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Adventure

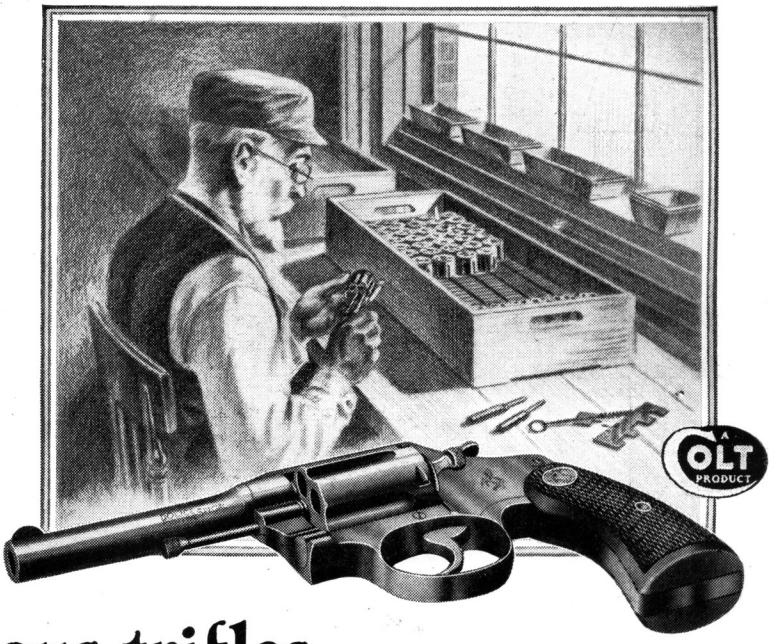
June 1st

EL CABALLERO

By

WALT COBURN

Published Twice
A Month



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CONTENTS

1928 for June 1st

Vol. LXVI No. 6

Anthony M. Rud
EDITOR

Cover Design by Duncan MacMillan *Headings by John R. Neill*

Published twice a month by The Butterick Publishing Company, Butterick Building, New York, N. Y., U. S. A. Joseph A. Moore, Chairman of the Board; S. R. Latshaw, President; Levin Rank, Secretary and Treasurer; Anthony M. Rud, Editor. Entered as Second Class Matter, October 1, 1910, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Chicago, Illinois. Yearly subscription $4.00 in advance. Single copy, Twenty-five Cents, in Canada Thirty Cents. Foreign postage, $2.00 additional. Canadian postage, 75 cents.

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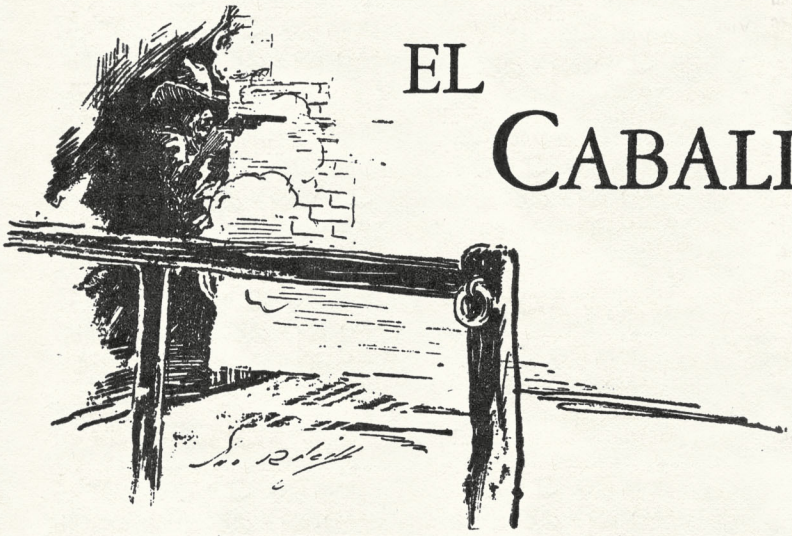


EL CABALLERO

A Complete Novelette

By WALT COBURN

ZEKE SAUNDERS was a thief, a blackguard and a killer. But he was not a coward. He was sitting on the top log of his horse corral whittling a stick and gazing fondly at some fifteen "wet horses" he had stolen over in Mexico, put across the Rio Grande after dark and corraled at daylight. The coats of the horses were still damp from the river, though Zeke's place was twenty miles north of the Mexican Border.

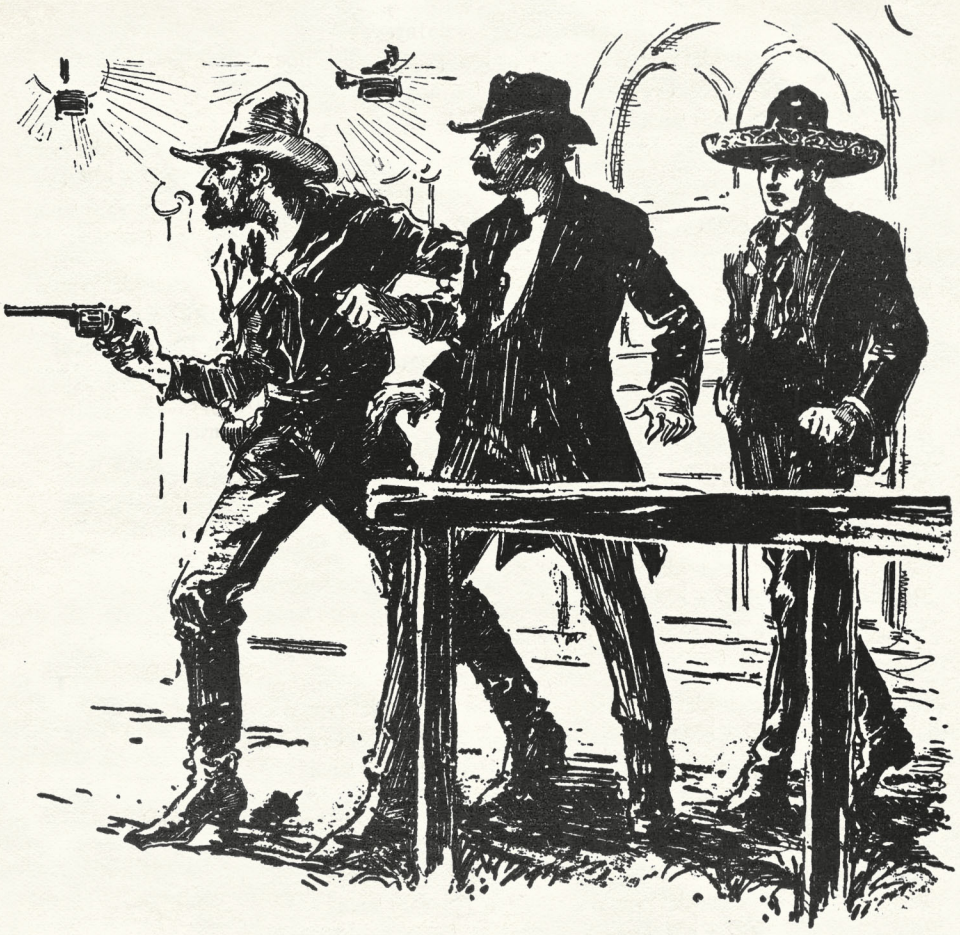
He had ridden hard. The two men who had gone with him had been killed by the Mexicans. He did not know how many greasers he had shot before he gave them the slip; he never counted Mexicans. The six notches on the cedar handle of his six-shooter represented six white men—three from ambush, the other three in fair fight.

He looked across the mesa into the red sunrise. From Zeke Saunders' place, a man could see for many miles in all directions. Zeke's eyes, bloodshot from loss of sleep, fatigue and *tequila*, squinted eastward. A tiny speck moved against the skyline. Zeke's coarse mouth quirked in a humorless smile. Without taking his gaze from the speck in the far distance, he called to some one inside the adobe cabin.

"Hustle up with that breakfast, Clay!"

"Grub's ready right this minute, paw."

A tall boy in cotton shirt and torn overalls appeared in the doorway of the cabin. He was probably seventeen, though tall for his age. His bare feet were small, as were the long fingered hands. His face was tanned and a little pinched looking. Though his jaw was well shaped and strong, the mouth was a little too



sensitive, the nose a little too fine. A pair of straight gazing hazel eyes looked from under heavy, level black brows. The uncut hair was the color of a crow's wing, of good texture, waving a little. Tall, straight as a ramrod, he would have looked well in the lace and velvet and sword of some Virginia cavalier.

Zeke swung a leg across the corral and looked down at the boy. The hard lines of the gaunt face deepened. The ugly mouth twisted in a sneer.

"If you've burnt that bread again I'll hide you with the blacksnake. A hell of a he'p you been to a man! Too weak hearted to fight, too damn' shiftless even to cook a decent meal. You don't earn your vittles. Throw your saddle on your hoss and git to hell outa my sight. Ride into town and fetch me back some decent licker. That *tequila* ties knots in a man's innards. Don't fiddle along the trail makin' up poetry and dreamin' like some girl, neither. Ride that hoss like you'd stole him an' was makin' a getaway. Hit the trail."

Clay Saunders obeyed in silence. His father was in one of his ugly moods. As Clay mounted and rode away he looked back across his shoulder. Zeke's big boned frame leaned against the doorway, the uncombed gray mane hanging like an animal's hair across his red eyes. Two cartridge belts sagged about the lean hips. There was a rifle in the crook of the horse-thief's arm. The lean jaws crunched meat and bread. In one hand was a cup of black coffee heavily spiked with whisky. He stared as he ate, out across the mesa towards the sunrise.

Because Clay Saunders' trail took him in a westerly direction, the boy did not notice the dust cloud that rose like a yellow film across the rising sun. Otherwise he would have stayed out of loyalty to the gray haired old jackal who had given him blows in the place of caresses, cursing him even when he did his best.

Clay did not know that the cold eyes of Zeke Saunders had softened as they followed the boy out of sight. He did not know that Zeke had sent him away to save his boy's life. There had been nothing in Zeke's former actions to justify such generosity of heart.

Zeke watched the boy fade from sight. Then, with a grim smile on his face, the old renegade stepped back inside the cabin and barred the heavy slab door. He finished his breakfast of bread and meat and brown beans and coffee mixed with liquor. He loaded his corncob pipe and smoked until five horsemen came within rifle range. Then he laid aside the pipe and picked up his gun. Poking the barrel through a small hole in the adobe wall, Zeke squinted along the sights. His grimy forefinger pressed against the trigger. Through the gray puff of powder smoke he saw one of the riders pitch sideways out of his saddle. He snarled something to himself as the other four sought quick shelter, leaving the dead man where he lay face up on the ground, the sunlight on his staring eyeballs.

The fight was on. Loading, firing, cursing his enemies, Zeke fought. A bullet ripped open his cheek, taking away part of one ear. Another bullet careened across the cabin and buried itself in his thigh. Zeke wrapped his wounds in filthy rags and drank heavily from his jug of *tequila*. He dropped another man.

For a time the firing died out. Then across the space between the cabin and stable something moved.

It was a spring wagon, loaded with burning mesquite brush. The men were pushing it. The flaming load served as a barricade as they shoved on the wagon tongue. The wagon gathered speed. Zeke Saunders shot with futile fury. The flaming wagon thudded against the door. The men broke from their barricade and raced in zigzag course for shelter. Zeke got one of them. The other two now lay behind the corral. The flames licked at the thatched roof. Zeke's stronghold became a furnace. Smoke filled his eyes and lungs. Yellow flames flicked at his clothing. When he could no longer bear the torture of the heat, he flung open the door and raced limpingly for shelter in the brush. He had not gone ten paces when he dropped in a heap, riddled with bullets. And even after he lay quiet, the two men re-loaded and again emptied their guns in the dead body.

WHEN Clay Saunders returned that evening, just before sundown, he found the cabin in smoking ruins, the four roofless walls still warm from the blaze. The corral was empty. The bullet riddled body of Zeke Saunders hung from the limb of a tall sycamore. Of the five men who had come and gone, no trace save blood spots and empty brass shells remained.

Clay Saunders cut down the bullet pocked body and buried it under the tall sycamore. He shed no false tears, yet there was an aching lump of loneliness in his throat as he stood bareheaded beside the new grave. This place was the only home he had ever known. He had grown up here without the memory of a mother to carry with his growing years. Now that home was gone. He would travel on, somewhere. Even his precious books were gone. Nothing remained. Nothing save a long barreled Colt's gun with six notches cut on its cedar butt. The gun lay on the ground where Zeke had fallen. The men had overlooked it in their bloody zeal to hang the dead body to the limb of the sycamore.

Clay picked up the gun and examined it. Each chamber was empty. Dry blood stained its barrel and darkened the wooden handle.

Clay shoved the grisly weapon in the waistband of his overalls. His face looked a little white under its coat of tan, but his

mouth was straight lipped, his eyes smouldering as he stood there by the burned cabin, tall and slender and straight in the sunset.

Under the dying coals of the ruins, buried under the earth, was a rawhide pack bag or *aparejo*, as the Mexicans called it. In that rawhide bag was money. Clay himself had buried it there, after Zeke and three others had divided the loot they had stolen from a Mexican smuggling train. The others had ridden away. Zeke, half drunk but still retaining most of his cunning, had made Clay dig a deep hole and bury the money in the dirt under the fireplace. Most of it was in Mexican 'dobe dollars, but there were two bars of gold, each bar weighing about twenty-five pounds.

Clay had heard Zeke and his companions drunkenly boast of killing the Mexican smugglers. He had studied the faces of those three evil companions and he would know them again: the thick-set, red cheeked man with curly black hair; a jolly, rollicking sort of fellow who made you laugh with his coarse humor until you looked into his black eyes and saw what the devil had written there. They called him Curly Bill.

Then there was the young fellow who laughed at everything the curly one said. A bold youth not yet twenty, who talked openly of murder and thievery. The others spoke of him as the Kid. Billy the Kid, though Clay thought him a shallow imitation of that boy outlaw whose guns were belching death over in New Mexico. But the youthful bandit beamed under the compliment of the name, missing the contempt that tainted the words of the older men.

The third man impressed Clay as the most dangerous. A tall, silent man whose garb and speech were those of a gentleman who had turned his back upon home and decency and now trailed with the pack of human wolves that raided the Border on both sides, killing boldly, stealing cattle and horses and gold. Though he drank twice as much as any of them, he did not show the effects of drink except that he became more silent and morose, and held himself more aloof from his coarser grained companions. His eyes became more tragic, more broodingly bitter than ever. This man they called John Ringo.

Something in the man John Ringo appealed to the boy Clay Saunders as he crouched in a far corner, watching with eyes that held an odd mixture of fright and curiosity and defiance. Ringo, noticing the boy's ragged clothes, had tossed him some gold pieces.

"Buy yourself some decent clothes, sonny."

Now, after two years, Clay recalled the words of John Ringo. And with the shovel that had dropped the sod in on Zeke's distorted body, he dug into the ashes of the cabin. When he emerged from the blackened roofless walls, he was dragging the rawhide sack with its heavy burden. The hot coals had burned his crude Mexican sandals. His clothes were black from the ashes. Beads of sweat stood out on his grimy face.

He loaded his pockets and saddlebags with the gold and 'dobe dollars. Then he buried the rest of the silver in its former resting place and carefully covered it again.

IT WAS quite dark when Clay Saunders quit the sinister place and rode away, never to return. In his heart burned the spark of adventure. His eyes sparkled brightly and he forgot that he was hungry and weary. He rode with a splendid ease, and the darkness hid his pitiful clothes. His eyes saw the beauty of the starlit night as his horse carried him along the trail. He might have been some young knight, setting out to win his golden spurs. His timidity was gone. A reckless smile played about his mouth. And there was a bold swagger to the manner in which he sat his saddle. Perhaps this young knight was not, upon closer look, so pure of heart. There had been little in his cramped youth to nourish fine ideals. This was the Southwest of the Eighties, when the length of

a man's luck and life depended on his rapidity with a gun.

As he rode, he dug six cartridges from his pocket and reloaded the Colt six-shooter with its six notches and its blood-stained butt. Yet, even young knights carried arms. It was up to Destiny which trail Clay Saunders would take—the straight trail that led out to another world of gentility and ease and mundane things; or the rougher, more twisted trail that would take the rider into a whirl of excitement and raw gold and gunpowder, where life flowed swiftly and redly against a background of rainbows and placer gold.

It was up to Destiny. And Destiny's voice now spoke out of the shadows along the trail—

II

"HANDS up!"

Fear like an icy chill gripped Clay Saunders. Unable to move or cry out, he sat his saddle. Ahead in the trail two men bulked against the sky that was faintly lit by a rising moon.

Whirlwind thoughts swept the boy's brain in the fraction of a moment. His first night of freedom from bondage to be thus blighted? The money he carried stolen, his horse shot or taken from him, his life to be snuffed out like a tallow-dip?

He felt the eager tremble of his horse under him. He had raised the black gelding from a colt. The horse smelled danger now.

"Hands up!" ripped the challenge of the two men on foot. And white lipped with the fear of his first adventure, Clay Saunders jerked his gun and rode at them. Crimson splashes of fire exploded at him. Clay was jerking the trigger of the cedar handled gun that had been his father's. Dumbly, as in some swift nightmare, Clay saw the man go down, saw the second man crumple in a heap, a ghostly white face with dark beard, horribly distorted, a black hole between the staring eyes.

The black gelding, mad with fright, rushed on. Though horse and boy had covered fifty miles since sunrise, neither felt an atom of weariness now. Both were held too securely in the hand of fear to be anything but afraid. They had gone a mile before Clay discovered that he had been hit in the thigh by a bullet. A flesh wound, but painful nevertheless. He bound it up as best he could with strips from an undershirt that was not any too clean. His nerves tingled warmly now from the thrill of his first real fight.

He felt like a man who has taken a plunge in ice cold water, then rubbed himself to a warm glow. A sense of victory brought a smile to his mouth. He was a man. He had fought against double odds and won. He had been marked by a bullet meant to take his life. He had tasted danger and found it palatable. Boylike, he disregarded the element of luck that had favored him. The pain of his wound but served to color his hour of glory. He rode with more of a swagger than ever, his right hand on the blood-stained forty-five.

But when he had gone on for almost an hour, the pain in his thigh made him sick and a little faint. He began watching for some ranch or camp where he might stop and give the wound its required attention.

Off in the distance showed a pinpoint of light. Half an hour's travel brought him into the yellow glow of a camp-fire. About the fire sat several men. Each of these men was heavily armed. No man spoke, but half a dozen pairs of suspicious eyes stared hard at the boy.

"I saw your fire," began Clay.

"The hell!" grunted one of the group, quirking his heavy brows in a comical expression of surprise. "Boys, this feller sighted our fire!"

"Odd," mused another. "Sighted our fire, says he. Kin you beat that?"

A blunt shaped man with bowed legs rose. His face bore neither a smile of welcome nor scowl of enmity, but under the brim of his hat a pair of keen black eyes surveyed the boy on the horse.

"Which way did you come?" he asked in a low voice, the quiet tones carrying with odd clarity.

Clay jerked a thumb back over his shoulder.

"Thataway."

"Anybody stop you?"

"No," said Clay, measuring his words, "nobody stopped me. I come right along."

"And I reckon," said the short statured man in that quiet voice to which every man listened closely, "that some cow-brute hooked you in the laig."

Clay shook his head. He was feeling oddly weak and dizzy and he gripped his saddle horn in both hands to steady himself.

"No. No, sir. I didn't get hooked. I got shot."

"Comin' up the trail?"

"Yes. Yes, sir." There was something in this short man's bearing that commanded the respect of youth.

"Thought you said nobody stopped you?"

"They didn't. I kept on comin'."

"Hmmm. I see. You kept on comin'. That's a right good answer, young man. That laig a-botherin' you?"

"Some," admitted Clay, determined not to appear a weakling before this keen eyed man. "But I reckon to make out. I'll be goin' on now."

"But you sighted our fire and rode here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I thought I might be asked to light and stay all night," said Clay, weary now of this questioning. "I was mistaken. So I'll travel along."

"Hold on, young man. I reckon you kin stay. I doubt if you kin travel far, the shape you're in. Git off, son. Let's take a squint at that laig. One of the boys'll hobble yore pony."

Clay dismounted stiffly. He tried to smile as he leaned against his horse. He unsaddled the black gelding and pulled off the bridle.

"Black Jack will hang around without bein' hobbled," he said.

The men looked at him curiously. The faded cotton shirt, the dilapidated hat, the patched overalls and crude sandals, the cedar handled gun shoved down in the waistband of the overalls. But the boy stood there without flinching, a sort of shy boldness in his eyes.

"Skin outa those pants, young man, while I look at that laig." There was grim kindness about the leader of these hard eyed, heavily armed men.

Clay sat down on a saddle blanket and obeyed the order. The black eyed man was whetting a long bladed Bowie knife on his boot. In those days of buffalo and trail herds the Bowie knife was as much a camp implement as a weapon. Clay noticed the boots—glove fitting, with fancy tops. Hand made, by special measure, those boots. The man's hat was almost cream colored and of finest beaver felt. Clay knew he must be some man out of the ordinary.

THE THUD of galloping hoofs halted the cutting away of the bandage. A horseman loomed up out of the night.

"Well?" asked the leader. "Pick up any sign?"

"Shore did, boss. I located the horses and fetched 'em back. Throwed 'em into the cavvy as I come by."

"That's good. I was afraid they'd been stolen."

"For that matter," said the man dryly, with the smile of a man about to unfold a tale, "the hosses was stole. And a dang good thing fer you, Bob Carver, that you didn't go after 'em personal."

"How's that?"

"Before I run on to the hosses, I finds me two men along the trail. Them two men was none other than Tex Ball and that halfbreed Mex we run acrost over in Chihuahua. Remember them five that was follerin' Zeke Saunders and them other two Curly Bill men—the five that wanted to work our herd? The five we run off?"

"I recollect 'em. Two of 'em stopped you, eh?"

The man grinned.

"No, they'd done quit stoppin' folks. They was dead. About as dead as any

two men I ever laid eyes on. And cowboys, my hat is shore off to the gent that downed them two scalawags. He'd shot 'em each as square between the horns as if he'd measured it with a rule."

"You don't say!"

The group at the fire was displaying enough interest now. Still the man sat his saddle, smiling at some silent joke. Bob Carver, the short statured man whose prowess as a fighter of outlaw and renegade Injun was a byword, glanced shrewdly at the bearer of this startling news.

"And what then?" he asked, seeming to enjoy the bit of drama by letting the man tell the story after his own manner. "What's the rest?"

"Well," said the fellow in a rich Southern drawl, "I done follered the sign of that shootin' man. The moon bein' up, his trail showed plain. His trail leads slap-dab up to this camp."

The eyes of every man swung to stare with heightened interest at Clay Saunders. Clay, sitting on the blanket, grew red under the scrutiny. Bob Carver picked up Clay's gun and gave it swift inspection. The weapon held two recently exploded shells.

"Fer a half baked kid," said Bob Carver softly, "you're right handy with a shootin' iron, young man." He ran a thumbnail along the six notches. "But I don't somehow believe, son, that this is a honest tally."

"That gun," said Clay, a little tremor of defiance in his voice, "belonged to my paw. He was killed this mornin'. I never shot at a man in my life till those two men jumped me along the trail."

"Mmmmm. Well, you made a right accurate beginnin', young man. But if this gun belonged to your paw, by these notches, I'd say you come plumb natural by your marksmanship. Who did you say was your paw?"

"His name," said Clay, "was Saunders. Zeke Saunders."

Bob Carver stiffened, his keen black eyes reading the face of the boy. A strange silence fell over the men as they looked at the white face of the boy who sat on the saddle blanket, blood oozing from the hole in his thigh.

Carver looked from the boy to his men, sending them some sort of silent warning. Then he went about the business of dressing the wound. Clay tried not to flinch as the blunt, skillful fingers squeezed the hole clean. He took a leather covered metal flask from his pocket and unscrewed the cork.

"Better take a shot of this firewater, young man. I'm gonna hurt you some."

"I don't use it, Mister Carver. I reckon to stand the hurt without it."

"So be it," nodded the cowman and, gripping the wounded leg, he poured a goodly amount of the raw liquor into the wound.

As the strong alcohol bit the quivering flesh, Clay went faint with pain. Carver's face dimmed to blackness. The boy, teeth clamped shut to keep back his groans, had fainted.

He did not hear Bob Carver's next words. Perhaps it was as well that he did not.

"He's the whelp of the coyote Saunders, boys." Bob Carver spoke grimly. "But by God, he's no craven coward!"

When Bob Carver, cowman and ex-Ranger voiced praise of any man, that man must be blessed with heroic strain.

III

CLAY SAUNDERS rode away next morning. He thanked Carver for his hospitality. Carver shook his head, an enigmatic smile on his mouth.

"I'd do as much fer a stray dog, young man. You're about as near to a stray critter as a man might find in a day's ride. But don't thank me fer anything. If ever you find John Ringo er Curly Bill, they'll tell you why, if you don't know what I mean. Good day, sir."

Clay Saunders rode away on his black horse. He looked with wistful eyes at the long trail herd, the dusty, bearded riders, the chuck wagon and its four mules. Something in his boy's heart

longed for that free life of the cowboy. That life of bitter hardship, lurking danger, and hard labor. Days of sun and wind and rain. Nights when the stars shone like a blanket of lights over the sleeping herd. Other nights when the lightning crashed and a thousand head of longhorns thundered in a tight packed mass across the plains, in wild stampede.

The lazy song of a rider drifted out of the dust haze that obscured the sun.

"Come all you jolly cowboys,
A song for you I'll sing . . ."

The wound in his thigh ached and throbbed. For all the wealth in his saddle pockets, for all his youth and dreams and swagger, he felt alone, an outcast. He knew that these men had not welcomed him. They had tolerated him, no more. Tears sprang into his eyes but he brushed them away with a tightly clenched fist. Carver had been frank enough. Stray dog, was he? Well, he'd begged his last meal, asked his last favor. The lesson was a little hard to understand, but he'd learned it. He'd stand on his own two feet and fight. He'd prove to Bob Carver and any other man, that he was no stray dog begging grub and shelter.

His first fight fought and won, his first lesson learned, the boy forced a whistle between clenched teeth and rode on along a trail that might lead anywhere.

HE RODE into the town of Santa Fé, New Mexico, one day, and exchanged a large portion of his money for clothes. His thigh was about healed, though he limped a little. He strolled along the streets in his new clothes, hiding his shy wonder of his first city under a little swagger.

He had satisfied his longing for good clothes. In a suit of unfringed buckskin that fit him as if tailored, a wide brimmed hat of cream colored beaver, half boots with fancy stitched uppers, silver spurs, flannel shirt and silk neckscarf of black, he made a handsome figure, boy that he was. His hair was trimmed, he was bathed and brushed. The notched gun hung from a wide, hand made cartridge belt, its loops filled with shells. About his middle was knotted a gay Mexican sash. The sash was his own idea. Few save Mexicans wore a sash. But it tickled his vanity and lent color to his garb.

The click of his high boot heels, the chiming music of his silver spurs pleased him. More than one dark eyed senorita of that old Spanish town looked with favor upon this boy with the handsome, reckless face and jet black hair. A *caballero*, that stripling. A warrior, or the gun with its notches lied.

Clay, flushed by these sidelong glances, hid his timidity behind his swagger. He was not accustomed to beautiful girls. Santa Fé seemed filled with them. At last, red and uncomfortable, he sought shelter in the largest of the many saloons and gambling places.

His black horse was well cared for at the barn. Dusk of the short Southwest twilight was creeping into the shadows of night. Clay was thrilled with the wonder of this gay life.

He paused at the bar, leaning against it idly, his curious eyes taking in the crowded throng. The men lined up at the bar, the well patronized gambling games, the dance floor beyond with its rough men and painted ladies of the night. Something in him responded to all this. Even as it had called his father, years ago, when Zeke Saunders had been a cowboy and a gambler and somewhat of a gentleman.

"What'll it be, stranger?" asked the bartender.

"How? Oh! Make it something light."

He turned to face the barkeep. A flush reddened his beardless cheeks.

"We're all outa milk, sonny."

The man behind the bar winked at a bearded man who was looking with open curiosity at the gaily clad boy.

Clay went hot, then cold, under the insult of the man's grin. He sensed, rather than saw, the amusement of the bearded man beside him. He had that

same quickening pulse beat, that clammy handed timidity that he felt at his first fight with the two men on the trail. A lump in his throat seemed to choke him. Then his hand moved toward his hip, moved back so swiftly that the movement seemed unbroken. The gun with its six notches on the handle was pointed at a spot between the bartender's eyes.

"Something light," Clay repeated, his voice sounding oddly harsh in his own ears. "Lemonade, I reckon."

That nausea of fear was gone. It was as if the feel of that gun banished fear by some odd magic. Clay's lips smiled crookedly. The bartender looked along the gun barrel to the eyes behind it. Those eyes were thin, shining slits now. The eyes of a killer.

"Excuse me, stranger," he said in a new voice. "Lemonade she is—if I have to grow the lemons personal."

Clay nodded. The gun went back into its tied holster. Clay faced the bearded man.

"Now, mister," he said in a chilly voice, "what'll be your game? I think you found something amusing about my clothes."

"I was jest admirin' 'em," said the bearded fellow, with a chuckle. No fear made him correct his viewpoint of amusement. "No offense, young feller. I enjoyed the show, which I'd be right proud to pay fer by buyin' a drink. I'd 'a' swore you was jest a fourflushin' kid, actin' big. But I dunno as I ever seen a purtier gun-throw. And I've seen aplenty. From Canady to Mexico. I'm Jake Hines, Gover'ment scout."

He shoved out a hand the color of old leather. It gripped Clay's in a steel vise. The blue eyes almost hidden in the brown beard, crinkled merrily.

"I'm Clay Saunders."

"Dunno as I ever heard the name. Here comes yore bellywash. Lemme have the bar bottle, Joe. Then shake hands with young Clay Saunders, from Texas. Joe's a right good hand at drink slingin', Clay, but he's hell fer his li'l jokes."

Clay tried to hide his embarrassment. This man was Jake Hines. Men spoke of Jake Hines with that same respectful tone they used in talking of Kit Carson, Bill Hickock and Cody. Hines was the bosom friend of Jim Bridger and Liver Eatin' Johnson.

Clay felt abashed. But the affable and garrulous Jake Hines would have none of that. He clapped Clay between the shoulders, felt of the new clothes, removed a battered hat and tried on Clay's new one. And after a few more drinks, he led Clay about the town with the air of some grand Lord Mayor, pointing out this and that, speaking easily to almost every one he met, now and then introducing the boy as "young Clay Saunders, from Texas."

"Texas," he explained largely, as they strolled arm in arm along the street, "is as good as anywhere to be from. Let's have it straight now, Clay—wasn't you scared purple when you jerked that gun uh your'n?"

Clay nodded.

"It was fight or get hooted out of the place. I chose to fight because I can't stand ridicule."

"Kin you hit anything with that gun?" Jake Hines wanted to know.

"Paw used to make me practise hitting chunks or clods he'd pitch in the air. When I missed, he'd cuff my ears. Once he rawhided me for missing a jackrabbit on the run. He didn't know I missed a-purpose because it was a tame rabbit. Yes, I kin shoot straight enough."

"Yore draw is swift and smooth. Yuh must 'a' practised that aplenty."

"Yes. Though I never thought I'd use a gun on a man. I have no desire to be a killer. I want to study books and—and gamble."

"Gamble?" echoed Jake, tugging sharply at his thatch of brown whiskers. "Cards, Clay?"

"Cards," nodded Clay.

"Books and cards, eh? There's a card game goin' acrost the street. How much money yuh got?"

"Quite a bit," admitted Clay.

"Set out a hundred fer your first lesson,

son. Lemme take keer uh the rest—if you trust me."

Clay laughed and handed over the gold money he had gotten in exchange for his Mexican silver. Taking a hundred dollars, he and Jake stepped into the gambling house.

EVERY table was filled. A man went broke at draw poker and Clay slid into his chair. The suave, somber clad gambler looked at the boy with lifted eyebrows. Clay shoved his gold on to the table in a neat little stack. They were using silver and gold instead of counters of any kind.

Jake, standing unobstrusively in the background, watched the boy with great amusement.

Clay stayed out of the first pot and again remained an onlooker at the second. The dealer eyed the boy with silent amusement. The cards came to Clay to be dealt. A sheep among gray wolves.

The boy's slender hands gathered in the cards, shuffled them with swift deftness and slid the deck to the man next to him. The man cut. Out went the cards with as speedy a delivery as ever made by a nimble fingered tinhorn.

"Cards, gentlemen?"

The pot grew with the betting. They were playing jackpots and the dealer opened for ten dollars. Clay's hundred dollars was in. His boy's face, beardless, without guile, held no trace of pleasure or disappointment.

"Three queens," smiled the gambler.

"Full house," Clay smiled back into the tinhorn's eyes and raked in the pot. He looked less like a sheep among wolves just then as he stacked his winnings.

He played on and on. Losing small pots. Winning larger ones. When he pushed back his chair two hours later Clay had won fifteen hundred dollars.

"Wherever did you learn poker like that, Clay?" asked Jake as they went out.

"My paw and his friends played a lot. He made me sit in and win. I played square poker tonight. I can cheat if I have to. When the game got big and the men drunk, paw would make me stack the hands or work sanded decks."

"Just what line uh business did that paw of your'n foller, son?"

"He was one of Curly Bill's gang."

"Oho! Don't be tellin' me your paw is Zeke Saunders?"

"Yes. Zeke Saunders."

"You come natural by your accomplishments, then. Zeke was a card man when I first run acrost him. Dealin' faro mostly and doin' well. Then he shot a man in the back because he was scared to kill him fair. Next I knowed, he fit a handkerchief duel with some feller. Killed him with a Bowie knife but the feller cut him up bad.

"Then him and three more fellers raided a herd uh beef cattle bound fer the Army post at San Carlos, Arizona. They killed two men. One of the men was a younger brother of Bob Carver. Bob and Zeke once laid up on a rimrock and held off twenty Apaches. I'll never believe it was Zeke that killed young Johnny, Bob's brother. Zeke was ornery as skunk tracks, but him and Johnny had been friends. How come you left home?"

Briefly Clay told of Zeke's death. The boy now understood why he was unwelcome at Bob Carver's camp. He knew that the sins of his father must always be his burden. He was the coyote whelp of a coyote sire.

Jake handed him back the money he had taken from Clay previous to the poker game. The old scout had grown oddly silent. Clay thought he understood the cause for that silence. He halted, holding out his hand in a gesture of farewell.

"I won't be bothering you any longer, Jake. I'll be—"

"Whoa, there! Hold up now, young rooster. Proud as a gosh darn gamecock, ain't you? But you ain't givin' ol' Jake the slip. Not by a jugful. Don't go explainin'. Jake Hines reads your sign. Because your paw was ornery, that's no sign you'd orter make snake tracks when you travel. I'm startin' north, come

mornin'. Advance scout fer a herd that's trailin' to Fort Benton, up in Montana. Clay, I'd be proud to fetch you along fer a pardner.

"You'll git nothin' but plain grub and some days not that. There will be dry days and some dang wet 'uns. There'll be snow afore we git back. There'll be night guards. There'll be Injuns, and some cattle rustlers to fight along the trail. Mebbe you'll git killed. But you'll see some right purty country and the trip'll be more eddication than yuh'll git from a shelf full uh almanacs an' dictionaries. Want to come?"

A lump choked the boy's speech. His eyes were moist as he gripped the steel muscled hand of Jake Hines.

"Good." Jake consulted a huge silver watch. "Got five drinkin' hours afore we pull out. I lost two hours watchin' you handle them cards. Foller me and see this here town."

IV

SIX MONTHS later a tanned youth whose buckskin clothes were travel stained and torn rode along the trail that led to the Diamond C ranch on the San Pedro River. The Diamond C belonged to Bob Carver.

The sash about the young man's waist was faded, as were the fancy boots and hat. But the boy himself was heavier, more matured, and sat his saddle with a reckless grace that became finer raiment. The black gelding was gaunt, but the sleek head tossed impatiently.

Clay Saunders rode at a running walk along the trail. The stocky figure of Bob Carver stood in the doorway of the adobe house. He had recognized the rider from a distance and waited with grim curiosity.

"Howdy, young man?" The cattleman did not add the customary bid to "light and look at your saddle."

Clay unfastened his saddlebags and tossed them to the ground.

"The Allison gang killed your trail boss at Dodge City, Mr. Carver. Here's the money for the herd delivered at Fort Benton. I'll be riding back as soon as you've counted it. Here's a letter from the post commander."

"Eh? How's this? The Allison boys killed my boss?"

"And three of your cowboys. Jake Hines took charge of the herd. We lost a few in night runs."

"Young man, you're the bearer of damn' strange news. You're telling me my trail boss and three men were killed? That Jake Hines took the herd on north? And where is Jake?"

"At camp. Laid up with a couple of holes in him. Somebody got word we were coming back with this money and they made a try for it."

"And just how did it come about that you went north with my trail herd, young man?"

"I hired out to Jake Hines. If you'll count that money, sir, I'll be going back to camp." Clay met the cowman's gaze without flinching.

"And I'll go along with you."

He called to some one inside. A comely lady with brown hair and eyes came to the door. In spite of the gray streaks in her thick hair, she looked young and fresh.

"Mother, put these bags in the bedroom. It's the money for the cattle that went to Montana. I'm taking a little ride."

He kissed her and for a moment the hardness was gone out of his eyes. When Bob Carver smiled it was like sunshine coming through a stormy sky. Mrs. Carver looked up with a smile at the boy on the black horse. His battered hat was off and his uncut hair dropped about the finely chiseled face.

"Perhaps the young man would care for a snack of food, Bob, and a cup of coffee, while you're saddling? He looks like he needed some warm food."

"This is Clay Saunders, mother. His father was Zeke Saunders. He'll be riding back with me in a few minutes."

But the wife of Bob Carver was made of the stuff of frontier women. For all

the softness of her smile, her eyes were brave and kind and just. She met her husband's grim coldness with feminine courage.

"It is I who asked Clay Saunders to eat," she said. "I did not ask who his father or grandfather might be. Clay Saunders, will you forget the rudeness of this husband of mine, whose growl means that he's just too stubborn to give in? Pay him no attention. Will you have some coffee and pie?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Carver," said Clay stiffly, "I'm not hungry."

"Tush, young man," growled Bob Carver, "you'd as well give in. She'll get that pie down you some way." He chuckled, the smile again crinkling his leather tanned face. "Feed him up, mother, while I saddle up."

"You'd better count the money, sir."

Bob Carver halted in his stride towards the barn. He looked up at Clay who still sat his horse.

"I reckon, Clay Saunders, that if you took the trouble to fetch that money back, it'll be all there."

"You won't count it, sir?"

"Why should I?"

"Because," said Clay, smiling oddly, "there's five thousand dollars more than you expect. Jake Hines appraised the herd my father stole from you at that amount. I'm paying you for those cattle. I regret, sir, that I can't make good the life of your younger brother."

Bowing stiffly to Mrs. Carver, Clay whirled his horse and galloped away, leaving the cowman and his wife staring at one another.

FROM the calico draped window of the house, a pair of wide dark eyes watched the boy's departure. These eyes belonged to a girl of fourteen. A willowy youngster with tanned face and bare legs, the daughter of Bob Carver. A shy, beautiful girl who rode like an Indian and found her only companions among the wild animals and birds about the ranch. Too shy to show herself, she had crouched beside the window, peeping out at this strange boy in worn clothes who sat his restive horse with such a careless grace.

The eyes of Virginia Carver were bright with wonder. An excited flush came into the tanned oval of her face. She had never seen such a boy as that. The boys she met at the distant cow land school were awkward of manner and speech, uncouth products of crude environment. This boy with his faded buckskin and tangled black hair was colorfully different, suggested the living spirit of romance. The gun slung about his waist gave a grim touch to his appearance. The once crimson sash spoke of a reckless vanity. He was like a boy from the pages of a book.

"Well, Bob Carver," said his wife, a sad little smile on her lips, "just what are you going to do now? That is the coyote pup you spoke of meeting, is it? Well, you may be a judge of men but I'll stake my best velvet and lace that there's no coyote in that stripling. He's splendid!"

"And the livin', spittin' image of Zeke Saunders twenty-five years ago when he was a captain under Quantrell," added the cattleman, scowling after the vanishing horseman. "Zeke could be the bravest man I ever saw, when he set his mind to it. Proud as Lucifer, too. Came from fine stock in Virginia. I never saw Zeke insult a woman or fail a friend. He never drank till that bunch of renegade Yanks murdered his wife and burned his ranch. That seemed to kill all the good in him.

"From then on Zeke Saunders went from bad to more bad. I can't forget that he once saved my life, Martha. Nor can I ever forget that he shot John in the back. The sole heritage he bequeathed that boy yonder consisted of a notched gun and some stolen money. God pity Clay Saunders. He'll need pity before he's hung some day."

Bob Carver turned towards the barn.

"Where are you going, Bob?" called his wife.

"I'm going to Jake Hines' camp to get the straight of this story."

V

CLAY was working around camp when Bob Carver rode up. In a sort of hammock made of hide and blanket, Jake Hines reclined, a cud of tobacco in his cheek, a fiddle in his hands. The bearded scout was a little white and drawn looking. A white bandage was coiled turbanwise about his head; one leg was bandaged. But he was calling out an imaginary quadrille.

"Allemen left!" he bawled, eyes half shut, the fiddle tucked up under his chin. He punctuated the words with a bar of gay music and a stream of tobacco juice.

"Join hands! Circle to the — H'are you, Bob Carver!"

Clay glanced at Carver, then strode off, an ax over his shoulder.

Carver shook hands with the old scout, then seating himself on a tree stump, smiled quizzically. Jake laid aside his fiddle and replied to the unworded question.

"I'll give it to you from the start, Bob—from the evenin' I met the young rooster in Santa Fé. I dunno when I taken to man, beast er cowboy like I cottoned to young Clay Saunders. You got him to thank fer the safe delivery uh that herd. Yes, sir. That trail boss uh your'n sold you out to them Allison boys. They waited fer us at Dodge. The boss had rode into Dodge from camp on some excuse. I smelt somethin' ornery and, leavin' Clay at camp, I fixes to foller that boss man.

" 'Clay,' says I, as I'm pullin' out fer town, 'keep yore eye peeled and your gun handy. Yonder's yore North Star, and there's the Dipper. Them's your bearin's. If this herd starts runnin', head 'em thataway and shoot any stranger that rides up. She's a full moon and there'll be no reason to miss.' And with that I rides into Dodge.

"Your boss and Charlie Allison is drinkin' at the bar. Closer'n kinfolks. I seen aplenty, so I gits my hoss and heads fer camp. It's nigh second guard time when I gits in rifle shot distance uh the wagon. I'm toppin' a leetle ridge as hell busts loose with both barrels. The earth shakes as them longhorns leaves the world. From the edge uh that runnin' herd comes shots. As I opens up my pony and unlimbers ol' Meat-in-the-Kittle, some bushwhackin' gent with a good eye shoots my hoss from under me and creases me as I goes down. I gits him. Yonder's his damn' scalp a hangin' to that limb. It was the tow headed Allison feller. One of the five was tow headed, remember?

"That herd is passin' me about fifty yards off. I kin see riders flankin' 'em. I sees this Clay young 'un on that black geldin'. He's ridin' like a drunk Injun, pointin' the leaders uh that herd as good as a man kin make out to point a runnin' herd. Them cattle weren't as snaky as some herds, Bob, and he's doin' right good when three-four riders comes at him, shootin' as they come. Clay downs three like he's stringin' fish. The other 'un turns back kinda discouraged at the lead throwin'.

"This gent must 'a' rode back to town, fer I hears later that two Allisons shot that trail boss full uh holes. There wa'n't supposed to be but two men on guard, and them two was in cahoots with the rustlers. They swore there was six a-shootin'. But Clay was the only man at that herd. I gits on Tow Head Allison's hoss and he'ps Clay git that herd strung out while the other boys is gettin' out to where we're at.

"I gits the Tow Head. Clay kills one Allison and the other two may 'a' died later. But we're out one boss and three men. And I got a hole in my neck. We gotta keep movin'. Which we does. Short handed as hell, but movin' along.

"A man had to watch keerful to ketch Clay Saunders sleepin'. He was up all hours uh day and night. Kept two strings of hosses rode down to where they wouldn't pitch much of a mornin'.

"Injuns jumped us twict. But we fit 'em off. Clay handles a rifle with the best of 'em. And he's a born cowman.

Up on the point er back with the drags, he does his work. He's shore a handsome lookin' young rascal as he rides into Fort Benton, up in Montana.

"Them officers aimed to have some fun with him, so they gits him into a poker game. Clay wins all but their boots. Then what do you think he does? He gives it back. Every cent. And he shows 'em how he cheated 'em. One white muzzled ol' major who's played cards all over the States, and most uh the territories, like tuh died uh mortification. And he taken Clay to his house to dinner next day.

"Clay tells me later that the ol' major wants him to study fer West Point. But Clay don't crave no Army discipline. No bugles fer that wild colt. He shows up at camp loaded with books. Tickled as if he'd been made partner in the U. S. mint. They taken a likin' to him, no mistake. The men talked to him. Their wives stuffed him with grub. The young gals fluttered around him. And it never sp'iled him a dang bit.

"Comin' back, he kep' his nose in them books. Arithmetics, grammars, pomes and such. He eats 'em up. Gits plumb drunk on readin', like a ol' whisky soak with a barrel uh licker. I begins to wonder if it ain't gonna ruin the boy fer work.

"But when the two Allisons and some more, made up as Injuns, raid us one night when we're camped north uh the Red, I skins back all doubts. I git hit on the head and my laig shot. I sees two painted Injuns bendin' over me. Then two shots crack and them two Injuns flops acrost my briskit, cussin' in good American lingo, both hit bad. Clay's behind a tree, shootin' at what moves in the shadders, in a way that is right discouragin' to them raiders. They moves off quicker'n they come.

"The two that jumped me turns out tuh be Charlie Allison and his brother, painted up like Injuns. They talks aplenty, tellin' the whole plot. They had it in fer you, Bob, fer runnin' 'em outa Arizona. We got 'em patched up and into town. The sawbones said he was afraid they'd live.

"Me bein' bunged up, we come slow. Pulled in here on the crick last evenin'. I sent Clay with the money. I savvy how you feel about the boy, Bob, but with the right handlin', he'll make a winner. I wish, Bob, that you'd give the young rascal a chance."

"He comes from bad stock, Jake. It ain't in his blood to settle down. He's a gambler. He's only a bald faced yearlin' and he's killed several men. Some day he'll swing at the end of a rope."

"You won't give him a job, then?" asked Jake.

"What kind of a job, Jake?"

"Some steady kind uh work at the ranch. Where he'll see what home-folks look like. Where he'll git shut uh them wild notions an' turn his mind to makin' somethin' of hisse'f. That kind uh work, Bob Carver."

"I don't believe in warming frozen snakes."

"Meanin'?"

"Meanin' that I don't consider Clay Saunders a sound bet. He's too much bronco. But he can go up the trail with my herds any time."

"All right, Bob. I don't reckon I should have expected more. Did you know that the boy taken every cent he had in the world to pay off fer them stolen cattle? He ain't got a dollar to buy clean socks with."

"Zeke Saunders shot an eighteen year old boy in the back. That boy was my young brother. I meant to kill Zeke like a snake when I cut his sign."

Bob Carver's mouth shut in a grim line. He mounted his horse and rode off. Clay saw him go and paused in his wood chopping to watch the cattleman's departure.

BOB CARVER, riding homeward in the slanting sunlight of late afternoon, felt vaguely troubled about this boy who so reminded him of a high strung, unbroken colt. A colt that would turn man killer under the wrong handling.

A colt with great possibilities if properly gentled. Bob Carver wanted to be just. He was known to be a man of stainless honor, just and honorable even in the smallest things, when he dealt with men. He wanted to be honorable in this. But the memory of the boy who had fallen under a murderer's gun was too poignant to be forgotten. Zeke Saunders had once been his friend. Zeke Saunders had once saved the life of Bob Carver. But Zeke Saunders had murdered Johnny Carver and the black taint of that killing could never be eradicated.

Deep in scowling thought, Bob Carver rode up to the house. His wife met him with a glad smile. Always, when he rode abroad, this cowman's life was in danger. Because he had waged such bitter war against rustlers, his enemies were many and dangerous.

"But where's Virginia?" she asked, as he gave her a bear hug.

"Eh? Virginia? Has the little rascal run off and hid again?"

"She rode after you, only a few minutes after you'd gone. I saw her too late to stop her. She was gone like some wild Indian on her pony."

The smile went out of Bob Carver's eyes. His hand shook a little as he tried to make a cigaret. Fear, like some keen knife, stabbed him in the back. Somehow, by some rangeman's intuition, Bob Carver felt that his enemies had struck. That in their studied cruelty they had wounded him so that he would live on and suffer.

Martha Carver, brave woman that she was, reached out her hands to comfort him. But even in this act of pity for her husband, her senses reeled and he caught her just in time to keep her from falling.

Gently, his eyes clouded, his face gray with suffering, he carried her into the house.

Some minutes later he walked toward the barn. There was a rifle in the crook of his arm and on his face was written a terrible calm.

It was roundup season and only a few men remained at the ranch. They were old men, too maimed by years of hardship to follow the long circles. To these men Bob Carver gave blunt instructions to remain. Then he rode away alone, into the sunset, on his errand of grim retribution. A silent, gray man of death, Bob Carver. His eyes were following the pony tracks in the dust of the trail.

At dark, Bob Carver rode up to Jake Hines' camp. Jake sat propped against his saddle, playing softly on his fiddle. Clay was reading a book. Bob Carver swung to the ground. Without returning their nods of greeting, he came to the point with characteristic bluntness.

"Jake, they've stolen my little girl. I lost the sign. I'll give you anything I own if you'll help me trail those men. I don't know another man that can read a trail like you do."

There was no mistaking the terrible grief in the cattleman's eyes. Like some humbled king he stood there, trying to keep his voice from breaking. Jake swung to his feet, leaning on a crude crutch. Clay had laid aside his book and stood by the fire, his heart filled with pity for this cattle baron who was now just a grief stricken father.

"I'll get the horses, Jake," said Clay. "Though you have no business riding with that leg. How many of them in the party, Mr. Carver?"

"Six, by the sign."

"Two apiece," said Clay, and went to fetch the horses.

"Eat some grub, Bob," said Jake, "and swaller some coffee. And don't worry about the baby. We'll have her back, safe and sound, before many hours. You got a real Injun trailer fer guide."

"You can find 'em if any man can, Jake."

"Me? Not me, gosh damn it! The boy! Wait till you see him in action. He's born to it. Got ary idee who the six might be, Bob?"

"Curly Bill's gang." Bob Carver raised a clenched fist and crashed it against the palm of his other hand. "They gutshot me this time, Jake." He flung a hand towards the starlit sky.

"If the God up yonder shows 'em mercy, then he's not Bob Carver's God! I'll shoot 'em where I find 'em!"

VI

JAKE motioned to Clay to take the lead. In single file, the three men rode into the night. The moon showed white and clear above the broken hills. Clay picked up the sign in the moonlight. Standing in his stirrups, his eyes staring ahead at the ground, he followed the horse tracks. They came to rocky ground. Clay got off his horse and handed his reins to Jake. On foot now, traveling at a crouching sort of gait that was almost a trot, he kept on. The trail led south toward the Mexican line, twenty miles away.

Then the trail was blotted out by a blur of many horse tracks.

"They've picked up a bunch of ponies to kill the sign," grunted Jake, frowning.

They lost half an hour here. Clay finally trotted off at a tangent to the main trail. He was following the lone track of one horse. He halted, a mile along this single trail, to pick something from a catclaw limb. It was a bit of cloth several inches square. He passed it to the cowman.

"It's a piece of the baby's dress," said Carver hoarsely. He spoke of Virginia as his baby. Clay visioned a child of perhaps three, able to toddle about.

"One man's taken her this way," explained Jake. "The others will circle back from that lava mesa to the east, join this jasper fu'ther on. White men er Injuns, Clay?"

"Injuns," said Clay quickly, and trotted on, breathing a little hard from his walking.

"Injuns, hell!" snapped Bob Carver.

"The boy's right, Bob. They're Apaches, I'd say. We been seein' smoke sign the last few days. Mebbeso them San Carols Apaches has broke out. What now, Clay?" The boy had again halted and picked up a stick from the trail. A smooth stick, some three feet long, like a wooden ramrod.

"Rifle stick," said Jake, examining it. He pointed to some markings on it. "Chiricahua Apache. Packin' a 45-70 Springfield most likely."

Clay stood by his horse, waiting for advice from Jake. It came in a moment. Jake pointed toward the sharp peaks to the south.

"There's where them varmints is camped right now. I'd bet my life on it. You just as well ride from here on, Clay."

Clay swung into the saddle and they were off at a stiff trot.

An hour dragged past. Two hours. Clay pulled to a quick halt and raised his hand for silence. The three men listened. The bawling of cattle came dimly out of the distance. Jake chuckled deep down in his throat.

"That'll be Curly Bill and his dang pirates comin' outa Mexico with a herd uh stolen cattle, Bob. You stay hid here. Me'n Clay'll ride to meet 'em."

"I'll go along," said Bob Carver.

"And git us all shot? No, stay here. If you hear shootin', come a-quirtin'."

"I'll come a-shootin' when I come," said Carver grimly.

"All right. But don't come onless you're called."

Clay and Jake rode side by side now. Bob Carver stayed behind. When the bawling of the stolen herd became plainer, Jake began singing.

"So's they'll know we're not on the prod," he explained.

Out of the dust ahead rode two men. Jake called out in a loud voice to them.

"If that's you, Curly Bill and John Ringo, hold your danged lead. It's ol' Jake Hines a-bellerin'."

"Who's with you?" challenged a voice.

"A bald faced kid that's so harmless it's sickenin'."

"Don't bawl so loud," called a second voice. "You'll wake up the kid."

Two men rode up out of the shadows. One was the bulky, rollicking Curly Bill. The other was the tall, unsmiling John Ringo. In Ringo's arms was the sleeping

daughter of Bob Carver. She slept, utterly weary, in the arms of the big outlaw.

"Found her when we run into some Injuns," said Curly Bill. "Ain't it Carver's kid? She was too nigh loco with fear to stand questions. Hung on to John like he was Santy Claus."

"Bob Carver's back yonder," said Jake. "I reckon, Bill, that he'll want to see you boys."

"We haven't time to waste killing Carver," said Ringo, his deep eyes fixed on Clay Saunders. He rode his horse closer, peering keenly at the boy. Clay sat his horse, silent and unafraid.

"You've grown some, youngster," said Ringo in a quiet voice, "but you are still Zeke's son. Better metal than Zeke. Tempered more keenly. They're saying around Dodge City that you're quite a lad. Still fond of poetry?"

The tragic face of the man who was meant for better things, seemed to soften as he voiced the question. Clay nodded without speaking. John Ringo rode closer and made as if to hand over his burden when the swift gallop of hoofs announced the arrival of Bob Carver.

The hands of the two outlaws held guns. Carver's Colts glittered dangerously naked in the moonlight.

"Hold up, Bob Carver," snapped Jake. "Don't do somethin' you'll regret to your grave. These men rescued your gal from the Apaches."

Slowly, very slowly, Bob Carver sheathed his gun. His lips were trembling as he rode up to John Ringo and took the sleeping child from the arms of the somber faced outlaw. Curly Bill looked on, his white teeth flashing in an odd smile.

Tears, unashamed and unchecked, coursed down Bob Carver's weather-stained cheeks. When he could find his voice, he spoke.

"Men, I've fought you since the first day I came here. I've sworn to kill you if ever I found you on my range. Tonight you force me to take back that oath. My door is open to you. What I have is yours. You have plugged my guns, John Ringo. I'd like to shake your hand as friend."

But John Ringo did not take the proffered hand. Erect in his saddle, his face chiseled by bitter tragedy and the torture of memory of a past that would not sink into oblivion, John Ringo, gentleman of parts, reputed to be the most dangerous man in the Southwest, gave answer.

"What we did, Carver, was not for you. We ask no favor of you. We'll tender no false friendship. Your ways are not our ways. Our trails run opposite directions. You owe us nothing, but I realize your emotions. Because we don't wish to obligate a man who feels toward us as you do, we'll keep off your range. We'll not bother your stock. Between us will be a truce. A truce, nothing more. Between us, Bob Carver, there can never be friendship. Good night."

HISTORY has branded John Ringo with the iron of infamy. It is said that he was a murderer, a felon and a rascal of the blackest type. But even his enemies have admitted his cold nerve. And it has been said of this man that once he gave his word, he never broke it. Now, as he turned his horse and rode away, there was something splendidly courageous about his loneliness. Perhaps the exile of Ringo from home and friends was the more bitter because the punishment was self-imposed.

John Ringo gave his word that he would never again molest Bob Carver's stock. The outlaw kept that given word.

Carver turned to the jocular, merry lipped, cold eyed Curly Bill.

"Well," said Carver slowly, "I reckon there's truth in what Ringo said. We don't use the same trails, Bill. But all the same, I'd be right proud to somehow pay for what you've done fer me."

"Better fergit 'er, Carver," chuckled the rotund Curly Bill. "Gawd knows we've stole aplenty off you. You're more of a man than I ever thought. Never knowed you had one uh them organs called a heart. Well, take good care uh that baby. She's shore a game li'l cuss.

Taken to John like he was kinfolks. She et supper with us. We had her laughin' afore long. Dunno how a danged ol' cuss like you ever got such a gal. John calls her his li'l wildflower and fer all he's solemn as a preecher, she took up with him like pardners. You let her git away again and by gosh, Carver, we'll keep her. So long, you ol' wolf."

Rascal that he was, Curly Bill had something in his coarse grained make-up that was almost likable. A chuckling, cutthroat, pirate chief set on the desert was this Curly Bill. He shoved out a hand and the enemies exchanged grips. Then the outlaw galloped off toward his stolen herd and his blackleg companions of the night trails, a song on his thick red mouth.

Clay's eyes followed the two outlaws. When they had gone, he turned his glance to his two companions.

"I'll meet you at camp, Jake," he said, and before Jake Hines or Carver could question him, the boy was gone in the wake of the two outlaws.

VII

JAKE HINES never questioned Clay about riding that night with the cattle rustlers. Clay came into camp about noon. The boy seemed wrapped in deep thought. He hardly seemed to hear Jake's words as the old scout told him that Bob Carver wanted them to come to his ranch and occupy an empty cabin there until it was time for another trail herd to go north. Kansas City this time. It was getting too late in the year to go up the long trail to Montana.

"We'll be more comfortable at the ranch, Clay."

"Uh? Oh, sure. When do you go, Jake?"

"Not 'me', young rooster. I said 'we'."

"If you'll get good care there at Carver's place," said Clay finally, "I'll be drifting along, pardner. Can't leave all my dollars in one place. I'm not welcome at Bob Carver's place. Besides, I have some business that needs attention."

Jake spat thoughtfully, eying the boy with a keen scrutiny that Clay foiled with a smile. The boy was becoming somewhat of a puzzle to the plainsman. About the time he had Clay figured out, the youngster presented another side of his complex nature.

"Looky here, young rooster. You ain't gonna join up with Curly Bill's wolf pack, are yuh?"

"I'm not joining any man, Jake. Not even you. I'll take no man's orders as long as I can make my own way. I'm going away to new places. I want to see what lies beyond that skyline."

"Restless, eh?"

"Something like that, Jake. I can't be happy here, sitting on my hocks whittling a stick. I want to cross the mountains. I want to sit on a strip of white sand and look at the ocean. I want to watch those white seagulls and see the sun go down behind the sea."

He seemed to have forgotten Jake. He stood with outflung arms, his eyes misty with vision, his face transformed. Such a look might have lighted the face of Columbus, Drake, Hudson, Lief the Lucky. It was the call of high adventure. The boy's blood pulsed more quickly, his mouth straightened to a smile. A tall, black haired boy in shabby buckskin.

Jake found his pipe and lit it. He puffed in silence, pretending not to notice the youth who stood as one transfixed by some vision.

"If I was twenty years younger, Clay," said the grizzled scout wistfully, "I'd be goin' along with you."

"You won't feel I'm deserting you, Jake?"

"Desertin' hell! But afore you go, you gotta ride over to Carver's and let Miz Carver fill you up on pie. I promised Virginia I'd fetch you."

"Virginia?"

"Carver's gal. The young 'un we found."

"How'd she know I existed?"

"She seen you yesterday when you took Carver his money. She woke up

comin' home and said she had rode out to see you. Got a clean shirt?"

"I can wash this one."

"It'll come apart if you put 'er in water. Ride into Tombstone and git some duds."

"Do they give clothes away in Tombstone, Jake?"

"I got credit there. I'll give you a note to Doc Holliday. Doc's a fancy dresser hisse'f. He'll rig you up."

"Loan me about enough to get in a card game," laughed Clay. "I'll win enough to buy us both clothes."

Jake tested his aching leg.

"I'll go along. I got a good drunk a-comin' anyways. We'll go in the mornin' when our hosses is rested. Kinda of a last celebration, Clay, bein's you're goin' away."

SO IT came about that the two rode together into that frontier city of Tombstone. As in Santa Fé, Jake seemed to know every one. Clay shook the hand of men who were making history. Wyatt Earp, the fearless marshal of Tombstone, whose six-shooter was law. Morgan Earp, his brother. The tall, emaciated Doc Holliday, said to be the quickest gunman in Tombstone, right hand bower of Wyatt Earp. A clean-cut young man named Breackenridge. Sheriff Behan. Others. Men of granite and steel, makers of shotgun law, men whose lives depended on their sheer courage and skill with a gun. The town they ruled was the Paris of the Southwest.

Gambling games ran without the burden of limit. The bars were crowded. The Bird Cage Opera House offered gay entertainment. Buckskin Frank Leslie, whose mixed drinks rivaled his uncanny skill with a six-shooter, served Clay lemonade that was a creation. He nodded approval at the boy's choice.

"A man lives longer," he said, "if he stays sober. Am I right, Jake?"

"You never was righter, Frank. Set me out my poison. Git in yourse'f. Then tell us where we kin locate a bath, a hair cut and some fancy clothes. Me'n my pardner is out to paint the village."

The genial Doc Holliday offered his services and led them down the street. This witty fellow whose face and frame showed the ravages of consumption, kept Clay laughing. Yet there was a deadliness about the suave and genial Doc that penetrated his humor. He was known throughout the Southwest as the killer of the Earp clan.

But tonight Doc Holliday was a skilled host. He looked at Clay with frank approval an hour later when, Jake and Clay in new gay garb, set out for the Oriental gambling palace, owned, it was said, by Holliday and Earp.

"I'm afraid, Saunders, that you won't last long in here."

"Bet you a new hat, Doc, that the boy makes a winnin'," chuckled Jake.

"Take the bet."

"And I'll bet a pair uh boots he kin out-cheat the slickest dealer you got."

"You're drunk, Jake."

"Mebbeso. Want the bet?"

"Hate to rob you, Jake."

"Want the bet, Doc?"

"Since you insist, yes. This will be quite a show if it keeps on. Come on. Yonder's a table. Clay, if you can crook that dealer, I'll buy you the best supper you ever ate."

"I'd rather play straight poker," said Clay.

"Don't draw out on your pardner," said Jake. "Use your tricks, son. It ain't crooked, I reckon, when the owner uh the layout knows it."

"Go the limit," smiled Doc.

Clay found a chair at the game. Jake and Doc Holliday looked on from a position at the bar. Wyatt Earp joined them.

Clay lost the first three pots he went into. Then he began winning a little. He lost twice, then won back three times the amount of his loss on one hand. He was cheating now. Cheating with a deck he had never seen before. At the end of an hour the dealer, a little tight lipped and noticably annoyed, sent a mute signal of distress towards Holliday. Doc nodded his head in a barely perceptible motion.

The dealer brightened perceptibly. He dealt from a new deck.

There were five men playing. When the betting climbed, all but Clay dropped out. Clay looked at his cards, laid them face down and shoved his entire winnings to the center of the table.

The dealer looked at him, smiling faintly, and covered the bet.

"I'm betting you're bluffing, young fellow," he said pleasantly. "Cards?"

"I'll play what I have," said Clay. "No cards. But before you draw to your hand, will you oblige by showing me the three bottom cards in the deck?"

"What do you mean?" The gambler's smile froze to a thin slit.

"I'm just a kid at this game," explained Clay with a naïve smile. "All I have is in that pot. I can't see what harm is done if you deal off the three bottom cards, face up where all of us can see 'em. I know it's a queer request and unethical, but surely, in an honest game, there is no harm done."

At the bar, Holliday stiffened a little. His hand dropped to his gun and the genial look on his face gave way to a mask-like calm. A hush had fallen across the men at the card table. It was an uneasy hush, like a dead calm that breeds a cyclone. Earp had gone out. Jake and Doc were alone. It looked as if the evening's entertainment might be suddenly brought to a climax by belching guns.

"On second thought," said Clay Saunders in an easy, soft drawled voice, "I'll retract the request. After all, it was a silly one."

The dealer relaxed, his lipless mouth twisting in a cold smile. His well kept right hand came away from the vest pocket that hid a little derringer pistol.

"Instead," said Clay gently, "I'll name the three cards on the bottom of the deck. Three aces. Diamond, spade and heart. Fill your hand!"

"Fill your hand!" The soft spoken words carried a double meaning. The dealer had the choice of filling his poker hand with the needed cards. Or he could fill his hand of flesh with the cold butt of a gun.

Clay's right hand had somehow slid from view. Its fingers closed on the cedar butt of a big Colt. His eyes held those of the gambler. His beardless mouth smiled soft challenge.

For a long moment the gambler stared into Clay Saunders' eyes. Then, with hands that shook a little, he discarded three cards and drew three from the top of the deck. With his left hand, Clay spread his five cards face upward on the table. Three jacks and a pair of treys.

"That beats me," said the dealer, reaching for the discard.

"One minute," said Clay, still smiling. "I'll bet the size of the pot against the gun in your vest pocket that there are three aces on the bottom of the deck."

But the dealer had raked in the discard and mixed the deck. Clay pushed back his chair and rose. Without attempting to claim his money, he walked empty handed to the bar and joined Doc Holliday and Jake.

"When do we eat?" grinned Clay. "I'm hungry."

"Hungry?" gasped the doctor. "After that?"

The eyes of a score of men had followed the boy to the bar. Who was this young gamecock who could upset the equanimity of hardened Tombstone? The dealer, at a signal from Holliday, joined them at the bar. Clay held out his hand.

"You have an apology coming, sir," said the boy, flushing awkwardly now. "I cheated several times. I had a bet with Doc Holliday."

"Any man than can out-fox my dealers," said Holliday, "is welcome to his winnings. But you threw a hell of a scare into us. That was a show worth the price, Clay Saunders. And if ever you want a job dealing, drop around."

"I wear a number seven hat, Doc," boomed Jake, reaching for the whisky, "and a number six boot."

"And a three by six wooden box, you old coyote," chuckled Doc. "Gentlemen, let's adjourn to the Maison Doree where our estimable chef, Julius Caesar, will set out the finest dinner between New York

and San Francisco. Then we'll honor the Bird Cage with our company. But I'm afraid the prize act of the evening has been already furnished."

And taking Clay by the arm, the whimsical Doc Holliday strode out, Jake following close behind, uncomfortable in his new clothes, almost forgetting to limp in his elation over an evening of promise.

VIII

THE PARTY of three ambled with luxurious leisure up the arcaded board sidewalk with its row of stores, saloons and eating houses. Allen Street, its Broadway, where the range and the city brushed leather against silk and broadcloth.

As they strolled along, Clay's keen eyes scrutinized each face as if he were seeking some one. But his gaze came away from each face without the flicker of recognition. Jake was too gloriously tipsy to notice and Doc Holliday passed it over as youthful curiosity, if he noticed it at all.

At the Maison Doree Clay partook of the finest meal he had ever eaten. He even sipped tentatively at a glass of champagne. Then they bent their course for the Bird Cage Opera House.

It was on the way there that an incident occurred that was to have a bearing on Clay's future.

Wyatt Earp had joined them as they sat over their coffee. He and Holliday had exchanged a few brief words in private. Earp, the marshal of Tombstone, was with them now as they walked up the street. Doc and Clay walked ahead, Jake and Wyatt Earp behind.

"Watch out, Wyatt," called Holliday in a low voice without turning his head or slackening pace. "Here they come."

Six men came down the street towards them. Even at a distance, Clay recognized the tall figure of John Ringo. The others were strangers to the boy. But not to Doc Holliday and Marshal Earp.

Clay, sensing the tenseness but vaguely, wondered at the actions of his companions. For Earp had stepped up alongside Holliday, forcing Clay back with old Jake. The two exchanged a quick look. Jake winked a little drunkenly. Holliday and Earp strode on, their hands on their guns.

"It's the Clantons, McLowerys and Ringo," muttered Jake.

"Evenin', Doc," called John Ringo, "H'are you, Wyatt?"

"Hello, boys," replied Holliday, sinister mockery in his tone.

"Howdy, Ringo?" added Wyatt Earp.

They passed one another like bristling dogs.

"Hello, John Ringo," called Clay, halting. "Here's your mail. I got it at the post office and was aiming to ride to Galeyville with it tomorrow."

"I'm obliged, Clay," Ringo took his letters and stalked on. "We're just pulling out," he called back with seeming irrelevance.

Jake bit off a chew of tobacco and munched ruminatively as they followed Holliday and Wyatt Earp.

"Well, you played hell, son," Jake muttered. "I never thought to warn yuh. The Earps and them boys is dead enemies. You ain't he'ped your standin' in Tombstone by bein' chummy with John Ringo."

"I speak to my friends where I find 'em, Jake," said Clay hotly. "I'm not seeking favors from Tombstone. I'm running for no office. I'll speak to whom I please."

"Shore thing." Jake grinned and sprayed the street with tobacco juice.

He was a little nettled at Clay. And Clay's self-assurance and swagger were that pride that comes before the inevitable fall. Jake hoped that the youngster would learn without his spirit being broken. But learn he must, and that day was not far distant.

It must be said for Clay Saunders that he did not realize, then, the bitter enmity between the Curly Bill faction and the Earp clan and Doc Holliday. They were like bulldogs held on a thin leash, ready to tear at one another's throats. The day was soon coming when they were to shoot

one another down. But of Tombstone politics, Clay knew less than nothing. It was Jake's place to warn him but Jake had forgotten.

Holliday's attitude towards Clay, as they found their way to a box at the Bird Cage, was an edge cool. Wyatt Earp left them there with a brief nod of parting. But his eyes bored into Clay's for a moment as if the marshal were reading the boy's inmost thoughts. Clay had an uncomfortable moment. He had a sudden feeling of helplessness. These were men who had won respect as law officers and fighters. His boy's prowess was a silly performance by comparison. He thought he read a warning in the eyes of Wyatt Earp. Perhaps. He shrugged away his uneasiness in sheer wonder at his first vaudeville performance.

Their box was directly above the stage. Two performers in red tights and gilt spangles were performing on a slack wire. A man and woman. The man was a little drunk, and the glare of the footlights revealed the weariness under the woman's paint and powder. But Clay sat there enthralled.

A comedy team came on. Two blackface minstrels whose songs were well sung and whose jokes rocked the audience with bellowing mirth.

Jake was stricken with a spasm of hiccoughs, and at Doc's suggestion drained a quart of champagne without the formality of a glass and without taking a breath until the bottle was emptied.

"Feel better?" questioned the genial host.

"Yes and no," came the dubious reply. "I fergot to lay aside my chaw. Swallered 'er. But she'd orter set good, Doc, if a man had another bottle uh that joy water to melt 'er."

The curtain had been rung down. Now it came up slowly to the accompaniment of orchestra music that was soft and sweet above the faint noises out in the audience. The stage was semi-dark, lit by a myriad candles meant to represent fireflies. Clay consulted his program.

"Dulcie Adoree, the Darling of the Pacific. The Dance of the Firefly."

Dulcie Adoree drifted across the stage like a bit of blown thistledown turned golden red. A colored spotlight followed her as she came on toe-tips, silken legs twinkling, her brief skirts billowing a little as she swayed this way and that. A mass of thick golden curls tossed about an elfin face. Clay leaned across the box, breathless at the fairylike girl whose delicate grace and elusive beauty was the most glorious thing his eyes had ever beheld.

She must have seen him, and read the frank adoration written on his face, for she sent him a fleeting smile. She moved as if she were floating in the summer dusk. In and out among the candle fireflies. Arms reaching for the tiny lights, eyes and lips wistful. To Clay she was a beautiful dream come to life, yet more elusive than the magic fabric of dream things. Beyond the reach of his plainsman's touch. Their worlds as far apart as are the poles.

In and out, like a flame hued moth, among the little lights. Dulcie Adoree, the Darling of the Pacific. In and out. Almost vanishing in the dusk. Returning once more, more beautiful, more fairylike than ever. Dulcie Adoree.

Then it happened. The thistledown was blown too close to the candles. The girl's chiffon skirt burst into swift flame. The licking, crackling flames enveloped the swaying body. Her face, white as death, with two crimson rouge spots, twisted with terror. She screamed. The packed audience froze with sickening horror.

CLAY cleared the box railing, running even as his feet struck the stage. His coat was off, and in the next split second its heavy folds smothered the flames. He crushed smaller flames with his hands without feeling the stab of his burned palms. He was holding her in his arms. Her eyes, stark with fright, were looking into his tense face. The pungent odor of burnt cloth stung his nostrils. He carried her into the wings, where a band

of painted, costumed troupers rendered blundering aid. A heavy woman holding a blue cape trimmed with white fur, rushed up.

"My God! My God! Goldie, Honey! Tell me you ain't dyin'!"

"Get a doctor!"

"Bring some salve! Lard'll do! Damn it, somebody!"

But the little dancer slipped from Clay's trembling arms and stood there, laughing a bit hysterically. She held Clay's coat in her hand. Her ballet dress was a charred ruin, but the girl was unhurt.

"Don't call any doctor," she said. "I'm quite—quite all right. Mother, stop shrieking and give me my wrap."

She stood there, shaking a little, her breath coming in quick little sobs. A butterfly with singed wings. Then with a quick, impulsive movement her arms went about Clay's shoulders and standing on her tiptoes, she kissed him on the mouth.

Clay went hot as fire, cold as if stricken by a chill. The red stuff from her mouth was now on his. Her wide blue eyes, heavily fringed and shining with unshed tears, were thanking him.

So Clay's dream girl became alive. Sweetly, gloriously alive. No longer beyond reach of his arms. Dazed as a man dead and waking in the midst of Paradise, Clay stood there, awkward, dumb, his eyes bright with wonder.

He did not remember until a very long time afterward, that the butterfly's mother smelled strongly of whisky. He barely knew that she thanked him moistly as she wrapped the singed butterfly in the blue cape trimmed with white rabbit fur. Clay was too entranced to see anything but the girl, too enthralled to hear any voice save hers. Though a dozen or more of these trouper folk wrung his hand.

Suddenly waking from his trance, Clay felt himself oddly out of place among these people with their grease paint and tawdry costumes. The manager of the Bird Cage had brought the first sort of aid that came to his mind, namely, several bottles of champagne. Corks popped. Everyone was chattering. Dulcie Adoree herself placed a glass of the sparkling wine in Clay's hand. She saw the burns on his hand and kissed them. And because Clay did not know that kisses were more ordinary than handclasps among these Gipsies of the spangled road, he felt, at the same time, terribly embarrassed and suddenly wafted to the golden aura of some pagan heaven. Her glass touched his.

"To my hero!" she whispered, her eyes holding his. Clay drank without the sensation of any taste save that of love.

The nimble brained manager was out on the stage, making a speech. The audience applauded with whistles and stamping feet and calls. The singed butterfly was dragging him out into the footlight glare. Coatless, his hair awry, he stood there, staring boorishly. And out of that sea of faces he saw but one. It was the whimsical, sinister face of Doc Holliday. Clay's head felt heavy. The wine was numbing his senses. He moved a little uncertainly when again in the box with Jake and the thinly smiling doctor.

Jake passed the boy a bottle.

"You look like you needed a bracer, son. Drink hearty."

"Felicitations, my young *caballero*," smiled Doc Holliday. "You're quite an impromptu entertainer." Clay missed the taint of malice in the voice of Tombstone's most deadly killer.

THE SHOW went on. But Dulcie Adoree was not to be cheated of her hour of applause. She brought Clay's coat to him and, at Doc Holliday's suave invitation, took a seat. The puffing, rouged mother of the girl flopped unbidden into a second chair and Jake made an unobtrusive attempt to put on the tight boots which he had previously slipped off in the great cause of bodily comfort.

The mother, back stage, had made the error of calling the girl "Goldie". But she now addressed her as Dulcie. Jake plied the ample lady with more wine.

"Ain't had so much fun since we hung the Johnson boys," declared the plainsman with enthusiasm. "Pass your glass, ma'am."

To any eyes save those envisaged by infatuation, Dulcie Adoree would have looked not at all like a fairy or butterfly in her street clothes. Pretty enough, to be sure, in a pink and white and baby blue way, with her golden curls and wide eyes fringed with blackened lashes. But her lips were a bit too vivid, her hair a shade too golden, her manner a trifle too forward. A child of the vaudeville, Dulcie. The tinsel of her spangles a little tarnished, her slippers a trifle soiled, her eyes spoiled by the watching of shattered ideals. Yet, withal, a wistful little girl who carried a battered doll in the tin trunk with her make-up, and scented, soiled costumes.

Perhaps, that night in Tombstone, the stage child was as sincere as she had ever been in her life of make-believe. She held Clay's burned hands in both of hers. She did not smoke or take any more wine. For she was woman enough to know that this strangely handsome boy worshiped her as only a boy worships his first love. And she would not have spoiled that adoration for anything in the world.

Dulcie Adoree, whose real name was Goldie Jones, had never met this sort of adoration, save in her dreams. Like some child playing with a delicate toy, she played with the boy and his love. His very silence and faltering of speech flattered the woman's vanity within her. She was not yet twenty and looked like a child of seventeen in the merciful night lights. Even the cynical Doc Holliday felt a little sorry for her.

From the tail of her eye she watched her mother. That lady of the calcium and grease paint world was becoming moistly, unmistakably intoxicated. She was weeping into a heavily scented handkerchief now as she told the attentive Jake how her husband had left her years ago. Left her for a black eyed hussy who already had three husbands and none of them under sod.

Dulcie squeezed Clay's hands, kissed him lightly, and piloted her unsteady and protesting mother out of the box. Doc Holliday bowed them a correctly formal, if somewhat ironical farewell.

"You'll come to see me in Frisco, Clay?" the girl called back.

"Yes. Yes indeed—Dulcie."

They resumed their seats. Clay's head was clearing again and he slowly swept the audience with a searching glance, as if he were hunting some certain face in that throng.

In turn, Holliday studied the boy with more than a casual interest. Jake, apparently saturated with liquor, watched the lean faced doctor intently. Jake's eyes were keen and steady and observing, albeit the plainsman's gait and tongue were unsteady.

The excitement of the evening had died, leaving the three occupants of the box somewhat bored. Doc Holliday yawned. Clay got to his feet, while Jake drained the last drop from a bottle and set it down.

AS THEY stepped into the darkened street, all three involuntarily halted, blinking a little as their eyes became accustomed to the dim light. Clay stood a little behind Holliday and Jake. The boy did not see Jake twist forward and sidewise. Two guns roared out of the night. One gun belonging to a man hidden in the shadows, a man who staggered drunkenly, then pitched headlong on his face in the dust. The other gun belonged to Jake Hines. Jake, who had been so unsteady on his feet that he had almost fallen as he left the box. Jake was sober enough now as he stood there, a thin spiral of smoke twisting from his gun barrel.

"I knowed that skunk 'ud show his hand soon er late," said Jake.

"Who?" asked Clay.

"That dealer from the Oriental. Feller you played with. You bent his pride and he aimed to collect damages. Sorry to deprive you of a dealer, Doc. The critter brung it on hisse'f."

Jake took off the new hat and poked a finger through the hole in its beaver crown.

"Ruined. Plumb ruined."

With a grin he handed it to Clay and took the hat from Clay's head. For the first time Clay noticed that Jake had exchanged hats inside the theatre. The old scout had emerged wearing the boy's cream colored beaver hat, while Clay had absentmindedly donned Jake's black hat.

"You switched hats on purpose, Jake!" Clay accused him.

"I seen that job-lot tinhorn sport sizin' up that hat uh your'n back at the Oriental. He has a ornery look in his eyes as he shakes hands. Seein' how you're comin' down with as tough a case uh puppy love as ever a man seen, I swaps headpieces. You're that lovesick that you don't ketch on. Yeah, I was expectin' that jasper to show his hole card afore we got outa town."

Sheriff Behan came bustling up. A small crowd gathered about them and the dead gambler.

"Who done it?"

"I'm your huckleberry, Johnny Behan," said Jake easily. "He shot at my head. I shot at his belly."

"It was a clear case of self-defense," put in Holliday. "Jake's explanation carries a moral to aspiring guntoters. The head of a man makes a damn' poor mark after dusk. The shot was meant for our young companion, here. Sheriff Behan, let me present young Clay Saunders. You may recall his father, Zeke Saunders, a member of Curly Bill's gang."

The doctor's lean face was smiling but his eyes were hard and cruel. Behan eyed Clay curiously, smiling wanly as he took the boy's hand. Jake looked on with grim silence.

The Earps and Sheriff Behan were political foes. It was rumored that Behan stood in with Curly Bill and John Ringo. Clay was unaware of this political enmity. He missed the irony of Holliday's reference to his father.

"As long as this killing was in self-defense, Jake," said the sheriff, "there's no need to hold you. I'll let you know if you're needed."

"I'll be at Bob Carver's ranch on the San Pedro," nodded Jake. "Come on, Clay, we done enough hell raisin' fer one night."

As Jake and Clay rode toward camp, the older man voiced a bit of sage advice.

"Son," said he solemnly, "I'd stay clear uh Tombstone from now on, if I was you."

IX

"YOUNG man," said Bob Carver, when Clay and Jake rode up to his ranch the following day, "I think it's time you and I buried the hatchet."

"I'd rather have your friendship, sir," said Clay simply, "than almost anything I ever desired." The boy's frank smile and the open sincerity of his words left Carver somewhat disconcerted. "Some day," Clay went on, "I hope to win that unreserved friendship. But just now, Mr. Carver, I won't ask it of you."

"You didn't ask any questions of me," said Carver, "when I came to your camp for help. You didn't give me time to thank you. My wife and little girl are waiting to do that for me. But I'll never forget, young man, that you risked your life to help me and mine."

"Risked nothing, sir," said Clay. "There was no fighting."

"There might have been."

He led them to the house. Clay felt silly when Mrs. Carver took his hands in both of hers and thanked him in the softest voice Clay had ever heard. Virginia greeted him shyly. He was more than ever her man-god.

"However did you burn your coat?" Mrs. Carver inquired of Clay as they sat in the ranch house parlor.

"I knocked out some ashes from my pipe on it," Jake stepped into the awkward silence with a nimble fabrication.

"Goodness, Jake," scolded the good housewife, "you're careless. Clay, take off your coat and Virginia will mend it.

She's a real artist with a needle. Now don't be bashful. Jake will tell you that we're plain folks and used to seeing men with their coats off."

So the coat was taken off and mended, the coat that had been burned in saving Dulcie Adoree. Mended by Virginia Carver. There was something of the prophetic in it.

For that unseen hand of Destiny was to point out strange trails which Clay Saunders would follow. The day was soon to come when Clay Saunders, the boy, would stand alone, stripped of honor and friends. Dulcie Adoree would have her part in that drama of life and death. There would be another coat to mend. The coat of honor and pride.

There would come the time when he was to look back upon this day with wistful longing.

But today, here in this homely household, the boy's thoughts were of the golden haired girl who had danced her thistledown way into his heart. He seemed preoccupied and a little bored. In his eyes, Virginia was but a child. For he was almost nineteen and Virginia Carver was a fourteen year old child. Beautiful, to be sure, but still a baby,

They had chicken and dumplings and all manner of good things to eat. Later they sat on the long veranda and talked.

"I'll have another trail herd shaped up in a few weeks," said Bob Carver. "Meanwhile you two boys can live in that cabin yonder. Jake'll need a few weeks' rest and Martha will feed you both up."

"Clay ain't stayin'," said Jake. "He's got an idee he wants to travel some. He's rarin' to see what's acrost the skyline. Somethin' about white sea chickens an' oceans an' such. It's them books he's been a-readin'."

"Don't blame him," said Bob Carver. "Every man needs some travel to shape him out good. Going out to California, Clay?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's gold out there," said Carver. "If I was younger and single I'd be headin' that direction myself. Well, when you get back don't forget where the ranch is."

Jake and Carver fell into a discussion about the relative future of Arizona and California. Virginia took Clay on a tour of inspection of the ranch. She showed him her pets, the wild things she had tamed. An owl, two rabbits, a whole covey of quail, a crippled deer. Clay pretended a greater interest than he really felt. He listened attentively as she told him of her capture by the Indians, of her rescue, of John Ringo and the jolly Curly Bill. The tragedy of her terror still showed in her eyes. And when he spoke, she listened with her child's heart in her brown eyes.

AT DUSK Clay rode away from the ranch. Jake rode part of the way with him, hiding his disappointment beneath a careless banter. He was afraid for the boy, yet he knew that Clay Saunders must face his test of manhood and either survive or perish.

"I'll be turnin' back here, Clay. So long, son. I ain't gonna waste breath givin' you advice. You savvy right from wrong. Don't worry over any mistakes you make. They're lessons, no more. Profit by 'em. There's a streak of bad in you. Watch it always. Keep a cool head and don't never lose your nerve. Don't pick trouble, but if it's forced on you, shoot fer the belly button. Good luck, Clay. And goodby."

Clay Saunders rode on into the purple shadows of the night. The open trail lay ahead. The trail to high adventure. Yet he felt no thrill of excitement. Only sorrow at parting from a friend.

He had left his bed and pack animal with Jake. He planned to ride horseback to Benson, the nearest railway point on the new Southern Pacific line. Jake had agreed to have Black Jack, the black gelding, brought back to Carver's ranch. Clay had told Virginia that she might have the horse until he came back.

The old haunting restless feeling drove him on. He had no desire to sleep. He

would ride on towards Benson, along the stage road.

His way took him past Tombstone, but Clay passed on, leaving the twinkling lights behind him. In his mind was Jake's warning to stay clear of that town. As for Dulcie, he would see her in San Francisco. He had her address. It was the golden lure of the girl, as much as the call of adventure, that stirred his blood to swift pulse now. The delicate beauty of the little dancer filled his senses. Her vision rode with him through the star filled night.

Black Jack swung at a pacing walk along the trail. The soft creak of the saddle and the silver chiming of his spur rowels blended into the silence of the night. Above, as Clay rode with his hat tilted back, the stars shone like a hundred million camp-fires in another world.

He reached a waterhole and halted. He unsaddled Black Jack and picketed the animal. As he sat down and rolled a smoke, Clay felt the weariness of tired muscles and relaxed nerves. He pulled the saddle-blanket over him and lay there on the ground, closing his eyes. In spite of himself, he fell asleep; and found the sun rising when he awoke.

He watered Black Jack, drank his own fill, then doused his head and face in the cooling water. He had just completed these simple ablutions when the rattle and creak of harness and wheels heralded the approach of the Tombstone-Benson stage. Clay swung the saddle on his horse and was tightening the saddle cinch when the six horse stage rocked into sight.

Clay grinned to himself as the shotgun messenger on the seat alongside the driver shifted his position at sight of the dismounted horseman ahead on the trail. Then the boy swung aboard his horse and jogged along the road, pulling aside to let the coach pass. He waved a careless greeting. Then a girl's head and face poked out from behind the canvas curtains that hid the interior of the rocking coach.

"Well, if it ain't Clay!" called Dulcie Adoree, dimpling her best. Clay's hat came off. The stage driver drove on, indifferent to the man on horseback. The shotgun messenger eyed him, however, his ugly weapon handy. Strangers were to be treated as enemies. There was a neat fortune in the Wells-Fargo strongbox that lay in the "boot" under his feet—an extra heavy shipment of treasure going out. Some fifty thousand dollars. And holdups were not infrequent. The messenger was a man recommended by Wyatt Earp who, not so long ago, had been a shotgun messenger on the Benson run. The man wore two sixshooters beside his shotgun.

"California?" asked the girl prettily.

"You bet!"

"Can't you hitch your horse alongside and ride with me? Mother's gone to sleep."

Clay swung the black gelding closer, and, leaning across the horse's neck, slid off the bridle, which he tied to the saddle. Then with an easy leap, he transferred himself to the coach.

"Black Jack is broke to follow a wagon without leading. He knows more than a lot of humans I've met."

He dropped into a seat beside the girl. Across from her reposed the ample lady who was her mother. Beside the mother was a man whom Clay did not know. The man smiled thinly now and voiced a question.

"Kin that smart hoss play poker, Saunders?"

His question was in no way insulting. The fellow was smiling as he spoke. Yet there was an indefinable hint of danger in his voice.

"He might do as well at the game as some men," smiled Clay. "You know my name? I don't recall having met you."

"No. We never met. I was in the Oriental when you set into that card game. We planted Ace Devine yesterday."

"Ace Devine?"

"The dealer that run your game. The man Jake Hines shot."

"I think I remember your face now," replied Clay, watching the man's smile and the cold eyes that did not warm up. "You were dealing faro bank, over by the wall."

"Right you are. Ace Devine was my pardner."

For the moment the girl was forgotten. Clay knew that this man would kill him if the chance broke right. The boy regretted the death of the gambler. He said so now.

"I had no idea he'd trail me. Jake had to kill him. Why did he want to kill me?"

"Because you'd smashed him at Tombstone, just as bad as if you'd hit him with an ax. Who wants to play with a crooked dealer? His goose was cooked. Then, when you made the big play with his girl, I reckon he might have been some jealous."

"*His* girl?" gasped Clay.

"Goldie, here," the gambler went on, "Goldie Jones."

"You mean Miss Adoree?" said Clay, trying to keep his voice steady.

He watched the gambler closely, not daring to remove his gaze. He did not see the girl's face darken with silent fury as she made mute signals to the speaker.

"I mean Goldie Jones," said the man, his slit of a mouth twisting up at one corner. "That's the name her old man give her. Ace was good enough for her till we hit these open camps and money come her way like rain. He paid for her ham and eggs out on the coast. If the old lady wasn't dead drunk I'd wake her up and prove it. Ace treated her right, too. Ace and Goldie has been livin' together fer two years. She don't dare deny it."

"Oh, shut up, for God's sake!" The girl's voice was thick with anger. "Ace hunted trouble and got it. If you wasn't drunk, you'd keep your damn' mouth shut. You dirty bum, Ace was your meal ticket! Pardner, hell! I'm the one that paid your admission, you cheap tinhorn! Me, little Goldie! Ace Devine got a run for his money. He got me cheap. Cheap at twice the price. I paid for more than one meal he ate. Paid for his pipe at the Chink's, too. Bought him and you your hop. Bought her—" the girl's finger pointed to the sleeping mother— "her booze. I'm a damn' fool to carry you two excess baggage!"

She finished with a string of colorful Barbary Coast epithets that would have made a muleskinner blush. Clay, white as chalk, made as if to rise. The girl's hand gripped his gun arm.

"Don't kill the hop-smoking pimp, Clay. He's my brother."

Clay felt sick to the depths of his soul. The gambler laughed gratingly. Dully, Clay saw the resemblance between this painted girl and the sallow faced, pale eyed gambler. The mother was snoring drunkenly. The closed stage reeked with the sour odor of stale liquor and garlic. The girl was sniffling now, her tears making crooked rivulets through the daubed paint on her cheeks. The black stuff from her lashes made a sooty track through the powder and paint.

Clay's hands felt icy cold and clammy as he clenched them. He wanted to groan. Instead he laughed. The sound of his unseemly mirth held the crazy hysteria of a man gone a little mad. He was on his feet, looking down at the man and girl, laughing into their faces. Then the stagecoach lurched to an abrupt halt that threw Clay almost on top of the girl.

"HANDS Up!"

The screech of brake blocks. The heavy crash of a gun. The body of the shotgun messenger catapulted from its perch and landed in an inert heap in the dust, the sawed off gun still clutched in the lifeless hands.

"Heave off the box, Ben!" grated a calm voice.

A masked head appeared at the curtains.

"Sorry to trouble you, ladies and gents, but you'll have to step out. A mere formality. We don't want your valuables. Only the gentlemen's guns.

Men first. *Bueno.* Now, young lady, out you come."

There was a familiar ring to that smooth, calm voice.

"There's a woman left inside," the masked man told a confederate.

"I just taken a look at 'er," chuckled the second robber. "She's drunker'n a boiled hoot owl. Tried to kiss me when I laid a-holt of 'er."

Two other masked and heavily armed men were dragging the heavy treasure box into the brush. The mask of one of these men slipped sidewise, exposing his face for a moment. Clay started a little, but kept his hands raised. The first speaker had taken his gun. Up on his seat, the driver bit off a corner of tobacco and chewed with grim patience. Hold-ups were all in his day's work. The road agents never harmed a driver, so long as he tended strictly to the business of driving.

The tall man with the soft voice stood there with two drawn guns covering the passengers. The other men were fading into the brush, laboring with the heavy box. Clay guessed that they were breaking the box open and transferring the gold to pack mules. Presently a voice from the brush called out.

"All set, I reckon."

"Then hit the trail. I'll ride close herd on these folks for a few moments."

There followed the sounds of rapidly vanishing hoofbeats. The one tall outlaw held them under the threat of his guns.

"My dear young lady," he said pleasantly, "there is no cause for alarm, I assure you." He dropped Clay's gun, and a blunt pocket pistol that had been the gambler's, into his pocket.

"Mister," said Clay, his hands elevated. "I'm right fond of that gun. It belonged to my father."

"If I give it back, would you promise not to take a snap shot at me if I grew careless?"

"I have no reason to shoot at you," said Clay. "I give you my word."

The masked man handed him his gun. Clay shoved the weapon into its holster, smiling a little.

"How about my gun?" asked the gambler.

"Your word isn't worth a tinker's damn, Spider Jones!"

"This man'll kill me!" Jones whined.

"If he does, the country should reward him. That diamond you're wearing looks like the stone you won from a friend of mine, Spider. I'll thank you for it."

"I won it! By God, this is larceny!"

"Quite so, Spider." The tall outlaw put away one of his guns and drew a knife. "I hope you won't put me to the inconvenience of cutting off that ring, *amigo.*"

Spider Jones jerked off the ring and tossed it to the ground. The outlaw stooped and picked it up. For a moment his back was turned.

"Kill him," Goldie whispered to Clay. But the boy's hands stayed in the air.

The tall outlaw straightened, the eyes in the holes of his black mask sparkling as he looked at Clay. He removed his hat and bowed.

"*Adois,*" he said. "Lady, I wish you a most pleasant journey."

Turning his back, he stalked away. The brush hid him for a moment. Then he rode away along a brush hidden trail.

"You're either one of that gang," said Goldie with cold scorn, "or else you're just a plain damned coward. And to think I almost got stuck on you. Ugh! Help me back inside, Spider, and open that whisky, I need a shot to take the bad taste of this dude out of my mouth."

"All aboard!" called the driver, when he and Clay loaded in the dead man.

"Lucky for you, you cub, that my gun ain't on me," was Spider Jones' parting shot. "I aimed to square Ace's murder."

Clay said no word. He stood in the dusty road, watching the departing stage.

He was still standing there, motionless, his eyes dull and filled with pain, when the grazing Black Jack, having finished a delectable bit of grass back along the trail, trotted up, stirrups flapping. The velvet muzzle nudged the boy. The horse's lips nibbled playfully at Clay's hair.

Clay slipped on the bridle over the black gelding's head and mounted.

"I reckon," he said, trying to grin, "that California will have to wait, pony. The gold we were going after turned out to be fool's gold."

X

CLAY camped alone that night among the pinons of the Dragoon Mountains. He had eaten at a ranch that evening, then rode on. He was following the tracks of four horses and three mules. Their trail led into the Dragoons.

He woke from a tortured slumber to stare into the barrels of several guns.

"It's him, all right," growled a man.

"Go clawin' fer a gun and you'll wake up in hell, my young bucko."

"Zeke Saunder's whelp, follerin' his old man's ways," spoke a third voice. "Where's yore runnin' mates, Saunders?"

"Who are you?" asked Clay.

"Officers uh the law. Mebbeso we're the men that'll be your judge, jury and executioners if we kin find a tree tall enough. Damn a country that ain't got big trees."

"We'd orter fetch him back," said another man. "With the evidence uh Spider Jones and the two women, he can't help but hang. Doc and Wyatt Earp seen him pass the tip to John Ringo, right in town the other day. Bold, I calls it. He was on that stage to cover the passengers. Didn't they give him back his gun? Didn't the young whelp back down when he had all the chance in the world to kill that road agent? Hang? I'll tell a man he'll hang!"

So the posse took Clay Saunders back to Tombstone. Doc Holliday greeted him with a chuckle that sounded like a death rattle in the boy's ears. Wyatt Earp guarded the prisoner from the swarm of men who would avenge the death of the shotgun messenger.

Earp sat with his prisoner, his shrewd eyes studying the boy's face.

"I knowed you were goin' too swift a gait to last long, Saunders."

"You think I'm guilty, Earp?"

"Mighty strong evidence piled up against your name. Your back trail is spotted with some black signs. Yore daddy was a bad 'un. You are known to be friends to Ringo and Curly Bill. Them two females is hollerin' fer yore hide to be hung on the fence. They taken up a collection to buy a fancy stone fer Ace Devine's grave. Public sentiment is strong against you. Looks like you'd be the main attraction at a hangin' bee."

"I asked you if you believed me guilty?" repeated Clay, meeting Wyatt Earp's stare with level gaze.

"I reckon I do, Clay Saunders. Though I don't think you're the low down blackguard some folks claims. Bein' friendly with Curly Bill's gang is a crime in itself."

"So I understand," said Clay, a grim smile flickering at the edges of his set mouth. "So much so that they wanted to lynch me where they found me."

"They'd have done it, I reckon," nodded Earp, "if two of my brothers hadn't been in the posse. So long as I'm in office I aim to do my duty as I see it. There'll be no lynching of my prisoners."

Wyatt Earp, marshal of Tombstone, had proven his sincerity in matters of that kind. He had, upon one occasion, stood alone in the street with a shotgun and faced a mob of five hundred men bent on lynching a prisoner under the marshal's care.

"Come on," he had invited, and had colored the invitation with proper profanity.

But no man had broken from the ranks to take up the challenge. No man in all that crowd would swap bullets with the lone officer who called them cowards. Tombstone remembers it as the greatest exhibition of cold nerve ever seen in that turbulent little city of pay dirt and gun smoke.

No, they would not lynch Clay Saunders so long as Wyatt Earp was alive to thumb a gun hammer.

Up the main street of Tombstone came a rider. A bearded, buckskin clad rider with a rifle across the saddle in front of

him. Jake Hines had heard the news of Clay's capture and had come to town to see the prisoner. Clay greeted Jake warmly and Wyatt Earp made as if to withdraw. But Jake waved him back.

"What me'n' the boy has to say, Wyatt, kin be said afore witness. Clay, let's have it. Between the three of us, what kind of a jackpot did you git into?"

"Any explanation I'd make," said Clay, "would sound silly. I'll stand my hand."

"Wyatt," said Jake solemnly, "I hear some uh these folks is raisin' a fuss about that gamblin' feller that shot a hole into Clay's new hat the other evenin'."

"It's that flax maned woman of his," agreed the marshal. "One female can stir up more fuss than an army kin stop."

"That gambler got what he come after. Behan knows that. So does Doc Holliday. Wyatt, this boy's kinda wild, but he's on the level. Ol' Jake Hines don't take up with coyotes ner skunks, you know that. Bob Carver sent word he'd go on Clay's bond. If the young 'un was bad, Bob wouldn't be doin' that."

"That's right," agreed the marshal.

"There's no word of proof that Clay had a hand in that stage holdup. I was with the boy when he called fer John Ringo's mail. Three letters. All from his kinfolks in California. I seen the letters. I seen Clay hand 'em to Ringo. The boy was settin' out fer California."

"California's west," said the officer. "They picked Clay Saunders up at the foot of the Dragoons which is easterly. That California thing don't hold water."

"What was you doin' over thataway, son?" asked Jake.

"I was trailing a man," said Clay. "One of Curly Bill's men. That's why I asked for my gun at the holdup. I aimed to fetch back that man to Tombstone."

Wyatt Earp smiled his disbelief. Jake scowled thoughtfully.

"I told you it would sound silly," said Clay. "But my main reason for going to California was because I hoped to trail down that man."

"No other reason," asked Jake gruffly.

"There *was* another reason. There isn't, now."

"You mean that buckskin haired gal?" questioned Jake brutally.

"Yes." Clay managed a smile. "I can see what a damn' fool I was."

Jake and Wyatt Earp exchanged a quick look.

"I told you the boy 'ud answer straight," said Jake. "Son, we all been young and foolish. Fergit it. Don't let that fret you. But the harm's done, as the feller says. When you come up fer trial, that female and her old lady will testify strong ag'in' you. They'll convict you not on any straight evidence that you stood in with the robbers, but that a tinhorn sport was shot the other evenin'. Yes, sir. You'll be tried on one charge, convicted on another. It ain't right."

"Saunders," put in Wyatt Earp, "did you recognize any of the robbers?"

"I did."

"How many?"

"I'd swear to recognizing one of them."

"John Ringo?" snapped Earp, eagerness in his tone.

"No," said Clay, his voice steady, "the man I recognized was not John Ringo."

"Who was the man who gave you back your gun?"

"I could not swear to the identity of a man whose face was hidden. You know that, sir."

"Then who was the man you recognized?"

"He's the one I was aiming to bring back if I could.

"What is his name?"

"I don't know his name. But his mask slipped and I knew his face. I'd seen him once before."

"John Ringo was the man that returned your gun," said Earp. "Ben, the stage driver, knew his voice and his manner. He talks like an educated man and is polite as hell around women. Don't tell me he didn't know you. He gave you your gun. You could have shot him. Why didn't you?"

"Because I gave my word I wouldn't."

"You done right," snapped Jake, "by keepin' your word. But it's gonna sound bad when it's told to a jury. You won't blab on Ringo. Ben's word ain't gonna hang John Ringo neither. He goes free. Them as was with him goes free. But they got Clay Saunders sewed up in a sack."

"It looks like it," admitted the boy.

"That yaller headed gal is gonna hang you," Jake went on, as if musing aloud. "Wyatt, kin we fix a bond fer the boy?"

"I'm afraid not. The messenger was killed. The charge will be accessory before the fact of murder, and carries a death penalty."

"In other words, they're gonna hang Clay in spite uh hell er high water."

Jake put on his hat and gripped Clay's hand.

"So long, son. Don't lose your nerve. The game ain't done yet." He looked around the makeshift jail. "A man could pull this dang place down with a stout rope and a good hoss. I don't reckon you'll be cooped up here much—"

Jake broke off abruptly, grinning foolishly.

"Hell, I was jest gassin'. Jest gassin', Wyatt." He walked to the locked door, and as the marshal stooped to unlock it, Jake winked at Clay. Wyatt Earp gave no sign that he had intercepted the wink.

XI

A SILVER moon hung like a round lantern over Tombstone. Clay lay dozing on his bunk. A guard squatted on his heels outside the door, a dead cigaret in his mouth, a shotgun across his lap. A buckboard clattered up to the door and one of its two passengers alighted. The guard covered him with his gun, then lowered the weapon with a grin of recognition.

"We're takin' Clay Saunders to Tucson fer a while. There's one mob bent on lynchin' him, and some other gents rode into town about dark that show signs of rescuin' him. The stage was held up again and the Earps and Doc have rode after 'em. Hell's gonna pop if we keep Saunders here."

The speaker was a deputy. The driver of the restless team was also a deputy. The guard nodded his approval of the plan.

The saloons were crowded with men who talked of hanging. A dozen cowboys, whose saddled horses stood at the hitch-rack down the street, were sauntering about, silent of tongue, drinking a little, mingling with the crowds. These cowboys were friendly with Curly Bill and his piratical crew. For while the Earps might rule Tombstone, Curly Bill's power was dominant on the open range.

The stage had been held up again. The trail of the robbers led plainly south towards the Mexican line. Curly Bill had bossed the job without the subterfuge of a mask. A posse was now in hot pursuit.

With but a few men to guard the prisoner, with two factions about to strike, the reasonable course lay in transferring the prisoner.

Clay was routed from bed and placed in the buckboard, his hands and legs manacled. The restive team lurched against their collars. The driver gave them their heads. The guard peered into the shadows, gun ready. The remaining guard squatted before a locked door that held nothing but a pile of sougans on a flimsy bunk.

The buckboard with its three silent passengers sped along the road. The lights of the town gave way to mesquite brush. When they had left the town behind, the driver eased the half-broken team to a long trot.

"We kin take 'er easy now, I reckon," he said.

"We shore give 'em the slip," agreed the other deputy, lighting a cigar. "Them laig irons frettin' you, Saunders?"

"Not much," said Clay. "But I'd like a smoke."

The deputy rolled him a cigaret and lit it for him. Clay thanked him. They rattled along for another mile. The way

led through a deep arroyo, dark with brush, over a bumpy bit of road that slowed their progress. Suddenly the team halted, snorting a little. Across the road was a pile of brush six feet high.

"Hands up, boys!" barked a harsh command. "We don't want to kill nobody. All we want is your prisoner, dead er alive. If you begin shootin', the three of you is gonna git killed. We mean business. Unlock his irons and toss him out. Then turn around and drive back. We got you foul. Git busy!"

"We're licked," said the driver.

"Looks thataway," said the other deputy. "They're hid. We're in full sight. Hold out your hands, Saunders. It looks like they're bound to hang you."

"No use in you boys getting killed," said Clay huskily. "You did your best."

The deputy unlocked the leg irons.

"Crawl outa that rig, Saunders. Don't try to run, fer we got this place surrounded. Hurry up, now."

Clay climbed out. The driver turned his team.

"So long, Saunders," he called. "We done our best."

"So long," called Clay. "No hard feelings."

His hands raised, he stood in the road, watching the buckboard as it clattered back down the arroyo and out of sight. He was smiling, his heart thumping wildly.

"Well, son," chuckled Jake Hines, stepping out of the brush, "it worked like a charm."

"Where are the others?" asked Clay.

"There ain't no others. This is a high lonesome. Shake your hocks, boy. We better git outa here. I got your hoss here. Grub and a gun to boot. You better not pull up till you hit Old Mexico."

They mounted and rode away at a stiff trot. When Clay tried to thank him, Jake chuckled and swore lustily.

"The fun is all mine, son. I shore sold them fellers cheap. Between me'n' you and yonder bald faced moon, Wyatt Earp ain't gonna shed no tears when he learns you're gone. He knowed you wouldn't git a fair shake. A square man, Wyatt. Even Doc Holliday began to take yore part when I told him why you was follerin' them gents into the Dragoons."

"How could you tell Doc when you don't know yourself why I trailed 'em?"

"Son," said old Jake, "I'm old and stove up and ain't loaded up with book learnin', but I ain't plumb shy on brains. I been studyin' you consider'ble. I wouldn't be helpin' you if I didn't know you was on the level."

Jake pulled up his horse.

"I'd better quit you here, Clay. I ain't askin' you where you're goin', ner why. But I hope you come back some day. I taken to you like you was my own. Mebbeso I'll tell you why some day. So long, son. Good luck."

And the old scout rode off before Clay could see the tears that dimmed his eyes.

CLAY SAUNDERS again rode his lone trail. An outlaw now, to be hunted down and shot like a dangerous beast. There would be a posse of men trailing him within two hours. He swung Black Jack southward toward the Mexican Border, avoiding the beaten trails, alert and keen eyed.

The golden haired dance hall girl had ripped a wound in his heart that time alone could heal. She had broken an ideal, laid his golden dream world in ruins. She had toppled from the pedestal on which, boylike, he had placed her, and her fall had left him numb with misery. His grief was no less poignant and terrible because it was only temporary. Those shattered beliefs of boyhood are perhaps the greatest sorrows of life. Broken toys, to be sure; but, after all is said, after time has patched the broken bits, the toys remain cracked and mended, never to resume their original gloss and perfection. And Clay Saunders had no one to mend that broken thing that had been his most wonderful possession.

It was not Goldie Jones who stood so tawdry and soiled in the light of revelation. It was the girl of his dreams. It was love. Or he so mistook infatuation

for love which, to adolescence, is synonymous. Still his pity was not for Clay Saunders, but for Goldie Jones who had once been Dulcie Adoree.

As Clay rode his trail that led towards Mexico, he felt the dull ache of disillusion. His thoughts broke back in retrospect across the happenings of the past few months. Not yet a year since his father had been killed and his body hung to a tree limb. Clay had "gone up the trail" into the north. An education in itself. He had passed his baptism of fire. He had seen cities like Dodge and Tombstone. He had shaken the hand of men like Wyatt Earp and Bob Carver. He had tasted the sweet and the bitter. He was an outlaw without the burden of crime to haunt his loneliness. He looked backward through a man's eyes at the folly of youth. Clay Saunders was learning the lessons of life.

Now, as he rode in the moonlight, he did not regret the loss of that gay life which Tombstone offered to her guests. Already he was tired of the gaming tables, the liquor, the blatant noise, the garish lights.

Instead, he missed the homely comfort of Bob Carver's home. The soft toned voice of Mrs. Carver, the understanding grip of the cowman's hand and the shy smile of the little girl with the large dark eyes, who had shown him her odd playfellows. He smiled a little at the memory of Virginia Carver and her pets. He even recalled their names: Professor, the owl; Humpty and Dumpty, the rabbits; Old Mother Hubbard and her brood of little quail; Peter, the tame deer.

Clay was destined to follow a meandering quest that led him into strange places. More than often he shared the food of outlaws. Many times there was no food or shelter, no human voice to fill the silence. And always he seemed searching for some one. He sought a man whose name he did not know, a man whose face he had seen but once.

Ringo and Curly Bill and Zeke Saunders had called this man "Billy the Kid". A bold eyed youth with yellow hair and yellow eyes who bragged of murders he had done. A bad imitation of the real Billy the Kid whose sheer nerve raised him from the muck of low banditry to a heroism put in song and history.

Ringo had lied when he said this man had gone to California. Clay had seen that bold face as a black mask slipped the morning of the stage robbery. Ringo had called him Blaze Webster that night when Clay had ridden with the outlaws who had saved Bob Carver's daughter.

"What do you want of Blaze Webster?" John Ringo had asked.

"He was with my father that night when Bob Carver's young brother was killed. I don't think my father did that killing. When I cut this Blaze Webster's sign, I'll make him tell the truth."

"Blaze Webster is as dangerous a man as ever shot a man in the back and spit tobacco on the corpse, Clay. Better forget it."

"Where is he?"

"California," Ringo had said, and lied like a man when he said it. He liked Clay and did not want to see the boy killed.

XII

FIVE years is a long time when counted by days and nights. It is a long time to follow the trail of a man, to ask one question when he stopped at a camp or a town or a ranch.

"Blaze Webster been here lately?"

He got all manner of replies, save the one he wished. From ranchers, from outlaws, from gamblers and women who brought back the memory of Goldie Jones. From Mexicans, good and bad. From Yaquis and Apaches. And always Clay rode on once more. It had not occurred to him that Blaze Webster might be asking the whereabouts of a tall youth called Clay Saunders. Blaze Webster was as cunning as he was bold.

Five years. The boy was a man now. Even Jake Hines would have looked twice before recognition came. A tall man, well knit, quiet of manner and speech. A man who drank but seldom,

who played a good game of cards, who treated women with an old fashioned deference. A man of whom it was said that he was as swift and deadly with a gun as chain lightning. Yet he had killed no man during those five years.

Clay Saunders was one *gringo* who was welcome in the homes of the Mexicans, be the Mexican a lowly peon or a proud don. He had gained a strange sort of reputation among them. They spoke of him as "El Caballero", who rode night and day in search of one man. These men of Mexico could well understand a man who thus rode alone to avenge a wrong. Here was one *gringo* who did not steal and murder. He came with a smile and a quiet greeting.

"*Buenos dias, señores,*" he would salute them.

"Caballero!" they would reply, and bid him dismount and share what they had.

Clay had learned the knack of remembering faces and names. His saddle pockets were always filled with odds and ends. Candy and little toys for the children. Bits of velvet or lace, a pair of red slippers or a comb for the señoritas. A bottle of perfume for the wife of some don. Gold money for the poor peon families.

They liked him for his chivalry and his manner toward their women. He did not make *gringo* love to them. The children flocked about him, the señoritas danced for him and taught him their fandangos. The matrons filled him with food. He was an honored guest at their fiestas and bailes.

A gay figure in his buckskins and beaver hat and fancy boots. He wore his scarlet sash and his notched gun with an air that won their admiration and envy. His black horse was sleek and fat and shiny.

He read every book he could find. His travels into far cities gave him a polish. He was a gay hearted fellow, they said, but under his smile and soft speech was the steely fiber of manhood. His eyes were clear and deep and searching. Few men could lie to Clay Saunders.

Sometimes his wanderings took him northward. To Dodge City, St. Louis and Kansas City. To Laramie and into Montana. Along the Chisholm and Goodnight cattle trails.

"Blaze Webster? Last I heered tell uh him, mister, was over in New Mexico. Er mebbe it was Wyomin'."

One fact was certain, Blaze Webster no longer tainted Arizona with his gun smoke. He had proved traitor to Curly Bill and had barely gotten away with his life. John Ringo had told Clay about it, one night down in Mexico. Ringo sought to dissuade Clay from his man hunt, but Clay remained smilingly firm.

Twice Clay missed meeting Jake by a few days. Jake was now trail boss for Bob Carver.

One evening in Santa Fé, New Mexico, Clay met two men, almost colliding with them as they came out of a gambling house. The two men were Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. At first they did not recognize him. Then Wyatt Earp grinned and shoved out his hand. It was the famous marshal's gun hand, but it held no weapon.

"I'm right glad to meet up with you, Saunders."

"Hang me for a horse stealing Mexican if the boy hasn't become a man!" put in the genial Doc. "Handsomer than ever. You can't shake us this time. We'll hold court right now. Court will come to order. We find you guilty of being a gentleman, a scholar and a good judge of bad whisky. What'll we fine the prisoner, Wyatt?"

"How about a round of drinks?" suggested the marshal sternly.

"Wine," nodded Doc Holliday. They ranged themselves on either side of Clay and marched him into the saloon.

"Why in hell, Clay Saunders," asked Earp, "didn't you tell me you were after Blaze Webster for personal reasons?"

"I tried to," smiled Clay, "but it sounded silly. How did you find out?"

"John Ringo rode into town a few weeks after you'd gone. He told Doc that you were not one of them. Ringo is ornery but he's not a liar."

"Then I'm free to come back to Tombstone?" asked Clay.

"Free as the sunshine, Saunders. Come back with us and we'll exonerate you publicly and with a fiesta to celebrate."

"I'll come back some day," said Clay, "but not now."

"Still trailing Blaze Webster?"

"When I'm not busy at my ranch."

"Didn't know you had a ranch?"

"It's in Mexico. I did a favor for old Don Julian Ortega a few years ago. When he died he willed me a land grant and a lot of cattle. About ten thousand head. I'm here in Santa Fé delivering a herd now."

"Then you're this El Caballero I've heard about. Saved old Don Julian's wife and kids from the Yaquis." Doc Holliday stood off, saluting Clay in a spirit of fun that was partly respect. "Your fame has spread across the Border. The Don Juan of Sonora. The Galahad of Chihuahua. Don Clay Saunders, the pet of the haciendas and the idol of the peons. It's an honor to drink with you."

"Quit rawhiding him, Doc," said Wyatt Earp.

"Rawhiding, nothing. I'm being truthful. Any man who can win over Julian Ortega has to have the stuff of a man in him. I had the pleasure of knowing that old Spaniard. He was no greaser. Castilian Spanish. Proud, courageous and a gentleman. Not to mention the fact that he was about the richest cattleman in Old Mexico. Next we know, Clay Saunders will marry one of those beautiful daughters I met, and inherit half of Mexico. Don't need two good vaqueros, do you, Clay?"

"The luck of some folks is beyond understanding," chuckled Earp.

Clay left them an hour later. They shook his hand warmly.

"He's turned out to be a man," remarked the marshal of Tombstone after Clay had gone.

"He has," came Holliday's emphatic reply. "Says he's quit gambling. That profession lost a genius. And the boothill is thereby cheated of a handsome corpse. But I hope he don't marry down there. He's too fine a specimen to be wasted. White men can't stand that manaña life. Makes 'em lazy and fat and they lose their self-respect."

"And to think," added Earp reminiscently, "he almost got hung."

"I'd like to have a good seat nearby when he meets up with Blaze Webster," said Doc Holliday.

AND THAT is how it came about that rumor reached Bob Carver's ranch that Clay Saunders was now one of Mexico's richest cattlemen. And as rumors will, this one expanded. Gossip had Clay married to a beautiful daughter of Don Julian Ortega.

Jake, trailing a herd north to Montana, branched off to visit at St. Louis. When he had cleaned up, he paid a call at the fashionable girls' seminary where Virginia Carver was learning all manner of things as befitted the daughter of a cattle baron.

There was little about this slender, beautiful young lady to remind one of the shy little ranch girl. She was groomed after the manner of the belle of that day. She had poise and charm and a dark beauty that left old Jake breathless. But the next moment she was hugging and kissing the old plainsman.

"Honey," he said at last, "you're cryin'."

"Of course I'm crying, Jake. I'm so happy I could die."

She sat on his lap until he told her she was "gettin' hefty". And he told her the news of the cow country: How her mother was coming to St. Louis to spend a few weeks. How her father was as hale and hearty as a two year old. How the horses and the dogs were missing her. And finally he spoke of Clay Saunders.

"You know, Jake, Clay's my beau. Remember how I cried when he left? Tell me about him." She was laughing, but her eyes were bright and there was a tremor of real eagerness in her voice.

So Jake haltingly told her what rumor said about Clay Saunders. That he had become a fine man. That he was hunting

Blaze Webster and would not return to Arizona until he could fetch Webster back and make him tell what he knew of the death of John Carver. Jake explained with some vagueness that Clay was now a wealthy cattle owner and was quite a man in Mexico. They called him El Caballero, which meant a gentleman and a cavalier of parts. And that his holdings included a huge land grant, dying gift of an old Spanish Don. Jake halted there in his recital. But Virginia was not to be so easily fooled.

"So the hero married a beautiful señorita and lived happily ever after," she laughed, trying to hide the hurt in her heart.

"So they say, honey. But I'd like to git it direct from Clay afore I believe it. Mostly, them Mexican gals gits fat after they've had a few children. And the kid's always is breeds."

"I hope that he is very, very happy," said Virginia slowly, staring at the toes of her little slippers.

"Well, I don't," snapped Jake hotly. "Damn it all, he's got a lickin' comin' and I'm the huckleberry that'll lay him out. The young idiot, trailin' with a pack uh greasers, playin' the don. There's times when I wished I'd let him git hung, gol dang him! Directly I've got shut uh this herd, I'm goin' down there and yank him out by the back uh his dang neck. He's a disgrace to the fambly. He's—"

"Ssh! If they hear you cussing here, out you'll go."

"Can't make out to express my sentiments no other way, honey. But don't you fret. I'm goin' down yonderly and fetch back that young rapscallion, if I have to rope him and drag him all the way. He'll fergit this here Mex gal and her breed kids bimeby. Then you hogtie 'im."

"Thanks, but I want no kidnaped husbands, Jake. You're taking it too much to heart. Don't you see I'm just joshing when I call Clay my beau. Heavens, he falls in love with every pretty face he sees. Dance-hall women, Mexicans—any one. He's a regular Don Juan."

"Who's Don Juan?"

"Don Juan," explained Virginia, "made love to every woman that appealed to his fancy. He was quite a devil of a fellow."

"Well I'll drag that nonsense outa him," promised Jake. "On my own hook. No son uh mine kin go lopin' around gatherin' a herd uh she-stock."

"Son of yours?" echoed Virginia, laughing at the old scout's wrath.

"He mighta been mine," said Jake, his eyes softening, "only Zeke Saunders met her first. That boy's mother was the only woman I ever loved."

"You knew his mother?" Virginia was holding Jake's gnarled old hands tightly.

"Yes. She was as beautiful and good as—as you, honey. But I never stood no chance. Her folks was quality. Neighbors of Zeke's fambly, who was real folks. Zeke run off as a kid with the Confederate cavalry. Wound up with Quantrell and was later outlawed. He snuk back, and Caroline—that was her name—run off with him. I was a scout under Lee. When I got back, she'd gone with Zeke. I never seen her again. I'd never told her about my feelin's. My folks was poor. My daddy was a scout and a trapper and kinda restless about stayin' in one place. All I had to offer was a bunch uh fox pelts.

"Zeke done good till she died. Then he went to hell. But I can't he'p but feel like Clay mighta been mine. I'd ruther be proud uh her boy than be President uh the United States. I'd ruther see him dead than to know he'd turned out bad. So, honey, I'm goin' to find the boy and see fer myse'f."

"And if he isn't the man you want him to be, Jake?"

"God knows what it'll do to me, honey. I dunno."

XIII

FROM a very high peak in the center of the Don Julian Ortega *rancho* a man might stand and look toward each compass point, and the watcher's eyes

could not see past any boundary of the huge grant. It was a kingdom that held the riches of a nation in grazing land, in cattle and horses, in gold and silver and copper. Thousands of cattle, many of them unbranded, filled the valleys and spotted the mesas. Hundreds of peons and vaqueros lived on the land and reared their families. A dozen major-domos rode out each morning from various ranches within a day's ride by a fast horse, from the main hacienda where the late Don Julian's sons, three in all, lived with their families in that carefree, happy manner peculiar to that race.

All three of these sons were well educated in the ways of books, etiquette, cattle work and gun play. Handsome, a little arrogant, perhaps, splendid horsemen, genial hosts, good lovers and hard haters. Spaniards, in fact, of that velvet and steel which belonged to such men as Cortez and Coronado.

There had been three daughters of the old don who lived here. Two of them had married and gone to Mexico City. The third, Margarita, the youngest and the old don's favorite child, still lived at the hacienda. A mixture of minx and Madonna, Margarita Ortega. Beautiful as only the true Castilian can be beautiful, vivacious, proud, full of the fire of her people, yet wonderfully gentle upon occasions. The peons worshiped her. No less than a score of tiny infants had been named for her.

It was said that those who lived on the Ortega grant were indeed fortunate. Their peonage was blessed with kindness and understanding. Margarita's mother had cared for them always, and when she died the daughter took up her task. Each week she rode away with old Padre Felipe when he made his rounds of the sub-ranchos. Behind the good *padre* and the girl came the dozen vaqueros as bodyguard. A dozen pack mules carried all manner of foodstuff and clothing and trinkets.

The life at the hacienda was one of fiestas, rodeos and *bailes*, or dances. Guitars strummed softly in the moonlight, while visiting caballeros sang beneath barred windows to soft eyed señoritas. Savory odors came from the huge barbecue pit. There were wine and silver and white linen. There was much laughter. Children played in the patio. Fine horses with silver and carved leather trappings pranced under the guidance of gaily clad caballeros.

They enjoyed life, those sons and daughters of the dons. And into this life Clay Saunders had ridden one day. He had saved the lives of Margarita, her mother and an older sister, after a band of Apaches had attacked their party en route to the ranch. Don Julian was of that breed that never forgets either a friendship or an enmity. Clay was made welcome despite the fact that along the boundaries of the Ortega grant were posted signs written in Spanish and English.

"*Aviso, gringo!*" warned the posters. "Death waits in readiness for the gringo robber within these lines."

Here and there the bleaching bones of *gringo* raiders gave grisly backing to the warnings. And yet many hundreds of cattle were gathered by the *gringo* raiders, run across the Border and easily disposed of to the cattle barons, who asked no questions so long as the price was cheap.

One could hardly blame the Mexicans for their hatred of the *gringo*. Those men like Curly Bill valued greaser life in such negative terms that they did not tally those killed. No white man with self-respect carved a notch on his gun when he shot a Mexican. And the Mexican was considered fair prey.

Untallied herds roamed the countless acres of those huge land grants across the Border. It was a simple task to swoop down across the line, gather a herd and run them north. If a group of Mexican vaqueros paid with their lives for their loyalty to an employer, or if a few of the outlaws were left behind to fatten the buzzards, it was all in the rules of the raider game. The outlaws sold their stolen stock, and the money they got went to the gamblers, the saloon men and the ladies of the night. While down in

Mexico the bodies of the dead vaqueros were buried in the little cemeteries, their requiem sung, and some sandaled and hooded *padre* said a mass for the repose of their souls.

"*Aviso, gringo!*" The friends and relatives of the dead vowed vengeance.

"*Aviso, gringo!*" read the posters.

But the outlaws shot holes in the signs and rode on with a careless curse.

CLAY SAUNDERS, riding back to his ranch from Santa Fé, came upon the body of a dead man. The man had been dead less than twenty-four hours. He lay there on the sand, face upward, a gun hung in his dead fingers, a twisted smile on his tobacco stained mouth. Clay recognized the man without dismounting. He had seen him in Tombstone with Curly Bill.

Clay found a stick and, gouging out a hole in the loose sand, he buried the fellow. Then he rode on, his eyes looking for sign. He had not far to look. Cattle tracks and horse tracks covered the ground.

"Damn 'em," he muttered, and rode on, wondering how many cattle he had lost, and who else of his acquaintance had been in the raiding party.

It was a long day's ride to his little ranch, which lay fifty miles east of the main hacienda occupied by the Ortegas. It was dusk when he reached home. No man greeted him. No peon ran out to take his horse. No smoke came from the house. The place was deserted, the house and stable and corrals were empty.

To the door of his adobe house was tacked a placard.

> Warning! You damn greaser lover. This is just a start. We will gut your place and hang your hide on the fence. We will learn you better than to throw in with the greasers. The man that done this is a white man. His name is Blaze Webster.

Inside the house Clay found the cold body of the Mexican woman who did his cooking. Outside lay the body of her husband, who had died fighting. Another dead vaquero lay sprawled in the doorway of the barn. Near the corral was a pitiful little huddle of bloodsoaked calico. They had even shot a four year old child.

These dead, the faithful and the innocent, had died because they were in Clay Saunders' service. The men who had murdered them were white men.

Not a horse remained in his stable. Inside the house was a chaos of smashed furniture and littered clothing. The raiders had all but torn down the place in their looting. Nothing of value remained.

Though Clay had eaten nothing since morning, he was too sick at heart to hunt food. He carried the dead bodies into the house and covered them over with blankets. The man's hand still held his gun. In the tiny fist of the dead baby was a little rag doll. That little family was gone and Clay recalled how happy they had been.

He cared for his black horse, then lay down outside and tried to rest, but his brain was too filled with whirling thought. At daybreak he rode away toward the Ortega hacienda. It was a long ride. Black Jack was gaunt and leg weary. Clay looked haggard and old and his usual swagger was gone.

IT WAS sundown when he rode through the opened gate into the patio.

"Caballero!" called Ramon Ortega, his dark face lighting with pleasure. Then the smile on his lips died as he read what was written in Clay's bloodshot eyes.

"*Madre de Dios, señor!*" cried the tall Ramon. "What is it? Has something happened to our Margarita?"

"Margarita?" croaked Clay, a terrible fear gripping his heart like the steel jaws of a trap.

"She and the *padre* should have come last night. They have not returned. *Valgame Dios, señor,* speak!"

Quickly, his voice harsh with emotion, Clay told of what he had found. When he had finished, Ramon Ortega stood there, his face drained of its color, his hands clenching and loosening. But the Spaniard's voice was deadly calm and composed when he spoke.

"Not a word to those in the house, Señor Clay. What you have told me convinces me that Margarita and Padre Felipe have been captured. May the *Señor Dios* protect them until we overtake the *gringo* devils. Come, *amigo*, you need food and wine and rest. My brother Pasqual has gone to Guadalajara. The task of the journey and the honor of vengeance must be yours and mine, my friend."

"Yours and mine, Ramon," replied Clay huskily. "Margarita! God, if they've harmed that girl, Ramon, they'll get no mercy on this earth, nor beyond this earth. If you'll saddle me a fresh horse, I'll be ready in a few moments."

Even as he turned to go, a vaquero rode up on a jaded horse. The frightened faced rider handed a bit of folded paper to Ramon Ortega. The tall Spaniard read it, then handed it to Clay without a word.

To Ortega, (it read, in the same handwriting that penned the warning that was fastened to Clay's door.) We got your girl and your bead mumbling priest. We'll swap them for gold. Plenty gold. You got more than you need. A greaser don't need money nohow. Fetch all that three mules can pack. Come with one peon and the gold. Ride across the line along the smuggler trail into Skeleton Cañon. The girl and the priest will be turned over to you. Try any greaser tricks and we'll kill them and you too.

—BLAZE WEBSTER.

"Where, then, my friend," asked Ramon Ortega, "is Skeleton Cañon?"

"I know where it is. Get the pack mules ready while I grab something to eat. I'll think out some plan. Load the mules with rocks. Cover the *aparejos* with canvas so that the load will fool them. We'll need one good man. A man with cool nerve, Ramon."

"I know such a man, *amigo*. We can disguise him so that he will pass for a mule driver."

"Good. Give me a few hours' start. We'll catch the jackal in a trap of his own setting. If only Jake is at Carver's ranch!"

"He is the one you speak of so often? Jake Hines?"

"Jake Hines," nodded Clay grimly. "He and I can turn the trick." Clay shook off his weariness as he spoke. "Skeleton Cañon is not far from the Carver ranch."

"This Jake will help?"

"Like a shot, if he's within call."

But Jake was somewhere on the cattle trail between Kansas and Montana.

XIV

SKELETON CAÑON. Grisly title for a sinister spot. A twisting, high walled crevice that wriggles a tortuous course through the rough mountains of the Peloncillos. Its course leads from the Animas Valley in New Mexico, which is the roundup ground of outlaws, into the San Simon Valley in Arizona. Along the winding cañon floor lie the bleached bones of unburied dead men. Its walls rocky, broken, treeless, seem to echo with the whisperings of men lying in wait to murder other men. When the storms crash through the cañon, the Mexicans swear that one can easily hear the screams and groans of the dying above the hollow roaring of gunfire.

It is a cañon of death, its floor and walls stained with the red blood of men who have been murdered. No Mexican would ride its length after dusk, for all the gold that has been stolen from the smugglers there. Few white men, hard and devoid of imagination, care to ride between those sinister walls after dark. It is the dwelling place of murdered dead, and the rendezvous of human derelicts.

Wyoming has had its Hole in the Wall, Colorado its Brown's Park, Montana its Bad Lands. New Mexico and Arizona have Skeleton Cañon.

Here it was that Curly Bill and his men waylaid a smuggler train under the leadership of Miguel Garcia. They killed Garcia and eighteen of his men. Only one of the Mexicans, a mere boy, escaped. The rest were shot down wantonly, without a chance. The robbers got seventy-five thousand dollars in Mexican silver. The bodies of the dead men were left

unburied to fatten the buzzards that circle the blue sky or perch with peering heads on the red rocks of the cañon.

Other men died there, from time to time. There is a tale of two outlaws who settled a dispute over their gold by fighting a handkerchief duel. Their fellows left them there as they fell, with empty sixshooters and riddled bodies, left hands holding a soiled silk neckscarf even after Satan claimed their souls. So their bodies lay until the flesh was rotted and picked and the bones bleached white. Rusting guns gripped in skeleton hands, the faded neckscarf held in bony clutch, the two skulls grimacing a last snarling hate at one another.

Skeleton Cañon had been dedicated to the devil. From time to time this altar of hell claimed its human sacrifice. Its rough walls gave shelter to those armed riders of the night who came to plot and kill. Its carrion birds again grew plump. Its ghosts whispered and moaned and shrieked when the wind tore through the treeless walls.

Clay Saunders rode alone into the cañon. A rifle filled his saddle scabbard. His notched sixshooter was in his hand. Discounting what odds might be piled against him, he rode to meet Blaze Webster.

Dusk had thickened into a moonless darkness, made more blackly opaque by the depth of the cañon floor.

He had eaten dinner with some cowpunchers who told him that Jake Hines was gone up the trail, that Bob Carver was laid up with a sprained leg. They had eyed Clay with frank curiosity but no man among them had asked what brought him into the San Simon Valley hunting Jake Hines.

Clay had waited until dusk, then had ridden on for Skeleton Cañon. He knew that Ramon and his companion would never enter that cañon until daylight. They would come into it by the way of the Animas, to the east. Clay entered now from the west end, where the red walls widened into the San Simon.

His move was not without strategy. Bold, reckless strategy, to be sure, but it held a possible element of success. He reasoned that the outlaws under Blaze Webster would not expect Ramon Ortega and his supposed peon companion until daybreak. Also the outlaws would be watching the Animas trail rather than the trail that entered the cañon from the San Simon Valley. They would feel the security of their position in the rough hills and would be somewhat careless. They were waiting for two Mexicans. They held a Mexican in careless contempt, especially on American soil and in the very back yard of their rustlers' home.

Clay rode warily, muscles taut, nerves whetted to razor edge. His horse shied and minced along uneasily, as if afraid of unseen things. A gust of wind sighed like some dying man. A cougar's scream, like the wail of a woman in mortal pain, sent a shudder over the rider, though he heard the sound once or twice before in his life and knew what it was. He quieted his horse and rode on in the thick blackness of the night. The moon would be coming up in an hour or so. A white, ghostly moon. A moon that would send its white beams along the cañon floor to make a target of the lone rider. Clay welcomed this darkness that cloaked his coming.

A bat winged past his face, unseen, its flight marked only by the ghostly breath of its wings. A rat, caught in the jaws of a prowling coyote or fox, squealed its death notes. A rock, loosened by recent rains, broke loose and rattled down into the black maw of the cañon. No wonder the Mexicans feared the place. It took a man with cold nerve to fathom the night sounds of Skeleton.

The hot blooded horse under Clay jumped at each sound, ready to bolt. Clay wished for Black Jack whose sagacity was almost equal to that of a man. This bay horse would be too high strung in a tight place, when bullets began spraying the ground. Forseeing what might happen if trouble started, Clay pulled his rifle from its scabbard. If the horse proved too jumpy under

fire, he'd dismount and fight it out on foot.

Clay had no way of knowing the hour. The tensity of his situation made a few seconds seem minutes, a few minutes, hours. He wished the horse would cease making so much noise. Those ragged walls confused him. He had been through the cañon several times by daylight, but he could recognize no landmarks.

Still no moon. It must be past ten o'clock. He wondered what was happening to the Señorita Margarita and the good Padre Felipe. He dared not believe what his fears told him. Ahead, the cañon narrowed. The floor was but a few feet across. On either side rose sheer rock walls where not even a goat could find footing. An ideal place for an ambush. A rock walled trap if . . .

"*QUIEN ES?*" The challenge ripped that opaque silence like a pistol shot. "*Quien es?*"

Clay slid off his horse and as he hit the ground, his rifle barrel poked the flank of the nervous horse. The animal leaped forward into the darkness. From a sort of shelf or rimrock a crimson flash bit into the blackness. Clay shot twice at the gun flash. As the threshing body of the wounded man fell from its perch to the floor of the cañon, Clay ran forward. His horse, wild with terror, was charging with empty saddle through the cañon. From both walls came the crashing fire of hidden rifles. A man shouted orders mingled with curses. Clay halted to pull off his boots, then crept on along the trail. Something moved in the brush. Clay halted in a low crouch, rifle ready. The dim bulk of a man seemed to leap from the bowels of the earth.

"He got away, damn his soul!"

Clay straightened and swung his gun as a club. A surprised grunt from the sagging bulk. Clay struck again, and the man was a huddled lump in the trail. Without halting to ascertain the extent of the man's injury, Clay stepped across the motionless bulk and crept on toward the spot from where the profane commands were coming. His stockinged feet made no noise. The thick blackness hid his movements.

The man had quit cursing now. The clatter of the stampeding horse dimmed in the distance. Clay halted, listening, trying to silence his breathing. His heart was pounding in his throat until he was certain it could be heard ten yards away. His nerves pulled taut, he crouched in the darkness, laying aside his rifle and drawing the notched sixshooter that had been Zeke Saunders'.

"Whoever it was," growled a voice barely beyond arm's reach of the listener, "he got away. Damn the dark, anyhow. Who do you reckon it was, Blaze?"

"How the hell do I know? I ain't got owl eyes, yoh fool! But it wasn't no greaser. Might 'a' been one uh Carver's men. Most mebbe not. Dunno but what it was one uh Curly Bill's boys. Hope not. There's only four of us. They'd kill us like rats. What the hell's keepin' Tex and Charlie? Go back along the trail and take a look. They might 'a' got hurt. That fool went through here like a fast freight."

"Mebbe it was Saunders, Blaze?"

"He's either at Santa Fé or on his way home from there. Git along back now."

Clay huddled close to the ground. He could not move without being heard and in order to get back along the trail, that man would have to walk right into him.

The cracking brush heralded the man's coming. Clay leaped to his feet and sprang sidewise as he shot. The outlaw gave a gasping curse, hurled his bulk at Clay, shooting as he jumped. Clay jerked his gun trigger as the man's weight struck him and they went down together. Something like a white hot iron burned Clay's thigh. A crashing, searing pain seemed to paralyze his whole left side. The heavy, sagging inert bulk of the dead outlaw was on top of him. Clay knew that he was badly hit. His brain clicked like some machine.

"I got 'im, Blaze," he croaked. "Lend a hand, damn it!"

A shadowy shape loomed out of the

darkness. Blaze Webster came at a run, stumbling in his haste.

Pain and nausea sent Clay's senses whirling. The bulk of that sweaty, hairy faced dead man on top of him seemed smothering him.

"Where in hell are —"

Clay, from beneath the bulk of the dead man on top of him, shifted his gun and shot at the shadowy form of his enemy. Blaze Webster, without a word, stood in his tracks, thumbing the hammer of his gun with the rapidity of an automatic. Clay shot again. Something warm and sticky and nauseating filled his face. Blaze Webster's bullets were thudding into the dead body that weighted Clay down beneath its smouldering inertness. The man must have weighed well over two hundred. Clay shot again, blindly. With a rattling scream, Blaze Webster pitched forward, mouthing curses as he tried to get to his knees.

Slowly, painfully, Clay crawled from beneath the heavy bulk that had served as a breastworks and saved his life. He tried to stand but his thigh ached horribly. His left side was tingling and burning. Crawling cautiously forward, he made his way towards that blot of darkness ahead which was Blaze Webster. The outlaw lay in a heap, moaning and cursing as his hands groped for the gun that had slipped from his grasp.

"Lay still, Webster," croaked Clay, "I got you. Move and I'll kill you!"

"That you, Saunders?"

"Yes. I'm takin' you back to Tombstone."

"That's one on you. I'm dyin'. Don't shoot. I'm cashin' in. There's a bottle on Heavy somewheres. I'd like one last drink, Saunders."

Clay crawled back and got the bottle. He knew that Blaze Webster was not lying. A jolt of raw whisky might help him talk. Clay felt the need of a stimulant himself.

He found the wounded man and handed him the bottle. Blaze sat up, grunting through clamped teeth.

"Pull off my boots, Saunders. Don't want to die with 'em on. God, you're slow."

The gurgle of the liquor followed. Clay, moving in a daze of pain, pulled off the dying man's boots.

"I'm sick, Saunders. Sick. Dyin', savvy? Shot twict in the belly. You got me."

"I wanted you alive but couldn't risk losing you in the dark. I wanted you to live long enough to talk."

"So I been told. Follered me a long time, didn't you?"

The moon would be pushing over the ragged skyline in a few moments. The white rays of its rising already had shed a pale light over this cañon of death. The face of the dying man showed ghastly clear. It was a bold, handsome face, etched by hardship and dissipation. The eyes that had been hard and cold and merciless were glazed with pain, dark with the shadow of coming death.

Clay Saunders had seen men die, but he had never shot a man and watched his life ebb slowly from him. The deep mystery of life and the passing of life were borne home to the boy, as he handed the whisky bottle back into the hand that was too numb to hold it. The odor of spilled liquor hung in his nostrils. Forgetting his own pain, he watched the blanket of death being pulled by an unseen hand across this man who had boasted of his crimes.

The graying lips of the dying outlaw moved in a twisting smile.

"God, Saunders, you're an awful fool. You done fer me, but I hold the winnin' hand." Blaze Webster tried to laugh, but the only sound that came from his throat was a rattling cough.

"Who killed John Carver, Webster?" asked Clay, a horrible fear gripping his heart.

"Zeke Saunders, your coyote father, killed Bob Carver's brother."

"Tell the truth, man!" Clay bent closer, peering into the pain twisted face that seemed to mock him.

"Dyin' folks never lie," grinned Webster. "Zeke done the trick. Damn you, anyhow. You plumb spoilt my game

here. You lost us boys some easy coin." He lifted the bottle and drank. "Damn you, Clay Saunders!"

With a shock of quick fear, Clay remembered Margarita and the *padre.*

"Where's the girl and the priest, Webster?"

"Where you'll never locate 'em," leered the outlaw. "You meddling fool. The priest is dead. The girl is worse than dead. Ain't you glad yuh found out, *hombre?*"

"You mean that —?"

"I mean," croaked the dying man huskily, "that I hired fer a tough hand and I'm playin' my string out. You shot me in the belly. I'm sick. I'll be gone, directly. But I'm rakin' in the chips from this last jackpot and I'm cashin' in winners. If Ringo er Curly Bill asks you, tell 'em— tell 'em that Blaze Webster died like he lived. Hard. Hard and— and game. Tell 'em that—"

Webster's voice sank to a weak whisper. Clay bent lower, sick with the pain of defeat, hoping to catch some dying word that would rekindle hope in his heart. Blaze leered mockingly into his anxious face.

"So long . . . Fool!" The man tried to laugh, even as the death rattle choked him. He was dead. Dead, with a mocking twist of triumph on his gray lips.

Another lost soul had joined the ghost ranks of Skeleton Cañon. A gust of wind swept through the rock walls of the cañon, like the passing of unseen things in the night.

CLAY SAUNDERS sat there, sobbing horribly in his defeat. His five year hunt had ended in this. In his hand was the long barreled Colt with its notched cedar handle. Clay looked at it for a moment, his bitter defeat turned into something akin to calm. He had used Zeke's gun as a weapon of atonement. That man made weapon had failed him. He had seen a man, wounded by that weapon, die slowly, clutching to a slipping life until the last moment. A shudder of revulsion swept him. With a sharp cry he flung the gun as far as he could.

"God!" he sobbed hoarsely, "God, oh God!" And lay there, his fevered face hidden in his arms, his body racked with dry eyed grief.

Clay did not know that his voice, pitched with terrible emotion, carried along the cañon walls to the ears of two listeners who crouched, stiff with fear and horror, in a cave. Heavy ropes bound the two, the sad eyed *padre* and the dry eyed Margarita Ortega.

"That is the voice of Don Clay Saunders, Padre!" whispered the girl. "They have shot him and he is praying. Can you slip free of the ropes, Señor Padre?"

"I am almost free, child. One moment. Dios be praised!"

The *padre* twisted loose from the ropes and stood up, moving his cramped muscles. In a few moments he had freed the girl. Together they made their way cautiously up the cañon, until they came upon Clay Saunders, lying there on the bloodstained ground.

"Peace, my son," said the *padre* softly, "peace."

Clay sat up with a start, wondering if he were dreaming.

"Don Clay," called Margarita. "El Caballero!"

"You?" gasped Clay, and when her sobbing little laugh gave answer, Clay knew that Blaze Webster had lied. Margarita Ortega was unharmed. Padre Felipe was alive. Blaze Webster had died with a lie on his stiffening lips.

"There are two men down the trail," remembered Clay suddenly, "wounded. You'd better get their guns, *padre,* and tie 'em up."

But the clatter of approaching horses balked any move on their part. A group of riders swung suddenly into view.

"Halloo!" called a booming voice. "Halloo, Clay Saunders!"

"Here!" called Clay.

The riders came on at a trot. One of them leaped from his horse. A gaunt framed man, clothed in buckskin, bearded, breathing hard.

"Clay!"

"Jake! Jake, you old timber wolf!"

Jake knelt beside him, tears trickled into his gray beard. The old scout's hands were already hunting for the boy's hurts.

"They said you were on the trail, Jake!"

"I come back by train. Met Bob in Tombstone. Me 'n' Virginia. Come home fer the holidays. Kinda snuk home to su'prise 'em, savvy? Stopped at a range camp and the boys said you was huntin' me. I smelt trouble when they said one of 'em had laid hid and seen Blaze Webster and three more skunks high-tailin' it fer Skeleton with a *padre* and a lady prisoner.

"Says I to Bob, 'I bet they stole Clay's wife', and with that we saddled up and fogged right along. Heard the shootin' and 'lowed you'd run your head into their trap." Jake looked up from his business of ripping away Clay's trouser leg with his Bowie knife.

"Miz Saunders, you better step back a bit, if the sight uh blood makes you weakish."

"I'm not Mrs. Saunders," said the girl, flushing, as she came forward, "and I am not afraid of blood, Señor Jake. Will some one bring water?"

Jake gulped hard. Then he spied the half emptied bottle of whisky.

"Nothin' like licker fer washin' a bullet hole. Take a swaller first, Clay, then watch ol' Jake waste good drinkin' licker on a gosh darned hole in a man's hide. Got anything we kin use fer bandage, Miz Saunders?"

"A petticoat," came the amused reply, "but I'm not Mrs. Saunders."

"Then you'd orter be," grunted Jake, as she withdrew to take off her petticoat. "Son," he lowered his voice to a husky stage whisper, "ain't that the one you married?"

"Married?" Clay sat propped against a rock, the bottle in his hand. "I'm not married, you darned old horse thief!"

"Goin' to be, mebbe?" persisted Jake stubbornly.

"No, ner goin' to be," mocked Clay.

"Well, I wouldn't be blamin' you if you was. She's purty as a spotted pony, and game as hell, beggin' her pardon. You ain't hooked up? No wife ner kids? Honest?"

"Nope." Clay was wondering whether the old rascal were tipsy. He was sure of it when Jake rose to his feet, cupped his hands as a trumpet and gave voice to a high pitched, wolflike call.

"Will you tell a man the reason for howling?" asked Clay, grinning in spite of the pain. "I'm not dying. Just a clean hole in my leg and a creased rib. If that's a death howl, it's badly timed."

"I'm jest callin' a friend uh mine. This here friend is bogged down, you might say, with timidness. Had that drink, young 'un?"

"Don't want it." Clay handed him the bottle, then set his jaws as the alcohol bit the raw wound. The pain was terrific, but Clay made no outcry. Margarita handed Jake the bandages ripped from her white petticoat. Clay fought in vain against the dizziness that swept over him. He was unconscious when Virginia Carver, white as chalk, but brave eyed, rode up with two cowboys.

THERE was a moment of awkwardness. Jake looked from the Mexican señorita to the American girl. It was Margarita Ortega who broke the silence.

"You must be Virginia Carver," she said in a low, vibrant tone. "Don Clay has told us about you many times. He has always dreamed of coming back to you. I am glad that you are here to care for him, and to bring happiness and love into the life of our Caballero. My father loved him as a son. He is our brother. I have seen him, when the moon shone, looking north, towards your country, with all the hunger and the wistful longing of a small boy who is away from home and sick inside his heart with longing to return.

"He will love you with all his heart. Be kind to him. Keep him always tightly held in your heart. Tell him, when he wakes, that Margarita Ortega shall always

pray for him, and for you, because you will be his wife. *Adios.*"

"But you mustn't go!" cried Virginia, "It is only a little way to the ranch. You can't go away now!"

"It is best that I go, señorita. You, of the north, do not understand how the women of Spain treat love. Don Clay has never spoken to me of love. He does not know that I love him. He must never know. That is why I am going now, before I lose my courage. Keep him held tightly in your heart, for always. May the *Señor Dios* bless you with great happiness. Come, Padre Felipe, we must go."

So Margarita Ortega left them, to ride southward with the sad eyed padre, to meet at sunrise Ramon and his companion, whose name was Don Carlos Carrillo. And when the handsome Don Carlos, splendid and graceful despite his peon rags, took her eagerly in his arms, she smiled mistily up into his eyes.

"We shall never again quarrel about El Caballero, Carlos," she told him.

"He is dead, then?"

"No, not dead. He has gone home to his people. He shall never return to Mexico."

And the young don was too happy to see the shadow of pain in her dark eyes.

BOB CARVER could not love a son more than he loved Clay Saunders. Virginia, nursing the boy back to health, was puzzled at Clay's hours of heavy, brooding silence. And while his love for her was always in his eyes, he spoke no word of it. He was like a man in prison, looking out with hungry eyes at that for which his heart ached. Virginia thought perhaps it was Margarita that haunted his thoughts. But Bob Carver knew that it was of Zeke Saunders that Clay thought with such dark brooding. Clay had told him with a hopeless sort of bitterness, that Blaze Webster had not killed John Carver, that Zeke had been the man who had done the murder. And while Bob and Jake tried to voice argument, Clay could not be shaken from his attitude.

Jake brought bits of news from Tombstone. The Earps and Clantons had met and fought it out. Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp had avenged Morgan Earp's death, then had gone away forever. Curly Bill had vanished. It was rumored that Wyatt Earp had killed that curly haired bandit.

Ringo and Frank Leslie were on a big drunk. Billy Claibourne was with them. Jake had seen them at the Widow Patterson's whisky ranch at Sulphur Springs Valley.

Clay received these bits of meaty gossip with a listless smile.

"I'm not much interested, Jake. My gun is back in Skeleton. I'm never going to pack another." And he would go back to his reading.

A week later Bob Carver rode up out of the sunset and contrary to his usual habit of stabling his horse, swung off in front of the house where Clay sat in a chair, his crutches beside him, looking with wistful eyes into the sunset.

"John Ringo is dead, Clay," said Bob Carver. "Suicide or murdered. This letter was in his pocket." The cattleman handed Clay a soiled envelope that bore the terse request:

> To be given to Bob Carver or Clay Saunders when I am dead.

Clay took a page of notepaper from the envelope. It was written in a clear, bold handwriting. The first sentence fairly leaped out at the boy.

> I am the man who killed John Carver.

With a dry, choking cry, Clay looked up at Carver who smiled down at him.

"Read all of it, Clay," said Carver, "while I put up my horse."

> I am the man who killed John Carver (Clay read). It was an accident, and one that I have never ceased to regret. Zeke Saunders was paid to take the blame. Blaze Webster was bribed never to reveal the truth. Because I was fond of Clay, the boy, I lied to him. I could not stand the ordeal of facing him and killing him. And I knew that I would kill him rather than be killed. One values one's

life, even when that life is a torment of hell upon earth. I beg no forgiveness from Clay Saunders. But if I read him right, he will give it, unbidden. He is a man.

Bob Carver will understand now why John Ringo could not take his hand in friendship. I could not be a hypocrite, bad as I am. Perhaps the return of the little girl, that night, may help him find it in his heart to withold his curse for a man who is quitting his hell upon earth for the eternal damnation of that shadow world across the Big Divide.

If such a man as I were given one wish before pushing back my chair and quitting this game called Life, I would wish this: That the girl Virginia and the boy Clay will find in one another that greatest of all life's blessings, that which we call love.

And so I push my last white chip into a losing game and say *adios*.

—JOHN RINGO.

The letter in his hands, Clay sat there in his chair, the setting sun tinting his pale face in its golden glow. And so Virginia found him. With a shaky laugh, Clay was on his feet, and without a word he took her in his arms.

BUFFALOES

By William Wells

THE EXTERMINATION of the buffalo on the great plains has been the theme for numberless stories; and as a general thing the writers of these expound the view that the horse Indians of the plains conserved the buffalo, killing only what they needed for food, being always careful to save all the meat; and that the slaughter that ended the buffalo was due entirely to the greed of the white skin-hunters. But this is only true in part.

The Indian tribes began the depletion of the great herds when they first began to hunt with horses and guns; and, what was worse, the Indians used very little of what they killed—a few hides for tents in the autumn, and usually only a few choice cuts of meat from each carcass.

Very few writers on the subject have any idea as to how the white skin-hunters conducted operations.

In nearly all cases skin-hunting was done from a "stand," since it did not pay to run buffalo in this kind of hunting. Not as many could be killed by running; those killed would be scattered from hell to breakfast, requiring a lot of travel to skin the animals and pick up the hides. And worse, the buffaloes left alive would be run clear out of the country in a day or so, and camp would have to be moved—not such an easy matter, with a lot of hides in all stages of curing, and good camping ground, with wood, water and grass scarce.

As to a single horseman holding a bunch of buffalo by riding around and shooting rapidly at them—well, words fail me. In just about thirty seconds after he tried this, all there would be left of those buffaloes would be a cloud of dust disappearing over a hill with a lone horseman trying to catch up.

Also, almost without exception, the weapon of the skin-hunters was the 50-120-550 Sharps rifle, weighing some-

where around twenty pounds. With one of these rifles, a belt or pouch of the long cartridges with their patched bullets—half-inch slugs of lead nearly two inches in length—and a couple of sticks tied together X-fashion as a rest for the heavy rifle, the hunter rode out of camp looking for a bunch of buffalo, which as a usual thing were not in the big herds of fiction, but scattered about in small bands numbering from a dozen up to several hundred, a bunch of between fifty and a hundred being the best for a stand.

Getting on a little rise commanding a good view of the herd if possible, the hunter concealed himself behind a tuft of grass, weeds or bush. Then he set his rest sticks in the ground, placed plenty of loose cartridges handy and, taking good aim, put a bullet through one of the big animals just back of the foreleg and about one third of the way up the body.

As a rule the stricken animal would walk a few steps, stop, brace itself on widely extended forelegs, then sink gently down, not disturbing any of the others, as they paid no attention to the report of the rifle.

The hunter kept this up, firing only at buffaloes broadside on, shooting slowly, running a rag, wet with water from his canteen, frequently through the rifle-barrel with his cleaning rod, so that the weapon would not overheat; dropping animals only on the outside of the bunch and paying particular attention to any that seemed likely to lead off, until all the way from ten to fifty, and in some cases a hundred, buffalo were down.

Sometimes one of the beasts would walk over to sniff at a fallen comrade. Such an animal the hunter would drop at once, if he could, before the scent of blood excited the rest. Finally the smell of blood would become so strong that several buffaloes would become alarmed at once, bellowing, pawing the earth; and then all at once the whole band would stampede, and that stand was over—nothing for the hunter to do but to hunt up another bunch of buffalo, if it was not too late in the day.

With every hunter there were usually several four-horse wagons, with one of the drivers acting as camp tender, horse herder and cook; the other drivers serving as skinners, and following the hunter with one of the wagons, keeping down wind out of sight, until the killing at a stand was finished.

The skinning was done by slitting down the inside of each leg and along the belly from neck to tail, the head skin not being taken. The legs and a strip along each side of the belly cut were skinned out with sharp knives, each skinner having several, as well as a steel and whetstone. The neck was skinned all the way around. A short rope with a hook on one end was looped around the thick skin of the neck; a horse was attached, and the entire hide, neck to tail was ripped off in a moment. A couple of men could skin a buffalo in this manner in a few minutes.

The hides from the day's kill were taken to camp, the hair dusted with poison to keep off the big blowflies and meat bugs. It was then pegged out to dry, flesh side up. This usually took but a couple of days in the hot, dry air. They were then laid, hair side up, to dry still further, then stacked in piles, hair side up, in which shape they would stand a hard rain without damage, until hauled to the railroad, although at times hide buyers sent freight outfits out to the buffalo range and bought right on the ground.

It was hard and dangerous work, especially in the Southwest, where the Comanches and Kiowas had a habit of watching until the lone hunter was off his guard and then rushing him, in which case his skinners often found a badly mutilated body; though more than once a hunter, having a little warning, took refuge in a buffalo wallow and stood the redskins off until help arrived. The Sharps rifle in skillful hands was a deadly weapon at charging horsemen coming head on.

In our opinion the author of "Paul Bunyan" and "Brawnyman" has never treated us to a more moving story than ~

The OLD WARHORSE

By JAMES STEVENS

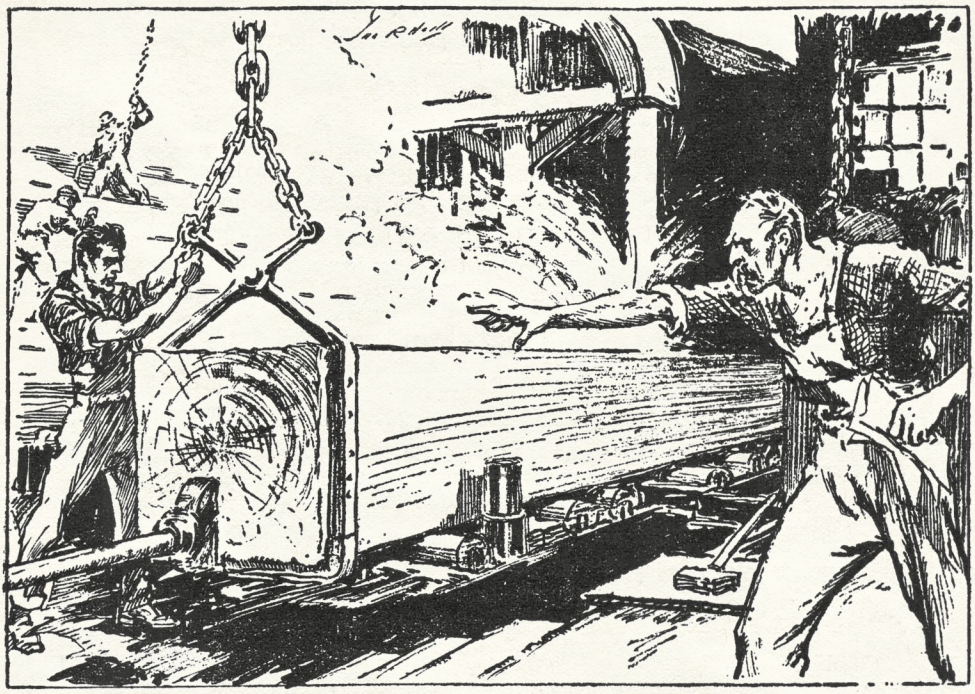
THE BIG Menominee and Tacoma mill—sawing average, two hundred thousand feet, board measure, per ten hours—was roaring close to the end of a payday shift. It was a rainy February day and the lights had gone on at four o'clock. There was a white blaze of them over the markers at the head of the long green chain, and over every sawing machine. Saw steel glittered from trimmer, edger, resaw and slasher, as the sharp teeth of circulars and bands bit and ripped through boards, cants and slabs. The screaming songs of the saws and the rumble of live rolls filled the big millhouse with a tumult of sound.

At the headrig the sixty foot bandsaw was a silver flash of ripping steel. A brute of a stick, seven feet through and eighty long, was on the carriage. The two doggers and the setter had to climb the log's side to catch the signals from the head sawyer's cage.

In that cage, with the log deck on his left, the carriage and its gigantic burden squarely in front of him, and the wide silver ribbon of the big band flashing on his right, stood old Johnny McCann. He had stood his ten hours a day in this cage for twenty-five years. He had stood in others like it back in Saginaw for fifteen more. Head sawyer. Boss of the millhouse floor. A great lumbering operation centering around the skill of his eye and hand. A mighty life. Aye, it was a tremendous job, this one of sawing up the big timber.

You felt like a general or a king when you got a great beauty of a log like this one off the deck and lined up for the bandsaw. Your eyes sized up the hundreds of year rings in its end. An old-timer. A tall tree before Columbus hit this new world. Ripe for lumber now. The sapwood is deep. Slab her heavy and hard. Square her down to the sweet, fine grained clear. Keep the figures of your orders in your head, Johnny, old horse! Get the taper of the log!

Signal the carriage crew with your left hand. Why the hell is the lad so slow, that setter, that boy of yours, young Johnny McCann? Ease over this lever in your right hand; now—she moves—



the old headsaw sings—*boom!* Down the live rolls goes the first slab! Back with the carriage, the big beauty of a log showing a face of clear sapwood. On again—down the rolls—back ahead—now a jiggle of the left hand lever to lift the mighty steel gooseneck hook of the turner. What force you can rouse by just a small motion of your hand!

FORTY years of it in a head sawyer's cage, still old Johnny McCann could thrill like a youth at the cutting of an ancient giant from the forest. The years rolled away from him then. So did his troubles. He even forgot the hot lead in his feet and the shooting pains in his legs. He forgot his worry about the superintendent, bending now over the sheets on the log scaler's desk. He was a head sawyer in all the glory of fighting a great bulk of a sawlog into lumber.

He felt only the levers in his hands, he saw only the steel hook of the turner, jerking the log over on its slabbed face, the carriage plunging ahead, and he heard only the screaming thunder of his bandsaw as it ripped through bark and grain. He was a hero, a king—and then the quitting whistle boomed through the mill.

The roar of machinery and the screams of the saws died away in a drone. Old Johnny McCann leaned on his levers and gazed miserably at the great log on the carriage. He had lost it. The night shift head sawyer would have it now. The sawyers and helpers were streaming for the door, all black shapes in the glaring light. The broad beamed young setter swung away from the carriage, calling over his shoulder:

"Won't be home for supper, dad. Eatin' downtown."

Old Johnny didn't hear. His gaze was on the superintendent, who was slowly approaching from the scaler's desk. Old Johnny felt his legs giving way under him. He gripped the levers hard. His mind seemed to be turning numb from the burning ache in his feet; they shot pain clear to his eyes. That's the way she goes, lads. Forty years of it, forty years of standing dead still and at a strain in a head sawyer's cage, then the old legs and

feet give out, the old hands get a little shaky and slow, and the super comes up, flushes, hems and haws, and finally blurts out the sad, sad news.

The time has come. Life's got you down at last. You're old, you're old. No use to buck it. But it's—well, hell, let 'er go. . .

OLD JOHNNY McCANN walked alone from the company office to his home above the tideflats. On other pay-day nights the blue check in his pocket had made a glow that spread all over him. But now it was cold. He hobbled along, the wind blowing rain over his bowed head.

Back of him the great domes of waste burners and the small lighted squares of millhouse windows shone through smoke and darkness. Old Johnny McCann was feeling like an exile, a man driven from his native city. Forty years as the king of a millhouse floor, and now—the superintendent's words kept pounding in his ears:

"Sorry, Johnny. Sorrier'n hell. But you know yourself, we got to hold the cut up to two hundred thousand. You've dropped to one ninety-five, then ninety—eighty-five—losing two hundred dollars a shift, the company is— Hrrumph! It's all right—all right! You've made us thousands extra in your twenty-five years. You've got a pension coming. You're going to be treated right.

"Take it easy rest of your days. That's better, huh? Hrrumph! The lad? Sorrier'n hell about the lad, too, Johnny. Looked like he'd step into your shoes till awhile back. Can't stand for head sawyers hitting the redeye now, Johnny. Times have changed since the old Saginaw days. . . . Well, maybe you *have* got it coming.

"Well, I'll give you another month—one more payday, Johnny—just one more. A chance to go out sawing on your highest average. I'll give you that. Forget it. Us old-timers got to stick together, Johnny."

The words kept hammering through old Johnny's head. A chance. Not a chance to keep himself from the waste pile. The shooting pains in his legs, the hot lead in his feet told him that. But for young Johnny, the broad beamed lad who thought he could lick anything in life with a grin, a jest, or at the worst with a swing of his big white fist—ah, the hell of it, thought Johnny McCann. Blowing his check all night over the bar of the Owl. Laughing and joking all he could think of, with that soft streak in him. Would it turn hard at the chance for a real fight?

Would he be willing to stand and battle by the old man's side? Old Johnny had his doubts. He only knew that he himself would make one mighty effort to go out in a grand smash of sawing. . . Well, a bit of supper, a spell of rest, then to look up the lad.

Old Johnny McCann hobbled on, his head bowed against the winter rain. . .

II

BROCK BARTON, day edgerman in the M. & T. mill, was picking a cigar from a box on the Owl bar. He was making his selection carelessly, without even examining the box, for he was gazing sidewise at young Johnny McCann. The broad beamed young setter had just ordered another round of drinks for the M. & T. gang. A contemptuous grin was on the edgerman's swarthy face. Old Johnny McCann saw that first, as he stepped through the swinging doors of the Owl. He knew what it meant; he knew what thoughts were in the edgerman's head. Something like:

"Keep it up, my fine buck. Drink the redeye down. But watch friend Brock take a cigar. Drink yourself out of your last chance at the headsaw, son; hop to 'er, lad, for that makes Brock Barton boss of the big rig when your old man saws himself off his feet."

Sure, those were his thoughts, though he spoke aloud so friendly and fine:

"Certainly I'm a friend of yours, Johnny. I just ain't drinkin' tonight,

that's all. Don't mind my takin' a cigar now, hey, Johnny?"

"Cer'nly not, Brock. Good ol' Brock, bes' edgerman on the tideflats! Take dozen s'gars on me, good ol' Brock."

Old Johnny felt his hands unclench, turn nerveless and cold. What was the use? That was the nature of the lad—puling drunk one minute, slobbering over the man who was all set to knock him out of the best sawing job on the tideflats, the next minute tearing loose with his fists. A puler or a hell raiser, that was young Johnny McCann, with never a thought of his work except for the check it would bring. But what he could be if he would only settle down for a bit! A fine young strapper, a real bully he might have been in the old Saginaw days.

Look at the big, beautiful white hand of him, clinking a piece of gold on the shining bar as he orders a round of drinks. The sandy bush sticking out from under the side cocked hat. The devil in the blue eye as a laugh roars out of his chest. Big, smart and fine, fit to be a head sawyer in spite of his thin, soft streak. Worth a battle for—but there he stands and lets that black bog trotter of an edgerman blarney him into a puling fool!

It was no use after all, old Johnny decided. The lad had the stuff in him, but he was too much for the old man. The only thing was to let go of life entirely, take a pension, spend the rest of the days in a padded rocking chair, with the wrecked legs and burned out feet restful and cool, forever restful and cool.

He who was once Roaring Johnny of the great sawmill town of Saginaw, was now only old Johnny McCann, pensioned off, headed for the waste pile, a has been. Well, let 'er go. Easy to rest. Easy and fine. What use to go on fighting when you're down, whipped, crippled, old? A fool to have thought of it, a fool to have imagined that the lad would toughen up and battle to take his old man's place in the head sawyer's cage. Puling away there, the M. & T. gang grinning around him. Getting poison drunk on Brock Barton's account. Well, there was home and rest—and he'd send the super word in the morning. . . .

OLD JOHNNY McCANN backed slowly toward the swinging doors of the Owl, his gaze still fixed in fading hope on his son. But it was no use; the lad was still haw-hawing away, slapping Brock Barton on the back. No use—so old Johnny turned to go. As he did so he noticed that J. Michael Murphy, proprietor of the Owl, was conversing grandly with a nabob. As he talked he pointed at a faded and streaked steel engraving that was framed above the bar mirror.

"That picksher yer inquirin' about—yeah, it's been in my fambly for a hundred years," J. Michael was saying. "A fine, rare picksher it is. Come from the old country. Can't ye smell battle in it, though? And look at the harse. Ye never saw a braver harse in a picksher. Yeah, a fambly heirloomb."

Old Johnny's gaze followed the pointing finger, and he grinned. The steel engraving was familiar to him. J. Michael had bought it from a peddler and hung it in his saloon back in the old Saginaw days. J. Michael had risen in the world out here on the Sound; he was a political influence and conversed with nabobs. Family heirlooms!

Old Johnny felt an impulse to tell the nabob the facts about the engraving, but it was smothered by a sudden swell of emotion in his heart. In an instant the engraving had come to life with meaning for him.

It pictured the repulse of a cavalry charge in one of Napoleon's battles. The thing was vivid with an illusion of movement in a mass of panic stricken horses. The background showed the enemy cavalry looming in pursuit. The battlefield was strewn with wounded and dying horses and men. But it was a hamstrung old warhorse in the center of the scene which had caught old Johnny's eye.

He was an old warhorse, by the saber scars on his flanks, which the artist had taken pains to distinguish from his new wounds. His hind legs were sprawled

impotently under him. Yet the heart of the old warhorse still throbbed with the fire of battle. That was beautifully shown. His lean, scarred, bleeding body was braced up on his sound front legs. His mane waved like a torn banner from his proud, arched neck. His teeth were bared at the onrushing enemy.

"Ah!" whispered old Johnny to himself, with huge astonishment. "To have known that picksher for so long and to have never really *seen* it afore! Why—why, it's *me!*"

Old Johnny McCann half closed his eyes. The shine of the mirror turned into a bright mist. He saw himself as Roaring Johnny, a bully young sawyer in the white pine country far away. He mingled with the gang of his youth again. Tramped along with it to the big, red mill, the frost steaming off the sidewalk boards. He saw the cool, clear blue of a morning sky; he stepped high as the keen frosty air tickled his ribs, he lifted his chest and was Roaring Johnny when he helloed his friends.

Fat out and away a snowy peak rose against the blue. Then a dark green ridge of virgin timber, then stump speckled, cut over hills rolled down, with a light green blanket of second growth on the older lands near town. Steam wafted up in the sunlight from the booms in the millpond, the quiet water shining between the logs. The big, red mill, the black smokestacks, the white drifts of sawdust smoke, the whiter clouds of steam that puffed out from the exhausts.

And the smells. The keen breeze bore down fresh and balmy smells from the green woods. It blew into your face the rousing pungent smells of green lumber and green sawdust. Ah, it was a life to live over again!

The life of the timberlands. His no more. Only to remember. But was it now? Old Johnny opened his eyes and stared hard at the warhorse in the engraving. By thunder, there he was! There was his story! He, too, had a grand life behind him! And, by the holy old mackinaw, he was going down fighting in just that style! And right here and now he'd show the lad, Brock Barton, all the rest of the gang, who was still the head sawyer of the M. and T. mill!

Yea, bullies! Sawdust and shaving are going to fly!

Come on, old warhorse, look up at your old tillicum in the picture there, square your shoulders, shake the hobbles out of your legs, and horn in!

III

"ONLY takin' cigars tonight, huh? Better put some redeye under your belt, Brock Barton, and get some life into your carcass! For you've got a month of hell ahead of you, old-timer!"

There was a hush of amazement among the M. & T. men at the bar. Only one or two of the old-timers among them had ever heard their head sawyer's Saginaw bully roar. And old Johnny appeared about six inches taller and ten years younger tonight, as he jammed in between young Johnny and Brock Barton. Old Johnny saw the wide stares of the sawdust savages and he shot a grim glance up at the old warhorse. More and more he was knowing how the brave old devil was feeling. It was kind of glorious, actually. The last grand stab in a mighty game.

"What are you buggin' your eyes about, Brock? Ain't you heard? Hell, I thought everybody in the mill knew I was due for the waste pile in another month. But you don't know, huh, Brock. You don't know you was brought here to take the headsaw when I passed out? Damn' innercent, ain't you?"

"Why, Mr. McCann, what you talkin' of?"

"Don't 'Mr. McCann' me, old-timer. I ain't no super. You know what I'm talkin' of—my last month on the headsaw. And I'm here to tell you it's goin' to be one grand smash! I'm tellin' you and the whole M. & T. outfit I'm out to bust all records for my finish. Two hundred thousand feet a shift won't be nothin' this next month! I'll send the

cants down the rolls to the edger so fast you'll wish you'd never heard of a sawmill, Brock Barton! You'll be skin and bone, time this month is out!"

Brock Barton's pride was stabbed, and he roared:

"Th' hell I will! You never saw the day you could cover me up, you stove up old Siwash! Nev—"

The last word was choked in the middle as he saw the flash of a big, white fist swinging at his mouth. Young Johnny had turned from puling to fighting. He bellowed and swung, but a gnarled old hand knocked the blow down and clamped his wrist.

"Just a minute, lad. I ain't ready to start on *you* yet."

Old Johnny turned on the edgerman again.

"I'm warnin' you fair, Brock. You'll have to cinch your leather apron up tight, spit on your hands and keep your carcass full of life if you handle the cants I'll roll down this month. Rest up good tomorrer, for Monday you ketch hell and hallelujah!"

Old Johnny smacked a double eagle on the bar.

"Set 'em up, bartenders! Three rounds for the house on Roaring Johnny McCann! Promenade to the bar! Drink to a month of sawin' such as has never been seen this side of Saginaw! Drink 'er down with an old warhorse of the timberlands!"

Brock Barton drank with the others. He felt kind of sick; he needed something. He could swear that the old sawyer was drunk. But old Johnny was steady on his feet, though his straight body swayed like a pine in a big wind. Maybe it *would* be hell and hallelujah. It was almost that right now, wrestling the big cants and tugging on the heavy edger levers. The toughest edging job he'd ever seen.

He wouldn't stay on it an hour if it wasn't for the chance at headsawing which the super had promised him soon. A few shifts of extra heavy cutting might do him up. He was no fool. There was more to this than just a grandstand play on the part of old Johnny McCann. The old stiff had more on his mind than that. The kid— That was it, by the holy old mackinaw! He wondered now. If the old head sawyer was playing a game for the kid. . . .

"OUTSIDE with you, lad. I've something to say to you alone."

Young Johnny obediently pushed his big frame from the bar and unsteadily followed the old man out through the swinging doors. Brock Barton scowled after them. He was suspicious. He had good reasons to be.

There was a space of clear glass at the top of the glazed front window of the Owl Saloon. Standing on the avenue curb, one might look up and through the oblong of clear glass and see the steel engraving above the bar mirror.

The old sawyer kept his gaze fixed on the battle scene as he stood and talked to the big lad at his side. About them were the trolleys, the horses and buggies in the wide avenue, the black shadows of store buildings, behind dim street lights, the bright spots along the sidewalks, marking the saloons, and the sawmill men stringing by, hilarious over a payday night.

But neither man was conscious of the life of the avenue as old Johnny had his say. One looked at a picture that had come to life for him; the other grew sober under words spoken in a voice that carried him back to the years when he was a small boy flushed with the pride of his dad being the head sawyer in the biggest mill on the tideflats.

Looking past the corner of the Owl Saloon, young Johnny McCann could see the red domes of the burners, the lights of millhouse windows. He began to feel something of what that meant to the old man. Maybe life *was* something more than blowing your pay check, hogging down the redeye, sporting with the girls, raising hell, cocky and proud.

It had hurt when the old man talked to him about being an old warhorse on his last legs, throwing it into him about having a soft streak, saying it looked like he'd

need another setter to go out in the grand smash of sawing he'd planned. It was the hurt of a scolded boy, and something else from boyhood welled up in young Johnny now. That feeling of his dad's being a hero—it had stirred again at this talk of ending up like an old warhorse.

That was it, right enough. The old man had sawed his way from the white pine sticks of Bangor and Saginaw to the big firs of Puget Sound. Battled the big sticks from a sawyer's cage for forty years. Young Johnny wanted to throw his arm around the stooped shoulders. But you could only bristle and bluster when words were coming at you like the licks of an ax.

"Your cocky hell raisin' has left you jug headed on the setworks, and that's what's knocked down my cut more'n any failin' of mine! The super knows. He didn't bring Brock Barton here on my account. You ain't got a chance to step into my shoes now, son!"

"To hell with it!"

"Yeah. All right. Hold your dander down. I ain't out for no lecture. I'm thinkin' of myself, my finish. How I make it is up to you. You *are* the best setter on the sideflats when you want to be; you're the only one, son, who can help me bust all sawin' records this last month and go out like an old warhorse."

Old Johnny's voice quavered a little there, then it sounded steady and hard.

"If you're goin' to lay down, say so, and I'll find a setter who'll see me through, anyway. I want to know now."

"Who the hell you think you're talkin' to, some ten year old? Certainly I won't lay down. You—"

"That's all I wanted to know." Old Johnny felt his knees shaking with relief, but he wouldn't soften. "Then come on home."

IV

A HEAD sawyer needs legs like two tough timbers. He stands on one spot and in a strain all through his shift. When the last cant is dropped from a sawlog and the carriage is shot back and ground to a stop in front of the log deck the sawyer steps on a plunger with his left foot and the dogs that hold the first of the log deck turn are released.

The sawyer's left foot then shoves a foot throttle down, steam pounds into a cylinder below the mill floor, and huge steel arms leap up and shove the new sawlog against the carriage headblocks.

The sawyer then has both feet to stand on until the log is ripped into cants. His right foot hardly moves in its place until the noon and night whistles blow. Forty years of it, and any head sawyer needs new legs for his job.

Old Johnny McCann was needing new legs on the eleventh day of his battle. The first ten had made sawmill history on the tideflats. Everything had been right. There had been a noble run of logs from the woods, all sticks between four and six feet in diameter. The only orders on the boards were for small timbers. So old Johnny had only to grade the clears out of each sawlog after slabbing off a face, and then knock off four to ten inch cants for the edger.

It was beautiful sawing. And young Johnny had been with him all the way. Whenever old Johnny had felt that he couldn't last another minute, that he'd have to give in to the pains that throbbed to his bones, to the weak trembles of his knees and the burning numbness in his feet that made him feel like his shoe soles were hot lead—then old Johnny only had to look up and out of the cage, across the sawlog on the carriage, and see the broad beamed young setter at his dial, showing new life in every move of him; and then the leg pains were fought down again.

It was marvelous what a change had shown in the lad that first Monday. Even the super had noticed it, remarking that it was too bad old Johnny hadn't got his hand in before Brock Barton was put on the edger and promised the headsaw. Old Johnny had managed a twisted grin, though a ten hour shift was done and his legs were about killing him. And he had said under his breath:

"Don't be too sure who's to take my

headsaw, Mr. Super. 'Tis only the first day of battle."

A mighty day it had been. The cut had jumped to two hundred and twenty thousand feet, a record for the mill. And Brock Barton was like a dishrag. He was more suspicious of old Johnny than ever, He had more reasons to be.

For the record was broken by two thousand feet the next day, and through the week it climbed on, until two hundred and thirty thousand feet were marked up by the scaler for Saturday. It had been a good thing for old Johnny that shift was a Saturday. Young Johnny had to go for a livery rig to take him home.

But it was all right; the lad stayed away from the saloons that night; and he stuck home all day Sunday. He still bristled and blustered at every word that was said to him, bragged about the big drunk he would have when this month was over, and the like of that. Old Johnny wished him in hell and declared he'd fire him off the carriage in a second, once another decent setter showed up in the mill. One would have thought the two were sworn enemies. But what a week of sawing it had been!

MONDAY was a blue day. The cut dropped to two fifteen. Still high over the average, but not enough. Brock Barton had been freshened by a Sunday's rest, also, and he left his edger with something of a swagger Monday night. Tuesday morning old Johnny's eyes were bleak and his face was drawn with desperate determination as he hobbled into his cage. That day he cut two thirty-five, with the edger table choked every minute of the shift. Wednesday and Thursday the old sawyer held the cut up to the high mark, and last night Brock Barton, his long body as limp as an empty sack, his face sweat streaked, his hair a wet tangle over his eyes, argued furiously with the superintendent.

The super shrugged his shoulders and turned away, meaning that if the wrathy edgerman didn't like it he could quit. Old Johnny had to be carted home again, but there was a thrilling hope in his heart that more than made up for his wrecked legs.

It was hot lead in his feet, running snakes of fire in his muscles, and the palsy in his knees this afternoon of the eleventh day. There was a cold spot in his heart from the feeling that this day was his last one. The old warhorse was licked; the enemy was looming closer and closer above him, like a black cloud. Still it was never say die with old Johnny. He was sawing away at a mightier lick than ever.

At mid-afternoon the scaler's figures showed that one hundred and ninety thousand feet of logs had already gone through the big headrig. If he could shove them on as fast he'd hang up two forty for the ten hours, maybe more. The edger table was choked with cants; the lineup men were stacking them; and Brock Barton was hog wild.

Maybe it'll be his Black Friday, thought old Johnny. The thought was made like a prayer, for he could feel his own finish drawing near.

He might last the day, but never the week, never tomorrow. Flesh and blood couldn't stand it. He could fight pain, fight it like an old warhorse, but when the old right leg began to sink under him as he tripped a log from the deck, he knew that the enemy was drawing close, ready to beat him down.

Looking over at young Johnny, who was all wildfire for the grand smash of sawing his old man was making, showing it in the shine of his eyes, the flush of his face, his swagger and bluster forgotten now—that would make old Johnny fight pain, but it couldn't keep the strained old knees from buckling.

Was he going now? Not on your life! Be an old warhorse, Johnny McCann, to the last snort! Rear up and show your teeth to the last damn' gasp!

He forced his mind back to the sawing. It slowed just so much whenever he let himself feel pain or think. His right hand quickened on the lever that stuck up from the floor by his right foot, and the carriage shot behind the flashing

teeth of the bandsaw so much the faster. Quicker again, and the carriage hardly seemed to stop before it was plunging forward, then slowing at the instant the log's end touched the ripping teeth, then crowding through, and another cant boomed down the rolls.

Back and forward, back and forward, signal the setter—he's just the setter now, and not the big lad—now that much quicker with the left hand lever. The giant gooseneck hook of the turner leaps up, stabs down into the sawlog, twists it like a cat twisting a ball of yarn, lifts, drops from sight as the steel arms set the log against the headblocks. . . .

Saw on, saw on, keep a sawing to break another record today, Johnny McCann! Aye, old warhorse, you're Roaring Johnny again!

THE WHISTLE shrilled for the millwrights. Black smoke rolled up from the edger with a stink of burning leather. Brock Barton had stuck a cant in his circulars and slipped his drive belt. Take just one glance at him, old Johnny! See him jumping and waving his fists like a maniac. Saw hard now, old-timer! Pile the cants ten feet high on the edger table! Beautiful logs on the deck! Roll 'em along!

The super was bawling into his ears, so as to be heard above the singing roar of the big band. What say—ease up?

"Ease up, hell! You want your big cut, don't you, hey? I'm sawin' logs!"

Forget the burning aches and pains. Quick on the levers, now, like you had the youth of the lad there behind the setter's dial. Hearken to the old saw's song! Better than a bugle call, hey, Johnny McCann? See the cants drop and boom down the rolls not a dozen feet apart! Ain't that some heavy artillery, old Johnny? Pile 'em ten feet high on the edger table! Pile 'em up, you lineup men! Got to put 'em somewhere. The old warhorse of the timberlands is busting another record today—two forty—two forty—two forty—you're going to make that figure, Johnny McCann!

What's that down behind the edger table? Sneak just one look and see what's going on. Hell, it's Brock Barton, shaking one fist at the pile of cants and his other in the super's face! And the super's bawling back at him—good glory, Johnny McCann, it looks like—yea, lad, there he goes! Off comes his leather apron, he jumps on it, heads for his locker, grabs his hat and coat, and out he goes, still shaking his fists, through the millhouse door! The super's taking the edger.

Hey, old warhorse, you've licked 'em! Old-timer, the last battle is yours! It's yours. . . .

Ah, Johnny lad, it's all right now—all right—and the old warhorse needs a bit of help now. He's sinking down. Can't you see, Johnny lad—it was all put on—where's your big young arm?

The big, young arm was around old Johnny a second after he had fallen between his sawyer's levers. From out of the grip of it a weak, old voice whispered:

"Take the headsaw, lad. She's yours."

THE CANAL DIGGERS' DINNER

By Edgar Young

ON SATURDAY evening May second, we Panama Canal diggers who live hereabouts gathered in the reception room of the Hotel Astor to greet one another once more before filing in to dinner. The old colonel (no general, he, to an ex-Canaler) wandered in and thrust out a friendly hand and moved gently about from group to group smiling, a wee bit older but the same good natured czar who topped the big job on the Zone. Barnes was there. He and I walked to the Zone from Mexico. Young Heald (his dad is superintendent of the Panama Railroad) hunted out Barnes and me. He gave up his room at the old Lincoln House in Colon when we moseyed in there looking for a bed, and doctored us for two weeks afterward besides.

The dining room doors opened and we swarmed in. There had been surreptitious flasks. It was all right as long as the colonel didn't see them, just as it used to be on the Zone, and men responded with alacrity to beckoning fingers and nods from around corners, but at that the most a man could get was a few thimblefuls to perfume his breath and whet his appetite. Many a shipload of it went into the digging of the Panama Canal.

The menu was in French and none of us knew what was coming, but we ate course after course until at last we lighted our cigars and sat puffing. The colonel rapped for order. The business of the Society was rapidly concluded. He gave a short talk recalling the old days and introduced one of the old Inca crowd, the 1903 men, and Mr. A. C. Griggs, as toastmaster, who was roundly cheered. He was one of the best liked men on the Zone. "Pop" Griggs got to talking about the old days, and the more he said the more he thought of saying until he glanced down from the little platform he was standing on and saw Secretary Sartor glance at his watch. He then hastily began introducing the first speaker.

This man he told us was so well known, not only in Panama, but all over the United States, in fact all over the world, that little introduction was required. He had put the first ship through the Canal and would tell us how he did it; he had put hundreds of other ships through, thousands, and he would tell us how he did that. At last Mr. Griggs paused impressively.

"And now gentlemen, I have the extreme pleasure of presenting Admiral——uh—Admiral—"

He paused and looked around sheepishly. We pulled hard for him. That hot sun and tin roofs had effected more than one of our memories. Secretary Sartor whispered the name up to him in a hoarse whisper. He did not catch it. The conversations, the bright lights, the big dinner, the roomful of smiling faces had caused his memory to go back on him. He looked over to where the Admiral sat flushing with embarrassment.

"What in the hell is your name, Admiral?"

"Hugh Rodman."

"Right you are. I had you mixed up with a machinist at Gatun. Gentlemen, this is Admiral Hugh Rodman, the man who put all those ships through I was telling you about."

Everybody roared. Hugh Rodman laughed until he could scarcely begin to speak. School kids all over the U. S. knew his name. "Pop" had known him for twenty years but the name had evaded him when he came to say it.

Continuing

IN THE YEAR 2000*

"I FOUND a Ruin and I made a Home." Such were the words—the hilltop epitaph of José Martinez the Spaniard who, with Rand the American, had founded the kingdom of Hoserán. It was a realm so remotely situated in the jungles of the upper Amazon that no one had visited it and departed since Rand returned to the United States with his companions, the adventurers Knowlton, Ryan and McKay.

Almost a century passed. The year 2000 was now not far away. A few Ecuadoreans had flown over Hoserán in observation planes, hoping some day to loot the rich stores of gold which the Jivero Indian slaves of the White Ones had mined from the nearby mountains. The aviators had been shot down, with one exception; and the exception, Salazar, had been captured and forced to operate Hoserán's one anti-aircraft gun against his own countrymen.

Meanwhile the world outside of lost Hoserán advanced in learning and progressed in science. A world war, fought with new and terrible weapons, swept the earth. An American air hero of that war was Meredith McKay, grandson of Knowlton and McKay.

When, after the war, Meredith McKay had left Quito far behind him and was circling over the orderly fields and villages of Hoserán his welcome was the glint of a heliograph, then the whistle of bullets and the boom of the anti-aircraft gun, fired by the captive Salazar.

He landed quickly, thinking that he had been mistaken for an Ecuadorean. At once he was surrounded by an angry group of swarthy natives. He explained his name, his errand, his friendliness.

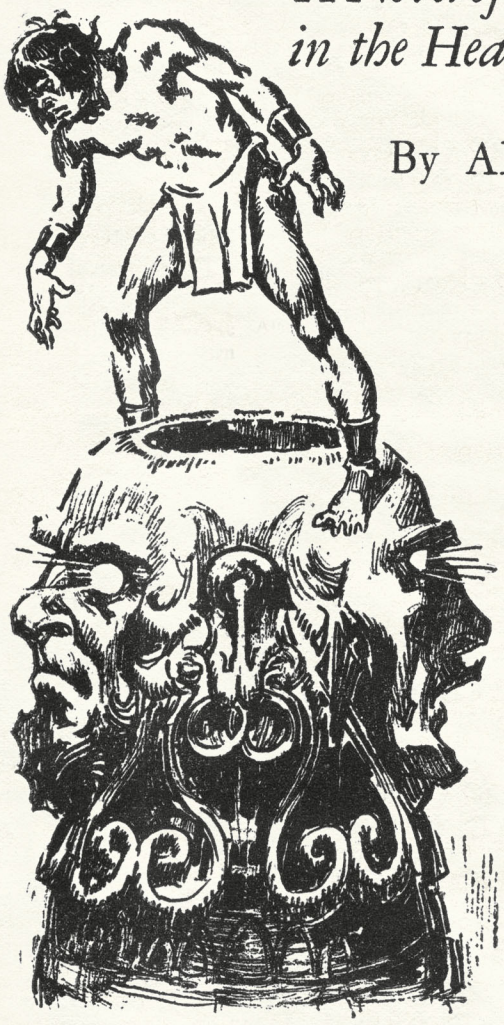
Slowly he realized that these belligerent latter Twentieth Century White Ones had forgotten McKay, his grandfather, and had little respect for his grandfather's comrade Martinez, the father of their country.

In the privacy of the prisonlike lodgings assigned to the visiting airman old Cononaco explained what had happened in Hoserán. The Old Ones were forgotten or neglected. The degenerate Jivero Indian slaves had mixed with the White Ones; the king himself—Vicente—was half Jivero. The rightful ruler was the Princess Nuné,

* *This is an "Off-the-Trail" story.*

A Novel of a White Man's Kingdom in the Heart of the Amazon Jungle

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL



Virgin of the Flame at the doubled visaged statue of José Martinez and Rand.

Cononaco took McKay in secret to meet Nuné. When McKay returned to the barracks where he and his plane were confined he found a deadly serpent chained to his bed. He called the guards to take it away, but he believed that they knew who had placed it there. He suspected Yanga, the Jivero whom he had struck in public the day he landed.

A moment later old Cononaco came creeping through a hidden door to McKay's room.

CHAPTER IX

NUNÉ RECEIVES

"FROM Nuné, the Queen of the Flame, comes a word," announced Cononaco, in low monotone. "To the mind of Cononaco it is a word not fitting to be spoken to a man of the blood of Oom Keh and Notun; but since it comes from the blood of Ho Seh and Ran, it is brought. And the word is 'Go!' "

"Humph!" muttered McKay. "And is that all?"

Cononaco hesitated; hesitated so long that another question followed.

"Did you tell Nuné that Oom Keh waited to see her again?"

"Aye."

"And she sent no other word than 'go'?"

"She said," grudgingly added the messenger, "that if the voice of Cononaco did not move Oom Keh to go, then her own voice would say the same."

"Oh." McKay chuckled. "When?"

"Now."

"Where?"

"At a place where Cononaco is to guide Oom Keh."

"Yes? Then lead on, *compañero*. When you tell me to go your voice has no weight."

Cononaco's hand closed again on his arm, a quick, strong grip bespeaking unmistakable approval. But the answering words sounded a bit dubious.

"A softer voice may prove more strong."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. Oom Keh goes when he will, and no sooner."

"*Bueno!*"

Another hearty squeeze, and a more cheerful tone. Plainly Cononaco, though obedient to the command laid on him by his princess, did not favor McKay's flight.

Now, with no more delay, he moved wallward, drawing the young man with him. Despite the confusing gloom he unerringly located the invisible exit; and, notwithstanding his stiffness of legs and back, he sank without apparent effort and opened it without sound. Through the unseen opening came cooler air and several dull thuds of slow, heavy raindrops on the outer ground. The downpour which so long had been but a threat now was about to become actuality.

A moment Cononaco lay listening. Vision was useless against the dense blackness enshrouding the mesa, whence even the lights of the king's doorway now had vanished. No footfall, no swish of bare soles on short grass, no other sound betraying the presence of watchers came to intent ears. Gradually the old man drew himself outward, McKay gaging his progress by holding lightly to a dragging foot. When it had passed the edge of the barrier he released it and, moving carefully, crawled through in his turn. Once his clothing scraped slightly against the dry cane ends, drawing from the pilot a faint hiss of warning. Otherwise his passage was silent.

A tap on his back told him to rise. Cononaco, seemingly cat eyed, closed the low door with only a tiny creak, muffled by the ponderous *spat* of more raindrops; then he hobbled briskly away, unassisted by his stick, but holding to an arm of his convoy.

Now that he was in the open, with his secret of penetrating the guarded wall still undiscovered, he evidently recked little of any challenge; for a gruff word of reply would doubtless satisfy any watchman that he was merely going about some business of his own, and no human eyes would be likely to discern his companion in the existent pall. Nonetheless he proceeded with tread habitually quiet.

McKay, moving with steps timed to the limp of his guide, breathed deeply and smiled as he fared onward, his pulses leaping with the sense of adventure and romance. To have walked across this plaza without concealment, attended by a light bearing escort—that would have been prosaic, even though a princess awaited him beyond. To make the same short journey in secrecy and stealth, under the wings of low swinging storm, with armed men lurking near—there was a nerve thrill in that. Once he laughed softly with sheer enjoyment, evoking from his mate a low growl of rebuke. Thereafter he proceeded with no more merriment.

A WARNING pressure, and Cononaco slowed, then stopped. They had reached a wall—a wall of clay, as exploring fingers told McKay—in which was a closed door. For a second the old man felt about. Then the door swung silently. Through the gap the pair passed, McKay stumbling over a sill and incurring another grunt of displeasure from the soft stepping veteran of the jungle trails. As the portal reclosed behind them, a sudden slap of rain on hard ground shattered the brooding silence. Succeeded a low, thick roar of pounding water.

Without speaking, Cononaco led on along a black corridor. Presently he halted again at a shut door. Against this he tapped repeatedly with his stick. A minute or two dragged past. Then the door swung. Beyond shone soft light, revealing a luxurious room. At a table near the center, above which hung a golden lamp, stood the Queen of the Flame.

She was alone. Nobody was at the door, which seemed to have opened of its own volition. She gazed composedly at the pair revealed in the rectangular frame, glancing an instant at the dour visage of Cononaco, looking longer at the livelier face of McKay.

"You may enter," she granted, her tone clear and cool.

Forthwith Cononaco stumped across the threshold and straight to her, McKay following at an easy stride. Her right hand moved and, unnoticed, the door

closed behind them, actuated by some system of remote control. Thereafter the hand rested lightly on the table top, the tapering fingers unconsciously toying with the edge of an open book.

"Oom Keh, like the mighty Oom Keh before him," abruptly announced Cononaco, "has his own mind, his own will. The voice of Cononaco has no weight when it bids him go. So Cononaco brings him to the voice which must be obeyed."

His tone was that of a soldier reporting to his officer, but with a sly undernote of satisfaction that brought a shade of annoyance to the steady eyes of Nuné and a twinkle to those of McKay. Having said his say, the old fellow stood wooden, meeting her displeased gaze with inflexible stare. Soon she inclined her head toward the door. He turned, went to it and squatted with back against it.

"Why, señor," she asked, facing the Northerner, "do you not go when well advised?"

"Because, señorita, you've given me no good reason to go. In fact, you've given me the best of reasons to stay."

His reckless smile and look brought a deepening frown. Then all at once her lips twitched and her gaze dropped to her book.

"You are—you are impudent," she accused, striving for severity, but with only partial success.

"Worse than that," he cheerfully exaggerated. "I'm irreverent—and incorrigible."

A moment of silence. Her hand played uncertainly with the book, then, in an absent way, closed it. Involuntarily following her gaze, he observed, with momentary surprise, that it was a fairly recent European publication dealing with the United States. Other books, too, lay about the table, some with English titles, some in Spanish. And, as his glance lifted again, he glimpsed along a farther wall several shelves whereon stood at least a hundred more volumes in orderly array.

Then the hazel eyes rose, and he forgot all written words.

"That is easily believed, señor." She stressed the formal title. "And in that case there is little use in further talk."

"I don't quite agree with that. For instance, I haven't yet been told why I ought to go, except that you don't want me around here. And I'm enjoying my visit immensely."

STEADILY she regarded him, seeming to overlook his bantering words while she searched for his true thoughts. In the wavering lamplight the glowing topaz on her brow became like a third eye, softly alive, subtly compelling, semihypnotic. It, too, seemed reaching into his mind. He frowned slightly, looked squarely at it, then met her gaze once more.

"Can your machine fly?"

The direct question caught him unexpectedly. His answer, however, was noncommittal—at least in words.

"*Quién sabe?*"

Through two slow breaths she continued her unchanging regard. Then she said, with calm certainty:

"It can. So there is no reason for you to remain here, except to satisfy the curiosity that brought you. And the reason why you should pocket your curiosity and go speedily is this:

"This land is not the same as when your fathers and mine fought side by side. Then there were honest friendship and naked enmity. Now friendship is dishonest and enmity masked. There are only treachery and intrigue in the highest place. You are already aware of that, I can see, and on your guard. Indeed, you are so much on your guard that you do not know a friend when you meet one, nor speak truth when you should!"

"Oh, say, that's not quite fair—"

"No? I think it is, señor. But enough of that. The thing that matters is that the name of McKay is no longer honored here as it was—"

"It made a considerable impression on the soldiers this morning, I noticed."

"Among the people it still is honored, yes. We have kept our history alive—until recently—and the names of the old heroes have been bright. But the people,

señor, do not rule. And here on this rock, in spite of all the deceitful courtesy shown you, you are actually a prisoner and in danger of death!"

"I know it. What of it?"

The nonchalant reply nonplused her. Leaning easily against the table, he grinned at her amazed face. In the silence sounded a faint chuckle from Cononaco.

"You know, I've seen enough of death to grow rather used to it," smiled the ex-bomber, "and life has been rather boresome lately, with nothing to do but the same old things I've done before. Maybe death might be a great adventure; you can't tell what I might find on the other side of the gulf. Still I'd like to know just how I'm to die—and why."

"There are many ways of dying, señor," she slowly responded, "and what way may be destined for you I do not know. But I know this, that the present king of this kingdom hates all the world outside it, thinks every man from that world to be a spy and allows no man who comes in here to go out. If such a man is useful to him he may live for a time, but when that use is over the man is gone, between sunset and sunrise, and is never seen again. Only one man now lives who came here before you; and he lives only because he is useful whenever needed. All the others—"

"Who is that one?"

"The man who shot the great gun at you today, a Quitonian named Salazar. He is very quick and sure at pointing the gun and has shot down several of his own countrymen who flew here."

"Humph! He must value his own life."

"It is the only way he can keep it."

HER CALM voice was neither defensive nor contemptuous. Evidently she felt that it was quite natural for any man to save himself by any means available, but took no interest in this particular individual. Thus it seemed quite obvious that she did not try to save all strangers as she was endeavoring to save McKay. But yet—

"Do I understand," queried the airman, "that no outsider has ever escaped from this place? Within recent times, I mean."

"None."

"That's odd. There's a chap in Quito now who claims to have been here only two or three months ago and to have escaped through the jungle. His name is Martinez."

The hazel eyes suddenly widened. The great topaz shot sparks as the head behind it jerked in uncontrollable surprise. From Cononaco broke a startled grunt.

"Martinez?" She leaned swiftly forward, staring into his quizzical eyes. "He lives?"

"He lived yesterday and probably lives today. And he has a great tale to tell of Hoserán—a tale of luxury and incredible wealth and beauteous women and a big two headed demon that—"

"Harrumph!"

Another vocal eruption from Cononaco, who scowled ferociously at the narrator. The latter, glancing at him, checked an instant, then continued—

"Er—that is revered by the people, you know; idol worship, and—ah—all that."

"Idol worship!" The topaz and the eyes under it flashed angrily. "The liar! So that is our reward for saving—"

She bit her lips, damming the rest. McKay completed the sentence for her.

"For saving a man whose family name happened to be the same as that of José Martinez? I thought perhaps that was the case. But, to tell you the whole truth, as you accused me just now of not doing, Martinez is a rather common name beyond the mountains, and this fellow is no relative of José; and, furthermore, he boasts that he escaped because a beautiful princess madly loved him and—"

"The beast!"

Low, but vibrant with swift fury, her exclamation cut short his revelation. Red rage dyed her face from brow to throat, and her right hand slid to the haft of a slender but serviceable dagger lying on the board. For an instant the long fingers gripped hard on that golden hilt. Then they relaxed, and she turned on Cononaco, now risen to his feet.

"Did you not tell me," she demanded, "that the men sent by the king said they overtook him in the forest and killed him? And that they brought back his ears in proof?"

"So they did say, *princesa*," sturdily replied the veteran, "and they brought back ears. But, to tell all of it, the ears were a little dark. They could have come from another head. But since they satisfied the king Cononaco spoke no word."

"But why did you not speak your thought to me? It was I who—"

"Who took pity on that one, *sí*. But Cononaco speaks what he knows, not what he suspects. The men said so and so; they showed ears; Cononaco heard the one and saw the other. So he told the queen what he heard and saw, and no more."

She looked hard at him, breathing fast, the flow of angry color slowly ebbing, while the tall outlander watched appreciatively. At length, with a shrug and a toss of the head, she regained self-control.

"It was a mistake," she admitted, "but what is said beyond the mountains does not matter here, so long as it remains beyond the mountains."

"Not a bit. But if it should come back—" suggested McKay.

Her brows drew down. She looked unseeingly at the table top.

"It would mean death for—for some one," she slowly admitted. "But I feel sure that the blood of McKay and Knowlton is not that of the gunner Salazar."

"Hardly! Nor yet that of the loose mouthed Martinez. In fact, it's just possible that this impudent ne'er-do-well of a McKay had something more than idle curiosity in his head when he hopped off from Quito this morning. Maybe he thought he could drop a quiet word or two into the right ears and put certain folks on their guard against possible trouble."

A PAUSE. Save for the muffled roar of torrential rain, the room was very still. Both Nuné and Cononaco stood mute, looking keenly at the bringer of news. Then the girl nodded, her expression more friendly than ever before.

"It would be like a McKay to do that, I think," she murmured. "But what sort of trouble do you mean? Can any danger be threatening my people, or am I the only one who needs to be watchful?"

His answer was slow in coming. Soberly now he looked at her, noting the growing anxiety of her expression as she waited; anxiety not for herself, he felt, but for those whom, though not under her sway, she called "my" people; for all the White Ones of Hoserán. Then he became once more aware of the penetrating quality of her gaze and the unwinking stare of the flame stone. And, for the first time, he diverted his own eyes.

"*Quién sabe?*" he repeated. "When a loose tongue wags of wealth and beauty, who knows what may come of it? And who knows when or how an echo may creep back through the jungle to damage somebody here? The point is that, now the right ears have been found, the word has been dropped. *Verbum sap.* Do you happen to know what that means?"

"A word to the wise is enough," she nodded. "But—"

"Hrrumph!" broke in Cononaco. "Have no fears for the people, *princesa*. The men of Quito never have had the legs or the backbones to bring them over the mountains. They will not march now, at the word of a braggart. And if they did, the men of Oriente could smash them in the forests before ever they reached this city. The roads still are guarded and the drums still signal. Aye, the men of the outposts still are men! Men and warriors, not soft slugs like these townsmen! *Cra*, it would be well for this kingdom if another war did come upon it now! All its men would once more become hard. Now they rot!"

The belligerent growl brought another smile to both the younger faces, though an odd expression flickered across that of McKay as he heard the disparagement of the Ecuadoreans. Nuné looked more at ease, however, and any response which might have been on McKay's tongue died

unspoken. Instead, he deflected the subject.

"These old-timers usually know what they're talking about, I've noticed. But now, if it's not a forbidden question, señorita—or *princesa*, or whatever you will—just what is this double headed demon, or idol, or whatnot, that Martinez talked about? There was nothing like that in my grandfathers' time, and I'm curious about it."

Another pause. Cononaco scowled. Nuné looked thoughtfully at the questioner, then glanced aloft. The roar of the rain continued with undiminished volume, deepened momentarily by a roll of thunder. Her next glance was toward a silent clock, tall, curiously carved, in a corner. The hands were nearing midnight.

Swiftly then she turned, glided to a great mahogany wardrobe and drew from it a hooded rubber cloak. In a moment she had shrouded herself from head to foot and slipped off her jeweled sandals. Then she walked buoyantly to the door.

"Come," she bade, "and you shall see."

CHAPTER X

THE TWO FACED GOD

ALONG the same corridor through which the two men had reached the library of Nuné the same pair now trod again, following the lead of the monkish figure in robe and hood. Their steps now were more certain, however, for the pocket light of McKay had been put to use. Around a couple of sharp turns they walked, and past several doors, all closed, they moved without pause. Then, at a larger portal, their guide stopped a moment.

"Put out the light," she prompted, "and prepare to be wet. Follow fast. The distance is short."

Blackness swooped as the ray vanished. A wet breath swept around the waiting men. The door had opened unseen, and a step beyond them fell the deluge. Across that watery density flickered a flare of lightning, revealing the black shape of Nuné walking rapidly across a walled enclosure, apparently a patio. For only an instant she was visible. Then the gloom swallowed her and all else, and overhead bumped thunder.

Ducking his head, McKay strode into the downpour, Cononaco stumping fast behind. For a score of paces they walked blindly. Then, just as McKay was about to collide with the invisible farther wall, another door opened within arm's length, emitting a dim light. Wheeling short, he entered.

Nuné, faintly glistening with rain, stood in another corridor—a short one—into which vague light and a fragrant smoke tang were wafted through wide grilles topping a wooden partition at the right. Beyond that barrier, evidently, was a large room wherein burned a low fire. For the moment, however, McKay was not to see it; for again he was bidden to wait.

"When the gong speaks you may enter," quietly instructed Nuné. "Until then be silent."

She moved away, throwing back her hood and loosing the black cloak as she walked, turned to the right, and was gone through a narrow portal which revealed light. McKay pressed the water from his dripping hair and grinned at Cononaco, who had noiselessly closed the entrance. No answering grin softened the seamed visage. The warrior's expression was somberly watchful, as if he felt himself now in a place where might lurk some unnamed danger.

Through the grilles overhead floated the voice of Nuné, speaking a few indistinguishable words which were answered by a low murmur of assent in another feminine tone. Silence ensued, broken only by a short rip of thunder. Gradually the light seemed to grow brighter. Then, low but reverberant, sounded a single stroke on a gong.

THE SOLEMN note seemed still quivering in the air when McKay stepped into the wide hall to which it summoned him. Hardly had he passed

the threshold when he involuntarily halted. Some distance away, but directly ahead, great green eyes stared straight at him from a hard featured face of reddish stone, a face which at first sight appeared alive, and so ominous that the jaw of the beholder set in combative retaliation.

For several seconds he stood there peering fixedly at the stony head; then, relaxing, he let his gaze rove down the bulky body below it and scanned the pedestal whence the figure rose, a rounded block of stone a yard high, on which burned a low fire, almost smokeless, seemingly surrounding the torso of the half man above. That rough hewn body began at the waist, ascended to rugged shoulders, but bore no arms. It was the head alone which was truly human—and not merely human but uncannily animate. Perhaps it was the imperceptible wavering of the silent flame below that gave the inflexible lineaments the semblance of responsiveness to inner thoughts. At any rate, the titanic countenance was alive with penetrating power, indomitable will and ruthless surety of judgment.

So completely did the probing stare of that massive shape seize upon the mind of the newcomer that for some little time he was altogether unaware of the presence of its guardian. At length he perceived Nuné, standing motionless near the pedestal, watching him. Once more she was the Flame Queen, flame robed and topaz crowned, the concealing rain cloak laid aside. A glance to right and left revealed no other person in the broad room, where lamps blazed softly along the clay colored walls. The girl recently on watch had withdrawn to some unseen spot. He advanced toward the waiting princess.

Nearing the pedestal, he glanced up again at the stone face, to find the emerald eyes still fixed on him. They seemed to move as he moved, keeping implacable watch. So skilfully set were they, so cunningly placed the distant wall lamps whence came the light rays which gave them life, that, maneuver as he would, no man could evade their surveillance until he had passed behind the immovable head. And the moment he finally escaped them he came into the range of other eyes and the influence of another face. The statue had another physiognomy at the back of its head, but not a replica. This other face differed, even to the eyes.

McKay, walking beyond the vigilance of the green stones, found himself caught by the sidelong observation of yellow ones. Topaz orbs had taken up the scrutiny given over by the emeralds; a lean hawk nosed visage replaced the heavy jawed face first seen. A few more steps, and he stopped again, gripped anew by the strangely lifelike expressions and the dominating resolution of the heroic countenance now gazing full at him.

Soon, however, he nodded to it as to a recognized friend. He knew this face. Though the spirit expressed by the unknown sculptor was here more harsh, almost merciless, the features were those of the far sighted man depicted on the bronze plate out in the rain swept plaza—José Martinez.

AGAIN he moved on around the squat colossus, looking occasionally now at base and fire as well as at the compelling faces. Both the pedestal and its inner flame formed a complete circle about the crudely cut torso.

The fire was only a narrow ring, giving off not much heat and, though topped by fragments of sweet smelling wood, burning so smoothly as to indicate that its main fuel was some sort of oil. Its only value, he judged, was for purposes of symbolism, perhaps typifying in its endless circuit and perpetual flame the supposedly undying power of the ideals of the men apotheosized within it.

As for any suggestion of the unnamed evil imputed to it by Cononaco, there was none. Yet Cononaco himself, standing stiff at the doorway where they had entered, peered at it with expression more dour than ever before. McKay glanced at him and wondered.

Now Nuné moved. As McKay paused

again before the green eyed half of the double deity, she drew back a little from the pedestal and slowly spread her arms wide. Her face lifted, and her gaze dwelt on the great head of stone. Low but clear, her voice sounded in unrhymed but regularly stressed ritual, while slight movements of shimmering robe and glowing topaz made her seem an incarnation of the gently wavering fire to which her life was consecrated.

"These are the Old Ones, the Great Ones, the Strong Ones.
These are the Stern Ones whose wills never die.
These are the Fierce Ones who led on the war trails.
These are the Wise Ones who plotted our power.

"Sleepless they strove till their work was completed.
Sleepless they watch now the work of their sons,
Judging our thoughts and our words and our actions,
Holding us true to their laws—"

She stopped, her face contracting slightly, as if she felt falsity in that last declaration. McKay, momentarily enthralled by the liturgic cadences and the rapt expression of the priestess, also frowned at the abrupt break; then, realizing its significance, he glanced cynically up at the harsh visage which, somehow, seemed more grim than before, as if the image also knew that the old laws now were violated and was angered by that knowledge. For a moment the place was very quiet. Then Nuné again took up the chant:

"While here they stand, never evil shall conquer,
Never our people shall swerve from the right,
Never a fighter shall fail in the battle,
Never a traitor shall rule—"

CRASH! A deafening thunderclap struck the words into nothingness. The lights leaped in a concussion of shattered air, then flickered wildly. In the agitated shadows thrown by the flames the stone face grimaced and its eyes shot green glances from side to side. The outspread arms of Nuné dropped, her hands locking before her in sudden terror, and her face blanched. For an instant she swayed as if unsteadied by the shock.

McKay stepped swiftly to her side. Then came the voice of Cononaco, blunt and unsparing.

"The Old Ones are angered, *princesa*, because the old words you speak have become lies. Evil conquers. Fighters grow unfit. A traitor rules!"

She made no reply. Her interlocked fingers pressed hard into her hands and she seemed tensed for another detonation. None came. Instead rumbled a redoubled volume of rain.

"Maybe there's some truth in that, Nuné," remarked McKay, smiling familiarly down at her, "but it's not your fault, so why let the thunder disturb you?"

The hands pressed tighter. Then they loosened and she relaxed somewhat.

"I am—I am a coward when it bursts close," she confessed. "I am ashamed—but I can not overcome it."

"Perfectly natural," he assured her. "Most girls are nervous about it, I've noticed. But now tell me, how did this statue take shape? It's a wonderful piece of work, and the idea is excellent. Two men made one by the same determination. José and Rand were like that. But who conceived this idea and carried it out? Are your people sculptors as well as builders?"

"No."

His practical tone and matter of fact attitude toward the weird figure brought steadiness to her own voice.

"It was made by a man who came here, a man caught on one of our rivers by our rangers, long before I was born. He was mad, or partly so, and where he came from I do not know, though it was from some place far away; his language was like none known here. He believed he was being hunted by some band of men, and when he was brought here he felt safe from them, so he never tried to go. After he learned the history of Hoserán he cut this figure. He worked at it for years. The faces were made from old pictures

drawn by my ancestor Rand, who was skilled at sketching and left a great album of faces and scenes. This man—Del Rio, he was called, because he came from the river—this Del Rio set the eyes, too, and the lamps which give them life. There has been no other man like him in Oriente."

Both looked up again at the countenance of the green eyed Rand, which now, since the lights had steadied, had resumed its wonted expressions. Thoughtfully McKay nodded.

"There will be no more like him," he predicted. "Like Del Rio, I mean, or like Rand either. This is a work of insane genius, nothing less. But did that fellow create the custom of the sacred fire and the watch by its priestesses, and so on?"

"I do not know. Perhaps. The custom and the ceremonies began at that time. But the fire is not sacred, as you call it, nor am I a priestess. I am only a guardian, and it is only a custom, not a religion. I have told you before that we are not idol worshippers."

A slight displeasure had crept into her tone. He nodded again, carelessly this time.

"All the same, the general effect is that of deification, you know," he said. "You have a regular formula of praise, and you carry it out before the people at certain fixed times, I suppose, and—"

"That is the honor due the Old Ones, señor! And the custom keeps alive the national spirit and the reverence for the old laws—"

"Does it?"

The laconic question stopped her. Half resentful, half hurt, she looked at him, at the saturnine Cononaco, and then soberly at the fire.

"You mean it used to," he amended, "before the royal fashion changed. But now—"

"Harrumph!"

CONONACO'S explosive throat noise and gimlet glower had cut him short, as once before. Perhaps the faithful watchdog misjudged the tenor of the forthcoming words. At any rate, he showed unmistakable disapproval. This time, however, his effort aroused retaliating displeasure. The man near the flame gave him a chill stare; the maid lifted her head with a touch of hauteur.

"You were saying, señor—" she prompted.

"Er, I've forgotten."

The gray eyes still dwelt frowningly on the interrupter, who stiffened slightly and turned wooden faced, as if under the scrutiny of an incensed superior. For the moment, indeed, McKay had again become an army captain looking at an officious aide. When his gaze reverted to the regal figure beside him, however, the steely look vanished. In its place came a twinkle.

"Well, I'm glad to know that this is only a statue, not an idol, and that you're not really a priestess," he declared. "I'd be afraid of a priestess."

"Would you?" She regarded him enigmatically.

"Scared to death. They must be unhuman creatures, very stern and unforgiving, and all that. But if you're just Nuné, a reembodiment of the Nuné my grandsires knew, well, then I haven't yet fulfilled my mission here."

"No?"

"No." He grinned, a growing recklessness in his look. "You've heard of Tim Ryan, the red headed chap who was here with the first McKay and Knowlton. He knew your ancestress Nuné, and he never forgot her; I think he must have been a bit in love with her. At any rate, when I was a boy and said that some day I'd come down here, he said, 'If ye do that, lad, give Nuné a kiss for me!' And I promised that I would."

And, before she could move, he kept his word.

For an amazed instant Nuné and Cononaco stood as petrified. Then Nuné started back from him, tempestuous anger flooding her face. And Cononaco, voicing inarticulate wrath, hobbled fast forward, his stout stick lifted for vengeful attack.

"You—you—" panted the affronted

princess, eyes flashing and cheeks aflame. Then she caught her tongue and stood with hands clenched, her burning gaze fixed on his own smiling eyes.

"No offense meant, of course," he drawled. "It's just the custom of my country, when a man likes a girl."

With that he turned toward Cononaco, to find him swinging down his stick with ferocious strength. The wrinkled countenance, hitherto friendly, had become a mask of merciless hostility. McKays might come and McKays might go, but not even a McKay could commit sacrilege on the person of the Queen of the Flame in his presence without retribution.

An instantaneous leap aside, a swift spring and grapple. The blow was evaded and the ancient fighter caught in an iron grip. Caught, but not conquered. He twisted, squirmed, kicked, kneed, struck vainly but savagely in recrudescence of old jungle fighting methods. Not until the younger man had pinioned both arms and the more active leg by wrestling holds was he rendered harmless. Even then he still fought.

"Stop it!" commanded his captor. A snarl and fresh efforts were the only response. He spoke next to Nuné.

"I don't want to hurt him. Maybe he'll obey you. Tell him to stop wearing himself out. And if you want me executed call the guards and let them do it—if they can."

SHE ACTED at once. Already the flush had faded from her cheeks, and outward composure had returned. Now she stepped to the swaying pair and spoke commandingly:

"Cononaco! Be still!"

Breathing hard, the old fellow desisted from his hopeless struggle, though he still glared hotly as he was released. McKay, panting from his own exertions, tossed back his rumpled hair and chuckled. Before the adversaries could exchange words Nuné spoke again.

"Executed, señor? You deserve it! But what do you mean?"

"Why, that's the penalty, isn't it?" he laughed. "At least, I heard so. 'The man who lays hand on the Queen of the Flame will be torn apart.' "

For several breaths she regarded him strangely, while Cononaco, leaning heavily on his cane, opened and shut his mouth without words.

"You heard that?" she questioned. "Then why—why did you do this thing? Is it the wine that has made you so bold? Or are you eager to die?"

"Oh, not eager, no. And the wine's not to blame. I just thought the kiss might be worth the risk. And it was."

Another minute of probing; and then, though her lips still were uncompromising, a touch of laughter seemed to flit across her face. Abruptly she turned from him and walked several steps away, her robe agleam with fireshot motion. Before the topaz eyed image of José Martinez she stopped, to stand a moment, then turn again to McKay.

"You may go," she coldly advised. "And you had best go fast and far. Cononaco, go as you came, *pronto*. Señor McKay, *adios!*"

Again she turned her back. Cononaco clutched a taloned hand on McKay's wrist and pulled him decisively toward the corridor. After balking a second, McKay moved with him.

"*Hasta la vista*," he returned. "I think we'll meet again. And so long to you, Dave and José." He waved a hand at the statue. "Maybe I'll see you again, too."

Another yank by Cononaco, and a growl:

"Out with you, Oom Keh! You have done an evil thing. And evil will come from it! Evil will come!"

Like emphasis to his prediction sounded a long, low roll of thunder.

At the entrance to the passageway McKay paused to look back. Nuné still stood aloof, ignoring him, her straight back eloquent of unforgiveness. But, in a flicker of light from some wall lamp, one of the emerald eyes of David Rand winked, and across the stony physiognomy darted an expression of sardonic mirth.

CHAPTER XI

RETROSPECT

HIGH, hot sun beat on the new built house in the plaza. A few paces from each of its known doors—the ordinary entrance built for the passage of its tenant and the extraordinary exit constructed for movement of his plane—sleepy looking but wideawake sentinels stood at ease. To its unknown "dog door" devised for the use of Cononaco no attention was given, since its existence was unsuspected. For the present, however, it was useless even to its designer. At this hour no man could approach the walls unseen, and any who did approach was gruffly ordered away.

It was high time for even the Northern visitor, who might not be accustomed to the early rising hours of equatorial lands, to be showing himself and demanding breakfast. As yet, however, there was no sign of his wakefulness; and, since it was known to the guards that he had participated at a royal dinner last night and that the other participants, particularly the king himself, had not yet recovered from the effects, the continued nonappearance of the guest of honor was considered altogether natural.

Within the walls, however, the outlander was no longer buried in sleep, though he still lay in bed. Nor did any dregs of dissipation becloud his open eyes or weight his lids. Eight hours of uninterrupted repose had banished all fatigue consequent on the excitements of the previous day, and neither wine nor rain had left any lassitude in his brain.

Now, with muscular arms comfortably folded behind his head, he lolled with gaze fixed absently on the ceiling and thoughts reviewing the occurrences since his arrival at Hoserán—particularly those most recent.

To the banquet and the banqueters of the bygone evening he gave scant reflection. Hilarious dinners were nothing new in his life, though this one had been more frankly bacchanalian than most; and the diners had been easily classified and lumped with many former fair weather companions, temporarily interesting but quickly dropped from mind. It was the subsequent series of events which now held him quiet in thoughtful retrospect.

First, the snake. There was in that incident a significance which he had not fully considered at the time, but which, now that he was at leisure, assumed more importance. Last night the most salient fact had been the attempt at assassination. This morning the more weighty consideration was the subtle treachery of that attempt, treachery not only against the descendant of the old hero McKay but against the ruling king.

Whatever the tricky mind of Vicente might intend toward his outwardly honored guest, it certainly was not immediate death, or an end by snake bite. It was not to his interest to terminate the existence of this visitor until he had ceased to be useful—particularly in revealing the secrets of his flying machine—nor was it sufficiently flattering to his self-importance to kill him in so crude a way.

Indeed, it would be decidedly derogatory to his dignity to have it known that, with all his army to defend his royal acropolis, he could not even keep it free from snakes. Therefore the man Yanga, presumably responsible for the setting of the man trap, had struck not merely at a hated foreigner but, indirectly, at his own king.

In the old days, McKay well knew, such a thing would have been unthinkable here. Then not only the wishes of the king himself but the person of any companion of his would have been inviolable, in thought as well as in deed. Now the subordination of the ruler's will to individual thirst for treacherous revenge augured two things. This ruler lacked the iron grip of his predecessors, and the kingdom was, as rough tongued Cononaco had asserted, rotting with a virus spreading from a rotten head.

This conclusion the Northerner contemplated with downdrawn brows. Presently he muttered:

"You're right, old-timer. The body

rots, blood and brain. And when that happens, the sooner it dies the better. Well, then I needn't worry much about what happens to Hoserán."

After that somewhat cryptic remark he slowly smiled, memory depicting his parting with Cononaco. True to the order of his princess, that incensed veteran had piloted him back through the blackness to the secret exit, and then, with an unintelligible growl, left him, though not until the wicket was safely shut. That last act might indicate that, although McKay had committed an unforgivable crime in the old man's sight, that "dog door" might be used again.

FOR ONLY a minute the gnarled visage of the ancient *capitán* remained clear in remembrance. Then it faded out, and instead came a face far younger and more winsome and more vividly impressed on his mind; a face which strove for severity, even for scorn and hatred, yet which laughed behind its transparent mask. At this he looked for some time, half smiling, half critical, seeking in it some trace of Indian ancestry, but finding none.

Presently his brows narrowed again with concentration, as he searched the recesses of memory for details of her lineage. On the one side she was descended directly from José Martinez, Spaniard; on the other from David Rand, American; both white. But what of the mothers in that line? Of what blood were they?

He wished now that he had been more attentive to some of the details mentioned by his grandfathers. It had been their talk of old wars, of jungle strategy, of marches over long dim trails and hand to hand combats with head hunters, which had gripped him in the days when the lifelong comrades recounted their adventures.

To the unexciting discussion of community customs and personal relationships he had listened with less interest, sometimes with ennui. But now, as he reached back for words almost obliterated, they struggled gradually into life once more, taking shapes first shadowy, then more solid, and grouping together to aid him. At length they formed the compact facts he wanted.

Rand, the American, had mated with the first Nuné, a dauntless girl who had been brought up among the ferocious Huambiza head hunters, but who was not one of them; a girl stolen as a babe from a Spanish settlement and, according to Huambiza custom, reared to become later the woman of some chief. Instead of submitting to this fate, she had eventually made herself a priestess whom they feared to harm and, still later, queen of King Ran here at Hoserán. She was Spanish by birth and white by blood.

José Martinez, on the other hand, had taken his queens from the White Ones who, though extraordinarily light of skin, were reputed Indians. Yet they were unlike any other Indians of the Amazonian region, near or far, being markedly superior in both physique and mentality. Moreover, there was a dim legend among them that at one time—a time lost, like their own origin, in the blankness of prehistoric days—their forefathers had been a strong nation living farther west, perhaps in the Andes, perhaps beyond them; and that some catastrophe had destroyed most of them and forced the survivors to scatter into the jungles.

Yes, McKay remembered now, both his ancestors and José Martinez had believed them to be the remnants of a lost white race.

A white race! If that belief were truth, Nuné was of pure white descent. Even if not, the tinge of aboriginal blood was infinitesimal. And even if she were entirely Indian, Nuné was still Nuné, and queen of all women McKay had ever seen.

"THAT was a boorish thing you did last night—downright sacrilegious, in fact," he rebuked himself. "Even if she did say she was no priestess, 'twas a sacrilege just the same. She's no sophisticated metropolitan, accustomed to being kissed by every new fellow that comes along. And you can't blame it on the wine, either, even though it was singing

in your head at the time. You ought to be shot!"

After which self-condemnation he smiled again, recalling the humorous expression on the face of the green eyed statue at his departure. At any rate, old Dave Rand had not been angered by his temerity. Still less, he felt, had José Martinez, who in life had been husband of nine wives at once. If the dour Rand had shown amusement, the more volatile Spaniard must have grinned wide.

Despite himself, the practical Northerner found himself attributing to that incredibly lifelike block of stone the human sentience it seemed visually to possess. So, without doubt, did the people of Hoserán, even though they knew it to be a manmade thing.

Indeed, there could be little question that to these jungle folk, for all their veneer of recent civilization, the figure was virtually an idol, to be accorded the fear and awe previously given the invisible demons of the mysterious forests. Even to hard headed Cononaco it had become at least a demigod, or a demidemon, with some sinister power for evil as well as for good.

What was that evil? What was the thing which Cononaco knew but which remained unknown to the image's most intimate guardian, the Queen of the Flame?

After a period of pondering McKay shook his head and gave up the problem for the time. There was no clue from which to work, unless the wild tale told by the refugee Martinez in Quito could be considered such. That strutting braggart had declared that the two headed *demonio* was a man eater. But McKay, having narrowly inspected the *demonio* at close range, dismissed that assertion as an incredible lie. Indeed, the figure was not even two headed, as Martinez had sworn; it was merely two faced. The distinction was of no consequence, but it proved the Quitonian an exaggerator.

And the swift anger of Nuné last night on learning of his arrant boast about her proved him a downright liar. As for the secret which Cononaco was withholding from his princess-priestess, perhaps he would reveal it at his own time. Until then it could rest.

THAT Cononaco would soon reappear, despite his recent ire, McKay felt confident. His eyes twinkled again as he recalled his short combat with the oldster. Astoundingly strong and agile for a man of his age was Cononaco. What a warrior he must have been in bygone years! Even now, given a machete and roused to battle fury, he would be a wicked antagonist in a mêlée. McKay felt that he himself would far rather fight with him than against him under such circumstances.

Then his thoughts reverted to the dominating statue and to the unbalanced Del Rio who had created it. Who could he have been? Some European sculptor, undoubtedly, since his native language had been unknown here; a mad Slav, perhaps, driven across the world by some crime or some altogether fanciful fear.

At any rate, though his masterpiece was individual in execution, it was European in conception, and very ancient in origin. Centuries old, in fact. The basic idea of the two faced god was that of the Roman Janus, whose image looked two ways. And the custom of the sacred fire, watched by virgins whose persons were inviolable, was equally old. The Roman vestals had officiated in the same way.

For a moment it had been in McKay's mind to tell Nuné of these facts last night, but he had foreborne to do so. Since she believed that the statue and the ceremonies had originated in Hoserán, why inform her that they were primarily but imitations of a long outworn paganism? No good purpose would thus be served.

"Well," said he to himself, sitting up, "so far, so good. And now another day has dawned and travels on apace—has traveled some distance apace, to be precise—and it behooves us, Meredito, to bestir ourself and see what it may bring us. And that reminds me."

Forthwith he walked, soft footed, into

the plane-room, climbed into the machine and, by the simple disconnection of one small wire, rendered its power totally dead until such time as the connection should be restored.

Now he or any one else could labor mightily about the craft without the slightest chance of starting it. This done, he returned to his bedroom, yawned loudly, grunted and groaned a couple of times, knocked over a chair, and then ambled to his tub, wherein he splashed about with all due noise.

To the ears of the guards, the outlander had just emerged from the fog of wine drugged sleep and was feeling rather seedy.

CHAPTER XII

HOSERÁN

BREAKFAST, served by two coquettish maids, had come and gone.

With a cigar between his teeth, McKay leaned against the jamb of the open door, his gaze idly roving over the portion of the plaza visible therefrom. The time now was midforenoon; the sky clear; the sun intense; and the open space, consequently, almost empty of human life. Under the broad roofs of piazzas were visible numerous indolent lords and ladies of the rock, probably discussing the king's latest dinner party—and also, as was quite evident from the frequent turning of faces toward him, gossiping and conjecturing about the American.

In the full glare of the sun, however, moved only an occasional figure passing from one house to another, a few heavy laden burros delivering supplies from the lower city and, close at hand, a couple of slow stepping, wide hatted sentries.

After a deliberate survey of the farther faces and figures, the gray eyes rested on the men nearby. Those two watchmen were neither the sly eyed friends of Yanga nor the pair who had relieved them. Presently he removed his cigar, knocked off the ash, and spoke—

"*Soldados!*"

"*Sí, señor!*" The response came at once, and the lethargic feet halted.

"*Aquí!* Here!"

They approached—not with the suspicious wariness of the night guards, but with self-reliant confidence blended with curiosity. Scanning their intelligent faces, he found no hint of hostility; rather, a disposition toward friendliness.

"What are your orders?"

The brusk question was voiced in the tone of an officer testing the memories of men on post. The reply came with military promptitude.

"To halt all men except the king or his officers. To allow no others to pass without the correct word. To shoot any man attempting to move the sky bird."

"Ah. But suppose I myself move that sky bird. What then?"

A short silence.

"The order is '*any* man'," emphasized one.

"I see."

The ex-captain contemplated them appreciatively. They were good soldiers.

"Well, then," he added, "suppose I go walking. What are the orders about that?"

Another pause. Then—

"None, señor."

"That's good, because I am going anyway, orders or no orders. Where is the road leading down to the city?"

"At that end, where the *cuartel* stands." The speaker moved his head eastward, then, with a faint smile, volunteered, "Cononaco is there."

McKay's brows lifted slightly, but he made no reply. His gaze went to the adobe building, somewhat taller than the others, indicated by the soldier—the barrack of the mesa guards. Then he stepped back inside, to emerge crowned by a sun helmet. Outside he paused, contemplating the shelterless sentries, then looking at his doorway, above which projected a short portico roof.

"I give you an order," he curtly announced. "Sit in my doorway until relieved. Let none pass without authority."

WITH that he sauntered away. The pair stood dubiously for a few seconds, first digesting the fact that this command in no way conflicted with previous instructions, then realizing that it was but a veiled invitation to rest in the shade. Forthwith they gladly obeyed.

McKay, ambling eastward and returning a salutation now and then, smiled a little as he went. The amiable attitude of those men might be attributable to respect for his grandfathers or to personal liking, but more probably it arose from words spoken in the right ears by Cononaco.

Even though the former counselor of the kings was accorded scant consideration by the present régime, there could be no question that he still possessed weighty influence, of which he made use whenever so minded. Also it was quite apparent that he still was disposed to use it, at least in small ways, for the benefit of Oom Keh.

"All is forgiven," whimsically thought the stroller. "Or is it, I wonder?"

His gaze veered to the long row of houses along the northern edge, seeking to distinguish the temple of the twin statue in which he had recently offended. The effort proved futile, for the broad, low buildings all looked similar—except that one lacked porches. Conscious of the watch of many eyes, he speedily turned his face forward again, giving no indication of any particular interest in that northern row.

Straight on to the *cuartel* he went. As he drew near, out from a doorway stepped four riflemen and a maroon tabbed *sargento*. Two on each side of the portal, the soldiers stood at attention. The noncom, a sharp eyed but pleasant faced giant, advanced three paces, then halted.

"*Buenos dias*," greeted McKay. "I come to greet you and walk on."

"*Bien*. To where?" calmly interrogated the big fellow.

"Down below, where my fathers once fought. Is this your whole force, *sargento?*"

"No. This is the next guard relief."

The brown eyes went beyond the visitor to his guarded house. Between them came a sudden scowl, which McKay correctly interpreted.

"The guards there sit at the door by my order," he explained.

"Why?" demanded the other, so sharply that the Northerner frowned.

"Well, perhaps in order that no snake may slip between them," he retorted.

The two looked each other straight in the eye. A shadowy smile seemed to come and go under the brows of the native.

"Has a snake disturbed you?"

"I have not said so. But one might."

To this there was no answer. The *sargento* continued his searching gaze, then lifted it and looked impersonally across the plaza.

"The *capitán* of this garrison is not here just now, nor the *teniente* either," he changed the subject, "but they will return."

His tone indicated that meanwhile McKay could enter and wait. Before the latter could reply a dry voice spoke from the big doorway—

"A *capitán* is here."

THERE in the portal stood Cononaco, leaning on his stick, sarcastically regarding all the little group. The *sargento* wheeled to face him, but said nothing until the ancient spoke again.

"And if Oom Keh would walk to look about the city the old Oom Keh helped to make, this *capitan* will walk with him."

An instant of silence, broken by McKay himself.

"*Buenos dias, capitán*. Where have you been ever since yesterday?"

The casual question, conveying to the ears of the guardsmen the misinformation that these two had not met since the noon repast of their king, brought an almost imperceptible twitch of amusement from the wrinkled lids.

"An old dog needs much rest," was the equally deceptive response.

Almost without pause, the veteran changed to his native Indian tongue, in

which he talked briefly but pointedly to the big under officer. The latter replied argumentatively, but was silenced by one terse sentence. For a few seconds he stood, looking dubious, caught between the horns of a dilemma quite manifest to McKay, even though the words exchanged had been unintelligible to his ear. The captain of the guard had not foreseen the likelihood of the prisoner guest wishing to tour the city in his absence, so he had issued no order covering the contingency. And outwardly the captive was not a captive but boon companion of the king, to be accorded all courtesy until contrary instructions should be given. Hence the perplexed *sargento* knew not which way to step without putting his foot into trouble.

Cononaco limped forward. At the same time McKay assisted the uncertain noncom to a decision.

"If the king asks for me," he suggested, "say that I shall return in time to join him at luncheon. In the meantime I should like an escort of honor. These men will do."

Relief showed in the return glance. The sending of an armed escort should preclude official censure, as McKay well knew. With no more hesitation the stalwart instructed his men.

"You will escort *el señor;* allow no harm to come near him; return him in safety to this *cuartel* at midday. *Vaya!*"

Then he grinned a little at the honored guest and went inside to form a new relief for the sentinels.

Cononaco growled something at the four assigned to the escort, then hobbled to a corner and around it, McKay walking beside him. The riflemen waited a moment before following; and then they held a fixed distance—fixed by Cononaco, no doubt—behind. It had been no part of their instructions to listen to what might be said.

ROUNDING the angle, McKay found the hard baked earth becoming bare rock, ending in nothingness at the outer edge. The path had begun; the narrow inclined ledge, running at a rather steep grade down the face of the butte, which formed the only line of access to the plateau from the city, or *vice versa.* The *cuartel,* at its top, completely dominated the approach, for through rifle slits in its wall a score of defenders could beat back an ascending army. There had been a time, McKay recalled, when a few warriors of the White Ones, with only a wooden hut as fort, had held their coign of vantage against a horde of murder mad head hunters; when the stone path had been dyed from top to foot with blood and carpeted with corpses, and the ferocious attack of the savages had been turned into a debacle from which few of them escaped. Now, with the bullet proof adobe commanding it, the acclivity was even more of a death trap. Only artillery fire or aerial bombs could conquer the holders of the mesa; and here in this jungle fastness there was scant possibility of either, at least from the barbarians. Moreover, the presence of the anti-aircraft gun proved that the royal garrison had taken precaution against possible air attack.

At the outer edge of the shelf path, which, despite its daily use, had no protective rail to save man or beast from toppling off to death, McKay paused to look abroad and down. A mile away rose the rambling mountain wall which encircled the city like the rim of a bowl; bare topped, save for a few thickets of woodland which, memory of the old tales whispered, were impenetrable tangles of thorn trees, planted for defense at sections where crevasses or precipices did not block access to the city. The only roads between Hoserán and the outer plantations and forests, the same mentor told him, passed through a few cañons, always kept strongly guarded in the old days, and now, without doubt, invulnerably fortified. Old José Martinez had known what he was about when he chose this stronghold for the birthplace of a new nation. With the cañons adequately garrisoned, no jungle foe could penetrate the natural defenses. Nor, he quite

appreciated, could any captive escape, unless aided by influence or wings.

Below, in a wheeling panorama, stretched a vista of roofs and trees. Close packed though the city was, the trees dominated the scene from this oblique angle of view, their mushroom heads of perpetual green soaring above the brownish thatches of homes and shops, lending their cool shade to the man made structure below, and no doubt yielding various succulent fruits to their owners at the seasons of maturity; for it was hardly likely that the practical minded White Ones would give space to useless flora when their settlement was so crowded as to necessitate growing their food crops outside the mountain wall. Here and there was visible a short strip of street, along which moved diminutive men and burros. Elsewhere the huddle of houses and attendant trees obscured all other highways or byways.

ONLY at the base of the mesa was space unoccupied by dwellings or avenues. There, for perhaps a hundred feet straight out from the precipitous rock, was a belt of other rocks—angular boulders and jagged blocks whereon any enemies overthrown from path or fortress would become crumpled corpses immediately on impact. The observer contemplated the rubble with lids slightly narrowed, then glanced again along the suggestively unbulwarked pathway. His eye met that of Cononaco, watching cornerwise.

"A convenient place to drop enemies, *capitán*," he remarked.

"Aye." The old man looked downward, an odd expression on his wizened visage. After a couple of breaths he added, "Two men fell there last night."

"So? Drunk?"

"No. Foolish."

Another side glance, pregnant with meaning, evoked a quick question from the younger man.

"Who were they?"

"Two of the guard." A pause. "Friends of Yanga."

With that he began limping away down the curved declivity. McKay stared, then followed, overtaking his companion in three strides.

"That was unfortunate," he said. "By the way, how is Yanga?"

"Better than ever before. Dead."

"Huh? How?"

"In a way most peculiar, Oom Keh." The old head wagged portentously. "The rising of the sun today found Yanga dead in a little house down yonder. Dead from the bite of a snake. The snake that had killed him was there also. It was dead too. In its tail was a piece of cord. None knows from where it came. It is all most queer."

A faint chuckle seemed to quiver through his concluding words, but his face preserved its solemn set.

"Humph!" muttered McKay, regarding him askance.

Retribution for treachery had come swiftly on Yanga and his "hands"; and in the death of the plotter himself by the fangs of his own venomous tool was a satiric irony bespeaking the mind of Cononaco. But the snakiness of that vengeance was a bit repulsive. Hard though the ancient fighter was, this seemed rather unworthy of him. McKay felt disappointed in him, almost disgusted.

But then, taking second thought, he revised his judgment. In all probability Cononaco had had no hand in the thing. Certainly he could not have hurled those two agile sentinels to their death. It was most unlikely that, tired as he was on leaving McKay, he had spent time hunting for Yanga in the city and putting the snake on him. It had not even been necessary for him to suggest such use of the reptile. That plan had been full born in the mind of the vengeful guard who prevented the killing of the creature when it was under McKay's bed. The fellow had saved its life for a purpose. Yes, he and his comrade were the ones responsible for the fall of their predecessors to death in the night and for the coming of the snake to Yanga. Cononaco might perhaps be regarded as an

accomplice, both before and after the fact. But his complicity was limited to foreknowledge of what they were likely to do and afterknowledge that they had done it. Otherwise his hands were clean.

Yet, though McKay silently absolved him, he still frowned as he traveled downward. In the bygone time of José and Rand, he knew, such stealthy reprisals among the White Ones would never have taken place. Then, if fellow soldiers had fallen foul of each other, they would have fought out their enmity in the open. Now it was a matter of trickery and counter trickery, stealth and assassination. When the soldiery, backbone of the nation, settled its scores thus, the blood of the state must be indeed contaminated. Moreover, the discipline of the barrack above must be lax when two of its garrison could throw two others to death, go down into the city and kill another man and escape detection. The former militarism of the kings must be now a hollow pretense, eaten out at the heart; a mere parade ground efficiency, deluding the vanity of King Vicente but unsubstantial and untrustworthy.

At that point in his musings McKay shrugged and, for no apparent reason, glanced up into the empty sky; then he turned his attention again to the city. From his own standpoint the three recent deaths were hardly cause for sober meditation. If Yanga had sought to incite others to enmity against him, the fate which had overtaken the inciter might well cause those others to refrain from following his counsels. At any rate, his demise left no grief in the heart of his intended victim.

CASTING a glance backward, McKay measured the distance between him and the escort, then quietly asked—

"Is there any message this morning from the place of the fire?"

"No."

The reply was so short that the questioner asked nothing further.

Down they passed, meeting *en route* a few men of soldierly bearing who spoke to Cononaco, looked frankly at McKay, then transferred their attention to the following riflemen, a faint sarcasm crossing their faces; also a pudgy fellow alone, who smirked obsequiously but was passed in stony silence by the veteran. Some merchant, no doubt, whom the warrior considered beneath notice. At the bottom waited a group of three or four burros, burdened with foodstuffs for the tables of the dwellers on high, and a couple of swart muleteers. Not until the downcoming party had gone by did these presume to set foot on the ascent. Cononaco deigned not so much as a flick of the eyes toward them. McKay, on the other hand, looked them over with interest, for they were of a type decidedly unlike the White Ones: dark skinned, slant eyed, low browed, short bodied. Their return gaze was sly, furtive, yet not servile; in fact, tinged with a cunning boldness verging on insolence, too tenuous to give affront, but perceptible to a searching eye. The ex-captain, versed in reading the looks of subordinates, perceived it and frowned again.

"Slaves?" he laconically inquired.

"Aye. No," Cononaco enigmatically contradicted himself. "Jiveros. Half brothers of our bastard king."

The blunt retort fetched a quirk to the lips of the inquirer. After a few more steps he remarked:

"It is a wonder to me, Cononaco, that the king lets you live when you call him such sweet names. There must be snaky tongues here ready to hiss your words to him, so he must know of them."

"Hrrrumph! Is Cononaco a fool, Oom Keh, to take no heed of what ears are open when he speaks? Cononaco knows snakes when he sees them, and when they are close he is dumb. The king does not know so much as he thinks he does, though he knows Cononaco has no respect for him; that has been made plain to him before now by Cononaco himself. But there are times when the words of all the purple parrots about the king are useless to guide him in some matter of government, and then he must send

for the old dog and let him bark, and the puzzle is then made clear. So, though the old dog may growl at other times, he lives on."

"Oh. I see." Several more steps. "And do you always advise him truly, old counselor?"

The counselor of the dead rulers scowled and answered with acerbity:

"Is Cononaco a traitor, to speak false when the good of Oriente hangs on his words? Kings pass, but the kingdom lives—even if sick for a time. Cononaco speaks always for the welfare of the kingdom. Cononaco fought with hand and brain for the kingdom in the days of the old kings. He fights for it now, though his hand grows weak. And he will fight for it when this rotten king has gone and a clean one has come!"

McKay's brows lifted. These aggressive assertions had a far different ring than yesterday's bitter declaration that the kingdom was dying. And did the dauntless old fellow deem himself immortal, that he thus asseverated loyalty to a king as yet unknown? For a second the far flyer regarded him quizzically; then turned his gaze again ahead, seeking whatever new sight might arise. The old eyes in their turn slid to the corners of their sockets to study the unconcerned young face, then resumed attention to the footing.

They walked on.

CHAPTER XIII

BROWN AND WHITE

NOON found the little party once more on the cliff path, returning from their tour.

They walked now in silence. Cononaco's limp, more pronounced than at the start, betokened fatigue, as did the added weight he put on his cane. The shuffling gait of the wordless half squad behind, and the frequency with which they shifted their guns from side to side, attested a flagging of their energies—and incidentally indicated that they were not as fit as soldiers should be, since a walk around their own city ought not to tire well conditioned troopers. The stalwart Northerner, on the other hand, walked with the same effortless pace as at the start. But his gaze, as he watched his footing or glanced aside at the gradually sinking vista of Hoserán, was pensive.

Except for momentary pauses when the guarded guest wished to give more than passing observation to something which struck his interest, they had been continually in motion, and thus had covered a good deal of ground. At first they had traveled a broad avenue, the main artery of the town, which ran almost directly beneath the western end of the mesa and therefore lay open to view from the king's eyrie at that extremity of the rock. This was the business street, along which small shops were interspersed among comfortable, though unpretentious, dwellings. Its extremities, Cononaco explained, were at the beginnings of the two principal cañons—north and south—penetrating the mountains, which formed the natural route for the movement of incoming produce or imports. There were three other cañons of entry, but these were narrow and tortuous, and hence not so advantageous for regular use. All five were heavily garrisoned.

"The time is not right, Oom Keh, for a visit to the stronghouses protecting those cañons," added the informant, as if anticipating some such suggestion. "None may enter there without an order from the king. At least, not by day, with such as these to make report of it."

A backward nod toward the escort emphasized his qualification. Then he switched to another topic.

"Observe," said he, "that all houses, all shops, all buildings of any sort, except the forts and some places on the rock, are of *chonta* palm wood, not clay nor stone. So it was ordered by the Old Ones. If the earth shakes itself the houses may sway, but do not fall; or if the quake is very bad and walls do give way, they are not heavy enough to crush their owners. The first people to live here, far

back before the beginning of our time, built of stone. And when we found this place not one stone was left standing upon another, and of those people not one whole bone remained. All were smashed to splinters by some mad agony of the earth."

McKay nodded. He had heard this tale also from his grandfathers; how, when José Martinez and his first band of White Ones entered this hidden vale, they found jumbles of stone which once had been houses; rock rimmed pools, former baths; well ordered waterways; fruits and vegetables still faithfully growing amid wild useless trees and bush; but not a trace, save crumbled bits of bone, of the habitants who here had lived and died.

CONONACO fell silent again, and they marched steadily along the avenue, regarded with varying mien by the beholders, who grew increasingly numerous as news of the coming of the party traveled ahead. At first men, then women and children, then even servants stood along the way or gazed from doorways. Some of these watched with lids narrowed; a few scowled and, when the six had passed, muttered sneers; but most of the men looked at the foreigner with steady, impartial scrutiny, as if appraising him, while the majority of the women stared with candid curiosity. As for the house slaves, they spied covertly, unnoticed by their mistresses and unobserved by the objects of their interest. In the slant eyes of those Jivero women, however, lurked an admixture of the sly insolence previously shown by the muleteers and of unfathomable evil. The evil was innate, racial, but the arrogance was of comparatively recent birth. It was not long before McKay became aware of it. In fact, it was put squarely before his gaze.

They turned at random into a cross street, narrower and more homelike, and far more typical than the business thoroughfare. During the remainder of their tramp they journeyed along similar byways, wandering whereverfancy directed the feet of McKay. Unlike the streets of a Spanish-American city, these were not lined by interminable house walls, pierced only by barred windows and heavy doors, and harshly repellant. Though the houses huddled close, each had its surrounding plot of ground, its few fruit trees, its herbaceous shrubs. This arrangement was so reminiscent of North America that the observer fancied it to be the product of the American ruler, Rand. At any rate, it was sociable and sensible. With their city circumvallated by the mountains, these folk could well dispense with the defensive house walls common to less impregnable cities; and neighborly friendliness was facilitated by the absence of intervening barriers.

Here, as on the avenue, the householders stood at gaze. Presently the pedestrians neared a house at which no White Ones were visible, but a couple of Jivero women worked lazily at some small gardening task. Emboldened perhaps by the temporary absence of their owners, they walked to the edge of the lawn and stared brazenly at the tall outlander. The younger, in fact, gave him a bold leer, the significance of which was unmistakable. He stared, scowled and passed on. In the course of the next hour three similar incidents came about. In the last instance the woman, considerably more personable than the average Jivero and evidently quite well aware of the fact, advanced so far as almost to brush herself against the white man.

"Back to your kennel, animal!" barked Cononaco, for the first time deigning notice to one of that blood.

She started back with hereditary fear of a masterful voice, then slid a poisonous look at him. He marched stonily on, and one of the escort jolted her with a gun butt. Thereat she hastily retreated, lips snarling but tongue silent.

McKay, though ignoring these repetitive signs of the times, glanced more carefully at the children as he forged onward. Among them all he noticed but two whose color and features betokened miscegenation; and these were

small. The larger boys and girls, of whom he saw many, bore no trace of halfbreed blood. Yet he had by no means seen all the youngsters of the city; and it was a logical supposition that the progeny of illicit unions would be kept in the background. There might be quite a number of them. At any rate, the presence of two proved well enough that Cononaco had spoken truth concerning the sullying of blood hitherto pure.

AS THEY once more neared the mesa, however, he beheld something which cheered his mood. For the first time he looked back—and discovered, to his surprise, that his following had increased. Behind his gun bearing guard marched at least a score of boys; soft footed, silent mouthed, steady eyed boys, aged about ten or twelve, aligned in a column of twos. Some bore bows, arrows or sticks at the right shoulder, others were empty handed; but all were as serious as full grown warriors trudging a forest trail, bound for war. Not once had they made a sound. Now the former captain viewed them with amazement.

A curt grunt broke from Cononaco when he followed the other's gaze. They halted. So did the boys; and there they stood coolly waiting, unabashed by the regard of their adopted leaders.

"I seem to be gathering an army," chuckled McKay.

"Aye," drawled the old commander, still scanning them. As if to himself, he softly added, "Where Oom Keh leads, young warriors will follow."

McKay gave him a whimsical glance, then laughed—

"Now that we have them, what shall we do with them?"

"Do not laugh at them, Oom Keh," reproved the other. "There are many worse soldiers than these. The hearts of these are clean and know no evil."

At that moment one of the riflemen, moved perhaps by impatience, rounded on the youngsters and growled an order to begone. They hesitated, but stood their ground.

"Hold!" snapped McKay, striding back. "Make way, you!"

The guardsmen, after a second of irresolution, gave way to right and left, letting him through. Before the two leading lads he halted.

"Well, sons, where do you march?" he asked, smiling again.

A moment of silence, while all the clear young eyes in the column centered on his. Then the ranking boy at the head of the line calmly countered—

"Where do you lead, M'Keh?"

The man to man tone brought a broadening of McKay's smile, coupled with a slight look of surprise at the speaker's knowledge of his identity; for he had not supposed himself to be known by name to the populace in general, as this youngster's familiarity indicated. Neither had he deemed this little parade behind him to be actuated by anything more than a boyish impulse to accompany soldiers and play at being an army. Now, as he reread the expressive faces, his amusement died. These adolescent White Ones were at play, perhaps, but play intensely serious and very real to them; play based on hero worship, with himself, blood and bone of the old time fighting McKay, as the hero. And, boys though they were today, these and others of their age were the soldiers of tomorrow—a tomorrow very near, since maturity comes early and suddenly under the equator. Already these lads bore themselves as disciplined fighting men.

For a few slow breaths he felt oddly moved by the unspoken tribute to his forefathers and himself. Then his eyes twinkled again and he glanced toward the sun.

"I give you an order," he announced. "It is time to eat. It is the duty of every soldier to eat when it is time, and to eat heartily, so that he may be strong. March now to your homes and fill yourselves with food. And say to your fathers that McKay, *capitán* of soldiers in a great war, has called you good soldiers. Forward! March!"

They marched. Heads up, eyes front,

faces aglow from the unsought praise, but mouths firm and unsmiling, they swung in steady cadence past the *capitán* McKay, the *capitán* Cononaco, and the amused riflemen. Perhaps one here and there marched out of step, but none heeded that. The two ex-commanders noted their exalted expressions, their straight backs, their strong framed shoulders, and their resilient stride—and smiled in approval. The men of the garrison grinned at what they considered an excellent joke, the reviewing of a handful of children as if they were a real army. The youngsters themselves, more solemn than ever, held to their advance with never a backward look, smartly turned a corner and were gone.

Thereafter the men resumed their own way toward the mesa, speaking hardly at all. Cononaco, for some obscure reason, seemed more than a little pleased by the incident, but kept his thoughts to himself. McKay, on the other hand, frowned now and again as his mind reverted to the candid gaze of the leading boy and repeated his straightforward question:

"Where do you lead, M'Keh?"

Somehow that query troubled him. Once he looked aloft, as if half expecting to find something far overhead in the vacant sky; then switched his glance aside at the indolent city, and scowled as he remembered the Jivero females who, by look and act if not by word, had belied their status of slaves and virtually asserted equality with white women. His nose wrinkled as if the breeze had borne a taint.

So they found themselves once more on the upward road, where the guard, sure that no further alertness was needed, relaxed into a dragging slouch, and Cononaco ascended with labor. They were halfway up the acclivity before the old man spoke.

"Oom Keh has done well," he quietly declared.

"At what?"

The crafty brown eyes dwelt on the gray ones, then veered forward.

"All things are made clear soon or late," was the indefinite reply.

With that he relapsed into meditation.

THE YOUNGER man, once more sweeping the city with recurrent surveys as he ascended, postponed reflection on the secretive words of his crippled companion. It did not occur to him that the wily old fellow had been not merely showing Hoserán to McKay but also showing McKay to Hoserán; that he had foreseen not only the king's disability after his debauch but also the natural inclination of the newcomer to tour the city, and had loafed at the fortress in order to be opportunely at hand to facilitate the excursion; that he was doubly pleased by the spontaneous boy parade, both because it indicated an impulsive liking for McKay and because, as the result of the Northerner's words to those boys, their fathers also would like him.

Reaching the top, they found a guard of two whole squads turned out to receive them; the *sargento*, looking somewhat sour, standing at the rear; and the heavy faced, hard mouthed commandant, Oliverio, in command. This officer tendered McKay a stiff salute—hand to heart and down—which the latter returned with equal formality in the American manner. It was quite evident that the commander felt his dignity belittled by the Northerner's temporary departure without his permission, and that the big noncom had borne the brunt of his displeasure. Nor was his mood mollified by the cool impersonality with which the airman now acknowledged his gesture and immediately turned his gaze to the men. The mouth of the *sargento* curved a little as he beheld this tacit indication that the self-important commandant was of scant importance to the king's visitor. Cononaco, too, smiled a sly smile. The others, if they saw, gave no sign of it.

After running an expert eye along the stiff double ranks, the outlander nodded careless approval of their efficient appearance and turned toward his house, speaking only to Cononaco.

"Thanks, Capitán Cononaco, for your guidance. I shall see you another time, and we shall talk further of the Old Ones, eh?"

"Umph," absently grunted the old man.

His eyes dwelt now on the open double door of the guardhouse, peering into the shadows beyond. McKay glanced in the same direction, then strode away.

After a step or two, though, he checked; hesitated a bare instant; then, without looking back, went on. Tardily he realized that within the dull light beyond those doors he had seen a man standing well back and watching; that it was that man who had absorbed the attention of Cononaco; and that the face of the loiterer, although half hidden by a hand ostensibly rubbing his nose, had borne a close resemblance to that of Basilio, the aristocrat who yesterday had been knocked down by McKay and banished in disgrace from the mesa by Vicente. If that man really was Basilio, back on the rock in defiance of the king's command and harbored by the commander of the king's own guard . . .

Softly McKay echoed Cononaco's last expression—

"Umph!"

CHAPTER XIV

SIESTA

HOT AND heavy, the hand of siesta lay over the land.

Down in the city, few forms moved under the sun, and these neither briskly nor far. Up on the mesa, none moved at all; at least, not in the shadeless plaza. Even the sentinels posted about La Casa del Extranjero—the House of the Stranger—virtually slept on their feet. Though nominally on watch, they stood close under the broad eaves, backs against the walls, legs crossed, knees braced against their guns, eyes almost shut, and brains dormant.

Their officers slept at the *cuartel;* the stranger whom they guarded slept inside; so why should not they also snatch a few winks? At this time of day even the beasts and the birds of the outer jungle yielded to the compulsion of soporific heat, napping until the sun slid lower; and he who unnecessarily bestirred himself now was defying the oldest law in existence—that of nature.

McKay himself, though wide awake during the forenoon, had temporarily succumbed to the lassitude consequent on the combination of a heavy dinner and somniferous temperature. The meal, served promptly after his return by girls even more flirtatiously inclined than those who had brought breakfast, had been so epicurean that, when left alone, he had soliloquized:

"Too bad that I can't feel more grateful toward so generous a host. He's treating me like a prince, even to the royal bodyguard and all that. But it's that same bodyguard that gives him away. And moreover, this hospitality smacks more than a little of the treatment given by the old Aztecs to the young men selected for sacrifice. They fed those victims with the finest food, gave them pretty girls as playmates and then slammed them onto the sacrificial block and ripped out their hearts. I wonder if Vicente has heard of that practise. Anyway, to my suspicious mind the present procedure looks decidedly similar. Ho-hum! Well, let's have a nap. There's nothing else to do—and it's just possible that we might be up late again tonight, Meredito."

So now he tranquilly slumbered. To outward appearance, all other acropolitans did likewise. Yet a few of these still were awake, with minds centered on the same spot and the same man—the new house and the newcomer who, for the present, took no thought of any one.

ONE OF these was no less a personage than the king himself. Although still blear eyed and squirmy stomached from the tenacious aftermath of excessive indulgence in palm wine, he was no longer incapacitated mentally. Lying luxuriously abed, he had already received certain reports which he now scowlingly considered. Presently he gave a snappish order.

A moment later a messenger marched across the plaza, heading for the *cuartel*. Each of the torpid guards opened one eye, then the other, and presented a semblance of vigilance until the inopportune pedestrian returned. Now he was followed by Cononaco, sleepy faced and heavy motioned, manifestly just aroused from repose. When the pair vanished through the portal of the palace the sentries relapsed into lethargy.

Within the regal bedroom Cononaco leaned on his stick, imperturbably meeting the boring gaze of his ruler. With equal unconcern he answered sharp questions bearing on the impromptu pilgrimage of McKay and his own part therein, dryly retracing the random movements of the party, which his auditor evidently knew already, until the latter peevishly broke in:

"To the devil with all that! I care nothing about this street and that street and the dirty nosed brats who followed the soldiers. What was the object behind all this hot walking? What was that man seeking to see? What questions did he ask? Answer truly!"

The old White One straightened slightly, and his chin lifted an inch. Fearlessly he voiced reproof.

"If the king knows of any time when the counselor of his fathers has given answers not true, let him name that time!"

"Answer my questions!"

"At command. The answer to the first is: He was restless, and perhaps had a headache which he wished to walk away. That would not be strange; the night guards say he returned from the king's table full of wine. To the second: He sought to see only the people and their way of living. To the third: He asked questions only about the same things."

"No questions about the forts, the ways through the mountains, the army, or the gold?"

"None."

The bloodshot eyes contracted, and the brows above them drew together in baffled thought. Suddenly came another query.

"Has he worked on his flying machine?"

"Cononaco is not permitted to approach his house. How then can Cononaco know what is done within it?"

Another pause, while the king's scowl deepened. One hand pulled repeatedly at an end of his mustache. Then, as if musing, he said:

"A man comes from afar, many hundreds of miles through the air, and stays at Quito—and then comes here—and lands even after the cannon has shot at him—and all for no purpose but to walk our streets and look at people doing nothing worth looking at. A likely tale, *por Dios!*"

"Oom Keh the old one, and Notun the old one, the fathers of this one, came more than once to this place, by ways much harder to travel than through the air—"

"With an object! They came first to find gold; and they found it. They came again to find Ran; and they found him. They never came again; nothing else drew them here. But this man comes so far with no object, or so he says. Bah! It is a lie. He has a reason. He seeks something. What is his purpose?"

Cononaco, plumbing his antagonistic glance and gaging his disputative tone, stood silent a few seconds. Then his reply was unexpected.

"*Quién sabe?* Cononaco has not yet found it."

Vicente stared, then cackled.

"Ha-ha-ha! You sly old dog! So you see there is an object, eh? And you have been smelling for it, eh? But you were too proud to admit failure, eh? Sometimes, Cononaco, you exasperate me most damnably with your way of arguing against me when you really think as I do. But I always penetrate your turtle shelled mind in the end, eh? Well, now, what is your real thought about this spy?"

His growling tone had turned cordial, his petulant face alight with goodfellowship; and a gesture invited the perverse old advisor to sit on the edge of the bed. But Cononaco, expressionless, remained standing and answered with deliberation:

"Thoughts are like fruits; he who

mouths them before they ripen may find them bitter on his tongue. In all the years of his counsel to the kings Cononaco has spoken what he knew, not what he guessed. So his counsel was always good. Cononaco now knows not what is in the mind of the young Oom Keh. Like the old Oom Keh, this one does not picture his thoughts plain on his face nor carry them loose on his tongue; and though he speaks many more words than the first Oom Keh, his mouth is no less tight, for the words tell nothing."

Vicente pulled the other end of his mustache. On his compressed lips grew cruelty.

"There are ways to make men speak," he murmured.

CONONACO'S mouth, habitually hard, became a shade harder, as if he sensed behind the suggestion a menace to himself as well as to his protégé. But his voice remained unaltered.

"Many ways for many men; few ways for a few men. Many tongues can be loosed by wine, women, fear, or pain. Some few can not. So here. The king has seen wine and women fail. Fear can not move a man of the tribe of Oom Keh; fear is not in them and can not be put in them, neither by threat nor by pain nor by death. In them is a hardness of rock. Rock can be torn apart, beaten to dust, destroyed, but not made to speak."

"Rock has no feelings and no tongue, old simpleton."

"When the mind of an Oom Keh becomes set like rock he has neither feelings nor tongue. Cononaco knows the breed. He marched and fought with the first Oom Keh and observed him well. He watched also Notun, the other ancestor of this one, and found him the same. In him was more of laughter than in the stony Oom Keh, but when his mind was set the same hardness was there. This one is of a piece with both those old ones. There is only one way to reach into his brain and see what is written there, and only one who can do it."

"Ah! Who?"

"I, Cononaco!"

"Humph! And how?"

"By free talk with him. Cononaco knows the tales most interesting to him, the deeds and words of his ancestors in the time of José and Ran. To these he would listen, and to these he might respond with other talk—of them and of himself. One word leads to another always, and when words flow freely caution is swept away. But to none but Cononaco will this one speak freely—and then only if no other ears hear."

Vicente considered, absently gripping his chin, while his roving gaze repeatedly stabbed into the leathery visage above him, then darted away.

"*Bien.* There may be sense in your plan," he presently conceded. "Try it."

"*Bien,*" echoed Cononaco, disinterestedly. "Let the way of approach be made clear. Now none can enter the new house."

"That will be attended to. Now go. And step carefully, *viejito,* step carefully!"

Naked menace leaped for a second into the black eyes. Cononaco deigned no response. Out he stalked with all the dignity his halting gait permitted. As he went, his ruler smiled sneeringly, gave his mustache a final stroke, and closed his eyes. Poor old fool, who thought himself so deep, yet could be so easily led to disclose his thoughts—yes, and even to do his king's thinking for him when the royal brain was fagged! Yet he was clever enough to work his way into the confidence of the North American imbecile, and dog loyal enough to report his findings; his record was surety of that. A decidedly useful animal at times, this Cononaco, despite his absurd self importance and obstinate worship for the crude old kings.

The old fool, on the other hand, did not smile, sneeringly or otherwise—at least, not visibly. But in his mind, as he departed from the presence of the half Jivero who made use of him when in a quandary but treated him with supercilious contempt between times, was not

merely a smile nor a grin, but a mocking laugh.

Out into the roasting sun he passed. Then, instead of heading straight across the open space, he turned to the left, following the line of house fronts. As he walked his eyes roved from side to side, noting that the guards at the House of the Stranger still drowsed and that nobody else paid any attention to him. About halfway along the northern row, where several houses were connected by unobtrusive rear walls, he sidled into an intervening space, slid through a side door and was gone.

A FEW minutes later he stood beside another bed, no less luxurious than that of Vicente. On it, gowned only in a filmy *traje de dormir* and half covered by a tenuous silken sheet, reposed Nuné, rosy cheeked from recent half conscious dreams, but bright eyed and wideawake. Unconsciously seductive, she smiled familiarly up at the crippled nonagenarian who had known her since she was a tiny mite of royalty. And, old though he was, the one time lusty fighting man scanned her appreciatively. For the moment she was no sacred Queen of the Flame, no dignified princess, but altogether a woman, young and infinitely attractive.

"You come early, Cononaco," she said. "Has anything happened?"

"Little, *princesa*, very little. But the sun is hot, so Cononaco pauses a moment in passing that he may grow cool."

She laughed lightly at his transparent excuse and tilted her head in permission to rest on the bedside—a privilege of which he promptly availed himself. With his lame leg crossed over his uninjured one and hands comfortably folded over the knob of his cane, he airily remarked:

"Just now Cononaco was bidden to sit on the bed of the king himself. But Cononaco is particular, and he remained standing."

"Yes? Nuné is honored, *capitán*, that you are more gracious to her," she demurely answered. "And what is the news?"

"All the news known to Cononaco is this— Two *soldados* fell off the path last night, perhaps while settling a difference. And a *sargento* stepped on a snake down below. And Oom Keh and Cononaco walked the town this morning, with four armed men at their heels, and saw nothing of consequence. And the king is perplexed because this Oom Keh will not be befooled by wine or women. So, to learn what deep secret is in the mind of Oom Keh, he sets Cononaco as a spy on him. That is all."

Her head lifted sharply from the lacy pillow.

"A spy? You? For the king—"

"Just so, *princesa*. It was the plan of Cononaco himself. Thus it is easier for Cononaco to have talk with Oom Keh. And while Cononaco does this spying work no harm will come to Oom Keh. It was in the mind of the Jivero, now that the wine cup and the snake eyed females have had no effect, to try next the influence of fear and other persuasions. But, that thought now is changed."

For an instant she paled slightly at his hint of nameless persuasions. Then she reached impulsively to the talons curved over the cane and gave them a swift squeeze.

"Cononaco *abuelo*, you are always clever and always good!" she praised. "Protect this Quixote with your wisdom, and persuade him to go—"

Her voice faltered in its command. Slowly her hand drew away, and her eyes clouded, looking absently at the footboard. Shrewdly the man whom she called *abuelo* — grandfather — watched her.

"CONONACO is glad that he has done right," he dryly remarked. "By custom and by law, that man should pay the penalty for laying bold hands on the Queen of the Flame. But the law is not an old law, not one of those made by the Old Ones who now stand in the fire. So if the queen forgives the insult—"

He stopped there. Long seconds passed. Then she lifted shapely bare arms high

overhead, let them sink to the pillows and smiled in reminiscence.

"*Abuelito mío*," she softly said, "sometimes it grows very tiresome to be a queen, a princess, a being apart from life. And it is wonderful to be just a woman in bold hands!"

Under the grizzled brows grew a slow smile.

"Aye, so. Something of the sort has been told to Cononaco by others in the days when his own hands were more strong and bold. Harrumph! *Bien*. The daring of this Oom Keh is forgiven, then. But now suppose—" he hesitated, regarding her closely; then ventured on—"suppose one could be both woman and queen?"

A shadow settled on her face.

"That can not be," she said. "The Queen of the Flame can be only queen, not a woman. You know the law. And the bold one must go before it is too late."

He sat, silent. Once his lips moved, but no words came. Whatever was in his mind, he thought it best to pursue the subject no further at present. Nuné lay now with wistful gaze fixed on nothingness, temporarily forgetful of him. After a short period of mutual reflection he quietly arose. His movement recalled her absent attention.

"You go?"

"All is said. Unless there is a word to be borne."

Her smile redawned.

"Has any word been asked?"

"This morning. One asked of Cononaco, 'Is there any message from the place of the fire?' Cononaco answered, 'No!' Then the one who had asked looked solemn and said no more."

"Yes?" The smile grew, and a slender finger traced aimless patterns on the silken coverlet. "Then if that one asks again, say this, 'To make bold with fire is dangerous.' "

"Wise words," sententiously approved Cononaco. "The man who kindles a flame may find himself unable to escape from it."

"Cononaco! What do you mean?"

"Nothing, *princesa*, nothing, except that the flame may put on that man such a spell that he has no wish to leave it, and so can not. *Adios!*"

With a final look at the glowing face he jogged outward. When he had disappeared Nuné lay a moment, wide eyed. Then she let her lashes droop and drifted back into dreamland.

Emerging from the doorway by which he had entered, Cononaco sent an all inclusive gaze sweeping about the plaza, then resumed his way toward the *cuartel*. A few minutes later, unnoticed save by a half observant sentry in a lookout box at one end of the roof, he had vanished within the sleepy fortress.

Meanwhile, unseen by any one, another figure had crept gradually from house to house along the southern row; watched for its chance, and then, with no cover save protective coloration—for its tan clothing blended well with the yellow soiled plaza—crept silently across the open to the somnolent Casa del Extranjero. Past dreaming sentinels it made its snaky way to the unlocked door. There, in a trice, it rose and was gone inside.

Half an hour later the guards yawned, stretched, looked about, and bestirred themselves. On different porches around the square appeared indolently moving figures, a few of which sauntered to other domiciles for lazy talk. Into the watch box atop the *cuartel* arose a new lookout, who cast a perfunctory glance all about, then settled to his monotonous task of pretence at vigilance; for, aside from the possibility of a heliograph flash, there was no need for watchfulness.

Siesta was over, and nothing at all had taken place.

CHAPTER XV

A WHITE RAT

McKAY, dozing, half clad, in the ornate hammock near the huge water filled tub—the coolest spot in the house at this time of day—lifted his lids

and blinked at the opening beyond which lay the dining and bed rooms. Nothing new was visible. Yet he had a sensation that something had just stood there—something sentient, something vigilant, which had peered so hard at him that he still could feel the force of its gaze.

Motionless, he watched and listened, with no result. Although his house was windowless, the light pouring in at the fan shaped ventilation openings near the roof showed clearly that no intruder was in his living quarters. From the large room of the plane came no sound. Presently his eyes reclosed. The queer feeling must be only the aftermath of some fleeting dream which he could not now remember. At this time of day it was most unlikely that anything could enter here unseen by the guards.

Some time later the movement of one of those guards aroused him again. The movement was slight, the sound vague—a mere creak of the sun dried canes at a corner as the man outside, hitherto resting heavily against the wall, came out of his standing nap and straightened up in ostentatious wakefulness. But it was near enough to the ears of the lightly slumbering Northerner to prompt him to look about him. An audible yawn from without disclosed the source of the noise. Silently McKay yawned in sympathy; then stood, stretched—and halted movement, rigid.

From the plane room had come another sound; a sudden dull thud, not loud enough to be heard outside, yet sufficiently heavy to be unmistakable to the hearer within. A man had fallen.

Silent but swift, the airman strode to the stable of his *caballito*. The corridor door was ajar, and as he threw it back a figure beyond crouched defensively, ready for retreat or attack, menacing as a predatory beast at bay. McKay's right hand lifted toward the weapon concealed within his shirt; then stopped waist high and slowly sank. He needed no gun for this creature, even though it held a naked knife.

CLOSE beside the machine the intruder stood, or stooped, and at a glance it was evident that he had been in that machine and, while prying into its secrets, had overbalanced and fallen. Dust of the earth floor smeared the front of his sweaty shirt and his greasy face, and blood from his bumped nose trickled down his bristly chin. Caught, he watched his discoverer, slit eyed, the dagger which he had instinctively drawn held low for a disemboweling upthrust, but his attitude betokening startled surprise rather than actual fear. In fact, his poise, his expression, his cold alertness were those of a cornered rat confronting an enemy from whom it expected no mercy and to whom it intended to give none. A verminous creature, this, actuated now by the same bold cunning which had motivated the creep across the open ground in the face of the sentries, when a more cautious man would have waited until night—and probably have been caught by watchers more vigilant.

McKay paused, not because of the threat of the knife, though fully aware of its readiness, but because he found the face before him worthy a second's consideration. Brutal, degraded, almost inhuman though it was, it was indubitably Spanish, with no discernible characteristic of the countenances of the White Ones. His first thought had been that this must be some friend of Yanga or of his broken tools, and therefore a native of Hoserán. But, though the tan clothing of the unknown was that of a common soldier, the features and the skin were those of an Ecuadorean or Peruvian descended straight from Castilian ancestors. The skin, in fact, was over white, blanched by the unhealthy pallor resulting from long avoidance of sun and from habitual indulgence of animal desires.

"Who are you?" snapped McKay.

No answer. No change of expression, except perhaps a slight tightening of the lids at sound of the hard voice. No alteration of posture. Wary, calculating, the interloper watched and waited.

"What are you doing here? Speak up!"

A tongue tip ran over thick lips. Then, restrained but coolly insolent, came reply.

"Looking at the machine, señor. Only looking at it. Have no fear."

The concluding words conveyed a sneer. With them came movement; a straightening of the spine, a relaxing of tension and a slow, insouciant advance, with knife still held ready. Apparently the impudent intruder expected a cautious retreat from the proximity of that hungry looking blade.

"*El señor* will have the goodness to speak softly," he asserted. "Ve-e-ery softly!"

The steel moved slightly, suggestively, with a twisting turn; and yellow teeth in pale gums grinned without mirth. As McKay unconsciously shifted weight to equalize his balance the grin widened. He seemed to be giving ground.

"*El señor* will also— *Sssangre de Cristo!*"

The hissing expletive broke from him as, without preliminary word or look, the foreigner leaped at him. The poniard stabbed in the stroke for which it was aimed, but missed. That stab had been gaged exactly by the assailant, and a swinging hand struck the darting weapon aside. Simultaneously a bony fist collided with the cadaverous visage, also missing its mark, as it had struck for the jaw. But the shock stopped the Spaniard dead for a second. Then he writhed and wrenched frantically to escape a steeltrap clutch on the wrist of his knife hand. Too late!

With both fists locked on that forearm, McKay whirled, threw the arm up, brought it down suddenly across his own right shoulder. A dull crack sounded. An irrepressible yell of pain and terror rang in the room. The dagger fell. McKay released his grip and spun about to confront the stabber, who staggered back, clutching at his broken arm.

"*EL SEÑOR* will also—" mocked McKay—"will also break your neck, you rat, if you have done any mischief in this machine. What have you done there? Answer!"

He glanced sidewise at the plane, seeking any obvious damage. None was visible. His eyes came back just in time. The trapped meddler, face contorted, was starting to stoop and try to snatch up his poniard with the left hand.

Another crack, louder and sharper than the first. The intruder stooped no farther. Instead he straightened up, rocked on his heels and fell backward, to lie dazed. McKay, knuckles dyed crimson and jaw hard set, stood over him a second, then turned to face newcomers. The outer door had slammed inward, and along the short corridor ran the guards.

"What is wrong here?" demanded the first, rifle ready for instant use.

"Nothing—except that another snake has crawled in. I am growing weary of them."

McKay's tone was cold, his gaze level. The tightening of the sentinel's mouth showed that the reference to a snake was understood, and the anger flashing into his eyes foretold ill for the setter of another Yanga trap. Then, as he saw what lay beyond the Northerner, astonishment replaced other emotions. He and his mates stopped, staring at the supine figure, the fallen dagger and the unarmed manhandler.

"Salazar!" exclaimed two at once.

The other two grunted.

McKay's brows lifted. So this was Salazar, captive and turncoat; the anti-aircraft gunner who kept his life by taking the lives of his own countrymen whenever they flew over, and had done his best to serve the last of the McKays likewise. But what had been his object in making this audacious visit now? Not to assassinate the Northerner, though he was prepared to kill if necessary. Had murder been his purpose, he could have accomplished it when he first entered. No, he either meant to make sure that the plane was permanently disabled, actuated perhaps by stealthy spite against the king, who was so intensely interested in it, or to ascertain whether it could serve his own ends in some way. In what way? There was but one obvious use for such a

craft: to fly away in it, and thus escape. Yes, that probably had been his scheme. And, though such a project might look suicidally rash in conception, it might be possible of execution if luck favored the attempt. To lie concealed here until night, slip out and silently knife the watchmen, roll out the light machine, hop aboard and take off before other obstructors could arrive, all this would be possible. Unlike the ancient models, this craft needed no warming up or other preliminaries to flight; it could dart away with the silent speed of the dragon fly. And, once away, an experienced airman needed not so much as a single star to guide him through the night. Direction, distance, speed and height all were automatically registered by his softly illuminated instruments.

But for his accidental fall, Salazar might have accomplished all this—if he understood the operation of this late type of plane, if he had adjusted it ready for instant use, and if he had evaded discovery by the owner until the right time came. Even despite discovery, he might have carried out his plan but for the fatal error of underestimating his discoverer. It was quite evident now that he had thought to overawe the Northerner and thus enforce silence concerning his presence here. Angered though McKay was he could appreciate the cold nerve of the fellow. But he felt none the more friendly.

"HOW COMES this man here?" abruptly demanded the first sentry.

"That is for you to explain," countered McKay. "I slept. Do you mean to say that he walked in here without your knowledge?"

A shamefaced look crossed the other's features. His mates, suddenly aware of their own delinquency, avoided the stern gray gaze.

"You can make your explanation to your own officers," coldly added the ex-captain. "Take him out of here! And if you allow any more of his sort to enter here against orders I will handle you myself. If you want to know what kind of handling I mean look this man over carefully. Now out with you!"

With that he turned his back on them and climbed into his machine to inspect it. Two of the guards, with mouths hardening, stepped to the man responsible for their predicament and prodded him roughly with rifle muzzles. Salazar snarled, struggled to a sit, glowering at all of them, and looked for his dagger. The man nearest to that fallen blade picked it up. Then all four of them grabbed him, yanked him to his feet and dragged him away. He went without a word, but with a vindictive parting glare at the Northerner.

The sky rider gave him not so much as a look in return. His sharp gaze was surveying all parts of his faithful little flyer, and the quintet passed out unnoticed. For some time after their departure he continued his inspection, finding nothing disarranged; nothing except the little wire which he himself had loosed, and which was just as he had left it. At length he readjusted this connection, listened a second for outside sounds, and then turned a black thumb key on the instrument board. Instantly sounded a soft hum of flowing power. Automatically his fingers moved to a red button an inch away—then caught themselves and drew back. Pressure on that button would complete all connections and hurl the quiescent machine headlong against the barred doors.

With a smile of satisfaction he turned off the power. Thereafter he crawled all over the machine again, reassuring himself that no serious strain had resulted from the gyrating fall and abrupt stop forced on him by the gunfire of Salazar. When he desisted he was hot and dirty, but good humored.

"Fit as a fiddle," he murmured. "Just when we'll hop off is more than I know now, little straddle bug; but we'll fly together or not at all. No white rats are going to ride you if I know it."

He sprang lightly down; then stood still, struck by a belated thought. The

white rat must be dead by now, unless the command of the king had been rescinded —or disobeyed. That command had imposed summary death by the guardsmen's guns on any one tampering with the plane. But no shot had been fired.

"Humph!" thought he. "My dear friend Vicente, your grip on your *soldados* seems to be slipping faster all the time. They sneak a snake into your guest's house, they kill one another in the dark, they let Basilio come back after you've banished him, they sleep on post, or else stand stone blind, while Salazar enters in broad day, and they ignore your order to shoot when they've caught him. Maybe they've just turned him loose to cover up their own negligence. And you think you can make yourself emperor of South America with that kind of soldiers! Ho-ho!"

He walked back into his living quarters. The outer door stood half open, and he went to it. A few feet away, close together, in growling converse stood the pair of sentries whose duty was to protect the front of the house. Salazar had disappeared. So had the rearward guards, perhaps back to their posts, perhaps elsewhere.

"What have you done with my visitor?" inquired McKay.

No answer came. Not even a look at him acknowledged that the question was heard. At sound of his voice they ceased talking, walked each to his corner, and stood rigid, faces blankly fronting the plaza.

McKay stared, scowled, shut the door and went to his tub.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SPY

"OOM KEH, beware! A spy has been set upon you."

Cononaco, face drawn into a more dour knot than ever, stood beside McKay's dining table, whence the vestiges of supper had just been removed. No sooner had the servants departed than the veteran had entered, unobstructed and unannounced. And now, while the hitherto isolated visitor still showed surprise at his bold entrance, he dropped his warning in sepulchral tone.

"Yes?" drawled McKay. "Well, one more or less makes little difference. Who is it this time?"

"Cononaco."

The wrinkled visage puckered more tightly in grotesque semblance of a ferocious grimace. The smooth skinned countenance of the younger man broadened in a responsive grin.

"That's interesting. Who sends this sly spy, and what for?"

"The king. Aye, the mighty king, before whom the knees of all men—even of Cononaco—become weak as water. The king dragged the old dog from his rest today to set him upon Oom Keh. The old dog forgot to tell of his dog door, so the man door has been made open to him. The king is uneasy of mind because Oom Keh asks nothing about the forts, the ways through the mountains, the army, the gold. It is not good that the king should be uneasy, Oom Keh."

"My error," acknowledged the listener. drawing at his new lit cigar and quizzically eying the humorous spy. "Well, then, I'll oblige him by asking those questions. What about the forts, the roads, and the army? Oh, yes, and the gold? By the way, have a cigar."

The oldster looked curiously at the open cigar box which had flown from far "Norte Amerikaa" and at the silvery foil wrapped shapes snugly ranged therein; but the proffer went unaccepted.

"Like the great Ran, Cononaco has never smoked," he declined. "Of wine and women he has had his share; but sucking in smoke and blowing it out seemed no good use of time, though the great Ho Seh did it often."

He looked toward the door, gaging its distance; then, with no further word, he betook himself to the big bed and sat comfortably on its edge. McKay sauntered after him and dropped by his side.

"The forts," abruptly began the caller, speaking low, "protect all entrances to

Hoserán. They are midway of each cañon, because there all enemies must come in close formation and so can be cut down like grass. The outer ends can not be so well defended, because there the enemy would have more room to move about. But the edges of the rock high overhead are piled with many stone blocks to drop on the heads of any who come. So any army is broken up before it reaches the forts, and then it is blown to nothing by the guns big and small. The guns are cannon and machine rifles and man rifles, and the balls and bullets for them are as many as the leaves of the forest, stored in great rooms cut in the rock behind the forts, enough to kill all the armies of all the world. And at the forts are great gates which drop into the cañons and so stop any men from passing if the guns miss them; and such men are then shot down at leisure by the riflemen."

"How about men who come in sky birds, as I did?"

"Such men are few, Oom Keh. Yet there are guns for them also. More guns than Oom Keh has seen. On all the mountains around Hoserán are small forts hidden among the thickets of thorn at those places where savages might come over the tops, if the thorns did not stop them. And in each of these forts are machine rifles to use against ground enemies and sky guns for sky enemies and men trained in their use. These sky guns have never been used, because only one sky man comes at a time, and then he is allowed to come close and shot down by the man Salazar, on this rock, who is most clever at such work. But the guns are there, the men are there, and when the signals come from the mountains farther out all are ready. The king of Oriente—whoever he may be—need never fear defeat by enemies who come by land, by water, or by air, Oom Keh! He can destroy all who attack!"

McKAY smoked thoughtfully. Cononaco watched him, sidelong. After a silent minute he added, as if to himself—

"Unless they come from the city itself."

The proviso passed unheeded. McKay squinted at his cigar end, knocked off an ash and continued slowly puffing. Presently he prompted:

"Proceed. Never mind about the roads. What about the army?"

"A good army, Oom Keh! Aye, a good army still, even though the parts nearest to the head grow rotten. Those parts which are farthest out, the men of the frontiers, the men of the roads and rivers and mountain tops, yes, even those of the cañon forts, all are hard, all healthy, all alert. Here in Hoserán many are softer; some are too soft to be of further use; some are altogether decayed in body and mind. Yet many others still are firm. And a cutting away of the rot, a hardening of the softness, an exercise of firmness would make all once more strong. Every man child born to the White Ones is born a soldier! And every day is born a new one."

The other nodded, seeing again the soldierly boys who had followed him that morning. Once more he gave unnecessary attention to his cigar, studying it as if it were a problem instead of a smooth smoking roll of tobacco. Then he remarked:

"Ah, yes. Well, let's see, what else was there? Oh, the gold. The gold that makes all Europe bend the knee to the mighty emperor Vicente. What about that?"

"There is much, Oom Keh. So much that the digging has long been stopped, because there was no need for all that had been dug. So much that strong houses built to hold it were packed full, and to store more was useless work. So much that it is used for buying the cheapest things—fruit, eggs, *cigarros*. Cononaco has heard, from men who came here but did not go out, that in other countries low metals like silver, and even slips of paper, are used for buying. Is that word true?"

"Yes."

"*Bien*." A hand dipped into a pocket of the threadbare breeches and emerged with a gold disk. "In Hoserán this will

buy ten eggs. Eggs are very cheap. There are many hens."

McKay, weighing and scanning the simple coin, so pure that he could bend it between thumb and fingers, whistled softly in amazement. In American money it was worth at least twenty dollars. Two dollars an egg, with eggs plentiful! Gold must be cheap indeed in Hoserán.

Cononaco, cannily observing the impression made, added in casual tone:

"If the digging had not been stopped that piece would buy only one egg. In the mines still waits much more gold than has ever been taken out."

The Northerner continued examining the smooth disk, stamped only with a cryptic character which seemed a combination of the letters J and R, perhaps signifying José and Ran.

"Too much gold is worth nothing," he absently agreed. "I have sometimes wished my grandfathers had not brought so much away from here. It has grown until it is rather a burden."

He passed the coin back to its donor, who seemed a bit disconcerted by his indifference. For a moment the self styled spy frowned down at it; then, unnoticed, he laid it on the bed.

"NOW THAT I have asked the required questions," bantered the far flyer, "let me ask some others. Has any word yet come from the place of the fire?"

"Aye. 'To make bold with fire is dangerous.' "

A quick look; a sudden puff at the cigar; a growing smile.

"Were the words spoken in anger?"

"Not so."

The smile broadened, and the gray eyes moved toward the ventilator, beyond which lay fast thickening darkness.

"Will it rain again tonight, wise one?"

"The eyes of Cononaco have seen a heavy cloud. But the mind of Cononaco says this night is not good to walk out."

"No? Why not?"

No explanation came. The wizened face drew tighter. The old eyes bleakly regarded the wall. After a sidelong scrutiny the questioner chuckled tolerantly and drew again at his cigar. But that quiet laughter disclosed as plainly as spoken words a determination to fare forth, at his own good time, in an endeavor to find again the place of the flame.

"I had a visitor this afternoon," the smoker broached a new topic. "Perhaps you have heard of him."

"There are few happenings on this rock of which Cononaco does not hear," admitted his auditor.

"Well, then, what became of him after he left?"

"He was taken straight to the king by two of the *soldados*. Since then nobody has seen him."

"To the king, eh?" McKay contemplated the wall speculatively; then chuckled again. "I hope the king liked his appearance. The king himself came near looking like that, or worse, when I found him in my plane yesterday."

Cononaco snickered aloud, much amused by the vision of Vicente broken boned and bloody faced. But he quickly sobered as some other thought obtruded on the diverting picture. Before he could put it into words, if he had any intention of doing so, his companion brought up another subject.

"When I left you this morning I thought I saw Basilio back in the shadows of the *cuartel*. Were my eyes twisted by the sun?"

"If they were, Oom Keh, those of Cononaco were twisted also. But when Cononaco entered the fort the shadow looking like Basilio was gone. So perhaps it was only a sun dream."

"Ah. Well, it doesn't matter. But now tell me something that does matter. What is the secret of the disappearance of men who come here? And what is the thing Nuné is not allowed to know? There's something about that statue where the fire burns—"

As abruptly as if kicked, Cononaco started up, cutting short the interrogation; and on the interrogator he turned a

forbidding scowl. In an undertone lower than his previous subdued pitch he warned—

"There are matters about which no wise man asks questions—or answers when asked!"

"Maybe," was the cool retort. "But the questions are asked."

They remained unanswered. Cononaco eyed him; then he deliberately moved toward the dining table and the door.

"Good night. Come again," laconically invited the rebuffed inquisitor.

WITHOUT response Cononaco opened the portal and looked out. Darkness lay over the mesa, broken only by small house lights here and there. Overhead the stars gleamed in clear sky, but at the eastward slowly rose an all obscuring cloud pregnant with rain. Near at hand lurked no listeners, though a faint footfall or two near the corners testified to the presence of watchers. He turned and hobbled back inside.

"The spy goes as he came," he quietly declared, "through the man door. It may be that later an old dog will come through a dog door, and that two will go out where one came in. But Oom Keh must be here when the old dog comes. And until that time it is not good that Oom Keh should walk outside."

McKay studied him with half a frown. Already determined to fare forth, and fully confident of ability to handle any situation that might arise, he found the admonitory attitude of the oldster rather irksome. For the moment, indeed, he felt that the ancient *capitán* was growing presumptuous. But then, realizing his own inexperience in traveling a path of which the other knew every ramification, he banished budding resentment. In this place where snakes appeared beneath guarded beds and other stealthy dangers lurked unseen on every hand, only a fool would refuse guidance. Yet he did not acquiesce without another question.

"When that time comes where do we go?" he hedged.

"To the place where Oom Keh means to go."

"Good! I'll be waiting."

Cononaco went. McKay drew a long puff, exhaled it slowly, watched the smoke writhe away in thinning convolutions and fade out. Idly he slid both hands along the bed at either side of him. One touched the gold coin. He glanced at it, picked it up, scrutinized it anew, seeing not merely its yellow surface but store houses full of gold bars and mines so rich that a hundred thousand people could not use their output. This, quite likely, was exactly what Cononaco had intended him to see.

"You old rascal," silently mused the lounging stalwart, "as a spy you're the most transparent simpleton imaginable—on the surface. But just how deep are you in reality? By Judas, I don't know! I think I can see through your game, but I'm not so sure. Not—so—sure."

And, still looking at the gold piece but glimpsing other things, he sat long in cogitation.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GODS EAT

GLOOM whelmed the rock. Cloud annihilated the sky. Stars were not. Earth lights were few, small and fixed. If any man moved on the mesa he bore no torch or lamp. From the black blanket overhead flickered no glint of lightning, sounded no growl of thunder. Rain hovered there, as on yesternight; but it was a sullen weight, dumb, devoid of life or motion. The air too was motionless, thick, heavy. Men sweltered.

At the Casa del Extranjero the door stood wide, emitting soft light which died just beyond the threshold. On that threshold sat *el extranjero* himself; and near him squatted the two night guards whose posts were at the front of the house. In lazy monolog, punctuated by an occasional grunt or chuckle from the auditors, he talked to them, telling tales of his ancestors and their doings here and elsewhere. They listened with absorbed

interest. To hear such stories was far more entertaining than to stand dully in darkness; and, since the señor felt like talking, there was no reason for them to stay aloof. Their duty was to watch over him, to keep others away and to answer no questions; and all this could be done as well, and more comfortably, by keeping him company. So they took their ease and enjoyed themselves while his gracious mood lasted.

It never occurred to them that his light filled doorway might serve as guiding beacon to any clandestine visitor, or that their absence from their corners could facilitate the entrance of any such person through the wall. Totally unaware of any way through that wall, they had no reason to think of such a possibility.

At length their entertainer yawned and sluggishly arose. Behind him, at the entrance to the plane room, had sounded a slight noise which resembled the gnawing of a mouse, but which might have been caused by human finger nails rasping a signal on dry wood. The story enthralled sentries had given it no notice.

"*Buenos noches, hombres,*" he drawled. "Keep close to my door, so that nothing may creep between you. If anything does sneak in here there will be trouble."

He closed the door with apparent negligence, but with covert attention to its firm latching. Then he stepped briskly to the rear. In the dimness of the large shed waited Cononaco.

"All right. Lead on," prompted the erstwhile lounger.

Cononaco stood still.

"Not yet, Oom Keh. First there is a word to be said and a promise to be made."

His face was solemn, his attitude resolute, his low tone almost menacing. McKay shrugged impatiently.

"Say your word, then, and let's go. I make no promises."

"Without the promise Oom Keh does not go," was the uncompromising retort. "The word is this. At the place of the flame tonight will be no Queen of the Flame—and no flame. Instead there will be a thing which is death to look upon. Yet Oom Keh may look on it and live, if he will make no sound then and breathe no word later. But Oom Keh must promise to keep still as a dead man. If he is caught he is a dead man in truth."

The other stared, his pulses quickening. Then he nodded in swift assent.

"I promise. But who sends this word?"

"Nobody. Nobody knows. Nobody but those who would kill others for knowing. Come. And do not forget the promise."

"Wait."

McKay stepped back into his bedroom, threw off his white shirt, donned one of thin brown flannel, and blew out the light. Guiding his steps by the pocket lamp, he rejoined his guide.

A FEW minutes later they were out on the plaza, moving through blackness so dense that even Cononaco seemed a trifle uncertain of his direction. He progressed more slowly and far more warily than on the previous night, taking pains to give forth not the slightest sound by footfall or cane tap. His caution was contagious. McKay, piloted by a grip on the arm, moved as he moved, and with equal stealth. The breathless night itself, with a deluge impending yet withholding, bore palpable threat, to which alert nerves instinctively responded. A sinister spirit of malevolence, the more awesome because unseen and unnamed, seemed to permeate the atmosphere.

A warning pressure, and Cononaco stopped; felt about on a wall, and moved again, slowly groping his way. Around a corner he worked, McKay sensing the change of direction by the turn of his feet, but seeing nothing at all. A few yards of progress; another turn; then a walk of several rods, the old-timer moving more confidently now. Another admonitory squeeze, a tiny squeak, and the invisible opening of a door. Mindful of his footing, he stepped high, clearing a low sill without collision. Inside, he moved on again, fingertips now brushing along a smooth wall, until his convoy

halted. At his ear breathed a barely audible whisper—

"Do not move."

Then Cononaco's hand was gone from him, and he stood alone.

Straining his ears to the utmost, he thought he heard limping footsteps receding; but so slow and soft were they that he could not be certain. Minutes dragged away. Then suddenly sounded a vague but swift struggle; a choking gasp; a dull bump on earth. A silence, succeeded by a low voice:

"This way. Step carefully."

Step by step McKay advanced. No wall was at either side now, and he felt that he was in open air—a patio, perhaps. Soon a foot struck something soft, inert, from which he instinctively recoiled. The voice spoke again, subdued, satirical.

"The old dog is weak. Let the young *capitán* help him. Three steps to the left is a wall, high as the head. This thing on the ground should be thrown over that wall."

Groping, McKay felt the "thing", the body of a man.

"Who is it?" he asked guardedly.

"A Jivero. Let it be thrown out."

The contempt expressed by the neuter pronoun was abysmal. To Cononaco a dead Jivero was not even an animal, but a lump of filth. He took no pride in the fact that, old and lame as he was, he had just killed a Jivero far younger and stronger than he. To him this was no feat; merely an incident. But as McKay secured a grip on the body and raised it his respect for the ancient warrior markedly increased. Its weight and its thickness of muscle proved it to be that of a man powerfully built. Moreover, his exploring hands had encountered beside it a naked machete, dropped from a dead fist. This man had been on guard, armed and awake. The craft of his slayer in finding him amid utter blackness, the deadly skill shown in killing him without an alarming sound, seemed superhuman.

To the wall McKay carried his soggy burden and, with a heave, cast it over. From the other side came no thump of impact. The body seemed to have stopped in air; it certainly had not hit ground. Then he realized that this wall must be on the verge of the cliff, and that the corpse had a long way to fall.

"Come," prompted Cononaco.

Walking with care lest he kick the machete, which, however, had already been removed by an unseen hand, he retraced his steps.

"Now what?" he whispered.

For answer the guiding grip closed again on his arm and drew him forward.

THEY passed through another door, beyond which feeble light disclosed a passageway. One wall was of clay, the other of wood, with small high apertures through which came the vague light. McKay felt that he was again in the temple of the double idol, though not in the same corridor as on yesternight. Along the narrow way they went until Cononaco halted and laid a hand on the wooden partition. For a second he bent on his protégé a look heavy with warning. Then beneath his raised hand opened a slit in the barrier, through which was visible the wide hall dominated by the twin gods.

McKay looked into the face of the yellow eyed José Martinez; a face which now seemed set in merciless lines, and eyes ablaze with cold fire. Its hardening of expression was, perhaps, due to the absence of the soft glowing flame below, which hitherto had ringed it round. That flame, the flame never allowed to die, ever attended by a sleepless vestal, was out.

Not only had it been extinguished, but its guardians had been banished. Nowhere in the room was the gowned form of the queen or of any subordinate virgin. Instead were present other figures, far different in person and predilection; as different as darkness from day, as demons from angels. With the extinction of the sacred fire had come a veritable pack of devils from the dark to revel in diabolism.

Naked, swart skinned, beady eyed, cruel mouthed, they pranced around the grim jawed statue in a dance the epitome

of savagery; a creeping, leaping, attacking, dodging medley of movement, haphazard, untimed, yet coherent and eloquent of murder, assassination and jungle war, interspersed with gestures and body writhings unspeakably bestial in suggestion and intent. Empty hands now brandished imaginary weapons, now held aloft invisible severed heads, now portrayed vileness utterly diabolical. Eyes gleamed with blood lust, teeth shone in fixed grimaces, lips and nostrils worked like those of beasts of prey hot on the trail of a kill. Yet not one made a vocal sound. Save for the faint susurrus of soft sliding soles and of fast breathing, they performed in inhuman silence.

Jiveros, these. Jiveros, holding a hellish orgy in the shrine of the old kings! The lowest creatures of the city disporting themselves in its most sacred place, heedless of the wrath of the White Ones' gods! It was a thing unbelievable, yet true.

But they were not alone in their iniquity. Two other men were there; one seated in an ornate chair, watching their barbarous evolutions with satanic enjoyment, teeth agleam, hands twitching as if his nerves quivered with desire to join the unholy crew and cavort among them with equal abandon; the other standing stark upright against the pedestal, bound and gagged, eyes desperate, face ghastly. The one was the king, Vicente; the other the gunner, Salazar.

Salazar, bold even when caught beside the plane by its owner, now was sick with fear; fear, not of the weaponless primitives around him, nor of the half savage in the chair before him, but evidently of the motionless stone gods behind. Repeatedly he cast shrinking glances over either shoulder, and at each look he visibly cringed. Yet, to the eye of the hidden McKay, that statue, uncanny though it was, held no cause of fear for a white man. Not even the fire was burning now, so the captive could not be tortured by it; and the grim faces above could do no harm. Yet there was something about them, something mysterious, horrible.

THE WATCHER'S hair stirred. This idol, according to the refugee Martinez, ate men! And, though he had recently dismissed that statement from mind as a preposterous lie . . .

The demoniac dance stopped. Vicente had spoken one word. The swart shapes were still.

Another word, unintelligible to McKay. The Jivero grins widened. All eyes turned to Salazar. Several of the Indians scrambled up on the pedestal. Others closed around the prisoner. But none touched him.

Vicente arose. His gaze, merciless and malicious as that of any of his myrmidons, dwelt on the haggard visage of the renegade. With tormenting deliberation he spoke.

"My good fellow, I have come to feel that life grows wearisome to you here among us barbarians. And a life devoid of interest is not worth living. Unfortunately I do not think it best to return you to those who first sent you here, nor to allow you to fly away in the machine which I myself mean to use. So I do the best I can for you. Since wine and women and other amusements have grown stale, I give you a new experience. I hope you will enjoy it!"

He smiled, stroking the end of his mustache. Salazar squirmed in his bonds, and from behind his gag came a wordless noise.

"Ah, yes, I know what you would say," purred Vicente. "But it comes late, fellow, very late. You are quite willing to continue as before, eh? You should have said so this afternoon, when you had the chance. This is another time, a later time, too late. And somehow I feel that I do not need your service any longer. There are others who can shoot well enough, and who are not so inquisitive. Recently you have been too curious about a number of things. So we must part. *Adios!*"

He lifted a hand. Jiveros below and above pounced on Salazar. In a trice he was lifted high in air. He writhed, kicked, contorted in frantic struggle—then went

limp. His handlers had knocked his head against that of the statue.

With monkeylike agility two of them surmounted the cranium of the god and hauled him up from the hands below. They held him straight above the stone head and let him down. He was gone!

In the space of a second he had vanished utterly, dropping into the apparently solid stone. The two Jiveros stood there, looking down at the spot where he had disappeared. Between them was nothing.

Vicente spoke sharply. The pair glanced at him, let themselves down the side of the head. They and the others sprang off the pedestal. Then all the aborigines grouped before the face of the green eyed Rand. Vicente, regally aloof, stood alone before the countenance of José. King and slaves fixedly watched the stern physiognomies confronting them. McKay, petrified, watched all.

MINUTES passed, unmeasured. Nobody moved. Nothing happened. The topaz eyes of José Martinez glared without perceptible change, reflecting only a steady glow from the unwavering wall lights. The face remained unaltered.

But no. It was altering, not in expression, not in visible mood, but in color. Its pinkish hue was deepening. Gradually it became more and more natural, flushing as if suffused with warm human blood. Life, actual life seemed flowing through the colossus, arousing it from wide eyed but immobile slumber to full wakefulness, precursor to movement and speech. It was alive, it *was* alive! It must be.

McKay's skin crept in cold contraction. Blood was in that thing; but what blood? Whose blood? Salazar's! The twin god had eaten Salazar, had swallowed him through a hole in its head, assimilated him in some infernal way, taken his blood to quicken its ogrish self into transient life! Through some awful process of which the semisavage Vicente knew the secret, a living man had been digested by a stone.

And by that hideous deed the Old Ones, the noble ones, the comrades of the ancestors of McKay, had been made cannibals! Made cannibals by their degenerate, illegitimate descendant who now stood grinning in their faces!

"By God!" gritted McKay.

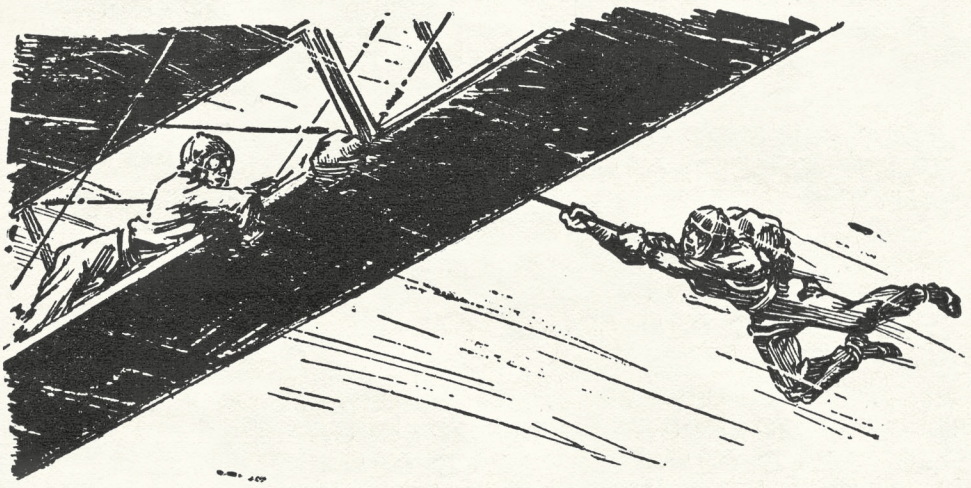
Face hard as the stone at which he looked, he turned from the slit, right hand sliding inside his shirt, to find himself fronting a face equally hard and resolute. Cononaco, jaw set and eyes dangerous, stood in his path, determined to block his advance to the door which must connect this corridor with the interior. McKay's hand came out again. Both big palms shot to the old man's armpits, lifted him bodily, spun him around and set him noiselessly down out of the way. Forthwith McKay strode along the passage.

Three steps he took before a slight shuffle sounded behind him. One more—he staggered. A silent, agonizing blow had struck his neck. Life halted. Muscles refused movement. Eyes blurred. While he struggled mentally to regain control, another blow fell. A fiery streak of pain shot to his brain. Then came oblivion.

TO BE CONTINUED

What about the flyer who never flies?

KIWI



By RAOUL F. WHITFIELD

IT SMOLDERED on the trip out from San Francisco, smoked up a bit when the transport docked over in Honolulu, smoldered again as we steamed over green, calm water toward Guam. It was a strange thing—this hatred existing between the two men. There were times when I wished the break would come; times when I could have welcomed a flailing of fists, a pounding of flesh. There was too much suppression, too much quiet, deep bitterness. It made things awkward as the devil.

There was, for example, that afternoon three days out of Honolulu. The Army transport *Thomas* was making a light trip; Bill Graham was having difficulty in getting four chairs in the smoker filled—for bridge. Jess Hall was seated, fingering the cards. I was lighting the worst and best of my pipes, and looked up to see whom Bill had brought along. It was Melford.

"Here we are!" Bill stated cheerfully. "It takes a good infantry shavetail to dig up a good flyin' man for a warm game of—"

And then Jess Hall laughed that nasty laugh of his, and Bill got wise to the fact that he'd pulled a bad one. Lieutenant Melford just stood in the smoker doorway, with a bit of deck and plenty of green Pacific back of him, and smiled.

"Sorry!" Jess rose from his seat and tossed the cards carelessly down on the table surface. "But something's making me sort of sick—and it isn't the motion of the boat, either."

I was watching Lew Melford. He had

rather a sallow complexion anyway; Hall's words robbed his face of what little color there was under the skin. He swayed a bit—and then Jess was moving his tall, rangy body toward the port door, and his back was turned to us. There was a little silence, and I broke it.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," I suggested. "Hall had too much pie for lunch, maybe."

But the other officer didn't sit down. He smiled grimly toward the port doorway, through which Jess had made his exit from the smoking room. Bill Graham was staring blankly at me. Lieutenant Melford spoke sharply.

"Too much pie for lunch—or too much command back in the States?" he snapped.

I reached for the cards. Bill Graham dropped down into a chair. He swore softly.

"What in hell's the matter?" he muttered. His eyes went to the brown ones of Lew Melford. "Don't you two get together?"

It was then that Melford got rid of the thought that I'd had in my mind for sometime. His voice was knife edged.

"Not *yet*," he replied. "But just give us time. We will!"

With that he swung about, vanished from sight along the deck. Bill Graham swore again. He reached for a pill, lighted up, and looked into my handsome face.

"Mac," he breathed, "what sort of a boner did I pull *that* time?"

I grinned. Graham was going down to the Islands detached, a little over two years out of West Point. He was taking the Army pretty seriously.

"Forget it," I advised. "Both of 'em ate too much pie for lunch."

But Bill is of the breed who possess inquisitive minds. And, too, he'd sensed the depth of the feeling between the two airmen.

"Your branch of the Service, Mac," he said slowly. "Come through."

I shook my head.

"I've been over at Rook for the last year—experimental and test work," I stated. "Lieutenant Hall's been down on the Border. Suppose you dig up two medicos. They usually play a good game, and we can—"

"Hall's been down on the Border," Bill Graham repeated slowly, and I could see my interruption hadn't got me a thing. "And where's Lieutenant Melford been?"

I groaned.

"The same place!" I stated softly. "How about getting Captain Jones and—"

I checked myself. Bill was smiling grimly, and it was a cinch that he had started to figure things out. I tried sarcasm.

"Three or four other fliers were on the Border, too," I stated slowly. "Will their names help any, Bill?"

Graham swore softly. He flipped over a card that had been lying face downward. The ace of clubs.

"Both on flying duty now, Mac?" he asked casually. "Both Hall and Melford?"

"I can let you know, shortly after we reach Manila," I stated sarcastically. "You might radio the staff office—"

"Lay off, Mac!" Bill's voice was grim. "I pulled a boner. Maybe if I hadn't come aboard this transport at Honolulu I'd have known better. It isn't kid stuff, Mac; those guys hate each other's guts! You can see it, hear it—and feel it. Why?"

I shook my head. Somehow, it made me feel superior not to show that I was just as curious as Bill. So I stuck to my line.

"I draw my monthly pay—even if I don't know the why," I replied. "And I still claim the ship's cook knows his pie and coffee—"

"Go to the devil!" Bill snapped grimly. "Before we make Manila I bet I'll know something."

"When a ship prop's turning—don't get too close," I advised quietly.

Bill looked at me sharply.

"Here's another," he said slowly. "A

funny old bird is the kiwi—looks like a bird, but can't fly. No wings."

I swore cheerfully.

"You've been reading books, Bill," I told him. "I'm going down for a nap."

But Bill Graham's no fool. I've run across him, off and on, in the past year, and I know that much.

"Like hell you are!" he returned. "You're going down and *think!*"

And Bill was right.

OUT OF Guam about two days we picked up the tail end of a typhoon. It wasn't bad, as typhoons go, but it was bad enough to set the *Thomas* up on end and crack up a few dishes. There was a big coil of cable up in the bow, and when things got going pretty bad a rumor got around that if the cable got loose it would batter the plates apart. The wind was blowing close to ninety, and the sea was white—no other color in it.

We were in the smoking room—Bill Graham and myself—having no troops to worry about, when Captain Phillips came in and gave us the news. The cable *had* got loose; two men were dead and three in the hospital, and things looked bad. They had all the men down below that they could use, and there wasn't anything for us to do but sit tight.

The ship was pitching fiercely; the captain was convinced that only the fact she was heavily loaded would pull us through. Crests of waves were running the decks; even the bridge was a tough spot. But the transport captain felt we would stay right side up, so Phillips told us.

Bill grinned.

"They always do," he stated. "Part of their business. If they handed out—"

Bill stopped speaking abruptly. The deck door on the port side was flung open; wind and spray filled the smoking room. A figure, bent low, came in. Lew Melford turned, got his weight against the door, slammed it shut. Then he faced us. His eyes were wide, staring—his lips moved, words came from them hoarsely.

"Overboard! Hall—went over the rail as she listed that last time—"

I stared at him. Bill Graham leaped to his feet. Captain Phillips was up, too, clutching one of the floor-clamped card tables with both hands. Above the shrill of the wind through the transport's rigging came a cry.

"Man overboard!"

Lieutenant Melford took a step forward. The ship pitched violently. As her bow came down, and her screw shuddered the length of steel and wood, out of water, Melford slumped to the cushions of the nearest seat. His face was ashen in color.

Bill Graham sank down near him. He looked up at the captain.

"No use jumping, Cap. Can't do anything," he muttered. "No one could live two minutes in this kind of a sea. Take it easy."

I nodded my head. A cry sounded faintly from the stern of the ship, hardly reaching us against the wind's shrilling. Lieutenant Melford groaned.

"He was—right ahead of me!" he half muttered. "When she slid through the crest of that one we both went down. He got to his feet—slipped—hit the rail and went over. Just ten feet from—this door!"

Melford buried his face in his arms. Bill Graham's eyes met mine. They held a peculiar expression. I could guess what Bill was thinking. I got to my feet, edged my way toward the door.

"You fellows stick with him," I told Bill and the captain. "I'll check up on—"

By that time I had the door opened and was saving my breath. The waves were coming in higher than the masts of the transport, but with plenty of sea valley space between them. I got outside and made my way along the deck toward the stern. Twice I was ankle deep in white foam, but I stayed clear of the rail. And then, suddenly, I saw him. Jess Hall!

I was up against the shelter of some forward cabins. Hall came along slowly, head bent low, hands gripping any object they could cling to; and I waited. He was almost beside me when he straightened a bit, and his eyes met mine. There

was red on his lips; he had a nasty cut over his left eye. And he was soaked. Water dripped from the short leather coat he had been wearing since the typhoon had struck us.

I gripped him by the arm nearest to me. But he shook me off, moved on toward the smoking room, up forward. And I followed. He plunged in through the door; I got it closed behind him. Standing just inside, he swayed, wiped the red from his left eye with the back of a soaked hand.

Lew Melford looked up. He cried out hoarsely, staggered to his feet. Bill Graham swore fiercely. The captain's eyes were wide.

"Hall!" Melford's voice was shaken, barely coherent. "You didn't go over? You didn't go—"

Then Jess Hall took one step forward. His left arm lashed out. He struck with everything he had—with his right. There was the sound of the impact—clenched fist against flesh—and they were both on the floor of the smoking room.

By that time Bill Graham and I had got into action. And by that time, also, we weren't needed. Jess Hall was lying with his eyes closed, unconscious—and Lew Melford was only semiconscious. We got them up, with Captain Phillips' help, and stretched them out on the smoking room side-cushions. Melford was coming out of it all right; there was a red spot under his left ear, where Hall's fist had landed. He struggled to sit up.

"He hit me!" he muttered thickly. "He thinks I—"

"Hell!" It was Bill Graham who interrupted. "Hall's in bad shape. We'd better get him down to the hospital and—"

Melford was rubbing the spot under his left ear. I called to the captain, who sat staring at Hall.

"You stick close to Melford, Cap. We'll get Jess down to the hospital. He's been banged up—out on the deck—"

Hall's lanky frame stirred. He tried to rise, but Bill held him down. Then he twisted his head—stared at Melford. With a sudden strength he shoved Bill out of the way. He straightened up to a sitting position, his eyes narrowed on Melford's.

"Tried it—*again*, eh?" he breathed hoarsely. "You damned kiwi!"

Then he pitched forward, and Bill Graham kept him from rolling to the floor. I looked at Melford. His eyes were shut, but his lips were moving. No words came from them. Captain Phillips was at his side, holding him by one arm. I looked doubtfully at Bill.

"Maybe we'd better get a doc up here—"

"Hell, no!" Bill snapped. "What these two need between them is distance. And your friend Hall may be badly hurt. If he went over the side—"

"He was swept over!" Melford spoke, his voice shaken. "The sea must have washed him—"

"Come on, Mac!" Bill interrupted again. "Grab hold and let's get him down to a doc. He may be in bad shape."

I don't know exactly how we did it—but we got him down to the ship hospital. The regular medicos and a couple going down to the Islands were all on duty, and they all had their hands full. We stuck around until we got the verdict. A bad rap on the head, head cuts and bruises all over the body, and three broken ribs.

"What happened?"

It was the ranking major who asked Bill the question, but I got in the answer first.

"He fell—on the deck," I stated. "Heavy sea smashed him into the rail."

The major nodded. That wasn't at all hard for him to believe. There were plenty of others who had been smashed down in the same way. Bill and I climbed up two decks and reached the dining saloon. It was empty—both of humans and food. We picked out a couple of swivel seats and dropped into them. Bill was smiling grimly.

"Guess you heard what Hall said, eh? And he called him a kiwi, too. I wasn't so dumb, after all." His voice was grim.

I did a little thinking. It was a cinch

that Jess Hall figured Lieutenant Melford had tried to shove him overboard. And it was a cinch that Jess figured he'd tried something of the sort once before. But, somehow, I wasn't so sure of that. Melford had always seemed pretty calm, and pretty white—to me.

"Bill," I said slowly, "there are a few things in this world that we don't know about. We don't know what happened to Jess Hall, back there on the deck and—"

"But we can guess," Bill cut in. "He comes in all excited—this fellow Melford—and says that Hall's been washed overboard. A lot of guys have been smashed down by these waves—but they haven't been washed overboard. Then Hall comes in—and goes after Melford. How come?"

"He hasn't much use for Melford. I'll admit that," I stated. "He showed that when you dug the other lieutenant up for a fourth at bridge. There's something, as I said before, that we don't know about. Something that dates back some. Hall might have been slapped down by that water wash, got a bump on his head and gone crazy momentarily."

"Get out!" There was derision in Bill Graham's voice. "You don't think that way, Mac. He called him a pretty rotten name, didn't he? Or do wing wearers like being called a kiwi these days?"

I shrugged.

"I wouldn't like it much—not the way he used it," I replied. "But I don't think Melford tried to murder Hall, that's sure."

There was a little silence. Bill Graham spoke in a low, cold tone.

"I do! And I think he tried it once before. And I don't think Hall was off his head when he got back to the smoking cabin. And—"

"Well," I snapped, getting a bit fed up on Bill's line, "who do you squeal to—the transport C. O.?"

That got Bill. His eyes were little slits, and he stuck his chin close to my face.

"I'm not talking, Mac—and you damn well know that. But I'll lay you a bet. Melford's on the nonflying list. Ten to one on that. And I'll lay you another. He won't talk. Still another—Hall won't talk. And here's the big one—even money that if the two of them ever got up in a plane together—"

Bill Graham shrugged his broad shoulders. He grinned with narrowed eyes and tight lips. Then he relaxed.

"You're not so dumb as you look, Mac. Figure it out for yourself, and take that bet or leave it."

"I'll leave it," I returned. "Oh, I get you, all right. You think they'll scrap it out to a finish. End up in a sky murder, or something. Well, it's their affair, Bill."

The infantry officer swore.

"Hell, but you're noble, Mac!" he muttered. "It's a damned shame that a guy like you will sit in for the finish—and I'll be sweating out in some province post."

I grinned.

"I'll write you all I hear—and see," I consoled.

"Which will be plenty!" Bill stated. "Even a kiwi can get sore."

I stared at Graham.

"How come you know so much about the breed, Bill?" I asked slowly. "How come you had the hunch that one of the two wasn't rated as flying?"

The infantry officer tossed me a pill, lighted up. He spoke quietly. The motion of the transport was less severe amidship, where the dining saloon was located. But it was bad enough.

"Went from the Point to Brooks Field—trained for seven months for the Air Service, Mac. Surprised? Thought you'd be. Well, I flopped. Wasn't alone—there were plenty who flopped. Lack of complete coordination—that's what they called it. Had a drill lieutenant named Muller. And I learned about kiwis from him. That's all. When they haven't been flying for a while they talk and act different. I've talked with Melford a bit. Also with Hall."

"Bill," I stated, "if you ever get fed up on the infantry, go in for intelligence. You're gifted."

Bill didn't smile, and he didn't get sore. He just looked at me through squinted eyes, his face expressionless.

"For you," he commented sarcastically, "that's a hell of a good suggestion!"

THE TRANSPORT got through the typhoon's tail in fourteen hours. Perhaps it was a bit more than a tail, but the captain rated it that way. She steamed into Manila Bay, past the gray Corregidor Island, with a half dozen life boats badly smashed, thirty-five men in the hospital and her flag at half mast. Lieutenant Jess Hall was one of the men in the hospital. Twelve enlisted men and two officers, a portion of the detail that had finally conquered the great coil of cable down in the bow, were hospital heroes. The boat was almost twenty hours overdue.

I left Bill Graham at the dock. Jess Hall would be in the General Hospital for another week. Lew Melford and I were to report to Major Very for assignment to active duty. Bill was going out to Mindoro as a replacement. We shook hands.

"Write me after it happens—and tell me how it happens." He smiled slightly. "Even if you don't draw the same post he does—you'll know. It's your branch of the Service."

"Forget it, Bill," I advised. "The heat down here will give you enough trouble without your worrying about Melford and Hall."

"Dengue or dysentery—I'll still be curious, Mac," he returned. "You scribble me the news."

He went along to look up his steamer trunk, leaving me staring at the stern of the *Cheyo Maru*, docked near the battered transport. I shook my head slowly.

"Maybe there won't *be* any news," I muttered to myself.

But I didn't really think that way. Jess Hall, for one, was too good a hater. And I wasn't so sure that Lieutenant Melford would forget the two blows Hall had given him, before they had both crashed to the slanting floor of the ship's smoking room.

Heat — considerable monotony — that would be just a part of the Island dose. A bad climate for brooding, hating. But there was a good chance that Hall and Lew Melford would draw separate posts, particularly if Hall wasn't flying. A good chance.

"All set, Lieutenant?"

I turned slightly, nodding my head. It was Lew Melford, and he was ready to hop into one of the waiting carrometas with me, for our report. We picked out one whose pony was almost as small as the native driver, and settled back. The driver shrilled thin words at the pony; the carromata jerked into action. We were both silent.

For five minutes or so we watched the crowded, narrow streets of Manila, without speaking. It was very hot. Then, as we turned into the Escolta, Melford spoke.

"Curious to know where we're going, MacLeod?"

Melford's voice was almost toneless. He was medium sized, with rather broad shoulders, his face sallow and his eyes rather deep set.

I grinned.

"More curious," I stated directly, "to know if you and Jess Hall are going to the same field."

He stiffened a little. And then he smiled. It was a different sort of smile than I'd ever seen on his face before.

"I'll relieve *your* curiosity," he said slowly. "Major Scott, an old friend of our family, came down to the boat to meet me. He's on the inside, when it comes to assignments. A new field is being established, just south of Batac, on Luzon. It's about two hundred and eighty air miles from Manila. Some enlisted men are up there now, and a few fliers. Barracks are up and the field is in fair shape. More planes are to be flown up, and there is talk of an air survey of the surrounding country—soon to be made. We go up there—you and I."

I was sitting up straight in the carrometa's seat now. My eyes met Lieutenant Melford's.

"And Lieutenant Hall? Does he—"

I checked myself at Melford's grim chuckle.

"Same place," he stated slowly. "I shall have another chance—to murder him."

He spoke the last three words bitterly, his eyes narrowed. My eyes pictured him, staggering into the smoking room of of the pitching *Thomas*, crying out that Jess Hall had been washed overboard.

The carromata driver was shrilling the pony around a corner. Odors and high pitched voices reached nostrils and ears. I could sense the future contact—the closeness of it. The same, small Island Field. The same mess. Heat. Monotony.

I swore softly—and Lew Melford chuckled again. His lips moved slightly; he spoke in a low, hoarse voice.

"Good place for the finish, eh? An accident—up in some Godforsaken—"

He broke off abruptly, as I stared at him. He relaxed, shrugging his shoulders. I started to speak, to ask questions, to try and learn something. But I realized that it would be no go. Melford reached for his handkerchief, wiped his lean face.

"Warm, eh?" he muttered. "And they say it gets warmer."

Then we were pulling toward the curb; the pony stopped, head low. The grinning native boy turned toward us. We had arrived at headquarters.

TEN DAYS of it. Testing out new ships, getting the feel of Batac country air. Learning the tricks of setting them down and taking them off from the small and not too level field, to the east of which were the post buildings. Six pilots, with one due to arrive in an hour or so. Ten ships, most of them P. T. training planes. A few new type Douglass planes were promised. But promises could be easily forgotten when the post was two hundred and eighty miles from Manila.

I sat on a cane chair on the tiny screened porch of my quarters. It was hot, as usual. There were many bugs beating against the screening. It was almost dusk. The Caraballo Mountains, off to the east, were framed darkly against a gorgeous red sunset. They took purple tints which became black with the passing minutes. I thought of flying planes over them, for the survey work, and smiled grimly. Great country!

Then, almost like the falling of a curtain, it became dark. The tropical twilight was swiftly sped. There was the sound of a car, crossing one end of the Field from the dirt road which ran into Batac. Voices drifted down the silence. I heard Lieutenant Collins, whose quarters were next to mine, bellow cheerfully.

"Here's Hall—tough luck for him! That engineer must have had a date. First time he pulled that tin steed of his in ahead of time."

Collins broke off, moved out toward the headquarters office. I followed him. Jess Hall, as lean and rangy as ever, climbed down from the Army car. Captain Sweeney came out to meet him, grinning. Jess saluted, grinned back.

"Welcome to Batac, Lieutenant!"

The C. O. and Jess shook hands.

I moved in closer. Jess Hall smiled at me. We shook hands. I was tempted to use Major Mullen's epic welcome to pilots who came down to his Border field, back in the States—"Welcome to hell, sir!"—but I didn't.

"How's everything, Mac?" Jess kept right on grinning.

"Fine," I returned. "Feel pretty fit?"

Hall's eyes narrowed.

"How's the kiwi?" he snapped suddenly. "Hasn't shot any one in the back yet, has he?"

I saw the C. O. straighten, watched the expression of surprise in his eyes. And I felt myself getting a bit cold. Then Hall laughed—the same, nasty sort of laugh he'd used in the smoking room of the *Thomas*. He turned toward Captain Sweeney.

"Just an old joke of ours, Captain," he explained. "Dates back to the Border."

The C. O. was smiling; he lead the way into the office. Jess Hall followed along.

I walked back toward my quarters. I was sitting on my cot, smoking a pill, when Melford came in from the Field.

"Ballin's still out—in the Curtiss Scout," he stated. "Looks like a forced landing. I'll go over and report. What's the matter, Mac?"

He must have seen something in my eyes. I grunted.

"Hall's here," I said slowly. "Just got in."

Lew Melford nodded. There was no expression in his eyes.

"Hope he likes it," he said quietly. "See you later, Mac."

And he moved along, toward the headquarters office. I grabbed my helmet and goggles and tagged along after him. Ballin was down somewhere and that meant a hurried search. The country was bad, and if the lieutenant had cracked up, the sooner we got to him the better. We had wing lights on the ships, and flares to drop. There would be a fair chance of locating the lost Curtiss Scout.

Melford was within ten feet of the two steps leading up to the screened porch of the headquarters office when Jess Hall came out. A few of the officers were around, waiting to say hello to Hall. But his eyes were on those of the field officer. Hands at his sides, he halted at the bottom of the steps and waited for Melford to come up.

The non-flying officer moved up close. He was smiling. Lights from within the office showed me that fact. I wasn't far behind him.

"Hello, Lieutenant!"

His voice was steady, though a bit strained. Jess Hall spoke harshly.

"To hell with you—kiwi!"

Melford stiffened. I swore softly. And then Melford lowered his head and rushed in. Jess stepped to one side, swung a battering right fist. But Melford went right through the impact of the blow. And then, suddenly, Jess Hall was stretched on the ground and Melford was standing over him, white faced, swaying slightly.

Collins was the first one to get into action. He bent down over Hall, with the help of Ed Means got him to his feet. The two of them half carried, half dragged him toward the officers' quarters and away from the C. O.'s office. Lew Melford stared at me stupidly.

"You damned fool!" I snapped. "You'll rate a court martial and—"

"He called me—kiwi!" Melford spoke thickly. "You heard him—"

A screened door slammed. The C. O. stood on the steps. Melford straightened.

"Lieutenant Ballin, sir—he hasn't come in. He's been out four hours. I would suggest searching ships, sir."

The C. O. nodded.

"You take charge, Lieutenant," he ordered. "Get ships up right away. Use all available officers and planes. Bad flying country. Ballin may be badly hurt."

I stared at the C. O. It was strange—letting a ground officer, even though in charge of Field operations, handle the search for the missing pilot and plane. But the C. O. was doing just that. He turned abruptly, moved toward his office. The screen door slammed behind him.

Melford faced me. His eyes held a peculiar expression. He spoke sharply.

"Get all flying officers out at Hangar B., Lieutenant. I'll have the flood lights turned on for the take-offs. Hurry them up, please!"

I nodded.

"How about Hall?" I asked foolishly.

Melford smiled grimly.

"He has not yet been assigned for flying duty," he snapped. "We won't need him."

I headed for the barracks. In ten minutes there were a half dozen pilots gathered around Lieutenant Melford. He spoke in a low, steady voice.

"Ballin was out for a look over the first range of the Caraballos—and he may have gone down over that way. Use your heads—as well as your ships—and don't set a plane down unless you've got a chance of reaching him. We don't want another crash just because we've had one. If you can get down, do it. If not, get

back here with the location of the ship. We'll try to reach him on foot. I've given you the sectors each plane is to cover. Watch for running lights. A red flare means the lost ship has been found. All right! You've all got food to drop him, and the first aid kits. Go to it!"

The pilots scattered, headed for their ships. There were flood lights on the field. I jerked my helmet over my head, adjusted the harness of my 'chute pack. Melford moved close to me. His face was drawn.

"Ballin's only a kid, Mac," he breathed. "I sent him up. If you spot the ship—and see him down below, hurt but still alive—come back and get me. That is, if you can't get down to him. It may be days before we can cut our way through the jungle to those mountains. I'll go over the side with a 'chute, try to get near—"

"The hell you will!"

There was amusement in the words—a grim, harsh note of it. Standing close behind Melford was Lieutenant Jess Hall. Neither of us had heard him, seen him come up.

"You didn't go over the side two years ago down on the Border!" Jess spoke quietly, icily now. "You made me think you were out, cracked in the head by a piece of strut, after that air crash. You made me try to land a one-wing ship, because I thought you were out—and wouldn't jump and let you crash alone. But you weren't out! You were just yellow — that's all! So yellow you wouldn't go over the side. And when you saw I couldn't make a landing, you jumped! At five hundred feet you jumped and let me crack up on the ground, thinking you were still out in the rear cockpit. *You'll* jump over for this Ballin? Like hell you will!"

"I sent him up there." Melford spoke tonelessly as I stared at Jess Hall.

"Sure you did!" Jess Hall's eyes met mine. "After that crash, back on the Border, Mac, this kiwi got off flying. He quit and he hated me because he was afraid I'd come through with the truth. He tried to get me on the boat, coming down. First time we'd come together in a year or so. Slammed me down—"

"Wait!" Melford interrupted. His voice was hard. "Ballin's down somewhere. We're wasting time. We'll change plans. You take the extra scout, Mac. Lieutenant Hall will fly the P. T. you were going to fly. And I'll ride the rear cockpit with him!"

I saw Jess stiffen. His eyes narrowed on Melford's. He smiled grimly.

"Jess may not be fit enough to—"

"I'm fit enough!" Jess cut me off sharply. "The kiwi's in charge, Mac. You skyride the scout. I'm flying the Curtiss. How about equipment?"

The roar of engines of the ships taking off from the lighted field almost drowned out Melford's orders to a ground crew sergeant.

"Equipment—for Lieutenant Hall," he ordered. "Fast, Sergeant."

Then he turned away, and I looked Jess Hall in the eyes. I spoke in a low tone.

"Be yourself, Jess! You know Melford isn't yellow. Give him a chance!"

"He never gave me one!" Hall interrupted. "But—he'll get his chance, Mac. And if he doesn't take it . . ."

He checked himself. I turned toward the deadline, and the Curtiss scout I was to fly. And I made up my mind about one thing. I'd fly fairly close to the two-seater Jess Hall was flying. If Bill Graham had been correct, and I was to be in on the finish—I'd be in on it right.

IT WASN'T a black night. Starlight in the tropics has a silver glow. The red exhaust streaks of the departing planes trailed to the eastward as I taxied the baby ship to one end of the field, kicked right rudder and got her headed into what little breeze there was. As I advanced the throttle, opened the engine up for the take-off, I got a glimpse of a P. T. plane coming out from the deadline. There was the waving of a hand—Jess Hall at the controls in the front cockpit.

I groaned, got the scout off the clipped, rough grass—and into the air. Climbing in a steeply banked spiral, I stared over the side of the fuselage, watched the P. T. plane coming up. I thought of Jess Hall's words. Had Lew Melford lost his nerve in that Border air crash? Had he forced Jess to believe he was unconscious, rather than jump—and at the last moment, when he had seen a crash ahead, had he gone over the side without Jess knowing it?

I shook my head. There was something about Melford that caused me to doubt Hall's version of the thing. But there was the transport incident. And now they were skyriding together.

The scout banked around momentarily to the west and I straightened in my seat. Almost at the same altitude as my ship, flying in from the west, was another plane. She had running lights—and she was small. I got the scout out of the bank—roared toward the other ship. She was coming in at an angle. In the starlight I got a good look at her. She was the other Curtiss scout and Lieutenant Ballin was piloting her!

As I flashed past her he waved a hand—nosed his plane downward. I waved back. That was the end of the search. The C. O. would send up one of the planes that had not yet left the field to fly after the others and bring them back. Better still—

I got my rocket pistol from the rack and held it over the side. There was a pretty burst of red. Probably most of the departing ships' pilots would catch the sky reflection of the rocket—the signal that the lost ship had been located. I fired one more burst, then nosed downward.

A shape flashed upward off my port wing. The P. T. in which rode Jess Hall and Lew Melford. I leveled off, pointed down toward the gliding Ballin Scout. Momentarily the two planes were flying close to each other.

"She's—in!" I shouted with all my strength.

And then I got a glimpse of Jess Hall's face. He was grinning. The goggles, with the starlight reflected in the goggle-glass, made his grin a hideous thing. He stuck a hand out in the prop-wash, jerked a thumb upward. Then, suddenly, he zoomed the P. T.

I understood in that second. Here was the showdown. Ballin was safe; even now he was setting the little scout ship down on the Batac Field. But there was something else. Jess Hall had Lew Melford riding the sky with him—

I zoomed the baby scout. When I pushed the stick forward, got her out of the zoom, we had six thousand feet, a couple of hundred better than the P. T. I got her over in almost a vertical bank—and watched the two-seater, which was circling in a mild bank below. I could see that Jess Hall had his head turned, was shouting words at Melford.

The P. T. was out of the bank now. Melford was standing up in the rear cockpit. He had an arm flung forward; his head was twisted to one side. I held the scout in the bank, my eyes on the plane below. There was movement in the front cockpit now. Jess Hall was up, squirming out of the cockpit. I could see the Irving 'chute pack on his back. He got a leg over the fuselage side—a foot on the wing surface. Melford's hands were groping for him.

I got it—then. Jess was about to make a hop-off. He was about to leave the non-flyer in the air, six thousand feet up, with just two things to do. Make a 'chute jump after Jess—or climb over into the front cockpit and land the plane! And Melford had not flown for months, not since the Border crash.

A 'chute jump, with the ship crashing down below, looked like the only chance for Melford. I groaned. Jess Hall was out on a wing several feet now; the plane was falling off into a spin . . .

I dived the scout downward, after the P. T. I shouted hoarsely, knowing that my voice would be drowned by the shrilling of wind through the planes' rigging. Something flashed downward from the two-seater's wing surface. Jess Hall had jumped!

And then my eyes widened. The two-seater was in the first turn of a spin and from the spot where Hall had leaped there trailed down lines—shroud lines! A figure dangled fifteen feet below, slanting out grotesquely. In some manner the rip-cord release ring, over Hall's left thigh, had been jerked. The pilot 'chute had been sprung, had caught, tangled itself on a strut of the wing! Jess Hall was trapped, dangling below the plane from which he had leaped, and which was going down now in a spin!

Even as I watched Jess trying to pull himself up on the shroud lines below the bigger spread of silk the P. T. came out of the spin and got into a mild glide. I maneuvered the scout into a better position, stared at the two-seater's front cockpit. Lew Melford had changed cockpits. He was at the controls, in front!

The P. T. was down to four thousand now. Jess Hall was still struggling. The 'chute seemed to me to be tangling. If he didn't get free in a hurry—

I glided the scout close to the other gliding plane. It was the pilot 'chute—the smaller spread of silk which jerks out the large, sailing spread—that was tangled on a strut. There would be no chance of saving Jess Hall unless he could be cut loose. And in seconds now the larger spread might be hopelessly tangled.

Jess had ceased to struggle. My eyes went to the figure of Lew Melford—the kiwi. His head was bent forward in the front cockpit. He was working desperately at something. I thought of trying to maneuver the Scout beneath Hall's dangling form, but there was too much risk of cutting him to pieces with my whirling propeller.

Lew's form had straightened now. The P. T. was down to three thousand, still in a mild glide. Lew swung a leg over the side of fuselage and the plane was wing-drooping now. He got his other leg over, clung to a strut, worked his way out toward the tangled pilot-'chute silk. Then he was slashing away with something that glistened in the silver starlight—a knife.

The ship was over in a sixty degree bank. Her nose was coming down. I was forced to dive the scout sharply. Then, suddenly, Jess Hall's body was drifting downward. The big main spread of silk swung lazily in the breeze, undamaged—bore Lieutenant Hall down toward the field. The man he had called a kiwi had cut him free!

My eyes went back to Melford's form, out on the wing surface. The P. T. was in a sky screaming spin. His figure was nothing but a blur. I muttered hoarsely as I dived the Scout.

"Jump! Get clear before she—"

A shape shot off to one side of the plunging plane. For seconds it raced the ship downward. Then it seemed to be arrested in the silver colored sky. Legs dangled loosely—above Lieutenant Melford and the shroud lines was the arc-shape of the big silk spread. Lew had got clear.

A crash came up from below; there was a great burst of yellow-red. A booming roar sounded above the shrill of wind through the scout's wires. Flames were stabbing into the sky from the wreckage of the P. T., not far from the field. I swore grimly, banked the ship around, nosed down the flood lights. There were running lights to the eastward; the other ships were coming in. Jess Hall's 'chute had let him down near the barracks and the mess hall. Melford was drifting toward the east end of the field.

"Kiwi!" I muttered. "Maybe he is—but he sure saved Jess from being a sort of —permanent one!"

I leveled off, got the tail assembly down for a pretty decent landing. Shaky? When I got the plane to the dead-line I had to grab for the switch three times before I could cut the engine. I slid down to the ground; the C. O. was coming toward me.

"What in hell," he snapped, "happened up there?"

I shook my head. "Lieutenant Hall can tell you, sir," I returned. "And, believe me, he ought to be damned glad to be *able* to do it!"

I WAS sitting with Lew Melford, in his quarters, two hours later. We had come out of the C. O.'s office, after an hour's conference. Lieutenant Hall had been ordered to remain.

"The thing that hurts, Mac—" Melford's voice was low, grim— "is that he thinks I tried to shove him overboard. I did lose my nerve, after that crash back on the Border. I couldn't force myself to jump at the right time. I never thought that Hall was sticking in front because he thought I was out. I had my eyes closed, and my head forward and I was trying like hell to make myself go over the side. When I reached the point where I *did* go over I never thought about Hall. It was pretty rotten. But he'd never listen to an explanation. He hated me all the way through. I lost confidence, and applied for ground duty. Thought perhaps I'd lost my nerve—was a washout up above. And until tonight—"

He stopped. The lanky form of Jess Hall loomed in the doorway of the room. Lew looked up.

"Come on in," he said. "What's the verdict?"

Jess Hall dropped down on the cot beside me. His eyes met those of Lew Melford in a grim smile. There was momentary silence except for the beating of insects' wings against the screening, the night screeching of birds out in the jungle growth.

"The C. O.'s white." Hall's voice was low. "He told me what I was. Said he'd heard rumors—about the two of us. He'd heard about the transport mess. Things get around, down here. He was wise. That's why he let you handle this search tonight, Melford, instead of running it himself. Ballin wasn't lost. He went out on the C. O.'s orders and stayed out of sight. Even then he came back a little too soon. The captain's guess was that we'd clash tonight. He wanted to get it over in a hurry. Called me a damned fool—but no court martial. You go back on flying status. The plane's charged up to an accident—unavoidable."

I swore softly. Lew Melford had a faint grin on his face. Jess Hall spoke again.

"Figured you tried to get me—on the transport, Melford. You did hit me an awful wallop."

Melford nodded.

"I went down on that slippery deck," he stated slowly. "Got up—and she listed badly with me half off balance. Then you came around the cabin, on the lee side and the sea battered me into you. You hit the rail and went over. I thought you were gone—and I lost my head. Made for the cabin."

Jess Hall grinned.

"Got a grip on the deck rail. That saved me. A crew member thought I was gone and yelled I was overboard. I was set to kill when I pulled myself back on deck. Several kinds of a fool—I've been, Melford."

Lew stuck out his hand, and Jess took it. He grinned at the field officer.

"I came near getting a new set of wings up there," he muttered. "Had a grip on the rip-cord ring and the ship hit a bump. Moved my arm to grab a strut and out came the pilot 'chute. Dumb—that was. Worse than a kiwi . . ."

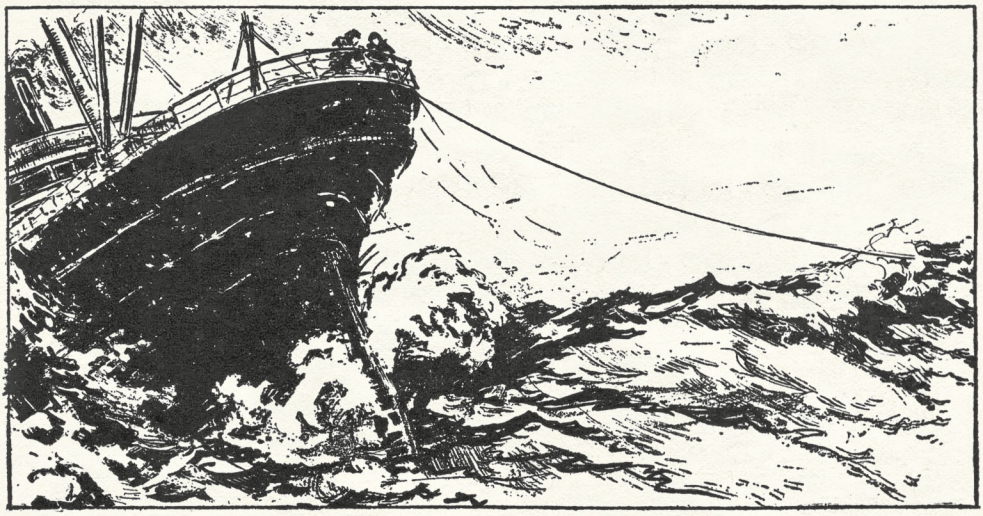
He broke off, shook head slowly. Lew and I grinned at him, and Jess grinned back.

"That's a bum line. I'm off it," he muttered. "There are kiwis and kiwis. You never can tell!"

After a few minutes I left them chinning and cursing about the Border. I had some literary work to do. And I hoped, for Bill Graham's sake, he could read my scrawl. He always was too curious.

SAILORS ALL

By STANLEY WARD WALKER



The Old Mate Said:

"I wish I was at sea again—on a real ship with canvas, I mean—not a sea-goin' automobile . . ."

THROUGH the open ports came a gentle breeze—a breeze in which the scent of hot lands was mingled with the sharp tang of the sea. The first mate laid down his cards with a sigh.

"Makes me wish that I was at sea again," he remarked, then added with a querulous rasp in his tones, "on a real ship with canvas, I mean; not a seagoing automobile."

"Reckon you're gettin' pretty old if you don't know we're twenty-six days south of New York now," the chief engineer reminded him.

The chief was a bit old himself, and he too felt a little out of place on this straight decked steel freighter with her drumming Diesel engines. He felt, however, that a mere deck officer should not forget himself in the presence of engineers.

"Yeah, we're twenty-six damn' dull days out o' New York, all right, and we ain't seen one piece of seamanship—nor of engineering either now, have we?"

The young first assistant engineer smiled deprecatingly at these two fierce old-timers, who bawled at each other in the halting, harsh speech made necessary by the wind and the noise of the machinery.

"Oh, it's not so bad," he remarked, holding up his cards hopefully.

"Iron ships and wooden sailors," muttered the mate.

"Windjammers still goin' to sea," promptly replied the chief.

The younger man had never quite become used to these friendly bickerings,

though he admired both of the old officers with their red faces, graying hair and militant talk. Again he strove to divert their attention:

"Don't you think, gentlemen, that events somewhat make the man? Now all through history—" he began shyly, but the hard blue eyes of the mate glared balefully at him.

"They didn't teach you how to club haul a ship at Purdue, did they, Mr. South? Don't know what it is, I suppose?"

The young engineer reddened silently.

"There used to be a question that the inspectors fired at you when you were up for a ticket: 'You're on a lee shore—rockbound coast—you can't wear and she won't tack—what are you going to do?'"

"Why, yes, sir—" the First grinned back at him—"when you club haul you drop the lee anchor with the hawser run around your bows, and sort of unwind the ship on the hawser, don't you?"

The old mate snorted.

"That's all, just unwind her. Boy, I saw Captain Black take a full rigged ship out of that kind of a jam in 'eighty-three, seas running forty feet high, us drivin' ashore. We just dropped a hook over as you say. Sort of played around on deck doin' it, and two lubbers were washed away. You could 'a' spit on the rocks before we straightened out and cut the hawser, but we made it. Just wind and seamanship. When you can do that you can spraddle your feet and say, 'I'm a sailor, by God.'"

The mate swept away his cards.

"Now they have spoiled the sea with stinkin' steam kettles only fit for pokin' up mud creeks."

The last was a double dig at the chief, who loved steam, and who came from New Orleans, where he had once been a river engineer.

"ALL RIGHT, now I'll tell one," said the chief, spreading his gnarled hands on the table and studying his fingers as if they were tools laid out for his selection. "Mine happened before yours. It happened in steam and it was on the river, too."

"What river?" interrupted the mate, with a wink at the young first assistant.

"*The* river," doggedly continued the chief. "You know my father came from Marietta, Ohio, and he was on a Yankee gunboat in 'Sixty-two. Just a kid then I reckon—striker he was on the *City of Madison*. Well they dropped downstream to look over Vicksburg, an' a little round shot came through, and smashed the sta'bo'd engine—killed the engineer and sort o' filled things with nice warm steam. And then they drifted past the batteries of the Confederate forces."

The mate had been listening with obvious interest, but the way in which the chief said "Confederate forces" annoyed him. His father had been with Farragut; so he politely interrupted with—

"They anchored on a sandbar, didn't they, Chief?"

"In sixty feet of water," firmly replied the chief, still staring at his outspread hands. Then he continued, "They were pretty badly pounded before they were out of range, an' they knew that they'd need some extra fog in the boilers mighty soon."

"Not the story about the nigger on the safety valve, please, Chief?" came from the Mate.

"No, just some wire on the valve lever. You see after they got below Vicksburg there weren't any more engineers aboard—not alive, that is. The steam was pretty damn' hot—valve gear out o' kilter too. My dad said he could bring her back; so they blanked off the sta'bo'd engine and he shipped up the port engine on full stroke, and worked the valves by hand—had wet cloths wrapped around his head—an' a soldier kept a-throwin' water in on him. Steam was leakin' pretty hot, you know. Well, reckon it was lucky for him that the Confederates didn't fire at 'em on the way back."

"Why didn't they?" eagerly interrupted the young First.

The old chief smiled for the first time.

"Why when they saw that old wreck a-comin', with her stacks down and half her paddle buckets gone, they just laughed, an' give 'em a cheer as they passed. Took a long time to pass, too. Funny war the Civil was."

THERE was silence except for the steady drone of the big motors, the same deep note that they had hummed ever since leaving Sandy Hook.

"Well, Chief, maybe you can run into some things with steam all right, but you must admit that things seem to be slowin' up all the time. Now with a steam engine you can maybe count on a few extra revolutions for a channel bar, but what can you do with those damn' oil engines back there? You fellows have just watched your lubricators since we left New York. If you wanted some extra power, what could you do?

The chief was mollified and his sober face relaxed.

"Reckon we just always have full power, Mr. Medlock," he replied, then chuckling he turned to the First. "You tell 'em, boy, about Diesel engines."

The First smiled rather uncertainly, but his zeal urged him on.

"You know, Mr. Medlock," he said, "that we burn less than half the fuel a steamship would require. Then we have a smaller crew. That means economy and greater cargo capacity—and isn't she a cleaner cooler job for all of us? You know that about sixty per cent. of the new ships being built are Diesel powered." He gave the mate a friendly grin. "I never thought of your problem of overloading the engines, but we haven't needed any more power so far, and we'll be in the River Plate tomorrow, won't we?"

"Mebbe, but I've seen some mighty stiff wind down here. A pampero is just about the worst storm I know." The mate's face was stubborn as he added, "Storms and sails used to make sailors."

THE YOUNG First tossed in his bunk a long time wondering just what they could do if they needed extra power. Finally he fell asleep and dreamed of mantillas, slatting sails and heroic deeds. Then some one began firing at the ship. *Boom-boom!* They were hitting her too; she jarred and trembled. A familiar voice said—

"Seven bells, First."

Usually the twelve to four oiler merely poked his face into the first assistant's door to make his call. This time, however, he was inside the room and leaning at an astonishing angle, when the engineer raised himself on his elbow.

"Coming up to blow," announced the oiler, and the door banged behind him.

The First slid his hard lumpy body into a faded boiler suit, stamped on a pair of oil soaked shoes and stepped out carefully. He felt solid chunks of wind trying to tear the door from his muscular fingers. Spray drove against him. It was hard and stung like sand. Water several inches deep sloshed around his feet. He saw a white masthead light plunging. The rest was a rushing blackness that skirled through the rigging like bagpipes. And there was the hiss and crash of heavy seas.

"Coming up to blow," he chortled plunging into the warm clattering air of the engine room.

Running a practised eye over the clean white bulkheads, the polished brightwork, and the faultlessly clean engines, he swayed down the engine room ladders, holding carefully to the hand rails.

The chief was already there, gazing with somber eyes at the third assistant engineer. His face brightened when he saw the First. Approaching the latter he shouted:

"You an' me better take watch an' watch. Help these fellows. Be rollin' our screws out soon. Takin' it on the quarter now. Don't trust them new fangled governors. Stand by your throttles all the time. Might pitch a wheel off."

The First nodded cheerfully, flattered by the older man's confidence in him.

"Yes," he answered, "and we'll be having some fun with our oil soon. She'll be stirring up all the dirt and water in the tanks. That last bunkering was about half water."

"I'll send the Second right down," yelled the chief, starting up the ladder. Then, pausing, he shouted back, "That old devil knew this was a-coming, I bet."

Rubbing his hands with a piece of clean waste the First stood balancing proudly between the two big engines—eyes, ears and nose alert for discords. He did not have to wait long, for a dozen lengths of heavy pipe crashed out of the pipe rack and clanged on to the steel 'tween decks.

As the vessel rolled they banged savagely at the guard railings and then slashed back, upsetting a sixty gallon can of lubricating oil. Instantly oil came streaming down on the floor plates. Some of it cascaded over a hot exhaust pipe, whereupon there arose a prodigious hissing and the upper part of the engine room was filled with a cumulous cloud of white smoke. Through the cloud a voice bellowed—

"Stand by throttles."

Then the chief and the Second seemed fairly to drop through this cloud.

"Oh you fallen angels," the First howled at them, forgetting the possibility of the clanging pipe's crashing down on him.

Above him was grim dangerous work, but the exultation of combat was still on the younger man, who eagerly watched the nimble efforts of the chief to secure the sliding pipe on an oil drenched, tilting deck.

The screws were being rolled out regularly, before the savagely charging pipe was captured, one piece at a time. Meanwhile the pendant loops of a heavy chain fall over one of the engine were swinging through an incredible arc.

At the end of the watch the chief came limping down with a crooked smile.

"Hard on the deck fellows, eh?" he yelled as he took over the throttle platform.

THE YOUNG engineer mounted the ladders springily toward his breakfast. "Sparks" was waiting to tell him of a tattered wireless aerial, and the First spent the morning helping to construct a substitute. He had a brief glimpse of cold gray mountains of water, mountains that eternally kept sliding down on the ship to explode into spray that whizzed through the rigging and rolled tons of green water over the decks.

Then he went below to spend another four hours closing the throttle of the starboard engine, as the stern lifted, and opening it as the ship settled back. Meanwhile the second assistant performed a like service for the port engine.

The oilers were hard put to keep the fuel oil strainers clear and the bilge pump suctions free; for a quantity of waste had been used to clean up the escaped lubricating oil, and most of this, together with ashes from the galley, which some zealous soul had thrown on the between decks, had worked down into the bilge. Water accumulated in the bilges at an alarming rate and threatened to burst up the floor plates as the vessel rolled.

This watch did not seem to pass so quickly as the first one; and the young assistant was glad to be relieved. He lay in his bunk, listening to the steady roar of the storm and wondering how he could in an emergency get extra power from the engines. Suddenly an idea exploded in his mind.

"Coming up to blow . . ."

These were two cycle engines; low pressure air was blown into the cylinders at the bottom of the stroke, to sweep out the exhaust gases. Then this scavenging air would in turn be compressed by the returning piston—compressed till it was so hot that crude oil sprayed into the cylinders would ignite and drive the piston on the power stroke.

The First thought that if he could only raise the pressure of the scavenging air, more of it would be compressed in the cylinder, which would mean more oxygen, more pressure, and hence more oil burned on the power stroke. That problem

seemed simple enough, but another problem remained—to find a practical method of raising the pressure of the scavenging air. He tossed about, muttering profanely for some time.

Then again he seemed to hear the oiler saying, "Coming up to blow." And he recalled that there was a dense air refrigerating machine on board to be used for return cargoes of beef. This refrigerator could furnish a large volume of compressed air. They had pipe and fittings on board. Oh, he could do the job all right.

His fatigue forgotten, the First gleefully pounded a hard fist into his pillow, and wished that something would happen, a wish that is likely to be gratified at sea. There was a lessened hum from the engine room and one engine stopped. Instinctively the First bounded from his bunk. He could feel the ship falling off before the wind.

"Offshore wind; it's the port engine," he muttered, automatically reaching for his dungarees.

"Hard luck trip," yelled the chief at him.

The older man was grinning philosophically, and the long faces of the assistants began to relax.

"Guess the skipper'll have to run before the wind on one slow engine while we fix that thrust bearing—'twas gettin' all the pressure holdin' her on course. Its burnt out now," he yelled at the First ear. "Too bad—losin' time—'ll keep the girls a-waitin'."

CLANG went the starboard telegraph, and the brass needle swung around the dial stopping at "Full Speed." Again it clanged, and the speaking tube screamed. Holding his ear to the tube, the chief gestured vaguely with his hand as if commanding silence, and the cheerful grin faded from his lined face.

"Boys, there's a little steam schooner sinkin' about fifty miles back, and we're doin' four knots on one engine."

"Christ!" said an oiler, not profanely.

With outthrust head and puckered face, the chief stood staring at the burnt bearing, weighing the chances of its holding up.

Then it was that the First eagerly outlined his plan for speeding up the engines. Ordinarily he would have been laughed out of court. Now, however, the easy going old chief was an alert fighting man, ready to take desperate chances.

"May work— Take two men—couple the big cooler on sta'bo'd engine; port, too, when you're through. Put the Second on sta'bo'd throttle. Rest of us'll race you on this thrust bearing."

An anxious steward came down, carrying a pot of hot coffee, which cooled unnoticed while engineers and oilers toiled frantically on a bucking, tilting deck, hoisting heavy pieces of metal that swayed and surged dangerously in the air. They were groping for tools that slid away, and crowding a day's work into an hour.

In a little over two hours the refrigerating machine was piped to the starboard engine. Another hour of hot hard work and the port engine was so connected, the damaged thrust bearing was in place, with a stream of water playing upon it, and both engines were running.

YEARS seemed to have fallen from the chief's shoulders, as he mounted the ladder to have a look around. He was bursting with pride at the way his boys had responded. The ship was plunging back over her course at full speed, with both engines delivering about sixty per cent. more than their usual power. With a shuddering smash, the ship again and again buried her bows in huge waves, while tons of solid water came battering over the decks, threatening to remove the deckhouses.

"We must look like a submarine," remarked the gaunt old chief to himself.

He cocked an ear, listening to a higher angrier roar from the big motors. They too seemed determined to conquer this unyielding sea.

The propellers churned a phosphorescent froth as they were lifted toward the

surface, and then drove viciously against deep water as the stern crashed back into the passing wave. The whole vessel vibrated under the pressure, and the deck seemed to spring upward as the ship was driven into the heavy seas.

The chief struggled along a lifeline to the bridge, where the deck officers in shining wet oilskins looked like big black beetles clinging to the rail. They were peering tensely ahead. Oblivious of the driving sheets of spray, the chief made his way to the first mate and shouted—

"Any more messages?"

"No, ought to pick her up soon, now, if she's afloat." For a few seconds the chief stood silent, gazing at that welter of water. "Damn' good thing the owners can't see you fellows crowdin' their pretty new ship this way. Wonder she don't break her back and sink," he said, groping for his chewing tobacco; then added, "Tell the skipper I want you for about five minutes. Plenty of men here—not your watch anyway."

The mate followed the Chief to the upper grating of the engine room. The chief pointed downward.

"See that," he said.

Dutifully the mate looked. The engine room was hazy with the acrid blue smoke of exhaust gas. Darting flames of dull red or orange flickered along the tops of the engines.

His thick legs firmly braced apart, the mate gazed down with bent head at those darting flames. He was reminded of angry snakes' tongues, and his ears were offended by an all pervasive stacatto clatter. An engineer clung to the throttle of each engine; an oiler was wiping and storing tools, while another oiler, with leg twinged about a stanchion, unconcernedly wiped an oil strainer and spat skillfully into the bilges. There was little to suggest the frantic action of the past few hours.

"Damn' good boys," bellowed the chief.

"They'll blow themselves up or burn the ship," howled back the mate, looking again at those darting flashes of red and orange.

"Just cylinder studs a-stretchin'. They'll hold, I reckon."

"Speakin' o' breakin' the ship's back, what would the steamboat inspectors do to your license if they saw that show?" countered the mate.

The chief, however, was still in his exultant mood.

"Remember the First's saying 'events make the man'? His idea."

THE STUMPY mate threw a wet oilskinned arm around the chief's neck and drew his head down. Using the chief's ear as a speaking tube he shouted—"They are good boys, Chief—" and with a grin—"so's their old man."

Then his face tightened.

"Our turn'll come soon, I hope. Ought to be seein' her before long now. We only got one boat left. Others stove in. Been catchin' hell on deck too."

The two friendly enemies shook hands.

"Make a good oil slick for the boat to work in," yelled the chief as the mate clumped away.

The chief and the First were both on the throttle platform when the telegraphs clanged—standby.

"She must be in sight now."

"Reckon we won't need the extra air any more. Wonder we ain't blown off her cylinder heads before this. Shut off that damn' refrigerator. First, before we wreck our plant and lose our tickets."

Again the telegraphs clanged.

Starboard engine—stop. Port engine—stop.

There now came a comparative silence that seemed almost painful after the usual roar. There was audible the *slap-slap* of bilge water, a hiss of compressed air and the hum of the dynamo.

A whistle from the speaking tube set raw nerves tingling. The stooped old chief listened for some seconds, then turned away with a gusty sigh.

"There's an Argentine cruiser standin' by her. Reckon us fellows ain't needed, after all."

"Hell's grate bars and the ash gun of Purgatory," chanted an oiler, subsiding

on a foot plate, and wearily wiping his face with a dirty sleeve.

The first assistant kicked petulantly at a harmless ball of oily waste. He had visioned an open boat, bobbing toward a wave swept hulk, a hulk that rolled helplessly in the trough of high seas. They had driven their beloved engines and themselves almost beyond endurance, and now . . .

Clang! Port engine—slow ahead. The chief tugged at a starting valve. There was a *whish-whish-whish* of compressed air, followed by a familiar thudding rumble. The first assistant wearily looked at the telegraphs, dejection showing in every line of his usually alert figure.

"Never mind; just take it easy till we're in port— Only necessary work from now on," yelled the chief.

Clang! Starboard engine—slow ahead.

The chief looked down as he mounted the ladder. The brightwork was tarnished, the engines were sooty, while oil and dirt were smeared deeply over everything in sight, including his men.

"Oh, not so bad, considerin'," mused the chief.

The wind was still screaming over the water, and the seas ran as high as ever, but the ship seemed almost quiet now on slow speed.

At the end of his regular watch, the First fell wearily into his bunk and slept. When he awoke there was the familiar hum of the motors and the ship was rising and falling—rising and falling through a heavy ground swell, but the wind had dropped, and sunlight streamed through the portholes.

The First strolled on deck. The superstructure was encrusted with salt crystals that glittered in the slanting sunlight.

"Well, not so bad," he remarked to the mate, who stood smoking in slippered ease.

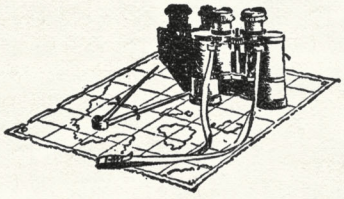
"No, not so bad," answered the mate, taking a pipe from his mouth and studying it carefully, before he remarked, "The chief says that you fellows had it kind o' lively."

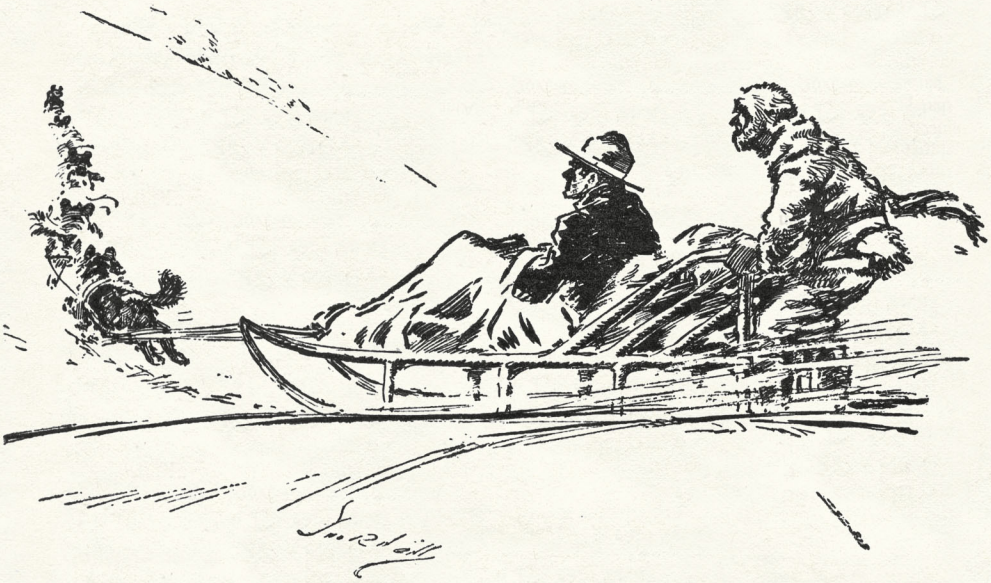
The younger man's chest filled sharply, but he answered with elaborate carelessness:

"Oh yes, we did spill a can of oil. Blew like hell for awhile, didn't it?"

The mate tamped his pipe with a square, horny thumb.

"Yeah," he replied. "Fair little gaff tops'l breeze."





BLACK BOOTY

A Story of the Northwest Mounted Police

By BERNARD J. FARMER

THE GALLOPIN' HAIRPIN, otherwise Corporal Jack Monk of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, spoke a quiet word to his halfbreed driver, Pete, who halted the dog train. Then motioning him to remain where he was, the corporal went ahead, and some three hundred yards from his sled, concealed himself behind a giant pine and peered warily.

Through the trees which fringed the clearing, he could see a small cabin, stoutly built of untrimmed pine logs, showing a gleam of light from a crack in the doorway. From a stovepipe projecting outside smoke was ascending in a steady spiral, and on the wind there came a faint odor of cooking bacon. Evidently, the owner of the cabin, Paul Belanger, was inside.

Satisfied, the corporal rose to his feet and at once disclosed the reason for his nickname. Fully six feet seven inches in height and rangy as the proverbial lath, when he bestrode his horse it seemed that any moment that much enduring animal would take a rest, with those long, hairpin-like legs striding the ground on either side.

It was one of the show sights of the post at Fort Alexander to see the corporal at revolver practise. Up he would come to the target, the thundering hoofs of his horse beating a wild chorus to his piston-like knees; then *bang-bang-bang!* and away again, with his incredibly long figure swaying like a reed in the wind.

But the affair now engaging the corporal's attention was more important than

revolver practise and not quite so amusing. Two days before, intelligence had reached the Post that a trapper, Henri Falardeau, had been found dead in the snow outside his cabin, with a knife thrust between his shoulders. The halfbreed who had brought the news had removed the knife; but the police had found little evidence in it to show who had committed the crime. It was an ordinary hunting one, obviously new, with a stout eight inch blade, and a plain beech handle which had not been carved into any distinguishing form, as is sometimes done to pass an idle hour.

Falardeau had been a genial, good natured man, seemingly incapable of making any real enemies. The season before he had trapped in partnership with Paul Belanger, but they had decided to part; and this winter, apparently without any ill will on either side, they had worked adjacent trap lines alone.

Whether the dead man's traps had been robbed or not, the breed was unable to say; but he had examined the cabin and said that Falardeau's cache of furs was still there. It was a case for immediate investigation on the spot; hence the presence of the Gallopin' Hairpin outside the cabin of Paul Belanger at eight o'clock at night.

FOR SOME time the corporal leaned against a tree and quietly deliberated. He had known and liked Falardeau well. As has already been said, he was a cheery soul, fond of good company, and it was probably owing to this that he had parted from Belanger, who was rather morose. The tall corporal, who was also fond of good company, had spent many an evening with Falardeau, and he was fiercely determined to catch and convict the murderer.

He decided to spend the night with the dead man's former partner and tomorrow push on to the actual scene of the crime.

Accordingly he made his way back to where he had left Pete, and with a cracking of the whip and yelping of the dogs, they drove up to the cabin.

As they arrived, the door opened, and the figure of Belanger showed black against the lighted doorway.

"*Qui est la?*" he said sharply, peering into the darkness.

The Gallopin' Hairpin stood slightly on one side, in the shadow.

"Brought some news for you, Belanger," he said slowly. "Falardeau has been found knifed—in the back."

"*Tonnere!*" Belanger rapped out the expletive. "It ees, yes, zee Corporal Monk?"

"Yeah."

The corporal revealed himself and stepped through the door.

Reluctantly Belanger gave way.

"You come to zee me," he said suspiciously. "I know nothing, *non!*"

"Sure you don't," said the corporal soothingly. "I just want to check up on a few facts."

With every sense alert, Belanger watched with his dark eyes while the corporal divested himself of his heavy fur coat and cap.

"You find Henri, yes?" he inquired.

The corporal shook his head.

"Goin' there tomorrow." He sniffed appreciatively. "That smells good."

"I just begeen supper; you will join me?"

"Glad to," said the corporal laconically. "Had nothing since twelve." He shouted to the halfbreed, who was unharnessing the dogs. "Feed 'em, Pete, and c'mon in."

Then, apparently oblivious of the strain in the atmosphere, he stretched out his hands to the roaring stove and watched while Belanger dexterously fried some more bacon.

"You know, Belanger," he said quietly, "poor Henri was a pal of mine; I'm goin' to track down his murderer if I have to wait ten years."

Belanger was turning a slice of bacon, and for a moment it seemed to require all his attention.

"Me too," he said presently. "Las' season we was partners; *c'est ça*, but ziz we go alone, ye-e-e-e-es. We still good freends, though. Eeet was great shock to

me that he was keel, and in ze back. You think who done it?"

"Well," said the corporal quietly, "I've got a few ideas, but I can't prove anything—yet."

"*Mais oui*," said Belanger sympathetically, "eet ees deefficult. Who breeng you zee news?"

"A breed."

"Ze breed may have keel heem; you theenk so, yes?"

"Maybe," said the corporal noncommittally.

At that moment Pete came in, and they both sat down and attacked steaming plates of beans and bacon. Pete never said a word; that was one of his advantages.

AFTER supper, while Belanger did the chores, the corporal wandered casually round the cabin. He pointed to a pile of furs in a corner.

"Your catch for the season?" he inquired.

Belanger looked up.

"*Oui*," he said, and waited with a plate in his hand while the corporal examined a magnificent black fox.

The black fox is very valuable; this one was of the deepest blue black; a bushy collarette encircled its neck, and its forelegs were covered with silky, wavy fur. The corporal bent over.

"Perfect skin," was the tribute; then he inquired casually, "Where did you get it?"

"My trap by Stone Creek," replied Belanger.

"Who traps on the other side?"

"Henri did."

"See him lately?"

"I see heem, ye-e-e-es, 'bout two week ago. I tell him of ze black fox, and he say, 'Ver' good.' "

"Ah," said the corporal gently, "then you got this mor'n two weeks ago?"

"*Mais oui*," said Belanger, and came closer. "You zee ze zilver fox?"

He picked up a silver fox skin and fondled it lovingly.

The corporal touched it and gave it a due share of admiration; then he turned to a checker board on a shelf near by.

"You play checkers?" he inquired.

"Ye-e-e-es, against mysel'," said Belanger.

The corporal took down the board.

"I'd like to have a game with you," he remarked. "I rather fancy myself at checkers; but perhaps you can beat me."

The French Canadian showed his gleaming white teeth.

"I'm not ver' good," he confessed, "but ye-e-e-es, I try an' beat you."

They drew up the two packing cases that served as chairs, while Pete looked on in inscrutable silence. Belanger set the board, and presently the game began.

The corporal puffed meditatively at his pipe, making his moves with a slow deliberation which contrasted with Belanger's nervous movements. Cigaret after cigaret he rolled, and forgot them before they were half smoked, in his fierce concentration on the board.

The corporal established his first king and laid aside his pipe.

"Smoke's hot," he explained. "Haven't got a stick of chewin' gum, have you? I 'most always carry some, but this time I've forgot."

Belanger never looked up.

"*Non*," he said absently. "I use *de tabac*."

The game went on.

Present Belanger gave a cry of triumph.

"*Tiens!* I have you cornered—zo!" With a flourish, he demonstrated that his four kings would menace the corporal whichever move he made.

The corporal swept the board clear.

"Yeah," he murmured, "I guess you've got me. We'll play another some time."

Abruptly he swung round and began to unlace his moccasins.

Belanger replaced the board on the shelf.

"I play good tonight," he said complacently, "but perhaps another time I lose, ye-e-e-es."

The corporal unrolled his sleeping bag.

"I guess I'll turn in," he remarked. "I want to be up at dawn."

"You go to ze cabin of Falardeau," asked Belanger, "and take heem back?"

"Yes," said the corporal quietly, "I shall take poor Falardeau back—and his murderer with him."

Belanger made no reply and closed the damper of the stove. Ten minutes later the three were asleep.

THE NEXT morning the corporal was up at dawn, as he had said, and refusing Belanger's offer to accompany him, he set out with Pete to the cabin of Falardeau. On the way they crossed Stone Creek, which marked the boundary line of the trapping grounds of the two men, and for some time the corporal stood on the snow covered ice, staring thoughtfully. Just what he expected to see he was not quite certain; but six feet of snow effectively blotted out traces of anything human. He shouted to Pete and they went on.

By three in the afternoon they had reached the cabin and, leaving Pete outside with the dogs which were howling mournfully, he went in. The dead man lay where he had been left by the halfbreed who had found him, in his bunk with a blanket covering him.

The corporal gently turned it back and gazed on the features of his friend. The face was set in a frozen calm, and the upward curve of the mouth showed the nature of the man in life. It seemed impossible that any one would want to murder him, and the corporal made a fierce resolution to avenge. Then stifling his personal feelings, he conducted a careful examination.

The knife had been driven in with tremendous force, for it had to pierce the heavy material of the mackinaw and after that a leather windbreaker. Death must have been practically instantaneous. The corporal turned the body over again, forced open the frozen pockets of the mackinaw and, after tabulating the contents, put them away in his own. What he found evidently gave him satisfaction, for he spoke softly—

"I'll get him for you, Henri."

Then he replaced the blanket and turned to make a survey of the room. This did not take long, for it was much the same as all such cabins; the most prominent object was the stove. A roughly constructed table and chair were all the furniture. As the halfbreed had said, the pile of furs lay in a corner, apparently untouched. The corporal turned them over; there was muskrat, mink, ermine, beaver, and cross fox; but Falardeau had not been so lucky as his former partner, for there was not a black or silver fox. The corporal packed up the skins ready to take back to the post with the body of their owner; and that concluded his examination.

It was now getting dusk, and he decided to spend the night in the cabin. As for Henri; he had been his friend in life; why should he harm him now? But Pete would not stay near. Like all halfbreeds, with the Indian strain predominant, he had a horror of dead bodies, and he preferred to lie outside in the sled, huddled up in blankets, with a roaring fire to keep off the evil spirits.

The corporal set fire to the stove and soon had a good blaze. Then he cooked a meal of bacon and beans, washed it down with strong tea, and after a single pipe, spread out his sleeping bag and was soon asleep.

THE NEXT day he was up early again, and he found Pete had already harnessed the dogs. Pete was anxious to be gone from that place of evil omen. The corporal loaded the body of Falardeau on to the sled, and they set off on the trail back to Belanger's cabin. The morning was clear and bright, with that wonderful aroma of pines in the air that lures man to the North and sets his blood tingling with the joy of life.

How poor Henri would have loved this, thought the corporal, and went ahead, with his usual good spirits lacking.

At ten they halted to spell the dogs one smoke, and again at noon they rested while they thawed out a frozen lump of beans and bacon and made a quick meal.

It was nearly dark before they pulled up outside. Belanger came out to meet them. He saw the burden on the sled and made to turn back the covering, but the corporal stopped him.

"You can do nothing now," he said quietly.

Belanger shrugged his shoulders and led the way into the cabin. "You spend ze night again?" he said ungraciously.

"Yes," said the corporal, "I'm goin' to take him back to the post tomorrow."

Belanger said nothing and started to prepare supper. The corporal removed his gloves and felt in his pocket.

"Look at this," he said, producing something which he held under the oil lamp.

Belanger turned from the stove and peered at it. It was a small lump, grayish white, about the size of a pea.

Just then Pete came in, and he had a look.

"Chewin' gum," he pronounced.

"Yeah," said the corporal, "chewin' gum."

Belanger touched it with a total lack of interest.

"Where you get it?" he asked indifferently.

"In Falardeau's cabin."

"And what does eet mean?"

"Only this, you damn' murderer! Put 'em up!"

With incredible speed the corporal whipped out his gun and leveled it steadily at Belanger, and his eyes lost their genial twinkle and froze to a cold, steely blue.

Belanger cast one glance at his Winchester in the corner, then met the gaze of the corporal and slowly raised his hands.

"Cleevaire poleeceman," he sneered, "I call your bluff—*sacre cochon!*"

The corporal gave his gun to Pete, who was standing stolidly by, and snapped on the handcuffs.

Belanger laughed.

"I make you pay for zis, poleeceman; you can prove—nothin'."

"All right," said the corporal unemotionally. "I'll show you a straight flush."

He pointed to the table.

"That's chewin' gum. Falardeau used it. We also found a packet in his pocket, an' a store list in which gum figures at the bottom."

Belanger interrupted.

"What is ziz to me, *cochon?*"

"Wait!"

The corporal pulled out the pile of furs from the corner and picked out the black fox skin. He turned it over and held it up to the light. Adhering to the inside was a small grayish lump."

"Chewin' gum," he explained. "How did it get there, Belanger?"

Belanger's sallow face whitened.

"I use de gum," he said desperately.

"You told me last night you didn't. That so, Pete?"

Pete nodded.

Belanger tried again.

"Falardeau, he give me de skin."

The corporal smiled contemptuously.

"Give you a skin you said you caught yourself; I'll say that's likely!"

Belanger leaned against the wall; the sweat poured off his forehead, and for a moment it seemed that he was going to faint.

"You say nothin'," he cried wildly, "an' I give you hundred dollar—two—tree—four—"

BUT THE corporal never even troubled to answer. He sat down on a packing case and lighted his pipe.

"I'm not Sherlock Holmes," he remarked, "but I do know a bit of Freud—he was the guy who put the 'sigh' in psychology—and this is the way I figure it out:

"You met Falardeau at the creek that day, like you said; but instead of you tellin' him of the black fox skin, he told you. You were always jealous of him; now once again he had got ahead of you, and it drove you to murder. You went with him to his cabin to see the skin; he suspected nothin', and when he bent down to undo the door you knifed him in the back—a foul blow, Belanger! Then you

went inside, took the black fox, and fled here.

"The knife you used was a new one you had brought up this trip; let's see the one you have now—" he stepped forward and pulled it from Belanger's belt—"ah, I thought so, look at the nicks in the blade; but you had to use it though, for you were afraid to go back and get your new one.

"Now we come to the chewin' gum. Falardeau, like many others, was mighty careless where he parked it, and a bit got stuck to the inside of the black fox skin. Seems you didn't notice that; I did—and here's where the psychology comes in. I played you at checkers last night, and you were so darned pleased with yourself that you never cared what you said; never thought it queer that a man who used gum should hit the trail without it. Well, I guess that's all, Belanger."

Belanger never answered. He was ashen now, and his eyes stared with dreadful intensity at the tiny window.

The Gallopin' Hairpin stood up and looked out.

"You'll go to the post with me—and Henri—tomorrow," he said quietly.

SNOWSHOE AND GRAPEVINE

By John L. Considine

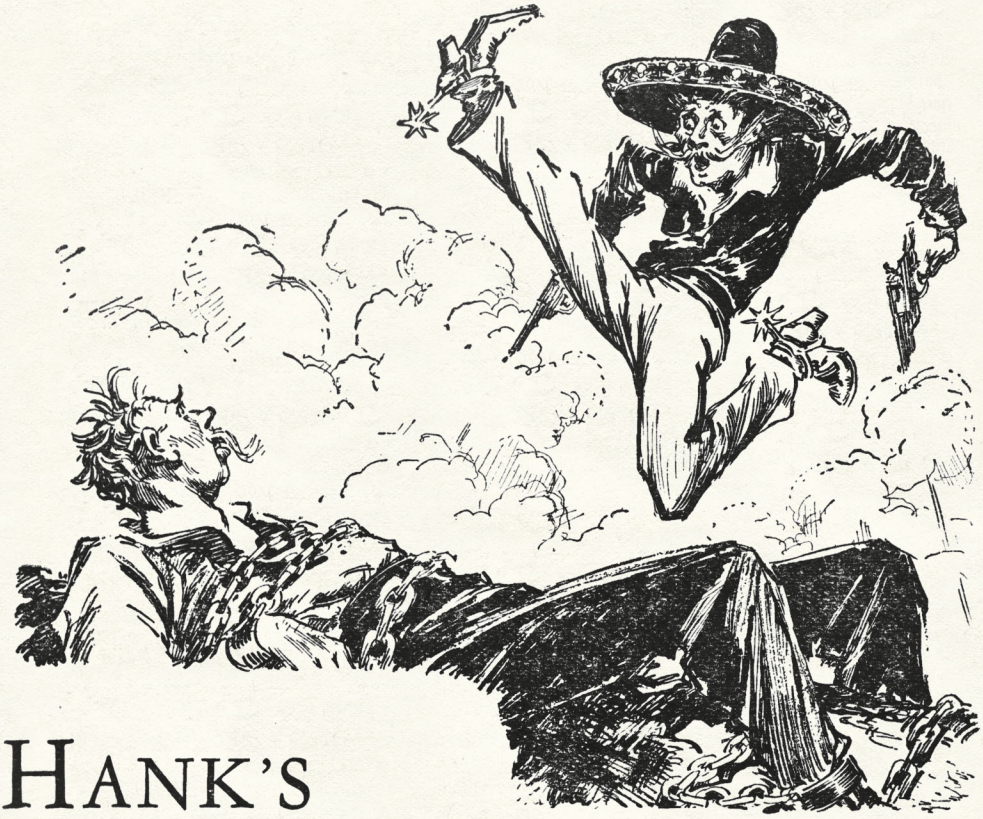
IN A SMALL California town in the Sierran foothills was recently held a commemoration of Snowshoe Johnson, the hardy Scandinavian who once furnished the sole transportation for the mails between western Nevada and eastern California in wintertime. He even carried type in this way for the first newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada, the journal that afterward became famous as the employer of Mark Twain while the humorist was getting the material for the book he wrote years afterward under the title of "Roughing It".

A phrase still current in the newspaper offices of the Far West, "the grapevine telegraph," originated in the days of Snowshoe Johnson. In 1859 Colonel Bee constructed a telegraph line between Placerville (Hangtown) California and Virginia City, attaching the wire to the trees. Their swaying stretched it until it lay in loops on the ground, resembling the trailing California wild grapevines. Frequent breaks occurred from falling trees and avalanches, till the line became almost useless, being sometimes beaten into Sacramento by the Pony Express.

California and Nevada newspapers took up the phrase, and whenever an editor wished to cast doubts on the freshness of a rival's news, he forthwith accused him of running a grapevine telegraph.

Even in San Francisco, within this generation, one evening newspaper was caught relaying grapevine telegraph. Another evening journal suspected the first one of stealing its wire dispatches and one afternoon published a thrilling news item about a battle between seal poachers and a government revenue cutter, dating the dispatch from Swenlaetsew, Alaska.

The pirate sheet promptly appropriated the item, and was covered with confusion when the following evening the journal in which the original "dispatch" appeared revealed the fact that it was pure fiction, and proved it by pointing out that "Swenlaetsew" is "We steal news" spelled backward. The retailer of this particular form of grapevine suffered terribly in prestige and shortly thereafter went out of business.



HANK'S OTHER PARDNER

Letters of a Wandering Partner

By ALAN LEMAY

Cheese Cloth Jale,
Middel Fall, 1878.

DEER BUG EYE,

Wel Bug Eye you hav 1 mor chanst to show you are a reel man an get yer pore pardners foot out of the grave. I had sum leters alredy rote to you telin you wat a terbil fix I was in an 1 of the Vijiluntys found them in the roks wen I was capcherd. He sed ware is this pardner of yrs. we woud like to get hold of him. I sed I dont noe ware he is, you wil hav to look fer him. He then becum very sourcastic Bug Eye an tho he went off with the leters I dout if he wil hav enuf sense to get them to you. But heer is wat hapend.

After I cum heer Bug Eye I got a job in the lookout chare in a gamblin sloon. An I soon see that wat Cheese Cloth needed was a genral cleen up. I went to werk an organized sum Vijiluntys an set

out to run Cheese Cloth rite. Wat was the 1st thing them ongrateful Vijilunts dun Bug Eye. They run me out of town. Thats wat they dun.

An ferther mor they got me cornered Bug Eye, an I had to stand off the entire town of Cheesecloth with roks until I was exausted. An wen I got exausted I went to sleep, an I dont noe wat was hapenin wile I was asleep, but I gess I lost the seeje Bug Eye, becaus next thing I new I was ½ way to Cheese Cloth riding crossways on a hooje mool, tide hand an foot an my feet dragin on 1 side the mool an my hands on the other. Wat a posishun to wake up to Bg. Eye.

So heer I am in jale agen Bug Eye, an it is a grate releef. An if this is the end of the trale fer pore Henry Clay Montgomery I am anyways glad that I am goin to die by hangin or shootin, starvin is much too gradjil to soot me.

They seem to be holdin me heer until they can tern me over to the express cumpany an colleck the reward. O Bug Eye how I wish I had never see the Dedwood Coach, an if I had to see it I at leest wish that I had atchelly robbed it. I mite jest as wel of, they are goin to hang me fer it enyway.

Wel Bug Eye the Perkins boy shoed up to ask fer his $8 dolers, an I hav perswaded him to take you these leters this 1nst mor. An wen you get them hury Bug Eye hury, cum heer an slit yer way into this canvas jale, an wen you hav done that we wil figger out sum way to get these log chanes off me. Bring a horse Bug Eye, we wil leeve this darn country ferever.

Ther wil not be any trubbel because ther is ony 1 gard, an he is out in frunt. An I am the ony prisoner in this tent, in fack it was put up speshully fer me, I am the 1st man to hav a publick bildin put up fer me in Cheese Cloth. An if you think that is any satisfacshun you are crazy.

Do not delay, Bug Eye, yer pore pardner is almost done.

Yr. Obeedint Servant,

—HANK

Cheese Cloth Jale
Black Hills 1878

DEER BUG EYE,

The trubbel around heer is not that I robed the Dedwood Coach, it is rether that I didunt rob it, I hav found out that mutch Bug Eye. The suspishun has got around that I am jest wat I say I am, a peeseful onest man. Ware as Cheese Cloth is cumpletly run by a pack of theeves, merderers, an werse, they don't like to see a onest man getin anyplase. If ever I get out of this Bug Eye I wil sistimatickly leed a werse life, I hav figered out how to get along good in the Black Hills. Onesty will be a thing of the past so fer as I am conserned, I am makin out a list now of sum of the ofenses I intend to comit.

1. I wil steel a horse, an if the troo owner complanes, I wil hav him hung.
2. I wil cheet in a card game, an if enybudy dont like it I wil cut his nose off. An go rite on playin.
3. I wil pick out the most harmless inofensive man in Cheese Cloth an beet him up an make him danse with bulits an such like an giv him no peese until he leeves.
4. Wenever I go in a sloon I wil not leeve it until it is a compleet reck. An I wil make a regler practis of this.
5. My charge to leeve peepul liv is gona be $1 doler, an enybudy that don't pay it I wil shoot him.
6. Wel, wat do you sujest fer number 6st Bug Eye?

This is gona be very paneful to my beter feelins, but wat the hel heer Bug Eye, a man has got to liv. An if I cant liv in peese without makin 1 continul fite of it, O al rite.

I have rote a song Bug Eye, an I wil rite it down heer fer you. I want you to see that it is printed in the diffrunt papers in the U.S. & Erope, I hav the feelin that nuthin like it has ever ben rote befour, an I do not want to keep it frum the werld. Heer it is:

Ther 1nst was a very extingwish man,
Name of Henry Clay Montgomery,
He cum to the Black Hills to get away frum sivilizashun,
An al such gol darn flummery.

Jest look at that Bug Eye, a rime fer Montgomery, you woudunt beleeve it coud of ben done.

This Montgomery feller was a hard werkin man,
Warever he did go,
He labered the hole of 1 winter suportin his pore old pardner,
In spite of the terific cold an the snoe.

Al the fellers in the Black Hills was littel short fellers,
They was jellus of this fine full-size man.
They sed we wil fix this feller Montgomery,
At leest we will if we can.

Now I want you to notis this next 1 Bug Eye, it has the best rime fixin ever I see, not ony does the 1st rime rime with the 3d rime, but the 2d rime also rimes with the 4st rime. This is very hard to get that way.

It aynt hardly needful to menshun
That wen they tride this you can jest bet
It was brot very strongly to ther attenshun
That Hank was the best man yet.

Hows that Bug Eye.

By cowerdly meens they went to werk
An flang him in the jale,
In spite of his grate cerridge
Sloe starvashun soon made him week an pale.

O pardner now deer pardner,
Ware the —— are you at,
Aynt you goin to cum an save pore Hank,
It woud be a good idee at that.

Pore Hank is sloely dyin,
Fer fer away frum home,
Tra la, tra la, tra la, tra la, tra la lulala,
Tra la.

That is as fer as I have got Bug Eye, in fack I hav not finish that last verse, I jest put in them tralas to finish out the toon, until I think of sum mor rimes. Notis that tuchin appeel in the next to the last verse Bug Eye. Mebbe you are wundrin wat that dash meens. That dash stans for "hel" Bug Eye, but it is beter to leeve it as it is wen it cums to printin it in the papers. I do not want peepul to think I am trine to cerupt ther childern, nuthin coud be ferther frum my intenshun.

This is sposed to be sang to the toon of The old Speckeld Cow is Dyin. The toon is a littel non regler, but if you run the werds together kind of fast in sum plases, you can generly manije to cum out strong on the last note. Wen sang rite the hole thing has a very sadenin affeckt.

Hury Bug Eye, I am week frum starvin.

Yr. Obeedint Servant,

—HANK.

Saim Plase.

DEER BUG EYE,

A littel hope has sprang to lite Bug Eye, if you dont soon get me out of this fix you wil find that I hav gone to werk an see to it myself.

Today a littel short feller with long mustashes cum to this heer jale tent an he sed so you are the Hoozer Jint an I sed so they say. He sed I am Wile Jim from Mexico, evrybudy has herd of me, I am bad. I sed that is very intrustin. He sed I am the meenest skunk in the Black Hills, I am too meen to let liv an too tuff to kill. With that he let out a long string of cuss werds, I did not noe wat he was swarin at then, but sinse then I hav found out he has to get them out evry time befour he can say sumthin.

Wel Bug Eye he looked around to see if enybudy was lookin, an the gard had gone to get a drink. So Wile Jim sed you are jest the feller I am lookin fer, I need a new pardner. I sed but, an he sed shut up, if you start argyin with me like that agen it wil be yer last werd, wat do you meen he sed. His hole apeerunse changed Bug Eye he looked like a wile man. He sed see that tin can in the street, *Bang*, an he shot a hole in it, an he sed see that saplin, an he thrun a hooge nife an it stuck cleer throo the saplin, later he had a hard time pulin it out. An he sed see the ridje pole of this heer tent, an he lep 4 feet in the air an giv the ridje pole a terific kik, an the tent cum down on me. An outside I herd him yelin That is the kine of pole cat I am, gimme room gimme room.

Wel Bug Eye I thrashed around under that tent ½ smuthered an very miserbil, an I coudunt find the edje, but finly I found a week plase in the canvas an stuck my hed out throo it. Wile Jim sed now wil you lissen an do wat I say an I sed yessir. He sed al rite, but the nex time you get funy wil be the last, I wil pul yer hed off.

Wel Bug Eye he cussed fer a long time, he is a teribil feler, I never see his beet. But finly he sed can you lift that log you are chaned to an I sed yes. He sed tonite I wil start a generl row in the sloon across the street, an the gard wil run across to see wat is up, an you cum down to the crick, an I wil hav horses ther, 1 fer you an 1 fer yer log, an we wil ride away, an get you loos frum the log at our leezyer. I sed ther is no use yer goin to the trubbel. He sed wy, an I sed becaus a row starts in that sloon evry nite, an if I want a horse or 2 I wil steel them. I am watin fer Bug Eye I sed.

That set him off agen Bug Eye, an he made a gump at me, an I ducked back into the canvas, an he wauked al over the pile of tent in his hi heel boots, an it was very paneful, but I gess he coud not find me, anyway he sed al rite you can cum out now. I stuck my hed out. He sed wil yo do wat I say, an I sed yessir.

Very wel, he sed, you had beter be ther at the crick tonite, otherwise I wil tan yer hide fer a shert, I need a new shert. He is awfil Bug Eye, ther is nuthin I woud put past him.

It looks very much like I got a new pardner Bug Eye. Plees do not take this as a insult to you, I do not meen it as such. I woud ony too wilinly wate until you cum ony I cannot help myself. Heer is wat you do Bug Eye, foller us up, an wen you cetch up with us we wil join forses an sum way pry me loose frum this teribil new pardner. But do not delay Bug Eye, I hav the feelin that if I exidently make a false moove with this feller it wil be the end.

Yr. Obeedint Servint,

—HANK.

Stil later.

DEER BUG EYE,

A wunderfil thing has hapen Bug Eye, I hav fel in luv. An if you laff I wil brake evry bone in yer hed Bug Eye, you woud not laff if you coud see how cum.

This afternoon after I had got my tent set up agen a beutifil gerl cum to the frunt of my tent. I was speechless with serprise. She was al dressed in calico Bug Eye as pritty as ever you see, an she had long brown curls over her sholders, an a flour in it, an eyes the color of good wisky, an with much the same effeck, an she was jest tal enuf to cum up to the 2nd button on my shert. An I am goin to keep that button always, to remember her by. Ther was ony 1 littel thing that any 1 coud say kinda marred her apeerunce, an that was she had a cuppel of frunt teeth missin. But the feller shoud be shot that woud mind a littel thing like that.

After a wile she sed wat are you starin like a zany fer. I giv her a smile. Then she sed You pore feller I feel sory fer you, I see you are a meer child in spite of yer grate size, an I sed yessum. She sed did you noe they are goin to hang you an I sed yessum, wen. She sed tonite. It giv me a terribil start Bug Eye. I sed ware, an she sed wat has that got to do with it, an I sed wy wat put it in ther heds to make it tonite, an she sed they hav tride to colleck the reward frum the express cumpny an the cumpny has went out of bizness. I sed so that is wy I have had nuthin to eet al day, an she sed yes they figgered it woud be wasted. Bug Eye I pritty neer cride, is that eny way to fatten a man up fer hangin, to give him nuthin to eet.

I sed how do you noe. She sed my father runs a sloon, we get al the late noos. My name is Rose she sed. I sed Ime pleesed to meet you my name is Henry Clay Montgomery, I am Bug Eyes pardner. I never herd of him she sed. I sed I expeck not, he dont amount to very much. She looked al round to see if enybudy was watchin. They wasunt. Suddinly she sed heer is the keey to them

padlocks, kwick unlock them. Bug Eye it shore felt grate to get them log chanes off my legs. I was goin to make a brake fer it, but she sed you set rite still an keep them chanes on yer legs jest like they was stil padlocked ther. An dont make a moove until tonite wen it is dark, an then you cleer out. I sed yessum.

With that she left me Bug Eye with me holerin cum back cum back dont go away yet, but she only told me to shut up, an presuntly she cum back with a side of bacin. It was oncooked but I ate it, an ever sinse then I have ben too dry to spit, but littel do I care Bug Eye. She sed goodby Mister Montgomery I wish you luck. I sed cal me Henry. She sed goodby Henry. I sed gimme kiss. She done so. I will never ferget it Bug Eye. An if ever I get out of this fix alive I wil try to leed a beter life, an contínly do good to others, an make my forchin, an go find the gold that I left in the crick that time I was hard pushed, an cum back an get Rose (wat a purty name Bug Eye) an take her to Singel Tree Indianna an never cum to the Black Hills agen. That is wat I am goin to do, so help me Mozus, this time I meen it.

Yr. Obeedint Servint,

—HANK.

P S I hav a exlint plan to get rid of this terbil new pardner Wile Jim. Wen I make my brake fer it I wil not take the trale to the crick, I wil take the trale leedin tord the pass. An I wil leeve Wile Jim watin at the crick frum then on, fer al I care. Pritty smart huh Bug Eye. An I wil go strate to Elk Mowntin. Meet me at our old stand on Elk Mowntin Bug Eye. Halyloogy, our luck is changed!

—HANK.

In the Hills,
Follerin day.

DEER BUG EYE,

O gosh Bug Eye this is awfil, wat do you think. I got out of jale al rite accordin to the plan, the row broke out in the sloon acros the street rite on scedil, an I snuck out of town the opposit way frum ware Wile Jim was sposed to be watin fer me. An as I cum round the bend in the trale jest outside Cheese Cloth I run rite smack into 3 horses, an ther was Wile Jim settin crooked in his saddel in a kine of sourcastic posishun, an lookin very meen.

I sed O it is you. He sed you gessed it. I sed I thout you was goin to be watin down by the crick. He sed Uhuh, I thout you woud try to giv me the slip by cumin out the opposit way, you tride to sneek away didunt you. An ther he sat, I coud not see wat he was doin, but frum the sound I gudged he was sharpenin his nife on his boot. I was jest about to brake an cut fer cover wen he sed Do not deseeve yourself you can not outrun my nife. You hav promis to be my pardner an do wat I say he sed, an Im going to keep you a man of yer werd. Get on that horse he sed, we are goin about our bizness. An he sed if you ever try to desseeve me agen you wil not even hav time to be sory it wil be too late. An he told me sum things he woud do to me, like he sed he has done to sum other fellers, an they made my blud run cold. I got on the horse Bug Eye.

So heer we are camp by White Crick, an I don't now how I am goin to get this to you or how it wil al end. Wile Jim is pertendin to be asleep but I now is ony watchin fer me to make a brake, an if ther is any misonderstandin I feer it wil go hard with yer pore pardner. Tomorrer we are goin to start out on sum skuldugery he is cookin up, I dont now wat it is exsep it is calclated to make Wile Jim rich. Meenwile we are heddin fer a hidin out plase he has up on Old Thunderashun.

I sernly feer the werst Bug Eye, an if you heer no more frum me I gess the best thing fer you to do is to cum up to Old Thunderashun an coleck the corps of yer pore pardner that always done wel by you. Goodby Bug Eye, I wil make a game struggel yet if ony I see a desint openin.

Yr. Obeedint Servint,

—HANK.

Ferther an werse off.

DEER BUG EYE,

O gosh Bug Eye the werst has cum to past, Wile Jim has told me his plan fer gettin hisself rich, an it is practicly al over alredy. He ames fer us to go huntin up the difrunt Injun vilages in difrunt parts of the Black Hills an steel ther horses an sell them. Wen I herd that Bug Eye I didunt now wether to laff or bust out cryin, but finly I desided to make a brake fer it. I lep to my feet an went galpin fer the tal timber, an I herd Wile Jim yel but I pade noe atenshun. Then I herd his gun speek *Bang*, an the dust gumped in frunt of me an I stopped. He sed cum back heer, an I cum back.

I also tride ressonin with him. I sed wat wil the Injuns be doin al this time, an he got very nasty about it Bug Eye, he sed they had better not make a false moove, or it wil go hard with them. That stumped me Bug Eye. But I tride 1 mor argyment. I hav found out Wile Jim has a grate respeck fer guvment cavulry, it makes me think he has had a ruckus with them at sum time an found out that ther is 1 outfit he cant wip.

I sed wat wil the guvment cavulry be dooin do you think. He sed that is jest ware we are on the rite side of the fense fer 1nst, as soon as the guvment finds the Injuns are chasin us they wil tern around an wip the Injuns agen an make it a lessin to them. Jest the saim he sed I woud jest as soon the cavulry new nuthin about it, anyway we wil not tel them, jest leeve them find out fer themselves, an then do wat they think rite. Wat are you goin to do with a feller like that Bug Eye. I have al but giv up hope.

Bug Eye if you get this cum an tie into this new pardner of mine befour it is too late.

Nuthin remanes but fer Wile Jim to deside wich Injuns we will rade 1st an ware. We are moovin on to Bobtale gap Bug Eye.

Yr. Obeedint Servant,

—HANK.

Bobtale Gap, afternoon.

DEER BUG EYE,

We hav run into a old broke down traper Bug Eye an he has told us that sum Shiyan Injuns is stil camp about 40ty miles frum heer, an ony about 16 miles frum the hidin out plase that Wile Jim cals his shebang. As soon as he herd that Wile Jim says I noe rite ware they are at. An after the old traper had went his way Wile Jim says them Shiyans is old Hawk Heds band, ther is ony about 5 teepees ful of them an they got neerly a 100 hed of horse, they are our 1st customers he sed, we wil rade them tomorrer nite.

Bug Eye I dont spose you wil ever see this leter but if you do, if you ever made a qwick moove in yer life make it now an hed us off befour we get to Simmerun Pass, it is the ony hope.

Hury Bug Eye—HANK.

P S If enythin shoud hapen to me Bug Eye such as getin shot an kilt, ther is jest 1 littel thing you can do for me, it is the last thing you can do fer yer pore ded pardner, I never asked you a faver befour, an I noe you will not refoos me now. I want you to go to Cheese Cloth Bug Eye an look up my Rose the saloon-keepers dotter, an I want you to see that she livs on the fat of the land frum now on, and don't let her mery enubudy else ner run off with enybudy includin you Bug Eye, an never leeve her as long as she lives but be her frend an pertecter always. An I noe you will do this fer pore Hank. An if you dont I sware I wil tern over in my grave uperds of 40ty times a nite Bug Eye, an cum back an hant you, an persnly see to it that you never get a ful onscart nites sleep agen to yer dyin day.

Wile Jims Shebang, Black Hills,
October, 1878.

DEER Bug Eye,

Wel Bug Eye the privut war between me an the Shiyan Injuns is finly over, at leest so far as I am conserned. An in sum ways it was a grate suxess, an in other ways it was not so much of a suxess. An heer I am at Wile Jims Shebang ware I was sposed to meet him,

watin anksusly to see wether he is goin to raze hel or not wen he gets back.

The grate rade on the Shiyans took plase last nite Bug Eye, I wil try to giv you a idee of wat took plase. In the 1st plase Bug Eye ther had not ben any moon the nite befour, an that is a shore sine ther isunt goin to be any moon the follerin nite, at least not much of a moon. So we new ther woud not be any trubbel with the moon.

Doorin the corse of the afternoon a hooge black storm begun bloein up frum the north eest, an I sed to Wile Jim we cant rade the Shiyans to nite, it is goin to rane to beet time. An Wile Jim let off that long string of cuss werds he always has to get off befour he can say wat he started out to say, an wen that was over he sed it cant rane too much to soot me, I hope we have to swim our horses an the horse herd too, it will be al the beter fer us an ony discerije the Shiyans, everybudy noes Shiyans is afrade* of thunder an litenin he sed. I sed I aynt crazy about it myself, litenin can pritty neer kil a feller if it hits him. I have offen herd of it so doin. An tho I aynt never herd of anybudy bein struck by thunder, I bet anybudy that was woud be nock endways, an get a walop he woud not soon ferget. I bet a feller that was run over by thunder woud be skwash flat, that is the way thunder sounds to me I sed. An Wile Jim cussed an sed I gess you are crazy, evrybudy noes thunder is ony a noise, an how can you get run over by a noise. I sed nuthin Bug Eye, but I gess he is the 1 that is crazy, whoo ever herd of a noise without nuthin makin it. That is about as sily as havin a shadder without nuthin makin it, I am not a man to be fooled by any such darn sooperstishuns.

About a hour before supper the storm broke Bug Eye. Any way it woud of ben a hour befour supper if it was you an me, but Wile Jim cares nuthin fer suppers or dinners eether, I never see such a feller, abslutly without prinsipul Bug Eye. 1st ther cum a teribil wind an bent the trees over an picked up sand in the canyun an thrun it in our fase and made the horses tern around an fase tale into it, we coudunt make any hedway fer mebby 15 minnits. Then the wind slacked up a littel to giv the litenin an thunder a chanse. *Crash whack* heer she cum. I thout the Black Hills was goin to split wide open. It is eesy to see ware al the canyuns an genral ruffness cum frum out heer, the thunder has busted evrythin up. At least that is my theery.

With that she begun to rane Bug Eye, she cum down in solid sheets about 6½ or 6 an ¾ inches thick, you had to cup yer hands over yer nose to get yer breth an wen you did get it it was ringin wet. Needless to say we was practicly soked Bug Eye, later I rung 1 qwart of water out of my undershirt aloan. Wel anyway we cum up to the lookout point we had picked an seen the Shiyan horses, bettern 8ty hed, rite in the meddoe ware we new they would be. An Wile Jim sed get yer barins now, so you wil noe wat you are doin wen it gets dark. An I done so.

Ther was not a Injun in site, they had al took cover in the teepees, exsep 2 sqwaws that was bringin in fire wood, they had probly put it off til the last minnit Bug Eye, an 1 skwaw fetchin water frum the crick, gosh you woud not think it woud be nesry.

I sed if this litenin keeps up sum Injun wil see us an ther wil be trubbel. Wile Jim sed I sernly hope so, I dont noe wat I wil do fer trubbel if we do not hav sum soon. Wat a feller, it was al I coud do to keep him frum galpin down an merderin them Shiyans in ther tents. Finly it got dark Bug Eye. The litenin stopped, an it settled in fer good old fashun rane, pore, pore, pore, like it does wen its good fer al nite. An still it got darker an darker, until it is a wunder a man woud not get on his horse backerds, an set fasin the tale without never noein the difrunts. Exsep that a experensed rider can genruly tell.

I sed wat wil we do if a water spowt goes to werk an cums down the canyun an drowns us. Wile Jim sed ther you go agen, you are the most cowardly man I ever see. I never let my pardners think of them things he sed, you do like I say or

you wil regret it. Wat coud I do Bug Eye, fer a minnit I didunt noe wich woud be werse, get kilt by Wile Jim or get shot by the Shiyans an drowned in the canyun, but finly I desided on the latter, hopin sumthin woud tern up.

At last Wile Jim sed al rite Hank get goin. I sed I wil foller you, you leed the way. He sed no, I hav to set heer an see that the Shiyans dont start nuthin. You go start them horses up the canyun he sed, befour I pul yer hed off an do it myself.

Wel Bug Eye I rode slowly down the mowntin, an pritty neer run over a teepee befour I finly found the horse herd rite ware I new it was al the time. I got them moovin, an a terribil time of it I had, I coudunt see a horse until I run into him, an I coudunt tell wether I had them al started or not exsep by count, an I coudunt find ony about 2 dozun of them in the dark by runin into them, an I ony had a generul idee of ware the canyun was by that time anyway, I wished I was ded. But finly I cum across a lite grey horse that I coud see pritty neer 5 teen feet away, an I sed to myself, heer is probly the leeder, I wil fog this grey horse up the canyun an the rest wil hav to push on ahead as best they can. An that is wat I done Bug Eye, an finly found the canyun by the sound of porin water, an up we went.

I will say nuthin about the teribil time I had ridin up the canyun Bug Eye, it is my hope I wil soon ferget it an never think of it agen. The crick was risin an rorin down over the roks, and ½ the time I was fitin my horse to get him to go on up an the other ½ the time I was keepin the grey horse frum ternin back, an sum times I had to get down in water pritty neer up to my neck an go along pushin my horse ahed of me, an at 1 time I was pushin both horses ahed of me, ther was no plase to put ther feet the water was too deep an too fast to swim, any of these little short fellers woud hav ben drowned in a minnit, let alown savin ther horses. But anyway I made it throo, altho I woud not try it agen fer a $10000000 dolers. An presuntly the goin got better, an we made the 15teen mile to Wile Jims Shebang in about 8 hours, jest as it was beginnin to cum lite.

A hapy serprise was watin fer me Bug Eye. I didunt hav any horse herd, the grey horse was the ony 1 that cum throo. But whoo do you spose that grey horse was Bug Eye. Bug Eye, mebby you remember my menshunin my horse name Wilbur, the 1 with the week legs. Wel sir the grey horse was Wilbur.

I coud hardly beleeve my eyes Bug Eye. An he was lookin so good I didunt hardly recernize him, pritty neer as fat as a punkin. I thout mebby his legs had got stronger, an I lep on his back to find out, an he kind of skweeked an fell down same as he used to. Dawgone, Bug Eye, fer a wile I was a hapy man.

Then I got thinkin Bug Eye. I had pritty neer fergot Wile Jim. Ware is he at Bug Eye. Wy hasunt he cum back to the shebang. Wen wil he be heer. Above all Bug Eye, wat wil Wile Jim do wen he asks ware is the horse herd an I show him Wilbur.

Sumtimes I think I wil take Wilbur an the other horse an cut an run fer it. But both horses is blowed an Wilbur is no good anyway, an even if I had 2 fresh rase horses I spose Wile Jim would get me in the end. An sumtimes I think I wil barikade myself in the roks an fite fer my life, but I see no hope in that eether, it woud ony be hasenin the end. It looks very much as if I hav done it now Bug Eye, yer pore pardner is a gone goose, wat wil I do an wich way wil I tern.

O gosh Bug Eye heer he cums.

—HECK.

On the way to Cheese Cloth,
Fall of 1878

DEER BUG EYE,

Hallyloogy Bug Eye, I am now the champeen bad man of the Black Hills. I am reddy an willin to admit that Wile Jim is the next tuffest man in the Black Hills, but if that is so I am in the leed by a eenormous gap, ther is not any comparison Bug Eye.

It all cum about frum me losin my temper Bug Eye, I find I hav ben exersisin too grate control. That is the troo secrut of suxess, to be always losin yer temper. Then peepul show you sum fittin respeck, dont let anybudy tel you difrunt. It is al rite to be a good nachered feller, if you are always kine an keep yer temper peepul wil say Ther is a fine feller, I like him, let us see if he wil let us taik away his sox an shert. But persnly I am goin to giv my terbil temper ful rain, an be the leedin talker frum now on. Heer is wat tuk plase Bg. Eye.

Rite soon after my last leter Wile Jim cum ridin up to the shebang, an he was wet an dripin an shiverin his teeth til he coud hardly talk anythin but chatters. He sed O heer you are rattel rattel an it is a good thing fer you, I have ben fitin al nite an made the Shiyan Injuns practicly a thing of the past. Ware is the cofee. Rattel. An I sed wat cofee, an he sed Wat rattel you havunt any cofee reddy, I have a grate mind to skin you alive. An I sed Plees let me off this time, I will try to do better. An he sed Wel ware is the horse herd we run off with. I sed ther it is tied to that tree.

He sed rattel dont goke with me, an I sed it is no goke, that is the horse we capcherd, his naim is Wilbur. Do not wery I sed, sinse you have wipped the Shiyans it wil be eesy to go back an get ther other horses. Wile Jim walked over an looked Wilbur over, an you never herd such cussin in al yer born days. An sudinly he giv Wilbur a terrific kik in the stummick, an pore Wilbur let out a yel of pane an fel down.

I hardly noe wat happened next Bug Eye, the next thing I noe I found I had Wile Jim by the throte, he seemed to be kine of rapped around a tree. I hav never ben worse scart Bug Eye I wil tel you frankly, I thout wat hav I done. With that I slacked up a littel on Wile Jims throte, an he sed help help.

It kine of startled me Bug Eye. Wat coud he meen yellin fer help, ther was nobudy within 60ty miles unless it was a few wounded Shiyans far away, an them runnin fer ther lives. On 2nd thout I desided to choke him a littel ferther.

Pritty soon I loosened up on him a littel agen an he sed Spare me an I choked him an he sed hav pitty on me an I hit him a lick an he sed plees do not kil me I wil be yer frend fer life an I shook the dalites out of him an he sed help stop you are kilin me. An with that I flang him up in the tree Bug Eye an he hung over a lim lookin mor ded than alive.

After a wile he begun to mone an say I am dyin I am kilt, an I sed you are the eesiest kilt ever I see, practicly no trubbel at al, I guess I wil shake you out of ther an finish the job. That brot him to life, Bug Eye, an he went scramblin up the branches holdin on fer deer life, an tho it was a yung tree ony about a foot thick I coud not dislodje him.

I sed throe down yer weepuns befour I been you with a rock. An he showered down qwite a colecshun Bug Eye. I sed who is the feller that is bad. He sed you are. I sed whoo is the meenest skunk in the Black Hills. He sed you are. I sed whoo is too mean to let liv an too tuff to kil, an he sed you are. I am ony a pore onest man he sed not meenin harm to nobudy.

In that case I sed you can cum down. He done so, an I sed I wil giv you 1 minnit to get out of heer, get away frum that grub. He sed Hank I wil starve to deth, an I sed that is probly so, that woud be too bad, I guess I will put you out of yer mizry rite heer, an I made a pass at him. An that is al the news about Wile Jim Bug Eye, I hav not seen him sinse.

An now I remember how I werked it wen I wipped the entire town of Hen Crick, I giv my temper free rein, thats wat I done. An now I am not afraide to go back to Cheese Cloth, if they want trubbel they can hav it with both barls. Cum to Cheese Cloth Bug Eye, you an me is eether goin to be boss of Cheese Cloth or we are goin to be the ony livin fellers in it. I am loded fer bare.

An I aynt nobudy's Obeedint Servint Eether,

Not by a dam site. —HANK.

CAPTAIN DINGLE

tells a tale of a detective and his gangster quarry shanghaied aboard a hell ship

BOUND SOUTH

IT WAS raining, which was bad enough. A cold rain, too. There was a clammy fog on the river, and the streets near the wharves were cheerless and dank, like a Russian hell where all is cold. Rats venturing from the ships to seek bits of food around the dirty shops scuttled back to the ships for comfort. The street lamps only half glowed, like rheumy eyes. Here and there a shaded window hinted at warmth within. If human beings trod the pavements, it was hurriedly, even furtively, and as briefly as possible.

Joe Lennard shuffled along one side of the street where the warehouse was, peering every way jerkily. Far enough behind him on the opposite side of the road Officer Burton, plain clothes man, kept pace with Joe, keeping to the shadows.

Presently Joe stopped. So did Burton. Joe slithered into a doorway near the wharf end of the street, and Burton reached the spot in one swift rush. In the same instant four men turned the corner as if they had a very definite object in view. There was a huddle, blows, choked curses; and then Joe Lennard and Detective Burton were bundled up like pieces of freight, pitched into a cart that sprang into being at a whistle, and were rolled decisively down to a grubby steamer with steam at her stack.

"You can tell Captain Irons to go

ahead. Dunno who or what we've caught, but they can shovel coal!" the chief engineer told a sailor on the dirty, littered deck.

Soon the engineroom telegraph rang, the steamer backed into the river and headed seaward. The *Lurcher* was bound south.

She was nicely on her way before poor, dope fuddled Joe Lennard or sizzling, vengeful Officer Burton knew it.

Joe did not know Burton, who was a new importation for the running to earth of a pestilent ring of drug moguls. That was a clever ring. It had fooled all the local cops, dicks and stools. Poor old Joe Lennard, one time near welterweight champion of another, cleaner ring, was known to be hanging on the fringes; but, doped as he almost always was, he was shrewd enough to keep out of danger until the new man appeared. Burton, secure in his newness, came nearer to following Joe to a killing than any officer had. Then the *Lurcher*, needing firemen for a hurried night sailing, upset the trap.

JOE AND Burton found themselves feeding voracious red furnaces with shovels that weighed a ton each. Side by side, choked with dust, scorched with fierce heat, with a savage engineer cursing them and a draught of cold air from the ventilators hitting them like ice douches, they slowly came to full consciousness after a period of daze. One other sweating wretch hurled coal with them; yet another grabbled coal from the bunker to the stokehold floor.

Burton straightened his back, shook his head, and flung down his shovel. His legs were unsteady; the steamer rolled and throbbed. His head ached like a Volstead New Year morning. The assistant engineer was on his way back along the alley to the engineroom when Burton's shovel clanged on the footplates, and Burton was already on the iron ladder leading to the fiddley hatch when the engineer turned to stop him.

There was a rush and a scuffle. Joe Lennard dropped his shovel to tackle the engineer. Burton clambered on upward, leaving a fine fight behind him. He was not interested in anything else just then but to tell the world, as represented by the skipper of this steamer, what it meant to kidnap an officer of the law. He blinked until his eyes mastered the clammy blackness of the drizzling night. Vague lights bleared out there in the murk, diminishing. Near at hand, more like a green ghostly luminance than a light, the starboard sidelight glimmered against the wet drift.

Then he made out the bridge and the ladder. The cold air revived him. He shook himself, took a deep breath and mounted the ladder. Two men stood in the weather bridge wing, talking in low tones. Burton appeared before them like a thunderbolt.

"Somebody pulled a boner when he pulled me on this boat," he snarled. "Who was it? I want to kiss him!"

"Who's this, Mister?" the skipper turned to the second mate.

"I'll tell you who I am!" retorted Burton. Even in the gloom they could see the badge shining on his vest as he opened his coat and crowded close to them. "You've kidnaped a police officer; that's what I am. Now start back to shore—"

The skipper and second mate of the *Lurcher* laughed at him. Burton got hot. The blood rushed to his bruised head. He made a grab for the nearest man, and they both jumped on him with sure, practised hands and feet. Something fell on his aching head, and he dropped. Then the officer blew his whistle. A seaman appeared.

"Get another hand and take this back to the second engineer," the captain said.

"It's one o' the guys we shanghaied, ain't it, sir?" the seaman muttered. "Had a gun, he did. Th' chief took it off him."

They carried Burton away, back to the fierce labor of the stokehold. The captain of the *Lurcher* kept the badge to add to other trophies. It went into a drawer along with the pocket kit of a doctor who had at one time postponed aiding a fatally injured man in order to study the

art of raising steam in the *Lurcher's* boilers.

WHEN Burton came to full consciousness for the second time, he was wise enough to tackle his job and so gain comparative respite. Joe Lennard was sweating in silence, too. Neither spoke to the other. The third fireman pricked and sliced, raked and flung coal, with the grim precision of long use; and the two greenhorns cannily followed his example. Joe's head was freshly battered; he sported a purple shiner; his lips were cruelly cut so that he grinned incessantly. His eyes burned and he breathed wheezily, but he carried on. And when the engineer appeared again, eager to find fault, the gages showed full head of steam, the fires were going splendidly.

"That's your game, my cherub," he grinned at Joe. "Do your stuff. A live fireman's better than a dead pug any day."

And as he ducked again into the alleyway:

"Joe Lennard! You a near champ, hey? Shovel coal, my son, that's you."

"You that Joe Lennard, the old welter?" Burton panted after awhile.

He glanced keenly at Joe's unlovely face. He knew Joe only by name.

"Hell! Do I look like it?" growled Joe.

He went on shoveling. And in due time the watches were changed. The beaten men crawled forward to the quarters, guided to bath and bunk by the silent third man. The steamer had cleared the coast, and was ploughing along to the southward at a steady speed that kept the seas foaming around her. The rain and the mist had cleared. It was a fine night. Before going below for the balance of the night the captain and the chief engineer met for a brief exchange.

"The Second tells me one o' those two birds we gathered in told him he was Joe Lennard, the old pug. A useful lad himself, the Second is. He'll have no more trouble," the chief said.

The captain laughed.

"The other lad came bustin' on to the bridge and flashed a trick badge. Said he was a detective. You'll have no more trouble with him. It was a real badge, though. Stole it, likely."

"Aye, shouldn't wonder, sir. I took a gun from him when he came aboard. A tough lookin' bird. Gunman, sure enough," the chief decided as he left for his slumbers.

A GOLDEN day was lighting up the blue ocean when next the green firemen had to go below. Sheer fellowship of misery drew them together. They found the deck unsteady, and there was something queer about the way their breakfast acted when they emerged from the forecastle into the keen air. They let their watch mate go ahead, and then they went over to the rail with one accord.

"I was going to brace that captain again," groaned Burton.

"I meant to tell that engineer my name again, "Joe moaned, "but—I—won't!"

Burton possessed a native shrewdness which saved him from the mistake of bearding the captain again. He saw the insecurity of his position. The ship was no fine liner. The crew were a desperate lot of hoboes apparently as much out of place here as he was. He saw a man talk back at the mate, and that man was carried forward, all reddened, and did not appear again for two days. He saw poor, shaky, livid Joe Lennard tell the engineer a few blistering home truths, and Joe, fighting like a terrier but grinning with agony, sobbing for wind, would have been battered to a pulp but for Burton's shovel. The cocky engineer dared not face the edge of that fearful tool in hands as sure and eager as Burton's.

"Our play is to carry on, Joe, and saw wood until we get to land," Burton advised afterward. "I know a trick then."

"If I c'd get hold of a snootful of snow—" whimpered Joe.

"You'll be able to lick him without dope, if you hold yer hosses and shovel coal," Burton said wisely. "Nothing like firing boilers for bringing back the old kick. Had some wallop once, didn't you, Joe?"

"Look at what that stiff handed me! Wallop!" grunted Joe.

But Burton had his way. He knew he could bring the captain to account in good time. The time was not yet. And he was interested in Joe Lennard now as he had not been before. He had only been hunting him as a cog in the wheel of drug sharks, never identifying him with grand old Joe Lennard of the ring. Now he could see a chance to combine business with sport and do a bit of getting even at the same time. He'd have Joe right to his hand when time was ripe, too. Duty must not suffer through any such trifle as a mere shanghaiing. Neither could it be set aside for friendship.

Misery made them shipmates, and Joe, knowing nothing of Burton's man hunting proclivities, accepted him for the stout sidekick he was. Together they hoped for the dawn of their own day. Clean salt air and hard work would do much for Joe, once the drug was out of his system.

But he was to suffer much before that cleansing was complete. Joe had sunk pretty low. For days the fierce travail of the stokehold came near to killing him. He suffered so that Burton went to the captain for stimulant to stave off collapse.

"Stimulant? Get for'ard, my lad, and tell your dopey prizefighter to sweat it out," the captain said.

Burton began to talk with savage emphasis. A mate joined in. Burton threatened. Skipper and mate together took him, turned him, and hurled him down the bridge ladder like a sack of corn. He had been a good man in his profession; few were better manhandlers than Burton; but it takes a super landsman to tackle successfully two hard bitten lusty seamen on a teetering deck with a ladder at his back.

BURTON took a lame back and a sprained wrist to his cheerless bunk. When he could no longer bear Joe's sufferings he went out on deck where men were washing clothes. He picked out the most likely pair, and went straight to his mark. He told them who he was, and promised them reward if they would help him force the captain to land him and his pal, who was a sick man. The men grinned at him, and winked, then grinned at each other.

"That's a noo lay, ain't it, Bill?" chuckled one.

"I'd say so," the other returned. "I've heard a few in my time. Didn't one lad say he was a parson, Jem?"

"Prizefighter!" said Jem.

Burton went back to Joe in disgust. And half an hour before it was time for them to go down to the fires again he took him on deck and walked him up and down. Joe cursed him fitfully. Burton told him it was all in preparation for the day of reckoning. The men Burton had spoken to told others, and a gang gathered, laughing and joking pointedly. A strapping fireman from the other watch off duty lounged across the deck and stood in their way.

"Which o' you's the champeen fighter?" he bawled.

His voice was thick with years of coal dust; his shoulders and arms were trademarked with the shovel and slice.

"Mind your business; the lad's sick," growled Burton, and shoved forward.

The fireman shoved back and grabbed Joe's arm.

"Let's see you! Gee! What a face fer a champeen! Put yer hands up, and I'll dot the other eye fer you. C'mon."

He slapped Joe's face, and Burton was hurled aside as Joe struck back, hard and straight, squashing the fireman's nose into a red smear. But that was all. The big fellow was a scrapper, hard and fit. He had sea legs too. Joe hooked and uppercut him twice; then one of the fireman's looping swings sank into Joe's stomach and Joe went down. Burton stepped in to keep the fireman back until Joe could stagger to his feet, and four men rushed him. Stokehold boots trampled his toes, and sea toughened arms beat at him.

Burton fell back against the bulwarks of the well deck and was beaten to his knees. He dimly saw Joe get up, totter

forward and go down again, sobbing. They helped each other below to their four hours of labor in eloquent silence. It was a hard place into which they had fallen, and a tough crowd with which to live.

DAY AFTER day of firing furnaces hardened unaccustomed muscles. Food plain and plenty, regular sleep and clean air worked magic. Their legs acquired sea sense, and Joe's eyes grew brighter. His skin too lost some of its pallor. Burton regained his self-confidence as his legs grew steadier. After his experience with the captain and mate at the bridge ladder, he carefully avoided officers.

The men almost left them alone, except for wordy attacks. One fat sailorman, encouraged by the last unequal conflict, stuck his elbow humorously into Burton's ribs with terrific force as they waited at the galley door. But Burton's legs were behaving. The fat sailorman was still sitting on the deck, gasping from a swift and sure demonstration of police manhandling practise, when Burton entered the firemen's forecastle with his mess kids. There was a marked falling off in unpleasant attentions afterward.

Then on a morning all blue and gold and fragrance the steamer swung to anchor in a palm fringed harbor. Red roofs, white houses, brown skinned people. A drowsy hum and a feeling of "never mind" reached out and enveloped the grubby iron ship, even to her wretched stokehold. Burton glanced at Joe, and a faint grimace flitted across his face. He tried to make out the flag that flew from a rambling building among tall palms. Joe seemed indifferent to it all. If anything, he showed increased interest in his job and the steamer.

"Going to hop it here, Joe?" Burton whispered.

Joe looked at him pityingly.

"Hop it?" he echoed. "Brother, you don't know me! I was in on a juicy melon to be cut that night we got sandbagged. I'm goin' right back in this boat to collect!"

"I thought the job was murdering you," Burton grinned.

"Murder me? Say, it's like pattin' the light bag to me! I nigh died fer want of a shot o' dope; but I got over that. Watch me on the way home. I got some debts to pay off." Joe looked hard into Burton's face. "Gee! If you want to beat it, buddy, count on me to give you a boost. I'm yer sidekick."

"I'm staying with you," returned Burton, laughing queerly and turning away. He tried hard to make out that national flag.

Burton meant to get ashore and resume his natural status, then take Joe into custody; afterward he would settle accounts with the captain of the *Lurcher*. Just for a moment he wanted to tell Joe the truth, thus giving him a chance to make himself scarce. Training stopped that impulse. He was bound to take Joe Lennard back. He had started out for that.

The steamer went alongside the wharf to unload. It was a miscellaneous cargo she had; but there was a full cargo to be loaded. The day was about done when she tied up; ship's work ceased. Burton was over the side and well uptown while his watch mates were still washing up. Nobody missed him, except Joe, and Joe guessed that his pal had skipped after all. That was all right. Joe could be dumb as an oyster, if necessary.

BURTON brushed off his clothes as he threaded the sleepy streets. He had worn his shoes and trousers on the passage down, for they were all he had. He had no hat. His coat and vest were an over smart match for the rest of him. They at least were not grimed with coal dust and oil, nor scorched with fierce flame, but merely crumpled by being slept on in a bedless bunk. He had a few silver coins in his pocket, and first of all bought a hat for twenty-five cents. Then he wandered along, looking for the police station, or its equivalent, or a consular office.

None of the crew had known in what

country this port was. They knew the port by name; further they never bothered to inquire. The language Burton heard around him sounded like some sort of Spanish, but he was as vague as most of his kind in matters of geography. Following the flutter of the flag he had first seen, he came to a place which held all the information he needed.

"No extradition," he muttered, emerging. "No use in lugging Joe ashore, then. Might as well stick it out and go back with him."

But he went to find the consul to tell him all about it. The man looked at him as if he had seen many a queer specimen in his time and had learned patience. But he frankly disbelieved Burton's story. Where was his badge? His credentials? Well, the consul would make a note of it, and see the captain of the *Lurcher* in the morning. Would he lend Burton money to cable to the home office? He would not. Perhaps tomorrow.

Burton sent a cable that took every cent he had. It was only one word, his name, Burton, no more. But he hoped the chief would notice the office of origin, and get the idea that his man Burton was at least alive, down there in Coralita. The rest must be guessed at. He tried to open a chat with a native policeman who smiled gleamingly and seemed friendly. But they were not talking each other's language. Burton grew irritable, the policeman ceased smiling, and Burton went aboard the ship in an angry state of mind. He looked for Joe. Joe had gone.

JOE'S absence started another train of unpleasant thought which soon wiped out the petty irritation caused by the futile conversation. Joe gone. Gone where? Burton went on deck and stood at the rail for half an hour trying to make up his mind. The town was quiet. Infrequently voices rang out, usually voices in harsher language than the natives used. Musical notes filtered through the trees from behind the town; fireflies flitted in all the dark spaces. From an anchored sailing ship thrummed a banjo; a negro voice sang to it, and the air was balmy and sweet.

Where had Joe Lennard gone? If he had flown the coop, after what he had said, Burton had been nicely fooled. And all the time he had thought himself so smart, leaving Joe in ignorance of his watchmate's identity. If Joe really had fooled him, and made himself scarce, it was hopeless to look for him, for nobody could ever know where a shrewd crook like Joe would hide. If he had only gone ashore for a ramble, it was not hard to guess that he'd gravitate to the haunts of his kind. But then there was no need to hunt after him. After all, the sane thing was to wait.

Burton waited. He would have relished a cigar. A returning fireman, rendered jovial and generous by liquor, handed out a bundle of reeking black cigarets with an obscene compliment. Burton sucked in the strong smoke gratefully. He was tranquil and assured again by the time Joe Lennard stepped nimbly up the gangway.

"Have a good time, Joe?" he greeted.

Joe grinned, hurrying forward to their quarters. Burton was at his heels and saw Joe peer keenly around the dim forecastle before taking a little package from his pocket and hiding it under his moldy straw mattress which was a relic of a previous voyage and occupant. Burton's bunk had no bed.

"Have a good time, Joe?" Burton repeated.

"Say, buddy, if I was lookin' for it I'd be able to get fried and floosied and elected alderman on the three dollars I got," Joe stated with quiet emphasis. "I never struck no place like this fer stuff. Quiet too. Every guy who has dough is uptown. Captain, and officers too. But I ain't playin' that game no more, buddy."

"What was that you slipped under the bed, Joe? Dope?"

Joe shot a keen glance at Burton, but there was no shame or furtiveness in his glance, only a mild surprise.

"Sure," he nodded.

Burton laid his hand on the bunk rail.

"You don't want to start all over again, Joe. Not that," he said seriously. "Let me have it." Joe grinned, and gently but firmly removed Burton's hand.

"Leave it be. Don't you worry about me," he said. "I'm all cleaned of it. But I want that for a purpose. Maybe you'll know, maybe not. Anyhow, it ain't fer me, old socks. Give you my hand on it, and I never threw a fight."

Somehow the strong grip of Joe's broken and gnarled hand sent a wave of discomfort surging through Burton. It was impossible to feel that grip and doubt the man's sincerity. It was impossible to carry on as he had gone; it was too much like the well known snake in the grass. Yet he could not frame the words that must break Joe's confidence in him. They were natural foes, made comrades by misfortune. And there was something theatrical in a man arresting a chum when all had been known for so long. Instead of blurting out his true status, Burton could only repeat his request for the package of drugs.

"Don't say no more, buddy," Joe returned sharply. "I told you I was through with the stuff, and I mean *through*. The bunch I run with 'ud never have roped me into their dirty game if they hadn't slipped me dope that night Koffman busted my ribs. I was crazy with pain. But there's no dope in me now. I'm goin' back at 'em. They can't use me for a stinkin' graft like that. They tried to make me peddle dope to high school kids. Gals! You know where the gals gets to afterwards. Quick, too. I might 'a' fell for it. They was takin' me in on a juicy cutup, to get me feelin' good, that night we got socked on the callybash. And you was takin' chances down that lane that night, 'bo. I feel better than I ever felt shot full o' snow; but, oh, boy, how different!"

"Just the same, Joe, I hate to see it on you."

"Forget it!" Joe whacked Burton on the back. "We been buddies, ain't we? And we're goin' to pay off some scores on the way back, ain't we? Come and cut in on the fun when we get there."

"I'll have to, Joe," said Burton, honestly.

Joe only laughed as they turned into their steamy bunks. In five minutes he was asleep. Burton lay wakeful for hours.

WHEN the *Lurcher* sailed for home, she shipped half a dozen desperate looking beachcombers to replace her own crowd who had fallen for the fleshpots spurned by Joe. The captain and chief engineer too had been having a good time ashore. It was not much of a cargo that the steamer had secured; barely a half freight of coffee in bags; yet sailing day was a roaring affair, with some flashy grandees from the town giving the officers a vinous sendoff such as might have speeded personages of note. And when the steamer got to sea and encountered a moderate head surge that set her to rolling and pitching crazily, things speedily began to happen.

Burton and Joe were closer now than ever; they were more or less old hands. Their two watchmates were new, and much newer than they had been when shanghaied. The cocky young engineer who popped in and out of the stokehold, yelling for steam, would have been jocose toward them; but Joe had a score to settle with him, and the payment was swift in coming. The two beachcombers were in a sad pickle, coming aboard drunk and half stupid. They were utterly helpless and useless. The engineer cursed them; and failing in that way to make one of them give him an excuse for beating him up, started to beat the fellow up anyway. Then Joe stepped in with eagerness.

"Leave him alone, buddy."

He shoved the engineer back.

"What th— Oh, it's the champ again!"

"You leave the man be; that's enough for you," Joe warned.

The reply was hard and straight; but it missed Joe. Joe was different. The engineer's fist went over Joe's shoulder, and Joe's counter took the fellow close up under the ribs and hurled him backward

over a heap of ashes into the door of the coal bunker.

The surprised and furious engineer forgot all about steam and crawled over the ashes to beat Joe to pulp. Joe met him with a grin, playing with him on the reeling iron floor. Joe had been good in his day. Now he jabbed and hooked and slapped with the open hand until he had his man dizzy and blind with rage. It was simply paying a score, to Joe's way of thinking.

Burton stood back by the ladder, enjoying the fight, but most of all the artistry of Joe's work. When the engineer's face was swollen like a pudding, and Joe still grinned, the job seemed about done. But the engineer thought otherwise. He stumbled back a pace, suddenly stooped for Joe's shovel and swung it.

Joe's grin vanished. He frowned, stepped in like a slither of light and struck under the shovel two trip hammer jolts to the chin. There was a click, the man pitched to the floor, out to the world and beyond.

"Hold him up," Joe said briskly.

Burton lifted the man to a sitting position.

"Jaw's unshipped," Joe told him, and with a matter of fact, deliberate punch, he knocked the jaw back into place again.

Then Joe took the bucket of oatmeal drinking water and sloshed it over the engineer's head and face. The man looked as if he had just been boiled in porridge. And when he came to, he glared fearfully at Joe. But Joe's debt was paid. He had no further animosity. He was back at his firing when the engineer stood shakily on his feet. The matter was closed; but it took the engineer almost as long to realize that as it did for his face to return to normal.

BEFORE the ship was a week at sea petty scrapping among the crew developed into something more serious. The skipper and engineer had been having too good a time all that week. They were drinking. And the officers and assistant engineers had their share, too. The ship was kept going by habit more than by anything else. The fires were fed, and the wheel was relieved by firemen and seamen who could think of no other routine as long as the galley produced the regular whack of food three times daily. The new hands, once they got over their seasickness, took a place among the forecastle crowd.

Joe and Burton had debts to collect among the old hands; but daily fights among the men themselves left them without adequate openings to single out their old enemies. Joe's pet enemy, the big fireman of the four to eight watch, suddenly got himself knifed, just when Joe had washed and trimmed his nails all ready to go out and slap his face. The knifing was not serious, but it put a new aspect on the forecastle fights. The new hands were dirty fighters—knifers.

There was a howl. Men ran to the captain. The captain was in a merry mood and told the men to kick the tar out of the knifer. With the advice, he ordered an issue of liquor, and that worked a complete change forward. In an hour the big fireman and his assailant were sitting side by side in a bunk, singing ribald songs. Wheel and stokehold reliefs were late; and only because Joe's watch stayed below after their spell was up did the steamer keep going at all.

"I never was on a boat before, Joe, but this one seems to be handled pretty incidental to me," Burton remarked, when at last they went forward and found the forecastles full of liquored men, drunk beyond the fighting and singing stages.

"Like a lot o' pigs in a crate," grunted Joe, hauling a snoring man out of his bunk and dumping him on the grimy floor.

Two days later the ship was running along the land in a misty rain. The skipper gave attention to verifying his position, then went back to his comfortable session with the chief, who had not been into the engineroom since leaving port. If the mates worried, they hid it

well. They seemed well content. But there was a new feeling about the crew on the evening of the landfall.

Joe and Burton had been left alone, much to their satisfaction; but it was only because they made it plain that they had nothing in common with the rest. When their watchmate had first told the others of Joe's whipping the engineer, Joe and Burton might have ruled the forecastle. They chose to decline all honors. It was no man and master fight that Joe fought; it was a simple man to man squaring of accounts.

So now they lay in their bunks after dark, watching men move about the fore hatch through mist and rain, like ghosts. At first they watched with idle curiosity; later with keener interest. The hatches were being silently removed. Then the steamer's speed noticeably slackened, and the voice of the bridge officer could be heard yelling down the engineroom tube for more revolutions.

"Let's take a look," said Burton.

All his professional instincts were sharpened. He smelled dirty business. Joe sensed trouble; that was enough to bring Joe out. They crept on deck and stood in the dark corner by the forecastle head ladder. Voices were loud and angry now on the bridge. The skipper appeared and yelled. Then an engineer bounced up from the stokehold to yell profanely about keeping steam when there was nobody shoveling coal. Hot words passed, then engineer and mate clattered down the ladders from the bridge and came lurching forward.

"This is going to be good!" chuckled Burton.

THE MATE was aware of the activity around the hatch. He flashed a light, cursing. Curses answered him. Then men rushed him and the engineer. The engineer took sudden fright and shouted nervous orders to delinquent firemen to return to their duty. He was taken by the same crowd that rushed the mate. Steel flashed. The mate went down with a grunt. The engineer backed away, striking out manfully with his fists, shouting murder.

"That's what it is!" snapped Joe. "Murder! Come on, buddy."

Burton and Joe Lennard found themselves standing side by side over the mate's body, fighting off crowding men who cursed them for lickspittles. Any other two men might have found the fight hopeless, for sticks and knives were plentiful. But Joe could hit and dodge; Burton had tackled mobs before. They gained breathing space, in which the engineer took courage again. His shouts brought other mates, other engineers. The skipper himself came running forward.

Then the fight became a battle. Somebody hit Burton on the head from behind before the reinforcements realized that he and Joe were not of the mutineers. Burton hit back on general principles, flooring the skipper, and went on with his battling. Burton fought on the side of authority because all his training was to that end. Joe fought against the crew, not so much because he loved the officers, as because he still had scores to pay with some of the crew. That and inherent dislike for knifing put powder into his punch and lightning into his eye.

The fight took on a desperate phase for a moment when two other seamen came running forward from the boat deck. But now the captain had his pistol working and fired two shots close overhead. Gradually the gang backed up and was shut in the forecastle.

"Who stood by the ship?" rasped the skipper. "Let's see you."

His torch flashed in the faces of Joe and Burton. He laughed nervously.

"Damned if it isn't the champion and the fly cop! All right, lads; I'll see you don't lose by it."

The mates took Joe and Burton aft, and they relashed and covered a boat which had been all ready to lower. Discovery of the ready boat had sent the captain scurrying forward again, to inspect the fore hatch fastenings. Then the engineers armed themselves, went to the forecastle and invited out men to get the

boilers going again. Joe and Burton were allowed to go to their bunks; and then Joe peered hard into his mate's face.

"What did he mean, fly cop?" he asked.

Burton laughed.

"That's what I told him when I tried to make him land us, Joe. But he was the fly one. If I'd been a dick I'd have got hunk with him down there in Coralita. Forget it."

THE NEXT day the captain appeared sober, and the ship was run strictly on seagoing schedule. She was running in for home, and there was no trace remaining of slipshod rule or mutiny. When she made her number there was no police flag flying. When she took her pilot, and later came to Quarantine, no word was said of mutiny and bloodshed.

Furtive men wondered. It was not like a shipmaster to quell a mutiny and make no complaint. It puzzled Burton, with his law trained mind. Joe said nothing. That puzzled Burton, too. He believed that Joe was well content to see no police flag flown, though he had been no mutineer.

Then the steamer slid into her slip. Burton was first at the gangway, and half a dozen burly fellows greeted him in a manner which made Joe's eyes snap. But Joe seemed to be very little worried, though he made his feelings clear:

"So you are a fly cop, eh? Well, you got to take me in, I suppose. I'm here."

The captain, engineer and officers were staring at the plain clothes men whom Burton was inviting aboard. That party looked like unexpected trouble.

"I'm not taking you, Joe," Burton said, "except as a witness against these guys for kidnaping me."

Then Joe grinned. He took from his pocket the little package he had hidden under his bed down south. Burton's face clouded. Joe opened the package and poured into one palm a dozen coffee beans. One bean he squeezed, keeping his back turned on everybody but Burton.

"Never mind about a piffling kidnaping case, buddy," he said hoarsely. The crushed bean had revealed a white powder. "There's a hundred bags of coffee in the forehold, and every one of 'em's half phoney, like these. Dope! Hurry and get the skipper! I was under the window when he took the shipment."

"Go get 'em, boys!" snapped Burton to the burly lads. "So that's why those guys tried to stop the ship and take a boat. Hatches off too. And that's why no police flag flew. But how the chief came to send the boys down to meet me is a mystery."

Joe chuckled. He was watching the captain and chief engineer trying to appear virtuous under arrest.

"Not much mystery about it, buddy. I cabled for 'em," said Joe.

The VANISHING VANDAL

A story of the West
and a sheriff who planned
a perfect crime

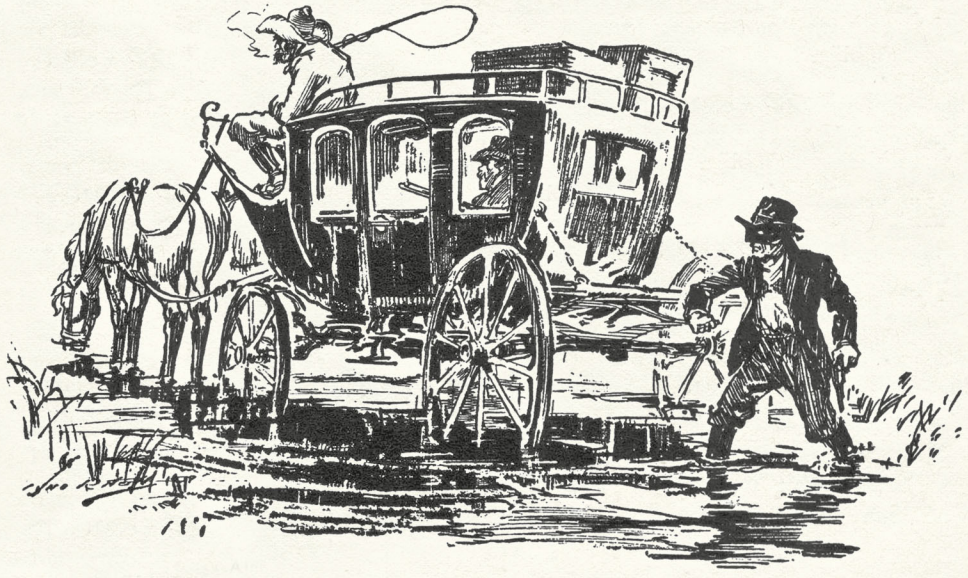
By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

LAMBERT, crouching behind a boulder by the side of the snowbound trail, spied upon the approach of the Redtop stagecoach. Its four-in-hand team, he observed, was proceeding at a walk up this steepish grade just out of Riverton.

This was to be the first stage that Lambert had ever held up. Hitherto his dealings with such crime had been from the other side of the fence. But just now the brass star that proclaimed that Lambert was county sheriff was concealed within his vest pocket. On this cold winter's day he had elected to turn crook.

The forty thousand dollars in cash being shipped from the Riverton National to the Bank of Redtop was a lure which Lambert couldn't resist. And he knew that the only passengers on the stage today would be Curly Bloom, the driver, and Shotgun Dorgan, the guard. While these men were both dangerous, Lambert was confident of success on account of the peculiarly novel specifications under which he planned to conduct his thievery.

The stagecoach, pursuing its leisurely gait up the grade, arrived opposite the ambush of Lambert. It was an old fashioned, enclosed stage coach, and Lambert, peering out, again made certain of the fact that there was no one inside



the roofed cab of it except old walrus mustached Shotgun Dorgan. He observed that the twin bored implement of defense for which Dorgan had been named was resting, muzzle up, between his knees, and the large leather money valise was reposing farther back on the guard's lap.

As for Curly Bloom, the driver, he was of course sitting high and forward on his box, reins four-in-hand. In a holster on Bloom's right hip was a .45 caliber Colt six-gun. Again Lambert conceded that it would take a pretty smooth play to wrest the money from under the weapons of both Dorgan and Bloom.

So Lambert began what he conceived to be a pretty smooth play, by allowing the stage to pass unaccosted. Then, unmasked, he stepped out from behind the boulder and took step behind the stage. The wheels of the vehicle, crunching in the snow, naturally rendered his own tread inaudible. Even had the occupants of the stage looked around they could not have seen Lambert, because the body of the high and boxed cab shut him from view.

As for shooting, Lambert would never have done that here on this grade, because the shots might have been heard below in Riverton. Even if he were to surprise and kill both driver and guard, he would have a poor chance of escaping with the loot. So, as the stage crawled up the grade, Lambert merely held his hand on the rail of a luggage rack which was cantilevered to the rear face of the cab and followed afoot up the hill.

This Riverton-Redtop stage had seen better days. In its youth it had been used on a run farther East, between more populous terminals and serving a clientele which, when it traveled, had been wont to take along certain dignities of wardrobe. Thus there was a luggage rack, with a capacity of perhaps a dozen pieces of hand baggage, cantilevered to the rear face of the stage. This rack was in the nature of a stout, canvas covered crate; it was empty now, as the only piece of baggage being transported on this trip was a leather valise riding on the knees of Shotgun Dorgan and enclosing, according to Lambert's tip, forty thousand dollars in cash.

Lambert, the sheriff now turned thief, cautiously drew himself from the snow of the road up over the rim and into the luggage rack. Once in the rack, he crouched on all fours and remained perfectly still.

ON WENT the stage up the grade. Finally Lambert heard Bloom's whip crack, heard him shout to the horses, was aware that the gait changed from walk to trot. They were up on the mesa now, on level ground.

The logical place for the holdup, planned Lambert, would be at Animas Arroyo, halfway between the terminals of the run. Therefore Lambert must crouch in the luggage rack at least three hours; the stage, he knew, would not arrive at the Animas water hole before one o'clock in the afternoon. Yet he knew, too, that upon reaching there Bloom would let his horses halt a moment to drink. That would be Lambert's cue to step around from the rear and hold up the stage.

As the old vehicle rambled along, Lambert reviewed his entire strategy. This technique, he assured himself, was far and away superior to the usual method of riding up on a horse from one side. Such an approach would warn the occupants of the stage, and only by complete surprise could Lambert hope to win. Moreover, a horse, both in approaching and withdrawing from the scene of holdup, would leave tracks on this clean and white blanket of snow. To Lambert's mind the outstanding virtue of his own program was that he, Lambert, *would leave no tracks at all.*

He would not make, and thus he would not leave, a single footprint of horse or man on this new fallen and virgin snow. He would rob the stage in mid desert and make off with the loot as if he were a winged spirit.

He was certain that no one knew that

he had ridden by roundabout route to Riverton the night before. To all intents and purposes Lambert was now at home, in Redtop. No one had seen him leave; none would see him return.

He did not consider it likely that other vehicles, on such a snowbound winter's day as this, would be abroad on the trail. Certainly no other equipage would overtake them from the rear, for these were pre-automobile days and the normal gait of the four-in-hand stage team was a trot. Should travelers coming from the other direction meet and pass the stage, they would have to turn their heads and look back after passing, even stand and peer closely before detecting, if then, the presence of Lambert's crouched form in the stage's baggage rack.

As for makeup, Lambert had first removed the sheriff's brass star from his lapel and placed it in a vest pocket. At the proper moment he would cover his face, scalp to chin, with a black mask. He was of a build neither conspicuously tall nor short. Just now he wore a gray coat and gray trousers, although as a habit he wore dun corduroys. His trousers legs were usually worn without his boots, while now they were tucked within. Masked, he was not fearful of being recognized as Sheriff Lambert.

For a safety card he had his sheriff's star in pocket. There was always a chance that Dorgan would peer around the corner of the cab's body and discover his presence. That, of course, would call off the holdup. Lambert would explain his unconventional position by claiming that he was acting on a tip that either Bloom or Dorgan had plotted with bandits for a holdup. Skeptical of this tip, yet wishing for a certainty either to prove or disprove it, Lambert, so he would say, was hiding in the rack. In such an unlikely eventuality, a sheriff's badge would be good color to back his rôle.

AN HOUR or so after noon, the Riverton-Redtop stage arrived at the Animas water hole. Along the sandy bed of this arroyo the flow of water was not continuous. In spots the bed was dry; and in other spots were pools. The stage trail, by design, crossed at one of the surest pools in all the arroyo's length.

The stagecoach coasted down the arroyo bank and came to a splashing stop in a wide, shallow water hole. Lambert, in the rear rack, heard the sucking sounds produced by the four horses as they lowered their unchecked necks and began to drink. Then he heard Curly Bloom, from the driver's box, call back to Dorgan, within the cab—

"Want to roll one, Dorg?"

Lambert knew that Bloom was passing back the makings of a cigaret. This he could do, Lambert knew, through an open vent just behind the driver's box, a hole designed so that at all times passengers might communicate with the driver. While his victims were occupied making cigarets, thought Lambert, would be a good time to stage the shooting. So he stepped out of the luggage rack, letting himself down into six inches of water so cautiously that he made no splash at all. And, being in water, he would of course leave no track.

From his first conception of it, Lambert had planned this crime in entire cold blood. He knew that only by killing both Dorgan and Bloom could he succeed. So he did not even call for hands up. Over his bloodless face, scalp to chin, he adjusted a black mask. Then he drew a Colt .45 gun. Stepping around the corner of the stage he opened a deadly fire.

He had to fire only twice. Shotgun Dorgan never knew what hit him. It was at Dorgan that Lambert shot first, point blank through the cab's window; then Lambert whirled the gun upward toward the driver's seat and sent a slug toward the brain of Curly Bloom. Bloom, in midsnatch for his own gun, crumpled on the seat. Lambert whirled the gun back to recover Dorgan; but he saw that Dorgan was shot through the chest and was dead.

Yet, although Lambert knew he had

pulled his own trigger but twice and that both victims had promptly collapsed, he was also aware that there had been three reports of gunfire. In the same split second in which death pierced his heart, the guard Dorgan had instinctively snatched at the trigger of the shotgun between his knees. It was a hammerless weapon with the safety off, and at Dorgan's convulsive snatch the thing had gone off. Not at aim, of course.

Lambert realized that the shot must have traveled forward and obliquely upward through the roof of the coach. Thus in the brief and deadly conflict there were three reports of gunfire—two from Lambert's .45 and one from Dorgan's shotgun.

Strangely enough it was now, after the job was all done, that Lambert first began feeling squeamish. His murderous hand trembled a little as he reached within the stage and seized the loot.

The leather valise, he discovered, was padlocked. So Lambert produced his knife and slashed away a square of leather. He wished to assure himself that the bag contained true loot and was not a decoy. So through the slashed hole he drew out the contents, package by package.

It was true loot, he found, all in currency. Lambert could not resist an impulse to count it, to check the accuracy of his tip that the shipment would amount to forty thousand dollars. Counting was easy, because the bills were new and in packages of a hundred each and with each package enclosed in a labeled band.

There was a package of a hundred hundreds, for instance, labeled ten thousand dollars. There was another of a hundred fifties, labeled five thousand dollars. Several were of a hundred twenties, each labeled two thousand dollars. So it took Lambert hardly a minute to count the swag. Thirty thousand dollars! Ten thousand short of what he had expected, but still he was satisfied. He restored the loot to the valise.

HE SET the valise back inside the coach and turned his attention to his victims. Again assuring himself that Dorgan was stone dead, Lambert climbed to the driver's seat to examine Curly Bloom.

To his surprise he found that Bloom was not seriously hurt; in fact he was hardly more than unconscious. Bloom's six-gun lay on the seat where it had fallen at Bloom's half executed snatch for it. Lambert removed the tall white cowboy hat from Bloom's head, and turned down the collar of the driver's sheepskin coat. He wanted to see just where Bloom was hit.

He found two wounds, both in the scalp. This amazed Lambert. Why two wounds? Then he saw something else. He saw several small holes through Blooms's tall hat crown. They were not bullet holes, but shot holes. Lambert realized that he himself had missed Bloom. It was the accidental discharge of the shotgun from between the knees of Dorgan that had put Bloom out of the fight. Two of the shots, number four duckshot, Lambert judged, had merely creased Bloom's scalp and knocked him out.

All this while the four stage horses had been standing, although stamping somewhat nervously, in the water hole. Being trained stage horses they were not gun shy. Hence the three reports of gunfire had not caused a stampede. However, having finished drinking, the two lead horses stepped out. Their equine minds were no doubt thinking of bedded stalls at Redtop. Lambert, on the seat, had to call a whoa. He wasn't ready to leave the water just yet.

Yes, thought Lambert, there was no doubt but that the wounds in Bloom's scalp had been caused by Dorgan's shotgun. He replaced the tall white hat on the driver's head. Then, suddenly, a new strategy flashed inspirationally to Lambert. Why not now frame this affair as a fight between the driver and the guard?

He could see how an outsider would review the evidence. Why should Dorgan

have shot Curly Bloom unless the latter had turned upon the guard with intent of thievery? Bloom, arriving in Redtop, would tell his story of an intruding bandit. A posse would come to the ford and find no tracks in the snow. In face of such a finding, how could people believe Bloom's story?

After thinking it over, Lambert conceived of still other ways in which he might plant evidence against the curly haired stage driver.

Lambert's original plan had been to put both bodies in the stage and drive on toward Redtop himself. He would wear no mask. He would put on Bloom's heavy coat, turning the collar high above his ears. Well down over his eyes he would wear the driver's tall white hat. Suppose he passed some one, which was not likely on the snow covered trail. He, driving, would pass at a gallop. No one would think that odd, because the stage often went a-gallop when late, or when with an important shipment. Also there was a stage company rule against a driver's stopping to gossip with any one along the road. Who would recognize Lambert, passing with his horses at the gallop and with his features reasonably well disguised?

They would arrive at Redtop about dusk, a gloom which descends early on cloudy winter days such as this. At the dusk bound outskirts of Redtop Lambert had meant to descend from the box. Then he had planned to restore the body of Bloom, properly clothed, back on the driver's seat.

He could then slap the team with the lines and allow it to go on, unguided, to its livery barn. Afoot and with the loot, Lambert could dodge back into the fields, skulking behind hedges and through alleys to his own home. A quick change, and he would be in his own office at the courthouse when citizens came rushing in to inform him of the arrival of the stage bearing two corpses.

That had been Lambert's original plan. Now he altered it, in part, because he found that Bloom was not dead.

TO EXECUTE his amended plan he descended to the ground, or rather to the shallow water of the pool. He took the money bag from the stage and carried it to the rear, placing it in that luggage rack in which he himself had ridden all morning. He then waded around to the front wheel again.

Reaching up to the seat he secured Bloom's gun. An examination proved that it had not been fired. Lambert was on the point of firing it himself when he realized that the detonation might bring Bloom to his senses. He didn't want the driver to be revived for a few minutes yet. So Lambert did not fire the pistol. Instead he removed the unused shell from just under the hammer and traded it for one of the empty shells in his own .45. This made it appear as if the driver's weapon had been fired once, and would account for the death of Dorgan.

Lambert didn't worry about whether the firing pin would match the punch on the empty shell, for he knew that detective science did not cling to such fine theories in Redtop; and anyway he himself would be the chief investigator.

He replaced Bloom's gun on the seat, in the same position in which it had fallen from Bloom's hand. Then Lambert slapped the rear off horse smartly on the flank. The four animals started at a walking gait, out of the ford and toward Redtop. They had stood long enough in cold water. The home stalls called to them, and though they might laze along Lambert knew they would not leave the main trail. It is not in the nature of trained stage horses to leave a road, especially if that road be a homeward road which they have traveled day after day.

As for Lambert, when the rear end swung by him he again climbed to the baggage rack. In this he snugly perched, his loot in hand and with the despoiled equipage rolling unguidedly on.

After awhile Lambert cautiously came to his knees in the rear rack and peered over the roof of the stage. Curly hadn't come to life yet, he saw. The reins were

still wrapped around the whip stand, where the driver had placed them at the stoppage of the team, when he had produced the cigaret makings to pass them back to Dorgan. Lambert realized that he might have to shoot Curly again and revert to his original plan of deception. Whether he did or not would depend upon the driver's deportment after recovering consciousness.

It was Lambert's belief that Bloom would recover before traveling many miles. With the stage moving, and with a cool damp breeze blowing on his face, a healthy, out of doors fellow like Bloom would be fairly certain to revive.

TEN MINUTES later Bloom regained consciousness. Lambert was not peering over the roof at the time, but he knew of the revival because the stage suddenly halted. He heard Curly Bloom call out in a thick, groggy voice:

"Hey, Dorg; where are we? Did that guy get away? Are you hurt, Dorg?"

Silence for a moment. Then Lambert heard Curly climbing to the ground. Lambert cocked his gun with the resolve to crack down without mercy upon the driver if he should come around to the rear of the stage.

But it appeared that Bloom learned all which he wished to learn upon investigation of the cab's interior. Lambert heard him cry out:

"Gosh! Dead as a door nail! And the money gone!"

The next comment which Lambert heard Bloom address to himself was:

"Gee! He put me to sleep, for true, didn't he? We're a good two mile from that water hole and I never knew we'd left it."

After apparently some indecision, Bloom did exactly what Lambert had guessed he would do. He climbed to the seat and started at a brisker pace for Redtop. Lambert could visualize the holdup as Bloom must be visualizing it. Bloom would think, of course, that the bandit had been ambushed in the arroyo, his saddled horse being obscured by some nearby bend of the bank. By now, as Bloom must obviously reason, the robber would be miles away, either up or down the arroyo.

Bloom would be thinking how easily it would be to track him on this clean white snow. Yet only horsemen could catch him. Bloom couldn't. No use for Bloom, wounded as he was, to turn around and drive two miles back to the arroyo. Without saddle horse he would be impotent to pursue the thief.

The thing for Bloom to do would be to get to Redtop and report the crime to the sheriff, delivering the body of Dorgan to the coroner. A mounted posse could then be rushed to the Animas ford.

Such a program, to Lambert's relief, Bloom chose to execute. He whipped to a trot and headed straight on toward Redtop. Lambert could tell by the sky that it would be dusk when they got there. The only thing which worried him at all was the possibility of a chance meeting with travelers on the road.

This happened about two miles farther on. Lambert heard Bloom again whoa his four-in-hand to a halt. A chill of terror went up and down Lambert's spine as he heard two horsemen gallop up from the direction of Redtop and stop opposite the forewheel of the stage. Lambert crouched as low as he could in the rack, yet he knew with a sinking heart that if the newcomers should circle the stage and make an extended survey of it they would find him.

"Curly Bloom!" he heard one of the horsemen call out. "What you so pale under the gills fer, Curly?"

"Hello, Buck; hello, Sam," Lambert heard Bloom reply.

He guessed that the two men accosted were Buck Johnson and Sam Thorne. Johnson and Thorne were stockmen of high standing in the county; and Lambert recalled with increasing terror that they were men who as a habit wore belts and guns. Lambert shivered, and crouched lower in the rack.

"Shotgun Dorgan's dead in the coach," he heard Bloom inform the two stockmen.

"Masked bandit in Animas arroyo. They drilled poor old Dorg but they only put me to sleep, it seems. Say, Buck, you and Sam split the breeze for the arroyo, will you? I see you got your guns on. See if you can track that coyote in this snow."

"Can we?" exclaimed a voice which Lambert easily recognized as Buck Johnson's. "Easiest thing in the world. Wonder that jigger had the nerve to pull a stickup on a snow like this."

"Thirty thousand dollars makes folks a heap nervy, sometimes," said Curly Bloom.

"Whewee!" exclaimed Sam Thorne. "That much? Come on, Buck. Let's you and me catch him. Maybe there'll be a reward."

"It'll be like fallin' off a log," exclaimed Buck Johnson. "Curly, you better drive on in to town, before you faint and fall off that seat. Leave the outlaw to Sam and me. You can tell Sheriff Lambert we'll get him sure. Sam, he's our meat. Let's go."

And away they went, agallop from a standing start. They whizzed past the rack which concealed Lambert almost before Lambert knew it. He heard the hoof beats thudding in swift cadence on the snow, as they departed along the trail in the direction from which the stage had just come. In a moment more Lambert heard Bloom cluck to his team; then the stage rolled on eastward toward Redtop.

THE AFTERNOON waned and they met no other travelers. It was a cloudy winter's day and brought an early winter's dusk. After many miles Lambert, peering over the stage top again, could see the dim outlines of the first houses of the town.

The very first house which the stage would pass, he knew, happened to be the cabin of Curly Bloom himself. He knew, too, that Bloom, being a bachelor, occupied it alone. That is, he slept there on those alternate nights when he was at the Redtop end of his run. The stage driver took his meals, as Lambert knew, at any convenient restaurant or hotel.

It was five o'clock and quite gloomy when the stage arrived at the spot Lambert had selected for disembarking. It was at a crossroads, and about an eighth of a mile short of Redtop's first cabin, the cabin of Bloom. At the crossroads, Lambert took his bag of loot in hand and alighted. He landed softly in the snow, which here at the intersection of trails was naturally well trodden. He dodged into the lane of the intersecting road. The stage rolled on into town.

From behind the fence corner Lambert watched a moment to see whether Bloom would stop at his own cabin. He did not. The stage rolled on along what was now Main street into the more thickly settled portion of Redtop.

Lambert hurried north along the road for a hundred yards until he came to an east and west hedge. Here he turned east. Keeping behind this hedge he ran fast, bending low; in a few moments he came to the blind end of the first of the town's alleys. A short run down this and he was behind Curly Bloom's barn. Into the rear of this barn, Lambert crept, finding it deserted. Bloom, at home only every other night, naturally kept no milch cow or horse.

Lambert had thought of this while rolling along in the stage. So he lost no time. He found an old gunny sack in the barn. Then he removed the thirty thousand dollars from the valise and placed the loot in the sack. He tossed the plundered valise into a manger, covering it with old straw.

That done, the sheriff dodged back into the gloom of the alley. With a sack now instead of a bag he continued on a run eastward along the alley. When he came to intersecting streets, he crossed them only after furtive inspection. In ten minutes he had gone five blocks. At a certain place he turned into another barn, which was his own. He scurried through his barn and then through his rear yard. In a moment more he had entered the back door of his own domicile.

In his main room he turned back a

corner of the rug and withdrew a loose board from the floor. In the hole he dropped his sack of loot. Then he made a lightning quick change of dress. He kicked off his boots, slipped out of his trousers and his coat. Gray trousers, gray coat and mask went into the hole with the loot. He replaced the board and the rug. Seconds more and he was garbed in the familiar dun corduroys.

He hastily tidied himself before the mirror, because Sheriff Lambert had the repute of being a well groomed and somewhat fastidious townsman. His trousers legs were now on the outside instead of the inside of his boot tops, his hair was brushed, and on his head he placed a black hat instead of a gray. He rushed out, speeding across the street toward the courthouse.

So jealous was he of time that he assumed the last detail of his sheriff's character on the run. Looking up the street, as he crossed it, he could see the stagecoach at a standstill a few buildings west, in front of the office of Coroner Jerome Martin. Bloom, he could see, had called the coroner to the walk and was telling his story.

Lambert reached the courthouse door without being seen by either Bloom or Martin and, as he crossed the threshold of his own office, he completed that last detail of his change of garb. He finished pinning a brass star, insignia of his betrayed trust, upon the lapel of his coat.

IN HIS office, the first to the right of the main entrance, he lighted a lamp, settled himself at the desk and rumpled papers, put a pipe in his mouth and deported himself as if he might have been there for some time. He had no more than assumed such a pose when the stagecoach, parked a few buildings west these last minutes, rolled on another fifty yards and stopped in front of the courthouse.

"There's a light in Lambert's office right now," the sheriff heard Coroner Jerome Martin say to Curly Bloom. "Hey, Lambert. Come out here. Hell's to pay."

Lambert sauntered to the walk, registering a pretended unconcern by lighting his pipe as he did so.

"A stickup murdered Shotgun Dorgan," announced Martin.

Then, of course, Lambert became alert.

He took the reins of investigation with a gracefully expert officiousness. In quizzing Curly Bloom and obtaining his story, Lambert did not make the mistake of displaying any premature suspicions. He knew the ex-cowboy was fairly popular around town and had a good record. Therefore he must let the evidence ooze out slowly. In no case must Lambert appear to bully Bloom.

So he obtained the driver's story and displayed complete credulity and sympathy.

Coroner Martin had produced a flashlight; with Martin, Lambert entered the stagecoach and thoroughly examined Dorgan's wound and Dorgan's shotgun. Lambert let Martin do most of the talking, which was not difficult, for the seedy little coroner was inclined toward loquacity anyhow.

"Dorgan got hit once; pistol ball in the chest," announced Martin. A moment later he added, "And Dorgan, I see, took one bang at the crook. His shotgun was fired once."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Curly Bloom, who was still standing on the walk.

This indeed was the first Bloom knew of it. He had not examined the shotgun himself. At the time of the holdup, the three shots had been fired so nearly together that Bloom had assumed they must have all come from the bandit.

NEXT, more as a matter of form than anything else, Coroner Martin examined the wounds of Bloom himself.

"Two nicks, neither of 'em bad," he muttered. "Say, Curly, that bandit was shootin' a shotgun, too, wasn't he?"

"No such thing," refuted Curly. "He was heavin' .45 slugs, and fast."

"But it was duckshot which hit you, if

I know anything!" exclaimed the coroner. "Hit you two places, about three inches apart."

"That couldn't hardly be," protested Lambert. "Curly here ain't the kind of a gent to get shot with a squirt gun and think it was a .45. If he says it was a .45, why, it was a .45."

"It sure was," insisted Bloom.

But Martin now saw something which was conclusive. All the time he had been holding Bloom's tall white hat in hand. He now indicated several tiny holes which had unquestionably been made by shot not larger than number fours.

"I'll leave it to any jury of experts you want to call in," he retorted. "You got so excited, Curly, that you don't know what that bandit like to have blowed your head off with. He had a shotgun."

"You're crazy," argued Lambert, appearing to defend Bloom yet in reality preparing a deadly noose for him. "How could he have had a shotgun? You yourself say Dorgan, in there, was shot with a .45. D'you mean to tell me that bandit had a shotgun in one hand and a .45 in the other?"

This was a poser. Bloom, after thinking a moment, raised his blondish eyebrows and spread his palms.

"Well," he offered, "maybe the bandit missed me. Maybe Dorgan shot wild at the bandit and hit me. That's the only way I can explain me bein' scalped with duckshot."

Lambert, playing his shrewd part, frowned and then gave Bloom a comradely pat on the back.

"I wouldn't say that, Curly," he suggested. "It might start people to talkin'. You know how people are. Some fool might even accuse y—er, well, Curly; jest take my advice and don't suggest it was Dorgan hit you with them duckshot."

Curly stared at him.

"Whatta you mean, Lambert?" he asked.

Lambert hesitated, affecting embarrassment. It was Jerome Martin who answered:

"He means, Curly, some one might suggest that, since Dorgan shot you, you might have shot Dorgan. That couldn't be, of course," went on the coroner in haste, as he saw the blue eyes of the ex-cowboy harden, "because—er, oh, well, because you just aren't that kind of a feller, Curley."

"And besides," cut in Lambert smoothly, "the snow will tell the whole story. Prettiest trackin' snow I ever saw. Curly says he sent Buck Johnson and Sam Thorne, the two best trackers in this county, to the ford to read sign and follow it. Good clean fighters, too, Sam and Buck. They'll trail the crook, and he won't have any chance."

"Curly," asked Coroner Martin, "what were you doin' while the bandit was shootin' Dorgan? You used to be pretty fast yourself, they tell me."

"I fell down like a chump, this time," admitted Bloom, sheepishly. "The hosses was drinkin' at the ford. I had just twirled a cigaret and passed the makings back to Dorg. Dorg was licking the paper of his'n, when the outlaw appeared suddenly and shot Dorg dead. I was clawin' at my own gun when somethin' slapped me on the head and put me to sleep. Next thing I knew the bronks was walkin' down the trail towards home. My gun was layin' right where it had dropped from my hand; Dorg was dead in the coach; and we was two miles east of the Animas."

"FUNNY the crook didn't take your and Dorgan's guns," suggested Martin, plucking Curly's .45 from his holster to examine it, "least you should come to and follow him."

"Likely he thought Curly was dead," cut in Lambert, clinging tightly to his rôle of appearing to defend Bloom. "Also, him bein' loaded down with thirty thousand dollars, he—"

"Thirty thousand dollars!" echoed Bloom, his blondish eyebrows again raising as he scanned Lambert. "How did—"

"This gun," exclaimed Coroner Martin,

interrupting Bloom, "has been shot! See?"

"What gun?" asked Bloom.

"Your gun, which you said you didn't even get clawed out of your holster."

"It has not been shot," refuted Bloom. "Not since it was cleaned last time."

At the word clean, Lambert saw that he had overlooked a bet. Placing an empty shell in Curley's gun did not, of course, foul the bore with powder.

In turn Martin, Lambert and Bloom looked through the bore toward Martin's flashlight. Both Martin and Lambert admitted that they couldn't be sure about the powder fouling in that poor light. Lambert gave the gun back to Bloom. There was a trick in his doing so. He knew that a later examination would mean nothing at all for by then Bloom would have had a chance to clean the gun. Yet the presence of the empty shell was now a witnessed fact.

AT THAT moment a diversion was created by two horsemen who galloped up Main Street from the west. They drew rein at the curb, proving to be Sam Thorne and Buck Johnson. It was now quite dark of course; the bell on the courthouse struck six o'clock.

"Hey, Curly!" shouted Buck Johnson. "What kind of a phantom outlaw was it helt you up, anyway?"

"Phantom my eye!" retorted Curly. "He was all flesh and blood and hot six-gun. What's eatin' on you?"

"Was he ahorse or afoot?" Sam Thorne wanted to know.

"Afoot when he done his stuff," replied Bloom. "But most likely he had a bronk around a bend of the arroyo somewheres. I only seen him half a split second before I got shotten up."

Johnson and Thorne exclaimed glances. Johnson's manner became very serious.

"Sheriff," he reported, turning to address Lambert, "Sam and me looked that ford over from A to Z. It was good and light then, and we seen everything there was to see. We found this—and that's all."

Johnson held up a square piece of brown leather with jagged edges, which looked as if it might have been cut from a valise.

"But as for tracks," went on Johnson, "they just ain't no tracks. Neither up nor down the arroyo. Not from that ford nor from any other place on the road."

"What?" cried Lambert.

"Not so much as a magpie track," confirmed Sam Thorne. "That snow was plumb clean."

"It's got us beat, Sheriff," went on Buck Johnson. "That outlaw must of been ridin' bareback on a buzzard. Not a scratch on the snow as fur as you can see, and Sam and me went both ways along the road."

"Yep," agreed Thorne, "me an' Buck can positively guarantee that nary a man's foot nor hoss's hoof has been away from that ford, nor away from the road, all day."

"Oh, come now," returned Lambert. "That's practically equivalent to accusing Curly, here, of having pulled the job himself. You know doggone well Curly wouldn't do a thing like that."

"Anybody says I did's a liar," challenged Curly, red to the roots of his curly blond hair and now beginning to get nettled by all the inuendos.

"We're not accusin' you of anything," said Lambert quickly. "We want another theory as bad as you do, and of course we'll find it sooner or later. How do *you* explain the absence of tracks, Curly?"

"I don't explain it," replied Bloom, scratching his jaw moodishly. After an awkward silence he added, "Well, what about it? You gonna pinch me, Lambert?"

"Certainly not," replied Lambert. "Not unless the Riverton Bank wants to swear out a warrant against you, and we won't hear from them till tomorrow. But say, Curly, just for the sake of form I'll ask you to stick close by; in case I need you fer—er, fer a witness or anything. *Sabe?* Just gimme your word you won't run. Your word's as good as a bond with me, Bloom."

"I'll stick around," promised Curly.

"All right," returned Lambert. "Where'll you be, case I want you in the next couple of hours?"

Bloom was pensive for a moment. He seemed interested in something about the pattern of Lambert's coat. He said:

"I'll go unload the body of Dorgan wherever Martin says. Then I'll eat supper at the Redtop Tavern, and hang around there until—oh, say eight o'clock."

"Good enough," answered Lambert. "Goin' to eat supper at the Redtop Tavern myself. At eight I'll see you there and we'll talk things over. Say, Curly, what you lookin' at, anyway?"

The stage driver's eyes were riveted upon Lambert's chest with much the same expression as if he had seen a tarantula crawling up the sheriff's necktie. So absorbed was he that he did not answer Lambert's last question.

"See anything green?" asked Lambert, somewhat testily; he was bending his chin down and trying to observe what Curly might be staring at.

"Not green. Yellow."

Only with these three enigmatic words did Bloom reply. Then he swung himself to the seat of the stage. Coroner Jerome Martin was already perched there. Bloom drove off down Main Street toward the morgue.

"WHAT th'hell did he mean by that?" asked Lambert, who remained on the walk with Buck Johnson and San Thorne.

It was almost pitch dark now. Johnson said, laughingly:

"I don't see anything yellow, Sheriff. Except that brass star on your coat."

Lambert shrugged. He was uneasy about the incident, although he couldn't see how the presence of a sheriff's star on his coat could implicate him.

To cover his confusion he launched briskly into action.

"Buck," he said, "you and Sam have started helping out on this job, and I want you to stay with it. You say there's no tracks out at Animas Arroyo. That and the fact that Bloom was shot by a shotgun almost makes a clear case against Bloom—except for one thing. What could he have done with the loot?"

The answer was fairly obvious, but Lambert waited for one of the others to suggest it. Sam Thorne did so.

"It's just possible," suggested Thorne, "that Curly stopped the stage in front of his own house—the first house on the west edge of town. Suppose he went in there and hid the money—and then came on."

"Not likely," objected Lambert, "but of course possible. To either prove it or disprove it, let's all three go down there. I'll appoint you deputies, and see that the county pays you for your time. If Bloom's guilty, we owe it to the State to convict him; if he's innocent, we owe it to him as a friend to clear his name. Let's go."

Lambert went into his office, coming out in a moment with three flashlights. With these the trio walked down Main Street, heading west. After a ten minute walk they arrived at the ramshackle cabin of Curly Bloom.

"I'll take the house," Lambert told his helpers. "Buck, you take the yard. Don't forget to look in the well and under the porches. Sam, you take the barn. Let's get this over with, fellahs. It kinda makes me feel cheap, snoopin' around Curly's house like this, when we all know down in our hearts he just couldn't have done a cold killin' like what some one done to poor Dorgan."

They got busy in their assigned areas, each man with a flashlight.

Lambert made a great show of searching the house, where he knew he wouldn't find a thing. In fifteen minutes he went into the back yard and accosted Buck Johnson. Buck had looked in the well, the cistern, the weed patch, and under the porches. He had found nothing of interest.

"I didn't expect to find anything," Lambert assured Buck, "but these details have to be attended to just the same. District attorney would give me a tongue

lashin' if I didn't, see? Us not findin' anything helps Curly. Here at his house is the only chance he had to ditch the money, so our not finding it here practically clears him. Hello, what's that you got, Sam?"

Sam Thorne was emerging from the barn. In his hand was a brown leather valise, padlocked at the top and with a jagged hole slashed in its side.

AS THE hands of the courthouse clock approached eight, Sheriff Lambert sat grimly out on one of the porch chairs of the Redtop Tavern, waiting for Curly Bloom. In Lambert's right hand he held a gun and in his left a pair of handcuffs. Duty demanded that he arrest Bloom on sight.

On inquiry he had learned that the stage driver had not appeared at the Tavern dining room for supper. Now the clock on the courthouse tower tolled eight, and still there was no sign of Bloom. Would he come? Lambert almost dared to hope that Curly had taken horse and fled, that he had broken his verbal bond. Nothing could possibly have suited Lambert better than Curly's flight.

Curly's flight would of course cap all other evidence; it would clinch the driver's guilt even in the minds of his best friends.

Five minutes passed; and then ten. Still no sign of Curly Bloom.

"Oh, if he just got scared and rode for nowhere!" thought Lambert hopefully.

It was due to such a hope that Lambert had not arrested Curly upon the first report of Johnson and Thorne.

It was at a quarter past eight that Lambert saw Buck Johnson coming down the walk.

"Can't find him anywhere, Sheriff," reported Johnson. "Sam and me have looked all over town."

"That means Curly's hit fer parts unknown," sighed Lambert, inwardly elated. "And of course we can't pick up his track till morning, either. Where I fell down was in not pinchin' him while I had a chance. But I didn't have no warrant. And we hadn't found that money bag, either. Where's Sam?"

"He's still pokin' around town lookin' fer Bloom," replied Johnson. "But of course, just as you say, Bloom's hit fer nowhere. Want Sam and me to help you look for his sign tomorrow, Lambert?"

"Yep, and we'll start at daybreak," answered Lambert, getting up briskly. "We might as well hit the hay, now. See you and Sam in the mornin', Buck. Good night."

They separated.

LAMBERT himself went directly home. Once in his own house, he lighted a lamp, locked every door and pulled down the shades. Then, turning back a corner of his living room rug, he removed a certain loose board from the floor. His eyes glowed now with a hot triumph; he was flushed with avarice; a vanished vandal whom no one could trail or accuse, he was eager to touch and to caress his plunder.

So he reached down to pluck it from the cache. First his groping hand brought out a black mask. Then came a gray coat, a gray hat, gray trousers. Then came a sack, the old gunny sack with the loot. From this Lambert had just retrieved the first package of currency when—

"So that's where you put it, Lambert?"

It was the voice of the curly haired ex-cowboy who drove the Redtop-Riverton stage. Bloom seemed to have stepped out into the lambent illumination of the oil lamp from behind a tall backed chair over in the corner.

"I looked all over the house fer that money," went on Bloom, "but I couldn't find it nowhere."

Lambert, as white as chalk and with his heart choking him, could only gasp one word—

"You?"

"Yep," said Curly, "and I don't claim to know how you done it, Lambert. Two things made you look phoney to me, so I came here to look."

"What two things?" asked Lambert huskily.

He was wondering whether he could beat Curly Bloom to a gun draw.

"When you and me and Martin was chewin' the rag out on the walk," explained Bloom, "you mentioned thirty thousand dollars. I wondered how come you knew that figger. I hadn't told you how much was in that bag. Out on the road I had told Buck and Sam, but not you. No one but me and Dorg and the Riverton Bank knew that the Riverton cashier had held out ten thousand from what had been planned as a forty thousand dollar payment to the bank here. That was because the Riverton cashier found out at the last minute that Dorgan, the guard, was only bonded for thirty thousand. So, to avoid all risk for his bank, the cashier only sent thirty thousand. Somehow you knew it. But even that would have got by me, Lambert, if you hadn't been wearin' your brass star—"

"What?" cried Lambert. "My brass star? Why can't I wear my brass star?"

"Upside down," finished Bloom. "It gave me a hunch you'd done a quick change act right recent. Huh, Lambert?"

Lambert decided that he just had one chance and he took it. He went for his .45 gun. Bloom's eyes were on him, so it was an even break. Right hands flashed in unison, and each man shot from hip. They were only a yard or so apart, so it was gun to gun and heart to heart. A wall of smoke arose between them. Out of it, toward the boots of Bloom, Lambert pitched, alighted on his knees, raised his gun again, felt Bloom knock it from his hand.

There was a pounding at the door.

"What's all the shootin' about?" a voice, Sam Thorne's, bawled from the porch.

Lambert, on his knees and groping for his gun, suddenly stiffened. His eyes glazed, his lying tongue thickened in his throat. He tumbled prone across his own disguise, his own mask, and his own loot. Possession of these attributes confirmed the guilt of Lambert, although Bloom and Thorne didn't know, nor do they know yet, how he robbed the Riverton stage.

The ARISTOCRAT

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

"THE MOST deplorable thing about Border service is that discipline gets so slack."

Captain Tinker wore a *pince-nez* on a long black silken cord. At a slight distance the effect was gratifyingly like that produced by a monocle.

"You have to overlook a little bit after the men have marched thirty miles in the hot sun," Davies apologized for his troop to the irritated little captain.

Perhaps, after all, those men by the tent should have stood to attention and saluted. But it was too bad the captain had "crawled" Sergeant Shedd. After all, Sergeant Shedd was a pretty good man, a lanky, clean faced fellow with a humorous quirk to his lips and an exceedingly steady eye.

The two officers turned into their tent, the sides of which were rolled up to allow what little breeze there was to reach them. It was getting toward late afternoon, with some hope of coolness in another hour or two. Davies took off his pistol belt and rubbed the white alkali dust from his boots. Tomorrow they had forty miles more to hike before hitting Sierra Roja, their destination.

The adjutant had called Davies in before they started.

"I've got to ship along this Captain Tinker with you," he explained. "He's been sent to us to make up some duty with troops so that he can go back to his swivel chair again."

"How long, O Lord, how long?" groaned Davies.

"Oh, just a month or two. He won't bother you much—at least I hope not," added the adjutant truthfully. "The colonel is set on your running Contreras out of business down there. That fellow is getting altogether too obstreperous. He's put it over on every outfit that's been sent after him."

"Was it Contreras that raided M Troop's camp and shot up some men and ran off with the horses?"

"That's the one, he's been getting away with murder for a long time. But look out for him; he's no ordinary Mexican. You'll have to use your head if you put anything over on Contreras."

And using his head had been the one thing very hard to do with this voluble Captain Tinker around, chattering from morning until night. For the little captain loved the sound of his own voice; he prated interminably. He was full of weird theories cooked up in the calm atmosphere of a desk job at headquarters

AND NOW Tinker was at it again, sitting on his cot, smoking a cigaret daintily held in a long ivory holder.

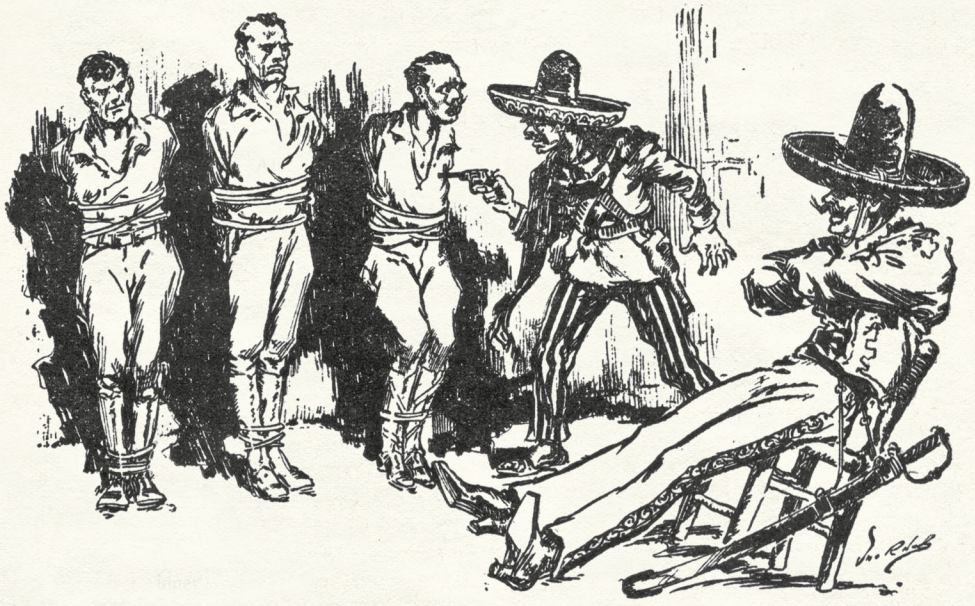
"The whole trouble with the American Army, it is too careless about the little things. Take saluting, for example," Captain Tinker went on. "I remember being at Edinburgh in Scotland a year or two ago. One of the Scotch sentries on duty at the castle saluted me. That was a beautiful sight. He went through seven different motions, each executed with snap and precision, finally coming to a present arms."

The captain glowed with the pride of that remembrance.

"Yes?" Davies remarked.

"And the sentries before Buckingham Palace!" Captain Tinker's eyes grew dreamy. "Two of them. They would signal each other on my approach. Then they would walk to the end of their posts,

A Novelette of a Dude Cavalry Officer on the Mexican Border



simultaneously face outward and execute a beautiful salute in unison. It was positively inspiring! It was really an object lesson in how an English soldier looks upon his officer as a superior being, an aristocrat whom he is humbly glad to salute."

"Well, maybe the English officers *are* aristocrats," Davies remarked quietly; but it was plain to be seen that Captain Tinker missed this, for he went on—

"The trouble with the American soldier is that he doesn't look up to his officer enough."

"Yes," agreed Davies, "he looks down on officers as a necessary evil. And he isn't humbly glad to salute anything that walks on two legs. But what can be done about it?"

"What can be done about it?" Tinker grew excited. "Why make him respect his officer. Make him snap to salute when he talks to a commissioned officer, make him stand to attention whenever an officer comes near him. Make him speak in the third person when he addresses an officer. That's easy enough!" He snorted. "Now look at this fellow coming up here."

He pointed toward Stiggins, the troop saddler, who approached with something in his hand.

Stiggins came up, carrying a long leather strap.

"Lieutenant—" he started to speak but the captain cut him off.

"A soldier should always wait until he is addressed before speaking to an officer," he reproved, "and he should always salute before speaking."

"Yes, sir," agreed Stiggins, then went on, forgetting both to salute and to wait

until he was spoken to, "Lieutenant, I noticed your strap on your saber carrier swingin' loose today and I tightened it up and put on an extra buckle. I think it'll work all right now."

He handed over the strap.

"Gee, that's fine," Davies said warmly. "I forgot all about that blame thing when I came into camp and it had nearly driven me wild, flapping away, all day on the march. Thanks very much, Stiggins."

" 'S'll right, Lieutenant," Stiggins replied; then in deference to the captain's wishes, he made some sort of attempt at a salute. "I jest sort of noticed it," he explained awkwardly, and shambled away.

"You see!" Captain Tinker's voice was positively triumphant. "Not a sign of a salute, and a most unsoldierly bearing."

"Yes, maybe so." Davies was thoughtful. "Personally, I'd rather have the saber strap than the salute," he admitted.

MURPHY, who had been working away in the rear of the tent, doing some mysterious things with a sponge and a round tin of saddle soap, came forward and stacked up Davies' equipment on a trunk locker at the foot of his bunk. The French field saddle gleamed like dull mahogany with the lustre of the saddle soap; the saddle pockets, the saber carrier and the saddle bags were of the same rich shade, soft and pliable and clean.

The bridle was hung on the tent pole, the bits and spur chain glittering, the reins and headstall reflecting the light in their dull sheen. Murphy had neglected nothing, not even the leather cases for the field glasses, the compass case, the map case and the pistol holster and its magazine carrier.

Across the neat pile he placed the long straight sword, its keen blade oiled, its scabbard freed from the clinging dust of the road.

After filling a bucket with water, opening the collapsible wash basin, setting up mirror, soap and brushes, Murphy departed.

The captain looked at the layout.

"You certainly do get service," he said, a note of envy in his voice. "How do you make him do all that for you."

"Oh, you mean Murphy?" Davies looked surprised. "I don't make him do it. He just comes and does it."

Murphy went on down to where a group had gathered at the end of the picket line, sprawled on some bales of hay which made a convenient abiding place.

"How's the new captain makin' out?" asked some one.

"Oh, all right, he's chewin' the fat with the lieutenant about aristocrats. Wot'ell is an aristocrat, anyway?"

"Oh, them dooks or counts and princes and such people like that," Sergeant Bloodstone explained.

"That's funny." Murphy looked puzzled. "Captain's sayin' that officers ought to be aristocrats and make every flat-footed buck private get down on his knees and worship 'em."

Sergeant Shedd, stretched languorously on top of a bale of fragrant timothy hay, rolled over on his elbow, looking interested.

"What did the lieutenant say?"

"Oh, the lieutenant didn't take much truck in it. Says he'd rather have his saber strap fixed then get saluted."

A grin went around the circle. Murphy, as the purveyor of news and gossip from the officer's line, had a distinct and clearly defined social value in the troop.

"But what's the captain mean—we gotta have dooks and princes for officers?"

Sergeant Bloodstone was puzzled. He looked at Sergeant Shedd for explanation.

"Don't ask me what that bird means—" Sergeant Shedd threw up his hand—"but a man can be an aristocrat without being a duke or count or having a title."

The gathering tried to digest this piece of knowledge.

"Tell me somethin' else." Murphy's voice broke the silence. "Yesterday the captain's chewin' the fat about aristocrats again and the lieutenant is kinda tired a listening to him jaw. The lieutenant says, 'I don't aim to be an aristocrat; I don't even know how to pronounce—' and he

says somethin' funny, sounded like 'nobles obliged.' "

"*Noblesse oblige*," corrected Sergeant Shedd.

"What's that mean?"

"It's kind of hard to translate. It's French. Means that responsibilities go with rank. A buck private can lay down on the job and it wouldn't mean much. He's only got himself to look after. But take an officer who's got a lot of men to look after, he can't lay down on the job. He's responsible for his men. That's *noblesse oblige*."

Murphy looked puzzled.

"But what's all this salutin' got to do with it?"

"Search me," replied Shedd. "A lot of officers worry more about being saluted than they worry about whether they've got the salute coming to them or not. They think it's being saluted that makes them aristocrats. It ain't; it's being plumb full of this *noblesse oblige* stuff that makes the aristocrat."

AS THEY neared Sierra Roja, the brown adobe buildings could be seen huddled on the hill. At this distance the houses seemed no more than dun colored inflations in the clay, earthen tumors swollen from the sun baked soil.

The long column of dust covered men and horses coiled across the great mesa like a tired snake. Near the head of the serpentine procession, a scarlet and white guidon flapped dispiritedly in the pitiless heat. Riding in front of the troop of cavalry were the two officers.

On the right rode the thin chested, narrow shouldered little captain, his head drooping. On his left was Davies, his eyes showing weary through the caked alkali dust that streaked his face. To the men in the rear, however, his back looked straight and his shoulders resolute. In the last ten miles of the forty-mile hike many a trooper had looked at that unwearied back and straightened up in the saddle in unconscious imitation.

"Well, there's our happy home for the next few months. It certainly *looks* peaceful enough," Davies mused aloud.

Nearer view showed the place somnolent and deserted in the hot sun. But he stared at it carefully, studying its black shadows and silent houses, dimly suspicious of its brooding, secret air.

He watched narrowly as the advance scouts entered the one street a thousand yards ahead of the troop. The waving of a hat reassured him. He turned again to the captain.

"Seems to be all clear," he reported.

The captain raised his head for the first time in half an hour.

"It's a most unpleasant looking place," he muttered, his voice thick, his head waggling from weariness. "I venture to say there's not a soul in the place with whom a gentleman would care to associate."

Davies studied him quietly for a space, a flicker of a smile showing at the corners of his mouth.

"Probably not," he answered at last, remembering the adjutant's description of the place as "the toughest town on the Border"; then Davies turned in his saddle and looked back at the column of men behind him, riding silently, two by two.

"We're almost there," he called to the nearest troopers. "Pass the word along to brace up going into town. Some Mexicans might see us and imagine that we're tired."

The word passed swiftly—

"Lieutenant says brace up, or the greasers will think we're tired."

One could follow the progress of the message down the long column. The soldiers heard the words incredulously. Most of them swore, then grinned at the irony and passed it on. A wave of animation followed in the wake of the words. The troopers braced up in their saddles, heads came up; horses, quick to sense the spirit of their riders, pricked up their ears and tightened up their shambling gaits.

It was as if a breath of fresh courage had hit the troop. The soldiers began to talk for the first time in many hours. There was even the sound of a chuckle here and there. Davies looked back

again, well satisfied. He glanced at the other officer.

THE NARROW shouldered little captain sat huddled in his saddle, his chin resting wearily on his chest. Davies looked slightly annoyed. He cleared his throat.

"I understand there's a good saloon here," he volunteered. "A glass of cold beer wouldn't go badly."

The captain raised his head again, new hope in his eyes.

Davies pointed ahead.

"That looks like the saloon," he remarked cheerfully, "the square building halfway up the hill."

The captain shook off his weariness and peered ahead, unconsciously straightening out his listless back and shoulders. Davies talked on, painting in glowing colors the delights of the waiting drink, regardless of the fact that his heavy pistol seemed to have numbed the hip against which it hung, that there was a steady ache between his shoulder blades, that his eyes were heavy, his throat parched and his head throbbing.

It would have been a hard day, in any case. Forty miles under the broiling Texas sun was no easy task, especially to an officer who strove to bring his sixty men and horses into camp "heads up and tails up." But it was rendered doubly hard by having to carry along this captain who had worried Davies all day by slumping down in his saddle, giving away abjectly to his weariness in plain view of the entire troop.

Now, tired looking officers, by some subtle reaction on the crowd mind, quickly make worn out soldiers; and fatigued cavalry soldiers, lounging dispiritedly in the saddles, weary their horses and, worst crime of all, make saddle sores by their unevenly distributed weights.

"I'll put the troop into camp if you want to go get yourself a beer," suggested Davies.

"Why, er, yes, indeed I wish you would."

The captain was looking up the dusty street they had just entered, his eyes resting on the inviting entrance to the saloon. Without a backward glance he put spurs to his horse and rode away. Davies saw him halt in front of the place, dismount and go in, after turning his horse over to his orderly. The men stared gravely at the scene.

Davies found a camping place behind the crest of the hill. He studied the ground for five minutes before giving the order to dismount and pitch tents.

The sixty dusty men swung out of the saddles, made a temporary picket line with their lariats and began, with unhurried motions, to erect their shelter tents. They worked with that deceptively slow, smooth economy of motion that marks a troop of old-timers. There were no words. Forty miles under the Texas sun leave little room for conversation.

CAPTAIN TINKER rode back and dismounted. Turning over his horse, he sat under the shade of an adobe building close by. His head nodded. Soon he was asleep.

"I'm going over to the saloon to see if they've got enough cold beer for the outfit," Davies called down to the top sergeant.

Alkali covered, sweat stained faced looked up; dry tongues moistened cracked lips; eager eyes watched his progress toward the saloon.

His boots kicking up little flurries of fine white dust, Davies walked over to the square adobe building and entered its semi-dark interior. His eyes took in the gleam of glass and polished mahogany. Five or six men in chaps and spurs were grouped midway down the length of the bar.

"My good man," one of them was mimicking some one.

"Sh-here comes another one!" Davies heard as he set foot inside.

But they did not turn around as he entered, his spurs clicking faintly.

"Good day, gentlemen," he greeted, his voice courteous.

The men continued to keep their backs toward him. In the big mirror behind the bar he could see them examining him furtively. The studied incivility of the group made him flush a little in spite of himself.

"Howdy, Lieutenant!" He heard a pleasant voice, and saw the white aproned barkeeper nod from the other end. "I see you brought the soldiers to town all right."

One of the group at the bar, a sallow faced man with a great scar livid across his chin, spat contemptuously on the floor.

"This town was a good town before the soldiers came—" he spoke to no one in particular—"and it'll smell a heap better after they go."

Davies turned quickly and studied the speaker. The barkeeper shook a warning head, but he paid no heed. After a long searching stare, Davies grinned suddenly, then deliberately turned his back.

The barkeeper reached under his bar with one hand, his eyes fixed on the scar faced man whose face grew pale with anger, so that his scar looked absolutely livid. His hand dropped to his belt. But out of the corner of his eye he observed the barkeeper's position. The scar faced man raised his arms, ostentatiously putting his elbows on the bar.

"Soldiers is a bunch of fourflushers," he spat out venomously.

Davies yawned as if greatly wearied.

"Have you enough beer for sixty men?" he asked the barkeeper, carelessly indifferent.

"Sure have," the barkeeper replied heartily, his whole attitude more friendly.

"Well, I'll have them over in a few minutes," the officer grinned, "but don't charge me any fancy Government prices; I'm digging into my own jeans for this."

"You bet I won't, Lieutenant," beamed the barkeeper.

Davies turned toward the door.

"Well, I'll tell the men that the beer will be ready as soon as we get through grooming," and waving his hand to the barkeeper he started out.

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant," that worthy called to him. "Won't you cut that there alkali cake with a drink on the house?"

He poured out a froth of cold beer from a dark bottle glistening with beads of cold moisture.

Davies looked at it wistfully but shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said simply. "I'll wait a little," and he went on out.

THE BARKEEPER nodded as if he had proven a point to his own satisfaction. He polished the mahogany smoothness of the bar, his eyes thoughtful.

"That blankety blank stuck up dude," the scar faced man snarled, as Davies disappeared from view.

"Oh, he ain't stuck up," the barkeeper corrected mildly. "I seen lots of them when I soldiered. This one is pretty good."

"Well, you can tell him from me that he won't be good for much if he goes monkeyin' around my territory," the scar faced man threatened. "I'll fix him so's his own mother won't know him."

The barkeeper stopped his work and looked at him gravely.

"Looka here, Rubio, I soldiered a long time and I claim to know something about soldierin'. Lookin' at the cut of that young fellow's jib I'd say you'd lay yourself open to plenty trouble if you go messin' around with him."

"That——!" Rubio made a lurid and picturesque estimate of Davies' immediate ancestry.

"All right, if he don't do it there'll be those that will."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean you'll have about sixty-five men buzzin' around you lookin' for to harm you permanent if you get gay with that feller. I've seen a couple like him. One of 'em was my old captain. This kid acts the same way. And I know what that means."

"How do you mean acts the same way?" one of the other men spoke up, curiosity in his tone.

"Well," the barkeeper replied thoughtfully, "you'll notice he's buyin' his men their thirst quencher out o' his own pocket—and second lieutenants ain't millionaires by a long shot. Then you'll notice he ain't takin' no drink hisself until his men gets some." He looked out of the door where the long line of bay horses could be seen off in the distance; the men were rubbing them down. "You'll notice nobody gets a drink until the horses is made comfortable."

"How about that elegant captain that comes sashayin' in here callin' you 'my good man,'" spoke up one of the others.

"Oh, him." The barkeeper shrugged his shoulders and kept silent.

"Well, why the hell don't they stay where they belong, instead of messin' around here where they ain't got any business?" the scar faced man, Rubio, spoke again.

The barkeeper stopped his polishing long enough to stare the speaker quietly in the eye.

"Maybe they figger out they got some business around here," he said meaningly.

Rubio tried to return his glance for a second, then dropped his eyes, mumbling something to himself.

"What's that you say?"

"Oh, nothin', 'cept that when Contreras hears about this outfit he's liable to stage a little party that won't be none too comfortable for all people concerned," the scar faced man said significantly.

"Contreras had best stay on his own side of the river, if he knows what's good for him," the barkeeper replied steadily.

"You better not let him hear of you sayin' things like that."

Rubio looked at him queerly. The barkeeper paled but went doggedly on with his work.

DAVIES, down on the temporary picket line, finished inspecting the last horse. He turned to the top sergeant.

"Forty miles and not a skin broken," he said exultantly.

The sergeant shook his head.

"Yes, sir, there's one."

"Whose horse is that?" Davies frowned.

"The captain's, sir," replied the sergeant quietly.

"Oh, I see." Then quickly, "You see, the captain's a little out of condition," he explained carefully.

The sergeant nodded.

"But keep those men busy working on twenty-six and forty-one, they've got puffs under the saddle."

"How about some extra duty for them two men that done it?"

"No!" Davies' voice was decisive. "Kellner is too short legged for that big barreled twenty-one horse. He rolls around like a peanut on a hot skillet. Have him trade horses with Hansen. Judson was sleeping in the saddle today, but the kid has a bad attack of boils and hasn't slept for several nights. Send him up to my tent after supper and I'll give him some stuff for his back."

Turning away, the sergeant shouted an order.

There was a cheerful knocking of currycombs against brushes as the command "Cease Grooming" brought its usual enthusiastic obedience. In less than five minutes the troop was lined up at the saloon, quaffing deeply and thankfully.

"Come on you guys, don't lean up against that bar and go to sleep; the lieutenant ain't had no drink yet." The word went down the line, and the slower men hastily finished up their beer and hurried out.

Davies came in at last and drank down a cool draught.

"Lord, but that is good!" he sighed thankfully. "How much do I owe you?" He pulled out his purse.

"You ain't owin' me nothin'; them's on the house," replied the barkeeper.

Davies expostulated. No amount of argument could make the barkeeper change his dictum.

"I'm kinda glad to see the boys pull in," he explained. "Things ain't so rosy around here."

"What seems to be the trouble?" Davies asked.

The barkeeper looked around cautiously, then lowering his voice:

"It ain't none too healthy for me to be shootin' off my face," he admitted, "but watch your step with this Rubio guy that give you some lip when you was in here before. He's a bad *hombre*—and he runs with a bad crowd. And there's another bad crowd acrost the river in Mexico. Fellow named Contreras; he's more vindictive than a rattlesnake. He's goin' to make trouble when he finds the soldiers have come here."

The barkeeper looked out the open doorway. Two men in chaps were approaching.

"Be blame' careful o' the place they call the Blue Hacienda," he whispered rapidly; then as the shadows of the newcomers darkened the doorway, "Yep," he said cheerily, "you bet it's good beer, I get it in from El Paso twice a month."

As Davies went out the taller of the men looked him over carefully, then turned and nudged his companion.

THE WAGONS had arrived when Davies reached camp, and a detail of men was busy unloading. He studied the camp site again as the men worked at their various tasks.

The tents were laid out on a slight knoll that faced toward the road. This road led south to the Rio Grande, distant some eight miles. Topping the knoll was a long low adobe building, empty now, but once used as a warehouse. The building commanded the town, which lay across a small gully to the rear.

Davies walked into the warehouse and studied the view from its windows. The walls were at least a foot thick. From the rear side he could look across the gully and down the town's one street, with its eight or ten houses, the saloon, a schoolhouse and a general store. As he studied the view, several men came out of the saloon. They stood there, talking together and pointing in the direction of the camp. One of them raised his fist and shook it toward the soldiers; then they mounted their horses and rode away.

As he went out of the door he saw the captain striding about.

"This is a strange camp site you picked out, Mr. Davies." Captain Tinker's voice was slightly querulous. "Why didn't you select a place in the center of the town? I can't find a decent place to put my tent. There isn't a patch of shade as big as a pocket handkerchief."

"How about the north side of the warehouse here?" suggested Davies, pointing to the shadow of the building.

Captain Tinker agreed that this spot was usable and, calling up the sergeant, he ordered his tent pitched.

The two officers watched as the cooks straightened out the kitchen equipment and prepared the evening meal. Davies reached into his pocket and brought forth a package of cigarets.

"Here! Have one of these."

Captain Tinker drew forth a cigaret case, a beautifully designed object in gold, having carved into its surface an ornate coat of arms. Within were gold tipped cigarets decorated with the same coat of arms. Davies took one politely and reached in his pocket for a match. Before he could find it, the captain had brought forth a gold cigar lighter, embossed with the same coat of arms and, flicking it open, lighted both their cigarets.

"Nice looking cigaret case and lighter you have there," commented Davies politely.

"Oh, just a couple of little things I'm rather attached to. You see, they have the old family crest on them," Tinker replied off hand with a careless flick of his cigaret.

"I see," Davies commented.

"Yes, the crest was given to one of my ancestors by Queen Elizabeth, a Sir Charles Tinker. Of course the title died out as so many of those titles do." The captain's air was as if he spoke of unconsidered and unimportant trifles. "If the family had remained in England, I would probably be a baronet today."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," Davies remarked, feeling called upon to say something and not knowing what else to say.

"Yes, it would be very interesting," agreed the captain. "Take in England now; it's the only place for a gentleman to live. The lower classes know their place so well over there."

"Yes," Davies nodded, "they're not always being elected president of the country or something like that."

"Er—no," agreed the captain, a trifle uncertainly, "they know their place."

AROUND the corner of the building came a man, the barkeeper, his beefy face shadowed by an immense Stetson hat, his chubby frame stuffed into an obviously new mail order suit of clothes.

"Thought I'd come over and take a look at the boys." His voice was uncertain, his eyes straying to where the men were straightening out the camp.

"Fine!" Davies welcomed him heartily. "Make yourself at home. You know the captain, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Captain Tinker, his voice lacking any enthusiasm. "Well, see you later," he added, and walked away.

The barkeeper stared after his retreating back, a slow flush showing in his face.

"Don't mind him—" Davies patted his shoulder swiftly—"he's had a hard march today and doesn't feel any too well."

"I see." The barkeeper nodded and his face cleared. "It sure makes a man feel a little grouchy to do forty miles."

He accepted a proffered cigaret and leaned against the adobe wall.

"Where's this Blue Hacienda you spoke to me about?" Davies asked.

The barkeeper pointed down the road, shading his eyes as he stared into the distance.

"See where that butte sticks up 'bout three or four miles from here? Well, it's right under that butte. You could see it with a pair o' spy glasses."

Davies walked over to where his saddle and equipment lay against the wall and pulled up his field glasses.

Looking through them, he stared long and carefully, finally picking up the outline of a building standing among some trees at the foot of the butte.

"Who lives there?" he asked.

"Old guy by the name o' Reilly. He's a widower; his wife she was Spanish. He had a daughter, half Irish and half Spanish," the barkeeper went on. "He lives there alone, as grouchy as a bear with a sore tooth."

"What's the matter with the place?"

Again the barkeeper looked around carefully before replying.

"It ain't a healthy place to stick around. They say there's some funny doin's around the place. I don't know nothing about it. I'm just warning you to keep your eyes peeled."

"Thanks," Davies nodded, then took a notebook out of his pocket, looking up something on its pages.

"Tell me something else; who is this fellow Contreras they are warning us to look for?"

"Oh, him—" the barkeeper looked worried. "He's one o' them greasers whose families owned thousands of acres of land before the Revolution. Old Spanish family. He kinda went to the bad after his folks lost everything. They say he's a mean one."

"Does he come over on this side often?"

The barkeeper nodded, then as if afraid he had said too much, he said—

"I think I'll mosey along and talk to the boys awhile."

He excused himself and soon was down among the soldiers, renewing old friendships.

DAVIES walked thoughtfully over to where the captain's tent had been pitched. He found Captain Tinker absorbedly pouring over a magazine, one of those ornately illustrated periodicals which gladden the heart of the mid-West stenographer by its representations of the life of the ultra-smart sets of the Eastern seaboard.

"I see Mrs. Sudbury Whale is showing her horses at Tuxedo this season," he informed Davies, "and the Castleton Tawns are entertaining for Lord Milford. I met the Castleton Tawns at Meadow-

brook last season," he announced carelessly, and with befitting modesty, as one might announce the winning of the Medal of Honor.

"Yes?" queried Davies politely, then went on with what was on his mind. "Have you got any special ideas about the camp guard, Captain?"

Captain Tinker looked annoyed.

"Oh the usual picket line guard, I suppose—"

Davies shook his head.

"I think we ought to have a little more than that, Captain; we're pretty close to Mexico here."

"Don't worry me about that; we're a long way from Mexico. The Mexicans haven't got enough nerve to come all this way to tackle an American camp."

Still Davies looked dissatisfied.

"You won't mind if I strengthen the guard a little?" he asked.

Tinker shrugged his shoulders.

"Suit yourself," he replied absently and returned to his magazine. "I see they're wearing double breasted waistcoats a lot this season," he announced, his voice very serious; then, as Davies started to leave, he looked up. "I can't imagine why the first sergeant doesn't send me a batman. I told him twenty minutes ago."

"I'll find out."

Davies walked down to where the first sergeant was supervising the digging of a pit.

Sergeant Bloodstone advanced to meet him, his brow worried.

"Lieutenant, can you tell me what a batman is?" he asked, mystified.

Davies smiled.

"An orderly," he supplied.

"Oh, a dog robber!" A great light broke on the sergeant; he grinned sheepishly. "Been tryin' to figger out for half an hour what it was he wanted." Then he frowned in fresh perplexity. "I detailed Johnson to him, but Johnson asks me if he can't do straight duty; says he don't wanta work for the captain. All the other men says the same thing. I can run one of 'em up there by the nape o' the neck and the seat of the breeches, but it wouldn't do the captain much good, and besides it's agin regulations."

The sergeant referred to the fact that it is forbidden to order a soldier against his will to perform menial service for an officer, a right very seldom invoked.

Davies whistled thoughtfully. It is generally easy enough to find men willing to act as an officer's orderly for the extra pay and the freedom from fatigue that such a detail enjoys.

"Sergeant, sometimes an officer is easier to get along with if he is well looked after," Davies said very deliberately. "It would simplify my problem if some of the men would help out on this."

"If I put it up to Johnson that away, he'll do it in a second."

The sergeant turned on his heel and called to the recalcitrant soldier. There was a moment's colloquy. Johnson nodded and moved off toward the captain's tent without further demur.

Sergeant Bloodstone returned.

"It's all right, Lieutenant." He dismissed the matter and waited for what was to come.

"I'M GOING to send a noncommissioned officer and some men down to that ranch called the Blue Hacienda," announced the lieutenant. "He's got to be one of the most dependable we have, and able to use his head. Who would you suggest, Sergeant?"

"Sergeant Shedd," Bloodstone answered without a second's hesitation.

Davies nodded in agreement.

"Call him," he asked.

Sergeant Shedd, grave faced and serious eyed, reported.

"You are elected to chase off in the woods by yourself," Davies told him. "There's a ranch-house down here on the road to Mexico that needs watching. What goes on there I don't know, but I know you'll find out. In addition to that, you and your detachment will act as an outpost for the rest of the troop here. I'll go down there with you tomorrow and we'll look the place over."

Sergeant Sheed nodded.

"All right, Lieutenant, I'll get ready." He saluted and returned to his duties.

"Well, that's that," Davies continued to Sergeant Bloodstone. "Now, there's one thing more. In case we're jumped by the Mexicans in the middle of the night, we don't want our horses shot up. So we'll put an extra picket line down in that gully between here and the town, and we will tie the horses there every night."

Davies went on talking steadily. The two walked into the adobe warehouse. Sergeant Bloodstone made notes as Davies spoke. They circled around the camp. Near the crest of the hill Davies put some stakes in the ground, sighting over them and sending the sergeant to mark other points.

"Have the work done quietly," he cautioned the sergeant, "and have it done quickly."

The sergeant nodded in approval, writing down various details as Davies spoke.

"I'll take the first platoon out tomorrow and down to the Blue Hacienda. Have three sentry posts, one toward the town, one toward Mexico and one to the north where we marched from. You and I will inspect the camp on alternate nights, making one inspection just before dawn every day. I'll start tonight. That's all."

Sergeant Bloodstone started immediately to carry out the various orders he had received. In ten minutes there were three soldiers very unostentatiously loitering about the camp seeming to have nothing in particular to do.

The captain, coming out of his tent, noticed some men digging just below the crest of the hill. He paid little attention to them, imagining that they were making pits for the burying of kitchen refuse.

"What's the idea of that picket line in the gully?" he asked Davies.

"I ordered the horses put down there every night, it will give them a little shelter against the high winds," Davies explained.

Captain Tinker was satisfied.

SUPPER over, the troop wasted little time in getting to sleep. By nine o'clock camp was silent except for the occasional stirring of a horse on the picket line. The kitchen fires were low. At eleven o'clock Davies woke up, slipped on his boots and overcoat and went forth. He found the corporal of the guard and the three sentries on the job.

Returning to his cot, he arose again at four in the morning and padded out silently. The air was chill and raw. He had trouble in finding the sentry on the town side. Finally he found the man seated on a bale of hay.

"That's a good way of going to sleep and getting yourself a nice court martial," he warned. "Stay on your feet."

The other two sentries were moving about in the chill air of early morning. He could not find the corporal of the guard. Searching around, he found him at last, undressed and snoring in his bed.

"You'd better get up and enjoy being a corporal a few hours more," he told the man quietly, "for tomorrow I'm going to make you a private."

And so it was. The corporal took his medicine philosophically next day.

"Stay on the job!" he warned his friends. "The lieutenant don't never sleep!"

After Davies had eaten his breakfast he reported to Captain Tinker's tent. That worthy gentleman was sitting up in his cot, sipping his coffee. Around his shoulders he had an extravagantly flowered silk dressing gown.

"I'd like to take a few men down the valley and establish an outpost," Davies requested.

"All right, if you can get any fun out of running around this God forsaken place, go to it," responded Tinker, not especially interested.

With this permission, Davies departed with twenty troopers and with Sergeant Shedd riding beside him. They swung off down the road leading to Mexico, trotting along in the silent heat, the scenery a monotonous expanse of cactus and Spanish bayonet eking out a

precarious existence in the sun baked soil.

When finally they came into sight of the Blue Hacienda the view of the place was something of a relief. It nestled in a patch of green, exceedingly kind to the eye in this arid wilderness.

The ranch-house was a rambling building set beside the road. It was painted a weird shade of blue. Davies, who took no chances on losing his men through ambush, had sent a patrol forward to scout out the place before the arrival of the platoon. All seemed to be clear as he drew his men up by the house and dismounted. The place was silent and deserted looking, though a thin eddy of smoke from the chimney showed that some one was within.

DAVIES knocked at the door. It was opened almost before his hand had time to drop. A scowling bearded face showed in the opening.

"Yeah? What do you want?" a voice growled at him.

"I'm commanding an Army detachment that is going to camp here," Davies responded crisply. "I want to talk to you and make arrangements."

The owner of the bearded face and the inhospitable voice came out, a lank man in his shirtsleeves, his beard stained with tobacco juice, his eyes red and rheumy and suspicious looking. But the assured bearing of the officer had its effect.

"All right," he answered, his tone less harsh, "c'mon in." He held the door wide open.

Stepping into the cool interior, Davies found himself in a large room, sparely furnished but clean and livable. As he stood there, he heard a soft footstep behind him and turned in time to see a girl come out of one of the side rooms. In the momentary glimpse that he had, he obtained a fleeting vision of a beautiful face, rather pale, and of a wealth of black hair laid across her forehead like a raven's wing, and of eyes that seemed infinitely sad. The girl's face haunted him, it was so tragically beautiful. She had disappeared as quickly as she had come.

"My daughter," grunted the old man, with a sidewise jerk of his head.

"What are you fellows messin' around here for?" went on the old fellow, his voice rather querulous.

"Oh, we're sent down to keep the peace on the Border," Davies responded. "I'm going to leave a sergeant and a few men with you here. I'd appreciate any courtesies that you can show them."

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't bother them if they don't bother me," he grumbled.

"Oh, I don't imagine they'll get in your way. They're only down here to stop gun running and raids across from the other side. By the way—" Davies watched his face narrowly—"does this fellow Contreras every annoy you here?"

The old man's eyes narrowed. He half turned away, like some annoyed old vulture, then faced Davies again.

"He ain't botherin' me none," he croaked, but his hand trembled slightly and he reached for the back of a chair as if for support.

Davies asked casually—

"I suppose you won't mind my men putting their horses in your corral and using your watering trough?"

"No, they're welcome to it," was the response, delivered in a shaky tone.

"All right then, I'll take a look around, if you don't mind," and Davies stepped out in the courtyard where the men waited dismounted.

He took Sergeant Shedd with him; they walked around the ranch-house and down the road to where a small hill rose a few feet above the floor of the valley.

THEY made their way to the top and studied the country from its height. It was a good lookout place. On the one side they could see the road winding away to the river and on the other side they could follow its meandering course crawling toward Sierra Roja. Through his glasses Davies could see the tents of the camp and the houses of the town.

"Here's the place to keep a man on duty day and night," directed Davies.

Sergeant Shedd nodded and reaching down, he unstrapped a long canvas bundle he had carried along with him. Out of it he took a tripod and set it up. On this he placed an arrangement of two mirrors set at either end of a metal frame. Adjusting the mirrors, he lined them up to catch the full glare of the sun. With the mirrors set, the two watched for results. There was no sign of response.

Again Sergeant Shedd turned the screws and shifted his mirrors. They watched again. Suddenly a brilliant flash of light seemed to flood the hillside near Sierra Roja where the camp was placed.

"Good! They got our flash," remarked Shedd.

He set up another tripod that held a black metal shutter which worked with a thumb catch. The flash that had burst from the camp disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

Shedd placed his thumb in the catch and rapidly snapped the shutter open and shut in a series of long and short movements. Stopping, he waited. Again that blinding flash came from the camp, only this time, instead of coming steadily, it came in long and short bursts.

"V—I—S—I, visi," spelled Sergeant Shedd aloud. "B—I—L—I—T—Y, bility, visibility, P—E—R, per, F—E—C—T, perfect, visibility perfect; Bloodstone is on the job," remarked Shedd. "I hope nobody saw all this flashing."

"No, I don't think so, they wouldn't be looking for it," Davies argued, "only we can't play with it any more, or some observant person will get wise. Once or twice during the week I'll tickle you up with a single short flash of about two seconds in duration just to keep your men on their toes."

They looked over the surrounding country in silence for a space.

Davies broke the silence.

"Now as to this place, the old man down in the house is either scared to death of Contreras, our friend across the river, or he is scared to death that we'll find out something about him around here. I can't figure out which. Anyway he is frightened when you mention the word Contreras. Find out what it's all about. I'll come back in a day or two and get the dope."

The two men clambered down. Before Davies left, a guard was posted on the small hilltop.

"You'd better keep your sentry on his toes, for your detachment might be jumped and wiped out before you could raise a hand. But I know you'll do that anyway; otherwise I wouldn't have picked you for this job."

Sergeant Shedd nodded.

"I'll do my best, Lieutenant," he promised gravely.

LEAVING ten men and a cook with the sergeant, Davies headed back for the main camp with the remainder of the platoon. They had made about half the distance when Davies saw three riders coming toward them. Closer inspection proved one of them to be Rubio, the scar faced man who had tried to pick a quarrel in the saloon.

Rubio, as he drew aside to let the soldiers pass, smiled at Davies, a queer sort of smile, half malice and half triumph. It puzzled the lieutenant vaguely, but he soon put it from his mind.

They were approaching the camp, and Davies surveyed the place carefully. Not until he was within a few yards could he see an almost indistinguishable furrow of a deeper brown than the mesa, a slight furrow that ran below the crest of the hill.

The section of the mesa that stretched below the faint brown furrow looked just the same to the casual eye. Davies studying more closely, saw a sign that made him nod, content.

In the camp he found the captain still in his dressing gown, reading in his tent. Sergeant Bloodstone appeared as he dismounted.

"Everything is all right, Sergeant?" Davies asked.

"Lots of people coming into town." The sergeant looked puzzled. "The population has sure picked up over night. Mostly Mexicans," he added.

"What are they doing?"

"Just milling around. Some of 'em stands over across the gully and watches us. I run a couple of 'em out o' camp and give orders no civilian can come in without a pass."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir, the barkeep tips me off there's a big shipment of arms and ammunition comin' in this week and meant for the other side."

"Did you get any dope as to how it's coming in?"

"By wagon through the town here and down to the river."

Davies slipped off his belt, heavy with its pistol and extra magazines, throwing it over his arm as he stared thoughtfully out over the mesa along the road whence his troop had marched but yesterday.

"All right," he said finally, "we'll just grab that little shipment. Get all the dope you can on it."

The captain strolled down toward them, his hands in the pockets of his silk dressing gown, a long ivory cigaret holder in his mouth.

"Frightfully slow and depressing place, this," he complained. "Nothing to do from morning until night. Why, there's not even a country club within miles." He flicked the ashes from his cigaret daintily.

His remarks were addressed to Davies. He ignored the sergeant. As far as the sergeant was concerned it was as if he did not exist. Sergeant Bloodstone saluted.

"Is that all, Lieutenant?" he asked, his face impassive.

"Yes, thank you. The camp looks fine."

Davies jerked his head toward the front where the crest of the hill showed nothing but a faint brown furrow and the mesa in front of it nothing but the slightest disturbance.

SERGEANT BLOODSTONE walked slowly down toward the picket line where Stewart, the horseshoer, in leather apron, was looking over the horses' hoofs.

"What t'ell is the matter with that captain, anyways?" growled Stewart. "He comes sashayin' down here where I'm workin', all dressed up in that trick bathrobe o' his. Seems like he can't speak to no one without swellin' up like a poisoned pup. He says to me, 'My good man, can't you put on a olive drab shirt?' he asks. 'It looks very disgustin' to see a soldier around the camp in his undershirt,' he says. I could 'a' said it looks disgustin' to see a officer around all day in his bathrobe, but I says nothin', only salutes and goes on with my work."

"Well, don't let your sensitive soul brood too deep over his unkind remarks," advised Bloodstone. "How's the shoein' comin'?"

"I only got four more to put on and they're O.K."

But the horseshoer was still upset over his encounter. No one, in his experience had ever questioned the immemorial right of horseshoers to work in their undershirts.

Sergeant Bloodstone went on his way to his tent. Near his bunk he took up a tripod and a black enameled mechanism that fitted over it. Unscrewing part of this mechanism, he placed some sort of chemical in a receptacle.

That night, after nine o'clock, he and Davies took the tripod with its mechanism and set it up at the edge of the hill, with a shutter arrangement set on another tripod, in front of it. Touching a light to the black enameled mechanism, they faced it down the valley toward the Blue Hacienda, where Sergeant Shedd's detachment was encamped.

In a little over a minute a small, bright, orange colored glow sprang up far down the valley. The glow seemed to wink at them once or twice, then went out as suddenly as it had appeared.

"That's all right then."

Davies nodded, and Sergeant Bloodstone took the apparatus away.

Before turning in, Davies inspected the camp and sentinels. Pausing above the gully on the town side, he listened to the sounds from the saloon. There certainly seemed to be a lot of people about.

Shouts and yells and singing came from the barroom. Soon he heard the rattle of hoofs, followed by a shot. This was succeeded by a yell of wild laughter. Again he heard the rattle of hoofs, this time coming toward the camp.

Suddenly on the opposite side of the gully a group of horsemen drew up.

"Tickle up the damn' soldiers!" he heard a drunken voice shout.

There was a flash and an explosion; he heard a bullet thud into some wooden object in the camp. Below him, in the gully, came a sudden answering flame and roar.

The horses on the opposite bank reared and plunged. Dimly he could see that one had gone down. The rest galloped away. Swearing like a regiment of mule skinners, the owner of the drunken voice picked himself up and staggered off down the street on foot.

Suddenly the ground around Davies erupted shadowy forms. He heard Sergeant Bloodstone's whisper.

The whole troop was out, armed and ready. Davies made a quick trip about the camp, finding every point manned with silent figures.

"It's all right, Sergeant," he whispered to Bloodstone. "Just a drunken party. I think he got a horse killed for his pains. Maybe it'll teach them that this camp is a healthy place to let alone."

As the men disappeared into their tents the captain came out, much agitated.

"I say, what's all the infernal row about?"

"Nothing, Captain," Davies reassured him. "Just some of the peasantry of these parts celebrating."

The camp settled down. The rest of the night passed quietly.

THE NEXT morning Davies mounted, preparatory to riding to the Blue Hacienda. The captain was up and dressed.

"Don't you want to ride down and see the place?" Davies asked.

"Why—er—yes, I'll go along," he agreed, rather unwillingly.

Davies soon regretted his invitation. The captain talked interminably every step of the way. Davies was entertained by a long description of an aniseed bag hunt as practised on Long Island.

"And this aniseed bag doesn't ever get vicious?" he asked the captain gravely and received a puzzled stare for his pains.

They trotted along in a cloud of dust, their two orderlies laughing and chatting behind them. Davies, in a lull in the captain's talk, heard one of the orderlies reproving the other.

"I say, my good man," he heard Murphy's voice, "I wish you would pull that steed over a little, he's crowding my knee."

The captain rode along, totally oblivious.

Sergeant Shedd came out to meet them as they dismounted. "That fellow Rubio and a couple of others arrived here just after you left yesterday," he whispered. "They were closeted with the old man for two or three hours; then some Mexicans came up from the river and joined them. The whole gang jawed away in there for the whole afternoon. Finally they all left, the old man riding with them. I watched them with my glasses and they went across the river. The old man got back this morning. They all seemed pretty excited about something."

As they stood there, the door of the house opened and out came the girl whom Davies had seen on his first visit. She stood for a few seconds on the porch. Davies caught himself staring at the sheer beauty of her. But her eyes sought Sergeant Shedd; a glance passed between them, a very quick but very telltale glance. She disappeared indoors.

"Well, Sergeant," Davies smiled, "not such a bad place to be stationed." Shedd grew a little red, but said nothing.

Captain Tinker seemed suddenly to have come to life. The girl's rare beauty had not found him unobservant.

"I must meet the owners of this ranch," he spoke with heavy importance. "It's very essential to cultivate good relations with the civilians around here."

Davies and Shedd glanced quietly at each other.

The captain went up to the house and knocked. The girl opened the door. He bowed very low.

"I am Captain Tinker," he introduced himself in great state, and with something of solemnity, and waited for the welcome that should follow that weighty announcement.

The girl looked at him, plainly nonplused, then glanced over his shoulder questioningly at Sergeant Shedd. The sergeant nodded imperceptibly. She invited the captain in. Before entering he turned around, looking narrowly at the sergeant. Evidently the little byplay had not been lost upon him.

"So there isn't much to report," continued the sergeant to Davies.

"Well, keep your eyes open and get us word instantly anything turns up." Davies looked over the arrangements the men had made for themselves and the horses. "I don't like that town up there. There seem to be a lot of strangers arrived in it suddenly. Do they come through here?"

"Quite a few men ride through in the course of the twenty-four hours, most of them at night," answered Shedd.

THE GIRL slipped out of the house again and joined them. It was plain to be seen that the good looking sergeant had won her esteem. Her eyes no longer were shadowed by the brooding look which had saddened them when Davies had seen her first.

He bowed to her, his hat in hand.

"I hope we're not putting you to any inconvenience," he said.

"Not at all," she answered pleasantly, and smiled at the sergeant. He looked embarrassed.

Looking at the girl, standing there in the sun as graceful as a willow tree, Davies found himself envying the sergeant and wishing that he were the lucky man.

"Well," he smiled, "if Sergeant Shedd doesn't do his best to make himself agreeable you've the troop to pick from."

But the glance that she gave Shedd showed plainly enough that she was content. The captain came out of the house, accompanied by old Reilly, her father. Tinker was none too pleased at the girl's desertion and the look he bent on Shedd was nothing to write home about.

"I hope my men are not annoying you, Miss Reilly." He looked at Shedd again. "If ever you have the slightest complaint, let me know immediately."

"Oh!" Her eyebrows went up in astonishment. "But they are so nice!" She smiled at Shedd and included the captain in her smile, as if she wished that these two might be friends.

The meeting of the three young people, which had seemed so pleasant and natural, suddenly seemed spoiled. Every one grew self-conscious. Davies felt positively ill at ease. He drew the captain away and they walked around the building to look over the picket line.

"Damn' beastly shame, a beautiful girl down here with no one but these soldiers for company," the captain commiserated when they were out of earshot.

"Oh, some of them are pretty decent birds," Davies replied mildly.

"Perhaps, but uncouth, frightfully uncouth!" The captain was positive in his statements. "A beautiful girl like that is worthy of something better than a common soldier," he announced.

Davies glanced at him, surprised at the vehemence Tinker was showing. But that individual missed the look and went on pursuing his train of thought.

"I don't like that sergeant fellow, what's his name? Shedd? I don't think the fellow knows his place."

Davies repressed a smile.

"Besides," Tinker went on, "I don't approve of soldiers getting themselves mixed up with women; I think I'll transfer him back to camp."

Davies frowned. This was getting a little too raw.

"I don't think that would be wise, Captain," he said quietly.

"What do you mean—wise?" Tinker's tone was slightly belligerent.

"Why," Davies went on steadily, "Sergeant Shedd has carried out his duties here extremely well. He's one of the most dependable men in the troop. To relieve him for any reason except his manner of performance of his military duties would create harm. Besides," he added, deliberately brutal, "I think the girl likes him. If he can work up all that affection in twenty-four hours, he's entitled to the cooperation of his officers, not their interference."

TINKER was silent. The two had circled the ranch-house in their talking and came around the corner into the courtyard. As they appeared, they were just in time to see the girl, her chin tilted, smiling very happily into Shedd's eyes. Shedd was gazing down at her rather tenderly and quizzically. The little tableau was over as soon as the officers were sighted. The girl fled up the steps and into the house. Shedd moved away.

"You see!" Captain Tinker's voice was excited. "That sort of thing can't go on; why, it's disgusting!"

"I thought it looked very nice," remarked Davies, but Tinker paid no attention.

"No, Mr. Davies, you take Sergeant Shedd back with you and send another noncommissioned officer to take his place. I'll take charge of the detachment until another one comes down."

It was on the tip of Davies' tongue to protest; then realizing that he would be doing Shedd more harm than good, he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Very well, sir," he assented and went with heavy heart to break the news to the sergeant.

"You've got to go on back to the main camp," he informed him.

Shedd's eyes opened in astonishment. He gulped hard, then like the good soldier he was—

"Very well, sir," he said. A worried look came over his face. "Lieutenant," he asked, "you aren't dissatisfied with the way I've run things down here?"

"Me! Dissatisfied? Hell, no!" Davies shot back with such emphasis that Shedd grinned in spite of himself. Feeling some explanation to be necessary, Davies went on, "The captain is afraid that feminine influence will lead you from the strict path of your duties. So you'd better bust in and say goodby to the young lady. And tell her that it's going to be necessary to send you down here often to bring orders and look things over," with which parting admonition, Shedd departed in better spirits.

But it was noticeable that the sergeant did not go to the girl first. Instead he sought out the corporal of the detachment and gave him explicit instructions as to how things were to be run. This duty done, he disappeared in the house. After a few minutes he came forth, the girl clinging to his arm. Leaving her, he mounted his horse, as she watched rather wistfully.

Davies and Shedd set forth, followed by the orderly. Shedd looked back only once, after they had progressed a few hundred yards. The girl stood there, a white shadow against the blue of the house. Shedd turned his face toward the main camp and rode ahead silently.

It was Davies who finally broke the silence.

"Did you find out where the Blue Hacienda fits in the puzzle?" he asked.

"Not very much. Reilly seems scared to death of this Contreras fellow. That Mexican has everybody bluffed around these parts."

"How so?"

"Well, they never know when he's going to turn up. And he pulls some pretty raw stuff. Last week he wrapped a couple of greasers in green rawhide and left them in the sun to die."

Davies looked puzzled.

"You know green rawhide shrinks quickly in this hot sun. It'll squeeze a man to death in no time—makes their eyes pop right out of their heads, I'm told."

"Nice fellow," commented the officer. "Did you get any idea as to how many men Contreras leads?"

"Yes, sir, near as I can make out he has between four and five hundred. He's been getting his ammunition through the Border along here somewheres."

THEY were trotting steadily along, the breeze blowing the dust behind them.

"Somebody in the town is evidently helping him get that ammunition—" Davies' horse shied suddenly.

The unmistakable, vicious, singing whine of a bullet passed overhead, followed by the sound of a rifle shot.

The crack of the rifle came from the right, where a low lying hill flanked the road at about five hundred yards distance.

Without a word Davies drew his pistol and set spurs to his horse. He galloped toward the hill, followed by Shedd and the orderly. No second shot followed the first one. They galloped up the hill. Across a low valley on the far side rose a slightly higher hill.

They were just in time to see a horseman disappear over its crest. So quickly did he drop out of sight that they saw little by which to identify him, except that he wore a red handkerchief around the lower part of his face. Something in the man's attitude as he looked back before going over the brow of the hill made Davies rein in and call back Shedd and the orderly who were setting out in pursuit.

"I think it's a trap," he told the two men. "He wants us to follow."

Shedd's face was angry.

"I'd give six months' pay to lay hands on that skunk," he growled as they turned back to the road.

A few more minutes of riding brought them into camp without further incident.

Once in camp Sergeant Shedd put up his horse and disappeared into the adobe warehouse. Here he quietly watched through the one window. After some fifteen minutes of waiting, he nodded to himself, staring far down the town's one street.

FIVE riders had come into view at the other end of the town. The one in front had a red handkerchief around his neck. As that rider came nearer Shedd could see that his horse was foam flecked. The five rode and halted before the saloon. They dismounted and disappeared inside.

Shedd walked down to the tents.

"Somebody took a shot at the lieutenant as we rode in," he announced to the nearest man. "I think I know the bird, and he's just come into town with a few of his friends. Anybody want to go with me while I argue with him a piece?"

A growl went up—

"You're damn' right we'll go with you."

They quietly slipped their pistols inside of their shirts. Without arousing any particular attention, ten or twelve of them drifted out of camp, meeting Sergeant Shedd on the far side of the gully toward town.

They made directly for the saloon. Rubio and four swarthy faced companions looked up as the place filled with soldiers.

"Put your guns on that bar and come on out here, we want to talk to you," Shedd ordered, his voice harsh and his eyes ominous.

"Why—what—?" Rubio started to bluster.

"That'll do from you!" Shedd cut him off. "Outside!"

The five men slowly placed their guns on the bar. They shambled out through a lane of soldiers that opened to let them pass and closed behind them. A few scattered Mexicans had gathered to see the excitement.

The grim faced manner in which these soldiers waved them away made most of them remember important business elsewhere immediately.

Rubio suddenly found himself the center of a circle of soldiers. The circle opened to admit Shedd, who was taking off his heavy belt and pistol. Suddenly Shedd advanced on him.

"Put up your hands!" commanded this strange American.

Rubio, anxious to obey, shot them up straight over his head.

A laugh went up from the Americans. There was something excessively grim and chill about that laugh.

"Put them up like this, see?" Shedd crouched into a fighting pose.

Rubio turned a shade paler, but did as he was ordered.

And then an earthquake hit him. The ground came up suddenly and struck him. He stumbled dizzily to his feet. To make his list of misfortunes complete, suddenly and without warning, the sky fell on him. Plainly this most disturbing American soldier was a good person from whom to get away. Too many things were happening in his vicinity. Tranquility seemed a very desirable thing to Rubio. He broke away and made for the circle of watching soldiers. The circle stood like a rock wall. He turned and then everything happened at once.

It seemed years later to him when he came to, stretched face upward on the ground. Through a haze he saw his friends, strangely dusty, their sleek, oiled hair mussed up, one or two of them with their eyes closed and the rest bleeding about the face. They were being assisted into their saddles by the Americans.

No one seemed disposed to hit Rubio while he remained down. So he continued to remain so. Finally he was heaved to his feet.

"Get the hell out of this place," a harsh voice broke on his ears, "and if we ever see that ugly mug o' yours around here again we won't treat you so gentle!"

Gentle? Gentle? The use of the word puzzled Rubio as he was helped to his horse and dizzily assisted into the saddle. In a haze he saw the barkeeper looking at him reproachfully.

"I told you, Rubio, what 'ud happen if you monkeyed with that young fellow," the barkeeper said.

It was a very battered looking cavalcade that shambled down the street and out into the mesa. Later, after arriving among their friends at a Mexican barrio, miles away, they told how they had been set upon by two hundred Americans who tried to trample them to death under the hoofs of wild horses. Their friends, looking over the damages, were convinced that such had been the case.

SERGEANT SHEDD blew on his knuckles as he returned to camp, followed by the soldiers who had watched the punishment. Lieutenant Davies, deep in conversation with the first sergeant, had not noticed anything. He was too deeply interested in the first sergeant's news to pay much attention to anything that went on about him at that particular time.

They had picked on Sergeant Woodson as a replacement for Sergeant Shedd at the Blue Hacienda.

"And send five men with him, I don't want to get him shot up on the way down," ordered Davies.

"I wouldn't be sending too many men out o' camp," Sergeant Bloodstone had demurred.

"Why?" Davies was all attention.

"The barkeep tells me there's a shipment o' ammunition due to come in tonight to be sent through to that fellow Contreras."

"Where is it coming from?"

"It's bein' unloaded up at the railroad. I seen a couple o' wagons leaving town today about three o'clock."

"How many men with the wagons?"

"There was only three with each wagon, but the town's full of Mexicans and they may figure on goin' out and escorting the stuff through."

"Well, we'll grab that stuff. And here's how we do it. You start out with ten men after dark. Move out south as quietly as possible. When you get away from town, circle back and head north for the railroad. I stay here with the troop, watching any outfit that leaves town. If any leave I follow them and we catch them between two fires."

"Fine!" the sergeant nodded, "that will get the stuff all right. What worries me a little is what's goin' to happen after we get it."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, the barkeep says this fellow Contreras is vindictive as a rattlesnake. So far he ain't allowed nobody to get away with nothin'. If one of his men gets caught up, he rescues him and shoots everything in sight doin' it. Once he hears we got his ammunition he'll come after us, horse, foot and guns."

"Good! Let's get busy."

At nightfall Sergeant Bloodstone led his men silently down the hill away from town. Mounting them up on the road, he moved out toward the Blue Hacienda. After advancing in this direction for five minutes, he swung sharply to the left and circled back, around the town, hitting the road which led to the north.

He had traveled steadily forward toward the railroad for about four miles when he heard voices and the creak of wagon wheels ahead. By the talking and confusion he judged that there must be thirty or forty men, at least.

Deciding that he would be too greatly outnumbered, he fell back before the approach of the Mexicans.

IN A FEW minutes a shadowy horseman loomed out of the darkness and rode up beside him.

"That you, Sergeant?" Davies voice whispered. "I've got the whole troop back here on a hill alongside the road. About seventy men came through town and started out this way after you left. They are about ten minutes behind us."

Bloodstone raised himself in his stirrups.

"We'll get caught between the two gangs of them!" he whispered, his voice agitated.

"Just what I want," replied Davies most surprisingly. "When you hear my whistle blow, have your men fire into the wagon train guard here ahead. I'll leave you six men and take the rest with me. Jump off the road and join me as soon as you've fired five rounds. I'll be shooting into the rear outfit at the same time."

Bloodstone grinned as he caught the beautiful idea.

"Then we go for the wagons?" he asked eagerly.

"We'll snake the wagons out when the excitement begins."

Davies faded into the darkness, taking all but six of the men with him. Moving cautiously down the road, with his group close behind him, he soon heard the voices and clamor of a large body of horsemen. Nearer and nearer they came until he could distinguish words of Spanish floating on the night air.

"Out with your rifles!" he whispered, and drew his pistol and his whistle at the same time.

Nearer and nearer came the confused noise of the Mexicans. They rode forward, careless as to whether they were heard or not.

"When I blow my whistle, give them rapid fire!" he ordered his men.

Suddenly the air was split with the shrill notes of the whistle. At almost the same instant, a volley of rifle shots crashed into the darkness. Behind him, a second later, Davies heard another volley. Sergeant Bloodstone's men were firing into the wagon guard. Both small detachments were firing as fast as they could load and pull the triggers, so fast that they gave the impression of a much larger force. Screams and yells broke from the Mexicans both in front and rear. Davies led his men off the road at a gallop. On the hillside above, he ran into Sergeant Bloodstone with his group. Higher above them the whole troop waited.

Below on the road pandemonium had broken loose. The blackness was stabbed with the fitful flashes of rifle and revolver fire. The air hummed with bullets. Shouts and yells and screams and high pitched curses in Spanish added to the din.

Davies wasted no time in watching the excitement. He led his men down the hill in rear of the fighting. As he hoped, he found the two wagons deserted, except for the drivers. They were quickly overpowered, tied and gagged, and thrown on top of the ammunition boxes in the wagons.

Soldier drivers whipped up the teams, taking them off the road and around the hill that masked the sanguinary conflict now going on between the two detachments of Mexicans. With half the troop before and half behind, they trotted swiftly toward camp, the wagon wheels, badly in need of grease, protesting as the heavy loads careened, wildly lurching and swaying from cactus bush to hillock.

Behind them they could hear the firing intensify in volume. It had evidently developed into a regular pitched battle. As the troop increased the distance, the sounds of conflict grew fainter.

THEY entered the camp on the side opposite the town. The horses were placed on the picket lines. The men were hugely delighted, and chuckled among themselves. A roll call showed not a man missing and neither horse nor man hurt in the whole outfit. A hasty estimate proved that the two wagons held about fifty thousand rounds of ammunition.

Extra guards were put on the camp.

"For heaven's sake, get some axle grease on those wheels," ordered Davies. "My hair nearly turned white listening to them. I thought they could be heard all the way to Mexico City!"

The troop teamsters immediately went to work, putting the captured wagons into shape.

The stir and bustle around camp gradually subsided. About an hour later, Davies, on watch, heard the town waking to life in the darkness. There was a sudden sound of running and shouting, and much banging of doors. He could hear the hoofs of many horses and a faint sound as of the groaning of wounded men. Evidently the Mexicans had discovered their mistake at last.

The exposed situation of the detachment at the Blue Hacienda had been preying on Davies' mind throughout the evening. Calling Sergeant Woodson, who had been allowed to delay his departure so as not to miss the raid, Davies ordered him to take six men and ride down to the outpost at the ranch. He was to tell Captain Tinker the news and to ask him whether he would not come in, bringing all men to the main camp.

Day came without further incident.

DAVIES knew very well that with the coming of light, keen eyes would search out the trail left by the troop and the wagons. In addition, the wagons themselves were in plain view in the center of the camp. He waited developments rather grimly.

They were not long in coming. As he sat eating his breakfast, word came that a Mexican wanted to speak to him on very important business.

Walking over to the gully, he saw on the other side, which was as far as the sentinel would allow the man to come, a very short, fat and exceedingly smiling Mexican.

"May I come over and talk with you?" asked the Mexican politely.

"Afraid not—" Davies shook his head in refusal. "What do you want?"

"*Teniente*, my chief sends very important word to you."

"Who is your chief, may I ask?"

"Señor Contreras, he sends word of his felicitations on the very clever trick you played on his men. He sends word that he is not angry."

"Very kind of him, I'm sure," Davies returned dryly. "What does he want?"

"He is very anxious to have his wagons and teams and the machinery they were hauling. He says that if you will let him have that he will be very grateful and will be your very good friend."

"Tell him from me that I am deeply appreciative of his felicitations and would be honored by his friendship, but that I am ordered by my Government to seize all arms and ammunition and the means used for transporting them. His only recourse is to take the matter up with the Government at Washington."

"So—" the Mexican smiled very engagingly—"it would be too bad to have trouble between us—so many good men killed."

The Mexican looked over the camp, its

tents exposed on the bare hillside, no shelter observable anywhere for the men, except probably in the adobe warehouse, where they would be huddled like sheep unable to fire at an attacker. The camp looked easy of capture, and dangerously exposed.

"Yes, it would be too bad," Davies agreed.

"Is that your last word?" the Mexican asked.

"Absolutely!"

"I am very much afraid it will not be Señor Contreras' last word," sighed the Mexican regretfully; then bowing and taking off his hat, "*Adios, teniente,*" he called, "*hasta luego!*"

Which might be translated as "See you again!" Taking another searching look over the bare and exposed camp, the Mexican turned and went away.

As Davies returned to his interrupted breakfast, Sergeant Shedd stopped him.

"Those wagons belong to old Reilly down at the Blue Hacienda," he stated. "I've seen them in his corral."

Davies nodded.

"So did I, the first day we arrived. I thought he was mixed up in this. What sort of ammunition is in those boxes?"

".30 caliber," and Sergeant Shedd mentioned the manufacturer's name.

"Good, it'll fit our rifles if we need it."

The day passed quietly. At noon the men who had been sent to accompany Sergeant Woodson to the Blue Hacienda returned. They brought back a message from Captain Tinker, stating that he preferred to remain out with the detachment for the time being. Davies shook his head at this not especially good news. Being cursed with a habit of worrying over the safety and well being of each and every man under him, he knew that he would get no rest until he had these distant soldiers out of danger.

The returned men reported much activity along the river and much coming and going of Mexicans.

With Sergeant Bloodstone he carefully inspected various measures to render the camp a safer place. Extra bandoleers of ammunition were broken out unobtrusively. It was in the afternoon sometime that they heard a shot over in the town.

The sentinel on the town side shouted—

"I think they shot the saloonkeeper!"

Davies hurried across the gully and over to the saloon. He arrived there in time to find the little barkeeper at his last gasp, shot through the lungs.

"Rubio!" whispered the red faced little man, and coughed and died.

The town seemed deserted. Careful search was made of the houses. Women and children had fled as before a storm. There was no trace of the murderer. Making such arrangements as possible for the care of the body, Davies had to return to his own problem. The troop grew grimly silent when the news was spread.

ALL MEN were ordered to sleep in the warehouse that night. The tents were left standing and vacant. Extra guards were put on at all points.

The town continued quiet after dark. It was suspiciously silent, Davies felt. Sharp lookout was kept toward the Blue Hacienda, but no message came flashing up from that place.

After dark Davies put out a "Cossack post," three men and a noncommissioned officer, one man to be on guard constantly and the other three in readiness with their horses. The Cossack post was placed about three hundred yards from camp, on the river side. Double sentry posts were established on the town side and to the north.

"Can't you get a few minutes' rest, Lieutenant?" asked Sergeant Bloodstone, gruffly. "I'll wake you if anything happens."

Davies agreed to rest for thirty minutes if the sergeant would wake him and take thirty minutes for himself.

But he was not destined to get his thirty minutes' rest. The first thing Davies knew some one was shaking him by the shoulder. He woke and stood bolt upright as Sergeant Bloodstone whispered tensely that the Cossack post had

reported a large body of horsemen advancing across the mesa from the direction of the river.

Davies rose, tightening his belt. Slipping the safety catch from his pistol, he headed into the darkness with Sergeant Bloodstone.

Without a word the two men went to their respective posts. The camp was filled with shadowy, silent figures. Thirty of these followed the first sergeant down to the crest of the hill. Here they pulled up a screen of earth covered sacking laid on light wooden cross pieces and climbed down into a trench that disclosed itself underneath. The trench was well built, complete with head cover, firing step and loopholes looking out over the mesa. There was a subdued click and rattle as rifles were loaded.

Davies joined another group of men who filed silently into the adobe warehouse. The soldiers went quietly to their places in the darkness. Strangely enough, the station of each man was marked by a picture cut from an illustrated magazine, a square of white in the gloom. They tore down the pictures, disclosing well made loopholes cut through the adobe wall. Knocking out the clods of earth that masked each loophole from the outside, the men loaded and waited in readiness.

From the doorway, where he could watch both sectors, Davies listened, straining his ears for the sound of the enemy.

Suddenly below Sergeant Bloodstone's trench a scattering volley of shots broke out. They whizzed through camp, tearing at the canvas tents, some of them striking the tent poles with a woody thud and splinter. High pitched yells and the thunder of many galloping horses followed the shooting.

The camp lay silent and seemingly deserted in the darkness. Nearer and nearer came the shooting and yelling.

THE HILLSIDE burst into a horizontal sheet of vicious flames that stabbed angrily out into the darkness in the direction of the bandit attack. Davies' heart lifted to the soul satisfying rattle and crack of Springfield rifles. Startled screams and yells greeted the unexpected hail of bullets.

The sergeant in charge of the warehouse force beckoned to Davies. Hurrying to the loophole, he peered out.

"There," whispered the sergeant, "in the shadow of that second house!"

Davies saw a black mass detach itself from the shadows of the second house. It crept forward like a huge snake toward the gully, where the horses were stirring restlessly at the whine of bullets passing overhead.

"Give it to them!" called Davies.

The room shook to the roar of rifle fire. Davies saw the black mass pause for a second, then saw it disintegrate into a shrieking mob of fleeing men. The rifles barked steadily and rapidly through the loopholes. The shadows melted away, leaving nothing but groaning bundles of blackness on the ground.

The firing had died down on Sergeant Bloodstone's sector. Far over the mesa could be heard the shouts and yells of fleeing men. The entire attack was over in less than five minutes. A quick survey showed the only damages to be a bullet hole through the hat of a too curious recruit in the trench. The exposed and defenseless camp had proved itself a hard nut to crack.

The loudly groaning enemy wounded were brought in and given rough first aid treatment. Twenty-five enemy dead were counted. Many of them had been caught in the low barbed wire entanglements, concealed on the mesa at the base of the hill. There were more than thirty wounded left behind on the ground. Many of the dead were pierced by five or six bullets.

The wounded were carried over to the nearest house in the town, given cigarets and water and left there, safe from the danger of another attack.

The Cossack post was again sent forth. The double sentry post was strengthened. Coffee was issued to the men.

The thought of the exposed detachment

at the Blue Hacienda still preyed like a dead weight on Davies' mind. Calling Sergeant Bloodstone, he set up the signal lamp. Flash after flash was sent down the dark valley. They waited with anxious hearts for a return signal. Not a flicker of light showed itself in return. After five minutes they tried again. This attempt was as fruitless. Davies stared at Sergeant Bloodstone, heavy hearted. Bloodstone shook his head.

THE SIGNALER at the Blue Hacienda was flat on his back, trussed like a steer and thrown in a corner. Near him on the floor of the wagon shed were the other men of the detachment in like situation. An exceedingly highly perfumed Mexican, his shoulders laden with many cross belts of ammunition, guarded them.

A light gleamed from the parlor window. Near the lamp sat a huge Mexican, a great dumpling of a man, whose heavy form slumped down on the chair like a mountain of lard. The Mexican's face was like a round moon of fat, a cherubic sort of face in which the lips hung pendulous and drooping with something of the pathetic effect of a disappointed baby. The eyes were small and close set and somewhat piggish looking. The face was infantile until he smiled.

The smile was not a pleasant thing to see. It was in too great contrast to the eyes, which stared, unblinking and lidless like the eyes of a snake. The eyes were the index to the man and made one understand why Contreras was feared and hated on both sides of the river.

To Captain Tinker, sitting huddled on the chair opposite the Mexican, the resemblance to a snake had occurred often in the last ten minutes. He cursed himself for having so cavalierly called the one sentinel from his post as he rode by the small hill, making the fellow come and attend to his horse; for not ten minutes later the place had been filled with armed Mexicans. Without a shot fired, they had captured the sleeping soldiers. But the huge Mexican was speaking again.

"With all due respect to you, Capitan—" Contreras' voice was smooth and silky—"I had much rather captured your lieutenant. *Madre de Dios!* He is a devil, that lieutenant! And I would give him a death worthy of a devil, something long and lingering—" the man's eyes lit up with a cold light that was almost insane, the insanity of the congenital sadist—"yes, I think I would give him a taste of the rawhide—the green rawhide that closes so lovingly on a man's frame, that draws him up and embraces him so that he shrieks with the joy of it."

Tinker shuddered, stirring uneasily.

Contreras looked at him reflectively. A white shirted follower came in, saying something in Spanish.

"*Pero, no!*" he gasped in disbelief.

"*Sí, sí, señor,*" the man insisted.

Contreras sunk his fat shoulders in thought for a space. Suddenly he raised his head.

"Very fortunately my men have discovered your excellent signal lamp. I suppose," he suggested smoothly, "that you are skilled in its use, like many officers of your so estimable Army?"

Tinker nodded.

"So! That simplifies matters greatly." Contreras rose and looked down at the captain. "Now, Capitan, you will signal to your wonderful soldiers, telling them to come down here immediately. And I will arrange that my men will make ready to receive them with fitting ceremony."

"No," Tinker shook his head, "they would not come if I signaled them. They only obey the lieutenant," he lied.

Contreras watched him sharply.

"It is easy to believe that they would not obey you," he commented brutally. "I believe that you speak truly. It is only the *teniente* whom they obey? Well and good, you will signal the *teniente* to come to you at once. He is an officer; he will obey even you."

CONTRERAS paced back and forth once or twice. He nodded his head as if having arrived at some conclusion.

"You will kindly signal to the *teniente*

to come alone, leaving his troop behind. I will soon find means to make the *teniente* surrender his men and my ammunition," he remarked with that cold glare again showing forth in his eyes.

Captain Tinker stirred helplessly in the ropes that bound him. His face was pale, his forehead wet with perspiration.

"No—no," his voice quavered, "I will not; it is a thing that no gentleman should do."

"So—o," Contreras stared at him for a second—"we'll see. Pedro!"

He turned sharply to the door. A long, lanky Mexican with somber eyes and a wild shock of hair appeared.

"Bring that young fellow, what is his name, the one who tried to knife me yesterday, Cardozas."

Pedro withdrew, to return presently with a white faced, burning eyed youth who stood very straight and silent in the center of the room.

"I wish to show you, Capitan," the silky smooth voice went on, "I wish to show you just what happens when people do not please us."

He turned to Pedro, speaking in Spanish.

Pedro nodded and drew his pistol, placing it at the ear of the white faced youth. Tinker stared, transfixed with horror. What followed happened so quickly that it seemed unreal. There was a muffled explosion. The white faced youth looked startled, he trembled slightly, then quietly slipped to his knees and rolled over on the floor, twitching spasmodically. A pool of blood spread slowly under his head.

Tinker closed his eyes, white and sick.

"Capitan—" Contreras raised inquiring eyebrows—"look upon this." He pointed with his foot at the dead body. "It is not pretty, no?" His voice grew very gentle. "You will send that message, yes?"

IT WAS Sergeant Bloodstone who first noticed the flash from the Blue Hacienda.

He called to Davies in great excitement. The two watched the steady orange glow near the ranch-house with lighter hearts. They sent an answering flash out into the night.

A series of dots and dashes came through slowly as if sent by one long unused to signaling. Sergeant Bloodstone spelt out the message.

"All right here," the flashes read. "Captain Tinker orders Lieutenant Davies to report here immediately, leaving the troop in position in camp."

"What the hell!" Bloodstone snorted.

Davies looked puzzled. He walked back and forth a few times, his hands behind him, his head sunk in thought.

"Well," he sighed finally, "orders are orders. Send for my horse. Tell Sergeant Shedd to come with me."

Bloodstone grumbled to himself. The horses were brought up, Murphy leading the lieutenant's bay mare. Sergeant Shedd stood by with his horse. Before Davies mounted, he turned to the first sergeant, giving him some directions in a low tone of voice. The sergeant nodded.

Davies flung himself into the saddle. They picked their way down the hill toward the road. Once on the road, they struck into an easy trot, saying little as the horses sped along.

The Blue Hacienda loomed silently up before them at last. Turning into the courtyard, they started to dismount, their eyes on the only light to be seen, the light that shone from the parlor window. As Davies' foot touched the ground, he felt himself seized from behind in a powerful grasp. His feet were kicked from under him. Strong arms subdued his struggles and his hands were tied tightly behind him. He heard a muffled struggle in the darkness close by.

"Have they hurt you, Shedd? he asked anxiously.

"No, sir," panted Shedd's voice, "they've got me trussed up like a chicken."

The two were half led, half dragged, toward the house. Once inside, they were shoved into the parlor. They stood, looking at the scene.

Tinker, his head bent low, stared at them miserably. The great bulk of

Contreras loomed above the three like a huge bloated spider. The Mexican sat down, rubbing his hands in high glee. Davies glanced at him indifferently. Turning to Captain Tinker—

"How did that message go through?" he asked gently.

There was no reply. Tinker looked at Pedro, still standing over him, and dropped his eyes, his face a sickly, grayish pallor.

Davies and Shedd looked at each other. A faint line of white showed around Shedd's nostrils. His eyes were full of contempt as he stared at Tinker.

The studied indifference of the two Americans to his presence began to worry Contreras.

"Now," he broke in, "I would like to talk to you whenever you are ready." He spoke in high irony.

Davies looked him over, a look that missed no detail of the man's unwholesome bulk. It was not a contemptuous look or a scornful look; it was simply a highly bored and somewhat wearied glance.

"MY DEAR fellow," Davies yawned, "you have the option of shooting us at your pleasure. Please do not torture us by making us listen to your ill bred conversation."

Contreras stared at him, open mouthed. A slow flush spread over his face.

"Ill bred?" he almost shouted in his excitement. "Ill bred? Me? A Contreras, me!" He struck his chest. "Descendant of proud Spanish grandees!"

Tinker looked from one to the other in puzzlement. Contreras who had terrorized him so horribly, was on the defensive, actually explaining himself!

"You, a descendant of the grandees of Spain?" Davies looked bored. "You have descended a long way, my dear fellow. Such knowledge as I have of the grandees of Spain leads me to the belief that they would not remain seated while a guest stood."

Contreras looked positively ashamed. He rose hurriedly and, stepping across the room, he brought a chair with his own hands and placed it for Davies. Pedro performed like office for Shedd.

"Your claim seems more reasonable now," commented Davies. "I could almost begin to believe you are what you say if you would be impelled to offer me a cigaret."

Again Contreras hurried to comply, looking around the room anxiously.

"I am desolated; I have nothing. Pedro, find some cigarets!" he ordered.

Pedro, the somber eyed, did not move from where he stood. He reached over into Captain Tinker's blouse pocket and drew forth the ornate gold cigaret case, handing it to Contreras.

The huge Mexican looked at it curiously. His eye was caught by the heavily embossed coat of arms. He glanced at Tinker, studying him through half closed eyes. Then he shook his head.

"You should not," he reproved Tinker, "carry things that do not belong to you." He turned, bowing to Davies. "Will you have one of these, señor? Pardon, your arm, Pedro."

He nodded to the peon. Pedro unloosed Davies' right arm. Contreras lighted the cigaret for the American.

DAVIES stared at the curiously black stains in the floor where the young Mexican had sobbed out his life so short a time previously.

He looked up to find Contreras eying him.

Davies smiled.

"I take it you have arranged a little demonstration here for the sake of my captain?"

Contreras nodded.

"And what may I ask, is your object in making me ride all the way down here when I am tired and in need of rest?"

"I am desolated, señor—" Contreras bowed. "I had thought of persuading you to signal your troop to follow where my men could meet them more advantageously."

"That was a little ridiculous," remarked Davies.

"I see now that it was ridiculous, señor," Contreras agreed simply.

Tinker's eyes were rounded with astonishment. Contreras turned on the captain.

"But your friend the captain here, is more amenable to persuasion," the Mexican purred smoothly. "There is only one alternative left me, and that is to ask the captain to send another message, this time in your name, to your brave soldiers."

Tinker grew pale again. His eyes sought Davies' pathetically. Again he glanced in horror at the pistol still held so carelessly in Pedro's hand.

Contreras' eyes watched him as the eyes of a cat watch the struggles of a wounded and bewildered mouse.

"Yes, *capitan?*" the big Mexican whispered softly.

The room was silent. Dimly through the night could be heard the distant sound of firing. Contreras threw open the window.

"My men are attacking again," he informed them. "I am very anxious to bring that unfortunate state of affairs to a happy conclusion. Capitan, I am afraid that I will have to persuade you to send another message. Pedro!"

The peon moved close to Tinker. The somber eyed Mexican raised the pistol.

"Just a minute, Contreras," Sergeant Shedd's voice broke in. Every one turned to stare at him.

"I'll send the message for you," he offered quietly.

Davies flicked the ashes from his cigaret. He was leaning forward, as if intent on hearing something. His glance went up to the door behind Contreras.

"Never mind," he advised. "there is no need of sending messages."

Contreras looked at him in surprise.

"There is no need of a message," he repeated.

Something in Davies' eyes made Contreras whirl suddenly toward the doorway. He looked into the cold rim of an automatic pistol held in the hand of Sergeant Bloodstone. Behind Bloodstone, the passage was filled with men in khaki.

The Mexican raised his hands slowly above his head. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Very clever," he complimented; then his face grew puzzled, he looked toward the open window through which still came the sound of distant firing.

"My men are firing on each other as they did yesterday?" he asked mildly.

"Yes, I left a few soldiers to introduce the two sides and start them playing," Davies explained.

Sergeant Bloodstone had cut the ropes which bound him. "Much obliged, Sergeant," he thanked and stretched his legs and arms to restore the circulation.

In turn Shedd was released, and finally the captain was set free of the chair.

DAVIES politely offered Contreras one of the gold tipped cigarets from the ornate case, lighting the match himself and applying it for the Mexican. Contreras bowed his thanks.

"But tell me, señor, how you brought your men with you? My soldiers reported that you came alone with but one other man."

"My troop was following along behind me off the road," explained the lieutenant; then turning to Sergeant Bloodstone, he asked, "How did you get in here so quietly?"

"The young lady here." Sergeant Bloodstone pointed to where the dark eyed, dark haired daughter of the Reillys stood beside Sergeant Shedd on the edge of the crowd. "She met us and took us around the side door and let us slide in."

"And what do you do with me?" asked Contreras quietly. "I would tell you that I would esteem it a favor to be shot rather than hanged."

"Oh, we have nothing to do with that. I simply have to turn you over to the United States marshal or his deputy and they put you in jail for a few months and feed you well. By the way, who

is the United States marshal in these parts?"

A look of something like interest came into the Mexican's face.

"A man by the name of Rubio is his deputy around here," he volunteered.

"Oh, phsaw," broke in Sergeant Bloodstone regretfully, "now ain't that too bad? We caught him on the way down. It seems he tried to get away and some of the boys shot at him and I guess—" the sergeant looked very concerned over the matter—"I guess there ain't any more Rubio." Bloodstone maintained an exceedingly straight face.

As Contreras was led out, he turned back.

"Oh there is one thing," he said, "The old man who owns this ranch; I might say that any aid he has given me has been—ah—what shall I say?—rather unwilling."

Captain Tinker sat silent and preoccupied, staring off into space. Davies turned to leave the room. Shedd rose from where he had been talking earnestly with the girl.

They went into the courtyard.

"Why did you offer to send that message, Shedd?" asked Davies curiously.

"Aw, that was just to gain time. I didn't want to see Captain Tinker embarrass himself. I promised his father I'd look after him if I ever ran across him. Tinker never writes to the old fellow and never sends him any money. So my old man takes care of him. It isn't any more than just. Tinker's father has been our butler for twenty years or more."

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of *Adventure*, published twice a month at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1928. State of New York, County of New York, *ss.* Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared LEVIN RANK, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Treasurer of THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, publisher of *Adventure*, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, Spring & Macdougal Streets, N. Y. C. Editor, ANTHONY M. RUD, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C. Managing Editor, JOSEPH COX, 223 Spring Street, N. Y. C. Business Managers, None. 2. That the owner is: THE BUTTERICK PUBLISHING COMPANY, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholder is: THE BUTTERICK COMPANY, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: CHAS. D. BARNEY & CO., 65 Broadway, New York City, MORRIS COHN, 351 Morris Ave., Newark, New Jersey, WILLIAM FREIDAY, 50 Broadway, New York City, WILLIAM O. HAMLIN, 60 Broadway, New York City, HAYDEN, STONE & CO., 87 Milk Street, Boston, Mass., HAYDEN, STONE & CO., 25 Broad Street, New York City, JOHNSON & WOOD, 111 Broadway, New York City, F. B. KEECH & CO., 52 Broadway, New York City, STANLEY R. LATSHAW, Butterick Bldg., 223 Spring St., New York City, LUKE, BANKS & WEEKS, 14 Wall Street, New York City, MERRICK & CO., c/o Customer's Securities Dept., THE NEW YORK TRUST COMPANY, 100 Broadway, New York City, JOS. A. MOORE, 300 Park Avenue, New York City, MOORE & SCHLEY, 100 Broadway, New York City, POST & FLAGG, 49 Broad Street, New York City. 3. That the known bondholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: DIME SAVINGS BANK, De Kalb Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. LEVIN RANK, Treasurer. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of March, 1928. BLEVINS C. DUNKLIN, Notary Public, New York County. County Clerk's No. 203, Reg. No. 9041; Bronx County Clerk's No. 4, Reg. No. 2901; Kings County Clerk's No. 5, Reg. No. 9059; (*My commission expires March 30, 1929.*: (*Seal*)—Form 3526.—Ed. 1924.

The CAMP-FIRE

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

Pfut!

COMRADE HARRIMAN, who had a particularly personal opportunity to learn what happens when bullets burn, puts the finishing touches to the discussion which began in April.

Hitch over and make room, boys. I'm edging into this wrangle because I have been there "and helped skin 'em."

Yup, back in '83 in Knapp, Wisconsin, when three two story wooden buildings burned down. Store on ground floor; family flat above. Scores of boxes of loaded shells in store—and going off like a machine gun battery in action. As you all know, the shells were alternated, half on butts, half on bullets. Every son of a gun on his tail thumped the wooden ceiling hard. Every one on his nose kicked an empty shell into the air, and they all made an unearthly racket, scooting wild. It was no place for a preacher's son, and I only glanced at the ceiling in passing, but feel sure that not one bullet struck there. They thumped hard, yes, but "showered down." I went upstairs, three at a "yump," entered each and every room, found nobody and came down, four at a "yump," left by the back door and at my third step beyond the door the whole building collapsed into the cellar and flames leaped fifty feet high.

The noise of those empty shells rollicking in there beat anything in my experience before or since. Some bottle necked .48-56 Spencer shells left scars on the ceiling plainly visible in one hurried glance, but no bullet appeared to embed itself far enough to stay put.

I have seen a wild frontiersman fire rifle shells by inserting them one after the other in a hole bored in a pine stick, then using the corner of a hatchet blade to explode them, and those bullets went a long way before they kicked snow dust off a field.

I have known a .45-90 shell, dropped in a stove by accident, to take the stove door off its hinges and seriously wound a woman ten feet off at the other side of the kitchen. I seriously doubt the ability of an old time rimfire .44 to show enough spunk to pierce an inch pine board at ten feet, when heat fired and free, even when sitting on a solid base, *mein herren*, I don't know what a Springfield .30-06 would do in like case. There is a difference, boys, a marked difference.—E. E. HARRIMAN.

Introducing—

BERNARD J. FARMER, whose story, "Black Booty," is his first in *Adventure*. By old Camp-Fire custom, Mr. Farmer rises to speak for himself.

I was born in England and have been in Canada some three years. My stories of the North commenced with my first experience in '25 when I set out from Winnipeg for a prolonged prospecting trip in Northern Manitoba. My partner and I entrained for Fort Alexander where we purchased supplies and a dog team. And that dog team! I still bear on my right hand the scars of initiation, and to add to our difficulties, we had to travel at top speed, as it was nearing spring; and when the thaw sets in properly the trail is impassable, as the ground is all muskeg.

Suffice to say we made the trip with ourselves and our possessions more or less intact and immediately set to work building a shack on the southern shore of Long Lake to wait till spring. Then came the unexpected. Spring, after having thrown a good scare into us, declined to come. Day after day was nothing but eat and sleep, eat and sleep, and our entire reading matter was a carefully salvaged portion of the *Manitoba Free Press*. After a week I knew even the advertisements by heart!

Once the snow cleared, however, our difficulties ended, and we set to work in earnest. Both of us owned to a knowledge of geology, and the next three months were happily spent in trying to rob mosquitoes of their natural prey and sampling quartz rock.

Since then I have been on many trips and made the acquaintance of the subject of many of my stories—the Mounted Police (one of my greatest friends being a Mounted Policeman), and although a great deal of false sentimentality has been, and still is, written on the Force, it is easy to see they do a real man's work in keeping order in regions where man's duty toward his neighbor too often depends on how much he can get away with.

To conclude, apart from prospecting, I have since leaving college designed electrical machinery, worked in a gold mine, fired a locomotive, sold insurance, worked on a section gang (in my opinion, one of the world's worst jobs) and, last but not least, beat my way across Canada on a freight train. All of which has brought me, in common, I suppose, with most of the readers of *Adventure*, a love of the new and strange in life.—BERNARD J. FARMER.

The Panama Canal

IN THIS day of transcontinental flights it is heartening to hear from a friend in the Canal Zone that ships go through faster than they used to.

That the Panama Canal is endeavoring at all times to give the best possible service to the world's shipping is exemplified by a recent innovation. Arrangements have been made and put into effect whereby a ship which can not be dispatched through the Canal on the day of arrival, on account of arriving too late at either terminal, may be passed through the first set of locks, and complete its transit the following day. This plan has been in effect for several months now, the first transit of this kind being made in December, 1927. Between then and February 28, 1928, a total of 83 ships were given partial transits, with an average saving per ship of a little over three hours, an average of 1.15 ships per day taking advantage of this plan.

In view of the success of this plan thus far, it has been decided to continue it indefinitely.

When the high cost of maintaining large commercial steamers is taken into consideration, the saving to shipping under this plan amounts to thousands of dollars annually.—R. S. CARTER, Balboa Heights, Canal Zone.

When Homer Nods . . .

THE WAR was such an enormous and complicated machine that we are sure Mr. Nash and the other cannoneers who pointed out the error in Mr. Barretto's story will excuse him this once—for Mr. Barretto was over there, and this is the first kick he's had on any story or book. We passed this letter on to Mr. Barretto:

I have read *Adventure* for over five years and never registered a kick yet, but when Larry Barretto has *one* mule pulling a Seventy-five gun *and* caisson where six horses are used, that's bad; when he has shafts on a gun carriage, ye gods! that's worse; but when four men, no matter how Herculean, talk about putting, *lifting* a Seventy-five into an ambulance—well, by all means let Larry Barretto see and lift a Seventy-five. It's 12:30 A.M. I was reading this story in bed and when I got to where they were going to put this Seventy-five in the ambulance I just had to write.—DONALD A. NASH, Oak Park, Ill., Battery D, 122 Field Artillery, 1917-19.

And Mr. Barretto replied:

Mr. Rud, the editor of *Adventure*, has passed on to me your letter of criticism and reproof in regard to "Soldiers' Luck."

No, I haven't any alibi to offer at all. You are quite right. All I can say is that the story is not entirely the result of my imagination. It was told me during the war by a Frenchman who had seen such an action fought on a farm near Belloy-en-Santerre. As he told it to me the gun was placed in

a cart—size not specified—which I made into an ambulance.

I know the 75 is exceedingly mobile, and I have seen them in action on the hills of Belgium in positions which it would seem impossible to place them, and so I got a false idea of their lightness. Also after ten years one's memory grows faulty.

The Frenchman may have been referring to a section of mountain artillery with the short tube 75 which can be broken up easily, but I should have said so in my story.

You are quite right about the other points. As for the caisson, that was a typewriter slip; I should have written "carriage."

Thank you for your corrections. I think I'll order my own court martial.—LARRY BARRETTO.

No. 3086234

WHEN Comrade Domont came across the following article by Paul Adams in the *Muskegon Chronicle* at the time of the second A. E. F. visit to France he kept it until it occurred to him that the Camp-Fire gang would be just as excited and envious as himself about Steamer Nason.

Some birds have all the luck. Take this guy Nason, for instance. He's got a dugout down in the Meuse-Argonne near the village of Cierges that he built back in 1918 and he visits it three times a year. Think of it—three times a year. And his other buddies in the American Legion will be all hyped up for one trip back to their former shell holes in September.

This dude Nason is a lieutenant now, but in those days he was a sergeant in the 7th Field Artillery of the 3rd Division. He and a buck named "Baldy" Bryden of Carbondale, Pa., and another stiff name Broderick from some other town in the States, got hold of a chunk of elephant iron one day and built a shelter. Just room enough in it for three, according to their plans and specifications—and a trifle crowded at that.

But one day the Germans put on a bit of an air raid in the vicinity and 11 other bons soldats squoze into the place, and did it handily, too. The incident proved that architects' plans usually go awry, Nason says.

After the guerre Nason, Leonard H., Sergeant 1st Cl., Serial Number 3086234, did a little writing, including a book known to the trade as "Chevrons" and another, "Three Lights From A Match." Now he and Mrs. Nason and their three youngsters live in a villa down near Biarritz.

Naturally, the sergeant combs his old sectors for material for his writings. And every time he drives up to Montfaucon and Romagne he leaves his car and takes a cut over the fields to his dugout. The farmer that owns the property wanted to do a little plowing there, but Nason made a deal with him to plant his wheat all around the place and leave the shelter alone. So now he can visit it three times a year, sometimes four, and when he does he squats inside, smokes a cigarette in violation of war-time regulations, and wonders how in Sam Hill 11 brothers ever managed to get inside during that air raid.

A Slip

A NUMBER of readers have brought to my attention the fact that W. C. Tuttle's two part novel, "Buzzards," which appeared in *Adventure's* April 15th and May 1st issues, had been published previously elsewhere. This is the truth—although I was quite unaware of it until both issues of the magazine had been distributed.

Of course it is not the policy of *Adventure* to reprint stories. Likewise, it is not the fault of our old friend Tut that the mistake occurred. Further than that, the reputable publishing firm which brought out the book, has no desire to make trouble for *Adventure*. Herewith a letter from Mr. Kent of Houghton, Mifflin's of Boston:

DEAR MR. RUD:

We have received from W. C. Tuttle a telegram calling our attention to the fact that the publication of his story by us under the title, "The Morgan Trail," has, through misunderstanding, preceded your serial issue of the same story under the title, "Buzzards." The enclosed copy of my letter of to-day to Tuttle states the facts so far as I have been able to discover them. I wish to add to it, however, an expression of our very great regret that the circumstance should have arisen. I have been a magazine editor myself and I know just how sore an occurrence of this kind makes the editor!

Faithfully yours,

—IRA RICH KENT.

Well, I am not angry. The change in title, a change in editors here, and the fact that it was deemed necessary to hold up serial publication of the story somewhat longer than usual, was responsible. I trust that it will not occur again.—ANTHONY M. RUD.

ASK *Adventure*

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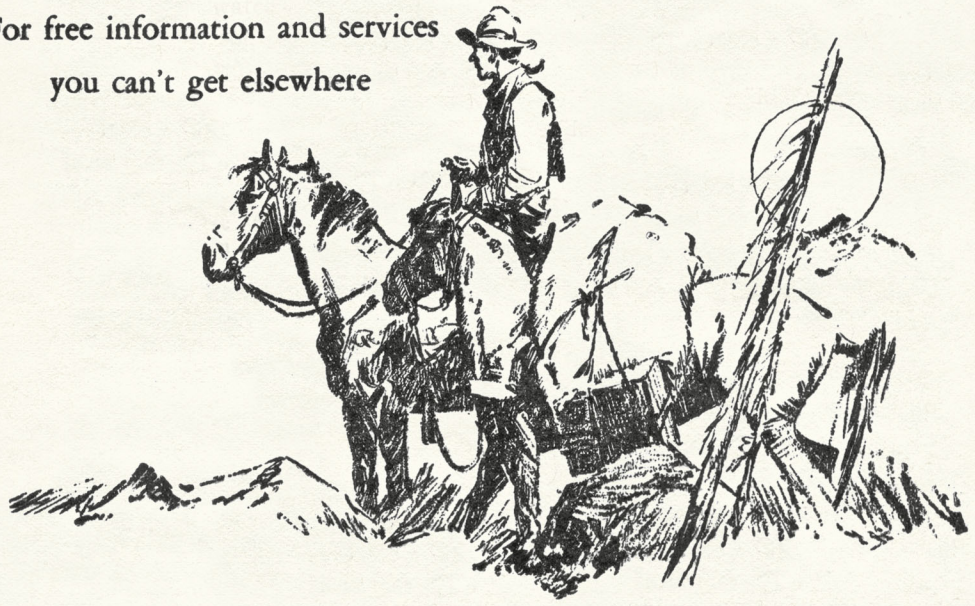

Gun Rust

HOW TO keep your weapon in good shape in a salt air locality.

Request:—"Can you tell me if there is any satisfactory way of protecting a revolver from the rusting effects of salt air? I ruined one good revolver that way, as it got so badly pitted. Cleaning daily did not seem to help much, as it was necessary to have it so oily to protect it that my hands and clothes soon got smeared and the gun collected so much dirt, lint and fuzz.

Is there a good way for re-blueing a gun where it is rubbed off from the holster? I have a recollection that you had such a process published in *Adventure*."
—D. W. BOSWORTH, Seattle, Wash.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—Along the Coastal waters, I find that a thorough cleaning, preferably with good nitro-solvent, of which I prefer either Rem Solvent or Chloroil, preferably the latter, then leaving the gun to stand for a day, and if no signs of any fouling shows, coating with B.S.A. Saftipaste both inside and out, does the work well. A very light coating, just as smearing a soft flannel rag with any good heavy grease and then the exterior of the gun, seems sufficient.

The rusting of the bore means just that you did not remove the primer salts thoroughly, and they have remained to some extent, causing rust to start, due to their affinity for moisture. That's why I recommend Chloroil; it positively removes them. I'll add that in greasing the bore of my arms, I use a common bristle cleaning brush and fill it with the Saftipaste, and run it through the bore till all is well coated, and rest content. I think you can get the B.S.A. Saftipaste or other greases from the Piper & Taft Co., of your city, or any other sporting goods store.

I'd advise returning the revolver to the makers for a really good re-blueing job, or to the following man, who is GOOD at it:

Phil Holmes, Alisky Bldg., Portland, Ore.

Canoes

POINTERS on converting into sailing craft.

Request:—"I want to add a sailing outfit to an 18 ft. open canvas canoe. I had for two years a lateen rig with leeboards, but somehow I don't think much of leeboards, as even with a light breeze they can, and do, bring an unholy amount of wet water inboard. And then a lateen rig isn't so good on the wind.

I don't want a racing outfit but just one to knock about on fishing trips and so forth. I had in mind a two-masted jib-headed rig, mainsail

about 35 sq. ft and mizzen about 20 sq. ft., the main-mast stepped 3 to 4 ft. from the bow, and the mizzen the same from the stern. Is this total area (55 sq. ft.) too large? Or too small?

And as to the water side of it: Would you advise a fixed keel or centerboard? The canoe will probably be kept in a boathouse which would mean taking it out every time it is used.

1. About what size would a keel need to be?
2. Approximately where would you locate a centerboard?
3. About what area would you advise? I thought about 150 sq. in.
4. I have heard of folding centerboards:
   (a) Can they be obtained? From whom?
   (b) Are they practical? I understand that a keel 3 in. wide or so is necessary with one, but I'm going to put a wider keel on anyway as the present one is only one inch wide.
5. Where can drop rudders, as used on racing canoes, be obtained? One will be necessary as the canoe will likely be beached more or less.

Do you know of any literature on the subject which you would care to recommend?"—ARNOLD C. ROCHOLL, Detroit, Mich.

Reply, by Mr. Edgar S. Perkins:—The leeboards may be wet but they are still the most practical of all to use. Some folks make a sort of splash board arrangement that fits around the leeboard brace and along the gunwales far enough on either side to hold tight and keep out the spray.

Putting a centerboard in a canoe means weakening its backbone and is bound to shorten its life. All keels or centerboards that I have ever seen or heard of were homemade affairs and not very successful. The keel can be attached so that by running a wire or line through to each side of the gunwale you can fold it against the bottom when getting into shore but I would not advise opening up the bottom of any canoe to put in a centerboard, as aside from weakening the craft you will find that much of your available space inboard is gone to make the box. The size keel you mention sounds about right; measure both leeboard blades and take three-fourths of their total square area. Drop rudders are mostly made at home, but many of the canoe companies sell them also.

I wonder if you realize how much room you will have left in your canoe to use for fishing with a centerboard and three sails. Think you will have much grief with your jib as I have seen that tried several times on an open canoe but never with success. If lateen sails give you trouble on the wind, would recommend using a double Improved Bailey or Batwing rig with a main of forty or fifty sq. ft. and a mizzen of twenty or twenty-five sq. ft. At least that is the logical size combination and and while the Marconi is considered the highest type of sail today I have handled a Bat rig against them time after time with no disadvantage to me, and the Bat gives its owner a roomier boat to use.

The placing of centerboard or keel will depend on where the masts are. Try whatever rig you make out with leeboards and find your dead center, then if you must, put on the keel.

Wild Horses

THOSE of you who have read the tales of Will James and other authentic writers of the West are familiar with these outcast horses. That they have little in common with the spirited mustang of the past seemed well established: that many are being sold for soap seems to be the last stroke of irony.

Request:—"Will you kindly give me information on the wild horse roundup in Eastern Oregon and Idaho and surrounding country?

Is it a State or Government activity?

Where can I get in communication with the party or parties?"—HENRY STEINKE, Long View, Wash.

Reply, by Mr. R. T. Newman:—Regarding wild horse roundups in Idaho and Eastern Oregon, I wish to advise you that these are not wild horses as in the days of the early West, but for the past several years a great many horses have been turned loose on the ranges, and the U. S. Government has been gathering these up and holding auction sales, and at the last one I was to, you could have bought horses for $12.

Some of these horses are being sold to soap companies, and they are turned loose many of them to roam the ranges, as it is cheaper to do this than feed them.

I suggest you write to the State Game Warden, Boise, Idaho; also the same at Salem, Ore., and also to the District Forester, Federal Building, Missoula, Montana, who has charge of part of Idaho and who will place you in direct touch with Government officials who have charge of this work.

A. E. F. Uniforms

IF THE supply has not yet been exhausted, World War veterans may obtain them at a nominal figure.

Request:—"I am an ex World War soldier and would like to have some information as to where I could procure a new uniform to wear at funerals, Decoration Day, etc. I read some time ago in the *Legion Monthly* that the War Department had a surplus on hand. Could I get a reissue or where could I purchase one from the Q. M. C.? I received a full issue when discharged in June, 1919, but no longer have it."—CHARLES E. FOWLER, Lovilia, Iowa.

Reply, by Lieut. Glen R. Townsend:—Sometime ago the War Department issued instructions under which World War veterans were to be permitted to purchase one complete uniform, World War type, until the supply of war uniforms is exhausted. I

have been unable to place my hands on these instructions since receiving your letter but if you will write to the Commanding Officer, Chicago Quartermaster Depot 1819, W. Pershing Road, Chicago, Ill., you will be able to obtain information of the conditions of sale and whether or not the supply has yet been exhausted. The price for a uniform, blouse and breeches is now $8.89 and in the event you send your order you should send enough additional to cover transportation charges.

Florida

AFTER the frenzied times of the late boom, apparently land may once more be obtained at a figure within reason. Hunting and fishing.

Request:—"Having decided to settle down, after a life of wandering, mostly at sea, I am in need of your advice as to the advisability of locating on the southwestern coast of Florida, somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Myers or the Thousand Isles. What I am looking for is a place, away from the crowd, where a fellow can do a bit of fishing and hunting, also cultivate a small piece of ground. Can such a place be had in or around the above named sections. If so,

1. Can land be bought, or leased, or are there locations where a person can 'squat' without being molested?
2. What is the cost of land in that section?
3. What does it lease for?
4. Could a person locate on one of the many small 'keys' among the Thousand Islands?
5. What about country around Fort Lauderdale?"—N. JOHN, Louisville, Ky.

Reply, by Mr. Hapsburg Liebe:—1. Land can be bought, or leased, almost anywhere in the State. I don't believe you could find a place to "squat" without being molested, if you cultivated any ground.

2. It's hard to say. Should be cheap now, though. Florida had a "boom" of the craziest imaginable sort, and is now in what you might call the "backwash" of it. I would advise being careful about the title to any land you bought here.

3. As for leasing land, that should come cheaply, too. Prices, as indicated above, have changed so that I can not give you anything definite. It is probable that you could get the use of land in return for clearing it; but if it were palmetto land, you'd get the worst of such a bargain. If the palmetto is thick, the land is miserably hard to clear.

4. As for the Ten Thousand Islands, few of them are anything but mud and mangrove with an oyster-bar for a base, and mosquitoes would carry you off piece by piece. Besides, there is no water except what you'd catch from rains. I believe there is a Land Office in Gainesville, Fla., that could give you information about these islands; if not, write the General Land Office, Washington, D. C.

5. The cultivatable country around Ft. Lauderdale is fairly well settled, as much of it is about Ft. Myers. The answers to your questions 1, 2 and 3 will apply to the Ft. Lauderdale section as well as about anywhere else in Florida.

The hunting here is overrated. Florida is pretty well hunted out. Many counties do not permit hunting, especially of deer and turkey. To get anything much in the woods you'd have to get far back—and the last time I was "far back" we killed more rattlesnakes than deer and turkey combined. I don't even own a shotgun now. The fishing is fair at times, sometimes it is good, but even that is overrated. One day you will catch an automobile-load of fish, then for ten days you may not get a bite.

Our Experts—They 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 commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

They 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 assume any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible.

1. **Service**—It is 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. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.

2. **Where to Send**—Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.

3. **Extent of Service**—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. **Be Definite**—Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing *Fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.*—JOHN B. THOMPSON ("Ozark Ripley"), care *Adventure.*

Small Boating *Skiff, outboard small launch river and lake tripping and cruising.*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, California.

Canoeing *Paddling, sailing, cruising; equipment and accessories, clubs, organizations, official meetings, regattas.*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, 841 Lake St., Oak Park, Illinois.

Yachting BERIAH BROWN, Coupeville, Wash., or HENRY W. RUBINKAM, Chicago Yacht Club, Box 507, Chicago, Ill.

Motor Boating GEORGE W. SUTTON, 6 East 45th St., New York City.

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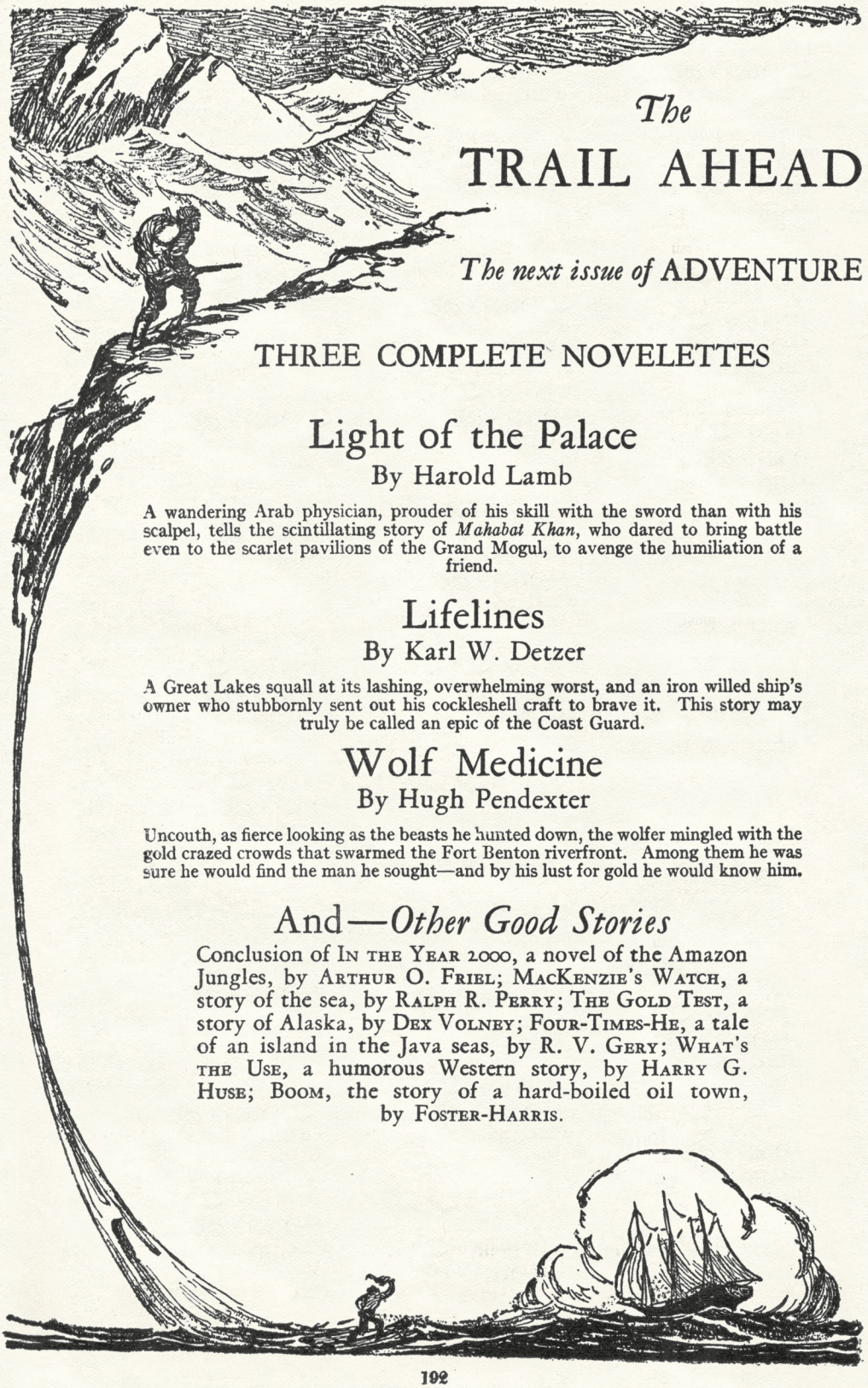

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