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Short Stories

Twice A Month

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The High Hats Fly to Battle in

Birds of a Feather

by

CARSON W. MOWRE

RIFLES at EAGLE PASS

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

revenge and a disputed range

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Short Stories

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HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

DECEMBER 10th, 1928

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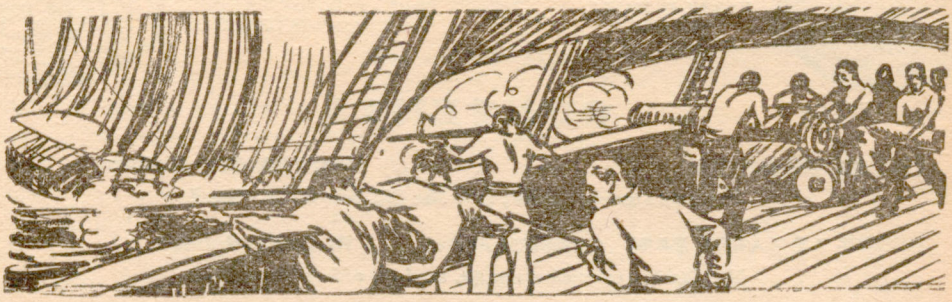

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TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

DECEMBER 10th 1928

Times Change

TIMES change, and with them customs, manners, and all the objects we use in our daily lives. And as these things progress year by year we change our outlook, broadening our view of the world, and our fund of knowledge. Sad indeed is the man or woman who cannot look forward and be a part of the life about him. For such a one only looks back and sighs for the good old days in which he was more comfortable. He forgets that there are a thousand competitors using new ways of selling goods, and getting them distributed and that the customer is only interested in getting what he wants. He forgets that there is a new generation who never heard of the good old times and who would scorn a man who wasn't up to the minute.

But there is one thing which does not change and that is human nature. We believe that man progresses, that he is more humane, more *civilized* in the broad sense—but under it all the nature is that of his great-great grandfathers. And stories—fiction—are the mirror held up to nature in which man sees himself.

In this world of sudden and violent change it would be very easy for a magazine to go to either extreme—to turn its eyes backward and ignore the changes in the world of realism. Or it would be still easier, to heed the call of new ways, new manners, new and more glamorous subjects so that its pages were like a tin rooster on a ball-bearing weather vane, shifting hither and yon with every breeze of fashion, but rarely sticking to a fundamentally sound course.

Short Stories in this unsettled time will continue to give its thousands of readers the best there is in popular, readable and exciting fiction. We are alive to the shifting currents of life about us and the stories our authors write for you will reflect the thrilling adventure that is the daily ration of the man at the stick of an airplane, that a million Americans saw in the Great War, that is being lived today in the modern West and the outlands of the earth. If there is anything new in adventure we will find it for you. *But* human nature remains the same and fiction, if it is good, must first of all reflect the man in relation to his great adventure.

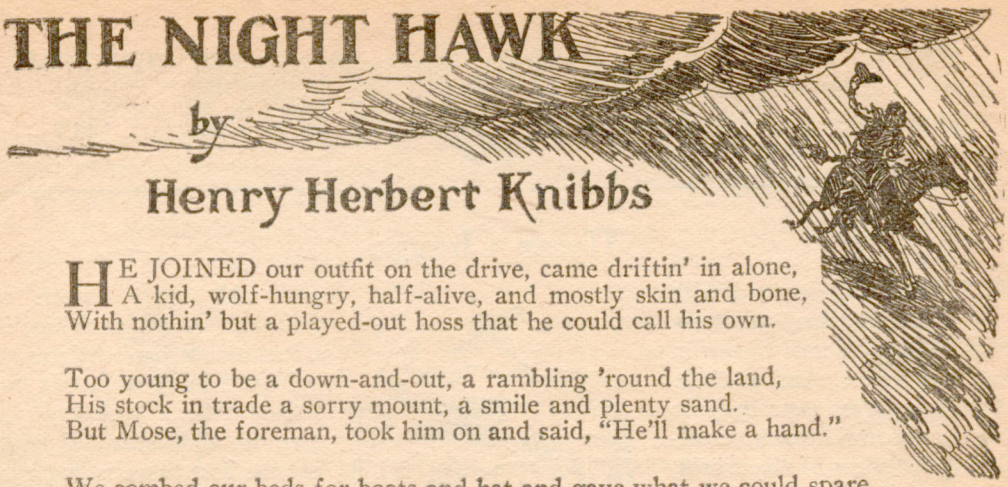
Therefore while others may vascillate with every faintest breeze of fashion reflecting the fad of the moment, we shall reflect the steady progress in adventure ever seeking the new while retaining all that has freshness, novelty and interest in the great stormy days that are no more. There are a thousand tales to tell of the West that have never been told; tales that will reveal a real man who might have been you, in a web of exciting circumstances, and in an environment as new in fiction as next year's car. At the same time there is the man of today fighting with new weapons, and master of elements undreamed of a year ago. He too will show you glorious adventure.

The Editor.

THE NIGHT HAWK

by

Henry Herbert Knibbs



HE JOINED our outfit on the drive, came driftin' in alone,
A kid, wolf-hungry, half-alive, and mostly skin and bone,
With nothin' but a played-out hoss that he could call his own.

Too young to be a down-and-out, a rambling 'round the land,
His stock in trade a sorry mount, a smile and plenty sand.
But Mose, the foreman, took him on and said, "He'll make a hand."

We combed our beds for boots and hat and gave what we could spare,
Mose put him on a pony that could take him anywhere.
And when we pushed 'em up the trail, you bet the Kid was there.

He weren't no angel, and we threw some language at the Kid;
But cussed for what he didn't do and cussed for what he did,
He didn't bow his neck and pitch, but kep' his temper hid.

The night was sultry, hot and queer, the clouds were movin' slow,
The Kid night-hawkin'—we could hear his whistlin' soft and low,
When, far away, like whisperin' the wind began to blow.

A shuffling in the beddin'-ground, and yonder, down the hill,
A streak of white, a rumblin' sound, then everything was still,
When, smellin' thunder in the air, the herd began to mill.

Old Mose was pullin' on his boots, a settin' on his bed;
"She's loadin' fast, and when she shoots—" and that was all he said,
For something busted in the sky, and lit the world with red.

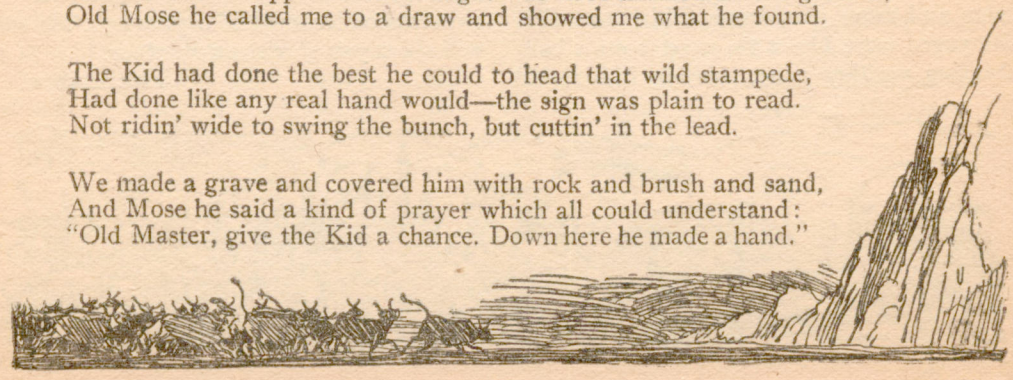
A spatterin' rain, a rush, a roar, and hell had opened wide,
The cattle down the valley floor, a humpin' hoof and hide,
As right and left we swung and rode like blind-drunk Injuns ride.

The wind fair tore your breath away, the rain beat swift and cold,
The lightnin' flooded white as day, the thunder ripped and rolled,
And every blunderin' jump a chance you wouldn't grow too old.

The mornin' air come sparklin' bright, the hills seemed close around,
And what had happened in the night was hoof-marked on the ground;
Old Mose he called me to a draw and showed me what he found.

The Kid had done the best he could to head that wild stampede,
Had done like any real hand would—the sign was plain to read.
Not ridin' wide to swing the bunch, but cuttin' in the lead.

We made a grave and covered him with rock and brush and sand,
And Mose he said a kind of prayer which all could understand:
"Old Master, give the Kid a chance. Down here he made a hand."



TWICE A MONTH

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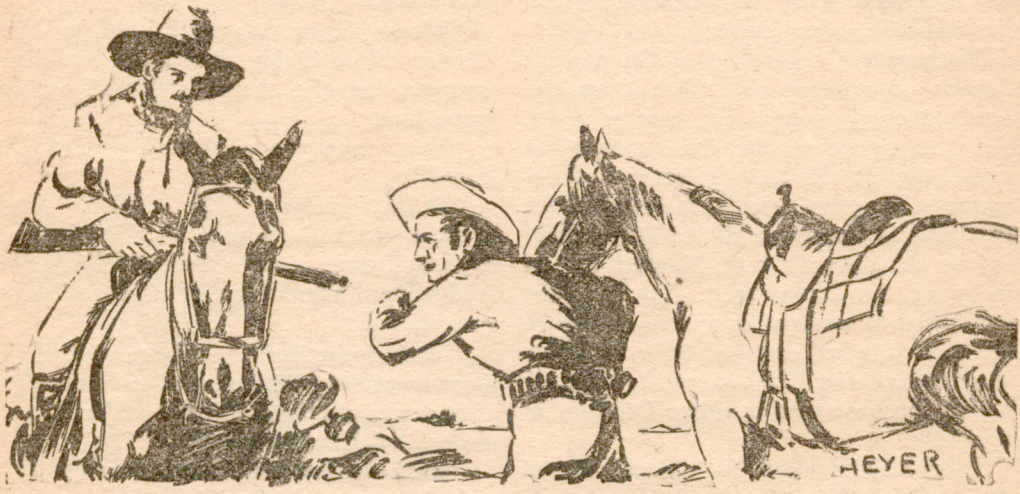


RIFLES AT EAGLE PASS

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "The Red Katy Trail," "The Crow's Craw," etc.

PECOS TAYLOR CAME RIDING SOUTH LIKE A TOPHAND DRIFTING FREE. BUT HE HAD A GRIM MISSION ALL HIS OWN. WHEN HE FOUND THAT BUYING INTO THE SCOTT RANCH WOULD HELP HIM IN HIS TASK HE BOUGHT AT THE DROP OF THE HAT—AND, BEFORE HIS JOB WAS FINISHED, LIKEWISE HAD TO SHOOT THAT WAY, FREQUENT AND FANCY

ALONE rider was lazily making his way up the western slope of Eagle Pass, his cowpony taking the steep grade and the rough road carefully while the rider lolled in the saddle and his second horse picked along behind.

"Puncher on the drift," such would have been the verdict of any critical eye. The faded and worn attire, sun-bleached Stetson, gun at hip, rifle in boot; the battered old rig with its brass nails; the soogans aboard the second pony, secure beneath as perfect a diamond hitch as might be found, all these bespoke a tophand going where the winter would be warmer than up in the Big Horse country.

The man about whom this outfit centered had a hard, lean face, a laughing pair of blue eyes, a mop of sun-faded reddish brown hair, and the general manner of a gentleman who did not care whether school kept or not. When he laughed, his laugh was infectious and cheery; but there was an underlying glint in his eye that looked like business.

He was whistling softly, gaily, carelessly, when a shot broke the afternoon stillness of the pass, volleyed along and away in rising echoes, and silence fell again. That shot had come from close at hand. Swiftly, sharply, the rider jerked his rifle out of boot, held it ready; nothing happened. Nothing was in sight on the sharply twisting road. After a moment he rode on again, his eyes very sharp and alert.

He turned a bend and came into sight of a man lying dead in the road, horse standing to one side cropping at brush.

The rider's gaze roved about. No one

was in sight; nothing moved along the brush clad slope above to the right, or below to the left. Ahead, all was still, hot, silent. The dead man lay on his back, shot through the heart. Near him, in the road, were a few bits of brush, a few leaves.

Dismounting, regardless of the possible danger of another rifle shot from the brush, though he kept his weapon ready, the rider went to the dead man, then looked up at the latter's horse and inspected the animal keenly. He crossed the road, saw a few more bits of brush clinging to the animal's coat, glanced frowningly at the dusty road. Tracks there were hard to read, yet it seemed as though the dead man had emerged from the brush —to meet a bullet. The road was in sight for only a short distance in either direction, at this point.

"Looks right queer, for a fact," mused the puncher. "Hard faced old feller, smells of sheep. Huh! Didn't know there was any sheep in these parts, or I wouldn't have headed this way. Sure to be some o' them travelin' shepherds and they might recognize me, and——"

"Up!"

The sharp, curt word drove in upon his thoughts, full of danger. Even before turning to see whence it came, he obeyed the command—that voice held warning enough. Letting fall his rifle, he lifted his arms.

UPON the road, coming from the pass above, had appeared a rider, silently, cautiously, leveled rifle covering the man standing in the road. The rider was a grizzled bearded man of fifty, with a sheriff's star on his shirt. Now, seeing his command obeyed, he let his horse walk forward.

"Got ye plumb to rights, didn't I?" he observed. He was a man of uncompromising features and his face was anything but pleasant to look upon. "Dead to rights, huh?"

"Looks that way, only it ain't," returned the puncher cheerfully. "I come along right after this feller was dropped, and was lookin' things over."

"Yeah, looks that-a-way," retorted the sheriff sarcastically. "Who be ye, pilgrim?"

"Name, Pecos Taylor; age, twenty-three; sex, male; business, punching cattle, two legged preferred; last place of residence, Three Star ranch in Bad Ax County; at present looking for a job elsewhere, not particular where or what at so long's it ain't sheep. Satisfy you?"

This catalogue was rattled off by Mr. Taylor with a highly cheery and confident manner, but the sheriff glowered darkly upon him.

"How come you to shoot Eph Sawyer, here?"

"Didn't," retorted Mr. Taylor. "Eph come through the brush, to judge by the sign, and come out into the road right here and stopped a bullet first crack. Most likely you shot him."

"Yeah, most likely," said the sheriff. "I been up at the toll house until right now, so that don't hold water. You're under arrest, feller. A driftin' puncher, huh?"

"Yeah, drifters get blamed for anything," said Taylor, and chuckled. "Look at my rifle, Sheriff—ain't been fired. You know well enough I didn't do it. I expect you know who done it, for that matter."

"Rifle can be cleaned," said the sheriff. He did not deign to notice the final remark. "You come here and I'll take your gun. Reckon you can march along with me."

Taylor approached him, hands in air. His smile had vanished.

"I'm tellin' you I didn't do it, Sheriff, and you know it durned well," he said. He came to a halt almost alongside the sheriff's horse. His arms were high. The sheriff's rifle was thrust down almost in his face, and the rifle was cocked. "Why are you tryin' to pin this on me, huh? Smells sort of bad, Sheriff."

"Does it?" retorted the sheriff, eyeing him grimly. "I'll tell ye why, mister. Because I was over to the Sweetwater country las' fall, that's why! And I know you're a durned liar, that's why. Your name's Taylor, all right, but you're the gent that was mixed up in that there sheep war and got three good men hung. I know that there mug o' yours a mile away."

"Yeah?" Taylor looked at him fixedly. "Don't that sort o' give *you* away, Sheriff?"

The bearded sheriff snarled down at him.

"Never mind that. You ain't going to live long enough to do no talkin'. I'll just take that there gun right here and now."

The sheriff leaned forward, reaching down his left hand for Taylor's gun. A look of horrified comprehension broke upon Taylor's face.

"Sheriff, you ain't goin' to arrest me, honest?" he whined.

"Inch around there and shet up," snapped the sheriff.

TAYLOR turned slightly, then moved like a flash. He dropped, caught the rifle as it exploded, held it harmlessly above his head. The sheriff let go, reached for his gun. Then Taylor's six-gun crashed out. Blown out of the saddle, the sheriff toppled backward as his horse plunged. He fell, dragged by one stirrup for a moment, then came free and lay on his face. His horse went careering down the steep trail and was lost to sight.

Taylor stooped above him for a moment, picked up the rifle, looked it over, laid it down again. He went to the body of Eph Sawyer, pulled out the latter's untouched gun, compared it with his own; both were ordinary revolvers, mates. He put Sawyer's in his own holster, dropped his own gun in the road near Sawyer. Then he turned to his own two horses, mounted, and started up the trail again. His face was serious now, his eyes were alert and reflective.

"Feller that shot Sawyer is still hidin' in the brush, maybe; and maybe not," he mused. "If he is, then he seen me and the sheriff, but he don't know why. That's the main thing! Sheriff knew me; probably was the only man in these parts who would know me. What a durned piece o' bad luck! Bad luck for him. He should ha' had more sense than tryin' to use a rifle that-a-way. Especially on me. So he aimed to rub me out, huh? Well, that just about shows where this here sheriff stands on the deal."

Another curve and another, and then into sight ahead came the toll gate.

The huge white bar was swung across the road. To the right, a house stood at the top of the divide, close to the road, a pretty house, painted white and green, with curtains at the windows and patches of flowers about. No lack of water here, evidently.

And to the left was opened up a sudden vista of that magnificent stretch of inland empire cut off by the Eagle Peaks from most of the world—the Medicine River Valley. It appeared flat as a pancake, seen from this height, and green as grass itself, with occasional flashes of silver where the Medicine River glimmered in the afternoon sunlight. Taylor drew rein and studied it.

He had never been here, but he knew the region none the less. Over to the right, just out of his sight, lay the town of Springvale, county seat of this hidden empire. All this flat land below him was cut up into farms, but not many, for the three big ranches of Medicine County held nearly the whole county in their grip. It was a selfish grip, since they had far more range than they could or did use. The highway that showed faintly ran to Moronia, eighteen miles away and the closest town to the railroad across the hills, a far bigger town indeed than Springvale, which had lapsed of recent years into idleness.

"Hm! Can't make it 'fore night. And besides, I'll have a lot o' talking to do here," said Taylor, and turned toward the toll house.

On the latter's wide veranda, which overlooked the road, had appeared a figure at which the approaching Taylor stared with undisguised delight and interest. The young woman was perhaps twenty, but appeared older by reason of her very capable bearing and expression. Dark hair framed an eager, vibrant face; but her impulses were evidently tempered by very sound judgment. Mr. Taylor, as he removed his hat, told himself that here was a woman who knew how to do things.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted her. "My name's Pecos Taylor, I'm bound for Springvale or somewheres, but I don't guess I'll get there 'fore night. Will there be any chance of getting me a bunk here?"

She studied him for a moment.

"I expect so," she replied. "We'll see when my brother gets back. But I didn't know that a puncher had any need of a room in this weather."

TAYLOR grinned. "Oh, I got my soogans along, ma'am, but I got money to pay for board too, and I sort o' like this here place. It's the prettiest looking outfit I've seen for quite a while. If it won't bother you none, I'll stop. If it will, just say so."

"No, we have a couple of rooms that folks use at odd times," she replied. "You'll find a stable around back; it isn't much, but it's enough. I'm Mary Scott, and my brother Russ will be back pretty soon. Fetch in what stuff you want, and——"

She broke off. Coming from the eastern side of the pass were two riders who seemed to be in some haste. They swung up to the veranda and drew rein.

"Howdy, ma'am," exclaimed one. "Seen anything of Sheriff Atwater this afternoon?"

"Why, yes," she replied. "He headed west about half an hour ago."

Taylor intervened. "Was he a right big gent with grayish whiskers? Sheriff's star?"

"Yeah, that's him," said the rider. "Meet him?"

"I seen him," said Taylor calmly. "He ain't far—'bout a quarter mile down the grade, I reckon. Him and another feller. Looks like they'd shot each other. Seen a hoss there, too. Both bein' dead, wasn't no use me tryin' to tote 'em in."

With startled exclamations the two riders swung their horses as Mary Scott swung the bar, and they went past at a spurring leap. Her hazel eyes startled and wide, the girl looked at Taylor.

"Is—is that true?" she said. "The other man—it couldn't be my——"

"I reckon not, ma'am," said he. "He was an old lookin' feller with a checked shirt."

Relief flooded into her face. Taylor turned his horse and followed a path that led around to the rear of the house.

Some little time elapsed before he had his two horses at ease. Leaving his belongings here, he returned to the front of the house and was just in time to see the two riders who had questioned him about the sheriff come back bearing the two bodies on Eph Sawyer's horse; the grisly load was covered from sight. The two men dismounted and came to Taylor. The girl was not in sight.

"Know anything about it, stranger?" asked one of them, rolling a cigarette.

"Don't seem able to recollect no more," said Taylor lightly. "Not bein' acquainted with either gent, I had to use my good sense an' drift along. Why?"

"Cain't figger it nohow," observed the other. "Looked like they'd met up an' gone to shootin' all right, and each one got the other. Hear any shootin' as you come up the pass?"

Taylor nodded. "Two-three shots. Thought it was someone after coyotes."

The other looked him over. "Aimin' to stay around here long? I'd like to have your evidence down to town. Flickinger's my name—deputy. This here is Bud Carrol of the C in a Ring."

Taylor acknowledged the introduction and gave his name.

"Sure, I'll be right glad," he continued easily. "I'll drop in and see you tomorrow. Dunno what I'm goin' to do. Maybe find me a job somewheres around here. Ain't in no hurry. I got money and I aim to see the country a spell."

THE others nodded comprehension. Flickinger was a slack jawed sort of man. Carrol was young, no older than Taylor himself; he had deep eyes under dark brows and a stubby, square-jawed face.

"You might do worse'n come out and see me if you take a notion to work," he said. "So long!"

"So long, gents," returned Taylor cheerfully. He reached up and swung the road-bar, and closed it again after the two had passed with the led horse. Mary Scott appeared at the door and he looked up at her, smiling.

"Reckon you don't want to make 'em pay, ma'am? Not under the circumstances, huh?"

"No, of course not," she said, and looked after the two.

So did Taylor. He wondered why Carrol and the deputy had been after the sheriff.

II

MR. TAYLOR was sitting on the veranda and talking about sunsets in general, stock branding and other gentle subjects with Mary Scott, when Russ Scott showed up.

He was a man of perhaps thirty, much

older than his sister, and wore a peculiar sullen, lowering expression which was at first extremely forbidding. Sizing him up, Taylor felt sorry for the sister. He set down Mr. Scott as weak-kneed, stubborn, vindictive, generally disliked, and too proud to fight in the open; none the less he tried to make himself agreeable, and gradually thawed out the other man with his cheery disposition.

"Sure ye can stay," said Russ, sinking down, and leaning his rifle against the rail. "Well, sis, what news? I didn't get that danged coyote. Seen fresh deer tracks, though."

"Some news," said the girl. "The sheriff was killed just down the trail."

Russ turned his head slowly, and his eyes were bulging.

"Huh?" he said. "Huh? The sheriff? Not him, surely—huh?"

"And another feller," said Taylor. "Gent named Eph Sawyer. Killed each other."

For a moment Russ Scott looked at Taylor. "By gosh!" he exclaimed. "Is that so? I ain't sorry 'bout neither of them. Wisht half this here county would kill off t'other half."

Mary Scott went in to get supper ready, and Mr. Taylor talked attentively with his host. Discovering that Russ apparently hated everyone in sight, he was not long in probing to the cause. It seemed that the brother and sister had been left a large property by their father, consisting of the Lazy S ranch and this toll road, the only approach to the county from the southwest, and a fairly good paying proposition.

HARD neighbors and a shiftless disposition had lost the ranch for Scott, and for the past year he and his sister had been settled here, working the toll road for support. The toll road was an unpopular institution. Insisting stubbornly on his legal rights, Scott had reached a state of virtual war with half the population "below"; and Taylor shrewdly judged that had it not been for Mary, Mr. Scott would have been run out of the county long since.

"Been a lot of excitement in these parts, I hear," said Taylor, shifting the subject. "They tell me two main ranches have got a private war on, the stage and the mails have been robbed twice in the last month, and four-five fellers killed."

"Yeah," agreed Scott gloomily. "That's Barton's doin's. Him and Bud Carrol about run the roost around here. It was Barton took over our ranch, durn' him! He ain't got the title, though, and he ain't going to get it."

"Huh?" Mr. Taylor pricked up his ears. "Meaning no offense, howcome, if he's got the ranch?"

"Oh, hell! It ain't no secret." Scott seemed glad to talk, glad to get a chance to converse with someone he did not distrust and hate. "Dad left the prop'ty to me and Mary equal, sabe? Well, I got to drinking one time, and we needed cash and one thing and another, and I mortgaged my half to Barton. He figured he'd marry Mary and have the ranch, sabe? Well, I got caught, that's all. Ranch wasn't worth a durn any more and Mary she wouldn't mortgage her share, and there we were. She wouldn't marry Barton neither. Barton, he says let him take over the ranch and build it up, and he'd give us half the profits. So we moved up here and he took the ranch, and that's the last of it. Ain't sent no profits and won't."

"Huh?" said Taylor, and whistled softly. "Think he's made any?"

"Made any?" Scott showed his teeth in a snarl. "Him and Sawyer—Eph Sawyer's his foreman and boss, or was—have got the place into elegant shape! We can't get no accounting out of him. He come over las' week and joshed us, and says he's losin' money and so on. But I know from Bud Carrol he done shipped out a big drive this spring and cleaned up on the high prices, and he's got a fine lot o' cattle there right now. Him and Carrol have a war on."

"Yeah?" prompted Taylor. "Which side was Sawyer on?"

"Dunno." Scott shot him a sulky, scared glance which made Taylor think. "Him and me wasn't friends. Him and Carrol ain't

—Carrol grabbed one of our springs on a boundary dispute, and the two outfits have fought ever since. There you are."

"Don't explain the robberies," said Taylor. "Ranchers makin' money don't rob the mails."

"No," said Scott, then delivered himself of an unexpectedly shrewd observation. "But when the big fellers have protection, when killing and rustling and burning can go on, then their riders will raise hell other ways. Some hombres never know when to stop."

"Right," said Taylor, and rose as Mary Scott appeared with word that supper was ready.

It was a simple, delightful meal, and the interior of the toll house was charming; but Taylor felt more than ever sorry for the girl, as it progressed. Russ Scott said little, was in a black and sullen humor, and Taylor wondered how the girl could live with such a man if he were like this all the time.

THE whimsical temper of the visitor, his laughing eyes and infectious mirth, somewhat relieved the situation, and charmed Russ out of his bad humor. He eyed Taylor wonderingly, even admiringly, while his sister wakened into merry laughter at the droll tales and audacious sallies of the stranger. Within half an hour, the three were old friends.

"Must be you ain't never had a care in the world, Taylor," said Russ suddenly. "You act it."

"Who, me?" Taylor looked at him. "Listen, partner. When I was ten, my dad was gored by a steer, and died a year later. We had a ranch-house half built, my mother was sick, and I had a kid sister. I ran the outfit. When I was sixteen, we owned the place clear and had money. Year after that, my sister died, the house was burned, and every head o' stock we owned was rustled. When I was twenty—three years ago—the bank in Morgantown was cleaned out one day by three robbers. We lost everything. Them three gents stopped by our place that night, while I was away. They wanted grub and hosses, and got gay when my mother fed 'em, and she took down a gun to hold 'em off. They shot her and rode away. I sold out, took my hoss and gun, and started in to run down them three killers. I got one acrost the Mexican line ten months later. Last year I got the second one. I'll get the third one before I quit. No. I ain't had a care in the world—not to ride me! If I got any cares, I ride them."

Mary Scott listened, her eyes shining as she heard this recital. Russ flushed a little.

"You're a man, by gosh!" he said. "If I had a feller like you with me, I—I'd go up against this here gang and wipe 'em clean!"

"Maybe," said Taylor. "And maybe you'd get wiped. Was the late sheriff a friend o' Barton?"

"Nope," said Russ. "Him and Bud Carrol were cousins. That's howcome he got killed. Sawyer was Barton's foreman."

"Anyhow, that's what everybody'll say," commented Taylor. Russ started.

"Huh? What you mean by that?"

Taylor smiled, pushed back his chair and rolled a smoke.

"Ain't saying." His eyes met those of the girl for a moment. "Miss Scott, Russ was tellin' me outside about you-all losing the ranch. I ain't aiming to interfere, but I'm sort of interested. Just how does it stand? Has Barton got any title to it at all? What sort is he?"

"He's a rough sort, able to make his own way," she returned slowly. "He grew up around here, went away, and came back two or three years ago pretty well fixed. He'd been in some sort of business up in Walla Walla. What was it, Russ?"

"Apple orchards and real estate," said Russ Scott.

"Anyhow, he had quite a bit of money." Mary Scott reddened slightly. "He bought a small ranch next to ours. Then he and Russ got friendly, and one thing and another happened, and——"

"Oh, tell him the straight of it," said Russ gloomily. "I done so already."

"He lent Russ money and Russ mortgaged him his share of the ranch, that's all," said the girl. "Things went from bad to worse, and Barton simply took over the whole place, agreeing to split the profits with us. We moved up here. I wanted to get away from things. We've never had any profits, and he laughs at us. I wanted to get a lawyer to force an accounting, but

there's only one in Smithvale, and he's a relative of Barton's. Bud Carrol wanted to force Barton into a showdown, but—but I wouldn't let him."

"Bud's courting her," said Russ. "Was, at least. Ain't now. Got his mind on a waitress over to Moronia. Right pretty girl, I hear, but sort o' shiftless."

"I see," said Taylor, with a whimsical glance at the girl. "Well, if you two want to take back your ranch, why don't you do it?"

"We'd have to pay that thousand dollars back to Barton first," said Russ. "Ain't got it."

Taylor frowned. "What? You mean to say the amount was only a thousand?"

"It's a lot when you ain't got it," returned Russ Scott. "Besides which, he wouldn't give it up. We'd have to grab the place. That'd mean fighting him and his outfit. He's got five fellers there and a Mexican cook who's hell on wheels, they say. Mex gunmen ain't of much account, but this here Mig Estrada, he's right good."

"Eh?" Taylor looked at Russ, and his eyes were suddenly sharp and keen. "Estrada—Miguel Estrada? Ain't a very common Mexican name. Well, folks, you don't know me, but I got a little proposition to make you—let you talk it over tonight. We got to have a yes or no tomorrow morning, because if it goes through, then there's got to be some sharp, swift action. Always take the other gent on the jump, is my motto."

"A proposition?" repeated Mary Scott.

"Yep; pure business, too," said Taylor briskly. He reached into his shirt and produced a small folded wallet, from which he drew a bank-note and a certified check. "Here's the last of my ranch price—thousand dollar bill and a check for fifteen hundred. Twenty-five hundred in all. Look 'em over."

HE SHOVED the two objects across the table. Russ looked them over; his sister looked the stranger over, and her dark eyes were very level and cool, almost suspicious.

"I didn't aim to do this when I came here," said Taylor, lighting his cigarette and breaking the match. "But I gamble a heap on folks. More'n I do on facts, to tell the truth. I ain't asked any proof o' your story; I believe it. My proposition is to turn this here money into the jackpot. You pay off that mortgage and do it at the bank, right early in the morning. Then you and me will amble along and throw Barton off the ranch, and Mary here can come along about tomorrow night. We can send out a wagon from town, I reckon, to move the stuff."

Russ Scott stared at him, gaped with jaw fallen.

"My gosh, feller!" he exclaimed, handing back the check and bill. "You talk like it wasn't nothing to throw Barton out!"

"Won't be nothing after it's done," and Taylor chuckled. "Ain't finished my proposition yet. There's fifteen hundred after the mortgage is paid. Keep it. I'll have a third interest, each of you a third. The only joker is that I'm to be manager. In running the ranch business, my word goes. I ain't aiming to over-ride you-all, but I'm good and I know it, and I aim to run whatever business my money is put into. There y'are, folks. Well, ma'am?"

Mary Scott's eyes were glowing, and color was rising in her cheeks.

"It—it's too good to be true!" she exclaimed, then checked herself. "But—but you're a wanderer, Mr. Taylor——"

"Pecos, ma'am."

"All right, Pecos. You say yourself you've been on the go for about three years, hunting down your mother's murderers. What chance is there of you being content to settle down here in this place and running a ranch?"

Taylor met her gaze for a long minute.

"Every chance in the world—now," he said; and if for an instant his words brought a glint of anger to her eyes, it fled as he went on. "You see, I don't have to go hunting the third man any further. I've done found him, I reckon."

"Eh?" She paled a little. "You mean—oh, the Estrada you mentioned! The Mexican cook?"

Taylor shook his head and puffed at his cigarette before replying.

"Nope. He's in on the game, though—his being here shows the other man, the third one, is here also. Let that rest until later. You see, it looks like chance has combined with fate to work things out for us all around. Let my proposition wait until morning. You folks talk it over tonight when I ain't around to influence you, and if you don't like the notion of it, then no hard feelin's. But listen to one thing, Russ! If you say yes, then tomorrow you got to work a dinged sight harder'n you've worked for a long while! Sabe? If you go into it, you got to keep up with me; and keepin' up with Pecos Taylor is a man's job. Well, now let's forget it, and help Mary wash up! I ain't pottered round a real kitchen for a long while."

MARY protested, but to no avail. Russ Scott, wide-eyed now and inclined to be feverishly excited over Taylor's proposal, lent a willing hand, and in no time at all everything was in shape and the three adjourned to the veranda over the road. In another hour the moon would be up and the view of a nearly full moon rising above the mighty stretch of country so far below was one not to be sneezed at, as Mary assured the visitor.

"Though," she added, " I don't know if you care much for views."

"But you think I do, huh?" Taylor chuckled. "Miss Mary, you got me at a disadvantage."

"How so?" she inquired.

"'Cause I'm right scared to make you mad. I like you folks a whole lot. As a rule I plow straight ahead with whatever comes into my mind; but if I like anybody, then I sure don't want to get 'em mad. So I'm walkin' on eggs where speech is concerned."

"And why?" she said, laughing. "Are your thoughts so terrible you don't dare utter them?"

"They're mighty risky," said Taylor, emboldened by the darkness around. "Yes'm, powerful risky. For a plumb stranger to up and say that you were a mighty wonderful sort o' girl, and that he seen things in your eyes he hadn't thought to see in anybody's eyes—why, you'd most likely feel insulted. So I ain't saying anything like that at all."

"Hm!" said the girl after a moment. "Things that are said for effect depend on who says them and how, don't they? Yes, I expect you'd better watch your tongue, Pecos. It might run you into trouble, for a fact. But, mercy! I'd better go get that room ready."

Mary Scott departed. The two men sat for a space in silence.

"Use your rifle any today, Russ?" demanded Taylor presently.

"Uh-huh. Didn't hit nothing, though. Doggoned gun ain't sighted right."

"I s'pose you're tryin' to figure out howcome Sawyer killed the sheriff after he was dead, huh?"

Russ emitted a startled sound that might have been a low gasp, as he caught the import of these words.

"Meanin' what, Taylor?"

"Well, I ain't any fool and I'm pretty good at reading sign," said Taylor calmly.

"So'm I, for that matter," said Russ in the darkness. "I know durned well the sheriff wa'n't killed by Sawyer, and it's a cinch he didn't kill himself."

Taylor chuckled quietly, and left it that way—with which Russ, seemingly, was more than content.

Taylor had learned what he wanted to know, however. Russ Scott had got larger game than coyotes that afternoon—and, from Taylor's viewpoint, had not got that game in any upstanding man-fashion. Had it not been for the sister, he would not have thought of riding forth in the morning with Russ Scott for partner; he read a sullen viciousness in the brother, a lack of all moral stamina, and it made him uneasy.

The talk ended there, for presently Mary came out with word that the room was all ready and Taylor could take his things in. She showed him to the room, and presently he rejoined them on the veranda, and so got his promised glimpse of the moonrise

over Medicine Valley below. After which he yawned, tossed away his cigarette, and said good night, leaving brother and sister to discuss his proposal.

"If you say yes," he said from the door, "then we got to be up and riding before the sun, that's all. Aim to hit that Springvale bank soon's the doors open, and be on our way. See you later, folks."

PECOS TAYLOR was asleep almost as soon as he hit the linen sheets and the white pillow, luxuries he had not experienced in some time.

When he wakened, it was still dark, and Russ Scott was shaking him.

"Come alive, partner!" said Russ. "Mary's gettin' breakfast. I'll have the hosses ready 'fore you are, and we're ridin' together."

"The proposition's good, is it?" asked Taylor, as he sat up.

"You bet. We cover your bet, feller. Hop to it!"

When Taylor had shaved and dressed, he came into the kitchen and found Mary setting breakfast on the table. She turned a face that was both radiant and anxious toward him.

"Good morning, Pecos! Well, you see, we've accepted. And I do hope it'll come out right."

"It will," he returned cheerfully. "Gosh, them biscuits smell good!"

"One thing." She came close to him, dropped her voice. "Keep Russ away from liquor if—if you want things to go right!"

"It's a promise," said Pecos Taylor.

Half an hour later, he and Russ Scott were riding down the eastern slope of Eagle Pass, on their way to destiny.

III

SPRINGVALE had started out well, but stopped halfway. It had a big brick courthouse and jail, and nothing much else. Some three dozen houses, half a dozen stores, post office, livery corral and four saloons made up its ensemble, together with at least two dozen empty stores and houses. The bank was a small building of brick fronting the courthouse. The whole town straggled along the river, across which ran a huge, rumbling, covered bridge of wood. The river was fairly wide at this point, and the bridge was like a tunnel of darkness, unpenetrated by any light save that which seeped in from a few cracks here and there. Taylor had left his extra horse at the toll house. He and Russ Scott rode into town a few minutes before bank-opening time, and Russ suggested they start the day's activities with a drink.

"Nope," said Taylor promptly. "We got to keep our heads, partner. The wrong move is going to gum things up, and we can't afford to have our rope draggin' today. I reckon we can go dry another day or so. Is the bank account in your name or Mary's?"

"In Mary's, what's left of it," said Russ.

"Then clean off your mortgage and deposit the balance." The two men had dismounted at the hitching rack in front of the bank and stood talking there. The few passers-by nodded to Russ and flung curious glances at the stranger. "We need a few riders, I reckon. Know anybody we can get?"

RUSS SCOTT considered. "Nope, not right here an' now. And if we find Barton's outfit to home, we're going to wish we had a few fellers behind us!"

"They won't be to home. Now, old timer, you let me do the talking when we get there," said Taylor. "You're liable to show you're mad, and I don't show it until I shoot. And the first shot is going to make a whole lot o' difference."

"Think there'll be a shot, huh?" grunted Russ.

"Sure," said Taylor cheerfully. "I didn't want to scare your sister about it, though. Who will be sheriff, now that the late official ain't no more?"

"His deputy, I reckon," said Russ. "He's a no-account feller name o' Horton."

"I'll trot over and see him," said Taylor. "Come over for me as soon as you get through here."

He turned and crossed the street, heading for the jail and sheriff's office, which adjoined the courthouse.

The new acting sheriff was alone in the office, dazedly struggling to go through the mail and account books and other papers. He was not a gentleman of gigantic intellect, obviously; in fact, it was locally stated that

Horton could not even hit a spittoon once out of five shots. He was lank, sallow, unshaven and considerably soiled about the edges, and being conscious of the fact that he was generally held in small respect, he was ready enough to cover this up by "biggety" talk and a hardboiled manner.

"Howdy," said Taylor, walking in. "This Sheriff Horton?"

"Yep," said Horton, eyeing him.

"My name's Taylor. I'm the one found the sheriff's body on the toll road yesterday. Feller named Flickinger claimed to be a deputy and was with Bud Carrol. I said I'd show up and see if any evidence was wanted."

Horton swung his chair around.

"Set down, Taylor," he said. "That danged Flickinger ain't no deputy. He was a special deputy on a posse last week—feller got killed up in the hills—but he ain't nothin' now. So you're Taylor, huh? Well, I reckon we don't want no evidence. Thing was clear enough. Sheriff gets buried today. Aiming to stay in these parts?"

"Yeah," said Taylor, and drew a paper from his pocket. It was the agreement written and signed that morning between himself and the Scotts. "You might cast your eye over this."

Mr. Horton did so, and his jaw fell.

"My gosh! You're partners with Russ Scott, huh? And aim to take over Barton's ranch?"

"Yep." Taylor rolled a smoke and smiled brightly at the sheriff. "And we aim to have you ride along with us just to make sure Barton and his outfit don't start no fuss. Russ will be along in a minute with the papers showing his mortgage is paid off and all clear. We aim to serve 'em on Barton and take over the ranch, since he's got no title to it."

"Good gosh, man!" Sheriff Horton was no relative of Carrol, but he followed the ways of his predecessor. He seemed to relish the idea of seeing Barton flung off the Scott property. "You got a program, all right—but I dunno if it's legal. Barton's got that there ranch, and he ain't a feller to let loose easy. You got a court order?"

Taylor grinned.

"Barton got any court order to stay on other people's land? I'm a partner in that there ranch, and I'm running it. Barton's got no shadow of right there, and he's refused any accounting. I'm grabbing the whole works, and he'll come a-running with his tongue hanging out to get the accounting done, soon's I got the place. Now, I got a heap of respect for sheriffs, and I'd admire to have you riding along with us. Being a stranger here, I sort of want you to keep your eye on things and see that I ain't starting any fight."

"No," said Horton, sarcastically. "You ain't starting nothing except a war, not if you aim to throw Barton off the Lazy S! I dunno had I ought to go along or not——"

"You're the new sheriff," said Taylor, and through the open doorway saw Russ Scott coming up the walk. "Looks like you'd ought to take the chance to make yourself felt."

"By gosh, that's an idea!" said Horton. "All right, I'll do it. Howdy, Russ."

"Howdy," said Scott entering.

"Taylor wants me to ride out with you-all and keep the peace," said Horton. "When you going?"

"On our way now," said Taylor, with a wink at Scott. "Want to get there before noon so's there won't be too much of a crowd on hand. Mortgage paid, Russ?"

"Yep." Scott produced the document. "Reckon I'd better burn it."

"Save it and show it to Barton," and Taylor chuckled. "It'll surprise him a heap. Got your hoss handy, Sheriff?"

"Gimme five minutes," said Horton. "Have a drink before we start?"

"Nope, we ain't drinking, not on an errand like this," said Taylor. "Afterward, sure!"

Horton nodded.

IN TEN minutes the three men were mounting and riding out of town together, rattling across the wooden bridge in the cool gloom of its semi-darkness. Russ Scott confided to Taylor that his payment of

the mortgage had created a small sensation at the bank.

To the Lazy S was no short jog. As the three rode. Horton talked a good deal; he was a garulous man, anxious to impress Taylor with his importance, and he was feeling his new office as a chance to impress everybody, a chance to redeem the former contempt in which he had been held by the world at large. He talked about Flickinger, who now considered himself deputy, and said profanely that he would be eternally condemned if he ever let Flickinger set foot inside his new office; he talked about everyone and everything he knew. Taylor was not long in comprehending the man, and chuckled to himself.

"I reckon your good qualities," he said to Horton, "have been sort of over shadowed by the late lamented sheriff, ain't it so? Folks prob'ly depended on him, and you were just the deputy and nobody give a damn about you. Now that you're fillin' out his term—by gosh, you know what? If you was to start out your first day in office by clapping some hombre in jail, you'd make yourself felt! Yes, sir. There'd be no mistake about who was sheriff."

Horton warmed to this idea. "Yeah, but who'll I clap in jail?" he said, with an eager grin.

"Well," said Taylor, "you might grab some o' the stage robbers and bandits around here. I hear tell there's been a lot o' law-breaking—even the mails robbed. Now, if the late sheriff never done a thing about it, and you were to start out—gosh! You'd be made for life. Or if you were to show yourself strong enough to grab any gunman. S'pose one o' Barton's outfit tries to pull a gun on me and I beat him up and have you arrest him——"

"Yeah!" said Horton. "Fat chance. Any one o' that outfit goes for a gun, there ain't no beatin' up done. There's a burial."

"Wait and see," said Taylor. "You play my game and I'll play yours. Sabe?"

"You bet," said Horton. "But about them bandits, nobody knows who they are. If I knew, by gosh, I'd go after 'em!"

Taylor judged that the man meant his words. Horton had been too small fry to be included in any actual knowledge of anything amiss going on. Now that he was abruptly raised to a place of power and responsibility, he was fired by a holy and righteous intent to show what was in him, or what he thought was in him. And if well used, such a man might be of utmost value.

The closer they came to the Lazy S, the less Sheriff Horton talked and the more he fully agreed that Taylor should be the chief actor in whatever might take place. Russ Scott, however, grew darker and more somber of mood the closer they came to his old home. Watching him narrowly, Taylor knew that here was his chief danger point. Russ might explode into anything—as he had probably exploded the previous afternoon at sight of Sawyer, who had doubtless ridden around the toll house rather than stop and pay toll. Sawyer's body was now in town awaiting burial late that afternoon, and Taylor had shrewdly figured Barton's outfit would not gather at the ranch before noon to come in for the ceremony. They probably would get in a good morning's work and take the afternoon and night off.

THEY were topping a sharp rise, just beyond which the Lazy S would come into view, when abruptly a rider appeared fifty feet ahead, coming toward them.

"There's luck," said Horton. "That's Barton now."

"Russ," said Taylor quietly, "you keep yourself in hand, sabe? If there's any shootin' done here, I'll do it."

Barton was evidently not overjoyed at sight of the three. He was a large, powerful man who looked more than his real age by reason of a square-clipped brown beard which accentuated the masterful lines of his face. He was plainly a man accustomed to have his own way; his eyes were heavy, dominant, penetrating. They touched on Horton, went to Russ Scott, and then gripped upon Taylor, who was in the lead.

"Howdy." Taylor drew rein, and, after Barton nodded to the others, gave his name.

"I've bought an interest in the Lazy S," he said curtly. "Scott, here, has the paid mortgage to show you. We've come to take possession."

Barton was thunderstruck. His eyes widened, and a flame grew and blazed in them as Scott handed him the mortgage. He glanced at it, then crumpled it in his fist and dropped it.

"What sort of a joke is this?" he demanded, and shot a threatening glance at Horton. "What game you playin', huh?"

Taylor got out the makings. A slight pressure of his knees, and while he deftly began to manufacture a smoke, his horse moved, apparently of its own volition, and came close to that of Barton's.

"Ain't no joke," said Taylor amiably. "Y'see, Barton, you've done refused any accounting and you got no claim to the ranch, and you're movin'. Now it's us who'll give the accounting. I reckon to run this here ranch right and make money with her."

Ignoring the other two, Barton fastened his attention on Taylor, rightly judging that this was the man he had to reckon with.

"Ain't you bit off a consid'able chew?" he asked in a low and menacing tone.

"Shucks, no!" Taylor grinned and began to roll the cigarette. He was apparently quite at his ease, unconscious of any tension in the air. His horse moved slightly, bringing him close to Barton's right side, stirrups almost touching. "You see, I figure that a feller knows when he's beat, and you ain't fool enough to buck a sure thing."

"Is that so?" said Barton, eyes narrowing.

"Sure." Taylor laughed easily, licked the cigarette, and pinched the end with critical approval. His careless air was tempting in the extreme. Probably Barton thought he was dealing with someone who could be bluffed out, and determined to carry off the matter with a high hand. At all events, without warning, Barton's hand slid to his gun and he jerked out the weapon.

But, swift as light, Taylor's hand flew to his wrist, caught and gripped it in iron fingers before he could even point up the gun. Barton snarled, there was a crashing report as the gun exploded, Taylor's grip keeping it pointing downward. Both horses plunged and reared wildly; the two men came out of their saddles, but Taylor had his feet loose in the stirrups and fell clear. Barton's heel caught and dragged, with Taylor hanging grimly to him, until Russ Scott halted his horse.

THE scene, pregnant with sharp tragedy, resolved itself into comic elements. Barton, furious but helpless, lay on his face, while Taylor sat astride him and shoved his whiskers into the dust. The gun lay where it had fallen.

"Now be a good boy," said Taylor calmly to the cursing rancher. "Nice little fellers like you hadn't ought to play with guns and things. Sheriff, I reckon you got to arrest this feller for assault with a deadly weapon. I'll swear out the warrant when we get back to town. Gimme them handcuffs you fetched along."

Barton turned a purpled face toward the sheriff and cursed blackly, threatening him. But Horton had just seen the mighty humbled, and was already thinking of what a figure he would cut fetching Barton to jail. He tossed the steel bracelets to Taylor, who deftly wrenched the arms of Barton around and pinioned him, despite his struggles, curses and threats. Russ had meantime brought in Taylor's horse, and was looking on in utmost astonishment.

It was a pardonable emotion. Of himself, Sheriff Horton would never have dared arrest Barton; but Taylor had prepared him to arrest somebody, and Taylor had here done all the work. Thus backed, Horton fell into line with pride and delight, and all the threats of Barton slid off him like water off a duck. Arms behind him, Barton was put into the saddle, and Taylor used his own rope to tie his feet in the stirrups.

"Can't take no chances with a jigger who'd pull a gun on me," he declared, with a wink at the sheriff.

"Blast your dirty hide," said Barton, deadly pale under his mask of dirt and beard, "I'll get you for this, and get you quick! This fool of a sheriff won't have me in jail an hour, if he ever gets me there. And when I get out, Taylor, Lord help you!"

"Never mind about me bein' a fool, Barton," cut in the sheriff proudly. "You and a few more jaspers around here are due to learn a few things, and you-all can bear in

mind that I'm sheriff o' Medicine County and I aim to stay so. And you don't need to be so danged promiscuous with what you aim to do, unless you want a murder charge laid on you."

Barton shot him one savage look, and said no more, but his bloodshot eyes were eloquent. Taylor remounted and reined in alongside his prisoner, and looked at him for a moment.

"I reckon you made a mistake, feller," he said slowly, his voice very cold. "Now, before we go on, let's you and me settle a little something. And lemme tell you, if you aim to get to Sawyer's funeral this afternoon, you talk turkey. Because if you don't, I'll sure as hell put a bullet into you."

In these icy words, in the eyes of the man behind them, Barton sensed an unguessed peril and reacted to it. He was far from being a fool.

"What you want?" he growled.

"I s'pose you were up in Walla Walla three years ago in June?" said Taylor.

"Yeah." Barton's eyes held his gaze steadily. "What's it to you?"

"It's *this* to you," and Taylor touched his gun. "Was Estrada with you?"

"Estrada? My cook? Hell, no!" Barton frowned, puzzled. "Done picked him up when I come back here, him and two-three more fellers, and they been with me since."

Taylor met his gaze for a long moment and felt truth in this reply.

"All right," he said quietly. "Then never mind about it."

"Huh!" said Barton. "I s'pose Bud Carrol put you up to all this business, huh?"

Taylor chuckled. "Nope," he replied. "Not him. Well, Russ, let's go take over our ranch!"

AND, with the sheriff leading his captive's horse behind them, Taylor and Russ Scott turned and headed for the Lazy S.

"My gosh!" said Russ in a low voice. "I'd never ha' believed it!"

Taylor chuckled again.

IV

TAYLOR could understand why a low groan broke from Russ Scott as they drew closer to the Lazy S and could distinguish details, and why Russ rode on with smoldering eyes and tightly clenched lips, as though not daring to say anything lest he burst forth in explosion. Now that the incredible had happened, now that Barton was humbled and his new partner riding cheerfully to new triumphs, Russ Scott was quite cocky and confident of a sudden.

The Lazy S showed traces of its former beauty, but only traces, for under Barton it had become distinctly a bachelor ranch and showed it. The whole place bore the trademark "For Business Only." The house was long and low, with a wide ell, and lay among cool trees beside the creek, the other buildings being three hundred yards further up. Where had once been flower beds, were now tools and impedimenta. By the front door, the chuckwagon was undergoing needed repairs. The windows were bare of curtains, a huge pile of empty tins reposed outside the kitchen door, and the general air of untidiness was everywhere in evidence.

By the bunkhouse and barns, one man was in sight, working over the rods of the windmill with bucket and slush brush. At the chuckwagon, another man was at work, a swarthy man, whom Taylor knew must be the cook, Estrada. He turned to Barton.

"Now," he said, "you let out one yip and you'll get your teeth bashed in. Sabe? Look after him, Russ. Don't make any halfway business of it—give him your gun over his mouth if he says a word. Sheriff, s'pose you and me ride along and do the talking."

Nothing loath, Horton turned over his prisoner to Russ Scott, and rode ahead with Taylor.

"This hombre is bad," he said warningly, but Taylor only smiled.

At their approach, Estrada stood up, hitched forward his gun, waited. He was a wide shouldered Mexican and extremely handsome, bold of eye, with an assured and confident manner, altogether an unusual type of vaquero, the Indian strain show-

ing strongly in dark skin and high cheekbones. Sight of the sheriff, the stranger and Russ Scott, with Barton in obvious constraint, must have shown him instantly that something was wrong. He nodded to the sheriff, and then transferred his attention to Taylor, as the latter dismounted and approached him.

"Howdy," said Taylor amiably, and gave his name. "You're Miguel Estrada, huh? This here ranch has changed hands, hombre, your boss is under arrest, and you're free to pack your soogans if you got any and be on your way. But first I got something to ask you."

Estrada nodded coolly and proceeded to roll a cigarette, but his eyes were very alert.

"What man came up to this country with you?" asked Taylor in Mexican. Estrada started slightly, paused in his work, regarded him steadily and carefully.

"Is that any of your business, señor?" he returned.

"Yes," said Taylor. "I should like you to tell me the man's present name, *caballero*. He is not known to me, but I should like to make his acquaintance. Down below, I believe he was called Arkansas Red."

Estrada shrugged.

"I have never heard of such a man, señor," he replied, and continued with his cigarette. "I am desolated at being unable to help you to his acquaintance, but I came alone to this country, and have no friends."

"Careful, Estrada!" said Taylor. At his tone, Estrada's eyes shot to him and widened a little, for Taylor meant business now. "I have said nothing to anyone about that bank robbery down at Morgantown. That is not my business at all. I know you were not concerned in it, nor in what followed it—you simply met the other three men at a certain place with horses. Therefore, as I say, it does not concern me. But I want this man's name."

THE cigarette, half made, fell from the fingers of Estrada. Into his face came an ashen pallor; he stood motionless, hands outstretched, and for an instant Taylor believed he was about to go for his gun.

Then a mask fell over the swarthy face, and the beady eyes dwelt on Taylor, blazing pinpoints of peril.

"You are mistaken, señor," he replied quietly. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"All right," said Taylor, in English. "Get your duffle packed up and get out. Men all out?"

"All but Slim, who hurt his foot yesterday," and Estrada motioned toward the man from the windmill, who was approaching at a limp—a staring rider, unarmed.

"By golly, what's goin' on?" demanded Slim.

"You are," said Taylor, with a grin. "Outfit has changed hands. Barton's on his way to jail. You and Mig can saddle up, pack your bags, and be off out o' the way before the other boys come home to dinner. Barton, you might save a heap o' trouble all around by confirming them orders."

"All right, boys," said Barton. "Pack your stuff into town. I'll not be in jail more'n ten minutes, and after Eph's funeral we can get together. Pack up and ride in with us."

Slim and Estrada departed toward the bunkhouse with no more words. Taylor looked after the Mexican, lips compressed. He knew nothing about the man of whom he was in search, other than the name of Arkansas Red, which would indicate that the man had red hair. It was not pleasant to have Estrada prove too sharp for him. Also, Estrada would now be certain to get warning to the man, unless the latter were, as Taylor hoped, among the Lazy S riders.

"Taylor," spoke out Barton, now relieved of the order to silence, "I warn you and Russ not to lay a finger on my stuff here. You can't jump in and grab a feller's private property."

"Don't want your danged private property," said Taylor, laughing. "Anyhow, we ain't playing your game—we'll have that accounting soon as you come along to go over the books, if you got any. We aim to play square, so don't worry."

"I ain't worried," returned Barton. "You will be, quick enough. Didn't have no luck with Mig about your durned Arkansas Red, huh?"

"So you speak Mex, huh?" Taylor looked at him. "Know this Arkansas Red?"

"No," spat out Barton. "And if I did, I won't let on to you, durn your lousy hide!"

Taylor turned away. Slim and Estrada,

having lost no time packing up, were saddling two horses at the corral. He watched them at work, saw them mount and ride to the house. Slim came on to join Barton and the sheriff, Estrada paused at the kitchen door, dismounted, and went into the house.

"Sheriff," said Taylor, "think you'll get him to town all right? Them two jaspers going along might take a notion to persuade you to let him loose."

Horton grinned at Slim. "Let 'em try it," he returned. "They'll ride in front anyhow."

Taylor went to the kitchen door, and there paused admiringly. Estrada's one horse was a magnificent sorrel, not a cow-pony at all, but a horse with some touch of the old Moorish strain, delicate of muzzle and hoof. As he stood, Taylor's back was to the doorway.

HE CAUGHT a slight sound, a "click" —the sound of a gun hammer going back. Slight as it was, tenuous as was any warning in it, he did not hesitate; his knees buckled under him, and he let himself go limp and prostrate, hand jerking to gun as he fell.

A gun roared in the doorway. Estrada stood there firing. Taylor's abrupt drop had saved him. for the bullet caught his hatbrim as he went down and tore it half away. Even as he hit the dust, even as the horse beside him plunged in startled alarm, a jet of white flame spurted from his body; his gun crashed out, and Estrada spun around and came staggering out a step, then fell forward and lay quiet.

Taylor rose and put up his gun. The sheriff came spurring up to him, while Russ Scott held his gun on a dazed and protesting Slim.

"Gosh, you're a quick one!" exclaimed the sheriff, dismounting. "Didn't he get you?"

"Nope, but I reckon I got him," said Taylor.

"Yep, you sure did." Sheriff Horton bent over Estrada, then straightened up. "Well, if I hadn't seen the whole thing I wouldn't believe it, by gosh! I'll catch his hoss. We'll take him into town and bury him with Eph. That'll keep Slim busy on the way in, too."

Taylor looked at the dead gunman, his eyes hard and grim. Despite the pros and cons, he was sorry for this action. Through Estrada he might have reached the man he had sought so long, the man unknown to him.

"That's twice I've had to spoil things with a gun," he reflected. "Back there with the late departed sheriff, who was hand in glove with the crooks and might ha' spilled a lot if I'd had a chance to handle him. And now Estrada. It's a cinch he was in with whatever gang has been working here, too!"

Sheriff Horton brought in the Arab, and a sudden idea struck Taylor at sight of the bedroll behind the high Mexican saddle.

"Say, Horton," he drawled. "This here Estrada might have known something about the mail robberies up this way. S'pose you take a look through his roll."

"Ain't a bad idee," said Horton, and waved his hand. "Hey, Slim! Come along and lend us a bit o' help here."

Slim came up sullenly and helped the sheriff tie Estrada's body to the saddle, after the man's pockets were examined. From these, and from the roll behind the saddle, Sheriff Horton produced a handful of gold eagles, two watches, and a large packet of crisp, new hundred-dollar bills.

Taylor watched Slim narrowly. The man was gaping, wide-eyed; he was a simple fellow and his astonishment at this unveiling of wealth in the possession of the cook was so obvious that he was evidently unaware of anything wrong. Sheriff Horton came over to Taylor.

"You're a mind reader, feller," he exclaimed. "My good gosh, if you ain't dropped onto it! Look at them two gold watches—and them bills!"

"Check up with the Federal authorities in the capital," advised Taylor. "I seen in the paper that some o' the loot them jiggers got was a batch o' new Federal Reserve bank notes, and the numbers will be known. Looks to me, Horton, like you'd took in a

pretty heavy jackpot your first day in office. You play your cards right, and if you ain't settin' pretty by tomorrow, I'm a Dutchman!"

Horton nodded. "And I ain't forgetting howcome it's happened, Taylor," he said. "You've handled things right for me, and when you need a favor, come a-running. My gosh, but you've sure steered me into something big!"

"All right, forget it and play your cards," said Taylor. "And don't let Barton talk you out of it before you reach town. So long, and good luck!"

BARTON, no less than Slim, had been dumbfounded by Estrada's wealth; his amazement was too genuine to be doubted. Taylor watched him ride back on the road to town with Sheriff Horton, preceded by Slim and the corpse-laden Arab. Russ Scott, who had dismounted, whistled under his breath.

"Don't it beat all!" he exclaimed, turning a wondering face to Taylor. "To think o' Mig bein' one o' them bandits! Well, it goes to prove what I said. He seen everybody pulling off rough stuff and getting away with it, and him and a few more got to acting up."

"Who?" demanded Taylor. "You know this outfit—who'd his partner be? Know anybody with red hair?"

"Nope, not in this outfit," said Russ promptly. "Well, partner, I reckon we got some work to do before Sis gets here! She'd have heart failure to see the old place lookin' like hell, the way it does."

"And we'll have a little more work on hand when the outfit straggles in about noon to wash up and get to town for Sawyer's funeral," said Taylor. "Let's turn in the hosses and get busy."

He himself went to the bunkhouse and there made a thorough search through everything in and out of sight, but it was fruitless. If any of the Lazy S outfit were in with Estrada on the banditry, their loot was well cached. Taylor rather thought the Mexican had been the only one in the outfit to be connected with the gang, however. The others must be sought elsewhere. The gang was probably drawn from several ranches.

Rejoining Russ, he went over the house, which was a large one. It was untidy enough, but not actually dirty; Barton subordinated everything to work, and had kept up the place in all respects save that of looks.

"Sis won't get here 'fore sundown, unless she's mighty impatient," said Russ. "I done sent out a wagon from town, to get there bout noon. Time she gets the stuff loaded up and rides the wagon here——"

"Not her," cut in Taylor dryly. "Bet you ten bucks she forks a bronc and gets here ahead of the wagon, partner! Pitch in."

Pitch in they did, although each of them were impatient enough to do other things—Russ Scott to go through the room Barton had used as an office, and find out how the ranch accounts stood, and Taylor to go through things on general principles. The bedrooms, three of which were used as storerooms, had to be emptied out and Barton's room given a good cleaning; noon was at hand before they had made a dent in the general appearance of things.

"How many riders in Barton's outfit?" said Taylor, glancing from a window and starting for the door.

"Five beside the late Eph Sawyer and Mig," returned Russ. "Why?"

"One gone to town with Mig Estrada leaves four," returned Taylor hastily. "And here's three coming in a bunch. Fetch your gun."

HE MADE his way to the kitchen door. The ranch kitchen was a huge one, and was used by Barton's outfit as a messroom. The three incoming riders turned their horses into the corral and trooped over to the kitchen, shouting for Estrada. They came to a halt as Taylor lounged into the doorway, facing them, and with careful pose began to roll a cigarette.

"Howdy, boys," he greeted them cheerfully. "Lookin' for somebody?"

"Yeah, the boss," returned one. He noted that all three were probably tophands. They were tough enough in general appearance to top anything.

"Speaking," said Taylor. "Pecos Taylor, partner in this here outfit and new boss."

Russ Scott came into sight, and the three recognized him with astonishment.

"I've taken back the ranch, gents," he explained curtly.

"Where's Barton?" asked one of the three.

"In jail," said Taylor, and lit his cigarette. "Sent him there this morning. He says for you boys to pack your bags and come along and camp out in town after the funeral. He might have some idea of throwing me and Russ out of here. So I reckon it's your move!"

"Huh!" exclaimed the spokesman, shoving forward. "Think so, huh? Where's Estrada?"

"Gettin' measured," said Taylor calmly.

"Measured?" The rider scowled. "You tryin' to joke?"

"Nope." Taylor chuckled. "Mig had about the same notion you have, feller. There's his gun layin' on the ground yonder, Slim packed him into town, and I expect they're measuring him right now for a wooden suit to keep Sawyer company."

"By gosh!" exclaimed another of the three, looking at the gun in the sunlight. "That sure as hell is Mig's gun! Say, what's been going on?"

"Quite a lot," said Taylor, eyeing them. "You'll have to make town in time for dinner, boys. We been too busy to cook up a thing." His voice changed suddenly. "And I'd advise you gents to stop wagging your tongues and get a-going. If you got any biggety notions, just go right after them guns you're wearing. Do one thing or the other, gents, and do it quick."

Three against two—and a gun lying in the hot sunlight, and a fly-covered patch of blood where Estrada had fallen. The three knew Estrada well, Taylor was an unknown quantity, and their hesitation won the day. They exchanged a look, a low word, and then turned in unison and departed to the corral.

Five minutes later they were saddled up, packing their soogans, and presently they rode off toward town.

"Another feller due," said Russ Scott. "That'll be Baldy. He ain't a bad feller, neither. Good hand, and Mary likes him."

"Hint accepted," said Taylor briskly, and pointed to a flurry of dust up the valley. "I expect that's him heading in now."

Baldy it was, riding in just after the other three had passed out of sight. He came direct to the kitchen door, seeing the two there, and nodded cordially enough to Scott as he swung down. He was a wrinkled, bald little man of perhaps fifty, with bright and laughing eyes.

"Howdy, gents," he said. "Where's everybody?"

"All of us here," returned Taylor. "New partner and boss; old partner; old partner's sister coming this aftenoon. Late squatter gone to jail. Cook dead. Outfit chucked out. There's the layout, feller. You're the only one sort o' lost and strayed. I hear tell there's a regular job waiting right here if you stay with the outfit."

BALDY took a minute or two to digest this, his shrewd, sparkling eyes appraising Taylor carefully, sweeping to Russ, then casting about and catching sight of Estrada's gun there in the sunlight.

"So that's it, huh?" he commented, and ejected a stream of tobacco juice. "Huh!" He wiped his lips with a leathery hand. "Allus said somebody faster'n Mig would come along one day and learn him to play tricks. Old partner looks good; old partner's sister listens good; new partner looks like he was out o' didies and kind o' salty—huh? Suits me. When do we eat?"

"Soon's we rustle up some grub," and Taylor grinned. "Come on in and lend a hand."

In this manner did the Lazy S change hands.

V

WHEN the interior of the house had been placed in at least fair condition, Russ continued with this while Taylor and Baldy got a team hitched up and went to work at the tin cans and rubbish outside.

The more Taylor saw of wizened old Baldy, the better he liked the man. Baldy had been with Barton a year, had no love for the man, but proclaimed him a good cowman.

"Got nothin' to say ag'in him," he stated. "Rough feller. That's natural. He's sure pulled this here place up and set her on her feet. Russ and Miss Mary comin' back suits me. She's a peach, that there gal! Her and me is good friends. If I was thirty year younger, by gash, I'd give all you young fellers a run for your money!"

Taylor grinned. "Know anybody around here with red hair? Answers to Arkansaw Red?"

"Nope," said Baldy promptly.

"Who was Estrada's partner?"

"Didn't have none," said Baldy. "He teamed around with anyone. Used to go over to the C in a Ring occasional. Flickinger and another feller over there talk Mex."

"Flickinger? Who's he?"

"Bud Carrol's foreman. Come to think of it, he's got sort o' sandy hair. Ain't red, though. What's our program with them jaspers? Fight 'em as usual?"

"Not if we can help it," said Taylor. "We got no quarrel with 'em."

Baldy grunted, as though he had his own notions about this.

With three men hard at work, a comparatively short time saw a vast difference in the looks of the place. They got the foreground largely cleared up and had knocked off for a smoke on the veranda, when Baldy jerked his thumb up the road.

"Feller coming," he observed.

The dust spurt developed into a rider spurring hard.

"Bud Carrol," stated Russ. "The danged fool always rides like a house afire. When he gets a hoss, that hoss is done for."

MR. SCOTT had changed for the better, under the influence of finding himself once more in unexpected possession of the Lazy S, and the hard work he had been doing. He had lost much of his surly enmity toward all the world, since leaving the toll house that morning, and had become almost cheerful.

From his encounter of the previous afternoon, Taylor recalled Bud Carrol as a heavy-jawed, hard-eyed young gentleman who seemed abundantly able to carve out his own fortune. A question to Baldy elicited that Carrol had inherited the C in a Ring, which for some inexplicable reason was not known as the Circle C, and had made good with it; also that Carrol was a good poker player, a hard drinker, and altogether an up-and-coming sort of man if he did not stop lead before he came.

"Funny Bud ain't in town, him bein' Sheriff Atwater's cousin—ought to be to the funeral," said Baldy.

"Prob'ly come out here to get in touch with me," and Russ Scott chuckled. "Heard the news and had a drink and rode out here."

"More likely, to find me," said Taylor. Baldy gave him a look of inquiry, but he only shrugged. He had no reason for his words. It was a mere hunch. Yet it was right enough.

Carrol reined in, dismounted, and stood at the steps. He flung a curt greeting at Russ and Baldy, but his gaze was fastened upon Taylor.

"You're Taylor, huh? New partner here—had Barton arrested and threw out his riders, huh? Yeah, I seen you yesterday all right. Want to have a word with you."

"Shoot ahead," drawled Taylor. "I got no secrets. Come on up and set a while."

"Like hell I will," snapped Carrol. "As for havin' secrets, you'll maybe change your mind about that 'fore I get done talking. Miss Mary here, Russ?"

"Not yet," said Russ. "On the way, I reckon."

Carrol nodded, and looked again at Taylor.

"Come on down and you and me go for a walk," he said. "I got no gun, so you don't need to be scared I aim to plug you. You and me got to have a word together."

"All right," rejoined Taylor.

BALDY caught his eye, leaned over so that Carrol could not see his gesture, and motioned with his hand as though in the act of stabbing. Taylor caught the warning and nodded. He had already seen that Carrol wore no gun belt; as for any danger from a knife, he laughed at the idea. Yet the warning was well heeded.

Leaving the porch, he joined Carrol and they walked a little way toward the creek together, until Carrol halted, well beyond earshot of the house.

"Now, then," he said, eyeing Taylor aggressively, challengingly, "out with it! Let's hear where you stand."

"Huh?" Taylor frowned. "I don't get you, Carrol."

"Nor me you. Are you aiming to fight Barton?"

"Search me." Taylor chuckled. "Depends on him."

"Then you'll sure as hell fight. He'll come over here and run you-all out. Want me to lend you a hand?"

"Huh?" Taylor was openly amazed at this query. "Why should you?"

"Because I want that there ranch o' Barton's—I mean the one he started with. It ain't no good to the Lazy S but would do me a heap o' good. Him and me had a meeting last week and signed up the papers—the bank's got 'em now in escrow, sabe? We quit our private war. I bought his old range off him, and he threw in the piece o' Lazy S range I grabbed. He's to give me possession first o' the month, and I complete the payment."

"I didn't know of that," said Taylor.

"Nobody else does neither," said Carrol. "It was a private agreement. And now you've played hell with it all."

"How come?" Taylor was momentarily puzzled by the man's attitude. There was something in all this he could not comprehend.

"Well," said Bud Carrol, "here Sheriff Atwater and Eph Sawyer killed each other—lookin' like the war was still goin' on. Now you jump in, rush Barton off his feet, throw him out of here. What's he goin' to do? Go back to his old little ranch, that's what, and throw over his agreement with me! Nothin' else he can do, except get out—and you can gamble he ain't a-doing that. Now, I need that there Lazy S jog to fill out my range. Barton couldn't gimme title to it, but you folks can. So far's his ranch goes, I can throw him out o' there and grab it, the papers bein' in escrow. So I thought I'd see you, before Barton comes arunning to me proposing that him and me throw you out o' here and split the difference."

Taylor began to see light. Shrewd Bud Carrol was playing his own hand regardless, and was playing it craftily. Barton's ranch was practically his now, though he might have to fight for it, but he also wanted the Lazy S strip he had grabbed illegally.

"Hm!" said Taylor. "You want us to deed you that strip, huh?"

"You bet. And you'd better do it."

FROM one viewpoint, this was true; it was the cheapest way out of sure trouble. Barton, his force already badly crippled, would cast about for allies. He would certainly try to get Carrol to join him, oust the Scotts and Taylor from the Lazy S, and regain possession, such being nine points of the law. The matter of actual ownership did not trouble Barton. He had been surprised and caught napping. If he could turn the tables and hold the Lazy S long enough to ship out the stock on the range, he would clean up handsomely.

"Your advice is pretty good, Carrol," said Taylor. "How much you expect to pay for that there Lazy S strip?"

"Huh? Pay?" Carrol looked his indignation. "Don't be a fool. I got the strip now, ain't I? I want a deed to it. I'll pay by helpin' you ag'in Barton."

"I don't reckon we need help that bad, for a fact," observed Taylor. "I sort of object——"

"Now listen here, feller," said Carrol, tapping him on the arm. "Just waive them objections and persuade the Scotts to make out that deed, sabe? You better had, and I'll tell you why. Me, I ain't no fool. Me and Flickinger packed in Sawyer and the sheriff yesterday, remember. I looked things over pretty good. Atwater, he hadn't shot Sawyer at all—Eph was killed by a thirty-thirty bullet. Atwater was killed by a revolver shoved up ag'in him so's it burned him—real close. And Sawyer was thirty foot away. Now, I dunno who killed Sawyer, and I don't give a durn. That's Barton's lookout! But puttin' one thing with another, I could come pretty close to sayin' who shot Sheriff Atwater. I expect you get the drift."

Taylor grinned at him.

"Bud, you sure have got your nerve! What's to hinder me plugging you here and now?"

Carrol met his gaze squarely.

"Hell! You're square enough. I seen that first thing," he rejoined. "You may be a killer, but you ain't a coward. Now, far's I'm concerned, I'm willin' to pass up the whole thing, provided you arrange about that there deed."

Taylor reflected. He could size up this man pretty well by this time, and the prospect was not pleasing. Carrol was entirely and absolutely selfish, willing to advantage himself in any way possible, and was ready to start a fight in any quarter that offered the best takings. In a way he was square enough, but he was not oppressed by any minor delicacies. And he was certainly strong.

"I'll tell you what happened yesterday," said Taylor quietly. "I come along and found Sawyer dead. Atwater showed up, thought I'd killed him, and wouldn't listen to reason—wouldn't even look to see that my gun hadn't been used. He had his gun on me and I jumped him, that's all."

That was not quite all, but it was enough to satisfy Carrol.

"I believe you," he responded. "After hearin' how you got Estrada, I'd believe anything of you. Well, do we hitch or not?"

"I can't give you any answer now, Bud," said Taylor quietly. "I got an interest in the place, that's all; when it comes to deeds, I got to talk things over with Miss Mary and Russ. You can see that for yourself."

"Sure." Carrol shot a glance at the veranda. "Far's Russ is concerned, I'd bend a gun over his head and persuade him quick enough. But Mary's another matter."

"S'pose we leave it like this, then," said Taylor. "I'll talk with 'em tonight. Tomorrow I'll ride over to your place and let you know, yes or no. Suit you?"

"Fair enough." Carrol eyed him. "If it's no, ain't you scared we'll jump you?"

"Try it," said Taylor coolly, and both men grinned. "Say, that feller Flickinger who was with you yesterday, he looked like a jigger I used to know down to Las Vegas two year ago. Was he down there then?"

"Nope." Carrol turned, and they walked toward his horse. "Flick's been with me now going on three year. Well, we'll look for you tomorrow, then. *Adios!*"

"*Hasta la vista,*" rejoined Taylor.

CARROL waved his hand to the two men on the porch, mounted, and departed at a rapid pace. Taylor returned to the porch.

"Blackmail," he said curtly. "Bud had it figured that I killed Atwater yesterday, and he wants us to deed him that there piece of Lazy S range he's grabbed. Otherwise, he'll throw in with Barton against us."

"Huh!" Baldy surveyed his new boss. "And did you kill Atwater or not?"

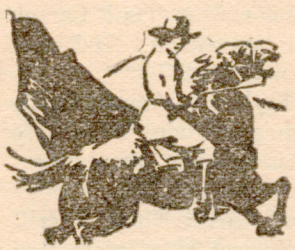
Taylor nodded and sat down. Russ Scott exploded in an oath.

"Deed him nothing! I'll see that jigger in hell first! Well, goin' back to work?"

Work was resumed.

VI

MARY SCOTT did exactly what it was predicted she would do. She got the wagon loaded, then forked a bronc and came right along to the Lazy S. Packing up had taken time, however, and she did not get out to the ranch before it was in fair shape for her. She did not beat the team and wagon by so much, either, since she had to come through town, and as everyone thought she was there for the funeral ceremonies she had to attend them out of pure womanly decency. What she heard, however, sent her on out to the ranch in a hurry.



"Is all this true?" she exclaimed, dismounting at the steps, where the three men were gathered to welcome her.

"Yep, all true. We're here, and so are you," said Taylor, grinning. "Welcome home, ma'am, and we sure hope you'll like it."

"Stop fooling!" she snapped. "Is it true about you having a fight with Estrada and arresting Barton and——"

"Sho, now!" said Taylor soothingly. "I reckon you done picked up a lot o' gossip somewheres, ma'am. Estrada was one o'

them mail robbers and he done got killed. I had a scrimmage with Barton, sure, but he wasn't hurt none and he's in jail or bailed out by now. Just you forget all your troubles and look at the work we got done here, and let bygones be bygones."

"I must say you take it calmly!" she exclaimed, staring at him.

"Why not, ma'am?" put in Baldy. "Howdy! I'm right glad to be workin' for you-all, lemme tell you! Come on in, ma'am —this here place is yours. I'll put up your hoss."

Mary Scott was not to be put off by fair words, however. Not until she had heard everything that had taken place, would she so much as take a survey of the house; and then she rendered a verdict that was flattering if dubious.

"Well, we seem to be here—for a while anyhow! And you've accomplished wonders, Russ, you and Pecos, in doing so much; I never dreamed you'd have possession of the place so soon. Let's go all over the old house. I suppose it's dreadfuly changed since we left."

SHE found it changed, indeed, but had no great opportunity to mourn, because the wagon arrived with their household belongings before many minutes. The only room left untouched by the house-cleaners was the former parlor, now used as an office by Barton. It held a large desk, a locked safe in one corner, and was strewn with books, papers, letters and other personal belongings of the late occupant.

"Here's our job, tonight," observed Taylor, as they looked into the room. "Baldy, if you got nothin' better to do, s'pose you ride in to town and see what Barton's up to. He's got three men in his outfit, and might make trouble."

"Yeah," said Baldy. "You aiming to run a ranch without no hands? We got consid'able stock roamin' loose. Feller was due from Harmer City tomorrow or next day to look 'em over. Buyer. Barton aimed to clean out about five hundred head, sellin' on the hoof."

"All right," said Taylor. "Can you hire a couple fellers in town?"

"There or beyond," said Baldy.

"You're range boss. Go to it. Arrange to meet that buyer and we'll do our own stock selling. And bring out word, or send it, where Barton is."

Before Baldy departed, the wagon arrived, and the rest of the afternoon was spent in getting the house arranged to Mary Scott's satisfaction. This kept both Taylor and Russ hard at work, and as there was no lack of room in the old house, it was arranged that Taylor should occupy a bedroom here rather than a bunk in the men's quarters.

Sunset saw everything in good shape, and Mary Scott summoned the two men to a plentiful supper that was something in the nature of a celebration. She was flushed, starry-eyed, happy, and Pecos Taylor found it hard to concentrate his attention on the food or anything else than the suddenly exuberant girl across the table. Yet he knew this was no time for light words.

"We have work tonight," he said gravely. "Barton will be here tomorrow, and I have to pay a call on Mr. Carrol—who has fortunately tipped his hand to me. We caught Barton napping, and we've got everything of his under our hand, account books, cash and all the rest."

"The safe's locked," growled Russ Scott.

"And it'll stay locked," said Taylor, "until Barton opens it. Now, as soon as we get the dishes cleaned up, let's settle down in the office and find out just where we stand financially. By all indications, we should have a good thing, if we can hold it! Suit you, folks?"

"You bet," said Russ, and the shining-eyed girl nodded.

"All except you doing the dishes," she said. "That's my job."

"Nix, we all turn in on that right now," said Taylor, and suited action to words.

Half an hour later they lighted the swinging lamp in the office and settled down to find out whether the Lazy S had come back to its owners bearing riches or poverty.

Russ Scott went into the matter scowling, absorbed, intent upon the outcome. Taylor cared very little one way or the other, to tell the truth; he was more than satisfied with things as they were, and if the ranch were not well-to-do, it could be made to pay ultimately. Mary Scott, too, seemed interested but not eager. She observed the cool,

detached manner of Taylor, and glanced at him with a smile.

"What's the matter, pardner? You seem to have something on your mind."

"I have had," said Taylor, with a laugh, "ever since I first met you. But——"

"Here we are!" broke in Russ Scott exultantly as he drew out a drawer from the desk. "Here's the books, by gosh, bank balance too! And durned if he ain't carried on the same old set o' books we left here. Look into 'em, Sis! You can tell right quick!"

Mary Scott looked into them, excitedly enough.

WITHIN fifteen minutes it became increasingly evident that Mr. Barton had never intended any eye but his own to see those books; and certainly not a Scott eye. He had kept up the books carefully, just as he had handled the ranch carefully, and it required only a very little figuring on the girl's part to discover that the ranch and its finances were in a state of astonishing prosperity. Barton had made two cattle shipments, had put some of the proceeds back into white-faced stock, and the Lazy S was in a position to make another shipment any time and stand the depletion of stock without a quiver.

"All of which," commented Mr. Taylor, "shows what a good man can do with this here ranch if he knows how. Slide us that there bank-book, Russ. Get your figures straightened out, Miss Mary, and let's see how things balance up."

Barton's bank balance proved to be impressive. When Mary Scott had brought her figuring to an end, and learned the bank balance in cash, she uttered an exclamation.

"Do you see? It's just about even—he's brought up the ranch value heavily, but probably a large share of this cash if not a full half, belongs to us, or would if we could get an accounting! We can't touch his money without going to law, but we can turn it all over to him, take the ranch and stock as it stands, and be even!"

When he was satisfied that her figures were approximately correct, Taylor leaned back in his chair, lighted a cigarette, and grinned comfortably.

"Partners," he announced, "we play the cards as they lay! Barton's licked, and he knows it. Now that we got a woman on the place, he ain't likely to try and run us off or kill us, grab and sell what stock he can rustle up, and light out. Nope; he'll be over tomorrow and we'll have a peaceful settlement—for the moment."

"You don't know him," said Mary Scott anxiously.

"Know him? One look at that hombre is enough to know him clear to the ground."

Taylor puffed a moment, then continued, "If I'm here tomorrow, he's liable to start gunplay. If you're here with me and Russ gone, then he's blocked. So Russ and I won't be here."

"Huh?" Russ looked up. "Mean to say you'll leave her alone!"

Taylor grinned. "Listen, cowboy—this here female is just as able to take care of herself as you or me, maybe better. Besides which, I figure Baldy will be back, to set on the porch with a shotgun and keep an eye on life in general. Miss Mary, you're a right good business woman—make whatever bargain suits you, and it'll suit me. I reckon Barton ain't at his best when he's dealin' with a woman, neither."

"It doesn't worry you, though, does it?" asked the girl.

"Not a bit," chuckled Taylor. "Depends on the woman, most generally."

Her gaze searched him. "Have you—have you had any luck—with the third man, I mean?"

Taylor shook his head. "He's here, all right; question is, to find him. I hope to find him tomorrow, at Carrol's place."

"Then I'm ridin' with you," said Russ Scott. Taylor nodded, as though he had counted on it, but said nothing.

BALDY returned unexpectedly. He had sent word to a couple of good men he knew, and was sure they would turn up sometime next day. Regarding Barton, his report was more dubious. The sudden del-

uge of funeral ceremonies had somewhat staggered Springvale; so had the prominence of the new sheriff, whose activities had made him cock of the walk. Barton, released from jail on bail, had done no talking but had gone home late in the afternoon with his three remaining men—home being his old little ranch, over beyond the C in a Ring.

So Baldy drew his orders to remain close to home in the morning and keep the scattergun handy, and the wizened little rider grinned knowingly.

Mr. Taylor slept the sleep of the just that night. It had been a long day's work, and well done; but he had a harder day's work on the morrow. He knew the situation had to be clarified, had to be settled sharply, unless the Lazy S wanted to be in for a long and desultory range war. Carrol and Barton had to be settled once and for all, and without gloves.

As to Arkansaw Red, that was another story. The presence of Miguel Estrada proved that Red, his partner, was close at hand; Taylor had thought Flickinger might be the man, but Carrol's statement that Flickinger had been with him for three years disproved it. There was one fairly certain means of identification, however—Arkansaw would certainly try to do for the man who had killed Estrada.

"And then I'll get him," determined Taylor, thinking these things over as he dressed and shaved in the morning. "And then I'll settle down here for life and quit chasing bad men—if! All depends."

The sun was just over the horizon when Taylor and Russ Scott rode away from the Lazy S. Neither of them spoke until the ranch-house behind them had faded into a blur; then, as the highway appeared ahead, Taylor drew rein.

"What's the quickest way to Carrol's ranch, Russ?"

Scott motioned to the highway. "Half a mile to the left there's a road in. I'll show——"

"No! You go to town," said Taylor. "Now listen, hombre! We don't know who was in that gang o' bandits, but there's two-three anyhow, and they'll have taken warning after hearing about Estrada. The man I'm after is one of them, prob'ly. I aim to prowl around, learn what I can learn, come to an understanding with Carrol, and then head for town. I may need you bad as quick's I get there, sabe? You get hold o' the new sheriff, and leave liquor alone."

"Huh?" said Russ, scowling a little. "Liquor don't hurt me none."

"No, but it hurts anybody's brains, and right now we need all the brains we got."

"All right," assented the other sullenly. "But you don't need to talk like I was a boy. If ye don't want me along, that's all right. I aimed to lend a hand."

"I know it, old man, but you can help me better in town," said Taylor.

UPON this they parted. Taylor, riding along, looked over his rifle and six-gun and made sure he was in readiness for anything and everything.

He expected nothing definite, yet he expected almost anything. For weeks silent forces had been gathering slowly to a head; criminals, bandits and murderers, probably in league with the late sheriff; bad blood between ranges, jealousy and greed, secret but strong on every hand; and this festering sore had been abruptly pricked. Now it must be cleansed rapidly. And it could only be cleansed by an eruption of men's passions, by jail or death.

From the moment he had been recognized by the late sheriff, he knew that his own existence depended on quick thinking, quick action, and quick shooting. The sheriff was not the only person in Medicine County allied with the outlaws. Barton was not guilty; Taylor thought Carrol was innocent of any connection. But someone——

"Estrada's old partner, Arkansaw Red!" thought Taylor as he rode. "There's the man! If I knew who he was, I'd be all set. So Estrada used to go over to Carrol's ranch to talk with Flickinger and another jasper, huh? Well, we got to find who else talks Mex over there, and then we got him. Maybe!"

This idea, added to the fact that Arkansaw would undoubtedly try to get Estrada's killer, made things look better, and more certain. Mr. Taylor rode on his way with a cheerful whistle, as though bound for a wedding instead of for a possible funeral.

VII

THE Carrol outfit was a magnificent property, denoting what inheritance added to ability could do for a man in Medicine County.

The buildings lay amid a perfect grove of trees, all of them old and stately and spaced wide. The house was well off by itself, and toward this Taylor turned his way. The building was of timber, the clapboards white with fresh paint, the window shutters vivid green; the place looked more like some old fashioned farm house of the Middle West than a ranch-house set in the distant places afar from railroads.

The house had a wide gallery or porch, stretching clear across the front, almost level with the ground, and shaded by a dropped canvas awning. Seeing two figures sitting here, Taylor took for granted that one was Carrol. He did not discover his mistake until he had dismounted, and was at the single step leading to the gallery floor. Then he perceived that one man was Flickinger, the other a stranger.

"Howdy, Taylor!" said Flickinger, rising. "Come along and set. Carrol allowed you was coming, but didn't look for you till afternoon. He's done gone to town. Set down and have a drink and a smoke. Meet Jabe Hartley. Jabe's a friend o' the boss, and roosts out here when he ain't running county politics. We got room and to spare here."

TAYLOR shook hands with Mr. Hartley and accepted a seat and a cigar. He was conscious of a keen and sustained scrutiny from Hartley, and repaid it with interest. The politician was a spare, rather undersized man, with two bright blue eyes that glittered in a dried-up face devoid of all expression; a perfect poker-face it was, framed by unruly hair of deep and lustrous blue-black, and the bright blue eyes shone in it like jewels.

"You've got a beautiful place here, all right," said Taylor. "So Carrol's gone to town, eh?"

"Yeah. Was you aiming to see him on business?"

"Yep. Personal," said Taylor. "I hear the sheriff raised quite a ruction by finding that Estrada was one o' them bandits."

Flickinger sneered. Hartley flung away his cigar and chuckled.

"This here new sheriff," he observed, "was maybe a mite hasty. I dunno the rights of it yet, but he ain't no shucks as a sheriff. He ain't a friend o' yours, Taylor?"

Taylor smiled a little. "Never met him before yesterday, so don't worry none. You can't offend me by talkin' about him."

"Thought so," said Hartley. "You aiming to square things up with Carrol? About that Lazy S strip?"

Taylor looked at the speaker, his lean face equally expressionless, his eyes cold and hard. Hartley sat quite motionless, which few men can do; it showed there was something to this man.

"That's for me and Carrol to settle," returned Taylor quietly. "I think I'll ride along toward town and meet him." He looked at Flickinger and spoke in Mexican. "Have you any message to send him?"

Flickinger shook his head, but Hartley smiled and answered in the same tongue.

"You might tell him that if he forgets to mail my letter I'll paralyze him!"

Taylor nodded and rose. He stepped out to his waiting horse, mounted, waved his hand to the two men, and headed for town.

So Hartley spoke Mex! There was one problem solved. Hartley, however, could not be Arkansaw Red. The only thing Taylor knew about his prey was that Arkansaw was a tow-headed man; and this fitted nobody in sight. Nor had Hartley displayed any animosity toward Estrada's killer.

"Looks like I drew blank, sure enough," said Taylor to himself as he rode. "Something wrong about them two jaspers settin' there. Can't figure it out nohow, but something wrong! Question is, has Carrol laid some trap? Looks like there's more in this than I knew! And I'd better get to town. Wasted time enough now, with Russ Scott and Carrol both there. Makin's of trouble, li'l hoss, sure's you're born! I was a fool to send Russ to town."

Although he pressed his horse, time passed ere Springvale hove in sight; the morning was wearing on toward noon, and the dilapidated county seat was inviting enough with its wide-spreading old trees.

As he rode into town, Taylor noted a scattering of horses before the hitching-racks of the five saloons, but few elsewhere. As his horse rumbled across the huge covered wooden bridge, the noise carried down Main Street, and one or two sauntering figures came forth to see who had arrived, then took to cover again.

HIS intent to find Russ Scott and get him away from a possible meeting with Carrol, Taylor dismounted before the War Arrow, the largest saloon, and strode inside. As he crossed the threshold from the blinding sunlight without, he was halted by two men; one was Sheriff Horton, the other a stranger.

"Hold up, Taylor!" exclaimed Horton in a low voice. "Gone too far to stop now——"

Taylor let himself be drawn to one side of the doorway, and blinked at the scene before him.

Except for two men at the bar, facing each other, the saloon was apparently empty —only a protruding head or two showed that men had taken to refuge a moment previously. The two at the bar were Carrol and Russ Scott, and the latter was speaking in a drunken rage.

"Deed you nothing, you polecat!" he was storming in violent anger. "That's done been settled! What's ours, we hang on to! And as for your throwin' in with Barton, do it and be damned to you!"

"That's fightin' talk, Russ," said Carrol in a low voice. "But I don't aim to kill you. I ain't aimin' to hurt you none. If——"

"T'ell with you and your aiming!" cried Russ Scott, glaring at him. "I'm a better man than you any day, with a gun or without it——"

"Yeah? And who shot Eph Sawyer t'other day, huh?" drawled Carrol.

Taylor, given no chance to interfere, saw Russ Scott go for his gun, saw Carrol move and draw; the two shots came almost together. Carrol sagged back against the bar, and the gun fell from his hand; Russ Scott continued firing, three more shots in all, continued pumping bullets into the figure before him, then he crumpled suddenly and pitched forward. Carrol's one bullet had blown a hole through his body.

Next moment the War Arrow came alive, as men flooded out from shelter and others came in from all directions to seek the cause of the shooting. Horton took charge, having the bodies placed in the back room. Pecos Taylor stood alone at the end of the bar, and took a stiff drink. He needed it. Presently the sheriff joined him and poured another.

"How! Well, Russ done it," said Horton, wiping his mustache. "He'd been sp'iling for trouble all morning. Now there's hell to pay."

"There is—for me," assented Taylor gloomily. "I got to tell his sister."

The sheriff eyed him strangely. "Say, Pecos, I like you! And I owe you a lot, and I ain't forgot it, but there's more hell to pay than you know, maybe. Know Hartley?"

"Met him this morning," said Taylor. "I was out to the ranch to find Carrol."

HORTON swore softly. They were alone together at the end of the bar and could speak freely without being overheard.

"This gent Hartley is bad med'cine, plumb bad," said the sheriff. "I been prayin' all day you'd git to town quick. I spoke to Russ, but he wouldn't talk none to me—he was in a bad mood. Well, this here Hartley was in town las' night, sabe? He come over to my office and had a talk. He says I'll have to give up the sheriff's star to Flickinger, and I says he can go to hell and Flickinger likewise. Hartley, he just laughs, and goes out. I heard later he was asking a lot o' questions about you from everybody."

"He's welcome," said Taylor.

"Yeah—you don't know him. Him and Carrol had a sort of agreement—he'd put some money into the property and was a silent partner. Well, last night I heard tell they had quarreled, but nobody knew what about. Now, this here Hartley, lemme tell you——"

"Never mind the whisky talk," said Taylor curtly, seeing that the sheriff had taken a drop too much. "Cut out the drinking if you want to keep that star on you! Forget

Hartley. Have you heard anything about the bank loot you found on Estrada?"

"Nope. I sent in word about it, but no answer's come. The point is, Taylor," went on the sheriff earnestly, "this here Hartley has a lot o' friends in town, sabe? Most o' Carrol's riders are somewhere's around, too. Ain't seen a one of 'em come in here, though. It looks mighty queer. I can feel danged well that something's up, but I dunno what it is. Now that Carrol's been killed, his gang will sure as hell try to clean up on you. There's queer talk goin' around, too. I dunno just what, but something about you havin' planted that there money in Estrada's warbag."

"Yeah?" Taylor looked at him hard and straight. "How far do you back me up?"

"Till hell freezes!" exclaimed the sheriff, but his eyes did not back up the conviction of his words.

"Is Barton behind whatever monkey-work is going on?"

"I dunno, for a fact," said Horton. "I kinda think he ain't, to tell the truth."

"Hm! Who's this Hartley? Where'd he come from?"

"Lived around here all his life," said the sheriff. "Oh, he's been away spells, maybe two-three year at a time; always come back here, though. Gambler, that's what he is. He's got a thumb and six fingers in county politics over to Moronia, too. That hombre is plumb bad."

Taylor finished his drink. "All right. I got a mean job to do at home, so I reckon I'll pull my freight and do it. Have Russ taken care of until I send word about the body."

He walked out of the War Arrow, thoughtfully mounted his horse, and started out of town. He shrank from telling Mary Scott about her brother, and was thinking more about this unpleasant duty than about Hartley.

Hartley puzzled him. If the man were really a little tin god in Medicine County, why had he taken on a vicious animosity to Pecos Taylor? The answer was obvious. He was allied with the bandits—perhaps had headed the gang. He and Flickinger might both be in on the game. At this thought, Taylor straightened in the saddle, and his eyes flashed.

"By jingo, I bet a dollar that's the answer! Them two jaspers were in with Estrada, sure as shooting. And if I could get out to Carrol's ranch and go through their property, I'd most likely turn up more of the loot they hadn't got rid of yet."

HE WAS passing the last houses of the town, before reaching the bridge. A startled yell rang out, followed by the crack of a shot; the bullet whistled past Taylor's cheek. One swift glance showed him a clump of horses at the side of a house, showed him four or five men tumbling out of the house, scrambling for their saddles. The bridge opening loomed ahead, and two or three shots together sent bullets spanging into the timbers around. Then, his spurs driving in, Taylor plunged into the cool darkness of the covered bridge.

Luckily, his talk with the sheriff had given him warning.

The dark tunnel loomed empty before him, as his horse lifted rattling reverberations from the planks. The men who had gathered at that house were undoubtedly Carrol's outfit; whether or not Hartley had instigated them to trouble, Carrol's death had touched off the spark.

"Caught 'em by surprise. They hadn't figured I'd leave town so quick," thought Taylor, and reached for his gun. "If they come after me——"

They were coming, and no mistake. He was two-thirds of the way across when yells and the rolling thunder of hooves filled the obscurity, and the roof echoed to the cavernous report of pistols. The bullets went wild.

Ahead, the opening grew and widened, empty. Taylor headed his horse as far as possible to the left, to keep himself out of the bull's-eye, and the instant he was out of the tunnel he pulled the animal clear to one side of the road and slipped from the saddle. He darted back inside the bridge, now a wild roar of thunderous hooves, and, unseen, emptied his gun down the tunnel.

The result was terrible.

There was a crash that shook the whole structure. To see what happened was impossible, but more than one horse must have gone down, and the others, unable to stop, piled up. Yells and screams, oaths and shots, vomited down the dust filled tunnel, but not a single rider spurred on to the opening. That bridge had been a death trap, and the pursuit had turned into a horrible welter of kicking animals and frantic men.

"I reckon that'll give 'em a lesson!" muttered Pecos Taylor, as he swung into the saddle.

Reloading as he rode, he headed sharply out along the road to get away from Springvale as rapidly as possible. But he was not bound for home now; his thoughts were all on Hartley and Flickinger, sitting on the cool gallery of the ranch-house. Why had they sent their men into town to kill him?

"We'll find out, maybe. Got to have the full story to tell Mary Scott!" muttered Taylor, and grinned mirthlessly at the white road.

VIII

THAT noon, three men were gathered in conclave at the C in a Ring, where no one remained of the outfit except the cook.

Barton had dropped in there, after visiting the Lazy S. He was not wearing any air of triumph, either. Finding that Carrol had gone to town, he consented to stay for dinner and wear out the heat of the day, more especially as Carrol's private stock of whisky was famous for quality.

He made no secret of his morning's work.

"I'm up against it, that's all," he said as they setted down at the dinner table. "So far as that there Taylor goes, I'll settle him one o' these days. But the danged cuss was slick enough to drag Mary Scott into it. With her on the place, I can't throw in a bunch o' men and go to shooting."

"Far's I can see, you ain't got a shadder o' right to do it anyhow," said Hartley. Barton gave him a dark look and grinned.

"Well, I'd aimed to clean up on a sizable herd o' stock," he confessed frankly. "Can't be done now, though. I ain't carrying no war on women. And we made a settlement, her and me, this morning. I dunno as I hadn't ought to be satisfied."

"My gosh, you're talkin' mighty low!" put in Flickinger. "That jigger Taylor was here this mornin', looking for Carrol. I wouldn't be s'prised if the two o' them had framed up something. Carrol, he's got the same notion you have about carryin' a war to women. He was right sweet on Mary Scott, too, one time. And this here Taylor is a slick one."

HARTLEY grunted, and his blue agate eyes swept the faces of the two men before him. "He's a durned slight slicker'n you gents know or think," he said slowly. "He's the feller who was workin' as association detective over in that there Sweetwater country sheep war last fall. Three cowmen was hung on his testimony, for killin' a shepherd. Three good men strung up, by gosh, for killin' a lousy, ornery shepherd that hadn't no excuse to live, anyhow!"

His words struck the others like a bombshell.

"What!" cried Barton, staring at him. "You mean to say he's that jasper? How you know?"

"Seen his picture. Same name, too," said Hartley.

"Then, by gosh, he ain't going to settle down near me!" said Barton, and swore a great oath. He started suddenly. "Say! I just thought o' something. Mary Scott, she says Russ was with Taylor. Both of them here, or just Taylor?"

"Just Taylor," said Flickinger. "Why?"

"Then it's a cinch Russ went to town," said Barton. "And if Carrol's there too, I bet you some fireworks go off! Most of your outfit there, Flick?"

"Yeah, all but a couple of riders workin' on the north range," said the foreman. He shrugged. "It don't worry me none if Russ gets his needin's."

"Yeah," said Barton, "but Carrol——"

"Blast Carrol," broke out Hartley, his blue eyes venomous. "Carrol's a fool, I tell you! I got an interest in this here outfit, and me and Carrol don't hitch. You might's well know it, Barton."

"Yeah." Barton surveyed him. "Carrol's square as a die, and you ain't. You needn't

to get riled up, neither. I've knowed you a long while Hartley, and——"

"My gosh, can't you two jiggers do better'n go to bawling each other out?" broke in Flickinger, anxiously. "Cut it out. If Taylor gets out o' town with a whole skin, which same he won't, then——"

"Why won't he?" snapped Barton.

"Because our outfit has orders to get him," said Hartley, a rasp in his voice. His gaze went to Barton challengingly. "Carrol wouldn't hear to it, and I gave 'em the orders, so there ye are. Like it?"

Barton nodded. "Suits me," he said. "Needn't think you can make me mad by killin' this Taylor! If you don't do it, I will, by gosh. I ain't evened up with him, by a durned sight!"

"Well, if you want my guess, here it is." Hartley leaned forward across the table. "Barton, you know about findin' that there bank loot in Estrada's roll? You seen it done?"

"Taylor found it," said Barton.

"Yeah. Him and Estrada were partners, by gosh! I can swear to that. Estrada told me about it a while back." Hartley, whatever the purpose of his lie, could lie with the effrontery of a veteran. "The two o' them pulled off a lot o' jobs up beyond Moronia, sabe? Taylor, he come along here and Estrada seen right off he had turned ag'in him, and Estrada done tried to get him. Well, you-all know what happened."

"My gosh!" exclaimed Barton, staring. "So that's howcome, huh? Prob'ly this Taylor had heard from Estrada all about me havin' the Lazy S and so forth. He sneaked along in and went right to Russ Scott and bought an interest—he had lots o' cash. Then he comes along and jumps Estrada, and tries to make a play about Estrada bein' a bandit! No wonder he could play a good game, with all them cards!"

"And by gosh, it was him killed Atwater!" cried out Flickinger eagerly. "Remember, Barton, the sheriff was over to the Sweetwater country time o' that sheep war? Bet you a dollar he seen Taylor there, and they met up on the road, and Atwater says something about it, and Taylor up and plugs him!"

"Huh!" exclaimed Barton. "But what about Eph Sawyer, then?"

"Shucks! I reckon Russ Scott shot him—he was killed with a rifle bullet, and Atwater with a six-gun held up ag'in him!" said Flickinger. "Me and Carrol figgered that all out."

THE blue eyes of Hartley glowed with an unholy light. This was even better than he had looked for.

"Lemme tell you birds something," he said earnestly. "This here Taylor ain't nobody's fool. He's so durned salty the cows come to lick his boots. I bet you he pulls out o' Springvale alive, for all of our outfit! I was talkin' to Horton las' night, but there's no use tryin' to drag that fool into it. He's all puffed up over jailin' Barton and finding the bank loot on Mig Estrada. The three of us have got to act."

"Shoot the works," said Barton. "Let's go out to the porch. Too durned hot here."

Their meal being over, the three men adjourned to the gallery, absorbed a shot of liquid nourishment, and lighted cigars. Then Hartley voiced his program.

"Gents, we got to get this Taylor—providing he leaves town alive. Now, it's a cinch that if he had money enough to buy into the Lazy S, he's got the rest of his loot with him."

"Then you've known quite a spell about Estrada bein' in that bandit gang?" demanded Barton.

"Sure. He says he'd reformed," said Hartley glibly. "About Taylor, now—the thing to do is to make that cuss Horton resign and get Flickinger appointed sheriff. I'll answer for the prosecutin' attorney and the rest of the boys. First thing, we'll fix Taylor. And when we go through his stuff, we'll find his share of the loot."

Barton did not like Hartley. Barton had his faults, but he was not yellow or crooked.

"I dunno just what you're drivin' at," he said flatly, "but I aim to get Taylor my own self and do it my own way."

Hartley hesitated, and shot Flickinger a glance, perhaps of warning.

"Well, that's all right," he said. "But about the sheriff——"

"Suits me to kick him out," said Barton.

Flickinger rose and went into the house. Hartley, saying he did not like the brand of whisky on the table, went in search of another. Barton emptied his glass and chewed on his cigar, eyes on the landscape. Presently Hartley returned with a fresh bottle.

"Somebody comin', looks like," observed the rancher. Hartley glanced up, eyed the distant rider, and hastily went back into the house, calling Flickinger.

Barton rose, after a moment, and hitched his gunbelt around. He, too, had recognized the oncoming rider. He poured another drink and downed it at a gulp; then, with a flush rising in his dark face, he stepped from the porch and started out to meet Pecos Taylor.

Coming up, Taylor saw Barton there, awaiting him, impassive, silent. The porch was empty, but as Taylor dismounted, Flickinger came hastily forth and then halted.

"Taylor," said Barton in a rather thick voice, "I'm lookin' for you."

Taylor, hands at his sides, could not mistake the import of the rancher's words and air, but he gave no indication of anger.

"Let your lookin' wait for a better time, then," he said quietly. "Prob'ly you don't know that Carrol and Russ Scott have just killed each other in town. It's no time for starting any more war, Barton."

HEARING this, Flickinger flung a look at the doorway of the house, but it was empty. Hartley had not appeared. The news made no impression upon Barton.

"I ain't studying nobody else's business," said Barton. "I got my own to mind. And I don't aim to take lying down what I've took off you."

"In which I don't blame you none," said Taylor, with the vestige of a smile. "But let it wait a spell, Barton. I'll meet you in town tomorrow if you want, but for today I got more important work than killing you. And I don't want to kill you now or later, if I can help it."

"This here is the day and the time," said Barton, as though he had not heard. "My gosh, do I got to draw and shoot you down like a dog?"

"I reckon you do, if you mean it," said Taylor crisply. Anger lightened his eyes. "Don't be a fool, man!" he exclaimed. "There's been altogether too much killing around here. It's got to end sometime. There's nothing between us that asks for gunplay——"

"Well, you started it, so I reckon you can finish it," said Barton grimly. "And I ain't anxious to be neighbors with no sneakin' association detective, neither. That got under your hide, huh?"

Taylor reddened, and shot a look at Flickinger. How had Barton learned this?

"I'm not an association detective," he said curtly.

"You lie!" cried Barton, and went for his gun.

Taylor caught the motion, read the deadly, murderous intent in the rancher's eyes, and in desperation reacted to save his own life.

Against this man, Barton had not a chance. As the rancher's gun leaped up, Taylor's weapon crashed out on the hot sunlight. Barton whirled half around; his gun went off wildly, the bullet going into the ground. Then he pitched down and lay on his face.

Taylor strode forward, knelt above him, looked up at Flickinger.

"Come out and look after him," he said, rising. "Prob'ly broke his leg, nothing worse." Then his gun jerked up. "Hear me? Step out here. Unbuckle your belt as you come. Drop the gun!"

"What you mean by this?" demanded Flickinger, coming out into the sunlight, fumbling at his belt.

"I mean what I say," snapped Taylor. "Let that gun drop—and grab for it if you want to take the chance! Where's Hartley?"

"Dunno," said Flickinger sullenly, letting

his gunbelt fall. "He rode off about an hour ago. Said he had an errand."

"Probably setting some more of the outfit on my trail, huh?" said Taylor. "Well, you look after Barton, and do the job right."

He picked up Flickinger's belt and gun, and stepped to the porch. As he glanced around, he caught sight of something moving in the open crack of the door, between door and jamb. He whirled like a shot—but he had detected the movement too late.

The white flame of a gun leaped out, and Taylor went down.

IX

AROUND the corner of the porch came the cook, running.

"What's the shootin' about?" he exclaimed, then caught sight of Barton. "My gosh, Flick! Who killed him?"

"Here, Ben!"

Hartley beckoned the cook to the porch, and pointed to the figure of Taylor, beside him.

"This gent done for Barton, but Barton got him," he said glibly. "Hustle in, now. Fetch cloths and water—hot water, if you got it. Barton ain't dead. Move!"

The cook vanished on the jump. Hartley leaned over the figure of Taylor for a moment, and then rose, and came out to join Flickinger.

"He ain't dead—creased him around the ribs," he said hastily. "I fixed things; so much the better! Now we'll make the job stick on him. Don't forget—Barton's bullet struck him, sabe? Barton won't know the difference. Here, we'll carry him up."

THEY lifted Barton and carried him up to the gallery. His leg was broken just below the knee. At this moment the cook appeared with a kettle of water and some more or less clean rags.

"Look at that jigger on the floor, while we get Barton fixed," directed Hartley.

The cook obeyed. He turned Taylor about on his face, and opened his shirt.

"My gosh!" The startled exclamation broke from him. "Looky here, Flick! Is this real?"

He showed them a flat, thick packet of brand new hundred-dollar bills that had fallen from inside the shirt of Taylor as he opened it. They were blood-stained now.

"Is he dead?" said Hartley, placing the bills on the table.

"Nope. Ain't going to be, neither. But my gosh! What a roll o' money!"

"S'pose you remember how you found it, Ben," said Flickinger. "This feller is the one Estrada told us about, Hartley—one o' them bandits. Go get a rope. We'll tie him up."

"And do it quick," added Hartley. "Looks as though some folks would be along from town most any time now."

In this, Hartley was more than right.

Taylor came to himself, to find that he was securely tied in a chair. His wound was of no serious import; a broken rib, loss of blood, damaged flesh and skin. A groan drew his attention to one side, where Barton was being held by Ben and Flickinger, while Hartley set the broken leg. The bullet had been extracted.

"All right," said Hartley calmly, as Barton relaxed. "She's set, and he's done fainted; so much the better. Got them splints, Flick? Gimme a hand with 'em. Ben, go get the bottle on my dresser with arnicy in it."

Ben departed hastily.

Taylor comprehended something of his own position, but did not understand why he was tied in the chair. He watched Hartley and Flickinger finish their job of rough surgery, and a very good job they made of it. Barton did not regain consciousness, for the pain had been terrific.

"All right, Flick." Hartley stood up. "Reckon we can go and wash. Hello! Taylor's awake. How you feelin', Mr. Taylor? Durn your lousy hide, you'll be feelin' worse pretty quick!"

Taylor made no response. In the glittering blue eyes of Hartley, in that queer poker-face, he read a venomous hatred. It puzzled him. Flickinger regarded him with a grin, but it did not hold the deadliness of those blue eyes.

The two men passed around to the side of the house, for their hands and wrists were red with blood. Taylor saw that they must have bandaged him before attending to Barton, since his wound was stanched and his shirt had been roughly replaced.

Ben stumbled out on to the gallery, came

to the table, and then swore softly.

"Hell's bells! This ain't the arnicy—it's Hartley's hair-dye!"

He swung around, but Taylor's sharp exclamation halted him.

"Hair-dye? Does Hartley dye his hair?"

Ben grinned. "Does he? Durned if he ain't the worst towhead you ever seen! Used to be, anyhow. You're lucky, feller! Yes, sir, I bet you can feel mighty lucky you ain't got but a scratch, and you can go to jail——"

TAYLOR did not hear what the cook was saying; he had closed his eyes, for realization had come to him with anguish and bitterness.

Hartley was Arkansas Red!

Now everything was explained by sight of that hair-dye. Hartley had altered his identity very simply; he was Estrada's old friend and partner; his vindictive hatred for Taylor was no longer a mystery, for he was the third man.

When Taylor opened his eyes and looked out at the landscape, his face was set in hard and bitter lines. He saw a lifting dust-spurt of approaching horsemen, but it meant nothing to him. He looked at Hartley and Flickinger as they came around the corner of the house, and when they grinned at him he said nothing.

"Pretty good catch, ain't he?" said Hartley. "Feelin' better, Taylor?"

Taylor did not reply, but under his steady gaze Hartley whitened a little, and then swore softly.

"Somebody coming," announced Ben from the doorway. "Hey, Hartley! Want that arnicy?"

"Don't matter—I done forgot about it," said Hartley. "Barton's bandages is on now. That'll be the outfit, Flick. Better send a rider to town and get the sheriff."

"And, by gosh, remember it was me found the money on this feller!" spoke out Ben proudly. "If they's a reward for him, then——"

"Then it's yours, you bet," said Hartley.

Taylor saw his grin, saw the packet of banknotes on the table, and suddenly comprehended that Hartley had trapped him. Then, for the first time, he spoke.

"You're done, Arkansas Red," he said, meeting the gaze of Hartley. "You'd better start in sayin' your prayers, for my trail's ended! You know who I am and what I want you for."

"Yeah, your trail's ended all right," said Hartley with a sneer. "It's ended in the pen, that's where! Are them the boys, Flick?"

"Nope." Flickinger was eyeing the approaching group of riders with a puzzled frown. "Looks like Shorty's hoss, all right—— Bygosh, it's that danged sheriff! And a couple more fellers from town, and a couple I don't know! Shorty and Poke are with 'em, though."

Taylor laughed harshly. "I reckon your outfit has lost considerable today," he said.

The others stood staring, as the string of riders, half a dozen in all, swept up toward the ranch-house. Two of them belonged to the outfit, two were complete strangers; Sheriff Horton and two deputies completed the group. As they came closer, Flickinger swore.

"Shorty and Poke are tied up, Hartley!" he exclaimed, startled. "Something wrong."

"We'll fix it," said Hartley quietly.

THE riders drew rein. The two men of the outfit kept their saddles; the other five dismounted and approached the gallery, the sheriff in the lead.

"Howdy, boys," he said. "My gosh, what's been goin' on here? Barton hurt? And what you got Taylor tied up for?"

"For you to arrest," said Hartley. "Come on up and have a drink and go into it. Who's your friends?"

The sheriff turned to the two strangers and introduced them.

"McGee and Foster, gov'ment men," he said proudly. "They heard about me locating Estrada as one o' that there bandit gang, and come along to see about it."

"Well, we got Estrada's partner right here, and caught him with the goods on him," said Hartley, motioning to Taylor. The latter said nothing. His eyes met and

held those of the two government men for a moment, but he made no response. The sheriff looked at him, frowning.

"This feller? Taylor?" said Horton. "Gosh, Hartley, you must be wrong there ——"

"Well, come on up and take it easy—explaining's simple," said Hartley. "What you got them two boys tied up for?"

"For raising hell," said the sheriff promptly. "Your durned riders tried to shoot up Taylor, and he crippled the hull gang all but these two, and we gathered them in as we come along."

All five of them came trooping up, disregarding Taylor and the senseless Barton. Ben hustled inside and brought out more glasses, and the bottle was passed around. McGee and Foster, the government men, did not drink. They looked at the package of money, and the sheriff handed it to them.

"What about this, gents? Is it loot?"

"Out o' the same lot you showed us at your office, sheriff," said McGee curtly. "Come out of a registered mail pouch; bank number's still on the paper around it. Where'd you get it?"

All looked at Hartley, who turned with a gesture to Ben. The cook spoke up proudly.

"There's the guy," and he pointed to Taylor. "It fell out o' this jigger's shirt when I went to turn him over."

"How about it?" snapped McGee.

Taylor said nothing at all; he sat there as though carven in stone; but his eyes remained fastened on Hartley. Now the latter spoke.

"Gents," he said slowly. "I've knowed for some time that Mig Estrada had been in that there bandit gang. He says he had got nothing out of it, and he had reformed and so forth, and would I keep quiet; I done it, so's to give him a chance to go straight. Well, you all know he fooled me, I reckon. The point is, he says to me one day that this feller Taylor had been the head o' that there outfit. Flickinger heard him."

"Yeah," said Flickinger, with a nod of assent.

"This Taylor came along today," pursued Hartley, "and Barton was here. Barton, he steps off the porch to meet Taylor and pulls a gun. He shot Taylor, and got shot. Me and Flick was looking at him, and Ben was seeing if Taylor was dead, and gives a holler, and shows us the money."

McGEE and Foster looked at each other, then looked at Taylor. The sheriff rubbed his nose uneasily, but was obviously helpless to intervene.

"Taylor's played a right smart game," went on Hartley. "He met up with Sheriff Atwater in Eagle Pass. The sheriff hadn't been killed by Eph Sawyer at all. Me and Carrol found the two bodies and figured out that Atwater had been killed by a gun held close to him. He was powder-burned. Well, seems like Taylor must ha' killed him. That don't signify, but it goes to show how slick Taylor is. I s'pose you'll deny it, Taylor?"

Everyone glanced at Taylor, who smiled grimly.

"Not a bit of it," he said, to the surprise of all. Then he fell silent again.

There was a moment of silence, then McGee cleared his throat and produced a pair of handcuffs. He jingled them in his hand.

"Looks like we'd got our man, Foster," he observed, and the other nodded. "I reckon you got no objection to our takin' him along, Sheriff?"

"I reckon not," said Sheriff Horton, none too happily.

McGee came over to Taylor, and motioned to the rope.

"Cut him loose, Foster," he said. "I'll 'tend to him when you get his arms loose."

Taylor said nothing. Foster worked at the rope, and after a moment it began to come loose. McGee reached down and caught Taylor's right wrist.

X

SOMETHING astonishing happened—something so astonishing that for an instant none of those who witnessed it could believe their senses. And that instant was fatal to one of the men who stood staring.

Instead of clapping the handcuffs on Taylor's wrist, McGee jerked out his gun and slipped it into Taylor's hand, then stood back.

"You boys slipped up on one point," he said. "Taylor happens to be the United

States marshal in charge of this case. Play your cards, Taylor."

TAYLOR grinned at the group of paralyzed men, as the rope fell loose and he came to his feet.

"Up, gents!" he said to Flickinger and Hartley. "You two jiggers are under arrest. Hartley, you're the leader of this bandit gang. Foster, you'll probably find what's left of the mail robbery loot in Hartley's possession. He slipped that package of notes nto my shirt so they'd be found. Flickinger's hand in glove with him. Iron them, McGee."

McGee was already crossing the gallery floor. He seized the uplifted hands of Flickinger and snapped on the handcuffs. Flickinger, pop-eyed, was too stupefied to find words. Foster moved toward Hartley, producing another pair of bracelets. For an instant his figure came between Taylor and Hartley.

In this instant, Hartley moved.

He ducked, a gun leaped into his hand, a shot crashed out. Another shot answered it like an echo. Hartley spun around and collapsed in a heap. Taylor lowered his smoking gun. There was a red crease on his cheek where Hartley's bullet had passed. A drop of blood gathered and fell to his chin.

"So that's the finish of Arkansas Red," he observed calmly. "Sorry, McGee—you'll have to be satisfied with Flickinger. Sheriff——"

"By gosh!" Sheriff Horton came to him hastily, seized his hand, and pumped it. "By gosh, Taylor, I'm right glad! I didn't see no way to help you—and now it's all right——"

"And you'd better turn them boys loose," said Taylor, indicating the two riders still in the saddle. "They were only obeying orders, and the outfit didn't hurt me none. McGee, if it's all right with you, I'll go for a ride. I got an errand to do, and it can't wait."

"Sure," said McGee. "Sure. We'll see you in town tomorrow, old timer."

Taylor strode out to where his horse waited with the others. Grimacing with pain, he mounted; then, without looking back, he headed for the Lazy S and Mary Scott.

His trail was ended.

KISMET IN PICARDY

By DON McGREW

Author of "Man the Guns," etc.

THE FOREIGN LEGION IS THE FOREIGN LEGION—WHETHER ON THE BURNING AFRICAN SANDS OR IN THE MUD OF FLANDERS. A GLOWING AFRICAN SUN SAW THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THIS DRAMA—AND A COLLAPSED DUGOUT WALL HID THE LAST FROM CURIOUS AMERICAN EYES

BEN AMOUD swears that Nat'alla will never be allowed to enter the seventh heaven because she will make all the houris jealous; but it is not her beauty alone that causes a stir in the Algerian bazaar of Sidi-bel-Abbes when she sees fit to beat a certain tom tom. The circle of swarthy Arabians in white burnouses who squat on the ancient cobblestones beneath her windows know that the tom tom has a story. At thought of it their piercing black eyes gleam, and they peer at one another from under their hoods with their lips curled back from their white teeth in unholy mirth. Of all the grisly tales brought back from the western front by Spahis, Senegalese and legionnaires of *le premier regiment des etrangers,* none tickles their fancy more than the yarn of that tom tom's cover. It is a tightly stretched bit of exquisitely tanned leather, brought back from the plains of Picardy.

And how do I know the story? I was a private in the Foreign Legion, in the spring of '14—so that's how I came to meet up with Vance Rutledge. He had just come down from Oran with a detachment of *les bleus,* which was our name for recruits who came from all over creation to do five years in the Legion, at five miserable centimes a day.

You've never seen the big barracks at Sidi-bel-Abbes, have you? You've missed a sight. You should see a batch of forlorn recruits fumbling with the buckles of their packs and staring at those grim, cheerless buildings for the first time! *Nom du bon dieu,* the sun beats down on the white stones of the barrack yard like an open furnace door, and the heat is held in by high, thick walls; but the prospect there for five years lays a chill on the heart like the hand of death. Ah, *oui*—like the hand of death.

Well, Vance was the only American in that batch; and when I saw him looking around I knew what he was thinking. There were men of all sorts came into the Legion at that time—despondent men, army deserters, men with blasted lives, adventurers, and hard-boiled Apache cutthroats, two jumps ahead of the gallows or the guillotine. That tall, blond kid stood out among those recruits—a boy with a queer mixture of

recklessness and aestheticism in his face, as different from many of those hard-bitten legionnaires as a grayhound is different from a pack of wolves. So when I saw him fumbling there like a lost soul with his blue tunic and his kepi and the rest of his kit I offered a hand; and he was ready to hug me.

"I'm an awful duffer, I'm afraid," he said to me after I'd explained his kit twice hand-running.

He *was* fairly helpless, for an ex-football player; being a rich man's son, he'd never been thrown on his own in his life. But I got him straightened away after a bit, and, as he had some francs left, we were heading out of the gate soon afterward, leaving the outfit howling, *"Alles schieb los! A la soupe!"* at the mess hall. No *potage au gamelle* for us that night—not while he had that roll of francs.

NOW, everyone who came to the Legion in those days had a story—and he told me his while the shadows crept out across the sands from Mount Tessala, and the voice of the muezzin was ringing out in a nasal sing song over the flat roofs of the town, calling the faithful to acknowledge Mahomet. It wasn't much of a story—though he thought it was, poor devil! There was a girl—there usually is—and for some reason he'd torn up her picture. That was in Nice, France. Then he'd looked long on the wine when it is red, and had ended up broke in Monte Carlo. By way of retrieving himself he had signed a check, thinking that his dad, back in the States, would make it good—as he had before.

"This time, though," said Vance, tossing me a letter across a café table, "he gave me the gate. *Regardez!"*

The letter was short and sweet. It read: *"I've given you a most extraordinary amount of rope, young man, thinking that you'd eventually round to, go to work, and play ball. As a man you're a good lounge lizard. Work your way home on a cattle boat, and I'll give you a job. Not a cent, though, for gambling debts. Your dad."*

"So,"I said, looking him over, "you took your choice between *caput, finis!*—and the Legion."

"Well, between l'Isle Diable—over that check, you know!—and the Legion. But it's the same thing, if you ask me." And the tears misted in the kid's eyes.

That was the way things were with him—at the time. He hadn't found himself as yet. He'd been floating along, so to speak, picking flowers along the high spots of life and blowing the petals any which way—*comme ça.* Proof! Now he was up against the real thing, with a double-barreled bang. By the silver statue of St. Michael, I was between two fires, looking at him; for while I knew that the jolt would be the making of him, if he pulled through, there was always the if to consider. The sands of the Sahara cover the bones of a host of forgotten men who were driven into cafard by the Legion.

WELL, I didn't stress that that night—and Vance kept on throwing vin blanc and cognac into his system. At first he was away down in the dumps, and full of choky sobs; then a reaction set in and he was ready to defy the world; and pretty soon, when the cognac had all his incandescent lamps going full blast, he craved action. Any sort of action, from jumping on a table in the estaminet, so they could hear him singing the better, to reciting "Jim Bludsoe" from the neck of a camel. He had a way with him, that kid; he could make even the Arabs laugh, and I couldn't reason with him. Off limits or not, he would explore those winding dark alleys as he pleased. So that's how we ended up under Nat'alla's windows, defending ourselves with loose cobblestones, our backs against the wall.

What started it I don't know, except that it was something he did. Anyway, there were a heap of Arabs there, about to make a rush with their knives, and Vance about to heave another stone, when a voice from the window behind us checked the Bedouins dead.

"Aha!" said Vance, looking up. In the half light Nat'alla was a vision. She had most eloquent eyes, had Nat'alla, and a creamy skin of gold and ivory. She wore long yellow trouserlettes of soft silk in lieu of skirts, and a sarong was draped around one shoulder; but the other was bare, and the high Spanish comb in her jet black hair

glinted with jewels. 'Twas no wonder Vance stared.

It was only a second, though. Off came his kepi, and he bowed low. "Cleopatra herself?" he exclaimed. Then he grinned in the way he had, and reached up his hand to her. "I'm sorry I was late," he said in French. "Will you forgive and forget?"

I started to grab him then. He didn't know who he was talking to. Nat'alla was a power in the province. There was a deal of mystery about her; from whence she came no one seemed to know; but she had both Tourareg and Spanish blood, and was ace high with the natives. They treated her as a sort of semi-saint, attributing certain supernatural powers to the girl. It was said of her that she appeared once out of a dust cloud in the desert, when the camels in a caravan had gone seven days without water, and were refusing to rise; and where the me'allim—men of water wisdom—had said there was no water, there she made water appear. Don't ask me how such legends start among those people; they do. Anyway, the French Government catered to her, having an eye to trade, and the colonel and his staff were occasionally her guest at téffin. With enlisted legionnaires she had never been seen.

"Come away from here while she's in good humor," I warned him in English. "You're crowding your luck."

BUT Nat'alla understood English, it appeared. There was something about that boy's infectious grin that had taken her fancy for the moment, too. Down she reached, siezed his hand—and in two shakes we were through the window.

Why did she do it? Not because she fell in love with him, at any rate. A whim, I suppose. It was the damned audacity of that kid that tickled her sense of humor, too, I suppose. Then, she'd been educated on the continent, and the blue tunic of the Legion couldn't hide the earmarks of his sort from her. Anyway, she clapped her hands, and Arab servants glided into the salon—and then Vance spotted the phonograph. In less than two shakes he had asked her to dance, and they put on a record.

That's the way we were when Von Bissemer came in. I was sitting back on a divan with a long, cool drink in my hand, and Vance was teaching Nat'alla a new tango step when suddenly Von Bissemer stood in the archway.

I can see that fellow yet! A tall, trim officer he was, with cold gray eyes, and a small blond mustache. Neatly waxed it was, too. He had the air about him of a man who had been born with a monocle in his eye—and he wore one that night.

In less than the bat of an eye I was on my feet, standing stiffly at attention. I knew Von Bissemer well. That is, I knew him as the stiffest disciplinarian in the Legion. A cold-blooded aristocrat from some old German family who looked on all enlisted men as dogs and swine. He had come to the Legion as a private, running from some sort of trouble in the German army—and then Nat'alla had fallen for him. Yes, Nat'alla. She loved him, and it was through her influence at headquarters that he received his commission as a lieutenant.

"Here," I thought, "is where we catch it!"

Said Von Bissemer, tapping his leg with a rosewood swagger stick, and smiling without separating his white teeth, "I knew my fiancé was fond of dogs, but I didn't know you fancied this particular breed, Nat'alla."

THE cognac, of course, had something to do with what followed. Vance stopped dancing and looked at Van Bissemer. By the nose of the holy camel, there was hate at first sight, if ever I saw it! Quick as a flash Vance shoved a hand in his pocket, withdrew a silver franc louis, shoved it in his eye, and stared at Von Bissemer.

"Do you know," he said in his best Harvard drawl, "that I really think you'd like my old friend Devonshire? He's quite a rotter, and a bit of an ass, and most awfully stupid—but *you'd* like him!"

I nearly fell through my shoes. Von Bissemer could speak several languages—and

I thought for a moment that the blood would burst through the skin of his face. His smile froze there. Then he stepped to the window and blew a whistle for the military police.

"Before I get through with you," Von Bissemer gritted, "you'll wish that you'd blown your brains out in Marseilles!"

Nat'alla tried to soften things a bit, saying that Vance could not have grasped the full significance of disrespect to an officer in the Legion; but she might as well have addressed a stone wall. In a minute or two a detail came running, and we were off for cells.

You've read of "black holes" in civilian prisons. We spent that night with thirty others, packed into a cell about twelve feet square. No bunks, no blankets, no air vent save for a small one above the door. One fellow went crazy that night and tried to bash in his head against the wall. The guard strung him up by the thumbs to bring him to reason.

"I guess I spoke out of turn," Vance acknowledged, when the liquor died within him.

He was a sick boy about then, so I didn't rub it in. I knew he was in for sheer downright hell on earth, and I pitied him.

WHEN morning came, I was sent without even *cafe et pain* to clean an Arab's sewer. But not Vance. He wasn't to escape *gymnastique des bleus*. It was always the same for recruits then. Fall in with full equipment and march to the drill grounds. Then, *"Formez les faisceaux! Sac a' terre!"* When knapsacks were discarded and arms stacked, it was *"Pas gymnastique! En avant! Marche!"* That and no more. "At the double—march!" March or die, dog trotting round and round, with the sergeant saying monotonously, *"A droit—droit!"*

I didn't see Vance until first soup call at ten thirty. He was lying on his bunk, spitting blood. His face was a fish-belly white, his eyes black and sunken. Every breath was an agony.

"My God," he wheezed, "this is worse than the Roman galleys; Thirty minutes at a stretch. Running. Men vomiting blood. Sobbing like children. Terrible. If you fell down that dog of Von Bissemer kicked you up. See? I'm black and blue. Those who refused—thrown into cells and strung up. Oh my God, why didn't I blow my head off?"

I never felt sorrier for anyone in my life, but that was no time for sympathy. "So?" I said. "You're a quitter, eh?"

He stared. "A quitter, is it? Say, what do I owe these rotten French, anyway? Taking a man in as a soldier and then making him do work that they can't even hire natives to do. A quitter, eh? Well, mark me down as a rebel—anything you like—I'm for beating it out of this as soon as I can get some money."

"Oh!" I said. "You're going to write to dad, eh?"

With that he gave me an ugly look. "I'll see him in hell first!" he exploded.

"Attaboy!" I cried. "In the meantime, keep this in mind—you'll get hardened before long, and then, when you've toughened up, you'll thank your stars some day when you're on the march. That's what the running's for. When the Touaregs are riding on our flanks, God help the poor devil who can't keep up with the column."

"I'll keep up with the column!" he choked out. "Long enough, anyway, to get that devil Von Bissemer!"

I really think that jibe I gave him about quitting was the turning point for that kid. Anyway, "Long enough to get Von Bissemer!" became a sort of slogan with him. After the first agonies, he toughened to the drill. He ate like a wolf, and began to fill out. In spite of the fact that he spent his first two weeks drilling during the day, and going to cells at night, he grew tough as whipcord. At every opportunity Von Bissemer singled him out for more punishment, but the kid bucked straight ahead. If his shoes had a spot on them he was sent to stack forage for the Spahis. If there was a spot of oil on his gun stock he was given two hours' extra pack drill, with a hundred

pounds of sand on his back. Yet Vance gritted his teeth and stuck it out. At the end of three months you wouldn't have recognized the reckless kid in the tanned, square-shouldered legionnaire who marched at my side.

"He'll not get me!" he promised me. "I'm a better man than he is, down deep, damn his soul."

I KNEW that, by this time; but I knew, too, that the odds were with Von Bissemer. He had no intention of throwing off his blouse and giving Vance a show, man to man. He'd swank about with his swagger stick when the sergeant was putting his platoon through its paces, and then say something like this:

"The men have done passably well, Sergeant—except that mistake for a man in the third squad." With which he'd point at Vance. "Give him an hour's extra drill for spoiling that last wheel." And he'd smile, without separating his teeth.

It almost came to murder one day when Vance came in from fatigue detail. Mind you, the boy was in fatigue clothes, and had been digging sewers. No chance to bathe as yet. Von Bissemer ran into him. "Take this man," he said to a sergeant, "and have him scrubbed off with sand under the showers. He's filthy."

I grabbed him when he came out of that, for they'd worked on him with scrub brushes and sand, taking the hide off in patches. He'd have gone straight to Von Bissemer's quarters, bayonet in hand. But I hustled him out the gate.

"It's just the chance Von Bissemer is looking for," I told him. "He'd shoot you like a dog before you got within reach. Even if you succeeded it would only mean a firing squad." And I weakened, thinking of the way he'd been lying on his cot of late, staring at the ceiling. It was high time to watch a man when he commenced doing that—in the Legion. Suddenly there'd be a screech, and we'd have a madman on our hands, slashing with a bayonet—or he'd go running straight off into the desert, to be cut up by Arabs.

"You'd better write to your dad," I told him. "Yes, I mean it. Get money and pull your freight. There's nothing but the prison battalion ahead of you here, with Von Bissemer on your trail."

HE WAS almost hopeless himself at the moment, and what he would have said I don't know, for just then a young woman came driving along the street in an American car. At sight of her Vance stopped dead and rubbed at his eyes.

"Blix?" he muttered. "In Sidi-bel-Abbes? I'm seeing things."

"Blix?" I said. "Blix who?"

He didn't seem to hear me. Just then Von Bissemer came around a corner, and doffed his cap. Yes, to the American girl. She stopped, and smiled—and this Von Bissemer could certainly bow gracefully from the hips! Ah, he was a handsome devil, and a polished devil, too—when it suited him. It suited him then, for Blix was a stunning girl. Her eyes were fairly shining, and he was quite unconscious of the fact that Nat'alla was watching from a window across the way. By the beard of a poilu, *her* eyes were as green as a cat's in the dark!

There was a situation for you—all in a flash. I knew that this was the girl who put the burr under Vance's saddle; I knew it before he spoke, for his face was chalky white under the tan. A tall, dark-haired independent young girl, with carved red lips and a resolute chin. Smiling winsomely at Von Bissemer, while Vance snarled murderously under his breath, and Nat'alla slowly withdrew behind the curtains, her hand on her heart.

"Wait here!" Vance said, a moment later, when Von Bissemer tipped his cap and started across the square. Then Vance marched straight toward the machine, calling her name.

I saw Von Bissemer stop and stare; he seemed about to return, but evidently thought better of it. Meanwhile the girl started, and stared at Vance, with two high spots of color in her cheeks.

What they said I couldn't hear. She didn't smile, though, as she had at Von Bissemer. Her chin was up, and she seemed to be retorting passionately, disdainfully to whatever he had to say. I could see that he was trembling, too. When he spoke it was with a low vehemence that shook him.

THEY didn't talk over five minutes. Then the girl started her car with a vicious jamb of the levers and whirled by me, her blazing eyes straight ahead. Vance came back to me, biting his lip. We walked on as much as two or three blocks before he opened his lips.

"That's the girl," he ground out then, between his teeth, "the girl whose picture I tore up. We've always scrapped, since we were kids because—because—oh, damn it, I don't really know. Engaged one day and off the next. That time it was serious, though—she went off to a house party in a villa in Nice, with a perfect rotter, and I objected. Said I couldn't dictate to her, and all that sort of thing. Well, that's that—but now she's here. No, it's no happenstance—her uncle is a military attache in Paris. Her father's got oodles of filthy lucre, and she's been in France about as much as she's been in the States. Went to school a year with our colonel's daughter. Well, when I disappeared, she thought of the Legion, and her uncle checked up—just in case. Then she cabled my dad. And that's why she's here."

"With a discharge?" I ventured.

"No. Couldn't pull it. With money to fix things up so I can be smuggled to the coast. Her brother's yacht is in Oran now."

"Then why are you looking so down in the mouth?" I cried. "We can both pull our freight now, man!"

"Billy," he said ruefully, "I didn't think of you. I really didn't. You saw her smiling at that hound of a Von Bissemer? I spilled the beans, Billy. It seems that she met him last night at the colonel's, shortly after she motored down. He has a title, you know—Baron something or other. I said something, and she came right back at me, and then when I found out that the money wasn't coming from dad—he absolutely refused to come through—why I told her to keep it. I'll be damned if I put myself under obligations to her!"

I'd seen too much of the world to argue with him. When two hot-headed young idiots strike fire like that, they must work it out alone. They had both been spoiled, and she rebelled at the age-old ball and chain. Reason plays no part whatever between two youngsters like that—it's a hot word, and another, and then chins are up, and they're off to the races.

IN THE meantime I remembered Nat'alla's eyes, and I was hoping that Blix would leave. She didn't, though. She stayed on at the colonel's—and she kept driving around with Von Bissemer. Sometimes I thought she was doing it merely to rub salt in Vance's wounds, but at others I wasn't so sure. Von Bissemer, as I've said, was anything but unattractive. And the motives of Blix counted for nothing in Nat'alla's eyes. She'd been thrown over—poof, like that!—and I knew that hell was brewing in her heart.

It was at the end of the second week—and this was in July of '14, with war clouds gathering in Europe—when our platoon got orders to escort the colonel's daughter and her guest to Fort Bismallah, two days' march from Sidi-bel-Abbes. We were sending supplies there, and Blix, we heard, wanted to see something of the desert.

That night Nat'alla sent for me. "Is it true that Mademoiselle Americaine goes with you tomorrow?" she said. "Or is she leaving for Oran?"

I knew, somehow, that Nat'alla was quite certain that Blix was not leaving for Oran; she had heard a rumor, and she merely wished to verify it. So I told her the little I knew.

"So she's not going away!" she said, with her eyes half closed. Her hand clenched. "Of what use is pretense?" she blazed suddenly. *Par le bon dieu,* it was as though a sheet of flame shot from her eyes! "It is not the woman I hate—ah, no, no, no. It is that dog, that ingrate, that renegade German baron. I made him here—yes, I. He was to marry me. A-h-h-h, I could have his heart out!" And she was up and storming around the salon like a tigress, running her hands through her black hair, beating her breasts, shaking with dry sobs. I left her when she motioned me away and threw herself on a divan, biting the pillows and

kicking like a madwoman in her impotent despair.

I HAD a chance for a word with Blix that evening, and I took it. "Make any pretext you like," I said, "but don't go on that trip."

I wouldn't give her any reasons, just urging her to trust me. She kept staring at me, speculatively, curiously, but my features were wooden. She was half angry, in one breath, and wheedling in the next; she tried both pouts and smiles, but neither worked. I didn't intend to involve Nat'alla. All I told her was that this was Africa, and that it would be better for her to stay out of the desert, platoon or no platoon.

"Well, I'll promise this much," she vouchsafed at last, "I'll think it over."

Next morning I was much relieved to hear that she had pleaded a headache, and we were to start without the girls. But Von Bissemer took the orderly's message with a muttered curse. He got it just as Vance was asking a sergeant for leave to draw a pair of socks before the hike.

"What's that?" snarled Von Bissemer, overhearing.

"Some one stole my socks last night, sir, and I had to put my shoes on bare feet."

A twisted smile distorted Von Bissemer's face. "Fall in, dog!" he snapped. "You'll learn to take care of your socks or go without."

Of course there were fellows in the layout who had extra socks in their kits, but Von Bissemer saw to it that no one slipped Vance a pair that day. And it was bad enough with socks between your feet and that burning leather. Overhead a glaring, blazing roaring sun, beating down upon you from a glazed blue sky without a cloud. An inverted steel bowl to confine the merciless heat. Heat swimming like a mist before your eyes. Heat rising from the red-hot sand to sear your eyeballs and transform the saliva in your mouth to balls of white cotton. Red slag-like patches from which wind had blown the sand. Hot gusts of wind from between the endless panorama of sand dunes, whipping gritty, cutting sand through the dead, dry air. Slogging along, with your head down, your face cloth down to your neck, and the sand sifting through to mix with your flooding sweat, getting under your arm pits, and down the back of your neck. And each step—even with socks—making you think of a furnace door. That's what a march in the desert meant in the Legion.

YOU can imagine what it was without socks. Poor Vance was blistering the soles of his feet before we'd covered a kilometer. Later on, when he began to stumble and shamble like a broken-backed beetle, with his eyes coal black and sunk in the sockets, Von Bissemer snapped, "Tie him to the wagonette!" By the wrists, mind you. Behind the wagon. When he fell, Vance was dragged. Dragged like a dog. It was "March!" in those days. "March, Legionnaire, march or die!" *C'est terrible, mais c'est la legion!*

"I'll murder him!" Vance groaned at a halt. "I'll murder him if it's the last thing I'm ever able to do."

"You'll get your chance," I thought, remembering Nat'alla. And it came, too, much sooner than I expected. For the Touaregs jumped us about noon, rushing out from behind the sand dunes on their tall rangy, swift camels that compare to the draft animal as an Arabian charger compares to a Percheron.

It was well conceived, that attack. They came at us from all sides, from behind a dozen dunes. Big strapping Touaregs, pirates of the desert, with black veils and burnouses. Bellowing, "Illah el Allah!" and counting any sortie against Christians a holy deed. Wrist swords swishing around their heads, rosaries of ninety beads around their necks, and shot full of *kif*—a form of hashish. Tommy will tell you of the Paythans in the old days, but your Legionnaire can tell you that a Touareg will give you double buckets full of bloody froth in a rush. The strength of a gorilla and the ferocity of a wolverine—that's a Touareg.

I MADE one flying leap for Vance, and was able to slash his wrist bonds with my bayonet—we filed them razor sharp for our work!—and then we were into a bloody jamb, with squealing camels tumbling down around us, and screeching devils coming at us with three bullets through them. Crawl-

ing over the sand at us, with both legs shot through and through! The column all scattered, and squads forming little last stand circles, here, there and everywhere.

There was a beautiful chance, after a few minutes of this, to get Von Bissemer. An easy target, not far away. Vance shoved his gun across the rump of a camel, and aimed. There was Von Bissemer, as cool as you please—no more flustered than he might have been at parade. A hand on his hip, and sighting his pistol at a big hairy giant who was charging straight at him on a monstrous camel. "Bravo, *mes enfants!*" he was shouting to his men. And Vance grimaced and shifted his aim. Von Bessemer's pistol missed fire, but Vance brought the sheik down in a heap with a shot through the head.

"I couldn't do it!" Vance groaned. "I'm a soft-bellied American, I guess."

There was a moment of respite soon after that—for the legion is the legion. Though half the platoon was down, we'd driven the Touaregs back. And there was work for knives, *toute de suite*. There's little quarter given by men who have seen the handiwork of Touareg and Arab women on Legionnaire wounded.

Well, there was a big giant of a Senegalese with those Touaregs, though this was unusual, when they were fighting. He lay wounded before Vance and me. It was Vance who had shot him. The boy had just given the black a drink from his canteen when Von Bissemer came round the end of the wagon.

"Cut the beast's tongue out!" Von Bissemer ordered. "Sit him on a stake."

In hot blood more than one Legionnaire had given a wounded Arab a quick coup de grace; but torture—Vance gulped and spat. "I'll see you in hell first, you murdering hound!" he spat out, his face black with a rush of blood.

"That'll mean the prison battalion—if you pull through!" Von Bissemer came back at him—and how he smiled! It was just such a chance as he'd been looking for. Then he jumped at poor Ben Amoud—the wounded Senegalese—with a knife in his fist.

Vance raised his gun to swing it, but a Touareg saved him the trouble. The Touareg had been shamming dead. He leaped up and swung his wrist sword. The blow wasn't well aimed, and my bayonet partially deflected it, so Von Bissemer only received a crack on the head with the flat of the blade. But it felled him like a poled ox. As he went down I finished the Touareg.

SO THERE we were, with our officer unconscious, and the Touaregs making another rush. It wasn't their last, either. Between rushes the Touaregs began to circle round us, using their rifles—which they'd scorned to use before, looking upon them as coward's weapons, or something to be used when the steel fails. So for three hours we fought there, with those twisted slugs knocking patches out the dead camels, or showering us with sand. Slugs screeching, and the sun beating down. Ah, that was hot work!

All through this Von Bissemer lay unconscious. Meantime I caught a slug in the leg, and had to do the rest of my fighting sitting down with my back against a smelly dead camel. But Vance was still up. One noncom after another kept going down—I remember well how Sergeant Bourget staggered in circles down the whole length of our position, clutching at his eyes before he slumped down, dead—and through the last hour and a half Vance took the lead. Yes, that American recruit. There were no noncoms left. He was running here, there and everywhere, while the slugs spanged into the sand between his legs. Collecting ammunition from our dead. Propping up a wounded man so he could fire. Shambling about on his poor blistered feet, yelling "Attaboy, Legionnaire!" to buck up those Austrians and Germans and Apache *camarades* who were beginning to lose hope.

"Stop that!" he yelled once, kicking Private Hines's rifle aside when the German tried to blow his own brains out.

"There's only a dozen of us left and

they'll put us to the torture!" Hines panted in broken French.

"We'll stand 'em off yet if you fellows keep on shooting!" Vance cried. "There! *Voila.* You got that one through the gizzard, Hines. *Voila, mon bon camarad! Caput! Vive la Legion!"*

Name of a dog; I hadn't much hope myself. I didn't have any, to tell the truth. Those devils kept edging in, or forming for new rushes. I shot till my shoulder was as sore as a tooth that is ulcerated. Still they kept at us. We piled them in heaps, and they kept at us. It was heartbreaking —but that boy Vance was *there.*

"Hang with 'em!" he'd yell, "we'll show these scum what side their bread is buttered on yet! Hoopla!"

THEN they got into us for a last rush —and poor Hines blew his brains out just in time. The Touaregs got in some hellish work among our wounded. Ben Amoud was helping us by that time—wounded in the leg like me, but shooting —the big, grinning, scar-faced beggar. Because, he told me, we'd saved him from Von Bissemer—and he wasn't in love with Touaregs, anyway. Then Vance went down with a slug that ricocheted and slapped him spang in the head. When we shot down the last Touareg close in, there were just four of us left alive. Von Bissemer, Vance, Ben Amoud and myself.

That's the way it was just before the relief column came in sight from behind the dunes. There were still a dozen Touaregs out there listening to a howling sheik who was exhorting them to make a final rush. Ben Amoud and I were both so weak from loss of blood we couldn't raise our rifles. We didn't know the relief column was coming—it appeared afterward that the eighth company had been out on a practice hike, and had heard our firing. But before we saw them, that dog Van Bissemer came to.

I heard him mutter something as he shook his bloody head and cleared his eyes. Then the Touaregs started, and he grabbed up a rifle.

So that's the way the relief column saw us when it came loping along at the double from behind the dunes to northward. Von Bissemer the lone defender! Von Bissemer the hero! Blazing away in a lone stand against a dozen Touaregs, under the blood-smeared tri-color of France!

Of course the relief outfit cut in with a murdering fire, saving the day. And of course they swarmed round Von Bissemer, shouting, *"Tres bon, mon brave!"* I kept my senses long enough to tell them what Ben Amoud had done to help — and then things went black.

When I came to Vance and I were in hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes. Vance was looking at a letter in his hand.

"They're decorating us," he informed me. *"The Croix de Guerre."* And he spat.

"What's that?" I exclaimed. "Decorated? I thought Von Bissemer would have us sent to cells when we got out of hospital. Why the gloom?"

"What in hell do I care about the decorations? They're decorating Von Bissemer, too—and promoting him. Moreover, Blix was in to see me. Know what Von Bissemer told her? That I knocked him out—from behind! But that he wouldn't report it because we were rivals!"

"And you let her——"

"Believe it? Certainly. She's engaged to him, damn his eyes. A swanking, monocled hero."

"I'll tell her!" I raved. "Why, if it hadn't been for his treatment of Nat'alla, there wouldn't have been——"

"Any attack. I know. We can't prove that on Nat'alla though. Ben Amoud said it was just a pinprick. He's to be pardoned because he helped us, and will join the colonists. And you won't tell Blix. She's gone to Paris. I've a letter here from my dad, with a money order. He's relented. So, my boy, we'll pull our freight before Von Bissemer gets another crack at us."

"Tres bien!" I almost shouted.

But it was at this moment that we heard cheering in the barrack yard. Like wild fire the word ran round that France was mobilizing troops. *La guerre, la guerre!*

The band started playing the Marseillaise. Sick men were leaving their cots and waltzing with their brothers in arms. Kepis were being tossed in the air. Hoarse throated men were cheering like mad.

"What was that I said?" Vance shouted in my ear. "Desert? Not by a jugfull. This is a horse of another color. *Vive la France!*"

So that was that. Von Bissemer was cock of the walk for the time. He came to the door of the ward once and looked in at Vance through his monocle. "Ha!" he said, then, with one of his faint grins—and turned away. We didn't see him again for a year.

BY THAT time Vance and I were lieutenants, and there were few of the original Legionnaires left. Von Bissemer was a major in command of a battalion of Senegalese shock troops. He'd been transferred to the colonials before Vance and I left the hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes.

Between the time we left the hospital in Sidi-bel-Abbes and our next meeting with Von Bissemer in front of Chateau sur Vigny, on the western front, in the summer of '15, Vance had never willingly brought up the subject of Blix again. For him the book was sealed and closed. I know that he made no attempt to write her, and you needed only a glance at her chin to know that she'd have made no overtures, even if she hadn't been engaged to Von Bissemer. Where she was, or what had transpired in the interim between her and Von Bissemer we knew not. I supposed that she'd married the baron, but I didn't say much about it to Vance. It was a sore, sore subject with him. Being close to him, I knew that he was brooding over it when his jaw muscles knotted and he stared off into space.

I was with him when he met Von Bissemer in a dugout. That was the night before his outfit attacked Chateau sur Vigny. His blacks, swelled by additional companies to about a thousand men, were to go over at daybreak. Vance and I had been told off with other Legion officers to take over several platoons of Legionnaires, carrying machineguns and fixed to consolidate the position. So we were reporting for orders.

He hadn't changed any, that I could see. Started a little when he saw Vance, but stuck his monocle in his eye and looked us over with the same old contemptuous stare. Then, after we'd checked maps and orders, he dismissed the others and detained Vance and me.

"Well," he said, searching Vance's face the while, "we meet again." He smiled, but it wasn't pleasant to see. "I knew that we would," he added.

VANCE was as white, yet there was a strange lack of animosity in his expression. He was older, steadier; a new gravity had settled in his features. He looked at Von Bissemer as one might at a subject under glass.

"There'll be no settlement between you and me," he said quietly. "She took you, and that's that. Aside from your bravery, you're a dog, Von Bissemer; but she took you, so——" He coughed, then his voice thrummed a little as he added, "Mark this, though. If we both pull through, and I hear that you mistreat her, there'll be no distance too great for me to get to you."

A smile was spreading over Von Bissemer's face. "So that's it!" he murmured. "Well, there is a settlement due, for let me tell you this—*I never forget.* You should have cut my throat when I lay unconscious that day in the desert."

"I'm unfortunate in that I didn't have the advantage of your training, Baron," said Vance.

"Get out!" said Von Bissemer. He ground the words between his white teeth in a sudden blaze of cold fury. "Get out; and may the shells spare you—for me."

WE DIDN'T see him again till next morning, when the day began to break, and we were in the jump off trench. By that time our artillery was going it to beat four of a kind in the preparatory bombardment, and Chateau sur Vigny, only two hundred meters away, was blotted out in a swelter of smoke. Our guns had Fritz's field pieces taped, too, and there was very little coming back at us.

Waiting out that last five or ten minutes before the zero hour was never popular with any soldier I ever talked to; and in this case No Man's Land was a sea of black mud with the unburied bodies of a battalion of

French poilus scattered about. Swollen dead horses. Stiff arms sticking out of the ooze. Skeletons propped against a canted gun with one wheel broken off. White flares going up to spread a ghostly light over it all. Brrrr!

But with these scar-faced tar babies in the jump off trench, there was something ghastly and awful about it. Every one of those black giants was stripped to a breech clout! Guns slung behind their bare shoulders. Gas masks hanging against black naked breasts as broad as two doors bolted together. And knives gripped in their powerful white teeth. Long, gleaming trench knives that broadened at the end and turned at right angles there to form a nasty hook.

There was not a man among them under six feet, and they'd cut and slashed their faces in youth to make themselves look more formidable. Yet with all their great rolling muscles, as thick as boa constrictors beneath their shining skins, there was a touch of pathos about them—just then. The shells scared them. Knife work they glory in—but shells are like their evil spirits. They come from nowhere and you cannot hit back at them. They couldn't keep still. Now one would drop on his knees and salaam three times, praying to Allah. Then he'd leap up again, to prance nervously with the rest of his chafing fellows—performing a sort of dog trot in one spot, with the clenched hands working in circles at the sides, and that trench knife gripped between his teeth.

CONTINUALLY, too, they kept looking at their white officers. There was something ludicrous and pathetic about it. It so happened that all their officers, save Von Bissemer, were small men. They were dwarfed by the black giants. Neat, calm, dapper little officers, dressed as though for parade, smoking their cigarettes nonchalantly, and carrying rosewood swagger sticks. Yet when a shell burst near us those big Senegalese would roll their eyes toward their officers, with the whites showing, like so many great dogs, looking for comfort and reassurance. And they'd get it, with a kindly, "Now, now, *mes enfants,* patience, patience. *Toute de suite—caput!*" Whereupon their lips would curl back from the blades in a hideous grin. Yes, it was pathetic—and ghastly, too. Those little officers tapping those big black devils gently on the shoulders with their swagger sticks, assuring them that the djinns would not let the shells get them, and that there would be sweet work for the knives presently.

There was only one among them who did not chafe and stamp. That was Ben Amoud. He was the largest of the lot. He stood there, immovable, staring across No Man's Land from under lowered brows. a great carved ebony statue. With a sphynx-like expression on his face. But now and again his great head would turn slowly toward Von Bissemer. He'd stare a minute, then swing his brooding gaze slowly back to No Man's Land.

Then suddenly the officers were looking at their wrist watches—and the whistles blew. Wow! There was a roar from those blacks fit to split the ear drums. As one man they vaulted the parapet—and away they flew across No Man's Land. Like a stampeding herd. With the speed of the wind. With a growl in the throat as savage as the grind of clanking gears. By the beard of the prophet, there was a sight to thrill a Viking!

WE MADE no attempt to keep up with them, but walked, with our machine-guns. The blacks disappeared in the smoke, and we could hear the Germans screaming. Poor devils, that bombardment had kept them huddled in their dugouts. The first one I saw came screaming out of the smoke, with his awkward boots clumping in the mud, and his face chalk white, and whereever Fritz turned, there was a knife darting over his shoulder, with the hook before his throat.

In retrospect war is ghastly to contemplate. At that time our nerves were inured to death and violence, our memories hot with tales of atrocities in Belgium. Fritz had set out to make war terrible, and there were men among us who felt that sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. Yet

there were sick men among the Legionnaires —the Legionnaires, mind you!—before we had our guns placed.

Not so Von Bissemer. No Frenchman ever hated the Germans more than this outlawed baron hated Kaiserism. He was holding a sort of hangman's court in the remains of the town square when Vance and I came near him again. The sun was up, and a herd of disarmed prisoners—nearly all wounded —were standing against a shattered stone wall. Von Bissemer sat on a beer keg, taunting them in German. The blacks were waiting, like eager wolves, sucking their breath in through their gritting teeth. The shaking prisoners were offered a coin to toss. If it fell with heads uppermost, the man had a few more minutes to live. The reverse meant that he could run the gauntlet between two rows of blacks who nicked him skillfully, playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse till the end. When one broke away from the wall in frenzied terror, he was chased by a Senegalese and heaved on high, while a second black crouched with the butt of his gun planted in the street, and the bayonet pointing skyward—waiting.

The blacks were drunk with blood. Sheer, stark, raving drunk. So was Von Bissemer. It was a madman's scene, a scene to revolt a vandal. Von Bissemer reveled in it.

"Enough, for God's sake!" cried Vance, coming up. He was backed by the growl of a dozen Legionnaires—several of whom were Americans. "Those men have surrendered, and they're helpless!" he thundered. "Call off those damned cutthroats."

"Ha! So it's you, is it, you soft-bellied swine!" barked Von Bissemer. "Well——"

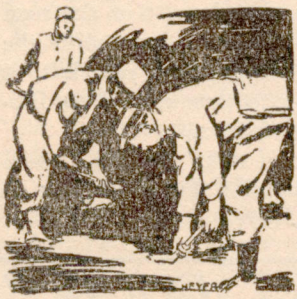
JUST then Fritz opened up on the town. Our batteries were still pounding heavily all the photographed positions behind the German front lines, but some reserve guns had apparently moved in during the night. Bevies of shells came whistling into the town, sending whole sections of walls tumbling over and over, high in the air.

There was a mad scramble for cover. Von Bissemer, Ben Amoud, Vance and myself, with a half dozen others, including two German prisoners, reached the entrance of a dugout under the former town hall. We were just under cover when a great .220 shell closed the entrance behind us.

We found ouselves in a long underground tunnel, fitted with bunks on either side, and a turn about fifteen feet from us. Before we reached this, another shell closed the second entranceway. We were entombed.

"Get shovels and start digging!" Von Bissemer ordered.

These were always at hand in German dugouts for such emergencies, and we fell to. We were all working at one end, then, and Von Bissemer was prowling around somewhere beyond the turn, when suddenly there was a swishing sound in the air. We had candles going, and Von Bissemer had found a pile of German hand grenades. He'd thrown one of these right into our midst.



Not all of us fully realized what had happened at the moment. But some instinct had warned Vance. He kicked the bomb—and it exploded about ten feet from us, killing one Senegalese and wounding two others.

There wasn't any time for hesitation there. We knew there would be more bombs coming. So we rushed. A second bomb struck some one and fell just behind us, wounding two more. Von Bissemer's pistol spat fire, too—but so did mine. He went down with a shot through the leg.

It was Ben Amoud who jerked him to his feet, while another Senegalese raised his knife.

"No, no," grunted Ben Amoud. "This will be done slowly. Ah, slowly!"

HE LOOKED round about at us then. Some one had lighted a candle—and I still remember the slow smile that started with a quiver of Ben Amoud's thick lips, and spread over his black face. "I will take a souvenir to Nat'alla!" he said. "It is kismet. *Oui,* it is written."

It was then that stark, craven fear turned Von Bissemer's bones to water. "My God!" he shrieked at Vance. "I meant to kill you,

but not this way. You're a white man. Let it be the pistol. For the love of God, have mercy!"

"You would have killed all of us, just to square accounts with me," Vance retorted.

"Yes, but even so, man, you have the best of it. Yes, with Blix. She's yours, man, yours. She broke her engagement to me within two weeks."

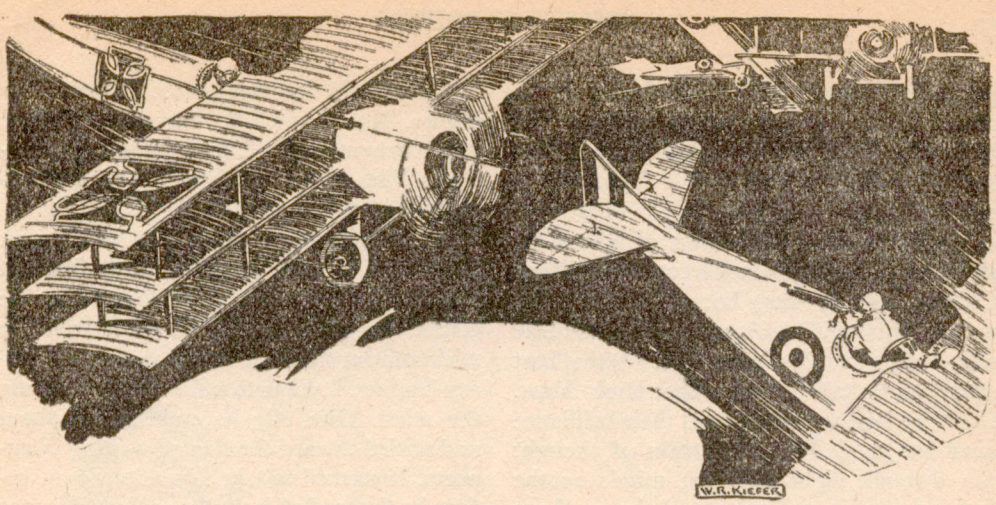
Through this babel Vance cut with sharp words. He knew, somehow, that the man was speaking truth. And even with the memory of the scenes we'd just left, it wasn't in the boy to turn even Von Bissemer over to those blacks.

"If we get out of this," he said, "you'll get a fair court martial. Turn him over to me, Ben Amoud."

But at that moment there was a rending, a crashing, and an explosion, deep down. A penetrating shell had struck. The explosion, to one side of our tunnel, blew us in all directions, and bulged the sides. When we jumped up and relighted the candles, we were separated. Von Bissemer, Ben Amoud and two Senegalese were on one side, the rest of us on the other side of the bulge. Save for an aperture, about neck high, this bulge completely filled the tunnel.

"Mon lieutenant," said Ben Amoud, sticking his black face into the hole, "I will stand court martial—if we pull through. It is written that we will, too. I will live to give Nat'alla a hide that tans well—with proper care."

And he grinned. God, how he grinned!



BIRDS OF A FEATHER

By CARSON W. MOWRE

Author of "Sky Born," etc.

THE "HIGH HATS," THEY WERE CALLED, THE MOST CELEBRATED AERIAL SQUADRON OF THE A. E. F., AND THEIR NEW COMMANDER THEY REGARDED AS A BIRD OF ANOTHER FEATHER. IT WAS TOUGH; AND BOTH THE GERMAN AND ALLIED ARMIES WERE TO KNOW JUST HOW TOUGH IT WAS BEFORE A FAMOUS FIGHT WAS OVER

TWENTY-SIXTH SQUADRON was standing at attention. Eight trim Nieuports stood wheels to the line. Beside each ship stood an immaculate pilot. Not one of them had less than ten ships—ten E. A. victories written behind his name on the board. Medals glistened in the sun on eight chests. On the left shoulder of each tunic, worked in thread of silk, was a circle in which reposed at a cocky angle a shining black silk high hat.

Below each dark tunic were light buff whipcoard breeches with that swagger cut that could have come from no place but Bond Street. They tapered into highly polished cordovan boots that spelled Thomas, of London.

Behind them, under the watchful eye of a hard boiled sergeant, stood the grease monkeys. Hands that could caress the most stubborn Hisso into action were held rigidly at trouser seams. And they were clean. Gaping at them from still farther behind were the open mouths of the hangars, swept clean for the first time in weeks. They, too, awaited him who came.

Twenty-sixth Squadron; the most decorated, the snappiest, and the most aloof bunch of cloud-crackers in all France. All graduates of Navarre, they had come as a unit. Mention the name of the Twenty-sixth on any tarmac from Paris to Berlin and you might receive either a contemptuous glance or a flood of praise. Airmen are peculiar.

A French pilot of a famous squadron might say with characteristic directness, "Ah, yes, Monsieur, they are *bon* pilots, but they are—what you say?—aware of it." Mention them to a quiet but efficient R. F. C. squadron. It would probably come in an Oxford drawl, "None better, old son, none better." And again, casually drop the word Twenty-sixth in an American mess some night. With a snort would come the reply, "The hottest gang on the front, and they won't let you forget it—dam' 'em."

TWENTY-SIXTH stood there in the line in all its splendor. They awaited the man that had come to command them; the man chosen as fit to command the squadron whose total Enemy Aircraft victories numbered two hundred and ten. Critically, eight

pair of eyes searched the skies in the direction of Tours. He was to come by plane. The bullet-nosed little Spad, known and respected from one end of the front to the other.

His name brought a shiver of apprehension to many a pilot of a Circus of the Black Cross. Many of them bore his marks. He was the outstanding American Ace, and he was coming to his command of the best squadron in all France—the High Hats. Could he lead them or would their brilliance outshine him? The same train of thought ran through eight different minds as the little speck materialized out of the southern horizon—would he be good enough?

Typical of the squadron that was known as the hottest in all France, was their beloved semi-crash landing. None but the best could do it, and they landed in no other manner. It consisted of a breathless side-slip to within twenty feet of the ground and then a smart wing-over to set the wheels on the tarmac and come to a full stop in less than thirty feet. Which, in consideration of the landing speed of a Nieuport or a Camel, was again typical. Even though carrying the steel of an enemy from a recent dogfight, any member of the High Hats would force consciousness to ride with him until that landing was accomplished. What mattered it if he went west the moment his trick hit—he was a High Hat.

What, then, could be more natural for the eight pair of critical eyes that watched the famed Major "Rocky" Thornton, to narrow in amazement as he came in for a cautious landing. That landing business was their hall mark. And, now, to see a man that topped them all in individual official victories, come in for a slow, flat landing. Well, it was a mark against him; he wasn't one of the High Hats—yet. Twenty-sixth to a man passed a mental decision.

II

ON SOME of the tarmacs of the overnight squadrons it was highly advisable to circle the field slowly before landing. Bombs have a way of dropping out of the darkness and high explosive long range shells search their screaming way for the vitals of the hangars. Sometimes a spot large enough to put a ship down is hard to find on a field that was perfect a short hour before. Not so with Twenty-sixth; it was a permanent field. Those wavering gray-green lines had never yet forced them to move back to a new sector.

Rocky Thornton was taking no chances. Slowly he circled the field, scrutinizing it closely from his low altitude, and then he circled it again. Gently he depressed the stick and set the little ship down in a feathery landing. It came to a slow stop, nose into the wind. Carefully he ruddered it about and taxied toward the line of waiting Nieuports. It seemed to take him a long time before he descended from the cockpit. He was busy checking every detail that would make the ship ready should he have to use it quickly.

When finally he did clamber down to the ground, it was not to walk over to the line of expectant pilots standing at rigid attention. He walked around the Spad and with practised finger he snapped flying wires while his ear listened for the twang that told him they were tight. A bit of fabric that was coming loose from the pinking caught his eye. He stopped and with a little pen knife he deftly cut the little piece off to prevent a rent. Finally before leaving, the probing toe of his boot thumped into the left tire to tell him more air was needed.

Searchingly he looked the whole ship over again and then his eyes came up.

He seemed to see the little group of men standing there for the first time. A flicker of a shadow swept over his eyes as he noted the splendor of the clothes worn by the men. His own were shabby in comparison. Even the mechanics seemed to have a certain something about them that denoted the *esprit* of the squadron. Slowly he advanced toward them.

CAPTAIN BERT WILSON, acting commander, walked out to meet Major Thornton. His was the lithe, eager grace that bespoke a man supremely confident of himself; a man that had little to do with any thing short of perfection. At ten feet from Major Thornton, he stooped and saluted smartly. His hand came down and with a perfunctory smile he extended it to Major Thornton.

"Captain Wilson, sir, acting commander

of Twenty-sixth Squadron. My men are ready for your inspection. My personal regards to you, sir, and I hope you will find us worthy of your command." To Major Thornton, as he held the hand of Captain Wilson, there seemed to be a bit of irony in his voice as the words "worthy of your command" dropped out. It was a wall of reserve and not at all like the other squadrons. He had heard of this bunch, their reputation, their belief in their own ability.

He sensed that they were holding him on trial. The fools, didn't they know that there was a war on? Dressed up like a bunch of kids from a military academy. The eyes that had started to smile a moment before were a shade narrower now and smoke seemed to linger in their gray depths.

"My compliments to you, Captain Wilson," said the major. "You have a fine looking squadron. We won't observe any formalities, gentlemen; you may stand at ease."

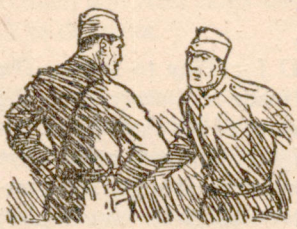
His eyes slowly went over them. They seemed to linger on the display of medals. His own chest was bare, although he rated two rows. They traveled to those resplendent boots and back again to insignia on their shoulders.

"I have heard a great deal about you, gentlemen. I am not unaware of your record. It was a great honor to be given command of such a squadron." He paused for a moment. Those smoky, gray eyes again wandered among them, pausing here and there as they saw some particularly fine bit of apparel. "However," and his voice was cold, "I am not interested in this dress parade. If you will stand beside your ships I will inspect *them*. We are fighting this war with planes."

IT WAS like a bombshell among them. Their pride was wounded as deeply as if he had criticised their flying. It was not a dress parade, but the everyday uniform. They resented the implication that they had tried to impress him with their medals. Stiffly each of them took his position on the right side of his ship. Captain Bert Wilson prepared to accompany him.

"If you don't mind, Captain, I prefer to look them over alone. I have certain ideas of my own."

Captain Bert Wilson retraced his steps to the Nieuport that stood ten paces in front of the rest of them. He stood tensely with hands that clenched and unclenched. His adam's apple ran a marathon up and down his throat. This boy was getting away big right from the start, insulting them before he had hardly landed. He might be a big shot, but he'd have hard lines around the High Hats.



Major Thornton started down the line. His eyes missed no detail of the little ships. The rigging seemed to be perfect—fabric excellent, every bullet hole neatly patched. He passed two of them with a casual examination and then stopped before the ship of "Tiny" Bedell. He stepped around behind the wing. His eyes ran to the machine guns and the little canvas coverings that protected them when not in use. Something seemed to interest him about the gun and he climbed up into the cockpit.

His head disappeared below the rim and the sound of two or three metallic clicks came to the ears of Tiny. There was a space of quiet and then the major's head came into view. His eyes as he turned them on Tiny, seemed smokier than ever. His feet struck the ground and he came down in front of Tiny.

"Lieutenant, what is your name?"

"Bedell." Purposely he neglected the "sir." No shadow of recognition crossed Major Thornton's face as the name that was known from one end of the United States to the other came to his ears.

"Just what purpose do those two extra Bowden trips serve?"

"It's a little idea of my own, Major. I figured that when I got into a tight place and was flying in different positions, it would be very handy to have machine guns trips where I could touch them with various parts of my body and still have the use of both my hands. Say, if I were upside down, in the top of a loop, I could touch the trip with my elbow and have the drop on the other fellow."

"Nice, very nice," said the major, as he looked Tiny straight in the eye, "but has it

occurred to you, Lieutenant, that you might temporarily lose control of your ship in a dog-fight and be forced against one of those extra controls? You might; and some of your own men might happen to be in front of your guns."

HE WAITED for Tiny to speak. The lieutenant made no reply, but the slowly diffusing wave of red that spread upward from his tightly buttoned collar gave indication of his suppressed anger. To question the thing that had given him his last three victories; to question the device that had been regarded as a stroke of genius by the rest of the squadron, was unbearable to Tiny. He held himself in check and waited for the major to go on. For one moment longer did the major regard him, and then in crisp words he spoke:

"Take them out, Lieutenant."

He continued his searching inspection down the line of ships. Nothing seemed to escape his eye. Of perfection he said nothing; it was irregularities that caught his eye. He came to a stop before the ship of Vare Brent. He had a premonition that something could be expected from Brent's ship. A man that wore the look Brent had in his eye could be expected to have a dozen gadgets on his crate. He noted that Brent had a certain little swagger, that, while not definable, made him stand out even in a squadron like this.

Carefully he inspected the ship from motor to empennage. It was regulation in every respect and in perfect condition. No product of a fertile imagination that would make his ship a little better than the average, could be found on Brent's machine. Major Thornton admitted that his judgment of the man was wrong. He started on down the line. In going around the tail of the Nieuport, he brushed against the rudder. It gave with the weight of his arm and then smartly snapped back into position. That was unusual! Major Thornton whirled and purposely pulled the rudder far over and let it go again. Again it snapped back into the straight position. He sped a searching glance at Vare and climbed into the cock pit.

Attached to each end of the rudder bar on the floor of the cockpit he found two coil springs. He snapped the springs with his finger. He noted that the pull was not strong, just sufficient to bring the rudder back in neutral position quickly. His fingers swept over them and unfastened the ends from the eyelets that held them. As his feet struck the ground he handed the springs to Vare Brent.

"Keep them off, Lieutenant; they might get you into a jam."

Brent's eyes clouded as he returned the level gaze of Major Thornton. The muscles of his forearm corded as he stemmed the flow of words that struggled in his throat. His mouth opened as if to speak and then came shut in a grim line. Impersonally the major regarded him—waiting. The words did not come; instead, Vare Brent straightened and executed a perfect salute and a clipped, "Yes, sir," forced itself through tight lips.

Major Thornton proceeded down the line. In his rear he left a pilot whose ship had been just a bit quicker in maneuverability than the others. His ship had been able to snap into a loop; whip into a barrel-roll, and lash out into a power dive a shade faster than the others. It had saved his life on several occasions when he had been against a faster Pfalf. It had accounted for that third palm on his Croix de Guerre. And now he held those little springs loosely in his hand. Rocky Thornton he might be, but not of the High Hats.

THE other two ships on the line passed the scrutiny of Major Thornton. Casually he saluted the men that stood beside them and after a brief inspection he passed on to the resplendent little blue ship that stood out in front of the others. Captain Bert Wilson stood at its side as the major came up. He had been able to see only part of the inspection behind him and was not prepared for the minute raking-over Major Thornton was about to give his ship. He saluted as the major stepped up to him. Courteously it was returned. Major Thornton snuggled his foot into the fuselage stirrup and climbed up. He did not drop down inside, but hesitated, as he looked at the canvas coverings on the twin Vickers, mounted on each side of the cowling. He lifted the envelope on one gun and inspected

it minutely. A peculiar light came into his eyes. Expertly he ran long, browned fingers over the closely packed cartridge-belt and then down along the shaft-like mechanism that connected the synchronized guns with the motor cam-shaft.

There was an unfamiliar little gear train hidden there in a well oiled housing. He bent his head down and peered at it. Then his hand went up and he fed by force, for a short distance, the cartridge belt while he attempted to turn the shaft with the fingers of his other hand. His brows contracted as puzzlement shone in his eyes. For another moment he tried to solve it, then his leg went over the side and he slipped to the ground. Captain Bert Wilson faced him as he hit the ground. His ears were eager for the praise that he expected after the major's inspection.

"Captain Wilson," Bert's ears were unprepared for the tone of voice; it was like ice water thrown in one's face, "will you explain the purpose of that gear box on your synchronizing shaft?"

IN SPITE of the coldness of the major's voice Bert felt a tingle of joy run over him. He hadn't thought the major would find that. That little device was his pride and joy—a masterpiece. Anticipation was in his voice as he explained the thing that was the envy of the squadron.

"It's a little idea of my own, sir. Thought it out and had one of the mechanics make it. There are three gears in there, and they step the speed of the old shaft up four times. In other words, my gun fires four times faster than the others. It gives me two shots between each blade on every revolution of the propeller. It has worked very nicely, sir, as you can see by the records."

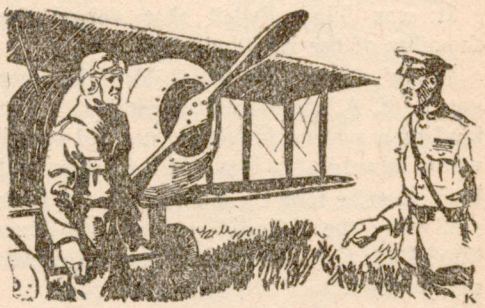
Personal pride was in his voice as he uttered the last sentence.

"Clever, Captain, extremely so. It gives faster firing speed and a chance to get in much more damage in a shorter time; also making your guns more susceptible to a jam. Had you thought of that? Your squadron, Captain, has shown a most fertile imagination but also a woeful lack of knowledge of the first principle of war—simplicity and efficiency. Will you call your squadron to attention?

With fire smouldering in his eyes, Captain Bert Wilson barked the other that brought the squadron to attention in front of Major Thornton.

"Gentlemen," began the brass hat, "I may seem unduly severe in the matter of these little improvements that you have so ably constructed. If I do, it is because I live by the principle on which war is fought, and incidentally, won. That is efficiency! I owe my life to it a hundred times. Since the early days when I was in a French escadrille, I have lived by that code.

"Never take a chance that will not bring results! When you do take that chance, fight hard and fight to win. You have an outstanding record, gentlemen, and I am not belittling your achievements. I do not know what your casualties have been in making that record; however, as long as I have command of this squadron our policy will



be cold efficiency and nothing else. Anything that will hamper us in carrying that idea out will be removed.

"You will have your ships stripped of the devices I refer to and hold yourselves on the alert for patrol at five tomorrow morning. Captain Wilson, I will look over your reports in your office. Dismissed!"

III

IT WAS a disconsolate group of pilots that sat around the mess table that night. Some of them were merely disconsolate and many of them were mad. And there were a few that were openly rebellious. Nothing could have wounded their pride more sharply than the afternoon's inspection. As has been said before, they were extremely good and, while among themselves it was the accepted thing, before others they were wont to stress their virtues. It was not the blustering braggadocio of the bully, but

the rushing spirit of youth that did things well and gloried in it.

And now had come a man to command them that would not take a chance, a man that was as cautious as an old woman. They were young yet and the halters did not wear well.

Their astounding number of victories had come from the very spirit that ruled them —good and they knew it. They believed that they could give odds to any man in the air and then down him. This cool, calculating style of battle was not theirs and they could not visualize the value of it. They were ruined forever. No more would Squadron Twenty-six head the list as the greatest unit on the front. No more would they stand before the tribunal of French generals to receive the medals that were balm to their souls. Twenty-six was done with Rocky Thornton as C. O.

It was Tiny Bedell that voiced the thoughts of the rebellious crew.

"Dam' a man like that! How he ever got the E. A.'s he's credited with, with that kind of a system, is beyond me. I'd surely would have liked to knock him for a ground loop when he took those extra trips out for me. Why the hell did we have to draw him? Bah! Give me a rickey while I drown my sorrows."

"Right," added Vare Brent. "That Kiwi should be back in S. O. S. juggling a ledger. The way he handed me those springs from my rudder bar was poison. If he can't fly it with those on I *can*. I hope I don't have to fly in his formation."

Others there were who were more reserved in their opinion but felt the degradation none the less keenly. It was little Davids that counseled a trial. He was a cool little chap. More like the major in temperament than the others. Not that he was a weakling, for in battle he held his own even with Tiny or Bert, but he was slow to criticise a fellow man. Back in the days at Navarre it had been the same. He, it had been, when even the great Tiny Bedell couldn't crash through Harvard's line, that had taken the ball through a hole for the Eastern title and then declined the credit.

"Don't be too rough on him, fellows. He might be all right—he just uses a different style. Let's give him a chance. We can't buck him and he might be good."

IT WAS at that moment that Bert Wilson came in. He had been going over his reports with Major Thornton. He was strangely quiet. He felt the cut of the afternoon more strongly than the others. That refusing to be allowed to accompany the major on the inspection of his own squadron was against all military etiquette. And yet he couldn't on account of his rank, speak the hurt that was in his mind. Searchingly they looked in the eyes of the man that had led them for months. He had been as one of them, never giving an order that he couldn't have executed himself, regularly making those early morning patrols that he would have been exempted from. He was Bert Wilson and now they were reading his eyes for the hurt that was in his heart.

No word of condemnation did he speak. He was a soldier and his superior's orders were his orders.

"I left orders with the sergeant to have our crates serviced and—er—put in their original condition. The squadron will fly in formation as a unit in the morning. *Echelon* formation over the lines for reconnaissance."

Not one of them but knew the hours Bert had spent on that device for speeding his guns up. They read his feelings and rebellion grew stronger in them.

IV

IN THE cold gray dawn motors were sputtering to life. Grease-monkeys were scurrying around the dim shapes that were chocked against the line. Vaguely they took shape as the dawn broke over the eastern horizon. Out in front of those familiar forms of the little blue Nieuports was another. It was stub-nosed and efficient looking. Its waspish lines terminated in twin noses of black machine gun muzzles. There was no insignia painted on its side. It was a cool little engine of death without trimmings, and it belonged to Rocky Thornton. Somehow it bore a resemblance to him, there was no bright coloring, no gaudy insignia gracing its thin sides, nothing to detract from the purpose for which it was created.

Down along the dim lines of the hangar

sleepy-eyed pilots were struggling into bulging flying suits as they made their way to the ships. It was an old thing, this daily morning patrol, and yet this morning it carried a new significance. It was a trial by flight. Rocky Thornton was to lead them over the lines. Many were the fervent wishes of a desperate tangle with a Heine *Jagdstaefel*. They would see how good this "efficiency" hedge-hopper was. And when, if they did, get into a Fokker or Pfalf or Albatross circus and it developed into individual dog fights, they'd see who got the most Jerries. Took a bit more than efficiency to down the Checkerboard Fokker squadron that was supposed to be in the sector now. They'd see.

Their hearts were pounding just a little faster as they stepped up to their ships and asked the mechanics the usual questions. Quietly they ran over the blue crates to see that they were serviced as the mechanics had told them. They took just a little longer with the job than usual. Cartridge belts were patted to make them lie free; nothing was overlooked. All along the line motors were bursting into their power songs as loving fingers jazzed the guns to get them warm. Eyes watched temperature gauges.

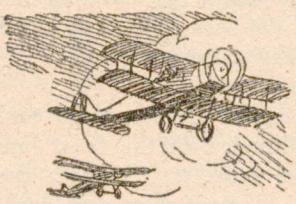
Cutting across the field at an angle to them came Rocky Thornton. He came straight to the little Spad that stood in front of the line. Carefully he looked it over from motor to tail skid. His mechanic was in the cockpit warming the motor for him. Bert Wilson came up and took his orders for the morning flight. The mechanic dropped to the ground and the major climbed in. For a moment he held the motor full gun and then his hand went up over the cockpit cowling and his chocks were pulled.

A cloud of dust flew up around him, his tail came up and then he was off. Major Rocky Thornton was "point" for Twenty-six. He led them to the trial. Close behind him and on each side came the roaring Nieuports of Tiny Bedell and Vare Brent. In a space of minutes they were all off the ground, swinging out behind point, four on a side like migrating geese. Bert Wilson brought up the rear on the right hand side. He was far removed from his old position, but that tag spot carried its responsibilities.

SLOWLY they circled at five thousand feet and then point waggled his wings and they headed deep into enemy territory. The sun was a great ball of fire as it peeped over the horizon to their left. It gave a garish effect, shadows seemed to stretch for miles along the ground amid the dull gray of the soil. The air was still murky and visibility was low. Tiny looked across at Vare and made a frivolous gesture with his fingers. It was good to be up, even behind Thornton. Motors droned their steady rhythm as they went farther and farther behind the lines.

A great patch of forest was unfolding below them. Its verdant green was in sharp contrast to the gray of the fields around. Here and there a tiny puff of white smoke would go wheeling forward for a short distance and then; lazily ascend. The morning long range straffing was beginning. Concealed under painted screens in the woods were the huge batteries of long range guns. Thunderously they sent their missiles of destruction winging their way the twenty miles to the front.

Their eyes were the observation planes. The Rumplers sailed serenely far over the lines with their photographic eyes peering through the bottom to register ammunition dumps and concentration points, escorted by an unseen squadron of fighting wasps hidden far above them. More important than the destruction of a whole squadron of fighting planes was the location of those guns. G. H. Q. was on its ear about them. Why hadn't they been located? Was the American Air Force so inferior to the enemy that they couldn't get behind the lines? Get those positions!



Those were the instructions that Rocky Thornton carried to Twenty-six when given command. Flight after flight of bombers and observation ships had attempted it, but returned empty handed—when they returned at all. And now a fighting squadron was attempting it. The best on the front. Each pilot had a tiny map, squared and numbered, strapped to his left wrist. They were to make dots on the exact position of those gun emplacements.

Thornton waggled the signal and they dived downward on the woods. Formation was forgotten as sticks were held in one hand while goggled eyes peered over cockpit edge for a better view. The air was rough. Archie was sending up his messages. Bursts of black smoke were breaking all around them. The concussion of the explosions chopped the air into great holes and pockets. Each gun seemed to be surrounded by a circle of the lesser anti-aircraft guns. Ships were rocking and weaving like drunken things. They would bump into a void in the air and fall thirty feet before the prop would again catch the air it could hold.

But still they held on. Harrassed and rigid fingers were getting those dots on the maps. All others had failed—they were the High Hats. Eyes watched holes appear like magic in their wings and fuselage, fought a slipping ship to a standstill, did unbelievable stunts that they might not crash into brother pilots, and yet those little dots were increasing. Funny that checkerboard squadron wasn't around, thought Bert Wilson. They were a high-powered outfit and they were supposed to be in this sector.

When the concentrated effort had been made to get these gun positions, the Checkerboard squadron, led by the famous Lerke, had moved in. Sufficient to say that until this day the guns had not been spotted by allied aircraft. Lerke's flight was also good.

AND then it came! Unexpectedly and from the direction of the front line three waspish-like ships tore in with the speed of the wind. Each of them were completely covered with small black and white squares. On the leading ship, painted on a white circle, was a black mailed fist.

Lerke himself! The speed with which he came down at them was a contemptuous gesture against the odds of nine to three.

Thornton was first to see them. He had been closer over the woods than the rest, but his ever watchful eyes had seen them as they whipped down from the protecting glare of the sun. He signalled for close formation. Bert Wilson and little Davids fell in on either side as they rose to meet the ships that were nearly on them. The others were scattered out over the woods and too far away to get to them before Lerke opened the ball.

Just above Rocky and out of range of his guns, Lerke did a quick wing-over and ripped down on him with twin Spandaus spitting a hail of death. Thornton depressed the stick of the Spad imperceptibly and drew out of the line of fire without losing altitude. Then smartly he snapped back into his stomach and the little ship stood on its nose.

It hung there as if suspended for a moment and in that fraction of a second Lerke had to pass his nose as he came out of his dive. Rigid, iron-like fingers held the Bowden trips down. A rattling, yellow-green flame leapt from the muzzles of his Vickers. He saw his tracers eating little paths through Lerke's left wing. But the German was no novice. In a trice he Immelmaned around into a position on Thornton's tail.

Around and around in tight spiral they went. Neither had the advantage. Slowly and a fraction of an inch at a time as they wheeled around in that dizzy spiral, Thornton was slipping his right rudder over and pushing down on the stick. Already he was ten feet below the German without his being aware of it. He planned to inch his nose up and then cut across that circle. But the Fokker seemed to anticipate him and in that instant when the muscles of Thornton's fingers contracted to hold the trips down, Lerke's right wing went down and he seemed to fall like a wounded bird.

WING over wing he fell and then in lightning-like maneuver his tail went down and his nose came up. He held a commanding position straight up into the vitals by an unseen squadron of fighting planes of the little Spad. It was Thornton's blind spot and for a second he could not see the tri-planed Fokker. Splinters flew up in his face as the shower of steel pierced his footboards. The hand on his altimeter dropped back to zero and he realized that it had been hit behind the dash.

This fellow seemed to know all the answers; it would be a tough battle. Thornton's mind raced as he thought over all the tricks that his experience had taught him. There was that time with Von Heinrich—

no, that was too old, they all knew that one. While he was thinking he shot a glance over his left wing to see how Bert and Davids were making it.

He saw Bert whipping in on the tail of a checkered Fokker. The tri-plane was in a bad way and Bert was holding his ship hard to the Heine's tail as they tumbled over and over. Then smoke burst from the Mercedes motor and his nose plunged down. That was one. Thornton banked over into a vertical slip and the rest of the squadron hanging above him caught his eye. Slowly they were circling around, keeping an eye open for more ships of the black cross. Disdainfully, it seemed to Rocky, they hung there. They made no effort to join his fight below them. And he was right, for it was the code of the High Hats. Never had they gone into battle with superior numbers in their favor. It might be the way of others, but they scorned it; they were the equal of any enemy aircraft on the front—why throw a whole formation against three planes?

They seemed to form an aerial jury as they circled slowly around. They were withholding their decision as Major Thornton underwent his baptism of fire as their commander. Yes, they were giving him that break that little Davids, who was now down there with a stinging wasp on his tail, had asked for. Even if his cautious ways were foreign to them, they would accept him if he was hot in combat. Decision withheld!

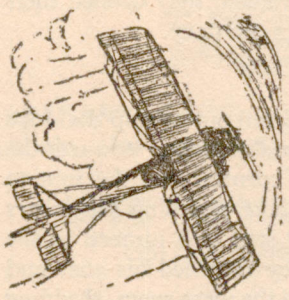
AND then as they watched they saw an unbelievable thing. Something no High Hat would do as long as life remained in his body.

Rocky Thornton was fleeing—turning tail to Lerke!

He had the nose of the little Spad down and was heading it for the lines with full gun. Leaving his squadron under fire and running like a whipped dog! Stout fellow! Fine kind of a jasper to have as a commander. Outstanding American Ace—bah! Angrily Tiny snapped the gun forward and sent his Nieuport down in a full power dive. The very thought of his commander running made his blood boil. Regardless of the wing-shedding proclivities of the Nieuport he was going down there. He'd take on Lerke if the great Rocky were yellow. His wires screamed like the whine of a high explosive shell.

Expertly he gauged the distance with his eye. Mentally calculated the exact spot where he would cut in on Lerke's tail. He fired a few bursts to clear his gun and held the ship in that screaming, distance-eating dive. Closer and closer—he could distinguish the numbers on Lerke's tail. His mouth was a grim gash across a determined face. Expectantly he fingered his trips. Slowly, oh, so slowly, it seemed that he gained on them. Lerke was hard on the major's tail as he whipped and twisted in his mad flight to escape the German Ace. Would he never get there? Now he could see the path of the tracers as they tore their way from belching Spandau mouths. What the hell was the matter with the yellow pup? Why didn't he fight instead of run? And Tiny hunched his shoulders forward as if to urge the already straining ship to greater speed.

And then for the second time that day amazement was written on Tiny's face. He was hardly five hundred yards away from the other ships when it happened, Rocky went down in a twisting, snarling dive to within three hundred feet of the ground with Lerke snapping at his tail a scant few feet behind. Their speed was terrific—so fast that Tiny failed to gain on them. Then Rocky's nose came up with the speed of a comet and whirled over into a loop.



Lerke's speed was so great that his every effort was hardly enough to fight the Fokker back from a certain crash. He had not been prepared for this. A man that runs for miles would hardly be expected to turn and fight. Madly he fought to get the nose of the Fokker up. Rocky came over from his loop with his nose barely fifty feet from the ground, but his nose was bearing on the German's tail. A stream of steel whipped into the Fokker. It wabbled and careened—first one wing tip then the other. Lerke's head could be seen bobbing as he fought the uncontrollable ship.

The nose went down and then it slipped off on the right wing to pound into the ground with the force of a pile driver. It seemed to bounce back from the impact then settle down like a crippled bird. Fire did not break out. This much Tiny saw in a fraction of an instant as he blazed his way to them.

It was all over—Rocky had got the great Lerke. Something that they would all have given a right arm to do. The great German Ace—a proud feather for any pilot's hat. It would almost certainly mean a high decoration and advancement of rank. And Thornton had got him—but how? Running like a yellow cur and then turning to yap in his face. Trickery—couldn't stay and fight it out like any of the rest of them would. Tiny mouthed his disgust as he pulled his stick back to join the rest of the squadron.

Bert had vanquished his man and the Fokker was going down in flames. Davids had fought his Fokker to a standstill and at the sight of his two comrades' defeat he was high-tailing it for home. Major Thornton was climbing to their altitude in a huge spiral. As he came to their level he signalled for the return to the drome. They fell in behind him each with their thoughts. Rocky Thornton he might be, more planes he might have than any other pilot, but he wasn't sporting. He wasn't a High Hat. He would never be. And for the second time sentence was passed on Major Rocky Thornton. Disheartened, they droned their way out of German territory.

V

MECHANICS ran out to stop the ships as they came wheeling toward the hangars. Major Thornton was the first to alight. He stood there watching the others as they came to a stop and jumped to the ground. Coolly they returned his gaze and then turned toward the mess room, shedding flying suits as they went. He stood there looking after them for a moment. Their actions were unmistakable—he read their thoughts. As if in indecision, he watched them go and then he followed them across the field to the door of the mess.

As he came through the door they were drinking cups of black coffee. Their heads came up and cool eyes met his. They held for a minute and then turned aside to continue their interrupted conversations. Rocky's shoulders jerked back and those gray eyes seemed to smoulder with their peculiar smoky haze.

"Gentlemen," he began, "your actions are not, nor are they intended to be, subtle. You condemn me! You are fools!" He paused for a moment. Eyes that also flashed fire met his.

"You think you are playing some game; you must be sportsmen, you must be gracious. Again, let me say, you are fools! Damn it, this is war, cold-blooded war—men are killed, die hellish deaths, that we may win. They are killed, understand, not kissed after defeat. There is one way to win this war, and that is by efficiency and brains.

"We completed today a mission that will save the lives of thousands of men, will save the labor of thousands of hands and will save for our country millions of pounds of ammunition with which to kill the enemy. That is war. We have done that thing and yet you stand there and condemn me with your eyes for something you do not think was *sporting*.

"What you saw today was a lesson in efficiency. You would not deign to enter that dog-fight because it was not sporting. When I was fighting Lerke, I was accomplishing nothing, he was my equal, possibly my superior. We were checkmated. I made believe that I ran. I tricked him if you please. There would come a moment when I would have him at a disadvantage, and it did. Lerke is gone—downed by cold, thinking efficiency. That and not sportsmanship wins a war. Condemn me if you will, but remember my words and be prepared to act on them as long as I retain command of this squadron."

He turned and walked out of the door.

MEN who have been under fire have experienced that quiet, deadening pall after a high explosive shell has burst near them. The world seems at a standstill, nothing moves, a tense stillness pervades the atmosphere as if waiting for the next one that will not burst so far away. It is deadening and nerve wracking, a world of noise would be better than that quietness.

That was somewhat the feelings of the

High Hats as they watched Major Rocky Thornton pass through the door. Had a bomb burst in their midst it would have been no worse. No word was spoken, no motion made, they stood still and were dumbfounded. Efficiency—brains—fools—act accordingly, while he was commander.

THE evening patrol had been in about twenty minutes. Pilots were straggling into the mess hall from hangars and billets. Some were preparing to leave for Avigny and relaxation, there to forget the humiliation of the day. Popping motorcycles with side-cars and an orderly on each seat were already drawn up outside. It was to be a night of hilarity. There was that little café on the outskirts of the town—*Donnez-moi à boire,* they called it. And there was Anette, she of the soulful eyes and the large heart; then, too, the Sixteenth from the twelfth sector would probably be over. There were a few things to settle with that gang of hedge-hoppers. It would probably turn into a regular "binge." Last time they'd——

A high-pitched whine of a straining motor filtered down through the darkness to interrupt their thoughts. Conversations were broken off as heads turned up to locate the direction of the ship.

"Gothas are out early tonight, aren't they?" asked Vare Brent of no one in particular.

"Not a Gotha. Motor's turning up too fast, and besides there's only one," answered Bert.

Far above them a great star shell broke. Its swift descent illuminated the heavens like day. The field that had been a sea of darkness, split only by the lights from the motorcycles, was now a blaze of light. Every eye was on the strange sight. Was it a night photographic hop? Were the enemy's ships lighting it up so a bomber could lay her eggs? No, that couldn't be—there was only one ship.

While they watched a little white parachute unfolded beneath the glare of the still burning star-shell. It was very small and it came fluttering swiftly to earth. So perfect was the aim of the hand that released it, that it struck in the exact center of the field. That much they saw and then the light burned out and again the field was in darkness.

Tiny was the first to his side-car, and he went roaring out on the tarmac to see what had dropped. After a few hurried circles, in which the feeble head-lamp of the motorcycle vainly tried to pick up the little white spot, he found it. Leaning far out over the edge of the side-car he picked it up as the orderly kept the machine in motion. Back to the lighted doorway of the mess hall. They stopped with a screaming of brakes and Tiny unfolded the silken parcel.

Tied to the shrouds of the miniature 'chute was an old spark plug, around which was wrapped a piece of wing fabric such as was used on Allied planes. Feverishly Tiny fumbled at the strings that held it. It came loose and he held it in front of the light of the motor bike. His eyes widened in amazement and an exclamation burst from his lips. He read it through twice, as if he couldn't believe it, and then silently handed it to Bert Wilson.

A whistle escaped Bert, and he started reading it to the eager bunch crowding into the small circle of light.

To Herr Major Thornton:

Congratulations, my Major. You are the first to succeed in many months. I, who know all those tricks, was led into one of the oldest. Your desperation seemed most real, my Major. I wonder if it wasn't? If you will meet me at ten thousand feet over Souilly, alone, we shall see.

Lerke.

"Well I'll be damned!" said Tiny. "I saw him smack the ground so hard this morning, that he ought to be bouncing yet. That bird must have nine lives."

"That efficiency lesson didn't take, it seems. Wonder what Rocky will say to that?"

"Let's take it over to the shack now. I'd

like to see his face when he reads that," said Vare.

GONE were the thoughts of Anette and the binge. They trooped across the field to the little building that served as the office for the squadron. A light was burning inside, and they could see the form of the major as he bent over his desk preparing his reports for G. H. Q. Tiny knocked at the door. Thornton bid him enter. Smartly saluting, he handed the note across the desk. The major seemed to be puzzled at the visit and looked at Tiny for a moment before glancing down at the note.

He read it slowly and then lifted his eyes to meet Tiny's gaze.

"You've read it I suppose?" His voice was as calm and impersonal as if he had read an everyday dispatch.

"Yes, sir," answered Tiny.

"What do you think, Bedell?"

"Why, there is only one thing to think," Tiny almost shouted. "You'll have to meet him!"

"Wrong again. That is not efficiency. If I meet him in the performance of my duties, then I will fight him. But to meet him to satisfy a personal vanity, to display the dashing courage so well known in this squadron, I will not do. You seem to learn slowly, Bedell. Needless risks are not to be taken by this squadron.

"Here is an order, I wish that you would transmit it to the rest of the men: Not I or any other pilot will answer that challenge from Lerke. Do you understand?" He was as calm as before, but those smoky eyes were boring into Tiny's face like gimlets.

"Yes, sir." And Tiny stumbled out of the door, his rage consuming him.

The others witnessed the performance through the windows, but they had not been able to hear Major Thornton's words. Eagerly they questioned Tiny.

"What did he say? When's he going?"

"Was he mad?" Quickly they shot the questions at him.

Tiny fought himself to get control of his speech. His oaths split the air. And then he turned on them, great hands knotted into fists.

"The pup is yellow—got a streak a mile wide down his back. Refuses to meet him. Says no one else is to meet him, either. Not efficiency—I'd like to break his cowardly neck."

"Damn such a man," exclaimed Davids. "I tried to give him a break and excuse him at first, but he just don't belong. We'll be the disgrace of the army. Sixteen, Twenty-two and the rest of the squadrons will hear about it. We'll never be able to face them. Our record is gone now."

"Hell!" Bert Wilson, former commander, said nothing more, but one word carried a world of feeling. Disgustedly they trooped back to their billets. Rebellion was in their breasts. They were straining at the bonds represented by Major Thornton. A coward had no place in their system of things. And to be led, to be commanded by one, was unbearable. The man was supposed to be a big shot, but instead they had been saddled with a rank coward. They, the highest ranking squadron on the front, regardless of flag.

THE dawn broke with a gray murk hanging over the ground. A drizzle of rain beat on the roofs. Visibility was low and ceiling was less than a thousand feet. There would be no flying today. Drowzily pilots looked out of windows and rolled over for much needed rest. Bert Wilson was awake. He was thinking of the note of the night before. Maybe this weather would give Thornton a break, it would be an alibi anyway. And then maybe he would change his mind by tomorrow. It was past the time now, Lerke probably wouldn't be out today.

Again came that high pitched drone above the field. Bert jumped up and looked out of the window. Nothing to be seen through that fog. It was there for an instant and gone, probably some observation plane out with dispatches. He turned around and was about to go back when a little white flutter caught his eye. It was another little chute. He went out and picked it up. It was another message from Lerke. Practically a duplication of yesterday's, except that penciled up in a corner was a notation in concise script. *"Second notice. I wonder, my Major, if you are afraid."*

Bert rumpled the paper in his hand and swore savagely.

What to do. Should he show it to Thorn-

ton—no, he'd only draw a rebuke, and he'd had plenty of them for awhile. Say nothing about it and make the best of it. Yes, that's what he'd do.

Evidently others had seen the chute light, for Vare and Tiny ran over to him.

"Who was it from? What did it say?"

Bert was silent for a moment, then he slowly tore the paper to bits and muttered something about another note from Lerke, as he stalked off for his breakfast.

IT WAS two days later. A little Spad with the markings of Squadron Sixteen on its tail, whistled over the hangar tops and left a little message for them. He circled and then made a derisive gesture with his fingers as they watched him go. A mechanic picked the message up and handed it to Bert. It read:

Twenty-sixth:

Listen, hot-shots, do we have to fight your battles for you? Here's a little message from Lerke; it's marked "third call." He dropped it on us this morning. If you don't feel up to it, let us know.

Sixteen.

Bert felt a wave of red spread over him. A feeling of utter shame enveloped him. Never had anything like that happened. Sixteen, their bitterest rivals in point of victories, asking if they didn't feel up to it. Damn Thornton, for a coward. Lerke would probably drop those messages all over the front—and their orders were not to meet that challenge. They'd all be grounded if they tried it. Might be worth a dishonorable discharge to go up and get Lerke. No, it wouldn't either. Bitterly he handed the paper over to Davids.

He read it and passed it around. Their bitterness knew no bounds. Many were the thoughts of disregarding orders and taking off to fulfil that mocking challenge. Tiny was for going immediately, but Bert, more cool than the rest, counseled against it. Always they had followed him before, taken his advice. And now after a heated argument he prevailed on them to wait. It would mean disgrace, imprisonment and a court martial if they went against the major's orders. Twenty-sixth squadron was on the brink of mutiny.

The next day another message came. A dispatch rider on a snorting motorcycle came tearing across the tarmac. A sergeant got off and handed an envelope to Vare Brent. With a perceptible sneer, he said, "See that this gets to the right party." And then he was gone.

It was addressed to the squadron only. There was no name on it.

Brent opened it. It was a duplicate of Lerke's other messages and penciled on it was "fourth call," but there was another message with it. It came from a lieutenant of the Twelfth infantry. Couched in sarcastic tones, it informed them that he had a buck private in his company that could fly a crate, and asked if he should send him over.

Raw, red rage burned in Brent's eyes as he read. The laughing stock of the army, huh? Even the infantry calling them yellow. A yellow pup as a commander and a mere Heine spreading it all over the front. Better take all that Thornton could give them than have this continue. His fists clenched and unclenched as he reread the insulting missile. The muscles along his jawbone stood out in cords. He went in search of Tiny.

He found him standing with Davids near a hangar door. Briefly he outlined the message and they went to his billet.

"I'm going after that Lerke," said Vare, "if I spend the rest of my life in Leavenworth. Damn a yellow pup that won't fight. We can't let this go on. Mud-crawling infantry looie sending over his little say-so. I'm through. What do you say, Tiny?"

"I'm with you. We'll go up and drag that Heinie out of the sky and spread him all over the front, whether it's efficiency or not. Major Thornton be damned. It will be hard on us, but anything is better than being tagged yellow by half the army," retorted Tiny.

But it was Davids that gave them the idea

they pursued. Earnestly they talked for ten minutes and then Tiny sat down and wrote a note. It was made into a package and tied around a piece of scrap iron and then fitted to a silk handkerchief as those other messages had been. Then they went in search of Bert. They found him tinkering around his ship in the hangar.

"Bert, here's a note we got this morning. You can see what it is."

He paused a moment while Bert read the message.

"There's going to be a little trouble around here in a few minutes and we don't want you to be in on it. You can be out on patrol. Will you go take this note and drop it on Lerke's drome? It's a little love note for him. We're telling him that we will not only meet him, but his entire squadron at the place he mentioned. That's eight against fourteen. He gets the odds, one for each day he's had to wait. We are going in and have a little talk with Thornton and you don't have to be there. Will you do it, Bert?"

IT WAS a struggle for Bert. He was a soldier. But this thing was getting on his nerves. He had built the squadron up to what it was, and then have it torn down, called yellow, sneered at—it was too much. His shoulders came back and his mind was made up.

"I leave on patrol in five minutes, and may I meet Lerke on my way." Quietly Tiny, Vare and Davids left the field and gathered the rest of the pilots. Hansen, Green, Jeanette and McCall. They were all apprised of the plans and savagely agreed. Determinedly they walked to the office of Major Thornton. This was no display of bravado, but a well thought out plan with full knowledge of the consequences. No more would they suffer the torments of insults.

They came to the door. No formality, no knocking. They walked in and stood before him. Instantly he read the mutiny in their faces. His hands grasped the table edge and he came to his feet. He held his eyes levelly on them and waited for the first to speak.

"Major Thornton, you are under arrest!" Tiny leaned closer to him as he spat out the words.

"In the absence of Captain Wilson, I, as next senior officer, will take command. It is provided in army regulations that in time of war, when an officer becomes unfit to command, the next senior officer shall replace him. It is our judgment that you are unfit to command this squadron. We do this knowing that it will bring us before a court martial. That, however, will be taken care of at the time. We no longer propose to be held up to ridicule by the entire army. Enemy aircraft are spotting our battery positions, you have orders to bring them down, and we propose to do it—starting with Lerke and his squadron."

Thornton had taken it coolly. He gave no indication of his contempt and anger. He paused for a moment after Tiny had delivered his ultimatum and then he spoke.

"Again, let me say, gentlemen, you are fools!"

"Lieutenant Brent and Lieutenant Davids, place Major Thornton in confinement and have a guard placed before the door. Be ready to leave on patrol in ten minutes."

THEY took him to a billet and locked the door. He had no word for them, but went calmly. An orderly was detailed to patrol the building and let no one in or out.

Blithely and in spite of the enormous thing they had done, they went to their ships with light hearts and laughing countenances. Laughingly they joked with each other and imitated Tiny as he pronounced the major's sentence. It was the after effects of a tense situation. They would probably suffer for it afterward, but they would laugh now; and besides there was Lerke waiting for them. It would be a large morning after the High Hat fashion.

VI

WITH a roar of throbbing engines they were off. Tiny was at point, Vare and Davids on right and left, immediately behind. Green, Hansen and the others made up the V. According to their code they had undergone great trials in the last few days. No one had suffered the shame they had undergone, they were the laughing stock of the front. Gladly now they went to combat against the best the enemy had to offer. They were going in against great

odds, but what mattered that; they were out to wipe out the shame visited on them by a commander that wouldn't fight. No more, after this day, would those insulting little notes be dropped on their field.

They were yet two miles from their goal when they sighted Bert. He was coming back from his trip to Lerke's drome. Happily, it seemed, he veered his course to join them when he saw the tight formation. He drew in beside Tiny and indicated with a swinging downward motion of his hand that he had delivered the message, and then dropped behind to fall in beside Jeanette. His was a position that could be changed to deliver a mighty thrust while they held that entering wedge formation.

The formation would probably hold only for the first moment, and then it would be a dog-fight, but in that moment before it broke an experienced fighter could do slashing damage. Steadily they held to their course. They intended to be the first at the rendezvous, not only for the moral effect, but for the added advantage of having Lerke's squadron open the fight. Souilly, with its shattered church spires, its leafless trees and shell torn aspect, was spreading out below them. It would be but a moment more until they were at the designated spot.

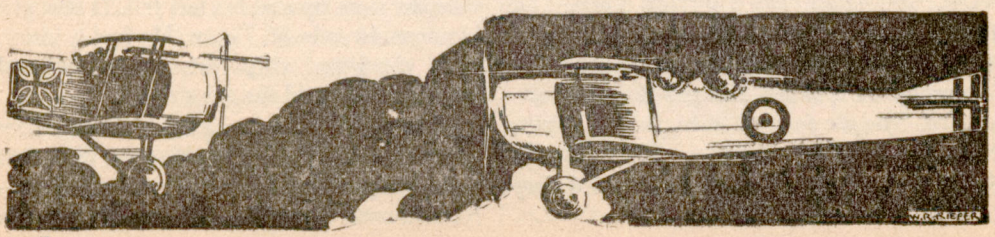
Tiny banked slowly on his right wing and led his mutineers around in a lazy circle as they scanned the horizon for the little dots that would tell them of the coming of Lerke. A plan of battle was entering Tiny's mind. He changed from the plan of the moment before—to stand and let the enemy open hostilities. He was a strong believer in the element of surprise. Why not, when they sighted them, to stand for a moment, and then as the enemy came on, drive for them with full gun.

When ships are rapidly approaching each other, head-on, it is difficult, even though the approaching ship increases in size rapidly, to realize that it is not your own speed that causes it. Hence, Tiny counted on those few moments to get in the first surprise blow. It was a matter of strategy and he knew it was good. Closely he inspected the sky in the direction from which the Germans must come. And then he saw the little specks coming from the north. He signalled his new plan of battle to the nearest pilot and it was relayed by motions of hand back to the end of the V.

He held the position until he could clearly distinguish the three separate wings of each ship in Lerke's group. Then his hand went up and down over the cockpit and he pushed his gun full forward. The Nieuport seemed to jump as the full surge of power whipped the prop through the air. Automatically each ship of the formation drew closer to point until there was little space between each. Massed for the attack.

Rapidly they approached each other—a thousand feet, five hundred, three hundred —and still they held that head-on position, neither giving way. Tiny opened the ball at three hundred feet. His Vickers spat a solid sheet of steel straight at the ship of Lerke. Bert had gone up a hundred feet over the formation, still holding his position, but climbing. Still they held—a crash seemed unavoidable. Sickening little shivers ran up and down pilots' backs as they watched fascinated. Who would weaken first? The air was a screaming inferno of flying steel and roaring motors.

Something was the matter with Green. He was wabbling around drunkenly, but trying to hold his position. Bert's nose came down in a whip-like gesture and he raked the three ships nearest to Lerke with a withering hail. He saw one of the Fokkers crumple and nose over. Motor dead, probably. That was one. And then Green flopped out of his crazy gyrations for a long moment. He seemed to hang there suspended in the air by an invisible hand and then he,



too, went tumbling to earth. Bert could see a tiny finger of flame licking back along the engine cowling. Tough. That, would be hot. Good kid. He dropped down to take the place of the burning ship.

IT WAS Lerke whose stick went down first. He could not outnerve the grim and determined fool of a Yankee that sat there like a madman and refused to budge. Not for nothing had the High Hats endured the gibes and taunts these last few days. Lerke would know that he would have to pay a heavy interest on those notes he had so blithely spread along the front. Madly Lerke and his thirteen pilots whipped under them and strove to come up beneath. The distance was too close and they swerved, still in close formation, to bring their guns in on the tails of the Nieuports that had just passed over them.

It was Bert that tore their protective formation wide open. As the Fokkers strained every atom of power to beat the Nieuports around, Bert seemed to swap ends on his own axis. It was the famous "horse-tail" he had invented. None of the rest of them could do it. And now he whipped down along one whole side of the German formation wilting them with the deadly fire from above. They were not able to reach him and he continued the fire until the last ship had been reached. Human flesh or material could not stand it. Fiercely they tore apart—anything to escape that hornet above them. The V was broken up and now the air was full of buzzing ships, tumbling in a dozen different directions. They were demoralized for the instant and Tiny led the High Hats straight into them.

Two Fokkers shuddered as if they had the ague. Jeanette got a burst through one of them and he went crashing to earth. Vare kicked right rudder and veered from the formation slightly to rake the other as they went past. There was a terrific crash. The bright sky seemed to be intensified by a hundred suns and then the enemy ship disintegrated in mid air. His gas tank had exploded. The air seemed to be full of angry, buzzing, spitting demons. They hardly knew which was which so swiftly did they attack.

Three of them gone, anyway. The odds were lessened. It was then that the mastery of Lerke began to assert itself. The sight of his comrades falling in a terrible death seemed to energize him with new powers. Backed by two of his lieutenants he swarmed into the still-held formation of Nieuports. He was everywhere. In and out, up and down, Spandaus pouring a livid flame of death into Tiny's crew. His vengeance was terrific. The Nieuport formation was scattered and the air was full of separate dog-fights.

AND now the power of those extra ships began to be felt—the odds of numbers was a heavy force to down. It meant that some Nieuport would absorb the punishment of two or more of the enemy. And one of those was Tiny.

Lerke, as was his custom, had picked the leader. He was on Tiny's tail in a terrible dive. Tiny was on his wing-tips in a vertical bank trying to escape the terrible punishment that ripped through his wings. Lerke gained on him and then nosed under a trifle to intercept Tiny's dive. In that instant another checkered Fokker swept by. They had him in a cross fire. The old trick—trap them into a dive and then cross steel on them. Tiny fought with the strength of a mad man. It seemed useless. He felt a tug at the shoulder of his leather coat and his arm went numb. And then little Davids whipped in and took that other wasp out.

Savagely Tiny forced the dead arm between himself and the cockpit wall while he handled the stick with his right. Lerke was above him now, preparing to come down in the thrust that would finish him. Tiny held back the pain that was consuming him and cut his gun to half speed. He waited until the last fraction of a second and then as Lerke flashed down at him he jerked the stick back. His speed was not sufficient to take the nose up and his tail fell. It brought his nose directly on Lerke. He had a vision of a checkered ship through his crossed sights and he held the trips down.

"Somebody else can play at that tricky game—damn you! How'd you like that little spray. Spread notes around will you—have another little shot of steel. And as the

nose of the little ship fell to gain an even keel Tiny raked him again before the German could escape. Tiny looked around as he straightened out and saw that Davids was in a bad way. His motor was emitting wisps of black smoke and a Fokker was crowding the limping Nieuport. He swept by like a flash, but not before he took the Fokker from Davids's tail.

TINY tried to check up on the rest of them, but it was impossible. Whirling, crashing, striking ships filled the air about him. He saw Hansen over on his right. Two of the Fokkers were giving him the old whip-snap. Between them the Nieuport was, and they checked him on every move, pouring that deadly cross fire into him. In that second, while Tiny watched he saw Hansen go down, his head lolling around on the cockpit rim. Hansen was gone. He snapped his rudder over to whip down on the tail of the two that had downed him, when Lerke again came boring in.

More savage than ever was this attack. No matter what Tiny did he didn't seem to be able to shake him. His breath was coming hard, and the blood was running down his sleeve from that arm. He had wondered why the stick had been so slippery. He saw a great splinter snap away from a wing strut. And then as the German drew in, a magic little line of holes snaked across the wing a foot above his head. Tiny, forcing himself to keep out of the red haze that seemed to draw across his eyes, whipped the stick back into his stomach. He went over into a loop as the German flashed under him.

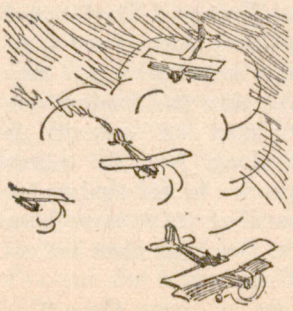
At the top of the loop he looked down. Vare and Davids were locked in grips with three Fokkers and now Lerke, whom he had just eluded for the moment, was tearing in to help them. Four to two. Dazedly Tiny brought his little crate out of the loop and started for the melée. Things were not going so good for the High Hats. Lerke was showing a brand of conflict that was almost invincible. He was everywhere. Lending his guns to a pilot here, whipping in on a Nieuport there, he still seemed to be untouched in a vital spot. Tiny felt a wave of despair go over him as he saw the four Fokkers whip in on Vare and Davids.

If he could only get there in time. God, how he wanted to knock Lerke down—wound him, anything to get that savage out of the air. His mind seemed to be viewing the conflict at great distance now. Doggedly he hung on. Have to get down there—couldn't let them knock little Davids down—have to make a touchdown, Davids carried the ball for him. Dimly through the haze he saw Bert whip down in front of his nose and join Davids and Vare. But Lerke had seen him coming and whirled around to meet him. Bert could not check the dive and he met a ripping roar of lead as he went by. Tiny saw the ship lurch and quaver. It seemed to nearly stall for a moment and then straightened out.

THAT had been a bad wound some place. Maybe his motor was cutting out. Would he never get there—damn such a slow horse—why wouldn't it move? That red wall was trying to crawl over his eyes again. Looked like the High Hats were about through—well, they would go down fighting anyway. They wouldn't run, and they'd take a few with them. Wonder what the folks at home would think. Too many Fokkers—maybe they had been foolish.

It was then that a new note came whining through the air. It came with a terrific scream down through the air above them. Tiny was hardly conscious of it, but he knew that another plane was coming down at a great speed.

The little gray ship burst into them like a meteor. It was spitting a welter of steel at those ships he was trying to get to. Then it was gone and at another. What a pilot that man was! He seemed to have the effect of ten planes. Tiny wondered who he was. If he only had that speed—it was then he realized that he was limping around in a circle with a clipped control wire.



The new ship tore into Lerke and before the German could swerve to avoid him, he had been pounded with a million little steel ham-

mers. Lerke tried to nose down away from the gray ship, but it was impossible, he was all over the German. He anticipated every move and met it with blazing guns. The German ship faltered and staggered like a man struck a mighty blow. His nose dropped and then he fell off on one wing. The other wing dropped to meet it and then fell below it. Down, down, end over end went Lerke. The Black Ace was again down. Vaguely Tiny watched him go and saw the great wall of red flame that wrapped his ship in its enfolding grasp.

There never had been such a man on the front—who could he be? Vare, wounded though he was, took new heart at the sight of the avenger that came among them. New hope seemed to permeate them all. The High Hats were getting a new lease on life. They had been granted an extension from blighty by one little gray Spad.

And then it was that the haze drifted from Tiny's mind for a moment and he recognized the newcomer.

It was Rocky Thornton!

What a thunderbolt of destruction he was. The squadron seemed to take on a new spirit. Thunderously they drummed into the remaining Fokkers. But the sight of Lerke, their great leader, down, and of this new arrival that was making such havoc among them was too much. They fled for their drome. Dazedly Tiny fell in behind the crippled birds of his own squadron and, half blinded by pain, he followed them.

HE HARDLY knew how he got home. He was vaguely conscious of gentle hands lifting him out of the cockpit. And then he seemed to be wide awake again. It was that flash that comes before oblivion. He saw Vare and Bert and Davids and Jeanette climbing slowly down from their machines. Their eyes were hollow and they were wan-faced. Davids was holding one arm with his other hand and he limped as he moved slowly along. And the others were wounded. Jeanette leaned against his tattered Nieuport as if afraid to move from its supporting bulk. The High Hats had returned—some of them.

There were some of them there that would not fly for many days, but all those that were not dead on the field of honor had returned. Little Davids and Bert, wounded though they were, had even made the High Hat landing. It was then, as Tiny watched them gather themselves together, that the little Spad came down.

There was none of that slow circling Major Thornton had used when he arrived. It was a swift, decisive landing—perfect. He came in with a vengeance. The little ship seemed to stop before it had hardly landed. The major hit the ground and then took a few steps toward them. He stopped and glared at them. Glared at those men, some of whom still felt the fingers of death tugging at them. His foot patted the ground in swift staccato. He held it for a deathly quiet moment and then whirled on his heels and stalked to his office.

They were beyond caring. What did it matter? They might get read out of the army or maybe a stretch in Leavenworth, but they were beyond feeling. What a pilot he was, though! And they had called him yellow. He had it all over them. Tiny felt himself sinking behind that wall—— Had to sleep—tired—Rocky Thornton was hot stuff.

VII

IT WAS a bedraggled bunch of weary pilots that stood in front of the bulletin board the next morning. Amazement pulled sunken eyes out from their tired sockets.

Mouths stood agape as they read the bulletins tacked on the board. Their eyes refused to believe what they saw. Hungry memories stored the words that they might tell those that lay back in the billets under a swath of white bandages. For, there on the board was this:

To: All Pilots of Squadron Twenty-six.
From: Commandant.
Subject: Discipline.

It has come to the notice of the Commandant that certain pilots are guilty of disrespect to their superior officers. Any further continuance of these tactics will be sufficient to have charges brought against them before a general court-martial.

Signed: L. W. Thornton, Major.
Commanding Squadron,
Twenty-six.

And then below was another notice.

To: Pilots, Squadron Twenty-six.
From: Commandant.
Subject: Decorations.

For extreme valor performed in the service above and beyond the call of duty, the following officers have this day been recommended to G. H. Q. for citations from their government.

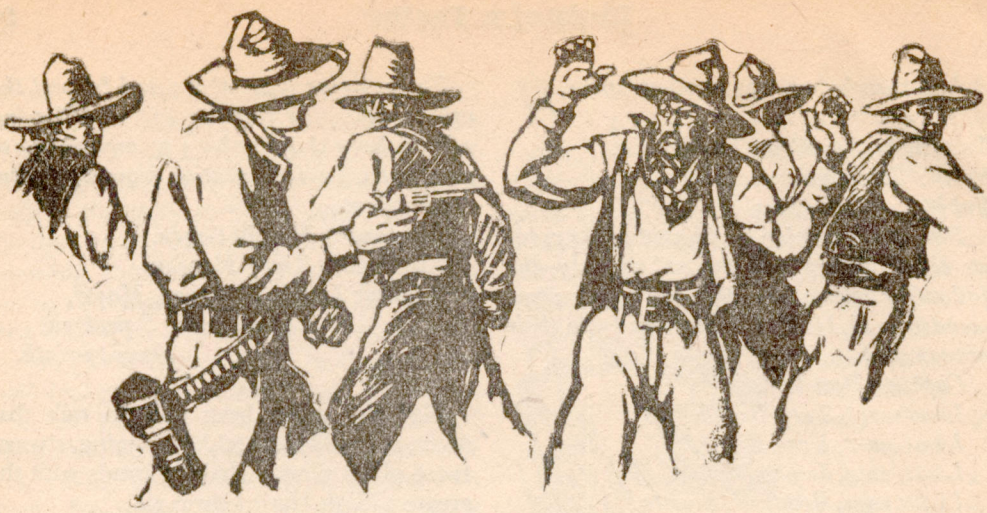
Captain, Bert Wilson.
Lieutenant, Tiny Bedell.
Lieutenant, Vare Brent.
Lieutenant, James Davids.
Lieutenant, Beaupre Jeanette.
Lieutenant, Donald McCall.

For extreme valor above and beyond the call of duty, the families of the following officers have this day been recommended to receive posthumous citation from a grateful government.

Lieutenant, Harold Green.
Lieutenant, Knute Hanson.
Signed: L. W. Thornton, Major.
Commanding Squadron,
Twenty-sixth.

Had the moon been able to talk that night, it would have told of limping, shamefaced pilots silently shaking hands with the greatest High Hat of them all.

Decision had been reversed!



THE KID BROTHER OF MEN

By HOMER KING GORDON

Author of "What Price Treasure," "The Border Fool," etc.

WHEN YOUNG STEVE MORRISON, TIRED OF BEING ONLY "THE MORRISON KID," AND WANTING TO MAKE HIS OWN REPUTATION IN THE COW COUNTRY, STARTED OUT TO PROVE HIMSELF A MAN AMONG MEN, HE LET HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY IN FOR MORE TROUBLE THAN HE HAD COUNTED ON

TIM HOGAN, with a pair of spectacles hooked on his ears, was perched on the edge of his bunk, mending the broken throat-latch of a bridle when Steve Morrison stuck his head through the open door of the Crazy S bunkhouse and looked around to see who was inside.

All that was left of Tim's hair was gray. His skin was the color of old saddle leather. Years of exposure to the cattle range brand of weather that sweeps across Arizona had left him with squint eyes and a mouth permanently puckered. The tips of his ears were scaly from continual wind and sunburn.

"Howdy," Steve stood stiffly in the doorway. "You all alone?"

Tim shifted a quid of tobacco into his cheek and peered sourly over the steel-rimmed glasses at his visitor.

"I wuz," he observed significantly.

Ignoring the sarcasm, Steve limped into the bunkhouse with a sigh of relief and lowered himself into a chair by the side of Tim's bunk. There were spots of color over his cheek bones and his eyes were bright. Slender and wiry, even at ease, he seemed charged with a suppressed force which might explode at the slightest provocation. The set of his thin face and the way his long fingers fondled his guns, made Tim instantly suspicious.

"You drunk?" he asked shortly.

Steve smiled and for an instant his face relaxed.

"Not yet. My feet hurt. These new boots are too damned tight."

Groaning, he pulled off his shoes and tenderly wiggled his toes.

"I reckon nothin' but old age ever learns a cowpuncher to git a hat small enough to fit his head an' boots big enough to accommodate his feet," Tim commented. "I'll bet you've got at least three lamp wicks under the sweat band of your hat right now."

"I've got hair. My head ain't like a billiard ball that kain't change its size or shape," Steve retorted. "Got anything to drink around here?"

"Water, if that's what you mean."

"Hell, I don't want a bath. I want a drink. I'm going to kill a man before sundown tonight an' I need somethin' stronger than water to do it on."

TIM swore softly as he jabbed the awl into his finger. Behind the light banter of Steve's remark Tim caught the tremble of cold drawn steel.

"Stevie," he said slowly, "it seems to me, for Ed's sake anyway, that you'd cut out some of this hell raisin' fer a spell."

"This killin' is bein' done for Ed's sake," Steve said evenly.

Tim waited until he had waxed a thread before he continued the conversation.

"Jist who do you figger on killin'—fer Ed's sake?" he then asked cautiously.

"Milt Haggerty."

"Since when can't Ed do his own killin', if Haggerty needs it that bad?"

"You'll never thread that end of the needle," Steve observed, as Tim began jabbing the waxed thread at the needle point.

"These window glasses—" Tim explained weakly.

STEVE grinned with his mouth but his eyes were as hard as blue-green ice.

"Haggerty's got to be killed like the cur dog he is. Ed couldn't kill no one that way. You know what I mean."

"Haggerty's mouth is jist loose," Tim remonstrated.

"It won't be fer long."

"Now, Stevie," Tim protested.

"Lissen, Tim," Steve drew his knees up under his chin and locked his arms about them. "Haggerty's been tellin' all over this county that I git away with robbin' an' stealin' an' cattle thievin' jist because Ed is sheriff an' I happen to be Ed's brother."

"Which ain't the truth," Tim declared. "We ain't never had a squarer sheriff than Ed Morrison."

"A lot of Ed's enemies are repeatin' it fer the truth," Steve retorted.

"Hell, lies always git all the repeatin'," Tim contended.

"It's hurtin' Ed," Steve maintained.

"Not mortal," Tim objected.

"A lot worse'n you think," Steve said slowly. "Anyway, I reckon it can be stopped right prompt."

Tim's gun and belt hung on a peg near the door. He stole a speculative look at it, and then estimated the distance from the gun to Steve.

"No use tryin' that," Steve remarked dryly. "My mind's made up."

"I wuz figgerin' it wouldn't do you no special harm to be whacked over the head good," Tim admitted. "You talk of spoilin' Ed's record by bein' his brother an' gittin' away with some kid pranks, an' then in the next breath you expect to do murder an' git away with it. How's that gonna help Ed's record?"

STEVE showed his teeth in a strained, nervous smile.

"I didn't say nothin' about gittin' away with it," he said softly.

Tim laid down his mending and pushed the spectacles back from his eyes.

"Seems to me the best way you could help Ed would be by givin' up some of your careless habits," he growled crossly.

"It's too late fer that," Steve answered.

Tim wiped his eyes with a gaudy bandanna, and edging up to the head of his bunk, reached under the pillow and pulled out a bottle of whisky.

"Jist happened to remember I had some left," he explained.

Steve took the bottle, eagerly held it to his mouth for several seconds. He swallowed noisily and smacked his lips with gusto, but Tim was not deceived. Steve had taken only a small drink.

"Thought you were thirsty," Tim taunted.

"I was," Steve retorted.

He took a heavy gold watch out of his vest pocket and looked at it.

"Two hours to go," he commented.

Tim made a move toward the door, but Steve slid out of his chair and with a catlike leap, was at the peg where the gun hung.

"No use, Tim," he declared. "Let's don't have no hard feelin's." He unloaded the gun and slid it along on the floor under the bunk and up into the corner.

"You'll end up gittin' your neck stretched," Tim warned.

"No, I won't," Steve answered. "Not even if I do deserve it."

"You shore do."

Steve picked up the bottle and took another sparing drink.

"Yes, I do," he admitted. "Haggerty ain't been lyin' about me none. I've been thievin' and runnin' cattle an' doin' the things he says I have. Ed won't believe it, but I have."

"An' why, you damn fool?" Tim exploded. "With a family name all Arizona is proud of, an'—an' everything you need to——"

"Not everything," Steve objected.

"What ain't you got?"

Steve looked out through the open door at the rolling range.

"All of my life I've jist been the Morrison kid," he said with slow bitterness. "The old man came out here and carved a name an' a ranch fer himself in spite of hell an' the elements, includin' his enemies. Ed took up where he left off. I never got any of the hard jobs. I was the kid. They couldn't 'a' petted me worse if I'd been a girl."

"Glory mean that much to you?"

"Maybe I did want some of the glory," Steve conceded. "But I never got a chance to earn any. Why, when I was a kid, if any of the other kids laid a finger on me, Ed would beat hell out of them if he found it out. I never had a chance to fight my own battles. I was jist the Morrison kid an' I wasn't no weaklin' either. I coulda held my own anywhere if they'd give me a chance."

"Killin' Milt Haggerty ain't gonna git you much glory."

STEVE ignored this remark.

"That's why I took up with the wild bunch that I did," he explained slowly. "With them I wasn't anybody's kid. I was able to fight my own battles."

"I reckon yore dad an' Ed never realized how you felt," Tim said gently.

"No," Steve agreed. "Because I was slim an' skinny an' not big muscled an' brawny, I reckon they figgered I was delicate."

"Better have another drink," Tim invited amiably, "I ain't much in favor of big sprees, but a good drink oughta do you good. It'll help work the bitterness outa yore system. Next time I git into town I'll have a quiet little talk with Ed an' see if I kain't open his eyes some. I hear he's needin' a deputy an' there ain't no reason why you kain't be it."

"There ain't—right now," Steve agreed. "But there's liable to be a big reason before sundown."

He chuckled mirthlessly.

"Go on," Tim urged. "Have a hearty drink."

Steve tipped the bottle to his lips and took a swallow.

"Got a pair of old boots around here?" he asked. "I figger when I make my big play I might at least be feelin' easy an' comfortable."

"Not a pair," Tim declared promptly.

"What size is yourn?"

"Sevens an' a half. They're too big."

"These are sixes," Steve admitted. "But I guess I could use yourn."

"Yeh, but what about me?" Tim protested.

"Kick 'em off," Steve ordered.

"I can't wear yourn an' I can't run around barefoot," Tim pleaded.

"I'm gonna show this damned range that all us Morrisons are men." Steve's eyes were bright and his voice was harsh. "Ed'll probably be glad to buy you a new pair of boots if need be."

"Milt Haggerty ain't worth it, Stevie," Tim protested.

"No, but Ed is, an' this is the first chance I ever had to pay off my debts to Ed." Steve stood up and squared his shoulders. "Kick

off your boots, old-timer, or I'll pull them off myself. I need 'em, an' anyway I don't want you ridin' on my heels and spoilin' my play. It's my day to howl."

Tim's eyes were grave and his lips were clamped together as he slowly pulled off his boots and tossed them at Steve's feet. Watching warily, Steve put them on and stamped about, trying them out.

"Kain't say they look handsome," he grinned, "but they shore feel loose enough. Let's have a little drink together, *amigo*, an' then I'll vamoose."

He put the bottle to his lips and drank.

"I hope you'll always be Ed's best friend," he said as he tossed the bottle over to Tim, who merely wet his lips with the whisky.

STEVE walked over to the bunkhouse door and stood there for a moment. His horse, with trailing bridle reins, stood a few yards from the door.

"There'll be some that say I was drunk," he remarked. "But I'm not drunk now an' I won't be when it happens. I don't reckon it matters much but I'd kinda like it known that I wasn't. Every move I'm makin' has been planned."

"Wait a day an' think things over again, Stevie," Tim pleaded.

"It's all thought out," Stevie smiled. "*Adios,* old-timer."

He walked quickly out of the bunkhouse, caught up the dangling bridle reins and rode away in a whirl of dust.

He did not hesitate or look back. Tim stood in the doorway until he was gone, then snatching up a saddle from the bunkhouse floor, he ran out toward the horse corral, swearing as he stumbled along in his socks, but too desperately in a hurry to stop and hunt for a pair of boots.

MILT HAGGERTY was in the Buckeye Saloon when Steve found him. He was sitting in a poker game at one of the tables down at the end of the bar, behind the round sheet-iron stove.

Haggerty's body was thick, his neck was thick, and his fingers were dirty and pudgy. His mouth, a raw slash joining his stubble-covered cheeks and heavy jowls, drooled tobacco juice. The bulge of his neck below his hat and above his greasy coat collar, was covered with thin unkempt hair.

He sat half facing the doorway, with one elbow on the card table, holding his cards close to his beady, shifting eyes, that darted quick glances from the cards to the other players about the table, and then at the door.

He was looking at the door when Steve Morrison walked into the saloon. His eyes wavered and then looked hastily down at his cards. Steve laughed, and stalked stiffly up to the bar. The back of Haggerty's neck went red and glistened with sudden sweat. His pudgy fingers fumbled with the edge of the card table and hesitated above his gun, but he moved them quickly over to his pile of chips and picked up as many as he could hold in his fingers.

"Afraid to make a move to draw, yuh white-bellied skunk," Steve said with harsh contempt. "All you ain't afraid to shoot off is your foul mouth."

Steve leaned against the bar. His right hand rested lightly on his gun, and although he spoke to the bartender, his eyes never left Haggerty.

"Give me a glass of whisky."

THE poker game was suspended as the players watched Steve.

"Heard you've been tellin' around that Ed winks at my thievin' an' things," Steve commented. "Heard you even hint that maybe I whack up with Ed in return fer gittin' protected. How about it? Got guts to tell me them things to my face?"

Haggerty mumbled something too far down in his throat to be understood and covered his eyes with his cards. His fingers aimlessly filtered chips.

"Take your gun out an' lay it on the table," Steve commanded.

Sweat rolled down Haggerty's cheeks as he brushed the palm of his hand over the table to free it of sticky chips.

"Lay it down," Steve snapped.

Haggerty drew his gun with his thumb and forefinger and laid it gingerly in the center of the table. The other players pushed away and slid out of their chairs and away from the two.

"Now stand up an' tell the world that you're a damn dirty liar," Steve said.

Haggerty leaned heavily on the table as he got to his feet. Moistening his lips with his tongue he made two futile attempts to speak before words came.

"I guess I did," he croaked finally.

"You guess——" Steve stepped swiftly toward him.

"I did," Haggerty said quickly. "I lied."

"Yeh, you lied all right," Steve declared, almost in a monotone. "You lied because you were afraid of Ed. You and your dirty pals know you can't put anything over on Ed so you want to blacken his record an' git someone else put in his place. You kinda figgered that your dirty underground slander an' whispers would do the trick. Well, I reckon there'll be less of that kind of talk after today."

Steve drew his gun and holding it before

him, advanced on Haggerty. With his eyes rolled up in an agony of terror, Haggerty backed around the table and up against the wall. With his arms outspread and his fingers digging into the mud-plastered wall, his knees sagged and he began to plead.

"Don't kill me like a rat," he whined.

"That's all you are, a lying, filthy range rat."

Steve hesitated a second. An expression of intense loathing and disgust spread over his face. He raised his gun on a level with Haggerty's face, but suddenly whirled on the men who were watching him.

"Get out of here, all of you," he ordered.

THEY made a rush for the door, all excepting the bartender, who dropped down behind the bar unnoticed by Steve. When they were all outside, Steve slammed the heavy doors shut so that none of them could see what was happening inside the saloon. Then he walked back to where Haggerty still stood huddled against the wall.

"Go on, pick up your gun. I'll give you a chance," he offered. "I didn't mean to, but I can't kill a man in cold blood. Not even for Ed's sake."

Haggerty made no move to reach for his gun which lay on the card table a few feet away. Steve picked up the gun and forced it into Haggerty's hands.

"Go on, shoot. Raise it," he counted.

Haggerty fired while Steve was talking, but his bullet missed Steve and plied into the bar.

"Take another shot," Steve shouted recklessly.

Their guns seemed to roar at the same instant, but Haggerty slumped forward with a bullet through his face; Steve was untouched.

He walked across the floor and kicked Haggerty's gun into a far corner. Then he went to the door of the saloon, opened it and flourishing his smoking gun, motioned for the white-faced men on the outside to come back into the saloon. They filed in silent and tight-lipped.

"I reckon you all saw an' heard what happened," Steve walked over to the bar and drank the whisky that was waiting there for him. "I killed him without giving him a chance. I shot at him four times, twice with his own gun and twice with mine. Missed him three times to make him die slower. You've all heard him whisper how Ed wouldn't arrest me fer nothin' jist because I happen to be Ed's brother."

He looked at Haggerty's crumpled body and laughed.

"Go git Ed an' find out what we'll do," he challenged them. "I ain't gonna run. I'll wait right here till he's found. Tell 'im what happened. Tell 'im jist how it was done, an' see what Ed does."

None of the men moved.

"Go ahead," Steve urged them. "I took his gun away from 'im and then shot 'im in cold blood. You've got a man fer sheriff. Find out how he acts when his own brother kills a man like that."

TWO men suddenly burst through the door and into the saloon. In the lead was Ed Morrison, with a sheriff's badge pinned on his vest. He wore a gun slung low on his right hip. His great chest was heaving as though he had been running. Behind him was Tim Hogan. Tim's tattered socks were spotted with blood and his feet were swollen.

"Stevie!" Ed said sharply.

He took two or three steps into the saloon and then stopped. Brushing the acrid smoke from his eyes he looked around the room until his eyes found the dead man by the wall.

"I took his gun away from him, an' then killed him," Steve said harshly, swaying slightly away from the bar. "He never had a chance."

Ed looked at the faces around him and no one denied Steve's story.

"Steve—are you drunk?" he asked dully.

"I killed Haggerty. I've robbed and thieved an' run cattle an' pulled the wool over your eyes for years," Stevie boasted. "You're afraid to arrest me. I'm your brother Stevie, the Morrison kid."

"Steve," Ed's voice was suddenly hard.

"I'm arresting you now."

"Arrestin' me when you know I'll be hung?"

"Arresting you when I know I'll have to hang you myself," Ed said sorrowfully.

STEVE backed away, holding his gun at his hip.

"You'll never take me alive," he said softly.

Ed did not answer, but took a step toward him.

"Never alive," Steve warned him, and raising his gun, he fired at his brother.

Ed hesitated, as though bewildered and sick. Steve raised his gun again and fired once more. Slowly, as though he hoped the third bullet would reach him first, Ed drew his gun.

"Then, Stevie," he said slowly, "I'll have to take you dead."

Steve had drawn himself erect, with his shoulders thrown back and his chin up, when Ed's bullet hit him. He smiled slightly, and fell backward to the floor.

Ed was down on the floor beside him, with his arms holding him up, when Steve opened his eyes.

"I wasn't aimin' at you—Ed," Steve whispered.

"I know'd you wasn't, Stevie," Ed said brokenly. "That's why I aimed true. To hang you—it seemed as if I couldn't—ever."

"Forgive me, Ed, fer makin' you do it," Steve pleaded. "An' don't throw away your badge—show 'em that—all—us Morrisons—are—men."

For a few minutes Ed knelt on the floor, holding Steve's limp body in his arms.

"He's dead, Tim."

"He's not either," Tim declared excitedly. "He's still breathin', yet. Look, your bullet hit that watch. It's all smashed."

Ed Morrison jerked the shirt off of Steve and glanced quickly at the jagged wound over his brother's heart.

"Get the doctor quick," he ordered.

While they were waiting, the bartender came up behind the bar and touched Ed timidly on the shoulder.

"That kid didn't kill nobody in cold blood," he declared. "He didn't know it, but I was hidin' back there behind the bar and heard Haggerty take two shots at him, before Steve touched the trigger. He tried to throw sand in your eyes, Ed, but there ain't a jury in Arizona that will convict him of anything except shootin' in self-defense, while I'm alive."

THAT night two men sat for a while on the steps of the 'dobe jail, just at the edge of the little cattle town. One was Ed Morrison, his hat pulled down low over his eyes, and his shoulders hunched against the wall. The other was Tim Hogan.

The sheriff's fingers toyed with a broken blood-stained gold watch which Tim had just given him, but his eyes stared off into the distance. Wearing a pair of new boots that creaked when he moved, Tim lit a cigarette and made a restless attempt to smoke.

"Ed, you ought to be rejoicing instead of takin' on so," he said. "The doctor says Steve will be as fit as a fiddle inside of a week."

"But I shot him," Ed answered. "And I shot to kill. It's an act of Providence that he's alive."

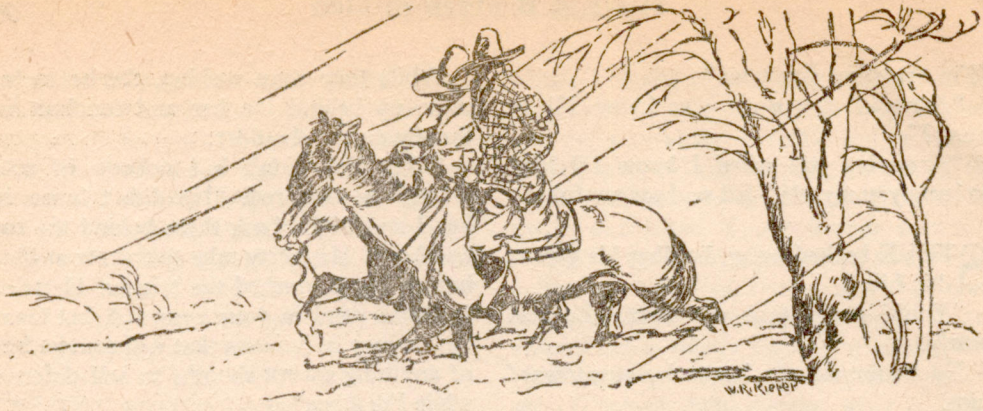
"I guess the Big Boss figures there wasn't any use of another man bein' killed like he was, just to make this Range a little easier for us bums," Tim said comfortingly. "I reckon he 'lowed you needed a new deputy more than he needed a new hand to ride trail herd on the stars."

Ed looked up. Cloudless and sparkling with stars, the sky hung over them as a jewel-set dome, edged with dusky blue velvet where it dipped down to touch the distant range. As they watched, a bright star cut across the heavens, leaving a glowing trail.

"If that's the case, I hope the Big Boss knows how much obliged to him I am," Ed said reverently.

"I reckon he does, Ed," Tim answered.

A night chill had fallen over the range, when Tim left, but Ed was still sitting on the jail house steps, watching the trail herders marshal the stars across the sky.



THE SWALLOWFORK BULLS

A Story of Pluck and the Montana Ranges

By B. M. BOWER

Author of "Power," "Poacher's Luck," etc.

Part II

SCOTT awoke in the house, sometime during the next morning. He was in bed in the unused sitting room—ironical term, since no one ever sat in it so far as he knew. The bed stood in the corner farthest from the two front windows and a peacock-patterned, calico curtain hung on a stretched wire gave a certain air of privacy to that end of the room. The curtain was now pushed back halfway to the foot of the bed so that he could look into the room. A round heater with two little iron doves ornamenting the smooth body at the front and with a fancy nickeled rim around the base, radiated heat and the faint odor of fresh blacking. A cup with a spoon in it stood on a chair near the bed. Scott's glance strayed to the one window within range of his vision —since the peacock curtain hid the other —and through the coarse, stiffly starched lace curtains looped back with faded pink ribbon he saw that the outer world was veiled thinly with driving snow; not the large, patterned flakes of a steady snowfall, but the fine-grained snow that is driven before a wind of biting cold. The kind of snow that will send cattle drifting miserably before it seeking shelter from the knife-sharp wind, their backs humped and whitened, their lashes rimed with the frost of their freezing breath.

Scott raised himself to an elbow, his thoughts going anxiously to the Swallowfork bulls. Whatever had happened to him did not matter half so much as that the bulls should be fed and kept contented in the sheds until the storm had passed; but whatever had happened to him took precedence in spite of him, for the stove suddenly reeled and the room went round and round and every object blurred and faded into a reddish dusk. That was as far as Scott went for the moment.

WHEN he opened his eyes again he took his time about lifting his head. The result was the same, though in a milder form. He did not drift off into the reddish dusk this time, but fought to hold his senses clear. He had to get out and feed the bulls. He *had* to. But will as he might to do it, he got no farther up than his elbow would prop him, and he hung there between full sense and oblivion, sicker than ever he had been on the side-lines after the whole enemy football team had piled on top of him and stepped on his ear. For a minute or so he half expected to hear the whistle. Instead, the door opened and Mrs. Pruitt came in.

"Now, you lay right down again and take it easy," she commanded in her brisk voice that could sharpen so easily. "You're a perty sick boy, and you'll be sicker if you

don't lay still. I been up most all night with you."

"Somebody hit me," Scott mumbled, watching her bleary-eyed and wishing her face wouldn't swell and shrink that way; she wasn't any too handsome at her best. "In the stable—when I was taking care of—of the team. Somebody hit me—on the head." His free hand went groping up to his head, touched a bandage and dropped heavily to the log-cabin quilt.

"Hit you—I should say it did! The feed box flew up and hit you, that's who hit you on the head. You must of fainted away. Your liver's out of order, that's what. When you didn't come and didn't come—and we all of us heard the wagon go past and we knew it hadn't ought to take all that time to unhitch and feed the horses—I sent Pa and Jim down to see what ailed you that you didn't come in to your supper. I had baked potatoes, and they was so soggy by that time they wasn't even fit to warm over. And here they come, luggin' you in feet first, bleeding in the head like a stuck pig.

"My conscience, I never did have such a startle! Seems they looked in the cabin and you wasn't there and hadn't been; no fire or light. So they got a lantern and went down to the stable, and they come perty near not finding you then. Pa says he raised the lantern and looked, and didn't see anything of you, and then he happened to notice there wasn't only one set of harness hanging back of the stalls—so then he went in where the horses was, and there he found you all in a heap and the harness piled on top of you. It's the greatest wonder in the world that you wasn't tromped to death!"

MY FOOT aches——"

"Yes, I should think it would ache! Horse stepped on it, by the looks. It's a wonder your leg wasn't broke, but Pa and Jim says it's just bruised up."

"I've got to feed the bulls. It's storming."

"You ain't no such a thing, got to feed any bulls today. Pa had Jim go and feed 'em, first thing this morning. You lay still and behave yourself."

"I never fainted in my life, Mrs. Pruitt. I didn't faint—somebody——"

"You didn't fall down standing still, I hope? A person with liver complaint will keel over at a minute's notice. You hit the corner of the feed box, pa says. I guess you would think somebody hit you all right, but that ain't possible, you see. There ain't anybody on the ranch to do a thing like that."

"I felt the blow," Scott argued stubbornly.

"Well, I s'pose you did feel the blow!"

THE SWALLOWFORK BULLS

By B. M. BOWER

Something about the Previous Chapters.

WHATEVER part of the West the author knows so well B. M. Bower chooses as the scene of a story, it is sure to be tense, dramatic and full of both thrills and human interest.

The action of "The Swallowfork Bulls" is laid on the blizzard swept ranges of Montana, to which, the country of his childhood, Scott Morrison returns when luck has turned against him and he must abandon the idea of further education and seek a job.

Scott's father had been a rancher in the old days. and Scott knew the country; he got to know it still better after he had been line rider for the Swallowfork outfit. And Scott had a dream for the country; a dream of control of water rights, of an irrigation system which would function for the whole surrounding district. It would need capital for the development of this plan, and it would also need more knowledge of engineering, hydraulics and technical matters than Scott had so far acquired. So Scott determined to do some studying while carrying on his job as line rider, but he found that the subject of cows took up most of his waking hours.

When winter came he was given charge of the Swallowfork bull herd, which herd was quartered near the household of the Pruitts, and here Scott boarded. The only member of the Pruitt family who seemed to hold any interest for Scott was Hester, the daughter of the house, but Scott received no encouragement to show any of that interest. So he spent his time between his bulls and his engineering books, and thought the Pruitts a pretty dull household. Then one night when he was stabling his team a premonition of danger assailed him in the stable; but the warning came too late. He received a blow which struck him to unconsciousness and he never knew whose hand had dealt it.

Mrs. Pruitt laughed shortly, nodding her head as if she knew a lot more about it than he did. "I can remember sliding on the ice when I was a girl; my feet flew out from under me and I'd a vowed and declared somebody hit me a lick on the back of my head. A course they never; it was the ice flew up and hit me, same as the feed box flew up and hit you. But shucks! It ain't the crack on the head that worries me so much; it's the condition of your liver that'd make you faint away like that. I'm steeping you some boneset. I guess that'll straighten you out, maybe."

SCOTT didn't know what boneset was, but he realized that he needed straightening out, mentally as well as physically. That theory of the faint and the feed box; Scott didn't believe it. He couldn't explain his disbelief convincingly, but it was there just the same. How could he make it clear to Mrs. Pruitt or anyone else that he had felt the first warning intuitively, in the back of his neck? Liver disturbances didn't hit a fellow there; at least, Scott never had heard that it did. No, he had felt the presence of danger—and that was odd, too. He would hesitate to tell anyone about it, it would sound too fishy. But he knew what he knew, nevertheless. There had been some one in the stable lying in wait for him. Come to think of it, the horses should have known some one was there—but that was their placid natures showing up again. Tanner and Pete were not the nervous, scarey kind, and John, the saddle horse, had probably had time to grow accustomed to the alien presence; otherwise he'd have shown some uneasiness no doubt.

No, he did not believe he had fainted and fallen on the corner of the feed box, though he was fair enough to admit that it was possible and that he might have believed it if he had felt no mental warning of danger. Moreover, as he carefully retraced his sensation and his movements when the cataclysm overwhelmed him, he remembered another thing. He was slipping the hames back over Pete's shoulders toward the back-strap when the blow fell. His last conscious thought was that gathering together of the harness before lifting it off. There had been no sense of slipping into blackness, no premonitory faintness; a crashing blow—as if the roof had fallen on him—and the blackness afterward.

"It wasn't my liver," he mumbled, opening his eyes to send that statement straight to the heart of Mrs. Pruitt's disbelief. But she was gone after the boneset, probably; at least, she was not in the room. By the time she returned with a cup of steaming liquid that had an atrocious smell and a worse flavor, Scott had decided to let her go on thinking it was the feed box.

THE day passed in fitful dozing, intervals of trying to guess just what had happened to him, fretful anxiety over the herd and a sense of discomfort in his body punctuated by the pain in his head and his foot. The bustling ministrations of Mrs. Pruitt embarrassed and annoyed him; he wished to the Lord she wouldn't fuss over him. If she would just let him alone and keep those ungodly mixtures away from him he would be all right, but it seemed as though he no more than got rid of that nauseating, squeamy feeling in his stomach when here she came with another dose of something. The woman meant well, of course; she was merely being motherly and kind—but he didn't want mothering. He wanted to know who or what had hit him on the head, and he wanted to get up and go look after the bulls. Lying there while Jim Pruitt did his work for him was something beyond endurance.

He did not get up that day, nor the next. Whenever he tried he was assailed with a sickness beyond anything he had ever known. He wanted to die, and he wondered sometimes why he didn't.

"It's your liver, just as I said it was," Mrs. Pruitt declared in what he considered a gloating tone. She needn't be so darned tickled because he was proving her argument for her, he thought with a weak fury that made his head pain splittingly. "Pa

had a spell like this last winter. I doctored him four days before he could keep a thing on his stomach."

WELL, she was certainly not going to doctor *him* for four days, Scott told himself and in sheer desperation he struck the cup away from his face. It sloshed over the woman's scrawny hand and down the front of her apron, leaving a sickish brown stain.

"If you bring any more of that damned stuff around here I'll pitch it through the window!" he said viciously. "I've swallowed all of your damned concoctions I'm going to. I certainly won't take——"

"There, now, that's liver, too!" Her tone was soothing, maddeningly so; but her eyes shot venom. "Pa got so cantankerous and mean——"

"Oh, for the Lord sake!" groaned Scott, and bunched the log-cabin quilt up around his ears to shut out the sound of her voice. "Let me die in peace!" He shut his eyes so tight he drew crows-feet all around the corners and turned his face to the wall and the window at the back of the bed. It was the first time he had ever spoken disrespectfully to any woman save his own sisters, but he took a malevolent joy in the iniquity and immediately felt better.

AFTER that she left him alone until supper time, when he woke from a confusing dream to hear a strange voice in the kitchen; two strange voices, he decided after a few moments of listening. Who could be up on Deer Creek in a storm? Not more hunters, surely. But now that he thought of it the blizzard had apparently failed to howl up to Jim's expectations. The wind had been gusty all day with blown snow in the air, but Scott did not believe it was so terribly cold, for the room had been warm enough without much stoking of the heater. Not too bad for traveling, probably—and he thought of the bulls. If Jim didn't feed them plenty at the sheds the herd would wander out and drift before the wind. He listened for the next gust, felt it push against the west end of the house and moved his aching head restlessly on the pillow. If the Swallowfork bulls left the shed and drifted down against the fence to huddle there as cattle will against a barrier, lacking the sense to move back away from it, their everlasting squabbling and fretful goring would result in some great body leaning too heavily against a post or even the wires. Once the fence went down and they passed over it, only the good Lord knew where they would be by morning.

Feverishly he pictured them wandering on down the creek or perhaps even crossing over a wooded ridge where the wind could not blow so hard—the picture grew in vividness as he dozed. He thought he was riding wildly, half frozen, trying to head off the bulls as they ducked and scattered before him. He awoke with a start, heard the supper sounds in the next room, dozed again and dreamed of hunting lost bulls in a blinding blizzard. His horse was down, dying of exhaustion in the snow, he himself so weak he could scarcely stand but still determined to keep on the trail of the bulls. He was trying to loosen the saddle so that he could pull out the blanket from under it and use it for extra protection from the storm, when he awoke with a start.

"You been asleep? Well, here's your supper and I want you should try and eat it. They's some men here to see you, but I thought they better wait till after supper and maybe you'd feel better. I know you don't drink coffee as a general thing at night, but you try and drink this anyway. It'll brace you up a little maybe."

HER kindness shamed Scott into drinking the coffee and trying to eat a little of the toast and poached egg she had prepared for him. He wished she had left the toast dry instead of moistening it with hot water and placing the egg in the middle of the slice, but he was a penitent youth this evening and he apologized for the afternoon's outbreak and would not mention his hatred of soggy toast.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Scott. I know

just how it goes against the grain for a man to take boneset tea. I couldn't scarcely get a drap down pa when he was sick. Now I'll send the men right in. They only got here a little while ago and they want to be leaving in the morning first thing if it don't snow again."

Scott wanted to ask who the men were and what was their business, but drowsiness seized him again after the hot drink and it didn't seem worth the effort. He would rather lie there and wait with his eyes shut until they came. Some one from the Swallowfork, probably. He wished he could have been well and on the job when they came.

They came into the room almost at once, but Scott was already dropping off into another uneasy dream about the bulls, and his mind came up from sleep fogged and leaden. He did not know these men, anyway. He had never seen them at the ranch. He didn't want to know them; he wanted to be left alone so he could sleep.

"We ain't going to bother you but a minute," the elder of the two said deprecatingly, coming over to stand beside the bed. "We want to be on the road at daylight and make it out of here if we can before the storm breaks again, or we wouldn't disturb you tonight at all. Sorry you're laid out; we were kind of counting on hiring you to go along with us and help——"

"Thanks—I've got a job," Scott mumbled, stifling a yawn in a feeble effort to be polite. "Herding bulls," he further elucidated with another yawn which he did not try to suppress. "Swallowfork outfit—m-m-m—feelin' rotten."

"Yes, I know you're with the Swallowfork outfit. We just came from there. We put through quite a deal with Nealey. Bought him out, as a matter of fact. This herd of bulls we're taking to Billings, as we've arranged to winter them down there. Nealey said he wouldn't have any further use for you, so we expected to hire you to help move the bulls down, and maybe keep you right on steady. But it looks as if you're not fit for work, and we can't wait. Weather is too unsettled.

"Here's a letter Nealey sent up, I suppose giving us the authority to move the bulls. Better see what he says."

SCOTT yawned so widely his jaws cracked in the joints with a faint popping sound, muttered unintelligibly and tore open the letter. He did not want to; he thought it would keep until morning, but the man—Brown, he said his name was—had picked up the lamp and brought it over, holding it so that Scott could read the brief note. His eyes blurred a bit, but by sternly concentrating his mind upon it he managed to sense Nealey's meaning.

"Scott, this authorizes you to deliver to the bearer J. W. Brown the stock now in your possession as follows, 180 *head Hereford bulls branded JJ on left side, earmark a swallow fork to the right. As Brown says he will hire you and I have no farther use for you I am enclosing your wages to date with two weeks in advance for short notice. The team and saddle horse you can leave at Pruitts as they will deliver them to the ranch later on. Yrs. truly*

J. Nealy."

Scott looked stupidly at the three twenty dollar bills folded into the letter, waved them weakly at Brown and was evidently going to make some remark about them. Instead, the hand that held them flopped down beside him and he lay quiet with his eyes closed.

"'S all right," he muttered thickly after a second or two, and opened his eyes sluggishly for a dull glance at Brown. "Go on—take the damn bulls. I don'—wanna—I don'——"

"Too bad you're sick," Brown said as he put the lamp back on the table. "I was going to lay up here and brand the herd before I moved them, but it's likely to come a deep snow and hold us all winter if we don't hit the trail right away. Anything we can do for you in town? Any medicine we could mail out to you?"

Deep breathing was all the answer he got.

CHAPTER IX

VANISHED BULLS

THE freezing snow crunched under Scott's feet as he limped up the path and pushed open the door of the long room

where the Swallowfork men sat at supper. Behind him the last color of the sunset was merging into the slaty purple of dusk; before him a cloud of warm air rushed out and fogged as it struck the cold. The lamp-lighted room looked smoky, with deep shadows behind the men's bodies and under the benches. Ev Bundy, facing the door from the other end of the table, looked up and froze with astonishment, a potato-loaded knife suspended midway from his plate.

"Well, I'll be damned! Where'd you drop down from, Scott?" he cried when the first paralysis had passed. "Anything wrong?"

"I think not, Ev. I just rode in to get the rest of my paraphernalia and correct a little error——"

"You—*what?*" Ev's welcoming grin, which widened his mouth after the first astonishment was over, suddenly pulled in at the corners. He glanced at the cook over by the stove to see if he were bringing the coffee pot and another plate, then looked at Scott again.

"Well, seeing I'm fired, as it were, I thought I'd better ride on in——"

"Who's feeding the bulls while you're gone?"

"Who's feeding them? What do you mean, Ev?" Those who watched him saw Scott's eyes widen and the wind-whipped look seep gradually out of his face, leaving it a sallow tan.

"What the hell would I mean?" Ev pushed back his plate as if food had become suddenly distasteful. He got up, one hand going mechanically back to grasp the chair and pushed it from him. "You never come off and left the bulls without nobody in charge, did yuh, Scotty?"

Scott looked at him blankly, looked at the curious staring faces of the men, looked again at Ev Bundy.

"Didn't Nealey sell the bulls to a man named Brown, and write me a letter authorizing me to turn the herd over to him?" Scott's voice had no especial tremor in it, but a mortal chill had seized his soul.

A gasp went round the table. Ev Bundy's eyes looked ready to burst from their lids.

"What's that? Say that again, Scott."

SCOTT said it again, while his thoughts raced round and round the whole subject; his uneasiness even in the midst of his sickness; his reading and rereading of Nealey's letter next day; his disquiet over the whole matter and his sudden determination to bring the work team in himself to the ranch and straighten out a few matters with Bundy. For one thing, why they had sent him sixty dollars when the Swallowfork owed him a hundred-and-seventy dollars, because after he had paid Ev for the saddle and had drawn a few dollars for small expenses he had asked Nealey to keep the rest of his wages until he was ready to leave; letting wages ride, the boys called it.

"God almighty!" breathed Ev Bundy in a hushed tone that told how Scott's words plumbed the wordless deeps of his soul.

"I was sick in bed when they came with the letter. It didn't strike me as strange; not then, at least. I read the letter and accepted it at its face value. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. They could have taken the bulls and said nothing to me. I couldn't get out of bed—but if I had been well I suppose I'd have done the same; let them take the bulls, I mean. It was none of my business if Nealey wanted to sell out. But as time went on I began to feel uneasy. Certain things——"

"As time went on!" Bundy's voice sounded choked. "How long ago was this, for God sake?"

"Nine days ago. Yesterday was the first day I could put any weight on my foot. So I saddled up and rode in. I brought the team back."

"You brought—— Oh, you—you damn' fool!" A dark flush mounted in Bundy's cheeks to his eyes, made them look bleary and bloodshot, with a glassy stare horrible to face. "Nine days ago—time enough for them to get clear outa the country—every bull the Swallowfork owns on earth, except yearlin's. You turned 'em over to the first man that asked, like you'd hand 'im a match! Why, you damn' idiot, don't you s'pose if

Nealey'd sold out, me or him woulda rode up there to make delivery? Don't you s'pose—— Why, seventy thousand dollars wouldn't replace that herd, and you let 'em go without so much as—— My God, this'll break Nealey. He's bought himself poor on she-stock a'ready. He couldn't buy another bullherd—take him a year to pick up enough good ones, and bulls has gone up till—— My God, and I talked him into givin' you the job up there! Told him you was a good boy and a steady boy!"

HE BROKE into sudden blistering epithets which Scott took standing as he would stand if Ev Bundy were a knife-throwing marvel hurling daggers to thrill an audience. Only, these oaths struck deeper than the thrust of thin steel. But he bore it, even when Ev came up and shook his fists under his nose; even when Ev struck him full on the mouth, in his rage wanting to shame Scott there before them all.

"You oughta be strung up to a limb!" he raved, frothing a little at the corners of his mouth. "You oughta be shot! Lettin' 'em walk off with the hull Swallowfork bullherd right in broad daylight—hangin's too good for a fool like you!"

And then he calmed suddenly, though he shook as if he had a chill. His eyes were bloodshot as they peered into Scott's stony face.

"Well, why don't yuh say something?" he asked hoarsely. "Why don't yuh hit back? You a coward as well as a fool?"

"You don't want me to strike—another blow at the Swallowfork, do you?" Scott spoke so low that the men at the far end of the table craned forward to hear. "I'm saving my energy, Ev."

"What for? You done about all the damage one man's able to do and live," snarled Ev. "You damn' coward! You college dude that I mistook for a man. Are yuh yella as well as a damn fool? Or are yuh tickled to git off with your hide? What I oughta do is fill yuh full of lead. If you'd laid awake nights thinkin' how you could hurt this outfit the worst, you couldn't of thought out any way to break Nealey quicker.

SAVIN' your energy!" he chortled wildly, glancing swiftly around the table at the frozen quiet of the men, as if he felt he was speaking their sentiments too. "What yuh savin' it for? To *run* with? What yuh figgerin' on doin' with your energy—s'posin' yuh got any, which I doubt? I can see now why old Hank Morrison ain't havin' anything to do with you. You're yella as mush! And yore dad was a *man!* You had spunk enough when you was a kid—is this what schoolin' does to a feller? Makes him a damn yella-livered coward!" He smacked Scott on the cheek with his open hand and laughed contemptuously. "Why don't yuh hit back, you ediucated cowboy? You're so good at figgerin', why don't yuh figger out what a feller oughta do when he's hit on the jaw? Why don't yuh say something? Why don't yuh *do* something? You're big as I am——"

"Yes, by God, and I could break your back across my knee! I could wring your dirty, unwashed neck with my two hands," Scott said with sudden fierceness between closed teeth. "I could make you howl for mercy so quick you wouldn't know what ailed you!" He leaned forward so that his face, streaked with red where Ev's fingers had whipped the blood to his cheek, was so close that Ev stepped back from the glitter of his eye, from the hot breath of his quivering nostrils.

"Any boneheaded bully can fight; even you," Scott went on passionately. "I could whip you—and that's why I can stand and take your blows, damn you. You're crazy as well as a fool. You stand here bawling and cursing and thrashing out at me, like a spoiled kid. If you're so loyal to the Swallowfork, why don't you use your brains to some purpose? Why waste your breath swearing at me now, nine days after the bulls were stolen? All that energy could have had men on the road with wires to be sent to all the sheriffs in all the surrounding counties—you could have planned your whole campaign against the thieves, in the time you've wasted abusing me!" He

gave a short contemptuous laugh that stung worse than a blow.

"That's why I won't fight back, you idiot. You, the foreman, must blow off steam and make a grandstand play before your men—and Nealey doesn't even know what's happened yet. You have known about it for ten or fifteen minutes, and you haven't made a move that would start any one on the thieves' trail. Why don't you do a little figuring, Ev? Ten minutes is a long time under certain conditions. Battles have been won and lost in ten minutes. Thieves have been caught—and they have been let go in ten minutes!" He looked with cool, insulting appraisement at the man. "A hell of a Swallowfork foreman you are!" he concluded, and walked out.

PROB'LY standin' in with 'em," some one ventured when the door closed. "I always did have my doubts about that flannel-mouthed guy. Too good to be true, if yuh ast me——"

"He oughta be hung," said another. "Let 'em walk off with the bullherd—my God, that's a fortune!"

"That'll bust Nealey flat as a pancake," Bill Meachim opined. "I dunno where he could pick up that many bulls on short notice, even if he had the dough; which he ain't got. He's runnin' on borrowed money right now. I know that for a fact."

"Nealey borrowed money from the bank to buy them T Ys," said another wise one. "He's mortgaged right up to the handle. 'Course, he'll pull out and be away to the good if he—or he would of. Ain't a chance in the world now."

Bundy had followed Scott, so the bunkhouse tongues were free to wag; these men were loyal as any, but that did not tie their tongues. As it happened, however, most of their talk was directed against Scott. His clothes, his language, the fact that he kept a nail file in his pocket—a *nail file*, by golly! His walk, his silver-conchoed chaps that were too tight for him; his thanky-ma'am politeness, the fact that he used no tobacco nor gambled nor drank; all these things came in for a share of their scornful attention. He was stuck-up, he was two-faced, he was a damned hypocrite, he was a psalm-singer and a coward. What would be done about the lost bullherd was a matter of conjecture, but something that the boss must figure out for himself. No cowboy was expected to take the initiative there. What they would do about Scott was another affair and one which they felt called upon to settle among themselves. They wouldn't kill him—they were partly civilized, and fools are not killed merely because they are fools; there must be some other excuse — reason, if you like. If he had only tackled Ev Bundy, now—but he was too yellow to fight. That kind never did stand right up to a man, in the opinion of the Swallowfork men. About all they could do to show their utter disgust—since he wouldn't fight—was to run him off the ranch. They'd do that the minute he showed up again. He was in the house now, whining to Nealey about being sick in bed when the fellows took the bulls. When Nealey kicked him out, which was as certain as anything they could name, then the bunkhouse fraternity would take him in hand. It wouldn't get the bulls back, that's true; but it would be a heap of satisfaction to the men.

YES, of course I'll take my wages," Scott was saying coldly at that moment. "There isn't enough money involved to make much difference to you, Mr. Nealey, and I think you'll both agree that I have worked hard for the few dollars I have coming. But I should like to buy that saddle horse I rode in. Whatever you think is a fair price for him, you may deduct from the balance due me."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jim Nealey muttered, looking up from the bill fold he was inspecting. It was the coolness of Scott's manner, however, that jarred the exclamation from him. "He's worth fifty dollars. I ain't blamin' you, understand, for being took in by them crooks. I've got to admit they played it on you perty slick. That letter would fool most anybody, I guess, if they didn't know me or my affairs." He spoke dejectedly while he thumbed a limp

little layer of banknotes. "I don't s'pose anybody could expect you to know I'm tied hand an' foot and couldn't sell anything except it was to the bank, maybe. Them bulls is mortgaged for thirty thousand dollars. I put a plaster on 'em when I bought the T Ys."

"You may get them back——"

Nealey's headshake stopped the half-hearted suggestion of hope.

"I'm goin' in, of course. I'll keep the wires hot—but it's 'most too late to overhaul 'em, I guess. They'd trail 'em at night, and they prob'ly took 'em down into Wyoming. This open weather would give 'em the best chance in the world. They'd push 'em right through—take 'em down the horse-thief trail, more'n likely. There's ranches where they could lay up and rest, daytimes—no tellin' where they are by this time. If I'd known about it quicker—but I ain't goin' to cry over spilt milk. You done the right thing to come in soon as you could; but I wish to the Lord you could of come quicker."

"I wasn't able to ride——"

"I know. Well, far as your bein' fired is concerned——"

"If I'm not fired," said Scott, "I'm quitting."

"Damn' right you are!" glared Ev Bundy. "This ranch ain't big enough to hold the both of us."

"Ev, I wish you'd have a couple of the boys get ready to ride in with me," said Nealey. "I might want to use 'em—send 'em somewhere, or send a message back to you. Meachim's a good man for one; pick the other one yourself. I'll take the buckboard. I guess there won't be snow enough on the trail to make hard going. Have the team ready in half an hour, will you, Ev? All I've got to do is pack my valise. Tell the boys to saddle the best horses they've got handy—never mind whose string they're out of. No telling what we'll go up against."

HE TURNED his head and looked up at Scott, who had remained standing during the painful interview; not because Nealey would have it so, but because he could not sit in a man's presence and tell how he had lost a fortune for that man.

"You going to town, Scott?" Nealey asked in a tired, lifeless tone, plainly making an effort to be kind to the young man. "You can ride in with me if you want."

"Thank you, Mr. Nealey, but I'm afraid I can't this time." Scott took the money Nealey was holding out to him, flushing a little at the unaccustomed poverty which made the taking a necessity. "If you will let me store my stuff here for a while I shall be obliged to you. I'm—riding light."

"Got any plans?" Nealey's eyes awoke to a new interest as he studied Scott's face.

"Yes, sir, I certainly have," Scott sent a quick, scowling glance at Bundy. "I intend to find the bulls."

"Haw-haw-haw!" Ev Bundy exploded mirthlessly.

"And you," flared Scott, turning upon Bundy a wrathful glare, "you're going to eat crow till it chokes you!"

"Haw-haw-haw! He's goin' to find the bulls!" chortled Ev, as Scott flung out of the room and shut the door with a bang.

CHAPTER X

A DEVICE NEEDED

SCOTT never knew—at least until long afterward—how the Swallowfork men had intended to deal with him. They had it all planned, with a beautiful attention to detail; this man was to do so, and another so, and a third was to step up at a certain moment and do so-and-so. No hazing was ever more carefully rehearsed than was the little surprise party being hatched for the Figgering Kid. They would make him do sums—trick "examples" cudgelled from memory. Sims had a great laugh over the problem he meant to propound—the one about the man who had twenty sick (six) sheep; one died, and how many were left? A special and barbarous penalty was attached to each one, and when all was done that could be done short of actual torture, they meant to give him his cap and overcoat and haze him out on the road to town. The walking, they frequently asserted, was good that night.

But while they were talking about it they were interrupted by Ev Bundy, who came to deliver Neeley's orders. Meachim and White left to saddle their horses and harness Nealey's team, and by the time the small flurry of their departure was over Scott also was ready to leave. He was putting his belongings in a neat pile in the harness room while the boys were busy at the stable, and since he knew exactly what they were doing he gave them no attention at all; and they were too hurried to bother about who had a lantern in the harness room.

SO SCOTT rode away on another trail five minutes after the three started for Lewistown. The clup-clup-clup of the trotting horses on the frozen ground, the squeal of the buckboard wheels through the shallow snow on the road came to his ears long after the lights of the bunkhouse had set like stars behind the low hill he had crossed.

For a time Scott did no clear thinking. He was too stunned with the stark disaster that had come to the Swallowfork, and the ache of his lame ankle, chilled as it was with his long ride, served but to punctuate his misery and make throbbing rhythm for his heavy thoughts.

"Well, anyway old Rooney got his belly full of hay and oats," was the first cheerful thought that passed through his mind, and that was when he was five miles away on the trail to Flatwillow line camp. As for himself, he had the tantalizing memory of the smell of hot coffee and fried meat and beans, but no one had remembered that he had ridden thirty miles through the cold and was hungry and tired. Not even Nealey had thought to ask him if he had eaten; but that was all right—Scott didn't expect it in the face of the staggering revelation he had made. What difference did it make to anyone whether he ever ate again or not? He could not have swallowed a mouthful of food there, anyway; not after the things Ev Bundy had said.

NOW he remembered that Ev Bundy's one great failing was his blind, unreasoning temper—if temper ever does reason. Bundy seldom let go that way, but Scott could remember once or twice at the Wishbone when Ev had flown into an insane rage. It didn't matter much now. Nothing mattered much, except that the Swallowfork bulls were stolen.

It was after ten o'clock when he opened the door of the Flatwillow cabin and struck a match in the close, chill room that held the musty odor of mice left undisturbed there for months. Rooney was in the shed with his saddle-blanket spread over his loins for warmth. Scott lifted the dusty lamp chimney and lit the soggy wick, so now the odor of burning kerosene filled the room; and presently wood smoke was added, until the heat of the fire created a draught up the rust-flecked stovepipe. There was food in tin containers, a few cans of tomatoes and corn, and half a sack of flour hung suspended by a wire from the ridgepole. The bacon grease in the covered lard bucket was still good, for the weather had been cool most of the time; but the half slab of bacon itself was almost too rancid to use.

Still, Scott made out a meal that dulled his hunger, and after that he filled the stove with dry cottonwood sticks which he himself had cut and piled behind the stove before he left last fall.

LIKE a blow came the memory of his thoughts when he cut that wood. He could follow distinctly the carefree dreaming—though at the time he had felt quite burdened with care; whether he should attempt to go on with mechanical drawing that winter—he had chopped several sticks while he gravely considered the pros and cons of that weighty question. Much good mechanical drawing would do him in this blind quest upon which he was riding! Then he had swung to the disappointment of having had no chance to explore the hills in search of a reservoir site for his dreamland irrigation system. He had been hoping that it would be his luck to be sent to ride circle in the foothills; he could take in a lot of territory that way.

Now, he was burning that wood and recalling what he considered very boyish thoughts, and he was wondering how he had best go about his search of the country to the south. He was disgraced, to all intents an outcast from the Swallowfork, and

once the news spread—as it would, he had no foolish doubt of that—he would be eyed askance wherever he rode. Probably he would not be able to find another job; certainly not on this range. Unless—and he set his teeth hard together at the thought—he were lucky enough to find the Swallowfork bulls. So he brought up against that same thought, how best could he search the country to the south?

THEY would not drive the bulls north, for that would force them to cross the Swallowfork range—sheer suicide of any hope to get away with the herd. West they could not travel, because there were the Snowies and the Belt Mountains to bar the way. In the summer it might be feasible

if one knew the trails, but certainly not in winter. There remained the eastward route, out toward Glendive and into the Dakotas; and south across the Crow Reservation and into Wyoming. That was the rustler's trail, as Scott had always heard; the way the horse-thieves went with stolen horses—cattle, too, by all accounts. It was bold of Brown to say he was taking the bulls down to Billings.

"And just because he said he was going there, he probably thought no one would believe it," Scott concluded. "I'd cross any trail they made if they went east. I'll keep an eye out for sign, and go straight to Billings first of all; unless, of course, I run onto evidence that they went east." It was the most practical plan he could think of, and he roused himself and bathed his aching foot and went to bed, rolled like a coccoon in the one heavy wool blanket he had brought with him. As he had told Nealey, he was riding light.

HE WAS riding early as well, for he was up and eating his breakfast before the morning star had more than risen, and he was well on his way when the dawn colors streaked the sky. He stopped at the stage station at Roundup to feed Rooney and get a meal for himself, and he took a chance and told the talkative owner of the place that he was on the trail of stolen cattle, and asked if any strange men had ridden that way within the past two weeks.

Strange men had, it appeared, but none who seemed to warrant suspicion or to answer Scott's somewhat vague description of Brown and his companion. He had not seen either of them clearly, what with his fogged mental condition and the dim light of the small lamp. It was possible that he might remember Brown's voice if he heard it again but one cannot well describe the ordinary voice, and Scott did not attempt it. The chief bit of information he gleaned there was negative; no cattle had passed that way since the last roundup.

It was too far to the north and east, anyway, and Scott had not really expected to run across any clue there, so he resaddled and went loping on along the road to Billings. No cattle could travel eastward without crossing that stage road somewhere, and with that fact well to the front of his mind he rode slowly whenever he neared level ground or a coulee bottom where stolen stock might be pushed across in the night. There were times when sudden hope sent him riding away from the road, but he always came back to it no wiser than before. So far as he could tell no cattle had been driven from the Musselshell toward the Yellowstone lately—and with the snow lying only in patches and drifts he should have been able to see some sign of their passing that way. He didn't believe it. They must have gone south.

IN BILLINGS he found a livery stable on a side street and gave Rooney a careful rub-down himself before he left. No telling where or when he might need to ride next, and the horse had done two days' of hard traveling. But he was a good one, long-legged and deep-chested and quiet; just the horse to see a man through in snow or over rough trails.

"Keep him up and feed him grain, will you?" he instructed the hostler, and forced a friendly smile. "I'll pay for extra care—with this for a start off."

The hostler looked at the dollar, slid it into his pants' pocket, sat and grinned knowingly at Scott.

"I won't advertise him, if that's what's on your mind," he said confidentially, "and he'll be ready for the trail at five minutes' notice. That the idea?"

"Yes, it is. And if your sheriff is the kind of a man who keeps his eyes open, I'd like to have a talk with him before I go to bed. Where shall I find him?"

"Oh." The hostler's interest slumped. "Right up this street a block, and turn to your right. His office is down about halfway—in the jail. Looking for some one?" he asked hopefully.

Scott hesitated, then decided to speak.

"A little bunch of cattle got away from me under suspicious circumstances," he explained. "I don't know the men, and if I can get the cattle back that's the main thing. I don't suppose you would know if any cattle went south in the last ten days."

The hostler shook his head, eying Scott with a speculative stare.

"No. And neither would the sheriff, unless he happened to run across 'em accidental. Gosh, you think they line-ride this range? If it was men, and they rode into town——"

"Well, you're right. I'll rest up and look around a little and ride on, I think."

"There ain't a way in the world you can get a line on 'em unless you know the men, or got right after 'em before they got far," the hostler volunteered. "If they took 'em down past here they're across the line by now. You been down on the rese'vation yet? Ain't? Well, you might pick up something there, but I doubt it."

SCOTT thanked him and limped off to a hotel whose sign he had observed a block away as he rode in.

"Like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack," he thought gloomily as he ate a belated supper in the hotel dining room. "But a herd of Hereford bulls can't fly, and if they walked from Deer Creek to the Wyoming line and beyond, some one was bound to see them; some one not in on the steal. And yet—the weather's fine for staying indoors, and they'd move the herd at night, which would let them slip past settlements if there are any. It's something to have narrowed the search down to one direction. *Somebody* will give me a pointer or two." So he tried to hearten himself while he ate in the big, chilly room where a bored waitress pottered about the other tables. The dining room would close shortly for the night, and Scott felt that his absence would be welcomed.

For that reason he hurried the meal and left his soggy pudding untouched, and so walked out into the barroom just as a young man turned away from the register with a seeking look in his eyes which filmed to indifference when they rested on Scott. Scott looked him over and mentally dismissed him. He was not one of the two men who had come to Pruitt's place, he was sure; furthermore, he had not registered and he now decided that he wouldn't; not in that hotel at least. Some one else the fellow was looking for, but it gave Scott a cautious impulse, steadied his purpose, slowed it down to a more careful consideration of details.

He could not go on riding here and there and everywhere asking each man he met if he had seen a small herd of cattle being driven south; though that in effect is what he had intended until the man's squinting look of inquiry gave him an impetus toward a less naïve method. Some one would be friendly to the thieves and would give the alarm, and Scott could ride the legs off his horse while the bulls were held close corralled in some out-of-the-way nook that he would never think of searching. It was a big country, blank as an empty ocean of clues. He would have to trust to luck.

HE FOUND an obscure rooming house where he could sleep one night or a dozen and no questions asked. He had been reminded there in the hotel that Brown and his companion must have studied his face rather closely—he recalled the unpleasant glare of the lamp in his eyes when

he was reading the letter—and they would know him if they saw him. There they had the advantage, for he could not remember the face of either. Still, they might think he had ridden in to find work—and they were probably a good many miles away from Billings by now he told himself bitterly.

His room was cold and clammy and his thoughts were gloomy. Across the street sounded the lively, if somewhat tinny music of a piano drowned now and then by a boisterous chorus of untrained voices singing, "Ta-ra-ra-ra boom-de-ay." Scott lifted the green shade of his window and looked out, then went out and locked his door. There would be a red-hot stove, and distraction. Scott was tired of his own thoughts, that had been going round and round in a circle since last night.

"Why, hello Scotty!" a voice cried joyously when he went into the clamorous place. "Darn your measley hide, what wind blowed *you* here? Don't you remem—— Say, if you claim you don't know me, I'll knock the stuffin' outa you. You're bigger, but you ain't changed a hair since I seen you last. Say, I could weep on your shoulder if I could reach it! My gosh, I'm glad to see yuh, Scott!" All this in one continuous flow of words while Scott's hand was being pumped up and down. "I knowed you the minute you opened that door!" the voice added triumphantly.

Scott blinked and looked again; grinned widely and gave the little man a thump on the back that nearly sent him headlong.

"Billy Burns, by all that's unholy!"

MEN turned to look, grinned in sympathy and returned to their own affairs. Billy Burns led Scott over to a small round table that had just been vacated by two men who were making for the faro table in the rear. There came two glasses and a bottle, by some magic which Scott failed to observe, and Billy with his arms folded on the table was leaning forward with his hat on the back of his head and his face shining with joy—or perhaps it was his eyes that shone.

"And I'm still ridin' the old hull you give me," said Billy, after the preliminaries were over. "Some saddle, boy. Still got your initials stamped on the cantle to keep yuh fresh in my memory. Say, you've shot up like a weed, ain't you? Prime beef, I'd call yuh, Scott. I wouldn't of knowed you at all, only for them chaps and then your face. That ain't changed."

"You haven't grown," Scott twitted. Billy Burns was a little man with a big heart, and Scott as a boy had worshipped him.

"Nope, if I growed I wouldn't fit the saddle no more. Well, what you doin' these days?"

Scott parried that question and got Billy to talk of himself. Billy tilted the bottle twice over his glass and sketched the history of the past few years so far as he was concerned; nothing very hair-raising at that. He had worked for this outfit and that, had drifted over into Wyoming and back again.

"You ain't drinking," he remarked at last. "Ain't you ever started, or have you quit?"

Whereupon Scott told him some things about himself; school and the sports that go with it, and the change in fortune that had sent him West.

"Gosh. College, huh? Well, you was cut out for it, Scotty. Me, I never could be anything but a roughneck, I guess. Where you stayin'?" And when Scott told him of the room across the street, Billy waggled a hand dispairingly.

"Boy, you're liable to git rolled, if yuh stay there. I don't go much on these roomin' joints. I got a shack over on the edge of town, and you can bunk with me if it's good enough. You're full up of something—you can't fool me, Scotty. I know yuh too well. What say we drag our ropes, huh? I'll make a fire in the old stove, and we can talk; and you can spill what's on your mind."

"I only came in here to get warm—or that's what I thought, but now I know it was you who pulled me across the street. Do you remember how I always gravitated to your presence—like a needle to a mag-

net? And you're right, just as you always were. I've a thundering lot on my mind, and there isn't a man in the world I'd rather tell it to than you, Billy. As you would say, I'm up against it for fair."

BILLY'S hand slid mechanically into his pocket, and Scott shook his head, biting his lip.

"What I need is advice," he said gently.

"Oh, advice!" Billy gave a sigh of relief. "Free as air, and always was. I'd split my last two-bit piece with yuh, Scotty, and you know it. All worried me was, I was wonderin' if I had enough to do yuh any good! But if it's advice you want, I'm full of it."

As they walked together down the street toward the outskirts of town, Scott was aware of a great buoyancy of spirits that found its way into speech.

"The Swallowfork bulls are good as found," he remarked without preface.

"The which?" Billy Burns's hat crown which bobbed along on a level with Scott's ear tilted to one side as Billy looked up at him.

"Oh, I was merely prophesying, Billy." And Scott laughed for the first time in several weeks.

Chapter XI

A Plan of Campaign

SO THAT'S the problem I have to solve before I can look myself or the world in the face, Billy. In my heart I know that any other man left in charge of the bull herd would have done as I did, granting conditions were the same. That far I can face the facts and know about where I stand. But technically I am responsible. I assumed that responsibility when I went up there to take charge, and I should have refused to let the bulls go until I had been notified in person by Nealey or Ev that they were sold; it's just possible I would have taken that stand, had I been normal. But I wasn't. I was so groggy I could scarcely read the letter and get any sense out of it. Mrs. Pruitt said it was my liver, but I still question that. The crack on the head I know I got in the stable, and not from the feed box, either. Some one hit me. One or both of those fellows must have been hiding out near the ranch and watched their chance to get at me. I believe now that they intended to take the bulls that night, and for some reason they changed their minds and waited until they could dope out another plan. Probably the Pruitts being kept out of their beds doctoring me, proved too great an obstacle. They could scarcely get the herd down past the house without Jim and Joe making some move to stop them you see. Those Swallowfork bulls are a rambunctious, quarrelsome lot, and they are always telling the world their opinion of the herd; they'd advertise their departure, no doubt in the world."

"They played it slick," Billy made sympathetic comment. "There ain't a man on the range that wouldn't of fell for it, sick or well. It was none of your business what Nealey done with his cattle, and if that letter didn't loom up as a forgery, you plumb *had* to deliver the bulls as per instructions. Rest your mind easy on that point, Scotty; nobody but a crazy man could blame you for what happened."

BUT there you have the crux of the whole trouble, Billy; at least, the thing that hits me as hard as the loss of the bulls. I didn't stress the matter, but it goes deep as the other; that is, what happened between Ev and myself. The Swallowfork has me tagged now as a coward, because I didn't let go all holds and fight Ev. He—he *struck* me, Bill. Slapped my face. And I knew he was crazy mad, knew how he'd curse himself for it when he cooled down, knew too that I could hand him one punch that would lay him out cold—and so I didn't lift a hand to him. I stood there and let him box my ears as if I were a school boy caught in mischief."

"You never, Scotty! Why——"

"Why, I know what you'd say if it were anyone else, Billy; you'd say what Ev said. He begged me to strike him, but I didn't do it."

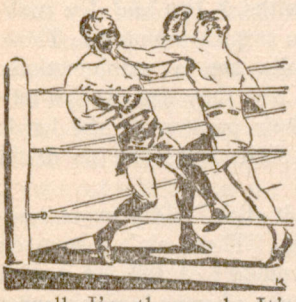
"Why didn't yuh, for gosh sake—when he hit you first?"

"Well—it's funny, in a way. You see, Billy, I—I was top of the heavyweight class in college. I put it all over my boxing

instructor even before I left, and I'm in better shape now than I was then. I've got more weight, and I can put more into a punch than I could then. Forking hay is certainly fine training for a man. So——"

"You son of a gun!" Billy exclaimed. admiringly. "But you coulda showed him where to head in at, Scotty. You didn't have to kill him."

"I don't know. That's another thing. I could keep my hands down, remembering his age and his insane temper and the kindnesses he'd done me—but if I'd once started on him—well, I'm thorough. It's in me to finish, once I start. I know that. After the first punch I'm afraid I wouldn't have stopped. And it was a shock to him, Billy. Here he'd stood back of me from the time I hit Lewistown; staked me to a new saddle, paid for it out of his own pocket and let me pay him when I could; got me the job of feeding the bullherd, so I could be by myself and study evenings. I didn't do much studying as it happened; those darned bulls kept me on the go, watching them. He was responsible for me, in a way. And I'd failed him, on the face of things, and put him in the position of dealing a death-blow to the Swallowfork. Nealey didn't take it that way, but Ev did. Hang it, Billy, when you know these things—when you can see the real underlying motive that actuates a man—you can't ignore it. At least I can't until my temper gets away; then I'm a fighting animal and don't think until it's over. I knew Ev was reacting to grief over the tragedy——"



WELL by gollies, he'd have reacted to a punch in the jaw, if it'd been me! I've saw many a time when I'd a took a crack at Ev myself if I'd a had the ghost of a show to lick him."

"That's it. Ev hadn't the ghost of a show, don't you see? And he said things to me that—well, I'd be feeling a brute beast now if I had turned myself loose on him, because—damn it, Billy, I don't want to crow, or sound stuck on myself, but I might have killed the blamed old fool!"

"Well, I begin to see the point, Scotty. As a kid you'd go along for weeks and months and never a yip outa you, and then—bing, you'd blow up like a plugged gun-barrel, and wildcats was doves alongside of you. Ev had oughta remembered that, I should think."

"Ev? He didn't remember anything! All he knew at that moment was that the Swallowfork had lost sixty or seventy-five thousand dollars and now because I knew better than to strike back at him, I'm not only a fool but a coward in his eyes and the eyes of all the Swallowfork men. Billy, if I don't find those bulls, I—I——"

"Sure, I know," Billy said gently because Scott's voice broke unexpectedly and he was biting his lips to hold them steady, and hoping Billy had not noticed. "We got to camp on their trail till we find 'em if it's five years."

HE GOT up and inspected the wood box, carefully choosing a dry stick with plenty of pitch in it; as if he wanted a cheerful crackling along with the heat.

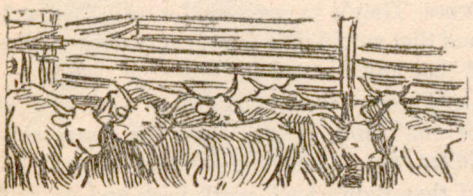
"Well, you got it pinned down to one direction they could of took. Ten days is purty long, but it ain't hopeless—not by a darn sight. I been down across the line; follered a bunch of horses that was stole from up north here on the Porcupine. Got 'em too—me and John Vorhees; guess he came into the country after you left. Well sir, we was a week behind that outfit, and they was foggin' right along, drivin' nights and layin' up in some hideout daytimes. But we thought we knowed about where they was headin' for, and we hits a high lope and never stopped goin' till we got there. We had two hosses apiece, but they sure was ridge-runners. You mind that little blue roan I broke the summer before you folks sold out? Well, sir, that roan was one; turned out to be a blue streak on the trail, and gentle—I could shoot off'n him anywheres or any time.

"Well, sir, by sleepin' in the saddle as yuh might say, and takin' all the shortcuts they was, we landed on Gooseberry Creek

while they was restin' up, thinkin' they was safe enough at this little ranch where they was at, and could work the brands—which they hadn't had time to do before—and lay up there a while and then take the hosses on down a few at a time, maybe, and sell 'em here and there. There was a great business in hosses bein' stole and run across the line an' peddled that way.

WELL, sir, we never lost a head. Got 'em all back on their home range again. But I lost the blue roan on that trip; he was shot from under me and like to of broke my leg when he went down, too. Anyway, he didn't, and we got back all right. It just goes to show yuh that nothin' ain't hopeless, Scott."

"If a big snowstorm doesn't strike the country and cover the trails; pretty rough country, isn't it, Billy?"



"Yeah, well——" Billy's eyes went glassy and vacant with a sudden thought which held him speechless for some minutes.

"Bonehead that I am, them bulls never went south, Scotty; not this winter, they never. Time I went after the horses it was in July and they swum the river with the herd. This winter the river's up, and no stock could cross much this side of Miles City, except right here on the bridge. And they'd have a sweet time, Scotty, gittin' them Swallowfork bulls acrost the bridge without givin' a pretty darn good account of themselves. A course they may of framed up a story like they told you, and in that case we'll know for sure and we can pick up the trail right from here. They wouldn't ship outa here, I don't believe. They'd be afraid to do that. It's just barely possible they brought 'em across and went on down with 'em on the rustler's trail, but if they did we'll know it. We'll find out first thing in the morning."

"It was dark when I rode down the hill this evening," said Scott. "I thought the river was frozen. Couldn't they cross on the ice somewhere?"

"Not for many a weary mile, they couldn't. Too swift water till you get away on farther down. It just freezes out from the edge a ways on both sides, and swift water in the middle. No, sir, it's the toll bridge or nothin' till the ice is out of the river. So if they trailed the herd over Miles City way, to where they could cross on the ice, that eats up a lot of time and we can either head 'em off or cut in behind and foller 'em. We can," he added dubiously, "if the weather holds this way."

"If we are storm bound at any time," Scott pointed out, "they will be also. We'll have that advantage at any rate, more than that, we certainly can travel when the bulls couldn't—or wouldn't, which is the same thing."

"And don't think we ain't goin' to have use for all them advantages, either. One of 'em that you need right now is sleep. You look about all in. She's a good bed," he grinned, tilting his head toward the tarp covered bunk in the corner. "Plenty wide for two; crawl in, Scotty, and forget about the bulls for a while. Your mind needs a rest from 'em. I'll do the thinkin' for the time bein'. I never got up till one o'clock this afternoon, and I ain't sleepy. I'll set here and dope us out a plan or two."

SCOTT suddenly realized that he was mortally tired, and that not all of his weariness came from physical exhaustion, though he had pushed his strength past the danger point in the last two days. It was good to have Billy Burns say we, when he spoke of Scott's problem. To have Billy's help made all the difference in the world. So, with that complete relaxation which a patient feels when his most trusted physician arrives and places sure fingers on the nervous pulse, Scott snuggled Billy's soft, all-wool blankets around his ears, sent a heavy-lidded glance toward the bowed profile of Billy's lean, leathery face with the droopy cigarette dangling from the lips and the wide hat brim tilted over the nose, and slid thankfully into oblivion.

WHEN he opened his eyes again Billy was gone, but the room was warm and there was a smell of coffee in the air.

Scott got up and dressed, went out and saw the sun hanging low in the sky at his right hand instead of his left, and went into the shack with the puzzled sense of being completely turned around. The sun, he discovered, was rising in the west that morning, though he could have sworn that he was properly oriented when he went to bed last night. But presently he noticed the nickel alarm clock pointed to four-twenty, and that gave him a shock until he decided that the clock must be crazy. But he had slept late, no doubt of that; and while he was raking down the coals in the fire box ready for fresh wood, Bill came stamping in, grinnning when he saw Scott.

"Well, I kinda thought you'd be up when I got back," he said, "so I brought a sirloin steak for supper. I was in about three, but you was still dead to the world so I let yuh sleep. I found out a few things, Scotty. The Swallowfork bulls never crossed this side of the mouth of the Musselshell, and I'd stake my life on that. I been out on a still hunt. The toll man ain't crossed any bulls at all. He keeps a tally of everything that crosses the bridge, yuh know, and he let me look over his book. Then I made the rounds of the saloons and nailed every puncher I seen that might possibly know something. You say Nealey's sent out the alarm, so there wasn't any use makin' a secret of it, and I told everybody I seen and talked to what it was I wanted to find out. I'm satisfied, Scotty, that they never brought the bulls this far south. If that don't spoil your appetite, boy, get yourself ready to flop your lip over this steak; she's a dandy—I inspected every side of beef in this town, and got this cut out of a two-year-old fat as butter. You still like yours the same way I do mine—just ready to beller when you draw your knife across?"

Scott did, and they feasted royally; tender beefsteak broiled rare and drenched with melted butter. Fluffy white sourdough cakes laid upon the steak and flavored ravishingly with meat juices and the butter blended perfectly; coffee as a range man likes it, and cold-boiled potatoes hashed and browned in bacon grease. No dietician on earth could have convinced Scott this was not the food for kings.

"WE'LL have to strike east and north, I guess," Billy planned when they could eat no more and had turned their chairs around to the warmth of the cluttered stove. "I've got a good packoutfit and a couple of dandy cayuses back here in the corral—and I tell you, Scotty, I ask no odds from any man, with my shack and

a place for my hosses to winter, and grub to see us all through the winter; I wouldn't swap places with the President! Well, my plan is to take a pack outfit and ride a winter circle for them bulls. Follow down river to where it spreads and slows enough so it freezes solid enough to cross. They'd have to sand a trail, I expect, and that would take time; every delay makes it that much better for us.

"Then we'll act accordin' to what we find or don't find. If they cross the river, we'll foller 'em to hell and beyond, if need be. If they didn't we'll work back and try and pick up their trail. She'll be one sweet job if the weather turns mean, but we'll go prepared."

"I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you, Billy——"

"Pay? You can forget that pay talk, or gratitude or anything runnin' that brand. I been killin' time and not knowin' what to do with m'self, layin' around town. Gettin' up at one, two o'clock and gettin' to bed God knows when. I'm tickled to death to have somethin' for my think works to do. Figgerin' out whether it's safe to raise on two pair is gettin' kinda monotonous. You're a god send, kid; no foolin'."

KNOWING the shyness of souls like Billy Burns, knowing too how far friendship will go beyond the power of words to portray its fine steadfastness, Scott let it go as Billy would have it.

"We'll start in the mornin'," said he, as eager as if he were planning a pleasure trip. "And believe me, boy, we'll make them jaspers hard to ketch!"

Chapter XII

ON THE TRAIL

SHOULDERS humped against the bitter wind, the two ploughed stoically into the teeth of the first real blizzard of the winter. In spite of the unplucked beaver coat which he had providently brought west with him, Scott was chilled to the bone. Billy Burns in his sheepskin-lined sourdough could not be much better off, though nothing could be seen of him save his snow encrusted figure, the white drifted hatbrim with the crown rising like a miniature snowy peak above it—and beneath, the snow crusted, blinking eyelashes through which his eyes peered in two narrow, shining lines. A blue bandanna was tied across his face in a mask that hid his nose. As Scott looked at him—his face turned sidewise away from the full bite of the storm—Billy glanced briefly his way and lifted his shoulders in a shrug that cracked two little snowdrifts through the middle.

"If we can't make Billings they's a claim-shack out this way we could hole up in," he leaned to shout into the storm; though their stirrups knocked together with the swing of their feet, they rode so close.

"No grub!" Scott lifted his own mask to shout the reminder.

Billy nodded acquiescence, and Scott could see the gleam of his eyes for just an instant before he turned his head away, tilting it so that his hat shielded his face from the driving snow.

It was true, they had no grub. They had been out three weeks and they had not stopped at many ranches for meals, partly because they felt certain the thieves had kept well away from all habitations and that it was useless to ride extra miles merely for sake of a few hours of greater physical comfort. And the weather had not been so bad at first. There had been days of bright sunshine and no wind, days when the wind veered to the south and the snow thawed even in the shade. The ridges were all bare, the hollows running rills of snow water. With the tepee tent and the tarp and wool blankets they were snug enough nights, though their cooking was more or less restricted to small, wind-whipped camp fires.

THEY were on what Billy called a still hunt, and they did not care to advertise their presence in the wilds. They approached each likely looking retreat furtively, leaving their horses tied together in seclusion somewhere and stalking the hidden coulees afoot. Billy knew every cabin, corral and every ranch-house in the country, and they visited them all, after they had followed the river to Miles City and beyond without seeing any trace of a secret crossing on the ice.

But now, with barely enough flour for one mixing of bannock and with no grease to fry it in; with no coffee left to warm their chilled bodies, Billy had suggested that they "hit for Billings and lay up there till the storm blowed itself out." That was what he had said in words, but Scott had read his meaning deeper. Billy Burns had no hope of finding the bulls, at least that winter and in that way. When he had said they would hit for Billings he was, Scott knew, acknowledging defeat. The Swallowfork bulls had vanished as completely as if they had taken wings and flown away. Indeed, Billy had remarked that morning that it looked as if the bulls had flew south with the geese; and though he had laughed when he spoke, his laughter had no depth.

Scott stood in the stirrups and slipped one chilled hand under him for warmth as he rode, and when his fingers stopped tingling and began to glow pleasantly he withdrew his hand and gave the other one a chance. Then he remembered that the ear next the wind had stoppd aching with the cold. Investigation with his bare fingers told him that ear was frozen so stiff he could not bend it at the top, and the lobe was hardening too; so he sat on his glove to keep it warm and scraped snow off Rooney's mane and rubbed the frozen ear until the life came stinging back and it burned like fire. He had an extra handkerchief in an inside pocket, and he bound that

around his head, pulled his snow-laden hat down over it, buttoned his fur coat again, blew on his fingers and got them into his glove.

IT ALL took time, and the steady plodding of the horses had carried them that much nearer town; provided, of course, they were traveling in that direction. He would have to trust to Billy for holding the right course, but he was not uneasy at the possibility of being lost. They had their two boundaries, as it were; the wind coming from the northwest, which they must parallel, until they struck the stage road, and the river on the other hand, which they could not cross if they wanted to until they reached the bridge—and beyond the bridge was the town. Billy must know exactly where they were, else he would not have suggested stopping at the claim shack.

Scott knew those shacks; little ten-by-twelve slant roofed buildings, the boards going up and down and covered with tarred building paper for warmth, with the one window and one door required by the homestead law. There might be a floor and there might not. There might be a small cookstove, but more likely there was none; some more recent claim holder would have annexed the stove. They did not call it stealing. They merely annexed whatever they could lay their hands on to lessen the cost of their own homesteading. Even with grub on the pack-horse the thought of a claim shack carried no appeal. Better to plod on until they reached town, Scott thought. They couldn't get much colder—nor much hungrier, either. He was glad the horses were not hungry anyway. Billy had packed along a sack of oats, and when it was extra cold or the feed was poor he fed the horses grain. He said, wisely, that a fed horse could carry a hungry man a long, long way; but a hungry horse might cost a man his life. Wise little cowpuncher was Billy.

SCOTT'S feet grew numb in his high-buckled overshoes, and he dismounted and walked ahead of Rooney. Billy followed his example and they plodded along together, the reins looped over their arms, heads bent before the storm. Silently. No use talking, it only steamed the cloth over their faces so that it froze harder than before. Nothing to say anyway that couldn't wait. The main thing was to reach Billings. It couldn't be more than ten or fifteen miles, Scott guessed. Maybe not that far; eight, perhaps. Billy might know, but it was not worth the trouble of asking. Whatever the distance, it must be covered somehow before they froze.

AFTER what seemed hours of laborious plodding which would have been intolerable except that it kept the blood circulating more briskly in his veins, Scott stumbled into a trenchlike depression. Billy halted an instant, moving his feet sidewise, then turned to the left. Scott followed.

"Stage road!" yelled Billy, ducking his head and looking wry-necked at Scott to keep the snow from driving directly into his eyes. "Can't be more than four mile—le's ride."

They stopped, stood in the shelter of their shivering horses and scraped the snow from their saddles before they mounted clumsily, kicking the snow from their overshoes before setting feet in the stirrups. The pack-horse huddled miserably and waited, head drooping. But now the wind drove at them from the white benchland behind them and the horses stepped out more briskly. Scott felt his spirits rise almost to cheerfulness, merely because he had the wind at his back and a road faintly pencilled before him across the bleak white waste. No great luxury, but it made a difference.

Then the long hill, and town housed and snug. Billy's shack with snow drifted against the door and Billy hastily scraping it away with his foot before he went in. The cheerless interior, everything just as they had left it at daybreak three weeks before, a bleak chill over all.

But they were safe home and they could thaw out. Billy suggested a restaurant, but Scott, more frugal, pointed out the risk of eating leathery steaks at twice the price it would cost to broil their own. So Billy went out and bought the makings of a meal while Scott poured cold water over four frozen potatoes to thaw them before boiling, and went wearily on tingling feet from

cupboard to table, getting plates to warm on the hearth, laying knives and forks across the teakettle top.

IT WAS not until that evening when they were basking in the warmth of the fire and listening to the swish of the blizzard outside that they warily approached the subject of the Swallowfork bulls.

"This storm kinda puts the kibosh on any more trailin' till spring opens up," Billy remarked with elaborate casualness while he held a splinter to the front of the stove to get a lighter for his cigarette. "I'd like to know what the devil they done with that herd—but no use buckin' the drifts just ridin' by guess and by gosh. I reckon Nealey'll maybe get track of 'em somehow." And after a puff or two he looked at Scott. "You shore have done your damnedest, Scotty. More than most punchers would do on their own hook."

"You're wrong there, Billy. I haven't done my damnedest until I find the bulls."

"That's easy said, boy, but you seen the kinda graft we was up against. We looked every darned place in the country where they could of held them bulls. What they done with 'em only God knows—and He ain't tellin'."

"And I'm not going to sit down an' wait until He does, either," Scott said gloomily. "I've got to find them, that's all."

BILLY smoked, leaned for another stick of wood, leaned forward and thrust it into the firebox in the midst of a fine blaze, kicking the door shut with his toe. They needed plenty of heat after that awful ride.

"Well, I don't see how you're goin' about it," he observed finally. "Seems to me we looked every place it was possible for 'em to go, and some that wasn't. It ain't up to you from now on. Nealey's got men out, don't you ever think he ain't. By some hook or crook they musta got acrost the Yellowstone without comin' to the bridge. Broke the ice out in a trail at their old crossin', maybe. I don't know how else. It could be done, I guess—but I sure wouldn't of thought they'd a tried it.

"Still, lookit the money tied up in them bulls. And the only time they could get the bullherd by itself is in the winter after they're gathered off the range and are bein' fed. Gittin' 'em acrost the river I'd a said was impossible, the way the ice is, but that's what they done, prob'ly. Once acrost they could haze 'em down the rustler's trail, with ranches along where they could stop and feed. Nobody that ain't in on it could swear what ranches them are, but there's a string of 'em all right, and they'll pass 'em along from one to the next, and on down acrost the line like runnin' through a chute. The money there is in them bulls, they wouldn't take no chances—they'd have the hull outfit workin' to slip 'em through. Next summer they'll peddle 'em out among the ranchers, a few here and a few there, and gilt fancy prices, I bet. Too bad—the J-up-an'-J-down ain't a hard brand to work; I know of sev'ral ways it can be changed. For instance——"

BUT Scott was not to be turned from the thing that obsessed his mind.

"I don't care if they have a rustler's trail clear into Mexico," he said shortly. "I'm going to find them. I've *got* to find them."

"You've done more——"

"To no purpose, so far," Scott cut in bitterly. "Nothing counts in this matter save success. There is something more than the bullherd at stake, Billy. I don't want to be melodramatic in this, and I've thought it out from every angle and tried to justify failure—but it's no use. I always come back to the same point. I've got to find those bulls."

"And for the Lord's sake, Scott, will you tell me *why?*" Billy's lean face had a sardonic cast with his mouth pulled down at the corners like that. "When you've done all a human can do, what more do you think's expected of yuh?"

"Success. Riding around in circles doesn't mean anything, unless I bring back the bulls. I'm where I was when I left the Swallowfork, nearly a month ago. My efforts have been purely negative, even with

you to help me; and don't think, Billy, that I'm discounting your help, for I'm not.

"But look where I stand after a month has passed. I know the bulls were stolen! Oh, I'll grant that I know a good many places where they are not. But that doesn't help Nealey any. I've got to find where they are."

BILLY folded his arms and heaved a sigh of exasperation. And Scott, who was not an obtuse young man, read his meaning.

"I know, I'm talking in circles just as I've been thinking in circles. But every problem has a correct solution, and one can always find that solution if he keeps right after it. You must admit, Billy, those bulls are *somewhere.*"

Billy sighed again, looked at his cigarette, tossed it toward the gap where the hearth top was pulled out for draught.

"All right—but don't ask me to crawl outa this shack tonight on the trail to that somewhere. She's a long hard road, boy, and there ain't no end to it." Then he grinned. "Wait till the storm's over, anyhow."

"If I hadn't stood there and taken Ev Bundy's cursing and his blows, it wouldn't be so impossible a situation," Scott went on, talking half to himself. "But——"

"Hell, go back and lick him, then!" Billy advised tartly. "That's a heap more sensible than wearin' a horse down in this snow."

"No, it's too late to do that, even if I wanted to. But I took his insults because I meant to find the bulls and that in itself would force him to acknowledge himself a cur and a mean-tempered one at that."

"You might better of beat the tar out of him and let it go at that," Billy's tone was sour.

"Well, I didn't," Scott retorted. "They all think I'm a coward, but I can't help that. I had my own reasons for not fighting Ev, and I considered that I was entitled to do as I thought best about it. But he twitted me with the fact that he had got me the job with the bullherd, and that I had made such a damnable failure of it that the outfit would probably go broke because of me. That was harder to swallow, don't you see, than all the rest of it. It was true, in a measure. Ev did use his influence to get me the bullherd to winter, and I was responsible for them. I may be a fool, but I still feel that I'm responsible and that I shall have to find them and take them back, if I am ever going to be able to live with myself on anything like friendly terms."

"That's drawin' it perty fine, seems to me," Billy yawned and looked toward the bedding that had been spread out to warm and dry beside the stove. "Well, I'm about ready to turn in, Scotty. Time enough to figure your next move. This blizzard ain't goin' to let up for a coupla days, the way it started in, so s'posin' we go to bed and forget about the bulls for a while."

Scott helped spread the blankets on the bunk and went to bed, but he did not forget about the bulls. He dreamed about them as a matter of fact.

CHAPTER XIII

TOO MUCH BULL

DO YOU suppose the toll man could have been bribed to go to sleep and leave the key to the gate handy?"

This was at breakfast. Billy gave a snort and swallowed his coffee the wrong way, upset his chair getting up to cough and strangle and whoop at the siruppy drop in his windpipe and finally came back voiceless and furious, wiping tears off his cheeks with his blue polka-dotted bandanna.

"For the love of heavens!" he cried asthmatically after a hasty gulp of cold water to complete his recovery, "I've et bulls and slep' with bulls and talked bulls and rode with 'em for a month just about. My gosh, if every cowpuncher took it to heart the way you do, every time a bunch of cattle is rustled off the range, there wouldn't be a live one left. All the outfits would go broke because all the riders had grieved themselves to death over stole cattle. It's all right to get out and hunt for 'em as long as there's a chance in the world, but there ain't no use in goin' crazy over them Swallowfork bulls. Forgit 'em long enough to eat, anyway."

SCOTT let it go at that, and the two washed the dishes in peace, after which Billy put a mess of beans on to cook while Scott swept the floor, made the bed and tidied the room generally. The outside wrapper of the package of steak Billy had bought the day before looked clean and not much wrinkled. Scott laid it aside until he had finished his work then spread it on the table and with a stubby pencil from the window-sill he began idly to draw a sketch map of the country; idly at first, because it helped clarify his thoughts which were still with the bullherd in spite of Billy's profane advice.

Billy, for want of something better to do, began an endless game of solitaire on the other side of the table. Outside the blizzard still swished over the town, piling the drifts high against the buildings. The slip-slip-slip of the cards in Billy's hands assumed a certain rhythm which carried Scott's thoughts insensibly into the realm of abstract mathematical reasoning. Supposing the bulls were the unknown quantity? All problems began with the known quantity——

Well, his finite facts ended when he unhitched Pete and Tanner from the load of hay and led them into the stable. He knew of his own knowledge that the bulls were at the sheds eating the hay he had thrown in there. He had heard the petulant voice of old Talleyrand; he remembered that distinctly.

SWIFTLY and almost unconsciously his fingers sketched the boundaries of the pasture, placed the sheds, the small knoll out in the center of the open grazing ground where the bulls had bedded down each night; wavy lines for the creek, groups of tiny triangles for the fringe of trees and bushes.

"Whatcha makin'?" Billy looked up from his game to ask curiously.

"Oh, nothing much. Map of the Pruitt place." Scott was drawing in the stables and the load of hay standing just inside the corral.

"Got to know the girl, didn't yuh? She's got a lot of edjucation too; or she started to get it. Old woman drug her home from school to help with the work, I heard. Somebody—some aunt—left the girl a little money, and she started goin' to school with it. But they're a pinch-gutted outfit, them Pruitts. Old woman wrote she was sick, way I heard it. The girl come home and they borried her money for her and kep' it. Kep' her, too."

Scott broke the point off his pencil and got out his knife to sharpen it. The oath he muttered may have had to do with the broken lead.

"Damn' shame the way they keep 'er up there in the hills. Just for the work they can git outa her."

"She certainly is not much like the rest of the family," Scott said coldly, when he saw that Billy expected some response from him. But a sense of outrage was surging through him. That girl taken from school to wash and scrub floors and carry water!

"No reason why she should be like 'em. They ain't her blood relations, none of 'em. Old lady married her father, and then he died and she married Joe Pruitt. I don't see why'n hell she don't pull up and leave. Waitin' to git hold of enough money, maybe. She can wait till she dies of old age, if she waits for them Pruitts to pay it back. They shore do worship the almighty dollar, them folks."

SCOTT was sketching in the house and the well, the trail down into the meadow where the haystacks stood. He made no reply and Billy relapsed into silence and the slip-slip-slip of the cards. From the compression of his lips and the deep line between his black eyebrows, Scott was deeply engrossed in his map making or in his thoughts; Billy did not know which. But he guessed that Scott wanted to be left alone. Was he thinking of the Pruitt girl? There might be something between them, Billy thought. A fellow as good-looking as Scott Morrison would take any girl's fancy, no matter how offish she was toward the boys on the range. And there was the fact that they were both interested in get-

ting an education; that would be a point of common interest, he supposed. Well, Billy sure would like to see Scott get the bulls back for Nealey. There was a good big reward offered for them by this time, of course. He would like to see Scott make good, since he took the loss so much to heart. Slip-slip-slip—another spread, and the two red aces coming up first thing. If he beat old sol this time he would go down to the Stockman's Saloon and see who all was in town. Might be able to scare up somebody to play pool with.

Scott's thoughts were different. For a time they centered around Hester Pruitt—no, her name couldn't be Pruitt, and he was darn glad of it. He had always disliked that name somehow. But not even her rather tragic plight could keep his thoughts from wandering again to the Swallowfork bulls and the mystery of their disappearance. He recalled every trivial incident of that last evening at his work, for that was where his first-hand knowledge of the bulls ceased. Right there was where the unknown quantity began to creep in.

IF I hadn't hauled the extra load of hay," his thoughts ran on, "I wouldn't have been unharnessing in the dark and I wouldn't have got that crack on the head maybe. That had to be done in the dark—but there was the chance that I'd have a lantern and be using it. Somebody must have known—— But why did they wait a couple of days, then, before they took the bulls?" And then came a thought that made him draw a sharp breath. "How do I know they did wait?" His mind paused before that question and considered it dispassionately from several angles, just as he would stop and consider some tricky point in a mathematical problem.

"Let's see. Jim was feeding the bulls; or rather, Mrs. Pruitt told me he was feeding the bulls. I have no proof that he was, but I suppose I can safely take her word for it. Perhaps the weather was unfavorable for driving the herd out of the country before that morning—and I didn't hear them go then. I ought to have heard them, I should think. They would go down the road—at least, they would if they had nothing to hide. Perhaps they went out some other way and didn't pass the house at all."

He stopped drawing the little eyebrow symbols for mountains. He had never been down Deer Creek below the Pruitt ranch, and he didn't know what the country was like. He wished now that he had explored the country while he was there.

BILLY swept up the cards, evened the deck and placed it on the corner of the table; got up and came over to look at the map.

"Slick work, Scotty. Good as any jogaphy map."

"What's down below Pruitt's?"

"Nothin' much. Canyon for a ways, and then it opens out into Soldier Coulee—we circled around in there, Scotty, when we first came back from down river. Cut across this side of Roundup, don't yuh mind? Then we swung back east in another big circle—just skirtin' the benches and ridin' the creeks and coulees. If you'd a made your map a little bigger I could show yuh——"

"Well, you should buy a bigger steak next time!" Scott laughed. "On this scale I'd need about six feet of paper to map our route as I remember it. Say, Billy——"

"Shoot. Is it the bulls ag'in?"

"Well—when this storm is over I'd like to borrow your pack-horse if you'll lend him."

"You know it. But you ain't goin' to make any pasear alone, 'cause if you're bound to go out again I'll go along."

Scott flushed a little and shaded a mountain peak very carefully; the peak he had seen away up the creek from the pasture.

"I don't think it's necessary to drag you out again, Billy," he said after a perceptible pause. "I thought I'd ride up to Deer Creek. I—I've an errand at Pruitt's, and I thought I might bring back a deer or maybe an elk. This snow will drive them down out of the mountains."

"Oh," said Billy in a tone that held many shades of meaning. "Sure, take the packhorse along. And stay as long as yuh like. No hurry at all."

When he bundled up to go out he was grinning, but Scott's head was bent over his map and he did not see Billy's face.

Chapter XIV

DESERTION

WHAT Scott really intended to do was go out alone and hunt for the bulls. It seemed a mean trick to play on Billy Burns, but Scott went methodically about his deception, attending to the details of it with the precision of a trained brain that has worked out in advance just what must be done. With his wool blanket and Billy's tarp and some other bedding which Billy insisted on lending, Scott packed the horse he had borrowed and rode out of town, Billy waving him good-by. Thus far it was simple enough and there was nothing to excite anyone's curiosity; certainly not Billy's.

But when he had rounded the turn in the road that would lead him past the stock yards and so on up the hill to the broad benchland that stretched away toward the Musselshell, Scott reined out of the road and went laboring through the new snowdrift to a narrow trail where some horseman had wallowed through to the back of the row of stores; an alley this would be in fair weather, but now it was merely a snowy gap between buildings. He went on until he reached a certain back yard and there dismounted and went up the steps. He emerged later with his arms full of bundles, and proceeded to unlash the packed bed roll which Billy had so neatly tied.

A CLERK carried out a sack of flour, went back and got a bag of grain and came grunting with it balanced on one shoulder. Scott thanked him gravely, heaved it in place on the horse and balanced his load carefully. A new tepee tent made a handy covering and further protected the load. Scott threw a one-man diamond and was actually ready for the trail nearly an hour after the unsuspecting Billy Burns had waved him good-by and good luck and had gone on down to the Stockman's Saloon to kill a pang of loneliness he felt.

The pack-horse floundered under his load when Scott rode back to the main-traveled trail, but the stage had come in from Lewiston and he knew the road was broken as far as he would follow it. The sun shone with a pleasant warmth on the back of his head and the snow sparkled like diamond dust whichever way he looked. Sparkling snow is beautiful but dangerous. Scott pulled a pair of smoked goggles from his pocket and put them on. These too were Billy's, pressed upon him at the last minute.

Poor old Billy would wait some time for his venison, Scott thought guiltily, though his lips twitched with the grim humor of it. Billy hadn't fooled him for a minute, though he had managed to fool Billy pretty thoroughly. Billy thought he was going up to Pruitt's to see Hester, and that the deer hunting was merely an excuse for the trip. Well, as a matter of fact it was. But what he really meant to do was to start at the beginning of the mystery, which was at the Pruitt ranch, and see if he could not pick up the trail from there.

IT MIGHT be that the Pruitts, once they knew the bulls had been stolen, could give him some valuable information that would hold a clue. All criminal investigations, he reflected as he rode up the hill, began at the scene of the crime. He and Billy had overlooked that important factor, and when the thought came to him over his map drawing he had realized that it would be useless to call Billy's attention to the oversight; especially since Billy refused to talk any more about the bulls. Out of sheer mistaken kindness that was, of course; Scott understood that well enough even while he set about defeating Billy's purpose.

That night he did avail himself of a claim shack for the sake of the shelter it afforded Rooney and Mick, the pack-horse. He let them root under the snow for bunch grass while he cooked his supper, sacrificing a board off the rough table for fuel. When he had eaten he led in the horses, fed them grain and went to bed, watching the greenish glow of their eyes as they reflected the last little flame in the broken stove and thinking, oddly enough, of the

brilliant blue which sometimes shone out from under Hester Pruitt's brown lashes; though her name wasn't Pruitt, of course.

He wished he had asked Billy what it was, though it would have been awkward since Billy evidently thought Scott knew. Billy might have suspected the real object of this trip if he had discovered how little Scott really knew of the girl. Billy would scarcely believe that Scott had stayed for more than a week in the house without speaking a dozen words to Hester. But then, Billy would not realize the sleepless vigilance of Mrs. Pruitt.

AGAIN, as on every night lately, he dreamed of the Swallowfork bulls. He was driving them somewhere in the snow, old Talleyrand arrogantly leading the herd. He had dreamed this same dream so often now that it seemed to have become a nightly habit; and as always before he awoke reluctantly, trying to pull the vision of the herd out into the waking world of reality. He hated to come back to a new day and have them fade into nothingness, leaving him with the baffled sense of defeat just when he had sighted success.

Next day was warmer and the snow softened and settled until by sundown little hillocks of bare ground could be seen here and there, and on sunny slopes the stage road showed sandy soil in the hoof tracks. Scott's spirits lightened to a distinct hope that he might even be able to follow the trail of the bulls from Deer Creek in spite of the time that had elapsed since they left.

On the third day out he followed the familiar trail up a coulee and over its rim to higher ground, then along a ridge and into a canyon and out again to climb a steeper ridge which he crossed and came suddenly into full view of Deer Creek winding through steep-slanted hillsides that had a bluish cast to the green of their forests. Beyond, rising higher and higher, stood the Snowies—living up to their name, he thought as he paused to gaze at their cold white radiance.

HERE the road wound down along the ridge to the Pruitt ranch, so directly beneath that the effect was like a bird's-eye view of the place. The house, the stables and corrals, the hay-corral down in the meadow below the house, even the upper pasture and the sheds where he had left the bulls that last evening he had fed the bulls were spread like miniature models in the narrow valley; each detail, every clump of willows and grove of cottonwoods and quaking aspens placed with meticulous care. He would travel three miles to reach the gate, but it looked close enough to shout down to the family and be heard.

Now that he was here, the actual arrival being a matter of less than an hour, a baffled sense of futility assailed him. What did he expect to find out at this late day? Did the Pruitts know anything about it, and if they did would they tell him what they knew? One point Scott settled to his own satisfaction while he studied the lay of the ranch, and that was the fact that he should have heard the bulls go by the house to take the hill trail. Two men—they had said they were short-handed and he believed it—would have had trouble getting the herd down from the pasture and past the stables into the road. Five men had taken them through the ranch and to the pasture, and they had all been busy heading off animals that bolted from the herd. Even if Joe and Jim had helped, as they probably would have done, there would have been a good deal of shouting mixed with the bawling of the herd.

AS HE saw the ranch now from the high road the conviction bore in upon him that they did not go past the house. But what excuse could they have given the Pruitts for taking the bulls down the rough canyon and out through the hills, especially since a storm had threatened? Scott did not hurry Rooney down the hill. The snow where it had drifted was slippery from thawing and the horses' feet kept balling with packed snow and sand, reason enough for taking it slowly. But aside from that, he wanted time to think.

A new angle had presented itself and

he was bound to see how it fitted into the problem or, if it didn't, to discard it before he rode up to the Pruitt's door. That angle was the Pruitts themselves. Had they known or suspected the trick played upon him by Brown? If they had—no, he recalled that there was no need to slip the herd out of the valley without his hearing them go. Why should they? He believed they had bought the herd, and even if he had been suspicious he was in no condition to try and stop them.

He decided that they would not attempt to hide the fact of their going, because, having gone boldly about the steal in the first place, boldness would have continued to characterize their actions. They would have made as much noise as they liked; and he, for all his torpor, would have heard the bulls go by. So the answer to that was they had not taken the hill road.

He stared down the meadows, crudely oval in shape and separated by brushy growth where the ground was rocky, as he could see from the height. There were three of these hay meadows, of considerable size and filling the creek bottom from hill to hill, save when the stream itself meandered through. At the lower end of the third meadow the hills shouldered in and pinched the valley together in a canyon which extended for some distance, according to Billy Burns.

BEYOND that the hills extended down toward the Musselshell like a huge paw, with coulees and gulches and cliffs and cutbanks between the toes. He had discussed that lower country with Billy, and Billy had assured him that they rode as far that way as it was feasible to go, when they made their three-weeks' search north of the Yellowstone. They had seen no sign of cattle having come out that way, and he did not think any clue would have escaped his eyes or Billy's.

Well, he could soon find out if they went down the creek. All he need do was ask one of the Pruitts. They would know. As a matter of fact, Joe and Jim could tell him exactly what direction they had taken —but here another idea occurred to him. If the Pruitts had guilty knowledge of the crime, they would not only lie about the direction but would probably see to it that he did not get out on the trail after them. And there came in the wedge of suspicion again; had Joe or Jim knocked him senseless in the stable that night? He had never thought so, but he admitted to himself now that it was possible. They did not seem that kind. They seemed not to have the initiative for a thing like that, and there would have been no object in it unless they knew Brown and the other fellow were coming after the bulls.

"But I always had the feeling there was something sinister about the damned place," he recalled. "It's a lonesome hole—and according to Billy's story of the way they have treated Hester, they aren't too blamed conscientious. If they're on the grab for money, they might have—by thunder, Jim was quizzing me about my wages, that very evening! Wanted to make sure they had not sent it up in the mail." That thought held him for a time, until another displaced it.

IF HE did not confide in the Pruitts, what excuse could he make for coming back? True, his board was paid until spring, but they would know he had not come all the distance for the sake of three meals a day.

"Well," he said ruefully to his horse, "if I decide not to tell them what business brought me up here they will probably think as Billy did that I have come courting Hester. Which will make me more unpopular than if I rode up and called them all thieves." Though he laughed when he said it, a sudden warmth surged through his body at the thought of the girl.

"She'll look at me, maybe, the way she did at that hunter from Billings. And Pa Pruitt will throw me out on my ear, and I'll be right where I started from — speaking figuratively. Moreover, I'll have to explain the pack-horse. Can't say I'm just riding through and thought I'd call, for this is the end of the road. I begin to

see complications—oh, thunder! And they know I went to the Swallowfork, because I took the team out with me. So I couldn't help knowing the bulls were stolen. And if I don't mention it, that will be worse than ever." Scott frowned as he rode down the last steep pitch in the trail, which would bring him into the willows along the creek and shut out all view of the house until he emerged from the thicket to approach the gate.

"Hope brother Jim isn't lying in wait in those willows with a shotgun," he thought, and was immediately diverted by something he saw just before he rode down out of sight at the foot of the hill. Hester had come out and around to the back of the house with the clothes basket, and when she saw him she had stopped short to stare, and then had set down the basket and was running straight down toward the willows as if she meant to intercept him.

WHEN he entered the thicket he saw that she was standing across the creek, beckoning him to leave the road and come down to where she waited. Heart hammering in his chest, Scott swung his horse that way, glancing to make certain that he was hidden from sight of the house, which was evidently what Hester intended.

"Oh, you've come about the bullherd, haven't you?" she began without preface, looking up at him with those terribly clear, blue eyes which had haunted his thoughts. "I knew you'd come back when you discovered—and I've only a minute. I'm supposed to be taking the clothes in off the line, and they are playing dominoes in the kitchen so they didn't see you come down the hill. Fortunately.

"I tried to tell you before you left, but she watches me like a hawk and I wouldn't make the situation worse by rousing her suspicion. They took the bulls away the night you were hurt. I am not certain, but I think they drove them up the creek. And —you will scarcely believe this, but it's the truth, for I saw it—when they brought you in and put you on the bed, Jim twisted your foot with his hands, so you wouldn't be able to walk for a while. I suspected something, when Jim didn't come in to his supper and she was so uneasy and so watchful of me. But when they brought you in and said you had had an accident, she went in with the lamp and I slipped out and looked in at the window. Then she kept you nauseated with something, I believe; though I'm not certain of that. So when the men came and pretended to you that they had bought the bullherd, of course I knew that—that the Pruitts are criminals, too.

"So you must not come to the house. You have your camp outfit, and you can find some place down in the meadow—by the hay corral, perhaps. They'll have no occasion to go down there. And tonight, or before daylight in the morning, ride up the creek—up along the outside of the pasture, where you'll find a trail. I don't know where they took them; over past White Sulphur Springs, perhaps. Joe and Jim were gone all night, and after that I didn't hear the bulls at all. They went that night, and they didn't come down this way."

BUT you—Hester, you're taking a terrible risk——"

"No— not if they don't see you, or suspect that I know what happened. I'm safe. I'm—useful for work. Some day the chance will come, and I'll go. But not until—there's something I want to discover first. Go on, Scott. I mustn't stay any longer."

But he leaned and laid a gloved hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes.

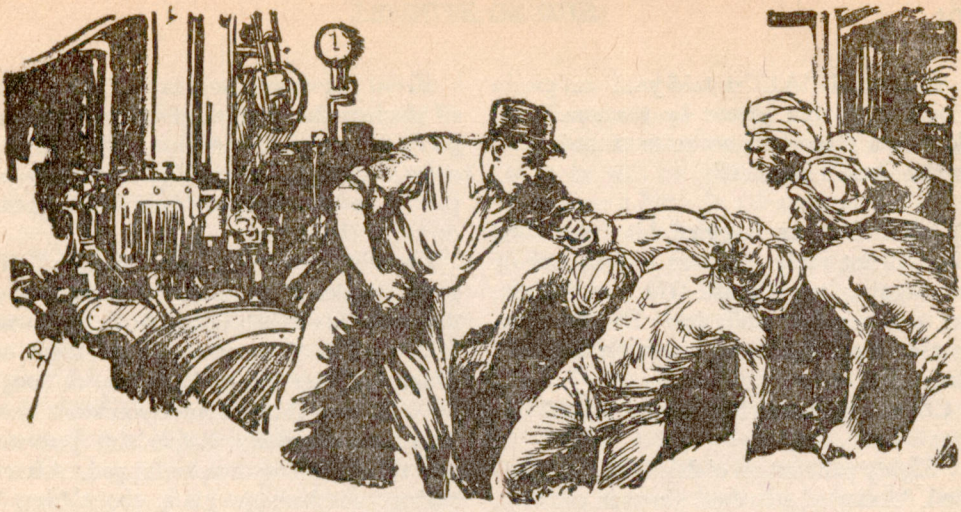
"Tell me, how did you know I'd come back?"

"Because you—you're steadfast."

"Steadfast?"

"Yes. They were in your care, and you'd keep on until you found them. Sooner or later you'd come back here pick up the clue. I've been watching for you to come, and hoping it would be like this, when I could tell you. I've planned it—good-by, and—good luck." She gave him a deep, intent look and fled back the way she had come, by a short cut through the willows to the back of the house.

(*To be continued in the next issue of* SHORT STORIES.)



THE SKIPPER KNOWS BEST

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "The Red Stone," "Island Honor," etc.

SKIPPER GROVER AND CHIEF ENGINEER MCGOVERN SAFELY DELIVERED THE OLD "KINGSTON" TO SHEIK ABU NAKHL OF RAS-EL-KASR—AND PROMPTLY FOUND THEMSELVES DELIVERED INTO THE HANDS OF THE PIRATICAL ABU, WHO HAD MOST EVIL DESIGNS ON THE PEARLERS OF THE PERSIAN GULF. ALL OF WHICH GAVE THE SKIPPER A CHANCE TO PROVE HE AT LEAST KNEW BEST HOW TO MAKE A NEW USE OF AN OLD ANCHOR

CHIEF ENGINEER McGOVERN poked his head up through a hole in the *Kingston's* deck and surveyed the shore mournfully. He sighed. It is always bad to be a young man in love. It is worse to be stuck on a tub like the *Kingston* out of love for the Skipper's daughter. But to be one of the only two white men on this dilapidated tramp, and to be delivering her to a God-forsaken port like Ras-el-Kasr when her sale to a native owner had reduced the Skipper to a speechless, raging gloom—that was worst of all.

The *Kingston* moved slowly through the water with her engines at a quarter speed ahead. An Arab leadsman cast and coiled and cast again, singing out the soundings in astounding nasal tones, now and then interrupted by spasmodic contractions of his vocal cords. Captain Grover regarded the land, which was slowly enveloping the *Kingston,* with a concentrated venom.

It was perfectly familiar. The old ship had nosed into this same harbor once before. But in addition, the town of Ras-el-Kasr was, and is, and always will be the exact duplicate of innumerable other heat baked towns on the Persian Gulf. Angular, out-of-plumb houses of sundried brick and stone in the middle, mat huts on the outskirts, a mud wall, a fort with the inevitable towers and the inevitable antique artillery, and a smell.

The smell was one of those corrosive, tropical smells that thrive on heat and sunlight and an overpowering humidity. It rose to the high heavens. It was thick enough to cut. And it reached out to the *Kingston* and caressed it.

The *Kingston* moved slowly past a jetty which was obscured by a horde of *btails* and *bakaras,* angular craft with incredible sails which ought at this time in late August to be out on the pearling banks. Further on, the smell intensified. The expression of concentrated venom upon Captain Grover's face deepened. The leadsman sang monotonously through his nose.

Chief Engineer McGovern sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose, and spat.

"Why d'ye keep the lead goin', Skipper?"

he demanded. "As I've told ye, I can gie ye a bearin' on the bazaar by the smell, an' likewise a reasonable accurate cross-bearin' on the Sheik's hareem."

THE Skipper waggled his beard and did not reply. He was leaning out of the sagging wheelhouse. He was hatless, and coatless, and collarless. His face expressed the ultimate of bitterness and dislike.

Chief Engineer McGovern closed his eyes.

"Eighty per centum o' dried fish," he pursued. "Assorted stenches, nineteen per cent. Sewage, three-quarters o' one per cent. An' attar o' roses, one-eighth o' one per cent. We are just passin' the end o' the jetty."

He opened his eyes again to check up. He was correct within the limits of good navigation.

"It would ha' worked," said McGovern, and sighed. "But I suppose the Skipper knows best."

Captain Grover turned and glared ferociously at the Arab steersman. The wheelman spun the wheel in haste and the *Kingston* heeled around in time to miss the clumsy stern of a two-hundred-ton *bagala*.

A hundred yards on, Captain Grover reached his hand to the engine-room telegraph, but Chief Engineer McGovern had turned his head and now swore down the hole through which his head projected. The engines stopped. The *Kingston* drifted forward gently. The Skipper's whiskers waggled. No man moved. The waggling became violent, and his expression of concentrated venom became more pronounced. A deep rumbling noise began deep down in his chest.

"Let go the anchor!" roared McGovern.

The Skipper subsided into his private state of dudgeon as the anchor-chain rolled out. Five-eight fathoms. It stopped its rattling roar and began to ooze gently out, indefinitely.

"Make it fast!" howled McGovern.

The order came as the Skipper was growing apoplectic. An Arab sailor hastened to obey, and the *Kingston* came to rest in the oily glassy waters while additional and hitherto unsuspected smells from the town floated toward her and enveloped her.

From the town, too, came boats. Boats of all sizes and degrees of unseaworthiness. They clustered about her and the Arab crew explained unintelligible things explicitly and the boatmen swarmed on board to argue the point.

Captain Grover's beard waggled. He grew purple. A rumbling noise began deep down in his diaphragm. And McGovern said hastily, "I wouldna order them off, Skipper. After all, ye ken, they've bought the *Kingston*. But of course you know best."

Captain Grover's purple tint persisted, but the rumbling noise stopped. After a raging, anathematic glare about him, he withdrew his head violently into the wheelhouse. And McGovern sighed, mopped his head, and turned to duck down below again.

AS HE descended the ladder he saw unusual activity below. He looked in instant alert suspicion. And then with a roar of rage he jumped down the last five steps. His own private tool-kit was open and was being enthusiastically inspected by the engine room crew. As he plunged forward a man staggered into view with an especially large armful of McGovern's personal possessions from his cabin. Other men were behind him, quarreling angrily over the loot. Somebody else was engaged in squabbling over McGovern's watch and chain with still another man, and a last touch to McGovern's wrath was given by the sight of his revolver in the hands of a member of the black gang.

"Scum o' the earth," roared McGovern, grabbing a slicebar as he rushed, "I'll——"

A knife flicked past his ear and with one accord the combined engine room and stokehold crews fell upon him. The slicebar landed once, with a satisfying thud. After that, mutiny had pretty much its way. McGovern, fighting in a berserk wrath, landed blows and took them. Once, rolling on his back with a dozen men clinging to him, he saw a bearded face peering down the ladder he had descended. Then he managed to get both legs free and kicked gloriously, to the accompaniment of anguished howls, until somebody landed on his head with a spanner.

He woke up possibly five minutes later. Hardly more, because men were still sitting

on him. One man, in fact, was sitting on his head and McGovern's first conscious

effort was to sink his teeth in him. The man arose with a yell, and McGovern spat.

"Now," he raged, "go ahead an' knife me an' be damned to you!"

He did not know what the mutiny was about. There had been no trouble on the voyage. He and the Skipper were delivering the newly sold *Kingston* to her new owner, the Sheik Abu Nakhl of Ras-el-Kasr. The Skipper was in the depths of despair at the final fate of his ship. McGovern was hopeful of at last being able to go back to England and marry Molly Grover, the Skipper's daughter. But this mutiny seemed to suggest that the Sheik Abu Nakhl had other plans for him.

"Why don't ye knife me?" demanded McGovern, raging. "Go ahead! I'm helpless enough! But if I'd had a gun——"

"Please, sar," said a plaintive voice. "The Sheik Abu Nakhl he give orders you shall not be kill."

A woebegone member of the stokehold crew, a man McGovern had noticed before was a Persian and not an Arab like the rest, was spitting blood from where a tooth was missing and interpreting at the apparent order of the bearded man above.

"He did, eh?" said McGovern savagely. "An' why was he so kind?"

"He intend, sar," said the woebegone little Persian dismally, "he intend to run this ship as pirate to loot the pearling fleet, sar. He want you alive, sar, to fixe engines if they break."

"You may tell him," said McGovern grimly, "to go to hell. What's that noise up there? A fight?"

"Yes, sar," said the Persian mournfully. "That are captain, sar. He are still fight."

AN INARTICULATE bellow arose above the crashing of bodies and thudding of feet above-decks. Bumps, blows, howls and crashings told that the Skipper was putting up a beautiful scrap, but the absence of revolver shots at once explained the length of the battle and foretold its ending.

The ending came suddenly. There was a monstrous crash that suggested that one of the flimsy partitions on the *Kingston* had given way. A howl of anguish and a roar of rage, and suddenly the scrap stopped.

"Tapped him on the head like they did me," said McGovern gloomily. "God forgie us, what a mess!"

And he lay still to contemplate the future of a white merchant marine officer held on board a Persian Gulf pirate ship to mend the engines if they broke.

II

TIED up in his cabin a couple of hours later, McGovern dismally revised his estimate of a phrase Molly Grover had first used.

"The Skipper knows best," she'd said firmly. "And I won't marry you unless he says so."

That was at the bottom of all this trouble. The Skipper didn't know best. When a series of disasters led to the *Kingston* being sold out of the Baltic trade, for which she was built, into the Mediterranean, then the Levant, and then the ultimate degradation of small cargo-steamers, the pilgrim trade to Jidda—when those disasters happened, the Skipper should have changed his berth. He should certainly have left her when she was sold to Abu Nakhl of Ras-el-Kasr. He didn't know best when he fell in love with the old tub and stuck to her as she sank down the social scale of the sea to the point of trading in small and heat baked harbors in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. McGovern felt that the Skipper had made a grave mistake.

The only wisdom he was willing to concede to the Skipper just then, was what he had showed in Port Said. McGovern had hired a harbor boat there, had had himself rowed to the *Kingston*, mounted to the deck of the rusty little old tramp and introduced

himself politely as the accepted suitor of the Skipper's daughter Molly. The Skipper had glared at him.

"Ye ken, sir," said McGovern anxiously, "Molly told me, sir, that she'd not marry me, sir, unless you approved."

The Skipper turned pink, then a delicate shade of purple. A rumbling noise set up about his belt buckle. It sounded like a coming explosion. The Skipper had just fired a Greek engineer bodily off the *Kingston,* and the engines looked like scrap-iron. He was in no mood to be approached on sentimental topics. The rumbling rose toward speech, which would be blistering, envenomed, wrathful speech. It would probably be a bellow of rage.

"I know, sir," said McGovern hastily and humbly, "she should make a better match. But I'm already junior engineer o' the——" He named his ship with modest pride. "An' in a couple more voyages, sir——"

THE rumbling had stopped short. The Skipper was regarding him ferociously. He stood up. He beckoned. And he led the way in speechless fury to the engine room of the *Kingston.* McGovern looked, was awed at the mess before him, and set to work while the Skipper scowled.

He had thought that a demonstration of his efficiency in his own profession might help to placate his future father-in-law. But when the *Kingston* left Port Said a former junior engineer on a P. & O. liner was chief and only engineer on board the *Kingston,* and was still in something of a daze at the transition.

He decided then that he was doing it out of love for Molly. Later he conceded that the Skipper did know what was best—in engineers. But he reflected gloomily on how far from best it had turned out to be for him, as he lay trussed up in his bunk in Ras-el-Kasr harbor.

There were excited yells and thumpings outside. Something heavy was being brought on board the *Kingston.* It would probably be a cannon, one of those antiquated brass affairs still venerated in the Persian Gulf, which go off sometimes when loaded, and always make a prodigious and entirely harmless din.

The little Persian had fed him and told him the Skipper was still alive, though battered. He had also explained that the great pearling season, the *Ghaus-al-Kabir,* was about to close and that the pearling fleets would have their entire catch on board, which was the reason for the choice of this particular time for raiding. Mournfully, the little man added, "Why this raid, sar, is because the other boats chase Ras-el-Kasr boats from pearling-banks because they steal."

"Um," said McGovern. "I've heard of that. Abu Nakhl is a born pirate an' his boats have been up to their old tricks whenever the gunboat was out of sight."

There is a British gunboat which patrols the pearling-banks in the pearling seasons for the suppression of piracy. The task is a noble one which is picturesquely cursed by the crew of the British gunboat told off for the job. Because the Persian Gulf is hot. Even the seawater goes up to a surprising temperature in midsummer.

"Yes, sar," said the little Persian unhappily. "An' I, sar, are interpreter, and I beg intercession, sar, if we are captured and you are not killed before surrender."

McGOVERN agreed to intercede, but did not expect to keep the promise. As he gathered the details, the raid would be made when the gunboat was known to be some distance away. If possible, in the middle of a *shamal,* one of those monster dust-storms from the Mesopotamian desert, which sweep in a monster spiral over the

Gulf and fill the air with dust as with a fog. A hundred and fifty pious cutthroats would be packed on the *Kingston.* With sufficient daring in her handling —and your Arab does not lack daring at sea—she would go lumbering through a fairly brisk gale and throw a horde of bloodthirsty Moslems on the deck of boat after boat on the pearling banks. She would be hidden by the storm. She would leave no witnesses to identify her. And she would be back in Ras-el-Kasr with an alibi

prepared by the time the fact of piracy committed was known.

It was simple enough, and probable enough. Ras-el-Kasr is in the middle of that strip the charts still call the "Pirate Coast." McGovern, and the Skipper if alive, were being held in case of an emergency—to be used to work the *Kingston* out of any jam that bad seamanship or an engine breakdown might get her into. When they were no longer needed, they would be killed.

McGovern was gloomy enough and growing furious when four men, armed to the teeth, came casually into his cabin and kicked him, and slit his bonds and jerked him up into the chartroom. Abu Nakhl was waiting there, large and impressive and with the cold, dispassionate eye of a large cod. The Skipper was there too, badly battered, with one eye closed, and an expression of speechless rage upon his face.

The Sheik Abu Nakhl spoke, uninterestedly.

"He say, sar," translated the little Persian almost tearfully, "that you are Christian dogs and he cut your throats presently. But if you help run the ship, he let you live. If you are good pirates, he will turn you free and give you shares in loot taken."

McGovern narrowed his eyes. He thought he saw a chance to grab a knife, if he sprang quickly enough.

"Ye can say," he observed pleasantly, "that we'll see him in the lowest of the seven hells he believes in before we'll turn pirate. I'm speaking for the Skipper an' myself."

The Skipper rumbled as the little Persian turned to translate. He rumbled more loudly until the small man stopped. And he glared at McGovern and waggled his beard speechlessly.

"What d'ye mean, sir?" demanded McGovern. "Aren't ye with me?"

THE Skipper growled negatively. One eye was closed rakishly. His lip was split. His expression was baleful and the perfection of concentrated venom. But he growled at McGovern instead of the Sheik Abu Nakhl.

"Ye mean ye'll take on this damned cutthroat an' his damned piracy before ye'll die like a white man should?" demanded McGovern wrathfully.

The Skipper growled again. But it was unquestionably an affirmative.

"All right, then," said McGovern savagely, "Tell the old pirate—" he addressed the mournful Persian— "tell him to cut my throat only. He's got a skipper, but I'm damned if he's got an engineer."

He clenched his fists. Despite the hairy arms that clutched him, he thought he had the ghost of a chance to grab one of the weapons that bristled in the sash of the man on his right.

But the Skipper bellowed suddenly. It was not articulate, but it was profane and it was enraged and it was definitely a command. He glared at McGovern as upon a previous occasion he had glared at a young man who came to announce that he was Molly Grover's accepted suitor.

McGovern stared at him. The fine recklessness that had possessed him evaporated.

"Oh, verra well," he said sulkily. "Molly says the Skipper knows best. I'll turn pirate wi' the rest of ye. But I'd much rather be an honorable corpse."

Abu Nakhl waited indifferently until the little Persian translated. Then he nodded his head negligently and McGovern was dragged from the chartroom and chucked bodily into his own looted cabin again. A whiskery pirate with a sashful of weapons squatted down outside his door.

OUT of his cabin porthole, three days later, McGovern could see the shore. It was low and sandy and bare, and the twin minarets of a mosque showed far behind the *Kingston,* and there was a patch of mud houses and the inevitable towers of the local sheik's fortress.

The *Kingston* lay at anchor, baking. McGovern fanned himself and sweated. A day's run from Bas-el-Kasr, the old ship had been at anchor for two days, now, and in that time McGovern had not stirred from his cabin, nor had a guard stirred from before his door. He had heard the Skipper moving about in the adjoining cabin, but McGovern made no attempt to communicate with him. Thinking over the fact that the Skipper had bellowed him into making terms with a damned pirate, McGovern had grown furious. Now he only waited for a

chance to make clear his withdrawal from that compact.

IN THE meantime he lay on his bunk, sweating and cursing wearily, when he could summon energy for words. The whole ship was quiet. Some holy individual was intoning the Koran while waiting for his opportunity to loot. Somebody else was honing a weapon. There was guttural talk, and the sound of an indolent game being played somewhere, and the gentle slapping of waves against the *Kingston's* rusty plates.

But suddenly, out on deck, a bustle began. Someone shouted. Someone else echoed the shout. It ran all over the ship, and there was a rushing of men to look and then a scampering of feet and the tumbling of men down into the engine room and stokehold. The clang of tools and the rattle of coal. Vast activity everywhere.

McGovern dragged himself to the porthole and looked out. The sea was empty. The sun shone down like molten bronze. What little breeze came from the shore was like the hot blast from a furnace. There was no sign of any vessel anywhere. But the horizon was peculiarly blurred. It was no longer a definite line. It was a vague demarkation between sea and sky, and, as McGovern looked, the water and the sky blended insensibly into one.

"Shamal," said McGovern drearily. "The wind's coming. I hope the old tub founders with all on board."

The whole ship was in a turmoil for long minutes, while the faint haze crept down the coast. Steam began to blow raucously out of the *Kingston's* dented funnel, to force a draught. And then there was a clanking of the anchor chain and a howling of men, and the *Kingston's* screw began to revolve and a wild yell ran over the ship.

The old ship gathered steerage-way and headed out to sea, her engines growling protestingly. Above-decks, of course, the navigation would be fairly adequate. Until driven from the pearling grounds, Ras-el-Kasr had sent thirty boats to the fishery, and the wheelman would know currents and depths and courses thoroughly. The *Kingston,* in fact, would be driven on a basis of one part knowledge and three parts dependence upon Allah.

She was five miles off the coast when the *shamal* struck. A wild screaming of wind, a dense opacity in the atmosphere, and the *Kingston* heeled over as under a heavy blow. Immediately after, it seemed, a colossal sea

was running and she was making heavy weather of it but being held recklessly on her course.

For an hour, then, McGovern waited grimly in his lurching, looted cabin for the wild yells in the engine room—which was the Arabic idea of discipline—to reach a climax and disclose that something vital had broken. He would be dragged out to fix it. And he would try to get hold of a knife or gun and wipe out the disgrace of having seemed even momentarily to have agreed to the terms of these scum.

At the end of the hour the yelling continued unabated, and the *Kingston* was still wallowing onward. She pitched. She rolled. She wallowed heavily and groaned as she lurched upright again. And McGovern reflected grimly that before long she would be on one of the pearling-banks and would be crashing alongside a pearling-boat to send a horde of yelling men down upon her.

ABOVE the tumult of the *shamal* outside a blow sounded suddenly, close by his head. A plank in the cabin wall split suddenly, wavered, and was dragged out of sight. And then a deep-toned rumbling noise reached McGovern's ears and he saw a battered, purpled, infuriated eye gazing in at him. The Skipper reached in his fist and dropped a particularly greasy revolver upon McGovern's bunk. An instant later his pudgy fist came in with a handful of shells. He dropped them and replaced his eye to the opening.

"Skipper!" said McGovern fervently. "I misjudged ye, man! I apologize! We'll be runnin' out an' fightin' our way to a seacock an' swamp the old tub? 'Tis the only thing we can do. There's a hundred an' fifty of these pirates on board, an' we've no hope of anything more than drowning 'em."

The Skipper rumbled more loudly. It was close to a roar. And it was an exasperated

negative. His expression was baleful and enraged. The rumbling continued to the point of articulation. And at last the Skipper bellowed.

"No!"

He withdrew his eye savagely. McGovern waited, dismally trying to discover some hope of escape for the two of them. There was none. A hundred and fifty Moslems, armed to the teeth, and two white men with revolvers. There was no chance whatever.

"But," said McGovern without conviction, "the Skipper knows best."

He peered into the Skipper's cabin. It had been looted as thoroughly as his own. Even the sheets had been taken from the bunk. Of all the Skipper's possessions, the only thing remaining was a fair-sized brass-bound box that McGovern remembered as containing the elements of the Skipper's Christmas dinner, when Christmas should come about. It had been emptied, now. A tinned plum-pudding, a tin of Danish butter, Devon sausages with a large picture of a pig on the label, and two monster Westphalian hams lay on the floor beside it. That explained the security of the box. No Moslem would touch its contents or have any use for a box so thoroughly defiled. If a couple of extra revolvers and a supply of shells were underneath the pork, they were quite safe from looting. No True Believer would look underneath the accursed pork.

The Skipper had his nose pressed to the glass of the porthole. He was watching for something which was included in some incredible scheme of his. McGovern racked his brain for an inkling of it, failed altogether to see any possibility whatever, and uncertainly followed suit. Maybe the Skipper knew best, but he doubted it.

FOR two solid hours the *Kingston* went wallowing before the wind. She was a disgrace of a tramp to begin with. Rust-streaked funnel awry, unpainted boats unkempt, her hull a fungoid red from rust with peeling strips of paint dangling from her upper plates, she was a disreputable ship to look at anyhow. But now, with the red-scimitar flag of Abu Nakhl floating at her masthead, with becloaked, bewhiskered and unwashed sons of the Prophet crowded about her decks, with villainous small brass cannon lashed to her forward and after-decks and seagreen water pouring from her scuppers, she was worse than disreputable. She was a disgrace to the high seas. She was a disgrace even to the Persian Gulf.

At the end of the second hour, the wind lessened a little. Simultaneously the sea rose to new heights, plainly betokening shoal water underneath. The waves, hitherto racing monsters, showed a tendency to break and they bounced the *Kingston* about outrageously. She went wallowing on through them, rolling until her side-rails went under and until the maniacs who manned her had new evidence of the favor of Allah in each successive recovery.

Then a howl went up from her decks, where men clung to rails and stanchions and their weapons. A wild howl of joy. Off to starboard a dim mass showed through the mist, a *batil* of the pearling fleet, riding at long anchor with a rag of sail up and men pouring oil over her bows.

The *Kingston* came around in a fashion to turn a seaman's hair gray. As she swung about in the momentary trough between two monster, curling seas, McGovern turned pale and hung on instinctively. As the following sea lifted her up again and held her balanced for one precarious instant atop a surging wall of water where the full blast of the *shamal* smote on her, he blinked his eyes. He could feel her going over——

And she sank abruptly into the next trough and came bubbling upright just in time to lurch heavily into the succeeding wave, waver precariously on its summit, and then plunge down one more with a wild uproar as her screw raced in midair.

"M-my God!" said McGovern shakily. "Allah is watching!"

The pearling-boat drifted slowly into sight through the porthole—a clumsy, ungainly craft with a huge mainmast from which a lateen sail would be spread, and a smaller lateen mizzen aft. It had a long anchor-cable out, its decks suddenly swarming with men in spite of the washing seas when the crimson-scimitar flag at the *Kingston's* masthead was made out. The *batil* was rolling and pitching at the end of her anchor-cable. With her heavy mast and heavier lateen boom, it seemed as if at any instant the sticks should roll out of her.

And then the *Kingston,* spouting green water from her scuppers, burying her squat bow in every sea, nosed alongside while her decks were black with howling, weapon-waving men.

THE oil that had been poured over the pearler's bows was providential. The gunwale of the pearler crashed against the *Kingston's* side, and there was a swarming and leaping of yelling men down. In seconds the deck of the *batil* was a mass of stabbing, battling figures. Firearms flashed with futile poppings in the *shamal's* roar. Men, locked in death-grips, rolled over and over on the decks that were flooded with raging seas. Swords glittered brightly, or were dulled with red. And the *Kingston,* held as close alongside as a wild-eyed steersman dared, crashed again against the pearler's side and a second wave of Abu Nahkl's cutthroats went howling down to her deck.

The steamer drew off a little, then. Even a crazy man could see that to linger close was suicide. She drew off fifty yards or more and wallowed and plunged like a mad thing while the fighting went on, on the pearler.

McGovern had been fascinated by the massacre. He almost forgot his own doom ahead. And then the Skipper howled inarticulately through the split plank and McGovern heard his cabin door crash wide.

McGovern crashed through his own only an instant after him, yelling from pure instinct and looking for somebody to shoot at. There was no one in sight. The guard at his cabin door was over on the *batil* fighting lustily and howling with joy. So was every other man on the *Kingston* except the engine and fire room crews.

The Skipper's fat legs twinkled as he went rumbling and racing forward. McGovern followed him out of instinct. The Skipper heaved himself up the bridge-ladder, unseen because all attention was focussed on the pearler. He bellowed over his shoulder to McGovern, balanced himself precariously, and plunged his full weight at the wheelhouse door.

McGovern joined him in the rush, and the two of them went hurtling into the wheelroom on top of the remnants of the splintered door. The Skipper went crashing down to the floor as the man at the wheel swung about and started shooting. McGovern dropped him handily, sneezed from the powder smoke, and helped the Skipper up.

"Now what?" he asked anxiously. "I didna think it could be done, sir, but you knew best. Now I'll hold down the stokehold crew while we run the old ship——"

THE Skipper boomed a raging negative. He seized the wheel of the *Kingston.* Her head was paying off from the one moment of the wheel's freedom. He brought her back, squinted carefully, and with the purple complexion of a man on the verge of apoplexy from rage, sent her into a wallowing roll.

She came up, shuddering, with many tons of water on her fore-deck. McGovern gasped.

"Skipper! Ye'll sink us both!"

The squat bow of the *Kingston* wavered, wabbled, and settled with a rending crash against the blunt bow of the *batil.* More, one of the *Kingston's* anchors, only indifferently stowed away, caught its fluke into the tangle of cordage and chainwork about the *batil's* bowsprit.

There was a howl of joy and some of the engine room crew came pouring out and jumped down into the still raging battle.

"Anchor!" howled the Skipper, on the verge of exploding from rage, and pointing to the anchor whose fluke was caught in the cordage of the batil's bowsprit.

McGovern raced down and forward. The anchor-chain paid out recklessly.

"Why the de'il," McGovern panted, "he did that——"

From the wheelhouse came an infuriated bellow. The Skipper pointed enragedly to the steel-taut cable at the end of which the pearler wallowed desperately. He made gestures, and McGovern flung up his hands helplessly. The *Kingston's* own anchor-

chain continued to ooze out until a howl of anguished, helpless rage from the Skipper made McGovern look up. Then, in obedience to unmistakable if infuriated signs, he checked it.

"He's gone dotty," said McGovern dismally. "An anchor an' chain would be cheap riddance."

Then he saw the Skipper shooting from the wheelhouse. Fifteen or twenty yards separated the two vessels now, and McGovern whirled about to join in the fighting. But the fighting was over. The *batil* was being happily looted by Abu Nakhl's men, and they had noted nothing whatever wrong with the *Kingston*. The Skipper continued to shoot, holding the wheel with one hand and shooting with the other. His expression was that of concentrated fury. He emptied his gun, bellowed with wrath at McGovern, and reloaded awkwardly. At his second shot the iron-stiff cable of the *batil* began to writhe. One of its strands had been severed by a bullet. That loosened strand curled up and writhed—and the cable broke.

THE broken end screamed above McGovern's head and splashed into the sea. Instantly, it seemed, the pearler was being driven astern. Heeling over until half her deck was under water, instant attention was given to the steamer. Wild howls and orders came from the looted *batil*.

And the Skipper, with an expression of pure ferocity upon his face, headed the *Kingston* into the teeth of the *shamal* again. Two minutes later came a shock as the paid-out anchor-chain drew taut. It raised from the water, and stiffened, and came inboard bending steel plates and stanchions in its passage. But it held.

McGovern sat down suddenly. He saw the point now. The *Kingston's* anchor hopelessly caught in the mass of cordage and chains about the bowsprit of the *batil*, with the full strain of a tow against it, could not be freed except by the hacking away of the whole bow and the immediate swamping of the *batil*. The Skipper was at the wheel of the Kingston. The late captors of the two white men were isolated on the pearling-boat in tow. They had to go where the *Kingston* took them.

"My God!" said McGovern piously.

And he made haste to the engine room, to be ready to argue gently with the remaining members of the stokehold crew with the revolver Captain Grover had given him. Half an hour later, when someone came up from the stokehold to find out why the raid took so long to execute, or perhaps to estimate the loot, he got no farther than the stokehold ladder. There he found himself looking into the muzzle of McGovern's weapon and saw McGovern smiling sweetly at him. He saw, further, a firehose propped to sweep down into the stokehold, the said firehose being coupled to a pipe full of excessively live steam.

"Scum o' the earth," said McGovern tenderly, "get back an' to work! If yon steam-gauge drops below a hundred an' fifty, I'll gie you an' your friends below a good fifty pounds o't. Get!"

WELL, sir," said McGovern hopefully, and admiringly, "since the *Kingston's* confiscated as a pirate ship an' sold to ye at auction for no more than ten per centum o' the reward paid for Abu Nakhl an' his fellow pirates, might I take up a matter I mentioned once before?"

Captain Grover glared at him. The *Kingston,* docked in Aden, was being painted resplendently under his eyes.

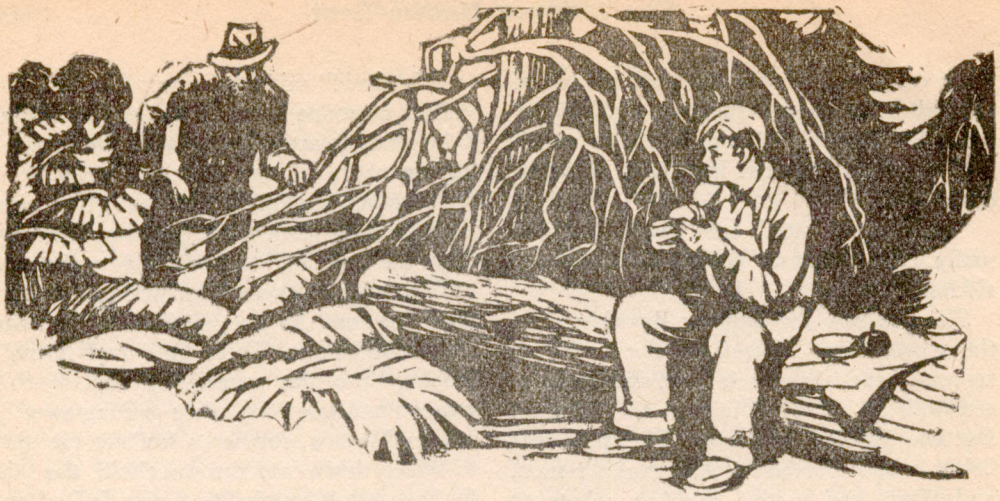
"I'm referrin', sir," said McGovern anxiously, "to Molly. She said, sir, that she'd marry me if ye had no objection to the match. An' I was junior engineer on the *Glenarvon Castle,* sir, which is not so bad for my age."

The Skipper rumbled in his chest. The rumbling grew louder.

"You're chief engineer of the *Kingston!*" he roared. "And after we give the old ship a lick of paint I'll be loading a cargo of rugs and olive-oil for Liverpool! When we get there we'll see what Molly says!"

McGovern sighed.

"She'll say, sir," he prophesied morosely, "'The Skipper knows best!'"



NOSEY'S CODE

By EDGAR VALENTINE SMITH

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A CROOK'S CODE, BUT IT WAS A STRICT ONE NEVERTHELESS. AND THERE WAS TO COME A TIME WHEN NOSEY'S CODE MEANT A GOOD DEAL TO A BOY OF THE SWAMP LUMBER COUNTRY—WHO ALSO HAD HIS STANDARDS

ONE should take into account, in judging Nosey, the school in which he had been drilled. It was a hard school. Not as to its curriculum, for this was simple—terribly simple!—since it consisted in the main of but two precepts: one must never bilk a pal, and one must always pay a debt—a real debt. But these had to be learned. They *had to be learned.*

Because he was letter perfect in his lessons, Nosey was now in full flight. He had deemed it wise—following the Pockmark incident that afternoon—to lie in hiding till nightfall before trying to leave town. Now, at the docks, he felt reasonably safe. Yet he scurried along, his slight figure hunched forward, coat collar turned up, cap pulled low, his eyes abnormally bright in his waxen face, scanning the smaller boats. Finally on the stern of one of these, scarcely legible in the dim light, he saw the name *Nellie O.*

He dropped cat-like to the deck. A yellow glow from a window marked the cabin. He crept forward and knocked on a door. An interval elapsed. Then, as the door was cracked open, a narrow shaft of light illumined one side of his face.

"Skipper"—his voice was a husky whisper—"it's me."

Skipper Jack Doane opened the door fleetingly and closed and bolted it the moment Nosey was inside. The skipper was a squat man with an expressionless face. His quick darting glance swept Nosey. He sensed the reason for his visit.

"Who was it this time?" he asked in a low voice.

"Pockmark Finella."

"Him that give you that left shoulder?"

Nosey winced. He was sensitive about that shoulder which sagged two inches lower than its mate. But Skipper Jack was a friend and he let the reference pass.

"Yeah—him. You remember he pinked me from behind. Bragged that next time we met he'd make the right one match the other. Well, we met. An' he didn't. That's all. Except—the bulls, for some reason, are actin' up. Gotta beat it till things blow over. When you leavin'?"

"Right away."

"Can I go along?"

"Sure! Ain't we always been pals?"

THE *Nellie*, once a submarine chaser, but now used for rum-running, was bound for The Bahamas. She carried a small crew: Skipper Jack, as owner and master, and two men, Bill and Joe, who alternated as helmsman and engineer. Nosey disliked these two intuitively. They were shifty-eyed and sullen. He catalogued them instantly as rats—just rats.

Nothing of moment happened on the southward voyage. Beating up the Florida west coast on the return one morning, they were within one day of the port where they were to unload cargo, when Nosey, lying late in his bunk, became aware that the boat had stopped. He half dressed and went on deck. No one was there. He missed, too, a shallow-draft skiff, powered with an outboard motor that had swung from the starboard davits. Then he saw the skiff a hundred yards distant, with Skipper Jack, Bill and Joe on board, standing toward a point of land that jutted at right angles to what had been the *Nellie's* course. The *Nellie* had eased aground in three feet of water. Two hundred yards away there gleamed a sandy beach. A glance to port showed a coast guard cutter, hove to. A launch from the cutter was heading landward trying to cut off the fleeing skiff.

Nosey rushed into the cabin and seized an oversize cap, a heavy trench coat, a box of cartridges, his automatic pistol and his shoes and scrambled back on deck. Rage at Skipper Jack—Skipper, who boasted so of friendship!—flamed within him, but this was no time to think of vengeance. He dropped overboard and made his way ashore.

Taking inventory, he found he had no socks. And his money, he remembered, was under his pillow. He put on the shoes. Ravenously hungry—for he had missed breakfast—he glanced up and down the beach—sand, gleaming, white sand. No chance of food there. Inland there lay a grove of scrub oaks. He started toward them.

After the oaks, as the terrain rose gradually, he came to a pine forest. The matting of dead pine needles made walking arduous. Presently he had to rest. He was thirsty, but there was no sign of water.

HE STARTED again. Two hours passed. Three. His thirst increased. And then the green, inviting coolness of a swamp—presaging water—beckoned to him. He plunged into it. But he found no water. Only sucking big holes of stiff mud. And undergrowth so dense as to make progress almost impossible. He became lost. A swinging vine caught on his shoulder. He threshed at it irritably. One of its thorns, imbedding itself in his cheek, marked a red line from ear to chin. A thin, treacherous coating of slime made footing uncertain. He fell once and struck his side against the sharply-round top of a cypress knee. The padding of the trench coat saved him from serious injury.

With all sense of direction lost, he fought his way through the tangle of small growth. He was hopelessly confused. Noonday found him near exhaustion.

After another hour he dragged himself from the swamp and sank down upon the first bit of dry ground. Later, by a supreme effort, he roused himself. He saw a deserted road which he followed hopefully. This merged into a sandbed, shoe-top deep. Presently all trace of the road disappeared.

Then, another forest and arduous walking. Mid-afternoon came—sundown—dusk. He raked together a bed of pine straw, dropped upon it and tried to cover himself with the trench coat.

WITH morning every muscle in his body ached. He was weak from hunger and his thirst hung on.

He forced himself to his feet. Staggering, pulling behind him the trench coat, he carried on. Hours dragged by, but he had lost track of time. Frequently he lay down. At last he heard a strange sound—a soft swishing, followed by something crashing against something else, and a dull *boo-oo-oom!* that shook the ground about him. He managed to get to his feet and dragged himself in the direction whence the sound had come. Trees lay on the ground with their tops cut off. Severed limbs were all about him. Then seated astride a fallen tree, he saw a boy. In front of the boy a tin pail sat, opened; beside it a bottle of colored liquid.

Nosey propped a hand against the trunk

and pulled himself forward. "For the love o' Pete, Pal," his voice was scarcely more than a whisper, "how about splittin' the eats with a guy?"

For a moment the boy gaped at this weird apparition with its bloody face and tattered clothing. Then, "Shore, Buddy!" He shoved pail and bottle forward. "He'p yorese'f!"

Nosey was eating before he slid to the ground with his back against the tree trunk. He was not conscious of what passed his lips. He bolted hunks of soggy corn pone; he gulped cold coffee, diluted with condensed milk; he bit greedily into slices of salt pork. Only when there was nothing left did he stop eating. Then he looked rather embarrassedly at his benefactor.

The boy had been eyeing him solemnly. "My name's Allen—Cleve Allen." He spoke with a pronounced drawl. "'What's your'n?"

"'Green.'" Nosey gave the first alias that came to mind. "Jimmy Green. An' thanks awf'ly, Pal, for the eats."

He was a sailor, he explained; his ship had been lost in the gulf. He interrupted his narrative to thank Cleve again for the food. "It was white of you, Pal——"

"You're plumb welcome." The boy was still regarding him gravely. "You look purty nigh tuckered out. Better come to my boardin' house an' rest a while."

"Say, Pal, that's swell of you——"

"I'm a-doin' my Christian duty. You know the parable o' the Good Samaritan learns us who our neighbors is."

IN HIS room at the logging camp boarding house the boy, Cleve, brought cold water in a tin basin for bathing. He washed the blood of the thorn wound from Nosey's face; applied salve, put some turpentine on his bruised feet. Then his eyes dwelt in slow appraisal on his guest's clothing. He excused himself and left the room. When he returned he brought a cheap pair of cotton socks, a cap and a suit of overalls.

"Got these from the comp'ny commissary," he explained. "Your'n ain't skeercely fitten to wear—even in a lawggin' camp."

Nosey protested faintly. "Pal, I can't never pay you back. I lost my kale when that ship foundered."

"All the more reason I orter he'p you," Cleve reminded him soberly. "Ever read the tenth chapter o' Luke's gawspel?"

"No-not lately," Nosey admitted.

"It learns us to be neighborly."

Nosey seized the opportunity as he rested luxuriously on the rude bed to size up his young host. He saw a gawky, plainly unsophisticated country boy—a day laborer. A stolid, unimaginative face topped a narrow pair of stooped shoulders. A face, Nosey's keen glance noted, that was preternaturally solemn—even somber—in expression. The boy's eyes, too, were shadowed just now, as though by a thought with which his mind wrestled. But they never faltered—Nosey's schooling had taught him to watch for just such hallmarks—in the directness of their gaze. They gave back look for look.

Plainly, though, the boy was slow-witted. His manner of speaking suggested this, for he drawled his words and paused between each of his sentences, as though even their simple construction called for mental effort. Yet, when he spoke, it was with an air of decided conviction. One would have said that, once his slowly-functioning mind arrived at a conclusion, there it would be anchored.

NOSEY was also able now, for the first time since leaving the *Nellie,* to array his thoughts in an orderly manner. Naturally, they harked back to Skipper Jack Doane. Skipper's perfidy, Nosey told himself, was unforgivable. For Skipper knew—and was supposed to live *and die* by—the code. Yet he had turned tail—a cold rage consumed Nosey as he recalled the incident—and left a friend marooned on a stranded boat to face the music alone. Well, the world wasn't really such a very big place. Maybe he'd meet the skipper again some day. He hoped so.

But—the boy here! Funny, the difference between people. This kid who had never seen him before, feeding him, giving him shelter, even clothing him. Willing to share

all he had with a stranger. And the skipper —with all his boasted friendship!—a rat, just a rat!

A quitter, yellow! But this kid—— Nosey glanced at the boy who sat, arms folded across his breast, head sunk on his chest, gazing moodily into the ashes of the fireplace. He was the kind that—— Well, you wouldn't mind answering when he called. And giving anything you could. Anything, everything. Musing drowsily, he dropped into slumber.

Cleve woke him for supper. After the meal, in the boy's room, Nosey talked, while Cleve listened with an occasional soberly-voiced, halting comment. At last he turned to Nosey and regarded him appraisingly for a long moment.

"I was just a-wonderin'," he drawled finally, "if you would keer to be my pardner?"

"Partner?" Nosey repeated. "Why, Kid, you've already treated me like I was a pal."

"I mean a lawg-sawin' partner. Mine quit on me yistiddy just before you come up. An' labor's skeerce."

"Then deal me a hand!" In the first flush of gratitude Nosey promised recklessly. "I'm game."

THEN, in his utter ingenuousness, the boy told his story. It had to do with himself, a girl, their romance—begun in childhood—and one Dink Radburn, camp bully.

Radburn, when he worked at all, so the boy recounted, ran rafts of logs down Shoalwater River for the timbering company. One day, as he waited about camp for one of these, he saw the girl. That he should at once lay claim to her, that he should spread forthwith his boast that he would possess her, had nothing of reason behind it other than the fact that he desired her—after his fashion.

"She's not fallin' for him?" Nosey interrupted. And at Cleve's look of mystification, "She ain't likin' him?"

"Like Radburn?" Cleve gave a shudder of disgust. "She'd rather eat p'isin oak than let him lay his little finger on 'er."

"Hmmm!" Nosey's eyes narrowed. "What's your idea, Pal?"

"I don't know, Buddy. I can't seem to see my way clear an' be a Christian." A frown furrowed the boy's forehead. "But I ain't aimin' to give 'er up—to Dink Radburn."

THE riverman, the boy said, had been a wanderer. Tales still drifted in from Texas and Louisiana and Mississippi of a trail he had left of women who had become wiser after he had gone. Nearer home folks knew, but could not prove, other things. A half-dozen deliberate killings—for Radburn fought only when the other man wasn't looking—had nearly been traced to him. There was a recent case. Radburn had quarreled with a fellow raftsman. Later, apparently sincere, he made friendly advances. The other man believed him. They started away together on a raft. Radburn arrived at their destination alone. His story was that the other man had fallen overboard and been drowned. But a fisherman said that he had rowed past the raft, tied up at the mouth of Watson's slough at dusk one evening. Radburn's companion was kneeling beside a fire on the raft frying bacon—the fisherman had smelled it—and Radburn was standing directly behind him, leaning on a peavey handle and looking down at him. But of course, what the fisherman had seen—and what everybody practically knew—couldn't convict a man in court. Besides, the body was never found. That sucking ooze at the bottom of Watson's slough covered by sixty feet of water, held fast whatever grim secrets were entrusted to it.

"An' Radburn's threatened me," Cleve said, concluding his story.

"So? He's a killer?" Nosey leaned toward the boy. "That ought to make it easy."

"Easy?" Cleve frowned in mystification. "How —easy?"

"Get the jane to toll this Radburn down to the river. We'll be there — me an' you. Before he can start anything, we take him for a ride —See? Then dump him in the water, an' nobody's the wiser."

"I couldn't do nothin' like that." The boy

shook his head stubbornly. "It'd be murder."

He told of the strict religious sect to which he belonged. Its members boasted that they believed the Bible word for word. Where it commanded them to wash one another's feet, they washed one another's feet. Since they were told to be baptized, they were baptized—or went to eternal damnation. "So, Buddy," the boy concluded, "I couldn't murder a man—not even one like Radburn."

"But," Nosey insisted, "when a bird's tryin' to cop your skirt——"

"It'd be killin', wouldn't it? An' the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' It'd be a sin, Buddy. A deadly sin." Cleve was silent for a moment, pondering. And then, "Besides—while I ain't aimin' to hurt yore feelin's, you ain't got no call to be mixin' in. It's me an' Radburn. So you'll hafta stay out."

He had spoken in his usual deliberate drawl. But there was something in his tone which was impressive. And somehow Nosey knew that he would respect the boy's wishes. He realized that he wanted to win—that, indeed, very earnestly he desired to win!—the favor of this preternaturally sober-faced, unsophisticated country youth. So, whatever fleeting idea he may have entertained for personally meting justice to Radburn—according to his school—must be definitely abandoned.

THE following morning when they went into the timber cutting, Nosey realized how rash he had been in agreeing to become the boy's sawing partner. He assumed the correct position at the base of a tree, legs spread wide apart as directed by Cleve, and was pulling away on his end of the saw, puffing with every breath, when Cleve cautioned, "Don't pull up on yore end of the saw, Buddy. It makes 'er cup an' bind. Stoop down lower." And when they were sawing the fallen tree into log lengths, Cleve warned again, "Don't ride the saw, Buddy."

"What you mean, ride?" Nosey panted.

"You bear down too heavy on my pull stroke. That's called ridin' it. Just let 'er come th'ough nachel."

Pure nerve, and a sort of pride, carried Nosey through that horrible day. When quitting time came it was all he could do to drag himself to the boarding house. He slept ten hours that night. At dawn, with lips grimly set, he followed Cleve again to the cutting. Sheer courage—and one of the lessons he had learned in school—held him to his task. His reasoning was simple: one couldn't bilk a pal. At noon it rained mercifully, and they returned to the boarding house, Nosey to drop, aching, upon the bed, and Cleve to sit in one of his spells of moodiness gazing into the ashes of the fireplace.

Had it not been for that hard school in which he had been drilled so thoroughly, Nosey surely must have failed to carry on. But, daily, with each untrained muscle in his body tormenting him, he hung doggedly to his self chosen task. Evenings found him with each separate ligament a source of torture. Yet something forced him to carry through.

AT THE end of a week the camp foreman announced that, owing to a sluggish log market, all crews would work only part time. Then followed days—whole days at a time!—when Nosey could rest.

One afternoon, at Cleve's suggestion that they go fishing, he accompanied the boy in a skiff down the river to what was known as the Mason Cut-off, a short-water route that lessened the distance to the gulf by several miles. Here, recently, numbers of motor boats manned by furtive-eyed men who asked few questions and answered none, had been coming to an unexplained rendezvous. They remained a few days and then left as unostentatiously as they came.

At the cut-off, Cleve asked to be put ashore; he would try fishing from the bank. Nosey then propelled the skiff to one of the craft, a seventy-foot motor sloop, anchored nearby, and tied up to the bowsprit. He cared nothing for fishing, and just now preferred to think. For recently something had come to him—something new and strange and inexplicable. It puzzled him. He had been only half-consciously aware of it, at first; now, with it more clearly defined in his mind, he sought to analyze it. Almost—he was beginning to like it down here. *Almost*. It was so calm and quiet and peaceful-like. And different. If it were not for the

work—the back-breaking, muscle-tearing labor that men here had to perform in order to live—it might not be such a bad place. It might not. It was so different. Peace. In all of his thirty years—as far as he could recall—he and peace had been strangers. Down here it was all so diff——

He glanced about sharply at the sound of a bass striking on the surface of the water. The quick turn of his head frightened a blue crane that had been standing, motionless on one leg, in the water's edge. With a *swi-i-ish* of its pinions, the bird took flight, sailing, with neck outstretched and long legs trailing straight behind, directly over Nosey's head. A kingfisher perched on a low-hanging limb flashed into the water and out again, bringing up a wriggling minnow.

But back to his musing: it *was* different here—with a difference he found himself coming to enjoy more and more. He had never known anything like it. No scurrying across alleys, eyes strained for a possible ambuscade. No snatching a bite to eat seated in one corner of a restaurant, back to the wall, appraising swiftly each newcomer as he entered the place. No skirting of a semi-darkened doorway, heart thumping, hand on automatic, till that possible man-trap was passed safely. No living—if one could call it living!—with nerves tense, strung almost to the snapping point, watching—waiting—watching. No. Here there was safety and calm and peace.

HE RAISED his head as he heard the *putt-putting* of a motor boat coming from the seaward end of the cut-off. A power-driven skiff hove into view. There was something familiar about the skiff—about the man, too, who was its sole occupant.

Suddenly Nosey was in school again. His eyes hardened; his right hand stole inside the bosom of his shirt.

The skiff, now with the power cut off, came closer, bumped into the stern of the sloop, eased off, and came to a stop amidships. The man, intent on making fast, had paid no attention to Nosey. He grasped a rope, started forward, and glanced up. The rope slid from his hand; he sank slowly upon the seat of the skiff.

Nosey was smiling thinly. "Well—Skipper?" His voice might have been a breath from the Polar Sea.

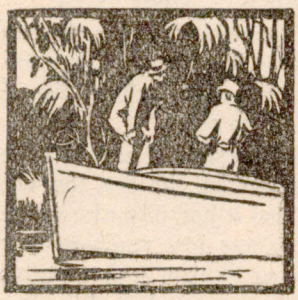
"Just a minute, Nosey." Skipper Jack Doane's voice was calm, his sphinx-like face emotionless. "I got somethin' to say."

"Say it, then, Skipper. But talk fast."

" 'Twasn't me left you stranded on the *Nellie*."

"No?" Nosey's smile grew thinner. "Who was it, then?"

"Them rats—Bill an' Joe. The skiff couldn't carry four and make headway. But I wasn't goin' to leave you. Told 'em I would stay. But they cover me with their gats an' make me go along. Say they're afraid I'd lug out a rifle I got hid aboard an' go to pepperin' 'em—for desertin' us—after they shove off." Skipper Jack had spoken plainly, convincingly. "An' that's the God's truth," he ended simply.



Somehow Nosey knew it was the truth. He smiled relievedly. "Didn't think you was that kind, Skipper." His hand slid from the bosom of his shirt. "But how'd you duck the cutter's launch?"

"Her motor goes on the blink an' we beat it around the point. Later I meet a guy that picks us up."

"What you doin' here?"

"This." Skipper Jack laid a hand on the sloop. "Bringin' in imported stuff an' takin' out moonshine. What's your graft?"

He was undemonstratively sympathetic at Nosey's recital of his experience; laughed soundlessly at the admission that he was working.

"About time you was beatin' it back for the big burg, ain't it?" he asked. "Guess the bulls've forgot the Pockmark business. I'm clearin' tomorrow at noon. Come along?"

"Skipper, I——" For a moment Nosey was tempted. He had thought, just a moment ago that he was forgetting. But the sight of Skipper Jack—— He choked back a memory. He shook his head. "Not this time,

Skipper." Swiftly he recounted the kindnesses of the boy, Cleve Allen. "An' he needs me for a log-sawin' partner, Skipper. You understand?"

"Sure! You can't turn a pal down."

The skipper had returned to the sloop for a supply of bottles. He loaded these in the skiff and shoved off. "Sorry you can't go," he called over his shoulder.

AFTER a while Cleve came back. His manner was more somber than usual. He suggested that they go back to camp, saying that the fish were not biting. As he headed the bow of the skiff into the river, he vouchsafed, "Radburn'll be in tomorrow."

"How do you know?" Nosey asked.

"The comp'ny's launch—it makes the trip ever' two weeks—is due then," Cleve explained. "It's the only way Radburn has o' gittin' back from down river."

Nosey withheld counsel; it would have been useless, he reasoned. Besides, thought of Radburn sounded a horribly discordant note just now. He was just realizing how glad he had been that Skipper Jack was able to show a clean slate; how glad—how tremendously glad!—he felt because he had not been forced to mete justice to the skipper according to their code. And now—— Radburn.

Nosey had observed that Cleve's fits of moodiness had been growing in frequency. The boy spoke now, more rarely than ever before, limiting himself on these occasions to the fewest possible words. Lately, as they worked in the timber, his preoccupation had been evident. Ordinarily an alert workman, he dragged himself listlessly about his task. Frequently he stopped what he was doing to rub a hand nervously across his forehead. More than once during the luncheon hour his dinner pail had gone almost untouched. His face wore a tense, strained look; shadows—evidences of sleepless nights—had formed under his eyes. It was plain to Nosey that the boy's slowly-functioning brain was wrestling laboriously—even painfully—with a problem of tremendous significance.

Nosey had waited patiently to learn what this was. Yet he was staggered when, as they sat in their room after supper that night, Cleve announced calmly:

"Buddy, I've thought it all out in my mind, an'—I'm a-goin' to kill me a man."

NOSEY could only gaze at him speechlessly.

"Yeah, Dink Radburn," Cleve continued. He spoke without the least show of emotion; indeed, it was the deadly level, monotonous note in his voice, rather than his words, that carried conviction. "I've made up my mind. An' I'm goin' to do it. Radburn's the bushwhackin' kind. Well, I'm a-goin' to meet 'im on his own ground. Excep'—I'm aimin' to beat him to it."

"An' you're dead right, with a skunk like that!" Nosey exclaimed.

"No; I'll be sinnin'. A deadly sin. An' I'll go to hell for it. But—somehow, I just can't he'p it. So, I ain't a-goin' to wait."

"You're right, for two reasons," Nosey insisted. "First, that bird tryin' to cop your jane——"

"That's what decided me," Cleve admitted. For the first time he showed emotion; thrice he swallowed hard before he could continue. "She—she's come to be deathly afeared o' him. Says it makes her afeared even to think 'bout 'im. Makes 'er tremble like she had a ague. Wakes up at night, screamin', with his ugly face a-ha'ntin' 'er. An' I can't abide that! I can't abide 'im makin' her afeared. So—— I'm a-goin' to kill 'im."

"An' the law won't touch you! Him threatenin' you——"

"Earthly courts don't worry me, Buddy. It's that Final Day, when I'll be called before the judgment bar o' God."

"Pal, you forget that, *please!*" Nosey begged. "When it's self-defense——"

"That don't make no diff'ence." The boy shook his head in stubborn negation. "The Bible don't mention self-defense. It just says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' An' it's God's word, give to us by him as 'a lamp unto our feet an' a light unto our pathway.' You ain't read it, Buddy, like I have. 'No murderer shall inherit the kingdom of heaven,' it says in one place. Then what shall he inherit? A lake o' fire an' brimstone prepared by the devil an' his angels. I know it's true, 'cause the Bible says so. An' I've wrastled

an' wrastled with this thing in prayer an' meditation. But it don't do no good. I reckon Satan's just tuck an' possessed me. You know he kin do that. Sometimes he's able, somehow, to overcome even the importunin' o' the Spirit. But I can't he'p it. I can't abide her bein' afeared o' Radburn. I can't abide it! An' I'm a-goin' to kill 'im."

NOSEY slept little that night; he heard a clock strike twelve before he dropped into troubled half-slumber. Something roused him; he raised his head. Cleve was not in bed. He glanced about the room. Silhouetted in a shaft of moonlight that streamed through the window he saw the boy. Cleve was kneeling beside a chair, hands clasped before him, face uplifted. His lips were moving inaudibly.

Nosey turned from the sight. He flushed hot, then broke into a cold perspiration. He closed his eyelids tight; he covered his head with his pillow, trying to shut out what he had seen. But he could not.

The boy there—praying. But for what? To be kept from doing the thing upon which he had determined? No; *never* that! For his thought was anchored. He would kill Radburn. What then was he praying for when—it might even be tomorrow!—he was going to take a man's life? What could he pray for? For, after he had committed

the act — even though it assured his physical safety for ever after—what then? What afterward? Any peace for him? With his mind keeping straight to the single track laid for him by his fanatical adherence to his faith, what could he hope for?

Nosey raised his head again. He tried to make out the figure outlined in the moonlight. But it seemed to him that he saw—as through a haze—only the boy's lips, moving silently.

At the breakfast table Nosey scarcely took his eyes from Cleve. The boy ate in stony, gray silence. When the meal was finished Nosey returned with him to their room.

"Do we work today, Pal?" he asked.

"Not us," Cleve answered. "Only the swampers."

Nosey picked up his cap. "See you later, then," he said and started toward the commissary.

THE men who make up the crew of a logging camp are a more or less phlegmatic lot, accepting stoically most of the things that come to them. A rolling log breaks the leg of a loader; it is only an incident. Sometimes a falling tree kills a log-sawyer. This is an occasion.

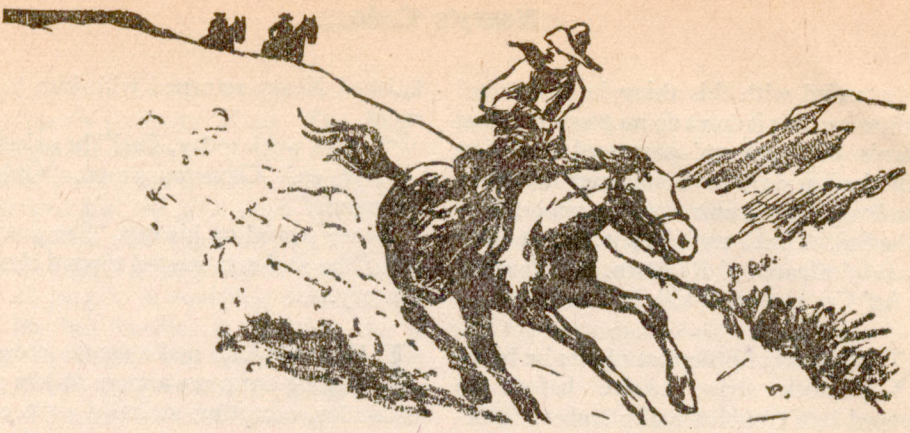
But when shortly after noon that day an ox-driver came into camp at a dogtrot, he brought a tale that caused the loungers in the commissary to crowd breathlessly about him. Dink Radburn was a-layin'—with that big gun o' his'n in his right hand—he'd got a good break, anyway—'longside the road a half mile this side o' the river! Was he dead? A half score of voices shot the question eagerly. Was he dead? The ox-driver laughed shortly. *Dead?* An' him stretched out flat on his back with five clean bullet holes right slap through his chest? Was he dead!

Then they did talk, all of them at once. But even as they surmised—futilely—a man sat on the rail of a motor sloop that was just breasting the Gulf of Mexico. Perhaps the incident in camp would not have interested him in the least, for his thoughts, plainly, dwelt only on peaceful pursuits as he conversed with a friend.

"Hard work? You ask me, Skipper; was it hard? An' me stoopin' over till my hands almost dragged the ground, pullin' a crosscut saw all day long? I didn't know there was so many trees in the world! But the kid; Skipper, he was a *prince,* if he was only a rube! The kid needed a partner—see?—an' I couldn't turn him down."

Then inexplicably the current of his thoughts seemed to shift. To one who had been listening—and not understanding fully—his next remark might even have seemed absurdly irrelevant:

"Say, Skipper, did you—did you ever watch a guy—*prayin'?*"



MEN OF RAWHIDE

By JAMES BUELL HARTLEY

TWO MEN MAY SHARE AN ADVENTUROUS—AND EVEN A SHADY PAST—YET WHEN THEY MEET AGAIN CIRCUMSTANCES MAY BE DIFFERENT. SO IT WAS WHEN THE BOSS OF THE X BAR L ENCOUNTERED SLIM BILLINGS A LONG TIME AFTER THEY'D HAD A BITTER FIGHT SOUTH OF THE EQUATOR

IT BEGAN in the Argentine, this feud between Buck Logan and Slim Billings. The provocative black eyes of a cantina girl had caused the fugitive cattle thieves from Arizona, U. S. A., to lock horns; Buck had her, Slim took her away from him. The *gauchos* still talk of the battle royal that wrecked the cantina when these two cowboys had gone wrong, who for months had been riding the pampas with their Latin-American brothers in the cattle game, essayed to settle the question of ownership by brute force instead of bullets. Result: Slim, slighter of the two, was all but killed by his heavier but cat-footed opponent; and the girl, with interesting perverseness, clicked her teeth at the victor and wept over the defeated.

Something besides enmity was born of this bone-breaking clash. Undying admiration in each for the rawhide qualities of the other. Said Buck Logan to his *gaucho compañeros* afterward, "I whupped him, but, by dog, it took everything I had to put him out. He can *fight,* sabe?" In similar vein did Slim Billings express himself to the girl he had temporarily annexed by taking punishment which would have crippled a bull, "That hombre, *querida mia,* is what I'd call a whale, though I'm hatin' his guts. If he could lick me, he's good—get that, *good!*"

They didn't meet again for two years, time enough for passion to have cooled in men whose blood runs thin. But Logan and Billings were full-blooded throwbacks to that dim period when man was a hairy savage. And the next time they stood face to face, with the old hatred flaming up as if the give-and-take that began it had happened but yesterday, they were back on U. S. soil and guns, not fists, the medium of exchanging compliments. Logan's voluntary exile in the Argentina had ceased the year before. He thought he might safely ride an Arizona range again—not the same from which he had fled—considering the lapse of time and the fact that he now wore a beard. He was back at his old tricks of despoiling other men's herds when Slim Billings, off the pampas but three months to a day and riding with a wary eye for star-packers, ran across him in the little desert-edge town of Sandburr. Two days and five stations back-along, Logan had got by the brand inspector with five hundred head of cows acquired through meticulous night-time leather whacking and brand-working that was pure artistry; these cattle he was taking via rail instead of the trail to a far distant range, where he hoped to sidetrack snooping by the law. The train had halted to take on water at the tank and Logan

slipped out of the caboose with the hard-faced, hard-riding fellows who shared his perils and his profits to wet their speaking-tubes at the beckoning adobe saloon across the gleaming double tracks.

THEY had stirred the hateful dust with their high-heeled boots to within ten paces of the doorway, when Slim Billings lounged out into the sunlight, mixed the name of Logan with a greeting and a curse and streaked his hand for iron. Buck Logan, foremost in the stiffly stalking ranks, wasn't so surprised at beholding this enemy out of the past that his gun hand was paralyzed as a consequence. He drew like lightning and dusted Billings both sides, saw him buckle at the knees and slip down, even as hot lead was shattering his own right arm.

"Hell, 'tain't nothin' much," Buck snarled at his crowding rustler crew, yet the rugged, sweaty face was twisted with the pain he could not disguise, however much he might deny it. "C'mon or that whistle'll be tootin' before we've had them drinks." And he went forward at a lurching step, awkwardly stabbing his gun in the holster with his left hand.

The warning whistle shrilled before a drink apiece had irrigated bone-dry throats. They piled out of the saloon trainward, several clutching quarts of Old Crow, Buck Logan tracking last, dizzy, sick and pain-racked. Beside the still body of Slim Billings he paused an instant, and stooping turned the hawk-like face to the flaming skies. Drops of Buck's sweat fell upon it. "I hope your soul's rangin' the wasteland of hell," he muttered. "Yet and all, you were a game guy. I'm comin'," he straightened at the insistent yelping of his crew, for the train was already moving. Stepping carefully over the body of his late enemy he surged at a spraddle-legged run for the caboose and was hauled aboard.

BUT Slim Billings didn't cross the Big Divide. He journeyed to the town nearest Sandburr in the *carreta* of a compassionate Mexican and lay six months in the apology for a hospital there, hovering between life and death. Buck Logan's arm warped in healing and would be forever a reminder of the Sandburr gunplay. Not that he often thought of it. There were more important things to occupy him. With the five hundred head of rustled cattle as a beginning, he was prospering on that new range in southern Nevada. Already picturing himself as a cattle king at some future day and —believe it if possible—testing the truth of the old saw that honesty is the best policy.

Widowed Mary Jane Kling was in part responsible for the change in the Logan code. Neighbor of Logan's and running the Lazy K iron of some several thousand head of graded stock, Mary Jane looked with extreme favor upon the attentions of burly, roughly good-looking Buck. Besides cattle, she owned some horses of Morgan strain. The late Bob Kling had planned to go in for horse-raising. In justice to Buck it may be said that covetousness had nothing to do with the ex-rustler's siege of the Lazy K's handsome mistress, though the two ranches combined would dominate that particular range. The widow's son, Billy Kling, aged fourteen and with aspirations to be a top-hand, already called Logan "Uncle Buckie."

WITH his "X bar L" brand duly registered in the brand book of Nevada, Buck and the same crew of men who had helped him bring the first five hundred head to the new country, engaged next spring in the annual calf-gather, tallying a nice increase by the end of the first day of the roundup. Like their boss, the men had put crooked ways behind them—Buck had promised to fire anyone who now transgressed the law of the range. Yes, he had gone the whole hog in reformation. When he gave the matter of his own past serious thought, there were a dozen cattle kings he could name whose start in life had been quite as shady as his own—a hungry rope and a straight-iron in the bootleg undoubtedly helped them to their present state of affluence. Outfitted with a new conscience, Buck sometimes worried that he couldn't make restitution to those from whom he had stolen the nucleus of his X Bar L herd today; but that was impossible without tipping his hand.

THE second day out on circle with two of his men, Buck came upon a dry-gulched cow bearing his brand on the left

hip. A forty-five bullet had done for her, but the calf for which the mammy had given her life was nowhere to be found. This was the first inkling Buck had that a rustler was busy on the Black River range; he didn't suspect any of his own men, rustlers though they had once been like himself. It must be a newcomer, maybe more than one man. Back in the timbered foothills were many ideal hide-outs for cattle thieves. To comb those hills thoroughly would take more time than Buck could spare from the roundup and there was no trail to follow—the enterprising thief had selected rough country in which to steal the calf from its mother's side. Buck's sense of humor was enough developed for him to smile grimly over this, a thief robbing a thief — pardon, an ex-thief.

He told the other owners about it when the different outfits gathered at the branding-corral later that day. Ways and means of nabbing the calf-stealer or stealers from the hills were discussed, but nothing done. No scheme worth trying had been hatched. "Where there's smoke, you'll find your rustler," remarked Buck Logan at the end of the war council outside the big corral, speaking out of a long experience at the same game, though mighty few of his hearers realized that. Orders were for all men on circle to "watch sharp and ride a-shootin'." The law required that all honest branding be done within corrals at Black River; therefore, smokes in the open range were signal fires of the lawless.

IT WASN'T his smoke that betrayed the rustler, however; he hadn't got as far as fire building, though the brush material for it was lying beside him in the dry wash, when he was startled by the clip-clop of horses' hoofs on the rocky benchland above his position. This happened in the forenoon of the following day. Buck Logan and Jack Hurley—who was range-boss timber if Buck knew hands—were leather whacking the far draws and washes of the range to poke out brush-hidden cows and offspring. They had no idea of the nearness of the thief who had been the subject of so much conversation in the last fifteen hours until a muffled bleat attracted their notice. His orphaned victim being already hog-tied when the warning click of hoofs drifted to his abnormally keen ears, the rustler essayed to straddle the calf and throttle any sound that would draw unwelcome attentions. But in his haste his sweaty hands slipped; a bleat escaped and the cattle-waddy knew that it had been heard when men's voices rose overhead in excited questioning. Creak of saddle-leather and spur music, with the crackle of brush and stone-spurning hoofs drowning out these sounds as the two riders pointed for the deep dry wash.

CURSING furiously, the rustler dragged his gun from the worn, scarred scabbard and made a lunge for the cover of two boulders across the gully; he was down behind them, his hat off, as Logan and Hurley risked their necks in a precipitate slide to the bottom of the wash. Everywhere was the evidence of incipient "mavericking," from the dead cow up-gully to the line-dragging horse a few paces behind the miserable, bleating little calf. The whereabouts of the rustler himself was established as the pair came charging hell-bent. Fire spurted over a boulder-top; Jack Hurley clutched his breast, coughed a crimson spray and slewed over the side of his pounding pony. Buck's gun hand moved with a dragging motion; the Colt tipped up for a throw-down as he reined hard and swung a leg to come to the ground on his mount's offside, when the all but invisible marksman in the rocks bounced upright. He skirted the boulders swiftly, holding such a dead bead that Buck kept his gun hand up, as ordered. He couldn't believe his eyes were beholding Slim Billings in the flesh, either, until the advancing rustler spoke.

"Yep, it's me, you six-toed polecat; quit starin' wall-eyed. That draw of yours has slowed up considerable—what done it?"

"The slug you drilled through my arm—recollect? Never been the same, damn you, and I'm awkward as hell with my left."

Buck swallowed hard. "The sun must've been in my eyes, that time in Sandburr," he exclaimed, on a note of deepest regret. "So it's you, you ring-boned mavericker, that's been dry-gulchin' my cows!" Thus, with the blued barrel of Slim's gun but inches from his midriff.

"*Your* cows!" bellowed Slim. "The X Bar L *your* brand? Hell!"

"Just so; stop that hyena laughin', it's enough to wake Hurley," snarled Buck, crazy to tie into Billings but self-controlled because of the menacing Colt.

SLIM sobered, hardly because of Buck's fierce injunction, and studied him a long moment in silence. Buck was smooth-shaven once more, the sign of prosperity was upon him and Slim's cupidity was agog. "Posin' as a honest cowman—if that don't beat hell!" said Billings at last. "I've only been up in this country for a week or so and the X Bar L calves was so numerous it looked like good territory to throw down in. Hadn't no idear you was here or that X Bar L was your iron, Buck, or I'd been over to headquarters pronto to make you a proposition—one you can't turn down." The eyes in his long, whiskered face narrowed, grew cunning.

"When I deal with you it'll be in hell!" ripped out Buck, the muscles in his neck cording.

"The proposition," went on Slim slowly, "is that you take me in as a pardner, with a good share in the cash profits, or—listen, damn your hide!" his voice lifted as Logan strove to interject his refusal in violent terms. "If you don't, so help me God, inside twenty-four hours the sheriff of this county and every rancher on Black River will know who Buck Logan really is. Where'll you and the X Bar L be then?"

"How about yourself, you lean-bellied wolf?" shouted Logan. "Do you think you'd escape from lookin' up a cottonwood?"

"Have to catch me first; besides, I got nothin' to lose. You have." Slim stated it almost gently, knowing that he stood on firm ground.

BUCK was stabbed in a vulnerable spot, how vital he wouldn't have dared reveal to his enemy. There were not only his cows to be considered, but the Widow Kling. All this reform business, too—was it to go for naught? It was the most torturing moment of indecision he had ever known. "How do you know I won't drill you from behind the first chance I get, should I let you come in?" he fired at Slim Billings suddenly.

"You ain't no shooter-in-the-back, I know that," replied the other with a lazy smile, his gun-hand still rigid. "I hate you like a greaser hates a blizzard, for a good many reasons, Logan, but I know you're game and I'd trust your word if you give it."

"The hell you would!" Buck squinted at Billings; he stormed a while longer, gave in. "Listen, you hell-spewed, hungry buzzard, show me where you've hid them X Bar L calves you been stealin', then go back to headquarters. I got to explain Hurley's death to my neighbors by lyin' and I sure hate to lie about the dead. I couldn't take you along to the brandin' corral, that's certain, you bein' a stranger to all except my own boys, who'll recognize you, I reckon, as the hombre I thought I killed in Sandburr."

"Tell 'em we kissed and made up," smirked Billings. He watched Buck's gun hand come down, down, until, with a sharp thrust, the six-shooter sucked leather; then he returned his own gun to the holster and backed slowly toward his restless horse and the hog-tied calf. "I won't need to be watchin' the back-trail, Buck, but the trail ahead—that's different. I sabe you'd rather have me out of the way than get a good calf crop."

"You said it—keep your eyes peeled, feller!" rapped the owner of the X Bar L. "Throw the piggin'-string off that calf—well, I'll do it myself, then!"

Late that afternoon he turned up at the branding-corral with a gather of twenty calves, ears window-sashed and a brand strange to Black River on their thin flanks. He did not lie outright about the dead man he towed behind him, lashed to a horse hair-branded X Bar L. He merely said, "Gents, I caught the thief; he won't be stealin' out of my iron no more!"

THE men of Buck's outfit present did not join in the general condemnation of Jack Hurley; neither did they disbelieve

his guilt. Perhaps the saying that "once a crook, always a crook" applied here and Jack had backslid. But Buck Logan left them in no doubt on this score as soon as he had them alone, where neighbors could not listen in. Of course they remembered the man who opposed their boss in that Sandburr gunfight; when they were acquainted with all the facts of the recent meeting, there was immediate talk of killing, not so much from a desire to avenge the dead Jack Hurley as to shut a mouth dangerous to the living. Weren't they all ex-rustlers, one with Buck Logan in being threatened by the presence of this latest arrival from Arizona?

"Listen," said Buck and his tone and look commanded silence, "he's too slick on the draw for any of you hombres, sabe? I know, and that ain't boastin'! Also shootin' in the back is out. Besides, if anybody's gonna get him it's my right and I won't stand for bein' cold-decked, see? Like I told you fellers once, this good hatin' between us started down in Argentina. There was a little Spanish trick that was crazy over me——"

"Say, Buck," one of the listeners interrupted with a sly grin, "you'd better not let the widow know about that Spanish gal."

Buck stared blankly at the speaker. "Well, hell, I don't aim to let her know," he said.

His audience yip, yipped and shouted until his face got redder than the sun had made it and he turned away with a curse, feeling foolish.

IN TWO days more Logan's outfit parted from the other spreads and returned to the home ranch, a satisfactory tally of calves marked up to the credit of the X Bar L. En route, Buck's thoughts were divided between the fine calf crop and that hungry buzzard who laid claim to partnership.

The X Bar L boss was treated to an unpleasant surprise the moment he crossed the threshold of his living-room. Slim was sitting on the edge of the center-table, a cigarette dead in his fingers, while he held the rapt attention of the charming Widow Kling and her son, Billy, with some wild tale that was probably fifty-fifty as to truth. Buck's heavy brows drew down in a black scowl, he clenched his big hands behind the wings of his chaps—but forced a smile, fearing Slim's tongue, when Mary Jane turned and saw him in the doorway.

"Oh, Buck, you never told me you had a friend from Arizona visiting you—he was spinning us the most thrilling yarn!" Mary Jane arose from Buck's favorite chair and came halfway to meet the big fellow, both hands outstretched.

"Yeh, Slim does run off at the head considerable," replied Logan sarcastically and glancing his hatred over her shoulder at the coolly grinning Billings. "You see, honey, he ain't been here long and me bein' away on roundup, I couldn't very well tell you about him——"

"But I'll be around from now on, ma'am," tucked in Slim, catching up one knee in his clasped hands and rocking in silent ecstasy at Logan's extreme discomfort. "Fact is, Buck wants me to throw in with him as business pardner—ain't it so, Buckie?"

WHAT could Logan do but answer affirmatively, looking murder at the devilishly self-possessed Slim. Young Billy Kling, a cowboy in miniature, capped the climax by asserting his liking for the style of "Uncle Buck's pardner."

"You'll tell me more about the sheriff and them rustlers some time, won't you, Slim?" said freckled Billy, pressing the chap-clad leg of Mr. Billings, whose mind was on a vastly different subject. "You know, I can't decide if I'd like to be a sheriff or a rustler, both is so excitin'."

"Better stay on the side of the law, kid," advised Slim, coming to earth and giving the boy a straight glance. "It don't pay to be a thief and it's hard on the nerves, always dodgin'."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Billy, not quite convinced.

Slim caught Buck looking at him with a queer twist to his lips and behind the widow's back thumbed his nose at Logan. Mary Jane almost caught him as she turned from

the arms of the X Bar L owner.

"I came over to get a *good* supper for you, Buck," she said, "figuring you'd be back from roundup today and knowing the kind of chuck that's served up on trail. Bob Kling always was mighty glad to get back home and sit in at a real meal. I suppose your appetite's doing duty, Mr. Billings?" she smiled at Slim, en route to the kitchen.

"It sure is, ma'am!" Billings assured her gustily, adding that he would appreciate her addressing him by his nickname, Buck's frowning glance upon him the while.

LOGAN, still eying his grinning enemy, who was applying a match to cigarette-end, got rid of Billy Kling temporarily by sending him on an errand to the bunkhouse. As the boy disappeared and the pans rattled reassuringly in the kitchen, Buck sidled toward Slim.

"Damn you for a limpin', tuck-tail wolf's whelp, Billings!" he snarled in low-pitched voice. "I've registered my brand where Widow Kling's concerned, sabe? You go dabbin' your loopin' around her and I'll——"

"It's the best man who wins in every game of life, you slobberin' big grizzly," put in Solomon nonchalantly.

"You gonna step shy of the widow like I'm tellin' you?" growled Buck.

"Hell, I'm makin' no promises, feller," Slim's manner was a rasp to raw-feelings. "You wouldn't do nothin' if I do decide to take up with her."

"Nothin' but kill you!" rapped Buck ferociously and his hand closed over the grip of his six-gun.

A sharp prod in the belly caused him to drop his rage-inflamed eyes—there was Slim's gun poking him and his own six-shooter not yet clear of the holster. He unhooked fingers from his Colt stock, lifting that hand doubled into a hamsized fist.

"You got the edge when it comes to gun-play since cripplin' my arm, but I can still smash you with this and I'll do a better job than that first time!" His powerful arm was straightening so that the fist was but a couple of inches from Slim's chin when that worthy thrust hard on the belly-pouched gun, causing Logan to grunt and step back.

"Don't make me push lead, old buffalo!" appealed Slim, his eyes cold as the light reflected from ice. "I want to stick around this range and share in some of the easy coin you're grabbin'! Six months in the hospital down Arizona way didn't improve my general health none and you could smash me easier than you done it in Argentina—only I don't aim to let you get hold of me thataway. I owe you plenty for that six months on my back, damn your soul! Funny how fate sometimes evens things up; I ain't husky like I was once, but that don't make me drag on the draw none, while you, the same old bone-breakin' he-grizzly as to strength, ain't as fast by half with the shootin'-iron."

QUICK steps trending toward the living-room from the kitchen caught his ear; his gun was re-slung in the holster as Mary Jane Kling, aproned, with bare forearms flour-whitened, appeared in the connecting doorway.

"Are you boys *fighting?*" she exclaimed.

"No, ma'am," Slim reassured her with marvelously simulated heartiness, though Buck could not trust himself to face her just then. "Talkin' over old times."

The widow was doubly escorted home to the Lazy K that night, Slim and Billy occupying the rear seats of the buckboard. At parting, Mrs. Kling said she hoped that Slim would come over often with Buck, and all the way back to the X Bar L, from his advantageous rear-seat, Billings rode the bear-sore Logan mercilessly.

"If you was the shoot-'em-in-the-back breed, Logan, damned if I'd go to sleep tonight," chuckled Slim, as the unharnessed team was being spanked into the X Bar L corral.

"Don't trust me too far!" roared Buck, flailing a fist impotently. "You've riled me about ragged today—and a man can change, you snake-low bum!"

"Ain't worryin' you will, not thataway," snickered Billings, but added. "In case you feel like visitin' me in the night to do a bare-handed job, it's only fair to tell you I'm snoozin' on my gun and that I sleep light. Now, don't laugh—what room am I gonna camp in?"

THE next night Billings vanished without mentioning his destination, and with him Buck's newest stock saddle, a sixty-pound Cheyenne. The brooding Logan didn't discover the fact of the surreptitious borrowing until an hour after he missed Slim; then he kicked the old riding-gear Slim had left behind half across the yard, bellowing to high heaven.

"God A'mighty, if he ain't snuck off to see Mary Jane, a-forkin' of my best kack!"

At first he was mad-minded to leather rig a pony and follow; sober second thought counseled him to await Billings's return here. Buck was fearful of that tongue of Slim's, especially in the widow's presence; it was as much of a menace as Slim's six-shooter, yes, more of one. If ever he got Slim in the clutch of those mighty arms of his he'd crack every rib, smash every bone in his body, reduce it to bloody pulp. Long into the night Buck sat at his living-room table, nursing his fury.

Keyed up to shoot it out with Billings, despite the other's superior speed, to win or die in the tick of a watch, Logan was startled by the familiar hated voice behind him at a few minutes past one o'clock.

"Lookin' for me to come through that door and meanin' to let drive pronto, eh, polecat?"

Logan sprang to his feet, whirling on the speaker, trying to get his gun out with some degree of the old nimbleness. And for a man whose shattered arm had knit poorly he did well—but the Colt barrel hung an inch within the holster top as he caught sight of the other's face—the condition of it. Slim's right eye was blackened and the cheek below it bruised. He wore a sheepish expression, like a kid caught jam-stealing.

SUDDENLY Buck tipped back his head and roared. "Haw! haw! haw!" He shook all over and rocked back and forth on his high boot heels, bellowing his mighty laugh. His hand had fallen away from his gun; he leaned upon the table, leonine head thrust forward and bobbing, and shouted again. "Haw! haw! haw!"

Slim nodded his head slowly. "Yeh, that laugh is comin' to you, Logan, it sure is—I stubbed my toe *plenty*. Your Mary Jane piles a wicked fist for a pretty little trick like her. 'Don't be stingy,' I says, 'just one harmless kiss, ma'am'."

"Ain't like that Spanish hussy much, is she, Slim? Haw! haw! haw!" Buck shouted.

"I said *your* Mary Jane, didn't I?" retorted Billings. "Well, I meant that. Far as she's concerned, there ain't no man on the Black River range grades up with Buck Logan."

He pivoted on his heel abruptly, presenting his back as a wide, inviting target and trundled his spurs toward the room he had occupied the previous night. Buck checked his laughter, his right hand slid to the gun low-slung on his leg, fingers clutching, spreading on the walnut stock a long moment; then he sat down and poured a stiff snort and, until dawn, sat thinking.

RUSTLING gets into the blood of some men; they wouldn't quit it if they had an offer of making a good stake at something less hazardous. Uncertainty appeals to breed of the untamed. Buck Logan's first thought was of Slim Billings when Mary Jane excitedly informed him over the telephone, three days later, that her twenty Morgan horses had disappeared over night from the fenced south pasture.

"I'll saddle up and be right over," Buck told her as he hung up the receiver. He would have liked to add, "Don't send for the sheriff till I've had a try at trailing," but was afraid it might sound suspicious.

All the way to the Lazy K he was planning how he'd take the trail of that horse thief alone, crowding it relentlessly until, run down, Billings and he would be face to face again behind gunsights, the last time for one or the other. Man of rawhide though he was, Buck couldn't stand the suspense of having Billings around—his nerve would crack under the strain. There was little doubt in his mind that Billings, cattle rustler, had turned his hand to horse-stealing—meaning to make a quick drive and sell them across the border where the brand wasn't known—for Slim had been absent from the

X Bar L all the night past. Buck desired, above all things, to catch Slim in the outlands, before he could return to the Black River range—unless this step was his farewell gesture; and naturally Buck didn't want the sheriff riding with him.

Yet the chief executive of law and order from the nearby county-seat was the first person Logan beheld on arriving at the Lazy K. Jim Dodge was tying up at the hitching-bar, answering the phoned summons of Mary Jane Kling in person, and he hailed Logan just as the mistress of the Lazy K swept out upon the porch to greet both and pour what details she knew into their eager ears. She was still talking, the men leaning against porch posts and idly smoking as they listened, when a procession of two ahorse impinged upon their vision. Billy Kling levelling a thirty-thirty carbine at the back of a man on a Morgan thoroughbred—Slim Billings!

THE sheriff flipped gun from holster and went down the steps at a double-quick, relieving the proud Billy of his charge. "You might tell us how you nailed him, kid," urged the sheriff, grimly smiling, while Buck Logan gazed with inward trembling into the eyes of stony-faced Slim, which told him nothing.

Avid was Billy to relate his experience. The boy had taken his carbine and gone range-sleuthing as soon as the horse-lifting was discovered in the early afternoon. The tracks of the stampeded band——

"Let me tell it, kid," interrupted Billings, removing his eyes from Buck. "You're too long-winded and your tongue's trippin'. I'd never been caught if my ridin' hoss hadn't stepped in a dog-hole and broke my leg as well's his own when he fell on me. And if them Morgan animiles hadn't stuck to grazin' right around where I dragged myself into the chaparral, nobody'd found me yet. Lucky I seen who you was as you Injuned up on me, kid—well, that's all." He studiously avoided the agony-drawn features of Billy's mother; therefore failed to note the swift change in her expression when she understood.

Billy, a lithe, eager, boyish figure, stepped up beside the statuesque Buck, who had moved hardly a finger since the boy rode in with Billings. "I'm sorry, Uncle Buck," he said, tipping up his flushed face, "that it had to be your pardner. I've learned somethin'—I'd rather be a sheriff."

In silence Buck dropped a hand lightly on the boy's hatless head and tried to meet levelly the stare of Sheriff Dodge, who had spun around to ask in surprise, "Did he say your *pardner*, Logan? You know this hoss thief, then?"

Buck nodded, but said no word, and this speechlessness Mary Jane interpreted in her own way, her dark eyes softening with pity—Buck loved his friend who had been caught red-handed.

"Well, I must say," the sheriff responded to the affirmative nod and there was a note of suspicion as well as sarcasm in his tone, "that you pick damn funny company, Logan, for an honest man."

SLIM BILLINGS broke in and at the sound of his voice Buck's taut nerves jumped, his eyes narrowed. What was this Slim was saying? "That pardnership talk don't amount to nothin', Sheriff. I was flat-busted on comin' here, hadn't a dollar to put into no cattle. Buck he was just bein' kind-hearted for old times' sake, aimin' to put me on my feet again. Don't blame him for nothin' I've done; old Buck didn't know I'd got a wrong start and kept goin' since we last rode the range together. Rustlin's in my blood, I reckon. Sabe? He never knowed till now that I'd backslid and turned thief—and that's that!"

Slim was looking at Buck, rather than the sheriff, as he talked, and saw the big fellow jerk as if a bullet had smacked him.

"Oh, Sheriff, can't you let him go?" Mrs. Kling broke into speech imploringly.

"Sorry, ma'am," soberly said Sheriff Dodge, who thought more of his oath and badge than of a human life. "Sorry, but it'd encourage horse stealin' in the county to let this man go. The law's got to be upheld, ma'am. Logan's pardner will get a fair trial, but

there ain't no doubt about him swingin'. I'll let you know when Billy's to come to the courthouse—clever kid you got, ma'am. And lucky!" he added, with a glance at Slim.

WHEN Dodge had departed with his prisoner, whose broken leg was bandaged in splints as well as an amateur surgeon could do it, Buck sat down heavily on the top porch step, his rugged face beaded with sweat. Billy was not on the scene. Besides Buck only Mary Jane, who sank at his side and caught one of his powerful hands in her slim ones. "Isn't there something we can do for him?" she cried softly. "He wouldn't raise his gun at Billy—and you must have loved him so, Buck. I know the affection that grows between men sharing saddle-blankets and campfires."

The big fellow looked at the westering sun, abruptly faced Mary Jane and gripped her shoulders, a new light in his eyes. "I just thought; it'll be dark long before the sheriff can reach the county-seat and I know the road he'd take. Would you be willin' to swear, Mary Jane, if anybody should ask you later, that I never got out of sight of this house all afternoon and evenin'?"

"My hand on it," said she.

He was in the saddle and pounding the most direct trail to the county-seat a moment after. He short-cut on the sheriff through a canyon that was hard traveling in daylight, doubly difficult at night, and star-pricked darkness had descended by the time he hit the narrow, twisted trail above roaring water and a drop of sixty feet. But he made it to the head of the canyon and out, striking the main-traveled road again at a point where trees and brush grew densely, from trailside clear to ridge-crest.

BUCK untied his rope as he swung groundward in the brush, spanned the trail with the hemp-line from tree to tree at a height calculated to throw a horse running against it suddenly, and tracked back to cover. A wait of fifteen or twenty minutes, then the hoofbeats of two horses coming at a swift lope from the south smote his ears. The big man grew tense; he had tied his bandanna across the lower half of his features and was squeezing the muzzle of his mount to prevent whinnying. The trail-hitters were opposite his place of concealment—the tight rope held as both horses struck it simultaneously, crashing down and piling their riders far ahead. Stooping as he ran from the brush, so that his unusual height would not be remarked, Buck hauled his gun forth and slashed with the barrel at the head of the dazed sheriff, who had lifted to his hands. Dodge sank with a grunt earthward again and Buck lunged to the side of the sprawled Billings, following an instant's fumbling through the sheriff's pockets.

"It's Logan, Slim!" he called, dropping on one knee to lift the handcuffed, groaning man. Slim had suffered far more in falling than the sheriff, because of those come-alongs and his broken leg. By the time he understood who was beside him, the bracelets were unlocked and lying in the road.

"Buck, huh!" Ghastly effort at a chuckle by Slim through gritted teeth.

"Here's my gun," said Logan, pressing it upon him. "You're still wearin' your belt of forty-fives. If your hoss was hurt headin' over that rope I'll trade you mine." He sprang up and ran with cat-like grace—and he was a big man!—back to where the borrowed Lazy K mount stood trembling; and expertly passed his hands over its legs. Sound enough! A moment more and he was supporting Slim's one-legged hop toward the rein-dragging mount. Pain-stung, Billings yet realized the need for haste.

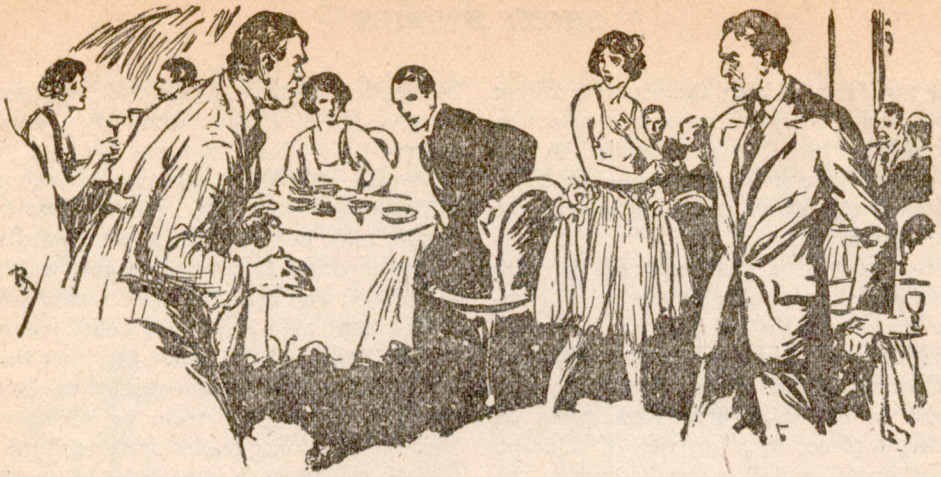
"What made you steal them Morgan hosses?" demanded Buck abruptly, as he boosted Slim and passed the reins up to him.

"Sorry to see me leave the range? I can't believe it!" said Slim, on a derisive note. "You and me is a different breed of men, now. You've changed, Buck; I ain't. Well, there's your answer."

"Not the whole of it," said Logan, softly for him. "Changed some yourself, Slim. If you don't know how, I'll tell you."

"Save your wind and give us your fist," Billings broke in. "Got to be goin'," and he stuck his right hand down, Logan's rising to meet it.

A few minutes later Sheriff Dodge sat up in the lonely road and addressed his horse. "Where's that prisoner—where's—what happened, anyhow? God A'mighty, my head!"



TWEEDS

By CARLYSLE GRAHAM RAHT

Author of "Violence," "Crowbait," etc.

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT IN THE PATIO OF THAT MEXICAN CAFÉ SAT CHUCK ROLLER, HIRED GUNMAN, WAITING FOR THE UNKNOWN WEARER OF THE ROSE OF DEATH WHOM HIS AUTOMATIC WAS TO BLAST OUT OF LIFE. AND THEN THE DANCING MYSTERY GIRL SUDDENLY SHUFFLED THE CARDS OF FATE

A WHITE sun-splashed bridge led south across the yellow river and into a country that anyone unfamiliar with the deceptive lethargy might call a land of nod. It was a country where a premium was placed on energy, where life dozed with half-closed eyes, yet, dozing, saw everything; where obstreperous swagger elbowed aside shrinking unobtrusiveness, and where the colors, red, white, and blue, mingled in more or less harmony with the colors, red, white, and green—national indices of the contrasting temperaments of the two races where their frontiers met.

This bridge was something more than a convenient passage-way across a wide river; it was a symbol of steel and concrete that cemented a friendship between a rich and powerful nation and a less fortunate sister nation that was just awakening to a nation consciousness. Seen from the air, the graceful white spans girded together a clean orderly city on the north bank, a city that was no longer a frontier town in appearance, but modern in every respect, with the smaller city on the south bank where squalor and poverty still predominated, where one sidestepped beggars and filth, finally to enter gilded palaces.

A nickel, American money, paid at the turnstile, was the only passport the pedestrians needed to cross the bridge. Once across and safely past the customs, health, and immigration officials on the south end of the bridge, then more swiftly past saloons, jitney stands, pool halls, money changers, lottery stalls, the Plaza Juarez—what would a Mexican town be without its Plaza Juarez—and then past more saloons, one finally entered the cooling shade of the patio of the Café L'Bohm, where sat "Chuck" Roller, the gunman, who waited the coming of the man he was to kill for pay, price seventy-five hundred American dollars and protection, and expenses while he waited.

There were a number of elements in the job that did not meet with Chuck Roller's approval. He was working wholly in the dark. The only assurance he had of safety was the word of Mickey McCool, and Mickey was altogether too far away for Chuck's comfort in case of need. Another

thing: he knew neither the man for whom he was doing the job nor the man whom he was to kill. The only sign to guide him was a girl wearing a mask, known as the Mystery Girl, who would pin a red rose on the lapel of his victim.

What sort of a girl could she be who would play the part of a female Judas? Suppose she pinned the red rose on the wrong man? These questions he had put to Mickey McCool when the "deal" was being discussed in the tight little back room of Mickey's place, in a district of Chicago where shadowy figures skulked along the dimly lighted streets and where shadow-proof blinds were carefully drawn to prevent a chance shot from finding a target.

Mickey McCool himself engineered the transaction. Mickey was the "power" in the district; Chuck Roller a high class tool.

Due to the latter reason, when the gunman objected to working in the dark, Mickey argued patiently with him. "What d'ye care who ye're workin' for or who it is ye're goin' to kill! Siventy-foive hundred berries don't grow on iv'ry bush, me b'y—with protection, a clean getaway, an' a good toime whilst yez are waitin'—eh?"

Mickey made no mention of the fact that his split of twenty-five hundred for swinging the "deal" had already been paid.

WHEN finally Chuck agreed to do the job—there were certain good reasons why he must leave Chicago for a time—Mickey sent him on his way fully instructed, with a bulging pocket and a piece of advice which the "power," knowing Chuck's weaknesses, deemed necessary to add. "Moind ye, me lad," Mickey warned, "cut out the skoits! There'll be toime enough for them whin yez git back. Good luck and a plisint journey!"

Chuck Roller had bumped off several victims before this; the wonder at the queer ways men accepted death had worn off. But he had not traveled far when he became impressed with two facts—the man he was to kill was evidently not an ordinary person, and the man who was having it done was no common gangster.

Chuck became aware of those facts through repeated significant occurrences that made him feel his importance. When he boarded the train, he naturally supposed he was to travel in a berth, but when he entered the Pullman he found his bags in a stateroom. And all his questioning drew no information from the grinning porter. Again, when he ate, he ate alone, regardless of the impatient hungry passengers waiting for places, who eyed the three vacant seats at his table, held back by a polite but obdurate dining car conductor. Another time, in Oklahoma, while the engines were being changed, he left the train to stretch his legs on the long brick platform, and it seemed to Chuck as if half the passengers elected to do likewise. These occurrences could not be attributed to accident, he reasoned. So, by the way of a test, he got out at another station at the last division point before reaching the border, on the off side from the platform, and he was conscious while he strolled up and down that eyes watched his every move.

Yet, never once was he spoken to nor interfered with until he reached the end of the line, and he was ushered, almost hustled, into a taxicab and driven to a quiet hotel where arrangements already had been made for him to stay.

This watchful care petted his vanity, fed his egotism, but when finally he was seated in the Café L'Bohm, at a table reserved for him, Chuck remembered that when a man was about to make a kill, it behooved him to study his surroundings.

There was an air about the Café L'Bohm that made him feel at home, a typical cabaret atmosphere. Yet, there was a subtle distinctive quality obtained through certain unique effects. For instance, the lighting was unusual, but natural enough. No straining after effects. Slowly moving color waves of light, red, orange, blue, green, cast a tropical glamor over the crowd and played strange tricks with the expression on the patrons' faces, changing happy smiles into grimaces, sober countenances into drunken apathy, and back again.

CHUCK ROLLER'S rather narrow-set, steel-gray eyes were sensitized plates upon which the slightest details were indelibly impressed. He saw everything and read beneath the surface of what he saw. The lighting system was controlled by a

switchbox near the entrance to the barroom. A flat nosed waiter had switched on the current when night fell. Flat Nose never left his station for long, and Chuck got the impression that the waiter was to play a part in the drama soon to be enacted in the patio. The impression was strengthened when the gunman observed significant glances pass between Flat Nose and the waiter who served Chuck, whom Chuck already had mentally catalogued as Number Thirteen because the metal button on his stiff white jacket bore the figures.

There were a dozen or more exits, a fact satisfying to the gunman, who might have occasion to use one or the other on a moment's notice. Some of the exits, he observed, led into a large courtyard now packed with automobiles. His own car, the one assigned to him by the man whom Mickey McCool had called the Boss, was conveniently parked near the main entrance just off the street, and his chauffeur, evidently under orders, sat at the wheel, alertly waiting.

High walls surrounded the patio; blank walls, without windows. He need not watch for spying eyes in that quarter, at any rate. Tall palms, with slender trunks overtopped with bunchy verdure, rose above the walls, and an aged oak tree reached out its protecting branches from a corner of the patio. The verdure, the rustle of leaves in the night breeze, created a sylvan atmosphere; the murmur of voices, excited laughter, even the jazz music as rendered by the Mexican band, heightened an impression of being aloof from the world of hustle and bustle.

One might wonder what really prompted Chuck Roller to accept the killer job, if it were not the big pay and necessity driving him from his haunts. The seventy-five hundred dollars most certainly influenced him; also, his need to duck out of town. But Mickey McCool knew all along how best to win his man's consent. Chuck had shown little more than passive interest until the Mystery Girl was mentioned; from then on, Mickey knew it was merely a matter of arranging the details.

Somewhere back in Chuck Roller's head an idea had found lodgment that some day he would meet a girl who would embody both the feminine charms his æsthetic soul demanded and the quality of brains needed to assist him in his more hazardous undertakings. The idea grew until it became a positive hunch that this Mystery Girl would prove to be the fulfillment of his ideal, and after a proper show of hesitancy he had accepted Mickey's offer.

It was she, therefore, whom he first sought and found, before he so much as considered his surroundings. And sitting there, sipping the gin fizz or the whisky-and-soda ever at his elbow, he spent the long evening hours gazing at her as she swept past him across the dance floor, pirouetting, swaying, upon the arm of one partner or another, obedient to the siren call of the sensuous music, her red, red lips enticing him, her sparkling masked eyes inviting him to join her in the mad whirl.

In some ways she baffled him. He knew it was not liquor that caused her cheeks to rival the red rose in her dark hair, for he observed that she drank sparingly, and even then he was not certain it was liquor she drank. But Chuck knew the janes; women were all alike, the country over. And he dreamed.

He was a smooth looker as he sat there in lightly checked tweeds, cravat and socks to match, and shapely narrow feet shod in polished English walking shoes. Why shouldn't this mystery dame take a shine to him, he reasoned. But business first, and then—she might be persuaded to like him. Who was there to stop her. Chuck brushed languidly at the lapel of his tweed coat, where the ashes of his Egyptian *elegantes* cigarette persistently clung. That was the drawback to tweeds. Anything touching the cloth stuck there like a burr.

THE MYSTERY GIRL was no mystery at all to Charley Bohm, the fat little proprietor of the Café L'Bohm. Or, at any rate, so he thought. She came to him self-introduced as a cabaret entertainer at a time Charlie was in despair. A slump in the price of crude oil had halted all drilling

activities in the oil field north of the river; tourists had turned their steps toward cooler climes, and the approaching Presidential election had brought on a near money panic. Confronted with the prospects of a staggering loss, with a daily overhead expense of two hundred dollars to meet, fat Charlie was ready to listen to any suggestion that might inject new interest, and dollars, into the night life of the Café L'Bohm.

The girl was easy to listen to. She was a personality salesman and Charlie Bohm was quick to see her potentialities.

"Put me in mask," she said, with overpowering earnestness. "Send out invitations to come and dance with the Mystery Girl, she has a prize for every partner. Keep me supplied with gardenias. I'll do the rest. Mr. Bohm, if I don't double your business the first week you're to pay me nothing!"

The proprietor was impressed. He called into consultation his silent partner, otherwise known as the Boss. The consultation was held over the telephone, the wires of which spanned the bridge. Charlie Bohm spoke from a private booth; the Boss from his office in the bank. The conversation was brief and to the point. The Mystery Girl got the job.

At the end of the telephone conversation, the Boss thoughtfully hung up the receiver. He had an ax to grind, and long after banking hours he sat in the glassed-in office with the word, "President," on the door. Only in the world of shadows was he called the Boss, and in that world he was as ethereal as a ghost, but a power nevertheless. Here, in the bank, however, he bore a name and was spoken to deferentially. The more observant employees in the bank made comments on the fact that the president had grown haggard. They attributed it to overwork. The real cause was Bal Conniston, the Federal district attorney.

Using the Café L'Bohm as a center of operations to collect Mexican gold and using his bank's purchasing power to buy it, the Boss was doing a profitable, if illicit, business of smuggling gold across the border into the United States. All went well with the enterprise until a carrier was caught at the bridge by the American custom officials and relieved of twenty thousand dollars in gold. There was no duty on the importation of gold into the United States; the point involved in law was whether or not the carrier had intended to declare the gold, gold being classed as property. Suit for recovery was brought against the Government, and was won, the carrier proving that he had intended declaring his gold. Of course, the carrier was liable under the Mexican law and dared not again cross the border into Mexico. He had committed no crime, however, against the laws of the United States.

THE Federal district attorney, stung by his defeat in the Supreme Court, but thoroughly aware that an organized gang was continually smuggling large quantities of gold across the river, set himself the task of running the gang to earth, being assured of the earnest cooperation of the Mexican customs department. To land his men, he must expose them on the Mexican side. But he must learn their identity first. He must identify every member, every tool, stool pigeon, fence, and their hangout. Moreover, he must identify the leader, otherwise his work would be lost.

The Federal district attorney was not the only one to recognize these facts. The Boss watched Bal Conniston's movements through agents. He soon came to know a danger. Gradually, the bulldog tenacity of the Federal district attorney was breaking down the barriers thrown up around the operations in the Café L'Bohm. The searching hand of the law even groped at the very doors of the bank. Something must be done, and done quickly, decided the Boss.

There was one thing only to do. Either "fix" the Federal district attorney or put him out of the way. And he could not be bribed.

It was at this stage of the game that Charlie Bohm telephoned to the Boss the Mystery Girl's proposition. The Boss seized on the idea of the

novelty stunt to draw Bal Conniston into the net across the border. Once in the net, he could be disposed of without danger to a single member of the gang by using an imported gunman to do the killing. If the Mystery Girl stuff went over big, everybody would flock to the Café L'Bohm to see her; and, soon or late, Bal Conniston would be among the number. For the Boss knew the Federal district attorney was human enough to desire relaxation from the grind of hunting down law breakers.

So the Mystery Girl went to work.

It took just two nights to convince Charlie Bohm that she was a gold mine. He was encouraged to pay out large sums for advertising. Of course, the advertising was cautiously done on the American side, as the law prohibited liquor ads appearing on prohibition soil. But he hit upon a unique scheme. He had photos of the Mystery Girl struck off on cardboard fans. The sticky heat made the fans popular. Nobody thought it criminal to smuggle fans across the border. Mystery Girl fans became a fad. Smuggled across, they were sent from friend to friend. And the word was sent with each fan to come and see the Mystery Girl do her stuff.

The scheme was a huge success. The Café L'Bohm saw faces around the tables and on the dance floor that had never appeared there before. Charlie Bohm perspired enthusiastically, playing the host admirably.

The Boss slipped quietly out of town, Chicago bound, to interview Mickey McPool, and Chuck Roller was the result of his journey. While in Chicago, the Boss outfitted himself in the latest style of clothes, and he returned to the border resplendent in a new suit of lightly checked tweeds.

IT WAS Chuck Roller who came nearest to solving the mystery of the Mystery Girl, if there was one. At first, certain cold calculations entered into his regard for her. For the time being he saw only her possibilities as an accomplice—saw her beauty, the grace of her movements, her charm, as an asset to be used to lure rich prey into the web that he, the spider, would weave. Pretty chill blooded was Chuck, like a fish.

Before the second night passed, he altered his plans slightly. He began to wonder if this jane was like the others he had known. He began to wish the business that had brought him there was over and he began to study closely the men who danced with her.

Never before had he known the pangs of jealousy as he came to know them now. His keen eyes took in every move, every gesture, of herself and the man dancing with her at the time. He watched her at the end of the dance while she stood smiling up at her partner, her back turned perhaps, and her deft fingers pining the white gardenia to the lapel of the man's coat.

But she never proffered a man the red rose in her hair. That, Chuck knew, was reserved to be given to the one he was to kill.

The more he studied her, the more she baffled him. She upset every preconceived idea he held on the subject of women, especially the sort of woman who would take such a part as she was to play. Yet, she must be aware of the whole plot; she must even know more than he, the killer. She must know the Boss, and as a matter of course, she must know the man she was to mark for the kill.

These conclusions troubled Chuck, at first vaguely, then poignantly. His instructions were minute and clear. After the shooting, he knew every move to make. His getaway was assured. But how about hers?

There was just one thing to do, he must find out. He must talk with her; arrange for a later meeting after the shooting took place.

The bridge closed at twelve, midnight. At 11:30, the first warning was given to those desiring to return to the American side for the night. By 11:45, the last cars would go joggling through the wretchedly graded streets toward the bridge. The Mystery Girl's car would be in the procession, and Chuck's.

When the first warning sounded the Mystery Girl quitted the dance floor, and soon after Chuck followed. He went to his car and waited until she appeared, walking hurriedly to her own car, which was chauffeured like his. He let her car go past, then he ordered his driver to follow it.

His chauffeur demurred. "It is against orders, señor," said the man.

Chuck growled an oath and he leaned forward, half drawing his automatic. "Do as I say," he ordered. "If you lose sight of that jane, you'll have me to deal with."

The threat was sufficient. With a shrug of a shoulder, the man cut into the line next to the Mystery Girl. "As you say, señor," he mumbled.

Evidently, thought Chuck, his chauffeur knew with whom he dealt.

THE long procession of cars filed slowly across the bridge, unhindered on the Mexican side save for the brief pause to pay the bridge toll. The Mystery Girl was now unmasked, but a filmy lace thing drawn loosely about the head and face concealed her features. But Chuck saw that she still wore the red rose.

When the American side was reached he almost lost her. While the cars ahead were being searched, hers shot past the customs officials who merely greeted her with a respectful salute. Chuck's car was stopped as usual, and while he and it were being searched, he sought for the reason why she was allowed to pass unmolested and the others held up. This time he failed to read beneath the surface. But it was such a little incident, he soon forgot it in the rush to overtake her.

This he did in three blocks, just as her car turned into a narrow side street where the lights were dim and far apart. It was a street lined with unpretentious dwellings. It was a very old street, evidently, and many of the houses sat close to the sidewalk, with an entrance gate on one side or the other. Chuck caught glimpses of tree-lined courtyards in the rear through closed iron trellised gates.

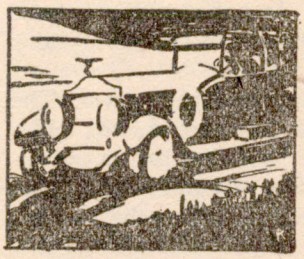
But not all the gates were closed, for the girl's car slowed up before an open driveway and she sprang out, permitting her car to continue its way, while she hurried toward the courtyard in the rear. She had not looked around nor had she given a sign that she was aware of another car in the street behind her. She made haste only as one might who came home late and was impatient to be abed.

Not until later did Chuck notice that the dwelling had a driveway on either side, with both gates swinging wide. At the moment he was too much concerned with not losing sight of the girl to notice anything.

He swung from the car as it slowed up, ordering his man to park and wait for him in the block further on. Then he followed the direction taken by the girl, turned the corner of the house, and halted abruptly. The Mystery Girl was nowhere in sight. But standing there he heard the purr of a motor and saw the faint reflection of a car light in the driveway leading out on the other side of the dwelling.

Muttering an oath of disappointment, mystified, as well as suspicious, he walked on to his car, entered it, and drove to his hotel.

WHEN she left her car, the Mystery Girl had moved swiftly and with definite intentions. Twice before she had been followed by a man, but managed both times to elude her pursuer at the bridge. Under the strong light of the custom office she had discerned the man's features. He was a prominent clubman and banker; and he was a frequenter of the Café L'Bohm. She caught occasional glimpses of him, but he never appeared in the patio to dance or drink. Once she saw him talking with Charlie Bohm, in the proprietor's office. She would have given much to know the topic of their conversation, but their tones were low, guarded, and when she appeared, they ceased talking altogether until she had gone.



But, from the moment on the first night that she had attempted to inveigle Chuck Roller into dancing with her she had anticipated his sooner or later following her after the closing hour. She had read it in his steel gray eye, in the immobility of his expressionless countenance. She had made bold bids for his attention, had all but asked him to dance with her. But he sat there night after night, at the same table,

his eyes burning, but his desire held back by some purpose. To know that purpose was the motive lying behind her boldness. For her boldness, her very presence in the Café L'Bohm was for a purpose too.

Hurrying round the darkened dwelling, she breathed a sigh of relief as the solid bulk of a car loomed against the background of foliage. She ran forward with a greeting.

"Quick, Bal! I'm followed!" she whispered, and sprang into the seat beside the driver.

The whir-r-r of the motor answered her, and the car leaped away, faster under shifted gears, and swept out of the driveway into the street, turning in the direction of the bridge. Once in the street the headlights were switched on by the man at the wheel, and the car, a low snappy roadster, raced away at a speed that challenged pursuit. Not until then did either of the occupants speak.

"I have them all but two, maybe there is a third, Bal," said the Mystery Girl. "It was he who followed me tonight. I cannot make him out. He sits night after night as if waiting for something or some one."

The car was now headed away from the bridge and into a long, silent street that led toward the better residential section of the city. The driver slowed down, after a glance rearward to assure himself there was no car following.

The girl spoke "There's waiter Number Thirteen, and another flat nose fellow, and—" she paused, her fingers fumbling at her vanity case—"here are even descriptions, Bal, and the evidence against them. I've been awfully efficient, don't you think!"

SHE snuggled her head against his shoulder, and then glanced up questioningly. In the dim reflection of the instrument board lights she saw that he was frowning.

"What's the matter, Bal?" she asked quickly. "Anything wrong?"

"It's nothing. You've done splendid work, Alice."

"Bal!" She appraised him with starry eyes; then she laughted indulgently. "Bal Conniston! You spoilt boy—here!" She plucked the rose from her hair. With a series of deft jerks she stripped the stem of thorny branches, and thrust it in the buttonhole on the lapel of his coat. "There!" she said, with a final pat, "Old jealous!"

"I never did like the idea——" he began.

"But somebody had to do it, Bal," she interrupted, "and I'm having bushels of fun!" She snuggled against him, softly saying, "I'm helping you, Bal, and after we are married——"

She knew how to manage him, but he accepted defeat ungraciously.

"Just the same I don't like to expose you—to every man thinking he has the right to follow you," he said.

She suddenly sat upright. "I have it!" she exclaimed. "Suppose you come tomorrow night. You'll be surprised how nice every one treats me. Flirt, yes. But nothing more than in any ballroom, Bal. Come—and I'll give you my red rose instead of a white gardenia!" And she ran her fingers caressingly through his wavy brown hair.

THE Café L'Bohm shone with lights. Already the evening crowds were gathering, the cars pausing at the entrance long enough to add their quotas of three, four, five, to the throng, then sweeping away to the space allotted by the attendant. Dancing had just begun. But it would be an hour yet before the merrymakers would begin to "whoop it up."

In Charlie Bohm's office a green shaded, drop light cast the upper walls and ceiling in dull tones. The floor and lounging chairs, the desk and bookcases, lay bared in a flood of white light. Every article on the desk stood out in bold relief. The green writing pad with inkwells and penholders, had been shoved aside, to make room for tall amber-colored bottles and two glasses. There was another container charged with carbonated water. The desk was moist in spots from spilled liquor. Several of the bottles already were empty. Propped against one of these was a fan with the picture of the Mystery Girl.

Across the desk from one another sat Charlie Bohm and the banker known as

the Boss. The Boss wore a suit of lightly checked tweeds. The proprietor called him "Jim." He was trying to keep him from drinking more liquor, for, of the two, the Boss was the drinker. It was he who had propped up the fan, and he sat gravely regarding the picture of the masked dancer.

He regarded the Mystery Girl with a sort of impersonal gravity. So much depended upon her, a strange woman, who did not even yet know the part that he, the Boss, had willed she should play. She would never know, for that matter. She would play it innocently, unconscious of any significance of the gift of the red rose, other than that her supply of gardenias were exhausted. The idea to give Bal Conniston the red rose would be put into her mind by suggestion, after the gardenias were put out of her reach. But first, the Federal district attorney must be induced to visit the Café L'Bohm, for apparently the Mystery Girl lure had failed. How was it to be accomplished?

The Boss gulped down a huge drink of raw liquor.

He labored under a nervous strain great enough to break the ordinary man. But he was no ordinary man. He was a dealer in big transactions wherein life and death, in some cases, entered—life and death, plots and counterplots, betrayals, deception, lying, as a matter of course, and some truth telling. When he had mapped out a course of procedure, he prided himself on never deviating from that course. He had planned the assassination of the one man who could ruin him. Coolly, cleverly, he had planned. His conscience never troubled him; yet the long hours of waiting had gotten on his nerves.

He poured out another drink.

He had just drained the glass when a waiter slipped through the door and whispered in Charlie Bohm's ear. The waiter had a flat nose. The proprietor smiled and motioned the man away. Then he looked at the Boss and smiled again.

"What's going on?" demanded the Boss.

"Lupo said Bal Conniston had come," said fat Charlie.

The Boss rose unsteadily. He thrust back his shoulders as if seeking a balance.

The proprietor looked inquiringly after him as he strode toward the door, "Where're you going, Jim?" he called.

"I'm going to dance a bit," replied the Boss.

He paused to brush tentatively at a fleck of cigar ashes on the sleeve of his tweed coat. Then with slow dignity he pursued his way toward the patio.

CHUCK ROELER had taken his cue from the behavior of the Mystery Girl. Sitting there watching her, he observed that her eyes flew to the door on the arrival of every new batch of merrymaking recruits. She was looking for some one, expecting some one. Who else could it be save the man she was to mark for the kill. Vicious thoughts surged through the gunman's mind. His failure of the previous night to have a word with her lashed him into a dangerous mood. He wanted her more than ever. And he watched her, watched her snap rigid finally when a boisterous, laughing group of well groomed men entered and scattered round several tables off to one side. Yet, he was not sure that his man was among the number. She still had the air of expectancy.

He scanned the newcomers, seeking out the one most likely to be his man. But he who was accustomed to read beneath the surface of things found no confirmation of his suspicions. They were merrymakers, nothing more.

As the group settled about the tables, ordering drinks, a lone man sauntered past them, to a table *en solo*. Chuck canvassed him carefully. He, too, was well groomed, an upstanding man, with wavy brown hair. There was something about him that Chuck instinctively liked. Perhaps it was the expression of openness in his countenance; there was nothing hidden there, a thinker, keenly intelligent, a sincere man, accustomed to quiet living, who was more of an observer than a participator

in the doings of such places. Chuck Roller mentally passed him by.

The gunman continued his search. He saw other signs now that pointed to an impending crisis. Flat Nose stood rigid at his station by the switch. Out of the tail of an eye, Chuck saw Number Thirteen hurrying toward him. He had given no signal for service.

He was wondering what Number Thirteen would say or do, when his watchful eyes snapped to a figure that lurched in the doorway leading from the barroom. There his eyes held on a big man, with the flush of drink on his face. Chuck noted immediately that he wore a tweed suit, and he frowned. The man must be an out-of-towner, perhaps from the East, Chicago or New York. Tweeds were not common on the border.

He had made this summary when he felt rather than saw Number Thirteen bending over him. He glanced up; caught the waiter's hard eyes, and read a message there. The eyes probing his told him that his man had come. Then, as if waiting an order, Number Thirteen stepped back a pace and stood motionless, with arms folded.

The Mystery Girl for the moment was disengaged. The music struck up and Chuck now intent on every move made in her direction, saw the man in tweeds accost her for the dance. Chuck saw her draw back, as if with repugnance. With the crucial moment at hand, it might be that she had gotten cold feet. Then the big man grabbed her and they whirled away in the dance.

DESPITE his unsteady condition, the girl's partner danced with a certain solid assurance. He was talking into the girl's ear. Chuck imagined what he was saying and his jealousy flamed. He sat watching them like a coiled spring that any overt act of the man in tweeds would release to life. The girl danced easily, but was intent apparently on keeping a space between her and her partner. From the expression on her face, as much as was revealed to Chuck beneath the black mask, he judged the man's remarks did not meet with her approval. Then Chuck saw her signal the orchestra. Already, he knew the meaning of that signal. When a partner became too persistent, or insulting, it was her method of ridding herself of the nuisance. The music stopped, and then——

The man drew the girl suddenly to him, tilted her chin, striving to kiss her.

The unexpectedness of his action had taken her by surprise. But instinctively she struggled to lower her chin, struggled to duck her head against his shoulder, all the while pummeling him with futile blows of her clenched fists.

The ferocity of her resistance momentarily baffled the man in tweeds. He growled an oath, and with the sudden strength of anger added to his desire he forced her head up and up until his lips met hers. For a long moment he held her. Then he released her, letting her almost fall as she staggered, panting, out of his grasp. Then he laughed, a drunken, satisfied laugh.

It was the last laugh he ever uttered.

Chuck Roller had risen, the spring ready for release, when the man first drew the girl to him. Chuck was filled with jealous rage. Mickey McCool's warning to "cut out the skoits" was forgotten; likewise the purpose that had brought him there. He thought only of the girl. Every man in the patio had risen. A chair crashed to the floor, and Chuck saw the well groomed man with wavy brown hair stride across the floor. But he of the brown hair was too late.

The next thing, Chuck saw the girl stagger away from the man. But she had carried out her work. It was a part of Chuck's instructions to see her do it. She had done it, all right, the cunning little devil! For when the pair thus separated, the red rose was left clinging to the lapel of the man's tweed coat. It clung there, a red badge of death, the sign for which Chuck Roller waited.

In a flash his automatic was out. He heard a shout of warning. He paid no heed. In a vague way, with his eyes watching everything within their range of vision, he saw Flat Nose reach for the switch; saw Number Thirteen spring toward him. Then his gun spit red, the repeated roar of it resounded in the patio, and he saw through the billows of smoke the man in tweeds crumple to the floor, pumped full of lead.

Then the patio filled with shouting, swearing blue-clad men. The lights went out.

A voice hissed in his ear, "You've killed the Boss!"

Excitement, commotion, in the court yard, where cars were striving to maneuver their way out of the crush. Bal Conniston, with a limp, sobbing form beside him, guided the low, snappy roadster through the exit portals and into the street. His lips were unsmiling, but his eyes held a satisfied light. His work was done. Furthermore, the girl's work was done, and there would be no more worry for her safety. As his wife, he could watch over her forever.

THE next day there was a padlock on the doors of the Café L'Bohm; there were padlocks on the doors of the chambers in which Charles Bohm, betrayed by a confessing accomplice, and a dozen others, sat brooding, for the penalty was heavy for those who smuggled gold out of the country south of the yellow river.

But Chuck Roller knew nothing of these happenings. When the voice of Number Thirteen hissed into his ear that he had killed the wrong man, cold steel had penetrated Chuck's ribs and pierced his heart, and now he lay in the morgue, with a white rag holding shut his jaws, alongside the man he had slain.

"OH, DE *NATCHEZ* AN' DE *LEE*!"

THE historic race, in July of 1870, from New Orleans to St. Louis, by the steamboats *Natchez* and *Robert E. Lee*, was long a fount of tale and poetry and doggerel throughout the lower river. The negro roustabouts' song about "de *Natchez* an' de *Lee*" pervaded main-deck and levee as a Mississippi River chantey.

The two boats, the *Natchez*, Captain Leathers, the *Robert E. Lee*, Captain Kannon, were rivals upon the lower river run, and were very closely matched, although the *Natchez* had the edge. The two captains agreed to race for a good purse. The betting upon the race was large even for those days. Scarcely a landing between New Orleans and St. Louis but had partisans of the crafts, and scarcely a deck-hand, white or black, but put up a stake. The papers of the country featured the coming contest, and the Far East press arranged for special telegraph reports of the race itself.

In the spring of 1844 the *J. M. White*, fastest boat on the river, had made the up trip, with a freight load, in 3 days, 23 hours; and there was considerable curiosity to see whether better boats had been built.

The *Natchez* was reckoned the faster boat when under way, and ruled favorite; but she was top-heavy and somewhat hard to swing, at landings. Moreover, Captain Kannon out-smarted Captain Leathers.

Both craft put out together, light, July 1, from New Orleans. Kannon however had stripped to the bones, having discarded anchors, beds and bedding, even the doors and shutters of the rooms, as well as every pound of stores that he could spare. He had filled hold and decks with pine knots, and had sent the steamboat *Paragoad* to meet him at Baton Rouge, 140 miles, with a load of more fuel.

At Baton Rouge the *Lee* was slightly behind; the *Paragoad*, another fast boat, tied on alongside, and without stopping her engines the *Lee* fueled up at almost full speed; whereas the *Natchez* had had to land, take a fuel barge in tow, and pull out again. She lost three hours before she could cast off the barge.

At Natchez, 300 miles, the *Lee* was 41 minutes ahead. Time, 17 hours, 11 minutes. At Vicksburg, 410 miles, she was 2 hours ahead. At Memphis, 775 miles, she was 3½ hours ahead. Time 2 days, 6 hours, 9 minutes.

So they went roaring up the river, under their thick black plumes of smoke by day, and their pitch flaming stacks by night, while the crowded landings cheered.

At Cairo, 1,000 miles, the *Lee* was 3 hours, 24 minutes ahead. At St. Louis, 1,200 miles, 200,000 people greeted her when, July 4, she spurted in, winner by 3 hours, 44 minutes. Time, 3 days, 18 hours, 14 minutes; schedule, 13 miles an hour including stops.

Captain Leathers of the *Natchez* was far from satisfied. In October the two boats staged another race, against time, New Orleans to Natchez. The *Natchez* won by 7½ minutes. But the *Lee* trying again for a record, cut that time by a little over 14 minutes. There they called quits. Neither had equalled the time of the old *Gray Eagle* of the upper river, which in 1856 made over 16 miles an hour for 400 miles, against the current.

E. L. S.

SAGE BRUSH VENGEANCE

By ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE

Author of "King Solomon's Shoe," "Too Much Spotlight," etc.

"ME, I RIDES ALONE TO MAKE MY VENGEANCE," SAID YOUNG JERE CUTTLES—EVEN WHEN THEY TOLD HIM THAT THE MAN WHO HAD KILLED HIS PARTNER WAS THE TOUGHEST ROAD AGENT AND GAMBLER ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

A HORSEMAN drooped in his saddle as his tired beast plodded up the zig-zags of the road over Cougar Mountain. White dust of the desert behind lay in a sweated crust on the animal, powdered the rider so that he looked like a miller fresh from the grinding. Bitter dust, tasting of death and the agonies of thirst in a bleak land where slow moving emigrant trains left their toll of oxen's bones and rude little crosses over heaps of stones.

Even as they climbed, the desert was reluctant to release its clutch upon the lone rider and his jaded beast. Black scum of sage still flowed away from the trail's narrow ribbon even when the first stunted pines came down from the heights to be heralds of a sweeter land above. Bit by bit the burnt cake of the desert yielded to the softness of a needle carpet as the road mounted. Creeping manzanita and squaw carpet crowded the sage. At last the summit of the mountain—tremendous panorama of the Sierra's white peaks filling all the western horizon with cold beauty.

The desert rider reined in his horse under the breath-taking compulsion of the scene. Transition from the gray and thirsty monotony of the Carson Valley, whence he had come, to this sweet high country of pines and promises of many waters was startling enough to stir even the soul of a Lucky Bill Hazard, jaded player at life's gaming table.

He looked down to where the road led into a broad valley running parallel with the north-and-south trend of the range far as his eye could carry. Directly below him where a stream wandered through natural meadows certain dun and moving spots caught the eye of the rider. Prime beef cattle. The only herd anywhere round the diggin's here in this part of the new, raw country called California.

Reason for his two days in the saddle from his home over in Carson Valley centered about those moving mites against meadow green two thousand feet below. Lucky Bill Hazard knew a great deal more about cattle than he did about placer gold—and fancied 'em higher.

IT WAS late afternoon before the desert rider found himself on the valley's level floor and following the stream northward to the new boom mining town of Fiddler's Bar. Dog tired, wet and shivering from two fordings of the stream, the stranger pricked his ears thankfully at the sound of an ax coming from a deep willow copse which fringed the stream. Somebody to put him

right about the trail——

Lucky Bill dismounted and pushed through the willows. Gambler though he was, player of hunches and trusting disciple of the genius who won him his name of Lucky, this minute when as a stranger he pushed through willows to the sound of an ax he did not feel the light touch of fate directing him to the most momentous encounter of his life. As with all of us, so with Lucky Bill; none may know what little turn in the trail of life will bring one face to face with the veiled shape of destiny.

A figure standing in a small clearing by the river bank and with felled willows heaped about him halted his ax in midswing at Lucky Bill's hail.

"Hey, stranger, which way to Lem Collins's hangout?"

The youth with the ax—for youth he was for all his gangling height—gave Lucky Bill a long, slow look from under the brim of his shapeless wool hat. His long, sallow face framed in a ridiculous straggle of first-crop whiskers corn colored and juvenile, registered neither surprise at the intrusion nor the least sign of having heard the question. Pale lids flickered over his eyes the color of the sky at morning. A sharply jutting jaw moved in slow sweeps against a hidden cud. Lucky Bill, taking in at a glance the dull and listless features, the single cowhide gallus which crossed one stooped shoulder to grapple the waistband of homespun trousers, the coarse cowhide boots, set the boy down for a blown-in-the-bottle Pike—Argonauts' scornful term for those half wild, fever shaken poor whites from Missouri who swarmed across the Overland Trail to overrun the California diggin's. He repeated his question.

"Cal'late ye mean Lem Collins the cowman?" drawled the youth.

Lucky Bill agreed.

"Don't hold no truck with him, I don't," said the other dispassionately. "Got a right peart bad name in these parts, Lem Collins has. Still, iffen yo're wishful to take up with him——" He left the burden of responsibility resting on the newcomer the while he studied Lucky Bill with his sleepy glance.

A RATHER eye-filling figure was Lucky Bill. His two hundred pounds were so well distributed that there was no hint of grossness anywhere the length of his six-feet- two. Though he had spent his thirty years carelessly, youth still ruled the set of his shoulders and the trim girth of waist. His face was one made wholesome by much laughter, albeit laughter which never could quite smudge out the steel-coldness in his blue eyes. One to fascinate most women and some men was Lucky Bill Hazard.

"So you count Lem Collins a bad man round these parts?" He gave the Pike a disarming smile.

"Sence ye asks me—yes." Gravely from the youth with the corn-tassel beard, and he looked down at his ax as a hint that conversation about folks in the Valley was not in his line.

"Hear he runs cattle for Frenchy Allaire," Lucky Bill ventured.

"Mostly runs 'em off, like's not." The other picked up his ax and started to turn his back on Lucky Bill.

"But you don't mind telling me where I can hook up with Collins?" the latter insinuated.

"Up to the forks yander—fust trail to yore left," came the direction over-shoulder. Lucky Bill, amused by the youth's boorishness, dared him into further conversation.

"Cutting willows for charcoal?"

"Nope. Wing-dam."

"Figuring on damming the river to work a claim under her?"

"Yep," and the ax head came down fairly into the notch in a willow's trunk. Evidently the Pike cared to "have no truck" with strangers, either. Lucky Bill grinned and threaded his way through the thicket back to his horse. On the trail to Lem Collins's place he wiped his mind clean of the picture of a gawky youth with the mist of a dull mentality in his eyes. Such boors were not for him to bother about.

THE strange friendship between Allaire the Frenchman and Jereboam Cuttles—almost a relationship of father and son—had an abiding interest for all the Valley. It was one of those bonds so common in the days of gold when men without women

braved the perils of two thousand miles through wilderness to face the anarchy and the turmoil of the gold diggings in a land just snatched from wilderness. Under the stress of this double hazard man groped for the comradeship of man with a yearning almost akin to love of women. Pardners cleaved one to the other with a constancy exceeding David and Jonathan's.

Quitting St. Louis in the spring, Pierre Allaire and his party of compatriots—all French of the old colonial stock—were pushing their wagon train through South Pass when under the southernmost spur of the Wind River range they came upon one of the tragic by-products of the great westward migration. A wagon abandoned by its train was being driven by a fifteen-year-old scarecrow whose eyes burned with the fires of cholera. Under its soiled hood lay the bodies of two dead—the father and mother. This wagon of death was lurching alone across the roof of the continent and with a mad boy swinging his goad over two starved oxen.

Then and there Pierre Allaire adopted Jereboam Cuttles, the waif; nursed him back to health; filled his starved life with a fervent Gallic affection. For was he not a fellow Missourian, this odd cabbage? What if he did come from the far western fringe of settlements where the Great River coiled down among red hills, and what if he did speak the language of the barbarous Kentuckians and shaggy rivermen? Did not this orphan need a father like a stray dog needs a master?

And the stray cur's affection was that

which Jere Cuttles, the Pike, gave to this St. Louis Frenchman twenty years his senior. Before the last demons of the cholera were driven from his racked body his eyes had taken the task which his stumbling tongue found too great; that of yielding unqualified adoration to the gentle Pierre. Awkward and uncouth of body, primitive as to mind and with all the inhibitions of his ancestors—silent and furtive backwoodsmen for generations—Jere Cuttles gave his soul into the keeping of a laughing, song-singing Gaul.

THEY hit the diggin's at Hangtown and set up their flume and rocker. But the anti-foreign selfishness of the greedy Americans, the cry, "Out with the dam' foreigners!" which sometimes preceded actual bloodshed, became intolerable to Allaire. He quit his claim, took Jere with him over to the Valley on the eastern slopes of the Sierras through which the Lassen Trail invited emigrants to a short cut for Shasta, there bought a herd of graded beef cattle from the Mormons and set up as a cattleman.

Now five years after the time when Allaire had rescued him from the wilderness of South Pass and with the rush to the Valley following rich discoveries in the Susan River, Jere Cuttles, gawky Pike of twenty, was caught by a fever no less savage than that which had brought him near death on the Overland Trail. He had his claim on the river. He shook out gold from his rocker. But once a week or oftener he walked fifteen miles to the little log house in the midst of the grazing range to sit with his foster-father Allaire; to turn upon the Frenchman his pallid eyes which were filled with dog-like adoration.

"My poor infant is bitten by the gold bug," Allaire would say to his friends in Fiddler's Bar. "He leaves me to trust to that *sacre* Collins and to that son of a wolf Despard to ride my range. But soon this unlovely Pike of mine will be coming back. He knows where home lies."

You see now, perhaps, why Jere Cuttles gave less than his usual niggardliness of conversation to Lucky Bill Hazard when the latter came questioning the whereabouts of Lem Collins, cowpuncher for his idol Allaire. Perhaps his surliness was tinged by a tweak of conscience in that his temporary desertion of Allaire for the lure of gold had forced his foster-father to rely upon the questionable services of Collins and of a Basque vagabond calling himself Despard. Like as not in his dull way this gaunt sapling of frontier stock fell back upon his native suspicion when a stranger to the country came asking to be directed

to Lem Collins. Why should anybody want to see that shifty-eyed polecat who'd sifted over the mountains from the gold camps with a tight mouth against all questions concerning the whys and wherefores of his coming?

A VAGUE shadow of uneasiness flickered behind Jere's dull eyes the rest of that day and the next. Up to his waist in snow water at his task of anchoring willow brush for his wing-dam, the youth was conscious of a formless dread for the interests of his idol Allaire. There was no reasoning the thing; it was one of those chimeras which make dogs bark at night. His impulse was to go over the trail to Allaire's cabin and assure himself that the coming of a stranger seeking the dubious Collins meant no harm to the Frenchman; but were he to leave his brush barrier unfinished even for a day the current would undo labor of weeks. He must wait until his dam was well anchored.

Three days after he'd talked to the big stranger Jere heard a single shot downriver. He thought little of it. Some hunter taking a crack at a buck.

The dam finished, Jere buckled the flap of his tent there in the willows and set out afoot for the Allaire ranch before daybreak. He came to his destination in mid-afternoon; a log house set in a little glade of the forest high on one shoulder of the valley's western wall and commanding blue distances. Allaire was not at home, "Prob'ly down to Fiddler's Bar to kotch hisself a armful of brandy," mused the Pike, tolerant of his patron's one genteel vice.

Jere waited. He waited all night and half the next day. No Allaire.

Near noon he set off afoot over the rolling range lands to the shack which Collins and Despard, the cowmen, occupied. Near dark the former rode up. He scowled when the rangy youth stepped out of the shadows to greet him.

"Where-at's Allaire?" Jere put his question bluntly.

"My job's to ride herd on his stock, not on him," grunted Collins.

"He hain't been to home overnight," Jere insisted in his high whine. "An' that hain't like him, nohow."

"Drunk most likely, down to the Bar." The cowman was busy loosing the saddle girths and flung this carelessly over shoulder. Jere gave that squat figure a long, speculative glance.

"Did that-thar stranger come up with ye t'other day?" Lem whirled suddenly at the question.

"What stranger, Pike?"

"Big fella with fringes onto his huntin' shirt—blue eyes—way o' smilin' quick."

"Say, what's eatin' you!" Lem put unnecessary heat in his challenge. "Ain't seen nothin' but beef critters and that Basco Despard going on a week. You clear outa here with your fool questions."

"Yo're plumb sure?"

The cowman whisked a quirt off his saddle horn and took two quick strides toward the gaunt youth.

"Look-y heere, you long, pindlin' drink-o'-water, what're you trying to put up to me? If I was a violent man—which I'm not—I'd snake the hide off'n you for misdoubtin' my word. Now get your feet to goin' while you're all in one piece."

Jere looked down at the menacing figure before him with a sleepy-slow insistence of the eyes. He turned to go.

"Iffen Allaire hain't to home by tomorrer," he said simply, "I'll come ask ye some more questions, like's not."

JERE walked all night to come to the sprawling town of Fiddler's Bar, an unlovely huddle of board and canvas shacks, every third one a bar. Here in graying dawn he made a tour of the saloons—still in their last flutter of the night's hectic life—and the two hotels. He awoke men to sleepy anger with his drawled questions. He scanned bloated faces below barroom tables.

Allaire was not in Fiddler's Bar.

Without sleep and almost without food, the Pike trudged wearily back to the Allaire cabin. As he approached he saw Lem Collins fill the open doorway. A musket lay in the crook of his left arm.

"Stop right where you are—you with your fool questions," the cowman called to Jere. "I'm in charge here now; an' I give you just three minutes to take it down the hill on a run."

II

JERE CUTTLES sweated in an agony of doubts and fears as he plodded back over the trail from Allaire's ranch to Fiddler's Bar. His simple mind, unaccustomed to grappling with anything more complex than day-by-day needs of life, launched itself futilely at the mystery of Pierre Allaire's disappearance—for mystery it appeared to Jere. Surely this partner of his would not have left the country without first telling him of the intention.

Only two hand-holds to the problem. First, that big stranger with the quick smile who'd asked him to be directed to Lem Collins; a fellow from the outside coming into the valley and wanting to find a man with a shady reputation. Then the queer carryings-on of Lem Collins himself. First off he'd denied having seen Allaire for a week and got his back hair roached up when Jere didn't seem to believe him. That same Lem standing in Allaire's doorway with a musket. "I'm in charge here now——"

"Them two's hooked up together somehow," the youth muttered. Then, with a catch in his throat, "Sartin sure they've massacreed my podner!"

Where to turn for help in solving this mystery? Whom could he enlist in the hunt for Allaire—if the good God still let him be in the land of the living? Or who would be on his side if Allaire's blood cried for vengeance? Jere knew nobody in the mushroom mining camp of Fiddler's Bar with its hundreds of boomers from over the Sierra crest. Only occasionally had he tramped in from his claim down river to exchange pokes of nuggets for cornmeal and sowbelly.

"But I jist gotta ease my troubles onto somebody——"

Night, and Fiddler's Bar was in full tilt. Lighted tents glowed like incandescent toadstools down the single street. Squeak of fiddles and moan of accordions spilled out through the doors of a dozen dance halls. Herds of men lurched from bar to bar; shaggy men with the bearded faces of baboons and the speech of the earth's far corners. In the Miners' Rest and the El Dorado where dance platforms crowded the bars men danced clumsily together like trained bears; those who wore a white patch of flour sack on the seat of their pants so designated themselves as coy partners to be sought with many bows and flourishes. Between dances the bartenders went into frenzies of activity; nothing served for less than an ounce of dust, and that bought a dozen drinks.

Aye, Fiddler's Bar, most remote of the California diggin's, told the silent white peaks circling it about that it was the ringtailest camp north of Rich Bar—and to hell with all others.

INTO this welter of folly crept Jere Cuttles the Pike. Jere Cuttles, half starved, dazed from lack of sleep and tottering on his tired legs. Jere, looking for a sympathetic listener to whom he could pour out his burden of doubts and fears.

Chance united with a half formed resolution to direct him to the one man in Fiddler's Bar most likely to give him a kindly ear—Jacob Stupe, *alcalde* by popular choice and lawyer by his own determination. A big slow-spoken man was this Jacob Stupe; shrewd by inheritance of his Pennsylvania Dutch blood; a steady rock in all the roaring tides of the new camp. Jere knew that his partner Allaire was an acquaintance of "Judge" Stupe's; he'd often heard the volatile Frenchman make jests at the expense of the other's sober habit of mind.

He found Jacob Stupe nursing a long pipe and a mug of porter away from the monte tables in the camp's most respectable resort. In broken and halting bits Jere told his story of Allaire's disappearance. The other heard him through soberly.

"My young friend," he said, "I see no reason for you to worry. If Allaire has gone away it is on proper business."

Then the *alcalde* told Jere of a visit Allaire had made upon him the week before; Allaire accompanied by a big stranger—Stupe did not remember the latter's name—who was negotiating for the purchase of the Frenchman's beef herd. They wished

Stupe to witness a bill of sale between them. Part payment for the herd passed from the stranger to Allaire in Stupe's presence —$3,000 if the judge recalled the figure correctly—and it seemed to be the understanding between them that Allaire was to accompany the purchaser to his home and there receive the remainder.

Jere followed the other's statement with troubled eyes. When he had done the youth launched a question. "Big fella, that-thar stranger, with fringes onto his huntin' shirt an' a sorta possum smile?"

Stupe nodded.

"An' whar from was he?"

"Somewhere over in Utah Territory along the Overland Trail, as best I can remember."

JERE knotted his bony fingers together and gave Judge Stupe an agonized look. "Jedge, hit jist don' make sense, my podner sellin' out an' goin' away 'thought tellin' me ary thing about hit. An that-thar Lem Collins settin' in my podner's cabin a'claimin' of hisself in charge.

"Jedge Stupe"—suddenly Jere's head came up under the thrust of a smashing thought—"iffen that-thar stranger was wishful to meet up with Allaire—him comin' into strange country an' all—whyn't he ask me, when he meets up with me down to my claim, whar-at's Pierre Allaire, 'stead of wantin' to know whar he kin find that polecat Lem Collins?"

Jacob Stupe stroked his long beard without answer. Jere hurried on.

"An' whyfor should Allaire go all the way over the mountains to Utah Territory to kotch the rest of his money when all he's gotta do is set tight with his cow critters an' let the stranger fotch it to him?"

Stupe took a long pull at his mug and swabbed his beard with the back of his hand. "I don't see that we can do anything, my young friend, on such slight suspicion. It would be likely that Allaire would put his head cowman in charge of his properties if he were going over the mountains with this purchaser of his herd. I don't see anything out of the way in the stranger's asking for Collins. Likely he knows Collins and relied upon him to meet your partner.

"Go back to your claim, young fella," Stupe finished with a paternal note, "and I promise you that if the Frenchman doesn't show up inside of a week I'll have this Lem Collins down here and put the screws on him."

TWO days passed. Jere Cuttles, at work with his long handled shovel lifting the gravel from the bed of the diverted river into his rocker box, was not as intent upon his work as he should have been. Day and night a weight of anxiety pressed down on his brain like lead foil packed inside his skull. Over and over again until the rote became maddening he had reviewed the scant circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Allaire, weighing, surmising, driving futilely at a conclusion which always evaded him.

Suddenly he dropped his shovel and started striding through the willows. That gunshot he'd heard down-river three days after the stranger had accosted him here on his claim, why hadn't he thought of that since?

The lanky youth took the trail following the windings of the river—the trail that crossed Cougar Mountain to carry down into the desert beyond. Here was open country unmarred by any settlement or miner's claim—Jere's own diggings were miles below the furor about Fiddler's Bar. The trail was but a meandering horse-track through wild oats and meadow grass well within sound of the river's voice.

Jere Cuttles could scarcely sense the subtle change that came over him once he was launched on this new business. As his grandfathers and their fathers before them had made themselves trail-wise in their pioneering over the passes of the Blue Ridge in their cheating of a skulking death ever ready to strike from forest shadows, so now he put into practice the craft that was in his blood. This narrow horse-track through virgin country began to tell him hidden secrets.

To back-track the trail of the stranger who'd come questioning Lem Collins was simple; where he'd tied his horse amid the willows on Jere's claim four hoofprints were plain in marshy ground—one of them made by a "skelped" hoof. But about two

miles south of the Pike's claim, where foxgloves bordered a little crossing rivulet, other hoofprints bearing in from the range lands on the west side of the valley joined the trail and followed it on its south'ard course. The tracker dropped to his knees and studied these prints closely.

One was made by the horse with the skelped hoof—the stranger cutting back from Allaire's range onto the trail to Utah Territory. There were two other horses in the party that had passed that way.

"Allowin's as how my podner mout be ridin' with that-thar big stranger, how-come a third?"

NOW the tracker was alert and tingling. The trail turned into a little flat where the old Indian campoodie stood. Jere looked for the landmark. He saw a circle of black smudge where the abandoned hut of grass and bark had been. Promptly he turned off the trail and strode to that circle.

Charred butt-ends of willow poles fringed the center pile of ashes. A few fragments of clay pots lay amid the crisp cinders. Jere's new-found impulse of a reader of blind signs prompted him to stir those cinders, to spread them out thin for his eyes to scan.

He picked from amid the ashes a scorched metal button—another. What appeared at first a calcined lump of willow butt proved to be a charred bootheel held together by steel pegs.

Jere sat back on his hunkers and pondered. The old campoodie would not have made a fire hot enough to consume a body even though it might destroy all but these relics of a man's clothing had been burned with the hut. No live man would set fire to an Indian campoodie to burn his clothes. But if they were a dead man's clothes——

The youth arose, trembling. He walked back to the trail and stood there slowly turning his eyes in widening sweeps across the little meadow. A white streak against the trunk of an alder tree screening the river caught his eye and he strode to investigate. There was a fresh wound in the bark where a horse's teeth had stripped off a piece—a tethered and restless horse. Beyond, the river widened in a dark pool.

Jere stood on a grassy bank a yard high over the green water and tried to peer into the depths. He could catch the dim outlines of great boulders ten feet below the surface, but there was frustrating shadows between.

He stripped off his clothes and plunged. The icy water drove knives into him and he was forced almost immediately to scramble up to the grassy slope. He beat himself furiously and dived again. Furiously he forced himself to explore the deepest crevices of the submerged rocks. Something white and grotesque came into his swimming vision. He put out a hand and touched it.

Jere Cuttles came to the surface and summoned his last atom of strength to drag himself up the bank. His eyes were bulging and his breath came in sharp whistles through the convulsions of chills.

"My podner! Oh my God—my podner!"

JUDGE STUPE and a dozen men from Fiddler's Bar with ropes and grapples made of hay hooks came next day under the guidance of a youth with the look of a destroying angel in his eyes. They brought to the sunlight the body of Pierre Allaire, naked and bound with rope about a weighting boulder.

A bullet hole had been drilled through the back of the dead man's skull.

III

PIERRE ALLAIRE'S body was buried in the flower flecked meadow by the side of the stream from whose watery cavern it had been recovered. *Alcalde* Stupe said a prayer over the bowed heads about the shallow grave. Jere Cuttles stood slope shouldered and moveless, his pale eyes following the falling clods.

When the others were moving toward their horses the lanky Pike still remained by the fresh mound.

"Podner," he whispered, "I aims to take vengeance, an' that I do. By tooth and eye,

by hair for hair I aims to take vengeance. God hear me!"

Then he took his horse with the others and rode with his chin on his chest.

By whispers and nods between man and man the burial party had become a company of vigilantes before ever the forks of the trail above Jere's claim had been reached. Such companies leap out of thin air when necessity arises—and there is no judge of necessity save themselves.

Jacob Stupe rode his horse alongside Jere and laid an arm over the boy's shoulder.

"My son, if you'd only come to me with your suspicions about Lem Collins the day after you did I'd been more ready to believe you."

Jere, deep in grim thoughts, gave no sign. Stupe continued, "Our lodge"—he named a secret society potent in California life—"got a letter by Langton's express driver over from Quincy the day after you talked to me. Letter from Acacia Lodge, 'way down in Merced country, telling of the killing of our brother Jim Anstey by a man calling himself Edwards. That was three months ago. Description fits Lem Collins to a T. How long had he been working for Allaire?"

"Goin' on two months," Jere said.

"Ever heard him say where he came from?"

"Wouldn't say, him; leastwise not when my pod—when Allaire tries to find out."

"We'll hang him for two murders," said the *alcalde* simply. "And the other fellow—the cattle buyer from over the mountains?"

"The Lord will deliver him inter my hands," solemnly from the Missourian.

RED of blood was in the western sky and all the snow peaks were ensanguined when the men with law in their hands rode up the slope to the cabin of Allaire's ranch. They dismounted and approached, spread out and with revolvers at hip. The cabin door was open. No expected shot from a trapped murderer.

They entered. Confusion there, what with every foot of the dirt floor spaded over and heaped about in piles; what with even the stones of the fireplace dislodged. Evidence enough of frantic digging for hidden gold. Was it for the $3,000 Jacob Stupe had seen the stranger give to the murdered man in part payment for his

stock? Pierre Allaire would not have thought of taking such a large sum with him if in truth he had agreed to accompany the purchaser to his home. Manifestly, the twain had killed him and then returned to the cabin to find what they believed to be hidden there.

And this had happened since the time Jere Cuttles came here seeking his foster-father. Could it have been—so Jere turned probabilities over in his mind—that on that morning following his interview with Lem when he returned to Allaire's cabin and was warned away by a musket in the cowman's hands that he had interrupted Collins in his work of searching for a dead man's treasure—in spading and prying after a hiding place?

"You know the way to the cowmen's camp," Stupe said to Jere. "You lead and I reckon we can make it before dark."

The vigilantes followed after the youth's horse over the miles of range along the slope of the western mountains. Shadows marched down from the purpling summits to flank them ere they came to destination. And none too soon. For as Jere and the leaders filed up out of a coulee north of the weather-beaten shack they saw a figure frantically saddling a horse in the corral beyond the house.

A dash—scattering shots and he who had attempted escape stood with hands high above his head. Despard the second cowman for Allaire's herd.

Riders formed a ring about the fellow. One dropped a noose over his head and tightened the slip-knot with a significant jerk.

"What's your hurry to get away?" Stupe asked the man. Answer came in a crackling Spanish oath.

"Where is Lem Collins?" the *alcalde* challenged.

"Not your dam' business," in a snarl from the swarthy Basco. The head man of

Fiddler's Bar bent a surprised glance at the fellow.

"Look-y here, Greaser, we mean business. We want Lem Collins for murder—and you, too, maybe. I give you another chance; where is your partner?"

"Go to hell!"

THE grave man on horseback slowly looked about in the clotting dark. His eyes fell on a white oak standing a little beyond the corral. A brief nod of his head thither and the horsemen closed about the Basco, driving him under the tree by the hustling of their horses' flanks. A man leaped down, fought briefly with the defiant cowman and had his arms triced behind him in no time. The loose end of the rope about his neck snaked up over a branch and was wrapped about a saddle horn.

"Where is Lem Collins?" Stupe thundered. The stubborn one's oath was strangled in his throat as his feet left the ground. A minute of horror as a body leaped and danced. Judge Stupe held up a hand and the rope was eased away. Despard crumpled choking on the ground.

Once again the wretch was made to look into the very eyes of death before his spirit was broken by the torture. He lay, at last, sobbing answers to questions put to him.

Collins had gone these two days since—gone a'horseback over the trail to Carson Valley over in the Utah desert. Yes, Collins had gone to join his friend Lucky Bill Hazard who lived at a place on the Overland Trail called Bitter Springs.

He, Despard, and Collins had planned to drive Allaire's cattle over to Hazard's ranch in the desert but Collins had become afraid over something and had ridden away in the night.

"What part did you have in the killing of Allaire?" Stupe drove into the strangled cowman's ear.

"Name of God, señor—nothing! I only guess the boss is killed by them when Collins begins digging the floor of the Frenchman's cabin. Before that I think he rides to Bitter Springs with that Hazard because he tells me watch well his cattle while he is gone."

"How much of Allaire's buried gold did Collins give you to keep your mouth shut?" some one of the group put in.

"Not a penny," whined the Basco. "I not even know Collins find that gold."

There was a whispered consultation between the *alcalde* and some of the men. Despard, they decided, had a guilty knowledge of the Frenchman's slaying and should be taken to Fiddler's Bar to stand trial before a miners' court. The man was hoisted in a saddle before one of the riders and the trail for the settlement taken.

JERE CUTTLES had said no word during the test under the oak tree and now he rode a little apart from the others. Before the cavalcade had ridden far through the dark Judge Stupe pushed his horse alongside.

"Well, my son, what'd we best do about this proposition?" His voice held a kindly invitation to confidence. Jere was silent for a minute.

"Far's I'm consarned, they hain't no 'we' into it," he said.

"You mean——"

"Judge, sir"—the boy turned to give the other a glance he would have seen to be full of flames had there been light—"back in the red oak kentry whar I was born an' whar my pappy was born, does somebody do yore family a hurt, yo' don't call in the hull county to make yore vengeance. Hit's the family's vengeance.

"Me, I rides alone to make my vengeance."

"But, young friend, I've heard of this Lucky Bill Hazard," the other expostulated. "Saw him myself, by jinks, when I came across three years ago. He's the toughest road agent and gambler on the Overland Trail and he's got a gang at his back—cutthroats and blacklegs. You can't fight the whole settlement of Bitter Springs. Now my lodge in Fiddler's Bar is interested in stringing up Collins for the murder he did down in the Merced country; Collins will be expecting us to trail him over there. If we could get a line on Collins and Hazard both—you feeling out the ground, for one man would be better than a crowd for that—why——"

Long the worthy *alcalde* argued to beat down the Missouri youth's stiff necked devotion to the idea of a personal and single

handed vengeance. Finally he won. In the star-strewn dark of the Sierra night the man and the boy came to agreement upon a plan, daring as the strategy of any fabled hero cast against overwhelming odds.

IV

THE tough frontier station of Bitter Springs, squatting like a congress of beetles in a valley of black sage, was the only eddy of life along five hundred miles of wheel tracks between the Mormon settlements at the head of Great Salt Lake and the first of the California gold camps on the Sierra's western slope. Great white wagons which threaded across the Overland Trail in the world's most spectacular caravan won through the blistering terrors of the Humboldt Sink to the north and east of Bitter Springs and came to the ugly town as to a promised Zion.

For there reprovisioning could be made in food stocks packed over the mountains from San Francisco and sold at almost their weight in gold. A few canny hay farmers —disappointed gold seekers turning back from El Dorado to squat on the valley's wild grasses—would open their meadows to starved trail cattle for a stiff price. The town's saloons and deadfalls offered sufficient excitement to men surfeited with months of monotony on the road out from Independence or Council Bluffs.

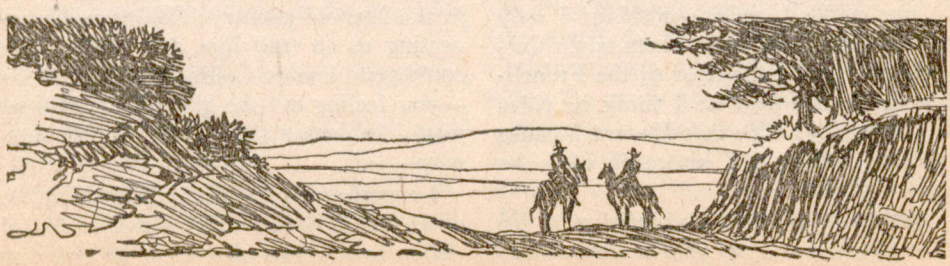
And Bitter Springs was Lucky Bill Hazard's personal domain. He had built it. He owned a major interest in all of the saloons and gambling tents. Largely he had populated it with blacklegs and shady characters fleeing the California diggings to find sanctuary from pursuing vigilantes; Sydney ducks driven out of San Francisco, discredited gamblers given ticket-of-leave from Sacramento, men with red hands. In the eyes of these refugees from the law Lucky Bill stood as a second Robin Hood. For the big fellow with the quick smile had a heart wide as outdoors for all crooks in trouble—and even for honest men in the same circumstance.

Lucky Bill was the Law—the only Law existing between Salt Lake and Sierra crest. At the time I introduce him to you there was no geographical area marked "Nevada." Bitter Springs lay in the shadowy jurisdiction of the Territory of Utah and with the nearest peace officer nigh a month away in terms of travel.

THIS master of crooks and desperadoes had been back two weeks from his mission over the Sierras—and he counted the trip a failure for reasons which will appear—when a wagon train from the east straggled into Bitter Springs with a horror tale more grim than the average. The wagon company's draft cattle were tottering skeletons, its people nigh dead from thirst and the ravages of what was called mountain fever.

"They's a wagon broke down back yonder by the Sink," a walking ghost under an alkali stained hat reported to Lucky Bill. "Ole man an' his daughter, both nigh dead with the fever, lyin' under the wagon. Best we could do for 'em was to leave a dram or so of water an' promise we'd get relief back when we hit this station."

Not in the three years of his rule had a tale of hardship and want in the desert gone unheeded by Lucky Bill. He might rob emigrants over his card tables or charge them out of their boots at his store, but he never left them to die in the wilderness. So, with this news to spur him, he set out with four horses hitched to his light prairie wagon and water barrels under the hood. Beside him on the high driver's seat rode one Doc. Almy, drunkard and gambler who once in his cleaner days had been a sur-



geon in the Navy; Doc Almy with his almost forgotten black bag of pills.

It was mid-July and the heat dropped like drippings from a melting sky of tin. Through the shimmering atmosphere mountains at a distance swelled and shrank like the sides of breathing monsters. Every stunted sagebush was a dead faggot charred by sun flames.

Not until near dark did the mercy wagon from Bitter Springs come upon the marooned prairie schooner canted over on one shattered wheel. One of two prone oxen hitched to the tongue lifted its head a few inches from the sand and tried to low.

Lucky Bill and Doc Almy found the abandoned sufferers on a pallet of blankets beneath the wagon box where the sun could not reach them. The man, who was in the middle age and with gray in his beard, lay in a stupor, eyes closed and scarcely breathing. Beside him a girl not many years beyond pinafores—Lucky Bill guessed she might be seventeen or eighteen—was stretched on her back, her wide eyes looking up at the dusty boards over her head. They slowly moved to fasten upon Lucky Bill's face when it bent over hers; but the action was automatic, there was no comprehension in the irises.

"Work on her first, Doc," Lucky Bill whispered. "This little beauty can't afford to die."

The master of Bitter Springs was not one to credit beauty in the opposite sex carelessly. Despite the burning flush spreading down from the double wave of chestnut hair over the brow, beauty lay on the girl's face like a caress. There was perfection in the curve of chin to throat and the full arch of lips; in all the features a certain spiritual quality which few of the sunbonneted women of the wagon trains Lucky Bill was used to seeing could display. The flimsy calico which gowned her fell about lines of budding womanhood.

ALL this Lucky Bill took in with an avid glance. He thought himself a judge of pretty women—though in this almost womanless West he saw few enough. A woman's beauty thrilled him as no chance on the gaming table could.

While Doc Almy was busy with dripping rags for the brows of the fever sufferers and brandy sponges for their stiffened lips, Lucky Bill's broad humanity pushed him to the needs of the poor beasts under their ox bow. As tenderly as if he had been ministering to the girl under the wagon box, he bathed the protruding tongues and then brought water by the bucketful for the reviving oxen.

"The man won't live; the girl—maybe," was Doc Almy's diagnosis when, long after sundown, he and Lucky Bill lifted the twain to a bed of blankets in the prairie wagon. Unconsciousness still held them. The apostate medico sat by the heads of the sufferers renewing the compresses on their brows while Lucky Bill drove through the dark on the homeward trail. The two oxen followed willingly enough, their noses lifted to the precious scent of water.

Some time during the dark hours when all was still but for the lisping of sand off the tires, the man in the wagon box called a woman's name in a high gasping voice, then breathed no more.

MARY, Pah-ute squaw, cook and housekeeper for the master of Bitter Springs, came loping down the single street of that frontier outpost on the back of a mule—all over the mule, it might be said, for Mary's physical specifications varied but slightly from those of a fair sized haystack. She sought out her boss where he was attacking a noonday steak in the town's single eating house.

"She wake-up," was Mary's wheezed message. That was sufficient to send Lucky Bill out to his horse. He mounted, passed a message for Doc Almy to one of the loafers on the sidewalk, then put off at a gallop. The squaw followed as best she could on her slower moving mount.

Lucky Bill's hay ranch and the cabin he called home lay in a sparse meadow where an underground river came up to spread a narrow carpet of green three miles from the town—a tiny spot of softness in the gray immensity of the desert. No neighbors; only the circle of mountains with the gray heads of prophets to look down upon the devious comings and goings of Lucky Bill Hazard.

He strode into the house and then un-

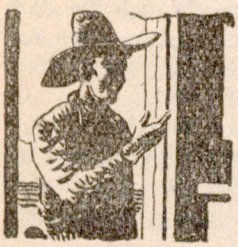
consciously went a'tiptoe as he approached the bedroom door. A flash of startled eyes met him as he stood in the doorway looking down at the girl on the bed. He saw a hand come up to pull close the opened throat of a shirt—one of his clean shirts. For a breath neither spoke.

"I am Bill Hazard," he said, then, inwardly a little surprised at a feeling of diffidence.

"Then I am—this is——" The girl was finding difficulty in marshaling a rush of questions.

"My house," he supplied. "And mighty welcome to it—er—Miss."

"Then that Indian woman—" She found another question more pressing, "How long have I been here—and what place is this?"



"You've been here three days—mighty sick. And, ma'am, you're two-three miles from Bitter Springs on the Overland Trail. Twenty, or thereabout, from where we found you."

On the ride out from town Lucky Bill had braced himself to meet one question he dreaded. Now it came. He answered it with no fumbling or silly evasion.

"Sorry to have to tell you, miss, your father died when Doc Almy and I were bringing the two of you in from the Sink."

THE girl on the bed took the news without flinching. Just a quick flutter of a hand to lips and the closing of eyelids in sharp pain. Lucky Bill stood twirling his hat, wondering if he should leave her with her grief or say something to assuage it. Subconsciously he was feasting himself on her fragile beauty.

"You—have—cared for—him?"

"Yes—near here," he answered. She turned her head to let her eyes travel through the window to the grave old men of the mountains. Then back to Lucky Bill.

"I am alone—then——"

To his confusion Lucky Bill found it difficult to put in the right word of reassurance here. He wanted to say, in his character of take—what-you-want, that—but shucks! That wouldn't go here.

"Not exactly alone, lady. Quite a lot of well-meaning folks in Bitter Springs"—Lucky Bill was lying brazenly—"who'll go far toward making you feel at home."

"I haven't thanked you yet," she suddenly cut in with a brave attempt at a smile. "I am not quite sure I have much to thank you for—saving my life, I mean; but when I feel stronger, maybe——"

Silence fell. For his part, Lucky Bill felt a little shame that his eyes should be traveling so hungrily from the round of her throat to the half-bared arm lying on the blankets. In his experience women were women, to be taken like a drink—when wanted. He thought he knew 'em. But this girl snatched from the desert; alone in a world she had not even seen, the tough world of Bitter Springs; weak and helpless as a new-born coyote—why, he just couldn't feel toward her like—like he thought he would.

"I am two thousand miles from home." Her voice came hushed by sudden realization of the hopelessness of her situation. "Now—with dad gone—I can't go on to California; no place for a girl alone. And I couldn't face that dreadful desert again to go back to the States. I just couldn't, even if I could find some one good enough to let me go with their party."

LUCKY BILL was on the point of saying it wouldn't be so bad for her to remain in Bitter Springs, but he compromised with, "When you get stronger will be time enough to figure on what's to be done."

He filled another pause by a blunt query, "What's your name, miss?"

"Lucy," she answered. "Lucy Brand."

"Pretty name. Knew a Lucy once, but she wasn't like you—hardly!" Lucky Bill's accustomed habit of boldness pushed through the unwonted delicacy he had felt during the interview. He tossed his hat into a corner and sat down on the bed beside the girl—the flicker of shrinking in her eyes was not lost on him, either.

"Lucky Bill Hazard's an awfully easy fellow to get along with, you'll find, Lucy; will go farther than most for them he likes."

Lucy Brand's eyes were fixed searchingly on the outlaw's bronzed features. She had

not known many men. Her neighbors back in Wisconsin, the young fellows who came to take her to choir meeting or to candy pulls, were all farm boys—plodders of the soil. None of them possessed the hint of recklessness, the taunt to the devil lying in the alert eyes and quickly smiling mouth of this man. She feared him and yet——

"That Indian woman who was bending over me when I spoke up a little time ago," Lucy questioned; "she is—I mean, maybe your wife has taken care of me and I didn't know it."

Lucky Bill grinned. "Which is your way of asking if Big Mary is my wife. Well—hardly!"

"Oh!" A flush mounted Lucy's cheeks. "I didn't mean—that is——"

Now Lucky Bill's first mood of pity and curbing deference was whisked away completely by the habit of mastery that was his. He flashed a knowing smile at Lucy Brand.

"That's not saying I may not get me a wife sometime—when I find a girl I figure I want."

Deep eyes bearing on him widened in an instant's startlement, then by an effort of will they composed themselves.

"Of course," she said.

V

JERE CUTTLES came to Bitter Springs on his mission of blood vengeance a week after Lucy Brand made her first discovery in the character of her rescuer. Jere's arrival was nigh a month after the murder of Pierre Allaire. It had required all of *Alcalde* Stupe's powers of persuasion to hold the boy off that long. No hurry, the canny Dutchman had argued; let Hazard and Collins believe the killing of the Frenchman had not been discovered and that they need fear no pursuit. Moreover—also on Stupe's recommendation—Jere did not take the trail direct from Fiddler's Bar over the Sierras to the desert town, but bore far to the south on the California side of the mountains and turned east when he struck the Overland Trail at Hangtown.

A new outfit of clothes bought at that lively camp and the sacrifice of the corn-tassel beard materially changed Jere's aspect. All arms and legs he still was; but without the juvenile fringe of beard his face had a more mature look. Jere Cuttles who rode into tough Bitter Springs was much less the gawky Pike than the Jere the valley knew. Perhaps the events which prodded him to this serious adventure had in themselves served to lift him over the border line between youth and manhood.

He rode into Bitter Springs with a very definite plan of action in mind and in a character he had rehearsed many times over the long trail across the mountains. From this and that bit of gossip he had gleaned from emigrants going west over the trail Jere had learned a good deal about the type of men constituting the town's citizenry; who were the outstanding ruffians besides Lucky Bill and what to expect from them. So he was primed to the feather edge.

It was late afternoon of a day of intolerable heat when Jere's horse reached the straggling single street; a double row of tents and false front wooden shacks emblazoned by signs of refreshment and folly; alkali dust a foot deep in the road; emigrants' white-hooded wagons parked in a central corral or drawn up before a store while their tenants gave themselves a thrill of town life after weeks in the silences.

He drew rein before a rude hitching rack, bridle-tied his beast and creaked his way in new boots into the first saloon. A dozen or more idlers there, hanging by the crook of their elbows on the pine bar or watching a listless game of high-low. Jere noisily beat his hat against his knees to rid it of dust the while his eyes shrewdly skimmed the fringe of loafers. He hit upon the biggest one, a whiskered fellow with the mark of hard liquor on his face, and swaggered up to him.

"Yo're the lop-eared ki-yote I been yearnin' to meet up with," Jere blustered and without more ado he shot his big hand into the other's face and gave his nose a terrific yank. The outraged owner of the assaulted nose staggered back and reached for his waistband. Jere was too quick for him. His left hand darted to the crook handle of a long dragoon revolver protruding above a belt, whisked the weapon out

and sent it crashing against a fancy pyramid of glasses behind the bar.

"No ye don't!" Jere bellowed. "Kaintuck' rules. Eye gougin' an' bitin' free as ever —but no weepons!" A crash of his fist against the injured nose sent the other reeling back against a card table.

Instantly a ring of excited spectators formed about the twain. Others rushed in from the street. Tables and chairs were whisked into a corner. Here was something to watch; a lanky stranger all of a sudden tying into Yazoo Yancy, the town's most spectacular killer. 'Nother funeral out to Boot Hill!

YAZOO spread his arms and made a rush for Jere. Neatly side-stepping, one of Jere's new boots came up with a swoop and landed against a kneecap—this was all within "Kaintuck' rules," remember. The big Yazoo's right leg crumpled under him and he sprawled. Jere leaped for his back. Landing on his doubled knees fairly between the other's shoulders, his hands went to Yazoo's hairy neck in a strangle hold.

But the Missouri youth might as well have tried to choke an elephant. Big Yazoo rose to one knee with a hoarse roar and pitched his lighter antagonist over his head. Then he plunged upon Jere before the latter had time to evade the avalanche of sinew and bone. Jere's rigid right arm popped the other's chin for an instant while his left thumb drove at the wolf-like eyes.

This was what men of the frontier, the trappers of the Rockies, the tough bargemen of the Mississippi, called "ground-scufflin'." A deadly and bone-breaking business. Jere Cuttles had learned all its tricks back in the Red Hills country of his birth —eye-gouging, biting, throttling. But now he realized that his stunt of bravado, his singling out the biggest man to fight as a proper introduction to Bitter Springs' good graces, suddenly had plumped him into a life-and-death issue.

"Git him, Yazoo! Trim the young pup of his ears! Now, Yaz', y'got 'im whar y'want 'im!" The crowd was all with Yancy, hungered for an execution.

Jere must break that grip on his arms, must get to his feet where his superior shiftiness could weigh against overwhelming weight. He felt fingers groping for his eyes, a sharp slicing pain across the lids.

With a supreme effort he bowed his back —Yazoo's weight was a terrific load to lift —and swung his long right leg upward in a sweeping arc. The coppered toe of the boot thudded against the base of a hairy skull just where the backbone emerged— a numbing blow. Yazoo went limp. Like a cat Jere was out from under and striding the big chest. His grip was on the other's ears ready to give the shaggy head what was called "the bumps" in the technic of ground scuffing when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You win, stranger. No use killing Yazoo just to settle a friendly argument."

JERE looked through blood at the face between his fists. Eyes were closed; jaw sagged open. He turned his head up toward the sound of the voice. Vaguely he saw the grinning face of the man who had accosted him in the willows a month ago— Lucky Bill Hazard. His pounding heart skipped a full beat and the roused fighting blood in him prompted that then and there he attempt to blot out the life of one of Allaire's slayers. But he remembered the responsibility drummed into him by Judge Stupe; he had come to Bitter Springs only as the agent of rough justice over the mountains, not as its principal.

Jere got stiffly to his feet. He found his hand grasped by Lucky Bill. The fickle crowd, eager to champion a victor, pushed about him to slap his back. The beaten Yazoo was dragged into a corner and forgotten. Men came solicitously with dripping towels to swab the blood from Jere's face. Lucky Bill ordered all hands to the bar to drink to the prowess of the stranger.

"What was your grudge against Yazoo Yancy?" Lucky Bill wanted to know when the first slug of burning liquor had scorched Jere's throat. Jere, emerging quickly from the daze of battle and finding himself exalted by Lucky Bill himself, dropped into the part he had planned for himself.

"Reckoned he was a polecat what did me outa a claim over in Californy three-four months ago. But when I gits to scuffin' him"—here Jere threw in a wide grin for

good measure—"I see I'm wrong. Anyway, I craved to git a fight outa my system. Hain't had a good one goin' on a month."

A roar of laughter greeted this sally. Once more Lucky Bill crooked a finger at the bartender.

"Headed for the States?" he asked.

Jere appeared to ponder his reply with the craft of a man who was unaccustomed to revealing his plans. "Maybe so," he finally conceded. "I'm sorta on the loose."

With a lordly gesture he ordered the barkeeper to refill the drained glasses and let Lucky Bill take the lead in conversation. The master of Bitter Springs was a connoisseur of men as some people in this softer age of ours are connoisseurs of porcelains and tapestries. He liked to have rare specimens of manhood about him. This long limbed stranger had just licked the town bully, wherefore he was a treasure to be added to Lucky Bill's precious collection.

Though strictly adhering to the West's rigorous code against prying into a man's past, Lucky Bill managed to draw from Jere vague hints about "trouble" he'd gotten into over the Sierras in the diggin's. "Trouble" in the Days of Gold had a peculiar significance; it covered everything from robbing sluice boxes to murder.

Jere allowed himself to be persuaded to stay a while in Bitter Springs.

Yazoo Yancy, brought around by copious sloshings of water, accepted Jere's apology for the results of a mistaken identity in an humble spirit. His crown had been snatched from him and perhaps he was glad to be rid of the responsibility.

So the avenger of Pierre Allaire established himself by a single daring stratagem in Lucky Bill's nest of murderers and hunted men. So in a few whirlwind minutes he learned the half of what he'd ridden many weary miles to know; the whereabouts of Hazard. Remained for him to discover if Lem Collins, the second man whose hands were wet with Allaire's blood, was also a fledgling in this infamous nest.

BEFORE he went to bed that night in the Emigrant's Rest, a two-storied scaffold with canvas stretched over it, Jere had sealed his place in the town's affections —and in Lucky Bill's—by sitting into a game of stud designed especially as a sort of second degree for neophytes and winning several stacks of Mexican dollars from the town's hardened gamblers. Here again, not luck so much as skill was with the Missourian. Jere could not read or write, but he'd studied poker—draw and stud—at his father's knee. He could read secrets in the twitch of an opponent's eyelash.

Not counting transient emigrants, there were not a hundred and fifty people in Bitter Springs and the surrounding oasis. Before he had been two days in town Jere saw them all. Lem Collins was not one of them. Jere checked this situation.

No doubting the confession made by Despard the Basco who told the truth when death faced him. Collins had quit the valley on sudden alarm to cross the mountains and join Lucky Bill in his desert retreat. Since he was not now in Bitter Springs, only two contingencies offered. Either, more timorous than Lucky Bill, he was hiding out somewhere in the surrounding mountains until all chance of pursuit should pass, or he had joined a wagon train of disheartened gold seekers headed east. In that case the cowman was ere now hopelessly beyond reach of the vigilantes' noose.

How to discover which of these two possibilities covered fact?

No safe way except through Lucky Bill himself, and that would require caution.

JERE set himself assiduously to cultivate the big fellow with the ready smile. Not openly, but in seeming casualness Jere put himself opposite Lucky Bill at friendly games of high-low, let himself be summoned by Lucky Bill to "whack in on a piece of bull meat" at the Rhinoceros Eating House. The Missourian's natural taciturnity commended him to the town's master rather than serving as a handicap; Lucky Bill did not favor men who told all they knew. The big fellow also found secret enjoy-

ment in the few homely bits of folk wisdom that came in Jere's lazy drawl.

This lanky fellow with the deceptive air of a gawk was a slick customer in Lucky Bill's estimation. He'd make a good steerer for emigrants over the new toll road Lucky Bill was planning to cut through Beckwourth Pass.

Lucky Bill Hazard, connoisseur of men, open-hearted patron of fugitives on the wrong side of the law, took into his heart the youth whose business it was to see him properly hanged.

As supreme evidence of this favor, on Jere's fourth day in Bitter Springs Lucky Bill drew him aside and with many winks and sly smiles entrusted him with a delicate mission.

"Like's not you've heard of my girl—my new one," he began. "She's out to my house on the hay ranch getting over a mountain fever which nigh killed her over in the Sink. She and Big Mary out there. I've been sleeping in town to make things look right and proper with her.

"Well, Jere, I reckon I've been crowding Lucy a li'l too hard with my—um—offer of affections. Yunno. And this morning she climbed out of bed, through the window and took it for the hills. Big Mary had to catch her and bring her back. You wouldn't think a likely young girl would act that way; now would you?"

Jere shook his head sagely. He had heard sly whispers about a girl Lucky Bill had rescued from the desert and had in his ranch-house over her convalescence.

"Well, sir, to sort of square myself with Lucy," the other resumed, "I've bought a new silk gown off a busted emigrant's wife. Lucy hasn't got anything but calico, and you know how girls admire to have pretties. You ride out there with this silk gown, give it to Lucy with a few kind words, and maybe later I'll lope out there and find her in a forgiving mind."

"But looky here, Lucky——"

"Oh, don't you be afraid of cutting me out!" A hearty slap on Jere's back. "Not with that map of yours!"

ONCE at the ranch, Jere had difficulty winning past Big Mary, jealous guardian of Lucy Brand. He finally persuaded her that he came as trusted messenger from Lucky Bill and the squaw grudgingly removed her bulk from the door. Jere halted, tongue tied, before the girl whose big eyes searched his questioningly. She sat swathed in a blanket and almost buried in the depths of an armchair fashioned from a large wine barrel. Two heavy braids of burnished chestnut framed her small features where they fell down to lie over her breast.

The Missouri youth's life since he was rescued from the wilderness of the Overland Trail had been almost without feminine contacts. Sure it is that the vision of pale beauty before him was not at all what he expected to see. Hard eyes, maybe; painted lips, but not——

"Lucky Bill sent you out this, ma-am." Jere clumsily laid a paper wrapped bundle in Lucy's lap and half turned as if to make an escape.

"Please—don't go!" Quickly from the girl, in her desperation seizing the opportunity for speech with somebody who did not possess the bold, hungry eyes of Lucky Bill. Jere halted and fumbled his hat.

"What——" Her fingers lightly touched the bundle.

"He says it's a silk gown he bought off a emigrant woman," Jere blurted. A line jumped between the girl's eyes and she let the gift slide to the floor. Again the small oval of her face was turned to Jere. Resolution fought with pressing fear there. Here, perhaps, was opportunity to find some way of escape from walls high as the desert sky.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Hazard's?" She put the question hesitantly. Even to Jere Cuttles an overtone of the gnawing anxiety behind Lucy's words carried unerringly.

"Well, ma-am, I hain't knowed him only four days. Lucky Bill 'pears to've taken a shine to me."

"Oh then you aren't one of his men—I mean the Bitter Springs outlaws I heard about on the trail before—before I was brought here?"

A QUICK gust of sympathy, half comprehended, stirred Jere's heart. Recalling the whispers and the sly nods in

the town's saloons; recalling, too, Lucky Bill's innuendo when commissioning him with the gift of the silk dress, Jere could not fit this wistful and fear ridden face into the ugly picture? Not in all his life had he seen in a woman's face what he saw in the one framed by oaken barrel staves there before him.

He told her truthfully he was not one of Lucky Bill's gang and was about to add a word of explanation when Lucy interposed.

"Why, then, did Hazard choose you to carry his—his hateful gift out to me?"

"I tell you, ma-am, he taken a shine to me -and—and"—Jere was bogging down in a situation but half guessed and wholly beyond his experience. He bull-headed through. "Iffen so be yo're in need of a friend, please, ma-am, figure on Jere Cuttles; that's me."

"Oh!" Her hands fluttered out in quick appeal. "I do need a friend. Somebody to take me away from this dreadful place before——"

Sound of a heavy tread on the boards of the lean-to kitchen beyond the cabin's main room. The Pah-ute squaw filled a doorway.

"You go now," she grunted. Jere looked at her sullenly. The creasy copper face was placid.

"You go now. Stay long 'nough." Big Mary gave the impression of a solid structure designed to remain in that doorway for all time. Reluctantly Jere turned to the front door, the Indian woman following. Over her mountainous shoulder the Missourian managed to send a message with his eyes; a message promising hope to Lucy Brand.

He mounted and was turning down the trail to town when a horseman cantered around a patch of willows beyond the dooryards. They passed within a yard of each other.

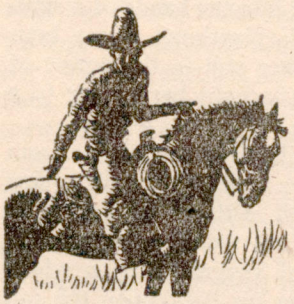
"Howdy!" The approaching rider gave Jere a searching look. The youth's heart gave a great bound and then seemed to stop. He lifted a hand in a wave of salutation —for he could not have spoken had he tried—and rode on.

Lem Collins!

VI

RECOVERING from the surprise of this encounter, Jere filled the short ride back to town with an attempt to analyze the situation which the past four days—and, particularly, recent minutes—had revealed. Consecutive thinking was a hard business for the Pike. He had to drive at it.

This much to the tally of the good: The



two men he'd ridden so far to find were both right here in this narrow valley—Lucky Bill without fear in the midst of his gang; Lem Collins skulking in the back country. Like as not, he was depending upon Lucky Bill for grub, or why should he show himself at the latter's ranch in broad daylight?

How to bring the cowman down from the hills so that when the vigilantes from over the Sierras made their swoop the two murderers could both be caught? That was a knotty problem. Only Lucky Bill could fetch Lem into Bitter Springs; and not even a rope around his neck could force him to do that or to tell where the cowman's hideout was. Jere had sized up the big outlaw's character sufficiently to establish this deduction.

"Gosh a'mighty! How kin I work on thet-thar big fella to ease this cowardly ki-yote into town, or leastwise to tell me whar-at he is?"

A pretty problem for a one-gallus Pike to solve.

Then there was another, tougher still: that girl with the big fear-ridden eyes he'd just left a prisoner under the eye of the fat squaw.

"Oh, I do need a friend!" So much in a note of desperate appeal before the big Indian woman had stopped the girl's lips. But those deep eyes had told him more—much more. Jere laboriously putting two and two together, found a strangely thrilling answer to the sum in his heart. Something stirred there which he never had

felt before; a tremulous tenderness wholly outside his experience.

JERE filled in the background of the picture she had made there, blanket swathed in that rude armchair. Bits of gossip he'd heard in the saloons gave him the colors. A girl robbed, as he had been, of a protector by the savage spirit of the desert; alone and without a friend in all this raw wilderness; tossed into the hands of a smiling outlaw for his plaything. Every hour that passed with her still in the power of the smiling giant brought her nearer to a fate which stirred the youth's gorge.

Yet what could he do to snatch her from her peril? Contrive to outwit the big squaw jailer and ride off with the girl back to Fiddler's Bar? That would mean forsaking the mission of vengeance upon which he'd come, turning his back upon the call of Pierre Allaire's blood and the confidence Judge Stupe and those others of Fiddler's Bar had imposed upon him.

"Oh Lawd, I kain't do thet—jist kain't!"

Lucky Bill spied Jere riding down the town's single street and hailed him eagerly, "How's the weather look out at the ranch?"

"Yo' mout say chilly an' risin' signs of storm," soberly from Jere. The big outlaw's face clouded momentarily, then his smile pushed through.

"Didn't my Lucy fancy the pretty gown?" He pitched his voice in a mimicking falsetto.

"Ask her yoreself," Jere bluntly advised. Then he seized upon a bold inspiration.

"Seen a fella ridin' in to yore house jist as I was siftin' away." Lucky Bill's eyes narrowed under the stab of primitive jealousy. Jere drawled on disinterestedly, "Mout've stopped an' passed the time of day iffen I'd been sure. Looked powerful like a fella I knowed once over in the Merced kentry yander of the mountings."

"So? What's the specifications of this fella you saw?" Jere described him.

"Oh, that'd be Lem Collins." Lucky Bill vented his relief in a brief laugh.

Jere caught him up with simulated interest. "Lem Collins—the same! Dawgone me, whyn't reckernize him for sure? What's Lem doin' this side of the range?"

"Living off me, mostly," the other grumbled.

"Whar-at kin I locate ole Lem?" innocently from Jere. Lucky Bill shot a shrewd look at him.

"If you're from the Merced country I suspicion Collins won't be hankering to see you," he said. "Got in a li'l trouble down there, Collins did; and a li'l more trouble somewhere else, more recent."

"Don't tell me it was a killin'," said Jere solicitously.

"I won't," was the other's cryptic answer and he swung his leg over the saddle. "That hungry wolf will hang round my place until I come out and stake him to some more grub. Right now I'm not craving to have any man hang round my house. I've got valuables there which I don't want stolen."

He gave Jere a ponderous wink and set off at a brisk lope in the direction of the ranch.

JERE was left all bogged down. He had tried out Lucky Bill on a lead which might bring precious information and that wily outlaw had parried. To bring up the subject of Lem Collins again would arouse the other's quick suspicion. His single chance of learning the cowardly cowman's hiding place had failed.

To distract his mind from the wearisome treadmill it pursued Jere left his horse in a saloon corral and walked a few hundred yards off the single street to where a newly come emigrant train, westward bound, had halted in a straggling line of covered wagons. Half the town was there; gamblers with their little portable tables going after a monte business right on the ground; hay farmers looking for business; Bitter Springs merchants with cloth for the women and provision price lists for wagon captains and lieutenants to scan. News from the East was swapped for lies about the California diggings just over the mountains. Hubbub and hurly-burly of a circus day.

In talk with a young boomer from Cincinnnati Jere learned that this Illinois Company—for so this emigrant train styled itself—was bound for the Shasta diggings in the far northern part of California and was planning to turn off the Overland Trail

here at Bitter Springs to follow the Beckwourth Road which led through Fiddler's Bar. He felt a prick of elation at the news. Here was a way to get a message to Judge Stupe. There wasn't a messenger in all Bitter Springs he could trust, so these pop-eyed emigrants were God-given.

But the train would rest here a week, Jere's new-found friend said, to allow the draft animals to rest and feed up before taking the harrowing road over the mountains.

A week! In that time he must learn the hiding place of Lem Collins and——

"Here you're fixin' up fer a wedding here in town," the young emigrant said. Jere admitted ignorance of such an impending event.

"Big fella you call Lucky Bill—and we heard lots about him from the Mormons back yonder—was over here not an hour ago askin' if there's a parson in the train. We told him half our company got hung up at Mormon Meadows—our preacher with 'em—but they'll be rolling in, come three-four days."

Jere Cuttles's heart went cold. Lucky Bill—a preacher—— Then that girl who had cried to him for rescue had only three or four days before——

A WILD thought came to him—these greenhorn emigrants; wouldn't they help? Suppose he stole Lucky Bill's girl and brought her to them for their protection.

Jere made a rapid appraisal. About thirty men here in the train; thirty against Lucky Bill's whole townful of roughnecks and bad men, even granted he could persuade them to risk all their dreams of gold to prevent an unknown girl's being properly married. What a chance!

"Good God— a li'l help!"

He quit the emigrants and walked back to the deserted street. Just in time to see Lucky Bill, evidently back from his flying trip to the ranch turn into the saloon which was his headquarters.

A crazy impulse seized Jere. He turned into the corral where his horse waited, mounted and cantered down the silent street out to where the wheel tracks of a nation's migration led toward the sunset sky. Unobserved, he rode until a small hill range lay between himself and the town, then he left the road and made a wide circle north in the direction of the ranch where Lucy Brand was held a prisoner.

"Don' know what's like to come of it," Jere told the backward turning ears before him; "but I jist kain't set round doin' nothin'. I gotta find me some action."

Jere Cuttles, the gawky Pike, was bursting from his chrysalis. Compulsion of circumstances, pressure of desperate need were forcing him to do a man's thinking.

VII

IN A green and gold dusk merging into the purple of night Jere came in sight of the squat log house with its outriggers of corral and shed—very desolate and alone under the black masses of the mountains. No lights in the two windows looking down the valley. Not a sign of anyone within. At a safe distance Jere sat his horse and studied the prospect. He finally dared to ride in a wide circle around the back of the cabin where he tied his horse to one of the posts of a hayrick. Then with an eye peeled for the Indian giantess he tiptoed to the door of the lean-to kitchen.

It was ajar. He slipped through the crack of the door and took a step in darkness. A board popped under his tread; the noise was like a pistol shot to the boy's taut nerves. No expected invasion of the kitchen by a ponderous squaw. Jere wondered if Lucky Bill had carried the girl away to another hiding place on this afternoon excursion.

He felt his way to the door giving onto the long main room—pushed it open and stood alert in the doorway. Though he saw nothing, heard nothing, yet some indefinable sense of a presence carried to him. His breath stopped as his ears strained to catch a sound. Finally:

"Lady," he called, very low, "whar-at be ye?" Then in quick afterthought, "I'm Jere Cuttles, the fella who's aimin' to help ye outa this pickle."

A long sigh of pent-up breath in the darkness, then a low call from somewhere at the room's far end:

"Here I am—tied."

Jere stumbled in the direction of the voice. His spread hands touched the staves of the great barrel chair, slipped over its top and fell upon soft hair.

"Lord love us, ma-am! Howcome?" Already his clasp knife was haggling at tough strands wrapped round and round the chair to imprison the body of the girl.

"Oh, when I heard your step in the kitchen," Lucy whispered with a catch of hysteria, "I didn't know who might be coming, what might happen to me; so I didn't dare speak. Mary, you see, wanted to ride to town and so to keep me from running away she tied me tight in this chair."

"Injun-like," Jere muttered as he cut loose the last bond about the girl's ankles. "Now we'll make a light."

"No—no!" in instant alarm. "If Hazard should come and find you here——"

"Let him." Jere was all recklessness under the presence he felt so close to him.

"But you're going to take me away with you, aren't you?" Hands fluttered through the dark to fall on the youth's head where he knelt, pulling severed ropes from Lucy's ankles. They pressed in desperate appeal.

"I—well ma-am——" Suddenly Jere Cuttles forgot everything in the world except the warm near presence of a woman who filled every bit of his being.

"Yes, ma-am, iffen yo're wishful fer me to do that," he said with a choke, and he stooped to lift her from the cavernous depths of the chair. The weakness of her convalescence added to numbness from the bonds Big Mary had imposed upon her made Lucy totter. Jere felt her weight sag, stooped suddenly and gathered her in his arms. Strands of her hair pressed against his cheek as he started to grope with a free hand toward the kitchen door. His blood leaped.

"Yo're trustin' me, ma-am?" he choked. "Yo're trustin' me true?"

"I am," Lucy whispered.

THE aloof desert stars looked down upon this odd variant of a tale old as the world. A youth who had come on a mission of blood vengeance forgetting all for the sake of a girl; a maid reading a clean heart in the exchange of a dozen words with a stranger youth and giving herself into the keeping of that youth's strong hands.

She was on the saddle before him and Jere was guiding his horse through the scrub over the circuitous route he'd picked for his trip to the ranch. For the first few minutes there was silence between them; each was a little dumbfounded by this swift turn of events into which both of them had been swept almost without conscious thought. Finally from Jere:

"We got a sight o' figgerin' to do afore we get clean outa here, ma-am." She gently corrected his form of address and he repeated after her, a little reverently, "Lucy."

"Yes, but you have already done the hardest part of it—taking me away from that dreadful place," she answered with a thrill of admiration in her voice. "And I thought, when you came to the house this morning bringing a gift from Hazard—I haven't even opened the hateful bundle; I thought you were just one of his bullies."

"That's been my game—makin' Lucky Bill think that same," simply from Jere. And then he told her why he was in Bitter Springs; of the murder of his foster father which had sent him, roundabout, into this nest of thugs and killers as scout for the vigilantes; how he was frustrated by the elusive Collins. He felt Lucy shudder in his arms.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Hazard a murderer; and he wanted—he *said* I was to marry him." She told Jere something of her experience since the fog of fever had lifted and she had found herself the guest-prisoner of a masterful outlaw with laughing eyes. Lucky Bill had been scrupulously chivalrous in outward deportment, the girl admitted, but he had told her bluntly that she was his; just as soon as a preacher came along the trail they would be wedded.

"You see, Jere, from what you have saved me," she finished in a tone which carried far behind her words. But the lanky youth who rode through the dark with a new and strange tumult in his heart was not so sure that he had saved Lucy Brand from the predatory hands of Lucky Bill. Now

that he had snatched her from her cabin prison, where could he take her?

TWO days' hard riding over the Beckwourth Trail to Fiddler's Bar—but one horse—no blankets or grub. And the girl still weak from fever's ravages. Even granted he could hide her in the desert, slip into town in the night and steal another horse, no chance of getting food and blankets without arousing curiosity. That would mean suspicion and—when Lucky Bill discovered the kidnapping of his girl—pursuit and inevitable capture.

Yet there was no place in Bitter Springs where he might hide Lucy while he made more ordered preparation for flight. In that town of tough men were but three women—not Lucy's kind; neither they nor any of the Bitter Springs men would dare harbor the girl stolen from the town's master even if they could provide a hiding place.

Greatest peril of all; the hoofprints in the sand which each minute were lengthening out behind them to bind them to Lucky Bill's little feudal despotism in the desert. When the lord of Bitter Springs discovered his loss and trailed those tracks back to town——

"Lucy, they's jist a single slim chance." Jere gravely spoke his thoughts aloud after many minutes of silence. "I'll circle the town and lose our tracks where the emigrants' horned cattle've been turned loose, then we'll sneak up on the train an' find some greenhorn woman who'll hide ye in a wagon fer a day till I kin ready up a trick fer liftin' us over the mountings. I dunno but what—Lawsy, what's that!"

A distant angry popping of shots. Over the top of a low hill lying between themselves and the town a rosy glow was fanning out against the night.

THE fight had started as so many of those affairs did—annals of the Argonauts are replete with instances—with a row between a drunken emigrant and a crooked gambler. Everywhere along the Overland Trail where nests of buzzards sprang up to pick the bones of California-bound boomers, red liquor and redder passions of men combined to produce savage combustion.

An Illinois corn-shucker from Quincy didn't like the way Diamond Joe flipped the cards around in a stud game at the Overland Rest. He said so and he emphasized his statement by a slam of his fist into Diamond Joe's face. Quicker than thought a derringer barked and the corn-shucker half arose, blood spouting from his neck, turned slowly on his heel, then pitched to the floor. Another Illinoisian, who was watching the game, swung a chair down on Diamond Joe's head.

Then uproar.

Five men of the Illinois wagon train, back to back, slowly retreated to the street in a shower of bottles and bullets. Bitter Springs's choicest thugs pressed them hard.

"Illinoy! Help, Illinoy!"

In answer to the battle cry valiants of the wagon train poured out of ten saloons all up and down the street and hurled themselves into the core of the fighting. Bitter Springs bravos, not unused to this sort of thing and schooled in a certain rough system of tactics, caught the wagon men on either flank as they pell-melled into the fray. Revolvers were not their common weapons; a club did better execution in the dark without drawing answering fire by a revealing streak of red.

Lucky Bill was in the thick of it. An emigrant's bullet through the flesh of a forearm roused him to a bull's fury. He was without weapon other than the thick oaken leg of a card table, but that swung on heads with terrific execution.

OUTNUMBERED, the Illinois men yielded ground until they had reached the circle of their wagons behind the shabby street. Thence a galling musket fire from the more sober stay-at-homes of the wagon company covered their retreat behind barriers of tongue and wheel. Now it was the turn of the Bitter Springs gang to give way; but not until some skulker had slipped around the circle of great prairie schooners under cover of darkness and hullabaloo and had set fire to a sheaf of hay projecting from the wagon bed of one of them.

A waving band of flame leaped at the sky. The townies, at a safe distance beyond musket balls, set up a great yell. Flustered emigrants ran with water pails, seized the tongue of the burning wagon and dragged it away from the inflammable circle of canvas hoods. Pickets with their Sharps rifles and their buffalo guns at the alert were thrown out in a wide cordon about the beleaguered train; but the Bitter Springs roughs had their bellies full of fighting and were content to retire to their street of canvas and wood shacks.

Five dead and a double score nursing wounds and bumps was the toll of this folly in Lucky Bill's robbers' roost. Just another episode in the life of the town whose infamy had spread away back to Council Bluffs and Independence.

Big Lucky Bill, his bullet drilled arm hung in a sling by the worthy Doc Almy and his temper sadly needing similar treatment, was mercifully spared added fury. He did not know at once that Big Mary, the Pah-ute squaw, was rapidly putting desert miles behind her on the back of one of Lucky Bill's mules. Big Mary was making for the wickiups of her people away over in the Cedar Range. Returning to Lucky Bill's ranch cabin from her stolen excursion into town and finding the cut loops of rope where her girl prisoner had been, Big Mary had decided it would be bad medicine to stay there longer.

IT WAS an hour after midnight when one of the sentries of the wagon train thought he saw a ghost rise out of the sage scrub. He promptly pulled down on the shadowy figure—"Halt there!"

"No harm, stranger—no harm!" Jere Cuttles sent his mollifying hail through the dark. "Call yore capting whiles I stay right here. I got somethin' mighty important to tell him."

The sentry whistled sharply and soon was joined by another. They commanded Jere to approach and wanted to know his business. He insisted he must see the wagon train's leader. After some argument one of the guards disappeared to fetch him.

"Mister, I taken no part in tonight's rukus," Jere began when he was faced by a bearded man in shirt and drawers. "I don't rightly b'long to Lucky Bill's gang o' wolves an' hold no truck with 'em a-tall."

"Ye-ah?" dubiously from the captain. "What's your game, then?"

"Mister, I'm plumb desp'rit else I wouldn't be botherin' ye. But Lucky Bill, the roach-haired chief of this Bitter Springs gang, is aimin' to force a decent young gal to marry with him—keeps her tied up like a Injun's captive out to his ranch-house. So tonight I went out an' stole her offen' Lucky Bill. You gotta——"

"Stole her!" The captain gave a surprised whistle. "What're ye drivin' at, stranger? Stole Lucky Bill's gal for yourself, eh?"

"No, mister," Jere answered truthfully enough. "I stole her to keep her from misery an' disgrace. Got her hid out in the scrub yander, waitin' to hear yore outfit'll take her in and care fer her tender-like."

Then, before the other could interpose objections, Jere hurried his story of how Lucy Brand came to Bitter Springs a waif from the desert orphaned and near dead; how she returned to life to find herself in the grip of the outlaw leader and how her fate would be sealed with the imminent arrival of a preacher in the second division of the Illinois contingent.

"I'm only askin', Captin, fer yore women folks to hide Lucy in one've yore wagons till I kin' ready myself to take her over the mountings to Fiddler's Bar, whar I live. After tonight's rukus it hain't likely Lucky Bill nor no other Bitter Springer'll come prowlin' round here on her trail.

"An' Capting"—in a final gust of pleading—"thar hain't no t'other place to hide her in all Utah Territory."

THE captain of the Illinois Company pondered this surprising request and the situation forcing it.

"But m'son, we're pulling out for Beckwourth Pass soon's we can round up our cattle tomorrow. After what happened tonight we can't stay here a minute longer than necessary."

"Then, mister"—eagerly from Jere—"take Lucy 'long with yore party. I kain't ride 'long of ye 'cause—'cause I got business here which Jedge Stupe, at Fiddler's Bar, will explain. Captin, sir, thar hain't no chance o' yore sayin' no to me!"

The captain retired a few paces with the two sentries and talked the matter over in low tones. He strode back to Jere.

"Bring the girl in," he said. Jere faded into the scrub.

"Lucy, they'll take ye in—an' yo're leavin' fer Fiddler's Bar come mornin'!" Jere knelt by the side of the girl where she crouched under a covert of willows. The ecstatic clasp of her hands over one of his was joy to him.

"Oh, Jere! But you'll come, too?"

"No, Lucy, I stay here. I got work to do round here."

"But Hazard, if he finds out you took me away from him——"

"He'll find out in the Lord's good time," grimly from Jere. "But I'm countin' on yore help, Lucy. Somethin' mighty important. Three-four days'll see ye in Fiddler's Bar, what with a wagon train bein' slower than horseback. Once thar, go straight to Jedge Stupe an' tell him Jere Cuttles, in Bitter Springs, is ready fer him."

"Yes, Jere, and God take care of you. And—and——" Lucy's voice quavered. She saw the shadowy sentries waiting ahead; the moment of separation had come.

"I'll leave word in Fiddler's Bar where the wagon train is going. Where they go I'll go, too. You——"

"I kin come an' find you—some day when I've finished my work here," huskily from Jere. They had stopped.

"Jere, you won't—won't think wrong if I——" Suddenly her arms went up. She pulled his head down and kissed him.

Then Jere saw her join the three waiting shadows.

VIII

THE Illinois Company's wagon train moved out of Bitter Springs with the dawn, on the road to Beckwourth Pass and California beyond. The sullen town of rags and shanty boards gave no sign of farewell; only a still smoking mound representing the burned emigrant wagon remained a token of the night's madness.

Jere Cuttles, in his bed on the second floor of the hotel and with his eye to a rent in the canvas wall, followed the progress of the white covered wagons as they serpentined through the dim sea of sage. Somewhere under those caterpillar hoods of canvas was one who had opened a new world to this wilderness waif. He wondered if he ever would see her again; and if he did, what——

But an eminently practical consideration jerked the youth back from vague dawn dreams. With that wagon train went, too, his message to the *alcalde* of Fiddler's Bar which would bring the vigilantes coursing over the mountains to execute their justice here in this lawless desert town. The vigilantes would come and he, Jere, would have but one of the brace of murderers to turn over to them. But five or six days were left to him in which to locate the hide-out of Lem Collins or contrive that the cowardly cowman should be in Bitter Springs when the surprise swoop of the avengers should be made.

Moodily Jere reflected that he'd sent that message by Lucy on impulse and because other trustworthy means of communication with Fiddler's Bar lacked. Now he must make good. Determination fired him anew. With the distraction of the girl and her plight removed, the deep crusader spirit of vengeance that had pushed him on his dangerous mission to Bitter Springs burned again.

Nor did the lanky Pike have long to wait before his revived resolution was put to supreme test.

Jere was sitting at a trestle in the Rhinoceros Eating House manfully attacking what passed for breakfast in that primitive establishment when Lucky Bill strode in. The big fellow stood for a minute at the head of the table letting his eye range down over the scattered line of food stokers. Jere gave him a casual look and nod. In that flick of the eye he read portent in the outlaw's face; it was drained of its usual healthy tan and the lips were a thin line of menace.

LUCKY BILL chose an empty place next to Jere and sat down without a word. With one arm in a sling he made hard

going of his handling of knife and fork, particularly when the Chinaman who was cook, waiter and general roustabout put a steak before him. Lucky Bill essayed to anchor the piece of meat with a fork held in his tethered hand while he sawed at it with the dull table knife. Suddenly he turned to Jere.

"Let me have your clasp knife. I can't do anything with this tin blade."

Something in the tone or the fox-like glance of the other's eyes gave a prompting of danger. Why he did it Jere could not have said; but instead of reaching into his trousers pocket for his heavy clasp knife his hand slid down into his boot and brought up his long bladed Bowie—in Jere's time as common an accouterment as a man's stick is today.

"This-here's cut tougher things 'n steak," he said carelessly as he offered the hilt to Lucky Bill. The latter's eyes were narrowed in deadly suspicion.

"I said I wanted your clasp knife, not your man-carver."

"Have to git one off'n somebody else, then. Never packed one o' them child's toys." Jere went on with his eating, leaving the Bowie knife where Lucky Bill had flung it down by his plate. Meanwhile his left hand had made a lightning-quick pass over his thighs; no bump there marking the presence of his clasp knife in pockets.

The outlaw leader dropped his untethered hand into a coat pocket, then opened his fist before Jere's coffee cup. A big clasp knife with a wooden handle rolled once over on the oilcloth and came to rest with two intials burned into the wood staring up at Jere.

They were "J.C."

"Your knife," in a cold monotone from Lucky Bill. Jere gave him an indifferent look.

"This a present yo're makin' me?"

"Your knife, I say." The other's voice was steel cold and the glitter of murder was in his eyes. Men up and down the table poised bundles of food midway to their mouths to stare. They knew the import of that tone.

"Iffen yo're pleased to make me a present of a boy's knife," Jere drawled, "whyn't ye git the 'nitials right? I hain't long on readin' an' writin' an sich, but I'm fair well grounded on my own 'nitials."

LUCKY BILL, taken aback, searched the homely face and found nothing but quizzical interest lightly touched by a dash of humor in the eyes.

"J.C. stands for Jere Cuttles," he snapped.

"Which I hain't disputin'," Jere gave him back.

"Then you admit this is your knife."

Lucky Bill's free hand was toying with the hilt of Jere's wicked Bowie blade where it lay amid the clutter of dirty dishes. The Missourian suddenly wiped the humor from his eyes and stiffened in a hint of antagonism.

"Say, Lucky, is this a game or somethin'? What's into all this palaver 'bout a child's knife with 'nitials onto it?"

Now the whole table was tense. This newcomer, this fightin' wildcat who'd licked Yazoo Yancy, was getting his scalplock roached up against Lucky Bill. One or two pushed back from the table in an access of caution.

"You may give my game any fancy name you like." The outlaw spaced his words in deadly deliberation. "I found this knife a short time ago in a place where it ain't healthy for men besides myself to be. You admit your initials are J.C. That same J.C. is branded onto this handle. I'm going to——"

"Lucky, I don't make a habit of callin' a man a liar—least-wise not a crippled man. But iffen yo're puttin' forth them letters for J.C. yo're a liar."

Jere gave this defy in a maddeningly slow drawl, the while his eyes held the other's locked. He was looking for the split-second signal meaning a death stroke with the Bowie.

The master of Bitter Creek was toppled from his sureness by the very effrontery of this charge as well as by the unusual experience of having some one dare him to strike. Perforce he had to listen.

"I'd reckoned, Lucky, ye had more

schoolin' 'n I got. But when ye say thet-thar's a J"—he pointed to the burnt letter on the knife handle—— "I know ye fer a pore ignorant man. A J has got its crook turned t'other way. Thet's a L—an' to hell with ye!"

Very slowly, very calmly Jere unbuckled his length and arose from the bench. He reached for the Bowie, stooped to slip it in his boot and walked out of the eating house. Lucky Bill sat staring at the brand on the knife handle.

"Lawsy, lawsy!" Jere whispered under his breath as he walked down to the feed lot to care for his horses. "Close squeak fer a young fella——"

LATER in the day, when Jere was walking down the frowsy street, he saw Lucky Bill approaching. Jere tensed himself for eventualities. The big outlaw advanced with his hand out.

"Son, I sure gotta do the handsome by you," he said as he gripped Jere's hand. "You're one man in Bitter Springs not afraid to stand up against Lucky Bill—even if you're right. Come in here; I got somethin' to say to you."

He led the way into a saloon and through the clutter of deserted card tables to a corner in the rear. When they were seated, Lucky Bill faced Jere with a serious countenance.

"Whether you're right or wrong about that being a L on this knife"—he flipped the damning evidence on the table before them—"and some of the boys in the Rhinoceros told me after you left that was the way they made a L, when you were willing to fight me about it I knew this knife wasn't yours. Now let me tell you why I was ready to slit your throat about it."

Lucky Bill then proceeded to narrate his discovery of Lucy's flight; how he'd ridden out to the ranch cabin after the fight with the Illinois men to reassure her in case she'd heard the firing and found Big Mary and Lucy both gone—found the cut strands of rope and this clasp knife lying by the barrel chair.

"When I made a light and saw your initials—or what I took to be your initials—on this handle and when I figgered you were the only man in camp those initials fit, and figgered, too, that you'd had a chance to talk to the girl when you took that silk gown out to her, I was in a killing mind. But I waited until morning and then spotted horse tracks coming and going between the ranch and town. Says I, 'There's only two townies ever seen my Lucy—Doc Almy and Jere Cuttles—J.C. on the knife cinches it."

Jere had been doing some quick and lofty thinking during the other's recital. A God-given stratagem popped into his head.

"Lucky," he drawled, "s'posin' this friend of yours who's hidin' out, this Lem Collins, makes a L the way I say she should be made"—Jere traced in the table dust a letter with a left hand turn—"what then?"

"Well s'posin' he does, allowing he can make any initials at all; what of it?"

"I met that Collins ridin' up to yore house yistiddy," Jere mused.

"You mean——"

JERE jerked his thumb at the tell-tale knife. "His'n," he said. Lucky Bill clenched a fist.

"But I sent him on some business for me over to a ranch in Washoe Valley," the other objected.

"Did you see him go?" innocently from Jere. The outlaw shook his head.

"How long do ye figger it'd take Collins to make the trip an' back?"

"Maybe three-four days."

"Then," Jere persisted, "this Collins fella might reckon he could lift yore Lucy an' take her over into Californy, an' ye wouldn't suspicion him as the fella for three-four days. He didn't start to once on that trip to Washoe Valley, but come into town last night to spy our whar ye mout be; knowed ye'd be mixed up in the big rukus an' so traipsed out to yore ranch, give that big Injun squaw some Mex dollars to pull her stake-rope an' grabbed the gal.

"That," Jere concluded casually, "is jist my way of figgerin' it all out. May be wrong; may be right."

Suddenly Lucky Bill smashed his fist into a cupped hand. "Why, what'd be more natural than for the son-of-a-gun to join up with the emigrant train? I'll pick me a dozen good shots, catch up with those Illinoy clam diggers and snatch 'em both."

JERE'S heart suddenly went cold and it required all his resources of nerve to keep a poker face. He covered a second of appalling fear by elaborately cutting a quid of tobacco with the disputed knife.

"Didn't ye tell me t'other day somethin' or other 'bout Collins gettin' into some sorta trouble over to Fiddler's Bar?" Jere knew the other had not specified Fiddler's Bar, but he took a long chance.

"Yes—a killin'," Lucky Bill answered.

"Hain't likely, then, yore man'd jine up with a outfit that's goin' through Fiddler's Bar; which one o' them Illinoysers told me they plan to do. What's more, ye don't reckon that wagon train'd welcome to its bosom anybody from Bitter Springs—much less a gal stealer."

Jere, feeling his way, with his brain keyed to seize upon every advantage of a word, was fighting desperately; first to fix suspicion surely on Lem Collins and seize some fortuitous advantage which might insure Lucky Bill's holding Collins in Bitter Springs, then—in the turn of this last minute—to prevent the outlaw's pursuit of the wagon train.

"Hit's none o' my business, Lucky, an' I'm not one to shove my oar into another fella's pond; but this's the way I size it up. Maybe Lem Collins hain't the man yo're lookin' for a-tall. Maybe he's lopin' along, innercent enough, on yore business to Washoe Valley an' will be back in three-four days. Iffen he hain't back then, why you'll know he's hid out yore gal somewhere or is taking her over to Californy on the Overland Trail. Easy enough then to follow him over the mountings an' land on him. Other than that, ye kin gallyvant all round Utah Territory to no purpose."

A long speech for taciturn Jere Cuttles. His lack-lustre eyes betrayed no hint of the stress behind them. Lucky Bill suddenly arose.

"Thanks a lot, Jere, for helping me figger this thing. You got a lot of brains even if you don't show it."

He strode out into the white sunlight.

Jere set back, surprised at himself. Surprised at the quickness and sureness of his brain's workings in the second by second development of crisis. No faltering. A dependable instrument, that brain of his.

IX

WHETHER it was Jere's hastily improvised logic or the result of his own survey of the situation, Lucky Bill remained in Bitter Springs awaiting the problematical return of Lem Collins from the mission to Washoe Valley. So five days passed; days whose dragging hours Jere Cuttles counted as so many centuries. With the passing of the third day after the Illinois wagon train quit the desert town, he began to visualize events on the far side of the Sierras. Given any luck, the wagons would now be drawing very close to Fiddler's Bar. But a little while and Lucy Brand would be giving his message to Judge Stupe. Then——

Jere could see the scurrying and the saddling up all along the single street of the new mining town; men with guns slung over their shoulders hastening to be out on the road that would lead down into the desert and to a nest of murderers. Give them two days to make the hard ride, just two days, and then——

Late in the night of the fifth day Jere was sitting in a light game of casino at the Overland—Bitter Springs gamblers played what they called "a lady's game" with one another between spurts of serious business when an emigrant train was in town—when Lucky Bill strolled behind his chair and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Want to see you when you've finished this hand."

Jere played through to the last card, cashed his chips and joined Lucky Bill at the bar. With a crook of his finger the latter drew Jere out to the street. Two horses were tethered there; Lucky Bill indicated that he mount.

"We're going out to the ranch—where we won't be disturbed," he said shortly. They rode the three miles in silence, Jere wondering just what development lay at the end of the trail. His companion pushed

ahead through the door of the cabin and lit a candle on the mantel. The first feeble flicker showed a dim figure sitting in the great barrel chair. As the flame waxed stronger Jere saw a familiar face emerge from shadow.

Lem Collins!

THAT instant of recognition came the screech of a rusty key turning in the door behind him.

Collins' wolf-like eyes under a shaggy mat of hair lanced white flames at Jere. His hands gripped the arms of the chair as if bracing him for a spring. As for the Missourian, whatever secret shock the encounter might have wrought on him, he didn't give a sign. Standing with his weight on one foot like a tired horse, he let his eyes travel slowly up and down the seated figure.

"Well," purred a silken voice behind him, "you don't seem right glad to meet your old friend, Lem Collins—the man you knew in the Merced country over the Sierras."

"No, Lucky, to tell truth, I hain't"—in Jere's tired drawl. "Nobody what's not a friend o' yours kin claim friendship with me."

"You dam'd spy!" Collins leaped to his feet and ran at Jere. Lucky Bill held him off with a straight arm.

"Hold on there, Collins; get a good look first." The outlaw chief brought the candle from the mantel and held the flame close to Jere's face. The ex-cowman launched his ugly head forward like a buzzard's and gave Jere a searching scrutiny.

"Put a fringe of kid's corn-tossed whiskers under them weak eyes an' round that big mouth o' hisn, an' he's the Frenchman's orphant," the murderer said. "Like I told you, Lucky, he's here to spy on us fer Allaire's killin'."

Jere, frozen at heart by this sudden turn, nevertheless kept his head high and his wits at wire tautness. He deliberately turned his back on Collins and addressed himself to Lucky Bill.

"Speakin' of killin's, Lucky, how about this fella's murder of Jim Anstey down in the Merced country? Think ye said something 'bout that yoreself jist t'other day."

"Lemme at the lyin' whelp; I'll tear his heart out!" Collins made another lunge, but Lucky Jim's grip on the collar of his shirt was unbreakable.

"All in good time, Collins," he soothed; then to Jere with a mocking smile of pseudo politeness, "If you'll sit, Mr. Cuttles, and join us in a li'l confab. But first, just so's there'll be no unfortunate mistakes——"

He swooped down and whisked Jere's Bowie knife from a bootleg, gave it a fling so that it stuck quivering in a far wall. Jere suffered this disarming without a change of countenance and took the stool indicated. In the guttering candle light he surveyed the faces of his two enemies with not so much as the flicker of an eyelash.

LUCKY BILL reached into a pocket with elaborate ceremony and tossed the wooden handled clasp knife with the initials onto the table under the candle.

"You see, Mr. Cuttles, conversation sorta swings back to this knife—where we left it t'other morning." Then, turning to Collins, "Tell our friend Mr. Cuttles what you know 'bout this knife."

"Allaire the Frenchman give it to him three-four months ago," snarled Collins. "I see the Frenchy settin' in front of his fireplace one day a'heatin' of a ramrod to burn the letters in. I remember 'cause the ramrod slipped once an' burnt his hand—and he done some tall cussin' in French, which don't sound like proper cussin'."

Lucky Jim turned on Jere, his cold eyes belying the smile on his lips.

"Do *you* think, Mr. Cuttles, a ignorant Frenchy would know which side to put the loop on a J?"

"I think this's a lot of Chinaman's palaver if yo're askin' me," doughtily from Jere; "and I'll be siftin' along iffen ye hain't got sense to talk."

"Oh, no you won't be siftin' yet a'while!" A quick flash of the outlaw's teeth. Then he turned to Collins.

"Ever see this long stalk of sparrergrass down in the Merced country where he claims to've known you?"

Collins denied with an oath.

"And you last saw him when—and where?"

"Few days after Allaire—I mean, he was

prowlin' round the Frenchy's cabin when I was lookin' fer somethin' there. That's what made me figger on gettin' out of the country before I could drive the cattle——"

"Needn't tell all you know, you pore dam' fool!" Lucky Bill sharply reproved. Then he turned his glance on Jere.

"What've you got to say, my friend?" The silkiness of his tone masked deadly venom. Jere gave him back look for look.

"Sence yore mind's made up to take the word of a killer, what do ye want me to say?"

"Just this!" Lucky Bill had leaped from his stool and towered over Jere. All pretense at mock civility was gone now. The man's stained soul was in his eyes.

"Just this, you lying whippersnapper: What did you do with my girl?"

JERE kept his seat. Not a tremor did he show. He slowly nodded his head toward Collins.

"Asked him that question, Lucky?"

"Yes, and he's proved he knows nothing about her. I'm asking you now; and by the Lord——"

"I don't know where she is," Jere answered in strict truth. The other's hands lifted as if to throttle the Missouri youth, but by a masterful effort of strong will Lucky Bill restrained himself. His face again went cold.

"Cuttles," he said tensely, "nobody but a mighty brave man can face me down like you're doing. I could kill you where you sit for stealing from me what I wouldn't trade for all the gold over the Sierras. But that's a business between you and me."

He took a quick turn about the room and came to a halt before Jere. "But there's something outside this personal business. You're a spy. You've come here to get hangin' stuff on Lem Collins—and maybe on me, for all I know. We have a way of hanging spies here in Bitter Springs. Come morning an' we'll take you down to town where everybody can see; an' there we'll hang you, Cuttles."

He gave a nod toward Collins. Together they fell upon Jere. After a sharp struggle they had him bound and triced to a staple in the stones of the fireplace.

"You sleep on that pile of buffalo robes where you can watch this man," Lucky Jim indicated to Collins. He turned at the door into the bedroom and gave Jere a steady look.

"Too bad to hang you, Cuttles. With your nerve you oughta go far."

X

A CANDLE guttered and built itself a pile of grease on a corner of the mantel above Jere's head. By its feeble light he could see the suggested shape of Lem Collins on his heap of buffalo robes in a far corner of the room. The man was a thousand fathoms deep in slumber; his breathing was like a tiger's snarl. In the bedroom which had been Lucy Brand's his other jailer, Lucky Bill, was sleeping; though lightly as Jere judged by the sound of intermittent stirring.

Though the blood was all squeezed from his extremities by the hard knots binding them, there was no numbness in his brain. Instead, that new-found instrument was geared to highest functioning. Love of life was the force now dominating its activities; yes, and a bitter resolve to triumph over these two enemies even in this moment of direst extremity. Death did not terrify Jere Cuttles so much as the prospect of suffering death with his oath of personal vengeance still unsatisfied. That was unthinkable!

He knew that ere this his riders from Fiddler's Bar were on the road to Bitter Springs. There could be no doubt of the Illinois wagon train's having won through in the time he allotted in his calculations; no question of Judge Stupe and his vigilantes making top speed over the mountains. But when they arrived he, Jere, must be on the ground to intercept them and guide them to their quarry. They might even be due to arrive at journey's end this night!

Jere could not see the staple between fireplace stones through which the rope tricing his arms and legs had been passed. He felt it as a lump between his shoulders. Very cautiously he strained forward to

bring strain upon the staple. Darting pains through his wrists were his sole reward. Then he resorted to patient manipulation.

By shifting his body slightly he got a purchase on the staple under one shoulder blade, tightened a muscle against the iron thing and commenced a slow up-and-down worrying of the unseen binding post. It hurt him with a nibbling pain through all his back muscles. He could not guess whether he was making progress or not, but every fiber of his being willed that progress it must be.

Minutes stretched into an hour—into two. Jere had no way of measuring the torture except by the tiger bellowings of the sleeping Collins.

At last his sore shoulder told him that the staple actually was loosened. He waited with caught breath until one of Collins' snores reached its crescendo, then suddenly leaned forward. He felt the staple pull from its fastening. A single sharp *clink* as it rang against the hearth stones.

Sound of feet dropping to the floor in the next room. Jere saw the door opening and quickly dropped his head onto his chest in simulated sleep. So for an age-long minute he endured the critical gaze of Lucky Bill in the doorway. When he finally dared open one eye the door was shut again. But he must needs wait interminable minutes for the light sound of breathing to tell him his restless warder was once again asleep.

Now the time of Jere's most desperate expedient, when every hope of life hung upon a most dubious factor. All the time of his labor to loosen the staple he had been conscious of faint heat from the fireplace to his right. Coals lay there somewhere in the heap of ashes; coals which now must be conjured to save him.

HE SLOWLY inched away from the stone side wall of the fireplace until his body was squarely before the black maw itself. Then his bound hands went backward into the ashes—live flesh groping for burning coals. He could not even twist his head to bring his eyes to the search; must needs trust only to the nerves in his finger tips. Inch by inch those groping fingers burrowed through ashes until lightning stabs of pain told of a treasure wound, then it was mumbled and shuffled with loving taps through the ashes to be added to a precious heap behind Jere's back. Slow burning greasewood and sage brands, resistant and long alight, were painfully garnered into a little pile forward of the ash heap.

Then the supreme moment.

Still unseeing, Jere pressed his bound hands down upon the heap so that the strands of rope pushed against red hearts of embers. Through the flesh of his fingers and wrists might not actually touch, yet was it so close to the source of heat that a slow parboiling was inevitable.

One blessed circumstance; the binding cord was old and dry. Had it been green, Jere's torture would have been to no end. Even as it was, from minute to minute he had to lift his hands away from the coals and bury them in the cooler ashes to dull the pain.

A smell of burning hemp came to his nostrils. He prayed that it would not penetrate beyond that closed door where Lucky Bill slept with one eye open—prayed, too, that the rope would not catch flame, in which case he would be done for.

Minutes of excruciating agony. Then suddenly his hands came free.

Jere sat for a minute dissolved in weakness. Then he gathered his resolution and set his blistered and swollen fingers to work upon the knots about his ankles. A tough business, but iron will drove him through with it.

Then he took stock of the situation. There he was with crippled hands, unarmed; how was he to capture two men, each armed with revolver and—presumably—a knife?

The flickering candle showed him but a half of the long room. His eyes had covered every inch of visible wall during the time he was bound and he'd seen neither gun nor revolver holster. His own Bowie knife was stuck in a wall of shadow somewhere where Lucky Bill had thrown it at the moment Jere walked into the trap. If he had that now—but daw-gone it! A Bowie was

for killin' and he didn't want to kill either of these men unless it was to save his own life. His business was to save Lucky Bill and Lem Collins for hemp!

FIRST pale light of dawn was marking the squares of two windows when Jere struck a balance of the pros and cons of strategy. First, and very painfully, he removed his boots, using for that operation a heavy bootjack which stood on the hearth. Then with the bootjack grasped in his left hand for a weapon, he started a cautious stocking-foot stalking of the snoring Lem Collins. Every board he tested before putting his weight upon it. He was crouched like a cougar for the spring. So, noiselessly, he came to where the cowman lay, stooped and let his free right hand stray stealthily along the other's waistband.

The brass stock of a dragoon revolver fell under his gliding fingers. Gently—oh, so gently—Jere started to draw the precious weapon from under the sleeping weight which pinned it down.

Just as the long barreled weapon was coming free the cowman opened his eyes. One startled look—the beginnings of a yell—then Jere's bootjack clouted the bull-like head just once. The man groaned and sank back.

In two bounds Jere was back at the fireplace and had swept the candle to the floor. Then he leaped aside just on the instant that a spurt of flame came from the door to the bedroom. With all his might he hurled the heavy bootjack at the lozenge of lighter dark which represented the doorway whence Lucky Bill had fired.

He heard a thud—a screamed oath—clatter of a revolver as it was knocked spinning from an unseen antagonist's hand. Jere closed in, stooping almost double, his captured weapon held clubwise by its long barrel. Lucky Bill, caught a little above the knees, toppled and fell forward like a giant pine felled.

Then in the graying dark of the cabin the twain locked in a death battle. Lucky Bill handicapped by that ball through a forearm which the Illinois Company had given him for a souvenir of the street battle. Jere Cuttles with hands half baked by recent contact with live coals. Lucky Bill fighting to kill. Jere fighting to save this man and one other for the noose. Advantage lay with Jere insofar as he had Lem Collins' dragoon revolver; but he was determined not to use it to shoot except in final extremity.

"Damn you, you won't live long enough to hang!" Lucky Bill panted in Jere's ear in their first deadly grip.

"But you will, Lucky," the youth gritted back at him, and he made a short swing with the revolver butt calculated to bring the brass knob of the butt down on the bandit chief's head. Instead it fell upon Lucky Bill's wounded arm thrown up as a cover. The man screamed in agony and broke his hold upon Jere. Before the latter could grapple him anew Lucky Bill had rolled over several times.

Jere heard his antagonist vent a triumphant cry, and almost instantly thereafter a streak of flame jetted at him. Lucky Bill had rolled onto the revolver which the hurtling boot jack had knocked from his hand. The bullet winged past Jere's cheek so close that he felt the wind of it.

WITH a quick shift of the body Jere managed to put the legs of the table between himself and the spot where that dangerous flame had spouted. Though a quick twist of his wrist had thrown the revolver butt into his hand and he bore steadily before him in the dark ready to shoot in defense of his life, he held his fire. Noiselessly he crab-legged himself backward.

"Come on and fight it out like a man," he heard Lucky Bill's taunt through the dark. "I know you've got Lem's gun. Looky here, I'll even give you a mark to shoot at."

A match scratched. A feeble sulphur blue flame showed close to the floor perhaps eight feet away. Even if he'd dared run the risk of spoiling a hanging, Jere was too wise to fall into the trap Lucky Bill was baiting; he knew too well that the spit of his gun would send a bullet his way. Instead, he inched himself backward and to one side, hoping to induce his hidden foe to carry the battle to him. At close grips in the dark perhaps he need not shoot.

In his last shift his stockinged feet plumped against a head. A mumbling groan

sounded sepulchrally from behind him—the forgotten Lem Collins!

"Lem!" Lucky Bill's clarion voice out of blackness. "Lem, get yourself together, you poor dam'd fool. It's Lucky Bill talking——"

"O-o-o-uh! Whazzat?"

JERE froze. Here was a second foe in the dark—one counted done for. He lifted himself quickly to one side and lay flat on the floor.

"Lem! Cuttles is loose. He's in this room. Get up and strike a light." So, cold bloodedly, Lucky Bill invited a befuddled man to sacrifice himself; deliberately he was trapping his confederate into danger to save himself.

Jere lay moveless, his mind suddenly composed to meet this new danger and turn it to his own account. He heard the cattleman groan again and want to know what had happened.

"Get up, I tell you!" from out of the gloom somewhere beyond the table. "Find the candle and light it."

The hulk on the buffalo robes stirred, raised itself to an elbow uncertainly—Jere not three feet away could just distinguish the shape in the little-less-than-dark filtering down from a nearby window.

"Somebody—um-m—must'a' hit me a wallop——" Lem Collins was on his feet, swaying. Jere, silent as a ghost, arose behind him. The man took a couple of wavering steps in the direction of the fireplace, his boots clumping heavily on the boards. Jere was his shadow.

"Wha' the hell, Lucky! No candle——"

Just then the shrill neigh of one of the horses in the corral behind the house. Jere thought he heard an answering whinny faint in the distance.

"Oh, here y'are. Stepped on it. Wait minute——"

Collins scratched a match. The flame waxed slowly and was brought unsteadily to the candle wick. Jere, crouching close behind the body of the swaying Collins, waited wire-taut. The yellow globule of flame at the candle tip waxed brighter—sent its puny invasion against the dark by little and little outward.

"Look out, Lem!"

But that instant Jere, too, had seen. He leveled his weapon under the cowman's uplifted arm at the shoulder of the big figure sprawled on the floor and fired.

"Don't stir, Collins," Jere growled in Lem's ear. "There's another bullet here marked with your name."

That instant a sharp rush of feet sounded outside the cabin and a splintering crash against the locked door.

"Once more, boys!" Another rending smash and the door caved in. Jere, dumbfounded, but still keeping his dragoon revolver pressed against Lem Collins's ribs, turned his head to where the flare of a torch showed a ring of guns in the light of new morning outside the portal. He saw the figure of Judge Stupe before the others and hailed him.

"Come on in, *Alcalde*. I got yore men."

THEN the vigilantes from Fiddler's Bar trooped in.

"My boy—my boy! Providence sent us just in time, I'd say." Judge Stupe was first to throw his arms about Jere after Lem Collins was ringed about by steel and others had squatted where Lucky Bill lay stretched on the floor. Others came up to slap him on the back and want to know what the shooting meant.

"Somebody look after Lucky Bill there," Jere broke the volley of felicitations, then added grimly, "I fired for the shoulder—to save him."

"We come a'runnin,' Jere," Judge Stupe was saying. "The girl told us we'd like to find the Curly Wolf himself here in this shack and gave us directions. But we weren't counting on finding you just winding up the job this way."

There was a great milling round. One of the vigilantes who professed a passing acquaintance with medicine dressed Lucky Bill's wound. It would be one slow to heal—ordinarily, said the amateur medico with a twisted grin. He added that he believed Lucky Bill need not worry himself about the healing business this time.

The dressing of Lucky Bill's wound com-

pleted, the king of Bitter Springs was lifted to the buffalo robes in the far corner of the room and the cursing Lem Collins was forced to lie down beside him. Leg irons clicked to join the precious pair. In a chance second when no bodies intervened Jere caught Lucky Bill's quizzical glance upon him; saw just the least backward nod of the outlaw's head summoning him. He walked over to where the twain lay shackled.

"Very neat, Jere—very neat," with a flash of Lucky Bill's strong teeth. "I ought to've killed you a while ago before your gang got here, then I'd of had good company in hell."

Jere looked down at him soberly as if weighing a question of policy. Then, "It mout comfort ye to know, Lucky, yore gal is in good hands. I sent her outa Bitter Springs with the Illinoy company.

"And gave her the message which brought your gang?" This without rancor. Jere nodded affirmation. The big outlaw's lips parted in one of his devil-teasing smiles.

"You'll likely see Lucy before—before I do. Tell her for me Lucky Bill made his primest mistake with her. Say he didn't know how to make love soft an' gentlemanly like, he not being rightly trained to it." He moved his head in what might have been a gesture of regret for lost opportunities. "But say this for me, too, Jere Cuttles. Say to Lucy I loved her true—if not tender."

Judge Stupe drew Jere away. "We've got the two men we're after," said he. "But there are ninety of us here and we figure to give Bitter Springs a housecleaning. After what we heard from the Illinois company the town needs it. We'll leave a dozen men here to guard these two until the trial, but you ride with us and post us as to where to locate the worst bullies in the town."

THE taking of Bitter Springs was absurdly simple. Armed men in the white of dawn rode down the single street, distributing themselves before saloons, hotels and lodging houses. Even before alarm lights began to flash through tent walls twenty of the choicest birds in Lucky Bill's foul nest found themselves bound and under guard in the Overland Rest. A score and more of the lesser ruffians scurried out into the desert like scared rabbits. The remainder of the citizens were voluble in their protestations of rectitude.

The second division of the Illinois Company—that one which carried the preacher Lucky Bill had so anxiously awaited—rolled into a surprise around nine o'clock of the morning. A town under martial law. To the emigrants went Judge Stupe with explanation of the situation and a request for cooperation in the serious business impending.

The shed back of Lucky Bill's log cabin was the court of the vigilantes; just a roof of wattles supported by poles. The scene had been chosen because of its safe distance from town and comparative immunity from attack should the outlaw leader's scattered supporters risk a raid. As added guaranty against such interruption pickets were thrown down the trail toward town and twenty men with muskets filled the cabin to man loopholes cut through the log chinking.

Half the men of the emigrant train had ridden out to witness the trial. Prompted by that scrupulous sense of adherence to the spirit of the law which characterized the extra-legal trials of the Argonauts, the Fiddler's Bar men chose twelve jurors from among the Illinois contingent and called upon them to supply a lawyer for the defense. A Fiddler's Bar lawyer who was of the vigilantes body claimed the right of prosecution. *Alcalde* Stupe was elevated to the position of judge.

IT WAS after noon and when the Illinois lawyer had had ample time to confer with the accused, that Judge Stupe took his seat before an improvised justice bar of barrels and boxes. The jury sat in a wagon box to his left. The two prisoners were seated on saddles placed side by side on the ground by his right hand, guards behind them. Out beyond the shed the hard ground was closely packed with spectators—nigh a hundred standing moveless in the broiling sun.

Lucky Bill Hazard and Lem Collins were put on trial for their lives, for the murder of Pierre Allaire.

The Fiddler's Bar prosecutor first called

three fellow townsmen o testify to the finding of Allaire's body, with a bullet through the head, in the deep river pool below Jere Cuttles's placer claim. They were excused without cross examination at the hands of the volunteer defense counsel from the wagon train. Then the prosecutor called, "Jereboam Cuttles to the bar." Jere took his seat on the cracker box serving as a witness stand.

He told of his first encounter with Lucky Bill, coming to him on his claim to inquire the whereabouts of Lem Collins, then recited in detail his meetings with the cowman, first at the latter's camp and on the second occasion when Collins ordered him away from Allaire's cabin; told how on revisiting the cabin he'd found the dirt floor all turned over and the fireplace stones displaced where a thorough search for supposed hidden gold had been made.

In simple phrases the Missourian detailed his exploration of the meadow downvalley from his claim, the discovery of the burnt wickiup and of the horse tracks thereabouts. Then, lightly passing over his coming to Bitter Springs, Jere quoted the statement Lucky Bill had made to him: "If you're from the Merced country I suspicion Collins won't be hankering to see you. He got in a little trouble down there, and a little more trouble somewhere else, more recent."

THE cowman stirred in his saddle seat at this juncture and darted a viperish look at his erstwhile leader, Lucky Bill. The latter's face was serene.

"You say that among the hoofprints of three horses about the burned wickiup and leading to the pool in the river you saw one that was marked—skelped, as you called it," said the prosecutor. "Is that your statement?" Jere nodded. The Fiddler's Bar lawyer gave a sign to some men behind him and they pushed through the crowd.

Two came back, rolling a barrel of flour from Lucky Bill's kitchen. Three more returned from the corral, each leading one of three horses found there. While the spectators stretched their necks a thick layer of flour was laid on the dirt floor of the shed before the wagon where the jury sat. Then one by one the three horses were led through the white patch.

"I ask you, Mr. Witness, to examine the prints in that flour and see if you can find there a duplicate of that skelped hoof," impressively from the prosecutor. Jere made a cursory examination and pointed to a mark where a part of the frog of a worn and unshod hoof had left its print.

"Did you notice the horse that made that mark; and, if so, can you say to whom it belongs?"

"Lucky Bill's horse," said Jere.

"Take the witness." The prosecutor turned with a formal bow to the stranger lawyer for the defense.

"Mr. Cuttles," he began, "when you found those horse tracks by the burned wickiup you had no way of knowing whether or not they were made on the day the wickiup was burned—and the clothing of a man with it, we will say—or at a time prior to the destruction of the Indian hut?"

"No," Jere declared.

"Then, Mr. Cuttles, if it should appear that Allaire rode with two men down that valley to show one of them the cattle he had for sale, or had sold; and if it should appear that after having inspected the cattle one of those men—call him William Hazard—rode on his way across the mountains to Bitter Springs while the other—say that this man was Lemuel Collins—rode back with Allaire to the latter's cabin; if all this should appear in evidence, Mr. Cuttles, would you still say that the tracks of horses you observed about that burned wickiup conclusively linked their riders with the murder of Allaire?"

THAT was a long question for Jere to digest. He went through it doggedly in his mind, then he gave a surprising answer:

"I'd agree to everythin' ye say, Mister, iffen it hadn't been thet one of them riders changed his boots right thar by the wickiup."

Even Judge Stupe's judicial reserve slipped at this statement and he looked his surprise. A flash of apprehension shot across Lucky Bill's features, to be instantly wiped clean again.

"Please explain that statement," severely from the Illinois lawyer. Jere reached inside his shirt and brought out a flaming silk handkerchief tied about something hard. He undid the knot and exhibited on the heel of his hand a charred black cinder.

"That-thar's the heel off'n a cowman's boot—a built-up heel," he said in his slowest drawl. "My podner Allaire never wore cowman's boots. When I last seen him alive he wore a new pair of boots with ord'nary heels which had been made fer him down to Sacramento—an' with his 'nitials worked on the hind pull-on strap."

Jere paused and let his eyes turn to where Lucky Bill sat manacled to Collins.

"He's wearin' Allaire's boots right now—been wearin' em ever since he helped murder my podner thar by the river. Stole the boots off'n a dead man, Lucky did, an' burnt up his old ones in the fire which burnt my podner's clothes."

The giant under the accusing finger leaped to his feet with an inarticulate cry and made a charging step; but the anchored weight of Collins on the leg-iron threw him to the dust. Instantly guards were upon him. They jerked off the boot from his free leg and passed it to Judge Stupe. The latter looked under the rear bootstrap, nodded his head and passed the boot to the jury.

Twelve men read the initials, "P.A." done in red thread through the leather.

"The Court declares all necessary evidence to be now before it," the judge decreed. He turned to the prisoners.

"Have you anything to say before your cases go to the jury?"

Lem Collins struggled to his feet. His face was blotched with purple laid on dead white.

"I'll turn state evidence," he bawled. "I'll tell the whole story if you'll be easy on me. I didn't——"

"We don't barter with murderers!" the judge thundered.

Lucky Bill did not even rise from his saddle. He gave Stupe a cold smile.

"Reckon the jig's up, Judge. I will say, though, I *was* careless about that swap of boots."

The jury found their verdict of guilty without leaving the wagon box.

Half an hour later a stunted alamo tree in the middle of Lucky Bill's green hay lot bore strange fruit.

BACK in Fiddler's Bar Jere Cuttles was restive under the various legal hurdles Judge Stupe kept putting in his way in the matter of settling the estate of Pierre Allaire. He was sole heir to the murdered Frenchman's cattle, his lands and homestead. The $3,000 in gold for which Lem Collins had dug so frantically was his, too. Jere had recovered it from Allaire's private bank in the bole of an old oak tree, known only to the two of them.

Finally Jere put his mark on the last document and was free.

"And now what, my son?" from kindly Judge Stupe. Jere blushed and drew a line in the dust with the toe of one of his shining new boots.

"Well, Jedge, reckon that-thar Illinoy wagon train'll be jist 'bout makin' into Shasta diggin's 'bout this time. I was figgerin' on ridin' up to Shasta an'—sorta projectin' round."

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

For Prospectors

SOME issues ago we ran Victor Shaw's answer to a query. Mr. Shaw gave us some dope on prospecting and incidentally offered to supply would-be prospectors with a list of informative books and necessary materials. So many folks wrote in to ask for that list that we're printing it here.

"The books I recommend have been selected from a long list, from my own knowledge and experience covering many years. A course of reading is advisable because it will aid in eliminating barren areas and confine a prospector to the more favorable territory. All prospecting is more or less of a gamble, and one should not expect to make wages. Might land a rich placer pocket, or a vein cropping rich enough to work at once by crude hand methods; but usually a pay mine must be developed, or sold to the highest bidder.

"The Miner's Guide," written by a practical prospector, Horace J. West, sells for $1.15 postpaid, at 340 Wilcox Building, Los Angeles, Calif. Contains hints on outfitting, minerals and their tests, location of claims and how to work them, where to go, etc. The mining laws of states may be obtained at same address: "Wilson's Mining Laws," price $1.65. A more extended knowledge of minerals and rock formations may be obtained from "Useful Minerals and Rare Ores," by Alex. McLeod, price $2.50, John Wiley & Sons, 440 Fourth Avenue, New York City. And while the three above will give a good practical equipment, more field information may be obtained from "Handbook for Prospectors," by M. W. von Bernewitz, price $3.00, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 370 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

"Details of geology and mineral resources of most Western mining and prospecting areas can be found in geological maps and bulletins issued free (or for a small sum) by writing the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Geological Survey, Washington, D. C. Also, most mining states maintain a mining bureau which distributes free information and literature. For Arizona, the Mining Department of the University of Arizona, Tucson; for California, the California Bureau of Mines, Ferry Building, San Francisco; for Idaho, the State Mining Bureau, Boise, etc.

"Prospecting tools are not expensive, nor is the outfit any more than a regular camping layout. Grub and transportation are the biggest items. But a grubstake of $300 to $500 should take one very comfortably almost anywhere in our West for one season. Pack animals required for hills and desert, canoe for the northern areas, and for Alaskan coast or that of British Columbia a good boat is necessary. Don't consider Old Mexico just now, or until its politics are more settled. They'll tax you out of all profits, and maybe trouble you in more serious ways. Arizona, Idaho, Montana, California, Canada, and Alaska, are the most favorable. Canadian laws obtained from the Dominion Department of Mines, Ottawa, Canada, or Minister of Mines, Victoria, B. C."

VICTOR SHAW.

You Can Always Tell A Marine

SOME of you bozos who read that heading will say, chests swelling with pride, "Boy, you sure can!" And maybe others will make a wry face and say, "I'll say you can. Who won the war?" And then somebody will get hit and there'll be a fight. There always is a fight when you get too many marines in one place with anybody else. And we've got fourteen (count 'em) in the next issue. And there's sure some fighting. "Fourteen Marines," by Frederick J. Liesmann is the story and you don't want to miss it. They're out of uniform, these hellions, but it doesn't make any difference in their fighting, because they've got plenty of ammunition and that's all that matters. They got on a windjammer and sail down to the Malay Seas with a few tons of munitions under the old scow's belt. Then they meet up with a few fighting Malays, and boy howdy. . . .

"Chicken to Order," by Wayne Brooke is another story in the next issue. He's a new author to you and you'll like him fine. Two young Lieutenants of the A. E. F. catch themselves a chicken for dinner but before they can eat it they have to go into battle somewhere in France. The chicken goes into the blanket roll of one of them, and that chicken goes through plenty before he gets out. There's fighting enough in that story to make your hair curl and humor enough to make you smile while it's curling. And you'll agree that Mr. Brooke sure knows his sage and onions.

Captain Dingle comes through in the next issue, with "The Coolie" a fine story of a brave man in the China Sea, and Clifford Knight is giving us another of his popular railroad stories in "Brick's Dust."

Alan LeMay has written another Bug Eye yarn. It's so darn funny we can hardly wait till next issue to pass it on to you, but we'll just have to. It's called, "Are You There Bug Eye."

A dog-fighting machine gunning air story, "Red Wreckage," by Raoul Whitfield is coming in the next issue. You all know Whitfield's wing-straining air stories! Well, here's one of the best. The pilot thought his observer was yellow; but thousands of feet above the earth, lost in fog, beset by lead-spurting Fokkers he learned that there is more to a man than one glance tells.

There's another war author that we're anxious to introduce to you. He's Lee Robinson the author of a fine yarn in the next issue, "The Damyankee." "The best shot in the A.E.F," that's what the lieutenant called the lanky mountaineer. But the mountaineer thought he was fighting the same damyankees that his father and grandfather had fought.

And, a novelette of the African diamond fields and the Major by L. Patrick Greene. This time Pat has outdone himself. In the character of Dutch Sam, bully of the fields, his meeting with the Major, and the final working out of their strange enmity you'll find a Major yarn as good as you've ever read. And that's saying some.

More Luck Next Time, Bill!

YOUNG Jere Cuttles in "Sage Brush Vengeance," Robert Welles Ritchie's novelette in this issue didn't set out to get any fictional villain when he rode across the overland trail. Bill Hazard was a real man and owned a real gang of cut-throats. Here's his story as gleaned by Mr. Ritchie from the newspapers of the time.

"Lucky Bill Hazard, the big laughing villain—if villain he was—of my story, once lived much as I have tried to picture him doing. And he died as so many of his tribe did in the hell-roarin' Fifties: of too much hemp.

"I first ran across the trail of the late Lucky Bill last summer while prowling about the old ghost towns of the Argonauts in the Sierras—forgotten scenes of what was unquestionably one of the world's epic episodes. In the little county seat of Downieville, snuggled away down in the gorge of North Yuba, I ran across the county surveyor who had in his office dusty bound files of Downieville papers of 1858. In the course of two days' gorgeous burrowing I found this single item under a July date line of that year:

" 'Lucky Bill, as the papers have it, was hanged by a mob in Carson Valley on the 19th. He was accused of having murdered

a Frenchman. More 'luck' next time, Bill."

A handsome satiric epitaph!

Just those few lines, and yet they stuck by me. A man called Lucky hanged by a mob——

Months afterward I was prowling through the very remarkable Bancroft Library, at the University of California on the quest of an obscure story, a hint of which I had gleaned from an old graybeard of the deserted town Port Wine. Reading through the files of the Sacramento Union of the year Fifty-eight, my eye hit the name "Lucky Bill" in the heading of a column of type; and there was the report of a correspondent—one J. A. Thompson—of the trial, by vigilantes, of that identical outlaw, which occurred in a barn on Clear Creek in Carson Valley. The eye-witness account said that a second man named Edwards was tried with Lucky Bill for the murder of the Frenchman Gordier in the Honey Lake Valley of what is now Lassen County, California.

And—gorgeous touch!—when the twain were captured by the vigilantes they were yoked together by a leg-iron made by a blacksmith from a discarded frying pan.

The Alta California of San Francisco, in a briefer account of the trial and execution come upon by a prompting to cross-reference, gave this grim picture of Lucky Bill's last moment:

"He made no confession but took things coolly, putting the rope around his own neck. His last words were, 'If you want to hang me, I am no hog.' "

Alas for the deceptive glitter of romance! It seems Lucky Bill was married at the time he came to the end of his tether. Legend of the Old Timers in the ghost camps has it that his widow went insane and that his only son became a gambler in Sacramento.

And there you have the bones of my story.

Perhaps I might add that my Judge Stupe, who, too, had his prototype in the flesh, headed a convention in the town I have called Bitter Springs, the object of which was to create the "Territory of Sierra Nevada" out of the flar-flung Utah Territory and to include therein all of California lying east of Sierra crest. But that is another story—and a whale of a story, at that.

ROBERT WELLES RITCHIE.

Carmel, California.

Prize Winner

EDGAR VALENTINE SMITH, whose yarn of logging in Florida, "Nosey's Code," is in this issue, was, in 1923, the winner of the O. Henry Memorial Prize with his story, "Prelude." Since then he has had another story printed in the O. Henry volume and has published stories in a number of places. Mr. Smith claims to have led an unadventurous life, but don't be too quick to believe him. Newspaper work, as anyone who has tried it can testify, is none too gentle a profession.

This is one of the times I envy particularly those writers who have had adventures, who've sailed the seven seas—or even only six of them, for that; fellows who've chummed with Malays in their natural setting, or watched the hula dancers, or heard the plaintive wails of Hawaiian guitars strummed by native fingers. For my own life has been absolutely without adventure to speak of.

All my life, practically—with the exception noted above has been spent in three Southern States—Alabama, Florida and Georgia, most of the time in Alabama.

I was born in Alabama, fifty-three years ago on the fourteenth of February—hence the middle name. The greater part of my business life was spent in the lumber business, having been a manufacturer of yellow pine lumber for years, and having passed these years at logging camps—on the Tombigbee River in Alabama—and at saw mill villages in Florida and Alabama.

I began—and stopped, for a while—writing at an early age. My first effort, when I was fourteen, was published in a Birmingham newspaper. I was promptly labelled *author* by my mates at school, and just as promptly quit trying to write for about ten years.

Nine years ago, however, the bug bit me again—fatally this time, for ever since then I've been writing, more or less in the between-times I can snatch from newspaper work. This last consists of the job of copy-

reader (one of several) and head writer (again one of a number) for *The Birmingham News,* an afternoon paper.

Probably I could turn out more stories if it were not for my newspaper work, but this, it seems, I can hardly let go. It is another one of those things, which—as almost anyone who has tried it can testify—when it bites, usually proves fatal.

EDGAR VALENTINE SMITH.

Cows and "Violence"

WHEN you read Carlysle Graham Raht's story of a border gunman, "Tweeds," in this issue, you'll probably remember his yarn of a few issues back, "Violence."

You may recall that at the same time we ran an item in the circle saying that the cattle weren't disappearing from the range country and using, among other things, Mr. Raht's story as evidence to prove it.

Well, here's a letter from a comrade who mentions both the story and the article. It's a right interesting letter and we're glad to be able to print it here.

Taft, Texas, Oct. 1, 1928.

I have read with some interest your story, "Violence" in a recent issue. It is a remarkable story, yet true, for I am personally acquainted with the town.

It is a town in Jim Hogg County and is situated some 35 miles southwest of Alice, Texas.

I read with further interest that cowboys and ranches are fast disappearing, which is to some extent true. However the largest ranch in the United States is right at our back doors. The ranch of which I am writing is the King Ranch located in Kleberg, Kenedy, Nueces, and Willacy counties, Texas, there are at this time over 1,000,000 acres running cattle under the Running W. brand. The figures are not incorrect, 1,000,000 acres, must sound large to Easterns who consider the Polo Grounds a fair sized piece of ground.

The longhorn cattle which have been made famous in stories of Texas are so fastly vanishing that the government has established a herd in a national Park in Oklahoma to preserve this breed which is being replaced by high-grade short horns and Brahma cattle from India. Brahma cattle were introduced to the lower coast country of Texas because of their ability to stand the long hot dry summers, so far they have been successful but are a hard breed to handle. The Brahma can clear a fence seven feet high with little or no effort at all, corrals for Brahmas are often built with heavy mesquite post extending some 10 or 12 feet into the air.

So you may inform your readers that if they want to see a real ranch come to south Texas and learn what big is.

Assuring you of my appreciation of Mr. Packard's story, "Tiger Claws," I am,

Yours sincerely,

THOS. HUTCHISON.

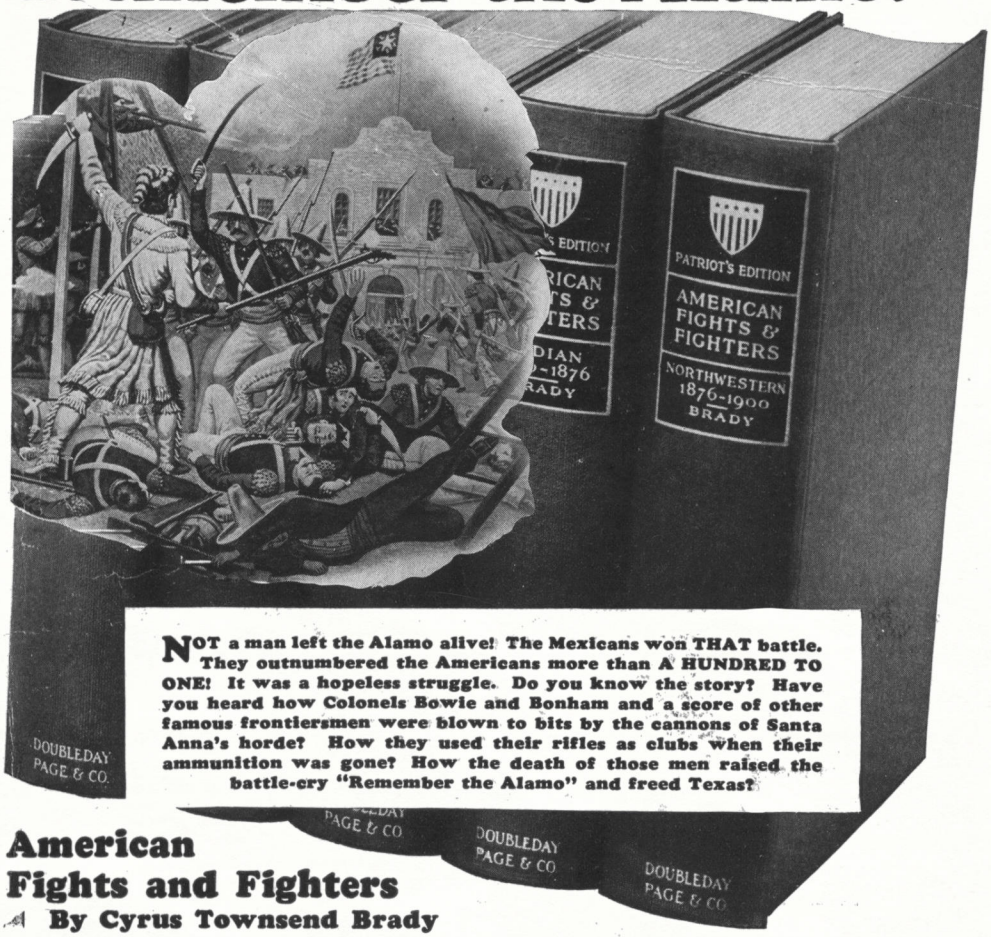
With His Boots On

MAYBE it's as well that the two "Men of Rawhide" on whom James Buell Hartley based his story of that name in this issue never met in real life. Otherwise one of them mightn't have died with his boots on. Here's what Mr. Hartley has to say about them.

The two main characters in my story, "Men of Rawhide," are—or were, both being dead—flesh-and-blood fellows and one of them really was a retired rustler, the other wasn't. (Hardly necessary to say I haven't used their right names.) Living in different states, they never met, but when I came across them it struck me that a good yarn might be spun of such a meeting. Tough as rawhide, both of them, and yet pliable under certain influences. A good wife made an honest man out of the fellow who coveted his neighbor's stock and he died in bed with his boots off, contrary to his own expectations when he was about my present age. It must have disappointed no less than three fighting sheriffs of counties in three separate states that he didn't cash looking up a tree. This old pistol-slick rustler never was in South America, like Logan in my story, but I reckon he felt as if he wanted to go there many a time when the star-packers were nipping at his heels.

JAMES BUELL HARTLEY.

"Remember the Alamo!"



NOT a man left the Alamo alive! The Mexicans won THAT battle. They outnumbered the Americans more than A HUNDRED TO ONE! It was a hopeless struggle. Do you know the story? Have you heard how Colonels Bowie and Bonham and a score of other famous frontiersmen were blown to bits by the cannons of Santa Anna's horde? How they used their rifles as clubs when their ammunition was gone? How the death of those men raised the battle-cry "Remember the Alamo" and freed Texas?

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