

January

# BLUE BOOK



Magazine

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Painted by J. C. Chenoweth

## WILDCAT

A complete book-length novel  
by ROLLIN BROWN

AFTER WORLDS COLLIDE, by Edwin Balmer  
and Philip Wylie • P. C. Wren • Beatrice Grimshaw

*Prize Stories of Real Experience*

# *A Complete Novel?*

**I**N this issue of BLUE BOOK we are offering you a complete book-length novel of fine quality—"Wildcat," a deeply interesting drama of the Southwestern oil-fields, by Rollin Brown. That is to say, this January issue offers you not only a generous assortment of excellent short stories, but a novel that in book form would cost you many times the price of the whole magazine.

In the choice of stories we have always been guided by quality rather than quantity. We shall continue to base our decisions entirely upon this factor. There is, however, a wide variation in the length in which a story can best be told. Some, like "After Worlds Collide," cover immense territory in time and space, and are concerned with many persons; such a story cannot be further compressed; and to avoid swamping the magazine with one sort of material, it is necessary to divide such a story into several installments. At the other end of the scale are tales like Georges D'Esparbes' "Ruffle of Drums," on page 93, which the author's skill enables him to present in brief compass. And there are, of course, all manner of sizes between them. So much for the writer's viewpoint.

To the reader, however, the factor of length may have another aspect. He may do his reading in short intervals on the train or in long evenings at home—or both; he may therefore prefer stories short, or long—or varied. And it is the business of the editor, we take it, to give the reader what he wants.

For this reason we would welcome expressions of opinion from our readers on this matter of length: Do you like this idea of a complete book-length novel in one issue? Or would you prefer a shorter novel—a "novelette," so-called—and two or three additional short stories? Whatever your preference, be assured that we shall, as heretofore, choose the stories we offer you wholly from the standpoint of quality.

—*The Editor*

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# BLUE BOOK



JANUARY, 1934

MAGAZINE

VOL. 58, NO. 3

## *A Complete Book-Length Novel*

**Wildcat** By Rollin Brown 96  
A fast-moving novel of mystery and adventure in the Southwest today.

## *The Best Serial of the Year*

**After Worlds Collide** By Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie 50  
This sequel to the much-discussed Blue Book success of last year, "When Worlds Collide," is even more deeply interesting.

## *Spirited Short Stories*

**Happy Ending** By Kenneth Gilbert 4  
A gallant hunting-dog loses a ribbon, but wins life and love for a lady.

**The Bride of Arabia** By James Francis Dwyer 14  
The Australian who gave us "The Splendid Thieves" offers the colorful story of an American wrestler's great adventure in North Africa.

**Lion at Large** By Arthur K. Akers 25  
A dark dog-catcher tackles bigger game—and strange events ensue.

**The Fires of Hell** By Percival Christopher Wren 34  
The author of "Beau Geste" tells a powerful story of the Legion and the sea.

**Christmas at Caribou Landing** By Reginald Barker 42  
An appealing drama of the North Woods in winter-time.

**Sun on the Pacific** By Beatrice Grimshaw 70  
A celebrated writer here contributes another fascinating romance of that far region which she has made her home—the South Sea Islands.

**The Evendean Affair** By Clarence Herbert New 80  
A mystery story by the author of the well-remembered *Free Lances in Diplomacy*.

**Ruffle of Drums** By Georges D'Esparbes 93  
This story of Napoleon's soldiers is very brief, but you will not soon forget it.

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**High Courage** By Warren T. Jamieson 153  
A daring mid-air achievement in a damaged plane.

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**The Lady and the Cougar** By Captain Walt Bethel 159  
A young Mexican girl shoots a mountain-lion with a .22—and the beast finds it out!

**Cover Design** By Joseph Chenoweth

*Except for stories of Real Experiences, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events.*

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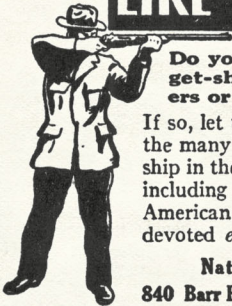
Published monthly, at McCall St., Dayton, Ohio. Subscription Offices—Dayton, Ohio. Editorial and Executive Offices—330 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. **THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE**—January, 1934, Vol. LVIII, No. 3. Copyright, 1933, by The McCall Company, in the United States and Great Britain. Entered as second-class matter, November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription Price, \$1.50 per year. Canadian postage 50c; foreign postage \$1.00. For change of address, give us four weeks notice and send old address as well as new. Special Note: Each issue of *The Blue Book Magazine* is copyrighted. Any republication of the matter appearing in the magazine, either wholly or in part, is not permitted except by special authorization. Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in *The Blue Book Magazine* will be received only on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit.

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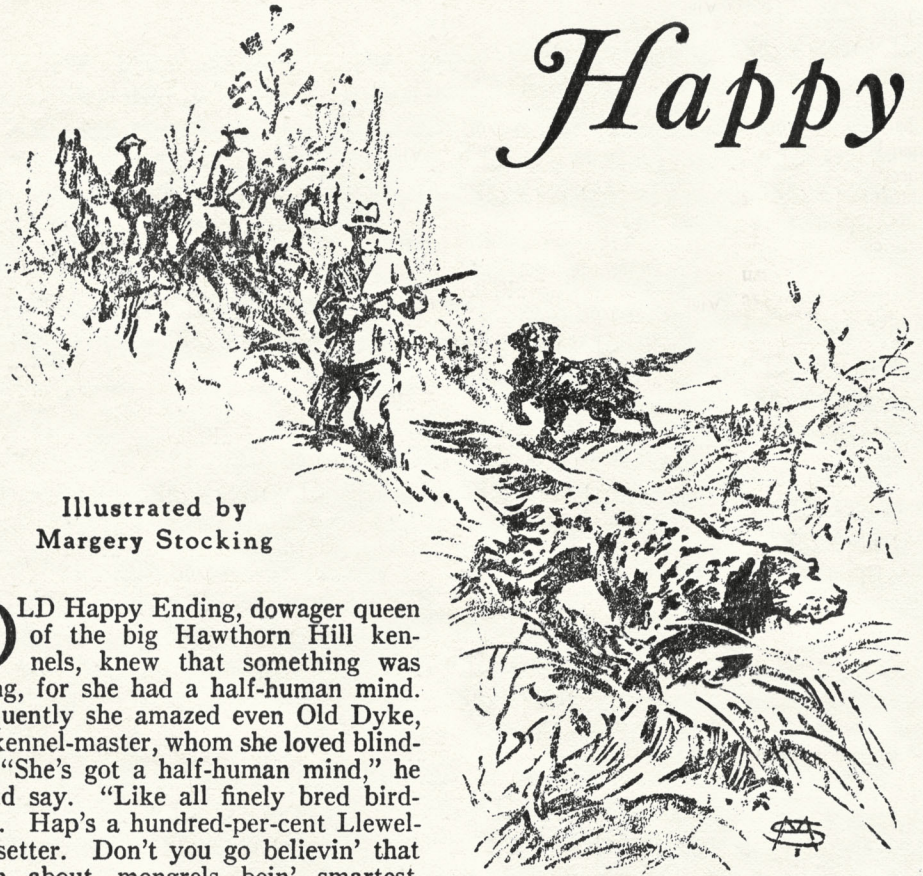
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# Happy



Illustrated by  
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OLD Happy Ending, dowager queen of the big Hawthorn Hill kennels, knew that something was wrong, for she had a half-human mind. Frequently she amazed even Old Dyke, her kennel-master, whom she loved blindly. "She's got a half-human mind," he would say. "Like all finely bred bird-dogs. Hap's a hundred-per-cent Llewellyn setter. Don't you go believin' that myth about mongrels bein' smartest. What brains they got came from a thoroughbred ancestor. . . . Hap understands things."

He could prove it, too. Only about once in every hundred years is there born a man who knows dogs as Old Dyke did. "She's mothered fifty-three puppies," he'd go on. "That's enough to give any dog wisdom. Nigh onto half turned out to be champions or near-champions. Wasn't any dumb-bells among the rest of 'em, either." This record is not so astonishing where cull puppies are weeded out; but Old Dyke never did that. He'd have quit his job if Farnsworth had insisted upon his doing that.

So old Happy Ending lay there in her run, eyes half-closed because the waning sunlight was in them, and not another of the twenty-eight setters in the runs about her so much as whined hungrily, although it was past feeding-time, and Old Dyke had not appeared, swinging his feed-buckets and singing his funny little song. For the Hawthorn dogs knew that old Hap, the dowager, understood things. . . . Something was evidently wrong.

You could get Old Dyke talking about dogs and field-trials, and every so often he'd swing back to Happy Ending, although she had never run a trial heat. "I could tell from the start that she'd understand things," he'd say. "It was in her eyes. The look of champions." Then he'd point out the great Otanamo, twice runner-up of the All-Age classic. He'd show you Larkspur, Otanamo's younger brother, who ran away with the Futurity. He'd take you up to the trophy-room of Farnsworth's big house on Hawthorn Hill, and show you pictures of Morning Glory and Dawn, and Wingover and Blue Ghost, and Hawthorn Fanny and Happy Choice, and dogs that had sold for as much as three thousand dollars each, and dogs that no money could buy. All smart sons and daughters of old Happy Ending, who had a half-human mind and understood things.

"I could see it in her eyes." Sometimes he'd get to sniffing, as the recollection grew on him. Sentimental Old Dyke, who had taken to drinking too much, and had twice fallen from his

# Ending

*A great-hearted dog loses  
a ribbon—and wins life  
and love for a lady.*

By KENNETH GILBERT

horse at field-trials when he tried to handle the Hawthorn string—and Farnsworth, a long-suffering man, had warned him sternly that the next time it happened he would be fired, even though he knew more about bird-dogs than anybody else. "I even named her," Old Dyke would point out. "*Hawthorn's Happy Ending*' is the way she's registered. A queer name, and prophetic. I foller my hunches. Them old Vikings had an idear. When one died, he took along his favorite horse to ride in Valhalla. I don't keer about Valhalla, but I'll want a dog in the happy huntin'-grounds Over Yonder. I'll want old Hap, and I reckon she'll want to be there with me. It'll work out that way, too; she'll prove her name.

"After all, who's to judge among those left behind? If she's happy, and I'm happy, nobody else need worry, I reckon." He'd go on harping like that because he must have felt that the end was not far off. He was drinking more steadily than usual, worrying over things which many thought he never noticed. But Old Dyke was deep, and he knew that he himself had good blood in him; as good, in fact, as Farnsworth blood, and it probably rankled him to see old Farnsworth, who was a proud man and made a fetish of thoroughbred strains, interfering with things that didn't concern him.

But that was Farnsworth's way. He'd pick out a horse, or a dog or a gun for his son Tom; or maybe it would be a fly-rod or a set of golf-clubs. That dominant trait had forced him up until he stood head and shoulders among other big men of his world, and many hated him. Even Old Dyke did at last. Farnsworth would pick the best because, as he said, he knew values. He wouldn't risk his son's making a mistake. He'd choose Tom's wife just as he'd select a new dog, or a gun.

He was a proud man who had made lots of money backing his own judgment, a man who might listen but would never

be swayed. He understood things, he said, and he considered only thoroughbred types. If he had any fear, it was that Tom would make a mistake. It was Farnsworth's way not to leave such a possibility to chance.

He thought that Tom showed symptoms concerning Old Dyke's girl Tavis, who had grown up at Hawthorn Hill and was pretty and clever enough for even a Farnsworth; yet that was insufficient. But Old Dyke had looked into Tavis' eyes, and he saw what was there; and when he realized what was in Farnsworth's mind, it rankled him. For Old Dyke was a proud man, too, although a simple one, with but the gift of knowing dogs, and with little head for anything else. So he drank a little harder, because the drink seemed to dull the edge of his pride and made him feel better; for he loved Tavis, and he had looked into her eyes and had seen things which Farnsworth never saw.

HE drank, too, because he knew that Farnsworth resented it, and had threatened to fire him. Yet he knew Farnsworth didn't dare do it, for there was nobody else who could handle the Hawthorn string like Old Dyke, and wins were the salt and savor of Farnsworth's soul. Farnsworth wanted the All-Age championship for his kennels as he wanted nothing else, and Old Dyke could get it for him again. Old Dyke handling the great Otanamo, whom he had broken and trained and molded into classic form because he was the wise son of Happy Ending, who had a half-human mind. Old Dyke surmised that it would be the last win he'd ever make. It would be something Farnsworth's money couldn't buy; but Old Dyke would do it for the glory of the dog and the grand old dowager. So he drank harder than ever, and looked into Tavis' eyes, and then went out and told his worries to Happy Ending, which is the way of a lonely man who is hurt, and who seeks an understanding sympathy

which rises from springs deeper than mere spoken words.

But it wasn't the killing liquor that took him off in the end, although it would have done so. Farnsworth gloomily thought that inasmuch as the thing had to be, it might have happened after Old Dyke and Otanamo had won the All-Age championship. Farnsworth fretted, and realized that the bubble of Hawthorn Hill's supremacy had burst, a dire thing in itself, for he had put his drive behind this hobby just as he had put his drive behind any desire.

When he heard the news, he knew what it meant, and it sorrowed him to think that the salt and savor had gone from life. He would break up his kennels, he decided, and sell the dogs. Happy Ending had no value now; she was too old. There were only two puppies in her last litter; there would be no more. Probably she'd die, anyway, grieving for Old Dyke. It might be a humane thing to destroy her, to gratify Old Dyke's whim for a dog in the happy hunting-grounds Over Yonder.

Farnsworth thought he might take up blooded horses. That would be something he could understand better than he did dogs. He had already made experiments with pedigreed cattle, but they didn't have the appeal of dogs or horses. Besides, his prize herd bull, for which he had paid ten thousand dollars, had become dangerous, and Farnsworth would have had him shot if the animal hadn't been such a blue-blooded aristocrat. Farnsworth hesitated to wipe out such a thoroughbred, even though the bull sometimes broke out and caused trouble.

He thought, too, in his understanding way, that inasmuch as Old Dyke was gone, the girl Tavis wouldn't care to remain if there were no dogs to look after. She loved them even as Old Dyke had, and she would want to leave when they were sold and scattered. If Tom saw her no more, the boy would likely forget. That seemed logical.

"**W**ERE as good as beaten at the trials," he told Tom. "I'm trying to get Renfro, who handled Commander for the Bennington kennels two years ago. He might handle Otanamo after a fashion, although the dog doesn't know him, and there's hardly time for the two to get acquainted. If Old Dyke had only lived—" He left the sentence unfinished while he pondered.

"Dad," said Tom suddenly, "I'm planning to marry Tavis. She's alone now, with nobody to look after her. She may decide to go away." Tom was tall, like his father, with the same steady eyes in which the dominance was already awakening. A man who could be hard to handle, although it had never occurred to his father that this was so.

"Eh?" queried the old man, as though the matter was a total surprise to him. "You—you wish to marry that girl?"

Tom met his gaze.

"That girl, Dad. She's good—and I love her."

**F**ARNSWORTH looked away. "She's not your kind, son." His voice had the quiet assurance of one accustomed to be pontifical. "Chances are, she's set her cap for you on account of your money. Her father was a fine dog-trainer, but pretty worthless otherwise. You haven't asked her yet?"

Tom looked very much like his father, the latter thought.

"No, but I intend to, Dad." There was nothing dramatic in the statement. It thrilled the old man to hear Tom speak just that way; he regarded his son with new interest, as though he had discovered something pleasantly astonishing: the Farnsworth manner, firm and confident; it disposed of things with finality.

"She may be good, and you may love her," declared the old man with sudden heat, "but she's not a thoroughbred."

"How do you know?" retorted the boy just as heatedly. "Who's to judge? What makes a thoroughbred, anyway? The possession of beauty, courage, high-spiritedness and pride? She has all of these!"

Old Farnsworth wagged his head patiently.

"You haven't given it a name," he pointed out. "I don't know that I can describe it. Not many can recognize it. Old Dyke could see it in a dog the moment he laid eyes on the animal. It's something more than purity of bloodlines, but that's my measuring-stick. There is no term for it other than the inadequate one I have mentioned."

"We're in deep water," Tom replied. "Old Dyke said he always followed his hunches. Maybe they come from the heart. I won't discuss Tavis with you, Dad. I think she's too fine to be my wife, but I intend to win her if I can!"

Old Farnsworth grunted.





"You'll win her, all right," he prophesied with asperity. "Why not? You've culture, breeding and background—and you'll come into a wad of money some day. But I don't think I want to have her for a daughter-in-law. . . ."

"Let it rest for a month. By that time the field-trials will be over, and I'll be giving things up here. We'll get rid of the dogs, and the stock. If you must marry this girl, I'll go abroad to wait it out. You and your bride may have Hawthorn Hill!"

He got up and stood at the window, looking out across the broad, rolling acres, with its checkerboard pattern of hedges and willow-bordered ditches, where wily old cock pheasants strutted and crowed defiance of bird-dogs seeking them with keen noses. Within a week the great field-trials would be run here. It would be the last time. The sunlight revealed deepening lines in the man's face. He looked older, much older, thought Tom.

"But, Dad—"

Farnsworth gestured shortly. In his eyes was the set stubbornness of an impatient man who meets an obstacle not easy to surmount. Yet his voice was calm enough.

"We'll let it ride that way."

OLD Hap lifted her head at last, and her tail thumped welcome. As if in response to her signal, the other dogs fell to whining eagerly, and one big-liver-and-white setter, an English newcomer to the kennels, stood on hind legs and poked his nose through a break in the wire-mesh. The back door of Old Dyke's house had opened at last; there would be food; it might be that things were not wrong, after all.

But it was not Old Dyke who appeared—that familiar figure in the soiled hunting-coat, worn winter and summer, and with floppy hat askew. Old Dyke, with the foolish song he sang to them, something about, "*Only mad dogs and Englishmen are out in the midday sun,*" while on his bent shoulders was a wooden yoke, a bucket of food balanced at each end. After that tail-thump, which was involuntary, the old setter was silent and watchful again. She still knew that something was wrong.

Yet the girl Tavis was beloved only a little less than Dyke himself. And it was Tavis who was looking after the dogs this evening, a man's job; but she loved them and would not delegate the work to a stranger. Old Hap stood up and greeted her with snuffles of appreciation, but there was an unanswered question in the dog's soft eyes. She wondered, puzzled. For Hap's sensitive soul twanged in dolorous euphony with the grief in the girl's face. In the doorway of the run, old Hap stood statue-like, her finely modeled body of clean white stippled with blue-black "ticks," the feathery tail wagging, mistily luminous eyes on the face of the girl.

"Hap," whispered Tavis. "Hap! You understand?"

Tom Farnsworth came up softly behind her.

"Those food-buckets are heavy," he reproved. "There are men to do this work. I could have helped."

The girl stroked the dog's glossy head. "I had to see her, and the others," Tavis said. "Tom, I think she understands what has happened. I can see it in her eyes. She knows something is wrong. Old Dyke always said that she had a half-human mind." Tavis, like



all of them, spoke of her father always as Old Dyke. No other name seemed to fit him so well.

Tom patted her shoulder. He was thinking of what his father had said about selling the dogs. Tavis would have to know. But not now.

"How is Otanamo?" he asked. "Dad is trying to get Renfro to handle him at the trials. He's determined to win, although secretly he believes it is impossible now."

"It means that much to him?"

Tom nodded.

"It's Dad's way. He's not used to failure; and he'd set his heart on winning this trial. There was a double shock for him when Old Dyke died. If Old Dyke had lived—"

"I know," she broke in. "Old Dyke thought of it—just before the end. You

know—he had changed greatly." Her voice was unsteady. "He never used to give way to this weakness; he was not at heart a drinking man. Something worried him. Yet he wanted to do the best he could for Otanamo, and for Happy Ending. He seemed bitter against your father. I don't know why.

"But Otanamo won't run. He is lamed from his last run with Old Dyke. Probably Old Dyke could have cured him in time. He knew how to do such things, better than any veterinarian, because the dogs seemed to have a way of telling him just what was needed. It was uncanny."

She hesitated. "I didn't believe your father would care to run Otanamo, now that Old Dyke is gone. But if he is determined, you must tell him that it is impossible. Renfro might handle him,

but Otanamo could hardly be expected to win. Besides, the dog might be lamed for life."

"That's bad news," Tom said gloomily. "Dad will be more disappointed than ever. Yet he may decide to run Otanamo anyway, for it will be the last trial Hawthorn Hill dogs are entered in." He paused, and added casually: "Dad intends to sell the dogs and break up the kennels. He was hoping for one more win, before he did it."

She stared at him. "He'd sell them all? Even old Happy Ending?"

The young man shifted uncomfortably.

"I doubt if a buyer could be found for her," he said. "She's old. It might be best to send her on to join Old Dyke. I think she'd prefer that—" He stopped at the look which had come into her face.

"You—you mean he'd *destroy* her?"

GENTLY Tom replied: "I know it sounds terrible; but after all, isn't it for the best? Old Dyke is waiting for her; she wants to join him—"

"But there was a debt," the girl's grief-weighted voice broke in. "Old Dyke never said that he wanted Happy Ending destroyed. He wanted the debt paid in full."

"What debt?"

"You couldn't understand," she went on wildly. "I'm not certain that I do. But—I *feel* that I know what Old Dyke wanted. He wouldn't have it this way. You sha'n't kill Happy Ending!" Her voice rose in a wail, and a near-by dog yelped an excited echo. "You sha'n't! I'll steal her first! I'll buy her—"

But he caught her by the arm, shook her almost roughly. "Hush!" he commanded; her sudden vehemence shocked him. "Tavis! You'll have your wish." This was Old Dyke's girl, who had played about the kennels, with puppies for toys instead of dolls. She understood dogs; probably she understood queer Old Dyke. Only a few hours before, she had seen him started on the journey to which he had looked forward, the pleasant journey to happy hunting-grounds Over Yonder. Old Dyke had steeped her in the lore of field-trials and field-trial dogs; and now he was gone, and something had gone out of her life. "Tavis," Tom repeated, "I'll see that Happy Ending is spared. No harm will come to her." He said it as Farnsworth himself might have said, with a finality which dismissed all doubt.

His manner steadied, calmed her. Her eyes spoke thanks. He liked her eyes—not alone because they were beautiful, he thought, but because they inspired him. He fancied he saw in them things he could not define.

"I'd do just about anything you asked, Tavis."

He wanted to say more then; he wanted to declare himself, and at the same time deny what his father had said, for it must become known some day, and he would not be dishonest. He felt that she had but to look at him to read his thoughts.

Maybe she did, for she seemed a little flustered. But old Hap nuzzled her hand, and the girl gained confidence.

"Tom" said the girl suddenly, "Happy Ending has never been run in a field-trial. Yet she's the mother of champions; and Old Dyke said that she was the greatest dog he had ever known. Otanamo will fail; he can't stand the pace, with that injured foot. Yet Hawthorn Hill mustn't lose by default."

He knew that she had something in mind. Old Dyke had been deep, in his way, and this was his girl, with more womanly intuition and balanced, mature judgment than one would expect to find.

"Tell me how I can help, Tavis."

The girl regarded old Happy Ending doubtfully.

"I'll need your help, Tom," said Tavis. "It seems cruel to deceive her, but Old Dyke would forgive me, if he knew." She hesitated.

"It all depends, Tom, upon how much she *does* understand—of what we have said!"

"Nonsense!" he told her. "The dog undoubtedly recognizes many words, but she hasn't the faculty of reading hidden meanings."

"She has intuition," retorted the girl. "Many people think dogs can see things in a world which is invisible to us."

He laughed. "Then we'll go where she can't overhear us," he told Tavis. "I want to know how I can help!"

THE dogs had been fed at last; they were quiet now and contented. No longer did they feel the spell which old Happy Ending had cast over them. Perhaps she had been wrong. All was well, apparently, even though Old Dyke had not appeared; the routine had not been disturbed. But old Hap, refusing to touch food, lay there once more in her

run, eyes closed to shut out the last fierce glare of the setting sun, which warmed her old body. Already she had seemingly forgotten the girl and Tom Farnsworth. She may have been trying to piece together the puzzle of their words.

But more probably she was thinking of Old Dyke, and his ways, which at times were inscrutable. Daydreaming, perhaps, after the manner of old dogs. Dreaming of joyous hours afield with her man-god, on a saunter which had no purpose save the delights of companionship, with the keen wind stroking her face as her delicate nostrils winnowed out here or there a trace of bird-scent, which set her heart pounding as his gentle old voice urged her on. Dreaming, too, as an old mother will, of her children, a whole procession of them which ran back from her newest-born—the beautiful pair which would be her last, and which Old Dyke had taken from her—beyond the vague edge of recollection. How she had hoped that Old Dyke would leave her that last pair of puppies. Yet her faith in him was great and encompassing. He knew best, and philosophically, she accepted his decision; nor had she whined over-loud as he walked off, a fat, wriggling little pup under each arm.

For she felt that he would come back, bringing her children. Surely he would have done so if he knew how much she missed them. Hours upon end she would watch the back door of the house, eyes expectant for his appearance. Each time he came, her hopes were raised high, only to be dashed to earth again. And now, for days, she had not seen him at all. She knew, then, what the other dogs did not—that something was unmistakably wrong.

**T**HAT night she broke a long record of good behavior, by howling; the other dogs took it up like a dirge. The lugubrious wailing woke old Farnsworth, on Hawthorn Hill; and although Tavis succeeded in quieting the dogs as soon as she could dress, the occurrence put Farnsworth in a savage mood. He was glad, he told himself, that he was leaving for the city to stay indefinitely. The field-trials would be over by then, and his own dogs sold. When he returned, doubtless Tavis would be gone, and Tom would be over his foolishness.

He gave his orders next morning, and left. But there were strange things that

happened at Hawthorn Hill when he had gone. There were plans, preparations, and through it all ran an undercurrent of excitement, which stirred even old Happy Ending from her lethargy and longing for Old Dyke.

**I**T was the third day of the trials. Farnsworth wasn't there, of course. He had ordered Otanamo withdrawn from entry when it was apparent the dog couldn't last, weakened as he was, in the fierce heat of competition, and possible injury to him might prove costly, for Otanamo was extremely valuable. Farnsworth plunged into his work in an endeavor to put the whole thing from his mind, for he did not realize until now what it meant to be out of the trials, to have no scion of Hawthorn Hill battling it out for the championship. In the evening of the second day, therefore, he was astonished at a telegram he received from Tom:

COME AND SEE A THOROUGHbred  
WIN TOMORROW.

The thing was inexplicable. Had Tom again entered Otanamo in the trial? Farnsworth frowned at the thought. There wasn't a chance in a thousand that the dog could be conditioned in time—and yet apparently Tom had accomplished it, for Hawthorn Hill had no other dog, Farnsworth told himself, who could compete in the high-class company.

Angrily he put in a telephone call for Tom, but that young man could not be located, and the caretaker at Hawthorn Hill seemed strangely uninformed. Farnsworth surmised that the man had been pledged to silence by Tom, or had been purposely kept in ignorance. What was this fool thing Tom had in mind? Always Farnsworth had made the boy's important decisions; it irked him now to think that Tom, having his own way at last, was embarked on some rash venture which most likely was ill-judged and would end in failure.

Cutting matters short, old Farnsworth determined to find out for himself. Intuition told him that something was afoot at Hawthorn Hill which he would do well to concern himself about. Canceling his plans, he caught the last train that night for Hawthorn Hill, and was gratified to find his car waiting for him at the station next morning. Evidently Tom had guessed that the telegram would not fail.

But the driver could add nothing to



So fierce was Happy Ending's onslaught that the bull wheeled with a low rumble of hatred; within three feet of his intended victim, he swung to fight the dog.

what old Farnsworth already knew. "I understand, sir, that they're running the last heat this morning," he told his employer. "But I haven't heard, sir, which dogs have been eliminated, and which will compete in the finals."

"Get me there in a hurry!" fumed old Farnsworth. If something big was afoot, Tom could never handle it. The boy was certain to blunder. The big car purred as it picked up speed. . . .

But out on the course, swept by the morning wind, drama was taking place. For two days now, brace after brace of dogs had been put down, and the elimination had been going on. The birds, plentiful and tame at the start, were now wild and scattered. Good dogs had gone down to defeat through ill luck or sheer inability to stand the strain of competition. Yet glorious bird-dog history had been made, and this meet would be talked over wherever field-dog fanciers gathered for years to come. As Farnsworth's car neared the place, he saw the big gallery following behind the judges who were on horseback. There were the "guns," too, a pair of expert wing-shots, trudging along in the wake of dog-handlers whose shrill whistles could be heard from time to time as they encouraged their charges. The thrill which only a field-trial follower can understand, came to him once more.

What wild thing was it that Tom had in mind when he sent that telegram?

The car stopped as near to the field as possible. Farnsworth piled out, and hastened to catch up with the gallery. A judge saw him, waved in salute, then spurred his horse nearer.

"Great dog you've got there, Farnsworth!" he called. "Never saw anything finer. But the show-down is coming right soon. We'll know who is the champion and who is the runner-up, on this next heat!"

He wheeled away and was gone before Farnsworth could ask a question. Then the gallery was moving forward swiftly, for the last brace of dogs—the pair which had eliminated all competition so far—would be set down for the final test. Farnsworth stumbled along in bewildered fashion, trying to fathom the mystery which was deepened by the judge's words. He wanted to get hold of Tom, but the young man was not in

sight. As he neared the knot of people gathered back of the judges, he knew that it was too late, that the thing was already under way.

He saw one of the judges lift a hand. The dog-handlers whistled, urging their dogs to cast out. To left and right, running at top speed straight up to the course, went two streaks of black and white. The announcer's voice came clearly:

"Final heat! Bennington's pointer Commander, and Hawthorn Hill's setter Happy Ending!"

**Y**ET even before Farnsworth heard, his jaw sagged at what he saw.

Following the speeding figure of the old setter who was meeting the challenge of the whirlwind Commander, was a figure on a horse, too familiar to be mistaken. Many times Farnsworth had seen that figure—the soiled hunting-coat, the floppy hat askew. By all the gods, Old Dyke!

But—Old Dyke was in his grave. Farnsworth thrilled as an explanation came to him.

"It's Renfro!" he declared to himself, amazed at Tom's cunning. "Otanamo was out, and Tom entered Happy Ending instead. But he knew that she'd never work for anybody but Old Dyke. So he dressed Renfro to look like Old Dyke. And—he's fooled her completely!"

Indeed, it seemed that way; for the gallant old setter, the mother of fifty-three puppies, was running a spectacular race which would have done credit to a seasoned dog years younger. She was doing it for the man-god, Old Dyke, who had miraculously returned. She knew what was wanted; Old Dyke had sworn that she had a half-human mind. To find birds, to point and hold them, and handle them perfectly—and do it before the fiery Commander beat her to the game—and win the praises of that beloved figure following her. For Happy Ending recognized her master from afar.

Several times she had attempted to seek him out, but Tom Farnsworth always headed her off. No matter! She knew where Old Dyke was, and that was sufficient. For the third day, now, she had been finding birds with a style never matched by any other dog from Hawthorn Hill; for was she not the mother of champions? This tough, sinewy pointer, she would beat him now as she had

beaten the others. Old Hap understood things.

And yet it happened in a manner which none could foresee. Off to the left, Commander came to a magnificent stand before a willow covert. His keen nose told him that a bird was in there, crouched for flight, but for the moment mesmerized by the nearness of the dog.

Swiftly, Commander's handler rode up, saw that the dog was stanch. He lifted his hand. "Point!" he called to the judges behind him.

They spurred closer. They noted that the dog was rigid. Probably he had a bird there; but there was only one way to make certain.

"Show me game!" cried a judge.

The handler rode in ahead of the statuesque dog. Up roared a grand old cock pheasant. At the sound of his wings, Commander settled to the ground. One of the guns spoke, and the bird crumpled in air. Still the dog stood fast. From the gallery came genuine applause for a great piece of work. Proudly the handler sent his dog on again. Commander had even made the retrieve.

"Five minutes more!" announced a judge. "Where's the Hawthorn dog?" At that moment it seemed certain that old Hap was beaten. She could not surpass the manner in which Commander had handled his point; she would be lucky, indeed, if she found a bird now before the time expired. The rider in the soiled hunting-coat and floppy hat had vanished, as had Happy Ending.

But from afar came a reedy cry. "Point!" It was over the brow of a knoll where, in the bottom of the draw was a tangle of wild rose bushes along a line ditch. Before this covert the great old setter stood in matchless pose. No false point about that; a bird was in there. Just back of old Hap was her handler.

"Show me game!" called the judge. His words were as a signal for the thing which happened, which sent gallery, judges, guns and all surging forward, but too late—it was over before they could reach the spot.

**F**OR as the horse crashed into the brush to startle the bird into flight, from the thicket came a bellowing roar. Farnsworth's prize bull, free again, had taken refuge there, while he dourly eyed the racing dogs, heard the whistles and shouts. Always ill-tempered, his

simmering wrath now burst into flame as the snorting horse, urged on by his rider, seemingly challenged him to battle. Head down, his short but sharp horns set at a vicious angle, the heavy beast charged.

TOO late the horse wheeled, for one of the bull's horns caught in the saddle-girth. Then, with a squeal of terror, the horse plunged, unseating the rider. With a heave of his great body, the bull swung around and bore down upon the dazed figure in the hunting-coat, lying on the ground. But ere he reached his mark, a black-and-white javelin was launched for the folds of his throat.

Old Happy Ending had broken point!

Gone was her gentleness now; she was a raging, demoniac beast fighting in defense of the man-god whom she loved better than life. So fierce was her onslaught that the bull staggered, then wheeled with a low rumble of hatred. Within three feet of his intended victim lying on the ground, he swung, to fight the dog.

Nimble she evaded him, for she fought as did her wolfish forebears, the deadly in-and-out leap which took toll each time she struck. But her giant foe was agile despite his bulk, and he had the craft of a born battler. He fainted once, and as she sprang in, he lunged heavily. She was caught, tossed, ever so lightly it seemed, and yet—

The glade echoed to the clapping report of a shot-gun. Farnsworth had snatched the weapon from a gunner, had run in close and had fired. There was no hesitancy. Again the gun blazed, from a distance of only a few feet—and ten thousand dollars' worth of surly brutishness sagged to its knees. Then, dropping the gun, Farnsworth was at the side of the dog-handler.

But Tom was already there, his arms hugging the figure in the soiled hunting-coat.

"Renfro!" cried the old man.

"Renfro?" echoed Tom. "It's Tavis! You understand? *Tavis!*"

The floppy hat had fallen off. Old Farnsworth saw her curly head in the crook of Tom's arm. Her eyes were open. She tried to smile.

"We lost," she said faintly. "Happy Ending—broke point!" Suddenly she struggled to sit up.

"What do I care if we lost?" demanded old Farnsworth huskily. "What difference—"

"Happy Ending!" she broke in hysterically. She was a little girl again, whose play-toys were highly valuable setter pups, and something dreadful had happened. "Old Hap! She's *hurt!*" But Farnsworth restrained her. He saw the others crowding about the old dog who lay where she had fallen. He wanted to go there too, but this girl—

"Steady!" he counseled. "I'm afraid it's too late. But we'll do everything possible for her. If we fail—remember how Happy Ending loved Old Dyke! Maybe this is the kindest and finest thing that could happen. To be with him—that's all she craves!"

He caught his son almost roughly by the shoulder. "Tom," he commanded, "if you don't bring this girl home with you to Hawthorn Hill, I'll disown you!" Old Farnsworth had at last looked into the eyes of Tavis, and had seen something which Old Dyke had always known was there. Farnsworth was excited, yet never more sure of himself. He was right this time; right even as to Happy Ending. He wanted to do things, to say things that would make amends, and he groped for light.

BUT to old Happy Ending, it seemed the turmoil was far removed. She was aware that kindly, gentle hands were exploring her hurts. Hopelessly. She was aware that the girl Tavis was crying over her. Old Dyke must be near too, for she caught the scent of the soiled hunting-coat. She tried to find his hand to lick, but it was not there; and oddly, she could not see. But he was near, very near, and she would find him.

And she did, as the mist seemed to clear away. She saw him coming toward her as she had seen him many times, wearing the old coat and the familiar hat, and singing his funny little song, a smile on his face. And—wonder of wonders!—he was not carrying food-buckets this time; instead, under each arm was a fat, wriggling little pup, the last of her lost little ones!

"Hap!" the old man was saying to her. "Happy Ending!"

It was hard to rise to meet him; she could not accomplish it until he was very close. And then, of a sudden, she found strength, and gained her feet, to follow joyously as he turned his steps toward a land new and pleasant, full of a mysterious, delightful promise of happiness undreamed.



Strange sights had they seen: Pygmies and cannibals, wild and naked folk in the moist jungles—savages who ate ants and worms and snakes. Flane and Thurland had made friends with them—marched with them for endless days.



# The Bride of Arabia

*The fascinating story of that valiant wrestler Flane, and the bride he rescued in strange combat on the flat roofs of Marrakech. . . . By the gifted author of "The Splendid Thieves."*

By JAMES FRANCIS DWYER

Illustrated by John Clymer

MY uncle, Flane Spillane the wrestler, was killed in the Great War. And strange indeed was the manner of his death. By a curious coincidence, my Uncle Flane, in turning a corner of a trench taken from the enemy, came face to face with a huge Bavarian he had wrestled with many times in New York, Chicago and other cities—a man named Jehudo Hegenbarth, known as "The Lion of Ansbach," a mighty fellow weighing two hundred and sixty pounds in his bare skin.

Face to face were the two enemies of the mat; and with cries of joy brought by the vision of a tussle, they dropped the rifles they carried and rushed at each other with their big strangling hands outstretched. For the Almighty gave man his hands to fight with; and Jehudo Hegenbarth and Flane Spillane were men whom the Almighty loved, and who obeyed His commands when possible. They thought it a dirty business to shoot men from behind sandbags, and so the sight of each other brought joy to their brave hearts.

Not another soul saw that wrestling-match. The big guns were banging beyond the forest of Trugny, and the boys of the Twenty-sixth were sweeping forward on Epieds; but Flane and Jehudo, trying for clutches, cared little about fixing the world for democracy. They just wished to find out who was the better man.

Fourteen hours after they threw down their rifles, a Red Cross patrol found them. My Uncle Flane was dead, his head blown off by a bomb that had landed in the trench; but the Bavarian was alive. Alive, yet held a prisoner by the dead man! And that was the miracle which the patrol saw. For Flane Spillane, before the bomb killed him, had managed to put a scissors grip on the

head of Jehudo Hegenbarth; and Flane's mighty thigh-muscles did not relax even when death took him!

A heap of trouble they had to get the head of Jehudo loose. And dumb with wonder were they when they got him clear. For hours and hours the head of the big Bavarian had been in the yoke of my uncle's thighs, but he was still alive! A fine bull of a man was Jehudo.

The Red Cross patrol poured a tot of brandy into him, and after a while he pulled himself into a sitting position and looked at my Uncle Flane. Looked at him with the admiration that one strong man has for another. "He was one mans," he said throatily. "Much better mans than me." And saying that, he reached over and took the cold hands of Flane and sobbed softly. A child at heart was the Lion of Ansbach.

Flane's brother, my Uncle Thurland, who was with the Forty-second, when told how Flane held the Bavarian with the scissors grip, brushed a tear from his eye and spoke. "Flane would have held him like that for all eternity," he said. "It was the grip he put on the big Arab, Ahmed Mansour, at Marrakech. Jehudo had luck that the Red Cross men came by, for Flane would have held him by the neck till Judgment Day."

NOW, it is of that wrestling-match between my Uncle Flane and the Arab, Ahmed Mansour, that I wish to tell here. I heard the story when I was a small boy. At the age of ten I drank it in; and at that age, the words of men are large and fine to listening boys. Large and fine, and covered with the dream-gold that is in the ears of boys, and into which the words are dipped before they reach the brain.

My uncles, Flane and Thurland, had arrived suddenly at my father's flat in



West Eighth Street. Two big men in the early twenties, standing six feet and a mite, muscled like tigers, and with the springy walk of large cats. On a wonder-day in the fall they had stormed in upon my father, kissed my mother and shook hands with all the children, asking our names as they did so.

"Let's all go out somewhere and eat," said Thurland. "We'll have a fine feed, and then we'll go somewhere for a run."

"And where have you come from now?" asked my father, as we hurriedly got ourselves ready for the outing.

"From the mouth of the Congo," said Thurland quietly.

Now those words, "mouth of the Congo" made my heart leap with the wonder that was in them. For the voice of Thurland Spillane was a husky voice that gave a background to the words that he used, so that you saw places when he spoke. Little towns and cities, and bare stretches of desert, and wild seas with lolloping waves racing each other like green stallions called to their food at the poles.

Tales a-plenty had the two of them. Tales of Africa that were like the roaring of water in dark caverns. For they had come up through Spanish Guinea to the Cameroons and into Nigeria, and from there across the Sahara to a city called Marrakech. And strange sights had they seen: Pygmies, and cannibals, and tribes that worked magic. Wild and naked folk in the moist jungles. Savages who ate ants and worms and snakes. Flane and Thurland had made friends with them, slept in their little huts and marched with them for endless days. The wanderings of Ulysses were nothing to the wanderings of my two uncles.

**B**UT of all the stories they related, I liked best the story of the wrestling-match between my Uncle Flane and the Arab, Ahmed Mansour. It was told by Thurland on a fall evening when Flane had taken himself to a fight at Madison Garden, and in the soft velvety

night it rolled and rumbled around the parlor in a manner that frightened me. And I think my father was startled at times by the barbaric setting of it. And my mother's brother, John Mahoney, who had a trucking business in Greenwich Street, grunted with astonishment as he listened.

Now of the exact words uttered by Thurland in the telling of the story I remember little. For words in themselves are hard and stiff, and mean little to children. It is the dream-gold that they bring into the mind that counts—the fine glittering color that settles down into luminous layers that are warm and glowing for years and years!

When Thurland began the story, I saw in fancy him and his brother storming up through the big sands to the City of Marrakech. A city that has the Arabic name of *Makhzenia*, which means *Imperial*. And I saw it as I listened. For one side of the parlor drifted away, and there was the city with its *souks* and its mosques, its narrow streets covered with fronds to keep off the fierce sun, its million waving palms, its orange groves and gardens of jasmine and mimosa, sitting at the foot of the Great Atlas and calling to the men of the desert like a soft woman sitting in the shade.

"The desert-dwellers cry for it," said Thurland. "Spurring up out of the hot wastes, they see the tower of the Koutoubia thrust up like a beckoning finger, and they weep as they drive their camels forward. For in the City of Marrakech there are fountains and shade and sweet drinks, and veiled women with hot glittering eyes that look at you the way a cat would look at a mouse. Women unlike any other women in the world."

"And why?" asked my mother quietly.

"I can't tell you, Margaret," answered my uncle. "Perhaps it is the mystery there is about them. Perhaps. For you see nothing but a moving pillar of white cotton, with a pair of dark eyes watching you, and you get curious."



For a moment the question of my mother halted Thurland; then he went on to tell of the Place Djema El Fna, which is a great open square in the center of the City of Marrakech. A place of immense wonder. Half as big as Central Park is this Place; and on it, from the moment the sun climbs out of the sands till the last star fades, there is movement. There is life, throbbing, pulsing life—strange and curious and a little wicked. On the great square are dancers and wizards, snake-charmers, sand-diviners, wrestlers, sword-swallowers, ballad-singers and story-tellers. And the hot air vibrates and quivers with the cries and the movement, the wild springing of dancing bodies, and the snaky twists of the muscles of wrestlers.

Some of Thurland's words slash back at me now as I write. Words that couldn't be ground into the color mass in my brain. "Mad Chleuh men from the Atlas are there with snakes!" he cried. "Fat, bob-tailed snakes with broad heads; and for the smallest coin in the world, that has the value of one of our cents, they bite the head off the living reptile! It's truth I'm telling you! . . . Racing round the ring with the head of the snake between their teeth! . . . For a little coin with a hole in it that has no value at all."

It was on this Place Djema El Fna that my two uncles, Flane and Thurland Spillane, first saw the Arab wrestler Ahmed Mansour.

My Uncle Thurland, in describing the Arab, thrust out a big fist at a plaster statue of Saint Patrick that stood in a corner of the parlor; and lo, the statue disappeared and there was the Arab standing where the blessed saint had stood with his golden two-peaked miter and his big crozier! For there was magic in the voice of Thurland. "A big up-standing brute of a man," cried my uncle; and the head of the Arab hit the ceiling of the parlor. "Muscled as no man was ever muscled in the world before!"

I saw the muscles! Rippling like water under silk. . . . "Stark naked except for a scarlet cloth around his loins, the hot sun beating down on him as he pranced around his mat, and the mouth of him bawling out the world for its cowardice!"

Saint Patrick tried to come back to the corner of the parlor, but the Arab held his place. Fixed by the words of Thurland! White fangs like the teeth of a wolf showed as the lips of the Arab moved in tossing out challenges.

**T**HE Arab saw Thurland and Flane—saw them as they pushed their way through the packed mass, and he knew at a glance that they were athletes. He cupped his hands and shouted at them. "*Ho! Américains!*" he screamed; then in French he taunted them. "Come and take a fall out of me!" he cried. "Come on, my big American elephants!"

Thurland and Flane stood and looked at him and there was little love in their hearts for the fellow. For his words were thrown acid that bit into their pride. And the Mohammedans in their white burnouses and yellow slippers, the Moroccan Israelites in their black caftans, the scorpion-black negroes from the far south, and the loafing soldiers of the *Légion Etrangère* fell back so that Ahmed Mansour could fling taunts at my uncles. Taunts that were like a million terriers snapping and biting. In five minutes they were the goats of the square, the crowd surging around them as the Arab whipped them with words. The men laughing behind their hands, and the black hot eyes of the women filled with merriment. Two baited Yankees! Little spahi officers with great red cloaks around them grinned openly; for there is, said my Uncle Thurland, a tremendous desire with all the people of the world to see an American humbled.

"And why I don't know!" cried Thurland, when telling the story. "For we have given with a full hand for famine and earthquake all over the world!"



The jeers of the Arab got under the skin of Flane Spillane. With an oath he started to tear off his coat; but Thurland seized hold of him. "Don't be a fool, brother o' mine!" he cried as Flane struggled. "Is it fun we are going to make for these lice of the desert? Wouldn't your old mother think you an omadhaun if she looked down from her seat in heaven and saw you sprawling around on this filthy parade-ground with an Arab? Be quiet, man."

But Flane was foaming mad, and he struggled to get at the Arab, who was shouting his insults louder than ever. And the crowd helped the fellow—helped him with words and some rotten dates that the dirty devils who kept the stalls hurled at my uncles. But Thurland was a strong man, and he dragged Flane away and cooled him in the gardens near the Koutoubia.

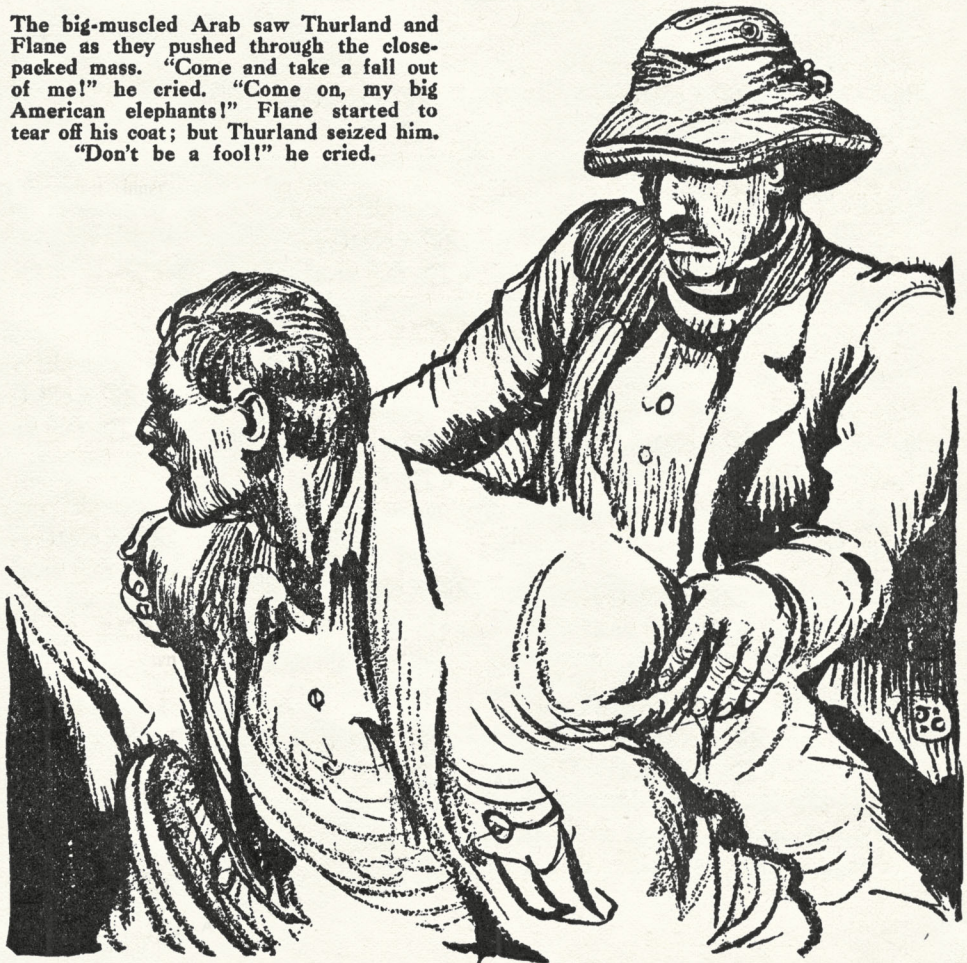
Each day that my uncles walked in the center of the city of Marrakech, the Arab, who had the eyes of a hawk, would

spot them and cry out his challenges and his abuse. They could not cross the Place Djema El Fna on account of the tongue of the fellow. And they couldn't sit in the little cafés that are around the Place. A devil of a tormentor was the man! If my uncles stopped to cool their thirst, a small boy would come running with a scrap of paper on which was written strange Arab words that they knew to be a challenge; for when they turned to look at the square, the big wrestler would be waving his arms in their direction, and all the people would be rocking with laughter. Great fun indeed for all the loafers of the city!

My Uncle Flane couldn't sleep because of this Ahmed Mansour. Not a wink. In the hot nights the jeering Arab would rise up before him, and his blood would race at fever heat, and words that were not prayers would come to his lips.

On these sleepless nights my Uncle Flane would go up on the flat roof of the house and look out over the city. And a

The big-muscled Arab saw Thurland and Flane as they pushed through the close-packed mass. "Come and take a fall out of me!" he cried. "Come on, my big American elephants!" Flane started to tear off his coat; but Thurland seized him. "Don't be a fool!" he cried.



great sight is this town of Marrakech; for although the population is only one hundred and fifty thousand, the city covers a wider area than New York. Leaning on the balustrade, he would look out over ten thousand roofs to the Mamounia, and the Palais de la Bahia; over the Mellah, and the waving palms beyond. And here and there on other roofs would be white-cloaked figures, motionless, watching the city. Men and women, but women mostly, for the men would be chattering to each other in little Moorish cafés.

It was easy for a man to hop from one roof to another, the houses being built against each other, and the idea of a run across the roofs in the soft blue moonlight took the fancy of Flane.

"Will you come?" said he to Thurland, on a night when the two of them were looking at the city, and the smell of jasmine and orange flowers brought a drunkenness to the brains of both.

"I will not," said Thurland. "It's a dangerous business; and it's a knife in your stomach that you'll be getting if you're not careful."

Flane laughed, for the devil was in him; and the taunts of the Arab on the Place Djema El Fna had brought him to a state of mind when a fight to the death would be pleasing. He kicked off his shoes so that he could run lightly over the roofs, and he dropped quietly over the balustrade onto the house next door.

"If I don't come back, you can have all that I am worth," he said to Thurland; and with that he was off into the soft night, a big tom-cat of a man, taking the low dividing walls in his stride, and swinging himself from one roof to another when the houses were apart.

**A**LWAYS and always, the picture of Flane running over the flat roofs brings thrills to me. As a boy, I would shut my eyes and picture him. He was part of Africa—the mysterious, tiger-like, prowling Africa that came up before my vision. He was one with the blue wash of moonlight, kin to the little wicked winds coming up from the great sands loaded with primitive odors that make men bold and reckless. The longing to be there—there in the city of Marrakech, running over the flat roofs with Flane, often brought me to the point of tears.

Thrilling were Thurland's words regarding the night-prowling of my uncle. For once Flane started that business, he

couldn't stop, the very danger of it being like wine to him. And many of the householders made objections to him running across their roofs. Once in leaping over a balustrade he landed on the head of an Arab who was at his devotions, and the fellow nearly got Flane with a thrust of his knife. And another time he flushed a party of young Moorish ladies whose squeals woke the quarter; and there was a night when a Moor who had doubts about his wife's fidelity took a pot-shot at Flane with his rifle, the bullet grazing his shoulder as he fled. Mad it was, perhaps, but it was an outlet for the wild anger that was in him.

**T**HERE came a night when the moon rode high above the Grand Atlas, and dogs barked because they saw specters in the wind. My Uncle Flane had run out over the Kasba by the great gate, Bab Aguenau, built hundreds of years ago by the sultans of the Almoravides. And there was much whispering and plotting in the night, with here and there the whine of a stringed instrument running like a golden worm through the silky stuff that the night was made of.

It was near the Mosquée de la Kasba that my uncle came upon a sobbing youth. There he was crouched in the inky shadow thrown by the protecting wall, crying as if his heart was broken.

My Uncle Flane could speak the tongue of the Moors, and he stopped and asked what was wrong. The youth wiped his eyes and answered. And the tale interested Flane, it being fat and colorful, and one with the night and the winds and the queer smells that rose up from the little streets below. Smells of saffron and oil, of dates and musk, of burnt mutton that was being cooked on little skewers over braziers; of camel-dung and mold, and all the thousand other smells that are Africa.

In a big square house that was separated by a narrow street from the roof where Flane and the youth talked, lived an old Moor who was the richest man in the City of Marrakech. He had great gobs of yellow gold, and chests full of coins. And he had hundreds of fine diamonds that had passed from one black sweaty hand to another up the length of Africa, up the secret gut of the land from the moment they were smuggled out of the mines of Jagersfontein. Fat stones that had never been put on a cutting-wheel. And big emeralds that had drifted westward across the desert, and had

come perchance from Cleopatra's Mines, which are at Jebel Zabara on the Red Sea beyond Assuan. And pearls from Bahrein and Condatchy. And sapphires and rubies and yellow topazes like the eyes of angry cats. "Stuff," said Thurland, "that would make the big jewelers of Fifth Avenue blink with wonder if they caught a glimpse of it."

"I've heard of all this," said Flane, when the youth had described the treasure in the house, "but what has it got to do with you? Are you thinking of plunderin' the old man?"

"He has plundered me," said the boy. "He has robbed me!"

"Eh?" said Flane. "Of what?"

"Of my sweetheart," said the youth. "He has bought her from her parents. This very evening they brought her to him, her eyes bound, and a cloth over her mouth so that she couldn't scream. A cap full of gold coins he gave for her."

My Uncle Flane considered the matter; then he spoke. "If I were you, young feller me lad," he said, "I'd hop across this trench, slip down the door from the roof, give the old grasshopper a poke in the ribs and take the lady away from him."

"Ah, but the guard—" gasped the youth.

"The guard?" said Flane.

"Yes, yes!" cried the young man. "I am nothing but a poet, yet he is afraid that I might do something, knowing that I love her greatly, so he has hired a guard. It is the Arab wrestler who gives exhibitions on the Place Djema El Fna who is protecting the house this night."

"Agh!" cried my Uncle Flane, and he blew the breath from his chest with a sort of joy. "Agh!" said he, and he rubbed the palms of his big hands together, the big hands that the Lion of Ansbach cried over in the trench in the forest of Trugny.

HE stood up and looked at the house of the rich Moor; and as he looked at it, the door of the roof opened, and out stepped the Arab, Ahmed Mansour! Stepped out onto the moon-washed roof, filled with the pride of strength, knowing there wasn't a man in the City of Marrakech who was willing to try grips with him! Still naked except for the scarlet cloth around his loins, he having a dislike to clothes, and a conceit in the golden pelt of his that he rubbed five times a day with palm-oil and the fat of the big blue lizards!

He saw my Uncle Flane, and he cried out to him. Cried out taunting words! He shouted the Arab word *kelb* which means *dog*; then he cried out *mewessekh bagra*, which means a dirty cow, a term that must be wiped out with combat.

FOR an instant Flane thought of leaping across the little street and rushing the Arab, but he controlled himself as he remembered Thurland. For Thurland loved a fight, and Flane didn't wish to rob him of one.

"Wait five minutes!" shouted my uncle; and as he spoke, he started running back to the house where he and Thurland lived.

He dashed down through the roof door and pulled Thurland from the bed.

"Come quick!" said Flane. "Don't bother to dress! Your pajamas will be enough! *Come!*"

"What is it?" cried Thurland.

"It's the rescue of a bride!" said Flane; and without another word, the two of them started running across the roofs in the direction of Bab Aguentaou, the big gate leading into the Kasba.

The Arab, Ahmed Mansour, was standing where Flane had last seen him. Bold as brass he stood up in the moonlight, while the youth who was a poet was sobbing on the roof opposite.

"Take it in your stride!" shouted Flane, as he and Thurland rushed the low balustrade that protected the street side of the house; and to the great amazement of the Arab wrestler, my two uncles rushed the low wall, and leaping together, went clear over the narrow lane and landed on the roof of the rich Moor's house. And before Ahmed Mansour had recovered from his surprise, Flane was pulling off the light shirt that he wore, so that he would be as slithery as the Arab when the fellow was trying for a grip.

"Come on!" shouted Flane. "It's a great night for a little pulling and hauling, and my heart is tired of your damned insults!" And saying that, he rushed.

My Uncle Thurland knows the sport of wrestling better than any other man in the world. He has made a study of the game, and he can talk learnedly of every great match that has ever taken place, from the one between Ajax and Odysseus, told of by Homer, down to the tussle of the night before last, where you yourself sat and yelled for action.

Every grip and clutch he knows. He can talk for hours of the tricks of Milo

of Crotona, a Greek who lived over two thousand years ago, and who was so good that he allowed his antagonists to grease themselves, while he rubbed his own body with sand so that they could get a better grip. And he can explain the holds of the great Japanese wrestler Sukane, who introduced *ju-jitsu*, and who threw thirty-four men one after the other as they stepped onto the mat, his cunning and his knowledge of nerves and tendons making infants of the best of them. It was to the teaching of Sukane that the Japanese emperor Seiwa owed his throne, for he and his brother agreed to wrestle for the perch after the death of their father.

This I mention here in an effort to explain the magic of Thurland when he commenced to tell of that combat. For the parlor of our apartment in West Eighth Street became the flat roof of the Moor's house in the Kasba of Marrakech! The flat, bare roof washed by the moonlight, the two big men writhing like great boa-constrictors, and Thurland stepping nimbly out of their way!

Maybe it was that I was small and impressionable. And maybe it was not. For I can recall now the faces of my father and mother, and the look of wonder on the hard visage of John Mahoney of Greenwich Street. I think they saw what I saw—Flane and Ahmed Mansour threshing around the floor, chairs and tables disappearing before their twisting bodies. And they heard what I heard—the smash of flesh on flesh, the smack of an open hand, the grind of a body on the plastered roof, the crack of muscles, and the quick intakes and sobbings of mighty chests in labor.

ON his feet was Thurland, right hand outstretched, eyes upon the floor. "There they are!" he cried, the magic of the harpers of old in his voice. "Flane has downed him with a back-heel! A hank, for sure! The wind is out of the Arab for a moment! . . . No, no! Like a Catherine-wheel against the coping! Mother o' God! A lump of the mud balustrade went down with the crash of them against the barrier! Two yards of it! Into the street below! And the noise of the crash and the dust woke the whole of the Kasba!"

From my mother came a little yelp of fear. Thurland glanced at her, and for an instant he was in New York; but the clutch of memory took him, and he was back in a flash on the roof in Marrakech.

"The Arab was the stronger!" he cried. "Stronger than my brother Flane! The golden skin of him, shining like the rump of a racehorse! Flashing in the moonlight! Breaking the grips of Flane! Grinning as he wriggled free! Grinning with pleasure. . . . And up from the little street came the cries and the yells of the running people! Bits of the coping tumbling down and keeping them at a distance. And the roofs around bubbling with people climbing up through the trapdoors, like ants getting out of their holes under a pot of hot water!"

I THINK my father had a desire to halt Thurland; I feel sure that he had. There was a strange look in his eyes as he watched his brother and listened to the story. But Thurland could not be halted. For the blessed gift of words was upon him. Centuries and centuries ago, when mighty Brian fought the Danes at Clontarf, some ancestor of Thurland Spillane had rushed through the furze-clad countryside telling of the glorious deeds of King Brian and his son Murchad—telling the story so that the hearers saw the great king smiting the red Danes with his ax—saw the invaders flying to their boats with the mad Munstermen chasing them, slashing and hacking with their short swords!

A throbbing pain was in my head as Thurland continued. A pain that was brought by fear for the safety of Flane. Forty feet above the street were the Arab and my uncle, and the coping that protected the roof was crumbling each time their bodies crashed against it. Crumbling and crashing into the street below!

"The guard was out!" cried Thurland. "A detachment of spahis and fifty men from the Foreign Legion! But the baked mud and the stones clattering down kept them at bay! And there I was running round the roof trying to get out of the way of the two of them! And mumbling a prayer as I ran! Yes, trying to think of little prayers that Father Cassidy had taught me years before. For if they rolled off the roof, they would both be killed! Killed or crippled, and one is as bad as the other!"

The knitting dropped from my mother's hands. It disappeared as the bodies of Flane and the Arab rolled over it. So it seemed to me. For as I pictured the roof, the great gap in the coping was on the side of the parlor where the divan was, and the visionary bodies that I saw



were rolling toward it! Rolling by the feet of my mother! Getting closer to the gap! Closer, closer, as Thurland cried out his breathless descriptions.

"A bright boy was the Arab!" cried Thurland. "Slippery as an eel! A dozen times Flane got a clutch on him that I thought he couldn't break, but the fellow was as hard to hold as the bits of quicksilver we used to chase as children when the thermometer broke! The greased

body of him slipping away like butter on hot cakes! Below in the street was a hullabaloo that was fair deafening; and every time a piece of the coping would

"Mother o' God! A lump of the mud balustrade went down. . . . If they rolled off the roof, they would both be killed! But that was nothing to them—nothing at all!"



go, the women would scream, and the men would yell to Allah!

"Six times I sprang in, thinking I could stop the battle! Six times! And what chance had I? None at all! For they were both mad as bulls! Glory be to God! Never in my life have I seen two men in such a temper! The coping could fall, and the roof could fall, and the City of Marrakech with its great towers and mosques could fall, but it was nothing to them! Nothing at all!

"Flane!" I cried, running round them as they struggled. "Flane! The balustrade is down, and you'll fall in the street and break your neck!" But Flane heard nothing. He was working to get a grip on that slippery devil, and his ears were stuffed with hate.

"Now they were rolling toward a gap in the coping! Over and over! Now Flane on top, and then the Arab. I ran to stop them, but I was bowled over by the two of them! I got to my knees, thinking to see them go over into the street, and it was then I saw the miracle! The miracle! As they touched the edge of the roof, Flane had got a scissors grip on the head of the Arab! A scissors hold! The head of the fellow was between the thighs of Flane, held as tight as ten cents' worth of ice in the tongs of the Italian on the corner! Tighter! And the body of the Arab had rolled over the edge and was hanging above the street! Hanging above the street, Flane's hold of him and the clutch of his own hands on the edge of the roof being the only support!"

MY Uncle Thurland paused, and looked around the room as if his eyes sought the bodies of Flane and the Arab. My father stirred in his chair; my mother sighed softly. It was John Mahoney who spoke.

"It would break a man's neck!" he snapped.

"It would," agreed Thurland, "if the man was an ordinary man. But Ahmed Mansour wasn't! Fifteen minutes Flane held him there! Fifteen minutes, while the spahis and the men of the Legion got ladders and put them against the wall. Ladders and ropes and slings and what-not! When they had put knots around his legs and his body, with the ends of the ropes held by soldiers on the roof, I myself untwisted the legs of Flane, so that they could lower the Arab to the ground!"

"He was dead?" asked John Mahoney.

"He was not!" said Thurland. "For an hour or so he lay like a sick pup on the side of the street; then he opened his eyes and asked for a drink. And when they gave him the drink, he asked for Flane. And he put out his big paw and shook Flane's hand, and they were friends. Devil a bit of hate between them. Good friends! There they sat together grinning at each other, and the whole town of Marrakech milling around trying to get a look at them."

THERE was a long silence after Thurland finished speaking; then my mother put a question.

"And the youth and the girl?" she murmured, she like a woman being more concerned with the love-affair than the wrestling-match.

Thurland laughed softly. "It's funny, your asking me that, Margaret," he said. "When Flane and I started to walk out of the house next morning, the girl was at the door waiting for us—she and her mother and father. And before Flane could backstep, she had made a hop at him and flung her arms around his neck. And she screamed out her thanks to him, telling him he was her savior. And she told him that she loved him more than she loved the youth, and was willing to go to the ends of the earth with him. A great job I had pulling her off him. The boy was a poet; but you see, Margaret, women the world over love a strong man before all the poets of the world."

My mother had recovered her knitting, and her needles were clicking busily. "Women," said she, glancing slyly at my father, "love a mixture. A man may be a poet and a strong man at the same time."

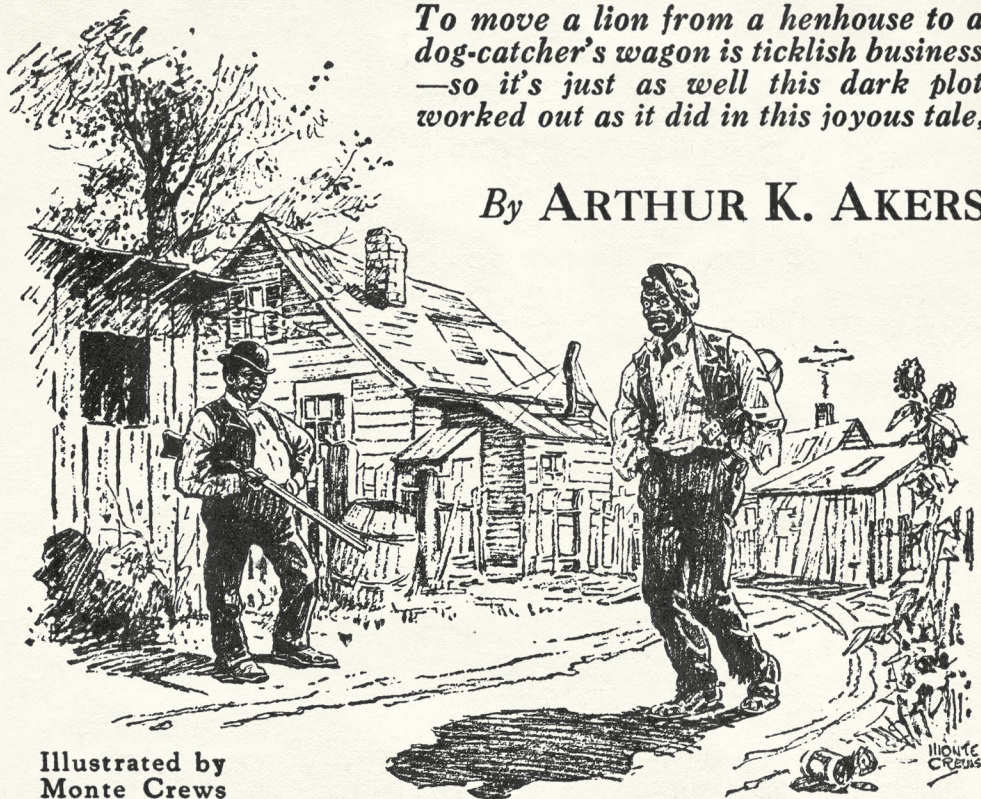
Thurland started to reply; but at that instant Flane came in, and as Thurland paused, Flane looked from one to the other and asked: "Was it something serious you were discussing?"

"It was," said Thurland. "We were discussing the relationship of love to poetry and strength. Was it a good fight you saw tonight?"

Flane stared at his brother as if he thought him a little insane; then he picked up the evening paper and strode off to his bedroom. I looked at the corner where the plaster statue of Saint Patrick stood before the magic of Thurland's words had washed him away. The saint had returned. His golden, two-peaked miter and his big crozier stood up in the shadows.

To move a lion from a henhouse to a dog-catcher's wagon is ticklish business —so it's just as well this dark plot worked out as it did in this joyous tale,

By ARTHUR K. AKERS



Illustrated by  
Monte Crews

## Lion at Large

**B**ANJO in hand and nursing a knot on his close-clipped skull but slightly smaller than a South American bond default, Gladstone Smith dragged his dark and gangling length up Baptist Hill.

"Whar at dat knot gwine wid you, Gladstone?" Shakespeare Shackelford, of an equal darkness, hailed him, shotgun in the crook of his arm, from across the alley.

"Ax Arcola; she give it to me!" groaned Gladstone ruefully.

"Her and who else? Boy, dat's a *knot*!"

"You tellin' me? Her and nobody else; I aint no more'n married dat woman till somep'n round de house aint suit her."

"What aint?"

"Me. . . . Whar at you headin' wid dat gun?"

"River road. To git myself five dollars."

"Who's *got* no five dollars?" depression-born skepticism battled with interest.

"Old bobcat," Shakespeare seemingly digressed, "been killin' a lot of dem fancy

chickens of Mist' Powell's, down on he river plantation. Makin' three-leg tracks whar he git cotched in a trap once, right up to de big house after 'em. Mist' Powell say he gimme five bucks is I git de right cat."

Mr. Smith scratched a sockless ankle thoughtfully, longingly. If he had even half of five dollars, he could get a divorce from Arcola. Then other yearned-for pleasures crowded in; and, "Go wid you," he decided, "exceptin' old circus comin' to town tomorrer. Craves to see dem tigers and lions."

"Costs four-bits to see a circus," reminded Shakespeare.

Gladstone's face re-fell. With two dollars and a half for a necessity like a divorce from Arcola lacking, how could he hope to raise fifty cents more for a luxury like a circus!

"Been studyin' about gittin' me a mess of dem Adam and Eve powders, see is it aint help my luck some," he further acknowledged defeat.

"B'ar down on dat bell, boy!" urged the set-faced Aspirin.



But here Mr. Shackelford suddenly became both parents of a hunch: times were tough—and ten per cent was ten per cent! "Boy, you aint need no powders!" he voiced this inspiration. "What you needs is a *manager*. Livin' widout brains is done got you in a jam."

"Sho is!" Gladstone rubbed his knot reflectively. "Meets me a gal in Frawg Bottom lately what look lovin' at me. Dat's how-come Arcola raise dis knot."

"Uh-huh!" Shakespeare seized this as a selling-point. "And is you had a manager now, you wouldn't be all time in a mess from bein' half-witted in de head. Look at dat white-folks' mule you cotches when you sets dat bear-trap last week! But git somebody to show you how to act bright in de brains—be a business man—and you'd commence showin' a profit instead of knots on yo' head. Maybe you'd even quit totin' dat li'l banjo round wid you all time."

Gladstone recalled the mule unhappily. And he eyed the offending banjo dubiously—it *had* been at the bottom of a lot of that Frog Bottom business.

"Yeah, but who I git to manage me?" he dallied with the idea.

"I is!" The hunch was speaking now. "All you does is give me ten per cents of all you takes in after you reopens yourself under new management—my management. And you *can't* do no worse dan you is been by yo'self."

"Boy," Gladstone surrendered all sales-resistance before the unanswerableness of that final phrase, "you said it! And aint care how quick you starts. Manager, *manager!*"

On the road to the grounds, next day, where the Great Goffin Consolidated Cir-

cuses and International Menageries, as that mangy, truck-traveling outfit modestly proclaimed itself, was advertised to exhibit, manager and man met again.

"Gallops about like you was fixin' to be de lion's breakfast!" criticized the management harshly. "Why aint you stand still and quit slappin' de sidewalk wid dem scow-boats you calls feets?"

"Been round to look at de lion," gibbered Gladstone, "—and *he's loose!*"

"Lion's *loose?*" Shakespeare's saucer eyes sought a tree, and his legs stirred involuntarily.

"Circus-gent'man runnin' round in circles!" Gladstone couldn't leave an audience agape like Shakespeare; yet the more he said, the more he unnerved himself too. "He say de lion was de life of de show. Dey got him on all de bills, *big*. So dey *got* to git him back: Offerin' twenty-five bucks, loud as dey can holler, to anybody what will fotch back dat lion alive."

On Shakespeare's perturbed face came a look as of dawn struggling out of darkness. "Says how much?" he kept one eye on the horizon, the other calculatingly upon his client.

"Twenty-five bucks—"

"Boy," interrupted the new manager excitedly, "you gits yourself under control jest in time! Aint had you but a day, and already I turns you loose on a big-money job! Cotchin' dat lion—"

Gladstone had passed two autos going his way, and was gaining rapidly on a third before his manager could overtake him.

"Why aint you stick around," panted Mr. Shackelford as he drew abreast of the sprinter, "and hear de rest—"

"Heard plenty!"

"I got another idea now, to go wid dat one—git me and you rich *right!*" Shakespeare further proved that he could evolve inspirations on the hoof as well as at rest.

"One *more* idea from you like dat last one, and I aint git rich—I gits flowers on my best vest!" Gladstone retained his speed and strong resemblance to a mule in head and heels.

"Yas suh!" his manager clung stubbornly to his point and client. "Us would lose money takin' dat lion back to de circus *now.*"

Mr. Smith slowed down at the first sign of sense he had noticed in his manager since the lion got loose. "Lay off of lions, and I listens," he compromised.

"So dumb cain't nobody manage you and stay in one place!" quarreled Mr. Shackelford. "Means de thing for us to do is, git de *big* money for ourselves; not stop at no little twenty-five dollars."

Gladstone thought of how far he could get from Arcola with twenty-five dollars.

"Git it how?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Exhibitin' dat lion ourselves; dat's how!"

Gladstone dazzled easily.

"Charges two-bits a look," Shakespeare elaborated largely. "Why, wid all dis grass in de cotton, folks'll come from Miss'ippi, even, to look at de lion instead of work. Till before long twenty-five bucks'll jest look like chicken-feed alongside what—"

"So would I," Mr. Smith began to catch up on details, "is dat lion start lappin' *me* up!"

"Specially," Mr. Shackelford got carried past his station in his enthusiasm over the outlook, "when you gits in de cage wid him wid a whip, and commences tam-in' de lion—"

**A**GAIN Mr. Smith had to be brought back—this, time from atop the nearest telephone-pole, where he had shot while temporarily out of control.

"Here come Aspirin Edwards, drivin' de new dawg-wagon," he reported by way of getting his management's mind off of lion-cage interiors.

But all that came to Shakespeare's mill continued to be grist. One thing kept fitting into another.

"Boy, dat fixes *eve'ything!*" he greeted this news gladly, if obscurely.

"Fixes what?" Gladstone demanded.

"De way for you to catch de lion."

"*Huh?*" Mr. Smith looked yearningly aloft again.

"I gits Aspirin to help you," continued Mr. Shackelford competently. "I thinks of eve'ything: dat how-come I manages so good. Aspirin been drivin' de dawg-wagon so long he can catch *anything*. And dis a new one."

Gladstone weakened before logic and the lure of profit: get to showing that lion around, and he could get a *couple* of divorces from Arcola—in case the first didn't stick. Sawing the dangerous nine-tenths of this lion job off on an expert like Mr. Edwards might be just the solution, too.

"Dat way," Shakespeare pressed his advantage, "you gits lousy wid money—enough to git shet of Arcola and make marriage wid de Frawg Bottom gal."

**G**LADSTONE hadn't thought as far as that. But the preliminaries appealed. "Swappin' Arcola for a lion sho makes a hit wid me!" He rubbed Mount Arcola on his head, and added himself to Shakespeare's side of the argument: "Boy, lead me to lions!"

"Tells you all de time," applauded Shakespeare, "all you needs is a manager. Look how good you is doin' already! But one thing you got to remember about git-in' Aspirin to help in dis—"

"What dat?" Gladstone chilled slightly.

"Aspirin's a dawg-catcher; so don't pester him by tellin' him he's cotchin' a lion. What he aint know aint gum him up in de mind den. And account of me bein' your manager, you better stay out de picture till I fixes eve'ything too."

Meeting Aspirin Edwards, either socially or professionally, was easy. Ownership of a dime for him to borrow, or knowledge of a dog for him to impound, were the sole requisites. Therefore was the appeal of Mr. Shakespeare Shackelford doubled, when manager and municipal official shortly after met, in front of a fried-fish stand in Strawberry Street.

Mr. Edwards was lunching lightly if lingeringly there on a glass of water and a fish built to the scale and specifications of a stunted sardine.

"What de matter, Aspirin—you on a diet?" Shakespeare eyed the fish sympathetically.

"Naw—on commission!" gloomed Mr. Edwards.

"How-come 'commission'?"

"White-folks gits up one dem economy waves round de City Hall," mourned Aspirin in response. "Spends a hundred dollars puttin' a new cage on de truck—strong enough to hold a lion, wid front and



back doors, and eve'ything; and den cuts off *my* wages and put me on piece-work."

Mr. Shackelford thrilled at the lion reference; everything dovetailed right in! "Piece-work?" he puzzled, however.

"Gits paid now by de dawg, instead of by de day. Dime a dawg—wid two-bits extra for de big ones."

Shakespeare thrilled again. This was perfect! "Knows whar you can git a *big* dawg now," he struck while the iron was hot. "You's sho to git two bits for him. Pays it myself. How dat sound?"

"So hongry I'd cotch a elephant for four-bits! Dis new cage stout enough to hold him, too! Whar at de dawg?"

"Got to ax Gladstone. He got him spotted; I jest hears about it," evaded a manager not ready to be rushed. Then, noticing armament alongside Aspirin's stool: "What you doin' wid dat gun on de dawg-wagon? Thought you cotched 'em, not killed 'em."

Mr. Edwards darkened, swelled, then visibly won a debate with himself—to the apparent effect that one confidence deserved another. "Old gun aint for *dawgs*," he divulged menacingly. "Some long-leg boy been banjo-ickin' lovin' up de alley whar my wife lives in Frawg Bottom lately. Right when I is about to git her to come back to me! Soon as I finds out now who he is and whar to git him, I aims to have him pickin' shot out of his hide across about four counties and a river."

Shakespeare started violently. Old plot was thickening *too* fast now! "Who de boy, you say?" he sought to check up on possible complications ahead.

But, "Aint know yit!" Aspirin ran true to form as a husband—the last to learn. "I jest hears about it yesterday, and starts loadin' dis gun for him."

Again Mr. Shackelford breathed easier. Aspirin didn't know anything *yet*.

**A**LONG the sidewalk in the early dusk that evening drifted Mr. Shackelford, Manager, his brain busied with mathematics and a rosy future, his lips moving in figures that were multiples of twenty-five dollars.

Far behind him and unheeded came the sound of Aspirin Edwards chugging disconsolately up Baptist Hill on his dog-wagon, with his day's bag of seven equally disconsolate canines within its stoutly barred cage.

Then suddenly the evening calm of Ash Street, a block away, was split from stem to stern by shrieks of terror. A dust, a wild clatter of soles, arose from its spurned surface. All briefly resolving itself into an oncoming blur that proved to be that frequent bearer of bad tidings, Mr. Wormholes Ford—in high and in horror.

"*De lion!*" gibbered Mr. Ford in his frenzy.

"Lion? *Whar?*" Shakespeare collided with himself in a couple of capacities.

"I jest seen him! He beat me inside of it—while de white-folks all gone to Selma!"

"Inside it? Inside of *what*?"

"Mist' Powell's henhouse! De big one! I slams de door locked on him and accumulates tracks ever since—plumb here from de river! Gangway for gallopin'!" And Mr. Ford was gone.

Shakespeare also reached for the road. Then he hesitated; a lion in a henhouse wouldn't have any immediate reasons for leaving it: luncheon-facilities were ample. During which nourishing interim—Shakespeare's head whirled as luck again rallied round! All he had to do was to keep Aspirin Edwards behind on his current events a trifle longer, and everything would indeed be jake, the Great Shackelford and Smith Lion Show ready to open! For already the approaching clamor of Mr. Edwards' sturdy dog-truck was replacing Wormholes as a near-by source of confusion. And Gladstone was never over fifty feet from the nearest fish-stand at this hour of any evening.

Indeed, just here Gladstone edged opportunely around the corner, baby banjo in hand.

Memory flashed for Shakespeare. "Ram dat li'l banjo inside your shirt, quick, Gladstone!" he rasped under its urge. "Don't let nobody see it no more."

"How-come ram de banjo?" Gladstone complied, evidently puzzled.

"None yo'—uh—it keeps you from lookin' like a *business*-man, dat's how-come! And us fixin' do big business. Git yourself a divo'cement from dat knot-raisin' Arcola in no time now, is you listen to me!"

"Listenin' all over!"

"Done got dat lion locked up and waitin' for you now," his manager revealed the cause of his excitement. "Got to make haste. He's fastened up in Mist' Powell's henhouse, down de river road. Wid de white-folks all in Selma. All you and Aspirin got do is go git him. He'll stay dar long as de hens hold out. And us'll be makin' money wid him now before mawnin'—at two-bits a look!"

**S**UDDEN sweat beaded the furrowed brow of Gladstone. For the first time, Arcola started looking better than the lion to him.

"Look at de money us makes!" Mr. Shackelford did a first-class job of mind-reading.

"Too busy lookin' at de lion! And listenin' to de pall-bearers sayin': 'Aint

he tote light, since de lion lunchify hisself on him!'"

"Be a business-man!" quarreled Shakespeare. "Ricollect how before you gits a manager you was all-time gittin' in a jam—"

"—Now I gits in a lion!"

"Git yo' mind on de profits. Git dat divo'cement from Arcola in no time wid jest part of de big money. Folks comin' from all over, at two-bits a look to see de great man-eatin' lion—"

"*What man?*" Mr. Smith couldn't see past the more sordid side of lion-catching.

"Shet up! Here come Aspirin! He gits two-bits for helpin' you cotch de lion. And remember, he works better is he aint know it's a lion!"

**W**ITH screech of brakes, the flagged-down Aspirin brought his yelping, yapping load to a halt.

"How's de dawg business today?" Shakespeare approached the dog-catcher on his blind side by talking shop first.

"Look 'em over," invited Mr. Edwards bitterly. "Dime a dawg—and aint worth it."

"Sho is a bum mess of pooches," admitted Mr. Shackelford appraisingly. "What *you* needs is a good *two-bits* big dawg to sweeten your stock up wid."

"*Aint* no two-bits dawgs now'days," Aspirin asserted.

"Jest gittin' around to dat." Shakespeare warmed to his work. "Gladstone, here, on his way to accumulate dat big dawg I was tellin' you about. Done got him locked up in a henhouse, ready to load in a hurry. Two-bits on delivery, for you."

"Gimme two-bits for him, and I aint care *who* Gladstone steal him from," Mr. Edwards misunderstood a complicated situation. "Whar at de dawg?"

"Gladstone shows you. I manages his business now, he got so much to pester him."

Gladstone's dulled gaze fell upon the dog-wagon, and dimmed; then upon Aspirin's shotgun, and brightened. "Totes de gun myself, case of hold-ups," he proffered.

"*I* totes de gun, pussonal," demurred Aspirin, releasing his brake, "—for de boy what I hears is been banjo-ickin' around my wife's house in Frawg Bottom."

Gladstone gripped the banjo inside his shirt convulsively. *Wife?* That girl hadn't said anything about being a wife! Now—manager or no manager—his business was verging on a jam again, in that

not only was he going after a lion, but going with the husband who was publicly gunning for him!

"Banjo, lay low!" hissed Mr. Smith fervently to that potential viper in his bosom. "Let Aspirin find out nothin' now, and us got to *both* sprout wings!"

Then, aloud: "Rallies noble round de li—ug—*dawg*, noble!" And he scrambled weakly aboard the truck.

In both Rock Cut and Lick Skillet they tell it yet, of the magnificent run of the Demopolis dog-wagon on that fateful August night!

"Mash down on dat gong, Gladstone—and hold yo' hat!" shouted Aspirin as they swung two-wheeled and gloriously into Capitol Street from the Square.

Gladstone laid a size-fourteen sole upon a projecting knob, and the echoes awoke along the river cliffs, as there leaped to life the wild clangors of alarm—instantly and nobly augmented by the seven still-imprisoned dogs within. What would happen when the exigencies of the situation and the deficiencies of Shakespeare's plan loosed a live lion in their midst—that was Mr. Shackelford's business: Gladstone didn't have to think!

OVER Ash and up Decatur sped the clamoring truck on the straight-away, with Gladstone praying frantically that the hens would hold out until their arrival. Pedestrian dogs joined joyously in the din, while the incarcerated dogs hurled themselves vociferously at their bars in shrill denunciation of their detractors in the dust below.

"B'ar down on dat bell!" howled the now-aroused Aspirin above the roar of motor and uproar of canines. "Aint let nobody beat me to dat two-bits dawg now!"

The night grew hideous, far and wide, as street after outlying street thrilled to the speeding dog-wagon, Aspirin at its wheel and Gladstone at the gong. From intersecting thoroughfares ever streamed reinforcements—fresh dogs to join the delirious pack that far outnumbered and out-yelped the shrieking seven within.

"Tells you b'ar down on dat bell, boy!" re-urged the set-faced Aspirin. "Us fixin' to bust dat river road wide open *now!* On de home-stretch! And got to outrun all dis dawg-racket, or somebody hear and beat us to dat big dawg yit!"

And wide-open, Aspirin split it! Only to run into personal perplexity, however, as they swept between the Powell plan-

tation gateposts. For suddenly every following dog took a sniff—and a frenzied departure! All but the seven immortals within the cage. And *their* yelpings broke, wavered, and keened sharply into howls of fear.

Manager Shackelford—inadvertently "taken for a ride" by the abruptness of the start, faded hastily and discreetly into the far distance as the truck careened to a stop.

"Dem dawgs done sniff deyselves some-p'n—aint got no sense, is all," Gladstone sought to divert suspicion, but his teeth were chattering.

Then other difficulties presented themselves—primarily to Chauffeur Edwards. "Cain't back de truck no closer to de henhouse widout gittin' on Miss Louise's flower-beds," he shortly and devastatingly reported. "Done got as close as I kin. Now I opens de cage back-door, handy, and pokes back de dime dawgs, while *you* entices out de two-bits dawg from de henhouse."

Gladstone held himself in the county only by the hardest. He knew what was in that henhouse, if Aspirin didn't. And it made deception difficult, even in the dark.

"Let me keep care of de gun, and *you* 'tices him out," he advanced a constructive counter-suggestion.

"Keeps de gun handy my ownself," declined Mr. Edwards obstinately. "Besides, it's loaded too heavy for dawgs—done filled it up for dat boy what's been hangin' round my wife's alley in Frawg Bottom lately."

IF possible, Gladstone's gills grew more pallid. A jealous husband was no man to cross—especially on a lion-hunt! A boy's business was fast getting into a fresh jam—between husband and lion—with no manager present to guide him.

"Banjo, *lay low!*" again Mr. Smith addressed fervently the interior of his shirt.

"Rally round dat henhouse door now, and poke him out!" ordered Aspirin.

"Y-y—yeah, poke him out," Gladstone choked over his verbal last will and testament. Old gap 'twixt cup and lip wasn't anything like the gap left yet between the truck and the henhouse door, but it was the best they could contrive.

Ever so slightly Gladstone eased the latch of the latter upward. The instant answering snarl from within all but coagulated his blood. Panic-stricken, he tried to relock and double-lock that door.





"H-e-l-p! H-e-l-p!"  
squalled the center of  
the instant bedlam.  
"Done locked me in wid  
de lion!"

But in his confusion he unlocked it. Followed by a hurtling weight crashing violently against it, a horrified squawk on his part—and hell broke loose upon the Tombigbee!

Starting with something tawny and spitting sparks that shot outward through the wide-swung door. To be followed by the swift thudding of six feet—two of them Gladstone's—and the chase was on!

Fragments from the circus posters flashed paralyzingly through Gladstone's mind as, in heading for the near-by garage, he tore across a flower-bed and crashed a neck-high clothesline in the darkness for a loss he couldn't spare.

"Shoo him in de truck! Shoo him in de truck!" coached an exasperated Aspirin hoarsely from the sidelines.

Gladstone rounded the garage like a cyclone, and without perceiving he was traveling in a circle. But still he could not gain. Terror mounted in him.

"Use yo' head! Says shoo him into de truck!" rang direction from the dark.

"Movin' so fast cain't see no truck!" yowled the pursued.

But even as Mr. Smith loosed this despairing wail, the dog-wagon loomed before him. And instantly he was overtaken by inspiration instead of by a lion: if he couldn't outrun this beast, he would out-think him!

Instantly and instinctively he dived, like a rabbit into its burrow, into the nearest opening—the open rear door of the dog-truck.

Only to find that he had miscalculated—by seven dogs and his pursuer!

The latter had been nearer than he knew. Hence Aspirin slamming the back door of the cage triumphantly shut upon an error of the first magnitude; one that jarred the stars and woke the welkin with its din, as:

"H-e-l-p! H-e-l-p!" squalled the sudden center of the instant whirling, snarling, yelping bedlam within the lurching cage. "Done locked me in wid de lion! Done locked me in wid de lion!"

"Aint nothin' but old two-bits dawg!" scoffed an Aspirin but the more bewildered by the uproar. Shakespeare's boasted strategy of keeping Mr. Edwards in the dark about his load was bearing boomerangs as fruit!

But Gladstone was as a drowning man. In a cage full of action he had to produce yet more and faster action—or his lodge six pall-bearers! In an avalanche of *ki-yi-ing* comrades-of-danger, his whole past life flashed before him—including Mr. Edwards' recent remark about this cage having a front door too. At which life-saving memory, one forty-fourth-of a split-second was all the time a boy as scared as Gladstone needed—to find and lift its latch from within.

But if the imperiled Gladstone was fast, the imprisoned dogs were faster. Unparalleled and uproarious was the traffic congestion that instantly arose at the front door of the cage—to end with Gladstone slamming shut this saving door from without: behind the frantically scattering seven and in the very face of a tawny streak of chain-lightning that crashed against its bars with blood-chilling snarls.

"Whuff! Sho is bang dat door in time!" crowed a staggering Gladstone for whom the world still whirled. With the conviction instantly upon him and fury-fed, that the raging beast within was only delayed. No such slender bars as even those of the new dog-wagon could hold for long before such assault.

But the re-arriving Aspirin dug up a fresh angle. Besides being slow of brain, Mr. Edwards was immersed in personal petty detail. And as sore as seven gum-boils, until his wrath obscured his perceptions. "Look at you! *Look at you!*" he made himself heard. "Runs myself ragged, cotchin' dawgs all day! Seven of 'em! Dime a dawg—seventy cents! And what is *you* do? Let *seven* loose while you's cagin' *one!* Nigger, wait till I gits my hands on yo' dumb—"

But just here the whole situation changed all over again for Gladstone. Backing off frantically from the advancing Aspirin, he fell over a stump. And as he fell there slipped from beneath his shirt and slid damningly into view—his banjo!

Instantly, cage and contents forgotten, Aspirin became more of a husband than a dog-catcher.

"*You? You!*" he raged as its import dawned. Gladstone scrambled wildly to his feet. All indeed was lost now—including life! "So *you* is de long-leg, banjo-pickin' pup what's been up my alley, is you!" rang the wrath of the outraged Aspirin.

And the pursuit was on!

Squalling incontinently, the terror-stricken Gladstone fled. Desperately—incriminatingly—he ducked and dodged about the truck and the sole remaining captive his earlier blunderings had left in it. That cage couldn't hold *much* longer, but what could a boy do now? Sweat poured from him as frantically he strove to keep it between himself and the berserk husband of that Frog Bottom girl. For the moment, the husband was far deadlier than the lion! For, let him make one false move now, and he wouldn't *need* any divorce from Arcola—not even a two-dollar-and-a-half one—but only lilies! Old hunt had no sooner quit being a lion-hunt than it was a man-hunt—with Gladstone as the prey.

**G**UN tight-gripped, the enraged Mr. Edwards circled and re-circled the dog-wagon with its plunging occupant—seeking earnestly, untiringly for a bead on Demopolis' newest and darkest Ro-

meo. From every side and angle the danger for Gladstone deepened, while round and round they went.

Until at last Mr. Smith slipped, slowed for one fatal fraction of a second his despairing dodging—and again the tortured night was shattered! This time by twin roars that drowned a third, as both barrels let go together.

**B**USILY multiplying census-figure totals for the colored population of western Alabama and eastern Mississippi by twenty-five (cents), to arrive at the probable gross intake of the budding Shackelford and Smith Lion Show, Mr. Shackelford was interrupted by the approaching anguished *slap! slap! slap!* of worn soles on the sidewalk without. And in the slight mitigation of the outer darkness afforded by a high-held kerosene lamp, an apparition stood hesitant.

"*Gladstone?*" gasped Shakespeare, appalled at the sight, before the total demolition evident there suggested something warming to the heart. Then, "Is you *git* him?" he demanded eagerly.

"I gits him," the answer escaped without enthusiasm.

"*Hot dawg!*" rang Mr. Shackelford's joyous relief. No wonder Gladstone's garments were in ribbons! "Den old lion-show fixin' to start! At two-bits a look! Tickets done added up to five hundred thousand dollars a'ready now, and—"

"Is if you stuff him, maybe!" croaked saucer-eyed Calamity on the threshold.

"*Stuff* him? *Huh?*"

"Says Aspirin shot at me—turned out my Frawg Bottom gal was *his* wife—but he miss me—and *killed de lion!*"

"*Killed de lion?*" Raucous through the night rang the scream of Mr. Shackelford, as rage mingled with grief.

"Old gun overloaded. It kick Aspirin nine foets back into de bushes," Mr. Smith feebly followed through. "But it jest naturally *ruint* dat lion. I looked."

Then a manager beside himself indeed! "*Dumb! Dumb to de gills!*" he disturbed adjacent alleys and areas with his outcries. "I starts in managin' you becaze you is so dumb you gums up all yo' *own* business, and what is you do? You gums up all *my* business! And *our* business, too, besides—becaze you cain't stand still and git shot! *Naw*—you got to dodge around and git *de lion* shot, instead! Wrecks de show! Half million dollars done gone up in smoke—*gun-smoke!* I hopes you starves! I hopes

you gits arrested! *I hopes you stays married to Arcola!*"

Dumbly Gladstone ducked beneath this deluge. A boy sure did get blamed for not getting shot!

"Now, whar at de lion's corpse?" climaxed Shakespeare. "Cain't git *your* corpse to stuff, lead me to de lion's!—And maybe Aspirin shoot you yit, I hopes!"

"Aspirin aint never been able to come to, yit, after de gun kick him. Leaves him still layin' out in de bushes. Takes you to whar him and de truck *is*."

But midway in their depressing journey, two eminent lion-men found that they were far from through—fresh complications entering a situation already awful; fresh news come to re-rock foundations already crumbling, to discredit a management already tottering.

**I**N brief, they again met Mr. Wormholes Ford, ever a harbinger of evil; wearing this time an unusually sheepish look, even for him.

"Sho is git back quick from whar at you gallops to, Wumholes," Mr. Smith greeted him sourly.

"Runs into somep'n what cuts down my speed and turns me round," came the answer.

Gladstone felt the place where a clothesline in the dark had done as much for him—and hoped it was the same line!

"Meets a boy what was been workin' for de circus," Wormholes took Shakespeare's grim silence for encouragement, "and he say old show aint got no lion, nohow—"

"*Aint got no lion?*" Ex-proprietors of the stillborn Great Shackelford and Smith Lion Show whirled upon him stunned, open-mouthed. Shakespeare's gurgle indicated the going-down for the third time of his last hope—taxidermy and a nickel-a-look at the resultant stuffed lion.

"Not no more, dey aint. Dis boy say de *bills* about de lion was left, though, after their lion died. So, in eve'y town dey comes to after dat, old circus-man jest puts out word dat de lion is loose, is why dey aint got him—and offers twenty-five bucks' reward, what he *knows* he aint gwine have to pay, for anybody what'll cotch him and bring him back. Boy says at stimulate-up de circus business more better dan old lion ever done when he was livin'!"

Stricken, Mr. Shackelford looked at Mr. Smith. So there never *had* been any

lion! In which case, gone glimmering was everything—reward, gate-receipts—even the ten per cent for management that had just proved a worse fiasco than Gladstone's own! While—

Again Shakespeare reeled at what he further glimpsed. No sooner had *this* blow fully fallen than the loom of another, staggering in its possibilities arose: with a boy as dumb as Gladstone, you could never tell—the full damage done could never be known till plumbed. While a glance showed that Gladstone had glimpsed it too; that memories of that white-folks' mule he had once caught in his bear-trap were blanching his face to a lilac hue.

"Boy," management croaked its last command before the Deluge, "hit dat river road: finds out *who* you *is* git shot—instead de lion what aint—so you'll know how fast—and fur—to run!"

Coming cautiously at last upon the abandoned dog-wagon, where only the sound of a husband reviving feebly in the undergrowth broke the silence, a discredited manager struck a match, and bent fearfully beside the cage to look.

Upon which his behavior became inexplicable. He gasped, staggered, straightened—and lit another. Before he rose to prove himself a man of instant resource and sound management after all! "Boy," demanded this new Shakespeare, "Aint I *tell* you all time what you needed was a *manager*?"

"Yeah—and look what happen!"

"*I is* lookin'. And dat's why I say any first-class cat—or manager—*always* lights on his feet, aint matter *who* gits shot!"

**W**HO *is* git shot?" Fires of anxiety but blazed the hotter beneath the anguished Gladstone.

"A good manager like *you* done reopened under," Shakespeare swept on to his climax, "shows a profit wid every shot! And now you pull dat corpse on out de dog-wagon before Aspirin comes to—and finds out you and him aint cotch and shot nothin' but a old bobcat—"

"*Bobcat*?" Gladstone's knees weakened, wavered. "Whar de profit in—"

"—But—on account of de good management *you* is under, you is lucky to de last! Plumb on down to its bein' a *three-legged* bobcat! De same one I been after and Mist' Powell still r'arin' to pay me dem five dollars for! So I splits it wid you, fifty-fifty, for dat divo'cement from Arcola—and starts in managin' you all over again tomorrer!"

# The Fires of Hell

The author of the celebrated "Beau Geste" here gives us a powerful story told by one of his best-loved characters.

THE heat in that stone niche in which lurked McSnorrt and I and our machine-gun, on that stony mountain-side, was terrific—well-nigh unbearable.

When, toward sunset, I observed to McSnorrt that I really thought this had been the hottest day I had ever known, that tough man of wire and whipcord smiled superiorly.

"What did ye say, ma mannie?"

"Well, have you ever been hotter?" I asked.

McSnorrt laughed, or rather emitted one short sharp bark, which one knew to be his longest peal of laughter.

"Hotter!" he sneered. "Huh!"

"Tell me," I said.

"Haud yer whist, ye jabberin' baboon," was the reply. From McSnorrt, rather pleasant and encouraging! When he wished to be unpleasant, he merely looked at one; and the look was—unpleasant indeed.

I held my whist; and McSnorrt held his *bidon* to his lips, for quite a while.

A long silence. . . .

Suddenly he burst into speech.

"Wasn't I tellin' ye about Captain Bobby McTavish, him they called Whisky Bobby, the only decent man I ever knew?"

"Aye," I said.

"Yer prattle about heat made me think of him. I'll tell ye, if ye can sit quiet for two whole consecutive minutes. . . .

"Hot, did ye say! I'm minded of the time that I was second engineer wi' Captain Bobby McTavish, and how he cursed—and I'm tellin' ye, ma mannie, Bobby McTavish knew how to curse—because we were put in quarantine at Salamanda in the West Indies, all through him bringing laborers from Grenada to discharge his cargo.

"Swear! How Bobby carried on about wasting precious time, wages going on and all that! But the cream of his cursin' was saved for the putty-faced muddyminded Creole port doctor

whose spite wouldna let us go to the anchorage.

"McTavish swore, loud enough for all hands and the cook to hear, that what the lecherous and libidinous loafer, the kill-all cure-none man-slayer, the rum-swilling rotten-boned ruffian, wanted was a little gold-grease on his itchin' palm.

"I ken nothing about that myself, but I tell you this, ma mannie: the dirty ill-will of that cross-grained spiteful disbleegin' pill-slinger saved Bobby McTavish's life—and a few sailor-men and a good ship from destruction.

"Aye, and what's more—saved my life too.

"Think of that! I tell ye, ma mannie, we dinna ken our blessings from our curses. Aye, 'tis a strange worrld. . . . Saved by yon dog's dirty spite. Ah, weel!

"Now, being by ordinar' fond of the bonny town of Salamanda and its sonsy lasses, I wasna any more well pleased myself, than was Captain Bobby McTavish. No, and I wasna fashed about a strange fact that a weird kind of drizzle was falling down over everything. 'Twas like as though the sky was gently raining ashes. Not a dust-storm, ye ken, but just a quiet steady shower of rain that wasna composed of raindrops. What should have been a raindrop was a wee flake of ash.

"There was a volcano a good six miles north of us, and I connected it in my silly young mind with this—phenomenon."

"Phenomenon?" I suggested warily.

"I *said* phenonemon, didn't I?" asked McSnorrt, eying me severely. "Aye, and a daft young fule I was in those days—nearly as bad as yourself—and I thought nothing could hurrt a Mc—never mind the name, laddie—say *McSnorrt*. A daft young fule, and there wasna a rating aboard the *Stourbridge* that was any better, so far as yon quiet little drift of ashes was concerned.

By PERCIVAL  
CHRISTOPHER  
WREN


Illustrated by  
Grattan Condon

"But there was one man in yon harbor that wasna daft, mark ye, and he was the skipper of the port-painted French barque *Antoinette*, loading sugar for Havre. And he knew our Bobby McTavish fine; many a time they'd met, up and down the Seven Seas, from Antwerp to St. Lucia, and Saigon to Algiers.

"Now, he was not able to come aboard, because we were flying the yellow flag—and that means '*Keep away, for there's anything from cholera to yellow jack or bubonic plague aboard.*' So he had his dinghy brought abreast our accommodation-ladder platform, and bawled that he wanted to speak to the Captain.

"Captain Bobby McTavish leaned over the bridge-rail and sang out:

"'Good mornn to ye, Captain Lebœuf. And what d'yer know about which?'



"Have you ever been hotter?" I asked. "Tell me!" McSnorrt gave a bark. "Haud yer whist, ye jabberin' baboon!"

"That was a daft-like question that was habitual with him when addressing any poor foreigner.

"As fast as yon Frenchman jumped up to wave his hands and shrug his shoulders and waggle his head, so fast the swell would capsize him, so that he sat him down on his hunkers with a bump. And yet, mark ye, I didna laugh, for it wasna funny. He was too much in earnest for that; and although we were enjoying the cool of the early morning, the beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead and ran in streams down his dark visage into his beard.

"'Vot do I know about vich?' he shouted. 'Sacred name of Noah's best sea-boots! I know that with my shippers I have one grand row. I say to them that I stop 'ere no more longer. No, not one hour less. When they say that in Havre they will then 'ave me arrest, I say, "*Bougre d'une vache,*" and I say, "*Foutez-moi le camp,*" and I say *je m'en fiche* of them and their arrest. For that I like better to be *en prison* at Havre



than *en casserole* at Salamanda. They say:

““Look you, Captain Lebœuf, you 'ave the cold feet.” And I tell them, “*Oui, so!*” and it is good. For before long they 'ave the 'ot feet, yes, 'otter as 'ell.”

“Captain Bobby McTavish laughed.

“‘What are ye talkin' about, Captain?’ said he. ‘Why, ye're only half loaded.’

“‘Better half cargo than no cargo,’ screamed Lebœuf. ‘Better half cargo in ship than no ship and no life. Vot good am I to me dead?’

“‘Who's goin' to dead you, son?’ asked McTavish.

“‘Captain Robert MacTahwisch, you listen at me: I know the Vesuvius. I know it as better as I know your face. More volcanoes too, I know also. I know the Stromboli, Etna and Krakatoa,

and I know this one here. And this one here I like not at all. I tell you I am afraid. I fright. I 'ave the courage to say I 'ave two cold feet and the trembles. And also, my friend, I 'ave the courage to waste my time and risk my ship and my men and my life, to come and tell you to go while you 'ave the steam up.

“‘Go, I tell you, *mon ami*. Go, for the love of God and your friend Lebœuf.’

“‘Spill some more, son,’ said Captain

“Captain Lebœuf bawled: ‘My friend I risk my life to come and tell you to go—for the love of God!’”

McTavish. 'Aye, sit down, or ye'll spill yourself.'

"*Capitaine, mon cher*, go quick, I beg you. Go now this minute, my old one, my cabbage. Look you, on board my ship they 'ave send two *douâniers* to watch me that I do not go. Nevertheless I do go, and those two *douâniers*, they go with me, if they don't get off my ship. I say to them:

"*"To France you go, or to hell you go,"* and I up anchor.'

"McTavish laughed.

"Then *au revoir*, Captain Robert MacTahwisch, and when you are dying, remember that Lebœuf risked his life to save you from that dying. Good-by, my friend. God bless me.'

"**A**YE, ma mannie, that's what he said, and he was as good as his word. By the time I'd finished my burgoo, that French barque's anchor was catted and her tops'ls sheeted home. Aye, and the two Customs officers were back in their boat and shaking their fists at Captain Lebœuf leaning over the counter and doing his poor best to spit upon 'em.

"Man, before that ship was weel down below the horizon, the podgy yellow fists of yon two customs men were baked and shriveled claws. Dead they were—and with thirty thousand more wiped out like I wipe the chalk-soundings off my board. 'Twas a case of *pouf!*—and in three minutes yon bonny town of light and color and fair women was a raging flaming hell, a holocaust.

"And by the irony of fate again, the sole survivor was a negro grave-digger, working in an underground vault. Buried alive, among the buried dead, he survived.

"Aye, laddie, these scars on my hands, and many another all over my body, are my little souvenirs of that day; and 'twas but by a miracle my face wasna touched, my beauty left unspoiled as you see.

"The quarantine station I'm tellin' ye about lay a fair distance from the port; and that fact, coupled with the skill and endurance of that grand and wonderful man Captain Bobby McTavish, saved me and the ship and a few of the crew from that raging inferno, that Tophet on earth.

"Out of twenty good ships, ours, and ours alone, was the one poor cripple that limped away, scorched and sizzling, to safety.

"They that saw her berth said that she looked as though she had sailed through

a sea of roaring flames—which was just precisely what she had done.

"Have ye ever seen the flames shoot forth when a furnace door is opened? Weel, it so happened that I was standing leaning on the rail, looking idly at the mountain, when a mighty invisible hand—as 'twas the hand of God himself—tore the whole front open like 'twas a fire-box door, a furnace door, and with a hissing crash, as though all the world's main steam-pipes had burst, there belched forth a terrifying purple cloud, all luminous and all shot through and through with a million flashes of lightning.

"Exploding and volleying, it roared down like a hurricane, a tornado, and then with a long *sweesh!* a giant match was struck—a match that flared to the sky itself with twisting lapping tongues of flame, and thick with fearful shrieks that were the awful cries of smitten and burning human souls.

"That match was the town of Salamanda itself, and all those blazing falling buildings looked like living things writhing in mortal agony.

"And under a black canopy like one vast mushroom, the hissing waters of the sea drove back, and not until I saw a big steamer swept clean of deck-house bridge and boats and masts, and laid on her beam ends a blasted and burning shell, did I awake and think to be afraid, and feel my inwards shrink within me.

"**B**EING an engineer, from instinct, I rushed in panic to the engine-room. The chief was snoring in a deck-chair outside his room; and as I sped past, I shouted with all my lungs:

"Run, man! Run! For God's sake!"

"Stout of body was auld McKechnie, and a wee bit slow in the up-take; and belike he thought I'd gone raving mad. I cannot say whether he opened his mouth with surprise or just to call me a bluidy young fule, but yon fearful blast from the bowels of the earth filled his lungs with its double-distilled essence of hell. And before my foot was on the top grating, he'd fallen back in his chair—dead.

"Hardly was I down to the second grating than a great belch of lava and scorching burning ashes poured in like raging hell through doors and skylights, and brought with it the tortures of the damned. Through the flame-lit darkness my smarting eyes saw the open door



of the storeroom, and leaping through, I slammed the door behind me.

"And well it was for me in that awful moment that I knew the inside of yon room like a book. For I was in the blackness of everlasting night—and that appalling heat stole the very breath from my lungs.

"At the first grope my hand found a heavy sackcloth cover; and as I dragged it around me, a mighty lurch of the vessel flung me on to a bale of waste. By the mercy and grace of God, yon sacking was sopping wet, or cotton waste would have been my funeral pyre.

"I cannot judge how long I lay gasping, barely conscious, but 'twas the screeching and knocking of my poor tortured engines that brought me painfully to life and to my feet.

"My scorched-up brain dreamed that the chief being dead, there was none to fend for my beauties, and that their bearings were crying to heaven and to me for a wee drap of oil to ease their consuming thirst. Aye, and my dream was not far wrong!

"And now Captain McTavish comes into the picture.

"By now, ye ken, ma mannie, that there's not many men that Jock Mc—well, McSnorr, we'll say—will play second fiddle to. But Whisky Bobby McTavish is one of 'em.

"I raise my hat to yon chiel, and I give him best. Long may he have command of bonny ships! And although he was not an engineer and my chief, I was proud to obey his orders.

"Wait while I tell ye what happened after I'd considered that discretion was the better part, if not the whole, of valor, and had laid me down to die in yon stifling den of a storeroom.

"He told it me all in hospital, when we lay side by side, wrapped in sheets of wadding, soaked in carron oil.

"To go back:

"When he'd done laughing at Captain Lebœuf's daft haverin's, McTavish was naturally all of a fike to be out of quarantine and into port to start unloading; and he was just peekin' through his binoculars for a sight of yon dommed port doctor's boat.

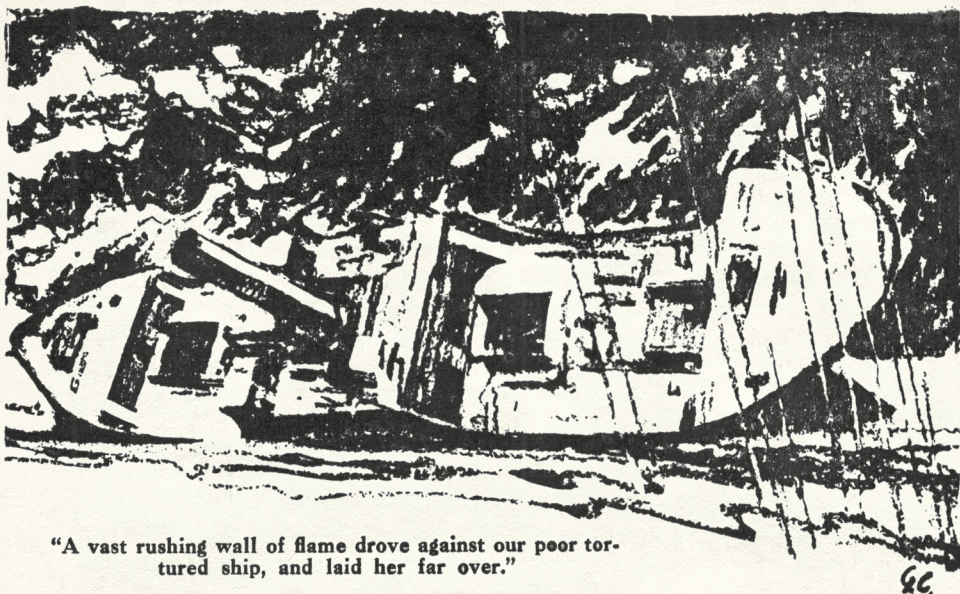
"Angry as a scalded cat he was, and fidgeting like a parrot on a hot perch, a living parched pea in a frying-pan, with annoyance and impotent wrath at the wicked waste of time. Little did he ken how soon his ship would be freed from quarantine, and that 'twould be Almighty God that would give her *pratique*.

"Parched pea in a frying-pan! Little did he ken how soon he'd be the parched pea, and his beloved *Stourbridge* the frying-pan! Aye!

"Now mark ye, the cool nerve of Whisky Bobby McTavish! *He* didn't run for his life—like a McSnorr—when the eruption came. In the very moment that, through his glasses, he saw yon blaze of hell driving down over the town, he sprang on to the bridge; and to protect—not himself, but the wheel and steering-compass, he slammed doors and windows, put the engine-room telegraph at '*Stand by*', and jumped down to the boat-deck with the intention of racing along to put steam on the steering-gear—which steam, by the grace o' God, was already turned on.

"And at the precise moment that he landed on the boat-deck, the blast struck our starboard quarter and enveloped a bunch of negroes lounging on Number Six hatch, under the poop awning.





"A vast rushing wall of flame drove against our poor tortured ship, and laid her far over."

GC.

"Ye can understand, laddie—ye who ken so much about what ye are pleased to call hot—that the awful spectacle of they poor de'ils of laborers, leaping and twisting and screaming with the agony of their burns, under that blazing awning, would give pause to any human man.

"Aye, and it brought McTavish up with a round turn, and from that second he kened full well that, to save his ship, he must first save himself—and with no time for meandering or mercy.

"Weel, the luck of Whisky Bobby is a byword in the Seven Seas, and his luck had taken him alongside the for'ard starboard lifeboat. Not only was that boat half open, but 'twas half-full of water—water put in that very morning at the wash-down of the decks.

"With the oars and thwarts to cover him, and that water to cool him, he had found, at the very moment, the least hellish place in all that floating furnace.

"As he hurtled over the gunwale of the boat and splashed down on the bottom boards, a vast rushing wall of flame drove against our poor tortured and tormented ship, and so far laid her over that McTavish feared lest the charred gripe-lashings should carry away and let the lifeboat roll clean out of her chocks.

"That was his thought, he told me, and strangely enough he didna think to be scared that the ship herself would capsize and drown such as hadna been grilled alive.

"Then, after what seemed to him a long eternity, the *Stourbridge* straight-

ened herself till she had no more than about twenty degrees list to port. Then, lying there, stifled and poisoned with gases, with naught but his nose showing above water, the instinct of a canny sailor-man told him that the ship was adrift.

"Scarcely was he in a condition to appreciate this good fortune. But surely God Himself was with us that day, and loosed us when we ourselves were powerless to go away from yon mouth of hell.

"Ye canna heave on a cable, laddie, when your windlass is a heap of scrap-iron; nor can you knock the pins out of chain shackles that lie buried beneath a fiery furnace of ash and lava.

"Yet we were free—free to leave the shore of yon accursed land of death. It might well be that when she canted over, a link of the cable took some queer stress of leverage and was snapped across the ship's stem. Maybe the cable parted under the strain of the combination of terrific heat and torsion and chemical action. . . . Who kens or cares? The solid fact remains that there were a few links of roasted cable dangling like a watch-chain from the hawse-pipe, and we lay there, held by nothing more than our own helplessness.

"But while Bobby McTavish was alive, we were not so helpless either. Where ordinary men would have quit—and small blame to them—McTavish must e'en pit himself against the de'ils from hell that would destroy us. He climbed out of yon boat wherein he was safe, and when he came out, he must

have seen an awful sight for a man that loved his ship as he loved the *Stourbridge*. Aye, and a scene that great artists would give their own left hands to paint as McTavish saw it. 'Twas as though all the fiends from the pit had made his tall and lovely ship their playground, and were now pelting and scalding and burning him for seeking to take her away from them.

"Aloft, her rigging writhed and twisted like angered snakes, and the paint of the funnel that was his pride hung in strips like paper from the wall of an unroofed hovel.

"On deck, in the gullies and valleys of a long gray chain of smoking hills of ash and lava, lay dead and dying horrors that, since she carried nothing else that breathed, must once have been men.

"Naught on deck there was that had form or shape. All was buckled and bent, chaos, without form, and void, and shrouded with dust and smoke and steam.

"Then sudden as death, and as though the angels themselves would cover the evil wrought by the imps of Satan, there fell an utter blackness of sheer and dreadful darkness—a darkness that could be felt.

"And it was not the mere darkness of night but the blinding darkness of the deepest pit. And then the de'ils must have laughed, as fire after fire sprang up and flared from the glowing masses of her woodwork; and soon there was light enough, though not the light of day.

"Aye, and having made total wreck of other ships that were firm anchored in that port and couldna move, the de'ils didna mean to let this one creep away to lick her sores.

"So with a strong current, they set her toward the flaming shore.

"**F**OOLISH de'ils couldna let well—or ill—alone. McTavish told me himself that when he saw the fires and the ruin, and the davits, ten inches thick, bend like melting candles, and thought himself the only man alive upon the *Stourbridge*, he was minded to dive over the side into the water and bide there. Then seeing the glowing flaring redness of the burning town so close aboard, his own devil waked up, and he swore that ship of his might burn, and burn to the water's edge, but while he was her captain and had the strength

to crawl, she would never pile up upon the beach.

"By what means he got himself down to the engine-room, his hands across his eyes, and there coaxed my poor mistreated engines to labor and creak under their covering of dust and ashes, the Lord Almighty kens; but as I've told ye, they made the one sound and song that could have brought me out of my sleep of death.

"**P**AINFULLY stumbling, crawling, going like a barefoot man on red-hot plates, I made my way down to spier who was so obliging as to take my watch. And so thick was the air, I was within two feet of him before I knew who 'twas.

"His manner of receiving me wa'd tell ye more concerning Whisky Bobby McTavish than a week of my haverin'. McTavish wasna sorry to see me!

"With eyebrows, eyelashes, and the hair of his head scorched from off him, choking and coughing and swaying on his feet, he croaked through parched and cracked lips:

"'Hullo, Mac. A sailor without a knife is like—a pig without a whistle. Lend me yours.'

"'My whistle?' I gasped.

"'No, yer knife, ye Tom fool!'

"I gave him the sharp blade I always carry to slice up my bacca, and while he cut away the bluidy strips of skin hangin' from the palms of his hands,—the rest of the skin bein' on the hot starting-wheel of the throttle valve,—he issued his orders as though he was paring his nails in his cabin.

"He told me that I was chief engineer the noo, and while he must apologize for not notifying me that steam would be required so soon, he wished to proceed to sea forthwith, or sooner.

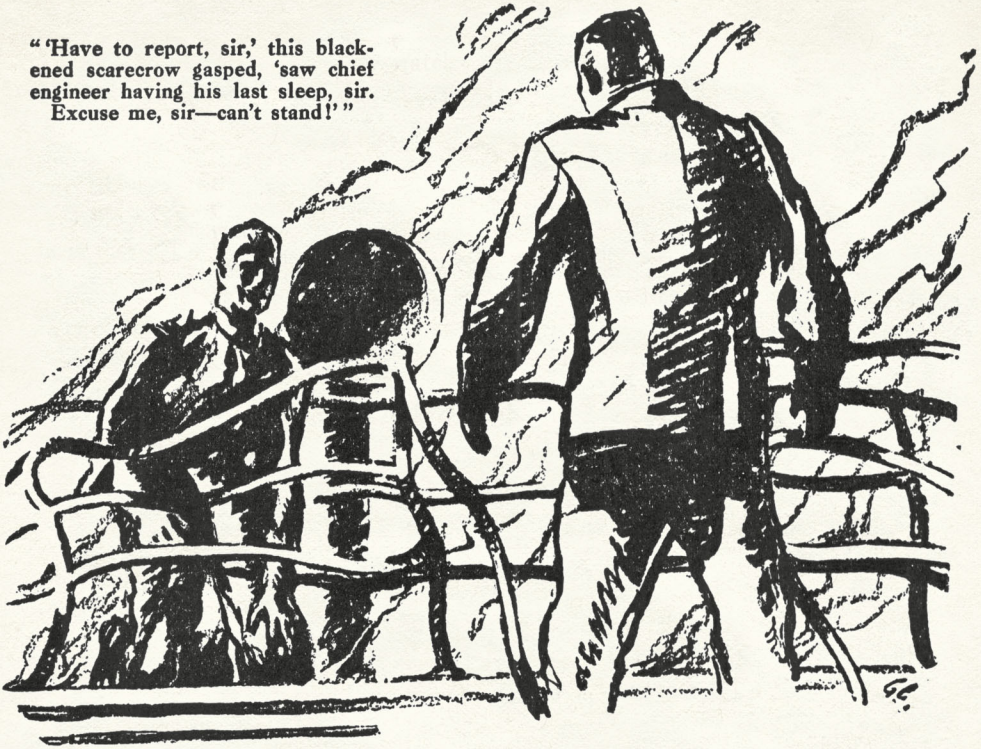
"Think of it, ma mannie—his ship a smokin' dust-bin; more than half his crew burnt and shriveled corpses; his chief engineer gone; and he grins, so far as his burnt face will let him, and apologizes.

"Aye, Captain Robert McTavish showed the mettle of his pastures and the metal of his courage—the purest flawless steel.

"And if he was counting on stiffening my pride, he wasna disappointed; for as you may be aware, laddie, I'm as hard a case as some, when I'm put to it.

"Soon I croaked back at him, judging by my gauges, without assistance I could

"'Have to report, sir,' this blackened scarecrow gasped, 'saw chief engineer having his last sleep, sir. Excuse me, sir—can't stand!'"



maintain a speed of Dead Slow for about an hour; but if I could secure the services of a live stoker or two half-dead ones, that speed would continue as long as they did.

"'Carry on, Chief,' whispered the amazing man, with a crooked grin that cracked his bleeding lips; and commenced his long sair pilgrimage up the hot iron ladders to the smoldering main deck.

"Perseverance and the dogged spirit of him having brought him alive to the bridge, he was there startled by the sight of something which he identified, by one tarnished shoulder-strap hanging from the remnants of a patrol-jacket, as his third officer.

"Less than half an hour previously—or was it half a lifetime?—he had ordered that smart white-uniformed young man to see whether certain thwartship beams had been unshipped from Number One 'tween-deck hatch for the quicker discharge of cargo. And this poor blackened scarecrow had returned to report!

"By aid of the Captain's leg, he clawed up from off his hands and knees and tried to stand straight—aye, and to manage a salute. Through stiff black lips he gasped and whistled:

"'Have to report, sir, Number One 'tween-deck beams lashed to starboard stringers. . . . Saw chief engineer having

his last sleep, sir; and—excuse me, sir—can't stand. Soles of feet burned.'

"And he sagged down on the bridge.

"What he needed was hospital, professional nursing, cotton wool and carron oil for his burned feet and body; but McTavish had work that must be done and he must e'en use the tools that came to his hand.

"'If ye canna stand, laddie, ye must sit,' he said, and put him on a box against the wheel.

"'Steer south by east for half an hour, ma son,' he said, 'and ye shall lie down for a month.'

"And as near as makes no odds, that's just about how it panned out; for after some thirty minutes, McTavish returned to find the boy not two degrees off his course, but crying to heaven and McTavish that the poor auld chief had burst asunder. . . . Aye, like many more victims of that awful heat.

"McTavish somehow carried the boy to the chart-room, and laid him on the settee. Then, taking the wheel himself, such was his stubborn pride and strength, that he never left the helm until the *Stourbridge* was moored, fore and aft, and he was carried ashore along with the boy and me, and some other poor things that had been men. . . .

"'Aye—'twas *really* hot on the *Stourbridge*, in Salamanda Harbor, yon time."

# Christmas at Caribou

*A drama of the North Woods.*

**J**IM RAINEY, driving his dog-team down the ice of Silver River, hadn't a care in the world; and to prove it, was singing at the top of his lusty voice an old carol:

*"Oh, Christmas is the gladdest time,  
The gayest time, the maddest time—"*

Forgetting the rest of the old song, he ended with a "Whoop!" that elicited a shriek of repartee from a blue-jay high among the branches of a silver spruce. The dogs, seeming to catch the spirit of the occasion, redoubled their speed as down the river they sped toward Caribou Landing.

There was some reason for Rainey's good spirits. On the sled were between six and seven hundred dollars' worth of furs the trapper had caught. Behind him, sixty-three miles behind, he had left his wife and year-old daughter Jeanne, in the four-room log house he had built with his own hands on the homestead he was carving out of the wilderness.

It had been a lucky day for Rainey when Mary had taken him for better or for worse, fully believing the promise he had given her that he would give up his wild ways.

Mary was a fine girl for a man like Rainey—Mary with her honey-colored hair that reached to her waist, and her cornflower-blue eyes that always seemed to her husband to be guarding secrets beyond the power of a man to understand. Rainey liked to think of the day he had carried his bride in his arms over the threshold of their new home, redolent with the fragrance of freshly hewn pine and cedar—but small, so very small.

"Welcome home, dear," Rainey had said. "It isn't much of a house; but I built it for you, Mary—built it with my own two hands."

Mary, slipping out of his arms, had with reverent finger-tips touched the things he had bought for her, and the aromatic log walls of the house he had built. Then she had come back to him and lifted her lips to his with a tremulous cry of joy and pride.

"I love the cabin because you built it for me, Jim; and I love you, boy."

Those first two years had not been easy ones, for there had been a team and a cow to buy, as well as land to clear. And money is never too plentiful on the frontier. By dint of heart-breaking labor they had managed to raise enough hay to support the team and the cow through the first winter. And in her little garden-patch Mary had grown enough vegetables to last till summer came again. For clothes and groceries and other expenses they had been entirely dependent on the furs Rainey caught during the winter months—furs which he sold to Jake Collister, who ran the trading-post down at Caribou Landing, a hundred miles to the south.

"We'll make it, boy," Mary had told her husband when the first snows of their second winter together had begun to whiten the higher hills. "I feel it in my heart that you'll have good luck on the trap-line this winter."

That Rainey had had good luck was proved by the bale of furs which lay on the sled as the dogs raced down the ice.

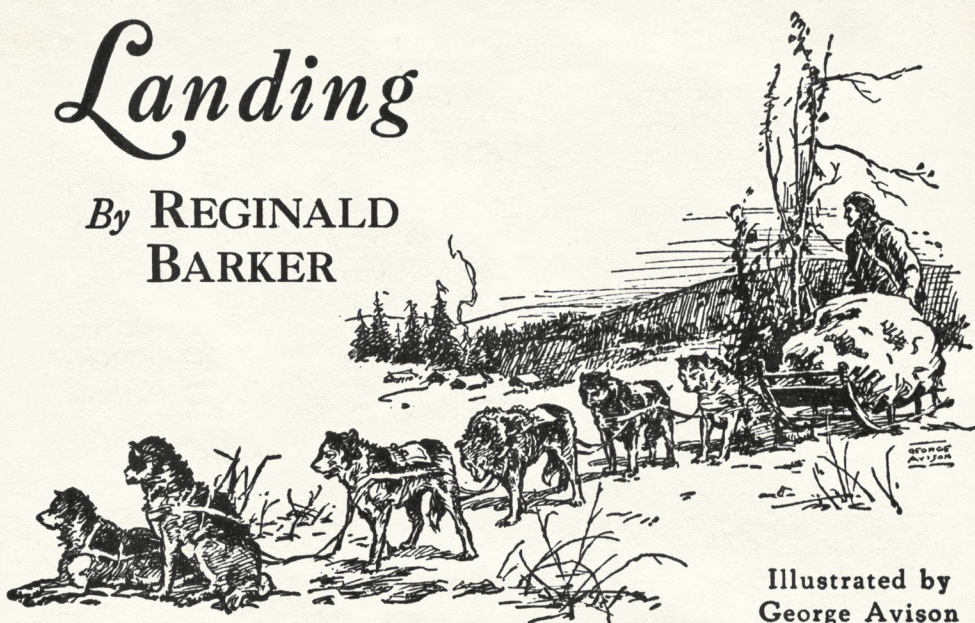
Rainey loved his wife more than anything else on earth; but of late he had found himself wishing he could once more enjoy the wild old times he had known in the days before he had married Mary. He had never told her so in words; but sometimes in the evening when the cabin was bright with lamplight, and merry with the inarticulate efforts at speech of the baby playing on the floor, Mary would glance up at her husband to see him sitting with his hands clasped around his knees, and in his dark eyes a far-away look that she had come to fear. At such times she would lay a hand on his shoulder and tilt his face upward until he had to look at her. Soft with yearning to share his trouble, her voice would interrupt his thoughts:

"What thinking about, boy?"

Rainey, trying to fight down the devils which had come to haunt him, would fidget a little in his chair.

# Landing

By REGINALD  
BARKER



Illustrated by  
George Avison

"Just thinking, honey, about you and little Jeanne."

He couldn't tell her he was thinking of the good old times he, as a single man, had had down at Caribou Landing. He couldn't tell her that he would have almost sold his soul to hear once more the tinkle of glasses, and to see himself sitting pretty in a poker-game, with twenty dollars in the pot. With the blind egotism of man, to whom the soul of woman will ever remain a mystery, Rainey never guessed that his secret was no secret at all to his wife. Nor did he guess at the fear in her heart on the morning she kissed him good-by, and watched him set forth on his hundred-mile trail, with six or seven hundred dollars' worth of furs on his sled, toward Caribou Landing.

The evening before he left, they had made their plans: Two hundred dollars were to go to pay the bill they owed Jake Collister the trader; one hundred dollars was to be spent on provisions and other necessities, which Rainey was to bring back with him on the sled. Twenty dollars were to furnish toys for baby Jeanne and Christmas for the family. The rest of the money Rainey was to bring back to the cabin.

To all these plans Rainey had agreed, trying to hide the longing in his heart which bade him take a few dollars and try a hand in the poker-game which went on every night down at Red Shan'an's Place, a mile below Caribou Landing.

"Good-by, boy; good-by—good-by!"

He seemed still to hear his wife's voice as he sped down the ice. "Good-by, honey. We'll expect you back on the night before Christmas." . . . .

Rainey sighted Caribou Landing late in the afternoon of the third day after leaving his homestead. Noses down, plummy tails waving, the dogs picked up speed; and soon the tinkle of their bells in front of Jake Collister's post brought the giant trader to the door. He stretched his face in a bearded grin.

"Out to get Mary her Christmas, Rainey? Glad to see you, boy. Never mind about the dogs—I'll send my roustabout to look after 'em. Come inside—warm your insides with a drop of the real stuff."

THE trader shot a swift glance at the loaded sled as he spoke; but he did not ask any questions until Rainey had taken a drink from the black bottle Collister set on the counter. Then:

"Any luck on the trap-line, Rainey?"

Rainey, strangely at peace with the world now, laughed the rollicking laugh the trader remembered so well. Crashing a powerful fist down on the bar, the trapper roared:

"Luck? I'll tell the world I've had luck, Collister! There are six-seven hundred dollars' worth of furs outside on the sled. I'll paint the town red to-night!"

Leaning over the counter, the big trader grasped Rainey by one shoulder, and looked searchingly into his face. What

he saw in the trapper's eyes caused Collister to say harshly:

"Forget what you are planning for tonight, Rainey. Those furs belong to Mary."

"Yeah?" There was a snarl in the trapper's voice. It was well known in Caribou Landing that Collister, the trader, had been Rainey's partner long before the trapper had married Mary. Everyone had thought the girl had made a mistake when she had turned the trader down to marry Rainey, who had had



nothing to offer her but his love, his team of dogs, and the strength which had made him known as the strongest man at Caribou Landing.

"Yes," said the trader. "Those furs belong to Mary; and you belong to Mary; and I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself at Red Shan'an's tonight."

"You don't need to worry yourself about me," said Rainey quietly. "I aim to pay you what I owe you, and to start back in the morning with a sled-load of grub, and my Merry Christmas to Mary and little Jeanne. The old days are over, Collister; they'll never come back any more."

Turning, he left the store, walking a little uncertainly as the fumes of the liquor began to cloud his brain. Leaning over the counter, the trader watched him stagger back with a great bale of furs. When it was inside, the trapper closed the door.

"Open 'em up, Collister," he said. "And tell me how much you'll pay."

It was a fine catch of furs Rainey had brought in. There were dark brown marten-skins with orange-hued throats and heads the color of silver mist; there were foxes and mink and snowy white ermine; there was the five-foot skin of a Canada lynx, and a wolf pelt that measured six feet and six inches from nose to tail. The trader's eyes glistened with love of fur for the sake of its beauty, as one by one he examined the skins and laid them aside in a pile.

"Six hundred and forty-five dollars," he offered. "It is the best I can do."

Rainey knew it would be useless to argue with Collister, who knew furs as few men know them, and had the reputation of dealing fairly with everybody.

"Right," said the trapper. "Take two hundred out of it and give me a receipt for the bill Mary and I owe you. Thanks for carrying us through last summer."

From an inside pocket of his mackinaw, Rainey took a folded sheet of paper from a cheap writing-tablet. He handed it to the trader.

"Here's a list of the stuff my wife wants," said the trapper. "Fix it up, will you, Collister? I'll be ready to start back in the morning."

Seating himself by the stove, Rainey filled his pipe. As he was about to touch a match to it, the door was pushed open and a tall, fox-faced, red-haired man strode inside. Stamping the snow off his arctics, he pushed back his fur cap and glanced toward the stove. Recognizing the trapper, he put out his hand and caught Rainey's in a steel grip.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "So you've come down to spend Christmas with us here at Caribou Landing."

"Can't do it, Red," said Rainey curtly. "Got to start back in the morning, so as to get home in time to give my wife and baby their Merry Christmas."

Red Shan'an, gambler and roadhouse-keeper, broke into a guffaw—which died into a mutter as his eyes met Rainey's.

"Anything particular to laugh at in the fact that I'm going home to spend Christmas?" asked the trapper.

"Nothing at all," said the gambler. "Only I was thinking that when you put your foot into the trap of matrimony, a good man died."

"Something you wanted, Shan'an?" asked the trader, hoping thus to avert the trouble he saw brewing.

Cold as twin points of blue ice were the eyes Red Shan'an fixed on Collister.

"Yes," replied the gambler. "Give me four packs of cards. The men from the creeks are coming in fast. There'll be high jinks down at my place tonight."

Flinging a ten-dollar gold-piece down on the counter, he said boastfully:

"Take it out of that, Collister. I won five hundred bucks last night from Charley Pigeon, the breed from Ker-rigan's Flat."

The cards in his hand, Shan'an glanced over his shoulder as he reached the door.

"Better come over tonight, Rainey," he said, "and take a hand."

Without awaiting a reply, he opened the door and stepped out into the snow, closing it softly behind him.

Sitting by the stove, Rainey watched the trader as he worked at putting up the goods the trapper had ordered. As Collister worked, he talked incessantly—part of the time to himself, part of the time to Rainey, sitting by the stove.

"Fifty pounds of red beans—dang it, Rainey, that's a lot of beans."

"They'll last us all next summer," said the trapper.

"Fifty pounds of sugar—ten pounds of salt, four ounces white pepper—four ounces candles—hell, no,—candied peel!"

Rainey, rising from his seat, went over to the counter. His face was grim; his dark eyes were seething with tiny flames.

"Give me fifty dollars in cash, Collister," he requested.

"What for?" asked the trader.

"Is that any of your business?"

"You're aiming to go down to Red Shan'an's and make an everlasting fool of yourself," said the trader. "Just like you used to do before you married Mary! Now, let me tell you this, Rainey: When you are ready to start back to your wife and baby, I'll hand you the balance due you—every cent of it. But until then, you don't get a penny. I know you, Rainey, and I know Shan'an. If he ever gets you into his place, he'll skin you out of every cent you've got."

Silence in Collister's store. Across the counter the trapper and the trader looked steadily into each other's eyes. Suddenly Rainey rapped out an oath, and his right hand came up holding a revolver.

"I want my money, Collister," he said curtly. "I want every penny of it. Right now!"

"Go ahead and shoot, if you feel like it," said the trader quietly. "But if you



A man was standing by the sled. Fifty yards away, the wolves were slinking to and fro, snarling and growling.

do, there'll be a hanging at Caribou Landing."

Bluffed by the cool nerve of a man who had bluffed better men than he, Rainey let his gun-arm drop. Swiftly he shoved the weapon into its holster and turned toward the door.

"All right for you, Collister!" he said. "But neither you nor anyone else can stop me from going to Shan'an's tonight."

Once outside, Rainey stood with his clenched fists deep in his mackinaw pockets. His face was turned toward the lights twinkling through the frosted panes of the windows of the long low building standing on the bluff that overlooked Caribou Lake.

Rainey hadn't a cent in his pocket, and he knew that short of killing Collister, it would be impossible to get any money from the trader, who passed his nights sleeping in a little room at the back of the store. Nor did the trapper for a moment believe that Red Shan'an would stake him; still, with head down and hands thrust in his pockets, he made his way toward the place he had promised his wife he would never enter again.

Oh, well, what did it matter? Having nothing, he couldn't lose anything. Wouldn't hurt to go inside and stand around and watch the games for a while before he went to the room he had taken at the only hotel in Caribou Landing. There would at least be company



at Shanan's among the boys he used to know!

Sound of laughter came from within, and a man's voice drifted through the log walls. Rainey's face flamed red in the dark as he caught the sneering tones.

"Yep, Jim Rainey's in town. But he aint allowed to come here any more. He's got to go home and rock the kid."

A hoarse guffaw followed the remark; then some one shouted: "Give us a tune."

Standing outside in the snow, Rainey heard some one strike the keys of a piano. Then a man's voice began to sing part of a song written by Charles Badger Clark, twenty years before:

*There's a hole called Red's saloon,  
In La Vaca town;  
There's an old piano there,  
Blistered, marred and brown.  
And a man that's older still,  
Taking drinks for fees,  
Plays all night from memory  
On the yellow keys.  
Clash of coin and clink of glass  
On the sloppy bar.  
Still the music sings of love,  
Takes you out afar,  
Ridin' old forgotten trails,  
Underneath the moon—  
Funny place for music, though,  
Down in Red's saloon.*

Rainey pushed open the door and stepped inside.

"Look who's here!" This from Red Shanan himself. "Shut down on the music, Pierre, and let's hear what the married man has to say."

Rainey strode over to the stove and held out his hands to the heat. It was fifty below zero that night.

"Going to take a hand, Rainey?" asked a bearded trapper from Wolf Creek. "Long time you no play poker."

"Not tonight, Bill," said Rainey; but his eyes glittered as they wandered to the cards a man was shuffling at a green-covered table near the stove.

"Rainey's married now," Shanan went to the trouble to explain, as though every man present was not aware of the fact. "His wife won't let him play."

"The money I got for my furs isn't mine," explained Rainey. "The only thing I can call my own is my dog-team. I've owned those dogs five years."

"Want to sell 'em, Rainey?" asked Shanan.

Now, when Rainey had entered the place, he had had no more idea of selling his dogs than he had of selling his family. So on the first impulse, he shook his head.

"No," said the trapper. "My dogs are my living in the winter. I couldn't sell the team."

Shanan nodded sagely as he stepped behind the rude bar that ran along one side of the room.

"Drinks on the house for everyone," shouted the gambler. "Here's to all the married men in the world, and specially to Jim Rainey."

After the first drink, Rainey was not so sure he did not wish to sell his dogs; after the second drink he asked Shanan what he would pay for the team. But Red Shanan, wise as a wolf, and crafty as a wolverine, thought he saw an easier way out.

"Tell you what I'll do," said the gambler. "I'll play you two hands out of three at draw poker. Your dogs against five hundred in gold!"

Digging down into his pocket, Shanan tossed two twenty-dollar gold coins into the air, and caught them deftly as they fell.

It grew very quiet as the gambler flung his challenge across the bar. Men glanced at each other as though they could not believe what they had just heard; then one and all they looked toward Rainey.

Rainey, gazing at his own reflection in the mirror facing him across the bar, sensed the tension in the air. Well he knew that every man present expected him to stake his team against Red Shanan's gold; and well he realized that should he refuse the gambler's challenge, his name would become a byword for cowardice. It was not a nice thought; but still worse was Rainey's knowledge that if he gambled his dogs away, he would be without the means of taking his supplies back to the cabin on the homestead, where his wife and baby were waiting.

If he lost— But on the other hand, if he won, he would have five hundred dollars in gold to add to the money he would receive from the trader for his furs. If Mary asked questions, he could tell her that he had received twice as much for his furs as he had thought possible. And she would believe him; for he had yet to tell her his first lie.

Not thirty seconds had passed since the gambler had flung his challenge;



but so swiftly does thought travel, that already Rainey saw himself tossing the gold into Mary's lap.

"So much, honey?" she would exclaim. "The prices of furs must have gone 'way up high!"

And his own reply:  
"Plumb out of sight!"

So vivid was the picture that Rainey had for the time forgotten where he was. He was recalled to himself by Shan'an's voice.

"Well, Rainey, going to crawl?"

The baited trapper passed the tip of his tongue over lips suddenly gone dry. Then he swept the faces of the assembled men. In every eye he saw the urge to him to try and beat Red Shan'an at his own game, for not a man there but would have taken the chance of winning the five hundred dollars that the gambler had offered to stake against Rainey's dogs that night.

His fist, crashing down on the bar, emphasized his decision.

"My team of dogs against five hundred in gold, Shan'an! The last game I shall ever play. Let 'er go!"

They took their places at the little green-covered table and began to play. One of the crowd that gathered around,—Charley Pigeon, the Kerrigan Creek 'breed,—watched the game with button-black eyes. He had lost five hundred to Red Shan'an the previous night. As the 'breed watched Shan'an deal the cards, he fumbled at a talismanic charm he wore around his neck and muttered in broken French.

With a sweep of the hand, Red Shan'an gathered back the cards he had dealt. Holding the pack in his left hand, he looked toward Charley Pigeon.

"What did you say?" he asked, mildly enough.

"M'sieur will win," said the 'breed. "It is written in ze star!"

Thirty minutes later Red Shan'an arose from his chair. On the green cloth before Rainey stood five little piles of gold coin. There were one hundred dollars in each pile.

Red Shan'an's voice was coldly ironical as he turned on Charley Pigeon.

"You go tell the bird that wrote on the stars," said the gambler, "that he don't know a hell of a lot about poker."

Collister the trader was just opening up when Rainey strode into the store next morning. He eyed the trapper with an accusing stare.



"Well," he said, "what did you do with yourself last night?"

Defiantly Rainey flung the news of his victory in Collister's face.

"Took a little hand in a game and won five hundred from Red Shan'an!"

From his pocket he drew out the buckskin sack in which he had placed his winnings. Slamming it down on the counter, he laughed in the trader's face.

"Give me whatever money is coming to me for my furs," he said. "I've played my last game. I just wanted to see if I could win like I used to. Now I'm going back to Mary."

Collister listened in silence as the trapper told how he had won the money. When he had finished, the trader said:

"Suppose you had lost, Rainey. What would you have told your wife?"

"I didn't lose, though," retorted Rainey.

"No," agreed the trader. "The gods let you win last night. But still—what will you tell Mary?"

Rainey, not knowing how to answer, let his gaze roam around the store. He saw a buckskin dress ornamented with beads and porcupine quills, such a dress as might have been made by a half-breed Indian woman or a squaw.

"It was made by Charley Pigeon's woman during the long days he was away on his trap-lines," explained the trader in answer to Rainey's questions. "She told him to sell it to me for what he could get."

"I'll give you fifty dollars for it," offered Rainey eagerly. "It will be my Christmas gift to Mary."

As though he had not heard the offer, the trader kept on talking.

"So I gave the 'breed what he asked for it, Rainey, and he went down and lost it with all the rest of his money to Red Shan'an. The five hundred dollars you won last night belongs by right to Charley Pigeon. Better look out for him, Rainey. He is only a 'breed, and he knows you've got the money. It's a long trail home."

Rainey bought the buckskin dress for the fifty dollars he had offered, and he was holding it in his hands when Charley Pigeon came into the store. Paying no attention to Rainey, the 'breed turned to the trader.

"I want to buy tobac', grub and striped candy, m'sieur," he said. "Also ze cartridge for my rifle. I pay you w'en ze ice she go out in ze spring."

Charley Pigeon owned no team of dogs; an accidental meal of poisoned bait had killed them early in the fall. Rainey knew this. Perhaps because of that, and perhaps because he wanted to keep an eye on the 'breed, he spoke suddenly.

"I shall pass the mouth of Kerrigan Creek on my way home," he said. "You can throw your pack on my sled."

THEY camped that night twenty-seven miles from Caribou Landing.

"We're making good time," observed Rainey as they sat around the fire smoking. "I'll be home at least a day before my wife is expecting me."

The 'breed looked at him across the fire, thinking of the money Rainey had won from Red Shanana.

"I 'ope," said Charley Pigeon, "m'sieur will 'ave ze Merry Christmas."

"You can bet your sweet life we will," said Rainey. "What with money you lost and I won—"

He caught back his words suddenly.

"Weather's moderating," he observed. "Looks like snow."

The blizzard struck shortly after midnight; by morning the new snow was six inches deep. Through it the loaded sled slid easily along, without making much sound. That night they reached the mouth of Kerrigan Creek. Ten miles from the mouth of the creek was Charley Pigeon's cabin. But the 'breed decided to camp with Rainey that night. As they sat around the fire, he raised his head in a listening attitude.

"Listen," he said. "The wolves are 'owling."

Rainey had heard wolves howl many a time, and was not particularly interested, until the 'breed said suddenly:

"Those wolves, she run in ze pack tonight. She is ver' hongree."

"They won't bother us," said Rainey. "They are too much afraid of fire."

All night long the wolf-pack howled, ceasing only when at last dawn came stealing over the snow-covered forest. It was snowing hard when Rainey parted from Charley Pigeon.

"Good-by—good luck to you!" he said. "And a Merry Christmas."

"And to you, m'sieur, and to ze good woman and ze leetle child," said Charley

Pigeon gravely, "I weesh you all ze Merry Christmas."

Not until Rainey had covered a mile, did he realize the irony of that. With all of Charley Pigeon's hard-earned money in his own pocket, he had had the unlimited nerve to wish the loser a Merry Christmas! And Charley Pigeon, good sport that he was, had taken his loss far more philosophically than Rainey would have done. Rainey could hear the 'breed's last words:

"And to you, m'sieur, and to ze good woman and ze leetle child, I weesh you all ze Merry Christmas."

"Hell!" exclaimed Rainey. "Charley Pigeon may be a 'breed, but he's pretty much of a man."

Dusk was stealing over the forest when Rainey came in sight of his cabin. For a moment he did not realize that there was no smoke rising from the stove-pipe, nor any tracks around the door. When he did notice it, a heavy hand seemed to lay chill fingers on his heart, and he raised his voice in a loud shout:

"Mary! Oh, Mary! I'm home again."

There was no answer. The only sound was the *sift, sift, sift* of the falling snow.

Mad with fear, Rainey flung open the door of the cabin, and still wearing his snowshoes, strode inside. He lit the lamp and gazed around the room with frightened eyes. His wife and baby were gone!

Mary and little Jeanne had vanished into a storm which had covered their tracks. And there wasn't a neighbor within thirty miles! In one corner of the room stood a little fir tree which Mary had cut and placed there to await the ornaments which her husband had brought over a hundred miles of snow-covered trail from the store at Caribou Landing.

Standing in the doorway of his empty home, Rainey shouted his wife's name until the echoes rang.

SUDDENLY he ceased shouting. Far away he had heard a low moan like the sound of a rising wind; but Rainey knew it to be the voices of a pack of wolves—running something down.

There was a grim twist to Rainey's lips, and a ghastly fear in his heart as he slashed free the sled-lashings and almost hurled the load into the cabin. Laying his rifle on the sled, he grabbed the gee-pole, and addressed the astonished and disappointed dogs.

"Mush on, boys! For God's sake, mush! Those wolves are after Mary!"

As though they understood, every dog in the team answered the man's plea for help. Heads down, bushy tails waving, stout legs going like machines, over the homestead in the dusk they tore toward the river, then down the ice in the direction in which the hungry wolf pack was howling.

Two miles down the river Rainey swerved the team, for now the howling of the wolves was coming from the right—a howling that suddenly merged into bitter snarling which died suddenly into silence. Then the crack of a rifle-shot once more gave Rainey the direction.

"Mush on," he yelled. "For God's sake, mush!"

HE came on the pack suddenly. Backed against a low hill, a man with a rifle to his shoulder was standing before a woman who was kneeling by a sled upon which, covered with blankets, lay a little child. Fifty yards in front of the sled a dozen big gray wolves were slinking to and fro, reluctant to face the rifle, yet too hungry to retreat. Snapping at each other, and snarling and growling among themselves, the beasts did not see Rainey.

*Crack!* A streak of orange flame from Rainey's rifle split the dark, and a gray beast leaped high with a bullet through its chest. *Crack!* Another tried to drag itself away with a broken back.

Lunging forward on his webs, Rainey was met by a gaunt beast that sprang full at his throat. But the man standing near the sled fired once more, and the wolf fell. Desperately wounded, it snapped at Rainey's legs as he passed, only to be met with a shot through the brain which ended the beast's struggles for all time. As the rest of the pack slunk away, Rainey reached the sled.

"Mary!" he cried. "Oh, Mary!"

"I got tired of waiting, honey," she said through her sobs. "And went over to Charley Pigeon's cabin to take his wife a little Merry Christmas."

Charley Pigeon, grim of face, let his hand lie limp in that of Rainey.

"It is nothing, m'sieur," said the 'breed. "Me, I cross the trail of Madame. Then I 'ear ze wolf 'owl. So I think I come and keel one wolf and take her hide 'ome to geev my woman for her Merry Christmas."

For one long minute Rainey fought a bitter fight with himself. Then he took from his pocket the money he had won. Pressing the heavy buckskin sack into the hand of Charley Pigeon, he said:

"Here is the money Red Shanawon won from you, and I won from him. Seems like if you don't take it back, I won't have a very merry Christmas."

WHEN the cabin was bright with light that night, and the little green tree was a dazzle of tinsel and tiny bells, Rainey sat with his wife at his side, gazing into the fire. Presently he told her what had happened to him down at Caribou Landing.

Silently she listened until he had finished; then she placed a hand on his knee and looked up into his face with a smile that was mingled with tears.

"Honey," she said, "I guess it is no use my trying to make you over, for while you were playing poker down at Caribou Landing, I was playing cribbage with Charley Pigeon's wife."

"Huh—what's that?" Rainey stared into his wife's face. Then curiosity conquered his inclination to give her a piece of his mind.

"Win anything?" he asked.

"Ye-es," slowly the confession came. "I won—fi-five pounds of beans!"

Rainey's lean features broke into a sudden grin which exploded at last into a roar of laughter. Springing from his chair, he grabbed his wife and whirled her around the cabin in a mad wild dance. Lying in her crib, baby Jeanne watched her parents with round blue eyes, as together they sang:

*"Oh, Christmas is the gladdest time,  
The gayest time, the maddest time—"*

Suddenly, and without knowing why, they ceased their mad whirling. Mary pointed to the clock on the shelf.

"Hush, honey!" she whispered. "In one minute it will be Christmas morning."

Hand in hand they went to the door and flung it open. The snow had ceased to fall, and beneath a flood of silver moonlight the world seemed clean and new. Not a sound broke the silence of the winter night until the clock struck twelve; then Mary spoke aloud the thought that comes just once a year to every soul on earth:

*Merry Christmas to everybody,  
Peace and good will toward men.*

# After Worlds Collide

*The survivors of Doomsday—the few greatly daring men and women who escaped before the cosmic collision that destroyed this earth, have arrived at a hazardous haven. Here, on a strange planet beyond the sun, their further adventures are even more deeply interesting.*

By EDWIN BALMER  
and PHILIP WYLIE

Illustrated by Joseph Franké

*The Story Thus Far:*

TWO new planets came hurtling out of space toward the doomed earth. Night after night, as they grew brighter in the southern skies, astronomers studied them; and they discovered that one of these onrushing planets was sweeping toward the earth on an orbit that would bring about a collision. It must destroy the moon and then the earth—destroy them utterly.

Its companion planet was smaller; it resembled the world in size, and it was physically of the same order of object as the earth. Its path, while carrying it close to the world, would bear it by; it would approach but not collide with the earth; and it would make its closest approach before its huge comrade destroyed us.

So, before the cataclysm, there might be—*might be*—a chance of escape.

How some human beings prepared their escape from the earth, and how they accomplished it, by means of an ark of the air—a giant space-ship driven rocket-like by the new atomic engines—already has been told. This is the chronicle of their adventures on this new world of Bronson Beta.

They had landed near the coast of a great sea. And directed by their leader the old scientist Cole Hendron, they established a temporary camp and explored the immediate vicinity. They found a river of sweet water near by, and a valley green with mosses and ferns whose spores had withstood the age-long cold which Bronson Beta had endured since it had been torn away from its original sun—until now, when our sun was

warming it again. They found a forest of dead trees, preserved through the ages, to supply them with wood for shelters and for fires. More, they found a long smooth-paved road extending into the far distance, and a tablet of some unknown substance inscribed with what might have been writing. And they came upon the wreck of a machine, a vehicle, apparently, built of some unknown crimson metal. Had it been driven, æons ago, by human beings, or by creatures of another sort?

And then one night—they heard the drone of an airplane overhead, caught the flash of a wing-surface. But the visitor vanished without signal or landing.

Definite perils, moreover, beset this loneliest company of adventurers in all history. Terrific showers of meteors—presumably fragments of the old earth—bombarded them from time to time. And three of the men—three of those who had examined the wrecked machine—died of a strange illness. Had that curious crimson metal some malign power?

It seemed essential to learn more of this new world they had exchanged for the old; and to this end they had almost ever since their arrival been at work on a small airship made out of parts of the gigantic ark of the air which had brought them to Bronson Beta and which had been worn out in that tremendous flight. Now at last this contrivance, driven also by an atomic engine, was completed and successfully tested. And Hendron's right-hand man Tony Drake, with the writer Eliot James, was chosen to make an exploration flight.

It was a thing astonishing indeed which these two pioneers of a new planet found some hundreds of miles away: a great city of the Unknown People who æons ago had inhabited Bronson Beta, perfectly preserved under a gigantic dome of some transparent metal. More, in exploring this long-dead city, they came upon the portrait of a woman, differing but slightly from the women of earth! God then indeed had made man in His Own image!

Leaving this city of marvels after three days, Drake and James set out again, but soon became aware of a curious search-light beam in the night sky. Landing, they approached its source on foot—and found David Ransdell with those of the other American space-ship who had sur-

vived a disastrous landing. (*The story continues in detail:*)

TONY felt it utterly useless to attempt to speak to the throng; the people were too hysterical. More than three hundred of them were able-bodied, though many of these still bore bandages that testified to the injuries from which they were recovering. They had thought themselves recuperated from shock; but this intense excitement betrayed them.

Ransdell, restored from his faintness, proved the superior quality of his nerves

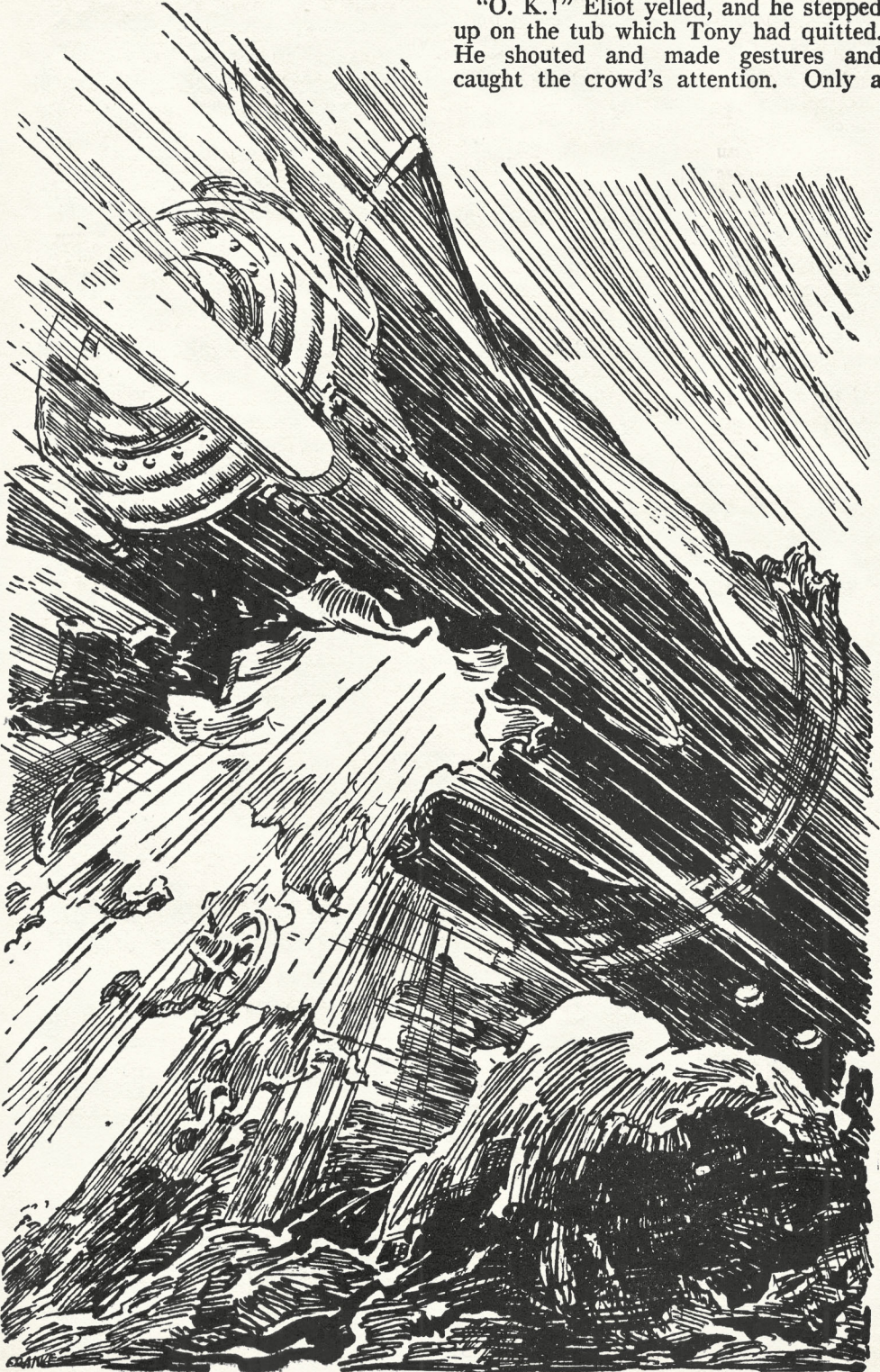


"The ground floor was a hall, or lobby, decorated by statuary of animals more fantastic and ferocious-looking than could be contrived in the wildest nightmare."

by attaining composure first. He went to Tony and drew him away from the excited throng which continued to clamor about them.

"Eliot!" shouted Tony to his companion in this flight of exploration. "You try to tell them—as soon as they give you a chance."

"O. K.!" Eliot yelled, and he stepped up on the tub which Tony had quitted. He shouted and made gestures and caught the crowd's attention. Only a



"Three of our tubes fused almost simultaneously. . . . And as we crashed,

few trailed after Tony and their own leader, Ransdell.

Tony could not yet quiet his own inner tumult. He felt an arm about his shoulder, and found Jack Taylor beside him; and he thought how he had traveled on a train along the Hudson, back on the earth, on his way to Cornell Uni-

versity to meet this young man and ask him to become a member of Hendron's party.

On the other side of him walked Peter Vanderbilt; and Tony thought of Fifth Avenue, and its clubs and mansions, so staid, so secure! Or they had felt themselves so. Now where were they?

Reveries of some similar sort were running through Vanderbilt's head. His eyes met Tony's, and he smiled.

"Tony, I woke up laughing, a night or so ago," Peter Vanderbilt said.

"Laughing at what?" Tony inquired. They had passed from the noise of the crowd.

"At my dream. I dreamed, you see, Tony, that I was back on earth. Not only that, but I was on earth before the time these delectable Bronson Bodies were reported in the night skies. I was attending the ceremonies of installation of somebody's statue—for the life of me, I can't say whose—in the Hall of the Immortals! After I woke up, a meteor crossed this sky. I couldn't help wondering if it mightn't have been part of that statue! . . . Well, why not sit here? You can tell us a little more of what happened to us."

So the four friends sat down on the ground close together, seeing each other in the distant radiance of the lights in the camp; and interrupting each other as they told, they traded their experiences in the flight from earth.

THE account that Tony heard was far more tragic, of course, than that which he had to tell. The technicians under command of David Ransdell had made their calculations accurately, and the journey through space had been little more eventful than that of the ship in which Tony and his comrades had traveled. However, the second Ark had been built more hastily, and its greater size increased its difficulties; as it approached Bronson Beta, it became evident to its navigators that the lining of its propulsion-tubes was being rapidly fused. It approached the planet safely, however; and like its sister ship, found itself over the surface of a sea. Fortunately, the coast was not far away, or the great vessel would have dropped into the water and all aboard perished.

The coast which the second Ark approached—the coast upon which it now lay—was fog-bound. "In spite of the fog," Ransdell said to Tony, "we had to land at once. Of course, the jets cleared



one of the jet-tubes burst."

away the fog below us, but only replaced it with a brilliant cloud of gases. We were flying 'blind,' and had to land by instrument. I ordered everybody to be strapped to the floor, and gave the command to set down the ship under the added pressure of the blast required for the delicate business of landing. Three of our tubes fused almost simultaneously. The ship careened and almost tipped over. In trying to right it, we rose perhaps fifty feet above this desert." He swept his hand toward the surrounding darkness. "And then we crashed."

**T**ONY nodded. Ransdell went on: "Every bit of apparatus that was in the least fragile was, of course, demolished. On top of the crash, one of the jet-tubes burst, and its blast penetrated the storeroom. That might have been much worse; it might have annihilated half our party. Perhaps it did so, indirectly—it fused or destroyed more than half our stores and equipment. Since landing, we have not found it possible to construct even a radio. That is why you have heard no signals from us. We had more than we could do, for the first weeks, taking care of our injured and burying the dead—and salvaging and making usable what supplies were spared, in part. The searchlight you saw to-night was the best effort we accomplished."

Suddenly Ransdell's voice failed him. He cleared his throat and continued very quietly: "To tell the truth, Tony, we wondered whether we should try to communicate with Hendron's party—assuming you had come through safe. We are so without supplies or resources, that we could only be a burden to you. We knew that at best you could barely manage for yourselves. It was that, as much as anything else, which stopped us from making efforts to find you. We decided not to drag you down and perhaps cause you, as well as ourselves, to perish."

"You would," said Tony. "You would decide that—Vanderbilt and Taylor and you, Dave. But thank God, that point's past. I haven't told you half the news. Eliot James and I didn't come from our camp to you. We came from a city!"

"City?"

"Of the Other People, Dave!"

"Other People? . . . What Other People? . . . Where?"

"I mean a city of the old inhabitants of this planet!" Tony cried. "For it was inhabited, as we thought. And by

what people! Eliot and I spent three days in one of their cities!"

"But not—with Them?"

"No," agreed Tony. "Not with them! They're gone! They're dead, I suppose—for a million years. But wait till you hear what they left behind them! And what the cold and the dark of space saved for us! Food, for one thing. Dave! Peter! Jack!" In their excitement, they were all standing up again, and Tony was beating each of them in turn upon the back. "Food—grain and other things saved for us by Space's wonderful refrigerator of absolute cold. Cheer up! Food—something to fill you—no longer's one of our troubles. Their food—if it doesn't kill us all. And it hasn't killed Eliot or me yet. . . Listen! What's that?"

For there was shouting in the camp.

"I suspect," said Peter Vanderbilt, "that James had got to that point too. He's been telling them of the food you found. Perhaps now we better rejoin our comrades and—the ladies."

Eliot James *had* reached that point; and it started a new hysteria; for they believed him, and had faith in the food-supplies he reported. The immediate effect was instinctive and practical; they ordered their own sparse supplies distributed more satisfyingly than on any occasion since the terrible landing on this earth.

It was indeed salvation which Tony Drake and Eliot James had brought out of the night—salvation and the end of some of the hardships heroically borne. Tony did not realize then the extent of those hardships; but when half an hour later coffee was served for all of them in the improvised dining-hall, he was made to realize it by a simple statement of Ransdell's. "This is the first ration of coffee we have served, except to those in most desperate condition, since the day after we landed."

**I**T was a hilarious midnight picnic in the impromptu dining-hall, where the men and women dared to eat as much as they wanted for the first time since their epochal journey—where they sang hymns, shouted snatches of gay songs from lost days on the vanished earth, wept and laughed again, overhilariously. Tony found himself compelled to repeat again and again details of the city which Eliot James and he had found; again and again he had to iterate how Hendron and Eve and all their people had fared;



and how the three had died from the strange disease.

In return he gained other items from this and that of his companions, who enabled him gradually to piece together a more coherent account of the experience of the second band of Argonauts. Each detail was made vivid by the various narrators. The horrible day of the landing as the fog cleared away, revealing moment by moment the magnitude of the disaster which had overtaken them; the groans of the wounded; the crushed and mangled bodies of the dead; the desperate efforts of the doctors and surgeons among them to save those who were not beyond hope. Hastily constructed operating-tables under a sun which had once shone on the earth, and which now cast its radiance into the greenish-blue skies of Bronson Beta. The gradual emergence of order. The tallying of the lists of stores and tools. The shocking discovery that every one of the seeds so carefully stored on the ship had been burned by the unleashed atomic blast. The necessary destruction of the animals which had survived the crash, and the utilization of them for food. Rationing, then, and hunger. Long and weary expeditions on foot in search of sustenance. Efforts to find vegetation on Bronson Beta for food—efforts which in more than one case had led to illness, and twice had brought about death. The erection of the searchlight. The nights and days of waiting and hoping, complicated by fear to be found, because of the burden their discovery might constitute to those who discovered them.

"For a while," said Jack Taylor, "we believed that nobody else—no other ship from earth—got over. We felt that, desperate as our situation was, yet we were the luckiest."

"But two weeks ago—two weeks of these peculiarly prolonged days, not to mention the similarly protracted nights," put in Peter Vanderbilt, "two weeks ago, we began to believe differently."

"Why?" asked Tony.

"Airplane," replied Vanderbilt succinctly.

"Where?"

"Where would it be?"

"I mean," said Tony, "it didn't land?"

"Not it. Nor too plainly appear."

"Neither did ours," said Tony.

"You mean you sent it? It was your machine?" Ransdell swiftly demanded.

"Not two weeks ago," Tony denied. "We had nothing in the air then. I mean,



"Clara stowed away; we discovered her when we were well away from earth. Of course we kept her."

an airplane visited us too; and it didn't too plainly appear."

"But you saw it?"

"We got a glimpse of it—a glint of light on a wing through the clouds," explained Tony. "Did you see more here?"

"Yes," said Ransdell. "We got a shape—a silhouette. Queer type; we couldn't identify it. Long, back-pointing wings. Like larks' wings, somebody said. It looked like a giant lark in the sky."

Tony looked up from Ransdell to Eliot James, who had joined the circle.

Eliot softly whistled.

"Well," said Tony to Eliot.

"Well yourself!" Eliot James retorted. "You say it."

"Say what?" demanded Ransdell impatiently. "You know whose plane it was? What party brought that type over?"

"No party," said Tony bluntly.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. No party from earth brought that ship with them. It wasn't brought over."

He had gone a little pale, as he spoke; and he wiped his forehead and then his hands with his handkerchief.

"What—the—hell!" whispered Jack Taylor with awed deliberation.

"I said," iterated Tony solemnly, "it wasn't brought over. On the edge of the city of the Other People, of which we've been telling you—under the great glass dome, but near an edge where they could

be run out, easily—was a sort of hangar of those things. We saw a—a hundred of them. Like larks, they'd look in the sky—all-metal larks of marvelous design. They had engines. Did you tell them of the engine in that car we found wrecked before we went off to find the city?" He appealed to Eliot James.

ELIOT nodded; and several voices urged Tony on with: "Yes; he told us. . . We know."

"Well," said Tony, "they had engines of that same small, powerful type. We recognized it; but we couldn't get one going. We tried to."

He stopped, wet his lips.

"Go on! For God's sake, go on!"

"All right," said Tony. "But where do I go from there? What am I to tell you? I can tell you this; for I know it. I saw it. I saw the machines; and I felt them with my hands; and as I told you, I tried to make the engine work, but Eliot and I couldn't."

"The Other People—the People a Million Years Dead—the inhabitants of Bronson Beta—had aircraft that would look, in the air, like nothing we had on earth but a lark. They had small, economical and evidently exceedingly powerful engines that propelled them by a motive-power we haven't learned to employ."

"I believe it was one of those machines which flew over you—and over us."

"Flew?" repeated Peter Vanderbilt calmly. "Of itself? No pilot?"

Tony shook his head.

"A pilot perhaps," pronounced Vanderbilt softly, "*a million years dead?*"

Tony nodded; the inclination of his head in this affirmative made them jump.

"You don't believe it!" Peter Vanderbilt rebuked him.

"You," said Tony, "haven't been in their city. We were there three days, and never ceased to expect them to walk out any door!"

"After a million years dead?"

"How do we know how it might have been?"

"We know," Jack Taylor reminded him, "how long it must have been at the very shortest. Less than a million years, to be sure; but—plenty long in the dark and absolute zero. They never could have survived it."

Tony looked at him. "Why?"

"Because they couldn't, Tony."

"You mean, because we couldn't have. But we're not—They."

Peter Vanderbilt flicked a speck from his sleeve. "We have no need to be metaphysical," he suggested. "The machine could have come from one source, the pilot from another. The machine could have survived the million years cold; we know that some did. You saw them. But the pilot need have survived no more than a passage from earth—which some three hundred of us here have survived, and a hundred in your camp also."

"Of course," accepted Eliot James practically. "Another party could have got across—several parties; the Germans, the Russians, the Japanese or some others. Two weeks or more ago they may have found another Sealed City with the Other People's aircraft."

"And they," said Tony, "may have got one of the engines going."

"Exactly!"

"All right," said Tony, "that's that. Then let's all sit down again. Why did the pilot, whoever he is, look us over and leave without message or signal? Why—"

They sat down, but drew closer, talking together: "If some of the Other People survived, what would be their attitude to us, would you say? . . . Would they know who we were, and where we came from?"

Tony led a dozen men to the ship in which Eliot and he had flown; and they bore to the camp the amazing articles from the Sealed City.

NOBODY tired. There was no end to their speculations and questions.

Tony, seated on the ground and leaning on his hand beside him, felt a queer, soft constriction of his forefinger. He drew his hand up, and the constriction clamped tighter, and he felt a little weight. Some small, living thing had clasped him.

It let go and leaped onto his shoulder.

"Hello!" cried Tony, as two tiny soft hands and two tiny-toed feet clung to him. "Hello! Hello!" It was a monkey.

"Her name's Clara," said Ransdell.

"Yours?" asked Tony. "You brought her over?"

"Nobody brought her over," Ransdell replied. "You know the regulations before leaving earth. I tried to enforce them; but Clara was too good for us. She stowed away."

"Stowed away?"

"We discovered her after things got calm in space," Ransdell said, smiling. "When we were well away from the earth

and had good equilibrium. Everybody denied they had anything to do with her being on board. In fact, nobody seemed able to account for her; nobody would even admit having seen her before; but there she was. And she survived the passage; and even our landing. Of course we kept her afterward."

"Of course," said Tony. "Good work, Clara." He extended his finger, which Clara clasped solemnly, and "shook hands" by keeping her clasp as he waved his finger.

"Since we're checking up," added Ransdell, "you might as well know that we brought over one more passenger not on the last lists we made back there in Michigan. —Marian!" he called to the group about them. "You here?"

"Where would I be?" A girl of about twenty-three stood up and walked toward him. Her eyes were gray; her chin was firm; her hair was darkly red. Tony noticed that she carried herself with a boldness different from the others.

"HER name," Ransdell murmured as she approached, "is Marian Jackson. Lived in St. Louis. An acrobatic dancer. Kept her head during the chaos before the destruction. Read about our plans. Crawled into camp the night before we took off. Lived in the woods for three weeks before that—nobody knows what on."

The girl reached the table and took Tony's hand. "I've heard about you," she said. "Often. You don't look anything like I supposed you would."

"I'm glad to meet you," Tony replied.

Unabashed, she studied him. "You look shot," she said finally.

Tony grinned. "I am a little tired."

"You're all in. But then, everybody's tired around here always."

"You better go back to your place," Ransdell said.

"Sure," the girl answered. She smiled buoyantly and returned.

Ransdell looked at her thoughtfully, sipped his coffee, and shook his head. Then he continued privately to Tony: "She's really a moron, I suppose. I doubt if Hendron will approve of having a moron in our company; but her empty-headedness, her astonishment at everything, even her ignorance, which is pretty naïve, have delighted everybody. And she did a big thing for us."

Tony looked thoughtfully at the red-headed girl as she sat down and resumed conversation with those beside her.

"What did she do?" he asked, returning his attention to Ransdell.

"The second night we were here, Eberville went mad. He decided early in the evening that it was against the will of God for us to be here, and that we should all be destroyed. But he quieted down, and he was left alone. Later he got up, got into the ship, started the only generator that would work, and turned on one of the lateral tubes. In the morning you can see a big black patch about four hundred yards to the left of where we were camped. He'd have wiped us out in ten seconds, but Marian jumped on him. She's strong. So was Eberville, insanely strong. But she has teeth and nails. That is why we all escaped annihilation a second time."

Tony shook his head slowly and thoughtfully, without speaking.

The little monkey, Clara, returned to him and squatted before him, peering up at him with its queerly humanlike, puzzled gaze.

She had no business here, Tony recollected. Monkeys were not on the list of necessary or useful creatures to be taken on the terrible transfer from earth to this planet; and a single representative of the tiny monkey clan was particularly impractical and useless. But Tony was glad that Clara was here.

Among the crowd he saw Marian Jackson's red head moving; and he thought: "She had not been selected, either; but all these girls here of higher intelligence, and all the men too, would have been wiped out, but for her."

He did not blame Hendron for the narrowness of the selections more than he blamed himself. He thought: "We must all have become a bit mad in those last days on earth—mad or at least fanatic. We could hope to save so few and became too intent on certain types."

**S**UDDENLY Tony got up. Hendron, he remembered, knew none of their discoveries and events. He could delay no longer his return to Hendron.

But when he suggested to Eliot James that they return, others would not allow it.

"Not both of you! . . . You haven't both got to go!"

There was altogether too much yet to tell, and to hear.

"Let Eliot stay here, Tony," Dave Ransdell said. "I'll go to Hendron with you. I ought to report to him; and I want so much to see him."

"Just right," Tony accepted this plan. "That's the thing to do."

They were in the air, Tony Drake and Dave Ransdell together. In the plane with them, they freighted a fair half of the objects intelligible and unintelligible, which Tony and Eliot had brought from the Sealed City. With them was also Eliot James' record, which he had read to the people in Ransdell's camp.

**I**T was dawn; the slow sunrise of Bronson Beta was spreading its first faint shafts across the sky; and the ground below was beginning to be etched in its pattern of plain and hill and river and estuary from the sea.

The veinlike tracery of roads appeared—the lines left by the Vanished People. Tony gazed far ahead and to each side, searching for another or others of such marvelous, gigantic bubbles which would become, upon approach, other cities. But nothing of the sort came in sight. They spied smears and blotches below which became, when they turned the glass upon them, rows of ruins. They did not stop for these. Already they had much to report; already they were long overdue.

They sighted, far ahead, columns of smoke lifted lazily into the sky. Ransdell pointed and Tony, leaning to his ear, shouted: "Our camp-fires! Our camp!"

He could make out now, in the early morning light, that these were indeed camp-fires ending their duty of lessening the chill of the long night, perhaps, starting their services of cooking. The camp seemed unchanged; it was safe.

Tony compared its crudeness and rudeness with the marvelously proportioned perfections of the Sealed City; and a pang of nostalgia for this encampment suddenly assailed him. Here were his own; here was home.

He glanced aside and surprised his comrade Dave Ransdell, as he stared down. What thousand shattering fragments of thoughts must fill Ransdell's mind! One—and Tony plainly could see it—overwhelmed all the rest. Here, below, was Eve Hendron.

For it was a sudden softness and yearning that was in the eyes of the broad-shouldered, Herculean man at Tony's side. What would be in Eve's eyes when she saw him?

Tony's nostalgia of the moment before was replaced by a jerk of jealousy. Eve always had admired Dave and liked him—and more. More, yes, more than liked

him, during those last desperate days on earth. Now he was here; and he had done well.

Yes; anyone would say—Hendron himself would declare—that Dave Ransdell had done well indeed to have brought across space the ship intrusted to him with loss of less than half the party. Ransdell would be greeted ecstatically as a hero.

Tony caught his lip between his teeth and tried to establish better control of his inward tumult. If Eve preferred Dave to himself, let her!

He busied himself grimly with his throttles, putting down the ship on the bare soil more than a mile from camp.

They had been seen in the air and recognized; and the camp was outpouring toward them. The tractor was leading, piled with passengers.

Tony and Dave started to run toward them; then they halted. The people from the camp began to see that one figure was not that of Eliot James.

"Who is it? Who's with you?" came the cry from the tractor which was ahead of the runners.

"Ransdell! Dave Ransdell!" Tony yelled; and Dave stopped and lifted high his arms.

"Ransdell! Ransdell?" came back.

"Yes! They got over! *The second ship got over!*"

Then the welcome began.

**"TONY,"** said Ransdell later, when for an instant they had a few words together, "how Hendron's changed!"

"Yes," said Tony, "of course he has." But he realized that to Ransdell, who had not seen their leader since the last day on earth, the alteration in Hendron's appearance and manner was more tragic. Indeed, it seemed to Tony that in the few days he had been gone, Hendron had become whiter and weaker.

Never had Tony heard Hendron's voice shake as now it did; and his hand, which clung to the list which Ransdell had given him, quivered as if with palsy.

It was the list of the survivors and of the dead from the second Ark, with which Hendron had insisted that he be supplied.

He had read it several times; but again and again, like a very old man, he went over it.

"It was the tubes, you say, David?" he kept reviewing the disaster at landing, with Ransdell. "Three of the tubes fused! That was the fault of the de-

sign—my fault," he blamed himself morbidly.

"Father!" whispered his daughter to him. "Father, you ought to be happier than any other man in the world."

"In the world!" repeated Hendron.

When the children came running up to Tony, he talked to them cheerfully.



"In all the universe!" Eve quickly corrected. "You brought all the people in our ship over safely; and more than three hundred in the other Ark! Oh, Father, Father, no man in the universe could have done more!"

Hendron shook his head. "These people here, of whom Tony has told us. What metallurgists! They would have made a ship. Ah! Ah! Aha! Tony—David—Higgins! The rest of you! What do you think of this? The People of this planet are not here because they made good their escape through space! They made their own space-ships and

better ones and more of them; and escaped when they were passing some habitable sphere as they scraped some star!"

"No, Father!"

"How do you know? I tell you, they probably did it; and accomplished it so much better than I, with my bungling, that I am an amateur—a murderer. How many did I kill, David? How many did you say? . . . What rows of names!"

"Father, you didn't kill them!"

"I tell you I did! The tubes fused—the tubes I figured and designed myself. The human factor did not fail. They piloted it properly. The tubes fused!"

No one could quiet him. His daughter had to lead him away with Tony and Ransdell both helping her. The excitement of Ransdell's news and, on top of it, Tony's, had snapped his nerves, drawn too long to extreme tension. It was perfectly plain to all the company whom

he had led that his day, as a man of resource, was done.

Tony, thoroughly realizing this, trembled himself as he helped lead his friend to his cabin. Partly it was from pity and compassion; for no one knew better than Tony with what mercilessness Hendron had driven himself and how he had borne so long his enormous burden. But partly this trembling was from an emotion far less worthy. It was jealousy again of Dave Ransdell.

Jealousy more bitter and hard than that which had possessed him when they both were on earth—and rivals. For here they were rivals again and with the conflict between them accentuated.

How Eve had hugged Dave and held to him and kissed him!

To be sure, they had all embraced him—men and girls. Every girl in the camp hysterically had kissed him. But Eve had not been hysterical, Tony knew. Eve—Eve— Well, it had changed this world for her that Dave Ransdell had reached it.

Then there was the talk which Tony had heard: the talk already tonight of Ransdell as the new leader of both camps; the leader of the survivors of earth to replace and follow Hendron.

Tony tingled alternately with hate of Dave, and with shame at himself, as he thought of this talk. He had quieted the talk of himself as leader and he honestly had not wanted it a few days ago; he would not permit himself to be considered a candidate against Hendron; but now that Hendron was surely done, he wanted his people—*his* people, he thought them—to want him for their leader. And some still did; but more, he thought miserably, tonight turned to Dave Ransdell.

This was unworthy; this was childish, this jealousy and hate of his strong, courageous comrade! So Tony told himself; but he could not conquer it.

**N**OW they had come to Hendron's cabin; and Tony felt himself becoming officious in the endeavor to be of more use to Hendron and to Eve than Dave might be.

Ransdell felt this and drew back.

"Thank you, Tony," said Eve, in her gentle voice. "Now you go back to the people."

"All right," said Tony. "Come along, Dave."

"Let him stay here, Tony," said Eve.

"Him—and not me?" Tony stared.

"What more can he tell them?" Eve asked patiently. "He's given them his news, who're living and who"—she lowered her voice carefully so her father could not hear—"who are dead. He has no more to tell. You—you haven't begun to tell them what you must have to tell of the strange city!"

"Don't *you* want to hear it?" Tony persisted.

"I'm staying with Father now," said Eve.

Rebelliously—and yet ashamed of himself for his feeling—Tony turned away and left her with Ransdell.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CITY OF VANISHED PEOPLE

**T**HE best way to give you some idea of the city," Tony said, facing the entire company of the camp except Hendron and Eve, "is to read you extracts from the record made, on the spot and at the time, by Eliot James. Before I begin, however, I ask you to think of a city made of many colored metals built like the spokes of a wheel around a vast central building. Think of a dome of transparent metal over it. And then remember particularly, while I read, that every street, every building, every object in the whole metropolis was in an amazing state of preservation.

"Remember that there was not a single sign of human habitation. I have already told you that the people were human—very much like ourselves—but there was not a sign of them or any remains of them except for statues and paintings and representations which we called photographic for lack of a better word and for record on their remarkable visual machines. Bear all that in mind. Here, for example, is what Eliot wrote on the evening of our first day there. It was the fifty-first day on Bronson Beta. I will skip the part that describes the city in general."

He began to read: "Tony and I are now seated in a bedroom of an apartment in one of the large buildings. The night of Bronson Beta has descended, but we have light. In fact, the adventure of light is the most bizarre which has befallen us since we penetrated this spectacular and silent city. As twilight descended we were about to return to our airplane. We were at the time on the street. We had visited one or two buildings, and the effect of the silence com-

bined with the oncoming darkness was more than we could bear. I know that my scalp was tingling, the palms of my hands were clammy, and when I stood still I could feel my muscles shaking. We could not rid ourselves of the feeling that the city was inhabited; we could not cease looking quickly over our shoulders in the hope or the fear of seeing somebody. As we stood uncertainly on the street the sun vanished altogether, its orange light reflected by low-lying cumulus clouds. The sky took on a deeper green and at a word from Tony I would have run from the place. Suddenly, to our utter confoundation, the city was bathed in light. The light came on without a sound. Its source, or rather, its sources, were invisible. It shone down on the streets from behind cornices. It burst luminously upon the walls of the giant buildings.

"The interiors of many of them were also filled with radiance. All this, suddenly, silently, in the gathering gloom. I shall never forget the expression on Tony's face as he turned to me and whispered: 'It's too much!' My own mind, appalled at this new, marvelous manifestation of the genius of the Other People, was very close to lapsing into unconsciousness for a second. Then I found myself with my hands clenched, saying over and over to myself, 'It's light, just light. It was getting dark, so they turned on the lights.' Then I amended that to—'The lights come on here when it's dark.' Immediately Tony and I fell into an altercation. 'It's just the lights coming on,' I said.

"'But that's impossible!'

"'Nevertheless, they're on.'

"Tony, searching frantically for the shreds of his sanity, replied, 'But if the lights come on every night in this city, we'd have seen it through telescopes.'

"'Maybe we didn't happen to catch it.'

"'It can't be.'

"Both of us thought of the same thing simultaneously: the lights had come on because the city had been entered. It was true that if the cities of Bronson Beta had been illuminated at night the fact would have been observed before their passing. And a new and utterly irrational feeling struck us. The people were dead, dead a million years—a hundred million years. But in this startling gesture of turning on the lights there was more than mechanical magic. There was hospitality. That was crazy, but it was the way we felt.

"'It was arranged,' Tony said. 'Arranged for somebody, sometime—so arranged that when they should come here everything would be ready for them. Consequently, unless we do something very stupid, nothing can happen to us.' I repeat that it was utterly irrational; but that was the way it made us feel.

"I was inclined to agree with him, and as my eyes traveled along the brilliant and magnificent streets of this metropolis, I too for the first time felt that the artificial light pouring indirectly upon us had lent to it a humanity that had been hitherto absent.

"'Let's stay,' Tony said. 'Maybe we can find a place to sleep. We really ought to know more about it before we go back.'

"And so we stayed. We picked a building which we thought contained residences and after some experimenting succeeded in entering it. The ground floor was a hall, or lobby, which was decorated by statuary and bas-reliefs, of animals more fantastic and ferocious-looking than could be contrived in the wildest nightmare. And yet their presentation had a gay note, as if the sculptor had set them as humorous, rather than savage, embellishments in that lobby. At one side of the lobby was another large room which contained the apparatus for what we presently realized was a variety of games. They were like no games on our earth. One of them was played with large metal-like balls, which were extremely light and yet very hard, and with magnets. Another was played over a pool, evidently with jets of water, but we could not turn on the jets and the pool was empty. We did not take the time to puzzle out the technique of these sports, but proceeded by a large staircase to the floor above. There, as we had hoped, we found apartments. One of them, which faced the street from which we had entered the building, was open—and this we have made our own."

AS Tony turned a page, his listeners waited almost breathlessly. He continued from the record:

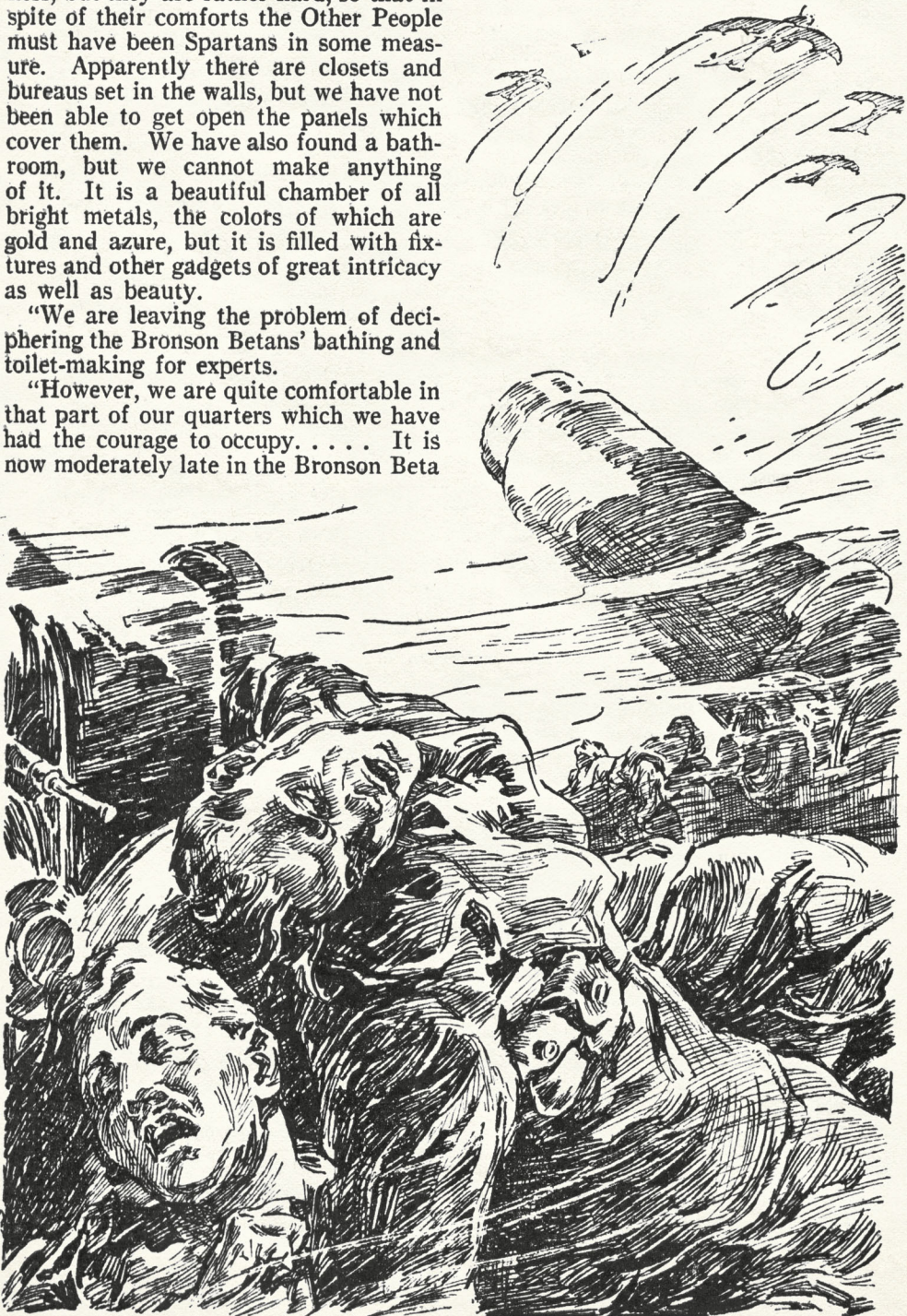
"It is an apartment of indescribable beauty. The living-room is more than twenty feet in height. Its walls are decorated with metal figures in various colors. There is no rug on the floor, but the floor is of a texture not unlike that of a very fine, deep rug. There are mirrors on many faces of the walls—the Other People must have enjoyed looking at them—

selves, or else they must have liked the added effect of distance lent by the mirrors, for large reflecting panels seem to be an important part of their interior decoration. We have also found beds. There were two bedrooms. The beds are very low. We had, I imagine, assumed that they would be of a luxurious softness, but they are rather hard, so that in spite of their comforts the Other People must have been Spartans in some measure. Apparently there are closets and bureaus set in the walls, but we have not been able to get open the panels which cover them. We have also found a bathroom, but we cannot make anything of it. It is a beautiful chamber of all bright metals, the colors of which are gold and azure, but it is filled with fixtures and other gadgets of great intricacy as well as beauty.

"We are leaving the problem of deciphering the Bronson Betans' bathing and toilet-making for experts.

"However, we are quite comfortable in that part of our quarters which we have had the courage to occupy. . . . It is now moderately late in the Bronson Beta

night and we have decided to try to sleep. To be sure, we have placed a chair in the door to the hall so it will not magically close upon us, for although we are only one story above the street it is impossible to break these windows. We have also planned to keep our pistols at our sides, although a glance at this world of the

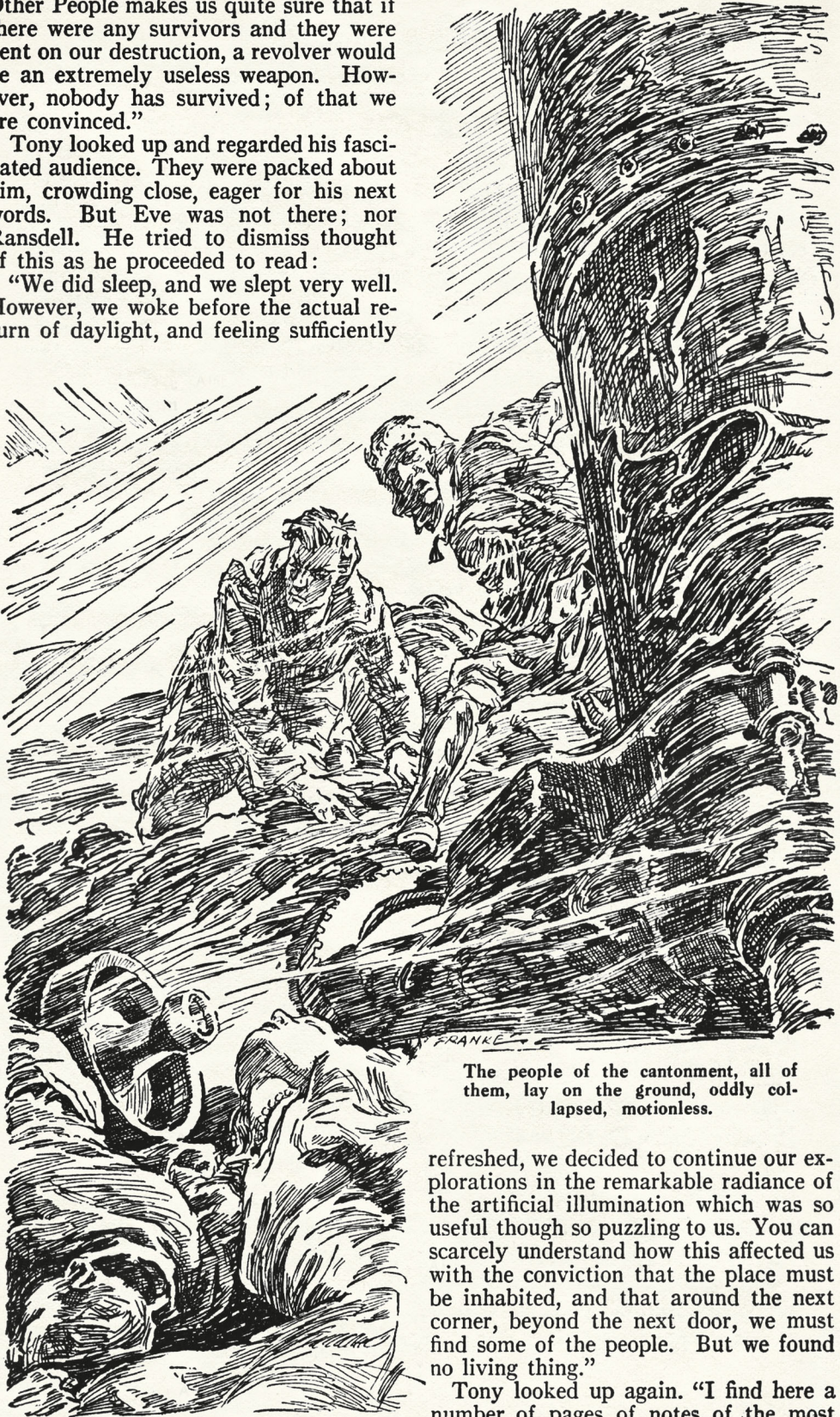




Other People makes us quite sure that if there were any survivors and they were bent on our destruction, a revolver would be an extremely useless weapon. However, nobody has survived; of that we are convinced."

Tony looked up and regarded his fascinated audience. They were packed about him, crowding close, eager for his next words. But Eve was not there; nor Ransdell. He tried to dismiss thought of this as he proceeded to read:

"We did sleep, and we slept very well. However, we woke before the actual return of daylight, and feeling sufficiently



The people of the cantonment, all of them, lay on the ground, oddly collapsed, motionless.

refreshed, we decided to continue our explorations in the remarkable radiance of the artificial illumination which was so useful though so puzzling to us. You can scarcely understand how this affected us with the conviction that the place must be inhabited, and that around the next corner, beyond the next door, we must find some of the people. But we found no living thing."

Tony looked up again. "I find here a number of pages of notes of the most

sober sort. They are Eliot James' attempt to describe and analyze some of the remarkable objects and implements which we examined. Of course neither he nor I are physicists, chemists or engineers, so our notions are probably valueless; those of you who are more expert than either of us will undoubtedly soon have a chance to inspect the engines and implements of the Other People.

"Along with such notes, I find the trivial record of what Eliot and I ate on that amazing morning. I will read that because it will show to you something of our state of mind. We seem to have been so stunned by what we had seen that it never occurred to Eliot that it was ridiculous to describe, along with the wonders of the Sealed City, our breakfast!"

His gaze returned to the notes.

"We got up in what we call the morning," Tony read, "although it was still dark, and we had a breakfast consisting of one bar of chocolate and a rather crumbled piece of hardtack which I had in my pocket, for what reason nobody will ever know. Then an extremely funny thing happened—at least we thought it was funny. We finished the last crumb of the hardtack—for our real food supply was in our ship outside the city—when I, looking for chance provender, felt in a pocket, and produced—to our mutual amazement—a stick of chewing-gum! This we broke evenly in half, and we embarked again on the streets of Bronson Beta chewing gum—a practice which I dare say was unknown on the planet in its earlier days.

"Well, the first thing we investigated that morning was a store. It was a department store in the sense that it contained a great many kinds of things; but it did not contain, for example, clothes or, as far as we could discover, food. It had house-furnishings, and furniture and kitchen appliances—and by the way, cooking must have been a cinch for the Other People, because apparently they cooked things by induced heat and under high pressure with steam, so that it only took a few minutes. The store also exhibited some of those automobile-like vehicles like the one we found wrecked.

"In the store," he continued, "we also found a large department of games and sports, and one of children's toys. The children had very peculiar blocks. Wires extend from their sides and corners so that they look like cockleburs and can be stuck together to make variously shaped figures in which the differently colored

blocks are held apart by wires. It was Tony who solved the enigma of those blocks. 'Molecules,' he said, as we stood staring at them. And then I realized that each block was designed to represent an atom and that the children were taught by playing with the blocks the atomic structure of various elements.

"I can give you no idea of the superlative order in which everything in it was arranged. It would be hopeless for me to try to tell you the skill with which those people combined use with beauty. Beauty and use with imaginative intelligence. I can only say two things—first, that you will all see it yourselves, and second, that while the streets, and the buildings, and the apartments of the city of the Other People fascinated us, we had intended to leave that morning."

AGAIN Tony ceased to read. "We appreciated, of course," he observed to his hearers, "that we ought to communicate with you; and after our breakfast, and a brief journey through some of the strange streets, we went out of the city by the way we had entered and returned to our ship where we tried to call you by radio. We failed utterly because of some puzzling interference.

"We argued, then, whether we should return to you with what we had learned or whether we should first try to learn much more. The second argument was overwhelming in its appeal to us. We returned to the city; and on the second day, we discovered that it was not quite so intact as we had supposed. In no less than six places which we observed, the huge transparent dome was pierced and showed great jagged tears or holes and below were marks of demolition exhibiting great violence. Meteors had torn through. But except for the wreckage caused by these, I tell you we found almost nothing out of order in that remarkable city. They left it in order, we believe; the meteors probably were met after the city was deserted and during this sphere's long journey through space.

"Now I will give you a few more random details from Eliot's diary:

"One thing we noted on our return to the stores—if they were stores," Tony read, "was that in none of them did there seem to have been a system for collecting money, or a medium of exchange, or of keeping books. Seemingly the Other People just came in and took what they wanted—or individuals must have kept their own books—or some system which

we couldn't imagine was used. For at the end of our three days' stay we were pretty certain that they had no medium of exchange to correspond to money.

"A department of that store was given over to musical instruments. Their chromatic scale is different from ours, and their way of writing music entirely different. They had a few stringed instruments, no wind instruments, many percussion instruments, but they had developed a vast variety of instruments which seem to have been operated by the transference of electrical impulses to sound. Unquestionably, music and the science of electricity had existed side by side for so long that the art had developed a science for its expression.

"We found in profusion the small, light vehicles of the type which we first discovered wrecked on the road near our camp. It is plain these were operated by some sort of electric impulse; but we could do nothing with them."

Tony skipped more pages. "Imagine us with the sun rising and the flood of indirect illumination dimming away. Imagine us under that vast transparent bubble in the early morning, having a long look at one marvel after another. We went across bridges and up and down streets. We tramped along ramps and on a dozen levels. We visited civic centers and museums and theaters and recreation-grounds and central kitchens and other places of assembly, the purpose of which was not clear. All we lacked was some one to explain at frequent intervals just what the devil we were seeing, because while we were interested we often could only guess, and sometimes none of our explanations made sense. We never found that some one. One thing was very clear, however: the Other People liked to spend a lot of time together. They had privacy in their own apartments, to be sure, but there were so many things and so many kinds of things for people to do in crowds that we became convinced that they were very gregarious. We felt too that their crowds were not comprised of mobs of unfriendly, unsympathetic, unacquainted individuals—like the crowds that once thronged the streets of New York—but were crowds of people who were associated in a most friendly and cooperative spirit with each other.

"We followed a gallery underground where we found more great machines—engines—which we could not at all understand. We saw further descents into depths we decided not to explore. But

we did come upon some of their stores of food—particularly grain."

"Samples of this grain," Tony reminded them, looking up, "already you have examined for yourselves. Eliot and I tasted it; we ate it. It was starchy and not unpleasant. Whether or not it still contains vitamins, at least it has the starch base for nutrition. In the afternoon, we found one other thing of far greater importance to us than any other discovery, if I may except the food supply. This was a school."

"A school?" several voices cried.

"We believe it was a school for their children from their early years up. Can you imagine the benefit of such a discovery to you? We have brought back some of the objects from that school. Some of them seem to be books—books of a different type, to be sure, than our volumes; yet they can be described as books. Other objects, which we believe to have been materials of instruction, are harder to describe. Neither Eliot nor I were able to operate them, but we formed the theory that they probably were mechanisms giving instruction visually or by sound.

"Then we found a sphere. It was in the lobby of the school. It was a sphere about fifty feet in diameter upon which was a relief map which we must assume to be of this planet. Eliot James made a most painstaking sketch of that sphere. There were other maps."

"In short," said Tony, closing Eliot James' book of notes, "we have awaiting us not only an equipment beyond anything dreamed of on earth, but a means of acquiring the secrets of the use of the engines and implements and other knowledge of this planet which we could not have obtained, by ourselves, at all.

"A little study by ourselves as children in those amazing classrooms, a little skill and a little luck in setting in operation their mechanisms of instruction; and their secrets are ours!"

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MYSTERIOUS ATTACK

LUNCH was very late that day; it was long before the company of the camp could be satisfied that they had heard everything of importance that Tony had to tell them. This included, of course, the report on the finding of the lark-like aircraft of which he had made report to the other camp.



Now Tony sat alone. Many, at first, tried to sit beside him and to talk to him. But he had told them that he was weary and wished to be alone for a little while. When the children came running up to him, however, he talked to them cheerfully. . . . Now they too had left.

Tony had seen meals being sent to Hendron's cabinlike house—watched them being carried past the Ark and the workshop and the lumber-piles. He had stared often at the door of the house. But no one had emerged—and Eve had not sent for him.

He sat alone, on a mound of chips and sawdust. Was Hendron turning over the command to Ransdell, in there now? Was Hendron asleep from exhaustion and were Eve and Ransdell taking advantage of the resultant solitude to express fresh love for each other? His heart was heavy; heavier still because he realized that the torrent of dreads and despairs it held were unworthy of him.

He ached, and stared at his plate. His eyes felt salty and hot. He tried to clamp his mind on present necessities. They should move to the miracle city; they should study the food and machinery

there. They should tend their own crops for fresh food. They should learn to run the Other People's vehicles—so that they could all be transported to the new city as rapidly as possible. They should prepare defenses for themselves against the possibility that the people who had flown the lark-like ships might some day attack them. People from earth? Or cautious scouts of the Other People?

His mind jumped incessantly back to Eve—Eve and Ransdell, his two closest friends. They seemed both on the point of deserting him. Ransdell was, of course, a great man. Stronger in character, perhaps. Tony felt the crushing weight of the responsibilities he himself had endured. Still, Ransdell had taken greater risks—held a higher office. And Ransdell had been a new and different sort of man for Eve. She had known plenty of Yale graduates with social position and wealth and superficial culture—plenty—even if the Yale graduates now left alive could be numbered on the fingers of one hand. . . .

"Mr. Drake?" said a voice.

Tony started. "Oh, Kyto!" Suddenly Tony did not want to be alone any longer. The smiling face of the little Japanese was familiar and good. "Sit down here, Kyto."

Kyto hesitated.

"You're not—working for me—any longer!" Tony grinned.

Kyto seated himself with a precise and smooth motion. "That's true," he said slowly. "I'd forgotten for an instant."

Tony was astonished. "You've certainly learned a lot of English in the last few months."

"I always knew more than I pretended to know," the Japanese answered coolly.

Tony smiled. "Really, Kyto? Then why did you pretend not to? Is that one of those things that makes people say the Japs are subtle and dangerous?"

"In a way," Kyto answered. "I pretended not to know much English while I was in your employ, because I was a spy."

"What!"

"It is true."

"But good God, Kyto, what use was my service—to a spy? I didn't know where there was a fort, or a gun—"

"It gave me a respectable character."

"And what did you spy on?"

"It doesn't matter now. I shall tell you some day. You see, I used to be,"—there was scarcely a trace of accent in his words,—"long ago in Tokio, a professor

of foreign languages. I spoke English when I was a baby. Missionaries taught me. I was a patriot. I volunteered for espionage. While I was in America, my ideas changed. I became—before the Bronson Bodies appeared—a pacifist. I had sent in my resignation and offered to give myself up—at the time of the discovery of the approaching planets. My letters were ignored in the subsequent frantic days. So, during those days, I endeavored to reshape my life. You Americans—some of you, at least—stood for the things I desired: A world run by sense and science; a world of peace and fraternity. I wished to go on your ship. But my wish was not exclusively a selfish one. I continued to mingle with my associates in espionage—as one of them. I learned much.”

Tony had never been more astonished. As he looked at his former servant he realized that his jaw had literally sagged. “I’ll be damned,” he murmured.

“You find it amusing?”

“Astounding.”

“You were right before.” Kyto laughed in a high key. “It is amusing. Delicious! And I was a fool. A blind, patriotic fool.”

“I’m glad you told me,” Tony said suddenly. “You’re a man, Kyto. And we need you here. Need the things your race possesses.”

“Thank you,” Kyto said solemnly. “You are also a man.”

Involuntarily Tony glanced at Hendron’s cabin and shook his head.

The Japanese understood perfectly. “I hope you will not mind an expression of my sympathies?”

Tony looked at him—his valet, expressing sympathies on a most personal matter! No—a friend—a professor—a savant. A man who had heroically offered to give up his life for the beliefs that he had gained. “No, Kyto.”

“You will need courage,” Kyto said. “Courage, restraint. You have both in sufficient quantities.”

“I have rats eating my soul,” Tony answered stonily.

“It is too big for all the rats on earth.”

Tony stared at the little man and said in a curious tone, “Funny.”

There was a silence between them.

“I HAVE more to say.” Kyto picked up a chip and opened a pocket-knife. He began to whittle as expertly as any country-store porch loafer.

“More?”

“You knew that other ships for the trip to this planet were being prepared?”

“Sure. But none of them—”

Kyto shrugged. “Did you know that in what had been Manchuria the most fanatical Japanese, the Russians, and certain Germans combined to build such a ship?”

“No.”

“They were mostly extreme communists. But owing to their need of scientific experts, they took into their group many non-communists.”

“So?”

“Great men. They were as likely to succeed as you.”

TONY stared at his companion. “And you believe they did? You think they are the people who have been flying here—”

“I know.” Kyto drew an object from his pocket—a tightly folded piece of paper. On it were drawn Japanese characters. “I found this a few hours ago. I had been walking from camp. It was blowing along in the wind. It was not mine.”

“What is it?”

“A prayer—a written prayer. They are in common use in Japan.”

“It might have come on the Ark.”

“Yes. But it might not. There is no such thing in the catalogue.”

“Anybody who had traveled in Japan might have had one—in a pocketbook—and lost it.”

“Again, yes. But I know intuitively.”

“If they were Russians and Germans and Japanese—why didn’t they land, then?”

“My point in telling this! They do not want company here. They came to set up a Soviet. I have the information in detail. They were sworn, if they reached here, to set up their own government—to wipe out all who opposed to them. It is not even a government like that of Russia. It is ruthless, inhuman—a travesty of socialism, a sort of scientific fanaticism. Most of those men and women believe in nothingness of the individual. They believe that love is really only breeding.”

Tony shook his head unbelievably. “Why didn’t they wipe us out, then?”

“Your ray-projectors were good protection. They may find a means of making them powerless. They are manifestly ahead of us here in studying the civilization of the Other People—they use their ships already.”

"I mean, the first time. Why didn't they annihilate us that first night? It would have been easy. A bomb or two—"

"I have wondered. There must have been a reason—for they are wholly ruthless. And I can find only one explanation: They wish to found a new state—to be alone on the planet—to make it theirs. To found a state takes people; and for people, one needs women. The more the better—the quicker. They will not strike until they can be selective in their killing—so they wipe out all who may oppose them, but preserve all whom they may convert—especially the women."

"GOOD God!" Tony stood up. "You mean to tell me you think there is a gang of men or people on Bronson Beta planning that?"

"I am positive."

"It's—it's crazy!"

Kyto shook his head. "Conquest was like that, only two thousand years ago—a short time. And there is no more world. Is there anything that can be said to be crazy now—anything we cannot expect?"

"Then why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Kyto fumbled the paper. "I wanted to be sure. This made me sure."

"It's the worst evidence I ever saw. The thing's fantastic!"

"I have warned you as best I can." He bowed his head, and walked away.

Oddly enough, this scene with Kyto had brought back to Tony some of the strength that had ebbed from him. The thought that his new information would be a good excuse to break in on Hendron and Ransdell and Eve occurred to him, but he thrust it aside without effort.

He walked into the group of people who had finished their midday meal. He touched several on the shoulder. "Duchesne, I want to talk to you privately. Von Beitz! Williamson!"

Fifteen minutes later he had explained his command to a dozen picked men.

"I'll have to tell Ransdell and Hendron later," Tony said. "First, we'll double the guard. Second, we'll put out some sentries—far enough out to give a warning of approaching planes. Third, we'll run off a blast on our projectors to make sure they are in order."

Von Beitz scowled. "I can't believe it. Germans? Maybe—some Germans. Heitbrat, for example. But wouldn't it be better if we said nothing to the women? They might get hysterical."

"These women don't get hysterical," Tony answered succinctly.

He had scarcely finished his instructions when a message was brought to him to report at Hendron's house.

He went in. Eve was in the living-room—the room that had been headquarters for the camp since the building of the house. She was sitting at her father's desk, and Ransdell stood at a little distance from her. Dodson was there. The faces of all three were serious.

"Hendron has collapsed," Dodson said to Tony. "Whether he will recover or not, I cannot say."

Tony shook his head sadly.

Eve spoke. "The camp must have a leader."

"Yes," Tony answered.

"Election might be unsatisfactory," she continued. "And it would take time."

"Yes."

"Father appointed no second-in-command. Whoever is in charge while he is ill must remain here. You and Eliot James alone can fly our single plane. We'll need it constantly now. A radio must be taken down to the other camp at once, for example."

Tony looked at her with as little sign of emotion as he could show. This was a new Eve to him—a stern, impartial Eve. Grief and need had combined to make her so. "The static we've been having makes a radio useless," he said.

"That static occurs only at night," she answered. "Sundown to sunup."

"The lights in the city—" Tony murmured. He squared his shoulders. "I'll take a radio down at once."

EVE rose and gestured Ransdell into her father's chair. She shook his hand. Dodson shook his hand. Tony shook his hand—Tony whose soul was at that moment in exquisite torment.

Ransdell looked drawn and bleak.

"One other thing," Tony said, his voice steady. "We may be in a new and to me fantastic danger." Like a soldier making a report, he detailed the knowledge Kyto had given him and told Ransdell what precautions he had already taken. Even as he spoke the air was filled with a hissing thunder and they waited to continue the conversation until tests of the blast tubes had been finished.

"I'll get outposts established at once," Ransdell said. "I scarcely believe that such a thing could be—but we can take no chances."

"I'd like to talk with Kyto," Eve said. She left the room even as Tony turned to bid her good-by.

"That radio—" said Ransdell. Tony could not make his senses believe that the man who spoke to him now was the man with whom he had spent the latter part of the previous night in deep exultation. Rivalry over leadership—rivalry over Eve—they seemed inadequate things intellectually for the breaking of a friendship. Tony remembered the pact he and Ransdell had reached in Michigan, long ago. Now—it seemed broken!

"I'll take it immediately, Dave," he answered.

The use of his first name startled Ransdell somewhat from his barren mood. He rose and held out his hand.

Tony took it. "So long," he said.  
"Good luck."

TONY opened the throttle regulating the supply of minute quantities of fuel to the atomic blast of his plane. The increase of speed as he fled southward took some of the strain from his nerves. His ears roared to the tune of the jets. The ground underneath moved in a steady blur. Beside him on the extra seat was the radio—a set taken from the ark of the air, and still crated.

Tony had lost his hope of being leader. He had lost Eve. Ransdell came first in the hearts of his companions. Tony wondered how other men in the camp would adjust their philosophies to this double catastrophe. Duquesne would shrug: "*C'est la vie.*" Vanderbilt would have an epigram. Eliot James would tell him to hope and to wait and to be courageous.

Far ahead he saw the cantonment.

He lost altitude, dropped in a tight spiral, straightened out, and landed at an unnecessarily furious speed.

A few minutes later he was surrounded, and the radio was being carried from the plane by experts.

James was at his side. "Lord, you look tired! I've got a bunk for you."

"Thanks."

Questions were being asked. "Got to sleep," Tony said, trying to smile. "Tell you later. Everyone's all right—Hendron's somewhat ill—Ransdell's commanding up there. See you after I have a nap." They let him go.

He stretched out under one of the shelters. James, after a private question or two, thoughtfully left him. He could not sleep, however. He did not even want to be alone. Then—some one entered the

room where he lay. He turned. It was the girl Marian Jackson.

"You're not asleep," she said easily.

"No."

She sat down on the side of his bed. "Want anything?"

"Guess not."

"Mind if I sit here?"

"No."

She brushed back the hair from his forehead and suddenly exclaimed. "You're all chapped and wind-burned!"

He smiled. "Sure. Flying."

"Wait." She was gone.

A moron, Tony reflected. But she was very sweet. Thoughtful! A woman, just brushing back your hair when you were weary, could do strange things in the way of giving comfort. She returned.

"Shut your eyes. This is salve. Make you feel better. You're shot; I can tell. I'll stay here while you sleep, so you won't need to worry about anything."

He felt her hands—delicate, tender. Then he was asleep.

He woke slowly. He was being shaken. Waking was like falling up a long, black hill.

Light hit his eyes. James stood there.

"Tony! Wake up!"

He sat up, shook himself.

"We got that radio working. Were talking to Hendron's camp. Suddenly the man at the other end coughed and yelled '*Help!*'—and now we can't raise any one."

Tony was up again—outdoors—running toward the plane. James was running behind him.

"Give me Vanderbilt and Taylor. We'll go."

"But—"

"What else can we do?"

AS Tony descended upon Hendron's encampment, three men peered tensely through the glass windows of the ship: Taylor, Vanderbilt, and Tony himself. Nothing seemed disturbed; the buildings were intact.

"Not a person in sight!" Taylor yelled suddenly.

They slid down the air.

Tony cut the motors so that their descent became a soft whistle.

Then they saw clearly.

Far below were human figures, the people of the cantonment, and all of them lay on the ground, oddly collapsed, utterly motionless.

The adventures of these daring pioneers beyond the sun grow continually more exciting—as the next installment (in our forthcoming February issue) will demonstrate.



# Sun on the Pacific

*A deeply moving drama of South Sea Island life  
by one who lives it and therefore knows it well  
—the distinguished author of “The Eerie  
Island” and “The Flaming Sword.”*

IT shone on the breast of the Pacific, with the stained-glass-window look that South Sea islands have, beneath the sun. The palms were very tall, and widely planted; the yellow-green of their leaves let through the light; their stems, of a crystal whiteness, were inlaid against incredible blues beyond. There was a beach that sparkled like spilled salt. About the edges of it, waves the color of green Venetian glass broke constantly with a careless pleasant sound. The whole place seemed careless; and that—one could not say why—was extraordinarily pleasant.

The Government steamer waited. A whaleboat came out, manned by a Sheba Island crew, wild fellows with boar-tusks thrust through their nostrils, and shining naked bodies that leaped against the oars. A white man stood in the stern, handling the sixteen-foot steer-oar as lightly as if it had been a match. He shouted “Way ’nough!” and brought up alongside.

Marie, wife of His Excellency the Hon. Eustace Netherleigh, Governor of the Sheba Islands, stood by the rail of the steamer, looking at the boat. It was the first time she had traveled round the group. This place, she knew, was Trent Lagoon, owned by James Hepburn, a Scotsman who had once been in the Foreign Office, and had resigned (or been dismissed) and immediately gone adventuring in the South Seas. She knew that he was not in favor with her hus-

band, although his name had never been excluded from the Government House list. She did not know why Eustace disliked him.

Curious, she scanned the face of Hepburn. Darkly tanned, heavily featured but handsome, surmounted by a commanding forehead, and crowned by a mass of thick black hair, it was a face to catch and hold attention, even without the intriguing disharmony of the blue, live eyes that surely ought to have been brown. Those eyes met boldly the gray eyes of Marie, little queen of the islands, caught them, and for one significant moment held them fast. Then Hepburn, swinging his steer-oar, guided the boat a little nearer, held her steady while a mail-bag was dropped in, and with one more look up to the deck and to Marie, shouted “Give way!” The Sheba men sprang upon their oars. The boat was gone. . . .

The *Southern Star* up-anchored, and steamed on her course. It grew dark; dinner was served in the little saloon, where glass and silver glittered on a white-clothed table, below a rack of loaded rifles. The Governor, a small spare figure, stood up at the end of the meal; and the secretaries stood, and the A.D.C.; then the Honorable Eustace, in his thready voice, said, “Gentlemen, the King!” and they drank. It was all as it had been since they left the port of New Hythe a day or two before; it was all just like the life Marie had led since,





By BEATRICE  
GRIMSHAW

Illustrated by Alexander DeLeslie

six months past, she came to the Shebas as chief lady of the Western Islands. Eustace did not look much like a king, with his mean figure and chicken neck; but a king, of sorts, he was; and in the Pacific, only the High Commissioner, Governor of Fiji, stood above him. He would have Fiji yet, he had told Marie. It was as if he had said to her: "We shall have heaven."

Now, as the *Southern Star* rolled along on her course, Marie was conscious that the cabin, where nothing seemed to have changed, was actually, utterly different—since an hour ago. In the wine that shone in her glass, as she lifted it to drink to the King, in the dim jasper of the ports, now closed for night; in the shadows that swung with the swinging of the ship, about dark corners of the saloon, Marie, wife of His Excellency, saw only the face of the man called Hepburn, as he had stood in the whale-boat holding his steer-oar, and looking up at her.

She had married Eustace, when she met him at home, on leave, for three apparently sufficient reasons: First, a girl had to marry some one. Second, Eustace was sure to get on. Third, Marie did not think—after one or two trifling love-affairs, of which she had tired first—that she had it in her to care very seriously about anyone.

She had been doubtful for some time, now, of the validity of the first reason. The second stood. The third—



It took her the rest of the voyage, and a day or so after, to realize that the third reason was dead—dead and buried, a sixteen-foot steer-oar marking its grave.

**T**HERE was a dance at Government House, after the return of the *Southern Star*. Everyone who was anybody, and many who were nobody, fox-trotted and tangoed in the big ballroom, under chandeliers wreathed with bougainvillea and trailing bamboo, past the imposing pillars that matched the pillars on the terrace outside, and like those other

pillars, and the magnificent steps, were nothing but painted wood. New Hythe made the best show possible, but it wasn't Suva.

The brass band, savagely played by Sheba Islanders, swept the ballroom with floods of raging sound; from the terrace outside, violent scents of tuberose trees, datura, pawpaw and stephanotis, blew in. Sound and scent alike expressed the something furious that lurks in the life of the Shebas, home of hurricanes, head-hunters, and volcanoes; that wars with the drugged sweetness of other sides of island life, breaks into the organ music of the reefs, shakes a sinister hand across the sunsets of sapphire and jargon that make an enchanted world of day's last moments on the beaches of the innumerable isles.

His Excellency the Hon. Eustace Netherleigh approved of neither aspect of the Sheba world. He distrusted, on principle, the spirit of the South Seas; he objected to all violence save the necessary and laudable violence of war.

Both sides of the Sheba shield were shown in these *omnium-gatherum* dances; the Governor wished they could have been avoided. But dances were duty; so he danced well, coldly, efficiently, with the right people, trying not to know that there were strange stories footing it beside him dressed in drill and broad-cloth and crêpe-de-chine, not to see that Marie was giving more than one dance to a man who shouldn't even have been introduced to her. . . . He must speak about it later. Gently, of course; one didn't want to hurt Marie. There was only one woman for him; he could and did, clasp half the pretty girls of New Hythe to his breast in the course of what he called, contemptuously, "these modern dances," without experiencing a pulse-beat of feeling for any one of them. Marie, with the sea-gray eyes, and dusky, waving hair, was his one woman of all the world.

**Y**ES, a one-woman man, His Excellency. And the woman, dancing with Black Bothwell of Trent Lagoon, so called because of his dark coloring and his historic name, was just beginning to realize that she was not a one-man woman. Or if she was, that the man was, emphatically, the wrong one.

When had one floated over any dance-floor in such a dream of gold? When had the live velvet of any man's hand burned upon hers as thrillingly as Both-

well's was burning now? Velvet on steel, a hand that could fence, could fight, could paint, play the violin (she had heard), could swing the massive steer-oar (she had seen) as lightly as it guided herself along the ballroom floor. Had she ever taken such close account of any other face as of this one, the level lines of it, straight-ruled eyebrows, straight mouth, sensuous but hard; deep eyelids, running in a line almost level across those blue, amazing eyes that surely should have been black? She had caught every detail in her first glance from the ship's deck; now she read the lesson over again, and found that she had it by heart. A gypsy fellow. A man outside the common world of society, of planters, of trade; a man who owned allegiance to nobody but himself. Who made a slender living from his palms, found his excitement swordfishing and shark-hunting about Trent Lagoon, ran his own native labor force and his own launch, had his own few friends and troubled about the port, the main island, the society of New Romney, not at all . . . So it was said.

**N**EVERTHELESS, here he was, in worn but well-cut evening clothes, in the Governor's house, dancing with the first lady of the islands. Why?

Marie, brought up in an Old World manse of the Highlands, Edwardian in outlook though Georgian in birth, would not admit to herself why. She did not believe in love at first sight—in violent love of any kind.

Yet, all round her, bathed in the perfumed heat of the Sheba night, clothed in georgette, in crêpe-de-chine, in black cloth and in white drill, slipped and stepped the wildest of romances, strangest of stories. Like the highly scented papaya palms outside the windows,—that magic tree that sprang from seed to fruit within ten months,—the flower of love, in the Shebas, driven by the something violent that underlay all Sheba life, blossomed almost while you looked at it, came to fruit . . .

The music stopped. Hepburn released his partner. They stood for a moment by one of the long windows, cooling themselves. Eustace, some way off, was escorting an uninteresting matron to the refreshment buffet.

Marie realized that she and Hepburn had hardly spoken to each other yet. There were things she wanted to ask him, that she wanted to know. . .



Hepburn was a man who owned allegiance to nobody but himself.

He was answering her, before she had asked.

"You saw my home the other day. I hope you liked it. It cost a good deal."

Odd thing to say! But she had wanted to know about his home. Cost? The price of atoll islands, in that group, was nothing amazing, and the copra couldn't be very valuable.

"It cost," he went on, quietly fanning her, "a pack of relations and a career. Because"—it was as if he had guessed that she wanted to ask and to know things, and that the time must be short, only until His Excellency returned to the ballroom, probably,—"because they couldn't see eye to eye with me about a very important matter."

She had heard rumors. . . But those things were always said about a bachelor.

"A question," he added, "of sun in the morning."

"Sun in the morning?" Almost she understood. He saw it, and there passed a lightning from his blue eyes to her gray eyes—gypsy eyes, both pairs; for not all gypsy eyes are black or brown.

He went on: "You see, unless you are one of the country-house set,—and that's pretty small,—you've got to live without sun in the morning. Best part of the day, best thing in the day. Means freedom. But no! Nine o'clock, or maybe earlier, sitting down to a desk. Always! Looking through windows. When you get the sun, it's sort of secondhand—done with. And that goes on. The principle of it, I mean. It's symbolical, sort of—if you want money and a career of any kind, and to please the damn' relations, you pay the morning sun away. All your life! All the morning sun for the rich—and the rips."

He fanned her so hard that the carved ivory fan-sticks were bent and shaken.

"So—I'm reckoned one of the rips. No future, no career, no job. Sunk my life-insurance to buy Trent. Trent keeps me in food and clothes. Never would do more. I'm supposed to be like my ancestor, a bad lot—"



"There's nothing but death could bring us together; but if death ever does—"

"Was Bothwell really—"

"Oh, yes. A far-out ancestor. He'd a way of getting the things he wanted, no matter what he paid for them. He liked to be free, and didn't care what it cost. Will you have another turn?"

She knew it would have been better not, but she slipped into his hold again, and let him ably swing her, as he had swung his mighty steer-oar, through opposing billows of other dancers. She was penetrated with the novelty, the keen romance, of what he had told her. It touched a thousand people she had known; it touched, in some degree, herself. Always her mornings were taken up with one duty or another; never could she afford to spend the glorious hours between eight and eleven simply living. . . . Best thing in the day—yes. And a symbol of many other things as well: Of freedom. Of leisure, owned by so few. Of the sharp tang of savage life, that lay always upon your lips in the Shebas, as salt lies on the lips of ocean-dwellers.

It came to her, dancing there in Hepburn's arms, that this man who strongly held and guided her body, as he had already taken hold of her mind, was in his way a discoverer, a pioneer. His sense of values was different; but hadn't

it a base in fact? Didn't civilization make many men—most—pay far too much for what they did not truly need? Still, there was one question—

As if he had been following her thought, Hepburn steered her once more to the open window, stopped dancing, and went on:

"There's a difficulty, of course. Brown women. Have you ever noticed their hands? Little pretty hands, you wouldn't believe how dainty; but God, they can hold like the suckers of a devil-fish—drag down. Always drag down. And a man never comes up. As for white women—"

He paused. The band roared like a battling dinosaur; it bumped and it boomed, and the bumps went down your spine. Eustace had come back. He was looking amazedly at one of the doors.

Hepburn went on, as one who sees a speedy end to opportunity: "I dare say you've heard things. I can't explain. Maybe I sha'n't have another chance of talking to you. But I had to tell you. Look here, there's only a minute—I must say it: I loved you the moment I saw you, and I sha'n't change. Don't think I don't know what you're like; I do. There's nothing but death could bring us together; but if death ever does—"

The voice of His Excellency, calm, iced, came through the sudden ending of the band: "Gross negligence, Mr. Timson. . . . Not now. Later, you may explain."

Timson was the head secretary, in charge of invitations and the general conduct of the dance. Marie, suddenly alone, saw him standing flushed, perplexed, beside her husband. Both men were looking at the same object. A woman, not very young, very lovely, very distinguished. With red hair—"Henna," something whispered to Marie. With an oval face, and a vermilion mouth, and a neck too long, too thin, but poised like a tulip-stem. "A woman like a tulip," some one was saying. Yes. One of those slender, distinguished blooms, all red and gold. A woman in a gold dress, staring at her.

Instantly a mass of loose links that had been tumbling about unrelated in Marie's mind, sprang together and became a chain. Talk about this Hepburn—talk about a Lady Carol Longbridge, who had run away from her husband. Some one had said: "She just turned up there, and what was he going to do?" And some one had answered: "I believe

she said she'd follow him in a white petticoat to the end of the world." Then the first again: "She must have been understudying Mary Stuart and his ancestor; but my belief is that she wouldn't know what a petticoat was, if you put it in her soup."

The vision of the unknown woman, incredibly slender, amazingly expressed by her slip of a gold gown, that looked like gold paint upon her trailing limbs, struck Marie as a sudden ray through a window previously unsuspected. Nothing but Eustace's intemperate temperance in the matter of gossip, could have kept her ignorant of what, it seemed, everybody knew about Lady Carol Longbridge whose husband hadn't divorced her after all ("for spite," they said), and Hepburn of the Lagoon.

Marie saw that Lady Carol was staring openly at her. She knew, quite as if she had read it all in a book, that the woman had come to the Government House ball without an invitation, just to see for herself what she, Marie, was like. And she knew why.

That day on the island steamer, when Hepburn had fallen in love with her at first sight—impossible that Lady Carol should not have guessed. Perhaps he had talked in his sleep. Perhaps his insistence on going to the dance was the first hint she had had. At any rate, here she was, defying all conventions, dancing now, with the tradesmen and ship people of the town (for no Government official dared to approach her, under the Governor's coldly angry eyes), dancing really too well, laughing, entirely at her ease, but always throwing a glance over her shoulder or her partner's shoulder, every now and then, toward the little lady who stood somewhat apart from the

glare of the electric lights, with Eustace's family diamonds shining upon her neck and arms, and—

*"The shadow of a monarch's crown  
... softened in her hair."*

A shadow indeed, to the thought of Hepburn, who saw it plainly that night; who knew, better than most men, how far that shadow stretched. . . .

He had left the ballroom, dismayed, as far as it was possible for him to feel dismay, by Lady Carol's impulsive action in following him. He knew that she would do what she liked, dance as long as she chose, and later, order him to take her back to Trent Lagoon in his own launch that she had seized upon, earlier in the day, leaving him to come in the whaleboat.

She would scold him all the way home; she would probably have hysterics. She would say things against Marie, and he would have to set his teeth, and remain silent, lest, speaking, he should say too much. Because, after all, she had thrown her cap over the windmills for his sake; she had "followed him to the end of the world in a white petticoat." Not unasked, as people said, but with very little asking.

"A woman like a tulip." That was what some one had said. Yes, Carol was like a tulip. And Marie was like a carnation, a rich dusky flower full of intriguing perfume, instinct with charm. She had a "widow's peak" on her forehead; it grew low and silky above her sweet eyes. Of what did it remind one?



Eustace was not to guess that Marie would go at last to live in the house that caught the morning sunlight under the palms.

Of what did Marie, altogether, remind him, Jim Hepburn, standing there on the terrace of the house that was the palace of Eustace Netherleigh?

The gods alone knew what ancestral memories flitted ghostlike through Hepburn's mind, in the few moments that passed before he straightened himself up, struck his hand upon the false marble of the balustrade, and said aloud, to the night wind and the bending papaya trees: "Marie—Marie Stuart!"

A planter from "outside," who had been dancing vigorously all night, was Marie's next partner. Wicks was his name. She might have thought him pleasant at any other time; he was well-educated and well-mannered, a tall fair Queenslander, from the land of topaz and of corn. But to her he was nothing more than a shadow until he began to speak of Hepburn. Then he suddenly became a human being; she realized him, and knew that Hepburn had notable friends.

For Wicks, tactfully, quietly, in the pauses of the dance, was trying to tell her things about Hepburn, whom he seemed to adore. Trying to slip in an excuse for the affair of Lady Carol. Trying to tell her just what Hepburn stood for, and what he was doing in the Pacific world.

"It's the last refuge of peace and freedom," he was saying. "And there's room—room—it's a third of the whole world. And mostly it's the bad lots come now, outside of officials and missionaries, and a few plantation-managers like me. Hepburn's the advance guard of the others. I wish His Excellency understood; perhaps he's misinformed."

"The Governor does not think that Mr. Hepburn should have thrown up a diplomatic career as he did," Marie carefully replied.

"Hepburn," said the other, "is doing something better. He's a sort of Thoreau of the Pacific; he'll be remembered when—ever so many other people—are forgotten. Trent Lagoon will be the Walden Pond of the next century."

MARIE flashed out—it was as if some other, more primitive woman spoke: "Mr. Hepburn might set a better example than what—it seems—he's doing!"

In answer to that, the Queenslander said: "I'm a widower. I had the luck to find what I wanted, and the bad luck to lose it. Hepburn's never had either.

Deal gently with him, Mrs. Netherleigh; we're not all as fortunate as you."

She felt the stab; it seemed this man was prepared to fight for his friend, fiercely if need be. She danced a little longer in silence, and at the end of the music, released her partner with a cool nod. Very angry she felt, very much the outraged queen. Who had the right to criticize her consort?

But afterward she thought: "That man would die for him." And *him* in her mind did not stand for *Eustace*.

SOME mornings after the dance Eustace, coming out into the garden, found Marie strolling by herself in the avenue of flamboyants that cast red snow upon the white of the coral paths at the back of Government House.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," he said.

"You needn't have," she answered him. "I wanted the morning."

"I don't understand."

She wanted to say, "You couldn't," but instead she asked: "Have you never heard of 'The winds that would be calling at all hours?'"

He said, "Nobody reads Keats nowadays unless for an examination."

She said: "But history repeats itself sometimes."

"You seem to be talking nonsense, my dear."

"If you weren't so clever, Eustace, you'd understand it," she said.

He looked at her indulgently. "Stay out, if you wish. I suppose you have one of your headaches. Shall I send your maid?"

"No, thanks."

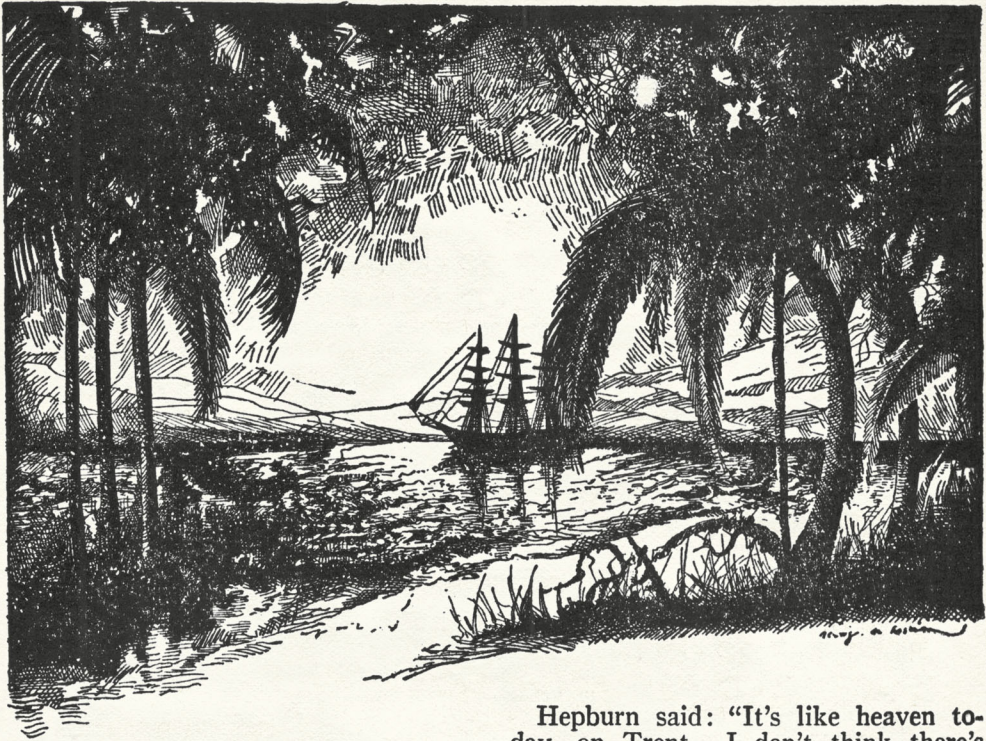
"You will excuse me, then; I have a deputation." He went.

"When you have a deputation," thought Marie, "what do you do for it?" She found herself speaking aloud. She found she was speaking to Jim Hepburn. It did not seem astonishing that he should have appeared through the poincinanas, that moment.

Gravely he answered her: "Take three stiff whiskies and sodas, and go to bed, and in the morning the deputation will have gone."

They laughed together. Their hearts were heavy, so they had to laugh.

Marie was saying to herself: "I can't go about meeting him; the whole island would talk; I can't see him again, but I will have this once." And she thought of Lady Carol and the "white petticoat,"



and it seemed to her that something, somewhere, had gone absurdly wrong. She could see herself, not Carol, in a lacy starched slip, the kind one's mother used to wear, following Black Bothwell to the "end of the world." She knew he hadn't cared very much about Carol. It seemed to her that Carol had no right to that petticoat. . . .

But of course one didn't do these things. One did not, even for a moment, think of destroying Eustace's career.

Hepburn was thinking: "She is more like Marie Stuart than any modern woman has a right to be; but I suppose the type persists. . . . And she's a queen too, of sorts. It was written that I should love her." For he believed in his not-too-well-authenticated ancestry; he was sure the James Hepburn of history had been one of his forefathers.

He said: "I was lucky to find you here. I have to apologize for my guest. There are things—one can't help."

She caught the double meaning. "I understand," she answered.

There was a rustic seat near them, but neither thought of sitting down. It seemed as if they could actually see the seconds, the minutes, speeding past them—those precious minutes that were like pearls. It was as if they could make them last longer, by standing, pretending every moment was the last.

Hepburn said: "It's like heaven today, on Trent. I don't think there's another such place. It's like a fairy ring that you get inside, and shut out everything else."

"You love it?"

He said, weighing his words: "I could have loved it—better."

There was silence for a moment. They heard the sea, a long way off, sounding its endless organ note upon the reef. They heard an island cuckoo, among the flamboyants, fluting its tiny tune. These things seemed happy; they did not seem to care.

Marie broke out suddenly: "It's no use. Both of us—both—" She could not finish the sentence.

"But if you cared," he said, "if you cared enough, nothing would stand in the way."

"Everything would," she told him, with a catch in her breath.

He was self-possessed, amazingly so. She could not help recalling how Eustace, in like case, had besought her, almost cried. . . . Jim Hepburn just looked at her, and said:

"Well, what I told you holds good. Life can't help us, it seems. If death does, I'm waiting. Any time, anywhere."

He took her hand, and squeezed it so hard that the rings cut into it. He lifted his hat. . . . For a long way, until he reached the turn of the poinciana avenue, she could see the shine of his

white suit, underneath the fluttering scarlet of the flowers. What was it somebody somewhere, had said? "*I shall never again be friends with roses.*"

It was a pity, she thought, that there were so many scarlet poincianas in these islands. She would never again be friends with them, those cruel flowers.

**M**ARIE grew a little paler, a little thinner in the days that followed, and there was no brightness now in her gray eyes. Eustace pestered her to see the doctor. At first she flatly refused. Before long, an excellent excuse came to help her. The one physician of the port fell seriously ill; down with pneumonia and pericarditis, his life hung balancing. There was only one nurse available; the other had gone on leave.

"You should have had two doctors," Marie told Eustace flatly. "Three women here are expecting babies, and they'll have to go away by the steamer."

Eustace was not sympathetic about the matter of the babies; it touched a hidden wound in his life and Marie's. They had been four years married, and were childless.

"The women will be better looked after in Auckland," was his sole comment. "And you know quite well that the estimates won't run more than one medical officer for the port. When Dr. Fillmore recovers, you'll have to see him. You look as if you were suffering from chronic indigestion, and you don't eat enough for a sparrow."

It was morning, and bright sun outside, with a fierce wind blowing. Marie left the breakfast-room, and went out, keeping away from the scarlet poinciana avenue. On the lawn a Sheba laborer was engaged in weeding. By his side a friend, a naked village boy, stood cheering him with talk.

Marie had learned a good deal of the Sheba language. She understood what the natives, secure in their belief that white people could not comprehend, were saying.

The laborer said: "Give me a turn at your smoke. Have you any news? I hear the Doctor Chief is dying."

The other handed him a banana-leaf cigarette. "Here. Yes, I heard that. But I have other news. We came in with our canoes from the reef this morning, and they smoke-signalized to us from Trent that the white chief there was dying; he will very likely be dead before the Chief Doctor."

"*Ou, ou!*" said the gardener. "That is news indeed."

As soldiers in the War were known to stand upright, shot through, before they fell, Marie stood upright on the false marbles of the veranda, unmoving, struck to the heart.

The native said: "That white woman did it. She jumped off the reef to drown herself, and he went in after her, but the sharks got her, and they got him; only his boys pulled him away and took him to the house. He is very bad."

The other, sucking at his cigarette, said: "It's well the Doctor Chief is dying too, because now they won't make us take the launch out, in this bad weather. I have to go when the Doctor Chief goes, because I know the reefs."

"Now I must get away," the village native said. "Take care of that White Chieftainess; she is looking at you angrily. You had better go on with your work."

"Yes, I am afraid of this White Chieftainess." He bent to his weeding. "There is something strong in her eye that is not in the eye of the Great Chief himself."

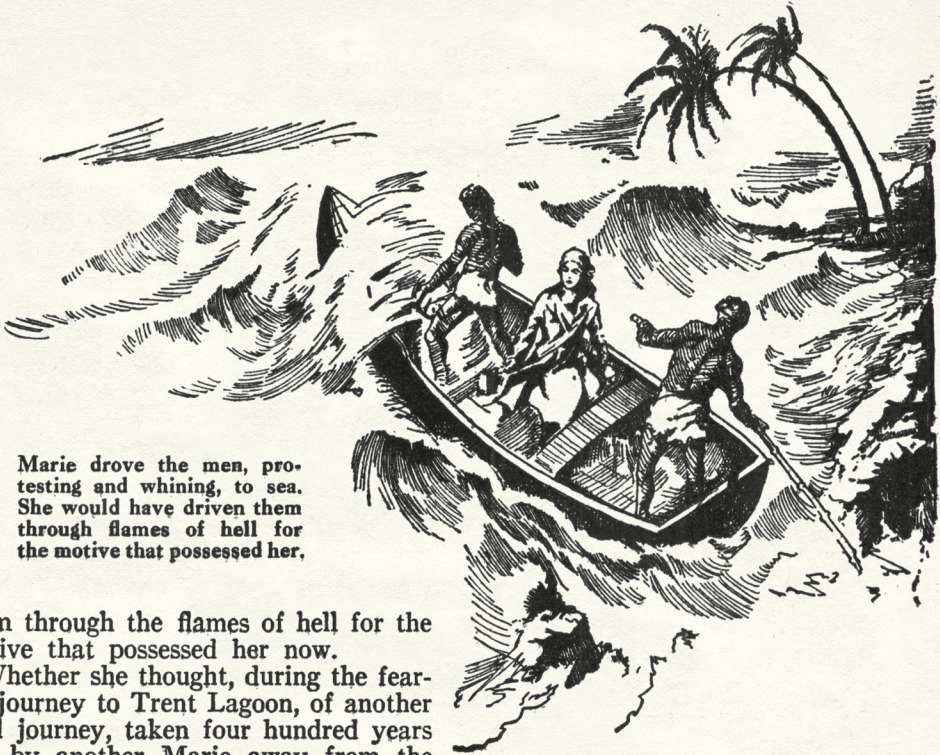
"You will have reason to know that," thought Marie, "before another hour is over."

She had been cold but a moment ago; she was hot now. The Highland spirit of her, crushed down all these years by the solid Englishry of Eustace, flamed up like whins afire. Once she had wanted to be a nurse; she had gone through a year and a half of training. She knew enough, maybe, to help, or save. They had counted her able, in the Edinburgh operating theater.

**S**HE went indoors, packed a raincoat and clothing, took some medical supplies from the storeroom, and carrying her parcel, slipped away. The black engineer who drove the launch, and the gardener who knew the reefs, came after her, resistant, but helpless. It was a terrible day. The southeast tore through the poinciana avenue, scattering its blooms; on the roadway matted foam was piled up, shivering, as high as the sea-wall. Bright sun turned the sea to scylla blue, but every foot of it was laced and crested with that same furious foam. In wrath the wild southeast was dying, as each year it died, leaving the shores of Sheba strewn with wrecks.

Marie drove the men, whining and protesting, to sea. She would have driven





Marie drove the men, protesting and whining, to sea. She would have driven them through flames of hell for the motive that possessed her.

them through the flames of hell for the motive that possessed her now.

Whether she thought, during the fearful journey to Trent Lagoon, of another wild journey, taken four hundred years ago by another Marie away from the pale fretful king to her wounded lover, no one was to know.

With dawn, and a quieting sea, they came to the atoll. Never all her life was Marie to forget the look of Trent in the early morning; that league-long wreath of standing palms, afloat on an opal sea; the stain of the sunrise turning the breakers to fiery rose, where they burst on the outer reef. The wind was down now; in a shining calm, the boat ran through the passage, came to rest, rocking slightly, on the live green of the inner lagoon.

Yet at the moment she saw nothing, consciously, until she reached the house under the palms, the brown house made of bamboo and thatch, and set with shining pearl-shell; the house she had never meant to enter. Near the doorway, on a pile of mats, where they had left him when they brought him in, Hepburn lay. He was quite conscious, and his face grew suddenly bright when he saw her.

She knelt, and took his hand. It pressed hers with amazing strength, but it was cold.

"I knew you'd come," he said, smiling as gayly as he had smiled in the ballroom on the night that seemed a century ago.

"How could you?"

"There's nothing I don't know about you. But you can do no good—Queen Marie."

"I couldn't bring the doctor; they say he's dying. But I've had training. Let me look." She lifted the rough dressing from his body. The mats, beneath, had been soaked in clotted blood.

A surgeon, at the first, might have done something. Nothing could be done now. The natives had dressed the frightful wounds with their own bush simples—had used a rough tourniquet, and saved his life for the time. No one could do more.

It hardly needed the verdict of the clinical thermometer, of the sinking pulse, to tell Marie so much. The loss of blood had been too great; it was a wonder that still he lived. He would not last much longer. His life had been given, freely, for Lady Carol, whom he did not love; and the woman he had loved at first sight could only watch him die.

ALL that day she stayed with him and cared for him, easing the last passage with her tender, skillful hands. When he wished to talk, she let him—why not, now? And she told him—why not?—that she had loved him from the first moment. "But," she said, "nothing could have come of it—you know."

"I know," he said, "that I've more than I ever thought to have, short of heaven."

"Lie beside me," he said, when the night came.

Simply, she laid her dark head on the pillow beside his dark head, and her warm hand found his.

"That's good," he said, struggling a little for breath. "More than I ever—"

Presently he said, in a stronger voice: "It was worth it."

His brown hands were plucking at the coverlet, and he did not speak again.

In the morning, just at sunup, he died. Marie, when she had closed his eyes, and straightened his limbs, went out into the light. Pain and relief, longing, and a sense of longing appeased, were strangely mingled in her mind. Above all, triumphant, rose one thought: "I have had this to remember. I can live."

She saw a launch, far out, making for the atoll.

"That's Eustace," she said to herself. She could not find energy enough to wonder what he might think of her absence.

It was not Eustace, however; it was Hepburn's friend the planter Wicks, come too late for anything but the one service that Hepburn would have wished—to take back Marie to New Hythe, and tell the truth.

Eustace could be generous, on occasion. He proved to be generous now. There was only one aspect of the affair that he seemed to find intolerable, and that was the fact—later apparent—that Hepburn had left Trent Lagoon to Marie, by will. Trent Lagoon, to the Governor of the Shebas, stood for everything that he had distrusted and reprobated, all his life. Especially, for the people who put foolish things like morning sun before the realities of a sane existence. . . .

He was not to guess that after his death Marie, still young, would abandon the title he had given her (for he died Baron Netherleigh) and go at last to live in the brown house on Trent, the house that caught the morning sunlight, underneath the palms. That the sons of Marie and of Wicks, the man who loved Black Bothwell, were to play there, under the fruiting and flowering papaya trees. And that Hepburn,

*"If the sturdy . . . children pulled the bush flowers on his grave,"*

might

*"Chance to hear them romping over-head,"*

and none the less, sleep well.

# The Evendean Affair

WHEN Michael Evendean came down the steps of his club, he found a typical London fog hiding even the opposite side of the street; he located a taxi at the curb, however, and gave the driver an address further west. But while taking a short-cut along the Embankment, where one was less likely to become confused, the motor stalled. Evendean thereupon started walking along the wall of the Embankment toward Big Ben, which he'd heard a moment before. His left hand, trailing along the top of the wall, touched a man, and he heard a low whimper of pain.

"What's the trouble? Are you hurt?" Not that Evendean cared a curse whether the man was hurt or not—but one instinctively says something when barging into another person in the fog, if only to avoid a row.

"Oh—it's nothing much, I fancy. Occasionally I get a dig through the old engine inside." The man coughed. "I say! Do you happen to have a match?"

"Of course. But—isn't smoke rather bad for the cough?" He struck a wax vesta and held it to the other man's cigarette—lighting up the face so that even the fog couldn't obscure its marked characteristics. Evendean's mouth puckered in a soundless whistle of amazement.

"Asthma, you know—smoke relieves the difficult breathing and tendency to cough," the man was saying.

Merely for the sake of getting another glimpse at that face, Evendean drew a cigarette from his own case and struck another vesta to light it—letting the wax burn down to his fingers as his eyes traveled over those other features—over as much of the shoulders and arms as he could see in the dim glow. Two years previously his cousin—who shaved his face during 'varsity and army days—had grown a closely trimmed Van Dyck after succeeding to the title, partly because al-

By CLARENCE  
HERBERT NEW

Illustrated by  
George Avison

*A specially attractive mystery story by the author of the famous Free Lances in Diplomacy series.*



"You've ferreted out, and would expose, my scheme. . . . Here's the answer, Wormser!"

ternate generations of Evendeau peers had worn them. And the clean, strongly marked features of this stranger were, line for line, a replica of Cyril Evendeau's when major in a crack regiment. A glimpse of the man's clothing and general appearance, however, blunted the resemblance. The collar and shirt were disreputably nearing the end of their third day—the coat and hat, of as many years. But the hands were well-kept, and the man had shaved that morning. Vague impressions were forming—fading out—forming again in Evendeau's brain. Was there any possible use he could make of a resemblance like that—within, say, a year or so? Was the man sufficiently down on his luck to consider a proposition with money in it—more or less regardless of how it might be earned?

"Mike" Evendeau had been raised in a good "county" family—had gone to Eton and Cambridge as a matter of course, and had acquired the instinctive manner and habits of "the right sort"—the sort who simply didn't do things which weren't done among that class. This surface veneer naturally took him among very decent people and made him, to some extent, popular among those of them who liked to have a bit of a fling, occasionally. Underneath, however, he was a throw-back to some remote ancestor who was as selfishly cold-blooded and dangerous as a cobra.

This amazing resemblance which he had stumbled upon was something which might be turned to his own advantage—he couldn't as yet see how, but certainly there were possibilities. The charming manner slipped on as easily as an old glove.

"I say, old chap! Will you pardon an utter stranger for asking a question or two? Eh? No offense, I trust?"

"I'm rather beyond taking offense, as it happens. Not exactly in position to, if you get what I mean. What would you like to know?"

"Well—for one thing, whether you'd mind strolling along with me to one of the restaurants around Westminster an' chatting for an hour? Fact is, you've a quite unusual resemblance to a man I know—gives one the feelin' that we're not altogether strangers, d'ye see. An' I'm wonderin' if possibly there might not be some sort of business proposition which you'd be willin' to consider? Of course that's merely by the way. What I really wish is just a casual chat between two men who've met in the fog an' may never see each other again, over a spot of somethin' eatable an' drinkable. What?"

"That's a very pleasant and tempting proposition—you see, I've eaten nothing

since a couple of buns I had last night. This business of 'dieting' takes a bit of self-restraint—give you my word!"

**I**N a closer inspection of the stranger—who gave his name as Branders—over a corner table in one of the smaller West End restaurants, Evendean got the impression that, while he had no appearance of illness which regular and decent feeding wouldn't eliminate, the man was probably suffering from chronic heart-trouble complicated by asthma. Barring sudden strain from unusual exertion, he might last a few years—or with unfavorable conditions, he might drop dead within as many weeks.

When they were sipping their coffee, Evendean asked:

"Had that heart of yours overhauled by a medico, recently?"

"Not since the war. Medico said there might be a bit of functional trouble if I got soused too often—but that's something I rarely do. The little twinges I get occasionally are of recent occurrence—probably something wrong with my nerves, I fancy."

"H-m-m—Branders, I've been thinking there is a job you might possibly take on for me, eight or ten months from now—perhaps sooner. As I see it, there would be nothing outside the law. But—again—conditions might change to such an extent that it would be a bit over the line. If, after due consideration, you felt like taking it on, I would employ you for a year at least at five quid a week—you to occupy yourself at anything you pleased until I needed your services. Might want to use you temporarily for one thing or another at any time—or there might be months when there was nothing at all. I'd want you to see a heart-specialist—at my expense. Main point would be your holdin' yourself in readiness for this special job at any time it happened to come up, d'ye see—an' not balk when the time came. I've said it may or may not be outside the law—there would be that amount of risk in it. Question is—would you feel like takin' on with me in that sort of arrangem't at five quid each week?"

"Well," replied Branders, "I've always lived clean and straight. Left a good-paying berth to go through four years of hell in France. Was finally gassed—invalided home. In the last fifteen years, after what I went through for my country, I've barely managed to get food, clothes and shelter. I've 'dieted'—until

my principles are considerably blunted. You may count upon me, if you're making the suggestion seriously—except for one thing: I will not kill or injure any chap who never has done anybody harm! If it's some bounder who has done you dirt and deserves anything he gets, I'll go as far as you like—but I'll not mess myself up with meanness for a matter of spite on some other fellow's part."

"Fancy our attitude would be much the same concernin' things which aren't done, Branders. Very good! You're on! Here are five pounds for the first week. Give me a permanent address where you're takin' up your digs, an' the same amount will be delivered to you there, each week, by registered post. You're not to know me if we meet on the street or anywhere else—but you may telephone or write in care of my club when there's any important communication to make—messages will be forwarded if I'm not there. Let me see, now—I fancy you'd best represent yourself as a solicitor handlin' confidential transactions—*Mr. Redding Tapely* would do—eh? Bit suggestive—what?"

**W**HEN Evendean got back to his bachelor quarters in one of the newer apartment buildings, around midnight, he was a bit in doubt as to whether he was throwing away five pounds a week or nursing along something which eventually might bring him in a title, an estate, town- and country-houses. On the whole, he was inclined to consider the weekly five pounds a good investment. Mike Evendean had inherited an income of a thousand a year from his mother—tied up so that he couldn't get at the principal. He usually owed a good deal, which he had no idea of paying in full, and was overdrawn on his income—but managed, nevertheless, always to have about him something for chance indulgences of a momentary whim like this one concerning Branders.

He had been in his rooms but a few moments when the bell of the apartment rang and his man ushered in an acquaintance of much the same principles whom he secretly hated, but tolerated because the man loaned him money when he didn't know where else to look for it.

Wormser mixed himself a cocktail, helped himself to a cigar, and stretched himself comfortably in an easy chair.

"Fancied I'd run you to earth here, Mike. Glimpse of you at Lady Dennison's an hour ago, lookin' a bit fed up—

knew you'd not stick it much longer. An' there's somethin' I'd in mind to go over with you—"

"Dash it all, Wormser, I'm not in the mood to discuss anything serious—lost a couple of ponies at the Pelican, last evening!"

"An' you're a bit short, eh? Oh, well, that can be remedied. I say! Dev'lish attractive girl, that cousin of yours!"

"Cousin? Which cousin?"

"Paula Crawford—Lord Cyril's niece. You're his cousin—so she must be your second, eh? Dev'lish handsome little piece of goods!"

"Didn't know you knew her. Where did you meet?"

"Well, I've seen her at several places—an' I'm dependin' on you to introduce me. Like the little gel a lot, you know—just the type that most attracts me. An' I fancy she'll not object to an introduction. Fact is, caught her rather lookin' my way, once or twice, you know."

"Must have been wondering how you happened to be there!"

Wormser had a pretty thick skin—apparently missed the point entirely.

"Haw-haw—I'll explain that when we're introduced. Don't know the Dennisons, but what's the diff'! Friend of mine managed to get an extra card. Now—when do I meet the little lady, eh?"

"Why—dare say you'll manage somehow. You're the sort that would!"

"But dash it all—it's you I'm dependin' on, Mike! Because you're a relative—carry more weight in an introduction than just any person, y'know!"

"Er—quite so. You're dashed well right! But—well, fancy I'm not in position to do it. My cousin's an independent sort. I'd have to put it up to her first—an' she's quite likely to say no. You'll have to count me out!"

"An' suppose I say that doesn't suit me at all—eh? I shall be stayin' a week or so at the next place, down in Devonshire—quite handy, runnin' over for tennis or a ride with her every day. An' I mean to be presented with the proper credentials, d'ye see. The Fleischmarks have invited me for a month if I care to stay. No crawlin' out of it, Mike—you've got to do it whether you like it or not!"

A PAIR of calculating eyes glanced at the boulder across the match-flame, as Evendeau lighted a cigar.

"Fleischmark? Oh, the stockbroker? That'll nail your coffin down tight, felley-

me-lad! Not half a dozen families in the county received them—he's supposed to be too shady in his city transactions. If you insist upon bein' in that neighborhood, you'd best hole-up in some other burrow. The Chudleighs might have you a few days if some mutual friend suggested it. Dev'lish good-natured lot—an' Chudleigh may be under obligations to you one way or another, I fancy."

"Oh—aye. I'd not thought of him! An' you'll introduce me to pretty little Paula—eh?"

"I will—not!"

"But—I say you will! Damn you, Evendeau, I'm just as good as the lot of you, aren't I? You'll introduce me to the little filly, or you'll pay me four thousand pounds by tomorrow evening!"

"Haven't the money—couldn't get the quarter of it in that time—wouldn't introduce you, anyhow!"

BUT Wormser smiled sardonically. "No? I wonder, now? Suppose I go to Lord Cyril, and tell him you're hobnobbin' with a chap called Branders who's the livin' image of him without his beard? Eh? Tell him you've employed the chap for some job in the future not yet mentioned—that *you're payin' him a salary to stick around until he can pull it off*? Eh? Waiter who served you happens to be under some obligations to me—an old lag, in fact. Didn't care much about tellin' me what he'd heard of your talk with Branders—but I used a little pressure. Now—what have you in mind to do with this chap who is Lord Cyril's twin when their faces are shaved? Eh? What do you fancy His Lordship will begin thinkin' about you—what you may have in mind?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. I can take Branders down with me when I go, an' introduce them—see how he strikes my cousin."

"Willing to do that, are you?"

"Rather than let you blackmail me? Naturally! Why not?"

"An' give up the whole scheme you've blocked out?"

"What scheme? What are you talking about? I hadn't thought of how Branders would fit in at Evendeau Hall—but it might be rather amusin' havin' twins like that under the same roof. What?"

"The devil! Mike, you're a cool one—I'll say that for you! Of course I might call certain facts to His Lordship's mind, you know. Miss Crawford is his

direct heir. If anything happens to her, or anyhow, when she dies—she has no near relatives beyond possible children which she might or might not have. Then you, as next of direct kin to His Lordship, inherit everything. How that might happen—whether you marry the fair Paula or have some other scheme for bringin' it about—of course nobody knows. But your employin' this chap Branders to hang on—waitin' for somethin' you've in mind to turn up—is a bit of an indication that you've some idea about possibly assistin' nature in one way or another. Eh?"

"Wormser, you're a foul sort of a rotter. There are men I know who'd have broken your filthy neck, right here—for some things you've said an' the fool threats you've made. Even if I were afraid of you, I wouldn't bargain one second for what you imagine you know about me—your word isn't worth a lump of snow on a summer day. I'll simply make a statem'nt of fact to you which will bear thinkin' over a bit: You'll possibly meet Miss Crawford through the Chudleighs if you're so bent upon it—but if, afterward, you do or say anything to displease her, I can promise that His Lordship will thrash you until a hospital will seem a haven of refuge. If you say one word about my friend Branders, or your crazy ideas concerning us, I'll kill you as certainly as you're sitting in that chair—an' do it as painfully as possible! Hope I make myself clear?"

It seemed that he did. Wormser never had seen this side of Mike Evendean—but he'd heard a lot about the utter recklessness of the aristocracy in carrying out anything they'd given their word to do, regardless of consequences. He'd had a few rosy visions of sharing in whatever windfall Mike could bring about. Now, however, he was certain he'd never see a penny of it beyond possibly a thousand or two which he might borrow—and would certainly be killed if he attempted to betray anything he might ferret out concerning the man. At the end of another month, Mike went down to Devon for a few weeks. As a relative in the more or less direct line of inheritance, a room was always reserved for him at Evendean Hall—in fact, was kept with his belongings in it, ready for occupancy, any time he cared to come down, which was rather frequently. . . .

In a few days Wormser dropped over with the Chudleighs and was casually introduced to Paula. In some ways the

fellow was cleverly adaptable, and Mike was somewhat surprised at the way he'd been toned down. But knowing the man's craze for Paula Crawford, he looked for trouble in that direction sooner or later, and managed to keep them in sight most of the time. . . .

Back of the sunken gardens at the rear of the house there was an old "maze" or labyrinth of thick, impenetrable box-hedge, so arranged in an in-



tricate geometrical pattern that guests frequently had spent an hour or two getting out of it. At intervals along the paths of this maze there were rustic summerhouses constructed of three-inch logs—U-shaped, with a table in the center. Although the growth of box was too dense to see through, anybody in one of these summerhouses could hear practically every word spoken by a person on the other side of the hedge at the back of it. Beyond a second hedge—they were about ten feet high, and trimmed square on top—voices were a mere indistinct murmur; with three hedges between, even the voices faded out. One particular little house along the second hedge

from the center was a favorite place where Lord Cyril and his bosom friend Sir Edward Coffin, who lived near by, liked to smoke after tea. So one afternoon when a number of guests were over for tea and tennis, Mike Evendeau took Dora Farnsworth down into the maze, which he knew so well that he was on the other side of the hedge from his cousin and Sir Edward in a few minutes. The two men had stopped talking when they heard the couple on the other side of the dense box hedge.

"You were going to say something about Paula, weren't you, Mike?" said Dora.

"Why, it wasn't much of anything," replied Michael, "—just an idea which sometimes occurs to me: You see, this good old place of Cyril's an' the other bits of property are taxed until it's impossible to keep more than one of 'em up an' goin' at all. The other places are in the hands of old servants as caretakers—goin' to seed an' running down for lack of repairs. Even as a sellin' proposition, they'd be worth twice as much if they were put in good condition. Townhouse is gettin' a bit seedy. Cyril has a few commercial int'rests that I know nothin' about—though I fancy he expects 'em to pay rather well in time, an' when they do, to put the property in good shape again. But that sort of thing isn't safe to count upon. If anything happens to him, Paula inherits, of course—but she wouldn't know anything about handlin' those commercial propositions—prob'ly lose out on all of 'em. What she inherited would keep her land-poor. So what I've wondered more than once is why Cyril doesn't take out a good-sized block of insurance in her favor? He's in first-class condition—nothing whatever wrong with him—ought to get a very low rate on that account. An' then if anything unexpected happens to him, Paula will have enough to put all the property in repair—not be obliged to

skimp, as any woman hates to do. Absolutely none of *my* affair, to be sure! But if I were in his place, I fancy I'd do it. Maybe I wouldn't—I know nothin' of how he's situated; may be good reasons against. Still an' all—it seems rather a sound idea, don't you think?"

"Why—yes, Mike, I do! One fancied of course that he'd be carrying insurance. Most everybody does. But with no immediate family, I suppose the title and property as they are might seem enough to leave more or less distant relatives—"

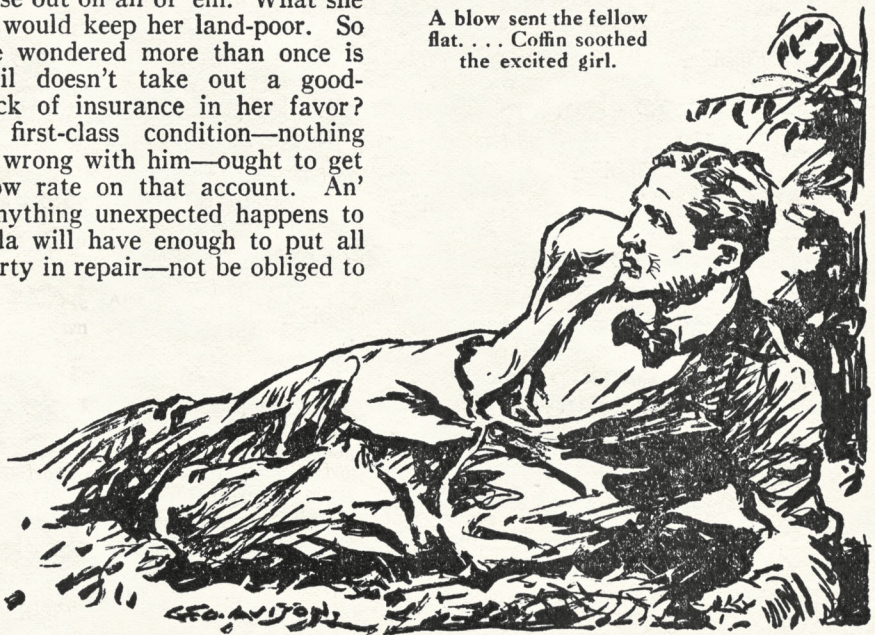
Mike glanced at his watch.

"Oh—I say! . . . The others must be ready for tennis—waiting for us to make up the second doubles. Come along!"

WHEN the couple were out of hearing, Lord Evendeau filled and lighted his pipe in a reflective mood—going over in mind what he had overheard quite by accident as he supposed.

"What do you think of that suggestion, Ned? Rather a sound proposition—what? I've shares in a couple of Northern Bechuanaland mines, d'ye see—paid a lot of assessm'ts at first, but we're by way of gettin' dividends now—hope for even better ones; engineers seem to think the veins are of considerable extent. But suppose they pinch out unexpectedly, as so often happens? Paula would have to put up more assessm'ts or lose the shares altogether—an' the estates won't run to it, now. She's fairly sure to be dished, one way or another.

A blow sent the fellow flat. . . . Coffin soothed the excited girl.



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On the other hand—with a good bit of insurance comin' to her, she could hang on as long as the solicitors advised it, or chuck the mines altogether an' have enough to keep the estates in decent shape. Eh?"

"H-m-m—yes, seems to me a good move," answered Sir Edward. "But if I were doing it myself, I'd leave the insurance to Paula individually—not as an asset of your estate. In case anything should happen to Paula, I see no reason why you should pay out premiums for several years on big insurance for Mike's benefit, eventually. He has a thousand a year of his own. In the event of Paula's death, leave some provision in your will that the insurance goes to some friend whom you like a lot and who needs the windfall. Make it a trust-fund for your tenantry, if you like—but don't leave it for Mike!"

"YOU'RE not so keen about Mike—eh?" Lord Cyril asked. "Yet he's rather a decent sort of chap, you know."

"I *don't* know! . . . That's just the point. I met up with all sorts of folks while I was at sea—learned to size 'em up pretty close to the mark. I don't know anything to Mike Evendean's discredit—far as I can remember. But I just don't trust him—that's all. How long has he been coming here, as one of the family?"

"Off an' on, ever since he was a lad, I fancy. The Governor always had a room for him, here, when he felt like comin'—an' naturally, I've not interfered with that arrangement. It's possible enough that the place might be his some day, d'ye see—"

"And the more he stays here as one of the family, the more that possibility is bound to stick in his mind. A thoroughly decent chap would put it out of his head entirely. Another one, who's a rotter inside, would even get to dreaming about it—wondering how some accident to you might occur in a perfectly natural way. He knows every corner of this maze as well as you do—suppose he happened to be fairly certain that we were smoking here, as we so often do, when he fetched Dora Farnsworth along the other side of this hedge? I don't say he really planned anything quite as clever as that—but his spiel was certainly one word for Paula and two for himself in the circumstances. If I were you, I'd make Paula the sole beneficiary—with reversion to some friend or trust-

fund, after her. Don't give Mike any such damn' good reason for thinking your death and hers would be such an advantage to him!"

THAT evening, Lord Evendean booked a berth to London on the night express from Plymouth. His cousin Mike boarded the same train at Exeter. But neither saw the other on the platform at Paddington in the morning. His Lordship called upon one of the managers at Lloyd's to whom Sir Edward had given him a letter explaining just how he wished the policy made out—but the friend happened to be out of town. Evendean was the type of man who had very little to do with commercial affairs, and he accepted the suggestion that he see one of the other managers. Naturally, he didn't present the letter to this stranger, but simply named Paula Crawford as the beneficiary and let the manager have the policy made out in the usual way—thinking it would be a simple matter to have any changes made after going over it with Coffin after he got home. (A crony of Mike's showed him a copy of the policy two days later.)

Meanwhile, Mike had taken the early morning plane from Croydon to Le Bourget, called at a theatrical wig-maker's in Paris to obtain certain expensive beards and wigs which he had ordered during a previous visit—and returned by the afternoon plane. Next evening he arrived in Devon some hours before his cousin.

The man Wormser was still with the Chudleighs—had been watching his step pretty carefully for nearly two weeks, but was now beginning to feel more self-confidence. When the two cousins returned to the Hall, matters had reached a point where Wormser considered it safe enough to become a little more familiar—and Paula was finding it more difficult to flag him back without attracting the attention of others. On the second day following, there was a climax which she had hoped to avoid.

Lord Evendean had been chatting with Coffin down in the maze when they heard Paula's voice on the other side of the hedge, warning Wormser in cool level tones against something he seemed bent upon doing. They heard an angry but partly stifled exclamation from her—the sound of a slap—the scuffling of feet on the path. Cyril and Sir Edward glanced quickly at each other; then they were out of the summer-house, His Lordship racing for a short-cut into the other path



—Coffin measuring the thick growth of box with his eye, then springing a good three feet upward until his hands grasped the top; then he hauled himself across through the smaller twigs until he could drop down into the path on the other side.

Paula, tightly held in Wormser's arms, was struggling with rapidly diminishing strength against the kisses he was pressing on her face. A single terrific blow just under the ear sent the fellow flat on the ground several feet away, pulling the girl down with him. Coffin promptly helped her up—and soothed her into a calmer condition just as Lord Evendean appeared, running down the path. He roughly hauled Wormser up by his coat-collar and propelled him out of the maze by the shortest way—saying to Sir Edward, over his shoulder:

“Hold this rotter for me, Ned, while I'm fetching something!”

The three emerged at the foot of the sunken gardens where some of the house-party were sitting on the benches before starting in for a few sets of tennis. Lord Cyril ran across to the kennels and returned in a couple of minutes with a heavy dog-whip. Motioning Coffin to stand aside, he cut Wormser twice across the face—then thrashed his body and legs until the man was howling for mercy.

“Wormser, I meant at first to cut you up so badly that you'd spend some time in a hospital—but this will do by way of a warning. Now—listen to me! If ever you speak to Miss Crawford again, lay a finger on her, or talk about her to *anybody*—I'll look you up. An' it'll depend upon how I feel at the time whether I kill you outright or thrash you into a total wreck! Get that? Very good! Take yourself off my land and don't forget what I've said!”

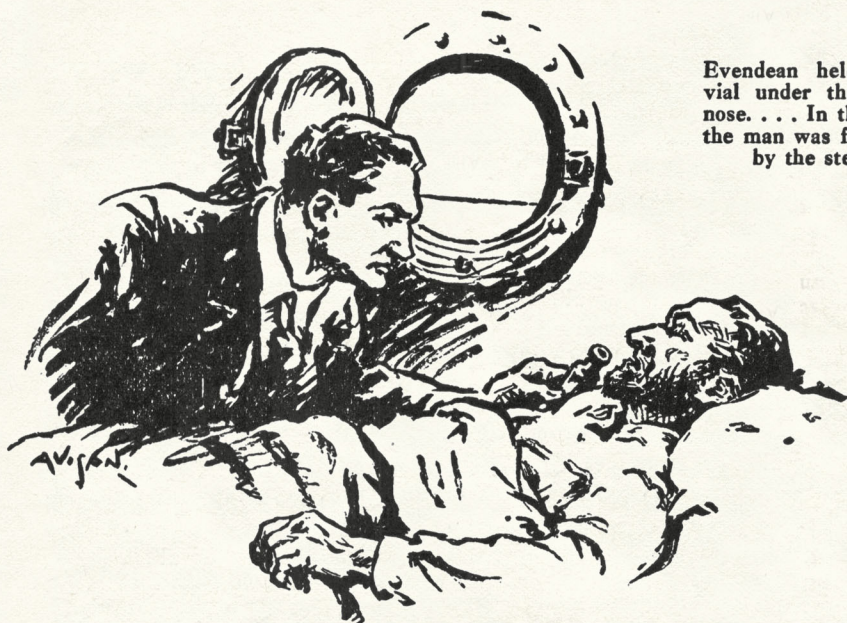
EVERYONE in the garden heard the words distinctly. They'd no idea what the man had been doing, but had sized him up sufficiently to know he was probably getting no more than what he deserved—though some of them were inclined to make some allowance for him on the ground of his antecedents. As he walked painfully along the road beyond the Evendean estate, a car containing Fleischmark and his daughter overtook him. They themselves had reason for disliking the neighborhood families, and they partly swallowed the story of outrageous assault he told—even urged his fetching over his kit for a visit with

them. He had made evening calls upon them three or four times when he wasn't likely to be seen, so that they had no reason to feel that he was neglecting them for more aristocratic friends. As he didn't care about facing the Chudleighs after what had occurred, he told Fleischmark they were all over at the other side of the county that afternoon, had him drive to the house for his luggage and then went home with him.

ON Mike Evendean's return from Plymouth, where he had been for part of the day, he heard what had occurred—and grinned to himself at the way matters were falling in with his plans even more favorably than he had expected. Slipping into his cousin's room before dinner, he located and took away with him His Lordship's service automatic, which he had carried through the war. That evening he walked over to the Fleischmark place two miles away, fairly certain of finding Wormser there. Mike had had some dealings with Fleischmark as a broker—and for policy's sake, he had called upon the family twice, after dark, and made himself agreeable. So he was received rather effusively when he came in. Saying, after a while, that he wanted to go over a business matter with Wormser, Mike suggested his walking back along the road with him. The man was so lame and sore that it was difficult for him to move, but he was fairly seething with rage and had some idea that Mike could be forced—or—paid—to assist him in a scheme for revenge. As they walked back toward the Hall, Evendean said that he ought to square himself with Paula Crawford if he could—and mentioned a path through the woods which came out at the end of the sunken gardens near the maze; he fancied he might get Paula to come out there with him the next evening. Then if Wormser mysteriously appeared with some plausible apology, she might be induced to listen while the three were standing there. Anyhow, he could get pretty close to the house by that path at any time if he had an object in doing so.

A man of higher intelligence—knowing that Mike only tolerated him for reasons of his own—would have been suspicious of these suggestions. But Wormser had no thought of personal risk to himself beyond a thrashing, and asked Mike to show him the place.

Just before they left the path, Mike said—in level tones:



Evendeau held a small vial under the sleeper's nose. . . . In the morning the man was found dead, by the steward.

"Wormser, you're shrewd enough in business matters—but you've so much conceit that it wrecks you. Just consider: I owe you four or five thousand pounds which I never mean to pay—common sense should tell you that I don't propose bein' sued or havin' any nasty row over it, either. You've had the colossal cheek to speak an' act toward Miss Crawford as if you were her equal—endin' up by grossly insultin' her. You've ferreted out, and would expose at any time you lost your temper, my scheme which is likely to stand me in a cool half-million. . . . Here's the answer, Wormser!"

With that, Mike's hand came out of his pocket, and sent two bullets crashing through the fellow's heart from a distance of less than a foot. Throwing down the pistol from that gloved hand, he drew a false Van Dyck beard and mustache from his pocket and expertly gummed them onto his cheeks, lips, chin, until the nerves of touch in his finger-tips assured him the disguise would pass well at night, especially out of doors. This had taken but two minutes. There was a murmur of voices coming from the stables. In another moment two of the grooms came walking cautiously down into the gardens. Without coming too close, in the starlight, Mike said:

"That you, Kelley? . . . And Dobbie? Did you hear a couple of shots about the place? I was finishing a cigar in the garden—sounded to me as if they came from somewhere over the other side of

the maze. Take a look about, will you—an' let me know if you turn up anything."

Mike's voice naturally was something like that of his cousin—he'd practiced the trick of making it more so. With the Van Dyck and dinner-coat, neither of the grooms would have questioned his identity for a second, and they did not notice the inch or more difference in height.

"Aye, Yer Ludship! Very good, sir—we'll 'ave a look about!"

As they disappeared around the other side of the maze, Mike dipped his handkerchief in the garden fountain and walked quickly across to the library in the east wing. Here, in a deep shadow, he soaked off the hair from his face with the wet handkerchief. Getting into the library by one of the French windows, he went up to his room by a narrow rear stairway without meeting anyone—gave his face a very careful cleaning, inspected his clothes—then went down to join some of the men in the billiard-room. Just by freakish luck, Lord Cyril had driven a small two-seater over to call upon a handsome neighbor whose husband was in London that evening—and had spent three hours with her, tête-à-tête.

Within an hour after the shots had been heard, the grooms had fetched lamps from a motorcar and found what lay at the end of the path through the woods. Without disturbing it or the pistol lying near by, they quietly came up to the Hall and asked for His Lordship.

Every servant on the place knew what happened in the maze that afternoon—thought Wormser deserved what he got. And now it looked to the grooms as if the bounder had been prowling about the place at night, and had been caught and shot by His Lordship—which they also thought was a good job, though it worried them as to what might come of it. Not finding Lord Cyril, they asked for Mike Evendean—who said His Lordship was spending the evening with one of the neighbors.

"That can't be, sir—'e was in the garden an hour gone—spoke to us, there, 'e did! An' now there'll be a corpus a-layin' in the woods-path, like—a felley as 'as been shot, sir."

WHEN His Lordship returned later, Mike was waiting in the garage and walked back to the house with him, none of the chauffeurs or grooms happening to be about at the moment.

"Come up to your rooms, old chap—by the back stairs! Something has happened!"

Considerably surprised, His Lordship said nothing until the door of his own suite was closed—then he looked questioningly at his cousin. "The body of Wormser has been found at the end of the woods-path, near the gardens—shot twice through the heart with a forty-four. Your service automatic was lying on the ground a few feet from him. Kelley an' Dobbie both swear they met you in the garden not a hundred feet from where the body lay within three minutes after the shots were heard, and that you sent them off around the opposite side of the maze. I asked them if they were sure it was you—an' they laughed at me. Unfortunately, a dozen people heard you warn the fellow that he'd be shot if he set foot on your ground again. But—of course you can account for every minute of your time since dinner? What?"

"Damn! . . . I *can't!* Silly sort of a joke, isn't it?"

"But surely the people you saw—were with—"

"Just happen to be in a position where testifying will be simply out of the question! An' that's torn it—eh? Police been notified?"

"Those two grooms are waiting for you to call 'em up—they've disturbed nothing about the body or gun. So far—I doubt if they've said anything—but of course we can't depend upon anything

like that! After that thrashing an' your warning this afternoon, they're positive you did it—think Wormser got what he deserved; but they'll have to testify just the same an' are afraid it will hang you!"

"Silly sort of a mess—what? Of course I didn't do it—wasn't within ten miles of here. But who the deuce will believe *that!*"

"Seems to me there's only one thing to do—temporarily."

"Well? . . . Get it out!"

"You can't do anything toward employing counsel or detectives—dig into the facts yourself—if you're locked up on a murder-charge. But if you shave off that beard, stick on the white mustache, wig an' eyebrows I wore as *Colonel Old-boy* in the theatricals we had down here during the Christmas holidays, last winter—let me drive you down near the station in the two-seater—get up to town an' across to France while the going is possible—that'll give you time to look into the situation from a safe distance. Eh?"

"Running away is a confession of guilt. Don't like it! Not cricket, you know! But it just so happens—all the circumst'nces considered—that it's an unholy sort of mess, the way it looks at this moment! Who the devil could the chap have been—lookin' so much like me that he fooled those grooms who've been here ten years or more? My word! It may be you're not far out with that suggestion, Mike. Very good! I'll do that—temporar'ly."

IT was Mike who suggested dropping his cousin from the two-seater at the corner of the road just out of sight from the station in order that there might be no risk of anyone seeing them together and suspecting His Lordship in that way—but this happened to suit Lord Cyril exactly for reasons of his own. Something at the back of his mind was registering vague surprise that his cousin should have worked out these details for his escape so methodically upon the spur of the moment. On the whole, he thought he *wouldn't* take that owl-train for Exeter and catch the London night express! He bought tickets for London—giving the stationmaster a good look at his face. But when the "Owl" stopped alongside the platform, he walked toward the rear of it with his suitcase and stepped off into the dark road—little more than a lane—at the opposite end of the platform from the regular ap-

proach to the station—a lane which ran along one side of Coffin's estate nearly two miles away. He met no one.

To Coffin's butler, who opened the door, he said he was an old shipmate of the baronet's—Cap'n Soames—and had run up from Plymouth to pay him a visit. Coffin didn't recall the name, but asked Jenkins to show his friend into the library—where he had been reading late with a novel—and take his kit up to one of the south bedrooms. After the butler had returned with drinks and tobacco, Sir Edward closed the door and looked more closely at his mysterious guest, who was now winking shamelessly.

"Your voice is familiar, Cap'n—but it must be some years since we saw each other last—eh?"

"About twelve hours, Ned." The voice was now unmistakable. "Hellova mess! I'll skim over the main points."

"Well—I'll be—damned! I'd have spotted you in a minute or two, old chap—but I'll admit that white shrubbery fooled me! Damn' well made, too—Parisian stuff, I suppose? They soak on the price, but they do make the hair look as if it grew out of you. Fact is, I've been apprehensive ever since we overheard that talk of Mike's with Dora Farnsworth. No use arguing, Cyril—you can't convince me that Mike isn't a wrong 'un! I've rubbed up against human cussedness too many years not to know when I run across it. But give me the story—beginning with dinner this evening. I've got it up to then, I think."

**E**VENDEAN had done *précis*-writing for his division commander during the war while detailed for staff duty, and so he was able to sketch very briefly what had happened.

Coffin's lips puckered in a low whistle: "Framed, by thunder! . . . Framed! Good and plenty—in a devilish clever manner! And just by fool mischance, you happened to be adventuring on your own in such a manner that it played right plunk into his hands. The lady could clear you in three minutes. She'll do it, too—before she'll see you hang for a murder you didn't commit! Mike suspected pretty closely where you were—knew you couldn't, or wouldn't, account for the time by dragging her into it. If you'd been playing bridge somewhere, he'd have been out of luck—couldn't have induced you to run! By the way—you had Yelverton make out your policy as we arranged it, didn't you?"

"Why—er—no. Your friend was out of town—they turned me over to another manager. Course, I wasn't showin' Yelverton's letter to a stranger. Chap assured me it was a very simple matter, after the physical examination their medico gave me—just wanted to know Paula's name an' address, as beneficiary. I was naturally quite upset at missin' Yelverton—in a stew to have the matter fixed up an' get home again—"

"**W**HICH means that if you're hanged for murder," said Ned Coffin, "or forced to keep out of the country under some other identity—and Paula is killed, as she will be—this infernal rotter comes into everything you've got *plus insurance for a hundred thousand pounds!* That's the scheme—I'd stake my last penny on it! You certainly had a hunch when you came straight to me, old chap. Will you put yourself in my hands, absolutely? Stout fella! It was Mike, of course, who supplied that white mustache and wig? Yes—he would! And it was he, with a brown Van Dyck like yours, whom the grooms saw in the gardens. Of course! Not another soul with the direct personal object he has in all this. Now—first thing you do—sit down at my desk and write a letter to Yelverton blocking out the sub-beneficiaries as you worked them out with me. Tell him this policy must be canceled at once and the new one made out that way—no argument! Of course Mike would have some tool at Lloyd's who could get a copy for him of the policy issued the other day.

"Say the new policy must be sent around to your solicitors by me and filed in their vault with your will—date the letter *yesterday*. If you haven't a will, make one tonight, and I'll take it to the solicitors. Then you're to stay here—unobtrusively, out of sight as much as possible—as my old friend Cap'n James Soames, who formerly commanded one of the Brock liners when I was with them. Mike won't have a doubt that you will reach Paris tomorrow. Write him tonight—I'll get it to the Lloyd's office in Paris by air-mail and have it remailed to him at once. I'm reasonably certain I can trust all of my servants, because they either worked here for my stepfather several years or sailed with me when I was in command. If any of the police turn up here, Jenkins will tip you off in time to hide—I'll show you how to get into the priest's-room in the thickness of the chimney—constructed

three hundred years ago. Jenkins won't let Mike into the house if he comes here, but there's not a thousandth chance that he will. While you're writing that letter, I'll be attending to that rotter in my own way."

Picking up one of the telephones on his desk, Sir Edward asked the operator to put him through to the *Daily News* in London. As he gave the Lloyd's code-word for rush business, he got the managing editor's office in twenty minutes and asked for Billy Saunderson, a clever reporter who had done some able detective work for him on another occasion. Locating him there in another twenty minutes, Coffin asked if he could wangle a plane at Croydon and fly down at once to the nearest airdrome—five miles from the house.

When Saunderson turned up at four in the morning, Coffin sketched the whole story for him—the murder, of course, being a scoop for his paper, as he would be a good eight hours ahead of the other correspondents.

THEN Coffin added slowly: "So much for your regular occupation, Billy. Aside from that, I'm taking you on for three or four hundred pounds—whatever you say is right—on work similar to that you did for me in the Vandersteyn case—that South African promoter. The local police won't permit Mike Evendean to leave the neighborhood until after the inquest, so there's no risk of his escaping you. But as soon as possible, he'll make for London—get in contact with at least one man there. I doubt if he'd risk more than one, because it's much safer to play a lone hand—he really doesn't dare do anything else—and that one man is doubtless in his power too deeply to blab. Stick to Mike like a leech—see and hear everything he does or says—pay a first-class man to shadow the other chap all the time. Then I want the very best man you know—Scotland Yard or Fleet Street; I don't care which—to come down here at once and stick close to Paula Crawford—not let her out of his sight—know of any talk or arrangement between her and Mike, reporting both to you and to me. Money no object—all the expense-cash you need. Get me? Can do?"

"Oh, rather! I was more than satisfied to work with you before the Cornelius Vandersteyn affair, Sir Edward. But after going through that together, I feel as if you had the first call upon

my time, d'ye see. Right-o! Can do. I'll have a spot of breakfast—yes? Bacon an' eggs—an' toast an' coffee? Quite so! Then I remove myself to the chief constable an' tell him all—if he doesn't already know it. Spot this Michael person—unobtrusively. Instruct my man from London as soon as he gets here. An' then we're off. What?"

IN due course the coroner's jury rendered a verdict of "willful murder at the hands of Lord Cyril Evendean," as had been a foregone conclusion from the evidence at hand. Paula was a nervous wreck until Coffin took her out in his car for a talk, and outlined to her Mike's *whole* scheme as he saw it. He assured her that he'd had word from Lord Cyril and was personally using every effort to prove him innocent, and warned her most seriously to make no promise or agreement whatsoever with Mike, or to go anywhere with him in any circumstances.

As soon as Mike Evendean could leave, he went up to London—left his club that evening by a rear entrance to insure himself against being followed, and was driven to Branders' lodgings, where they had a lengthy talk, blocking out their next movements. Acting upon code-instructions, Branders had been letting his beard grow for two weeks and had torn a peculiar-shaped scar on his left forearm, which he burned with alcohol to make it heal like an old shrapnel-wound.

Saunderson, however, knew all about that rear exit from the club, and the man working with him had happened to see an envelope Branders was addressing in a basement restaurant. Next day Evendean came into the booking-offices of the Union Castle line a few steps behind Branders and stood alongside him at the counter—the two appearing to be total strangers. Carefully examining the cabin-diagram, Branders picked an outside stateroom on the *Norman* just across the little side-passage from another outside room which he saw, on the open page of the passenger booking-list for that boat, was still unsold. As soon as the clerk had entered his name, Mike asked if he could have the other one—the *Norman* sailed on the following Saturday. Within three hours Sir Edward Coffin—well-known to the managing directors and an old shipmate of Captain Forbes—took the suite on the starboard end of B-deck, forward.

After the *Norman* was out in the Channel, Coffin got a good look at Branders' face as he sat opposite Mike, halfway down the Captain's table—and for a second he was startled. Branders was now "Charles Millar," a Cape man—on the saloon list. His beard had grown long enough for him to trim it closely at the sides and leave a tuft at the chin which soon would be more pointed. Already he was a twin of Lord Cyril, though a trifle thinner—which could have been caused by worry over the murder-charge. Lord Cyril, as Coffin very well knew, was at his own home in Devon—but he felt as if he were seeing double, and noticed the Captain staring intently down the table at the same time.

Later, Captain Forbes eased his mind:

"I say, Ned! If that isn't Lord Evendeau at my table, I'm a Dutchman! Know him well—fine chap, sailed with me a few times. But he's indicted for murder! Dashed if I know just what to do—eh?"

"Sit tight and do nothing, Tommy, unless the authorities send you a wireless—which they won't. The chap has angina and lung trouble, if I know the symptoms—may not last the voyage out. If he dies—or is lost overboard—you'll be asked to identify him. Mike Evendeau is his cousin—knows him perfectly well, but isn't admitting it, of course—probably rather stunned to find him aboard."

FOUR nights later Mike softly opened Branders' door and slipped in. The man lay wheezing in a drugged sleep. With chemically soaked cotton in his own nostrils, Evendeau held a small vial directly under the sleeper's nose, eased out the glass cork for a few seconds—then tossed the vial out through the port. It had contained cyanogen gas.

In the morning the man was found dead, by his room-steward—an evident case of heart-failure. Being asked by the Captain if he knew the man, Mike positively identified him as his cousin—said they would find a shrapnel-scar on his left arm—which they did. Forbes' identification was almost as positive. The death and identity were duly wirelessly back to London, much to the amazement of a white-haired sea-captain at that time a guest in Sir Edward's house.

A month afterward—Mike having returned from Madeira with the body and buried it in the churchyard with the other Evendeans—Paula Crawford accepted an

invitation from old friends for a yacht-cruise, and Mike came aboard just before sailing, as another guest, the owner knowing of nothing whatever against him. Among the crew was a man who had been shadowing Paula for her own protection. In Penzance harbor that night a coil of inch-rope was slipped around her waist; she was lifted bodily and thrown over the after-deck rail—an iron grate-bar at the other end of the rope following her in another second.

ALMOST at once there was a second splash, amidships. The Scotland Yard man had his work laid out to cut that rope and get the girl to the surface before both drowned—he just managed it.

While she was being attended by the owner and his wife, her rescuer snapped handcuffs on Mike after a savage struggle, and took him ashore on a charge of deliberately attempted murder.

Next morning a certain lady in Devon—after a satisfactory explanation to her husband—handed the chief constable a written statement in which she testified on oath that Lord Cyril, a lifelong friend, had spent the entire evening with her on the night of Wormser's death, and her parlor-maid swore to a confirming statement. Then Sir Edward Coffin, Mr. William Sanderson of the *Daily News* and two Yard men produced evidence showing who the deceased Lord Evendeau really had been, with a full exposé of Mike's plot. Yelverton couldn't seem to make head or tail of the proposition as affecting the insurance policy in any way, until Coffin patiently explained:

"As the situation now stands, Evendeau is a first-class risk for twenty or thirty years, and his mining investments are quite likely to net him a fortune. When he's made a good pot out of them and no longer needs it to secure his niece, he'll let your policy lapse. You'll be in all of your premiums, with nothing whatever to pay out. On the other hand, if I hadn't got busy digging into the matter for my friends' sakes and yours, Mike easily would have won out. With 'His Lordship' buried in the family churchyard, the real Lord Cyril a fugitive from justice who couldn't have proved his own identity after that, you'd have had to pay over that hundred thousand pounds within a few months after Paula Crawford was drowned from that yacht. (She was mighty *near* drowned, as it was!) Now—do you get it?"

Another story by Mr. New will appear in the next, the February, issue.

# Ruffle of Drums

*A brief drama of Napoleon and his grenadiers, by the famous French writer who gave us "Long Live the Emperor!"*

By GEORGES D'ESPARBES

Illustrated by Paul De Leslie



PRINCE CHARLES had taken advantage of the night to occupy Ratisbon. Napoleon wished to retake that city before marching on Vienna. The enemy had six thousand soldiers, gunners on the ramparts, grenadiers at the parapets. To beat the Austrians, it would be necessary to ford deep moats under shell-fire, then to climb with ladders to storm massive fortifications, the angles of which were protected by artillery.

The Emperor, on a hillock a cannon-shot away, ordered Marshal Lannes to send up Morand's division. To shelter the troopers from fire until the moment of attack, they were placed behind barns; ladders seized in neighboring villages were distributed to the soldiers.

The generals then passed their units in review.

One General,—one of whom Marshal Lannes was fond,—nominated Baron of the Empire after the battle of Eckmühl, was a young chief of thirty, with hair curly as that of a woman, gentle in the rest area, severe on the march, kind with his men, always in the lead when there was fighting to be done. He was called Duclos, Baron Duclos.

He reined his horse behind a barn, ordered assembly sounded, carefully examined his uniform as if he were about to be introduced before the Empress at court, and walked toward his soldiers. Those he greeted first were grenadiers, veterans, chaps who had fought at Arcole, Rivoli, Castiglione, before the Pyramids in Egypt, before Saint-John of Acre in Palestine, at Austerlitz, everywhere.

When he faced their lines, the General

saluted the flag surmounted by the Imperial Eagle, and he appeared before these old fighters almost feminine, thin, slender in the greatcoat glittering with gold lace.

"Open ranks!" he called.

The majors faced their battalions: "Second rank, three paces back!" One of the lines of fur busbies moved. "Present—arms!"

Duclos entered into the space between the long files, followed by his staff.

He passed before the first rank. He seemed to know all the men, for as he strode along, he would address them personally, remind them of a charge, an attack in which they had shared. They flushed with pleasure as he spoke. Neat in their mended uniforms, they ranged from thirty to fifty years old; their graying mustaches, stiffened by the rains and the sun, drooped to the firm chins. All these heads lifted and were still, as if carved from granite, when Duclos went by. A rigid discipline, backed by degradation or death, had driven into their brains intense respect for superiors, seemed to have forged their spines into bars of bronze. Generals quarreled to have them in their units, for these old soldiers made heroism commonplace, were willing to serve without reward, waited for decorations twenty years without a murmur. They were the soul of the Grand Army.

"You—I saw you at Mont-Thabor," Duclos said.

"Yes, General. You were a captain then."

"And you, over there—you were a sergeant at Austerlitz!"



And the soldier shivered with joy.

"I had you decorated by the Emperor at Burgos," he informed a third.

Everything was in order; the inspection went well; the General was pleased. Occasionally he would halt to amend the tilt of a busby, to open a knapsack, to adjust straps. In the middle of the fourth row he came to a stop before a private, and contemplated him, motionless and thoughtful.

The man was old. He had the clear eyes of a loyal animal. Bent toward this soldier of the old army, so near that his breath brushed his face, the General scanned the grenadier, concerned with his uniform and equipment, careless of the human being, it appeared. He handled his weapons, inspected him from gaiters to collar.

"Not clean." He laid a finger on the private's cartridge-box; his tone was severe. "Why do you disregard regulations? You have been honored with the Cross, yet you come to an attack with dirty weapons!"

The man grew pale; his mouth gaped; his hands quivered.

"Come on," the General went on softly. "The head somewhat higher—the thumb stretched on the plate—"

Then he walked on.

"Michel," another grenadier addressed the private when the inspection was

over, "you know the General. You can't kid me. Even when he scolds you, you look at each other like old pals."

"I'm not in the habit of talking," the veteran snapped angrily.

"You talk in corners, the two of you, in camp. When you were wounded before Saragossa, he came to see you at once. The night of Landshutt, when the going was tough, he gave you wine to share with your comrades—"

"We don't know each other," the grenadier protested stubbornly. "Me, the friend of a General, of a baron who won special gifts from the Emperor! Everybody knows he never loses a chance to scold me. You saw awhile ago, about that cartridge-box—"

"That's kidding. I'm telling you you've bitten tobacco from the same plug, sometime."

They were interrupted by a ruffle of drums. It was the signal to attack. . . .

The ladders brought for the storming of the walls were on the ground before the barn.

Marshal Lannes had asked for fifty men to take those ladders into the moats and lift them against the walls, and several times fifty volunteered. But no sooner had they left cover than a general discharge thundered from the ramparts, and the fifty volunteers were fifty corpses. At Lannes' voice, at Morand's voice, fifty others picked up the ladders and ran forward. Another discharge of canister laid them low.

General Morand turned, raging, spurring his horse: "Duclos, call on those of Austerlitz!"

The young General galloped before his troops.

"Soldiers!" the wind swept his voice to the hesitating regiments: "Soldiers! Remember the days of Trebia, Zurich, Aboukir, Marengo!" He whirled and galloped down the length of another battalion. "Soldiers!" his voice rose above the beat of the animal's hoofs. "Soldiers of Hohenlinden, of Jena, grenadiers of Eylau and Friedland, will you remain paralyzed before the enemy?" Another whirl brought him to the front once more, shouting: "Soldiers! You are French; the Emperor looks at you, and there's a city waiting to be taken!"

The regiments did not stir, but a lone grenadier stepped from the ranks, and there followed a grotesque scene: A single man carrying a ladder marched deliberately toward eight thousand soldiers and two hundred cannon.



Duclos was white: "Will no one follow that one brave?" The regiments moved forward. "Forward!"

He dismounted, charged with the grenadiers. With a terrifying clamor, the men rushed on the ramparts. The old soldier was already on top. A long streak of lightning illuminated Ratisbon, as the fusillade increased. But after three hours of tumult, the Austrian cannon were mute.

The city was taken.

Duclos fought on. In the center of a public place, surrounded by his staff, exposed to the enemy's fire, bareheaded, his coat in tatters, he urged on his grenadiers. But a score of riders appeared, halted behind them.

"Halt!" said a voice. It was the Emperor—Napoleon.

"General, form a square." This order was carried out under the downpour of shells. "How many men have you?"

"Perhaps five hundred. My regiments suffered most."

Napoleon brought his horse beside the General. Duclos spoke to him in a low voice. . . .

"Bring him to me," the Emperor said at last.

The troops had presented arms, and a great silence had come. The men seen by the General a few hours before were there, but not as neat as they had been, sweating, bloody, handsome as warriors should be. Duclos swept the ranks with a glance, from squad to squad, anxiously. Then suddenly he raised his sword, having found the one whom he sought.

"In the name of the Emperor, the soldier who led the storming party will step forward!"

There were detonations elsewhere in the city, but the enemy was routed. Accompanied by this martial sound, a man left the ranks. He was the same who

had been scolded by Duclos. He walked with his head bent, annoyed by blood seeping from a gash in his forehead into his eyes, which he had to wipe constantly. When he was in the center of the square, four paces from the General, he presented arms. Duclos lifted himself on his stirrups, and shouted:

"A ruffle of drums!"

Thirty drums beat at once. The grenadier shuddered, as if drunk with glory.

"You were in Egypt with me," the Emperor said, recognizing him. "And your Cross?"

"Won at Marengo!"

"All right." The Emperor addressed Duclos: "Carry on."

The General addressed the troopers.

"Grenadiers and drummers! You will acknowledge from now on as corporal, Private Michel Duclos, first to enter Ratisbon, and wounded in the face. And you will obey him in all that concerns the good of the service and the execution of military regulations!"

He whirled, and shouted in the silence:

"Drummers, the closing ruffle!"

Then he dismounted, embraced the grenadier, and it was seen that the two men wept.

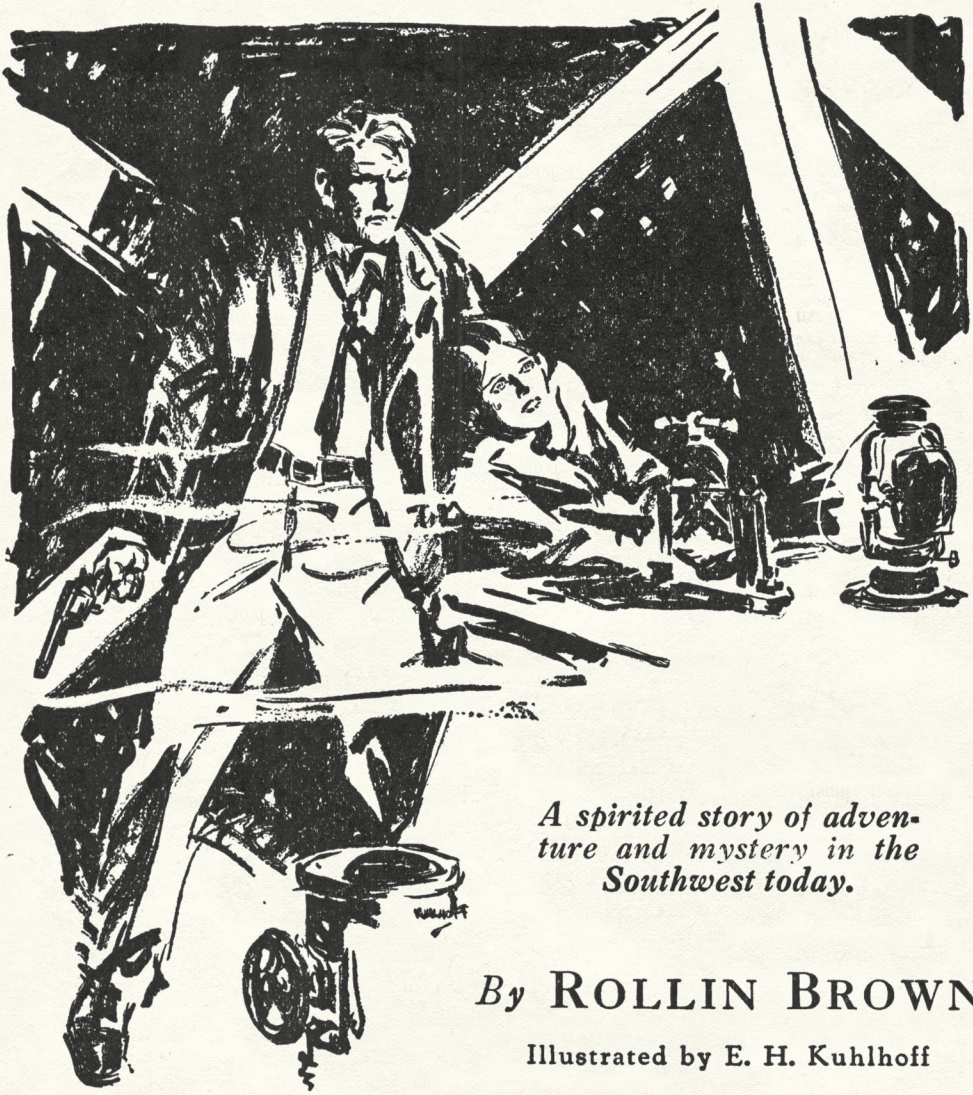
"MONSIEUR the Baron," the Emperor asked, "why is such a brave man only a private of grenadiers?"

"He had been pensioned, but I advised him to reënlist, last year." Duclos gazed at the veteran. "That way, we can see each other every day. Your Majesty, I have seen my family once in the last five years. A bullet can drop me; at least *he* will be there. We have sworn to die together for France and our Emperor."

"The man is known to you?"

Duclos answered: "He is my father."





*A spirited story of adventure and mystery in the Southwest today.*

By **ROLLIN BROWN**

Illustrated by E. H. Kuhlhoff

SINCE the first graying of early dawn the three men had been on the move. The hot white sun had now reached the noontime meridian. Two of the three were mounted on worn animals; the third led the way afoot. They climbed through a seemingly infinite expanse of barren ridges, always higher toward the ragged, zigzag divides of the Shed Roof range. They were three dotlike ants struggling against immensity. A buzzard wheeled far overhead.

"That spring, now," said Buck Henderson, the man who led afoot, "ought to be just beyond the next ridge. Just yonder. We've crossed back over the Santa Bella County line."

Buck tilted an old sombrero up from his eyes and wiped his forehead with a strip of torn red bandana. His lean

face was streaked with dust and rivulets of sweat that had run down from the hatband. His blue-gray eyes were bloodshot from wind and dust. At times Buck's face looked hard. Much of his twenty-eight years of life had been filled with hard experience, hard teacher of men.

Just last night there had been a new experience, a new lesson. Stake-ropes of one saddle-animal and the pack-horse had been cut; the animals had been tied too far from camp, out of sight and hearing in the bright starlight. At dawn, when the three men made preparation to go on, they had only two mounts, and no way of carrying more provisions than would go in saddlebags. So Buck walked. They were headed back toward the town of Buttonwillow, which they had left three days before, for a

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

# WILDCAT

last general survey of Honda Creek and the country beyond.

The two mounted men following Buck had no knowledge of the saddle. The elder, a slight, clean-featured man who wore spectacles, and whose face was burned to the color of raw steak, tried from time to time to lean sidewise in the saddle, easing weary muscles. He had spoken to Buck, wishing to stand a turn afoot now.

"No, Sanborn," Buck had decided. "When we get to the spring, I take the best horse and ride on. After that, you and Andy will have plenty of walking."

THE geologist Sanborn—Martin Sanborn—was of national repute. The other who rode behind, Andy Harris, was a big, bony man, with large features, ruggedly formed. He was known as "Silent" Andy. He sat his saddle unmoving, scowling, a black felt hat pulled down over his eyes, silent.

They climbed on. Sweat clogged the pores of the men and animals; dust stung their eyes.

The slight, spectacled Sanborn began to take new interest in the topography of the country as they worked higher on the central ridge of the range. His sunburned face lost its expression of acute discomfort. To the north became gradually visible miles of broken rough lands, flattening off to either side into semi-desert terrain. Sanborn's interest centered possibly ten miles away, but in the dry clear atmosphere this distance seemed halved. Finally he spoke to Henderson, his tone precise and clear-cut:

"Buck, the general topography appears to better advantage at this point, I would say, than in any previous location. Note the northerly outcropping now. You get it in a perspective that is readily traced. The anticlinal fold appears in its true proportion, sloping to the east and west. The upper strata layers have been soft—you see it plainly—deflecting the natural channel of Honda Creek to the east by what geological-ly would be considered 'stream piracy.'

Thus the main channel of Honda Creek follows the structure. That possibly explains why some one of the Two-State or Southwest Production Company's geologists haven't noted it. Unusual in the extreme. Trace the curvature of the structure to the west now, into Santa Bella County. Now note—"

"Yes, Sanborn; I see it," said Buck. "But it still must be better'n forty miles on into Buttonwillow. I'm going to be there tonight."

There was no halt. The weary man led on, and the two worn horses followed with their saddle-burdens. The fact that the third saddle-animal and the pack-horse had been cut loose from the ropes last night and driven away might mean almost anything. But it didn't mean some chance misfortune. Buck knew that for the past two days they had been followed. Cut ropes bespoke a knife, a hand on the knife and a purpose. It might be that the purpose was simply to hinder them; or again it might be definite attempt to delay their return to Buttonwillow.

Buck had left his partner Brad Ellis, of the Ellis-Henderson Promotion Company, in Buttonwillow four days ago. Brad Ellis had been attempting to negotiate a suitable long-time lease on the vast Rancho Viguá. Sanborn's opinion had been favorable from the start. There were a hundred thousand acres in the Viguá property, belonging to Miguel Viguá and his sister—held, however, under the guardianship of Felipe Mendez, an uncle. It was one of the few intact old California land-grants. Ellis had been trying to round things into shape at Rancho Viguá, at the same time waiting for Sanborn to pass final judgment.

Sanborn had given that now, after a last general survey, and his word was Honda Creek! Buck intended to get the word to Ellis tonight.

AFTER a half-hour of steady climbing they crossed the divide ridge. The spring that Buck looked for was visible below them—a small green fertile spot



in a swale of the ragged dun foothills below. Beyond, far south, stretched the desert miles of the upper Tinaquaic country. But now that they had crossed the divide of the Shed Roofs, the general scene had changed. To the northeast, toward the town of Buttonwillow, the slight chain of the Alamar Hills stood up from the flat country. The lower channel of Honda Creek was visible. Beyond the Alamars could be seen the dry-land cultivation on the edge of the town—burned, waterless squares, tawny in color, made tiny by distance.

The descent toward the spring was rapid. Buck, afoot, moved faster than the horses. Sanborn groaned audibly at the racking torture to his muscles, while the big, bony Andy Harris merely pulled his slouch hat farther over his eyes in silence. Buck scanned the country ahead. One pace going down this side of the ridge was worth three climbing the other. In the course of fifteen minutes the little spring was close below them.

**B**UCK halted suddenly. Sanborn's mount came on and stopped without command at Buck's heels. Sanborn looked up, startled, adjusted his spectacles and asked what the trouble was. Andy Harris twitched the brim of his slouch hat up from his eyes.

"Three men down there at the spring," said Buck thoughtfully. "They just took to the saddle. Looks like they're workin' up the other side of the swale for higher ground, after catchin' sight of us. Wonder what that means?"

Sanborn's face brightened visibly. "They may be cowhands from the rancho, and we might possibly get a third horse from them."

Much as Sanborn disliked the saddle, he none the less wanted to get on to Buttonwillow swiftly as possible. Buck, however, shook his head, and said:

"They don't act quite right!"

Silent Andy Harris was silent.

After a moment of hesitation Buck led on again. They wove down through

a patch of dry mesquite, out into the open once more. The three men who had ridden at their approach could be plainly seen now, holding their mounts on the rise of the next slight ridge beyond the spring. One of the men had dismounted, standing before the others. The air-line distance across the intervening swale was not much over a couple of hundred yards. Buck saw the man on foot lift his arms.

Something plunked into the slope behind and above them. Then the echoes of a shot resounded through the swale.

"They—they're shooting at us!" said Sanborn with utter amazement.

Buck had halted again. He shook his head ever so slightly.

"No, Sanborn. Not at us—over our heads. No man would be so poor a shot."

Andy Harris had reached back for his saddlebag, where he carried a serviceable heavy-bore revolver. But in a moment they heard a voice, thin with distance, yet carrying clearly across the swale:

"You no come here! Thees ees Rancho Viguá land. You savvy? No trespass; no come here!"

Buck turned to Sanborn. "Got those binoculars of yours handy?" he snapped. "Get 'em! I want to take a look at that fellow. He don't spika-the-English quite like some Mexican buckaroo tryin' to, if you get me!"

The geologist's hand trembled slightly as he pulled the small pair of field binoculars from case under his arm. He handed them to Buck, and for a long moment Buck studied the men grouped across the swale. In silence he gave the binoculars back to Sanborn, and turned now to Andy Harris.

"Do you remember a man named Gapolonis?" Buck said carefully to Silent Andy. "Gapolonis used to be some sort of a henchman to Joe Greer, down in the Ranger fields. A killer, if there ever was one. I guess we all knew Greer was in Buttonwillow now—tryin' to buck Ellis, in fact. But this is the first time I've seen Gapolonis in person!"

"There?" asked Andy, gesturing across the swale.

"Right there," said Buck. "He happens to be the man afoot, the one with the rifle. One of the other horsemen wears a derby hat. That's a good pair of binoculars, Sanborn, as I've remarked before."

The geologist was quiet, and Andy Harris merely nodded, a dark glow in his somber eyes.

"If we swing back," considered Buck, "we'll have to climb this ridge we've come down. Ten miles or more to the next water. Late evening, before we'd get swung back for Buttonwillow. I wonder if it isn't pretty plain now who cut the ropes on our stock last night?"

Andy nodded. Sanborn wiped a nervous hand across his damp forehead and nervously readjusted his spectacles.

"So I think I'm ridin' through," continued Buck. "Straight across Rancho Viguá land, in the shortest route from here to town. But you might let me carry that gun of yours, Andy."

It was the only weapon among the three. Andy nodded, gave up the gun in his hand, and spoke for the second time since dawn.

"Alone?" he asked.

"Alone," said Buck. "It's my job, not yours. You two wait here, and I think pretty soon the way will be clear for you to get down to the spring. Rest there, and when it gets cooler, follow in any way that looks wisest. I'm takin' your horse, Sanborn; it's the best."

Sanborn dismounted, but he was apprehensive. "Look here, Buck, what if it will take us a half-day longer to go around? Better that, than for you to take a chance."

"With Gapolonis over there?" said Buck. "With Joe Greer known to be in Buttonwillow, buckin' Ellis? With the ropes on our mounts cut last night? No, Sanborn; I just don't dare go around. Ellis will be waiting to hear from us. It's Buttonwillow for me tonight. It's just got to be!"

Sanborn's shoulders dropped helplessly, while Buck cupped his hands to mouth and called back across the swale to the three men:

"I'm comin' with a gun! Keep your distance!"

Buck waved the revolver Andy had given him and stuck it in his belt, grinning back over his shoulder to Sanborn.

"I got a hunch that's my passport. They're no Viguá riders!"

There was a sparkle of admiration behind the lenses of Sanborn's spectacles as Henderson mounted and rode into the swale below, calmly watered his horse and turned on into Viguá land.

"By Jove!" said Sanborn. "He's got nerve! I didn't suppose this thing meant so much to them."



"Everything," said Andy. It was Andy's third word since dawn. A sufficiency. Most men used words in a scatter-brained, prodigal fashion. But the word everything expressed it; that was just about what the winning of a suitable lease in here meant to both Brad Ellis and Buck Henderson. It accounted for the desperate gamble Ellis had, in fact, already started to play.

Buck cut a straight course for the northerly end of the other range of hills, the Alamars. The three men on the ridge by the spring watched him ride by without further move of resistance. They carefully maintained a distance beyond that of recognition for the naked eye. Buck grinned to himself.

"If Gapolonis wants to keep us from reachin' Buttonwillow," he told himself, "that's the best reason I know of to get there in a hurry!"

But before he had gone a mile, Buck had the sense that he was being followed. He began to watch the falling ridges and roll of the land to the rear. At length he sighted the dot-form of a single rider, following at a distance of a mile or more. It was undoubtedly one of the men at the spring, likely Gapolonis himself. For an hour the rider came no nearer, nor fell farther behind. Then he was gone.

Buck was untroubled. He crossed the flat stretches of land between the foothills of the Shed Roofs and the Alamar Hills, angling northeast. And by late afternoon he cut through the slighter range of hills, across the gradual valleys and swales of the Alamars that would lead him out onto the main road from Honda Creek to Buttonwillow.

IT was in the Alamars that Buck's restless eye caught sight of another rider. The man rode a big cream or "palomino" horse, and approached down a slope to the right, moving rapidly. Somewhere in here, Buck knew, a trail from the Rancho Viguá home place cut through the Alamars into Honda Creek, where a water conservation dam, in



which the Viguás were interested, was now in the process of construction. A family or two of homesteaders had found land outside the Viguá grant in the Alamars and filed on it. The rider, Buck judged, might be any one of the settlers or a cowboy.

But to his surprise Buck saw the man suddenly draw rein and turn to one side. In a moment he was purring the palomino animal south. Buck wondered.

"Funny country," he said to himself. "One man afraid to meet another. Gapolonis ridin' the Viguá range an' tryin' to throw a bluff that we can't cross. Strange country!"

Buck continued on down the valley at the same steady pace he had ridden since leaving the spring. The thing that counted was to get into Buttonwillow tonight, find Ellis and give him Sanborn's verdict—Honda Creek. Whether the presence of Gapolonis on Viguá range could mean that Greer had grabbed the rancho lease under Ellis' nose, Buck didn't know. He knew his partner, however, and thought not.

Yet after Buck had passed some distance, he saw the lone rider again turn back to the cross-trail he had been following, and continue toward the site of the dam in the higher levels of Honda Creek.

"Funny!" Buck told himself again, and forgot the matter. In the light of subsequent events, however, he was destined to remember. . . .

When dark settled, Buck was on the main road from Honda Creek to Button-

willow—an ungraded and uncared-for road, deeply rutted by the heavy trucking of cement, machinery and supplies to the site of the Viguá water conservation dam above. Buck smiled to himself; if luck only broke right, this same road would shortly see derrick-timber, men, bits and tools, oil-well machinery and fuel coming up it to the site of a wildcat well in Honda Creek. The wildcat would be called the Ellis-Henderson No. 1. Its significance would be Hope, the outcome of Fate. Buck smiled.

The dust was thick. He smelled it, breathed it; but overhead, stars were bright in the clear night dome of the sky. Toward eight or nine o'clock in the night an old car came rattling down the road from Honda Creek, throwing thick billows of dry dust. Two men were hunched in the foreseat of the auto. They passed, and Buck's weary mount shambled on toward town. Buck drowsed in the saddle, but the slacking muscles of his neck would always let his head snap forward and awaken him at the instant of sleep.

It was just a bit before midnight when he turned down the main street of the town. Despite the lateness of the hour, lights were still bright. Not a few stores were still open for business in this boom town. Men stood in knots along the streets. Cars and trucks were parked beside curbs, or loaded, moved on toward the east.

Ten miles east, the Southwest Production Company and Two-State Oil had brought in a shallow, high-gravity field some few months ago. Machinery, tools, men, and still more of each; steel, lumber and human muscle—all went into the maw of the east field, and it cried for more. Overnight, almost, this sleepy-county-seat town of Buttonwillow had become a place capable of handling iron and steel and capable of giving amusement to brawny muscle.

Buck stabled the exhausted horse; and now that the ride was over, he felt overpowering weariness in his own muscles. He staggered into a restaurant, ate a huge meal. Outside, trying to hold himself up, walk steadily, Buck lurched up the street to the rough frame hotel where he should find Brad Ellis.

**B**UTTONWILLOW, as a town, was wide open. In one corner of the hotel lobby a crap-game was openly in progress. Men were hunched over a spread blanket on the floor—tense, eager,

faces, glittering eyes. A little, skinny figure, flushed of face, breathed against the cubes in his palm, whispering drunkenly to them. He shot the dice.

"Wham! Read 'em an' weep!"

The little figure was on his feet. One hand clutched a sheaf of yellow-backs. He waved it wildly—danced across the room. His dissipated, weak, yet good-natured, face was convulsed.

"Shoot another thousand! Shoot a grand! Got five of 'em here—five thousands! Name's Hoppy Benner. Look me over. It's my night to howl! Shoot—shoot a thousand at one crack!"

Buck told the clerk at the hotel desk that he wanted Ellis—Brad Ellis. The clerk consulted a record.

"Mr. Ellis checked out last night," he said. "Late last night."

"What?" Buck stared dizzily into space. That forced ride for nothing!

The clerk repeated: "Mr. Ellis checked out last night."

"What address did he leave?"

"Let's see. . . . Los Angeles. 'Care of Ed C. Wheeler, Spring Street office, Los Angeles.'"

Buck nodded now. He knew Ed C. Wheeler; the name Wheeler meant that Ellis had gone after money. That in turn might mean anything. It might, in fact, mean that Ellis had accomplished some sort of deal. Buck nodded again.

"Gimme a telegraph blank." He wrote a six-word message:

CLOSE ON HONDA CREEK AND RANCHO  
BUCK

Buck could do no more. But those six words should mean all he could tell his partner, anyhow. He asked the clerk to get the message off immediately, then told him he wanted a bed for the night.

"Have to put you on a cot in the dining-room," the clerk informed him. "Every room filled tonight."

"All right. Anywhere."

Buck followed the clerk. Every muscle in his long, lean body cried for sleep. Dimly on Buck's consciousness the words broke again:

"M'name's Hoppy Benner! It's my night to howl! Shoot a thousand! Shoot—shoot a grand, I tell yuh! I got four of 'em left, pikers!"

The clerk turned and spoke back over his shoulder to Buck:

"You witness the fleecing of a lamb. Yesterday Mr. Hoppy Benner was begging the streets for the price of a cup of coffee. Tonight he's drunk and has

five thousand dollars! Tomorrow morning he will be begging on the streets again for the price of a cup of coffee. Here's your cot. Good night."

Buck flopped on the cot in the empty dining-room, boots on, hat on his head. A brief image of Hoppy Benner, waving a sheaf of yellow-backs, five thousand dollars, crossed his mind. Buck thought of Brad Ellis, in Los Angeles now. A good partner, Brad! Best in the world. Ed C. Wheeler had money, a lot of it. Might mean anything. Next move depended on Ellis, and there should be an answer to the telegram by morning. Buck slept. . . .

In the morning it was Brad Ellis, in person, who awakened him.

## CHAPTER II

"KEEP STILL, I TELL YOU!"

**P**OURED water on him. Slapped him with a newspaper. But this fella just don't want to wake up. If



he's still here in the dining-room by noon, the eat-gang will think he's a stiff."

The hotel clerk spoke, and Brad Ellis studied Buck's gaunt, sleeping face, then turned to the clerk.

"Get me that vacant room upstairs now. Put two extra cots in it. Two other friends of mine got into town this mornin'. Yeah, right now. I'll wake this fella up!"

Brad Ellis, who was perhaps ten years older than the prone Buck Henderson, sat down on the edge of the cot.

"Hell!" said Ellis finally. "Don't know whether I want to wake him up or not."

With that he shook Buck, not too roughly. Ellis was a gentle man. But the size and movement of the shoulders under his coat bespoke tremendous strength. He continued shaking Buck.

"Listen, fella! We got some land an' a lease. We got an unheard-of drillin' clause. We gotta get to work right now. We got no money in the bank—"

IT was Ellis' voice that turned the trick. Buck's eyes came open, blood-shot, staring. He hoisted himself on one arm, asking swiftly:

"Get my wire last night, Brad? Honda Creek!"

Ellis shook his head. "I caught the Continental Express out of Los Angeles, midnight last night. But had to wait at the junction until this mornin', to get a jerkwater freight connection down here."

Buck was wide awake now. "What's happened? If you didn't get my wire—"

"Fast action, Buck," Ellis interrupted. "He pushed me. No way of gettin' word to you, y'know. I had to take what I could get, and close the deal. Happened day before yesterday."

"He? Who pushed you?"

"Young Miguel Viguá. That strip of land that's his by title, in Honda Creek. But just the strip in Honda Creek. An' it cost—it cost money, Buck."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars bonus. Cash in hand. I'd never've got it, even so, except that young Viguá just had to have some money before the end of the week. He an' his sister have been backin' that conservation dam in Honda Creek. The pay-roll and other things was due, an' past due; young Viguá just had to have five thousand dollars."

"Whew!" mumbled Buck, bewildered. "Five thousand dollars! Say, that's strictly wildcat up there. Better than thirty-five miles from this Southwest and Two-State stuff. It might as well be a thousand miles—you know that! That's wildcat in Honda Creek, an' nothin' else. We should've got the whole sweep, the whole Viguá grant, for five thousand dollars. That's what we need—" Buck paused, and asked, "What was behind it?"

"Joe Greer," said Ellis calmly. "Young Viguá found himself in a position where he could play what Greer offered against

what we had. The biggest ante took the strip. That was all."

"Greer, huh?" said Buck Henderson. His face turned hard.

"Uh-huh, Joe Greer. An' by the way; he offered a thousand above me before papers could be signed. But young Viguá played square and didn't jump. Which was either mighty unfortunate or pretty lucky, however it turns out; because if you remember, we couldn't have met an extra hundred dollars over five thousand. It cleaned out our bank-balance."

"Uh-huh."

"That aint all," said Ellis calmly.

"No?"

"No! It's a three-months' drilling proposition."

"Uh!" grunted Buck. "Well, we can do it. Raise the capital in that time, if ever. Get a derrick on the spot and spudded. Not so bad, Ellis!"

Ellis laughed. "Spudded?" he said. "No, you utterly mistake me, Buck. It's not a case of gettin' the tools holed into the ground in three months. It's a case of—now just keep those mitts of yours off my throat, Buck—but it's a case of gettin' the tools down into the pay in three months! Gettin' production, understand? Gettin' oil in three months, or we lose the lease by default!"

Buck's blue-gray eyes turned slightly glassy. He thought about it for a long time, one arm hoisting him up in bed.

"Uh!" he said. "Three months from today, yesterday, or the day before? Which? You told me, but I forgot. We'll be splitting seconds!"

"Day before yesterday," said Ellis. "Last day of the month. There was no way of gettin' word to you sooner, y'know."

BUCK was out of bed now, pulling on the boots some thoughtful soul had removed when it was seen that he was not to be awakened at breakfast.

"Must see Sanborn again," he muttered.

"It's really not so bad, Buck," said Brad Ellis cheerfully. "Ed Wheeler has promised five thousand dollars for the bag. Went to Los Angeles right away to see him. Haven't got the money yet, but it's promised. As Wheeler expressed it, he has as much faith in fools' luck as geologists' reports. We're the fools!"

Buck nodded agreement.

"For the price of the hotel," Ellis continued, "I got a room upstairs this



mornin'. Sanborn an' Andy already got in town; I met 'em on the street. They'll likely be upstairs by now."

"Lead the way," said Buck.

Silent Andrew Harris and Martin Sanborn, the crisp little geologist, had fared better than Buck imagined. They had rested an hour or more at the spring without molestation; and at middle afternoon hit north, paralleling the western boundary of Rancho Viguá land. This had led them down the Shed Roof range and into an upper fork of Honda Creek. By midnight, when Buck had reached Buttonwillow, they had come upon the labor-camp at the site of the half-constructed Honda Creek dam. They had been given beds and food, and this morning a car coming into town had given them a welcome lift.

"THERE was some worry at the dam," Sanborn mentioned. "It seems that money was to have arrived yesterday, to meet the month-past payroll. It hadn't come last night or this morning. The construction superintendent was of the opinion that work at the dam was at an end. He stated that he wouldn't accept Miguel's personal check—meaning, I suppose, that Miguel Viguá's bank balance wasn't adequate, and the like. Seems strange."

Ellis turned to Buck. "That's the money young Viguá wanted. He needed five thousand dollars in cash. Nothing strange about it, though; his strip of land in Honda Creek is the only thing he can touch in all that vast rancho acreage. But Viguá should have had the money to the dam by now; the bank here was to see that he had cash in hand yesterday morning."

Brad Ellis was already getting out maps, spreading them across the single table in the hotel room. They heard a gigantic snore from Silent Andrew Harris, who had dropped onto the bed. The other three men bent immediately over the maps. Sanborn had a pencil in his hand, skillfully following the contour-lines of the map along Honda Creek. He checked a cross on the map and turned to Buck.

"There's the spot a test well should go, in my judgment," he said. "See it? The site of the Honda Creek dam marks the narrowest point in the cañon for a number of miles. The valley opens rapidly below. Geologically, the narrow point where the dam is now in construction marks one peak of the anti-

clinal fold; it is accounted for by a harder under-crush cropping through. This is completely broken down to the east. Remember this spot I've marked on the map from the ground, Buck?"

"Within fifty yards," said Buck.

ELLIS grunted and bent still farther over the table, to another sheet. "Good!" he muttered. "That comes well inside Miguel Viguá's strip of land. In the corner, here—see it? That Ballinger homestead, at the base of the Alamars, comes close to the south. We'll get a lease on that too, if humanly possible."

"Go after the main Viguá grant," advised Sanborn. "Protect yourselves with that; it's bound to cover everything in sight. Get it under a lease that will give you plenty of time—twenty-four months, say, at the inside. Five years would be better. I don't mean that the Ballinger lease wouldn't be A No. 1, for it is. But there's a hundred thousand acres in that main Viguá grant. If you could cover it, you've made a scoop—"

"'Fraid we can't," said Ellis briefly. "It was a sore point; Ellis had tried. 'Fraid not, just at present."

"No?" Sanborn looked up.

"No," said Brad. "It's one of those mixed-up affairs, Sanborn. Any lease-hound can tell you of 'em by the dozen. In this case we've got a Spanish grant—families of Mendez and Viguá. The title was, like most of 'em, recognized by the U. S. Government when California was annexed, and is as good as gold. For over a hundred years the grant has been in the hands of either a Mendez or a Viguá, by direct inheritance. Now:

"A man called Don Verdugo Ramón Viguá marries his distant cousin, a Mendez. The whole of the grant is his by the marriage. He has two children, this young Viguá we know, Miguel, and his sister—wait a minute, I got her full name here; I'll read it to you—Señorita Mary Consuela Josefa Mendez Viguá. How's that? Now, old Don Verdugo was a wise *hombre* in some ways. He had seen a lot of his intimate friends become poor people, what with taxes, drouth, high living and no sense of business management. So on his death-bed Don Verdugo planned different for his children. To Miguel, when he should become twenty-one, was given the strip of Honda Creek land, about a thousand acres, stretching east and west, to use as he wished. . . . All right! We got the drilling lease on that."

Sanborn nodded. "Yes. Good! That's your test well."

"But the other—not yet!" Brad Ellis shook his head. "Old Don Verdugo plainly wanted to keep the main grant intact. The girl and her brother share it equally. Young Miguel gets a speaking share when he's reached the age of twenty-five years; and the girl, when she marries; or no marriage, never. The girl's a year younger than her brother, who hasn't been twenty-one more than a month or so. Now, at the time old Don Verdugo died, his deceased wife's brother was living with him—a man of seemingly mature judgment and insight. Don Verdugo gave the management of the place to him in iron-bound terms. He's a Mendez—Don Felipe Ygnacio Mendez."

"HOW about dealing with Mendez, then?" Sanborn asked.

"O. K.," said Ellis. "Only he's a very cautious old gentleman. Miguel would like to have the lease go into our hands, if anyone's; I'm sure of that. But while he doesn't seem unfavorable to us, Mendez sees no cause for hurry whatsoever. You can't blame him. Then there's this to be considered: suppose the girl got married tomorrow, automatically getting full control of her share of the rancho?"

"A good attorney could advise you, of course," said Sanborn. "It could be handled in some way. Mendez may have full rental control of the property. Likely has."

"Uh-huh," said Ellis. "The girl, however, would follow any lead her uncle decides on. Miguel's the only hope we have. Maybe he will talk Mendez into it, in time. And that's all. For the past week I been out there every day. There's nothing more that can be done. Mendez is a fine old gentleman, but he simply isn't in any hurry."

Buck suddenly grunted.

"Brad," he said softly, "it looks to me like we been played for suckers. I think it's Greer behind the works. Here's what it looks to me has happened: Young Miguel Viguá signs the lease on this strip of land that's his in full title. We've paid five thousand dollars to sink a hole in it, which is an unheard-of bonus for strictly wildcat. If we produce, Viguá gets the customary one-eighth royalty. There's an unheard-of drilling-time clause—three months to get production. I tell you it looks fishy. If our test well doesn't actually produce oil in three months, from

the day before yesterday, the land will go back into Viguá's hands by default, and we're out five thousand dollars and full cost of drilling. Three months! If we fail, everything that the Viguás own will again be under one hand, and—"

But Ellis cut him short:

"Sure, I know what it looks like, Buck. I aint blind. At the same time, I'm sayin' I believe young Miguel is square. He's playin' straight. Needed that five thousand dollars the worst way."

"The fact that he didn't accept Joe Greer's offer of one thousand dollars over yours makes you think so, huh?" asked Buck. "Well, I'd say that Greer probably engineered that little touch of realism himself—in the same way that the ante on Miguel's strip of land was pushed up, by his biddin' against you."

"No," considered Ellis gravely, while his big shoulders hunched aggressively. "I don't think so. I know young Miguel, and I trust him, Buck. He favors us, not Greer; I'm sure of it. The fact that he drove a hard bargain on Honda Creek can't be held against him. It's sort of like this with Miguel, as he told me: He and his sister have been behind that dam in Honda Creek. They want to see it go through, and they had money enough to get behind the thing and start construction, figuring that they could then get funds from outside somewhere. It hasn't happened that way. With the dam up about fifty feet, half finished, there aint money to go any farther. Miguel needed five thousand dollars to pay actual debts on the thing and to meet the pay-roll now due. He fought to get that money; and when he had it, he played square by us."

"What accounts for the three-months' drilling-time clause?" asked Buck.

"Greer," said Ellis. "He offered to take it on that. Greer was pushing against us there in just the same way he was raising the ante."

"WELL, little enough difference as far as we're concerned," muttered Buck, restlessly pacing the width of the room. He was now getting into the spirit of the thing. "Oh, hell!" he snapped. "We'll do it! We'll drill a well in Honda Creek in three months, and it'll have oil in it."

Brad grinned. But Buck was looking from the hotel room window down into the main street.

"When did Wheeler say he'd give us the cash?" he asked. "We'll need it

*pronto*, for a start. It'll give us a little credit. Let's see: Stormy Harris can take one shift. Andy'll dress tools for him. Where was it Sam Eggers went now? Kettleman Hills, was it? We'll need him. Sandy Culver was at Santa Fe Springs last I heard. We'll—"

For the length of time it would have taken to count ten slowly, Buck forgot to speak. He stood motionless at the window, looking into the street. Then he spoke carefully, as though there was need for care in even the mention of the man's name:

"There's Joe Greer now!"

ELLIS got to his feet and walked to the window, while Sanborn still sat at the table, idly tapping the end of a pencil on the arm of his chair and studying the maps. Greer had just left a car at the curb below, and turned down the opposite side of the street. He paused for a moment, said something over his shoulder to the driver of the car, who could not be seen, nodded and went on. Greer was a thick-set and quick-moving man, dressed in mildly flashy clothes. His polished shoes were dusty now, and the cuffs of his trousers rolled up. He walked rapidly away.

Buck Henderson's eyes were hard little pin-points of blue-gray.

"Wonder where Greer's bodyguard is this mornin'?" he asked softly of no one. Then, turning to Ellis: "I mean Gapolonis. You remember Gapolonis, I guess. Down in Texas, if you'll recollect, Greer rarely dared leave a doorway without Gapolonis at his heels. Several land-owners he'd tricked down there would have taken pleasure in shooting Greer."

Brad Ellis nodded. "I remember," he said. "Gapolonis was a killer with a gun, if there ever was. Fast, too, like lightning. I happened to have seen him kill Skinny Davis, tool-dresser for old Ragline Willis, down in Ranger. Skinny went for a gun first, right enough, but his fingers never touched it. I guess that incident hasn't escaped your mind either, Buck. I've often wondered, since, why a man who was fast and accurate enough with a gun to drill Skinny square between the eyes, didn't just wing him instead."

"Uh-huh," said Buck. "Well, Gapolonis has followed Greer up here to But-tonwillow, or Greer has brought him." And Buck related the affair at the spring the day before, and mentioned the fact that their horses' ropes had been cut, the night before that.

Brad Ellis' face was a study. "You're sure it was Gapolonis?" he asked, when Buck had finished.

"Positive!" said Buck. "For about an hour after that one of the three followed me across country. Maybe for longer, but I didn't pay any attention."

"It's certain Greer has had some one watching our movements," considered Ellis. "Maybe he thought I wouldn't move until I heard from you. That might explain it—tryin' to delay you. Meanwhile the deal had come off. Buck, I had to play fast and to the limit on that Honda Creek strip if we wanted a hand in this country. That was all."

Ellis turned back to the table, and Buck followed. Swift plans again began to take form and dovetail. On the bed, Andy Harris snored. Sanborn bent over the maps with expert eyes.

"Look here," Sanborn pointed out. "There's the approximate location of the new Two-State wildcat, over west, in Santa Bella County. I was over there last month. You two want to keep an eye on that well. No, nothing direct about it. But in my judgment they will have been going through something of the same formation you'll find. We'll see. If true, it'll give you some sort of gauge on yourselves. This Honda Creek structure is long. It can be traced for miles. But that, of course, doesn't mean that the whole under-length of it is soggy with oil. The production area might be very small."

PERHAPS ten minutes passed. Buck had written three telegrams. He pushed his chair back now, about to leave the room and get them on the wires—

There was a sharp rap on the door. "Come in."

The door had already opened. A lean, leathery-skinned figure stood in the doorway. There was a wad of tobacco in one cheek, and the wings of his long mustache were tipped with amber, from much and frequent tobacco-juice. He wore hip overalls and a faded blue cotton shirt. A small-brimmed, dusty black sombrero was tilted back on his forehead. There was the point of a star to be seen under the wing of his vest.

In the man's leathery right hand was a shiny, much-used revolver, held steadily but not menacingly lifted.

"Wondered if yo'-all was at home," he said. "Clerk at the desk reckoned to me that this was where I'd find you. Which one of you, now, is the tired an' exhaust-



ed man that hit town here, midnight las' night? Name of Buck Henderson."

Under the table-edge Buck suddenly felt the hand of Ellis close on his wrist. It held him down in his chair so powerfully that he could see the big shoulder-muscles under Ellis' coat swell. It was Ellis who answered, his voice gentle, conversational in tone:

"Oh, Buck? Him! What trouble has Buck Henderson got himself into now?"

There was no trace of emotion on the leathery man's face. He shifted the lump of tobacco farther back in one cheek and suspiciously eyed Andy Harris, who was now sitting up on the bed, blinking from sleep.

"Well," he told Ellis, in an equally conversational tone of voice, "well, it just seems Buck got playful or something yesterday an' killed a man. Murdered young Miguel Viguá on the Alamar trail, to be exact. Coroner is bringin' the body in this mornin'. Further, there is theft, to the extent of some five thousand dollars, from Miguel's dead body."

Four men in the room sat utterly motionless, utterly silent. Sanborn stared dazedly into Buck's face. The hoarse breathing of Silent Andy was the only sound. Breath whistled in Andy's nostrils now, as it had two moments before in sleep, but for utterly different reason. He glared at the leathery man. Surprisingly, it was Silent Andy who spoke:

"A lie!" Two words.

The leathery man wagged his head. He seemed impartial and unconcerned, except for the shiny gun, held steady but not lifted menacingly.

"I asked a question," he stated. "It aint been answered yet. It's gonna be! Which of you is Buck Henderson? The warrant is here in my pocket. Charge is murder. I'm Sheriff Donahue, Button-willow County."

Buck's chair rasped back on the floor. The grip that Ellis had on his wrist was not enough to hold him. He shot up, white-knuckled hands on the edge of the table.

"Where does that charge come from?"

"Well, son, from a man named Gapolonis," stated the Sheriff. "Gapolonis claims to have been followin' this Henderson through the Alamars, and to have been an eyewitness. That's all. But I intend to take Buck Henderson into my personal safekeeping for a while. I intend to do that without further delay, also!"

Silent Andy Harris was already half across the room.

"I'm Buck Henderson!" Andy roared.

Ellis, at the table, had a new grip on Buck.

"Shut up!" Ellis hissed in Buck's ear. "Keep still, I tell you! Greer is behind this!"

### CHAPTER III

"GO AFTER HIM, SON!"

ELLIS got Buck out of town that night. He ignored all protest. His great-muscled shoulders appeared to square themselves against actual physical menace, while he argued gently.

"Listen, Buck! Listen to me. It aint as though this was a blow aimed just at you—this is a shot at the Ellis-Henderson Promotion Company. If you'll remember, Silent Andrew Harris has a share in this same Ellis-Henderson combine; an' if he wants to do this thing, he's got a right to."

"Yes," said Buck, enunciating carefully. "I remember that Andy Harris didn't get his wages out of that dry Ranger test well of ours, because we didn't have the money left to pay him. So to keep from losin' everything, Silent Andy accepted a share in the company. Yes, that's true, like that!"

"Well, he's got a personal interest with us anyhow," insisted Ellis. "You can't deny that. An' you can't deny that he saw things pretty plain an' thought pretty fast this mornin', with this Sheriff Donahue standin' there in the room, waitin' to pick out Buck Henderson."

"But—murder!" whispered Buck. "If the charge was anything else—"

"If the charge was anything else, there wouldn't be any need for what Andy's done," said Ellis. "You can't bail out a man charged with murder. Buck, for the next few hours, days or a week, you got to be on the job. It means everything. If you had only the sense to see things like Andy did! Look here, Buck: It was only luck that this could've happened. Suppose Greer had come—he'd have identified you in a second. Or Gapolonis. I tell you, Buck, that was a break. It was luck! Are you crossin' that sort of luck, Buck Henderson?"

"But murder!" repeated Buck. "Gapolonis an eyewitness. Followed me into the Alamar Hills. Saw me kill and rob Viguá! I tell you—"

"YOU tell me nothin' I don't know," growled Ellis. "It's a rank frame-up. We got to sink a wildcat in two months an' twenty-eight days, and we got to get production. Every minute counts. We got to get machinery, men and a derrick on the spot before a hole can even start down. You got to take up my end of things now, Buck. I'll have to stick here. If our luck would only hold for a day, a week. A week, Buck—think what that would mean! Andy isn't goin' to be tried for that murder! Neither are you. But you got to do all you can in what time we have."

"I reckon," said Buck, "that Greer, or Gapolonis, or the law-force of Buttonwillow, wouldn't exactly be expectin' somebody else to claim my shoes under a murder-charge."

"Exactly," said Ellis. "Exactly: That's the reason it carried off as it did. The only reason. Remember, Buck, that Andy hasn't confessed to the murder. Nothin' like that. He's just briefly took your place in the Buttonwillow County jail, for maybe an hour more, for maybe a few days. There's goin' to be an explosion when it's found out, a big explosion—but maybe you got a day or so free, Buck. See? A little time, Buck, an' it's worth everything."

"Oh, I see, I reckon."

"When things break we'll fight. We'll fight with everything we got! It's a trumped-up charge, Buck. I know, Sanborn knows, an' Andy knows, it's one of the rankest frame-ups ever pulled. Andy's takin' your shoes, Buck, and givin' you freedom for an hour or a day. You got to take it! Of course, the *saf-*

*est* thing you could do right now, Buck, would be to identify yourself and take your seat behind the bars instead of Andy. If you were to argue the thing from that angle now, I'd never say a word against it. If you want to—"

"Brad," Buck admitted, "you have a most persuadin' way of putting things. It amounts to genius with you. I'll fall flat handlin' your end of the partnership, but I'll try for as long as I got. Who do I see first? Ed C. Wheeler?"

"Yeah." Brad was instantly business. "Get that five thousand from Wheeler in cash, deposit it in our Los Angeles bank without a second's delay. Then try to talk Wheeler out of some more, as much as you can get. And Buck, don't by any chance mention the fact that Buckley L. Henderson is in trouble, wanted on a murder-charge, frame-up, fake or whatnot. See! Talk to Wheeler, Buck, an' talk sweet. Old Ed C. is a gambler, and he's worth anywhere from two millions to ten, dependin' on the stock-market, various oil properties and other things at the moment. You might even get another five thousand dollars, on a bet. Never can tell. Here's Sanborn's report to show him. We got to have it, an' twice as much again from somewhere. Meanwhile we haven't got a cent. Think of that—not enough to buy rig-timbers!"

"The best I can do," Buck promised.

He gave Ellis' big hand a fleeting grip, took up a single bag and ran from the patch of shadow they had been standing in along the tracks, for a long freight of flat-cars just getting into motion.

AT eight the next morning, freshly shaved and trimmed, Buck Henderson stepped into Ed C. Wheeler's office, Spring Street, Los Angeles. For an hour and a half thereafter he cooled his heels in the outer room, seething mentally. In Buttonwillow, in these very moments, he knew, Brad Ellis was fighting to get men, rig-timber and transportation, on nothing but sheer nerve and promises.

It was precisely nine-thirty when a buzzer on the secretary's desk rang, and she nodded Buck toward an inner door. Buck swung back the mahogany panel.

At a big desk in the inner room sat Ed C. Wheeler, a portly, well-dressed yet somehow rough-appearing, man. His eyes were shrewd and sharp under bushy eyebrows, and while he had passed the sixty-year mark, his cheeks were ruddy with health. He was known as a plunger

and gambler, and also as one of the sharpest business men in the West.

"Hello, fella. How come—you givin' your partner a rest an' vacation in the money-gettin' graft, or he givin' you one?"

**B**UCK took the square, hard hand that was offered. "Neither," he said. "We find we have a rig to build in Honda Creek, and Brad used to follow the trade of rig-builder. So we swapped places for the good of the job. Further, we need the money you promised in cash, an' a lot more besides. Brad himself sort of hesitated to ask for it."

"I'll just bet!" said Wheeler. "Brad is the hesitating kind—until he's swung a loop of talk about you, or thinks he has, and tied it fast. You're more direct. So you want that five thousand dollars this minute, huh? An' how much more?"

"Well, well," said Buck. "Well, say twenty thousand dollars! On top of that, we might come back for another ten. This is a hurry-up job—"

"I'd say it was a damn'-fool drillin' lease," interrupted Wheeler. "You got a little strip of land on which you've got to get oil in three months, or forfeit. You paid ten times' too much bonus. But what was Sanborn's final opinion?"

"He believes in it," said Buck truthfully, but without visible impression. "Here's Sanborn's report. He's enthusiastic."

"How about the other leases in there?" asked Wheeler, not glancing at Sanborn's report. "That Rancho Viguá, for instance. Or are you going to develop that hundred thousand acres for somebody else? Show 'em that there's oil underground, an' all they got to do is drill for themselves an' get it."

"We've got a likely piece of land as it is, Wheeler. Wildcats have been sunk on a fraction of the area we got in Honda Creek. Granting we get production, there's enough land in that single strip to sell and pay back your investment a hundred times over." Buck was talking.

"Investment?" asked Wheeler. "No, son—gamble. It's nothin' but a gamble. An' a long while ago I learned all about that 'grantin' production' stuff. Just grant production on almost anything, and it's a grand proposition. Now if that hundred thousand acres in Rancho Viguá was in the lease, y'see, I might feel more sympathetic about things."

"It's not," said Buck. "Mendez holds off. That's all. And if Brad hadn't jumped in as he did, we'd have lost

Honda Creek. Now we can't hold up drilling, waiting for Mendez."

Wheeler laughed outright. "I'd give a lot if only Brad Ellis could hear your line of talk, Henderson. An' I'd give a lot more to hear what he had to say to you alone, after hearin' it. I don't think you're goin' to talk me out of ten cents, Henderson. Not that I mean Brad Ellis could either. But listen now; there is one-two things I am interested in: How, for instance, do you happen to be in Los Angeles and at the same time in the Buttonwillow County jail, facin' a murder charge of some consequence? How?"

Buck felt that he was falling in the swift elevator that had lifted him to Wheeler's suite—a sickening, terrible sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Well, there was a little line about it in this morning's paper, for one thing," said Wheeler. "Here you are in person, for the other."

Buck looked at him. "Does that mean you're calling a cop, Wheeler?"

"No," considered Wheeler thoughtfully. "But it might mean I was going to give you twenty thousand dollars. I'm interested."

**I**T developed that Wheeler's interest was not so much in the charge as in who had brought it, and the circumstances. His keen eyes twinkled at what Andy had done; he slapped one knee with the firm, square palm of his hand. Yet his expression was serious.

"Joe Greer," he said, "is an unscrupulous crook. Besides that he's a first-rate oil promoter. I know him! He's got a world of experience behind him. If you beat Joe Greer, son, you're going some. Murder, if he thought it would get him what he wanted, wouldn't balk him for a minute. Now I wonder what actually did happen to Viguá?"

"He's dead," said Henderson. "That's about all I know. The bullet entered his throat and went upward through the brain. The shot was fired at very close range, at a distance so close that it might have come from his own hand. But the money was gone from his body—five thousand dollars!"

Wheeler nodded. "Around a boom town like Buttonwillow, you'd find any number of characters willing and glad to undertake murder for less than the five grand young Viguá was carrying. On their own, I mean. Greer might have engineered it, or he might not. What

could Viguá's death possibly get Greer, I wonder?"

Buck could only make a vague guess. "Young Viguá's share of Rancho Viguá would go to his sister, I suppose. Mendez has control as guardian. Ellis had it figured that Miguel was favorable to us and would like to see us get some kind of a percentage lease on the whole rancho. Mendez' own opinion isn't known."

"Uh-huh," muttered Wheeler. He thought about it a while, then whistled softly. "This is bad business. Since the junior member of the Ellis-Henderson Promotion Company is accused of the murder of young Viguá, the chances of the aforesaid company's getting the rancho lease are not very good, I'd surmise. Not quite! But I suppose the murder is purely on circumstantial evidence, Henderson. The fact that your partner knew young Viguá would have the money, I mean; that you were in the Alamars that afternoon, and the like. The money would be the motive. Law force couldn't find anybody else to hang it on, huh?"

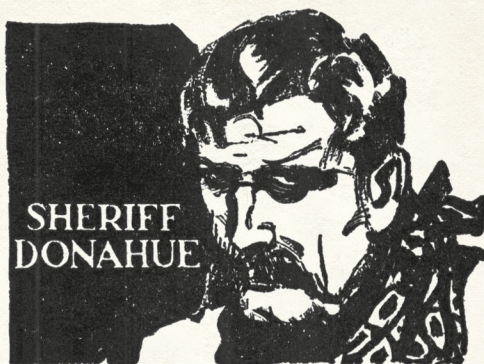
"No," said Buck: "There's a supposed eyewitness. Name of Gapolonis. As a matter of fact Gapolonis used to be a sort of henchman to Greer and his private gunman, down in Ranger, Texas. Brad, Andy and I knew him down there. He's got a killer's reputation."

Ed Wheeler whistled softly again. He was silent. Then he suddenly pushed the buzzer button at his desk. In a moment his secretary entered.

"Will you draw a check for twenty thousand dollars and bring it in for my signature, Miss Smith? And while you are here, may I present Mr. Andrew Harris—I believe the name should be. The fact that Mr. Harris gave you a different name, when asking for me this morning, was merely an oversight on his part. Merely an oversight, which I don't think he will make again. The party called Henderson happens to be confined in the Buttonwillow County jail, and while newspapers occasionally make errors, many people believe them. Thank you kindly, Miss Smith. Make the check payable to Ellis-Henderson Promotion."

**WHEN** the girl had gone Buck turned back to Wheeler, a changed expression on his face.

"Wheeler," he said, "it's just occurred to me what I've been asking of you. Suppose I wanted this twenty thousand dollars for a get-away? Suppose I'd done



it—that murder! How do you know I didn't? What proof—"

"Then, son," interrupted Wheeler, his shrewd, sharp eyes twinkling, "I'd be getting off cheap. The last man I judged wrong cost me just a quarter-million. It happened when I was interested in the Texas fields. That man's name was Mr. Joe Greer! That's why you've got this money. Go after him, son!"

#### CHAPTER IV

##### "WE SPUD TOMORROW, ANDY!"

**TEN** o'clock in Buttonwillow. Brad Ellis pounded his fist on the wall of a telephone-booth. He had a long-distance connection with Haybrook, Field & Company—lumber.

"Get that order out of your yards in half an hour," he bellowed. "It's got to unload here in Buttonwillow tomorrow. Rush job! Rush, I said! . . . What?"

Brad's voice died. Singing into the receiver, the voice on the other end of the line said:

"Very sorry, Mr. Ellis. But we cannot possibly give you credit to that extent. Not at this time. I'm sorry."

But Brad could bluff. If the lumber didn't leave Los Angeles by noon, he knew that there was not a chance in a thousand of getting it to Buttonwillow on the morrow. The Buttonwillow yard couldn't supply him and wouldn't advance credit, if it could. Brad had to bluff; he couldn't wait until Buck would have had time to see Wheeler, talk to the canny, hard-shell old capitalist, squeeze money out of him and get it to the bank.

"Say!" Brad growled into the phone. "Say, you—our bank will honor a check for that lumber an' ten times over. We have deposited to our account,"—might as well make it good, something whispered to Ellis,—"we have deposited to our account ten thousand dollars. Now if

you don't want to sell lumber, say so, an' I'll talk to a real outfit that'll be tickled to death at the chance. . . . What? What? You say you're calling our bank for verification? What—"

"If you'll hold the line, please," said the voice on the other end of the wire. "We're calling your bank."

Weakly Brad sagged against the wall of the telephone-booth. This was the third lumber-company he'd called. The others wouldn't do it. All afraid of wild-cat drilling outfits. No credit. Ellis had to have that lumber tomorrow. Had to! They'd called his bluff. . . . The voice was speaking again.

"Hello. Hello, Mr. Ellis. . . . Yes, we'll have your order at the railroad in an hour. Rush order—we'll see to it. Perfectly satisfactory. Your bank gives your credit standing at twenty thousand dollars. Thank you for the order. We'll see that it's rushed."

The receiver slipped from Ellis' weak fingers. But an hour later a telegram signed "*Andrew Harris*" verified the information.

Then Brad Ellis went after a crew of rig-builders—and got half a crew. That morning, at dawn, he had offered double wages, and speeded a car of laborers west into Honda Creek, to level off and get foundations set. Sanborn, who now knew himself involved, at least, when the trial of the State versus Buckley L. Henderson would be forthcoming, or the hoax exploded, had spared another day to accompany them. For the past week an important rush job had been calling Sanborn north.

"But they're fighters!" Sanborn told himself.

There was work for ten men; and Ellis, collar torn open and tie pulled half down his great chest, did it alone.

AN hour after noon, that same day, at the wheel of a dilapidated car he had bought, Ellis swerved off the Honda Creek road to the south, following meandering twin ruts. A crudely lettered sign on the main road had directed him:

#### BALLINGER HOMESTEAD

There was a dry-land quarter-section of homestead in here that Ellis wanted. It lay on an edge of the Alamar Hills, adjoining the Miguel Viguá strip to the south, cutting into a flaw in the main Viguá grant.

With money actually in the bank, Ellis was prepared to pay any reason-

able spot-cash bonus for a lease on Ballinger's land. Driving into the homesteader's ranch yard, however, he was utterly unprepared for the turn things took.

Ballinger, a shiftless dry-land homesteader, squared his lean jaw and glared at Ellis. In the doorway of the shack behind him were the heads of a slim young woman and several children, all craning necks to see the stranger.

"Mister," growled Ballinger, "yore name admits thet you're partner to thet-there Henderson murderer. As such, Mister, you don't want to come try to get no lease from me, or anything else. Savvy, fella? I hope they hang Henderson; he oughta be lynched! Mister, you got just about sixty seconds to get started out on the same road you come by." Ballinger turned to the girl in the doorway. "Mary, git my gun an' bring it to me!"

ELLIS was suddenly angry—through to the core of him.

"Henderson had nothing to do with Viguá's death!" he roared. "Say such a thing again, and I'll knock you flat! There never was a rottener frame-up. Viguá was one of the few friends we had in the country here, the last man we wanted to see dead. It's the dumb fools like you—" There rage choked Ellis. "Dumb fools like you that believe everything they hear!"

"Huh!" said the other, surprised by Ellis' fury. "Huh!"

Ellis glared at him, started to say something more, then turned away. He heard Ballinger mutter uncertainly:

"Mary saw him fleein'. If it warn't murder, there never was murder!"

Ellis pivoted like a top.

"Sure it was murder, you fool! But we didn't want to see Viguá dead. Let that seep into your dumb head, an' I could give you plenty of reasons why we didn't." Brad paused suddenly. "Who's Mary? Who's this Mary who saw somebody fleein'?"

Ballinger made a gesture over his shoulder with a thumb. The girl was already obediently coming from the shack with her father's rifle. She was seventeen or eighteen years old, tall and gawkily formed, but with an uncared-for prettiness about her features.

"Mary heard some one shootin'," mumbled Ballinger, "an' she thought it was me after cottontails, over yonder in the hills. So she come over that



way. She seen him runnin', I tell yuh—an' a-runnin' fast!"

"Seen who runnin'?" snapped Ellis.

"Seen this Buck Henderson, I'm tellin' yuh! Fleein' like the devil was after him."

Ellis whistled softly to himself. "How did Mary know it was Henderson?" he asked carefully. "Had Mary ever seen Henderson before that time?"

"No," considered Ballinger. "No, I reckon to the fact she hadn't. But I also reckon she knows a stranger in the Alamars when she sees one. Huh, Mary?"

The girl nodded silently.

Brad Ellis laughed hoarsely and without mirth. "So Mary saw a stranger, huh? And that's how you person'y know Buck Henderson killed Viguá! That's good; that's pretty good!" He paused suddenly. "Say, what do you mean by *runnin'*? Runnin' on foot?"

"That's the way most men run, Mister."

"Whew!" whistled Ellis. "Tall, lank fella, was he? Wearin' boots an' an old sombrero?" He addressed the questions to the girl now.

"He had money in his hand," said Mary Ballinger, with conviction. "That was about all I saw. It scared me, too. He had a whole lot of bills in one hand, and he kept wavin' them, first in one hand then in the other. I don't think he was a very tall man; he looked kind of little and small. Just runnin' he was, with his eyes on those bills, and wavin' them. He seemed as scared of me when he saw me, as I was of him. I knew some crime had been committed when I saw all that money. We heard the truth this mornin'."

**B**RAD ELLIS forgot about the lease he had come here for, forgot the hostility of Ballinger. For Ellis knew that Gapolonis claimed to have followed Buck from the meeting at the spring and to have been an eyewitness to the shooting of Miguel on the Alamar trail. There had certainly been no mention of a little man running away from the scene afoot, with bills clutched in his hands. Here was something of vital importance!

"Whew! Runnin' afoot—little man—bills—a witness!" muttered Ellis under his breath. He whirled again to the girl. "Just where was this?"

"Yonder," answered the elder Ballinger for his daughter. "Where that trail for the dam first cuts down out of

the Alamars. Reckon you aint familiar with the country hereabouts, or—"

But Ellis was already striding for his car. He forgot the lease entirely. The starter ground savagely under his heel. He shot the car around and went down the road with billows of dust piling up behind him.

**H**E was actually back on the main Honda Creek road before he began to realize what the consequence of his intended action would be. He was headed for the Buttonwillow Sheriff's office. Surely the girl should be forced to give her written testimony immediately. While her idea of the man who had had the bills was foggy, Mary Ballinger would undoubtedly realize that Buck wasn't that man, seeing him. She should be brought into Buttonwillow at once and faced with Buck Henderson.

There Ellis halted. It wasn't Buck Henderson now held in the county jail. It was Andy Harris. What the girl would say would be meaningless, if she were brought to confront Andy. For a moment some conception of the conspiracy against the course of justice, of which each of the four men in the hotel room had been guilty when Andy Harris took Buck's place, stared Ellis in the face. Each of them had aided in the deception. When the whole thing came before a court, that part would not appear savory, to say the least. Somewhere in this business was impending disaster—Ellis could vaguely sense it.

Mary Ballinger couldn't be brought to face Buck Henderson now. Buck was in Los Angeles. To bring him back to Buttonwillow would be to expose the whole thing. It would mean that both Buck and Ellis would be caught in the mesh of legal deliberation. It would mean that the wildcat in Honda Creek would be forced to wait for a while, or move forward under other management.

That couldn't happen, if avoidable! Three months to get a well down, get production! Minutes counted! Get the derrick up, get a hole started down first. Then—

Ellis swung west on the Honda Creek road, instead of back to Buttonwillow. Fifteen minutes later he was on the site of the wildcat. To Brad's mind, it was already a well, going down after oil. Sanborn had superintended the leveling and foundation seats. But he knew that Ellis had intended to go after the lease on the Ballinger place, before news of



**BUCK  
HENDERSON**

actual construction in Honda Creek was broadcast through the country. Sanborn asked Ellis about it.

Brad shook a downcast head. "Buck killed Viguá; I'm Buck's partner. Old Ballinger ordered me off the place."

"I see," was Sanborn's dry comment. After a while he asked. "May I have the lease-blank, Brad?"

Ellis gave it to him. His mind was on other things. When he saw Sanborn drive away in the flivver, half an hour later, he merely nodded. But Sanborn came back with the Ballinger lease.

"I had to give Ballinger more of a cash bonus than it's worth, Brad," he said. "But I'll make the difference right from my own pocket. I believe in this, and if you have no objection, I'd like to have some definite interest here with you."

"You've got some interest," snapped Ellis, "whether you want it or not, Sanborn. All of us may find ourselves inside lookin' out for a while—through bars. That's an interestin' fact that's just occurred to me." Brad swore to himself softly for a moment. "I won't try to thank you for the lease, Sanborn."

The slight, dry Sanborn merely smiled. Brad Ellis swore again.

"It appears," Ellis muttered, "that everybody else accomplishes my own jobs for me."

That was far from true. With half a crew of rig-builders on the job, Brad Ellis took saw and hatchet beside them. Old dimensions and figures for the standard timber derrick came back to his mind, snapped on the end of his tongue. His saw ripped through brace and girt lumber. With monkeylike sureness and speed the great-shouldered man went aloft. In his day he had been a famous rig-builder and now he was equal to two men on the job. The big twenty-penny spikes disappeared into lumber as though eaten, Brad's hatchet and the power of

his mighty forearms and shoulders behind the blows. He drove with either hand, and among those he had hired, Brad Ellis commanded instant respect.

They used the auto that Ellis had bought, to run the timbers up by pulley, and four days after the lumber was on the job, the derrick was completed.

Trucks had come out the Honda Creek road—west, as Buck Henderson had visioned they would, that night not long before when Buck rode a lone way to Buttonwillow. But he was not there to see. The trucks roared and groaned under the mighty weight of tools, boiler, drilling-engine, bull-, calf-, and band-wheels, drilling-line, bits—the many things that go into drilling an oil-well.

It was a giant job for strong men. Brad Ellis was capable. He caught a bare three or four hours' sleep each night, and was at it again before dawn. Telegrams crackled on the wires, to an Andrew Harris, Los Angeles; and tools and machinery came back to the wildcat in Honda Creek by truck and rail. And men had come.

There was a little sour-faced, hawk-nosed individual who appeared at the rig one sunset. This was Stormy Harris, blood brother of the silent Andy. He was years older, half Andy's size, and only in the hawkish features could family resemblance be traced. He swore continually in a low-pitched whine, when things went to suit him; and when they didn't, men said the silent Andy was a hot-mouthed geyser by comparison. Stormy immediately sought Ellis, and he was icily calm and short of words.

"Andy's my brother, kid brother. Now how come, Ellis?" Stormy gestured toward Buttonwillow.

**E**LLIS was inclined not to go into details. The facts behind Andy's confinement in the Buttonwillow jail were not things to be carelessly spoken of.

"Don't stall!" growled Stormy.

So Ellis, knowing and reading the man, told him everything. Stormy Harris said nothing when he had finished; but five minutes later a soft, unimpassioned stream of curses came from Stormy's lips. The pitman on the walking-beam didn't suit him. It should be red oak. Any fool knew that! He, Stormy Harris, was commanding the rigging-up of this outfit. Further, they needed a bigger boiler than the one ordered. At least an "eighty." Send this back and get the other.

Thus Stormy, one wildcat driller in a thousand, delivered himself. And Ellis, raging inwardly, harassed, worried, dead with fatigue, obeyed. Stormy Harris was not a man to be crossed. And he was going to drill the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, in Honda Creek.

Then there came Sam Eggers, who was fat and voluble, to handle the other shift—he had left a better job in the Kettleman Hills for this. There was Sandy Culver, humbly a tool-dresser, but wise in the lore of wildcats. They came in procession, and they were picked men, cream of the hard-fisted, hard-headed workers and fighters. They were no men to be hired by money alone. They came now because they knew Ellis and Henderson, and Buck had asked them.

**T**HREE days after the derrick was up, —record time,—the job was rigged, ready to spud. And not until then, after three days, did Stormy draw Ellis aside. "Andy wanted to see you," he told Ellis. "First minute you got to spare. I thought I wouldn't mention it until you had that minute. I talked through the bars with Andy, day I come."

If Andy had sent for him, Ellis knew instantly how important it must be. In five minutes he was burning the road toward Buttonwillow. Ellis had put Andy in the hands of the best attorney he could find in the town, and left the rest to fate. He doubted that Andy would speak, even to the attorney; but the attorney was to do whatever possible in the matter of collecting scattered evidence of any nature whatsoever, and attempting in every way to delay a date of trial. Delay was the keynote of Brad Ellis' admonitions—delay and silence. Why Greer had not pushed things, or at least looked closer into them, Ellis did not know.

His restless mind mulled over the idea, as he shot the car along the Honda Creek road for Buttonwillow. The fact that Andy's fake rôle had not been discovered before now might be ominous, or it might mean that Greer, through Gapolonis, knew he had nothing to stand on, once the trial went before a court. Afraid of his own frame-up! Perhaps Greer also was pulling for delay of trial, merely to keep Buck Henderson, as he thought, out of the fighting on Honda Creek as long as possible.

Little over an hour after he had left the wildcat, Brad Ellis charged into the town of Buttonwillow. At the county

jail he was allowed to speak immediately with Andy. Silent Andrew had lost his sunburn; he appeared somehow drawn and worn. Andy had tasted third-degree. His hawklike face pushed narrowly against the bars now.

"Gapolonis been here," he growled. "Seen me. Thought you better know."

Ellis became suddenly tense as steel, and a hand that grasped one of the bars turned white along the knuckles.

"Gapolonis knows Buck by sight. They never were on speakin' terms, but they knew each other down in Ranger. Gapolonis made the charge," Ellis whispered. "Andy, he'd know in a second you weren't Buck. Whew! Brought to identify the criminal, of course. I wondered why he hadn't been."

"Was!" Andy Harris nodded scowling agreement.

"How about Greer?" Ellis shot at him tersely. "Has Greer been round?"

"Once," said Andy. "Looked at me close!"

Ellis was dumfounded. Greer certainly knew Buck. Not a doubt but that Gapolonis did too—he knew him, followed him from the spring that day. This didn't make sense. Greer, through Gapolonis, had framed Buck for the murder of Miguel Viguá, no matter how young Viguá had died. Gapolonis had supposedly been an eyewitness to the crime; he'd given testimony to that fact. Now he apparently killed whatever value his words would later have by recognizing the wrong man. Andy himself, who had been with Sanborn, had a sound alibi. It appeared certain victory for Buck Henderson, once the case came before a court. Or did it? There was no changing the fact that four men had each aided in the deception that had put the wrong man behind bars on a murder charge. How long would a court debate that? What would be the verdict?

**A**NDY HARRIS' hawklike face was darkly scowling, savage.

"Aint talked! Aint goin' to!" muttered Andy.

Ellis nodded, unthinking.

"How's—the well comin'?"

"We spud tomorrow, Andy."

The paling face of Silent Andrew Harris lighted with a grin. He nodded sagaciously, silent. In record time the derrick in Honda Creek was up, rigged and the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 ready to spud—that made it worth the price that Andy was paying.

## CHAPTER V

"SHE'S KIND OF A PRETTY GIRL."

EARLY next morning Buck Henderson in person was back in Buttonwillow County, at the test well in Honda Creek. He had come by airplane, landed on a flat strip of bottoms in the low corner of the Ballinger homestead and dismissed his sky-bird. He appeared at the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 on foot, in overalls, the slouch hat pushed back on his brow. He shook hands with the crew all around, looked over the job and fell to work.

"My name," Buck told the gang, "is Andrew Harris." That was all. But the loyal Stormy, Eggers, Sandy Culver and the second tool-dresser understood.

Ellis was still in town. But Buck was back where he belonged, on the job. He was in time to see the Ellis-Henderson spud, an event he was forced to realize Ellis would have missed only because of other matters of decided importance. Steam was up; over went the great band-wheel; then the huge bit was striking into the soft top-soil with mighty strokes. She had spudded, and there was no demonstration. Nobody shouted or waved cheers. Merely the job was on; and Stormy Harris, head driller, swore whiningly and incessantly to himself. All was well with the world and Stormy.

Brad Ellis didn't get back to the wild-cat until early afternoon. He showed no surprise at seeing Buck.

"I thought you'd come back when you got my telegram, Buck. Greer is wise, as I told you. No point in your hiding too far out, in that event."

Buck nodded. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Only thing I can see, positively, is that Greer wants to see us get the test down a ways now," said Ellis. "He knows it's Andy, not you, in the Buttonwillow jail—and he's content to let matters rest just there."

"UH-HUH." Buck studied this for a moment, his brow knit. "In turn that must mean he's got the Viguá grant cinched. He wants us to show him what's underground here without expense to himself; then he can develop the big thing."

Ellis shook his head. "We've got close to a thousand acres here in Miguel's strip, Buck. If we show oil, just how much will the lease on those acres be worth? Figure it out for yourself.

And we might easily have the whole field covered with Honda Creek and the Ballinger lease. The hundred thousand acres of Rancho Viguá would cinch everything; that's its value to us right now. But Sanborn gave his O. K. to this strip without thought of whose land it was." Ellis paused. "Buck, would it be like Greer to calmly sit by, if he thought he could get this strip too?"

"No," said Buck. "Not that I know of."

"Then don't figure it in that fashion," snapped Ellis. "Joe Greer undoubtedly wants the Rancho Viguá lease. But he doesn't want it just so he can calmly sit by, watch us do the work, then develop a sure thing on his own. It might be a sure thing, and again it might not, which Greer knows as well as the next man. Buck, he wants the rancho lease for two reasons—and one of 'em is: If he gets it, he's got another chance at Honda Creek! He'll try to scoop the works."

"Just how?" asked Buck.

LISTEN! Since Miguel is dead, this Honda Creek strip goes back to the main rancho acreage. Right? Then at this minute Miss Mary Consuela Josefa Mendez Viguá owns Honda Creek, subject to our lease upon it. It's all hers, and she hasn't a word more to say about it than she's had before. Don Felipe Mendez, if you remember, has the speaking part. And he continues to speak until such time as Miss Viguá marries suitably, according to her father's will. In any event the girl isn't of age yet. . . . All right: Do you see what Greer is after?"

"In a way," considered Buck thoughtfully.

Ellis nodded. "If Greer could land the rancho lease, he's in a position to get Honda Creek also. It's all under Mendez' control now. If we fall through on this lease, don't get oil in three months, according to the drilling-time clause, we lose everything, all right to Honda Creek. If Greer had the rancho tied up then, say, he'd get Honda Creek with the rest of the land. So much is plain as day; add two and two together. Buck, the minute Greer happened to get the rancho lease,—if tomorrow,—we'd about want an army standin' around the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, to guard the property. Any long delay, or accident, and we lose. I believe you know how easy it is to jim a well!"

Often enough, under ordinary drilling conditions, a bit got loose from the cable. The crew might fish for hours, days, weeks, before work could go on. If serious accident happened in the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, she would never get down to the pay in time and fulfill the terms of the lease, as Buck well knew.

"I was out to Rancho Viguá this morning," Ellis continued. "Greer evidently has been making himself sweet with old Don Felipe Mendez. He's a guest at the rancho, I take it. Anyhow, he's there. I went out there just once more to talk about a lease with old Mendez. Playin' a thousand-to-one chance, of course."

"Uh-huh. What happened?"

"Just what might be expected to happen," said Ellis. "I was ordered off at the point of a gun. Y'see, I'm known as the partner of the man who murdered Miguel Viguá, for the five thousand dollars he was carryin' on his person. Buck, we two will never get the Rancho Viguá lease now. Never! Greer may. And if he does, Buck, then we've got to guard this wildcat as though it was made of gold. . . . Since I talked with Andy last night, I've hired a man to shadow Greer or Gapolonis if they leave the ranch. That's the only precaution I can think of. Something, Buck, is bound to happen."

"What?"

"That's the question!"

Meanwhile the test in Honda Creek was eating down. Meanwhile Andy Harris reposed in the solitary confinement of the Buttonwillow jail, under the alias of Buck Henderson, charged with murder in the first degree. Brad Ellis, through the attorney, fought for time on the grounds of bringing difficult evidence into the case. The attorney proved to be a shrewd man; yet he confessed that there were limits to the time that he could delay action.

WITH Buck at the well, Ellis took quarters in town. He hurried back and forth to Los Angeles, in and out of supply-houses. There was casing to be delivered now on the Ellis-Henderson No. 1; they had hit a big flow of water above the three-hundred-foot level, more at the five. There were small accidents and delay, and there were days when the sour-faced Stormy cursed softly and incessantly to himself, and the paunchy Sam Eggers spun lies for the amusement of any and all listeners;

when the giant bits pounded steadily down through a fast-eaten sandstone, and all was well.

Ellis began to pray for time—just time. If they could bring the Ellis-Henderson in,—and she was close to making wildcat history for a standard rig,—that was all. Just bring her in, then let Joe Greer spring anything he had in a stacked deck. At the same time Ellis knew in his heart that this was just the thing Greer wouldn't wait for.

ELLIS began to make plans, preparation; and he talked long with Stormy Harris at such time. In case Buck and himself were suddenly put out of the running, Stormy was to take charge, full charge. And after five hundred feet Ellis thought it advisable to have an armed guard on the rig, day and night. He chose two men with the utmost care. It later proved not enough—not enough care; but Ellis didn't have superhuman judgment. . . .

Work on the Honda Creek dam had been indefinitely suspended. From his own pocket the honorable gentleman Don Felipe Mendez—and he was such—made up the money stolen from the body of Miguel Viguá, and paid off the debts. He could do no more. The grant of the Rancho Viguá paid profit with its cattle, of course, and was worth a vast amount of money; yet it was not Don Felipe's pleasure to spend these funds, since he was guardian of the property, in either a way that he might personally wish, or in a way that his niece, owner of the place in name, might choose. All of that was settled in the will that had made Mendez guardian.

The dam in Honda Creek remained as workmen had dropped their tools. The contractor trucked the best of his machinery from the job. A watchman was installed to protect what was left. The dam was simply an unfinished wall across Honda Creek, in the narrows less than a mile above the new wildcat, now drilling; it was erected to a height of little over fifty-five feet, curved against the mighty force of a body of water it might have impounded. Honda Creek ran little water at this season, but flood gates had early been installed and were in working order. Finished, the structure would have stood eighty-nine feet high in the narrows, cement reinforced with steel, grounded on bed-rock.

Rumor had it that Miss Mary Viguá would have done almost anything now,

had she been able, to see construction continue. Even more, since Miguel was gone, she wanted to see the dam completed. The climate was right, soil was good, and the lands would blossom under irrigation; but they were in no part Viguá property. Had they been, she could have drawn on the rancho funds. The low-country settlers, once wildly enthusiastic about the project, had lost interest with the coming of the oil-boom about Buttonwillow; the fools among them dreamed of the black gold under the whole country. They cared nothing for water above, at least not enough now to subscribe funds by mortgage or bonds. But to Mary Viguá the dam meant the fulfillment of a dream, its completion a tribute to the memory of her brother.

**S**UDDENLY, one day, Greer left the Rancho Viguá and the town of Buttonwillow, Gapolonis at his heels. The man Ellis had set to watch Greer reported faithfully. The two had gone to Los Angeles. Ellis knew that it was only an incident; Greer would be back, but Ellis felt heartened.

There were other incidents: One afternoon the handy-man about the well—and cook of a sort—told Buck he was quitting. Stormy Harris and he had had words; Stormy had been insulting. Buck told the man to go on into town on the fuel-truck and get his pay from Ellis. The man had a curling smile on his lips, and he spoke out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes not meeting Buck's.

"How come that you person'y got so many names, Mr. Harris?" he asked. "I notice that the crew here calls you Buck until some stranger, scout or a truck-driver blows in; then it's Mr. Harris this, Mr. Harris that."

Buck simply reached out and took the man by the collar. "Is that any of your business? Huh? . . . Now get out of here, and when you get your pay from Ellis, tell him to send out a new man. Make it snappy. You're not quitting; you're fired!"

The next day Ellis came, and there was a small, skinny figure on the seat of the car beside him, a man with a dissipated, weak and yet good-natured face. That he belonged to the general order of bums was plain to be seen; yet his smile was cheery somehow and vaguely winning. Buck Henderson wondered where he had seen the man before.

Ellis came over and introduced them. The little man stuck out an eager hand.

"My name's Hoppy Benner," he said. "Mighty pleased to meetcha, Mr. Harris. . . . Now could I make myself a cup o' coffee before takin' up duty?"

Buck grinned. He remembered Hoppy Benner now. . . . A crap-game! The little figure dancing wildly in the lobby of the Buttonwillow hotel with a sheaf of bills in his hand. The clerk had mentioned then that he would be as broke again by morning as he had been the day before. The prophecy had plainly not been groundless.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Stormy Harris seemed to take instant liking to Hoppy Benner; yet this may have been simply because he could curse him unendingly and Hoppy would only grin. They understood each other from the start. Hoppy made himself endless cups of coffee in the cook-tent, prepared meals, and besides the cook job was a willing and faithful worker at the tasks any and all gave him. He did three times the work the other man had done, and fitted swiftly and cheerfully into the scheme of ever hard-pushing labor, into the grinding monotony, the pounding, straining endless hours. Buck swiftly forgot him except when there was some special side-job that Hoppy could handle, or he ate a meal Hoppy had prepared.

**W**ORD came from Martin Sanborn, who had not been seen since the day he helped put in foundations and had brought back the Ballinger lease. It was a telegram to Ellis, dry and straight to the point as Sanborn himself:

TWO STATE SANTA BELLA COUNTY WELL  
BROUGHT IN TWENTY ONE HUNDRED FEET  
HIGH GRAVITY BUT SMALL PRODUCTION LET  
ME HAVE CHECK ON YOUR OWN FORMATION.  
ANYTHING DEFINITE ON TRIAL  
SANBORN

There was nothing definite on the trial. But Ellis lost no time in sending Sanborn notes and samples of their own formation. Back came the message:

FORMATION CHECKS SO FAR YOU SHOULD  
HIT THREE HUNDRED ABOVE SANTA BELLA  
REMEMBER I SAID WATCH THAT WELL  
SANBORN

"Sanborn thinks it'll be around eighteen hundred, then," Ellis told Buck. "Eighteen hundred! Whow! We figured up to twenty-five. Buck, we're goin' to do it. I mean we're goin' to see eighteen hundred, the way things are goin', an' if necessary a lot more."



The next day the bit hit a creeping, elastic, clay-like formation at eleven hundred and forty. The stratum carried a flow of water. The bit pounded endlessly on the elastic mass that gave to the stroke and went back into the hole. The bailer wouldn't bring up what it should. The hole pushed in before the reamer had it ready for the next joint of casing. The Ellis-Henderson was a workhouse for driller and tool-dresser. Endless bailing, endless drilling, with no headway.

Two days later, Joe Greer and Gaponis arrived back in town and once more became permanent guests at Rancho Viguá. Ellis immediately put the man he had hired before to watch them, but the task was difficult. Greer and Gaponis showed no desire to leave the house at any time. They waited in cheerful seclusion. There they were—ominous, watchful shadows. And the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 pounded on, shift after shift, against the maddening formation struck at eleven-forty, and made little headway.

The crew became nervous irritable, and strained. To ease the tension in his own mind, Buck began taking long walks through Honda Creek when the cool of afternoon came. There was nothing now but the endless bailing, endless pounding of the bit upon the slipping, elastic structure below. A wire from Sanborn stated the Two-State's Santa Bella had encountered this same thing from fourteen-fifty to a bit past fifteen hundred, without the water flow, however, which made all the difference in the world. But further, the Santa Bella County test was making a little stir west, which might with all reason spread across the county line to them. His own opinion on the length of the structure and formation, Sanborn stated, met with that of one of the Southwest geologists, this latter company pushing in swiftly to get some hold in the possibly good new territory of Santa Bella.

TEN days passed. Everything went wrong. Stormy, silent and irritable, spent fifteen to eighteen hours of the twenty-four on the drilling floor. Scant inches of hole that held shape was victory, yet maddening victory. They had

pounded a bare thirty-five feet of casing into the yielding, tenacious mass below. And Buck said to Ellis one night:

"You remember what you told me about that Ballinger girl, Brad? About her seein' a man runnin' away from the spot where young Viguá was killed—afoot, bills in his hands?"

"I remember," growled Ellis. "Every word. And I don't intend to forget. What about it?"

"Nothin' much," said Buck. "But she's kind of a pretty girl, I think—this Mary Ballinger. Nice eyes an' hair, y'know."

ELLIS sensed the bomb before it exploded. He snapped two words:

"How come?"

"Oh, I got to wanderin' the other afternoon," Buck explained half-reluctantly. "Finally hit out across Honda Creek and over into the Ballinger land. Up sort of on the edge of the two, there's a hill that looks up and down the valley bed. It stands right over the dam. Maybe you've noticed. Kind of a nice hill. . . . Well, she happened to have climbed that hill the same day, too."

"So?" was Ellis' comment.

"Bein' two people so far alone by ourselves," confessed Buck, "we couldn't quite pass each other by without speakin', y'see."

"Who'd you tell her you were?" snapped Ellis.

"I didn't tell her. She seemed to think I was visitin' the watchman at the dam below or something like that."

Brad Ellis was suddenly eager. "You met her there more'n once, Buck?"

"Yeah," admitted Buck, still reluctantly. "Twice now."

"Listen!" snapped Ellis. "This is right. Buck, you pump that girl. Say anything, but make it clear to her you're interested in the death of Miguel Viguá. Say you know Greer. Tell her what kind of a bird he is. Pump her about the man she saw runnin' away from the murder with bills in his hands. Remember every scrap of it—keep it all fresh in her own mind. Don't let her forget."

Buck nodded. "I kind of had that idea at first myself. But somehow she don't pump very well. Seems kind of

constrained an' distant the minute Viguá's death is mentioned. Like it bothered her."

"Listen!" growled Ellis. "That girl may be the card to beat anything Greer can spring. Buck, you got to play that girl for what she knows, every word of it. Because Greer aint made another move in weeks means that he's all the more dangerous. Andy is still in jail. The attorney is having trouble gettin' further delay. Any hour, any minute, something may pop. You got to play her along, get her on our side. If she's in sympathy with us, she'll be worth twice as much as a witness!"

"But it's kind of difficult," muttered Buck. "She's pretty, such nice eyes an' hair. She rides a big palomino horse up there. You ought to see the way that girl can manage a saddle-animal. A fella just naturally sort of hates to have some deceitful idea underneath, right or wrong; he just naturally hates to be stringin' her along for some purpose of his own—"

Above the rattle of machinery in the night beyond the two suddenly heard Stormy Harris curse shrilly. He was apparently calling Hoppy Benner. It seemed that this shrill, unimpassioned rattle of oaths snapped the tension of the days past suddenly, as though some magic. Each man knew Stormy and his idiosyncrasies. There was no question, no further words; but something suddenly relaxed, like tension eased on a straining cable. Ellis chuckled audibly and hurried to the floor.

**B**Y noon of the next day casing was pushed down. The hole now was on tough, firm shale, far from easy going; but Stormy, gambling on Sanborn's judgment of the formation, decreased the hole to eight-and-a-quarter-inch tools, and they were hammering down with the fastest hole-makers of all ordinary cable-tool equipment.

The progress became steady. Shifts changed with regularity once more, sought their bunks, food and what relaxation they could find, and were back on the job for twelve grilling hours more of it. Frequent scouts now appeared from the big companies, talked to Buck, went away and were back again after a while. All knew of the Two-State's test in Santa Bella that had come in with too little pay to cover operation; most were of the opinion that this merely proved the Santa Bella territory worth-

less. But Two-State was planning to erect another test two miles this way, to the east.

The Ellis-Henderson No. 1 hammered on into the tough shale that changed once more suddenly, and a single shift was able to drop forty-five feet. The test was making history. Yet Ellis was more taciturn, and he repeatedly cautioned the two armed guards. They hit the fifteen-hundred-foot level, the sixteen. Still Andy Harris reposed in the Buttonwillow County jail, under the apparently unguessed alias of Buck Henderson, charged with the murder of Miguel Viguá. The attorney Ellis had hired was having increased difficulty in delaying things. Buck had never left Honda Creek. But now, on the sixteen-hundred-foot level, there was still a month of time left for the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 to become an oil-well.

**I**N Los Angeles one day the shrewd, canny Wheeler, who gambled on men as well as oil, spoke to Ellis of practically unlimited funds for future development, if they showed indication and could only get something better in the way of leases. Suppose the Ellis-Henderson showed promise, but no oil, an event far from improbable. If they could only get something better, a long-time lease on Honda Creek, and the Rancho Viguá tied up in some form, as protection! A hundred thousand acres in there, all open for lease, all in one piece, waiting for somebody! The Rancho Viguá!

"Nobody can keep you from leasing it on your own, or trying to, Wheeler," Ellis snapped in irritation.

Wheeler smiled thoughtfully. "You think I haven't tried to do just that, Ellis? Then let me put you right. I've sent a man out there twice, on my own. And mine wasn't the first cash offer for the Rancho Viguá lease, either. Several companies are interested. Greer, as near as I can tell, is acting as adviser to old Don Felipe Mendez in the matter."

That was news! But Ellis had suspected as much. At the same time he felt assured that Greer hadn't got the lease in his own name, holding it secretly. Don Felipe was cautious. Ellis' shadow-man had his own troubles, but he regularly reported each move that Greer or Gapolonis made beyond the confines of the ranch.

Thirty days were left, one month, for the wildcat in Honda Creek to show pay



or become so much useless junk as far as Ellis-Henderson was concerned, under the existing lease. For ten days of that time the tools pounded slowly down, as though nothing could stop them now, this close to the eighteen-hundred-foot level—where, if Sanborn's judgment proved correct, they would meet the verdict. The wiry, sour-faced Stormy became thoughtful and silent, waiting apparently for the change in formation that should occur. He had given his own order to the guards about the well. It was:

"Let nobody but the crew get on this derrick floor, or within a hundred yards of it. Savvy that?"

In Buttonwillow the attorney Ellis had hired for Andy suddenly confessed himself powerless to obtain further delay over the last date set for the trial. The date was only a week distant.

At the well, the formation changed!

The waiting, watching, became tense. One morning Stormy would speak to no one. He had slept no more than an hour or two in the off-shift. Even the affable, paunchy Sam Eggers was restrained and sharp. Sandy Culver, tool-dresser wise in the lore of wildcats, walked somehow as though he moved over eggs. The guard on duty felt it. They hammered into water-bearing shales, feet each hour; yet the formation was firm enough to hold the hole. The bit was running fifty feet below the casing, and the last joint of the big pipe at the well was in the hole. Water rose to the level of the casing and slowly came higher.

AT noon a hundred feet of water was in the hole. Stormy was feeling the stroke of the bit. Throughout their formation, notes checked roughly with those of the Santa Bella County test, as Sanborn had long before prophesied. But before the verdict, casing must still be landed. Then the cementing-in—three hundred sacks of cement dropped down the hole, pushed into the outer formation and allowed to harden. If a water-tight job were the result, the hardened plug would then be drilled and the well brought in. There was no thought of blowing in the Ellis-Henderson, in a hole that was running water. Casing landed and the cementing job were necessary, to shut the water flow from the hole.

So still the fate of the Miguel lease hung on the phrase that had amused old

Ed C. Wheeler—"granting production." In ten days the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, in Honda Creek, might be oil-journal talk; in ten days she might be a hopeless hole in the earth, a useless derrick, monument to fools. Sixteen days left in the lease, to get production.

The trial of Buck Henderson for murder was on the court calendar for the middle of the coming week.

THIS day was a Saturday. Two scouts drove in after noon. The day-guard stopped them on the road fifty yards from the derrick, and Buck talked to the men, noncommittally. The scouts knew the well to have been guarded since the early days of work and saw nothing for suspicion.

In the afternoon Hoppy Benner took a word from Buck as dismissal for the rest of the day, and disappeared, ambling aimlessly south toward the Balingler place, an old shotgun in hand. The same thing had happened the day before, although Hoppy hadn't returned to the rig with any of the ever-welcome cottontails for the mess.

But nobody missed him. The scene was too tense. Both drillers were on the floor. There wasn't anything for Benner to do right now; he had been faithful, uncomplaining and willing for the many hard days past, doing the work of two men.

Stormy was running the bailer with clocklike regularity. Drilling and bailing. The sour-faced little driller handled the huge tools and machinery with the seeming delicacy of a watchmaker. He carefully recovered cuttings from the bit, smelled them, tasted them. When the bailer dumped, his hawk-like eyes were always on the sump. They were in changing strata, beyond the water, but with the upper flow a hundred feet high in the hole. There was something uncanny about the wiry, hard-cursing little driller.

Just before three o'clock Ellis suddenly appeared on the scene. He heard what Buck had to tell him, and dismissed it with a single, curt nod.

"Buck, Greer has the Rancho Viguá lease!"

"When did you find that out?"

"About an hour and a half ago," said Ellis.

"The man you've had shadowing Greer learn it?"

"No. There's a public stenographer I've been hiring in town every once in



a while, to get off letters and one thing and another needing to be typed. She's naturally learned what business I was in, and the like. Knows it's Honda Creek, of course. Right after lunch today I went to her with a letter, and she told me that she was sorry that I hadn't been able to swing the Rancho Viguá lease also.

"That surprised me a bit, and I asked her how she knew I wasn't going to get it after all.

"Why, because Mr. Greer has it," she said. "He dictated a lease to me on tentative terms over a week ago. This morning he had me working on the final paper and copies."

**B**UCK whistled softly to himself, looking into Ellis' eyes.

"I questioned her some on the terms of Greer's lease on Rancho Viguá," Ellis continued, his big shoulders stiff and unnatural. "It's just simple robbery, Buck! On the surface of the thing, Greer enters a partnership arrangement with Don Felipe, for the development of the lands the old man is guardian of. Get it? That fixes things up for Greer. It lets him out of paying a bonus, even. It gives Greer an infinite amount of time for development. Rancho Viguá even meets a proportion of the drilling-expenses. It's just robbery, Buck—about the cleverest robbery I ever knew being drawn into a lease. My God, if Miguel had been alive, he'd have kept the old man from signing any such thing as that!"

"The lease is signed, is it?"

"Don't know," snapped Ellis. "But if Greer has had the papers drawn, it will be. Don't underestimate him for a minute, Buck. Greer undoubtedly knows his man. There's not a thing in the world we can do! Out of fair-play, if nothing more, I'd like to hit over there and tell old Mendez what he's done or

going to do. But he'd never listen to a word of it, coming from me. He'd sign that much quicker. It's rotten, Buck! It's the crafty, vicious robbery that only a man like Greer would be capable of!"

Ellis looked at his watch. The hour was just three. He turned rapidly away, over to the floor, speaking with Stormy for a scant moment.

"I'll have that casing out in the morning," Ellis promised. "Four-five joints more will be all we're ever going to need here—right, Stormy? The Ellis-Henderson is gettin' ready to show us how we stand. I'll have a cementing crew lined up for us."

Ellis walked rapidly to his car, climbed in. The day-guard happened to be standing near by.

"Is that gun you're packin' loaded?" Ellis asked him.

For answer the man drew the weapon and showed the cylinder. A row of six brass cartridge heads caught the glint of afternoon sun.

"Keep it loaded!" snapped Ellis. He was gone, back to Buttonwillow, in a swift cloud of dust.

Later in the afternoon Buck saw Hoppy Benner returning to the test. Hoppy, evidently, hadn't had any luck hunting over on the Ballinger place. No game in hand. Hoppy disappeared in the cook-tent. There was something frightened and rabbit-like in the way he dodged under the flap and was gone from sight.

Buck couldn't see the actual fear in Hoppy's face. It was white with fright, as though Hoppy might have seen an apparition over there on the Ballinger homestead, the Alamar Hills, where Miguel Viguá had died, his body robbed of five thousand dollars!

## CHAPTER VI

### AT THE RANCHO

**T**HE clock in Don Felipe Mendez' study showed the hour to be just four in the afternoon when Joe Greer rose from a chair at the opposite side of the table. The flashy, heavy-set Greer studied the old gentleman before him for a second wordlessly, then concluded bluntly:

"This is simply business, Mr. Mendez. Let's have the witnesses in now."

Greer had his own copy of lease on the table before them. For the past hour they had been going over the various

clauses and terms set forth on paper. All lands embraced by Rancho Viguá, under the guardianship of Don Felipe, were included in the lease for the direct development of the property. It was cannily worded. Honda Creek was included, Miguel's title having gone back to the main grant since his death; it was explicitly stated that if the present lease in Honda Creek went by default of the drilling-time clause, it was to be developed under the new terms of the other and Greer's management.

"But business," considered Don Felipe. "No, my friend, there is more than just business in this lease before us. Business today is too cold and hard. I somehow find myself at a loss in it. It's your friendship and advice that have been invaluable to me since Miguel's death. I would never have known what way to turn except for you—"

"Yes, yes," snapped Greer. "But let's have the witnesses in now. I have other business to attend to this afternoon."

GREER stepped briskly to the door that opened onto the veranda, made a motion with his hand. In a moment the lithe form of Gapolonis appeared in the doorway, in answer.

"Ready for us?" Gapolonis asked. It had all been planned.

Greer nodded. "Call Steve."

"I have never seen a man more faithful than Mr. Gapolonis," commented Don Felipe. "A case of perfect understanding and trust between you, I take it. Such examples are always stirring; they are all too rare in this modern day and business. All too rare."

"Slim Gapolonis and I understand each other," agreed Greer.

"Yes, exactly. Nothing is more essential to friendship than understanding—"

Gapolonis had come back into the room, the man called Steve at his heels. Steve was a man of medium height, commonplace feature and dress. He had no outstanding characteristic, but had Brad Ellis been able to look on, he would have been profoundly interested in Stephen E. Admour.

"Now, Mr. Mendez, if you'll sign, please," interrupted Greer. "And acknowledge to the witnesses that you've carefully read our contract and thoroughly understand each portion of it."

"Yes, in every way," agreed Don Felipe.

None the less, for the shade of a moment, the pen remained poised in the

slender hand of the old man. Behind his signature lay his honor and his word to Don Verdugo Viguá, on a deathbed, that he would care for Rancho Viguá, Miguel and Mary, as though the rancho were his own and the children likewise. That had been written on paper also, drawn by the best attorney available; but it was his word, his pledge, that concerned Don Felipe. Miguel was dead now; he had been murdered. Don Felipe Mendez paused for the shade of a moment—before scrolling his name in a delicate, ornate penmanship across the paper, adding: "*Guardian and comptroller of Rancho Viguá.*"

"Good!" snapped Greer. "The other now."

Gapolonis affixed his witnessing signature in a scrawl that was scarcely legible; Steve's signature was, like the man himself, commonplace. Greer had his lease on Rancho Viguá; it was legal, signed and witnessed. He smiled slowly.

"Thank you. Thank you, gentlemen."

He folded the signed lease on the rancho, placing it carefully in the inner breast pocket of his coat. All, in the end, as simple as this! He smiled again, at Don Felipe, his gaze finally lifting to the small study clock; then he turned to Gapolonis and Steve.

"If you'll wait for me outside," he said. "I want to speak with Mendez in private for a moment."

Gapolonis obediently left the study, Steve at his heels. For a long moment then, Greer waited; one foot began to tap the floor restlessly. Don Felipe watched him. Greer swung about.

"Mr. Mendez," he said, "a bunch of crooks have been standin' about, near here, just waitin' to get their hold on you, close and walk off with a lease on Rancho Viguá. I guess you know that. I've done everything possible to make things turn out right, finally coming in on the thing myself, to keep you from gettin' skinned."

"You've been, and done, everything that I could ask," said Don Felipe. "I unhesitatingly give you all credit."

"Uh-huh," said Greer. "Did you ever consider this now: I mean the sayin' that no matter what the means used, they're to be judged by the result?"

"IT is a matter of philosophy," said Don Felipe, his eyes brightening. "Indeed, so many of the old sayings, in both Spanish and English, have more than a grain of wisdom underneath."

"You'd agree with this, then, I'd take it? Means are justified by the end."

"Yes, most decidedly. Within certain bounds, of course. In the time of war, for instance. Any war in history is filled with examples of just that thing, deeds which can only be judged in the light of their after-result, grand, courageous examples—"

"Business, particularly the oil business, is war," Greer cut in. "It's a dog-eat-dog, cut-throat gamble. If a man's going to win, he's got to take every break, play every odd he's got in the shuffle, an' he can't think too much about whether it's right or wrong at the time. Results tell the tale; they say whether he should have, or not. It's the thing I've had to do, had to do it time and again in the oil business. It's the result that talks. I'm glad you look at it that way."

Don Felipe only nodded now. He undoubtedly sensed that Joe Greer was about to make some disclosure.

"Take this case of the death of your nephew, now," Greer continued, but his eyes no longer met those of Don Felipe's, even fleetingly. "Take the case of his death, for instance. My man Gapolonis discovered the body, y'know. Miguel was dead. Nothin' would bring him to life, no matter what was said about it, or wasn't said, or anything like that. Miguel was dead, and that was that. At the same time Gapolonis knew a break when he saw one. That was a break, Miguel lyin' dead there in the Alamar trail—"

"WHAT—what do you mean?" asked Don Felipe, his face blanching.

"Why, I mean that Miguel's bein' dead was a thing that could be turned to advantage, with a bunch of crooks already howlin' around your door. You couldn't see it at the time, but Gapolonis did. He saw it in a second. So did I, when I heard about it. You had to be protected against yourself. So we used the break, in a way of speakin'. Nothin', remember, made any difference to Miguel. Nothin' could have helped his dyin' as he did. It was just a break; that's all. But it could be turned to advantage, to protect you from yourself."

"What—what are you telling me?"

"Why," said Greer, "Miguel wasn't murdered. His horse just naturally stumbled with him, there on the Alamar trail. Miguel maybe had the gun he was carryin' in his hand. Anyhow, when he spilled, the gun was loose; in the fall it exploded somehow and killed him. It

wasn't even a particularly unusual accident, for a man ridin' with a loaded gun in hand. One of my best friends, once, got his in just that fashion; and he happened to be ridin' in a posse at the time, and right at the Sheriff's right hand, at that. I reckon you know of accidents happenin' like that yourself. Any saddle man would."

DON FELIPE said nothing. His lips now were two taut lines upon a deadly white face. His eyes alone seemed to be living—they were like burning coals. He said nothing at all.

Greer took a swift glance at him.

"Even the coroner," Greer continued hurriedly, "had a hunch it might've been accident. He wasn't botherin' you with the details, but he spoke to me about it. I stepped in and took charge of things for you, remember. Y'see, the Sheriff and coroner both saw how Miguel was lyin' on the trail, that his gun was still in his own hand, one shot fired; that the shot that killed him come from a distance of not over two or three feet, entering the neck. In other words, the shot that killed Miguel come from his own gun, from his own hand. The coroner remarked that he'd viewed several accidents of that general sort."

Greer took another swift glance at Don Felipe. The old man, from all appearance, might not even have heard the words—except for the glowing, terrible eyes in his face.

"Y'see, that was where the break come in," Greer tried to explain. "When Gapolonis discovered the accident, it was all plain before his eyes just how it had happened. Miguel had been ridin' fast on the Alamar trail, too fast; his horse stumbled, spilled him out of the saddle; when Miguel hit ground, he was all tense, tryin' to catch himself; the gun in his hand got a tug on the trigger, exploded and killed him. Nothin' more to it. But there wasn't any way of helpin' what had happened. If it was a break, it was a break. Nothin' would bring Miguel back to life again. Gapolonis knew how Ellis-Henderson had been tryin' to get a lease on the rancho; he knew how they'd already managed to skin Miguel out of Honda Creek—and he saw just how to put a crimp into Ellis-Henderson. He'd been trailin' Hende:son all afternoon anyhow, wonderin' what Henderson was up to, cuttin' across the rancho. It just popped into Gapolonis' mind. So when he got word to the Sheriff and coroner,

he reports murder; and to make it more convincin', he states he was eyewitness. It's just another case of where the means used must be judged by the result. D'you see? In this case Ellis-Henderson was blocked in an instant. Otherwise they might've got the rancho lease from you, and you know it. We saved you from yourself, in a way of speakin'."

Greer gave Don Felipe another swift glance. Not a muscle in the old man's body had moved. Only the strange, glowing eyes, the deathly white face.

"Well—well," said Greer, "I'll let you think the thing over. I just wanted you to have the truth. Gapolonis may have to leave the country now, before any trial comes off. We'll see what's to be done. I dunno. He may be in a lot of trouble. But after all, Henderson had been cuttin' through the hills at about that time. Men findin' a body like that usually do get pretty excited, and might imagine a bit that didn't happen. I dunno. Gapolonis may have to skip, and I wanted you to know beforehand. Y'see what I mean, I guess—"

The terrible eyes of Don Felipe Mendez seemed to be breaking Greer's grip on himself. He edged toward the veranda door. The eyes, only movement in the deathlike face of the old man, followed him. Greer paused.

"I just wanted you to know the facts," he continued lamely, hurriedly. "I wanted you to see that it couldn't have been murder. That's all. I guess you won't forget. You might be questioned sometime soon. Facts show it was accident—"

Greer hesitated in the open door.

"I just wanted you to know the truth," he concluded. "That's all."

In a moment a car started in the yards. The engine purred rapidly down the lane toward Buttonwillow.

THE moments ticked on, by the small clock in Don Felipe Mendez' study at Rancho Viguá. The *tick-tock* of passing time sounded upon unhearing ears. In the yard shadows lengthened, as the afternoon sun dropped nearer to the horizon, seeming to expand, grow ruddy and big in the hour of its dying. Birds twittered in the old trees, singing last songs, getting ready for the night. It was the hour of the day that Don Felipe best loved, sunset.

An Indian serving-woman laid a tea-table on the veranda. There was the tiny half-musical clatter of china. Two chairs were put at the table, big, roomy fan-

back chairs, faced so that they fronted the magnificent view across the rancho lands, the Alamar Hills, where there was blue shadow in the the swales and valleys, and the mauve light of sunset on the ridges. The stark lines of the Shed Roofs stood out in silhouette beyond. The ranges were oddly hazy in the late afternoon, unusually gaunt-looking and beautiful in the light.

MARY VIGUÁ came up the veranda steps after a while.

"Tea's ready?" she asked in Spanish.

The woman nodded and left. A fat teapot steamed on the table. Mary Viguá sat down and arranged the cups. She was dressed in riding-clothes—breeches, a man's shirt open at the neck, a short sleeveless jacket. Her wavy, dark hair shone, and her eyes were brown, somber pools of beauty in the sunset.

For a time the girl watched the changing lights, the swift-running blocks of shadow. The Indian woman returned.

"Where is Don Felipe? Tea is getting cold."

The woman nodded toward the study door. "He is in there, señorita."

Mary walked down the veranda, paused at the door and called her uncle.

"It is tea-time," she reminded.

He answered immediately. His voice was clear, evenly modulated, calm:

"Yes, yes; to be sure. The hour had slipped my attention!"

In a moment he joined her. Nothing in his manner betrayed the man who had sat wordless all this while, unseeing eyes fixed staring before him. His smile was even, kind; his voice soft and normal.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, and asked pleasantly: "You were riding again today?"

"Yes. I rode over through the Alamars."

Moments later Don Felipe said, as though the Alamars had reminded him of something: "Ah, yes. I wonder, *Maria mia*, if you ever thought of this— Please don't let it disturb you. But I wonder, did you ever think that Miguel might have met his death through accident? You see, there are certain things that might point to such a thing. Miguel was riding hurriedly, you know. He had the money and he was carrying a loaded gun, for the certain protection it offered. If the palomino had stumbled now, you see, thrown Miguel, tensed and trying to catch himself, with the loaded gun in his hand—such a thing could happen

only too easily, it seems. The shot entered—entered his throat from very close range, not greater than that of his own hand. Do you think—”

The girl now was rigid. “Miguel’s palomino,” she said, “is one saddle-animal in a hundred. Palo never stumbles. Then—then, there was the money! Five thousand dollars! What became of that?”

Don Felipe nodded. He said no more. He had wondered if that thought wouldn’t occur to the girl also. The money, the five thousand dollars that Miguel was known to be carrying, was not found on his person; it was missing and unexplained, unless the murderer had taken it. The horse that Mary Viguá spoke of had eventually returned to the rancho, free of its rider. One of the men about the ranch had unsaddled the animal and put Miguel’s saddle on the customary peg in the barns, where it still hung dusty and unused. But already, by that time, Sheriff Donahue, of Buttonwillow, had informed the girl and Don Felipe of Miguel’s death and what scant details were necessary. Donahue had attempted to spare them as much as possible.

Don Felipe left the table. Not until he was about to enter his study door did two of the ranch *vaqueros* nervously approach him. They were trusted men, whose fathers had ridden these same rancho lands as they now did.

“Señor,” said the spokesman, “we must speak with you, if it meets your pleasure. We have seen things that you must know.”

“Yes, José. What is it?”

“Will you follow us, señor? Come!”

Don Felipe knew the man. He followed without comment. Only a flecked red of sunset light remained in the west, but the light remained strong enough for Don Felipe to see plainly. The two men led him to the barn.

Inside, they gestured to Miguel’s saddle, hung on a peg beside others. Hands had disturbed the dust collected on the saddle. There were small polished spots where fingers had lately touched.

“Señor, will you look there carefully? In the right-hand saddle-pocket.”

## CHAPTER VII

### THE TRAP

IT was just after sunset, the west sky flecked with the peculiar afterglow cloud formation, that Buck Henderson noted a moving line of dust down the

Honda Creek road from Buttonwillow. He wondered if it could be Ellis, coming back so soon. The line moved up the bottoms in a fast-rising whitish streamer that settled to earth far behind the lurching dark dot of the auto ahead. Buck watched it for a moment or two.

HE looked up again just as the car took the curve from the main road, cutting across the broad open creek-bed to the rig. He watched it come nearer. It wasn’t the car Ellis used. The day-guard, still on duty, stopped the auto fifty yards from the derrick. Strangers, evidently—two men on the front seat. The guard seemed to be arguing with them.

“Harris!” he called to Buck after a moment.

Buck leaped down from the floor, striding out to the road. The day-guard made a motion of his head toward the two men in the car, and explained:

“They say Ellis sent ’em.”

Buck looked his question at the driver. The other man in the foreseat, a small person, wore a battered derby hat and a soiled striped silk shirt.

“Yeah?” asked Buck skeptically.

The driver nodded. Without preliminary he explained: “Ellis told me to tell you, Mr. Harris, that Buck Henderson has been released from the county jail. Ellis wants to see you in town immediately now. Said to bring Hoppy Benner along also.”

Buck whistled softly, breathlessly. “So Buck is released, huh? Because of what?”

The driver shook his head. “Don’t know. Those were Ellis’ words; that’s all I know. He gave me to understand that it was a hurry-up trip out here for you.”

“Why,” asked Buck, “would Ellis want Hoppy Benner also?”

“Can’t tell you,” snapped the driver. “I’m just repeatin’ what Ellis said; that’s all. If you don’t feel like comin’, it’s all-same to me. We’ll be goin’ back.”

“I’ll find Benner,” said Buck.

Buck went over to the cook-tent. Hoppy wasn’t there; Buck called several times outside. Nor was Hoppy in the sleeping-tent. Buck returned to the waiting car.

“Can’t find Benner,” he told the driver. “Nowhere about. But it can’t be very important to Ellis, I guess.”

“Yeah, pretty important,” cut in the man in the derby. “Ellis acted so anyhow. Told us sure to get Benner.”

For the space of ten seconds Buck studied the man in the striped shirt. He turned back to the driver.

"Say, just who are you two, anyhow? I'd like to know."

The driver motioned Buck closer. "Perhaps Ellis has mentioned that he's employed a man to watch a certain Mr. Joe Greer and a Mr. Gapolonis. I'm that man. Does that clear things up? My name is Stephen E. Admour."

For answer Buck simply swung into the seat beside the driver. The man with the derby was in the rear.

"O. K.," said Buck. "Let's go."

The car backed around, turned and bumped out across the dry creek bed. It swung the sharp curve into the main Honda Creek road at gathering speed; and settled off, racing now, east toward the town of Buttonwillow. Neither of the two men spoke, and Buck didn't ask more questions. He whistled tunelessly and softly to himself. If Andy, still under Buck's own name, had been released from the Buttonwillow jail, it was certainly an event of utmost importance. It might mean anything hopeful.

**A**T the wildcat in Honda Creek the past two hours of the afternoon had made the situation even tenser. There seemed the vague odor of gas over the casting-head. Stormy was an automaton. He was running the tools with delicate precision and care, still drilling and bailing with clocklike regularity. Now, or likely never, the tools hung right over the pay. Stormy wanted more indication, but at any moment he might give the word and draw the tools. By tomorrow morning, even late tonight, the Ellis-Henderson might be ready for the cementing crew. Nothing but the vital import of this information from Ellis could have persuaded Buck to leave the hole, unless to carry word to Ellis that they were ready!

The last light of dusk was going. Stars popped out. It seemed warm tonight, almost sticky. Unusual sort of night; in the semi-arid country it customarily turned chill directly after sunset. Buck remembered another night when he had traveled this road to Buttonwillow—a tired, exhausted horse under him, an exhausted, weary man in the saddle.

On the edge of town the car slowed. The Saturday night streets were jammed. But even Buck had heard rumor, to the effect that the Two-State and Southwest fields, over east, were not holding up as

## MARY JOSEFA VIGUA



first expected. A limit of production, over there, had already been reached. They weren't going to make another Santa Fe Springs, Wheeler Ridge or Kettleman Hills.

But maybe Honda Creek would! That was a thought!

The car went down the main street, into the dark outskirts of the east end of the town.

"Say," Buck said to the driver, "what's Ellis doing with an office way over here? I thought he had rooms right in town."

The driver shook his head. "No, not any more. He used to have. But Ellis lost that place, end of last week, and had to take what he could get over here."

The car drew up before a deserted-looking two-story frame building that stood alone on a corner. There was a single lighted window, with a yellow drawn shade, on the second floor. Funny, thought Buck, that Ellis hadn't mentioned the change!

Steve Admour, the man Ellis had employed to shadow Greer and Gapolonis, shut off the engine. The man in the bright shirt and derby, who had ridden behind, was already out and waiting at Buck's door. He sprang the catch and opened it.

"Right over here, Mr. Harris. There's a stairway up."

**J**UST at that instant a head appeared in shadow against the blind of the window. The profile in silhouette was enlarged, correspondingly slightly blurred. The man within the lighted room had possibly leaned his head against the shade to listen into the street below. But the profile decidedly wasn't that of Brad Ellis. In fact, it looked much more to Buck like a man named Joe Greer!

Buck was almost sure of it. He remarked conversationally: "Well, to tell the truth, the news you two brought me does take something of a load off the

mind, as it were. That Brad's room with the light in it?"

"Yeah. That's Ellis' room."

The head in silhouette had now disappeared. They were advancing the short half-dozen paces to the narrow door, opening into the dark front of the building. Steve, the driver was again at Buck's side. Very close. The man with the derby had fallen to the rear, crowding Buck, almost.

Beyond question of a doubt, Buck now realized, that was the hard bulk of a gun he could feel in Steve's right-hand coat pocket, held in a concealed hand. The man with the derby wasn't more than a pace to the rear. Much too close! And once going up the narrow staircase to the room above, there would be no turning for Buck Henderson! He knew it.

Greer had set a trap and baited it!

Buck could use a weapon with a good bit better than ordinary precision. But the armed defense of the Honda Creek wildcat had been left entirely in the hands of the two guards. With the exception of the arms these guards carried, there were no weapons at the derrick except the shotgun and a .22 rifle, used for occasional hunting.

But Buck had his fists. Two paces on to the door. Buck stepped into what was probably a landing hall, at the foot of the staircase. No light. Black as night fog. Buck's right fist doubled to a knot that was so much iron.

From his hip he swung for the approximate location of Steve's jaw!

**T**HERE was the brittle-sounding pop of bony knuckles on bone and flesh. Steve's jaws came together and his head flopped back. His legs crumpled under him—

But before Steve's body hit the floor, a powerful flashlight snapped on full in Buck's eyes. Below the flashlight was the unmistakable, glinting, blue-black shape of a gun.

"Make a move, an' you'll get the works now!"

The speaker was Gapolonis. Behind, the man in the derby and striped shirt poked steel into Buck's spine. The flashlight glared unwaveringly in his face. Gradually Buck could make out the form of Gapolonis behind.

"Lucky I was waitin' here for you!" was Gapolonis' comment.

Buck had no answer. But it didn't seem lucky. Steve groaned audibly from underfoot. The man in the derby said:

"Well, I'd of got him anyhow. Watchin' him all-time!"

"Yeah? Steve probably was too," said Gapolonis. "Where's Benner? Did you an' Steve forget him in the excitement?"

"We couldn't get him. I'll tell you how it was—" began the man behind.

"Never mind," snapped Gapolonis. "Tell Greer. Now, keep that gun in his back, Tony, an' start upstairs. I'll be followin' with the light an' another gun!"

**A** SHAFT of steady light from an opened door above now illuminated the head of the staircase. The muscular form of Greer appeared in dark outline above. No further word was said as Buck was marched up the stairway and into the lighted room, to one side of an upper hall. Greer, evidently unarmed, followed them. In the room he motioned Buck to a chair.

"You, Tony," said Gapolonis to the derby hat, "go down an' see about Steve."

Greer stayed the order. "Where's Benner? Didn't you understand your orders, Tony? What the hell!"

"Well," said Tony, "the minute I begun to mention that Ellis wanted Benner bad, he got suspicious. Steve was playin' the lead an' decided to let Benner go, I guess. If we'd insisted, Harris, here, would have got wise sure—"

"Not Harris. This is Buck Henderson, in person."

"Well, Henderson, here, would have got wise. He acted kinda suspicious anyhow. It was that jail-release stuff that fetched him—that an' Steve bein' Ellis' shadow-man on you two."

Greer merely nodded. Tony, the derby hat tight on his head, took the nod as dismissal and left the room. Gapolonis sat down easily and crossed his legs, the automatic in his hand resting lightly on the upper knee, ranged in the general direction of Buck. There was a single strong electric globe overhead, throwing Gapolonis' lean, vicious features into relief.

Joe Greer stood at one side, thick hands on his solid hips. Greer was dressed in a brown-stripe suit, loud tie at his neck, heavy-link gold watch-chain across the front of his vest. The promoter's eyes rested searchingly on Buck.

Gapolonis smiled. "No use wastin' time, Joe," he suggested.

"No," agreed Greer. "I was just standin' here, wonderin' to myself if Buck Henderson knew what he was up against. I wondered if he was goin' to understand



when it was explained, or—would other things be necessary. Such things as—”

“The torture-chamber,” suggested Buck cheerfully, his first words. Behind a half-smile, Buck’s mind was lightning. He knew that very soon a lot was going to depend on just how he acted. He didn’t misjudge the situation in the least.

Greer scowled. “You get the general idea, Henderson. But the method won’t be the torture-chamber; it’ll be—the works! If necessary. Get me?”

“Generally classified as murder, huh?”

“Again you get the important point,” agreed Greer. “In this special case, however, it might still be made to seem the killing of a desperate criminal, the murderer of Miguel Viguá! Now do you get the idea?”

“Decidedly,” said Buck.

“In which case, we’ll continue. It’s this, Henderson, and there’s no use mincing words: You’ve got a couple of drillers and a couple of tool-dressers out at that Honda Creek wildcat tonight. If those four men and the guard off duty started for Buttonwillow tonight and left the well for five minutes in the hands of the night man, it would be quite satisfactory. So I’m goin’ to ask you to send ’em a note. Those men have stuck tighter’n wax at that well for almost three months now, an’ like most of the boys, they’re probably cravin’ a taste of bright lights an’ need no special urgin’. It’s up to you to write ’em a note tonight, Henderson, which I’ll guarantee will be delivered. The note will say that everything is cleared up, that Andy Harris is out of jail, that the night guard can watch things an’ you’re throwin’ a party in town for the gang. Do you get it?”

**B**UCK nodded. “Meanwhile—what happens?” he asked.

“To be frank,” said Greer, “since you know it anyhow, there will then be a slight unexplained accident in Honda Creek. Somehow a string of loose tools will get dropped into the hole, in such a way that they won’t be easily fished. It will keep you from ever bringing the well into production within the terms of the lease you hold. The title, clear of all claim, will then go back to Rancho Viguá in a little over two weeks.”

“Uh-huh,” said Buck. “I’d imagined that might be the point of this business.”

“In case you don’t feel inclined to write such a note,” continued Greer, “we’ll try another bet. One of us will call Ellis on the phone an’ explain the matter to him.

I believe we can persuade you to say a word to Ellis yourself, to let him know you’re here. Your partner knows Gapolonis. When the thing is explained, he may think it worth while to do just what we ask—to save his partner’s life. He’ll know that Gapolonis is capable of doing just that thing—givin’ you the works from the business end of a gun!”

Gapolonis smiled amiable agreement.

Buck smiled back at him. Somewhere he was seeing a ray of daylight.

**F**OR Greer’s suggestion was far too involved. Not that Buck underestimated Gapolonis’ capabilities. The man was dangerous as a snake, deadly as a rattler. But the point was this: Joe Greer wasn’t, and never had been, a fool! The threat that he might make away with Buck, take him for a ride and give him the works, was a possibility to be seriously considered. But when Greer spoke of calling Ellis on the phone, that was another matter. It involved too much chance of something going wrong, chance word-witnesses, or opposite action on the part of Ellis. Unquestioningly, Ellis would forfeit all right in Honda Creek for Buck, if it had to be. But from Greer, this was merely bluff!

If Joe Greer was bluffing, things were in a better state than Buck had imagined. A hoax had brought Buck into town. Andy wasn’t free; nothing in the situation had changed, except that Buck knew certainly that Greer meant to make an attack on the well. That meant Greer had the signed Rancho Viguá lease, of course. Somehow, swiftly, Buck had to get out of here, back to Honda Creek. If he were kept prisoner, which might be the actual idea in Greer’s mind, it would mean that Ellis would soon learn of his disappearance and begin turning things up to find him. Ellis would turn every loyal man at the well into a search, except a guard. One of the guards, Buck realized now, was treacherous—the night man, whom Greer wanted left at the wildcat tonight.

Buck must get back to Honda Creek! With the exception of the guards, one treacherous, the crew wasn’t prepared. The danger was in Honda Creek.

“On the other hand,” Greer was saying, “if you agree, you’ll lose Honda Creek, but I think the matter of Miguel Viguá’s death can be fixed up to your satisfaction. He happened to have died as the result of an accident. Miguel was riding through the Alamars; his horse

stumbled, and in the fall his own gun somehow exploded, killing him. Gapolonis, following you, happened to discover the accident; that's all there was to it. But he saw instantly to what advantage the thing could be turned. It's possible he'll have to beat it out of the country now before any court action takes place, involving him."

"Yeah?" said Buck. He sat up straight. So that was why Gapolonis had been content to identify the wrong man, Andy Harris? That was why Greer had not pushed things. Afraid of the results of his own rank frame-up! But only too clear in Buck's mind, meanwhile, was another thing—Mary Ballinger, her story as Ellis had had it: the little man seen running away from the crime with bills in his hands.

"Just what," asked Buck, "became of the five thousand dollars Miguel was carrying at the time of the *accident*?"

GREER smiled. "Uh-huh," he said. "Smart boy! I expected another man to ask me that question this afternoon. But he didn't. Henderson, let me tell you this: that missing money furnished direct, simple motive for the crime. Since your partner had given it to Viguá, it was one good reason for suspecting you of the murder, apart from Gapolonis' testimony. The question of where that money went is still one of the important points. You were in the Almars that day, Henderson. If it was to be proved, for instance, that you happened to have the money also, you'd likely swing despite anything. If somebody else happened to have it, they'd be in for a lot of trouble, no matter what was said or done. Savvy? Henderson, where that money went is pretty important. *I know where it is!*"

"Uh!" grunted Buck. "Does that mean you think you could bring the money to light and prove that Miguel's death was an accident and not murder?"

"I got a hunch it does! My hunches are usually good!"

"Interesting if true," was Buck's comment. Buck thought about it for a while. "It's been a pretty cute frame-up all the way through, Greer. I admit it; I got to hand you that much. We played into your hands, though. If I'd stood arrest and trial right at the start, we'd have come out better."

"Maybe," said Greer. "Maybe not. Maybe you'd be in the big lock-up today, waitin' for something unpleasant. May-

be you will be yet. It more or less depends on the way you person'y view other matters right now. I'm repeatin' that we still might take you for a ride tonight and bump you, if necessary. What I've explained to you isn't generally known."

Buck didn't doubt that either one of the two was capable of taking him on the suggested ride, but some other things he did doubt. He nodded. The room was humidly warm. Buck wiped little beads of perspiration from his forehead. Greer took it for nervousness.

"In a way we're offerin' you a trade, Henderson," he continued. "You lose Honda Creek, but you come clear on the other thing. The whole charge, as it concerns any of you, will explode into empty air. No grudge against you; this is just a matter of business. But we got the breaks—and we're playin' to the limit tonight, tomorrow or any other time. Just remember that!"

Buck wiped his forehead again. He wanted to give the impression that they were sweating him. He wanted to look worried, harassed and desperate. It was an easy matter—he was! Somehow he had to get out of here. Had to get word to Ellis, and get back to Honda Creek. That was imperative. He had to get back to Honda Creek!

"Well," said Buck, "I dunno—"

"Fella, you haven't got all night to make up your mind!" Gapolonis put in.

Buck realized that also. Steve had evidently been knocked cold, and Tony was having difficulty bringing him around. At any moment now, however, the two might appear. Gapolonis was dangerous enough in himself, an accurate shot, a killer with a gun in hand. There was no underestimating Gapolonis. But the return of the two men would double the odds. Buck sank deeper into the chair; his fingers gnawed at his forehead; finally he decided:

"All right."

"Good!" snapped Greer. "Smart boy! There's pen, ink and paper on the desk there. Just write the note in your own fashion. We'll read it when you've finished."

THE desk stood by the window with the drawn shade, chair against the wall. Greer had evidently been seated there when he leaned over to listen into the street below. Buck wondered if the window-panes, by any chance, were open behind the shade. Perhaps. It was a hot

night. Buck moved across the room to the desk and sat down. He picked up a pen, dipped it in the round glass inkwell before him.

He couldn't think quite what to write. It had to sound real. The night-guard was Greer's spy. Steve, the man Ellis had hired to shadow Greer and Gapolonis, was another Greer man. Beyond any doubt, after what had been shown, Greer knew practically everything that had happened at the wildcat. The note had to be real.

The pen moved in Buck's hand—

*Stormy Harris,*

*Stormy, we win! Andy is out of jail, as maybe you know by now. You and the boys drop everything, grab the car, and come into town. I'm throwing one whoop of a party for you tonight.*

*Leave the night-guard on duty at the well. But this invitation includes the day-man and Hoppy Benner.*

*Buck Henderson*

Gapolonis, gun in hand, leaned over the desk.

"No," he said. "The invitation does not include Mr. Hoppy Benner. Benner is to stay at the well now. Understand? Write it over!"

Buck took a fresh sheet of paper. He pondered, with pen dipped in the inkwell. What was all this trouble about Benner? First they seemingly wanted him in town, now to stay at the wildcat with the false night-guard. . . . A nice piece of round, hard glass, that inkwell! Buck could feel it right under his finger tips. Nice, round, hard—must weigh a couple of pounds!

Gapolonis, gun in hand, leaned on the desk and eyed Buck. Out of the corner of his eye Buck could see Greer, half across the room—

With a single motion Buck's fingers closed around the inkwell and flung it squarely for Gapolonis' head. There was no pause. Buck never knew just where the inkwell hit Gapolonis. The single motion carried him around, facing the shade-drawn window. Buck's arms swung up to the overhead casing. He grabbed it. The following part of the motion lifted his body by the arms, swung him out, feet foremost.

The shade ripped. A rusty fly-screen went out. But the window-panes were up.

And Buck crashed through!

He was conscious of two things—falling, and a double explosion from Gapolonis' automatic in the room behind.



Fifteen feet below the level of the window, he hit earth. Buck had the presence of mind to crumple on the spot. He had taken enough chance from Gapolonis' deadly gun tonight. He lay still, a dully discernible heap of shadow and body on the ground below the window. His face was an upturned spot of white.

He heard some one shout within the building. Boots raced up the staircase. He saw Gapolonis leaning out of the window above, and heard the gunman's words plainly:

"I never miss two shots, Greer! Can we use that note as it is?"

There was silence above. Then the man called Tony, rushing into the room, said something.

"Go down an' collect him," Gapolonis ordered.

Buck could still see Gapolonis' head looking down from the window, waiting, watching. It was Greer who spoke next, from within the room.

"Cross out Benner's name, you mean?" Greer asked.

"We can't take a chance on him, is the way I figure."

"Dunno," Gapolonis muttered. "Let's see how it reads again."

For an instant the dark spot that was Gapolonis' head disappeared into the room. The time was long enough. When Tony came out of the entrance, he could not find the limp figure below the window. He shouted up to Gapolonis.

"You dumb-head! Right under your feet!" Gapolonis told him.

There was nothing under Tony's feet but his own shadow. Buck Henderson had rounded the corner of the building and was speeding across back lots as fast as his legs would carry him.

## CHAPTER VIII

### HOPPY BENNER

**B**UCK traveled a zigzag, back-alley, fence-climbing course, back halfway through the town. Then he turned toward the main street. Here he slowed to a swift walk, to avoid undue attention.

Several things had to be accomplished swiftly. Foremost was the fact that Buck Henderson must get back to Honda Creek without delay. To do that, he had to have a car. Hire one somewhere. It was also imperative that Ellis know what had happened. Unwarned, Ellis might as easily fall into some second trap. Greer was striking! Ellis had to be warned not to trust the man he had hired to shadow Greer, Steve Admour. Later, at the well, there would be the matter of the false night-guard to be taken up.

**T**HERE were other details of Greer's play, however, that were not clear to Buck. What, for instance, did Greer want with Hoppy Benner? Why had Steve and Tony had orders to bring Hoppy with Buck if possible?

But one matter worried Buck not at all. It was the note he had written to Stormy. Greer knew the situation well enough, so that could be faked in the note—but Greer didn't know Stormy. There was the catch. Stormy, drilling on what he knew was the edge of a formation, would no more think of leaving the hole of the Ellis-Henderson tonight than of flying to paradise.

There was a hard-eyed fighting look on Buck Henderson's face as he shoved through the crowds on the main street. Every store was lighted and open for business. Buttonwillow, boom town of a year's mushroom growth, hadn't yet felt the slacking of the Two-State and Southwest fields, over east, that had reached limits of production so swiftly. Big glistening cars, trucks, every manner of nondescript vehicle stood at the curbs. There was dust, the odor of tobacco-smoke and the smell of raw, illegal whisky sold almost openly. Poolrooms were crowded, balls clicking. A sultry, strange warmth pervaded the streets; the humid feel of coming storm; yet the sky overhead was clear and bright with stars.

Buck swung into what looked like a pawnshop. He emerged two minutes later with a revolver tucked into his hip pocket. The gun was loaded. Further, the proprietor of the shop, upon question, had remembered noting a sign, "Ellis-Henderson Promotion Company," hung in an upper window across the street.

That was Brad. Buck saw it. The window was lighted. He dodged across the street.

There was a small landing-hall and a staircase that led up to the second story of the building, not dissimilar to

the structure Buck had left so shortly before. The difference lay in a light that shown steadily in the hall above.

One of the doors above again repeated the sign, "ELLIS-HENDERSON COMPANY," on cardboard, with the notation scrawled below—"Now drilling in Honda Creek." Buck pushed the door open without a knock.

He was instantly struck by the tenseness of the scene before him. Ellis sat at a scarred desk, one big fist doubled, the other taut and white-knuckled on the arm of his chair. A drop-cord light hung in the center of the room. Across from Ellis, seated in the other two chairs that the furnishings afforded, were a bearded, lean-jawed man of an age that was about fifty, and an immature girl of seventeen or so. The girl was dressed in overalls, like the man; with this she wore a sunbonnet. Buck had never seen either of the two before.

Ellis' head snapped around.

"What the deuce, Buck—"

There were visible signs of excitement on Brad Ellis' face. He was as nervous and eager about something as Buck had ever seen him.

"Let me speak to you alone a minute, Brad," said Buck.

"Anything wrong at the well?"

"No."

"Then it can wait," decided Ellis. Without pause, he continued: "Buck, this is Ballinger, who owns that homestead lease we have just south of the test. I guess you know the young lady."

For once, twice in succession, Ellis had forgotten the Andrew Harris name. Neither of the two seated across the room, however, seemed to note the blunder, or sense its significance. But Brad remembered as swiftly. "I mean, *Harris*, I believe you and the young lady have met before—Miss Mary Ballinger."

**B**UCK had never seen the girl before. He stared at her. Something was wrong. If this was Mary Ballinger, she was a totally unknown person to him! The girl in overalls showed her surprise as plainly. Three times now Buck had met a girl he thought to be Mary Ballinger, on the hilltop overlooking the valleys and the Honda Creek dam.

For an instant Brad studied the situation. As shortly he dismissed it from his mind, apparently. He plunged on, into other explanation:

"Harris, if you'll remember, it was Miss Ballinger who saw a man fleeing

from the spot where Miguel Viguá had shortly before been killed. In one hand the little man clutched a sheaf of bills, which, almost beyond doubt, was the five thousand dollars Miguel was known to be taking to the dam that day. The money missing from his person. Those are facts. It's obvious that the small man must know a great deal about the murder, if he isn't the man who actually committed it. That's plain, I think."

"Shore is," the elder Ballinger put in, wagging his lean jaws. "That's the man that killed Miguel Viguá!"

"**Y**ESTERDAY," Brad said, "Miss Ballinger saw a stranger cutting across their land, coming from the general direction of Honda Creek. At a distance she noticed that he was a man of small stature and carried a shotgun, probably hunting quail or rabbits. She placed no more significance on the event. Today, however—this afternoon—she saw the man again. Once more he was hunting. This time he was nearer, and she realized that there was something familiar about him. It worried her—she finally sensed the truth!

"Her father was not at home at the time. Miss Ballinger saddled a horse as swiftly as possible and took after the little man, to get a closer look at him. By angling through the hills, she did! She met him face to face. The meeting occurred at just about the spot in the hills where Miguel was murdered.

"It was the small man Miss Ballinger had seen running away from the murder, with the sheaf of bills clutched in his hand!"

Brad Ellis' eyes met Buck's.

"An' that little feller," put in the elder Ballinger, "knew Mary, also. He got out of there this time no less fast than the other. Right, Mary?"

The girl in overalls nodded nervously. "Yes. When I saw it was the same man, I was scared too. I hit right for home. Paw didn't get back till almost dark, but I told him quick as he did. He thought we'd better come see you."

"The fact," said Ellis, "is that the murderer probably had returned to the site of the crime. It's said that a criminal often does that, some sort of fascination about the thing. It's plain that the man is now somewhere at large in the vicinity of Honda Creek. . . . We've got to find him!"

But Ellis got no farther. The door to the office was suddenly flung wide.

In the portals stood a trembling, eager Hoppy Benner. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Buck!" he yelled. "Ellis! She's goin' to be a oil-well! Sure as little green apples grow on apple trees, she is! Gas-bubbles in the sump. The bailer fin'ly come up with oil showin' on 'er! Stormy pulled the tools. He's waitin' now for that casin'. Cement in tomorrow, if you can get it out tonight!"

**H**OPPY told it as though he owned a share in the well. Each person in the room took the news differently; each had reason to be vitally interested. Brad Ellis merely smiled slowly. Buck grinned and stared at Hoppy. Finally Ellis got to his feet, his big shoulders like iron under his shirt. He reached across the desk and slapped Buck once on the back.

"Well, Buck! Well—well, that's news for us! Had to send to the Southwest for that casing, but it'll be on the job in the morning. Got the cementing crew lined up. Buck—Buck, the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, in Honda Creek, is goin' to be an *oil-well*, I guess. That sound like music?"

That sounded like music, the sweetest Buck had ever listened to! They could hear Ballinger talking to his daughter. Ballinger misunderstood; he seemed to think the wildcat was already a producing well. He took simple indication that tools were ready to break into the pay for the final verdict. But no one felt the desire to point out the error to him.

"Mary, we're rich! Hear thet, gal? Rich, I tell yuh! That's us! There's jist bound to be oil under our land, if they is in Honda Creek!"

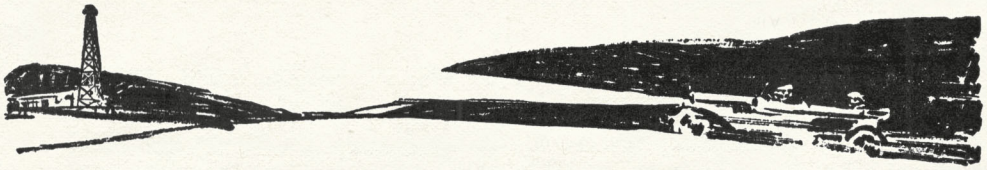
Buck was looking at Mary Ballinger, the girl he had never seen before these moments. She seemed to be staring at the door of the room. Then she got half up from the chair she sat in. She half lifted one pointing finger toward the door. With that, the girl collapsed into a heap on the floor.

The room was instantly hushed. Brad and Buck leaped toward her.

"Fainted!" said Ellis. "Get some water, Buck. Maybe better call a doctor."

The lean, bearded Ballinger was bending down. "Jist too much fer Mary, I reckon—thinkin' of us as rich folks. She'll come 'round in a minute."

He fell clumsily to chafing her wrists. Buck had to go into the hall for water. He couldn't find a glass at the stand;



he returned and got one from Ellis. A moment or more passed before Mary Ballinger opened her eyes, face and hair dripping with water. She tried to sit up.

"Where—where is he?" she asked.

Buck and Ellis were bending over the girl. Hoppy Benner, however, was no longer in the room.

"Where is who?" asked Ellis slowly.

"That—that little man!" screamed the girl. "He's the one. The man in the door. He's the little man with the bills that day! Running—"

There followed utter silence.

"Hoppy Benner!" said Ellis slowly, thoughtfully. "So it was Hoppy Benner!"

Buck got to his feet, and went swiftly to find Hoppy Benner.

#### CHAPTER IX

"I'M TAKIN' YOU WITH ME, ELLIS!"

TEN or fifteen minutes passed before Buck returned. He had made rapid search through streets and by-streets. Hoppy Benner had vanished, swallowed in the moving crowds, light and shadow.

It was strange, Buck had had time to reflect, how transparent and clear a thing could become once a glimmer of light had been thrown on it. He remembered the scene in the hotel lobby, that first night, perfectly now. He remembered Hoppy hunched excitedly over the crap-game, with five thousand dollars, "five grand!" Buck also remembered that Hoppy had been absent from the well in Honda Creek this afternoon, and the afternoon of the day before. Buck had seen him go toward the Ballinger place with the shotgun. He had seen him return, dodge into the cook tent with frightened gesture. Hoppy had been seen fleeing from the spot of the crime by Mary Ballinger; fifteen minutes ago, Mary Ballinger had identified him in an utterly convincing manner. Hoppy had seen her at the same time and fled. The facts were self-evident. Buck felt shaken somehow. In common with the rest of the crew at the well, he had liked and trusted the cheerful, eager little bum. . . .

In the interval that Buck had been gone, Ellis had phoned the county jail for Sheriff Donahue, giving him the best possible description of Benner. Ellis had stated that he had positive information that Benner, if caught, would be a key-witness in the matter of Miguel Viguá's murder. Donahue, however, seemed little impressed.

Mary Ballinger and her father had left the office. Ellis was alone when Buck entered. He asked:

"No sign of him, huh?"

Buck shook his head. "No; he's gone."

"The Sheriff promised to watch the roads, and notify Santa Bella County," said Ellis. "That Donahue is a funny bird, though; I don't know whether he got it all or not."

Buck nodded. He was silent for the space of ten seconds. Then:

"Brad—about this girl, this Mary Ballinger! She's not the one I met—"

"No," said Brad; "I noticed she wasn't. She, however, happens to be the authentic Miss Mary Ballinger. But who is the young lady you *have* talked with? Did she ever say that she was Miss Mary Ballinger?"

"No," confessed Buck. "She never did, in so many words. I just kind of took that for granted. After all, the Honda Creek neighborhood isn't overpopulated with young women."

"I SEE," snapped Ellis. "Who, then, do you think the other woman was? What did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her much," said Buck. "She thought I was some friend of the watchman at the dam, y'know. Somehow we always got to talkin' of other things. She liked to talk about the dam, for instance; about how it would water that dry land below, make it blossom. Just general things, like that."

"Yeah?" growled Ellis. "Why, out of a world full of sensible men, I ever picked you for a partner is more than I can savvy. Buck, the young lady you have been meeting and talking to up there is just one person—Miss Mary Consuela Josefa Mendez Viguá! Like you say, the neighborhood isn't overpopulated with young women."

Buck nodded dumb agreement.

"What a complete damn' fool!" Ellis growled dismally. "Why, you could have played her for Rancho Viguá; you could have made her see how we stood. You could have given her the side-lights on Joe Greer. You might have been able to keep Greer from stealin' the rancho lease from under her uncle's nose. Those are some of the things you might have done, and didn't!"

But the mention of Greer snapped Buck's mind into running order again. In the next two minutes he explained how he happened to be here in Button-willow tonight, Greer's trap, Gapolonis, the treachery of Steve Admour and the fact that the night-guard at the well was Greer's man. He ended by relating Joe Greer's interpretation of the death of Miguel Viguá as accidental.

"Whew!" whistled Ellis thoughtfully. "Wonder what that means? It might be true, at that! I mean the actual details of Miguel's death could look like accident, except for the missing money."

"AT one time," Buck said, "I had it half figured that Gapolonis himself had killed Viguá. But when I think about it, I know that the man I saw in the Alamars, that afternoon, cuttin' across by the trail, must have been Miguel Viguá. Y'remember I told you about that. The rider whirled his horse in another direction, after catchin' sight of me; plainly he didn't want to meet anybody. But he turned right back on the trail after I'd passed, ridin' on fast for the dam. If Gapolonis was still followin' me, he was a long way behind. It would mean Gapolonis himself couldn't have come up with Viguá and killed him, even had he wanted to."

"Uh-huh," considered Ellis. "It centers down again on that money, that five thousand Miguel had with him. That means Hoppy Benner now. Hoppy's the key, if we can ever lay hands on him again. Somehow we got to do it!"

"Greer said that he knew where the money went," said Buck. "It sounded like he did—even coming from Greer. I asked him if that meant he could bring the money to light and prove Miguel's death an accident, not murder. Greer's exact answer was: 'I got a hunch it does! My hunches are usually pretty good!'"

"Humph!" muttered Brad Ellis. "That may be the connection between Greer and Hoppy Benner. Prove it by Hoppy somehow—or not prove it! I wonder?"

"Maybe," said Buck. "At any rate the idea's been stuck in my head for some time now."

"Buck, you get back to Honda Creek! Hire a car on the streets. Get out there fast! I'm goin' to the Sheriff's office and see what I can do to push the capture of Hoppy Benner. Buck, Greer will strike before morning! I'll follow you as soon as I make sure Donahue is in action an' appreciates the full importance of Benner. Get goin', Buck!"

BUCK went, hurtling down the stairs. He hired the first high-powered car he could find in the streets. It was a low, four-passenger speedster.

"Now drive! Honda Creek. Know the road?"

The driver nodded. The car shot out through the Saturday-night traffic.

Ellis, however, didn't have time to leave his office. Buck could not have much more than reached the street, when Ellis heard some one ascending the stairs. Ten seconds later, he found Sheriff Donahue eying him quizzically from the doorway.

There was a wad of the ever-present tobacco in the leathery old Sheriff's right cheek. The fingers of his left hand stroked one wing of his grizzled mustache reflectively; the right hand rested carelessly over the Sheriff's holstered gun.

"Good!" snapped Ellis. "I was just heading over to see you, Donahue. Was that description of Benner clear?"

"Yep. Clear as glass," said Donahue. He smiled amiably. "Plain as day."

"It's this way—" continued Ellis swiftly. But Donahue cut him short:

"Yep. Jist this way! Fella, I've had that game pulled on me before! Last time was when two yeggs tried to cut in to the First National vaults. They reckoned to get the Buttonwillow law-force elsewhere when they pulled a get-away. Sure, somebody will try that stunt every month or so."

"What d'you mean?" asked Ellis. His voice became a heavy growl. "D'you mean to say you think I'm tryin' to pull something because I phoned you about Benner? Benner's the man. Don't be a fool, Donahue!"

Donahue smiled. "Jist what I mean. Fella, tell me this: Am I right, or wrong, in thinkin' you're Buck Henderson's partner?"

Ellis realized suddenly where all this might be leading. "Right," he acknowledged weakly. "My partner."

"That was my own impression," stated Donahue. "Now, tell me another thing: Was my eyesight good or bad? Did I, or didn't I, recognize you among them present in the hotel room, when I stepped in for Buck Henderson on a murder charge? Did you know your partner that day, or didn't you? Or did your eyes suddenly git crossed so that you mistook Mr. Andrew Harris for Mr. Henderson?"

It was out. Ellis knew just what was going to happen now. Sheer, futile anger began to make his big shoulders tremble.

"An' did you, or did you not," continued the dry Donahue, "realize that any man, knowin'ly protectin' the person charged with a felony or convicted thereof, becomes an accessory to the crime hisself? You're wanted—at least until a whole lot more is known than at present. I'm takin' you along with me, Ellis!"

ELLIS knew there was no protest. He knew, that instant, that he was out of the fight for the well in Honda Creek. Perhaps he could get a wire to Wheeler for help. Get bail later. It was a bomb that Ellis had known to be among them, ready to explode; but with the weeks that it had lain quiet, he had grown careless of it, forgetful even, as men become inured to an ever-present danger.

It had exploded now at the crucial moment. Ellis saw his one great mistake; this thing should have been forced long ago and cleared up, one way or another, no matter what that cost would have been to the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 at the time. Ellis growled a question:

"Who came out with that story? Harris break?"

Donahue smiled. "No, Harris didn't break. From what I seen of him, Harris aint quite the breakin' kind. It was an old friend of yours that talked. When he saw Buck Henderson at large in town here tonight, he come to me with a few well-timed questions an' sich. Some of them things he told me amounts to proof. The warrant I had that day I made the arrest called for Buck Henderson—you knowin'ly hoisted another man off on me. How-come this man was later identified, I dunno; but that means I want this Gapolonis tonight also. Accordin' to my own private checkin'-up, Harris was with a geologist named Sanborn the afternoon of the crime. He's been in jail; Henderson's been travelin' under his name. Somethin' is pretty rotten. When you called with this Benner joker, it looked

like time to get busy. You're first on the list, Ellis; that's all." Donahue sighed and concluded:

"Oh, yeh—your friend's name was Greer. Joe Greer. He's the man that put me wise."

Ellis couldn't speak. Greer! He might have known, of course. His throat felt taut, constricted. He simply nodded.

Donahue had a set of handcuffs. He motioned Ellis toward him, snapped one cuff on Ellis' right wrist, the other to his own leathery forearm.

"Well, we'll be amblin' along," he said.

They went down the staircase to the street, side by side. Ellis was playing last bets. He knew that nothing would release him from the Buttonwillow jail tonight, not Mary Ballinger's story, nothing that he himself could say or bring to light. Donahue had simply discovered the hoax that had been played upon him; impartially, calmly, shrewdly, he was gathering in the members of the deception, including Gapolonis. After all, Miguel Viguá had died—and the charge was that of murder!

But there were still minor last bets to be played. A telegram to Wheeler, for help. And the matter of Hoppy Benner! Ellis pleaded that Hoppy was real, vital to the case. Benner had taken that money, five thousand dollars, from Miguel's body. There was a witness, Mary Ballinger; that was the truth. Donahue promised to look into the thing—as soon as he had the time.

Ellis knew fear. Greer wanted Benner also. What would it mean if Greer got him?

IN the short walk to the Sheriff's office, which seemed like miles, Ellis regretted he hadn't come to physical grips with Donahue in the office. He might have got by with it then, overpowered Donahue. Now he was hopelessly chained to the flesh and bone of the leathery old Sheriff's wrist. Greer was striking tonight! Donahue chatted amiably:

"Hope you an' me can get along as well as Harris an' me have," he said. "Often pretty lonesome round the jail. Harris—I still keep thinkin' of him as Henderson—anyhow, Harris plays a right smart hand of poker. Right smart! But I used to have a kind of side-game I played with him, whenever I went back to the cell. If I could get Harris to speak three words, I won the side-game. If he only spoke two, Harris won. An' would you believe it, I only been able to win



that-'ere side-game jist once. Jist once! That was tonight when I sprung the Harris name on him. How he did cuss!"

Just before they came to the jail, there was an open block in the street, looking west across-country toward the Shed Roofs. Over the distant ranges the flashing twitch of lightning could be seen. It threw the arid mountains into flickering, black silhouette. No stars were visible over the west horizon. Half up to the meridian of the sky they were blotted out by the gigantic, rolling cloud formation.

"That looks bad," said Donahue, who knew the country.

## CHAPTER X

"YOU'LL HAVE NO OIL-WELL IF—"

THE car Buck had hired charged through the night. Glancing at the lighted dashboard clock, in front of the driver's hunched knees, Buck was surprised to see that the hour lacked a few moments of nine o'clock. It seemed as if hours had passed since sundown.

Ahead, white lightning-flashes outlined the ragged divides and ridges of the Shed Roofs. Occasional growl of thunder was becoming audible above the roar of the racing motor. There was a definite atmospheric pressure upon Buck's lungs, making it vaguely difficult to breathe, even a little suffocating. There seemed to be no breeze, no stirring of air across the flat lands before Honda Creek.

The driver appeared worried. Once he said:

"There's nothin' fiercer in the world than one of them desert cloudbursts. Mountain country is no place to be when one hits!"

The pressure seemed to increase; by the time they were in Honda Creek, the lightning over the mountains ahead was blinding. Monstrous, rolling thunderheads were piled together in gigantic, seething masses over the ranges.

The driver's face was tense in the steady illumination of the dash-light. He was shooting the car up the rough road. Buck had no longer reason to urge speed. The driver turned to him, shouted:

"How much farther? I want to get my car back out of this cañon bottom!"

"Not over a mile more," Buck told him. "Slow up when I give the word. We leave the main road. Swing right to the rig."

The driver didn't ease the throttle. In the next serried lightning-flash the whole valley of Honda Creek was visible in twitching outline. Buck could see the narrows above, the site of the Honda Creek dam. He strained his eyes. Over to the right now, the twinkling night lights of the derrick should be visible.

He scanned the whole side of the cañon. No reassuring twinkle of steady light from the drilling floor, no yellow window at the engine-house or boiler-shed. Nothing!

A moment later they approached the turn-off. Buck shouted to the driver to slow, swing right. Above the roll of thunder the brakes screamed. The driver came to a halt too soon. He moved on slowly, ready to turn. The powerful running lights of the car were a steady, fan-shaped path of white on the road ahead. The driver swung the sharp corner slowly, the lights sweeping in a wide arc ahead. The moving path of illumination centered full on the wreck of a small light car that had gone out of control on the corner. The car had careened off the road for a distance of fifty yards, gone into a ditch and overturned.

The speedster halted; Buck leaped out, and in the path of light, approached warily.

He saw at first near glance that it was the car kept at the rig. Windshield and top were smashed. The car lay on its side.

How did it come to be here now? Had Hoppy returned to Honda Creek? Plainly the car had been headed up-cañon. Either the speed had been too great or something else had happened on the turn-off. Buck examined the wreck in the lightning flash and the steady illumination from behind.

HE could see dark drops on a piece of broken windshield. Buck nervously reached down, put his finger to one of the drops. It stuck to his finger. Blood! Blood not yet congealed. Buck wiped his hand on his trouser leg. He touched the radiator of the machine. It was hot. The accident, then, was not moments old.

At a run Buck returned to the other machine.

"Get on!" he told the driver tersely.

They moved the last distance across the bottoms at what, to Buck, was a maddening crawl. From the lower stretch of the road, he had failed to find the lights that should have shown steadily

at the rig—lights over the floor, the lighted windows of the engine-house and boiler-shed. The rig had a portable electric plant that had run all night, every night, since the wildcat had spudded. From the main road Buck had thought that maybe some object in the foreground blocked the lights out.

Now he knew that there were none! The site of the test was black as the pitch black of night between lightning-flashes.

Finally the lights of the car threw steady illumination on the lower part of the derrick, doghouse and roof. No person was in sight. No movement. The customary guard hadn't appeared to meet them. It looked as though Stormy, Sam, the whole crew, had simply walked out.

Did that mean—what *did* it mean?

"Cut your lights!" Buck hissed in the driver's ear.

The man did so. The flash of lightning was blinding one instant, the next darkness, thick and solid enough to cut with a knife. The crack and rattle of thunder from the ranges, the hollow vibrant echoes in the cañons was continuous, deafening.

A minute or two passed. The revolver was openly out in Buck's hand, his thumb on the hammer. The driver noticed.

"What you gettin' me into?" he asked hoarsely against Buck's ear.

Buck didn't answer. Every nerve in his body was tense; drawn like taut, vibrating wire. He was ready, suspecting anything. Slowly, carefully, the gun always up, Buck pulled the side-door catch and let himself out to the ground. Stood there, undecided, for several seconds.

**T**HEN he began to walk through the cracking night, step by slow step, toward the looming, black outlines of the Honda Creek derrick. Scenes flashed blinding white one instant, and the next he walked through thick, soft-feeling, warm inky darkness.

But Buck hadn't gone fifty feet when a voice almost in his ear commanded hoarsely:

"Stop in your tracks, fella!"

It was Stormy. A shotgun pressed suddenly into Buck's ribs.

Something seemed to give way in Buck, his tense nerves suddenly to relax. He knew that if Stormy were still here, still on his feet, nothing serious had happened in the hole.

A flash of lightning. The gun dropped. Stormy recognized Buck.

"Come 'long!" he commanded.

**B**UCK swiftly followed Stormy to the rig. Sam Eggers, Sandy Culver, the second tool-dresser and the day-guard named Jameson were ranged all about, standing or sitting here and there in the black shadow of the timbers. Sam Eggers had a revolver, Culver the .22 rifle, the second tool-dresser a pick-handle. Eggers took the lead as spokesman, his lips against Buck's ear. Even then Buck missed a part of it in the rattle of the thunder.

"Happened not fifteen minutes ago, Buck!" Eggers shouted. "Some man come in with a car—give Stormy a note from you. You said come into town. Stormy just laughed. But a minute later the night-guard got a chance an' stuck up both Stormy an' Jameson in the boiler shed. Sandy an' me was alone on the floor when they rushed us—"

"Who rushed you?"

"Dunno. Three men. One wore a derby hat. Two got Sandy an' me against the wall, guns in our backs. Steam was up. The third man tried to hitch onto the under-reamer, lift it over the hole on the cable, head down, an' drop loose."

"Did he?"

"No. 'Fore he could, steam was cut off. Stormy, in the boiler-shed, had got his hand on a wrench. He cracked the night-guard's head. Then Stormy cut the steam right at the boiler."

The rest of the story followed.

Steam cut off at the boiler instantly meant no power in the engine; consequently the cable went dead. The under-reamer, head down, hadn't yet swung into a position over the casing head, where it could be dropped to the bottom of the hole, a plug of steel against further drilling. The attackers knew what had happened. All leaped to help, but the weight of the big piece of tool-steel defied their strength. Thirty seconds later Stormy, with the shotgun now, and the armed Jameson rushed the floor. Eggers and Culver did their part. Two or three shots were fired, but only Jameson had been touched—a flesh-wound in the leg. The attackers had fled, outnumbered. There had been no attempt on the part of the crew to halt them.

**W**HAT happened to the night-guard?" Buck wanted to know. "Did he get away?"

"Stormy used the wrench mebbe a little too hard," was the startling reply. "The guard's body is over in the boiler-shed now, where he fell. He's dead!"

"Dead?"

"Stone dead!"

This was a death undeniably linked with the sinking of the test in Honda Creek. It sent a shiver through Buck. Stormy's act was undoubtedly justifiable homicide, in protection of property; at the same time it meant investigation, perhaps lengthy. Stormy and witnesses would be taken to Buttonwillow.

Buck thought about it for a moment. He questioned Stormy about Hoppy.

Stormy had sent Hoppy into town, with the news for Ellis. The word was authentic; there was every indication that the tools were ready to break into the pay. Stormy was holding steam now, on the hope that Ellis might get the needed joints of casing out tonight, and they would be ready for the cementing crew to follow at dawn.

"Funny thing," shouted Eggers, "but we saw car lights comin' up the main road just ahead of yours! Maybe five minutes ahead of you. Then something happened on the turn-off. Lights snapped out. Sandy thought he heard gun-shots!"

"Shots?" asked Buck.

"Yeah. Car half turned the corner. Shootin'. Then the lights snapped out."

**S**UDDENLY it was clear to Buck. Greer had struck already. Gaponis, Steve, Tony and probably Greer himself had beat Buck into Honda Creek.

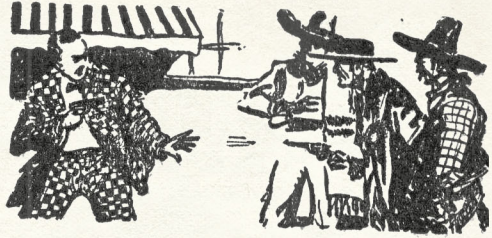
Buck charged back to the car that had brought him. The driver had turned the machine; the motor was running. Plainly he didn't intend to wait much longer. Buck gave the driver word for Ellis, the facts of the case; told the man that he would probably meet Ellis on the road, and to stop any machine headed this way.

The men ranged about the derrick no longer tried to speak together. Speech was becoming next to impossible. They stood against the timbers, waiting, watching. The crew knew that for almost an hour the violence of the storm had been breaking in the ranges to the west, with all the force of a mountain cloudburst.

"How about this dam above us?" Sandy Culver had asked once.

"We're lucky that dam's there," Eggers told him. "Mighty lucky! That's all."

Buck took out his watch, held it ready in his hand against the next lightning-flash. The hour was shortly past ten o'clock. Time seemed to pass with an awful slowness, an interminable dally-



ing. Buck hadn't been back at the well much over twenty minutes.

He finally gave Sandy orders to start the light-plant going again. No use waiting in the darkness like this. It destroyed morale; the crew was jumpy.

But before Sandy could start the plant, lightning hit just above them in the bottoms—hit again and again, like the bombardment of terrible guns, along the ridges and bottoms of Honda Creek. The main force of the storm, however, was still well to the west, Buck knew—in the ravines, gullies and cañons that lay through the ranges in the form of some immense, misshapen vine, twigs, stems and limbs all connected and draining into the big trunk that was the wash of Honda Creek.

A big drop of rain hit the back of Buck's hand. Another splashed along his cheek.

Without warning, the wind! It struck in a blast that threatened the clothing on Buck's shoulders. His hat soared into space. Like a driven blow, the wind hit the structure of the derrick. It screamed, shrieked through the braces and girts. The structure itself trembled, as though rattled by the earth. Buck hung against the timbers.

Following that single, terrible gust of wind, they could hear the great roar of rain sweeping across the bottoms on them. It was audible above the thunder. Just before it hit, Buck felt Eggers' hand clutch his shoulder.

"Down the road!" Eggers yelled in his ear. "Another car!"

Buck saw the globes of an auto, tiny with the distance of a mile or more, lurching up the main road toward them. Then rain blotted everything out.

It fell in torrents, sheets, streams, blown by heavy wind, aftermath of the single terrible blast. The lightning and thunder were gone almost as suddenly. Behind was left the great rising roar of the cloudburst, the crying screams of steady, chill wind through the derrick-timbers and braces. The oppressive heat had gone in an instant.

Buck left the half-shelter of the timbers and roof-edge and ran for the floor door, to get under the main roof. A man could hardly stand against the sweep of the storm. Eggers followed in the drenched black of the night. Buck felt his way, running and stumbling the few short feet around the foundation-corner to the housing floor. Sheet-like spouts of water already poured from the corrugated roof over the floor. Buck felt his shoes fill with water. He finally climbed inside, bumped into somebody already there.

Speech was impossible, with the roar of rain on the sheet-iron roof overhead. Drenched and shivering now, the crew stood about the floor, huddled here and there, the darkness was black as night. But Buck knew, all the while, that only an edge of the terrific storm above was touching them. The full force of the cloudburst that had been breaking for an hour or more in the Shed Roofs was still hitting in the watersheds and ranges above, flowing into the beds of tiny ravines and gullies, pouring on to join torrential streams in cañons and creek-beds, racing in roaring walls of flood upon the valleys and bottoms.

After a long while Sandy, in the engine-house, managed to get the little gasoline light-plant running. Electric globes came on, small, yellow and feeble in the dense black of the night. But light eased the tension; Buck saw Stormy smile and sit down on a roll of cable. The same thought had been in each mind; each had wondered who the man next to him was in the darkness.

**A**NYTHING might have accounted for Buck's suspicion. It might have been a hunch. Visibly, it was the fact that the car halted a full fifty yards from the derrick. Buck had every reason to expect that the car held Ellis, coming on to Honda Creek, as he had promised—every reason, except that the car halted a full fifty yards from the derrick!

Ten minutes after it struck, the force of the storm was dying. The black night outside was filled with spent waves of drizzle. Once more now, distant, the echoed growl of the thunder came back.

But the car that came to a stop fifty yards away was still waiting; from the floor Buck watched it. Half-minded to go and meet Ellis, he still didn't move.

A figure passed before the lights. A second followed. Somehow Buck got the impression that he saw the sticklike

shape of a gun held crisscross to the second man's body.

Buck looked at Eggers, Stormy. Eggers shook his head uncertainly.

"Get cover!" said Buck.

For himself, Buck chose to dodge around the corner, into the band-wheel housing. Lights shone steadily over the floor now. Stormy and the day-guard, Jameson, moved behind timbers. Eggers fell back into the doghouse. The tool-dressers eased into shadow. The crew guarded the open floor efficiently. If Ellis, all well and good—if Greer again, they were prepared!

**T**HE figure that shortly swung up onto the floor, however, was neither. He was a gnarled, middle-aged, leathery man. One hand rested easily over the holster at his hip. A star-point of metal glinted from a pocket of his vest. In short, Sheriff Donahue, of Buttonwillow!

He surveyed the scene in silence for a moment. Eggers moved out of the doghouse.

"Expectin' somebody?" asked Donahue. The ever-present wad of tobacco wormed in his cheek. "Somebody?"

Donahue made a motion with one gnarled hand. A man stepped into the light on the other side of the floor, from the housing opening on the sump—not ten feet from Buck. The man carried a sawed-off shotgun crisscross to his body. Buck flattened into concealing shadow.

"Buck Henderson here?" asked Donahue casually.

Buck heard the question. He knew then just what had brought Donahue, as Ellis had also known tonight. Things had broken wide open somewhere. Probably Ellis was already out of the running.

Stormy stood up, glaring at Donahue.

"Henderson here?" he asked back, equally casual in tone. "Hell, no! Last I heard Buck was in that calaboose of yours in Buttonwillow. Let him escape, did you?"

Stormy spat disgustedly, as though that ended the matter. Donahue studied Stormy with a pleased expression on his leathery features.

"Hard-boiled like your brother Andrew, aint yuh?" said the Sheriff with withering directness.

For a full moment Stormy could not speak. He realized as well as Buck, crouched back in the housing, what those words meant, that Donahue knew the hoax played on him, that no subter-

fuge was possible. Stormy tried to speak and couldn't. Finally two words came: "Andy—squeal?"

"No," said Donahue. He shook his head gravely, and repeated the single word: "No!"

Stormy was icily calm again. He saw the situation with equal clarity. He knew that Greer would undoubtedly strike again, the minute odds were in his favor. Everything was finished if Greer's men once gained control of the floor for a few short moments. All the weeks of grilling labor, struggle, fight—all that would be of no account. The thing Andy had done, Sanborn's loyalty, Wheeler's gamble on men—all for nothing! The wiry little driller's face was hard as so much flint, as he turned to Sandy Culver:

"Sandy, you drop back to the boiler an' see how the steam-pressure is holdin' up. We may get that casing tonight. We're goin' to need a whole crew."

"Right! I'll 'tend to that little matter," Sandy said understandingly.

Donahue didn't move. Sandy disappeared onto the walk leading back to the engine-house and boiler-shed. Then Donahue nodded to his single deputy.

"See what this tool-dresser is up to," he commanded. "The rest of you," he continued, "stay right where each of you is! Get me?"

Donahue had his own hunches. Eggers seemed suddenly to comprehend, or for the first time to remember the body of the night-guard who had played false. His plump, good-natured face blanched in the light, Donahue hadn't shifted his position a foot on the floor. After ten seconds, he remarked:

"If that tool-dresser's gone back to warn him, it's jist too bad. Y'know, I'm here to get Buck Henderson!"

The crew, ranged about the floor, stood utterly silent. There was not a thing they could do. Each stood strained, tense; the wise old Sheriff noted it.

"So that tool-dresser was sent back to tip Buck off, huh? Well, I reckon I seen most all varieties of trick-stuff in my day. Sometimes it'll work, sometimes not."

**I**T was possibly a minute and a half before the deputy returned. Sandy came ahead of him into the light, prodded forward on the muzzle of the deputy's sawed-off shotgun.

"What d'yuh reckon this fella was up to?" growled the deputy. He paused

dramatically. "There's a stiff in the boiler-shed! He was tryin' to hide it!"

Donahue looked at Sandy for a while. "So? That so?" he asked mildly.

"Yeah," continued the deputy. "I reckon there was plenty reason for us comin' out here tonight, huh? Body's scarce cold. Cracked skull. Couldn't have happened long ago!"

"So? That so?" asked Donahue. It was as close to surprise as the leathery old Sheriff ever came. For a moment he was silent. He turned to the assembled crew.

"Which of you did it?"

Stormy glared, mad, raging against futility. The sour-faced, loyal little driller's hands dropped in a gesture.

"Me!" whispered Stormy. "I did it!"

"There have been confessions harder to get," remarked Donahue after a while. "Any witnesses?"

The day-guard, Jameson, nodded.

In the night outside, the parting drizzle of the storm had gone. While struts and beams still dripped, a star-bright strip of sky was clearing rapidly heavenward to the south. The roll of thunder was scarcely audible. But for some time, in the night outside, the dying roll of thunder had been replaced by another sound. Buck had heard it vaguely, too intent on the other thing to give it note. But the sound was a tiny, distant roar—the roar of torrential tons of loose water, coming down Honda Creek!

**W**ILD-EYED, drenched, a figure charged into the rig lights—the middle-aged, previously imperturbable watchman from the dam, a man content to bury himself in the lonely job of caring for what machinery and property was left at the uncompleted structure when the contractor moved out. Spent and gasping, he yelled:

"The dam! The dam up-cañon! Trash cloggin' the floodgates. One's stuck. Can't get it free. Water risin' every second!"

Donahue, of all the men, understood instantly, thoroughly, calmly. No change of expression on his countenance. He snapped:

"Chance for us to get the gates open?"

"Don't know," the watchman panted. "I can't alone. I come for help. It aint like that dam was finished—she might crack—might break! Go out!"

Donahue nodded. "We'll see what we can do!"

But under the calmness of Donahue's words men saw the other thing. No one of them needed to be told what would happen if the half-completed man-made wall held for a time, then went out under the strain. Thousands of tons of water loosed in a single instant! They could hear the low, rising roar, as waves of flood from the mountain cañons reached Honda Creek.

Sandy Culver suddenly turned away. The deputy followed, passed Sandy and leaped into the driver's seat of the Sheriff's car. Eggers alone started to protest, and Donahue cut him short with a snap:

"You'll have no oil-well if that dam goes out!"

The menace of Joe Greer seemed suddenly of little importance. A shallow stream, a hundred feet wide, was escaping the clogged gates and spreading through the bottoms by the rig. Stormy, who could do nothing, turned a final glance of mute appeal toward the shadow of the band-wheel housing.

The deputy had the car turned on the road, motor racing. Men clambered in. Donahue commanded:

"Get us up to that dam. Then you take the car and hit down-cañon. That homestead on the flats has got to be warned. There's another squatter three miles below. Drive, man!"

The motor roared. The car shot into the shallow stream beyond the rig, tires throwing waves of mud and water into the lights, high overhead, spattering the windshield. The machine lurched, skidded; then firm ground was under the wheels.

From the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 a red tail-light bobbed into distance, and disappeared when the car swung into the main road up toward the dam.

Buck saw it go—and laughed!

## CHAPTER XI

### GUN-FIRE

**T**HE laugh was harsh and metallic; not like a laugh from a human throat. Buck laughed in the face of Fate. At his feet lay Stormy's shotgun. In Buck Henderson's mind there was just one idea, one thought, one purpose:

He would never leave the floor of the wildcat tonight—not while one muscle in his hard body remained alive! The glitter in his eyes was so hard and purposeful that it wasn't quite sane—he was

a man who had reached the limit, who stood ready, willing, to fight any odds. Such men have accomplished the unbelievable in time of war, accident or emergency. But a straw on the wrong side of the balance, and he was death—deadly as the weapon in his hand. . . .

Hoppy Benner didn't know. When the car had ditched at the turn-off, Hoppy hadn't continued on up Honda Creek afoot, hoping to escape into Santa Bella County. No such thought had been in his mind. He had fled from Ellis' office, but he had actually known only one place to go—the wildcat in Honda Creek, a refuge for the past month and a half, as much a home as he had ever known. The only friends he knew were here. He hadn't drawn his wage from Ellis; he had no money for escape. His one thought had been to return to Stormy—Stormy Harris!

**F**ROM the ditched car Hoppy had fled distractedly toward the rig. He had found it dark, figures moving about. Hoppy had hid in the cook-shack, waiting uncertainly. He had been shot through the arm, and he stanching the flow of blood with a dish-towel. Subsequent events, the arrival of the Sheriff's car, left him terrified. Distance had been too great for him to overhear any words. But now the test seemed deserted, lights left on over the floor. In the doghouse was an emergency medical kit, and Hoppy knew the need of disinfectants for his wound.

He crept into the night, moving toward the lighted housing door. He paused for a moment outside, then glanced swiftly in—

His eyes looked instantly, squarely, into Buck Henderson's!

For the span of sixty seconds the two men looked into each other's eyes. Neither made a move nearer, nor away. Neither spoke. A nerve in one of Hoppy's cheeks began to twitch.

There was a dark spot on the cloth of Hoppy's left-hand coat sleeve. His left arm hung stiff and unnatural, hurt.

In the end, lips still twitching, it was Hoppy who—grinned! The grin snapped the tension.

"Come in here, Hoppy!" commanded Buck.

With a single searching glance, Buck scrutinized Hoppy in the light and seemed to see everything: Hoppy's torn, spattered clothing, streaked face, and the blood on Hoppy's useless arm.

"Hit you?" asked Buck. "Who shot?"

"Three-four men," said Hoppy. "Happened at the turn-off from the main road over here. Hit my arm. I'd slowed, but before I could right 'er, the flivver ditched and smashed."

"You were headed back *here*? To the well?"

Hoppy nodded. "Yeah, where else? They didn't get me, neither. Fall threw me half-clear; I got to my feet an' run. Made it back here. Hid!"

Buck stared at him. Then as though he knew Hoppy wouldn't flee, he turned to the doghouse and brought out the medical kit.

"Hoppy," said Buck, "how did you get that money from Viguá's body that day? Tell me the truth. Some of us will stick with you later."

Simple words, question without artifice; things were stripped to the naked elements tonight. Hoppy Benner shuddered. His little body shivered.

"That girl!" he croaked. "That girl in Ellis' office—she squealed, didn't she? I could see she was goin' to; that's the reason I beat it. She saw me—sure, I know she did!"

But Buck had only one question. "How did you get that money from Viguá's body?"

"Took it! Took it with my hands!" screamed Hoppy. "That dam was bein' constructed then. I'd been up there to find work. They wouldn't hire me. So I was followin' the trail over to Rancho Viguá. Heard a shot or two ahead—an' hurried on. There was Viguá lyin' in the trail—an' he was dead! I didn't know who he was then, an' I begun to run a hand over his clothes, to find some name or somethin' . . . There was all that money! I—I took it."

**B**OTH men were silent for a moment. Buck was unrolling a bandage. His eyes met Hoppy's.

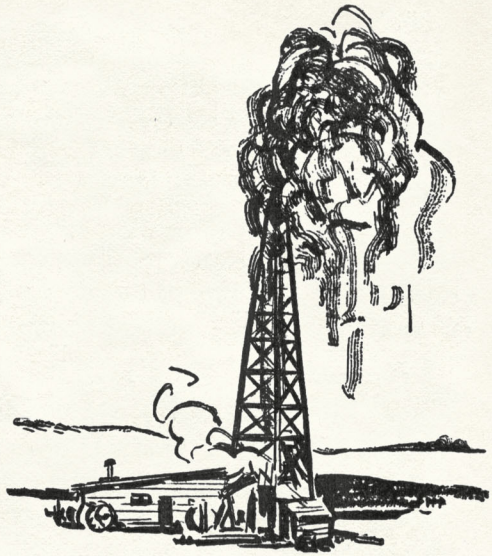
"Hoppy, do you know a man named Greer? Or another called Gapolonis?"

"No. Never heard of 'em! Neither of 'em!"

His eyes held Buck's. And Buck knew it was the truth. He asked slowly:

"Could Miguel's death have been—have been an accident? I'm wonderin', Hoppy?"

"Dunno. Dunno," chattered the little man. "I heard that shot. Maybe two shots—it's all kinda mixed in my mind now, like I'd dreamed it. But I saw nobody till I run face to face with



that girl, later. I beat it for the main road, fast as legs would carry me. A car come along after dark an' give me a lift to town. In town, I got to drinkin'. I was gettin' scared. They might frame me for the killin'! I was goin' to beat it. I got another drink, to brace me up. Another. Then I didn't care. At mornin' the money was gone."

Things were in the raw tonight. Every shred of Hoppy's character was bare before Buck's eyes. Buck knew that he told unadorned truth. Hoppy was no murderer! He had found the money on Miguel's body, and temptation had been too much for the broken little drifter.

Buck sponged the wound in Hoppy's arm and applied iodine. He began to wrap the bandage. Hoppy was looking back toward the open housing door, over Buck's shoulder, and suddenly he hissed in Buck's ear:

"Look!"

When Buck turned, the gun was in his hand, lifting. But—

In the light stood Mary Viguá!

She had been in the storm without protection—drenched and spattered, except for the scared white oval of her face. In the half-light behind, they could see the horse she had ridden, the big palomino that had been Miguel Viguá's. The girl motioned to Buck.

Buck crossed the floor as though he saw a dream take flesh and blood before his eyes. Mary Viguá was tearing at the button on a pocket. She drew out a folded, damp scrap of paper. Trembling fingers opened it, for Buck to read slowly in the yellow light:

*Mary, mia:*

*It is all too plain for a mistake now. I see what the man has been after, what he's done. Take this note to Ellis-Henderson, Honda Creek—they too must know. Joe Greer is the murderer of Miguel!*

*There is only one thing left for a gentleman of honor to do, and I go to do it.*  
Don Felipe.

Brief to the point of incoherence. But the one sentence—"Joe Greer is the murderer of Miguel!" Buck's eyes lifted. "Don Felipe is your uncle?"

The girl nodded frantically. "Yes, yes. But what—what does it mean? I go to his study every evening, to bid him good night. Tonight there—there was this instead. Beside it was a copy of a lease in Greer's name on Rancho Viguá. My uncle is gone."

Buck could only nod now, slowly.

"He tells me to come here," said the girl. "Ellis-Henderson—"

"Yes," said Buck thoughtfully. "Early tonight it would have made a lot of difference. Maybe not so much now; I don't know. But one of the Ellis-Henderson partners feels a lot better."

"What do you mean?"

"One of the partners was accused of murdering your brother, Miguel Viguá."

"Yes—" For the first time there was question of Buck himself in the girl's eyes. So great was the stress in her mind that she had apparently accepted him here at the wildcat without thought or surprise. Now her eyes were wide on his.

"I happen to be that partner," said Buck. "I'm Buck Henderson. You—happen to be the girl I love."

**S**ILENCE for a long, long moment. "You must leave here now!" said Buck. "Get away! Ride! There isn't time to explain—"

Lights over the floor suddenly faded. Something had gone wrong at the light-plant, chugging unnoticed in the night. The small gasoline engine stopped. Yellow globes on the floor, in the engine-room, boiler-shed and derrick tower turned dull glowing red—snapped out.

The night was instantly black as some deep cave. The escaping water through the bottoms gurgled laughingly.

One of Buck's strong arms suddenly went about the girl and drew her back into the still deeper black of the floor. He could feel her small, damp body next his own. He pushed her gently among

the corner housing-timbers. Left her there. The gun was back in his hand.

"Hoppy."

"Yeah, boss."

"I'm going out to see what's the matter," said Buck slowly.

"Wait, boss," whispered Hoppy hoarsely. "Wait just a minnit!"

Buck could feel it, too—a sense of human presence, human eyes other than their own. The gun was rigid in his hand. His muscles quivered slightly, tigerishly. He stood there looking into the night, and there was again that terrible fight-mad look in the eyes that tried to pierce the darkness.

The minute passed. Another.

**B**UCK could see better into the night now; through the housing doors he could see the clear, star-bright strip of sky to the south that had widened half across the black dome of the heavens. Lights were of no importance. But another thing was—what had happened! If the floor was about to be rushed, it was the last place in the world for Mary Viguá, for the girl Buck loved.

"Hoppy."

"Yeah, boss."

"Stormy's shotgun was lying there on the floor—"

"I already got it, boss."

"Anything might be wrong with that light-plant," considered Buck softly. "Short in the ignition, fouled spark-plug, out of gas. I'm goin' to see."

"Boss, you stay here. You stay with the girl!" It was Hoppy Benner, who had the courage now to say that—Hoppy, the weakling!

Buck was staring into the night. Across, by the wall of the cook-tent, he seemed to see something move. It was shadow against shadow. Then he couldn't be sure. Maybe his eyes, tense nerves, were playing a trick on him.

He heard Hoppy move across the floor, take the plank walk back to the engine-shed, where the light-plant was installed. He even heard Hoppy whistling tuneless, half-breath notes, like a small boy afraid of the dark, bolstering up frail spirit. Buck followed him swiftly into the night, to protect him from the rear and sides. The gun in Buck's hand was a hair-trigger, ready thing. His eyes strained into the shadow of the cook-tent. . . . Maybe it was nothing.

Seconds took on the seeming time-dimension of eternities. Hoppy went ahead, half down the walk, by the shed



door. Buck followed close, then halted. His eyes strained to cut the shadow by the tent. Attack might come from that quarter—

He heard Hoppy start to yell. The sound was cut short in his throat. A half-audible thud. A body fell!

Something both icy chill and fire-hot went through Buck Henderson's body. They had got Hoppy! He knew each careful, measured step he took, following down the walk. They were not more than six or eight, so many yards. . . .

By the door of the engine-house, shadows moved. Flash of a gun almost before Buck's eyes!

Buck's finger twitched answer. He remembered Hoppy, knew Hoppy was down, knocked out or killed, somewhere underfoot. Shoot waist-high or above! In the echoes of gun-fire, a man coughed.

Instant fire cut loose from two points. Around one corner of the shed little spiteful points of flame danced in a flicker. Others opened from the door. Shadows were in movement, form.

Buck stood there, swaying. Mechanical as a target-shooter, he answered.

**H**E didn't move when a leaping shadow collapsed at his feet. He centered a single shot beyond. This was the end, he knew; this finished things . . . . Guns at a range of not more than three or four paces. Men were black shadows on black. The serried detonation was deafening, sounding like an irregular burst of machine-gun fire. The duration of the mad battle was not actually longer than five or six seconds.

Underfoot the man coughed again. A shadow staggered, moving away. . . . Running. . . . Silence.

Legs braced, Buck swayed. Fire-points of pain convulsed his own shoulders. It took all the strength of his muscles and will to reverse the gun in his hand, butt forward. It was still a weapon. And Buck waited!

Why didn't they close on him now? He was waiting, the gun-butt forward in his hand. Why didn't they rush him? Was it possible the murderers were going to give him the chance to reload? Fog was getting in his vision.

He stood there for what seemed an endless length of time. Dull, goading pain replaced the fire-hot nerve-points. He felt that it was going to make him sick. But he couldn't go down yet. Nothing was going to take him away from Honda Creek tonight, not so long

as there was a shudder of life in his muscles. Why didn't they come on, attack again? They could get him now, as easily as they had Benner.

Mechanically, by the feel of the cartridges and cylinder of the weapon, Buck managed to reload. He was still waiting. But if they didn't hurry, Buck knew he was going to fall.

Then the earth seemed to move dizzily, swaying on its axis for him. It wasn't as though he fell, but the earth moved up to meet him. It was comforting. One leg was crumpled under him. Buck wondered at that.

The black, foggy thing was getting a hold on his eyes. It seemed to be feeling on into his brain. He tried to center his mind on that—fight off that thick, black fogginess!

Time forever might have passed. Buck moved again with racking pain in his shoulders, one side of his chest. Hoppy Benner's voice seemed to say something. Mary Viguá answered:

"Hold the light up. Help me with this bandage."

Buck tried to push words through his own infinitely heavy lips. In a dream he seemed to stand again on the floor. The sour-faced little Stormy was drilling. The creak and jar of the walking-beam, lifting and falling with the mighty weight of tools on the end of the cable. The derrick shivered gentle accompaniment. Buck was about to take a stroll up Honda Creek, to a certain hilltop; maybe the girl he had met before would be there again. His lips framed two words, and he said:

"Hammer down!"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE SOUND OF MUSIC

**M**IDNIGHT—the streets of Buttonwillow. The stores were still open for business. The crowds had thinned, but men milled along the streets. Poker-games were just getting well under way, behind lighted upper-story windows. No rain had fallen in the town, but the distant thunder-rattle from the Shed Roof ranges had been audible, vibrant, low and heavy through the earth, like the din of far-off artillery fire.

"Hell must of broke out in them mountains yonder," announced an idler. The man puffed listlessly on his cigarette for a moment. "Say, who's this old bird comin' up the street? I seen



him pass three times tonight, walkin' by stiff and straight like that. Looks like he might be somebody."

"Somebody? That's old Mendez. Felipe Mendez, from Rancho Vigúa. Somebody is right. A hundred thousand acres in that old Vigúa land-grant, all in one piece, an' Mendez has got the say on the whole cheese."

The idlers fell silent as Don Felipe Mendez passed. The old man walked with an even, careful tread, measured and yet swift. His face was pale and utterly expressionless. The eyes alone moved—and they saw everything, every face, every figure on the walks. Two Mexican *vaqueros* from the ranch followed at his heels, two paces back.

"Huh! He's packin' a gun!" remarked the man with the cigarette. "Packin' it low on the hip. Can't be lookin' for somebody, can he?"

Another idler, drifting into the group, remarked: "Watch him! Every once in a while he'll see somebody he knows on the street an' go over to 'em. He asks one question; I heard him say it twice. Each time, clear an' distinct—'Have you by any chance seen Mr. Greer this evening? Mr. Joseph Greer. I wish to find him. . . . No? Then I am sorry to have troubled you, señor.'"

"Huh!" considered the man with the cigarette. "I dunno that I'd like to be Mr. Joseph Greer, at that. Don't believe I would!"

The word spread. For two hours Don Felipe Mendez had been walking the streets, searching, asking and waiting for Joe Greer. It was a gun of old-time make and pattern at his hip, a five-shot .36 revolver of worthy balance. The holster holding it was of hand-carved leather and well-worn. It was tied low down to the right thigh. Several old friends of Don Felipe's had nervously visited the Sheriff's office; but learning that Donahue and his deputy had gone on an errand to Honda Creek, they could do no more. They stood helplessly by, hoping that a man named Greer would not visit Buttonwillow tonight.

A few on the streets knew Greer either personally or by reputation, and they nodded knowingly. Before now Greer had dealt with duped landowners. If he showed his face on the streets tonight, it would only be with Gapolonis, the killer, at his side. This old man wouldn't have a chance; his friends should get together and take him home. Something serious might happen. Men waited to see if it wouldn't. . . .

A muddy car shot into the west end of town. Meeting two vehicles in the street, it swerved by them, almost crashing a curb. The car slowed with a scream of brakes, righted itself and came on into the main street, where many eyes were suddenly on it.

The mud-spattered car moved past lights. The driver was a dark hulk of a man, with a full, strangely blanched face. At his side sat a slimmer form. The slim man seemed to be crouched in the seat, his head almost out of sight, his eyes ever on the changing street ahead. Almost as swift as the passage of the car, word ran after it:

"Greer! Joe Greer—and Gapolonis in the seat beside him!"

UP the street, Don Felipe Mendez, the two *vaqueros* at his heels, chose this moment to cross to the other side. They moved into the street. Just as they reached the opposite curb, the car swerved in, a bare fifteen yards ahead.

It was before a well-lighted store-front that housed a doctor's office in rooms overhead. Men on the street suddenly ran, seeking cover of other cars along the curbs, straining to look on in safety. This was the meeting!

Silence came, for a distance of fifty yards in either direction, so complete that men heard Don Felipe cough, clear his throat softly.

"Greer!"

The mud-spattered Greer, leaping from the car, whirled. His face had heavy, brutal lines on it that customarily were not so noticeable.

"You! What d'you want now?" he growled.

"Draw!"

Men could see Greer's face, the brutal lines of it, the chalk white of his complexion. The hidden Gapolonis had not moved from his seat. Any second those who watched expected to hear the explosion from the car and see Don Felipe crumple in his tracks.

"Draw, murderer!" lashed Don Felipe.

Tense, he waited. Right hand a claw, inches above the holster at his hip. Ten seconds of taut silence. Ten seconds in which no man moved. Then the watchers saw Greer tear into his coat-front. He ripped out a flat, blunt-nosed automatic from hidden holster. The gun lifted—before Don Felipe moved.

A single shot sounded through the streets of Buttonwillow!

IT had been the fast draw of a man who had known the day when every *caballero* rode armed—and had not quite forgotten. Don Felipe turned away without a backward glance. Greer was dead before his body fell to the curb!

After a while one of the men in the street touched the waiting Gapolonis' shoulder. But Gapolonis didn't move. The man shook him. The gunman's head lost the support of his hunched shoulder and sagged. There had been another gun-battle somewhere, long before the mud-spattered car lurched into Buttonwillow.

Gapolonis' gun-arm was shattered; the same bullet had gone on into his body. He was unconscious from the wound and loss of blood.

No man stepped to halt Don Felipe. He marched slowly up the length of the street, the two *vaqueros* at his heels. Taut, stiff, he turned into the deserted Sheriff's office. He carefully took a chair, to wait; the two *vaqueros* sat also, one to each side of him. . . .

Dawn broke in chill, cold gray. A truck, under the manipulation of a hard-handed driver, ground its way out the Honda Creek road, headed for the Ellis-Henderson No. 1 with six joints of casing. The driver waved an approaching auto to a halt.

"How's the road ahead?" he wanted to know. "Storm wash anything out?"

It was Donahue who answered from the car. "Road's O.K. But you might have some trouble gettin' across to the Ellis-Henderson rig. Flood-gates open above. Lot of water comin' down the bottoms there. An' plenty left at the dam!"

As far as anyone knew, that was Donahue's sole comment on the battle he had commanded the night before.

But the men in the car with Donahue were scarecrow figures—muddy clothing dried stiff; worn, strained faces now strangely relaxed and gaunt. Stormy Harris and the deputy were on the front seat. In the half-light the truck-driver

couldn't see very well, but it looked like a woman supporting a prone figure in the rear. A little man hung to one running-board.

"Say," muttered the truckster, "aint you Donahue? Sheriff Donahue, of Buttonwillow!"

"Yeah."

"There was trouble in town last night," the driver informed him. "This old Mendez, from Rancho Viguá, shot a man named Greer on the streets. Killed him!"

The waiting auto lurched, starting forward.

Buck, who lay prone on the rear seat, felt the sudden tensing of the girl's body and knew that she had heard. For moments he could feel Mary Viguá's hand clutched tight on his. He could see the cold chill gray of dawn light beyond, and her profile seemingly etched upon it.

A bullet had passed high through Buck's left shoulder, broken the collar-bone and gone clean. A second had cut deep into one thigh. He had lost a quantity of blood and was weak as a child. There was a nick in his arm, above the elbow. Buck was shot up! But—

"Lucky!" Donahue had said. "Lucky—an' how."

Apart from the wounds, there were two other bullet-holes in Buck's clothing. The battle had been fought in black darkness, but the range of the guns less than four paces. Two Greer men had fallen at the engine-shed, but they were the hirelings. There was nothing, at the derrick, to show that either Greer or Gapolonis had been in the battle. That information waited in Buttonwillow, oddly enough. That, and other!

Donahue, driving, shook his head. Affairs such as this were not wiped off the slate by words and a gesture of explanation. He foresaw something of the things to follow.

AN airplane slid down from a morning sky, bringing Ed Wheeler, of Los Angeles, in reply to Brad's telegram for help. But help was no longer needed at the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, in Honda Creek; the weary crew remaining was faithfully at it under Eggers' order, landing the last joints of casing, ready to cement in. At mid-morning Ellis was released. Gapolonis, who, vitally wounded, had made it back to Buttonwillow with Greer, lingered between life

and death. A coroner's jury was meeting. For a while Hoppy Benner was under a fire of question.

The motive for Greer to have struck on Honda Creek was plain enough, since a lease on Rancho Viguá had been signed. Several men could explain that; Honda Creek showed plenty of promise and might be the next big field. But as somebody expressed it, Greer had struck one man in Honda Creek. That one man had been enough!

**Y**ET this did not alter the case of Don Felipe. He had killed a man—had forced him to draw, shot him down on the streets of Buttonwillow! It was a different thing from the affair in Honda Creek, where Buck Henderson had taken the only way to protect life and property. Different from Stormy Harris' act. The charge might necessarily be manslaughter.

"If we had proof," considered Donahue thoughtfully, "proof that Greer had a hand in Miguel's murder, I don't believe that the jury was ever assembled in Buttonwillow County that would see any sentence passed. But Benner's findin' the money intact like that! . . . The fact is, it looks more an' more like Miguel *might* have met his death through accident."

Don Felipe Mendez sat in the Sheriff's office, in the same stiff posture, the two *vaqueros* on either side of him.

"That was Greer's idea," he said. "Miguel opposed him for the rancho lease. I believe he killed Miguel for no more reason. That was the single motive when it happened. . . . Then Benner appeared from nowhere, took the money. You've stated that Benner confesses that much."

"Yeah. Benner's in for a real sweat-in," agreed Donahue. "But there's scarce a doubt in my mind but that he's told the truth. He found the money on Miguel's body; temptation was too much for him, an' he took it. Got drunk an' was robbed of the whole wad that same night. Benner's no killer. But there was plenty reason after that for him to keep his mouth shut. Tight shut!"

"Yes," said Don Felipe. "Greer could depend on that. Even so, perhaps Greer would have liked to get his hands on Benner, made sure in the end—"

"The fact is," stated Donahue, "that Greer was after Benner last night. There's no explained reason. Benner didn't even know Greer by sight or name,

it seems. . . . Say, just what're you driving at?"

"At just one thing!" said Don Felipe. His eyes had a strange intensity. "Just one thing—and it alone is enough. Five thousand dollars has been found!"

"Sure," nodded Donahue. "We've just gone over that. Benner found and took it."

"No," whispered Don Felipe. "I found it and have it!"

Donahue looked at the tense old man and was silent.

"The five thousand dollars I speak of," continued Don Felipe, "was found in one pocket of Miguel's saddlebags. When his riderless horse returned to the ranch, the saddle was taken from the animal's back and hung on its accustomed peg in the barns. It has never been used since that day. All these weeks the saddle has hung there. Late yesterday afternoon I took five thousand dollars from one saddlebag pocket. I have it with me now, as a certain proof."

Donahue nodded slowly. He was thoughtfully silent for a long while.

"That would look," he remarked finally, "—that would sure look like Miguel had put the money in the saddlebag pocket, instead of carryin' it on his person, an' there it has been until this day. It would sure look that way! You never thought to search there before? No one of your men ever went through the saddlebags before, or thought of that?"

"No," said Don Felipe. "No one. But after all, it was a thing that Miguel might quite possibly have done. I've known him to put valuables there; any man might do it, if he didn't intend to leave his mount. The money would be safer there than on his person."

"Yeah, I see that," snapped Donahue. "Only too plain. Damn it, this looks bad! Miguel's horse comes home, an' the saddle is hung away, money intact. There was plenty about Miguel's death that looked like accident all along. This looks bad—a lot worse'n the other!"

**T**HE two *vaqueros* sat silent, motionless, on Don Felipe's either hand.

"Bad—yes!" agreed Don Felipe. "It proves that Greer thought it worth five thousand dollars, in the end, to make Miguel's death appear accidental. He evidently foresaw the fact that a motive for him to have killed Miguel would eventually come to light. Carrying through what he intended in Honda Creek was bound to make trouble. When

the charge against Henderson exploded, Greer didn't want the other swinging back on himself. It alone might get him. It was worth five thousand dollars now—for Miguel's death to appear accidental!"

Donahue was silent.

"These two *vaqueros*," continued Don Felipe, "witnessed the incident. They saw Joe Greer place the money in the saddle-pocket yesterday afternoon."

"Funny!" Donahue remarked after a while. "Right queer how a stacked deck of cards will sometimes show out in the shuffle. Here Greer just paid five thousand dollars—to make the best proof in the world that he was the murderer!"

IT was an hour later that Gapolonis was brought to the point of confessing. It seemed doubtful that the slim killer would live the day out. Greer was gone, and Gapolonis, in the end, was confronted with what amounted to proof.

Miguel Viguá had been an obstacle that Greer saw the chance to remove. Honda Creek had already gone to Ellis-Henderson at less than his own offer. Greer had met Miguel, ridden beside him and fired the shot at closest range, exploding the fallen man's gun a moment later and leaving it in his hand. The riderless horse went free.

The part Gapolonis played had been quite simple. Not until the evening following the crime did Greer learn that his gunman had followed Buck alone back through the Alamars. Scant moments after the crime, hidden at short distance, Greer had been forced to see Benner take the money from Miguel's body, powerless to lift a finger without showing himself. This meant that Miguel's death would no longer appear the accident Greer had craftily intended. Something had to be done. The fact that Henderson might be accused of the crime offered double satisfaction; it would be a crippling blow at the time Ellis-Henderson could least stand it; it would at least temporarily throw all suspicion upon Henderson. Gapolonis made the charge. Through all the following weeks Greer had obviously been less willing to see any trial come before the court than Ellis-Henderson.

"Five thousand dollars!" muttered Donahue. "Greer bought and paid for his own proof!"

What now of four men who sat in a hotel room before Donahue, that day, each aiding the deception by silence or

act, that had placed the wrong man behind bars in a murder-charge? What about it? Donahue didn't quite know. The county attorney had no reason to press things; it was suspected, without proof, that the attorney might have accepted money from Greer, in the matter of evidence and the same delay that Ellis had fought for.

Donahue shook his head, and late one morning he appeared at the Two-State hospital, where Buck was convalescing. Buck was in a wheel-chair on the porch.

"How about it, fella?" asked Donahue. "You walkin' any yet?"

"Few steps," Buck told him.

"Reckon they'd let you outa here, to take a little fresh-air drive?"

"Mebbe so."

"Somebody," said Donahue, "has mentioned the fact that your lease in Honda Creek expires end of this week, unless production is proved. D'you realize how time has passed?"

"I know," said Buck.

They struck the road for Honda Creek. Donahue drove with unusual care. Like many a saddle-man, the Sheriff was not a cautious driver; he could never quite get over the idea that a car wouldn't follow the road like a horse, climb embankments and straddle ditches if given full throttle. But today he thoughtfully consumed an hour and a half on the road.

"Ellis asked me if I wouldn't do this," he confided. "Ellis himself is a pretty busy man."

At a distance Buck saw a line of vehicles parked at the big derrick. Knots of men stood about. The Sheriff swung the turn-off, creeping across the bottoms, and Buck saw a filthy, oil-black crew swarming on and off the floor. He knew then.

"When did it happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Ellis thought you'd want to see it with your own eyes. She come in unexpected, at that. A gusher. They say she'll do better'n two thousand barrels."

BRAD Ellis met them on the road, where a guard had customarily been.

"Look at 'er, Buck! Two thousand barrels! Capped without trouble. A two-thousand gusher! That sounds like music?"

Buck finally nodded. It was music. There was the Ellis-Henderson No. 1—an oil-well! There were Stormy and Andy, Eggers, Culver and the other tool-dresser.

"Yes," said Buck. "That sounds like music."

A wild exultation filled him. There was the thing he had dreamed of, labored and fought for! A gusher! Two thousand barrels!

Ballinger and his elder daughter, the brood of motherless children in the rear seat, drove up to the rig in a shiny new car, bought thus swiftly on undeniable credit, now that there was oil in Honda Creek. The family was jubilant. A dozen scouts and promoters still hung about the well. Buck heard Ballinger offered four hundred dollars an acre, spot cash, for his holdings. Ellis, with offers of twice that, and percentage, had laughed at them.

"Sanborn has it figured that Honda Creek is the cream," was Ellis' reply. "We're not selling at any price. Ed C. Wheeler backs us with all the private capital we can use, and this is just about going to be the best-producing field in three counties. Further, there's a hundred thousand acres in Rancho Viguá. Greer's lease on that land had peculiar terms in it; it was drawn on a partnership basis, and Don Felipe was the other partner. Some legal work is bein' done, but I can promise anybody that Ellis-Henderson will do any future development over that way."

Don Felipe Mendez had been at the well since noon, quietly looking on from the back of one of the splendid big Viguá saddle-animals. Ellis spoke to Buck.

"Buck, how about that girl—the one with kinda pretty eyes an' hair, y'know. Mary somebody—what was the last name now? Ballinger or Viguá? You never seen her since that night, when she stood with you on the Ellis-Henderson and rode into town with you next mornin'? Never seen her since?"

**B**UCK shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "Not since then. She came to the hospital sometimes, but I never saw her. There—there were some things I told her that night, Brad. Maybe she didn't care for the sound of 'em. I reckon that's it. . . . I—I told her I—loved her; in the same breath that I was Buck Henderson. A minute later I was in the thick of that fight. I guess that was the end, Brad."

"Not such a bad end," remarked Ellis. "There it is—the Ellis-Henderson No. 1, in Honda Creek. There's a two-thousand-barrel gusher for you, Buck!"

No disputing the fact. There would be others now, great reservoirs, pipelines, pumps. There would be a thin forest of derricks in Honda Creek, swift-drilling rotaries. There would be boom following boom in Buttonwillow. It was all here, but—

"How about me takin' your car for half an hour?" Buck asked Donahue still later.

"O.K. But think you can manage alone? That nurse, y'know—"

"Hang that nurse," said Buck.

**H**E slowly turned the car. Back across the bottoms, into the main road, and up toward the dam. The hour was nearing sunset. Rich light over the hilltop, where Buck had once met a girl. He stopped the car below. Weary slow step by step he began the climb upward.

Below, he could see the white, unfinished wall across Honda Creek. For a mile up-cañon, water had been dammed behind it, acres now covered with muddy silt and débris from the mountains, still a long lake of flood held behind eased gates. Sunlight glinted upon the water. Buck thought of all the waste land between here and Buttonwillow, land that could be watered and made fertile by proper flood-storage and conservation. Here was another dream and hope. Here was another job—for somebody to finish. All the funds of the vast Rancho Viguá were tied up, and could only be used for development of the property itself. Something like that, Ellis had once explained. Buck knew how Mary Viguá must feel—like he would have felt, looking down on Honda Creek now, upon failure instead of victory.

Step by step Buck climbed the slope. The half-hour was gone, but he climbed slowly on. Sunset light across the long cañon, and he looked back again on the site of the new field in Honda Creek. He remembered every hour of those grilling days of labor; he could hear the creak of the walking-beam; he could see the sour-faced, wiry little Stormy. Buck wished again for those days—and an afternoon when he stood here. . . .

"Buck! Buck—"

Buck Henderson turned slowly, as though he scarcely dared to turn. She had left the palomino's saddle and was walking toward him across the hilltop. He looked again into the glory of Mary Viguá's eyes in the sunset.

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

# REAL EXPERIENCES

*In nearly everyone's life there has been at least one experience so exciting or otherwise memorable as to deserve record in print. For this reason we offer each month prizes for the best five stories of this type submitted and publish them in this department. (For details of this prize contest, see page 3.) First an adventurous old sailor tells of his eventful first voyage.*



## St. Elmo's Fire

By CAPTAIN RAABE

"VOYAGES, many, many, of them have I made since then," writes Captain Raabe, "but was there ever a voyage again which had the thrill of the first—the first kiss between lovers: the sailor and the blue sea!"

The Captain is a gentle, white-haired old man now, living alone on his boat in a Long Island harbor, and writing his reminiscences. (One book of his, "Cannibal Nights," has been published.) But there is gossip among his cronies that he once served as mate aboard the ship of the all-too-well-known Bully Hayes. It is, however, of that well-remembered first voyage that he writes here—the voyage that began when at the age of thirteen he ran away from a German military academy, swam across Hamburg harbor to an American ship, and stowed away. We take up the story just after our young stowaway was discovered by the negro cook and haled before the captain.

"DO you know what we do with boys like you?" asked the captain.

I had mental visions of corpses dangling from yardarms. A quick glance aloft, though, convinced me of having had no predecessors, so:

"No sir," I replied meekly.

"Oh, you don't, eh?" This came with a most sinister frown. "Still, I think you had an idea. I saw you looking aloft. How old are you, anyway?"

"I vos t'irteen," I blurted out in my school English.

The captain struck his fist into the palm of his hand in apparent disgust.

"Now aint that hell!" he said to the mate in affected rueful tones. "We can't hang 'em unless they are of age. Now, what will we do with this desperate villain?"

The tall, dark man shrugged.

"How about keelhauling? Nope, that won't do. We'd have to stop for that, and this cutthroat is too fond of water to consider that punishment."

The captain scratched his head perplexedly. Inadvertently my gaze wandered aloft again.

"I see—" I began.

The captain too glanced upward.

"What do you see?" he snapped.

"Hole in vun sail."

That reply came so unexpectedly that they forgot all their mock-dignity. The hand suddenly slipped from my collar, and they gave way to their mirth.

"Mr. Kohler," said the captain to the mate, whose iron hand immediately reattached itself to me, "conduct the prisoner to the galley and turn him over to the custody of the cook."

Five days at sea. The English Channel lay astern. Before me lay an ever-growing heap of potato-peels. A galley-slave! Was such a degrading existence worth the hardships I'd endured to become a sailor?

But that very evening the Lord proved to me that He takes care of sailors and fools. He brought my chance. But He failed to tell me that the job required a strong man's muscle and skill as much as valor. . . .

The open Atlantic lay ahead. It was evening. The galley was closed for the day. Disgusted with potatoes, pots and

pans, I strolled around the deck. The watch was loitering about, wishing for eight bells. Dutch Charley was leaning against the rail, smoking his pipe. He seemed interested in a bank of clouds lying low and heavy on the northwestern horizon.

We were under top-gallants; but the breeze, which only half an hour before had been too much for the royals, began to slacken rapidly. With sullen darkness the wind failed completely. But what a clear night this promised to be! The phosphorescence of the sea, which on previous evenings had enraptured me, disappeared completely as the waves smoothed down, as if a film of oil had spread over the surface. The sea looked inky, the deck uncannily dark. A cloud-bank was already screening the last of the afterglow of sunset. The sky—

What was that? Had the phosphorescence left the sea to take to the air? Was it now playing pranks in the rigging?

Over the yards, the lines, and down the spars a luminous pale-blue pall had been dropped. Now it was gone.

Had it been my imagination? No! There it was again.

Now I had the answer. St. Elmo's fire! I remembered having heard my grandfather speak about it. Nothing to be alarmed at. Today, with everything that floats mostly of metal, this phenomenon of static discharge is seldom seen. But in the days of wood and hemp it often assumed fantastic shapes.

**F**OR the third time it appeared! This time it must have come to stay. Everything of wood or hemp, above, appeared to emanate some ghostly fluid. Now and then, here and there, little blue tongues of flame leaped into space and disappeared. Sometimes whole clusters of these flames flickered around the masts and the ends of the yards. It was eerie but magnificent. A mysterious hush hung over the ship.

The captain had come on deck. He seemed nervous, was walking up and down on the poop-deck, stamping his feet as if he meant to scare an unwanted visitor away with his noisy presence.

"What's all the mystery about?" I asked of my friend the sailor Charley.

"Shut up," he growled, and pushed me away.

So, that was it. Superstition! Well, if there would be any reefing to do tonight, the men might be a little tardy. Their

tardiness might bring my chance to prove my valor.

Suddenly came a light puff of wind. Like the flame of a candle extinguished by a draft, the uncanny glow disappeared.

The captain stopped abruptly.

"Stand by t'gallant halyards and clew-lines! Lower away!"

I jumped at the order. Hauled my full share on the clewlines of the main. The yards were hauled down. The sheets were not clewed up, only the buntlines taken in sufficiently to spill excess wind from the sails. Everything the same, as the time when the sails had been reefed. Now or never!

**W**ITHOUT waiting for orders, I was lost in the dark—was in the main shrouds, and aloft like a cat.

Nobody had seen me, for there came no shout back. When my feet touched the footropes, I was elated to note that as yet there was not a man on my heels. I had beaten them all at the game they thought too strenuous for me.

I reached the end of the yardarm. Straddled it as Charley did. Boy, what a sailor you are!

In a jiffy the reef-pendant was uncoiled, passed through the cringle on the standing leech. Two more turns like the first one, and I hauled in all the slack I could, and made fast the best I knew how.

Then the squall broke.

I felt myself swung in a great arc as the ship listed heavily to port. There was not much to hold onto, out there, on the very end of a round, slippery spar. It began to rain, large, icy drops. Then came a battering bombardment of hailstones the size of walnuts. And the wind felt as if it came direct from the North Pole. I simply had to stick at my post; it was a case of hold on for dear life. The belly of the sail, now frozen as hard as a piece of sheet iron, was thrashing me as if it resented my presence. Not a soul besides me had come up, and now I began to wonder whether there wasn't something wrong with my judgment.

The squall subsided as suddenly as it had burst. With the lull my bravado returned. Of course, the others had been afraid to go aloft during the squall! Wouldn't they pat me on the back for having been so brave! My part of the work was done, done too well indeed. There was nothing I could do now but wait for the rest. But help did not come. Instead I heard an order shouted way down, below.



"Main t'gallant, leggo bunt and clew-lines; hoist away!"

Heavens! Did the skipper think I had reefed that whole big rag alone? They started to hoist. The yard began to see-saw, to lift. Now I did have to hang on to keep from being jerked off. No chance to shout a warning that the sail was not ready for hoisting.

The leech below me tightened. The hurraw's nest I had made of the pendant took the strain. The yard began to tilt at a perilous angle.

They stopped hoisting. I heard Mr. Woolsey's voice:

"She's fouled on the starboard side. Lay aloft there, one of you men, and clear it. Lively now!"

What a pickle I had got myself into! Now, after the blunder had been made, things began to explain themselves. The sail had been lowered for just the duration of the squall, to be hoisted again afterward. In the darkness nobody had seen me go aloft.

The rigging vibrated from some one's hurrying aloft. A man appeared on the topgallant shrouds. His hand reached for the yard, his face turned my way. I was wondering what sort of explanation for my lofty perch would sound most plausible, when the man stopped abruptly, hesitated for a fraction of a second, gave a most unearthly yell, let go his hold, and fairly leaped through space at one of the backstays. He slid down at a speed which left me wondering whether he would have any skin left in his hands.

NOW I was sure I did not belong in that particular place. Frantically I tried to undo the tangled mess, but the hurriedly made granny-knot had been pulled too tight by the strain to which the partly hoisted sail had subjected it. I did not get far in the attempt at salvaging the wreckage before the rigging vibrated again. The man who appeared this time did not stop to stare at ghosts. By the time he reached the footrope, I recognized him as Dutch Charley.

"I'll teach you to play monkey-shines!" he assured me. Ghosts held no terrors for him! Within a second and a half I was in his clutches. *Swat!* his hand landed on the back of my neck. His fingers clamped themselves right there, like a terrier with a rat.

"Now you lay below," he added after my teeth had rattled sufficiently. "The mate's waiting for you below, good and plenty."

Not only the mate, but a whole reception-committee was waiting. From out of the darkness on the main deck came the words: "The wuthless young cuss, I'll—"

I recognized that voice as the carpenter's, but before that garrulous individual could make any headway, Mr. Kohler's familiar hand was in its accustomed place. He did not waste much time by shaking me up. His other hand swung a rope's end, which proved more effective than mere shaking. After receiving my full share of that, I was planted in front of the captain. Charley had meanwhile returned on deck, and was giving an account of my mischief.

"What the devil were you trying to do anyway, you imp of Satan?" the old man thundered at me.

THAT gave me a chance to relieve myself of my tale of woe. By the time my story was finished the captain was convinced that it had been an overabundance of ambition rather than merely mischief which had prompted me.

"So you thought you could reef a top-gallant sail, a job for four grown men, all by yourself, eh?" he chuckled. "Well, I'll be damned! Now remember this, my lad, if I decide to take you out of the galley and put you before the mast, don't ever try to jump ahead of an order. Jump *at* the order, and then jump like hell. Now, down to the main deck, and let me see what kind of a hand you are at the halyard." Gladly I hurried away.

I came on deck in the morning, uncertain what my fate was to be. The *Dolphin* was plowing her way westward, close-hauled on the starboard tack. Little white clouds in a blue sky seemed to be smiling down upon me when the second mate approached.

"You go and help Charley this morning. Never mind the galley," he said curtly, and walked aft.

I helped Charley. With my hands and bared forearms smeared with tar, right in my glory, I was passing a ball of spun-yarn for him while he was serving the splice in a new forestay he had made. But there was something on my mind.

"Charley," I said, "what made Pete so awfully scared when he saw me on the yardarm last night?"

The man's grin faded suddenly. His reply came with a frown.

"That's nothing to joke about, young fellow. D'you know what St. Elmo's fire means?"

"Why, no," I replied, puzzled.

"Well, be careful about what you say and do when it appears. And don't let on about what I'm going to tell you. On our way to Hamburg we lost a man off the yardarm you were roosting on—lost him at about the same place at sea. St. Elmo's fire's the ghost of a lost man; and when he comes aboard, the first man who sees him will be next. Savvy?"

Well, at least I had won my point. I was before the mast. I was constantly on the lookout for some retaliation on Pete's part. But the sea never gave Pete the chance to square accounts with me.

It was on the third morning after my prank when I came on deck with the watch. The first thing I noticed was that the water had lost its alluring azure. Now it was a dark, cold green. The white wave-crests suggested snow-capped peaks of mountains; there was not a patch of blue in the sky. A North Atlantic winter gale was in the making.

**T**HE morning chore of washing the deck had been dispensed with. Instead, the watch-on-deck had been kept busy taking in all the light canvas. Now all hands were turned to at the task of reinforcing the lashings of all the deck gear.

The topgallants were still on. These sails Captain Hanson appeared to love to take chances with. The enormous leverage these sails exert over the masts now made the ship list so that the lee scuppers spurted water. The men stole anxious glances aft as the whining of the wind assumed a warning note. At last:

"Clew up t'gallants. Lay aloft and furl."

All hands jumped to the task. The sails were quickly stowed. This time I did useful work on the yardarm where last I had blundered.

It surely was going to blow. With Mr. Woolsey's, "That'll do the port watch now," came the cautioning: "Be ready for 'All hands' at any time."

I soon learned why the deck-washing had been omitted that morning. Sea after sea was "stretching its neck" for a peep over the rail. Most of the time the lee side of the deck was knee-deep under water. I was busy wading from one belaying pin to another, untangling and coiling lines which were continually being washed down.

By eight o'clock that night, when at last the starboard watch could turn in, the *Dolphin* was pounding on her way, stripped to her fore lower topsail with the lee sheet "goose-winged."

At twelve my watch had to take the deck again. Now the gale had brought its playmate, a blizzard. Between the darkness and driving snow it was impossible to see objects more than a yard from one's eyes.

It was Pete's turn to take the wheel. An obstinate thing to manage, a large windjammer's wheel, when running free with a hundred-and-twenty-mile gale on the quarter. Many a good, able-bodied man has been catapulted over a vessel's side by a jerk of the teak-wood monster, when a sea broke against the rudder. Let a man relax his grip on the slippery spokes but a moment—and that has been done by the best, the most seasoned sailors—and it was a task endangering life and limb to recapture the whirling, rebellious brute.

Pete, like others who had stood their turn, stood abaft the weather side of the five-foot wheel. The bight of a line, with both its ends belayed to a cleat on the deck, was slung over his shoulder. That line was a safeguard against being lifted off one's feet and being thrown over; but a man had to depend upon his own strength to hold the wheel against crushing him down when the rudder tried to jerk it toward him. In a following sea the rudder could not be lashed, for the vessel will persist in trying to broach to.

Pete Larsen may have been superstitious to a fault, but he was a good sailor. He had followed the sea for nearly twenty years. Yet in that biting blizzard, with the temperature far below freezing, he took the wheel without wearing mittens.

The polished spokes of a wheel will become very slippery from the adhering snowflakes. Pete had a grip like a vise—the back of my neck could attest to that. But his hands must have become numb from the cold; otherwise I cannot understand how he could have lost his hold on the spokes.

He had stood about fifteen minutes of his turn, and nobody paid further attention to him. Suddenly his voice was heard coming like a savage snarl; the snarl was followed by a crash like the breaking of a piece of heavy scantling. Not a man was less than twenty-five feet from the helmsman—but the crash was so loud that we all heard it above the noise of wind and waves.

**I**NSTANTLY the second mate and Charley rushed aft. They knew only too well what that sound meant. Out of sheer curiosity I followed close behind

them. And there, in the circle of dim light cast upon the scene by the binnacle lamp, lay Pete, all crumpled up in a heap. His face was turned down, half buried in snow. He was unconscious. The wheel, now free, was spinning madly to and fro. The ship began to broach—look out!

Mr. Kohler's call brought all the others aft. First of all the wheel had to be secured. The safety of the ship with every man aboard depended upon the rudder.

Realizing the danger a disabled rudder would bring forth, every man seized whatever cordage was at hand and threw bights of lines at the gyrating spokes. Time and time again the wheel, like a maddened beast resisting capture, threw the snares off. However, after many fruitless efforts, some of the bights caught. Just as one tremendous broadside sea towered above us, the ship was brought under control.

Then the wheel itself gave mute evidence of what it had done to the man who had struggled with it alone. Two of the strong clublike spokes had snapped off close to the rim. A piece of rag torn from the man's southwester, and a patch of his scalp clung to the splinters of one of the broken ends. Two blows, each with

a force to break those massive spokes, no human bones could withstand! Pete was more than merely stunned.

The snow, wind-banked against the wheelbox, was turning a ghastly crimson. Pete's head rested there; his left leg lay awkwardly doubled under him as if there were a joint halfway between his thigh and knee.

*(Peter Larsen recovered consciousness next day, and sent a message by the boy who became Captain Raabe to his sister in Sweden. Soon afterward, however, he died. And our young mariner began to learn another sailor's art when he was called to help sew a canvas shroud.)*

The whole crew stood bareheaded at the rail. The ominous bundle lay with its foot-end pointed toward the gangway. The captain read the short sermon from the Book.

One great splash. Momentarily on the water a circle of white foam; then hastily the waves obliterated that last mark, as if anxious to blot out the memory of one who could serve them no longer.

Ten minutes later, during which the deck was bustling with the activity of putting her back on her course, the *Dolphin* was again racing westward.

*Mr. Jamieson is a brother of Leland Jamieson, the pilot-writer whose stories you have often enjoyed in these pages. We deeply regret to add that since this narrative was written, the third brother, Lawrence, whose daring feat is described here, has lost his life in an airplane accident.*



## High Courage

By WARREN  
T. JAMIESON

**D**URING the summer of 1929, I was visiting my brother at an Indiana city, where he was a pilot for a commercial air line. The company had just bought a new cabin plane; and as a part of the Fourth of July program, were carrying passengers in it. About three o'clock business slowed up a little, and Lawrence (my brother) asked me if I wanted to take a little joy-ride in the new plane, adding that it would have to be a short one, as the plane was low on gas. I was anxious to go.

The field had been a wheat-field until the city bought it and converted it into

an airport, and the small disked ridges had never been completely smoothed out.

We got in, Lawrence in front at the controls, and I in the double rear seat. We took off, and just as the plane left the ground I felt a pronounced jar; thinking we must have blown out a tire, I looked out the left window and saw to my utter consternation that the steady vibration from crossing the rough field had sheared the rivets in the landing-gear fitting, letting the shock-strut, wheel and all swing clear down below the cabin. By this time we were in the air, and I started punching Lawrence in the back to call

his attention to the wheel; he had already seen it, however, and yelled:

"Look in that baggage-box back of you and see if there are any tools in it."

I looked, but the compartment was empty except for a first-aid kit.

"What are you going to do? It's empty," I yelled back, trying to make him hear me above the roar of the motor. He didn't reply at once, but started climbing the ship at its maximum angle, then motioned for me to come forward. When I was close enough to hear him talk, he said:

"Take off your belt, and when I get started out the window, you fly this thing. I've got to fix up that wheel."

"I was panic-stricken, but obeyed, knowing it would be impossible to land with the wheel hanging in that position, without a bad crack-up.

I had flown about five hours' solo at that time, and had never been in a cabin plane, so was extremely doubtful whether I could fly it with him hanging on the side; however, there was no time to argue, as we had reached two thousand feet and he had started out the window, leaving me with the controls.

I took the stick, but when he was fully exposed to the prop-blast felt the plane suddenly skid to the right. I was unable to stop it in time to keep us from sliding off on one wing, Lawrence holding on for dear life. I at last got the ship under control; and Lawrence, groping for the wing-strut with his feet, sat down, still holding onto the window-sill to keep the ninety-mile wind from blowing him off for a two-thousand-foot drop.

I was having a great deal of trouble with the plane, trying to fly in a circle and still keep it level enough to enable Lawrence to stay on his perch.

**B**Y this time several planes had taken off, presumably with the intention of letting a rope down to us, but after watching my erratic flying, they gave up the idea, for which I was grateful, as they had come too close to suit me.

Lawrence finally succeeded in getting the wheel between his feet, and by exerting every ounce of strength in his body, he had pulled it up where he could get the strut in his hands; then due to a sudden descending current of air, and my inexpert piloting, he lost his balance. He made a wild grab for the window and saved himself, but dropped the wheel. He looked around at me and shook his head disapprovingly.

"Boy, that was close!" he yelled.

He tried once more, and this time was able to loop our belts, which he had tied together, around the axle, pulling the wheel up to its position with the strut in its socket.

Then began the hard fight to get back into the cabin. He was nearly exhausted from lifting the heavy wheel and holding on against the terrific wind, but after much straining and squirming, he got through the window and slumped onto the floor to rest.

**W**E were comparatively safe now, but in constantly increasing danger of running out of gas, as all that flying around had consumed at least thirty minutes of the precious fluid, and the chances for a successful "dead-stick" landing were slight on that rough field.

The other planes had landed or flown away after seeing Lawrence get back into the cabin, leaving us a clear field—clear, that is, except for about five thousand people who were celebrating the Fourth at the port, and were now swarming out on the runway to see the impending crack-up.

After another circuit of the field, Lawrence seemed to be rested, so I got back into the rear seat, letting him take the controls to land. When we came around into the wind I noticed for the first time, the fire-wagon and ambulance which had been called to the field when the manager saw our trouble at the take-off. This sight didn't add a great deal to my peace of mind.

Lawrence made what looked to me like a good landing, but just as I was congratulating myself on the outcome, that left wheel hit a ridge, breaking the belts and letting the strut drop out of its socket. The wing-strut dropped down on the wheel, stopping it as suddenly as if the brake had been put on, whipping the ship completely around. We stopped, headed in the opposite direction, with the left wing just off the ground; another foot, and we would have gone over on our back.

We were unhurt, but so nervous from the reaction, we could hardly climb out of the plane, and I thanked my lucky star for having had a real pilot at the controls at the crucial moment.

As a result of that near-accident, the factory changed the design of the landing on the next models, and I have flown a ship just like that one, over five hundred hours without a sign of trouble.

# That Villain Frog

*This is a fisherman's story, and so you may believe it or not. But we know you will find it amusing indeed.*



By  
MAX C.  
SHERIDAN

FIFTY-DOLLAR DIVINE FLY-ROD, LEATHER-BOUND WICKER BASKET, AND AN IMPERIAL ANTI-BACKLASH REEL, FOR THE BIGGEST TROUT CAUGHT IN THE VICINITY. SEE CLERK AT FISHING-TACKLE COUNTER FOR DETAILS.

I PAUSED in my mad rush for the office to glance at the sign blazing at me from its surrounding halo of reels, rods and baskets; it was June, and symptoms of "fisherman's fever" were upon me.

Following the instructions of the sign, I entered the store and made my way through the maze of guns, baseball bats and golf clubs, to the counter which boasted an array of all types and kinds of bugs, insects and flies labeled "Dan's Best Fish Lure." The clerk's eyes twinkled, as I thought at the time, with genuine welcome and good fellowship. Now I am sure it was merely an avaricious glitter.

To my inquiry concerning the offer in the show-window, the fiend responded with an enthusiastic description of the contest, the beauty and worth of the awards offered, and the ease with which an experienced angler like myself (so he said) might win them. The contest was open to any man, woman or child, of any race, color or religion. The fish were to be weighed before dressing; hence, he laughingly advised me, it would be wise to catch one which had just finished a hearty meal. The contest was to last just the opening day of the fishing season, which was the next day—fortunately or otherwise, a Sunday.

Having inveigled a victim into his net, the clerk now continued with his diabolical coercion. He told me that of course I would need all the best and latest tackle, including flies which had been carefully prepared for the conditions prevailing in the particular region; I would need the strongest silk-wrapped tapered line. All

this, of course, every fisherman must have for any chance of winning—but there was something, he cunningly continued, that would almost cinch my success, something which had been sent as a sample and was the only one he had in stock.

He delved into the depths of a drawer and produced an object which at first sight looked like a chameleon affected with jaundice. It was about two inches long, speckled with haphazard spots of red and green on a vivid yellow background, and had apparently been fashioned with an attempt at resemblance to a frog. Four hooks depended from the body of the monstrosity at various angles, supplying it with legs.

This, the rascal continued, was the latest thing in natural fish lure. The bright colors attracted the most recalcitrant trout, and the amphibian resemblance made the enticing morsel irresistible. Furthermore, since this was a sample, he would make me a price of only one dollar.

Under the hypnotic salesmanship of Satan himself, I finally rushed from the store with a twenty-dollar collection of flies, gnats, lines and the rainbow frog.

AT four next morning I prepared my breakfast, gathered up my collection of tackle, and started for the river. The road, ordinarily deserted at that hour, literally teemed with cars, all bound apparently for the river. When I arrived at its banks, dim figures maneuvering in the semi-darkness convinced me that far from being the first, I was one of the stragglers. However, that was merely incidental; I had something new, a lure which no sane fish could pass up—in short, the rainbow frog.

Confidently I jointed my old serviceable rod, threaded the new silk line through its eyes, and attached the frog with a six-foot tested leader. Slinging my

dilapidated basket over a shoulder, I walked leisurely upstream for some distance to avoid the early arrivals before beginning my conquest.

After an hour's walk I arrived at an abrupt turn in the stream where a reef halted the mad race of the water to a calm and dignified swirling of greater depths. Untwisting my line, I made ready to offer the colorful bait to the first-comer. But as I whipped my line back for the first cast, the malignant frog extended its four hooked legs and firmly grasped the highest branch of a willow sapling. Mildly indignant, I pushed my way through the tearing brambles, and finally succeeded in bending the tree over and disengaging the frog from its loving embrace.

The thorns played havoc with my trousers on the way back to the pool, and I was annoyed when my second cast caught the frog on an outcropping rock some distance upstream—its four legs serving all too well as anchors. With difficulty I restrained myself from yanking violently at the cursed thing, and made my way upstream to the rock. I found it was just beyond my reach. I could almost touch the frog as I leaned out over the water—but not quite. Exasperated, I attempted to stretch just the one additional inch; my foot slipped—and I was gasping and choking in water up to my neck.

If it hadn't been for the cooling influence of the mountain stream, I must surely have gone up in smoke. As it was, I finally managed to calm myself to the extent of grasping the thing and jerking it violently from its perch. With a cry of pain I realized that I had reckoned without its four hooks—the monster had bit me. I swear it intentionally sank its two front barbs into my hand like the pinchers of a crab. Muttering Bible words, I laboriously worked the hooks from my hand and climbed out on the bank.

**A** GAIN I made ready to cast, carefully swinging my line to avoid conniving underbrush. The frog swung clear and landed just at the head of the pool where the swifter current joined the swirling eddies. If there were trout there, I thought, that perfect cast must certainly bring them from their hiding-places. Intently I watched the colorful frog turn and twist as it slowly floated down toward the reef at the lower boundary of the pool. Again I cast and waited. There came a tautening of the line—the miserable frog had found an invisible snag at the head of the pool!

This was beyond human patience. In a frenzy of rage, I threw down my pole and heaved on the line with all my strength. The gut leader parted with a sharp twang, and I went head over heels into a bramble-bush. I got to my feet just in time to see that damnable monster release its grip on the snag and float serenely toward the pool. I retained my sanity by assuring myself that the thing was of no earthly use anyway; no self-respecting fish would take a second look at such a hideous object; in fact, it was good riddance. Nevertheless I watched it in its meanderings over the surface of the calm water—until there came a sudden flash of gleaming silver, a splash, and the rainbow frog was gone.

**I**T was a half-hour later when I became rational again, and turned my thought toward revenge. I picked out the most appetizing fly from my collection, attached a new leader, and I was ready for business. I hurriedly left the vicinity of the accursed pool and tramped several miles upstream before I ventured to try my luck. All that day I fished, with only a few occasional strikes. But late that afternoon I had a really promising strike. I carefully tensed my line, and the trout was hooked. The reel sang, and the line burned my fingers as the fish turned and rushed downstream. I murmured a little prayer to myself that I should land him safely, for here was certainly the prize-winning trout. I let out line, then slowly reeled it in, working the fish always closer to the bank—and finally dragged the flopping silver beauty up at my feet. I swooped down and grabbed him, carefully placing him in my basket before attempting to disengage the hook. My heart swelled with pride and anticipation as I started on the long tramp back to the landing, singing blithely to myself.

Nearing the landing, I was surprised to hear a tremendous commotion, and increasing my stride, I arrived to see a crowd of fishermen gathered on the bank. When I gained the edge of the stream, I saw immediately the cause of it all. A huge negro mammy was seated on the bank, heaving on a line with all the strength of her plump arms, all the while calling directions and encouragement to five little pickaninnies who were scrambling around waist-deep in the stream. She had hooked a fish, and a big one. The children were trying to herd the fish toward the bank by scooping it forward every time it started toward one of them.

That fish didn't have a chance. Within a short time it lay gasping on the bank.

Between bursts of laughter, I gathered the story from hilarious onlookers. Evidently the mammy had decided to enter the prize contest for the biggest fish, and had bought a chalk-line, and a ten-cent spinner from the local five-and-ten. On arriving at the river, she had tied the line to a willow pole and attached the spinner. A jesting bystander had advised her to soak her leader carefully before starting to fish; and taking him at his word, she had waded out to the edge of the stream and allowed the line with the attached spinner to pay out downstream. . . .

After the excitement had partially subsided, the onlookers, noticing my trout hanging partly out of the basket, demanded that the two big fish be compared. We did so; and rather worried, I saw that the mammy's catch was almost the same size as mine. Interested now, everyone suggested that we return to town and weigh up the two at the sport store.

Before long the whole crowd reassembled at the tackle-counter, with much pushing and jostling to be in the front line. According to the rules of the contest, the fish were to be weighed without being dressed, so the smirking clerk brought out a set of scales and went to work.

My fish tipped the scales at exactly six pounds. The crowd pressed closer as the clerk lifted the negro mammy's catch to the scales. The fish weighed six pounds and one third of an ounce! The mammy had won the prize!

Disgusted, I started to turn away, when an exclamation from the clerk stopped me. I turned to see him tugging at a length of leader hanging from the trout's mouth. He gave several quick jerks—and there, blazing in its glory, was my rainbow frog!

Threatened with apoplexy, I stood glued in my tracks while, at an insistent clamor from the crowd, he put the frog on the scales and adjusted the weights. *That insidious monster weighed just two thirds of an ounce!* He had beaten me.



## Undesired Captives

*The queerest adventure that ever befell a couple who have made many journeys in the interior of China.*

By GENE LAMB

THE predicament of suddenly finding one's self in the hands of three thousand Chinese bandits might seem disconcerting. That is exactly the position I found myself in during the spring of 1925; and yet—

Accompanied by my wife I was returning from a two-year trek through northern Tibet. Our small caravan was encumbered with thousands of feet of motion-picture film, specimens and camp paraphernalia. Our destination was Hsi Pao T'ou, the railway terminal; and our course ran parallel to the Wula Shan, a notorious mountain retreat for the bandit gangs which for years have ravaged this area in North China. The thought of returning to civilization cheered us as we rode beside our three clumsy carts.

The rigors of Tibetan travel had depleted our stores to the point where we almost presented the appearance of beggars. The handsome boots with which we had commenced the journey had resigned in favor of Tibetan footwear. Our riding-breeches looked like crazy quilts, so much patching had they received. Tibetan *pulu*, a cloth made in Lhasa, had long since supplanted our upper garments, and hung about our persons like Indian blankets. And the grime of bathtubless weeks added a finish to a crazy spectacle.

Civilization again! It seemed too good to be true. I was meditating on this fact when a cloud of dust to our left brought my pleasant reflections to an abrupt end. Quickly I raised my binoculars. Our carters ceased their singing, and brought

our caravan to a sudden halt. I was now able to make out a large group of horse-men galloping toward us at a furious pace. From years of experience I knew we were about to make the acquaintance of Wula Shan bandits.

No use to run for it under the circumstances; it was a question of how to make the best of it. The leader of the detachment—some fifty men—soon confronted me, and I could detect the trace of a smile as he eyed the strange-appearing victims he had stumbled upon.

"How much money do you carry?" he questioned.

I proudly exhibited the fifty-odd ounces of silver which constituted our worldly wealth at that time, and I could sense his disappointment. Only a few months before, Dr. Thompson, who had traveled with the unfortunate General Perreira in Tibet, had been captured at almost the same point; and I knew that our poverty-stricken condition would suggest ransom as the only profitable alternative.

"You will have to come with us," the leader said.

"With the greatest of pleasure," I replied, and he seemed a bit taken back by my instant acquiescence.

**A** RAPID journey of thirty *li* (about ten miles) brought us to the main encampment of the bandits; and my wife and I were marched before the curious gaze of the ex-military riffraff to a 'dobe hut which served for a headquarters. The bandit chieftain had none of the fierce characteristics usually associated with his kind. Instead, he was a tall, handsome Chinese, and his well-fitting and substantial uniform indicated that at one time he had held a high command in some warlord's army. Lack of pay for many months had forced his desertion, and now he led his former command in the gentle art of brigandage, in order to recoup their losses. It was the old, old story in China.

There followed a brief discussion, during which I was not surprised to learn that we were to be held for ransom. I was commanded to address a letter to the American Legation in Peking, and inform them of the circumstances.

"But," I interjected in the middle of my captor's instructions, "I have no intention of doing anything of the sort. In the first place," I explained, "the American Legation would not pay a penny for my release, as I agreed with them at the outset of the journey that I was proceeding at my own risk. In the second place, I have

no desire to return. I can repair rifles, reload cartridges, speak five languages; and I am a pretty good doctor as well. Your outfit looks good to me, and I prefer to join you as an asset and not a liability. How about it?"

The bandit leader had not been prepared to receive so willing a victim. It seemed a situation which demanded considerable thought, for we were dismissed, and instructed to provide for the night.

The next two hours I devoted to making camp on a scale calculated to convince anyone that we had come to stay. I did not miss an opportunity of informing the curious bystanders how fortunate we all felt at having discovered such congenial associates, and I elaborated on the rosy future which I now anticipated. My carters I silenced with threats of terrible things if they even so much as grunted.

Night came, and after a hearty meal I lay on my *p'u kai*, wondering just how our hosts would react, and what chances my scheme had of being successful. I took comfort in the thought that there had been no rough handling of our persons (at least so far), and soon I was sound asleep.

I was roused at about four o'clock in the morning, and looked up into the face of the leader himself. We were to go, and quickly. That was the essence of his message. Not only that, but he intended to provide an escort for the journey, in order that his henchmen farther along the road would not commit a like blunder and recapture us. I protested politely but firmly. I gave him all of the arguments used by a man about to lose a highly lucrative position with an extremely reliable corporation. It was no use. We were fired.

**T**HREE days later we halted within sight of the North Gate of Hsi Pao T'ou. Our escort of ten men dismounted and cast a disdainful look at the Chinese military sentinels who paced up and down before the entrance to the walled city. I removed the McClellan saddle from my sterling pony and handed it to one of the men with explanations that it was to be returned as a gift from me to the commandant. My silver I removed from my sleeping-bag and handed that over with instructions that they could divide it equally. There was a general shaking of hands, and as our two groups separated, I held my hand aloft and shouted back to them that old familiar Chinese phrase:

"*I lu p'ing an*—Peace be unto you on the road." Five minutes later we rode through the North Gate of Hsi Pao T'ou.

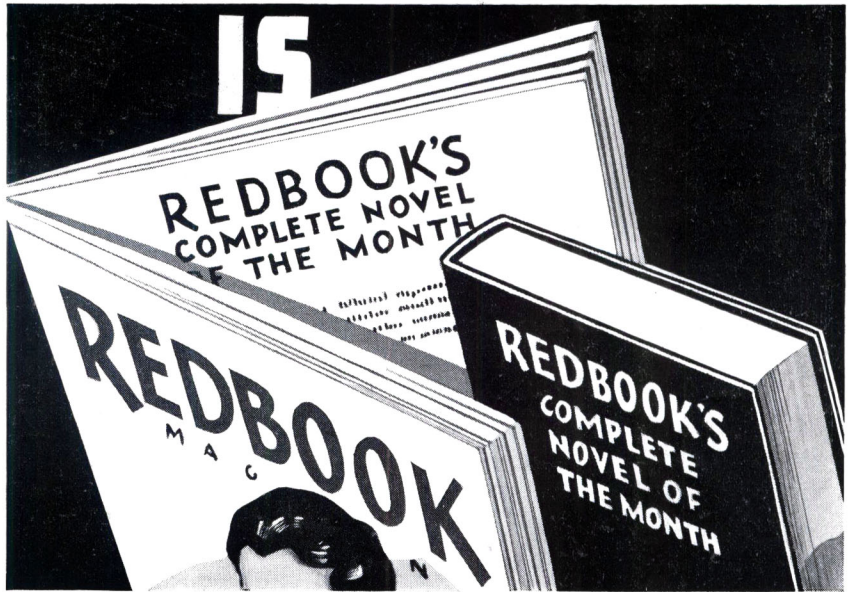


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# "THE CROSS OF PEACE"

BY SIR PHILIP  
GIBBS



● Here is a great event in magazine publishing. Sir Philip Gibbs, world famous English author of a dozen great novels, novels that have sold into the hundreds of thousands in this country because of their universal appeal, has written a glorious story of love and war and death, which ends with a tremendous climax in the Nazi Germany of today. It is a novel that has *everything*—romance, adventure, comedy, tragedy—and done by a master-craftsman in fiction.

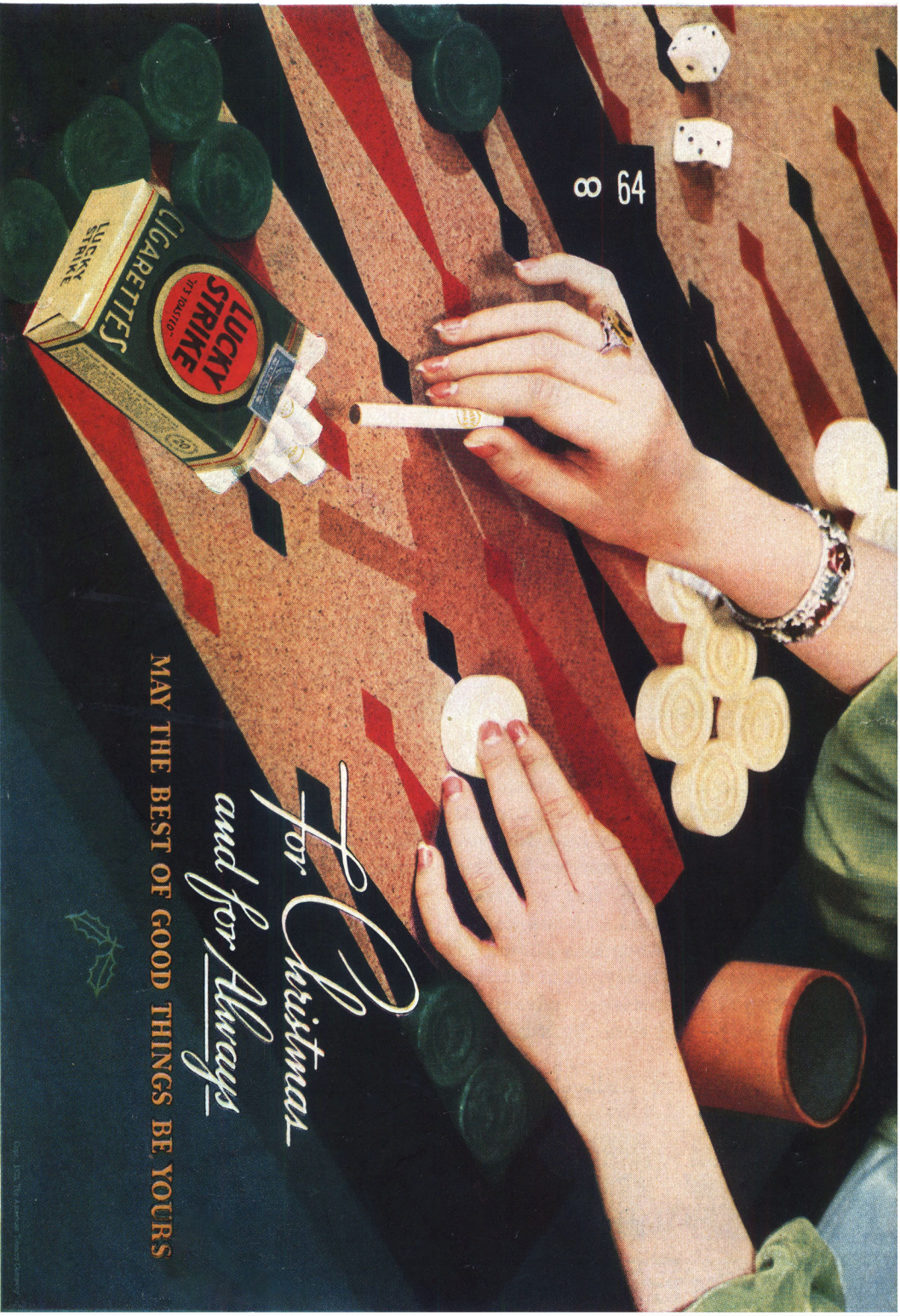
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