to Canton easily with his loot.

"That lascar serang, Kelapa, must have sniffed the jewels," reflected Bracken. "He told Combs about 'em—perhaps he knows where they are stowed away! So Combs shipped him and his men; they're all a gang of pirates, by their looks and by the account of Tuwak. Old Simmons may well grin! There'll be —— to pay in the Gulf of Tongking and no mistake!"

Noon of the second day out showed the *Fengshui* nearly opposite the Condore group, and beyond doubt she would strike the Catwicks about midnight, which meant

risky business. No sign of the *Eastern Star* had been seen; this was not strange, as the two ships were almost evenly matched in speed, and the Australian skipper had a lead of several hours.

At eight bells that evening Bracken gave the deck to Simmons, not a little worried since the ship was driving ahead full speed. He went to his own cabin, and as he approached this, thought he saw a dark figure slip away forward. An instant later he halted, hearing a groan and a low cry come from the cabin adjoining his—that of Watkins. Bracken knocked, had no reply, and pushed open the door. He switched on the light, and stood staring down at Watkins, who lay at his feet with two knife-wounds in his back.

Watkins was dead before Bracken could stoop to him.

III

THE body removed to be sewed up for burial, Captain Combs closed the cabin door and regarded Bracken with a sardonic gleam in his blue eyes.

"An unfortunate affair, Mr. Bracken, most unfortunate! Have you a knife?"

"No," said Bracken, frowning at the question. "Why?"

Combs regarded him fixedly.

"It had occurred to me," he responded, "that your position in this matter might easily be misconstrued. Let us suppose that you had had words with Mr. Watkins——"

"I haven't spoken to him except at mess," interjected Bracken sharply.

Combs waved his hand.

"Purely a hypothetic case," he pursued smoothly. "Let us suppose that you met him at the door, here, as you came off duty; there was an argument, you stabbed him, jerked the knife over the rail——"

"Are you mad, to make such charges?" exclaimed Bracken in rising anger.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow! I make no charges," said Combs, watching him. "Your story is quite satisfactory and will be logged as such; I know, of course, that you had nothing to do with the murder. But we have some clever men aboard this hooker, Mr. Bracken. Suppose they framed up some such story as this on you, and it afterward leaked out? There would be an investigation and you would of course be cleared; at the same time, it'd leave a black mark against your ticket——"

"What are you driving at?" snapped Bracken. "That's all moonshine, and you know it!"

"I trust so," and Combs turned to the door. "Well, I must get above. Come to the bridge at six bells, will you? I'll need both you and Simmons."

Combs departed. Bracken followed to his own cabin, slowly reaching an understanding of the astounding charges of the skipper. He swore softly to himself as he realized the truth.

Combs had made no effort to find the murderer of Watkins; had said, with some semblance of right, that to do so would now be impossible, as any of the crew might have done the deed, and there was no reason to suspect one man more than another. Then his private talk with Bracken, the significance of his words, his peculiar smile and his general air.

"The serang, of course!" muttered Bracken, sinking down on the edge of his bunk. "Kelapa just came off watch—and Combs put him up to murdering poor Watkins! Had to get Watkins out of the way, sure—oh, you're a sly ——, Combs! Then you sneak down and give me that song-and-dance; and why? To warn me. You've been sizing me up. You want me to throw in with you and help you, but you're not ready to give away your hand, eh? So you calmly let me know that I'll be framed if I don't mind my step. Bluff, bluff—of course! A smooth game, all the same. You could get evidence from a dozen of these cursed Malays that'd make it look black for me if you wanted to do so. So you're making sure of me. Now you think you have a hold on me. If I'm a good dog, you'll pat me on the head and let me help you steal the rubies. If not, you'll have me killed, and then log me as the murderer of Watkins and so forth. Pretty little game!"

Bracken grinned to himself and rolled up in his blankets, for he needed sleep if he was to go on duty at eleven. It was not easy to sleep at once, with the memory of Watkins lying murdered before him; but he realized that he himself was safe enough. Combs had need of him and would now be sure to make use of him. He must play the game and see what turned up.

Simmons he knew was honest, if something of a fool, while he could count on the

engine-room officers and his own Malay, Tuwak. So, although realizing clearly that trouble lay ahead, it was not due for some time, and he had plenty of opportunity to lay a counter-plot against Combs. On this thought, he fell asleep.

Six bells found him on the bridge. By good fortune the night was clear, with a moon that gave very essential aid. Combs showed himself the seaman that he actually was, for he struck into the danger-zone at full speed, had all hands on the look-out, and managed things very decently. Shoe Island was just visible to the east. Combs drove straight on past the barren rock of Great Catwick, going within a quarter-mile of the island, and then headed straight for the Yusun shoal and Cecir de Mer Island.

"We'll scrape the shoal," he confided to Bracken with a grin. "We're not drawing quite twenty-three, and the shoal is four fathom. The *Eastern Star* will take the usual channel outside the islands—you'll see!"

Scrape the shoal they did, though without harm, and later, toward dawn, passed Cecir de Mer. Here came the real danger of the passage, for directly in their course lay a patch of reefs and islets, and Combs refused to budge an inch from the course he had laid down. In fact, he actually skirted the shore reef, and passed within five hundred yards of the sixty-foot rock on the northeast end of the island. He passed, however, and Bracken drew a deep breath of relief as the last of the danger-zone faded out in the dawn-light, leaving nothing ahead but a clear run up the coast to the Gulf of Tongking.

Watkins was buried at sunrise, all hands standing by and Combs reading the service. A fine reader was Captain Israel Combs, rolling the words with unction on his tongue, his fair hair blowing about his blue eyes in the breeze, white men and brown listening attentively. All hands knew that some one aboard had murdered Watkins, that the murderer himself stood there by the rail, but no one was able to point out the man.

The serang Kelapa stood at the head of his brown men—a lithe, silent Malay like the others, distinguished only by his air of intelligence and a trifle smarter dress. A sullen lot they were, and Bracken eyed them with misgivings. As the full sunrise broke, the body was slid over; Simmons grinned and wiped at his eyes as the sonorous commitment rang out.

Not until the following day did Bracken have any opportunity of private speech with Tuwak. Then, as they stood in the pilot-house, he sent the helmsman on an errand below, put the quartermaster at the wheel, and flung a grim word at him when the door was shut:

"Well? Speak."

The Malay, who was furtively and against orders chewing betel, wiped some blood-red saliva from his lips and grinned.

"Aye, *tuan*. It was Kelapa who did the deed, for there was a spot of blood on the handle of his kris. It were well to think twice before speech, *tuan*."

"Right." Bracken compressed his lips a moment. "Tuan Watkins was a watch-dog, and so he was slain. I shall be brought into the council of the thieves. But what of you, Tuwak?"

"I also, *tuan*," and the quartermaster grinned. "One man spoke to me last night, asking whether gold would tempt me, and I made it clear to him that I was easily tempted. They will count me as one of themselves. They expect the ship to belong to them very soon."

"Then all are in it?"

"All, *tuan*."

Then, as the helmsman returned, Tuwak snarled at him:

"Come and watch the course better, fool! *Utara barat laut*."

"Aye, *tuan*, north north west," repeated the Malay, and took over the wheel.

Understanding from this brief dialog that Tuwak was to be entirely depended upon, Bracken also comprehended the general scheme of operations. It was now clear that Combs meant to skip out with the rubies, probably taking Kelapa with him. The ship and general loot would be turned over to the other Malays, who would be crafty enough to land on the mainland or on Hainan Island, and scatter. Neither Simmons nor the engineers stood in immediate danger, since their services would be needed until the very last.

With his usual temerity, Combs now held a straight course to the north, passing the dangerous Outer Bank off Hainan at night, with a confidence in his reckoning which was well enough founded, but nerve-shattering to his officers. When daylight broke, however, the value of his tactics was fully proved, for the *Eastern Star* was sighted

a few miles to the westward, upon a parallel course.

The two steamers ran all morning neck and neck, though Combs pushed the engines to the ultimate revolution. While taking the noon sights, Bracken glanced at the enemy, frowned, and turned to the skipper who was at his elbow.

"You haven't changed the course, sir?"

Combs started slightly and reached for his glasses.

"Certainly not. Ho there, serang! What's your course?"

"*Utara, tuan*," came the singsong voice of Kelapa, at the wheel. "North, *tuan*, by three-quarters west."

"Right." Combs focused on the *Eastern Star*, then lowered his glasses. "Mr. Simmons! Go to Mr. Watkins' cabin and break open that case of rifles he brought aboard. Issue a rifle to each officer, the two quartermasters, and six of the hands for'ard, with five rounds per man. Have them laid by for further orders."

"Aye, sir," and Simmons departed hastily.

Bracken looked at the skipper, who met the inquiring glance with an oath.

"I know that rascal Jenkins! He's changed his course a point—same trick he once played a Jap pearl poacher out o' Thursday Ireland. You'll see! We'll be ready for him, that's all."

With this, Bracken had to be content, though he had not previously been aware that Israel Combs had any acquaintance with the Australian skipper. He was rapidly learning things.

Toward eight bells in the afternoon watch, Bracken inspected the *Eastern Star* through his glasses. She was now within a mile of the *Fengshui*, for her course had gradually converged upon that of the latter ship. Studying her closely, Bracken suddenly discerned a group of figures come out on her bridge.

Almost before he realized it, Bracken found himself watching a scene of swiftly tumultuous action on the other ship, whose meaning was for the moment hidden from him. Three of those figures were Chinese; the fourth was a very tall man, who he knew must be Captain Jenkins; the fifth, a woman, could be no other than Captain Nash's widow.

All five were watching the *Fengshui*. Jenkins flung up his arm toward her. The woman turned to him as though uttering some protest. Jenkins threw back his head and laughed; Bracken could imagine the raucous, sneering laugh on his lips. The woman seemed angered. Jenkins put out his arm toward her and shoved her aside; instantly he went staggering under a direct blow in the face. Before he recovered, the woman was holding a pistol on him.

"Good!" exclaimed Bracken. "Good for——"

An oath came to his lips. Two of the Chinese caught her from behind, wrested the pistol from her, held her helpless. Jenkins shook his fist in her face, then she was led away by the two Chinese. She vanished from sight.

Bracken was still wondering what it could mean, when Captain Combs appeared. He briefly related the scene, and Combs laughed, then flung an order to the helmsman. The *Fengshui* slightly changed her course, toward the other ship.

Combs turned back to Bracken.

"What's it mean? Why, Jenkins told his little scheme and the lady tried to block it, that's all! He's meanin' to hail us, then pour a rifle-fire into us—give us a sharp lesson, savvy? I'll accommodate him, blast him!"

So that was it! A cool and clever scheme, too. The *Fengshui* staggered under a blast of bullets, men killed and hurt, would be put out of the race—as Jenkins figured. No wonder the woman had protested!

Now the figures disappeared from the bridge of the other ship. The two craft gradually converged upon each other, while Combs disposed his rifle-men behind the bulwarks and boats, waiting. Presently Combs was proven a true prophet, when the *Eastern Star* sent a signal to her triatic stay—

"I want to speak with you."

Only the signal man was visible aboard her.

Combs, standing on the bridge, ordered his forces to fire at his word. He answered the signal. Almost at once, men appeared aboard the other ship, rifles glittered in the afternoon sunlight, and Bracken heard a bellowed order from Combs, who leaped into the pilot-house for protection. Then the rifles poured a hail of bullets into the *Eastern Star* as fast as the bolts could be worked.

Combs was a fraction of a moment faster with his volley than Jenkins, and the latter

found the tables turned upon him. His men scarce returned a shot. Bullets raked his decks, dropped his yellow men, poured into his pilot-house and swept his bridge. His helmsman was riddled, and his ship fell off her course.

Then, darting out to the bridge-rail, Combs shook his fist exultantly at the other ship.

"Take that, ye —— pirate!" he yelled. "Follow me if ye dare!"

No response came from the *Eastern Star*, and Combs headed his ship into the north.

IV

MANY OFTEN and often, while the *Fengshui* drove to the northward, Bracken thought of that scene aboard the other steamer, before the firing began. He felt sorry for the Nash woman. Her husband had technically broken the law, perhaps under pressure from his Chinese owners, and she was now suffering for it. Perhaps all Nash had was wrapped up in those stones. Whoever got and kept them would also be a law-breaker—but it was certain that no one would hand them over to the French colonial government. Bracken himself scouted the thought.

"The poor woman's in with a worse lot of rascals than she thought for," he reflected. "Her position aboard that craft is something like that of Watkins aboard us—though she's in no danger from her own crowd. Jenkins is there to get the loot at all costs. Combs is working for himself. I'm working for Swann & Smythe, worse luck! And I'd better forget Nash's widow and pay attention to Cap'n Combs, or I'll have trouble."

Combs, however, was too circumspect and shrewd to reveal his hand at this stage in the game, and Bracken waited vainly for him to broach his schemes. The master of the *Fengshui* maintained a profound silence; nor, according to Tuwak, was there any talk going the rounds of the Malay hands. The rifles which had been served out and used were cleaned, polished and returned to Simmons, who was given charge of them. The brief flutter of piracy on the high seas was over, and the ship's routine was resumed.

At this point of affairs, a surprizing and disturbing discovery was made. Except for the tank now in use and nearly empty, all the fresh drinking-water aboard ship was distinctly saline. Combs, informed of the matter, summoned his officers and faced the issue squarely.

"They've hit us," he announced bluntly. "Probably that chink outfit managed it while we were outfitting—easy enough for them to bribe a stevedore to pollute the water! Now, what shall we do, eh? What say, Mr. Bracken?"

"Get water," said Bracken, and shrugged. "It has to be done. Any on the Loshu group?"

"I don't know—the pilot doesn't say," returned Combs, frowning. "There's water on Ma Shao Island to the south-west, but we might save time at a bad anchorage by heading in to Haifong."

"And let Jenkins get ahead of us, eh?" commented Bracken.

Simmons grinned and spoke up.

"They've got a hydrant on the new iron wharf at Haifong, and there'd be no messing around making it fit for drinking. All good mountain water there. You know good and well we dassn't take a chance on this coast water, anywhere else! But at Haifong we can get it easy——"

"And they know it," interjected Combs gloomily, but watching the second officer in a peculiar manner that drew Bracken's attention. "Chances are, if we put into Haifong we'll be detained. We've got to expect anything from this yellow crowd, blast 'em! We've a supply for two days aboard. What say, Bracken?"

"Take a chance," said Bracken. "Get to where we're going, and then look for water. Bound to be some on Loshu Island, and at worst we can filter or condense it. If that crowd can't hit us any harder than this, we're all right. Suppose we don't find good water? Then throw our men aboard the wreck to hold her, while we go to Port Wallut for a supply."

"That's folly," said Simmons anxiously. "It's breakin' all the regulations about water. You know yourselves that we can't——"

"But we will," said Combs, and rose to his feet. "Mr. Simmons, you haven't the guts of a sick cat!"

A sudden violence showed in the eyes and voice of the skipper. He seemed to lose his temper most vilely. He poured a gusty flood of oaths at Simmons, interlarding it with foul epithets in a wild burst of passion.

The second officer was too astounded to make any response; he sat in gaping silence, until with a final rasped oath of disgust, Combs stepped out to the deck.

Bracken, who had suddenly comprehended the reason, followed him and caught the arm of the skipper. The quick, piercing blue eyes struck into him.

"You bungled that, sir," he said quietly.

"Meaning what?" snapped Combs.

"What I say. You handled him wrong. Say the word, and I'll attend to him—tonight."

For a long moment Combs met his gaze. The two men stood eye to eye, each probing into the other—then Bracken had his answer.

"Do it," said Combs, and turned away.

Bracken watched him go below. He turned swiftly and went back to where Simmons still sat silent, pallid, shaking with the anger that had risen against the insults.

"Come outside," said Bracken imperatively.

Simmons rose and came. Bracken led him into the lee of the house, then gripped his arm and swung him about.

"Wake up, now, wake up! Think fast!" he said, such a bite in his voice that Simmons jumped to the sound. "That was a frame-up—the old man wanted to get you mad, raging mad! Then lord only knows what would have happened. He was ready; had a gun in his pocket. Don't you see, man? He wants to be rid of you. For some reason, you're in his way, just as poor Watkins was; you'll be blown out of the way like a withered leaf, just as Watkins was. Wake up and use your head, now. Let me tell you his little game."

Poor Simmons stood all a-stare, startled beyond words, unable to speak; as Bracken went on speaking, a mortal pallor crept into his cheeks.

Bracken told, briefly as possible, his suspicions of Combs, and made Simmons realize what his own position was with the skipper.

"I'm safe enough for the present," he concluded. "The very fact that he's told me to get rid of you, shows that my suspicions are right, and that I'm in his confidence to a certain extent. But why the —— does he want to be rid if you? What's happened?"

"Nothing," said the bewildered second officer. "Nothing at all. See here, Bracken—is this a wild dream of yours? Man, it——"

"Shut up," snapped Bracken impatiently. "I've no time to argue. What's happened today out of the ordinary? Anything?"

"Nothing," repeated Simmons, gaping. "I had a bit o' trouble with that lascar serang when he turned in his rifle. It was dirty, and he was impudent, and I kicked him out——"

"There you are!" Bracken drew a quick breath. "You see? Kelapa demanded your head, and Combs had to give in. Savvy now? We can't do a thing. Nobody but the two engineers and Tuwak to depend on. We can't buck Combs, in spite of what I know. It'd be like him to have us up for mutiny, if we did—he might turn us over to the first ship he met, or run us in to port. All the Malays are back of him, understand."

"And you're—pretending?" demanded Simmons, beginning to understand things.

"You bet I am. Tonight when you turn over the deck to me, you're going to vanish. It's the only way to save your life. Get some grub and water, unlash the tarp from the after lifeboat on the port side, and crawl in. I'll lash her up again. Then you stay there until I call you out. Get me?"

Simmons nodded. Bracken dared not remain longer with him, lest they be seen, and hurriedly returned to his post of duty. He was tremendously worried for fear Simmons would give away the game—but the second officer was no fool.

It was not until four o'clock the next morning, when Simmons should have appeared to take the deck from Bracken, that he was missed. Then Bracken went to the skipper's cabin and made his report.

"Mr. Simmons is missing, sir," he said calmly, while Combs sat on the edge of his berth and stared. "Most extraordinary—he appears to have vanished completely. When he turned over the bridge to me at midnight, I noticed that he spoke in a queer manner, but thought little of it. His cap was found by the stern rail. Looks as he'd jumped overboard."

Combs looked up, and suddenly smiled.

"You cursed clever rascal!" he said in a low voice. "Very well, sir. During the past day or two, I remember that Mr. Simmons had the thought of suicide in his mind. A

most unfortunate incident. Log it, Mr. Bracken. You've had the ship searched, of course?"

"Of course, sir."

"Very good; nothing more to be done, I suppose. Place the quartermaster Kelapa in charge of the other watch as acting second officer."

Thus passed Simmons, for the time being. The serang Kelapa received his new rank with stoical mien, and made no comment. As for the two engineers, Bracken dared not give them any warning, nor did he consider it necessary. They would not be harmed, he reflected, for the present—if at all. Before taking them into his confidence, he must learn what Combs purposed.

Combs, however, kept silent.

Thus stood matters when, soon after daybreak the following morning, the main peak of the Loshu group was sighted. The *Fengshui* steamed along at half-speed, for these waters were but poorly charted and dangers lay all around her. Astern and to port, five miles away, showed the bare contours of the Kai Tao group; to starboard, close by, were the two southern islands of the Loshu trilogy, and dead ahead showed the ridges of the hill-crest of Loshu itself—an island two miles in length, the waters all around it dotted with reefs and ledges and sunken rocks. Fortunately there was only a slight swell and the weather promised to be fine, according to the glass. This was a cruel place in a blow, as the wreck of the *He Lung* bore witness.

And, on sighting that wreck, Bracken felt an insane impulse to laugh. He did not laugh, however, for Combs was standing at his side growling oaths.

The conjectures of poor Watkins were amply verified. Off the southeastern tip of the island, ledges ran out for half a mile, the bare rocks being now exposed at low tide. Firmly wedged among those rocks, at the extremity of the shoal, lay the wreck of the *He Lung*, she was slightly canted to starboard, her slanting decks exposed to view—and close in to her were moored two large Chinese fishing craft.

"Lucky there aren't a dozen of 'em," said Bracken, examining these latter. "Think they've stripped her, sir?"

Combs spat another oath.

"No. Local boats, those are; a few chink fishermen live on the islands, and there's a French resident at the salt works on the Kai Tao group behind us. We could expect some damage, o' course. If they ain't found the hop or hurt the silk, we'll be all right."

"Oh!" said Bracken, a tinge of mockery in his accent. "Do we care about the silk?"

Combs glanced at him.

"Humph! As soon as we've anchored, you report to me in my cabin. Now look alive! Lower a boat and send it ashore to see if we can get fresh water on the island. Send another boat ahead of us to the wreck to take soundings. Stop the engines till we make sure—chart shows a quick drop from six to three fathom; we want to get as close in to her as possible. If we can drop the hook in four fathom at low tide, we'll be all right."

Bracken got busy.

There was no need to borrow trouble regarding the attitude of the two fishing craft. By their loads of deck fittings, chairs, and metal, these had obviously been content to strip the wreck itself without investigating the cargo, up to the present. Seeing the approach of the steamer, the two craft did not pause to dispute the loot, but hoisted sail and slipped away through the reefs to the east, then hauled north in the evident intention of rounding the island and regaining their villages. Combs was more than glad to let them go unmolested.

The *Fengshui* gradually crept in upon the wreck, one boat taking soundings ahead and another under Tuwak pulling for shore in search of water. Combs, studying the chart, called Bracken to his aid when all was in shape; between them they found that there was more water than the chart

called for, since the moon had just attained her greatest north declination, and there was only one tide a day to be expected here. This being highly satisfactory, and the various sunken rocks in the vicinity being avoided safely, the *Fengshui* was at length berthed a hundred yards from the wreck, in four fathom, and securely moored.

"If a blow comes, then Heaven help us!" observed the second engineer, who had come to the bridge to watch operations. "We'll have to run like a bat out of purgatory."

"We will," said Bracken grimly, and went down to his interview with Combs.

He knew what was coming now.

V

CAPTAIN ISRAEL COMBS never drank when on duty. Now, as Bracken stepped into his cabin, the skipper was extracting the cork from a bottle and was pouring two drinks. He extended one glass to Bracken, evidencing a slight nervousness.

"Here's luck!"

Bracken nodded and drank, and put down his glass. Combs met his gaze squarely, lighted a cheroot, met his gaze again, and then spoke. He abruptly abandoned all ceremony:

"Bracken, I'm excited as ——. There's a fortune waiting for us aboard that hooker. Are you in on it or not?"

"Sure," said Bracken simply. "All I want is to see how we can get away with it safely."

"Safely!" Combs uttered a short laugh, and took the cheroot from his mouth. "What's to be feared? If we make our getaway, —— the sea! We'll never come back to it."

"Right," said Bracken. "Name the program. You're thinking of the stones?"

"Man, I'm thinking of everything—the stones for us, and a covered trail!" shot out Combs, whose eyes were sparkling like blue steel under his inward stress. "Everything's figured out to a T."

"That's like you," and Bracken smiled. "Who else knows about the stones?"

"Kelapa. He's in on the deal. He acts for the Malays—he goes overland to Canton with us, splits the loot, and takes their share to them at Singapore. Sit down and I'll talk."

Bracken seated himself. Combs strode up and down, puffing furiously between sentences, and outlined his scheme.

It was simplicity itself, to a man of his type, who did not hesitate at bilking owners. Kelapa knew approximately where the stones were concealed; he and Combs were to make the search for them. Bracken, meantime, was to take charge of the salvage work, getting the silk bales and the opium aboard the *Fengshui*. Since Combs might have to strip the after-cabins of the wreck to the bare frame before finding the stones, there was no haste.

"We want all the stuff aboard," said Combs, "and a clear log. Then we pile up the barge along the coast islands—we can do it while we run to Pak Hoi for a water-supply. You and I and Kelapa take one boat, reach Pak Hoi at night, and start for Canton. The engineers take the other boats; the lascars will delay them, be sure of that! We disappear and are supposed to be lost. Simple enough! Our reputations will be clear. Swann & Smythe may suspect, but they can't prove. You see?"

"Looks first rate," commented Bracken. "But you've forgotten the *Eastern Star*. Suppose Jenkins comes along and makes a fight?"

Combs laughed.

"All he wants is the stones. I'll fool him about that, savvy? Leave it to me. I'll have the stones, but he won't know it. If we have to fight, we'll fight—but we'll not have to. He ain't such a fool unless forced. Now, what do you say?"

"Nothing to say," and Bracken rose, with a slight shrug. "Give the orders. Want to go aboard her?"

Combs nodded. He was furiously exultant, yet there was mingled with his eagerness a certain hesitant fear, as if, after all, his luck were too good to be true. Now he said as much, and added:

"Can't take chances, Bracken. If the stones don't show up, if they ain't there, then we take the rest of the stuff and go home. But if they are—think of it, man! It's the big chance. No more slaving for petty owners, no more wasting the best years o' life in figuring time forms an' demurrage an' stiffening and tuppence-ha'penny breakages! We're out of all that for good—free! And what price, eh? By takin' what's there. We've as much right to it as old pussyfoot Swann, —— him!"

Bracken nodded. For a moment he was

under the spell of Combs—handsome, forceful, capable, blue eyes aflash. For a moment he was tempted by the specious argument of this apologia. Then he remembered Watkins, the sinister Kelapa, Simmons hidden in the after-boat, his own duty to the men who had hired him.

"Ready?" he asked.

Combs nodded and caught up his cap.

They went on deck. Tuwak had not returned; his boat lay on the shore, off to the left, one man sprawled aboard her while the others were ashore questing water. The other boat, with Kelapa and his Malays aboard, lay under the ladder. Combs got into her, and Bracken followed. The brown men put out the oars; the boat crawled toward the wreck.

They boarded her at the stern, which was low, by the lines which had been left hanging by the fishermen looters. The deck was a scene of confusion, piled with objects which the Chinese had intended to carry off. Combs and Kelapa disappeared aft, while Bracken went forward and sought the bridge deck. All small objects had been plundered, all the boats were gone, and the forward hold had been broken into.

Ten minutes later Bracken met Combs on the fore-deck. The latter was jubilant.

"Everything aft is looted, cabin stores and opium included," said the skipper, "but they haven't touched the cabin sheathing. Nash had a secret hole somewhere—we'll have to find it. How about the silk?"

"Intact and unhurt," reported Bracken. "In eighty catty-bales, not cased; between sixty and eighty of them."

"Whew!" A whistle escaped Combs. "A tidy little fortune right there, eh? Well, things are in your hands. I'll camp aboard here with Kelapa and go after the stones. Fetch us over some tools from the carpenter's chest—everything's gone here."

Bracken nodded and returned to the boat. He saw Tuwak returning from shore, and they reached the *Fengshui* together. Tuwak reported that a small stream of good water had been found, and Bracken ordered him to break out casks and get some water aboard.

"I'm going to the bridge deck to look over the other boats," he added. "Come up there when you're ready."

"Aye, *tuan*," said the Malay, and departed.

Bracken, after a moment of talk with the engineers, went above. The bridge was deserted, and he passed aft to the boat which concealed Simmons. A low word, and Simmons responded from beneath his cover.

"All right, yes. What's up?"

"We're at the wreck," said Bracken. "Combs is going to stay aboard her for the present, so you can come out safely enough tonight. I don't know yet what must be done. Everything hinges on what turns up. You'd better lie doggo until needed. Got a gun?"

"Yes."

Tuwak appeared. Bracken, in a few words, apprised him of Simmons' hiding-place and ordered him to be careful. The quartermaster grinned, and then set about getting the third boat into the water, not touching that in which Simmons lay. Getting the tools which Combs needed, Bracken now returned to the wreck. He had two boats at his command, and would have a third when Tuwak had loaded a supply of drinking water aboard.

Combs met him and led him down to the cabin which had belonged to Nash, and which was now stripped practically to the bare walls.

"It's a big job we've got here," said Israel Combs, while Kelapa listened and chewed his betel-paste. "A fine big cabin, and all the sheathing solid teak. Old Nash did himself rather well, eh? There's no sign of a safe about, and we haven't been able to locate any hollow panels. However, the stuff is bound to be here, so it's only a question of time. Found water?"

"Plenty. Well, I'll get to work. Luck to you!"

Bracken left the cabin, and set about his task of transferring the silk aboard the other ship. This was no great matter, since each bale weighed only a trifle over a hundred pounds and there were no cases to shift. He knew nothing of the bale markings, but one of the Malays who could read them said that the silk was of the first quality. Since it would bring something like seven thousand pounds, Swann & Smythe were not likely to lose on the deal even if the gems were not discovered.

Except for a short lay-off at noon, when some food was brought aboard, Combs and Kelapa did not leave their task. By mid-afternoon they had stripped only a small portion of the cabin, but without result;

and, as the first fever of their search had spent itself, Combs now quit for the day. He was desperately tired, for it was no small job to rip out that heavy teak sheathing, and Israel Combs was not accustomed to heavy manual labor.

"I'll put some o' Kelapa's men at it tomorrow," he declared, joining Bracken and watching the bales of silk go down to the boats. "You're gettin' this cleared up shipshape, eh? We might as well rig slings tomorrow and break out the best of the general cargo; mostly for looks. Keep the men busy, too, while we're finding the stones."

"What about guarding the wreck tonight?" asked Bracken.

The skipper chuckled.

"I'm stayin' myself—Kelapa likewise. I'll take no chances on a filthy chink fisherman sneaking aboard, thanks! You might send us over some blankets and a bit o' grub. Keep an eye on the glass, though. If a blow comes up, that anchorage won't hold."

Bracken guessed shrewdly that the two treasure-seekers meant to continue their labor during the night.

By sunset everything was shipshape, the silk was stowed aboard the *Fengshui*, and a temporary supply of water. Bracken, figuring up the probable value of the silk, concluded that since Combs planned to throw away this small fortune, the jewels must be of immense value. If they were not found, what would Combs do then—play straight with the owners? The query was bothersome.

That night Bracken had a talk with Simmons, while Tuwak stood guard against any who might approach. The two men had a straight talk, reached a thorough understanding, and Bracken perceived that whatever might turn up, Simmons was going to prove a valuable ally. What the second officer was to do with himself, however, presented a problem.

"If you stay here—" and Bracken gestured toward the shape of the boat in the darkness—"it's risky. Something may come up any time to put this boat into service—and then your goose is cooked. You can't well hide aboard without letting the engineers and the steward into the secret—and the fewer who know, the better. You might take some grub and get ashore, and be safe."

"Sharks," objected Simmons laconically.

Bracken called Tuwak, and conferred. Only an anchor-watch would be kept during the night, and since there was considerable opium in the forecastle, Tuwak guaranteed that by midnight the look-out would be snoring. He offered to put Simmons ashore and bring back the boat, and to this Simmons consented in some relief. The boats were moored at the ladder, and with reasonable care there would be no trouble.

At midnight Bracken witnessed the departure. Simmons, with his bundle of food and a rifle which Bracken had obtained for him, got away without alarm; his fate was in the hands of Bracken, and he accepted the matter philosophically.

It did not occur to Bracken that his fate might yet be in the hands of Simmons.

VI

BRACKEN'S first intimation of a change in the situation came soon after daybreak, when he had dressed and started for the deck. He did not go far, for his cabin door refused to open. He exerted force—and suddenly jumped back from a thin blade of steel that splintered through the wood within an inch of his face. A laugh came from outside, then a sharper voice cut in, which instantly lifted to him. It was a strange voice, crisp and energetic.

"You, Mr. Chief Mate! Keep quiet in there or you'll get a bullet. Keep cool and you'll not be hurt."

"Who the —— are you?" demanded Bracken.

"Cap'n Jenkins. The ship's mine. No fuss, now!"

Jenkins! Bracken stood for a moment in consternation, mingled with incredulity, then turned and darted to his port-hole, which faced toward the wreck. What he beheld there kept him immobile, astounded and overcome by dismay.

The sun was just about to come up. In front of Bracken lay the wreck, the long fringe of half-bared rocks, the reefs and shoals beyond that extended around the point of the island. A boat, holding six Chinese, was pulling leisurely enough for the wreck, which appeared to be deserted; Combs and Kelapa, thought Bracken, must still be asleep, weary from their hard labor. Beyond the shoals and headland, toward the northeast, a plume of black smoke was

lifting into the sky. The *Eastern Star!*

It was instantly apparent to Bracken what had taken place. Jenkins had circled about, gaining the island from the north, and during the night had come down with his men in boats, leaving the steamer to follow. At dawn, he had boarded the *Fengshui*, had doubtless found the Malay lookout asleep, and took the ship without a struggle. But what about Combs and Kelapa, aboard the wreck?

"By glory, he never dreamed they were aboard there!" flashed into Bracken's mind, as he saw the boat come alongside the wreck. "He took for granted she was empty! If Combs could be warned—no, it's too late."

The Chinese were mounting the ladder to the stern of the wreck. Then Bracken started suddenly, stood staring. The first man to reach her deck lost his balance and fell; the second toppled backward into the water. From the bridge of the wreck came two rifle-shots. The other Chinese hurriedly tumbled back into the boat.

"Good for Combs!" and Bracken let out a yell of rejoicing. "He and Kelapa are stowed away on the bridge——"

Aboard the *Fengshui* reigned confusion. A din of shouts, yells, trampling feet reached Bracken suddenly. Jenkins had discovered his error, and his brazen voice was lifted in ringing orders. The four Chinese remaining at the wreck pulled their boat back to the *Fengshui*, but were unmolested by Combs.

As steam had been kept up aboard ship, Bracken was not surprized to find the donkey-engine set to work, and judged that Jenkins was bringing in the anchors; the object of this puzzled him, since it was unlikely that the Australian would go to the extent of casting the *Fengshui* ashore, which meant open piracy. There were certain limits to which he might safely go, since Swann & Smythe could make no outcry about the loss of the gems, but he surely would not be fool enough to pass these limits.

Meantime, the *Eastern Star* was creeping down. Bracken saw her appear, swinging around the Pluvier bank and bearing directly for the captured ship. As she was rounding the end of the ledge, at slow speed, he heard voices at his door. Jenkins was there.

Swiftly, Bracken caught up his cap. He had two automatics. One he slipped into his jacket pocket, the other he put on his head, drawing his cap over it. The result was clumsy, but might pass inspection. As he turned to the door, this was flung open.

"Come on out," snapped the voice of Jenkins. "And no tricks."

Bracken obeyed. As he stepped into the passage two Chinese, naked to the waist, closed in upon him with rifles. They made a swift search of his clothes, removed the automatic from his pocket, but failed to touch his cap.

Beyond waited Jenkins, and the two white men exchanged a quick glance of appraisal. The Australian was very tall, gaunt, bony, his features harsh, his eyes alight with reckless deviltry. He grinned, exposing a huge set of horse-teeth.

"You're Bracken, eh?" Jenkins glanced at a paper in his hand. He had evidently been rifling the skipper's papers. "Watkins is gone, I hear; second officer too. Who's over there on the wreck with Combs, —— his pious soul?"

"Some of the Malays," said Bracken, taking out his pipe and stuffing it. He knew that Combs would bluff, so thought to advance the play. "Four. You'll have a sweet job to take her, too! They've got rifles, plenty of supplies, all shipshape."

Jenkins cast a glance toward his own approaching ship, and jerked his head.

"[redacted] along to the bridge. I think I'll ke[redacted] where I can have an eye on you, mister. And don't try to get gay, or these chinks will knife you proper."

Bracken, understanding clearly that this was a far more dangerous man than Israel Combs, had no intention of jeopardizing himself. He followed to the bridge, guarded by the two Chinese, and there found the chief engineer waiting. Jenkins addressed the chief bluntly:

"I m running this ship for the present, Mac. Get below and take my orders, and you'll have no trouble. I'm going to anchor her in the cove at Rat Point, and after a few hours you'll be at liberty. Get below, and give me half-speed at once."

The chief, after one glance at Bracken, obeyed. Jenkins bellowed an order at his own ship, which was anchoring two hundred yards distant, then beckoned one of the Chinese who had come to the bridge and began to speak with him, low-voiced. This man was obviously to be left in charge of the *Fengshui*. Looking around, Bracken

perceived guards at the forecastle hood, and knew that the Malays must all be locked up below. Aboard the *Eastern Star* was no sign of any white man; except for Jenkins, the officers and crew were all Chinese.

"All right, Bracken," said Jenkins, turning abruptly. "Let's get gone before she takes on speed. Tumble down into a boat, and move lively."

Lively it was, since the engines were turning over the propeller. Bracken presently found himself in one of the boats, Jenkins at his side, Chinese at the oars. He guessed that the guard left aboard the *Fengshui* numbered only half a dozen in all. Jenkins read his thoughts and showed his horse-teeth in a laugh.

"You'll see her again presently, Bracken; they'll take her over to Rat Point and moor her there. So old Combs is on the wreck, eh? Well, I'll pay him back for that trick he played me off Hainan, blast him! That cost me three men, and he's got two more this morning. Sly fox, isn't he?"

Bracken wondered if Simmons, ashore, were watching events.

"What about the Admiralty Courts, Jenkins?" he asked.

"They ain't going to interest me," said Jenkins. "Never fear, your owners don't want any questions asked! They'll swallow the loss and grin. You know what we're after?"

Bracken merely nodded.

"Well, come along and we'll get a bite to eat."

Jenkins rose as the boat came under the dangling ladder of his ship, with the other boats following in tow. The *Fengshui* was by this time standing away to the westward.

"We need an hour's sleep, too—been laying over the oars all night. You can have the run of the ship; if you don't take too much for granted, you'll be all right. We'll let old Combs stew for an hour or so."

In every word and move Jenkins was alert, agile, sure of himself, but not cocksure. Reaching the deck and looking at the yellow men around, Bracken understood that these must be picked men with orders to obey Jenkins implicitly. All were large, raw-boned Straits Chinese.

"Come along to breakfast," said Jenkins. "Glad to have you with us. Relations ain't been any too pleasant between me and my table companion."

Understanding that Jenkins and Mrs. Nash probably messed alone, Bracken followed to the companionway. Jenkins went down the ladder, with Bracken at his heels. The Chinese all remained on deck. Knowing that this was doubtless his only chance, Bracken seized it coolly and swiftly. He removed his cap, secured the automatic, slipped it into his pocket; it was all done in an instant, and done without observation.

Then they were at the table, and Bracken found himself staring at Mrs. Nash. Jenkins mumbled an introduction, plumped into a chair, and reached for food, wolfishly. So he did not see the flash of recognition that leaped into the woman's eyes.

Bracken now saw her unveiled, and his first impression of her was verified. In other days she must have been beautiful; now he saw her face delicate of contour, yet firm, and the wide gray eyes were full-lidded, heavy-browed, crowned with a mass of burnished bronze hair. She conveyed an impression of slender daintiness, yet the hand that passed him the milk was large and firm, the woman herself was strongly built, deep-throated, deep-bosomed. She was dressed plainly, in black, wearing no ornaments. Again Bracken felt that he was in the presence of character, personality, self-assertion, yet she sat in silence.

"Bracken," said Jenkins, thumbing his coffee-cup between bites, "is too good a man to be turned loose with his ship. He's one o' these silent ones, too. Well, Mrs. Nash, you give him the lay of things. Tell him what a brute I am, and so forth. What was the thing you called me last night—buccaneer? Whatever that is, I'm a bucko mate and no mistake, and Bracken had best know it when he slings his billycan aboard this hooker."

The woman made no response, though a gleam of scorn flashed in her eyes. Bracken sweetened his coffee and chuckled, as he surveyed his captor.

"You seem to think I need warnings, but I don't," he observed. "Give me half a chance and I'll show you what a fight is—but I want the half-chance first."

Jenkins grinned at that and showed his horse-teeth.

"Fair enough! I'm off to catch forty winks, then we'll settle old Combs."

He rose, and bowed mockingly to the widow.

"See you later, fair one! Don't grieve

for me. Maybe absence will make the heart beat fonder."

When Jenkins and his coarse laugh had departed, Bracken looked across the table at Mrs. Nash, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Your skipper is a diamond in the rough, eh? Very much in the rough. I'm glad to meet you so formally, ma'am. Our first meeting left much to be desired."

A smile transfigured her face, swept from it the touch of years.

"I remember you, of course. Odd, how we met that day in Singapore!" Again her rich voice thrilled him. He wondered how old she was—thirty-five, at a guess. "I'm afraid this meeting is not very lucky for you."

"Luck's what you make it, Mrs. Nash. But what about yourself? I'm afraid you didn't use a lot of judgment, coming along with this outfit. Couldn't you have told them where the stones were hidden?"

Her gray eyes widened, momentarily amazed.

"You know—about them?"

"Of course. The secret seems to have side-slipped considerably, and the effect has been demoralizing. My owners picked faithful men—and made a sweet mess of things. Everybody in the game is at sixes and sevens, a good man has been murdered, and the end is not in sight yet. Was it necessary for you to come along with this ship?"

She studied him a moment, then nodded.

"Yes, it was." A slight smile crept to her eyes. "Do you know, I feel much safer, now that you're here."

"You're not a helpless female, Mrs. Nash," and Bracken laughed. "What are you afraid of? The chinks?"

"These Chinese are good fellows—courteous and pleasant to me," she said soberly. "There's a syndicate, you know; old men, very polite and quiet men. They asked if I knew where my husband might have put the stones, and offered to complete the payment due him if I could direct them aright. So we came to terms. There are two places on his ship that he used for hiding things. All his private papers were aboard with him, and I had to have them; insurance policies, one or two bonds, bank certificates, and so on. They're bound to be in one of those hiding-places. As for this ship, it's all right. These Chinese are ordered to see to my comfort in every way, though of course they must obey Jenkins——"

"Ah! So Jenkins is the fly in the ointment? A fine sample of Australian!"

"Not at all; I happen to be an Australian myself, Mr. Bracken. Yes, I—well, I think Jenkins is a splendid seaman, but he is apt to be personal at times." A faint color crept into her face. "And, no matter how nice these yellow men may be—they're yellow. I just couldn't help being glad to see you, even if you were a prisoner. Then again, I had not anticipated that there would be any fighting——"

Bracken rose.

"If you've finished, let's go out on deck and talk. Looks to me like blood on the moon, ma'am, and the sooner we reach an understanding, the better. As for your husband's private papers, you may rest assured that you'll have all the help I can give you in securing them."

They went out on deck together and passed to the stern, where an awning was stretched over the short after-deck, and easy Singapore chairs were placed. The wreck, Bracken saw, was apparently as deserted as ever. Off to the left, the *Feng-shui* had vanished around the south point of the island, a mile or more away. While he seemed to be unguarded, Bracken noted that two Chinese lolled over the rail not far distant; both wore pistols at their belts.

"Your skipper and mine are pretty much of a pair," said Bracken, when his pipe was drawing. "I happened to see your argument with Jenkins, that day we were coming up the coast—I gather that you were protesting against his methods?"

"Yes." The gray eyes snapped with anger. "I learned, that day, what to expect. He afterward apologized to me—but no matter. Where is your captain? Combs, I think he is? My husband knew him slightly. A good seaman, I understand."

Bracken pointed to the wreck with his pipe, and explained the situation frankly. If he sensed that this woman was in need of aid, he also sensed in her a friend and ally. There was a fine poise about her, a readiness, a direct sincerity, that he liked. Thus, having nothing to lose, he kept back nothing. When speaking of Simmons, he spoke softly that the two loitering Chinese seamen might not overhear, but made no secret of the rest of the story. What did he care? And the woman, while startled, was not surprized.

"Cap'n Jenkins expected as much," she

commented gravely. "He said Combs would try to grab the stones for himself. It's queer about Jenkins. He's honest, yet he's a brute. Honest, yet——"

What she left unsaid, showed Bracken what she feared.

"Are the stones valuable?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "They must be. I don't care about them—have no concern with them, except to be paid if they're recovered. I've told Jenkins where I think they are. The rest is up to him. All I care about is the papers."

"I'm with you there, then." Bracken rose, for he saw Jenkins coming down the passage toward them. "And elsewhere, if you need me. I hope you'll not need me."

"I'm afraid I will," she said, calmly looking up at the advancing Jenkins. The latter was upon them, with his grinning display of teeth.

"All aboard, Mr. Bracken!" he summoned. "Had a nice chat? Well, let's go smoke out your skipper. Tumble down to the boat, mister—tumble down! I need you. If anybody gets a bullet this trip it's you, not me. Tumble down!"

VII

SIX Chinese at the oars, the boat crawled across the water, which, except for a slight ground-swell, was dead calm; the morning was coming up hot and oppressive. Bracken was at the tiller of the boat. Stretched full length at his feet, grinning up at him, was Jenkins.

As he sat, thus, steering for the wreck, the impulsive temptation leaped into Bracken's heart—out with his automatic pistol, drop Jenkins, force the rowers onward, join Combs! Cooler thought restrained the impulse, proved its madness, yet his pulses hammered at the chance he was resisting. Jenkins saw the color in his face, and laughed.

"Think Combs will fire on you, eh? He won't. You know these chinks aren't armed. I'm taking all the chances. You do your job, now, as I've told you. Why, you fool, I know he hasn't any Malays aboard with him! One man alone. None of your tricks, mister. You're covered this minute."

And Jenkins' hand, in his jacket pocket, bore out the threat. Bracken only shrugged in response. Even now, had Combs been a true man, he might have carried out that impulse—but Combs was treacherous, a scoundrel. What did the gems matter, anyway? He was not sure which was the greater rascal; Jenkins, an animal whose sole decency was a fidelity to his employers, or Combs, decent in all things, far more of a man in all ways, save in this one taint of treachery! Whichever won, the gems were lost to Swann & Smythe, Ltd.

"Let 'em be lost!" and Bracken uttered a grunt of disgust at the thought. "Swann didn't tell me about 'em—his confidence didn't go so far. I'll do my duty, no more, and blamed lucky if I get out of it alive."

As the boat swung in under the stern of the wreck, he caught the lines and wondered grimly whether Combs would pot him. Jenkins, who had been taking no chances on drawing a shot in advance of the parley, uttered a nasty laugh, and the sound drove Bracken to the deck above. He swung his leg over the splintered rail, and nothing happened. The ax-holes smashed below the rear light of the bridge-house remained empty.

He advanced along the deck until he came to the break of the well, and there paused.

"Ahoy, Mr. Combs!" Bracken lifted his voice in a hail. "Jenkins wants to talk with you."

Unexpectedly, the voice of Combs blared at him from the after cabins, instead of from the bridge.

"What's the game, Bracken?"

"Ask him, not me." Bracken discovered the tawny head of Combs at a high port. "He's got the ship, and sent me up with a message. Six chinks in the boat, and they're unarmed. Jenkins is armed. Says for you to come out on the after-deck and talk with him. He'll trust to you that Kelapa won't shoot him down. Tried to bluff him about your having more men here, but it didn't work. Somebody aboard our hooker must have talked."

"Send him up," said Combs. "I'll come out. The beggar has nerve and no mistake!"

Bracken retired to the rail, and found Jenkins already coming up. He gave the Australian a hand. Combs appeared, crossing the well-deck, and came up to the after-deck. The two skippers stood for a moment staring at each other—Jenkins all agrin,

horse-teeth flashing in the morning sunlight, Combs unshaven and looking like a viking as he stood, defiant, blue eyes glinting.

"What's to hinder me," said Combs slowly, "from giving it to you here and now?"

"Not a thing," said Jenkins, who was quite cool. "We can fight it out between us, if you say the word. But why be a fool? Wiping me out won't get you anything but murder. Those chinks of mine are here to see the thing through. They'll sink your —— hooker and knife your fool lascars, if you scrag me, and then they'll get you. You want blood and you'll get it!"

"I believe you mean it," said Combs.

"Blime, I do!" Jenkins mouthed an oath. "What price we make terms?"

"Name 'em."

"Three fourths to me, one fourth to you."

Combs laughed.

"Think I'm a fool? These chinks must trust you a lot, Jenkins."

"Sure. I've worked with their syndicates down south."

"S'pose we split even?"

"Nothing doing. I've orders to offer one fourth to avoid a row."

"Ho! You obeyin' orders? Why not you and me and Bracken go to Canton together?"

Jenkins grinned at that.

"I'm honest."

"Honest!" It was Combs who swore now. "You're an honest bird, you are! How about your Thursday Island deal with them pearlers? How about them two Jap women——"

Jenkins flicked a hand to his pocket.

"Want to start it?"

Combs stood motionless, fighting down his anger. He certainly did not want to start it, and showed as much.

"We're all right here," he said. "If you want the stones, come and get 'em."

Jenkins whistled a few snatches of a tune.

"Cool bird! I s'pose you've got them?"

"Yes," said Combs.

"You lie!" Jenkins laughed raucously. "You don't know where they are, and you won't know! You'd better take my offer of one-fourth. It's good until sundown. Tonight we'll come aboard your —— wreck, savvy? And if we come, you'll not go. That's sure. What say?"

Combs reflected.

"Fair enough. Want a signal tonight?"

"I'll come over about sundown. Or send Bracken."

And with this, Jenkins deliberately turned his back and walked to the rail. Combs was tempted, plainly enough, but desisted; to murder the Australian would not be to remove the peril, and indeed would bring more and greater danger down upon him, for he did not doubt what Jenkins had threatened.

"Tumble down," said Jenkins at the rail, with a motion to Bracken.

The latter obeyed at once, for he had determined not to cast his lot with Combs, as he might have done. He descended to the stern of the boat, and Jenkins sat beside him openly, now that the message had been delivered and truce declared. The Chinese pushed off.

"Thought you were coming over to settle old Combs?" inquired Bracken.

Jenkins turned his head and grinned.

"He's done for right now. His only chance was to fight it out with me—but he didn't know it. Yep, he's done for—don't turn around, blast you!"

For Bracken, in sudden comprehension, had started to turn; he checked the motion and sat staring at the oarsmen. There had been six in the boat—there were now but five. One man had been left at the wreck. How and why? Jenkins, who plainly read his thought, laughed and answered the unspoken query:

"Swimmin' around the wreck. He'll haul aboard for'ard and lie up till sunset—then we'll see. Old Combs must think I'm —— balmy, to give him all day! When I go aboard him tonight, I'll stay aboard!"

Then, with a sudden change of voice, and touching Bracken's arm to attract his gaze, Jenkins spoke softly, significantly, intently.

"Look'ee! You steer a clear course around the Nash widder."

"Eh?" Bracken's brows went up. "How do you mean?"

"Just that. She ain't yours. She's mine."

The tone, the look that accompanied the words, were eloquent of unuttered things.

"You're welcome." Bracken forced a smile. They were under the ship's side by this time. "You're welcome. You'll have a job taming her."

The array of horse-teeth gleamed wolfishly.

"That's half the fun. And you lay off my property or you'll find trouble."

Bracken went up the sea-ladder, his brain in a whirl. Here was confirmation of the worst he had feared. As he came face to face with Mrs. Nash, eagerly awaiting them, he flushed and turned aft, leaving Jenkins to inform her of what had passed. He needed to collect himself before he could meet the cool gray eyes of that woman, knowing what he now knew. He passed on to the after-deck, two Chinese silently following him, and leaning over the rail, lighted his pipe.

Combs, he now believed, would give in—if allowed to. What that Chinese meant to do aboard the wreck, what Jenkins had in mind, was problematical; by sunset, Combs and Kelapa might be murdered. If not, they would probably accept the offered terms. All of Combs' trickery had availed him nothing, unless he were able to find the gems before sunset. Then, indeed, he might effect a better bargain with the Australian.

Bracken's thoughts, however, were concerned with his own course of action. His duty was clear enough. It was his place, under the circumstances, to get the *Fengshui* and the salvaged silk away in safety; to do this, he had only to bide quietly until Jenkins sent him off with the ship. So, at least, it appeared.

In opposition to this course, appeared the problem of Mrs. Nash.

"That fool Jenkins," reflected Bracken, "can't see straight. He's an animal, and lust has put a squint in his eyesight. He thinks that I'm attracted by Mrs. Nash—good Lord! Well, she's a fine woman, a good woman, one in a thousand. She has come to see what she's let herself in for, and she looks to me for help if need be. Duty or no duty, by George, a woman comes first every time! To —— with Swann & Smythe—if that swine Jenkins goes too far, there's only one thing for me to do."

Jenkins and Mrs. Nash joined him on the after-deck, the woman busying herself with some sewing while Jenkins went into details of the visit to the wreck. There was more craft in the Australian's game than appeared on the surface.

"Combs will work his —— head off today," he declared, grinning joyously. "He's prob'ly ripping up the after-cabins. Toward sunset he and the serang will have given up. If they don't come to terms, I've got 'em anyhow, and if they do, we win the game."

"Then the stones aren't in the after-cabins?" said Bracken.

Mrs. Nash flashed a look at him, and Jenkins chuckled.

"Ho! You'd like to know, eh? Well, they ain't. Cap'n Nash wasn't no fool, I can tell you—no ways a fool." He accompanied this with a wink and a leer; then swung away forward and was gone, but not without a significant glance at Bracken.

The latter regarded Mrs. Nash thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that Jenkins is a bad egg."

The gray eyes swept up to meet his look, and read it aright.

"Yes?" she said quietly. "What happened, then?"

Bracken shrugged, and let the question go unanswered.

"I'm going to study charts this afternoon," he said slowly. "We'll have to be ready for anything—tonight."

She studied him for a moment in silence.

"As bad as that?"

"I think so. Now, all the boats from the *Fengshui* are here, under the ladder with your boats. They're all regulation-equipped, of course. There's only one boat left on the *Fengshui*, and we needn't worry about that. Do you know anything about engines?"

She frowned, perplexed, but nodded.

"Yes. More that you'd imagine, perhaps. My brother is a chief in the Royal Mail."

"Good!" Bracken listened a moment. "I've noticed that the pumps have been going ever since I've been aboard; I expect Jenkins strained her in the race up the coast and she's taking in a bit of water. Are there Chinese engineers aboard?"

She nodded again.

"The worst in the world."

"Granted. The main injection is fitted with a connection to the bilge; there's probably a valve fitting to pump water-ballast into one of the holds, too. Now, if any one could open these valves—say, this afternoon sometime, or even tonight—the result would be that the *Eastern Star*, being in mighty shallow water with a falling tide, would be hard and fast aground

sometime tonight, and would stay that way until sometime tomorrow. There's only one tide a day here, you know. That is, of course, on the supposition that the engine-room force would not observe that the pumps were bringing water in and not throwing it out. The proceeding is risky from start to finish. I couldn't attempt it, because I'm watched rather closely."

"I see," she said slowly. "Just what is your plan?"

Bracken laughed and rose.

"My dear Mrs. Nash, I haven't the ghost of a plan! Any one of a dozen things may happen by tonight, and we can't discount uncertainties. The only sure thing is—this ship must not be allowed to pursue."

"Then you do figure on running away from her?"

"If we find that possible. Now I must run along and spend a couple of hours over the charts. I'd suggest that you be ready for anything, Mrs. Nash. Things are really pretty bad—but don't worry."

"I'm not afraid," she said simply.

And, as Bracken departed, he carried a memory of her gazing out at the horizon with calm gray eyes that understood perfectly all that was implied—and were not afraid.

VIII

DESPITE his words to the widow, Bracken did have a half-formed scheme of reaching the *Fengshui* that night in a boat, Mrs. Nash helping him, and getting away. Rather, of getting her away. Jenkins, he believed, was no longer an uncertain quantity. Captain Combs was still a factor to be considered, and could not be downright abandoned to his fate.

With this in mind, Bracken spent half the afternoon poring over coastal charts on the bridge, having some hopes of standing in for the coast and making Port Wallut in case of necessity. It all depended on what might happen at sunset—and later. It did not occur to him that it could also depend on what might happen before sunset.

Jenkins attempted to keep no discipline aboard, at least while the ship lay moored. The Chinese, only a chosen number of whom appeared to be armed, crowded the fore-deck under the hot sunlight and gambled assiduously but quietly. The more he saw of them, the less Bracken liked the looks of these Straits Chinese.

Mrs. Nash had apparently retired to her own cabin for the day, since Bracken saw no more of her, even at noon mess. Jenkins, clad only in pajamas, remained under the bridge awning; he was occupied in writing up his log, obviously a work of fiction, and in drinking squareface. His drinking could scarcely be termed moderate, yet Bracken could not detect that it affected him in the least.

It was nearly four o'clock when Bracken, convinced that he had the island channels and port bearings firmly in his head, rolled up the charts, shoved away the Pilot and Light List, and stuffed tobacco into his pipe. He came out to where his two faithful guards were squatting, and looked at Jenkins.

At this instant a shrill cry came from the deck below.

Jenkins, who spoke the dialect of the Straits Chinese, was out of his chair in a flash and leaping to the rail. Bracken joined him. Coming toward them from the south point of the island, streaking swiftly across the glassily heaving water, was a boat. It was the one remaining boat of the *Fengshui*, the same in which Simmons had been concealed. Six yellow men in her.

"And now what, I wonder?" muttered Jenkins, with a suspicious glance at Bracken. The latter chuckled.

"Malays thrown your chinks out, maybe."

The two men waited, silent as the Chinese crowding the bows below. The boat came on, swiftly but unhurried; the six men aboard her seemed unhurt. In the tenseness that gripped the watchers, in the silent suspense that held them all, Bracken's nerves suddenly quivered. He caught the sudden cessation of a pulsing sound—a slight sound enough, yet one on which his attention had been fastened for an hour or more. A glance around showed him that Jenkins and the others had not noticed it.

The sound had been the steady plunge of water overside, from the pump-drain. Now it had ceased.

One of the yellow men forward sent out a shrill, staccato hail. The steersman in the boat waved a hand, laughed in response. The tension was broken, and a babble of cries arose.

"Nothin' wrong, then, blast 'em!" growled Jenkins.

The steersman sent in a shouted message

as the boat drew closer. An officer in the bows repeated it to Jenkins, who laughed, turned to Bracken, and wiped sweat from his brow.

"They rammed her on the two-fathom bank near Rat Point," and the Australian showed his teeth amusedly. "No damage done—accident was lucky enough, it seems! She's safe to hang there till tomorrow, anyhow——"

Another outburst from the boat, which was now alongside, and Jenkins grinned again.

"Sure she will! Rammed her nose into it hard—laying square on it, he says. They'd pumped a lot o' water into her, too. It's about flood now, and if she don't break, she'll get off tomorrow after she's pumped out. Well, get ready. I'll slip into some clothes and we'll go call on old Combs. No use waitin' longer."

Except for red splotches in his cheeks, Jenkins showed no sign of his drinking.

Bracken, left alone, gripped the rail and cursed softly. In the boat below him he saw piles of knives, half a dozen rifles; the Chinese prize crew had stripped the *Fengshui* of weapons before leaving her to the Malays. Therefore, even if he could reach her with Mrs. Nash, he could not hope to escape Jenkins or fight him off. The Malays were weaponless.

There was an ironic touch about this business that impressed him with its grim significance. The very thing he planned against the *Eastern Star*, Jenkins had carried into effect against the *Fengshui*—for despite the talk of accident, he knew that Jenkins had planned it. The prize crew had pulled it off an hour or two ahead of time, that was all.

"And now what?" thought Bracken desperately.

He could not see what to do, which way to turn. There was no help to be had from the Chinese aboard here; given a choice between obeying Mrs. Nash and Jenkins, they would of course choose Jenkins. And they were ruthless men, to be feared; beside them Kelapa's lascars were as children—and doubtless knew it.

"Ahoy, Bracken!" came the brazen voice of Jenkins, and Bracken descended to the boat. Mrs. Nash was in the bow. He and Jenkins sat in the stern.

All day the wreck had been silent under the blazing sun. There was no sign of life aboard her, nor was there any indication of Simmons, somewhere ashore. Looking back, Bracken saw every man aboard the *Eastern Star* crowded along her forward rails, watching intently for what would happen. He could not tell if the ship were lower in the water; panic was close to seizing him, for everything looked hopeless. He had done nothing, had sat like a fool all day with a gun in his pocket—yet the gray-eyed woman had done things! Then he looked forward to where she sat in the bow, and she smiled.

Jenkins uttered a low oath. His eyes were glimmering savagely.

"Glass is going down fast, —— fast!" he said to Bracken. "That chink skipper I put aboard your craft did right to lay her up and not wait for sunset. Tomorrow morning these islands will be cursed unhealthy for any ship—I'll send old Combs back with you to your craft, if he don't show his teeth. Treacherous ——, though; that's why I've got the chink aboard with him. Settle up with him, pull my hook sometime tonight and get out——"

So the barometer was falling! Worse and worse. The madness of these two skippers was dooming their ships and their men and themselves. A curiously detached feeling came over Bracken. He seemed to be as one watching a play of forces running to a predestined end; the "queer streaks" in these two men, sly treachery in the one and unafraid, animal brutality in the other, were as two millstones. And he, hovering on the edge of the conflict, only too liable to be crushed between upper and nether, yet taking no part in their strife!

Now they were under the dangling sea-ladder from the stern of the *He Lung*.

"Bring her up," said Jenkins to Bracken, and threw himself up at the lines, avid to meet Combs and get it finished.

It was not in him to recall that Mrs. Nash was about to set foot aboard the ship where her husband had so recently perished—but Bracken could think of nothing else, as the woman came toward him, her face a little white, and he helped her to start upward. He could read in her eyes the thought that this was her husband's ship.

Bracken followed her to the high stern and joined her at the starboard rail. Jenkins was waiting above the break of the deck for Captain Israel Combs, who was

coming toward him across the well-deck; behind Combs, Kelapa squatted against the after cabin wall, without his rifle but playing with a pistol. Derricks and booms being smashed away, boats gone from the bridge-deck, and a litter of equipment and stores lying all about, it was no wonder that sight of the splintered superstructure and canted decks brought unhappiness to the woman's eyes.

Combs came up the ladder, bobbed his head to Mrs. Nash, then glared at Jenkins.

"Thought you weren't coming till sunset? Out of respect of the lady, I let you come; now what you want?"

"A decision," said Jenkins gravely. "We couldn't wait. The glass is dropping, and your ship's put her nose on a reef near Rat Point. You know what that means, with the glass going down."

Combs knew, and started.

"That true?" he fired at Bracken. The latter nodded.

"I believe so. Jenkins' men have all come aboard from our craft."

"If you want to take my terms—a fourth to you—we can get the stones here and now and let Mrs. Nash divide 'em," went on Jenkins, while Combs, tawny hair flying loose in the sunlight, glared at him icily. "The lady's come to get some private papers belongin' to Nash, which ain't my business nor yours. Soon's we divvy up, you and Bracken and your serang can go back to the *Fengshui* with your boats. I'll set you aboard. No use askin' if you've found the stones; I know right well you ain't."

Combs glanced at the widow.

"How do I know Mrs. Nash isn't goin' after the stones while you tip me a song an' dance?" he demanded sulkily. "I'm takin' no chances, and I ain't leaving the deck——"

"Oh, stow your jaw!" exclaimed Jenkins in angry irritation. "Let Bracken go with her, to make sure she don't steal your cussed stones! You poor fool, she's goin' below, and the stones are on the bridge. Now, take my terms or fight. Which is it? Speak up."

Combs stared at them, his big hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. He looked gaunt, hollow-eyed, heavy with work and lack of sleep. In his whole manner it was evident that he realized the utter hopelessness of his position. Even Bracken, suspecting all things from the man, did not doubt his despair.

"You win, Jenkins," he said in a dull voice. "Bracken, go with Mrs. Nash. Who'll get the stones?"

"Your lascar will," and Jenkins grinned suddenly. "And be quick about it, you black fellow, or I'll come after you with a gun! Go get a handful of charts out of the locker—get all you can carry, and bring 'em here."

Combs confirmed the order, Kelapa rose and slipped forward along the port passage. Mrs. Nash started across the deck, gave Bracken a glance, and he joined her. Combs who was staring at Jenkins in bewildered anger, stepped aside to let them pass.

"Blast you, Jenkins!" he said thickly. "Charts, eh? And they're scattered all over the place up there! I never thought of that——"

"And you ain't thought of it yet," said Jenkins, grinning again. "Not by half!"

Bracken accompanied Mrs. Nash across the well-deck. She, knowing her way perfectly, led him on to the companionway and the mess cabin—now a scene of indescribable confusion. Bracken stopped at the entrance and waited.

It was all very matter of fact, very simply and quickly done. Mrs. Nash went to the table, which was fast to the deck, put her hand beneath one corner, and after a moment of effort slid out a shallow, deep tray, which by the way it shot forth was held by a secret spring. From this tray she took half a dozen papers and thrust them into the bosom of her waist. Her eyes lifted to those of Bracken.

"Nothing else," she said. Her words, her manner, were indescribably mournful; he knew that in this moment she was thinking of the man who had laid those papers away. Then, swiftly, she was coming toward him, and the gray eyes were alert and startled.

"I had no chance to tell you, Mr. Bracken—I did it while every one was watching that boat come from your ship!" she said breathlessly. "No one was in the engine-room. It was perfectly safe. But I—I'm afraid that I jammed and broke those valves——"

"And now that my ship's laid up," said Bracken, with a smile. "I'm afraid we'll have a job getting away clear! But never mind. Be ready for anything, any minute. If we get back to your craft without any crisis, we'll manage something tonight. We'll have to. So come along. I don't intend to go away with Combs and leave you if I can help it."

She nodded and returned to the deck. Bracken, following, made a grimace. He could see no hope, except in some desperate action; and he was sanely enough balanced to shrink from the idea. He forgot, however, that other men aboard the wreck were not sanely balanced.

IX

THE oarsmen in Jenkins' boat had not left her but remained under the stern. When Mrs. Nash and Bracken disappeared, Jenkins turned and waved a hand to his own ship, and activity became apparent aboard her.

"What's that for?" demanded Combs, with quick suspicion.

"Boat—to take you and Bracken to the *Fengshui*." Jenkins surveyed him with a grin, half in contempt and half in amusement. "You don't know your luck, mister. Think I'd give up part o' the loot, if I wasn't ordered to avoid a row? Not much. I've got you nipped, and if it was my stuff, I'd keep you nipped!"

One of the boats, with yellow men at the oars, detached itself and started toward the wreck. Mrs. Nash and Bracken appeared and came aft. As they gained the after-deck, Kelapa came into sight, following them, his arms filled with chart rolls. Combs looked at Mrs. Nash, his blue eyes hard and chill.

"Get your papers, ma'am?" he asked. His suspicion seemed to have departed.

"Yes, thank you," and she touched her bosom, then joined Bracken at the lower rail.

Combs and Jenkins stood watching Kalapa, as the Malay crossed the well-deck and mounted the ladder to them. He dropped the rolled charts on the deck, and stood waiting; murder flashed in his brown face when he looked at Jenkins.

The Australian looked down at the charts, then stooped and picked up one which had, apparently, been left unopened. He picked it up, glanced at the brown-paper wrapping, and his big teeth showed in a grin. He held out a hand to the Malay serang—

"Your knife!"

Kelapa's eyes narrowed, but after an instant he handed over his flame-bladed knife with its shagreen handle. Bracken, standing apart with the woman, distinctly gained the idea that Jenkins was not so open and aboveboard as appeared in this little matter. Then, with the knife, Jenkins carelessly slit paper wrapping and chart, curled aside the fragments, and exposed the wooden roller upon which the chart had been wrapped. This, instead of being wood, was of two-inch bamboo—a length with four joints.

A grunt broke from Kelapa; Combs stirred slightly, his eyes agleam. They both understood now. So did Bracken. The bamboo had been split asunder, and was bound together with fine silk cords midmost of each joint. These cords Jenkins slit with the knife—then, abruptly, tossed the knife overboard.

At that, Kelapa cried out, crouched, drove a hand to the pistol in his pocket. Jenkins looked at him, and under the savage, intolerant stare he hesitated; Combs shot a word at him and he relaxed, sullenly.

"Better not," said Jenkins, and carefully opened the two halves of the bamboo.

It was not a great thing to see—uncut stones, filling the hollow of the wood, dull pebbles which not even the sunset radiance could bring into living flame. Bracken, after craning forward for one look, drew back again beside Mrs. Nash and gave his attention to the three men. He began to think that his imagination had deceived him; that, after all, the affair was going to pass off tamely; that Combs would take his share and go.

A wild blaze leaped into the blue eyes of Combs as he viewed the stones.

"Four joints," said Jenkins. "Take your pick—all alike, I guess. Which?"

Combs licked his lips, reached forward, scooped the stones from the nearest bamboo joint with trembling fingers. When he had finished, Jenkins emptied the other three joints, pocketed the stones, dropped the bamboo halves.

Then, with an oath, Combs jerked out his automatic. The treacherous streak had won.

"Got you!" he cried feverishly. "Hands up, you!"

Jenkins snarled. Helpless, he lifted his hands.

"A line, serang!" cried Combs, and his voice was exultant. "Tie him up! Bracken, don't let those chinks aboard—get the rifles from the after-cabin——"

Kelapa darted down to the well-deck, where lines were flung about. Bracken

did not move, however. He saw what Combs did not see—what caused Mrs. Nash to grip his arm, a low exclamation on her lips.

From the litter of stuff at the after-end of the bridge deck, above them, rose the figure of the yellow man who had swum aboard that morning. He stood there, pistol in hand, etched against the sky. Jenkins, taking a step aside, grinned and looked up.

"Let him have it!"

Combs uttered a maddened cry, glanced over his shoulders—too late. The shot cracked, and as it did so, Jenkins whipped out his own weapon and echoed it. Kelapa uttered a strangled cry and pitched forward across the tangle of lines, and lay dead.

Pistol fallen from his nerveless hand, swaying on his feet, Combs stood gasping but unable to speak; a smear of crimson was spreading across his chest, for the bullet had gone through from back to front. Jenkins came up to him and leered into his face.

"You asked for it," said he, and with deliberate brutality struck the dying man backward down the ladder to the well-deck.

At this, Mrs. Nash covered her face with her hands.

Jenkins flung Bracken a look. Into the Australian's face had now leaped a flood of passion, of unleashed fury, of exultant brutality. He beckoned the Chinese assassin down from the bridge deck, then went to the stern rail, spoke to the men below in the two boats. The one which had just arrived, turned and began to row back to the ship.

For a long moment there was a heavy silence, broken only by the patter of the assassin's feet as he crossed the well-deck. The sun was trembling at the western horizon, and heavily massing clouds to north and east were touched with a glowing radiance. The island shore, jutting with boulders and jagged rocks, rimmed with a narrow beach of white sand, was empty and desolate. Mrs. Nash, hands now clasped at her breast, was staring at the empty after-deck, her gray eyes wide with horror.

Bracken stood motionless, waiting, a dread certainty slowly creeping upon him. Combs had worked out his own fate, after all; had met his master at craft and guile; had evoked, from out his own soul, his doom. Would Jenkins now do the same thing? Queer! Now that Combs was gone, Bracken felt his aloof feeling pass. He was entering into the game now. One apex of the triangle was swept away, leaving only a straight line between two points. He was one of those points, Jenkins was the other. And what did the line represent? The little dull stones. Somehow, they were tangled up with the ending, but Bracken could not quite see how—he had washed his hands of them——

"Tumble down!"

All this had passed in a moment. The yellow assassin was only just on the ladder. He was still out of sight from the after-deck; he had paused to look down at the dead Combs, and the top of his head appeared there. Jenkins had turned, with an abrupt gesture, a jerk of his hand toward the boat.

"Tumble down!" he said again, looking at Bracken. His eyes were savage.

"Going back?" asked Bracken.

"You are—to your own ship."

"But you've sent the boat back!"

"Don't need it. You'll take this boat." Jenkins flung a glance at Mrs. Nash, and his big teeth flashed out. "We ain't going."

Bracken looked at him, stupidly, then realized the implication of the words.

"Oh!" he answered.

Fortunately, Jenkins gave him a few brief instants for decision.

"Yes, oh!" he mimicked, with a sneer. "You get your ship off. Log Combs' death any way you want to, but leave me out, savvy? Blame that serang blighter. Tumble down, now!"

"All right," said Bracken, and turned to Mrs. Nash, who was staring at him. "I'll say good-by, Mrs. Nash——"

She held out her hand, mechanically. Bracken was half-turned from Jenkins, who could not discern the action as he slipped the automatic from his pocket and put it into her hand. The head of the yellow assassin was rising at the ladder.

"Take care of him," and Bracken jerked his head toward the Chinese. "Be ready."

He turned and went to Jenkins, who, grinning at him, could not see the weapon in the hand of the woman behind him.

"You'll bury Combs?" he asked, coming to a stop.

"Sure, sure!" said Jenkins mockingly. "I'll work hard, with a blow coming up

tomorrow and the wreck smashin' her bones! Tumble down, I tell you——"

"Right," said Bracken, turned, and swung his fist into the Australian.

No warning—that was his only hope! And he won with it, for the blow was absolutely unexpected. From Jenkins broke a stabbing cry, of mingled surprize and agony, as Bracken drove fist into stomach; the cry ended in a gasp, he reeled backward against the rail and stood, hands outspread for support, face contorted in frightful anguish, body momentarily out of action, all paralyzed by that blow.

Bracken swung into him, and made a costly error. Dreading at each instant the crack of a pistol from behind, carried out of himself by those savagely glaring, blood-shot eyes, the eyes of a wild beast, that fronted him, Bracken forgot all his fighting lore. Instead of smashing cruelly into the hurt body, he struck for the jaw—struck twice. Two full blows, crashing into that contorted brown face, bending Jenkins back over the rail; blows that reddened Bracken's knuckles, ripped his skin on the big teeth! Yet neither landed flush, for Jenkins jerked his head slightly, bent backward from the hips, back like a bow of steel—and then, like a bow of steel released, suddenly came forward.

The attack was pantherish. An incredible ferocity animated Jenkins; his rage was bestial, and like an animal, he came in with teeth and nails and feet all at work, his body a great spring of steel. Bracken met the rush with a blow, square to the jaw, that had absolutely no effect. He covered up, retreated, found himself impotent before the berserk fury of that attack. His blows were of no avail; he knew himself lost. Now, try as he would, he could not reach that vulnerable stomach. The hard fists smashed into him, a kick brought a swirl of agony into his brain. He staggered backward across the deck, the fury driving him, until he came to the opposite rail and could go no farther.

From the corner of his eye he saw the yellow assassin, back turned, hands in air, and Mrs. Nash, wide-eyed, trying to watch both fight and prisoner. A savage blow in the cheek snapped his head around. Jenkins crowded in upon him, blood dripping from mouth, eyes flaming with madness. The bared fangs threatened Bracken, frightened him. No man, but beast, veritable beast, teeth to throat, nails ripping flesh!

Then Jenkins paused. Even through his fury pierced that terrible sound—the shrill screams of men in deadly terror!

Bracken heard the sound, and it cleared the mist from his eyes. No need to look; he knew what it was. The Chinese aboard the *Eastern Star* had discovered that the ship was pumping in water, was half-filled, was perhaps on the rocks! Their scream rose, inchoate, wordless, frightful in its despair and appeal. And Jenkins, hearing, turning his head to look——

This time Bracken made no error. Square to the pit of the stomach drove his fist—again—a right whipped across to the crimson mouth—shift of balance and another blow with full weight back of it. From Jenkins broke a whimpering groan of sheerest bestial agony. Hands down, he reeled sidewise, gripped at the rail—right and left to the stomach again—and as he doubled forward, another right that somehow caught the angle of his jaw and curled him backward, bodily, over the rail.

Bracken wiped his eyes clear, staring, gasping for breath. Unbelievably, he was alone! A cry from Mrs. Nash brought him around. She was holding out to him a second pistol; the yellow man was running, leaping to the well-deck out of sight.

"Quick! They're coming—look!"

He looked at the ship. The sun was under the western sky-rim now; across the lurid water he saw boats starting out, crowded with shouting men. It flashed across him instantly that the stones were gone, that they would show no mercy——

He leaped to the rail. In the boat below, the six unarmed Chinese were staring upward stupidly, not knowing what had happened. No sign of Jenkins, unless it were a red smear merging with the water. Bracken caught the woman's arm, urged her to the rail.

"Into the boat—quick! Ashore is our only chance——"

She was over swiftly, catching a line and sliding down like any seaman. Bracken was after her. The six yellow men, chattering shrilly, threatening, looked into his pistol and crowded back.

"Row!" ordered Bracken, and fired over their heads.

They tumbled to the oars. He shoved the tiller into the woman's hands.

"Put away your pistol—wait, give it

here! That's it. Land us at that strip of beach. No surf there at all. Row, you ——!"

He fired again as the boat turned. Two crowded boats from the ship were only a hundred yards distant; his shot dropped an oarsman in the first, and two rifles made wild response. The shore was not far. The frightened men gave way, sent the boat straining through the water for the strip of beach under the jagged rocks of the headland.

The two boats bored on, with a roar of furious cries from the yellow men. Jenkins dead, the stones, or most of them, lost, their ship on the rocks—Bracken knew what to expect of their vengeance. He had cooled, now, under the new peril, and he began to fire deliberately. A rower went down in each boat, causing confusion, but men were crowded and the two boats came leaping none the less. A third was in the rear. Yet, measuring the distance, Bracken knew that there was no escape. They would reach shore close behind him, and then—the hunt. They knew it too, and did not answer his shots.

"Shore!" cried Mrs. Nash, and he turned, just in time to preserve his balance as the boat ran her nose into the white sand.

"Out with you!" he snapped. "Get up among the rocks. Run for it! I'll join you."

She obeyed without protest, leaping out into the water and, gaining the sand, turning to look for him. Bracken followed her. One of the unarmed Chinese all but got him in the back with an oar, as he passed; he pistoled the man and joined Mrs. Nash.

"Off with you now!" he exclaimed. "I'll check 'em——"

He turned and began to fire. The five Chinese in his boat were frantically shoving out, the other two boats were swirling in toward the shore. One pistol clicked—empty. He dropped it, shot deliberately with the other. No illusion was in his mind; he wanted only to hold them around him until the woman might escape. In another twenty minutes darkness would be over everything, and she would have a chance.

One boat was disabled by his shots. It turned, men hanging over the gunwale, other men clambering to reach the oars; it broached and went over in the swell. Bracken laughed, as the other boat drove in. His second pistol was empty. He saw the boat leap forward to the sand, two men poised in her bow for the jump. He waited, still laughing.

Then, amazingly, those two men doubled up and fell. Behind him cracked a rifle, and another with it. They cracked again. Shrill yells poured up from the yellow men; the oars backed furiously. Another crack of rifles. Bracken, wondering, turned about and looked. Nothing was in sight. Then, to right and left, a spurt of flame from the rocks, another crack of rifles.

Simmons uprose into sight, grinning widely.

"I reckon we're even, Bracken!" he called. "Come on. They've had enough."

True. The yellow men were backing out, picking up their comrades, shooting wildly. Bracken crossed the strip of sand, joined Simmons and Mrs. Nash. From among the rocks to the right came Tuwak, little monkey-face all agrin with delight.

"Tuwak swam ashore with a rifle he'd hidden," said Simmons. "The ship's off the rocks—the lascars got her off. Tide higher'n usual, I reckon. Gosh! Who hit you?"

Bracken looked at Mrs. Nash, and his puffed lips managed a smile.

"Come along, then, let's go!" he said. "We'll get you aboard somehow, Mrs. Nash—we'll have to walk over to Rat Point and get aboard before those chinks come with the boats. Tuwak, run ahead of us. Swim out to her and get the hose rigged—steam up—in case they beat us——"

"Where's Combs?" demanded Simmons. "Looked like he had a fight——"

Bracken laughed wildly, as the tension broke.

"Looked like it? Never mind. Come on. Combs isn't coming. Ready, Mrs. Nash?"

"Ready, thank you," she said.

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

SOMETHING from J. D. Newsom in connection with his story in this issue:

Philadelphia, Pa.

I suppose ambergris is well enough known to require no special mention. It never impressed me as a thing to write home about until I discovered that perfume makers pay $25 an ounce for it; then I became an ambergris hound, but my luck was out. I heard a great deal about splendid catches, I witnessed one such catch, but never a scrap came my way.

Another more important point: Small, uninhabited islands in the New Hebrides are fairly numerous and are growing more so every day for the natives are dying off at a terrific rate. New diseases, new foods, new laws, new religions are ruthlessly mowing down the aborigines. Some of the contributing factors are unavoidable, but the vast majority of them can only be called damnable carelessness and callousness. We still pursue under the guise of smug satisfaction what Dean Inge has described as one of the characteristics of the nineteenth century—"The European races established their ascendency over the whole planet, introducing the blessings of civilization to the savage peoples whom they exterminated."—J. D. NEWSOM.

SELDOM does any one meet you of Camp-Fire and get such a rousing, whole-souled greeting as has Bill Adams. That isn't just because Bill Adams can write, but because the man himself somehow makes us feel at first meeting as if we'd been friends of his for a long time. He makes us feel that way because he does consider us, and all men, his friends. There are men in whom he finds things to despise and to fight, but even these I think he feels are his brothers and need friendliness as well as chastisement for their good.

Bill doesn't just have beliefs. He acts them, lives them. Fallible like all the rest

of us, of course, but I think he lives them as much as any of us live ours. And Bill stands for plain, unadulterated friendship and brotherhood with his fellow men.

He doesn't give a darn about such things as social position, wealth, fine clothes, outward appearances in general. He sees only the fellow man underneath and if he had to choose between a millionaire and a tramp I'd bet that just on general principles he'd choose the tramp—as more likely to be human and comfortable as a companion. Humanness, that's Bill. He has the gift to understand us—our goodness and our rottenness, and to like us anyhow. And he likes us on the basis that he's just as good and just as rotten as the rest of us. None of the "better than thou" stuff about Bill Adams.

BILL has a special weakness—a weakness for the under dog. He's been the under dog himself and knows what it feels like. A fighter—of other people's battles and for his own principles. A seaman—until the sea broke his body. But it did not break his intense love of it.

No swelled head. No craze for publicity. When he reads what I'm writing about him he'll cuss me out.

He'll have to stand it, though. I'm not talking just to say pleasant things about Bill Adams but to explain just why we begin, in this issue, to print little scraps of things from him under the general heading "Slants on Life." They weren't written for publication. But Bill, being human and friendly, writes letters and in his letters he says what he thinks and says it any old way and any old how that comes easy and natural. Rambling, happy-go-lucky letters, saying whatever happens to come into his mind or heart. But full of meat for other humans. And always touched with his gift of seeing beauty and passing it on to us who can not so often see it for ourselves.

WHEN we suggested it he didn't want these scraps published. Said he'd perish of shame if we put him up in the position of a fellow standing up before others and trying to act wise. But these bits were too good not to be given out to all of you and after much arguing and promising not to put his name in big type if we insisted on using his name at all and to explain to you that he was just talking free and easy to friends by letter with no thought of having his talk printed, he consented.

So we collected his letters from our files, letters written to several of us on the staff, went through them and picked out such bits as seemed to fit the purpose. Another friend of Bill's, Perceval Hudson, of Weehawken, was kind enough to let us, with Bill's consent, get other bits from Bill's letters to him.

And there you are. If you get as much from these scraps of talk from Bill Adams as have we in the office, you'll pat us on the back for passing them along.

ONE thing more I want to say about Bill. He's unafraid. There are plenty of men who can face death with grim or smiling lips, but there are very few in this world who are unafraid to say what they really think. Or to let themselves feel what they really want to feel. If Bill, once marked among seamen for his size and physical strength, gets pleasure from a little flower, he says so and doesn't give a —— whether any one thinks it's "effeminate" to feel or talk that way. If he admires something or loves something he just says so and if any one thinks it's "soft" to say it right out, well, if the other fellow feels that way he needn't say it, but Bill doesn't feel that way, so he does say it. Every fellow to his own way—if he has courage enough. Bill believes in being natural. And "being natural" is a safe guide if you happen to have insides like Bill Adams.

FOLLOWING Camp-Fire custom Karl W. Detzer rises and introduces himself on the occasion of his first story in our magazine:

Mt. Vernon, Iowa.

I am stopping off at your Camp-Fire on my way from a quiet hill town in Iowa to a cabin in the north woods, where I'll spend the next eight months. Three miles from that cabin is the road you take in "The Pantry Watch," with the Manitou Islands flat against the horizon and Pyramid Point standing out yellow and blue down on the left.

Credentials? Certainly. I'm a Hoosier born, a newspaper man till 1916. That year, when the bandits were running loose along the lower Rio Grande, I did night patrol at Progresso. Overseas I was a Captain of Infantry in the 84th division. After the armistice I spent a year in command of one of the eight groups of the American secret police in Europe, and there learned the wiles and

ways of the bad men of many nations. It was an adventuresome post and the men with whom I surrounded myself were adventurers all.

Back in Chicago I wrote advertising for State Street department stores until last Fall. Now I'm free lancing, writing of past adventures, preparing for new ones.

May we meet again in the Camp-Fire light!—KARL W. DETZER.

A REPORT reaches us that an oil stock company has been using one of our Station numbers as a return address on their envelopes. Whether or not this is the case, it is just as well to emphasize the fact that our Stations are not intended for business uses of any kind and that any concern so using them is doing so without authorization. As to this particular oil company, if the report is true, most readers would figure that any company without an address of its own needed further investigation.

CAPTAIN NORTH need never hesitate about talking to us at Camp-Fire. The old-timers are the ones to whom we listen most closely and Captain North has never yet failed to interest us.

Columbus, Nebraska.

I am forever seeing something in Camp-Fire that I know about and feel like answering. In a late number was a letter from Buffalo Gap, South Dakota, enquiring about Buck Taylor, king of the cowboys. W. L. (Buck) Taylor drove cattle from Texas to Ogallala for R. W. Fant in 1877 and that Fall went to work for us on the Cody & North Ranch at the head of the Dismal River, sixty-five miles northwest of North Platte, Neb. I was foreman and Buck and I rode together for five years until 1882, when we sold out and I think Buck went to Wyoming, in the Spring of 1883. Col. Cody (Buffalo Bill) organized the Wild West show and hired Buck to take charge of his band of cowboys. He was with the show for several years and while showing in London, England, his horse fell on him, breaking his hip, and my impression is that it put an end to his riding outlaw horses.

AFTER the show came back from Europe, Buck started a Wild West show of his own but it was not successful and he went to work for some horse-breeding farm at Norristown, Pennsylvania, and if he is still living, he may be there yet.

When he commenced to work for me he was nineteen years old, six feet, four inches in height, weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds. He was a wonderfully active man for his size. He could of course ride anything and although raised on horseback he was a fast foot-racer, could do 100 yards in 10½ seconds, and at running broad jump cleaned 19 feet 8 inches. I don't think he was much afraid of anything. His strength was tremendous. He would face a charging Texas steer with his bare hands and, when the steer got to him, would catch him by the horns and throw him down, then get on him just in front of his hips, pull his tail across his right leg and let him get up. He would ride him, too, until he got tired, when he would jump off. He was the best-natured kid in the world, a first class cow hand, an all around good fellow and perfectly able to take care of himself anywhere.—L. H. NORTH.

Here's another letter from him, replying to one of mine:

Columbus, Nebraska.

In regard to California Joe I know absolutely nothing about his name or age and never saw him but the one time that I mentioned. In 1875 my brother Major Frank North was chief scout and guide at Fort D. A. Russel (Cheyenne), Wyoming. While in service at Fort Laramie that year he met Joe, who was camped above the Fort on the North Platte River. He, Joe, was acting as guide for a lot of gold-seekers on their way to the Black Hills. His party was stopped by the Government troops until a treaty could be made with Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, opening the Hills for settlement. My brother rode over from Fort Laramie to Joe's camp every day for perhaps a month and became very well acquainted with him, but I don't think he ever knew his name. As to his age I was guessing at that.

I am very much interested in Hugh Pendexter's stories especially where the Pawnees figure in them. My company of scouts was recruited from the Skidi band. I wonder if Mr. Pendexter knows that the Arikarees were an offshoot of the Skidi. They separated perhaps 140 years ago and the site of the old village where the separation took place is about fifty miles west of here on the Loup River. I found the ridges of dirt where their houses were in the Fall of 1872 and when I came down to the village at Genoa (where the Pawnees were then located) I stopped in the Skidi village and was told the story of the separation of the band. I had never been there since till last Summer (48 years), but found the spot without much difficulty. It was in a cornfield, but we found a few pieces of broken pottery.

Will you forgive a garrulous old man? When I get started on the Skidis I never know when to stop. Cut out as much of this as you like.—L. H. NORTH.

Yes, thank you, captain, I did cut out as much of that letter as I liked. What I cut out was "Yours of February 9th came yesterday." Can't see that your letters need any cutting.

WHO wrote this book on pirates—Daniel Defoe or Captain George Roberts? H. Bedford-Jones of our writers' brigade is stumped on this point and Lewis Appleton Barker of "A. A." and the brigade can't rescue him.

My dear Mr. Barker: Some time ago I got a book presumably written by Capt. Geo. Roberts, published in London, 1726, touching on his adventures with pirates and his hardships in the Verde Islands. In my blissful ignorance, I used many of the facts for an entirely mythical story, making Roberts the hero. In Maggs' catalog I find this

book listed as written by Defoe. And here I've gone ahead quoting Roberts, thinking that he was original and the real quill!

On going through the book, I can't believe that Defoe wrote it, despite the evidence of the style. It contains a complete and minute description of each of the Verde Islands, with innumerable other details which only a seaman could know. Yet it may be that I'm off the track entirely. Do you happen to know anything about this work? If you can give me any information, I'll appreciate it greatly. And lay off me when that story comes out in *Adventure*! If Defoe really did the dirty work, I'm in bad.—H. BEDFORD JONES.

Brookline, Massachusetts.

My dear Mr. Bedford-Jones: As to your book by Capt. Geo. Roberts, published in London in 1726. No, I have never seen it and am totally unfamiliar with it. Nor do I know of any such book by Defoe. At just about that time, of course, Defoe was writing a great deal of sea and pirate stuff, much of it more or less repetition.

THUS, in 1720, "Life, Adventures and Piracies of Captain Singleton," containing an account of Madagascar and its inhabitants, and much about Africa, its people and customs. In 1724, "A New Voyage Round the World," in which the hero left the Cape in September, 1714, and the following May, having touched at Madagascar and the East Indies, reached Manila. Going thence, and touching at the Ladrones and Guam, he reached the West Coast of South America in eight months. Then, rounding Cape Horn, he arrived at Dunkirk in April, 1717. Between 1720 and 1726 he wrote the Life of the Pirate Capt. John Gow, and "The King of the Pirates," (being the life of John Avery).

Sea and pirate works seem to have been very popular just then. In addition to these and the editions of Esquemeling, in 1726 came out the 4th edition of Capt. Charles Johnson's "Lives of the Pirates." In two vols., which I have. Defoe also wrote an account of Robert Knox's adventures in Ceylon, having the latter's book in his library.

Defoe's acquaintance with books of travel and his extensive knowledge of remote parts of the world show themselves in all these, as well as in "Colonel Jaques," "Moll Flanders," and "Robinson Crusoe," and his "seaman's knowledge" seemed to be such that I have no doubt that he could write a book minutely describing the Verde Islands, etc., that would appear to be the production of only a seaman.—LEWIS APPLETON BARKER.

I wish to add that I shall look forward with pleasure to reading your story in *Adventure*, as that is the only magazine I find time to read

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THE letter from a convict comrade brings out one from a secret service comrade, who also answers an inquirer about "dope." Our S. S. comrade pictures a dirty situation and doesn't mince his words. There are of course, honest law enforcement officers, but there are, of course, plenty of the other kind. Same as to other public officers from Congressmen and Cabinet officials on down—if there's anything lower than some Congressmen and Cabinet officials. And the funny thing is that most of the wrong kind would be honestly surprized and indignant if told they were traitors to their country. Traitors and far rottener criminals than many men doing time behind the bars.

I have stood it as long as I can and I insist on some of the gang crowding over and let me get a chance at the Camp-Fire. I have been reading *Adventure* since the birth of the magazine and needless to say the first thing that I turn to is "Camp-Fire" and get the latest gossip.

Have been a secret service operative for over 20 years and I am not the least bit proud of the calling.

I AM at present engaged in the narcotic situation and believe that if the gentleman querying in the Feb. 28th number about the "laughing plant" will investigate the drug known as Cannabis Indica, he will find what he is looking for. It can be had in 3 forms, liquid extract, powdered and the leaves can be brewed into an infusion or smoked with pipe or cigaret; when used in the latter form it is called Marijuna. A cousin of Cannabis Indica is grown some places on this continent and called Cannabis Americanus and is about half as strong as the foreign plant and has been called Loco Weed in some of the Southwestern States.

I could relate much more about this plant but please underscore this, DO NOT FOOL WITH THIS STUFF, as it has nitro beat a block for power, and stick with wood alcohol if you have to have a "kick." I would rather be blind drinking the latter stuff than take a chance on what the other will do to you and if you do investigate this drug try it on the "hound."

THE comrade that writes from the Folsom Prison interests me greatly as I can appreciate his stuff as I also have been in the underworld probably as much as he has and I can easily see the situation as he does.

I have no maudlin sympathy for crooks and I believe that they should be corrected, but I have sat in a courtroom many a day and seen some poor devil have the book thrown at him when the men giving evidence should have been in his place. I know law enforcement officers over the entire United States who are at this present time guilty of crimes that are more heinous than those committed by over one-quarter of the convicts now serving time in our prisons. I am not romancing when I make that statement and will make good on it in case I have to do so.

I actually know "Men of the Night" that I can trust with most anything from money to secrets and I know very few police that I can say as much for, as the usual law enforcement officer will double-cross his grandmother to get his name on the book.

I HAVE never been backward in expressing my sentiments and consequently I am a very much disliked person and only recently I escaped from a frame-up that all but had me in one of the stone instutitions maintained by the Government. I had the unheard of nerve to criticize an official for supplying a "stool pigeon" with dope in return for information and maintained that the official was

just as much a vendor and criminal as the underworld merchant of dope was. Well, I was indicted shortly afterward on another matter and it was freely predicted that I was due to be settled for a nice little hitch in a "stir," but some outside persons saw the situation in time and the other fellow resigned and he also had company.

There are several things that I don't like and among them are rattlesnakes, dope vendors, crooked police and smallpox and they come in about the order that I have them arranged. I used that word "police" in a composite manner and mean all law enforcement officers from judges on down the line.

There is something radically wrong with a country that will stand for such things as manufacturing crooks to order, and that is done in many localities and the situation grows worse. If I had the ability I could write a book on facts that would be startling to the public.

Mr. Sidney Howard is now publishing a series of articles that are getting at the facts on the dope situation but he is only scratching the surface, as he will no doubt admit, yet it is the best that we have ever had so far in the way of publicity.

However, the situation is beyond me and I am discouraged when I see nearly every law on the books violated by persons who are evidently above correction and then watch the poor devil who has no money or friends take his jolt at the big house and wait patiently for his particular "mob" to get action on the pardoning or parole board and then back to the old life again. For what is the use of trying to go straight unless you are one of those supermen that sometimes develop inside prison walls?

I am very thankful that I can look back over my record and can say that I never committed perjury to heave a man into prison and never accepted bribe-money in any case.

OF COURSE, I realize that my chances are very slim of being the owner of a high-power car and, in fact, will not own much of anything as long as I continue in the business. My services are not in demand as much as a person might think in my special line of work, as I am not just the right sort to get ahead and I have a mania for getting the fellow higher up, so the solution of the matter is that the "higher up" sees that I am not permanently established in his vicinity for any length of time.

Every time there is a squawk made in any locality the "dicks" made a grandstand play and pinch a few addicts to dope and get a write-up in the local sheet and then point with pride to the wonderful efficiency of the department.

The same results could be accomplished if they raided a hospital and took the same amount of patients, as all addicts are sick people and extremely sick. No effort is made to get the fellow that causes this condition except in rare occasions.

An ounce of cocaine or morphine is actually worth about $7 but after it is broken up into "bindles," which contain about 1 grain with a like amount of sugar of milk, it retails for $1, so you can appreciate the profit.

The dealer never uses the stuff personally as they have to be able at all times to handle big deals and keep the law squared, and don't imagine for a moment that they can't do this.

Investigate any corrective institution in this country where they have contract labor and locate all of the addicts and then wonder how they get the stuff inside the walls. Also watch closely the next big seizure of narcotics in your locality and marvel at the shrinkage between the time it is seized and the time it is offered as evidence.

I wonder how long the public will stand for this nonsense and allow the law manufacturers to continue with this pedigreed bunk and waste of money of law enforcement.

There are less than 200 operatives in the Federal Narcotic Division and this department could be abolished and it would never be missed unless some one should notice that the situation had improved.

Don't ask "dope dicks" the cause of this but try and find some person not interested in the game who can be believed and is not interested in politics.

I can at this time buy any narcotic known on the Pacific Coast in any city or town of any size, and any quantity from a bindle to a ton, and all that I need is the money.

A gentleman in Michigan coined a phrase that fits this situation nicely—"There's a reason."

A FAMOUS "stool" was recently sent to McNeil's Island who has acted in this capacity from childhood and he was trained in his particular line and unofficially allowed to peddle dope for years. When conditions warmed up too much for some of the higher ups they sacrificed this "stool" and he endeavored to tell the truth of the situation. It is hardly worth while to finish the story as he is now doing time and needless to say his story was discredited and not even allowed to be heard.

Of course the "stool" got just what he deserved but at the same time I can't help but think that there is room for a few of his friends who made it possible for him to get in trouble and then deserted him and especially so, when these men are minions of the law.

The day will come, I hope, when some of the things you have been saying in your editorials will come to pass and that we can have more of the Golden Rule in life as we pass through and a few paltry filthy dollars will not be so attractive.

I am certain that the time will never come in my life where I will sacrifice myself to any cheap politician and have to take instructions from them. Would prefer to live next door to that man in Folsom Prison, as I am certain that his morals are perfect in comparison to some of the officials that I have met.

In event that you publish this please withhold the name of the town and my name and I will answer any correspondence that in my judgment deserves an answer, providing that it comes through you.

With best wishes to the comrades of the Camp-Fire—Identification Card No. 11157.

IT ALWAYS makes me ashamed when any members of our Camp-Fire make —— fools of themselves. Or when they impose on the rest of Camp-Fire by abusing any of the services offered to Camp-Fire through the kindness and friendliness of comrades who play the game as it is played among ordinary decent men who are neither crooks or half-witted. The keeper of our Antwerp Station is altogether OK in his position and I'm glad he said his piece. In

answering any letters at all he is voluntarily going beyond what is expected of him as a keeper.

You can't impress anything on an idiot's mind, an idiot not having any, but some of the offenders have brains enough and offend through mere thoughtlessness or just through being too young and green. Won't these latter settle down enough to grasp the simple idea that "Ask Adventure" is the place to get their questions answered and that Stations are quite another matter and are under no obligation to answer any questions or letters of any kind? Why make laughing-stocks and nuisances of yourselves by not using your horse-sense a little?

It makes me grin to think of some half-baked or would be adventurer trying to put something over on a man like our Antwerp keeper. Doesn't it ever occur to that breed that a keeper is likely to have forgotten more than they'll ever know about the things on which they pride themselves most?

It might be a good idea to print for Camp-Fire some of these silly letters that come in to some of our Stations, giving the writers' names and addresses in full.

Antwerp, Belgium.

Permit me as a keeper of a Camp-Fire station, space enough at Camp-Fire to register a kick against a certain kind of pest who takes advantage of the spirit which conceived and keeps alive Camp-Fire. The pests I allude to are any and all of the so-called, self-styled "adventurers" who write to me, and no doubt other keepers as well, the sort of letters which I enclose as proof of my allegations.

NOW for the benefit of the world at large and the aforementioned pest in particular, I wish to announce that neither I nor Antwerp Station, as long as I run it, are in any manner or means an intermediary for the following: "Matrimonial" Agencies, Labor Bureaus, Stamp Collectors, Information Bureaus, nor is the keeper of this Station a sucker for any Wild Cat Oil Industry. And for any of the above mentioned types of person to presume that my name appears as a Keeper of a Camp-Fire Station for any of the functions also mentioned above is an insult to human intelligence.

The door of my home is open twenty-four hours a day to any and all adventurers, soldiers of fortune, "Gentry of the Road" and "Gentlemen of the Camp-Fire," and both I and my wife will do all in our power to entertain, help and assist any and all of the above who happen our way; but the pest whom this kick is registered against can save stamps and pass my door without knocking.

MY REASON for hollering is this: I have traveled farther over the face of this earth than most men twice my age. I am only thirty-three, but I have been in every capital city on the North and South American continents, also Europe; I have crossed Asia overland, from Beyrouth to Pekin and by way of the Steppes of Afghanistan. I have traveled from Cairo to the Cape, overland; I have roamed and lived in the Australian bush with the "Bush-Whacker," the islands of the South Seas are sweet memories of the past to me; I have fought under four flags and served in the late war from August the fourth, 1914, until March the nineteenth, 1919. For any information of this world, I, like all other "Soldiers of Fortune," have paid and paid dearly, and stay-at-home, self-styled adventurers can get out and get experience and information as I did.

ONE person wants to know my nationality; well, for every one's information, I will volunteer the following:

I was born in Dennisville, Cape May County, New Jersey, September 29, 1889; have lived abroad for the last twelve years and expect to the rest of my life; reason—wife is a Belgian and I like the scenery.

To any letter asking for straight cut information, I will do my best to answer, but any letter conveying hidden meanings is relegated *toute de suite* to the W. P. B.

Long live Camp-Fire and the spirit that gave it birth. May other keepers, if they think I am out of order, say so, and I will step aside for another, for I certainly will not abdicate from my present viewpoint of what I consider a pest.

Wishing all genuine members of Camp-Fire throughout the entire universe the best that life affords, I beg to submit my heartiest good wishes and respects.—REUBEN S. JAMES.

HOW'S this for a comrade sixty-seven years old? And a pretty good record for our Camp-Fire button. An earlier letter is in our cache; this one was written last December.

Sacramento, California.

On May 1st I left here to obey or try to obey my doctor's advice to live out of doors the remainder of the year, as a consequence I've not slept under a roof—not even a tent—from that day to this. The distance from Sacramento is 777.6 miles and I hiked it in twenty-eight days flat, a trifle better than 27.8 miles a day. I was born Feb. 24, 1856, and so lack two months and two days of being 67 years old.

I CARRIED an average weight of forty-five pounds in a knapsack, camp ax, hunting-knife and my .41 cal. Army Colt model of '97-8. I want to emphasize right here the advantage of the "71" button. I wore it, as I always do, on the left lapel of my coat. I left Sacramento with ample means to see me to my destination, *viz.*, ten A. B. A. Travelers Checks for $50 each. In the 27 days on the road I met up with thirteen men wearing the Camp-Fire button. Every one of them is proud to wear it and every one of them gave me the "glad hand."

At Dunsmuir, California, was the guest at supper and breakfast the following morning of Allen Thorpe and his sweet wife; he is a member of three years' standing and, by the way, one of the most interesting companions I've ever met.

I had two quite thrilling adventures on the return hike, one in Oregon and one at Castella, California.

IN REGARD to Custer's movements on that bloody 25th of June, '76, no man can say with any degree of accuracy. 'Tis all more or less conjecture. I described, however, in a former letter the facts concerning the Reno scandal, the position of the bodies of all Custer's officers of whom my oldest brother Lieut. (Surgeon) William H. Moore was one. Second Lieut. Autie Reed's remains were never found.

I heard from Uncle Frank Huston while in Portland and also from Capt. North. I knew North's older brother Frank while he was in command of Pawnee Indian Scouts with the rank of Major.

IN RE. this dispute about J. B. Hickok (Wild Bill). I've seen the court records there at Nebraska City in regard to that killing and have talked with people who were resident in the community where it occurred at the *time* it occurred and all are agreed that Hickok fought solely in self-defense. Consult the War Department accounts, too, of his fight with the ten or twelve drunken soldiers when he was Marshal of Hayes City. This was about one year before he killed Dave Tutt in Abilene, Kansas. The Hayes City affair occurred in '72 and the killing of Tutt in '73 or possibly in '74, while he was Marshal of that town. Abilene and Caldwell, Kansas, vied with each other in those days for honor (?) of being the toughest town in the United States.

When I first went to Grinnell, Gove County, Kansas, in April, '74, there were 21 or 22 (I forget which) graves a half a mile west of the town which constituted "God's acre" of that thriving "sink of iniquity" and of that number one was that of a woman who died in childbirth, two were those of children, and all the others had "died with their boots on." About this same Wild Bill. Some who never knew him or saw him, who knew as much about what the West truly was in the years from '66 to the 80's as I do of the inhabitants of Mars, will try to tell you that he was a desperado and an all round "gun-man." He was a "gun-man" in the fact of being just about as perfect an embodiment of quick and sure death to all evil-doers as ever wore fringed buckskin or pulled trigger of a Colt "single" .45. He undoubtedly did more to make Kansas and Nebraska fit to bring up your children in peace and security than any other five white men either soldier of civilian.

ONE thing more while we are on the subject. Hickok was never marshal of Abilene, Texas, as some would try to have you believe. He was at different times, however, marshal of several towns in Kansas; I will mention Caldwell, Dodge City, Abilene, Hayes City and I think Salina, but am not certain about the latter. He was murdered in cold blood in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, in '76 and his murderer, "Cross-eyed" Jack McCall, was hanged at Yankton in September of the same year. This was the first official hanging in Dakota Territory.

"Wild Bill" taught Cody ("Buffalo Bill") all he knew of plainscraft; furthermore, for the edification of the Camp-Fire comrades, Cody was never a commissioned officer of the U. S. Army and never had the right to sign himself "Chief of Scouts." If you doubt me, consult War Department records, or write and ask our Camp-Fire comrade Capt. North. There were never in the U. S. Army two more trustworthy and absolutely fearless officers than Captain and Major North.

Well, I've may be takin' a long time to come to it, but fact is I want to clear my throat and rise within the glow of the dear old Camp-Fire and wish you all a right Merry Christmas and a Happy and prosperous New Year.—JAMES D. MOORE.

OUR Camp-Fire stations are spreading over the map. Help make them grow.

A STATION may be in any shop, home or other reputable place. The only requirements are that a Station shall display the regular Station sign, provide a box or drawer for mail to be called for and preserve the register book.

No responsibility for mail is assumed by anybody; the Station merely uses ordinary care. Entries in register to be confined to name or serial number, route, destination, permanent address and such other brief notes or remarks as desired; each Station can impose its own limit on space to be used. Registers become permament property of Station; signs remain property of this magazine, so that if there is due cause of complaint from members a Station can be discontinued by withdrawing sign.

A Station bulletin-board is strongly to be recommended as almost necessary. On it travelers can leave tips as to conditions of trails, etc., resident members can post their names and addresses, such hospitality as they care to offer, calls for any travelers who are familiar with countries these residents once knew, calls for particular men if they happen that way, etc., notices or tips about local facilities and conditions. Letters to resident members can be posted on this bulletin-board.

Any one who wishes is a member of Camp-Fire and therefore entitled to the above Station privileges subject to the Keeper's discretion. Those offering hospitality of any kind do so on their own responsibility and at their own risk and can therefore make any discriminations they see fit. Traveling members will naturally be expected to remember that they are merely guests and act accordingly.

Keepers answer letters only if they wish. For local information write "Ask Adventure."

A Station may offer only the required register and mail facilities or enlarge its scope to any degree it pleases. Its possibilities as headquarters for a local club of resident Camp-Fire members are excellent.

The only connection between a Station and this magazine is that stated above, and a Keeper is in no other way responsible to this magazine nor representative of it.

Alabama—50—**Fairfield. Percy E. Coleman, 405 Forty-fifth St.**

Arkansas—161—**Hot Springs. Tom Manning, Jr., 322 Morrison Ave.**

California—44—**Oakland Lewis F. Wilson, 836 Seventh Ave.**

28—Lost Hills. **Mr. and Mrs. M. A. Monson, care of Gen. Del. No. 2.**

38—Los Angeles. **Colonel Wm. Strover, Westlake Military School, Mount Washington.**

60—San Bernardino. **Charles A. Rouse, Hotel St. Augustine.**

73—Galt. **E. M. Cook, Box 256.**

74—Eagle Rock. **John R. Finney, 109 Eddy Ave.**

89—Chico. K. W. Mason, 1428 Park Ave.

108—Helendale. **G. R. Wells, P. O. Box 17.**

113—Vallejo. Edith G. Engesser, Golden Triangle Rabbitry, Highway Homes.

114—Mill Valley, Louis F. Guedet, **Restawhyle Knoll.**

115—Los Gatos. G. H. Johnson.

116—Sabastopol. **Mrs. Lucy E. Hicks, 420 S. Main St.**

126—Covelo. Whit H. Ham. Box 388.

141—Santa Cruz. **A. W. Wyatt, Capitola Road and Jose Ave.**

149—San Francisco. **A. H. Hutchinson, Veteran Press, 1264 Valencia St.**

180—Santa Ysabel. **William Strover, Santa Ysabel Inn.**

Colorado—105—Grand Junction. Bart Lynch, 236 Main St.

176—Denver. **Elmer S. Burrows, 3407 Larimer St.**

Connecticut—103—New Haven. Ralph Pierson, 3 Yale Station.

142—Meridan. **Homer H. Brown, 1 Colony Place.**

D. C.—167—Washington. Walter A. Shell, 503 Sixth St. N. E.

Florida—87—Miami. A. C. Smith, 49 N. E. First St.

117—Miami. Miami Canoe Club, 115 S. W. South River Drive.
128—Titusville. Max von Koppelow, Box 1014.
129—Clearwater. E. E. Preston, 504 Vine St.
139—St. Petersburg. Capt. Lee Whetstone, Hotel Poinsettia.
143—St. Petersburg. J. G. Barnhill, 10 Third St. N.
158—Crescent City. E. N. Clark, care *Courier*.
179—Key West. William McCarthy, 201 Fleming St.

Georgia—98—Hinesville. R. N. Martin, *The Liberty County Herald*.

Idaho—110—Pocatello. C. W. Craig, 223 S. Second Ave.

Indiana—18—Connersville. Norba Wm. Guerin, 112 East Eighteenth St.
90—Linton. Herschell Isom, 73 Tenth St., N. E.
180—Warsaw. Homer Lewis.

Illinois—47—Peoria. B. H. Coffeen.
66—Mt. Carmel. W. C. Carter, 1122 Chestnut St.
67—Plainfield. J. P. Glass, The Linshield Co.

Kentucky—144—Corbin. Keith Mauney.

Maine—19—Bangor. Dr. G. E. Hathorne, 70 Main St.
59—Augusta. Robie M. Liscomb, 73½ Bridge St.
111—Lewiston. Howard N. Lary, 714 Main Street.

Maryland—55—Baltimore. Henry W. L. Fricke. 1200 E. Madison St. at Asquith.
82—Baltimore. Joseph Patti, Jr., 4014 E. Lombard St.
151—Williamsport. L. J. Schaefer. Frederick St.

Massachusetts—26—Malden. Arthur R. Lloyd, 16 Cross St.

Michigan—69—Grand Rapids. Dr. A. B. Muir, 1133 Lincoln Ave., N. W.
79—Lansing. Geo. H. Allen, *Lansing Industrial News*, 109½ N. Washington Ave.
80—Detroit. R. A. Taylor, 5129 Maybury Grand.
106—Gaylord. Sidney M. Cook.
131—North Muskegon. James Fort Forsyth, Forsyth Publisher's Service, Phone 5891.
137—Flint. O'Leary & Livingston, 309 So. Saginaw St

Minnesota—112—St. Paul. St. Paul *Daily News*, 92 E. Fourth St.
145—Brainerd. F. T. Tracey, care Brainerd Gas & Electric Co.
181—Ortonville. T. Glenn Harrison. *The Ortonville Independent*.

Mississippi—88—Tunica. C. S. Swann, Box 244.
99—Picayune. D. E. Jonson.

Missouri—51—St. Louis. W. R. Hoyt. 7921 Van Buren St., phone Riverside 250.
94—St. Louis. C. Carter Lee, M. D., 3819 Olive St.
127—Salem. Emmet C. Higgins, 100 N. Tenth St.

Nebraska—95—Omaha. L. W. Stewart, 119 No. 16th St.

New Mexico—96—Silver City. Edward S. Jackson, Box 435.

New Jersey—17—Caldwell. Chas. A. Gerlard. Box 13.
164—Chatham. Roy S. Tinney.
16—Bayonne. J. D. Gray, 92 West Sixth St.
91—Tenafly. Ed Stiles, P. O. Box 254.
146—Paterson. Charles S. Gall, 378 Dakota St.

New York—23—Jamestown. W. E. Jones, 906 Jefferson St.
34—New York City. St. Mary's Men's Club, 142 Alexander Ave., Bronx, N. Y. C.
93—Rochester. Thomas C. Murphy, 62 Swan St.
107—New York City. Bronx Division, U. S. Junior Naval Reserves, 3132 Webster Ave.
140—New York City. L. D. Montgomery, U.S.S. *Utah*.
147—Youngsville. Harry Malowitz, Youngsville House.
165—Saratoga. Mrs. Wilma D. Chapman, Office No. 9, Chamber of Commerce Arcade.
171—Albany. 224 Greene St.
177—Brooklyn. George Iverson, 306 Macon St.
185—Brooklyn. J. M. Canavan, 69 Bond St.

North Carolina—92—Asheville. B. Taylor and C. M. Gravatt. The Southern Spar and Mica Co., 322 Haywood Bldg.
133—Pine Bluff. N. Steve Hutchings.
159—Waynesville. Harry M. Hall, 720 Walnut St.

North Dakota—109—Stanley. Dr. W. W. Coe, Box 301.
160—Fargo. James E. Cowan, Central Garage, rear Grand Theatre.

Ohio—58—Cleveland. J. F. Thompson, Community Pharmacy, 9505 Denison Ave.
52—Ulrichsville. Anthony Sciarra, 329 W. Fourth St.
63—Ulrichsville. Chas. F. Burroway, 312 Water St.
75—Columbus. Chas. W. Jenkins, 54 S. Burgess Ave.
113—Columbus. Geo. T. Watters, 679 N. Nelson Road.
166—Toledo. Frank P. Carey, 3267 Maplewood Ave., or wherever his Ford happens to be.
168—Greenville. K. S. Enos, Camp Eldorado, R. F. D. 44.

Oklahoma—57—Haskell. Roy Holt.

Oregon—4—Salem. D. Wiggins.
187—Portland. W. J. Belduke, 29½ N. Ninth St.

Pennsylvania—20—Philadelphia. Wm. A. Fulmer, 252 S. Ninth St.
21—Braddock. Clarence Jenkins, Union News Co.
24—Philadelphia. Alfred A. Krombach. 4159 N. Eighth Street, and Spring Mills Station, P. & R. Ry. Co., Montgomery County.
78—Pittsburgh. Peter C. Szarmach, 3201 Brereton St.
100—Philadelphia. Veterans of Foreign Wars, 926 N. 41st St.
121—Philadelphia. Don L. Brown, 3444 D St.
152—Harrisburg. Mrs. L. H. Wistrand, Box 1027.
182—Greensburg. Don Frederick Wermuth.

South Dakota—179—Fairburn. Jesse K. Fell, *Custer County Press*.

Texas—33—Houston. J. M. Shamblin, 2003 Gray St.
123—San Juan. D. L. Carter, Box 436.
134—Breckenridge. Joe Randel, 226 Baylor Avenue.
135—Mexia. Charles O. Hurley, M. D.
148—Port Arthur. Ralph C. Cornwell, 215 Eighth St.
174—San Angelo. E. M. Weeks, 24 West Eighth St.
183—San Antonio. J. F. Nicodemus, Box 111.

Utah—157—Salt Lake City. Ned Howard, 127 N. St.

Vermont—56—Fort Ethan Allen. E. Worth Benson, Box 10.

Virginia—108—Cape Charles. Lynn Stevenson, Custom House Building.

Washington—1—Ione. A. S. Albert, Albert's Billiard Hall.
61—Burlington. Judge B. N. Albertson, Fairhaven Ave.
83—Seattle. Chas. D. Raymer, Raymer's Old Book-Store, 1330 First Ave.
153—Monroe. Ed. L. Carson, *The Monitor*.
154—Mt. Vernon. Miss Beatrice Bell, Western Washington Auto Club.
155—Olympia. B. F. Hume, Commercial Club Rooms.
172—Sunnyside. Mark Austin.

West Virginia—48—Huntington. John Geiske, 1682 Sixth St.

Wisconsin—41—Madison. Frank Weston, 401 Gay Bldg.
5—Milwaukee. Paul A. Buerger, Apt. 2, 150 Biddle St.
138—Tomahawk Lake. Mrs. J. S. Hughson, Hughson's Resort.

Africa—173—Sinkat, Red Sea Province, Sudan. W. T. Moffat.

Australia—39—Melbourne. William H. Turner, 52 Emmaline St., Northcote; and Carters' and Drivers, Union, 46 William St.
76—Victoria. Chas. M. Healy, 30, The Avenue.
130—Brisbane. H. V. Shead, Sutton St., Kangaroo Pt.

Belgium—131—Antwerp. Reuben S. James, Rue Chapelle de Grace 4.—Grage Kapel-straat, 4.

Canada—31—Howe Sound. C. Plowden, Plowden Bay.
84—White Rock, B. C. Charles L. Thompson.
22—Burlington, Ontario. T. M. Waumsly, Jocelyn Bookstore.
4—Dunedin, P. E. Island. J. N. Berrigan.
29—Deseronto. Harry M. Moore, *The Post Weekly*.
45—Norwood, Manitoba. Albert Whyte, 172½ De Meurons St.
30—Winnipeg, Man. Walter Peterson, 143 Kennedy St.
62—Woodstock, Ontario. George L. Catton, 94 Metcalfe St.
85—Oshawa, Ontario. J. Worral, 6½ King St. E.
102—Amherst. Lloyd E. MacPherson, 5 Belmont St.
124—Hartshorn, Alberta. Leonard Brown, 33-34-17 W4M.
178—Moncton, N. B. Chas. H. McCall, 178 St. George St.

Newfoundland—132—St. John's. P. C. Mara, Smallwood Bldg.

Canal Zone—37—Cristobal. F. E. Stevens.
156—Ancon. Arthur Haughton, Box 418.

Cuba—15—Havana. Ricardo N. Farres, Dominques, 7 Cerro.
175—Miranda, Oriente. Volney L. Held.

Great Britain—65—North Wales. William J. Cooper, "Kia-Ora," Plastirion Ave., Prestatyn.

Hawaiian Islands—170—Leilehua, Oahu. Chateau Shanty.

Honduras, C. A.—32—Galeras, Olancho. Dr. Wm. C. Robertson.
70—La Ceiba. Jos. Buckly Taylor.

Mexico—68—Guadalajara, Jal. W. C. Money, Hotel Fenix, Calle Lopez, Cotilla Nos. 269 a 281.
136—Tampico, Tamps. Jack Hester, care of T. D. El Humo, Apartado 238.

Navy—71—U. S. *Arizona*. Elmer E. McLean.

Porto Rico—46—Ensenada. M. B. Couch, P. O. Box 5.

Various Practical Services to Any Reader

In the last issue of each month are printed in full the friendly services of *Adventure* to readers: Free Identification Card in eleven languages (metal, 25 cents); Mail Address and Forwarding service; Back Issues Exchanged; Camp-Fire Buttons; Camp-Fire Stations, etc.

Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular department whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

Please Note: **To avoid using so much needed space each issue for standing matter and to gain more space for the actual meat of "Ask Adventure" the full statement of its various sections and of "Lost Trails" will be given only in alternate issues. In other issues only the bare names of the sections will be given, inquirers to get exact fields covered and names and addresses from full statement in alternate issues. Do *not* write to the magazine, but to the editors of the sections at their home addresses.**

1—3. The Sea. In Three Parts
4, 5. Islands and Coasts. In Two Parts
6, 7. New Zealand and the South Sea Islands. In Two Parts
8. Australia and Tasmania
9. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
10. New Guinea
11. Philippine Islands
12. Hawaiian Islands and China
13. Japan
14—16. Asia. In Three Parts
17—24. Africa. In Eight Parts
25. Turkey and Asia Minor
26—28. Balkans. In Three Parts
29. Scandinavia
30. Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Austria, Poland
31—33. South America. In Three Parts
34. Central America
35, 36. Mexico. In Two Parts
37—43. Canada. In Seven Parts
44. Alaska
45. Baffinland and Greenland
46—50. Western U. S. In Five Parts
51—54. Middle Western U. S. In Four Parts
55—60. Eastern U. S. In Six Parts
Radio
Mining and Prospecting
Tropical Forestry
Weapons, Past and Present. In Three Parts
Salt and Fresh Water Fishing
Aviation
Standing Information
Lost Trails

Canoeing near Big Cities

NEW YORK, Philadelphia and points west, attention!

Question:—"I will have my vacation during the last two weeks of August and the first week of September, and I think I would enjoy a canoe-trip down—note the word down—some of the small streams in this part of the country, through the hills and mountains. I do not care to get into any part of the country where I can not get milk, butter and eggs often enough to keep from getting hungry, and I would much prefer paying for meals at farmhouses to cooking them myself. I want a vacation!

What I want to know is, where to launch my canoe; that is, what is the railroad the highest up

the stream to which I can have it shipped? Can the whole journey be made in safety? Any other knowledge that I ought to have, I shall be glad to get. I have never done any canoeing on what you might call white water, and I am not a very good swimmer, but I would be willing to try anything once.

Can you find time to tell me about it?

I forgot to say that I have used a Kennebec torpedo lake-style canoe in and around New York harbor for the past two or three years, and know how to handle alone or with partner."—LEON T. RICHARDS, New York.

Answer, by Mr. Shannon:—Why not make the trip from New York through the Raritan Canal and down the Delaware?

You can go as far as you like, through the Delaware-Chesapeake Canal and into Chesapeake Bay. Good fishing in that canal, in the bay and tributary streams.

Accommodations all along the line. Some wide stretches. I had air chambers in my eighteen-foot Robertson when I made the trip with the wife in the Spring of last year. Some rough water. Also had a couple of light-weight swimming-belts—didn't need them, as it happened.

Susquehanna is a fine canoe-stream, too. Ship to Sunbury, Pa., and come down to Octaro Junction, then ship to Perryville, Md., and on down the bay as far as you want to go. Good fishing—plenty of fine farms with all available products.

Names and addresses of department editors and the exact field covered by each section are given in the next issue of the magazine. Do not write to the magazine itself.

Summer Packing on the Yukon

AGAIN it is necessary to remind inquirers that the "A. A." experts can supply an answer which will fit each individual case exactly, only if questions are specific and detailed. Read the rules on page 186 before you ask anything:

Question:—"We intend to take a trip in Alaska. Intend to go up the Yukon and make side-trips of about a month. We intend to stay about 18 months in all.

What pack and equipment would be necessary for about a month's side trip, and also what would be necessary for the rest of the time?"—GILES T. STURCHLER, Newell, Ia.

Answer, by Mr. Solomons:—You do not give me enough information for an intelligent answer. Do you want to pack on your back? Do you make trips in Winter? Do you want to live primitively? Are you good hunters and fishermen? It all depends, you see.

What you want is a good poling boat, procured up there. Then you want to buy an outfit in Seattle and ship it to the lowermost point on the Yukon where you intend to leave the steamer. Take a Summer's grub, or, if you want to cache it and relay back for it—a poor plan—you can take enough for the whole eighteen months. Better take enough to do you all Summer, and then when you arrive at a place on the river where you intend to Winter, buy at the trading-post enough for Winter. That's better than relaying down and up the river.

You can figure, without game, on a consumption of three pounds per man of ordinary food-stuffs, allowing in that some canned goods besides milk. If you live much on the country, two pounds or less will do it.

A pack-strap is a necessity.

Obtain a frame one by preference, or a simpler one, in Seattle. But you can use the rivers with your poling boat—tributaries of the Yukon much of the time Summers—so that your actual back-packing can be reduced to only a few days or a week at a time. Sixty pounds is a comfortable pack, which gets lighter each day. Few utensils and one down quilt sewed into a bag are the thing for such trips. Have a light canvas sheet for rain-protection of your packs.

One gun among you is plenty—a shotgun preferably. I'm speaking still about pack-trips in Summer over the wet niggerhead bogs and swamps. In the woods it is almost as hard walking.

Winter is the best season for all prospecting activities, though naturally the digging is harder.

Take plenty of butter, sugar and canned milk—nearly as much sugar as flour, strange as it may seem. Give yourselves variety of food-stuffs. Avoid ham, and much meat. Plenty of bacon. Evaporated eggs are good, and dried fruits and vegetables are splendid.

That's about all, for a sketch. Your questions are very general and hard to answer specifically.

Washington

THE following is the fourth of a series of half a dozen leaflets that Brother Harriman has had us print up for him dealing with the six States in his charge. Any leaflet, or the whole six of them, may be obtained by applying to him, provided request is accompanied by self-addressed envelop and stamp. Don't expect an answer otherwise.

The first leaflet printed for Brother Harriman, by the way, described California, and appeared in the April 10 issue of our magazine. The second, which discussed Arizona, was published in the May 20 issue and the third, treating of Nevada, was in the June 20 number.

WASHINGTON covers 67,000 square miles. Its western portion has a heavy yearly precipitation, the eastern a relatively light one. Many eastern counties can raise crops only through irrigation, excepting the grains in time of extra heavy rains.

The rainfall along Puget Sound runs in some cases to well above 100 inches per annum. The forests of Washington are famous for perfect timber, enormous sizes of trees and beauty of collective masses.

With Oregon and California, she offers the world the best spar timber known. Her lumber goes all over the world.

As a fruit-raising State Washington is unexcelled. Her land along Puget Sound and its extensive arms raises the best loganberries in the world. Her apples, like those of Colorado, Oregon and mountain apples of California, are unequaled. An apple orchard in the Northwest pays as large dividends as do the citrus orchards of the Southwest.

The scenery of Washington, like that of Oregon and California, is superb. She has great fields of wheat, oats, barley, rye, corn and other agricultural products. Her herds and flocks are large, and she sells some of the best cattle, sheep and hogs in the country.

The shipping interests of Washington are immense, and she builds many ships. Like Oregon, she cans salmon in great quantities. She has good coal-mines in several places. Her metal-minerals production is small, however, as her mountains have not been very well exploited in this line. It is harder prospecting for minerals in a country where heavy forestation exists than in open country.

Washington's potential water-power is great, rivaling her enormous horticultural and agricultural possibilities and actualities. Seattle, Everett, Bellingham, Tacoma, Anacortes, Port Townsend, all are great ports, out of which travel numerous steamship lines. From her coast ports, such as Gray's Harbor, the shipping of lumber is a matter of world interest, and the State still has very large forests to draw from.

In parts of the State where irrigation has had a fair trial, it has established itself as a great wealth-producer, bringing land values up from a very low ebb to a high figure. This it has done by increasing production by several hundred per cent.

Washington has much wild game and fine fishing. It offers every variety of outdoor sport, in all sorts of surroundings. Puget Sound is famous for the delights of boating-trips, sailing-craft and power-boats plying its waters in great numbers.

In the Olympic Peninsula, Skagit River Cañon, Mt. Ranier—or Tacoma, as it really should be called—and the Cascades, Blue and other ranges it offers a variety of mountain scenery of wide range and exceptional quality. Seattle is the natural distributing-point for Alaska and the north Asiatic coast.—E. E. HARRIMAN.

No Locomotives

ISLANDS which would get along just as well if Stephenson had never lived:

Question:—"Would like to know what opportunity there is in Bermuda or Bahama Islands for a British subject? I have had several years' experience as a locomotive engineer and am familiar with gas engines.

Is there any Government land to be acquired as homestead?

Would it require much money to farm there?

I don't wish full name to appear, if you publish this letter in *Adventure*."—R. McC., Niles, Mich.

Answer, by Capt. Dingle:—There are neither locomotives nor automobiles in Bermuda, and no locomotives in the Bahamas. The only engine jobs that I know about are in the larger hotels, bakeries, laundries, light stations, etc., and there are few such jobs running wild.

Bermuda, with all its more than three hundred islands, is less than twenty square miles in area, not more than half of which is habitable. Very little is cultivable actually, and that only by the most expert of handling and fertilizing. So you will see about what chance there is for Government land to be still available.

As for the Bahamas, there are islands outside the more thickly settled ones which are cultivable, but everything worth while is owned by one or other of the Bahaman merchants. You might be able to rent, lease or buy a tract of land. I suggest you write to the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, Nassau, Bahamas, and ask about such possibilities.

Farming costs rather high at first because fertilizing is necessary in nearly all lines of culture. And of course, lying as they do within the tropics largely, farming is on a different scale to northern cultivation; produce is different, labor conditions and markets.

Why don't you try Porto Rico or Jamaica in the automobile-engine line? You would only have to get there and ask for a job, I feel sure. But you ought to take enough money with you to get home in case you don't connect with something.

Address your question direct to the expert in charge, NOT to the magazine.

Note from an "A. A." Man

THE subjoined communication was prompted by the fact that an inquirer wrote Mr. Holt from Corpus Christi, Texas, for some information, the letter being returned endorsed "New Orleans, La.," and reendorsed "Out." If the inquirer writes us we can send him his letter. As for Mr. Holt's assertion that inquirers should leave proper and full addresses, of course any sensible person is in hearty agreement. As well as with the rest of what he has to say:

I wonder if other "A. A." folks have the difficulty which I have frequently had, of having their replies reach the writers. It's happened in quite a number of cases with me.

I enclose a letter as an example; perhaps you can locate Mr. W——. I spent just one solid evening on this letter—and although I think I'm a pretty good sport it *does* seem to me that when a man makes inquiry through "A. A." he might have the courtesy to provide a forwarding address for his mail. The average inquirer wants *all* the information the authority can give him—and cheerfully requests it. If one says to oneself, "Well, he probably will never receive the letter anyhow," and cuts it short, that isn't service. But it's sort of —— aggravating to write a coupla thousand words for the benefit of somebody who isn't sufficiently interested to arrange for the stuff to reach him. Mr. W—— didn't die—if he had I should have forgiven him, of course—but apparently moved to New Orleans.

Another thing while I'm on this subject. May I suggest to *all* "A. A." inquirers, that it would be a

courtesy much appreciated if they would acknowledge, even on a post-card, receipt of the reply from the "A. A." man? I've written dozens of letters which have *not* been returned—but so far as any acknowledgment goes I've never had one.

There's another slant besides courtesy here: Further information may be available from time to time. But I don't think any "A. A." man is under the slightest obligation to offer such information in case his first letter is not acknowledged.

Do you know, I'd like to see a little analysis made of the "A. A." *results*—as to whether the information so generously given out by *Adventure* is actually used in any substantial number of instances. Perhaps a dozen people inquire of me each year concerning Morocco. Not one of them, so far as my knowledge goes, has ever gone there. Of course I understand that a more substantial service is rendered by us in keeping a man from going to a place of which he has utterly mistaken ideas; but it would be interesting to see the reverse of the medal—if there is one. In other words, is "A. A." a stimulus or an obstacle to travel, to adventure?—GEORGE E. HOLT.

Life in Hongkong

HINTS that will save dollars to the prospective resident of Britain's greatest port in China:

Question:—"I may have the opportunity of accepting a position at Hongkong with a steamship company and would be glad if you could let me have some particulars under the following headings:

1. Roughly, cost of living as compared with America, as mentioned under A and B.

(In quoting amounts of money in answer to this or any other question please indicate whether amount mentioned is in Hongkong or American dollars.)

A. Food B. Clothing

2. House rentals.

3. Would you advise parties going there to take their own furniture or purchase out there?

4. Climate. Have heard it rains steadily for three months.

5. Is it healthy? Free from malaria? Does one have to dope himself constantly with any kind of drug such as quinin?

6. What clothing should one take; or is it better to buy there?

7. What footwear does one wear?

8. Are flies or mosquitoes bad?

9. Servant problem.

If you are not acquainted with Hongkong perhaps you would be so kind as to hand this letter for answer to some one who is."—H. I. N., Ottawa, Ont., Canada.

Answer, by Mr. Halton:—Generally speaking, both food and clothing are cheaper in Hongkong than in the States. During the war, when the Mexican or Hongkong dollar climbed up to the value of a gold dollar, everything went up in proportion. The dollar has dropped to about pre-war levels, and while commodities have not dropped in proportion they are considerably cheaper than they were. Of course food and clothing that are imported from Europe and the States are slightly higher than here. Item B will be more fully treated in answer to your question 6.

2. House rentals are more expensive than here. There are no frame dwellings—all being built of stone or brick; and all the woodwork is teak to withstand the ravages of the white ant. You can rent a five-room house with servants' quarters for about $100, gold, per month.

3. If you are going to work for a steamship company it is possible you will obtain free transportation for your household effects, in which case I should recommend you take your furniture—that is, metal bedsteads and all furniture that is not veneered, because you will find that in the excessive humidity of the Hongkong climate during the Summer months the veneer will peel off. You will find that the rattan furniture you can buy very cheaply in Hongkong will be very serviceable and particularly suited to the climate. Of course you will take your linens and silverware.

4. There are two seasons in Hongkong. From May to October is called the southwest monsoon season. It does not rain all the time by any means; but the rainfall is much heavier during that period, which is a season of typhoons. It may rain for two or three days and be fine for a couple of weeks.

From October to May is the northeast monsoon season, and there is little or no rain. The temperature in Summer attains a maximum of about 90 degrees; but the humidity is also around 90 per cent. and this makes the heat very trying. The Winters are delightful with a minimum of about 45 degrees, and of course there is very much less humidity.

5. Hongkong is probably one of the most healthful spots in China. There is no malaria, and if one takes a reasonable amount of exercise—even in the hot months—he can remain healthy. Smallpox and bubonic plague are epidemic, but Europeans or Americans seldom contract these diseases.

6. I would advise the purchase of clothing over there. In the Summer-time you will wear duck or pongee silk clothes, and they can be obtained very much cheaper in Hongkong than here.

The question of yearly cost of clothing has often been debated, some claiming that the cost runs 50 per cent. under American prices. Personally I found that my clothing cost me, if anything, more than it does at home. In the Summer-time you will probably change your clothes completely twice a day owing to excessive perspiration, and I found that after they had been treated to the tender mercies of the laundry their life was considerably lessened.

Depending of course on the position you hold there, it will be more or less necessary to have a full equipment of evening clothes, both light and heavy, for Summer and Winter wear. This will of course add to the cost of your wardrobe. In short, while you pay less per suit of clothes you will probably wear—or the laundry will—many more suits.

7. Footwear is used as at home. Would recommend that you lay in a good supply on this side, as you will find that the most sought-for shoes are those of American manufacture, and by the time they reach Hongkong they are very much more expensive. You will need white shoes for Summer wear.

8. The mosquitoes are bad in Summer, but they are not malarious. They are practically the only pests.

9. Chinese servants are used exclusively. They

are very good usually; but you can not get a "general" servant. The cook will not usually wait on table or do other housework. The house "boy" will not sweep the floors. He will make the beds and generally oversee the house, but he will require a coolie for the rougher kinds of work. If you have children the *amah* or nurse will not do any housework, but attends strictly to the children. For this reason servants are not inexpensive because you require so many.

The better plan would be to stop at some boarding-establishment, and I believe that this is cheaper and much more satisfactory for small families.

If there are any other questions that occur to you will be glad to hear from you again.

Lands of the Philippines

RICH homesteads to be had by Americans at ten dollars apiece—but there's a catch in it. What will happen to the settler from the United States when the islands are made independent?

Question:—"Enclosed find stamped and addressed envelope.

Would like to know how I can acquire land in Philippine Islands. About how much would it take to start a small plantation? What would be the best crops to grow? Have some farm experience and am not afraid of work.

Is trading as profitable as farming? What size schooner or yawl would be necessary? What would be the probable cost? What kind of goods would be carried?

Please don't use my name."— ——— ———, Cottage Grove, Ore.

Answer, by Mr. Connor:—Land is acquired in much the same manner as the public lands that are open for homesteading in the U. S. There are approximately 73,114,742 acres of public lands in the islands. Of this area 41,029,900 acres are considered suitable for agricultural purposes. But the lands still available are 37,870,188 acres. In Cotaboto Province, on Mindanao, there are 3,578,169 acres not yet occupied or applied for. The province of Samar has 2,524,388 acres available. This was the island on which we had considerable fighting during the insurrection of 1899-1904.

"Act 2,874 of the Philippine Legislature, approved November 29, 1919, provided that any citizen of the islands or of the U. S. over the age of 18 years, or the head of a family who does not own more than 59 acres of land in the islands, may enter a homestead not to exceed 59 acres of agricultural land of the public domain.

Upon filing an application and the approval thereof by the Director of Public Lands, possession may be taken of the land applied for upon payment of $5 as entry fee. The period for "proving up"is from 2 to 5 years. Then the applicant pays another $5 for the proving certificate. That ends the transaction.

Lands may be purchased by a citizen of the islands or of the U. S. not to exceed 247 acres; 2,530 acres for corporations. Of course, the land must be appraised before a definite price can be fixed. This appraisement is done by Government officials.

Lands may be leased by individuals not to exceed 2,530 acres. Lease contracts run for 25 years, and may be renewed for another period not to exceed 25 years after the first 25 years has expired.

Your farm experience in this country would not do much good when it comes to plantation growing —I am speaking of the tropics now—because, as I interpret your letter, you desire to enter into coconut farming or some other tropical agricultural pursuit. Your only outlet there would be to get employment from some firm in the islands and learn the tropical plantation work. But again you could not get far along that course—unless you have money to help bear your expenses—for you could not compete with native labor.

Trading is done mostly by inter-island steamers, and is carried on by very large corporations—a great many English, and some large American firms.

The cost of a yawl or schooner varies, depending upon its construction—from the smaller size to the larger in the neighborhood of $3,000 to $20,000, all depending. The goods that are to be carried also depend upon where you intend to trade.

Now, sir, my information is based upon the report of the Special Mission appointed for that purpose, and headed by Major-Gen. Leonard Wood, and it is not advisable to feel that the native is enraptured or overjoyed at finding Americans competing with him. They are all urged by political aspiration toward Philippine independence, and are not to be considered otherwise than as being for themselves—irrespective of our good offices in educating them and placing them among nations.

Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camps, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have or find, so that all may share in them.

Although conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and *IF* all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelop and reply postage (*NOT* attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, *NOT* to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, 1,262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

SOMEHOW I've always felt that this department of *Adventure* belonged quite as much with Camp-Fire as it did tucked away under that "Staff of Experts" at the end of the magazine. I've dropped in at every meeting since 1916 and haven't found a dull one yet. But I don't claim to be an *expert* at all, simply to be interested—tremendously interested—in old songs, songs that belong to us all

as a people, songs that for generations have been passed on from man to man, songs that *haven't been* printed and that *ought to be* printed.

Many of these songs are rapidly passing from memory. The old ballads our grandfathers and grandmothers used to sing are almost entirely forgotten; the sailor chanteys which began to disappear from the sea with the coming of steam are now hardly sung at all; many of the haunting melodies of the old-time negro, his humorous or pathetic love songs, his unique work songs, have been lost for want of some one to take them down and record them. The greater number of those red-blooded songs of the Western pioneer, songs that told of his hardships and his hopes as he journeyed laboriously across the great plains, or as he "reaped the shinin' gold" on "the banks o' the Sacramento" have gone forever with the men who created and sang them.

That's why I appeal to you other men about the fire, to those of you who have from time to time spoken up and to that larger group who have sat in, and smoked, and dreamed, and listened. These are *your* songs. You have sung and enjoyed them; will you pass them on, share them with those who are yet to come? You are the men who *now possess them;* you are the only ones who can collect and preserve them.

Taken collectively, Camp-Fire is the greatest living expert on the songs of the American people. There is not a nook or cranny that one of us has not explored, not an experience that one of us has not had, not a song that one of us has not sung.

I want Bill Adams and Captain Dingle to bundle up and send in those deep-sea chanteys; I want Hapsburg Liebe to contribute more of his songs of the South and of the Southern negro. I want you each one to tear a few blank sheets from the old note-book and scribble down titles and then add the verses—even the fragmentary, half-remembered ones—and *then* send them in. Don't wait for questions to be published; send in the songs and make the questions, most of them at least, unnecessary.

Seriously it's very much worth the doing. A few years ago an English scholar, Cecil Sharpe, during a brief visit in our Southern mountains succeeded in obtaining a number of valuable and unrecorded songs. We knew and had known that the songs were there; but we had been too careless, too indifferent to take the trouble to collect and preserve them. The mass of worth-while material still unprinted is large; glance for a moment at the heading and note its variety. What Mr. Sharpe did for a small section, *Adventure* can, if it desires, do for the entire country. The men actively engaged in helping to preserve these songs of the American people are few. Their names will be remembered with gratitude by future generations.

It's up to you men to decide. Write me a line and say frankly what you think of it all. If you're interested, let's all get to work before it's too late.—R. W. GORDON, 1,262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif.

HERE is an unpublished New England version of a genuine old American song that has been sung in one form or another for over a hundred and fifty years. It was given to me at Cambridge, Mass., in 1916, by Austin R. Frey, who said:

"My father used to sing 'Springfield Mountain' to me as a lullaby when I was a baby. He learned it from my uncle, who in turn heard it sung by guides at Franconia Notch in the White Mountains."

Springfield Mountain

On Springfield Mountain there did dwell
A nice young man; I knew him well—I ell.

Chorus: Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay,
Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay—I ay.

He farmed it on his father's farm,
And never thought he'd come to harm—I arm.

He worked away from morn till dark,
And then his sweetheart he did spark—I ark.

Her cheeks were red, her hair the same,
And Molly Brand it was her name—I aim.

One Monday morning he did go
Out in the meadow for to mow—I owe.

He scarce had mowed one-half the field
When a pesky sarpint bit his heel—I eel.

He raised his scythe and struck a blow
That laid the pesky sarpint low—I owe.

He took the sarpint in his hand
And posted off to Molly Brand—I and.

Poor Molly screamed in mortal fright
When she observed the sarpint's bite—I ite.

"Oh, Johnny dear, why did you go
Out in the meadow for to mow?—I owe."

"Oh, Molly dear, I thought you knowed
'Twas father's field and must be mowed—I ode."

"Oh Johnny dear, you'll surely die
Unless you drink some good old rye—I ie."

He drank old whisky by the pail;
Alas, it proved of no avail—I ail.

And this young man gave up the ghost,
And hastened off to Gabriel's host—I ost.

Poor Molly wept a week or more,
And blackest bombazine she wore—I ore.

She could not dance, or sing, or laugh
Till she had writ this epitaph—I af:

"Here lies a man within his grave
Whom even whisky could not save—I ave."

Then dried her eyes, and soon began
To try to catch another man—I an.

Now all young men a warning take:
Beware of the bite of a pizen snake—I ake.

Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay,
Sing Tu Ri Lu, Ri Lu Ri Lay—I ay.

HAPSBURG LIEBE sends in some interesting additional stanzas for the song of "John Henry," published recently. He says:

"The song given in the back of *Adventure* for April 20th is quite 'famous' in the hills of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina—it is dying out a little now, but when I was a boy everybody knew and sang it. I heard a *Congressman* sing it. It was a *banjo* song, and there really *is* something catching about the air—I used to knock it out on the banjo and sing it myself. It is a foregone

conclusion that a man needs about a tin cupful of corn whisky to give it right. In the aforesaid hills it is 'John Hardy' instead of 'John Henry.' This is one of the songs that everybody who sings adds a verse. The words are always on the tragic order. Here are a few verses that *Adventure's* man missed:

"John Hardy had a sweet true love,
He kept her all dressed in red;
She followed him to his hanging-ground—
'Oh, Hardy, I heerd you was dead, pore boy!
Oh, Hardy, I heerd you was dead!'

"Father and mother standin' around—
'Father, won't you pray fo' me?
I'm standin' on my hangin'-ground.
Father, won't you pray fo' me, pore boy—
Oh, father, won't you pray fo' me?' "

"The first stanza as I've heard it is usually this:

"John Hardy was a bad, bad man;
He carried two guns every day;
When sheriffs rode out through the land,
You ought 'o seed John Hardy gettin' away—
Oh, you ought 'o seed John Hardy gettin' away!"
—HAPSBURG LIEBE.

In the "Journal of American Folk-Lore" for 1919, pages 505-520, Professor J. H. Cox sums up what is known of John Hardy and prints a number of the songs sung about him. Professor Cox has discovered that there was in 1872 a negro of this name famous as a steel-driller—"a gambler, a roué and a fierce fighter," and that in 1893 a negro of the same name was executed for murder in West Virginia. These he believes to have been one and the same man. He points out that three different groups of songs have sprung up about Hardy, one dealing with him as a steel-driver, a second dealing with him as a steel-driver who was murdered, and still a third dealing with him as a murderer.

A FEW days ago a friend of mine who desires to remain anonymous gave me a fragment of a song popular in the South some thirty years ago about "King Brady." It's rather amusing, and seems to be connected in some way with the John Henry-John Hardy group. Can any one send a more complete version, or give any information about its hero?

King Brady

When King Brady was on de beat,
He 'lowed no ladies to walk de street;
Now King Brady is daid an' gone,
An' de ladies walk de street all night long.

"Mammy, Mammy, how can it be,
Pappy was killed in de firs' degree?"
"No, no, son, dat cain't be so,
Fuh he was here 'bout a nour ago."

"Mammy, Mammy, gimme my hat."
"No, no, my son, I cain't do dat.
Jes' wrap dis shawl all 'bout yo' head,
An' go an' see if yo' daddy's daid."

When King Brady was well an' soun',
He chased dem ladies jes' like a houn';
Now King Brady is daid an' gone
An' dem ladies is walkin' de streets all night long.

When dey heard King Brady was daid,
Dey all went home an' dressed in red;
Come back dancin' an' singin' a song—
King Brady went to hell wid a Stetson on.

SEND all song material and all requests for information to R. W. GORDON, 1,262 Euclid Ave., Berkeley, Calif. Do not send them to the magazine.

RAFAEL SABATINI

has written another of his fascinating novels about Cesare Borgia for *Everybody's Magazine*. "The Perugian" in the July number is the story of an Italian girl who matches her wits against those of the crafty Cesare Borgia to save her lover's life.

She promises to marry one of Cesare's *condottieri* in order to trap him. But she in turn is trapped into really marrying him—unless she reveals her lover's hiding-place to Cesare. Will she sacrifice herself or her lover? Or will she be able to outwit Cesare?

You will want to read this fascinating story by Sabatini, one of the most popular authors of the day.

RAFAEL SABATINI
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and
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