COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL Magazine

15¢
JULY

"LOST CACHE"
A BIG NOVELETTE
by
WM. BYRON MOWERY

"BELOW ZERO"
COMPLETE
75,000 WORD NOVEL
by HAROLD TITUS

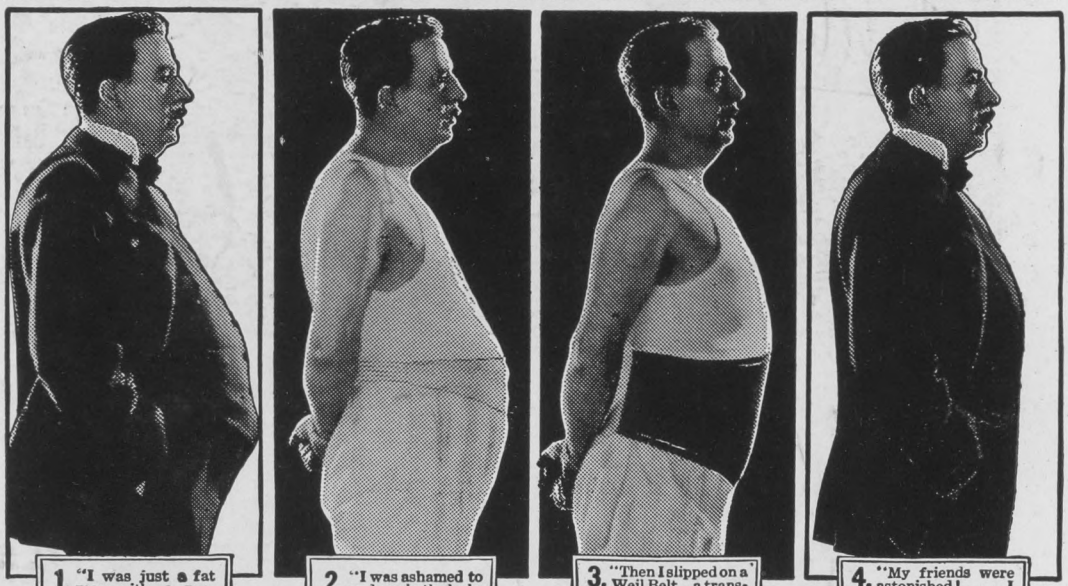
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... *in 10 MINUTES!*

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES" WRITES GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach...ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"

3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

4. "My friends were astonished! . . . I looked better — my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

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Flute	'Cello

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COMPLETE • NORTHWEST NOVEL MAGAZINE

Vol. II, No. 5 MICHAEL IVAN, Editor July, 1937

CONTENTS

COMPLETE 75,000 WORD NOVEL

AN ACTION PACKED NOVELETTE

TWO EXCELLENT SHORT STORIES

DEPARTMENTS

COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL MAGAZINE, published every other month by Northwest Publishing Co., Inc., 2256 Grove St., Chicago, Ill. Editorial and executive offices at 100 Hudson St., New York City. Entered as second class matter December 10, 1936, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription 75c. For advertising rates write Double Action Group, 100 Hudson St., N. Y. C.

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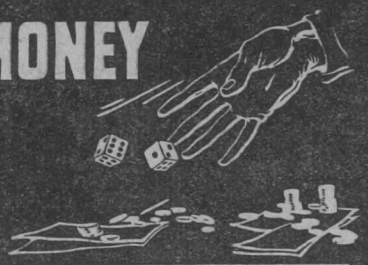

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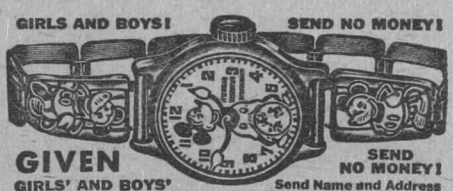

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BELOW ZERO

CHAPTER I

IN his young days Tom Belknap may have squirmed now and then; most men who have undergone the vicissitudes of fortune-building in the lumber industry have. But this much is certain: for a brace of decades, if he had occasionally felt discomfiture, he had kept it well to himself, concealed behind that brusk, gruff front.

Now, however, he put on a first rate exhibition of a man in an uncomfortable corner as Harrington, small and grey and amazed, stood in that spacious chamber and stared at him.

The old fellow had made his assertion with a growl, as he always did when at variance with his aids, and ordinarily that tone ended argument abruptly. Not today.

"But," said Harrington, after a long pause, "what's the boy going to say to *that?*"

"He'll do as he's told!"—a mumble.

"Twice? You'll disappoint him twice, Tom? A boy with . . . with as much spirit as you have yourself?" He scratched his thin hair absently and frowned. "Why, he took it standing a year ago in June when you sent him from college to Witch Hill instead of to Kampfest. That was a

A COMPLETE ACTION-PACKED NOVEL *by*

HAROLD TITUS

He fought battle, this John Steel Belknap; with his father and his friends turned against him. But he was tough as the steel that felled the forests, and with his world hating him he showed them all what he was wound on.

body-blow, after all the talk and planning, but you told him to go and show what he could do and he did. . . . Now, he's coming here in a few minutes to claim the reward you held out to him, and instead of sending him to Kampfest, you're shunting him off on Belknap Seven! It beats me!"

The other fidgeted with his watch chain and cleared his throat irritably.

"Well," he said, "John ain't going to Kampfest yet. . . . Not yet!" He shook his head. "No, sir! Not to Kampfest!"

Harrington's grey eyes were prying now.

"Are you in trouble at Kampfest?" he asked quietly, and the old face flashed up at him.

"If I am, it's my own trouble!"

A watcher might not have noticed that Harrington had tensed on his query, but the sudden relaxing of his body was obvious.

"I thought as much," he said grimly, meeting the challenge in those eyes. "I was afraid trouble might follow when you

took Gorbel in on this thing. I've suspected matters weren't right there for two years now; last month, when you came back from Kampfest, you had the look of a beaten man, and I was pretty sure. Now, I know."

"You know a lot!"—grumpily as he hitched closer to the massive desk.

The other did not respond. With pursed lips he pondered a moment and then burst out:

"Look here, Tom! Why don't you let us help you up there? Why don't you come down off your high horse and let the office straighten things out while you're away?"

Belknap gave a dry mirthless laugh.

"You're doin' a lot of guessing!" he snorted. "You're guessing at things, Harrington!" He swung in his chair to confront his inquisitor and slapped the mahogany with his palm. "Guesswork! I'll admit nothing; I'll deny most. But I'll go this far: if I'm in bad, whose business is it? If I guessed wrong on a man, whose funeral is it? If I've got dirty clothes to wash, whose job is it? Eh?

"From the beginning you've all been against me on my opinion of Gorbel, from you on down through this organization to . . . to John himself. You didn't like him; you didn't like the idea of a partnership. John, my boy, warned me after he'd talked to the man twenty minutes. Warned *me!* A cub!

"But I bet on Gorbel. He had the layout I've wanted all my life, had it tied up. I took him on and listened to all of you yelp and predict trouble, and made up my mind that the Belknap Lumber Company offices never would have to bother with a line of Belknap & Gorbel business. I put it under my hat and it's been there since. That's where it's goin' to stay, Harrington, and you can stuff that in your pipe!"

His face was flushed now.

The other shrugged. "That ought to be final," he said glumly. "But what frets me, Tom, is where John comes in . . . or isn't let in."

Old Tom sank back in his chair and stared bleakly through one of the great windows against which a savage December gale hurled itself in across sullen Lake Michigan.

"That's somethin' else," he growled.

HARRINGTON persistently eyed him, and the old man squirmed again.

"There's only one thing that really matters, when all's said and done," he said finally. "That's a man's reputation. And a man's reputation narrows down to his reputation with certain folks. I've got a rating as an honest man, which is something everybody with self-respect's got to have; and I'm rated as rich, but I don't give a hoot about how much money the Belknap Lumber Company's worth, or the value of any of the outfits it controls under other names. I'm glad I've got a name for bein' a hard fighter; gladder that men must concede I'm a fair fighter. But there's only one thing that matters much, that gets in close to a man's heart." He paused. "That's what John thinks of me."

Silence for a moment, except for the buffetings of the gale about that Chicago skyscraper.

"You've got three kids, Harrington. I had only one . . . and a humdinger! That cub. . . . Hell's bells, a man can't say what he feels on some things! Nobody'll ever know how hard I tried to play up to what he's thought of me ever since he was so high; nobody ever can know what a burden it's been to be the kind of a party he thought I was.

"He opposed me just once; he warned me just once. Him, a kid, warnin' me about my judgment of a *man!* I laughed at him and . . . Well, I laughed at him and—"

Harrington added:

"And he was right."

"Another guess"—in another surly growl. "But"—looking up again, face furrowed with intense earnestness—"if that was so—I'm not admittin' it, but *if* it was so—would you let *him* find it out first? Would you let *him* come to *you* and say I-told-you-so?" Pause. "Not on your life, you wouldn't!

"You wouldn't let him even suspect that the thing he'd worked for and waited for wasn't what he'd expected! You wouldn't let him think that the one present he'd wanted was marred before it got into his hands. Not much, you wouldn't! You'd fix it up, somehow, even if the trouble was so mysterious you couldn't locate it, before you handed it over so . . . so the estimate he'd had of you wouldn't lose anything of . . . of what it had. *Then* you'd tell him he'd been right, but not before!"

He waited a long moment. "Wouldn't you?" he insisted.

"If I had your devotion and the Belknap pride, Tom, I expect I would," Harrington answered gravely. "But the devil of it is that you're leaving to-day for Europe, and won't be—"

"Yes! The devil of it! And the devil of it is, the damn doctors are right! I'm no fool, Harrington; I know that they *know*. I know when they say I need three months in a place where business can't reach me that I'd better hit the grade for that place. Well, nobody but the doctors and you know this trip's forced. I ain't going to worry anybody. A big timber operation can't go to hell in a heap in ninety days. I'll be back; I'll be fit to go into the Kampfest thing with sleeves rolled up, find out just what and how much is wrong, and I'll set it for John as we'd planned it'd be!"

"But don't you see that while you're away the office could—"

"I wash my own dirty linen!"

"But suppose, Tom, something should happen?"

The old man shook his head, half in negation, half in agreement.

"I'd have to come clean, then, I guess. I've prepared for that." He opened a drawer and took out a sealed envelope. "I wrote this last night. It's for John if . . . if some cathedral should fall on me. If I come back, I want it back from you. . . . And if I don't come back you might just say, Harrington . . . say to the boy that . . . that he was a humdinger . . . will you?"

The strong voice shook a trifle as Harrington eyed the firm pen strokes, inscribing the name of John Steele Belknap on that envelope.

"Sure, Tom," the secretary said just a bit huskily. "Sure thing. And I *hope* he'll go to Belknap Seven. But remember he's got his father's pride, he's high-strung. You can't give a colt too much bit even to save him a fall!"

CHAPTER II

AND a half-hour later in that chamber, the brain-housing of vast industry, a young man was about to burn up.

A big young man, this John Steele Belknap, tall and broad and thick of chest. Out of place, he looked, in this room, with its deep-napped rugs and heavy hangings. He wore a maroon checkered Mackinaw and stagged pants clung to stalwart calves; feet in the greased pacs were spread a bit as a man will when he meets an assault. Out of place, those garments, in such quarters; exotic, the faint aroma he exuded, a mingling of the odors of smoking bacon grease and Peerless tobacco and drying woollens; the sweet scent of swamp timbers and the ammoniac suggestion of horse barns: the unmistakable sense-mark of the shanty man.

His face was weather-beaten but a bit pale now, and his nostrils dilated though he fought to keep at least a vestige of good humor in the deep blue eyes, and the semblance of a grin on the wide mouth by telling himself to stay by it another minute, to hold the old dander down just another second!

Old Tom, staring through the window, trying to still the racing of his heart, struggling to hold his voice steady, growled:

"Don't tell me what you're good for or what's good for you!"

"But don't you see, Tom," the lad began, "that it's what I've worked and waited for all these years? It wasn't any plan of mine in the first plans I'd made for myself.

"I didn't want any help from you. I'd always figured on hitting it off for myself to see how good I am, just as you did, and grandfather did. I wanted forestry school and got it, and thought when I'd finished that I'd hook up with some other organization and see what I could do and, if I checked out, would then get in here with you and help pull the load.

"Then you got this idea, this big idea. You said the Belknaps had all the money any family had a right to have, and I guess you're right. You said enough of us had put in their lives gathering dollars. You wanted to develop the one big, ideal operation in northern hardwoods; you talked like an evangelist or an . . . an architect with a vision, or something like that. You carried me away with the notion. We could go on making money, you said, but it wouldn't be the chief object. We'd do selective cutting; we'd experiment with wood utilization; we'd find out a lot of things that people should know about the forest industries. We'd leave something

behind us besides devastated acres and more money!"

He paused and wet his lips and shook his head, smiling wistfully.

"It got me, Tom. It . . . I can't tell you how it made me feel, to think that I was going to jump in with you right off the bat and try something that nobody else had ever dared try before! I worked like a fool on the campus, getting all the theory I could; I lay awake at night dreaming about it!

"Then you stumbled on to the location and the properties that fitted like a glove to the plan. You couldn't wait for me to start, of course. You had to go ahead because if any demonstration is going to be of account it's got to show profit, and big timber holdings can't be carried along any more without operating. You and Gorbel got the mill up and running, the best mill ever built! You got the chemical plant operating. You were going to exercise your agreement with Gorbel and buy him out and we'd go to it . . . you and I. . . . Together!"

He extended one hand in a little gesture.

"And when I thought I was ready for that, I went up to Witch Hill. I'll admit now that it was a bitter dose. But I took it, didn't I? I stayed on longer than you'd said I'd have to stay before getting my finger into the Kampfest thing. I've been waiting for months for word that I could drop it, and the word has never come.

"We wound her up. When I knew you and mother were going to-day I got the last of the equipment loaded, the last chore done, and high-tailed down here without even stopping to buy civilized clothes because I thought . . . Kampfest at last! And instead of that I'm told that I am now superintendent at Belknap Seven!"

His lax fist fell on the desk and he nodded as if wearied.

Still old Tom did not look at him. He stared through the window and conjured the only defence he had against things rising in his breast, against that conflict between his sense of fairness and his pride. His face darkened and his jaws set ominously.

"Don't like it, eh? Roils you!"

A bull's-eye that! Right as a die! Roiled, the boy was, and darker color went flooding into the bronze of his face, his nostrils dilated, the last of the tolerance was wiped from the clear eyes.

"Yes," he said sharply. "Beginning to roil me!"

He stood a bit straighter, and the hand gripping the Scotch cap clenched into the cloth.

His father sniffed and rattled the sheet of paper he held.

"That's the trouble with you young gaffers. Don't have the guts to wait. Got to jump in and learn jobs from the top down. Stuffed shirts, for God knows how many years; yes-men. You won't take the time to learn from the bottom up!"

"Doesn't that mean anything?" John asked with a curt gesture towards the paper in the age-mottled hands.

The man's eyes dropped to that scrawl, written on the letter-head of the Witch Hill Lumber Company. He read it once more:

To whom it may concern dear sir. John Steele has worked as camp foreman here for one year. He is only a kid but as good a logger as ever wore sox. Respy J. McIver supt.

THE lowering of his face concealed from the son's burning eyes the pride which swept it, and John could not know the warmth which re-reading the words generated again in the old heart, nor the chagrin and fear at what he was now doing. But the belittling grunt and the dismissing gesture as he tossed the letter back to the desk top made the boy stir on his feet and tighten his lips.

"Sandy!" old Tom growled. "Sandy, writin' a recommendation!" He laughed. "Think he's ever done that for anybody before? Not much! Why, he was so rattled he left out the only part of your name that counts! Done it for you because he liked you. As my old-timers always 've done, he probably babied you from the time—"

"Babied!" The interruption was hot with anger. "Babied me, did he? Damn funny babying, I'd call it!" He laughed bitterly. "I know what went ahead of me to Witch Hill. Sandy told me when it was all over. You ordered him to see what kind of a Belknap was left after the college professors got through with one! You told him to make it as rough for me as he knew how!"

He nodded again, that brisk, irate gesture.

"And what of it?"

"This!" He flung his cap into a chair and slapped the desk. "I didn't squawk!

I didn't even ask for a fair break. It was June, with the black flies so bad Sandy couldn't keep roadbuilders in the woods. He put me in there with what he had left of a crew and I stuck. I was the only one of the gang I started with who stayed through, and when we wound up I was boss!

"Did I get something better then? Guess again! I swamped, I drove team, I went with the loading crew, and every place I was put I set the pace for the rest of 'em. Yeah. College boy. Getting sand-papered because he was son of the push!"

He nodded once more, a bit white now.

"Four things I'v proved I could do better than anybody else there. Four!"—holding up the fingers of a trembling hand. "Saws next. Could I get a partner to stay with me even at the money I made for him? I could not! They brought in a Finn who'd never found a man to stand his pace; he hoisted his turkey the ninth day and went out with his tail dragging, and when Swanson got sick there was nothing else to do but put me in to run the show, was there?

"You know what happened then. Forty cents a thousand I saved you below anything that'd ever been done at Witch Hill, and when we were winding up the job at that! And the boys liked me. I had 'em working their heads off for you and showed the lowest labor turn-over they'd had in the country since God knows when!

"Stuffed shirt? Yes-man? Hell, sir!"

"My," said old Tom with forced sardonic mildness. "My, you're proud, ain't you?"

The boy caught his breath as though for a stormy denial; checked himself and flared:

"You're damned right, I am! It showed what I can do on one job; it gave me something to go on when I ask for the bigger one that's been promised me!" His voice trembled. "You'd admit it to anybody else, too; you'd admit it of any other kid who turned the trick. Then, sir, why the devil won't you admit it to and about *me?*"

His fist fell to the desk again, but this time with a sharp thud. Tom Belknap's eyes left that accusing gaze, and he stared once more through the window.

"No," he said dryly, as if to end debate with himself and the suggested alteration of his face which had threatened, perhaps, a melting, a softening, came to nothing. "It goes back to where we started; that I'm runnin' this outfit yet and hiring men and putting 'em where I think they'll do me the most good.

"One thing," he propounded, "you've got to learn is to know men, to get along with men. You don't like Gorbel—"

"No! I never have! Neither does anybody else around this outfit!"—with an inclusive gesture. "You've got a price on his interest, and even if you aren't ready to buy him out I won't lock horns with him. Let him run the office and the mills; let him run the bank. I want to get into the *woods,* Tom, and at Kampfest. There'd be no conflict!"

"As I was sayin'; you don't like Gorbel and for no reason, I can see. You've got to learn why you like and don't like men. You've only been on one job. You try another, now, and come spring you show me what you're wound on!" Color was deepening in the lined face and the eyes showed pale against it. "We've had a lot of gabble this forenoon! Here's your letter from Sandy. See if you can make a showin' somewhere else, and when I get back . . . we'll see what we can see!"

He rose.

"That's all then?" John asked, oddly restrained.

"That's all there is. The Century leaves in two hours. If you're going to say good-bye to your mother you'd better be about it."

The boy stood irresolute, conflicting impulses surging within him. Then, with a sweeping movement, he snatched up his cap.

"Good-bye, sir"—crisply.

"Good-bye, John. I . . . well, good-bye!" gruffly.

Their hands met briefly, formally.

"You'll go on to Seven to-morrow . . . " Difficult to tell whether that was statement or query; difficult to tell, too, whether the clearing of the throat had been necessary or not.

"I seem to have my orders," the boy said, and none could have told what impulse lay behind the words.

He wheeled and went quickly out, and for a long moment after he had gone his father stood, a gaunt, wearied old figure. He lifted one hand with a helpless movement and sank into the great chair, chin on knuckles . . . An unhappy man, this, helpless to rectify his mood . . .

CHAPTER III

NOW, when a young man, fever hot with rebellion, at odds with his world, set upon, treated unfairly, finding his firmest trust betrayed, mad to his marrow, steps off a train into a strange town and is hit in the mouth by a stranger, certain events are bound to follow. For one thing, the pressure of temper within him finds relief.

Young John Belknap was as hot with rage this afternoon as the stove in the corner of the smoking car which carried him northward.

A slap in the face he had had yesterday; a blow that knocked him from his balance. But he had regained poise, knowing that only one thing remained for him to do; to chuck it all, to walk out of the paternal home, refusing to accept an unfair, unmerited rebuff. When a man has spirit he can't take a drubbing and then be walked on, can be? Not a man such as this!

It was easy enough to come to a decision as to what to do; easy enough to decide that the Mid-West headquarters, up in the wilderness, was as good a place as any for a young man going out on his own to present himself and ask for a chance. Easy, simple!

But not so easy to summon that rage which would wipe out the hurt. He had had his fondest hopes betrayed by the one human being he had trusted above all others. It cut and scourged, made him drive himself into a furious temper.

He had boarded a late train, pack-sack over his shoulder, oblivious to the stares of people in the station, telling himself that he had been double-crossed, abused to a point which was intolerable. Through the remaining hours of the night he had tossed in his berth, letting that rage eat up the disappointment and heartache. Today, on a less comfortable train, his ire mounted and as the cars rocked and bounced on northward over increasingly rough steel, he sat for long intervals without moving a muscle, the fire in his eyes growing, the darkness in his heart deepening. It is not good for a youth to let his temper run such a course without outlet, but as yet no fist had fallen on his lips to drain the poison from his heart.

Snow fell. Now and again some of it sifted down from ventilators to the greasy rattan seats of the smoker. The brakeman came in and lighted oil lamps as waning afternoon brought wintry darkness. One more change now, and he would be on the Kampfest line . . . But he was not going to stop at Kampfest!

He moved with a start, then, and his jaw muscles bulged. This was the route he had planned so long to take, but the destination was no longer what it had been in those years of planning. On through Kampfest, rather, on for the better part of another hundred miles to Mid-West headquarters. He wondered if this churning rage in him would not overflow as they passed through Kampfest. . . .

But he was not to be put to that ordeal this evening.

"You're out of luck," the conductor said; "getting into Kampfest to-night. They got three cars off on a culvert and it may take 'em until noon to get their line open. Tell you what; the Junction boarding-house's a fright. You could go on to Shoestring where there's a good place to stay and come back in the morning in time to get the East-bound."

"Shoestring? Never heard of it."

"Spry little town." The conductor smiled grimly as he adjusted the wick of his lantern. "If the branch hadn't been blocked this afternoon, you might've seen some big times there to-night. . . . "

John did not heed this. He said, "Much obliged," and settled back in the corner of his seat with his wrath.

Soon the brakeman rose and sung out: "Shoestring!"

Buttoning his Mackinaw, slinging his pack-sack to one shoulder, John stood in the end of the car as they jolted to a stop. He was the only passenger disembarking, and when he pulled the door open snow swirled about him. Moving figures showed against the glow of depot lights.

He paused, pulling his cap over his ears, and did not notice that those figures were grouping about the car steps with a purposeful compactness. Eight or ten of them were there, and he saw, as he stepped down, that faces peered upward at him.

A voice sung out sharply:

"That's him!"

He dropped to shin-deep snow on the platform, and a bulking figure moved to confront him.

"You'd better git back on the train," the man said. "You ain't welcome here!"

Men beside and behind the fellow were jostling.

"Check him through!" someone called hoarsely.

"What's the big idea?" John snapped. "Who are you to—"

"We ain't here to argue, Jack! You git back aboard that car and keep your feet out of Shoestring and you'll be better off!"

The big man grasped his arm determinedly, and as John twisted to free himself he slipped. He flung out a hand to catch his balance and, on the gesture, a stinging blow caught him full in the mouth.

An instant before, and despite his black mood, he would have argued; but that fist on his lips dropped a red curtain before his eyes, coagulated all the anger which had kept him hot for two days and a night; stripped reason from him. A shout:

"Sock him again!" They crowded forward. He struck out at the nearest as he shook off his pack-sack. They smothered his fists; hands grappled to lift him back up the smoker steps.

HE crouched; he rushed. He was going to let no gang put him back on any train! He bored into them, through them, until he had distance between himself and the car and then straightened, catching one a stiff blow on the neck that spun him about. He whirled and drove his fist hard into a belly.

Voices, then, sharp and profane. Someone struck him on the cheek, and with an uppercut John dropped a man who charged in from the right. The taste of blood on his lips goaded him.

The huge fellow who had ordered him out of town shouldered his way through the group.

"Get away!" he roared. "I'll handle this party!"

But they would not get away. The fight belonged to all of them! Retreating slowly, John fought them off, edging towards the station building, giving ground adroitly to get his back against a wall.

They came on with a rush. He kicked one's feet from under him, and the falling fellow tripped another.

He had no inkling of what it was all about, nor did he care greatly. This was a fight to defend himself against numbers, and from the first insolent order, a savage joy had been rioting within him. This was what a man needed who had been at odds with his world!

He struck and kicked and elbowed and ducked. His head rocked sideways from a blow, and he squeezed his eyes shut for a split instant to check the mounting dizziness. They could have had him down and beaten to a pulp in one minute, if they'd used their heads. They were too mad, too eager to carry the fight; they got in one another's way, fended off the blows of their fellows.

Hands found a hold on his feet. He tried to kick and could not. He staggered and a tremendous blow bashed into the pit of his stomach to make him reel and retch and cover up as best he could. Losing now. . . . He hated to lose, even to great odds. . . .

He came out of the momentary weakness to find the group thinned. A man, charging him, checked and veered, and he had a fleeting glimpse of a small figure on the edge of the group, shoving at his assailants, holding up a dissuading hand.

A voice, then, a girl's voice, was raised sharply.

"Stop! Stop it! Tiny, Ezra, Way-Bill! Let him alone!"

The *him* was beyond a doubt John Steele Belknap, but that young man was now in no mood to be let alone! The figure of the leader was before him, poised, waiting; perhaps in indecision at the sudden wilting of spirit or intent among his fellows; perhaps waiting on this stranger who was so unwelcome in their midst. If for the latter, his wait was brief because as he kicked free from those impeding hands John rushed him, striking quickly, with short, savage blows, glorying in this moment of even odds.

The man retreated slowly. Hard fists bore him backward into the glare that streamed from the open station doorway.

A cry, then, as John, bareheaded, face set, burst into the light.

" 'Taint him, Tiny! Tain't *him!*"

Now this Tiny might, in another instant, have had reason to claim that the shout distracted him, did he care to lay upon an alibi. But even before the words were past the lips that yelped them, John found the opening he had been fighting for.

Full on the point of Tiny's chin his knuckles struck and the man's legs sagged. The force of the blow rocked him backward and he crumpled. His head, lolling to one side, crunched oddly as it struck the wheel of a baggage truck.

John heard that sound and a tingle ran through him. He lurched on forward. Well enough to knock the big devil out, but he did not like that crunch! Hands clutched at his shoulder and a hoarse protest was in his ear.

"Get away!" John cried, shaking off the hands, heedless of the words, and dropped to his knees in the snow beside the fallen man.

"Hit his head!" someone cried, as they gathered closely about.

"Get back!" John snapped. "Give him room!"

The voice of authority, that.

Tiny's face was bruised and bleeding. He lay lax, and when John raised one of the great arms it dropped back limply. The man breathed heavily, and apprehension mounted in the boy's consciousness.

"Get hold here!"—sharply. "Carry him inside where I can see!" And gently, easily, considering the man's weight, he slid an arm beneath the broad shoulders and raised the torso.

Others helped, and they shuffled into the waiting-room with their burden, placing it carefully on the floor beside the stove.

John was heedless of the crowd that pressed close again. He removed the thick cap from Tiny's head and with light, careful fingers rummaged through the stiff hair. He encountered no great bruise, no depression. The cap had been ample protection; no fracture, perhaps not even . . .

Tiny stirred and moaned.

"Get me some snow!" John said, and two scurried outside.

WITH his handkerchief he wiped blood from the man's chin, and when the snow came he took a great handful and held it against brow and temples.

Tiny grimaced and puckered his lips and stirred. He moaned next, and opened one eye and whimpered.

"What th' hell—" he began, and the crowd stirred, as in relief.

John drew a deep breath, then, and looked up at the faces above him; weather-beaten, vigorous faces, they were, and as his eyes swept them they turned on him with curious expressions.

"He wants to know what the hell," he began. "And that makes two of us. What the hell does it—"

He broke short. He had settled back to his heels, searching those faces with a demand for explanation when he saw her. She had stood beside him, looking down. Very small and slight of figure she was, and the face beneath the snug turban of beaver was as gentle as those others were rough. Her eyes were dark and large and serious.

She was looking full in his face. He caught his breath. "Sorry!"—to her. "I should say"—whipping his glance to the men again—"what's a stranger to think of being ganged like this?"

A slim, wiry man, who had squatted on the other side of the reviving Tiny, spoke.

"We was expectin' another party, chum," he said. "You're a match for him in size, but you ain't the one we're lookin' for; this particular hard egg was sent in to clean us out by old Tom Belknap!"

John's head jerked.

"What?" he demanded.

"I said: we'd got news a certain party who's raised hell here was comin' in to put a chunk under a corner. We aimed to get him back to Kampfest with bad news for old Belknap. Bein' excited like we was, and bein' dark like it was, we mistook you for him. Not important, mebby, but true!"

John took a quick breath and let it out through his nostrils in an amazed whiff.

"Well, I'll be—"

He looked up again for the girl's face, as though an exchange of glances with her might clarify this bewildering situation. She was gone. He stared at the others, but they were watching Tiny, who was being helped to a sitting posture by the smaller man.

"All right, Tiny?" the other asked.

The big fellow felt his chin gingerly.

" 'D he git away?" he asked.

A chuckle from the crowd then.

"Away, your grandma! There he sets, Tiny!"

The dazed eyes followed the gesture and then blinked slowly.

" 'Y God, Way-Bill, 'tain't him," he said weakly.

"No, 'tain't."

" 'Nd if this one *was* him—"

"Then we'd have a lot more to worry about. Yes, sir, if old Belknap could hire 'em like you, chum"—to John—"then the company *would* have somethin' to lay awake nights about!"

Tiny had been staring at John and now his gaze wavered as a man's will when he is overcome with embarrassment.

". . . get up," he mumbled, and John helped him to his feet.

The boy's heart was pounding. Old Tom, starting *that* sort of trouble?

"All right, Tiny?" Way-Bill asked, and when assured that the late unconscious man was getting to be as good as new, he turned to John. "Guess it's due you to explain a little," he said. "Mebby you've heard of old Tom Belknap?"

"I have . . . once"—some of his wrath surging upward to mingle with high curiosity.

"Well, he's evident aimin' to run the Richards Company, here, off the earth. He's done a plenty, but the last thing he thought up was to bring a hand named Baxter to Kampfest."

John, frowning, followed the man's matter-of-fact words closely. He spoke as one sure of himself.

"This Baxter's a tough customer. He mixed it with our woods boss last week, tossed him off a car'nd broke his hip. Tonight he was advertised to come over here 'nd clean out the town single-handed. Makes us pretty hot"—voice rising a trifle—"bein' that old Belknap only wants to close us down so's he can buy somethin' for little or nothin'. We done what, likely, you'd do for the outfit that hired you 'nd you knew was fair 'nd square 'nd in a jack-pot. Only . . . we done 'n error."

A grim little man, he was, but he had spoken with a fine spirit of loyalty. He now added: "I'm sorry. Tiny, here, sure ought to be *awful* sorry, and I guess everybody else feels like we do. I hope, chum, the feelin's ain't too hard."

THEY stilled as a group will when an answer to an important question is due.

"Why, no. . . . I see how it is," John said, but blankly.

Mistaken for his father's hired bully! And old Tom trying to run this other company into a corner? Was that a possible explanation of why he—young John—had been so carefully kept away from Kampfest? Were things transpiring in this country of which his father was ashamed?

Thoughts, guesses, emotions swirled in him. Whatever it was, this Richards outfit evidently was in a bad way, with its men worked up to such a point. Why, if these things were true . . .

Like, a white-hot thread the thought seared through his consciousness. If a fight was on here, waged by his father against a weaker competitor. . . . Until this moment his only possible vengeance on his father had been to run away, but now . . .

A man came in from outside, beating snow from a Scotch cap with his mitten.

"Here," he said, holding it towards John. "Here's your cap. I . . . I guess I knocked it off and . . . well, you see how it was."

He was flushed and so evidently contrite that John smiled, and when he smiled the tension that had been on those men relaxed.

"Anything we can do for you now . . . after tryin' our best licks to do things *to* you?" Way-Bill asked.

"Why . . . I guess not. Thanks a lot." He was finding his poise, stilling the hot curiosity that might lead him into blunders, making up his mind to learn this whole story, but to do it adroitly, at the proper time. "If somebody'll point out the hotel, now. . . . "

CHAPTER IV

IT was past the supper hour in Shoestring's one public stopping place, Rex Jasper's Palace Hotel.

But Rex was neither inhospitable nor unmindful of the dimes. No more was he an uncommunicative host. So he himself spread cold but satisfactory viands on one end of a long table and sat there, elbows on the oilcloth, while his guest ate, and responded well to the questions that John Steele Belknap, identity as yet unknown in Shoestring, put to him.

The boy ate slowly.

"It just goes to show," Rex said, narrowing his watery blue eyes, "what the concentration of great wealth into the hands of unscrupulous men will cause."

John asked impatiently, "Are you sure that this man Belknap is behind all the trouble?"

"Sure? Sure!" The little man bristled with assurance. "He's got the Richards Company in a corner and he ain't goin' to let it out. Why, even his own partner, Gorbel, over here at Kampfest, can't stop him. Gorbel ain't so bad, but Belknap gives the orders."

John shoved back his plate and tapped the table with his fork.

"Just a minute. Let's see if I've got

this story right: The logging railroad, owned by the Richards Lumber Company, goes through Belknap & Gorbel timber. The right of way was granted by a man named Kampfest who used to own that timber. Belknap & Gorbel bought him out and began to operate. Under the terms of the old contract they can either force the Richards Company to haul their logs out to a main-line branch or order them to pull their steel. And, to tighten this squeeze, the Belknap camps are making logs in such quantities that the mill here can't be safely logged? That it?"

"That's right! This old Belknap ain't satisfied to have a soft thing, he ain't. The Richards mill's been gettin' by some way; God knows how, 'nd soon's he sees that he starts gettin' rough. He has his hired help put Royce, the Richards woods boss, out of commission, which is awful bad. You can't log without a good boss, and no man in his right mind's going to tackle a job where, on top of having to scratch to make a showin', he's in danger of getting his block knocked off any minute. You see—"

But John Belknap, leaning back in his chair now, gave no heed to Landlord Jasper's dissertation. After what his father had done to him yesterday, young John was ready to believe anything. He had known of wars waged by old Tom against competitors; he had always thought them waged on fair terms. But here was a conflict apparently unfair, unwarranted. As good as a blow in the mouth, this! He had been kept away from Kampfest after heading towards it these years.

Why? What reason? Because old Tom did not want him to know what was going on? Because he knew that John would have demanded an about-face?

The idea conceived down yonder in the depot was aborning. He had asked for responsibility and been put back into the class from which he had demonstrated his fitness for graduation; asked for bread and been given a stone. . . .

Well, how would his father like it if he refused to take what was offered; if, more than that, he stepped in and aligned himself with an opposition because it gave him a chance to see what he was wound on? And with their backs to the wall, this Richards outfit, whoever and whatever it might be, needed a leader, fresh blood, someone who was not afraid of this giant, Tom Belknap!

". . . and when such——"

"Where's the Richards office?" John interrupted, rising.

"Why, it's acrost from the mill," Jasper said, shuffling to a window and peering out. "Yes, the' 's a light there now. Generally is, nights . . . this winter."

SNOW had ceased falling. The wind had dropped and the planks of wooden sidewalks, deep under hard-packed snow, snapped and boomed as John traversed the shadows of lumber piles towards the looming hulk of a sawmill and the lighted, one-story building across from it which had been pointed out to him.

He had no definite plan. He had considered telling the manager the whole truth and asking for a job. That, however, might not be advisable; depended entirely on the type of individual he encountered. It would be a tough chore to convince some men that they should hire for a responsible post the son of an arch enemy! . . . But whoever he found he would at least learn more of what his father was up to. Of that only was he certain as he took the office steps at a jump and opened the door.

The building was divided into halves by a cold hallway. A single light bulb, dusty and weak with service, was set in the ceiling. Its light was not good, but a room to the left had better illumination, and on the glazed glass of the door was painted the word Manager.

John stamped snow from his feet on a husk rug, but as he started for this evidently occupied office, the sound of a voice arrested him.

A man was talking swiftly, quietly, and he stopped, not wanting to intrude.

The voice went on: ". . . and my offer stands! I'm helpless to help the Richards Company in any other way, but I will buy, at that price, the entire property, timber, railroad and mill!

"Perhaps this offer seems small, but look what is going to happen if you try to keep on alone! I'm a partner with Tom Belknap, yes, but I'm powerless to shape the policy or direct the practice of that partnership! I'd give every dollar I have, Ellen, to see you personally at peace, but you will have no peace until Belknap has his way! He is out to buy this company at a figure even lower than I offer, and he finishes what he starts. . . . Now, what do you say?"

John's heart raced as he stood there listening. The man in that other room was Paul Gorbel. He was making threats in Tom Belknap's name! Bullying a woman for old Tom!

The woman spoke then.

"I have only one thing to say, Paul! That the Richards properties aren't for sale at any such absurd price; that they aren't for sale at any figure under such pressure. They're in a tight place, well enough; they would have plenty to contend with in a fair fight, but you may take this word back to your Mr. Belknap: that the Richards Company is going to keep on fighting!

"Take that word to your renegade partner, Paul, and don't come here again with one hand extended in friendship and the other carrying a club!"

Her voice, gentle in the beginning, had mounted, and her hard-flung defiance sent a prickling sensation to John's very fingertips. Some loyal employee—a bookkeeper, an office woman; a wife or daughter or sister of the Richards involved—had set Gorbel down with a jolt!

Behind that closed door, a low, sorry laugh and the sound of slow footsteps. A shadow crossed the lighted glass and Gorbel spoke again.

"Ellen! . . . Ellen, *dear!* Don't you see that behind this is only one thing for me? Can't you understand that I'm risking all I've got just trying to help you in small ways? It's you I want"—voice roughening a bit with passion. "It's you who's got into my blood! It's the waiting that kills me. . . . I can't wait, I tell you! I can't—"

"Get back! Get away! Don't you dare *touch* me!"

He called her name again, almost savagely. Feet scraped on the floor; a sharp cry as with a crash the light in the office went out and the glass in the door showed a blank for John Belknap.

"Paul! Get out of this office, I tell you! Get away . . . away!"

Panic, now, in the tone, and for the man waiting outside there was but one move to make. . . .

The faint light from the hallway, further impaired by his own shadow as he poised there, hand still on the knob, revealed them.

A desk lamp lay on the floor at the man's feet and he was turning, relinquishing his hold on the girl's wrist, looking over his shoulder with a white, drawn face. He posed so a moment, staring at this intruder who showed only in silhouette.

"Well?"—in sharp demand.

Young Belknap did not move; did not reply for a moment. Then he said almost casually:

"I happened to overhear you being told to get out. I opened the door for you."

Gorbel whirled to face him then, feet spread, arms held with stiff truculence at his sides.

"And who are you?"—bright eyes searching, striving to identify the shadowed face.

"The chap who opened the door."

Gorbel's hands were knotting into fists.

"You dammed eavesdropper!" he muttered. "You—"

JOHN took the few quick strides that put him face to face with Gorbel, so close to him that he could hear the man's quick breathing.

"No names!" he muttered. "No names . . . or any other talk. Are you going out on your own legs?"

Gorbel swayed backward. His right hand swept the desk top, and with a growl John had the arm in one hand, twisted the man about, and wrenched upward on the wrist until Gorbel doubled over with a cry.

Gorbel moaned as added pressure came on his arm, his fingers opened, and a heavy paper-weight thudded to the floor.

"Now. . . . Get out!"

Still retaining his grip that had the man's hand between his shoulder blades, the pain of which raised him to his toes as he walked, John propelled Gorbel swiftly out of the office, into the hallway, towards the entry.

"You damned butter-in!" he croaked thickly.

"Maybe!" John said quietly, alert, now, to keep the man's face away from him. He did not want Paul Gorbel to know that he was in Shoestring: did not want his father's partner to know yet that he had, even for a brief moment, taken up the cause of the one they were so vigorously oppressing.

Gorbel struggled, but the lock on his wrist was secure. He bent forward for relief as John opened the door. The cold night surged in on them, and then the one was running down the steps to regain the balance that the other's shove had imperiled.

At the bottom he whirled and lifted his face, normally handsome, now wrenched with rage.

"You swine!" he cried. "You'll pay for this!"

"Collect, then! But *you* stay away from here until you're sent for! Get that?"

He closed the door and turned back to the office, removing his cap as he went.

Brighter lights burned now, for a cluster in the ceiling had been switched on. The girl sat at a littered desk in the middle of the room, pale, shoulders hunched, head bowed. He stopped, poised in surprise. She was the girl he had seen in the station waiting-room, and with her coat and hat removed, in the jersey dress which exposed a graceful column of throat, she was as out of place in this office with its battered desks and dingy walls as a flower in a wood-yard!

She did not look at him; her eyes were averted as though the meeting of another gaze would break down her small margin of self-control.

John spoke:

"He called me an eavesdropper. I guess, in a way, he was right."

"Fortunately, you heard," she murmured, and then looked up. "Oh . . . Oh, I didn't know it was you!" She brushed at her soft, short hair nervously and managed a sort of smile. "I . . . I wanted to tell you how . . . how sorry I am that the boys did what they did. . . . Won't you come in?"

She rose, and he could see that she was rallying her composure rapidly.

"I feel like an intruder," he said, advancing. "I came over here on the chance that I might find the manager and ran into the late unpleasantness!"

"I am the manager," she said simply.

And now surprise had him wholly; so completely that he blinked and laughed outright.

"What! You. . . . Why, a *girl* in this mess?"

She flushed deeply.

"I guess that's what it is: a mess. Even strangers know! I am Ellen Richards. This was my father's company. I've been trying to carry on for over a year now, since he . . . since he died."

"Oh," he said dully. "Oh!"—a bit long-drawn, this time, and in a sort of relief rather than amazement or stupefaction. Relief, because it was a girl on whom h father made war!

It simplified matters for a chap in a embarrassing position. A man, even in pinch, might want to fight through to th finish on his own resources. A girl woul be needing help. Lots of help! Immedi ately!

"Well!" he said as he took the chai she indicated, and in the ejaculation was deal of satisfaction.

"It was terrible the way the boys me you," she said. "There's an excuse for it of course. It can be explained by the fac that they're so worked up over what ha been going on and so loyal to my father's memory that they do these things regard less of my wishes. I'm . . . I'm so sorry! I feel responsible for it."

He touched his cut lip.

"Don't mind me. As I understand the situation you seem to have troubles enough without worrying about a scratch on a stranger!"

HER eyes dropped. "And it was awfully generous of you to . . . to do what you did just now"—voice trembling ever so little. "First, we hear that Tom Belknap's bully is coming here to harm more of my men and we beat you up in our excitement. Next, you walk in here to find Tom Belknap's partner demanding surrender and save me . . . embarrassment. There are some matters a girl can't handle . . . alone."

She was embarrassed on the last, but John did not heed that. When a man's mind is riveted to one purpose by a consuming rage, other details go by the board. Normally her voice was gentle, well modulated, but when she spoke his father's name it was with stout bitterness.

John stirred uneasily. To tell a girl who could speak of a man with such contempt and animosity that he was that man's son was a bit more of an ordeal than he cared to undertake.

His heart went down . . . and then rebounded. Sandy's letter rested in his billfold. Good old Sandy, so rattled at writing a letter of character that he left out the once important, but now damning, third of his name!

He picked up her last words:

"Yes: a lot of matters a girl can't handle alone. Throwing your caller out was simple. Maybe it won't be so easy to help

you in other things. But that's what I came here for: to ask for a chance to try."

He tossed his cap to the desk top and unbuttoned his Mackinaw with an air of one who has come to stay.

Her face changed oddly. The confusion and self-consciousness disappeared and across the depths of her dark eyes flashed something that might have been a reflection of relief or caution or conflict between these two.

"Meaning just what?" she asked with an odd bluntness for a girl.

"That I understand you're looking for a woods superintendent and I'd like to take on the chore."

"And that . . . that's what brought you to Shoestring?"

Surely it was a surge of relief, the sudden dawning of an unlooked-for hope, which unsteadied her tone then!

Well, now, a young man can't lie, can he? Not to a girl who, for an instant and even through the concentration of a savage purpose, seems peculiarly lovely to behold? No. . . . This young man could not; but for the sake of attaining his goal he may evade a little, may he not?

"I've just finished one job. I don't know how good I am; I'd like to find out. When I heard of the jam you're in here, I thought it might be a good place to see what I'm good for . . . what I'm wound on."

A moment of silence followed. She folded her small hands and looked at him with a gaze as searching as it was level.

"Perhaps you're asking for more than you understand . . . in the way of trouble, I mean. I need help and right away, but I wouldn't want any man to come to work for me without knowing just how desperate the situation is. That, you see, wouldn't be fair to . . . to the sort of man I need.

"People who have known this company for years figure that we are through. Even the men on the job have the notion that we're marked paid. Perhaps they are right; I'm trying to prove them wrong.

"I . . . It might be simpler if I knew just how much you have heard?"

He told her tersely the gossip he had listened to in the past hour, and she nodded slowly.

"Those things are all true. There's a fundamental problem of finance, however, which is behind it all. The Bank of Kampfest, now owned by Belknap & Gorbel, holds enough of our paper to make our statement look very bad. The only way to keep from being sold out is to keep the mill sawing. I can borrow on lumber in the yard from Milwaukee banks, largely because we have some very favorable contracts. However, those contracts will be voided unless we are prepared to meet their terms of regular and prompt deliveries.

"The way out now goes back to keeping the mill logged and running. Things haven't been any too smooth at the woods end; you know what we are up against in the matter of transportation, evidently. We can't spend a dollar for more equipment. We must keep afloat with what we have . . . or go down."

She paused and John had a queer feeling: annoyance at her apparent competence.

"Snow came early and we're going to have trouble with it. We have fourteen miles of railroad through choppings where drifting will be certain. I was worried to-night and went looking for Tiny and Way-Bill—my engineer and conductor—to have them take the plow out if it didn't let up. That's how I happened to see your reception. The snow has stopped; we're safe for to-night. How long we'll be safe, no one can tell. Without fighting snow we've been unable to build up a reserve of logs in the mill-yard. A three-day shut-down would ruin us."

SHE paused again and her eyes shifted a moment from his intent scrutiny.

"No, things haven't been going so well in the woods. I kept Royce, my father's old superintendent, on because I could trust him absolutely and I . . . I need men I can trust"—the shell she had built about herself giving way ever so little for the moment. "We were just getting along when Mr. Belknap himself came up to Kampfest."

John's mouth tightened and his brows gathered closer.

"He seems to have arranged things very well. For a year Mr. Gorbel, his partner, has been asking me to put a price on the property. I have refused. After Mr. Belknap left, the process of forcing us out began. They overtaxed our railroad with their logs; then Mr. Belknap's hired thug put my superintendent out of the picture. The camp foreman, Mark Saunders, isn't up to the job. Two others who are good

loggers won't come, now that the story has got around that Tom Belknap is after the Richards hide.

"That is the situation," she ended abruptly. "That's what a superintendent will have to confront. Who are you to do it?"

He smiled, despite the unpleasant conviction that this Ellen Richards was going to be amazingly hard to deal with, and reached into a pocket for his bill-fold.

"A fellow doesn't like to polish his own medals," he laughed a bit nervously. "I've only held one job that amounted to anything"—fingering through the papers in the wallet. "I've had four years in forestry school, but the value of that remains to be proven, I suppose." He handed over Sandy's letter. "I don't know what you expect in the way of personal qualifications. I swear when it isn't always necessary; I smoke cigarettes; I've been known to drink some. I don't know all that there is to know about hardwood logging by a long shot."

She was not reading the letter; watching him, instead, as though his words or manner intrigued her.

"I'd be interested in this job principally because it would . . . would show what I could do, and I'm curious to know how good or how bad I am. As for the rest, I'll leave it to Sandy McIver"—gesturing towards the letter she held.

The girl's eyes dropped to the scrawl and her mouth twitched. It was coming now, he felt! She was going to jump at the chance of getting help! He leaned forward a bit.

"That's a fine letter, Mr. Steele," she said. "Witch Hill. . . . I don't know the company." She looked at him as if slightly puzzled and paused a moment. Then, decisively: "I'd like to have you go to camp with me to-morrow morning. After a few hours on the job I'll give you an answer."

She rose with a manner of dismissal and John Belknap, masquerading now as John Steele, got to his feet.

"Fair enough," he said. "What time?"

"Seven sharp, in the mill-yard. Good night."

"Good night," he said, resentful of this further strain on his harried patience.

She was waiting for him to go and he started for the door. As he reached for the knob she spoke again.

"And once more: I thank you for . . . for what you did here."

"That was all right," he said. "I'd glad to take on a row with a hand li Gorbel!"

CHAPTER V

IT WAS a queer experience, spending day with a girl who was sizing him u He was in the mill-yard earl watching Ellen, clad in Mackinaw a breeches and pacs, as she watched the loa ing of camp supplies. She was crisp, inte business-like and greeted him almo curtly.

Tiny Temple reached down from the l comotive cab to shake his hand; Way-Bi took a moment to apologize again for th trouble of last night, and John could se that both were watching him closely, prob ably wondering about his errand.

He strolled about; watched the mill saw looked over equipment in the yard. Wit the train under way he sat alone in th "dog-house" of the way-car while Elle remained below, talking earnestly with th conductor.

Out to the northward they toiled, up mile after mile of stiff grade, and after seven miles they crossed the main-line branch, with its water tank and tender's house. To the eastward along that stee was Kampfest, and it was to this poin that Ellen was forced to deliver the Belk nap & Gorbel logs from their landing, fif teen miles to the northward.

From the crossing they rocked and clanked down long grades towards the dis tant timber, stopped at the Belknap & Gor bel camps, spotted cars and then went on another three miles to Richards Camp Six teen, woods headquarters.

Until the Belknap cars were spotted Ellen did not come near John. Then she climbed to the perch beside him and with a long breath settled back.

"Some bad cuts back there," he remarked.

"Yes. We'll have our troubles with snow any time now."

"Your locomotive leaks"—eyeing the clouds of steam ahead.

"Tiny, bless him, will work twenty hours a day to keep her going! Perhaps it will die on us before spring, spite of him. If we had another I'd let Mr. Belknap whistle!

can't have another until we make more a showing"—with finality.

John nodded to himself. She was in a liner, all right. Well, if she'd give him a chance he might let her out; at the last he would show old Tom a trick or two to lose an eye trying!

"And now," Ellen said as they came to a pleasing stop at her camp, "I've a lot to do. If you just follow me around——"

He just followed her around. He met men: Saunders, the foreman; Jack Tait, the barn boss; the cook, the scaler, the clerk, Jerry Tubbs, fat and asthmatic. He heard her talk to these men as he himself would have talked to men in his employ: directly, tersely, in their own language. He kept his eyes as well as ears open; he asked questions of Ellen occasionally and of a man here and there; but all the time she was restive, up on the bit, growing hourly more provoked with a girl who needed him but who would keep him waiting!

But in late afternoon, when she led the way into the office, deserted for the moment, she changed; ceased to be the assured young business woman, filling a man's shoes more or less competently.

The crude office was silent, and as John closed the door there penetrated from afar the scream of a whistle.

"So cold!" she said. "The loads pull heavily. We can't take more than four cars at a time up those grades to the crossing. They've been doubling with Belknap & Gorbel logs all day and we won't get half a day's cut to our mill tonight!"

She dropped to a chair as though suddenly weakened and her mouth worked. Small and fragile and lost she looked there.

She looked up with a wry little smile and asked:

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"Hay-wire!" he exploded. "It's slow, costly . . . a joke! No wonder you're in trouble, with a woods job run like this one!"

The words tumbled out as words will when they have been withheld too long. His conviction was double-ply. What he had seen had stirred pride in his own capacities: he knew he could speed up the operation. And the prospect of taking it in hand and stinging his father as he had been stung, gave his eagerness a touch of fever.

"Well . . . what would you do?" she asked.

He stood there and told her what he would do and why, item by item; told it emphatically, told it with a thoroughness which revealed his powers of observation and his agility of interpretation. He seated himself on the edge of a chair and made rough diagrams on paper. He shot questions at the girl to which he expected no answer and then answered them himself.

Sales talk, it was; driving, pounding, convincing sales talk.

She watched him, lips parting as his conviction carried him away and when he stopped, again standing before her, saying, "Those are a few of the things I'd do until I dug up more to do," she looked away into the sunset, filtering through the naked tops of maple and birch and beech and her eyes misted.

"I'm glad you're looking for a hard job, John Steele!" she said calmly. "I think . . . I think I'm going to depend on you from now on."

CHAPTER VI

NOW when a young man, wholly mad, is out to show what he can do, and who has had an opportunity of displaying his capacities dangled before his eyes tantalizingly for a day that seemed like a week, he is bound to go fast, once started.

Ellen Richard's new woods boss went like the wind, like fire, like a wild horse; by day he drove his crews; by night he sat in the office at camp or in town and laid plans for further driving.

No wonder the reserve of logs in the millyard was low! Even if Ellen had had no Belknap & Gorbel logs to overtax her transport facilities the scale in the decks would have been deficient and the train crew, with only Richards stuff to move, would have been idling away its time. Surprisingly few logs were ready in the woods.

The winter's operation had been confined to a long, narrow ravine into which, because of the contour of the country, steel could not be laid at justified expense. The haul was along the bottom of this sharp depression to its lower end and thence up a hill, where a tow-team worked every hour getting loads to the top. From there

the sleighs doubled back on the high land, paralleling the first part of the haul to reach the landing.

Over three miles, it was, and at one point the steel came within forty rods of the rim of the ravine.

"We should be dumping right there!" John exclaimed to Saunders when he saw the place.

"Yeah. But we don't haul through the air yet!" the foreman growled.

John said no more but his mind was busy. In the mill-yard was an old Rapid stream loader, discarded years before for the more efficient McGiffert. It was not in bad shape, and three days later it was in the woods; men were building a road through the deepening snow straight up the side of that pot-hole and on to the adjacent steel. The jammer was set down, skidded to the brink of the steep pitch and a cable bent to the drum. Teams left off the long journey by iced road, took their sleighs down the pitch to the skidways, brought them, loaded, to the foot of the incline, unhooked and came up ahead while the power of the Rapid's stream engine snaked the loads to the top.

The tow-team was liberated for the haul; each sleigh was able to move an extra thousand a day; costs were cut. Daily the size of the decks at the new landing increased; log production was stepping up; a fundamental shortcoming was being overcome, and as he stood on the third afternoon following the initiation of his new plan, John muttered tightly:

" . . . see what I'm wound on, Tom!"

Another saw-gang went on; the blacksmith flew at the task of widening bunks; section men, working with slabs and cull lumber, built snow fences at strategic places along the right of way. The job took on new life. It was reaching out, looking far ahead; rushing in to meet problems rather than waiting for them to come for solution.

"Look close, Tom!" he growled at the end of the tenth day. "See what I'm wound on, yet?"

Yes, the Richards operation had new life, new vigor so long as John had his fingers on each phase, but a man can't be in more than one place at a time; each day has only its allotted hours.

He had had the train crew with him from the beginning and did not need to worry about getting the best out of what equipment he had there. Tucker, the r master, was spry enough, eager enou seemed, but there were times when felt that he could not wholly trust the Nothing he could put his finger on delinquency he could point out. Jus tuitive distrust.

He won Jack Tait, the barn boss, stalwart friend by sitting up through bitter night to help minister to a horse. He needed the staunch suppor his men, as any executive needs the and loyalty of those at his command. business will succeed unless divisional h are behind the management heart and s the backbone of an army is its non-co

And in one important place John k that his organization was weak.

Mark Saunders, the camp foreman, undoubtedly looked forward to stepping in the Richards organization. A grizz middle-aged man, he had evidently garded the opening caused by Royce's r fortune as an opportunity; a veteran of camps, he resented working under a youn man.

From the beginning, John understo this, but he also believed that with anot to lay plans for him, Saunders could fu tion nicely. The man was capable, disgruntled. He became suddenly loyal Royce, whose plan of operation was bei upset; he was disinclined to accept innov tions with good grace. More, when wo took John into Shoestring he returned find that the speed of the job had fall off because, instead of being with his me Saunders would sit in the office and nur his grievances.

He tried to draw out the best in Sau ders, but the man was adamant. He sh up like a clam when approached with arg ment; he would not respond to an appe for help in this time of the company's nee In another week, John told himself, Sau ders would either click or pack and get ou He was worried. If he failed because h could not win the support of his men, wha a thing that would be for old Tom to mull

A CHANCE to take on an order fo veneer birch came in and John talke the matter over with his foreman.

"Lots of fuss for nothing!" Saunder sniffed. "Snow's getting too deep. A put tering job, and how could we move 'em t town if we did get 'em to steel?"

"Let me figure that out. The price i

high; there's a chance for profit. I'd like to look at the stuff, anyhow."

So, on an afternoon when the temperature hovered around zero, John and Saunders snow-shoed away from the job through the silent forest to a section where the cruise indicated that birch stood in unusual quantities. John tried to make talk, but his companion would not respond and little was said until they crossed a pole bridge that spanned the Mad Woman river.

"Ice thick enough to haul on," Saunders observed.

"Except on the riffles."

"They'll be tight by now."

"Not so sure. What do you call this below? High Banks? I saw it last week and it was open in the current. Ice won't be safe yet in water that swift."

"Well, you're boss. You ought to know everything!"

John concentrated on holding his temper.

An hour later they stopped to check their tallies.

"You're right on this piece, Saunders," John admitted. "The stuff simply isn't here in big enough quantities. But down below it may be."

"Well, you know the corners now; the only way for you to be sure is to look. My word's no good."

"Snap out of it, Mark! I've got to be shown, haven't I, or let somebody else run this job?"

The other shrugged. "Go see, then. I've got to get back unless you tell me different."

"No; I'll do it alone."

Abruptly the foreman turned away. He did not take their back track but struck to the southward, directly for camp.

"Careful of that ice if you're going across the river!" John called. "It's pretty young."

"It's *my* skin that'll get wet if I'm wrong!" the man growled doggedly.

Saunders walked rapidly through the timber towards the river, muttering to himself now and again. He dropped from the hardwood to a ribbon of cedar swamp, wallowed through to a poplar flat above the stream where beaver had worked, and came out on the bank of the Mad Woman.

Twenty feet from either side old ice, thickly coated with snow, showed. Over the channel, however, the wind had in places cleared the surface of the new black veneer that low temperature had created. Only a night or two old, it was, and the man paused a moment indecisively. Had he not been warned, now, he would go upstream to the bridge, but this Steele knew too much!

He went briskly out on to the frozen surface, webs biting the wind-packed snow. As he stepped from the old ice to the young, he went a bit gingerly. The footing was slippery.

Young ice; and strong ice, considering its thickness; flexible ice, too. It began to bend and, seeing, Saunders went faster, sliding along, skating on his shoes rather than walking. He turned in a moment, to see a dark stain of water following him.

With a low ejaculation he began to move in a shuffling run. Three strides he took, putting him beyond the center of the stream, putting him within thirty feet of the ice ahead. Three strides, and on the fourth his foot went through.

He sprawled forward then, half on purpose, trying to distribute his weight more widely, but he fell heavily on his hip, smashing through, feeling his feet drop into the current!

Into the current, with the snow-shoes dragging his feet under! Into the current, with ice breaking beneath his arms as he fought against the pull on his legs! Into the deep, sucking river, fighting desperately for a hold on safety!

He thrust his arms far forward, leaned his head low to the ice edge and clung. For a moment it held him up and he raised his voice in a shrill, clear whoop . . . and another and a third. He wriggled for a firmer hold, and the sleeves of his coat resisted the pull. They were frozen to the ice, giving him security against slipping backward for the moment, but he raised his head and yelled again, frantically, because his feet were stretching far forward, his hips yielding to the drag of the Mad Woman and sliding under!

Back in the timber John heard the first of those cries come ringing and reverberating through the afternoon silence. The sounds seemed to come from all directions, echoing down the ravines among the stalwart tree-trunks. He stopped, cocking his head. Again the cry . . . and again.

No warning shout of a teamster, that; he was too far from the job. No one else was near him except Saunders and, knowing that, the peculiar qualities of the hail

snapped into evidence. Distress, it was! A call for help!

He was running then, in long, strong strides, lifting his feet high in the soft snow, head turned for other sounds. They came in rapid succession: the panic cries of a frightened man, growing a bit hoarse now.

HE DID not know that he could run that fast on snow-shoes! He went down an incline and floundered up a rise at top speed, driving his heart and legs to maintain the pace. He came on Saunders' trail and that made the going easier, but he fell after a moment, tripping on a buried top. He was up in an instant, redoubling his efforts to make up for lost seconds. . . .

Down a slope, through hemlocks, into a barrier of thick cedars; the cries were closer now, but not so loud; seemed muffled, strangled.

He was through the cedar, out into the beaver-gutted poplar and could see.

Saunders was there, down to his breast in the water, arms stretched on the ice before him, backward tilt of head and neck indicating that his feet were close under the ice, stretched out there by the pull of the current.

"Steele!" the man was calling. "Steele! For God's sake, Steele!"

"Coming!" John yelled.

But he was not coming just then. He was wrenching at a lodged poplar which beaver had started to fall. It was three inches through at the butt, straight and tall, the cut not wholly completed, and the top lodged in the tops of companion trees.

He wrenched and heaved at the thing, cursing its hold. . . . It came free at the butt, and he dragged the top down, knocking off the branches, brittle with frost, not yet brittle with decay. And as he worked he watched Saunders, gauged the ice and the distance.

He was heavier than the foreman by thirty pounds, so he had no chance of making it out there without crashing through. On the old ice he stooped and unbuckled the straps about his ankles, and leaving his toes in the harness, he shuffled forward, out from safety, out on to the new ice, feeling it sag beneath him, and hearing its protesting creak. . . .

He ran in short, shuffling strides, carrying the tree as a rope-walker carries his pole. He held his eyes on the man yonder whose face, in a fixity of suspense, was turned towards him. He could see the cords of Saunders' neck standing out as he fought the drag on his feet and held his frozen sleeves rigid, the last hold on life.

Ice gave beneath John and he lunged forward, still on top. He saw a section of ice under Saunders yield. Water swept about one of his arms and the sleeve let go. The man flung it high and clawed frantically, making strange sounds.

And then John was out of his shoes, letting his body fall forward, taking one quick stride as he went down, smashing the ice for his full length, sousing into that bitterly cold water, holding the saving pole tight to his breast, its ends on the unbroken ice to either side. He kicked himself, shoved himself forward, moving the pole out to arm's length, drawing himself up to it; repeating the manœuvre, calling out to the other to hang on another second.

"Just another second!" he yelled, and feared that his words had double meaning, that only such a brief space of time was left to the man yonder.

But the other, mind numbed by the strength-sapping chill, construed the call as something else again. He thought that John meant it would take him only a second to get to his side and he babled against what appeared to be an unnecessary delay.

Lunge forward, draw yourself up, smash more ice ahead, shove the pole out, pull yourself up to it; smash again. . . . Fight the current with your legs; keep your body on the surface as best you can. Inches at a time. . . . Inches, with water seeping towards Saunders' other sleeve to melt the hold that frost had there. . . .

Inches at a time; two yards away now; a yard. . . . Almost within reach. . . . And the water spread. The ice under the foreman gave. With a cry Saunders was turned about as the current sucked hungrily, and John just caught the sodden mitten as it swept past on its way to destruction!

"Got you!" he panted. "Got you, Saunders! . . . Easy now!"

He dragged the man to him, his own teeth chattering with cold. Saunders was beyond that sort of reaction. He was moaning lowly and could scarcely move.

Face to face across the pole they clung for a moment.

"Not too much weight on it. . . . Steady now. . . . Too much and we'll both go under!"

He let Saunders down against unbroken ice, hitching the pole along, making it support them.

"Get your elbow on the edge there. Easy now! Not too much!"

He was up to his armpits in the water himself, and tried to shove Saunders, whose chin was in the current, higher.

"Can't!" the man moaned. "The snow-shoes. . . . can't——"

"Work your foot up to me, if you can. . . . Hey! Hear me?" The glaze coming over the other's eyes frightened him. "Your *foot!* We've got to get those damned rackets off!"

He began groping with his own feet for Saunders' legs. He locked a hand in the man's coat across the pole and with the other found his knife deep in a pocket. He opened the blade with his teeth and held it in his mouth as he drew that helpless leg towards him. . . .

He worked it up to the surface somehow, holding Saunders to the pole, one shoulder crowded against the ice edge. The man protested that his head would go under, but it did not. The snow-shoe came out of water, and with a slash John cut it loose and tossed it out to the ice. . . .

More trouble with the other foot.

"Drown me. . . . You'll drown me"—dully, as he went to his side in the stream and gurgling current rippled about his cheek.

"Drown, both of us, if we can't get——" He grunted as he pulled the other unwieldy foot up. He slashed once, and the knife turned in his numbing hand; again, and he cut Saunders' pac. . . . The third time and the strap parted. . . .

He let the knife go and clamped his teeth against the seeping weakness. He was cold, terribly cold. It seemed as though his bones were brittle with frost, as if the ice of the river had worked into the very valves of his heart. For a moment he felt very tired; so tired that he must stop and rest. . . . Rest? With this man asleep beside him?

HE SLAPPED the face there. He tried to strike it with his fist. Blood showed on a lip.

"Stay by it, Mark! Another minute now. . . . Get your belly on that web. . . . Up you go now!"

Shoving with a knee, with his free hand, ordering, imploring, cursing; seeing the ice break again and again to defeat him, he finally managed to get the other out from the hips up, belly sprawled on the snow-shoe.

"Get the other shoe now. . . . Oh, ahead of you. . . . Reach! Reach for it, man! It's life itself! Reach. . . . The other way. . . . The other *way!*"

It took minutes for Saunders to work to those saving webs, and he lay there for what seemed hours, clothing going grey as the air made a coating of ice from the water in the fabric. He would not respond until John reached out and, from his position in the water, struck him in the mouth again. . . . Then he rolled over and clawed to tear a snow-shoe free and shove it ahead and go on.

"Good lad! Made a yard! . . . Do it again now. . . . Do it again——"

He caught himself talking wildly after that; hitching along beside his foreman, still in the water himself, not daring to leave the other's side yet, knowing the ice would not hold them both.

He got along, somehow; and he badgered and coaxed and shamed the other along. Old ice was only feet away. . . . A yard away. . . . His pole was holding. It was slippery with ice. . . . Greased . . . a greased pole!

He laughed and found himself standing on the queerest legs he had ever owned, dragging Saunders to safety, slapping him, swearing close in his ear.

"You weak sister!" he taunted. "Stand up like a man! You, a camp foreman, letting a little cold——"

No use! He left the other there. A man who has been through an ordeal like that has only so much strength left and there was another job to do. Drowning or cold: either will kill. He had reeled and almost fallen, and now he was staggering towards the bank, eyes strained wide as their gaze held on a birch tree, an ancient birch tree there above him with feathers of bark dangling from its trunk, with a frost crack showing a great flake of bark ready to be torn off.

He gathered the stuff with infinite care; with staccato stutterings coming from his throat. His fingers would not function, and so he put his palms together and clamped them on shreds of bark, tore them off, sometimes after many attempts, and dropped them, one by one, into his cap which lay on the snow. . . .

A cap full now; overflowing, after more hours of toil. Twigs next, harvested at the cost of tremendous, clumsy effort, until a sheaf of them lay at his feet.

Somehow, he got into his pocket again and drew the waterproof match-safe out. It fell into the snow and, on his knees, he pawed for it, flakes of ice falling from his clothing as he bent his stiffening frame. He could not clamp a hand on the cap; the damned hand would not bend, would not go where he willed it to go! He shut his teeth on the cap, finally, and unscrewed it. . . .

Steady now! This had taken a long time and Saunders lay there on the edge of the ice, in the edge of the drift, face down; he had not moved for long. Steady now! Don't drop the matches. . . . Little old red-and-white heads, they're your chance at getting out. . . . Mark's chance, too . . . maybe. . . . Don't drop 'em. . . . He scratched one and it broke without igniting. The next spluttered and leaped to flame and slipped away. . . . Two together now. . . . Carefully, *carefully!* . . . The flame burned clear in the motionless air. . . .

He sank to his knees with a moan of relief and shoved the tiny pennant of fire down into the curls of birch bark which packed and overflowed his cap. . . . An orange tongue leaped upward, fringed with quivering black smoke. Lovely sight! Exquisite sight! Carefully he laid the twigs over the fire. He smelt smoke and heat, breathed it in through open lips as he crouched there. . . .

It took him so long to get back to that hemlock stub. . . . Hours, it seemed, he wallowed in snow to his thighs, to his hips. He beat the loosened bark with his open hands and it fell away. He toiled back with a precious armful, came again, tore off larger chunks, one slab as big as the back of his jacket. . . . It smoked, it threw out such heat! . . .

How he got Saunders up the bank to the fire he never knew. He recalled fighting his way back to the hemlock again, swearing thinly as he knocked and tore off more bark, and when he toiled down to the fire again Saunders was there, up on one elbow, trying to wriggle closer to the growing blaze! . . .

The fire melted a well for itself in the snow; a well, and then a cavern as more fuel was heaped on. It hissed and snapped and sang, and when cedar boughs, stuck into the snow behind it to make a reflector threw more of its heat at them, the flakes of ice on their clothing changed to beads of water. . . .

Blue with cold, shivering, moaning now and then, they stood naked before that great pyre at last, wringing out their garments, waving them through the smoke. Sweet smell, that of drying wool!

It was not until he was half dressed that Saunders spoke. He did not look at John. He stood hunched, buttoning his drawers about his waist.

"Much obliged," he said, and cleared his throat sharply.

"That's all right, Mark," John replied.

But that night, after the cook's range had finally driven the chill of the Mad Woman from his blood, Mark Saunders stopped in the men's camp on his way from cook-shanty to office.

Talk dwindled off as the foreman closed the door and walked into the center of the room, halting there.

"Listen here," he said gruffly. "Things ain't been right, around this job. I'm one that's to blame; mebby the' 's others. I got just this to say: Steele's all wool and over a yard wide. Any man that ain't ready to work his back in two and his heart out had better drag it before daylight."

He looked about again and nodded once grimly.

"That's all," he said, and walked out slowly, deliberately, as he had come.

CHAPTER VII

THE weak link in the chain was welded. The uphill pull commenced to show progress. Forty thousand a day, John must put to the mill to keep the band-saw fed. He began to do better than this; by holiday time the reserve decked in the yard had crept up a trifle; a two-day cut was there, waiting for an emergency; a three, enough for four days.

Not time, yet, for a long breath, but time to let yourself hope . . . a trifle.

" . . . show you what I'm wound on!" he growled between set teeth as he watched a load going on to the deck instead of directly into the hot-pond.

Not time, yet, for a long breath, though. The night-watchman at the mill reported that in making his rounds an unidentified skulker had run out of the locomotive stall.

A wrench was found, dropped in the doorway, and John put on a special man to guard Tiny's old relic, their only hope.

John met Burke, the Belknap & Gorbel woods superintendent, at the crossing.

"How's she go?" the man asked.

"Not so good; we're still alive!"—with a level look.

"Don't let 'em bluff you!" the man advised, but his air was patronizing.

Three days later, running for one of the stiff grades with four loads of logs bound for Kampfest, Tiny Temple looked back to see a car leave the rails, to see the splintered ends of ties pop up through the snow, to see the car take the ditch and go over before he could stop.

Wrecking tools were in Shoestring, and it was necessary to make the run in for jacks and replacers. They got the car back on and the track repaired, but a day was lost and the margin of safety for the mill shrank instead of growing.

Way-Bill and Tiny came to John.

"A brake-beam on that car'd been monkeyed with," the conductor said. "You could see the fresh wrench marks on the nuts."

"What do you make of that?"

"They know we're doin' too well. Fixed to spill us to make trouble. They care a damn about getting *their* logs moved. The Kampfest yard's full, and if we keep on the main line won't be able to clean out the switches at the crossing. More dirty work!"

John called Tucker into the conference, but the road-master smiled and shook his head doubtfully.

"Fairy story!" he said. "You couldn't tell within two weeks when that beam'd been repaired."

Way-Bill spat and big Tiny eyed Tucker with a look that was not just pleasant. John wondered, feeling a bit uneasy. Thereafter, he kept wrecking equipment in the way-car.

And now Burke's men commenced dumping at two landings which meant that it would be necessary to spot two strings of empties daily, more minutes taken from the time of Ellen's train crew. A man must take it and grin, though. John knew that; he had read the old contract by which Richards agreed to transport those logs.

More men came into the Belknap & Gorbel camps; the production there picked up. More loads were completed for the driven Richards trainmen to trundle over the ridge. Tiny Temple commenced to lose a bit of weight from the long hours he worked in the cab and, in Shoestring, industriously repairing his racked locomotive.

"They're watching us," Saunders growled to John, "Damn 'em, they'll crowd harder the faster we go!"

"Let 'em come! Tom Belknap'll know he's been in a bear-fight!"

Since his coming to the job John had seen Ellen Richards irregularly and, mostly, for brief intervals.

When they talked it was of the job; only the job. He talked to her as he would to another man. His resourcefulness caused her to look at him with pronounced admiration; his bitterness, when he spoke of Gorbel or Belknap, set a puzzled expression on her face. It was almost as though a personal fight were being made against him; unusual to find a hired man keeping so high an emotional pitch over his employer's interests.

Ellen talked to him in detail of the company finances to point out the necessity of going even faster. Cars of air-dried lumber rolled out of Shoestring; piles of green lumber grew. New loans, with lumber as security, were negotiated in Milwaukee to care for the curt demands of the Kampfest bank.

"But we're only one jump ahead of disaster!" she said. "These Milwaukee bankers have been so decent with us up to now, but there's no telling when their good nature will give out. If we should shut down it would bring them up here in a hurry. If we can just keep *going!*"

They had not got abreast of the situation again as yet. A four-day tie-up would leave the mill hungry.

"Luck is with us," Ellen said that night. "We've had no blizzards since you came. You seem to be able to checkmate their moves, but you can't beat bad weather!"

"Cross your fingers," he said grimly.

RIGHT he was. The next afternoon the placid western sky hazed up and the temperature, which had been moderate for days, dropped suddenly. A restive, puffy wind began to blow and settled, towards dusk, to a moaning breeze which carried fine, stinging snow before it.

When the quitting whistle blew its voice was whipped away by the making gale; as the mill crew streamed homeward for the

night they broke through growing drifts and bent low to the drive of the increasing storm.

Tiny Temple brought the train in an hour late, locomotive plastered with snow, festooned with icicles, and John, who had been busy in town all day, was there to meet him.

"Get your suppers," he told the crew. "She's going to be a buster! We'll run the plow to-night."

"That's the way to lick it!" a brakeman said.

Two hours for food for the men and coal and water for the engine and to couple to the wing plow that stood ready on its siding. Men were there, a dozen of them, armed with shovels, sitting in the heated way-car, waiting to give battle.

Tucker and John and two section men were in the plow; the first brace to ride in the lookout and watch ahead; the others to man the big wheel which manipulated the wings.

Wind tore about the cupola as they moved out of the yard; snow was driven through the rattling window sashes; the cold was intense.

They had some shelter for the first mile up the long grade, but beyond that the track lay exposed in long sections to the wrath of the blizzard.

"Smart to come out to-night," Tucker said to John. "It would 'a' been a case of shovel in all these cuts if we'd waited until she stopped."

They were nearing the first bad point, and he leaned forward to see better.

"Ready, there? . . . Open your wings!" he called, and the men below bent on the wheel, turning it to force the wings outward so they would toss the displaced snow far to either side.

Behind, the locomotive shuddered and thundered as they rushed the first white barrier rising before them. John had a fleeting glimpse of great fronds of snow curling out away from the track, saw an immense, up-ending cataract come over the front of the plow, flickering and fluttering as it drove back the beams of the headlight, shutting off their view completely. He felt their speed diminish as though velvet-faced brake-shoes had gripped the wheels and Tucker bawled:

"Let 'em in!"

A man at the wheel kicked the trip; the wings were squeezed back against the sides of the plow; they held their pace a moment longer and then came to a stop.

Back out now and look at the narrowing hole you've made in the cut. Pull off for another run at it; hold on while Tiny gives her the last notch, threatens to beat the stack off her; brace yourself as you rock and bounce forward to charge it, rushing into the opening with the locomotive drive-wheels grinding on sand!

They gave it all they had and broke through with the last gasp. They backed out; spread the wings and charged once more, widening the tunnel. . . . Then on to fresh barriers, fresh conquest.

John's snow fences had functioned and some of the cuts were easy to traverse because of these barriers which caught and held the snow to windward, but in other places the going was impossible. A dozen times the shovellers were out, tossing snow from cuts that had blown bank full; standing aside and waiting to shovel the plow free when Tiny wedged it into the drift.

The wind held; snow fell faster. They were getting up the hump, but what lay behind was surely almost as bad as they had encountered on the outward trip!

At five in the morning they gained the mainline crossing. Atop the ridge as it was the snow had almost blown away, but Tucker held the wings open until they approached the last switch.

"Bring 'em in!" he called, and chewed briskly as they bumped across the points. It was the one place on the line where caution must be used with the wings: the one standard switch-stand on the whole line was located there and to pass it with wings extended might mean derailment.

John had arranged for breakfast at the crossing tender's house by telephone before they left town, and as he watched the men fall to the steaming food he grinned. The battle wasn't over yet, but he had held his own so far. He had checkmated old Tom's ruthlessness; he was wresting an even break from the weather. . . . He would not have been so easy of mind, would not have taken such a fierce glory in the conflict with snow, had he known that late yesterday afternoon, in the shadow of a car of logs, Tucker had listened to Paul Gorbel while the man talked, slowly at first, as one feeling his way, rapidly later, as one who has achieved his end. . . .

And now on into the camp: hours of battle through the barren choppings until they

ained the shelter of timber. Tiny must inker for half an hour with his engine; hen must rest. Fresh shovellers could be aken on at camp, but the engine crew ould not be replaced.

John moved about restlessly during the wo hours that his key men snored. No ogs would move townward to-day, but the mill would run, eating into its reserve, and the forest still rocked beneath the blizzard blasts.

They went out again, that short, hoary train, artillery to give battle to the storm gods; up the tedious grade, bucking, bunting, backing, charging. Long delays in progress came when shovellers went out to function, John leading them, throwing more snow than any, encouraging and flattering the best of them, driving the laggards.

AS DAY waned the wind dropped and snow thinned. The temperature fell, too, but the back of the storm was broken. All that remained now was to reopen the road from the crossing on into Shoestring, seven miles and all down grade. He felt relief as they trundled across the switches, the lights of which showed green before them in the coming dusk. He did not notice that Tucker watched him covertly, and that when he climbed down from the lookout the man chewed briskly. They would stop in a moment now for water.

John opened the plow door, waiting for that stop. The wings were spread and he could hear the fluff of snow they shoved out to either side.

Up above, alone now, Tucker grasped the hand rail tightly and braced his feet. One of the men at the wheel spoke to his mate and looked upward, a bit puzzled. That standard switch-stand was just ahead. . . .

From the engine came a muffled toot. Brakes set sharply. They slowed, but it was too late.

Tiny Temple had seen. He knew that switch as intimately as Tucker knew it. He tried to stop on the slight grade and on frost-slick steel. Brake-shoes gripped the wheels and sand streamed before them, but the drivers slid on cold tires.

From the right, a thud and a rasping rattle as the wing caught the switch-stand, tearing it from its anchorage. A jolt and a clank from the moving switch just as the plow's rear trucks met the point and the wheels dropped down on the ties. . . .

"Off!" yelled John. "Jump, you!" He led the way, hurling himself out into the snow bank.

The plow bucked, careened, tilted. A splintering sound as the front trucks left the steel, and with a rack and a crash the plow was on its right side and John was floundering in the snow, watching the locomotive. He saw her stick her pilot into the drift, saw the fireman leap, saw Tiny follow him. The engine, all the motive power they had, settled slowly to its side, carrying the tank over with it. . . .

Excitement! Men were in the snow; men were shouting; the way-car was spewing more men. Anybody hurt? Guess not! But we're derailed, man, *derailed!*

John was confronting Tucker then.

"What the devil!"—angered, he was, flaring, ready to take a man apart.

"My God, Stele, I forgot!"

The road-master was shaking, holding a wrist in the other hand.

"Forgot the damned thing!" he cried again. "Thought we were over the hump and——"

Something in his manner nipped John's attention, steadied his judgment, but he did not dwell on it then; neither did he speak further to Tucker.

He turned to the shovellers who were wallowing up from the way-car.

"Get your shovels, half of you. Jim, take the rest of the boys back to that tie pile. Bring up a lot of 'em; all there are. Way-Bill, get the boys shovelling down to gravel here. Tiny, uncouple your tender. Tucker, get some wood from that car yonder and build a fire . . . a big one. Snap to it, now! You'll chow in an hour and then it'll be all night for most of you. Double time for every man that stays by it!"

Heart pounding, he oversaw the first preparations. Made a monkey of, was he? . . . Looked like it. He'd made his gesture, played his cards in defiance of his father. The main-line branch was snowed in. A locomotive wouldn't be through for days to offer help. Without such help, righting this equipment was a man's-sized job for anybody; the best of men needed time to turn a trick like this, but no Richards man had time to do else but haul logs. . . . Four days, perhaps only three days of run was left for the mill. He could see his father's

face when the old man heard; he could hear Tom's disdainful laugh when he learned of this failure!

He hurried back to the crossing tender's house. His wife had enough grub for one more meal, anyhow. He telephoned Saunders at camp and ordered a team with food and blankets to start fighting its way through the timber. . . .

He emerged into the night, looking up at the cold, bright stars. It was very still. Licked? Beaten? Had the winding come off to show what was deep in him? . . . He shut his teeth against rising dismay.

He turned back to the house after a time, just as the flare from the bonfire his men had built commenced to light up the tangle of equipment across the track below him. He'd have to report. In a way, it was his predicament, but it involved another in another way.

Ellen was still in the office and answered his ring.

"Bad news," he said and could hear her breath catch.

"How bad?"

"We've got the plow and locomotive strung all over an acre of ground at the crossing."

She did not answer.

"Hear me?" he asked loudly, impatient with her, a girl in a man's job. A man, now, would stand up and take it. "Hear me? No chance of getting a wrecker or even a locomotive in, even if we could pay the bill. I've got the jacks here and we'll go to work now. We ought to get out . . . say, day after to-morrow."

"Day after to-morrow!" she cried, and he could hear her voice break. "Why . . . with no loads coming in that means——"

"I know what it means!"—wagging his head. "We'll do our best. We could go faster if it wasn't so cold. It's below zero out here."

"Below zero!" she echoed. "So are our hopes!"

It looked that way, and a queer emotion was rising from his heart, swelling his throat.

"Hello! Hello, Ellen! . . . Hello!"

She had hung up and he turned away, rubbing his chin slowly.

"This is awful hard on Ellen," the woman said, as she hurried through the room. "My land! A girl, in such a fix!"

John's eyes followed her closely as she went through the kitchen doorway.

"That's so!" he muttered. "That's s . . . It's a girl in a fix and I . . . She got only me to depend on."

Suddenly his job had taken on an ama ing aspect. Until now it had been a figh against his father, Ellen Richards a co venient fulcrum on which to test h strength. But now . . . Why, a lovel girl was in distress and he was her onl champion.

CHAPTER VIII

AND now twin emotions drove the ma known in this operation as John Steel to the task confronting him.

His rage against his father still held but it was augmented by fear, and that fea was twofold.

First came the fear that he was goin to fail.

Secondly was the fear that Ellen Rich ards, suddenly become for him a lovely gir in distress, would see her hopes go tumb ling, her misgivings realized.

He could work hard enough, could driv men fast enough, when only rage spurre him; but with rage backed by fear he wa a superman.

He needed to be just that in this emer gency.

He thanked Providence that after las week's derailment he had carried wreckin tools in the way-car. Otherwise a day an a night at the least would have been waste in getting them out from town by team.

There under the stars, with frost dus eddying about the leaping flames of grea bonfires, a score of men worked with th intentness of ants. Shovels cleared th snow from about the locomotive, exposin the raw earth.

Men shoved timbers beneath the loco motive to give the great jacks footing. A cross-cut saw rasped and sang in swif tempo as ties were cut into short length for the crib-work that would make the func tioning of the jacks more than temporary

The men ate in relays at the crossin tender's table, but John stayed on the jo swigging coffee, munching sandwiches a he walked restlessly from group to grou

Tucker came from his meal, face draw in the firelight.

"Don't you think we'd better get a switc point——" he began, addressing John.

"I'll run this show, Tucker. You . . . ou might forget something again."

Their gazes locked and the road-master's ll after a moment.

"Hell, Steele, I may be in wrong, but I'd ke to help."

"You can't though"—ironically, gesturng towards the man's wrist, which he had andaged. "You can keep a fire in the wayar. . . . Yes, you'd better do that. I'm oing to have coffee here all night. That'll e your job, Tucker: in the way-car, and I wouldn't come out again if I were you. The air in this locality isn't so good for a man with a bad memory!"

He would talk to Tucker later. . . .

A delicate job, getting the first footing for your jacks in a place like that. With a lantern, and pieces of stout cedar ties, John himself lay on his belly in the excavations beneath the prostrate locomotive and scraped out the last shovelfuls of earth and set the blocks. A long time this had taken; night was well advanced before the men came lugging the lifting devices up from the way-car.

Carefully they set them, so purchase would come on the engine's frame at the proper angle, and John set the capstan bars and took the first few turns himself.

Once he had helped old Sandy to do this same thing down at Witch Hill, but there they had good equipment; swift, easily operated machines. These old timers were slow, would be hard on his men.

Slow, indeed. Two men on the bars, turning a short hitch at a time, there in a cramped position under the faintly sizzling locomotive; three full turns to an inch it took; many, many minutes to make those three turns.

He stood back, watching. The old engine creaked and snapped as they commenced to lift her. He watched the movement carefully, trying to gauge it with his eye; watched the jacks, to see that they did not shift, had his men ready to start the crib-work the moment there was room to place blocks so that if things went wrong and the locomotive slipped back towards her resting-place they would not lose all.

Up she went, so reluctantly, at the cost of such an effort. Mittens stuck to frosted steel, retarding effort; noses and cheeks burned with the cold, and men had to watch their fellows for warning indications of frost-bite. Some of the work kept blood moving; at other jobs, men were forced to go to the fires now and again, stand there and let glowing heat limber stiffening muscles.

But up she went! Crib-work followed the lift of the jacks until they had raised to their utmost. Then back she settled an inch, resting on the cross-piled blocks. Out came the jacks; in went new foundations for them; again men fell to the slow task of forcing the sixty tons of locomotive back to its upright position.

Midnight, and they had only run the jacks to their limit twice; two o'clock and his men were wearying, motions slower and with less sharp, excited talk among them.

JOHN wondered at the numbness which had settled upon him, and then recalled that this was his second sleepless night. He went to the way-car and drank black coffee greedily. Tucker sat on a bench and asked uneasily about progress. John scarcely answered.

He did not need so many men now; he would need fresh men to-morrow and to-morrow night. He told them off, sending a half-dozen to sleep on the floor of the crossing tender's house; sending others to stretch out on benches in the way-car.

Things became fuzzy in John's head. A brash singing seemed to be in his ears. He wondered what it was and started. . . . Dreaming on his feet of a band-saw eating into that scant supply of logs decked beside the hot-pond! . . .

Dawn, with the locomotive up enough so they could commence to build track under her while the jacks screwed slowly to their limits yet again. Long ties now, were to be slid between the wheels, any old place you can get them; drive them through, level 'em up after a fashion.

Daylight, with every twig and wire and structure white with frost except where fire burned or men's hands touched repeatedly. Daylight, with a faint yelp of greeting to the northward, and they looked briefly to see Saunders and a whitened team laboring through the snow behind shovellers. Grub and blankets! Food, and something for weary muscles to lie in!

All night John had been waiting to do one specific, necessary thing; not so essential, however, as this work. He tried to remember what it was. Something which had made him want to take a man apart. . . . Tucker! That was it: he was going to put Tucker on the grill and satisfy the

suspicion in his mind. If this was his father's doing he wanted to know about it.

For a half-hour he was alert because of the rage this suspicion engendered.

But when they called him to the telephone he walked stiffly, on feet that struck the packed snow heavily. . . . It was Ellen calling, and her voice was weary and faint.

Things stirred in him. He wanted to talk to her gently, to reassure her; to laugh at the situation, to defy chance to do them up in this round. But a man must be fresh for that, mustn't he?

"Going good," was all he could mumble. "Going great! The boys are wonders. . . . When? God knows," he muttered wearily, and hung up the receiver.

Breakfast now; and Saunders was beside him, fresher than the others. Blankets over strewn hay were in the way-car; men rolled into them and dropped at once to heavy sleep. The bed-room in the house held others, three on the mattress, the rest on the floor.

John forced Tiny to turn in and the fireman as well. He set Saunders with a crew tearing up a switch point, getting ready. He swore at them when they took him by the arms and forced him to a cot in the crossing tender's tiny parlor. He awoke after noon to bound up and stand staring about in bewilderment in the low-ceilinged room.

The locomotive was up now! Almost up on her feet! They had crib-work on the other side to hold her from going on over before they were ready. Rails were torn up; ties in place. The switch points were going in against the main line to set her back where she belonged.

Slowly she settled into place, wheels taking the one rail. Up she went on the other side, a fraction of an inch at a time. The other rail went in; spikes sunk home; the jacks pulled in their necks. She sat there, square on the rails, and the fireman had steam on her! . . .

As a lemon-colored sun dropped to its frost haze in the west, the locomotive spoke with its whistle voice once; it panted, stirred, backed out on to the main line, and tired men cheered. . . .

Night again; and more fires. But they had something to work with this time.

The way-car was shunted out; a cable bent over the tender to help the jacks. It came up on the rails, was yanked out, set off, coupled in place, and Tiny held the whistle cord down as he steamed forwa over new track to put his power on plow. . . .

Dawn it was, when they made up th train again, and as Tiny backed down couple on to the way-car John ended talk with Tucker.

He had come in an hour before, when knew that the job was done, when Wa Bill and Saunders and Tiny could hand the detail without his help.

Tucker was there alone, poking at t fire, and looked up quickly as John clos the door behind him.

The superintendent did not speak at firs He took off his cap, unbuttoned his coa fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette an then, with the tobacco burning, sat dow across the car from his road-master.

He puffed a moment in silence.

"You didn't forget, you know," he sai almost casually.

"What?" The man's cry was startled but the quality did not ring just true. "I didn't what?"

"You didn't forget, Tucker. A man who built this road wouldn't forget tha switch. It just isn't in the cards that h *could!*"

The other drew himself up with a good show of anger.

"Well, that's the damnedest thing that's ever been said to me!" he growled. "What could've happened if I hadn't forgot?"

He hurled the question confidently, as though it would settle this absurd charge.

"I think you deliberately ditched us, Tucker. I think you've sold out to Belknap & Gorbel. I think you're . . . a skunk."

Quietly still, and Tucker rose to his feet.

"Don't you say a thing like that to me——"

"Sit *down!*" Bite and sting in the tone. "Sit down!" he repeated lowly, with contempt, and the man settled to the bench from which he had risen. His face twitched; guilt sat heavily upon him.

John sat very straight and his eyes burned.

"You're on your way, Tucker," he said. "Have it that you forgot. Well and good: you forgot! And you're fired because you forgot, but you can take a message with you to deliver to Burke or to Gorbel or to whoever bought your manhood and decency. The message is from me and it's this:

"Tell 'em we ask for no quarter. Tell them that I think they're snakes in the grass and that I'll treat 'em as I would snakes! The Richards outfit isn't out yet, and in spite of all their dirty work we're not going to be out!"

THEY opened the road to Shoestring by noon; red-eyed, weary men dropped down from the train to meet Roberts, the mill foreman, and Ellen Richards.

Her face was strained and white, lined with the weariness that these last sleepless nights had set upon her. John's heart jolted as he looked at her, as he caught the query of desperation in her dark eyes. He went quickly to her.

"Well, the flag still flies!" he laughed.

Her expression changed, was suffused by a look of deep gratitude.

"Yes. It flies!" Her voice, too, gave evidence of weariness and strain. "But by to-morrow noon we'll saw the last log here and the Milwaukee bank has heard of the trouble and is asking questions."

"We'll have an answer!" he said, looking down into her face. "I'm sending the train back now. Tiny's all in, but the fireman can handle her. I'll be with him. By dark we'll roll in with a day's cut!"

"Oh, that's splendid!" she cried lowly. "It isn't *all* bad luck then, John Steele? But if it hadn't been for you. . . ."

Warm, gentle, her voice, with heart in it now; it was the first time her shell of self-control had really broken, his initial experience with her as a woman.

"How can I ever tell you what it means to have . . . to have you here?" she asked.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I wonder if you could manage to smile a little!" he said. "That'd be pretty good thanks, if I've any thanks coming on account."

After a moment she smiled, flushing a trifle.

"How's that?" she asked, and laughed softly.

He went about his job then, suddenly resolving not to tell her of Tucker's treachery. She had enough in her heart without having to consider disloyalty among her men. He wanted to save her worries now; before, he had not cared.

To his bed went the fagged Tiny; out up the grade went the train once more, fireman at the throttle, John riding the cab with him. John's optimism was a bit broad. They were not back by dark, but at nine o'clock in the evening they rolled home with eight loads and, because John had telephoned ahead Tiny was there to meet them and out into the night again went the train, beating up the grade, rolling down the other side into camp, lugging four loads up the long pull to the crossing; doubling back for another four and as he crossed the branch, homeward bound with daylight not far off, he could see in the eastward the glare of headlights as the main-line plow bucked snow to open the branch and let Paul Gorbel demand that his loaded cars be moved out of the woods.

CHAPTER IX

HE WOULD demand that, too. One could tell by the glint in his grey eyes, by the set of his mouth that he would demand it as he sat listening to Tucker in the Belknap & Gorbel office at Kampfest.

Tucker had come in from Shoestring the night before; he was waiting when Gorbel appeared.

"Well!" the manager said when he saw the man. "Well, now!" and in his voice was the tone of extreme gratification.

He unbuttoned his coat and removed his cap of sealskin, eyes twinkling.

"It worked!" he said.

"Yes . . . worked," hesitatingly.

"What's the rub?"—arresting his movements.

"Rub enough! He saw through it!"

Gorbel slid into a chair at his desk, leaning towards the man.

"Who? Steele?"

"Steele!"—bitterly, with an uncomfortable movement.

"Well, come on with it!"

Tucker sighed.

"I did it just as we figured out I could. The stand went over and threw 'em all ways from hell. Damn near broke my arm when we took the ditch, and what's he do? The first word he said showed me he saw through it!"

The man's mouth worked as in angered fright.

"I made a play to help, but would he let me? He would not! He sent me into the way-car to stay there, to keep coffee hot!

"I went through hell, two nights and a day, sittin' there, wonderin' what'd happen. Then he come in 'nd he told me off."

"You admitted it?"

"Not on your life! But he knew. . . . Hell, Gorbel, that lad's got second sight! I thought it wasn't goin' to be so bad when he first started talkin' to me until he looked at me. Those damned eyes of his go right through you!"

"What else? What'd he say?"—impatiently, as the man paused.

"He just said I was fired and then gave me a message to deliver to you. He said to you or to Burke or whoever'd hired me."

"You spilled your——" Gorbel began in hot accusation.

"Spilled nothin'! I lied my best but he sneered at me."

"What's the word he sent?"

"He said"—clearing his throat—"he said you was snakes in the grass and that he'd treat you like that, and he said to come on and do your worst."

Gorbel leaned back and smiled.

"And don't think he's out, either." Tucker leaned forward suddenly, as if this were the most important thing he had to say. "Don't you believe it, Gorbel! He's a whirlwind, that lad! He's a logging fool and he knows his stuff. Hell, I've been railroadin' for logging outfits for twenty years and I'm here to tell the world that what I did would've tied me up. It didn't tie *him* up! Nothin' you've done so far will. He'll keep that mill logged in spite of hell 'nd high water, 'nd you, Gorbel!"

Gorbel pondered.

"Where'd he come from?" he asked.

"God knows. Ain't you seen him?"

The other grimaced. "I think I did . . . once. But I didn't get a good look. Now, what else do you want?"

Tucker crossed his knees as one will who is suddenly quite comfortable.

"I want my pay, first. Then I want the job you promised me if things went wrong."

Gorbel smoothed his hair.

"Well, the pay's easy. The job, though . . . that's another matter."

"Yeah, quite."

Evidently Gorbel did not like the tone.

"What's your idea of it?"

"Just this: if I squawk what chance've you got? You're without the law, Gorbel. I could get off by makin' the yelp against you. A job, and my mouth's shut; no job and——" He shrugged and gestured with palms upward.

CHAPTER X

JOHN had been in camp for two nights. The train rolled in on time the next morning and from the way-car emerged unusual passengers.

Three dogs first, huge, long-haired mongrels, wearing simple harness; a travel-worn toboggan next, shoved through the door by Way-Bill. Then packs, of various sizes and shapes. Finally, as odd a human being as John had observed for a long time.

He was short and apparently emaciated and yet from the spryness of his movements it was certain that muscles of steel cloaked the small frame. His cap was of coonskin with huge ear flaps, and a long visor was now folded back against the crown. His beard was grey, streaked with brown, and covered his face almost to the small, bright eyes. His coat was of bearskin, hitting him at the hips. Great gauntlet gloves of fur were on his hands and moccasins covered his feet.

"Here, Jumbo! Come on back here!"—sharply to a dog who moved stiffly, roach bristling, towards the hog pen. "Come back here now, Jumbo! Leave them hogs alone. Loves hogs, Jumbo"—looking up briefly at Way-Bill as he reached into the car for his snow-shoes. "Loves to tease 'nd kill hogs, Jumbo. Great dog, Jumbo. . . . Come back now!"—The dog came in.

He was starting to stow the packs on the toboggan when John approached and, seeing him, the old man spat and nodded and went on in his high-pitched voice:

"Name's Richards!" he yelped. "Wolf Richards! Wolf Richards from Mad Woman! Uncle to Ellen on her pa's side. . . . Name's Steele! John Steele! Heerd 'bout you; know all 'bout you! Curious 'bout you, so come back this-a-way to take a look-see at John Steele much's to save time gittin' back to Mad Woman!

"Wouldn't come in 'f 'd be'n able to pack out enough grub before snow come. Wrenched my back 'nd no could do much. Lucky couldn't. Wouldn't 've heerd 'bout Ellen's trouble if I'd stayed in. Interestin', trouble. Interestin', seein' man who ain't scared from Tom Belknap's shadder!"

All this with scarcely a pause to draw

breath, and when John stopped beside the man his eyes were twinkling.

"Big feller!" he went on, not pausing for more than a fleeting glance upward as he shook out a tarpaulin to cover the packs. 'Big feller! Handsome feller, too!"

Way-Bill was grinning from the steps as he gave the hi-ball, and John saw the conductor point and nod at him for Tiny's benefit. The exhaust of the locomotive as it started to back made talking difficult, but the little man kept on, squealing the louder to make his voice carry.

"Name's Richards!"—rising and extending a hand. "Pleased to meet cha! Glad to meet folks. You, 'special! Richards, my name!"

"Hello, Mr. Richards!" John said. "I'm glad to see you, too."

"Thought you would be. Ellen said so. Said I'd be welcome to stay long 's I like. Sure love the camps; love folks. Don't see many at Mad Woman. Feller livin' alone, makin' a business bein' 'lone, don't want folks, ordinary. Ellen said she'd be out 'fore I went, likely. Hope so! She'd ought to come visit me to Mad Woman. Looks peaked. Too much work! A man's job's pretty hard on a girl."

He stepped close and the metallic quality went from his voice.

"She looks bad!" he said lowly, and in the queer little eyes John detected a genuine concern. "She's all I got now; I'm all she's got. Queer, they call me, but I . . . I got feelin's like anybody else, Steele. If anything happened to Ellen I dunno what I'd do. She's all I got, Ellen!"

Something pathetic in this earnestness.

"Well, it might do her good to visit you, Wolf," he agreed. "But that's up to her. I'm only a hired man. Make yourself comfortable and keep your dogs out of the hog pen!"

"He! He! Say, you'd ought to see that Jumbo wrastle a hog! Gives 'em a battle, he does. Gits 'em on their backs 'nd then 't 's all day. Good sled dog, too. Fit 'n otter last week, 'nd——"

"Well, you make yourself comfortable!" John broke in again. "I've a job to do, but I'll see you at dinner."

He tore away then, leaving the little man still spewing words as he walked over to the barn to join Jack Tait and Saunders.

"Who's Richards?" he asked, and they grinned. "He says he's Ellen's uncle and he's already proven that he's entitled to some sort of talking championship!"

"He's her uncle," Saunders chuckled. "Her dad's only brother. 'Course, he's cracked. Damn good trapper, too; would make well at it if he'd leave wolves alone, but when he hears of a wolf or thinks he knows where one might show up, he'll stay by him until he gets him or drives him out of the country. Lives alone away down on the Mad Woman. Has for years. They all get that way, you know."

"Yup," Jack Tait agreed. "A queer old duck. Harmless for the most part, but he'll make trouble yet, I'm afraid. You'd think, to see him in town or here, that he was the friendliest codger alive, but he ain't. Won't take a traveler in at all when he's home. Wouldn't even let his own brother in. If he's away it's all right for folks to use his camp; but if he's there he'll let 'em starve or perish before he'll help. All but Ellen. She goes up to see him for a day or so now and then. He's real human when he's with her, I guess. Fusses over her like a woman would."

UNTIL the noon hour John thought no more of Wolf Richards. He and Saunders were busy trying to figure a way through the complications which confronted them.

Burke had put on even more saws at the Belknap & Gorbel camps. The switches at the crossing were plugged with loaded cars bound for Kampfest; equipment breakdown on the branch had delayed movement, but when John had called this to Burke's attention, arguing that it achieved his employers nothing to keep insisting that their logs were moved to the crossing as soon as loaded, the man only grinned.

"Orders are orders; contracts are contracts. I've got mine; go read yours, Steele!"

And so John buckled down in earnest to the uphill pull.

"Heavy snow will slow them as much as it does us," he told Saunders. "If we could only build up a week's run down yonder!"

"We may, if we get all the luck; and if we keep up production here."

Something of pride in the old fellow's voice then. His woods crew was functioning without a hitch, making logs cheaply, loading them promptly.

John entered the cook-shanty late, but instead of the usual traditional, voiceless

group he found the men bent low over their plates, many snorting with repressed laughter, while Wolf Richards, mouth filled with food, talked without cessation.

"Love to eat after 'nother cook! Love grub! Love different grub! Love fresh pork, like Jumbo. Love hog! My goodness, ain't them string beans elegant! My, my! Fat of the land's what you live on. . . .

"Hello, Mister Steele! Fine cook you got! My, my, ain't them pickles tasty!"

He let the old fellow go. In the first place, nothing else was to be done; again, the men seemed to enjoy it.

Through supper and for a brief time in the office afterwards, the old trapper's voice held to its sustained, shrill gabble. Then, abruptly, he rose, and, divesting himself of his outer clothing with rapid jerks, jumped into the bed assigned him, and within seconds was snoring.

Jack Tait came in to talk to John who sat before the stove, smoking and going over plans with Saunders. He was there a few minutes and went out. Saunders yawned, rose and stretched. He rid himself of his chew and unbuttoned his shirt.

The light was turned out, and superintendent and foreman lay in their beds, still talking lowly.

"I feel like a fella at the edge of a big drop-off in the dark," Mark said, and stirred in his blankets. "Everything's rosy so long's we keep the ground under our feet, but any step ahead's likely to send us tail over ears down to the rocks yonder. Somethin' might happen here in the woods to slow us down; Tiny's old coffee-pot may go all to hell in a heap and then where are we?"

"Over the edge," said John morosely, and rolled to his side.

Things bothered him; new things. Ellen Richards bothered him, for one item. He could not get the sound of her voice when she said that her hopes had gone below zero out of his mind. Again and again it recurred in memory, tugging at his heart-strings, making him uncomfortable. He wondered what she would think or feel or say or do if she knew that his name did not stop at the Steele indicated on her pay roll, but went on to that other name, the one that was now casting a shadow over her hopes and her future. He had a helpless feeling on thought of his father.

For a long time he lay there, sleepless. He dozed and suddenly saw his father pursuing someone who fled towards him screaming for his help, and this other suddenly revealed, was Ellen Richards.

He woke with a start and rolled over muttering to himself. . . . He dreamed stamping his foot next, stamping his on a resounding floor and demanding Paul Gorbel that he come into the and fight. . . . Of stamping, stamping and when he stopped stamping the continued.

He sat up. The sound continued, he looked about for its source, bewildered by sleep.

Sounds, yes; coming from outside Heavy thuds. Horses kicking! A number of horses kicking, and a shrill nickering.

His feet hit the cold floor and he lunged to a window.

"Turn out!" he croaked, as he whirled back to grope for his pants. "Turn out you! The barn's afire!"

Orange light showed through window and cracks in the structure yonder. It flickered faintly across him as he stamped into his pacs, not stopping for socks.

Saunders was up; Jerry was rolling out babbling as sleep added to his panic. Wolf Richards chattered shrilly. . . .

"Fire!" John yelled, as he ran outside and buttoning his coat over his underwear made for the men's shanty. . . . "Fire!"— as he burst in the door. "Out, you bullies! Fire!"

He went on, Saunders hard after him.

Horses were squealing now, and kicking more furiously. He heard wood splintered under a hoof and could see, through the partially opened doorway, the low cavern of the barn lighted by angry flames. Smoke rolled up through the ventilators.

He was into it, throwing an arm over his face to strain smoke from the air he breathed. He caught a distinct odor though, and through his mind went one word:

Gasoline!

A WINDROW of hay along the center of the building burned. Flakes of the bales, half torn apart, were strewn there, it seemed, and they blazed brightly, orange fronds of flame leaping upward to find hold on cobwebbed rafters as the draft of the ventilators sucked the gases through the roof. Smoke swirled about the floor and he stumbled as he ran on, striving to gain the rear stalls first.

He choked as he entered the stall, but

hi asped the horse's name over and over, put-
oth ng a hand on the rump, hesitating a mo-
ls. ient, watching the wringing tail. He
ov ipped past as the horse kicked blindly.
ed "Come on, boy!" he said, trying to speak
fo ithout excitement. "Steady now!"
ng The big Percheron crowded forward, try-
op ng to clamber into the manger to be away
. rom the flames that ran along the litter
ou lose to his heels.
John jerked the halter rope loose. "Back,
ar ou! Back an inch!"
ere The horse obeyed, backed, trembling and
norting, until fire licked about his hock.
sid Then, with a scream, he leaped into the
nb stall again.
It was a test for John's strength to hold
ge he powerful head down. He was crowded
into a corner and swung the rope end
rl stoutly across the animal's face to drive
ou it back. He tore at his Mackinaw then;
slipped it from his shoulders.
ow The horse squatted, holding his head
high, but John threw the coat over it, grip-
pe ping the folds beneath the horse's throat
to hold the blindfold secure.
ut "Back now! Back up, you!"
Vol He jerked backward on the halter and
shoved with his shoulder. The horse moved
ide out. Flame touched his fetlocks again and
ea he shivered and cringed, but backed.
"Come along, boy! Come along now!"
es! They went, at a slow walk. The horse
sidled, banged into a stall stanchion, leaped
the other way, kicked as flame touched his
ng belly. He broke, tried to run and John
ed went with him, strangling from the smoke,
he bumping into another led horse, out into
rn the night. . . .
ke Men were running; others were back in
there, shouting at horses.
is "Here, you! Take him. . . . You, Jack,
ne help! Lead him away. Don't let him bolt!"
h, And as soon as those four brawny hands
had the halter he was back into the inferno
again.
Jack Tait, clad only in his underwear,
er passed him, leading a grey horse. Two
e other men fought with a panic-stricken
e, beast that would not budge even though
e blindfolded. Into a stall went John. The
d horse there seemed calmer; trembled,
e twitched, moaned and coughed but did not
e kick. Nor would he lead. He stood there,
d snuffling, rolling his eyes, ears up, and
n refused to move.
t "Get a blanket!" John shouted to a man,
but the man did not hear. . . . No time,
either, to send for help. The flames were roaring now, spreading, mushrooming across the roof boards, licking into the stalls. The heat was unbearable.

He raked the harness from its hook with one movement.

"Whoa, you!"—roughly as he flung it hard on the animal's back. He set the hames down on the neck with a force that made the creature flinch. "Come along now!"

Reluctantly, snuffling, but still obeying, the horse, wearing his regalia of labor, now moved outward. They breathed the fresh air again.

"How many in there?" John yelled, grabbing Tait's arm as the barn boss, crying now, ran past him.

"All out but two. Prince won't come!"

John saw men struggling with a horse inside and turned to their aid.

The heat was like a furnace. The roaring of flames was like the voice of a mighty river, punctuated by explosive cracklings as hemlock burned rapidly.

He found a pitchfork and got behind the horse, striking it without mercy, prodding with the tines. The animal screamed and kicked. It leaped ahead and swung about and John struck it again, ducking a blazing brand that grazed his shoulder.

They got the animal out and Jack Tait reeled, gagging with nausea. John backed from the building, shielding his face with an upraised arm. Flames were through the roof now, licking at the cornices, melting holes in the walls.

"All out, Jack?" he croaked. . . .

"Look out!"

The warning shout made John whirl. He threw himself forward to grab at the rope as the horse shook off the last restraining hand, throwing a man end over end, and broke for the stable. John caught the rope and was snapped from his feet as though his weight were so many ounces. He catapulted through the air and came to a stop against the side of the barn with a shock that stunned him while the horse charged on through.

A man followed, running rapidly. His pace stopped. He ducked; he whirled, hesitated, tried to go on and came back; bent low, arms wrapped over his head.

The horse that had bolted within screamed shrilly. John could see him, outlines distorted by wriggling heat waves. He crouched low and rushed in.

Heat flowed about him, eating through his woollen shirt, needling insistently into his flesh.

HE heard the horse scream again and kick. The terror of the creature's cry gave him strength. Clear to the rear, it had gone, up into the stall where it had found rest and warmth and food after long days of toil against weighted collar. It screamed the third time, and John dropped to his hands and knees for relief.

He stopped crawling. He had almost gone on, across that thing. It felt like a bag of oats, a sack of inert material, until his hands brushed flesh.

He had come upon a man, lying there, when he sought to save a horse!

No use shaking him; no sense in calling out. He was beyond that, this fellow, else he would have moved.

John grasped a limp arm and pulled the figure about. He got to his feet and, bent double, ran three steps. The heat and the burden beat him down. He hitched the man along, a hand's breadth at a time. An eddy brought in a gulp of fresh air. He rose again and made a stride or two . . . and went down, cowering from the terrific punishment of standing.

More air, as a bit of roof fell in and uprushing gases sucked it in from outdoors. . . .

Another man was crawling towards John from the doorway. He found a hold and they went for the open with a rush.

It was Jack Tait who had come in to help.

"Who . . . who's this?" John choked, rolling the man over.

Firelight fell on the face as a score of men pressed about.

"Never saw him!" panted the barn boss.

"He's about done. . . . Stand back, give him air, you lads!"

Someone began to fan the face with a cap and Jack Tait plucked at John's arm.

The old veteran was holding up a hand, blood-stained. That hand had just turned the unconscious man's head over, had been pressed against the side of the skull.

The others did not see because Saunders was yelling for men from the now smoking cook-shanty where a bucket brigade was forming.

"Get over with Mark!" John ordered those about him. "Jack and I'll tend to this lad."

The group scattered.

The burden that the two carried was heavy. They went across the trampled sn towards the office, walking the faster they neared their objective.

John lighted the hanging lamp and th stood, looking down into that set face.

"Never seen him!" the barn boss said.

"Nor did I."

Gingerly John examined the great ma on the skull, tracing it out with his finge through the thick hair.

"What's it shaped like?" he asked, loo ing up.

"Horseshoe. There's where the calk we in"—pointing.

Tait stared at John.

" 'D you notice anything special in t barn?"

"Smell, you mean?"

The other nodded grimly.

"I smelt gasoline," he said.

"So did I!"

Old Jack spat nervously.

"Where was he?"

"Right behind your pile of baled hay

"Prince got him!" he muttered. "He the only horse in the lot that's light be hind. He"—gesturing—"touched the plac off, the swine! Old Prince got him!"

Saunders came in, breathless, slammin the door.

"Got her soused down," he said. "Worst over. Who's that?"

"Ever see him?" John asked.

A pause, while the foreman stared har at the face.

"Never."

"And what did you smell?" John de manded.

MARK looked from one to the other. " 'D you both get it?"

"Both of us. . . . "

"A bug fire! God damn 'em, they'll—"

John held up a warning hand.

"It's between the three of us, for now Keep it from the men. This fellow wa suffocated, as far as they know. Stranger drunk; got in, tried to smoke. . . . An here we are!"

"But the three of us smelt gasoline. Thi man's hair isn't even singed. See? H didn't die from fire. It was the kick of horse. We find out who he is and wher he came from and why—if we can—an we may make things as hot for othe parties as they made them for us to-night!

Hot for other parties! And even as swore that this thing would not go unished if he could track it down a sort terror seized him. Old Tom, his father, hind this? The thought made his mid- go weak.

Oh, a man's temper can stir him to bitness against those for whom he has had fection. But old loyalties, old respects e hard to down. For nearly a month w John Belknap had thought of his ther as an enemy, but this night's work lled his temper, replaced it with a pround fear.

Old Tom in a rough-and-tumble fight? es, that was imaginable! But old Tom sorting to the torch? That was unthinkble, did not square with anything in experience.

A shock will tear scales from human yes and now, standing there in the presnce of violent death, in the presence of hese true men, knowing that this particuar tragedy could never be of Belknap loing, the boy felt doubt of recent hot onvictions surging through him.

A hard old bird, men had said of his ather; a relentless fighter when driven to t . . . when *driven to it!* But a fair fighter, it was agreed, and even beaten enemies had admitted that.

He looked at the others and sent them out to see that the guard against the last chance of spreading fire was safe. He needed to be alone. . . .

Old Tom in this mess? It could not be; simply was beyond all reason! That the responsibility for all Ellen Richards's trouble should rest on his father's shoulders seemed to be reasonable . . . *seemed* to be. But it could not be. His father was no incendiary; his father was no wrecker; his father, gruff and bluff as he was, unjust as he may have been to his own son, would not hire bullies to maim the men of other employers, would not take unfair advantage of a weaker competitor!

He drew his palms over his face and shuddered. The whole thing was a nightmare, some wild, impossible bit of fancy! Bad enough to have one who meant more to you than any other man in the world under such black suspicion and far away where an appeal for explanation could not be properly made. But that was little compared to the conflict now rending his heart: that clash between what Ellen Richards believed of his father and what he was coming to believe of her: that she was something more than an employer, more than just another lovely girl. . . .

CHAPTER XI

THE barn was gone; one horse was gone; some harness burned, and the rest in a sorry tangle. Not a pound of feed was left in camp.

After the embers ashed over the crew turned in. John ordered the stranger's body placed in a box-car on the siding, shut the door and told the men to keep away. The belief that an unknown man had wandered into the barn and inadvertently set it off was well established.

But in the office a small group waited while John repeatedly made unavailing efforts to rouse central.

It was four o'clock before John's persistent ringing brought an answering sleepy voice. He called Roberts, the mill foreman, at his house, not wanting to disturb Ellen.

Rapidly he told what had happened.

"We'll need a car of lumber," he said, "and saws and hammers and nails. The fire was set by a drunk who wandered in. He suffocated. Send the sheriff out with the train to take charge of that angle. Guess I've told you everything. Don't forget the grain and hay. And you'd better be stirring now and get Tiny and Way-Bill out."

Evidently Roberts did, for while the crew was still at breakfast the shrill, familiar scream of the locomotive's whistle came echoing down the forest.

They had not stopped to hook on to empties. The car of lumber and the caboose made up the train.

Ellen was the first off. Her mouth was set.

Old Wolf ran towards her as she dropped from the way-car and John could see the paternal light in his face, the protecting posture in his whole body as he reached out for the girl. They spoke lowly together, and it was evident from her look that this odd old man was something more than a caricature for her; that beneath his eccentric exterior was a spirit that rendered her something of what she needed in a time of stress.

Their meeting was so obviously an affair for the two that John did not approach

until Ellen, who had been looking at him an interval while she listened to her uncle, raised her chin in a beckoning movement.

"One more body blow," she said as he came up. Her tone made him wince, and the fragment of a smile which she sought to summon wrenched at his heart.

"No getting around that," he agreed. "But it might be a lot worse. Suppose the whole set of camps had gone? Where'd we be then? I went right ahead without consulting you and I guess we'll have a new barn, of a sort, up by night."

He took her over to the ruins, outlining his plan for reconstruction, talking steadily and a bit swiftly as her few replies and the set of her mouth made him know something of what went on within her. He did not go into his theory of the fire's origin.

"There's loss, of course," he said finally. "One horse gone; some harness ruined and some lost; several hundred dollars' worth of feed gone up in smoke. But they haven't got us licked yet!"

"Haven't they?" she asked, and in the tone was a cynicism, a suggestion of surrender.

He looked about quickly. Men were coming and going, scraping away ruins, bringing up lumber.

"Come into the office," he muttered, and turned to lead the way.

Alone, there, she stood before him, wearily drawing off her gloves.

"Don't quit now!" he said. "It's a body blow, yes; but we're not licked, Ellen! We're not through yet! We've only commenced to fight!"

She looked up at him, studying his face with her large eyes, and smiled a trifle.

"You're fine!" she said. "You . . . Without you doing just what you've done I'd have given up weeks ago, I'm afraid. You've done so much for me, you've fought so well and so hard to make a showing. . . . But it seems a little unfair, doesn't it? A little as though the cards were stacked against us? To have a thing like this happen on top of all the things that are planned and executed against us?"

She turned away suddenly, as though fearful of breaking down before him.

"I wish I were a man!" she said tensely. "I'm tired playing a man's part; worn out with trying not to show what I think and feel and . . . fear!"

John stepped forward and put his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to face him.

"I'm glad you're not a man," he gently. "I'm glad you're just . . . you are. It's a tough break to have face all that's come, but I want you know now that this job is something than just a matter of services rend and pay received and experience for It wouldn't be any more than that, E if the one who stands to win or lose a man! It wouldn't be . . . what it is.

Her lips had parted a bit, and he felt tremble as his fingers pressed the flesh beneath her Mackinaw.

"Oh," she said weakly. "Oh . . . *tha*

"That!" he repeated with a vehem nod. "And the reason I haven't said before, the reason I haven't said a lot things that there are to be said, is beca trouble has been coming too fast! In pinch, survival comes first; living aft wards.

"That's one thing I want to say. T other is that you'll have to keep up y courage. I don't want you ever again say to yourself, even, what you said me out there. I want you to keep saying and thinking and believing wh you said to Gorbel that night when I sto outside your office door: that we may lo but we'll go down fighting! . . . And don't think we're going to lose!"

"It isn't that I don't *want* to win, John she protested. "I want it more than I wanted anything else! It was my fathe heart that went into this operation. T last years of his life went into it, all h hopes and all his energy. I feel th children owe their fathers something; th it's up to us to carry on. My father memory is here, in my heart. I owe it him to finish what he set out to do. Isn that natural? Don't you have that sam feeling of high regard for the things you father wanted to do, or wants to do?"

He looked away.

"My father . . . yes! He's right. He always been right! He'll always be right!

HIS vehemence startled the girl and he looked deep into her eyes. He wanted to tell it all, then and there; wanted to cleanse her mind of the impression held. Wanted to say: "My father is th man you suspect of throwing all these ob stacles in your path; my father is the ma whom you would suspect of other fantasti acts which have been committed against you if I'd let you know *all* that has hap-

d. My father is the man you loathe. he is *right;* he is guiltless. I know, ase I am his son!" He wanted to those things but he could not, when he evidence available on this side of Atlantic was against him!

hat he said was: "We're going to on, but I'm going to keep on worry- about you unless you'll clear out of mess and chase the look out of your that's been there since a week ago, n we piled up the plow!"

Clear out? What are you thinking of, n? You don't mean——"

Why, worry is wearing you down!"— king her. "I . . . I can't stand it to k of you alone in town there, lying ke nights, in a panic daytimes! It gets I'm telling you! Can't you get away? ldn't you go down the river with old lf for a few days? He wants you."

he laughed wanly.

'Away now. When things are—"

'Yes, now! The job's important but . . . why, you're something else again. , how can I tell you, here and now?"— ds slipping down from her shoulders to hands. "You're something more than art of the job, Ellen!" He was leaning se to her, drawing her towards him, lift- g her hands.

"John!" she whispered.

He spoke her name but before their lips uld touch the door opened and they had ant time to break apart before Wolf ichards burst in.

"Lookit!" he said, holding up fragments a glass. "Lookit what I found out yon- r, Johnny! Found 'em in th' ashes; ght in th' middle of th' barn. Jug, I'm llin' you. . . . Jug, 'tis! What's a jug oin' into the middle of a barn, eh? hisky, likely. You're right. . . . He was runk 'nd touched her off. He . . . He . . ."

He stopped talking and eyed Ellen close- as John took the fragments of glass from im. Her face was flushed from his un- mely intrusion and the old man chuckled himself.

"Time 'nd place for all things!" he ackled. "Some things go any time, any lace!"

As John left the office a man whom he ad seen repeatedly in town approached.

"Steele?" he said. "Bradshaw."

"Hullo, sheriff! Knew who you were, of ourse. . . . Now, Ellen, excuse us. The sheriff's errand isn't exactly pleasant. Mark'll get things going right off."

Indeed, even as he and the sheriff turned away men were handing sacks of feed down from the car, others were moving bales of hay. Over by the smoking ruin men with shovels were at work and the binding boards of the car of lumber were being ripped off.

"Stranger, eh?" the sheriff said as he pulled back the blanket and looked into the face of the dead man. "Stranger to all your boys?"

"None of 'em ever saw him."

The other nodded.

Step by step John went over the story, speaking lowly of the certainty that he and two others had smelt burning gasoline, telling of the jug fragments just now discovered. He traced the mark of a horseshoe on the skull, pointed out the clear impression of the calk; began to argue a bit as the sheriff squatted there, unresponsive, chewing on a cigar stub, almost bland, almost disinterested.

"My guess is this," he said. "The same people that have been badgering us for weeks pulled this. They sent this poor devil in here with a jug of gasoline. He shook hay out along the barn floor, poured the gas on it and touched it off. He'd naturally start her to the rear first and as he bent over to set it going behind Prince, the old fellow got him."

The sheriff scratched a match and lighted his frayed cigar. He stood in the partly open doorway of the box-car, staring blankly out into the forest. Then he cleared his throat.

"I'm goin' to tell the curious just what everybody else out here but you seems to think," he said. "I'm goin' to tell them that here was some bum, walkin' in for a job. He gets to camp, sees everybody's in the hay and knows he's likely to catch hell if he wakes 'em up. So he slips into the barn, which is warm enough for anybody to sleep in; lights his pipe, goes to sleep and . . . there you are!"

"But, good lord, sheriff, aren't you going—"

"Hold on, a minute!"

He eyed his cigar stub, again extinct, and threw it away.

"I do things in my own way. I've been watchin' what went on here a long time. I been watchin' you and what you've done since you took hold. It's enough, what

I've seen; enough to judge you and to make a pretty good guess at what else went on. Your friend here"—jerking his thumb towards the figure beneath the blanket—"went to work for Burke at the Belknap & Gorbel camp last Monday."

"The devil!"

"Yeah." He stripped the foil from another cigar. "I guess, Steele, we understand each other?"

He winked, a bit grimly.

"Go to it!" John said under his breath.

SOUNDS of saw and hammer filled the air. Men moved methodically from place to place. On the ashes of yesterday's barn, a new, rough structure grew. Men were smeared with soot and ashes; many doing work to which they were not accustomed, but they worked! They worked! And Ellen Richards, as she stood on a stump and watched the framework grow, watched the roof go on, watched sheeting slapped into place and held and nailed home, smiled with misted eyes.

John talked to her at intervals throughout the forenoon and, somehow, he had difficulty talking of the work. Other things kept coming to his lips, personal, gentle things. . . . And deep in his heart lay that new trouble, that growing conviction: that in such a warfare as this a man like old Tom Belknap could have no hand!

Wolf Richards had recovered from his shock of last night. To himself he assigned the task of helping Jack Tait sort out the tangle of harness, and as he worked he talked . . . rather sparingly at first, but, by the time the cook appeared in the doorway of his shanty and yelled to come get it, he was going his best.

No silence at that meal! Not with Wolf Richards shrilling from the end of the table.

"My, but them's elegant corn fritters!" he croaked. "My, my, what a cook this is!" For the moment his voice was so impeded by the quantity of the approved fritter that he could not speak. When the words came clearly, though, they seemed to be addressed to John.

". . . 'nd don't worry 'bout twins. Twins on her ma's side. Two pair on 'em. 'Nd our paw, her paw's 'nd mine, he had red hair. So don't fuss over red hair. But 'tain't no time to set 'nd moon—"

Ellen's face had gone crimson. It looked, to John, as blazing red as his felt. A stirring went up and down the table & C rustling; a muffled, choking sound. the

"Uncle!" the girl cried. "Uncle, ugh Will you stop?" mor

She had risen and rapped the table bel her knife handle, chin high, blushing ven taking the old man's embarrassing ch Ri with good humor and a certain poise. dee

The old man stopped; stopped with e. mouth agape as though amazed that usar outspokenness had been unwelcome. r-da

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "Body with . . 'n eye can tell 'bout you two. Fine se Ellen; fine young feller, Steele. Expla or things that might happen saves trose Trouble's to be avoided. Huh!" ho

He relapsed into a glaring silence i n the chuckles subsided slowly. en

The barn would be habitable for nse teams that night; a few hours of work a a dozen men to-morrow would complete Fi a track problem at the crossing had He come pressing, and John welcomed t chance to ride that far with Ellen. pai would return on a speeder. a

There was little chance for them to teni with the train crew, the sheriff, a man go it out from the Belknap & Gorbel camp, as the grim burden in the far end of the wid car. But they were near one another H there comes a time in the intimacies l men and women when silences are mas eloquent than syllables, anyhow. alk hn

THEY were at the crossing a tou while Tiny tinkered and Jop watched Ellen viewing the long strings " loads, taxing the storage capacities a trackage, waiting to be moved into Kam " fest. He saw her look at the short litn train of her own logs they had dragg up the grade, and her shoulders slackl significantly. u

"A feast for them," she commented, "an for us . . . famine!"

The look in her eyes wrenched his hea Her hand closed on his tightly and th she was gone. He stood for a time watc ing the train rock on towards Shoestrin steam shut off now, as they slid down t stiff grades that led into town.

Feast, or a famine! Not his fathe doing, this; Gorbel's probably; but t situation was real and acute, and he cou not recover from the look on the girl face.

He walked along a switch filled wit loaded cars awaiting removal to the Be

tabb & Gorbel mill. Not since the blizzard d. the branch been cleaned out. Only le, ugh cars were removed to make room more coming in from the Belknap & able bel camps.

hing ven a switch, theretofore used only by g ch Richards empties, had been com- oise. deered. He counted the cars standing with e. Twenty-one there were; seven thausand feet to a load . . . enough for a ne. r-day cut. If those belonged to Ellen with . . . . The car wheels were blocked be- Fine se the switch ran into the Shoestring xpla on the down-grade. He eyed one of tro se charred chunks which supplemented hold of hand-set brakes as though he ce never seen such a device used before. en he went on, whistling tunelessly to for self. He laughed, after a moment, and work aloud:

plete "Fire . . . fire's best fought with fire!"

had He talked with the crossing tender of ed track difficulties, outlined temporary n. pairs. The man asked for the next night apologetically; his wife wanted an to tening of movies; John told him to plan n g it, a bit more heartily than even he p, as wont to grant favors to men. . . . He e w d a plan, had John.

er He had noticed that the Belknap & Gor- cies l man, who had ridden in the caboose, mas hanging about the crossing. He alked with a pronounced limp, and as hn and the tender started for the little touse where the gas car was stored he Joproached.

gs "Jim, ain't they making a run from es ampfest this evening?" he asked.

am "No; had trouble in the yards," the lit nder said.

agg "My hard luck, then!" the man said. ack I'd ought to 've telephoned and found ut." He looked at John. "Is there any "anance getting back to camp to-night?"

"Ride in on the speeder with me, if you ea ant."

th That was agreeable to the stranger.

at A mile out of the crossing, as they rolled rin hrough the twilight towards timber on the t horizon, his passenger put a hand on John's houlder and asked:

he "Would you shut her off a minute? I t ot something to talk about."

ou That roused curiosity; John threw off ir he switch; the motor went dead, and they olled to a stop, there in the solitude of vi now-blanketed choppings.

Be "Mr. Steele," he said, "the sheriff told me about your fire. I heard him talking to the train crew about it and how he thinks that the man they're taking to Shoestring wandered into your barn while he was drunk and set the place off trying to smoke."

He paused.

"I try to be a decent citizen. I try to be loyal to the man that hires and pays me. But I like horses. . . . I like 'em better than I like humans, my wife says! I used to be a barn boss for Kampfest, but I got this stiff leg and can't get around so much. I'm filing for Gorbel in camp now. I don't like to bite the hand that feeds me, but . . . I'm decent!"

Something dogged about him then.

"What I've got to say is this: that a man who'll burn horses alive don't deserve loyalty; he don't deserve anything but the worst he can get! That's why I'm going to tell you what I *know*.

"That man under the blanket in your way-car worked in our camp for three days. He was no good. He just made motions instead of working. But yesterday afternoon Gorbel came to camp. He and this man stood outside the window of my shop a long time. I went out and then went back to get something. It takes me a long time to walk a little ways. I didn't aim to spy, but when I got back there, Mr. Steele, these two men were over by the gasoline tank, which sets off by itself, drawing off gasoline!"

John's heart leaped.

"They drew a jug of it. The man went out and walked down the track; Gorbel went in and ate and drove back to Kampfest that night. We haven't seen the man since."

He ended with a grim nod.

"We found a broken jug in the ruins," John said. "A plain glass, gallon jug."

"That's what they had!" the other whispered.

John swore softly.

"We knew it was set," he said after eyeing the man's face and deciding that it was wholly good and without guile. "We're keeping still; we're going to try to run this thing down without any fuss. Now, if you'll tell the sheriff what you've told me, his job would be easy."

The other hesitated, then twisted his head in a nod of assent.

"I will," he promised. "I don't like to get any man into trouble, but . . . it's the

horses, you see."

"I understand. Nobody likes to squawk, but in a case like this it's almost a man's duty."

"That's what I figure, too. I . . . I'd made up my mind to quit working for Gorbel to-night, but maybe it'll be better if I stay on, even if I hate to take money from a man like that."

"You stay on," John said. "I'll pass your story along to Bradshaw and he'll see you sometime when it won't give his hand away."

"I'll help all I can, even to stickin' on for Belknap & Gorbel"—grimly. "My name's DeYoung. When you want me, send word."

CHAPTER XII

AGAIN something new for a young man to consider as he rolled down alone towards camp. Until now this had been a fight without the law; now, the possibility loomed that the government might step in and help in thwarting the persecution which was being directed against Ellen Richards.

He went at once to Jack Tait and they stood outside the barn and talked for long. In the beginning the barn boss nodded mildly from time to time; at the end, he was spitting tobacco juice and his old eyes were ablaze with whole-hearted enthusiasm.

A team—a white team—came in off the job at noon. The teamster was put at other work. The wood-butcher had chopped stove-length sticks in two and had charred them in the blacksmith shop, as car blocks are treated.

At two o'clock Jack Tait hitched the white horses to a light sleigh, tossed the freshly made blocks in, and drove off, chewing rapidly.

John went out with the loads, and when he dropped off at the crossing Way-Bill looked at him inquiringly.

"Jim and his wife, here, are going to paint Shoestring to-night!" John laughed. "I just wanted to see that you got up the hump. Jack Tait's bringing in a team and I'll ride back with him. S'long! . . . Have a good time, Jim, and buy the missus popcorn! Where do you hide the key, in case I want to get warm?"

"On top the door casing to the left."

"Right! Good luck!"

He stood there as the train broke to the down grade, rocking in the late noon stillness towards Shoestring.

It was very quiet; a light snow was ing, flakes large and feathery, blotting the tracks men had made not long He strolled down the main line, down the break, on for twenty rods. The paused, looked right and left and n grimly.

At dusk he heard Jack Tait comin walked out to meet him.

"We'll carry the blocks over," he "This snow might stop; runner wouldn't be so good. Horse track harder to trace."

While Jack fed his team John went Jim's house and telephoned. A private this, with no chance of a central operator overhearing. He called for the mill man's office, and when Roberts answered said crisply:

"It's Steele, Roberts. How do t stand?"

"Not so good! We've only got t thousand in the yards to-night and snowing here. If she starts to blow . . be worse than not so good!"

"Now listen; and don't ask quest Get your supper as soon as you can, back to your office and stand by the phone."

"O.K.," answered the man.

He and Jack ate a cold meal hastily went outside. From the sleigh they ca arm loads of charred blocks and st them along the track down beyond break in the grade. This done, Jack the evener from his sleigh, hooked a d ing chain to it and drove his team ac the tracks to the long line of Belkna Gorbel loads waiting on the switch.

The wings of the plow had shoved snow back to give ample room. Jack hoo his chain to the arch bar of the first front trucks while John knocked the blo from the wheels and mounted the grasping the brake wheel.

"All right," he said, and Jack spoke his horses. They leaned into the coll strained, hung, and then the car slo started to move.

With the wheels once turning it was ea Out on the main line they trundled, a John set the brake gradually, driving shoes tighter against the wheels as the gra became pronounced.

"Steady now. . . . She wants to roll

was straining on the wheel with all his
ck pulled in his team until slack of
hain dangled in the snow, unhooked,
d a block and held it on the rail before
wheel while the tire munched into its
red surface. In its own length then,
car came to a grudging halt. Quickly
thrust more blocks in place and turned
team backward.

own they came with another car, re-
ing the process, careful to let it ease
t gently against the first they had
ed, blocking it securely, making the
pling fast. Back again. . . .

hey spoke but little and then in under-
es, though they were miles from other
s. They worked rapidly, even the horses
ning to enter the spirit of the occasion.
w fell faster. Ankle deep, shin deep,
t, fluffy flakes fell steadily.

THE last car went into place; the final coupling was made.

"Get your team back to the sleigh now," n whispered. "I'll call Roberts."

In the house again he rang the mill office the foreman answered at once.

"Is the last yard switch open?" John ked.

"Ought to be. Always is. That's orders. s, I can see the light from here."

"That's good proof, but I wish you'd ke a run out there and be sure."

"Why . . . Well . . . Why, sure. If you y so."

The man was evidently mystified and hn hung up. Jack came in, a hulking fig- e in the gloom, moving on tiptoe, like a owler.

"Got to be sure," John told him. "The vitch always *has* been left open at night any chance runaway wouldn't go straight rough the mill. But we've got to be *dead* re!"

"God, yes," chuckled the other. "If they ent in on the main line now, wouldn't ey raise hell!"

The bell tinkled.

"She's open," Roberts said quietly. The ood of the night's work evidently had ade itself apparent even over the wire.

"Then stay in your office and keep your yes open. And if anybody starts down that ard get 'em back!"

Out they went, carrying axes. Up on to he first car John climbed and released the rakes. Jack knocked the blocks from the wheels. Back to the next, repeating the operation; a third and a fourth were released. The train stirred a bit as the freed cars took up slack. Another wheel spun, more blocks were knocked out. Jack tossed his axe into the snow and ran to the next car, letting the brake wheel spin as John passed him at a run.

A game of leap frog they played. The train was chucking, groaning, as the freed cars on the far end strained at the anchorage formed by those at the rear. As John mounted the third from the last it stirred a trifle. He smiled to himself.

"Snappy!" he yelled at Jack as he dropped into the snow.

The string was moving now, wheels of the last car sliding, squealing. He grabbed the hand rail and swung up the step. He kicked the dog loose and spun the wheel.

"Jump!" yelled Tait as he stood aside, and John jumped as the cars gained momentum on the grade.

They went slowly at first, until those up ahead dragged the others off the level track. They slipped easily on smooth-running wheels. They picked up speed. The steel commenced to ring a bit instead of rumble, and as they took the first curve the couplings banged and clacked. . . .

Fresh snow, fallen on the logs, began to whip away in light, shattering blocks, in streamers of dust. Fire streamed from a wheel as they swung another bend. The clatter of trucks over rail joints was like hail on a roof. . . .

A curved log rolled in its nest, turning one end upward. It went off, shattering the stump it struck, bouncing high again, burying itself in snow. Fast and faster now the train ran, flying down the grade, storming over the level stretches, assaulting the short pitches as though in conscious effort to keep going, to increase the momentum of its flight!

The cars careened, they rolled, they jumped and bounced. The last, yanked along by the others, tilted and tipped dangerously on curves. It threatened to go over. It lost a part of its load, but it held the rails. Runaways don't leave the track! They stay by it until stopped or smashed in their flight.

The roaring echoed among the hills. The speed became mad. Logs were stirring restlessly between the stakes, twisting, writhing, trying to fly off as the rails changed the direction of that stampede of wheels.

But the stakes were good; the logs could grumble and shift and protest, but not many could get away.

On through the choppings, on along the sides of hills; through narrow ravines debouching into wider valleys; level track could not slow them; short rises had no more than a barely perceptible influence on the pace. . . . They broke over the last pitch, and any there might have seen the lights of Shoestring strung like blurred jewels through the snow a quarter of a mile away.

It seemed to Tait and John, standing there in the silence, that they could hear the clangor of those runaways until they stopped. The sound came echoing back to them through the falling snow, faint and fainter, but still there.

They shoved caps from their ears to hear better; they strained, with cocked heads.

"Hear it yet?" John whispered.

Jack shook his head.

"Just a mite!"

John turned then and ran into the house. Roberts answered his ring.

"Anything happened?" John asked.

"Happened. . . . 'Y God, Steele! Happened!" The man's voice cackled with excitement. "'D yuh ever hear about it rainin' frogs?"

"Once."

"And manna? It rained that, didn't it?"

"No, ravens brought—"

"Well, it come, anyhow, but what I wanted to ask is, d'yuh ever hear of its rainin' saw-logs into a hungry mill-yard?"

"No. But I've prayed for it!"

"Eh?" You what? You prayed for it!" He could hear the man draw a great breath. "Well, Steele, I'm here to say that if ever I want a whole lot and real bad I'm goin' to get you to pray about a dime's worth for me! Say, the' 's saw-logs strung from hell to breakfast in this here yard. It'll be a mess to untangle, but if she blows now we can saw for a week!"

"Fair enough, Roberts. And you know nothing else except that it rained logs on you to-night."

"That's all I want to know. I'm part clam. Good *night!*"

When the crossing was half a mile behind, Jack Tait, beside John on the sleigh seat, commenced to laugh. He laughed through his nose first; then through his mouth. He bent forward and rocked backward. He slapped the robe over his knees and roared aloud until the team broke into an alarmed trot.

"Wh-whoa, you!" he gasped. "I'll run your ribs bare! . . . Whoa. . . . John, I feel like I uster feel on Hallowe'en I guess that'll upset old Belknap's cart for a minute!"

CHAPTER XIII

JOHN was in the camp office a few minutes before dinner-time when the phone rang.

He had talked over that instrument to-day, to an amazed and bewildered

"Do you know what happened?" asked.

"I'd heard, yes. Heard it tore up main line."

"Oh. . . . They fixed that in half hour. Tiny was only a little late getting out. Of course, they're not our logs. am I going to do?"

He was grinning. This was not the of thing to reveal wholly to a girl. Tactics such as this are men's affairs.

"I don't know. I've got to fix it up Burke somehow. I don't see how we use their logs legally; I don't see they're going to get them out without mying us up. We'll have to go careful Ellen."

Her "Oh," he thought, was a bit mayed.

"Don't worry," he assured her.

But this was not Ellen calling again was Burke, as John had known the would call or come.

"Steele? Burke talking. That was a one somebody pulled!"

"I'm with you! Why the devil your help block their loads so they're running away and cluttering up other mill-yards?"

"Say, you can forget that line right You know damned well that those didn't run away! We want our logs back

"Then go get 'em and send 'em around by the main line."

"Wh-what! Why that's a two-hundred mile haul. No, sir. We expect you to liver those logs back to the crossing stand a law suit if you put a single one 'em through your mill!"

John grinned.

"We're no common carrier," he said "You've got us on the haul in; you've

n us the other way. It's up to you to that those logs are anything but a nce to the Richards Company. We litter the yard with 'em. If you don't m out at once we'll have to saw 'em."

hy, you know damned well that to there and send 'em around to Kamp- y main line would eat up their value!"

f course I know that! I'm glad you e it. There's only one thing for you : accept our logs to replace yours. take your scale if it looks fair. Other- . . . the courts are run to settle just arguments as this."

lot of business you've got in court on deal!"

We'd take our chances. Is that all?"

Wait a minute!"

he man evidently turned aside and ed his hand over the transmitter while alked with another.

've got nothing else to say except this: expect to have our logs back at the sing by the end of the week!"

And you tell whoever's there coaching that logs are cluttering things up down w. If they aren't loaded out day after norrow we'll start in sawing 'em. Good-

!"

e slammed up the receiver and turned y, eyes laughing.

n immediate and pressing need had been d.

He would not have been so comfortable he been aware of one incident which nspired after supper that night. He in the office with Mark and Jack Tait en a light driving team came trotting ntly into camp. The driver stepped wn, tied the near horse to a sapling and proached the little building with a stride ich bespoke determination. At the steps ich led to the doorway he slowed, how- r. Light streamed through a window on him; he glanced inside and stopped . almost with a jolt.

John was standing where the rays of the nging lamp fell full on his face, holding e in one hand and burning match in the her as he listened to Mark Saunders argue tly with the barn boss over an item of ocedure. The one outside did not look the others, did not strain to overhear hat was being said. He watched John ly, closely, and after a moment he ughed softly to himself.

A man came out of the cook-shanty and alked towards the office. The visitor tugged at the visor of his fur cap and turned to meet him.

"Say, Jack," he said, "where is Steele?"

"Ain't he in the office there?" the other countered. "Sure he is! That's him, standin' up there."

"Oh, thanks," and with a muttered word about tying his team the man turned away from the buildings. He did no tying; he untied the one horse, mounted the seat and drove away smartly, not tucking the robe about his legs until he was well out of camp.

Then Paul Gorbel pulled the horses to a walk and lighted a cigar. He smoked rapidly as he thought rapidly. He had gone into the Richards woods headquarters tonight to threaten and badger this stranger named Steele who was going so far in upsetting the fruition of a carefully laid plan. But he had not talked to him, had not thought of stolen logs from the moment he looked through that window. John Belknap, masquerading as John Steele!

That fear which had never left him since he realized that his eagerness had put him into Tucker's hands took on new proportions. He gnawed his cigar between puffs. For years he had worked to secure the trust and respect of men; not that he cared for these things, but because they would serve a purpose when the time came. Now the time had come; he was stepping forth from the security of his good standing to take some of the things he wanted and time was short. John Belknap was in his way, costing him precious days. . . .

Why the assumed name? He grasped that question and followed its various possibilities. He smoked less feverishly after a time. He removed the cigar from his mouth and laughed once, briefly and without mirth. Then he cut his team cruelly with the whip and drove on past his camp where he had planned to spend the night, speeding for Kampfest. . . . Let Burke handle the affair of stolen logs. That was a detail. If John Belknap wanted to get away with it . . . well and good. Larger matters commanded his attention.

CHAPTER XIV

HIS position had become untenable for John Belknap. He had come into the employ of Ellen Richards with a single purpose, and, to serve that purpose, it was well enough to seize on a

fortuitous circumstance which would let her think that men had always known him as John Steele. But another and a graver purpose had loomed over the horizon of his desires, and it gave him almost the feeling of a skulker to continue the deception.

He did not consider the dangers lurking in the possibility of Ellen's discovery of his masquerade; his first worry was on a more lofty plane than that, but her feeling against his father was also the first obstacle which he must remove. That would let him come into the open, let him be rid of this distasteful handicap of deception.

He had something to work on now. If Nat Bradshaw, the sheriff, could pin the barn fire on Paul Gorbel it would be like a loose thread in woven fabric, would permit him to unravel the whole sorry story which had plunged Ellen into such distress and cast such an unwarranted cloud over Tom Belknap in the girl's eyes.

He had written the sheriff at length the night after DeYoung, the Belknap & Gorbel filer, had told his story, not trusting a word of that to script but setting down a theory as he had evolved it and outlining a programme for the well-intentioned, likeable but slow thinking officer to follow. This afternoon Bradshaw had telephoned that certain investigations had been made and John rode in with the logs to determine what he had learned.

He was with Ellen in the office after the others had gone, and being there with this growing sense of odd guilt on his conscience made him as uncomfortable as he had ever been in his life.

His mood puzzled her, he saw. He was impelled to burst out into explanation then, but checked himself. What good? What could come of it? He must bide his time until he could tell her all, and he could not tell her all until he could show her beyond any doubt where it was Paul Gorbel alone and not his father who merited her contempt and distrust.

He was in a fever to accomplish this end as he entered the jail office and greeted Bradshaw.

"Been waitin' for you," the sheriff said, closing the door and scratching his head. "Sit, Steele. I done what you told me but it didn't seem to get us anywhere. Everything *looks* straight as a string."

"So? Just what'd you find?"

"Well, I did just what you suggested in your letter. I went to Kampfest yesterday and made the point that the "John didn't want to bury this lad and r hat locate his relatives. hey tal

"Was careful to ask around in bed wi places and, just as you figured, he ha could help. Then I went to Gorbel le wou was kind of a last resort, and ap certain for troublin' him on it and he t an ea straightest story you ever heard!" wn wi

"What did he offer?" bel of

"Hell, he told me everything! Paul G the straightest story a man'd ever lly int to. He'd fired this man himself, h gli because he was full of moon. He lousy him half crocked in camp that aft When and sent him out. He said you coul con hooch on the next forty and he calc worl the lad had a jug cached somewhere t, ga my guess was a good one: that he'd ment down the track, takin' a pull ever ll clos while, crawled into your barn, t He s smoke and touched her off. Said i eame and again, that the man'd been dru call lord! ietly

"I didn't let on that I'd expected t odish any different. The only thing was t rt of kept harping away on this hooch. If e st was anything else to go on, we might orbel on trippin' him up in his story. I "Oh lying, he sure is a good hand at it!" whi

"What do you suppose he'd say ith knew we had a witness to his handing ve a jug to this man? And if the wi ght was pretty certain the jug was filled "A gasoline?" orb

"Huh?" Bradshaw gauped. "Wit You mean—"

John nodded. "Witness!" he whis sharply. "I've got him, Nat!"

Rapidly he recounted what DeY ha had told him and the sheriff's eyes ve round with excitement. n if

"Damn me!" he kept interje "Damn me, if I wasn't 'bout ready t him get away with it!"

"He won't get away with it!" John ld clared. "Now, the next move is to u ve Gorbel's own story. He told you a au and again that the man was drunk. f Young doesn't think so, but if that sto hasn't alcohol in it, then Paul Gor ur well on his way towards being suspe ic of arson, and arson isn't a mild charg wr this state, Nat!" be

"I'll say! I'll say it ain't! Damn me to We'll have a deburyin' a day or now, and we'll see what we'll see!" of leaned back and lighted his cigar excit ca

the "Johnny, you got somethin' under
nd r hat besides hair!"

They talked until late and John went to
d in bed with a firmer sense of well-being
ed, t he had had for a long time.
rbel He would not have been so complacent,
ap certain that his problem would come
e te an easy and early solution had he
'" wn what went on in the Belknap &
bel offices that same evening.

Paul Gorbel had driven his team relent-
er lly into Kampfest that day, his dark
f, hs glittering. Fear and hate and
He lousy rode with him.
afte When he entered his office, however, he
oul s controlled, apparently at peace with
calc world. He went to the Bank of Kamp-
ere t, gave orders to the cashier, visited a
'd ment, and was in his office when the
ery ll closed.
tri He stood in the doorway as the men
it eamed by and when Tucker approached
un called the man to him. He talked
ietly for a moment. A girl came out,
t odishly dressed in a fur coat, a different
thrt of figure than those you will see on
If e streets of a northern lumber town.
t orbel broke his talk to Tucker.
I "Oh, Marie!" The girl turned, showing
white face under the light, lips heavy
y ith make-up, even, gleaming teeth. "I'll
ng ave some letters this evening. About
wi ght?"
d "All right," she said, and went on and
orbel turned again to Tucker.

tr

WHEN he had finished the man nodded.

"Hell, yes. You know, she's never been
hand to say much against folks. But
've heard her burn up old Belknap worse
n if she'd cussed him out!"

More rapid mumbling from Gorbel.

"Front of Steele? . . . Why . . . I dunno.
. . Oh, yes! Once I did! She sure gave
ld Tom what-for to Steele! Day after
ve ditched your cars to tie 'em up." He
aughed unpleasantly at recalling this act
f treachery.

Gorbel had told the stenographer to re-
turn at eight. He, however, was in his of-
fice again before seven, seated at his desk,
writing slowly. He paused at great length
between sentences, scratched out words,
tore up sheets of paper, began again.

The outer door opened and closed; his
office knob turned and the girl, Marie,
came in.

"Lo!" she said in a half whisper.

He smiled and spoke without looking up.

She took off her coat, removed the snug, felt turban, pulled off her galoshes and stood revealed, a silken-legged, low-necked, short-sleeved slip of a girl with eyes that might have been gentle, but were not, with a mouth that might have been tender, but was not.

"What's on?" she asked, fluffing her bobbed hair and approaching, laying a hand familiarly on Gorbel's shoulder and leaning over to read what he was writing.

He slipped a sheet of paper over the penciled lines.

"Not yet!"

"What's the big idea?" she asked, hostility in the tone, drawing back.

He caught her wrist roughly and laughed as he drew her to his chair arm.

"Hot-headed baby!" he breathed, and kissed her arm. "It's a letter to another girl. But when you've read it through you'll understand. And I'm going to let you read!"

He patted her back and the temper receded from her face slowly.

"Well, ever since I caught you writing to this Richards party, and found out you'd been going to see her and lying to me about it, I've naturally been suspicious."

"Good God, have we got to have that over again? Hasn't it been explained well enough to satisfy even your jealousy?"

"Well, it was . . . once. But what's a girl to think? I come up from Chicago on the promise I'm going to be a respectable married woman"—ironically. "I wait and whine and beg and am put off until—"

"Can't you see?" he pleaded impatiently. "You know the state things are in now! Let me get hold of this Richards property on my own, let me get things running here as they should go and I'll throw you a party, preacher and all!"

"Well, seeing's believing."

"And what I've got on now is just about the knock-out. I want you to read this and hold your temper until you get to the end. I want you to copy it on plain paper and address an envelope. I'm going to mail it. . . . Read, Marie, a bomb-shell!"

He thrust the paper into her hands and watched her face as she read.

"Well, for gosh sakes!" was her comment, blue eyes widening in amazement "Is it a fact?"

"Sure as you're born!" He slapped the desk. "See what it means? See what it'll do?" He talked rapidly, eyes narrowed in earnestness.

The girl listened, and when he had finished she took a long breath.

"You're the cats when it comes to scheming!" She was silent a moment, thrusting out her lower lip. "If it was anybody else, I'd be sorry for her!"

She took the chair he had vacated and drew writing materials towards her, preparing to copy what he had written.

"But if old Tom ever heard what's been going on," she said, "it'd be like him to give *you* the run-around and pay her for what you've broken!"

"He won't know . . . for another sixty days. And if this works"—gesturing towards his handwriting—"she'll give him the air and she'll be sold out and I'll own the Richards Lumber Company. I've got Tom tied up to a price on my interest here. He can pay that and rave all he wants to then!"

The girl looked at him sharply.

"Better not let him find out about the deals with the North Star Company."

"What do you know about that?" he asked, bridling.

The girl giggled.

"Maybe I just guessed it; maybe I know it all; maybe I know nothing. So long as you play the game with me, dearie, I play along with you. . . . Just that long!"

With an amused smile she began to write.

CHAPTER XV

TWO days later, shortly after noon, as he entered the office, the clerk wheezed to John:

"Ellen telephoned. She said for you to come in with the loads to-night, sure."

"Anything else?"

"That's all. She said to be sure."

John wondered. Usually when Ellen wanted to get in touch with him she left word for him to call. He rang the office in town and asked for her.

"Who is it?" the bookkeeper asked after a moment.

"Steele, at camp."

Another interval; indistinct sounds came over the wire; then the man's voice:

"She says she'll see you to-night."

So it was with his curiosity roused that John left the train after its late [illegible] crossed the mill-yard and entered the [illegible]

Lights were burning in the office [illegible] he hastened in.

"Hello!" he said, opening the door [illegible] seeing Ellen alone at her desk.

She lifted her head slowly, and [illegible] on him a face that was a mask of [illegible] White, she was, and drawn, and her [illegible] smouldered.

"Hello . . . Ellen! You sent for [illegible] What's . . . what's the matter?"

She had spoken no word; she did [illegible] need to speak to make him understand [illegible] that catastrophe was in the air. She [illegible] down her pen slowly, opened a purse [illegible] lay on the desk beside her and took out [illegible] letter.

"Explain this," she said, and her voice [illegible] was like ice.

Frowning, he took the envelope from [illegible] her.

"Why . . . why, what's—"

"Read it!" she said, and her manner [illegible] forbade more words.

He shook out the single sheet of paper [illegible] with hands that trembled.

He read:

DEAR FRIEND:—In times of trouble it is [illegible] women to stand together. I have known [illegible] thing for weeks that has been on my conscience [illegible] If you will look back you will see that many [illegible] the trouble which has come to you has been [illegible] the man who calls himself John Steele can [illegible] work for you. You may recall the things [illegible] apparently has done in your behalf; consider [illegible] things that have happened. This superintendent [illegible] of yours conspired with Tucker, your road-master [illegible] to cause two wrecks on your railroad. He [illegible] charged Tucker to make his game seem coincidental [illegible] ing. Your barn was burned at his orders and [illegible] harmless tramp lost his life in it.

Certain accomplishments have been placed [illegible] his credit. Your property, were it not for [illegible] being so heavily involved, would be on its [illegible] If your creditors should force you out now [illegible] would be in a position to make the operation [illegible] from the hour they took charge, thanks to [illegible] this so-called John Steele has done for you [illegible] under guise of doing it for you.

All this may sound beyond belief, but just [illegible] this Steele whether or not he is using his [illegible] name or if he is not known elsewhere as [illegible] Steele Belknap. Yours in sympathy,

A FRIEND.

His heart seemed to have stopped [illegible] Strength went from his legs.

"Why, that's a lie!" he choked. "[illegible] a black, infamous—"

"Wait a minute!" She had risen [illegible] and stood before him. "What," she asked

though her voice would break, "what your name?"

"Why, that part's all right. I can explain it. I am John Belknap. I did—"

"And this! Explain this! I remembered, you see!"

She whipped a telegram from her desk, thrusting it towards him. It was from the State Bank of Ferrysville, the nearest bank to Witch Hill. It read:

Witch Hill Lumber Co. owned by Belknap Lumber Co., Chicago stop S. McIver is superintendent.

"Why . . . why, yes, Ellen. That's all true. But, you see, I couldn't let you think I was who I am. . . . I couldn't come in here and offer to help you, admitting my own name, could I?"

"Why not?" she asked bitingly.

"You wouldn't have believed me, feeling as you have about my father."

She laughed then, with a wildness which startled him.

"Right! How right you are! I wouldn't have believed, no! I wouldn't have let a Belknap set foot on my property! I didn't believe that anonymous letter when it came to; I didn't want to. My first impulse was to tear it up, forget it. . . . And then I remembered that my father always said a man who was right could stand investigation. I looked up Witch Hill, I telegraphed that bank and you've read the answer. . . ."

She paused, panting.

"But, Ellen—"

"Never mind! I'm going to talk now! No, you didn't dare reveal yourself. So you have a superintendent write a lie. You may have worked as camp foreman for him, but not as John Steele. He knew you weren't John Steele. He knew your full name because it was your father's money that paid him, your father's money that sent you in here!"

"Ellen, Ellen! Listen to me! He's a poor, old, ignorant man, Sandy. He's a man who's never written a letter of recommendation before. He simply forgot, confused as . . . as he . . . Don't you see?"—stammering now, as her bitter smile showed him how unconvincing his own words sounded.

"Do you expect me to believe that?" she asked, suddenly calm.

He drew a deep breath.

"No," he said, and shook his head. "It sounds . . . It won't do, true as it is!"

"And will any of the rest do? Can you explain all that's happened? You've done things, yes, but I see now why you did them. You did just enough to get the job in shape so that when your father and his partner and his *son*"—hissing the word—"ruin this company, it will still be a going concern. You've made a showing in the woods; you've done just enough for the mill to keep the job afloat until you could close down on us!"

SHE made a dismissing gesture with one small fist.

"I've been such a fool! I suppose it was all staged, that first encounter you had with Paul Gorbel here. Well, you did it admirably. I'll give you credit for that. You fooled me; you worked me up emotionally until I was ready to grasp at anything for help. And I grasped . . . at Tom Belknap's son!"

"It sounds logical," he said wearily. "It sounds reasonable. It looks like a staged drama, yes. But, Ellen dear, won't you believe me when I say that I came to you that night determined to *fight* my father! That I jumped in, first to settle a grudge against my father and that I have gone far enough now to be convinced that he has no hand in all this trouble that has been made for—"

"Stop! Stop!" she broke in, stamping a foot. "Don't treat me like a child, John Belknap! If you'd come in here and told me your name, it would have been different, but you started with a lie, a *lie!* And anything founded on a lie must be evil!

"Tom Belknap not fighting me? Tom Belknap not trying to ruin me?" Tears sprang to her eyes. "Black is white, east is west. . . . Oh, John Belknap, what a fraud you are!"

She dropped into her chair, elbows on desk, hands over her face.

"Ellen!" He tried to touch her but she shook off his hand.

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Don't let me ever hear the sound of your voice or see your face again! To think . . . to think that only yesterday I thought . . . I hoped . . . I wanted . . .

"Oh, won't you get out?" She dropped her hands and turned her distressed, tear-wet eyes to him. "Won't you please go now?"—voice growing light and feeble. "Won't you let me alone now, with what

I've got left? Won't you . . . if you have any decency left in you?"

Shaken, he backed away.

"I'll go," he said. "I'll go. . . . But I'll be near. I'll be helping you. I'm . . . I'm what I am. Time may show it but . . . I'm going. . . . "

He turned towards the door quickly, feet unsteady on the floor.

CHAPTER XVI

BEWILDERED to a point where he felt remorse almost as profound as would have been his lot had he been scheming to ruin Ellen Richard's property, John Belknap, no longer masquerading as John Steele, left the girl's office and made his way to the hotel where he had lived when in town.

He evaded the loquacious Rex Jasper, ate a perfunctory meal and went slowly up the stairs to his cubicle of a room. He dropped to the creaking bed and sat there, hands dangling between his knees for a long interval, frowning at the floor.

The case that Ellen had built up against him was so logical. Even without being strung up to a state which bordered on hysteria, she would have been justified in believing that he had come to Shoestring with design, that old Sandy's letter, once considered a fortuitous blunder, was deliberate misrepresentation, and that he had, in fact, simply prepared the Richards operation for smooth functioning once it had been forced from her hands.

He had needed time to prove his conviction that it was not old Tom who had instigated this unfair, at points criminal competition. Gorbel was doing it, he was certain; doing it to serve his own personal ends; doing it without old Tom's knowledge or consent. A subtle, shrewd, cautious schemer, Gorbel; a man no one trusted . . . except his father.

John stirred and shook his head despairingly. If old Tom were only within reach! But he was not. No, he was on his own for the next six weeks, anyhow. . . . And much could happen in six weeks to a concern as crowded as was the Richards Lumber Company.

He was in a pinch; beaten in his lofty ambition to champion the oppressed; a growing love had been hurled back into his teeth. But he laughed! He laughed, sitting there alone in the bare little room, a other laugh had in it a defiance, a challenis g the fates which had woven this net as J cumstances about him. nothi

He rose to his full height and flex Elle arms. He wasn't through; he had or the gun. What the next step would be he'd see even a guess. He needed time to think wo out, but of two things he was certain Gorbel was not going to drive Ellen's hen pany to the wall and Ellen was not; bre on thinking for much longer that his A pi was behind the trouble which had pick made for her. With those ends a I'm plished, this other, this cold weight narr his heart, would be ready for com'ly ation. ner.

But he could not stay here in Shoes ab It would avail him nothing; it would hin bring him continued distress. . . . Hkin not know what to plan. . . . son

He paced the room, pondering, and 'Yo to a halt beside the spotted little dra sh Last week's *Shoestring Banner* lay a tr and he stared at the smudgy lines, unsleft . . . Unseeing until his idly roving d w fell on the heavily typed words: owe

BELKNAP & GORBEL

He leaned lower and read what was a to them: He

"Y

MEN WANTED! ar

For Mills and Camps
Modern Buildings; Good Wages

BELKNAP & GORBEL,
KAMPFEST.

He remained bent over a long mon and then straightened, his tongue in cheek. . . .

Why not? he asked himself. He wa man out of a job, a good man. Paul Go was advertising for men. . . .

He began to pack hastily, movement bit feverish.

He caught Bradshaw just as the she was leaving the jail.

"Something new?" the sheriff asked he turned back and read the excitement the boy's eyes.

"A lot. . . . About something yo never guessed!"

He plunged into his story with the p nouncement that he had been living a working and fighting under another nam

other's jaw dropped, and for an inter-
his grey eyes were hard with suspicion,
as John talked on, earnestly, leaving
nothing except his personal relationship
Ellen, that look altered and mellowed,
the big officer began to nod slowly. He
d see; he was a man and not involved;
woman, with everything she possessed,
ding her heart, at stake.
hen the boy had finished, Nat drew a
breath and let it out in a soft whistle.
A pickle!" he said, wrinkling his brow.
pickle! It's a tough break for you, son,
I'm going to string along. . . . Huh!"
narrowed his eyes and considered. "It's
b'ly so, what you think about your
er. This Gorbel, now, has got by up
e about a hundred per cent. His men
him; he's got a reputation for the fair-
kind of dealing. But, lookin' back, I can
some smart work.
Your dad was here a month before
showed up. I mind hearin' he was goin'
a trip. And the first trouble started after
left. Gorbel started gumming up Ellen's
with his logs; this rough party Baxter
wed up and knocked Royce for a goal.
likely figured to do it all while your
was away, thinkin'—and right, too—
t news of his first skirmishes wouldn't
to Chicago before the old man left. . . ."
He lighted a cigar and crossed his legs.
"Your pa, now, 's a good figure to pick
and give a bad name. Most rich men
supposed to be without any scruple.
orking men'll believe that before they
ll any good of 'em. 'Course, he's never
erated in here before, but I've always
ard him spoken of well by the few old-
ners I've known who worked for him. By
cks, come to think back, they all *liked*
m! It sort of looks, John, like our case
s a lot of angles!"
By livery team and through the night,
hn drove to Kampfest, all his worldly
ssessions in a pack-sack, a new and reso-
te purpose over-riding the undertone of
rrow and misgiving in his heart.

JOHN was the first to enter Paul Gor-
bel's office after he had seated himself
his desk for another day's work.
The man looked up, and if he experienced
ny reaction other than surprise he covered
well.
"Of all things!" he exclaimed. "John
elknap! Where'd you come from?"—
ising, and extending his hand.

"Don't get up!" John ignored the proffered clasp.

"Well, you're about the last person I expected to see walk in here this morning!"

John looked at him with close scrutiny as he said: "Yes. That's easy to understand." He thought the man's face changed a trifle. "I didn't figure that you'd expect me."

"Up from Chicago?"

And now a decided, but still subtle, alteration was in the eyes; Gorbel seemed to be steeling himself, rallying all his quick wits to an emergency.

"No. I haven't been in Chicago for over six weeks. I've been at Shoestring, running the Richards job."

"Shoestring? Richards?" His counterfeit of amazement was splendid.

"Why, yes. Didn't you know, Gorbel?" Pause, while John scrutinized the other in open hostility. "I supposed, of course, you knew that I'd been there, using the name of John Steele and trying to pull the operation out of the hole it's in."

And now a faint, faint trace of color started to climb the man's cheeks as he resumed his chair and gestured towards another. But John did not sit down. He stood there, staring hard at his father's partner.

"Someone in Kampfest tipped Miss Richards off to the fact that I hadn't dared use my father's name when I struck her for a job. I was let out yesterday, a bit discredited!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" breathed Gorbel and John's temper flared.

"Forget it!" he snapped. "I'm coming clean with you; be man enough to do as much with me!"

The other was on his feet again, faint color deepening.

"Look here, John, I don't know what the devil you're driving at!"

"Then I'll give it to you: I blundered into a mess over yonder. I found out that a lot of desperate things were being done in my father's name. We'd had a little difference, Tom and I, and I welcomed the chance to hit back at him. I hadn't been on the job long, though, before I realized that what was being done wasn't the sort of plan he'd follow or countenance. Somebody else was behind it, screening himself behind the Belknap name!"

"Good lord, man! And you're insinuating that I know something about—"

"Know! Know? Why, I heard you make threats to Miss Richards, just a moment before I tossed you out of her office in December!"

The other swayed a bit and the flush of temper yielded to the paling of fear.

"Yes! I thought so!" John muttered. "Let's come clean with each other, Gorbel! From now on, let's fight in the open!"

"Fight? That what you're here for? A fight?"

John pondered and a hard smile flickered about his lips.

"Not unless it's forced, Gorbel. I'm here . . . on guard, maybe. In the first place, I'm going to stick right here in Kampfest and keep my eyes and my ears open. If unexplainable things keep happening to the Richards outfit, I'm going to take on the chore of explaining 'em! If Ellen is let alone to make a go of the job—which she can do now with a fair break—you and I'll get along splendidly; if not . . . then there'll be war!"

Gorbel summoned a sort of laugh.

"Sir Galahad, eh?"

"If you choose. Names don't count, now that I've got my own back"—bitterly. "We understand each other, I guess, and all that's left is for you to give me a job."

"Job? After you've made a play like this?"

"Of course a job. You're advertising for men; you're hiring men every day. I can't just mount guard over you and do nothing else. Or are you afraid to have me around?"

Gorbel's mouth twitched.

"A job as an assistant, I suppose?" he asked mockingly. "Or perhaps you'd like to take my place!"

"Don't be foolish! I expect nothing from you, not even quarter now. Any job . . . a job in the woods, in the chemical plant, in the mill . . . I don't give a continental where I work or what I do!"

The other lighted a cigarette with a hand that was remarkably steady.

"Listen here, John," he began. "You've been guessing at a great many things; you've gone off half cocked. What you heard me say to Ellen Richards can be explained. It had nothing to do with your father whatever. I . . . I may have overstepped a trifle in a . . . in a deal that's entirely outside my obligations to this concern; but nothing more than that. It's my affair. I'm not going to even try to start to explain in the face of such a[n] attitude—"

"Explain? Who the devil's asking an explanation. Where and when answer the advertisement you've been running in local papers for men?"

CONFLICT in those eyes before then! Fright and caution and flickered in their depths.

He shrugged. "Very well. Have it your own way. If you want to go to work common laborer, good. But I don't what's open. You might ask McW the mill foreman. If you'd be reasonable I'd make a place for you, but not . . . No, sir! Not now!"

"Fair enough, Gorbel! That's the decent impulse you seem to 've had I came in. I'll find McWethy. Good ing!"

He walked towards the door without much as another look.

When he had gone Paul Gorbel jabbed out his cigarette with vicious movements. His bland face was clouded, lips set. took the desk telephone in his hand pondered a moment; then called the foreman.

"McWethy," he said, and his voice in it no trace of the emotions reflected his face, "young John Belknap is coming down to ask for a job. He's had a row the old man, I take it. I think you'd better put him in at the bottom. Start him the pond crew. Fire somebody if you to."

The girl, Marie, came slipping into room as he hung up. Her eyes were wide.

"My gosh, it worked!" she whispered.

"Worked!" Gorbel snapped. "I'll say worked!"

"What's the matter?" — approach "Did he guess where the letter came from

"If he did he neglected to mention That's no matter. He's guessed the rack all right, and he's come here to work in mill so he can keep his damned eyes open

The girl drew a quick breath but did speak.

"That'll raise hell!" he muttered. "A just when I was sure I had 'em tied up she'd have to sell to me. . . . Well"—wa a shrug. He began to pace the rug nervously. "Still, it may not be so bad in way. If I do let up now, won't she think her finding out about his game had some

ng to do with easier going? That might an advantage. I'll need all the breaks an get now"—glancing at the calendar. he old man'll be on his way back in a nth. . . . Maybe it won't be so bad ving the kid here under my thumb! And erything's tied up, sewed up. He can't sure of a thing. All he'll have is his mned suspicion!"

"Don't be too sure. If he ever tumbles the North Star deal, look out!"

His head jolted forward truculently.

"What do *you* know about North Star?"

"I haven't been a stenog in lumber offes for five years without learning my ay around!"—heatedly. "It's all right you get away with it. I'd sooner see you o-time a rich old geezer than to throw e harpoon into a girl. But this John Belnap's no dumb-bell. We knew that down Chicago; you should know it up here. nd if he gets inside this office and gets e same bee in his bonnet that I've got it's e old ball and chain anklet for you, big oy!"

He wiped his forehead irritably.

"You know too damned much."

She flushed beneath her make-up.

"I didn't know enough once, it appears! believed you and kicked my chances in hicago over to trail up here. What've I ot? Promises! More promises! All I et—"

"And a fur coat, and a car, and enough resses to stock a store; and—"

"Which were only a part of the bargain!" he put a hand on his shoulder and a hard anxiety showed in her wide blue eyes. Paul! Don't be a goop. Don't try to hog t. Don't try to run a racket on old Tom. 've got a stake in you now. I may fly off he handle now and then and say mean things, but . . . Paul . . . I'm crazy about you all the time!"

Her mouth trembled.

"Good girl!" he said absently, and kissed her. "Don't fret. I've done pretty well for myself so far. I know about where I'm going, even in the dark!"

She wiped her eyes and her weak, pretty, unstable little face regained its composure.

"John Belknap, workin' around a mill!" she breathed. "You can't beat it, not with a drumstick!" She started for the door, slowly. Hand on the knob she paused, reminiscent look in her eyes. "My gosh, the thrill he used to give us girls when he walked through the Chicago office!"

CHAPTER XVII

AND now a young man, scion of great wealth, who had come into the country to create furor by meeting disturbance with disturbance, by demonstrating his ability as a logger to the satisfaction of everyone who came in contact with him, was at work at lowly labor.

In calked boots and his heavy clothing he toiled ten hours each day about the hot-pond of the property which his father shared with Paul Gorbel.

His immediate superior was a Swede, hailed as Ole, whatever his name might be. His job was to help keep logs going from pond to saw floor as rapidly as the mill reduced them to lumber.

Cars came in alongside the rectangular pond on a track tilted towards the water to speed unloading. The crew tripped the patent stakes, let the loads roll from the cars and bounce and rumble down to the water, kept free of ice by the nigger exhaust. When the logs snarled and tangled on shore, John worked with a peavey, prying them free, rolling them on down. Then, with pike-pole, from shore or from his stand on other logs, he helped tool them to the foot of the slide with its endless chain which gripped and dragged them upward to disappear within the mill.

He lived in the company boarding-house, a modern, clean, well-managed establishment. He spent his first evenings in the company recreation hall, at checkers with other men, playing pool or bowling, watching moving pictures.

As he toiled during his shift he was helping man the most efficient sawmill that ever had been built; as he went to and from his work he passed a chemical plant which was the last word in equipment for the utilization of forest growth that would not serve as raw material for other products. He could see, protruding above the snow, foundations for the building which was to be an experimental laboratory to determine finer usage of what came from the camps. On a hill at the town's edge stood the trim, well-equipped hospital.

And all this he had helped plan. During vacation periods at home he had sat late at night with his father, listening, suggesting, on fire with the purpose of high industrial adventure. Of all this he had lived and worked to be a part, but no such part as he now occupied.

But bitterness on that score had no place in his heart. He was grave, determined, intent; all ears and eyes and memory. He mingled with the men to find that they liked and respected Paul Gorbel; the managing partner had a name as a fair-dealer, a benevolent employer. Only vague echoes of trouble at Shoestring had reached Kampfest.

During those first days and nights he was only another man, one of hundreds, and accepted as such; but towards the end of the week his checker opponent—Foote, a lumber inspector—said casually:

"You know, Jack, they're saying your name's Belknap."

"It is."

"Are *you* old Tom's boy?"

John admitted it.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" the other laughed and turned away.

As his identity became known it brought some incredulous looks, some good-natured scepticism; and soon thereafter he had a distinct feeling that his standing was not what it had been, that now and again a man laughed at him, a bit sneeringly. He wondered about this; set out to find a reason. Inadvertently his boss, Ole divulged it.

"Big fella like you shouldn't take a spankin'," the man said with a familiar, fatherly chuckle.

"Spanking? Who's spanking me, Ole?"

The Swede laughed again. "We ban get lots o' noos, Yohn. Don't try to run away from ol' man again!"—waggling his head and grinning. "Don't try to do what ol' man don' say to do. Big smart fella laak you shoult be all dress' oop; shoult have slick job in office, not work laak Ole! Better should mind ol' man nax' time, eh?"

So that was it! The story had been spread that John Belknap, son of the chief, was being punished for misbehavior. He knew the handicaps under which the owner's son is placed in association with employees; this was the sort of tale well fitted to turn their first friendship into ridicule.

A distorted report of what he had done went through the town. He had been kicked out by his father; he had gone to work for the Richards Company; he had stolen some of his father's logs, had been discharged and ordered to come to Kampfest where he could be under the watchful eye of Gorbel. The son of the boss was being disciplined. . . . Well, let it ride! he decided. He had more important to think about than what people of him.

Still being this particular sort of a was unpleasant. It was the man Bax brought his status home to him mo ibly. This was the man who, Richar believed, had been brought in t trouble and whose rumored coming t string had set the stage for John dramatic entrance into that town.

John had singled the fellow out night in the recreation hall. A great, shouldered, thick-bearded ruffian, always seated by the fireplace, spitt piously, boasting to the younger a stable men. His tongue was vile, great, and though his job was only helper in the repair shop, John thoug the man bore himself with a greater of confidence than his mere physical ority and his station warranted.

He passed the fellow and his grou night and heard him mutter:

"Takes a lickin' like a yellah dog!

He knew by the turning of heads the words were about him. He did n it but gave no indication of having Let that ride! Let everything ride his sole objective!

IT was on Saturday that Nat Brad drove up before the Belknap & C office, blanketed his team, tossed awa cigar stub, and went casually up the and into the manager's office.

"Howdy, Paul!" he said cheerily.

"Oh, hullo, Sheriff!"—those eyes c ing ever so slightly. "Cold!"

"Kinda. Time of year for it, anyh

"Have a chair. What can I do for y

"Oh, I've got a letter from the wi one of your boys here"—fumbling i pocket. "They've had a row and he's h out and left her with a coupla kids don't send her money regularly. I dered if you'd have a talk with him."

Gorbel leaned across the desk to se letter, perhaps a bit over eagerly, as relief.

"Anything I can do, of course. Wh he? Oh. . . . I'll look him up and a talk with him myself."

For several minutes they discussed case, Gorbel obliging, suave, offering to any lengths to help settle the matter.

"Fine of you." Nat started to rise. by the way! Seems that this feller

t up the Richards stable's got a brother
n below. He had some kind of fraternal
rance that was void if he met death
e drunk. They've written in about it,
company. I s'pose they've got a right
he facts."

e was eyeing his cigar now, but he did
miss Gorbel's slow shift in his chair.
could not see the man's eyes, but he
ld feel them, prying, prying . . .

Why, that's only right. I don't like to
t a family out of what might be due,
ugh."

But he *was* drunk?"—looking up
nly.

So soaked he couldn't or wouldn't
k!"

And you knew it and gave him the
"

Yes. Just as I told you."

And that was after supper?"

No. Just before. I told him to get out
t thing in the morning, but I got under
skin, I guess. I didn't see him after-
rds."

That's right. You told me that before.
u don't want to write a letter to the
urance company, then?"

Gorbel cleared his throat again.

"No. I don't. But if they'll make an
vestigation, I'll tell them what I know
course."

"But you didn't see him drinking, did
u?"

"See him! Sure! He was just emptying
bottle out by our gasoline cache when I
ught him!"

"I see." The sheriff sighed and stretched.
s he leaned back, quick alarm rode in
aul Gorbel's eyes. "Well; get along, I
ess. I'll tell this lodge to make their own
vestigation, then."

"That's only right." Gorbel was on his
et now, toying nervously with a pencil.

"Drop in again, Nat," he said.

"Will. S'long."

So far Bradshaw, whose wits were no
atch for Paul Gorbel's agile mind, had
ade no betraying blunders. He had led
is man on, a step at a time, as John had
lanned he should do, and had gained one
ny step this afternoon. But he did the
rong thing next. He drove slowly away,
ot towards Shoestring, but down towards
he mill. He stopped his team again and
alked across the street and Gorbel, from
is office window, watched.

An hour later when McWethy, the mill foreman, came in with his daily report, Gorbel met him in the hallway.

"What was Bradshaw prowling around the mill for?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, I guess. He stopped in to chin a minute and went on out."

"Didn't talk to anybody else?"

"No. . . . Oh, yes. . . . He did go over and visit a minute with young Belknap."

Gorbel turned abruptly into his office and stood beside his desk, biting a lip, frowning. Marie opened the door.

"Going to dance to-night?" she asked.

He whirled on her, raging.

"Good lord, Marie, do you think all I've got to do is *dance?* No!"

She bridled at his tone.

"Well, you needn't be so rough about it!"

"And you needn't nag day after day!"

"Sa-a-ay!" She closed the door. "Needn't nag, need I?"—approaching. "I suppose you *have* got a full evening. Going to drive over to Shoestring?"

"I haven't been in Shoestring for a month!"

"You lie!"

"Don't you tell—"

"You lie!" she cried again, cutting him off. "You were over Wednesday night and tried to see this Richards broad and got a door slammed in your face!"

"Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"I'll see what of it! I've been lied to and double-crossed and strung along about long enough! I'm"—voice dropping to a curiously controlled level—"I'm about done."

"Any time you're through, then, just say the word!"

She turned and went out, slamming the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOHN BELKNAP did not go townward with the rest of the crew. He turned in the other direction and followed the road past the last lighted habitation. The sheriff was there, driving his team slowly up and down, waiting.

"Get in," he said gruffly, and lifted the robe to make room beside him.

Settled there beside the hulking figure, John listened attentively while the sheriff told what he had to tell.

"It ain't so much," he said, "but he admitted he was out by their gasoline drum

with this feller. When we get the stomach analysis we'll know whether he's lyin' about the man's bein' boozed up or not. We should have that back here in a few days now."

"And what about the old job?" John asked, when he had finished.

"Smooth as silk! Saw Saunders this forenoon and he's tickled pink! Says that Gorbel has pulled off a lot of saws and that it ain't any chore at all now, to keep Ellen in logs."

John nodded.

"Which makes it look worse for me."

"How come?"

"As quick as I land there, hell starts to pop. When I'm discovered and sent up the road, trouble subsides!"—bitterly. "He's smart, Gorbel!"

"Smart in some ways!" he chuckled. "Was over in our town the other night; tried to see Ellen at her house. She wouldn't have it 'nd her housekeeper told how he hammered on the door and begged!"

John moved uneasily.

"He used to be sweet on her, all right, and it looked for a time, before her daddy died, like she was goin' to reciprocate, or whatever you call it. But it's different now. . . . Yeah, smart in some ways! He's made it look bad for you for a time but, Johnny, Saunders is for you, all ways; so are the rest of Ellen's boys. They don't understand it all, no more than you and I do, but they'd go to hell for you, every last one of 'em!"

"They would!"—warmly. "Bless 'em all, they would! . . . But . . . but Miss Richards. . . . She'll be thinking that I caused the trouble and when she let me go trouble went with me."

The sheriff nodded.

"Tough!" He turned to stare at John in the darkness. "I get you, son. Women's ways are hard for a man to follow. But I notice we keep tryin' and tryin' and sometimes . . . we get the hang of 'em!"

A world of understanding and sympathy and encouragement came with the tone and John left the sheriff with spirits higher than they had been for days.

HE was restless after his supper that night. This was Saturday and the whole town was gathering at the recreation hall for the weekly dance, but John had no desire for that sort of relaxation. In the first place, the attitude of the men was hurting him more than he cared to admit. Secondly, things bore too heavily upon his mind. But he was lonely as well as restless.

He found himself, despite his intelligence, strolling up the steps of the recreation hall. He stood looking into the room through the glass. The music, the fair, the place filled with young and old revelling in the amusement his father had provided.

Young he was, and lonely. And he stepped inside . . . just for a moment.

Couples swirled past. Girls and women looked at him significantly. He saw a whisper to her partner and the man turned at John and nodded and chuckled. . . . He was marked.

The dance ended. A man spoke to him. Ole came up, shaved, red of face, all dressed up in his celluloid collar.

"Yohn, how goes?" he asked, and the plump woman with the little ear-rings beside him grinned. "Yohn, dis my woman!"

Ole, anyhow, liked him! He shook hands with the woman and talked to her a moment.

He was conscious, while he visited with the blushing Scandinavian, of other eyes on him and when the two passed on he turned to see a girl watching from a spot near the door.

She smiled and he bowed, though he did not remember ever having seen her. She rose quickly, and came towards him.

"I guess you don't remember me, Mr. Belknap!" she said. "I'm Marie Vance. I used to be in the Chicago office."

"Oh!" he said, taken aback. "I guess it's one on me! In a place where there are so many good-looking girls, though, you can't blame a poor boy from the west if he gets confused, can you?"

She laughed.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Fourteen months now."

"In the office, I suppose?"

"Yes."

The orchestra struck up. Marie looked about and stood on one foot.

"Well," she said finally, "I guess I better get back to the girls."

"Oh . . . can't we dance, then?"

Her smile flashed. She had achieved.

He left his coat and cap on a chair and whirled away with her. Since leaving

versity he had danced little, but from first few steps he realized that this ographer was an exceptional dancer.

he turned her face towards him, very e.

I'm glad you came," she said.

So am I! This is the first time I've ced—"

I don't mean that. Ordinarily I'd have ome-back for you, Mr. Belknap. But on't feel like wise-cracking to-night. I ne here hoping I'd see you. I've got nething to tell you."

"Yes?"

"A lot"—and he felt her tremble against n. "A lot you should know; a lot your her should know."

"So? That's interesting!"

"It will be, but I can't talk here . . . And can't go out together. I've got to see u alone."

John was not very good at interpreting men. He was just a trifle wary now, d evidently she understood.

"It's all right. I'm shooting square. I'll ll you this much: I'm responsible for tting you out of Shoestring!"

"I don't quite understand," he said cauusly.

"I wrote a letter to Miss Richards, on ctation. Does that mean anything?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"And if I hadn't written that letter I ight have gone for a ride . . . or whatever ey do up here in the woods! If that isn't ough, I'll say this: somebody in Kampst has been scared stiff since you came ere. Things that had been going on be- re have stopped since you came into the icture. . . . Now are you interested?"

"Very much!"

The music stopped. They both applaudd vigorously. When the encore started he put her cheek close to his.

"I'll leave after the next dance. I'm ere with other girls from the office. I live n the third house after you turn right t the post office. You walk past a halfour after I leave and I'll be waiting in the storm house. When I see you, and if the street's empty, I'll open the door for you."

After a moment he said: "Fair enough!"

He didn't like this matter of clandestine meetings, of skulking to a rendezvous with a girl of this type. But she knew something that solved one problem, evidently. What he had to learn must be learned.

He waited through lagging minutes, heedless of the music and laughter and talk about him, sitting against the wall, heart thumping.

He went out and strolled down the street. At the dark post office he turned, swung rapidly along the sidewalk with its high piles of snow on either side, scanning the house fronts.

The third was painted white; it set back thirty feet from the street. As he came abreast of it the door of the storm-house, which, during the winter, protected the tiny front porch from weather, opened inward. He saw her standing there and she beckoned.

"Come in," she said, looking down the street, and closed the door, shutting them into the little cubicle. "All right, now"—speaking in a normal tone. "Old lady Vogle—this is her house—is deaf as a post. She sleeps like a log, too. If anybody comes up the walk here, you go straight through the kitchen and out the back door!"

"Why . . . Well . . . Who would come?" he asked, suspicious now.

"Paul Gorbel might come," she said.

"Oh! . ... Oh, Gorbel, eh?"

"Yes! And if he found you here with me he'd . . . he might kill me!"—dramatically, "He'd be afraid of you, but he'd never let me get away, knowing that I know all I do and after he'd seen us together. That's why"—more easily—"I can't take you up to my room. If he trapped us there—"

"In the habit of coming to your room, is he?"

"Yes," she said lowly. Then she lifted her face quickly. "I'm not going to try to put anything over on you, Mr. Belknap."

"That's generous, I'm sure. But . . . "

"I know this is a wild sounding sort of thing, but I want you to believe that everything I say is God's truth!

"It's a long story, Mr. Belknap. It's the kind of a story with a moral, far as I'm concerned, I guess." She laughed, a trifle bitterly. She stood close to him, shrouded in her fur coat, her face a small oval in the darkness.

"I'm coming clean. I've got to, to show you how I know these things, and to make you understand why I tell 'em to you. I've done my part up here. I've been given a dirty deal from the beginning!" And now her voice was coarse, unpleasant, filled with anger.

"Don't misjudge me, Mr. Belknap! Please don't do that! I was only a kid when Paul Gorbel commenced coming into the Chicago office. I was a typist there and he . . . well he's good-looking, you know, and he had money and he's got a line. It all started then."

John drew back. The story sounded so old. But as though she sensed this she grasped his arm and cried:

"Hear me through now! Hear all I've got to say! Please. . . . " Her voice caught and he felt a measure of sympathy for her.

"He propositioned me while he was in and out of Chicago, seeing your father about building the new plant here. He took me out and made his promises and . . . well, by that time I had to believe him if I was going to have any self-respect left.

"I was to come up here as his secretary. As soon as we could make good with the town, so there wouldn't be any gossip, he said, we'd be married. Well, we made good with the town. He's smart; I've been awful careful. We've got by. But, until now, I haven't heard any wedding bells! First it was the excuse of heading off gossip. Then it was something else again. . . .

"You see, everything had been between Paul and your father. None of the others in the Chicago office had anything to do with it. This plant isn't supervised and audited like the Belknap Company plants are. I never knew why.

"But a year ago Paul came back all in a huff. The old . . . I mean, your father wasn't just satisfied with the way things were going. He'd commenced to ask questions about the plant and the bank that were hard for Paul to answer. He came up himself, but he never found out anything.

"Now Paul commenced to figure that he was about through with your father. He'd gone as far as he could in getting stock in this company.

"All along, I'd had a feeling that he wasn't shooting straight with me. I hadn't been here a month before I was sure of it. It seems that he'd been trying to make this Ellen Richards for a—

"Surprise you?" she laughed as she felt John start violently. "Well, he had!

"It got under my skin, of course. A girl can't help it if she gets jealous, Mr. Belknap. I've never seen this girl, hate the ground she walks on!"

JOHN grimaced.

"Never mind Miss Richards," quietly. "Let's get on."

"Well, as I say, she didn't think so hot. She didn't have time for an but her job, anywhow, after her died. You see, the bank here had a their notes and Paul knew all abo affairs. He got his big idea about property last fall. I remember the hit on it. He had a lot of bank repo his office and I came in to find him r his hands and grinning the way h when he's got what you might call spiration.

"I'm not dumb! Not exactly! I wa and listened and put two and two to and found out his scheme. He figure the Richards Company was in such way that he could close it up in weeks if he could crowd it a little h He wanted to do that but he didn't until he heard your father was goi Europe. He counted the days un thought he was safe and then opened

She laughed, a bit nervously.

"I guess you know what happened. he did it, all on his own, and timed your father wouldn't get wind of wha going on before he sailed. He started ming up her railroad; he brought in Baxter to clean up on her men. He lot of other things that I don't know probably, thinking he could force the wall, buy at his own price and the could go over there as sole owner, lea his stock in this company in this ban security for the loan it would take to s the deal. Get it? He'd be free of Tom. . . . Excuse me! Of your fa then.

"Now I happen to know how he wo it. He let the story out—as he's a of doing—that your father was respons for all this. He spread that story pr cute, I'll say. But you, Mr. Belknap, of upset his buggy!"

She giggled and the manner betrayed tension.

"Then he found out who this John St was and you'd ought to 've heard him r He dictated that letter and I had to w it to Ellen Richards. When you showed here and went to work it knocked him a loop! He was scared stiff. He laid

ichards job and started in, tryin' to her again"—darkly. "The dirty e-crosser!"

'ell!" said John with his heart rapping bs. "Well, and it's about as I had it d out. He's played his own game, my father's cards and my father's !"

hat's it! But that ain't the half of it, !" Again her hand was on his arm, stood a bit closer, her face was just ath his.

he thing that got your father suspi- was how the lumber was grading. It ed up an awful lot of low-grade stuff. more we cut, the worse it seemed to Well, that's easy . . . if you're inside. y week, car after car of good Num- Two Common and better rolls out of pfest, billed to the North Star Lum- Company in St. Paul as cull! Yes, sir! can check on that!"—nodding. Her e was a bit hoarse now. "And that th Star Company is Paul Gorbel. . . . he'd kill me if he knew this! But it's "—desperately. "It's true, John. He's ble-crossing your father every day in week.

There's things in the bank, too. How h I don't know. I do know that he's pting a lot of North Star notes in pay- t for that good lumber at cull prices. other words, he's stealing Belknap & bel blind!"

He ended, breathing rapidly and John d there, so close to her, triumphant tions surging in his heart.

Don't you think I'm a double-crosser, n?" she asked.

Why no. A crook deserves nothing !"

Oh, I'm glad you think that way!" ain her hand on his arm. "And about . . . . You don't think . . . Can you derstand how a girl will trust a man?"

I do," he said, and meant it. He looked wn at her face, so close to his. "I'm ry," he said, and meant that.

Thank you, Marie," he said. "Maybe re are things I'll be asking of you later!"

But if he found out he'd k-kill me!" e sobbed, putting her face against his at.

Don't worry about what he'll do. He's o smart. . . ."

Don't you believe that, John Belknap!" e whispered, and he knew that she spoke w with honest conviction. "I've seen him mad! I want to tell you that he's got a temper that's hell itself! He's a very dangerous man."

"Then don't try to see me again. Just do your job and wait. If I have to see you, I'll write a note and let you plan the meeting.

"I'm awfully obliged. Good night!"

He went then, leaving her in the doorway. She watched him go and finally turned into the house with a sigh.

"Gosh!" she said. "Gosh. . . . As hard to make as a million dollars!"

In his room at the boarding-house John wrote a letter before he turned in. It was to Bradshaw, brief and to the point. And the concluding paragraph read:

> And so send the following message to T. A. Wolcott, St. Anthony's Trust Co., Minneapolis. He is an old friend; open his reply and follow any leads he may give you.
>
> "Please find out at once all you can about investors in and officers of North Star Lumber Co., St. Paul, also advise me of its local standing stop Send reply to Nat Bradshaw, this address.—JOHN BELKNAP."

CHAPTER XIX

PAUL GORBEL had not attended the dance. He had had other matters to occupy him. Neither had Baxter been in the recreation hall, though on other Saturday nights he had occupied his place by the fire and made his uncouth observations of women for the benefit of boys and low-grade men.

To-night he stood in the shadow of a lumber pile with Gorbel and took his orders. Big as Gorbel was, the other was larger, but he took those orders, snapped at him coldly, with grace.

"But s'pose it kills him!" the man muttered.

"So much the better!"

"Good God, Gorbel, I don't want to kill any of old Tom Belknap's!"

"I'm giving you your orders. If you don't go through with it . . . remember, I know who has your thumb-prints and your pictures."

The other made chewing movements with his lips.

"That crowds me, Gorbel. If anything goes wrong, I'll drag you down too!"

"And I'm, in a way, putting myself in your hands. Isn't that fair?"

Baxter hesitated.

"I s'pose I'll have it to do. You've got me in a hole."

"Good guess. . . . This week, remember. You've every chance in the world to get away with it."

AND so while John Belknap toiled at the hot-pond in a fever of suspense and excitement, death stalked him. Stalked him in the early portion of his shift and through its late hours, when darkness lay over the land and electric lights about the mill-yard cast their deep shadows.

Death stalked, waiting, skulking in those shadows. But this morning he was on the far side of the pond; that evening he worked close to another man of the crew. This day, one man alone could not handle the stake trips on the tilted, heavily laden cars; the next, the pond was full and no loads had been set it. . . . So on, until Thursday.

Thursday afternoon, then, with the yard engine setting in more cars; pulling out, leaving the loads on the canted track beside the pond to throw dark shadows beyond them. A prowler could come through the lumber yard then, and stand well screened to watch. He could stoop and look beneath the car and see the pond-men working. He could slip forward silently in the snow, squatting on the dark side of the trucks . . . waiting, watching. . . .

Lazy snowflakes were falling. The band-saw sang; the planer racketed; the edger and trimmers yelped sharply.

Across the pond was Ole, tooling a log slowly towards the slide where other workers were busy. And now around the end of the pond came John Belknap, walking swiftly, pike-pole over his shoulder. He was abreast the car now, and the man, hands on the trips, bent low to look beneath, saw his legs. . . .

A hiss of breath, a jerk with great hands and logs were careening down upon that man beneath them!

On the first stir, John looked sharply. He had a glimpse of stakes leaping from their seats, of a smooth beech log bursting from the chains that had held it, hurtling at him through the air, outrider of a score of others, rolling, bouncing, leaping towards him!

No place to go, there! He was squarely in the middle of that deck. Eight feet ahead would put him in the clear; eight feet backward, and he would be safe. But eight feet are . . . two strides. It man time to get under way. . . . Two with that first log already in the a

One other place, then; one other The place, the pond; the chance, enough movement to cheat that ava

Before the pike-pole which had his shoulder hit the ground, he dive dived from far back on the skids calks of his river-boots took goo He flung himself outward, hurtling gap between two logs in the pond strike them, to have that rolling come on him, would crush life ou had to make it!

Eyes open, hands extended, he c water. His hip brushed one log and went under, swimming mightily, he f first of the down-rolling deck touch Touch it! That was all. He had an opening. He had missed catas by inches. . . . And he was under th swimming, groping for a way out.

Ole had seen. With a cry he saw disappear. With a shrill yelp he lea a maple, danced along a hemlock, s over a trio of small birches. Close to the logs lay in the pond; scarcely roo a man to slip between them an there! He gauged the distance. He his pike-pole. He brought his wei bear on a high-riding log, and sho with all his strength, crowding it away the pole, shoving the one on which he in the opposite direction with his fee

"Hi!" he yelled. "Hi, Yohn!"

A bulging, a swirling. . . . An arm through; a face showed, and John Bel grasping a log, was choking and gaggi breath!

The excited Swede tried to drag him

"All right! Let me breathe! breathe!" he gasped, and Ole stood others came running.

What happened? Anybody hurt? was it? . . . Chattering then, as John panting, shaking with cold, dragged self out.

"All right!" he gasped, and then to "Much obliged. . . . Seemed to swim an hour looking for . . . a hole!"

"Py gosh, Yohn, you come by a now!" said Ole as, water streaming his woolen clothing, John made his wa shore across the logs.

He was shivering, hunching his shoul with cold, but he shook his head.

"Not now, Ole. Not yet!"

ers protested but he gave them no on except to growl: "Got something first."

manner excluded them, but as he l around the pond, under the slide nade for the car from which four nd feet of logs had rumbled down to e him, Ole put down his pike-pole ollowed.

the Swede rounded the half-emptied saw John squatted low to the snow. reful, Ole!" the boy cautioned, teeth ring. "Don't step in his tracks. Got ch?"

ging along so that his feet would not rate any of the traces there in the fallen snow, the older man drew es from his pocket and lighted one. e came in from yonder," John said, ing to lumber piles. "He stood there d that truck, a while; squatted down, Here's where his weight rocked up on alls of his feet. . . . Came over here afterwards went out that way. See e he ran?"

e match went out and Ole stared at in the gloom.

Who, Yohn?" he asked, puzzled.

Whoever tripped the stakes to let the down on me!" He laughed harshly. u didn't think they just *let* go, did you, "

Yumpin' Yesus!" breathed his com- on.

Hustle with the light now. Let's see t we can see!"

ogether they bent low over the tracks, e Ole struck a fresh match.

New rubbers, see, Ole? . . . See that brand in the heel? Old ones wouldn't e a clean mark like that . . . Heavy big man." Quickly he spanned the prints with spread fingers to gauge the ensions of the footmarks. "Long step- too! See how far he stepped when lit out for cover? Tall as I am, Ole."

he Swede was speechless until John, ing off into the shadows of the lumber d, involuntarily moaned with the cold.

Py gosh, Yonny, you come by a fire v quick!"

He went then, standing before open fire- in the boiler-room. The fighting light his eyes was something to behold, and he later changed from his half-dried thing in his room his movements were ck and sharp, possessing a distinctly dictive quality.

He did not eat. He went, instead, from store to store where foot-gear was sold in Kampfest. In the third and last place where he might find a clue the proprietor advised one to bet his life he had rubbers.

"New stock. Just opened 'em this week," he said. "They're the best buy for the money I've found and——"

John did not listen as the man extolled the virtues of his wares. He held a rubber in his hand, gazing at the raised star in the heel.

"Sold many?"

"Well, not many. Only two pairs, yet."

"Not now. Who bought?"

The merchant scratched his head and told him the names of his purchasers. The last man mentioned crystallized the suspicion that had been in John's mind.

THE recreation hall was accommodating its usual evening throng when John entered. He did not come as a pleasure-seeker, as one relaxed. He closed the door quickly and his eyes ran round the room, searching.

Baxter was sitting against the wall, a pimply faced lad grinning at him from one side; another loafer sitting bent far forward, elbows on his knees. He looked up, perhaps a trifle warily, as John approached. His hands were in his pockets, one foot crossed over the other knee.

"Put up your foot, Baxter!" John said sharply, coming to a halt before him.

The man started.

"Put up your foot!"

The toe of the dangling foot depressed itself; the leg stopped swinging.

"Who says so?" he asked truculently.

"I do. Put it up!"

"If you want my foot up," the man growled, drawing his hands from his pockets, "you go down and git it and——"

John did as he was bidden. He went down with a swoop and a crouch, a swing of his one hand, fastening on the man's ankle, a backward sway, dragging Baxter from his chair with a thud, a crash, an oath.

One leg in the air, held there by that hand, seated on the floor for a split second, the man gawped while his face flooded with ugliness. Other chairs scraped; feet thudded; men looked, and came scurrying.

John stared down at the rubber: big star on the heel.

"Thought so!" he said with a sharp nod and let the resisting leg go.

Baxter had started to turn over with a mighty heave of his great body as John relinquished his grip. His foot dropped and upset him again, but he came up with an agile scramble, cursing, clenching his fists, swinging in for the fight he knew would come now. . . .

But a man, even a fighting man, a bullying fighting man, doesn't wade in and crush a man who stands before him, mind on something other than fighting so completely that he pays no attention to your stance, your crouch, the drawing back of your fist.

Baxter remained poised, ready to strike, but not striking; ready to spring, but firmly on balance, facing the torrent of words from young John Belknap, who stepped closer, one hand, palm upward, extended in a business-like sideways gesture.

"If you'd put it up, it'd saved you being set down on your tail, Baxter. I wanted to see the bottom of your new rubber because I found a track in the snow a couple of hours ago and, put alongside of other things I found out, I figured your rubber made that print. You've got a reputation to uphold, I suppose, but hereafter when I tell you to do a thing I want you to do it!"

No fear, not even consideration of the man confronting him, was in the boy's manner, and though Baxter swayed backward as if to drive that poised fist full into John's mouth he did not.

"Don't get ready to fight yet!" John said, as he might have talked to an enraged child. "Maybe there'll be some fighting between us, but not until you've had your chance to get out of it."

"Chance!" Baxter relaxed, hands going to his hips, face thrusting close to John's. "Chance? Say, you got a lot of guts, talkin' of givin' *me* a chance to get out of fighting you!"

John nodded. "Yes, I have. Enough guts so you don't scare me very much, Baxter. And plenty to tell you what I've come to tell."

"Tell? What you got to tell me?" he demanded.

"This: A little history, first. Probably you've heard the boys saying that I came pretty near getting mine this evening out at the mill. A load let go and I had to take to the pond. I'd trusted those stakes, Baxter. They're the best paten[t] made.

In the fresh snow behind that [ding] a man's tracks. He'd come from [fraid,] lumber piles where nobody else [res.] for weeks. He stood for quite a [ver his] the shadow of the trucks; he stoope[d a you] there, to see what was going on [ually as] other side of the car. When the thi[. . Son] pened that he'd waited and watched [strange] tiptoed to the trips and let 'em go [when] he ran. . . ."

[fest at]

He paused a moment and his e[with a] the first time, smouldered. [ed the]

"He didn't get me, Baxter. I [here y] and found his tracks in the snow. [r asked] ured his foot; I saw the print of a [y pla] the heel. They were new rubbers. [r grow] yours. Yours have the star. I [] measured yours yet, because I want you a run for your money.

"I've got this proposition to ma[WAS] you weren't the man in those rubbe[Vethy] right here in Kampfest. If you a[s he] tain you weren't, *I*'ve go to be s[ot a] If you're here to-morrow night at th[?]" I'm coming in here and take your [eah.] off and measure it and if it's the sa[arn b] as that worn by the man who tried t[on't] pulp of me with saw-logs, I'm go[hy,] make pulp of you with the only th[ur m] know how to fight with! . . . These!"[nated]

He extended his hands, and [e?"] Smiled! [Never]

"Get it? I don't want to clean[cWet] man without warning. You've got a[e he] tation, I understand, for being a har[Vell,] Baxter, you don't know what a har[boss] is! That's all I've got to say. Good n[y wi]

He turned and in an amazed [bled] made his way towards the door. [s las]

"Say!" Baxter's hail was a croa[er.] John did not stop. "Say, you!" The[t ju] took a half-dozen paces forward and [ste] John, without turning, called out: [s th]

"To-morrow night . . . if you're s[tcW] town . . . if the rubber fits!" [lon't]

"I'll be here!" he shouted. "I[' w] waitin'!" [iny.]

"Why didn't you soak him?" the pi[. . .] faced boy asked. [gs l]

"Hell . . . he's the boss's son, ain't [The] . . . But the man, even while he made [Me] feeble excuse, appeared to be wonde['t] himself, why he had not crushed [nak] Belknap then and there. [n w]

He mumbled and grumbled and g[yo] balefully at men who came and went. [san]

well enough what they were think-
hat at last he had encountered fear
ding a man who had no fear. He
fraid, this Baxter; caught between
res. From behind, Gorbel, with a
ver his head, was goading; beyond
a youth who dismissed his threats
ually as he would brush at a buzzing
. . Something new, that was, some-
strange, something to be feared . . .
l when the way freight went through
fest at two the next morning a heavy
with a grain sack over his shoulder
ed the caboose.

here you want to go, Jack?" the con-
r asked.

y place. . . . Out of this dump!"
r growled.

CHAPTER XX

WAS at noon the next day that Mc-
Vethy, the mill foreman, hailed John
s he returned from dinner.

ot a new job for you," he said gruffly.
?"

eah. Barn boss."

arn boss!" John laughed.

on't it strike your fancy?"

hy, anything's all right with me."

ur man's took sick; seems like you're
nated to fill the hole. Ever run a barn
e?"

lever."

cWethy whittled off a chew of plug
e he spoke again.

Vell," he said dryly, "I guess you're
boss, anyhow." He stared through the
window a moment and then turned
oled eyes on the boy. "You most got
s last night, son. I heard you lay out
er. He hauled between days, but . . .
t just this to say"—grimly: "Watch
step!"

s that a threat or a warning?"

cWethy's heavy moustache twitched.
on't know anybody around this she-
who'd make threats against you,
ny. I don't *know* anybody who would
. . . I don't like the smell of some
gs lately."

Then you're trying to warn me?"

Mebby I'm goin' off half cocked, but I
't like the way things was arranged
ake it look like this shiftin' you to the
was my idea. It ain't. Mebby it's
your safety but lightnin' don't strike
same place twice. Until lately I've fig-
ured I was workin' for a white man but . . . things change, seem to. Or else wolves are slippin' off their sheep-skins."

"And you don't want to talk because you're just playing a hunch. That's fine, Mac. I'll watch my step!"

THAT night a letter was waiting for John, post marked Shoestring. Within was a single sheet of paper and written on it the words:

Meet me in the same place.—N. B.

The sheriff was there before him, driving his team to keep them from cooling too rapidly.

"News!" he whispered. "Here . . . Here's telegrams and a flashlight."

John took the messages and the torch from him, spread the sheets on his knees and snapped on the beam.

"Yeah. That come first!" Bradshaw muttered, leaning forward to see.

John read:

North Star Lumber Co. subsidiary to Mid-West Forest Products stop Latter incorporated year ago in Michigan stop North Star statement excellent and carries comfortable cash balance locally.

"Now when I got that," Nat said, "I telegraphed right down to Lansing. Read what *they* say!"

Mid-West Forest Products articles incorporated show Deman Hill pres. Paul Gorbel vice-pres. Agnes Hill secy. and treas.

The paper shook in John's hand.

"Now Hill," said Nat, "is Gorbel's brother-in-law. This North Star Company seems to be all in the family. What's the low-down, if it's any of my business?"

John told, briefly, what Marie had told him, and the sheriff whistled.

"Rimmin' your father all ways from the jack! If he *ain't* a crook!"

"Poor old Tom!" John muttered. "This'll hurt. If there has been anything he prided himself on, it was picking men. This is the first time I know of that he's gone away wrong. Finding it out'll be like poison to him."

"It looks, son, like you were doin' a whole lot to drain that poison out. What's happened here since you had your talk with this stenographer?"

The boy related yesterday's happening

and his change of work, and the sheriff grumbled in a rage.

"He's out to get you, Johnny!" he warned. "You do as McWethy says and watch your step. Dang me if I don't feel like I ought to take you out of here."

"Now?" John laughed. "Hell, Nat, we're just getting ready to spring the trap. No, sir! Have you heard anything from the University?"

"Ain't time yet, I reckon. They say it takes about a week to get a stomach analysis and the mail, with that stomach in it, was just about timed to hit a two-day blizzard they had below that tied everything up."

"Do you think there's a chance he might get scared and jump?" John asked.

The sheriff pondered a moment.

"Not much chance," he said. "He's got too much at stake to jump before he's sure trouble is on his heels. No . . . he won't jump."

John itched to be at the bank records, to know what they might reveal, but he could make no move in that direction without exposing his entire hand. So he waited.

It was Saturday night; another week was down. He was buying some necessary things when he met McWethy.

"Say, Gorbel 'phoned he'd bargained for another team to be delivered to-night or to-morrow," he said. "You'd gone when I come past the barn."

"All right; there are empty stalls. They can stand 'em in."

"Watchin' your step?"

"Every move!" And John grinned as the other twisted his head in grim approval.

He went to sleep dreaming of Ellen Richards, and woke with an empty feeling. . . . Hang on! he told himself. Hang on and keep going and you'll be able to show her how much of her trouble can be laid at old Tom's door!

He was out at four o'clock, wading through new drifts towards the barn to feed and water. This was Sunday. The teamsters would show up late and spend an hour or so giving their horses a good going-over.

The barn was silent; no one was about. He opened the door and reached for the lantern that hung inside and lighted it. The warm smell of the stable was strong. A blaze-faced sorrel turned his head towards the light and nickered.

He swung his lantern and looked to the left.

"Hullo!" he muttered.

A strange, black horse was there, halter rope dangling, eyeing head up. Coal black, night black a handsome creature, though the defiant.

One of the new horses, deli night, probably, and insecurely

"Well, boy, enjoying liberty asked, and slipping the lantern one arm advanced, hand extende the rope.

He should have been warned the light been better. He could tensing of the big animal's fra approached. He was wholly unpre the charge when it came.

With a squeal that stopped Joh with his lip flickering back over yellow teeth, with a greenish glitt ing to life in his eyes, the anim him!

He reared to his hind feet, sh head, and curled in his front legs and maim with those sharp-shod

SO QUICKLY did it happen, so quarters, that John could not run. To the left the outer wall him, without niche or corner with to use as sanctuary. To the rig other horses, and as the black squ one nearest danced and wrung his

All in a flash. In a split second swayed backward, not daring to t used the only weapon he had: the He swung it as the horse reared. the whole length of his arm and full in the creature's face as he p the downward pitch that would m ken bones and torn flesh.

The animal cried out as the lanter his nose. The glass broke with a cr a tinkling; the light went out. Joh vague impression of the horse goi ways, over against a stall partition quickly turned and fled.

He did not go far. Feet thudded him. The killer squealed again, John caught a stanchion in one ha swung himself in beside another ho black thundered on his heels.

"Whoa!" he cried, as the horse gave him protection kicked. "Whoa,

Against the faint glow from mi lights that penetrated the dusty w he could see the black there, sta crowding to get into the stall.

ked again and squealed and lunged as the black's teeth nipped his hip. vas up in the manger by then, try- uiet the one horse as the outlaw way, stamping.

od, a bit shaky, stroking the snuf- zle in the darkness.

of you, old fellow, to take me in!" and twined his fingers in the coarse

lack was standing there, waiting he thought, waiting like a surly ght wait for his quarry to emerge, g now and again. The other horses tless from the disturbance.

slipped through into the feed alley, pitchfork, walked along to the far the building and crawled through window into a box-stall, used for ses when occasion demanded.

tood against the door which gave stall row, listening. Then, careful little sound, he slid it open. That e retreated to the feed alley again oved along, trying to locate the horse. He found that the animal w standing behind a vacant stall, own, almost as though listening him-

iously John crawled through to the , standing erect, dragging the fork im. Then he stepped down and with stride, fork held before him, was in er-way, confronting the black.

u!" he cried, and leaped forward. animal squealed again. His hoofs he straw-padded floor as he gathered f for another charge. And then he out in pain as the fork tines raked e, as they prodded his chest, merci-

ck, you! Get back!"

could hear the savage teeth popping darkness, felt a fore-foot strike out torturing fork. But the animal re- tly gave ground.

the door of the box-stall John swung rk sideways at the horse's head to im. The beast bit and struck. He a stand, there, until John got the tine against the neck and shoved, and a scream the black yielded, turned he box-stall and thundered to a far r.

n had the door closed in a second, he hasp in place and drew a deep h. . . .

ow. . . . Something else to figure out!" he muttered.

The first of the teamsters trailed in as daylight drove back the shadows.

"Here, Tim; take a look at this pony, will you?"

The man came down behind the horses and John let down a window in the door of the box-stall.

"How 'n hell 'd he get here?" the man asked sharply.

"I found him loose, yonder."

"How'd you get him *here?*"

"Drove him in with a pitchfork."

"My God!" the man said. "That's old DeForest's renegade! What's that horse doin' *here?*"

John explained that the horse had been sold to Gorbel and had been delivered after quitting time last night.

"Gorbel bought *him?*" he demanded. "Cripes, that horse's been in this country for five years and DeForest's the only man who walks who can get near him and come away whole. You mean, Gorbel was thinking of *buyin'* him?"

John shrugged.

"That's the way I took it. Where does this DeForest live?"

"Three mile west and half mile south."

"I guess, so long as I'm running this barn, we'll try to do without him. What say?"

"If you want me around here; or anybody else who knows that horse you will! Why, it's a wonder he ain't killed a dozen men. And you handled him *alone?*"

Three miles west and half a mile south over sleigh roads, and an hour with DeForest; a long, haggling hour that got him nowhere. The horse trader, shrewd, truculent, was a hard nut to crack and his defiant story of an attempt at a sharp sale of undesirable property seemed to hold water.

Gorbel was spreading out dangerously, but he strengthened his defences as he went and it would be difficult to prove that he was even remotely implicated in either of these attempts on John's well-being. It gave a man something to think about!

As John went slowly back towards town he saw two people on skis a quarter of a mile away. He watched them for a time and made up his mind that it was Gorbel with Marie. They seemed to be watching him, too, although because of the glare of an early March sun on the snow he could not be sure.

On Monday morning he stood for the

second time in Paul Gorbel's office. The man turned on him a face that was lined now; hollows showed beneath eyes that roved a bit; eyes that had been so well controlled a fortnight before, so steady, so bland. But they would not obey the remnant of self-control that tried to direct the light in them this day. Uneasy eyes, they were, and the man's voice was slightly husked.

"You sent word by Mac Saturday night that you'd bought a new team," John said.

"Yes. DeForest came in and offered a bargain. I thought I'd let you have 'em tried out."

"Well"—dryly—"he just came in to take 'em back."

"So soon? You . . . you tried them?"

"One tried me."

"I don't understand."

"A horse was loose in the barn when I went in yesterday. He'd never been properly tied up."

HE spoke dispassionately and watched for change in the face before him; but Gorbel held steady now.

"Well . . . I don't . . . He should have tied him, yes. But . . . I don't get you. Did you send the team back because the man was careless on a detail?"

"Don't stall, Gorbel!" John cried, and the other straightened as color whipped into his face. "Don't stall another syllable. I'm here because good luck was with me!"

Gorbel shoved back his chair.

"What's the idea?" he asked thickly, rising. "I don't like this, Belknap, whatever it may be!"

"No, you don't like it!" Rage, now, had young John; had his eyes and his voice and his gestures. "You tried to frame me with a man once, and with a horse next. You——"

"Frame you!" His voice was a snarl.

"——have known for years, likely, about DeForest's outlaw black. If you haven't, it's the one thing you haven't known about this country! I found him loose in the barn. He tried to get me and didn't. My teamsters all knew about him; every man-jack of them knew that no sane man would buy the horse.

"I called on DeForest. You'd schooled him well, Gorbel. You'd probably schooled Baxter well, too, but I didn't bother trying to break him down!"

"Man, you're crazy! DeForest? An outlaw horse? Baxter? What the you driving at?"

The rigidity went from John posture and he laughed helpless

"You're good!" he said. "Yo you toad! Why don't you try to a man? You've guts enough to der, why don't you try it in Why won't you let——"

"Look here! I'm damned if I addled kid talk to me like th damned if . . . Murder? Fight body trying to harm you and yo ing to hand the blame on me? Now why in the name of heaven want to harm you?"

A quick warning flickered John's anger. Roused as he was, craft had not deserted him. P was now, using the fertile field of h when bars of caution are down, to what and how much John Belkna and the boy drove back his temper contempt, striving to match cunni cunning.

"I haven't the slightest idea," "But you don't want me here; yo ing to drive me out."

He thought a shadow of relief a in that face before him.

Gorbel let out a short breath of

"Drive you out!" he muttered. haven't even remembered you were the job a dozen times since you c But if you're not drunk, you're ins there's room here for neither booze nor madmen!"

"I'm fired, then?"

"Right now!"

John shrugged. "Your privileg said.

"And you'll get out of the co boarding-house to-day!"

"Also your right."

"And out of Kampfest, too!"

"Steady, neighbor!" John's rag passing; he was noting the anxiety other's tone now. "Little too far, tha staying in town, Gorbel. Things hav quiet in Shoestring since I came here. was my principal reason in coming I'll be in Kampfest, watching my st you try me again . . . in person, pl

He went out without another word ing the door firmly, and Paul Gorbel, ing there, eyes on the door, let a ha slowly to his chin, fingers fumbling the flesh there.

ood so for a long interval. Then a bit unsteadily, he crossed the nd locked the door. Fists rammed ockets, he paced the room while e pricked out in tiny pearls on his

was riding the man now, fear and tion. Not fear of the possibility hn Belknap might be able to prove against him through either Baxter Forest.

ther fear gnawed at him, had been g him for days, and something about elknap's attitude made him feel that was not thinking wholly of his own He had had the manner of one who more than he tells, of one who is g, with all confidence, for a remend-oment. . . .

l Nat Bradshaw had been a bit too the last time he came. His eyes etrayed a flicker of guile when he of the fire in the Richards barn; nother time he had come he had gone this office to the hot-pond where John ap worked!

years Paul Gorbel's conscience had roubled him; he had taken what he take, by fair means or foul, escaping tion but piling up in his own heart a ulative burden of fear. He had not tted that fear even to himself until , and then, like a festering wound, it commenced to swell and throb.

had thought the pounding in his ears the heavy beating of his heart; last it had been like the fall of collective . . . thudding in awkward measure as marched in lock-step! . . . Last night and young Belknap knew more than he said. . . .

e halted in mid-room and looked about one trapped. Then he went to his , opened a locked drawer, and slipped pistol that lay there into his pocket. r a time he unlocked the door and went ugh the motions of functioning as a aging partner.

CHAPTER XXI

AND over in Shoestring Ellen Richards was going through the motions of performing her daily tasks.

Evidence of strain was heavy upon her, different sort of strain than that which racked her when the man she now knew be John Belknap came to her employ. Matters had eased in the woods; the Belknap & Gorbel operation on her railroad had slowed down on log production; her transportation facilities had been able to take care of both jobs handily; a reserve of logs was growing in her yard; the dark clouds which had hovered over her business affairs were seeming to lift . . .

But things had happened to her which robbed this turn of events of any joy; things which wakened her from sound sleep with heart racing, with a feeling of having called out in her dreams appealingly to the man who had come into her life and gone out of it again, leaving the job in order but her life in chaos.

Yesterday the woman who kept her house had declared her ill. This morning the old bookkeeper had eyed her over the rims of his spectacles and said one word: "Peaked!"

Walls seemed closing in about her. A breaking-point was near, and suddenly she wanted to run away . . .

To run away! She found herself on her feet in the middle of the office, rising so quickly that others looked sharply. Then she laughed, dryly and briefly, and passed a hand across her eyes.

The bookkeeper left his high stool and drew his spectacles down low on his nose again.

"Ellen, you're comin' down with something!" he declared. "Sakes, but you do look peaked! You better go home an' rest."

Home? To lie there in the room where she dreamed tenderly at night of a man who was her worst enemy? Home?

Not home! A girl can't stay in the theatre of heart-break when her nerves are rubbed raw and drawn singing tight, can she?

"Tell the barn to hitch up the drivers," she said. "I'll have them take me out towards the Mad Woman. A day or two at Wolf's is what I need, I guess."

And so she went, driving briskly out of town, north and eastward, along a deeply rutted road, dressed for the woods, a light pack-sack and snow-shoes stowed behind her, eager to be afoot and trudging the dozen miles that lay between the end of this road and the trapper's camp. Bodily exertion might ease the tension in her; she could walk until she dropped, and, perhaps exhausted physically, she could sleep without dreams.

CHAPTER XXII

A BAD day for Paul Gorbel was drawing to its close, with light snow falling outside.

He had changed to his woods clothing at noon, intending to drive to one of the camps. But fear held him in town. He prowled the mill and the yards; he was in and out of his office a dozen times, curt to his aids, savage to Marie when she came in.

The girl tried to elicit an explanation of his mood, but he would not talk, and she left him in a huff.

Dusk now, and the approach of closing time. He sat brooding, planning how he could flee the country if flight became necessary.

A cruiser came in, dropping his pack in the hallway. He had been to the northward for a fortnight, and Gorbel appeared to listen while the man made a brief report of his activity and his findings.

"Didn't expect you back so soon," Paul said.

"Nor would I've made it but for findin' old man Richards's cabin empty. Run on to him headed east with his outfit after wolves that are raiding the Caribou deer yard . . . so he said. The old devil! I knew he'd camp over there until he'd got the wolves or used up all his tricks, so I moved my stuff down into his camp."

The man chuckled.

"He wouldn't take anybody in when he's at home, but it's all right with him if folks use his camp when he's away! He don't even lock up. I didn't have to spend most of my time goin' from camp to timber."

The mill whistle blew then; in the back office chairs scraped and feet sounded.

"Another day," Gorbel said. "Come in tomorrow and we'll go over this matter again."

The woodsman left.

Clerks passed his door and went down the steps; companies of men from the mills passed his windows. He sat there, with the light turned out, belly aching from nervous tension.

And as the street emptied itself of pedestrians bound for their evening meals, a team pulled to a halt before the office, and the big man on the seat of the light sleigh kicked robes from about his feet and rose. Inside Gorbel grabbed the corner of the desk as if to rise but he did not; instead he just sat there, strained for waiting.

A tie strap went about a sounded on the steps, in the co

They paused outside the d knuckles fell on the panel.

"Come in!" Gorbel said, tr snap and curtness into the wor emerged hoarsely, unsteadily.

The knob turned and Nat big hulk showed in the gloom.

"Oh!" he said. "You, Gorbel

A question, but he was cer identity of the one sitting the to rise now. It was not the c going voice of the man he had was crisp, cold . . . as cold as racing Paul Gorbel's spine.

"Hullo!" he said, fighting f control, telling himself that he w misgiving, that nothing could pened, that he had planned ever well. "Hullo, Nat! Just leavi

He was on his feet as the o the door behind him. The sher advance but stood there, sayin sliding his hands into his pant feet spead, back against that d

"Then I'm just in time," he s

Pause. Those eyes were stu through the darkness, Gorbel k were cold, as cold as the voice; praising, official eyes.

"What's up, Nat?" he asked. what've you come for . . . this ti

Guilt had his strength, his s sion, his courage now. Guilt whi carried for weeks; guilt streng panic. He was giving himself aw faltering speech.

"I've come for you, Gorbel!"

"Me?"

"Yeah. You . . . finally!"— fell heavily.

No fancied corner now! No tr up of the fabrics of guilty imagi closing on Paul Gorbel. This wa

"Why . . . why, what the devil driving at?" he demanded, rallyin of bluster.

"Turn on your light and I'll re

Light! Light, with the sheriff there against the door, suspicious for any emergency?

"They're burned out," he lied. blew just before you drove up. . . do you mean—you'll read why?"

He could feel the other's eyes st

watching every move of his silhouette
nst lights from across the way.
've got a warrant for you, Gorbel,"
sheriff said slowly. "It's for arson."
paused.
Arson!" Gorbel's voice crackled.
Yeah. Ain't a pleasant word, is it?
t a pleasant crime, neither. Bad as
der, Gorbel. You overstepped yourself
our story. The University says the lad
put in the way of bein' killed hadn't
drinkin' for long. . . . Put on your
and coat; we've got a drive to make."
Look here, Nat! . . . Why, there's some
take! There's some devilish mistake be-
d this! Arson? . . . Good God, Nat, you
't——"
I don't aim to visit with you, Gorbel.
t on your *coat!*"

THE sheriff was advancing now, hands still in his pockets, coming towards n, an indistinct hulk in the darkness, a untain of doom moving down to smother d bury him, and bitterness was rising in e sheriff's heart, a contempt that must voiced.

"I don't aim to visit with you. I've got u cold, Gorbel! For a long time you've oled us all, but that's over now. I'm ad I'm sheriff of this county to-night to ke back to my jail a fire-bug, a skunk!"

Lights danced before Paul Gorbel's eyes, ough there were no lights. A roaring unded in his ears.

He turned, as if to tear open a window d jump, and a great hand caught his m.

"No you don't! If I have to, I'll——"

The man shrank in the sheriff's clutch, ied to tear away. He tugged at a hip ocket.

"Let me go!" he screamed. "Let me go!"

"No . . . you've gone: to the end of your ope, and if——"

The pistol came out. The stream of fire as short, barely the span of a man's and, so closely was it held to the sheriff's reast. The report filled the room, and hen, as Gorbel felt those stout fingers oosen on his arm, the sheriff drew a long, etching breath. . . .

"Shot!" he muttered. "Shot . . . and . . . and——"

He threw out a hand awkwardly for support and dragged a chair over with him as he fell against the desk. . . .

Paul Gorbel was at the door, springing the lock. He drew it shut behind him. He went along the corridor and down the steps with breath sputtering through set lips. . . . Inside, the man on the floor breathed heavily, trying to speak, to call out, fighting against the pain, struggling to rise; then slumping backward to lie and pant. But his eyes were open and through the low window he watched the lighted stores across the way.

CHAPTER XXIII

JOHN BELKNAP entered the boarding-house late for supper.

He had located a room for rent that suited him and arranged to move on the morrow. He had talked to McWethy, confiding a part of his suspicion against Gorbel, drawing from the man one or two leads that might aid in building up the case. He had visited, after closing hours, with the young cashier of the Bank of Kampfest, paving the way for following up the story of double-dealing there that Marie had told him.

As he passed through the office the manager hailed him.

"Long distance's been tryin' to get you all afternoon from Shoestring," he said. "And Nat Bradshaw was here, lookin' for you. . . . Oh, not over half-hour ago"—glancing at the clock.

"Did Nat drive back?" John asked.

"Search me. He seemed sort of . . . sort of glum, I guess. Didn't visit like he usually does."

John stood a moment, irresolute. Men were coming from the dining-room then.

"I'll look up and down the street for Nat," he said. "Likely the call was from him."

He stepped outside. He walked to the corner, looked towards the mill and could see a team standing tied before the Belknap & Gorbel offices.

It was Nat's team, he saw, as he came close. He scanned the building. The windows were blanks, reflecting only the lights from stores across the way.

McWethy approached.

"Mac, have you seen Nat?" John asked.

"No . . . that's his team, ain't it?"

"Yes. He's in town; was looking for me."

They stood, looking at passers, speculating as to the sheriff's whereabouts.

Inside that darkened office Nat Brad-

shaw, breathing painfully, heard voices drifting into his consciousness as though a dream. He was cold. His feet were numb. His hands felt lifeless. The only warmth about him was the burning spot in his breast and, as he tried to move, a fresh spreading warmth ran down his side.

He roused himself, fighting off the chill and the inner darkness which was fuzzy, like a soft fog. The voices were close outside there; men standing talking. . . . Men! He needed men. . . . An officer of the law, shot down, with a prisoner escaping, needs the help of other men!

He tried to call out but choked, and his throat filled with fluid. He strangled and reached an uncertain hand upward. The fingers found a leg of the overturned chair and gripped there. He pulled on the hand, he shoved upward with the other elbow. He raised his torso slowly, breath bubbling at the effort, until his eyes were above the level of the window-sill.

They were standing there, John Belknap and one he could not distinguish; standing talking, looking up and down the street. He tried to call out again, but his voice was drowned in that stuff which made his breath rattle.

He struggled against his weakness more determinedly. One hand was propping his body up. He let go the chair and groped the desk top with the other. Fingers tipped over a heavy ink-well and the liquid ran down his sleeve. He fumbled for it again, so clumsily, so painfully.

They were going now; those two outside were moving away . . . off somewhere . . . leaving him, when he needed men . . . when an officer needed help. . . .

The fingers had the ink-well. He drew the forearm up and put all the strength he had into the throw.

The heavy chunk of glass struck the broad window-pane; with an explosive crash it shattered and with a rasp and a tinkle big sections of it came sliding down, some of the fragments jingling about the sheriff as, gasping, he sank slowly back to the rug his blood had stained. . . .

On the crash, John and McWethy turned sharply.

" 'Y gosh! Somebody busted that window!" the mill foreman exclaimed.

Instinctively, both looked across the street to locate the source of this minor destruction. No one was there who would have flung an object to smash the glass. Men were coming towards them, attracted by the sound. A small boy ran across the road, wallowing through the drift.

"Busted!" he shrilled. "Hey! Look!"

He had stooped, picked something from the snow, and held it up just as he reached his side.

"Ink-well!" he said, and with the object in his hand, looked up at the window, brow drawn.

A group was gathering, questioning, exclaiming.

"That came from inside, Mac," John said quietly. "It was thrown through the window . . . and there was no light there. Come along!"

McWethy at his heels, John ran up the steps. The outer door was unlocked, but as he tried the knob to Gorbel's private office the latch resisted him.

"Gorbel?" he cried sharply. "Gorbel! Are you in there?"

He held his head close to the panel. McWethy gestured for silence to those who had followed.

"Gorbel!" sharply now. The silence in that room was ominous. "I'm coming in unless you speak!"

He strained against the door and thought he heard something like a light, low moan.

"Get back!" he said abruptly. "Give me room!"

He shoved them aside, poised and flung his shoulder hard against the door. The lock gave and let him headlong into the darkened office.

"Somebody here!" he cried sharply as he saw the overturned chair, the figure on the floor. "Where's the light. . . . Somebody hurt. . . . Here!"

The room flooded as McWethy turned the switch.

" 'Y gosh, it's Nat. . . . He's *hurt!*"

The mill foreman spoke shrilly. John knelt quickly beside the sheriff; he felt the wrist, put the other hand on the cold, wet forehead.

The head turned slightly beneath his hand; the eyes opened stupidly, dully.

"Nat! Nat, what happened?" John cried.

THE other seemed to be struggling to gather fading faculties.

"You're hurt, Nat? Who did it?"

He leaned low as the lips worked.

"Johnny! . . . Johnny, you came . . . back?" the faintest sort of whisper.

Yes, I'm here, Nat! What happened?"

he eyes were clearing now, as consciousness emerged from its low ebb.

Shot me!" Bradshaw whispered. "Shot . . . lung shot . . . Warrants in my . . . ket, Johnny. The stomach didn't have alky in . . . it. He shot . . ." A oxysm of strangling broke the words John wiped a crimson stain from the s.

Panting now, the sheriff, and a bright peration was climbing through the dull- s in his eyes.

One of his hands gripped John's arm htly.

"Listen. . . . You're . . . deputy now. . Warrant's in my . . . pocket. . . . Take gun. . . . Gorbel shot me when I . . . d him he was under . . . under . . . Unrstand, Johnny?"

"I've got you, Nat"—gently. Then, er his shoulder: "Call a doctor! Quick!"

He leaned low to the sheriff again as a an snatched up the telephone on the desk d gave a number.

"Nat! You have a warrant for Gorbel. ou came in here to serve it and he shot u down. I've got that. Do you remember how long ago it was? And what did e do?"

The brows on the suffering face were igh arched now, as the man fought for reath and strength. He panted through pen lips and his fingers worked on John's rm.

"Whistle time . . . minute or two . . . fter. . . . Don't know where he . . . went. p to you . . . Johnny. . . . Nev' mind . . . me!"

"We will mind you! That's the first hing we will mind, Nat!"

"Doctor's coming!" McWethy whispered oarsely. "On his way."

"Hear that, Nat? Doctor's almost here! The minute he gets in I'm after Gorbel."

He drew a pistol from Bradshaw's pocket and deliberated a moment, kneeling there, the sheriff's head on his knee. "Mac! Call the jail at Shoestring and tell them. Send word up and down the line that Gorbel's wanted!"

He saw the stares on the growing group of faces about him—incredulous, shocked looks.

"Nat had a warrant for Gorbel's arrest on a charge of arson, for planning to burn out the Richards camps," he explained bitterly. "And now there'll be another warrant, so help me Heaven!"

He addressed McWethy again:

"Get a team out on every road from town. 'Phone every Belknap & Gorbel camp and tell 'em to report Gorbel if they see him or they stand a chance of taking a trip with him! I'll go to his rooming-house the minute the doctor comes and——"

"Here he is!"

The physician was shouldering his way through the group.

"Don't stop at anything, doctor!" John said, letting Nat's head back to the rug. "Spend any amount that will help in any way if this case has got you stopped. You men stand by to help the doctor. Then report to McWethy."

He was gone then, running out of the building, along the street through the falling snow, around a corner and thundering up well-swept steps.

No, Mr. Gorbel was not at his rooming-house; he had not been there since noon. His supper was waiting. . . .

Look for the woman! The phrase was flashing through his mind as he ran along the street, passing men who ran in the other direction, towards the offices, scene of tragedy.

He rounded the post office corner and flung himself up into the storm-house where he had stood with Marie Varnell and listened to her story of Gorbel's duplicities.

His fists beat upon the door until the glass in it rattled. He heard a voice calling sharply, wanting to know who he was. He entered to confront the girl who stood on the stairs, a hand at her cheek, lips parted in something like terror.

"Where's Gorbel?" he asked sharply.

"My God, how should I know? What's happened? He came in here like a . . . like he was crazy! He said everything was all off and for me to get out of town and instead . . . and he gave me a dirty fifty dollars and said it was——"

She was sobbing, and he went up the steps to grasp her extended hand, showing the crumpled bill, and shake it.

"Steady, Marie!" he said. "I'm looking for Gorbel; I've got to find him——"

"And he wouldn't listen!" she screamed. "He gave me a lousy fifty dollars and said to get to hell out of town as fast as I could or they'd be after me, too!" She laughed shrilly.

John grasped her other hand savagely.

"Hold your tongue!" he cried sharply. "Hold your tongue, Marie!"

His roughness had the planned effect, shocked her out of the mounting hysteria.

"There's nothing at all for you to be afraid of," he said then, trying to make his voice sound reassuring. "I just want you to tell me what happened, Marie, and where he went."

She wiped her eyes.

"I'd been buying some things and was a little late getting home," she said unsteadily. "He came up the walk behind me on a run. He scared me, the way he looked. Oh, Mr. Belknap, it was awful!"

She shrank away, almost falling; he caught her around the waist and held her so.

"All right; he can't hurt you. Just tell me everything."

"What's he done?" she begged. "Have you got it on him? I never saw a man look like he looked!"

"I know! I know! But what did he say and do? Give me your story first!"

"He said it was all off between us! Everything was off, was what he said. He couldn't talk straight. He kind of stuttered. He swore awful and said I was in the jam along with him and they'd be after me and to get to hell out of town as fast as I could before they nailed me.

"He wouldn't listen to me, wouldn't tell me any more than that. He grabbed his skis out of the storm-house where he'd left 'em yesterday and beat it off across the tracks! Oh, what's happened, Mr. Belknap?"

"He shot the sheriff. Probably killed him."

THE girl drew back, freeing her hands, pressing palms to her cheeks and gave a long, shrill scream.

Footsteps then, as the deaf woman of the house came bustling from the kitchen.

Neither of the two on the stairway heeded her amazed face, her strained voice, lifted in bewildered query.

"Steady, Marie! Which way'd he go? Just where'd he cross the tracks? Tell me that! Hang to yourself a minute longer!"

But the girl was past giving him further aid for the moment. Slowly she sank to the steps, head falling backward. He gathered her in his arms, swung down into the living-room and laid Marie gently on a couch, while the old woman hovered over him.

"There's been trouble at the office," he shouted in her ear. "Look after her, and I'll be back!"

He had left the front door open when he burst in. The light from the hall streamed out into the storm-house. And there was there, a broom. A pair of skis leaned against the wall and, in a far corner, a pair of shoes. He grabbed them up and hurried down the steps, searching for tracks in the new snow.

Easy to find, these were, under the hall light. He saw where a man had come running towards the railroad; other tracks had followed and turned back: those were Marie's. The trail was distinct, but already filling with the light, large flakes. He was through the deep snow between the house and the railroad tracks, bending low to be sure he trailed this man. He saw where he had stopped, where skis had been dropped into the snow; where they had been scraped about as the straps were adjusted, where they had slid off to the northward. . . .

Off to the northward in the beginning but where after that? Already the falling snow was obliterating them. It was growing dark; in another twenty minutes, perhaps, traces of that fugitive's flight would be covered so thoroughly that in darkness it could not be followed.

Gorbel knew the country intimately. He could head for any one of a hundred points unknown to John, hide, wait out a careful combing of the territory and, perhaps, make good his escape. Another familiar with the forest might guess his destination but it would be only a guess . . . and there was a trail, something better than guesswork; but a trail being covered more effectively each second!

He was jamming his toes into the fastenings then, whipping the straps about his ankles. He stood up, wriggled his feet, started, bent low, moving at a swift walk, eyes on those twin depressions in the snow before him. . . .

Straight north the man had gone through a strip of chopping across a little lake and into timber on the other side. His skis had made deep grooves in the snow-mantled buckthorn where he left the lake but in the timber, with the trees shutting out even what faint light the night afforded

open, John could scarcely make out ression inches deep.

went as quickly as he dared, stoop- ow and then and with a bare hand g the snow before him for the betray- arks, better than half filled. Gorbel oing faster by far than he was; each onal mile that intervened between put an additional handicap on him.

sgiving and doubt commenced to rise n him; his mouth went dry as an ap- ation of the odds in this night's som- ame grew, but he could not turn back. might fall even faster, and by the he had returned to town for lantern ashlight or aid, the trail would be ly lost. But if he kept on he might work out of the storm and so long as as certain of Gorbel's direction, even gh he lose it eventually, he had gained thing.

e entered a thick growth of hemlocks re his eyes were of little aid, but of a len his rackets commenced to sink er into the soft going. A decided ge it was, and he retraced his way, ed forward and found that he could ct the trail beneath him by the feel of snow that skis had packed. He went shuffling along, feeling sign with his and when he emerged from the gloom the thick conifers he saw where snow been knocked from stiff brush. All ut, twig and branchlet was accumulat- its thick coating of flakes in the quiet ht so that they blended with the white kground, but a man, crashing through protruding branches, had knocked them e again and they showed dark against ground covering.

He was not through yet, not shaken off. e trail, his sense of direction told him, s swinging a bit to the westward, keep- to the open where skis would ride bet- , crossing a wide chopping coming up second growth now, where he could those creases in the unmarked snow d the barren brush that had been dis- rbed. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

AST MONTH, an assured schemer, in- tent on ruthlessly feathering his nest; last week, a panic-stricken vessel for reboding but clinging to the hope of ma- rial gain; to-night, a fugitive, casting pos- ssions behind him, intent only on that pitiful sort of liberty that is the meagre lot of the escaped offender against society.

Escape was the only thing that mattered to Paul Gorbel this night. Escape from the processes of the law, escape from the gates that, he knew, hungered for him. . . .

His self-control had cracked back there in the office where, for so long, he had planned and plotted. He had jumped from the frying-pan to the fire in that one insane second when his mind was centered only on dodging one charge which, with clever defense, might not even have been proven against him. He had shot without meaning to kill, intent only on the horrible fear which rode him.

But he had cast his die. He was far outside the pale of decent men now. He was running away, blindly at first, with the thought only of putting distance between himself and others.

To go northward was natural, for a man seeking solitudes. In other directions railroads and towns would be encountered. In this direction, though, only the wastes of Lake Superior lay and somewhere along its rugged shores or in the wide swamps inland he could find safe hiding. . . .

Only that was in his mind as he strapped on his skis and started at high speed. But a man's memory plays queer tricks in times of stress, renders service in odd manners. Why his mind should go back to his talk with the cruiser late in the afternoon was beyond accounting for. But he did think of that as he raced on, looking over his shoulder from time to time, cocking an ear to listen as he crossed choppings or threaded standing timber. He thought of his cruiser who had come in from the northward, with his casual story of having stopped at Wolf Richards's cabin and made his abode there in the trapper's absence . . .

Wolf's camp was the only habitation out yonder; the only habitation in all that country about Kampfest where travellers were turned away. For years men had known that when old Wolf was at home none was welcome to pass his threshold except Ellen Richards; he had denied shelter to men in savage weather. He had threatened with his rifle those who had insistently begged. His was a place to shun, a camp where succor was not available. . . .

But Wolf was gone now. He was out in the Caribou deer yard, forty miles away, the cruiser had said. He would stay there, too. Snaring or driving out timber wolves,

come to fill their winter-slack bellies on the easy living afforded by yarded deer, is not a day's work.

Richards's cabin, then, was sanctuary for a man who fled the law. Doubly so: going there would throw trailers off the scent; he would find a chance to rest; would take food and ammunition and anything else he might need for a long period of hiding. He could lose himself in great swamp fastnesses, perhaps; he could wait out the first feverish pursuit, keeping close to his temporary abode. Then, when the heat of the chase cooled, he could make his way to the westward, around the head of Superior and off into Canada. . . .

He was not an old man, not yet even in his prime. True, he would start with his hands again, but he had started so once and if it had not been for his avariciousness he would have possessed many of the things he wanted.

He ran a bit until the strain on his heart, already heavily taxed by excitement, forced him to walk. He looked over his shoulder every few strides, as he had looked ever since mounting his skis. He came from timber to a clearing and a man stood before him. He stopped, with a gagging sound.

"Who's that?" he asked, voice breaking. "Who're *you?*"

No reply. He laughed shrilly. The man was a fire-blackened snag. He went on, fingers working in his gloves, cold sweat making his skin clammy. Minutes later he halted again, thinking he saw someone running off to the right, circling to get in front of him; but it was nothing, a trick of his eyes, of his inflamed fancy.

"Hang on to yourself!" he growled shakily. "You've lost your head once tonight . . . that's enough. . . ."

The snow still fell, covering his tracks. He took a passing comfort in that. By midnight his trail would show only faint traces; by morning, if the wind blew even a breath, this light snow would shift and obliterate them forever. . . .

HE did not reckon that a man was already on that trail, coming slowly, painfully, groping at times with only his feet to find where a fugitive's weight had made two, parallel, narrow strips of firmer footing in the loose snow. No, he did not guess such a circumstance; no more than he dreamed that as he left Shoestring behind a lone girl was striking a m
Wolf Richards's camp, looking abo
nonplussed and then, with a sigh, se
for kindling to build the fire that
make this place, though otherwise
anted to-night, wholly habitable for

The permanent abodes of solitar
pers almost without exception fall i
of two categories: the meticulous
or the impossibly filthy. To the f
longed Wolf Richards's.

In this living-room, direct evidenc
calling was missing. A rifle and a sh
greased rags stuffed into the muzzles
upright in a rack. On the shelf a
store of ammunition reposed in
boxes, and beside them were a half
worn books.

An oil lamp with a glass shade p
blue gave light and, with the fire goi
place took on an air of comfort, of
for the troubled girl.

She put a kettle on and, unhookin
plank door at the end of the room, e
Wolf's fur loft, a windowless cha
filled with animal scents, and dragge
it a cot. Her own blankets were on a
before which hung a curtain of brillia
calico, and while water heated she ma
her bed, as she had made it many a
time when coming here to spend a
with the old recluse.

Lighting a lantern she went out t
root cellar, shovelled snow from befo
entrance and secured vegetables. Th
the spring for water. Returning, she
fully swept out the snow she had tr
in.

Good camper that she had been t
to be, accustomed to her uncle's co
and goings at any and all times, she
restless at finding herself alone in the
to-night.

Ellen began to wish she had stay
town. She tried to tell herself tha
must get hold of her emotions and
guided by reason. Out here, twenty
from the nearest habitation, there cou
no cause for this feeling of apprehen
which was rising . . . rising. She was
of the breed of women that fears isol
and loneliness. . . .

But even as she argued so, tears w
into her eyes.

She lay down on the cot, head pro
on one hand and stared at the rectan
of open draft in the stove, bright ora
from the fire within. Her brows

red as she fought against the weight tugged at her heart.
epless nights were in her immediate harried days had taken their toll. afternoon she had walked a dozen through soft going and her body was ed. She dropped her cheek to the kets for just a moment; if Wolf did ome soon she would undress, bolt the fill the stove with wood, and prepare end the night alone. . . . Just a mo- . . . And sleep came as Gorbel, two s away from that lonely cabin, cursed e thinning of the snow, at the faintly ed stars which began to appear in had been a void above him.

CHAPTER XXV

LLEN woke with a start.

The room was cold; her body stiff, but it was not the chill nor the ach- of her muscles which startled her from sleep.

ot these. . . . Rather the careful, slow king of a door hinge.

he lay perfectly still, gathering her fac- es. Her face was in shadow, for the p was behind her and the stove had long e ceased to throw glow through the cks between its castings.

Wolf returning? That was the first pos- lity which presented itself to her clear- consciousness, but immediately she soned that a man does not enter his own ne with stealth and caution.

A man was there, outside. She could his fingers clasping the door's edge, ld make out a segment of his face, prob- y watching her.

"Who is it?" she cried sharply, sitting and swinging her feet to the floor.

He hesitated, and she could see his fingers itch.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

She was standing then, covering her ght.

The door moved and Paul Gorbel half led into the room.

"It's I, Ellen. And what do I want?"— th something of a sneer, something of avado. . . . "What do I want?"—weak- ing quickly, oddly. "I . . . I came for u . . . for you! That's what!"

Over an hour ago he had come to a halt the crest of the burned ridge which swept wnward to the swamp where Wolf had built his cabin, the first objective in his flight. He had stopped with a gasp. . . . Twin rectangles of light showed down there, windows in a building, a structure which he had counted on being unoccupied. He had gambled everything on finding the place deserted and well stocked with the supplies a man would need for the bush in winter ready for his taking. And someone was there!

He looked about wildly, at the dark wall of swamp, at the bald ridge on either side, back at the way he had come. He was without food, without more than a pocket-knife as a device for procuring food and warmth because he had dropped his pistol back there in the office after his finger had pulled the trigger and drove him away from men and food and shelter.

To retrace his way southward was an impossibility; to the east and the west lay uninhabited country and, even had logging camps or trappers or settlements been in either or both directions, he would not have dared show himself. To retain his hold on liberty he must keep out of sight. This place was the only depot of aid and now, occupied, it must be passed by.

But a man cannot endure the wilderness in winter without food or the means of procuring food. He must have an axe and blankets; he should have utensils to make the food he could take palatable.

His knees shook and his breath came and went in light moans. Wolf Richards there . . . back home . . . a man who was impossible of approach, even had a traveller been free to approach any human being!

Wild possibilities raced through his brain. He might wait until those lights went out, wait until Wolf slept, steal into the house and take what he needed. He laughed at himself for the absurdity, the childishness of the plan. The man's sled dogs would tear him to bits. . . . If he had a gun, now, to shoot them down, one by one; he could shoot Wolf. . . . One more slaying would be nothing. . . .

He wondered why the dogs had not started their clamor. He had been this way before and on each occasion the beasts had set up a tremendous din long before he was this near. . . . He closed one eye, striving by that gesture of concentration to still his whirling brain. . . . If Wolf were home, his dogs would be home; if dogs were there, they should be raising the dead by now. . . .

But probably the occupant of that cabin was not Wolf Richards at all. Someone else had stopped there to-night, as his cruiser had been there last night. . . . Relief, with that thought, and on the heels of relief, dismay again. Anyone there, anyone who knew him, anyone observing enough to remember and to describe him would present a fatal hazard.

He started cautiously forward, wondering if the dogs might not be there after all, ready to begin their devilish barking. He stood a long interval at the edge of the timber, less than a hundred feet from the cabin, watching, listening. No dogs were there; Wolf could not be home. This was some other person. . . .

The soft snow covered all sounds of his progress. He could see snow-shoes standing against the log wall: a single pair, he thought; if so, only one must be encountered. . . . As he approached the window he held a glove over his mouth because he could not control the stuttering hiss of his breath. He edged along the building to the window, peering through the half-frosted panes. . . .

His heart stopped as he saw her lying there on the cot, and then raced wildly on again. Ellen Richards, the girl behind all this! The girl he had desired and, finding her impossible to possess, the girl whose property he had attempted to acquire through the scheming and treachery which had brought him to the status of a fugitive. . . . Paul Gorbel sank to his knees, gloating.

HE WANTED revenge in this moment! Wanted to make her suffer for the suffering which his fevered mind traced back to her now. He'd break her pride, her heart, her life, as his pride and heart and life had been shattered! And as he reasoned so his want of her became stronger than his aching for vengeance. He wanted her . . . wanted her. . . .

He looked up at the stars, mouth working. . . . Why not, then? Why shouldn't he take her, the last thing remaining of the life that was behind him? Why couldn't he take her, driving or dragging her with him into this new phase of existence which lay yonder . . . somewhere.

Gorbel rose to his feet, atremble with this new purpose. It was not good for a man to step out into the unknown alone. He could take this girl with him and ease his suffering by watching her suffer; could have her near him, someone familiar, someone desirable, to love, to badger, work for, to sneer at.

But after he had entered, after he had revealed himself to her, after he had made his first declaration, doubts began to assemble. She did not know what had happened back there in Kampfest to-night, but she would know some time. He had left town, by a way unknown to any other, and now he had put himself into Ellen's hands. If he should fail in this . . . if he should not be able to drive or drag her. . . .

And that was why his voice weakened, his fingers fumbled at his chin, why his eyes roved restlessly as he told the girl he had come for her and she only stood there apparently unafraid.

Apparently unafraid, yes, but her courage was solely a matter of appearance. Beneath that exterior she was aquiver with apprehension.

But she could not show that. Her will, alone, stood between her and danger. She needed her resources, unhampered by panic, needed her strength, needed time. . . . Time!

"I came for you . . . that's what," he ended and, legs suddenly weak, sank into a chair.

She stood a moment eyeing him, mind groping for possible strategies that could be used in such an emergency.

"For me, Paul?"—gently now, wanting to soothe and humor him until she could determine what it might be that had driven this well poised man so far off poise. "And how did you know I was here?"

He did not answer. She stepped past and closed the door, which he had opened.

"How did you know, Paul?" she repeated slowly.

"Eh? Know. . . . Know! How did I . . . " He looked up and some of the old craft came into his face for the moment. "I knew!"—with a nod. "Never mind how!"

"But it's so late. You . . . you look cold; you must be tired. Have you eaten?"

"Eaten?" He licked his lips and stared hard at her as though the words were scarcely intelligible. "Eaten?" He shook his head. "No, not since . . . not since before . . . no, I haven't eaten. . . . "

"Well, I'll get you something now, then"—turning to the wood-box. "I'll make you a supper, Paul."

He grunted and sat there, staring hard the table before him.

Ellen replenished the fire; she went to ıe cupboard and took coffee from a shelf, atching him, letting fear come into her ace when he could not see. Her hands embled. . . . Time! She needed time!

The coffee-pot was on before either spoke gain.

"Wouldn't you like bacon?" she asked. Wouldn't bacon——"

"You're back of it all," he said quietly. You're back of it all, you know. If it adn't been for you, it'd never have hapened . . . any of it."

"Well, can't we talk that over after ou've eaten?"

He looked at her, lips loose.

"Trying to put me off, eh?"—trucuently. "Don't want to talk about it? That how you feel?" He unbuttoned his coat. "Well, you'd better. . . . You'd better talk it over. You're responsible for it all. If it hadn't 've been for you I wouldn't have . . . wouldn't have done it. I wouldn't be running away now; he wouldn't be lying there . . . lying back there. . . . I wouldn't 've shot him if it hadn't been for——"

"Shot him, Paul?" Her interruption was shrill. "Shot who?"

He laughed.

"Guess!" he said. "Guess. . . . Only I didn't"—leaning forward intently. "It *looks* as if I did, but I didn't. They'll think I shot him; they'll find him there in my office and I'll be gone, but I didn't shoot him and the snow covers trails and they won't know. . . . Let them think. I'll be gone . . . with you . . . out yonder, somewhere, to begin again. . . .

"If it hadn't been for you and that hounding Belknap. . . . The kid'll think I shot him. . . . Damn him, he'll *know,* like he knows everything else!" He rose, trembling, breath rattling in his throat.

"He'll *know,* like he knows everything else! He knew I showed him up to you, didn't he? He wouldn't let on he cared about that. Discredited, fired, he kept right on working for you. He wouldn't stay licked, wouldn't stay down! John Steele! Ha-ha!"

ELLEN'S brows were drawn incredulously, her lips parted, her eyes dark with confusion, amazement. She summoned all her guile with difficulty and spoke.

"I sent him away, Paul," she said. "I fired him when I found out who he was."

"Yes!" He stepped close and she could see the madness flickering deep in his eyes. "You fired him! I knew you would; I fixed that, I did! He couldn't explain that, the fool! He couldn't keep on. And then he came to me and dared me to put him to work and I did and he walked into the trap and out again. . . . He walked into two traps, and out again without a scratch!" His hands were working and his words slowed. "Without a scratch! And all the time he was closing in, closing in. It wasn't Bradshaw who did it; it was *Belknap!* But Bradshaw won't serve that warrant. . . . No warrant for arson!"—voice dropping to a whisper. "It's a serious charge, arson! They'd have sent me away for it. . . . Belknap would! It's better to 've shot him down and get away instead of spending years in prison for arson? Isn't it, Ellen? I didn't lose my head so badly, did I? Smart, wasn't it? Smart to . . . smart to keep free . . . free. . . . "

He looked about slowly, still like a man waking from a bewildering dream.

"Of course, Paul," she said, trying to hold her voice steady, while her heart cried out to go on, to question him, to learn more of these revealing things which, even in this moment of peril, sent warmth to replace the weight of cold which had hung about her heart since that day when she convinced herself that the man she had known as John Steele was another. . . . She put the temptation aside. Time would explain fully if she could extricate herself from this circumstance in which she found herself.

Gorbel sat down heavily and drew a hand across his eyes in that weak gesture for clarity.

"Of course," he said, "we can begin again somewhere else. . . . You and I. . . . " He looked about. "Grub here; guns here; blankets, axes. . . . We can hide out. *I* can hide out!"—staring hard at her. "And you'll go with me. I won't be cheated out of everything! Belknap can't take *all* there is from me! I'll have you, Ellen! By God, I'll have you at last!"

She retreated as he rose and stepped towards her, stripped for the moment of even her front of fearlessness.

"Stay back!" she cried. "Don't come near me, Paul"—beseechingly.

He stopped with a sorry laugh.

"Still hate me, eh? . . . Well, you'll get over that." He brushed his eyes once more. "What'd I say, just now . . . a minute ago? What'd I say about Belknap? Mustn't believe it, Ellen. . . . A man gets upset. . . . Says things he doesn't mean. . . . Lies! I'm . . . I'm tired, Ellen. I don't know what I'm doing."

Through her contempt and fright a wave of pity went surging. He did not know what he was doing, did not know what he was saying! A strong man, Paul Gorbel, gone to smash in an emergency of his own creation, buried beneath the ruins of his wicked hopes! . . .

"Of course you're tired," she said. "You've come a long way. Take off your coat and cap. Sit down, here by the fire."

He let her help him and, seated again, he spread unsteady hands to the stove.

"Where's Wolf?" he asked after a long silence.

Ellen speculated swiftly, came to a quick decision.

"He'll be back any time. I was waiting for him when you——"

"Don't lie to me!" he cut in sharply. "I know where he is; miles away, after wolves in the Caribou! He won't be back for days. . . . " He grinned as he saw her confusion. "That's why I came here. Nobody'll know I'm fixed to wait it out in the swamps. . . . Nobody'll know I've an outfit and . . . and you. . . ."

He rose again.

"It's you I want!"—through shut teeth. "You're behind it all. You'll pay now, Ellen. You'll——"

With a sharp hiss the coffee boiled over and he turned quickly at the sound. The girl, detecting the break in his concentration, snatched at the opening it rendered.

"Here's coffee for you, Paul. Sugar? There's no cream."

He sat down heavily, head in his hands. . . .

"Black!" he mumbled. "Just black. . . ."

She poured a great cup of the scalding beverage and he took it clumsily from her.

"Careful," she said. "It's hot. . . ."

He appeared not to have heard, just sat there with the cup in his hands, staring at the floor. After a time he sipped and his face wrinkled at the heat.

He drank the coffee slowly; she filled the cup again. He appeared to be oblivious of her presence for long intervals.

Three cups, he drank, scarcely speaking, and another half-hour was gone.

"There!" he said, setting the cup on the hearth with a clatter and rising. "Better now!" He eyed the girl closely. "Where were we, eh? We were . . . Oh, yes: about you . . . you're paying. . . . You're paying for not loving me! You've scorned me, you had him wait outside your office and throw me out. . . . Well, he isn't here now —advancing. "He isn't in call to-night. He's back there, wondering where the devil I am . . . and the snow covered the trail. . . ."

Ellen backed away as he came forward, heart pounding in her throat.

"He won't know; you can't call him." He seized her wrists in his clammy grip and drew her close. "We'll leave here together, you and I. . . . Just you and I, and——"

"Let me go!" she cried, wrestling again his hold. "Let me go, Paul!" She tore one hand free and struck at his face with it in a paroxysm of fear. "Let me *go,* I say!"

She staggered and would have fallen except for the table as she broke from his hold. She poised there a moment watching him. Then, like a flash, she whirled and flung herself against the outer door, tearing it open, crossing the threshold in flight as he cried out and leaped forward.

THE girl's strength was no match for his. He caught an arm and dragged her back into the room.

"None of that!" he said evenly. "None of that, Ellen! You've eluded me for . . . long, now. That's over. We're here . . . together . . . alone. . . . "

She circled the room to a far corner and stood there, hands behind her back, while he dragged the table along the wall and placed it against the door.

"There!" he said. "There we are!" He smiled oddly. "I've things to do, Ellen. I'm going on. I've got to get an outfit together. Can't have you running off while I'm busy. . . . "

He stood a moment, fingering his chin, looking at her narrowly.

"I'm going on!" he said. "And you're going with me!"

The girl was fighting for her self-possession, driving back panic.

"Where, Paul?" she asked. "Where are we . . . where are you taking me?"

"That would be telling!" He snapped a

numb and brushed his eyes, evidently struggling for self-control as she struggled. That would be telling"—in a whisper. Besides, I don't know! I don't know yet where we'll go."

"And when?" she asked evenly.

"When the outfit's ready," he muttered.

He moved to the cupboard then, opened the doors and surveyed the contents. Salt, tea, sugar, he took down and carried to the table. He eyed the utensils next, picking up kettles one by one, examining them, selecting one of the lot eventually, placing it also on the table. A frying-pan next; a teapot.

He stood a long time after that, head cocked, as though listening. His lips moved now and again, but no sound came from them. The girl watched him closely, but he seemed for that interval to be unaware of her presence. He stood . . . stood, and she waited, unmoving, thinking that she must scream from the suspense, but just at that instant, when it seemed that she no longer could hold back sound, he moved and began sorting knives and forks from the box on a shelf. . . .

Flour next, and other articles, until the end of the table was heaped with them. After this he started rummaging, peering under the bed, tearing aside the calico hanging at one end of the room to paw over the deep shelves behind it, muttering to himself.

Then, as though he had just remembered that he was not alone, Gorbel asked:

"Where's he keep his pack-sacks?"

Ellen gestured towards the fur loft and tried to speak. The words would not come; the inspiration, the hope, throbbing in her heart, choked them back.

"In there," she finally said.

He passed her, approaching the door of heavy planks, held closed by a stout iron hook, and stopped. For a moment he stared at the door and its fastening and then looked at her.

"You bring the lamp," he said almost gently. When she hesitated he repeated the words with contrasting harshness.

Without response she moved to obey, and he watched her walk to the table, lift the lamp in both hands. He stood aside, shoving the door open, and she passed within.

A single pack-sack was hanging from a rafter and he took it down. Ellen started to move into the outer room.

"Wait!" he said, and with a queer chuckle went first. "Now you may come," he remarked when he crossed the threshold. "That hook . . . it'd hold a person in there a long time. . . . "

He had seen the opportunity as Ellen had seen it. Upset as he was, Paul Gorbel's mind still pursued its function of guarding his own interests!

He dropped the sack to the floor and surveyed the room a moment. Then he walked to the gun-rack and took down the rifle, inspecting it carefully.

She had replaced the lamp on the table and stood where he had dropped the pack. Its straps were sprawled across the floor and her hand sped into her pocket, seized the knife there, held it behind her back while she opened the blads. Gorbel raised himself on tiptoe to view better the ammunition on the shelf and the girl stooped cautiously, set the blade against a strap and slashed. The leather fell, parted, at her feet.

Time was what she needed now; time and daylight.

He selected rifle ammunition, muttering now and again. He gathered his plunder in a pile on the floor and reached for the pack-sack. The dangling strap caught his eye and he cursed savagely. . . .

"Rivets?" he demanded. "Where are the rivets? Where does Wolf keep 'em?"

"I don't know, Paul. I'll . . . I'll look."

"Look then!"

She began to look, searching in those places where she was certain rivets would not be kept, using up minutes, counting even seconds so spent as precious. Wolf might come, some wayfarer might come . . . but daylight would *surely* come. A girl can take strength from daylight, can command resources which darkness makes unavailable.

GORBEL began to search as well, throwing things from shelves, dumping a trunk upside down on the floor, hurling the articles it contained from the heap one by one.

"No time to fool!" he snarled. "Got to be going, you and I!"

His look chilled her and she turned her face away, making motions towards searching in the table drawer.

Gorbel found the rivets on a small shelf behind the door. He repaired the cut strap of the pack-sack and began stowing the appropriated supplies in it.

"You must eat!" Ellen said, hot with inspiration.

"Eh? . . . Eat? . . . " He stared at her abstractedly. "Oh. I had coffee . . . the first you'd ever cooked for me . . . "

"No, Paul. If you're going across country, if you're taking me with you, we must eat. You can't take the trail on just coffee, Paul."

"No. . . . Not hungry. Haven't eaten since . . . since God knows when. . . . Yesterday morning, perhaps. . . . Not since he came, the fool. . . . Ah, Baxter bungled! The horse, even, couldn't get him! . . . He'll be coming sometime. . . . But it snowed; snow covers tracks. . . . "

The girl made a great clatter with utensils.

"The bacon's in the fur room. Will you get it?" she asked.

Cunning showed in his face.

"That's a stout hook!" he mumbled. "Bacon . . . 'd taste good. You get it. . . "

She took a knife from the table, a long, thin-bladed knife; she picked a flashlight from her own pack as he crammed blankets into the one spread on the floor; she went quickly through the door of heavy planks. . . .

Bacon hung there from a peeled log that lay across rafters, but it was not at bacon that the girl looked. Her breath was quick now; she gauged the length of that stick. Eight feet, probably; four inches through at its smaller end; stout, slow-growing cedar.

The fur room itself was the width of the cabin but barely six feet in depth. The far wall, like the others, was of tamarack logs. She dropped the knife, reached upward, rolled the peeled cedar across the rafters until one end was clear, pulled on it, brought it sliding down.

Gorbel had turned to look.

"Here!" he cried. "Here, you. . . . "

He was getting from his knees to his feet, lunging towards her as she put her shoulder against the door and brought the pole bouncing to the floor. She shoved the far end against the bottom of the wall, she hugged the other in her arms and swung it in a brief arc, crying out as she set it with a thud against the plank of the closed door, throwing her weight on it.

A greater weight came against the door as she dropped to her knees there, and she heard his breath burst from his lungs at the shock. But the prop she had dropped into place held. . . . It held there, as she cried, cracking under the strain.

He struck the planks then with his fist.

"Open that door, Ellen!" he shouted thickly. "Open it, I say, or I'll beat it down!"

He stopped and she could hear him breathing as she listened.

"Open that door, I tell you! I can get in if you won't! . . . "

Yes, she knew he could get in, but breaking down the door would take time . . . time . . . the most precious thing she could win!

He tried to break through by hurling his weight against it repeatedly and failed. He retreated, muttering.

"Stay there, then!" she heard him say, "until I'm ready."

She cowered in the darkness, hugging the log which propped the door tightly, shuddering, listening to him move and mutter. . . . He crammed the blankets into the pack, thrust smaller articles into their folds, pausing now and again to listen for sounds from the girl, for possible sounds from outside. . . .

And miles back there John Belknap stopped and straightened, pressing hands to the small of his back, aching from the hours of travel in a stooped posture.

Constellations arched above him now, unscreened by clouds. It had stopped snowing long ago. A breath of breeze touched his face and in the east was the first faint herald of dawn. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

PAUL GORBEL hefted the axe carefully. The pack-sack was strapped shut; the rifle, its magazine filled, lay across the table.

"One more chance!" he panted. "One more chance for you to come out. . . . I'm coming in, then!"

The girl did not reply. He swung and struck and the axe edge bit deeply into the hand-hewn pine planks. She cried out then in fright, but put more of her weight on the post which blocked the door. His blows fell rapidly, feeling for the point of greatest resistance. High up he struck now, axe just grazing the lintel, and with each impact the door leaped in its seat and the prop Ellen held jolted despite her. . . .

He stopped, panting, and reeled a bit.

Panic had taken not only strength of mind but strength of body.

"Open it!" he panted. "It's only a matter of time. . . . "

He swung the axe again, assaulting the bolt-heads that indicated the position of the upper hinge. He took his time, swinging deliberately, putting all the force he could summon into each blow. The door began to give a bit under the driving, a space showed between the planks and the stopper. Success gave him strength now. He struck the harder, the faster. . . . The barrier was yielding, sagging inward. . . .

With a sob the girl clutched at the post which slipped as its good angle of purchase was disturbed. She could not get it back into place between blows. She removed her weight from it, tried to shift it. . . . The door, sagging on the lower hinge, tilted inward. . . .

She was up then, backing from him as he stood in the lamplight, long knife in her hand, the other spread across her breast.

"Don't come in here!" she whispered. "Don't come in here or I'll . . . I'll do the only thing you've left me to do!"

"Do? Do what?"

"Anything that will keep you away from me! I'm not going with you, Paul! I'm not leaving this camp!"

"Eh? Not leaving?" He brushed his eyes with a hand and laughed. "Not . . . leaving, eh?"

For an interval he stood staring at the girl back there in the shadows. Behind him the windows were going grey as night yielded to the coming dawn. "Not going!" he whispered and plucked at his chin with trembling fingers. "Of course you're going!"

He strode forward then and stopped as, with a cry, the girl flashed the long blade at him. He recoiled, cursing.

"I could kill you!"

"You could, of course!"

"You think I won't?"

"You might. But I'm not leaving this camp!"

She had made her choice now, the choice of the lesser evil; she did not want to die, but to surrender this small advantage she held was the last conscious thing she would do. . . .

He backed away, keeping his eyes on her, out into the other room.

"You think I wouldn't, eh?"—fumbling for the rifle. "You think I wouldn't shoot you down? . . . Well, think again! Leave you here to spread the word? Leave you alive to get back and spoil my twenty miles of covered trail. To-day they can trail!"—in a mutter. "To-day a trail'll be an open book. . . . "

He looked out into the coming dawn.

"To-day it won't snow and—"

He crouched then and his head thrust forward. She heard a ragged breath sizzle through his lips as he crept, cat-like, towards a window, rifle at ready, and she heard the safety click open. . . .

"Belknap, eh?" he muttered, and in the tone was something of savage joy. "Belknap, after me. . . . "

He straightened slowly, spreading his feet. Out yonder, coming down the slope of the old burning towards the swamp was a man. He came swiftly, eyes on the trail before him, a trail now being obliterated by the stirrings of the early breeze. He did not look up; he swung forward with long strides, with something relentless in his very posture.

The rifle butt slipped to Gorbel's shoulder; his cheek pressed the worn walnut of the stock. . . .

And then a girl was leaping forward, screaming, dropping the knife she held, hurling herself upon him.

Her hands touched his sleeve as the gun roared. She all but knocked him from his feet.

The man swore sharply, once. He wrenched at the rifle as she grappled for it.

"No, no!" she cried sharply. "No, no! You shan't! You shan't!"

And as he swung her about, almost lifting her from her feet as he wrested the weapon from her frantic grasp, she lifted her voice again:

"Stay back, John! Stay back!"

Clear and shrill, that voice, and she caught breath for another warning scream, but Gorbel's palm, hard over her mouth, shut it back. She felt the rifle ripped from her fingers, heard it thud to the floor. Gorbel gathered her in his arms, held her close, ran with her the length of the room and threw her, sprawling, into that dark, windowless chamber. He seized the door, dragged it shut on its sagging hinges and slipped the heavy iron hook into its staple.

He staggered back to where he had drop-

ped the gun, snatched it up and aimed through the shattered window. He had the barest flicker of a man disappearing behind the fringe of timber, could see his tracks where he had run desperately down the slope for the only shelter afforded. He shot again and once more the girl screamed.

CHAPTER XXVII

OUT there in the open the sound of that shot, the whine of the wild bullet, stopped John Belknap in his tracks.

He looked then for the first time closely at the swamp edge and saw the snow-banked structure nestling behind the fringe of spruces.

He was in a vast area of snow-covered country, without stump or tree protruding of sufficient proportions to shelter his body. He whipped Nat's pistol from his pocket, a foolish gesture, and as he realized the futility of giving battle to a screened adversary he heard a girl's voice lifted. Muffled, the sound was, but he caught the last words clearly.

"Stay back!" someone had called, and he thought the words were preceded by his own name!

It came again, sound of that voice, sharp and clear . . . and then was cut off abruptly. . . .

Stay back, he had been warned! But why stay back? A quarter of a mile of open lay behind him, and before he could cross the sheltering ridge to the southward he would be made a sieve by even the most inaccurate of marksmen.

Shelter was in only one direction, straight on towards that cabin from which his life had been attempted, and he began to run. His belly was taunt, aching with strain. At any leap now his flesh might be rent. He could not hear the muffled sounds of scuffle within the cabin, could not know that he had seconds of safety. He took the only chance open to him and ran until blood roared in his ears. He hurled himself forward, going far off balance, he lunged and dived for the screening trees, and as he dropped forward into the snow, another rifle shot crashed again, the missile clipping a bare birch twig from its branch in line with where his head had been. . . .

He wriggled through the snow, close in to the cover, he rolled over as the rifle spoke again; he came up against a stump, snuggling close to it, blessing its thickness.

For an interval the silence was profound. The breeze had dropped; not a leaf stirred. Only the hammering of John's heart broke that immaculate, that terrible stillness.

And then, as his pulses slowed, he made out an odd, indistinguishable sound coming from the cabin. It rose and fell, stopped; began again. Then another, a man's voice, cursing sharply. . . . And a shot!

On that the girl in the cabin screamed again. His name!

"John!" she cried. "John Belknap! Are you hurt?"

He stiffened, at the muffled sound, raised his head in an ineffectual effort to see through the thick growth before him.

"Not hurt!" he cried. "Not hurt!"

The rifle crashed. A bullet tore through the screen of boughs to his right. Another snapped above his head, a third to the left; a fourth went into the stump before him with a plunky spatter.

Then silence once more. . . .

A woman, a woman who knew him, had given warning; a woman who knew his name and identity had screamed to know of his welfare. . . . What woman?

"Ellen?" he shouted.

Her answer came from the close confines of the fur room: "John. . . . John, are you all right?"

"Right!" he yelled, raising himself a bit so his voice would carry better. "Is it you, Ellen? Where are you?"

Again the rifle, shooting savagely, aimlessly now. Six times, shot after shot, until echoes came ringing back.

"Right!" he shouted again. "Where are *you?*"

" . . . fur room. At the east end. . . . Stay safe," she called. "He has a world of ammunition and is shooting at you through the window!"

Another voice then, a muffled snarl of warning. Gorbel was cursing the girl as he stood in mid-room, peering through the window, waiting for a movement outside while he stuffed cartridges into the magazine.

And on the sound John hunched to his knees, rose to a nearly upright position, pistol in his hand. He could see now, through the upper branches; he saw a movement within, a shadowy, indistinct movement, and fired. A pane of glass pul-

verized, the figure in there shifted quickly; he shot again and his ball tore through the other of the two windows he could see.

He dropped for shelter and cried out:

"Stay back, Gorbel! I'll drill you, s'help me!"

He pressed his body against the stump, but the man inside did not reply, with words or gun-fire. That silence descended again.

All manner of impulses, of hopes, of fears, surged through John. . . . Ellen, here, with Gorbel! Why had she come? Why had Gorbel borne so straight for this place?

But one thing was clear: the girl had warned him. And another: she was in abject terror.

"Ellen!" he called, suddenly frantic. "You all right?"

"Right!" Her voice was fainter now, husked with tears.

The rifle spoke again, six barking shots, and on the last John leaped up. Two small windows flanked the cabin door on this, the western exposure. Strong morning light poured through windows on the other side. He saw a figure move, saw it bend over, turn its face from the window a moment and, bursting through the screening trees, he ran!

He ran for the end of the building, sinking deeply, floundering and straining until he threw himself flat in the great drift at the corner. He wriggled close against the log wall holding the pistol at ready, holding his breath, listening. No sound came to indicate that Gorbel had seen him close in.

SLIGHT sounds reached him, a series of small clickings; then a clack and snap as, magazine filled, a cartridge was pumped into the chamber. Footsteps, next, as the barricaded fugitive moved to where he could command the timber which had, a moment before, concealed his pursuer.

Silence. Tension screwed up. John wondered if Gorbel would see the tracks he had left in his dash for the cabin. They were there, ready to be seen, of course. The wind soughed about the eaves and John rose. He twitched as Gorbel shot again. He heard the bullet nick at growth out yonder. His move had gone undetected.

Gorbel had fired through the broken sash of the far window and, afterwards, swore hoarsely. " . . . sieve of him!" John heard.

He removed the snowshoes and crept along the wall, movements silent in the new snow, ducking low as he passed the near window, coming to a halt beside the door.

"Two!" he counted as the rifle crashed once more. . . . After another wait he could whisper "Three!" . . . And then "Four!"

A slight movement in the timber attracted him. It was a grosbeak, hopping in the low branches of a spruce. The bird sat there an interval and John could see his head turning as he searched for food. Then he hopped, with a brief flutter, a flash of yellow, to another branch, dislodging snow, which sifted down in a fine cloud.

Five and six shots, then, and spruce branches were clipped off and dropped and feet sounded on the cabin floor. . . . And then John Belknap had his left hand on the latch, his shoulder to the stout door, was swinging it open, grunting as it started to swing and stopped. . . .

No turning back, now! He shoved with all his strength and the legs of the table which Gorbel had set across the entry rumbled on the planks as John pushed it sideways.

He had a look at a drawn and haggard face, stamped with terror and cruelty as Gorbel, rifle in one hand, the other outstretched for cartridges scattered on the cot, swung to face this intrusion.

"Drop it!" snapped Belknap. "Drop that gun!"

He knew what was coming before it started. He could have fired then and felled Gorbel in his tracks but he did not. He was no killer; not when the weapon in the other's hand was empty.

But an empty rifle is a weapon nevertheless. He saw the quick bracing of Gorbel's feet, observed the short, sharp gesture with which he hurled the gun. He ducked, quite sure of himself, too sure of himself. The butt of the rifle missed his head as it sailed towards him, but the barrel, trailing, dropping as it came, rapped him across the skull.

It was a heavy blow. His cap was protection enough to turn it from a stunning shock to simple bewilderment for a second . . . or a fractional second.

He fired as Gorbel rushed. He fired quickly, with intent to kill; but he fired blindly, too; was off balance when he

squeezed. The bullet found some other mark and Gorbel was upon him, beating him down, sprawling over him as the pistol, knocked from John's grasp, skittered across the floor.

Locked together, they rolled over with a mighty threshing of legs, upsetting the table, coming to rest against it, John, head now cleared, on top, grappling for Gorbel's throat.

The body beneath him heaved and bowed. It was like steel, with the strength of desperation. He was shaken off, struck in the mouth, tossed aside and Gorbel was up, turning as he rose towards where the pistol lay, against the far wall.

John clinched and a knee drove into his groin. He hung on, fighting, besides this crazed man, a sharp nausea.

A chair went over and Gorbel tripped. He threw one hand to the wall for support and John drove him down. Gorbel's teeth caught John's wrist and tore at the flesh and with his hands he fought like the maniac he was. . . .

They were up again, locked once more, and John could feel ragged breath, hot on his cheek. He struck at the hand which groped for his throat. He stamped on Gorbel's feet.

They had an instant of blows, toe to toe, and then Gorbel was on John's throat. He tore at the locked grip and could not break it. He drove his knee upward and though the force lifted Gorbel from his feet his throttling hold did not weaken.

Things began to grow fuzzy, to darken. A buzzing sounded in his ears, growing louder. His legs went limp and he sagged to the floor. Gorbel leaned over him, both hands locked on John's throat, heedless of the other hands clawing at them. . . .

But a man with a job of work to do can't fail, can he? Not when failure means tragedy, can he? Not while there's a spark of consciousness left in him, he can't. That spark in John Belknap was small and waning rapidly as he drew his knees up and scourged his faltering strength with a final effort of will and struck. He struck hard; the blow landed squarely on Gorbel's mouth and John was free, with the sweet air flooding his throat, with the buzzing dying out, but as he rolled over the other kicked. His pac toe caught John in the side, threw him against the wall, knocking down an axe which was leaning there.

He was free, but Gorbel also was free, and scrambling towards the stove, stooping over to retrieve the pistol.

He gave a crow of triumph as he whirled, weapon in his hand. He brought the muzzle to its mark but as he pulled he ducked because an axe was swinging towards him, flung hastily and none too surely. A man on his knees cannot seize an axe and fling it all in one moment and be sure. . . .

But it was good enough. The tongue of flame spurted wide and Gorbel fell heavily as the axe head caught him full on the chin.

John was on his limp body in an instant. He had the hands crossed on the small of the man's back, pinned there by a knee as he stripped his own belt from his waist. He felt the other struggle slightly as he took the first hitch about those hands, and he struggled harder in a second . . . but it did him no good. He might curse and threaten and thresh the floor with his body. He was bound securely. He was through!

CHAPTER XXVIII

JOHN found her cowering against the wall. He lifted her slowly to her feet.

"It's all right, Ellen!" he said gently. "It's all over!"

She stared, bewildered, into his face.

"You, John?" she asked, and trembled violently. "You? . . . I heard the steps coming towards the door . . . I was afraid, John . . . I was afraid!"

He led her out into the wrecked room, which showed Paul Gorbel, bound hand and foot in a chair, leaning forward, sobbing, straining with futile movements against his bonds.

The girl drew back, almost in collapse now, with the need for courage gone.

"Don't be afraid," John said. "He can't get away."

The man looked up then. He stared at them with glazed eyes.

"That's what you wanted!" he croaked. "That's what you wanted"—nodding at them as they stood, John supporting the girl by an arm about her shoulders. "That's why you came, eh?"

"No, Gorbel. I didn't know, or it would have been why. I came with a warrant that Nat Bradshaw tried to serve. . . . "

The other's face changed; he blinked.

"Bradshaw!" he whispered. . . . "A war-

rant. . . . Yes! I'd forgotten that. . . . Yes! Bradshaw! That's right. . . ."

"And there'll be another for you by now. For murder, maybe, Gorbel—"

"Murder? Murder?" His voice was shrill and he wrenched his wrists against the unyielding belt. "No, no! That can't be. . . . No murder. Mistake! Mistake!"

"Tell you"—licking his lips. "I'll tell you. . . . I'll trade with you Belknap . . . John. I'll trade. You got her now. . . . She's yours, when she knows. . . . I'll trade you what I know for this warrant you talk about! Let me loose. . . . I'll tell you everything."

"I'm not going to untie you, Gorbel," John said evenly while he watched as one fascinated the play of desperation on that wretched countenance and felt Ellen press closer to him.

"Oh, yes you will!" Tears sprang to Gorbel's eyes. "I'll give you all you want now, for just a moment's start! I'll go away; I'll stay. . . . I'll never bother you again. You can go to your father then, and tell him you found out what he couldn't. Great man, old Tom; smart. But you'll be smarter than he. . . ."

He licked his lips again.

"See? It'll give you prestige; that's what you want now . . . after Ellen, there. Prestige with the old man! Yes. That's it! . . . You can tell him how I crossed him up. North Star Lumber Company? Ever hear of it? That's me; Paul Gorbel. . . . Dummy company in St. Paul. I got the good grades of lumber at cull prices, see? I paid with notes at the Belknap & Gorbel bank in Kampfest. I took it all, every dime of it. . . . Paper's no good; worthless. Belknap & Gorbel 'd have been insolvent in another year if it hadn't been for you. . . . When old Tom got suspicious we forged inspector's reports and changed car numbers on him. He couldn't check up. North Star looks great on paper; St. Paul banks liked us . . . But it was me . . . all me! See? Your finding out'll make a hit with him!"

He laughed shrilly.

"And it wasn't old Tom who was after Ellen, there. It got you in Dutch with her, thinking it was. No. . . . Me, again: Paul Gorbel! See?" He laughed. "Spent years building up a reputation for fair dealings; going to cash on it in a hurry, I was! Going to ruin Belknap & Gorbel and get out without a scratch; going to own the Richards Company, too. . . . Yes! . . . I did it all, and put the bee on old Tom! Understand that? He never knew a whisper! He never guessed. Waited until he was on his way to Europe and then I squeezed"—nodding. "Squeezed! I wrecked trains and burned barns and the poor devil that . . .

"Arson? . . . Arson, John? Got that warrant? Give it to me now. . . . I've come clean; you give me a break. . . ."

He breathed rapidly through open lips.

"Oh, don't! Don't let him go on!" Ellen whispered.

She buried her face on John's chest, and he gathered her close, turning his back to Gorbel whose chin now sagged low as he sobbed hoarsely.

"Hold it!" he whispered, mouth against her ear. "Hold it, old fellow! It's an ordeal but—"

"But worth it!" She caught up his word and lifted her face to look into his. "Anything's worth it . . . to know . . . oh, John, John! How could I ever have believed it? What a silly, blind girl I—"

"Not that!" he broke in tensely, shaking her. "If it hadn't been for that, he might have gone unpunished. Understand that? It's only a few days, a few weeks out of our lives. . . . Don't you understand that, Ellen? And we're young! We still have so many days, so many weeks before us!"

"But I want them all. . . . I don't want to lose . . . even a second!" she said.

She might have said more had his lips not stopped her words. They stood so in that first, long kiss.

They did not hear the opening of the door, did not see Wolf Richards' amazed and truculent gaze sweep his room with its littered floor, the smashed chair, did not see him stare at Paul Gorbel nor at them.

But as he stepped in and stamped snow from his feet they sprang apart, wheeling towards him.

"'S all right!" he yelped. "'S all right! Don't mind me, young uns! Hell to pay here, I see! Place ruint! Paul Gorbel under my roof where I'd never have him. Tied up, too, which means somethin'! Come home to find my camp full of folks 'nd ruint like it's never been. . . . But 's all right! 'S all right! Nothin' matters but what ails you too, for sure! Nothin' else matters a-tall!"

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was evening when that strange procession made its way into Kampfest, John Belknap in the lead, Wolf Richards behind him, dogs and toboggan with its bundled burden next and Ellen walking in the trail they made.

The town swarmed about them until John had to call on others to clear the way. . . .

Night then, and wires commenced to sing and the next morning's newspapers told the story in bold headlines for Harrington to read in the Belknap Lumber Company offices, for others to read the world over: some in a Paris hotel.

Harrington could not get John the first dozen times he called because the boy, with Ellen in the corridor outside, sat at the bedside where Nat Bradshaw fought for his life.

"Tell them I'll answer no 'phone calls," he whispered to Ellen. "That goes until Nat is . . . until a change comes. . . . "

And so other telephone calls had time to be made, even calls which spanned the ocean; and more time for more editions to tell more of the story, because Ellen answered questions patiently, painstakingly.

It was evening before the doctor, who had leaned over the bed with such concentration for so many minutes, this time, straightened with a sigh.

"Well," he said, "it looks like a go!"

He smiled then.

"You mean he's going to make it?" John whispered.

The other screwed up his mouth and hemmed lowly. The head on the pillow moved; the eyes opened and looked up at them, blinking. . . .

" 'Course, Johnny," Nat whispered. "Sure thing. . . . "

AND then a boy could be free to ease a distracted central, to sit in the hospital office and converse in Harrington's methodical way of conversation.

"I guess the newspapers had it all, then," he said, after he had listened for long. "I'm all right; Nat's going to live; we're all set here and I guess you've spent enough on tolls."

"Tolls! Wait until you see the toll bill for a talk I've had with your father today!"

"What! You talked to— Is he back in this country?"

"Back nothing! He's in Paris and read the bulletin in the *Herald's* edition over there. A son of Tom Belknap can't put on a stunt like that and not get on to the cables, Johnny! He got me on the wire and, luckily, the afternoon editions were coming off so I could give him some details. He says, first, that he's on his way home on the next boat. Next, he wants me to read you a letter that he left with me to be opened in case . . . well, 'in case a cathedral fell on him,' was the way he put it. Here goes. Ready?"

"Shoot!"

"It's dated in December, the day he left. He wrote it just before you came in from Witch Hill, I guess.

"This is it:

DEAR JOHNNY,—If you read this, it will be because the doctors overlooked a lot of shakes and blow-downs when they cruised my insides two weeks ago. I've kept my mouth shut about being under the weather; time enough to worry folks when there's a cause, especially your mother. They tell me that three months of rest will put me spry again. I hope they're right for a lot of reasons, but only one of them frets me much.

This is because if I hit the grade for the last time now you are going to beat me to finding out just how big a monkey I've been made in the Kampfest operation. Yes, son, things are wrong up there. I guess you were right in your estimate of Gorbel. For over a year I've been certain that a plenty is being put over on us. I can't run it down now: that is a job for a well man. I'm going off to get well so I can fix what I broke.

If there's one thing I've prided myself on it was the picking of men. I took Gorbel on, first, because he had a hold on just the lay-out you and I needed for the Big Job; and, second, because—spite of all of you—he looked good to me.

There are some men who can admit mistakes, but a Belknap hates to. When we have to, though, we want to do it ourselves and not have somebody else finding out what fools we've been. Besides, any man with a son like you wants to be able to turn over the works to him without any messes to clean up. I don't even want you to guess that there's a mess until I get it fixed up. Then I can tell you and save my face. That is straining a point, perhaps, but if you ever have the sort of a son you should have—such a son as you are to me—you'll get the idea that the admiration and respect of a boy will keep his old dad hustling to be worthy of them.

The thing that I especially want to keep is the look that used to be in your eye when I used to drag you by the hand around through mill-yards and along skid roads. You were only about hopper-grass high then. You'd get hot in summer and cold in winter; the flies would bite you and you'd be tired and hungry. But it was always all right with you. Anything I did was all right. You believed in me. For you, I was durned near in-

fallible and able to do anything I set out to do. I've got to hang on to that, Johnny; it's the real treasure I've had in life.

You'll be in soon. For the second time I'm going to steer you away from Kampfest. It's going to break your heart and mine, too. But you're not going to show it; neither am I. The reason is that we're Belknaps, and the breed doesn't show hurts or affections much. It feels a lot, though, and so if the doctors are wrong and you have to get your explanation this way, please believe that I'm hurting you so I can have a chance to wash the clothes I've dirtied and by doing so keep your respect. A Belknap has never yet yelled for help; a Belknap has never yet held a grudge.

And above all, you must realize this: that an old man has a devil of a time playing up to what a father of a son like you should be. I'm so proud of you it keeps me awake nights. Good luck; God bless you. TOM.

Harrington paused. His voice had shaken a trifle on the last.

John blinked his eyes and cleared his throat with a brave, long *hur-r-rump!*

"I'll . . . I'll . . ." he began. "I guess I'll be damned"—weakly.

"But you should have heard him cheer, clear across the Atlantic, when I told him what the afternoon papers said, about all the double-crossing you'd forced Gorbel to confess. I think, John, he'd been crying a little.

"And he said for you to stay right there in Kampfest and run the job and that he was coming to ask for a chance to help—that's just what he said: to *ask* for a chance to help—as fast as boats and trains can bring him. Says that he feels fit as a fiddle and had already booked passage two weeks earlier than he'd intended to. You can use your own judgment, of course, but I don't know as I'd make any important changes until he gets here."

JOHN reached out for Ellen's hand.

"How long will it take him?" he asked, commencing to smile.

"Why, not long; ten days, say."

"Ten *days!* Don't you call that long? . . . What's that?"—leaning closer to the 'phone as the wire went bad for a moment. "Oh . . . the job! Sure, the *job* can stagger along for ten days without any changes. But there are other things up here, Harrington, so important that they make the job look like a joke. . . . And ten days? Man, for these other things, ten days is ages . . . and ages . . . and ages. . . . "

AN ACTION-PACKED NOVELETTE

LOST CACHE

The man crept up in back of Jean

by

WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

A fortune in furs spells trouble; trouble punctuated with plenty of bullets

ON a mossy rock that slanted down into their cascade swimming pool, Allen Lovett sat silently pondering a mystery.

Beside him, Jean had picked up his long-range glasses and was watching a band of bighorns far away above them on a glacier moraine. In her soft French she sang softly a *chanson* peculiarly fitting to that place and hour:

"A la claire fontaine
M'en allant promener.
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné."

So deep in thought that he only half-heard her, Allen went on studying the puzzle. In his five years as detective-sergeant, before going out of the Mounted into mining work, he had bumped into many a queer circumstance, but none that challenged him

more than the mystery shrouding this man Wycherly.

"It's over my head and hands," he had said a dozen times to himself. "No concern of mine, but I'd give a leg to know what his game is!"

He gave it up for a moment and glanced out of the corner of his eye at Jean. She was sitting beside him, elbows on her knees, looking upward at the moraine. She had taken off her bathing cap and shaken her hair out loose. Long and wavy and rich dark-brown, it flowed down across her shoulders and spread out upon the rock, shimmering in the slant sunshine of late afternoon.

High up above the mountain valley a golden eagle was homing from the Alberta plains. Up the opposite slope where Jean was watching, a bighorn ram stood guard over his band of fleecy ewes. Lower down on a sage grass mesa, half a dozen black bears were pawing stones for grubs and mice.

Hemmed in by snowy ranges and a forest wilderness, the little ten-acre prairillon of blue-grass and daisies basked lazily in the mid-June sunshine. Down through the center of it Rivière aux Loutres flowed peacefully after its tumultuous mountain course. On its bank, three hundred yards below the cascade pool, stood old Fort Fournier where Jean had wanted to come for their honeymoon.

It was her girlhood home, this abandoned trading vedette. There she had been born, nineteen years ago; and grew up there—the daughter of Radisson Fournier. In a wild freedom, untroubled by school or a mother's eye, she had roamed the mountains that looked down upon the prairillon, and followed game trails along the trout creeks, and journeyed with her father to Indian camps hidden deep in the Canadian Rockies.

Allen could understand why the girl's seminary at Edmonton had been like a cage to Jean, and why school-teaching down at Bernie, where he met her, had been little better. Half-French and half-Scotch, wilderness born and reared, she was still high-spirited, unfathomable as a deep pool, elusive at times as a shy woods bird.

He understood, too, why she had brought him back here to her old home. It was a subtle reason that touched him profoundly when he realized. Her years before she knew him had been spent here. She wanted to live them over again in his company, and share that past with him, and link him up with her girlhood so it would seem she had known him *always*.

SHE laid the glasses on the moss, looked up and caught him studying her. He tried to turn it aside.

"Jean, I've been thinking—what do you suppose this man Wycherly is up to? He's got me stumped; I can't figure him out."

Wycherly, a stranger to them both, was an unobtrusive fellow-camper there at the vedette. Two weeks before, he had appeared from nowhere in particular, and taken up his abode in an out-shed near the main fort. On some business of his own in the mountains, he came and went each day, a silent, furtive, puzzling character.

"You can't figure him out?" Jean echoed. "Why, what's there to figure out, Allen? He's prospecting, isn't he?"

Allen smiled quietly.

"My observing habits, I guess, still pretty strong on me. You remember the chunk of yellow pyrite I picked up for a door-stop? That first day he came and we asked him to eat supper with us, he saw it. Nearly knocked his eyeballs off—till I told him it wasn't gold ore but low-grade iron. If he ever pushed a tom-rocker in his life or used a sourdough's pan except to mix up slam-bang in, I'm—I'm mistaken."

Jean stopped digging her slippered toe into the moss.

"But he says he's prospecting, Allen. Maybe he thinks he *is*."

"I figured him that way at first. About ten days ago I took pity on him and explained there wasn't any gold in these ranges. Told him he couldn't expect to find it everywhere he looked. But that didn't faze him."

"Maybe he doesn't understand that you're—that you know what you're talking about. Maybe he's a chechahco—"

"That fellow? Jean, he's bush-wise as an Indian. Nothing chechahco about him. If I've got to convince you he isn't prospecting, I can do it. Listen here.

"That morning last week when you slept late and I ankled upstream after the trout for breakfast, I was up there by the forks when he came slipping past in the gray mist. He was toting his shovel, pick and pan, all right. But I watched him stop and monkey around there by a log and then fade on up the left branch. I went over and looked.

It's sort of odd—isn't it, Jean?—for a prospector, even a chechahco, as soon as he gets out of sight, *to hide his tools!*"

Jean's brown eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"And yesterday, to top it all off," Allen went on, "he dropped a strange remark. Asked me if some men came up this valley and I saw them, to hang something white on the old fur-press so he'd notice it from up on the range. *He's expecting somebody.* From the way he talked, he's afraid of them. Deadly afraid. That explains why he lugs his heavy rifle along with him every day, when there's no danger from grizzlies this late in the season."

"Maybe he's hiding out—done something, Allen—"

"A fellow hiding out—would he deliberately camp here with us and be as friendly as he's been?"

"Then what in the world *is* he doing?"

"That's a stumper. All I'll swear to—he's up to something queer and expecting visitors and scared of his noonday shadow."

She looked around, up and down the valley, and unconsciously edged a little nearer him. He saw she was frightened by his disclosure.

"What are you expecting to happen, Allen?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Nothing, so far as you and I are concerned. Don't be worried. I wouldn't have mentioned it except I wanted you to be—to be sort of warned if one of these times Wycherly doesn't come back at all!"

SOME minutes later, when he had reassured her it was nothing for them to worry about, Jean stepped down the slanting rock and slipped into the water in a graceful, curving dive. He watched her—a trim, swift, white-bodied figure swimming like a young otter down in the crystal depths of the pool.

She came up near the center and floated—hands under her head, lying flat on the water. Though busy thinking, Allen kept a close eye upon her. If the eddies should carry her too close to the overfalls, she might get knocked under and bruised on the rocks. She was a swift and easy swimmer but it took a man's arms to battle that foaming, tumultuous chute.

Except that he rather liked Wycherly and that his curiosity was aroused by any dark and puzzling circumstance, Allen was not greatly interested in the man's strange actions and stranger fears. He had troubles of his own.

He hated the prospect of going back to Bernie and taking the job as tunnel-master in the Taylor-Holman iron mines. It was the best thing in sight; the salary was really generous; the English partners liked and trusted him. But the slag heaps, the bleak, fire-swept hills, the desolate, God-forsaken mining hamlet where he would have to live! He could stand it a few years till he laid by a stake, but how about Jean? She would face it bravely enough; she had urged him to take the job; but he knew she dreaded the very thought of living there.

Over near Hazelton he had a project of his own—a gold and silver claim which he had bought from an old sourdough friend. It was a pretty fair lode, assaying better than sixteen dollars to the ton and lying in a very extensive deposit. He figured that the ore could be milled for three dollars a ton at most.

Once the project was developed, he could be sure of a sizable income. What was more, the location—twenty miles north of the Grand Trunk in the Firepans—was as isolated and beautiful as this valley of Rivière aux Loutres. There Jean could have her mountains and trout creeks and all the wild freedom she wanted!

But a stamp-mill came high, and transportation twenty miles across a jumble of mountains came still higher. It was useless to try raising the money from a bank or mining company; from Dawson to the Koot'ny, scores of claims as good or better than his were lying idle in the wilderness for lack of initial capital. The sane and sensible thing to do was to dig in, save as much of his salary as possible, and in seven or eight years have the means to develop his lode.

Seven or eight years! He wondered, as he watched Jean, if that were not a little too high a price even for something that would stake them the rest of their life.

Jean came out of the chill water presently. As she lay sunning herself on the warm rock, he remarked, as lightly as he could:

"Today is Sunday. Tomorrow—I guess that'll be our Blue Monday, Jean—the end of our *lune de miel.* We'll have to pack up tomorrow and leave Tuesday. I've got to be down at Bernie Saturday."

The shadow of a cloud flitted across her

face. But she fought down her emotions and bravely nodded.

IF only he could have turned his steps west to Hazelton, Allen would have been glad and more than glad to be getting out of the Rivière aux Loutres country. Ever since coming there a month ago, he had been vaguely uneasy, half expecting a visitor of his own.

This Chevalier le Claire—Allen could not altogether blame him for not meekly accepting Jean's marriage and forgetting her. The man had known her for years. For the free-traders of that country he had been a bush-loper in the old days, working among the Indians *en derouine,* that is, visiting their camps and bargaining for their furs. After her father's desertion of her, Le Claire had befriended her at Edmonton when she was lonely and tragically bewildered. Though Jean would have nothing of his insistent courtship, he had even followed her down to Bernie, holding out to her the lure of the northern mountains if she would go back with him.

He was a captivating figure—Chevalier le Claire; adventuresome, strikingly handsome of person, embodying all the dash and bold qualities and wilderness traits of the old fur *voyageurs.* In winter he still worked *en derouine* for a post in the Sikanni country. An occupation steadier or more sober than that would have been anathema to him.

So far as Allen could make out, Le Claire's virtues and human failings struck a pretty fair average. He was hot-blooded, unstable, somewhat idle, true enough, but these were faults of heritage and environment. He had taken the daughter of a Sikanni sub-chief as his wilderness wife—a fact which Allen had not seen fit to tell Jean; but there too he had plenty of precedent among the fur men.

However, Allen had little use for a person of Le Claire's foot-loose, adventuresome type. Daredeviltry bored Allen. He found more romance in watching a strange warbler than in going after a grizzly with a single cartridge in his gun. In the Mounted he had been through the mill; had probably seen more action in one year than Le Claire had seen in all his life.

Just how far Le Claire's daredeviltry would take him—that was the question that made Allen uneasy. Down at Bernie, when Jean told him of her engagement, he had invited Allen to walk out with him into the bush with a rifle apiece. The idea of a rifle bullet being the arbiter of Jean's marriage was ridiculous to Allen. Besides he had a shadowy suspicion that Le Claire would "plant" a couple of confederates in the bush. So he refused.

"Very well," Le Claire remarked, "I have given you your chance."

A score of times since, Allen had thought about that remark. Just what did the man mean by it? And by the sneering taunt as he walked away?

He thoroughly understood the man's love for Jean. He went farther, and sympathized with Le Claire; for there was no doubting the man's passion and no glossing over the fact that her marriage had been a hard blow to him. But this veiled threat to hound her afterwards when she had given herself to another man—Allen's charity stopped there.

If Le Claire meant to force a fight upon him, this isolation in the Rivière aux Loutres country would have been a golden opportunity. There were times when Allen looked askance at Wycherly and wondered in the back of his mind. . . .

But Wycherly's humble devotion to Jean, his friendliness to both of them, banished any shadow of doubt in that quarter. As the day of their leaving came near, Allen concluded that his uneasiness about Le Claire could be consigned to the limbo of dead fears.

TROUT were beginning to leap up in the *sauté* below the overfalls—a sign that the evening fishing would be good. With that Blue Monday staring at her, Jean wanted to take him to a creek she remembered three miles down the valley. They cut their swimming short, walked down the river bank, and splashed across the ford toward the vedette.

The old fort still bore evidence of the stirring times when Radisson Fournier was trader there, with fur wars and Indian troubles and parties of bush-sneak fur thieves to contend with. One could pick bullets out of the log walls with a knife. On the west hill slope stood a dozen lob-sticks of men who had died suddenly. Down past the little fur-storage shed that Wycherly was camped in lay a circle of blackened stones and ashes where a vedette, established by the *voyageurs* a hundred

years ago, had been burned by the Smoky Rivers.

The big log building looked as though it had not known a human tenant since Radisson Fournier had picked up and left it years before. But with mosquito-netting across the windows and the place tidied up generally, they had made it habitable again. The kitchen stove and some utensils were still there; the fireplace in the trading hall was cheerful on cool evenings; and they slept in Jean's old room on the east wing.

IN the trading hall Allen stopped to dress. Jean went on back to her room. As he finished, and before she came out to join him, he heard a rifle shot up-valley, shattering the quiet of the Sunday afternoon.

It was Wycherly's gun; he recognized the heavy *boom*. Probably bringing in a "wild pony" for the three of them, Allen thought, as he had done ten days ago. He paid no attention, and went on lacing some new flies to the leader of Jean's line.

Jean came out in a few moments. She had changed to a woods suit of tiny laced boots, a jacket and short skirt of corduroy.

"Dear," she asked, somewhat anxiously, "didn't you hear something a minute ago?"

He started to answer casually, but the words were checked on his tongue. For Wycherly's gun suddenly barked twice in quick succession, and before the echoes of it had died away a regular salvo of shots rang out in answer.

"Good Lord!" he thought to himself. "Wycherly's visitors—they must've come!"

He stepped to the door. The shots were echoing down the left valley; they sounded about a mile above the forks. Listening closely he distinguished the sharp, pattering staccato of four 30-30's and the dull boom of Wycherly's bear gun. It was a battle, hot and furious.

He remembered Wycherly's fears and the man's furtive habits and trembling dread of visitors. Here those fears had become reality. What it was all about, he had not the slightest inkling. But one thing was bed-rock certain: up there in those black spruces Wycherly was fighting for his life against four enemies.

Jean slipped into the doorway beside him, her arm linked through his, her eyes big with wonder as she listened.

Allen debated swiftly with himself. If he did not interpose, Wycherly was going to get killed. One man, unless he were a superb shot, stood no chance against four. In his rough way Wycherly had been neighborly and thoughtful. Several evenings, lonely for company, he had come and talked half the night with them. He had brought them birch-rind pails of berries which it must have taken him hours to pick. Once when Jean mentioned that the bunk needed a new mattress of spruce tips, he had dragged up half a tree. If she happened to speak of some rare mountain flower, he would be sure to lay a nosegay of it on the doorstep the next evening.

To leave him alone up there, fighting for his life against four men, was not exactly the decent thing to do, as Allen saw it. To get mixed up in some bush feud was not to his liking, either. But he figured that he could slip up on the fight easily enough, find out what the trouble was, and perhaps bring about a compromise.

Stepping back inside, he reached his long-barreled rifle from a peg, slipped a few extra cartridges into his pocket and caught up his glasses. Jean was so intent on the fight that she did not notice what he was doing till he was beside her again. But when she did turn and saw the rifle and realized his intentions—

"Allen, you're not going up there! You'll run into danger!"

"Danger? How's that? I don't intend to get mixed up in it. It's just some hair-trigger affair that needs a referee. I'll have 'em sitting on a log in half an hour, talking it over. If I don't go—why, gracious, Jean, you wouldn't want me to stand here and let Wycherly get killed, would you?"

"Then I'm going along!"

"You stay here, Jean," he said rather firmly. "We don't know what their trouble is. I've butted into things like that before, but you—a girl like you—it's not your place to take ch—to go. You stay here. Better keep out of sight till I get back; some of these bush-sneak outfits can't be trusted."

He bent and kissed her. His last impression, as he hurried away up the valley, was the troubled fear in the depths of her dark-lashed eyes.

WHEN Allen reached the forks a half-mile above, the shots had slackened, as though the parties were shooting from cover now. He climbed up among the

red pines to a high jutting rock and listened. The fight was up the left branch, on higher among the black spruces just below timberline in a region of caves and windfall and deep, tangled couloirs.

Wycherly, he thought, must have found shelter in a cave or he could hardly have stood off four men that long. The man was up-hill from his enemies; the shots sounded a couple of hundred yards apart.

Locating the spot roughly, Allen worked out along the slope, climbing gradually up out of the red pines into the larch and spruce. On the edge of a sage grass mesa he stopped again in a thicket of laurel and saw how things stood.

At the upper side of the mesa Wycherly was barricaded in a tangle of windfall, shooting down across it at his enemies. Three of them were hidden in the woods below. He spotted their positions easily, and caught a glimpse of one man with his glasses. The fourth person he could not locate; the man had quit shooting.

He figured it would be dangerous to slip up on four strangers. They might shoot, and ask questions afterwards. But if he could get to Wycherly and find out what the trouble was, he might parley them from the windfall.

Creeping back unseen into the heavy timber, he climbed higher, circled west and dropped down to the upper edge of the tangle.

He worked his way rapidly down toward the spot where Wycherly lay. As he came near he went more cautiously, searching out the tangle ahead. If Wycherly glimpsed him and thought him one of the four men—

He kept wondering, as he crept down through the tangle, what on earth was behind this strange feud. He had been amused at times by Wycherly's fears and excessive caution. Only an hour ago, when he talked the puzzle over with Jean, he had dismissed it with scarcely a second thought. He saw now that Wycherly's fear of shadowy enemies had been justified; that this was no little two-by-four affair, but a deadly enmity.

Without much trouble he worked down past the center of the windfall, lay hidden behind a log and raised his voice guardedly.

"Hello! Wycherly!"

He heard the man jerk around; heard the snick of his rifle being cocked.

"Easy, friend," he bade. "This is Lovett. Put up your gun."

He waited a moment, till he was sure that Wycherly understood; then crept on down.

Wycherly was crouched behind a barricade of three big logs, his rifle thrust through a chink between them. A score of empty cartridges were scattered on the ground. His face, when he looked around, was very white and drawn. He tried to grin welcome, but a spasm of pain twisted his features.

As Allen slid up beside him, he felt something wet beneath his palm. He looked at his hand; it was red with blood. Then at Wycherly—at his blood-soaked shirt and the wax-like hue of his face; and the truth crashed upon him like a boulder-slide.

Wycherly had been shot. He was dying.

"GOOD Lord, man!" Allen said in sudden compassion. "You're hurt! Here, lie down and let me look—"

Wycherly shook his head. "No—use, friend—twice through th' chest—I know when—I've got—mine."

A fit of coughing seized him. His rifle fell out of his hands; he slumped against the logs, limp and nerveless. Tenderly Allen eased him to the ground, and slipped his padded jacket under his head.

A couple bullets *splatted* into the barricade. A third sizzled through the chink and missed Allen by half a foot. He turned away from Wycherly, cupped his hands and shouted:

"Hello, down there! Cut out that shooting! You've hurt—this man is dying now."

The shooting stopped dead short. A minute's deep silence followed. Then a voice from the woods below:

"Who th' hell air you?"

"That isn't important. My name's Lovett. Camped down in the valley. Heard your fight and came up here. I say, cut out your shooting."

Another silence, as though the men below were conferring. Then the voice again:

"If that bird's hit, we wanta talk to'm before he passes out. What th' hell did you come buttin' in for? You pick up an' git. Don't waste any time about it, either. This's none of your damn' mix-in. You better git while th' gittin's good. We want our man."

The snarling threat angered Allen. The idea of turning over to them a person who was dying, a man they had shot, was a bit

more than he could agree to unless some good reason was forthcoming.

"What d'you want him for? What's he done to you? What's all this rifle-talk this afternoon—what's it all about?"

"Some more of your damn' business! You come stickin' your nose in this an' you'll wish to hell you hadn't! Clear out. We wanta talk to Wycherly."

"You can send up one person if you've got to talk to him. But I'm staying here. You won't manhandle him when he's dying—if I've got a word to say about it."

"I'm tellin' you," the voice whipped back, angry and menacing, "one last time—you better git an' git quick. We don't want you hangin' around. If you don't clear out—"

"Oh, shut up!" Allen said disgustedly. "Took four of you half an hour to get one man, when you could've sneaked up on him in three minutes. If you could shoot as ugly as you talk, I'd *hyak*."

He pried loose a small log, stoppered the chink against their bullets and turned to Wycherly.

"Try to tell me, partner," he urged, rousing him gently, "what the trouble is. If you want to send word to anybody or make any request—"

Wycherly looked up at him. His lips moved. Allen bent closer to hear.

"You better—git out of this, friend—like they said," he whispered haltingly. "You—you're bringin' trouble—onto yourself. They haven't got—any use—for you—*now*—let alone—"

"No use for *me?*" Allen echoed. "Why, what've they got against me—except my trying to help you?"

Wycherly lay quiet for a moment, a far-away expression in his eyes.

"Your—th' young missus—she was—Radisson Fournier's girl, wasn't she?"

The words jolted Allen. But he put his astonishment aside. The moments were precious. . . .

"Yes, Jean Fournier. Go on."

"I knowed—knowed her first time I saw her. Listen to me, Lovett. Git out of this mess. You hadn't—ought to've—come here—to the old vedette. This fellow Rossman—leader of 'em down there—"

In a flush of excitement Wycherly tried to rise to an elbow. Another fit of coughing seized him and choked what he meant to say. A tremor ran through his body. He rallied in a moment and opened his eyes again. Bending close to him Allen caught a broken phrase.

"Pencil—somethin'—write—"

He fished a pencil from his pocket, tore a strip of birch paper from a log, and supported Wycherly so he could write. He thought it would be a will or somebody's address or a message. But it was a map Wycherly was drawing with his last gasp of strength; a crude but effective chart of the vedette, the forks, the left valley, the stream that wound up toward the Devil's Glacier, and a spot high up toward the glacier nose—a spot marked with a circle and a cross.

The feeble pencil stopped when it made the cross, and hovered there. Allen's eyes were upon the map, waiting for perhaps another detail to be added. But the pencil did not move again, and Wycherly did not speak again; and wondering, looking down at him, Allen saw that he was dead.

He laid the body down and turned his attention to the living men in the woods below. They had stopped shooting; he thought they might be creeping up on him. Loath to cause further bloodshed, he hailed them again, telling them what had happened. The voice answered from down in the timber.

"What did he tell you 'fore he kicked?"

"You seem mighty sure he told me something," Allen answered.

"Damn' right we're sure! You was too damn' silent th' last five minutes. He had *somethin' to tell* an' he told *you*."

Allen thought a moment—whether to mention the map or not. The men seemed dead certain that Wycherly had disclosed some secret. They would not take a denial and go away.

"Wycherly gave me a chart," he called.

Even at the three hundred yard distance he heard their oaths of surprise and elation.

"That's what we want—th' chart. Pass it over. Then you mosey down to camp an' baggage up an' take your woman an' git. We're givin' you a chance—"

If they had parleyed decently, if they had not been so cold-blooded over killing a man, Allen would have surrendered the map gladly. Of his own accord he had practically decided to give it to them. It meant nothing to him. He wanted to get out of the trouble as quickly as he could, now Wycherly had no need of a friend's help.

But the order to pass it over, to take his "woman an' git," as though that country were not as much his as theirs—it thoroughly angered him. To the best of his recollection, he had never yet been chased out of a place by a party of bush-sneaks. And Wycherly, lying behind him dead—he remembered the man's humble devotion to Jean; and that steeled him.

"You prove you're entitled to this map, and I'll let you have it. Otherwise—he gave it to *me*, and I'll keep it. You haven't got me hog-tied and a knife against my ribs—to be serving ultimatums on me."

Their answer to that was three bullets smacking into the logs; and Allen realized that now, without his wishing it and whether he liked it or not, he had taken Wycherly's fight upon himself and was involved, inextricably, in the trouble.

The whereabouts of that fourth man began to worry him. He crept a few paces to the right and lay behind a screen of dwarf birch, searching the slope and the timber below with his glasses. One man down in the spruces, looking from behind a tree, he could have shot easily enough, but he had no desire to do anything save defend himself.

Presently, halfway down across the mesa, he spotted the missing person, a man in a cap and blue shirt, lying in a patch of sage grass, where he had crept up to get a point-blank shot at Wycherly. Aiming carefully, Allen placed a bullet a yard to the man's right and another to his left.

"The next one, friend," he called, "is going to split the difference. Get up and walk back to the timber and stay there."

The man obeyed, glad to get off with his life. He had no sooner ducked to cover than the men below started shooting at the deerbush screen. But Allen, foreseeing that, happened to be over behind the barricade again!

Half a dozen times in the next few minutes he spotted a man with his glasses, and sizzled a bullet past him so close the man yelled and dodged. The men finally understood he was not shooting to hit them; that it would be suicide to rush the windfall or try to close on a rifle-shot like that.

They stopped shooting. A silence fell on the woods below. He searched tree tops all around him for a possible sniper, but saw none. The minutes lengthened to a quarter-hour without a sign or a sound. He saw or heard nothing more out of them.

IT PUZZLED him—that silence. They had not given up. They wanted that map; wanted it badly enough to kill a man for it. They were plotting some new move. But what? They had neither the nerve nor the gumption to circle above and come down upon the windfall. They would not try the slope again. They were not waiting for darkness; that would give him a better chance than now to get away and back to the vedette.

He simply could not figure them out, and it made him uneasy.

As he crouched there behind the logs, with an ominous silence brooding over the whole mountain slope, he groped for some explanation of the fight. Wycherly had been cut off before he could tell about it. The hint or two he had dropped merely made the puzzle darker and more fraught with possibilities.

He had mentioned Jean; had known she was Radisson Fournier's girl. Now what under the vaulted heavens had that fact to do with this fight? He had said that these four men already had something against him—against Allen himself? Did those two things hang together? The fact that he was her husband—did that involve him in this trouble? Impossible as it sounded, that was exactly what Wycherly's halting words implied.

"You hadn't—ought to've come back here—" There was another stumper. And who the devil was Rossman? The only man he knew by that name—a claim-jumper, alias Soapy Haskell—was not yet out of prison where Allen had sent him once upon a time.

The sole explanation he could see to the whole affair was the possibility that some old feud out of the past, some trouble of Radisson Fournier's, had come down to the present; that in marrying Jean he had become a party to it.

The possibility seemed a trifle unthinkable, till he studied it a while. As a Mounted sergeant, though his territory was the Canadian Yukon and upper Mackenzie, he had heard about the stirring times here at Fort Fournier. The vedette lay in the heart of a rich fur country. It was one of the most strategic points on the continent Within fifty miles of it were the head-waters of canoe streams flowing into three oceans: the head-waters of the Peace, leading to the Arctic; of the mighty Fraser westward to the Pacific, of the Saskatche-

wan flowing south and east. Since the coming of the first traders it had been a battle-ground, and Radisson Fournier, to the day he left, had had his share of fur wars and Indian troubles and campaigns against the fur-thieves.

The World War years had been hard for many a trader. One reason, the Mounted and Provincial police forces had been riddled by enlistments—reduced to a mere handful, and the wilderness regions left to look after themselves. For another thing, a certain element on the fringe of civilization—the gun toters and small-potato bad men—had drawn farther back in the bush to escape military service. In many instances they had ganged up as fur-thieves and as whiskey smugglers to the Indians.

Allen had never met Radisson Fournier, Jean's father; but from others in the Mounted he had heard much of the stanch, hard-fighting trader. It had always been a mystery to him why Fournier—even with the fur-wars going against him and troubles on every side—why he should send Jean out to Edmonton and then pick up and leave, dropping completely out of sight with only a brief, curt note to her.

Jean rarely spoke about it; she could not bring herself to speak of it, even to her husband. But through a few chance phrases, through her moody, wistful reveries, through her silence itself, he had caught glimpses of a beautiful relationship between Jean and her father. For more than fifteen years her father had been most of her world. He had cherished her, called her his *p'tite mignonette;* and, in a more practical way, had banked almost his last dollar at Edmonton to insure her schooling.

His curt final note, his silence ever since, his utter abandonment of her, had dazed and bewildered Jean. It was a crueler blow than if he had died. It destroyed her girlhood ideal; and all the years since had not lightened the tragedy of it for her.

It seemed to Allen that there was some unexplained reason why Radisson Fournier should leave like that; some powerful and compelling reason which might well be bound up with this present trouble. The more he thought of Wycherly's dying words to him and remembered little significant things of the last two weeks, the more he came to believe that this feud was an echo out of the past.

But that explained nothing; it merely deepened the puzzle.

In a general way he knew something about Fournier and the troubles there, but when it came to detailed and particular facts, he was all in the dark. She had not mentioned her father twice in the last month; and he had been reluctant to stir up painful memories. But he resolved now to question her when he got back to the vedette. She would know who Rossman was. She probably would be able to throw some light upon the affair.

"One thing," he mused "—she brought me here to connect me up with her girlhood. And—luck or fate or chance—it looks like I'm going to be!"

FORTY minutes had passed without a sign from the enemy in the woods below. Allen was keenly uneasy. It was hard to tell what they were cooking up. In half an hour it would be twilight. He wanted to get back to the fort, take Jean away and sleep out in the woods that night, for he figured that the four men would come sneaking upon the camp during the brief hours of darkness to get that map.

He crept back to the edge of the windfall. Taking his chances on getting hit, he made a break for the nearest thick timber. To his surprise he reached cover without a shot fired at him.

That was strange, mighty strange! They would surely have guarded that upper side —the side he came in on—*if they were around there at all.*

Dropping to the red pine belt where the slope was clear of undergrowth, he hurried down toward the forks through the gradually purpling twilight. He realized by now that the men had drawn away from the fight more than half an hour ago. Where had they gone?

A sudden cold fear struck him as he guessed the truth. He stopped, shot three times as a signal to Jean, and then broke into a swift run.

A couple hundred yards from the observation rock he heard a sudden sputter of rifles down at the vedette—the sharp *cr-aa-ck* of Jean's gun and the bark of 30-30's.

Fighting! His signal had warned her; she had seen the men in time; she was holding them off!

He sprang out upon the rock for a swift look, to see what was the best and quickest

way for him to take a hand. Across the river in a thicket of red alders, three men were shooting at the vedette. From a west loop-hope in the trading room, Jean was sending them back as good as she got, if not better. In the face of her spirited fire, her enemies were keeping their distance, not daring to splash across the ford and close in upon her.

But the fourth man? Again that missing rifle made Allen pause, suspicious and wary. In all probability that fourth man was ambushing the back trail at the forks just below.

He decided to circle west around the forks, cross the left branch, whip down along the slope, come upon the men from behind and catch them between two fires. But just as he turned to leave the rock, he saw something that stopped him dead short.

Out of the woods *east* of the prairillon a man suddenly appeared, running across the meadow toward the vedette.

Their whole strategy was plain as day. While the three across the stream were drawing her attention, the fourth man was to come in unseen from the other side, get the drop on Jean, attack and overpower her.

There was no earthly chance for him to beat the man there. He shouted warning; but Jean, inside the building and holding off three men, did not hear. He thumbed up his elevation sight, knelt and emptied his magazine. But at a moving target eight hundred yards away in the failing light, he missed.

The man gained the vedette, slid through the window of Jean's room, and disappeared. A few moments later the crack of her rifle suddenly ceased. And then, as if answering a signal that she had been overpowered, the three men in the alders jumped up and loped across the stream and walked into the fort.

FOR the first time that afternoon Allen was thoroughly roused. He had to fight the impulse to go down there and go after them. To attack the fort lone-handed against four men would mean suicide and Jean left alone in their power.

He forced himself to sit down and look at the situation soberly. It was an unenviable fix to be in. Jean and the camp in their hands. Himself alone, eighty miles from the Mounted post at Jackfish Lake. And worst of all, four remaining cartridges for his rifle.

They wanted that map, he reasoned. When he refused their orders to give it up they had planned to capture his young wife. Why? That was plain enough. If they had her, they could force his hand—could force him to trade the map for her. To get her as a hostage—that was the only reason he could see *then* for taking her a prisoner.

For several minutes, while the twilight thickened and the poor-wills began their tremulous calling, he sat thinking hard. He was dealing with men who had little decency in their make-up, whose word of promise was worthless. That map was the sole thing he had to bargain with. If he made one false or hasty move in that bargaining . . .

Presently he stepped out to the edge of the rock and hailed the vedette. A couple men—he could barely distinguish their figures in the twilight—came out. One answered.

"Willin' to talk turkey with us now, I guess."

Allen did not bandy words. He offered to trade the map for Jean.

They agreed, ordering him to bring it down. A bit too wise to go in and give them the drop on him, he refused. He offered to put the map on a rock at the prairillon edge. A man could come and see that it was the map. Then when Jean was a safe distance from the vedette, he would allow the man to go back. That would guard against trickery on either side.

They told him, in reply, to go to hell.

After several minutes' more bargaining they made a last offer. They would send an unarmed man up to get the map. When he was safely back to the fort, they would release Jean. Lovett could take that or leave it.

He thought it over. If he agreed to their terms there was a chance—small, indeed, but a chance—that they would release Jean according to the agreement. If he refused, if he balked them further in their determination to have that map, they might retaliate in some unspeakable way with her.

Because there was no choice left to him, he agreed to their proposal. A man left the vedette and came up-valley toward him. While he was coming, Allen sat down with

paper and pencil and worked hastily.

He meant, if they dealt treacherously with him and kept Jean a prisoner, to give them a swift and terrible surprise the next morning.

As the man groped his way through the woods and out upon the rock, Allen recognized him as the one whose life he had spared on the sage grass mesa that afternoon. He kept his rifle alert till he saw his enemy was unarmed.

The man stepped up to him. He was about Lovett's age, slenderly built, curly-haired, rather boyish in appearance.

"My name's—ah, Noice—" he introduced himself. "I'm much obliged to you for not borin' me up there this afternoon."

"You show gratitude in a hell of a queer way, friend."

"Wasn't me that run across th' medder an' grabbed her. I said up there at th' windfall when we talked it over—I said it wasn't th' right thing to do. An' I said, if Lovett is mad already, what'll he be when we take his wife? But Rossman—hell an' high water wouldn't hold him from comin' down an' gettin' her."

"What was the idea of this trouble between your gang and Wycherly?"

"You're askin' me a question, partner, I mustn't answer. I'll take th' map now an' dust back."

Allen sized Noice up swiftly. The man was plainly half-hearted about the whole affair. If he could be brought over . . . .

"This is a mighty rotten outfit, Noice," he remarked, "for you to be hooked up with, whatever their business is. You'd better pull out of it. Your gang can't get away. You may be in the bush now but when you try to get outside—"

"We won't try," Noice interrupted. "Rossman's got a cabin somewhere—knows this country A to Z—an' we're hittin' for there when we get through with this trick."

"Even so, it's a sorry business for a white man to be mixed up in. Now here: I've got twenty-eight hundred dollars in bank. If you shoot square with me, I'll shoot square with you; that twenty-eight hundred is yours—"

Noice shook his head. "I won't double-cross 'em. That 'ud be carcajou stuff."

Allen hid his disappointment. "I'm glad anyway," he said diplomatically, "to find there's one decent man in this outfit. Here's your map."

NOICE looked at it, curled it up carefully, and started off. But a few feet away he turned.

"Say—friend—" the words came stumbling and reluctant— "don't—you'd better not—follow me—expectin' to meet th' missus. You didn't see him—too dusky—but Rossman sneaked up th' river bank and's layin' low for you there at th' overfalls. You done me a good turn, so—"

"Thanks," Allen said tersely.

He walked out to the edge of the rock and waited, straining his eyes down upon the dusky prairillon for Jean to appear. Five minutes passed—ten—fifteen; she did not come. He knew then that they had broken their pledged word and were holding her.

He could not understand it. To them, he thought, she was merely a hostage. Their whole concern was this business with Wycherly. They had seized her to get the whip hand over him and force him to give up the map. Why then were they holding her?

He planned to slip down there presently, during the hour between deep dark and the moon-rise; to creep up on the fort and see if there was any possible chance of getting her out of their hands.

He was not yet ready to risk her life by precipitating a fight. As he saw it, they meant to hold her a prisoner till the business there in Rivière aux Loutres was finished. Of them releasing her eventually, he had little doubt.

But then, as he turned to leave the rock and go down there, he heard a yell. It came not from the vedette but from the dark spruces west across the river. Afraid of the very thing he had planned, they had left the camp and hidden themselves in the woods where they would be safe from him.

The yell rose again, long-drawn and taunting. A phrase in French came to Allen's ears—a defiant, leering challenge. It was like a bullet whizzing past his throat. For that expression had been hurled at him once before—six weeks ago down at Bernie; and he recognized the voice of Chevalier le Claire.

THIS staggering discovery that Le Claire was one of the party—it struck him like a dazing physical blow. He would not have believed it, but the taunt still rang in his ears. Two things which he had

thought as widely separate as the Poles—Wycherly's feud and his own uneasiness about Le Claire—here came smashing head-on together!

He guessed that "Rossman" was Le Claire. That one of the other men, under instructions, had done the parleying. And he knew now that Wycherly had tried to tell him who "Rossman" was. The full significance of those words—"They haven't any use for you *now;* you hadn't ought to've come back here"—burst upon him.

Up until this afternoon Le Claire had not had courage or desperation to make good his threat. Otherwise he would never have waited a whole month. But this map, this intervention in the trouble with Wycherly, and Jean alone down in the vedette—that was too much for him. It was a superb chance for a two-edged blow, and he had seized it.

The taunt put a sudden end to Allen's confidence that Jean was in strangers' hands, held only as a hostage, and would eventually be released. The realization came home to him that with her in his power and the map in his possession and that hidden cabin within reach, Le Claire intended to keep her.

Her safety depended solely upon what Allen himself could do single-handed. And he had to work swiftly.

Instead of going down and futilely trying to hunt them out along that timbered mountain-slope, he turned in the other direction and headed back up that left hollow, following the game trail along the purling stream. He hurried, despite the darkness; the night was brief for what he had in front of him.

In half an hour he reached the place where, three thousand feet up the slope at his right, Wycherly was lying dead in the windfall. He meant to give Wycherly a decent burial and a lobstick—if he himself were still alive the next day. Without stopping he hurried on. The moon inched up over the eastern mountains presently, and lit his way, filtering down through the minaret spruces and turning the stream to a torrent of molten silver.

The forest around him was hushed and silent save for a solitaire singing in the moonlight. Now and then a deer tripping down to drink glanced away like a startled shadow. At the water edge a lynx on a mossy boulder, flipping out unwary trout, hissed and spat at him but yielded the path. A huge grizzly, shuffling along the game trail to berry patches lower down, ambled aside with a complacent *woof.* For a mile he was vaguely aware of something shadowing him out in the woods. Then it stopped. A little later he heard the scream of a great cat a thousand yards behind him, and knew he had passed close to the den where she had her precious cubs.

The stream climbed steadily toward its glacier head fifteen miles above. He whipped past overfalls and walked foot logs across the torrent; and where the creek made a *sauté* down through a narrow cañon and the trail veered aside, he followed it up against the cliff and along high ledges where he looked down at the dark-silvered tree-tops below him.

For all his haste he went carefully, trail-wise as an Indian, leaving no track or sign of his passing. At midnight he stopped to rest on a ram-ledge high up against a cliff-side. The valley was a deep blue cleft below him. He felt the cool breath of snow-fields on above, white, silent, lonely.

As he sat there looking out over the ranges and leagues of moonlit forestry, he thought of his claim in the mountains north of Hazelton—in mountains such as these; and for once he rebelled at the dreary prospect of a job down at Bernie. It was only a fleeting thought—a trouble dwarfed and trivial beside more present worries.

His brief talk and acquaintance with Noice was one consolation to him in his throbbing anxiety about Jean. The young fellow seemed to be of pretty decent sort—strange to find in his present company. He had spoken of her with a man's respect. While he was with that party, she would be safe—that night at least. . . .

The fact that Chevalier le Claire was actually leader of the four men explained a lot. It linked up with what Wycherly had said. It linked up with the fact that Le Claire had lived in that country in the old days and so could be involved in this present trouble.

Whether he had come back to Rivière aux Loutres to carry out his threat against Jean, or because of this trouble with Wycherly, was a question. Perhaps both. Probably he had been wavering, trying to get up nerve to carry out the threat. Probably Allen's interference had swept his hesitance aside; had seemed to him excuse and justification. Whatever the truth, the bald fact remained that he had her now.

It seemed incredible that any sane man should attempt to steal and carry off a woman, even with that wilderness retreat to hide in. Soon or late he would have to come out. Every Mounted, every Provincial in three provinces would be watching for him. The consequences would be dire and sure. Unless he took her on north into the upper Cassiars he would be ferreted out in a year's time. He would be caught eventually. But how would that help Jean?

Until that yell came flaunting up to him Allen had shrunk back from the idea of bloodshed. But now when the stark necessity of it confronted him, he had no compunction, no wish to temporize. This hostility between himself and the four men had come down to the arbitrament of rifles. It was a death fight now; it had to be. The other three were equally guilty with Le Claire. They had broken a solemn pledge; they had dealt treacherously; they had violated the law which says that war is between men alone and that a woman shall not be seized as a pawn in it. So they had forfeited their right to live.

Above the ledge he passed out of the heavy timber into the lodgepole belt and climbed steadily toward the glacier nose five miles on higher. Dawn came at three in the morning and found him above timberline. Shortly afterwards he passed a lesser peak on his right—a sheer bold cliff a thousand feet high, honeycombed with innumerable hoar-frosted caves. The old fur *voyageurs,* Jean once told him, had called it the Devil's Refrigerator, and he thought the name apt.

Two hours later, at the edge of the snowfield, he reached his goal.

In the bargaining about Jean last evening he had counted on treachery. When he once surrendered the map, he would be powerless; if they so wished, they could keep Jean and hide in the woods and laugh at his futile hunting to find them. He had guarded against that. There was one place where he would be sure to meet up with them—the spot marked by a circle and a cross on Wycherly's birchbark map. He had made a copy of that map, and he stood there at the spot now!

The stream, dwindled to a brooklet he could step across, tumbled down over a fifty-foot cliff, frost-cracked and hoary with old lichens. In the foamy cascade pool little fingerling trout, bright as rainbow gleams, were flashing through the white water. Above lay the snow-fields and the tentacle of a glacier.

The circle and cross marked a place a dozen yards to the right of the cascade, at foot of the cliff. He studied the spot for minutes, saw nothing there, walked back and forth along the rock, saw nothing, and then returned to the spot.

It looked identical with the rest of the wall—frost-cracked, green with scum moss and tiny lichens, apparently undisturbed for ages. For a moment he thought that Wycherly's mind had been darkened when he made the map and he had confused locations. Then, looking closer, he saw.

At one spot a few feet square it seemed to him that the rock seams were a regular pattern—more like rough masonry than the haphazard work of frost and percolating water. He discovered a smaller spot where the cracks showed clear signs of having been freshly disturbed.

Hardly knowing what to expect, he thrust a couple of fingers into a seam and pried. A stone came out. Another and another, till he saw that the whole surface there had been walled up with clever inlay work to simulate the frost cracks of the rest of the cliff.

BEHIND this first outer layer of stones was a barrier of small boulders as a buttress for them. He lifted out several and saw a darkness beyond. A chill frozen aid soughed out of the opening—proof that a cave of some size led back under the rock. He peered into it intently, but could see nothing in that Stygian blackness.

Down the slope a few hundred feet he gathered some moraine grass and twisted it into half a dozen torches. Back at the opening again he lifted out several more boulders, till the aperture was wide enough to crawl through. He took his rifle with him; the darkness and strangely cold air and the weird mystery of it all were a strain on even his steady nerves.

At its mouth the cave was high as his head and hands but very narrow. It widened as he stepped farther back, torch held over his head. He saw nothing unusual in the tunnel; nothing save what he could have seen in a hundred caves along that mountainside.

But a stone's toss back, the tunnel suddenly opened out into a big rock chamber, high-vaulted, spacious as a huge hall.

He lit a double torch and held it up, staring around him in speechless awe. In all his life he had never seen a sight so strange, so fantastic, so ineffably beautiful. No chill and empty and oppressive tomb, but a silent cathedral whose worshipers had deserted it.

The whole interior, thickly hoar-frosted, was a dazzling white, shooting back his torch gleams in a million iridescent sparkles. From the dome hung a huge candelabra of icicles. The niches along the sides lacked only images of saints. The walls were a very tapestry of delicate frost flowers and trees and gargoyles and intricate designs of lace work; and the ice stalagmites of the floor seemed incense candles which had been snuffed out. The vault was resonant to the slightest shuffle of his feet, and his gasp of astonishment came back at him from a dozen points.

It was a long minute before he recollected his business there, and began to look around. The floor was level, covered with several inches of hoar-frost; but on the far side he saw what looked like a platform. And through the stalagmites he saw a path—an aisle rather it seemed to him—leading down to that raised place. A man's fresh foot-prints, which he knew to be Wycherly's, followed the path.

He stepped across to the platform. At one place the frost had been brushed away. Working swiftly by the light of his last three torches, he uncovered a larger portion; and the secret of that glacier cave lay before his eyes.

It was a cache of furs, two dozen large *pacquetons;* each tightly baled and roped with moose rawhide; each wrapped in the skin of a timber wolf, after the Strong Woods habit of protecting precious peltry. He lifted one, a hundred-pound weight it proved, and laid it at his feet; cut the *babiche* thongs and unwrapped the wolf skin. A dozen small *pacquettes* rolled out; *pacquettes* of dark brown marten, each skin as light as a bank-note.

In growing wonder and amazement he pulled out a single pelt and examined it close to the light of the torch, fearful that its beauty was only a sham and that the skin had been ruined by the years. He blew upon the fur; it was fluffy and silken and "live" as ever. It was an Indian-caught pelt, like most of the others; carefully flensed and stretched and smoke-dried, showing all the patient care which Indian squaws take of the raw furs brought back to the tepees. It could have lain there a hundred years in that hoar-frosted cave and lost nothing of its beauty or value.

He lifted down another *pacqueton,* a long, spindle-shaped bundle. Otter, mountain otter, seventy or eighty pelts, black as night. The luxurious fur shimmered richly in the torch light. Not one of the pelts was small or "common" but all of them prime, large—the choice furs of a winter's catch!

Before the last torch burned to his fingers he lifted down a third bale, heavy, square-shaped, wrapped in a small grizzly rug. Fox! Silvers—thirty-odd splendid furs with half a dozen princely blacks scattered among them—the most beautiful and valuable *pacqueton* of furs it had ever been his luck to see.

And he had sampled but three of the packs! A wealth of furs lay there before him. His torch flickered out; he stood there in darkness, groping for an explanation of how they came to be there, of whose they were.

By right of discovery, his own. He had a moment's vision of that stake he had been praying for, day-dreaming about. But a sober reflection brought him up short. If the furs were marked, if they could be identified by their rightful owners. . . .

He struck a double match and hastily examined a number of pelts. On odd ones he recognized the marks of the two big trading companies. Most of them were stamped with free-trader's symbols unfamiliar to him. But the important fact, the thing that killed any hopes of his own —*all the furs were marked.*

He did not stop to examine them further or waste precious time in regrets. Too much lay ahead of him. Jean was still a prisoner. All the peltry that could be stacked in that whole cave meant nothing in comparison with getting her back again. He recognized, once and for all, that those furs were marked; that he could not keep a single one of them without putting himself on a level with the men who had stolen them in the first place.

With a gesture of finality he brushed aside his vision of a few moments ago and put the matter completely out of mind.

Feeling his way back along the aisle, he found the tunnel and crept through it till he was out into the sunlit world again.

Hastily blocking the cave mouth against a marauding bear or carcajou, he caught up his rifle and hurried back down the mountain trail.

TWO miles below, in the first struggling, wind-gnarled timber he took up his ambush on top of a cliff. The path there led up through a fissure, and he had a good view of the valley spread beneath him.

Snapping the four cartridges from his rifle, he wiped them carefully and examined the weapon before reloading it. Four cartridges, four men—he dared not miss.

The first one, he resolved, would be for Noice; the second and third would dispose of the other two confederates; the fourth—his last—he meant for Chevalier le Claire.

He knew beforehand that Jean would not be with them. There was good reason. They would not want to be held back by a prisoner. Le Claire, too, would take no chances on her breaking away and eluding them in some thick timber belt.

There was another reason, the weightiest of all. They did not know where he was; did not know when he might strike at them and force a battle. If she were left behind, bound and helpless, in some cave where he could never hope to find her, where she would be certain to die—that would be better armor than triple-steel against his bullets. He would not dare raise his gun against them.

But he had outguessed them there again.

An hour passed; two hours; mid-morning came before he caught sight of them winding up the game trail far below him. Four figures in silent file—he studied them through his glasses. Noice led, as though again he was the readiest to face a sudden bullet. Next came the other two men; then Le Claire, glancing around him furtively into the bush, his rifle at ready in his hands.

They came on, and the cliff presently cut off the sight of them. A little later he heard their labored scrambling up through the fissure. Noice appeared; the others scrambled out on top. In plain view, not thirty yards away, they stopped to rest after that steep climb.

Steady and terribly cool, Allen raised his rifle, muffling the snick of the hammer. His aim at Noice was deliberate—longer than all the rest of the swift, hot battle.

At his first shot the weapon flew out of Noice's hands, its mechanism scattered to bits. At his second, his third, the other two men spun around and dropped like ten-pins, clinging one-handed to shrubs, to save themselves from rolling over the cliff to their death below.

Le Claire jerked up his rifle, looked wildly around. An oath of sudden, mortal fear burst from his lips. Allen rose out of hiding and faced him openly. It was his answer to the taunt of cowardice down at Bernie.

But his last cartridge was never shot.

Terror-stricken at the spectacle of himself alone, his three men put out of the fight, Le Claire shrank back from Allen, cowering. All his vaunted daredeviltry changed in a twinkling to a fear for his life. His gun dropped from his hands. Forgetting the cliff, he whirled around to flee. The loose earth over-curling the lip of the rock broke off under his feet. He lunged desperately, dug his fingers into the moss, tried to pull himself up. But the moss gave way; he shot downward out of sight.

A dull thud on the jagged boulders a hundred feet below. . . . .

HALFWAY back to Rivière aux Loutres, near the mouth of a cave in the belt of Alpine spruces, three people sat talking.

Noice, chewing a birch-sprout, kept his eyes on the ground, looking up only now and then at Allen and Jean. He was shamefaced and nervous and uncertain of what was going to happen to him.

A dozen yards away the other two men squatted weakly against a boulder — a sullen and miserable pair. Allen had stanched the bleeding from their wounds, and though it was almost a needless precaution, he had tied them securely with the thongs he had taken from Jean a few minutes ago.

He could still see the red marks where the *babiche* thongs had bound her slender wrists. To his astonishment—after all she had been through since last evening—she had just slipped away and gone down to a pool. He had seen her bathing her face and arranging her disheveled hair with the pool as a mirror, and mending a slit in her skirt with thorns from a devil's-club bush.

She was sitting in a splash of sunshine on the moss, quite calm and unperturbed. A born little bush-loper, he thought; so slender and girlish and adorable, so mad-

deningly pretty that he half-excused and wholly understood Le Claire's ill-fated attempt to capture her.

"From what Noice here told me,"—he was speaking mostly to her,—"and what I pried out of these two specimens, I think I can piece this thing together, Jean.

"You remember there was a bush-sneak outfit working this country some years ago. You remember they cut off sled loads of fur, and robbed trappers and even stole from the Freres and the H.B. They made a rich haul, but things got too hot for them when the Mounted came back. They saw they had to break up and quit.

"The three ringleaders of the outfit they double-crossed the rest of their men. One time when the others were out on a trick, those three moved the stolen peltry and hid it up there where I found it. Then tried to get away—to come back later. But you remember the trio your dad and a couple *médis* shot it out with down below the vedette one March? Those three they killed were these three ringleaders.

"Wycherly belonged to that outfit—one of their best scouts. He was the only one of the gang who had any notion where the ringleaders had cached that forty thousand dollars worth of fur. He knew it was up near that glacier nose; he'd followed their dim snow tracks and would've found it then if a snowslide hadn't ruined the trail. But right then, he had to leave the country. Am I telling it straight, Noice?"

The latter nodded without looking up.

"As I understand it," Allen went on, "Wycherly was afraid to come back that first year afterwards. The next two or three, he spent in jail. Then he turned over a new leaf and swore he'd never look for the lost cache. He had a superstition it was bad medicine for him—as it proved to be. But a month ago down in Barkerville he met up with Le Claire.

"You remember in the old days—it's one of the few things you ever told me—that Le Claire off and on worked for half a dozen companies around here. I don't suppose, after what happened last night, you're much surprised to hear it, but *Le Claire was one of that outfit,* working *en derouine* to get inside information.

"Wycherly and he got to talking about the old times. Wycherly mentioned the lost cache—his suspicion where it was. Le Claire said he had a trip to make up here himself. So they struck up an agreement, and took on these other three men to help.

"But Wycherly—when he found out what Le Claire was coming up here for—he balked flat-footed and broke away. Wouldn't have anything to do with the scheme to get rid of me and take you. So he came up here alone and started hunting for the furs. Expected Le Claire to follow; knew what they'd do to him; that's why he was mortally afraid.

"Yesterday he found the cache. They'd been watching him, Noice says, for a week. His show of prospecting didn't fool them. They knew he'd found it—excited, running, coming back long before evening. What happened when they jumped on him—you know the rest of it. But there's one thing more—something that comes close home to you, Jean."

SHE stopped toying with a woods flower and looked up at him, alarmed at the tone of his last words. He reached out and took her hand in his. Unconsciously his voice softened.

"You never talked much about your dad, Jean. He was most of your world, I guess. And then for him to leave you, desert you, never even send word where he was—you couldn't understand. You wanted to believe he was too noble, treasured you too much to do that; but his note—you had to believe his own words. You never dreamed this letter might be an out-and-out forgery. If no one suspected the truth, if everyone was convinced your dad simply picked up and left—don't you see how that letter could cover up a crime?"

Jean was leaning toward him, hanging upon his words. Her cheeks were pale. Her breast heaved, and he could feel the tremble of her hand in his. He hated to go on with what he had to say. Those lonely years had left a wistfulness upon her face. This question of her father was tragedy enough to her already. But he forced himself to finish the story of what had happened years ago.

"Your dad took you down to Edmonton, Jean; then came back here to wind things up. One part of that was to hand out justice to the rest of this bush-sneak gang. I guess he meant to go somewhere else and begin all over again, and send for you. It wasn't his fault you were left alone, unhappy there at school, all bewildered by his disappearing. For Le Claire—when he saw your dad suspected him, was digging

up proof of his treachery—one day up that right fork—Le Claire ambushed and killed him."

ALLEN thought the shock of hearing how her father died would break her. She was profoundly moved. But she sat very quiet, looking past him out across the ranges, thinking back across the years.

As he watched her, aware how empty and useless any word of comfort would be, it seemed to him that even in her sorrow there was a certain gladness, a joy in knowing her father had not abandoned her.

Noice broke the silence. What he said was neither flattery nor attempt to curry favor, but meant sincerely.

"I must've had a fever in my blood when I joined this trick. Wanted somethin' wild an' excitin'. Felt I could ride an avalanche bareback. But seems to me now, what comes out of tricks like this is nothin' but bloodshed an' misery an' such like things. I've got a bellyful. I'm goin' back to my rock-hog job when—when I shake free of this mess.

"Le Claire was a sneak all through. I thought when I first met 'im, that he cut a high, wide an' handsome swath. If I'd seen him an' you together, Lovett; if any man had told me that you—gosh, you don't look dangerous, but I've learned *different!* Lord! You outguessed 'im every jump; licked him an' three men with one hand tied behind you. Up there at th' windfall you held off shootin' us an' kept on holdin' off right up to th' end. That was a man-sized thing to do; it opened my eyes to th' difference 'tween a *man* and—Le Claire. Hell! I'm glad you didn't shoot 'im an' have that on your hands—"

Allen interrupted. He had small use for praise, even sincerely meant. Besides, there was something he wanted to speak about with Jean. He had told her briefly of the fur cache. But in those first tense moments she had not understood him clearly. She seemed to think the furs were his. He had to disillusion her.

"You take those two men," he ordered Noice, "and start on down the trail. You're responsible for them. I think maybe you've learned your lesson. If you have and if you want to root in again, I can probably get you a job down at Bernie, where we're going."

Noice swallowed a couple times at this unexpected generosity, but got up without speaking and obeyed. Allen watched him start down the trail with the two men.

Through a rift in the graceful pines Jean was looking out across her beloved wilderness of forest, mountain and glacier. Allen followed her gaze. He was thinking of that country north of Hazelton where his own claim lay. The prospect of those slag heaps and fire-gutted hills at Bernie, the thought of working there long years, of having to wait till he was nearly forty before striking out for himself—he was tempted to throw over his position and head north with Jean, foot-loose and free, into the untrodden bush. But he fought down his rebellion.

"You misunderstood me, Jean girl," he plunged into the sorrowful disclosure. "Those furs up there don't belong to us—unless we play Le Claire's own sneak-game with them. We'll have to return 'em to their owners."

"Their owners?" she echoed in dismay. "But, Allen, maybe part of—"

He had to look away from her.

"No," he interrupted. "They're all stamped, Jean; every last one of them. I suppose we'll maybe get a reward, such as it is, for finding them. Ought to, anyway—recovering a good-sized fortune like that. One fellow—with that crouching panther mark—we're turning over to him alone better than twenty-five thousand—"

"Allen! With that *what* mark?"

He did not notice that she caught her breath like a stab and leaned toward him, her eyes suddenly wide and startled as a young fawn's, as though she did not believe his words. He went on with his disillusioning.

"A crouching panther. Some free-trader, I guess. Sign has the blurred legend, *'I hunt alone'* beneath it. They must've come down on him hard; he owns two out of three furs in that cache."

She grasped his arm and made him look at her. Her flush of excitement, her breathless agitation alarmed him. He thought that his disclosure had overwhelmed her. He swore at himself for having been so blunt.

"I'm sorry, Jean; sorry as you are. Maybe I shouldn't have told you all at once—"

"But, Allen!" she interrupted desperately. "Stop—give me a chance—you don't understand! That mark—those furs—they're—*they're my dad's!*"

THE PRIVATE GOD

The tent and the hummock disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

It was his Private God, the idol that he carried, that kept Harry Mek-Luk free from all evil, except that which was of his own design

by MURRAY LEINSTER

HARRY MEK-LUK'S broad-cheeked head bobbed above the crows-nest, and his eyes were squinted even more than usual as he gazed above mile after mile of growler ice, looking for those elusive black specks that meant seals. Rocking gently, the ice reached to the far horizon. A winding, narrowing lane of open water followed the *Bluenose* as she ground and shouldered the flat cakes aside, bumping her way into what looked like oblivion before her.

Thunderous crashes came from her squat bows. A steady "chug-chug-chugging" came from her single-cylinder engine. From the bowsprit lookout a shrill yell sounded, *"Hard apo-o-ort!"* and from astern the helmsman chanted, *"Apo-o-ort it is!"* The *Bluenose* swerved and dodged a monster hummock two acres in extent,

against which smaller pans were grinding themselves to pieces.

Harry Mek-Luk rubbed his eyes and grinned to himself. His own private god rested safely in an inside pocket of his pea-jacket, and all was well with the world. Already, below-hatches, was a catch of seal-skins that assured a comfortable winter for the crew, and maybe a bonus besides. But Harry was not thinking of a comfortable winter for the crew. He was thinking of something else entirely. The skipper was getting restless,—and Harry Mek-Luk knew the skipper.

Without particular surprise, he saw dancing black dots. He raised his voice in a cracked, half-Oriental wail.

"Se-e-eals! Two p'ints t' Sta-a-arbo'd!"

And there was an uproar on deck. A medley of shouted questions and answers. Men grinned, or swore with something approaching awe. This cruise of the *Bluenose* was going to make history. Already she had a bumper catch. And more besides. . . . It was incredible. But Harry Mek-Luk was totally unastonished. He had expected it. His own private god rested in an inner pocket, and this was no more than natural.

It had not always been his own private god. He had knifed a man for it in an Eskimo village the winter before. The other man was lucky. He had won everything Harry owned in one of the innumerable gambling games of the North. And then he had displayed the god as a means of bragging of his luck. Only, Harry had promptly knifed him, taken all the stakes, and skipped out with the other man's dog-team,—and the god.

The skipper swarmed up the ratlines. For an instant his face was close to Harry's. And Harry grinned again. There was surely something going to happen.

There were the seals, undoubtedly, a good six miles away. The ice was almost black with them. Under roared orders from above, the *Bluenose's* course changed. She began to bump and crash her way toward them.

For a while she was a mad ship, in the confusion of preparation. But then she came to a stop beside a monster pan and the men got over the side and began their march toward their prey. Gunners and cartridge-men, skinners and all, streaked out in a long line, wavering and uncertain, but always progressing. Leaping, now and then, from one hummock to another, or skipping perilously from one small ice-pan to a larger, they stalked their quarry.

Presently they dispersed cautiously. From the crows-nest they could still be seen as individual mites upon the blinding whiteness. Then came faint, incisive little cracks and puffs of thin blue smoke. They were opening fire, shooting the look-out seals first, and then working havoc with the others. Those gently rolling, rocking, grinding cakes of ice that now were dotted with black would be streaming red, soon, when the skinners got to work.

The skipper turned his red-rimmed eyes upon Harry.

"Well!" he said harshly, "what're you grinning at?"

"S'prise they'll get," said Harry with sudden boldness. He knew the skipper. In fact, there were times when he suspected that the skipper might be his father because their minds worked so much alike. But of course he could not be sure. Only Harry's own private god knew just who his father was.

The skipper's eyes narrowed.

"What d' you mean?"

"Nothin'," said Harry Mek-Luk, still grinning, "fo' annybody but me an' you to know."

THERE was dead silence up there in the crows-nest, but the dull thunder of the rolling ice came up from the world below them. The *Bluenose* was still. Her engine was motionless, but she rocked slowly in the monster swell, and now and then shuddered slightly when a huge pan was crashed against her sheathed sides.

The skipper was staring at Harry, and from the menace in his face most men would have turned away. His eyes were particularly evil. They were cold and gray and fierce, and the lids were reddened and inflamed. But Harry Mek-Luk knew the skipper,—and besides, he had his own private god safely buttoned inside his coat. He grinned, confidently.

"Just what do you mean?" repeated the skipper.

"You," said Harry Mek-Luk, "an' me, —we clever men. 'Spose men die, huh? 'Spose we tek ship, huh? 'Spose she get wreck nice, where nobody ever come, huh? We have plenty skin, much money, much kayack, much ever'thing. Huh?"

The skipper's eyes narrowed still more. And then he nodded slowly.

"Keep your trap shut," he said coldly.

He disappeared down the ratlines, and Harry grinned more exuberantly than before. He was half white, and part Eskimo, and the rest was entirely uncertain. But he was all crooked, and he had attained to an education of a sort in the distinctly unrefined school of a sealer's forecastle. He could read the skipper's mind with uncanny surety.

A bumper catch, worth a quarter of a million. Of that, the skipper's share might be four or five thousand, maybe a little more. And the skipper would be getting tired of small profits from small crookedness. Already he had sailed in the North for thirty years, and had nothing but empty hands and an evil name to show for it. He would be ready to turn one big trick and quit,—turn Eskimo, perhaps, living with four or five flat-faced wives in a stone house because of his riches, and sleeping his life away with nothing to bother him, ever. He would be quite capable of that. Certainly he was not too squeamish.

Harry Mek-Luk giggled a little to himself at an inner thought and eased himself out of the padded barrel. The skipper had been looking for another man to help him. He'd need someone wtih him to work the ship when the ice thinned out and he could risk a short-handed sail onto a lee shore. Now they understood each other. It would be Harry Mek-Luk and the skipper. And the rest of the men would most likely be left on the pan ice somewhere when a storm was working up.

With the pans rubbing and growling in a normal swell it was ticklish work crossing them. With a gale blowing, with every portion of the field a mass of screaming, tortured ice-cakes, grinding, crashing, dashing themselves into a filthy slush;—the men need not be feared. They would never be heard from again. They would struggle, and curse, and maybe at the end each man might have time for his separate scream as he felt the huge pans nipping him while he struggled in the freezing water, but that would be all.

But the *Bluenose*, with Harry Mek-Luk and the skipper, would be plunging South through the storm, close-reefed, perhaps, with ice-cakes on her decks, but wallowing clear to come to rest in an uncharted little bay where her bumper catch of skins could be cached and the ship sunk, after due looting. And then they would be rich men. Rifles, rum, and seal-skins. They meant wine and women, if not song, which the North is not given to. They meant a lifetime of ease in over-hot huts with broad-faced tribesmen in abject awe—.

Harry Mek-Luk was not thinking of the skipper in this latter meditation. Somewhere along the line of thought he had eliminated the skipper, definitely, because he knew the skipper was thinking similar thoughts of eliminating him. There was wealth for two men below-decks. There was riches untold for one. He and the skipper would work together for a certain length of time, but then it would be a question of which one killed the other first. Harry Mek-Luk knew. He understood the skipper, and even suspected that the skipper might be his father.

As he swung down on the deck, the red-rimmed eyes were turned on him for an instant. A certain fierce speculation lay in their depths. The skipper was, after his own fashion, suffering the tortures of the damned. He was tempted, terribly tempted, and he foreknew that he was going to do the thing, and he foreknew, also, that always in his ears would be the cries of the men who had sailed under him as the ice took them one by one. And so he went below and drank fiercely, gulping down the unspeakable trade-rum the sealer carried, by the tumbler-full.

And then, of course, he justified it. He had worked long and savagely,—for nothing. Just this one trick and the skipper's mind envisioned an endless orgy, extending through all the years, a long, continual, slothful existence of much food and more drink and an unending succession of Eskimo women who would live only to please him. He had earned it! By God, he had earned it! And the men who would die upon the ice,—they would die anyway, in some brawl or other, or perhaps upon this same ice he would leave them on. He would only be hastening the event a little.

The skipper grew very drunk as he fought with himself, and presently his red-rimmed eyes glowed with a drunken idea. He would always hear them, if he simply left them on the ice, always hear their screams when the polar sea took them. But there was another way, a better way. He threw back his head and chuckled. A bet-

ter, quicker way, and no man would mind hearing a little rumble now and then, no matter how bad his conscience was. Just a little rumble, a little mutter in the distance. That wouldn't be bad at all. Cheating the furies of remorse. Vaguely, drunkenly, the skipper remembered hearing something about those Furies. There had been a woman who had screamed at him that he would never rest quiet in his bed or in his grave. And for a long time it had bothered him. A few drinks fixed it, though. But a mutter in the distance. . . .

The men came back on board, shouting, for grog and supper. It was served to them, piping hot from the galley. With a mug of laced coffee in one fist, they crowded about the tally-keeper with their tokens of the kill. And then with flaring torches in the rigging as the short night fell, the already-frozen skins were hoisted on board with a whip and dumped down below on top of the others. Chunks of solidified blood fell on the decks. Long lances,—flame-colored in the torch-light,—waved in the hands of the skinners. Dripping bundles of hides, swinging in mid-air. Rumbling, growling ice out-board and the cold still stars of the Arctic shining down from overhead. Then the engine took up its steady chug-chug-chugging as the *Bluenose* forged on through the ice-pans in search of further prey.

And down in his cabin the skipper drank and shaped his plan with drunken cunning. And down in the forecastle Harry Mek-Luk grinned exuberantly, and was secure in the knowledge that his own private god was safely next to his skin, and that presently he and the skipper and the *Bluenose*, with a full cargo of skins, would be running south through open water while all these men fought off screaming death, futilely. And then it would be only a matter of a knife, perhaps, and then Harry Mek-Luk would be rich, so rich, and spend all his life living in a stone house with many, many wives and all the rum he could drink. . . .

It was curious, but Harry Mek-Luk's private god had been carved out of a walrus-tusk wearing just such an exuberant, faintly mocking grin as Harry wore. It smacked, somehow, of derisive anticipation.

AND the *Bluenose* reached open water. Behind her lay the ice-pack, moving sluggishly in an indefinite ground-swell. Before her was clear open sea, with a hummock or a pan here and there, of course, but marvelously transparent and kindly after many days amid the pack. Far back against the horizon there were two or three monster bergs, strangely formed. One of them was tilted wierdly. Perhaps its bottom, far under water, was aground and the inexorable current was forcing it upon its side to float free again.

With an effect of oddity, the *Bluenose* picked up speed. A discernable bow-wave appeared. The lookout forward was called away. She was loaded, packed, full to the hatches with the biggest catch of skins in history. For a little while she made a peculiar picture as she skirted the edge of the monster ice-field.

Harry Mek-Luk squinted wisely over the horizon from his perch in the crows-nest. He was beginning to be a trifle dubious, and yet he was confident, somehow. The skipper had kept himself at least half drunk for a week, now. And sometimes there was that in his eyes which told Harry he had some great plan in store.

He came heaving up to the crows-nest. For the benefit of those on deck he made a pretense of sweeping the sea with his glass, but Harry knew that he actually wanted to talk.

Harry opened the conversation upon an entirely irrelevant topic.

"You been Itsaquoa, huh?" he asked suddenly.

The skipper nodded, not turning his head.

"You like 'em Eskimo girl there?" questioned Harry again. His eyes were shrewd.

The skipper turned, this time.

"Dozens of 'em," he said harshly. "Why?"

"I think," said Harry Mek-Luk, giggling, "mebbe you my pop. We look 'like, huh? An' we both clever, huh?"

There was not so much improbability in the idea. They did look alike, after allowing for the broad cheek-bones on Harry's face and his squint eyes. And certainly the skipper could not have denied the accusation. He merely grunted.

"Look here, do you know about fuses?" he demanded.

"For blow hole in ice, huh? Sure!"

They are needed. Dynamite is an essential article of equipment for a sealer. A few sticks, judiciously placed, will open a

way, sometimes, where absolutely no passage exists through the ice and when it is too thick to be rammed. Harry had placed dozens of such charges and lighted their fuses, too.

"There's going to be a big feed," said the skipper, harshly. "Going to land the crew on a big hummock. Make 'em a tent with a sail and put up a tent to feed 'em on. Get 'em drunk, to boot. Under the table,—You get me?"

Harry grinned admiringly.

"Sure, pop," he said impudently. "I fix 'em."

The skipper's eyes flashed queerly, and he went down. A little later the word was passed. In celebration of the biggest catch in history, there would be a feed. Unlimited food, and hardly more limited rum. And to give full rein to festivity, they would tie up to some hummock or other and fix up a tent, where they could stretch their legs instead of being cooped up in the forecastle.

The skipper had not been altogether popular, but this proved him a real man. Cheerfully enough, the men did the necessary work. They rigged up a monster table of boards on packing-cases. The galley hummed with activity. And the skipper called Harry Mek-Luk into his cabin. He pointed to a box in one corner.

"There it is," he said briefly. "You carry it, a few sticks at a time, so you won't be noticed. Put it under your coat. You know what'll happen if you drop it."

Harry did. He handled the sticks of dynamite with reverent circumspection. But then he remembered his own private god, and grinned. The last two sticks he juggled in the air before he thrust them out of sight to swagger out of the cabin. The skipper was just speaking to the mate.

"A bumper catch, all right," he was saying. "Your share ought to be around two thousand dollars. How does that sound?"

"Sound?" echoed the mate, almost fiercely, "it sounds like heaven! There's a girl been waiting. We thought it would be years. But now—."

Harry Mek-Luk went up the companion stairs grinning more widely than before. That girl would wait forever. Most of the sticks of dynamite were already stacked neatly in the central packing-case. Forty of them, carefully placed. When they went off, the table would rise,—and so would the men. It was simple, so simple, and so beautifully perfect! And incidentally, it fitted in precisely with Harry's desires.

HE went to the skipper.

"All right, pop," he said impertinently. "How long make fuse, huh?"

The skipper blinked, and something that was like a sigh came out of his lips. He was being sobered somewhat by the thing that was to happen. Now he stared at Harry Mek-Luk with a queer revulsion.

"You do look like me," he said irrelevantly. He smiled in a ghastly fashion. "I wonder if you are my son!" Then he laughed,—barked, rather. "I guess there'll be others when this is done with. We'll get us some wives, eh?"

He poured himself a drink. Harry Mek-Luk snatched out his hand and took it for himself. The skipper purpled, then calmed.

"You're beginning early," he growled. His red-rimmed eyes were deadly for an instant. "Come on."

He gulped down a huge drink of his own and strode out. He paused at the galley.

"When the stuff is ready, carry it to the tent and start to feed the men. Yell and they'll come a'running. The rum's already there. I'll stay on board for anchor-watch."

He went over the rail and onto the hummock. Harry Mek-Luk followed him. The skipper led the way with huge strides to the clumsy tent above the feasting-table. He cast a glance at the sticks of dynamite Harry showed him, then drew some strands of fuse from his pocket.

"Look at these," he ordered harshly. "I'm color-blind. Time fuse is all gray. Instantaneous fuse, that burns like a flash, has a red thread in the covering. You want to use the time, of course."

Harry took them and inspected them carefully. The skipper had needed Harry for this final service, because to him the red and gray looked quite alike. Harry looked up.

"What you say, huh?"

"Is that all gray? All the same color? Or has it some red, like this?"

He pulled down the sleeve of his undershirt. He knew it was supposed to be red, but to him it had no color.

"All same, pop," said Harry, grinning.

The skipper grunted and his hand van-

ished from sight. It came out with a small revolver in it.

"All right, then," said the skipper, harshly.

And he pulled the trigger. Harry doubled up at the report, an expression of stupefied surprise upon his face. He gasped, staggered, and dropped to the icy floor. The skipper went to the flap of the tent and looked. The sound of his shot had not been enough to attract attention from ears attuned to the cannon-like reports of crashing ice-pans.

He turned back and stirred Harry Mek-Luk's figure with his foot.

"Planning to knife me anyway," he said grimly, "as soon as you got a chance."

He bent over the heap of dynamite-sticks and affixed the fulminate cap carefully in place. And then something hit him behind the ear. When he came back to consciousness it was Harry Mek-Luk who was grinning down at him. And the skipper was bound fast with sinews of deer-hide, bound cleverly, so that he could not possibly move or speak.

"My little god, he mek me lucky," said Harry Mek-Luk. "Pop, you mek mistake. Look!"

Carefully, he turned an inner pocket inside out. Splintered bone and a flattened bullet told their tale.

"Little god," said Harry Mek-Luk, exuberantly, "he stop bullet. Always bring luck. Now, pop."

He tugged and dragged the skipper's bulky figure into the packing-case. He packed the dynamite-sticks all about him, on top of him, under him, around him. Cold sweat stood out on the skipper's face. Harry Mek-Luk giggled.

"Now put cover on, huh? An' light fuse, huh? An' men come an' eat, an' in middle, bang!—Huh?"

He fitted the cover in place. And then he giggled again. He had left out just a little of the fuse, which he understood quite well. He knew that it burned so much in so much time. He had allowed for time for the men to come and seat themselves, even to get well into their meal. And he counted implicitly upon his own private god. It was odd that he had not noticed the little god's expression of derisive anticipation.

He struck a match, while a murmur that might have been a groan of awful horror came from within the packing case . . .

On the *Bluenose* men were exchanging congratulations and profane eoniums on the skipper. The mate, his eyes alight, was telling someone that this was the biggest catch of skins in history and that he was going to get married and never sail the seas again. One man lay dreamily upon a hatch, dreaming of what he would do in port . . .

BANG! The tent and the center of the hummock disappeared in a cloud of flame and smoke, and huge masses of ice flew in every direction, and all with the suddenness of the crack of doom. They crashed down upon the *Bluenose's* deck. They splashed violently in the water. One man against the rail suddenly swore violently, even while he stared in stupefaction at the vacancy that a little while before had been the promise of a feast.

Then he jerked automatically at something that had imbedded itself in his wrist. It was a sliver of walrus-ivory, part of a tusk that had been carved into a private god which Harry Mek-Luk had acquired. The man jerked it out, and gazed at the smoke of the explosion, and swore in uncomprehending astonishment. Then he flung the sliver of walrus-ivory overboard.

HE did not know it, of course, but in doing that he eliminated the last chance of anyone's ever understanding the matter. Because only Harry Mek-Luk's own private god could have explained the essential facts that colorblindness is hereditary, and that the skipper had asked Harry Mek-Luk to pick out instantaneous fuse from time-fuse by its color. And only the little god could have added that to Harry Mek-Luk, as to the skipper, red and gray looked just alike.

So with the private god out of the reckoning, there was no-one left to tell how Harry Mek-Luk looked when he touched his match to the fuse, and instead of smouldering slowly, so much in so much time, the fuse sputtered, then flashed into flame and ran madly, like a continuing explosion, into the bundle of dynamite.

But maybe that private god, in his separate fragments, continued to grin exuberantly and sardonically at what a joke it was on both Harry and the skipper. Because every member of the crew did have a comfortable winter on his share of the catch.

IN SPRING THAWS

It Would Never Occur to Traynor, Safe Outside, That the Stars in Their Courses Had Intervened on His Behalf, That Night in the Arctic When Life and Death Hung Teeteringly in the Balance . . .

by WILL F. JENKINS

IT is stated by reputable authority that the stars in their courses once fought against Sisera, but it has not been pointed out as often as it should be, that sometimes they fight in behalf of later and lesser individuals. That, after all, is the reason for this story.

The tall man had fallen down three times in two miles and this was the fourth. The other man watched him floundering now with a glitter of hope in his eyes. Snow was all about them. The earth was white. The trees were burdened. The man who had fallen was an image of white as he struggled to his feet again, panting.

He wavered unsteadily for a little while, getting back his breath in great gasps. Presently he tried to grin.

"Th'—th' first thousan' miles are the hardest, Bob."

The other man had swung into the trail again, staggering a little from weakness but noticeably stronger than his tall companion. The tall man could not see his face, nor its expression of bitter rage.

Snow was falling in great white flakes that clung. It was not cold, for the North. Spring was not far off. Thawing had begun, though the great flakes fell steadily. The snow-crust was so rotten with warmth that it collapsed beneath the webbing of the snowshoes. The drifts caked instead of packing, the separate crystals crunched into soggy balls instead of breaking with a brittle little tinkling sound, and the very snowshoe rabbits remained within their burrows rather than attempt to travel over the settling slush.

Only desperation would make men attempt to traverse such snow. Their long shoes gathered weight with every step. Pounds of caked stuff clung to them. The burdened trees occasionally dropped their soggy loads with dull thuds to the ground. The strongest of men would have become exhausted by the mere effort to cover space in such weather. For men sick with long-continued hunger and racked with the despair of attempting an impossibility, exhaustion was merely a prelude to death.

No living thing made any sound except the two. Their footsteps dragged. They panted. They stumbled as they struggled onward. Their breath was steam, not the glittering cloud of tiny snow-crystals that had drifted from their nostrils during the Winter.

Everything was wet. Even the falling snow seemed saturated with moisture. Somewhere far away a little sucking noise began and ceased, and was followed by an intermittent bubbling. The two men waded over a spongy blanket of snow that yielded, and caked, and exhausted them.

The short man began to curse hoarsely, with panting breaths. He cursed the North Country and all things that had contributed to his present predicament.

"I know we're bad off, Bob," said the tall man patiently, "but we got to stand it."

"I'm going to eat my stuff now," said the short man sullenly. "I can't stand it any longer."

"We got near a hundred miles to go," insisted the other. "You keep a holt on yourself, Bob. We got somethin' to eat tomorrow, an' somethin' the next day. But we got maybe four days goin' before us."

That was a flagrant underestimate. Weakened as they were, and with the snow melting beneath them, they were covering no more than fifteen miles a day. And they were at the end of their strength. With the best of luck they had six days before them, six days of such terrible travel as this. The last two days without food was a physical impossibility. Two days, perhaps. Four days, never in all the world.

At that, though, the shorter man was in better condition for the attempt. When their cabin burned, two weeks' travel back,

it was the tall Sam Traynor who was badly burned in trying to salvage something from the flames. And Bob Wheaton had been fat. He had lived on that fat as well as the pitiful supply of food they had saved. Traynor had shared equally, and more than equally, with his partner. But he had known from the outset that they were doomed. He knew it now.

That knowledge alone showed a vast difference between the two men. Traynor, knowing that they were doomed, joked to keep up Wheaton's spirits. Wheaton, believing they would get through, brooded darkly on the claim they had found, but which he would have to share with Traynor. And often, too, he felt a sick rage at remembering that Traynor would be a rich man, now, and would go Outside and inevitably learn that the girl he loved was Wheaton's wife. That Wheaton had assured her that Traynor was dead, as he had told Traynor of her sudden marriage to someone else.

THE tall man struggled to keep up his partner's spirits, foreknowing that they could not live. The other brooded angrily over the money he would not have and the treachery that would be discovered because Traynor would not die.

They had gone up-river in a canoe, many months back. Fortune had seemed to smile. They located a claim in virgin territory. They found game,—not in abundance, but enough. It was Wheaton who urged remaining inside al winter. Frozen meat and such supplies as they had could be made to do. And with great fires they could thaw out a heap of gravel that the spring floods would wash out in a month or less. Then they could strike down-river with bulging pokes of dust.

But just two weeks past they had returned to their cabin from the pit where they had been thawing and digging the pay-dirt, to find the cabin a roaring furnace. Wheaton had left the fire blazing high in the fireplace instead of smouldering. Sparks, spitting up, had lighted blankets first, then the bedding, then the timbers, and the whole cabin was an inferno when Traynor plunged inside to come out burned and choking with part of a scorched side of bacon as his only salvage. Weapons, blankets,—everything was gone. The only relieving feature was the near approach of Spring, which made the nights less bitter, though they still were bitter enough.

Now for fourteen days they had struggled down toward Carson's Landing. If they reached it, they would live. If they did not, they would die. They had six day's travel before them. They had a scant meal, —a pitiful meal,—for each of two days. They would not have had so much if they had not been lucky enough to snare rabbits two or three times on the way. Once they came upon the nearly-devoured kill of some wild thing. They had eaten voraciously of the little that remained.

They staggered on. Wheaton stopped. Traynor took the lead.

"Breakin' trail don't do much good in this stuff," he panted, "but maybe if you step careful it'll help some."

He struggled onward, dragging the snowshoes that were deadly weights, yet without which he would have sunk waist-deep in the spongy snow. Wheaton's eyes glittered malevolently. Four days' travel, at least. Maybe six. Two meals for Traynor. He could not last.

"You—you know the landmarks," gasped Traynor, fighting desperately to keep on his feet and moving. "I—I'm near all in, Bob. If I—go under, you can find the Landing, can't you?"

The short man grunted. His belly ached with hunger. The skin hung in loose folds about his face where the fat had vanished. Worse, where Traynor had reached that miserable yet merciful stage of starvation where hunger is merely an all-pervading aching, Wheaton was suffering the more acute pains of an earlier stage. Each night when they camped they had set snares. Now and then a rabbit had been caught. But though Traynor had shared the single one he had found, Wheaton had concealed two,—caught at different times,—dismembered and beneath the folds of his now loose parka. These he had gnawed secretly while Traynor slept, with terrible struggles to keep from bolting all of them at once. Now Traynor's hunger was terrible but he had reached a curious stage of apathy in which he could regard it as something apart from and outside of himself. But Wheaton's belly screamed aloud for food.

From the gray haze in the distance to the lazily down-drifting flakes nearby the snowfall faded into nothingness. It must have been sunset. The two men could not tell. But when the sifting specks of white were but little graying blurs against

a black curtain all about them, Traynor stopped. They could go no farther. It was little short of a miracle he had come so far.

They made a fire. Laboriously. They squatted beside it, soaking in the heat as a substitute for food. With nightfall came a little chill, but the thawing went on almost unchecked. Now and then a slow dripping began and from some point in the trees overhead a deliberate tap, tap, tapping began as melted snow splashed down from one limb to another and thence to the ground below.

The fire cast a ruddy light on the faces of the two men. They stared into it as they waited for the water in their one tin cup to boil. Traynor's face was lined and sombre. Wheaton's was malevolent and bitter. In their poses there was a similar distinction. Wheaton was restless and fretful, using up energy in nervous movements. Traynor was still with the motionlessness of exhaustion. Wheaton was starving. Traynor was starved.

But he summoned the cheerfulness he seemed to regard as a duty when he looked across at Wheaton.

"We'll be laughin' at this, Bob," he said in an attempt at whimsicality, "when we're sittin' fine an' pretty down there in Frisco."

Wheaton grunted savagely. Traynor gazed at him a moment and his face,—for all its pitiful starved look,—grew sympathetic.

"You' thinkin' 'bout that wife of yours, Bob?" he asked gently. "It's kind of hard, you havin' to leave her after bein' married only a coupla months. An' then bein' Inside all winter. But don't you see why you' got to keep a holt on yourself? Don't talk foolishness about eatin' that bacon, any more."

IN spite of himself, Traynor's mouth watered at the thought of bacon. But he wrenched his mind away from it.

"You see," he said urgently, "you' got to hang on. We' goin' to need all our nerve before we get through. But you got something to take back to her now. That claim of ours, it's worth money."

Wheaton growled savagely.

"We got to talk about somethin', Bob," said Traynor with a queer grimness, "to keep from thinkin' about food. Tell me about your wife." His voice changed a little. "It'd ought to feel kind of heartening to feel like somebody was waiting for you."

Wheaton mumbled and gazed suspiciously at his companion. But Traynor was staring into the fire. His eyes were startlingly blue, and the red glow from the flames made them seem darker and deeper.

"If I'd had Dorothy waitin' for me now," Traynor went on sombrely. "I might feel a little mite stronger. I sure could go through hell if she was—" He stopped and shrugged. Then he looked up, casting aside all pretense, as a man near to death may do. "You said she looked like she was happy, Bob?"

Wheaton growled an unintelligible assent. Traynor thought it over, his eyes brooding.

"An' that there husban' of hers, he seemed like he was a pretty good sort?" he insisted.

"Yes," snarled Wheaton. He was gazing at Traynor with tense suspicion. "What're you going over it for?" he demanded surlily.

"Wonderin'," said Traynor. He looked apologetic. "You know I'm thinkin' maybe I won't make it through, Bob. I'd just like to be sure about her. You know you writin' me she'd got married sudden to somebody else was kind of a wrench."

"She's happy," grunted Wheaton.

"I'm sort of glad of that," said Traynor. He grinned awkwardly. "You know, I sort of think I could make it through if she was waitin' for me. Ain't it funny what a man can do for a woman? But you see, I'm mighty tired, and if she's all right,—well,—I needn't feel like I've got to get through, like you do. I'm—mighty tired."

Wheaton grunted. He drank the hot water they had heated. Traynor drank his share. They slept, or seemed to sleep.

Traynor was the more exhausted and the weaker. His stomach seized upon the hot water as a fictitious food. He slept heavily while the rotten snow became more water-soaked and the possibility of travel became more remote. Wheaton fought to keep awake for a little while.

Presently he stirred and stared long and malevolently at the sleeping man. He listened to his breathing. Then with furtive fingers and a certain ravenous haste he dug into the folds of his loosened parka. Food came out in his fingers. A bit of

bacon that was supposed to feed him for two days. Four fragments of a rabbit he had snared and hidden from Traynor, feasting on it secretly with agonies of withholding himself from consuming it all. He had to save it. They ate one meal in the morning, so that they might have strength to travel. They drank hot water at night, so that they might sleep. But Wheaton had eaten meagrely of his secreted store at night while Traynor slept.

He chewed ravenously upon the tough sinews now. He crushed the last small bones and sucked their marrow for the last least trace of sustenance they might contain. And in the red glow of the dying fire, with the slow drip-drip-dripping of the thawing snow all about him, he hovered in the agony of longing over the remaining fragments of his stock. But four days more. . . . Maybe six. . . . He could not,—he dared not eat.

His eyes darted to Traynor, slumbering heavily from weakness and exhaustion. Traynor had more food. Plenty more. Suspicion flamed on Wheaton's features. He had hidden food from Traynor. Of course —he believed that Traynor had done the same to him. There might be an edible treasure concealed about Traynor now! And if not, why, the two days' rations that Traynor confessed to carrying . . .

It would have been easy to read Wheaton's thoughts by the expressions his face yielded to. Traynor was weak, and he carried at least the food they had allotted themselves for two days more. Traynor could not make it through to Carson's Landing, worn out as he was. Two days earlier death would make no difference to him, but two days' food would make all the difference in the world to Wheaton.

Had Wheaton possessed any weapon, there might have been one of those furtive tragedies the North Woods have known. Traynor would have been shot while he slept, for a ration of a quarter of a pound of salt meat. Men have been killed for no more.

But though Wheaton was still the stronger, he was not capable of sinking his fingers in Traynor's neck. He was afraid to do that. He could only covet, and hate, and curse venomously. He gazed from the scraps of foods in his hands to Traynor, lying in exhausted sleep. He imagined unknown hoards of food-scraps hidden in Traynor's pockets, tucked beneath his clothing. . . . He licked his lips ravenously. His eyes were like coals. But he could never commit murder by force. . . .

Presently he started as a thought struck him. He struggled with it, sweating. And then in desperate haste he reached down, far underneath his parka. There was a belt there with a little packet of first-aid kit strapped to it. A silly thing, useless in the woods, but his wife had given it to him,—that same Dorothy he had told of Traynor's death. He dragged it out and ripped it open, his hands shaking. He tore out the tiny phials and studied them feverishly. The death's head and the corrugated stopper. Antiseptic, an incredibly potent mass of tiny crystals. *Barium Cyanide*. Enough in that thimble-sized phial to make many gallons of antiseptic solution for cuts and wounds, or to kill a hundred men. . . .

Wheaton's face looked like a devil's features as he poured out half a dozen grains into his palm. Of the bits of food in his hand he selected the smallest. He split a tiny crack in it with his thumb-nail. He forced in the largest crystal. Far in. Shaking, he thrust his store of food away. Then he crept over to where Traynor slept in the queer slumber of starvation and exhaustion. He put the bit of food to Traynor's lips.

Traynor woke.

"Here, eat this," said Wheaton hoarsely.

Traynor put up his hand, weakly. Wheaton thrust the morsel into his fingers. It was easy to tell what it was by the feel of it. A bit of meat, of fat bacon. He caught his breath.

"D-damn you, Bob," he said faintly, "I —I can't take your food. I—I don't need it, ol' feller. I—I'm used to this hungry stuff. You eat it!"

Wheaton was shaking terribly. He sweated, but he understood the interpretation Traynor placed upon his offer.

"Eat it," he rasped.

Traynor's lips moved as he gazed longingly down at the morsel. Less than the size of a teaspoon bowl. An infinitesimal scrap of meat. A ridiculous tidbit of tough bacon-rind.

"I'll tell you," he said presently. His voice was curiously soft. "I'll eat it in the mornin'. It'll give me extra strength for hikin', then. An'—thanks, Bob."

WHEATON swore. He argued, sweating. And Traynor wavered, and half-yielded, and then put it resolutely away. He lay down, licking his lips hungrily but denying himself the least taste that would rearouse his tormenting hunger before morning.

Silence fell after a long while. The snowfall slowly ceased. Rifts in the clouds appeared. Stars peeped out now and then. Wheaton lay awake shivering, until exhaustion laid a heavy hand upon him and he slept, twitching.

All about the fire slow drippings set up. Far away through the forest a breeze stirred the tree-tops. It drew nearer, rustling and whispering amid the bare boughs. It reached the two men. It was a warm breeze. Thawing would begin in earnest, now.

Then Traynor stirred. His face was queerly softened in the dim glow from the remaining embers. He brought out his own food. A mere scrap of meat hardly larger than the one Wheaton had thrust upon him. He gazed at it longingly and shook his head. He muttered to himself.

"He's got a wife waitin'. . . He was givin' me some of his stuff. . . . Thought I'd eat it without knowin', maybe. . . . I reg'n he's done that lots of times an' I've eat it when I thought I was dreamin'. . . ."

He raised the two scraps to his nostrils as if to smell them longingly and put them down before the odor could tempt him. With feverish haste to get it out of his sight, he thrust it into the loose folds of Wheaton's parka. He knew where Wheaton kept his food. Then he struggled to his feet and stumbled away, with his snowshoes dragging upon his feet.

He did not take the direction that would lead to Carson's Landing. He cut off to one side, weak and dizzy and fainting, without any aim other than to be gone before Wheaton should wake. Having given Wheaton his own last chance of life, now he stumbled purposelessly onward lest Wheaton try to give it back. . . .

It was quite simple. As he saw it, they had not food for two men to reach safety. Not possibly. But enough for one,—with luck. So Traynor had given his to Wheaton and staggered off to die. And that was heroism, probably, but certainly it was folly. Because he could have robbed Wheaton had he chosen, and gone on ahead. He could have bolted all the food both of them had and with new strength headed for a stream where the thaw might conceivably carry him down-river on floating ice. He could have done any number of things other than the one he had chosen. But if the stars in their courses once fought against Sisera, the stars sometimes fight on behalf of later individuals.

The rifts in the clouds overhead widened. The stars peered out now and then. A dim gray glow began toward the East, while Traynor staggered ever more wearily over the rotting snow. The warm breeze from the South continued to blow. Traynor even saw a bare space of earth where the snow had been blown nearly away and the rest had melted. He fell, and floundered up again and went dizzily on.

And the stars in one of their intermittant appearances shone upon Wheaton. Their dim light awoke him, perhaps. He opened his eyes. His belly was screaming for food. He fumbled beneath his parka, and listened. No sound from Traynor. No noise of his breathing.

Wheaton drew in his breath with a little whistling sound. He looked terrified. Dawn had not come and the fire was long since out. The steady drip, drip, dripping of the thawing trees was queerly horrible. To wake from sleep to believe that one has become a murderer is not pleasant.

Wheaton clutched his scraps of food tightly. It was for food that he had poisoned Traynor. . . .

"I had to get him," he whispered in the darkness. "He couldn't last through, nor me either unless I had more grub. And—and he'd have killed me when he found out Dorothy married me. . . . "

He shivered in superstitious terror, while the stars twinkled coldly above him. But there was at least a bit of bacon hidden on Traynor's body. . . .

Hunger swept over him in overpowering anguish. He wanted to make sure about Traynor, but he had to have heart, first. He put a fragment of meat in his mouth. It was a tiny bit, but he dared take no more,—yet. Four days to travel, maybe six. . . .

Then he began to crawl toward where Traynor should be lying with a look of silly surprise upon his face. The stars saw that Traynor was a long distance off, stumbling dizzily away from the man he had given his last bit of food to. And the stars saw Wheaton stop suddenly with a little

choked cry and slump down in the melting snow, with the food for which he had tried to commit murder, freely given him and in his hiding-place even then.

The stars gazed coldly down upon Wheaton lying still where he had fallen. Wheaton was a puny antagonist after Sisera. But there was still a litfle left for them to do. Traynor was stumbling off to die after having given his last chance of life to his partner. The stars in their courses attended to him with some efficiency.

And the sunrise saw the end of it. Traynor stumbling back with a partly-devoured rabbit in his hands. Coming back joyously. Shouting while still a long distance off.

"Bob! Oh, Bob! I got a rabbit! A rabbit, Bob! It jumped when I come near an' went slap in a stream of slush an' water! Couldn't swim or hop out. I got it, Bob! I got it!"

HE had come back to share his miraculous windfall with Wheaton. But Wheaton did not answer. The bit of food that Wheaton had poisoned for Traynor had happened,—perhaps the stars in their courses had something to do with the matter,—had happened to be the bit he had chosen to hearten him before he robbed Traynor's body. Wheaton was dead.

And so Traynor had to go on alone. Puzzled by the extra food he found. Bewildered by the ripped-open first-aid kit. Grieved and amazed at the death of his comrade. But forced to go on alone. To find the widow of his friend and tell her that Wheaton had left her half a claim that would certainly make her rich. To find,—incidentally,—the girl he loved, who had married Wheaton only because she despairingly believed him dead. To find something of contentment and something of happiness, but never anything of understanding.

Because of course, though he, like everybody else, had heard that the stars in their courses once fought against Sisera, it would never occur to him that they might intervene on behalf of later and lesser individuals.

The WHITE RIVER POST is open to all readers of COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL. We encourage correspondence. Here, you will make new friends; perhaps thousands of miles away or right in your own home town. Send your letter in to us and we will print it in these pages. If you don't want your name and address to appear, sign your nickname and send address confidential to us and we will forward all answers to you. Let's hear what you think of this magazine. Address, Room 203, 100 Hudson St., N. Y. C.

White River "Pete."

A FRENCH DESCENDANT

Dear Pete:

Have been a reader of "Northwest Novel" for quite a long time and decided to take a chance on writing to you to see if you wouldn't please publish my plea for "pen pals."

I am a man of French descent, have hazel eyes, black hair, am 5 ft. 6 in. tall and weigh 150 pounds. I neither smoke nor drink, but don't object to people who do.

(Am thirty-nine years of age), interested in baseball. My favorite sport is swimming.

So please won't someone write to me.

Thanking you kindly,

I remain,

MR. FRANK A. GLASSY,

1713 *So. Fawcett Ave.,*
Tacoma, Washington.

SINGS OVER THE RADIO

Dear Pete:

Can a young Irish girl of 18 enter your club?

I read your magazine and find them all very exciting.

I am a girl with brown eyes, brown wavy hair, and fair complexion. I am 5 ft. 3 ins. tall, and weigh 119 lbs.

I sing over the radio frequently and my favorite sports are horseback riding, hiking, and it may seem strange but I adore hunting and am considered very good at handling a gun. I want to hear from men of the R. M. P. and of their exciting times.

I guarantee to answer all letters from both sexes all over the world.

Sincerely,

BARBARA "BOBBY" MORRIS,

152 *Olive Ave., Lawrence, Mass.*

IN THE ENGLISH AIR FORCE

Dear Pete:

I am in need of Pen Pals all over America, North and South, and would be pleased to hear from anyone who would write. I am at present away from home, a few thousand miles in fact, and you know how lonely a person can be.

I am in the English Air Force, and during the past two years have visited Japan, Korea, Manchukuo, Malay states, and majority of large ports in China. If anyone would like to hear of these places I can tell them, and also send snaps to show them what they are like.

As for a description of myself, I am 23 years of age, 5 ft. 9 ins. tall, and weigh about 150 lbs. Would like to hear from girls between the ages of 18 and 23, so come on and give a lonely birdman a break. I will send to the first reply a book on Ryojun, or Port Arthur.

Hoping you will print this letter I leave you.

Yours sincerely,

H. ROLLINSON,

824 *F. S. R. Squadron,*
I. Mess. H. M. S. Hermes,
Care G. P. O., Hong Kong, China.

A SURPRISE AWAITS YOU

Dear Pete:

I am sending this in hope that you will put this letter in your magazine. I am a boy 18 years old, 5 ft. 7 ins. tall, and weigh 145 lbs. I have blue eyes and dark hair. My favorite sports are dancing, swimming, and writing letters. I would like to hear from both girls and boys. To the first ten girls who answer I will send them a surprise. I will answer all letters, and will be glad to exchange snaps.

Thank you.

F. W. GIBSON,

Box 145, Warrenville, S. C.

TWO CANADIAN MISSES

Dear Pete:

I hope this letter will be published. We are two girls, considered good looking. Stella is a blonde with curly hair and dimples, 5 ft. 4 ins. tall, 16 years old. Evelyn is a blue-eyed blonde, 5 ft. 6 ins. tall, 17 years old. We both like all outdoor sports and dancing. We will answer all letters we receive and exchange snapshots. Write all letters to Stella to the same address.

EVELYN RAISER,

24 *Rosemont Ave., Hamilton, Ont., Canada.*

ATTENTION, LONE COWHANDS

Dear Pete:

I must say you are to be congratulated on N. W. Novels. The magazine is stupendous. We're a bit late over here in getting the magazines, but take it from me, from now on I haunt the bookstalls.

I'm a mighty lonesome feller, and would like some Pen Pals from anyone over your way, particularly those "lone cowhand fellers," who know all the cowboy songs. I am 5 ft. 10 ins., age 19, 155 lbs., black hair and green eyes, and am fond of songs and the "wide open spaces." Anyone who would like to know what the Scotch "haggis" really is, just drop me a line. All letters answered. Hoping to see this in print, and wishing your magazine success, I remain,

Sincerely,

ROBERT (BOB) INNES,

7 *Blair Street,*
Glasgow E. 2, Scotland.

ALL THE WAY FROM NEWFOUNDLAND

Dear Pete:

I have been reading quite a few of your magazines lately and think they are very interesting, and wish you every success in the future.

I should like to receive letters from anyone who may care to write a Newfoundland boy of 25 years of age. I'm 5 ft. 11 ins., weigh 156 lbs. If anyone would like to know more of Newfoundland please write to me. I shall answer all letters.

Best wishes to all for 1937.

E. F. WALTERS,

32 *Scott St., St. Johns, Newfoundland.*

"IN HIS MAJESTY'S NAVY"

Dear Pete:

Can you please welcome a lonely sailor from England. I am blue eyed, blonde, 5 ft. 10 in. tall and turn the scales at 165 lbs. I am 20 years old. My favorite hobbies are dancing, swimming, going to the movies and also sailing. I promise to answer letters from boys and girls all over the world, also willing to exchange snaps. So will you please print this, Pete, as I am lonely and wish for Pen Pals. Thanks.

Yours sincerely.

MERWYN H. L. CRANE ABSSX16141.
H. M. S. Sapphire,
c/o G. P. O., London, England.

"ENJOYS NORTHWEST NOVELS"

Dear Pete:

I have surely enjoyed reading my first issue of the Northwest Novel Magazine, also the letters printed therein, and wonder if I could possibly get a letter printed there myself.

I am eighteen, five feet ten, and weigh one hundred sixty-four, brown hair, blue eyes. I love all sports, hockey, swimming, dancing and baseball; in fact, everything in general. So come on, girls, and write.

Yours truly,
FORD HORTON.
Lansdowne, Ontario, Canada.

A CCC COOK

Dear Pete:

I am a constant reader of your magazine and really think it O. K.

I would appreciate it very much if you would publish my plea for pen pals. I am a 1st cook in a CCC camp, 19 years old, have dark brown hair, brown eyes, 5 ft. 9 in. tall and am considered good looking.

I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots, so let me hear from you of the fair sex. I am really lonesome and crave romance.

Yours for a continued success,
VICTOR GREGGS.
Co. 217, S.P. 47,
Tompkins Corners, New York.

ATTENTION: FOREIGN LEGIONNAIRES

Hello, Pete:

How about a few pen pals? I'd certainly appreciate them.

I especially would like to hear from some one in the Foreign Legion, Navy, and CCC camps, but of course everyone is certainly welcome.

I am almost 19, slim, have dark wavy hair, dark eyes, and am not afraid to exchange snaps. Good luck to your mag, but it doesn't need it.

Yours truly,
DORIS GAGNON.
Smooth Rock Falls,
Box 174, Ontario, Canada.

A BOXING FAN

Dear Pete:

I think your magazine is great, it's got everything.

Please, Pete, will you print this letter for me as I would very much like some pen pals. I am sixteen, chestnut brown hair, hazel eyes, weigh 140 lbs, height 5 ft. 9 in. I am keen on all sports especially boxing. My hobbies are stamps, films, swimming, etc. So please, boys and girls, drop a line to a lonely chap in England and you will be sure of a reply.

Yours truly,
PETER CURTIS.
102 Rectory Grove,
Leigh, England.

MOVIE OPERATORS

Dear Pete:

We are two cinema projectionists who read your mag. regularly and vote it one of the best. We have written to you before, but the letters must have been mislaid as we received no letter in reply.

We wish to correspond with any girls between the ages of 16 and 26 who are interested in cinemas. We are both 22, are 6 ft. tall, have blue eyes and dark hair. Some think us handsome. Please print as soon as possible as we are waiting for answers.

We are yours truly,
W. G. SMITHERS,
L. A. ADAMS.
c/o Playhouse Cinema,
Chertsey, Surrey, England.

With hundreds of letters coming in every week, it is impossible to print them all. Below are the names, ages, and descriptions of some Pen Pals, who will be eager to hear from you.

Wallace Howe, (amateur stamp collector), 3 Headley Ten, Irvington, N. J.

G. F. Cleveland (ranch worker), Blythe, Cal., Gen. Del.

Marie Clabo, (18, Blond Hill Billy) Star Route (Banner), Sevierville, Tenn.

Barbara M. Blackner, (17, likes cowboys) R. 3 Box 261, Johnstown, Pa.

Howard Pack, (22, exchanges snaps) Service Co., 1st Infantry, Fort F. E. Warren, Wyo.

A. D. Starkiss, (Youth of 18) 53 Sele Road, Hertford, Herts, England.

Raymond Herner, (17, aviation enthusiast) R. D. No. 1, Dallas, Texas.

Milton Milford, (18, black hair, brown eyes) General Delivery, Lake Charles, La.

C. L. Sheppard, (17, lonely girl) Route No. 1, Canton, N. C.

Burt Dyson (Texas boy in C. C. C. Camp) Br-22-C-Co. 2803, Grand Junction, Col.

Richard L. French, (17, red hair, blue eyes) 16 Poplar St., Winchendon, Mass.

Miss Tommie Staggs, (17, wants Canadian pen pals) Nixon, Texas.

Arden Simmons, (18, hunts and fishes) Box 128, Rufus, Ore.

C. J. Wilson, (English coal miner, 19) Codfits Hse., Gt. Clifton, Nr. Workington, Cumberland, England.

Tom Lewis, (23, tall, dark and modest) Spring Lake Ranch, Cuttingsville, Vt.

Meg Golding, (17, fun lover) 390 Melrose Ave., Verdun, Quebec, Canada.

Alfred Dwyer, (14 years old on June 10th, 1937) Box 12, Blair, Kan.

Melvin Cantrell, (20, fair to look at) Leora, Mo.

Van Higby, (20, and blue eyed) Fair View, Utah.

Miss Helen Emerich, (23, loves animals) 1536 N. Claremont Ave., Chicago, Ill.

S. R. Wagner, (36, saddle rider) General Delivery, Victor, Col.

D. Arnold, (18, art and music), R. F. D. No. 1, Military Road, Niagara Falls, N. Y.

Betty Zane Duvall, (a farmer's daughter) Route No. 1, Bunker Hill, Kan.

Norman Blake Horsfall, (26, Canadian Militiaman) 2219 Hawarden Ave., Montreal, Quebec.

Theo. R. Warren, (young rancher who cooks) Box 493, Route 1, Bellevue, Wash.

Levi Burgess, (19, good looking and good natured) Trenton, Ontario, R. R. 4.

Kath Leonard, (16, wants snaps) The Cottage, Woori Yallock, Victoria, Australia.

Fannya Himanka, (17, "youse" guys and gals, write) Bruce Crossing, Mich.

Joseph G. Wallon, (20, interested in police work) 228 School St., Stoughton, Mass.

Robin Davey, (24, black hair, blue eyes).

James McKenon, (21, brown hair, blue eyes).

Alan Bell, (18, blond, blue eyes).

All of 25 Wilberforce Road, Finsbury Park, London, N. 4.

Harold Whiting, (28, 6 foot 2) No. Scituate, Mass.

Louis Frank Bullen, (17, likes the Mounties) Box 218, Penn Ave., Rosemont, Md.

William N. Kiser, (born near Juneau, Alaska) 600 N. Boundary St., Raleigh, N. C.

Marian Charbonneau, (15, blond, loves sports) 112 Union St., No. Adams, Mass.

Lonely Bill, (middle aged bachelor) Hillcrest Tavern, Edina, Mo.

Rudy Nichols, (31, wants friends) Long Lots Road, Westport, Conn.

Lionel Lee Lapointe, (17, lonely) 520 Virgin St., Rumford, Me.

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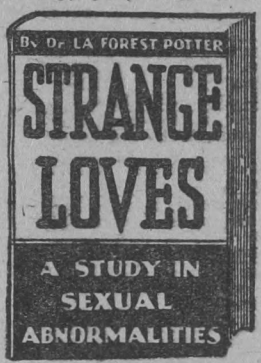

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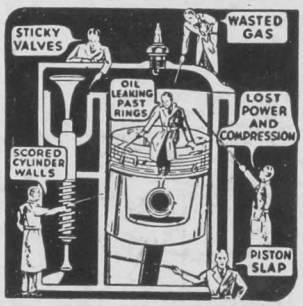

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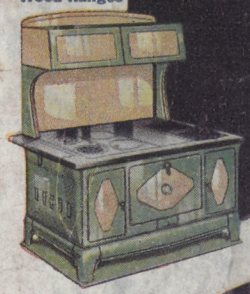

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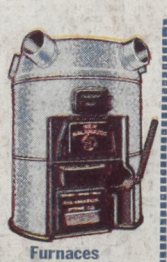

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