

"Texas Steerers" by Thomson Burtis
Crooks vs. Airmen of the Border Patrol

Short Stories

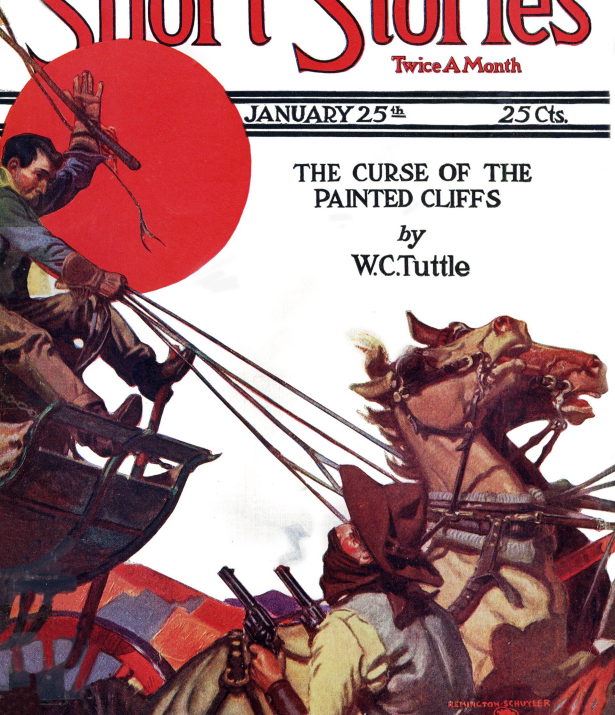
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JANUARY 25th

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W.C. Tuttle





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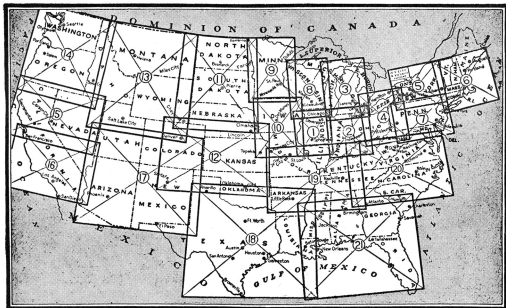
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SHORT STORIES

Vol. CII., No. 2

Whole No. 411

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITORD. McLWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

WHOSE TIME IS IT?

HOW much time have you, I, all of us spent in waiting for the man who is always late?

Someone once said that all humanity was divided into two classes—those who kept people waiting, and those who waited. Some people are never on time for anything—business appointments, trains, theatres, social engagements, or simply meeting a friend for lunch. It has often been said that it is women who are always late, and men who do the waiting, but careful observation shows that a fair proportion of both sexes have the habit firmly established of believing that one o'clock is anywhere from one-fifteen to one-thirty—and no trouble to anyone.

There are times, of course, when unpunctuality is unavoidable. Trains are delayed, traffic is congested, or the like, and everyone, being human, is entitled to be late occasionally, but that is aside from that section of humanity which simply never

starts to do anything or go anywhere until it is time to be there.

Look around among your own friends or business acquaintances. How many times have you waited for Brown or Jones, and

how often have you sighed over the minutes spent in waiting? Unfortunately you cannot say that the man who is never on time is invariably a failure. Very often he is a greater figure in his own field than any one of the people he has kept waiting—people who perhaps have no claim to fame, save that they have the habit of being on time.

But one appeal can be made to this class of citizens: If you have not yourself suffered by your habit of lateness, for the sake of humanity think of the time of other people you've wasted. You may not be jeopardizing your own future—although that may also frequently be the case—but you are stealing time that belongs not to you, but to the other fellow. THE EDITOR.



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Short Stories

Twice A Month

Out the 10th and 25th

THE NEXT ISSUE



These three links contained the key to the strange and sinister events of WILLIAM JOHNSTON'S great mystery story—novel length

The Waddington Cipher

B. M. BOWER

Eyes of the Desert—The first story in SHORT STORIES by this author whose stories of the West are favorites the country over.

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E. E. HARRIMAN

The Revolt—An incident in border politics, an election of the sort where every bullet had one vote, if not more.

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Part III of “The Desert of the Three Skulls,” takes the reader deeper into the mystery of that land of mysteries—Lower California.

and others

February 10th SHORT STORIES

Out the day it's dated



TEXAS STEERERS

A Complete Novel

By THOMSON BURTIS

A COMPLETE HISTORY OF FOUR DAYS IN A TEXAS TOWN, INCLUDING ALL SORTS OF ACTION FROM AERIAL BOOTLEGGING TO CROOKED POLITICS, TOLD BY AN AIRMAN WHO DROPPED IN CASUALLY, AND ENDED BY PLAYING A BIG PART IN THE CLEANING UP OF FARIFUS

I

KINDLY pardon me while I rise and rave. I have just finished perusing three magazines while lying on my back with the flu, *née* grippe. In one of these yarns the skilful bozo who flew the machine landed on a lawn where a lawn-party was being held—at night, too—grabbed his girl off the porch, chucked her in the ship, and took off nonchalantly through people, electric light wires, tables, and so forth. Did he hit anybody, damage his plane, or anything like that? Not he.

In the second magazine there was a tale about one of these big passenger-carrying ships in Europe. The pilot was knocked out by an aerial highwayman, and the beautiful gal flew the ship until he came to. Had she ever flown before? No, indeed. The governments concerned in the late unpleasantness made a big mistake bothering with flying training. It seems flying comes natural to *débutantes*.

The third tome merely had an advertisement wherein a flyer had just stepped from his plane. It was midsummer, according to the flowers, golf-players, and bathing beauties in the foreground, but this airman was decorated with a leather helmet, muffler, leather coat, gauntlets, and

other clothing sufficient to equip the Amundsen expedition. As usual he had landed on the lawn of Mrs. Vere de Vere's country estate.

If a slight flicker passes over my face, you'll have to excuse me, as I said before. Because I'm a flyer, and I'm on my back wondering how long I want to live if this flu or whatever it is keeps up. And all of it is the result of a trip I just finished this morning. I have a mind to tell you about it to relieve myself.

My name is, "Slim" Evans, and having been a flyer since the start of the war I may know a little about it. Many of my early instructors not only said that I didn't, but that I never would. I've told a few hundred cadets the same thing since.

When I say I'm a flyer I suppose a picture leaps into your mind's eye. It's the likeness of a tall, slim young Hercules standing beside a glistening ship, an expression of lofty contempt for the world in general on his collar-ad face. His smart leather coat falls in graceful lines over his spotless breeches, and the shine on his form-fit boots matches the sparkle of daredeviltry in his moving-picture eyes.

As a matter of fact, I'm six feet four tall, and built like a flagpole. All the old gags about my only figure being my Adam's apple, and how many chances I

take pulling the stopper out of the bathtub, have been dinned into my ears almost as much as the world's standard wise crack when introducing an aviator: "He's a high-flyer." My dad once told me that if I had my nose full of nickels I could retire. My hands are big, as likewise are my feet. In other words, I am not the answer to a maiden's prayer. When I step out of a ship my sleeves are rolled up, I have on a pair of sleeveless, dirty, grease-spotted coveralls, and my stringy brown hair looks approximately like the recently vacated villa of Mr. and Mrs. Mouse.

A couple of weeks ago Major Stratton—he commands the mechanic's school here at Donovan Field, Texas—called me into his office. He looked as pleasant as a grizzly bear with the toothache.

"Evans," he said, with his mustache looking as though every hair was a separate spike, "once again I fell into the error of lending one of these Washington birds a ship. He's cracked it up in some God-forsaken place named Vreeman, near the Gulf somewhere. Look it up on the map. You and Carson will go down there, carrying this list of needed supplies on your ship, fix up the plane I lent out of the goodness of my heart, and then you fly it back here. Carson can bring back the ship you go down in."

"What did he——?" I started in and the Major slammed his fist on the desk.

"Don't ask so many questions!" he yelled, so I exited pronto.

Well, Carson and I finally staggered into this Vreeman the next day, with enough propellers, wheels, wires and motor parts on our ship to make the *Mauretania* loggy. The crack-up was in a swamp—they'd had a lot of rain down there—and when we finally succeeded in landing without cracking ourselves up I wondered how in the world the wreck hadn't floated away without an anchor. This Washington man had come back by train.

To make this introduction short, it took us a week of work to get it fixed up, and then the damn motor wouldn't turn up more than fifteen hundred revolutions a minute. Carson, being married, took off and went on back to Donovan and his wife with the ship we'd brought down. The next day I hired some mules and dragged the other ship to the main street of this little town, Vreeman, and took off down the main stem. That motor never would have got the crate off that muddy field.

I broke a plate glass window with one wing and missed the telephone wires by a

hair, but I did get off, finally, and set sail with this old ship for Donovan Field. I was afloat in the open ozone, so to speak, but there were holes in the boat. Dirty weather, mates, very dirty weather. It was a Jenny, equipped with a French 160 horsepower motor, and the thing wouldn't turn up enough to do anything more than keep the ship in the air. I took off at four o'clock in the afternoon, and at five-thirty the harrowing tale really starts.

It had been getting more and more cloudy as I went along, until finally I was flying above the clouds, out of sight of the earth entirely, setting my course by the compass. I've roomed with a couple of fellows who were in love with girls who were far, far away, and likewise have ridden the range all by myself when a small kid in Utah, so I claim to know what it means to be lonesome. But at five-thirty that afternoon I felt as though the middle of the Sahara desert would be paradise if I only had both feet on the ground.

I couldn't see the ground, and didn't have the slightest idea what was underneath me. By all the laws of flying, my gas should have been completely gone. And it was getting dark. And I couldn't find a single, solitary hole in those clouds.

There was only one thing to do, so I did it. I nosed down slightly, and started to dive. In a moment I was going through the clouds, and couldn't see my hand before my face. Nothing around me but opaque mist, and every moment the altimeter was dropping, until finally it read a thousand feet. 'It's a hell of a job to keep anywhere near rightside up in the clouds—you can't see a thing to orient yourself by. The wires commenced to sing and the ship began to tremble all over, so I tried my damndest to pull the nose up and reduce the speed. It was a tough job, because I had got going so fast that it took a lot of strength to work the elevators, but with the altimeter reading five hundred I got it nearly level.

Still no sign of the ground; and right there the motor whistled, moaned, sighed, popped and died. The gas was all gone. Underneath me there might be a city, for all I knew. Whatever it was, I would have to land on it.

I had to push up my goggles, because the mist made them as transparent as a sheet of tin. The rush of the air made my eyes water so that they were almost useless for purposes of vision, which is their main use.

Feeling my way that last two hundred feet through the mist, I remember I wasn't

so much scared as disgusted with myself. With a million good jobs driving automobiles, punching cows, tapping typewriters or holystoning decks, why should I pick flying, I thought, meanwhile trying to see through the water in my eyes enough to make out what was below me. The clouds were thinning, but it was getting wetter. It was raining on the ground, evidently. I had some slight curiosity as to what was below me, for I was only three hundred feet high and there would be nothing to do but dive straight ahead into whatever there was. I wouldn't be high enough to even make a turn with a dead motor.

At two hundred feet I saw enough to make me give vent to the loudest yell ever emitted from mortal lungs. Had there been any people below, they'd have thought Gabriel was dropping through the clouds tooting his well-known trumpet.

There were open fields below.

In a moment it didn't look so good as I'd thought at first, but still it was better than it might have been. With the rain stinging my face as though every drop was a red-hot needle, I leaned out of the side of the cockpit and by main strength kept my eyes open long enough to see that there were irrigation ditches crisscrossing those newly-planted cotton fields, and that there was not a space longer than a hundred yards to land on without running into a ditch.

I was going faster than I'd thought. The little section I'd planned to land on slipped by before I knew it, and in a blurred kind of a way I saw a wire fence ahead. I pulled up, and for a moment the ship answered.



It didn't answer loud enough, however. The undercarriage caught on the top wire, and there was not speed enough to break it. For a moment the old Jenny hesitated

lazily, and then dropped over nose-first into newly-furrowed, muddy loam. The jar snapped my forehead against the dashboard, but luckily I missed the compass and only got a slight cut.

I didn't feel so bad, however. When a man has just reached out his hand to shake with St. Peter, and then suddenly finds he's still on earth he doesn't mind a headache so much. I climbed out and surveyed

the remains of that ship. It was being wrecked so much it must have grown wise to proper methods of doing it, because I found that there wasn't a thing wrong except a splintered landing gear and a broken propeller. The old crate was standing on her nose, but the wings seemed sound enough and I didn't believe the crankshaft was bent.

The rain was only a drizzle, now, although the clouds were rushing by close overhead and the muddy ground testified to a considerable deluge. My face felt as though hornets had stung it, and I was wet to the skin. I wish the birds that draw the pictures of aviators could have been there to see a real live one tenderly pressing the red rain-spots on his face, said face having not been shaved for three days, and taken in the dirty, tattered shirt and oil-spotted breeches that flapped forlornly around his bony form.

I looked around over miles of flat fields, broken by isolated clumps of mesquite, to discover some signs of civilization. Strange to say, no beautiful girl materialized from a nearby mansion, nor did a crowd of awe-struck people pour forth to do homage to the man who had just come down from his "hazardous occupation of riding the upper air"—I quote from memory from a story I once read.

I did see what looked like a line of wires a considerable distance away, so I unwired my suitcase and started plowing through the mud toward them. They ought to be running along a road, I figured.

The suitcase was heavy as lead, and if you've ever had any experience with that variety of Texas mud that cakes on your feet in ever-growing, sticky masses, you'll know what a pleasant stroll I had through the gumbo. I slipped and slid and fell, dragging that water-soaked suitcase with arms that ached like an exposed nerve.

It took me about as long to get close to those wires as it had to get from Freeman to wherever I was. I didn't have the slightest idea. If my compass was correct I ought to be within a few miles of San Antonio and Donovan Field, but some of those compasses are about as reliable as the word of a salesman for oil stock. Unless you have landmarks on the ground to check up by, you're sure leaning on a rotten staff when you use a compass. Electricity in the air and all the metal in a ship affect it, and then there's no way of telling how much the wind may be blowing you off your course.

I finally made the grade, and slumped

down alongside a muddy, narrow little road. My suitcase slid off into the ditch, and plumped into it with a gurgle. I rescued it, now weighing at least a ton, and sat me down on the side of the wet highway to meditate on the romance of the air.

II

TEMPUS fugited slowly, so slowly that I haven't much idea of the interval that elapsed between my arrival and the time that I spotted a vehicle which hove into sight around a turn in the road. It was almost dark—an artificial darkness brought on by the rain—and for a moment I thought that said equipage was not moving at all. Then I recognized it as a horse drawing a buggy with the top up. For a moment I forgot my soaked condition as I mused reverently on the amorous memories generated by this relic of my youth, and then rose to flag it.

It approached leisurely, finally getting close enough for me to see that it had two occupants. One was an old man, and the other a woman. The horse thankfully came to a stop, and the old man leaned forward and peered out at me through puckered eyes.

"Where did yuh light?" he asked in a squeaky voice.

"Over in the cotton fields a few miles away," I answered. "Would you mind telling me what the name of the nearest town is, and how I could get there?"

By this time I had walked close enough to the buggy to see the woman. She was the tallest female I've ever seen, and likewise the homeliest. Her face was as thin as mine, and her nose, honestly, was bigger. She had on a sort of a low-cut gingham dress, which showed a very scrawny neck. She looked to be about thirty, and as I took in the old man I figured them as father and daughter.

"What might your name be, and where d'yuh hail from?" the old man enquired, leaving my questions hanging in the air.

"My name is Evans, and I come from Donovan Field at San Antone," I made reply, wiping my dripping face with an equally wet bare arm.

"Yuh don't say!" replied the old fellow quickly, and his little eyes darted up and down me with the speed of lightning. "Not the feller that come intuh some money and—"

"The very same," said I, considerably surprised.

You see I had an uncle that was a pretty prominent senator. He's the reason I

wormed my way into the Air Service without any college experience except three months, at the end of which I was requested to leave, due to carelessly forgetting to attend class for some three weeks. This uncle left me five thousand when he died, which was three months before meeting this old bird. Due to his prominence the bequest got some publicity in Texas, although not nearly as much as the method whereby I got rid of a thousand of it. That's another story.

"Well, well," cackled this old Texan, spitting out the side of the buggy with gusto and then wiping his stained mustache with the back of his hand. "Climb in and we'll give yuh a lift to town."

I couldn't quite figure where I was going to fit in with my elongated legs, but I heaved the suitcase in the back and then finally succeeded in wedging myself in on the outside.

"My name's Hyson—Tom Hyson—and this here's my daughter Minnie," the old man said, and the attenuated virgin by my side grinned cordially.

"Glad to meet you both," I said, taking time to squint at my newly-met acquaintances while he went through the motions of starting the old plug he was driving. He was tall and thin, with a beak-like nose and little eyes. The skin on his face might have been leather grafted from a saddle, and what few wrinkles he had were so deep they looked like canyons. His teeth were discolored from chewing tobacco, and his lantern jaw was covered with stiff white bristles. He needed a shave as bad as I did. The fair Minnie was a slightly feminized edition of her father.

SOMEHOW or other, with no particular reason, I suppose, I didn't care so much for old man Hyson. Did you ever meet people that you instinctively disliked? He really wasn't such a bad-looking old coot—I've liked a lot worse-looking people—but to me there was something as repugnant about him as there would be about a buzzard. He was dressed in overalls, a striped shirt, and embossed cowboy boots. He had a rickety straw sombrero on. The girl was in gingham.

It was now nearly dark, and we plodded along the muddy road slowly.

"Did you happen to mention what the name of the town we're going to is?" I enquired.

"Don't know where yuh are, eh?" chuckled Hyson. "You're comin' intuh Farifus, Texas, son."

"Well I'll be damned," I exploded, and then apologized to the lady. Farifus was a hundred miles from San Antonio, southward. I surely had been blown a long way off-course above those clouds. I was almost as far from San Antone as I had been when I started.

"Did yuh hurt your plane when yuh lighted?" Hyson asked.

"A little. I'll have to get a new landing gear and prop from the Field," I answered. "Farifus, I've heard quite a little about Farifus, but I just can't connect up—"

"We're havin' a rodeo here startin' day after tomorrow, includin' some good hoss races," he interrupted me. "Mebbe you been readin' about it in the papers."

"That's it," I agreed, for his words reminded me that I had noticed several small items about the coming rodeo. The big feature of it was the races—for the first time in that part of Texas they were going to have a race meet of a few days—and I remembered that they had succeeded in getting some fair horses that couldn't quite make the grade in Juarez or New Orleans.

But there was more than that in my mind. I remembered then how Tex MacDowell, a flyer you probably have heard about, was telling me one time that this Farifus was a real good town. You know what the term "good town" means when a young transient uses it. Tex said it was the buying center for a lot of ranches; and that it was surrounded for a few miles with some of the best cotton land in Texas. Naturally it would be the mecca of the riders from all the ranches.

"Come to think of it, your name sounds familiar to me, Mr. Hyson," I remarked, peering at the old man.

"I'm head o' the rodeo committee, and likewise mayor o' Farifus," he said, waving his whip impressively.

"I guess I read it in the paper, then, in connection with the rodeo. Going to have a pretty good time?"

"They're comin' from all around Texas for the races," he said. "First time real high-class hoss races has been held around this section. We're puttin' up some good purses—two of 'em a thousand dollars each—and there'll be some good bettin'. Of course we're goin' t' have some races fur cow-ponies and such as that, but there's horses like Lanikin and this here Fiddledee that's been well-known racers."

"Will I have any trouble getting accommodations in town? I'll have to be here three or four days."

"We'd admire t' have yuh at the house,"

said Hyson, and all of a sudden the lofty Minnie lets out a shrill giggle. It was the first audible indication that she was among those present.

For a moment I hesitated. As a matter of fact, I would have much preferred to stay by myself somewhere, but there didn't seem to be any way I could gracefully withdraw. If I hadn't known something about some old-fashioned Texans I would have positively refused because of a fear that I wouldn't have a decent bed to sleep in or an edible meal. According to the dilapidated outfit he was riding in and the tramp's clothes he was wearing, His Honor the Mayor looked as though he'd be lucky to have a shack to live in, but I surmised that he might have the best house in town. Some of these old fellows are worth half a million and haven't had their knives out of their mouths for twenty years, or their neck covered. I've seen five thousand dollar cars roll out of weatherbeaten old barns many a time in some of those little towns.

"I'll surely be very grateful to you, Mr. Hyson," I said.

"Glad to have yuh, son," he said heartily.

I was almost ashamed of myself for the feeling I had that Hyson didn't ring true. That was the second time he'd called me "son," and for some reason or other it rubbed me the wrong way.

There were houses along each side of the road now, and pretty soon we passed a concrete, open air swimming pool. There was a crowd of girls and men in swimming, and, from the noise, they were having one good time. It was dark as pitch now, and occasionally there would come a little drizzle of rain, but the pool was all lit up and a little thing like a rainy night didn't seem to dampen their enthusiasm a bit.

In a couple of minutes more we were rolling down the main stem of Farifus. It was paved for four blocks, and they had a

good lineup of stores, mostly open. The street was crowded, and there were some good-looking cars rolling up and down or parked along the curb. Sandwiched in between 'em were cow-



ponies and old rigs about like the one we were riding in. A lot of people greeted Hyson, most of them with marked respect.

There didn't seem to be much curiosity about me. Probably none of them knew a plane had landed nearby.

A little further on one side of the main street became a scraggly, sandy little park, with a few discouraged-looking mesquite trees standing around forlornly. There must have been a hundred saddle horses tied to hitching racks in this open space. Over behind it was the depot, and there was a line of pens that must have had a capacity of several hundred head of cattle. I judged the town was the shipping point for a lot of ranches.

The people were of all kinds. Some of them might have stepped down from San Antone, and there were a lot of others without collar or coat, others in cowboy rig, and a lot of old-timers in approximately the same make-up as my prospective host wore. There were a lot of ordinary saloons with conspicuous soft-drink signs on them, but from the noises inside I suspected that maybe the beer was a little nearer than usual. I noticed several pool-rooms, too. All in all, it was a right snappy-looking town, and with three or four days ahead of me, I couldn't kick much on my selection of a place to be stranded in.

"Well, what do you think of Farifus?" said Minnie suddenly.

It was the first thing she'd uttered, and it came with an explosive effect that was funny.

"Fine," I said, meeting her eyes a minute and looking away just as quickly. She sure was one homely female.

We turned down a side-street lined with small frame houses. Over back of them, a considerable distance away, was a big brick house all lighted up. I expected that it might turn out to be Tyson's, but he finally drove into a lane that led alongside a plain white house with a dinky little pocket-handkerchief lawn in front. He drove around to the back yard, and stopped in front of a stable that hadn't been painted since the flood. A stick, set against one of the doors to keep it open, looked as though it might be holding the whole building up.

"Well, here we are," he said, and with some difficulty we climbed out.

An old darky came moseying out of the stable with a milk-pail in his hand. He set it down and commenced to unharness the dashing steed. Hyson led us in through the kitchen, me carrying my waterlogged suitcase. A tall, thin, tired-faced woman came out of a front room, and I was introduced to her. She shook hands limply.

There were remnants of beauty in her face, but there was a sort of scared look in her eyes. She looked like a woman who had been bossed all her life with no gentle hand.

"I couldn't get to see Pasquale till late, and then I run across the lieutenant here," Hyson explained to her. "He told her who I was and how I came to be there. 'Hold up supper till he gets washed up. Right this way, Lieutenant.'"

He seemed very eager to make me comfortable, finally loaning me a white shirt and a pair of pants and some cowboy boots. All the stuff in my suitcase was wet. I scraped away on my face with an old straight razor, narrowly escaping with my life.

All the while I was wondering about the Hysons. The house was plainly furnished and small, and there was no servant. And yet Hyson was a prominent man in a sizeable town. Remembering his sudden cordiality when he learned who I was, and connecting things up a bit, I came to the conclusion that he probably was the champion tightwad of Texas. And then I cursed myself for my dislike of my host, but I'll swear the more he did for me the less I liked him. Funny about those things, isn't it?

III

SUPPER proved to be composed of plain but wholesome food—enough of it, but not too much. The conversation was confined exclusively to Hyson and myself. My efforts to draw Mrs. Hyson out were absolutely fruitless. She drooped over the table as though constantly immersed in hopeless reverie. There was something unutterably sad about her; it seemed as though she were the result of a lifetime of cringing. Naturally, I had to believe that old man Hyson was the cause of her spiritless, scared submissiveness, but I'm bound to say that he did or said nothing while I was present to justify the opinion.

We talked principally about my deceased uncle, and time after time Hyson asked questions hinting toward information as to how much of that five thousand dollars I still had left. He overdid his cordiality, in my opinion, and likewise was too ostentatious in calling his wife "my dear." I'll bet she hadn't heard that phrase of endearment for years, except in company.

Finally he said, "Now, son, as long's you're goin' tuh be here for some time you'll prob'ly want tuh join in and have a

good time. If you want any checks cashed or anything like that we'll fix it up for yuh. I was young once myself, and you'll want tuh mebbe bet the races and have a little fling generally."



"Thanks. I have plenty of cash on me," I answered. "On these flying trips emergencies arise frequently, so I always go well-heeled."

"Well, if yuh run short we'll cash your checks," he insisted, apparently in high good humor.

I was glad when supper was over and we went out on the porch. Minnie and Mrs. Hyson started in on the dishes. I lit a cigarette and Mr. Hyson rolled his own. As soon as we were comfortably seated, listening to the drip off the eaves, he leaned over confidentially.

"This here's a good town, Evans," he said meaningly, and winked portentously. "In a little while we'll go down town and I'll introduce yuh to some fellers that'll show yuh the ropes. I was young once myself, son."

Now I'll not deny I enjoy a drink once in a while; likewise a little game of cards or a session with the ivories. In fact, I'm no model in general, but there was something repulsive about this old buzzard's confidential winking and chuckling. I can't get chummy with anybody but intimate friends within a few years of my own age on matters of wassail, and I didn't like this dried-up old fellow anyway. So I just nodded, and let it go at that.

"Farifus is sensible about them things; we believe in lettin' people pretty much alone. 'Have their fling,' say I."

"It's a pretty good idea not to try to run everyone's business for 'em," I agreed. "I'll be interested to look over the town a little, at that."

"We'll start right away. There's quite a crowd in town already—some men bringin' horses down, entries in the rodeo, and such-like. Git your hat, and we'll go. Mebbe I can stir up some excitement for you."

I didn't tell him I'd rather stir up my own.

We started downtown, and in a few minutes were weaving through the crowd on the main street. Hyson was greeted from all sides, and two or three times men stopped him. I was introduced to all of them. One was the Chief of Police, another the

owner of the town ice-factory and a member of the rodeo committee, and a third a fat, jolly sort of a fellow who proved to be the owner of that big brick house I'd seen and the principal lawyer of the town.

Hyson explained to all of them just who I was, not forgetting to mention who my uncle was and to make jocular cracks about my inheritance. For almost the first time, in circumstances of that kind, I met people who showed absolutely no curiosity about flying. These three men asked about where my ship was in a desultory kind of way, and that was about all of it. I wondered about it a little.

Finally Hyson led me into the town hotel—a frame affair that might have been able to hold a hundred guests.

"I've got some business to attend to, so I'll see if I can find a couple of live young fellers that can take yuh in tow and show you the place," he said as we walked up on the porch.

He disappeared inside, and I stood out there and watched the never-ending stream of people that surged up and down the sidewalks in front. I'd thought I might be a mite embarrassed in my shake-down costume, but it wasn't a bit conspicuous in that motley throng. It seemed to be a breach of etiquette to wear a coat in Farifus, and boots were almost as stylish as ordinary shoes. As a matter of fact, I was glad that I didn't have a uniform on. The less conspicuous I am, the better I like it.

I turned around carelessly, and through a window saw Hyson talking to two men, whose backs were toward me. They were dressed in ordinary sack suits. Hyson gestured in my general direction, and then inclined his head and talked to them in a very confidential manner.

I strolled over to the door, back of a line of porch chairs holding a number of middle-aged and elderly men who talked very little and appraised me without particular curiosity. Near the door there was a prominently lettered poster which awakened vague memories in my mind. It read:

TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD
Will be paid for the arrest and conviction
of the person or persons responsible
for the murder of former sheriff

GEORGE BARTON

on the night of July 18th
at Farifus, Texas

John T. Kimberly,
Acting Sheriff.

I leaned against the wall and strove to call up the crumbs of information which had cluttered up my mind since the case flamed on the front pages of the newspapers. As I recollected it, Barton was a very young man who had been elected by a freak of politics and a last minute split in the other party. According to the papers, he had turned out to be a whale of a sheriff, and the few months of his régime had been packed



with excitement and surprise. I remembered, then, that Farifus had been the scene of his untimely demise. He had been found, early in the morning, shot to death, and thrown into one of the cattlepens along the railroad track. Only the fact that a ranch-hand was looking for some money or jewelry or something that he'd lost, had been the cause of discovering the body so quickly. This man had been working in the pen the day before, and in poking around under a heap of refuse had run across the body. Physicians had said that he had been dead only a few hours. The case had created considerable excitement, due to the dead man's reputation and the number of outlaws who would have been capable of the deed.

My idle thoughts were interrupted by the advent of Hyson and the two younger men.

"Lieutenant Evans, shake hands with Bud Granger and Charley Ball. Boys, take the lieutenant in tow and show him a good time," said Hyson.

I shook hands with my prospective hosts, Hyson looking on with a crooked grin.

Ball was of medium height, very chunky, and had a square, hard kind of a face made a trifle unprepossessing through the presence of a prominent scar on his left cheek. He wore a straw hat on the side of his head, tilted forward a little, and picked his teeth persistently.

Granger was a horse of another color. He was tall and slim, neatly dressed in well-fitting blue serge and a white silk shirt. His face was long and thin, with remarkably well-chiseled features and rather narrow, dark eyes. His slight smile was attractive, and his long-fingered hand gripped mine with warm strength. His face, I noticed, was somewhat pallid compared to the deep tan of the average small-town Texan, and his speech, unlike both

Hyson's and Ball's, was correct and clear, without a touch of drawl or slurred endings. He looked, talked and comported himself like a gentleman. When he took off his neat straw sailor his hair showed sleek and dark, thinning a trifle on top. He seemed older with his hat off.

"These boys are live wires and know the town, son," said Hyson. "I got to mosey along and tend to some business. Have a good time, boys."

He clumped down off the porch and went on down the street. Ball pulled out a package of cigarettes, and he and I lit up. Granger, it seemed, didn't smoke.

"Well, what shall we do?" enquired Ball. "Want to look over the town a little?"

"Anything suits me," I said. As a matter of fact, I was tired and not very keen for anything, but I couldn't very well wiggle out at that early stage in the game.

Ball lowered his voice.

"There's plenty of places to get liquor, and a little later there'll be a couple of places open where we can stake a dollar or two, if you like. There ain't much of a crowd this early. Do you ever like to grab the ivories or play a little poker?"

"I sure do. What are these places—regular gambling joints?"

Granger nodded.

"This is a pretty good town," he said, using the same phrase that seemed to occur to most people when describing Farifus. "I'll tell you, let's go down to Barney's and get a pint and come back up to the room and have a little game of our own for a while. A little later we'll start down the line when it's commencing to get good."

He rattled a pair of dice which he had in his pocket, and looked at me inquiringly.

"Suits me," said Ball. "How about it, Lieutenant?"

I nodded, but nevertheless, as I walked down the street toward this Barney's place with them, I was sizing them up to the best of my ability. I know a lot of little towns along through the far South and Southwest where part of every kid's education is a course in controlling the dice and a deck of cards. I made up my mind to be on guard, even if the mayor had vouched for them.

It occurred to me that this might be a good opportunity to find out a little about his raggedy Honor, the Mayor.

"I was considerably surprised to find out that Mr. Hyson was the high muckaroo of town," I ventured.

"I don't blame you," returned Granger. "He's an old cattleman, but now all he does is draw the income from several hundred acres of the best cotton land you ever saw. Crop failures for three years, though, have hit him hard."

He talked without any trace of the drawl which was characteristic of the other Texans I had met in Farifus. In fact, Granger puzzled me. In manner, dress and speech he appeared to be a well-educated fellow with a considerable share of refinement and culture. He was the direct opposite of his partner, Charley Ball.

"He doesn't give the impression of being a wealthy man," I remarked as we turned into one of the saloons.

"Appearances are deceitful," said Granger. "Which is a very original remark that I suppose you've never heard."

Ball emitted a throaty laugh.

"You never can tell," he chuckled, and glanced over at Granger meaningly.

I remember wondering whether they had a secret contempt for Hyson. It seemed not unlikely.

The saloon we were in was small, and of the conventional type which strewed the country before Volstead became an author. The bar was pretty well lined with men of



all ages, mostly drinking beer—whether the old-time stuff or not I couldn't tell. Quite occasionally I noticed a dark fluid in a small glass being pushed across the bar, however, and there were several drinks which bore all the ear-

marks of rickys and highballs. Two young fellows who looked like punchers were getting a little boisterous up at one end of the bar. I could see several guns in the crowd, but this is not unusual in the ranch country. It doesn't mean that the owners thereof have the slightest idea of using them on human targets, necessarily. However, I remembered that poster.

It only took Ball, who, along with Granger was greeted by most of the bar's patrons, a moment to conduct his negotiations. A package, already wrapped up, was pushed over to him and I saw him give the barkeeper four dollars.

"Let's go," said Granger, and led the way out the swinging doors.

"Good luck, boys," someone yelled as we were going out.

He must have been a mind reader.

IV

THE room into which my two acquaintances led me was of the ordinary country hotel variety—bowl and pitcher on a superannuated washstand, print of a Victorian lady leaning against a fence and contemplating a flower with an expression on her face which indicated that she had eaten something that didn't agree with her, a couple of towels, dirty curtains on the window, and a low bed with a ragged white coverlet over it, fairly clean. Ball switched on the light, produced glasses, and we all had a drink of very good whisky.

"Well, we're not planning to shoot for any length of time, so let's get started," said Ball, removing his coat.

Granger, whom I really liked, turned to me and said frankly, "I'll tell you, Lieutenant Evans, let's have an understanding before we start, and please don't get insulted. You don't know us and we don't know you. Just to make sure that there are no hard feelings, how does it suit you to shoot against the wall, no shot to count unless the dice are both bounced off the wall? We can shoot on the flat side of this trunk here, which will be more comfortable than the floor, and there can be no suspicion on anybody's part."

"Fine," I said heartily. "I'd rather bounce 'em—it's fairer all around."

They laid this trunk-locker, which was of the ordinary type made popular by the army, against the wall, with the top up. It was smooth, and large enough to make a good course for the dominoes to canter on. I noticed when I helped them move it against the wall that it was pretty heavy.

"Let's pee-wee for the dice," suggested Granger.

He produced an ordinary pair of white dice, and handed one to me. It only took me a second to feel the corners, and as I was shaking it a little I tried to discover any symptoms of lopsidedness, but as I rolled I was convinced that they were square dice.

I rolled a two, Granger got a five and Ball drew a six, so it was my shot.

"How does a five suit you—two and a half to each of you?"

Granger and Ball each threw their money in to cover my five, and I bounced the babies off the wall with a healthy smack. Seven showed.

"Cover it all if you so desire," I announced, and they lost no time in so doing.

I drew a Big Dick that shot, but by dint

of singing to 'em, swearing at 'em and other well-known methods of the confirmed craps shooter I finally got my point. Two fives came up big as life.

Once again I let it ride, and they covered. I fell off, however, finding a couple of aces staring me right in the face.

"That's every bit of it," said I, and Ball scooped up the dice and handed them to Granger. Granger, by the way, had been picking them up and handing them to me.

"Shooting twenty," stated the Texan, and Ball and I covered. He shot an eleven.

Well, to make a sad story short and deaden the wound as much as possible, that boy Granger naturalized four straight times with all the money riding every time. I had started by covering ten of it, as had Ball, so we each were lightened up by approximately one hundred and twenty berries.

He drew down for the fifth shot, shooting ten, and threw a six which he made on the second roll. He let the twenty ride, and fell off trying to throw a five.

"Listen, poison," I said as Granger picked up the dice and handed them to Ball, "I can't stand more than one session like that."

"If cash is all you're worried about, your check is all right in case you don't start getting your money back," returned

Granger.

He was as composed as ever. Unlike most dice en-

thusiasts he shot quietly, deigning to smile a little apologetically when he threw a natural.

Ball was different. He had a sort of throaty, rasping voice, and talked to 'em all the while he was spinning them. He ran his fingers through his bristly brown hair after every shot, and pleaded with the dancing cubes as though life itself depended on what they showed.

He threw three straight naturals, drew down, and then crapped. That left me with about fifty dollars in cash left. I shot it all, and succeeded in making my point—eight. I let the wad ride along, and threw a five, which I likewise made. Then I drew down, which was a mistake, for I sevened for only ten dollars. On the fourth roll I fell off.

The game proceeded, punctuated by occasional drinks, and it was phenomenal how luck was with the man shooting. It seemed as though Ball and Granger

couldn't throw anything but sevens. I didn't natural many times, but it seemed as though I could make any point on the dice. However, they slowly but surely dragged me down, until I finally had to let Granger cash a two hundred dollar check for me.

All this time I had been on the alert, as I thought, but of crooked work there was none, as far as I could see. And yet, I couldn't help but believe that it was uncanny the way those boys threw sevens. They bounced the dice against the wall, not lightly, either, and more often than not the man who was shooting did not pick up the dice himself. I have known craps shooters who could piquet the cubes against a wall and be fairly certain of what they were going to throw, but I didn't have any evidence at all against these two Texans.

I succeeded in laying up fifty dollars on my roll, and then set myself to watch with all my eyes on the chance that there might be something I'd overlooked.

Ball picked up my dice and dropped them into Granger's hand. Granger was between myself and Ball. Granger shot, and one of those damn naturals showed up. His next roll, another one came, and I had an idea—perhaps due to my rapidly growing suspicions—that it rolled over on seven very slowly. I reached out quickly and grabbed the dice, and then moved slowly while handing them back to Granger. Both men looked at me quickly, but I gave no sign.

It gave me all the opportunity I needed to make sure, as I thought, that the dice had not been switched. The corners were square, all right. As though through carelessness, I dropped the dice on the floor.

I watched them closely while remarking with all the nonchalance I could muster, "Butterfingers!"

Both dice rolled naturally, with not a sign of any slowness or wobbling such as would be the case if they were loaded.

Nevertheless and notwithstanding, Granger promptly showed another seven when he shot.

"Honestly, I've never seen such lucky shooting in my life," he remarked easily, and Ball grunted.

"Percentage has gone to hell in this game. The baby that's got the dice——"

"Is the infant that wins," I finished up for him. "I'm ahead on my own rolls myself, but you fellows sure take me down regularly while you've got 'em."

"Seems so," agreed Ball, as Granger sevened after getting a ten to shoot at.

With me watching him so closely I was afraid to wink for fear I'd miss something, he picked up the dice, shook them up plenty, and rolled. He was shooting twenty dollars, and I saw my ten bucks melt away to the tune of eleven little polka dots facing to the north.

He passed three times, and right there I made up my mind that I was up against two clever crooks—crooks so clever that I couldn't get their game even with my massive intellect alert and my peepers wide open.

Then, like a bolt from the sky, I caught something that made me certain. When Ball picked up the dice he rolled them for just a second between both hands. When he shot, instead of a seven a six showed up. He made that point, then threw a four and crapped. But I was morally certain that by slick sleight-of-hand work he had switched dice.

But for what reason? The dice I had been shooting with all evening had certainly been good to me. If those two birds had been switching right along, they certainly hadn't run in any dice on me that were loaded for craps. Nevertheless, I decided to play safe.

"I have an idea I won't be lucky this time," I said, "and inasmuch as I only have a trifle of kale remaining out of that check, I'll try five berries."

I got a ten, and made the point. Letting the money stay out there, I sevened. Still letting it ride, I elevened.

"You took the wrong time to draw down, Lieutenant," said Granger with his thin-lipped, but not unattractive smile.

"I'm going to draw down again, anyway," I said disgustedly, and left only five out there. I was right this time, for I

fell off trying to roll a six.



It was clear to me that the dice I was shooting with were O. K. Ball picked them up, and once again dropped them into Granger's hand. All of a sudden the

thought struck me: if Ball is as clever at sleight-of-hand as I suspected he was, could he not have palmed the dice he'd picked up, and Granger, with the other dice in his hand, pretend he had received the ones Ball had picked up?

Ten minutes more, during which I lost

another fifty, convinced me that I was right. My natural impulse was to leap in and grab the dice for myself or else jump on these two thugs, and yet somehow or other it seemed to me there ought to be another method whereby I might at least get my money back. And I was completely at sea regarding the peculiarities of the dice they were using. I succeeded in getting those dice once more and dropping them, and I'll swear they rolled and felt like evenly weighted dominoes. I did the same thing I had done before—dropped them on the floor.

For a couple of minutes I scarcely watched the game, my mind was so busy trying to plumb the mystery. I thought back over everything that had transpired: the suggestion of the game, the idea of shooting against the wall on that trunk—and like a flash I connected the heaviness of the trunk with Granger's apparently frank and aboveboard scheme. There sprang into my mind a yarn I'd heard about an electrically magnetized crap-table, where the dice had some steel filings or something like that in them, and through magnetic attraction fell pretty regularly on seven.

Right then and there I was convinced that within that trunk was the equipment—batteries and wiring—and that probably the top of the trunk was steel. Careless pounding with my fingernail convinced me. Then I commenced to fire on all two cylinders. I was fully determined to get my money back, and that wasn't the half of it. I was inundated with desire to out-crook the crooks.

It took me about two minutes to figure my scheme, during which I watched fifty dollars melt away like a crowd when the contribution box is passed. This event having come to pass, I wrote out another check for two hundred.

"If you wouldn't mind cashing this, I'll take one more crack at some of my money that you hold in your possession," I said. "First, though, I want to skip downstairs a minute and put in a phone call to Donovan Field. I forgot that, and I've got to get word to them so that I can get the material I need for the ship down here tomorrow. Maybe the layoff'll change my luck."

"We'll be waiting for you," smiled Granger.

The room was on the third and last floor. I went down into the oilcloth-covered lobby and grabbed one of the bell-boys.

"Will you please go up to room thirty-six and tell Mr. Granger that there is a man downstairs that would like to see him immediately?" I said, and slipped him fifty cents.

I followed him upstairs—he hadn't seen me come down—at a safe distance, and went into the family bathroom on the third floor. I peeked through a crack in the door, and saw the boy knock, deliver the message and go on downstairs. He had to pass my point of vantage to get to the stairs.

In a moment out came Granger, finishing the tying of his natty bow tie. Any man that can tie a respectable bow-knot without a looking-glass—or with one, as far as that goes—has right there a certificate of breeding. I never saw an ignorant bum yet that could tie a bow tie. Granger was a puzzler to me, and because I had figured him the wisest and hardest proposition of the two, I had selected him for my victim.

Luckily for me the floor was absolutely deserted. As he strolled past the door, I was out and on him like a flash. Before he saw who his assailant was I had him flat on his back and a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth. Kneeling on both of his arms, I used his necktie to bind in the gag.

"Make any more noise with those feet of yours and I'll knock you out with a full-arm swing to the point of your jaw," I told him.

I had to admire his calmness as I dragged him in the bathroom. Two towels provided the means of tying him hand and foot. The spotty bathtub in this temple of sanitation provided a providential resting place for my recumbent captive; it was in a partitioned place by itself, and it was dark and shadowy in there.

A search of Granger's clothing was very satisfactory. It yielded up very little money, indicating that he had left his winnings with Ball or on the table, but it did bring forth two pairs of dice. One of the sets was probably of the straight variety I had been shooting with, the other loaded with metal, if my suspicions were correct. They couldn't have worked the scheme very well unless both he and Ball were provided with both kinds.

I squeezed him down into the bathtub, and went my merry way back to the room.

"I saw Granger going down, and he said he'd be back in a few minutes. Said to tell you to fade his half for him while

he was gone. Did he leave his money here?"

The bullet-headed Mr. Ball, his face now a trifle flushed with liquor, nodded. He apparently had no suspicions whatever.

"Shoot!" he said, and handed me the dice.

I had one of the stolen sets in my left hand, and purposely threw the dice. Ball had given me so hard that they bounced clear off the trunk. I was shooting ten dollars, faded half from Granger's stack and half from Ball's. When I picked up the dice I had a chance to switch them.

My first roll with the new dice was a seven, and when a natural came up again for the twenty I was certain I had picked the loaded pair the first time.

"I feel my luck changing!" I orated. "There's forty on the board; I'm adding sixty to make a hundred even. What say?"

"My answer is yes," said Ball, and the hundred was faded, fifty-fifty.

Well, I ran that hundred up to sixteen hundred the next three rolls, then dragged down to ten bucks, bounced the dice off the trunk again, and switched back to the straight dice. Ball was a little agitated, but not unduly so, because he figured, of course, that it was only a matter of a few minutes before the money came back.

But he was destined to disappointment. I took no chances, but grabbed him around the hips and found out that he had a gun. He hesitated an instant in total surprise,



and then fought back like a wild-cat. I got in a very salubrious belt to his belly, however, and when he crumpled up I had that gun in less than a jiffy. All he could do was gasp.

I came to my feet with the Colt in my hand.

"Just as soon as you get your wind, get up and parade to the bathroom with me, in which place I plan to tell you and your friend Granger something."

Ball was stunned with surprise. He couldn't imagine what it was all about, for a moment.

"And don't think I'll hesitate to get rough, either," I warned him. "I happen to belong to the army, and I also happen to know what your crooked game is up

here with the aid of that trunk and your loaded dice. If I should shoot you there isn't a court-martial in the world that would convict me, and I'm not shy of guns."

I knew I'd scored, for a look of the most absolute astonishment spread over his face. Without a word he walked ahead of me down the hall and into the bathroom.

"Untie your friend, and then we'll go back to the room," I ordered, and it was a pleasure to see him hop to it.

Just then I took a quick slant up and down the hall, and for a moment got a good kick out of what I saw. Peeping through a half-opened door directly across from the bathroom was a short, stocky little fellow, wearing a soft hat with the brim pulled down all around. His face was one wide grin, but I took no chances.

"Step right across the hall here, partner," I said, "and I'll explain matters. In case you don't know who I am, I'm an army officer and this isn't any holdup."

"Right you are!" he returned blithely, and stepped out of his room, still grinning.

I got behind him, and then invited the two gamblers out. I wasn't at all afraid of their making a break. I had them dead to rights.

It was the luck of the gods that the upper floor was so deserted, and that our little parade back to the room was uninterrupted. When we got inside I backed them all against the farther wall. The stocky little interloper looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"My name's Evans, and my business is to fly airplanes at Donovan Field. I don't know who you are—you may be a friend of this pair, for all I know—but here's the story," I said, and proceeded to give him an outline of the night's events.

Granger listened without perceptible expression, but Ball's face was ugly. His eyes remained on the floor, Granger's on my face. At the end of the galloping résumé I gave him, the stranger threw back his head and his chuckle grew into a whole-souled laugh that immediately labeled him a good egg, in my estimation.

"The longer I stay in this town, the better I think it is," he chortled.

"Now, just to prove absolutely that I'm right, you, Granger, open that would-be trunk there and let me have a peep at what's inside. I'm around seven hundred or so winner off your crooked game, so I'm satisfied. But in case you have any further idea of rimming the festive sucker

around these parts, I'm going to warn you to get out of town immediately. Tomorrow night at this time the police will know all about you. Get that?"

"Yes, we get that, and it doesn't mean a thing," sneered Ball. "No use of opening the trunk—the lay's there, all right. Go ahead and report to the police and see how much good——"

"Shut up, you damn fool," said Granger evenly.

"Well, I've said my say. Thanks for the seven hundred, old-timers, and after this, beware of bathrooms," I said, and then turned to the stranger. "Excuse me if I've put you to any trouble. Are you leaving with me?"

"You bet, and well satisfied with the show," he grinned.

The two of us made our exit. I tossed the gun on the bed, having previously removed the shells, just as we went out the door.

"Lieutenant, this calls for a drink, if you'll do me the honor. My name's Redfield, and here's my room. What say?"

I hesitated just a minute.

"You're on!"

V

REDFIELD'S room was the exact twin of the den of iniquity up the hall. While he dove to the bottom of his trunk I conducted a somewhat more detailed inspection of my recent captive, and the more I inspected the better I liked him. He wasn't but an inch or two over five feet, but he had powerful shoulders and strong-looking wrists and hands. His face was round and good-natured, ornamented by a pair of bright brown eyes that always seemed to hold a laugh in their depths. His mouth was a little thin, and two deep wrinkles ran from his nostrils to each corner. In some indefinable way he radiated an air of competence. I got the idea that he had seen something of the world.

"You're not a Farifus man, I take it," said I as he drew the cork from a quart bottle of gin.

"No indeed," he grinned. "I'm beginning to believe I've missed something, at that. I'm here for the races."

"Got a horse?"

Redfield nodded as he handed me my drink. My eyes happened to wander to an open drawer of his wardrobe trunk, and right on top lay a photograph of a jockey astride a horse, with a great wreath of flowers hung on the saddle and another

bunch around the horse's neck. There



in the background, was Churchill Downs, Kentucky.

"That picture is a good likeness of you," I said.

He took it out and handed it to me.

"That's the second year I rode the winner of the Kentucky Derby," he said, and could not quite hide the satisfaction in his eyes.

Now, I'm a lover of good horseflesh and never am within a hundred miles of a race-track that I don't manage some way or another to get over to it frequently. And elusive memories commenced to knock at my mental doors, so to speak.

"You're not, by any chance, 'Flash' Redfield, are you?" I asked him as my mind got its teeth into things.

"I was, five years ago," he corrected with that likeable grin.

I raised my glass and silently drank to one of the greatest jocks that ever rode a winner.

"I never had a chance to see you ride, Redfield, but I know I missed something," I said, and I meant it.

"Thanks," he replied.

"I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing down here," he remarked, lying back on the bed. I occupied the only chair.

"It does seem a bit incongruous, at that," I made answer.

"Whatever that is," he laughed. "I'm trying to pick up enough easy money to get me and a horse I own East to the big tracks. If I can pick up some cash as easy as you do it——"

He trailed off into a laugh, and as I began to think back over things I was compelled to join him.

In response to a question of his I detailed my introduction to Granger and Ball. And as I told the yarn some sub-conscious ideas which had been vaguely gnawing at my internal workings rose to the surface.

"Do you know, Redfield, that I'm almost of the opinion that the mayor of this Farifus village must have known what diver-

sions these two hombres were wont to indulge in? I told you about his curiosity regarding that inheritance of mine, and all that. It's a hell of an idea for a city official, supposed to be wealthy, at that, to have a hand in anything of that sort, and yet he——"

I stopped, my mind going back over the barrenness of the Hyson home, and other contradictory things I had noticed about my host. Redfield broke in on my thoughts.

"I met a real good guy today that might do you some good," he said slowly. "He dropped a couple of hints that ain't so far different, to my mind, from what you been thinking. He's down here moseying around during the rodeo, he says, trying to uncover the sleeper which knocked off the sheriff, who was a friend of his. Anyway, he ain't none too much taken with this town."

He had a soft, slow way of talking which was very soothing to listen to. In addition, his words held possibilities. I was becoming more and more anxious to take a squint at Farifus' machinery to see what made it go around. And, like any man, I hate to be picked as a sucker.

"It looks to me as though officials around here weren't the best bets in the world," I opined.

"Any time you find a town that seems to be running wide open, you're likely to find the powers that be hiding in the woodpile if you poke around a little," stated Redfield. "And it sure looks to me like maybe the mayor ain't exactly as pure as the snow on a convent roof. Naturally, he wouldn't figure you'd get wise to that clever little frame——"

"Well, before I let my imagination get the best of me, let's find this fellow you mentioned and get the dope," I suggested, and we set out immediately.

It was a constant source of satisfaction to me to remember how inconspicuous I was in my misfit clothes.

Redfield kept his eyes open all the time; but it was a hard matter to spot anybody; the crowd was still milling up and down the street with frequency. Redfield asked a few people—all strangers to him, apparently—about his man, whose name was Gates, and finally we ran him down in a movie. That is, we found out he was there and waited around for him to come out.

We sat on the curbstone, which was not de trop in Farifus, and talked. I found out that Redfield wore well. He had ridden and trained horses all over the

country, and like all those kid jocks who are making too much money, had sowed his full share of wild oats. Instead of ruining him, however, that experience had seemed to have merely broadened him. Did you ever notice how borsome the average persons, who have merely been born, brought up, worked and stayed in the many usual ruts all their lives, are to talk to? I



mean, compared to the man who has been around a lot, knows all kinds of people, and has seen a variety of things. It isn't so much the stories they can tell. It's the broadmindedness generated in 'em—a sort of tolerance, and a natural philosophy—that's bound to grow in a man who has seen crooked ornaments of society, for instance, and straight bums as well as the other way around. That was Redfield.

Sitting there on the curb, he finally told me why he was in Farifus. The main reason was that he was broke.

"I ran across this horse Speedway down in New Orleans," he said. "I liked his running, I liked his breeding, I liked everything about him. But the horse wasn't any account at all. He'd run like a flash for maybe three eights, and then he was through. Sometimes he wouldn't even leave the post. He beat the record for six furlongs in a trial out at Jefferson Park, New Orleans, but never won a race.

"I thought maybe I could do something with him. He belonged to Charley Seakirk, the big racing man, at that time, and I didn't like Joe Carmichael, that was training him. His methods, I mean.

"You know how a horse or a dog or a man'll sometimes get to you for no good reason? Well, that was Speedway. He's a big, powerful bay, and a dead ringer for the greatest race-horse that ever stepped on a track—Exterminator."

It was a sight to see the way little Redfield's eyes softened when he mentioned the "Big Train." It's a habit the real race men have when speaking of Old Poison.

"Anyway, I got the horse off of Seakirk for three hundred, and spent everything else I had, nearly, on him. I worked with him for months, I'll tell you, with five bucks a day for stable keep and my bets not bring me in so much money. Fi-

nally I picked up little Billy Kernan, who is a real jock, and who's got the T. B. He was down and out and broke, so I used him a little to gallop Speedway. And don't you know that boy can ride that horse home? Explain it anyway you want to; Speedway with Kernan on his back can step a mile in close to 1.38 right now and he's getting better.

"Well, Willie and I had about three hundred dollars left. I shot the whole wad on Exterminator, running up at Churchill Downs, and he paid \$2.90 to \$2 to win; so I added a little more to my stack and brought Speedway up here to win those two purses at a grand each, and anything more he can get. He'll be the only race-horse in the meet. That'll give a shoe-string to get him up to the fall meetings at Louisville and Lexington; that is, if Billy keeps on getting better down here, and then we'll clean up."

"Will there be any betting down here—books, I mean?"

"Uh huh. But I ain't got nothing to bet. Hello! There comes Gates now. See that quiet-looking little fellow with a vest on? That's our huckleberry."

So we turned our attention from racing back to Farifus. Both subjects were hard to figure, for me.

Redfield reached through the crowd and tapped Gates on the shoulder. The slim little Texan turned around, and his thin, tanned face lighted up warmly when he saw who it was.

"Hello, Redfield. Glad to see yuh, suh," he drawled in a musical voice which carried the thickest Southern dialect I ever heard.

"Lon Gates, Lieutenant Evans," Redfield introduced us.

"Had a little accident with yore airy-plane, suh?" enquired Gates.

I nodded.

"I likewise came near having one of a financial nature," I remarked.

"Which is what we wanted to confab with you about, Gates," Redfield put in. "Let's canter back to my stall, and talk things over."

"Count me in," drawled Gates, and we set off.

We must have been a queer-looking trio. Neither Redfield nor Gates approached five feet six in height, and there was I in the middle, like a skyscraper between two shacks. They each had to take two steps to my one.

"Did you hurt yore plane much, suh?" asked Gates.

He looked up at me with slightly puckered eyes, his sombrero tilted back far enough to show ash-blond hair that harmonized with the golden tan which set him apart from the ordinary mahogany-tinted outdoor man in Texas. His blue eyes were tranquil and unwavering, looking out of a thin, somewhat lined face. He wore a vest over a white shirt, and dark trousers. I happened to see his vest flop back and the butt of a Colt peep from his waistband.

"I'll need a new propeller and an undercarriage," I said. "I should have telephoned or wired the Field tonight, but forgot it in the excitement."

"There's a plane right here at Farifus, and I hear they keep a right smart stock o' accessories," remarked Gates.

"Is that so! Why, it's a funny thing no one mentioned——"

"I don't know exactly, but I think it's a young hombre named Sax that runs it, and he goes out to surroundin' towns takin' up passengers or somethin', but this is his headquahtuhs. I think Hyson and mebbe some others heah are behind him, but I don't rightly know."

By this time we had reached the hotel, and I withheld the questions which swarmed on my tongue while we percolated through the lobby—that's a laugh, too, calling that room a lobby—and ascended to Redfield's boudoir.

I told Gates what had happened, and likewise the suspicions I was beginning to entertain about Hyson. Before mentioning the mayor, however, I took good care to make sure that he was not a particular friend of Gates'. His answer to my question was negative and unhesitating.

"Well, what do you think of it?" queried Redfield, his round face serious and his bright brown eyes resting on Gates. The Texan had heard the story, giving no sign of astonishment or particular interest, although it was obvious that he was following my words with the closest of attention.

At Redfield's question his tranquil blue eyes roved silently from Redfield to me and then back again.

"Bein' somewhat of a lone wolf down heah, I have an effeminate desiah to unlimbuh a few," he drawled presently. "First, I shouldn't be so astonished I'd die from the shock if you-all was pretty neah right.

"Concernin' this Farifus, of course it's plain that it's runnin' wide-open, which, to a certain degree, ain't so unnatural nor debauchin', deacons to the contrary."

"I understand that you are down here trying to run down the murderer of Sheriff Barton," I said.

"I am, suh, and fuhthuhmoah, I'm goin' to, God willin', and when I do——"

There was no outward change that you could put your finger on, but suddenly the little, bronzed Texan became menace incarnate. There peeped forth from icy blue eyes a light that seemed to fairly shrivel anything they looked at. If ever I saw sudden death peep forth from behind a non-committal mask, it was then.

It was over as suddenly as it had come. Although he had not moved a muscle, it seemed as though Gates relaxed.

"Now about Farifus," he went on quietly. "It's been gettin' worse and worse, accordin' to what I can find out, an' for some reason Barton, my buddy, didn't get around to it for some time on account o' two things. By the way, did yuh ever meet up with him, suh?"

The question was addressed to me, and I shook my head.

"I remember the newspaper reports of the case very well, though," I answered.

"There wasn't a better man walked than George," stated Gates. "I'm carryin' his picture for various reasons."

He tossed a small photo over to me. There looked up at me a handsome, smiling, square-jawed youngster with a pair of level eyes. Even though I didn't know him, it was rather an unpleasant thing to visualize this strapping young fellow shot to death by criminals and dumped into a cattle pen to die.

"As I was sayin'," resumed Gates, "George didn't mess with Farifus for two reasons. One I know of, and the othuh I have my idees on. Said idees will go no futhuh?"

Once again we stood inspection, and once again we passed successfully.

"He was right busy on a couple o' cases—murder and lynchin', for one reason. The othuh, I believe, was powuhful influence. Accordin' to hints he let drop the only time I've seen him the last few months—I been down on the borduh—he was pressed considerable to do othuh things first. Farifus must have influence up in the county seat. Barton was just a young felluh, and I believe there's reasons I won't ever know why his intentions, announced to me, o' gettin' after Farifus never come to pass until about six weeks or so ago. Somethin' started him then. He must o' got hold o' some infohmation that give him a good start. In a place like

this, individual arrests for petty crimes like bootleggin' and runnin' gamblin' houses ain't worth nothin'. He had somethin' important about somebody down here, or maybe got the inside of the pow-uhs-that-be.

"A few days latuh he was shot, prob'ly less'n a hundred yards from where we sit."

His soft, even voice ceased. He sat with his chair cocked back against the wall and his eyes on the ceiling.

"I'm aimin' to get the coyote that shot Bart," he said presently, "as previously announced, just as soon's I can find out who he is. It's a plumb difficult job, on account o' havin' to play a lone hand. The only men that could give any real information is more hindrance than help. But I'll get 'im.

"Regardin' Hyson, I don't know him except by general reputation. He's more or less of a miser—m o n e y crazy, accordin' to what I hear roundabout Texas. He was one o' the old cattlemen, and accordin' to what I hear from men who know, he was mixed up in a lot o' deals which wouldn't bear no inspection. O' course, yuh know that in them days there wasn't much law, and might was right, and conditions was peculiar. They do say, though, that Hyson was the hardest man to deal with in this part o' Texas.

"The older he grows the harder he's been tryin' to add to his pile. The only land he owns now is cotton land, and the crop failures the last few years have hit him hard, I reckon. My idee is that he's Mayor o' Farifus because he wants to be and had brains enough t' get there, and that the only reason he'd want t' be is that he gets plenty dinero out o' the job. And the salary ain't so emolumental.

"You'll find, same's I knew in a general way and found out fur shore, here lately, that the town fathuhs stick togethuh in a very self-edifyin' manner."

"It may be that they're doing here what they always have done, and probably are doing, in many a town bigger than this, from New York to Frisco," remarked Redfield, watching a heavy smoke ring rise lazily ceilingward. "It's been the merry custom o' the politicians to cut in on the graft since Noah was mayor of the Ark. Little burgs are the same as big ones, in a two-for-a-cent kind of a way.

I got some friends in the carnival business, and a lot o' others that make small-town fairs and such-like on various kinds o' business. They say a little fixing goes a long ways in nine out of ten towns, big or small. I've struck damn few towns in my own business where some high-up wasn't suffering with an itching mitt."

"I don't remember whether I mentioned it or not, but when I relieved myself of a few remarks to those gamblers down the hall one of 'em started to tell me just how little I could do about it, and the other one shut him up."

Gates nodded.

"No question about there bein' a lot o' protection around heah," he said. "For that reason, I'm layin' low and sayin' nothin' and just pokin' around on my own. Maybe we can uncovuh somethin' aftuh I get a little familiuh with the lay."

"Well, I sure wish you luck," I said, getting up to go. It had been a hard day, and I was tired. "And thanks very much for all you've told me. I simply wanted some help in making up my mind how far to trust this Hyson, and I've decided to play safe and not trust him any farther than I can throw this hotel with my left arm. I've got no interest in cleaning up Farifus but I have got an interest in my bankroll. If there's anything I can do to help you out in this murder case, however, why count on me till the cows come home."

Just then I recollected what Gates had said about that other plane in town, and the questions that had been on the tip of my tongue at the time.

"Why do you suppose Hyson didn't mention something about that other ship?" I enquired.

"Hahd to tell, suh. Mebbe he just didn't think of it; more likely he's some interested in it and was afraid you might call on 'em for a few cents wuth o' parts or help."

"That may be it, but I was bound to find out about it sooner or later, anyway. Well, see you all tomorrow, eh?"

"Sure thing," returned Redfield.

"I suah hope so, suh," drawled the Texan, getting up likewise.

As I strolled down the street toward Hyson's I was at peace with the world. I was a few dollars ahead, and, more pleasing yet, had succeeded in putting one over on the gang that was trying to trim me, and I had met two fellows whom I really liked. The few days which stretched ahead in Farifus held far from an unpleasant prospect, to my mind.



I turned down the first of the shadowed, quiet side-streets which led toward my destination. Although there had been many signs of life audible behind the closed doors of Main Street, out here there was nothing but darkness and peace.

I was walking past a fenced yard. Just behind the fence was a line of high, thick shrubbery. As I passed the gate I noticed that it was open, although the house, set a considerable distance back, was dark.

All I can remember from then on is very little, not to say microscopic. Without so much as a footstep to warn me, myriad stars appeared before my eyes. I can barely remember hitting the ground a solid smack—or perhaps to say that the walk came up and smote me would be more accurate—and from then on my memory laid off.



The assault had taken place a little after midnight, and at one-thirty I came to. I wished I hadn't. My head was splitting, and there was a feeling of utter nausea pervading my whole body. I was the weakest, sickest flyer that ever crashed without being in a ship.

I staggered to my feet, and took hold of myself long enough to take my bearings. I had been lying behind that hedge. As my mind grasped the details of what had happened, I reached for my money.

It didn't take over a second for me to realize that it would take a considerably longer reach than I possessed to get my hands on my ex-bankroll. I had been cleaned, absolutely. There wasn't a nickel in any pocket. Even the checks, which would do the robbers no good, were gone.

Right there I forgot to be sick. I was so mad that little things like headaches were too tiny to be bothered with. What made me more and more wrathful was my own simple-mindedness in risking a hold-up, suspecting as much as I did about the state of affairs in Farifus as far as I was concerned.

I staggered away with a thousand schemes in my head. The fact that I hadn't seen as much as a shadow of my assailant, or assailants, didn't mitigate my decision. As I tiptoed into the official mansion of Mr. Tom Hyson and found my room, my perverse mind was fully made up that certain Farifus people were going

to find out that they had bitten off more than they could chew. I fell asleep, finally, two hours later, still stewing. And I had resolved to request that one Lieutenant Tex MacDowell be delegated to fly my extra parts down to Farifus. With him, plus Redfield and Gates, I figured that there might prove to be a way whereby my overwhelming desire to administer a sound spanking to certain denizens of Farifus could be assuaged.

And I wanted that money. If I was an honest-to-god hero I suppose I'd have started to help clean up the town because of my high desire to see virtue prevail and place my foot on the outstretched neck of vice. Being averse to kidding myself, I hereby state that the condition of affairs in Farifus didn't matter a damn to me until they feloniously extracted my bankroll and severely lacerated my tender feelings. My head, besides.

Right then I became a crusader.

VI

HYSON knocked on my door next morning, and broke in on a series of dreams I was having about smiting various people hip and thigh. I felt surprisingly good; there was a good sized lump on my head, but due to my immersion in the sticks I was in need of a haircut and said break in the contour of my head was pretty well camouflaged.

As I dressed I wondered what the old man's attitude would be. As you may imagine, I was a bit curious as to what would happen when I finally walked into the dining-room. I had made up my mind to say nothing in front of Mrs. Hyson or Minnie.

Hyson greeted me heartily, showing no signs of uneasiness. Minnie giggled as usual, and Mrs. Hyson said good morning spiritlessly.

"Well, well, I missed yuh last evenin'." Did yuh make out all right?" he asked, holding his fork in the air while he watched me closely.

"I had quite an interesting time," I said.

He tried several times to get a rise out of me, without success.

When breakfast was over I said, "I'd like to talk to you for a moment, Mr. Hyson. I guess I will need to have a check cashed, at that."

He laughed, and we went out on the porch.

I looked him straight in the eye and orated as follows, "Mr. Hyson, those two fellows you introduced me to were crooked

gamblers. I got wise to their game, and won a little money from 'em in spite of their loaded dice and their electrically wired trunk. On the way home, I was robbed of not only my winnings, but three hundred of my own. Inasmuch as you introduced me to them——"

"You don't say!" he exclaimed, slapping one bony shank in apparent surprise. "Now, what do yuh think o' that?"

"I'm thinking a hell of a lot, to be perfectly frank," I replied.

"I'll have to give him credit; he carried off his part well.

"I shore am sorry son," he said at length. "I never dreamed o' anything like that. You're sure they was crooked? They never——"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Well, now, you leave this whole thing to me, and I'll git right busy on it," he said rapidly, drumming on his boots with his finger. "Why didn't yuh come to me quicker?"

"Until the holdup, I was winner. And about that holdup. They were the only ones who knew how much money I was carrying——"

"Absolutely. But o' course they might o' told somebody, and there's a lot o' strangers in town."

"Are they strangers?"

"Kind o' half-way. They been here some time, and seemed to be nice boys."

He was getting a little nervous, I thought. I decided not to play my hand too strong. The less he knew about what-ever snooping around I was planning to do, the better.

"I'll go right downtown and see about it. The chances are they're gone. I'm shore sorry, son."

"Not half as sorry as I am. I'll go down with you. I'll want that check cashed, and I also want to call up Donovan Field. By the way, I hear there's a ship operating from here. Maybe the man that runs it could help me out a little."

"That's right, I forgot to tell yuh," said Hyson hastily. "But he ain't here now. He's always away somewhere. I wouldn't count on Chester much. If I was you I'd go right ahead without plannin' on him helpin'. He may be away for a long time, and he's kind o' peculiar anyway."

"Well, if he gets back I'll drop over and see him, anyway. Where is his field?"

"Over thataway," Hyson said, gesturing vaguely to the east.

We started downtown, and presently he

said, "Yuh say yuh didn't see who held yuh up?"

"Didn't get a single peep at 'em."

I might have been wrong, but I thought he showed a little relief. But when a man is as suspicious as I was, he's liable to let his sentiments affect his common sense.

"Now you go do your telephonin' and I'll mosey around and see the Chief o' Police and see what we can do. O' course, you not havin' any real evidence I kind o' doubt whether we can do anything, but we'll see. I'll meet yuh in the hotel," and he started off like an awkward old stork.



I put in my call to Donovan Field, and then went up and got Redfield to sit around while I was waiting. When I told him what had happened the night before he could hardly believe his ears.

"That appears to me to be about the rawest deal I have heard of for considerable time," he announced. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I've got the mayor at work, but for some strange reason I haven't much confidence in the result. What I am going to do is poke around a little and see if I can't get revenge."

"Just how?"

"If I can just get something really definite on these boys that are running the crooked work, I may be able to do some good," I said. "And I'm sure going to try. If I could get hold of some squealer who——"

Redfield nodded.

"But how?"

"That remains to be seen. Maybe with Gates' helping out we can get next to some of the curves being thrown around here."

"I'm wondering whether I ain't picked the wrong time to put my little deal over," said Redfield thoughtfully. "Here's your call, I guess."

Sure enough, the seedy-looking girl that was running the desk was motioning to me. I entered the booth, and in a couple of minutes had Major Stratton on the line.

I hated to do it, but telling him the truth over the phone seemed the only thing to do. I had to take my chances on listeners-in.

I told him just what had happened, and then went on, "I'd like to have a three-day pass to take effect after I get the work done on the ship. I'd sure appreciate it,

Major, if you'd assign Tex MacDowell to fly the parts down here and give him permission to help me out."

The major was full of questions, but when I told him over the phone that I did not think it wise to say any more than was absolutely necessary, he saw the point.

"I'll get hold of MacDowell right away, and if he wants to go——"

Major or not, I had to laugh at the idea of Tex not wanting to come when he heard of the layout. I could hear the major's echoing chuckle over the phone.

"Now give me a description of the nearest field," he said.

"I really don't know, Major. I'd suggest that Tex do his own picking. The land is irrigated where I am, and he will be in better shape to find a place as near as possible to me than I would. There's a civilian passenger-carrying plane that works out of here; if he can't find any other field he can land there. It's just east of town."

"All right. And be careful, Evans. Good-by."

"Well, I have a sidekick of mine coming down here who's about the keenest proposition in any kind of a scrape that you ever saw," I told Redfield.

"Flyer?"

"Uh huh. He's a young Texan on the border patrol, and has just finished nailing old Dave Fitzpatrick's hide to the wall. This Fitzpatrick is a powerful influence in Texas, or was, and ran a smuggling gang all over the border. He tried his best to frame Tex on account of hating old man MacDowell, and this Tex just naturally wiggled out of the frameups and then turned around and got Fitzpatrick plenty. He's in jail now."

I hadn't finished the yarn when Hyson



came in, accompanied by Durkins, who had been introduced to me the night before as Chief of Police. He was a fairly tall man, with a powerful pair of shoulders, a walrus mus-

tache, and a square, rugged-looking face. His jaw protruded belligerently. He was almost entirely bald.

"Tell me about it!" he commanded brusquely as soon as I'd introduced Redfield.

I told him the whole story. I could see Redfield sizing both Farifus men up closely as I talked.

"Let's go upstairs," Durkins said abruptly, without commenting on the story at all.

To my surprise we found both Granger and Ball in. Granger was shaving in front of a cracked wall mirror, and Ball was stretched on the bed, reading a magazine. By the looks of his chin he was waiting for a chance at the mirror himself.

"Hello, Chief," Granger greeted Durkins, and then spoke pleasantly to the rest of us.

There was a smile on his face, and he was as calm as a May morning. I had a sneaking liking for him, I must say. Ball was different. He looked more the part of a thug. That hold-up would have been a perfectly congruous thing for him to be mixed up in.

"Lieutenant Evans has made a complaint that he was in a crooked gambling game up here last night," stated Durkins heavily, and retailed the story for their benefit. "He admits havin' won money, as I told yuh. He also states he was robbed on his way home later. I'm gonna search that there trunk, and call on you for any alibis you may have as to where you was between the hours of twelve and one last night."

"Go right ahead," grinned Granger.

He handed a key to the chief, and he unlocked the trunk.

He found just what I expected—an ordinary trunk with clothing in it.

Ball jumped to his feet.

"Now I wanta say somethin'!" he said belligerently. "Go ahead an' arrest us for that holdup, if there was a holdup. We can prove an alibi—we was down Barney's all the time from eleven o'clock to two. This guy here loses some money in a square game, goes out in the hall and belts Granger here, gets his dice because he figured they was crooked, comes back and wins all the money, and then accuses us o' cheatin' besides. You ain't got no proof and never had any. I——"

"It's sure funny Granger's dice won, and that you admitted there was electrical apparatus in the trunk that was here last night."

"We never said any such thing. An' you better look out or I'll knock you so far——"

"Shut up, Charley," Granger cut in evenly.

"If these boys can claim a alibi you ain't

got no case," bellowed Durkins. "It looks bad for yuh."

"If you'll remember, the only case I want to investigate is that holdup. Believe me, I want that money back and I'm going to get it!" I told him. "Do you think I'm boob enough to figure that there'd be any proof left this morning about that game? And don't think I don't remember what you said last night, Ball, about a complaint not doing any good. I——"

A warning look from Redfield made me haul up short. No use of showing my suspicions about Hyson, and Durkins, too, for that matter.

Durkins became suddenly conciliatory.

"Step out in the hall a minute, Lieutenant," he said, and I followed him out.

"I ain't got any doubt whatever that these boys can prove a alibi," he said, "and the fact o' the matter is we got no case against 'em if they can."

"Probably not," I answered.

"Just a friendly warnin'," Durkins went on, his hard eyes looking upward momentarily. "I don't know how you got in bad——"

"Just what do you mean?"

"Well, I mean in this scrape——"

"Whatever scrape I've got into is the result of Mayor Hyson's introduction!"

"I know, I know," he said hastily. "What I meant was this: O' course you're a stranger around here, and so's your friend there. What I was goin' to say was that if you'd kind o' go easy and let me investigate matters, why it might be better for yuh. If you go and make enemies o' these boys and their friends, why it might be harder on yuh than as though you just sat tight and let the authorities get to the bottom of it."

"I see. Well, this is a small town and I was knocked on the head and robbed of a sizeable sum of money. I'll expect some action."

"You'll get it!" Durkins assured me.

We went back into the room. Everything was quiet in there—Granger had resumed his shaving and no one was talking. Hyson gave me a lightning-like look from those little, repulsive eyes of his.

"You don't mind if I finish before you take us down to Barney's, do you?" Granger enquired pleasantly, and the chief shook his head.

In a few minutes Granger had finished, and rapidly dressed. He was certainly an ingratiating looking fellow when he was ready for the street.

"If there's anything to hold these fel-

lows on I'll do it. Drop around and see me in an hour or two," said Durkins in parting.

Hyson went out with them. To me he appeared very much ill at ease.

"I'm shore sorry about all this," he said hesitantly. "But Clem, there'll, soon find out all there is to be found."

"Which I don't figure'll be much," I said, and once again got that warning look from the quiet Redfield.

Hyson came over to me and lowered his voice.

"O' course there's a chance you may be wrong, just a little chance," he said rapidly. His eyes did not meet mine. "If I was you I wouldn't start nothin', but just lay back and let us see what there is to it."

"Which is exactly what Durkins said."

With that the chief official of the municipality of Farifus wended his way out the door, with Redfield and I following as far as Redfield's room.

As soon as the two of us had entered the room Redfield said, "For God's sake, man, don't let them suspect a thing! What you want to do is to get them dead to rights and then squeeze 'em!"

"I know it, but that transparent stuff about alibis and all that!"

"The fact o' the matter is that I'm pretty well convinced those two birds didn't pull the holdup at all," Redfield cut in.

"Maybe you're right, at that. But I'm firmly convinced that both Durkins and Hyson knew everything that came off! These old buzzards make me squirm with the desire to give 'em an honest and above-board spanking."

"I don't blame you. There's no question that they're cutting in on all the graft. It's sort of a funny play for the mayor to be a lookout for easy marks, though. That inheritance of yours just about made his mouth water. He's feeling kind o' sick now because they only got a few hundred and you ain't a target for no more financial



bonanzas. Ten to one they figured on cleaning your last dime in that crap game."

"You'd better watch your step in the racing, too," I reminded him with a grin.

"Don't I know it!" was his thoughtful reply.

"I think I'll make tracks for my ship and see that everything is O. K. out there. How would you like to go along?"

"Fine. And then we'll go out to the track and see how Billy and Speedaway are getting along. I'm going to work him out late this evening, when nobody will be around. I know from experience that any fly-by-nights who may have shipped their punk horses into this little meet'll be wise enough to get a line on any morning workouts, and no tellin' what they might do. If the town sports are off-color, too——"

"You're in a hell of a fix."

"Uh huh. Well, shall we start?"

We went out, and I entered into converse with a long-mustached, thin old fellow regarding possibilities of a taxi. Pursuant to his advice, we started down the street toward the corner where a couple of Fords hung out for business.

It was apparent that the town was in the throes of a celebration. The street was well peopled for the morning hours. Probably a number of strangers, with the townspeople parading around to look them over. I never saw so many girls for a town of its size in my life. Although it was only ten o'clock, the street was well-lined with vehicles and saddle-horses.

We hadn't proceeded more than half way to our destination when we met Durkins striding along with ludicrously long steps, looking as important as a prize bull. He stopped us, and drew me to one side.

"The mayor an' I been investigatin'," he said, his eyes boring into mine and his mustache outthrust belligerently. "Granger an' Ball got iron-clad alibis about that hold-up. I don't see nothin' we can do."

"Thank you for your trouble. I guess I'm out the money, eh?"

I was as pleasant as possible, realizing the mistake I'd made in my haste before.

"Not unless we can get holt of a clue about who did do it. How long did yuh say yuh might be in town?"

"Three or four days."

"Let me tell yuh somethin'. Them two boys got a lot o' friends. Now, mind yuh, I ain't stickin' up for 'em, but their friends is all young fellers which are full o' life an' meanness. An' they're in arms about you accusin' Granger an' Ball the way yuh did. If I was you I'd be damn careful around here. Don't go pokin' intuh anythin', and kinda plan to git away quick. I'm talkin'

for yore own good."

He was in earnest; there was no doubt about that.

"I've got no desire to stay any longer than I have to," I replied, noticing the eagerness with which he awaited my answer. "Thank you again, and I'll bear your advice in mind."

"I'll let yuh know if anything turns up," he said in parting.

Interested lookers-on watched my departure with Redfield, and I glimpsed several men closing in on the chief—for information, probably.

I told Redfield what had occurred, and he nodded.

"You let the cat out of the bag this morning when you made that crack about what Ball said, which same indicated your suspicions pretty plain. Knowing that you'll be strictly on your guard and that their chances are slim for trimming you any more, and that you may be plannin' to make the goin' muddy for 'em, the quicker you get out of town the better for them. They don't want you poking around, clocking 'em."

"I wonder just how anxious they are to get rid of me? Just how far they'd go?"



"You never can tell till the finish. Well, I guess here's our jitney."

There were a number of Fords lined up against the curb, and a knot of twenty or thirty men talking on the corner. One kid jumped out of the group.

"Taxi?"

"Yes. What do you say we try to find Gates, Evans? I like his style, and he might like to gallop along with us."

Nothing could have suited me better, so we set sail toward the house where Gates was staying. Redfield remembered the name of the widow who ran this little boarding-house, and our chauffeur knew the way. We passed this Barney's saloon, and saw Ball lounging around in front in company with several men, mostly young. All of them looked at us as we went by, and there was a burst of laughter.

Redfield grinned slowly.

"You sure got runnin' right in the bunch from the getaway, didn't you?"

"And got pocketed, too."

"Let's hope you beat 'em down the stretch, then," chuckled the horseman.

We found Gates smoking brown-paper cigarettes on the front porch of the plain frame house which our driver indicated as Perkins' boarding-house.

He waved nonchalantly, and walked slowly toward the car.

"How are you-all this mawnin'?" he enquired.

"Wondering whether you'd like to take a ride out to the ship and then to the track to see how Redfield's horse is getting along," I answered.

"I'm willin', suh."

As he climbed in, a portly woman and a young and very pretty girl appeared at the door and watched us briefly.

"I'll be back for lunch, ma'am," called Gates. "Mrs. Perkins and her daughter," he added to us as we drove off. "She and a kid son suppo'ts the girl and themselves, I understand. I ain't met up with him yet. Bart always used to stay there."

"You haven't heard the latest news about the lieutenant, have you?" inquired Redfield.

Gates shook his head, whereupon I told him about the holdup and the events of the morning.

"Jemima's jamboree!" he exclaimed with a still further slowing of his speech. "Ain't this town a hummer?"

"It is. And if you don't mind, I'd like to offer whatever poor assistance I can in getting to the bottom of things. My first object is to satisfy my own injured feelings——"

"Which is only natural," nodded Gates.

Further conversation was interrupted by our arrival opposite the field where my good ship was resting on her nose. Everyone, the driver included, climbed out and started trudging over to the scene of the wreck.

"That ain't the customary method o' landin', I take it," drawled Gates.

"Not quite. I wonder whether one of you would let me do the lifting and get you high enough to pull that tail down so she'll rest on an even keel?"

Gates, being lightest, was elected. I boosted him high enough in the air to wrap his arms around the fuselage, and with a heave that nearly threw me off my balance he succeeded in getting it started down. Redfield leaped forward and slowed up the descent so that the tailskid didn't hit too hard.

Another survey of the ship proved that my original diagnosis had been accurate.

Outside of some rigging to get the wings properly lined up, there was nothing to be done except attach a new prop and put on an undercarriage. One nasty detail looming ahead was the dragging of the ship to a field where a take-off would be possible.

As I was explaining the altimeter, tachometer, compass, oil-gauge and other details to my interested auditors a sudden thought struck me which caused me to break off in the middle of my discourse and do some heavy thinking.

As soon as we had started back toward the car I let the driver get out of earshot ahead of us and said, "What do you think of this, Gates? It's apparent that the Farifus officials want me out of town as quickly as possible. They also know that I won't leave until the ship is fixed. Do you suppose they'd have nerve enough to try to burn it up or something so there'd be no reason for my staying? Of course, it wouldn't be done in daylight, but it would be a simple matter at night, unless I stand guard."

Gates, as always, took plenty of time before answering.

"They ain't shy on nerve, suh, an', I don't believe, on brains," he said.

Further discussion was impossible because of the near presence of the driver, but on the way back to town I came to some conclusions. I decided to wait until Tex arrived, and then get down to brass tacks, with Gates and Redfield sitting in. They both impressed me as men whose advice was worth something in almost any kind of a deal.

VII

WE WERE just entering the outskirts of town when I heard the noise of an airplane motor. We stopped and got out, and in a moment I picked up a Jenny coming from the north. When it started to circle over my ship I



became certain that it was Tex.

"Let's wait right here until we see where he's going to land," I sug-

gested, so we camped out along the highway, and watched.

As I expected, he didn't find any landing field near my ship which looked very good to him, and in a minute or two had started circling more and more widely. After

three or four minutes he started spiraling down, east of town.

"He's lightin' where Chester Sax does," volunteered our driver.

"Get us over there fast, will you?" I returned, and in a moment we were bouncing along faster than a flivver ever ought to go.

It was three miles or more to that field, and by the time we arrived the ship was staked down and the cockpit and propeller covered with canvas. I could see a tall, lounging figure leaning against the side of a big shed which acted in the capacity of a hangar, I imagined.

Tex came walking over toward the road as soon as he spied me—no one ever could mistake me for anybody else. As he came closer and got a good look at my costume that slow grin of his appeared on his face.

"Did they even take your clothes?" he drawled.

"It's a wonder they didn't. I'm sure glad to see you, Tex. Meet Mr. Redfield and Mr. Gates; Lieutenant MacDowell."

Tex shook hands with them, eyeing them both with that appraising look which has grown familiar to all of us that know him. He's over six feet tall, with a clean-cut face, and a pair of powerful shoulders which help to camouflage his real height. I could see that Redfield and Gates took to him from the start.

"Well, I've got your landing gear and your prop," said Tex. "I'll trade 'em for some information. Just what's going on down here?"

I looked at the other two and asked, "Neither one of you is in a hurry, are you?"

It appeared that neither of them was.

"Well, let's lean against some soft fence-posts while I tell the wild tale."

This being agreeable, I sketched the events for MacDowell's benefit. I thought he'd choke over that crap game.

"Now here's the lay, then," I finished up. "It seems reasonable that the mayor and the other big men of town are shareholders, at least, in the gambling and bootlegging that goes on here. It also seems to me that Hyson, being a money-hound, and knowing that I just inherited some money, started in to have me relieved of it. Due to my own foolishness in popping off the way I did, I believe the chief of police and the mayor all believe that I have my suspicions about them. That being the case, they know they can't take me for any more dough, and consequently they are anxious

to have me get out of town as quickly as possible. And I'm not going to get out until I get a few hundred dollars back, or get on those birds' tails hard enough to get my money's worth of revenge."

"I'm not so much surprised, generally speaking," opined Tex, blowing out a lungful of smoke. "This town's had a reputation all over Texas."

"It shore deserves it, too, suh," said Gates. "My buddy, Barton, was plannin' to clean up on 'em when he got shot. Yuh see, suh, there ain't no use o' arrestin' any individuals. It wouldn't do any more good than Evans' complaint about that holdup. He had to get the whole frame-up in his hands to do anything. An' if it so happens that I can turn up anything about Bart's killin', I'm of the absolute opinion that it may crack the whole bunch open."

I began to wonder right there just who Gates might be.

"It might, at that," nodded Tex.

"What we've got to do," I said, "is snoop around and find somebody that we can get the goods on, who'll squeal enough to get us started. Gates, here, wants Barton's murderer—so do we all with that fat reward hung up—and I want those holdup men, or, better still, my money."

"Well, have you picked anybody to start on?"

I hesitated for a minute. I didn't want to make myself ridiculous, but I had had a persistent idea in mind for some time.

Finally I said, "I suppose there are plenty we could start on, but the one I've got in mind I haven't even seen yet. It's this guy Sax that flies this plane here. He hasn't been in town since I have, but they say he's rarely away over twenty-four hours."

Gates and Redfield were all attention. I could see that Gates, especially, was puzzled.

"Why pick on him?" inquired Tex.

"Gates, here, told me that he thought Hyson and one or two others in town were interested in this plane, and also that there are a lot of spare parts for it here in town. And yet Hyson never mentioned the plane to me and when I spoke to him about it he seemed anxious to divert my attention. I am of the opinion that the farther away from that ship I kept the better he'd be satisfied."

"Are you sure Hyson has any interest in it?" Tex asked Gates.

I could tell by the way those big gray eyes of his were commencing to shine that his mental machinery was accelerating.

"So I heard from good authority, suh. And this young Sax, that runs it, never did amount to nothin' nor have any money. I don't know him puhsonally, but I know his reputation. He is a tough proposition."

"Well, what's your idea, Slim?"

"Where does all the booze—and good booze, too—come from?"



There was momentary silence as I propounded this inquiry, and then Gates swore softly.

"From the border!" he drawled, so slowly that there was a pause between each word.

"Exactly, and by air, probably. My idea is this: It's going to be damn hard to find a squealer right here in Farifus, where any man caught would have his powerful friends to depend upon. If my ideas about this ship are correct, we might be able to follow this bird on one of his trips and catch him with the goods a long way from here. He ought to be important enough in the scheme of things to know considerable about the machinery. It's a sure thing that there is more booze floating around this town than anywhere I've ever seen outside of the border or seaport towns. You know how it is around San Antone and those places, Tex. Scarcer than hen's teeth."

"I believe there's something in what you say," said Tex. "It's worth a try, anyway. Say, Gates, how does it come about that Farifus is such a lively burg?"

"There's thousands of acres o' wonderful cotton land, suh, a lot of big ranches employin' hundreds o' men, and several other things, like the railroad shops, to employ men. This town draws hundreds o' men when they get paid off. None o' the punchers go to San Antone or Houston for their good time."

"I see. Well, Slim, you sure have landed up to your neck in this town, haven't you?" grinned Tex. "Everybody from the mayor down to the gamblers down on you."

"Uh huh. And I've been thinking that if they want me to leave town so quickly, perhaps they might figure the best way to get me out would be to make my ship disappear so it wouldn't need any fixing."

"You sure pulled a bone in giving them the slightest idea that you were suspicious of the big men," stated Tex candidly.

"I know it."

"Like most people, they also prob'ly got the idee that him bein' in the army is related to the law in some way," said Gates. "I'll bet half the people in town believe an army officer's got some power in a legal way, if you-all get what I mean. Any civilian they ain't afraid of. Why? Because they can beat the ordinary courts in this county. O' course, if anybody was to get to know *too* much about 'em—"

"He might follow Barton," Redfield cut in.

"Exactly, suh," returned Gates with the ghost of a smile.

"Well, then, it's decided that we keep a weather eye on this aviator for our first try," Tex summed up. "With Gates after Barton's murderer, and Slim, here, after the gang that took him, and me after excitement, this town sure ought to be sleuthed to death, hadn't it?"

VIII

ON THE way out to the racetrack the whole proposition was discussed up and down, by and across, and through the middle. Gates was not addicted to showing enthusiasm, I judged, but you could tell he was figuring things out all the while.

He did give vent to his inner feelings at the end of the low-voiced discussion when he said, "I don't mind tellin' you-all that it's comfortin' to have somebody workin' with me. This town's hell for anybody in my position. Every man's hand is against me, same's you. They don't want their playhouse broke up, not at all."

Once again I doubted whether Gates was just a friend of Barton's. I wondered just what "his position" was.

As for Tex, I knew he was tickled to death. Things sure get monotonous awfully quick for that bird. Give him a proposition like we had, and he's the happiest man in the world.

Out at the track there wasn't a great deal of bustle—not as much as I expected. We did see a couple of bulls being brought in and one horse being worked out, but that was about all. There were fifty or more men hanging around the stables, talking horses.

Redfield led us to the stall where his nag, Speedaway, was quartered. Standing by the door of the stall were two very small men. One of them had a deeply wrinkled face and small, very bright eyes. His cheeks were flushed, and as we came up we could hear him coughing.

"Billy Kernan, meet Lieutenants MacDowell and Evans, and Mr. Gates," Redfield introduced us.

Kernan, who looked like a little old man, shook hands with a grip that made me wince. His hands and wrists were out of all proportion to his stunted, bowlegged body.

Redfield's full, ruddy face was not prepossessing as he looked at the other man. "Who's your friend, Billy?" he asked softly.

"George Perkins, meet the gang," Kernan said, and the little chap shook hands shyly.

He looked to be about twenty, and was as short and light as Kernan. He had a thin face, illuminated by a pair of big, brown eyes and garnished with a beautiful crop of freckles. His forehead was very wide, I noticed, and from there down his face dwindled to a mere point of a chin.

Redfield and I were standing a little to one side. I could hear Kernan as he whispered, "This guy is a local boy."

"Not the widow Perkins son, are yuh?" Gates broke in.

"Yessir," came the answer.

"—and last night he kep' me from losin' my roll in a crooked stud poker game up to a saloon. Damn near hauled me out



by my neck. I was drunk. He's wild about horses, and is a good little guy. Speedway took to him; that's how good he is. I——"

"Didn't I tell you to allow nobody around and give out no info. whatever?" asked Redfield with a snap in his voice.

"You sure did, Flash, but this little guy done me a favor. He's all right. Give me a lot o' dope about the others. Say, Johnny Williams is here. He's gonna do the startin'. He's been around bullin' me twicet today. Wants to know what we're doin' here, and what about Speedway."

"Did you tell him anything?"

Redfield's face was just as smooth and cold as a piece of ice.

"Nary thing. They's been others, too, but they ain't none of 'em—" The little fellow broke off in a terrible, wracking cough.

"Found out anything, eh?"

"Not a damn thing. Williams 's the only one that knows anything about Speedway. He's kind o' suspicious, too, even if he did talk a lot about what a no-good dog Speedway is."

"He's hired, you mean, by the committee to start the races?"

"Uh huh."

"It's a cinch his employers know all there is to know, then. He'd double-cross his best friend for a dime. Well, let's have a look at the old boy."

Everybody trooped into the big box stall.

"Keep back, everybody. Speedway is a mean actor with most people."

Redfield stopped talking suddenly as he saw little Perkins advance fearlessly into the gloom and reach up to put his arm around the neck of the big, shining bay, who was watching us with head in the air. I could hear Redfield catch his breath as the great horse bent his head and nuzzled the frail little freckle-face who was crooning to him.

I was strong for Perkins from that minute.

"What a horse, what a horse!"

Redfield did not comment on the kid's temerity, but walked up and rubbed Speedway's nose. The rest of us kept back.

"Like horses, do you, son?" asked the ex-jockey.

"Horses like this 'un I do."

"Ever ride much?"

"Yessir—that is, all I could. I get chances on the ranches sometimes, and I've broke a few."

Redfield asked the kid a few more questions, all of which were answered without hesitation. He did know horses, there was no question about that. His attitude toward Redfield was one of awe, almost reverence.

"What about the other horses here?" asked Redfield of Kernan.

"There's where Georgey, here, comes in. There ain't no horses here is any good, except a big black stallion that ain't built for speed, although he's a hoss. But Perkins says there is a horse that's the class, except for Speedway. She's a filly named Dawn, but she ain't the horse here in the barn that's supposed to be Dawn. The feller that owns this real horse sent a plug down here, which naturally people expects is Dawn, bein' in that owner's stall."

"She belongs to old man Hyson, the mayor," interjected Perkins.

"So-o-o!" said Redfield. "How good is the real horse, Perkins?"

"Never could beat no Speedway, Mr. Redfield."

"Not without the owner, maybe," remarked Tex.

"So there's a ringer about," said Redfield, a hard kind of a smile on his face. "I guess your friend Hyson is out for a clean-up, Evans. How do you know all this, Perkins?"



"A friend o' mine named Granger told my sister—he and she are pretty thick. He said, not to tell no one, but to bet on Dawn; that the odds would be good because no one would be wise to how

good she was. Through that I found out."

"Why did you tell us?"

The young Texan lowered his eyes shyly.

"I dunno, except I didn't think you'd tell nobody and—and it don't make no difference with Speedway in it," he said hesitantly, as though fearful of having displeased the great man.

"Thanks for one friend in this mess, anyway," returned Redfield. "Don't work Speedway until nearly dark, Billy. The less they know the better."

Kernan nodded, and then went into another one of those spasms of coughing. We all walked out of the stall, Perkins stopping to give Speedway a last pat.

"You're sure about Hyson owning this Dawn filly, son?" asked Redfield.

"Y-yessir."

"You weren't home last night, were you?" inquired Gates suddenly.

"Nossir, I stayed here with Mr. Kernan."

"I see. I'm staying with your mother, the same as Mr. Barton used to. Did you know him?"

"Yes, damn 'im!"

His snarled reply was so sudden, so entirely unexpected, that for a moment there was absolute silence.

"You didn't like him?" came Gates' slow question.

Perkins did not answer. He seemed suddenly fearful. He glanced upward fleetingly, and then his eyes sought the ground.

"What about it? Didn't you like him?"

"Oh, he was all right," was the lifeless reply.

Gates did not press the point, but I

could see him looking at the kid with eyes that never wavered.

"Well, let's go," suggested Tex MacDowell.

As we all started for the car he came over to me.

"I thought this Barton was supposed to be a good fellow," he said.

"According to Gates he was. I can't understand Perkins' remark. Maybe Barton was on his trail for something or other."

"Maybe."

As we rode toward town I forgot the incident completely in thinking over my idea about an attempt to get rid of me by getting rid of the ship. When I broached the matter to Tex he thought a moment.

"It might be a good idea to guard it, but not let anybody know about it. In fact, to spread the news around that it isn't guarded. Somebody might walk into the trap, at that," he whispered. Then aloud, "Where do I stay while in this unfair city?"

"Why not come around to Perkins' with me?" said Gates. "Yuh can't beat the food, and I believe she's got a spare room, suh."

"Good."

Strange to say, I would have preferred Mrs. Perkins' establishment to the executive mansion myself.

IX

AT SUPPER—that's what the Hyson's called it—his honor the mayor was in no jovial mood. That strained geniality which he had shown toward me the night before was completely absent. It was a silent meal, the only direct indication of his lack of welcome for me coming after he had asked how long it would take to get my ship fixed up.

"Oh, it's liable to take several days," I answered.

He knit his beetling brows and jabbed his knife into the potatoes viciously.

"I hope you're takin' our advice about keepin' outside o' any entanglements," he said, but got no reply since just at that instant I could hear the drone of an airplane motor.

"Chester Sax comin' home, I guess," said Hyson rapidly. "Excuse me, I got some business downtown. Stayin' home tonight, I s'pose?"

"No, I think I'll travel out and see Sax and his plane. I might have known him in the army. I——"

"I wouldn't do that," the old fellow

broke in. "He's right peculiar, Chester is, about people comin' near his plane—anybody."

His labored efforts fell off as if he were casting around for a reasonable explanation of his advice not to go out to the field. Right there my last doubt as to whether Sax would prove a fruitful source of information vanished into thin air.

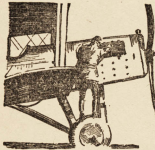
"Well, I won't bother him, then. I thought of taking a little ride with Lieutenant MacDowell, and we may ride by the field and see what kind of a ship he has. Good evening, everybody. I'll be back before long and then for a long sleep. I'm tired."

As I walked down the street Hyson went into the house. A few minutes thereafter a Ford passed me, apparently on its way to the house. It was going fast.

I had been planning to get Tex, but right there I obeyed that impulse and hailed a car with a young fellow driving it.

"Could I hire you to drive me out to the flying field? I want to see the landing," I said.

He looked at me a moment, and then said, "Yuh can't hire me, but I'd just as lief drive yuh out."



It was just getting dusk when we arrived, to find that same Ford standing close by the ship. It had driven into the field through a gate which was now closed and padlocked.

"They don't allow no one on the field," said my driver.

"I'll just look over that other ship and make sure she's staked down all right," I said, and vaulted the fence.

The civilian plane was a big, clumsy ship of the type which had been used in the early part of the war to train cadets. Those ships have a big wingspread, and while slow, are great weight-carriers. In addition, I could see that the rear cockpit was especially large. As I came up, the Ford drove away, but Hyson, who had evidently come in it, stayed behind. I tried my best to get a look inside it, but couldn't.

"Come out anyway, I see," commented the mayor, eyeing me balefully.

"I decided I'd better make sure our ship was staked down firmly," I answered.

There were four men besides Hyson there. I did not know any of them. Three were middle-aged men, dressed in flannel shirts and wearing no coats. The fourth had an oil-grimed face, and was carrying helmet and goggles.

"I presume this is Mr. Sax?" I said, breaking the silence which had followed my last remark. "My name's Evans."

He nodded, and shook hands silently.

"Have a good trip?"

"Uh huh."

"Where did you come from? Didn't run into any rain, did you?"

"Down Corpus Christi way," he answered vaguely. "No, good weather."

He was a slim, black-haired young fellow with a dark, rather strong looking face, slightly sullen. He seemed a trifle ill at ease, as did all the others.

"It's been a long while since I've seen one of these babies," I said, and started walking toward the ship. A canvas top had been hastily thrown over the rear cockpit.

"Oh, Lieutenant Evans, meet these gents," came Hyson's voice, and I barely could repress a grin as I came back. They hadn't had time to cache that cargo in the automobile before I got there, I believed.

I met the three reserved gentlemen, and thereafter made two starts for the ship, to be called back on some pretext or other each time. I gave it up, then, but I was satisfied. Unless I was badly mistaken, we might succeed in getting Sax where the hair was short, and through him some of the rest of Farifus. I made a nominal inspection of the stakes on MacDowell's ship, and then went back to my car.

I turned around and yelled back to Hyson, "It won't be necessary to put a guard on our ships, will it?"

"No, nobody'll touch 'em," returned Hyson, more comfortable now that I was going. He was walking toward me, in company with one of the men, whose principal distinction was a remarkably luxuriant mustache, stained with tobacco. I conceived the sudden idea that I had seen him behind the bar down at Barney's.

"I wouldn't care much if they did," I said. "If my crate should be destroyed I wouldn't have to do all that work and could go right home. No chance of a friendly cyclone or anything, is there?"

Mr. White, he of the mustachios, ha ha'd raucously.

Having done my humble best to spread my net, I climbed into my obliging driv-

er's equipage and we started back to town. I was in uniform that night—that is, shirt, breeches and boots—and my driver seemed considerably interested in aviation. By dint of judicious inquiries I elicited the information that Sax occasionally took up passengers, always two at a time in the rear seat, but that he was away a good deal. I also found out that my driver, who was a frank-faced youngster, didn't like "that fathead."

He took me around to Perkins', where I found Tex and Gates decorating the front porch. I told them what had transpired, to MacDowell's great enjoyment and Gates' repressed approval.

"The dope is not to let a soul know that we're going to stand guard tonight—slip out late and sneak cut there. I guess we'll have to walk. We may find a victim, if they fall for my stuff, who'll talk."

"Probably wouldn't know much," said Gates, and then lapsed into silence.

I could hear a girl's sweet, light voice singing inside.

"Miss Perkins?" I asked.

Tex nodded.

"Good looking little wildcat," he remarked.

"I had a little confab with Mrs. Perkins," Gates drawled in low tones. "She thought everything in the world o' Bart, seems like. And says George is a fine boy—has been workin' for years and bringin' it all home. Funny."

"It may be the kid went wrong—it'd be a wonder if he didn't, in this town—and Barton was on his trail for something," suggested Tex.

"Uh huh. Maybe I can get him to talk, later."

"Well, let's stroll down to some of the sinks of iniquity, and pick up Redfield on the way. I'm anxious to have another look at this town," said Tex. "I sure like that bird."

"He's all there," I agreed, and we started forthwith to get him.



We found him at the hotel, where he had just arrived after watching Speedway work out at the track. His face was serious and thoughtful, and

he greeted us absently.

"I'm worried," he said abruptly. "That

sneak Williams watched the workout from around the corner of a stable. Didn't know I saw him. If there's any crooked work afoot—"

"Are they doing much betting, I wonder?" asked Tex.

"A lot. There's a handbook in every saloon. Two or three local horses are getting quite a play. The highest odds are six to one, and both the mayor's horse and Speedway are eight to one. I asked one fellow how they got the odds, and he said they just didn't know the horses and fixed up the odds according to the betting, so they'd make something on it. He told me that Dawn didn't have a chance. That seems to be the hot dope around town. I presume Hyson is spreading it on purpose so that he can make some private bets. Out at these small tracks personal bets are the big things. And if Williams believes Speedway might come to life, you can bet he'll tell Hyson all about it. Mighty shrewd horseman, Williams, too. He knows Speedway, he knows Kernan and he knows me. I wonder."

"I believe, if I were you, I'd keep a weather eye on your horse if you think Williams is wise," I said.

Redfield began pacing up and down the room with quick, choppy strides.

"You know what I think I'll do? Have Speedway taken out of his stall and hidden out somewhere. It seems foolish to get so worked up, but I think I'll go out right now. Want to come along?"

Having nothing else to do, we went.

As our taxi drew up alongside the stables we could hear a loud voice say, "And I say you're a damn liar!"

Shouts, and the thud of blows came to our ears. With Redfield leading, we sprinted around the corner. Nearly opposite Speedway's stall struggling figures were illumined fitfully by the light of a flickering lantern. I could see a small figure rise from the ground, to be knocked down again by a cruel kick. Then another heap on the ground could be seen as the fight suddenly ceased. Those two prone battlers were Perkins and Kernan.

"Slope, fellers!" yelled one of the men as we came within a few yards of them, and they scattered quickly. There were five of them. We never stopped, but each picked our man.

"Get 'em, damn 'em!" a voice sobbed as we passed Kernan and Perkins, and that injunction was obeyed to the letter.

With my long legs I overtook the stocky, powerfully built man I was after in

less than no time. He realized that running was useless, and nearly ended the fight before it started by whirling suddenly and sending a hefty swing straight for my midriff. I just barely dodged it, but going as fast as I was the quick swerve threw me off-balance and I nearly fell. My opponent was on me like a cat, and while I was still tottering and slipping he sent the most terrible blow I ever felt straight to the side of the jaw. It knocked me down cold, and for a second all the world was hazy to me. The impact of his body on mine brought me to myself.

I felt his fingers around my throat. For a second I lay motionless, as though unconscious, and let him choke. Then I felt his fingers loosen a trifle, and right there I made my move. With all the strength I had, I heaved upward, and partially unseated him. I tore his fingers loose, and with a drawn up knee succeeded in loosening his last hold on me.

I was on my feet quicker than he was, and as he came up I settled him, as I thought, with a punch that carried everything I had in stock with it. It dropped him like a felled ox, but he came again. He had had enough, however, for he started off at a groggy run. Running through my mind was the picture of those two youngsters lying on the ground in their own blood, and that sobbing exhortation from one of them. There came to my ears, without particular significance, the sounds of struggle from all about me. I heard shouts from the shadows beyond, as though others were running to the scene. My whole world, however, was bound up in the fleeing figure ahead of me.

About four jumps and I had him again. I tripped him from behind, and he fell so heavily I thought surely he'd broken some bones.

I made a dive for him, and like a flash his leg came up. With all the power in his body he kicked out at me, and if I hadn't been able to dodge just a trifle I would have been done for. As it was, it seemed as though my thigh was broken. It sent me on my back, with terrible pain in my leg.

I staggered to my feet to meet his rush, and we went into a clinch. He tore one arm loose, and punished me badly with body blows. I jumped backward, and, with all I had, met him with a right jab. It stopped him for a moment, and I dropped him with a left, more because he was off balance than through any particular force or accuracy in the blow.

I was on him before he could rise or make any defence, this time, and in a second we were kicking, clawing, and he was even trying to bite as we rolled over and over on the ground. I battered him into a limp mass before he finally subsided. When he lay as unconscious as a piece of wood I lifted him to my shoulder, stalked back to the stables and through a ring of men. I dumped him on the ground. He was not a pleasant-looking sight.

There were at least twenty men gathered around the spot where Kernan and Perkins had been lying. Gates was covered with blood, and Redfield was badly battered. Tex MacDowell was unmarked, but his eyes were blazing so that they seemed to stand out like a wolf's in that eerie light.

The excited chattering ceased as I stalked into the circle of light and dumped my dago down. He was still as full of life as a potato. Never in my life have I been so mad.

"Did you fellows get the others?" I asked, careless of the crowd.

"One of 'em. The rest got away," returned Tex slowly. "Here he is."

He turned over Charley Ball, limp and unconscious.

"Gates got him with a revolver butt."

I whirled on the crowd.

"Do any of you know anything about the reason for these men assaulting these two boys?"

The crowd, composed entirely of stable-boys and other men of that stripe, just sort of melted away.

"—an we were talkin' an' all of a sudden one of 'em says, 'you're a damn liar' and hits me. Then they all piled in on us," came the half-sobbing voice of Perkins.

"That's the straight dope, boss," mumbled Kernan, and then coughed horribly. He was a terrible sight. He had been beaten up fearfully.

My hands were twitching at my sides. I could cheerfully have strangled the two ruffians on the ground with my bare hands.

Redfield, his breath coming in long, deep gusts, wiped the blood from his face, and then helped Tex take care of Kernan. Perkins was not so badly beaten.

"I felt it comin'," the horseman said quietly. "Williams decided Speedway might mean that Dawn didn't have a sure thing. The easiest way to put Speedway out was to get my rider out of the way. I'm sorry, Billy."

"Oh, hell! Beat up them guys for me and I'll be happy long's I live!"

The nervy little fellow couldn't stand up, he was so weak, but his twisted, young-old face was the setting for a pair of eyes that gleamed brightly through the increasing swelling.

"He couldn't possibly ride, could he?" asked Gates, who had been engaged in making him look like something less than a wild man. As for me, I was still in a sort of red-tinted dream in which I sought something on which to relieve my fury.

Redfield shook his head.

"Mr. Redfield, please let me ride 'im to-morrer!" whispered Perkins eagerly. "No one wouldn't need to know 'till the race and they'll think yuh ain't gonna race Speedway."

"Here, what is all this?" a voice broke in from the darkness, and in a moment Durkins and a young fellow with a badge on came striding into the circle.

"I'll tell you what it is!" I blazed forth, and jumped over in front of him and shook



a very disrespectful fist so close under his nose that he involuntarily stepped back. "It's all of a piece with the crooked game I got into and my being held up. These bums and two more like 'em deliberately beat up two kids—they only figured on beatin' up one and had to add Perkins here—to keep a horse from running in the races tomorrow. Chief of Police—hell! And let me tell you this: If you don't have these two men in jail within fifteen minutes we'll see to it that there's some damn close investigation of what's the matter with your crooked, double-crossing, thieving, murdering little hole down here!"

"Wh-what d'yuh mean?" he blustered. "Don't talk that way tuh me!"

"Try and stop us!" Tex MacDowell broke in.

Durkins started to say something, and then stopped. For a moment there was absolute silence—eight men, six of them more or less battered, standing silently in the light of an old lantern. From the barns, close by, occasional stamping was all that broke the silence. Then came that wracking cough of Kernan's.

"Here's what happened, Chief," came Gates' unemotional tones, and bit by bit he told the story.

It acted as a sedative for all of us. The

tension broke, somewhat, and as Ball stirred on the ground the chief turned to his assistant.

"Take Tony and I'll take Ball," he ordered. "Gents, I'm shore sorry about this an' I give yuh my word we're tryin' t' do everything we can. I told yuh, friendly-like, Mr. Evans, that the quicker yuh left town the better in the circumstances. I have no doubt that Ball, here, an' his friends did this just because Mr. Redfield is a friend o' yours. We'll git the rest of 'em, never fear, an' they'll be brought to trial all right and proper."

I got wise to myself in time. I was about to say something that would give further indication of the reasons I suspected were back of the assault, but refrained. Instead I spun a little more of a web, just in case we had the lay figured correctly.

"I'm not anxious to stay in town, but I can't leave until my ship is fixed, which will be several days. If it had cracked up completely or been burned or anything I would have been out long ago. By the way, it doesn't need any guard, does it?"

"No, indeed!"

"Good. Have you got any trace of the men that held me up?"

"Nary one. Well, let's go, Joe. Anybody got any water? Tony must've got a bad beatin'. Charley, what the hell you been up to?"

Ball had assumed a sitting position. He looked around dazedly, his eyes finally resting on me. If ever I saw hate in a face it was then.

"What'd yuh say?" he finally asked.

"I say what the hell d'yuh think yuh're doin' around here. What's the meanin' of all this?" bellowed Durkins with tremendous ferocity.

"I been out gettin' my evenin's exercise," returned Ball contemptuously.

Durkins stood glaring down at him, and as Ball's eyes came up, the two men stared at each other for a minute. I couldn't see whether there was any signal or not, but Ball suddenly changed his tone.

"I'm sorry I said that, Chief, honest. We got in a argument with this smart-aleck Kernan——"

"Shut up!" snapped Redfield, taking a pace forward.

"——with this Kernan," amended Ball, lowering his furious eyes, "and we lost our temper. There wouldn't o' been nothin' if these fellows hadn't come along and mixed in and made it a fight. We didn't aim to hurt Kernan.

"Oh, no," said the jockey, through bleeding, puffed lips.

"Well, you're under arrest, Charley. Got the water, Joe? Throw it on Tony, and then let's go. You badly hurt, Kernan?"

"Very badly," Redfield replied. "Billy has tuberculosis, and the whole thing has weakened him tremendously. He won't be able to ride Speedway tomorrow."

"Yuh don't say!" said Durkins in apparent sympathy, but to my mind there was more of exultation in his voice. "There ain't no other riders fur the big race, neither—all booked up. Ain't that too bad!"

"Yes, my horse is out," said Redfield, and I caught him pinching little Perkins, who was standing next to him.

Without more ado the two officers and their captives went on through the darkness.

"Billy, you go up and sleep in my room at the hotel," said Redfield. "I'm going



to stay down here with the horse. Get a doctor and have him look you over and see what he can do for you. Here's some money. Want to stay here with me, son?"

"Y-yessir!" said Perkins eagerly. "Please, Mr. Redfield, lemme ride Speedway tomorruh. I can ride him, honest."

"We'll talk about that later. What are you gentlemen going to do now?"

I took a look at my watch. It was nearing ten o'clock.

"Go home for a stall, sneak out the window or something, and go out to the ship to see what we can see."

"I'll dribble along, if yuh don't mind," drawled Gates. His face was a sight.

X

I GUESS all of us had completely forgotten our taxi. When we went around to the road we found the driver talking with a group of men. We got him, and started toward town.

"We'd better get you home right away," said Tex. "Are you sure you can slip out without them knowing it?"

"Yes, indeed. My room's close to the back door. It may be more or less senseless to go to that trouble, at that."

"I don't know. I think it's more senseless to believe that they'll try to harm the ship, as I think of it."

"I don't see why," I whispered. "Don't you see that everything can be laid off on the friends of Ball and Granger? It looks as though every yegg in town was protected, and none of them will squeal as long as they've got that power behind them. Durkins and Hyson would just say 'I told you so' when they were told about the ship being destroyed. It's a cinch they want us all out of town so bad they don't know what to do. Being army men, they don't dare take direct methods. I've popped off enough to let them know that we suspect a regular political ring here that's promoting all this lawlessness, and if only we can be got rid of—"

"It's a wonder they don't return the bank-roll to yuh," remarked Kernan.



"How could they, without producing a culprit? And highway robbery is too much of an offense for anybody to take a chance with. But by hook or crook I'm going to get that dough. Regardless of that, Tex, I'm commencing to despise this gang of sneaks so damn much that I enjoy every crack I can get at 'em. At the start, nothing made any difference to me. Now, I'll be damned if I haven't turned reformer!"

Tex laughed.

"The first requisite for a reformer is a pure and spotless record," he chuckled.

"That's a thought, too. Well, here we are. I'll meet you down at the swimming pool in twenty minutes. Make sure you get there by a roundabout way. So long."

When I reached Hyson's I ran into complications. As I approached I could hear the voice of none other than Minnie. Another feminine voice joined in as I came up the walk. I wondered whether it could be the ghost-like Mrs. Hyson.

"Good evening," I greeted them as I came up the steps.

"Good evenin'. Lieutenant Evans, meet Miss Perkins," giggled Minnie.

In the light which shone through the window I could see a most remarkably good-looking blonde girl. She nodded shortly.

"Won't you sit down?" Minnie invited me, and I accepted perforce.

"Are you George's sister?" I asked to break the silence, and once again the girl nodded.

Her face was somewhat sullen, I thought, even though it was attractive.

There was another thick silence. Minnie moved nervously, but Miss Perkins did not make a sign.

"I met your brother today," I said. "He was with us when we had a little set-to with some bums down at the stables tonight."

George's sister started as though someone had pricked her with a pin.

"D-do you know who they were?" she asked hurriedly.

"A fellow by the name of Ball was the only one I knew," I answered, and she sank back with a little sigh, as of relief.

"Life seems to be just one thing after another here in Farifus," I went on casually, my brain busy with schemes whereby I might escape on my mission to the ship.

"Then why don't you keep out of things?" blazed the girl, so suddenly and with such bitterness that I was genuinely astonished.

"Now, Hilda," broke in Minnie, as though partly soothing, partly warning her.

"I don't care!" the girl half-sobbed, and buried her face in her arms for a second.

For the first time I liked Minnie as she stooped over her and whispered in her ear.

"If you'll all pardon me, I believe I'll go to bed," I said, deciding it was as good a time as any to make a break. "Good night."

As I went into my room you can imagine how thoroughly I tried to find an explanation for the peculiar actions of our friend Hilda Perkins. It might be that she was sorry her brother was mixed up in any scrap. I decided that was it. Perhaps he didn't amount to a great deal and she figured that what I had said simply added another chapter to a no-good history.

I went into my room, and began to wonder how I could get out again without being seen. The back door was probably locked, and if I should be caught sneaking out it would be very bad. I finally decided to do it boldly. The two girls would have no reason to suspect anything.

Coming out on the porch I interrupted a low-voiced conversation by saying, "I haven't a cigarette left, so I guess I'll have to mosey downtown and procure some."

Outside of Minnie's customary giggle, there was no reply, so I proceeded without more ado. I couldn't help wishing that I knew a little more about Hilda—not only personally, but the causes which had given rise to her sudden eruption against me.

"I guess Hilda makes it almost unanimous, in the case of Flyers vs. Farifus," I remember thinking.

As soon as I was out of sight of the house I went up a side street and made my way as quickly as possible to the appointed meeting place. Tex and Gates were there already, as I expected.



Both Tex and I had our Colts—we always carry guns when on cross-country—and of course Gates

was armed. As we walked along swiftly, I told them about my adventure with Miss Perkins.

"That shore is right funny," opined Gates. "I do know this, mostly from Bart. That boy George has always been mighty good to his folks, and he sort of idolized Hilda, bein' his only sister an' so pretty and all. So she wondered why you-all didn't quit monkeyin' in things that didn't concern yuh, eh?"

"I guess Slim's idea about figuring we're getting George into trouble sounds the most reasonable," opined Tex. "I hope we're not too late for any excitement that may come up out here."

"Did you tell Slim about that shadow, suh?" asked Gates.

"Oh, no. Say, Slim, when we were going into Perkins' a man stopped across the street for a moment—he'd been following us. Then he turned and went back, going around a corner. We waited some time, and then sneaked out the back way, but passing that corner I had just a faint idea that I saw him leave the other corner and make for the center of town. Might have been just imagination."

"If it isn't, they're anxious to know just what we're doing," I said.

"Well, I'm damn certain they ain't no one following us now, suh," said Gates. "Yuh know I shouldn't be surprised if there was excitement heah. If you convinced 'em that you'd go right home if you had no ship, they'll shore be here. I——"

My sudden poke in his ribs made him cease abruptly.

"Listen! I think I hear a car," I whispered.

In a moment it was unmistakable. The noise of a motor was plainly distinguishable, and it was coming closer all the while,

It was dark as pitch, with the clouds just thick enough to obscure the stars.

"This is a mighty deserted road, gentlemen, an' if they should happen to be our hombres they'd get the work done before we could catch 'em on foot," said Gates.

"We'll stop 'em and see," I said. "I guess we can get away with that all right." Tex nodded.

"We can sure try," he said gleefully.

In a moment the headlights, which had been lighting up the sky a bit, came in sight around a turn. We disposed ourselves across the road, our hands on our guns and the other hand up in a stop signal. The flivver was coming fast.

As the driver put on the brakes I could plainly hear an astonished voice shout, "It's them, damn 'em!"

As though in answer the car leaped forward again. I was standing in the middle of the road, and before I could get out of the way in the slippery mud a fender caught me and sent me sprawling into a ditch half-full of water. As I picked myself up I heard a revolver crack, and then a louder crash and a chorus of curses.

"You got 'em!" yelled MacDowell's voice in a half-laugh, and then came another report, closely followed by a third.

As I poked my head above the ditch still another shot was fired. In the momentary flash I could see the flivver, half-upended in the ditch on the other side of the road. Even as I watched it slid off further.

"That's caught 'em like rats in a trap!" drawled Gates from the other side of the road. "Where are yuh, Evans?"

"Right here. Anybody hit?"

"Nope. I popped their tires."

We could hear cursing men in that car, which was now almost upside down.

"If you'll hold your fire we'll help you put out!" yelled Tex, a chuckle in his voice. How that boy does love a scrap!"

There was no answer.

"Let's sneak ahead," I whispered.

TEX and Gates in one ditch, and I in mine, plowed along through the water.

"We've got you covered, so make a false move and you're gone!" stated Tex. "Want some help?"

"Yes, damn it!" roared somebody.

I risked a quick trip across the road to join the others, but there was no further shooting. As we approached the car one man was edging his way from beneath it.

"Anybody hurt?" I asked him.

"I reckon not, but there's gonna be when you explain in court."

"We'll discuss that later," drawled Gates. "Let's all give a lift."

The Ford had slid off until the crumpled front wheels were resting on the bottom of the wide ditch, and it was practically upside down. With all of us helping, although we kept our guns ready, we succeeded in lifting it up until the two other men could crawl out easily. One of them was armed, and Tex relieved him of his artillery as he scrambled out. He had previously disarmed the first man.

"Whadda yuh mean by all this!" yelled the biggest of the three after he had got out. "Tryin' tuh hold up men and then takin' 'em with a gun!"

"It means that we knew that you were on the way to our ship with the intention of burning it up!" I cut in, my mind made up to bluff it through. "We stopped you, and then heard one of you say, 'that's them, damn 'em,' and right there you started up and tried to knock me off in the bargain. What do you think we were out here for if we didn't know you were coming? And you'd be surprised who tipped us off, too."

There was a silence you could hang your hat on. It was so dark we couldn't see anybody's face, but those three men were surely knocked for a row of Bulgarian breadknives for a moment. There we were, all standing up to our knees in mud and water, next to a broken Ford, waiting for somebody to say something.

"You can tell 'em all that in court, and we'll see," said the big fellow finally, but a lot of assurance had gone out of his voice.

"What do you think of third-degreeing 'em separately?" whispered Tex.

"I believe it would be just as well to have it out in front of the big-bugs," I returned.

"O' course you got us now, but I'd advise yuh to get us back to town pronto!" blustered the spokesman. "I'm gonna wake up Durkins an' we'll see—"

"Good idea," said Gates softly. "We ain't after you small fry, anyhow. You might know who killed Barton, at that."

"Huh?"

All three of them gave vent to a surprised, fearful grunt that would have been funny if the situation hadn't been tense as drawn wire.

"You-all can bluff all yuh want to, but I'd advise yuh for the good of yore hides to come clean. This Farifus town an' its ring has run wild long enough," pursued Gates, and three badly scared men said not a word.

For a moment I thought Gates' daring gamble was going to be successful. I could fairly feel those fellows vacillating between throwing up the sponge and seeing it through. I'll give the big fellow credit; he was on his home sod and still where he could count on the protection of the higher-ups he worked for, but it was a ticklish situation just the same, and he came through nobly for his bosses.

"What's all this talk?" he sneered. "Get us back t' town, and tell yore story. By the time yuh've paid for this car and explained why yore shootin' up peaceable men—"

"Where were you taking that can of gasoline to?" asked Tex suddenly.

"None o' yore business!"

"Probably not," grinned Tex. "Well, let's go. Climb out after me, you fellows, and no false moves, because we'd just as soon shoot you up as your automobile. We're getting about fed up on you Farifus specimens."

There was no further conversation from them. Tex climbed out of the ditch first, with Gates and I keeping our men covered until he was set up above. Then they clambered out, and Gates and I followed.

The walk back to town was tedious and slow. The three localites plodded on ahead, talking in low tones, while the three of us were discussing matters in the rear.

"I thought we was goin' tuh win," drawled Gates as we neared town. "I don't know as it makes much difference how much they know that we know, anyway. Accordin' to the indications, they're pretty firmly convinced we suspect plenty, as it is. We might just as well lay our cards on the table in front o' the whole kit an' boodle now as any time."

"Let's lay for that flyer, though," I suggested. "It's becoming more and more plain to me that as long as this gang can rely on the Farifus ring they won't come through with a thing. And catching that bootlegger—if he is one—away from town looks to be our one best bet."



"How are yuh plannin' to get 'im?" asked Gates.

"We'll fix that up at the time," grinned Tex. "When he starts anywhere, we'll be thereabouts."

It was considerably after two o'clock as

we swung into town, and as we entered Main Street there wasn't a soul in sight, although some of the saloons were lighted up and occasional gleams showed from second story places.

We hadn't gone more than a block when a policeman hove in sight—uniform and everything.

"Well, here's a cop. What do you want to do?" I asked our captives.

They turned, and for the first time we got a look at them. I hadn't seen any of them before. The big spokesman had a round, rough-looking face, very ruddy, and a pair of cold gray eyes. He was dressed in a shirt that had been white, and dark trousers. The other two were similarly attired. All of us were caked with mud from the knees down, and most of us had taken at least one roll in the ditch, so that there were splotches all over us. We were a wild-looking sextette, I'll say.

"We're gonna get the judge and have this out right here," said our big captive, and the other two nodded. They were shift-eyed specimens, small, and not at all impressive. One of them had a cast in his left eye, and was almost totally bald.

As the cop came closer the leader stopped him.

"We got a complaint to make. These three men stopped our car by firin' intuh our tires and wreckin' us. We want Judge Adams got up right away."

"We have something to say to the judge, too," I broke in.

The beefy-looking policeman was somewhat nonplussed.

"C'mere," ordered the big fellow, and the policeman followed him like a lamb. There was a moment of low-voiced conversation.

"Bert, you go ahead and get 'em," said the cop aloud. "The rest o' you birds come with me."

"Just what's the lay?" drawled Gates, helping himself to a chew of tobacco. "Y' see, Officer, just because they got in the first word don't mean that we didn't bring 'em back to town as our prisoners, and for a damn good reason."

"I'm responsible," grunted the puzzled minion of the law. "He's gonna get the chief and the judge, and we'll get the ins and outs o' this. Looks bad."

"You'll be responsible for this man?" insisted MacDowell, jerking his thumb toward the leader.

"Yes, I'm runnin' this shinanigan!" yelled the cop. "You birds come along and say nothin'. Understand?"

It was the empty prating of a man not sure of his ground and climbing up on his badge, and we accepted it as such. Without more ado, we followed him while the man he had called Bert started off down the shadowed street.

We ended up at the jail, and were escorted into a small room holding a desk, some chairs and a filing cabinet. Back of it, lining a passage, we could see the barred cells. It was too dark to find out whether there were any prisoners therein or not. Charley Ball might have been there, but I would have given odds of ten to one that he was as free as air.

We sat down, lit cigarettes, and waited. I was very tired, and I guess neither Gates nor MacDowell was feeling like jumping around just for the exercise. The two men we had herded into town were equally reserved, stretched out in their chairs with eyes on the floor. The representative of the laws and the statutes of the town of Farifus alternately wheezed and blew, and could not seem to keep still. He lumbered around like an elephant with the St. Vitus dance.

It seemed as though our friend Bert would never return. It must have been more than an hour before we heard footsteps outside. In a moment in came a portly, short little fellow whom I recognized as the lawyer Hyson had introduced me to the first evening I was in town. I say the first evening—I mean the evening before. I had to pinch myself to realize that I had only been in Farifus a little more than twenty-four hours.

"Well, well, what's all this?" enquired Barbour, which was this law-hound's name.

His bright little eyes darted around from face to face, and there was a set smile on his lips. He seemed determinedly cheerful. I whispered his identity to Tex and Gates, and also informed them of the method whereby I had met him.

Our two captives looked up and nodded. The policeman seemed surprised.

"I didn't know they was gettin' you, sir," he said.

"Bert routed me out to represent you fellows."

More footsteps outside, and presently in came the man they called Bert, another long, lean, sad-looking hombre with a scraggly mustache, and Hyson. For three o'clock in the morning it was certainly a distinguished gathering.

Hyson was far from pleasant to look at. His eyes were bleary with sleep, and his

face was like a thundercloud. As he looked at me he seemed like some venomous reptile coiling to strike.

"I understand you want tuh make a complaint against these men?" the judge commenced without ceremony. Apparently it was to be a regular session of court.

"You're damn right we do," the big fellow burst forth, when Barbour stopped him.

"Tell the story calmly, Bert," he ordered.

"Jim, Bill and I was goin' out to Pasquale Cervantes, in my Ford along about midnight, Judge, when we see in the light of the headlights three men drew up along the road with their hands on their guns. They had their hands up to make us stop. I seen no reason why I should take a chance of a holdup, and put on all the gas to try and plow through 'em. I



got through, and then one of 'em—I don't know which—shot our tires full o' holes, and we skidded in the mud intuh the ditch and turned over. The car is wrecked complete, and I want tuh make a complaint all right and proper an' in addition sue these fellows fur a thousand dollars damages."

"Have yuh anything to say?" Barbour asked me in a melancholy voice.

Before I could start, Durkins came in. "Huh, huh, what's the meanin' of all this?" he bellowed.

"Shut up and you'll see, Clem," returned Hyson icily, and Durkins did exactly so.

"What this fellow says is substantially correct," I said. "But there is an explanation for our actions. The fact of the matter is that we were on our way to the ship which I landed here, in order to guard it through the night. We had reason to believe—good reason to believe—that there was to be an attempt to destroy it tonight. When we heard a car at this late hour, going toward the ship, we naturally tried to stop it and find out who the occupants were. They simply confirmed our suspicions when they refused to stop, even though they could plainly see two of us were army officers, and so, in our business of protecting fifteen thousand dollars' worth of government property, we shot, and stopped the car. I may say that we were the target for several shots on our own hook, and that the driver desperately tried to run into me with his car."

"In addition, I may add that they were about to stop *until* they saw who we were, and that a can of gasoline was found in their car to corroborate our idea of their mission."

Hyson, Durkins, Barbour and the judge had been following my words with almost painful attention. I did not miss a trick, and when I said that we had had reason to believe that there was to be an attempt made on the ship I could see Hyson lick his lips and Durkins start. The lawyer seemed to be the most self-possessed of the three.

"What made yuh git an idee the ship was to be tampered with?" asked Hyson as soon as I had finished. His rat-eyes were boring into mine fiercely.

"That's neither here nor there," I made reply.

"It is here and there, too," snapped the mayor, jumping off his chair as though in unbearable nervousness. "Let me tell yuh all somethin'. I'm down here because this feller, here, is stayin' at my house. Out o' the goodness of my heart I invited him, and ever since he's been here there's been nothin' but trouble. One cock-an'-bull story after another, and no proof for any of 'em. You been goin' around here, young feller, in a way we don't like."

"Yo're damn right!" corroborated Durkins virtuously.

"The best thing yuh can do, all of yuh is——"

Right there something snapped in me. My cursed temper, I suppose, plus my growing repulsion for the gang which ran Farifus and all their works. I jumped to my feet and in one stride was over in front of the scraggly-bearded, mahogany-faced old buzzard who had been squeaking along as reported above. I shook my finger about an eighth of an inch ahead of his nose, and something in my attitude made him momentarily shrink.

"So you don't like the way we're doing, eh?" I asked him belligerently. "Well, I don't like being robbed by Farifus thugs, my friends beat up to win a horse-race, and my ship burned. Get that? And I've got a damn good idea who's behind all the things that've been happening, too. Get that? And I'm going to stay here, and I'm going to get the men who've got my money, sent a poor little t. b jockey to bed with his life hanging in the balance, plotted to destroy a Government ship because they knew I suspected too much when I found that the men they introduced me to were crooked gamblers——"

"And maybe were responsible for the killin' o' Barton!"

Gates' unexcited conclusion to my remarks was somehow more impressive because of the slow, thoughtful temper of it. It came like a bomb in that tense company, and for a moment there was not a move. Subconsciously I saw Tex, his eyes glowing like two coals of fire, watching them like a cat would a mouse. The Farifus men were as though frozen in their tracks.

It was Barbour who came to himself first.

"Let's not get excited, any of us," he said, licking his full lips as though they were parched. "I know the lieutenant here has some cause to——"

"Let's have a showdown right here!" snapped Hyson, and if ever there was a living embodiment of wrath he was it. "What do you mean, making any such accusations? Why, damn you, I'll——"

Barbour was beside him like a flash.

"Tom, let's get at this thing calmly," he pleaded, and Durkins, too, went over beside him and put his hand on the mayor's arm. Hyson shook them off as though they were flies.

"Damn 'em, what do they mean by sayin' any such things? What proof have they got? Adams, I hereby order you tuh——"

"To what?"

It was Tex, who had now jumped to his feet and thrust his face close to Hyson's and grated out that question.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, let's get at this thing quietly," begged Barbour, his fleshy face beaded with sweat. "We none of us mean all we've been saying. We're all friends——"

"Friends hell! I don't want any friends in Farifus," I said.

"—— and let's settle all this amicably," Barbour went on smoothly. "Now listen. Personally, I take the lieutenant's word for it that he was robbed of considerable money. Now, in view of the fact that he's in the service, and has lost that money, I suggest that you, Bert, drop the charges against these army men and let them go. I'm sure that on second thought these men, undoubtedly a little wrought up, will realize that they have been a little



hasty and indiscreet in their charges. It's unfortunate that their friend, the racehorse man, thinks that there was some ulterior motive in the unfortunate affair when his rider got into a fight, but you must all realize, gentlemen, that with the rodeo here, and all that, that such things are bound to occur. Bert, how about it? We can't blame the lieutenant too much for being hasty in trying to stop you-all out there on the road. Let's drop the charges, eh?"

The perspiring lawyer was pleading as he never had before a jury, I imagine, in an effort to settle everybody down.

"Yes, and I'll give you another reason why you can drop 'em," came Gates' slow drawl. "I was the man that shot his tires, and I'm Gates of the Texas Rangers."

He did not show any badge or other sign of authority, but just stood there, smiling a little in a kind of cold way, with his arms hanging at his sides, slightly crooked.

"Barton was a friend of mine, and I'm down here to get his murderer. I don't exactly know who it is, yet, but I will. And, gentlemen, don't get too gay around here. I ain't got time to bother with nothin' but my friend Bart's murderer right now; runnin' your town is your own funeral. I'm stringin' with these boys because they seem to be gettin' to the bottom o' things a little mite. Are yuh all satisfied when I say that I done the shootin' this evenin', and done it for a damn good reason? An' that I don't aim to be fooled with?"

"Certainly, certainly," bubbled Barbour.

The rest of us were somewhat beyond speech, I guess. I know it was a stunning surprise to me to find out who Gates was, and I had been wondering about him, too.

"It's all settled," went on Barbour with determined optimism oozing from every greasy pore. "And, Lieutenant, you must admit that it has all come out not unadvantageously for you. I hope that you'll give Farifus credit for trying to be square, won't you?"

I nodded—there was nothing else to do.

"Well, are we through?" asked Tex.

"I guess so. Good-night everybody," I said. "Mr. Hyson, in view of all that has happened, I will feel more comfortable if I stay at the hotel hereafter. I'll get my stuff from your house tonight."

That old shake was apparently in the grip of a consuming wrath which overcame

what would normally have been his best judgment.

He said, "All right. You can sneak in and out there better'n yuh can a private house!"

I held my temper that time. You can't imagine the personal hatred he had generated in me. I started the whole affair with no other motive than that of personal satisfaction and the desire to get back what was rightfully my own. It had turned into a craving to get the goods on the lowest, sneakiest, must unscrupulous gang with which I had ever come in contact.

As we went out I communicated these sentiments to Tex and Gates.

"I guess we're all in the same boat, suh," said Gates, and Tex nodded. "I'd admire to get 'em, and get 'em good, almost as much as I would to throw down on the man that shot Bart. Well, the mawnin' is anothuh day. We'll go up t' old man Hyson's aftuh yore stuff, an' then for some sleep, eh? Maybe tomorruh'll turn out to be busy."

XI

I BUNKED in with Tex that night, and we both pounded our ears industriously. I had to do an eccentric contortion act to fold myself into the bed, but I was asleep about two jumps before I hit the pillow.

I woke up around ten o'clock the next morning to find Gates and Tex smoking a sociable cigarette on the edge of the bed.

"Have you finished playing reveille?" Tex enquired. "You keep on the key much better asleep than awake."

"Thanks. Class will tell. Well, what's the program? I suppose we've got to get those damn parts over to my ship and start work."

"Oh, let's leave that for today. The big doings come off this afternoon and we should certainly be there to have a few dollars on Redfield's horse, to say nothing of looking over the mob."

"Let's look up Redfield," suggested Gates. "I wonduh if his night compared with ours?"

"Good idea," I agreed, unfolding my stiff joints. "Can a cold bath be procured hereabouts?"

It could, and helped me out amazingly. We didn't stop at the house for breakfast, but went on downtown and had rolls and



coffee at a restaurant where flies as big as De Havilands buzzed around our heads. This done, we set sail for the hotel.

Redfield's key was at the desk, and Redfield himself was nowhere to be seen, so we took a taxi out to the scene of the coming festivities. The town was a riot of activity. The streets were lined with vehicles, the sidewalks crowded, and even the drugstores were doing a big business. As for the saloons, they were crammed to the doors. Everybody seemed to be out for a good time, and the punchers, especially, were getting oiled for the occasion. There were hundreds of tanned, bowlegged young men clumping up and down the streets. It must have approximated the old days when the puncher was king.

We found Redfield sitting alongside the stable, with young Perkins. Both of them looked as though they hadn't had a great deal of sleep, but the stocky, smiling horseman greeted us with his usual bright geniality.

"Any fuhthuh trouble last night, suh?" asked Gates.

"Nary a bit."

"Well, how do prospects look?" Tex asked while I was paying off our jehu.

"George, here, is going to ride Speedway, and I believe he can win with him," Redfield returned, smiling at the freckled youngster.

Perkins grinned shyly. It was plain to be seen that he was in the seventh heaven.

"He worked out Speedway this morning, at dawn, and handled him in great shape," Redfield went on kindly. "We're not going to make a move until just before race time, so these town sharps will think that my horse is out of it. George took a quick trip into town a few minutes ago, and tells me that the odds against Speedway are ten to one, now, and against the supposed Dawn horse, eight to one. Old man Hyson and his gang are sure planning to run a whizzer when they put in that ringer, but both Kernan and Perkins agree that she can't beat Speedway, if he'll run. There's a wealthy ranchman named Dawson that has a big black stallion in who's getting a play. He's only two to one."

"What's the distance of the big race this afternoon?" I asked.

"Two miles—four times around this track. The people will have a chance to get a run for their money all right."

Redfield walked over closer to us, and asked, "How did things come out with you last night?"

We told him, and he whistled thought-

fully at MacDowell's description of the affair at the jail.

"So-o-o," he said slowly. "I've got a little dope for you that may come in handy."

We strolled away from the stables, which were surrounded by a considerable number of men eagerly talking horses, and sat down in the shade of a tree. Perkins disappeared into Speedway's stall.

"I had a long talk with Perkins last night, and on account of me being an ex-jock and maybe givin' him a chance to be one if he pans out, George and I got along fine. He spilled just about everything to me about what he knows around town. It isn't much, except in one thing. You remember how he shot off his mouth about this fellow Barton?"

We nodded, waiting for him to go on.

"Well, I couldn't get a word out of him about Barton, but I did get a lot about this fellow Granger—you know, the tall, good-looking one that couldn't be bothered."

Redfield paused to light a cigarette. Gates was watching him with unwinking eyes.

"This Perkins is a nice kid, and he's been working since he was fifteen, helping support his mother and sister. And if ever a kid was raving crazy about his sister, he's the one. He thinks she's the most beautiful, wonderful thing that ever wore skirts."

"She is good-looking, all right," I agreed, harking back to my short conversation with her on the porch the night before.

"And the other one he thinks everything

in the world of is this bird Granger, strange as it may seem. So far as George is concerned, Granger is the law and the prophets. I tried and tried before I could get any reason for his

liking. It seems that when Granger first came to town, which was about a year ago, he proceeded, the very first day he was here, to stop a runaway horse that Hilda Perkins was riding. Granger came up here from Mexico, appearing with Sax, this aviator, when he came back from one of those mysterious trips of his.

"As I get the story, Granger is pretty much interested in Hilda, and is a great friend of the whole family. So far as



George is concerned, there's nothing crooked about Granger. His job has been town clerk, or something like that. And George knows some of the crooked gamblers, too, and swears Granger isn't crooked. That means, to my mind, that Granger hasn't been mixing openly in that kind of stuff. They must have thought that you, Evans, had enough kale to take particular pains with.

"Anyhow, it seems Mrs. Perkins had a small mortgage on the house she couldn't pay off, and Granger lent her the money to do it, on account of the girl, I presume. There's the lay. George idolizes Granger an' hates Barton. That must mean that Barton was chasin' Granger about the time he got bumped off, doesn't it? Because it seems George had nothin' personal against Barton. An he gets so wrought up about it every time I mention it that I believe——"

Redfield stopped, as though to let some one else fill in the sentence.

"That Granger killed Barton and that George knows about it?" suggested Gates slowly.

Redfield nodded, and then looked at Tex and me.

"It doesn't seem so darn unlikely, at that," stated MacDowell.

"So Granger has been a benefactor and all that, and is in love with Perkins' sister," I said. "That would explain, maybe, the kind of an interview I had with her last evening," and went on to describe the girl's peculiar attitude.

"Here's another scrap I picked up, too," Redfield went on. "It seems that right after the armistice Sax was either put out or got out of the army, and went down to Mexico. Shortly after he appeared around here with a ship, Granger came riding back with him one afternoon. He and Sax are quite friendly, I gather. It didn't take Granger any time at all to get in right in town. In fact, I believe that the ruling powers imported Sax and Granger for confidential men, or something like that."

"I'd like to know what they was up to in Mexico," drawled Gates, his eyes resting absently on a horse which was being led around the barn. "That's a right devious country, gents, and a white man can be up to almost anything down thataway." Which suggestion we all knew to be the truth.

"It still seems to me that our one best bet is Sax," I declared.

"Starting in the early morn, we'll keep a wary peeper on him," said Tex. "Gates,

what do you think you'll do about Redfield's information?"

"I dunno just how I'll use it yet, but I'll use it," returned the Ranger. "Maybe if you boys turn up anything on Sax, that'll be valuable, too. I take it that Sax must be in the innuh circle around heah, from all that's been said."

"Going back to town?" I asked Redfield. "Not on your life!" was the emphatic reply. "Speedaway and Perkins don't get out of my sight until race-time. Are you boys betting anything? Mind you, I'm telling you it's a gamble on Speedaway. I believe he's the best horse in the race, but he'll have a green rider up and he's a bad actor."

"And he's running against the other horses, the other jockeys, the mayor of Farifus, and God knows who else," I put in.

"It's going to be good," stated MacDowell delightedly. "Hyson and the gang running in a ringer which we know about; believing that Speedaway won't run, which he will; thinking they've got something on us when we've really got it on them, and after it all comes out, wondering what Speedaway and Perkins will do. Talk about double-crossing!"

"Well, I might risk a few dollars on your speed marvel," I said. "Where are the books located?"

"The biggest one—Berry's—is in the hotel."

"Well, we'll look up the prices and see what we can do. By the way, Tex, what say to getting our ship gassed and oiled? We can't very well chase Sax unless we stoke up."

"Right you are. Let's get at it."

Gates decided to stay out at the track—it was after eleven then—so Tex and I caught a ride back to town and succeeded in getting a truck to carry gas, oil and water out to the field.

We got there about one o'clock. Sax wasn't there, but there was a business-like guard on his ship who spoiled our chances of taking a close look at the plane. He watched us warily, and refused to put out any information whatever.

Having fixed up our ship to our satisfaction, we hustled back to town and took a hasty lunch at Mrs. Perkins'. She was a motherly-looking woman with iron gray



hair and a round, placid face. Her daughter was just finishing lunch as we came in, and vouchsafed us a nod of greeting. Thereafter she kept her eyes on her plate. She was just the sort to take your breath away, even if her face was persistently sullen. I wondered whether our presence was what made her that way. If she was in love with Granger she'd naturally hate me like poison.

Mrs. Perkins was somewhat worried about her son.

"He's out at the track with Mr. Redfield, who is a horseman," I told her. "George seems to love horses, and he's having a good time chinning with Redfield."

"Redfield's a friend of yours, isn't he?" the girl asked suddenly, with a quick look upward.

"Just a casual one," Tex returned easily.

She sniffed, and relapsed into her brooding silence. Mrs. Perkins' face seemed worried as she looked at her daughter.

There came steps on the porch, and Hilda looked up quickly. The change in her face was remarkable as she jumped up. She was not quick enough, however, to forestall the entrance of Mr. Bud Granger.

He entered the dining-room with a laughing greeting to Mrs. Perkins, and then saw us. He was not nonplussed in the slightest.

"How do you do, Evans?" he said easily.

"Going out to the rodeo?"

"Yes indeed. This is Lieutenant MacDowell, Mr. Granger."

Hilda watched breathlessly as the two men shook hands. MacDowell's eyes were dancing with deviltry, and Granger was as devil-may-care as you please.

"Is George still out at the track?" Granger asked Mrs. Perkins.

"So these gentlemen say, Bud," she answered.

"I see."

His clean-cut face became thoughtful for a moment, and then he smiled that curiously mocking smile of his. For the first time I noticed what seemed to be a hardness just below the surface in him. I got the impression that with all his careless attractiveness he had a streak of granite in him—sort of a velvet exterior and iron interior, if you get what I mean.

"Ready, Hilda?" he asked finally.

"Uh huh."

The girl adjusted her hat momentarily in the sideboard mirror, and then went out of the dining-room with Granger. Her mother's eyes were soft as they followed

the good-looking young couple out the door.

"Lieutenant Evans, what's all this trouble I been hearin' about between you an' Bud?" she asked, her kind old eyes plumb-ing mine steadily.

"Why, I'd rather not go into it, Mrs. Perkins," I said. "It's all forgotten, and maybe I was wrong."

What else could I say?

"I'm sure you are," she declared. "No finer boy ever lived than Buddy. He's the only man in the town good enough for my daughter. If George finds as good a girl some time as Hilda has a man, I'll die happy."

"George is a fine boy," said Tex, leaning back and lighting a cigarette.

"He is, indeed," smiled the proud mother, and then sighed. "Ever since his father died he's had to work, but he's done it cheerful-like and never complained. Buddy Granger has helped him out a lot, too. I don't know what we'd done without Buddy."

"He's surely a nice-looking chap, and even if we did have a little trouble, I like him," I said as we arose from the table. "Can we take you out to the rodeo, Mrs. Perkins? I'll tell you a secret, if you'll promise to keep it. George is going to ride Mr. Redfield's horse in the big race, and if he wins he'll get a fat price for his services."

"Do tell! Now, ain't it funny that Buddy didn't know anything about it? He said that this Redfield horse wasn't going to run, and I'd o' thought Georgy would o' told him."

"Probably hasn't had a chance," drawled Tex. "Well, are you going to go out with us, Mrs. Perkins?"

"No, I thank yuh. Buddy is sendin' a car after me about two o'clock," was the reply.

"It seems that friend Buddy is right on the spot," remarked MacDowell as we walked down the street toward the center of the town. "And I'm bound to say that although I like him all right, he doesn't seem to me to be a natural philanthropist."

"Well, being in love makes a difference," I suggested.

"Sure. But what I'm wondering is how quickly he'd use his friends for his own good?" drawled Tex slowly. "The more I see of Granger, the more I respect his ability. I'll bet his career would make interesting reading. I wonder what he'd think if he realized the direction in which our minds are working?"

"He probably wouldn't think very long, but I'm damn certain there'd be some action!"

XII

IT SEEMED that the bookmaker who had been doing business in the hotel that morning had transferred his activities to the track, so we proceeded out there after a hard fight to get transportation. We finally were hailed by a big, jovial man who was driving an expensive car. He hailed us from the street while we were standing at a corner waiting for a taxi to come along.

"Goin' to the races, flyers?" he bellowed, and we said "yes" promptly.

It was the first time during our stay in Farifus that anyone had gone out of his way to be courteous to us.

"Hop in, then, and I'll take yuh. This is my wife, Mrs. Dawson."

We introduced ourselves, and got in. Of all the wild drives I've ever taken, that was the wildest. Talk about airplanes being hazardous! That old man just wove in and out of the traffic in a manner that made my eyes pop. He talked steadily, laughed frequently, and all in all seemed to be having the time of his life.

"I understand you-all run intuh some excitement here in town," he remarked as we neared the grounds.

"Uh huh."

"Some time later, if I have a chance, I can tell yuh a few things. I live fifty miles from here, myself, but I know somethin' about the town. Well, I guess this is about as fur's we can get an' have a place to park. Mother, can you toddle from here to the grandstand without strainin' yoreself?"

The little, gray-haired woman assented smilingly, so we all climbed out and started for the track.

"If yuh want to make a small bet on the big race, yuh won't go fur wrong bettin' on Black Master, my stallion. He's a runnin' fool, and'll beat these broken-down thoroughbreds in a walk," Mr. Dawson told us.

I hesitated for a moment, and then told him about Redfield's horse, including the fact that Perkins was going to ride him due to the beating up of Kernan.

"Yuh don't say!" exclaimed Dawson. "An' that's sport! I got a good jock aboard Black Master, though, and I'm backin' my own hoss. He's a smart rider that's been ruled off the big tracks, but of course they can't none of 'em make a horse run no faster than he can."

"Right you are. Well, thank you, Mr. Dawson, for the lift. I hope we'll see you and your wife again some time," I said, as our slow progress through the crowd brought us up to the stables. The grandstand was a considerable distance further on.

"Look me up at the hotel this evenin'," he returned heartily.

We found Redfield walking Speedway around.

"Are you going to bet?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed."

"Then do it quick, before I send word that Speedway'll run with Perkins up. That'll shorten the odds, or I don't know Williams. I just found out that Williams has spread the word that Speedway can't possibly run. I told him this morning I had no jockey. The odds are close to fifteen to one, I imagine, against Speedway, with no bettors. Up to a half hour before race time the bettor has to take a chance on the horse's running. They're sure rooking the bettors here. 'Sour Jim' Berry is running the biggest book. I don't know how he got here, but he plays these small fairs quite a bit when the big track bettors have cleaned him for most of his wad. His book is right behind the grandstand, and he's laying fairly heavy."

Tex and I decided to bet fifty apiece on Speedway, and Tex made off to place it. Redfield was nervous as a witch. He put Speedway back in his stall, finally, watched by a little group of stable hands who seemed greatly interested in the horse.

"Some of them know him," Redfield explained. "Boy, I've seen a lot of racing, but I'll swear I can't remember one that meant so much as this one. If Kernan was only able to ride!"

"How's the kid coming?"

"Not so good. I'm afraid he hasn't got long to live, Evans. He was in bad shape when we got here. If I clean up anything here I'll have him taken care of out in Arizona somewhere. I bet my last fifty on Speedway a few minutes ago. How I hope that horse'll run! There can't anything here beat him! Just a bunch of worn-out selling platers, local mixed-bloods, and that filly of Hyson's."

"Did Perkins handle him well this mornin'?"

"Fine. He seems to be one of those fellows that can make a temperamental horse like Speedway run, and urge him enough to keep him from quitting. He and Speedway get along like brothers. That's what I'm banking on. But Curry

and Ainsworth, two jocks that have been ruled off most o' the tracks in the country, are here and no tellin' what they'll pull off. They're with Williams, who's startin', and one of 'em is ridin' for Hyson and the other for another local man. There's another good horse—Lanikin. Lanikin is a dope horse, but even when he's hopped up he can't run two miles within ten seconds of Speedway. Hyson, according to Perkins, must be doing his betting with individuals. They say he and a rancher named Dawson have two thousand dollars bet, even money. Dawson has a horse that—"

"I know. We rode out here with him. It's a shame to have a ringer run in."

"It isn't exactly a ringer at an unauthorized meet like this," said Redfield. "Hyson entered a horse called Dawn, and stables an old plug down here at the track. If people want to assume that that's Dawn, why—"

"It's their own funeral. I see. He's got even the bookies fooled, has he?"

"Uh huh. But don't worry about them at a meet like this. Their odds are so arranged that they can't lose. Here comes MacDowell."

"That bookie sure looked me up and down and by and across when I laid a hundred on Speedway. He reduced the odds to eight to one right after my bet. Even then he laughed at me, and told the clerk I must be a sucker. There doesn't anybody think Speed-



away's going to run."

"I'll have to notify the stewards right away that he is going to. Two o'clock's my last chance. Where will I see you afterward?"

"No telling. I want to see the rodeo. Suppose we meet you here in half an hour?"

"Good," and the little horseman made off with choppy strides.

"Broke, or rich enough to campaign Speedway for a lot of money, all resting on a race with the crookedest bunch of skunks I ever saw," mused Tex aloud. "Redfield leads what I call an interesting existence. Good sport, isn't he? I never saw my last dollar and all my hopes riding on a horse."

"I have. Well, let's see if we can get a good observation point somewhere."

The buzz of the crowd had been a low drone back of the stables, but as we rounded the corner it grew in volume. The rail, from stables to the grandstand, was lined five deep with men. The grandstand, a large one, was packed with people, and as we walked behind it, and in front of the bookmakers' stands, we caught a glimpse beyond the stand, and it was as solidly packed with people as the other side. We wandered around to find a point of vantage, and finally, both of us being well over six feet, we found a thinly populated sector where we could see what was going on.

We didn't have a program, but from the conversation around us we gathered that the rodeo events of the day were confined to roping and tying steers for time. There were to be three races, and the roping was divided into three sections. The big race was the last one of the day. There were so many entrants for the roping that it had been found necessary to devote an entire day to it. The following days would see fancy riding, bronco-busting, bulldogging and the other pastimes dear to the Westerner's heart.

Both Tex and I were in uniform, and for the first time since arriving in Farifus were conscious of being somewhat conspicuous. People were constantly nudging each other and pointing to us, and there was much low-voiced conversation when we were around. It was probably because of the fact that many strangers were in town, and undoubtedly some of the events of the last forty-eight hours had become known.

Suddenly the buzz of the crowd became momentarily lower. A little, runt-like man with no hat on was riding a rangy little cow-pony down the inside of the track, at a walk.

"Attaboy, Billy!" "Get 'im under twenty, cowboy!" and similar encouraging shouts marked his progress down the line toward the big corral which had been built at one end of the track, on the inside. Evidently he was the first candidate for roping honors.

He was good, too. His steer was a big, mean-looking black-and-white, and he came charging out of the corral as though the devil was after him. That stunted little horse was out like a flash, and within five seconds the puncher's rope writhed out and the steer was down. We were too far away to see plainly, but this little fellow's

movements were like flashes of lightning. It didn't seem humanly possible, to my mind, and I was born in the cattle country, that he could be through when he waved his hand. There was a tremendous cheer, and all around me men were saying, "Around twenty-two, or I'm a liar," "Let 'em beat that!" and similar confident exclamations.

A bull voice which sounded like Dawson's, roared out, "Hooray, cowboy!"

"That's his boss!" a roughly-dressed man next to me remarked to his neighbor. "Old man Dawson'd give his shirt to win every event out yere."

There were six more candidates who got their chance, and all but one of them did well. I didn't think any of them approached the snake-like swiftness of the first little fellow, but they were good, all the same. The crowd seemed to know them all, and there was a rough good-humor about the whole proceeding that was very attractive.

Came the first race—a half-mile dash for cow-ponies. I got my first long-distance slant at this Williams, the starter and Redfield's Nemesis. He was a small man, but I've got to admit he knew how to start a horse-race. One of the ponies was too fractious for the assistant starter, and the dapperly dressed little man went down and lined him up himself. Then he let the assistant hold his head while he got back in his stand. The rest of the ponies stood like statues.

They were all ridden by small punchers dressed in full regalia. When the barrier sprung they got away slowly, although better than most two-year-olds, at that. They were all accustomed to sudden starts after cows.

It was one of the prettiest races I ever saw—slow, but they were all bunched. Coming around the turn out of the short backstretch there was a spill, and two horses went down. No one noticed, hardly, because the other six were coming around into the stretch like a chariot race.

A rangy black, being ridden for dear life, came thundering down in a way to make any lover of a good horse rave. Low to the ground, he drew away from this field to win by half a length. It was one of the best stretch finishes I ever saw.

The crowd had been raving maniacs during the race, and the victory seemed a popular one. The slim, handsome kid who rode the winner was carried off on the shoulders of his enthusiastic friends when

he came back to the judge's stand. The affair was nothing if not informal.

More roping, and then a mile race—



free-for-all, as near as I could judge. When the horses paraded, it was easy to see that there were no cow-ponies in it. The jocks wore silks, and rode like veterans. The purse was five hundred dollars. The horses looked pretty good. I got hold of a program that had been dropped on the ground, and both Tex and I recognized the names of some of the nags. They were worn-out selling platers, mostly eight and nine years old, but thoroughbreds and still capable of putting up an interesting race.

The barrier sprung while one horse was at least four feet back of it and turned slightly sideways.

"Two to one that horse will run the best race of them all, and fail to win because of the start," I yelled to Tex through the din.

"Why?"

"That was a deliberately poor start, and I believe the race is crooked."

That's a favorite game at small tracks—those fly-by-night owners have every race fixed ahead, sometimes. Sure enough, I was right. At the end, a big bay mare won the race and my horse, a chestnut, was only beaten a neck. The jock riding him didn't put up a very hard stretch ride, either. I heard Redfield's voice at my elbow.

"That chestnut's not a bad horse. He'll lose until the last day, and then spread-eagle the field!"

"We were just about to go over to find you," I said. "Everything come out all right?"

"They were sure some surprised, and they haven't recovered yet," was the soft response. "Want to come over while we saddle up?"

We made our way through the crowd, and back to the stables. Perkins, all toggled out in blue and white silks and riding boots, was leading Speedaway up and

down, preparatory to going to the paddock. The big horse was covered with a white sheet, but from his eyes and tossing head you could tell that the murmur of the crowd, the whole atmosphere, was like a battlecry to him.

Little Perkins was white as a sheet, and trembling with every move. His eyes blazed in his face like two live coals.

There were no iron-clad rules about jocks staying in their room and all that such as they have on a big track, so we all moseyed over to the deserted paddock. Everybody was watching the last of the roping contest.

"Billy Dale from the Circle L and Jack Sims of the Bar 2 tied," one of the young fellows who acted as track valet told us.

One by one the other horses came over, and were walked round and round the corral which did duty as a paddock. Suddenly there was a mighty roar, and dozens of men began sifting over to the paddock. Shortly the enclosure was surrounded by a ring ten deep. There was excited discussion over each horse. Those men were betting high, wide and handsome, and they knew horses.

"Look at Dawn—see, she hasn't got her sheet off?" whispered Redfield, as he passed me.

Sure enough, that beautiful head could not be the head of the horse which had been stabled in Hyson's stall. And that sheet wouldn't be removed until the last moment, either, like Speedway's.

Dawson's great black stallion was one beautiful horse, albeit a little heavily built for a racer. He seemed to be getting most of the play. The regular thoroughbreds, without any exceptions save Dawn and Speedway, had bad legs and were heavily bandaged. Those horsemen argued and almost fought over who to bet on. There was much speculation about Speedway, but the fact that Perkins was to ride him caused most of them to hold the horse lightly. Slowly but surely the choice fell on Dawson's stallion. There was a constant stream of men leaving the paddock for the books, but they were always replaced by other eager onlookers.

Came time to saddle. As the coverings were removed from Dawn and Speedway there was a sudden, ever-growing murmur.

"Old Hyson's pulled another!" we heard one excited puncher exclaim. "That's good enough for me!"

There was a tidal wave of men who made for the books. Over there we could

hear the shouting as they tried to get their bets down.

One man, bursting through the crowd, flung over his shoulder, "Dawn only two to one and goin' down!"

Redfield caught my eye and winked. His round face was whiter than usual, and the wide, thin mouth was set as he tightened the saddle, talking to little Perkins all the while in low tones. The other jocks came in the paddock and made for their horses. They were shifty-looking, wrinkled, stooped specimens of humanity, every one of them with the marks of dissipation and crookedness on his face. Had they not been that kind, they would not have been riding at a little fair meet.

Speedway was number seven—the outside position. One by one the horses paraded out, Speedway in the rear. He seemed full of life, stepping sideways and tossing his head as though scenting the battle ahead, and welcoming it. He was big and rawboned, but his haunches were powerful, his chest deep and wide, and his coat shone like silk. He was in the pink of condition. The big black was likewise pining for action. With curved neck and tossing mane, the great stallion was a picture of beautiful horseflesh.

In direct contrast to him, dainty little Dawn looked every inch an aristocrat—small, cleanly-built, feminine in every move. She was a beautiful filly, and built for speed. To me it seemed as though two miles would be a long run for her.

Redfield joined Tex and me and we made for the rail.

"Those two jocks Williams brought along are riding Dawn and the stallion," he said in that soft, unhurried voice of his. "You say you know Dawson, that owns him?"

"Right, and he looks to be a good old sport. I wonder how he got hold of his jockey?"

"That's the point. Probably Hyson and the rest of 'em did that. They must think Dawson's horse dange. What I'm wondering is, how did they get hold of Williams and these riders? It doesn't seem as though these men would be familiar enough with racing and the track—"

"What about friend Granger?" drawled Tex as we wedged in on the rail. Redfield nodded wordlessly, and then we all fell silent, along with the crowd, as the horses cantered back from the parade to the barrier and started lining up. The start was, of course, directly in front of the stand—same place as the finish, it be-

ing a two-mile race over a half-mile track.

It seemed as though Perkins was having a hard time handling Speedway, but he was getting away with it. The horse was dancing around on the outside, occasionally nosing the barrier. Dawn, who had the rail, was plainly well-trained. She stood quietly, as did the others, with the excep-

tion of the big black. The barrier, it seemed, meant nothing to him. I judged that he had had no track training whatever. However, in a two-mile race the start doesn't mean a great deal.



"Now if George will only remember what I told him," murmured Redfield, his heart in his eyes.

I was all wrought up, myself. I had only fifty bucks riding, but I felt as though the race meant as much to me as it did to Redfield. When a man is racing for all he's got, there just isn't any bigger stake.

"They're off!"

It was like a sudden clap of thunder, that cry. Redfield began pounding me on the back as I leaned forward to watch.

"He held Speedway, like I told him. Good boy, good boy!"

"Why?" I yelled, my eyes on the horses, who were rounding the first turn.

"So he can't be interfered with. There'll be chance enough the last lap!"

"Look at that black!" yelled Tex, and the crowd was yelling itself hoarse.

They were sweeping down the backstretch now, and the stallion was in the lead, running heavily, but setting a terrific pace. Behind him was Dawn, and the rest of the horses were strung out already. Speedway was running fifth, on the rail. He was galloping as easily as could be.

"I told him to keep away from Dawn and Black Master, on account of the riders, until the last minute," Redfield said rapidly. "What a race he's riding! Keep the rail, boy, keep the rail!"

Speedaway and Perkins kept it. Dawn was still on the inside, with Black Master near the center of the track a half length in front. Speedway was directly behind Dawn, two lengths back. It seemed as though everybody instinctively counted all the other horses out of it, although a couple were running strongly.

The roar of the crowd was deafening as the field thundered down the stretch. Black Master was a beautiful sight as his pounding hooves spurned the track and with flattened ears he swept past the stand. Dawn was running hard, I thought, but Speedway was working as easily as though in an exercise gallop. He was losing a little ground, apparently, with Perkins holding him off the pace.

"His mouth's wide open!" yelled Redfield exultantly. "Georgey's holdin' him for all he's worth!"

All around us the men who knew horses were noticing the same thing.

"Look at that Speedway hawss!" belled a stentorian voice near us. The roar of the crowd slackened a trifle, and then fell almost entirely away. Speedway was falling back little by little, Black Master and Dawn racing in unchanged positions. I took a quick look at the grandstand. I could see old man Dawson, his iron gray hair waving wildly in the breeze and his big hat crushed in his hand, riding his horse from the stand as hard as the jock who was on his back.

Making the turn out of the backstretch on the second lap, Speedway made up some ground. Once again Redfield's voice rang in my ear.

"He let go of him for a minute, and did yuh see him walk up?"

Truly, he had come up in about four strides in a way that made the other two horses look as though they were standing still. Entering the stretch, it was easy to see Perkins take hold of him again, still two lengths behind the leaders. The kid took a quick look around at the trailers, and then settled down to business again. He was riding as perfectly as any jockey in the race, standing in the stirrups, well over his horse's neck, and fairly lifting Speedway along. The stallion was still running strongly, and Dawn kept her position unchanged.

Bit by bit the excitement grew as they flashed down the backstretch on the third lap. I could hear Dawson's mighty bellow, "Open up on 'em, Beauty, open up on 'em!"

The rest of the field was hopelessly out of it, and to the casual eye it might seem as though Speedway himself had none too good a chance. Once again he was dropping back.

Then came Redfield's voice—it was almost a groan.

"He's stoppin', by God!"

And so it seemed. Farther and farther

back, with shortening strides, Speedway was allowing the gap between him and the two leaders to widen.

And yet Perkins did not use his whip. Bent far over his mount's neck, the boy was hand-riding him for all he was worth. They turned into the stretch. Still in the lead, Black Master was nevertheless starting to labor. Little Dawn, her white-blazed face stretched out until it seemed almost horizontal, was gradually lengthening her stride, and bit by bit was creeping up on Black Master. The bedlam in the stands was so great it seemed as though that duel marked the end of the race. Myriad voices were pleading with Black Master; fewer, but nevertheless noisy on-lookers were exultantly hailing the gallant little filly. Far back in the ruck, unhonored and unsung, Speedway was limping along barely a length ahead of the rest of the field.

"Great God!"

It was a prayer, the way Redfield breathed it, and Tex MacDowell smote me a most powerful smite between the shoulder blades.

"He's started again!"

Redfield's mighty bellow split the din, and the round, unemotional face was suddenly blazing.

"Come on, you Speedway!" we three yelled in unison, and as he passed us it seemed that the horse was answering. Longer and longer the mighty strides became, and running as smoothly as a well-oiled engine the big bay lay close to the ground and ate up the distance separating him from the leaders. Still Perkins did not use his whip. As the horses became momentarily separated rounding the turn it was plain to everybody that Speedway was closing. So far as running went,



there was nothing else in the race. Nothing labored, not a sign of fatigue—the grace and power of it seemed like a veritable race-track epic. Three lengths back of the leaders, and closing fast!

"And he hasn't got his head yet!" said Redfield conversationally, suddenly calm. "Now if the boy will go to the outside and avoid all chance of interference——"

Down the backstretch, with Speedway closed to two lengths and Black Master falling back, Dawn's head was thrust out ahead now, but with every bound the big gelding was catching her. I could see her rider glance back, and start his drive on the turn. The jock on Black Master did not seem to be making any great effort, despite the thunder of pleading which rolled across to him.

"A set-up for Dawn, unless—Perkins, keep away from Black Master, boy!"

I felt as though I was running that race myself. Every nerve in my body seemed at the breaking point. I grasped Redfield's idea, but nevertheless I almost groaned aloud as I saw Perkins carry the flying Speedway wide on the turn into the stretch, well away from Black Master.

The roar grew into bedlam and a curse fell like a blistered coal from Redfield's lips as he saw. For Black Master careened wide at the turn, directly ahead of Speedway. It seemed inevitable that they bump—and Dawn was streaking down the stretch like a flash of light. She was in distress, but game to the last. Her jockey was putting up as beautiful a ride with hand and whip as I've ever seen.

Then Perkins' whip came into play. As Black Master crowded him more and more to the outside rail he hit Speedway, and for a few strides the whip rose and fell in regular cadence. The gelding answered nobly. Whether or not he was bumped or not, right there, I don't know, but I do know that as they passed us, Speedway barely a head behind Black Master, and perhaps a half-length behind Dawn, that the whip of the jockey on Black Master was cruelly punishing Perkins with every backward flip. The two horses were so close together that it seemed as though it might have been an accident, but I knew otherwise.

A steady stream of curses came from all our lips as we watched Perkins take that punishment, and hold to his riding. With every jump Speedway was eating up the track. Within fifty yards he had left Black Master behind. Would that other fifty be enough to head Dawn?

A few seconds, and then the indiscriminate roar of the crowd took shape.

"Speedaway!" came the shout, and the three of us shook hands wordlessly.

Came a sudden shout, as of terror. Women's shrieks rent the air. Redfield darted to the rail again and looked ahead.

"Perkins down!" he said briefly.

The three of us vaulted the fence, and at a dead run made for the finish. We could see Speedaway galloping wildly around the track, riderless. A growing knot of people in the center of the track indicated where Perkins lay.

We fought our way through, regardless of people's feelings, until we reached the huddled little figure. His face was a mass of blood, and through it one could see great welts across cheeks and forehead. The boy was babbling crazily, fighting off a man who was striving to lift him from the ground.

We saw it was Gates.

"Buddy, yuh mustn't let 'im do it!" the boy screamed suddenly in his delirium. "I'll get 'im for yuh!"

Redfield, Gates and I lifted him up, and Gates felt around over him rapidly.

"No bones broken," he said briefly.

Suddenly the body in our arms stiffened, and Perkins began riding the race again. A stream of names flowed from his lips.

"Whip me if yuh want tuh, yuh yellow sneak! Come on, boy, we can do it—" and his hands and arms stiffened and relaxed convulsively. Then, "Ah, that fixed him, Bud! He won't bother yuh no—"

I got just a flash of Granger through the crowd at that moment. Perhaps he had heard Perkins—I don't know—but his face was suddenly paler.

With him was Hilda. The girl's face was contorted with agony, and the tears were streaming down her face. Right there I had no doubt that the attraction between her and her brother was mutual.

"I'm a doctor. Let me see if I can bring him to," said a thin, bespectacled man at my elbow. "Here, get back and let him have some air!" he shouted. "Let's carry him over on the grass."

Once on the grass on the inside of the track, we were reassured by the doctor's incisive diagnosis.

"Delirious from the fall on his head—no bones broken, and nothing serious."

He had his bag with him, and immediately began to work. Hilda was helping him, and I could see Mrs. Perkins being guided through the crowd toward her son by Granger.

There were now several hundred people gathered on the track. "7, 1, 4" were the numbers showing on the board, indicating that the horses had finished Speedaway, Dawn and Black Master. I was lighting MacDowell's cigarette for him, preparatory to lighting one for myself, when a bull-like bellow which caused sudden si-

lence reached my ears. It came from the center of the crowd.

"An' I furthermore state, Tom Hyson, that you're nothin' but a sneakin', double-crossin', crooked nincompoop, if yuh are a mayor!"

It was Dawson's voice, unmistakably. Animated by a single impulse, Tex, Gates, Redfield and myself dove through the thickening mob of men. Dawson, towering above the crowd almost as far as I did, spied me coming and beckoned with an outflung arm.

"Gentlemen, I ain't sayin' nothin' about my own hawss. He might o' won, properly handled. But I jest found out, Hyson, that them two jocks that rode Dawn and Black Master is in the employ o' the starter yuh hired. An' with my own eyes I've seen you deliberately fool everybody on which hawss yuh was racin', seen one o' them crooked jocks deliberately put Black



Master out of it by tryin' to bump Speedaway, and then seen him deliberately whippin' little George Perkins, makin' him bleed so much he fell off his hawss because he could

not see! Here's yore dirty money—" and he contemptuously thrust a check in Hyson's face—"because your ringer did finish ahead o' Black Master, but I'm tickled to death yuh was beat. I'm declarin' myself now—the day o' you and yore gang in Farifus is damn near over, if I do live fifty miles from town!"

The stalwart old rancher was red-faced and vehement, his puckered eyes gleaming dangerously and bushy gray eyebrows meeting over his nose in a deep frown. Hyson was wordless. Once again he seemed struggling for speech, his thin face working. There was a murmur of assent from the crowd at Dawson's words. To me the atmosphere seemed electric. I wouldn't have been surprised at anything that happened.

"I'm through with this damn crooked fair, and all my men that's entered are through, right now. An' I wouldn't insult a good hawss by riskin' him in it. This thing is a frame to make money for the dirty gang that's been runnin' this town."

He stopped and looked around quickly, as though estimating the size and temper

of the packed crowd. We were standing by his elbow, and the dozens of punchers and other men around were giving us considerable inspection while listening to the raving old man.

"You get me, Hyson?" he asked suddenly.

"Dawson, don't go off half-cocked. We'll throw the race out."

"We'll do no such thing. Yuh've been a no-account too long, and these boys here won some money on their hawss. Let 'em have it. But look out, Hyson."

"Look out nothin'!" blazed the mayor, who was now backed by Durkins and another policeman, Granger, Adams, and several more. "And I'm tellin' yuh that I've stood for more'n I ever would if you wasn't loser, Bill Dawson! I——"

"Oh, hell! Come on, boys, I want tuh talk tuh yuh right now."

For the first time, I think, Hyson noticed us, particularly Gates. And suddenly, very suddenly, he became calm and speculative. He, Durkins and Granger whispered together for a moment, then turned and made their way silently through a hostile crowd.

"Let's see how that boy is first," grunted Dawson, and led the way through a mob which opened for him promptly and without delay.

"I wonder just what all this means," inquired Tex, his eyes dancing with interest.

"Mebbe considerable," opined Gates, methodical as always. "Gents, that was a race!"

"You've said it," said Redfield with a little smile. "And George Perkins can be a jock if he still wants to. Won in spite of hell, didn't he?"

"He's all right," the doctor greeted us, and sure enough, Perkins was sitting up with his freckled face beaming and his head pillowed on his mother's ample shoulder. Granger was there, cool and aloof as always, standing behind Hilda, who was wiping the last of the blood from her brother's face.

"Where's the horse, Mr. Redfield?" was Perkins' first question.

"Be danged if I know!" was the surprised reply.

"He's been caught and they're takin' him to the barn right now," volunteered an onlooker.

"Excuse me just a minute, please," exclaimed Redfield. "I've just got to cool him out."

"Meet us right here!" commanded Dawson, and Redfield nodded.

I caught Granger's eye and for just a moment there was a slight smile on his clean-cut face. It was as though he was estimating, appraising, figuring. In some subtle way, it was disquieting.

Tex made off to cash our tickets on Speedway, while I remained with Gates and Dawson and the rest. The crowd melted away, little by little, although there were still a considerable number talking over the race in excited groups. Perkins was the hero of the day. Out on the track there was still a milling crowd, and there were at least three fights between partisans of Hyson and Dawson. The old rancher was striding up and down, apparently deep in thought. Finally he stopped and began talking to Mrs. Perkins.

"Yuh have a fine boy, Mrs. Perkins," he told her. "I'd admire to have him on my ranch."

"What do you think, Georgey?" asked his mother, her placid face shining.

"Mr. Redfield's promised me I could be a jockey, Ma. Yuh know who he is? He's Flash Redfield, that used to be the greatest jockey on the track. He's won the Derby and the Futurity and the Suburban and every big race in the country. A good jockey can make a thousand a week, ma, and Mr. Redfield——"

"Is that who he is!" exploded Dawson. He whirled on Gates. "I understand yore a Ranger, Gates."

"I am, suh," drawled the imperturbable Texan.

"Have you any mysterious identification to pull later, youngster?" asked Dawson of me. I could fairly feel Granger listening.

"Not a thing, sir," I grinned back. "One expendable first lieutenant, O. D., complete with nosebag, spurs and footlocker. That's all."

"From vague rumors I been hearin' yuh've kicked up a lot o' hell between yuh. We'll talk that over soon's the boys get back. I know who MacDowell is. I have a mind to let Farifus know Bill Dawson has hit it."

I happened to glance at Gates, and found him watching Granger and Perkins beneath lowered lids. George's eyes were on the ground, his face white. He glanced at Granger, who returned the look without a trace of expression. Then he said something to Hilda. The look she gave him spoke volumes.



XIII

BY THE time Tex and Redfield had returned, Perkins and his mother had gone home, and Dawson, Gates and I were waiting.

"Let's adjourn to my car. I'll get my wife and we'll go to the hotel. You boys don't mind givin' me some time, do yuh?" said Dawson.

"No, suh," Gates answered for us. "In fact, I'm eager-like."

"I may be able to do you some good. The car is parked next to the gate in the parking space. Yuh can't miss it. It's red, drolled up like the Queen o' Sheby. Yuh-all remember it, don't yuh?"

We did, and found our way to it a little before the Dawsons. We proceeded directly to the hotel, where Mrs. Dawson left us to do some shopping. We went to Redfield's rodm.

"Now, gents, some o' the boys from the ranch been giving me isolated earfuls about sundry events been happenin' here in Farifus with you-all as the center. How did yuh come to be connected up, and jest what's happened? It ain't idle curiosity on my part."

"You're elected, Slim," said MacDowell.

"Seconded," drawled Gates, rolling a cigarette.

So I told the story, substantially as I'm telling it here. I included our suspicions of Hyson and other Farifus men, and tried to leave no detail out which might tend to pile up the evidence. It's hard to get on paper the atmosphere, the looks, the little things that made me just as sure as though I'd actually known every individual in the inner circle of Farifus. At the end of the tale, which Dawson had listened to without a move or a word, he nodded his shaggy head slowly.

"In a way, yuh ain't said a thing to surprise me. In another way, yuh have. Lots o' people have known, y' understand, for years what Farifus was. That is, a right good place for the boys to have a good time in. And we also knew, in a general way, that the governin' powers was in on it, which ain't no different than a lot o' towns bigger and smaller than this 'un. They never got very rough here—none o' my boys ever had no kick. If they run up against a crooked professional gambler they figured it their own fault; there was plenty o' places where they could sit in a good game with a house cut. Naturally it was

kind o' taken for granted that the town fathers had a cut to let it go on.

"What does kind o' surprise me is what yuh say about Hyson, in addition to what I saw with my own eyes t'day. I didn't know he'd got as crazy about a dollar as all that. Make no mistake, gents. I've knowed him in a general way for forty years. He's a keen hombre. I always did figure him as settin' on top o' the heap and gettin' the lion's share, but I didn't think he'd of been found actually intro-ducin' yuh to a crooked game."

"It was a big haul, with practically no chance o' gettin' caught," interjected Gates.

"Uh huh. An' see how this rodeo was planned—just to feather the nests o' Hyson and his friends, in addition to all the extra money to the storekeepers, saloons, and gamblin' places. Son, you say yuh got so sore about bein' held up thataway for yore roll that you just naturally decided to take a crack at 'em. Still feelin' the same?"

"I sure am. To be perfectly frank, every move they've made has kept getting me sorer and sorer. Not that holdup especially, although all that money means a lot to me. But little Kernan and Perkins, and all that stuff, has just given me a wild desire to have hold of that gang where the hair is short."

"And having received aid and comfort from Gates, here," added Tex, "and for the sake of what interest might be attached to it, we wouldn't mind trying to get hold of Barton's murderer."

"That's what I'm here for," stated Gates. "And what I'm going to do, or bust. I ain't here for nothin' else right now."

Dawson was smiling queerly below the sweeping gray mustache as he surveyed us with twinkling eyes.

"And how was you plannin' t' unravel all these things?" he queried.

I went on to tell him about our suspicions of the airplane's cargoes, our be-



lief that Sax was not only in the ring but must, of necessity, be pretty thoroughly involved, and our scheme to follow him, get something on him, if possible, and work on him away

from his home diggings and the protection of his superiors.

As I explained it in detail—how we expected to find a bootlegging rendezvous

somewhere, catch Sax, bluff him with a connected story of the gang's ramifications in Farifus, and try to force him to tell what he knew, the old man slapped his thigh and erupted into a hearty "Ho-ho-ho!" that fairly shook the ceiling.

"You boys should o' all been detectives," he chortled. "'Cause I'm in a position to know yore at least half-way right. Unless little items I been pickin' up is all wrong, that ship there does carry lots o' contraband o' one kind and another. And make no mistake about this: Tom Hyson is a thievin', sneakin' miser, but he ain't shy on brains, even if he has muffed this whole affair. He's insane about money, always has been. But as a great general rule he don't bother with chicken feed. His frame-up of this rodeo is a sample—gettin' jocks and all that and fixin' to clean up thousands on it. And I believe if you foller on close enough, yuh may be surprised what yuh find down near the border somewheres."

"If yuh'll excuse me, I'd suggest we talk a little mite lower," said Gates. "Never can tell, yuh know."

"Right, excitable old fool that I am. Now listen, boys. With Gates here a Ranger, anything yuh might uncover yuh got the means right with yuh of grabbin'. And it's my opinion, like yores, that gettin' hold o' any one thread and tracin' it down'll lead yuh to the center of the snarl. Another item may help. This Sax was a aviator in Mexico, and Granger was in some capacity with the Federal troops. They was some trouble that was hushed up, accordin' to a puncher I give a job to not long ago. Previous to that, he says, Granger, who was a big man in Mexico for a month or so, was a racetrack man. Followed 'em, that is. Accordin' to this feller, he picked up with a Spig general in Juarez and won him so much dinero the Spig was grateful ever after until Granger double-crossed his own gang some way and barely got out alive. Sax flew him out, they say, and that very ship he has now belongs by right to some Spig. I have no doubt that Sax, bein' a local boy, just told Hyson what a good schemer Granger was and they both got in right. And it's my own idea that you'll find two snakes coiled up in the middle o' the den: Granger an' Hyson."

"And yet I'm bound to like Granger a bit," I said.

"That's what makes him dangerous," said Gates, "If he's all you say."

"Understand, I don't know much,"

stated Dawson. "Reputations get inflated, yuh know, but accordin' to my information this Granger was considerable of a power around the throne in Mexico."

There was silence for a moment, and then Gates asked reflectively:

"You think it likely that if we run 'em down you'd find strings runnin' further'n Farifus, eh?"

"I shore do."

"Would you gents consider takin' me along when you trail Sax his next trip?"

I considered it a moment, as did Tex.

"I believe, all in all, that it'd be the wise thing to have the law along," MacDowell said finally. "But I'm sure I'd give my left leg to go, and by the same token this lanky beanpole here, with all his don't-give-a-damn attitude about things in general, would rather be shot than miss it. However, him being the starter of all this, I'll resign in his favor."

"I think it'd be a good thing for Gates to go," declared Dawson, once again raising his voice in forgetfulness of possible eavesdroppers. "And I'm plumb certain that you'll run on to somethin'. I know it. Now, what can I do? I'm weepin' and pinin' my old heart away to have a hand in the unseatin' o' that toad Hyson. What happened out there today is a big disgrace to the sovereign state o' Texas."

"I don't see anything you can do," I told him.

"How about me?" enquired Redfield.

"Or you, either."

"I know somethin' I can do," said Dawson. "I'll have three or four o' my boys keep kind of a watch over yuh tonight and until yuh leave. There's a million ways to get yuh if they want to bad enough, don't forget that."



"Same's they got Barton," nodded the Ranger.

"Shore. When you goin' tuh start watchin' that plane? Strikes me that with all this crowd in town business oughta be good and it may be that they're plannin' to leave quick."

"I think we ought to start standing guard right quick," said Tex. "Be all ready to leave on the minute."

"How are you going to keep him from knowing you're on his trail?"

"Fly a long way behind him, and lower than he is," I answered. "A pilot almost never looks back, and can't see anything if

he does. The fuselage cuts off a view of most of the country behind him. A ship lower than you are in the air, due to its brown color, is next to impossible to spot, likewise. Sometimes when you know there's one there you can't find it. We'll leave a few minutes behind him. He'll be easy to see against the sky, of course."

"While you have the earth fur a back-ground," agreed Dawson. "Well, boys, I'm shore sorry I can't help more, but yuh've got a damn good friend, if I do say it myself, if yuh get in any jams. And my men, whether yuh like it or not, will be somewhere nearby while you're in town in case of trouble."

"It'll be my first experience with a body-guard," I told him. "Redfield, what are your plans now that you've got a thousand dollar purse in your kick, and won your bet besides?"

"Corral the other purse, and make tracks for the East. I'm going to stick around to see this gang get theirs, though. I can afford it now."

"Good!" was the simultaneous exclamation of Gates, Tex and myself.

"A fine gang of hellion-reformers!" chuckled Dawson.

XIV

WE WERE all so afraid of missing a trick that we decided to start standing guard that evening. There might be things going on during the night which would be valuable to get a peep at. Before adjourning to the field, however, we decided to call on little Billy Kernan, and then have something to eat.

Billy was in the small, rickety building which did duty as a hospital. Two aged nurses and a doctor surveyed us with great interest as we made our way toward the patient. The little fellow was lying quietly, a hectic flush on his face, which still showed bruises. His eyes were feverishly bright in his wasted face. The doctor told us that he had been outside all day, and that they were going to have him sleep outside thereafter.

"He's terribly weak, but he may pull through," the medico said.

If there was anything needed to make us forget the discomfort ahead of us, it was the sight of the jockey lying there. I know it affected me, and I'm certain it did Tex and Gates as we lined up alongside the bed and met his crooked smile. Gates' face was set in harsh lines, and in MacDowell's countenance the eyes were glowing softly. It sort of nerved us up, as it

were, and hardened our resolution to get that gang by hook or crook. In fact, I almost lost sight of the original events that had brought on the struggle between us; in my mind there was simply the realization that we were in a fight with Hyson and his outfit, and that I wanted to get them dead to rights more than I have ever wanted to do anything.

"So Speedway won! Great stuff, Flash. Didn't I tell yuh Perkins——"

"You sure did, Billy. And it means you're going to Arizona just as soon's you get a little more strength, and get well out there. I'll train Georgey to take your place till you get back, an' by that time I'll have a stable, if Speedway keeps running."

"He will," wheezed Kernan weakly. "He's a horse, rightly handled. Did they double-cross yuh any out there?"

"Tried to," and Redfield spun the yarn.

His description of the race, studded with technical expressions as it was, was as vivid as anything I ever heard. Kernan, his heart in his eyes, followed it avidly. Toward the end the little rider was in the race himself. I'll swear I could see his body rising and falling slightly, and his arms handriding Speedway to the wire. At the end of the recital he sank back weakly, but the tough face was transfigured.

"Slipped it over on 'em all, eh, Flash?" he chuckled, half-coughing. "No wonder you was the jock of the century, Flash."

Over at the other side of the room the doctor raised a warning finger.

"Four eyes over there is giving us the office to go, Billy," said his boss. "We'll all be back tomorrow—that is, unless a couple of us are away on business."

"Huh? Are yuh trailin' this Farifus bunch, Flash? Got anything on 'em?"

"Lieutenant Evans, here, and Mr. Gates expect they may get something definite on 'em by tomorrow."

"I sure hope so, Loot!" coughed Kernan.

His eyes followed us out the door like those of some haunting ghost. Redfield's face was not one to indicate his inner feelings to any great extent, but the thin lips were closed tightly and the merry brown eyes solemn and abstracted as we emerged from the hospital.

"I'd hate to have that to be responsible for," he said at length. "And by the same token I'd hate to leave this town without givin' 'em one crack for Billy."

"That's unanimous," said Gates. "Well,

gents, we're late for supper now. Let's get it, and then mosey out to the ship as soon's it's dark."

This being agreed on, we all went to the hotel. It was too late for Mrs. Perkins' regular meal. We did call up and find out that George Perkins was all right.

When we entered the small dining-room it was crowded. The Dawsons waved to us, and everybody in the room seemed to



have an accurate idea as to just who we were, and what had been happening since our arrival in town, for we were the cynosure of all eyes during the entire meal. Gates, his identity as a Ranger now well known, ate calmly and said little. Tex and I conversed casually with Redfield, and for the fiftieth time went over that race.

It was after eight when we arose from the table. Redfield was going to spend the night with Speedway, and the other three of us out at the ship. We made our way through the crowds to Mrs. Perkins'. There was unwilling respect, and much curiosity in the attitude of most people toward us. In front of Barney's place, and two other saloons, the hangers-on gave us looks which were none too friendly. Our appearance was usually the signal for much low-voiced conversation.

At the boarding-house we found the front porch thronged. There was the Perkins family, Granger, Minnie Hyson, and three or four other girls, to say nothing of two young men. The regular boarders—a couple of clerks, a bespectacled stenographer, and the foreman of the ice-factory—were all present as well. In the midst of them, like a potentate enthroned, was Georgey Perkins.

Silence, broken only by Minnie's ever-present giggle, fell as we came up the walk. Then young Perkins called, "Where's Mr. Redfield?"

"He didn't dare leave Speedway," I answered as we came up on the porch. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. D'yuh know everybody. This is—" and he went on introducing us. Apparently he had forgotten Granger, whose seat was back in the shadow, close to Hilda's. When he reached Granger the boy stopped, and a sudden flush dyed his face.

"I know Mr. Granger," I said, and Tex and Gates quietly corroborated the statement.

"Quite a race this afternoon," stated Granger easily.

"Uh huh. Perkins, here, did himself proud, in spite of the crooks that were hired to get him!" drawled Gates. "How's old man Hyson feelin' this evenin', I wonder?"

There is no way to convey the subtle impudence, the humorous, sardonic lift in that last question.

"Oh, he's all right, I guess," replied Granger, a hint of a chuckle in his voice. "Better off'n a lot of us that bet on his horse."

"If George had been allowed to tell his friends, instead of the men that hired him trying to be hogs," flared Hilda viciously, "why——"

"Hilda!"

It was not her mother, not her brother, but Granger, and his voice, caressing a bit, nevertheless had steel and ice in it. And the hot-tempered girl subsided without a word.

"Granger, we took a trick today," grinned Tex.

Most of the innuendos in the conversation were completely lost on the others, I could see, although Mrs. Perkins' face was worried as she listened.

"You sure did. Maybe luck'll change, though."

The insinuation in his cryptic phrase was not lost on any of us.

"Well, I guess I'll go in and get washed up before sallying forth to get a look around downtown," I said. "How are you this evening, Miss Hyson?"

"All right," replied Minnie. "Lieutenant Evans, can I see yuh a minute?"

When we had strolled down to walk as far as the fence, she peered back of her and whispered mysteriously, "Look out for that feller Granger. He's a deep one!"

I could hardly refrain from laughing, and yet I appreciated her motive, even if the method of her warning was so melodramatic.

When we returned to the porch Minnie resumed her seat and Gates and MacDowell followed me inside. We quickly got our guns, carrying them under our arms, inside the shirt. Tex and I stuffed helmets and goggles in our pockets, and we took care not to stop on our way out. Gates brought a pair of field-glasses. Downtown I handed my burdens to the others, and went in a little place where I bought

bread, sardines, and some milk. I had no mind to go without food.

It was a long walk out to the field, but we strolled along easily.

After a few minutes' desultory conversation Tex finally broached something that had undoubtedly been on his mind for hours.

"Listen, Slim, we all agree that we may run into something if it so happens there is a flying trip ahead. In that case, three's a lot better than two, and your ship is so much faster than theirs that you could load three in it and still keep up. Why not take all three of us?"

I had to laugh at his wistful drawl.

"You wouldn't have another happy minute if you thought you were going to miss anything, would you?" I enquired. "Well, what do you honestly think, Tex?"

"It couldn't do any harm, and it might do some good," he stated, and I knew that he would not allow his personal preference to affect the success of the mission. And there was really no reason, aside from the discomfort of riding, why all three of us could not go. So it was thus arranged.

A half mile from the field we started to move warily, and circled to approach some bushes we had in mind as a hiding place. They were on the edge of the field, and by coming up to them from the rear we figured that there would be little chance of being discovered. So we moved slowly across level, furrowed cotton fields, and finally eased up behind these bushes. The Sax ship was in the hangar, and ours loomed dimly through the darkness. Without the privilege of smoking we were driven to talking to pass the time. Although the night was divided into watches, it was a long while before any of us felt the need of sleep. We swapped yarns of funny places and funny times, lying there beneath a sky that was aglow with stars, and I guess we all got closer together than we ever had before. And I'm positive that every one of us would have been deeply dissatisfied had we thought that there was no chance of excitement on the morrow. The more we talked it over, the more likely it seemed to us that we were on the right track and that developments of almost any kind might be expected.

The only thing we didn't allow for was the desperation of our quarry.

XV

THE sky was graying in the east, and the stars fading out when the noise of an automobile motor reached my ears. Gates was snoring

softly, lying on his back beneath a bush. Tex slept quietly, his long legs coiled carelessly and his head pillowed on his arms.

I waited for a moment before awakening them. Through the thin mist the car's headlights shone dimly as it came nearer. It stopped before the padlocked gate, and a man unlocked it. As the car wound its way down the twisting road across the lower end of the field I gently awoke my two sleeping beauties.

There were three men in the car. The machine was backed up to the hangar—the top was down—and the tail of their airplane lifted onto the back of it. By this means they hauled the clumsy craft out to the line, where it bulked almost as big as a DeHaviland compared to our Jenny. As I have mentioned before, it was a plane of the type which was used early in '17 to train our first flyers. Later the lighter, smaller, more scientifically built Jenny took its place. Our ship was a Jenny, but it had a hundred and eighty horse-power French motor, twice the horse-power of the usual Jenny engine, so that our craft was really a fairly fast and powerful ship. That big boat they had was slow and clumsy, but it would carry a lot of weight.

Before long the motor in their ship was going. There were three men around it—the guard, and two of the new arrivals. It grew light enough for us to make certain that it was Sax in the cockpit.



Louder and louder grew the roar of the motor as the pilot increased the r.p.m. Great streams of sparks rushed out of the exhaust pipes, their brightness lessening as it grew lighter. Finally Sax pulled back on the throttle, and there was just an easy, low hum as it idled.

We were watching closely. He was going through some mysterious motions which for a moment I did not understand.

"What are those straps he's putting over his shoulders?" I whispered to Tex.

"Search me, unless it's one of those German type belts—you know, like they have in the Fokkers."

"Uh huh. But it's funny, at that."

He was taking a great deal of time to

adjust it. There were wide bands over each shoulder, which apparently crossed on his chest and back.

"Let's have a look through the field-glasses," suggested MacDowell, and Gates handed them over.

For a moment Tex looked at Sax closely.

"I've seen something like that before," he murmured, as though to himself. "I've got it. He's got a seat pack—you know, one of those newfangled parachutes that Cook Field recently tested and approved?"

I nodded, much surprised at the fact that so modern a safety feature should have found its way down to Farifus on a civilian plane.

"You-all are talkin' Greek to me," Gates reminded us.

"He's strapping on a parachute for use in case of something going wrong with his ship," I explained. "The ordinary parachute is on your back, and is very uncomfortable because you can't sit comfortably. Because no pilot will desert his ship except in case of fire or the ship itself breaking, few of the pilots use it. This new 'chute, though, is built so that the pilot sits on it, and in case of accident he releases a small 'chute, which pulls out the big one. That one pulls him clear of the plane."

"I see. And that's the contraption he's got, eh?"

"Right. He must be flying over bad country between here and where he's going."

"Well, it keeps him from taking a chance if he has a forced landing somewhere with a lot of whisky—some place where he'd stand a chance of being nabbed," suggested Tex. "Say, compadres in crime, what the hell are we going to do if any of that bunch stick around after he's gone?"

"Start right ahead. What can they do after we leave the ground?"

"Brilliant thought, me lad. Probably we're going to know immediately whether, by means of either men watching us or happening to overhear our plans up at the hotel, they have any idea of what we're up to. If they have, does it occur to you that with a couple of quick stabs they could ruin our said ship out there?"

That was a poser, and for the next few moments we all three leaned forward tensely, waiting to see if they were going to take the precaution of putting our ship out of business. Old man Dawson had talked loudly up at the hotel, and we might have been shadowed the entire night.

Once again the plane's motor roared, and with two of the men on one wing the

ship lumbered around until it was pointed northward, the long way of the field. They released it, and with a parting wave of the hand Sax started the takeoff.

His helpers did not wait a moment. They all piled into the car, followed by our exultant eyes, and before Sax had made his first turn were on the way home. Had they been trying to help us, they could not have made more haste to get out of the way. I was to think of that point, later.

We waited for Sax to finish his circling for altitude, and get started southward. No sooner had he cleared the field, around fifteen hundred feet high, than we made for our ship full tilt.

We ripped off prop and motor covers, and pulled the stakes in a jiffy. Tex jumped in the cockpit, while I spun that propeller as though it had been a toothpick. Gates, fieldglasses in hand, followed the course of the other ship. It was lumbering along, still in plain sight, by the time Tex had turned on the gas and I had spun the propeller enough to get the cylinders well-primed.

"Contact!" I yelled, and I could hear the switch click home.

"Start her on three!" I yelled, and Tex nodded.

I counted. At three I pulled the propeller through, and at the same time Tex spun the booster magneto which is supposed to be a self-starter but doesn't work, unassisted, on a cold motor once out of five times. With the aid of my yank to get the prop in motion, though, the motor started the first try.

Gates and I piled into the back seat. It had been decided that Tex was to fly, being all in all the heftiest one of the aggregation, and that Gates and I would ride the rear. Believe me, it's a compliment I've never paid another living flyer, too.

Before we got set in the back I squinted over the cowlings to have a look at the instruments. Temperature was only fifty, Centigrade, and that French motor needs to be hot. Oil was around sixty pounds, though, and the air was holding steady.

"The other one's gettin' pretty far away," yelled Gates in my ear.

Tex pushed the throttle half-way open and held the stick between his knees—to keep the ship from nosing up in the propeller blast you have to clamp the stick way back—and adjusted his helmet. Gates didn't have any helmet or goggles, but he wouldn't really need them because he was so short and could hunch down behind the windshield.

There was no stick in the back seat. I sat down and buckled the belt, and then the Ranger sat on my lap, me holding him



in my arms to keep him from falling out. I noticed his face a little white beneath the golden tan, and the hollows in his lean cheeks seemed deeper. His narrow, usually placid eyes were

now blazing with a sort of cold fire. For the first time I realized that what was so matter of course to Tex and me was an event to Gates. And it was a flight which bid fair to be far more dangerous and eventful than the ordinary ascent into the upper regions, yet Gates, without a question, had simply accepted it.

Tex glanced back to make sure we were all set, and then gave it the gun. I could see him set himself against the stick, and slowly the tail came up as we scudded with increasing rapidity across the smooth ground. My feet rested lightly on the rudder bar in the back seat, and I could feel it move slightly as Tex kept the ship on a straight course.

It was loggy, due to the extra weight, but well short of the end of the field I could feel it leave the ground. It was the first time I had ever flown with Tex, and it didn't take me more than ten seconds to agree with all I had heard of his flying. To one who has flown a few hundred hours, especially as an instructor, a real flyer cannot camouflage, nor a poor one throw a bluff. The smooth, slipless, skidless bank which Tex made—the sense of absolute mastery of his ship—was as apparent to me as the fact that we were off the ground.

We wasted no time. In a gradual bank we turned southward. Gates, shrinking low behind the windshield, brought the fieldglasses into play, and Tex and I leaned far out the side to pick up our quarry. It was easy to find him—he must have been three thousand feet high, outlined clearly against the lightening sky.

Tex put the ship in a gradual climb—a steep one would reduce our speed too much. The motor hummed along with an even roar, and Tex, after listening with bent head and searching his instruments, nodded slightly. That meant that everything was as it should be.

Slowly we gained on the other ship, until finally Tex went into a steeper climb. We had passed the flat, open cotton fields, and Farifus was dropping out of sight behind us. Ahead was the scraggly fringe of what was undoubtedly a far-flung wilderness of mesquite. The ship ahead was flying almost due south, according to our compass, and shortly we found ourselves over a billowing sea of gray-green mesquite which stretched away as far as the eye could see. Ahead the horizon was shrouded in mist, and below us there were streamers of it to soften the panorama below.

Now that it was unnecessary to keep such a close eye on the ship ahead, Gates was conning the ground below. His face was set in a half-smile of delight at the sensation of flying, and he never seemed to tire of the vast stretch of earth spread out below him. He watched the back-seat altimeter almost as closely as I did. The needle crept up slowly to two, three, then four thousand feet, and still the ship ahead was lumbering along a thousand feet higher than we were.

I couldn't have enjoyed the ride as much as Gates, even had it been a novelty, for two reasons. The main one was that every faculty was intent on listening to the even firing of our motor. Down there below there were no landing fields—motor failure meant a crash into the trees at seventy miles an hour. And that is far from a pleasant prospect. The other reason was that Gates, on my lap, was an uncomfortable burden.

Every minute or so I took a slant at the other plane, to make sure that it never lost us. It's darn hard to pick up another plane in the air, even when you know it's there. It's only a speck in a limitless space.

I had not looked at the Farifus plane for some time, being engaged in studying the ground. The mesquite was thinning, apparently, after we'd been in the air a little over a half hour. There were isolated open patches, apparently sandy, but no sign whatever of a human habitation or of a human being ever having been there. However, there was a good chance of landing without breaking our necks in the event of a break in that motor, so it was a little more comfortable to drum along after our prey.

Purely by chance I happened to glance upward just in time to see the other ship start to bank around. I pinched Gates and pointed, and he leaned over and signaled

Tex. All three of us watched in amazement as the big ship ahead banked around a hundred and eighty degrees, and started to fly directly back over us.

There was nothing for us to do but throttle down a bit, and see what we could see. The altimeter was standing at nearly five thousand feet now, and I figured Sax was a thousand feet higher, at least. He flew steadily northward, until he was back of us.

I guess none of us felt very good over that contretemps; it seemed certain that he had seen us and was going back to Farifus. Then, a half mile or so back of us, he turned again, and started to dive toward us.

I had my head screwed around as far as I could get it to keep an eye on him, and just then Tex banked himself, so that Sax was diving for us from the side. I was completely puzzled. Was he coming down to make sure who we were? If so, why come at such terrific speed?

NEARER and nearer he rushed, banking slightly so that he was pointed directly at us at all times. It was a creepy, far-from-comfortable feeling to watch that aerial monster roaring toward us like a bolt from the blue. I glanced over at Tex, and that gentleman's eyes were narrowed and blazing. He didn't wink behind his big goggles, so intent was his gaze.

Sax was perhaps three hundred yards away from us when there leaped into my brain a thought that nearly paralyzed me. I remembered that parachute, and in a dizzying flash the idea came to me that perhaps Sax might be planning to hit us, and escape himself in his 'chute.

There was no time to examine the thing mentally. Mechanically I reached over around Gates and gripped Tex.

"He'll hit us!" I bawled at the top of my voice.

Tex says he never heard me, but that the words my lips formed coincided exactly with the thought that leaped into his own mind. Like a flash he banked way over and shoved the nose down. That big ship just escaped hitting us by a hair.

Sax acted like a crazy man. Despite his big, heavy, none-too-strong craft he pulled out of that terrific dive and went up on his back in a reënversement.* In a few sec-

onds he was diving out of it, back toward us again.

Closer and closer, faster and faster, he came on, and once again Tex waited until the last minute. Sax was diving already for extra speed, and we were going over a hundred miles an hour ourselves.

I couldn't have done it myself, I don't believe—waited so patiently for the right moment. You see, the later he waited, the less chance Sax would have to change his course and hit us. This time Tex went upward and to the right in a tremendous steep climbing turn, and once again Sax swooped past us with only a few feet to spare.

The thought of it all still sends little half-pleased shivers up and down my back as I remember it. Four thousand feet above that deserted country the strangest aerial duel that ever was fought went on with unabated fury. How the Farifus ship lasted, I do not know, and how we escaped it I am equally at a loss to explain. We were like two monstrous dragon flies as our ships roared and whined and twisted and turned. I had my arms clamped around Gates so tight he told me afterward that he could scarcely breathe, but I honestly did not know he was there.

Through the vague mass of sensations, the explanation of what was happening was ever-present in my mind. The world was one of shrieking wires, of an all-pervading roar, of quivering wood and metal, of topsy-turvy, twisting changes of direction, of speed so great that the air was snatched from one's nostrils and the airstream seemed like a thing possessing weight and substance.

Tex was fighting his way downward—our only hope. If by any chance we could escape that mighty thing which pursued us long enough to get down below a thousand feet, Sax's parachute would avail him nothing, for there would not be altitude enough to make certain of the parachute pulling him from his plane after the collision and opening.

One moment we would be diving like mad, until the time came when Sax, nosed down until his ship was vertical, overtook us. Then there would come a wrenching change of direction, and a shadow of terrible meaning would flash by, balked again. The earth was like a rolling sea—now below us, now invisible as our nose went straight in the air, again only to be seen by looking to one side or another.

A plane as it roars by at a hundred miles an hour seems among the mightiest things

*A maneuver to reverse direction. It consists in throwing the ship on its back with stick and rudder. It hangs there momentarily, facing in the direction of flight, until the weight of the motor brings it swooping around in a half-loop. When the ship comes right-side-up again, the direction has been reversed and the ship is moving at tremendous speed. The popular and inaccurate term for the maneuver is "Immelman Turn", which is in reality a far different stunt. T. B.

of earth, but it is only a frail framework for a mighty motor—linen that you can poke your finger through stretched over wooden braces that can be broken across your knee.

The sky was bright and shining and the earth a vast, lifeless painting below us, but a shrieking tempest of tortured wires and laboring motor blotted out the quiet universe. Time after time it seemed that no power on earth could save us from being carved in two in mid-air, but still, little by little, we killed altitude in the brief stretches when Sax was turning after missing his target. He flew like a crazy man, but he had his 'chute to depend on.

Our only hope was the cold steel nerve of Tex MacDowell, and his flying ability. The only way whereby we could escape those awful swoops of the other plane, made with all the speed of gravity plus a wide-open motor, was to wait until the last moment, and then swerve. If our plane changed direction while the other was still a considerable distance away, it would give Sax a chance to change his course, likewise, and our effort would be abortive. Time after time he missed us by inches only—a slight miscalculation of speed or distance would have been our undoing.

How long it took us I never knew, but it seemed like an eternity before we got down to two thousand feet. Once again we dived in the moment's respite afforded us. As though he realized his prey was escaping him, Sax went into a whip-like reënversement, and, coming out, held his ship in an absolutely vertical dive. It seemed like the climax . . . and then it happened.

Wood and wire and linen could stand the strain no longer, and it was his ship which yielded first. Not five hundred feet away from us the other ship gave up the chase. The right wings crumpled, and sheered off

the fuselage. Like a flash the force of the wind on the other wings automatically banked the ship, throwing it nearly on its back. A second more, and a white bag whipped out. The crippled ship shot past us, turning over and over. Above us, swinging from side to side, a black figure was suspended to a huge white umbrella.



Tex cut the throttle to idling. "What do you want to do?" he yelled back.

"Go after him!" I bellowed back, and Gates nodded.

The Ranger's face was absolutely white beneath that layer of tan, and I have never seen mortal eyes as terrible as his. I have no doubt that I looked somewhat abnormal myself, after those few minutes.

Sax was swinging from side to side, indicating that a stiff wind was blowing. He was making no effort to slip his parachute. By using the shroudlines that go from the harness to the edges of the 'chute proper it is possible, by pulling down one end of the big bag, to somewhat control your course, slipping in the direction you want to go.

Below us there were open places, but very small. However, at that time, landing seemed a small thing. I gave it scarcely any consideration. There was just one object in life, and that was to get Sax. Farifus, Hyson, the reasons for all that had happened, were temporarily forgotten. A great big tree had sure sprung from a damn little acorn—a crooked crap game grown into the attempted murder of three men.

We got down to three hundred feet, and then circled, watching Sax. I have only jumped in a parachute once, but before we were allowed to jump we were given a lot of instruction, and it was plain to me that Sax knew nothing about the contraptions. He was simply floating down, absolutely at the mercy of the wind and the 'chute. He had evidently waited to pull his little stunt until there was comparatively open country to land in, and in addition, nobody around to give any testimony as to what happened.

As he got down to two hundred feet or thereabouts, it was apparent to me that Sax was bound to miss the last open space and land in the trees. He was still swinging like a pendulum, and was being carried straight for the fringe of mesquite.

As the three of us watched with all our eyes, we saw him get down to twenty-five feet, still swinging. It was a horrible thing to watch. He was dashed against a mesquite tree, with what seemed like considerable force. The 'chute caught in the branches, and his body rebounded from the trunk of the tree, and then hit it again. There he hung, perhaps ten feet off the ground, motionless.

That settled our program, regardless of anything we might have planned before.

He was undoubtedly badly hurt, and, left there, would slowly starve to death. He might be dead, but we didn't know.

Tex started circling, and he and I both scrutinized the landing prospects. I got Gates' fieldglasses to take a close look at the ground, leaving him to hold himself in the plane. The open space next to where Sax was hanging was very narrow, and perhaps a hundred yards long. The wind seemed to be blowing the long way of the field, according to the direction Sax had taken with the chute, and an examination of the sandy soil showed it fairly smooth. There were a few mounds in it, but they did not look too bad.

I motioned toward it, and Tex nodded. He circled to the west, barely escaping the tops of the scrubby trees, and finally got pointed for the field. Our speed decreased again, testifying to the force of the Gulf breeze. Little by little he cut the throttle as we neared the edge of the clearing, until we were barely going fast enough to stay in the air.

The bumps were very bad, but Tex effortlessly kept the ship level. As we cleared the last tree it seemed as though the ship dropped out from under us, so accurately had he estimated his distance and speed. We dropped eight or ten feet like a plummet, and only the quick stab of throttle which he gave it kept us from a bad crash. As it was, we bounced high in the air, then a second time, and then rolled slowly down the field. Had we landed any faster, we would certainly have cracked up, for those hummocks were larger than I had thought.

Tex cut the throttle, and Gates got out. My arms were absolutely paralyzed, seemingly, and they had to rub them hard to get any life back in them. This done, we started for that pitiful figure swaying against the trunk of the tree.

The limp body seemed without life as we approached.

"Get on my shoulders and cut him down, Gates. Slim, catch him," said Tex, and Gates produced a big knife.

I gave him a leg up to MacDowell's shoulders, and steadied him as he hacked away on the shroud lines. There was not a drop of blood to be discerned on Sax, but his head lolled over weakly, and there was no sign of life. Gates got hold of a branch to steady himself, and I got set underneath to catch Sax when he was cut free. In a moment he dropped down, and I caught him. He felt as though half the bones in his body had been broken.

I stooped over him and loosened his shirt. There was just a faint heartbeat audible.

"He's alive, at any rate," I said. "Hello, what's this?"

It was a sizeable package, stowed inside his shirt. In it was a couple of raw tomatoes, a small bottle of water, and two slices of bread.

"He was preparin' for a twenty mile walk, or more," said Gates. "Mebbe the water'll help revive him. I want tuh talk t' this hombre."

We laid him on his back, and started working on him by strenuous massage and occasional flicks of water in his face. A close inspection of that sullenly handsome, bull-dog jawed countenance was interesting. There were lines of recklessness and lines of weakness, but the predominating impression was that of fiery, intolerant resolution. Even in unconsciousness his full lips were set, and the dark face was harsh. He had eyelashes as long as a girl's, and his wavy, thick black hair was plastered over his forehead in wild disorder.

It was perhaps ten minutes before his eyelids quivered.

In the meantime Gates had felt around pretty thoroughly, and had shaken his head slightly as he said, "Pretty bad shape. Both legs broken, and more than half his ribs. I don't believe he's got a chance. Must be all ripped up inside."

The flyer's gaze, as he opened his eyes, was glassy and fixed. I bent over him, and gave him some of the water. When he spoke, in a weak whisper, it was a shock, because it was so rational.

"I hit the damn trees, I see," he whispered.

"Right. Tried to hit us, didn't you?"

He smiled slightly.

"I won't be tryin' to hit anybody else," he whispered.

"How do you feel?"

For a moment the young fellow didn't answer.

"I may live five more minutes," he said.

"It hurts like hell to breathe, and I know I'm bleedin' inside."

He hadn't moved hand nor foot, and now he lay motionless, head slightly to one side, with eyes closed.

"Listen, Sax," said Gates. "Why did you start out to get us this morning? It was murder."

"Sure. Ten thousand berries I'd have got if I'd made the grade."

"I see. Somebody overheard us up at

the hotel when we were talking to Dawson, eh?"

"Uh huh."

It was just a whisper, and it seemed as though Sax was about to pass on. Suddenly he aroused himself.

"Well, are you-all satisfied?" he asked.

"When we get Granger for the murder of Barton we will be," said Gates.

All three of us were leaning over the recumbent figure, watching him closely. As Gates spoke, the dying man batted his eyes surprisedly.

"What makes yuh think Buddy did it?" he whispered.

"We know he did."

Sax smiled fleetingly.

"Bud gets them kind o' things done for him," he stated. "Are yuh disappointed yuh didn't find no bootleggin' rendezvous down thisaway?"

I'll swear that fellow was kidding us as he died!

"I'll say we are," drawled Tex.

"Listen. I'll come clean," said Sax abruptly, to our complete astonishment. "Yuh know the reason? Because I been doing all the work and getting the least money. I come home from Mexico and Hyson started hinting around. About flying booze and dope. I got four fellows and four planes for him, and Granger arranged to have the booze smuggled across the border—little field a few miles from San Bida. These other fellows fly it all around Texas for Hyson, an' he gets the



big rakeoff—him and his pals. I bring Granger to Farius, and right away he starts skimming the cream. I do all this flying and everything and get only a small

split, and no rakeoff on the gambling and everything like Granger. I was going to do this job, take my ten thousand, and blow.

"The ones held you up, Evans, was Charley Ball and another fellow name of Beery. That gang rook the punchers and railroad men and all that bunch out o' thousands every month, with Hyson and the police getting theirs out of it, too. They were planning the biggest air bootleg stunt you ever saw when you-all busted in on 'em."

His whisper died away and Gates leaned over eagerly and gave him some more water, flicking part of it on his face.

"Who killed Barton?" he asked slowly.

"If Granger didn't do it he fixed it. I don't know, but I think maybe—Granger'd use anybody—double-crossing— You'd sell your soul for a dime, you yellow quitter! Yes, I'll do it, if you put that dough in the bank right now—you'll never see me again. No, I'll take it in cash right now. Get 'im, Pete! Well——"

For a moment his eyes stared horribly. The next instant he was dead.

VII

THERE was a considerable interval during which the three of us squatted silently around the dead body of the man who had tried to murder us all. The sun blazed down out of a burning sky which was beginning to be flecked with miniature clouds. Underneath us the sand was already growing hot to the touch, and there was a buzzing undertone as thousands of insects droned around under that scraggly mesquite tree. Up in its branches the remains of the parachute flapped slightly in the breeze. A half dozen specks in the sky indicated that the buzzards were maintaining their grisly vigil.

Gates methodically rolled a cigarette, and Tex, without speaking, followed suit. I drew out one of my tailor-mades, and we silently lighted up.

"Well, that's every bit of it for Sax," I said finally.

"Uh huh. Say, the boy had nerve, didn't he?" said Tex, his eyes on the dead man's face.

"Just what was he plannin'?" asked Gates. "To hit us, and then come down in his parachute himself? And what happened to his plane?"

"In chasing us he got too much speed, and he had twisted that old ship around too much as it was. She just went flooey on him—wings collapsed," I said, and went on to explain more fully the technicalities of that seat-pack Sax had been wearing. "It was a nervy stunt, though, to cripple us in the air and then get down by 'chute. He was taking a big chance on being beamed with a propeller himself, or something like that."

"A man'll do a lot for ten thousand dollars," said Tex.

"Man, oh man, who'd dream they'd go this far!" mused Gates, gazing absently through the mesquite. "It was a beautiful frame from their point o' view, at that. Get rid of all three of us in one swoop, and in a airplane accident which, if anybody should o' seen it, couldn't be explained nor

the blame laid on nobody. One thing's certain—they're scared silly about us."

"You're darn right," stated Tex. "Undoubtedly they think we know a hell of a lot more than we really do—that is, that we have more definite information than we really have. Probably the snatches they overheard there in the hotel, added to Slim's ferocious remarks and other things, have made them figure that we've got the goods absolutely on 'em."

"Well, after burying Sax here, what's the next step?" I put in. "Tex, we can't take off here without cutting down a lot of trees."

"Which means leg it somewhere."

"Let's beat it right for Farifus, fix up my ship, and fly a couple of axes down here."

"It's a right long walk, gents," drawled Gates.

"Well, let's start. What are we going to do when we get there?"

"We're goin' tuh sneak in unbeknownst to anybody, get Buddy Granger all by himself, and little Georgy Perkins, who knows somethin'. Did you-all heah his ravin' out to the track, and add it some to his cussin' o' Bart before? It's my opinion Granger shot Barton and that Perkins knows it. We'll see what we can do, when we get hold of 'em."

"What about Hyson and the rest?"

"Let's wait and see just how much we can get definitely on 'em through confessions, and so forth. We've got Charley Ball to work on, too, you know. I believe a little bluff right now will have the whole situation at our mercy," I said. "What can we dig this grave with?"

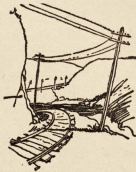
Apparently there was nothing, until I happened to think of the tool-kit in the ship. With a couple of tools therein we succeeded in half-way sharpening a couple of old stakes, and with these unhandy things we worked. It was a long three hour job to dig out a shallow trench and lay Sax in it.

We covered him up, and Tex gave him his parting salute when he said slowly, "I don't like murder, but I do admire guts!"

"Give him what credit is due 'im," nodded Gates, and the three of us, as we covered the staring eyes and lifeless form with sand, gave silent respect to his fearlessness, if not to his motives.

This being done, we secured the sandwiches and the little remaining water, and proceeded to consume them. Then, in single file, we started northward. We had

agreed that thirty miles, straight northward toward Farifus, ought to bring us to the railroad which ran southwest from Farifus. It might be our luck to run into a house before that time, and borrow some horses.



I won't dwell on that walk. Sufficient to say that for countless hours, it seemed, we struggled through the blazing heat and the heavy going. Gates was leading us, and to keep a straight course he kept sighting ahead

all the time, picking some object to prevent us going in a circle. The sun had dropped behind the horizon when the mesquite started to thin, and all three of us, by common consent, dropped to the ground in utter weariness as we saw a cultivated field before us. Gleaming through a belt of mesquite on the other side of the field we could see a light.

It was fully a half-hour before any of us had enough ambition to move and start for the house. Finally, sighing, I lifted myself to my feet.

"On, caballeros, to yonder shelter, where succor and surcease may possibly be had," I orated.

"Lead on, brave leader," grinned Tex.

After our silent hours of deadly work it was pleasant to talk again, and there came the reaction in a disposition on everybody's part to be slightly hysterical. Not a word could be spoken without drawing gales of hilarity from the others.

We found a small cabin, and three men sitting outside it, smoking. One of them was a strapping, gray-bearded old fellow, another a slim youngster, and the third a roughly-dressed man of middle age. They looked at us silently as we came up.

"We were in a airplane, an' had to come down out in the mesquite. We're headin' for Farifus. We'd be obliged to yuh if yuh'd loan us horses. I'll agree tuh have 'em back here in—how far is it to Farifus, gentlemen?"

"'Bout twenty-five miles," volunteered the young fellow.

"Have 'em back by day after t'morruh."

The men held their peace for a moment longer, inspecting us leisurely.

"Whut d'yuh think, Bide?" asked the old man at length.

"I seen their plane go over this mornin'.

They was two of 'em. I'd take a chance. Where yuh from, boys?"

"Two of us from Donovan Field, San Antone."

"And I'm from Austin. My name's Gates—Texas Rangers."

That quiet announcement was like an electric shock. You could feel the concentrated interest and surprise of the men before us.

"Yuh don't say. Anything doin', Mr. Gates, down thisaway?"

There was such marked deference in the attitude of every one of them that my intuitive idea about Gates was confirmed right there. His quiet competence had impressed every one of us, and there had been brief glimpses flashed from eyes and face at various times that indicated a deadliness that was bound to stamp the Ranger indelibly on our minds. I had thought, before, and now I knew, that if all the truth were known about Gates, he would stand high in the annals of the Rangers, and, gentlemen, that means something.

"No, just foolin' around in Farifus a little," was Gates' equable reply. "How about the hawses, and maybe a bite of supper?"

Our hosts waited not on the order of their going.

"Johnny, cook 'em up somethin' quick. Bide, go out to the corral and get 'em hawses and bring 'em around," ordered the old man.

We washed, drank about a quart of water apiece, and shortly thereafter ate beef, potatoes and coffee which surely hit the spot in a way that no other meal I've ever eaten has.

"Thank you-all, and you have my word that your hawses will be back in good time, gents," said Gates.

We rode off in a shower of assurances that we were welcome as the flowers in May to anything they had.

"Your name, or profession, or something, acted like a charm," said Tex as we rode down the dim trail which, a few miles on, joined a regular road.

Gates chuckled quietly.

"The middle-aged felluh used to be on the border. I know him—did some smug-glin' down theah. He knew me, too. I didn't see no call to let him know I recognized 'im, though. I used to work down around El Paso and Laredo and them Rio Grande towns. Some country."

We rode along for a while, through the thickening darkness, and all of us were im-

mersed in our thoughts. I was vaguely uncomfortable, for there was an unpleasant possibility coming constantly to the surface in my mind. Finally I decided to sound the others.

"Gates, did you say you were going to get hold of Georgey Perkins as soon as we hit town?"

"Yes, suh."

"Gates, do you think there's any possibility that Perkins is mixed up in the murder of Barton?"

For a pregnant moment he did not answer. Then, "I should hate to so think, suh, but I got to kinda question 'im."

"Funny, but I have been wondering about that ever since Sax talked, and haven't dared breathe a word of it," said Tex. "I was mentally aiding and abetting a possible criminal, I guess, because I liked him. Fine clean-up artist I am!"

"I like him myself, suh," said Gates, and we could see the shadowy smile that crossed his thin face.

At about nine o'clock, or maybe a little later, we reached a small settlement, and by luck happened to find a car bound for Farifus, which was eighteen miles away. Gates arranged with the store-keeper to return our horses to their owners, and we made the rest of the trip via a Ford, driven by a gaunt old man whose home, he said, was five miles this side of Farifus. Two dollars persuaded him to go on into town.

I don't really think that two dollars was necessary, at that. That driver was as much in awe of us as though we had been angels dropped from heaven. He wouldn't say a word, and seemed nervous as a witch. He had undoubtedly heard rumors of what had been going on, with ourselves as the center, but, if so, he did not mention anything about it.

"I feel pretty certain that between Ball, Granger, and maybe Perkins, we can nail Hyson and his aides to the cross at last," I whispered to Tex. "But I'll be hanged if it'll be any pleasure if it involves little Perkins. I like that kid!"

"With the story of Sax's death, and the good and detailed yarn we can pretend we had from him, they'll be falling over themselves to turn States' evidence," agreed Tex. "A bluff'll look like a mighty strong hand



right here. Aren't they the pleasant citizens, though!"

We relapsed into silence, and in about two minutes I was dead to the world. The others followed suit, for when a big bounce awakened me, both Gates and Tex were snoring away peacefully.

"Where are we?" I asked the driver.

"Two miles out," he replied briefly.

"Stop just outside town," I ordered him, and then awakened Tex and Gates.

It was about ten-thirty. Gates agreed that we ought to walk into town by a secluded route. If we rambled back into town openly our birds would fly the coop, undoubtedly. We all believed thoroughly that they thought Tex and I were in Farifus not by accident, but by design, to help Gates get Barton's murderer, and probably round up that aerial bootlegging scheme. The little things I had said, and that we'd all indicated in one way or another, plus the snatches they had overheard in the hotel, would naturally make them believe their goose was cooked. Their only chance, they had figured, was to bump us off in that highly artistic manner. We'd have to play dead until we had rounded up our men by devious and underground methods.

We stopped just before reaching the outlying houses which marked the beginning of Farifus proper. I turned to Gates.

"It's tough, Gates, but as a matter of cold fact, Perkins is going to be much easier to pump than Granger. And if he's still spending his nights down at the stables with Redfield, as I imagine, he'll be easier to get to. In my opinion, he's our best bet to start."

"Exactly what I was thinkin', suh, although I hadn't had it in mind that he might be at the stables. Drivuh, you might as well drive us down theah—we'll have less chance o' bein' spotted in a car than on foot," he added, to Tex and me. "Do you know a roundabout route to the fairgrounds, mistuh?"

The driver nodded—he was not full of speech—and in a few minutes we drew up alongside the stables. Occasional lanterns were the only illumination, save for two glowing cigarette butts.

"Thank you, suh," said Gates to the driver. "Do you know who I am?"

"Not exactly," stammered the driver.

"I'm Gates of the Texas Rangers. And I'm tellin' yuh to go straight home, and say nothin' to nobody. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He drove off rapidly.

"I found out he was all right, down the line," stated the Ranger. "Now for what we can find out. Somethin' tells me that we're nearin' the end o' the trail."

XVII

THE two men lounging against the stable wall proved to be stablehands, who vouchsafed the information that Redfield and Perkins were around back.

"Prob'ly find one of 'em asleep and the other watchin'," one man said with a grin. "It ain't healthy to get within a hundred yards o' that dog, Speedaway."

We strolled around to the rear, and I'm certain that expectant little tingles went up and down my spine as the moment neared when perhaps many things would be laid bare. There was a vague sense of impending calamity mixed into the mess of my feelings. Somehow I hated what was to come, and yet there was a sort of horrible fascination about it.

It was Redfield who was awake. As we neared the stall, walking quietly along the path next to the stable wall, there came a sharp challenge.

"Who are you?"

"Friend!" laughed Tex.

"Have you got a password now?"



Redfield stepped out of the gloom into the moonlight that silvered everything in a flood of pale light.

"Well, well, this is a pleasant surprise. I don't mind telling you that Georgey and I have been wondering and worrying a hell of a lot. Find out anything?" he asked eagerly.

"First, is Perkins here with yuh?" queried Gates.

"Uh huh. Asleep in the loft over Speedaway's stall. He's helping me stand guard. I let him take the last three hours before dawn. Why?"

"Wait till yuh hear the yarn," returned Gates, and seated himself against the wall, cigarette in hand.

The rest of us flopped likewise, and I proceeded to narrate the events of the last twenty-four hours. Redfield's cigarette went out, and he listened with painful attention.

"And so, adding the peculiar fascination

that Granger seems to have for the Perkins family, the admiration of George for him, his delirious raving after the accident, Sax's hints, and Perkins' obvious hatred of Barton, all together, we were bound to come to the conclusion that we ought to know everything that Perkins knows about Farifus, with particular reference to Barton's murder," I concluded.

Redfield drew a deep breath.

"God, what a mess!" he breathed, staring absently into the distance. "Honest, fellows, that little guy is real all the way through. In two years he'll be the biggest jock in this country."

"We suah hope we're wrong, suh," interjected Gates gently. "Have yuh seen Granger lately?"

"He sat around for about an hour this afternoon, after the day's festivities. He and Perkins are like brothers, apparently. I'm bound to admire the cool impudence of the man. He's a character."

"I shouldn't be surrounded if he was more of a character than we realize," I remarked. "Well, what say, Gates?"

"I reckon there's no time like the present. Want me to handle this, suh?"

"Good Lord, yes!" I said, with such fervor that Tex laughed quietly.

For some reason I felt as though I myself was coming on trial as Redfield went up the ladder and awakened Perkins. I was tensed almost to the breaking point—probably fatigue had something to do with it, too. In my mind's eye, picture after picture unrolled—the little fellow with his arm around Speedway's neck, crooning to him; the look in his eyes as he turned and gave words to his love for the horse; the white-faced, excited youngster who had ridden out on the track yesterday to ride his first race against as great odds as any jock ever faced; the little, hunched figure on the great horse's back urging him down the stretch under a hail of blows; the happy kid whose face shone so at home that night, and the beaming pride of his mother.

He followed Redfield down the ladder, and dragged reluctantly toward us, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"What's up, Mr. Redfield?" he asked.

Then he made out who we were, and shrank away as though confronted suddenly by some fearful danger.

"Wh-what's the matter?" he stammered, his eyes darting from one face to the other as if seeking some kindly ray of friendship.

No one answered for a moment. It was

hard for me to realize that the young fellow before us was over twenty—a man. He was so small and slight and freckled, and in the cool moonlight he seemed like a small boy confronted with danger with which he was utterly powerless to cope. I actually felt ashamed of myself.

"Georgey, I'm sorry, son, but I'm aftuh yuh for the murder o' Sheriff Barton!"

It was like the crack of doom.

Perkins was momentarily a figure of stone. Then, suddenly, he swayed slightly, and I could see his face work. I expected a collapse, but the little fellow got hold of himself, and I listened eagerly. His words, uttered in a flat voice that was without life or shading, came to my ears with deadening, stupefying finality.

"Well, you've got me."

It was a hopeless admission. Right up to that moment I don't suppose I had really believed that Perkins had shot Barton. It had been a terrible possibility, and Gates' raw accusation had torn the confession from the nervous youngster in front of us.

"How did Granger help you?" the Ranger asked deliberately.

Every line of his body, from the probing eyes to the back-thrust foot and hand on his gun expressed purpose incarnate.

The effect of his question was that of touching a hidden spring.

"No way. Honest, Mr. Gates, Granger didn't know nothin' about it. Buddy nor nobody else even knows I shot him! I did it myself——"

"Why?" came the whip-like question.

Perkins, who had been talking wildly, suddenly became quiet.

"He done something—I dunno."

"Why? Tell me!"

Perkins winced slightly.

"I ain't goin' tuh tell nobody," he returned, eyes on the ground.



"Yuh realize that yo're bound straight for hangin' unless yuh can prove some reason——"

"Yes, sir."

"Then tell me! Great God, boy, yuh didn't shoot a feller like Bart fur nothin'!"

"I ain't sayin' nothin'!" repeated Perkins steadfastly, and this time the tortured face was raised to meet Gates' eyes, and the boy's showed no signs of wavering.

Right then I stepped into the picture.

"Gates, we'll have to get Granger. We know he was implicated in the murder,

in spite of what George says. As Sax said——"

I stopped purposely, to see whether I had galvanized Perkins again with my words, and the insinuation conveyed in my unfinished sentence. I got the effect for which I had been hoping to back up a shadowy theory in my mind.

"Sax didn't know nothin' about it, Lieutenant. Not a damn thing!" Perkins said in a rush of words. "I tell yuh, nobody knew I shot him or what for except me. Buddy Granger ain't in it. I shot Barton, and nobody else was in it, an' I won't tell why!"

Gates suddenly relaxed. He turned, and his eyes met mine in wordless inquiry. I understood what was going on in his mind as clearly as though words had been spoken. He turned to Perkins.

"Put up your hands, George."

He obeyed, and the Ranger swiftly searched him.

"Is Granger still staying at the hotel?" Gates asked as he methodically ran his hands over the young fellow's clothing. Perkins nodded.

"Redfield, can you get some rope around heah right quick?"

The ex-jockey, who had been silent and absorbed during the entire colloquy, nodded wordlessly and disappeared into the stable, producing a pocket flashlight.

"The next move is—Granger, I take it," drawled Tex.

"I think so."

"Yo're right, gents. There's more to the shootin' o' the straightest man that ever walked than what went on in the head of a fool kid!"

Redfield returned with some rope, and in a trice Gates had Perkins securely, albeit loosely, bound.

"Come with us, son," he said kindly.

I wondered at the change in his manner—the quieting of spirit which had suddenly come over him. And as we started for town, silent and ghostlike, I wondered whether all the trails we had cast over would end up in the capture of George Perkins, and leave the slimy gang uptown untouched. Somehow, I couldn't believe it.

XVIII

I DROPPED back to walk for a moment with Tex and Gates, leaving Redfield and the silent Perkins to lead the way.

"Is it necessary to have George's hands tied?" I asked.

"No tellin' what a crazy kid might do," was Gates' sober reply.

"Just how are we going to land Granger?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Lieutenant," drawled Gates, "I don't want tuh set myself up as the high mucky-muck in this thing, Ranger or no Ranger. If it hadn't been for you boys I wouldn't be nowhere right now. You done figured everything out to a T, and I savvy that all right and proper. But if you'd be satisfied to leave it tuh me I'll——"

"Sure thing," was the simultaneous reply of both MacDowell and myself.

Gates appeared to be cogitating deeply as we started up a deserted side street which joined the main promenade a hundred yards or so up.

"I guess the thing to do is to let me go up to the hotel and to his room and land 'im," he said presently, his eyes gazing absently across that scraggly park which partially hid the depot. We were walking along the side of it.

"Then what?"

"Usin' Sax and Perkins as means o' bluffin', I'll be able to show Granger which side his bread's buttered on. He strikes me as one man that is lookin' out for number one exclusive-like."

"I shouldn't wonder if you were right," agreed Tex.

"He's more impressive than most of 'em here," I remarked. "Perhaps because his activities are more mysterious, and always have been. There hasn't been much of a chance for familiarity to breed contempt where he's concerned."

"Well, Evans, you put it over him temporary-like," grinned Gates. "Say, I'd be havin' a right good time if it wasn't fur that——"

"Perkins. Maybe a few little mysteries will be cleared up soon," I said. "There's something damn interesting behind the killing of Barton by a kid like that. Isn't that Granger?"



A tall, slender man had just crossed our street, walking down Main Street, and in the dim light of street lamps it looked to me like Granger.

"I believe so. Say, suppose you-all let me trail 'im and you wait here and watch. If he has any

idea o' boltin', the whole crowd of us would put him wise quick. I can get close to 'im without warnin', and grab my game all private and easy."

Without more ado the Ranger ran the last few yards with the awkwardness of an accustomed rider, and disappeared around the corner, slowing to a walk. I explained the situation to Redfield in a few words, and the four of us veered off beneath the trees. They were thick enough to hide us from the casual gaze, and we eagerly made our way through the park, parallel to Main Street. I noticed that there was no light in the depot, and only a few upstairs lights burning along Main Street. It was after two o'clock.

We could see Granger—I was certain, now, that it was he—striding swiftly along. Behind him, perhaps fifty yards, Gates was coming at a rapid walk.

Governed by some instinct beyond explanation, we all stopped and watched.

"Oh, Granger!"

Gates' hail was soft but carried clearly. Granger stopped and looked around.

"Well, what is it, and who is it?" he asked.

There never was an answer to that question. Granger must have seen who his pursuer was before Gates could answer. He whirled and made off diagonally through the white-spined mesquite trees, toward the depot. He was running swiftly.

Like a flash Tex and I were after him, running so that we would join Gates' path.

The Ranger suddenly shouted, "Stop, in the name o' the law!"

But Granger did not stop.

"He wanted to get Gates over in a secluded place, or I'm a liar," I panted to Tex, and he nodded.

I couldn't see that we were gaining; perhaps Granger did not even know that his pursuers had grown to three in number. Regardless of that, however, he made his play at the depot. Gates was in the lead, with Tex and me coming in from one side. Granger whirled at the corner of the freight platform, and I could see one arm, with inconceivable quickness, dart in and out of his coat.

But there was something quicker. Gates, I'll swear, did not have the sign of a gun in his hand at the moment Granger turned. As though in a dream I saw Gates' arm move like a streak of light. So quickly that you couldn't call it a second, the report ran out, and Granger crumpled, his gun going off as he fell.

The two reports seemed multiplied by the silence. It was as though there had been an earth-shaking explosion. I expected to see people come pouring toward the depot from every side as we all ran toward Granger.

"Careful—he may shoot again," warned Gates.

We stopped behind trees for a moment, and then Gates made his way forward.

"All right, boys, don't worry. I'm through, and you're in no danger," came in an ironical voice.

"Still has his poise," remarked Tex as he walked forward. "This was a swift climax, wasn't it?"

We could see Redfield and Perkins running toward us, and from the other side one man. I forgot him as I bent over Granger.

"Where are you shot?" Gates was asking.

"Through the stomach, damn you," was the easy reply.

The clean-cut, diamond-hard face was white as a sheet, and all Gates' efforts could not staunch the blood.

"I'll dive for a doctor," I said. "Granger, where is the nearest one?"

"Never mind, Evans. I'm through."

"Stand back!" roared a new voice, and our friend, the policeman, burst forward, his eyes glaring with excitement and his red, fat face perspiring.

"Go get a doctor, this minute!" snapped Gates. "I'm Gates, of the Rangers, and I'm handlin' this, case!"

"See here——"

"See nothin'! Get that doctor!"

The minion of the law made off at a lumbering run, without another word.

"Come back here without saying a word to anybody but the doctor!" called Gates, and we could see the policeman's head nod.

"Now, Granger, what the hell did yuh want tuh start gun-play for?" asked Gates, as he tucked his rolled vest under the outlaw's head.

"Just to pass the time away. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. When I saw you I knew that some way or another you'd put one over on Sax, and the minute I got under arrest the jig was up. My record—won't bear much perusing, Gates. I—I wish I'd known you other boys were around. Where—where were you hiding?"

"Never mind——"

A racking sob interrupted Gates' reply. For the first time, it seemed, Granger noticed Perkins. The boy, his hands tied

behind him, had his head bent, and his shoulders were shaking with the force of that uncontrollable sobbing.

"What's George doing here? Cheer up, George."

"He's under arrest for the murder of Sheriff Barton!" said Gates evenly. "He confessed to it!"

"Now, isn't that a shame," said Granger with a half-smile on his graying face. "Inasmuch as I'm about to shuffle off, Mr. Ranger, lieutenants of the army, and other troublesome strangers, get him out of hearing and——"

"You'll give us the truth of it?" I interrupted eagerly.

"Uh huh. If I'm not deceased after I tell it, I'd like to hear your yarn, t-too. I'm getting weaker, though."

Running footsteps through the grove, and a puffing doctor, with his case, was kneeling beside Granger. There was absolute silence, save for Perkins' sobbing, as he made a swift examination.

"You have a very few minutes to live, Bud," he said slowly.

"Fix me up as best yuh can, Doc, I got something I—I want to—say," whispered Granger.

With a steady hand the doctor mixed a hypodermic, and shot it into the calm outlaw's arm.

"Good, and now get George out of hearing."

Granger lay quietly, his eyes on the star-studded sky, while Redfield led George a few paces away.

"Now, what are you fellows all after—the clearing up of Barton's shooting?"

"Principally. Through the confession of Sax, before he died, we've got the rest of you dead to rights on your grafting here in town."

"I see. Well, I'll tell you all about that shooting, and you-all and the doc can witness it. Keep that cop away when he gets back."

He moved an arm slightly, as though to get more comfortable.

"When I got here and got in right, I made up my mind that Hilda Perkins, George's sister, was a pretty good bet, and that I'd make her if I could. My intentions were not—er—honorable."

The doctor moved uncomfortably. The rest of us were as silent as the grave. Redfield tiptoed up, and knelt beside Granger with us.

"I had plenty of dinero, and saw that prospects were good for a lot more, so in pursuance of my aim to get myself a

sweetheart I paid off a little mortgage that was bothering the Perkinses and in other ways made myself agreeable. They never knew what I was doing around here, or what I had done, but they liked me pretty well, which was my intention. Hilda,



like all women—that's the trouble with 'em—got in love up to her neck."

The cold, unrepentant cynicism of the dying man was like an icy wind. I've seen hard-boiled specimens before, but he took all prizes.

"Well, anyway, Barton came down here, and I found out that through somebody he had some pretty straight dope on me. He was going to clean up Farifus—" the sneer in that voice simply cannot be conveyed in print—"and was going to make me the fall-guy. So I decided Barton had to be got out of the way. I hate to do those things myself, so with a young worshipper like George, what was the answer?"

"I'll be damned," whispered Tex to me.

"I told Hilda and George that they'd never see me again, and gave them this long yarn about how I was hunted for a crime I didn't commit, and that I'd have to run, and probably would be caught and get jugged, anyway. I made Barton out a crooked bum, and all that.

"Hilda, like all lovesick women would, went wild. She's a tigress, anyway. She was going to go with me—that's a laugh—and then she was going to kill Barton herself, and a lot of other raving, which was what I wanted. George worshipped her, and me, too, and knew she was in love with me and thought I was in love with her. So he decided to kill Barton.

"Now here's the real laugh. I posted him in an upstairs room that was safe, and gave him a gun with blanks in it. He isn't a good shot, and I was afraid he'd miss. I did the shooting myself from another place, but of course George thought he'd done it, and in case the thing was ferreted down I knew he'd confess just as he did, and everything would be pretty. Now, though, that I'm done for anyway there's no sense in having—having him get hung for it. He never shot Barton any more'n you did, but thinks he did. He was crazy that time, no doubt about it. He isn't a bad kid. I like his sister better, though I never could get anywhere with her."

His voice was getting weaker and

weaker, and toward the close of the utterly passionless, matter-of-fact recital it was almost inaudible. We were all stooping over to catch that amazing tale, spoken by lips which were curved mockingly to the last.

"I shot at you—or tried to—and if I'd got you you'd been dead and buried and nobody would of known where you went to. That's the beauty of livin' in Farifus. Isn't it—a—a shame that such a good scheme should go wrong? Here I am laying after—after all that work——"

"How much did Hyson and Durkins know?"

"I'll never say a word. There isn't any use of me telling anything. Be thankful I told you as much as I have. It may be that——"

His voice trailed off, and his eyelids, which had been screening those opaque black eyes of his, opened a little. His thin, well-chiseled lips remained set in a sardonic curve, and his eyes slowly closed. The doctor bent over him, as footsteps approached swiftly.

"Dead," he said.

No one of us noted, particularly, that there was someone nearing that tragic scene. I was looking at the well-cut, marble face, and wondering. To my dying day, I presume, I shall wonder about Granger; what lay back of that utterly unscrupulous, albeit strangely fascinating personality.

A familiar, breathless bellow shattered the brooding silence.

"What's happened here?"

It was Chief Durkins, and his ruddy face was beaded with perspiration. His eyes darted around, after one brief look at Granger, and they never rested for more than an instant on any one face.

"I told that cop o' yores not to tell nobody, but I expect it's just as well," stated Gates, getting to his feet. "Chief, yore time is up. Yore term is ended. I expect as good a time to settle everything is right now. Where's yore cop?"

"Whaddayuh mean? He's comin'. What the hell?"

"Send him to get Mayor Hyson, and tell him to tell the mayor it'll be better for him to come. What we've got to say ain't so pleasant, and yuh can take it right now or yuh can take it t'morruh, public-like. Sax is dead, an' we know what he knows. Granger's dead, an' we know what he knows. So——"

The little Ranger's steady eyes finished that sentence. Durkins dropped his eyes

and turned on his heel without a word. The policeman was confing through the grove with lagging steps. They met, and Durkins' underling made off again on his mission.

"Doc, will yuh see that Granger's body is removed? An' tomorruh mornin' I'll get a written statement, signed and swore to, that Granger confessed to the murder o' Sheriff Barton. Right?"

"Yes, indeed," said the bearded physician briskly. "A remarkable drama, sir."

"Yuh don't know the half of it, Doc," drawled Gates.



"Redfield, suppose yuh untie Perkins an' give him the glad news. Then we'll have a little confab."

It was nearly five minutes—silent minutes—before Redfield and Perkins came up. I could see Redfield, in the gloom beneath a tree, talking steadily to his protégé. When Perkins arrived, his freckled face was composed and he did not even look at the silent body of his erstwhile hero.

"Now, gents, I'm plannin' to have a showdown right here. We've found out that we've had these hombies bluffed cold. They thought we had a lot stronger hand 'n we did, or this here wouldn't o' come off, nor that airplane wreck damn near come off.

"What do yuh all think is the next move?"

This was my cue.

"As a matter of fact, I believe the thing to do is to put the proposition up to Hyson, and give him, Durkins and this lawyer that seems to be so prominent a chance to get out. Have 'em all resign their official positions, I mean, and give some real men a chance. Spoilin' their graft for 'em'll just about kill 'em, anyway. This town'll be scared clean! As a matter of fact, we haven't the ghost of a chance to pin any conspiracy on them in connection with Sax's attempt, or Granger's. We'll just let them wipe themselves off the slate. There won't be any more crooked work pulled down here by that gang for a long, long time."

"Seems sensible to me," said Tex. "Had enough action for the money you lost, Slim?"

"I'll say so! Thanks to Speedaway, I'm not so bad off, now, anyway."

"I think yo're talkin' sense," said Gates. "My job's done. O' course, I'd like to run down that bootleg ring down on the border, but it ain't rightly under way yet, accordin' to our dope. There's two or three planes gettin' liquor down there, and it won't be nothin' to fix that little matter up pronto. You know, in my opinion, it's only a matter o' time before some bright hombre goes into aërial bootleggin' on a big scale, and it's goin' tuh be hard to stop. If ever we have to get after it, and you fellows would like to join in——"

"Sounds good," laughed Tex, and I was bound to agree.

"Well, then, it's decided that right here we lay down the law to Hyson and fix Farifus up, eh?" I said. "As a matter of fact, I'm no reformer, myself. My grudge was—here he comes, now!"

Sure enough, here came Hyson, his lanky figure moving slowly beside the bovine cop. He walked through the misty gloom on leaden feet—scared to come, more scared to stay away.

"Welcome to our city, Mr. Hyson," greeted Tex. "One of your friends, unfortunately, is deceased, and we knew you'd be a mourner."

The repulsive old man was one broken-down leader for any cause right then.

There, under the deeper shadow of a mesquite tree, with a dead body lying quietly in the center of a silent group, at three o'clock in the morning, Mayor Hyson of Farifus came to his judgment. Every moment I expected other onlookers to arrive, but apparently the two pistol cracks had aroused no rumpus whatever, and I was not interrupted as I constructed, for the mayor's benefit, the whole story. What we did not have proof for I pretended we did, and bit by bit, with every sentence another blow at his position and prestige, I battered down the last remnant of his resistance. I pictured the bootleggers, gamblers, and some of the thugs of town under his patronage; his heading of the scheme to bring in liquor by plane; made him an accessory in the murder of Barton, and the attempted murder of Tex, Gates and myself; reconstructed for him a complete skeleton of the Farifus political structure. I did not forget to touch on the rodeo, either, and I was careful never to hint that perhaps we were not all there on purpose. I was firmly of the opinion that during the last twenty-four hours, if not before, Hyson and his henchmen had

been of the opinion that we were all there for the definite purpose of getting to the bottom of things.

When I, finished, Hyson said not a word. There wasn't the slightest effort on his part to bluff it through, or to defend himself. His silence was an admission of the accuracy of our surmises.

"And therefore, your honor," drawled Gates, "yore term as mayor is over. Likewise, Durkins, as chief of police. Likewise, the emoluments and positions appertainin' to a lot o' felluhs like this cop, Charley Ball, and others which I will mention in detail later. You will see to it that resignations pour in t'morruh, I'm goin' tuh leave it tuh Mr. Dawson to kind o' organize the forces o' town for a new set o' officials. And yo're lucky at that. If ever yo're caught mixin' in again, yo're gone. Get me? I'll leave it tuh you to impress that on yore followers. In fact, I'll expect to meet every man holdin' a official position t'morruh at two o'clock in the afternoon, private-like, and see to it that they understand. Do you?"

Hyson nodded.

"Is that all?" he stammered.

"That's every bit of it," said Gates, using one of my favorite expressions.

Without a word, a dishonored chieftain stalked silently away, disappearing into the murky darkness with lagging steps as though he was very, very tired.

XIX

PERSONALLY, I didn't get weary of pounding my ear until three o'clock that afternoon. I awakened to find Tex, in pajamas, and Gates, fully attired, sitting on the edge of the bed smoking a sociable cheroot. It appeared that Gates had already met in prodigious conclave with the town fathers of Farifus.

"I ruled 'em with an iron hand," he drawled, "and they was meek as lambs. Resignations poured in. Charley Ball, and a lot more yuh don't know, are leavin' town—got twenty-four hours before they're jugged. Dawson, the ministers, and a lot more substantial people which have let well enough alone for a long time are on the warpath. There's considerable excitement around town about Granger, but the news that he's Barton's murderer and that I shot 'im tryin' to get away is not only truthful but satisfiyin' to the rank and file. As a matter o' fact, I don't believe anybody but Granger and Georgey Perkins and maybe Hilda knowed exactly

who killed Barton. They might o' suspected, in fact almost certainly did, but apparently Barton had more on Granger than he did on anybody else. He might not o' had nothin' on the ring, at that, but he was shore in a good way to find out.

"They all'll suspect about why the government o' their fair city is vamoosin', and it won't be healthy, I don't guess, for any of 'em to whimper from now on. Hyson is sellin' out, he told me, and Durkins is plannin' to leave soon's he can sell his saloon. That's a fine thing, ain't it? Chief o' Police the leadin' bootlegger.

"Well, get out o' your downy couch, and let's go see Dawson. Reformers've got to work night an' day in overcomin' the forces of iniquity."

"Amen. Where's my frock coat?" I returned.

Tex and I got washed, polished and highly perfumed, so to speak, and we all set sail for the track. Speedway wasn't running until the morrow, but Dawson would undoubtedly be there.

During respites in the bronco-busting and outlaw-riding and racing we told Dawson the detailed story of our adventures, and his enthusiasm was tremendous and very public. He delightedly announced, for the hundredth time, that he would see to it that some real men were injected into the affairs of Farifus, and that no one of the old régime would dare lift a finger from then on.

"They'll be rode till they're sick an' sore," he stated. "They'd better approach the station and ask what the longest ticket they sell is."

Of course Dawson wasn't a resident of Farifus, but his standing and influence, plus the fact that the town was his buying and shipping point and that his dozens of employees did their spending there, were sufficient reasons why he could live up to his word.

We took him with us, at his own request, to see little Billy Kernan. On the way, Gates brought up something that had slipped my mind.

"What about this here reward? It ought to be split even, if at all."

"Here's my idea about that," I spoke up. "This poor little jock has got the little end of the stick all around. He's got nothing, and is right close to the well-known pearly gates this minute, due in part to a beating he got trying to protect Redfield's interests. My share of the reward is his to use to get well."

"And mine," agreed Tex.

"Likewise, amen," said Gates.

I was honestly embarrassed when my eyes caught those of one Flash Redfield. He couldn't really talk for a moment, and being the kind of a man he was, his emotion was somewhat affecting to the rest of us. He didn't try to thank us, or anything, but we knew the way he felt, and that he had picked Kernan up himself and, broke as he was, had been taking care of him and was planning even further expenditure for his sake. Our share was a mighty small one, compared to his.

The little jockey was all a-smile when we entered.

"Well, how's the tough guys gettin' along?" he hailed us. "Been puttin' anything over on 'em?"

We told him just how much had been put over on them, and Kernan was like I used to be with a new Nick Carter story in my fist.

"No way o' gettin' them fellers that beat me and Perkins up, eh?" he asked finally.

"There would be, with a lot of work, but they've lost their cinch jobs, and everybody would have to stay around here a long while to run, them down definitely. Better a clean sweep than just sticking a few individuals for isolated crimes. The minute you start on that line in Farifus you've got a long road to walk," I said, and Kernan agreed.

Then Redfield told about the reward, and about that trip to Arizona he was going to take. The tough, wizened face, illumined by blazing eyes, began to work, and I could see moisture in his eyes.

"I—thank yuh, fellers. You guys are—"

And right there he cried like a baby. We left him the happiest little man I ever saw, assuring Redfield that in a few months, when Speedway had won a stable for him, that he and Perkins would ride "any dog in the barn under the wire first, in the Derby or any other hoss-race!"

"There's been something bothering me, and that's Hilda Perkins," stated Gates absently, as he stood in front of the little frame hospital. "D'yuh suppose there's anything we could do?"

"Might talk to her mother," I suggested. "And tell her the truth, with George left out. If we tell her how Granger tried to make George a murderer, trading on his love for Hilda—"



"Uh huh. But I ain't no hand with women. They get me all messed up, talkin' to 'em."

"Let's leave it up to Tex. He seems to stand pretty high with Mrs. Perkins," I said, and despite his protests, he was elected.

He told me later that it was a darb of a job we'd wished on him, but Tex has got a mighty persuasive way with him.

"When I left the girl was still taking it rather badly, but I made her believe that Granger was really in love with her, and that helped. She felt that it was her uplifting influence that caused Granger to give up his plan of having George do the shooting, and do it himself. A woman can't be unhappy when she thinks she's reformed some man. Mrs. Perkins has got a lot of sense, and when I laid the real facts before her she was thanking the good Lord that it had all been found out in time. And the brilliant and lucrative career opening ahead of George is having a very uplifting effect, very."

"I wish some uplift expert would hoist me out of the depths I fall into whenever I think of the work ahead of us," I said. "We haven't got a thing to do except work like hell on my ship, get it fixed, fly down and land in that God-forsaken mesquite, probably crack up, chop down a young forest, try to make a takeoff and crack up the other ship, walk twenty miles——"

"Better put it off 'till after tomorruh, and see the closin' festivities," said Gates.

"I wouldn't give the change of a nickel to see the burning of Rome with the original cast," I stated.

The next day we procured a truck, transferred the landing gear and propeller over where my ship was, and by the end of the day, working in the broiling sun, the ship was ready. I won't go into the perspiring details of dragging it to a suitable field to take off in, bridging ditches and all that stuff, but suffice it to say that the next morning, with food, water and two axes, we took off and flew down to our landing field. I was flying, and by the grace of Providence we didn't crack up landing.

Tex and I got to work on the trees, and chopped all day. That night we were still a dozen trees shy of a takeoff, and settled down for the night. About eleven o'clock, while listening to the coyotes yap and discussing everything in general, there came the gentle tap of raindrops. They grew in number, until it was raining so hard a snub-nosed man would have drowned.

No sleep, and seven hours' work, wet to

the skin, the next day. Close to evening-



fall we staggered off the ground, each flying one of the planes, and made Farifus that night, both of us suffering with bad colds.

Gates was awaiting us at the field, along

with Redfield, and we learned that Speed-away had won the other thousand dollar purse, that Redfield had gambled with the bookmakers at one to five, and won, and that Hilda had decided not to die of a broken heart.

Redfield, Perkins and Gates accompanied us out to the ships the next day, and Dawson and many other people were there as well. We cranked up both busses, and then left them idling as we went over to our little gang of friends.

"So long, everybody," I said, shivering even then with the grippe, flu, or whatever ailment it is I'm suffering with right now. "You know where to find us, and I'd sure like to see you-all some time."

"Reforming done by the hour, day or week, with detectiving thrown in at reasonable rates," drawled Tex, and we shook hands all round.

Lying here now and thinking it over, I have to titter slightly as the fine points of the yarn resolve themselves out of the blurred mass. An ex-jockey trying to arrange for his horse to win some money at a jerkwater race-meet, a Ranger seeking, through motives far more personal than official, to track down a murderer, one flyer trying to get back his bankroll, and another one seeking excitement, blasted a crooked political ring to smithereens. What the government of Farifus was mattered not a particle to all of us put together, at the start, and yet we four casual passers-through cleaned up a rotten town; unsnarled a murder mystery; broke up a love affair and saved a girl from life-long unhappiness; gave a youngster his chance in life; won a sizeable wad for a penniless race-owner; provided the means whereby a man dying of tuberculosis could make a fight for his life; brought to poetic justice one murderer and one would-be murderer; and won a little kale for ourselves.

And it all started with a crooked crap game. Life is a funny proposition.

And that, I guess, is every bit of it.



THE VOICE IN THE DRUM

By HAROLD LAMB

Author of "Two Thousand Years," "The Last Cabin," etc.

WATER POURED ON THE DESERT SANDS SEEPS IN AND IS LOST; WATER GIVEN TO A MAN OF THE DESERT MAY WORK MUCH MAGIC—BACK THERE AT THE EARTH'S END, THE HINTERLANDS OF CHINA

BILL GORDON, called Black Gordon because he had sun bleached hair and light eyes, was in a hurry. For one thing, he wished to be out of the desert. It was no longer safe for him. And then, too, he wanted to meet up with his chum, Tom Eldridge.

It is not so easy to leave the Gobi desert in a hurry. Gordon knew this. He did not try to make speed, but he made time. For a night and the better part of a day he had been in the saddle of the shaggy Mongolian pony. His compass had been stolen, and for two days he had not seen the sun.

"Might as well give a guy his tombstone as take his compass, here in this Gobi," he grumbled, thinking of Mo Yan and his men, who had run off his own followers, and, for good measure, all but one of his pack animals.

He did not want to think of Mo Yan, for the present—or of the cupful of warm water that sloshed around in the canteen on his hip. Because he had no more water, and it was hard to tell just how far he was from the edge of the barren plateau, the rock pinnacles and the clay gullies, the dry river beds and the piercing winds that made the Gobi the most desolate thing in the world.

True, he knew that he was heading nearly due east toward the hills that form the backdoor of China—knew it by the shape of the wind ridges where sandy stretches were met with. Marco Polo probably, had guided himself to Cathay by these same ridges in the marching sands. And since the day of Marco Polo the Gobi had not changed.



It was an ancient world, wherein rivers had vanished and the ruins of cities older than China itself had been covered by the sands. Early explorers related that stragglers from caravans had died when they followed after beings that sought them from the wastes. There was a tale, too, that at night the thunder of rushing hoofs could be heard, the blare of elephants, the roll of kettle drums—in short that the spectral horde of Genghis Khan moved again over the barrens.

"Bunk," Gordon had said of this, and he knew the Gobi as few men did, "all of that. There isn't any magic. Anyone who gets himself lost in the Gobi is gone, sure

enough. And as for the noises—the moving sands sound queer, sometimes.”

But then he thought of Mo Yan and the horsemen he had seen passing at night against the stars on the skyline when he was camped in a hollow out of reach of the wind. He did not speak of that. In fact he seldom had anyone to talk to except himself. Black Gordon, a man of his hands, and a crack shot, had a level head. Then, too, the spell of the desert was on him, as it does hold a man, whether in the uplands of Arizona or the Gobi.

So long as he was alone, he was king of the open spaces. From city or seaport he headed back, eventually to the barrens, as a sailor heeds the call of the sea and seeks out a ship. He made a living shooting big game and selling the rare heads, mountain sheep, musk deer or takin, in Hong-kong.

He had done this until Mo Yan's men had sought out his camp a few days before and asked for tribute. Black Gordon had no money, but he had a rifle and showed it, speaking a few pointed words. That night all his followers, because they feared Mo Yan, disappeared and with them all the animals except the one tied in front of his dog tent.

GORDON reined in his tired pony and squinted under the brim of his hat. Rounding a shoulder of naked, purple basalt, he had sighted something moving in the gray level of clay in front of him. It looked very much like an animal rooting under a growth of withered tamarisk—one of the small and savage blue bears of Tibet.

Riding closer, the hunter made it out to be a man. Loosening the rifle in the saddle sheath, because he had by no means forgotten Mo Yan, he whistled. The man was no bigger than a dwarf, almost as broad as he was high, with tiny, twinkling eyes hidden under wide, bushy brows.

Under the bearskin that covered shoulders and head, long black hair hung, under this string after string of tiny iron ornaments shaped like animals. The skin of the face was wrinkled with age. The man ceased digging feebly in the hard clay and fell to staring banefully at Black Gordon.

Gordon knew the native to be a Mongol *shaman*. It was rather out of the country of the Mongol tribes, and the hunter had never known a conjurer to stray from his tribe before. Then he saw that the old man's mouth hung open, and the lips were dry.

“Thirsty,” he reasoned, “damned thirsty. Lost his strength, but too proud to beg for a drink.”

Dismounting, he gazed down into the hole, barely two feet deep and scanned the tamarisk growth keenly. “Either he's digging his own grave or he thinks he's magician enough to know where water is—if you dig far enough.”

Satisfied, apparently, that the white man meant no harm, the native began prying at the clay with a stick and tugging it up with powerful, but enfeebled hands. The hunter stepped away and put his foot in the stirrup. Minutes were worth more than gold, and he needed every drop of water in his canteen. Glancing over his shoulder, he found that the Mongol was squatted on his haunches, gazing at him with silent appeal in the bloodshot eyes.

“O, hell,” muttered the white man. “Whole hog or none, it is.”

Taking up his canteen, he drew the cup from his bags and carefully poured it half full. Holding the cup out to the old native he nodded. The Mongol sucked it down and grunted. Then Gordon drank the other half cup himself. As he did so he noticed that the horse was sniffing around the hole in the clay.

Gordon pondered. If he mounted and went on, the pony would soon give out. Whereas if he stayed to work the hole deeper, and found no water, well—that would be the end, and Mo Yan undoubtedly would be pleased.

The *shaman* was at his task again, but making little progress.



“Wish I knew if he thought it was a grave he was digging or a well,” the hunter mused.

Mongols, and Chinese also, have a horror of death without burial. It struck him suddenly that the old native would die anyway, if he went on. The half cup of water would not keep him alive long.

Gordon took off his coat and drew the small spade from behind his saddle. Pushing the conjurer aside he fell to work, standing in the hole and tossing out the loosened clay. After a while the native began to push and pull the piled up earth further from the hole, so that the white man would not have to throw it so high.

Overhead the blazing glory of sunset filled the sky behind the pinnacles of basalt, now black, resembling the inanimate fingers of a giant up-stretched from the earth. The air chilled, and the inevitable wind began to move the wisps of tamarisk and the pony's mane.

It had been dark for some time before Gordon felt mud under his feet. An hour later a shallow pool of water stood in the excavation. Before midnight the hunter had a brisk fire going and was roasting antelope steak over it. The old native proved to be as hungry as he had been thirsty. He sat in his bearskin, huddled close to the fire, chewing at the shreds of meat in his hand, and as soon as the last of it was gone, hollowed out a sleeping place in the layer of sand that topped the clay, where he could feel the warmth of the embers.

Although Gordon watched for a great part of the night and slept lightly, he did not hear the *shaman* leave the water hole. When he looked around, in the morning mists, there was no sign of his late companion except the imprint of a small bear's tracks in the sand. This surprised him only a moment, because it soon appeared that the animal tracks and the marks of his own boots were the only traces visible.

"Bunk," thought Gordon. "As a water finder Sham's right there but his magic's old stuff."

In many out of the way places Black Gordon had seen the conjuring of the natives, the famous mango trick performed before the veranda of a white man's hotel in Calcutta, the unpleasant voodoo of the Haiti plantation blacks. Be the magic black or white, Gordon reasoned, the fundamentals were the same—"three cards, now you see 'em, now you don't."

It was all wrong, he thought, the saying that the hand was quicker than the eye. Some said that Black Gordon gained his nickname from a deadly temper, and that the man had known how to manipulate three cards, as well as the five of a poker hand in his youth. Too, it was said that Black Gordon was quick on the draw; in former days he had carried a derringer slung under one armpit. For years, however, no man had seen the desert rider carry anything except a rifle, and now he was quiet—slow to anger.

But before twenty-four hours passed Black Gordon's mood altered, and within a week he admitted that there was something in magic that he had overlooked. This was on account of the drum, and here is how it happened.

II

THE HALF WAY HOUSE

RIDING in from the open plains, Black Gordon always stopped at Tom Eldridge's house. By the very few white men who ventured beyond the Kansu mountains to the Gobi and returned to China, the *go-down* of Eldridge was known as the Half Way House because it was the last abode of a white man.

Eldridge, always hospitable, was a Standard Oil agent. Gordon had formed the habit of bringing in some kind of a present for Betty, Tom's eleven-year-old daughter, a mite of a child, pretty and quiet.

Now, as he threaded down the narrow paths of the China side of the Kansu hills—having found himself in familiar surroundings the day after leaving the Mongol—Gordon was looking forward to the greeting of the Half Way House.

Passing through the gate of the compound he shouted cheerfully, and, when no house boy came, stamped up the steps to the screened veranda. Eldridge was not there, but a slender, stooped, shouldered man stood



peering at him from thick spectacles. Gordon thought that the stranger looked like a bird—if a bird ever wore a cartridge belt.

"Where's Eldridge?" the hunter asked.

"Down the river at Chengtu, in the hospital of the Mission college," the other answered precisely.

"What for?" Black Gordon was impatient, a little tired and more than a little hungry. "What's the matter? Is Betty with him?"

"Dysentery," said the visitor gravely. "No, Betty is gone."

The hunter started to swear, but checked the words as he scanned the intent face behind the big lenses. "You'll have to talk louder, I'm a little deaf. Where are the house boys, and why is Betty gone?"

For an instant the stranger scanned the big frame of the hunter coldly, resenting the other's manner. Then, seeing Gordon's fatigue, he shrugged and explained concisely that he was Rand, of the College, that Eldridge was his friend, and that

he had come to the Half Way House to search for Betty.

The child had been missing for three weeks. The only thing Eldridge could say of her was that one afternoon she had mounted a favorite pony and had gone up into the Kansu hills, accompanied by one of the Chinese servants. The boy, however, who brought the Standard Oil agent down to Chengtu, had told Rand that Betty had been carried off by riders from the Gobi.

"He said they were Mo Yan's men," added the man from Chengtu, watching the lined face of the hunter curiously.

The face did not change, but the eyes narrowed, and all impatience, born of weariness, fell from Black Gordon. He walked almost casually through the empty rooms of the bungalow, and, when he emerged, measured the height of the sun over the western hills. The day was nearly ended.

Realizing this, the desert rider sat down and began to fill his pipe. He knew now that the child of Tom Eldridge had been in his thoughts since he left the water-hole; that he had been watching for the first glimpse of her brown face. And she had been carried away from the Half Way House.

It happened three weeks ago, Rand summed up, in his placid manner. Eldridge had been too ill to search for her, and so he, Rand, had come.

"How did the boy know it was Mo Yan who made off with Betty?"

"He would say very little, except that at the time Betty was lost on the hill trail he heard a drum, beaten in the woods nearby. It was an angry drum, he maintains, and one that heralded a mission of vengeance."

Black Gordon frowned over his pipe, studying the flood of ruddy orange over the knobs of the hill summits as it changed to a dull purple pierced by the glimmer of stars. Betty had not come back from the far side of those hills, and she was a mite of a thing, pretty as a flower.

"The kerosene trade," went on the level voice of Rand, pitched so that the hunter could hear, "in the towns of the Kansu range was handled by poor Tom. About a year ago there came to this house a Chinese merchant, an affable man, who demanded one fifth of the net price of the kerosene sales, to be paid to Mo Yan, a new *taotai* or ruler of the Gobi."

Rising, he found matches and lit the lamp on the table between them. "Tom

refused to pay bribery—had to, you know, because he did not own the goods he was handling. Then he began to have trouble getting carts or camels to carry his products, until he took to hiring the desert Mongols to carry his stuff."

Gordon nodded. He knew the Mongol tribesmen, nomads, uncertain as gypsies and violent at times.

"After that," resumed White, "the agent found a note on his desk. It was simply a bill, written in excellent English, reminding him that he had not paid an account due the town of Lanchow. It puzzled him a good deal, until he remembered that the *taotai* of the Gobi lived in Lanchow, one of the old caravanserais, about a day's ride from the hills out into the desert."

"Yes," said Gordon suddenly, "a walled town, made out of the ruins of Lord knows what, on the caravan track from China to India. Did the merchant who called for the rake-off see Betty?"

"I presume so. Tom tore up the bill and carried on as usual. And then, during his illness, Betty disappeared."

"Then it was Mo Yan who carried her off," Gordon related his experience in the desert, after he had refused to pay a bribe to the master of Lanchow.

"I rather feared it," assented Rand. "Who is Mo Yan—exactly? I have heard some rather tall tales."

"All we can go on is that he has come out of nowhere, apparently, and appointed himself dictator of this part of the world, and a law unto himself," Gordon replied. "He has a fast-moving bunch of horsemen, well trained, and writes English."

"When I first came to this house," continued the professor, "I found upon Tom's desk another paper. Appearances led me to believe it was left here after he had gone." He extended a slip of plain paper to the hunter.

"*'The Wisdom of the East. . . . What is lost is lost. A fool will lose what he has in seeking that which he has not.'*"



"Clear as mud," grunted the hunter. "No Mongol ever wrote that."

"And yet, the Chinese around here fear Mo Yan. Witness their

flight from this house, and the fact that they refuse to talk in the villages about him."

"Add to Mo Yan's pedigree," nodded Gordon, "that he beats a drum."

Recalling the Mongol *shaman* that he had befriended, Gordon paused, but only for an instant. Surely it could not be that the surly creature of the water hole had written, or caused to be written, that last missive. "We'll start for Lanchow after daybreak."

Rand looked up quizzically. He saw that the desert rider was tired bodily and mentally, but Gordon's face reassured him. "It may not be the safest *trek* in the world, you know. We are about a thousand miles from the nearest British consul."

"Two thousand from an American gunboat, which is more to the point," grinned Gordon. "And I know that Lanchow lies outside the back door of China. And that's a first-rate reason for not pestering the Chinese authorities about an investigation. I have a debt to square with Mo Yan, I think. Did you ever shoot a rifle, Professor?"

Rand started, and blinked. "I don't recollect—why, not to my knowledge."

"And you were going to look up Mo Yan just like that?" The hunter pointed at the heavy cartridge belt and the new-looking Enfield resting against the wall. His opinion of Rand went up several points. "I want to take back my remark, a while ago. Will you shake hands with me?"

In this way the two men, so ill matched in natures and experience, became warm friends. Black Gordon sometimes said curtly that it was because Rand did the listening, and he did the watching that they managed to work together. He had seen almost at once that the professor was so near sighted as to be almost blind, except at close range.

"I really did not plan," explained the slender man, "to go direct to Lanchow. The villagers about here say that a Mongol *shaman* has taken up his stand on the further side of the hills, near the caravan route and beats his drum regularly. They say it is a message of some kind, an angry message. He must be the drummer Betty and the boy heard, and he can tell us something."

III

THE MAN IN THE CAGE

IT WAS noon the next day when they saw the blue bear. Gordon's keen sight recognized it as one of a rare species, commonly called the little blue bear of Tibet—an active animal, fierce and

unusually savage in attack, but no larger than a stocky Airedale.

Gordon had had a bath and a good sleep and showed few traces of the three days and one night in the saddle. They had locked up the station, the house and store-room, and set out with their rifles and two good ponies. For a moment the hunter scanned the animal watching them from the edge of the brush ahead of them, at a turn in the trail, and Gordon wondered why it endured their near approach. Then he swore heartily.

From a yard behind him Professor Rand had fired hurriedly at the blue bear. The shot went wide. So much Gordon saw as he urged his reluctant pony forward, to see where the animal went. Contrary to general belief a bear can move very swiftly on its feet, and the hunter had no desire to be rushed from the screen of the thicket, especially by the blue bundle of sinews and temper that had just vanished from in front of him.

The animal's trail led along a faintly marked path, through a shallow gully. Rounding the shoulder of the mountain, both men reined in silently. They had emerged from the trees upon the edge of a precipice overlooking the brown plain of the Gobi. A few feet to their left the path ended where the cliff rose sheer overhead. Under this overhang of rock, squatting at the brink of the precipice, was the gnome-like figure of Sham, the Mongol conjurer. A few steps more and they would have ridden him down, because there was no way to leave the spot except by the trail up which they had come.

On its side, beneath his hand, was a large drum of leather stretched inside a carved wooden framework.

"Here's our man!" Rand dismounted to peer at the sturdy dwarf, who glared back with interest, moving his head like a hunted animal, to follow the two white men. The professor spoke to him in Tatar and Manchu without drawing an answer to questions about the missing white child.

"Ask him where the bear went," suggested Gordon.

No response was forthcoming. For a moment the hunter stared into the yellow eyes, unblinking and malevolent. Then he turned to peer down the cliff, observing that the drop was over a hundred feet, sheer. "What gets me," he ruminated aloud, "is for why a chap should want to come up here to beat a drum?"

"It's some ceremonial," explained Rand. "These beggars always come to the high

places for that. You ought to be able to make out Lanchow from here. The place is like a pulpit, with the cliff for sounding-board. Look!"

Far out in the haze of the heat-ridden plain, the hunter could see a gray blur. He tightened his reins. "Let's be going. This guy is hard boiled. If he won't answer a civil question for the man that gave him a drink—I reckon Mo Yan is what we want, anyway."

For the first time the lips of the squatting man moved. Rand translated the guttural clucking.

"Our friend says literally, 'Not go house of Mo Yan.'"

"And why?"

Sham's reply was brief and pointed. It was better, he assured them, not to have their bodies eaten by jackals. Sham's tongue began to clack again and Rand listened with growing interest.

"The beggar's giving us his pedigree. Says he's a *shaman* of the desert Mongols, and has a son who is wiser than he. As nearly as I can make out he learned from his son that it would be dangerous for us to go to Lanchow. Sham, as you call him, came to this place because *tez basin-yat*, the ancestor spirit, called. *Tez basin-yat* was or is angered.

"Sham's family deity is the bear. He was running, in spirit, with the bear spirit when we interrupted the magic. When he runs like that he is hungry. At such times, he feeds. Just now he was on the pursuit of blood, to avenge an injury of some kind. Our coming brought him back from the spirit world to his own body."

"You mean," Gordon's frown deepened, "that Sham says he was running about in the body of a bear a while ago?"

"Right you are. More to it than that, though. I've seen these old Mongols do curious things. They have lived with animals for so long that they have a kind of understanding with them. Laps and Finns, their kinsmen, for instance, are the only human beings who know how to manage reindeer—"

"Bunk," said the hunter impatiently. "All magic is bunk."

He would have said more just then, but Sham, as if grasping the meaning behind his words, took his hand from the drum. As he did so the big leather cylinder rolled over half way and stopped. Rand stepped back as if he had seen a snake.

"It moved up-hill!" he whispered.

"Some string attached," said Gordon brusquely. For the second time his eyes

challenged the conjurer, studying the small eyes under shaggy brows, the bearskin, with paws dangling over each high shoulder, the hands of the man that were like claws. He would have liked to see the under side of Sham's feet, to know if the old native wore boot soles or the pads and claws of a bear.

Because, clear to the eye, the marks of claws came up the trail to the rock ledge, where Sham sat. But there was something ominous about the man, and Gordon's instinct warned him that it would not be well to touch the leather apron that hung from the conjurer's loins, covering his knees and feet.

"If ever I saw a man honing himself for a fight," the hunter muttered, "Sham is that man. He's making war medicine, drum and all. Come along, Rand, we are losing time."

"Good heavens!" The professor looked up anxiously. "Do you think it could have been Sham I shot at, on the caravan road? These Mongols are like gypsies; they never forget a kindness or an injury. And, look here, Gordon, if it was a real animal, what became of it? This place is an impasse. Yet you are sure the bear ran up to this ledge."

"Absolutely sure. It had me guessing."

Rand blinked thoughtfully. "Gordon, you have to admit either one of two things. Either it was Sham, back on the caravan trail—!"

"It was not. I know a bear when I see one."

"—or Sham has made the animal vanish and taken its place himself."

"I know just one thing," replied the hunter savagely; "we must get to Mo Yan, pay him his money and bring Betty back to Chengtu. If we do not manage to do that, somehow, Tom Eldridge will die of grieving for his child."

Twilight had settled upon the plain before they sighted the first outpost of Lanchow. It was a tapering pagoda temple, black against the sunset. Beside the road loomed up what appeared to be a signpost—a thing like a crate with a round object projecting from its top.

From it came a gripping and disgusting smell that Black Gordon knew. With difficulty he reined his pony close enough to inspect the box. He was looking into the swollen face of a dead man, its chin



perched on the logs at the top of the wooden cage that had kept the unfortunate a prisoner until he died of hunger or thirst.

Gordon was uncomfortably conscious of small, animate things that had slipped out of the cage, away from the body at his approach. Rats, he supposed. The body itself was small in stature and covered with a sheepskin alive with ants.

Until then the twilight had been without sound except the labored breathing of the tired horses and the sigh of the light airs that passed over the desert floor. Rand, however, held up his hand and raised his head.

"What is it?" Gordon heard nothing.

"Behind us, Sham is beating his drum."

IV

MO YAN'S HOSPITALITY

THE desert rider and Rand had agreed that their best course of action was to approach Lanchow as if chance had taken them there. It would not do to make their purpose understood at once. Nor could they hope to discover Betty, if she were hidden away in the village.

They must see Mo Yan, talk with him if possible, and then decide how to deal with him.

So they agreed, and by the next morning they had to confess that Mo Yan was as great a mystery as ever.

In the first place they had been met by Chinese boys carrying lanterns outside the gates of Lanchow. They were escorted through the winding alleys where crumbling clay structures loomed dark and odorous; passing through the central market place where the caravans halted, they found that the *yamen* of Mo Yan was a massive building, surrounded, however, by the inevitable courtyard which was in turn guarded by a high stone wall, loop-holed. Against the wall, on the inside, was built a series of low barracks. By sound and smell Gordon knew that stables were nearby. The place was like a citadel, of four centuries ago.

A major-domo, a tall Chinese, with a persuasive smile, announced that his excellency, Mo Yan, *taotai* of the Gobi, felt that his poor and insufficient house was rich indeed in such guests. They were served with an excellent dinner, European dishes mingled with the countless Chinese tidbits of ancient usage; their room had a real bed and mosquito netting.

"It beats me," Black Gordon confessed

the next day. "Mo Yan has taken a caravanserai and made it into a palace hotel. Did you see that ebony parlor with the collection of ivories? I'll swear he has a gun-room—got half a look into it before breakfast."

They were, however, given more than half a look. The major-domo appeared and smilingly exhibited the racks of rifles, with several shotguns and one or two revolvers of ancient vintage. Gordon noticed that the weapons were nearly all of different makes.

"Ask the butler if Mo Yan goes after much big game around here," he suggested to Rand.

"The Mongols of the desert are unruly, honorable sirs," their guide informed them blandly, but meaningly. "In such a place as this, beyond the authority of Peking, one must take thought for personal safety. Outlaws must be punished. But one who is not a fool will not seek to attack Mo Yan. Come, I will show you why."

Outside the house—the keep, as it were, of the castle—they found a company of infantry mustered before the barracks, an orderly and capable set of men, armed with Mausers; on every corner of the wall was a machine-gun, in its cover. In the pagoda tower rising over the yamen, a sentry kept watch with field glasses, while the bronze wind bells of old China chimed at his very ear. Behind the house, servants were grooming ponies. The citadel of the night before was now disclosed as a modern stronghold.

"Very often," observed the tall Chinese, who wore the red button of a mandarin of the second rank, "Mo Yan hunts big game." Deprecatingly he waved two fingers of one hand. "He does not claim your skill—with the rifle—Mr. Gordon. I see your rifle is fouled with sand. May I suggest that Mo Yan has an excellent gunsmith who will take down your pieces and clean them."

Rand was about to object, when Gordon checked him. The hunter observed that the rifles were, in fact, filled with sand, though he did not know how it had been done.

"Listen, Professor," he whispered. "So far we are a set-up for Mo Yan. These beggars are laughing at us. That butler guy is no servant; he's a mandarin. Instead of us getting a look at the *taotai*, he's probably been spying on us, let alone listening to what we say. Mo Yan knows English. This six-footer has a revolver up his sleeve—see where it sags? He

may be Mo Yan, or he may not. Anyway, there's half a company of super Chinese infantry going through the manual of arms behind us, and if we tried to put up a fight we'd be crow meat in ten seconds. Do as he says."

Accordingly they surrendered their weapons to a Lascar in one of the chambers off the courtyard.

After Rand had been persuaded by the major-domo to look at some Khotanese



manuscripts in the library of Mo Yan's house, Black Gordon went for a stroll. They decided that it would not do to try to keep together; there was no indication that they would meet with violence, for the present, at least, at the hand of the master of the Gobi.

Lighting his pipe, Gordon extended his walk through what the mandarin had smilingly termed the Chinatown of Lanchow. Here the usual medley of beggars and coolies bearing mules' load crowded against him. He was aware of hostile stares, but no affront was offered. The bazaar interested him, and for a long time he stood at one of the gates, eyed by a blue smocked soldier with an old flintlock, typical more of the Chinese warrior of the old days.

Walking smartly forward, out of the gate, and rounding a nest of dung heaps, Gordon stopped and glanced back. The man had disappeared. With a grin the hunter resumed his promenade, presently returning to the archway, now filled with a crowd. The loiterers had formed a circle and were staring at something within.

While he hesitated, he heard the thin scream of a woman in pain. Taking his pipe in his left hand, Gordon pushed through the crowd that gave way to him readily—too readily to be honest about it. He feared that Mo Yan was up to some of his deviltry and Betty Eldridge had been the victim.

But the girl who whimpered with down-drooping hands was a Mongol woman, more than usually pretty. All the fingers of each hand had been cut off. They lay scattered on the reddened earth in front of Gordon, and as he stared in horror, the girl slumped forward on her knees. Beside her the man of the smock was cleaning a sharp, curved sword on her dress.

"The swine!" grunted Gordon, flushing. He took a step toward the soldier, only to halt thoughtfully, as he saw the shrewd, slant eyes gazing at him expectantly.

A sixth sense told him that men behind him were pushing forward. His right hand crept upward toward the region of his heart, then fell to his side. These men, he knew, expected him to make a hostile movement, perhaps to knock down the torturer with the sword. The whole thing had been staged, as it were, to arouse his anger to the fighting pitch.

Nothing he could do would make whole again the injured girl. So, reluctantly, Black Gordon walked through the circle, seeking his friend, and wondering whether the crippling of the Mongol woman was not intended to warn him of the fate that awaited Betty Eldridge. The effect upon the desert rider was to stir within him a cold wave of anger that would not endure further delay in coming to grips with Mo Yan.

"Rand," he said crisply as he entered their room, "fix it so we can talk to Mo Yan tonight."

AN HOUR after sun-down, Red Button, as they termed the mandarin, ushered them through the gun room and opened a door into an interior chamber of the house. Carefully, Red Button closed the door and stood with his back against it.

Shelves, filled with European text books and oriental cylinder books stood against the further wall. Over these shelves was hung a large map of the Gobi. At a plain ebony table with carved dragons for legs sat Mo Yan, an American phonograph beside him.

For a full moment the two white men gazed at the *taotai* in puzzled surprise. He appeared taller than Gordon, and the bones of a mighty body showed under a black alpaca office coat. A skull cap of the same hue covered a broad head, above features small and shrunken as those of a sick child—the bleared eyes set close together, the lips thin as the edges of parchment.

"Be seated, gentlemen," he said in good English. "I was expecting visitors, though not Mr. Gordon."

His voice was shrill, belying the bulk of the man's body. Professor Rand sat down near the desk, but Gordon preferred to stand where the mandarin would not be behind his back.

"Whom *did* you expect, Mo Yan?" asked Rand mildly.

"Envoys from Chengtu. Men have come



to pay their respects to me from the Mongol tribes, and from the Chinese villages of Kansu. You delayed—a long time.

Gordon remembered that while he stood

at the gate that afternoon, apparently idling, he had noticed several officials in carts and litters. One at least did not care to be recognized, because he had held his fan in front of his face. So the clans at the Gobi's edge were gathering, at Mo Yan's command. Why?

"Too long?" murmured Rand. "And why, pray?"

"My feast of justice," Mo Yan's tiny eyes went from one to the other, "is tomorrow. Other khans, *taotais* and headmen have traveled a long distance to hear me raise the voice of authority. I am glad you have come. Have you decided to pay for your hunter's license, Mr. Gordon?"

It would be hard to picture the insolent irony of the man's words, under the appearance of business-like courtesy. In fact Gordon and Rand found it difficult to believe that this modern office and alpaca coat could be the outward semblance of Mo Yan, whose name was whispered in fear beyond the back door of China.

"No," responded Gordon shortly. "I'm here to offer you six hundred dollars—a hundred and twenty-five pounds—for an American child, Elizabeth Eldridge."

"I do not sell slaves." There was a slight accent on the word "sell."

"What Mr. Gordon means," explained Rand quickly, "is that we will pay the money owed you by Mr. Eldridge, in payment of a certain duty on kerosene. We hope that this will enable you to make search for the child, who is missing, and who may be in Lanchow."

As he spoke he glanced warningly at the hunter. If Mo Yan were Chinese, they must offer him the chance to escape from blame, if they were to recover the missing girl; he must be allowed to save his face. The European garments, the sallow skin of the tall man at the desk, made it difficult to judge his race, or nationality. He lacked

the slant eyes of the Chinese, or the high cheek bones and receding brow of the Mongol.

Rand, an expert in languages, was hard put to in determining the accent of Mo Yan, with its strident, harsh syllables. He would have liked to try Mo Yan with Hindustani, but decided to stick to English.

"Have you the money?"

Gordon nodded dryly. Rand had taken up a collection at Chengtu, and had made up the rest out of the safe at the Half Way House, judging that this was what the master of Lanchow sought from them, and that for this he was holding Betty.

The lean fingers of Mo Yan tapped upon the table top. "Probably one of the Mongol bands carried her off. I am doing my best to teach them the meaning of my law. A week ago I executed one of their leaders."

Again the hunter nodded. "We saw the man. But I've an idea the American missy was fetched to Lanchow. If your men will search, you can find her. Then we'll pay you the money."

"I am sorry. I know nothing about an American girl-child."

"But," persisted Rand, frowning, "you can search the bazaars of Lanchow."

Mo Yan shook his head slightly, and his eyes flickered at the mandarin by the door. "If this child of Mr. Eldridge is in Lanchow I would know it. The time to pay my men money to search is when the money is due. Now it is too late, as I said."

Malicious triumph rang in the words, and Gordon's teeth set with an audible snap. "You mean—has anything happened to Betty?" The fingers of his right hand twitched upward as Mo Yan's lifeless eyes met his. "If you got any reason for thinking like that," he drawled, and this, in him was a danger signal, "you'd better say so now."

Rand heard a sound behind him, the mandarin's hand on the door knob. Mo Yan was silent, watchful as a cat.

"You took that little girl," went on the hunter slowly, "and you have her here. As things stand, we'll pay you what you want and take her home. We're making this offer just once. Do you accept or not?"

Mo Yan closed his eyes as if thinking, and gently shook his head. It took courage to do that, but the man seemed not to have the least fear. "I said it was too late. You white men are stupid, you cannot learn from the wisdom of others. You

must be taught. The Mongol boy who lost his life last week was wiser than you. Read this!"

Reaching out a long arm, he drew down a volume from the shelves behind him, opened it at a marked page, and indicated a paragraph with a steady forefinger. Rand leaned forward, and gave a visible start.

"It is a book of ancient sayings," explained Mo Yan. "I commend to you this sentence: *'What is lost is lost. . . . A fool will lose what he has in seeking that which he has not.'*"

When he said this neither Gordon nor Rand doubted that Mo Yan had taken captive the child of Tom Eldridge, and wished them to know it, without openly admitting the fact. Furthermore, that he would not give Betty back for the money. Rand wanted to think this over. Gordon, on the other hand, was accustomed to think quickly in tight moments. If he should attack Mo Yan now, he might overcome the two Lanchow leaders, and by keeping close to Mo Yan could keep the man helpless for a while and Rand and himself immune from harm, while he tried to force the surrender of the child.

It was almost certain, however, that Mo Yan would have Betty hidden away effectively, and it would be useless to act until he should see the child within reach. Mo Yan did not seem to scare easily; then, too, if anything happened to Gordon, Betty was lost.

Mo Yan, he guessed, had something planned for them, and he wanted to find out what this something was.

"What do you advise us to do, your excellency?" he asked curiously.

"Tomorrow, at the feast of justice—as we call it—in this house, I will have some thieving Mongols brought before me. Perhaps you can learn from them what happened to your friend's child. You must not fail to be present."

"We'll be there," Gordon promised.

Mo Yan rose and bowed. "Permit me to return your rifles."

In the open door stood the Lascar, smiling, with their two weapons, cleaned and oiled, even the stocks glistening. Gordon

took his—an old army Springfield—and swiftly looked it over, drawing out the bolt and trying the spring. Then he peered into the magazine, snapped it open and worked the trigger a time or two. Then, as if he had found what he was looking for, he smiled.

"A good gunsmith you have, Mo Yan. He has filed down the sear notch so the trigger functions beautifully—without setting off the gun. They are no good to us."

Stepping outside he placed both weapons in one of the racks. "Accept 'em with my compliments. Quite a collection you have, Mo Yan. Lots of travelers passing through Lanchow lately and leaving their rifles, I suppose?" He took Rand's arm, drawing him away. "Oh, Mo Yan, did you ever hear this? We'll call it the Wisdom of the West. *'Honesty is the best policy.'* No? Well, think it over, before tomorrow."

ONCE within their room, the door locked, and assured—by Rand's keen ears at the crack—that no listeners were pad-padding into position outside—Black Gordon's mask of cheerfulness fell from his brown face and he sat heavily down on the bed, taking out pipe and tobacco pouch as he did so.

"Mo Yan," said the professor thoughtfully, "is a most dangerous nature to deal with—an Eastern mind, tutored in a European university. I think he is a Tibetan."

"What! Not a chap from the land of lamas and dirt and—"

"And ignorance and hatred; and bottomless cruelty. The one nation, you know, that shut itself off from the world, as if it were still the Middle Ages. Only Mo Yan is no longer ignorant. He knows the white man's magic—weapons. Machine guns."

"And, he has the white man's learning. He's a mixed breed, Rand."

Mildly the man from Chengtu blinked at the moths buzzing around the lamp. "Billy, he's the breed that built the pyramids."

Applying a match to the bowl of his pipe, Gordon waited for an explanation of this.

"Mo Yan," went on Rand, "is making himself a power, through fear. The kings who built the pyramids of Egypt glorified their names by working to death some tens



of thousands of slaves. Mo Yan is sacrificing lives to make himself dreaded—witness that unfortunate Mongol in the cage, and the girl you saw at the gate. And—Betty Eldridge.”

“But he won’t take money for her.”

“That’s just the point, Billy. It’s worse than that. He may want to keep her for a slave in his household, or to sell her; but first he wants to show off his power to the chieftains of the clans that are gathering in Lanchow.”

Black Gordon nodded. “By sending us away empty handed? He’s guessed wrong.”

“No, Billy, I think he wants to kill us.”

“No doubt. Will he risk it, though?”

“Think how it would increase his prestige among the wild tribes of the desert. And the Chinese officials would be more afraid of him than ever. A good sprinkling of them have drifted into Lanchow. He knew that a white man was bound to come out to him, sooner or later, to look for the child. When we appeared, he began to summon his neighboring chiefs, to see the white men dished and served up.”

Again Black Gordon nodded, thinking of the bleak eyes and the reptile mouth of the Tibetan, Mo Yan. That was why their rifles were returned—useless. So that they might make a move to use them, if Mo Yan angered them enough, and thus afford a shallow excuse for shooting them down.

“He’ll try to get us to make the first move, Professor,” reasoned the hunter. “We’ll have to be almighty careful to keep our tempers.”

Rand smiled. “Rather. Don’t you see how it all fits in with Mo Yan’s pet quotation: *‘A fool will lose what he has in seeking that which he has not.’* He means that by looking for Betty, we will only lose our lives.” His smile went a little awry. “Have you any plan, for tomorrow?”

The imagination of the man from Chengtu could make clear what was in the mind of their enemy, but it was the hunter’s task to say what they must do.

“I’ve a hunch,” responded Gordon slowly. “We’ll see Betty tomorrow at the court session, I think. We’ll watch for our chance. Then, when and if I start shooting, you go for the child and I’ll cover the two of you as you go out the door to the courtyard. Head for the stables. I’ve noticed they always keep three or four horses saddled. Go for them. I’ll join you. That’s all the plan we can make.”

“But Mo Yan has our rifles.”

“I know it. We want him to have ’em,

because they wouldn’t do us any earthly good in a close packed room. We have something better.”

Black Gordon’s right hand strayed up toward the breast of his coat. Then he shook his head slightly, glancing at the lattice of the open window, and blowing out the lamp. In the darkness he drew from a shoulder sling under his coat a heavy thirty-eight caliber Colt, double action.

Every hour of the day this weapon had remained slung against his body, concealed by his heavy corduroy jacket. At night he slept on it. Black Gordon was not one of those who trust a weapon under a pillow—when he had a pillow. Mo Yan did not know he had it. That was the one card he could play and he was going to make the most of it.

Throughout the remainder of the night he slept quietly, while Rand tossed wakefully, his nerves aquiver. When the openings in the lattice showed gray, the man from the college sat up, his heart pounding.

So lightly does sleep touch those who are tired, toward dawn, that Rand could not know whether he had been dreaming or not. He fancied that he had heard the sonorous throbbing of a big drum. It might have been the blood beating in his ears. Still, he was sure that he had heard the soft cry of a child in distress. And he was reasonably certain it was the voice of Betty Eldridge.

V

THE CORD OF MERCY

MO YAN had the wisdom of ancient people and profited by it. His hall, where he held the judgment on the following day, was not a part of the yamen that Gordon and Rand had seen. It was under the house. Before the moving sands of the Gobi had covered this chamber it had been a castle, perhaps, or a temple of sandstone.

The modern yamen had been built upon the walls of the judgment hall; a winding stair led down to it, and guards were stationed at the stair entrance—two men with loaded rifles. Since the judgment hall was underground, it was lighted by four candles, two placed in niches in the walls at either side of the chair of Mo Yan, and two on the ebony table directly in front of him.

The *taotai*, in a ceremonial robe of blue silk, sat in a huge ebony chair, the arms carved into dragons, raised a yard or so from the floor. Near his right hand a silk

cord hung, coming from a hole in the ceiling.

Gordon and Rand were ushered by Red Button to a bench in front of the tables, the candles and Mo Yan.



They could see, in the dim light, lines of men squatting on the floor near one wall, and

servants and women on the other side. But the space around them was clear. As far as Gordon could see, none of the visiting chieftains were armed. Nor was there a sign of a weapon about the massive form of Mo Yan.

But the hunter's instinct warned him that he was being watched—watched and covered by deadly weapons. The feeling grew on him, and he scanned the walls and the entrance-way behind him. The two guards apparently, were still at their post on the floor above.

Then he raised his eyes, though not his head. Mo Yan was trying the case of a bedraggled shepherd, accused of stealing from the flocks of the *taotai*; without being heard, he was sentenced to forfeit half his flocks and to the bastinado.

"It's worse than I thought, this room," Gordon whispered softly. "You can't see 'em, but there are three—no, four—beggars with rifles lying on that balcony over Mo Yan."

Rand could only make out the blacker line of the gallery where the candles cast a shadow against the arched ceiling. Gordon smiled, thinking how cleverly Mo Yan had arranged the *mise en scene*. The glare of the candles, standing on the table, was full on the two white men, confusing their sight and making their slightest movement plain to the men who watched from above. The floor around them was cleared, so that if they should take alarm they would have to run some distance to shelter.

Waving his fan gently, Mo Yan regarded them, pleased. He laid down the fan to clap his hands.

"The child, whose dishonorable father failed to pay the taxes due Lanchow," he said in Chinese, consulting an ivory tablet.

An attendant led forward a slim girl and placed her in a sitting position on the dais directly at Mo Yan's feet. Her black hair was tightly coiled over each ear in the desert fashion, and the dark garments she

wore were of Mongol cut, but even Rand's poor sight recognized her as Betty Elbridge. A slight shifting of Gordon's big body showed that the hunter knew her.

The girl started at sight of them, and her tear-stained eyes widened. Silk bands wrapped about her head, over her mouth, prevented her from crying out their names. Mo Yan took up his fan again.

"In the oldest of laws," his high voice proclaimed, "it is written that those who pay not the debts owing to a prince shall have their families seized. This child must pay for the fault of her father. She shall go to join the sleepers who walk the earth no more."

Fleeting, he glanced at the white men, and Rand translated his speech to the hunter.

"The criminals who die in Lanchow will be put in the cage of oblivion by the caravan way, after execution, so that all who pass may know it is the will of Mo Yan. Unbind the maid and place on her throat the cord of mercy."

Gordon had time to realize that the *taotai* was probably speaking the truth. Clad perhaps in native garments, he planned to place their three bodies where the rats and the ants could obliterate all traces of their identity.

So swiftly did the two powerful men who emerged from the shadows of the side wall loosen the silk bandage and slip it down about the slender throat of the girl, that Betty could only utter a strangled cry before the tightening cord silenced her tongue.

"Stop, you yellow devil!" Gordon did not move. "That is the child we claim as ours."

The expressionless eyes of the Tibetan glowed, and, craving to hear the white men beg for mercy, he signed to the men to loosen the strangler's cord. Gordon was edging his end of the seat nearer the table where the candles stood. "Talk to him, Rand," he whispered fiercely.

Before the professor could move there was a loud interruption—a series of *thuds* on the stairs, and a round object rolled out on the floor. It continued to roll, bumping against the table, causing the candles to flicker, and bouncing off, to collide with the dais. Then it trundled off and slowed to a stop near Gordon.

It proved to be the drum of Sham, and at the same moment the Mongol conjurer appeared, escorted by the two guards from the stairs. Mo Yan frowned angrily, but seemed appeased when he heard that the

old native had been found in the process of burying the body of the criminal that had stood in the cage by the pagoda for a week.

Sham looked even more tousled and tattered than usual; his drawn face and over-bright eyes showed that he had had no food for days. His voice grated harshly.

"Great Scot!" whispered Rand, "the old



chap says it was the body of his son he was burying, and that his drum rolled in front of him to point the way to his murderer. Do you suppose this is more of Mo Yan's deviltry?"

Gordon hardly heard, intent on getting nearer the candles. Presently Sham spoke again, and, at first Mo Yan waved his fan aside, in token of denial. But, glancing at the harrassed Rand, the *taotai* changed his mind and nodded.

"The *shaman's* going to finish his ceremonial before he is sentenced," Rand explained.

"Mo Yan wants to watch us suffer a bit," grunted the hunter.

Indeed the Tibetan's stare was feverish in its eagerness; a sense of his own power seemed to intoxicate him. He paid little attention to the conjurer, who crouched down over the drum, letting his long hair fall over his face. Drawing the bearskin over his shoulders, he began to murmur.

"He is talking to *tes basin-yat*, the ancestor spirit," interpreted Rand, "calling the bear spirit to run with his spirit."

Gordon gained another inch forward, welcoming the diversion which would put him within reach of the table. If he could knock down the candles, there would be a chance—a desperate chance—of shooting the men who stood by Betty and gaining the stair: There he would have to deal with the armed guards. Rand, interested, despite his tension, listened to the *shaman*. He was sure he had heard the conjurer give the harsh call of a falcon, and that an answer had come from the ceiling above.

The heavy head of Sham swayed over the drum. Animal calls now came from each quarter of the room. Each time this happened the men of Lanchow looked about in trepidation; only Mo Yan and the two white men were quiet. Betty was whimpering a little, for the stranglers had loosened the cord when Sham entered, and

Gordon had made her a sign to keep quiet.

A loud growl was heard, and Sham rose, circling the drum and calling in a high, plaintive voice. The iron images about him jangled an accompaniment.

"He has heard the call of his kin," Rand went on, "and is looking for the way that leads to their meeting place."

Gordon thought fleetingly that if it was ventriloquism, it was well done, and wondered why Sham no longer beat his drum. Meanwhile, above the *whirr* of invisible wings, the old native's voice deepened to thunder, and Rand could no longer follow what he said.

Then Sham began to dance, grotesquely, yet swiftly, shaking his short, stocky arms in the air, and drawing the skin closer about him. His face was no longer visible under the hair. Gordon heard the whistle of wind, and saw the candles quiver, although the air of the room was still.

The watching natives began to draw back uneasily, while Sham moved around the drum, silent now, his body drooping toward the floor.

"It is enough!" Mo Yan commanded sharply. "Take this beast and bury him in the grave that he dug."

No one moved because just then Sham burst into a veritable outcry. Growls and snarls filled the air—the pent-up wrath of a beast, if Gordon heard aright. Rand fancied that the ceremonial was near an end, that Sham was voicing his hunger. He had scarcely time to think, for the old conjurer flung the bearskin full against the candles, sweeping them to the floor and putting them out.

In the obscurity, relieved only by the two points of light in the colored lanterns on either wall, Rand's near-sighted eyes saw Sham clasp the drum and break it in two parts. Mo Yan reached into his sleeve and drew out a long knife, his lips opening, to call to his men.

Sham had disappeared. From the place where he had been a furry body leaped upon the table. It was a bear, beyond any doubt, a blue bear of Tibet lean with hunger, its jaws aslaver, a snarl rending its throat.

The tall form of Mo Yan rose from the chair, one arm lifting the knife. The bear leaped, a paw swept the shoulder of Mo Yan, ripping the tensed muscles of the man's arm into harmless ribbons of flesh. The knife clanged on the floor. The left arm of the *taotai* caught at the silk tassel that led to the ceiling.

The lips of Mo Yan drew back from his

teeth, and he screamed in horror as he was borne back on the chair by the furious animal, and in a second more his throat was torn out.



A rifle flashed from the gallery above, and the report thundered in the ears of the watchers. As swiftly as the animal had leaped upon Mo Yan, the right hand of Black Gordon went to the breast of his coat, and his Colt roared an answer. Flash darted at flash, and the murk of smoke filled the chamber.

Gordon caught the hand of the frightened child and pulled her bodily across the table, thrusting her into Rand's arms.

"Get out the door!" he ordered, pushing fresh shells into his weapon. The Chinese and Mongols—guards, prisoners and visitors—huddled back against the walls or rushed toward the prostrate master of Lanchow. Bewildered by the unexpected shooting, and unarmed—for Mo Yan allowed weapons in the hands of none except his sentries—they peered through the haze of smoke, beginning to realize that the man who had claimed the empire of the desert was dying. The two guards at the stair had run forward to the dais, so that Rand found his path clear to the sunlight of the courtyard.

Rand lost no time in reaching the saddled horses, and, mounting a sturdy pony, helped Betty into the saddle of another. This done, he reined his horse toward the door to the hall of judgment. Several servants were approaching, uncertainly, but the big figure of Gordon backed out of the door, his gun crashing as he came. Half blinded by the bright light, he felt behind him for the reins of the pony on which Betty sat. Seeing the desert rider with a weapon in his hand, the attendants of Mo Yan hung back.

Another minute and the two white men were through the gate of the courtyard, and, before the alarm could be spread through the alleys, they had passed beyond

the walls and were streaking out into the desert toward the hills.

IT WAS long after nightfall before they halted to breathe the ponies and drink from a water hole in the first foothills of Kansu. Betty, exhausted, had fallen asleep in Gordon's arms, and Rand was pacing back and forth, wrestling with his thoughts.

"Look here, Billy," he said finally, "my nerves may not be normal just now, but I swear that it seemed to me—I can't dodge the fact that Sham somehow or other assumed the likeness of a bear when he killed Mo Yan. It was assuredly nothing human I saw."

Gordon turned his head to one side as if listening.

"Sham killed Mo Yan, right enough," he assented gravely. "And it was what you call magic. Sham's magic was sleight of hand, but it was the finest article of its kind I've ever known. That bear was a real bear, but it was Sham's bear—trained to obey him. We shot at it, and then he hid it——"

"In the drum?" Rand laughed.

"Right you are. In that over-size drum. The soldiers rolled it along into court, as evidence, I suppose. Probably that made the beast angry and Sham worked up its rage like a real artist; then he slipped the top off the drum and set the bear on Mo Yan. He saved our lives, I think."

Here Rand held up his hand for silence.

Something was coming up the trail. To the near-sighted eyes of the man from Chengtu, two blurred shapes passed them, outlined against the after-glow of the sunset. The keen sight of the hunter, however, identified the passerby as the old Mongol, on a pony, and at his heels the shambling form of a small animal.



"The beggar and his friend got away," he whispered. "I believe now there is one kind of real magic loose in the world."

Rand gathered up the reins of his pony and laughed at Gordon's serious tone. "What is it, Billy?"

"Half a cup of water given to a thirsty man. It works wonders, and I'm for it every time."



THE CURSE OF THE PAINTED CLIFFS

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Spawn of the Desert," "The Plotters," etc.

Calico Town

*A sky of brass, the sun a flame,
And the land no place to dwell;
The 'only spot that God forgot,
A hunk of earth, so doggone hot
That it still belongs to Hell.*

Descriptive of Calico Town.

AN ORE-WAGON creaking over a desert road, going at a snail-like pace, heading for a jumble of bright-hued, rock-ribbed hills. The land a desolation of sand, harsh sage, cactus, which rattled like paper in the heat-laden breeze. The sky a brassy dome, almost green in its intensity, out of which flamed a sun.

Far above the hills circled the buzzards, seemingly suspended on invisible wires, for they hung motionless in that thin air—watching, always watching. On all sides stretched the desert, broken here and there in the distance by black peaks, as though at some remote period this country had been a vast mountain range, which had sifted full of sand, until only the peaks remained.

Only the creaking ore-wagon and the rutted road showed the hand of man in this place. A few hours would suffice the desert to reclaim the road; for the desert is jealous of the hand of man, and, like the jungle, it is ever striving to protect its own.

But the ore-wagon creaked on and on toward the painted rocks, which flashed back the sunlight. The two men on the ore-wagon humped dejectedly in the heat, saying nothing. They were black from the wind and sun, colorless of garb, harsh of feature.

Up a rutty, rocky road creaked the wagon, going into the painted hills. One of the men touched the other on the arm and pointed toward a spire of rocks. On a shelf of this spire stood a girl, looking out into the desert. Her black dress threw her into bold relief against the orange tint of the rocks.

She was not beautiful, but there was a sweetness, a wistfulness about her face that made men look at her more than once. Her eyes were a misty-gray; almost black in the strong lights, and her brown hair, with its tint of copper, she wore in a long braid.

"Luck Sled," said one of the men in a flat, colorless voice. "She's always lookin' out into the desert."

"What fer?" wondered the other.

"Gawd knows what fer."

"Ain't nothin' to see, except the damn desert. What would anybody look at the desert fer?"

"Whatcha ask me fer?" peevishly. "I ain't never seen nothin' out there to look at. Been here a year and I ain't never seen nothin' but heat and sand. Gawd, I wonder what green grass and runnin' water look like."

"Ain't none," wearily. "Fairly tales, Jim; things yuh dream you've seen, like castles in Spain. Wonder what Luck Sled is lookin' at. Dreams, mebber?"

"Mebbe. Agin mebber she's lookin' fer a sweetheart to come in out of the desert." The man laughed bitterly and shook his head. "He'd be a hell of a looker, if he crossed the Mojave."

"Like me and you, eh? But looks don't count up here, Jim. Nothin' much counts, except water and whisky and bein' quick with a gun. If yuh got all them, along with a heat-proof brain, mebber you'll git along. I dunno."

"Gotta have a sun-proof brain, that's a cinch. Mine's fried to a cinder. Cinder brain, that's me. That's what we all got. If we didn't have cinder brains we'd all pull out of here, but a cinder brain won't let yuh think long enough to git plumb out of the Mojave. Giddap!"

The ore-wagon ground on up to a rock-ribbed flat, the tired horses panting heavily in the heat, leaving behind them the tall spire of rock, beside which stood the black-clad girl, looking out into the desert.

Before them, on the slope, seemingly plastered against the cliffs, was the town of Calico—a one-street huddle of adobe houses, made from adobe clay and colored with muck from the silver mines. No two of the houses were the same color, and at a distance they appeared as colored drawings against the cliffs.

The street was short—not over two hundred yards in length—paved unevenly with the solid rock of the hills. Back of the street the hill sloped sharply to ledges, where a few more adobe houses perched drunkenly, and behind them towered the painted cliffs, which were honeycombed with tunnels.

On the north side of the town was a deep, rock-bound canyon, known as Sunshine Alley. It angled sharply back into the mountain, the sides breaking sheer, and the whole canyon so grotesque in formation that it did not appear to be a work of nature. And on all sides, beyond the slope

on which stood the main street, the cliffs heightened in broken ledges, dotted thickly with more tunnels, with wooden chutes extending into the canyon, through which



poured streams of silver-laden ore, to ore-wagons or cribs built in the bottom.

And in this Sunshine Alley lived the greater part of the thirty-five hundred population; lived in caves, hollowed places in the cliffs and in homes built into the angle of the canyon. For the most part they were roofless, windowless. Rain did not come to the Calico mountains; so there was little need of a dwelling place, except for semi-privacy. With great frequency one or more of the population would move permanently to Hell's Depot, the iron-hard graveyard which played a conspicuous part in the life of the town.

In fact, Calico, in the middle of the eighties, was little better than a village of cliff dwellers, as far as habitation was concerned; and morals were as scarce as house-tops.

"Silver" Sled had been the boss of Calico for a number of years. His Silver Bar was the only saloon and gambling house in the town, a concession which he had jealously guarded, and his death had caused all of his holdings to be inherited by Luck. Her name was Nola, but Sled, whose good fortune was proverbial, had nicknamed her Sled's Luck. To her belonged the Silver Bar, the California saloon and gambling house, at Cactus City, and the Lady Slipper and Nola mines, which were two of the largest producers of Calico.

"I don't sabe Luck," declared one of the mine owners, following the death of Silver Sled. "Luck hankers f'r education and wants t' be a grand lady; so why in hell don't she sell out and go where she can be them three things? She's plumb rich now."

"Don't have t' sell out," declared another. "She can go away and let somebody run them places, can't she?"

Luck let others run her business places, but still she stayed on. Something seemed to hold her to Calico, although she hated it with all of her young soul. Men had tried to make love to her, but Luck would have none of them.

Just now she came back from the tall spire, where she had stood looking out across the desolation of the Mojave desert. The long, purple shadows of evening were already softening the rough edges of the hills, and from the depths of Sunshine Alley long, thin ribbons of smoke were already reaching upward, as the evening meals were being prepared for the men, who would soon be coming out of the tunnels, ant-like figures, which would wind slowly down the perilous trails or swing carefully down rope ladders.

Then would come the moonlight to make the world a fairyland of the softest of blue; a mystical land, covered by a velvet sky, studded with sky-diamonds, which seemed very close to the earth, and a moon, like a great ball, stereopticon in its contour and fairly transparent in its soft brilliancy.

Luck loved the nights. From the doorway of her home, perched on a narrow slope above the town, she always sat in the moonlight; a solitary figure, drinking in the wonders, while below her gleamed the yellow lights of the town and to her ears came the screeching of a violin, the tin-panny jangle of a piano, the discordant jumble of human voices, or, perhaps, the dull thump of a pistol shot.

Luck came slowly up the street, paying little attention to those who spoke to her, until she came opposite the Silver Bar. A tall, frock-coated man was standing in the doorway, evidently deep in thought. His dark eyes were squinted beneath the brim of his wide, black hat and his white teeth were clenched tightly around a very black cigar.

A thin nose surmounted a sharply waxed mustache, below which jutted a belligerent chin. But the most noticeable thing about this man was his lavish display of jewels. The buttons of his ornate vest, the stick-pin, cuff-links were all made from finely cut sapphires



of large size, but the solitaire which gleamed from the third finger of his left hand dwarfed and outshone all the rest.

This man was "Fire" French, a virtuoso of the green cloth. He had been nicknamed "Sapphire," which had been shortened to Fire.

Contrary to his nickname, he was as cold as ice—a killer; a killer who weighed the odds carefully and spared when the balance was against him. He lifted his eyes and looked across at Luck. His hand swept to his sombrero and he bowed. Luck merely nodded and passed on. Fire French watched her pass on and a smile twisted the corners of his thin mouth. He shook his head, as though he did not understand her. For the first time in his life, Fire French had found a woman who was not at all dazzled by his personality or raiment, and he was piqued.

At the instigation of several friends, she had engaged French to run the Silver Bar. They had argued that it would require a man of great ability, and Fire French was the man. There were only two dissenting voices—those of Mica Gates and Louie Yen.

Mica Gates had stood squarely behind Luck in everything, except hiring Fire French. Mica was a born pessimist, a retailer of news, to which was added dire prophecy, and freely-given advice. He was short of stature, bowed of legs and bearded to the eyes.

Louie Yen was the only Chinaman in Calico; the only oriental that had ever been allowed in the town. He owned the only laundry and minded his own business. He was very old—he did not know how old—with a wrinkled face, the skin of which was parchment-like and seemed to crackle when he grinned his toothless grin. And Louie Yen was very wise. He had the inherited wisdom of his ancestors, to which he had added his own golden years of experience.

Mica Gates did not like Fire French, and he did not care who knew it. Louie Yen did not like Fire French, but he told it to no man, except himself; because he knew only one man he could trust—himself.

Louie Yen worshipped Luck Slead. He had watched her bloom into womanhood, and he was forever shaking his head sadly over his ironing-board or washtub. To him she would always be "Li'l gi'l," just as she was the day that she came to town with Silver Slead.

Louie was standing in the doorway of his laundry, smoking a long pipe, as Luck came up the street. He could see Fire French looking after her. He had seen Fire French's courtly bow. Now he removed the pipe from his mouth and grinned pleasantly.

"H'lo, li'l gi'l."

"Hello, Louie," Luck stopped and smiled at him.

"Louie Yen jus' smile," he told her seriously. "Too ol'. No can bow, yo' sabe?"

"Oh!" Luck looked back toward the Silver Bar, but Fire French was not there now.

"Wha'sa matta?" queried Louie. "Yo' no look please."

"I want to ask you a question, Louie Yen. Do you remember the day before, or the day that my father was killed?"

Louie nodded quickly.

"There was a poker game, Louie Yen."

Louie nodded again, but his eyes were blank now. He was trying to forget.

"In that poker game," continued Luck, "my father lost some money to the man who was called Duke Steele. That money was never paid, Louie Yen. Do you know how much money it was?"

Louie Yen knew, but Louie Yen did not want to tell her that Duke Steele had won forty-six thousand dollars from Silver Slead, and that he had accepted Slead's I. O. U., for this great amount. Duke Steele had disappeared, following the death of Slead, and no one knew where he had gone.

"How much money, Louie Yen?" persisted Luck.

"No can tell, li'l gi'l. Five men see fo' sure; fo' dead, one gone."

"Why didn't he come back and collect his money?"

"Ho!" chuckled Louie Yen. "No can tell. Yo' want find him jus' fo' give him money, li'l gi'l?"

Luck flushed slightly and Louie Yen puffed rapidly on his long pipe. He was very wise, was Louie Yen. Luck turned and started up the hill.

"Goo'-by, li'l gi'l," called Louie softly.

"Good night, Louie Yen."

The misty moonlight had quickly followed the sunset, and the

mountain was bathed in a soft blue haze, making everything indistinct. Men were already coming in over the rim of Sunshine Alley, and the yellow lights

of the street threw their shadows in grotesque shapes on the adobe walls.

From the doorway of her home, Luck

Slead looked down at the lighted street and lifted her eyes to the velvety, star-lit sky.

"God only made the nights," she said softly. "Preacher Bill Bushnell told me that. He said that the devil bossed the day-shift until Calico was built and then he worked overtime."

Luck Slead's life had not been laid in pleasant paths; being, as far back as she could remember, one succession of killings. It was little wonder that she looked down upon the reveling Calico and repeated Preacher Bill's decision that—

"Calico don't need religion, Luck. You could preach the gospel down there until hell froze over. They don't sabe what yuh say. Tell it to 'em in hot lead—that's the language they understand. I ain't sayin' a word agin' your father, but Calico needs a man with high ideals and the ability to shoot hell out of those who are too deaf to hear him curse 'em."

Luck smiled over the words of Preacher Bill, who had not lived long afterward. Perhaps he was right, perhaps wrong; she did not know. At any rate, she was tired of bloodshed and the shamelessness of Calico Town. She gazed over the town, out into the misty stillness of the desert. Somewhere out there was a man; a young man, whose face was indelibly stamped upon her memory. He and his little burro had faded out into the desert, carrying an I. O. U. for forty-six thousand dollars, signed by Silver Slead.

Luck did not know the amount of this I. O. U., but she did know that it was an enormous amount. Did Duke Steele deliberately throw away this amount so that she might have it, or was he crazy, as some declared? Luck shook her head. She was considered wealthy, but this money would never belong to her until that gambling debt was paid. That was why she stayed in Calico—to pay a debt. So she told herself.

IT WAS the following morning that Mica Gates came past Luck's house, bringing her word of a shooting scrape in the Silver Bar, in which a miner had been killed by Fire French.

"He was a miner in the Lady Slipper, Luck," explained Mica, "and he had a wife and one kid."

Luck shut her lips tightly.

"I reckon the boys'll have t' take up a collection f'r her and the kid," observed Mica sadly.

"What started the trouble, Mica?"

"Poker game. This Andy Bowers



didn't take kindly to the way Fire French dealt the draw in a big pot; so he throws down his hand and opines to remove his money, statin' at the same time that he don't care t' play the game thataway.

"French kinda watches him, like a cat watchin' a mouse, and then he says, 'You insinuatn' that this here game ain't on the square?'"

"Andy hauls his money out and gets to his feet, as he says, 'Nobody ever seen me draw my money out, of a pot before, French; so yuh can figure it out for yourself.'"

"French gits to his feet, kinda easy-like; not actin' a bit sore, but before anybody has a chance to say a word, he shoots from his hip and kills Andy too dead t' skin. Then Fire French explains that he don't allow no man t' question his honesty nor honor. I ain't sayin' that the game was crooked, Luck; but it don't 'pear to me that it was sufficient cause t' kill a man."

Luck shook her head. "A gambler's honor! Most of the killings are over honor, Mica Gates. Does taking a life clear a gambler's honor, I wonder?"

"I s'pose. If a man ever declares 'em crooked, they're done for, 'less they wipe out the insult with blood."

"It's a queer world, Mica Gates."

"Yes'm, Luck, it sure is queer. What do yuh know about the new saloon and gamblin' house, the Mojave?"

"Nothing. I only know that the new place is going to open tonight."

"Silver Sled wouldn't 'a' stood fer it," declared Mica. "No tin-horn gamblers ever cut in on his town. It sure looks t' me like they was a-goin' t' try and run you out of business, Luck. Them two new places in Cactus City has plumb ruined yore trade down there, and now this here new place will split up business. Killin' of Andy Bowers ain't goin' t' make Fire French any too pop'lar, y'betcha."

Luck nodded slowly. It was true that the Sled fortune was not growing. Both the Lady Slipper and the Nola were not paying expenses now. Luck had twenty thousand dollars in coin hidden away, which



had been slowly dribbling away through alleged bad runs of luck in the gambling houses.

"Pete Black still runnin' the Lady Slipper?" queried Mica Cates.

"Yes—both mines, Mica."

"Neither one payin' a cent? I heard it talked about, Luck. Poor old Andy Bowers talked about it last night. He had a few drinks, I reckon. Some of the miners was worryin' about them two veins peterin' out and they was talkin' about it. Andy said it wasn't poor ore, but it was damn poor minin'. Said they cut right away from the rich ore in the Lady Slipper. Well, Andy's gone now. Feller ain't none too secure in this here life. Here t'day, gone t'morrow—and a gambler's honor saved. S'long, Luck."

"So-long, Mica Cates."

She watched him go over the rim into Sunshine Alley; going down to start a collection for the wife and kid of Andy Bowers. Luck turned and went back into the house, where she stopped before a crude mirror and looked at herself closely. A misty-eyed girl stared back at her; a girl with tousled hair and compressed lips.

For a long time she stared into the mirror at herself. Lying on the old-fashioned bureau in front of her was the six-shooter that had belonged to Silver Sled; the gun he had taught her to shoot.

Suddenly another reflection seemed to fade into the mirror, and she saw Fire French's grinning lips, waxed mustache, sparkling sapphires.

Swiftly she whirled, with the gun in her hand; but he had stopped midway between the open door and where she stood, and was still smiling at her.

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

Fire French laughed softly and shook his head. "Did I frighten you, Luck?"

"No!" She shook her head quickly. "But why do you come sneaking into my house, Fire French?"

"I didn't mean to. The door was open and I seen you admirin' yourself in the mirror; so I thought I'd help you do a little admirin', Luck."

"This house is mine and I don't allow nobody to come here. I wasn't admiring myself."

"You ought to," smiled French. "You're pretty. Never seen eyes like you've got, Luck. Some folks look at you and think you're still a kid, but you're a woman and you've got a woman's charms. Why don't yuh mix with folks?"

"Like you?" queried Luck.

"Well, why not? Is there anythin' wrong with me?"

"Yes," said Luck slowly. "You're too honest."

Fire French laughed loudly, thinking that she meant it as a compliment.

"You have too much honor to protect," added Luck.

"What do you mean?" French came closer to her, but he still respected the un-wavering revolver muzzle.

"Killing a man to protect your honor," said Luck slowly, "a man with a wife and a kid."

"Oh, hell!" French shrugged his shoulders impatiently, "Do you want it said that a crooked deal is pulled off in the Silver Bar?"

"No, nor a killing."

French smiled sarcastically. "Silver Sled wasn't so particular. You hired me to run that place, and I'm going to run it, Luck—run it like Silver Sled did." French glanced around the room and shook his head. "It ain't right for you to live alone like this. You're too pretty to spend your time alone."

"I hired you to run the Silver Bar, but not to run my business," said Luck coldly. "Get out of here!"

"Why?" queried French, "what's the idea? You wouldn't shoot me for just coming in your house, would you?"

"You shot a man to protect your honor," Luck reminded him in a flat voice, "and I'm as good as any gambler, I hope."

"You're hopeless, Luck." French shrugged his shoulders and turned to the door.

"Maybe I am, but not helpless," retorted Luck.

Fire French laughed shortly and went down the trail, while Luck still leaned against the bureau and stared at the doorway, with the heavy gun hanging limp in her hand.

Came a soft knocking at the door and she turned to see Louie Yen, carrying a small bundle of laundry, which he placed on a chair. The bundle had been carelessly tied—not at all like Louie

Yen's neat work—and Louie Yen was not panting from the walk up the steep hill.

"I bling jus' li'l bit today," apologized Louie. "Mo' bling tomolla, li'l gi'l."

"Why did you only bring part of it, Louie Yen?"

Louis shifted his feet and stared blankly at her.

"Velly hot today," he observed. "Mus' go back now."

He turned and went out of the door, hurrying away before Luck had a chance to question him further. But Luck knew that Louie Yen had seen Fire French coming up to her house, and she knew that Louie Yen had grabbed part of her laundry and followed Fire French. The few pieces of laundry were only an alibi for Louie Yen to be there in case she needed help.

CARTIER LE MOYNE was the biggest man in the desert country; the biggest physically, and no weakling mentally. But he did not let the power of his physical being interfere with his dreams of conquest; his plans to make himself the king of the desert.

His plan was to control the mines, the liquor trade and the gambling. The rest of the desert was merely incidental. Le Moyne's keen mind studied the possibilities for a long time before he began active operations. One of his stumbling blocks had been Silver Sled, but he was safely out of the way now.

Le Moyne had come to Cactus City as an assayer. To his little shop had come the prospector, trusting in Le Moyne to give him a fair report on assays; but Le Moyne was not in business for any such purpose. If he found a particularly rich sample of ore, and was unable to find out where it was found from the prospector himself, he would have a trusted man to trail the prospector back to his claim.

A rifle shot, another man who did not come back, a location notice filed in the name of the man who fired the shot—it was all so simple. No law to interfere. In a few days the coyotes and buzzards would remove the evidence, and what was left the desert would cover deeply. Then Le Moyne would acquire the prospect legally, and proceed to develop it.

But these prospects required money to develop them, and Le Moyne was shooting at bigger game just now. He still operated the assay office, while from his private office he pulled the strings that were to eventually drag the desert kingdom into his big hands.



Two days before he had sent one of his trusted men to follow a prospector, whose assay sample had run into hundreds of dollars a ton. He sat at his desk, humped in his chair, wondering how large this rich vein might be. His features were massive, seemingly out of proportion to the rest of the man. His skin was greasy, yellow; his hair black and of coarse texture.

His desk was a litter of papers, ore samples, a box of very black cigars. Directly in front of him lay a heavy six-shooter. Le Moyne was not a gunman, but he kept a loaded gun handy. He preferred to let his hirelings do the shooting.

Suddenly his door flew open and a man stepped inside. Le Moyne's head jerked up quickly at the intrusion, but he did not speak. The intruder was kicking the door shut with his heel, but keeping his dark gray eyes steadily on Le Moyne. He was hardly past thirty years of age, bronzed as an Indian, with black hair, which grew low between his ear and cheek, and with the easy grace of a desert wolf.

Neither of them spoke. Le Moyne scowled slightly, but there was no hint of recognition in his black eyes. The newcomer's left hand searched inside his belt and with a flip of the wrist tossed a small buckskin sack onto the desk in front of Le Moyne, where it thudded softly.

Le Moyne glanced at the sack and back at the man, taking in his personal appearance. This man wore a faded shirt, wide sombrero, woolen pants, which were tucked into the tops of his boots. His waist was circled by a wide, weather-beaten cartridge belt, heavily studded with cartridges, and the holster, which hung low on his thigh, contained a serviceable-looking six-shooter. Le Moyne also noted that the holster was tied down to the man's leg.

Le Moyne's eyes flashed down to the buckskin sack and he shifted in his chair.

"Whatcha want it assayed for?" he asked hoarsely.

"The price of a man's life," said the younger man coldly. "Melt her up and see if it's worth it, Le Moyne."

"What do yuh mean, stranger?" wonderingly.

"I'm Duke Steele," said the man softly. "Your hired killer told me a few things and sent that hundred dollars back to you. He said you always paid him in advance."

Le Moyne licked his lips. He had known who this man was, but had tried to bluff. Now, he knew the bluff was not going to work well at all.

"A quitter, was he?" Le Moyne knew he might as well admit his guilt in the matter.

"Not the way you mean, Le Moyne. When your assay only showed a trace of gold, I knew you lied for a purpose; so I watched my own trail. I had melted some gold and run it into the seams of that sample."

Le Moyne blinked rapidly. He had been a fool. Why did he not give this man an honest report? The fact of the matter was this: Le Moyne had been too lazy to assay the sample, but knew from outward appearances that it was worth acquiring.

"Well, you can't prove anything," declared Le Moyne.

Duke Steele smiled and walked over to the desk, where he picked up Le Moyne's gun and tossed it aside. Then he sat down on the corner of the desk and smiled down at Le Moyne's greasy face.

"Goin' to boss the desert, are yuh, Le Moyne? Yes, your man told me all about it before he cashed in. I reckon he told me a lot of things about you. Seems queer to you that this man should tell me things, but when a man's dyin' he has to talk to somebody. Kinda eases his conscience, I reckon. That man had quite a lot of sin on his mind.

"He told me about killin' off the original locator of the Dancing Jasper mine. He



told me how you sent him on the trail of the old crippled Swede that located the Aztec, and how the old Swede squealed when the bullet hit him, and then he told me——"

"Damn your soul, stop that!" Le Moyne's face had gone ashen. "You can't prove nothin'! What do you want, Steele?"

"Me?" Steele grinned softly. "I want my part of this big steal you're going to make, Le Moyne."

"Oh!" Le Moyne relaxed in his chair and wiped the perspiration off his face. He laughed, but it was without mirth.

"No, I'm not a fool," assured Duke Steele. "I know what kind of an organization you've got. Mebbe they could wipe me off the earth without no trouble. I want to throw in with you, Le Moyne. I sabe that nobody outside of your gang

will be able to hold a thing here, and I want mine."

Le Moyne laughed, and this time with mirth. "I thought you was an honest man, Steele. Ha, ha, ha! You don't need to be afraid of me and my gang, 'cause you're one of us. I need a few more men like you—men with cold nerve."

"I'm not afraid of you and your gang, Le Moyne. Who have yuh got that stacks up as a nervy man?"

Le Moyne smiled and lighted a cigar. "Well, I've got Fire French and Pete Black at Calico—been there for quite a while. 'Slim' Curlew is there by this time. He's goin' to run the Mojave. With Pete Black in charge of the Nola and Lady Slipper, Fire French in charge of the Silver Bar at Calico, and Tex Suppveda runnin' the California, here in Cactus City, I reckon we kinda stand to put these two towns where we want 'em."

Duke Steele smiled. "And you've got men on every good prospect around here. Where do I fit in? Got any place to put me at Calico?"

Le Moyne licked the wrapper of his cigar thoughtfully before he said, "Why do yuh want to go to Calico, Steele?"

"It was my pardner who killed Silver Sled, and they ran me out of town."

Le Moyne straightened in his chair. "Thasso? Say, are you the feller that trimmed Sled in a poker game?"

Duke nodded. Le Moyne leaned across his desk.

"I heard all about that, Steele. How much did yuh win from him that night?"

"Forty-six thousand."

"Whew!" Le Moyne whistled softly. "Where is the I. O. U. he gave yuh?"

"Lost it," lied Duke softly, and his thoughts went back to that night, when he stopped in the desert moonlight and tore into bits that piece of paper. He wanted Luck to have all that money.

"Gawd!" mumbled Le Moyne. "Yuh could collect that money if yuh still had the paper. Didja ever see Sled's girl?"

Duke Steele's eyes softened for a moment, but he did not want Le Moyne to know too much; so he shook his head.

"She owns everythin' that Sled owned," grinned Le Moyne, "but the mines have quit payin' and the Silver Bar is havin' a hard run of luck. Mebbe we can buy cheap in a short time. The California ain't doin' nothin' either."

"Freeze-out, eh?" queried Duke.

"Damn right!" Le Moyne leaned across the table and held out his enormous right

hand clenched. "Inside of six months I'll have the Mojave desert where I can squeeze every dollar out through my fingers, Steele. I'm goin' to be good to them that help me—to hell with the rest!"

"Where do I go?" queried Duke.

"To Calico. This time they won't run yuh out, Steele. Fire French can use yuh, I reckon—him and Slim Curlew."

He tossed the buckskin sack to Duke.

"Go and get some clothes, Steele. If that ain't enough, send 'em to me for the balance."

Duke Steele accepted the money and left Le Moyne, who was very glad to realize that things had turned out much better for him than he had expected. It was true that he had lost a hired killer, failed to acquire a rich mine, but a man like Duke Steele was worth winning.

But Le Moyne had no idea of playing fair with Duke. He was only a tool—and Le Moyne needed good tools just now. Later on, when his usefulness was over, Le Moyne knew of many ways to rid himself of those who expected to help him in squeezing the desert.

And Duke Steele knew all this; knew that he would only be a cog in Le Moyne's machinery—a machine that would be broken into bits after Le Moyne's position was secured. Others might pride themselves that they would have rich holdings under Le Moyne, but Duke Steele knew that Le Moyne intended to be absolute monarch.

But Duke lost no time in buying new clothes, and when he left the little trading store he was a sartorial triumph. A wide, white sombrero, trimmed in a band of Mexican silver; a many-hued silk shirt, a beaded vest, frock coat and a pair of checked trousers, narrow of knee and broad of bottom, which he tucked into a pair of fancy-stitched, soft-leather boots, with very high heels. He spent the hundred dollars and left a bill of another hundred against Cartier Le Moyne. As a parting present the storekeeper gave him a large scarlet silk handkerchief, which Duke Steele looped about his neck.

The stage was preparing for the sixty-mile night trip to Calico, and Cartier Le Moyne was talking with the driver when Duke came up to them. Le Moyne grinned at Duke, but did not mention the gaudy outfit.

"Ready to leave?" he asked, and Duke nodded.

"Hop on," grunted the driver. "We're pullin' out."

"The driver will take yuh to French," said Le Moyne, and went on up the street. Duke watched after him until he went into the California saloon, and then climbed into the stage-coach.

Sixty miles over a desert road was a long way—an almost impossible distance in day-



light—so the stage left either terminal at sundown and made the entire distance in the cool of the nights. The natural desert road, untouched by scraper or grader, is as smooth as the best boulevard, and

the stage-coach swayed gently to the rhythm of four speeding horses.

Alone inside the coach, Duke Steele relaxed. He was wearing Le Moyne's clothes, taking Le Moyne's pay and was now one of an organization that would not hesitate for a moment to kill him if he played them false. Still he smiled softly and thought of a misty-eyed girl. No, Duke Steele was not in love with the girl he had barely known almost a year before. She was only a kid, he remembered, but she had probably saved him from death at the hands of a mob.

It seemed but yesterday to Duke Steele. He had led his burro silently away from Calico, and out on the desert he had destroyed Silver Slead's I. O. U for forty-six thousand dollars. That was a lot of money—more money than Silver Slead could have paid. It would have taken everything away from Luck.

Duke had expected that Luck would have sold out and gone away long before this. She wanted education; wanted to live in a civilized world. Why did she stay in Calico? Duke shook his head over the question and went to sleep, with his head pillowed in his white sombrero and the scarlet handkerchief across his face to keep out the sifting sand.

THE stage drew up at the adobe stage-station and Duke Steele alighted. There had been little change in Calico in a year. Louie Yen was coming up the street and he glanced curiously at Duke. Somehow the face was familiar, but the Chinaman was unable to remember just where he had seen this man before.

Duke went straight to the Silver Bar and found Fire French, who had just got

out of bed. In a few short words he explained who he was and who had sent him to Calico. French looked him over coldly, until the stage-driver came in and corroborated Duke's story.

"I don't know what in hell Le Moyne wanted to send yuh here for," growled French. "There's enough of us here to handle this end of it."

"Yuh might go to Cactus City and ask him," replied Duke coldly.

"Yeah?" sarcastically. "Did he tell you to take orders from me?"

"He did not."

"Oh, I suppose you came up here to run things, eh?"

"I'm here because I told Le Moyne I wanted to come here. There wasn't any argument, French."

French flicked back his long hair with a jerk of his head and grinned patronizingly at Duke Steele.

"Can that be possible? 'Pardner, know-in' Le Moyne like I do, I don't hesitate to tell you that you're a——"

Swift as the slash of a panther, Duke Steele's right hand shot out and an iron fist collided with French's jutting jaw. Back against the bar went French, rebounding into a left-handed swing that caught him on the opposite side of the jaw, knocking him cold.

As Duke landed his knockout he sprang back across the room, and his heavy six-shooter covered the few people who had witnessed the affair. The two bartenders stared at Duke and seemed to want to look over the top of the bar at the huddled fig-



ure of Fire French, but did not want to take too many chances with this quick-moving, hard-eyed young man.

"I reckon he was goin' to call me a liar," observed Duke slowly, "which I wasn't."

Fire French came slowly back to life and got to his feet. The world was still semi-opaque and he clung to the bar for several moments before his head cleared sufficiently for him to remember what had happened. His teeth seemed to ache col-

lectively and there was a numbness about his jaw-bone.

He looked at Duke Steele dazedly and felt tenderly of his jaw. Fire French had never been knocked down before and he did not like the after-effect. It would cause him to lose caste, but there was nothing he could do—just now.

"I didn't let yuh finish your declaration," said Duke seriously, "'cause I don't like the word you was goin' to use, French. If you don't think yuh had an even break in the game, we'll throw away our guns and settle it now."

Fire French took this under advisement. Here was a man who wanted to fight, a man who was prepared—and Fire French never fought unless the odds were in his favor.

"Or," continued Duke, "if you'd rather settle it with a gun, I'm willin'."

French shook his head slowly. "I reckon I made a mistake, Steele." His voice was flat.

Duke grinned. "Le Moyne told me he had nervy men up here. I suppose I ought to accept your apology, French, but it wasn't sincere. You reckon you made a mistake, eh? Yes, you did, but you still think I'm a liar; the mistake you made was in saying such a thing."

"Well, let's drop the argument," said French painfully. His jaw was beginning to hurt badly, and his pride pained him even more than the sore jaw. He knew that argument was not going to get him anywhere with this gaudy young man.

"All right, I'm willin' to drop it," agreed Duke. "Never did like arguments. I reckon I'll go and find myself some breakfast."

Duke went out the door, but kept one eye on French and the others. French turned to the bar and helped himself to a stiff jolt of liquor. The stage-driver moved in beside him and accepted a free drink.

Then the two men turned toward the door, where Luck Sleed was standing, looking at them. Her face was a trifle pale, for she had spent a sleepless night arriving at a grim resolution concerning Fire French. It was the first time she had ever been in the Silver Bar, and the men stared at her wonderingly, as her eyes traveled from face to face. Then she looked directly at Fire French and her words were very distinct and spaced widely apart:

"French—you—are—fired."

She flung her hand in an imperious ges-

ture toward the door. "Get—out—of—here. I'm—going—to—run—this—place—myself."

"You are?" French gasped, and glanced quickly at the others, as though not believing his own ears.

"I am!"

For a moment they were too stunned to do more than stare at her and at each other. Then French laughed loudly.

"Girl, have you gone crazy?" he demanded harshly.

"You can't do that, Luck," added Black, quickly.

"Can't I?" Luck half-smiled, but only with her lips.

"Never heard of such a crazy idea in my life," declared Slim Curlew.

Luck pointed toward the rear of the room. "Take your stuff and get out," she went on. "I don't know how many people you have hired since you started working here, but they go with you."

French snorted sarcastically and spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "What can yuh do in a case like that?"

"Better think it over, Luck," advised Black. "You can't run a place like this. Silver Sleed never let yuh mix into this kind of business—with these kind of folks. You don't know anythin' about the business."

"Oh, let her run it if she wants to," laughed French. "She won't last long."

He turned and went to the rear, where he packed up his few belongings. The bartenders grinned widely and came around to the front of the bar.

"We're fired, too, are we?" one of them asked.

"If French hired you, yes," replied Luck firmly.

"You'll have a sweet time runnin' this place," stated Slim Curlew threateningly.

"I expect to," smiled Luck, "and I'm going to start by asking you to keep out of here."



"Z a s s o?" spluttered Curlew. "This is a public place and you'll have a hell of a time if you try to pick and choose your customers."

Curlew swaggered out and after a moment Black and the two bartenders followed. French came from the rear room, carrying his belongings. He

grinned sarcastically at Luck, but did not speak, as he went out of the door.

The miners had stood apart during the argument, but now they gathered around her.

"I tended bar for yore dad," said one of them, a youngish sort of miner, "but French fired me and I went to work in the mines."

"Did you?" queried Luck. "I suppose I will need bartenders, won't I? Do you want the job?"

"I'll take it," he declared, and at that moment Mica Cates came in. He stared at Luck for a moment, and then a wide grin spread across his face.

"Luck, I was in the Mojave a few minutes ago and I heard what you was goin' to do. Fired the whole works, eh?"

"Hired me already," grinned the new bartender.

"That's good," applauded Mica. "Bud Harvey's a good bartender. But, Luck, yuh got to have at least three men to run games and one more bartender."

"Will you work for me, Mica Cates?"

"Gosh, no!" gasped Mica. "I dunno a danged thing about this kinda work, but mebbe I can help yuh pick out some good men."

"All right," smiled Luck, "you pick them out for me. I don't know what to do myself."

Mica Cates considered her for a few moments and scratched his head, as he said, "I dunno either, Luck. If it was me, the first thing I'd do would be to hook m' fingers around a gun."

Luck's right hand came slowly into view, from where she had concealed it in the folds of her skirt, and it was holding a heavy six-shooter.

A MAN came into the little restaurant, where Duke was eating, and exploded the news to everybody.

"Luck Sleed is goin' to run the Silver Bar! She's done fired Fire French and his whole outfit."

For a few moments the restaurant buzzed with the news. Duke Steele made no comments, but smiled softly to himself, as he paid for his meal and went down the street to the Mojave gambling house.

French was standing at the bar, laughing with the crowd, which was partaking of the Mojave hospitality, but he sobered quickly at the sight of Duke Steele. Slim Curlew sized up the newcomer carefully. He had heard of French's downfall and was curious to see this young wildcat.

But French, in spite of his previous trouble, was diplomatic enough to drop all reference to it and introduced Duke to Curlew and Pete Black. None of them shook hands, but Curlew drew Duke aside.

"Did Le Moyne tell yuh what to do up here?" he asked hoarsely. Curlew had a whisky voice, which was almost asthmatic in quality.

Duke shook his head. "No, I'm not under orders from anybody."

"Tha's funny," observed Curlew. "Le Moyne ain't in the habit of doin' things like that. He usually tells yuh what to do, and he sees that yuh do it, too."

"Yeah?" Duke seemed amused, and his smile did not set any too well with Curlew.

"You fellers are afraid of Le Moyne, ain't yuh?" asked Duke.

"I don't sabe you," Curlew shook his head, ignoring Duke's question. He was afraid to talk business to Duke, for fear that Duke might have been sent to Calico on a secret mission.

"Don't let that bother yuh," grinned Duke. "Lotsa folks don't sabe me, Curlew. Le Moyne don't."

Curlew nodded and shoved his hands deeply into his pockets. "Heard about the Silver Bar, didn't yuh, Steele?"

Duke laughed. "I heard a girl was goin' to run it, if that's what yuh mean."

"Yeah. That can't last, though; Le Moyne will see to that."

"I reckon so. Got a place where a feller can sleep? I didn't get much sleep on that stage."

"Sure, I can fix yuh up, Steele."

Curlew led the way to a short stairway, which led to the rooms at the rear, and opened the door of his own private room. It was roughly furnished, but the bunk looked good to Duke Steele.

"Won't nobody bother yuh here," stated Curlew. "Sleep as long as yuh want to."

He went back down the stairs and joined French and Black at the bar.

"What do yuh think of him?" queried French.

"Look out for him," warned Curlew. "I've got a hunch that Le Moyne sent him in here to spy on us. He's too damned independent to just be a helper."

"Do yuh reckon Le Moyne's suspicious that we're—" began Black nervously.

"Shut up!" interrupted French. "If Le Moyne's suspicious that we're high-gradin' his mines or holdin' out on the gamblin' money—let him. A big crook

like Le Moyne is always suspicious. If this Steele is his spy, go easy. We've got to play soft with him, boys. Bumpin' him off might be easy, but it would start Le Moyne on our trail in no time."

"He'll have a hard time provin' anythin'," growled Curlew. "Whatcha goin' to do about the Silver Bar?"

"I'm sendin' word to Le Moyne tonight," said French, "and we'll let things go as they are until we hear from him. He'll know how to handle it."

"Then we keep our hands off this Steele, eh?" queried Black.

"If you know what's good for yuh," replied French, absently caressing his sore jaw.

THE news spread quickly in Calico, and when the stars peeped over the hills, Sunshine Alley spewed its polyglot horde into the main street. The Silver Bar was overcrowded. Never before had the play been as big, nor had liquor flowed in such quantities.



Duke Steele awoke and looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock, and he wondered at the lack of noise from the gambling room. It took him only a moment to dress, and he walked slowly through the big room, paying no attention to the idle attendants. On the sidewalk he met Curlew and French, who were coming to the Mojave.

"The girl is gettin' a big play, is she?" he asked.

Curlew swore softly and looked back toward the Silver Bar.

"Just somethin' new," grunted French. "We'll have 'em all back tomorrow night."

Duke walked on and crowded his way inside. The room was a roaring hive of sound; the rattle of poker chips, clinking of glasses, the screech of a fiddle, shuffling of many rough boots and the discord of many tongues.

A solid cloud of tobacco smoke eddied about the low ceiling, fogging the yellow oil lights; swooping down and making faces and forms grotesque and indistinct. Duke elbowed his way to the center of the room. It was like being in the midst of a herd of animals.

Suddenly he saw Luck Sled. She was standing against the end of the bar, dressed in black. Her face was very white and the misty-yellow lights only seemed to add a copper sheen to her hair. She seemed oddly out of place in there.

A man started to squirm past Duke, but looked into his face and stopped. The man was Mica Cates and he had recognized Duke Steele. Duke remembered him, too, and smiled.

"Well, you came back, eh?" said Mica, and started to say something else, but was shoved away by several more men who were going toward the bar.

Duke shoved past them and worked his way to a place beside Luck. For several moments she did not look his way, and when she did there was no sign of recognition. Her eyes strayed back to the crowd, and Duke smiled softly. It was all so new to her, in spite of the fact that she had lived in Calico for a long time.

"It's a big night, Miss Luck," said Duke.

She turned and looked at him, as she might have looked at any of the miners who had spoken to her that night, and nodded. Again she started to turn away, but her eyes came back to his face. For several moments she stared at him.

"You?" she gasped wonderingly. "You?"

"Yes'm, it's me," said Duke softly.

She moved in closer, still staring at him, and grasped him by the arm.

"I've looked—wondered, I mean," she stammered, a flush coloring her white cheeks.

"You've changed a lot in a year," said Duke. "Why, you was only a little kid."

They looked at each other, oblivious of the noise of the room.

"Why did you stay here, Luck?" asked Duke.

"I wanted to see you. I heard about the money you won that night. Nobody would ever tell me how much it was."

"Shucks, I thought everybody had forgotten that."

"How much was it?" asked Luck.

"I dunno," smiled Duke. "It doesn't matter, anyway."

"But I want to pay it to you—an honest debt," insisted Luck. "How much was it?"

Duke shook his head and smiled down at her, but suddenly the smile faded and he took her by the arm, roughly.

"My God, was that why you stayed here? To pay that old gamblin' debt, Luck?"

Luck looked away from him, as she

said, "I knew I'd never see you again if I went away, but I was sure you'd come back here some day."

Duke looked at her and around at the mass of men. He knew that Luck had stayed in a place she hated, just waiting for him to come back and get that money. And he had come back at last—not to collect a debt, but to help another man deprive her of everything.

Right now she was starting in to buck the most powerful man in the desert country; a man who would show her about as much mercy as a wounded grizzly would show. It was a forlorn hope for the frail girl—bucking a power she did not know about as yet. Duke looked at her and wondered if she would defy Le Moyne, if she knew what he intended to do.

A man had moved in close beside him and he turned to see the little Chinaman



looking around, his face as inscrutable as a piece of yellow parchment. Louie Yen had never been in there before. It was no place for an Oriental. He caught

Luck's eye and smiled.

"I come play li'l pokah, li'l gi'l," he grinned, and then looked at Duke Steele closely.

"I sabe yo'," he said. "Yo' come back, eh?"

"I knew he'd come back, Louie Yen," said Luck.

"Tha's ve'y nice," replied Louie. "Long time wish, bimeby come. I go now."

Louie Yen shuffled away into the crowd, heading toward the door. Duke looked after him, a queer expression in his eyes. Then he turned to Luck.

"He never came in here to gamble."

"No?" queried Luck.

Duke shook his head and smiled. "That Chinaman had a knife two feet long up his sleeve."

Luck glanced toward the door and back at Duke.

"Louie Yen is my friend. I haven't many in Calico."

"You don't need many of that kind," smiled Duke, and then, seriously, "Luck, this is no place for you. You can't stand this kind of a life."

"I've been told that before, Duke Steele."

"I wondered if you remembered my name, Luck," and then softly, "these men have no respect for any girl, Luck. The spawn of the devil work in these mines."

An altercation had broken out in the center of the room and the crowd surged toward that point. Blows were being exchanged, curses hurled freely. The room became a shoving, shouting mass of men. A table crashed to the floor. Suddenly a bottle whizzed over their heads—a flash of glass in the whirling smoke—and Duke Steele flung up his right hand and knocked it spinning, just as it was about to hit Luck in the face.

The heavy bottle numbed his hand and wrist, but he flung himself headlong into the mob, like a football player diving into the midst of a scrimmage. He had seen the man who threw the bottle; caught just a glimpse of his face in the hazy light.

Three men were in a clinch, struggling, doing little to hurt each other. One of them was Pete Black and the other two were miners from the Nola mine. Duke's rush carried him against them, and like a flash he caught Black by his big, red beard with both hands and fairly flung him off his feet into the close-packed mob.

The other two fighting miners drew apart and considered this newcomer. Neither of them bore any marks of conflict. The crowd howled loudly at the interruption, but Black scrambled back to his feet, his face distorted with rage and suffering. Some of his beard still dangled from Duke Steele's clenched fists.

Black was the bigger of the two, powerful as a grizzly, but slow to start. Duke Steele did not wait a moment. As Black surged to his feet, Duke stepped into him, driving his left fist flush into Black's face. The blow was well timed and it set Black back onto his heels.

But Black was no coward. He dropped into a crouch and covered clumsily, as he advanced slowly. Twice Duke ripped overhand blows to the bridge of Black's nose, but the big man only shook his head.

"Look out for his feet!" yelled a voice. "Black's a kicker!"

The warning came just in time. Quick as a flash, Black kicked straight for Duke's midriff, but Duke had sidestepped, set himself for the punch, and as Black's kick met only the empty air, which caused him to momentarily lose his balance, Duke drove a terrific uppercut to his unprotected jaw.

For several moments, Black pawed at the air, tottered on his legs and went down

in a crumpled heap. The miners shouted with drunken glee and tried to pick Duke up on their shoulders, but he managed to escape them and went back to where he had left Luck. She was not there.

Duke drew himself up on the bar and searched the crowd, but there was no sign



of her. The mob still yelped and surged about the room, their appetite whetted for anything now. Duke dropped down and forced his way to the doorway.

He gulped in a mouthful of fresh air and went out into the deserted street. His hands were cut and bleeding, and his right hand and wrist were swelling from the impact of the heavy bottle.

He wanted to find Luck, and he wondered if she had been frightened and run home. He knew where she lived, and he mechanically traveled up the hill toward her home. A dark blotch in the shadow of a building attracted his attention and he stopped to investigate. It was the crumpled figure of a man, and when he lifted the face to the moonlight he looked down into the features of Louie Yen.

There was a great blue welt above his left eye, but he was still breathing. Duke picked him up in his arms and from the rocky street came the clank of metal. It was Louie Yen's knife, which had fallen from his nerveless hand.

Duke picked up the long knife and glanced at it. The blade was discolored with blood.

"Got a little action, anyway, Louie Yen," he muttered, as he crossed the street, wondering where he could take the wounded Chinaman. Suddenly he saw Louie's sign, which dangled before his little shack, and into this he carried its owner.

There was a smell of wet clothes, strong soap and of many meals. He placed Louie on a hard bunk, drew down the shade on the only window, fastened the door and lighted the grimy oil lamp. Louie Yen mumbled to himself, while Duke bathed his head in lukewarm water from the barrel in the corner of the room. The blow on the head had knocked the Chinaman out, but Duke could find no other wounds on him. It appeared to have been a glancing blow, probably struck with the barrel

of a six-shooter, and intended to smash Louie Yen's skull.

Then Louie's eyes opened and he stared up at Duke. He turned his head and looked around the room and then tried to sit up. Duke had placed the knife on a rough table near the bunk, and now Louie looked keenly at it.

"Better take it easy," advised Duke, but Louie sat up and his slant eyes seemed to fairly blaze in his yellow face, as he pointed a claw-like hand toward the door. For a moment his tongue seemed paralyzed, but when the words did come they were like the crackle of pistol shots.

"Yo' go 'way from here!"

"Loco," thought Duke instantly.

Louie spat something in the Chinese tongue, which might have been a terrible curse, so earnestly was it spoken.

"How does your head feel?" asked Duke.

Louie shook his head vehemently, still pointing at the door. "I sabe yo'! Yo' go quick now!"

There was no doubt that Louie was deadly serious and not at all insane. Duke grinned and nodded, "All right, old-timer. Don't get all heated up."

But Duke backed toward the door. He was not taking any chances on Louie Yen, who was leaning forward off the bed, his slant eyes watching Duke with blazing hatred. Duke reached the door, unbarred it and started to go out; as Louie Yen flung himself forward to the table. His arm jerked up and backward; a silvery flash of light across the room, and the long knife tore a splinter of wood from the door casing and was caught tight as the door slammed shut behind Duke Steele.

Duke whirled and looked at the knife blade. The throw had been almost perfect, but Louie had delayed too long. Duke shuddered, as he walked back down the street. Louie's act had been so quick that it would have been almost impossible for Duke to have drawn a gun and stopped Louie ahead of the throw.

"Now, what made him do that?" wondered Duke. "Why did he try to kill me? He wasn't crazy, not a bit."

Duke stopped in the shadow of a building and tried to figure it out. Suddenly he realized that he was not wearing a hat. He had lost it in the Silver Bar, and he wondered grimly if there was anything left of his costly sombrero.

He went back to the Silver Bar, but was unable to make any search on account of the mob. Again he looked for Luck, but

she was nowhere in sight. Black was not there either, but in a few minutes he saw Slim Curlew at a roulette table.

Someone spoke to him and he turned to see Fire French grinning at him. French invited him to have a drink, but Duke refused.



"Seen anythin' of our fair gambler-hall maiden?" asked French.

Duke shook his head.

"Where's your hat?" asked French, grinning.

"Lost it in a fight," replied Duke coldly. "and I reckon it's been tromped plumb to bed-rock by this time."

"Fight?" French was interested.

"With your friend, Black."

"Oh!" French squinted closely at Duke. He knew that Black was a bad man in a fight, and he wondered how it could be that Duke Steele still had his being. Black usually put the boots to his victims, but Duke Steele did not seem to be suffering.

"Just a conversational battle?"

Duke lifted a swollen and cut pair of hands. "Look like it was, French? I reckon I made a soup-eater out of Black. The son-of-a-jackass tried to kick me, but I was lookin' for it. I hate a kicker."

"Yeah?" marveled French. "And then what?"

"Nothin'. He just stayed down, thassall."

"Thassall, eh?" French shook his head. "Steele, you can't do things like that here. Black is one of Le Moyne's best men. Didn't yuh know that?"

"Then Le Moyne is a damn poor judge of men," retorted Duke. "The more I hear about Le Moyne the more I think he's a big, greasy bluffer. If Pete Black is the type of men that Le Moyne is usin' in his big game, Le Moyne is due to lose. They say that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, French; Le Moyne's chain has got a lot of weak links. He made a mistake in hirin' tin-horn crooks to sit in a big game."

French's jaw muscles tightened and his eyes twitched, but he managed to control himself. A burning hatred of this cold-eyed young man seared his soul, but he was afraid. Then, without a word, he turned and went out of the Silver Bar.

Duke grinned softly. He knew that French was afraid of him. Calico was going to be an unhealthy place for him, he knew. Somewhere was Pete Black, minus several teeth and much prestige. Miners are quick to back a fighter, but, like the rest of humanity, are quick to lose confidence in a man after he has been whipped.

Duke left the Silver Bar and went to the Mojave. A few miners were in there, but the Mojave was far from being a lively place. He went back to Curlew's room, barred the door and went to bed, wondering what had become of Luck Sleed, wondering why the Chinaman had spat at him and threw the long knife at his back.

CARTIER LE MOYNE was an early riser. Long before the first tints of dawn painted the desert sky he could be found in his office, poring over smelter reports, planning further conquests. The smelter belonged to Le Moyne, but no one, except Le Moyne and the general manager, knew this.

This morning Le Moyne's face was drawn in a deep scowl, as he looked over the reports and read the name of "Telluride" Taylor. Opposite his name was a credit of five hundred dollars. Each monthly report showed a big net for Taylor. His ore was the richest in the desert.

Time after time had Le Moyne's men tried to trail Taylor to his mine, but he always managed to fade away into the desert, leaving them baffled. Then, silently herding his pack-train of burros, he would appear in Cactus City and unload at the smelter.

Le Moyne had grown to hate Taylor, although he admired his skill in covering the trail. If one man, working alone, with only a few burros for transportation, could bring in such wealth, what could Le Moyne do with a force of men?

Le Moyne tossed the reports into a drawer, got to his feet and went back to his stable, where he kept a horse. He was too unsettled to work; so he saddled the horse and rode away into the desert, going out the Calico road.

Far away in the distance the sun was striking the black peaks, making them appear as golden cones on an ebony base. A few minutes later the light changed to a violet hue, shot with gold, changing suddenly to a deep amber, shot with cobalt streaks. It was like the fading out of one tint and the fading in of another on a motion picture screen.

Then the world seemed to grow brighter as the harsh light of morning drove away the soft-hued tints, and the desert stood out in its true colors.

Le Moyne rode slowly, looking out upon the desert, as a baron of old might have looked upon a land he intended to conquer. It was not a fair land in the light of day, but to Le Moyne it meant wealth and power.



He left the road and rode slowly to a brushy hillock, where a group of Joshua-palms, the "Dancing Jaspers," of the desert, grew thickly. A jack-rabbit scooted from in front of him and bounced like a gray shadow up the slope, and a coyote, as gray as the desert brush, gave him one glance and limped away into the heavy cover.

Near the top of the hillock Le Moyne drew rein. Far down the road came the stage from Calico, a thin cloud of dust blowing away from it in the slight breeze. To Le Moyne's ears came the faint tinkle of a bell.

He moved further into the cover of the palms and watched the stage coming swiftly. To his ears came the tinkle, tinkle of a bell again, and it seemed to be on the far side of the hill. He watched the stage until it was near enough to be hidden from his sight.

Minute after minute passed, still the stage did not come into sight. There was no reason for the delay. Then he turned his horse and rode around the side of the hill, seeking to find why the stage had stopped, but before he reached the point of the hill the stage drove past him and went on toward Cactus City.

Le Moyne lit a cigar and watched the stage fade out in a haze of dust. The sun was already growing hot, so he turned and rode down the hill. Again he heard the tiny tinkle of the bell, but this time the sound of it was continuous, as though the animal wearing it was traveling steadily.

He turned and rode around the point of the hill, where he met a herd of five burros, heavily laden with sacks of ore, and behind them came a weather-beaten prospector, carrying a rifle over his shoulder.

It was Telluride Taylor, with his ship-

ment of rich silver ore, heading toward the smelter. Le Moyne did not wait to meet him, but turned and rode back toward Cactus City.

Suddenly he drew rein and his eyes narrowed in thought. Something had just occurred to him; something that burned into his soul like a white-hot brand. Had the stage stopped there to unload those sacks of high-grade silver ore? Was Telluride Taylor waiting there to receive the stolen ore?

These thoughts caused Le Moyne to straighten up in his saddle and curse witheringly. If that was a fact, it was easy to see why his hired men had never been able to trail Telluride to his treasure mine. They were in partnership to beat him. Right now they were laughing at Le Moyne; stealing from him, while they took his pay.

In a haze of anger he rode back and stabled his horse. He was too wise to shout his knowledge to the four winds, and there was no trace of anger in him when he met the stage-driver and received the report from Fire French. The written report read:

Let us know what you expect of Steele. Do not know where to use him. Acts like he owned the town and seems to be looking for trouble. Will not take orders from anyone. Luck Sleed fired me and all the gang from the Silver Bar and is going to try to run it herself. Tell us what you want done. Black says everything is going good.

French.

Le Moyne read the message carefully. Things were not going at all well with him, but he smiled at the reference to Duke Steele looking for trouble.

"I dunno what got into that danged girl," said the driver. "She ain't showin' much sense."

Le Moyne looked coldly at him, as he folded up the message and said, "I'll go to Calico with you tonight."

"All right," said the driver slowly. "Mebbe that'll help some."

"I think it will," meaningly, "in more ways than one."

Le Moyne turned and crossed the street



just ahead of Telluride Taylor's string of burros, but did not even look at Telluride. The driver watched him go into his office and squinted thoughtfully.

"In more ways than one, eh?" he muttered. "Jist what in hell did he mean by that, do yuh suppose?"

As there was no one there to answer the question, the driver shook his head and went seeking a bed.

MICA CATES had also spent a bad night. Somehow he felt responsible for Luck, wanted to help her, but she was nowhere to be found. A miner had told him about the big fight between Black and the newcomer, and he had gone back to the Silver Bar, but could not find anybody who knew what had become of Luck.

One of the bartenders remembered seeing her talking with Duke Steele, but had not seen her after the fight. Nearly all night Mica had sat on Luck's doorstep, waiting for her, wondering what had happened to her. It was after daylight when he came down the street to Louie Yen's laundry. The door was closed, but Mica opened it and peered inside.

Louie Yen was humped up on a box beside his ironing board, his head swathed in bandages. He was smoking a long pipe, while he slowly whetted his long knife with a tiny hone.

"Hyah, Louie," greeted Mica, coming inside. "Seen anythin' of Luck?"

Louie stopped honing and stared at Mica. His old face seemed to have aged years in one night.

"Yo' no find?" he asked softly.

"Dang it all—no!" Mica was very positive. "I've looked all over for her, Louie. What happened to you?"

Louie's hand went to his bandage and he shook his head.

"You don't know?" asked Mica.

"I know," nodded Louie. "Mebbe know too much; yo' sabe?"

"Thasso? Whatcha mean, Louie?"

"Know too much, mebbe die," ominously.

"Aw, shucks! What's got into yuh?"

Louie picked up his hone and knife and began to put a razor edge on the long knife. The room was silent, but for the keen, *wheen, wheen*, of the hone against fine steel.

"Yuh make me nervous," complained Mica. "I asked yuh if yuh knew where Luck Sleed is, but yuh never said."

"No can do," Louie shook his head, but

did not look up. "I hear two men talk in dark las' night. Louie Yen ki'p very quiet."

He tested the blade on the ball of his thumb and began honing again, while he continued in a sing-song tone, "One man say wait li'l gi'l and other man say why wait fo' big man say what to do? Yo' takum now. One man say we fixum scheme. They go 'way. Louie Yen no can go to see. Louie Yen bimeby gonsee li'l gi'l and fin' li'l gi'l talk to one man."

"Louie Yen go outside, see what can fin'. Bimeby big fight. Louie Yen see two men in dark, carry li'l gi'l. She scream, but no can make hear. Louie Yen hear. Louie Yen try catch li'l gi'l. No can do."

Louie pointed to the bandage on his head and again he tested the edge of his knife.

"Somebody steal her?" gasped Mica, getting to his feet.

Louie nodded slowly and the lines deepened in his old yellow face.

"Louie," Mica's voice quavered, "Louie, do yuh know who it was?"

"No can do," Louie shook his head. "One man wear big hat—w'ite hat; yo' sabe?"

"With silver trimmin'?" asked Mica quickly.

"Yes-s-s," answered Louie. "Yo' sabe now?"

Mica nodded quickly. He knew that Duke Steele was the only man in Calico who wore that kind of headgear.

"No sabe?" Louie shook his head. "W'y he steal li'l gi'l? Long time she look fo' him. Plenty glad fo' see him."

"I don't sabe it either, Louie. Who do yuh reckon they meant when they spoke about the big man? Who is he?"

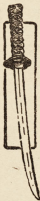
"No can tell, Mica. He say not wait fo' big man. Bimeby we fin' out. Ah-h-h-h!" Louie's gnarled thumb tested the edge of the knife and had found it perfect. He picked up his pipe and began smoking.

"Well, ain't we goin' look for her?" demanded Mica impatiently.

"No can do," Louie shook his head. "Hunt now, never fin'; yo' sabe? Li'l gi'l plenty safe now. Too much look, mebbe almos' fin'—no safe."

"Yuh reckon they can't afford to let us find her?"

"Um-m-m. Eyes no good fo' hunt now. Somebody talk bimeby."



"All right, Louie, but I sure want to git m' hands on the dirty coyotes that stole her."

"Plenty time; yo' wait," advised Louie softly.

Mica nodded and went outside. It was blistering hot and not even a dog was in sight on the street. He went slowly down past the Silver Bar and into the Mojave. Duke Steele was sitting at a card table, playing solitaire.

He smiled and nodded at Mica, who sat down at the table. Mica noticed that Duke was not wearing a hat and there was no sign of the hat on the table nor on any of the chairs. Neither of the men spoke. It was stifling hot in there and finally Duke threw the cards aside and leaned back in his chair.

"This country ain't cooled off none since I was here a year ago," observed Duke. He had placed his hands on the table, and Mica could see that they were swollen and bruised. Duke noticed Mica's glance and grinned.

"Compliments of Pete Black," he remarked, indicating his hands. "Have yuh seen him today?"

Mica shook his head. He had heard of the fight.

Duke studied Mica Cates for a while and then leaned across the table toward him, as he asked softly, "Do you know where Luck Sled is, Cates?"

Mica shook his head. "No, do you?"

Duke smiled and shook his head, "No, but I'd sure like to, y'betcha."

Mica could not help feeling that Duke was in earnest. Either that, or he was a good actor and wanted to find out how much Mica Cates knew.

"When did yuh see her last?" queried Mica.

"Just before I fought with Pete Black. I was talkin' with her when the fight started and I took a hand in it. When the fight was over she had disappeared."

Mica blinked over this information, but he was not going to let Duke Steele know his suspicions. Then, before he thought, he blurted the question, "Steele, who is the big man you're workin' for?"

Duke stared closely at Mica and leaned slowly back in his chair. "Big man?" he asked. "What do yuh mean, Cates?"

"You know what I mean, Steele."

"Do I?" Duke smiled at Mica's anxious face.

"Listen," said Mica, "I ain't sayin' I ain't afraid of you, Steele. You've licked two good men with your hands since you

came here, and I sabe what you can do with a gun, but," Mica stopped and leaned closer, "but jist the same I'm askin' yuh what yuh done with Luck Sled?"

"What I done with her?" Duke's smile was gone now and his voice was hard. "Would I be lookin' for her, if I knew where she is, Cates?"

Cates shook his head, but was unconvinced.

"What do yuh mean by 'big man'?" demanded Duke.

Mica licked his lips slowly, but decided to try and bluff it through.

"You and another man talked about a big man last night, Steele; and it sounds like you was workin' for him. One of yuh wanted Luck Sled and decided to steal her. That fight was jist a blind to steal her out of the crowd."

Duke squinted closely at Mica, whose face was beaded with perspiration, and a glimmer of understanding came to him.

"Did you hear me talkin' to another man?" demanded Duke. Mica shook his head.

"Then how do yuh figure it was me?"

"One of the men that stole Luck Sled was wearin' a big, white sombrero, with silver trimmin's, Steele. Where is your hat?"

Duke shook his head. "Pardner, I reckon the verdict is easy to read. I'm much obliged to yuh, jist the same."

He leaned over and picked up the cards, paying no attention to Mica, who got to



his feet and went back to the street. At the doorway he looked back at Duke, who was building another solitaire layout.

Mica scratched his head and tried to re-

view just what Duke Steele had said. He had not told who the big man was, nor had he admitted stealing Luck Sled. Somehow, Mica felt that Duke Steele had had nothing to do with it. He had thanked Mica for some information, but Mica was not aware that he had explained anything to him.

THAT night, French, Black and Curlew met in Curlew's room at the rear of the Mojave. Black's lips were puffed and discolored, one eye was as pur-

ple as a plum and all of his front teeth were missing. He had not been able to eat solid food that day and whisky was a torture to his sore lips and mouth.

French was in sympathy with Black, because his own jaw was still sore from Duke Steele's fist, but Curlew was rather amused at both of them.

"I'll kill him, if it's the last thing I ever do," declared Black. "I don't care a damn what Le Moyne says."

"If I was goin' to kill him, I'd hire it done," said Curlew. "After seein' what he done to both of you fellers, I'm workin' shy of that hombre. Is he such a hell of a fighter, or are you jaspers overrated?"

French and Black made no reply. Curlew knew that both of them were well known as fighters, and he was only joking them about their recent defeats.

"He's a gunman, too," said French, as though admitting that Steele was a good fighter with his fists. "A year ago he kinda cleaned up around here."

"Whatcha tryin' to do, scare yourself or us?" demanded Black.

"I'm tellin' yuh some history, Black."

"History don't repeat itself, French. I ain't a danged bit scared of this hard-headed fool, even if you are."

"Still, yuh don't know him and Le Moyne are hooked up," said French. "I'd advise layin' off him until we hear from Le Moyne and see where this feller stands."

Came a knock on the door, but before anyone could speak, a man came into the room. He was grimy from the desert and his face was brick-red from the intense heat.

"Just got in," he informed them huskily. "Damn horse went down on me about three miles down the road and I had to walk the rest of the way."

"What's the idea, Pell?" asked French nervously.

The newcomer picked up a bottle of liquor from the table and took a long drink.

"Plumb dried out inside," he explained, sitting down on the bunk and half-removing his boots before he continued.

"Telluride sent me in. Said that he got the ore, but that he saw Le Moyne about a minute after he got loaded, and he's plumb scared that Le Moyne saw them. He went over and woke up the stage-driver and he said that Le Moyne was comin' to Calico with him t'night."

"Hell!" exploded French, getting nervously to his feet.

"Hang onto yourself!" snapped Curlew.

"You're as nervous as an old lady, French. Mebbe he didn't see nothin'."



"And if he did?" said Black ominously. "Are we goin' to eat dirt for Le Moyne? You'd think he was the devil himself."

The man called Pell helped himself to more liquor, while the other three men pondered deeply.

"If yuh want my advice," said Black, "I'd say that we better get rid of this Steele right away. Yuh know damn well that he's sweet on Luck Sled, French."

"Lot of good it's doin' him," grinned French.

"If trouble started in the Silver Bar tonight, and Steele happened to be there," suggested Curlew meaningly, "Le Moyne never hired us to take care of Steele."

French got to his feet again and paced the length of the room several times. He stopped at the table and looked at Black and Curlew, who had been watching him.

"Black is right," declared French. "Why should we eat dirt for Le Moyne? Is he any better than we are? Let's take Calico for ourselves, and to hell with Le Moyne! I'm tired of taking orders from him. When he shows up here he's as helpless as any other man, ain't he? How about it?"

"That's the idea," applauded Black. "We won't only set into the big game, but we'll run it, eh?"

"And take the rakeoff for ourselves," nodded Curlew.

Pell finished the bottle and went back into the saloon, where he got a couple of more drinks and went out. Duke Steele was in the room. He had seen Pell enter the room, and knew that Black, Curlew and French were in there.

Pell was just a trifle unsteady on his legs, as he went out into the street, and Duke had no difficulty in shadowing him. Several times Pell stopped and looked back, but Duke kept to the heavy shadows. Down near where the road sloped sharply off into the desert, Pell stopped and spoke a word. A moment later another man joined him and Duke heard the husky voice of Le Moyne, as he talked to Pell.

Duke was unable to get close enough to find out what the conversation was about, but he heard Le Moyne tell Pell to stable the horses where no one would see them, and a few moments later Le Moyne passed Duke's hiding-place, going slowly toward the lighted street.

As soon as he was safely past, Duke circled back to the upper end of the street. He was curious to know just why Le Moyne had come secretly to Calico. Something had gone wrong with his plans, that much was sure, and Duke thought it might concern the disappearance of Luck Sled.

He felt sure, after what he had learned from Mica Cates, that French and Curlew were the ones that had kidnapped Luck. There was no question in his mind but what the fight had been started to attract the attention of the crowd, and that Black had thrown the bottle to draw him away from Luck. Of course, Black had not expected it to turn out so badly for him.

Duke had lost his hat, which was not part of their plans, but one of them had worn it, possibly on the chance that they might shift the blame, in case they were seen by anyone on the street. It was fairly clear to Duke now, the reasons for Louie Yen's hatred. "No doubt," thought Duke, "the Chinaman recognized me by the hat, because there was not another hat like it in Calico."

Duke had come in beside Louie Yen's laundry and now he stopped near the corner.



A man was coming toward him, and Duke thought that this might possibly be Le Moyne. As he drew back into the deeper shadows something descended upon his head, knocking him

flat on his face.

Dimly he heard voices and felt someone dragging him into the house. In a hazy way he felt them binding his hands, but was unable to prevent them. Gradually the roaring noise died out of his ears and he came back to almost full consciousness, but he did not open his eyes nor try to move.

His nose informed him that he was inside of Louie Yen's laundry and that Louie was talking to someone in his own peculiar pidgin-English.

"Bimeby he talk now, yo' sabe? Louie Yen fin' out."

"That's a damn heathen way of doin' things," replied Mica Cates' voice. "I wouldn't do it, Louie."

"I watch him," stated Louie. "He walk after man, who meet one man. One man ve'y big, yo' sabe?"

"Thasso?" Mica was interested. "And then you trailed Steele up here and hit him on the head."

"Yes-s-s, like yo' see. Bimeby this man tell where is li'l gi'l, yo' sabe?"

"How hot do yuh have to git them irons?" asked Mica.

"Plenty hot."

Louie got up and shuffled softly into the rear room. Duke's eyes flashed open. He was lying in the middle of the floor, flat on his back, with both hands tied behind him. Mica Cates was standing near him, watching him closely.

"Cates," Duke whispered softly, "does that Chinaman think I know where Luck Sled is hidden?"

Mica glanced swiftly toward the rear, dropped on his hands and knees and with a swift motion of a knife, cut Duke's hands loose.

"Gun's on the table," he breathed.

But Duke did not move. Louie Yen was coming in from the rear room, carrying a flat-iron, the handle of which was heavily wrapped in rags. There was a smell of burning cloth, as Louie Yen knelt at the feet of Duke Steele and placed the hot iron on the floor.

Duke had drawn up his feet, and as Louie took hold of one of his boots Duke shoved him violently aside, sprang to his feet, grasped the six-shooter and whirled to look down at the little old Chinaman, sprawled on the floor.

Louie Yen was not looking at Duke, but at the strands of rope on the floor; strands which had been cut with a very sharp knife. Then he got slowly to his feet, shook his head sadly and sat down on a box; a very sorrowful looking old Chinaman.

"I had t' do it, Louie Yen," said Mica softly. "He's a white man."

Duke studied the two of them, pitied them in their puny efforts to get information of Luck Sled.

"Yuh don't need to feel bad about it, Louie," said Duke consolingly. "Burnin' my feet wouldn't make me tell where that girl is, 'cause I don't know. I lost my hat in the fight and somebody stole it. I found you out there in the street."

Louie Yen's beady eyes studied Duke's face for a while, unblinking.

"Yo' don' know where is li'l gi'l?"

"No," Duke shook his head. "Not any more than you do."

"No can fin'," Louie shook his head, while the hot iron sent up a vile odor of burning cloth. Duke kicked the iron aside and felt of the lump on his head. It was very sore, but there was little blood. Louie noticed Duke's actions and shook his head sadly.

"Ve'y solly," he muttered. "Louie Yen plenty damn fool; yo' sabe?"

"Never mind me," grinned Duke, "I've got a hard head, and I've got an idea. Will you two jaspers help me work it out?"

"Tell it," grunted Mica Cates. "We've tried everythin' else."

"Here's what yuh got to do," explained Duke. "One of yuh watch the rear door and the other the front door of the Silver Bar, while I go inside. Watch for Pete Black, French or Slim Curlew. If any of them come out, follow 'em and find out where they go. Do yuh understand?"

"Mo' bettah," nodded Louie Yen, getting to his feet.

"And look out," warned Duke. "Hell is due to bust loose in Calico tonight, unless I can't read signs, and we're liable to get singed a little."

"Let her bust," replied Mica.

Duke turned to the door. "You fellers wait a minute, 'cause I don't want to be seen with yuh."

Duke went down the street and into the Silver Bar. There was a fair sized crowd inside, but the place was orderly. Pete Black was at a poker-table, French was at a roulette layout, and Curlew was standing at the bar, talking to the man named Pell, who had brought the message to them from Telluride Taylor.

Bud Harvey was one of the bartenders, and he nodded pleasantly to Duke, who stepped in beside Curlew and Pell.

"Miss Luck ain't got here yet, has she?" asked Duke.

Bud Harvey shook his head. "No, I ain't seen her today and I was wonderin' if she wasn't comin' down tonight. None of the boys has seen her today."

"She's been away," said Duke casually, "but she ought to be here pretty quick."

Duke felt that Curlew had turned and was looking at him, but he calmly poured out his drink and paid for it. Then he sauntered toward the rear of the room and moved in beside a faro layout, where he could turn, facing the room.

Curlew walked part way to the door with Pell, but left him and went straight to the poker game and spoke to Pete Black, who got out of his chair. Only a word was exchanged, and Black turned to cash in his chips.

Duke glanced at French, who was watching Black and Curlew. Curlew signaled cautiously to French and walked slowly back to the bar, followed in a moment by Black. None of them looked toward Duke, but he knew that three pairs of eyes were watching him.

To anyone else it would seem that these three men were having a friendly drink, but Duke felt that this conference might mean a lot to him. They finished their drink and all walked over to the roulette layout, laughing. Duke walked toward the rear of the room, where the two-piece orchestra was screeching out a discordant tune, and when he turned and looked toward the roulette game, Pete Black was not there. In fact he was not in the Silver Bar. Duke grinned and sauntered down the room until he stood near French and Curlew. A half-drunk miner came in the door and stumbled toward the bar.

"Wha's matter with the Mojave?" he asked loudly. "Has she gone out of business?"

Several people looked at him curiously, and he seemed to realize that he was the center of interest, so he continued:

"Locked up tight, zat's what she is. Whazza matter, eh?"

French strode over to the man and grasped him by the arm.

"What do yuh mean?" he demanded.

"Mojave's closed," insisted the drunk. "Lights all out and a padlock on the door."

"What the hell does that mean?" queried Curlew. "Who would do that?"

French whirled toward the door and Curlew almost trod on his heels in his hurry to get out and see what had happened. Duke grinned, as he realized that this was Le Moyne's first move, but he did not know just what it meant. Duke did not know that Black, French and Curlew had announced their intentions to double-cross Le Moyne, and that Le Moyne knew this.

Duke turned and went out the back door, where he called softly, and was joined by Mica Cates.

"Black went out the front door," said Duke.

"Then Louie Yen is on his trail," grinned Mica, "and that danged Chink could trail a buzzard and never be seen."

"And that ain't no lie," replied Duke. "I know it."

As they started around the corner a bulky figure almost ran into them. Quick as a flash, Duke whipped out his gun and covered the man, who backed against the wall; the face of him showing clear in the moonlight.

It was Le Moyne, dangerous as a cornered wolf, who snarled at Duke, "You, too, eh? Well, damn you—shoot!"

Duke shook his head, but kept the muzzle of the big six-shooter leveled at Le Moyne's waistline.

"Not unless I have to, Le Moyne," replied Duke.

"Better take my advice," said Le Moyne coldly. "You'll never have a better chance."

"Never want a better one," smiled Duke. "Meet my friend Mica Cates, Mr. Le Moyne."

"Aw, hell!" exploded Le Moyne. "What's the use of all this, Steele?"

"Courtesy," replied Steele. "You fellows ain't never met," and then to Mica, "this is the big man yuh heard about, Mica."

"You're takin' chances on not pullin' that trigger," reminded Le Moyne coldly.

Duke laughed. "You don't scare me, Le Moyne. You told me that you had some good men up here, but I whipped two of them and am willin' to try the other one. I've lost all faith in you, big feller. You picked some fine scorpions to handle this end of the big game."

"I've found that out," agreed Le Moyne warmly, "and that is why I'm up here tonight. How much have they promised you, Steele?"

"A spot in Hell's Depot," grinned Duke. "What do you mean, Steele?"

"Just what I said. I didn't like this gang and I had to whip French a few minutes after I landed here. Last night I fought Pete Black and moved most of his teeth. I ain't had no chance to mix with Curlew yet."

Le Moyne laughed harshly. "I wish I had seen it. Now, the question is this—are you still with me, Steele?"

"Nope," Duke shook his head, but added, "I'm not against yuh, Le Moyne, except in one thing. You can take the Mojave des-

ert and everythin' in the danged spot, except Luck Slead's property."

"Yeah? Got stuck on the girl, did yuh, Steele?"

"I'm squeezin' the trigger," said Duke softly, "and another remark like that finishes the deal for you. Your hired tin-horns stole her last night, Le Moyne."

"Not on my orders," defended Le Moyne quickly. "Mine was a freeze-out game—not a kidnapping. I might beat her out of what she owns, but I'm damned if I'd injure her."

"You've got a lot of control over your men, ain't yuh?"

"I will have when I'm through with 'em," retorted Le Moyne hotly. "That's why I'm up here. They don't look for me until mornin', but I choked the truth out of the stage-driver. They've been stealin' from me all the time, Steele. I sent a man I could trust to tell 'em that I was comin' on the night stage, and they talked too much before him. They're goin' to try and shove me out of Calico."

"And you've only got that one man with yuh?" queried Duke. "A drunk! Do yuh realize what you're up against? There's Black, French, Curlew, a handful of gamblers and all of Black's men from both mines. They're all gettin' their share of the loot. What can one man do against that crowd?"

"By God, I'll show 'em what Le Moyne can do!"

"You're a big-headed fool!" snapped Duke. "You've dreamed about ownin' the desert until it's gone to your head, Le



Moyne. Wake up for a minute and figure out just who you are. One man! Are yuh bullet-proof? Can yuh shoot so fast that yuh can buck an army? This job will take a lot of brains, which you ain't got."

Le Moyne was silent for several moments, as this seemed to percolate through his mind. No man had ever talked like that to him before; no man had dared to talk like that to Le Moyne. He shrugged his big shoulders and leaned back against the building.

"Well, Steele, I never thought about it—like—that. I guess—probably—I've got the—wrong—idea."

"You ain't exactly brainless," remarked Duke.

"Almost," Le Moyne smiled crookedly. "What would you do, if you was in my place, Steele?"

"I wouldn't try to fool myself into thinkin' that I was all-powerful, Le Moyne."

"All right." Le Moyne's tone was almost meek.

"Got a gun?"

Le Moyne threw his coat open, disclosing a cartridge belt and two heavy guns.

"Can yuh shoot straight?"

"No." Le Moyne was honest. "I never was a good shot."

"It's a wonder yuh ever come this close to bein' a king of the desert," declared Duke.

"I hired my shootin' done," said Le Moyne, half-humorously, half-bitterly.

"Well, yuh ain't got money enough to hire a trigger-finger tonight," declared Duke, "so yuh better forget ownin' the desert and concentrate on shootin'."

"You won't lose nothin' by stickin' to me," assured Le Moyne, "neither one of you."

"Aw, forget the pay," grunted Duke. "Why did yuh close up the Mojave?"

"I scared the devil out of that gang in there," Le Moyne laughed nervously. "They all know me. I wanted to get that bunch all together in one place; so I cleaned out the Mojave and locked the door."

"And by now every one of your hired crooks know that you are in Calico. Le Moyne, you've got a fine chance to never leave Calico alive. There's only one hope left, and that hinges on the fact that you hired a bunch of tin-horns to run your business. How much nerve have you got?"

"Why do you ask me that?" queried Le Moyne.

"Have you got nerve enough to walk into that gang and start shootin'?"

"Do we have to do that, Steele?"

"No-o-o, we can run away."

"Feller can't die but once." Thus Mica Cates, speaking for the first time since they met Le Moyne.

"I'm a poor runner," said Le Moyne, "and there's plenty of time to run when we're scared, Steele."

"And Luck Sled won't lose?" queried Duke.

"Not even what Black's gang stole," said Le Moyne. "I've got the smelter lists to check back on it, Steele."

"You may never be a king," observed Duke, "but you're a couple of notches above bein' a knave. Come on."

FRENCH and Curlew found the Mojave padlocked and the lights out. Several of the miners who were in the pay of Pete Black followed them. One of the bartenders and a man who had run a roulette outfit for Curlew were in front of the place.

"What in hell is goin' on here?" demanded Curlew.

"Hell is right," agreed the gambler. "Le Moyne closed the place a few minutes ago."

"Le Moyne!" gasped French. "Is he here?"

"He sure is," grunted the bartender. "He's here like a wolf, French."

"But he wasn't due here until mornin'," said Curlew in a half-whisper. "Why did he—?"

"Pell!" French's voice broke thinly. "Pell came with him, Slim! He heard what we said about takin' Calico for ourselves. Le Moyne knows now where Telluride's rich ore comes from, and he's up here—"

"With only Pell behind him!" snapped Curlew. "Two men, and one of them drunk! Get the gangs from both mines. Black will be back in a few minutes."

"Where's Steele?" queried French nervously. "Damn him, he's a spy of Le Moyne's."

"I'll get the gang," said one of the miners, and ran heavily toward the rim of Sunshine Alley.

"Get back in the shadows," advised Curlew. "We'll wait for the miners and Black."

Calico was strangely silent now. Only the yellow lights of the Silver Bar made a greenish glow in the blue haze of moon-lighted street. It was a land of blocky, grotesque shadows, high-lighted by a moon,



like a huge globe suspended but a short distance away from the earth.

Then, from far down in Sunshine Alley came the thin, indistinct notes of a violin;

from out in the desert came the eerie wail of a half-starved coyote. A man in the doorway of the Silver Bar laughed drunkenly and began singing in a hoarse voice.

French cursed audibly. Men were coming up over the rim of Sunshine Alley now, and hurrying toward the Mojave. The notes of the violin had ceased. The man in the doorway of the Silver Bar stopped singing and went back inside. It was Pell, the Le Moyne spy; singing to keep up his courage.

Duke Steele heard him singing, as he opened the rear door of the Silver Bar and led Le Moyne and Mica Cates inside. The games were still running and men were at the bar, drinking, but a silence had seemed to settle over the room. A man cursed at Pell, who turned and came back to the bar.

Several men glanced curiously at Le Moyne. He was so big that he towered like a giant in the low ceilinged room. Men were coming in both front and rear doors now; big, hulking miners, with the colored muck of the silver mines on their clothes.

"Look out!" called Duke at Le Moyne. "These are all Black's men. Hell's due to take a recess in a minute!"

A big miner lurched into Le Moyne, staggering him. It might have been unintentional, but Le Moyne smashed the man full in the face with a terrific blow and the big miner spun like a top into a roulette table, crashing it down like a mass of kindling.

A woman screamed, breaking the momentary silence after the crash; just outside the door, from somewhere in that mass of men, came the smack of a pistol shot. Pell, who was backed against the bar, with arms outspread, flung his arms across his face, as though to protect himself, and plunged headlong into the crowd.

The place was a bedlam now. Duke saw French and Curlew near the door, but was unable to use his gun in that crush of humanity. Le Moyne was fighting like a great grizzly, using his hands instead of his guns. Mica Cates was lost in the confusion, but Duke felt that the little bow-legged man was giving a good account of himself.

Duke managed to get his gun loose and was using it as a club. He had no desire to kill the miners, but he did want to come to close quarters with either Curlew or French. He was dazed and shaken from blows, which seemed to rain on him from every direction. A flying bottle cut his

cheek and the blood ran into his mouth, a salty stream.

Blindly he reversed his gun and shot straight ahead, trying to clear a path to the door. It was a case of three against thirty, and Duke knew that it was only a question of time until the thirty would win.

He went to his knees from a smashing blow on the back of his head, but managed to hang onto his gun. Men walked on him, fell over him, but he surged to his feet and found himself near the door.

The bloody face of Fire French leered at him and he smashed at it with his gun-barrel and French went backward. A bullet seared his neck and the powder burned



his chin, but he whirled and tried to shoot Curlew, but a big miner fell into him, knocking him outside the door.

The lamps went out and the fight continued in the dark. French and Curlew were screaming orders; trying to tell their men that part of the quarry had escaped. A blaze sprang up from a smashed lamp, as Duke staggered into the street, trying to fill his lungs with air and to shake the haze from his brain.

He staggered over a huddled figure, which fired a gun, the bullet missing him by a yard. Duke saw the man's face and yanked him to his feet. It was Mica Cates, sobbing, cursing.

Men were coming out of the Silver Bar, and they seemed to be still fighting. An orange-colored flash pointed toward Duke and Mica, and a bullet screamed off the rocks at their feet.

Duke grasped Mica by the arm and hurried him toward the rim of Sunshine Alley. Both of them staggered, and Duke smiled grimly to think that it was a case of the blind leading the blind.

"Not into the Alley!" wailed Mica. "They'll find us too easy. The tunnels, Steele! Climb the hill—past—Luck's place."

"You know this place better than I do, Mica," agreed Duke, "so you lead the way."

Both men were reeling, dizzy from their injuries, but they climbed the steep trails up the cliffs, while behind them came the howling of the mob, growing fainter all the time.

"God help Le Moyné!" panted Duke.

"They'll kill him," choked Mica, "but we couldn't help him none. Thank God, they're not on our trail yet."

Mica led the way into a tunnel, which was so dark that they were forced to travel slowly, feeling their way along. It seemed to Duke that they had gone miles, when Mica drew him at right angles and into another tunnel, which sloped sharply upward.

"Goin' into the Lady Slipper," panted Mica. "They won't look for us in there, and if they don't guard the bottom we can go down on ropes to the trails below."

Then the tunnel floor leveled out, and Duke knew that they were on the Lady Slipper level. Suddenly he stumbled and sprawled against the side of the drift. Mica Cates was swearing and floundering around.

"Got a match?" wheezed Mica. Duke found one and scratched it on the wall. Lying in the center of the tunnel was the crumpled body of Louie Yen, and the match-light flickered on the long-bladed knife beside him.

"Black got him!" croaked Mica, steady-ing himself with both hands, while he peered down at Louie Yen. "Look out for Black."

They stumbled on, going more cautiously now. The tunnel grew lighter now, as though they were approaching daylight. Then it widened into a big stope. To the left was the mouth of a tunnel, like the bore of a giant cannon, and silhouetted against the moonlight, crawling toward the opening, was a huge, animal-like figure.

As they stopped they could hear it whimpering, like an animal that had been whipped severely.

"My God, it's Black!" croaked Mica hoarsely.

The figure had reached the edge, and now it seemed to grasp a rope, swing over the rim and disappear.

Duke started for the opening, but Mica grasped him by the arm. "Luck must be here, Steele! To hell with Black!"

They turned and staggered back through the stope, where they found Luck Sleed, bound with ropes and lying against a pile

of broken rock. Her face was like a white mask in the dim light, and she did not speak while Duke cut the ropes from her.

Lying beside her was a big, white sombrero, with Mexican silver trimmings. Duke picked it up and put it on his head. Luck was watching him closely and now she tried to get to her feet, but she had been bound for so long that her arms and legs were paralyzed. Duke started to pick her up, but she stopped him.

"Don't touch me," she begged him. "Why did you do this to me? Why, I thought I could trust you."

"Hol' on, Luck," wailed Mica. "Me and Louie thought the same thing, but Steele never done it. Don't yuh remember that he was fightin' Black when they grabbed you?"

"Someone hit my head," said Luck painfully. "I don't remember anything after that until I woke up here. That hat was there on the rocks. Black laughed at me."

"Well, Steele never harmed yuh, Luck. He had Louie Yen follow Black so as to find yuh."

"They fought," said Luck in a flat voice. "It seemed like hours. I couldn't see all



of it. There was only one shot fired, and I think Black lost his gun. Did Louie get killed, Mica?"

"Yeah, I guess so, Luck," sadly. "There's been hell raised in Calico tonight,

but it's too long to explain it to yuh now. Me and Steele got away from 'em. I dunno what we're goin' to do now."

"We're goin' to take Miss Luck back to her home," said Duke, "and we're goin' to see what we'll see, Mica. Anyway, we just wanted to find her, didn't we? What matters after that, old pardner?"

"Don't say that," begged Luck. "I'm sorry I thought that you—"

"Thassall right, Luck. We'll get yuh home."

"But I don't want you to—oh, I don't know what to say. I've tried to think that you would do this, but I couldn't convince myself. Don't you believe me, Duke Steele?"

"Yes, I do, Luck. Mebbe you'll have to trust me a lot for a while now. If Calico ain't right, it's the desert for all of us,

little girl. So yuh see you've got to trust me a lot."

"All right, Duke Steele."

"Can yuh walk, Luck?" asked Mica.

"Not very fast, but I—I guess I can walk a little."

Walking was a painful experience, after being bound tightly for so long, but Luck was game.

Back into the sloping tunnel they went, feeling their way along, expecting momentarily to find the body of Louie Yen, but it was not there.

"Where'd he go?" complained Mica. "I ask yuh, where did he go, Steele?"

"Mebbe he wasn't dead," suggested Duke. "Chinamen have as many lives as a cat."

They came out on the ledge at the mouth of the tunnel. Below them lay the town; dark save for the lights at the front of the Silver Bar. They could hear muffled cheers, yells; exultation rather than anger. There was no sign of pursuit.

Mica led the way down to Luck's cabin, but she would not go in.

"I'm going with you," she declared firmly. "That Silver Bar belongs to me and I'm going down there."

And without a word of further protest, Duke led the way down the street. There was no one in sight, but the Silver Bar was a roar of voices, the cheering of drunken men.

Straight in through the mass of humanity they went, until they reached the fringe of a huge circle, where a queer sight met their gaze. Le Moyne, only half-conscious, his face and head bruised and cut badly and his clothes mere strips of rags, was slouched in a chair in the center of the circle.

Around his big shoulders was tied a dirty Mexican *serape* of flaming red, and in his bleeding hand had been thrust a broken whisky bottle. Fire French, bruised and battered, was assisting Curlew in arranging this mockery, while the crowd cheered wildly.

"The king of Mojave!" yelled the crowd. "Long live the king!"

The place was a bedlam. Men were drinking toasts from broken-necked bottles; men who were bleeding, ragged and sweat-grimed from the battle.

A man came shoving through the crowd from the rear, carrying something in a blanket, which he placed on a table.

"For the king!" shrilled French. "A crown for the king of the desert!"

Grasping the piece of blanket in both

hands, he up-ended it on top of Le Moyne's massive head and yanked the blanket away. It had contained a number of great cacti, which dug their spines into Le Moyne's head. He swayed his head, like a wounded buffalo, but was too weak to shake them off.

"The king is crowned!" yelled the crowd. "A crown for the king of Mojave desert! Long live the king!"

French tore a bottle from the hands of a drunken miner and knocked the top off against his boot-heel. Lifting his hand above Le Moyne's head, he started to pour out the liquor. Duke was watching him closely and saw that French was staring toward the door. He dropped the bottle, which caromed off Le Moyne's head and fell to the floor.

Pete Black was coming slowly through the room, and the crowd stood aside to let him to the center. He had met Louie Yen's long knife in the battle in the tunnel and the effect was awful to behold. He kept his arms wrapped about his middle, as though fearful of what might happen if he released them.

French and Curlew stared at him, as he stumbled up and almost fell into Le Moyne's lap.

"Look out!" croaked Black. "They—found—her. That—damn—Chink—"

Black swayed and tried to straighten up, as he turned toward the door, and a whimper of fear came from his lips. Duke grasped Luck by the arm and tried to draw her back. Louie Yen was coming through the room, his old face set and almost white with suffering. In his right hand he carried the long-bladed knife.

Black stared at him for a moment, whirled and tried to run, but fell over the feet of Le Moyne, and sprawled on his face, his arms wide-flung.

"You yellow snake!" French fairly shrieked as he whipped out his gun. But Duke was looking for such a move and fired a fraction of a second ahead of French, whose bullet tore into the floor. French groped blindly for the table and fell on his knees.

Curlew did not make a move. He seemed paralyzed for a moment, and only stared at Duke, as he walked up and took Curlew's gun from his unresisting hand. The crowd seemed shocked to inaction, and Duke turned quickly on them.



"You fools! Do you want to wreck the town to satisfy the greed of some tin-horn gamblers? Curlew is the last one of them left; the last of the crooks that tried to plunder Calico. You all know Luck Sled. They kidnapped her and hid her in



the Lady Slipper, where we found her tonight.

"Black and his gang have been high-grading on her, while French and his gang have stolen everything from the Silver Bar. If you are men, if you have any decency about you at all, tomorrow will not see one of Black's men, nor Slim Curlew, in Calico town."

Swiftly the temper of the crowd changed. Duke's words were words that they understood. Men were dodging out of the door, as a group of drunken miners grasped the unlucky Curlew and hurled him out of the place.

Duke stepped over and removed the cactus from the head of Le Moyne. He looked at Duke, but there was only a glimmer of intelligence in his eyes. He had been mortally wounded during the fight, and the mockery he had undergone meant nothing to him now.

"Le Moyne, do yuh know me?" asked Duke.

"Steele? Yes, I know—you. It was a—good—fight."

"I brought the girl, Le Moyne. You

remember the girl I told you about—Luck Sled."

"Yes—Steele. Why don't somebody light the lamps?"

"Listen, Le Moyne," Duke was talking swiftly against time, "you said she'd get what belonged to her."

Le Moyne seemed to rouse up and his eyes were a little clearer. Several of the miners were standing close, listening, and Le Moyne spoke to them.

"Come in—closer—and—listen. No—time—to—write." Le Moyne licked his bloody lips and drew a deep breath. "Everything I've got belongs to—Duke—Steele. Do you hear—that? Everything. I will it—to—him—and—I—want—you—to—witness."

"But, Le Moyne, I don't want it for myself," explained Duke. "I want it for Luck Sled."

"You're a—man—can—hold—it," mumbled Le Moyne thickly. "I—I think you'll—share—things—together—now. Pay back what you can—Steele. No—lights here—"

"The passing of a king," said Duke softly. "I hope he won't be misjudged."

"What did he mean?" whispered Luck. "He said that we would share things together, Duke."

Louie Yen had been hanging onto the back of a chair and now he grinned softly, as he said, "Yo' takum, li'l gi'l. Yo' need stlong man—Calico need stlong man, yo' sabe?"

Duke held out his hand to her, and together they went out into the desert night, while behind them huddled the dead figure of a man who aspired to a desert crown, and gazed with unseeing eyes as a crippled miner clasped hands with a crippled and very old Chinaman, and limped out of the door after them.



A complete Mystery Novel in our next
number; a story of vanished jewels
and sinister feuds—

The Waddington Cipher

By William Johnston



PEG-LEG, SHIP'S COOK

By BILL ADAMS

A sailor name o' Billy's washin' dishes,
A man wi' one peg-leg,
A' throwin' out the scraps to finny fishes,
An' the gulls what comes to beg,



Billy Peg-leg, wi' his wood leg,
And his tweaky fiddle string,
When the dog-watch comes old Peg-leg
Will make that fiddle sing.

He used to be a skipper, Billy Peg-leg,
But Billy took to drink,
And fell from off her side and lost a good leg,
In less than half a wink.



Billy Peg-leg lost a good leg
When the shark went swimming past,
When the dog-watch comes old Peg-leg
Will fiddle by the mast.

Old Billy's got a pimple on his forehead,
And a wart upon his nose,
And the wimmen folk ashore would think him horrid,
The way he wears his clothes.



Billy Peg-leg, with his wood leg,
Oh, he walks all jiggedy,
When he goes ashore old Peg-leg
Goes arm in arm with me.

I'm helping Billy Peg-leg wash the dishes,
And a'listening to him sing,
A' throwing out the scraps to finny fishes
And white gulls on the wing.



Billy Peg-leg, with his wood leg,
And a smile upon his lips,
He follows of the sea does Peg-leg,
Because he loves her ships.



THE DESERT OF THE THREE SKULLS

A Story of Lower California and the Call of Hidden Treasure

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Author of "The Speed Hound of the Pintado," "A Cross in the Desert," etc.

PART II

CHAPTER IX

A VOICE AT THE GATE

MOUNTAINS like the dream of some mad scene painter slapped against a canvas of fiery reds and blood shades. Mountains harsh and brittle as the slagged mouth of a monstrous rector, razor-edged against sunset flames—these filled a dominating background. Straight to their very roots marched the white surf riders of the Gulf; scratches across the blue zinc plaque of the waters. In heavier shadows, where the surf line limned the mountain dark, glimmered a single pin-point of light—Miraflores, the port.

It was the sunset following the meeting with the disabled *Shark* and the visit of Bullock and the man Anse to the powerboat *Bonita*. Intervening hours had dragged to the *Bonita's* slow higgling down the wild coastline of Baja California. Just behind her stern lay Isla del Carmen, bare as a gnawed bone yet strangely supporting life at a salt marsh. There the *Bonita* had touched to land supplies for the workers, and the aged dame who smoked cigars. Now destination for Peter Free and Nancy Hannibal was marked by that prick of light at the mountains' feet.

The two sat on Peter's trunk by the rail. It had become more than a trysting place, that little old trunk from a Hinsville attic. Now Peter knew it was his most prized possession. He never would have believed an old zinc-lined trunk could become so precious. This wonder hour of color play over the rim of the ragged world sealed the lips of man and girl alike. Speech would have been intrusion upon the *gloria* of a mighty evensong.

The heart of Peter Free, gentleman adventurer, was in a tumult. Each time he sought to sort out its conflicting emotions he succeeded only in rousing a delicious pain. Here he was sitting so close to the strange girl Nancy that he could feel the light touch of her skirt against his knee, and every revolution of the *Bonita's* puny screw brought nearer the moment when no longer could he hear the velvety contralto of her laughter, see the play of half-humorous lights in her deep eyes. Over there where the pin-prick of light momentarily grew stronger; over yonder in the shadowland of Baja California she would leave him. She would be swallowed up in some dark business wherein she pitted herself against Bullock. "I'll fight a woman just as readily as a man," Peter recalled the threat the saturnine Bullock had uttered in the half-light of dawn.

This girl alone in a strange land and defying two men who once had hunted her with rifles! The thought was intolerable to Peter, yet what could he do about it?

Nancy's reserve was as steadfast as the valor that had prompted her to bluff down two bullies with the silver top of a toilet bottle. Not a word had she said in allusion to the incident of Bullock's and Anse's invasion of the *Bonita* since the two beaten men went over-side. Not a word about her mission to Baja California, the enterprise which, Bullock declared, had commenced with a burglary back in San Francisco—her burglary! Just once had the girl inclined ever so little to the yielding of confidence and that when, on the evening before the *Shark* was encountered, she had asked Peter if he would come to her aid in a contingency.

The man from Hinsville had played out to satiety all the little melodramas involving Peter, the hero, and Nancy, the persecuted, his imagination could evolve. Now on this eve of parting from the one who had shared his trunk over two hundred hectic miles his feet were fairly on the ground. At least so far as appreciation of one tremendous fact was involved. That tremendous fact was the birth of a great love for Nancy Hannibal.

"Nancy"—they had come to comfortable informality, you see—"Nancy, there's something I've wanted to say and—and I don't know just how to say it. I——"

"Wouldn't it be better not to?" came the quiet suggestion. Peter felt a blush climbing under his collar. She'd thought he was trying to frame a proposal when——

"No, I'm not going to say what you think I wanted to," he blurted out, and his cheeks grew hotter. "I just wanted to tell you that when we get ashore at this Miraflores place and—you go your way and I go mine—well, you remember what you

said that first night out from Guaymas about maybe your needing me." A sisterly little pat on the arm sent an electric thrill to Peter's heart.

Came Nancy's reassurance, "Peter Free, you have been good to me not to ask a lot of questions which I could not answer. You have been more than good in wanting to help me in—in what I have to do down here. But I cannot accept your offer. It just happens I have to play a lone hand. Maybe I'll find it too hard a game to play alone, then——"

"Any time, anywhere, send a call to Peter Free," he eagerly supplied. The phrase possessed a broad and free chivalry which pleased Peter.

"Yes, I promise to do that," Nancy conceded. Had the dusk permitted Peter to see the twitching of her mouth he might have been resentful. But as if in repentance of having taken lightly Peter's unconscious grandiloquence she hurried to a surprising amende. "I have wanted to tell you—I think you ought to know that everything Nathaniel Bullock said was true. I did break into his house in San Francisco and steal something of great value—to me."

Peter was a bit shaken by her confession. He had believed Bullock's charges mere bullyragging. To hear Nancy confess burglary thus unexpectedly did not tarnish in the least the image he had built in his heart; it only added high light to the nimbus of mystery veiling that image. The romantic soul of Peter Free leaped to this pure gold of revelation.

"Corking! Now I know you're one of us—us fellows who go out to the world's frontier to put things across."

"Am I?" the girl echoed, and again that tremor of the mobile mouth. "Then we're fellow members of that Lost Legion Kipling wrote about."

THE DESERT OF THE THREE SKULLS

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

An account of the previous chapters

In San Francisco, high on Russian Hill, overlooking the harbor, was the "House of the Winking Light." Here lived alone Nathaniel Bullock, a man evidently possessed of a great fear. From his house is stolen a mysterious paper long concealed in a great Buhl cabinet; and it is stolen by Nancy Hannibal, whose invalid father, has coached her in the past of Nathaniel Bullock, and who cannot, himself, embark on a series of adventures.

Bullock hires Jim Anse as bodyguard and starts for Lower California—but Nancy has also left for that part of the world. On her journey she meets Peter Free, young and enthusiastic, who is looking for adventure back of civilization.

Aboard a launch bound for Miraflores, Bullock and Anse threaten Nancy, and Peter flies to her defence. But it is Nancy, herself, who routs the intruders, flashing a bit of metal in the gray dawn, which metal she afterward shows as a silver bottle from her dressing case.

The rattle of the *Bonita's* anchor chain put a period to thirty hours of fellowship on the zinc-lined trunk. A light bobbed over the water from the direction of the dim surf line and a port doctor in white came aboard to make perfunctory inspection. Then other dancing lights marked



the swooping of a fleet of canoes to transport passengers and baggage ashore. Nancy and Peter went together in one of the rudely hollowed out skiffs.

The journey shoreward and through the thin surf line was for Peter appropriate prelude to melodrama. Shadow masses of giant palms drawing nearer, winking lights of little houses seen through thickets of greenery, black bulk of the towering mountains ready to topple over and crush the clutter of habitations. And the paddlers were giants, bearded and with rings in their ears.

Nancy, in her fluent Spanish, bargained with the driver of an ancient victoria. Their baggage was bundled on the *cochero's* seat and they were off through dim alleys of buildings. Here and there lights behind opened doors flush with the street flashed mysterious interiors. Guitar music sounded hauntingly. Voice of a girl in some secret patio carried a plaintive song. Fancy and latent promise were everywhere abroad. Miraflores drowns in the dream sleep of its dead two centuries past.

The Hotel de Pacifico, Miraflores' sole hostelry, was a sketchy affair—just a low square of walls about a patio all jungle growth of palms and heavy flowers and mocking birds asleep in cages. A mountainous dwarf of a woman, who could not have been five feet in height nor less than three in thickness, introduced herself to Nancy as Señorita Angelita, proprietress. Before the guests had so much as announced their desire for lodgings, the Little Angel—to render the English of it—broke off her welcome to drag a heavy tomato crate beneath the single flickering gasoline lamp hanging above the hotel register. This she mounted laboriously and with many shrill objurgations, the eminence perilously achieved, the Little Angel applied a bicycle pump to the faulty pressure tank beneath the light. The tending of this crippled lamp was the Little Angel's great cross in life.

"Angelita says she has a nice hammock for you here in the patio," Nancy translated for Peter's untutored ear. "I am to have a single room upstairs. And Angelita says you are not to mind a pet iguana which lives in the patio—a giant lizard, you know. His looks are worse than his bite."

Nancy disappeared behind a great tuft of bamboo grass with a parting, "*Adios, Peter Free.*" The waddling Little Angel led Peter to a far corner of the patio where, swung between pillars of the arched arcade, stretched a hammock—a very tenuous web, Peter thought. He carried his chest and trunk over to make a hasty anti-iguana barricade beneath the hammock, disposed his sombrero upon the top of that and gingerly entrusted himself to the hammock. Sounded from a distance the *pish-pish* of the bicycle pump at work upon the faulty lamp and the musical cursings of the Little Angel.

Peter stretched out. Overhead the open sky and stars, greater and more fiery-burning than ever shone down on Hinsville; strangely intimate stars with spaces between which could be plumbed by the exploring eye. Delicate tracery of some exotic vine fell like a mantle of rare lace from the patio balustrade. A single great pallid blossom like a mandrake flower magnified ten times nodded in little whispers of wind and drenched him with a perfume almost unbearably sweet. A bat wove erratic parabolas against the stars.

He shivered slightly at a shuffling, scraping sound coming through the patio's greenery. Perhaps the iguana was abroad at his nocturnal pleasures! But no; only the Little Angel slithering along in her slippers at her task of closing and barricading the great gate opening to the street. Those sounds died as the miniature giantess sought her couch. Peter slept.

He came awake with a leap that almost spilled him to the stone flags. A thundering and pounding on the postern gate Angelita had so carefully barred. A cry in brusque English, "Open up in there!"

What hour it might be, how long he had slept—matters of no consequence to Peter. What chiefly mattered in this instant of painful awakening was that he recognized the voice demanding admission. The same he'd heard bullying Nancy aboard the *Bonita*—Nathaniel Bullock's!

He lay still and listened to the continued thumping. His thoughts were pumping like the blood in his veins, faster than he could tally them. Bullock and his hench-

man, Anse, come to Miraflores—Nancy Hannibal defenseless in her room upstairs!

"*Alto, alto!*" The Little Angel's voice from somewhere beyond, then sound of her scuffling feet. She paused at the postern door and shrilled a query to know what was wanted. A voice beyond the wood answered something in Spanish which reassured her into opening.

Peter heard the scuffling of more than one pair of feet on the patio's stones, then the bull-like roar of Jim Anse, "Say, you got a girl stopping here—Americano named Nancy Hannibal?"

CHAPTER X

A BULL WHIP CRACKS

EASTERN tourists in Southern California, who motor over macadam highways smooth as a dance floor, past orange groves and the Moorish palaces of moving picture darlings, note at certain crossroads slender iron standards



supporting at their curving tops a bell of antique mold. The real estate salesman, their guide, explains volubly that those bells mark the old Camino Real—the Royal Road of the

Padres who marched up the coast, strewing their missions all the way from San Diego to San Francisco, each at the end of a day's post.

Much is made of that Camino Real. It is heavily drawn upon to supply the atmosphere of romance and the savor of an elder day which the shrewd folk of Southern California capitalize along with sunshine, fruit and flowers. Romantic visitors from Kewanee, Illinois, send home picture postcards of those bells which point the way along flawless boulevards.

But the sojourner amid Southern California's beguilements is told nothing about the forgotten links of this Camino Real south of San Diego and beyond the ultimate frontier of gasoline and haughty twin-sixes; about the Royal Road which threads down and down through the wilderness of Baja California to the town where pioneers in cassock and cowl first turned a spade to mark its beginning. To La Paz, the ancient. Here in this land of forgotten yesterdays is no macadam dance floor for autos to trundle over; here no inns of cushioned magnificence to refresh

the traveler; no esthetic signposts to mark a well-conned highway.

Just a gray thread across rock and sand, this real Royal Road. Down from San Diego to Ensenada on the Pacific, then twisting eastward to bury itself in a maze beyond Santo Domingo, the ancient road becomes a trail over which burros, even, stumble at peril of their necks. The Desert of the Three Skulls knows the thin line of the route from water-hole to water-hole; men say that one who crosses the Desert of the Three Skulls without thirst need never drink again. Mountain sheep use the padres' road where it crosses a knife-edge divide at the Thorns of Christ, ten thousand feet above the waters of the Gulf in near distance. The *cardone* and cat's-claw choke its narrow way through the gorge of Tres Virgenes. It is lost and found again amid the parched cliffs of La Gigantea.

Not once in ten years do travelers thread the entire length of El Camino Real from La Paz to Ensenada. Better they go to one of the little orphan ports on the Gulf and trust themselves to a canoe than face bitter thirst and furnace heat on the padres' trail. Dark legend clusters thick over the forgotten highway: how the Pearls of Loretto, stolen from the shrine of Our Lady, became blood red when a knife flashed in the ruined Mission Comodu; how the beautiful Donna Tia Mestris found her husband hanging to an *ocote* tree by the Well of San Xavier and in her madness fled into the thickets of mesquite, never to be seen again.

Oh, a bitter, bitter way, this Camino Real!

But there is one rare jewel strung on this filament of iron cruelty—the Valley of San Ysidro. A bit of Adam's Garden dropped into the burning heart of the wilderness!

You come upon San Ysidro as into a dream. The desert mesas, which lie like plait on plait of chain armor falling from the flanks of the Sierra, bald as iron, burning like iron from the forge—these seem to stretch interminably to blue distances. Suddenly you come to a crack in the mesas' expanse—you look down. Green there, scintillant emerald.

Hot green splashed here and there by burning purple and magenta where the bougainvillea vine stretches tents between cocoa palm and the regal head of a date. Softer green of sugar cane and grape vineyard. Jewel light from precious water falling over a rock bridge. Old red of

tiles suggesting houses amid orange and fig jungle. Mossy dome of the Mission San Ysidro just peeping above the surf of oleander blossoms. All this is the gorge and hamlet of San Ysidro the Blest.

In all the new world there's no more remote a village, no habitation of men so isolated from the world's fuss and fury. Three days by muleback from Miraflores, the port, to the east; a week on the Camino Real coming up from La Paz will hardly serve to put the traveler in San Ysidro. North and west there's nothing—absolutely nothing. Telegraph is lacking. Mails come only at the caprice of some postmaster on the Gulf. San Ysidro knows no world beyond the gaunt desert which embraces it on all sides; the world knows not San Ysidro.

Did I say all was beauty in the Vale of



San Ysidro? A correction here; all outside the Casa de las Sombras—the House of Shadows—where dwelt Don Elias Santandos and his Yaqui, Feliz. Let the sun shed a glory over the

gorge of San Ysidro ever so brightly, yet there was always the House of Shadows. Ever on a night of glorious moon the tinkle of the guitar in a doorway was stilled, a snatch of love song left unfinished when passed the cloaked figure of Don Elias, at his heels the puma-like stalker, Feliz. These twain, the gaunt old white man with his face of a monk and the savage who never left his heels—these were the blight of San Ysidro. Legend said there once was a time when Don Elias was seen to smile—just once. El Tigre, the bandit, was howling for a priest just before the noose dropped under his chin.

The somnolence that is San Ysidro's year on year was rudely broken on a night in April, broken in a manner San Ysidro never had known. For the Yaquis, whom Don Elias had brought over from Sonora to work his cane fields not three months before, were about a strange and fearsome business. All the more did the folk of the village in the gorge feel fear of what was going forward this night because Don Elias, master of the strange Indians, was not in the Casa de las Sombras. His was the only voice of authority potent to stop the barbarous business, and Don Elias had

not returned from Miraflores whither he had gone the week before.

The strange doings of the Yaquis were in progress beneath a grove of giant cocoas a little beyond where San Ysidro's single street straggled into a cowpath across the cane fields. Here was the village of the Yaqui laborers, an abomination in the sight of the gentle people of the gorge. An abomination and ever-present token of haunting fear. For, in common with all people of North Mexico, San Ysidro's folk looked upon the half-civilized Indians from Sonora with a chill of apprehension. The Yaqui's fame as a ruthless and implacable foe had penetrated even to this isolated garden in the desert. They sensed a grim irony, in character with the saturnine humor of Don Elias, in his bringing these Indians here to plague them.

Before the thatched palm huts of the Indians scattered fires splashed the deeper night beneath the tent of the cocoas; white trunks were painted with flickering shadows. About these fires sat the squaws and children of the community. The fifty and more bucks, Don Elias' laborers, were gathered in the ring marked by the fires and the dumpy shapes of the womenkind. With an intenseness sometimes mounting to mild frenzy these men were engaged in the *Pascola* dance.

Big men they were, with round, copper-hued features and mats of coarse hair sheared off below the ears. Now, in the ritualistic solemnity of the dance, features were set in an immovable death-mask; whites of the eyes showed freely, giving to every face a staring vacuity. Head-dresses were the rule; some were the stuffed heads of deer worn like a drum major's shako, others were paper cornucopias all frilled and bangled with unusual ornaments.

All the dancers were barefooted; their feet, gray with dust, and calloused to the texture of elephant hide, kept an untiring step-and-shuffle after the rote of an archaic ceremonial. One fiddler went through the dance steps, keeping up an untiring repetition of a wailing tune on the instrument beneath his chin.

Invocation of rain, dominant motif in all the ceremonials of Southwestern Indians, was represented by gourd rattles, dyed a pomegranate red; the pebbles within the dry shells were made to imitate sluicing of a cloudburst's water on parched soil. One man stood aside near where two aged men were thumping the water drums, and from time to time he swung a "bull-roarer" on

a rawhide over a wide circle above his head; its screech was like a locomotive whistle.

Flicker of the fires' light on the drooping cocoa fronds overhead, bobbing and twisting of deer-head taboos and frilled paper caps, thud-thud of bare feet on the packed adobe and the *bum-bum-bum* of the water drums; the night over the Yaqui village at San Ysidro was one lifted unchanged from some dim past time when desert savages invoked the gods of thunder and rain to be merciful to their scourged people.

Hi-ilo-o-ya-a! The Bluebird is holding
In his talons clouds that are thunder-
ing.

Hi-ilo-a-ya-a! Yellow bird is holding
In his claws clouds that are raining.

Hour after hour San Ysidro lay behind barred doors and listened to the throb and mutter of the drums, the minor cadences of the rain song. Only the bravest of them, Enrique Cornejo, the *presidente municipal*, and his two *rurales* dared venture near. They dodged on the outskirts of the cocoa grove and with hands on rifle triggers awaited some untoward event.

This filthy performance of the Yaquis! Old Don Elias of the Casa de las Sombras, he was responsible for visiting this affliction upon San Ysidro.

Two figures came riding over the desert mesas along the Camino Real, homeward bound from Miraflores on the Gulf. The stars were their sufficient guide along the blurred outlines of the trail; moreover, both were familiar with every twist and turn in the three-days' journey.

They came riding down the steep pitch of the gorge of San Ysidro. A distant flicker of firelight caught the eye of the foremost rider, who was Don Elias Santandos. Abruptly he reined in his mule. Faint pulse of drums came to his ears.

"Ho, Feliz!" The Yaqui spurred his mule alongside that of his master. The noise and the light had not passed unnoticed of him. The big Yaqui, who was muscled like a discus thrower, trembled in his saddle.

"Feliz, did I tell those Yaqui hounds before I left not to celebrate *Pascola*? Did you tell them for me—tell Diego, their headman?"

"Si, señor." Feliz felt the cold hand of premonition at his throat.

"Ah," from Don Elias, and he rode on down into the misty depths of the oasis. He came to his house, the Casa de las Sombras, set deep in a wildwood of bougain-

villea and orange trees with sentinel date palms over the gates. He ordered Feliz to unsaddle and turn the mules into the corral, then to report back to him. The Yaqui did as bidden. He found Don Elias standing before the heavy iron-studded door of the house. A bull-whip was in his hand.

"Now," said Don Elias, "we go to see what we may see," and he turned down the single street of San Ysidro in the direction of the Yaqui village.

The dancers stopped short at what the firelight revealed. A tall white man was



striding past the fires and the seated squaws into the circle of the dancers. His head was bare. Heavy white hair tumbled from his crown to the velvet collar of his riding coat, of a style

fifty years gone. White, too, was the thin and wax-tipped imperial over a thin lip, the goatee like a stiletto. His deep-set eyes—eyes of a monk or a flagellant—were icy cold with anger.

The master—the white master—was come and in a wolf-rage. He carried a bull-whip.

Don Elias came to a halt in the midst of the crowd of heavily-muscled men and let his cold eye pass from one to another in teasing deliberation. Glance for glance the Yaquis gave him. No cowardly breed, the Yaqui. Don Elias slowly turned to Feliz.

"Tell these hounds in your own barbarous tongue they have disobeyed me. They disobeyed me because I was out of sight. Now I have caught them in their disobedience and someone must suffer for the sin." He waited while Feliz translated. The spiked tips of his imperial twitched like a hound's lip when it is eager for the blood hunt. Came a growl from one of the dancers.

"They wish to know, señor, which one you choose to punish," Feliz reported. A thin grin parted the snowy tufts on Don Elias' lips.

"Tell them to make their choice," he said shortly. Feliz carried the injunction over into the Yaqui tongue. Immediately eyes became set. No man looked at his neighbor. None spoke.

"They will not make a choice, señor,"

Feliz ventured after a minute of waiting.

"Ah, then I shall have to choose for them. Sweet religion teaches us, Feliz, that it is noble to suffer for the sins of others. I shall, therefore, choose you, Feliz. You are innocent, to be sure, but that will make the lesson all the more impressive. Moreover, Feliz, I know that I can whip you, and I cannot be sure that I could do the same to any of these swine with impunity. Tut—tut, Feliz! Do I see you cringe?"

"No, señor." Don Elias' body-servant stiffened.

"The pain will be mercifully brief, Feliz," sardonically. "And the lesson you will demonstrate will be out of all proportion to the suffering. Direct two of these dogs to hold your arms, Feliz."

The Yaqui spoke a few quiet words to those nearest him and held out his arms. Now at last the stony reserve of the dancers was broken. They backed hurriedly away from the victim. Excited gutturals passed from mouth to mouth. One man ran to the nearest fire and plucked up a heavy stick, one end blazing.

Don Elias, master of the Casa de las Sombras, stood easily facing the Indians. His arms were folded over the snaky lash of the bull-whip. Not a flicker across the leathern countenance save about the eyes. They had narrowed like a lynx's; they seemed to jet light from needle-point pupils.

Mastery lay with the white man.

When none would volunteer to hold him, the victim turned his back on Don Elias and waited alone in the circle of bronze faces. The white man removed his coat, carefully folded it and laid it at his feet. He rolled away a sleeve from a lean and corded arm. Slowly the arm drew back. The tapering lash of the bull-whip stirred a little puff of dust as it retreated along the ground.

A whistle—a black flicker through the air. As if whirled out by a knife cut, an inch-round bit of blue denim and an adhering circlet of skin leaped from the back of Feliz. Only the tip of the lash had bitten, but that had bitten viciously.

Not so much as a sigh from Feliz. Not a sound from the circle of spectators. The cold face of Don Elias began to assume a slow flush, hardly perceptible under the mahogany-colored skin.

Again with great deliberation he struck. Once more just the torturing tip of the bull-whip inflicted punishment. A knife stab would have been more merciful.

Six times the sinuous lash forked through the air. A cross was marked between the shoulders of the Indian when Don Elias threw down the whip, picked up his coat and strode away. Feliz followed.

CHAPTER XI

DON ELIAS LAUGHS

DON ELIAS SANTANDOS had been a resident of San Ysidro near five years—in the little oasis hamlet, but not of it. No man in all the primitive country from Ensenada to San José del Cabo was more cordially hated than he; none so greatly feared. San Ysidro's naked babies rolling in the dust were warned Don Elias would get them if they were not good. Grown men surreptitiously crossed themselves upon meeting the gaunt figure in the cane fields or astride his saddle mule on the desert mesas. For it was common talk Don Elias was possessed of the devil; the more simple-minded believed the man to be actually the devil incarnate.

The devil surely had protected his own. Don Elias had been shot at. A stealthy knife thrown from a shadow thicket once had pinned his strange looking riding coat to a tree. Yet always he had passed unharmed and with that tantalizing smile of cruelty lifting the tufts of white upon his lips.

In San Ysidro the Arcadian, where land titles were shadowy things and every man's saddle and last were the property of his neighbor, none knew just how or why this saturnine man managed to take up all those acres of cane west of the town. They had lain there fallow countless numbers of years; now and again one man or another of the village had scratched them a little, planted the cane and boiled the *panocha* for himself and his neighbors. Then along came this devil of a man with his wire fencing—unknown abomination in the gorge of San Ysidro—and declared these acres were his. None disputed him. The good God alone knew whether or not he was right; there seemed no human way of determining.

And he had rebuilt for his habitation the Casa de las Sombras, once the church-house of the Jesuits but, with the mission, long ago fallen into ruins after expropriation by the government drove out the good *frailes*. Right behind the ancient mission stood the Casa de las Sombras. The mission orangery surrounded it, and the olive trees planted by Padre Juan Luyando in

the year 1728 now lifted their silver-gray crowns high above the restored church house. From the day the carpenters and



the dobe brick makers turned over the rehabilitated house to its new tenant—and they said its interior was magnificent as a king's house—no man or woman of San Ysidro ever

had set foot behind the iron-studded front door.

Behind that door were secrets guarded by the two who dwelt there—Don Elias and his Yaqui body-servant, Feliz. Folk only knew that train after train of mules from Miraflores, the port, had carried over the desert oddly shaped bundles and crates. Perhaps furniture; more likely engines of the devil for doing the devil's work.

Though Don Elias often went out on El Camino Real, none knew where his journeys took him save that Miraflores reported his presence there once in a blue moon. Carlita, the hunter, once spread a tale that he had stalked Don Elias away back in the high sierra by Tres Virgenes and had heard Don Elias give the lion cry; lions had come from their dens to frolic and skip about him. Carlita reported that; but Carlita was known to be a liar.

So for five years there had lived in San Ysidro this evil and greatly feared man right in the shadow of the House of God. In the shadow of beauty, too. For the Mission San Ysidro, far gone in decay as it was, nevertheless still held to a fragile and russet beauty; the beauty of a very old cameo dulled in outline by age and usage. Built of a million pesos donated by a Queen of Spain, its Moorish grace of dome and doorway once held first place among all the missions of Baja California. Then when the new Republic of Mexico disestablished the church, plunderers ravaged San Ysidro's altars and left the hoary mission church a shell.

It was the morning after the incident of the bull-whip in the Yaqui village. Don Elias in a suit of white sat at breakfast in the patio of his house. A giant fig tree spread a tent over his head. Great red stars of hibiscus glowed from one pale blue wall bounding the patio. Against an opposite wall a peach tree, trained in continental fashion to spread across the sun-warmed

bricks, was in full blush of blossom. Mocking-birds in wide cages suspended from the fig's lowermost branches made the whole garden choral.

Don Elias was pleased with the morning and with himself. Before him was a small pile of unopened letters—mail he had found awaiting haphazard delivery at Miraflores on the day of his departure thence for the homeward trip. Between sups of his orange the man slit envelopes and read their contents.

Feliz, moving silently on his straw *guaranchas*, came bringing stewed kid from the outdoor kitchen around the corner from the patio. The Yaqui showed no evidence of last night's torture aside from a certain stiffness in the movements of his arms; his features were carved manzanita, puckered and red as a manzanita bole. Don Elias looked up from his reading.

"Ah, Feliz, we are refreshed this morning and pure of spirit after last night's exposition of brotherly sacrifice?"

"Si, señor." The Yaqui was like some well trained dog; what he failed to catch of the import of words he fully supplied from their inflection. From long custom he had come to know the meaning of his master's biting irony by the drawl in which it was delivered, by the slight down-pulling of the waxed imperial ends in a twisted smile.

"It was a noble sacrifice, Feliz, and it gave me much spiritual pleasure besides unquestionably exercising an elevating influence on your brothers, those dogs of Yaquis. You are to be congratulated, Feliz."

"Si, señor." Feliz mechanically poured the coffee. He turned to go back to the outdoor kitchen, but Don Elias stopped him. The white man's teasing humor was not yet satiated.

"Whipping is not so bad, is it, Feliz? Not so bad as hanging."

"No, señor."

"And, of course you remember, Feliz, you would have been hanged back in Sonora five years ago had I not interfered. A little matter of your shooting a few Mexicans, you remember?" The Yaqui bowed ever so slightly. "Or was it quite five years ago, Feliz?" This in simulated after-thought.

"Five years last quarter of the moon after next," Feliz replied evenly and he made a step to depart for his kitchen. Don Elias checked him with a raised hand.

"I have been thinking, Feliz, my worthy servant, thinking a little since last night. Your word—the word of a Yaqui any-

where—is better than any white man's, isn't it?" Again the slight bow of the round head with its heavy mop of hair sheared below the ears.

"And you said after I saved you from hanging—and I often wonder why I did that, Feliz—you said you would serve me for five years out of gratitude. Eh, Feliz?"

"Si, señor."

"You often have wanted to kill me during these five years now nearly gone, Fel-



liz. You have lain awake at nights and thought how pleasant it would be to stretch me naked on a clump of *cholla*—the *cholla* with the longest thorns,

which cause a poisonous burning to the skin—and then to plant a nest of little horned rattlesnakes under that *cholla* and leave me to them. Am I right, Feliz?"

Not a muscle of the carven features moved. Only the eyes veiled themselves slightly. Don Elias gave a dry little laugh.

"You have been counting the moons and the twelve-moons all these five years, Feliz. Worthy and diligent servant! But so have I, excellent Feliz. Be assured you never will kill me, for I shall kill you first—kill you before the last quarter of the moon after next.

"Now don't stand there like a toad on a stone. More coffee, quick!" The Yaqui went back to his kitchen with the coffee-pot. Don Elias opened another letter. Under date of San Francisco it read:

Five years ago, sir, you greatly misjudged me. You were too quick to leap to the conclusion that I was attempting to play a double game with you in the great enterprise in which we two and a third had embarked in your Baja California.

If the fact I was forced to shoot my one-time friend, John Hannibal, who was the third in our adventure; if this fact, I say, did not prove to you the sincerity of my dealings, no words of mine at this late date can add any weight of conviction. Yet I am moved to determine by personal visit if you accept my good faith. I am leaving Yuma, Arizona, via the Colorado, to the Gulf im-

mediately and hope to learn of your whereabouts at the port of Miraflores. With highest wishes,
NATHANIEL BULLOCK.

Don Elias re-read the letter. Then he tossed back his white head and laughed gustily. He laughed for the first time in years.

"Oh-ho! Nathaniel Bullock comes to me! What is it Nathaniel Bullock has lost that he must come to Don Elias in Baja California?"

"Oh, *hombre de Dios!*"

CHAPTER XII

WHEREIN PETER MEETS ADVENTURE

PETER FREE, recognizing the voice at the gate of the Hotel de Pacifico, was thrown into an ague of trepidation. Here were come the twain who had challenged Nancy Hannibal aboard the *Bonita*, and they were demanding to know if Nancy were in the hotel. Fatuously Peter had thought the two out-manuevered and done for when Nancy bluffed them over the *Bonita's* side. He had not counted upon so close a pursuit, if pursuit at all. Now in this strange land of Baja California, where the shadow of law was as thin as a grass blade, appeared the same two men, set in deadly hostility against a girl alone.

He rolled from his hammock and in stocking-feet made a few tentative steps across the patio's flags toward the distant glimmer of the light marking the office. Peering over the frond of a date palm, he could make out the two visitors, Anse and Bullock; a third with them appeared a native, probably a guide picked up on the beach. Bullock was conversing with the Little Angel, but in Spanish. The dumpy proprietress, with excited spreading of the hands, seemed to be attempting to dissuade the graybeard from some determined intent.

Peter hesitated no longer. A quick glance showed him the foot of the stairs leading to the upper railed gallery about the patio, onto which opened all the chamber doors. Between the stairs and where the two intruders stood was a great clump of bamboo grass, partially screening them. He stole noiselessly behind the rank stalks, found the stairs and was up like a cat. No cry of discovery from the group under the lamp.

Once on the overhead gallery, Peter was in a quandary. To find Nancy's room and

warn her of the presence of her enemies—perhaps fight for her, if it came to that—was a necessity strong as a charge of dynamite. But how to do it? He did not know her room number. There might be all of fifteen doors on the four sides of the gallery; from many of them issued sounds of snoring. To knock haphazard at any one of these doors—impossible! Yet he did not dare call Nancy's name, for those in the patio below would hear.

The man from Hinsville was tiptoeing irresolutely down the gallery, furiously striving to unravel the knot of difficulties presented, when he heard a heavy step on the stairway. The Little Angel was wheezing a slow way upstairs. Manifestly coming to carry some message to Nancy from Anse and Bullock.

Peter flattened himself into a patch of shadow against a wall. Here was a last slender chance: the Little Angel would summon Nancy to her door. That would mark the room, and when she turned away Peter could steal thither and have a word with the girl before the next step in the encounter was met.

The Little Angel waddled past him and



paused at the second door beyond. She knocked, knocked again. She called quietly. She turned the handle and opened the door. "Madre de Dios!" Peter heard the startled ex-

clamation. The Little Angel disappeared into the room for a minute, then came bursting out onto the gallery. She steam-engined past Peter at top bent, headed for the stairs.

His heart knocked against his ribs. What had the woman seen in Nancy's room to cause such excitement? In three steps he was at the door and, flutteringly, he took a step inside.

Flickering light of a candle revealed an empty room.

The bed had not been opened; upon it lay Nancy's little, feathered hat. By the single chair was her baggage; the little trunk and a black hand-bag. Nothing else to suggest the room ever had been tenanted. A second glance told Peter there was no window—just an air vent not big enough for a cat to crawl through, away up near the ceiling.

Flight! The burning candle, the hat left upon the bed—they called flight. Yet how had the girl disappeared? If, like Peter, she had been roused to danger by the voices at the gate, there was no way she could have slipped from the hotel. The barred gate off the patio must give the only exit, and that had been closed to her by the presence of Anse and Bullock. Over the roof—impossible! And where, in darkness and a labyrinth of strange streets, could Nancy find asylum?

Peter turned from the door back to the gallery. Just as he did so the head of Bullock rose above the floor level of the staircase not fifteen feet away. He carried a pocket flash. Its white eye blazed full on Peter.

"Ah-ha!" Bullock's exclamation voiced a mirthless laugh. Peter stood rooted, awaiting the turn of the next second's development. Came to him Bullock and Anse, the Little Angel trailing laboriously behind. The flashlight dropped for an instant to cut Peter's stockinged feet out of the darkness, then back to search his face.

"Indeed!" Again that rallying, ironic hint of mirth. "Anse, the young gentleman from the *Bonita*, whose acquaintance seems now more than before forced upon us. And right here behind him is the young woman's room"—he stepped to the door and took in the room's emptiness at a glance—"the young woman's room, Anse, which our new friend seems to have just quit in his stocking-feet. This is more than interesting, Anse.

"Perhaps you may care to explain what you were doing at this hour in Miss Hannibal's empty room—and in stocking-feet like a porch-climber."

A hot surge of anger against the possessor of this chiselling voice seized Peter. Added to that, a notion to keep Bullock haggling here. For Nancy, every minute search was delayed might be precious.

"Perhaps I might care to explain, Mr. Bullock. Hardly to you, though." Peter's voice was tinged with a quality faintly histrionic; the inner soul of him leaped to possibilities for drama in the situation.

"To the chief of the *rurales* in Miraflores, then," Bullock retorted with a sneer in his voice. "An American in a Mexican jail—well, they have a habit down here of throwing the key away after a jail door has been closed on a gringo."

"Would you like to have me talking with the chief of police, telling him all I know?"

Unconsciously Peter packed into his de-

mand much more innuendo than he realized. What he knew about Bullock was only the latter's encounter with Nancy aboard the *Bonita*. What Bullock might think this young man knew about him and his reason for trying to find a girl in the Hotel de Pacifico at dead of night—

"I think we'd better have a little talk together, you and I," was the older man's somewhat mollifying reply. "If you'll—"

"Say, Mr. Bullock, ain't we goin' to look around a bit for that girl?" grumblingly from Anse.

"Be quiet, Anse! Do you think she can lose herself long in Miraflores?" Then, turning again to Peter. "Don't you think you'd better come with us to my boat down in the harbor and have a little talk?"

The histrionic urge swelled stronger in Peter. "If you have anything to say to me, Mr. Bullock, you'll find me at my office—"

"I'll find you aboard the *Shark* with me in just half an hour, young man, or you'll find yourself in jail with many explanations to make!" Hard as a cutting diamond his words. They carried to their hearer unpleasant promptings of possible consequences. He, found sneaking from the room of a girl who mysteriously had disappeared in the night; he, alone in a strange land and without even the prop of the country's tongue to aid him, having to undergo examination before a Mexican chief of police.

"My shoes—" Peter capitulated.

Half an hour later, even as Bullock had prophesied, Peter sat alone with the gray-bearded man under a swinging lamp in a tiny cabin. The *Shark* lay some distance from the beach line. No other craft was near. Not a house within hailing distance ashore. The burly Anse was posted just outside the door. A distinctly long step in adventure for one just come to the adventure land of Baja California, Peter reflected.

Bullock sat down across a little table from Peter. The light shone strongly down upon a high forehead made all the more massive by the roached rough of nearly white hair above it. Eyes were so deep in the sockets that under the furze of eyebrows meeting across the base of the nose they gave the impression of being in-

dependent of the rest of the man's features—lent themselves not a whit to nuances of thought behind uttered speech. The heavy beard guarded his mouth from observation. Nathaniel Bullock was a man in a mask.

"Now, young man, your name," was his matter-of-fact command. Peter gave it.

"Why are you down here in Baja California, Mr. Free?" The question drove straight at Peter's secret pride, his favorite pose.

"Oh, maybe just to pick up something worth while, something that can be found along the last frontier," was the elaborately careless answer.

"Ah!" said Bullock, and a hand combed his beard contemplatively.

Had Peter been able to plumb the depths of those strangely detached eyes he might have seen a little light gleam and go out.

"Your acquaintance with Nancy Hannibal has been no chance one of a voyage then?"

"We'll leave that lady's name out of our discussion, if you please," warned Peter with a touch of the grandiose manner. Even as he said it, he was aware that was just the proper retort to make at this juncture; the hero in the pages of Red Romance would have used those very words. But Bullock's reception of the reproof was not regular. The hand which had been toying with the beard—and it was an enormous hand—came down upon the table as a clenched fist.

"None of your damned shilly-shally here, young Mr. Free! How long have you known Nancy Hannibal and John Hannibal, her father?"

"None of your damned business!" Peter flared, all impulse to play-acting sped. He was pink to the ears. Little muscles in his temples fluttered. For a minute old Bullock studied the features across the table. He might have been re-casting his strategy. When he spoke again his voice was almost a purr.

"Do you realize, young Mr. Free, that I am down here on serious business and I will not be played with by anybody—by a whippersnapper either in pants or skirts?"

Peter merely glared. His anger was mounting; it left him no sober thought of consequences.

"What were you doing in Nancy Hannibal's room tonight?"

"I went up there to protect her from you," bluntly.

"Ah!"—the purring was becoming tiger-



like—"Mr. Free, and have her pass something to you before she disappeared—something of great value to me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Peter honestly declared. But the other took his declaration for another evasion. Nathaniel Bullock was rapidly losing his grip on himself. His voice roughened.

"Look here! No more of your impertinence and beating round the bush. I know you came down here with Nancy Hannibal and you two came for one thing. I know that one or the other of you has the plan to the Corridor of All Saints which was stolen from my house in San Francisco last month. I think it likely you have it. I mean to have that plan if I've got to kill to get it. Now do you understand that?"

Peter grinned. The act was purely reflex, for a very real terror was creeping upon him. Bullock mis-read his grin as defiance. A tightened austerity sat in his eyes.

"The girl's clever; she has slipped me twice," he rasped. "But you are a fool. I have you and, having you, I need not worry about finding the girl yet awhile. Now fish or cut bait. Do I get the plan to the Corridor of All Saints or do you—disappear?"

Peter, knowing not what answer to make, grinned again. Bullock lifted his voice to carry to Anse beyond the door. "Tell Diego to go ahead!"

A rumble somewhere forward, the spit of a gas engine, ripple of cloven waters. Peter leaped to peer through a porthole above his head. The shore lights were moving. The *Shark* was putting out of Miraflores harbor.

CHAPTER XIII

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

PETER made a dive to open the cabin door. The blocky figure of Jim Anse filled the narrow portal; the rare-beef face of Jim Anse grinned broadly. "Not so sudden, young fellah!"

Peter whirled upon the seated Bullock in a frenzy of fury and hurt dignity. "What's the meaning of this, Bullock? Is this kidnapping you're attempting?"

The ghost of a smile played beneath the gray beard. "You may call it that. But kidnapping is only the beginning. Before I have finished with you the indictment may be amended to include other crimes. Anse, help young Mr. Peter Free undress."

"Undress!" Peter gasped. "But what is——?"

Smiling, Jim Anse was advancing upon him with bear-like paws outstretched.



Peter braced one foot against a cushioned locker top and struck at the grin with all his force. Anse dodged lightly, caught the wrist as it grazed his ear and by a twist had the light body of the outraged Peter for an instant on his broad back. He dumped Peter to the floor like a rice sack, knelt upon him none too tenderly and began to undo buttons. Peter capitulated; his pride would not tolerate this hazing.

"Let me up and I'll do whatever undressing is necessary."

At a beck from Bullock, Anse complied. Peter got to his feet, his face red as a blush-rose. In a frost of rage he divested himself of his garments right down to his socks. Bullock received them one by one. To coat and trousers he paid particular attention; not a pocket left unturned; not a seam or lining which escaped the careful exploration of fingers. His money-belt was emptied—five glorious golden moons spinning on the table top—and with a knife blade Bullock slit the canvas belt into ribbons that its double lining might be exposed. Even Peter's shoes must needs undergo a careful scrutiny. A suspected pearl smuggler in the hands of customs sleuths could not have been more consistently combed.

Bullock's face during the course of the examination was a study. An avid light in the deep-burning eyes could not veil itself; with each successive stage in the search yielding naught, that light sunk into dead ash. Peter, conquering initial mortification, detected this dying of a great hope and was openly rejoiced.

"I left all my cigar coupons at home, Bullock," he taunted. "I'm saving them to get a handsome hand-etched ice pitcher."

"You'll never need it," was Bullock's grudging answer. "Now get dressed. Anse, you may go."

PETER prolonged the process of dressing to give himself every available minute for high-pressure thinking; for it was evident Bullock was far from finished with his interrogations. A brooding cloud of cogitation in the gray-beard's eyes warned that the man was not taking a first rebuff for finality.

The adventurer from Hinsville realized full well a time had come to use his head as he had never done before. Somehow—and Peter did not appreciate how he himself had contributed to the situation by his little vanities—somehow he had been caught into the very middle of that dark business which first threatened Nancy Hannibal in the course of the dawn aboard the *Bonita*. Somehow circumstance had made him an ally of hers with no conscious volition on his part—an ally opposed to a very determined old man named Bullock and his henchman, Anse.

And what if he, Peter Free, had not the remotest idea concerning the cause of all this secret battling and hints of violence? A stolen plan to some mythical Corridor of All Saints; riotously romantic that—particularly if Nancy were, in truth, the thief! And a gorgeously romantic figure this girl, Nancy, with her brooding eyes and little tip-tilted nose, her velvety alto voice like the sound of deep bells. Peter, in a moment of solemn dedication—a moment when his head was buried in his shirt—determined he would go through ice and fire for Nancy Hannibal. That moment gave him, too, clear view of his future course; come what might at the whim of Bullock, he must contrive to keep Bullock away from Miraflores as long as possible. Every hour that Nancy was not beset by the immediate menace of Bullock must be priceless for her.

"You need not be so fussy with your scarf, young man." Bullock's voice carried a strain of impatience. "We have something much more important than butterfly knots to discuss."

"I'll just let it dangle, for I can't tell when I may have to undress again." An impudent smile tucked up the corners of Peter's silken mustache. Bullock's cavernous eyes resented the levity with a dangerous flicker.

"There is every chance such matters as dressing and undressing may not disturb you much longer—or even the commonplace business of drawing your breath. Do you know how long it takes a man to die of thirst, for instance?"

"I never have had the experience." An-

swer came glibly enough albeit Peter's inner spirit quailed.

"I would not set aside that experience as being wholly beyond probability," came Bullock's dulled speech. "There's an



island twenty miles south of here—Little Guardian Angel is the name. Not even a goat can live on that island. Our course lies there and if we should have to make a

landing—" He let his voice trail off to a blurred murmur. Peter steeled himself against a palpable bluff.

"Of course, that would be murder, Bullock, and even in Baja California—"

"Where there is but one American consular agent and he in La Paz two hundred miles south of here," Bullock caught him up, "and where the disappearance of a gringo is not considered a matter of grave importance anywhere on the peninsula. Tut-tut, young man!"

Silence between them, broken finally by the elder man. "Of course, your baggage at the Hotel de Pacifico; I'll see it before you do. Go through it as carefully as I went through your clothing a few minutes ago."

Peter smiled inwardly at thought of what Bullock would find in the little zinc-bound trunk from a Hinsville attic—a dentist's foot-power drill, trays of burrs and drill-points and pluggers, a wall-bracket instrument holder—

"So you see," Bullock continued evenly, "I am bound to find what I am after in the long run. You simply are making it more difficult. With you out of the way, I can deal with the girl if I come to the conclusion she, rather than you, has what was stolen from my house in San Francisco."

Peter, groping every instant for some leverage to use against his antagonist in this blind game, was visited by sudden inspiration.

"What if neither of us has the thing you're looking for?"

Bullock suddenly squared his shoulders; his beard appeared to stir with hidden prickles of malevolence.

"You mean Don Elias? That Santandos already has the plan in his hands?"

Peter shrugged. He hardly had expected to plumb another hidden lead in this maze of mystery wherein he wandered;

having done so, apparently, he would not spoil success by any ill-chosen words. Bullock shook his great head as if to clear his brain of too-hasty deduction; then a smile fluttered beneath his beard.

"Nice attempt, young man. Pretty try at a bluff. As it happens, however, Don Elias could hardly have received anything of value from your hands or the pretty hands of little Miss Nancy. He is at his home in San Ysidro; be quite sure I discovered that immediately upon my arrival at Miraflores today—which was five hours before your *Bonita* got into port. No, I cannot swallow the notion that John Hannibal would send his daughter away down here to play into such hands as Don Elias'—even with so competent a protector as yourself."

An ironic inclination of the head pointed the mock compliment.

Peter sensed that, despite the other's attempt to cover up, he had touched some vulnerable point of apprehension. Having gone thus far, having thrown to the winds any attempt to convince his captor of his utter ignorance in the whole mystifying business, recklessly he shot another arrow.

"Of course, you know as well as I do this Don Elias fellow might still be in—in the place he calls his home and yet receive anything a person wanted to get into his hands. I guess he's no fool, this Don Elias."

Away back beneath the furze of eyebrows and the heavy arch of sockets the eyes of Nathaniel Bullock betrayed all the lust of a soul's single purpose. Gone was their reticence, their tricks of dissimulation. From irises narrowed to scalpel tips and strangely oval, as the slits in the eyes of a cat facing sunlight, jetted scorching fire.

"Damn you, young Free, if you're trying to play with me—if you're trying to lie to me I'll kill you without a thought. Now give me a fair answer if you want to live. At this minute who has the plan to the Corridor of All Saints?"

Peter tried to keep a brave front under the bane of hot murder promise he read in those concentrated irises. He answered slowly: "At this minute—I—don't know."

Bullock heaved himself abruptly from his seat and strode out of the cabin. The door slammed behind him.

Peter sat alone, staring at the five golden moons, his gold pieces emptied by Bullock from the money belt and remaining un-

touched on the table during all the colloquy between them. Now he picked them up one by one and tucked them away in his pockets. These golden discs, gift of an Uncle Peter back in Hinsville to a gentleman adventurer on hazard bound, seemed of lesser worth than their face value just now. Gilded souvenirs of a halcyon day in an Iowa corn paradise! Staring at them, Peter wondered how he would dispose of them should he find himself on that Island of the Little Guardian Angel of which Bullock had spoken, that island where even a goat could not stave off thirst. There was a chance Bullock wasn't bluffing, and if he wasn't—

His mind, a little wearied by the strain of the past half hour and the tax of instantaneous ingenuity put upon it, refused to review in detail what had passed. It perceived dully that Peter Free had come to a very decided impasse without attempting to determine just how he had so come.



Before Peter's mental retina the cloud of fatigue slowly took shape and revealed a figure—the girl Nancy as she sat on Peter's trunk in the gray light of dawn with hands folded in lap and a wicked glint of something metallic

and menacing showing between the fingers.

A girl alone, cowing two men with a silver bottle of tooth powder. There was a girl! There was the girl for Peter Free to fight for, take chances for—die for if it came to that! One who would start alone for the bleak peninsula of Baja California to fight single-handed the craft of Bullock and the brute-blindness of the man Anse for some high prize. Was not such a one a worthy example of courage to pattern after?

And where was Nancy at this minute? Where, in an outland town of shadows and little deceitful lights shining through barred windows, had the girl found a hiding place? Hatless, forsaking her small effects, she had fled into the dark of Miraflores with but a single purpose as Peter read it now—to keep from Bullock's hands that thing for which Peter himself now was enduring genteel kidnapping and far from genteel inquisition. That prized plan to the Corridor of All Saints!

Well—God keep Nancy Hannibal!

Peter shook off the incubus of morbid-

ness and went out onto the starlit deck. He was prepared to carry trouble to Bullock if trouble Bullock wanted.

The deckhouse door opened onto the small vessel's stern. Two empty arm-chairs were placed there below the rail. He dropped into one of them and his eyes traveled up forward of the squat funnel a little beyond 'midships. Two figures blocked off bits of stair carpet there. They were in low conversation. Peter watched them idly, wondering just what move might be under incubation.

After a time one of the men turned and walked back toward him, ignored his presence and opened the cabin door to enter. Light from within revealed Bullock, then the door shut behind him. The second figure strolled slowly down toward the deck chairs; a vagrant brightening of a cigar point lighted the wide mouth and heavy cheeks of Jim Anse. The fellow dropped heavily into the chair near Peter.

"You've got the Old Man's mad up some way or other," he said after a moment's silence. Peter did not answer; he was wary of some planned attack from a new angle and through the agency of the body-guard.

"An' the Old Man's figurin' on landing you on some Godforsaken island hereabouts and letting you dry up and blow away."

"So he told me," was Peter's blunt rejoinder. Anse pondered this statement as if it cast a revealing light on the situation.

"Well, sir, I won't stand for it, for one," Anse growled. "I didn't sign on for nothing they call cold murder on this junket—not me!"

"Thank you very much," coldly from Peter. He was hardly prepared to grant face value to anything Anse might say. Anse drew deeply on his cigar while his mind indolently searched for phrases.

"I says to the Old Man, I says, 'You asks me if I could shoot when you signed me up for this wild-eyed trip an' I says I can shoot, thinking you means I gotta shoot to protect you from somebody-or-other. But you didn't ask me,' I says, 'will I help land a decent-appearing young fellah on a desert island and leave him there to rot. And I'm not goin' to mix up in any such dirty business as that,' I tells the Old Man."

Anse finished this unwonted burst of speech with a clicking oath. Peter thought he sensed the sound of genuineness in it, but he would not permit himself fully to believe.

"There might be other ways of getting rid of me—less unpleasant ways," he hazarded.

Long silence, then explosively from Anse, "Say, young fellah, what's the Old Man got it in for you for anyway? You an' that girl I see on the *Bonita*—that spunky girl who shooshed us off with a gun? I swear to Moses I'm just bustin' with curiosity about the whole shootin'-match!" Peter turned to read truth in eyes he could not see, for the genuineness in Anse's plea for light was beyond play-acting—by one of the gripman's mental calibre, at any rate.

"Guess you'll have to ask him that," Peter parried, still fearful lest Bullock had set Anse to pump him.

"There you are!" growled Anse. "Minute I begin asking questions about anything on this junket I'm canned. That's the understanding. Me, I just gotta go blundering ahead—maybe run my neck into a noose—and not ask a damned question of old Bullock. That's the reason I'm puttin' it to you straight like this. I'm plumb sick of my job already."

Peter artfully played upon the other's curiosity to the point of full revelation on Anse's part. In his mood of resentment the man was bursting to talk. He told of his strange meeting with the eccentric owner of



the House of the Winking Light, of his visits there, of Bullock's living fear of being shot at and finally of the robbery. "Though I swear I don't know what the girl took, if it was that same girl I see on the *Bonita*, as the Old Man says."

Peter hoped in vain that Anse would let drop something which would give him a clue to the mysterious quest upon which Nancy and Bullock both were set.

"By jiminy, I forgot to tell you one thing," Anse hastily appended—"that religious picture! You know, a big painted picture of Christ being crucified like you see in some churches and which the light used to shine on in a way to give a fellah the dry-jerk. Well, sir, Bullock's brought that with him, all packed up like it was a hundred thousand dollars. Now what d'you suppose he wants that for 'way down here?"

"A painting of the Crucifixion?" Peter echoed dazedly.

"Yep, life-size you might say, and terrible human-like as I saw it in the flashes from Alcatraz. The Old Man's got it all folded up an' under lock right here on this boat. An' I don't dast ask a question about *that* neither.

"Young fellow, I tell you that's phoney. This whole junket's phoney as the devil; an' I got my belly full of the whole dingedonged business!"

CHAPTER XIV

CONCERNING A TENDER MERCY

DAWN. First fairy light touched the spires of the Sierra de la Gigantea and, wave on wave, cascaded down into wells of shadow. Peaks leaped full-born into the morning. Incredible declivities became chutes into purple gorges. Along this knife-edge summit the desert *cardone*—vegetable python ever writhing in attitudes of agony—made a frieze against the sky. A thicket set on that mountain's flank caught first rays of the sun and sparkled like a stubble field under frost. Everywhere was the hush and stillness of a new day mustering its forces to scourge with heat and thirst a land in bondage—forgotten land of Baja California.

Over the mountains a stillness; out upon the indigo plane of the Gulf, once called the Vermilion Sea, not the lifting of a foam fleck. Just two moving spots defied universal lifelessness: one, a dot of a boat upon the Gulf and veering shoreward; the other, two mules with riders, mere midgets in the wilderness of desert mesas fringing the shore-line. The sardonic genius of the waste places, which plays with destinies of men in the same temper as it withers the cactus flower and destroys the coyote's whelps, amused itself with bringing these two moving spots into conjunction. The place it chose for meeting was the tiny port of Espiritu Santo—just a handful of palm-thatched huts beneath giant cocoas fringing a crescent of beach. Espiritu Santo, long-forgotten pirates' roost and one-time stronghold of a daring soldier under the Society of Jesus.

The moving dot upon the waters was the motor yacht *Shark*, one night out from the port of Miraflores to the north and now making for the beach line of Espiritu Santo. The twin specks in the wilderness of mesquite and cat's-claw fringing the oasis about the little hamlet were the rid-

ers Don Elias Santandos from San Ysidro and his Yaqui, Feliz. Don Elias, two days' journey away from his Casa de las Sombras, was come to the gulf port on matters



dealing with the sale of his *panoc h a*—crudely crystallized cones of brown sugar. Neither Nathaniel Bullock, aboard the *Shark*, nor Don Elias, on his mule, had pre-

monition of impending meeting. The fate that broods over affairs of men in the peninsula has a way of dropping surprises before their feet.

Bullock, aboard the *Shark*, had not slept in the night hours following his cross-questioning of Peter Free, his prisoner. Alone in his cabin, the man had brooded somber thoughts; had toyed with the notion of murder, weighing it against the innate qualities of mind and heart that were his, balancing against his bitter craving for revenge against the young man who had cheated him—as he thought—questions of cold expediency. There was Anse, for example; the man had shown a surprising rebellion against the project to maroon young Free on Little Guardian Angel, and a Jim Anse other than docile might prove troublesome.

Peter, asleep in the deck chair, was roused in the first light of dawn by a rough shake of his shoulder. He opened his eyes to see Bullock before him.

"You are a fool—the greatest fool the Lord ever let live," was Bullock's greeting. Peter, still blinking, had no ready answer. The graybeard's biting voice continued.

"Such a fool I have decided you're not worth killing. Only a clever man can arouse in another the rather lofty inspiration to commit murder. A whippersnapper like you—faugh! One only wants to get rid of a whippersnapper with the least trouble. So I am going to get rid of you."

"You mentioned certain plans for getting rid of me last night," Peter murmured with a grin which fell far short of designed breeziness.

"Back of you there is the Little Guardian Angel Island"—Peter turned his head to see a purple shadow mass rising out of the blue many miles to eastward, the island of thirst—"ahead is the town of Espiritu Santo, where I am going to put you ashore. It is two days by mule-back

to Miraflores if you can find a guide to show you the way. Or try your luck in a canoe hollowed out of a tree trunk if you prefer the water road. In either event, by the time you get back to Miraflores I'll be beyond being bothered by you and——"

"The pleasure will be mutual," Peter interrupted. Bullock ignored him. "And I advise you not to take the trouble to try to find the girl Nancy. She, too, will be decidedly beyond being bothered by a blundering fool who thinks he can play horse with Nathaniel Bullock. Now go forward and get some breakfast. You'll need it where you're going."

This surprising offer of hospitality, hard on the heels of Bullock's bitter personalities, was but in character with the surprising old man. Peter went as directed to where big Jim Anse sat on the coaming around the open engine pit. Coffee and bacon fried on a cylinder head were passed up by the silent Diego, engineer, cook and crew of the *Shark*. Anse was morose and disinclined to pursue conversation. Evidently he repented in a measure his garrulity of the night before. Perhaps he had awakened to the circumstances that whereas in that talk in the dark he had told everything he knew about Nathaniel Bullock and strange happenings in San Francisco, the young man whom he had made his confidant had told nothing. Peter's inability to disclose any secrets Anse could not know. He believed he had been cheated, which was poor reward for his scruples against marooning a young fellow on a waterless rock.

The unusual meal progressed. The *Shark* drew nearer a dent in the coast under the very eaves of topping mountains.

Arrival of any craft, even the smallest, in the roadstead of Espiritu Santo was an event in the day's round. All of the population that was not bedridden gathered along shore when the *Shark* dropped her mudhook a hundred yards from the line of breakers. A canoe wallowed through the breakers and began to make with swift strokes for the visitor's side. In it sat a tall, spare man in white; under his palm-leaf hat showed thin spikes of imperial and goatee, like a cat's whiskers. Nathaniel Bullock, leaning against the deckhouse and idly watching the approach of the canoe, suddenly dove into the cabin and returned with binoculars. He kept them bearing upon the figure in white for several minutes, and when he put them aside faint amazement mingled with another and un-

definable emotion and fluttered about his eyes.

The canoe came alongside and Don Elias Santandos stepped over the rail.

"Ah, Señor Boolock! Our meeting is as unexpected as our last farewell." The Mexican's English was but slightly tinged



with soft Spanish inflection. He put out a lean hand, brown as weathered leather. "I have just come to Espiritu Santo myself—saw your ship approaching even as I descended from the mountains and knew this was my day of good luck."

An air of restrained cordiality on Bullock's part met the stranger's smiling greeting. His eyes put questions and warily sought for answers in the Don's coffee-colored eyes. As two old pit-dogs trained to the wiles of seizing instant advantage, these two faced each other. It was Bullock who hazarded an opening.

"My letter from San Francisco——?"

"Received a week ago," Don Elias answered. "Therefore I have been expecting you, but hardly in Espiritu Santo."

"Business brought me here," the other began and then, thinking better of himself, "if you will come with me to the cabin——"

At the door he paused to call to Anse, who was standing near Peter on the far side of the deckhouse, "No one leaves the boat without my permission."

Followed an hour during which Peter once more attacked the wall of mystery which in the past two days suddenly had closed around him, holding him prisoner amid grotesque unrealities. Painstakingly he revived events since the moment when a blue light on the gulf waters in a dawn hour had heralded a procession of prodigies and portents bewilderingly confusing: The girl Nancy charged with burglary by Bullock, and Bullock in turn cowed by the girl's bold gesture of defiance; Nancy disappearing from her room in the Hotel de Pacifico when the voices of her enemies sounded at the gate; Bullock's sudden

switching of hostility to an innocent and bewildered Peter Free; kidnapping—search—threat of marooning after pirate fashion—

And, final bizarre dash to the melange of mysteries, that tale of Jim Anse's of a Nathaniel Bullock living alone in a dark house; of this same Bullock carrying down to an adventure land and on adventure quest a great painting of the Crucifixion, "life-size and terrible human-like."

Beyond unraveling the tangled skein of the immediate past might be; how far beyond hazard of prophecy the immediate future!

Here aboard the *Shark* and about to be put ashore stood Peter Free in a Hinsville style pinpoint check suit and with no hat—the precious sombrero was under his hammock in the hotel patio when last he saw it—not only hatless but with not even a fresh handkerchief. Here stood Peter Free, one hundred American gold dollars in his pocket, not a word of Spanish in his head, separated from his trunk and his box of instruments by two days' riding over yonder unscalable mountains by a path he did not know.

At his elbow was a man who had but reluctantly given over the idea of killing him; in the immediate foreground beyond the boil of surf on a curving beach lay the beginning of a new chapter of misadventure:

Espiritu Santo, a pin-prick on an unmapped territory, place of aliens, wretched little huddle of life between fence of mountains and trap of sea.

"Glory! What would I give just to be turning into Charley Walters' drug store for a glass of grape fizz!"

Just before a new episode opened for Peter Free a tiny drop of balm splashed into his bitter cup. Jim Anse sidled over to him and growled at him out of the corner of his mouth, "Don't get way down on your luck, young fellow. Member, I kept you from being put ashore on that island place, and if we ever meet up again you can count on Honest Jim to come through for you again."

Then the cabin door opened and Bullock stepped out, the Mexican following.

"Free, you go ashore with Don Elias"—a smile almost benevolent lurked beneath Bullock's beard. "He will do what he can for you during your stay in Espiritu Santo."

Without a word, Peter went over-side and into the waiting canoe which swarthy paddlers steadied. The spare man in white followed. Peter looked up as the canoe was shoved away. He caught a flicker of poisonous humor in the eyes of Bullock. Behind the bearded cynic stood Anse; he gave Peter a broad wink by way of farewell.

(To be continued in the next issue of SHORT STORIES)

NEXT TIME

A tale of the Red-woods, and of the men of giant stature, who are at home among them.

BIG TIMBER

BY
J. ALLAN DUNN

A desert blizzard helps to show the breed of men who buck the wilderness.

Eyes of the Desert

BY
B. M. BOWER



THE SOUL OF THE LAGOONS

By G. A. WELLS

Author of "Empty Bunkers," "G'rilla," etc.

OUTWITTED BY A SLEUTH WHOSE IDEAS OF JUSTICE AND PERSONAL GAIN WERE ONE, IT REMAINED FOR THIS LITTLE FRENCHMAN OF THE SOUTHERN SEAS TO SHOW THAT THE SPIRIT OF SACRIFICE IS GREATER THAN LOVE OF LIFE

ALPHONSE BOSSUET owned a schooner, a two-masted affair of about sixty gross tons with a tiny main cabin and two state-rooms like bird cages aft, a cargo hold between the masts, and a fore-castle forward for the use of the four Gilbert island boys who composed her crew. Seven years ago Alphonse had plucked the *Josephine* from a reef in the Carolines where a disgusted owner had abandoned her to her fate. He bought her "where is, as is" for three hundred Chili dollars.

Originally the *Josephine* had been called the *Belle o' Sydney*. Alphonse had renamed her after that wife of the Corsican's who had played such a large part in the destiny of nations. For know that Alphonse Bossuet was intensely French; the air and the words of "La Marseillaise" were ever upon his lips and in his heart.

Came to Papeete one day while the *Josephine* lay in the harbor and her owner and captain regaled himself in a cafe in the city, a white man whose untanned skin denoted him a new arrival from a more temperate clime. Designing fate had directed this man to the very café wherein sat Alphonse sipping his beer and puffing a cigarette.

"I was told at the hotel," Alphonse heard the stranger say to the barman, "that I

might find Alphonse Bossuet here?"

Alphonse spoke for himself, leaping to his feet from the table where he sat nearby and bowing to the stranger with the grace and dignity of a Bourbon courtier.

"Excuse, m'sieur, I am Captain Alphonse Bossuet," he announced.

The stranger looked at Alphonse critically and his lips curled in a scornful sneer. Save for straw sandals Alphonse's feet were bare, his shirt was cotton, his trousers soiled duck, the hat he had snatched from his head a dingy red tam-o'-shanter with a once white tassel on the top. Five feet, seven inches tall was Alphonse, pulling the beam of the scales at one hundred and twenty some-odd pounds, including the little mustache with carefully waxed ends that graced his upper lip. He was probably forty years old. Long sojourning under the South Sea sun had tinted his skin a very deep brown.

The stranger was evidently disappointed in Captain Alphonse Bossuet; it may have been that he expected to find a commanding looking man in uniform and brass buttons. Condescendingly he advanced to the table where Alphonse stood awaiting his pleasure. Alphonse was excitedly interested, for not often did such distinguished looking gentlemen inquire for Captain Alphonse Bossuet.

Plainly an American, this stranger. In proper season Pepeete saw many American tourists and the earmarks of the breed were evident to Alphonse. This was not the tourist season, however, which fact increased Alphonse's interest in the man. He was garbed in laundered Palm Beach and silk, with a wide-brimmed Panama hat on his head. His eyes were a steely-blue.

"Sit down, Captain Bossuet," the stranger invited.

They sat, one on either side of the table, and presently two glasses were filled with wine such as Alphonse seldom afforded himself. The bottle stood at the stranger's elbow.

"M'sieur, you have ask for Captain Alphonse Bossuet," suggested Alphonse. "I am leeson to hear."

"All right, captain, we'll get down to business," nodded the other. "They tell me you know the Pacific Ocean like an open book, captain?"

"I have sail dees Sout' Sea a long time," answered Alphonse, rolling the ends of his mustache between thumb and forefinger. "I know heem well."

For a few moments the stranger eyed Alphonse speculatively, then from a hip pocket drew a small buckskin bag fastened at the throat with a thong. He untied the thong and from the bag poured a handful of gleaming golden coins, American fives, tens and twenties.

Alphonse's eyes shone at the beautiful sight. What he could do with those pretty yellow disks! The *Josephine* needed a new set of sails, and certainly it would not hurt to have her painted and her masts re-stepped.

Slowly the stranger poured the coins back into the bag and retied it. Then he lit a cigar.

"Captain, suppose you had a chance to earn the money in this sack?" he asked suddenly. "Five hundred dollars."

Alphonse's eyes flashed eagerly.

"I take heem queek, zat chance," he answered. "What does m'sieur wish I do to earn zat money?"

The other noted that Alphonse's glass was empty and refilled it to the brim.

"I'm looking for a certain man, a white man," he said.

"An' hees name, m'sieur?"

"He's been in this neck of the woods—let's see—well, say about four years," the

stranger went on, tapping the bag gently with his fingers to make its contents jingle. "I am a lawyer, Felton by name, Samuel C. Felton, of San Francisco."

He paused and puffed at his cigar and looked at Alphonse keenly through wreaths of blue-gray smoke.

"This man I'm looking for is the only child of a man living at Frisco," he proceeded. "That is, the old man did live there. He's dead now; died a week less than a year ago. About four years ago the kid and his daddy had a rumpus and the kid tells papa to go jump in the lake and skips out."

"Dees keed, what ees hees name?" interposed Alphonse.

"The old man, as I say, kicked off about a year ago; it'll be a year a week from today," Felton continued, ignoring Alphonse's question. "I am his lawyer, y'understand. Before he cashed in he made me promise I'd find this son and turn over his inheritance to him. In all it amounts to about five million dollars."

Alphonse's eyes popped.

"Hees name?" he insisted, curious to know the name of such a fortunate person. "I'll come to that," replied Felton. "Where to look for this kid was a problem. Y'understand nobody had heard from him or about him during the four years he'd been gone. But his old man told me to find him and to hell with the expense. So I set every detective agency in the United States to work. Six months of that cost the estate about forty thousand dollars, but the kid didn't turn up."

"Then it kinda struck me maybe he was out this way; kind of a hunch, y'understand. Back home the kid used to fool around the bay in a little yacht his daddy bought him, and he was partial to the water. Well, I thought I'd take a hand myself in this game of find-the-button, and here I am."

"They told me at the hotel here that you knew the islands and everybody that lived on 'em, and if anybody could help me locate this boy you were the party. I'll make it worth your while if you'll take me to him, captain."

Felton casually lifted the bag of coins from the table and let it drop again. The jingle of those golden disks was sweet music to Alphonse's ears.

"Eef, m'sieur, excuse, tell me dees man's name p'raps—"

"Philip Stanton."

Apparently Captain Alphonse Bossuet did not know a man of the name Philip



Stanton, else his eyes would have shown recognition. Felton took a small photograph from the inside pocket of his coat and laid it before Alphonse.

"That's him about five years ago."

Alphonse started when he looked at the photograph, and the start brought an exultant flash into Felton's steely-blue eyes.

"Know him, eh, captain?"

"What you say hees name, m'sieur?"

"Stanton, Philip Stanton."

Alphonse shook his head.

"I know zat man as Peter Larch, m'sieur," he said.

Felton put the photograph back in his pocket and refilled Alphonse's empty glass.

"Names," he said, "are unimportant. In fact, I rather suspected that Stanton would be sailing under another name; that's why I brought along the photo. You've recognized him by the photo and that's all that matters. A man with a nose as crooked as that isn't hard to identify, captain. I understand he got that beak in a boxing bout at college; set himself up as a sort of amateur pug, y'understand."

"Well, what do you say, captain?"

Alphonse did not reply at once. He sat rolling the needle points of his mustache and looking at the bag of gold with poignant eyes. At length he wagged his head negatively, though with not a little reluctance.

"M'sieur, eet ees not for me to take you to see zat man," he said.

"You mean you don't know where he is?"

"I do know, m'sieur. But I am forbeed. Often zat man say, he says, 'Alphonse, you not ever say to no man zat I am here on ziss island.'"

"What island, captain?"

"Zat island where he ees, m'sieur," replied Alphonse with a flash of white teeth. "For what he say zat I don't know. Of heem I know but what I know from time I first meet heem zat day at ziss place, Papeete. He deed not tell me where he come from or anyt'ing about heemself. Eet was not my affair, m'sieur, an' in zee Sout' Sea eet ees not polite to say, 'What name? From where you come? What for you come?' Non, m'sieur. Dees man he ees married."

"Married?"

"Oui, to Marie Duvivier, who ees my cousin, m'sieur. Long time ago I take Marie go cruise weeth me sometime. One time I take her to zat island where M'sieur Peter leeve an' zey fall in love. I take

zem to a missionary priest in Fiji islands to marry. *Oui, m'sieur.* Marie, she have two children. Ah! Zat gentle Alphonse! Zat sweet Lucile!"

Alphonse rolled his eyes ecstatically. A dark frown overspread Felton's face.

"But look here, captain," the latter argued. "You have a perfect right to disregard Stanton's orders and take me to this island where he lives. Circumstances alter cases, y'understand."

Alphonse looked at him dubiously, yet quite willing to be convinced because of the bag of gold lying on the table before him. Alphonse coveted that bag of gold for the sake of his beloved *Josephine*.

"Now if I were a—well, say an officer of the law looking for Stanton to take him into custody; that would be entirely different. In that event I would admire your loyalty for refusing to disclose his whereabouts. But that isn't the case, captain."

"I am a lawyer commissioned by the boy's dead father to find him and turn over his inheritance. Before he can get the money his father left him he must sign certain papers I have in my trunk at the hotel. It's to Stanton's advantage to be found by me. Look here, captain. Suppose you were Stanton and he were you, and suppose I asked him to take me to you so that you could inherit a lot of money. See how it is, captain?"

"But, m'sieur, you show me dees papers—proofs of what you say?"

"Oh sure. Here, look at this!"

With a flourish Felton took from his breast pocket an impressive legal-looking paper much decorated with ribbons and seals apparently signed by the governor of California and with many "whereases" and "to wits" confirming the identity and mission of the bearer.

Alphonse, after puzzling over this a while, sighed, handed it back.

"She seem what you say, O. K.," he said uncertainly.

"Of course," replied Felton briskly. "Now, there's another side to it. Do I have to point out to you, Captain Bossuet, that as Stanton's cousin by marriage, you will naturally share in his good fortune? Maybe there are certain things you want—a trip to Paris, maybe; fine clothes; good things to eat; a pocket full of money; perhaps a little yacht to cruise around in. Think of going to France in your own private yacht, captain! Damn it, man, I don't believe you see the possibilities of this thing! And another thing, captain, you are under moral obligation to take me to



Stanton. Would you cheat him out of all that money? And of course you'd be cheating yourself at the same time, y'understand."

"Zat sounds true, m'sieur," said Alphonse, wavering.

"It is true," Felton assured him. "It's up to you, captain. By the terms of old man Stanton's will, if his son doesn't sign those papers I have within a year after his daddy's death, the money goes to a California university. Now then, does the university get the money, or does it go to Stanton, where it rightfully belongs?"

Alphonse kept silence for a space, twisting his mustache.

"M'sieur, what you say I go ask Cousin Peter what he tink, eh?"

"How long will that take you?"

"Two week."

Felton shook his head.

"Can't be done, captain," he said. "I've got just one little lone week to put those papers in Stanton's hands, otherwise he loses the money. As I said, it's up to you. And there's this much about it, captain; if you don't do as I ask, you'd better not ever mention this business to Stanton. He'll boil you in oil. Moreover, captain, here's five hundred dollars on account."

Felton pushed the clinking bag toward Alphonse and leaned back in his chair. For perhaps a full minute Alphonse kept his eyes glued to the bag, then put out a hand and drew it toward him.

"When you like to start, m'sieur?" he inquired.

"The sooner the better," answered Felton.

"Then come, m'sieur."

Alphonse led the way to the street, Felton at his heels, chuckling quietly to himself.

FIVE days later the schooner *Josephine* was threading her way through a maze of islands stippling the blue waters of the Pacific on or near the equator and lying between longitudes one hundred and seventy and one hundred and eighty west. The Gilbert group, they are called, belonging to Great Britain. The morning of the sixth day they raised Carioa, a small island lying at the extreme northwestward fringe of the group.



Carioa was but a dot on the most complete admiralty chart, put there altogether for the purpose of showing ship's captains where it lay so that they would not jam their vessels against it in the dark. It was an atoll, outside dimensions about five miles long by perhaps three miles wide. The width of the land that fenced the lagoon ranged from a few yards to almost half a mile, and in no place did it rise above ten feet from high water level.

On Carioa lived Philip Stanton and his wife, their two children, and about three dozen natives. There was an abundance of fruit in the groves, coconut palms were plentiful, there were fish in the lagoon, and pigs had been imported from other islands nearby. It was a tropical Eden where one might loaf the year through with not a care in the world.

There was no trade at Carioa. The schooner was the only craft that ever touched there, saving for a few native canoes from adjacent islands. Alphonse served as the link that connected the island with the outside world, and in his schooner he brought in various things required. Carioa was as much home to Alphonse as any place on dry land could be, and this by virtue of the cousin who lived there with her husband and children in a crude but substantial house, that nestled like an egg in a nest in the heart of a grove of breadfruit trees and tall palms and ferns.

Captain Alphonse Bossuet steered the *Josephine* into the placid lagoon through the narrow passage at the south end of the atoll and finally moored her against the very shore, where one had little trouble stepping from ship to land over the low rail. The *Josephine* was moored with two chains fore and aft, the shore end of the chains fastened to ring bolts embedded in the coral rock. This saved the necessity of putting out the schooner's line when she came to port at Carioa.

"M'sieur, we have arrive," Alphonse announced to his passenger.

"Thank God for that!" said Felton fervently. "Captain, don't steamers come here ever? It gives me the creeps to think of making the trip back to Papeete in your damned old tub."

Alphonse's face clouded at the slight put upon his darling *Josephine*. He forced back the angry retort that surged to his lips.

"Non, m'sieur," he replied. "No steamer, no sail sheep she ever come zis way. My *Josephine* ees only sheep ever come zis way."

Felton groaned.

During the five days at sea Felton had shown his true colors and Alphonse had taken a decided dislike for the man. Felton was full of complaints. He complained of his room, his bed, the heat, the food, the lack of drink, of the *Josephine's* speed, of the crew. And he complained of Alphonse most of all because of the little Frenchman's persistent, incessant humming of "La Marseillaise," to which he frequently accompanied himself on a battered guitar.

A number of times during those five days, "For God's sake, Frenchy, knock off the racket!" had sounded in Felton's wrathful voice.

"Ah, m'sieur, you do not understand what I feel here," Alphonse would try to explain, touching his breast. "Zat so glorious song she ees——"

"To hell with your song! How far we got to go yet?"

And Alphonse would subside—for a while. At times he regretted bringing Felton to Carioa. His consolation for indignities was the clinking bag of gold in his pocket and the millions his cousin-in-law would inherit.

When Alphonse leaped ashore after the schooner had been moored with the two stout chains Felton followed. The little Frenchman shook hands with several tall natives who had come down from their houses in the grove to meet the schooner, but, to their glances of askance at Felton, Alphonse offered no explanation. He and his passenger went on toward the house that peeped at them through the interstices of the trees.

On the thatched veranda of the house stood a man and a woman. There was nothing of a distinguishing nature about the man except a rather prominent nose that was all awry. He was of average size. The woman was distinguished by an unusual prettiness. Down the path that led to the house dashed two children, a boy of about six and a girl of perhaps four. With glad cries they flung themselves into Alphonse's outstretched arms, and while he stooped and smothered their heads with kisses they jabbered at him in a mixture of French



and English. Alphonse probably sensed the question that occurred to Felton at sight of the children.

"Marie, she was a widow when she marry M'sieur Peter, an' she already have children," he explained. "She was married to Andre Duvivier in Paris when she was sixteen, an' Andre he come to Papeete for zee goverment an' zat ees where he die. So you see, m'sieur?"

Felton nodded his understanding.

They went on up the path toward the house, Alphonse leading and holding a hand of either child. He told them of mysterious presents he had brought for them from Papeete. Finally they stepped upon the veranda of the house. The veranda was, in fact, a native "*paepae*," a porch made of slabs of roughly hewn stone about five feet high. It was spacious, answering for a room in itself.

Marie Stanton, who despite her two children was yet little more than a girl, looked at Felton interestedly, a smile of welcome upon her red lips.

Stanton, who stood beside her, eyed Felton suspiciously, his body stiffening and tensing as does the body of a wild animal on the verge of springing or scampering away to safety.

Felton let his steely-gray eyes run from Stanton's face to his feet and back again. Stanton threw a sidelong, accusing glance at Alphonse.

"Cousin Peter," Alphonse introduced, "zis ees M'sieur Felton, who I have breeng from Papeete to see you."

When Stanton spoke his voice was harsh.

"I can't tell you I'm glad to see you, Felton, until I know what business brings you all the way from Papeete to see me."

A slight smile played about Felton's lips and he casually folded his arms across his breast, the right hand thrust beneath the coat.

"My visit concerns the matter of a certain murder in New York about four years ago, Stanton," he said. "Remember?"

Stanton's face went white. For a brief moment he stood, his body rigid, then with a snarl he flung himself at Felton. Felton leaped backward and whipped an automatic from the holster suspended under his left armpit. Stanton landed three or four feet short of his mark and stood staring into the black muzzle of the gun that threatened his heart. At length he lifted his gleaming eyes to Felton's face.

"Samuel C. Felton, Stanton, free-lance detective. That's me. You left New York in such a hurry maybe you don't

know they posted seven thousand dollars in rewards for you. Those rewards haven't been withdrawn. I've got extradition papers from several governments owning land out this way, England among 'em. I've been looking for you in more or less earnest ever since you bumped off that chap Stevens four years ago. It's the unexpected that happens, y'understand. Went to Honolulu on vacation a few weeks ago and accidentally—accidentally, mark that, Stanton—accidentally got on your trail there. Bumped into a ship agent who told me you'd inquired of him about passage to Papeete a long time ago. That snoot of yours, y'understand, looks like a bonfire on a hilltop. So I came on to Papeete and heard about this frog-sticking cousin of yours. Do you believe in windfalls, Stanton?"

Felton laughed maliciously.

"But," broke in Alphonse, "those papers, those red seals—proofs!"

"Oh, sure," laughed Felton gratingly. "A good detective anticipates all such little needs."

Alphonse and Marie were staring at Felton open-mouthed, as if they refused to believe their senses. Suddenly Alphonse snatched something from his shirt and lunged at Felton. The detective's gun cracked and the little Frenchman staggered back, clutching at his right hand. A long-bladed knife clattered to the veranda. Then Alphonse turned and ran down the steps of the veranda, screeching, and disappeared among the trees.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later he came out on a shelf of coral rock that overhung a deep pool in the sea. He jerked a jingling buckskin bag from his pocket and hurled it into the water. It sank out of sight, Alphonse cursing it in French. Then he threw himself on his stomach, head on arms, and sobbed wailingly, his wounded hand oozing blood upon the hot rock.

And there Alphonse remained the rest of that day and all that night. Often he was seized with bursts of wild sobbing. He could not see the house or his schooner. Trees intervened. He was alone. Before him the far stretch of the sea, but he saw nothing of it. What was going on back there at the house? He put the question out of his mind. He did not want to know. It was horror to him.

Judas! He condemned himself with that hateful word. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed One for thirty pieces of silver.

Alphonse Bossuet had betrayed his cousin-in-law for five hundred, American gold. The difference was that Judas betrayed knowingly, voluntarily. Alphonse, the trusting, had betrayed unwittingly, had been tricked by a smooth-tongued stranger. But in his mental torment Alphonse was incapable of distinguishing the difference between Judas Iscariot and himself.

The day died swiftly, as is the way of days in the tropics; it was like snapping off an electric light. Myriad twinkling stars came out and studded the velvet vault overhead. But still Alphonse sat on, looking at the sea without seeing it. The blood of the wound in his hand had long since clotted and stayed the flow.

If Peter Larch, rightfully Philip Stanton, had only told him, was the ceaseless plaint of Alphonse. If Stanton had only told him of that specter hovering there in the outer world ready to swoop down upon him and destroy him. But Stanton had not told. And Alphonse had unwittingly brought the dread specter to Carioa island.

A trick of fate that Alphonse had been at Papeete when Felton came seeking his man. Fate had jested with the little Frenchman. The very waves that slapped against the rock upon which he sat seemed to mock him with their laughter.

In the morning Marie, his cousin, found him there. Alphonse rose to his feet and for a time they looked into each other's eyes. It was Alphonse who finally dropped his gaze.

"Is this to repay us for nursing you through your long illness last year, thou foul ingrate?" Marie cried.

Alphonse flinched as from a knife. He had thought of that. Stanton and his wife had saved his life when they had nursed him through a long siege of blackwater fever. That was only last year when they pulled him back through the door that leads to death. The thought of that, then, hurt him all the more now.

"I did not know, Marie," he answered meekly. "Believe me, dear cousin, I did not know. Listen."

Forthwith he told her how it came about that Felton had come to Carioa. As he proceeded with his narrative the hard look in Marie's eyes softened, and when he finished she took an impulsive step toward him and kissed him on the cheek.

"I forgive you, cousin," she said. "Nor did I know, therefore I do not hold you to blame. Nonetheless, cousin, though Peter have blood upon his hands, I bless him. A



man married his sister back there in New York, and so cruelly did he misuse her that she died. And Peter killed him. He left a note with the dead, saying that it was he who had done the deed, for he wished them to know. I heard them talking last night, Peter and that—that beast.”

“Is Peter—free?” asked Alphonse fortuitously.

“Free? Blessed Saviour! Free he is like a wild animal in a trap, with rings of steel and a chain upon his wrists and that monster sitting over him with his pistol, laughing at him. Free! Even my pleading avails not, Alphonse, though I throw myself upon my knees. Nay, he will not respite us for fear we go aboard the *Josephine* and escape him.

“And then what become my seven t’ousand dollar reward?” he says. Was there ever such another inhuman monster in the world!”

Alphonse’s hands clenched and his eyes flashed fire. Marie seized him by the shoulders and shook him.

“Can you not do something, cousin? Oh, say you can! For Peter, cousin! For me, for your little namesake, for my Lucile! On your soul, Alphonse Bossuet, you must do something!”

“Mother of Jesus! Would I not give my very soul to do something! My very soul, yes! Tell me what. That trickster! I could—thus!”

Alphonse made motions with his hands as if rending Felton limb from limb, his teeth grinding together. Then he shuddered.

“But no, cousin mine, I could not do murder though my own life were at stake,” he said suddenly. “I am not of that kind, you see. But there is a way. I know there is a way. Go, dear cousin, and let me think.”

Marie, crying, left him and returned to the house. Alphonse followed slowly and made his way aboard the *Josephine*. He had not noticed that the sun was veiled in a mist like a day in autumn, the sun showing pumpkin-like through it. Not a breath of wind stirred and the air felt heavy and sticky.

There was no one aboard the schooner. The four members of her crew lived in the houses with their compatriots when the *Josephine* was anchored in Carioa lagoon. Alphonse went down to the main cabin and threw himself upon a chest and put his head in his hands.

There Detective Felton found him when he went aboard the schooner a little after

noon. Alphonse sprang to his feet and bared his teeth. Felton smiled amusedly. This diminutive Frenchman could not harm him, especially when he held an automatic in his hand.

“Now don’t go getting on your high horse, sport,” the detective said in a humorous tone. “There’s provisions made for folks who try to interfere with the law and block justice.”



“Justice!”

Alphonse hurled the word from between clenched teeth.

“Sure, Frenchy, justice. It applies to Stanton as well as other people. And if incidentally I pull down a few thousand bucks reward for my trouble that’s my good luck.”

“An’ what, m’sieur, become of zat wife an’ zem children?” burst from Alphonse half pleadingly, half savagely. “Eh? What zey do eef you take heem away?”

Felton shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s that to me, Bossuet?” he answered curtly. “But we won’t argue the question. What I came to see you about is when can we start for Papeete?”

“I don’t help take M’sieur Peter to be hung,” protested Alphonse.

“Oh, is that the way of it?” snapped the detective. “Yes, mister, you’re going to take me and Stanton to Papeete, where we can catch a steamer for the States. Moreover, they don’t hang in New York; they electrocute. Have your tub ready to start about three o’clock. I’ll have Stanton aboard by that time. The woman and the kids stay here, and you can come back to them later. We start at three o’clock, Bossuet. It’s almost one now.”

With that Felton turned on his heel and went ashore again.

BY TWO o’clock blue-black clouds were thrusting their heads above the horizon and the sky was brassy. But no breath of wind yet marred the glassy surface of the lagoon. The leaves of the trees and the fronds of the tall ferns hung listless, as if carved from wood.

Alphonse felt the need of a good breath of air in his lungs. That in the cabin was suffocating. He went on deck. There was an old barometer hanging on a nail in

the hatch hood. Alphonse consulted it. It read twenty-nine, one. Even as he looked at it it dropped to twenty-nine flat, then to twenty-eight, eight.

He sent an inquiring glance at the water in the lagoon, then toward the brassy sky. He noted the blue-black clouds that rolled and tumbled like smoke from an inferno of flame beneath the horizon. Their edges were a yellowish green. Back to the barometer his gaze went. It now read twenty-eight, five.

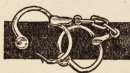
Alphonse scratched his chin in puzzlement. He could not, with such a barometer, understand the stillness. It was like being in a petrified world. Then, abruptly, the heavy, sticky air seemed to be jerked away. Alphonse felt the weight of it removed from his lungs. There was no motion to it, no force of its going that could be felt tangibly. It simply went, and the only indication of that was the greater effort required for breathing. Alphonse panted.

His gaze went back to the clouds again. At least they were moving. They swung along the horizon toward the right. He watched them, fascinated. Suddenly they paused, halted dead as a needle will halt at the insistent pull of the magnet. Not an inch did they move for several long minutes, then suddenly they were in motion again, tossing and billowing, being pulled and twisted into new shapes. They grew larger and larger with fearful swiftness, marching up over the rim of the sea in seemingly endless ranks. And they were headed directly for the atoll.

Alphonse understood. Carioa island was in a vacuum, a vacuum that must somehow be destroyed, an equilibrium that must be restored. Once before, on the China coast, he had experienced such a thing.

He snatched a final look at the barometer and was aghast at the reading. It stood twenty-eight, two. He dashed across the deck and over the rail and struck the land running. He was puffing and sucking like a spent swimmer when he reached the house and bounded into the living room.

Marie was there, a child at either elbow.



She was sobbing quietly. The two children looked on dumbly. Stanton sat on a window seat, handcuffs about his

wrists. Felton sat in a chair opposite his prisoner, his air nonchalant, a lighted cigar between his lips, the automatic in his right hand.

"Hurricane!" gasped Alphonse. "You come outside an' lay flat down. Zis house, she go like—like——"

He pretended to scatter the house to the four winds. Leaping to where the children stood he tucked one under each arm and fled for the door. Marie ran after him. Felton gestured toward the door with his gun and followed Stanton out on the jump.

They had gone but a little way, from the veranda when the hurricane broke over them. The sun was blotted out. There was a weird humming noise in the air. It suddenly transformed itself to a roar. Then the rain came, great obliterating sheets of water. Bolt after bolt of lightning crashed earthward. And the wind! Monstrous waves of it shrieked and whistled fiendishly through the trees. The trees bent far over, then were motionless, held there by the force of the wind. Leaves, twigs, branches, whole trees sailed through the air.

Nor did any of those who rushed from the house lie down of their own accord. The wind threw them down and pressed them against the earth. Alphonse managed to throw his body across the two children to protect them. He glanced toward the house. It seemed to puff and swell as if trying to draw a deep breath, then its thatched roof sprang upward and like some grotesque bird flapped away toward the lagoon, flapping itself to bits as it went. So thick with water was the air that vision was completely nullified beyond a dozen yards or so.

Alphonse had followed the flapping roof with his eyes until it disappeared in the welter. He looked at the house again. And there was no house. Where the house had been was only a stone porch littered with splintered timbers. Alphonse grunted with amazement.

"Blessed Mary!" he gasped.

Never had he seen anything like it. It

was past comprehension. He scarcely believed what his eyes beheld. Surely it was a nightmare and he would waken to find he had been asleep. But



there was the painful consciousness of the horizontal rain spears stabbing at him.

All this occurred while Alphonse might have counted twenty.

He looked about for the others. Stanton and his wife lay eight or ten feet to his right, face down, Stanton clutching his wife's arm with his manacled hands to hold her down. Felton lay a few feet behind them, face upward. His right hand clutched the automatic grippingly. On the near side of his head was a long gash where a wind-driven something had struck him. But there was no blood; as fast it oozed from the wound the pour of rain washed it away. The detective was either unconscious or dead. Alphonse wondered . . . hoped . . . that would be a satisfactory end to the whole business.

Little by little, dragging the children with him through the muck, Alphonse fought his way against the press of wind to Stanton's side. There he left the children and crawled to Felton. He felt in the detective's pockets and found the key to the handcuffs. He tried to wrench the gun from Felton's hand but the fingers would not relax. Felton rolled over on his face. He was not dead and Alphonse uttered an oath.

Then he must go on to the end—the certain and inevitable end. And what of that gun in Felton's hand? His brain raced forward.

"Ze gun," he muttered, "ze gun. What does she matter in what we are to face next. Let him keep ze gun."

Back to Stanton Alphonse crawled and unlocked the handcuffs.

"Peter, we get Marie an' zee children in zee lee of zat veranda," he cried into Stanton's ear.

Crawling and squirming, pulling and hauling at each other, they came to the lee side of the veranda, Stanton, his wife and the children snuggled against its protective bulk, while Alphonse made his way back to Felton's side. Alphonse shook him.

"Come, m'sieur!" he screamed. "To zee sheep! Queek now!"

He rolled the detective over on his back. Felton looked up at him dazedly. He was like a drunken man. Alphonse helped him up and they went lurching down the littered path toward the lagoon. They climbed over and under and around fallen trees that blocked their way. Other trees crashed down all about them. The air was a mixture of water, of limbs, branches, splinters, even cocoanuts that drove with cannon ball velocity against tree trunks and splattered like overripe tomatoes. The butt of a limb whizzed past Alphonse's

head and slashed off the major portion of one ear. He clenched his teeth with the pain of it.

"You say we go at t'ree o'clock, m'sieur detective," he mumbled to himself. "Zat's right, we go."

And on toward the lagoon, Alphonse half dragging the dazed detective. They came to the lagoon almost naked, clothes in ribbons and rags. Their bodies were gashed and slashed. At sight of the schooner Alphonse would have crossed himself as a token of thanks to heaven had his arms not been full of Felton.

But what a schooner! Her two masts were down, snapped short off several feet above the deck, flinging about in the water overside like great flails, held fast to the schooner by their standing rigging. Her deck was bare. The deckhouse was gone, and the hatch hood. The wheel stood awry and the rails were smashed. The wind heeled the naked hull far over, and that the two chains that moored the *Josephine* to the shore still held Alphonse attributed to nothing less than a special dispensation of God.

"Come, m'sieur, we go aboard," Alphonse cried.

Felton looked at him dumbly. The wind lifted them aboard. Aye, literally picked them up bodily and flung them on deck amid the welter of water that washed over the schooner.

"You go to zee cabin an' wait for me, m'sieu," yelled Alphonse. "We go to sea till zis hurricane blow heemself out. *Oui*, m'sieur."

None too gently Alphonse dropped Felton down the hatch ladder. The little Frenchman fought his way forward, waited for a back wash to slacken the tension of the chain there and cast it off. A few minutes later the chain aft was off and the schooner darted away into the lagoon.

Perhaps not even a Dante could do justice to the scene of those madly heaving waters, the shrieking of the wind, the crack of lightning and the roar of thunder. It was inferno plus. Alphonse clung precariously to the stump of the mainmast and looked shoreward. It was at best a dim bulk, then suddenly it was blotted out. Alphonse threw



a kiss in that direction and made a dive for the hatch.

He found Felton in the main cabin, sitting on and clinging to a bunk. An uncertain light filtered in from the smashed skylight overhead, and with it a good deal of water that put the cabin desk awash. Felton's mind was now cleared. He looked at Alphonse, wild-eyed, and Alphonse smiled amiably. Neither of them spoke for some time. Talking was difficult. Then, too, one had to look alive to keep from being hurled this way and that by the rolling, plunging, pitching schooner. She sped through the water with incredible swiftness, the wind seeming some gigantic hand that pushed her on.

"Frenchy, where are we going?" demanded the detective at last. "Look here, I believe you've tricked me!"

The smile on Alphonse's face broadened. But it was only his mouth that smiled, not his eyes. His eyes were alight with hate.

"You t'ink so, m'sieur detective?" he yelled answer.

"Where's Stanton and his wife and kids? Where's your crew? What you doing in this cabin in a storm? Answer me, Frenchy!"

The automatic, which he yet gripped with a sort of unconscious tenacity, pointed at Alphonse.

"M'sieur Peter an' hees family deed not come, m'sieur," replied Alphonse. "Zee sea she ees wild, she make zat poor leetle Marie so seek. M'sieur, we are alone on zis sheep."

"God A'mighty!" roared Felton, looking about him like a rat in a trap.

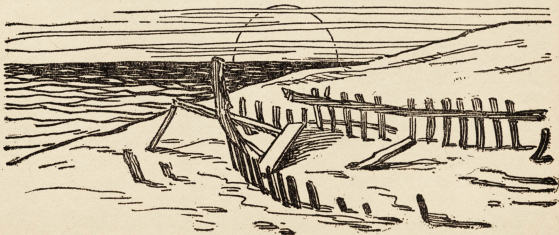
"*Oui, m'sieur,*" said Alphonse with a mocking bow. "You call for God, eh? Zat's right. One, two minute we see heem, I t'ink. Or maybe we go to hell. On zee other side of zee lagoon ees—you shall see, m'sieur. What for you treek me at Papeete, eh? What for I treek you now, eh? When zee storm she go M'sieur Peter feex hees house an' all ees well weeth heem an' Marie an' zem sweet children. You an' me, m'sieur, we go to make Peter safe. *Oui!* I could have keel you back there weeth my hands when you are unconscious. But no, zat would be murder an' I have not zat heart to keel like zat. So I theenk eef I come weeth you zis time my soul she will be save. We cannot go back, m'sieur. Zen we must go on, eh? What you t'ink zee way you treek me zat day at Papeete, m'sieur? Zat was good joke, eh?"

Alphonse laughed outright. At last Felton grasped the full significance of Alphonse's bringing him aboard the schooner. He turned white with wrath and fear.

"Damn your stinking soul!" he shrieked.

"*Oui, m'sieur, my soul—*"

Alphonse broke off coughingly. A stream of lead poured into his body from the automatic in Felton's hand. Still smiling he pitched to the deck. A gigantic sea swept against the low, narrow coral rim of the lagoon, swept over it, swept out to sea, moaning. The *Josephine* went with it, crumbling into toothpicks.



THEM DIZZY DUDES

By JAMES W. EGAN

Author of "Dove of War," "The Pinch-Thinker," etc.

"DUDE WRANGLERS AIN'T GOT THE SOFTEST LIFE THERE IS," ACCORDING TO ASH BARLOW, WHO TRIED HIS PRACTISED HAND AT BEING ONE

REDEYE and reason ain't never been twins, and I reckon I should have knowed better. But bein' none too intelligent, nohow, I hadda go and get all lit up the night of the big barn dance at the Circle C on stuff a mule would back timidly away from and nearly ruin Old Man Milton's perfectly good party, to say nothin' of drivin' his daughter Sis to fury and tears.

That little episode kinda poisoned my future on the Circle C. The next day Old Man Milton allowed I could evacuate his bunkhouse pronto and pepperlike, statin' further and with great feelin' that if ever I showed my ugly physz around the ranch again he'd put enough lead in me to interest a coupla minnin' syndicates.

Of course gettin' throwed outa your job is always plenty distressin', yet the thing that made me feel real lowdown was losin' the fond regard of Sis Milton. There wasn't a prettier girl in the whole state of Colorado than Sis, and I reckon I was about four aces with her until I let that licker loco me.

When her ragin' parent handed me my time and a few kind words I tried to go around and sorta square myself; but bow-in' in the dust didn't appease the lovely Sis none whatsoever.

"If I never, never see you again, Ash Barlow, it'll be a couple years too soon," she informs me. "After last night, our friendship is at an end. I'm glad dad is sendin' you away from the ranch, for a man of your character don't belong. That's all I want to say to you, Mr. Barlow!"

I allow it was ample and abundant. Sis was burnin' up, and I figured I'd better wander off the Circle C while the wanderin' was good.

That's how I happened to drift up into Wyomin' and go to work wranglin' for Jeb Curley of the Double Comet. I wasn't exactly keen for that sorta toil, but like most cowhands I had nothin' stored away, and despite my achin' heart, I appeared to be eatin' as much as ever.

The Double Comet is a dude ranch—one of them places where Easterners and the

like come out and play at bein' wild and woolly at so much per month. Jeb was makin' pretty good at the graft. He had a big herd of customers for the summer season.

Dude wranglers ain't got the softest life there is. You gotta be awful polite to people who is mostly impolite, and about twenty-seven times a day keep your hands off hombres who allow a hoss is just like a machine in which you shift the gears and yank the spark whenever you get the notion.

The Double Comet had its share of pony persecutors and cuckoos who wore the wildest clothes ever throwed together by the firm of Needle and Thread, and still there was some folks among the dudes that was pretty nigh human.

One of them was a young fellow named Bob Havens, supposed to be from some rich New York family. He was a handsome lad and rode well, but there was somethin' a little bit funny about him. I couldn't say just what it was; yet I felt it.

Havens was throwin' a sorta appreciative eye toward a young lady dude named Iva Kennicott, and she was worth a lotta any hombre's attention. She was slim and mighty pretty, with dark brown eyes,



remindin' me a powerful heap of Sis Milton.

Miss Kennicott seemed to be friendly enough toward Havens, but not any more so than she was with a slightly older Easterner called Garland Salter. This Salter was a galoot about thirty-five, and fairly decent as dudes go; still, he had a pair of lamps that wasn't any softer than hunks of marble.

All three of them had arrived at the Double Comet a bit later than the rest of Jeb Curley's boarders, the girl bein' the

last to come, and they possibly consorted together on that account.

A wrangler is always glad to ride out with a pretty lady dude, and several of the boys was continually makin' it a point to pick 'em outa the corral for Miss Iva; but one mornin' she got up after the regular bunch had gone and come on me as I was spinnin' a rope to loosen up my wrist a trifle.

"I wish I could do that," she admires. "Do girls ever learn to be expert with the lasso, or whatever you call it?"

"Kinda hard for a girl, ma'am," I tell her. "Though I have seen one or two that could handle them right clever and skilful."

I was thinkin' of Sis Milton, who could do more stuff with a grass lariat than any puncher around the Circle C.

"Oh, sometimes I wish I could ride and rope and shoot as well as a man!" exclaims Iva Kennicott. "Perhaps I could if I tried real hard. They say nowadays a woman can do anythin' a man does."

Bein' reminded of Sis Milton had kinda grouched me up against the sex for a moment, and I chirp, "Men is men and women women, ma'am. There's a whole passel of things we do easy that a lady can't. She ain't strong enough, to begin with."

"Oh, it may not be a question of stren'th," she objects. "Now, I must be much weaker than you, yet I'm positive I could defend myself successfully from you if I had to."

"Huh?" I warble, sorta startled. "How do you——?"

"It's just the art of knowin' how," she smiles. "Let me demonstrate."

She reaches out for my arm and wrist, and faster than a fat dude leavin' the deck of an outlaw cayuse somethin' transpires. I find myself hittin' the ground with a wicked bump.

"What kicked me?" I cry, scramblin' to my feet, all red and embarrassed.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" pleads Miss Kennicott. "I didn't mean to go so far. I was just showin' you one of the tricks taught me by a Japanese instructor. I've probably a dozen other holds just as effective. If you want——"

"Thanks, ma'am, but I ain't hankerin' to meet them twelve," I confide. "You and me is gonna remain friends, Miss Kennicott, if I got anythin' to say about it. You sure have that stuff down pat."

"Well, it is a wonderful system of self-defense. I know certain holds that might

break or twist one's limbs. Strange stuff for a girl to study, ain't it? Perhaps if I——"

Abruptly she broke off, changin' the topic.

"But I want to learn a little of ropin'. I'm sure you can show me many things about that art."

I played with the old hemp for quite a spell, and she thanked me very pretty and sweet for my trouble. I sorta liked the girl, in spite of the spill she give me. There was a good deal about Iva Kennicott that put me in mind of Sis Milton. And anyone who resembled Sis was bound to mildly interest and excite yours in mournin'.

From that mornin' on I was counted among the boys in Miss Iva's train, and got a pretty good chance to observe how things was with her. I noticed how much Bob Havens and Salter was in her charmin' company, and while I ain't too bright, it begun to filter through my skull that some day there was apt to be a muss. You know how it is when a coupla hembres get knocked for a row of surcingles by the same girl.

It seemed to me that Salter was already followin' Havens around with poison in his marble eyes, and one night I was handed a real shock.

Some of the bronses had been kickin' tar-nation outa the corral. I went and quieted them and was on my way back to a crap game in the bunkhouse when I saw some galoot sneakin' about one of the dude cabins. Of course Jeb Curley had the usual outfit of individual shacks scattered around the Double Comet.

Allowin' I'd give this prowler the once-over, I ambled up gently and managed to grab the hembre by the shoulder before he realized I was among them present and accounted for.

Garland Salter was the fellow I grabbed, and he had been foolin' around the cabin of Bob Havens. He was attemptin' a peek through a lighted window when I horned in.

"Well," I asks, pretty cold and stiff, "what's the main idea? What are you doin' about this shebang?"

"This ain't none of your affair," snaps Salter in a low but real sour tone.



"Mebbe not," I agree, "but I reckon it's some of Mr. Havens' affair. My duty is to tell him, and I'm gonna." I endeavored to make out as if I was, anyhow.

"You don't understand," Salter insists.

"No, I don't. Jeb Curley mightn't understand, either. Prowlin' about these cabins ain't healthy for dudes or anybody else. You know it as well as me."

"Wait a minute, Barlow. I'll admit my actions appear to put me in a bad light, but if you'll come to my cabin I'll quickly prove to you I'm actin' with reason. I don't want to stay here and rouse Havens now." Salter's voice is now rather calm.

Sorta puzzled, I let him drag me over to his shack. Once the lights are on and I'm seated, he pulls out a leather wallet.

"Before makin' this revelation I must pledge you to secrecy," he states. "Owin' to a certain rivalry between Havens and myself you may have been inclined to place a wrong construction on tonight's doin's, and I shall have to tell you somethin' nobody on this ranch knows. You promise on your honor not to give me away?"

"If you're on the level you've nothin' to fear from me," I remark.

"Fair enough, Barlow. You shall judge for yourself." He opens the wallet and pulls out some papers. "My real name ain't Salter. It happens to be Richard Braid. These documents will prove I'm a member of the Government Secret Service."

"Secret Service?" This staggers me.

"Look over my credentials."

An examination of the papers backs up his words. They seem to show that beyond a doubt Richard Braid is a *bona fide* member of Uncle Sammy's pet policemen.

"You're lookin' for somebody around the Double Comet?" I mumble.

"Indeed I am," he answers, gettin' grim. "Have you ever heard of a man named Howard Hillsey? The man who has buncoed the government outa many thousands? A swindler among swindlers?"

I shook my head. I ain't never been no hand for newspaper readin', as far as that goes.

"Probably you are one of the very few that ain't, then. Hillsey has taken in the Government in great shape. A few months ago he put his foot in it, and fled. Uncle Sam is mighty anxious to land him. The Secret Service—well, I've been on the case a long while.

"Recently it was reported that Hillsey, under an assumed name, was posin' as a summer tourist on a big Western ranch.

Clues I followed led me here. And I'm sure I've spotted my man, though he's clever at hidin' a trail."

"You mean Havens?" I demanded.

"You've guessed it. I'm closin' the net about that young man. He claims to be a rich New Yorker, but that isn't so. In Manhattan a wealthy Bob Havens is unknown. Possibly in a day or two I'll be able to make an arrest. I want to be sure, for it is a big thing. You see why I take such interest in the movements of Havens?"

"Does Miss Kennicott suspect anythin' of this?" Somethin' made me blurt it out.

"Naturally I'm not confidin' in Miss Kennicott or anyone else, unless I have to," is the sharp retort. "With you I've had to, and I want you to respect my confidence. No one on the ranch now knows as much as you do about the case. However, I may say that I regard Miss Kennicott as a sweet and lovely girl, and it wouldn't be fair to let her get deeply interested in a rascal like Hillsey? Would it?"

"No, I reckon not," I grant dubiously.

"I have talked to you in strictest confidence, Mr. Barlow. You know my real identity. Please do not expose it. Perhaps—well, I may need some help from you before this case is settled."

"I've given Uncle Sam a hand before, and I reckon I can again," I tell him as we part, but not bustin' with enthusiasm.

The revelation by Salter—I use the name by which he was generally known—sure give me somethin' to cogitate upon. Bob Havens didn't exactly look like a swindler, even if there was somethin' odd in his manner, that wouldn't prevent him from bein' a crook.

On the afternoon followin' Salter's little story to me Iva Kennicott chose me outa the other wranglers to take a ride in the general direction of the wild Crumblin' Craggs region. The Craggs happen to be

Jeb Curley's pet scenic standby.

"Mr. Barlow," the girl says all of a sudden, as we're lopin' along easy, "how do you like Bob Havens?"

"Why—why, I allow he's right enough," I get out, the query bein' sorta unexpected.

"Sometimes I wonder if I—" she begins queerly, and then breaks off.



I say nothin', figurin' I better wait.

"Do you like Mr. Salter, too?" she next puts to me.

"Pretty well," I allow. "He treats a hoss kinda human."

"So does Mr. Havens, doesn't he?" She smiles. "Do you know, though, there are occasions when both of them seem a little strange—as if they might be actin' parts, almost? I wonder what sends such a silly thought into my head?"

Knowin' what I knowed, it wasn't so silly, but I made shift to chirp somethin' that would mean nothin'. I couldn't expose Salter.

"All dudes are actors when they get out here," I voice. "They put on orange chaps and nine-gallon hats and think they're Bill Mix and Tom Hart rolled into one devastating whole."

"Oh, dear!" Miss Kennicott sighs, evidently payin' slight heed to my feeble crack. "Now and then a girl wishes she were anythin' but a girl. Her heart is apt to warp her judgment."

"Not to mention her judgment sometimes warpin' her heart," I comment bitterly, rememberin' Sis Milton of the Circle C.

"Why, Ash Barlow!" My companion reins in her cayuse. "I'll bet you have a love affair all your own, haven't you?"

"I had," I admit, "but I got throwed outta the saddle, and I reckon I'll never be able to get back in."

"I want to hear all about it, you poor, sufferin' cowboy," she insists, and proceeds to worm out the sad story.

"Well," she says, when I'm through, "I'll bet your Sis is willin' to forgive you right now. She's over that angry spell by this time. If I were you I'd sit down and write her a nice letter, and I'll be surprised if she doesn't write back at once. Bein' a girl myself, I know a trifle about my sex."

This appeared pretty logical to me. The ride with Iva Kennicott encouraged me a lot, and made me feel more friendly than ever toward her. Takin' her advice and ignorin' witty and cuttin' remarks from the bunkhouse jesters, that evenin' I sat down and painfully spread the ink over many sheets of clean white paper. I was willin' to endure plenty of rough humor for the sake of winnin' back Sis Milton.

Next day a number of the dudes had planned a big ride to Crumblin' Crag, bringin' lunches and so forth. Iva Kennicott and Salter seemed to have teamed up for the affair. The latter acted a bit ex-

cited, and the girl was in a gay mood herself.

Evidently Bob Havens wasn't goin'. The young man had received a coupla telegrams via Dusty Creek, the nearest railroad station, and was considerable busy in his cabin.

But when Miss Kennicott come around for her steed alone—Salter bein' off in the crowd—Havens suddenly showed up. I was on duty at the corral and couldn't help overhearin' a lotta what was said.

"I wanted you to ride with me," says the young man of more or less mystery. "And here you go with Salter!"

"Isn't it my privilege to ride with Mr. Salter, if I wish, Mr. Havens?" cuts in the fair Iva, usin' a tone I'd heard Sis Milton employ several times.

"Your privilege, certainly, but I don't know that I'd exercise it, Iva. You might be—sorry."

"I don't like your tone, Bob Havens! Why do you display such an interest in my affairs now—such a sudden anxiety over my ridin' companions?" Her voice is soft, yet—

"Because—Oh, I don't care to have you with Salter!" he blurts.

"Why not?"

"I—well, I can't tell you now. I have a feelin', though—"

"Perhaps I like him." She says it queerly.

"You must not!" The young fellow gets all heated. "I forbid you to."

"Forbid me! By what right, Mr. Havens? I will not talk to you another second!" Iva Kennicott's head goes up, and her cheeks are flamin' as she turns away from him.

A few minutes later the girl was gallopin' away with the man on the trail of Howard Hillsey, seemin' as merry as any of the big party of dudes and wranglers bound for the wild Crag country.

Bob Havens didn't ride. He sulked in and around his cabin until dark.

Nightfall brought back a hungry crowd. All except Salter and Iva Kennicott. They failed to check in. None of the dudes nor the wranglers knew where they were.

"They separated from us and said they'd be on hand O. K.," utters Tod Jones, who'd been in charge. "They both can ride, so I let 'em go."

"Mebbe they're all right, but you take Slim and Cal and go after 'em as soon as you eat," orders Jeb Curley. "Don't want to lose nobody, and the Crag is wild country."

Bob Havens hunted me up after grub. He certainly was fussed.

"They ain't in yet? What's wrong, do you suppose?" he asks.

"Nothin', probably," I assure him. "Of course they might've got lost. Tod and the boys oughta pick them up, though."

"I should never have allowed Iva to go!" Havens growls.

He was actin' mighty funny. So funny and upset I had a hunch he'd bear watchin', knowin' what I knowed. I was a bit puzzled over the absence of the girl and the Secret Service operative, but not worried. Likely they'd lost themselves, as more than one dude has done around Crumblin' Crag.

I was rollin' a puff outa the old sack a little later when I thought I saw a light in Salter's cabin. This was strange. The man wasn't back, so who could be in there?

I took a look for myself.

Not altogether surprised was I to peek in through a window and view Bob Havens turnin' things upside down in his rival's quarters, and right pronto I allowed Ash Barlow would take a hand. After

all, it was my duty to help one of Uncle Sam's men.

Goin' around to the door I shot it open with a shove. As I bounced in to the cabin I unlimbered the chunk of artillery I usually carried for ornamental purposes.

"Now, mister," I chirp, "you'd better grab for the sky, and explain these do-

in's quick if you don't want me to call the boys."

"Put down that gun, Barlow, and don't be an ass," he responds, cool despite the start I'd given him. "You are interferin' with a Government officer in the pursuance of duty."

"Indeed?" I observe, real sarcastic. "Another one, huh? The ranch seems to be full of the breed. I reckon your name ain't Havens, then?"

"No, it ain't. But what do you mean by sayin' the ranch——?"

"Interests you, huh? Mebbe it should, Mr. Howard Hillsey!" I spring it quick.

"What do you know about Howard Hillsey?" he yodels. "You have met Carroll, that's evident!"

"Carroll? I don't know any Carroll!" I growl. "All I know is that a secret service man has been watchin' you for days,

havin' had you spotted for this Hillsey hombre—and I reckon he ain't wrong."

"Hillsey! I'm not Hillsey! I'm a Secret Service man, Barlow! So is Carroll, but I didn't know he was on the ranch. Who is the man you know? It must be Carroll under some adopted name. It's not——?"

"This cabin belongs to the man I mean."

"Salter! Surely not Salter? Good heavens, have we two dumb-bells been spyin' on each other all this time for nothin'. And I had made up my mind— How do you know Salter is a Secret Service operative, Barlow?"

"I know more about him than you," I declare, still keepin' my gun ready for action. "I've seen his credentials. Where are yours, Havens?"

"I—I have nothin' except some code telegrams. That is, to prove my identity. At Kansas City someone unknown got me in the dark and robbed me of my wallet and all my papers. You'll have to believe me, that's all."

"Oh, indeed?" I reckon I ain't none too cordial. "Well, who do you claim to be?"

"My real name is Richard Braid, and I——"

"Braid!" I bust out. "Why, that's Salter's real name! What kinda business is this?"

"Salter showed you the papers of Richard Braid!"

Havens is tremendously excited.

"Then he ain't Carroll. I thought it funny. I was right, after all. Salter robbed me in Kansas City, has known me every minute. No wonder it has been so hard to run him down! The bold scoundrel!"

"Who the tarnation three-tailed mustang is who in this tangle?" I yelp, my head spinnin'.

"There ain't no time to talk, Barlow! I've told you the truth. Salter is Howard Hillsey, beyond question. And Iva Kennicott is in the power of that villain! He has skipped with her. He knew he was at the end of the rope, especially if he heard of Carroll comin' in on this, too, and he's runnin' away with the girl. Take me to Jeb Curley. We gotta get busy! Think of what may be happenin' to Iva!"

The whole affair has me pretty loco, but I can't help bein' impressed by Havens' earnestness. In less time than it takes to cinch a saddle we're interviewin' the boss, and Jeb grows real excited himself.

Another bunch of wranglers was herded together by Jeb, but before they're ready



Havens and I had hit it off on a couple fleet broncos.

The young fellow was stewin' like a muligan right fresh from the fire, frantic with fear for Iva Kennicott's safety.

I was fond of the girl myself and some troubled; still I wasn't as alarmed as my companion. Rememberin' a little experience of my own, I figured the fair Iva could be dangerous in a tight place. If Salter or whatever his name was started any rough stuff he was apt to be handed an astonishin' jolt.

Into the night we rode madly and long. The Crumbling Crag country ain't meant for reckless horsemanship, especially when it's dark. My companion had a bad spill and upset me on top of him. Both of us were banged up some, but luckily the mounts survived. Havens-Braid insisted on pushin' on.

About midnight, headin' into a ravine,



we spied a light. Probably a campfire. Mebbe Salter and the girl were near it. Mebbe Tod and the two wranglers were restin'. We had seen nothin' of them so far.

Leavin' our mounts we walked and then crawled toward the fire. Just as we was gettin' close enough for action Havens tripped into a mess of vines and spilled with enough noise to wake the shadow of Kit Carson.

Right pronto his tumble fetched results.

"Who is there? Speak, or I'll shoot!"

The voice is a woman's.

"Iva, is it you? Are you safe, dear?"

Havens cries, scramblin' to his feet.

"We're friends. Ash Barlow and Havens," I chirp, to avoid any impendin' accidents.

"Oh, I'm so glad! I thought—please come to the fire!"

And when we got into the light an odd spectacle was shown us. There is Iva Kennicott, kinda pale, and armed with a tiny automatic, which she's keepin' more or less on a hombre across the blaze.

We recognize this party as Garland Salter. His face is wrinkled up with pain and chagrin, and he seems to be nursin' a bum arm. Mr. Salter, alias Braid, alias the Lord knowed who else, was in no gay and happy mood.

"Thank Heaven you're safe and unharmed, Iva!" utters Havens. "You've

been in the society of a highly dangerous criminal. But what's happened to him? Is he hurt?"

"Both his arm and his feelin's are badly hurt, I imagine," the girl answers, just a trifle shakily. "You see, Mr. Hillsey wouldn't believe somethin' I told him, and I had to convince him rather painfully. I'm sorry, but I think I've broken his arm."

"Hillsey! You know that is his real name, Iva? I was positive of it. He is a much wanted rascal. The U. S. Government is anxious to put him behind bars. I couldn't tell you before, but I am a Secret Service operative on his trail. Richard Braid is my real name, and somehow Hillsey recognized me and robbed me in Kansas City."

The man with the broken arm growled under his breath.

"Bob Havens, are you Richard Braid?" comes rather queerly from the girl. "And you've been after Howard Hillsey ever since he landed at the Double Comet. Why—"

"I'll take charge of him for you now, Iva. I blundered a lot on this matter, but there is yet a chance to make good."

"How do you know I'll let you take charge of him?" she demands pertly. "I landed him myself, Mr. Braid. You must not steal my stuff. You see I'm known at Washington as—Carroll. Iva Kennicott Carroll."

"Carroll—you are 'Carroll? A Government operative? A woman! And after Hillsey, too! Talk about your surprises!" The young man staggers.

"I'll say so!" mumbles the victim on the other side of the fire. I hadda hide a grin myself.

"I heard of Carroll comin' in on the case, but I never even suspected you!" Havens confesses. "Did you have a tip on Salter?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't know whether you or him was the man. I got orders from the big chief to go to the Double Comet—he feared Braid had been side-tracked. Both of you acted strange. Either might be Hillsey; either might be Braid. I hadda find out. I did. I hoped, after a bit—well, it has turned out all right."

"Havin' robbed me, Hillsey knew me all the time. Why did he stick?"

"Sure I knowed you, but I ain't got no brains!" snarls Salter-Hillsey. "I fell for the dame and hadda make a fool play for her. Then this cowpuncher, Barlow, but-

ted in one night and caught me snoopin' around your shebang, and I had to stall him with your stolen papers. That tied



my hands. Today, when you began to get wise I was afraid the game was up. Of course you didn't know, but you suspected me. I figured I'd run off with the girl—and how she fooled me!”

“I let him go ahead with the game,” adds Miss Carroll. “In attemptin’ to pull off his wild scheme he gave me positive proof of his identity. We had an argument—very unpleasant—and it resulted disastrously for him. He didn’t know my expertness in jiu-jitsu. It cost him a broken arm to learn.”

I still grinned. That part of the story didn’t surprise me like the rest of it.

“Not knowin’ how to get back to the ranch I hadda camp at dark. I feared I’d have to sit and watch him all night, though I expected parties would be huntin’ for us. They are, aren’t they, Ash?”

“The whole gang is scourin’ the country,” I reply.

“To think you’re Carroll!” marvels Havens-Braid. “You’ve done wonderfully well, and you’ll get the credit. I was a dumb-bell throughout, startin’ at Kansas City. Oh, but I was worried at your fail-

ure to return this evenin’. I feared——”

“You see you didn’t have any need,” asserts Miss Iva. “You were rude to me today. Givin’ me orders not to ride, and I had to, in the cause of duty.”

There was mockery in her tone.

“Why, Iva, I didn’t know. I—I couldn’t bear to have anythin’ happen to you. Because Carroll or no Carroll, you mean all the world to me and I——”

She knew what he meant. In the firelight she looked at him.

“Bob—Dick—I’m sorry,” she whispers.

Oh, yes, he was forgiven everythin’. I knew he would be. Imaginin’ I heard some of the boys approachin’, I sneaked back to tell ‘em all was well. Also to give two young people a chance.

Somehow it all set me to thinkin’ furiously about Sis Milton and the letter I’d sent her. Mebbe soon——

But this happened two months back. Howard Hillsey and the two Government operatives, who’ll probably team up permanent in the near future, have departed long since, and the dizzy doin’s in which they partook is already an old story amongst dude happenin’s on the Double Comet.

Yet I ain’t received no answer or encouragement none whatever from that ornery little Sis of Circle C. I allow some girls must be less forgivin’ than others.

CAVE DWELLERS

THE caveman may have been a tough guy, as popular fancy paints him, but cave-dwelling animals are timid, weakly, nervous and delicate—which is why they live in caves.

FARMERS FURNISH SMALL PART OF RAILWAY FREIGHT

COAL, ore, cement, and their products—stuff originating in the mining industry—constitute 65 percent of all railway freight in America, while foodstuffs and livestock and other farm products yield only ten percent of railway freight, manufactured goods about fifteen percent and lumber contributes a scant ten percent.

GREAT OPPORTUNITIES OPEN FOR INVENTORS

THE field for inventors is not narrowing, but broadening with every new scientific discovery. Once in a while some unimaginative person rises upon his hind legs and emits the opinion that civilization has reached its apogee and is beginning to slump. Don’t take such croakers seriously. Science has opened the door to wonderful possibilities that only await engineering development to make this old planet over into a really comfortable all-the-year-round habitation. The little matter of catching, storing and utilizing solar energy, for example, holds rich reward for the fellow who can work it out. An engine that could utilize only five percent of the sun’s heat received over a given area in the Sahara or Death Valley would be a world-beater. So would an effective mosquito-exterminator.

JOCKEY RANDLEMAN UP

By ROMAINE LOWDERMILK AND LYLE ABBOTT

THE WORD "GOLD," WHISPERED UNDER THE RAIN-SOAKED ROOF OF A BACK ROOM OF TONY BENNET'S SALOON, BROUGHT ABOUT A CRISIS IN THE LIVES OF MEN—AND A WOMAN—THAT ONLY THE OLD WHITE MARE AND HER COLT HAD POWER TO BRING TO A FITTING CLIMAX

TO THE old white mare, left to shift for herself until spring, the little ten-acre pasture fenced off along the bank of a steep mountain stream in the Colorado Rockies began to present, early in the fall, a pretty discouraging outlook for winter feed. The few rows of corn stalks in the clearing by the cabin didn't seem to promise much in the way of hay, either. For the autumn sun had bleached the fodder, and the wind was already whipping out the leaves.

The owner of the outfit, a month ago, had gathered the corn and stowed it in the cabin. Taking the pouch of gold nuggets which he and the old mare had plowed and sluiced from the gravels along his claim, he hied him to the warmth and gaiety of California's coast. His co-worker in the gold-producing operations of the summer—the old mare—was left in the pasture with the supposition that if she survived there'd be corn next summer to give her strength to drag the plow or plod at the whim pole. Naturally if she wouldn't rustle her own living through the winter, why, a burro would do the work just as well. She was an old thing anyhow, an awfully expensive eater; one just couldn't keep her fat.

So it was that the old mare had been left, with her expectations, among the corn stalks. During



the last bright days of September she had rejoiced in her leisure and nibbled the dry feed thankfully. She seemed to have an unheard of appetite and she poked her old nozzle under all the fallen limbs and fence-rails to get every spear of the drying summer grass. At her side trotted and capered and experimented the great joy of her life, and she spent precious min-

utes from her food-hunting to coddle her wobbly offspring.

Then came the day, early in October, when the rain fell drearily, unceasingly. With darkness the downpour came in torrents. The old mare shepherded her colt to refuge on the highest ground against what shelter the pole fence afforded, unaware that fate had decreed her a part in a drama already commencing a half-mile distant under the rain-soaked roof of a back room to Tony Bennet's saloon and dance hall. This was the palace of liquor and chance, about which the gold camp of Rich Creek centered.

A WHITE-HAIRED stranger, his clothing wet with the drizzling rain and spattered with clay from the trail, straggled into the brightly lighted saloon in search of a companionable place to dry and recuperate. His southern accent—as did even his white mustache and goatee—betrayed him as one far from home. So Burt Alrod, one of Bennet's gamblers, hastened, casually enough, to greet him.

Thirty minutes later, in a rear room, the old man, warmed, his clothing beginning to dry upon him and the remains of a hearty repast on the table, mellowed under Alrod's skilled hospitality. He took from his pocket a piece of rock-ore.

"Mist' Alrod," he asked, "would ye 'blige me by tellin' whut is this hyar? Hit's gold, hain't 't?"

Alrod's whole body stiffened at the sight of the gold-flecked token. It was the sort of rock any man in that mining country would give his right hand to find. Alrod instinctively concealed his emotion. He assumed his poker-face. It would not be difficult to persuade this old man, who evidently knew little of the value of his find, to reveal the location of the discovery. Alrod's brain raced furiously, for before him was gold such as Rich Creek had never seen—such as the world had never seen. This was bonanza ore. This was Gold!

"Hmf," Alrod sniffed. It was as though

he regarded the specimen a mere worthless pebble. "Country's full of that sort of rock. It's got gold in it, of course, but not much. A feller'll be here in a minute that'll tell you all about it, how much it's worth an' so on." Furtively Alrod poked the bell that would bring Tony Bennet himself. If he punched it twice Bennet would bring Frisco along and post him at the door as a recruit in case of interference. Alrod poked it twice.

GOLD! "Gold" is a magic word. Whispered at one side of the world it will set the dead stirring in their graves at the other side. Already the man who had uttered it under the rain-soaked roof of the back room of Tony Bennet's saloon and dance hall and showed its yellow gleam in his hard palm, lay stunned on the thick, showy carpet. His breath came in irregular gasps, his ancient, wood-handled revolver lay where it had fallen from his outflung hand.

"Know him?" Tony Bennet shot a glance of inquiry at each of the other two men standing over the prostrate stranger.

They wagged their heads negatively. Neither knew this tough old Southerner who had come out of the night and shown Alrod his nugget of gold with country rock, fresh broken, clinging to it. The golden stone was still gripped in the gnarled fist, clutched as it had been from the time he realized the secret of its source was in danger of being forced from him.

Tony Bennet, big, smooth-shaven and attired in a modern business suit, did not seem the dive-keeper. But his jeweled fingers, his diamond stud and ornate scarf-pin betrayed him for what he was.

But he was a big man in the town of Rich Creek. Just now he was down on his knees, his fingers deftly



searching the stranger's pockets.

"He came in over the trail," Bennet was saying. "He admitted getting off the train down at the Junction and hoofing it on up here. The narrow-gauge made the down trip today, so it's a cinch he came up over the trail. Chances are he stumbled onto a ledge this rain exposed right by the path. Just plain tenderfoot luck."

Bennet stuffed the belongings back into

the old man's pockets and rose briskly, dusting his palms.

"No location blank on him that I can find," he stated with finality. "Chances are he didn't have sense enough to stick up any sort of a discovery notice." Bennet took his overcoat from a closet. "I'm going back along that trail and put up a discovery notice over that ledge for myself. Right now!"

"What about him?" Burt Alrod indicated the figure on the floor.

"Leave him lay," snapped Bennet, lurching into his heavy coat. "He won't be the first come-on to go out of here roaring about being held up. Won't do him any good in this camp. What Tony Bennet does in Rich Creek goes. I'm boss of this camp. All the time."

"Sure," seconded Alrod. He, too, was struggling into a coat.

"I'm in on this—uh, trip." Frisco, the strong man of the trio, hunched his great shoulders and leered meaningly at Bennet, his close-set eyes glistening in the electric light. It had been his skilled touch that laid the old stranger on the carpet.

Bennet hesitated. They stood in silence a moment, listening to the roar of the wind as it scoured the building, shaking the walls and rattling the window to the accompaniment of the drumming down-pour. It was a wild night without, and Frisco's strength might be needed before the goal could be reached.

"All right," Bennet grunted ungraciously.

They wrenched open the outer door and passed out to the uneven board walk that skirted the rear. The lock snapped behind them. Rain poured from the eaves and dashed up from the black boards underfoot. Before they had gone fifty steps their heavy coats were saturated. With their electric flashlights making foggy circles against the sodden murk, they bowed manfully to their task and disappeared through the darkness of the alleyway.

VERY little went on around Tony Bennet's place that got past Miss Louise. For more than two years she had been there, and had danced and sung and prospered in such a spirit of good-fellowship that even the wives of Rich Creek liked her, which was a whole lot more than could be said of any of the other girls who danced at Tony Bennet's.

Miss Louise had seen the stranger soon after Burt Alrod took him in hand, and

the black, slouch hat, the goatee and mustache, and the erect Southern bearing of the slight figure were acutely familiar. Too late to beat Alrod to the old man, she was obliged to content herself with covertly watching the closed door to Room No. 12 while whirling on the dance floor in the arms of the miners, or while at the bar coaxing them to buy drinks.

Now Miss Louise, like any other normal American girl, had a gentleman friend. Her friend was Mr. Newt Randleman. And when she saw the light turned off behind the transom of Room 12 she knew that Alrod, Bennet and Frisco had gone out the back way. That meant something. So she appealed to the only man in Rich Creek she could trust—Newt Randleman, the pianist for the dance floor at Bennet's.

"Get your coat and come outside." She strolled by the piano and dropped the words to him carelessly as if she were but asking him to play some favorite tune.

"Outside? On a night like this!" Randleman looked up from his playing half expecting it to be another of Louise's sly jokes. But something in her eyes told him it was no joke. So he played on, the human automatic-piano-player he was, until he saw Louise



slip unnoticed out a side door. He beckoned a husky miner lad who delighted in displaying his own rather remarkable renditions of the jazziest jizzes and turned the piano over to him. He struggled into his coat, thrust a flashlight into a pocket and, aided by crutch and cane, swung out at the side door. There was Miss Louise, flattened against the sprayed wall, waiting.

"We've got to get there right now." She led the way to the rear and put her strong shoulder to the door of Room 12, and shoved. The door was heavy, the lock solid. "Ran," she said, panting, "help break it in."

Newt Randleman did not stop to question. He dropped his cane and crutch and poised upon his one good leg. "Drop against it, Louise," he ordered.

Together they flung their weight against the door. Louise shoved with solid jolts, her breath warm against his neck. The catch broke at the casing, the door swung inward. They fell in a heap across the

threshold. Louise giggled nervously. Randleman, despite a new pain in his helpless limb, chuckled too.

"Well," he murmured against her hair, "we're in outa the rain, anyhow."

"Get up easy, Ran," she counseled. "I'll get your cane." She never referred to his crutch; it was always "cane."

She pressed his wet sticks into his hands with a friendly squeeze. Randleman got out his flashlight as she closed the door. Even before the circle of light found the prostrate figure, Louise was bending over the old man.

"Pappy!" she called softly. "Wake up. Here—" She shook water from her rain-drenched coat against the old face and sopped his brow with her dampened handkerchief. "Help me, Ran!" her voice rose hysterically. "Oh, Ran! Pappy won't wake up. Get water! Do something—quick!"

Randleman laid the flashlight on the table and moved toward the door. He didn't understand the situation exactly, but his impulse was to drag the old man into the cold rain.

"Hurry up, Ran!" Louise's voice was impatient, but there was a tender note in it that Randleman had not heard her use before. "Open that door!" she was saying. "Let some air in here. Hurry!"

THE old man stirred. His eyes opened with the clear gaze of returning consciousness. He blinked sleepily and turned his face from the light, folding his arms over his eyes.

"Oh, Pappy," crooned Louise, "you're all right now? It's me, Pappy. It's your little Lou-gal. Don't you know me, Pappy?"

The old Southerner grunted weakly. "Uh huh."

The wind dashed spray into the room, bedewing the carpet. Water splashed from the board walk over the sill. The old man waved a gnarled hand toward the opening. "Shu—shut thet do', Lou-gal. Hit's a-drownin' us!"

With an exclamation Louise arose and closed the door. Then she drew Randleman aside.

"Listen, Ran," she began excitedly. "Don't let him know I'm dancing—in a dance-hall! You see I—I've been writing home that I'm married. Married to a— a great musician out here. The folks back home'd forgive me for running away if they thought I'd married a great musician." Her voice carried a hint of

tears as she went on, "You won't—you won't tell? You won't let Pappy know?"

Abruptly the old man sat up. Louise was at his side in an instant.

"My gosh, Lou-gal, what kind of a town is this, anyhow!" he demanded dazedly.



"I don't no more'n git hyar till somebody knocks me inter Kingdom-come. Say, Lou-gal, jus' hand me thet gun a-lay-in' thar behind ye. Hit's my o' g u n. Thanks." The

old man fingered his head gingerly. Thar's a lump like a flint-cawn nubbin."

"You feel all right now, don't you, Pappy?" begged Louise.

"Y'betcha," agreed the old man. "An', Lou-gal, hit's shore a sight for sore eyes to see ye ag'in. Ye're shore a-lookin' peart. How come ye knowed I's a-com-in'? 'An' how'n hell did ye find whar I was at?"

"Why—why I—I—" Louise sought for an answer. She couldn't tell him she had been in the place when he came in. She was ashamed to admit she was employed in a dance hall. She evaded his question. "Why did they knock you out, Pappy? Were you gambling with them?"

"Sho' now! Whur's my gold!" The rumpled Southerner got to his feet with astonishing alacrity. He searched every pocket in silence, turning out an amazing array of pocket trinkets. Among them were four crumpled letters.

"Them's letters from ye, Lou-gal," he stated tenderly, thumbing the worn, damp envelopes.

Louise flashed a glance at Randleman, for those letters contained her assertions concerning the great musician she had married! The old Southerner followed her gaze. Apparently he saw Randleman for the first time. He stiffened and his brows went up, his goatee wagged excitedly.

"This is Newt Randleman, Pappy," explained Louise. "He's from back home, too. Up in Virginia." She turned to Randleman. "This is my father, Ran," her arm went around the old man's rough coat. "His name is Gransom, Tom Gransom."

Old Tom Gransom's hand met Randleman's firm, piano-trained fingers in a grip of greeting.

"Met 'nother feller hyar from the South," he said a bit suspiciously. "He called himse'f Alrod. He coaxed me back here an' he tried to fin' out 'bout my gold. Ye know 'im?"

"No, I don't know Alrod," replied Randleman gravely. "We," he indicated Louise, "we don't know anybody in this place."

Louise thanked him with her eyes.

WELL, thet's fine!" Old Tom Gransom's hand again sought the grasp of the younger. "Thet's fine! Now whut ye reckon them skunks done with my nugget?"

"What about your nugget, Pappy?" urged Randleman kindly. "Tell us about it. Did they rob you?"

"Rob me?" protested the old man innocently. "Shucks, no! Whut of?"

"They knocked you out. They don't do that for fun."

Old Tom Gransom glanced inquiringly to his daughter.

"Go ahead and tell us, Pappy," she urged gently. "It's safe to tell us both."

The old man sat down in the chair Louise had offered him and told of how, coming over the trail, he had come upon a miniature land-slide that had soaked from the mountainside, and in that raw gash he had seen the ledge of gold-flecked rock. Knowing this was a gold country he naturally supposed ledges of gold were a usual thing and had merely broken off a lump of the outcrop and passed on, never realizing he might stake the discovery for his very own.

He told of stepping into this warm, brightly lighted saloon to dry and rest a bit before looking up his daughter and her musician husband, for he feared she might not like him to come to her house all wet and muddy from the long walk over the crooked trail. He detailed the account of how Alrod had engaged him in conversation, finally inviting him to the back room where Gransom had ordered dinner for them both. After which came his careless revealing of the nugget and the calling in by Alrod of Tony Bennet, and finally a blow from behind. Randleman and Louise recognized the latter as the work of Frisco, but avoided each other's eyes.

"Do you remember if you'd crossed a deep canyon where there's a little foot-bridge across the water?" Randleman

asked him when he had finished. "Before you came upon the ledge, I mean."

The old man pondered the question. "Yep, I'd crossed that bridge," he replied slowly. "Hit's the only bridge on the trail, hain't hit? I know I waded two or three other cricks."

"Yes, that's the only bridge on the trail. It's at Halfway Canyon—eight miles."

Randleman paused reflectively. He knew that Bennet and Alrod, possibly



Frisco, had already started for the location, intending to put up discovery notices for themselves. It was a law of the country that a proper discovery notice must be posted on the claim before a locator can file valid

claim in the Recorder's office. The discovery notice can be informally—and even illegibly—worded, but it must be posted at the point of discovery.

"Let's take Pappy over to—to Maw Hanson's," suggested Louise, breaking in on Randleman's meditation. "There's a room we can give Pappy." Together they piloted the old man through the driving storm to Louise's own room at "Maw" Hanson's, the motherly wife of the shift boss in Number One shaft, where Louise roomed and boarded.

NEWTON RANDLEMAN left them there, telling Louise he must hasten back to his piano. But he did not return to Bennet's. Instead, he turned off on the trail to the Junction, bobbing through the murk, his crutch and cane sinking deep in the mud at every step. He went as rapidly as he could, aware that whoever first placed a notice of location upon the ledge Tom Gransom had discovered would be the one to own it, provided he got to the Recorder promptly thereafter. Tracks left in the mud would give ample proof if some later locator came to destroy the original notice. Randleman, crippled as he was, determined to be the first to stake Gransom's claim. Though the men ahead had a long start when measured by minutes, they were far behind in resourcefulness. For Newt Randleman knew where he could enlist an ally.

The first half-mile took fifteen minutes. This brought him down to the waters, tumbling over the bouldered bed of Rich Creek. Here he turned off, stumbling

along the stony bank for perhaps fifty yards. Humped against the pole fence loomed, gray and blurred, the object of his visit.

"Woah, old gal," he spoke gently. "Woah, gray mare."

The old mare looked about in the black downpour toward this pleasant voice. A strange figure with two man's legs and two spindly, wooden ones was moving along outside the fence. She essayed a snort, but her old throat played her false. Instead of the snort came forth a nicker that betrayed her instinctive trust in this kindly-voiced man who might be bringing her something to eat. Her colt, head erect and tail raised, stared with baby eyes at the interloper. Following the lead of his mother, he gave forth an off-key whinny that ended in a series of little grunts and quaverings. To the old mare this was the neighing of a horse colt, sturdy, fearless and true; to Newt Randleman it was the pathetic cry of stout-hearted but undernourished little life.

He worked his way along the poles until he came to a gap barricaded by many strands of smooth wire, stolen from the mines above. This was the gate. Raising the garland of wire that held the slack strands in place, Randleman opened the gate. Stooping, he removed one of the wires.

Cautiously he approached the old mare. Reassured by the kindly voice she stood quietly, albeit warily, mindful of sundry beatings at the hand of her owner. Beguiled by Randleman's soft words and, too, she had stood there so long in the cold rain she'd rather chance a beating than move, the mare hesitated too long. Randleman got his wire about her neck. Patting her shoulder, he worked his way back along her side. He climbed to the fence and, with a floppy scramble, bestrode her astonished back. Gathering the wire as a rein he thumped her ribby side with his crutch—he had dropped the cane—and bumped her with his good heel.

"Wake up, old gal," he urged. "Snap out of it!"

In response to his urgings the old mare slowly began to move.

TO A man on horseback great things are possible. Randleman thumped the mare down to the creek and coaxed her into the waters. The colt, swallowing his fears, breasted the flood at the lumbering flanks of his time-honored parent. Once safely across, Randleman

put his mount into the trail and took up the chase of the men who had gone before.

The mare, thin and undernourished though she was, being an honest, willing beast, did her best. She slogged on steadily, stumbling in the gross darkness over rotting logs and against snags, floundering through unexpected pools and lumbering across rocky reaches. It would be something like eight miles from Bennet's saloon to the ledge Gransom discovered. Randleman figured that the men ahead had, possibly, a two-mile start. But with the mare he could travel twice as fast as they, which should enable him to at least catch up with them within five or six miles.

Randleman handled the old mare skillfully. And with good reason. Up to his nineteenth year he had been a jockey. He



was twenty-eight now, and six years older than Louise. But when he was nineteen Jockey Randleman was riding the fastest string of running horses in the South, which is saying he was a top-notch. Then came the day when his horse fell with half the field behind him. Randleman was carried from the track, his hip broken, his knee and the lower bones of the leg splintered. But his spirit was not broken. As proof he had not flinched when, three months later, the doctors told him his right leg would always dangle, useless, from the hip. So, turning to the only other talent he possessed, he became a pianist, pounding out foot-stirring jazz improvisations.

He had been playing at Tony Bennet's when Louise Gransom arrived. After that, he couldn't bring himself to leave. Now he had the opportunity for which he had been hoping—an opportunity to show her that he loved her. He would, at any hazard, stake for her the claim her father had discovered.

After more than an hour and a quarter of bone-racking travel the mare's ears pricked forward. Something was ahead. Glimpsed through the close-set pine boles that edged the crooked trail he could see the fogged glimmer of an electric flash bobbing ahead of three humped forms who inched along the unstable footing.

From their very slowness Randleman guessed their despairing condition as, weighted down with many pounds of water-soaked clothing they dragged, mud-covered, over the trail.

Randleman feared the mare would balk at passing such weird figures and nudged her encouragingly. She did not stop to indulge in any skittishness. She had long since learned skittishness was useless, and only fatigued one. She knew she must carry her rider on, and she intended to do so in a direct and businesslike manner. These were but men in the path ahead and the easiest way to get by was to crowd by and, from the thumpings she was getting, her rider evidently desired her to hasten with it.

THE old mare just laid back her ears and had at 'em. The colt, sensing his mother's decision, laid back his ears, too, all unbeknownst to either the mare or her rider, and even forged ahead until his bony little shoulder pressed his parent's scissoring hock and his hard little head projected around her flank. To an onlooker he would have appeared to be cringing against where his mother's apron strings ought to be, but he knew better; he was getting just as far to the fore as the narrow path would permit, for he, too, was going to crowd right past those lumbering beings who blocked the trail.

As they drew near, Randleman lay low against the gray withers and spoke to the mare. He spoke as he had spoken to the thoroughbred racing horses, pounding down the stretch but a scant nose ahead of a flying field.

"Come on, ol' hoss," he crooned. "Sh-h-h, come o-o-on!"

Lifting his crutch he gave his mount a good thwack. She switched her tail and walked a little faster. For the moment Jockey Randleman was in a dream. Most great men are in a dream when their inspired moment arrives. To him the old mare's walk suddenly became a swift gallop. He even glanced behind as, in the days of his pain-free jockeyhood, he had glanced back in the faces of oncoming contenders. Behold, there at his stirrup—or rather where his heel bumped the ribby side—bobbed a head, strangely large, strangely slender, with ears back and nose stretched forward. So had other horses, with ears back and nose out-thrust, reached for his heel when he rode, a jockey, on the fastest tracks in America. So Randleman

jerked forward, his face buried in the scanty, gray mane.

"Come on, ol' hoss," he urged. "Get by! Now!"

The old mare responded. Encouraged by the warm little shoves behind, she lumbered into a rickety gallop. There was a shout as the horse and rider loomed unexpectedly upon the three men. There was a tumbling of dark forms as the mare plowed through, and a sudden *phlop*, as the colt in passing kicked out at the stumbling men—and hit one.

Still at a gallop they lurched around a turn in the trail. A scrambling and spattering followed as the men attempted to give chase. Then came a pistol shot. But that shot and the ones which followed were but a futile effort of angry men, firing into the blackness ahead. Newt Randleman, pulling his trembling steed to a walk, did not even hear the bullets as they drilled the thick trunks of the pines that stood between him and the bend in the trail from whence they came.

Forty minutes later he could hear the waters roaring under the bridge at Halfway Canyon. Dismounting, with his crutch he hobbled ahead of the mare, keeping his flashlight focused on the outcroppings. At last he came upon the landslip. The glow of his torch revealed the ledge old Tom Gransom had so unwittingly stumbled upon.

Accustomed as he was to seeing gold ore from the mines of Rich Creek, Randleman knew that here was something that far surpassed anything Rich Creek had ever seen. He stood, breathless, in the presence of Tom Gransom's discovery. Here indeed was wealth. A claim staked over this would bring a fortune.

To comply with the law, Randleman, shielding his notebook and flashlight under his coat, wrote out a notice of discovery and location and made a copy thereof for the Recorder. Mindful of the legal requirements he searched about for a "post not less than three feet in height." True enough, there were many posts in the timber about, but he had no axe. Too, there were numerous fallen trees, but they were of such heft and distance he could not break out a suitable limb. There was need for haste, as the men on the trail behind might arrive at any moment. In desperation his choice perforce fell upon his crutch. Here, at least, was a post of legal height.

Removing the rubber cap from its end he thrust the crutch deep into the soaked

earth behind the outcropping. Folding the leaves torn from his notebook he jammed them into the crotch. He had complied with the law as regards staking a lode claim. Now there remained but to record the copy.



He returned to his horse. Grasping the steed's spinal elevation he contrived to skid himself into place upon its back.

He did not attempt to return by the trail. Instead, he hauled the mare out to one side and picked a way along in a considerable detour to avoid meeting with the men he had passed. After an hour's rough going, he again turned back into the trail. Once in the path, and headed toward home, the mare needed no urging. Randleman slumped tiredly on her back, and bowed to the pelting rain.

Finally, in the small hours of the morning, they crossed Rich Creek where Randleman had first put the old mare into the trail. The trip had occupied more than five hours and the mare displayed a determination to return straight to her pasture. But Randleman, minus his crutch, desired that she carry him onward to the town a short half-mile farther. He pulled on the wire that should have steered her into the town trail.

BUT no. The old mare stopped in her tracks. Forbidding as was her home, she wanted to go there, and refused to be urged on past her turning-off place. The rain fell steadily, and as steadily did Randleman haul upon his wire. Equally as steadily did the old gray mare roll her eyes toward her beloved, pole-fenced, enclosure. There was no observable result. Neither would give in. Things were at a deadlock.

The colt, taking advantage of the halt, sought solace in what meager refreshment he could extract from his private lunch counter, and smacked with much more gusto than the occasion warranted. Finally giving it up he came around to be petted. The old mare nuzzled him motheringly awhile, then skewed her long head about to glare obdurately at her stubborn rider who was trying to compel her to carry him up to the town. She'd made

one trip that night and there was no use talking—she simply wasn't going to make another.

Then came a light, wavering down the trail from town. The mare saw it first, then Randleman, and finally the colt. The three stood at attention as the light neared them. Soon Randleman made out a slight figure, carrying a lantern.

It was Louise, Louise Gransom. Though she still wore her high-heeled slippers, and her silken ankles flashed wet in the lantern light, she strode through the mud with steps sure and agile.

"Newt Randleman!" she exclaimed. "What do you think you're going to do? I've looked everywhere for you. I stayed with Pappy until after midnight and then went back to Bennet's. They told me there you hadn't come back. I waited around there a while and danced. Then I went over to your room, but you weren't there, either. So I just guessed you'd started out to try to stake that fool claim. Why, Newt, you couldn't ever get there in all this storm—"

"Why, Louise, I—"

"Don't argue with me, Newt Randleman," she ordered. "You get down off that horse this minute. I wouldn't have you risk your life out on a night like this for all the gold mines in the world."

"But I—I—," he stammered, weakly.

A tiny slipper arose and descended in a quick stamp that only drenched its mate with slush. "You're not going!" she stated. "You can't stand it."

Newt Randleman felt very weak and sick. It had been a tough trip he'd had and his injured leg was paining. He was thirsty, too, awfully thirsty, and it was so very dark. Even the glare of Louise's lantern that had hurt his eyes a minute ago seemed blurred and foggy.

"Louise—" He leaned down over the mare's bony withers. "Get the location notice—copy—in my pocket. Wake up—Recorder." Randleman swayed. The light seemed to waver—it was going out.

Louise sprang to his side and steadied him on the horse. Shoving the mare about like a dead weight, she headed her up the slope toward town, holding Randleman to his place on her back. The colt followed dolefully.

IT was daylight when Randleman awoke. He was comfortably in a bed that was reminiscent of Louise's perfume. A bewildered survey and he con-

cluded he must be in her room. A body stirred beside him. Randleman started and brought his gaze sharply to the other occupant of the couch. A shaggy, gray head lay half buried in the pillow; contented, regular breathing emanated from the weathered countenance. It was old Tom Gransom, her Pappy.

The door opened and Louise, in a crisp dress and showing no sign of the adventure the night before, stepped in. Seeing Randleman awake she came across and knelt by the bed.

"Oh, Ran," she whispered, "that's the dearest little colt! I've bought all the



corn-meal in town and that old mare is out in the back yard now, eating it. I've phoned down to the Junction for hay and it'll be up on the narrow-gauge by noon.

And Ran," she

went on breathlessly, "I woke up the Recorder last night and he recorded the notice you posted for Pappy. Everybody says it'll make us rich. Alrod and Frisco came back this morning; they'd tried to reach the ledge, but gave it up after you passed them.

"Bennet got hurt—a horse kicked him in the temple. The coroner has gone out to bring him in." Her voice sobered. "And, Ran, Pappy says the folks all want me to come back home. They want me to come home and bring that musical husband of mine back with me! I've thought it all out, Ran—" her cheeks flushed—"you've got to be it! You've got to doll up and be it. Please say you will, Ran. We can just—just make believe-like, can't we?"

"Oh, yes," he replied a trifle bitterly. "We can just make believe-like, I suppose. You wouldn't want a cripple for a real husband, of course. Or—would you?"

She lifted her flushed face and looked him straight in the eyes. "Well, I should say I would," she stated evenly. But there was an exquisite little trill of joy in her voice.

Outside, the old mare's colt, capering in the sunlight that gleamed now and then through scurrying clouds, lifted his voice.

"Haw-w-w He-e-e-e," he shrilled. "Haw-w-w, he-e-e."



PEACE RIVER PENDLETON

By HAMILTON CRAIGIE

"Author of 'The Man Who Wouldn't Listen,' 'Threads of Destiny,' etc.

EVERY MAN TO HIS TRADE INDEED; FOR BY HIS VERY USE OF TOOLS MAY ONE KNOW HIM AS A CRAFTSMAN, A HARD WORKER, A VILLAIN—OR EVEN A MURDERER

PEACE RIVER" PENDLETON was sharpening his ax.

The logs were "in"; presently the crew of Camp No. 10 of the Babine Development and Timber Company would be on the way southward over the Skeena to Port Essington and the Coast. The wangan-boss had shouted "Grub-pile!" but Peace River continued to whet the great blade with slow, sure, steady strokes, as if his life depended upon it.

And perhaps, by a grim jest, that is just what it did, as will be seen when the time is served.

Peace River grunted, turning the great blade of the four-and-a-half pound axe upward to the light. That blade had never failed him—yet. It was a good blade, and it had served him well; as a weapon, behind it the lift and drive of the great shoulders and the mast-like arms, it would be chain lightning. But Peace River had never used that axe save as a woodsman uses it—to cut down trees. But there are some trees that stand too long.

Now he twisted a long horse-hair from the shoulder of his mackinaw, drawing it smoothly across the glistening edge. There were several threads in the handful; they parted now on contact with the razor-like steel, hanging by a single hair.

There might have been an omen in it if Pendleton had been superstitious. Now

he merely grunted again, squinting along the bright blade as a shadow bulked suddenly between him and the light.

The man who faced Pendleton, powerful as he, himself, was, could never have handled that axe as could its owner. In his hands it would have been a weapon, to



be sure, but an unaccustomed one; in the giant timberjack's it could be on occasion a whirling white blindness of steel, and he handled it like a giant, to the quick heave

and thrust of his powerful shoulders, as a lesser man might twirl a peavie, say, or a white-water man a pike-pole.

And the great axe was as well known as its owner. It had his initials on it, burned into the handle; there could be no mistaking it.

Now the timber-jack looked upward, and a swift shadow, like the sun on water, passed over his dark, hard-bitten countenance. When Peace River smiled—that was another matter. Then you could follow the smile inward to find a heart that was as sound as a new-minted dollar. But just now there was no smile, but a grim, straight, brooding look that might have

been a warning to the man who faced him, sneering.

"You, Peace River!" he said.

Speech can be meaningless and yet charged with meaning. Now there was a drawling insolence in the tone, a snarling violence in the trap-like mouth, twisted like an animal's, the lip lifting from the stained and blackened teeth.

"Denver," for that was all the name he went by, was tall and broad; he was a bigger man physically even than Peace River Pendleton. But he was not a woodsman; beneath the stubble of a new-grown beard his face had that curious, dead pallor found not merely in cities. And there was a perpetual, blinking cast to the furtive eyes; when he spoke it was out of the corner of his mouth, in the prison twist. And he had got a job at Camp No. 10 for the sole reason that they were short-handed, and a man was a man. Old Tom Hardesty would have hired the devil himself and welcome, if he could have used him; there was but one species of human that Old Tom had no manner of use for, and that was, to quote his own quaint phrase—a "jude."

But there was certainly nothing of the dude about Denver. Now his little eyes narrowed at the corners as he leaned close.

"You, Peace River!" he repeated thickly. "They're callin' you 'Peace River,' ha? Well, I hear you're a hellbender in a scrap, ha? Well, now, you listen here a minute, old-timer."

His voice fell to a purring insolence, a low note, falling almost to a mutter.

"You an' Mary Sigerson, you ain't been friends lately. Well, an' you ain't going t' be, Mister Peace River Pendleton."

"We'll leave the lady's name out of it!"

The words were low, even, controlled. The strong hand holding the axe turned it over; there came a quick wrench, and the head was jerked clear of the stout haft. There are few woodsmen who can "strip" an axe-blade, but Pendleton did it without visible effort. It was as if, too, he would not trust himself with that axe in hand, with that sneering face thrust close to his. But for the matter of that he had been meaning to put a new wedge in it—a taper screw. It had been his own invention.

But now, at that poisonous reference to Mary Sigerson, the veins in his neck and temples stood out in ridges. He got to his feet, lurching a little, as a bear lurches, lumbering and slow. For he was thinking of Mary, and of her father. The

"timber-waddy jude," Hardesty had called him—perhaps with reason.

Sigerson's camp was close at hand, at the portage at "Forty Mile," and was in a way a permanent one. It had been only the previous season that Pendleton, acting as guide and general handy man for the opulent Sigerson, had met his daughter, Mary, for the first time. Mary had liked the upstanding axeman; she had made no secret of her preference, but there had been Sigerson to reckon with. And Peace River had never forgotten the sportsman's sarcastic stare, the slow, head-to-foot inspection, the drawling, amused comment of, "Well, but my good man, of course, you understand—or is it possible you don't?"

Pendleton had felt within him the beast which is in every man rising to the surface, but he had thrust it under with an effort.

"You timber-waddy dude!" was all that he had said, but as such things fall out, rumor had magnified the matter—he had had a fist-fight with Sigerson, half killed him, threatened to "get" him, and so forth. And it was generally understood thereafter that he "had it in" for the sportsman.

And now, the thought of this hulking jailbird and Mary! It was too much. He knew that Denver had been a casual visitor to the Sigerson camp, but others of the lumbermen—scalers, timber-cruisers—had been welcome there. There was nothing unusual in that. But that Denver had presumed—! It was too much.

As in a red mist he beheld the broad, flat face close to his, heard the unspeak-



able epithet, even as his fist, behind it the full weight of his two hundred pounds of iron-hard muscle, had crashed full upon Denver's jaw.

Or, rather, he thought that it had.

Peace River Pendleton was a fighter. As a rough-and-tumble mixer, he was without a peer from Babine Lake southward to Port Essington, but as a boxer he was just a fair amateur, and little more. Before he had sunk downward in the scale to the man that he had become, Denver Ed Gunderson had been a heavyweight fighter of renown; it had been his own undisciplined character which had kept him from the

championship. If Peace River had heard that name of Gunderson he would have known him upon the instant, but it would have made little difference. For the measure of a man here in the North Woods, the British Columbian wilderness, was the measure of his heart.

Peace River grunted, the force of the blow turning him half round. But the blow found empty air. For Denver, grinning his cold grin, had stepped inside the punch even as his own left fist, lifting from his shoe-tops, came upward with the speed of light.

That punch had, aforetime, won many a fight for Denver Ed Gunderson; a lesser man than Peace River Pendleton would have wilted in his tracks. But Pendleton took it, his feet braced, head lowered and weaving from side to side, as a grizzly meets the onslaught of wolves. Then, fists going like flails, he was on top of his adversary, crowding him backward along the snow by the very force and fury of his attack.

But Denver Ed, light on his feet for all his bulk, side-stepped, circled with the lithe ease of the professional. Most of Peace River's blows he took upon his shoulders, his arms, picking them out of the air before they were well started, countering with heavy rights and lefts. But he could not set himself for another haymaker; the timber-jack had come in close, his great arms reaching now for this elusive antagonist, who mocked him even as he reached him on occasion with punishing blows.

Denver Ed's sojourn in the timber had served him well. Soft from months and years of easy living, sledge and maul and axe had hardened and toughened him so that indeed he was by now almost the man that he had been in the past. And he could take it. For there was nothing yellow about Denver Ed. As for his heart, that was black, and it was just a muscle, without pity and without fear.

But as the fight went on, his easy sneering abated, if by the merest shade; his confidence, the careless ease of the master giving a boxing lesson to a pupil, began to waver, to dissolve in a sudden, strange, uneasy apprehension.

This fellow—he could take it, and then some! But there was more to it than that. There was a grim earnestness, a resistless fury, an invincible, dogged determination about Pendleton that for the first time planted a thin, entering wedge of doubt and disbelief in Gunderson's heart. Why,

the fellow didn't know when he was beaten! He had hit him with everything but the bucket, in the parlance of the squared circle; hooks, jabs, uppercuts, straight-lefting his face into a red smear; pile-driving rights and lefts, jolting him backward upon his heels. Why, the fellow was beaten to a fare-you-well!

But he could hit; there was no doubt about that, Gunderson grudgingly admitted as he ducked under a long, curving left grazing his jaw. It was followed by a right just inside his guard. The blow, traveling a scant six inches, spun Gunderson like a top, jarring him to the heels. He grunted, falling into a clinch, and upon the instant felt himself lifted, swung.

For if he had thought to rough it with this timber-jack, he found now that all his skill, his shiftiness, the tricks which had brought him the nickname of "Elbows" for his brutal infighting, availed him nothing. It is common knowledge that a good rough-and-tumble fighter, *given his chance*, may and frequently will, best the cleverest ring-master that ever drew on a glove. Something of this flashed through the mind of Denver Ed as suddenly he felt those iron arms contract, pinning him helpless as though with hooks of steel. Peace River Pendleton bent, straightened, heaved; there came a sudden, brief explosion of movement, and the body of his antagonist catapulted over his head.

Gunderson fell heavily on one shoulder-point, twitched a moment, then, rising, his mean mouth dripping curses as a man turns the spigot of a barrel, made a quick pass for his hip.

And in that instant Pendleton swung.



Gunderson, going for his knife, saw the blow in the split second that his guard rose to block it. It was a perfect defense, even for that mighty blow, but there were no entangling gloves to smother it. Straight through that guard, as if it had been paper, the great fist drove; there came the sound as of a butcher's cleaver on the chopping-

block as it landed with a smacking thud. Gunderson bent, swayed, stumbled, recovered; then, in a long, slumping fall, he was down. He twitched a moment, then lay still, his face upturned to the still, gray sky.

It had been a knockout—clean.

Peace River Pendleton grinned, a mere spasmodic contraction of the lips, as he stood over the fallen man, his gaze somber, even in his hour of victory. His thoughts were bitter, brooding, turning now to that camp a scant five miles northward across the timber—the camp of Einar Sigerson. His eyes turned to ice now as Gunderson stirred, grunted, got slowly to a sitting position, then, unsteadily, to his feet.

But there was no fight left in him—with his fists.

He turned without a word, shambling onward over the snow. At a little distance, he halted, dark face twisted over his shoulder. Words came.

"You got away with it this time, Mister Peace River," he said tensely, "but—an' you can smoke this with your cigarette—I'll get you, an' I'll get you good!"

II

PENDLETON watched him go, then, with slow steps, he steered an uncertain course for the bunkhouse. First, however, he picked up his axe.

Hardesty met him at the door. His eyes widened at the sight.

"Great tomcats, man! What you been doing t' yourself?" he exclaimed. "Look like ye'd been clawed by a painter!"

Behind him, Morse, the scaler, echoed it, "A catamount—sure an' certain!"

Neither man had seen the fight; it had been, so to speak, without witnesses. Pendleton grinned through split and blackened lips.

"I reckon I have been," he mumbled, "even if he did walk on two laigs. Saved me a dentist's bill, anyway," he continued, as he spat out a tooth. "That fancy tooth-puller down at Hazelton now, he'd a charged me good an' plenty, I'll tell a man!"

He grinned again, then abruptly his face hardened. He swung round abruptly at a cool voice at his elbow.

"Why, hello, Pendleton, is that you? You—you're not well, ha? Oh, excuse me!"

There came then the sound of a discreetly smothered laugh.

It was Sigerson. Dapper, precise, from the jaunty set of his fur cap, to the high-

laced boots, he stood peering and grimacing in the doorway, nose sharpened to a pointed question, mouth with its infinitesimal mustache hiding the faintest of faint grins. Sleek—that, in a word, was Einar Sigerson. And seeing him, and Mary, you wondered, and gave it up.

With the reek of battle still upon him, Pendleton, his face dark, leaped now without sound, arm raised, upon the dapper insolence who faced him, poised, serene.

It is doubtful if it was the timber-jack's mind to do him actual hurt. But Hardesty and the scaler leaped between.

"Easy does it, old-timer!" grunted the wangan-boss. "Easy now. 'Twon't do, 'twon't do at all. That's the stuff!"

Sigerson, paling slightly, had made two stiff, mincing, backward steps. Now, as he turned going out the door, Pendleton found voice. Strangely enough, the words were almost an echo of Denver Ed Gunderson's.

"You listen to me, Mister Sigerson. Some day I'm goin' to fix you—an' I'll fix you good!"

III

IN THE bunkhouse at Camp Ten the crew slept, fathoms deep in dreams. Presently there would be a moon, but just now the darkness was ink-black, save for the spectral shimmer of the star-shine upon the snow, filtering downward from the remote blue dome of the sky.

Abruptly, out of the dense shadows at the rear, a formless black blot showed for a moment against the snow. There came the brief, darkling glimmer of star-shine upon steel; then, at a swift, stealthy lope, the figure was across the clearing, lost in the black belt of timber to the north.

In the confusion of tracks around and about the clearing the trail of this midnight prowler would be lost as in a labyrinth of con-



verging trails. The shadow chuckled now, and the sound was not a pleasant one. Denver Ed Gunderson, pausing only long enough to fit the head to the axe-helve—

for that was how he had found it, just as it had been left by the timber-jack—went forward now among the trees along that dim trail which led northward to vengeance

—and the camp of Einar Sigerson. And the axe was the good blade of Peace River Pendleton.

Only that day Mary had given Gunderson his answer, and his sentence, and it had been but a single, incisive word.

"You!" she had said, the whole essence of loathing in a phrase, a word.

Now that which he was about to do would be easy enough—to leave that bunkhouse undetected, and to return as he had come. It was too easy, when you thought of it. For he could have walked over the bodies of those sleepers, fathoms deep in dreams, and none ever the wiser; a charge of dynamite would scarcely have awakened them. Still, to make assurance doubly sure, he had seen to it that there would be no slip-up; certain white powders which he had obtained, no matter how, and the coffee—it had been too easy.

In the dense darkness of the timber he had paused to fit the axe-handle to the blade—and by so doing sealed his fate.

Remorseless as his four-footed brothers, of fang and claw, Denver Ed Gunderson possessed the heart of a cougar and the conscience of a wolf. He had nothing in particular against Einar Sigerson, but he would use him now as the instrument of his revenge against Peace River Pendleton. And another instrument was also in his hands. It was a two-edged weapon, indeed, an edged tool with which presently he would kill two birds with the same stone—or steel. It was all one, he reflected, with an inward grin.

And, as he thought of it, there was a certain matter between him and Sigerson, that, as well as another pretext, would serve him now, dovetailing with his purpose.

Mary had departed that morning for Hazelton. Gunderson knew of this, and that, too, gibed with his plan. And the sportsman, as was common knowledge, carried a considerable sum in cash upon his person. Here again Denver would accomplish a double stroke.

For it was well known that between Pendleton and the father of Mary no love was lost, and there was the timber-jack's threat no later than that very noon:

"I'll fix you—an' I'll fix you good!"

Denver Ed, grinning in the darkness, reached Sigerson's camp, circled it, then, axe in hand, approached the cabin door.

A little wind, rising among the pines, murmured like voices whispering together out of the dark, as Denver, his hand upon the staple of the door, listened for a few moments to the sound of heavy breathing,

slow, like the measured beating of a heart.

"Open up," he called finally. "It's me —Denver. I want to see you, special. Open up!"

There came a fumbling at the door. Einar Sigerson, heavy with sleep, heard that harsh summons with a sudden, strange prevision of evil, coming upon him out of the dark. For there was a cadence in the voice, an eagerness, which Denver could not all conceal; it rang now, vibrant in the midnight silence.

Sigerson, hesitating a moment, reached about him in the darkness for his pistol, but he could not find it. Well, anyway, what was there to fear? The man outside was Denver Ed Gunderson; he had nothing to fear from Denver Ed. He shivered suddenly in the frosty air.

"Someohe's walking over my grave," he muttered, and with the words flung wide the door.

Instantly he knew that he had blundered. And he knew it by that sixth sense which warns of danger. He could not see Gunderson's eyes, but the rigid poise of the man, the forward-thrusting tilt of his head, the hunched shoulders, affected him with a sudden sense of crisis.

"What is it, Denver; what's wrong?" he asked, his voice strained and hoarse.

Gunderson's answer came with a sort of snarling violence.

"You know damn well! You sicked me onto this Peace River Pendleton, an' what he did to me was a-plenty; you musta knowed that he would. Me, I ain't forgettin' that, Mister Sigerson." His thick tones rose to a kind of singing fury. "An' what's more, you ain't never paid me f'r the job, but—you'll pay me now, you mangy wolverine!"

Sigerson's protest died in his throat. He made one halting, backward step, flung out a hand.

The great axe rose; it fell, like the Hammer of Thor.

IV

BOOTHS ALLISTON, Sheriff of Kit-kargas, gazed down at the giant where he sat dejectedly before the great sheet-iron stove in the bunkhouse at Camp Ten.

"I'm right down sorry, Peace River," he said huskily, "but the evidence is against you, and it's pretty strong. You were heard to threaten Sigerson; it's common knowledge that you didn't exactly love him; and the axe—there's no mistake about that. It's yours, isn't it?" he asked, but

the words were less a question than a statement of fact.

The timber-jack nodded, without speech. The two men had been friends, but, as sheriff, Alliston had no other choice than to perform his duty. Now he turned heavily to a thick-set, grizzled man in the doorway; it was Hardesty. The latter had



been examining the axe, perhaps drawn by a morbid fascination to the weapon which had killed a man.

Alliston cleared his throat. Plainly

it was a task which was repugnant. In his heart he was divided between wonder and disbelief, but duty was duty, and he had been sworn to uphold the law, without fear and without favor.

"Well, Peace River," he was beginning, "I reckon we'll be on our way—" when at a word from the wangan-boss he ceased abruptly in mid-speech.

The wangan-boss seemed in the grip of a sudden, strange, overmastering emotion.

"Peace River," he barked abruptly, "you stay where you are! Why, dammit, man, I'd take your word against a stack of Bibles, an' you can smoke that with your cigarette. But, by God, I don't have to! Because," he paused, "because you never killed Einar Sigerson. But I got a damn blazin' hunch who did!"

He wheeled, calling out the doorway to Morse, the scaler, yelling a quick, barking order.

"You heard me?" he then asked, turning to the two who gazed at him in a sudden amazement.

"But—" began the sheriff.

"Wait!" rasped Hardesty, with a smile secret and grim. "I'm no detective, but I'll lay the price of this winter's cut against a plugged nickel that I'm right!"

Ten minutes passed, then there came a quick clamor from without. It was the scaler. He burst in now without ceremony.

"I sent for Denver, like you said, Mr.

Hardesty," he told him. "He was off by that blowdown with Pedersen, that thick Swede. Pedersen says that the minute he heard he was wanted he lit out, the other way, hell-bent. An' so—"

"And so that proves it!" exclaimed the wangan-boss. "It proves, anyway, that he was afraid to come and see!"

He grinned widely at Alliston.

"But he won't get away, will he, Boots? I reckon he won't, lessen he starves to death this side o' Hazelton. An' so we got him—like that!"

He opened and closed one huge, hairy fist.

"Well," he continued, to the two who faced him now, Pendleton on his feet, eyes like live coals set in a face dead white, "I didn't *know*, certain-sure, until I set that trap just now, but, first, I knew that no woodsman had swung that axe back there at Forty-Mile—I'll tell you why in a minute. And in all this outfit the only man who was not a woodsman was this Denver Ed. And the reason why I knew was this!"

He held up the axe for them to see. Alliston and the timber-jack crowded forward.

"It cuts both ways, ha? Well, the blade was off, see? And this Denver Ed, he had to fit it on again before he—used it. But there was one little thing he never noticed, and for the matter of that neither did I until just a few minutes ago, and it was a thing that no axeman, no timber-jack would have failed to notice, or to feel, either, for that matter. He put the head on—curved end foremost; you see—*wrong end first!*"

He dropped the great blade, ringing, at his feet.

An axe, even an ordinary axe, curves inward, the straight end foremost; in a woodsman's axe this is even more pronounced. The murderer, unaware of this—for it was not as an axeman that he had been hired by Hardesty—had betrayed himself with the very instrument of his vengeance. Or, rather, it had betrayed him at the moment of his greatest need.

Its purpose accomplished, the great axe lay where it had fallen, upright against the empty door. The good blade of Peace River Pendleton had not failed.

NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL GAS

TO REPLACE the natural gas now used in the United States for domestic and industrial purposes, were the supply cut off, would require \$1,000,000 worth of artificial gas daily.



ANY OLD PLUG

By WENDELL W. HANMER

A GREAT, GREAT DEAL DEPENDED ON THE OUTCOME OF THE NAVY BOAT RACE—MORE EVEN THAN THE GLORY OF THE RACE. THAT WAS WHY THERE WERE SOME TENSE MOMENTS AS THE CUTTERS CROSSED THE LINE

JIM WARD had not yet become suspicious of Shorty McClellan, the coxswain. In fact, he still was destined to be induced by him to bet his every cent on the race. But he already had wagered more than he could afford to lose, so that it was only natural he should ponder the disturbing events of the day.

They had begun in the morning, when Mike Hogan, the stroke, had failed to appear on time for practice. The evening before all hands had been notified that the boat would shove off fifteen minutes earlier than usual. The bugler had sounded the earlier summons, which Hogan must have heard. He alone had failed to respond promptly. A fretful wait of half an hour had followed, all hands grumbling and growling at the delay. They had heartily concurred in Shorty's summation, when he railed:

"Hogan's one of those bull-headed, back-biting cusses who always do what you tell 'em not to do, then cuss you out for telling 'em. If I'd 'a' told him to take his time about getting down this morning, he'd 'a' been waiting on the gangway before the boat was over the side."

They were about to shove off without him, when Hogan appeared. As he descended the gangway, Shorty greeted him with picturesque vituperation.

"Don't cuss at me, you runt!" Hogan angrily retorted.

"Get down into the boat!" Shorty commanded, with further invective embellishment.

"Damned if I will!" Hogan snorted.

He retraced his steps up the gangway and disappeared on deck.

It was too near the date of the race to break in a new stroke oarsman. Shorty remained in the boat a few moments, relieving his rage with dynamic eloquence. Then he leaped to the gangway and clambered up. He had gone to the Executive Officer, Jim now knew, and had Hogan summoned. The Executive had ordered the stroke to resume his place in the boat or be court martialed for refusing duty. The navy took its athletics seriously in 1915, particularly its race boating.

When Shorty returned, Hogan had followed him. He manned his oar, but did not extend himself. He went through the motions, but pulled not a pound. Shorty berated him to no avail.

As they disembarked after the morning practice, Shorty had contemptuously remarked to no one in particular, "Eleven men can pull this boat as good as twelve, but we've got to have a stroke to keep her on an even keel."

Someone laughed.

Hogan, half way up the gangway, turned on him with an ominous scowl.

Shorty smiled enigmatically, and murmured, "I know how I'll make the big bum pull."

The afternoon had produced a more disquieting development. They had gone not more than twenty yards from the ship, Jim estimated, when he noticed how little was the distance separating the pools of eddies churned by the oar blades.

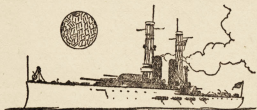
"Shorty," he called out, "what's the matter with the boat? She seems dead in the water."

Shorty had replied airily, "The boat? Oh, she's all right, but she's carrying a couple o' hundred pounds dead weight."

The shaft had been directed at Hogan, Jim knew. He had regarded the back of the stroke, who occupied the thwart before him. The play of straining muscles in the powerful back, arms and shoulders had shown that Hogan again was pulling as he had pulled during target practice, when the ship had been brought to on the range and the race boat lowered. It was the same superb quality of oarsmanship the stroke had displayed in the navy yard before the ship came south for practice.

Next Jim had glanced behind and seen that the rest of the crew, too, were pulling with a will. Then he had glanced again at the pools of eddies over the side. They had been wider spaced in the morning, when Hogan had "soldiered," and they started him pondering.

Jim was now aft on the main deck, leaning upon the life lines. Ahead and astern and in a similar long line two hundred yards to port lay the ships of the Atlantic fleet, peacefully anchored. Down the lane



between them they soon would pull the race. Behind him, on the clean, scoured deck of the warship, other white clad seamen walked or sat in groups, cheerfully conversing. Directly across from the U. S. S. *New York* lay the U. S. S. *Maryland*, and beyond her in the distance twinkled the lights of the Marine post ashore, at the base of the foot-hills enclosing Guantanamo Bay. The scene was bathed in the light of a full Cuban moon, providing a prospect to delight the artist's eye, but wasted on Jim. He was aroused from his reverie by a touch on the arm, and turned to see Hogan.

"I just want to give you a friendly tip,

Ward," Hogan began, leaning against the life lines beside him. "I wouldn't bet anything on the race, if I were you."

"Why?" asked Jim.

"Because I believe Shorty's gonna throw it."

"What do you mean, throw it?" Jim indignantly demanded.

"Just what I said. I don't know it for sure, but all the signs point to it. I know Shorty of old, Ward, though I was never shipmates with him before. I know he's up to something phoney."

"Just what do you mean?"

"Well, I heard he hasn't bet anything on the race, for one thing. For another, a friend of mine on the *Wyoming* told me he's lent everything he's got to his brother. His brother's pulling in the *Wyoming's* boat, I suppose you know?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, he is. Any of the fellows will tell you so. The *Wyoming's* the only boat we ain't sure of beating, and they're betting everything they can beg, borrow and steal that they'll cop the cup. They probably will, too, now," he concluded gloomily.

"Now? Why the now?"

"Haven't you noticed the boat, how she pulled this afternoon?"

"Yes, I did. What do you suppose caused it, anyway?"

"I don't know, but I'll bet Shorty McClellan does. I was on the west coast when he was in that fleet and, believe me, he's liable to do anything. I guess you think I'm just a sorehead over what happened this morning, but it's not that. I'm just tipping you off because I know you're getting paid off soon and don't intend to ship over. You'll need your money on the outside."

Taps put an end to the conversation, sending each to his hammock.

FOR the next two days Jim continued to ponder the situation. He already had bet more than he could afford to lose, had risked part of the money he had saved to purchase an interest in a business back home. The boat continued sluggish. The *Wyoming* was offering odds that they would win the race. He still believed Hogan's warning inspired by malice, but he was beginning to worry. He decided to talk things over with Shorty.

He found Shorty in the race boat, which was in its cradles on the superstructure deck, atop of the deck houses. He was tinkering with the foot beackets on a stretcher, changing one that had frayed

and was in danger of breaking. He looked up when Jim rested his forearms on the gunwale and leaned against the boat.

"Shorty," Jim began, "I'm worried. I'd like some advice."

"Huh!" Shorty grunted. "What about?"

Jim hesitated a moment, then blurted out, "What's the matter with the boat, anyway? Why is she so dead in the water the last few days?"

Shorty straightened up enough to slide back and seat himself on the thwart at his back. He regarded Jim belligerently.

"Who the hell's running this boat?" he demanded. "Never mind whether the boat's dead in the water or not; you pull your oar! That's all you've got to do. Pull your oar and do as I tell you, and we'll win the race."

Jim did not resent his tone. He had long since come to believe that Shorty's bark was worse than his bite, and his bark only a pose. He was, in fact, still rather fond of Shorty, who had done him several favors, including having the Division Officer assign him a petty officer's clothes locker, to which he was not entitled as a seaman.

"Tell me, Shorty, are we going to win this race?" he asked earnestly.

"If we don't, I'll bust a tiller over your head! What's all the agony about, anyhow? What are you pulling such a long face about?"

"I'll tell you, Shorty," Jim replied quietly. "This race means an awful lot to me, more than just winning the cup and winning or losing a few dollars. I'm getting paid off pretty soon, as you know, and I've bet more than I can afford to lose."

Jim paused, hesitant about making an intimate confession.

"Go on," said Shorty.

"I am engaged to a girl back home," Jim resumed. "That is, I'm sort of engaged. We've known each other since we were kids. We'll get married when my cruise is up, if I can earn enough. I came into the navy almost directly out of high school, you see, and four years on deck hasn't fitted me for anything ashore. My town's not very big, don't offer many opportunities. I can't marry on a grocery clerk's pay, or on what I'd get jerking soda-water or working on a farm." Jim stopped.

"Go on," Shorty growled.

"I've got, or had," Jim continued, "three thousand dollars. My girl's brother offered me a fourth interest in his hardware business for that—it's worth more. I've

already bet five hundred on the race. I was a fool to risk it."

Jim again lapsed into silence. Unconscious of Shorty's intent scrutiny, for more than a minute he thoughtfully regarded the gunwale, where he picked at it with a thumb and forefinger. Then he looked up and concluded his confession.

"She's a darned fine girl, Shorty," he said softly. "If I win my bet, I'll have enough to buy that interest and five hundred over to start a home. If not—" He shrugged his shoulders, leaving the sentence unfinished. "That's why I'm worrying, Shorty. That's why I want to know if you think we'll win."

"Think?" Shorty laughed derisively. "I know! We'll win, and win easy. Because we've slowed up now doesn't mean a thing. I was race boating when you



were swinging on the gate, before you knew there was a navy. I've seen crews slow up like this before, just before a race. We'll be all right when the race comes; you can bet your socks on it. Take your other twenty-five hundred and put it against that two to one stuff the *Wyoming* is offering. Let's see—twenty-five hundred and twenty-five hundred is five thousand, and five hundred is five thousand five hundred bucks to start your housekeeping on."

"Nope," Jim shook his head. "I'd be afraid to risk it, I wouldn't dare. Look at this, Shorty." He took his watch from his pocket, unscrewed the back and showed, pasted within, the picture of his fiancée. Shorty returned it after a brief inspection.

"Huh!" he grunted. "She's a good looker, all right, but none of 'em for me. They don't know the difference between the loom of an oar and a tiller, and you couldn't teach one of 'em in a year. But that's got nothing to do with the race. If you're gonna get spliced, get spliced right. Bet the rest of your roll and hit the beach with—let's see—six thousand bucks."

"I'd like to, Shorty, but, I tell you, I don't dare."

"Don't dare? Well, you poor swab! If I was back on the West coast now, or in the Asiatic, believe me, anybody I told to bet on a race would put his gold teeth up. The poor fish on this wagon'll do it, too, after this race. Why, kid, you could buy half of the guy's farm, or whatever it is, 'stead of a quarter!"

"Yeah, I know I could. It's inviting, I admit. But I can't bet it, anyhow. It's in the bank, back in New York."

"Huh!" Shorty wrinkled his weather-beaten brow as with profound thought. "Huh!" he repeated. "Guess I ought to let you go to blazes, but I was a tadpole like you, myself, once. And I was sweet on the same kind of a little Jane as you've got in your watch, too. But I'm nothing but an old barnacle now. I'll keep messing 'round with race boats until I die in some old sailor's home or some Sand Street shark douses my lights with a sand-bag."

He regarded Jim thoughtfully. Gradually his expression became such as one might expect Neptune to wear in the rôle of Santa Claus. Suddenly he thumped his thigh with a horny fist.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Yep, I'll do it!"

"Do what?" asked Jim.

"Fix it, that's what. You go down and see Lieutenant Stapleton in about an hour. He'll lend you the money. I'll see him first and fix it. This old salt ain't been to sea all his life without stowing a couple o' dollars away, anyhow. I'll go security for you." He rose, put a hand on the gunwale, vaulted from the boat to the deck. "I'll see him right away."

"But, Shorty," Jim expostulated, extending a restraining hand.

"Forget the thanks," Shorty growled, shaking free from the grasp on his arm.

Jim sat down on a sea chest that stood against a ventilator nearby. He weighed the situation. Hogan's aspersions were not to be taken too seriously; they undoubtedly were inspired by resentment. Shorty had always been such a decent sort. The sluggishness of the boat might be the fault of the crew, undoubtedly was; Shorty ought to know. He now was serving his third enlistment and had been race-boating most of the time. It didn't seem to trouble him. Besides, hadn't he already bet five hundred dollars. If he lost, it would leave him that much short of the required amount. He might as well risk the balance for the big stake. He had decided when Shorty returned. He thanked him and started for Lieutenant Stapleton's stateroom.

On the way he encountered Hogan.

"Where are you hurrying to, Ward?" the stroke greeted.

Jim told him.

"Don't be a damned fool," Hogan advised. "Shorty's a crook, I tell you, and

I feel sure he's going to throw the race. I'd keep away from Stapleton, too, if I were you. For all you know, him and Shorty's in cahoots. Those birds in the wardroom don't make so much money, you know, and they've got to spend a lot to live and chuck the bluff they do ashore."

But Jim only smiled and shook his head. "Guess I'll take a chance," he said, and continued on his way.

Jim's business with the lieutenant was quickly transacted. When the officer said that he would be glad to undertake the placing of the bet, it was gratefully entrusted to him. Jim was inclined to exult when he left the stateroom, and to visualize the six thousand dollars as already in his pocket, together with his discharge, and himself speeding west to sweetheart and hardware business. He did not perceive the specific magnanimity referred to in the lieutenant's final remark, but he was deeply grateful for the loan.

The lieutenant had said, "It's a big-hearted thing, Shorty fixing it up for you this way; magnanimous!"

Soon, however, he began to doubt the wisdom of this second wager he had made. As the day of the race drew near, he believed he observed a gradual crumbling of their morale. No longer did they seem to evidence the same assurance of ability to run away with the race that had been so conspicuously displayed the first week in the harbor. The ship's company, too, appeared to have lost confidence in their race-boat crew, and many were betting on other boats, particularly that of the *Wyoming*. The *Wyoming's* men, toward the end of the training period, offered odds of three to one, yet found few takers.

Wearily Jim mounted the gangway the evening they returned from the final practice pull. Sweat dripped from his rowing togs, his long spoon oar was carried listlessly under his left arm. Hogan, who had preceded him, waited at the head of the gangway. Jim would have passed him and followed the other members of the crew to the washrooms below, but Hogan intercepted him.

"Come with me," he said, when the others had disappeared from sight into the enclosed 'midship section of the main deck.

Hogan led in the direction of the door through which they had disappeared, but ascended a ladder beside it to the top side. He took Jim to the life lines and told him to look over the side.

Jim looked down upon the bow man, fending the race boat off the ship's side as

two seamen on deck hauled it under the boat crane with a long painter. He also saw Shorty, crouched in the stern sheets, doing something his body concealed.

"What's the idea?" he asked, after a moment of uncomprehending observation.



"Can't you see?" Hogan replied. "That's why the boat's been so hard to pull, why I've

said Shorty's going to throw the race."

Jim frowned, puzzled.

"He's tinkering with the boat plug, I suppose," he said, "seeing the grating's off; but darned if I can make out what you're getting at."

Shorty had completed his task in the bottom of the boat. He was sliding the grating back into place with one hand, while with the other he appeared to fumble something under his blouse, seemed to be tucking it into the waist band of his trousers.

"If I tell you, will you give me your word you won't tell him I put you wise?"

"I'll swear it!"

"He's—Look!"

Upon the grating had clattered a piece of iron pipe, fallen from under Shorty's blouse. It had fallen as he rose from his stooped position and now lay distinctly visible to the two on deck. It was an eighteen inch piece of one inch pipe, with a quarter-inch cut running nearly its entire length. In the uncut end was fitted a wooden plug. It was obvious that Shorty had used this for a boat plug, the pipe, projecting into the water, creating the resistance that had made the boat so sluggish.

"Come on, let's get below and clean up," said Hogan, pulling Jim away from the life lines just as Shorty tucked the pipe plug back under his blouse and glanced up over his shoulder.

"Come on," Hogan repeated, profound disgust in his voice. "The way I've been pulling, I knew he'd doctored the boat. Guess you're satisfied he's a crook now, ain't you?"

Jim made no reply until they had descended to the gun deck and entered the washroom. There he expressed the conclusions at which he had arrived on the way.

"Yeah, I guess he is a crook. I don't know why it took me so long to find it out. I'll let him know what I think of him,

soon's I get cleaned up. Then I'll see if I can do anything about pulling down my bets. I can't afford to throw away what I've got up on this race. It means too much to me—and to someone else."

"I've got a better plan than yours, Jim. I've had longer to think it up. No question but what we've got the boat crew and the best boat in the fleet. All we need is a coxswain that'll steer a straight course. There's a hundred fellows on the ship can do it without practice. I've got a nice piece of change on this race, myself, and want my winnings. There's no need to have all bets called off. We'll wait 'till just before shoving off for the course, then show him up."

"But why not show him up now?"

"You poor boob! He'd make a fool of you, that's why. He'd say the plug was only a training stunt, or some other hokum. Then he'd leave his pipe out and chuck the race by getting disqualified or by steering all over the course."

The explanation seemed logical.

Hogan had not worked out the final details for effecting the exposé, but that they could do together the next day. It was nearly supper time, and immediately after supper he was going with a visiting party to one of the other ships, he explained, or he would not suggest the deferment.

Jim agreed to take no immediate action, and passed the evening regretting the wagers he had made.

DURING neither the forenoon nor early afternoon of the next day did they find an opportunity to discuss final arrangements. With the other members of the crew, they spent these hours grooming the boat under Shorty's direction, sand-papering and greasing the bottom to reduce her hull resistance to a minimum. When the task was completed and Shorty dismissed them, however, chance seemed to come to their aid. Shorty ordered Jim to assist him in lowering the boat in the morning and in giving it a final inspection before the race. Around this order they completed their scheme.

"Remember now," said Hogan as they parted before supper, "we may be all wrong. Maybe he intends to pull the race on the level, after all. Anyhow, we're giving him a chance to do it on his own; we ain't forcing his hand. We'll soon know whether he's a crook or not."

But in Jim's mind there was little doubt what the scheme would prove—if it

worked. He was not enthusiastic about it, but it was the best they could devise. He bitterly regretted not having heeded Hogan's warning when first he gave it.

The U. S. S. *New York* had been in the harbor a week then, when Hogan first had warned him. He already had made his first wager, but he could have withheld the second. How enthusiastically they had trained, then, for this race which annually concluded the fortnight spent in Guantanamo Bay after the spring target practice. This fortnight, as was customary, had been devoted to rifle and revolver practice ashore and athletic competitions ashore and afloat. The competitions had included baseball, basketball, boxing, wrestling, swimming and running, but he had paid no attention to them, concentrating on the race of the morrow. The following day the fleet would sail for home ports.

Sleep came late to Jim that night, but he did not linger in his hammock when reveille awakened him, the next morning. Quickly he donned his gray woollen rowing suit and heavy coat sweater, then lashed and stowed away his hammock. Leaving until later the fetching of his oar from the rack below, he hastened from the enclosed main deck, where he had slept, to the race boat on the superstructure.

The sun already was above the horizon; the mist which nightly settled over the bay was clearing before a cool, gentle breeze from the ocean; there was a tang to the air that insistently invited deep breathing, but Jim was unconscious of it all.

Reaching the race boat, he found that Shorty already had arrived and was engaged in clearing the boat slings preparatory to hoisting out. The bottom grating was up in the stern, Jim saw, as he climbed into the boat, but neither in the drain hole, the bilge, nor on the bottom boards was a boat plug visible.

"Fine day for the race, Jim, great weather!" Shorty greeted.

"Wonderful!" Jim replied, feigning enthusiasm, and turned to, helping with the boat slings.

"What do you say, Shorty," hailed a voice from the boat crane a moment later, "ready to hoist out?"

"All set, juice," Shorty called back to the deck electrician.

The crane arm was trained amidship and the hook at its end lowered over the boat. Jim hooked on the boat slings, and immediately the hook rose until it had lifted the boat clear of the cradles. Then the crane was trained outboard.

"Ready to lower?" called the electrician, when the boat hung above the water.

"Lower away," Shorty returned.

When the boat had passed below the level of the ship's deck, Shorty squatted in the stern sheets and busied himself in the bilges.

Jim, in the bow with a boat hook, knew Shorty was putting in the plug, but was unable to see what plug it was. He was kept too busy preventing the boat from smashing against the ship's side to watch very closely. When it settled upon the water with a splash, Jim saw that Shorty had completed the task and had slipped the grating into position.

A seaman on deck threw down a heavy line, on the end of which they were drifted aft to the gangway. Here Jim cast off the line, and he and Shorty held the boat alongside with boat hooks.

Within a few minutes Hogan appeared at the head of the gangway, his oar balanced on one shoulder, his coat sweater bundled under the opposite arm. He had descended and was stepping into the boat when a youth on deck shouted down that Shorty was wanted by the Officer-of-the-Deck.

"Here, hold her stern," Shorty told Hogan as the latter laid down oar and sweater preparatory to taking his seat.

Hogan took the boat hook. But he laid it across the gunwales as soon as Shorty had mounted to the deck and disappeared from view. He dropped upon his thwart, in the same motion sweeping from it the bundled sweater he had laid there. Then he dropped to his knees.

"Keep your eyes peeled," he called tensely, amid a clatter that informed Jim he was removing the grating.

"I'm watching," Jim replied without turning.

"Ah!" exclaimed Hogan, in a tone of satisfaction.

Jim imagined he had extracted the plug. "Quick, he's coming!" he warned an instant later, as he saw part of Shorty's head and torso beyond the gangway upper platform.



Another clatter of the grating followed as Jim saw Shorty step upon the upper platform.

"Hey, you big stew," Shorty jocularly yelled to Hogan when half way down the gangway, "think you're going to a dance? Get out your boat hook and leave your shoer alone."

"Lacing came loose," Hogan lied, straightening up.

"Here, give me the hook and relieve Jim," Shorty directed when he had stepped aboard. "You, Jim," he continued, "run up and get your cocoa and toast, and tell the rest of the gang to hurry down here."

"All right, Shorty," Jim responded, and as he stepped to the gangway, asked, "What did the Officer-of-the-Deck want?"

"Didn't want nothing," was the reply. "Some kid was trying to play a joke on me, I guess. Met the Officer-of-the-Deck 'midships, coming aft. There he is now," Shorty indicated that officer, who glanced over the rail and withdrew.

Jim ran up the gangway. He joined the rest of the crew in one of the gun compartments and partook of their light repast. Then he went for his oar. When he returned with it to the boat, he found the rest of the crew present.

Soon one of the ship's steam launches, with Lieutenant Stapleton aboard, came to the gangway and passed them a line. In a moment it had been fastened in the bow and they were on the way to the race course. Less than a score of men manned the rail to speed them with a cheer.

As soon as the opportunity presented, Jim leaned forward and whispered a query regarding the results of the boat plug inspection.

Hogan swung about on his thwart and faced forward. He talked about other matters until sure he was not noticed.

"Couldn't pull it out," he then whispered. "Didn't have time."

Jim was downcast.

"Cheer up," Hogan comforted. "Believe we had the wrong dope, after all. Though I didn't get it out, I lifted it enough to feel pretty sure it's not the pipe plug. Besides, the end of another plug stuck up in the after end of the bilge, just under the grating frame. Didn't have time to pull it out and look, either, but it sure looked like the old pipe plug."

Jim took what comfort he could from Hogan's words. Pipe plug or regular boat plug, he determined to pull as he had never pulled before.

They arrived at the head of the course.

Half a dozen boats were before them, they found, and as many more were arriving under tow from their respective vessels. Presently all seventeen had arrived and were milling about, some practicing starts, others merely drifting, their oars shipped or trailing.

Promptly at seven o'clock, when the tide was flood, the boats were ordered to the starting line, marked by two moored dinghies flying pennants in their bows.

Some time was expended getting the boats in position, the starter, from his launch beside one of the dinghies, ordering first one race boat, then another, to advance or to retire a little.

When the line began to settle down, Shorty advised in an undertone:

"In a minute or two the starter'll give 'Stand by.' When he does, I want you to back water. Give two short, hard strokes, enough to send her back about a boat length. Don't make any more fuss about it than you can help. Maybe he won't see you do it, but no matter. Anyway, he'll have to order us up on the line before giving the signal to go, and we'll have headway when the gun's fired. I won't give any orders, now, so watch me. When I drop my hand, give way."

Shorty straightened up and faced the starter. He lifted his hand and fingered his chin. A moment later he dropped the hand to his side.

A long-drawn cry of "Stand by," followed, but already one back stroke had been described and the second was begun.

"New York, what's the matter with you, anyway?" sounded the angry voice of the starter. "Get up on the line there!"

Shorty smiled.

"Stand by for a single stroke, men," he instructed softly. "You know the kind, not too hard. Snap back to the ready soon as you've pulled it. Keep your eyes on your blades and your ears open. Stand by—go."

The stroke was pulled and recovered. The boat glided to the line. With blades poised and bodies tense, the crew waited.

"Stand by!" megaphoned the starter.

"Stand by," echoed every coxswain on the line.

"Stand by!" Shorty repeated tensely a moment later, quickly following it by cleaving the air with his disengaged right hand and a galvanizing shout of "Go!"

Jim bit his oar blade into the water and whipped it through with all of the power he could command. Before the stroke was half completed he heard the report of the

starting gun. Shorty had given his signal as the gun lanyard was lifted, he concluded. That, coupled with the expedient resorted to to give the boat the added advantage of momentum on the signal, convinced him the race was to be honestly steered.

"Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Shorty now counted in vibrant tones, beating time with his right hand, steering with his left.

Jim pulled whole-heartedly the nine quick strokes of medium length which followed the first extra long stroke of the start they had practised.

"*Krunk! Krunk! Kerunk!*" sang the rowlocks, as the oars bent with the effort of the rowers.

Their boat got away to a flying start. She was a full length ahead of the others.

"Settle down, men, thirty-four strokes to the minute," admonished Shorty. "You've a long way to go. Settle down to the count." He set the cadence: "Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!"

Jim, pulling a port oar at No. 2, turned his head to find the *Wyoming's* boat. Before he could locate her, Shorty snapped, "Keep your eyes on your oar, No. 2!"

Jim turned back. He saw that the boats to port were well bunched. He settled down to strenuous plugging.



Soon sweat began to drip from his chin and elbows, and his suit to grow moist and glisten in the morning sun. Hogan's neck, shoulders and arms were also wet; and his shirt, too, Jim saw, glistened.

The first quarter-mile mark was reached. The boats to port began to string out. Three of the ten that had been to the left of them at the start had climbed abreast, three were about two boat lengths to the rear of these, after another interval of open water straggled the rest.

"Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Shorty counted monotonously, beating the air in accompaniment. Occasionally he interrupted his count to caution one man to bevel his oar more or less, another to dig more or less water.

They passed the half-mile mark and entered the channel between the two lines of anchored warships, the three boats abreast at the quarter still in that position, those behind stringing out more.

Aboard the first warship the crew manned the rail, tops of turrets, smokestacks, ventilators and masts. Above the tooting of her signal whistle and the wail of her

siren, Jim could distinguish the discordant playing of her band, half-hidden among cheering bluejackets crowding the fore-castle. A similar pandemonium reigned to starboard, but when he turned his head to observe it, his gaze was ordered back to his oar. At his back, like the thunder of storm surf on a rocky coast, Jim heard the applauding of other ships waiting their arrival, growing ever louder as they drew near.

"Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Shorty continued his counting, thirty-four counts to the minute.

"*Kerunk! Kerunk! Kerunk!*" continued the rowlocks, a determined minor note accompaniment.

Another warship was passed; then another, and another. The din was deafening.

The sweat flowed freely now, and dripped from the end of Jim's rowing shirt. His hair was moist, as was the band about his brow, worn to protect his eyes from smarting perspiration.

They passed the first mile mark, and the mile-and-a-quarter.

"We're getting near the ship," Shorty bellowed above the uproar. "We'll spurt when we pass her. Show what you can do when I call for it."

He resumed his chant, his voice a definite, intimate note in the bedlam of noises.

They passed the *Arkansas*, marking half of the three-mile course covered. Next lay the *Maryland*, and across the channel from her the *New York*.

"Stand by for a spurt!" called Shorty.

The *New York's* greeting was now distinguishable. Jim heard it and felt refreshed. Weariness fell from him like a cloak.

"Stand by!"

They completed another stroke.

"Go! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!"

"Rotten!" Shorty pronounced, when they had resumed the thirty-four strokes to the minute cadence. "Rotten! We moved like a coal scow. What's the matter with you? Give it to me again, now. Put some beef into it. Stand by for another spurt. Stand by!"

"Go! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Shorty again thundered through ten counts.

He shook his head when they again settled down.

"Darn if I know what to make of you," he shouted, and resumed his forceful, monotonous thirty-four to the minute chant, "Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!"

The two-mile mark was passed, they reached the two-and-a-half.

Only another half-mile to go. The stimulating cheers from the battleships had been left behind, and empty stillness seemed ahead, beyond their straining backs. Only the cheers from the steam launches that followed the race on the side lines, and Shorty's goading, spurred them on. Jim's oar was becoming heavy. He was beginning to pant and breathe through his mouth.

"Shut your mouth!" ordered Shorty, as he previously had ordered half a dozen others. "Breathe through your nose."

The boats to port now strung out irregularly a quarter of a mile. One boat only kept pace with them, that of the *West Virginia*. They led her by half a length.

"Stand by for a spurt!" called Shorty.

"Go!" followed in sequence, and thereafter the other thundered nine "Strokes!" that completed the spurt count.

"What the blue blazes is the matter with you?" Shorty raved. "What's the matter with you, anyhow? Put some beef on it, won't you? Bend your backs. Get into it! Another spurt now. Altogether. Go!"

Once more the nine vociferous counts of "Stroke!" and accompanying flailing of the air with Shorty's disengaged arm.

"Steady down," followed as usual, then the monotonous chant of the cadence.

Not more than a dozen of these strokes had been counted when Jim looked up, attracted by the suddenly changed inflection of the last count. Beyond Hogan, he saw the rounded curve of Shorty's stooped back, then saw him hurl aside the grating. Swearing furiously, he straightened up, kicking the grating into place, holding something in his right hand, never having removed his left from the tiller.

"The pipe plug!" Jim involuntarily gasped, missing a stroke in the surprise of his discovery.

"Stop fanning the air, damn you!" Shorty shouted, menacing him with the pipe. "Get your eyes on your oar!" He seemed suddenly plunged into a berserk's rage. "Pull, darn you, every mother's son of you!" he thundered at the crew as a whole. "If we lose this race I'll run amuck! I'll brain the bunch of you, you sea pigs! Pull, damn you, lay down to it! Stroke! Put beef into it! Stroke! Stroke!"

There was now a quality in Shorty's chant that Jim had never before heard. It savored of the maniacal.

Shorty called for a spurt. When they had delivered it, he called for another. A third followed in quick succession.

Jim grew very tired. Sweat splashed from his arms and face, ran from his soaked head band into his eyes. The winning of the race no longer seemed worth the effort. He wanted to quit, to release his cramped, burning grip on the sweat-wet handle of his oar and sink into oblivion. His oar weighed a ton. He wished Shorty would reduce the pace, stop for a minute and let him rest. Weren't they a full three boat lengths from the nearest boat he could see?

Shorty was storming again.

"Bend your backs, you bums!" Jim heard him shouting. "Get into it! Get into it! God help you if we lose!"

Jim lifted a clouded gaze.

"Watch your oar!" snapped Shorty.

He obeyed mechanically.

"Another spurt now. Stand by! Go!"

Beyond his oar blade Jim gradually made out the hazy outline of a race boat's stern. Gradually, steadily, this stern dropped back, succeeded by a waist, then a bow, in his line of vision. Suddenly he identified the boat as that of the *Wyoming*. It dawned upon him that she had been to starboard earlier in the race, and until now must have been ahead. The realization that they were beating the *Wyoming* tapped a small, unknown reservoir of reserve energy.

"I'll brain you, Hogan, if you take your eyes off your oar!" impinged on Jim's hearing a second later. "Keep your eyes on your side of the boat; on your oar!"

Jim did not lift his gaze from the *Wyoming's* boat. Slowly, steadily, the distance between them was increasing. A million diamonds seemed to glisten on the oar blades with which they chopped the water so madly. The boat was growing dim.

"Damn you!"

The venomous tones of the words compelled his attention. He saw as through a



haze Shorty bring the pipe down on Hogan's head and the stroke crumple and pitch forward. Jim felt that he ought to do something about it, but didn't know

just what. There was some other, more insistent something he should do, also. He was doing it, he sensed, but not well enough. If only his breath could reach his lungs. It only parched his tongue and throat and left in his mouth dry cotton.

Through the haze which now enveloped everything he saw Shorty pull Hogan's oar through the rowlock, almost to the blade. Then he saw him lift it out and drop it across both gunwales. He turned back to his own blade.

Beyond the tip of his blade again appeared the wraith-like stern of the *Wyoming's* race boat. Once more he watched it give way to the waist, then seem to cling there.

"Only ten—yards—together—Stroke! Stroke!" he heard as in a whisper from a great distance. Everything was going black. "Boom!" Faint and far off sounded the report of the finishing gun. He lost consciousness.

When he revived, he was wedged between his thwart and the one forward of it. Water gushed over his face and head, cool and refreshing. It stopped and he opened his eyes. A seaman on the deck of a steam launch that had come alongside was about to hold over him a dripping deck swab he had dipped over the side. Jim arrested its movement with an arm weakly lifted in protest.

Jim's thwartmate, No. 3, helped him back upon his seat.

"What did you hit him for, McClellan? Anybody might catch a crab, the best oarsmen do," were the first words Jim heard.

He looked at the speaker, who resembled Lieutenant Stapleton. He seemed to be lifting Hogan.

"It was no accident, sir, I tell you," Shorty was replying. "The dirty skunk did it on purpose, soon as he saw the *Wyoming*. He tried this first."

Jim recognized the pipe boat plug in the object Shorty presented. Full consciousness returned to him with a rush.

"Mr. Stapleton," Jim called. "Don't you believe him. It's his, his, Shorty Mc-

Clellan's. We saw him with it the other day, Hogan and I."

Shorty turned on Jim.

"Mine?" he thundered. "What would I want to lose my own race for?"

"A darned good reason. Your brother's in the *Wyoming* boat. He bet your money. You didn't bet a cent on your own boat. I saw you with that plug the other——"

"You poor simp!" Shorty interrupted. "My plug's in my locker, on board. I used it to make that bull-headed bum pull. Why the dickens should I beat the *Wyoming* if I——"

"Beat the *Wyoming*? Did we beat her?" Jim was nonplussed.

Shorty turned away in disgust.

"Beat her by about three feet," Lieutenant Stapleton informed him.

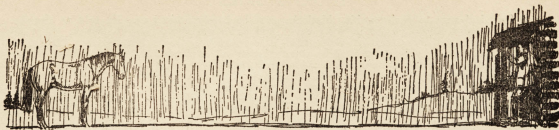
The truth began to dawn upon Jim. He looked at the forecastle of the steamer, where the still unconscious Hogan lay stretched out, being ministered to by a hospital apprentice. Hogan was a ship's fitter, 1st class. How simple for him to make a pipe boat plug like Shorty's. And he was just the vindictive sort to do so and use it. Suddenly it became clear to Jim. He remembered the bundled sweater and the thump with which it had landed when Hogan swept it before him from the thwart into the bottom of the boat. Then the clatter of the grating and Shorty's reappearance too soon for Hogan to dispose of the regulation plug he had removed to substitute the pipe plug of his own making. As clearly as though he had seen the action, he visualized Shorty during the race, lifting the grating and seeing the regulation plug in the bilge, partly concealed by a frame, and the top of the pipe plug projecting above the drain hole. Jim shook his head.

"And I fell for him, too," he murmured sadly. "Believed Shorty was trying to do me."

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" said the lieutenant, dryly. "He loaned you the money that he was going to bet."

FLEAS SURVIVE FORTY YEARS' BURIAL

SCIENTIFIC investigation has failed to confirm the story of the toad that hopped out, Salive, from the interior of a sunbaked brick found under a pyramid where it had lain for a thousand years. But while this fable has been relegated to the same limbo of pseudo-science as the other popular tale of corn taken from a sealed vessel found in an Indian mound and successfully germinated, there is ample proof of the fact that certain water-fleas have existed for forty years inside of chunks of dried mud, only to resume their activities when the mud was again moistened.



IN THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

FIRE AWAY

DID you notice the announcement and first article of the new question and answer department in the last issue? If so, how did you like it and what do you think of the idea? *We* think it's a good one if you take advantage of it and ask us the questions that come to your mind as to the customs, habits, animals, plants, etc., of the strange countries in which certain stories are laid. As we said before, don't let a word be just a word. Make it mean something to you. And if you have not the time nor the inclination to look it up yourself, why, ask us. Fire away with your questions.

A good many readers have read of the *ocotillo*, *palo verde*, etc., without knowing what they really looked like. The result is that in the past year we have had any number of people write in about this, that, or the other cactus mentioned in a story. To answer those questions and the unspeakable ones of probably a great many more readers, we prepared the article on the American desert plants in the last issue. Next number there will be a brief article on desert animals, birds and reptiles as well as answers to any questions that come in. It may seem surprising to the Western reader, but the number of inquiries we get from Easterners about desert animals and birds is enormous. Hence this little article. But remember it's all a part of the Story Tellers' Circle. This is not an article magazine. Our contents is, and will continue to be, entirely devoted to fiction. But if these questions and answers make the stories we publish more enjoyable to you, we feel the time, effort and space well spent.

MYSTERY

DO YOU remember "The Missing Motive" by William Johnston, a mystery story which we published a year or so ago? Well, Mr. Johnston has written another

full length novel entitled "The Waddington Cipher" which will lead the next issue. (Shortly thereafter it will be published in book form at \$1.75—and worth it.) Here's a story you mustn't miss unless you positively dislike a mystery tale with a fine, strong young hero, an attractive heroine, a house full of strange sounds and seemingly cursed by an ancient feud, an attempted murder, a missing treasure, and—well—action, mystery and terror on every page.

B. M. BOWER

WE ARE also delighted to tell you that B. M. Bower will be with us next time in a charming Western story called "Eyes of the Desert." If you love animals, Western stories, or humorous ones, you'll get full satisfaction from the trials and tribulations of Chuckwalla Foster.

THE BORDER AIR PATROL

THOMSON BURTIS, although not a new writer, makes his first bow to the readers of *SHORT STORIES* in this issue. Burtis is a lieutenant in the U. S. Air Service and has for some time been stationed on the Texas-Mexican border. His story is written from his experiences and observation of life along that hectic strip of country. Burtis's picture of the devil-may-care young fliers in the border patrol is the real thing, and we know you'll be glad to know that there's another one on the way to appear soon.

Meanwhile, here are a few remarks from the lieutenant himself that will give you an idea of what a bully sort he is:

That border is still a right amusing place, take it from me. You wouldn't believe the number of Spigs that get shot down there every year. Do you remember when two fliers were captured and held for ransom in 1919, and Captain Matlock skipped out with them without paying half the ransom? They were border patrolmen, one of them my room-mate. When I was down there, Matlock was asked to come

see a Spig had man to parley a bit. Matlock disposed his invariable bodyguard of forty cavalrymen around the house, out of sight, and walked to the door. As he approached he saw the muzzle of a gun, with the Mexican's face behind it, poke itself out the window. Well, I'll say Matlock didn't need his bodyguard to protect him. Say, he would make a lot of fiction characters step mightily to compete with him.

CALICO TOWN

OUR good friend W. C. Tuttle is with us again this issue with another story of Calico town, that hot and lawless little mining camp of "Spawn of the Desert," of a few issues back. Tuttle has some interesting things to say about his return to Calico with the new story, "The Curse of the Painted Cliffs."

Tut, you tell 'em,

Somehow, Calico gets into my blood and I must write of the old place. I have often thought of Duke Steele, heading into the old Mojave, and of Luck Sled in Calico. Then there came the urge to use them again. I wonder where that urge comes from. There is a psychology to explain it all, I suppose; why brain children come back and do more adventure.

Le Moynes was created out of whole cloth. Some may say it was far-fetched to create a character whose ambition was to rule the desert. But men have hankered for queer honors since the world began, and why not one who wanted to boss the Mojave?

I have wanted to put the old Chinaman back into words. He was merely mentioned in "Spawn of the Desert," but to me he is one of the outstanding shades of the old place. Out of all those buried in Hell's Depot, all are there, sleeping under the desert sun, except the old Chinaman. I don't know what his name was. Years after Calico was deserted, a committee of Chinamen went up there, dug up the remains of the old Oriental and shipped him back to China.

He was the only Chinaman that ever went to the town, except those who came to claim his bones. From this I have created Louie Yen, the knife fighter. And I hope you and SHORT STORIES will like the tale as I have tried to tell it.

BILL ADAMS WAS A SAILOR

SOUNDS like the first line of a song—and it ought to be, for Bill Adams sure was a sailor. Read his comments on the decorations for his poem, "Peg Leg—Ship's Cook."

I won't go so far as to say that I have ever actually seen either fish or gulls acting just as the gulls and fish in this chap's picture are acting; but I'll believe anything. It reminds me a bit of an old shipmate of mine called Polly Thompson. He was a big, homely, broad-footed young cuss with a dreamy manner, unless he was aloft. Then he became all energy and curses. He came forward from the wheel one fine starry night when she was steering full and bye. He wore a bright and shining look in his big orbs,

and he barely noticed us. He told us that he had had a dream while at the wheel. Only he swore that it was more than a dream. He vowed that he had seen most delightful mermaids swimming all about the ship's stately counter in the gleamy sea beneath him. He would not listen to any sarcasm of ours whatever, and went out to the main hatch to sit there and to ponder on the exquisiteness of the sea ladies whom he had so lately seen.

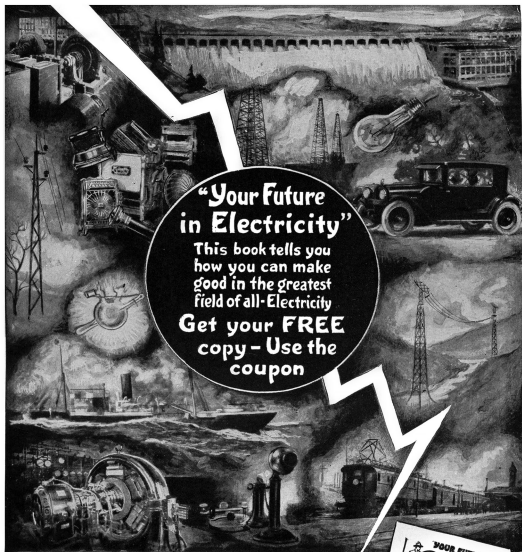
Well—maybe this artist chap is a similar duck?

STRANGERS' CLUBS

JOHN CURTIS UNDERWOOD, the Sante Fé poet, who is responsible for the suggestion of Strangers' Clubs in every city and town of the country, writes us from Glendale, California, as follows:

Your Strangers' Club dope looks good to me. My original suggestion was to have some of the Clubs for men only, but also to have plenty of them as free to anyone fit to use them as the Parisian neighborhood cafe of the better sort. Friendliness is fine when it gets across, but not enough in itself to make this germ of a national movement what it may be. Strangers' Clubs should be growing centers of national and race consciousness rather than mere neighborhood or community houses. They should be part of the new politics, something that effects all of us who are up against the farm labor bloc, red strikes, and the banker-publicity over-lords. They should be run as middle-class centers for middle-class Americans. These are the pioneers who should have a sense of the imminent crisis and the service which they will be called upon to give. These are the people who are willing and fit to make Strangers' Clubs, the race blockhouses of a new and greater adventure than some of us went overseas to seek in 1620 or 1918. There is a color and a romance of service and adventure in this prospect that mere friendliness can never match.

So you see, Mr. Underwood has a big ideal for the Strangers' Clubs. He sounds a little belligerent, perhaps even revolutionary, but we don't think he means just that. If we get his idea, he means to see that the Strangers' Clubs will be a focusing point for creating solidarity in the great middle-class which hitherto has been ground between the upper and nether millstones of society and is getting it in the neck worse than ever these days. Once you create a unified consciousness, as he suggests, it will not be so easy for Mr. Middle-class man to be harried on the one side by the labor barons and exploited on the other side by the capitalists, or so Mr. Underwood infers. We are not quite sure we agree with him. After all, the fundamental principle of our democracy is striving upward. If you create a self-conscious middle-class satisfied to remain a middle-class, what happens then?



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