

THE MAN WHO RODE BY HIMSELF

A Complete Novel

by

Bertrand W. Sinclair



Short Stories

Twice A Month

October 25th

25c

A
"MAJOR"
Novelette
by
**L. PATRICK
GREENE**

**Homer
King
Gordon**

**H.
Bedford-
Jones**

B. M. Bower — Perry Adams



"IF MY HUSBAND HAD ONLY KNOWN—"



WOULD HAVE KEPT US FROM WANT

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Insur- Age ages	Insur- Age ages
18 \$1275	35 9513
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20 1221	37 759
21 1194	38 734
22 1167	39 706
23 1140	40 683
24 1112	41 657
25 1085	42 632
26 1057	43 607
27 1030	44 583
28 1003	45 559
29 976	46 535
30 948	47 512
31 921	48 489
32 894	49 467
33 866	50 445
34 840	

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We also issue a
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TEAR OFF—MAIL TODAY

Postal Life Insurance Co., Arthur Jordan, Pres.
Dept. 244-E, 511 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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My exact date of birth is..... Race.....

Place of Birth..... Nationality.....

My occupation is..... I wish to pay a premium of..... per month. This entitles me to..... worth of insurance. I am enclosing the first month's premium, which will be returned to me if my application is not accepted.

Insurance payable to..... Full Name.....

Relationship to me.....

Name.....

Street and Number.....

City..... State.....

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Name

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FRESH
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HAVANA CIGARS

GUARANTEED
15¢ QUALITY

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Each

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PACKED IN A
METAL HUMIDOR **2** POST-PAID

2½¢ each for cigars we manufacture to retail up to 20¢ apiece. Absolutely fresh, delicious, hand-made cigars (representative of more than 100 different brands we make!)—none shorter than 5 inches, and most of them even longer.

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... WE GUARANTEE that you will smoke and enjoy every one of them, just as though you had paid the full retail price.

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—and the smokes are on us!

If you do not receive, IN YOUR OWN OPINION, at least \$10 worth of smoking pleasure from these 100 assorted cigars, tell us frankly, and we will refund every penny of your money—and the smokes are on us!

NO MORE THAN 100 of these Factory Seconds and Odd Lots to any one individual, as it is our aim to prevent these cigars from falling into the hands of dealers who, we have discovered, have been purchasing them in large quantities, assorting them, and retelling them as firsts at very high prices.

Send check or money order for \$2.75, or pay postman upon arrival. We have been making fine Havana cigars for over 50 years—the company was incorporated in 1903! References: Dun—Bradstreet or any bank in U. S. or Cuba.

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GUARANTEED \$3.75 VALUE FOR \$1.00

Our nationally advertised "ALEMENDARES EXCEPCIONALES" (15¢ Straight) made in a rough manner to permit this "Get Acquainted" offer! Enjoy the selected quality, long Havana Filler, Conn. Shade Wrapper and Broadleaf Binder. As fine a cigar as you want to smoke—MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE, OF COURSE!

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JOBS LEADING to SALARIES of \$50 a Week and Up

Prepare for jobs as Designer, Inspector and Tester—as Radio Salesman and in Service and Installation Work—as Operator or Manager of a Broadcasting Station—as Wireless Operator on a Ship or Airplane, or in Talking Picture or Sound Work—HUNDREDS of OPPORTUNITIES for a real future in Radio!

TEN WEEKS of SHOP TRAINING **Pay Your Tuition After Graduation**

We don't teach by book study. We train you on a great outlay of Radio, Television and Sound equipment—on scores of modern Radio Receivers, huge Broadcasting equipment, the very latest and newest Television apparatus, Talking Picture and Sound Reproduction equipment, Code Practice equipment, etc. You don't need advanced education or previous experience. We give you—RIGHT HERE IN THE COYNE SHOPS—the actual practice and experience you'll need for your start in this great field. And because we cut out all useless theory and only give that which is necessary you get a practical training in 10 weeks.

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And Television is already here! Soon there'll be a demand for THOUSANDS of TELEVISION EXPERTS! The man who learns Television now can have a great future in this great new field. Get in on the ground-floor of this amazing new Radio development! Come to COYNE and learn Television on the very latest, newest Television equipment. Talking Picture and Public Address Systems offer opportunities to the Trained Radio Man. Here is a great new Radio field just beginning to grow! Prepare NOW for these wonderful opportunities! Learn Radio Sound Work at COYNE on actual Talking Picture and Sound Reproduction equipment.

PAY for YOUR TRAINING **After You Graduate**

I am making an offer that no other school has dared to do. I'll take you here in my shops and give you this training and you pay your tuition after you have graduated. Two months after you complete my course you make your first payment and then you have ten months to complete your payments. There are no strings to this offer. I know a lot of honest fellows haven't got a lot of money these days, but still want to prepare themselves for a real job so they won't have to worry about hard times or lay offs.

I've got enough confidence in these fellows and in my training to give them the training they need and pay me back after they have their training. If you who read this advertisement are really interested in your future here is the chance of a lifetime. Mail the coupon today and I'll give you all the facts.

ALL PRACTICAL WORK **At COYNE in Chicago**

ALL ACTUAL, PRACTICAL WORK. You build radio sets, install and service them. You actually operate great Broadcasting equipment. You construct Television Receiving Sets and actually transmit your own Television programs over



our modern Television equipment. You work on real Talking Picture machines and Sound equipment. You learn Wireless Operating on actual Code Practice apparatus. We don't waste time on useless theory. We give you the practical training you'll need—in 10 short, pleasant weeks.

MANY EARN WHILE LEARNING

You get Free Employment Service for Life. And don't let lack of money stop you. Many of our students make all or a good part of their living expenses while going to school and if you should need this help just write to me. Coyne is 33 years old! Coyne Training is tested—proven beyond all doubt. You can find out everything absolutely free. Just mail coupon for my big free book!

H. C. Lewis, Pres. RADIO DIVISION Founded 1899
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 73-5E, Chicago, Ill.

Mail Coupon Today for All the Facts

H. C. LEWIS, President
Radio Division, Coyne Electrical School
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 73-5E, Chicago, Ill.

Dear Mr. Lewis:

Send me your Big Free Radio Book, and all details of your Special Offer, including your "Pay After Graduate" offer.

Name

Address

Town.....State.....

WANTED—MEN FOR TEA and COFFEE ROUTES

make up to **\$45.00** a week

**NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED — I GIVE YOU
WHAT LITTLE TRAINING NECESSARY —
NO RED TAPE — PAY STARTS AT ONCE**

Read This Article Carefully

Hundreds of deserving men should read this
enclosed. Many who have been beset
with financial distress will find prompt and
permanent relief from their money worries

FOR YEAR 'ROUND INCOME

Think how wonderful it is to have a nice
weekly income just from calling upon and
supplying people with daily necessities. Plenty
of money to pay your nagging bills—buy
clothing—pay off the mortgage—buy your-
self a home—put money in the bank—or
anything else your heart desires.

TEA AND COFFEE ROUTES PAY BEST

Everybody knows there is nothing like a
good weekly route for a fine, steady income.
Our routes pay far better than most because
we supply the things people must use in order
to live. You simply take care

of customers' orders on the
route in your locality. Estab-
lished route belongs to you.
You collect all the cash we
take in and keep a big
share of it just for
delivering the goods
and taking care of the
business. I'll furnish

you with hun-
dreds of fine pre-
miums to give
away with tea
and coffee and
other fine food
products. Hun-
dreds waiting to
be served in many
localities. Pay
begins at once where
you call on trade already
established.

YOUR OWN FOOD PRODUCTS AT WHOLESALE PRICES

When I send you instructions for making
money on my new neighborhood Tea and
Coffee Route plan I also give you rock-bottom
wholesale prices on your own groceries, about
half the regular retail prices. This is in
addition to your regular pay, so you make
big money in cash and save big money on
the things you use in your own home.

GO TO WORK AT ONCE

My plan provides immediate cash earnings
for those who need money. I want to give
employment to a lot more people at once.
You start work right in your own locality
right near where you live. There is nothing
hard or difficult about this job. There's no

red tape connected with it. You don't have a
lot of expensive equipment to buy.

EXPERIENCE OR CAPITAL UNNECESSARY

I spent years of time and a fortune in
money perfecting business plans that I give
you the very first day you start. Part of your
job will be to distribute some advertising
matter and sample packages. You will deliver
all the goods, collect the money, and keep a
big share of it as your pay. This provides you
with immediate cash to relieve urgent money
worries.

NO LIMIT TO MY OFFER

You have probably
never worked for a
boss who didn't want
to limit the pay you
got on Saturday
night. You have
dreamed of a chance
to make \$50.00,
\$60.00, or even \$75.00
in a week. That's just
the kind of unlimited
offer I am making.
If you are honest,
conscientious, and
willing to listen to
reason, I won't put
any limit on your
earnings. I'll explain
all this to you just
as soon as you send
me your name.

DON'T SEND MONEY— JUST YOUR NAME

Don't confuse this with anything you have
ever read before—I don't need your money—
I need your help. Send me your name so



I can lay the facts
before you. Then you
can decide if the pay
is satisfactory. I fur-
nish everything, in-
cluding a new Ford
Sedan, to producers.
Don't expect me to
wait indefinitely to
hear from you. If you
act promptly it will
be a strong thing in
your favor with me.
Send coupon or penny
postcard today—
EVERYTHING IS
FREE.

FACTORY FRESH FOODS

My tea and coffee and other
food products are factory fresh,
tested and approved by the
American Testing Institute,
the very highest known quality
at popular prices. It's no
wonder people insist on having
my brand in preference to
any other. I tell you all about
this in the free booklet I
send you.



I'M NOT AFTER YOUR MONEY

Don't send me a cent—I don't want your
money—I need your help. First I want an
opportunity to tell you the truth about how
to make up to \$45.00 a week in pleasant,
congenial work. I'll lay all the facts before
you, and you be the judge if the pay is
satisfactory. I'll take all the chances—I don't
want you to take any. You may be just the
man I'm seeking. I

am not going to
ask you a lot of
embarrassing ques-
tions or pry into
your personal affairs
when you join me.
You and I can get
together on this
business deal with-
out all that. If you
have a part time
job, this is your
chance for permanent
work with no danger of
being fired. You don't
even need to devote all
of your time to this
work and you are
through punishing a
time-clock once you
start with me in dead earnest.



**FORD CAR FURNISHED
FREE AS AN EXTRA BONUS
NEW FORD TUDOR SEDAN
NOT A CONTEST OR A PRIZE**

THINGS TO DO

1. Mail Coupon.
2. Read Facts.
3. Start to work for me.

TEA and COFFEE ROUTE COUPON

Albert Mills, Route Mgr.

1105 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Send me full particulars of "Home Owned" Tea and Coffee
Route plan and just how I can get started on a basis of up to
\$45.00 a week at once. This is without obligation to me.

NAME

ADDRESS

(Please Print or Write Plainly)



.. His Harvest Years Made Miserable Through Failure of the **DANGER GLAND*** That Wrecks Men After 40!

...yet This Little Book Might Have Saved Him Years of Needless Pain!

DEEP in the body of every man lies a tiny gland—the prostate. Every year, in thousands of men, this gland becomes so seriously swollen and inflamed that the victims, who should be vigorous, healthy men, become physical wrecks. Pains in the back and legs—peculiar headaches they can't account for—frequent need to get up at night, all warn them that something is the matter. Yet they fail to heed. They think the night rising is a symptom of "bladder trouble" or "a sign of advancing age."

Competent medical authority says that 65% of all men past a certain age suffer from these symptoms—are actively victimized to some degree by this gland. Thousands of men who have finished their working years expect to finish their days easily and pleasantly. Instead, due to prostate ravages, they end their lives in misery. Thousands more aren't even allowed to retire—the murderous onset of this gland failure wrecks their earning power, and they end their shortened lives not only in ill health but in poverty. Millions more, if they are not actually sick, are harassed and kept about half-alive by the nagging, annoying symptoms of prostate weakness.

Yet a hundred thousand men today who heeded these warnings, and learned the truth about this danger gland, have found a way to end these painful, sometimes embarrassing warning symptoms and prevent the disaster which threatens them. Through a clearly written little book, filled full of sound facts which every man over forty should have,

they have learned how a great scientific discovery can now be employed—for the purpose of preserving health and strength, in many cases to prolong life, by curbing the ravages of this murderous little gland. Thousands upon thousands have written, in gratitude—have told us amazing stories of restored health and happiness, saying, "Use my name as a reference to save other sufferers as you saved me."

*Prostate

The prostate gland lies right at the neck of the bladder. In men over forty it is easy for this tiny gland to get swollen and inflamed. As it swells, it partially prevents the bladder from emptying itself. Nerves are deadened; poisons accumulate. If not relieved early, it may even cause gland operation of the most dangerous sort.

Of course, we can't publish all those names here—not one-tenth of them could we put on this page. But we can, and we will—send you the book which showed them the facts about prostate weakness, and the facts about Thermanal, as this easy, drugless gland stimulation is called.

Mail the coupon today for your copy of "Why Many Men Are Old At 40," the volume which has showed 100,000 men over forty how to attack this painful and murderous gland failure. It presents the facts and the symptoms—clearly and intelligently,

collected carefully from the observations of the world's greatest specialists on this subject. Find out from this book now—don't wait for the sick gland to tell you the details in a more unpleasant fashion. Simply mail the coupon.



**Where Shall
We Send
Your Copy
FREE?**

**W. J. KIRK, PRESIDENT
THE ELECTRO THERMAL CO.
5549 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio**

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 803 Van Nuys Building, Dept. 55-2, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada, address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 55-2, 63 Yonge St., Toronto, Can.

**W. J. KIRK, President,
THE ELECTRO THERMAL COMPANY,
5549 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.**
Please send at once, without obligation, my copy of "Why Many Men Are Old At 40," and full information regarding the new treatment.

Name
Address
City State

THE GREATEST AND BEST



Short

TWICE A MONTH

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ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

Stories



HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR

Title Registered in
U. S. Patent Office

OCT. 25th, 1933

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Whole No. 668



THE MAN WHO RODE BY HIMSELF

By
BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

*Author of "Twenty-Minute Eggs,"
"Both Sides of the Law," etc.*

CHAPTER I

THE SON OF HIS FATHER

PROPPED up by a stack of pillows in a hospital bed Colonel Henry Boldt adjusted a pair of spectacles across the bridge of a thin hooked nose and shuffled several sheets of paper. Meanwhile he stared in an appraising sort of fashion at the younger man sitting beside his bed. Which was precisely what the Colonel was doing—appraising Stan Rickard's capacity to handle a job that was important, and might be difficult. There were other men, older men, tried and proven, that the Colonel would have preferred, if he could conveniently have got hold of them. But time was money, the other men were far away, and Stan Rickard was at hand. It crossed the Colonel's mind as being strange that the very qualities he had sometimes deprecated in Stan, a cheerful, careless spirit, and an eagerness for new scenes and rapid action, were what recommended him for this undertaking.

"Take the numbers down," said Colonel Henry. "You don't need the scrip itself. But be sure you list all these numbers on the location notices. I don't want no slip-up in getting the deed to that land once it's staked. I have seen some considerable fusses over careless markin' of figures pertainin' to deeds of land."

Stan bent his yellow head over a tablet, jotting with a pencil. His blue eyes were alight with anticipation. All his young life he had been troubled with the itching foot, and here was legitimate reason to go far and fast and do things for a definite purpose.

"That's all," the Colonel said. "Ouch! A railroad car mashes you up worse than a cayuse when it takes a tumble. Now, don't get into trouble, young fellow. And don't get sidetracked on the way to Montana. The quicker you get Roman Wells staked the better."

"You've seen this garden of the gods, that you're so set on gettin' it?" Stan asked. "I didn't know you'd been up north."

"I have not," the crippled gentleman growled. "But I have this description of it from a man who knows a first-class ranch location when he sees one. This is a case of gettin' in on the ground floor, goin' early to avoid the rush. In another year half the outfits in the Southwest will be establishin' themselves up north. They've just found it's a cow country. After that there ain't no more free range left in the United States. I'm sendin' you on a mighty important undertakin' young feller."

"I don't know why you picked on me," Stan laughed. "But I reckon I'll deliver the goods."

"If you do," Colonel Henry Boldt wrinkled his bushy eyebrows, "I'll make you a wagon boss at a hundred a month, even if you ain't but a kid. If you'll settle down and stay with the job. You have not showed no signs of that yet, Stan. You worry the life out of your mother. You're in the Panhandle one season, somewhere in Colorado the next. You ain't a steady man at all. The only thing you got to recommend you, by gum, is the impression you give folk that you can be trusted. That, an' your cravin' to go new places is mostly why I'm sendin' you to Montana. I guess it's in your blood."

"So I've heard," Stan murmured. "Mom has reminded me of that off an' on the last four, five years. If I come by my roamin' tendencies honest, why jump on me all the time about it?"

Henry Boldt grinned at the young man.

"I don't blame you, son," said he. "Time was when I roamed considerable myself. Before I settled down to business. Now I got so darned much business to tend to I have to stay home. You tell your mother you're goin' north as a favor to me."

"Oh, sure," Stan nodded, but his tone was not enthusiastic.

*A Young Man with Fighting Blood in His Veins Rides
North to Take Possession of Some Pretty Cattle Country
—Where Some Bad Men Were Already Settled In.*



"She'll bawl me out for encouragin' you in ramblin' off," Henry Boldt drawled. "But Montana's gettin' civilized like all the rest of the darn country—too civilized for the cow business, almost. And I got to send a man I can trust to stake Roman Wells an' hold it down till them trail herds arrive. Don't lose that map nor them scrip numbers, Stan. I'll be up there this fall myself, soon as I get on my feet again."

MARY RICKARD didn't wait to lodge her complaint with this train-smashed cattleman, about sending her son on a long and hazardous trail. She took it out on her son, not because there might be hazards by the way, but because she chose to feel that he was deserting her. There was nothing new about that. Stan had listened to her prim, sweet voice enumerating in grieved tones his shortcomings at intervals since he left high school, which he hated, to ride in Texas roundups, which he loved.

He walked now from the San Antonio hospital where the crippled colonel lay, along streets lined with shade trees until he came to an adobe brick cottage, set in a garden bright with flowers in front and showing neat rows of vegetables at the rear. There was an acre or more in the walled garden. Great cherry trees flung wide branches. Stan had lived ever since he could remember in that 'dobe house. On hot days like this his mother sat in the same chair in the same lattice-shaded spot on the porch. She sat there now. Stan roosted on the top step and told her where he was going and why. He was a trifle proud of being sent on that mission.

"If you had any consideration for me you wouldn't go at all," Mary Rickard said mournfully. "But of course you haven't. You are becoming exactly like your father."

"You've told me that before," Stan said meekly. He was fond of his mother, but when she harped on what he should do

if he had for her the sort of affection a son *should* have for a mother who had devoted her life to him, and reminded him that he exhibited tendencies inherited from the male line, of which she highly disapproved, Stan sometimes grew a little impatient.

"Lord, mom," said he. "I can't just sit on your skirt. Cows wean their calves long before they're full grown. I ain't a baby no more."

"That's downright coarse," Mary Rickard reproved. She rocked slowly back and forth, her eyes growing bright with tears of self-pity.

"Your father never would heed my wishes," she snuffled. "He took me from a good home——"

"Mother, mother, for the love of Pete!" Stan cried. "Please. I've heard that so often since I grew up. You've still got a pretty good home."

"You aren't grown up mentally at all," she chose to ignore his last sentence. "I sometimes wonder if you ever will be. No man is until he has a sense of responsibility. You never have had. I brought you into the world and devoted the best years of my life to you—and what have I got? Nothing. Nothing but an empty house, when your place is here, to stand by me in my old age——"

"Old age my eye," Stan interrupted. "You're forty-three. You look less'n thirty-five. I can't stay tied to your apron strings, mom."

"You could stay at home," she sobbed openly now. "You could find some useful, dignified employment, instead of——"

"Helling around over Texas with roundups," Stan supplied. "Doesn't it ever strike you that it's better to be a top range hand than a clerk or a two-bit business man's assistant in a one-horse town? I was not made for that sort of thing. I am at home on a horse. I *sabe* handlin' wild cattle on a large scale. A cowpuncher has got to be man enough to look anybody in the eye an' tell 'em to go to hell. Mom,

be reasonable. I got to make my own way in the world. I have to do it my own way. Every man has, that's worth a whoop."

"You could have been a doctor or a lawyer—or anything," she protested bitterly. "And you could have been near me always, and I would have been proud of you."

"Seeing that the last two years of school proved conclusive that studyin' was not gettin' me anywhere, and that to stay in school indefinitely was all same a long sentence in the pen to me, that I took no prizes when it come to higher mathematics and the other highbrow stuff a man must digest if he's goin' into a profession, it boiled down to whether I lived off you, or got myself a job," Stan said defensively. He resented the implication of neglect, of undutifulness. "A man that must work is a fool if he don't work at what he likes best and is good at. So your argument won't hold water, mom. Let's close the debate. I'm startin' north at sunrise. Let's eat, drink an' be merry, an' quit arguin'. I'll stay home this winter—but I'm not goin' to be no doctor, lawyer, merchant chief. I'm a range man from my feet up, and someday I will have a cow outfit of my own. Then you'll be pointin' with pride that your son is a very successful man."

"Successful!" Mary Rickard sniffed disdainfully. "That was a delusion your father suffered from. You are so much like him in your ways, Stan, that sometimes it makes me afraid. Horses and guns meant more to him than a wife and a home."

STAN said nothing. In his soul he wished he had known the legendary figure that was his father, so that he could have formed his own judgment. But he knew better than to voice such a thought. A wife's affection, Stan reflected, might be like a mother's, an all-consuming passion to bind the object of that affection in the fetters of her own desires. Horses and guns! A good horse was a magnifi-

cent beast. And a gun was a man's proven friend on the frontier. Why should a delight in animals and weapons be a black mark against a man? He shook himself out of these distasteful reflections and started a fire in the kitchen stove. He spread the cloth and set the table while his mother got dinner, and helped her wash dishes afterward. She expected him to do that, and reproved him gently if he failed to help.

She made a great fuss over his preparations to ride north in the morning, complaining because he would be so far away, that he would be gone so long when a son's place was by his mother. Once Stan nearly demanded of her: "How in blazes do women eat an' wear clothes an' enjoy comfortable homes if men don't ride an' work." But he shut his lips tight on his exasperation. After all, that wave of complaining would cease to wash over him after sunrise. He felt ashamed, but he had fled more than once from that sweet voice that could grow so freighted with sadness over years of neglect, of disappointment in her only son, that could plead unceasingly with him to fall in with her conception of what he should do to make her life complete.

She was looking over his socks, which good mothers have done for sons about to travel, since wool first covered men's feet, and she said to Stan, "There are some I must darn. Dear, look in my dresser and you'll find a little bag with balls of wool. I don't know whether it's the top or the second, but it's in one."

Stan Rickard came back carrying in one hand the little bag of yarn balls. And in the other he held a beautiful specimen of the gunmaker's craft—a Colt single action, Frontier model revolver. Engraved by an artist, inlaid with intricate patterns of silver. A mother of pearl grip like slabs of fire opal.

"I put my hand on this in one of the drawers, an' felt what it was through the wrappin'," Stan said. "Whose gun is this, mom?"

Mary Rickard sat very primly, her hands in her lap, an air of profound disapproval on her face. She had a sweet face—spoiled only by the peevish, willful droop of her mouth.

"That was your father's," she said. "He had a pair. When he went away to the Pecos he took the other one."

"You might have told me," Stan said. "It's the finest-looking six-gun I've ever seen." He squinted down the barrel. "Well oiled," he muttered, "but dusty. Hasn't been shot for years, looks like."

"The last time it was fired was here in the streets of San Antone," Mary Rickard said, it seemed to Stan almost spitefully, certainly with obvious rancor. "Your father shot a man with it one day when you were not two years old. I have often been tempted to give that weapon away. Now I wish I had. George Rickard was a violent man when his temper rose. It has been one of the horrors of my life that you might be too much like him."

"I'll remove the temptation for you to give it to anybody," Stan said a little grimly. "If this was my dad's, it's mine. I'll take care of it."

"I don't approve of you carrying a gun," Mary Rickard said. "You know I don't, Stan."

"A gun," Stan answered absently, balancing the silver-mounted, forty-five in his hand, "is like an umbrella or a slicker. You either don't need 'em at all or you need 'em mighty bad. So you pack 'em a long for emergencies."



Sitting

on the side of his bed that night Stan paused with one boot in his hand. His eyes rested on the pearl grip of the silver

gun thrust now in the holster where he had carried a plain blued Colt.

"So you're one of a pair of fancy guns that my unworthy father carried," he muttered. "He killed a man with you, eh? He cared more for horses an' guns than he did for a wife an' a home. He was a violent man. An' it's been the horror of her sorrowin' life that I might turn out like him, eh?"

And then for no apparent reason at all Stan Rickard uttered a low-toned, expressive, "Hell!"

CHAPTER II

ONE OF THE LITTLE ACORNS

HATE can be kindled as spontaneously as love. The glance of an eye, the curl of a lip, a word, some unpremeditated action that rasps like a file across a tender surface—the flame is kindled, burns, rises sometimes to a destructive flare.

Stan Rickard thought something like that, a little less clearly, but as much to the point, as he moved softly away from the elbow of a youngster no older than himself. Something had stirred in Stan's breast at a slurring phrase. But he had not let that show in his eyes or his speech. The other man had. Funny, Stan thought, here I step into a strange place among a strange crowd. One lone *hombre* takes one look at me, don't like my looks an' starts right in bein' nasty. He is looking for trouble an' advertisin' the fact. I don't want trouble. I don't like his looks nor style any better than he likes me. But shucks—

Stan shifted sidewise with his glass along the bar. One accidental contact with that elbow had brought a remark that would have precipitated instant war if Stan Rickard had acted according to instinct instead of cool judgment. Stan had something on his mind besides a good Stetson hat. He was here tonight and gone in the morning on business more important than shooting out a quarrel with an arro-

gant man who felt himself cock of the walk in Roche Crossing that night.

But Stan's prudence and restraint failed of their object. Sam Acorn twisted his body and stared at Stan with a sneer.

"Better sidle over to a table. You'll feel safer, maybe," he said. "What cat dragged you in here?"

STAN set down his glass. A queer anticipatory hush fell on the dozen men lining the bar. Even the bartender, used to trail-herd feuds, the swift and deadly clashes between men who nursed old grudges or flared up suddenly with new-born ones, arrested his cloth on a glass and stared at young Acorn in surprise. The very tone of his voice was like a lash, a palpable challenge. There was something in it that no free-born man bred in the Southwest could pass over in silence unless he wished to be branded yellow.

"The same cat," Stan said after a brief silence, "that will drag you out, if you persist in picking a row with me. I never saw you before. I don't even know who you are. I am not looking for trouble over nothing at all. You act like a man that's insistin' on it. What's eatin' on you anyway?"

Young Acorn faced about on Stan squarely, truculently. He had been drinking, but he was not drunk. His movements were too calculated, too deliberate. He was a little taller than Stan Rickard, handsome in a lean, swarthy fashion. He had a little black mustache over full red lips.

"You never saw me before," he sneered. "You're a damn liar. You rode in the Acorn roundup two years ago. You gypped me out of the best mount in my string. I'm Sam Acorn. Young Sam Acorn."

"Oh," Stan said easily. A little smile flitted across his face. "You've growed a mustache since then. No, I didn't know you. An' *that's* what ails you, is it? You're crazy with the heat, an' you know it. Your old man put that horse in my

string because he figured I needed him. That's nothin' to be sore about. I remember you cussed and groused at the time. Hell, I forgot about it the next day! Forget it, now. Why cook up a killin' over a fool thing like that?"

"Who said anything about a killin'?" young Acorn demanded arrogantly. "Are you threatenin' *me*?"

Stan didn't answer. There was craft as well as malice in thus twisting his own words against him. So he said nothing, but waited. It was, he reflected, the other man's move.

And young Acorn made his move with a speed and timeliness so unexpected that Stan was on his back on the saloon floor, stars dancing before his eyes, before he realized what had happened. Where he had expected either a surly passing over of the situation, or a break with a gun, young Acorn had lunged with his fist and knocked Stan down. For good measure he kicked Stan twice in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him, and paralyzing the hand that almost automatically clutched at his gun-grip.

The men around him, strangers to Stan Rickard, Acorn riders and casuals from here and there in the Roche country, would have stood by in complete immobility and let the two shoot each other to death. But it violated their sense of fitness to see a man kicked when he was down and helpless. They stepped in between. In a dim sort of way Stan could hear voices protesting above him:

"Aw, hell that ain't no way to do, Sam!"

Stan's senses cleared. He rolled over on his side. Hands helped him. The same hands took his gun out of its scabbard on his belt as he fumbled for the weapon. They helped him up. He stood swaying a little on his feet, half-sick from that vicious kick in the abdomen. But his head had cleared, and something cold and deadly began to work in his veins.

"It appears," he said, "that anything goes in this man's town."

"What I say, goes," young Acorn shouldered through the knot of men. "This is my town. There's no room in it for you. You got a hour to get out of it. I'll start lookin' around for you in a hour. If you're in sight you won't need to get out. You'll be carried out. *Vamos!*"

"It's a free country," Stan said slowly. "I don't take orders like that from no man. I'll leave Roche Crossing when I get good and ready."

"You heard what I said," Young Acorn answered. "Suit yourself."

"Somebody grabbed my gun," Stan continued calmly. "Do I get it back or do I have to go and buy one or borrow one? Or is it part of the Acorn system to get their victims disarmed an' kill 'em in a nice safe way?"

"I got your gun, kid," an older man said. "I'll give it to you outside."

HE FOLLOWED Stan to the narrow porch that fronted the saloon. A mule team kicked up dust in the single street of Roche Crossing. The sun glinted on a river splitting a wide gray flat. A line of blue hills broke the skyline on the west. Just like any afternoon in any southern Wyoming cow town.

The man gave Stan his pearl-handled six-shooter and the five shells he had jiggered out of the cylinder.

"I grabbed this when you was fumblin' for it," he said, "because you was not in any shape to shoot with nobody right at that minute. Sam woulda plugged you the second you raised your hand. *Sabe*, kid? I ain't no Acorn supporter. I was tryin' to do you a good turn."

"Maybe you did," Stan answered. "Thanks, anyway."

He stood a second rolling the five brass cartridges in the palm of his hand. Then he shoved them into the cylinder, and put the Colt back in its scabbard.

"Lissen, kid," the man said. "I know how you feel. But don't let that feelin' get away with you. Mount your horse an' ride on. You don't have to feel

ashamed of doin' that. This is Acorn territory. Young Sam is a poisonous cuss. Somebody will kill him someday. But you'll lose if you try to make it your job. Even if you got away with him, you'd still have a tough row to hoe. Let it slide."

"Your advice is mighty practical," Stan said slowly, "but nobody has jumped you unprovoked. You have not been knocked down an' kicked in the stomach and given one hour to leave town, just to please an arrogant pup."

"Well, I wish you luck," the man commented. "An' I hope you are handy enough with a gun to protect yourself."

"I can take my chances," Stan said softly.

He walked across the street to the lone hotel in that little town. His horses were in the livery stable. He took a drink of whisky in the hotel bar, to stop the queer feeling that persisted in rising in the pit of his stomach. Then he went to the stable, saddled one horse, packed his bed on the other, led them to a hitching rack before the hotel and tied them there. Then he sat down on the hotel porch in a chair. He leaned back against the wall smoking. One hour to get out of Roche Crossing. Stan's lip curled. There were some things a man couldn't take and live in peace with himself. He had laughed and ridden across the Southwest, without ever having had to draw a gun in anger, in defense of his rights or his life. And now a swaggering fool in a strange town had forced him into this position. Stan had seen similar things happen. He had never thought to be caught in such a coil himself. Still—he looked at the sun dipping over toward the west. If Sam Acorn made good his talk one of them would never see the sun-god's golden chariot wheel out of the east again.

THAT disturbing notion vanished and he shifted into an easier position on his chair. Half a dozen men had pushed out of the door of the saloon across the

dusty street. Ninety feet away. In the clear thin plains air he could see their features plainly. They stood in a row talking, looking across at the hotel front.

One took a hitch in his belt and began to walk across the street. Young Sam Acorn. He leaned a little forward. His hands hung by his sides. Stan stood up, and pushed the chair aside. He did not move off the porch, away from the wall. Little tingles ran up and down his arms, yet his face remained an expressionless mask.

Sam Acorn came on slowly until he stood in the bright sunlight twenty feet away. His red lips were twisted in a snarl. His little black mustache seemed to bristle.

"I told you I'd be lookin' for you," he said in a croak.

"You've found me," Stan answered. His tone seemed amused, mocking almost. "Ain't you surprised?"

His lips parted in a mechanical smile. And that seemed to touch off his enemy. Sam Acorn's head hunched into his shoulders. His hand swept up, bringing a gun out of a carved leather scabbard. At waist level it spat a thin puff of blue smoke. And Stan Rickard scarcely heard the crack of that forty-five, so intent was his eye on the notch in the frame and the knife-blade sight ahead of that, which he brought to bear on a point six inches below Sam Acorn's chin before he pulled trigger. He heard the roar. He smelled the powder. He felt nothing. He did not know whether he fired two shots or three. But presently he knew that he stood unharmed on the edge of the porch, gun in hand, and Sam Acorn lay huddled on his face in the dust, the sun striking glints on a pair of silver spurs turned toward the sky.

CHAPTER III

THE ELEMENT OF CHANCE

THE sun had been climbing a long time above the crest of the Rawhides. It shed a brassy glare on gray sage spread-

ing like an immobile sea away to infinite distances, a flat surface upon which rose little puffs of dust struck by trotting hoofs. There was nothing unusual in horsemen crossing Roche Prairie. Wild cattle and wilder horses grazed over its vast area, watering along a stream whose winding course slunk here and there as furtively as if ashamed of a turbid color and a bitter taste. Wherever range stock runs riders come and go about their lawful occasions.

But there was a something unusual about this riding group. They traveled abreast, half a dozen men, tired men on tired horses. Sweat-caked streaks lay along flank and shoulder. Some of the men sat bolt upright, stiffened against saddle-weariness. Others slouched. They were all armed. Their faces were either impassive or grimly scowling.

Ahead of them a few yards one man rode by himself.

He rode easily, carelessly, facing that blistering sunshine, a slim, fair-haired man well past middle age. You had to look closely to see the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. But they were there. And there were white hairs buried among the yellow under his hat. His eyes lifted to the grass that clothed the foothills of the Rawhide Range, grass yellow like gold, miles of gold waving in little wandering breezes. He had no rifle under his left stirrup-leather like the others. His gun belt carried an empty scabbard. But he could grin sardonically as they left the gray sage flat and began to climb the undulating foothills that pitched down from pine-clad slopes and rock-strewn ridges, gaunt as a wild boar's back in the spring of a hard winter.

Yes, he bore himself easily in his saddle, and smiled, though he was under sentence of death, this man who rode by himself. The first clump of pines would be his scaffold. Yet, like the French aristocrats who rode the creaking tumbrils and took a pinch of snuff as they faced the Barber whose keen blade shaved off their heads instead of their beards, this man

looked up at the nearing pines without dismay, less disturbed outwardly than his potential executioners.

They came at length to the first fringe of timber. Beside a grove of gnarly-limbed jack pine a clear mountain spring bubbled out of the hillside. The man who rode by himself dismounted first, let his horse drink while he himself lay flat on his stomach and dipped his face in the



cold water. Then he stood aside. The others drank thirstily, the first clear cold water they had found that morning. And although they seemed careless of their prisoner there were always three or four pairs of eyes on him. Disarmed, under a dozen guns, flight hopeless, still they seemed wary of this man.

WHEN the last man and horse had quenched his thirst there came a moment of silence, of hesitation. The man who rode by himself stood puffing a cigarette. He seemed to inhale the smoke with an eagerness, a relish, as a man taking his last earthly pleasure might well do.

And then an elderly man with tremendous shoulders, and a black spade-shaped beard that covered his chest broke the silence gruffly. "Might as well get it over. Climb aboard your cayuse, Jones."

Chiwawa Jones looked at the man with the black beard. He looked once at the inverted blue bowl of the sky. Then he shrugged his wide, flat shoulders and mounted.

Without word or order, as if it were

a rehearsed scene in which the actors were letter perfect one took Chiwawa Jones' horse by the rein and led him under a pine. Another took the coiled *reata* from his saddle-fork and tossed one end over a limb above. A third took the noose and fixed it about Chiwawa Jones' neck.

"You got anything to say, Jones," the black-bearded man asked.

"Why I could wax mighty eloquent, I expect—but what different would it make?" Chiwawa Jones answered in the slow drawl of the Southwest. "You have me. You got fixed ideas about me. You have announced your intentions right positive. You claim the law ain't ever been able to handle me, so you aim to attend to that yo'selves. I don't reckon I could talk you out of that."

"You have got it comin', an' you might as well admit it," the leader said harshly. "Things have got to a point where I just naturally got to protect my own interests. Who was ridin' with you when we jumped you yesterday?"

"You didn't jump me yesterday," Chiwawa Jones answered. "I have told you that before. You caught me asleep this mornin', that's all. An' lucky for you I was asleep, Sam Acorn."

"Somebody was ridin' with you yesterday. You didn't come onto the Acorn range alone," the big black-bearded one insisted. "Cough up, Jones. I can hang you quick or I can hang you by inches. I want to know who was your partner."

"I ride by myself," Chiwawa Jones cried fiercely. "You stranglin' hound! I could name men in this crowd, an' that would include you, Acorn, that deserve hangin' more'n I do. To hell with you! You can string me up—but you can't make me crawl. Do your damndest!"

"Cinch that rope-end, Dan," Acorn growled.

THE man who held the loose end got down to fasten it about the trunk of the pine. He drew it tight. But he had barely taken a turn about the rough bark

when a voice said with a mocking inflection: "Gentlemen. *Gentlemen!* De—sist!"

A moment of startled silence, arrested motion. In that breathless moment a gun cracked from a scrub pine thicket thirty feet away. Sam Acorn's gray felt hat tipped backward a little on his massive head.

"That's one point in my argument against lynch law," the voice continued. "The next will be four inches lower, Mister Acorn. Turn Chiwawa Jones loose."

For a matter of five seconds the Acorn riders looked at each other, at the thicket which concealed this threat, and at Chiwawa Jones—who sat his horse with the rope about his neck as surprised as they.

"Don't try it, little acorns, or some of you'll never grow to be tall oaks," the voice warned. "I'm a mind-reader as well as a pretty good shot. You *might* get me if you rushed in a bunch—but I'll guarantee that at least five new faces will appear in hell while you're at it. Turn Chiwawa Jones loose. *Pronto.* I'll count four. Then I begin to shoot. And it won't be at anybody's hat."

One. Two. Like a bell tolling. At three the man holding the hanging rope cast it aside as if it burned his fingers. Chiwawa Jones laughed and lifted the noose off his neck. He twisted his head this way and that as if the rope had irked him.

"Heaven," he drawled at the scowling dark face of Sam Acorn, "*does* protect the workin' girl."

"Whichever one of you has Chiwawa's artillery give it back to him," the voice intoned. "Don't dally. I'm gettin' nervous."

"Pass over my Winchester an' six-gun, Murph," Chiwawa said. "Looks like a new deal is bein' made."

Ed Murphy handed over the weapons.

"Now, get," the voice sharpened, took on an acid note, "and get fast. Your health will fail you if you linger longer around here."

THEY didn't carp at that but swung about and rode back down the slopes of golden grass toward the gray desert out of which they had brought Chiwawa Jones to hang him on a pine. Their departure was not without dignity. They did not scuttle. They rode at a sedate trot. Their backs, Chiwawa Jones thought as he stared after them, were almost eloquent. At which quaint notion he laughed again.

"For a man who had one foot inside the pearly gates," the voice drawled out of the thicket, "you don't seem to have much sympathy for them disappointed men. Don't you reckon Mister Acorn is just plumb full of sorrow at partin' with you thataway?"

Whereupon Chiwawa Jones grinned. He knew what emotion filled Sam Acorn's forty-four inch bosom.

The bushes parted and a man stepped out with a Winchester carbine in one hand. He looked after the group of horsemen dropping down to the sage flat and smiled. He was tall like Chiwawa Jones, and like Jones he was a very fair man. His hair was yellow as ripe corn. Blue eyes straddled a straight fine nose. He wore a black sateen shirt, a pair of gray cloth trousers, and a pair of handmade riding boots. He was certainly not more than twenty-three. And he stared at Chiwawa Jones with frank curiosity.

"I've heard of you," he said at length. "Never figured I'd meet up with you just when a bunch of stranglers was stringin' you to a handy pine."

"I can't return the compliment," Chiwawa Jones fingered his neck tentatively. "But I'm mighty grateful, just the same. What inspired you to break up Sam Acorn's pleasant little neck-tie party?"

The youngster flashed white teeth.

"A fellow feelin' for a fellow creature," he answered. "You see, I come pretty near bein' the honored guest at the same kind of party not so long ago, an' not so far away. Besides—say, come on along to my camp. Reckon you could eat a snack?"

"Eat," Chiwawa Jones echoed. "Say, I could nibble pine cones like a squirrel right now. They was shy on grub an' wouldn't give me any breakfast. They said a man hung better on a empty stomach!"

CHAPTER IV

SPLIT TRAILS

CHIWAWA JONES let his tired horse follow at the heels of his rescuer who strode through the open between clumps of pine and scattered thickets until in a glade a little way up the ridge they came to a dry camp with two horses on picket. The spot commanded a view of all the slopes below. Chiwawa could see the departing stranglers, a shrinking cluster of dark specks.

A bed was unrolled under a pine tree. A saddle and two kyaks were stacked by the bed. A little heap of dry twigs and some chopped wood was laid. Chiwawa's companion touched a match to the heap. He had brought in his hand a bucket of water from the spring. He now made coffee as the flame began to dance. Chiwawa Jones marked this dry camp in a secluded spot. Out of his own experience he drew conclusions. But he said nothing, picketed his horse and sat down. Silently the other got food out of his kyaks, sliced bacon, and piled bread and butter on a tin plate. Frying-pan in hand he hovered over the small fire. In a little while it was ready and they ate. With a cigarette between his lips, his back to the trunk of a shading pine, he broke that long silence, looked at Chiwawa and said:

"So you're the famous Chiwawa Jones, eh? Me, I'm Stan Rickard. Old Sam Acorn is probably pretty sore at havin' a victim snatched out of his noose. But he'd be sorer if he knew who done the snatchin'."

Chiwawa Jones didn't comment on that. He stared intently at Stan. His lean, mahogany-tanned face didn't express anything. But there was a strange concentra-

tion in that steady gaze. His tone was quite casual when he said:

"Would you by any chance be George Rickard's boy? From San Antone. Your mother wouldn't be Mary Rickard? She was a Harper, from Rowan County, Kansas, if I recollect right?"

"I am," Stan said. "You have sure got my pedigree. The Rickard family has been in San Antone for many a day. My mother lives there now. I live wherever I hang my hat. How come? When did you know my folks? Did you know my dad? That's more'n I ever did."

"Yeah, I knowed him," Chiwawa Jones nodded. "Your mother, too. And I reckon I musta seen you many a time when you wasn't knee high to a grasshopper. But I lost track of you all long ago."

"He was a rootin, tootin', shootin' son of a gun, by all accounts, old George Rickard," Stan said reflectively "If you knowed him, Chiwawa, tell me what sort of a citizen he was, will you? He didn't exactly break my mother's heart, but he sure musta kept her guessin'. They tell me I look like him an' take after him some ways. I don't take root, somehow. I seem to get in and out of trouble like a jack in the box."

"You in any kind of jackpot now?" Chiwawa asked diffidently. "None of my business, of course, but——"

"N-no. Not to speak of," the boy answered. "Oh, I suppose that bunch that was about to string you up would have abandoned you cheerful if they could have got me. Acorn would doubtless deal me a rougher hand than that—but he'd have to get me first. I'll be a long way from the Acorn territory pretty soon. So——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"What become of George Rickard?" Chiwawa Jones asked. "Didn't he die or get killed, or somethin'?"

"I don't know," Stan frowned. "I ask mom. She reckons he went to the wild bunch. He was supposed to be killed in a ruction on the upper Pecos when I was

about five years old. Did you know him, Chiwawa? What kind of a man was he then?"

"Restless an' ambitious, an' a good man to have at your elbow if trouble come your way—provided he was for you," Chiwawa said. "He dropped outa sight about fifteen or sixteen years ago, far as I was concerned."

"An' you've never run across him in your—your travels?" Stan knitted his brows.

CHIWAWA JONES smiled. "You mean in the various nefarious enterprises chalked up against me," he said. "Son, I've got a reputation from the Sabine to the tip of the Panhandle an' beyond. But I have never been in jail, an' without attemptin' to establish any alibi Sam Acorn an' his riders were simply goin' to string me up on general principles, not because they had the goods on me in any way."

"That's his style," young Rickard commented. "I rode for him one spring roundup two years ago. He's the kind that hangs or shoots first an' talks after. All the Acorns are like that, I guess. High-handed as hell."

"Did you by any chance have a run-in with one of 'em?" Chiwawa asked. "Were you in Roche Crossin' in the last two, three days?"

Stan Rickard looked at him.

"I was askin' you about my dad," he said gently.

"No, kid, I can't tell you nothin' about him," Chiwawa shook his head, "except what he was like when I knew him. He was supposed to have been killed, as you say. I've heard that before."

"Mom never believed that," Stan frowned. "They split up when I was little. He was wild as a hawk, an' it seems she was all for settlin' down an' bein' steady an' playin' safe. She always seemed kinda expectin' he'd turn up again. She still believes he is circulatin' somewhere, because once or twice a year she gets money

sent her mysterious, ever since he went away. It's quite a lot sometimes. She has always been able to live well, and send me to good schools—as long as she could keep me in a school. Funny way for a family to go along, ain't it, Chiwawa? I don't know what my dad looked like, even. He wouldn't know me if he saw me. An' mom stays single all these years. An' now she's sentenced to worry because her boy Stan that she raised so careful goes helling around on the range. She says it must be in the blood. Shucks, I couldn't stay in a town or hold down a steady job, if I tried. An' after her raisin' me to leave guns alone an' never drink whisky an' fight shy of dance hall girls, here I go an'—well——"

He grinned and hummed lightly:

"Once in the saddle I used to ride dashingly,

Once in the saddle I used to ride gay.

But I took to drinking, card-playing and gambling.

Got shot through the breast and now dying I lay.

"So beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly

And play the Dead March as you carry me along.

Take me to the prairie and turn the sod over me.

I'm a poor cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"An' so have you, Chiwawa Jones," he finished with a smile. "Yet neither of us suffers from remorse. Say, it's about time to move. How about ridin' along with me?"

"I ride by myself mostly," Chiwawa Jones answered with a curious hesitation. He wasn't looking at young Rickard when he said that. He was staring out over Rawhide Prairie, out over that gray sea of sagebrush that flowed away to the horizon in endless monotony.

"You got better eyes than me, kid," he

said. "Can you see the dear departed?"

"Sure," Stan Rickard drawled. "I been watchin' 'em. That's why I suggested movin'. Them boys are sore, an' without a doubt they hanker to play even. They are splittin' in two bunches. One crowd is slantin' east, the other west. I expect they reckon to swing around an' maybe take us on the flank, figurin' we'll be together somewhere in the Rawhides—which we are."

He took a pair of field glasses out of a saddle pocket and studied those dim specks, to discern which with the naked eye needed an eagle's vision.

"Yes," he nodded, "that's what they're up to. It's our move Chiwawa. I know the Rawhide Range like a book. I have hunted deer here. I'm bound north, anyhow, so I'd as soon be on my way. Come on along with me, Chiwawa. I got business up there. It may not be very profitable, but it won't be monotonous."

"I been north before," Chiwawa Jones said. "I can't say I like the climate. Why go north in search of either excitement or profit? Now, I could suggest a way to make a thousand dollars off Mister Sam Acorn while they rage around in the Rawhides lookin' for us."

"F'rinstance?" Stan asked.

"Sam Acorn has a *remuda* of mighty fine horses in pasture at his home ranch," Chiwawa Jones murmured. "About a good night's ride from here. I know a cash market for such stock in Nebraska."



"Huh!" Stan Rickard grunted. "Anything else up your sleeve?"

"Sure. On the way east I know a store on the

Niobrara," Chiwawa grinned, "where there's most always several hundred dollars in the till. We could sort of levy a tax on that."

"Funny," Stan said slowly. "I have

heard of you pullin' some mighty desperate gun-play. You been a terror in a couple of range wars, never bein' particular which side you fought on. But I never did know you were a horsethief. Maybe I shoulda let Sam Acorn hang you?"

"You don't take kindly to these suggestions, then?" Chiwawa asked. "You're on the dodge. Should think you'd be kinda receptive to opportunity when she knocks at your door."

"I am on the dodge," Stan answered, measuring his words. "I killed a man because he knocked me down and booted me in the stomach—an' then give me an hour to leave his town like a sneakin' hound dog, tail between his legs. But I have never been a thief. I might skin a sucker in a poker game, but I couldn't pick his pocket. I guess you had better ride by yourself, Chiwawa. I am not honest because of moral principles. I don't steal because I was not raised that way. I don't like them that do."

CHIWAWA JONES rose to his feet with a curious suppleness in a man no longer young. He laughed.

"Son," said he, "there is more than one way of killin' a cat besides chokin' him to death with butter."

"What d'you mean?" Stan asked tartly.

"If you want to find out what a man's notions are concernin' anything," Chiwawa said, "you make him a proposition concernin' that particular thing, an' see how he takes it. I never saw you before, kid. I know you killed young Sam Acorn. You might be inclined to turn your hand to anything. Everybody in Texas knows me. A lot don't love me much. But as you said you never heard of me stealin' horses or robbin' the widow an' orphan. I was sort of curious to know your idea about easy money."

"You ought to be satisfied," Stan said sourly. "I'm no plaster saint, but I draw the line at a few things. The Acorn outfit would tear me limb from limb. That's no reason I should steal anything they got.

Still, I reckon the joke's on me. I shouldn't 'a' took your proposition serious. Well, we got to move unless we want to be surrounded an' tangle with that Acorn bunch again."

They packed Stan's outfit on a high-headed roan, saddled and rode up the ridge. Stan's packhorse and the bay he bestrode stepped light-footed as colts. Five miles up in the Rawhides Stan looked sidelong at Chiwawa's leg-weary mount.

"If you're goin' to ride along with me," he said. "How about you switchin' your saddle to the roan? Your horse will travel better under that light pack."

"I don't know as I'll ride with you long," Chiwawa Jones answered. "I ride by myself mostly. And I don't want to handicap you none, kid. We ain't clear of the Acorn riders yet."

"Oh, to hell with the Acorn outfit," Stan said carelessly. "Come dark they'll hunt their own hole. You better ride the roan and give that tired *caballo* of yours a chance to travel light. Bed an' grub don't weigh half what you do."

They had halted on the high crest of a rough divide to look back, to survey the winding pine-swathed canyons sloping down from the summit of the Rawhides. Patches of quaking aspen, cottonwoods on the watercourses, willow and berry brush lay below. Above, dark brooding forests of pine, broken by barren rocky knolls. Seventy miles north of that mountain range lay a pleasant well-watered country and scattered cow ranches where any rider was an unquestioned guest if he chose to tarry an hour, a night, or a week, where a man was treated as a friend until he showed himself an enemy. Chiwawa and Stan spoke of crossing that country, where no Acorn riders could or would follow.

And while they sat looking over this wooded slope a burst of shots crackled from a hillside facing them. Bullets spat-tered the earth. Luckily not one found a mark.

"Hell!" Chiwawa Jones snorted. "We

loafed too long. That crowd has got sight of us."

He jumped his horse out of the open glade into a handy thickét. Stan Rickard acted as quickly. But he seemed slightly amused.

"They're six hundred yards away, Chiwawa," he said. "Their mounts must be near played out. Stay with your uncle Dudley an' they won't get another sight of us. We don't have to run, even. Unless you'd prefer to stand pat and have a go at 'em."

"I'd as soon," Chiwawa snarled in a way that made Stan Rickard look hard at him. "Ride on, kid. I don't take kindly to bein' hunted like a coyote."

His face had darkened, become tight-lipped. His eyes burned. Stan Rickard stared at him.

"Why, you son of a gun!" he said. "I believe you would dig in right here an' have it out with 'em."

"I've taught bigger an' better gatherin's of strangers to leave me alone before now," Chiwawa Jones snapped. "My horse *is* tired. I would not spur hell out of that pony to get away from any rabble. He's better flesh than they are. Ain't you, Sandy?"

He leaned forward to pat the sorrel's curved neck that now had a weary droop.

"Listen, Chiwawa Jones, to me, even if I'm young an' foolish," Stan said. "I'm not ridin' off by myself. If you want to make a demonstration against this Acorn crowd I'm in on the play. But it seems better policy to sidestep a scrap. We can easy shake 'em off. Come on."

"Oh, all right, all right," Chiwawa grumbled. "It ain't that I hanker for a fight. It's just—well—"

STAN RICKARD plunged deeper into the pines. He knew the Rawhides and Chiwawa Jones didn't. He rode at an easy trot and he rode always under cover. Eventually he slowed to a walk, bearing always upward, which was north. Once they halted for an hour to rest Chiwawa's

sorrel, and after the halt Chiwawa rode Stan's roan. At last Stan turned west along a high ridge swathed with young pine, a veritable sward of Christmas trees. Through these, boughs brushing their faces Stan and Chiwawa Jones moved until the sun was off the mountain tops, gone into the valley of the west. It was hot in that windless cover. The backbone would like a sluggish snake. Stan turned at last out of that dense growth, rode down a gulch until they came to a gentler slope where pine needles carpeting the forest floor allowed them to pass soundless as ghosts, leaving no hoofprint that human eye could follow. On the bank of this creek which flowed north Stan halted when dark began to close in.

"They'd have to have bloodhounds to track us here," he said. "I hunted in this part of the range once. She's a No Man's land. Let's cook some grub an' have a good sleep, Chiwawa."

They lay in Stan's blankets looking up at bright stars shining through pine boughs. And they talked, as men will talk when they have faced danger together and proved each other. Chiwawa Jones put diplomatic questions here and there. Stan Rickard's natural reserve fell aside. He had nothing to conceal anyway. He had an important mission in Montana, but there was nothing in it that involved secrecy. So he told Chiwawa Jones a great deal more about himself and his business than he realized.

In a cool dawn they rode out in the open.

"Good luck to you, kid," Chiwawa Jones said abruptly, and held out his hand. "Maybe you'll see me in the Viaducts before fall. Don't shoot if you see me first."

Stan laughed.

"So you're plumb determined to go on ridin' by yourself," he commented. "Well, if you can't be good, be careful. So-long."

Thus they parted. When Stan sat resting his gloved hands on his saddle horn watching Chiwawa Jones ride away, his sorrel horse stepping daintily as a deer

after a night's rest, he murmured to himself:

"I kinda took to the old boy's style, but it looks like I got to ride by myself too. Well, step along ponies. Here we come and there we goes, an' where we'll stop nobody knows!"

CHAPTER V

MEDICINE TALK

CHIWAWA JONES rode by himself and he rode fast. But not so very far. He doubled right back across the country where the Acorn outfit had come near hanging him to a pine. The second day he was on the southern edge of Rawhide Prairie. He could see Roche River's brush-lined banks a far dark line. Up river and down the dust of half a dozen trail-herds made faint blurs against a cloudless horizon. Chiwawa Jones made for the nearest of these. He took a look at the road brand on the longhorns, and spoke to the first rider working on the flank of the herd. Bar B Bar. A herd belonging to Colonel Henry Boldt of Laredo, Texas. Headed for Montana. The Colonel had another trail-herd of twenty-five hundred cattle a couple of days' march behind. The Square and Compass, the L7 and the Diamond G were the other herds in sight. Yes, the Acorn outfit, was moving lock, stock and barrel out of Texas, too. They had established a ranch on the Roche three or four years earlier, but like other cattlemen, Sam Acorn was shoving on north with trail-herds to skim the grazing cream of a new grass country, where the last of the buffalo were going down before the rifles of the hide-hunters.

All this Chiwawa Jones learned from riders' talk as he lounged around the Bar B Bar chuck-wagon that night. They didn't expect to reach their destination until August. A trail-herd averaged little more than ten miles a day.

When Chiwawa left them at daybreak he followed the Roche until he struck the main line of the U. P. Railway. He rode

boldly through Roche Crossing. It amused him to pass through a town where the Acorns great and small were top dog. But he knew Sam Acorn was probably two days' ride to the north. And he did not stop to thumb his nose at his enemy's stronghold. He kept on west until he came to another hamlet beside the track, which had a railway station as well as a hotel and such business and dwellings as go with any cowtown. He stabled his horse, and sent a telegram. For three days he loafed. Until an evening after an east-bound passenger train rolled through he rose out of a chair in the office to greet a man about his own age, a sun-burned man in town clothes with a touch of gray in his hair, which like Chiwawa's own had once been a bright yellow to go with their dark blue eyes. They were very much alike, these two. Together they went up to Chiwawa's room.

"I thought you'd never get here," Chiwawa said.

"Only got your wire last night," the other replied. "I was in Laramie, as it happened. What's excitin' you, Chiwawa?"

"I ain't excited none," Chiwawa denied.

"There are certain infallible signs when you got anything important simmerin' in what you use for a mind," the newcomer smiled. "You don't send me hurry-up calls for mere pastime."

Chiwawa Jones rubbed out the stub of a cigarette on his boot-heel.

"Uncle Henry has sent a man north with a sheaf of soldier's scrip to file on the Roman Wells an' surroundin' territory in the Viaducts," he said abruptly.

"A man? The old fool. I told him to send a crew of Texans with plenty of ammunition," the other murmured. "The gallant Colonel always was an optimist."

"This emissary of his is a young fellow who is all wool and a yard wide," Chiwawa went on. "His name is Stan Rickard. He hailed originally from San Antonio. His dad's name was George Rickard. But he has no recollection of this male parent of his. His mother lives there yet. Young

Rickard is on his way to stake that Roman Wells country single-handed. Is that important enough to attract your attention?"

"Keep right on shootin'," the other said softly.

"I tumbled on this accidental," Chiwawa continued. "I met this boy in—well, under circumstances that would have put me under everlastin' obligation, anyhow. If he hadn't been game an' cool and quick-minded I wouldn't be alive to tell the tale. You know how Sam Acorn loves me. Well, I was lookin' for these Boldt trail herds, an' the Acorn outfit rides up on me just at daybreak while I'm still asleep by a creek that crosses Rawhide Prairie. What they aimed to deal me was plenty. But they had to take me a few miles to play the hand out—"

"They had to take you to where a tree was handy, you mean," the other interrupted.

"Naturally. But this boy Stan horned in at the psychological moment an' those wolves of the Rawhide, under the old ex-wolf of the upper Pecos, had to abandon their prey. Afterward he told me who he was, where he hailed from, an' what business took him north. In fact by judicious primin' on my part, an' considerin' we'd both been recent in a pretty tight corner, he unburdened himself pretty free about various things. I admitted I'd known all his family. That killin' of George Rickard in a fuss on the Pecos, just don't go any more, Speck. The kid an' his mother both figure George is still in circulation. Stan says Mary figures the funds that have come to her all these years would only come from one source. That, however, is beside the point, which is that Colonel Henry has wished a job on the kid that is just plain poison. When you suggested that location to the old man maybe you didn't stress the fact that takin' Roman Wells might stir up a little trouble. The kid don't know what he's up against in the Viaducts. I didn't see no use in tellin' him. I don't believe he'd sidestep it anyway. He don't fear nothin' nor nobody. He isn't old enough

to be cautious much. He's too damn proud to back up an inch if all hell was in his way. I can't let this slide, Speck. Here's how it stands. You know the situation in the Viaduct Range—I mean in the territory surroundin' Roman Wells. No man can ride in there single handed an' hold that land around the springs. Boldt evidently didn't get it straight, or you weren't specific enough. Besides the crowd that will fight to keep their hangout from bein' invaded there are complications from another quarter. Sam Acorn has heard about the Viaducts an' Colonnade Basin. He is headed up there with five thousand long-



horns in two herds. Young Stan Rickard tarried in Roche Crossin' long enough to tangle with Sam Acorn junior, an' Stan killed him. Even if

he don't come to grief sooner, Acorn's trail herds will arrive at Roman Wells a few days ahead of the Boldt outfits. If Sam Acorn finds that kid holdin' down Roman Wells alone his life ain't worth that," Chiwawa Jones ended with a snap of his finger and thumb.

"What was Henry Boldt thinkin' of to send that kid alone on such a mission?" the other man got up and paced the room. "Darn his fool soul. I told him that Viaduct country was the sweetest range that lay outdoors, but that it might be a Hell's Half-acre. It never occurred to me he might head in there himself. He was interested, that's all."

"The gallant colonel was layin' in hospital nursin' some broken bones he got in a train-wreck, when Stan left Texas," Chiwawa murmured. "Boldt wants the Wells, all right. In any case the kid is on his way alone, when he should have half a dozen gun men at his back. Because what with Murch Davis on the ground, an' Sam

Acorn headed there, Stan Rickard or any other lone individual tryin' to hold down several thousand acres of valuable land an' water is goin' to be snuffed out. You know it."

SPECK sat down again. His lean weathered face clouded with a mixture of regret and annoyance.

"A man's chickens come home to roost in queer ways, don't they, Chiwawa?" he muttered.

"They do," Chiwawa Jones agreed. "I can't overlook this, Speck. It is part of my own doin'. I would never rest easy again if anythin' happened that kid. I'm askin' you will you back my play, Speck? Do you reckon it could be squared if we both vanished into thin air for a spell?"

Speck nodded absently.

"I think so," he said. "I wish somethin' could be done official."

"Will you back my play?" Chiwawa demanded tensely, almost fiercely. "You're in the clear no matter what happens. I may have to sink myself a thousand fathoms deep. I have a notion I could make an openin' for you to act regular. But I might have to play right into Murch Davis's hand once more."

"Damn your soul," the other man, who was so curiously like Chiwawa in looks, voice and stature, said impatiently. "I been backin' your plays, good, bad and in-different, for quite a while. You can declare me in on this. But how are you goin' to go about drawin' the teeth of these wolves?"

"That," Chiwawa Jones said bluntly, "you can leave to me."

CHAPTER VI

HORNET'S NEST

FROM a little knoll, crowned with a grove of quaking aspen, which in turn was fringed by serviceberry brush hung with fruit ripening in the August sun, a hillock that stood like an island in a grassy sea, Stan Rickard sat on his bay

horse looking over a golden bowl. The upper rim was a circle of peaks swathed in deep green, forests of pine. Its cover was the blue sky. On the south a deep notch opened. Through that gateway he had entered the Viaduct Range into this hollowed-out heart of gold, to claim a couple of thousand acres of land for an elderly gentleman in Texas, who was already wealthier than he needed to be.

To him that hath shall be given. That phase of it didn't occur to Stan. A trust had been laid upon him, and he was at the moment taking pride in a measure of its fulfillment, without any expectation that Colonel Henry Boldt would eventually say to him, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant,"—or words to that effect. No, he was merely thinking that fertile soil, rich grass, an abundance of pure water, made this spot a cattlemen's paradise. He wondered, too, why no one had squatted on this strategic point before now. No matter that the Northwest was still sparsely peopled. Gold-seekers, buffalo-hunters, the scouts of cattlemen in the crowded Southwest had been looking over the north for some time. Men must have marked this basin, camped on its springs, killed game, looked in those gulches and trickling mountain streams for placer gold. Yet it lay bared to the sun and wind as it had lain since immemorial time. The mere sight of those pleasant acres, which America still had to give her sons for the taking, gave Stan Rickard a new thrill. He had crossed five states and territories since leaving Texas, without beholding such an estate as this. All over the older states men had waged war, spilled blood, worked and struggled with all their force, for less desirable portions of the good earth than lay around him for miles.

The Roman Wells clustered in a group about this knob. Six or seven limpid pools of water, bubbling in sandy pits, the overflow from each glittering in the sunshine as it flowed through its own channel until it joined the others. Within two hundred yards of the knob the spring waters united

to form a creek that ran thence through a mile of natural meadow that had known no mower save the teeth of the vanished bison and the lordly elk that still ranged in small bands through the Viaducts. Viaduct Range. Colonnade Basin. Roman Wells. Someone steeped in ancient history must have passed that way. Bestowed those place names of old world significance and passed on, and no one else had cared to tarry. Here and there he had marked old signs of stock. But so far as he had seen only the wild life of plain and mountain inhabited the Viaducts now. He sat there a long time staring at the natural beauty surrounding him, thinking how beautiful it was—and how lonely. A hushed land with no human voice to lift an echo. A ring of mountains covered with virgin pine forest enclosing a hundred thousand acres of rich soil, untilled and unclaimed.

BUT not unclaimed now. On two square miles of the Basin, with Roman Wells as a central point Stan had driven location stakes bearing penciled notices to whom it might concern that by virtue of certain U. S. scrip, lawfully held by him, Henry Arthur Boldt, of Laredo, Texas, claimed this land to have and to hold, under authority of the U. S. land laws duly enacted.

To whom it may concern. Who, in this silent waste, could it possibly concern, Stan wondered idly? Only another cowman who might rest covetous eyes on this basin. And that staking was a prior claim which all the weight of Federal law would uphold.

"Well, here's your ranch, Uncle Henry," Stan said aloud. "I can certify she's the finest I've seen in my travels. I only wish I didn't have to ride herd on her till your outfit gets here. I was sure not cut out for no hermit existence."

"But ridin' herd on the Colonel's location don't prevent me from lookin' about for a likely spot to squat on myself," he murmured, after a time. "Yes, sir, if there ever was a place outdoors I liked the look of enough to want a hunk of it for my-

self, this is it. I wish she was populated some, though. Probably, like the rest of the cow country, she'll settle up too darned speedy for a cattleman's comfort, once they start movin' in. But there is sure lots of room right now."

Stan shook up his horse. His roan was on picket and his camp was all in order in that aspen grove. He had nothing to do but sit and think, or roam around. So he elected to roam. He followed the creek formed by the overflow of Roman Wells. It ran north. The mountains stood like a wall. No lake sparkled in the Basin. So there must be an outlet for that stream to some river on the north. He had ridden far east and west after coming in from the south. Now he was all for a closer view of those tiered hills, to ride among the pine sniffing their sharp fragrance, perhaps to bring down a buck and have venison for his frying pan.

Beyond the meadow where a thousand tons of hay stood ripe for the sickle, he followed the creek to where it split rolling foothills. The channel slipped into a hollow. That opened to a ravine. The ravine became a gorge, grass on its narrow floor, pines on the slopes above. That gorge split the northern wall of the Viaducts to let the stream flow through. The water gurgled in a pebbled bed, looping from side to side like a snake. Stan's interest quickened, when he began to note fresh horse and cattle sign. He saw neither hoof nor horn, although both had recently been in that canyon in considerable numbers. According to Stan's meager information no stockman had ever located in the Viaducts. Yet beasts of the field meant people within riding distance. And all the sign was of casual grazing, not a herd simply passing through.

He picked his way along a narrowing bottom, crossing and recrossing the winding stream. The cleft deepened. The sun shone on high walls, but it left the bottom in shadow, in gloom. The hush, the dead, still atmosphere, the immensity of the cliffs towering up to a ribbon of blue sky, awed

Stan a little. He had entered that canyon humming and whistling. Now he was silent as the gorge itself, a shadow riding in shadow.

Until suddenly as if he had passed through a door in a great wall he passed out of that canyon into a lesser duplicate of Colonnade Basin, a perfect bowl in the hills less than a mile across. Before him loomed a sprawling log house, flanked by a stable and corrals, a stack of hay. Hundreds of cattle grazing in the open. Horses in a pole pasture. A smoke pennant flew from a chimney.

When a man has not spoken to a living soul for three weeks he seeks companionship, be it ever so casual, as naturally as water runs downhill. Lonely ranches in far places greet a traveler as eagerly as he seeks their hospitality—as a rule.

So Stan spurred up his horse and came trotting into the yard of this ranch, pleased to find that some pioneer stockman was already there. He saw two men come out of a corral and stand looking. Three more sauntered by as he drew up before a low porch. They stood in a row looking at him. He saw a woman's face at a window.

And none of the three uttered a word, welcoming or otherwise, nor did either smile or frown alter the immobile features of the trio that stood staring at him. Not until Stan himself uttered the usual "howdy," of the range.

"Howdy," one grunted and said no more. Thus for a matter of seconds their eyes searched each other, three men in a row on a porch, and one sitting sidewise in his saddle.

STAN RICKARD was anything but sluggish mentally. He had grown up in a country still far from tame. He knew something of men and manners. This atmosphere chilled him. Those frozen faces and basilisk stares were the attributes of men wary of danger, or resentful of intrusion. For a moment he was at a loss. It was in his mind to utter a casual "so-long" and ride away. Yet something told

him that in itself might not be a wise thing to do. Then one said curtly:

"Where you from, stranger?"

Except under stress that question was never put to any wayfarer in any part of the cattle country. It was, in effect, a challenge, when it was uttered, like a sentry's "who goes there?"

"Down south," Stan answered as curtly. More than ever he felt that he should turn and ride. But something warned him that such an action might be more dangerous than to stand his ground. He was curious, too, about this potential hostility. He read hostile appraisal in those cold, hard stares. What sort of aggregation had he stumbled on? Why did these men regard him with suspicion?

"Down south covers a lot of territory," one said.

Stan curled one leg around the horn of his saddle. He was anything but at ease. But he assumed ease.

"Well, I covered a lot of territory down there," he said with a grin. "A little more than maybe was good policy. That's partly why I'm here. But if I ain't welcome, I'll ride on."

"No need," the first man who had spoken, took up the conversation again. "Tie your horse in the barn. We'll be eatin' by an' by."

"Thanks," Stan said politely. He would have declined that invitation and turned back the way he had come—save for an instinct never to withdraw under fire, a definite impression that a retreat now was dangerous policy. But he was not exactly happy when he crossed that yard to stable his horse.

The house behind him was like a fort. Walls of eighteen-inch pine logs, narrow windows, earth trampled bare on all sides by many hoofs. The log stable was equally stout, a sprawling barn with stalls for twenty head. The corrals were high and strong. Water ran in a ditch past the gable end of the house and close beside the barn. A curious rough stone tower rose above one low gable. The place, Stan

saw, was planned and built to stand a siege. That was understandable enough in a region where any ranch might be jumped by Indian war-parties. It was the look and manner of the men that filled him with uneasiness, made him want to ride away more rapidly than he had come.

Yet that would be a churlish and craven thing to do, an insult even to such grudging invitation as had been extended. Nevertheless when he reached the stable he felt more strongly that he had taken a seat in the wrong pew. The two men there, wearing guns low on their belts, regarded him as did the others silently, without a trace of friendliness, with a hard-eyed unsmiling scrutiny.

And one of them, after Stan had unsaddled and thrown his mount an armful of hay put the same question as his fellow on the porch:

"Where you from, stranger?"

And again Stan Rickard answered laconically, "Down south."

"Where's your outfit?" the fellow continued.

"There an' there," Stan pointed to his horse and saddle, purposely affecting to misunderstand. "What kind of layout is this, anyway, that wants to know a man's personal history and his business the minute he rides in sight? You boys got a war on, or somethin'?"

NEITHER man changed expression. Neither answered. They simply continued to stare at Stan as though he was something about which they were guardedly interested. It got under his skin. But he conceded they were within their rights. If they chose to be frigid and suspicious—Stan shrugged his shoulders and turned toward the house. And though he did not look back he knew the two followed ten feet behind. He walked through the door whence the other three had issued to look him over and found himself in a great room, the heavy ridge-logs darkened with fire-smoke and ill-lighted by the few, narrow windows.

One end was given over to a fireplace with ovens built of stone flanking a bed of coals, a long rough table, shelves on the walls piled with dishes and canned stuff, piled sacks and boxes. Two women were moving about amid this kitchen equipment.

The other half of the room was lined with bunks. The gable end had another fireplace, the hearth deep with the ash of old fires though it yawned blackly on this summer afternoon. Two of the men were stretched on bunks. The third sat tinkering with a rawhide rope. The two who entered on Stan's heels seated themselves. No one spoke.

"My room," Stan thought, "is more to their taste than my company. But I'll be damned if I run. What the devil have I walked into?"

He got a partial answer to that an hour or so later. Across the basin from the south came a group of riders. One led a packed animal. When they neared Stan Rickard's brows wrinkled with combined anger and uneasiness. He rose, walked to the stable. The men, seven in number, were about to dismount. The fellow who led Stan's roan was just enough of young



Sam Acorn's physical type—except that he was ten years older—to arouse instant distaste, to make Stan's tone brusk.

"What's the idea for gatherin' in my pack horse an' outfit an' bringin' 'em here?" he asked. "Can't a man leave his camp outfit in this country for a few hours without havin' it meddled with?"

The dark man scowled once at Stan.

Then his eyes turned questioningly to one who still sat in his saddle—a little man fifty or more, with very small, deep-set gray eyes, and a short chin whisker streaked with gray.

"What about it, Murch?" he growled.

"Use your own judgment, Bill," the older man said carelessly. "He's your meat if you want him."

THE dark man faced about on Stan Rickard. The way his fingers opened letting fall both reins and lead-rope, the forward hunch of his shoulders, were signs that Stan read with a quickening pulse. He didn't need to be told that he had dropped into a hornet's nest and that one of the hornets was getting ready to sting. He had seen killers square themselves for action before now.

His eyes never left those dark ones that narrowed slowly to slits. A queer tension made Stan's right arm tingle, although his fingers hung loose beside the curved grip of his gun. No one spoke. No man moved. Death, Stan felt, hovered in the air. He watched the other like a hawk. A touch of contempt rose above the realization that fear was tapping at the door of his heart.

"For a man that's fixin' to shoot, Black-bird," he said in a voice that sounded hollow in his own ears, "you're goshawful slow gettin' started."

Someone in that group snickered—a strange sound. But it touched off that dark-eyed killer as a match to powder. As he moved so Stan moved. It seemed to Stan Rickard that some agency outside his conscious mind directed his movements, preserved his life. He did not himself quite understand how he could get a gun out of its holster, snick back the hammer and let go a shot with such uncanny speed and accuracy. He had done it against Sam Acorn for the first time in his life. And he did it now. The dark man's gun only exploded under the convulsive twitch of a forefinger as he collapsed. Stan had

beaten him to the shot with an even break on the draw.

He faced the rest of them, feet apart, gun waist high. He glared at them. He faced them like a cornered wolf, ready to die fighting, knowing himself in a trap. And he saw neither anger nor shock in the faces turned on him, nor did any man make a hostile move. No man's features registered any emotion beyond a faint touch of surprise.

And in that waiting silence the little old man who had been addressed as Murch said to another sitting on a horse beside him:

"By God, if he ain't the livin' image of Chiwawa Jones in action!"

"Yes, an' by God, if Chiwawa Jones was with me there'd be more guts to clean in your yard than there is now!" Stan gritted defiantly.

A rider stepped his horse sidewise. Stan backed up a step or two. His forty-five wavered like a snake's tongue, covering them all. His mouth tightened. Old Murch grinned wolfishly.

"Lay off boys," he said. "This kid carries his credentials in his hand. Leave him be. He's welcome here."

"It looks damned like it," Stan snapped. "You all have a queer way of welcomin' a passin' stranger. Is it your habit to make free with a man's private property an' then sick a killer on him?"

"That was just Black Bill's misfortune, I reckon," old Murch smiled blandly. "You spoke your piece rather impudent for one so young an' innocent seemin'. How was Bill to know he was tacklin' a streak of lightnin'? You look harmless, son, but so I recollect, did Billy the Kid. Jesse James himself was an amiable-lookin' man. Me, I am plumb gentle in appearance. So was my old friend Chiwawa Jones. Did I understand you to say Chiwawa was a friend of yours?"

"I don't know as I could claim that," Stan said truthfully. "But Chiwawa Jones an' me got into a sort of jackpot together an' out of it, not so long ago.

I guess Chiwawa might consider I was his friend."

"I see. You an' Chiwawa done some business together, eh? Well, well, so my old boyhood friend is still in circulation. Put away your gun, kid. There'll be no more powder-burnin' today. Stable this packadero of yours an' drag your blankets over to the bunkhouse."

"What for did you-all bring my camp outfit from where I left it?" Stan persisted. "Can't a man leave his camp spread where he wants to?"

"Not in the Viaduct. Not in Colonnade Basin. Not at Roman Wells," Murch answered slowly.

"Why?" Stan asked.

THE man dismounted lightly. On the ground he barely reached Stan's shoulder. He was under-sized and middle-aged. Yet he gave the impression of power, of a latent ferocity held in check, as he tapped Stan's arm with the stubby fingers of a gnarly hand.

"Because I say so," he sank his voice till it seemed to rumble in his throat. "You've made a fair start, young feller. Don't spoil it. I have learned these boys to be slow at tongue-waggin' an' quick with their hands. Foller their example, an' maybe you'll live an' prosper. Maybe. There ain't no guarantee offered that you'll do either very long. What is't the Good Book says: In the midst of life we are in death. Yes, sir. Here today an' gone tomorrow."

He laughed, a laugh that rose to a thin cackle. Then swung about on his men.

"Take that off 'n' bury it," he said, pointing to Black Bill's body. "Don't forget I know about how much he carries, so don't try holdin' out nothin', boys. Likewise, I might mention, in connection with our young friend here, as I have mentioned more than once, that it don't pay to underestimate nobody, no time, nowhere."

And it occurred to Stan Rickard by the time they all gathered at the supper table

that it was unlikely any of this crew would underestimate him again. They would likely overestimate what he was capable of, because he gathered from asides he overheard that Black Bill had been considered a fast man with a gun. There was a change in their attitude, as if Stan had suddenly spoken to them in a language they could understand and appreciate. That basilisk stare of wariness had gone out of their eyes. They seemed more at their ease. They addressed him casually, as an equal.

But Stan didn't try to fool himself. He had fallen into a nest of killers or worse and neither his life nor his liberty rested altogether in his own hands while he remained under that roof. He got a little more light on the situation when the last four men came in from burying the fellow Stan had killed.

Murch Davis sat in a chair by a small table before the fire. One of the burying squad laid before him a calfskin money-belt. Murch emptied the pockets. He shook out a little pile of gold pieces, and several flat packets of U. S. gold certificates, as well as a mixture of banknotes. He made two piles. One he swept into a pocket of his coat. The other he divided into ten portions. Each man came forward and picked up his share in silence. There remained a few gold pieces on the table. Murch gathered them up.

"Ho, Kate," he called.

From that dull smoky kitchen end a woman came. She was very short, scarcely five feet, and very broad, not with fat but with what looked like able sinew. A woman about forty-five with high cheekbones and a short turned-up nose. Her china blue eyes rested avidly on the coin in Murch's hand.

"Another split, Kate," Murch said jocularly. "Here's yours. Pretty soon you'll be honin' for that trip to Paris for your trousseau."

The woman smiled, took her money and turned away. Murch spun two gold

twenties on the table surface like a gambler playing with chips.

"Lil," he called, in a gentler tone than he had hitherto used.

"Oh, I'm busy," a voice answered. There was a singularly pleasant quality in that voice. It was sweet, a gurgle in it like water in a stony brook. A note of impatience, too.

"Come on, come on," Murch repeated a little testily. "Nobody's goin' to bite you. There's a stranger in our midst. An' I got a present for you."

Feet tapped across the hewn pine floor. A slim figure, auburn-haired, gray-eyed, freckles showing faintly under a skin like cream touched with rose-petals. The girl's eyes darted once to Stan Rickard, and rested a second on Murch. He handed her the gold pieces.

"I don't want 'em," she said sullenly.

"Sure you do," Murch smiled. "Take the pretty pieces, baby."

"Blood money!" the girl almost hissed at him.

"It'll buy as much as any other kind of money," Murch said, unruffled. "Here, take 'em, an' no nonsense."

At this peremptory command she took the two twenties. Murch laid his fingers lightly on her arm. He indicated Stan Rickard.

"Here's a boy about your age," he said with a chuckle. "Take a good look at him. You'll be seein' him around here. He's young, an' fast on his feet. He put Black Bill away without a struggle. He'll be with us for a spell. But don't try flirtin' with him, Lil, if you happen to like his looks. You know the rule. You hear me?"

"I hear you," the girl answered. She shook his hand off her arm and went back to her work.

And when the squat gorilla-built woman and this fresh-faced slip of a girl served supper to that crew Stan Rickard caught her eyes on him more than once with something like wonder in them, and something like pity too.

CHAPTER VII

WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOR

MORNING sun shot yellow shafts through narrow windows as they finished breakfast. Murch Davis issued orders. Men nodded and departed by twos and threes until Davis sat facing Stan. Two men remained. One sat on each side of Murch. He bent his little, deep-seated eyes on Stan.

"So," he said, "Henry Boldt sent you to stake Roman Wells?"

"You could hardly help seein' the location notices when you picked up my horse an' camp outfit," Stan returned.

"You can forget you ever posted them notices," Murch said slowly. "You are takin' on another job."

"How come?" Stan suppressed the instant demur that rose to his lips. Instead he voiced something that had been running in his mind since the evening before. "A couple of years ago I worked in a roundup on the Canadian River west of Amarillo. I heard about a Murch Davis that was once a range boss for the Slater outfit on the upper Pecos—an'——"

"An' he went to the wild bunch," old Murch said with a twisted smile, "after fightin' a range war that made J. B. Slater a fortune. Said Murch Davis was credited with organizin' some of the boys that fought under him, an' doin' some smooth rustlin' along the Colorado line, eh?"

"Somethin' like that," Stan admitted.

"Me an' Chiwawa Jones an' Flint Starley an' some more boys that wasn't afraid of our shadows, we took our guns an' our lives in our hands to make a cattleman rich," Murch grunted. "Yes, sir. An' what did we get out of it? Ridin' wages. A few slugs of rotgut whisky an' some cheap cigars!"

He uttered a snarl of contempt.

"God helps them that help themselves," said he. "So I came north an' helped myself to the Viaduct Range. An' I mean to hold it, kid. Possession is nine points

of the law. So you can see where Colonel Henry Boldt's stakin' comes in. Yes, I'm the Murch Davis you heard about. Only I've been plumb respectable a long time. Me an' these boys are now runnin' cattle here on a share basis. The Colonnade Basin an' Roman Wells is our winter range."

"It's public domain," Stan told him. "Cowmen won't stay out of a country like the Viaduct just because you want it. Texas cowmen aren't made that way. Wait till Colonel Henry lands here——"

"He won't land here," Murch shook his half-bald head. "He'll send hired men to grab land an' run his stock. They'll make a livin' outa him an' he'll make money outa them. I know the system. Cowmen can always hire suckers to fatten their bankroll."

"Boldt isn't the only one headed here," Stan tried another tack. "Kansas an' Nebraska an' Wyoming are black with trail herds movin' north. Wasn't it Sam Acorn's outfit you all fought against for J. B. Slater on the upper Pecos long ago?"

THE string of blasphemous oaths that burst from Murch Davis's lips told Stan he had touched a sore spot—of which range gossip heard here and there had given him an inkling. He sat still a moment. It was strange, disturbing almost, to come upon one of the chief protagonists in that bloody cattleman's war in which George Rickard had supposedly lost his life.

"Well, Sam Acorn in person is headed straight for Roman Wells with three trail herds," Stan declared.

That was a random statement, a bluff. Stan knew about what Murch Davis running cattle on shares meant. And he realized that he and his scrip stakings were a nuisance Murch meant to abate. What other intentions Murch might have concerning him he was trying to discover. His chief object was to convey to Murch the impression that he, Stan Rickard, cut little

figure compared to the cattlemen and long-horn herds swarming north in search of virgin pasture. Stan had no idea where the Acorn herds were headed. He hadn't tarried in Roche Crossing to ask questions after he fought young Sam Acorn. He did know that the older Acorn, he of the black spade beard, had three or four herds crossing the Rawhide when he tried to hang Chiwawa Jones.

"This Basin in the Viaducts is his destination," Stan continued. "With thirty or forty riders at his back Sam Acorn'll squat on Roman Wells an' nothin' but a prior legal right'll stop him. That's why Colonel Henry sent me ahead—to beat Sam Acorn to Roman Wells. That stakin'



will hold good in law. An' law is comin' into this country with that swarm of herds!"

"That black-whiskered skunk!" Murch Davis hissed. He turned to his two men. "You hear what this kid says?"

They nodded, leaning forward, deeply intent. Old Murch's eyes blazed. He spat on the floor.

"Stand in law," he said finally in a terrible voice. "Henry Boldt sneakin' in behind the law. Sam Acorn, who'd cut his best friend's throat for a two-bit advantage, rushin' north to cut in on me. An' they think they can establish themselves in the Viaduct range. They do, do they?"

"For two pins," he turned fiercely on Stan, "I'd cut your damn throat an' throw your carcass to the coyotes."

"Help yourself," Stan said laconically, and as he was speaking he slid two steps sidewise like a dancing-master to put his

back against a log wall. His hand rested on the pearl butt of his gun.

"Three to one at the minute," he said. "I'll guarantee to get two of you, before I go down."

They stared at him, all three.

"Well, well, well!" Murch Davis said in a tone that mingled surprise and admiration. "You've got the right idea, kid. Never weaken. Always call a bluff. Set down. You're worth more to us alive than dead. A damn sight more!"

Something convincing in the man's tone made Stan release the grip of his gun, resume his seat.

"So you think we can't hold Colonnade Basin an' Roman Wells agin' them that would take it?" said he.

"Not unless you can hold it with your guns—which would mighty soon bring U. S. marshals, an' finally troops to pacify you," Stan pointed out. "You haven't established so much as a squatter's right. Your headquarters is here, not at Roman Wells. You haven't so much as set up a corral post there. You got no claim."

Murch Davis hunched his scrawny neck into his shoulders like a retiring turtle. A thoughtful look came over his hard old face.

"Now there's an idea," he murmured reflectively. "Two or three of 'em, in fact. M-mm."

But he did not enumerate those ideas. He sat brooding for at least five minutes. Then he asked abruptly:

"What road brand is Sam Acorn drivin' his herds in?"

"One herd is Acorn brand stock cattle. The other two is longhorn two-year-old steers from the south, road branded two Xs on the left ribs." That much Stan knew.

"Double X. Like this? Left ribs, you said?" Murch made marks on the floor with the toe of his boot.

"Yes," Stan nodded.

Old Murch looked at his two men. He grinned, and the grin became laughter that rose to a high thin cackle. He doubled

up finally with that merriment. He slapped his leg. He whooped and stamped on the floor with his feet. He stopped suddenly.

"When do you reckon these trail herds of Acorn's would get here?" he asked Stan.

"They were swingin' up to the Rawhide Mountains in Wyoming a month ago," Stan told him. "Late August or September ought to get 'em this far north. But Henry Boldt will be here with an outfit long before that."

"I don't give a damn about Boldt," Murch declared. "But this Acorn information. Say, kid, if you're right you're entitled to a bonus."

THAT didn't make sense to Stan Rickard so he said nothing. There was more to come, he felt sure, but it did not seem to be immediately forthcoming. Murch relapsed into deep thought again. So Stan put out a feeler. Said he: "I reckon I might as well be on my way."

Murch shook his head.

"Couldn't think of it," he drawled. "I like your company. You got some style. I'll make you a proposition."

"Suppose I don't entertain it?" Stan countered.

"That'd be too bad," Murch said blandly. "Because it wouldn't be to my interest to let you ride off an' tell old Henry Boldt you did stake Roman Wells for him to claim with his scrip. Oh no. I expect you're right about the legal part of it. I know Henry Boldt. He was always a great man for lawful ways of collectin' rent, interest, an' profit. So as far as you're concerned, young feller, you never saw Roman Wells, nor staked nothin' for nobody. *Sabe?*"

"I do not," Stan declared—although the implication was plain enough. "I did stake that land. You know I did."

"Oh, I don't mind admittin' it to you, here," Murch said coolly. "Sure, you done your part. But you will never testify

to that stakin' before no land commissioner, before no court. You understand that, don't you?"

"You mean you'd put my light out if I try to go through with what Henry Boldt sent me here to do for him?"

"Exactly," Murch nodded agreement. "The only reason you are drawin' your breath now is that you're faster with a gun than you got any license to be. We're short-handed. You made us one shorter. It struck me right then an' there that with your superior talents you'd make a good substitute for the man you downed. My proposition is that you join us."

"Takin' your proposition as you make it," Stan drawled. "What am I joinin' up to? An' what is there in it for me?"

Old Murch blinked thoughtfully at him. Finally he smiled.

"Now you're exhibitin' some sense," said he. "You want to make money, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?" Stan retorted.

"You will be joinin' Murch Davis's crowd. An enterprise that has been a goin' concern in the Viaduct for a good many moons. We fought our way into this country with a bunch of cattle. We drove the buffalo an' the Injuns out. There ain't but five of the original eight that came north with me. But we're eleven strong now, an' by judicious pickin' we have increased our cattle an' horses." He smiled as if there was something that amused him. "We range now over seven thousand head. We're a cow outfit. We'll get bigger 'n' better as the country grows. We work on shares. I do the brain work an' the boys works the range an' the ranch. I take a fifty per cent cut of everything. The boys divide the other fifty, share an' share alike. When a man drops out—for any reason—he bequeaths his share to the rest of us. Now I can declare you in on Black Bill's ten per cent share of half the cattle. I will allow you outa the common fund a cowpuncher's wages—so when you go out to some little town on a bust you'll have money to spend. You'll get

your cut outa any enterprise we pull off. Why, it's a bonanza, kid. You'd be a sucker not to come in—a kid with your talents. There's men would give their eye teeth for a chance like I'm offerin' you."

"I was not born a damn fool," Stan measured his words and looked old Murch in the eye. "I got a pretty clear idea what sort of operations you carry on. It's been done down south. I got to think this over."

"Sure, sure," Murch agreed. "Take your time. Make up your mind. Only—don't get absent-minded an' start ridin' off by yourself while you're ponderin'. Night an' day there's always somebody keepin' track of who comes an' goes around here. If there's any doubt they shoot first an' talk it over after. She's a hard an' lonesome country, kid, so we take no chances with them that might horn in here. Make yourself to home, kid, while you consider. Personally, I'd admire to have you with us. You got the right qualifications."

"But that wouldn't prevent you all makin' coyote bait of me if I don't fall in with your notions," Stan observed dryly.

"You're a bright youth," old Murch said. "Ain't he, boys?" The other two grinned and nodded. "Yes, sir, you hit the nail on the head. Maybe that seems a mite harsh to you, kid. You was a mite harsh with Black Bill last night. Still, you was simply protectin' yourself. An' we aim to protect ourselves, so we can live an' prosper. Let me know in the mornin' if this layout looks good enough to you. Meantime——"

He rose and turned away. Turned back suddenly.

"What do we call you?" he demanded.

"Stan Rickard."

"Rickard! Where did you pick up a fancy name like that? Say, Flint, this kid says his name is Rickard."

MURCH'S two men had started for the door. They came back to stand and stare at Stan. They were men a little

younger than Murch Davis, twenty years or more older than Stan, lean, hawk-faced men, a little stooped from years of leaning forward in a saddle. They wore mustaches streaked, like Murch Davis's scanty hair, with gray. They looked like veterans of hard living, and their looks did not belie them.

"It happens to be the name I was born with," Stan said. "I ain't seen any reason to change it yet."

"Then you *are* kin to Chiwawa Jones," Murch growled. "Didn't I say last night you was the image of Chiwawa Jones in action? You're a Rickard, all right. Ain't he, Flint?"

The man nodded.

"Of course I'm a Rickard," Stan said impatiently. "But what makes you connect me with Chiwawa Jones? I only met him the once in my life. What——"

He broke off. A queer, stirring thought struck him.

"Chiwawa Jones is a Rickard, too, whether you know it or not," Murch pursed his lips. "At least he was when he started out in life. Chiwawa was with me in that Slater war you mentioned. You got fightin' blood in you, all right, kid."

He motioned his two men to the door. When they were out of earshot he turned on Stan.

"You come of an outlaw breed," he said pleasantly. "I know the Rickards, root an' branch. You'll fit in here like a glove on my hand. I can use you, kid—an' by God I will! Don't make no mistake about that!"

He turned his back on Stan, walked to the door, faced about with a curling lip that bared his yellow teeth.

"Them that come to the Viaduct," he said with cold assurance, "plays the game my way or they cash in their chips an' the game ends for them."

But that culminating threat no more than made Stan Rickard shrug his broad shoulders. He knew he was dealing with craft and ruthlessness. He had stumbled on a deadly combination in this green and

gold bowl hidden in the Viaducts, and he had made up his mind to match craft with craft, and be ruthless too, if nothing else would serve his need. For the moment, though, something besides Murch's threat had set up a queer commotion inside him. He recalled odd thoughts that filtered through his mind as he sat with Chiwawa Jones in camp after Sam Acorn's abortive necktie party. He recalled Chiwawa's exact knowledge of his family—and his father. He remembered too the legends that ran in southern cow camps about Chiwawa Jones. It might be—it was difficult for Stan to put it into words.

Outlaw breed! He remembered his mother's dark hinting. There was black and bloody history behind Murch Davis in the Southwest. There might be behind Chiwawa, too. More than he had ever heard. By the tone and manner of Murch Davis Rickards had played his desperate games in times gone by.

"I can use you, an' by God, I will!" Murch had sworn.

"You will, will you?" Stan snarled at the heavy walls. "I'll have somethin' to say about that!"

Then he should to think what part he should play, how he should act. He knew now that whether or not he fulfilled the trust Henry Boldt placed in him he carried his life in his hands—in his good right hand—if his wits failed him.

CHAPTER VIII

SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY

A MAN'S word, forced from him, ain't worth a damn," Murch Davis said shrewdly. "So you don't swear no oaths nor sign no documents nor promise nothin'. Just remember this; if you throw in with us you will have to pull your oar or be throwed outa the boat. You will be a cog in a workin' machine. A machine that will chew you up an' spit you out in fragments any time you don't mesh with the rest of the cogs—when I pull the lever. You *sabe?*"

"Sure," Stan grinned. "Nobody ever accused me of bein' stupid."

They had finished another breakfast. Murch had beckoned Stan and asked ironically if his intentions were strictly honorable. Stan could not help smiling at this deadly little man's droll way of putting it.

So now Murch lifted his voice.

"Boys," said he. "We have a new partner in the combination. He takes Black Bill's place an' Bill's share in everythin'. Anybody any objections? Speak now or forever hold your peace."

No one spoke. A few grinned, eying Stan Rickard approvingly.

"Meet the boys," Murch made a smirking bow. "Rickard's the name. Stan Rickard."

And so Stan shook hands with Flint Starley, Spots Derwent, Kay Connel, Bat Kells, Pete Gore, Poggun Smith, Rock Sanborn, Red River Murray, Holly Spence, Sam Middleton. Counting himself and Murch they made an even dozen. Twelve good men and true!

"For ridin' you can keep your own two mounts. They look good," Murch continued. "Spots'll make you up a full string of ponies. Spots, you take the kid in tow today. Ride around. Show him brands, explain the layout an' so forth."

He turned to the others, issuing curt orders about wagons and tools. Spots Derwent motioned Stan to come with him and led the way to the corrals. He was a man well past forty, gaunt, lantern-jawed, sandy hair on a long head, freckles like the markings of a leopard dotting his face. Someone had bunched fifty head of sleek, trim-built saddle horses out of the pole pasture. Stan saddled his roan. Spots roped out a black that might have been bred in the bluegrass country.

"You fellows ride good stock," Stan commented.

"We need to," Spots said casually. "You'll be glad of a good horse under you now an' then—if you last."

"Any reason I shouldn't last?" Stan asked as they rode away from the ranch.

Spots turned sidewise in the saddle.

"If you ever give Murch any lip. If you ever fall down on anything he lays out for you to do, or tangle with me or Flint Starley or Kay Conel or Bat Kells for any reason whatsoever, you're done finished, wiped up an' put away."

"Why you four in particular?" Stan per-

sisted. "Since I'm new in the layout naturally I want to know what's expected of me an' what I have to sidestep. How come Murch Davis an' them you

mention are special poison?"

"We're all that's left of the old crowd that fought its way from the Rio Grande to the Canada line," Spots said with a touch of pride. "Murch planned this spread. We've made it stick. Us five is the originals. The rest is like you—fellers that have come in because we got a good thing, an' it takes a crew to handle it. Some has lasted. Some hasn't. Anybody in this crowd'll beef you if you don't toe the mark. All Murch has to do is give a nod. But if we all hold up our end, by 'n' by we'll be sittin' pretty. Matter of fact we're sittin' pretty right now. When the country settles up we'll be plumb respectable, members of the Stock Association, an' sudden death on rustlers an' outlaws."

He grinned broadly at his own quip.

"Meantime we rustle for ourselves while the rustlin' is good, eh?" Stan observed.

"You got to get it while the gettin' is easy," Spots replied. "We don't overlook nothin' that spells money. I'll show you some of the fruits of honest toil as we ride. One or two more good strokes of business an' we can all quit takin' chances. Now look."

They had come to a bunch of grazing cattle. Spots called Stan's attention to the

brands. MDM, another brand like a lattice running from shoulder to hip.

"What do you call that?" Stan asked. There were few rustling tricks that range riders in general do not know. Obviously this was an excellent cover for working over other brands.

"The Railroad," Spots told him.

But the bulk of the cattle Stan saw in this and other bunches they looked over in passing carried a clean Three Diamonds on the left ribs. Stan commented on that.

"We use the MDM an' the Railroad when we have to," Spots said. "But the Three Diamonds is our main brand. We brought Three Diamond cattle into the Viaduct with us. They have increased like hell. All calves is branded with that. With them three marks we can work over most any brand. Only we pick what works cleanest, not bein' damn fools. It's a hell of a good spread, kid. Most of the boys is packin' a cash roll four or five thousand strong. There would be some tall poker games around here if Murch would let 'em play anythin' but penny ante. Hell, the interest in these cattle that you fell heir to from Black Bill is worth ten thousand dollars right now. You got in soft—because you happened to be greased lightnin' with that pretty gun. Some of us has been takin' the dirty end for years to build this up."

There was a touch of envy in the man's tone. But Stan wasn't thinking of what he said. He was brooding over that Three Diamond brand—and remembering how Murch Davis had questioned him about Sam Acorn's road brand, and how Murch had stared, and grinned, and finally whooped with laughter as at some rare joke when Stan told him Acorn had two herds of longhorns under the Double X. XX. Stan stared at a fat Three Diamond cow waddling by. You ran a few strokes of a hot iron up and a few down. It leaped before his eyes to a vista of smoking fires, the smell of burning hair, hot irons in gloved hands, dusty, sweating horses and men.



"It would be pickin's, if they could take them herds," he muttered.

"What's that?" Spots asked.

"Oh, nothin' much," Stan said. "Say, these are mighty good stock cattle."

"The second season after we located in the Viaducts," Spots told him, "we took a little *pasear* down into the Laramie country. They was an outfit there had imported a lot of pure-bred Hereford bulls. You got to hand it to Murch for havin' a head. Sez he, 'A grade steer don't eat no more grass to get fat than a scrub, an' he's worth half as much again when he goes to market.' So we collected about forty fifty of them bald-face bulls to improve the breed of our stock. Incidentally we picked up about eight hundred head of average native cattle that trip, too."

"Haven't you ever bit off more'n you could chew on one of those raids?" Stan asked bluntly. "Hasn't anybody ever trailed you up an' taken a fall outa you?"

"Our system's air-tight," Spots shook his head. "We ain't ever slipped up on nothin' we undertook. Once in awhile somebody has got hurt. But nobody has ever been wise enough or nervy enough to take a fall out of us here in our own roost. Fact is, kid, outside of our own crowd mighty few people know how we've expanded. We discourage folk passing through the Viaduct Range. We've protected ourselves pretty thorough."

"An' you're convinced you can still hold the Viaduct in spite of all them Texican outfits that are swarmin' north with trail herds, lookin' for a good place to light?"

"We'll hold Roman Wells an' the Basin," Spots declared, "spite of hell an' high water. If anybody wants to fight us for it, why——"

He shrugged his shoulders and touched his horse with the spurs. From one bunch of cattle to another he rode, until they reached the far side of Little Basin. Then Spots took to the hills. That part of the Viaduct Range was a mixture of timber and grass. Open meadows in timber-ringed glades. Little spring-fed streams

flowed everywhere. In every hollow they came on bunches of stock, wild cattle or wilder horses.

FROM a height they looked at last to a rolling country spreading north till it met the sky-line.

"We line ride to keep our stuff from driftin' north of the hills," Spots said. "Come winter we throw everythin' into Colonnade Basin where they winter fat an' sassy. Roman Wells alone would water ten thousand head. The Basin will carry twenty-five thousand head. Ain't that worth fightin' for?"

And Stan Rickard candidly agreed that it was, without mentioning that he meant to fight for it—but not to secure Murch Davis in its possession.

"Where do you ship your beef?" he asked idly.

"Oh, we used to trail 'em here an' there an' get rid of 'em," Spots replied. "Last year they finished a railroad across Canada, so we drove up there an' shipped a full train plumb to the English market. We'll head up there again in October with about eleven hundred head."

Stan did some mental arithmetic. He knew average beef prices. Eleven hundred at forty dollars a head. Forty-four thousand dollars. He whistled. The wages of sin were high.

"You'll be packin' a couple of thousand dollars cash when them beef returns come in," Spots told him, glancing sidelong.

"Kinda lucky for me I shot my way into this party," Stan drawled.

"Your way of toyin' with a gun was a powerful recommend, all right," Spots agreed. "We have had occasion to use guns, an' we may again. But you better be just as handy with horses an' cows an' a brandin' iron as you are with a six-shooter if you want to stay popular around here."

Spots swung around the crest of Little Basin until they had completed a little circle which brought them out on a ridge above the canyon through which Stan had

come from Roman Wells. They could look down on the Davis stronghold on one side, into the golden bowl to the south. From the hillock by Roman Wells smoke lifted. Stan reached for his field-glasses.

"I can tell you what that is without lookin'," Spots drawled. "Murch took to heart what you said last night about us not even havin' a squatter's claim. So he's started the boys buildin' a ranch-house an' a set of corrals there. Some of us'll winter there to hold her down. Me, I wouldn't do no such labor. I ain't so fond of ax-work. I'd meet anybody that disputed our claim to this range with a fog of powder. But Murch is long-headed, an' maybe his way is best."

THROUGH his glasses Stan could see a four-horse wagon loaded with poles crawl across the Basin floor. Possession was nine points of the law. Outwardly calm enough, inwardly he boiled. He had ridden two thousand miles to stake that land which lay there unclaimed. The foundation logs of a new robber's roost being laid upon it filled him with helpless anger.

Yet, he reflected, that original staking held good in law, if he lived long enough to give testimony in a Federal court. Or if he could escape, to return with enough Boldt riders to enforce the only law Murch Davis and his men recognized, the law frontiersmen carried in steel tubes on their belts. Law without force was a negation here.

So Stan pocketed his glasses and rolled a smoke in silence. And Spots stared a while and turned his horse downhill.

"I'm gittin' hungry," said he. "You've had a slant at the layout. This afternoon we'll loaf. Tomorrow Murch'll have us sweatin' on this new ranch work."

As they walked from the stable to the house, Stan, sharply observant of everything, wondered at the purpose of the square stone tower rising above the kitchen end. Now that he had become one of them he felt free to ask.

"Lookout tower," Spots told him. "Two men up there every night from dusk to daybreak, in the summer. There might be folks try to steal a march on us. We take no chances. You'll get your turn at that."

THEY did not take chances, Stan learned as days passed. Neither with the enemy without nor defection from within. From Murch Davis down they went wary and watchful, placing no great trust, it seemed, even in each other. No man ever left that place alone. That was a standing order, and Murch's orders seemed to be accepted as a devout Christian accepts the will of God. They rode in pairs or fours. In ten days Stan Rickard never got out of sight or hearing of some member of that gang. Nor did any of the others. Even Davis, to whose iron discipline, all submitted without a murmur, moved always with two men at his flank. This bodyguard Stan soon noticed consisted always of the same pairs, either Flint Starley and Bat Kells, or Spots Derwent and Kay Connel. They were the originals, Murch and that quartette. All men between forty and fifty. The bond that united them had been forged in their common history long before they came to the Viaducts, Stan supposed.

"Why does old Murch always have one pair or the other at his elbow?" Stan asked Holly Spence one afternoon. They were notching a ridge-log into place above walls of peeled pine logs that made a yellow square on the knob by Roman Wells. Holly nicked his ax in the log, wiped the sweat off his face.

"Try makin' a pass at Murch sometime, an' see."

"Does he reckon some of us might make a pass at him?"

"It's been tried, kid," Holly answered. He was a thick-set fair man about thirty-five. Good-natured. Inclined to boast about his deeds—or misdeeds. "When you are handlin' a pack of wolves you don't aim to have 'em turn on you an' pull you

down. Murch pays 'em a extra hundred a month to be eyes for him."

"Somebody's got to be head of a show like this," Stan said.

"Hell, yes," Holly grimaced. "An' the head of it gets the lion's share of the plunder. So there's always somebody ambitious to run the show. If you could beef old Murch an' step into his shoes, you'd do it. So would I. So would anybody in the crowd. He has got fifty or sixty thousand in cold cash in a steel safe in that shuttered room he sleeps in. One time an' another he has put the fear of God in every man in the outfit. Murch don't stay top dog because the boys love him. They're all afraid of him, kid. They don't admit it, but they are. It pays to be in this layout, kid. But once in there's only one way out. Murch attends to that."

"How?"

"I have been with him three years. In that time Murch has shot down three of his own men cold-blooded. One fella got cold feet an' wanted to quit. Murch hung him to the corral gate. His partner made a break at Murch. Spots plugged him from behind. F'rinstance, kid. I got nothin' agin you. Fact, I kinda like you. But you're workin' with me just now. If you was to mount your *caballo* with the idea of pullin' out I'd grab my rifle an' get you. I don't want to shoot you down—but if I let you get away, Murch takes it out on me. Same all the way through. Like it was in the Bible, every man here is his brother's keeper."

"Nice system," Stan murmured.

"It works," Holly observed.

STAN fell to work again, silent. No loophole in that unseen surrounding wall, no weak link in the chain that shackled him. He did not shrink from taking a chance. Only so far he had seen no chance except to make a break that was direct suicide.

Murch held them to a routine in their daily lives. They were hurrying this set of new buildings to hold Roman Wells.

They left for a day's work at sunrise and trailed back to Little Basin at sunset, ate supper and went to bed. Two men went on guard in the tower. One slept from then to midnight, the other slept from midnight to dawn. One pair of eyes looked continually down over the eaves of that sprawling house. Nothing could move unobserved across that trampled yard. With dinner over old Kate and the girl Lily went into a room off the kitchen. At ten o'clock old Murch walked into another small room built of heavy logs, closed a thick door, banged a heavy cross-bar into place. In ten minutes all lights went out, or Murch screamed at them through a peephole. No man left that bunkroom till dawn. That was an order.

But even a cast-iron system, Stan kept saying to himself, must have some weak point.

So far, in a week of intimacy with the working of Murch Davis' system Stan had seen no way of getting out of the Viaducts with a whole skin. Murch Davis had meant what he said, and knew whereof he spoke, when he told Stan that he would never testify to that staking before any land commissioner. And if he didn't get out, if he was forced to participate in the raid they openly discussed now on Sam Acorn's trail herds, he would be branded for all time with the mark of those plundering ruffians. Murch planned to take one Acorn herd of Double Xs, and perhaps both, to swell the Three Diamond herd before the influx of cattlemen and riders



made such raids impossible. Once driven into the Viaducts those Double Xs would swiftly become Three Diamonds—and the

worked brand would hair over in three weeks.

Twenty-five hundred steers in each herd. Stan didn't believe Murch Davis's gang could get away with such a raid as that.

And he couldn't get away from them. He had shot his way into this combination. He wasn't foolhardy enough to believe he could shoot his way out.

CHAPTER IX

COMPANIONS IN MISERY

IN THE evenings, after a day of work or riding they talked of this new coup—the last, Murch assured them, they would ever have a chance to make.

"I seen cowmen pour into New Mexico, and then into Colorado," Murch asserted, "an' I saw what happened. Settlement, organization, means the end of easy pickin's for such as us. The Northwest is the last stand of free grass. They're comin' to it like the locusts descended on Egypt. When there's a outfit holdin' down every good ranch location all we could do is nibble a little here an' there like mice at a big cheese. So why not take the cheese before it gets surrounded with cats an' traps?"

There was common assent to that.

If a kindlier philosopher than Murch once said that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy Murch Davis knew well enough that driven men must have rest or discontent breeds discord. So one day in seven after the Biblical command, they rested. But never in a body. Every day in their turn two men loafed at the ranch, their only task to keep an eye open for the unexpected.

On Stan's second rest day he sat up in the tower brooding, while Spots Derwent supposedly dozed on his bunk. Moodily Stan wondered if he could slip down those stairs, saddle a horse and be out of gun-range before Spots wakened. Not likely. Old Kate would see that Spots woke up. She was another pair of eyes for Murch—that gorilla-built female who fed them

and washed their clothes. She could use a rifle like a man, Holly Spence had told Stan. She watched everything that went on around the ranch and told Murch all she saw or heard.

Deep in thought Stan sat staring over the low tower wall, resting his elbows on a level with his breast. He heard nothing until a voice at his elbow said in almost a whisper:

"How do you like it here?"

He turned his head. Lily stood beside him. She had come silently up the narrow stairs on moccasined feet. Standing she was only half a head taller than Stan seated on a bench. He stared at her. The cotton dress she wore outlined a slender body, poised, tense, like a bird about to take wing. He had noticed that queer tensivity about her movements when she waited on table. Her eyes were gray smoldering pools. In the sunlight that came under the tower roof of split pine her reddish gold hair shone like great braids of burnished copper wound about her head. She couldn't, Stan thought, be more than seventeen. A flower in a field of weeds.

"I said how do you like it here?" she repeated in that subdued voice.

"It's all right," Stan said guardedly, for in this sink of iniquity who could a man trust for the unburdening of what lay in his heart.

"Is it?" she remarked. "You like the company?"

"I like the country," Stan evaded.

"Well enough to stay in it if you could get out of it safely?"

Something must have gleamed momentarily in Stan's eyes. The girl moved up a step, sat down beside him.

"Did you come looking for a place to light?" she asked, in that same low, searching tone. "Or did Murch trap you when you wandered in?"

"I was sent by a Texas cowman into the Viaducts on legitimate business," he replied truthfully. "I rode in here by chance. One of Murch's men jumped me."

"I know," she nodded. "I saw that."

"So I was elected to take his place," Stan said. "That's all."

"They aren't very sure of you," Lily whispered. Her eyes never left his face. It was as if she tried to read something there.

"Who's sure of who else around here?"

Stan said a little contemptuously. "Are outlaws an' killers ever sure of each other? You can report that to Murch, if you like. He knows how much he trusts any of his men. Even his bought ones he plays one against the other. He has to. What do I care whether they are sure of me or not? I hold up my end at what I'm told to do."

"You don't say much an' you think a lot," Lily went on. "They're uncertain about you. Kate sent me up here to shine up to you an' pump you, if I could."

"And why do you tell me this?" Stan asked.

"Because I hate bein' here as much as you do," she said with a sudden blaze in her eyes. "I hate thieves an' murderers. I don't want to be here. I never have. I never will. And I've got to get away soon."

Her tone and gesture stirred a wave of sympathy—but he was wary, too.

"What makes you reckon I don't want to be here?"

"I watch you. I can read the look on your face now an' then. I know. Please, Stan Rickard," she dropped her voice to an indistinct mutter and her eyes turned to the stairway, "help me to get away from here. I know you want to go. Make a break—an' take me with you."

Something rose in Stan's throat. The girl laid her hands on his knee. Fear, an anger that Stan could not account for, struggled for mastery on her face, in her voice. It convinced him, loosened his tongue to confidence.

"I've been tryin' to figure a way out for myself, but it looks airtight, short of murderin' a man when he ain't lookin', which I can't bring myself to do," he ad-

mitted. "Twice as hard for two of us, an' one a woman."

"Being a woman is no handicap to me," she declared. "I can ride. I could use a gun too if I had one. I don't care where we go nor what we do so long as I get out of here. I can't stand it much longer. I hate that slimy old reptile!"

"Murch?"

Lily nodded.

"He killed my father. I saw him. I was little but I never forget," her voice shook. "Now he wants me. He's tired of Kate. She doesn't know that, but I do. He wants me himself. He has never let anybody look at me twice. When the beef herd goes out in October he's goin' to let Kate go for a trip East. But I have to stay here an' cook, he says. I know what that means."

Stan muttered something. It seemed monstrous, but likely enough. Murch Davis took what he wanted.

"I'd hop to it like a flea," he muttered. "But I've seen no chance."

"Make a chance," she said imperatively. "I'll tell you how. I planned the same thing once before, but the man weakened. He was afraid to take me. And Spots Derwent was on the watch an' shot him when he broke away himself. But I know it can be done. This is the first time I've been able to talk to you. I've watched you plenty—an' wondered. You aren't like the rest of them. I wanted to talk to you, but Murch made it a rule I mustn't get friendly with any of the men. He must have told Kate to sic me onto you, to find out what you really think of being in the gang. So in case she doesn't let me follow it up, here's how we might manage it: You'll be on night guard with somebody in this tower soon. I'll watch when it's your turn. I can always get out of the bedroom window. I will get out, if I have to crack Kate on the head. At midnight. I'll get to the stable and saddle two horses. You will have to do something to the man on guard with you. Choke him, knock him out with your gun, I don't care what.

Then sneak to the stable an' we'll ride. They'll never catch us in the dark. Are you game? Will you try?"

"Will I?" Stan's face lit up. "Funny—I never thought of that. Suppose—suppose you double-cross me?"

Lily looked at him for a full minute, looked until the blood rose faintly to his cheeks under that searching scrutiny. She glanced here and there, down the steps that gave access to the tower floor. Then she leaned forward and deliberately kissed him on the mouth. Her hands rested on his shoulders. He could feel the tremble in her fingers.

"Do you think I'd double-cross you to please that slimy old toad?" she asked. "You *know* I wouldn't."

"No," Stan whispered back. "I don't believe you would. All right. How am I goin' to let you know what night I go on guard?"

"I'll know," she said. "I'll watch. I'll try to have a little grub. But grub or no grub I'll be at the stable and have two horses saddled at midnight. Everybody will be asleep except you and one other man, on guard in the tower. You'll have to handle him without any noise. You won't fail me, will you?"

"No," Stan promised. "I'll be there if I have to come shootin'."

"Even that," said she, "would be better than being somethin' for Murch Davis to make use of."

"I'd better go down now," she said. "I'll tell Kate you figure you're in on a good thing. That'll sort of settle their minds about you."

"And maybe help me to settle their hash," Stan thought, but left the thought unspoken.

HE WATCHED Lily go down the stairs. When her spun-copper hair was on a level with the tower floor she turned for an instant to smile at him—the first time he had ever seen her smile. It was like the sun breaking through a rift

in clouds after a day of rain. Somehow it warmed his heart. That was no Judas kiss.

"Lord, if we can make it," he muttered—and it was like a prayer.

That evening, in the idle hour after supper, when a couple of penny ante games were under way, when Murch Davis sat in his cushioned chair with his feet on a table and his back tilted against the wall, while Stan lay on his bunk brooding and planning, the closed door from the front opened and a man stepped in. Jauntily, fearlessly, with a grin on his face he came forward toward Murch Davis.

Stan Rickard raised on one elbow with a gasp of astonishment. Cardplayers froze in their several postures. Murmuring voices were hushed.

For the man who had stepped casually, unchallenged, into that den of thieves was Chiwawa Jones, the man who—as he said—rode by himself.

CHAPTER X

OLD DEBTS

HELLO, Murch, old college chum," Chiwawa greeted. "Your guards are damn slack, it strikes me. Why, hello, kid," he smiled at Stan. "Didn't I tell you I'd see you in the Viaducts before fall? An' how are you Flint, old sox? Also Bat, the bad boy of the Pecos. How are you, Spots, you old freckle-faced wolf? It's like old times to see you all gathered together."

Chiwawa Jones seemed wholly at ease, shedding a smile upon that dumbfounded company. Stan was startled, across his mind shot vague, unpleasant conjectures born of Chiwawa's genial familiarity with this crowd, but his own surprise and uneasiness did not cause him to miss the fact that Murch Davis was at a loss, that something had confronted that little, iron-handed desperado with which he scarcely knew how to reckon. Stan felt something electric in the air.

Chiwawa Jones, however, speedily left no one in doubt as to why he was there, nor bid them guess at his purpose and intention. When he spoke again in that waiting silence his smile had faded, his voice had a bite in it, a quality almost malevolent.

"You have owed me somethin' a long time, Murch," he said. "I have come to collect. Flint, you an' Bat step aside. This is between Murch an' me."

They obeyed him! Stan sitting upright now on his bunk saw that and marveled. Flint Starley and Bat Kells stood up and moved away from Murch without a word. They folded their arms across their chests, as if to show that their fingers had no itch for a gun grip. Old Murch hunched forward in his chair. He ran the tip of his tongue slowly across his lower lip.

"When we fought Sam Acorn for J. B. Slater an' ran the Acorn outfit off the Pecos," Chiwawa continued, "you bossed us, Murch. A bunch of fightin' kids. You made a deal with Slater. If we won that scrap J. B. offered to give us a thousand apiece. There's six of us present that was there. We won that little war. Slater paid off to you, Murch. An' you told us you couldn't pry nothin' out of J. B. except an extra hundred apiece. I found that out from J. B. himself. For years I have been promisin' myself to look you up about that little matter. An' here I am."

"Aw, forget it, Chiwawa," Murch said coolly. "You'd oughto joined long ago, instead of goin' it alone. You kin step right into your old place as my right-hand man."

"I have picked the place I aim to occupy," Chiwawa replied. "It is not either on your right or your left, Murch. It is——"

What happened then proved to Stan Rickard once more that the quickness of the hand deceives the keenest eye.

One moment Chiwawa Jones stood there in a negligent attitude, speaking in that taunting drawl. Murch sat hunched in his

chair. The next instant Murch Davis was on his feet, moaning, his unfired gun lying on the floor, blood dripping from both his

hands. The room echoed to the blast of two shots, reeked with the smell of burned powder. Chiwawa Jones stood unharmed,



smiling again, speaking to Flint Starley and Bat Kells, a pearl-handled gun with a silver barrel in his hand. Stan could not have described what happened in detail, but he knew that Murch had reached for his gun, that Chiwawa Jones had shot that gun-hand and when Murch stooped to retrieve his gun with his left Chiwawa had put a bullet through that arm too.

"You will notice that like wine I have improved with age," Chiwawa was saying, "whereas Murch musta slowed up a trifle. You two was his particular shadows. Maybe you-all have ambitions too. Murch was boss. Now I'm boss. Just in case you doubt that."

He thrust his gun back into a carved scabbard on his belt. He stood there with hands hanging loose by his sides.

"I run this show from now on," Chiwawa said. "I come here for that specific purpose. If anybody here doubts my ability to do so—why, I'll give any or all of you an even break. See?" He held out both hands. His voice had the same note that rang in it when with a rope about his neck he told Sam Acorn to do his damndest.

"All any one of you that aspires to fill Murch's shoes has to do is to draw an' down me, an' take his place."

THERE was a moment of silence. Chiwawa Jones stood waiting in the light of the oil lamps, tall and straight and wide-eyed. Stan got off the bunk and stood up too, moved by an impulse he could

not name. Only it seemed that he must. At any rate Stan stood up.

"Hell," Spots Derwent croaked, "I wouldn't dispute no claim you make, Chiwawa!"

"What about you, Flint?" Chiwawa asked. "You Bat, an' Kay too. Do you go with me or do you go for me? Speak up!"

"Chiwawa," Flint Starley said with a grin, "in the old days I never made nothin' an issue with you. I don't now. No man need be ashamed to follow your lead an' take your orders. I kin testify to that for the benefit of them here that don't know you as well as I do. Personally, I'd rather. Murch was pretty hard to stomach sometimes."

"I may be just as hard," Chiwawa said grimly. "Only I won't deal in bullets when a man's back is turned, as Murch has done. I don't need to, for one thing. All right. Two of you lead Murch into his kennel an' bandage up them busted arms. He'll be harmless for a couple of weeks."

Flint Starley looked at Murch Davis. His face was ghastly, not with pain—with fear.

"By God!" Flint said contemptuously. "All these years you've fooled us into thinkin' you was chain lightnin' an' iron combined. You are shakin'. You are scared. An' all you got is both arms busted, when Chiwawa coulda killed you just as easy. You're yellow, you old buzzard!"

"I didn't aim to kill him," Chiwawa said quietly. "I got a use for him."

He turned toward the kitchen end of that long room.

"Kate," he called, "rustle me some bread an' meat an' hot coffee. Bring it here."

The gorilla-built woman stared at him a second or two, then turned silently to her shelves and stove. If Chiwawa's deliberate crippling of Murch Davis moved her she showed no sign. Not until she put a plate of food and a cup of steaming coffee on the table where sometimes Murch used to spread a solitaire layout.

Then she said hoarsely, "I hope to God it chokes you!"

Chiwawa laughed. Kate waddled away to her kitchen. She and Lily vanished into their bedroom. When he finished eating Chiwawa cocked his booted feet up on the table and rolled a cigarette. The low chatter that had filled the room up to the moment of his entrance did not resume. From Flint Starley and Bat Kells, the killing machines which had failed Murch Davis at last, down to Stan, they sat silent, looking at this clear-eyed, yellow-haired man who had walked alone into a lion's den and broken the lion's teeth. Stan saw no resentment, nothing but curiosity and a touch of admiration on those case-hardened faces. They would follow a man like Chiwawa Jones without one regret for the leader he had deposed. Or perhaps they were just waiting, like a wolf-pack. Stan was no part of a wolf-pack, nor could ever be. He had saved Chiwawa Jones from Sam Acorn's hanging rope. He wondered if that would get him any consideration now—or if Chiwawa would simply go on from where Murch left off and play every card in hand to hold the Viaducts against all comers.

He was not left long in doubt. Chiwawa took his feet off the table and began to talk.

"Pay attention, you *hombres*," he said curtly. "While you all have been holed up here, sallyin' forth now an' then to line Murch's nest with swansdown while you got a few feathers for yourselves, I have been circulatin' over considerable territory between here an' the Rio Grande. Keepin' my eyes open an' my mouth shut. The days of this layout operatin' as it has operated, are numbered."

They came rigidly to attention.

"Why take the chances you took on gettin' Murch out an' yourself in if you figure we're finished?" Flint Starley asked.

"Oh, I don't mean we're finished," Chiwawa corrected. "Only ridin' an' raidin' is done—after this season. Come now there will be a hundred southern cow out-

fits north of the Yellowstone. The country will be overrun by Texans that pack guns for use, not ornament. We're goin' to have organized counties, sheriffs, little towns springin' up everywhere. Then any raid such as you have made in the past, leavin' no trace behind, will bring a hundred men down on you like hounds after a coyote.

"But," Chiwawa smiled and drummed on the table with his long, supple fingers, "we have time an' opportunity for one more big killin'. I stood by that window last night," he pointed, "an' listened to you talk about them Acorn herds. It's a cinch. If we do the job right, with what's already accumulated, we fix ourselves for life. That Three Diamond brand you've built up is made to order for this deal. We can control this Viaduct range, stand pat, and this will be a million-dollar outfit in less than ten years. I'll spread my hand face up in the mornin'. You'll admit it's a good one. Meantime, I'm goin' to have a sleep. Which of these bunks ain't occupied?"

They pointed to a vacant one. Chiwawa sat down on the edge of it and began to pull off his boots. When the first one dropped to the floor Spots Derwent voiced a query that had troubled Stan, too.

"Say, Chiwawa," Spots asked, "how in hell do you know the details of every arrangement this outfit has, even to Murch's safe which you mentioned awhile ago? How come you have all this pat? You never been here before."

"Spots," Chiwawa lifted his head to smile at the freckled one, "they say fools rush in where angels fear to tread. I never was a fool. I have been lookin' this lay-out over at short range for some time. If I'd wanted to I could have potted any of you half a dozen times a day. In spite of all the precautions Murch took to keep his business private I have ways of findin' things out. I could tell you surprisin' things about the plunder Murch has in that safe in his bedroom. Murch bluffed you all a heap in more ways than one. He

isn't half as smart as he made you think. He has chiseled you plenty here, just as he chiseled us outa the money J. B. Slater handed over for us when we were a bunch of fightin' kids. Good night, boys. We'll make medicine tomorrow."

Stan's bunk stood between Flint Starley's and Holly Spence's. Holly sank his voice and spoke to Flint:

"By gum, that old boy shapes up like he'd go some. Who is he, Flint? How come you'n Bat——"

"How come Murch weakened an' started to go to pieces the minute Chiwawa stepped in?" Flint snarled. "Sure, I'm supposed to protect old Murch. What of it? If you knowed Chiwawa Jones as well as I do you wouldn't need to ask damn fool questions. This was personal between them two. You heard him, didn't you? You see him, don't you? Fifteen years back he was reckoned the fastest man with a gun in New Mexico or Texas."

"From one sample of his wares, I reckon you could include Montana an' a few more territories," Spence drawled.

"He is," Flint growled. "I wish he'd stayed outa the Viaducts—unless he's changed. Chiwawa Jones is a fightin' fool an' trouble is his middle name. The man that follows him will have to go some."

"G'wan," Spots Derwent edged in to whisper. "You was always jealous of Chiwawa's rep with a gun, Flint. What's eatin' on you? Compared to Murch, Chiwawa Jones is a gentleman an' a scholar."

"I don't dispute that," Flint said soberly. "But stop an' think. Most of us have been on the dodge for years. There's been cash rewards offered for some of us. He has burned powder all over the Southwest, but I never heard of Chiwawa mixin' in anythin' crooked. Ain't that so, Bat?"

Bat Kells nodded. They were grouped now by Stan's bed, thirty feet from where Chiwawa lay in his blankets as if he were secure among friends.

"Well?" Spots said doubtfully. "Call a spade a spade."

"How many wells does it take to make a

river?" Flint retorted. "Every man in this room is an outlaw, except maybe this kid here, an' he don't exhibit no aversion to easy money. Chiwawa Jones has been mixed up in plenty of trouble, but always on the cattleman's side, never with rustlers. What I'm gettin' at is the off chance that Chiwawa come into the Viaducts with somethin' on his mind besides steppin' into Murch Davis' shoes."

Flint looked at Stan and stopped speaking. But when he sat down on his own bed they gathered in a row on Flint's bunk and went on talking in lowered tones. Stan lay down. He was wide awake long after the last lamp went out. He recalled Chiwawa's remark when they parted on the north slope of the Rawhides: "Maybe I'll see you in the Viaducts before fall. Don't shoot if you see me first."

The words seemed almost prophetic—as if Chiwawa Jones then had seen the coming events that cast their shadow before.

CHAPTER XI

AND SOME NEW ONES

THE long table was set with enameled plates and cups. Old Kate was setting on platters of fried beef and hot biscuits and Lily was pouring coffee when Chiwawa Jones finished combing his hair by a wash bench at the back door.

"All set? Line up boys," he said, and took his place at one end. "Feed Murch," he told Kate briefly.

The sun slipping through a window laid a beam on hair so corn-yellow that it hid the gray on his temples. His thin, tanned face bent over his food. He said nothing, nor did anyone else. But when they began to push back the bench seats Chiwawa drew Flint, Bat, Spots Derwent and Kay Connel—the four originals—outside. They squatted on their bootheels in the yard, making aimless marks in the dust, heads together for half an hour. Then Chiwawa called the rest of the crew.

"This is the plan," said he. "It is our last chance to make a real haul before these

ranges get lousy with cowpunchers. After that we hold what we got, the pick of the Viaduct grazin' land. The natural increase will make us all rich. I reckon most of you have heard of the Acorn outfit? Of Sam particular."

Most of them nodded assent.

"There are five of us sittin' here that know him inside out," Chiwawa continued. "For myself I would kill him like I would a wolf, and he has always been achin' to do the same for me. Among cowmen Sam Acorn has no friends. In his way Sam is worse than we are. He stole his start from a man that trusted him. He has gone on stealin' an' ambushin' them he didn't like, an' got rich walkin' on people unable to protect themselves. Always posin' as the honest cattleman an' gettin' away with it so far as the law went. But never foolin' them that knew him. So if somebody was to take a hard fall out of Sam Acorn cowmen from Montana to Texas would only shrug their shoulders an' say it served him right.

"So Sam Acorn's our meat. I have looked over his trail herds. I know where they are. Also somebody has primed him about the Viaducts. Two of his herds, the Double X herds, are within a week's drive of the Basin. I was told in Wyoming that he aims to start two separate outfits in Montana, one here, one north of the Missouri. It's a stroke of luck for us he is shovin' in here with the Double X. If his cowpunchers are broke up an' scattered, long before anybody is interested enough to get nosy them worked brands will be healed. And it is my personal intention to put Sam Acorn, himself, personal, outa business for keeps if I am lucky enough to find him with the first herd we tackle."

"Sounds like big business," Flint drawled. "I'm for it."

The others voiced agreement.

"When do we make the play?" Bat Kells asked.

"When the first Double X herd reaches the south slope of the Viaduct Range," Chiwawa answered promptly. "In two

or three days we'll begin to look for trail-dust on the sky line from the south side. We can throw an outfit together in two hours when we sight 'em. Meantime there is work to do. I am goin' to drive you



boys. When that Roman Wells ranch is finished, when we have rebranded them Acorn cattle, when we have shipped our beef steers, we will settle down an' take life easy. Till then, when the sweat is in your eyes remember

you're workin' to fatten your own bankroll. I am goin' to make Murch disgorge. What he has in that safe comes out to be shared equal among us. I keep his share of the cattle an' I control this outfit. Eventually I will make it a regular share company, all legal an' proper, so that every man's interest will stand in his name no matter what happens. Now, fly at that buildin' job. I looked her over last night. If you step lively you can finish it before we tackle Sam Acorn. Flint's boss when I'm not around."

They began to move off.

"You stay here, kid," Chiwawa spoke directly to Stan.

He remained squatting on his boot heels. Stan stood on his feet. The rest were presently far out of earshot. Chiwawa traced with his finger in the dust a double x and continued running lines until he had extended it to a triple diamond.

He looked up suddenly, his face mask-like.

"You didn't cotton to my proposition to get away with a few of Sam Acorn's horses," said he dryly. "Why didn't you tell me you had bigger ideas?"

"I talked to you pretty free, I reckon," Stan answered. "It happens I told you the truth. It is still the truth when I tell you that I rode into this gang's headquarters accidental, an' so far I have seen no way of gettin' out without signin' my own

death warrant. Murch Davis reckoned he would use me."

"After you'd deprived him of a pretty useful man," Chiwawa observed. "I would reckon that good policy—in Murch's place. You must be pretty deadly with a gun, kid. You could be useful."

"Well, you've took his place," Stan said sullenly. "What's your policy as regards me?"

"Would you follow my lead with a better heart than you'd follow Murch's?" Chiwawa demanded.

"Not in no such business as this gang is engaged in," Stan flung caution to the winds. The truth in him came out in a blast of anger—anger at being trapped, anger at Chiwawa Jones. He had bottled up shame and humiliation many days—and there was only Chiwawa Jones and himself in that yard. "I am not a thief nor a murderer an' I never had no ambition to turn outlaw," he flashed.

"Them's hard words, considerin' that you have killed two men quite recent," Chiwawa commented quietly.

"There is a difference," Stan contended, "between a fightin' man an' a killer."

"Yes, that's so," Chiwawa said thoughtfully. He paused a moment. "You haven't reminded me that you saved my neck from bein' neatly stretched by Mister Acorn."

"It hadn't occurred to me to trade on that," Stan answered stiffly.

CHIWAHA JONES shook his head, smiling queerly.

"You're an uppity youth," he remarked. "Even the hardest citizen generally nurses a spark of gratitude for the man who takes some trouble to save his life. Old an' steeped in sin as I am, kid, I still reckon I owe you somethin' I can't repay by compellin' you to take part in somethin' you want no part in, or sickin' a killer on you if you don't. So if you are in this thing under protest, I'm inclined to give you a chance to get out."

"Are you goin' through with this Acorn raid?" Stan asked pointblank.

"It's the chance of a lifetime," Chiwawa answered softly, "to kill two birds with one stone."

"I'd be plum grateful," Stan said, "if you'd leave me out."

"The trouble is," Chiwawa said casually, "you know too much now, not only about what these boys has been doin', but what we aim to do. They know only one safe way of stoppin' a man's mouth. If you won't stay with us, you'll have to ease out mighty careful. Do you reckon you could sort of fade away quietly if I made an opportunity? I think you're a damn fool, but I sorta feel like I should return the favor you done me. Would you slide away without makin' any fuss?"

"Would I?" Stan echoed. "Let me outa gunshot of this place once on a good horse, an' I can take care of myself."

"I don't doubt it," Chiwawa murmured. "But what would you aim to do about this stakin' of Roman Wells for Henry Boldt? Set down an' talk man to man, kid."

"I don't know," Stan said. "I will figure that out once I am in the clear again."

"Ain't it obvious," Chiwawa said persuasively, "that for you to try an' go any farther with this job for the Colonel is plumb suicide? We're in possession. We're strong enough to hold the Viaduct against all comers. There's plenty of good range elsewhere for Henry Boldt."

"He sent me to stake Roman Wells, an' I did stake it," Stan said stubbornly. "It was not occupied or claimed when I made that stakin'. My word in a Federal court is good against any number of outlaw guns."

"Sure, if you lived to testify," Chiwawa said. "Do you always hang an' rattle like this to anythin' you undertake?"

Stan stood dumb. He had already said more to this self-appointed leader of the Davis gang than was policy. He was even a trifle surprised at himself for this stubborn insistence that he must somehow make good the trust Colonel Henry Boldt had

placed on him. That wasn't a reasoned conviction. It was, he suddenly understood, a personal disinclination to accept defeat, to be driven off by force, to be beaten. So he did not answer Chiwawa Jones, who might be kin to him but who appeared quite as determined as Murch Davis to hold the Viaducts and the plunder in his hands. Besides Stan did not want to boast.

"Sam Acorn will beat the Boldt outfits here anyway," Chiwawa said thoughtfully. "And Sam will be a hard nut for the Colonel to crack. You couldn't do anything with Sam Acorn, any more than you can with us."

"Henry Boldt will not have to crack any Acorns if your scheme is carried out," Stan reminded him.

"That's so. I'd forgot for a minute," Chiwawa said simply. "But all I am interested in is givin' you a chance to get outa this deal, kid, since it goes so much agin your grain. I owe you that much."

"Is that all you owe me?" Stan blurted out. "There's men in this outfit that knew you a long time back."

"Oh," Chiwawa looked up at him. "Somebody been talkin' outa turn?"

"Murch talked," Stan told him.

"What did he say?"

"He said you were a Rickard," Stan lashed out. "He said I come of an outlaw breed."

"I'll remember that for Murch," Chiwawa's face darkened. "An' so you jumped to certain conclusions, eh? An' they don't set well on your stomach?"

"Put yourself in my plocce," Stan said to him.

"I wish I could," Chiwawa rose to his feet. "Listen to me, kid. Whatever you heard, whatever you think an' feel, keep it to yourself. Forget it. Let the dead past lay dead in its grave. Don't try to dig it up. It concerns other people besides you—or me. Concerns them maybe more than it does you or me. You may see an' hear more that will make you speculate mighty hard, if you persist in tryin' to go through

with what you come north for. Keep it all to yourself. You hear me?"

"I hear you," Stan answered. "God knows I would not be proud to go around shoutin' it, not the way things shape up now. I will never mention it again."

"Your life," Chiwawa Jones said slowly, "is not goin' to be twisted out of shape by somebody's mistakes or shortcomin's or misdeeds. So leave it lay. I will get you out of here. You want to go, an' you'd handicap me considerable if you stayed."

He stood a moment, staring at the brown earth trampled into dust, his blue eyes narrowed so that a multitude of fine lines radiated from their corners. For a minute he looked careworn and old. Then he smiled.

"Come on into the house," said he, "till they're all clear of the ranch."

They hadn't talked long, but already horses were hitched and saddled, men beginning to leave. Stan followed Chiwawa in. To him it was now clear that Chiwawa Jones wanted him away from there as much as he wanted to be away. He wondered if when the ranch was left to him and Chiwawa and the wounded Murch he would be free to go—and only then did he remember that he had promised to take Lily. He wondered what Chiwawa would say to that. He hardly knew what to make of the man.

Lily was sweeping up the bunkroom when they came in. She stood in the full flood of sunshine through a window. Chiwawa Jones looked hard at her.

"What's your name, young lady?" he asked.

"Lily."

"Lily what?"

The girl matched stares with him.

"I don't know."

"Huh!" Chiwawa Jones continued to scrutinize her closely for a minute. Then he called, "Kate, come here."

Old Kate came slowly to that end of the long room.

"Who does she belong to?" Chiwawa pointed at Lily.

"To me," old Kate bristled. "Keep your damn paws off'n her!"

"Well, well," Chiwawa drawled. "I never knew you'n Murch had any family."

His blue eyes switched back and forth between the straight, slender girl with the rose petal skin and burnished copper hair and this gorilla-built creature.

"Belongs to *you*!" Chiwawa went on contemptuously. "Murch brought this girl to you from Blue River when she was just a kid. Didn't he?"

A sullen anger spread over the woman's face. Her lips shut in grim compression.

Chiwawa's steel fingers closed on her arm. He shook her so that her head snapped back and forth on her short thick neck.

"Answer me, you moon-faced slut!" he breathed in a terrible voice. "Is this the child Murch brought you from Blue River?"

"I didn't want to," Kate whimpered. "Murch said keep her. I don't know where he got her. How'd you know?"

"There's damned little about you an' Murch Davis I don't know," Chiwawa released her arm. "Go an' bring Murch out here. Tell him be quick or I'll drag him out."

She scuttled away. From the bedroom Murch Davis presently emerged, came slowly up to where Chiwawa stood with the girl on one side of him and Stan on the other. Fear was on his face, in his sunken eyes. His shirt-sleeves were rolled above the elbows and both forearms were wrapped in bandages that showed bloody spots.

"Is this Len Cole's girl?" Chiwawa asked, when the man came up close. Murch started. But he did not answer.

Chiwawa drew his gun. He reached out, and as Murch seemed to shrivel in his skin, he rapped him smartly over one bandage. The old outlaw uttered a sharp whine of pain.

"Speak up," Chiwawa towered over him, "or I'll play a tune on them busted arms with this gun barrel like I would on a

guitar. Is this the child you took from that Blue River ranch nine years ago?"

"Yes, yes," Murch whined. "Sure, I took good care of her, Chiwawa."

"This is Len Cole's girl?" Chiwawa went on in that voice that was a threat and sorrowful in the same breath.

"Yeah," Murch sniffled.

"Get back to your den, you coyote," Chiwawa snarled.

HE TURNED to look at the girl again, breathing hard, as Murch retreated, as old Kate scuttled into the darkest corner of the kitchen. Gradually his face became impassive.

"I think I'll ship you outa here," he said to Lily at last. "Any girl as good-lookin' as you are is bound to be a disturbin' element in a crowd of men. That's all. Go back to your work."

"Oh, wait a minute," he stopped her. "If you don't recall your last name, maybe you recollect where you come from an' what happened before—before you left there."

Lily looked at him with the same half-fearful defiance Stan had seen always in her attitude toward Murch Davis.

"What I remember, I keep to myself," she said. "You seem to know. Maybe you were there."

"No," Chiwawa shook his head. "I might have been but I wasn't. That's all, Lily."

He sat down on a bunk. He brooded over two successive cigarettes. He watched through a window the Davis men vanish into the gap that led to the Colonnade. Finally he turned to Stan.

"You've been around here several days. How does this girl stand generally in this layout?"

Stan told him truthfully so far as he knew. Chiwawa's brows knitted when Stan spoke of the girl's loathing for Murch Davis, and what she feared Murch had in store for her.

"Murch was savin' her up for himself," he finished.

Chiwawa's eyes held a frosty gleam.

"If I fix it for you to make a getaway," he said, "will you promise to deliver her safe an' sound to people I'll name?"

It was as if the man had some uncanny power of divination,



Stan thought. He had already promised to do that—and she had sealed their bargain with a kiss that he could still feel on his lips.

"I promise that,"

he said. And added, "I meant to get her outa here anyhow."

Chiwawa Jones smiled.

"It's a darn shame," he drawled, "that you ain't stayin' to see this show of ours through. You're a mighty enterprisin' young man!"

CHAPTER XII

NIGHT'S KINDLY CLOAK

CHIWAWA JONES abolished the all-night guard.

"What the hell!" he said contemptuously, that evening. "Who's goin' to come in on us in our sleep? Our cattle an' horses graze in the open. Anybody can look down on this ranch from the timber. Because Murch was scared of what might sneak up in the dark, should we be? Any of you that can't sleep well for fear somebody comes prowlin' around is free to stand guard in the tower. But it is not compulsory. What Murch was scared of has happened," he laughed. "I'm what happened. Did your night guard keep me out? The only night work we are goin' to find necessary is when we come down on Sam Acorn like a bunch of war-whoops."

The night watch never had been popular, and no one gainsaid Chiwawa. And he talked and laughed among them as if he had no fear of any man. Where Murch went warily with a hired bodyguard Chiwawa seemed content to rely on himself. So they lay down to sleep and when breakfast had been finished Chiwawa ordered

Stan to ride with Bat Kells for a look down the south slope of the Viaducts. When they went to the stable to saddle up, Chiwawa took advantage of the others being beyond earshot to mutter, "I will try to fix it for tonight. It is dark till late. Then there's a bright moon. I will give you instructions later in the day, after I have a talk with that girl."

Stan followed Bat Kells from a rosy sunrise until well past noon. Bat was a frozen-faced, silent man. He did not utter a dozen sentences all day. Once he mentioned Chiwawa Jones.

"You an' Chiwawa are kin, ain't you, kid?" he asked abruptly.

"What of it?" Stan adopted the same tone.

"Oh, nothin'," Bat said. "I was just wonderin' why he let you come in single-handed an' make a bluff at stakin' Roman Wells, when he meant to put old Murch away an' take the play himself? We mighta beefed you."

"Maybe Chiwawa reckoned I was able to protect myself," Stan said prudently. The man was fishing. Something troubled him—the same thing Flint had expressed, a doubt of Chiwawa's real intention, of his tactics.

"That's so," Bat agreed. "Chiwawa always reckoned *he* could. I guess you're chips off the same block. Chiwawa never feared nothin' nor no man. He used to be a good man to string with."

But what he meant by that Bat refused to state. To Stan's "Why?" he shrugged his shoulders and took to staring at the landscape. A landscape which revealed nothing on the undulating roll of the great plains as far as they could see with field-glasses. At least nothing until they halted on a peak far south in the Viaducts, overlooking a thousand square miles of grass-land. Then they descried two tiny blobs of haze against the blue horizon line, and Stan knew that trail herds lifted that dust. So did Bat.

"They're two days' drive south, yet," he said. "Wonder is that Sam Acorn?"

Somebody'll have to ride up on 'em tomorrow an' look their brand over close."

STAN and Bat pulled in to the new ranch at Roman Wells. Chiwawa was there, helping put the last course of poles on a high corral. The house was roofed with poles and sod, the walls chinked tight. It needed only a hewn pine floor, and filling for empty door and window spaces.

"This is where the home ranch shoulda been from the beginning," Chiwawa said to Bat Kells.

"So some of us thought," Bat nodded. "But Murch reckoned the little Basin more outa sight."

"From now on, we don't have to hide," Chiwawa declared. "Unless Sam Acorn puts us on the run."

At which Bat grunted disdain, and Spots Derwent on the other end of the pole let his wide mouth open in an amused grin.

Their day ended. They hooked up their teams, mounted their saddle horses and moved off across the Basin floor, like any body of honest toilers wending homeward at the close of day: And as they moved across the Colonnade gradually Stan and Chiwawa Jones segregated themselves, so that they rode with the wagon on their rear and a group of horsemen ahead.

"I have definitely fixed it for tonight," Chiwawa said in an undertone. "I had a talk with Lily this mornin'. Durin' the evenin' I will go to the stable, saddle two horses an' tie them back of the stable to the corral. There will be a little grub in the saddle pockets. I will give you my rifle an' some ammunition. When I have done this I will give you an' Lily Cole the high sign. She has her own way of gettin' out. You will have to act careless an' saunter out of the house. Once you're at the stable let nobody stop you. Don't pay no heed to anything you don't *sabe*. Mount an' ride."

"I won't need no urg'in'," Stan said. And after a moment, diffidently, "Thanks a heap."

Chiwawa Jones lifted his eyebrows.

"The favor is all mine," he said coldly. "With your Sunday school notions you don't belong here."

That silenced Stan.

When he dismounted at the stable he hung his saddle on a peg by the stall his roan occupied. The beast he had ridden he turned into the pasture. From then until supper was over, until the sun dipped behind the pine-darkened hills he sat outwardly calm, inwardly chafing with impatience and expectation.

Darkness closed in on the ranch. Near midnight there would be a bright moon. But until then, though stars dotted the canopy above, that mountain-ringed basin was a shadowy pit.

Old Kate and Lily Cole finished their kitchen work. By an oil lamp the two sat knitting. Chiwawa Jones roosted on his bunk. The evening seemed to drag.

Now, when it seemed to Stan that he had waited through uncounted hours, Chiwawa rose, yawned, walked outside. He was gone ten or fifteen minutes. Bat Kells and Flint Starley were deep in a crib game. Another group played penny ante. Two or three were stretched on their bunks. The tension of old Murch's continual example of wariness had relaxed. They hardly noticed Chiwawa's absence. When he came back he stood a minute looking over the shoulders of the poker players. He sat down on his bunk. It was after ten o'clock. After a time Chiwawa said:

"You *hombres* expect to play poker all night an' swing a axe all day? Lights out in ten minutes, brothers. We need our beauty sleep."

Lily Cole laid her knitting on the kitchen table, rose, walked into the bedroom she shared with old Kate. Stan got off his bunk, sauntered out the door.

When his feet touched the brown earth he ran. Behind him shadows broke the yellow square of the doorway. Voices murmured. Other men were stepping out for a breath of air, to look at the sky, before turning in. Stan flitted around the stable corner, went more softly, straining

his eyes for the dim bulk of saddled horses.

They were there. Lily Cole had them untied. She thrust the reins of one into Stan's hand. The stirrup creaked as she swung up herself.

"Hurry," she whispered.

But something had engaged Stan's attention. A third horse with a saddle on his back was tied by a *macarta* to the corral. With a rifle under one stirrup leather, too. Chiwawa's words recurred to him: "Pay no heed to what you don't *sabe*. Mount an' ride."

Mount and ride he did, on the instant, moving away from the stable at a walk, keeping the dim bulk of stable and corrals between him and the house until they were three hundred yards away. It was all clear. The pole pasture lay to the north. Then they broke into a lope. They were half a mile away in three minutes more, wrapped in darkness, with the Pole Star and the Dipper above to give direction. A thrill of exultation shot through Stan Rickard. They were clear. Lily Cole galloped beside him. Silence back where lighted windows made yellow dots in the soft black. Stan could have lifted a defiant whoop in that first uplift of spirit. Then he grew calmer.

"I wonder why that other horse was saddled there?" he spoke for the first time.

"He told me to take the two nearest the stable," Lily said. "I was to get there first. I did too."

"I know," Stan said. "I can't help wonderin', though. Seems funny. Well, they don't appear to have missed us. She's quiet as the grave back there."

That funereal stillness was suddenly broken. A shot, then another, a few seconds of silence followed by a fusillade. Red and orange rosettes gleamed here and there. The hills flung back the echoes of that burst of firing.

Stan gave the roan horse his head, heading for the notch that opened into Colonnade Basin. Lily Cole's mount matched strides with the roan, eating up distance, hoofs lifting a muffled beat on grassy turf.

CHAPTER XIII

HOLD THE FORT!

SOUNDS like hell to pay in the Robbers' Roost," Stan said to Lily. "They aren't shootin' at us, either. Just the same we'll burn the earth till we're far from this sink of iniquity. Scared, Lily?"

"I'm not so easily scared," she answered.

"Not scared of bein' alone on the boundless plains with a outlaw like me?" Stan bantered.

Beside him an amused laugh countered that question.

"All that sudden gun-play back there was mighty curious," Stan commented. "That crowd don't ever bother just makin' a noise with their guns. I wonder what busted loose?"

Neither he nor Lily Cole could answer that. They were more curious than concerned. Stan Rickard was mounted and armed and on his way again. That gave him scope enough to keep his mind busy as they rode through the gloomy cleft that led out to Colonnade Basin and Roman Wells. Chiwawa had suggested that he take to timber as soon as he got out of Little Basin, but Stan had his own notions about the way to go. He remembered the dust of those trail herds in the southern sky.

Near the south end of the gorge they slowed to a walk, mindful to keep their mounts fresh. They were miles on their way with no sound of pursuit. Nevertheless, where the gorge widened between rolling hills and the big moon that shone on the basin was flooding every nook with silver, Stan stopped to listen.

Almost immediately they both heard the low, rapid drum of hoofs. A momentary splatter in the stream that wound like a snake through the narrow sun-baked flats near-by, and that *kliptetty-klop, kliptetty-klop* again. A single horse at a steady lope, back in the gloom behind, where as yet the moonbeams did not shine.

Stan swung aside into a thicket of berry brush. The moon-glow flooded the hollow,

thrusting aside the dark, spilling out of Colonnade Basin into the opening mouth of the gorge. Stan drew his rifle. The hoof-beats neared, slowed. The rider pulled up plain in the moon-glare within twenty feet of that thicket.

It was Chiwawa Jones, once more riding by himself. He held a rifle crosswise before him. His head cocked on one side listening.

"Come right along, boys!" he said aloud, in a tone freighted with contempt and defiance. "It's my night to howl."

He turned his head from side to side. A dark smear showed on one cheek, plain in the silver brightness that approached the light of day. Then he turned his horse south and loped on. Stan booted his rifle again. They watched Chiwawa Jones clear the hollow. Then Stan followed.

"We can swing off to the right presently," he told Lily. "Evidently there has been a mutiny on board ship. I expect that bunch is mounted an' ridin', too."

The bunch was. Well into the open of Colonnade Basin, with Chiwawa a black bobbing dot ahead a group of other black dots began to bob behind.

"Hell," Stan growled. "If we can see them they can see us. We got to run for it now. We got to make the timber on the other side of the Basin."

The group of riders spread into a line abreast, well apart. Shadows inky black on the ripe grass raced with them. Stan made a pace that his horse could hold indefinitely, and that line drew up inch by inch. Stan opened up a little. And still they seemed to gain.

"We daren't risk a chase clear across the Basin," he said at last, suddenly aware of pressing danger. "We got to make that house at Roman Wells. If a horse was to fall, they'd be on top of us. We can stand 'em off behind log walls. By the Lord, Chiwawa is headed for there, too. They're after him as well as us."

Chiwawa Jones was indeed pointing straight for Roman Wells. The house stood out bold, a yellow shining castle on a

low hillock. Half of that pursuing group rode like hunters to hounds on Chiwawa's trail, the other half had swerved to follow Stan and Lily Cole.

Stan swerved back to head for that shelter. He lifted a shrill whoop of angry defiance. He loosed a bullet from his rifle and drew a burst of fire in reply, for now less than six hundred yards separated their flying horses and those human hounds.

THEY were holding their own with Murch Davis's buzzing hornets, and they drew up on Chiwawa Jones. Either he waited or his horse was slowing down. It crossed Stan's mind that Chiwawa Jones might take them for enemies and fire. The range was getting short. He stood in his stirrups and yelled at the top of his voice.

"Save your wind," Chiwawa called back. "I ain't blind."

They came up on him rapidly. When they were within thirty yards Chiwawa's horse put foot in a badger-hole and went down as if shot.

"Keep on to the house," Stan bawled at Lily.

He didn't think. He didn't stop to reason. He acted blindly on instinct as



does a swimmer cast unexpectedly into deep water. He plowed the roan to a standstill beside Chiwawa who was scrambling to his feet. Supple as a willow wand he leaned from his saddle and reached one hand to Chiwawa.

"Up behind," Stan commanded. "Damn it, quick!"

Chiwawa cast one look at his mount, still prone, dazed by the fall. Then he caught a saddle-string with the hand that grasped a rifle still and leaped, landing be-

hind Stan astride the roan. The beast was in full stride before Chiwawa got straightened and bullets were whistling past them. The silver night was split with sharp snapping sounds and bright flashes.

But the house on the knoll loomed near. Lily Cole was already dismounted at the door. She looked at them charging up and yanking on the reins drew her horse inside.

Stan drove the roan at the doorway. He knew what this horse of his would and would not do.

"Duck your head, Chiwawa," said he and bending over the saddle horn went through that narrow space in full stride, and the roan plowed with his forefeet to a stop on the earth floor inside.

Lily Cole had already gone to a window facing north. She had a pistol in her hand which she raised, steadied and fired at the oncoming riders.

"Save your ca'tridges, Lily," Chiwawa Jones called to her. "I'll watch the door, kid, you take a window. By God, I hope they try to rush us! I wouldn't ask nothin' better."

CHIWAWA'S wish was not to be granted. Cunning went hand in hand with the courage of those desperadoes. They dropped from their saddles prone in the grass and began to stalk, Indian fashion, the barricade that sheltered their prey. The rank growth gave them cover. Up to the very foot of the knoll it stood stirrup-high. Stealthy and silent. Firing no shot, lifting no voice. For twenty minutes, yes, for half an hour Roman Wells lay as still in the moonlight as it had lain through the centuries. The roan and the horse Lily had ridden stood in a corner and rattled the bits in their mouths. There was no other sound.

Until Stan fired at a tuft of grass that wavered. From half a dozen points around the very foot of the knoll the outlaws fired then at the flash of his gun. Chiwawa loosed a single shot. Someone yelled.

"First blood," he said cheerfully. "Don't waste no shells shootin' blind, you two. I

had two hundred rounds on that cayuse of mine that went down."

"Your musket a .44 Winchester?" Stan asked.

"Yeah."

"I got four extra boxes in my left saddle pocket," Stan said. "Besides a belt full."

He heard Chiwawa's grunt of satisfaction. From the west side a fusillade began. Bullets went *pluck—pluck* in timber. They passed through the window and door spaces to smack in the log wall. A horse snorted, gave a little squeal. But in the main the stout logs stopped the slugs, since jacketed bullets and nitro-powder were yet in the womb of time.

Stan peered over the low window ledge into the glow that silvered the grassland, and made the Viaduct peaks stand like etchings in black and white. He curled his lip at this senseless waste of powder. But he soon learned the method in that seeming folly. He heard a sibilant "look out," from Chiwawa.

THERE were three of them. There were five openings in the four walls, well known to those who had labored at those walls with axe and saw. A gun belched right in the open space of one undefended square. Lily Cole cried out. Stan whirled. Chiwawa was firing at that window. And behind Chiwawa Jones as Stan's gaze flashed around the dark interior a head lifted low in the doorway.

Stan's finger crooked on the trigger. The dark shadow rose suddenly and fell across the threshold. Beyond a window to which Chiwawa Jones suddenly leaped and thrust his arm through to fire a voice uttered a sharp cry of pain. Stan grasped Lily Cole by the arm and pulled her flat on the floor. If they were to be rushed that was the place to shoot from. He could not see Chiwawa but he guessed the old fox lay flat, listening, waiting. And with that the guns ceased to talk. A voice out in the fringe of service brush left standing called: "Hey, Poppun!"

"Come an' get him!" Chiwawa Jones

shouted back. "He lays across the door-sill. Come on in, boys. The water's fine."

No one answered that. For a long time no stir could be seen or heard. Then the distant saddle horses, standing patiently on the reins, began to draw together. Stan aimed carefully and fired at them. From the doorway Chiwawa Jones, erect now, watched.

"Not much use, kid," said he. "It's three hundred yards an' the moonlight is tricky. They're drawin' off—for the time bein'. Either of you get nicked?"

"Uh-uh," Stan grunted. Blood trickled stickily down his face where a splinter had cut his scalp. But he didn't count that a wound. Lily was unhurt. He had asked her.

"They've backed off—barrin' this gent in the doorway," Stan said.

"You stopped him neat," Chiwawa commented, bending down to look at the dead man. "I had to get to that window. Needed eyes both sides of my head. I pinked that other *hombre* but not fatal. We played in luck, kid."

"Keep down," Stan warned. "Maybe there's one or two layin' for us close by."

"No," Chiwawa said. "They're all out on the flat. I counted 'em."

"There's only eight out there," Stan said. "I counted 'em, too. If they all come after us there should be nine."

"No," Chiwawa corrected. "Only eight. I dropped Bat Kells before I left. He was—next to Flint—the most poisonous of the lot. So they're all out there. This here is Poppun, all right. You drilled him right in the wishbone. We keep whittlin' away an' by 'n' by we'll have this gang down to our size. Damn your soul, Stan, why didn't you take to the timber like I told you? You wouldn't 'a' been mixed up in this then."

Chiwawa's tone sounded distinctly querulous.

"Since when," Stan asked, "do I have to do what you tell me?"

"You'd save me a heap of worry if you would," Chiwawa answered. "But I reckon that's too much to expect of anybody that

goes around lookin' for trouble the way you do."

He chuckled. He stood over Popgun Smith and relieved that unlamented warrior of gun and ammunition belt, and thrust the body aside. He stood staring.

"I thought so," said he at last. "They are goin' to bottle us up whilst they figure the next move."

STAN and Lily saw what Chiwawa meant. Three men separated from the group, rode in a half circle well beyond rifle-shot and at three different quarters each dismounted and sat down. Thus a rifleman was posted on three corners of a triangle. No one could leave Roman Wells without being exposed to their fire. The rest pointed north, riding away till they faded in that silver glow.

"Anyway," Stan said, "if we can't move out they can't move in. So while the gettin' is good I will bring some water."

In one corner stood a pail and dipper used by the builders. Stan brought it full from the nearest spring.

"We have a little grub," said he. "A man can fight a long time on just water. Say, we better put these horses out in the corral. One of 'em near tromped me when the lead was flyin' so free."

The horse Lily rode had been shot through a leg. Stan took the saddle off and turned the beast loose, to limp away. He took the roan out and tied him in what cover had been left by slashing axes.

"One horse an' three people," he observed when he came back. "We couldn't leave here if we were free to go. I wish I knew if that was a Boldt herd."

"I doubt it," Chiwawa said. "Far more likely to be a Acorn herd."

He squatted in the doorway, rolling a smoke.

"We can stand 'em off in daylight, easy," he said. "Come dark tomorrow night, they'll work in on us again. Oh, well. Darn it, kid, I wish you'd kept goin', paid no attention to me. My own fault I picked a slow horse. Pure accident he steps in a

hole. You shouldn't 'a' been there at all."

"What's your game, Chiwawa?" Stan asked slowly. "I don't know what to make of you. I—I— First you're on one side of the fence, then the other. You stepped right into the middle of that gang an' they ate outa your hand like you was the kingpin of them all. You sit down with 'em an' plan a big steal. You told me in the Rawhides you might see me in the Viaducts. You turn up all right. You take command of a bunch of outlaws. Now you're fightin' your own crowd."

"No, sir," Chiwawa laughed. "Never was *my* crowd. I made 'em think so, for a spell, long enough to enable me to do somethin' I wanted to do, an' whittle down one or two of the toughest branches on that crooked tree. It's a long story, kid. I tried to get you outa there before hell began to pop. Them wolves will show their teeth to the last gasp. I thought maybe I could keep 'em in check until—well, it seems I miscalculated a trifle. I still think the best bet is for you an' Lily to get away, tomorrow night on that roan horse, under cover of the first dark."

"Don't be a damn fool," Stan said. "You couldn't hold this place alone. No one man could. An' I'm more interested in holdin' it than you are. Murch said possession was nine points of the law. Well, we're in possession. Maybe a Boldt herd will string in through the south gap at day-break."

"No," Chiwawa said positively. "Sam Acorn's herd will arrive here first, unless they been delayed. An' I don't need to remind you that Sam Acorn would clean us two just as eager as that Davis bunch."

"Nobody has cleaned us yet," Stan replied cheerfully. "An' if you're on our side legitimate we'll take some cleanin'."

CHIWAWA laughed. "Kid," said he, "I been on your side all the time, only I didn't dare tell you so. You ain't like me—you have not yet reached years of discretion."

Chiwawa laughed, he kept on laughing,

as if he found something highly amusing. And Stan said nothing—but he felt better. He could dimly see reasons for Chiwawa playing a part, but he was satisfied to let the man explain himself in due season.

"You scared, Lily?" Chiwawa asked the girl. The moonlight fell on her oval face. She smiled.

"Not since you crippled that old reptile," she said. "And I wasn't so much scared of him as I hated him. He shot my daddy."

"Oh, you do remember that, do you?" Chiwawa said quickly. "Do you remember how it was done, so you could swear to it in court?"

"Yes," she said with a shudder. "I was little, but I can see it yet. He wanted to kill me, too, because I saw. But the men wouldn't let him."

"What men?" Chiwawa asked.

"Flint an' Kay Connel, an' Bat an' Spots," she said. "And some others. But they're gone—the others."

"So he took you away an' turned you over to old Kate, eh?" Chiwawa murmured. "Well, that's one less black mark against them four."

"How did you know," Lily asked. "Were you a friend of my dad's?"

"Yes," Chiwawa said slowly. "I was his friend."

"Funny," he broke out in a minute, "I didn't suspect Murch of that deviltry. Not till I had a good look at you. Not till I seen that Three Diamond brand. You're the double of your mother, youngster. I knowed it the minute I laid eyes on you. Lord, I'd 'a' cleaned Murch Davis long ago, if I'd known. So he shot Len Cole himself. Well, old Kate'll tell her story. An' Murch will get what he has long deserved."

"Why didn't you finish him?" Stan cut in. He had listened, piecing things together. "Why did you just put a slug through each arm?"

"Because I was savin' Murch for a hangman's rope," Chiwawa answered. "To be shot is too clean an' quick a finish for such

as him. "I was a friend of his once, too," Chiwawa finished sadly. "I fought beside him all through a bloody ruction, admirin' him. Gosh, when some men go bad, they go plumb bad."

CHIWAWA sat in deep thought for a time. Then he laughed softly.

"The joke's on Murch, though," said he. "He thought I'd gone bad too."

"I had you guessin' for awhile, didn't I, kid?" he went on. "You'd 'a' took a shot at me yourself if the sign had been right, wouldn't you?"

"You missed your callin'," Stan said. "You shoulda been on the stage. Though I don't know what your real callin' is yet."

"I'll tell you this, son," Chiwawa leaned over to tap Stan lightly on the knee. "I started out in life a rip-snortin' young cowpunch like yourself. I made mistakes—plenty. But I mended my ways before it was too late. For the last seven years I have been a United States Marshal in Wyoming territory. That ought to explain some things to you. Any part of the U. S. A. is a marshal's jurisdiction—if Federal law is involved. So Murch Davis was under the wrong impression when he told you you come of an outlaw breed. You come of a restless an' ambitious breed. Rickards have fought plenty, but never murdered or stole. When you balk at them things you're runnin' true to form."

He fell silent again, and Stan respected that silence.

"Kinda queer," Chiwawa took up the thread again. "Here we are, you 'n' me an' Len Cole's girl gathered together after all these years. Holed up in a shack tryin' to stand off a pack of wolves. We're in a tight corner, Stan. I slipped up on my calculations. There is a posse of U. S. deputy marshals layin' in the pines south of the Viaducts right now. I was to join them after I'd got you clear. An' then, if my little visit verified some of our suspicions we intended to wind up the operations of this Davis crowd. But I didn't quite cut the mustard."

"If you'd told me where you were at, yesterday——" Stan began.

"I wanted you out of it altogether," Chiwawa said stubbornly. "I was responsible indirectly for you bein' here. It was a hint of mine that set Henry Boldt honin' to own Roman Wells while he could pick it up for the askin'. How was I to know he'd be such a damn fool as to send you alone up here to grab the Wells under that scrip? I thought he knew enough about the Viaducts to send a crew. Murch would never have fought a crew of Texas riders. No, I got enough to carry without your blood on my head. There was Sam Acorn to be dealt with as well as this



crowd. It wasn't your fight. An' it has been my fight for years. Acorn's as bad as they are. I put three bullets into Sam once in a fair fight, an' he lives to keep that tale to hisself. You killed his son, also in a fair fight, because he tried to walk on you—like Acorns do to anyone that'll let 'em. It's my business to deal with outlaws. I didn't want you mixed up in no scrap of this kind. Can't you *sabe*?"

"Yeah, I *sabe* that," Stan said. A wistful note in Chiwawa's voice had stirred him deeply. On the other side Lily Cole's fingers clasped over his hand. For the first time in his life Stan Rickard felt himself surrounded by unselfish affection. A lump rose in his throat. He reached out his free hand to Chiwawa.

"Shake, old scout," he muttered. "I *sabe* your slant. But I'm in it up to my neck, an' I wouldn't have it different. Seems like you might admit I'm able to make a fair stagger at holdin' up my end in these parlor games they play in the Viaducts."

Chiwawa's fingers closed till Stan's hand tingled. Chiwawa laughed deep in his throat.

"You're a good sport, kid," said he. "Your folks ought to be proud of you."

CHAPTER XIV

TO THE BITTER END

THEY took stock of the food in Stan's saddle pockets, Lily had stolen away with enough, by rationing, to last two or three days.

"We can hold out two or three more, long as we have water," Stan declared. "We have lots of cartridges. Not so bad, Chiwawa. If it wasn't for them three coyotes sittin' out there I could lay down an' go to sleep quite cheerful."

"Lay down an' sleep anyhow," Chiwawa advised. "You an' Lily. I'll stand guard till daylight, then take a nap. We'll need to be wide awake come dark tomorrow night."

"Don't you reckon Murch's crowd'll call it off pretty soon," Stan suggested. "They can't be such hogs for punishment."

Chiwawa shook his head.

"They'll never let up while they got us cornered," he said positively. "They were leery of me from the start. But they were also afraid of me. I crippled Murch an' fooled the rest of 'em with the idea that I was assumin' leadership for my own benefit. That was a play they could *sabe*. But they know now, where I stand. They know that if we get away alive we'll come back with men enough to clean 'em up. So they'll get us if they can. Murch didn't have no soft babies in his gang. They'll fight to hold what they got. If they knew there was a posse ready to swoop down on 'em they'd be whangin' at us right now, instead of layin' back to figure how they can smoke us out without too much trouble."

"Well, I'm not goin' to let that worry me right now," Stan said. "I am sleepy. Now I lay me down to sleep, while o'er the grass the outlaws creep."

Himself he crept around outside and got a double armful of grass for the roan horse tied in the brush, another to make a mattress for Lily. He spread a saddle blanket over her and lay down at arm's length. Lying drowsy, he felt a hand reach out, find his own and squeeze it gently.

"Can you sleep, Stan?" she whispered.

"Sure. Can you?"

"Yes. Funny. I feel quite safe here."

"You are safe," he assured her.

"Nighty-night an' go to sleep."

THE sun on his face wakened him. Chiwawa Jones sat by a window scanning the Basin with Stan's field-glasses.

"They have a wagon camped by the meadow. They've relieved the night guard. Otherwise all is quiet along the Potomac. They won't likely make any move till dark," Chiwawa told him.

Nor did they. The sun sailed high and hot. The old immemorial hush filled the Colonnade. Lily Cole and Stan watched their besiegers. Chiwawa Jones slept till noon, then joined them at their vigil. Noon passed. The sun dipped slowly from its zenith toward the peaks on the west.

"A waitin' game is hell," Chiwawa Jones said, and Stan nodded. Lily Cole, staring out a south window cried, "Look!"

From the deep notch that split the Viaducts on the south a black mass was pouring into the Basin. Dust lifted in a haze, ground up by innumerable hoofs.

"Trail herd," Stan said. "Now is it Boldt or is it Acorn?"

"We better pray it ain't Sam Acorn," Chiwawa murmured.

"Reckon he'd throw in with these outlaws?" Stan conjectured. "What's the gain to him? They are fightin' for Roman Wells for themselves."

"Sam Acorn would cheerfully give Roman Wells for either of us," Chiwawa said. "With us eliminated an' riders from two or three trail herds at his back he could snap his fingers at the Davis bunch,

an' take Roman Wells anyhow. He's a fox."

Four riders from the wagon camped on the flat went bobbing away south, straight for that dark mass of moving cattle. An hour rolled off the scroll of time. Two. Three. The sun became a fiery red ball resting on the tip of the westward hills. Riders came bobbing back in a long row. Stan counted them—fourteen men. Chiwawa smiled sardonically.

"Reinforcements," he muttered. "They'll give us a run for our money, tonight, kid. Them ain't Boldt men. Boldt riders wouldn't parley with outlaws."

"Unless Acorn drove his cattle harder than common," Stan said, "the Boldt outfits can't be far behind. They was only a day or two apart in southern Wyoming. The Bar B Bar might roll in any hour."

"An' there is a posse layin' south of the Viaducts waitin' for me to show up," Chiwawa grumbled. "But these birds are here."

"Well, we'll hold out faithful to the end," Stan said lightly. "They'll waste lots of lead on this barricade."

"We got no choice," Chiwawa answered. "We got to hold out or die. There'll be a parcel of new faces in hell before they do clean us out. Ha! Look."

The group of horsemen had drawn up eight hundred yards away. Now one detached himself and rode straight for the log house on the hillock. From one outstretched hand he waved a white cloth.

"Flag of truce," Chiwawa grinned. "We can discount any proposition they make. They ever get us outside they'll kill us like they would three rattlesnakes. Let me do the talkin'."

Stan nodded agreement.

"Love of Pete!" Chiwawa grunted as the flag-bearer drew near. "If it ain't the old he-coon himself!"

And Stan saw that it was indeed Sam Acorn himself. He rode boldly up to the house. His black beard lay in a square on his shirt front. He sat in his saddle like a square pillar, a big, dark man of

sixty who feared nothing and stopped at nothing his crafty acquisitive nature urged him to dare or take. Stan had ridden in the Acorn roundup once. He had killed this man's arrogant son. Acorn knew him. Chiwawa had poured bullets into the man's body once. What could they hope for from him and his flag of truce? The simple fact that he and his men rode with the Davis men told its own tale. They looked at him from within the doorway, guns in their hands. He sat on his horse, staring at them impassively.

"Did you reckon you had to come personal to make sure who it was Murch Davis's crowd finds so hard a nut to crack?" Chiwawa spoke first.

"I aim to have me a ranch on this location," Sam Acorn said. "I don't care nothin' about your dispute with this other outfit. I will give you safe escort south of the Viaducts if you will holster your guns an' walk out."

"Now that's mighty generous of you when there's so many pines handy," Chiwawa said with a short laugh. "No man ever could trust you, Sam, except you swore to do him an injury. You always lived up to them promises. Suppose we don't choose to walk out under your escort?"

"Then we'll smoke you out," Acorn said calmly.

"Go back to them coyotes that follow you," Chiwawa defied. "Tell 'em we'll take some smokin'. You know, Acorn, if I was the kind of man you are, I'd drop you off your horse right now. You did that once to a Slater man on the Pecos. Someday I will have to kill you. Unfortunately I have to do it like a gentleman."

"Like that misbegotten pup killed my son," Sam Acorn glared, and thrust a forefinger at Stan. For a moment his dark eyes glowed. Then he seemed to shake off his anger with a twist of his shaggy head. "I don't deny it would be a pleasure to string you both to a handy pine. But I am willin' to forego that. I want peace-

ful possession of Roman Wells before some other cow outfit lights on it."

"A cow outfit has already lit on it," Stan snarled at him. "I claimed an' staked this spot for Henry Boldt of Texas with U. S. scrip. That holds good in law. As far as killin' your son is concerned, you know as well as I do that one man undertakes to walk rough-shod over another at his own risk—but if you hanker for revenge ride off twenty yards an' dismount. I'll walk out to meet you. You got a gun on your belt."

Sam Acorn's eyes glittered again for a second. But he shook his head.

"I ain't so young as I used to be," he said coldly. "An' they tell me you are sudden death with a six-shooter. I don't want to fight you. That wouldn't bring my boy back to life. I'm willin' to overlook what I owe both of you. We'll wipe you out before mornin' anyway. I'm willin' to save a little blood-spillin' by lettin' you go—if you go right now."

"Your word was never worth a damn," Chiwawa said bluntly. "Only a sucker would put his foot in your trap. Even if by some miracle you inclined to leave us alone after we surrendered you couldn't hold that Davis bunch. We have killed an' crippled three or four of 'em. We know too much. They couldn't let us walk off scot-free. Nor would you. You don't get no easy victims outa here, Sam Acorn. If you take us you'll know you've been to a fight."

"An' when the fightin's over," Stan put in, "you will still have to reckon with the law."

"Law!" Acorn snorted. "Law here—five hundred miles from nowhere. They ain't no law here to bother me."

"The law is already here," Stan persisted, disregarding Chiwawa's frown. "You better know it, Acorn. This man is a United States marshal. Dead or alive the weight of Federal law is behind him to bear on them that buck Federal law or resist its officers. You can put that in your pipe an' smoke it. There is even

now a posse of Federal officers ridin' to this basin. You'll hold Roman Wells about as long as a snowball would last in hell!"

"You a Federal officer?" Acorn sneered. "Federal hell! You been a gunfighter an' a gambler. You may have kept on the right side of the law—but you ain't the law, Chiwawa Jones."

"Would you like to see my papers?" Chiwawa said softly. "I didn't think of statin' what happens to be a fact. Do you reckon you're big enough to buck Uncle Sam?"

"I'm from Missouri," Acorn answered sullenly. "Show me your papers."

Chiwawa Jones laid aside his rifle. From inside his shirt he took a leather wallet, and from that a formal-looking document stamped with a great seal.

Sam Acorn studied that sheet, folded it slowly and handed it back. His lips parted in a snarling grimace. He mumbled something that sounded like an oath, swung his horse, drove spurs home with a force that made the beast leap like a startled deer. He crashed through the berry brush and tore across the flat to where his men waited.

"By gum," Chiwawa Jones said thoughtfully, "you jarred him to his foundations, Stan. Now I didn't think of puttin' it to him like that. Will he reckon it's worth while to take a chance to satisfy a personal grudge? I wonder. You sure made him think."

"Acorn may be an outlaw at heart," Stan said. "He has made his own law wherever he could make it stick. But as a cattleman he can hardly afford to stage a fight to a finish with a Federal officer over a piece of land already legally claimed. He knows now that after us he still has Colonel Henry Boldt to reckon with—an' the Colonel is just about as big a man as Sam Acorn. He'll do some thinkin' before he goes any farther."

"It looks to me like he's done his thinkin'," Chiwawa's gaze was on that bunch of riders sitting where the dark shadow

of the hills swept across the Basin floor, driving the sun-gold off the ripe grass, "an' is on his way."

STAN took up his field-glasses. Sam Acorn rode south at the head of his cowboys. They went at a sharp trot toward that distant trail herd. The four Davis men sat alternately watching him go and looking at the house on the hill by Roman Wells. Stan put down the glasses with a smile. Under their magnifying power he could see the wry expression on the outlaws' faces, anger and disappointment. One lifted his fist and shook it at those stout log walls. Then they rode away to the wagon camped by the meadow stream. Stan told Chiwawa about that futile gesture.

"They ain't scared of Federal or any other kind of law," Chiwawa declared. "They've thumbed their noses at all law so long it don't mean nothin' to them. So we better fill the water bucket an' give the horse an armful of hay while we have the chance. Come dark we'll probably



do a land office business. I hope the boys come early so nobody gets tramped to death in the rush."

They sat with guns handy watching darkness creep over the land. When the last gleam faded out of the sky a campfire lifted its glow on the flat, flickering and waving like a red tongue, dying to a ruby spot, until at last it died outright.

Each at his post began to grow tense, staring to penetrate that gloom, in which the enemy might crawl unseen to the very walls that sheltered them.

And that is what the enemy succeeded

in doing. Their first warning was a shot that cracked almost in the open doorway where Chiwawa kept guard. With that flash and report bullets hailed in through every opening, smacking into the pine logs.

The flash of a black powder gun in darkness is a brilliant rosette, beautiful and deadly. All about them these red and orange flowers of death bloomed for an instant, faded and bloomed again.

CHAPTER XV

A SPRUNG TRAP

CHIWAWA and Stan and Lily had discussed the possible modes of attack and defense from every angle. They had anticipated just what occurred.

So now they lay flat on the earth floor under that spray of lead. The house topped a rise. Except a man worked to a door or window and got his hand inside, the angle of fire must be such that bullets entering ranged up instead of down. The window and door openings gave light enough to limn any body thrust therein. So they lay, Chiwawa by the door, Stan by one window and Lily by another, and they watched those openings. If a bullet punched through the foundation logs that was the fortune of war. What they had to guard against was even a single gunman getting inside.

Now and then one or another lifted a hand to a sill and flung a shot at random. Each time the outside fire concentrated on that spot. But no man of the attackers was foolhardy enough to rush in.

Not for at least twenty minutes of desultory firing after that first volley. Then something loomed in the opening above Stan. A shot blazed so close that grains of powder stung his face. But his own gun answered and that dim bulk fell back with a thud, a cry that turned to groaning.

"Good shot," Chiwawa yelled across the room. "Little by little we whittle 'em down."

On Lily Cole's side something scuffed against the outside wall, [The girl rose,

thrust her gun barrel out and fired twice. She screamed a defiance like the squeal of an angry leopard as she settled down again. Chiwawa Jones peering over the threshold fired at something he saw move. Very distinctly and very near a voice uttered a blasphemy, a voice eloquent of pain.

"Come on, boys. Come on, boys, you're pretty slow — pretty slow!" Chiwawa taunted.

Half a dozen guns answered him. And then silence. Out there in the dark someone called, "Oh, Flint." Starley answered. Both very near. Other voices called back and forth. They receded, drawing farther and farther away, complaining to each other, cursing, fading out completely at last.

For half an hour they lay on their guns, listening, waiting, watching for a renewal. Then Chiwawa Jones said, "Looks like they got their bellyful again, an' drew off."

"I wisht that moon was up," Stan answered fretfully. "This dark ain't no comfort."

Chiwawa laughed. His low-voiced chuckle was cut into by a blast of flame in the very doorway he guarded.

Stan had turned as he spoke to Chiwawa. His eyes were on that opening, a framing for three bright stars on a dusky canvas. His gun was ready in his hand. He saw that flash and fired at it as instinctively as a man throws up his arm to ward off a blow. He knew someone had crept in that lull to the door. He understood the strategy of that advertised withdrawal. He crouched, edging up to the door in the stillness that followed those two shots. In a minute or two of listening and reasoning, he decided that if more than one raider had gained close quarters both would have fired when he did. In the hush that wrapped the place now, he thought he could hear heavy breathing outside that doorway. He gained the threshold. Yes, he could hear someone breathe in short, labored gasps. And at that sound he fired twice more.

No answering gun spoke. When he lis-

tened again he could hear nothing but the far, faint yapping of a coyote.

"Chiwawa," said he.

NO ANSWER. He crawled, felt, until his fingers came on warm flesh. Chiwawa was stretched full length, still, limp. Stan's exploring fingers grew wet with warm blood when they reached Chiwawa's face. But his heart beat slow and steady. Yet he must be deeply stung, Stan knew, to drop unconscious.

"Lily?" he whispered, suddenly fearful for her.

"I'm all right," she answered the note in his voice. He moved over beside her.

"That last one got Chiwawa," he told her. "One stayed behind an' sneaked in close. I don't think there's any more of them around right now. Lissen. While it's still dark you slide out, mount the roan, an' head south. Come daylight look for a trail herd. Make sure it's a Boldt herd, Bar B Bar. If you strike no herd keep right on to the river. Follow it to Yellowstone City an' raise an alarm."

"I won't leave you," Lily protested.

"You got to. An' you got to go right now. The moon's comin' up back of the hills."

"I will not," she said flatly. "I will not leave you here alone. If they get us they get us both. I can use a gun and I'm not afraid. We'll beat 'em off."

Her arms closed around him.

"You're a stubborn piece," Stan whispered. "I wish you'd go. That might give us both a chance. All they can do is kill me—but you—"

"All they can do is kill me too," she said. "And they'll have to do that. I never liked a man before, Stan. I'd as soon be dead if you are. But they won't get us, honey. I've got a feelin' they won't."

"Well, it sure doesn't look promisin'," Stan breathed. "Chiwawa was an army in himself. God, I wish I had half a dozen men at my back for the rest of the night! There'd be a different story."

ARED flicker of light began to shine by the outlaws' camp.

"Hot coffee an' fried beef," Stan muttered. "Damn their souls!"

A high faint lucence touched the eastward sky. The tips of the Viaduct began to turn silver. Light spread, spilled into the Basin, dimmed the stars. A fat moon showed its upper segment, swam clear, shone on Roman Wells with its bright radiance. Stan could see the figures of men move, the black blobs that were horses, around that fire by the creek.

He could see too, when he moved warily to the door the body of a man stretched face up on the ground. The body lay in dark shadow, but enough light served to show him a great, square black beard—Sam Acorn! Stan shivered. Father and son. Then he felt a quick surge of justification. They had asked for it—and they had got it. Both of them. What sorrow he felt was for Chiwawa Jones. And as if the surge of pity and regret that swept over Stan Rickard somehow penetrated the borderland that divides the quick and the dead, Chiwawa suddenly said:

"Look out, kid!"

"I'm all right," Stan bent over him. Chiwawa went on mumbling. He touched Stan's hand on his breast and grew quiet.

"Where you hit, Chiwawa?" Stan repeated anxiously. "How do you feel?"

Chiwawa Jones sat up suddenly, with unexpected strength for a wounded man. He made queer chuckling noises.

"We still in the ring?" he asked.

"Sure," Stan said. "They backed away, all right. All but one that laid for us. He got you—but I got him. How bad are you hurt, Chiwawa?"

"I ain't hurt at all," Chiwawa Jones grumbled. "I'm just a clumsy plug. When that gent fired, I throwed myself sideways. I musta throwed myself head first against the log wall, an' knocked myself out. I got hit in the leg earlier in the procedin's, but that don't amount to nothin'."

"Thank the Lord," Stan sighed with relief. "Take a look at the party that snuck up on us so neat."

Chiwawa Jones peered out.

"Hm-m," said he, "that solves one problem, for both of us, kid. Gosh, how he musta hated me. You too, I expect. But it was a fifteen-year feud with me. He give up the idea of takin' Roman Wells, but he couldn't resist comin' back himself to try an' play even for his own personal satisfaction. The old wolf had guts. He took a desperate chance—an' there he lays."

"I see riders comin'," Lily Cole warned them.

FROM the south a row of bobbing dots came straight for Roman Wells, eight riders abreast. Chiwawa Jones snatched at Stan's field-glasses.

"If there is a man ridin' a black an' white paint horse—" said he.

He took one look, dropped the glasses, pounded Stan Rickard on the back.

"Speck's made his own play," he cried joyfully. "Them's our men, kid. Now the hares turn on the hounds!"

Chiwawa turned to look through the glasses at the outlaw camp.

"They haven't seen them come," he announced. "They ain't payin' no attention. See! This little hill with the house on top is right in line. I don't see nobody ridin' to give the alarm."

"We have killed two of them," Stan said. "Probably nicked a couple more. I heard squawks. They will be sittin' figurin' what to try next."

"If they'll just sit figurin' another half hour," Chiwawa replied grimly, "there'll be nothin' more for 'em to figure out."

The horsemen neared. They rode up to the brush and halted. One, mounted on a high-headed black and white horse rode slowly up to the walls of the house, skirted it until he saw the door.

"Hello, the house," he spoke gently. "Anybody here?"

Chiwawa Jones limped out.

"We're all here, Speck," he greeted. "I couldn't make connections. So it's mighty lucky you made a move. Did you hear some shootin' a while back?"

"That's what brought us," the man swung off his calico horse. "You were overdue an' I was gettin' anxious. We moved over the divide last night when that Acorn herd came through. When we heard the guns talk we decided to come along."

"Go tell your men to make no noise, nor light any matches," Chiwawa counseled. "Tell 'em to come in here quiet. What's left of Murch's crowd is camped out on the flat—you can see them around a fire. Oh, take a look at what lays here, Speck."

The man bent over Sam Acorn.

"God's sake," he breathed. "You had it out with him at last."

"He aimed to have it out," Chiwawa said. "But the kid here laid him low. Meet Stan Rickard. Sort of a family gatherin', Speck."

Stan wondered at that remark, while the man addressed as Speck moved away to give orders. Presently he came back with his men, moving soft-footed, keeping in shadow, rifles in their hands and double cartridge belts around their lean hips. Once inside Chiwawa made explanations.

"We have the goods on this bunch," said he. "Murch is crippled, helpless. Bat Kells is dead. The kid here downed Black Bill Spears a week ago. Popgun Smith got his last night. We stopped another one a while ago. Look see who it is, Stan."

"Kay Connel. I looked," Stan told them.

"Five. That leaves seven," Chiwawa went on. "The thing is to take them without gettin' shot up."

LOW-VOICED, intent, the posse discussed strategy. Stan listened, said nothing. He felt suddenly a boy among men. He sat back in the dusky room, Lily Cole's hand imprisoned between his palms. But a phrase stirred him to speech at last.

"If they ever get to that stronghold it'll take dynamite to jar 'em loose."

Stan visualized that dark defile between the Colonnade and Little Basin. At its narrowest two great cottonwoods made a bullet-proof shield. One man behind them could stop a score. He said eagerly:

"Why let 'em get to that ranch? They're still in camp. The moon's bright as day. If we all ride out they'll break for their hangout like a wolf to his den. Suppose _____"

"Go on, kid," Chiwawa encouraged.

"Suppose I mount my horse an' lope toward 'em. One man comin' won't disturb 'em. They don't scare easy. When I come near enough I throw a couple of shots at 'em an' go like hell for the pass. That roan horse of mine can outrun anything they got. They'll take after me,



follow me into that gorge. When I come to the two cottonwoods—you remember them, Chiwawa—I take cover there. I can stop 'em. I know I can. Once they follow me into that canyon, you fellows break across the Basin, an' plug the mouth. We'd have 'em bottled up. Only a fly could climb them walls."

"The kid has it," one man said. "But you've both had it pretty tough. Why not one of us?"

"You don't know the lay of the land," Chiwawa said. "Stan does. So do I."

"You got a bullet through one leg," Stan objected. "I can turn the trick."

"Not by yourself," Chiwawa said flatly. "You can, but you're not goin' to alone."

"Aw hell, it's better for me to play a lone hand," Stan pleaded.

"Not by a damn sight!" Chiwawa said. "Them gents'll take some stoppin'. Besides we started this scrap together, kid, an' we'll finish it together."

There was no gainsaying Chiwawa Jones when he took that tone. He tore up a clean shirt one marshal had in his bag, bandaged his leg and declared it fit for a foot-race much more for riding. He took a rangy black from another marshal. The dismounted officer was to stay at Roman Wells with Lily and hold the house against emergencies.

With which Chiwawa and Stan rode away from that little hillock toward the Davis camp.

They did not hurry. They walked their horses to save their wind for a dash at top speed to take them clear of those seven guns.

Figures rose as they approached. Some moved toward saddled horses. Two hundred yards away Stan and Chiwawa spurred up, rose in their stirrups with a derisive whoop, pouring at the same time bullets from their six-shooters as fast as they could pull trigger. Aim at that distance from a running horse was impossible. But it was a challenge and as such was accepted. Rifles barked at them. Stan and Chiwawa had reckoned on that. What time the outlaws paused to squint over gunsights enabled Stan and Chiwawa at breakneck speed to pass beyond any heading off.

And their bait was swallowed. They rode hell for leather for the mouth of that pass and behind them pursuit thundered. Chiwawa Jones looked back, and laughed aloud when the walls of that defile grew high and dark on either hand and they could still hear the pound of hoofs following.

They reached the twin cottonwoods, rough-barked giants four feet in diameter. A small jutting point of earth cliff gave shelter for their mounts from the lead bees soon to buzz angrily in that gloomy bottom. They dismounted there, ran back to the cottonwoods, crouched there with

cocked rifles as the raiders turned the near-est bend.

IN THAT narrow cleft shadows dwelt under a full moon or a midday sun. But enough light filtered from above. They met that charge with the dual element of rapid fire and surprise. And they stopped it dead. Horses plowed to a sudden halt. Men would not face that ambushade. They knew the ground too well. They whipped back to the cover of the first turn.

"Check to the castle," Chiwawa murmured.

They lay waiting. For a long time they heard no stir, no sound. They did not know if Flint Starley might lead his men swiftly back to the south end and go over the ridge through the timber, fearing a trap. Then they heard a quick burst of gunfire, lifting echoes in the canyon. One quick flurry of shots, a few scattered reports. And presently the patter of hoofs again, and riders appearing. Stan and Chiwawa aimed and fired methodically until they dodged back to cover under a high dark bank.

"We got 'em in our sack," Chiwawa said then, with deep satisfaction. "They're wonderin' what has broke loose. Come daybreak they'll find out."

When day broke the Davis men did find out, to their dismay. August dawn comes early in that latitude. A paling sky, a yellow brightness topping the canyon walls far above. Stan and Chiwawa peering forth saw nothing. But as they looked a rifle spoke from the rim of the canyon above, then another from the opposite side. Three, four, half a dozen shots. A surge of riders around the nearest point. Methodically Stan and Chiwawa shot down three horses, before they turned tail and the guns of the riflemen above took up the refrain. Then a hush fell. In that clear cool dawn a voice called from above:

"You Davis men! Will you be shot where you stand or will you walk out on the flat an' throw down your guns? You're surrounded."

"We got 'em where the hair is short," Chiwawa chuckled. "Speck has got men above. Now, will they weaken or will they die with their boots on. I wonder?"

A second time that voice from above challenged imperatively. And Stan and Chiwawa saw seven men, three of whom limped heavily, one who walked supported by his fellows, move out into the clear, lay down their rifles, strip off their gun belts, and lift their hands high in mute surrender.

After which five U. S. Marshals rode up and Stan and Chiwawa walked from their post at the cottonwoods up to this group. Seven to seven. But the riflemen on the cliffs dominated the situation and the outlaws knew now what trap had been sprung on them. They stood dejected, men beaten at their own game. Only Flint Starley held his head defiantly.

"Brothers," Chiwawa Jones' leg gave way under him and he sat down suddenly on the parched turf. The bandage had slipped. His boot top spilled blood in great clots. But the impish spirit of the man rose above any physical hurt. "Brothers," said he with a sardonic inflection, "we opened this meetin' with bullets. Let us close it with prayer."

CHAPTER XVI

A TYING OF RAVELED THREADS

CHIWAWA JONES clumped on homemade crutches out on the porch, settled stiffly in a chair upholstered with buffalo hide. Lily Cole and Stan joined him. Stan settled his back against the wall and sighed contentedly. Hot sun blazed on the trampled yard. Men moved about corrals and stable. A Texan cowboy swung an axe lustily on the woodpile. Another lank Texan draped in a white apron bustled around in the kitchen looking over his stock in trade. Off on the yellow grass of Little Basin cattle drifted down to water.

From that dooryard at sunrise Stan had seen a wagon depart. A deputy U. S. Marshal held the reins on a high spring

seat. Other marshals rode behind that wagon. In the deep box rode Murch Davis and the remains of his gang, seven souls—if they could be classed as souls, which Chiwawa Jones, reckoning a tale of rapine, murder and pillage, would have disputed. Disarmed, half of them wounded, under an escort of Federal officers, they were bound for jail, trial and certain conviction.

Fifty feet before the house a steel safe lay on the ground, its heavy door askew on twisted hinges. Stan stared at that. When they asked Murch Davis to open it he snarlingly refused. Chiwawa said there was loot and damning evidence in that safe. And when the officers searching that robbers' roost, stumbled on half a case of dynamite in sticks they blew the safe. There was, as Chiwawa contended, loot in that steel box. Thousands in currency. But also two thick bundles of U. S. gold bonds, which by their serial numbers had been taken in a hold-up of the Union Pacific three years earlier. That made a suspicion certainty, opened the penitentiary gates wide for all of them.

There was a darker chapter which Chiwawa had hinted of to Stan. But Stan Rickard at that moment wasn't very curious. In reaction from days and nights of strain, of violence, he sat now more or less passive. He was tired, too. Since early morning he had ridden fast and far.

"Your middle name is speed," Chiwawa commented. "You ain't more'n gone before you're back bringin' cowboys like sheep followin' the bell wether. Did you kidnap these boys, borrow 'em, or what?"

"Darn it, I told you," Stan said. "I just took over one of Henry Boldt's trail crews. One crew is goin' to hold down Roman Wells. These boys were about to head back south. So me'n Colonel Henry's range boss persuaded 'em to stay for a roundup of these cattle like you said must be made. Why do we have to gather up these rustlers' cattle?"

"Because, these Three Diamond cattle belong to us. An' since they have no claim

to this ranch, we will take that too, since if we don't some other cow outfit will."

"Us?" Stan echoed.

"Me an' Lily Cole," Chiwawa nodded. "Uh-huh."

"What in blazes are you sayin'?" Stan hunched forward uneasily. "Has your sore leg gone to your head or somethin'?"

"Why do you suppose I start you off this mornin' to collect a parcel of riders to make a roundup?" Chiwawa countered with a question of his own. "Oh, well. Let's begin at the beginnin'. Murch Davis is goin' to hang higher'n Gilderoy's kite. Old Kate lived with him off'n on for years but she'll help hang him, just the same. Murch played a strong hand for all it was worth—an' he only succeeded in makin' Lily Cole an' me tolerably rich. You'll be marryin' money, Stan."

Stan looked appealingly at Lily. She only smiled. He turned to Chiwawa.

"Does your head feel hot or anything, old-timer?" he asked. "Either you're crazy, or I am. What you say just don't make sense."

"Listen, an' you'll see the sense of it," Chiwawa said. "I told Lily this mornin' after you pulled out, just to pass the time. You've seen the main brand these rustlers used—the Three Diamonds?"

"Yes," Stan said. "Plenty of them around."

"Well, son, when this girl's father, Len Cole, started himself up on a little cow ranch on Blue River, New Mexico, he registered this brand, Three Diamonds on the left ribs. Len had some cattle an' was ambitious to have more. He was married to a mighty sweet woman, Lily's mother. But she died. An' Len was so fond of this kid he wouldn't send her nowhere to be raised. He kept her right at the ranch with him, although there was just the two of them there most of the time. He taught her to read an' write when she wasn't but fire years old. That Blue River ranch was a lonely place.

"Len an' me an' Flint Starley an' Kay Connel an' Bat Kells an' Spots Derwent

an' several more that you never knew had all fought under Murch in that scrap on the Pecos between J. B. Slater an' Sam Acorn. You know about that. Sam had stole a start an' was expandin' rapid an' reckless. He undertook to run the Slater outfit off the upper Pecos. We ran him off instead. Sam never forgave us that. He held it against me like poison, on account I tangled with him personal a couple of times. The last shots in that Slater-Acorn war was fired by Sam an' me at each other in Santa Fe.

"Murch was older than any of us that followed him. I was ridin' for Slater an' Murch was a wagon boss. He was hell on wheels, an' we followed where the wheels rolled. After that scrap was over there was a lot of easy money to be picked up in a disorganized country, an' whatever Murch had been before he went bad after. Some of the boys that thirsted for quick easy money an' excitement followed him. I didn't, because I found out Murch had chiselled us out of most of the money Slater told him he would divide among us if we cleaned up on Sam Acorn. We cut Sam's claws all right an' Slater paid Murch, but Murch held out on us. Anyhow neither Len Cole nor myself wanted to play Murch's game. So Len an' me went to ridin' again an' Murch an' his crowd went their way. They operated along the Rio Grande, up into Colorado. They acquired a hard name. But nobody ever hung anything definite on 'em. Finally they ceased to bother New Mexico.

"Eventually Len Cole, like I said, got him this ranch on Blue River. He held it down for quite a spell, till he had about seven hundred cattle rangin' around home.

"Then one day a rider come down into Blue River. The Cole ranch is a empty shell. Len's body lays in the yard. He'd been shot. His kid was gone. His horses was gone. His cattle was gone. Not a hoof wearin' the Three Diamonds is on the range an' none was ever found. Nothin' left but a dead man who couldn't tell what had happened.

"But this is what did happen:

"The Murch Davis crowd went down into Louisiana with a bunch of horses they'd stole someplace. Comin' back they rode by night to keep their trail blind, till they come to Blue River. Murch had planned it. Plannin' things like that was his long suit. So they rode into Len Cole's yard. Murch climbs off his horse, smilin'.

"'Hello, Len,' says he. 'Passin' by an' just stopped in to say howdy.'

"Len shakes hands with him. An' while he has Len Cole's right hand gripped in his Murch pulls a gun with his left an' let Len have it.

"This little kid, Lily here," Chiwawa droned on, "was standin' in the doorway an' Murch pulled down on her. In his wolf mind was the thought to kill her too because she'd seen an' was old enough to remember an' describe what they looked like.

"But Flint Starley an' old Spots, wouldn't stand for that. They were case-hardened sinners but they wouldn't let him murder a little kid. But they couldn't leave her there to tell. So they took her along, an' eventually Murch turned her over to Kate Lorne who was livin' with him at their main hangout in Colorado.

"So they got away with over seven hundred head of cattle an' a nice bunch of stock horses, all in one brand. A little stockman's outfit that wouldn't be missed much. The big outfits was gettin' jealous of their range. Murch figured correct that nobody would miss Len Cole's outfit for awhile, nor bother much about what become of his stock. Len couldn't make no complaint.

"They trailed that little herd up into southern Colorado. Next year they shifted into Wyoming, kept movin' north till finally they got clear up into this Viaduct Range, a long way from any cattle country at that time. Murch wanted a range a long way from anybody. He was foxy. He wanted to play as safe as he could while he built himself up.

"He went a long way when he made a

raid. He didn't make many, but they were good ones. If he'd been satisfied just to rustle stock nobody might have knowed where his holdout was until settlement began. But he an' his crowd did other little



jobs. They stuck up stages an' trains. They tampered with U. S. mail, an' Federal men began to smell around. A couple of years back suspicion

was directed to Murch's outfit, but there was no proof.

"Now, in all this time that had gone by nobody knew or cared what brand or brands Murch Davis ran in the Viaduct Range. He used to trail beef west into Oregon an' sell it. If he'd shipped to Chicago his brands would have been known to different stock associations. Last year, when he made his first real big shipment of beef steers he went into Canada, shipped via C. P. R. an' steamer to the English market.

"So the one man that had a double interest in regard to Len Cole never heard of any Three Diamonds in all the cattle country—not till he come here himself an' saw the brand on them cattle. An' saw Lily Cole. Lily is the double of her mother. He'd known Lily's mother.

"You see, kid," Chiwawa finished soberly, "me'n Len Cole was partners in that Blue River ranch. We owned that Three Diamonds brand jointly. It is registered in both our names."

"Why didn't you kill the old hound on sight," Stan demanded fiercely. "I would have."

"I knew a better way," Chiwawa smiled frostily. "The minute I saw that brand I knew who got Len Cole. I sat down an' figured it out. I aimed to make Murch tell me how it was done. Then I saw Lily. And I enlarged my plan to make it include

cleanin' up this bunch, puttin' 'em on trial, makin' the whole thing a matter of court record, thus makin' her title clear as well as mine to this stock. Seven hundred head of cattle increase a heap in eight years, Stan. No doubt they been increased considerable by theft. But the Three Diamonds belong to Lily an' me, an' it is as well to have that ownership legally established. An' it is a fitter penalty for Murch Davis to hang by the neck until he is dead, than for me to shoot him. Hangin' is more likely to make other folk think murder an' stealin' is not a payin' profession."

"Mis' Cole," the Texan cook appeared in the doorway, "does you all know where I kin find brown sugar 'n' is they any bakin' sody around here?"

Lily rose and went inside. She tweaked Stan's ear as she passed, smiled at him over her shoulder from the doorway.

"We will round up all these cattle," Chiwawa went on. "Ship an' sell everythin' in the Railroad an' MDM. That's all stolen stuff. The money can lay in a bank till it's discovered who it belongs to. Flint blowed to me that there was over five thousand head in the Three Diamond brand, never dreamin' he was talkin' to a man that owned half of 'em. Gosh, kid, there's been a lot of blind luck in this. If Colonel Henry hadn't concluded Roman Wells was a good place for him to light on up north, you'd never have started on that lone expedition. If you hadn't, Sam Acorn would have strung me to a pine sure as hell's a man-trap. You see I might not have found out about Lily Cole an' these Three Diamonds for years. The Colonel knew about Roman Wells from Speck. Speck sent a man up here once to look Murch Davis over, but decided he didn't have enough legal evidence to molest 'em. Speck never knew about Len Cole nor them Three Diamonds cattle. I never talked about that. Once I met you, an' you told me your business, I knew you were walkin' into a mighty dangerous spot. Murch was here an' likely to pop off anybody tryin' to establish a foothold in the Viaducts. Sam

Acorn was on his way to grab Roman Wells for himself, an' he'd do plenty to you if he found you there. I wasn't just talkin' when I told you you'd see me in the Viaducts. I meant to be here right on your heels. But I had to get hold of Speck an' get him to organize on the chance that hell would break loose here an' Murch would so overplay his hand that we could take him. We both walked into somethin' a heap bigger than we reckoned on."

"You and Speck look a lot alike," Stan voiced his curiosity for the first time. That was the only name he had heard for the man.

"We ought to," Chiwawa grinned. "Seein' he's the older steadier brother that kinda kept me on an even keel. He's a big man in his own way, Speck. Always was. Me, I been kinda restless an' rovin'. Trouble seemed to be always handy where I was. Until the last six years or so. I been a U. S. marshal under Speck, cleanin' up messes for Uncle Sam here an' there. Playin' a lone hand pretty much."

"Ridin' by yourself mostly," Stan murmured.

"Yeah," Chiwawa said. "Not because I wanted to, kid. Seemed like I had to."

THEY sat silent for a minute. Stan reached over and drew Chiwawa's gun from its holster, took out his own, laid them side by side. Line for line, in engraving and inlaid silver, they matched. Chiwawa took them up and balanced them in his hands, very thoughtful.

"There never was prettier pistols made," said he. "How'd you get hold of this other one?"

"I found it in a drawer the night before I started north," Stan told him. "So I packed it along. I was always crazy about horses an' guns. How come you left it behind?"

"I wasn't thinkin' very clear when I left San Antone the last time," Chiwawa answered. "I guess I just forgot it. An' I never went back."

Again they relapsed into thought.

"You been mighty sudden about Lily Cole," Chiwawa spoke again. "You're sudden about anything—like I was at your age. I hope you get off better than I did, son."

"Why did you change your name an' let it get spread that you got killed on the Pecos?" Stan blurted out. "Didn't you care nothin' about your family? Didn't you ever reckon on seein' your son again? You seem to have played a lone hand all these years. Mom never took on another man."

"Once was enough for her, maybe," Chiwawa said soberly, without bitterness. "I took her out of a good home," Stan winced at that familiar phrase, although it was not uttered now with the note of grievance he knew so well. "I guess I just didn't live up to her expectations. She wouldn't live the only way I was able to live. I couldn't live the way she thought I ought to. One year on a ranch, durin' which time you were born, finished her. I could never get her out of a town again. Them days in any town I knew I was like a bear in a cage. I was ambitious to make a start in cattle. She wanted me to go to work in a bank—like she wanted you to be a lawyer."

"How'd you know that?" Stan asked quickly.

"Henry Boldt kept me posted," Chiwawa told him. "Colonel Henry is distant kin of the Rickards. I kept track of you through him. Old Henry was always kinda on my side. He knew what throwed me off the track in the beginnin'."

"What was it?" Stan asked.

"In San Antone I got into a fuss with a man," Chiwawa said, "just like you tangled with young Sam Acorn in Roche Crossin'. A mean, bull-dozin' would-be bad man. I killed him. I had to, or he'd a killed me. Clear self-defence. There was a trial. The jury acquitted me without leavin' the box."

"But she called me a murderer. She said I'd disgraced her an' put a stain on her son, an' my ways would break her heart. That if it wasn't for her pride

she'd go home to her people. She said she would be happy if she never saw my face again.

"So," Chiwawa spoke very slowly, in a flat colorless tone, "since I wanted her to be happy, I rode off by myself an' seen to it she never did lay eyes on me again. I had started in with good intentions, a lot of mighty fine pictures in my mind, a world of ambition. But I had a fair amount of sinful pride, too. I didn't want no woman, no matter how much I craved her, that didn't want me. So I went my own way from that time on. I done my part except for that. I made plenty of money here an' there. Through Henry Boldt I paid her her share. I provided a good livin' for her an' you."

"As for changin' my name an' playin' dead," Chiwawa laughed. "That come about sort of funny. I came over to the Slater outfit on the Pecos from a *hacienda* in the State of Chihuahua. So naturally they called me Chiwawa. When J. B. Slater, who was a rough an' ready man, wrote my first pay check he didn't bother askin' names. He just made it payable to Chiwawa Jones, an' that christened me. It didn't seem worth while to correct folks, to be forever sayin' my name wasn't Jones. So finally I let it ride. The story about me bein' killed come pretty near truth. Sam Acorn ran into me in Santa Fe. He started throwin' lead on sight. We shot each other up pretty bad. We should both 'a' died, but we were too tough. Somebody who knew I was George Rickard heard I got killed. I wasn't interested enough to waste time writin' to San Antone contradictin' that. All these things happened natural enough. I done my best; but my best wasn't good enough for Mary. Seems like she did a good job of bringin' you up. It's kinda late in the day, an' I had mighty little to do with it, but I'm proud of you, Stan. She ought to be."

Stan didn't answer that. He didn't have the heart to say that Mary Rickard judged her son by his father, that her de-

sire to compel a man to live in the image of her ideal of the good life was as powerful a factor in her now as when she drove George Rickard away with bitterness in his heart.

Stan looked at this man whom he had seen face death and disaster without dismay, who had taken desperate chances to put his son in safety while he faced danger for himself. Like father, like son. What's bred in the bone will come out in the flesh. Those two reproachful complaints of his mother recurred to Stan now.

"You don't complain. You don't blame anybody," he said slowly. "You did your damndest an' that's all any man can do. I reckon some women just don't see things that way, dad. I can."

CHIWAHA JONES started. A queer pleased smile spread over his face.

"Why," he said diffidently, "I wouldn't blame you if you figured I wasn't such a much."

"Aw, shucks!" Stan retorted feebly. He couldn't find the right words. So he said no more.

"Well," he resumed after a minute, "seein' you've done considerable ridin' by yourself, how would it be, when your leg gets all right, if you rode for a spell with me?"

"I was thinkin'," Chiwawa nodded, "that that would be a mighty fine idea."

Presently Stan broke out again. Said he thoughtfully:

"I wonder, if things was different, would Lily go where I wanted to go, an' be content?"

Neither of them had heard her come to the window above their heads. She had thrust her head, heavy with burnished copper hair, through the open space. And she herself answered that tentative query of Stan Rickard's.

"You know I would," she said with low-voiced tensivity that amounted to a fierce emphasis. "To hell and back again if you wanted me to!"



*"Count Me Out," Said the Major,
"I'm Dead." And Having Settled
that Point He was Free to Tackle
Some Enemies of His and of the
State.*



SWIFT JUSTICE



By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "Double Bluff," "Vengeance Trail," etc.

JUSTICE, even white man's justice which is so frequently hampered by form and formalities, can be very swift in Africa; as swift and as merciless as a momba's bite—or as the justice which sentenced Frank Bailey to be hanged by the neck until he was dead for the murder of Aubrey St. John Major, alias "the Major."

There were several factors contributing to the speed in which the trial was conducted.

First of all Bailey insisted on pleading guilty and the only statement he made in extenuation of his crime was that he had been informed by two men—whom he had believed to be trustworthy—that the Major was a desperate criminal and had murdered his, Bailey's, brother in cold blood.

Questioned whether he had not also been

informed by many reputable men that the Major was universally popular and a man of sterling character, the prisoner frankly admitted that was true; he added, however, that his later informants had played on his credulity so cleverly that he believed all they said to be fact.

There were only two witnesses for the Crown—none for the Defense. Of the former, the most important was Jim, the Major's Hottentot servant. His evidence, as translated by the court interpreter, was dramatic in its simplicity and his voice—now charged with hate for Bailey, now full of sorrow for the loss of a Baas who had been his God for so many years—seemed to recreate the scene of the murder, even for those who had to await the interpreter's stumbling translation.

"I speak of the thing as it happened,"

he said. "My Baas was sitting on a boulder, his back to the river. The sun was setting—*Wo-we*, for me the sun has set for ever!—when I saw that evil man creeping like a snake through the grass toward us. He had a gun in his hand. On his face was the look of one who is about to kill. I shouted a warning to my Baas. I flung a knoberry at that evil man. But think you that my Baas could hear my voice over the voice of the gun? And had he heard, could he have moved faster than the bullet which sped toward his heart? Have I not seen a bullet from my Baas' gun overtake a racing springbok? Nor could my knoberry speed fast enough through the air to stop the evil man from firing the shot he aimed at my Baas' heart. So, thus it was. With no cry of pain for farewell, in silence, my Baas fell backward into the river.

"I ran to the bank, but my Baas was not to be seen. Good cause—there were crocodiles in that river.

"Then I ran to the man who had done this evil. *Wo-we!* He had pulled a curtain of sorrow across the sun. And I found that the knoberry I had thrown had reached the evil one. But too late. Too late to save my Baas. My knoberry had brought the sleep of the little death to the evil one and, remembering what he had done, I took him up in my arms. I would have thrown him then to the crocodiles had not two white men at that moment rushed out of the bush and stopped me.

"And now—I ask for justice."

WHEN the Hottentot had vacated the witness-box, his place was taken by a man who answered to the name of Alfred Webster, though he was better known to the community as "Soapy Sam." He was a fat, oily skinned individual with the face and fawning hypocrisy of an accomplished liar.

His long statement boiled down to this:

The accused had accompanied Kaffir Morkel (the other white man mentioned by

the Hottentot) and himself on a trading trip to Mangwato's country. He drank continuously and his behavior towards the natives was such that trading was made impossible. On the afternoon of the murder, he said, Bailey announced that he was going to the Major's outspan and show "the damned dude" that he wasn't the only man in South Africa who was quick on the trigger.

"I thought nothing of it at the time, me lord," Soapy said sadly. "I thought it was just a youngster's drunken talk and I didn't try to stop him from going to the Major's outspan. I reckoned, anyway, that the Major 'ud teach him a little lesson—like he's done a lot of others who needed one.

"Then me and Kaffir talked things over and decided we'd better go after Bailey. We did, me lord. We got there too late. We was only just in time to stop the Major's nigger, as he says, from throwing Bailey to the crocs. An' now I think of it, I wish we hadn't. Hanging's too good for the man what killed the Major. Shot him when he wasn't looking, he did. The swine!"

Soapy grinned at the murmur of approval which came from the jury and the spectators.

He hotly denied that he, or Morkel, had told Bailey that the Major was the man who had shot Bailey's brother, or that he had any reason for desiring the Major's death.

There was nothing more to the case. Kaffir Morkel was up country, trading, but under the circumstances his evidence—it could only have corroborated Soapy's—was not vital. And though, naturally, the prosecution could not produce the body, the judge held that death could be presumed and caused as stated in Bailey's confession. He was rather caustic in his treatment of Soapy but pointed out to the jury that they were not trying that man—or Kaffir Morkel—and warned them that they must arrive at their verdict solely on the evidence presented to them.

"For," he said, "even if the accused man did honestly believe that Aubrey St. John Major had killed his brother, we cannot accept that as an excuse for murder."

The jury's retirement was a mere formality. They returned almost immediately with a verdict of "Guilty."

THAT evening Soapy Sam entertained two men in his private room at the back of the Maxim Hotel bar. He entertained them lavishly—but not willingly; each man had just paid him the sum of five hundred pounds and they felt that they had the right to demand the best—and a lot of it.

"It's easy money for you, Soapy," Fat Gilson grunted, "but I don't grudge it."

"I should think not, Fat," Soapy said with a mocking laugh. "Who else but me could have thought up a way of getting rid of the Major? Besides, now we've got Bailey put out of the way, there ain't much chance of anybody fixing the murder of his brother on you, Fat."

Gilson mopped his forehead with a large handkerchief.

"You talk too damned much, Soapy," he growled.

"Only amongst friends," Soapy assured him easily, "and we're all friends here, ain't we?"

"I ain't worrying about you and Fenton," Fat Gilson retorted, nodding toward the slender, extravagantly dressed man who was smoothing his thickly pomaded hair with an almost caressing gesture. "I've got as much on you two as you've got on me. You don't dare split. It's the girls I'm thinking about. What in hell do you always have them hanging about for, Soapy?"

He scowled at the two women who sat silently at the table. One, her name was Bessie, had once been very pretty, in a flaxen-haired, dollish sort of way, but the African sun plus the life she had been forced to lead, had robbed her of her beauty. And now, at thirty, she looked like a disillusioned woman of forty-five.

Her companion, Violet, was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, vivacious girl who had not yet surrendered to the evil which had ensnared her companions. True, she had played a willing part in sundry confidence scenes worked by Soapy, her employer, but she had played that part in a spirit of youthful, though misdirected, adventure.

She was about to give a heated retort to Fat Gilson's doubt of her loyalty when Slick Fenton, leering at her suggestively said:

"You don't have to worry about the girls, Fat. Where the heart is, there's where there's loyalty. Ain't that right, Vi?" He did not see Violet's moue of contempt and continued, "As for old Bess—Soapy'll answer for her."

Soapy nodded.

"Bess wouldn't move a little finger to save herself from drowning—'less I gave the word," he said complacently.

"And maybe not if you did," Bessie exclaimed wearily. "You ain't so handsome, Soapy, that I'd exert myself just for the pleasure of being your door-mat."

"You won't be even that much longer, my dear," Soapy said softly. "A worn out mat is no good to anybody. Remember that."

"I ain't likely to forget it," Bessie retorted. "You've told me times enough. But when I'm through—you'll be through too."

Soapy's answer to that was a violent blow which landed flush on Bessie's mouth, knocking her off her chair. As she dropped to the ground Violet knelt beside her.

"You rotten swine," she blazed, looking up at Soapy.

"She had to be taught a little lesson," Soapy replied suavely. "She ought to know better than threaten me. And you'd better take that as a warning, Vi."

"If you treated me as you treat Bess," the girl stormed, "I'd kill you if it was the last thing I ever did."

Soapy laughed.

"Regular little spit-fire, ain't she, Slick?"

"I like 'em with a bit of spirit," Fenton observed casually in the tone of one appraising the points of a horse.

BUT Fat Gilson was perturbed and he sat heavily in his chair, tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip.

"You'll go too far with Bess one of these days, Soapy," he said. "Not that I care a damn about you. But if she blabs—chances are she'll blab about me and Fenton, too."

"She won't blab," Soapy said confidently. "Will you, my dear?"

He turned to Bessie who was now sitting up, supported tenderly by Violet. There was a dazed look in her eyes. Her lips were cut and bleeding.

"Of course I won't blab," she said thickly.

There was a short silence, then Fenton returned to the subject of the payments he and Fat had just made to Soapy.

"You won't forget, will you, Soapy, that we've paid you Kaffir Morkel's share as well as your own?"

"You ain't by any chance insinuating that I'll hold out Kaffir's share from him, are you?" Soapy asked sadly.

"I don't care a damn whether you do or not. That's your *indaba*. But you'd better fix it so that he won't try to claim from us again. That's all."

"Trust me," Soapy said with a leer, "to do the right thing by Kaffir."

There was a loud knock at the door and Soapy rose from his chair calling, "Who's there?"

"It's me, Boss, Hans," a voice replied.

Laughing contemptuously at Gilson and Fenton who had drawn their revolvers and were eyeing him suspiciously, Soapy walked to the door, unlocked it and admitting a down-at-the-heels, vicious looking half-caste.

"Well?" Soapy demanded. "What's your news—and for your skin's sake it had better be something worth hearing."

"It is, Boss," Hans replied. "Just now I was waiting outside the police office and

I saw Kaffir Morkel's wagon coming down the street."

Fenton and Gilson laughed uproariously



at the look of chagrin which came on Soapy's face.

"He's wasting no time, Soapy. He knows you. He's come to collect his share," Fenton taunted.

"You'll have to work fast, Soapy," said Gilson, "and I'm going to stay and see the fun. It'll be an education—of a sort."

"There is more, Boss," the half-caste continued. "A policeman was driving the mules and——"

Once again laughter interrupted him. This time it was Soapy's.

"You've got the luck of the devil," Gilson said disgustedly. "I suppose the bobby nabbed Kaffir for selling dope and booze to niggers. I always did say Kaffir took too many risks. Well, he's due for a long term on the breakwater. He won't be able to collect from you now, Soapy. And I ain't whining. With Kaffir out of the way, I'm looking for my own trade to pick up."

"You're crowing too soon," Fenton said earnestly. "I don't care a hell what you do—but I'm getting out of the way for a bit. Kaffir boasts he's *slim*, but he's only a fool, back-veld Boer. And when the police start firing questions at him, he'll give away things without meaning to. For the matter of that, him being a *verdoemte* swine, I wouldn't put it past him to blab in the hope of getting a lighter sentence."

This thought sobered the other two.

"Then we'd better bail him out before he has a chance to talk. Come on——"

"Boss," the half-caste interposed hurriedly, "Kaffir Morkel will not talk. He can't. He's dead."

"You sure?" Soapy exclaimed excitedly.

"Sure, yes, Boss. I heard the policeman talk to another. Kaffir Morkel was killed by niggers up in Mangwato's country. The policeman buried him and brought back the nigger who killed him. That nigger is now in *trunk*."

Soapy nodded.

"All right—you can go, Hans." He opened the door for him. "Here—" he handed the half-caste a gold piece—"that's for bringing me the best news I've heard since the Major was put out of the way."

"You've got the devil's luck, Soapy," Gilson said as Soapy, a smirk of triumph on his face, came back to the table.

"Maybe it ain't all luck," Fenton remarked, eyeing Soapy thoughtfully. "Wouldn't surprise me to learn Soapy *arranged* for Kaffir's death."

"I didn't," Soapy denied quickly. "But I'll admit I expected something of the sort to happen. Kaffir would go back to Mangwato's country to do a bit of labor-recruiting, just after the Major had been up there warning the niggers of his nasty little tricks. He was asking for trouble, if you ask me."

"And if you ask me," Bessie cried in a shrill voice, "he got it. Kaffir's dead—and you three ain't got the sense to see who's responsible. Well, I'll tell you. It was the Major. He——"

"Shut up, you fool," Soapy said roughly. "The Major's dead."

But Bessie, despite Violet's attempts to calm her, continued:

"So he's dead, is he? Well: who's seen the Major's body?"

"The Major's dead, I tell you," Soapy said calmly. "Bailey shot him and a croc made a meal of him—that's why nobody has seen the body."

Bessie sniffed contemptuously.

"He's been dead before, ain't he? You reckoned he was dead—or as good as—when you left him bound in the desert, without food or water and next door to naked. Right. What's the next you hear of him? Why that Scar Gaynor runs into

the Major up in the Congo and dies. And who killed him? The Major. Then Tank Hale thought he had killed the Major and goes out to view the body. We all know what happened to Tank, don't we? And now Soapy and Kaffir play a *slim* trick on the Major. They fill an innocent young idiot with a lot of lies and send him off to kill the Major. According to Soapy's story——"

"Damn it, Bess," Fenton broke in un- easily, "it's not only Soapy's story, but the Major's nigger tells the same story. So does Bailey. And Bailey may be a fool—but he ain't such a fool as to get himself hanged for a murder he didn't commit."

Bessie rose unsteadily to her feet and, supported by Violet's arm about her waist, faced the three men with a desperate courage.

"Laugh at me, if you like," she said, "but don't forget that Kaffir's dead. And that's three of the eight of us who played a dirty trick on the Major accounted for. Whose turn'll be next? Yours, Fat? Yours, Slick? Mine or Violet's? Or—" she almost spat the words with contemptuous hate—"yours, Soapy?"

She laughed at their silence, correctly interpreting the fear which held them dumb. She continued:

"Take her away, Vi," at last Soapy said angrily. "Put her to bed. You needn't come back either."

Ten minutes later, after she had put Bessie to bed and bathed her bruised face, Violet dressed herself in a becoming street costume.

"Where you goin', Vi?" Bessie asked dully.

Violet turned on her fiercely.

"I've got friends, good friends, in the *dorp*, Bess. I'm going to tell 'em about the trick Soapy and Kaffir played on that poor kid Bailey. And they're going to help him break out of that tumbledown shack they call a prison—if they won't, I'll do it myself. He's no murderer, Bess. He thought he was killing the man who killed his brother—that's all."

"I wish you luck, Vi," Bessie said. "But you ain't going to turn informer, are you? Don't do that, dear. Don't be a sneak. Play the game—even if it is a rotten one."

"I'll play the game," Violet retorted. "And it isn't sneaking to catch rats in a trap. S'long. If anybody asks; you don't know where I am, or when I'll be back. Neither do I, for the matter of that."

THAT same night another conference was taking place in the neat, simply furnished office of the captain in charge of the local detachment of mounted police.

Besides the captain—a tall, willowy Dutchman—there were present three other men: the Judge who had presided at the trial of Frank Bailey, a plain-clothes sergeant-detective named Jones, and a man who looked as if he had just stepped out of a first class tailor's establishment where he had been completely outfitted with the very latest thing in riding kit.

"But I don't understand it, Mr.—ah—St. John Major," the Judge said in bewildered tones when the Major came to the end of a long and earnest statement he had been making.

"Call me 'Major,' sir," that man drawled easily, raising his eyebrows so that his gold-rimmed monocle dropped into the palm of his firm, well-shaped hand. "That's a name which—as it were—comes trippingly off the tongue. What?"

With the final word he replaced the monocle in his eye and stared at the others with a good humored, but vacant, smile.

The Judge appealed to the captain of police.

"I suppose there is no doubt that this man is the Major?"

That man scowled: things were happening which did not conform to his ideas.

"I've never had the opportunity of meeting the man they call 'the Major' before, sir," he replied. "But, at least, I can say this; he answers the descriptions of the Major." As if reciting from a police circular he continued: "Height, six foot two inches. Gray eyes. Black hair——"

"It's well sprinkled with gray, Captain," the Judge observed shrewdly.

"The dear old captain must be quoting from a rather ancient circular," the Major drawled. "*Tempus does fugit* you know, dear and honored Judge. And the flight does things to one's hair. You've experienced the same yourself, I'm sure, if you'll pardon the personality."

The captain frowned and Jones coughed to cover the beginnings of a chuckle.

"Fair hit, there," the Judge said easily, passing his hand slowly over his bald head. "But go on with your description of the Major, Captain."

"Black hair," the captain continued, "brushed back in a pompadour. Wears a monocle, talks in an affected drawl, always well dressed and poses as a brainless dude."

"That certainly fits this man," the Judge observed. "But go on."

"Speaks the *taal* and many native dialects fluently. Is an unusually good judge of diamonds. Rides, shoots——"

"M'Lord, Sir," Jones interrupted breathlessly, "this is the Major. I've got good reason for knowing him. Me and him have matched wits more than once—with me on the losing end, though I don't hold no grudge against him for that——"

"Splendid fellow! Sportin' of you, very," the Major murmured.

The compliment seemed to confuse the detective but he continued after a moment's hesitation:

"As I was about to say, m'Lord and sir; I've been up against the Major a good many times in my day. I've thought I had the goods on him for illicit diamond buying more times than I like to count—but I've never been able to build up a case I could take to court."

"That, dear old detective," the Major observed gaily, "is because you were laboring under a misapprehension. I'm not an I. D. B. They're filthy fellows——"

"Granted you ain't one of the mob, Major," the detective agreed. "But, for all that, you can't deny the fact that a

lot of stones pass through your hands that you can't legally account for. An' some day one of them stones is going to stick. When that day comes—I'll get you, as sure as my name's Jones."

"That'll be a charming day for both of us," the Major said with a bow.

"That's quite enough," the Judge said dryly. "You'll be kissing each other next. Then there's no doubt in your mind that this is the Major?"

"None, m'Lord," Jones said positively.

"The same Aubrey St. John Major for whose murder Frank Bailey has been sentenced to death?"

"The same, m'Lord."

THE Judge drew himself up in his chair and adjusted his eye-glasses, suddenly assuming the majesty and dignity of his high office. And instantly the atmosphere of the little room changed. The free and easy conference was over. The Judge was now a representative of Justice—of a Justice he considered to have been outraged.

"I require an explanation from you, Aubrey St. John Major," he said in a cold, biting voice. "On your own admission you allowed a man to go through the awful mental torture of thinking he had killed you. He has been tried for murder, found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. I will say nothing now of my own feelings at being compelled to sentence a



fellow man to death. I only ask you now, and I warn you that your explanation had better be one that I can accept; why didn't you come forward earlier?"

"I couldn't, my Lord," the Major said earnestly. "You see, I only anticipated Bailey's shot by a fraction of a second. He meant to kill me—that was evident.

And I didn't know then why he had tried to kill me. I only knew that he was a companion of two men who had made many attempts on my life.

"After falling into the river I managed to swim to a cave in the bank I knew of. Its entrance just below the surface of the river is too small for a crocodile to enter. It has an exit some feet back from the bank.

"I might have shown myself to Bailey then, but I had to consider the other two men—Soapy Sam and Kaffir Morkel. I knew they were near-by and I thought things would be simpler if they believed that Bailey's attempt to murder me had been successful.

"So I remained in hiding. I'm glad I did, for I heard them boasting of the way in which they had persuaded Bailey that I was his brother's murderer——"

"And you're not?" the Judge snapped.

"The Major was two or three hundred miles away at the time of the murder, m'Lord," the detective said.

"And young Bailey did think," the Major continued, with a nod of thanks to Jones, "that I was a man deserving of death. He's very young—Soapy Sam is diabolically clever. Incidentally——" the Major turned to the detective—"it was Fat Gilson who killed Bailey's brother."

"We know that," Jones admitted sourly. "But we can't prove it. Can you?"

The Major shook his head.

"Not yet. But I will, before I've finished with him."

"Leaving the main issue for the moment," the Judge said, "do you mind telling us why these men desire to kill you?"

"Does that matter, sir?" the Major asked softly.

"I can answer that, m'Lord," Jones said stoutly. "The Major's got the reputation—and earns it—of always lending a hand to them who haven't got the brains or guts to help themselves. And he don't stand for no dirty work, neither. And it's a matter of record, m'Lord, that he's scotched a lot of dirty games in his time.

That's why men like Soapy Sam, Kaffir Morkel, Slick Fenton—and men like that—'ud like to see the Major killed. There's a rumor going round that six of them trapped him and took him into the Kalahari desert and left him there to die. I don't know how true it is——” He looked at the Major.

“Quite true,” the Major murmured and for a moment a cold, steely light came into his eyes.

“Anyway,” the detective continued, “he escaped from certain death and naturally them men are more determined to put him away than ever. Only——” Jones added slowly—“there's only three of them left now.”

“What happened to the others?” the Judge asked.

“One died up in the Congo. That was Scar Gaynor—a gun-runner and ivory poacher; a man who sjamboked niggers just for the joy of hearing them squeal. Tank Hale—an illicit booze seller—is serving time on the Cape Town Breakwater. He'll be no good when he does come out; he's lost most of his wits. Kaffir Morkel—well, m'Lord, we've just heard how he died.”

“It would appear,” the Judge said slowly, “that the remaining men have good cause for desiring the Major's death.” He looked shrewdly at the Major. “Did you,” he asked, “have anything to do with the fate which has overtaken the three men just mentioned?”

The Major hesitated.

“If you mean, did I kill Gaynor and Morkel—no, sir. Their own rottenness killed them—or they were killed because of their rottenness. As for Tank Hale, I must admit to having been actively responsible for the collection of evidence which ensured his being sentenced for a long term of imprisonment. Perhaps, in a measure, I am also responsible for his mental condition. But my conscience does not worry me on that score.”

“Good provocation,” the Judge said, “does not give you the right to take to

yourself the office of executioner. Your personal desire for vengeance——”

“It no longer exists, sir,” the Major interrupted. “And yet—I shall not rest until I have brought the others to face the justice they have outraged. And I am not referring to the attempted murder of myself. That is nothing. I can—I think I may say it without boasting—take care of myself. I—but you must pardon me, sir; I get rather over-heated when I think of the dirty tricks worked by the people we are discussing, tricks played on natives, on women, on innocent young fools like Bailey.”

“Ah!” the Judge breathed softly. “It is time we returned to him. You have not yet told us why you did not appear before. You haven't explained why you allowed Bailey to be tried and sentenced for your murder.”

Again the atmosphere of the Court Room filled the little room.

“My Lord,” the Major said, “if I had shown myself that day at the river, there would have been shooting. I might have been killed—and Jim. I am sure Soapy Sam and Morkel would have been. And when they broke camp next morning, it was impossible for me to travel to the *dorp* with Soapy Sam. I should have been discovered. But I was able to get into Kaffir Morkel's wagon, unseen, and travel with him. And that was what I wanted to do. You see; I heard him discuss with Soapy his plans for labor recruiting up in Mangwato's country. He was going to use dope—and I wanted to be on hand to prevent that. As it happened, I needn't have bothered. The natives had been warned. They treated him as he deserved to be treated.

“Even so, his killing was an accident. He was running from me at the time. He thought I was a ghost!

“I returned then with the police to whom Morkel's death had been reported, prepared to give the evidence that would free Bailey. I must confess, my Lord, that I did not hurry unduly. After all, Bailey *had* tried to kill me, and I thought a week or so

of imprisonment would do him no harm. I thought it would teach him a lesson. I had no idea that he would be brought to trial so quickly, otherwise——” The Major shrugged his shoulders.

The Judge nodded reflectively.

“I accept your statement without reservation, Major,” he said. “And now—it only remains for certain formalities to be observed and Bailey shall be released. But I think we owe it to him that he should be informed at once that—by the mercy of Providence—he is guiltless of the crime to which he confessed and that his release is only a matter of days. Will you see to that, Captain?”

“Jones shall go down to the *trunk* at once, sir,” the captain replied.

“Wait a minute, please,” the Major cried, his face beaming with an appearance of vacuous inanity now that the Judge had relaxed. “I am afraid I am considering my own safety, and obviously it is to my advantage that Messrs Soapy Sam, Fat Gilson, Slick Fenton *et al*, should continue to think that I am dead. If Bailey is told that he is innocent and his release is announced, why then those—er—gentlemen will be very much on their guard and make it very difficult for me to—er—deal with them. Why, they might even try to kill me again—and succeed. Worse yet; I feel that they would not be happy until they had dealt with Bailey in some particularly nasty way.”

“What are you getting at then?” the captain asked testily.

“I take it,” the Major replied, “that we all want to see a murderer brought to justice. And Fat Gilson is a murderer—he’s other things, too, but murder carries the heaviest penalty. Please believe that it’s not a demonstration of personal vindictiveness when I say that I want Fat Gilson to pay the penalty for his crimes. And you see—though I may appear to flatter myself—I have a feeling that the news that I am alive and in the *dorp* will be the signal for three men to depart hurriedly—Fat Gilson being one of the three.”

“But we can’t leave an innocent man under sentence of death,” the Judge expostulated. “We must tell him the facts. Just what do you propose?”

“Release him tonight, secretly, in my charge. In the morning, spread the news that he’s escaped.”

Before the Judge and the captain could give voice to their indignation at the Major’s proposal, the door was flung violently open and a young trooper came into the room. He dragged with him a curly haired and very pretty “boy” dressed in garments several sizes too large.

“What’s all this, Trooper Bowen?” the captain demanded wrathfully.

“Beg your pardon, sir,” the trooper said confusedly, releasing his hold of his prisoner and coming to attention.

The boy—who was Violet—dropped into a near-by chair and smiled pertly at the judge as she lighted a cigarette.

“Well, Trooper?” the captain said icily.

“About an hour ago, sir,” the trooper blurted out, “this woman—only she wasn’t dressed like this then—came down to the *trunk* and asked to see the prisoner, Bailey. She said she was his sister, sir. And she was crying. And——”

“Get to the point man,” the captain said impatiently.

“I let her go into the cell, sir,” the trooper said. “She was in there about twenty minutes. And when she came out again she was crying so hard that I didn’t try to talk with her. She walked away slowly with her head bent, a handkerchief up to her face. After she had gone, I looked in at Bailey. And he was crying, too. He was lying face down on his bunk, the blankets all huddled about him. I thought that was natural, sir, under the circumstances. But about ten minutes later I thought—I don’t know why, sir—something was wrong. So I went into the cell to have a look at Bailey. And it wasn’t Bailey, sir. It was this woman. She’d changed clothes with him and——”

“Have you spread the alarm?” the Major asked anxiously.

"No, sir," the trooper replied. "I brought the woman straight up here and said nothing to nobody."

"Splendid!" the Major applauded softly.

The girl looked toward him, a puzzled expression on her face. But he stood in a corner of the room, leaning carelessly against the wall, beyond the circle of light thrown by the shaded desk lamp.

"I don't see anything splendid about it," the captain said curtly. "Trooper Bowen will not find it splendid by the time I've finished with him. He's let a condemned murderer escape——"

"You needn't blame him," Violet cried. "He couldn't help himself."

"We'll deal with you presently," the captain said. "But first—Get out and spread the alarm, Jones."

"No!" the Major exclaimed imperatively. "Please! Let me talk to the lady. After all, under the circumstances, Bailey's escape is not very important, is it?"

The girl gasped.

The Major moved forward a little.

"I rather fancy you know me, don't you?"

SHE stared at him incredulously. Then fear came into her eyes and, shrinking back into her chair, she put her hands up to her face as if to ward off a blow.

"The Major!" she gasped. "But you're dead. That poor kid, Bailey, said he'd killed you. He——"

And then courage returning to her she jumped to her feet and rushed at the Major, pound-

ing at his chest with her clenched fists.

"You beast!" she cried. "You're alive. He didn't kill you! It is all one of your slim tricks. You *think* he's one of the gang that tried to kill you and this is your dirty way of squaring things. You let an

innocent kid be tried for murder——"

"He *did* try to murder me," the Major reminded her.

"What of it," she retorted hotly. "It wasn't his fault. He believed you'd killed his brother. Soapy and Kaffir told him so. He didn't know any better. He's young—and he thought the world of his brother."

She burst into a fit of wild weeping and made no resistance when the Major led her back to the chair. She continued presently:

"He used to talk to me about that brother of his. He told me how he had come out to England to join him only to find that he had been murdered the day before his arrival. And Soapy and Sam filled him with lies about the Major. And he went mad for a little while—he told me he did. He shot the Major—but he was sorry about it the moment his finger pressed the trigger. He's not a murderer——" Then she laughed wildly. "Of course he's not a murderer. The Major's alive——"

"Where is he now?"

"I won't tell you."

"Why did you help him to escape, my child?" the Judge asked gently.

"Because, because——" her armor of confidence broke down before the Judge's kindly smile—"because I love him. Yes I do. I'd made arrangements with friends of mine for him to be taken safe out of the country where you couldn't get him. We were going together. But he wouldn't go. I pleaded with him in the cell—but he wouldn't listen. He said that he'd killed an innocent man and he'd take his punishment. The only thing that worried him, he said, was that he had not killed his brother's murderer. And so—it seemed the least I could do—I told him the name of the man who killed his brother. And he begged me to help him get out of prison long enough to kill him. So I did that. I thought——" her voice faltered—"I thought he had the right to do that. He was being hanged for killing



a man he thought had murdered his brother. It seemed only just that he should have the satisfaction of squaring matters with the man who really killed him. But now—" she made a gesture of utter weariness—"I don't know. I don't know."

"You told him that Fat Gilson killed his brother?"

She nodded, her eyes fixed hopefully on the Major.

"Can you prove that?" the captain snapped.

"No. I only know he did. I've heard them talking about it."

"Where is Bailey now?" the Major asked.

"I won't tell you," she said defiantly.

AND then with a rush a consciousness of all that was involved came to her.

"He's not a murderer," she cried. "He won't be hanged. He's free to go where he likes. Oh! And what have I done? I've set him free only to make a murderer of him. You must stop him. He's gone to Fat Gilson's house. He's waiting there for Fat to come back from Soapy Sam's. Fat'll be drunk."

She shrugged her shoulders and began to cry again: quietly this time.

"Cheer up, old thing," the Major said jovially. "He hasn't committed a murder yet—and we'll take jolly good care he doesn't."

He turned with a gesture of appeal to the judge and the captain.

"Will you leave this in my hands, gentlemen. Or rather," he continued swiftly, anticipating their refusal, "in the hands of the Jones and myself. I rather fancy that, with Bailey's help, we'll get evidence against Gilson that will be sufficient to convict him."

"Can you count on Bailey's help, do you think?" the judge asked gravely.

The Major nodded confidently.

"I rather fancy so. After all—he owes his life to me, doesn't he?"

"And just what do you propose to do?" the captain asked.

"That's a question I'd rather not answer at the moment," the Major replied. "As a matter of fact, I'm not quite sure. It depends such a lot, doesn't it, on circumstances. But I want you to give us an hour's start and then sound the alarm. Spread the news that Bailey has escaped—*unaided*. Say that he has attacked the guard—that he—oh, anything, so long as you tell a good story. And don't let anyone know that I'm alive and in the *dorp*. That's most important."

The Judge and the captain conferred together for a few moments then the Judge said:

"It's most irregular, Major, but—in the interests of justice we've decided to agree to your proposal. But, remember; we can't countenance any suggestion of your taking the law into your own hands. Deliver Gilson—if he is a murderer—to the properly constituted authorities——"

"That's me, for the time being," Jones said with a grim, meaning smile. "I'll see the Major plays no tricks."

"Of course you will, Jonesy," the Major exclaimed.

"There's one other thing," the Judge said. "We can't keep the truth back indefinitely, you know. Sooner or later we must publish the fact that you're alive and ——"

"Then let it be later, sir," the Major begged. "And now," he turned to Violet, "what time will Fat leave the Maxim Bar?"

"They generally sit drinking until one or two in the morning," she replied.

The Major nodded. "And Bailey? Is he armed?"

"No—except with a knoberry. He wouldn't take the revolver I got for him."

"That makes it easier for us to collar him," Jones said, a note of relief in his voice.

"Not so easy," the Major warned. "It's a dark night, and he'll be hiding in the

bushes. He'll know where we are, but we won't know where he is."

"We can call out to him," Jones expostulated. "We can tell him who we are, and explain——"

"Do you think he'd believe us?" the Major asked sarcastically. "Besides, I don't want my presence broadcast. I thought I'd already made that clear."

"He'd listen to me," Violet said, rising determinedly to her feet. "And I'm coming with you."

The Major looked at her perplexedly.

"You're not," he said. "You're going to stay here. I don't want you upsetting my plans. Put her under arrest, Captain. She's a notorious character; and if you're in doubt as to what charge to bring against her, she helped a murderer to escape from prison. That's enough to hold her on, isn't it?"

"It is," the captain said grimly. "Hey! Stop her, Bowen!"

But Bowen, who had been listening open mouthed to the conversation, had anticipated Violet's rush for the door and held her easily despite her frantic struggles.

"Take her away," the captain ordered. "Lock her up. Don't let any one see her or talk to her. And don't talk yourself. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. If you carry out your instructions capably—I may forget your carelessness in permitting a man convicted of murder to escape!"

"Very good, sir!"

The trooper fastened his handcuffs on Violet's wrists and led her out of the room.

She went quietly, her only words were an appeal to the Major:

"I suppose I deserve this. But—you'll save Frank, won't you? I don't matter."

The next moment the door closed behind her.

The Major was thoughtful for a moment.

Then he said briskly, "Come on, Jones. We'd better get Bailey."

IT WAS very dark outside but the Major and Jones made their way along the dusty thoroughfare with a confident speed. Their footfalls were silent and—after a few spasmodic attempts at conversation on the part of the detective—their voices were silent also.

Occasionally, whenever a door of one of the houses which lined the street opened and permitted a band of light to shine across the roadway, their pace slowed. Their errand was a secret one and they had no intention of passing into the ribbons of light.

Several times they were hailed by home going men who had been drinking well, if not too wisely, at one of the *dorp's* many saloons, but they made no reply. Once a drunken man who had been sprawling in the road rose up directly in front of them and tried to grapple with the Major. For a long time after his one topic of conversation was about two ghosts he had encountered.

"I grabbed hold of one of them," he'd say. "I got my two hands on him. Man! I could feel him. Then, suddenly, he melted away—and I saw a lot of stars!"

"That was 'Bull' Horn," the detective had commented as they hurried on after the encounter. "He's one of the toughest fighters in the *dorp*—and a devil when he's drunk. They say he's never been knocked out, Major."

"Are you trying to tell everyone I'm in the *dorp*?" the Major replied sarcastically.

"Oh, hell! Who's going to hear?" the detective grumbled.

"No one, I hope," the Major replied tersely. "Certainly no one if you keep your—ah—mouth shut."

THEY had come at last to the outskirts of the *dorp*. Here the road was not any better than a deeply rutted wagon track and the houses were few and far between.

A gentle wind had scattered the low-lying clouds and the sky glowed phosphorescently with the light of the stars which

crowded it. It was a deceptive light, distorting nearby objects and making far off ones seem very near. The air was filled with the clean, pungent scents of the veld.



The terrific heat seemed to muffle all sound save that of the native laborers in one of the mine compounds. They were holding a beer drink, trying to

recapture—under the watchful eye of the compound manager—something of the barbaric freedom of kraal life.

Detective Jones was sweating profusely and irritated beyond measure by the cloud of mosquitoes which crowded about him.

"Hell!" he exclaimed softly. "We've been trekking damned fast and I'm all in. Let's have a rest. Besides, we're nearly there and we ought to plan what we're going to do."

As he spoke, he sat down on a boulder by the side of the road.

The Major halted.

"Which is Fat Gilson's house?" he asked.

"The next on the right. It's about four hundred yards on an' set back quite a bit from the road amongst a lot of scrub bush."

The Major nodded thoughtfully.

"Look here," he said suddenly. "I'm going on from here alone."

The detective eyed him mistrustfully.

"What's the game, Major? I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Don't be a fool, dear old detective!" the Major exclaimed impatiently. "Our first job is to get hold of Bailey, isn't it? And if two of us went up to Gilson's place Bailey 'ud smell a rat an' clear out. We'd have the deuce an' all of a job to catch him in the bush tonight, an' we might get hurt in the process."

"How do you think you're going to get

hold of him alone?" the detective asked.

"Easily," the Major replied with a chuckle. "I'm going to be Fat Gilson for a little while. That's the bait to snare the tiger—eh, what?"

"All right," Jones reluctantly agreed. "But no monkey tricks, mind."

"'Pon my soul—how you misjudge me. Lend me your handcuffs, there's a good fellow."

"Why?" Suspicion again showed itself in the detective's tone.

"Bailey may prove unwilling to listen to reason. And if he's handcuffed, it'll be easier for me to show him the error of his ways."

THE detective silently handed the Major his handcuffs.

"Thanks," the Major drawled. "Now, you'd better wait until you hear me whistle. Right? Then watch the bally old metamorphosis."

As he spoke the Major tilted his helmet over the side of his head and in some way changed his posture so that he appeared a grossly fat man.

"Lucky it's dark," he commented, "or Bailey 'ud never be taken in. As it is—though I deplore the inefficiency of my make-up—it will serve."

He lurched off down the road, singing fragments of a ballad in a hoarse, tuneless voice.

"Damn me," Detective Jones softly commented to himself in tones of ungrudging admiration, "if that ain't Fat Gilson on his way home after his weekly binge, to the life!

"Hell! I forgot to tell the Major about the nigger."

He jumped to his feet about to run after the Major then, realizing that to do so would give the game away, he sat down again, ruefully.

"Chances are though," he comforted himself, "that the nigger—knowing Fat won't be back till one or two—has gone to the beer drink at the Compound."

MEANWHILE, the Major was continuing his way down the road, reeling from side to side, interrupting his song with bursts of profanity against the unevenness of the road and the unseen things which—he loudly affirmed—were trying to trip him.

But when he came to the path which led from the road to a bungalow in the midst of a thick patch of bush his singing and cursing ceased and—although his movements were even more ludicrously like those of a drunken man—he made scarcely any noise. He was listening intently knowing that his life probably depended on his ability to detect the presence of the man he believed to be lurking in the bush beside the path; knowing that at any moment Bailey—made mad, in a sense, by the knowledge that he was under sentence of death and a desire to avenge his brother—might aim a skull-crushing blow at him with a knobkerry which was his only weapon.

Suddenly the Major halted, swaying drunkenly. He muttered incoherently something about having left his helmet at Soapy Sam's.

His hands went up to his head, and he giggled loudly.

"Wearing it all the time!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

He tipped it backward and tilted so that the brim covered the nape of his neck and the right side of his head. He made a great business of mopping his perfectly dry face with a large white handkerchief.

When he went on again he retained the handkerchief in his left hand: it was a silken one and it made a compact ball in his closed fist. And he now walked—with scarcely any reeling—on the left hand side of the path.

Despite his alertness he almost became a victim to Bailey's sudden and hate-impelled attack. He only just side-stepped in time, receiving on his right shoulder the blow—it jarred him from head to foot—which, had it landed on his head must have broken through the helmet's scanty protec-

tion and would have probably smashed in his skull.

Even as he turned, Bailey struck again but—unnerved at the failure of his first blow and the unexpected soberness of the man he had expected to find an easy victim—his aim was poor and so weakly delivered that the Major had little difficulty in dodging it.

He did not have a third chance, for the Major closed with him and, after a short, desperate struggle, succeeded in tripping him.

The two men fell to the ground, Bailey underneath. The fall knocked the breath from him, but he still struggled so desperately that the Major was compelled to exert his tremendous strength to its utmost.

IT WAS quickly over then. For a very little while—a matter of split seconds—Bailey was unconscious. Before he had recovered the Major thrust the silk handkerchief into his mouth—it made a very effective gag—snapped the handcuffs about his wrists and lighting a cigarette sat down calmly on Bailey's chest.

"Feeling a bit dazed, eh, old chap?" the Major said quietly as Bailey opening his eyes and not realizing immediately how helpless he was, attempted to renew the struggle. "No, stop that. Not a bit of good struggling. Instead—you're going to listen to me preach a bit. By jove, you are! Know who I am?" He laughed softly at the look of incredulous amazement which came into Bailey's eyes and adjusted his monocle.

"How do you do? Yes, old chap. That's right. I'm the Major. And you didn't kill me, though, by jove, you came bally near to it. Even now I sometimes fancy I can feel the icy blast of the bullet whizzing past my face. My word, yes. But you're a most utter young fool, you know. You make friends with the most utter, utter swine and believe all they tell you. As a result you commit murder—or try to. Then when one of your bally criminal friends fills you with more stories and

helps you to escape from prison—" He laughed softly at the look of anger on Bailey's face—"you show your gratitude by planning to commit another murder.

"But really; your way of going about things—well, it's not sporting is it? First trying to shoot me when I wasn't looking—only I was. And so was Jim. Then trying to kill Fat Gilson—I made a very good Fat, didn't I?—without a word of warning. Really, you couldn't have been more reprehensible in your conduct."

He blew a succession of smoke rings, watched them dissolve and then continued:

"Of course you will argue that Fat Gilson killed your brother—shot him in the back, didn't he?—and that, together with other things, puts Gilson quite beyond the pale, as it were. Quite. Just the same, it isn't done. Can't take the law into your own hands—not when we have such a splendid police force! If you knew me better, you might accuse me of sarcasm; but I'm being most serious, really.

"And now, having finished my little—er—homily, let's get to the matter in hand. If you are prepared to be a good boy and do all that I tell you to do without question, I think I can safely promise you that Mr. Fat Gilson will take his first step gallows-wards before sunrise. I have a little plan and your co-operation is required—though not essential. What do you say?

"Oh, I'm sorry. You can't talk, can you. Well—blink your blinking eyes."

Bailey stared at him earnestly, then his eyes blinked.

"Splendid," the Major chatted. "But I must warn you," he added gravely, "that there's to be no more of this desire for bloodshed you evince so readily. We're going to try to get evidence against Fat Gilson, but if we fail, you must promise to let the matter rest there. Your brother must have been a splendid fellow—but vengeance is bally unsatisfactory. I *know*. Well?"

Again Bailey blinked.

"That's splendid," the Major said again. "And now I'll take off the handcuffs and

take out the gag. But don't ask any questions now. Explanations will come later—perhaps. Just now I want to do all the talking. A bad habit of mine, I'm afraid." As he spoke the Major freed Bailey from the handcuffs, pulled out the gag and assisted him to rise to his feet.

"I'm an awful fool, Major," he blurted out as soon as he could find his voice.

"Of course you are," the Major agreed cheerfully. "So am I. Now keep quiet while I call up my partner. He's a detective, but don't let that alarm you. He's quite harmless, really."



The Major whistled shrilly, as he did so there was a sound of a scuffle down the road.

"Sounds as if he's run into trouble," the Major ex-

claimed in tones of annoyance. "Come along!"

As they moved off the Major leading the way, the sound of fighting ceased and they heard Jones' voice raised in anger.

The Major stopped and whistled again. This time he was answered by Jones:

"Coming, Major!"

"The bally ass!" the Major said wrathfully. "Hope there's no casual wayfarers within hearing. We'll wait here, Bailey."

There was a moment's silence. Then Bailey said awkwardly, "I want to tell you how sorry I am, Major. And how glad I am I was such a rotten shot."

"That's all right, old chap," the Major replied absently. "And you weren't a rotten shot—not by a long shot. Ha! Ha!"

"There's one other thing, Major," Bailey said a little pugnaciously. "You referred to the young lady who helped me to escape in rather insulting tones."

"Well?" The Major looked at him curiously.

"You called her a criminal——"

"And isn't she?"

"No." The denial was emphatic.

The Major shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a proverb about touching pitch. Blackmailers, gun-runners, I. D. B.'s, and white slavers. A pretty gang."

"Violet isn't a member of the gang. She's left it. She——"

Bailey's voice rose in anger at the mocking smile on the Major's face. "You've got to believe it, Major," he concluded. "You've got to apologize for even thinking she's rotten."

"And if I won't? Never mind, don't answer. You're a hot-headed young ass. I apologize. Any girl who risks what she has risked to save a young fool she happens to love—must be a winner. By the way, have you considered that her life won't be worth much if Soapy Sam and the rest get to know she's a friend of yours and is washing her hands of the gang?"

Bailey nodded. "But I can take care of her, Major."

"I wonder," the Major observed dryly. "At any rate—the sooner you get away from the *dorp* the better. You——"

What more he would have said was interrupted by the panting arrival of Jones and a tremendously powerful native who was bleeding from a cut over the right eye.

"So you got him without any trouble, did you, Major?" Jones asked. "Lucky for you, young fellow. You've made enough trouble, if you ask me, with your fool ideas of——"

"Never mind about that, Jones," the Major exclaimed. "Who's this man?"

"This," Jones said pompously, "is Charley—Fat Gilson's bodyguard, and the biggest rogue in the *dorp*. He must have heard you and Bailey discussing things, and he was on his way to the *dorp* to warn Fat that everything was not what it ought to be.

"Lucky I suggested staying behind, or he'd have got clean away and spilled the beans. He had the nerve to put up a bit

of a scrap, at that. Had to hit him on the head with my revolver."

THE Major looked at the native. "You know me?" he said presently in the vernacular.

"True, *inkosi*," the native replied. "Who, amongst my people, does not know you?"

"Then you know that when my word is passed I do not take it back again?"

"That, too, is known to me, *inkosi*."

"Then listen; tonight, you are my man. Tonight you shall do as I tell you to do—no more, no less. Obey—and in the morning you shall be free to go back to your kraal, the evil you have done at the bidding of the fat white man who is your Baas shall be forgotten. Disobey—and the white man's law shall deal with you. But before that, I shall talk with you."

"I will obey, *inkosi*," the native replied promptly. "And I will be glad to obey if it means the end of the man who is my Baas. He is evil—and he has caught me in the snare of his evil."

The Major nodded understandingly.

"Come," he said, speaking in English now, "we will go into the house. We have to rehearse our parts in the little play we are going to act.

"I suppose, Jones, that there's no doubt that Fat will return before daybreak?"

"He never stays away over night, Major," the detective said confidently. "But what are you going to do?"

"I do nothing," the Major said with a laugh. "I'm only the bally stage manager, as it were. Bailey and Fat Gilson are the stars. Charley will have a fat part and you, as a representative of the jolly old law, will have the pleasure of ringing down the curtain. But I don't appear. I'm dead."

IT WAS after midnight when Fat Gilson hurried along the road leading to his bungalow at the edge of the *dorp*. Despite his bulk, he walked with a cat-like swiftness and silence. In his right hand he carried his revolver and he peered contin-

ually to the left and right as if expecting to discover an enemy hiding in the bush at the side of the road. Occasionally he halted, listening intently.

Stark fear shone from his eyes—that same fear had completely neutralized the effects of the liquor he had been drinking at Soapy Sam's place, leaving him coldly sober and ready to kill mercilessly.

The fear had been born in him at that moment when one of Soapy Sam's henchmen brought the news that Frank Bailey had escaped from prison. It had reached its present height when the discovery had later been made that Violet had disappeared.

It was then that Fat Gilson recalled how friendly the girl had been toward Bailey and he had immediately jumped to the conclusion that she had helped Bailey to escape and also had told him that Fat Gilson was his brother's murderer.

Flash Fenton and Soapy Sam had laughed at his fears—they could afford to! Bailey was not looking for them; they would gain by his, Gilson's, death. They would welcome the news that he had been murdered. And they made no attempts to check his panic-stricken haste to return to his bungalow, nor, despite his pleading, would they accompany him.

There were moments as he passed along the deserted street, shrinking from shadows which his fear-quickenened imagination materialized into the form of the vengeance-seeking Bailey, that Fat Gilson regretted his precipitate flight from the security of the Maxim Bar. But now that he was almost home, his courage began to mount. He persuaded himself that Violet had not given him away. He told himself that Bailey would be too concerned with making a dash for the border to put his neck in jeopardy by seeking vengeance.

WHEN he came to the path leading back from the road to his bungalow Fat Gilson whistled shrilly—paused, then whistled again.

Instantly lights appeared in the windows of his bungalow.

He sighed with relief. Charley was on the lookout and the chances of Bailey having succeeded in hiding himself in the bushes unknown to Charley were very slim. But Fat Gilson meant to take no unnecessary risks and he ran at top speed along the path.

The door opened wide as he climbed swiftly up the steps of the *stoep* which surrounded the bungalow, giving a clear view of a luxuriously furnished room.

"Shut the door and bolt it, Charley," he panted as he passed into the room and dropped into the comfortable recesses of a soft cushioned divan. "Hell!" he continued as he put his feet up and completely relaxed, letting his revolver drop from his hand to the carpet. "I ain't stirring away from here again until they've caught that—Bailey."

He sighed with relief at the sound of the door closing and the turning of the heavy key in the lock.

"Mix me a strong drink, Charley," he said. "And you can have one yourself."

"You won't want a drink where you're going, Gilson. And it's no good shouting out to Charley."

Fat started fearfully and for the first time looked in the direction of the man who had opened the door for him, the man who had answered his whistled signal by turning up the lamps; the man he had supposed to be his bodyguard, Charley.

His jaw sagged, beads of sweat sprang on his forehead. He made a tentative movement for his revolver which was so near.

"Try and get it, if you like," Frank Bailey said. "You'll die that much sooner, that's all."

Fat Gilson sprawled back on the cushions, looking like an impaled toad, as Bailey walked slowly toward him.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped. "What do you want?"

"What do you think I want?" Bailey said coldly as, stooping quickly, he picked up Gilson's revolver and pocketed it. The

revolver in his hand did not waver for one instant from his aim at Gilson's fat paunch.

Gilson licked his lips nervously and attempted a good humored smile; it contorted his face into a semblance of a devilish gargoyle.

"So you came to old Fat to help you escape, did you? Well, you came to the right man, youngster. That was a dirty trick Soapy and Kaffir played on you, making you think the Major killed your brother. Now if you'd asked me, I could have told you a different tale. Well, what do you want? Money? Or, perhaps you'd better hide up here for a few days. Yes. I think that 'ud be better. It'll be easier to smuggle you over the border—I've done a lot of smuggling one way an' another in my time—after the hue and cry's died down a bit. How about it?"

Bailey shook his head.

"I'm not planning to escape," he said. "In the morning I'm going to give myself up. But first I'm going to kill the man who murdered my brother."

"Don't be a fool, Bailey. They hang men for murder in this country."

"I've got good reason to know that," Bailey retorted with a hollow laugh. "But they can't hang me twice—can they? I'm going to be hanged for killing the man I thought had killed my brother. I owe it to both of them—and myself—to kill the actual murderer!"

"And you know who he is?"

"I know," Bailey said.

"My God!" Fat exclaimed hoarsely. "If I ever get my hands on that—Violet——"

"You'd better keep her name out of your filthy mouth, Fat," Bailey said viciously, "unless you prefer a slow death."

"So you're mushy on her, are you?" Fat sneered. "You make a good pair: a murderer and a——"

He didn't complete the sentence, intimidated by Bailey's sudden tenseness.

"Listen, youngster," he continued in a wheedling tone. "I don't know what tale Violet told you about me an' your brother.

I killed him—yes, I'll admit that. But it was in self defence."

"You shot him in the back," Bailey interrupted coldly. "And that's how I'm going to kill you."

"Don't be a fool, youngster," Fat wailed. "Look—I can help you to escape. I'll give you money. As much as you want. You'll be rich for life. I was going to give it to you anyway. My conscience wouldn't have let me keep it. You see, youngster, it really belongs to your brother. And listen; I'll do my best to get that sentence squashed. I've got influence in this *dorp*. The judge'll do anything I tell him. See? I'll tell him how Kaffir and Soapy put you up to killing the Major and he'll order a new trial. Why, I'll get you discharged without a stain on your character."

Bailey shook his head.

"That wouldn't settle my conscience, Fat," he said. "And do you think I could live under an obligation to my brother's murderer. For the matter of that; do you think I believe you'd do any of the things you promise to do?"

"I will—on my word of honor, I will."

"You won't," Bailey said curtly, "because I'm going to kill you now. Turn over—you shot my brother in the back."

But Fat Gilson did not move. He only shrank back amongst the silken cushions as if they could protect him from the death he feared. And then, suddenly, a look of hope came into his eyes. It vanished immediately to be replaced by one of savage, cunning exultation. Even that he disguised by an exhibition of hysterical raving.

H HE BEGGED for mercy. He offered bribes of money and freedom. He promised to confess his nefarious deeds to the police authorities and all the time he forced himself to look away from the native Charley who was creeping up on Bailey with the silent graceful ease of a leopard.

Bailey's finger began to contract on the trigger.

And that was the moment when Charley leaped upon him. The revolver went off, the bullet burying itself in the ceiling. The two men struggled—but only briefly. Charley was very strong and he quickly succeeded in disarming Bailey and pinioning his arms to his sides.

"What shall I do with him, Baas?" Charley asked. "Kill him?"

For a moment Fat hesitated. Then he said with a laugh.

"No, bind him up and in the morning we'll hand him over to the police. That'll be a good joke. Maybe they'll give me a reward."

He watched Charley truss Bailey up securely in a chair, then retrieved Bailey's revolver and his own from Bailey's pocket.

"You ain't crowing so loud now, are you, you young swine? You gave me a bad ten minutes. Well, you're going to pay for that!"

He struck Bailey across the mouth with the flat of his hand, laughing callously as he did so.

Then he went back to the divan again and lounged negligently back against the cushions. He was now completely master of himself and the situation.

"Bring me the whiskey, Charley," he ordered.

The native obeyed silently placing a tray of whiskey and a glass on a small table close to Fat's hand.

Fat poured himself out four fingers, drained it at a gulp and smacked his lips appreciatively. Then he scowled at Charley.

"Why didn't you keep better watch?" he demanded. "This young fool might have killed me. How did he get into the house?"

"Baas," the native said earnestly, speaking English with a lisping accent. "I heard a noise outside. I went to see and this man leaped on me. He hit me here with his gun," Charley pointed to the wound on his forehead—"and for a little while I slept. When I came to, I was bound and gagged, Baas. But I worked myself free. The rest you know."

Fat Gilson smiled complacently.

"The rest I know. Lucky you came when you did, Charley. All right. You can go now. But in the morning I'll flog your hide for not keeping a better watch."

He poured himself out another drink as Charley left the room, and drank it and grinned happily at Bailey.

"Me an' you can have a nice little talk," he said softly. "An' I ain't even going to pretend that I'll help you to escape. In the morning you're going back to the trunk an' in due course you'll be hanged by the neck till you're dead."

"So will you," Bailey retorted sullenly.

Fat Gilson laughed mockingly.

"You're thinking they'll arrest me for the murder of your brother. Not a chance. They can't get a case against me that will hold water. They may *know* I did it—but they can't prove it."

"You admitted it to me," Bailey said.

"That ain't proof, you—! Besides, I'd deny it. An' do you think they'd accept your word against mine?"

HE DRANK again and now that his fears had gone the liquor he had already drunk at Soapy Sam's was beginning to manifest its effects. His face was flushed, his speech thickened and was interspersed with hiccoughs. He laughed frequently and waved his arms about in what were meant to be grandiloquent gestures.

"There ain't nobody can prove I killed your brother," he boasted. "Except maybe Charley. And nobody would listen to what he had to say—even if he wanted to give me away. An' he daren't, the black swine. I've got him where I want him. An' I got you where I want you.

"Listen—" he looked at the clock on the shelf—"we've got a lot of time afore sun up. I tell you things I never told anybody. You can be my confessor—shee? Funny that, ain't it? Confession's good for the—hic—soul. An' you'll be as safe to talk to 'cause nobody 'ud believe you if you did split.

"Want to know why I killed him?"

His voice droned on and on, as he boasted of the crimes he had committed—and the cold blooded murder of Bailey's brother was far from being the most revolting.

At times he stopped to pour himself out a drink, occasionally his voice faded to a whisper as if sleep was overtaking him.

At such time a scornfully doubting question from Bailey started him off again, giving minute details of many of his cold blooded deeds.

At last drink and the lateness of the hour defeated him. The glass he had just filled fell from his hand, his eyes closed and he snored hoggishly.

HE AWOKE sluggishly just as the first rays of morning light streamed into the room.

Rousing himself with a start which accentuated the dull throbbing ache in his head, he looked about the room, vaguely wondering that it should be in such a state of disorder; desk drawers opened and their contents littered about, the pile carpet pulled back, the door of his tiny wall safe ajar.

Then he was suddenly conscious that he was not alone, and looked up into the faces of Detective Jones and Bailey.

"So you got the young swine, eh, Jones?" he said. "Good work. He's mad. Must be. Got a bug in his bonnet that I killed his brother and came here to kill me. I——"

He stopped as Jones stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I arrest you, Gilson, for the murder of John Bailey and I warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you."

Fat Gilson was stunned for a moment, but he quickly recovered.

"Don't be a fool, Jones," he said. "Even if I did kill him—which I don't admit for a moment—you can't prove it."

"Maybe you're forgetting," Jones said coldly, "that you were drunk last night and you talked a lot."

"What if I did?" Gilson said indignantly. "I was pulling the young swine's leg that's all. Besides what he says I said ain't evidence."

"Come on," Jones said curtly. "Can't waste any more time here." He pulled Gilson to his feet, and snapped the handcuffs about his wrists.

Gilson swore viciously.

"You can't get away with this, Jones. I'll make you pay for it. I'll make you the laughing stock of the *dorp*. Arresting me for murder on the say so of this young swine."

And then his eyes ranged round the room again and his face paled.

"Look here," he blustered, "who the hell gave you the right to go through my possessions?"

"The law," Jones retorted crisply. "And listen here, Gilson, the less you say the better for you. With what you said last night, plus the evidence I've found here in this room, plus the evidence Charley said he is ready to give—I've got enough to hang you ten times over. An' if the jury's squeamish about hanging you—an' they won't be—I've got enough evidence to send you to the Breakwater for the rest of your life."

Gilson muttered desperately.

"What Bailey says I said ain't evidence."

"It's what I say you said," Jones retorted. "I've got it all down here—" he produced a fat note book.

"You trying to tell me you were here all the time?"

"All the time," Jones replied. "Me an' Bailey—I reckoned that was coming to him—and Charley and—and another chap formed up that little play for you. We figured you'd be more ready to talk if you were put in fear of death first. And you were! Now come on, before the sun gets up too high. On your way, Bailey."

ONCE again justice moved swiftly and three weeks later Fat Gilson was carried, screaming for the mercy he had always withheld, from the dock with the

death sentence ringing deafeningly in his ears.

Gilson's well deserved fate was not the sole item of news which, that night, was eagerly discussed with varying emotions by the citizens of the *dorp*; and there were



many wild guesses as to the real explanation of the official bulletin signed by the Governor of the Colony which tersely announced the unconditional release of Frank Bailey, owing, the bulletin mysteriously concluded, "to additional evidence which has been placed before the crown; evidence which at this time cannot be divulged."

Soapy Sam and Slick Fenton were more perturbed at Bailey's release than they were at the fate of their fellow crook. Gilson's fate only served to strengthen their own position in the realms of crime, but Bailey's release was fraught with dangerous possibilities specially as he was probably with Violet who had been strangely missing since the night before Gilson's arrest.

And Violet knew too much.

"I tell you, I don't know where she is," Bessie said wearily in response to Soapy Sam's angry questions. "She went out that night after she had put me to bed."

"I'll slit her throat—an' yours too—if she blabs," Soapy Sam said viciously, but he flinched a little at Bessie's look of scorn.

At that moment the girl, Violet, was released from the hut where she had been kept a close prisoner ever since the night of Frank Bailey's escape.

"If you're wise, my dear," said the kind hearted woman who had been her warder, "you'll get out of the *dorp* at once. Your life won't be worth anything if Soapy

Sam—or any of his crowd—lays hands on you."

"I suppose not," the girl agreed dully, and walked slowly away, head bent in thought. Presently she was aware of the fact that some one was walking beside her, and looking up with a gasp of fear, saw—by the light that streamed through the window of a house they were passing—that it was the Major.

"Thank you, Major," she said breathlessly, "thank you for what you have done for Frank."

"He did most of it, himself," the Major said lightly. "I was—if you understand me—the stage manager—*cum*—scene shifter—*cum*—noises heard off, and all that. And now, what about you?"

"I'm going to Soapy's," the girl replied.

"Why?" The Major's tone was crisp. "Going back to the old game of steering fools into Soapy's clutches?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, I'm through with that. But I've broken the rule of the crowd. I've given away one of the gang. I'm going back to take my medicine."

The Major pretended not to understand.

"Your medicine?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Soapy will kill me." She made the statement in a flat, colorless voice.

"And Frank Bailey?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I think he's forgotten we ever met. He's leaving the *dorp* tonight. And I'm glad. They'd kill him if he stayed here."

The Major was silent for a little while. Then he said, "So you're going back to Soapy?"

"Yes."

"But how about me?"

"You!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, me! You'll admit, I suppose, that I have a little count to settle with you?"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "That was a dirty trick I played on you, Major, I'm sorry. Please believe that."

"And you think to settle my account so easily?" he asked coldly.

"Soapy will settle it for you before morning," she retorted, a little catch in her voice.

"I don't allow other people to settle my debts," the Major said.

"So—what?"

"So—I think you will not go back to Soapy Sam's. Instead, you're coming with me."

As he spoke he seized her firmly by the wrist and dragged her along with him, down a side street which led directly to the open veld.

She struggled for a little while then, resigning herself to her fate, walked along meekly beside him.

"Things have a way of happening as you want them to, haven't they, Major?" she said bravely after they had left the *dorp* a couple of miles behind them. "We thought we had killed you—eight of us. But you're alive and there's only four of us left; Bessie, Fenton, Soapy Sam, and me. What, what are you going to do with me?"

"In an hour—or less," he answered grimly—"there won't be a Violet Grayson."

She gasped in dismay.

"How did you know that was my name?"

"I have a way of discovering things," he replied.

"You won't tell my people?" she begged.

When he did not answer her she begged and pleaded with him until his cold silence dried up her speech and tears.

AT LAST they came to an outspan where a wagon and a bell tent stood out ghostily against the shimmer of stars.

A fire blazed cheerfully and by it sat a Hottentot holding in his hands the bridle reins of two saddled horses—a coal black stallion and a flea-bitten gray.

The Hottentot sprang to his feet.

"All is ready, Baas. I will inspan the mules now."

"Good, Jim," the Major said briefly. "As for you—" he gave Violet a push, propelling her toward the tent—"go in there until I am ready to deal with you."

She went forward, groping blindly for the fly of the tent. Finding it, she pulled it on one side and entered.

An oil lamp hung from the tent pole and by its light she saw a gray-bearded man in clerical attire. He had an open book in his hand, and on the book a gold ring rested. He smiled at her encouragingly.

She turned, frightened, unable to credit the evidence of her eyes, and saw Bailey standing there, holding out his arms towards her.

She went to him, and for a little while there was only the sound of her happy sobbing.

A few minutes later they both turned and, hand in hand, faced the gray-bearded man.

"We're ready now, Padre," Frank Bailey said. "Where's the Major?"

But the Major had not waited to see the ceremony which was to end the career of Violet Grayson, and when Frank Bailey rushed out of the tent to find him, he and Jim were cantering over the veld beyond recall.

"That is like the Major," the priest observed with a smile when Frank Bailey re-entered the tent. "But he left a message with me for you both. You are to trek south as soon as the ceremony is over—the mules are already inspanned—and take the first boat for England. You will find all the money you need in the black despatch box—diamonds, too. It is all rightfully yours, for it belonged to your brother. And now—we must waste no more time. Stand together before me, please."

And that was the moment the Hottentot observed to his Baas:

"This is a strange vengeance you have taken, Baas. Whom do you punish, the man or the woman?"

"Don't be a bally cynic, Jim!" the Major drawled in English.



REVERSE ENGLISH

By PERRY ADAMS

Author of "It Takes a War," and other stories.

HARBINGERS of winter soon to descend from the icy fastnesses of the Hindu Kush, chill winds swirled and eddied about a watch tower which guarded the valley of that notorious Pathan chieftain, the Haji of Turganzai.

Atop the tower, around the embers of a dying fire, thick felt cloaks drawn protectingly about them, squatted a group of Afridis, deep in conversation with the Haji. This uncomfortable spot had been chosen because of its isolation; here their deliberations would be undisturbed.

The short autumn afternoon was drawing to a close. They had been sitting for several hours without change of position. Presently, from a minaret far down the valley, came faintly the muezzin's sing-song call to evening prayer.

With half-concealed sighs of relief, cramped bodies stirred. All joined in respectful salaams to Allah, the All-merciful.

The Haji rose from his knees a few seconds before the others. He walked to the low parapet and spat thoughtfully. Like a knowing old war horse he sniffed the wind. His eyes sought the northwest, as

though he could see the giant peaks beyond Afghanistan. Slowly he faced about and returned to the others.

"The coming snows bring bitter memories of recent conflict with the white Unbelievers," he said. "Eyes in their flying ships mark our every move—may the curse of the Prophet destroy them! More, the ships drop great fire-eggs on my people, killing many. The good days of old, when we could fight them man to man, often with great credit and much profit—those days, I fear, are gone!"

He sighed gustily and resumed his place with the others, who stared stolidly at the glowing coals.

Abdul Hasan, chief of the Aka Khel, in the gathering darkness stretched out a hand and studied its silhouette against the embers. He moved his fingers absently, made a fist and spoke.

"You do not answer our question, O Haji."

"Nay, but I do!" said the Haji. "Of what profit is it to hold this white woman for ransom, when the ships with wings see all from afar?"

"As I have explained," said the other

***Meet Miss Matilda May Quincy of Boston and the One and Only
Haji of Turganzai in Their First and Only Appearance
Under the Management of Private William Cox.***

patiently, "she has made no secret of her plans—they are well known in Peshawar. Should she carry them out and disappear, the British will make inquiries among my people, for Aka Khel country is her avowed destination. When the English question us, we shall say that she changed her plans and merely passed through our territory on her way to Afghanistan. In reality, she will be held captive by you. None will suspect that she is here in Turganzai. Presently the British will tire of their search and will go home. Then I shall cause rumors to be spread in Peshawar bazaar that she may be ransomed. We would share the rich reward. There would be much profit and no risk!"

For a moment, the Haji's crafty old eyes gleamed with avarice. Then he shook his head.

"I hear your words, Abdul Hasan, but the affair leaves me cold. The British are far from fools. What if our plan should miscarry?"

"*Bismillah!*" cried the other, "that I should live to hear such faint words from the great Haji! There is yet another side to the matter. This woman's father came among us to belittle the Prophet—to demand that we become Christians. We slew him. Now we learn that she is in Peshawar for the same purpose. Think! A woman comes to flaunt her faith in our teeth—a woman, O Haji! Will you permit this double insult to go unavenged—you, who have made the journey to Mecca and who wear the green turban?"

The Haji's expression changed. "Is it so! You should have said this before. Truly, when these dogs of Unbelievers seek to meddle with the True Faith, they must be made to pay heavily!"

THUS plotted the tribal chieftains among their barren hills, all unknown to the lady in question and to a certain diminutive private soldier in the Prince of Wales' Light Infantry. These two, strangers to each other in Peshawar, little

dreamed of the strange web destined to draw them together.

Miss Matilda May Quincy of Boston, Massachusetts, was about twenty-five—an earnest Amazon who could have been far from unprepossessing had she given a mite more thought to her looks and a share less to the career toward which her whole life had pointed. As it was, she wore rimmed spectacles, sensible clothes and flat heeled shoes. She had perfected herself in the intricacies of the Pushtu language at the expense of a school girl complexion, for great was her desire to follow in the footsteps of her father, the cause of whose sudden demise has already been indicated.

Through bazaar spies, Matilda May's presence in Peshawar was known to the Afridis almost as soon as her application for a permit to proceed across the border reached the British High Commissioner. And while the tribesmen made eager plans for her future, such was not the case with the harrassed official, who just now was wishing all missionaries—and this American female in particular—far, far away.

"I simply can't let you proceed further," he was telling the disappointed Bostonian. "The Northwest Frontier isn't the place for a missionary—and a woman!" He threw up his hands and shook his head.

"But I simply must pick up where my dear father left off," pleaded Matilda May. "Why, I've been planning this all my life!"

The Commissioner looked at her pityingly. "There's nothing to pick up and your father never had any business going among the Afridis in the first place," he said shortly. Then, seeing her drooping mouth, he added more kindly—"Your best plan is to go somewhere down country and be a missionary where it will do some good. Take my word for it, Miss Quincy, all you can do here is to lose your life or, by some miracle failing that, create a problem which would involve sending a costly expedition to get you out."

After two more interviews, in which the exasperated Commissioner patiently covered the same ground as before, it began to

dawn on Matilda May that official sanction would never attend her "cause." With the stubbornness of ignorance, and stimulated by the erroneous belief that she was being discriminated against because she was an American, Matilda May determined to proceed on her own account.

She possessed an old detail map once sent by her father, showing the contours of the objective country. Long study had familiarized her with every line on the map.

Three ponies had been purchased some days before. Equipped with a small tent and simple camping utensils, and accompanied by her bearer Chunda Lal, a Madras Christian who, like the camp things, had been selected upon her arrival in Bombay, the leader of the Second Quincy Missionary Expedition to the Afridis stole away from Peshawar in the hours of darkness.

IT WAS not until the following afternoon that her disappearance was discovered. The Commissioner's ire was a thing to behold. His remarks seared the ears even of his case-hardened staff.

Soon the insistent drone of a departing fleet of planes turned quiet Peshawar into one vast sawmill. In barracks, wakened from their siesta, men suddenly sat up, cursed the noise—and wondered.

In a bungalow occupied by the Prince of Wales' Light Infantry, there awoke with the rest Private William Cox—a sandy half-pint of Tommy who had been all but rejected for service because of his minute proportions.

"Wot's all th' bloomin' row?" he demanded truculently. His reddish mop stood out at all angles from his head, giving him rather the air of an angry terrier.

His friend and tormentor in the next bed, "Feathers" Finnerty, winked largely at the others.

"Th' ginal heard you wuz a lover o' birds' nests, Coxy. He sez ter me, 'Feathers,' he sez. 'the R. A. F. needs exercise, so it does, an' now's our chanct to send 'em

lookin' fer nests fer good ole Coxy.'"

A roar of laughter followed, for Coxy's harmless hobby had long been a joke in the regiment. Until recently, the unit had been stationed in Burma. Originally more as a pastime than with any idea of gain, Coxy had gathered nests and eggs of many strange birds which made their homes in the thick jungle within a stone's throw of barracks. Presently, in an old copy of some London paper, he had read an advertisement which offered substantial sums for eggs and nests of tropical birds. There had ensued for Coxy a period of unprecedented affluence; foolishly, he had openly boasted of his good fortune and had been pridefully willing to scatter alms to his needy comrades. For the moment, Coxy was king-pin of his company.

But 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' The regiment moved from Burma to Peshawar. To his dismay, Coxy found the new station about as tropical as his native London. The source of his extra income was no longer available. Coxy, dethroned plutocrat, found his mates all too ready to turn on their erstwhile benefactor. Too, now that he was no longer able to grant financial favors, his small stature was forever being audibly noticed.

"If th' tribesmen ever gets ahold o' yer," said Feathers Finnerty, "they'll use yer fer a dust mop ter clean off them hills."

"Yeh wrong, Finnerty," said another man who sorely missed the sums he had been wont to "borrow" from the good natured Coxy, "them Pathans would be 'elpless. Y'see, one look h'at Coxy, 'n' they'd be h'overcome—wiv laughter!"

"Size h'ain't h'everything," said Coxy, "h'it's wot yer got h'above th' neck wot counts. Brains ter fink wiv."

"Aw—that wuz just luck in Burma," said Feathers, "you've had your day."

"Yus? Just gimme a little time—mebbe you'll be surprised," countered Coxy darkly.

During this conversation and long after it, a sky-filling armada searched in vain for the vanished Miss Quincy. As night came

on, one by one weary pilots landed and slid down from their cockpits with silent shakes of their heads. Matilda May simply wasn't!

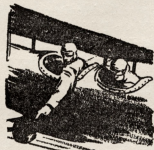
The Commissioner conferred with the commanding general.

"Fool woman—serve her jolly well right to let her go and forget her!" barked the Commissioner.

"Which, naturally, we can't do."

"No—much as I'd like to! See here, we want to avoid making an issue of this, at

all costs. How would it be, initially, to send in a native agent—someone they trust? Send word to the Aka Khels to give up the woman at once or



take the consequences?"

"That," said the general, "seems like a sound idea."

THE object of their anxiety had reached the foothills before the air search began and had managed to conceal her small cavalcade from British eyes. She entered Afridi territory unmolested, although carefully watched by lurking tribesmen. Considered as valuable merchandise on the hoof, she would have been in danger only had she attempted to turn back. Since nothing was further from her mind, her plans and the Afridis' were in perfect accord. In due course she arrived at the head village of the Aka Khels. Without explanation, she was forwarded by night to the Haji.

Once in Turganzai, although much mystified over the shift of scene, she refused to consider herself a prisoner; and since she was able to convey this thought to those about her, the Haji began to scratch his head in perplexity. If he hadn't a frightened captive who would sue for the privilege of being ransomed, just what had he?

After considerable thought, he concluded that he had the makings of a large headache.

His valley was honeycombed with caves. In one of these, near the village, Matilda May had been installed. Here she immediately set to work by lecturing her grinning guards on the advantages of embracing Christianity. Her vocabulary did not include much of the local slang, or she might have been amazed and chagrined over the true results of her efforts.

Nor would her peace of mind have been increased had she known that her servant, the Madras Christian, who crept about the cave with an outraged look in his eyes, had already been all but converted to Islam!

Across the mountains the Haji's fellow conspirator, Abdul Hasan, was receiving the British native agent with ceremony and every show of friendliness. Yes, Abdul assured him, several days ago the strange white woman had passed through Aka Khel territory, saying that her destination was Afghanistan.

The agent looked down his nose and sighed.

"In Peshawar, they may think it improbable that she would choose such a route," he said drily, "when others are easier and less hazardous."

There was, Abdul remarked, no accounting for the actions of foreigners.

"I was to add," said the agent, "that should your answers seem unsatisfactory, you will soon have visitors." The meaning of his skyward glance was unmistakable.

By every oath known to a devout Mohammedan, the chief swore that he had told the truth, had concealed nothing. Then his tone changed.

"Go back to those who sent you," he cried, a world of wounded pride in his voice, "and say that if they do not believe, to send their soldiers here and we of the Aka Khel will aid their search!"

The other made soothing noises. The answer, he thought, was clever. Far better to have infantry to lead on a wild goose

chase, than to court the sudden appearance of the dreaded ships with wings, dealing death without a word.

"Of course," added the chief judiciously, "the English must know that while I can answer for my own people, I have, alas, little influence over my neighbors. How they would construe the appearance of an armed force during a period of peace, I cannot say."

"I am but the go-between," said the agent, upon whom this last touch was not wasted, "I shall convey your messages exactly."

"Go with God!" said the other piously.

Accordingly, the agent returned to Peshawar, reported his conversation and vanished into the bazaar, whence he had come.

Since the British threat had failed to produce results, immediate action was the only course left open.

And so it was that presently the Prince of Wales' Light Infantry, with Coxy scampering along in the van, headed into the valleys of the Aka Khel.

"If we runs inter trouble," said Feathers Finnerty to his small companion, "just leap inter me haversack. You'll be safe there!"

"Aw, give th' little lad a chawncie," advised a corporal who marched nearby, "'Ow would yer h'expect 'im ter go a-leapin' that 'igh?"

SAID a deep voice several furs to the rear: "Mebbe he'll find an empty bird's nest ter jump inter—one that's blown down."

Coxy tried to think up a crushing retort. Since none occurred to him on the spur of the moment, he remained silent. Soon the attention of all was attracted to a village, before which stood a large group of Afridis.

They made no hostile move, although all were armed to the teeth.

The British column halted. Headed by two officers, a small party made its way forward. Halfway it was met by a tall tribesman, with a dozen spearmen as escort.

After a brief conference, the officers returned to the column and led the way to a camp site at no great distance from the village.

This was the beginning, for Coxy and the rest, of several curious days. The hunt for Miss Quincy led them far afield, always accompanied and guided by their traditional enemies, who appeared friendly.

True to his word, given the agent, the tall Abdul Hasan was seemingly untiring in his efforts to help. His attitude was one of courteous resignation. His word had been doubted. Very well—in spite of that, his people would aid the British in searching every inch of the country. Naturally, he said, there was not the slightest hope of finding the missing woman. How could there be, when the memsahib had long since headed west? Imperturbably, the British continued to search until satisfied.

One factor Abdul Hasan had not taken into account. The Haji of Turganzai was growing old. Already certain *mullahs* were making their influence felt among his warriors—influence at present entirely counter to the Haji's. The *mullahs* deplored the faint heartedness of their once great leader, pointing out the golden opportunity to attack the white Unbelievers encamped only a few valleys away. Was this chance to be wasted?

By way of answer, the young men of Turganzai attacked before dawn on the very day when the British planned to move westward in their search.

Coxy and Feathers Finnerty were sleeping side by side when the first fusillade shattered the peace of the valley. They sprang to their knees and fumbled for their rifles.

"Light a *bhutti*!" shouted someone, as men sought to disentangle themselves in the crowded service tent. A match flared in an attempt to light the hurricane lamp with which each tent was provided. The match sputtered and went out.

"No lights!" cried the platoon commander sternly, from some point nearby.

More shots. Then, closer, sounds of

hand-to-hand fighting—grunts, snarls, curses. Just as he rose to his feet, Coxy heard the thud of running feet. There was a ripping noise as the runner stumbled over tent pegs and guys—then the entire tent was collapsing.

Heavy wooden uprights leaned drunkenly, gaining momentum as they fell. With utmost precision, one thick pole struck Coxy squarely on the head. He had a fleeting vision of all the stars of the firmament—and knew nothing more.

Feathers and the others managed to scramble from under the fallen tent. They joined the company, fixing bayonets in the darkness. Aided by the growing daylight, the regiment soon rallied and cleared the camp.

As they stood to, half expecting a further attack, the morning patrol from Peshawar flew over the camp. When the Turganzais heard the familiar drone they fled.

Planes swooped low and accounted for many with machine guns. Until late in the morning others were observed straggling back to their villages in the Haji's territory. This the planes reported from the air, to the pack wireless in the camp. The origin of the attack was thus unmistakable.

Throughout, to their credit, the Aka Khel had taken no part. This the British commander observed as he determined to move on Turganzai. He had no means of knowing that for once, the Haji himself was entirely innocent.

THE embattled Prince of Wales' Light Infantry was breaking camp, having breakfast, binding up its wounds and vowing vengeance.

Through all this ran Feathers Finnerty, an agonized look on his face.

"Seen Coxy—seen Coxy?" he demanded of everyone he met. The half-pint had utterly disappeared.

The fallen tent still lay in a heap when Feathers returned after his fruitless search.

"Silly little blighter's mislaid for sure," he told his companions. They were just

then discussing the contents of a newly opened tin of bully-beef, washed down with hot tea. At Feathers' words, they paused.

"Who's mislaid?" asked the platoon sergeant, his mouth full of beef.

"Little Coxy, sergeant—you ain't seen him, have you?"

"Aw, 'e'll turn up," said the sergeant reassuringly, "h'if 'e wuz a casualty, you'd see 'im layin' abaht 'ere, wouldn't yer?"

"Them blokes may've carried 'im off fer a mascot," said someone.

The sergeant wiped greasy hands on his breeches.

"Well," he said, "let's get th' tent rolled h'up. 'Ere, you chaps, grab 'old by th' ridge pole 'n drag 'er clear. Then y'c'n get yer kit h'out from beneath."

The tent was dragged to one side. From the middle of a tangled mass of blankets, webbing equipment and clothing, emerged a tousled red head. The apparition sat up and gazed about somewhat dazedly, tenderly feeling the top of his head.

"H'is breakfast h'over?" he asked plaintively.

With one accord, the men turned.

"Coxy!"

"Fer Gossakes," cried the amazed sergeant, "'ave you been h'under that there h'all this time?"

"Feels like h'I been knocked h'on th' dome, like—wot's been goin' h'on?"

In the pause that followed, one voice was heard—that of Feathers.

"Our hero!" was all he said.

It was enough. The ensuing shout brought others running. Soon the story was all over the camp. If poor Coxy had been badgered before, only the fact that they were soon on the march saved him from the worst spoofing of his life. As it was, his platoon mates took care not to let him forget his apparent delinquency.

Easy going though he was, this continued reference to an unfortunate incident at last got under Coxy's skin. The maddening part of it was that he could offer no explanation, for he had no idea what

had happened to him at the beginning of the attack.

At last he turned on his friend Feathers, who marched, as usual, by his side. The fun-loving Irishman had led the attack on his small crony.

"Call yerself a pal," sneered Coxy. "All you wuz good fer wuz ter spend my money h'in Burma. Fair weavver friends—that's wot y'are—h'all h'of yer!"

"Begorrah," retorted Feathers, "if them brains yer allus talkin' about is only good ter think up ways of kapin' out of danger, why, I'm glad I'm dumb!"

"Brains is brains," said Coxy doggedly, "'n no matter wot yer think, time will prove h'it."

But the immediate future seemed to offer little enough opportunity for any extended exhibition of Coxy's superior intelligence.

Entrance into Turganzai could only be effected through a narrow pass, guarded by precipitous, frowning cliffs. On the following day, time after time the air force attempted to clear the pass of defenders; but without success. There were caves all about, and into these the tribesmen retired when attacked from the air. Immediately the planes had flown over, out they popped in defiance.

SUPPORTED by a battalion of Sikhs and covered both by the bombing and machine gun fire of the planes, as well as by three mountain batteries and numerous machine guns in the rear, the Prince of Wales' Light Infantry worked slowly toward the pass. Their front was necessarily narrow—confined by the valley through which they deployed.

Many of those in the van went down; some, temporarily knocked out, rolled into the swift stream which carved the valley, and were drowned.

On they went, gradually nearing their goal. And now the leaders were so close that they were all but in the field of fire of their own rearward guns. The batteries

became silent. Some of the planes by now had run out of ammunition.

As the British prepared to charge, the hillmen appeared in force and poured a withering fire upon their attackers.

Suddenly Cox and Feathers surged forward with the onslaught, deafened by the concussion of the tribesmen's point blank range. A slug took the man next Coxy, who pressed forward, the man's blood warm on his face and hands.

Dark faces, hideous with the killer's lust, bobbed past Coxy's eyes. They were all about him, a nightmare pattern, weaving in and out. Then he saw a youthful spearman poised to thrust at him. Coxy braced to parry the blow with his bayonet, but a chance shot blotted the man out.

Cox glimpsed Feathers off to one side in a tense struggle for possession of his own rifle. Coxy rushed in. His bayonet bit into yielding flesh—and stuck. He pulled his trigger and the blade came free. Even in death, the tribesman kept his grip on Feathers' weapon.

These two were disengaging it from the man's hands when a loud cheer announced that the position had been carried.

The Turganzai retreat dotted the valley beyond the pass; with Lewis guns and rifles, the British were firing at will. By the time the machine guns and mountain batteries could be brought up, the fading light ended hostilities for the day.

EVEN as the British stormed the pass, the distraught Haji cast about for some means of escape with his valuable prisoner. Aided by their planes, he was certain that his enemies would soon penetrate into his villages. He was caught, he felt, like a rat in a trap. If he took the woman and tried to escape through the far end of the valley, those all-seeing eyes from above would mark his progress and somehow cut him off. And he could not risk waiting until darkness—then might be too late.

For the thousandth time he was cursing Abdul Hasan and deploring his own fool-

ishness for having permitted the Aka Khel to draw him into the scheme, when a new thought struck him.

Under the summit of a jutting promontory, near the pass which his people now disputed with the British, there was a cave remembered from boyhood and known only to himself. The entrance could only be reached by a faint trail which ran up from the pass itself. Would he have time to make it?

Quickly he dismissed the few guards in his household, sending them off to fight. He filled a large bag with food and a goat-skin sack with water. Then he dragged out two long, hooded cloaks, such as were used against the cold in the dead of winter. He bundled the cloaks into another bag, shouldered the lot, and made his way out of the now deserted village.

Soon he reached the cave where Matilda May had been kept prisoner. Her guards, too, he dismissed.

"What does all the firing mean—what is happening?" she asked him. The guards had told her nothing.

"The English are here," said the Haji, knowing that she would not welcome the news. "Come," he added, emptying the cloaks on the floor, "there is no time to lose! Put on this cloak and pull the hood over your head—so. We must hide elsewhere until they have gone."

Matilda May sensed only friendliness in his suggestion. This fierce looking old chief was her ally! She drew the cloak closely about her, as the Haji donned the other and picked up the two remaining bags.

"Keep close to me," he warned. "Soon we shall be near the fighting. Keep your face covered, so that none may know who you are. We go to a safe place."

A rapid walk soon brought them near the pass. In the noise and confusion at this rear fringe of the fight, they threaded their way unnoticed and unchallenged.

THE trail to the cave bore sharply away from the pass. Within a minute, a bend hid their progress from any of the

Haji's people who might have found time to be curious. They came out upon higher ground. A magnificent panorama of the valley lay to their left, the village far beneath them. But there was no time to admire scenery.

Only in the nick of time had the Haji carried out his plan, for presently prolonged British cheers told all too clearly that the pass had been taken.

Ahead, on the edge of the cliff and slightly above them, the leafless branches of a dead tree stretched up to heaven as though in silent protest at having been forced to live and die in such bleak, cheerless surroundings.

The Haji led Matilda May to the foot of this old tree. About its unprotesting and exposed roots scrub vines had wound in a thick mass. The Haji knelt and carefully parted these. In a moment a narrow, well-like tunnel was exposed. The Haji lowered himself carefully until only his head was visible to the waiting missionary.

"Pull the vines back in place and follow me carefully," said the chief, "there are small steps hollowed in the earth."

They made the steep descent without mishap. At the bottom of the twenty-foot funnel—for it was little more—they entered the cave. At some remote period, this place had been rudely lined with slabs of slate and a peep-hole had been pierced through on the valley side.

The Haji busied himself tearing away the lichen which had grown over this small opening.

"Here the British will never find us," he said over his shoulder.

"Soon they will go away and my people will return to their homes. Then we, too, shall return."

"You have food?" she asked.

Silently he indicated the bags.

Mention of food reminded Matilda May that her bearer, Chunda Lal, had not been bringing her meals lately; her guards had fed her.

"What did you do with my servant?" she asked.

The Haji turned with a smile. "Did not your guards tell you? He is now a good Mohammedan, praise Allah!"

"A Mohammedan! Why, that can't be—he's a Christian."

"No longer! Christians cannot live here. Soon you must become a Mohammedan yourself."

"But—but—I came here to make you all Christians!"

"A grave mistake on your part."

Matilda May's complacency was sadly shaken. She began to think of the disagreeable possibilities ahead—and suddenly she was very much afraid.

"I shall never become a Mohammedan," she said finally.

"In that case," said the Haji pleasantly, "someone among your family or friends will doubtless be willing to compensate us for our disappointment. Say fifty thousand rupees, so that you may depart in safety. Should the money not be forthcoming—" From the folds of his waistband he drew the long, razor-sharp knife which the tribal chiefs habitually carry.

Delicately he felt the edge of the blade, looked at her speculatively—and smiled.

ON THE morning following the storming of the pass, the Air Force flew out from Peshawar and bombed Turganzai into a heap of powdery dust. Coxy and Feathers sat and watched the troops follow down the valley, routing out hiding tribesmen from the low-lying caves as they went.

A good natured sergeant had loaned the friends a pair of field glasses.

"Fer once," said Feathers, "you 'n me picked a cushy job. Bein' rear guard an' waitin' here in th' pass 'til them blokes mops up, is my idea of a nice war, bedad!"

"Yus—too nice," said the owner of the glasses, coming up behind them. "Captain wants two men as a picket on that 'igh ground there. Keep th' glasses—'n use

'em. Orf yer goes—send yer relief h'at noon!"

GRUMBLING, the two men rose and wandered uncertainly in the general direction indicated by the sergeant.

Presently Coxy discovered the same faint trail used by the Haji and Matilda May.

"See—'ere's a sort of path," he exclaimed.

They walked up this for some distance, until they had an unobstructed view on all sides.

"Let's sit down here," said Feathers, "this's as good a spot as any."

They lit cigarettes. Feathers eased his skeleton pack from his shoulder straps and made a pillow of his rolled British warm coat. He leaned back and tilted his helmet over his eyes.

"Wake me for dinner, kid," said he, lazily. Soon he was asleep.

Coxy took the glasses from their case and casually scanned points of interest. The mopping up job, he observed, was about over. He could see the troops gathered near what had been the village. Apparently they had fallen out for a rest.

What did clouds look like through glasses, he idly wondered? He ranged the binoculars upward. An immense bird

floated across his vision and disappeared. He lowered the glasses. There it was! What a wopper!

He could see the bird clearly without the glasses. It floated gracefully about



the valley. Even at the distance he noticed its pointed wings and wedge-shaped tail. Could it be a lammergeyer? A memory came rushing back to him and his heart skipped a beat. Why, a nest or an egg of one of those birds was what the bloke back in Blighty had always wanted him to se-

cure. There had been none in Burma. The collector had made him a standing offer of twenty quid for the nest, Coxy remembered. What was it the fellow had written? "Always tell them by their great size, their pointed wings and wedge-shaped tails." A cross between an eagle and a vulture.

Coxy watched the bird's flight. In ever narrowing circles it swooped toward a dead tree not far away. There! It was on the ground beside the tree.

He trained his glasses on the bird. It walked clumsily a few paces to the edge of the cliff and fluttered down to a ledge not far below the top.

That would be where the nest was. Through the glasses it looked as though, with a little effort, a man could reach down to the ledge.

Twenty quid! Coxy glanced hastily around. In the morning sunlight, all was peaceful and serene. Should he waken Feathers? What was the use? The top of the cliff was only about two hundred yards away.

In his excitement, he broke into a run. His eye on the objective, he stumbled several times as he approached. That was a lammergeyer all right—nothing else that flew was so big!

He reached the tree. He stumbled over exposed roots, some of which protruded from the cliff side. It was going to be quite a climb down to that ledge.

Again he tripped over a root. One foot shot forward to prevent a fall. What was this? He was several feet from the edge, yet the foot kept sinking.

HIS body was following. Frantically, he clutched at vines—the heavy tree roots in that second were all out of reach. For an instant the vines supported him—then gave way.

Down he shot, with a tremendous rattle of loose stones and earth. He struck bottom—and knew instantly that his left leg was either badly sprained or broken.

His slung rifle had somehow managed

to slip off over his head. Now it followed him down—struck him sharply in the back. He seized it.

The Haji stood with his hand on his knife hilt, too surprised to move.

Unable to believe her eyes, Matilda May laughed hysterically.

Coxy methodically pumped a cartridge into his breech and looked from one to the other. As an afterthought, sitting there, he fixed his bayonet. Such is the result of training for an emergency.

Then the Haji made his rush. He came up snarling but stopped dead as Coxy's bayonet just pricked the skin of his stomach.

"Back!" said Coxy, giving him an extra prod.

And back went the Haji—not because he understood the English word, but because Coxy's intent would have been clear without any language at all. He retreated clear to the other side of the cave; stood there glowering.

"Nah then—wot's h't orl abaht?" asked the sitting Coxy. An eye still on the Haji, he addressed Matilda May:

"'Oo's this dodger?"

"The Haji of Turganzai."

"'N yer this Miss Quincy, ain't yer?"

"Yes," said Matilda May.

"Wot luck! Well, g'arn h'over 'n tyke that bloomin' carver awye from 'is nibs—will yer, please?"

Matilda May spoke to the Haji: "He says, 'drop that knife!'"

The chief glanced at Coxy. He saw the Britisher's rifle at the firing position, the muzzle pointing toward his chest. He dropped the knife.

"Blyme," said Coxy admiringly, "so yer sling th' bat, do yer?"

"Oh, yes," said Matilda May, picking up the knife, "I've studied Pushtu for years."

"That'll be 'andy—y'c'n sorta order 'im abaht," said Coxy. "Y'see, one h'of me legs is queer."

"Oh—you're hurt! Let me see if I can help you."

"Nix—not now, lady. We got ter get h'out o' 'ere!"

"Good!" said Matilda May, "can you stand on the leg?"

Coxy, his eye never leaving the Haji, made a brave effort to rest his weight on the injured leg. It was impossible.

"I'm so sorry," she said, seeing his face involuntarily contorted with pain.

Then, at the same instant, they both had the same thought. Getting to the surface with the Haji in tow was going to be quite a problem.

"You wear a petticoat?" asked Coxy suddenly.

Matilda May gulped. "Why—yes."

"Could yer tear mebbe h'eight ter ten feet h'in strips? I got an idea!"

She turned away. Presently came the sound of tearing cloth. It never occurred to her to question this forceful little man.

The strips were tied into a passable rope—quite strong. The petticoat had been chosen for service!

With a little threatening, the Haji was backed over near Coxy.

Taking instructions from him, Matilda May tied the linen rope about the Haji's waist and passed the loose ends through the trigger guard of the rifle. She then drew the muzzle tightly against the Haji's back.

"Werry nice," said Coxy approvingly. "Now tell 'im ter start h'up that there chute. 'E can kinda pull me, 'n mebbe yer won't mind pushin' from be'ind. Tell 'im h'if 'e h'acts funny, h'I'll pull me trigger."

Thus the strange trio worked their way out to open air, the business end of the rifle always glued to the Haji's back.

COXY looked off to where he had left Feathers. Immobile, a smudge of khaki showed against the gray stone.

"That there's me myte, miss," indicating the recumbent Feathers, "'e's a werry good sleeper—leaves th' thinkin' and th' doin' ter me, like."

"How thankful I am that he did!" cried the relieved Matilda May. "Why, you've been splendid! See, I can easily carry you to him."

The thought of being carried by a woman caused the splendid one to blush deeply. He felt very small as she picked him up.

The noise of their approach awakened the somnolent Feathers. He sat up and stared—and continued to stare. Reading from front to rear, more or less, this is what met his amazed gaze:

Item: One large and oldish native, richly dressed, a worried frown on his face, mincing along carefully as though walking on new-laid eggs.

Item: One large and youngish female, white, wearing, among other things, rimmed spectacles and an earnest expression. In her right arm, akimbo, a strange bundle.

Item: The bundle—Private William Cox, holding rifle against said native's back and wearing, in addition to uniform, a look compounded of self-satisfaction and self-consciousness, the whole tinged with pain.

Feathers sprang up. "Glory be t'God—an' phwat have we here?"

"Whatever h'it is," replied Coxy, "h'it h'ain't no bunch h'of birds' nests. Permit me ter h'interjuice th' missin' Miss Quincy an' th' much sought Haji of Turganzai—both, h'entire, together!"

Feathers' mouth fell open.

Added Coxy, as an afterthought: "'N this h'is their first 'n h'only h'appearance h'under my management."

"Boy," said the awed Feathers, "I dunno how you done it, but there won't be nothin' too good fer yer—nothin'!"

"Brains done h'it," said Coxy proudly. "Now kneel down 'n let a chap wiv a dud leg get h'on yer back. Yer pretty dumb, but y'll serve fer a beast h'of burden. C'mon, *juldi*, yer big h'ox, 'n put them useless shoulders h'of yours where they belongs—er—h'under my management!"



MECHANICAL EARS

By HOMER KING GORDON

Author of "*The Long Trail Ends*,"
"*Death in the Hole*," etc.

JIMMY CALHOUN eased his crippled leg under the desk, smoothed the strips of teletype tape so that they could be read rapidly, and with a last brief glance at the huge dial-studded instrument board against the end of the room, cleared his throat and clicked the switch that put the Bay Farm Island government airways station on the air for the regular eight o'clock weather broadcast.

However the weather report had to wait.

At just that moment the door of the broadcasting room burst open and Jimmy looked up into the muzzle of a German-made automatic pistol. It had been many years since Jimmy had looked into the business end of a gun of that make, but he could distinctly remember the hole a bullet from one of them could make in his anatomy. The young man holding the gun appeared grimly anxious to press the trigger

if Jimmy gave him the slightest excuse.

"Set still. Don't move a finger," he ordered.

He was squat, dark and deft in his movements. His face was square and flat and coarse. Under a low bulging forehead his small round black eyes were alert but not intelligent. He stepped into the room and closed the door without flicking his attention from Jimmy for even an instant.

"Get up. Step away from that table. Don't touch any of them things. Get me. I'll croak you if you do."

Jimmy was sitting in a swivel chair. It was something of a job to get his game leg under him and stand up without touching either the desk or the chair arms.

"I'm lame," he apologized.

The gunman's eyes were suspicious.

"Yeh. Maybe. I've heard that stall before. Get over there in the corner an'

*From the Days of Robin Hood, Crooks
Have Had to Keep Up with the Latest
Gadgets in the Defence Line. But One
Had Still to Learn that You Shouldn't Do
Business in Front of a Microphone.*



face the wall. You'll be lamer if you don't."

Jimmy glanced at the clock. It was one minute past the weather broadcast hour. Several pilots coming in towards the bay area as well as several hundred short wave fans, and widely scattered ranchers, fruit shippers and others were about to miss a daily feature they might be expecting. But what a bedtime story they might be going to get instead!

"Shake it, bo," the gunman said impatiently.

A battery of receiving sets were ranged above the broadcasting desk. Each set was tuned on a different wave band. One was for the Trans American Express and Passenger. The other was for the mail lines. Another was commercial. All were tuned in as they always were. It was a part of Jimmy's job to listen in for calls and distress signals as well as answer calls for special weather directions.

In addition there was a small table set which Jimmy generally kept tuned in to one of the San Francisco stations. Just now it was delivering a dance orchestra program.

JIMMY limped over to the corner.

"I've got sixteen cents in my pants pocket," he protested. "This is a Department of Commerce radio station, not a mint."

"Shut up."

The gun poked Jimmy hard in the ribs.

"Turn around and keep your hands flat on the wall."

Swiftly and thoroughly, the gunman searched Jimmy for a gun. A high whirling whine snapped from one of the sets over the desk. It was Pilot Madison calling from the mail plane coming down the coast from the north.

"Wake up, Jimmy," Madison barked over the roar of his motor. "The beam's been off for two minutes now. Give us the weather."

The gunman muttered something uneasily.

"Time for my regular weather report," Jimmy explained.

"Put your hands down an' cross 'em behind your back," the gunman ordered.

Jimmy obeyed and his wrists were seized and bound with tire tape.

"Stand there."

Jimmy's ankles were given the same treatment.

"Okay." The gunman jerked Jimmy backwards.

As he fell he managed to turn enough to protect the back of his head, but it was a nasty fall. The gunman had stepped back and was watching him closely.

"Thanks, brother," Jimmy said softly.

The gunman grinned sourly.

"I'll take the payoff whenever you're ready," he declared. "Right now I'm boss, sec. What I say goes. Get that."

"Perfectly," Jimmy agreed. "I can lie here like this only it's hard on my leg. Why not let me sit up here in this corner?"

"Why not?" the gunman agreed carelessly. He even reached over and helped jerk Jimmy into a sitting position. But that done he stepped away and waved his gun significantly.

"As far as I'm concerned you can put that up," Jimmy remarked. "I'm house broken. The joint is yours. Wreck it or mash it up in little pieces. It don't belong to me anyway."

There was only one chair in the room. That was Jimmy's swivel chair. Visitors were neither invited nor sanctioned at the station, so there were no accommodations kept for them in the broadcasting room.

"You do as I say and you won't be hurt," the gunman advised. "Neither will anything you've got here. I'm here to see that you don't butt in, sec."

"Into what?" Jimmy asked.

The gunman looked around and finally at Jimmy's chair. Darting a distrustful glance at the desk and the sets above it, he edged over and sat down warily.

"None of your business," he growled.

That remark certainly went out over the air, if nothing else had, Jimmy knew. The

gunman was sitting within a foot or so of the microphone, and his voice had a penetrating quality which carried clearly, even if his lips did move but slightly.

The microphone Jimmy used was merely a desk telephone type instrument with the funnel mouthpiece removed. It looked like a nickel plated desk telephone and the gunman had evidently considered it one, if he had given the matter a thought. He certainly did not suspect that it was a microphone and that everything he said loud enough for it to pick up was being sent out over the air.

"Says you," Madison cut back in. "Come on, Jimmy. Give us the dope or the beam."

"What's that guy beefin' about?" the gunman asked uneasily.

"It's a pilot in two-way communication with his company," Jimmy lied glibly. "You're only hearing one side of the conversation."

"I could get along without hearin' even that much," the gunman growled.

"You don't know much about radio, do you?" Jimmy commented.

"I know plenty for this job," the gunman exclaimed.

"You've got me guessing," Jimmy said. "I can't figure what this is, if it isn't a hold up. All we do here is send out a weather report and a radio beacon beam to direct pilots on their course."

"Keep guessin' then," the gunman advised him. "I ain't here for my health."

THE Trans American line went on the air. Capper was at the microphone and his voice sounded strange and forced to Jimmy. He began calling for Red Carson. Red was one of the crack pilots of the Trans American system. He and Jimmy were old war buddies. He had helped carry Jimmy out of the mass of wreckage from which Jimmy's game leg was dated.

Over there the Squadron had known Red as Windy Carson. But years and a few bad bumps had taken most of the wind

out of him and his old nickname had gradually fallen into discard in favor of a new one manufactured from the color of his carefully trimmed mustache.

Red had been in the East on vacation.



Jimmy did not know that he was back, however after Capper had called him for several minutes, the drone of a motor rode in on the Trans American

wave band and Red reported.

"Carson talking. What's up, Capper? Everything's okay with me. Altitude six thousand over Sacramento."

"Change of orders, Red," Capper announced. "Instead of coming in here you are to land at Livermore. Land your plane at Livermore. Get that."

"Sure," Red answered. "But what's the big idea? Fog in there?"

"No, change of orders," Capper declared.

The gunman was listening eagerly to this conversation. It began to dawn on Jimmy that there was some connection with Red's plane and the presence of this thug.

"What's——?"

"Shut up," the gunman said savagely. "I want to hear what that pilot says."

"Change of orders." Red said slowly. "Okay, Capper. What's happened to the weather tonight? I'm not picking up the beam either."

"I'll call back if there's any more orders?" Capper said, ignoring the question. "Keep in touch with me, but put your plane down at Livermore."

"By God, it's worked!" the gunman said excitedly. His beady eyes were sparkling. "It's worked!"

"What's worked?" Jimmy said persuasively. He noticed that Red's motor was still coming in over the air which meant that Red had not cut off his sending set.

The gunman hesitated. He was bursting to talk.

"That bird's bringin' a couple million dollars worth of new money out here from the mint," he said finally. "Figure it out for yourself."

"Apple sauce," Jimmy scoffed.

He knew, however, that the gunman had probably told the truth. No regular-run Trans American plane was due in from the East at that hour. Red must be flying a special.

"Apple sauce hell!" the gunman exploded. "We got the tip-off and when that bird lands at Livermore he'll be met by more machine gun bullets than he ever figured he'd run into."

"He's dodged several already."

"Well, he won't dodge all of these," the gunman bragged.

"So that's why you've got me muzzled?" Jimmy remarked.

"Sure," the gunman agreed. "Our gang takes no chances."

"I suppose one of your mob has a gun in Capper's ribs making him talk and telling him what to say," Jimmy observed.

"Three men," the gunman said. "And there's one down the road to see that we're not interrupted, too."

Jimmy's telephone bell jangled. Jimmy grinned with relief. Evidently someone who knew the number had picked up something and wanted some answers.

"Better answer it," he suggested.

"Like hell I will!" the gunman retorted. Madison on the mail run cut in:

"Say, am I being kidded or am I being kidded?" he demanded.

"What's that guy mean?"

"How should I know?" Jimmy declared. Red Carson began talking.

"This is Windy calling. Six thousand feet over Fresno. Jimmy, I'm putting up with the Army tonight. Understand. I'm on the beam all right. Caliber reading about forty-five and wind up. No? Tail up. Carry on. Disregard what I say until the war's over."

It was nonsense, partly, but evidently Red had picked up enough to figure out that something was wrong. He had given

his old nickname in the hope that Jimmy would hear.

"What's the caliber of that cannon you've got?" Jimmy asked innocently.

"Takes a thirty-eight," the gunman said. "What's that got to do with you?"

"Okay, Jimmy," Red called back and immediately began to sing.

"Say, what's goin' on here?" the gunman demanded uneasily.

Jimmy was grinning. The telephone was still ringing.

"I'll tell you a bedtime story," Jimmy said recklessly. "Settle back in your chair and pretend you're all wrapped up in your nightie and tucked in your little white bed."

He was nearly shouting, hoping that his voice would carry to the microphone, although now it was not necessary. He knew that by this time police cars were already under way and a net was being slowly closed around three widely separated spots.

ONE was Livermore where a gang of mobsters were awaiting the arrival of an aeroplane load of currency. Another was the broadcasting office of the Trans American line where Capper was being held a prisoner. The third and least important spot was the bay farm department of Commerce radio station where Jimmy was beginning to enjoy himself.

"I'm not deaf," the gunman growled. "Can that chatter?"

"Suit yourself," Jimmy agreed. "Only I can tell you something about radio you'll be glad to know."

"What?"

"First of all," Jimmy explained. "I really run two stations from this office. One is the direction beam range station, which I operate by remote control. It's over by the airport and is automatic. It really runs itself until I shut it off whenever I broadcast weather reports from here—over the same wave band."

"That's not hot news."

"No," Jimmy admitted. "Only the

reason these pilots are squawking about the beam is that I had just shut it off before you popped in. There isn't any beam now."

"That's their tough luck," the gunman exclaimed. "I ain't interested."

"Carson calling," Red cut in. "I'm between Sacramento and Livermore. Any more orders, Capper?"

"Land at Livermore," Capper said promptly.

"Okay," Red answered. "Okay, Jimmy. Call out the Army and Navy and the Marines."

"What's that?" It was not Capper talking but someone else speaking over the Trans American microphone. "What's that you said?"

Red laughed mockingly.

"Say—there's some kind of funny business goin' on here," the gunman at Jimmy's table jerked out. "That's a guy I know. But didn't that pilot say he was in sight of Livermore? Won't he go ahead and land there?"

"I suppose so," Jimmy agreed.

ABOVE the noise of the various sets he thought he caught the shrill whine of a police car siren. That would be the police warning the bay farm island bridge tender that they were coming and to keep the bridge span down.

The gunman heard it too.

"What's that noise?" he demanded.

"You heard that?"

"Heard what?"

"That police siren."

"Some speed cop picking up a speeder maybe," Jimmy commented.

"Swede, you clunk. You damned idiot. Get away from that mike. Hear me. This is Stooze, Swede. Answer. Answer."

It was the voice Jimmy had heard a moment earlier speaking over the Trans American microphone after Capper had finished. The swarthy gunman cringed and looked helplessly at Jimmy.

"What—say—he's talking to me."

"Of course I am, you dumb Polak. Get

away from that mike. If you've blabbed, oh hell! Listen, this is Stooze talking. Answer, Swede. Have you been talking to that radio operator? Did he touch anything on his desk? I can hear your answer. Hurry up."

Sweat began dripping from the gunman's face. He looked at the receiving sets above the desk.

"I swear he didn't touch anything, Stooze. Neither have I. I ain't said anything. There ain't nothing on this desk except the telephone. It's been ringin', but I ain't answered."

The telephone that had been ringing was a desk telephone, but it happened to be on the floor, over by the window, while some temporary repairs were being made to the stand on which it usually was set.

"That telephone, Swede, is a microphone. You'd better scram. Every word you've said has been broadcasted. I just tuned you in by accident. I don't know what you've said, but if you've given this show away you know what to expect. Now put a bullet through that radio man and beat it. You know the plans. The police can hear me."

"So can I, don't forget that." It was Red Carson, cutting in from somewhere out by the Berkeley Hills. "I'm landing my cargo at the Army field in San Francisco. Been heading for there ever since I heard Swede talking over the beam band. Tough luck, Stooze. I'm afraid you and your gang are headed for the hoosgow. Better not add any murder to your mistakes."

The Trans American station went off the air suddenly.

SWEDE turned dumbly to Jimmy. He was fondling his gun but his nerve was shaken. Too much was happening that he did not understand.

"You're trapped," Jimmy warned. He realized that seconds were precious. "That's a microphone there in front of you and thousands have heard every word you said since you came in here."

Swede leaped out of the chair and flattened himself against the wall by the door, staring at the nickel plated instrument.

"You're stalling," he whispered, but there was desperation and panic in his accusation.

A police siren was distinct now.

"You're bottled up here," Jimmy said. "Go ahead and shoot if you're that dumb. Just remember there'll be thousands of witnesses who'll testify they heard you shoot me."

A rattle of shots came from the distance.

"There goes your lookout," Jimmy exclaimed. "You want to be shot down like that or give up and take your chances in court?"

Swede did not answer. Sweat glistened on his swarthy face. He clutched his gun while his eyes seemed fascinated by the dials on the instrument board.

A police car screamed into the lane and threw a shower of pebbles against the porch as it swerved up to the steps. Still Swede stood there, as though hypnotized and unable to move.

A policeman rushed into the room, gun in hand.

"Drop that," he ordered, jamming the muzzle of his own gun into Swede's stomach. The gunman shuddered and let his gun clatter to the floor.

Two more uniformed men rushed in. Another car arrived with a shrieking siren.

"Okay, buddy?" one of them asked Jimmy, freeing him of the tape that bound his hands and feet.

"Sure," Jimmy's voice was shaky. He staggered over to the desk and sat down before the microphone.

"Red. This is Jimmy. Everything here is under control. No lives lost, no damage done. I'll cut you back on the beam. The weather report can wait."

"Ride 'em, cowboy," Red answered. "Telephone the army field in San Francisco I'm coming down there, so they better have the lights on. See you in church."

"Attaboy!" Madison cheered from somewhere in the north.

JIMMY threw the switch that took his station off the air, and then dialed in the beam from the range station.

"Okay," Red reported.

Jimmy turned back to the police and their prisoner.

"I knew you'd get here, but I didn't expect you so quick," he said to the officer who seemed to be in command.

"Say," the policeman answered, "we'd have been here sooner but we had to fight traffic all the way from the station. I'll bet there's a hundred cars lined up on the road trying to get out here and see the battle."

It was Jimmy's turn to stare. The police officer grinned at him.

"You may be no Rudy Vallee, brother, but don't ever think you haven't got your radio fans. Everybody and his kid brother's got a pair of mechanical ears ready to pick up anything exciting that comes in over these short wave stations."

The Swede seemed to be actually relieved to be again in a situation which he recognized.

"Want to take a bow to your unseen audience, Swede, before we take you into town?" one of the policemen asked him.

"I ain't sayin' a thing," Swede answered, but he spoke almost in a whisper with an involuntary glance of fear and respect at the microphone.

Jimmy limped over to the telephone which had been ringing insistently. It was a long distance call from a ranch down south of San José.

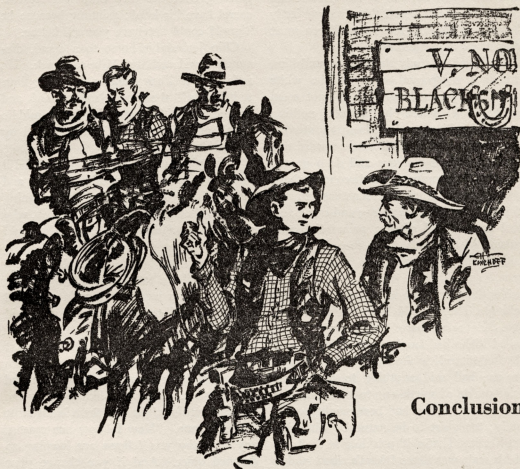
"Got them robbers yet?" the rancher asked.

"Yes," Jimmy assured him.

"Just wondered," the rancher explained. "And say, how about the weather tonight. Are we going to have any frost? I've got to set my smudge pots out under the peaches if we are."

"I'll be on the air in ten minutes with a detailed weather bulletin," Jimmy promised. After all, crime was crime, but some of his fans had their mechanical ears waiting for some hot dope on the weather.

A Story of Chip of the Flying U



Conclusion

THE WHOOP-UP TRAIL

By B. M. BOWER

*Chip Isn't Such a Kid Any More After He Has Brought in an
Outlaw Outfit Single Handed. The Thrilling Finish
of B. M. Bower's Rousing Serial.*

CHAPTER XXI

A CERTAIN sharp pointed little hill should have appeared before them, and it did not. The way they had come that morning, they had made almost a complete circuit of the odd knoll, because

it had blocked the tip of a chasm nothing but a bird could cross. The way around had led through a sandy draw where the rains and snows of centuries had run down the steep hillside and sluiced a channel through to lower ground where the greedy sand had drunk it all. It was beside that knoll that Chip had changed horses at noon

and had eaten the last of his biscuits and beef. He remembered the place perfectly because of its odd formation, like a moat dug round a castle wall.

He began to study the hills around him, standing sharp and clear in the white moonlight. Somehow they did not seem right; look where he would, nothing seemed familiar—and yet in that grotesque confusion of hills set all askew toward one another, and of canyons and deep gorges and chasms running in all directions, there was after all a certain sameness to the chaotic mass left here to sag and crack and cool as it would after a primordial convulsion of the earth. The moonlight, too, with its sharp black shadows made a difference.

Yet the sharp little hill there was no mistaking. They should have passed it long ago. He remembered now how the man called Idaho had laughed out suddenly and checked himself in the middle of it, though no one had said anything to cause that brief cackle of mirth—or to silence it, for that matter. They had been mighty quiet lately; too quiet to be natural. Chip did not like it. That chill prickling at the back of his scalp was like a friend's elbow nudging him to attention, telling him something was wrong; that he had somehow missed the tracks.

But his horse seemed sure of the way. And then he remembered something that made his breath stick in his throat. He remembered that Cash Farley had been riding Dude, probably for months, and that Dude had only a couple of hours' acquaintance with the Flying U corral. He wouldn't go back there of his own accord, nor would he follow Silvia and Rummy and Jeff. He had had more than two years in which to forget them. Why, these horses the outlaws were riding were old friends of Dude's.

Chip glanced behind him. Caught off his guard, Cash Farley's face in the moonlight wore a malicious, sneering grin. And like shouted words Chip read the meaning in that look. Cash Farley was waiting,

gloating over the way Chip had let that sorrel have his head; grinning because he himself could not have planned better.

Chip jerked his horse to a stand, dismounted and anchored Mike to a rock. He rode back to Farley with a face like flint, twitched off the man's neckerchief and gagged him with it, stopping in the middle Cash's angry protest. Then he pulled up beside Eb.

"One yip out of either of you and I'll knock you cold," he said brusquely, and tapped his gun to make the meaning clearer. And he proceeded to gag Eb, who swore at him viciously so long as he could speak.

Idaho cringed before his implacable approach. "What's eatin' on yuh, feller? Me, I ain't spoke a word fer more'n an hour! You got no call to pick on me—I ain't said a thing!"

Until he was through and ready to start on, Chip made no remark whatever. Then he looked back along the mute line and gave a snort. "I always like to know the reason for things," he told them in his most sarcastic tone. "Now I know one reason, anyway, why you fellows are keeping so damned quiet. And if you change your minds and want to holler your heads off, I know damned good and well why you don't."

While they pondered that, glaring at him with impotent hate, he shifted his saddle to Mike, barely restraining himself from taking out his spite on Dude for getting him into this fix. Anyway it was his own fault. He'd no business getting so worked up and excited over nabbing these fellows that he forgot he wasn't out of the woods yet, by a long shot. He'd acted like a damned pilgrim, and the sooner he came out of his trance and used his head, the better. No telling where he was, now. He might be right on top of Big Butch's camp, for all he knew.

As a matter of fact he was within a mile of it, but it was perhaps just as well he didn't know it. He had trouble enough without that.

He didn't know just what it would be best to do. He could go back to where he had let Dude leave the trail of the horses, but he had no very clear idea of the distance, and there was the risk of meeting more of the gang. Moreover, with the cloud patches drifting up from the west again the moonlight was tricky and there was a probability of being left in the dark altogether. In country like this he would have to stop and wait for morning. Of course, Mike would probably know the way home—but he was in no mood to trust himself to a horse again that night. Not altogether.

He went on across the flat they were crossing, and in spite of what he had just been telling himself he did give Mike his head, but with his whole mind alert and watching directions. So, where Dude would have edged off to the south and entered a sandy gulch which opened a wide mouth to the flat, Mike kept on up the flat to its very end, leaving it only when he must and choosing a somewhat steep and rocky ravine that presently tilted down toward the southwest and later debouched upon another small basin which seemed sparsely covered with sage brush.

For ten minutes then they went in darkness and Chip was bound to trust the horse whether he would or no. And when the moon emerged again he saw that they were entering another gulch much like the last but twisting and turning, yet always coming back to the same general direction, which was toward the southwest. The Whoop-up Trail lay off that way—how far off he could not tell—and it was certain Mike was traveling toward it as straight as he could go in such a rough country.

After a little he dismounted and walked back to see how his prisoners were coming along. He had an uneasy feeling that this journey was altogether too tame and peaceful to be trusted; as if they were somehow going to work loose and escape or something, though he didn't see how they could. Their eyes were murderous, but their bonds were as he had tied them. There was nothing they could do save sit in their

saddles and ride wherever he led the way.

It was with a distinct feeling of relief that he rode out of a dry sandy wash into a long, narrow valley lying peaceful under the moon, its close rim of hills oddly familiar. Mike knew it, too—Chip sensed that at once by the way his ears stood forward and he felt for the bit, thrusting out his nose for more slack in his reins as his pace quickened. As his feet struck into a dim trail through the grass, he heaved a sigh as horses will, and started to lope forward; but the jerk on his tail stopped that and he decided that a trot would do.

This was the place where Chip had held up Cash Farley and taken Dude away from him. He couldn't resist the temptation to turn and look at Cash, though the light was failing again and he could not see much of his face. Cash was remembering all about it, that was a cinch. Maybe he was seeing that a man didn't have to go around shooting and killing in order to hold his own in this world. Chip hoped so. He also hoped that Hec Grimes would learn a lesson from this capture, and would admit that brains were better than bullets any day. Here he was, hadn't fired a shot at a man in his whole life, and look what he'd managed to do! Caught Cash Farley cold, twice hand running—to say nothing of these other two jaspers that were probably killers.

With these thoughts and others quite as self satisfied, Chip rode steadily toward the moon and the Missouri River. Since they struck the trail they were making better time and he had no further worry. Not far ahead now was the creek they must follow; then they would be in the road, and a few miles more would land them in Cow Island. They'd open their eyes, Burch and Shaner and all of them, when he turned over three of Big Butch's gang—that they were all so scared of!

HE WAS approaching the creek, riding along the south wall of the valley, when Mike suddenly threw up his head and took mincing steps, staring toward the

hidden stream. And Chip, who knew every mood and every movement of the horse, swung out of the trail and into the black shadow of the cliff. As surely as though Mike had spoken, he knew that someone was coming in from the main road; someone he was certain he would not want to meet, since this was not a trail known to many.

To swerve from the trail and ride in behind a line of brush next the cliff was too instinctive an action to be called a decision. He had to hide in a hurry. He knew that. The next instant he was off his horse, darting from horse to horse, ruthlessly slicing saddle strings and tying them around the nose of each horse so there could be no whinny nor even a snort to betray him. He stepped up close to Cash Farley, standing so that he faced the other two.

"I'll kill the man that makes a sound," he said fiercely, and pulled his gun and stepped back so that, while almost within reach, he still could shoot at any one of the three and be sure of hitting his mark.

His heart pounded like slow hammer beats while he waited—and though it seemed long, it must have been a matter of seconds that he listened to the measured splashing of wading horses. Then a rider tilted up into sight over the bank and came on in white moonlight. Big Butch, looming huge in the saddle, his long blond mustache standing out crisply on either side of his florid face, his light eyes gleaming like a cat's as the moon shone full upon him. Big Butch and three of his men, coming straight toward him as if they knew he was there at bay against the cliff.

CHAPTER XXII

CHIP held his breath, afraid to loose it lest Big Butch hear it, he came so close. Then the trail bent away from the cliff toward the open flat, and their faces were turned a little from the bushes. He wished they would talk, the silence was

so profound he feared the breathing of the horses standing there.

Then Cash Farley took a chance and kicked his horse, making it start forward, rattling the branches of the bush where he stood. But there again Chip's guardian angel was alert, for a breeze swooped down into the basin and set all the bushes swaying, and Chip had reached out and caught the horse, shoving his gun-barrel hard into Cash's belly.

Dust was lifted in the trail. One of the horses out there sneezed.

"Betcha it'll rain b'fore mornin'," the last man said listlessly.

Big Butch turned in his saddle, cast a glance up and around, sweeping the sky with its drifting clouds and dropping his gaze to the surrounding hills. Had he known exactly where Chip and his prisoners were concealed he could not have looked straighter at them. Yet in the black shadows he saw nothing.

"Ain't liable to," he said. "Not this far down. Like t'-day, t'ey never got a sprinkle at Cow Island, ner this far north."

The man next behind him laughed. "Wel-l, lay the dust and yuh

leave tracks like a duck in a mud-puddle," he remarked. "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

"Not me, I don't," Big Butch retorted. "I takes my choice but I don't pay no money."

His three companions laughed at that, evidently applying the remark humorously to some recent transaction. Running off the Flying U horses, Chip thought bitterly. Butch's horse felt a sting of the spurs and broke into a gallop, the others following. They loped off down the trail, their forms blurring in the dust they made.



AS HE made his way to where Mike stood at the end of the line Chip staggered a little. He was yet too young to take these close calls as a matter of course, or perhaps he had too much imagination. All he could think of just then was the disaster that would have befallen him had he been three minutes sooner or later along that trail. A little sooner, he would have met Big Butch face to face in the creek channel. It didn't require much imagination to guess what would have happened then. He was no gunman and he never would be one. Big Butch would have killed him, then or back in the open. Either way, he had missed death by too small a margin for steady nerves. He was so shaken that he almost forgot to take those strings off the horses' noses before he started on.

It was a strange cavalcade that forded the river that night. Turk Bowles, coming to the door of his shack when he heard the splashing in the river, gobbled an excited sentence that brought Hec Grimes to the doorway, five cards in his hand. His eyes were popping when he turned back and flung down the cards.

"I gotta go, Turk. That there was the Bennett boy leadin' Cash Farley an'—my Gawd, he'll git himself killed for shore! Ain't got no more sense than a last year's bird nest, when it comes to keepin' his fingers outa the fire."

What Turk said cannot be written intelligibly, but its meaning was a general agreement with Hec, who was trotting up the road to the settlement talking to himself as he went.

Barr Lang was pouring himself a big glass of beer as a nightcap while the bartender got ready to lock up. Across the way, Dave Burch's light went out as Chip pulled up at the hitch-rail and went into the saloon. Lang looked up, stared and came forward.

"The Bennett boy, ain't yuh? What's the matter? Anything wrong out at the Flying U?" He looked at his stein of beer, set it back on the bar without drink-

ing. "The boys left this forenoon," he added, as if that might help.

Chip stood within the doorway, glancing sharply from Lang to the bartender and back. The pupils of his eyes were like pinheads, giving him a fierce intent look.

"I've got three men out here I want to turn over to whatever law you've got in this burg," he said bluntly. "Horsethieves. Some of the gang that raided the Flying U."

"What's that? Who——"

"Cash Farley and two more. What'll I do with 'em?"

Lang crooked a finger at the bartender as he came forward. "Charley, you run across and get Dave and Tom." He stared at Chip doubtfully. "Cash Farley? You sure?"

"I ought to be."

"Well—who's with you?" Lang peered out of the open door and stepped back as if he had seen something he shouldn't.

"Nobody but those three." Chip turned and glanced outside. "They can't make a break. I've got 'em tied on."

"I'll — be — damned!" breathed Lang, just above a whisper. "You done it alone? How in hell——"

"I'll tell all that at the trial," Chip cut him off. "Say, Mr. Lang, is it too late to get a little something to eat?" His tone and manner relaxed a little under Barr Lang's very human surprise and sympathy. "I haven't had any supper," he explained simply.

Lang looked at the big round-faced clock on the wall, looked again at Chip. "It's after one o'clock," he said unnecessarily. "I'll see if I can scare up something. Want a bed, too, don't you?"

Of a sudden Chip knew that he was dog tired, and that a bed under the same roof with his Goldilocks would be like going to heaven. But there were his horses. "I've got an outfit," he said. "I'll sleep outside. But I sure would like some supper if I can get it."

Lang walked lumberingly to a doorway, disappeared for a minute or two and came

back hurrying as though he feared he might miss something. Chip was still waiting in the saloon, half sitting on a card table, shaking tobacco into a cigarette paper and spilling more than he saved, his fingers shook so. Lang's little eyes in their rolls of fat noticed that and flicked up to study Chip's face. He looked fagged, years older than he had been the Fourth.

"Beats me," said Lang. "Anybody but Cash Farley——"

Chip was drawing the tobacco bag shut, one end of the string caught between his teeth. The operation gave him a grinning look which his bleak eyes contradicted.

"Cash Farley don't like the idea of a bullet in his back, any more than anyone else," he said, and walked to the door rolling the cigarette as he went.

In the doorway he dropped it and whipped out his gun, firing at something outside.

"Hey! Get away from those prisoners!" he yelled. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He shot again, aiming low so that the bullet spat into the ground ten feet short. There was an answering flash, the bullet kicking bark against Chip's cheek. A man running toward the corner of the dance hall turned and fired another shot before he disappeared around the corner.

Chip ran that way, hugging the wall. Men were running across from the blacksmith shop and the stable, but Chip was only vaguely aware of them. He reached the corner, edged around it carefully with his gun pointing the way. There was nothing. In the shadows of the grove dry twigs were cracking, and that was all. He had no mind to go man-hunting in that brush at night, so he turned back and came face to face with Dave Burch.

"What's all this? What's all this shooting about?" Burch demanded, the harsh note of authority in his tone.

"Some damned busybody thought he'd turn these prisoners loose." Chip ran past Burch, coming to a stop beside Cash Farley.

The gag was off, pulled down around Farley's neck. His hands were loose—but he was still anchored to the saddle and he was snarling like a trapped wolf.

"Drop that knife!" cried Chip, "before I hand you the hot end of a bullet! Drop it!"

Cash dropped it, cursing and spitting at the taste of the knotted corners of his own dirty neckerchief he had been obliged to chew on for hours. "I'll skin you alive for this," he promised savagely.

"Oh, I don't know," drawled Chip, stepping aside as Burch shouldered his way to the man's side. "According to my experience, Cow Island isn't so friendly to horse-thieves. You won't be skinning anything except your teeth, when the rope tightens."

"What's the charge against these men? Who brought 'em in? You?" Burch spoke irritably, as if he found his official duties somewhat onerous at this time of night and when someone else thrust them upon him.

"There ain't any charge," Cash Farley said quickly, with profane trimmings. "That damned half-wit there held us up ——"

"The charge," Chip cut in sharply, "is horse-stealing. I brought 'em in, and if you love law and order the way you claim you do, you'll lock 'em up till you can get your jury together."

"I don't need to be told what to do," Dave Burch squelched him. "Tom, you and Jim and Wallace take these men in charge. I'll hold you responsible for their appearance at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. You," he barked, stabbing a finger toward Chip, "come over to my office and swear out your complaint, and name your witnesses."

"If it's a horsethief you're lookin' for, grab that fool," Cash Farley sneered. "He stole that sorral from me the Fourth."

"That's a lie!" Chip retorted angrily. "I took back the horse you stole from my brother. Jim Whitmore can swear to that."

A throaty chuckle from the saloon porch

interrupted. "Kinda jeopardizin' your reputation, ain't yuh, Cash? Seems to me the kid there has kinda got you buffaloed."

Barr Lang laughed again.

"I ain't through with him yet," Cash growled. "You wait till the last card's turned. He ain't got the brains of a louse—layin' in the brush and holdin' up folks that's just ridin' along the trail! Burch, you got no license to hold us here. Turn us loose, er we'll tear this damn place apart."

BURCH turned to him with a pacific gesture. "Now, now, Mr. Farley, you know the law laid down by our Committee. Every man brought before us has got to be tried, whether er no. Tom'll take yuh over and make yuh comfortable till morning, and the trial'll show up the facts. If you want to call in any witnesses——"

"Hell, I don't need no witnesses!" snorted Farley. "There ain't no case. That damn idiot there thinks he's a Billy the Kid er somebody——"

"Well, well, it'll all come out at the trial," Burch repeated nervously. "You take 'em over to your place, Tom, and keep 'em till morning." He turned and beckoned Chip to follow.

"What are you so polite about?" Chip called out recklessly to Shaner, who was trying to placate Farley as he led the three across to the stable. "Why don't you knock him in the head with an ax or something, the way you did me?" He gave a hard mirthless laugh. "Hell, I didn't know you said it with flowers. I always supposed it was a pick-handle you used!"

That stirred up language, but Chip didn't care. He was willing at that moment to fight the pack of them. Knuckling down like that to Cash Farley—why didn't they give him that potato pile to sleep on? He certainly had it coming, and so did the rest of them. They must be awful scared of these birds—and at the thought his lip curled with contempt. They might be

tough but they sure gentled down nice as anybody when you poked a six-gun at them.

Vaguely uneasy, more disheartened than he would have admitted even to himself, he ate a cold supper which Barr Lang himself set out for him, took his horses down to the camp ground where two freight outfits were camped for the night, and having foraged for hay enough for Dude and Mike he rolled himself in his blanket and slept. But his dreams were troubled ones in which he fought over and over a desperately one-sided battle with Big Butch's gang. He thought he was trying to kill Cash Farley—did kill him, more than once. But always when he thought the fight was over, there was Cash coming at him again; a man who wouldn't stay dead.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE blacksmith shop a dozen men were assembled, the smoke tainted gloom of the big building in sharp contrast with the hot glare of the midmorning sun outside. Cash Farley and his two companions sat unbound, in a row upon the beam of a heavy old plow with rusted share. Hats on the backs of their heads, they were smoking and listening to the evidence against them



which, when it lay pared down to the bare bone of facts, looked pretty thin. Cash was grinning maliciously at the stubborn truthfulness of Chip's testimony.

"You say you didn't see these men take the horses?"

"No. They took them about the time we left here to go back to the ranch."

"Who did see them take the horses out of the Flyin' U pasture?" Dave Burch was being very exact, very careful of the

perfect justice of his questions. Chip had to concede that.

"Well, Mr. Whitmore fired some shots at them as they went past the camp, and Patsy the cook fired his shotgun."

"Did they hit any of the thieves?"

"Well, they didn't know for sure. J. G. thought he did, but they were too far off to be sure."

"Hmm. They was too far off to tell whether he hit anyone. How did he reckonize these men? Was they closer, before he started in shootin'?"

Chip felt a premonitory sinking of a weight in his chest. "N-no, I don't believe they were. He woke up and ran out as they were going past with the horses." And he foresaw the next question, foresaw too that he could not answer it satisfactorily.

"How did he know it was these men, then?"

And the inevitable answer. "He said he was pretty sure it was Big Butch's gang."

The captain of the Vigilance Committee gave a snort which Chip knew was justified. "That there is no evidence at all!" he complained. "You couldn't hang a side uh pork on that kinda evidence."

"No sir, it isn't proof," Chip admitted.

"Well, when *did* you see these fellers drivin' the Flyin' U horses, then?"

Chip chose his words carefully. "Well, I was following the tracks through the Badlands yesterday afternoon. There was a pretty hard storm, with lots of thunder and lightning, and some of the horses broke back on them and started home. My mare's colt was back at the ranch, and she was crazy to get to it. A lot of the horses followed her, and I met them."

"Was these men with them?"

"No. They hadn't caught up with them. I caught the mare and milked her out, and then started her home. And I went on—I started on, I mean—to try to get the rest of the horses."

"Well, where did you see these men? Was they driving the rest of the herd?"

"No," said Chip, "they weren't. They were coming after the bunch that got away. I met them in the canyon. I heard them coming, on around a turn, so I pulled out to one side behind a bush—a juniper—and waited till they got past. Then I threw down on them." He glanced at Cash. "And brought them in," he added with a pardonable satisfaction.

Burch lifted his heavy, iron gray brows and looked from witness to prisoners. If he thought it a large order for the young fellow before him, he did not say so. He stuck very close to the salient points.

"How long was it after the horses come along, before these men showed up?"

Chip flushed and bit his lip. "Ten or fifteen minutes. I was fussing with the mare that long, I guess."

Captain Burch scowled. "We don't want any more guess-work. That's about all we've had, so fur," he stated glumly. "You shore it wasn't more'n fifteen minutes?"

"It wasn't much more. I'm sure of that."

"Well, you heard these men say they was comin' home from the Larb Hills country and was takin' a short-cut. Can you swear they was after your horses?"

"I'd swear to it, yes. I know they were. Maybe I couldn't prove it, though."

"Is there anything," Captain Burch asked dryly, "that you *can* prove?"

"Well," Chip retorted in the same tone, "I can prove what I think of the bunch. I brought them in here and turned them over to you—and that proves I know in my own mind they're guilty as hell." He turned and gave the three a long, deliberate stare. "I proved to them, anyway, that I'm dead next to them. They stole those horses, and if they get away with it they're just lucky, that's all."

"We ain't here to prove your opinion of them or anybody else," Burch told him with his most judicial tone and manner. "We got to have facts, not opinions. If that's all you can prove, I guess we're through takin' your testimony."

"Yes, sir," Chip answered him crisply, and went to the doorway, standing there leaning against the grimy casing while he made himself a smoke. Since he was the accuser, they had questioned him first. Now Cash Farley was being called to stand before Burch.

Sick at heart, Chip turned away. He felt that he could not stand there and listen to what Cash Farley would say—the lies he would tell. Now that it was too late he wished that he had taken those damned hounds to the ranch. That's what he should have done, no matter how far it was. He could have stood the ride all right, and they couldn't have helped themselves. J. G. and the boys would have known what to do with them, quick enough. He was just a damned, swell-headed fool, bringing them here to this Cow Island bunch. He might have known how it would pan out.

Hec Grimes, coming at a shambling run up the road, saw him standing there gloomily at the corner of the shop and swerved that way. With frantic gestures imploring haste and silence, he beckoned Chip to follow him around behind the coal shed.

"What's eating on yuh, Hec?" Chip demanded sourly when they stood together in the rank burdock weeds.

"You come with me, Chip," Hec panted, and led the way into a junk cluttered gully behind the buildings. "You shore are in fer it now! How's she goin'? They're turnin' Cash an' them loose, ain't they?"

"They will. Burke's going to unwind some of that red tape of his, and then the damned skunks will walk outa there all set to go steal some more horses. Why? What's on your chest?"

"Come awn!" Hec urged him along faster. "Whoever it was tried t' turn them fellers loose, las' night, he musta went an' told Butch about it. Big Butch an' about six of his bunch is comin'. I seen 'em ride into the river."

"Coming as character witnesses, probably," Chip snorted. "Too bad. They're

going to be late for the show. It's all over but the shouting."

In haste though he was, Hec stopped short and turned a look of deep disgust on Chip.

"You damned fool," he said huskily, "it's all over but the shootin', you mean. Don't yuh know they'll kill yuh? It's twice now you've throwed an' tied Cash Farley. Draggin' him in here t' stand trial—say, they'll kill yuh by inches fer that!"

"Oh, I guess not that bad." But the blood seeped from Chip's face and he walked a little faster.

"I knowed they'd turn them fellers loose," Hec went on hurriedly. "Them makin' the talk they done, about you not havin' no case agin' 'em—and you bein' all stark solitary alone—nobody t' back you up in nothin'—I knowed as well as t' I'm alive 't they'd git off. It was a cinch."

"I kinda thought they would, myself."

"You'd oughta thought b'fore yuh went an' tied into that bunch," Hec complained. "Any time yuh go after any of them birds you want to have a cinch." He stopped and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There they go—Butch and them. Come on, now. You wait a minute right there by the ferry. I got yore hosses tied back up here in the bushes. I saddled up for yuh. I knowed damn good an' well you'd be pullin' out in front of a flock uh bullets."

Chip slowed, stopped. "I know your intentions were fine, Hec—but damn it, I haven't done anything—"

"Nothin' but act the cussed fool," Hec grumbled as he went off to bring the horses.

CHIP waited, but his mouth was set in stubborn lines, his eyes held rebellion. He did not mean to sneak off like a coyote when the dogs barked at dawn. Even Big Butch wouldn't dare shoot him in broad daylight, right there in Cow Island. There'd be something for the bunch to stand trial for, then. He wasn't going to

run. He had to see Goldilocks before he left. It was mostly on that account he had decided to bring his prisoners here and turn them over to Burch; not to show off, as Hec seemed to think—but to furnish an excuse to see Julie. She hadn't waited on table at breakfast that morning. He had eaten at the hotel expecting to see her. Now he had to find some other way. He certainly wasn't going to pull out now.

Hec had other ideas about that. "Here yuh are," he said gruffly when he handed Chip the reins. "Crawl that hull now, an' hightail it fer home quick as the good Lord'll let yuh. They'll have a drink er two first——"

"I'm not going," Chip told him bluntly. "I don't think I can be called a coward—yet. But——" he grinned disarmingly at Hec—"If I fan it outa here now——"

"Hell!" snapped Hec. "Stayin' here ain't courage, boy; that's plain damn ignorance!" He pulled out his plug, looked at it, waved it toward Lang's Place. "You wanta git yourself beefed, an' let that bunch fog it over to the Flyin' U and ketch 'em when they ain't lookin'? Hell, they got their honor to defend, now! They been publicly accused uh stealin' horses! An' the Flyin' U has did the accusin'. You hit fer home an' tell 'em what all you been up to—and if ole J. G. don't dust your breeches for yuh, he'd oughta."

Chip looked toward Lang's, looked back at Hec. "Gosh, you don't think they'd tackle——"

"Think!" snorted Hec, almost weeping with his earnestness, "Think! Hell, man, I know!"

Without another word, Chip went into the saddle and hit the river at a lope.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT WAS the morning of the fourth day after Chip's tumultuous return. Nothing whatever had happened save a lot of useless preparations for trouble that failed to arrive, and a great deal of bunkhouse argument which, having covered the

ground thoroughly several times, now was forced to talk in circles. Chip was getting tired of listening to the endless discussion, though until now he hadn't said much. After tearing home and telling them to get ready for a battle because Big Butch and his gang were coming, there didn't seem to be much left to say.

Cal Emmett came in last to breakfast and he was carrying his rifle ostentatiously over his shoulder as he dodged in and slammed the door shut behind him. With the butt of his gun he nudged Happy Jack along on the bench nearest him.

"Shove over, Happy," he implored. "I gotta set here where I can aim and shoot out the window without gittin' up. I been buildin' myself a case of dyspepshu, jumpin' up every minute when somebody holstered Big Butch. Me, I gotta take more care of m'self from now on."

"Yep—pinin' away to a cart load," Penny declared, tilting his head sidewise to size Cal up the better. "Careful, boy. This strain is gittin' yuh down."

"I know it," sighed Cal, reaching a long arm to spear a slab of beefsteak the size of his foot. "My appetite's goin' back on me. I couldn't eat but 'leven slapjacks yesterday." With a wicked eye turned toward Chip he leaned and peered through the window, one hand going out to the gun standing beside him. Then he settled back



with his left hand on his heart and a look of collapse on his face. "Nope—nothin' but a chicken hawk castin' his shadow before."

Several of the boys laughed. "Before what?" someone asked.

"Before Big Butch," Cal elaborated gravely. "Gee whiz, this strain is awful!"

CHIP looked up with a bitter twist of the lips that had meant to be a smile. "Somebody knock Cal on the head and put him out of his misery," he suggested in

his most sarcastic voice. "If I'd known it was going to scare him to death, I wouldn't have said anything about Big Butch's intentions."

"You didn't," Cal told him regretfully. "It's these damn nightmares I can't stand."

"Yes?" Chip's only sign of mental disturbance was the extra spoonful of sugar he dipped into his coffee.

Shorty put an end to Cal's rough joking. Knife and fork poised over his plate, he leaned and looked down the table to where Chip sat wanting to murder Cal.

"On the square, Chip, how'd you find out Big Butch was comin' up here to clean us out? He say so?"

Chip drew a quick breath through his nostrils. It was a question he had been dreading during the past two days. But he would not hedge nor deny. He sat forward so that he could return Shorty's look.

"He'd be a fool if he did, wouldn't he? No, I didn't see Butch himself. Cash Farley made some crack at that alleged trial. Bragged of what he'd do to me. Of course I expected that. When Burch began to holler for actual open-and-shut proof, I knew what was coming." To show the calmness he did not feel he took a swallow of coffee and set down the cup neatly, in the exact center of the wet ring where it had stood.

"No," he added the complete answer to Shorty's question, "it was Hec Grimes told me. I was going to stay and have it out with Cash and be done with it, one way or the other"—lying a little there, because he would not say he was going to stay to see Julie Lang. No one knew how he felt about his Goldilocks, and they weren't going to know, either, till it was all settled and he was ready to tell them.

"But Hec raised particular hell with me. He said the whole gang would head straight for here, and if I didn't beat them to it and warn you, the Flying U would be wiped out." He gave a snort of disgust, his defiant hazel-brown eyes moving from face to face. "I realize now that it

was a case of casting pearls before swine. But since some of you seem all broke up over it, I suppose I'd better apologize because that bunch didn't come and kill you off. Sorry, boys," he added, straddling the bench to rise from the table. "Hope the worst befalls you next time."

"My gosh, how I hate an edjycated guy!" groaned Cal, as Chip passed him on his way to the door. "Now I don't know whether I'm a pearl or a swine, goi darn it!"

"Go look in the glass, and you can tell quick enough," Chip flung over his shoulder as he went out.

He met Patsy just outside the door with an empty milk pan and a family size coffee-pot in his hands. Patsy had been taking Jim Whitmore's breakfast in to him, using the pan in place of a tray.

"Der poss vants to talk mit," he grunted as he went by. "I pet you gid fired yoost for two cents, so you look out."

Whereupon Chip gave another snort of disdain at such narrow-mindedness. The way everyone was acting, you'd think, by gosh, they were blaming him because they hadn't been killed! And now J. G. was going to tear into him about it. It made Chip tired.

JIM WHITMORE was sitting in a chair with his wounded leg stretched out before him on a blanket-padded box, eating beefsteak and fried potatoes and sourdough biscuit with an appetite that would have startled a dietitian of today into predicting an early demise for the invalid. Ignorance being bliss in this case, however, J. G. was enjoying his breakfast with no fear that it would shorten his life. He looked up, swallowing a mouthful as Chip appeared.

"Had your breakfast? Set down. I want you to give me the straight of this run-in you had with Big Butch and his gang. Looks like we've wasted four good days, hangin' around the ranch here waitin' for 'em to come and make their war-talk.

How about it? Where'd you git the idee they was comin' to wipe us out?"

Chip braced himself for the worst. At least he could be thankful J. G. wasn't going to josh and bedevil him about it the way the boys had been doing, the last day or two. He had told the story before, with a becoming modesty that omitted certain colorful details of the exploit, touching mainly upon his disgust at the fear Cow Island seemed to have of offending Cash Farley and the rest. He especially dwelt upon the injustice of giving Cash Farley a bed at the livery stable, when by rights they should have suffered the lumps and the smells of that potato pile in the cellar. But he told a more circumstantial story this time, which revealed the fact that he had taken Hec Grimes' word for more than he should, perhaps.

Jim Whitmore used the last piece of his second biscuit to mop up the steak gravy on his tin plate. Until that was accomplished to his complete satisfaction he made no comment whatever; while Chip sat smoking and absently watching the process.

"Hec Grimes ain't more'n half baked,"

Jim Whitmore observed without malice when he had finished and was getting out his old briar pipe. "Calamity howler, from all I know of 'im. It don't look like Big Butch is goin' to take up the quarrel; don't see what he'd expect t' gain by it—and it's Number One he's always lookin' out for, you can bet on that."

"Cash Farley, an' Eb and' Idaho—they said——"

"Yeah, well, they're a horse of another color. They'll git back at yuh—give 'em a chance. You'll have to stick to your own range and keep outa their way. But Butch is after the almighty dollar. He ain't goin' to let them three put off up here just to settle a personal grudge with a kid. They got fifty head of broke horses to cash in on. That comes first with Butch. And he knows damn well—or would if he took the trouble to think it out—that I can't spare the men to git 'em back."

"I'd have gone on after them, Mr. Whit-

more, only I had to grab those fellows when they came along. They'd have got the ones that did start home." Chip's voice told how far he felt he had fallen short of his full duty. "And then when—after that, I was afraid to go on after the horses. I didn't think I could handle the rest of the bunch."

Jim Whitmore was an old smoker, but he choked on a mouthful of smoke until tears came into his eyes.

"You was workin' on your own time," he said gruffly when he could trust himself to speak. "I never told yuh to tackle that job, remember. You quit and went off on your own hook. You don't have to apologize to me for not cleanin' up the hull gang."

That sounded like sarcasm. Chip turned a dark red under his tan.

"I wasn't apologizin' for not cleaning up the whole gang. I don't seem to have accomplished much of anything," he said stiffly, "except build up a fine large feud, maybe." He flung his half burned cigarette spitefully outside and rose. "I realize that I made a damned fool of myself all around, if that's what you're hinting at—but as you say, it seems to be my own lookout. So I'll just go on being a damned fool, trying to find out what happened to Wane, and getting his stuff back."

"Seddown!" roared J. G. "How many times have I got t' tell you to keep away from that river?" He sucked savagely on his pipe. "Dawgoned if I wouldn't ruther learn a bull calf t' drink out of a bucket! Short-handed as I be, d'you think I'm goin' to let you go scurrupin' around on a wild-geese chase that'll git yuh killed? If there was any way of findin' out about Wane, don't yuh s'pose I'd 'a' done it long ago? Hell, it'd take a regiment uh soldiers t' comb the country like it'd have t' be combed. Yore father was a damn good friend of mine; don't yuh s'pose I done all I could t' git at the bottom of that drownin'?"

He glared at Chip, tamped the tobacco down in his pipe and spat. "Wane could

of been workin' for me and kept outa trouble, only he wanted to be close to the river. Got stuck on that yella-headed hussy at Lang's. Had t' be close, where he could hang around there half the time. Didn't have sense enough t' see she was just playin' him for a sucker, just as she does the rest of the damn fools that hang around there. *That's* why he didn't want t' work fer me. Too fur from Cow Island——"

Chip was white now as his tan would let him be. "Mr. Whitmore——"

"Don't Mr. Whitmore me! You'll keep away from down there if I have t' hog-tie yuh. You've got 'em all after your skelp now—that'd oughta satisfy yuh fer awhile. I sh'd think," he added, dropping to his old whimsical complaining, "you'd git action enough on the brones you'll have to help take the wire edge off of. You got a fine chance there t' git your neck broke, if that's all yuh want." He grunted and with both hands lifted his leg to a new place on the blanket.

"A busted bone ain't as painful as a bullet hole," he stated grimly. "I've sampled both, so I'd oughta know. You ramble over t' the mess house and tell Shorty I want him. And don't let me hear no more about this fool quittin'. You'll quit when I tell yuh you're fired, and not before."

FURIOUS, yet with an unaccountable feeling of relief down deep in his heart, Chip went off to do as he was told. He could have choked J. G. till his eyes popped. Calling Julie a name like that—saying she—well, just as good as saying she was just a mean little flirt that only wanted to make a fool of a man. Chip went hot all over when he thought of it.

She wasn't like that at all. J. G. didn't know what he was talking about. Just because she was beautiful and he was too darned old to understand or appreciate a girl like that. He probably meant all right, but what did an old man of forty know about girls, anyway? A fellow just had

to consider the source and forget about it.

Anyway, he still had his job. That was a bigger relief than he would admit to himself, though it carried the stinger of being forbidden to go back to the river for a while. Still, if he were slammed up in a corner and made to come clean with the truth, he would have to admit that he would just as soon stay away till things cooled down a little. Cash Farley certainly wasn't the killer folks tried to make out he was, but Chip wouldn't put it past him to try and start something if they happened to run across each other.

And he certainly was thankful old J. G. had headed him off before he gave himself away about Julie. Had his mouth all fixed to tell the boss where he could go—it would have been a dead give away. No, the thing to do was make a hand here and help get another remuda shaped up for fall roundup. Then he'd make some excuse and get a few days off, and go right down to Cow Island and board at Lang's till he found out the truth about Wane, and got his stuff together. He'd have a chance then to see Goldilocks every day without advertising it to the whole country. Another month—it was going to be pretty hard to wait that long, but he couldn't see any other way out.

All this, while he was riding down east of the ranch in the rough country north of the breaks, hunting horses. He had started out with Weary and Cal, the other boys riding north. But with water everywhere and plenty of good feed, the broom-tails had split into small bands and mixed with other brands so it wasn't so easy to comb them out of the draws and get them all headed in to the ranch. One little bunch of a dozen or so ducked down into a gully, and Chip went after these alone. Weary was chasing a few saddle-marked geldings up over a ridge, thinking to swing them toward the roundup ground and let them go. And Cal was off somewhere on a quest of his own and hadn't been seen by either for more than half an hour.

Chip was just as well pleased to get rid

of Cal; Weary, too, for that matter. In fact, the less he saw of any of the boys the better he'd like it, until they quit chew-



ing the rag about that false alarm of his.

The gully, deepening to a rocky gulch as it sloped downward, opened out unexpectedly into a small coulee with high walls and a narrow, grassy bottom, open country showing beyond. Already the horses he was after were racing away toward the mouth of the coulee, wheeling now and then to stare back at him for a moment before they turned and went on.

Chip was riding Dude that day, chiefly because he was a shade faster than Mike, a little quicker at turning. With four days of rest on good grass, today he was running like an antelope. He went down that coulee like a sorrel streak, gaining on the straightaway so that Chip was sure he'd have the bunch turned and headed the other way in another half mile at the most. Beyond the coulee the land sloped gently down to a creek bottom thinly wooded, the immediate slope broken into small round ridges, much like the ground-swell of an ocean lazily recovering from a storm. Not bad country to ride over; better than a flat covered with prairie dog villages. He could get into one of those swales and ride out of sight, heading the herd back up the coulee to join the bunches Weary and Cal would have on the upper flat.

He rode out of the coulee at top speed, reined toward a smooth looking draw that seemed to run in the direction he wanted. He was just entering it when something zipped across his thigh; and in the middle of his stride Dude faltered, tried to gather himself, then went down head foremost in a heap.

Chip heard the distant crack of a rifle as he hit the ground, by sheer instinct jerking his feet from the stirrups as he went down. And for an unmeasured space of time that was the last he knew of anything.

CHAPTER XXV

ONE cannot gauge by itself a time of complete unconsciousness. Chip heard the shot as he went down. Then a blank space. Next, he was lying on the south side of the gully, his head in the shade of a tall clump of weeds. He looked at Dude and saw a round hole appear suddenly in his flank with a soft plopping sound. Then he heard a rifle shot. He pulled in his feet with the flashing thought of how lucky he was not to be pinned under the horse.

Another hole in Dude's sweaty neck came with a swiftness that spoke of concentrated venom on the part of the shooter. They certainly didn't intend that he should escape—they were hunting him under that horse with their bullets. If he had his carbine in its scabbard, he'd take a hand in this target practice himself. Even the way his head was buzzing, he thought he could give a pretty fair account of himself.

But he was afraid to slide down there where he could reach for the gun. Dude had fallen on the other side, with the gun stock sticking up in plain sight. A good old thirty-thirty that had been his father's. He was afraid a bullet might smash the stock. They certainly would shoot it if they happened to see it—and then he realized that they were not close enough to see the gun. If they were, they'd know he was not there—pinned underneath. It must be he they were trying to get; they wouldn't waste bullets on a dead horse. By "they," he of course meant Cash Farley and Eb and Idaho; perhaps the rest of the gang as well. There was no doubt of that, nor that Cash had recognized him at a distance by the horse he rode. He'd

know Dude as far as he could see him.

Never in his life had Chip been so scared. Never had he felt more helpless, more alone—unless it was while he lay in that root-cellar. He had to have that carbine, but for all it was so close, it might as well have been across the ridge, he thought desperately. As it was, he was barely hidden. Only for this clump of weeds—wild sunflowers, they were—he might be in plain sight of them. From the sound of the shots, they must be up on the coulee rim. On their way to the ranch, he guessed, coming in from a direction that would put them on the north rim of Flying U Coulee. Lord, they could lie up there and shoot right down on the camp!

BUT that was still in the future. Now, he had to save his life if he could. He started crawling down the gully, flattening his body to earth, thankful for the fringe of tall grass and weeds, yet afraid that they would not extend far enough. He had gained a few yards when he came up against a scraggy sage bush that halted him. If he crawled down into the bottom of the gully to get around the bush, he would probably be seen and shot. If he crawled up the bank they couldn't miss seeing him. He thought perhaps he might wriggle through if he were careful.

With the first dead branch he had broken off he lay and considered something that had just occurred to him. The stick was fairly tough, about the size of a walking stick. It had a crook at the tip. It had struck him that he might be able to work his rifle out of its scabbard and drag it up to where he could get hold of it. A risky business, especially if someone decided to ride down there and investigate. Cash Farley might even take a notion to have that saddle. There wasn't a better one in the country that Chip had seen so far, and the one Cash had been riding the other day wasn't such great shakes. He might want to change before he went on.

But the carbine Chip couldn't bring himself to leave if there was any possible way

of getting it. He wriggled himself around and started back, dragging the stick carefully so that it would not break. Dead sage was pretty brittle.

THERE were no more shots, and that in itself worried Chip more than an occasional bullet would have done. He was afraid it meant that someone was coming down to make sure. It was not altogether the heat that made the sweat run down his face while he lay there fishing for that gun.

The stick was too large at the end. He had to whittle it down, which took time; a minute or two, in spite of his haste. When he finally succeeded in working the gun out of its scabbard on to the ground he was so elated that he forgot his caution and went after it with both hands. And for that indiscretion he felt a quick spiteful tug at his hat and knew, even before he heard the shot, that a bullet had gone through it. The shot seemed closer, too; as if Cash Farley were coming down.

On hands and knees Chip scuttled to the bush. Close beside it he removed his hat and inched up until he could look out over the gully's brim. What he saw made him ease up his rifle, take careful aim and fire. The horseman picking his way down the steep coulee wall folded up, clung sagging to the saddle for a few seconds and slid off to the ground. Chip watched him fall, then slid to the bottom and ran crouching down the gully.

He was seen. Bullets followed him, and one nipped the point of his shoulder like the sting of a hornet. He ducked into cover until he could better choose his line of retreat. He was near the end of this particular gully, where it merged with a wider, deeper ravine. But at the point of meeting it flattened and broadened until there was no cover at all.

HHE HAD to risk it. He had to get back up on the bench if he could; back where Weary and Cal could be warned. He halted and lay against the sheltered bank,

sighted along his rifle barrel, moving it slowly until it picked up a target. Got it and fired. He could not wait to see whether he hit anyone.

Over the lip of the deeper gulch he tripped and fell headlong, striking his knee against a rock with a force that numbed his whole leg for a minute. Afterwards he knew that fall must have saved his life, because when he picked up his hat he saw where it had collected another bullet hole; two, to be exact; the small, brown rimmed hole where the bullet struck, and the ragged tear where it went on through. But for the moment he was safe, hidden from sight beneath that three-foot drop.

Not so safe, either, for he heard the strident buzz of a rattlesnake among the rocks ten feet away, and his quick glance gave him a glimpse of a thick, mottled-gray body sliding into a slow coil. For the first time in his life he let a rattler go without making an effort to batter out its poisonous life. No time now—something worse than rattlesnakes had to be fought to a finish. Chip picked up his carbine, examined it anxiously to make sure it was not broken anywhere, felt to make sure his six-shooter had not dropped from his holster, moved that to a safer place inside his waistband in front where he could better protect it, and hobbled off down the gulch.

This led straight to the creek bottom which offered plenty of cover and wound away for miles in either direction. An ideal place to dodge bullets. One that would keep several men busy for hours hunting him out.

So he kept away from that creek bottom, dodging instead into the next gully that looked deep enough to hide him, and limping as fast as he could toward the low benchland, expecting to strike it north of the coulee. Let them hunt him down there in the brush. It would give him time to warn the boys, maybe.

He had reached the base of the steep hill and was looking for a way up that

would not bring him into plain sight of anyone below him, when a bullet spatted into a tuft of grass not six inches to one side of his shoulder.

So he had been seen again. With a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach Chip made a crouching, scrambling run to a nest of boulders a few yards away. Wild currant bushes grew there, making a tangled screen into which he crashed as a leaden hornet stung his side. A rat darted out from under his body as he fell, and a jack-rabbit



bounced away up the hill. Bullets plopped into the hill behind him, snipping off fruit laden branches as they zipped through the brush. More than once he heard the

whining hum of a ricochet where a bullet had glanced from a rock.

They had him now, he realized with a dull resignation when he had wriggled himself into a niche where he felt a trifle more secure. He could hold them off here for awhile—until they circled and came around behind him on the edge of the bluff. When that happened he could see his finish. There was no possible way of protecting his back from the lead they could pour into it. Once they got above him, he told himself grimly, they'd have him dead to rights. He wouldn't even be able to make a run for it. They'd tumble him heels over head like a shot rabbit.

He'd fooled them for a few minutes, anyway. They had gone into the creek-bottom looking for him. But they must have eyes like hawks, since someone had seen him up there against the hill. They'd start closing in, now, and that would give him a chance at them. Good thing he'd filled his cartridge belt that morning with one side all rifle shells. He ought to be able to do some damage anyway before

they got him. Pay for Dude's life as well as his own.

With his carbine laid between two rocks which gave sufficient play for aiming, Chip squinted along the sights, looking for horsemen down toward the creek. He did not see any, but he did catch the telltale glint of sunlight on metal, up near the top of the gulch and about half way to the creek. He lifted himself a little, drew a fine bead a few inches below the glitter and fired.

At that instant a puff of smoke bloomed above the glitter, then the bushes behind it became violently agitated. When a cluster of ripe currants dropped on his shoulder and slid down upon his hand he scarcely noticed them, or thought how close the bullet had come that clipped the stem so neatly. Blood from his shoulder stained the currant leaves, but he did not notice that, either. He was watching the bushes down there where the blue flower of smoke had bloomed a few seconds before. He fired again at the spot, but the bushes were still now, though the smoke still hung there, veiling any gun shine there might have been. He was sure he had scored a hit.

"*Pung-ng-ng,*" sang a bit of lead just above him. He ducked though the danger had passed. No fresh smoke showed down there, which meant that another gun somewhere off to the right was getting an angle that glanced a bullet off the rounded side of the boulder. *Zip-p* came another, off to the other side, flicking off leaves and twigs as it tore through the bushes. Those fellows couldn't see him but they knew where he was and they were closing in on him.

Not too close, however. Until they silenced that 30-30 of his they were keeping at a respectful distance. In half an hour he was ringed round with men intent on killing him before they were done. Methodically, with a deadly patience that turned his blood to ice-water, they were sending a cross-fire into that clump of brush. Even though they could not see the

rocks they must have guessed that he had a natural barricade. They hoped by some lucky shot to reach him. He knew that by the way they sent their bullets here and there, lacing the greenery with lines of death. And without wasting more ammunition than he must, he answered them with slugs able to end the argument when they found their mark.

He was pretty sure he had ended one or two, for the shooting lessened as the minutes passed. One rifle he was sure had stopped barking. But it might be they were drawing off to get at him from above. They had him trapped, he knew that. Once they got on top—

It happened. From up on the hill the *pow-w* of a rifle floated down to him, sending a chill to the middle of his bones. He tried to crouch lower, looked anxiously for better cover. There wasn't any. That first shot must have gone over; it wasn't easy to shoot straight down hill and hit what you aimed at. But he was in plain sight—and he couldn't help it. They'd get the range and that would be the end.

"Hope he's a good shot," he muttered to himself, and shivered as if a cold wind had struck his bare flesh. That sounded like a 30-30, up there. Second time he'd missed. When he did hit, Chip hoped it would finish him quick. The thought of a bullet ploughing into his flesh, tearing muscles and tendons, smashing bones and yet not killing him was horrible. He didn't want them to get him alive—they might try some of those Injun tricks they had talked about that night he led them in to Cow Island; things they said they'd do to him when they caught him; things unthinkable.

He pulled his thoughts away from such horrors; away from the shooting as much as he could, except when he thought he saw a mark to aim at. He tried to think of Goldilocks, but those thoughts blurred like a reflection in water when a breeze passes over the pool. Troubled blue eyes and honey colored hair—that was all he could see of her. And presently that too faded.

He had to think of himself now. He had to think what he should do if they just shot him helpless. Trust to their mercy?

Answering that question, he pulled his six-gun from his belt and looked at it gravely, laid it down beside him where his hand would fall upon it easily. Unless they got him in the head or the heart—when it wouldn't matter—he'd have strength enough to lift that gun and pull the trigger, surely. After that he felt better. He took the carbine, pulled cartridges from his belt and slipped them one by one into the magazine; blew a bit of bark from the mechanism and settled himself to fight back. When they did come, damn them, they wouldn't find him with a lot of ammunition on hand.

Minutes crawled like snails. The guns out front had shifted position. They kept blazing away, but he couldn't see the smoke from where he was. Occasionally a bullet tore through the bushes or spatted against a rock, but it seemed as though those fellows up on the hill were a long time getting the range. They kept on shooting, but they hadn't come within a mile of him yet.

A man off to the right gave a squawking kind of screech as if he had been hit where it hurt—and Chip had not fired in that direction lately but to the left. The gun in front was silent. Down near the mouth of the gully a horseman galloped out of sight going toward the creek-bottom. The shooting went on up there on the hill, but everywhere else was silent. Even the man who had been yelling out there yelled no more. And that was strange.

Then a voice came booming down from the hilltop. "Hey, Chip! Y'all right? Where'bouts is your horse?"

Weary! Good old Weary Willie up there, putting Cash Farley on the run! Chip clawed to his feet, waved a hand and tried to yell. To his surprise no sound would come from his dry throat, and his darned legs wanted to fold up under him all the time. But it was all right—the boys were up there and they'd take charge of

everything. Maybe it was his side that made him feel so kind of wabbly.

Funny, the way the boys got down there so darned quick. He had just sat down—or so it seemed to him—when here they were, milling around that clump of brush like a bunch of cattle around spilled blood. He wasn't sitting on the ground, however. He was lying on his back and Weary was trying to get his shirt off. Chip pushed away his hands and tried to get up.

"Lay still, 'fore I brain yuh. Don't yuh know you're shot up?"

"Nicked a little, that's all." Chip wetted his lips, which were dry and stiff. "That bunch is damn poor shots—" He stopped because he did not like the sound of his voice. It sounded as if it had been washed and wrung dry. Something like that. "I'm—all right," he added gruffly. "Where'd they go to?"

"Hell," Cal Emmett told him bluntly. "You oughta know. You wrote the ticket."

"You mean—" Chip struggled to his feet and stood there weaving drunkenly, supported by Weary and Ted Culver. "You mean I—you mean Cash Farley?" He gulped. "Is he dead?"

Cal nodded grimly. "Deader'n hell in a preacher's back yard. Shot three times. You sure are a thorough cuss when yuh git started."

"They shot Dude. And they all went gunning for me. I had to run like a rabbit—till I found a place where I could stand 'em off. I—I guess there's one back up on the hill—on the south side of the coulee. Right at the mouth. I had to. He was coming down after me. I—they were headed for the ranch and—"

Weary eased him back against the bullet scarred boulder.

"Yeah, well, they ain't headed nowhere now. Them that you didn't stop, the rest of us kinda discouraged from going on."

"Discouraged hell!" snorted Cal. "Why —"

"Jar loose, there. We've got to get him home," Weary cut in again. "Where's your horse, Chip?"

"Dead," Chip answered vaguely. "But I want Wane's saddle off him—and the bridle——"

"Yes, but *where?*"

"R-right—straight out——"

Weary caught him as he toppled over.

CHAPTER XXVI

UP IN the pasture where he had gone to get away from the endless wrangling of the Happy Family, Chip was sitting with his back against a cottonwood tree, smoking and trying to compose a letter to his Goldilocks. It wasn't easy, though it had seemed simple enough last night when he lay in bed thinking about it. It wasn't supposed to be a love letter, yet he wanted it a little different from the ordinary friendly note any fellow would write. He wanted to send her the picture he had made of her, and he wanted her to be sure and get the secret meaning in the picture. He would not come right out and tell her that Milt Cummings was the snake and she had better look out for him; he wanted to word the note so that Julie would read between the lines and get his warning. A nice problem, that.

Then, without actually telling her so—in case she had just been flirting with him and didn't expect him to take it seriously—he thought he should let her see he was going right ahead planning the future. And he had to explain that she probably wouldn't see him very often because he was going to be awfully busy. And maybe he ought to mention something about keeping an eye out for a nice piece of land he could file a homestead on when he came of age. He sure didn't want her to get the idea he wasn't in earnest and willing to go right ahead and make a home for her as soon as he could.

And there was another thing. He didn't want her or anyone else to think he had gone hunting trouble with Cash Farley and his men. He had to explain somehow that he was fighting in self defence. A man had to fight for his life, and kill if

it was necessary. She was kind of funny, though. She might blame him for killing Cash Farley and one or two more. He ought to square himself, maybe.

And of course he'd better explain he

had been hit a few places, but not to amount to much. Just a couple of bullet gashes that had made him bleed a lot, so he was



knocked out from riding for a few days. And his knee was pretty sore, but he guessed he needn't mention that, because falling down didn't amount to anything anyway.

All told, his task was to condense about ten pages of letter into a dozen lines or so that would let her know he was still in earnest, yet which any stranger could read without knowing too much of his affairs. A full day's work for this mild Sabbath day, as anyone would agree who had ever tackled such a job.

By noon he had written "Dear Goldilocks:—" in beautiful Spencerian script. The D and the G were nicely shaded, as was proper when you were writing a letter of such special importance. For a full half hour he had been sitting there staring down at the words, wondering if it would sound too mushy if he wrote it "Dear Little Goldilocks" instead. She'd like that, maybe, a whole lot better. And then he wouldn't have to go on and write a lot of mush about love. But if someone got hold of the letter they'd think that was an awful soft beginning. The boys sure would never let him hear the last of it, if they ever got wise to that.

But—hell, if you were going to marry a girl you were naturally supposed to make love to her. Let them keep their damned noses out of his business. It sure wouldn't be healthy for them if they ever boned him about it. He guessed he'd better start over again and put in the word *little*. That's what she was; little and awful pretty. If

she hadn't turned right around and let Milt Cummings hug her before all those kids— If she ever married Chip Bennett she'd have to cut that out. He wouldn't stand for it. He'd tell her that much.

He tore off that first salutation, and wadded it into a ball which he dropped into his pocket. On a fresh sheet of paper he wrote "Dear Little Goldilocks" with a warm feeling in his face, though he sat in shade. And the longer he stared at the words the mushier they looked. So after awhile he tore that off as he had the other, and pulled it to bits the size of a child's finger-nail, making sure that no two letters remained on one fragment. Then he hunted the other wad out of his pocket and tore that up also. He had suddenly found himself completely out of the notion of writing any letter at all. Hell, he'd be seeing her one of these days. He guessed all he had to say would keep.

A stir among his horses that had been contentedly feeding around him lifted his eyes and his thoughts from the paper before him. Rummy and little Silver were starting for the fence, taking two or three tentative steps and then stopping to stare again. Silvia moved after them, then decided she wouldn't bother. It was only Weary Willie coming, and the colts would follow him back. Mike deigned only one long glance at the cowboy stilting along on his high heels. Mike knew that one; he switched a fly off his rump, blew flower pollen from his nostrils and moved off—not that he expected to be wanted, but just in case.

"Hey, Chip! Y'ain't tryin' to break yourself of the habit of eatin', are yuh? Dinner's about ready, I guess. I saw Patsy puttin' dumplin's into a kettle of them grouse Slim brought in—and if I was you I'd kinda edge up towards the feed trough. Six grouse are sure going to last quick when them yahoos land at the table." Weary made a pass at Rummy, meaning to grab him by the mane, and grinned foolishly when the colt was not there at all. "Mamma, he's quick! Well, come on.

What yuh been doin' with yourself all morning?"

"Nothing." Chip lifted himself up as carefully as an old man, slipping the tablet into his coat pocket.

"How's the knee and the side and all the rest of yuh?"

"All right. Knee's stiff as the devil; got a kink in it somewhere, I guess. You, Rummy! You bite Silver once more and I'll brain yuh with a rock!" Chip grinned as he turned away to limp through the gate Weary had opened for him. "Talk about the devil entering into a drove of hogs—if there ain't seven devils in that damned colt, I miss my guess."

"Sure is a corker, all right. If he keeps on the way he's started, he sure will be a rim-runner, one of these days, now I'm tellin' yuh." He looked at Chip with a twinkle in his eyes. "What's the chance of tradin' yuh out of that colt?"

"You go to hell," Chip advised him sweetly.

A new covered buggy, shiny black where the dust of the trail had not dimmed its luster, had just turned out of the creek bottom below the corrals and was coming toward the camp. "Now who the devil is that?" ejaculated Weary. "Milt's brown team—but he always drove a buckboard. Mamma! He's gettin' up in the world, stakin' himself to a new top buggy. Wonder—"

Weary did not finish that sentence. He knew who sat on the seat beside Milt Cummings. He wondered if Chip knew, but he tactfully refrained from asking.

Chip did know. By the thump of his heart he knew it before Weary did. It was Goldilocks, coming to see him. Wanting to see him so much that she got Milt to bring her. He wished she hadn't—wished she wouldn't put herself under obligations to Milt Cummings, even though it did show how much she cared.

BY THE time the two reached the cabins the team had pulled in and stopped. Milt was out, helping Julie down

and holding her closer and longer than he'd any business to, Chip thought resentfully. He didn't know as he cared to marry a girl who carried on like that with other men. He was glad he hadn't written that letter, because now he had a few things to tell Miss Julie Lang, and they wouldn't be the things he had meant to put in the letter, either. What he thought about the way she acted with Milt Cummings, for one thing. Hugging her right before everybody—and she didn't act like she gave a darn how it looked or what folks would think! Darned little flirt, she needn't think she could make a fool of *him*, and he'd tell her so, too.

All these thoughts while he walked toward them. Then Milt turned grinning, his arm still around her.

"Folks, meet the future Mrs. Cummings!" His exultant voice carried even to the ears of Patsy in the doorway of the cook shack. "Going to be married quick as that new railroad up north here gets through, so we can start our honeymoon on it. Plans are all made. She's been dodgin' my loop quite a while, but I've sure got her noosed now for keeps. See that?" He held up Julie's left hand to display the diamond flashing on her third finger.

"I wish you joy, Milt," Chip said distinctly, his scornful gaze on Julie.

But no one heard him. Cal Emmett was bellowing facetiously, "Well, I'm sure goin' to kiss the bride to be, just in case I don't git an invite to the weddin'!" And he proceeded to do so with the manner of an unruly boy teasing the girls at school.

The whanging of Patsy's dishpan for dinner ended that play as soon almost as it began. Ted and Happy Jack took the team and a led horse to the corral and hurried back in fear of missing some of the grouse pot pie. Babel filled the mess house for an hour.

IT WAS not until dinner was over that Chip spoke more than that one sentence to Milt, or exchanged more than a glance

with Julie. Then Milt beckoned him and started for the buggy, Julie walking beside him with her hands clasped round his arm, the diamond carefully uppermost and dazzling the eye as it caught the sunlight. Chip hesitated. But then it occurred to him they must want to explain themselves, and he had a sardonic interest in hearing what they might have to say.

But Milt walked round to the luggage box behind the seat. As he reached to pull out a lumpy bag he looked up at Chip, his eyes showing green as the sun shone in them.

"Julie said you wanted your brother's stuff, so I thought I'd bring it over," he said. "It's all here but his spurs, and he had them on—that night. And his saddle and bridle you got."

Chip leaned hard against the wheel, swallowing dryly. "I—thanks," he said baldly. It was all he could think of to say.

Milt nodded his bare head toward the corral. "I brought his other horse—Peg-leg, he called him. He's down there in the corral. This is his blankets and clothes and—well, you know. Odds and ends; trinkets he had. Your picture and his mother's and father's— And you got the other horse, so this covers it all."

"You poor boy," Julie said in her softest tone, and laid her hand with its new ring on his shoulder. "We know just how you feel about it, and we're just awfully sorry —"

"Thanks." Chip moved so that her hand slid down away from him. He looked at Milt. "How did Cash Farley come to have that horse and saddle?"

"Stole 'em. Wane was out in the edge of the hills last fall, just a week or so before he was killed——"

"Killed? I was told it was an accident."

"Well, we did think at the time it was an accident. I got it out of Turk Bowles the other day, when the boys had packed in Cash's body and them others and made their report to Burch. Up till then Turk swore he never saw a thing. Scared of Cash.

"But about the horse—it was along toward evening. He was on his way to Cow Island—going to see Julie. She'd been wanting to make some chokecherry jell, and Wane had told her he knew where there were some dandies. So he had a floursack along and was going to pick her some cherries."

"He did, too. Great big juicy ones," Julie interpolated, clasping Milt's arm again and flashing her diamond.

"Yeah. Well, he was picking along and never heard a thing. He'd left the sorrel stand and went on up a gulch where the bushes was taller and the cherries better. So when he come back to his horse it was gone. He had to walk and catch up another horse. He never did find out what become of the sorrel—not till that last night, I guess.

"That night, Wane had been over to Lang's again and was just startin' home. Pretty late, I guess it was——"

"No later than you stay, silly! You're just jealous——"

"Sure, I'm jealous." Milt laid a hand over hers. "Well, anyway, he was crossin' the river when here come Cash Farley ridin' the sorrel. Turk never heard what was said, but the moon was bright so he seen the hull thing. Wane hollered at Cash—told him to get down off that horse, probably. And Cash pulled his gun and shot him and turned around and rode back the way he'd come.

"Turk was scared to say anything about it. When we was out lookin' for Wane, Turk claimed he was asleep and never seen 'im cross the river at all. But he told me yesterday that Wane fell off his horse but hung onto the reins and dragged him off into swimmin' water. Seein' it was too late to do anything about him—he was watchin' and he never seen Wane make a move to swim out—why Turk kept his mouth shut. You can't blame him much, either. Cash would of killed him like a dog if he thought Turk seen the fracas."

"Thanks for telling me," Chip said tonelessly.

"Oh, that's nothing. I thought a lot of Wane Bennett—oh, I was so damn jealous I couldn't see straight, there for awhile; but I liked him a whole lot, only for that. If I'd known it was Cash Farley——"

Chip gave him a sharp look. "Didn't you ever see him riding Dude?"

"Why, no. If I had——"

"He didn't make any bones of riding Dude into the middle of things the Fourth," Chip pointed out. "Tied him to Lang's hitch-rail as bold as you please."

"Well, I didn't see him." Milt's nice teeth came together with a click. "Wane didn't ride the sorrel much. He was turned out in the pasture most of the time——"

"He was riding him the time he got stolen."

"Well, for pity sake!" Julie cried sharply. "Are you trying to hint that Milt *knew* Cash Farley had Wane's horse and saddle? I should think you'd be ashamed!"

"No, I was just wondering. Cash seems to have got awful bold, all of a sudden. But he was riding Dude that night he met Wane in the river, and he rode him the Fourth in broad daylight. It just looks as though Cash Farley felt pretty sure of himself around here."

"Can't say, as to that. I never happened to run into him once in a blue moon. And when I did, he certainly wasn't riding that horse." His eyes narrowed. "If he had been," he added shortly, "I certainly would have called him on it."

HE PULLED out a thin bed-roll marked with a brand it wrenched Chip's heart to look at. WB, branded with black paint on the tarp in two places. Chip himself had drawn those two brands on the canvas and filled them in neatly with the paint, the night before Wane left for the north. He reached out and took the bundle from Milt, grinding his teeth together to steady himself.

"Where yuh want this warbag?" Milt asked, picking it up. "In the bunkhouse? Lemme have that bed. I'll carry 'em in for yuh."

In the strip of shade the Happy Family were roosting, talking in low tones together as they smoked, careful not to show that they knew what was going on at the buggy. Weary and Cal edged over to make a passage to the bunkhouse clear. Milt went in, stood the roll and the bag against the wall, turned and looked at Chip.

"I admit I kinda had my back up, that day in front of the blacksmith shop when you tore into Tom Shaner," he said, half smiling. "I guess I'm a plumb fool over Julie, and I kinda thought you was makin' a play for her yourself."

"You needn't worry," Chip said stiffly. "Far as I'm concerned she's just a pretty girl."

"Yeah. I know better now, uh course. I'd like to be friends, Chip."

"Thanks. No reason why not, is there?"

"None in the world, that I know of. You've showed yourself a real go-getter, Chip. You'll make out all right, anywhere yuh go."

"Thanks."

MILT gave him a slap on the shoulder and went out. Chip closed the door after him, kicked a box against it and sat down on the nearest bunk, making himself a cigarette with fingers that shook with the strain he had been under.

So that was it, huh? Cash Farley was the one. That might be true, Chip thought. It sounded logical. Just the same, it was damn funny Milt had to be all this while finding out that Cash Farley was riding Wane's horse and saddle like they were his own.

"Friends—hell!" his thoughts exploded suddenly into speech. He limped over and pushed a heavier box against the door, started for the bunk, turned back and pushed both boxes back out of the way, pulled the door open and limped to where a box, nailed against the wall, served as a cupboard. He fumbled there amongst a litter of small objects, returned to the bunk and sat down where he could glance out of the window now and then.

Weary's browned face and big gray hat showed at the door, hesitated, ventured farther. "Feel like riding back on the bench a little ways, Chip?" he asked in what might be termed a sick-bed tone. "There's a big bunch of antelope drifting down into the next coulee——"

"Sure. In a minute." Chip glanced out of the window, dropped his eyes again to the tablet in his hands.

Weary edged closer, glanced out, looked at the drawing Chip was just finishing and grinned. "Mamma!" he breathed relievedly. "You'll git over it, I guess. No busted heart could put a grin like that on the girl that's loved and lost." He took another look and laughed. "Milt'll shoot you if he sees that. You've got her down pat, all right—but still at the same time I down't hardly think she'd like it very well. Better not show it till they're outa camp."

"What the hell difference does it make, what she thinks?" Chip held the drawing off at arm's length, looked at it critically and brought it back to make the simper more pronounced. "That's how she looks—to me, anyway." He stood up and hung the picture on a nail beside the window, and stood back for another scrutiny.

It won another chuckle from Weary as he studied it. "Well, she sure never done as much damage as she aimed to do, I guess."

"I'll tell a man she didn't. No damn girl's ever going to get her loop on me, you can bank on that."

"Now you're shoutin'!" approved Weary. "Julie's cute, but—well, I'd just as soon it's Milt. Damn right."

"And that," said Chip with a fine casualness, "makes it unanimous. Got any spare shells, Weary? I'm about out. Have to stock up again."

"Yeah," grinned Weary, "you sure are hard on ammunition, all right. Help yourself—that box up there over the window."

They went out together, talking antelope as they went by Julie and Milt. And if Chip's thoughts were not wholly on the hunt, no one ever knew.

Adventurers All



MAROONED ON A SKYSCRAPER



TO SOME, adventure comes in the form of hardship in the jungle, on barren mountain peaks, or in the depths of shark-haunted seas. Perhaps it is because one expects excitement in such isolated places that many unusual experiences fall to the lot of the world wanderer. However, when hunger, thirst, and pain are suffered in the heart of a great city, and when one is not more than five hundred feet from the nearest human beings and yet as completely cut off as if cast away on a tropical atoll, then I would term that true adventure.

Marooned on a skyscraper? Ridiculous, you would say at first thought. Yet, perhaps you will understand as I continue.

There is a 24-story building in the heart of Denver, Colorado, which is owned by a large department store. It was in their office that I worked as file clerk for a few months while I was staying in that city. The first fifteen floors of the building are given over to the various departments while the next five above are used as store-rooms. The last four are taken up by a receding tower with two very narrow balconies, scarcely more than copings, one about forty feet above the other. Above the highest balcony stands the tower about fifty feet high and topped by a small cupola. Between the two ledges there is a clock with four sunken faces that are illuminated at night. The ledges are about three and a half feet wide. I have gone into detail so that you may see in your mind the place that was my prison for two days and two nights.

For some time I had been intending to visit the tower to take a panorama photograph of Denver, for I knew that there would be no visitors in the tower room at the time when I left my work to come up. I did not tell anyone of my intentions as I feared that the company might not look with approval on an employee who stayed in the building after business hours were over. My work was finished at five o'clock and since the building would be open until six-thirty I felt that I would have plenty of time to get back down again. The janitors would be working until that time, and I was sure that there was no danger of being locked in overnight. As I left my desk I picked up a special delivery letter that my employer had given me to mail. I thought that I would have plenty of time to post it as I went home.

Carrying the camera and munching on a candy bar, I climbed to the fifteenth floor without any trouble. Going a floor higher, I found the door that led to the stairway. Evidently it had not been used for some time, for it opened only after much jerking. Finally it gave way, and I went up the dusty staircase to the tower room.

The sun was still far above the horizon and the sky was a deep gold in color. There was still excellent light for a photograph. Waves of shimmering heat rose toward me from the pavement far below.

Seating myself on the coping, I gazed down into the narrow gorge of the street. My heart gave a startled leap and I felt unwell for a moment. As I looked downward I had the feeling that the whole building was going to topple over. The

camera slipped from beneath my arm and disappeared over the ledge. Curious as to whether it had fallen all the way down, I leaned over—just a little too far.

As I looked down through what seemed an immensity of space, that strange nausea of high places seized me. I realized in helpless terror that my body was slipping outward over the low wall. Then in an instant I was whirling down to seemingly inevitable death!

My next sensation was a jarring shock that knocked me unconscious. For ages, it seemed, I was wandering in a forest of trees whose branches were roaring flames. I was brought back to my senses by the low, steady humming sound of the clock mechanism above me. I looked around and found myself on the first ledge forty feet below where I had been sitting. Below me yawned a drop of three hundred feet!

The narrow wall of the ledge had caught me; my body had swayed hesitatingly and, by the merest chance, slipped inward. A trick of gravity had saved me! My hopes leaped high, but they were to be discouraged in the hours to come.

Several of my left ribs must have been broken or fractured, for my side pained me excruciatingly. The sun had disappeared. Blue-black thunderclouds filled the sky and the lightning flashed incessantly. The first big drops of the approaching storm pelted down upon me. It was very dark now and all the lights below flashed into sight. The lights on the four sides of the tower clock were turned on, and the glow from the dials enabled me to see what I was doing. I was on an abutment about four feet wide, edged by a tiny ridge three feet high. The tower wall was straight and smooth to a distance of fifteen feet above me. From there on, the space was taken up by the clocks.

For some hours I lay in a half-stupor, the storm beating down so that I was soaked in the first half hour of the down-pour. The rain revived me at two o'clock Sunday morning. I had been there since six o'clock the afternoon before. By the

time it was light I had dragged myself to the tower corner where there was a little more room for me to turn over on my uninjured side.

The sun came up, making the ledge very hot and my clothes steaming, but they soon were dry. By this time I was able to make my way around to the other side of the tower where there would be shade for at least a short while. Here I discovered a small door just large enough to get through if one stooped a bit. My hope was short-lived—the door was locked. I found a loose bit of mortar and pounded on the door with it until I remembered that the building would be deserted until Monday morning. I gave it up and lay down again.

The day passed and night came on the wings of a high wind. This was unusual, for August until then had been a very calm month as far as weather was concerned. I had to hold myself tightly braced against the tower wall to keep from being blown off. My head was aching terrifically, and there was an unpleasant gnawing at the pit of my stomach. Save for a candy bar, I had not had anything to eat since luncheon on Saturday. I had been very thirsty for the first twenty hours or so, but after the rain I got several swallows of fairly clean water. My side stiffened until it felt as though it were turning to stone. It soon became hard for me to breathe. And the hard ridge of the balcony was not exactly the most comfortable spot to cure such a hurt.

The last night was the hardest. I thought that it would never come to an end. Agony flamed all over my body and I thought, in my spells of delirium, that the stars were little showers of sparks that were falling on the tower. I tried to keep my eyes closed so that I would not have to lie upon my back and look straight up into the sky. This gave me the same falling sensation as though I were going to tumble right off into the heavens.

Monday morning came at last. I moved in closer to the cavity made by the frame

of the door and commenced tapping once more in the possibility that someone might hear me and investigate. I remember, too, that I shouted until I was hoarse, but no one seemed to hear me. By early afternoon I was very weak, but still kept pounding at the door so that I would have something to do to break the monotony.

About two o'clock I was startled to hear a key turn in the lock and the door pulled slowly inward. At first I could not understand that someone must have heard my signals and have come to my rescue. It seemed that half a dozen hands pulled me in at the same time. I was carried down to the elevator which dropped me, trembling, to the first floor. There was a wait of a quarter of an hour and then an ambulance howled down the street. The hospital was reached in what I am told was record

time. The last thing that I remember was the sight of a young surgeon pulling on his rubber gloves in preparation for probing into my side. Later I learned that three ribs had been broken and infection had begun.

Ten weeks later I walked out of the hospital and it was not until I had been home a few days that I discovered the special delivery letter in my torn and shrunk coat. The best thing, it appeared, was to take it to my employer and explain the situation. As I entered his office we both started telling each other that I was quitting and that I was getting fired. I did not feel especially sorry—I had heard enough jokes about my hitting the high spots, and I wanted to get away from Denver.

John Caldwell.

\$15 For True Adventures

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FAREWELL PARTY

By MARQUETTE HALL

Author of "Pull 'Um Tiger Whiskers," etc.



A FEW short, sharp words suddenly snuffed the hilarity out of our little party at the Hingmoon Customs Club. It was a farewell party for Bertram Arfent. In the morning he was to leave for Hongkong, to take a boat for home. He was giving the party himself, and he knew how. All the white folks in our little colony were there—except the missionaries, and they had been invited. Bertram, a perfect host, was the animation of the party, and kept it from being a mere dull session of serious drinking.

"Bertie," said Evelyn Forman, the Commissioner's delectable daughter, "just where is your home?"

"Oh, London, Honolulu, New York, Cannes, Rio, Paris, or wherever I fancy going."

That wasn't posing. Bertram was a born citizen of the world. None of us knew where he came from originally, but he had evidently been everywhere since. His travel talk was quite authentic, we knew, because some of us had been places ourselves, and could check on him.

"I suppose you'll never come back to Hingmoon," said Evelyn. She had a way of saying things like this that made you think she would be terribly

disappointed if her supposition came true. No doubt about her regrets being sincere in this case, however, because Arfent had taken a lot of dullness out of her life in our sleepy little port.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Arfent protested. "If a certain Commissioner, and his charming wife, and daughter are still here, nothing will keep me away long."

The Commissioner's charming wife appropriated the greater part of this compliment, but Evelyn knew it was meant for herself alone, as also did young Kelly. Young Kelly was only a tide-waiter in the Customs, an outside man. While a tide-waiter may look at a commissioner's daughter, he should not expect her to twist her fair neck looking around for him, especially when an attraction like Bertie is prominently in view. Kelly, however, did seem to expect this, and when the ladies smiled on Bertram, Kelly frowned his annoyance, and turned to his glass. That was Kelly's one great fault; he turned to his glass when annoyed.

"Cheerio, Bertie!" he said. "Here's wind in your sails!"

*In China the Life of the
Party May Turn Out to Be
the Death of Some of It.*

Before Bertie could respond to this rather two-sided toast, a red-sashed native tide-waiter came in the front door. He had been running.

"What d'you want, you bloody heathen?" Spink growled at him. Spink despised the Chinese, but he didn't dare show it until after the fourth drink.

The fellow ignored Spink, and approached the Commissioner, who was shooting a few billiards with me between drinks. He blurted a torrent of Chinese at Forman. At his first words, Arfent abruptly left the ladies, and strolled across the room to lean against the door frame.

"What's this? What's this?" the Commissioner turned to Kelly. Having done most of his service in the North, he did not understand Cantonese.

"He says a strange steamer has just passed up river, and refused to answer when hailed," Kelly interpreted.

"The audacity of 'em!" exclaimed the Commissioner. "Smugglers, I'll wager. How far away are they now?"

"Only a short distance, and going slow."

"Well, well! Take the launch, and go after 'em, and bring 'em back."

"Righto," said Kelly. He emptied his glass, bowed to the ladies, and strode to the door.

"Oh, I say. Why break up this jolly little gathering because of a filthy old tramp?" Arfent asked in the drawl he sometimes affected. "Sit down, Kelly, and have a drink!"

"Sorry, old chap, but I must toddle along now. I'll have two when I get back."

"I said sit down!" Arfent's voice was harsh and sharp. "Sit down! No one leaves this place until I permit!"

"Why, why, man, what do you mean?" Forman demanded, blinking his eyes. "What authority have you to—?"

"This!" snapped Arfent, as his right hand flipped an automatic from his hip pocket, and let its nose sort of waver around towards every man in the room.

"I say, Bertie, what's the joke?" Evelyn brought us out of our coma with a gay laugh that broke rather nervously.

"My dear young lady, please realize that I am not joking. This is my farewell party, and I will not have it interrupted."

"Come on, Arf, quit pulling our legs," said Kelly, stepping forward. "The bloody old tub will get away from me."

"Nothing would please me more," Arfent said, pointing the gun at Kelly's stomach.

I THINK the truth struck all of us at the same time. That steamer was carrying a cargo of contraband that belonged to Arfent. Opium? Guns? I doubt that we would have been more astonished had the mild-mannered Padre from the Mission suddenly walked in, and pulled a gun out of his robe. Yet, we should not have been astonished. No one really knew anything about Arfent. He was not a permanent member of our little community. He merely made long stops here on his way to and from the interior of China on business, the nature of which he never explained. While he was a great talker, he told only about what he had seen and heard, seldom about what he had been doing. Still, we just stood and gaped. The pleasant and popular Bertie a contraband smuggler on a big scale!

"Tell your man here," Arfent nodded at the Chinese tide-waiter, "that everything is quite all right, and to go home to bed. And remember, I'm listening."

"I'll be damned if I do!" declared Forman, thumping his cue on the floor.

"Very well. Let him stop and join our little party," said Arfent, closing the door at his back. "Ah-Hing, please lock that rear door—don't go out of it—and bring me the key. Thanks. Boy, see what the ladies and gentlemen will have to drink."

"You dirty blighter!" muttered Kelly, advancing on Arfent with clenched fists.

"Careful!" warned Bertie, his eyes boring into Kelly's, and the automatic held rigid. "Better back up a little."

KELLY backed against the billiard table, his hands behind him. Old Forman just stood there and glared, as did the other men. I couldn't see the ladies, they being behind me, but I could hear

them breathing heavily, Mrs. Forman almost gasping. The club boy pattered softly around, filling glasses. White folks's peculiar doings were none of his pidgin.

Neither was this affair any of mine. I am only a little Yank oil and gas man, and this was a matter between the Chinese Maritime Customs, and Bertram Arfent. Ordinarily, my sympathy is apt to be with the fellow trying to get past the Customs. Of course I did not approve of this gunplay, with ladies present, and I was somewhat worried about young Kelly. That hot-headed Irishman was liable to get himself hurt.

"I suggest that you all continue your various little amusements," said Arfent, smiling, cool and confident.

I came out of my stupor to find myself holding the billiard cue out in front of me like a soldier at present arms. Willing to do my part to break up the suspense, and re-open festivities, I nonchalantly tried a shot. I must have been a little nervous, for the cue barely scraped the ball, which slowly rolled across the table, and came to rest against Kelly's hand. I saw his fingers enclose it. Before I realized what he was about his arm flew up, and he threw the ball at Arfent, with all his strength. I suppose he aimed at Arfent's gun-hand, but he missed him altogether, and the ball split the door panel with a crash that made everybody jump.

Kelly hurled himself after the ball, and with better aim. He rammed Arfent amidships, and jerked the legs from under him. The gun blazed once, twice, knocking hell out of a bottle of gin on the bar, and boring a portrait of Sir Robert Hart, that hung above the fireplace.

"Kelly, be careful!" shrieked Evelyn, in a way that showed it was not Arfent she was worried about. Her mother just squeaked, and subsided into oblivion.

Kelly wasted no time trying to disarm Bertie. He tramped over his squirming body, jerked open the door, and dashed into the moonlight, leaving Arfent to us. Arfent was on his feet again, before we

could reach him, and flung out after Kelly, shooting at him as he disappeared behind the hibiscus hedge.

"Stay back!" Arfent snarled, as we rushed into action more or less confusedly and started after him. "Stay back, or I'll get somebody yet!"

KELLY made for the Customs jetty, where the native crew waited in the launch, with the motor going. The boat swung away as he leaped aboard. Arfent gave him a parting shot, and turned down the Bund to my Company's jetty. My launch was tied up there, with some of the crew sleeping aboard. When I guessed his intention I waddled after him. This was where I became personally concerned in the affair. By the time I reached the end of the jetty, he had shouted, and kicked my crew awake, and on the job.

"Hey," I yelled, "you can't take my launch!" and I jumped aboard, looking for a handy tool.

"What do you want, you fool?" he demanded.

"You can't take my boat. I'll have you arrested for piracy!"

"Piracy, hell!" he snorted. "Piracy is nothing compared to what will happen to you, if you don't stop squawking, and get off."

I nearly fell backwards overboard, as the boat lurched forward.

"Oh, well, since you insist upon butting in, you might as well ride along," he said. "It's your old boat anyway. But sit down here in front of me," he motioned with the gun, "and don't move, or I'll perforate you in a second."

I sat down as indicated.

"Full speed," Arfent barked at the engineer, in Cantonese. "Catch that Customs boat."

"Can't do it," protested the engineer. "It's too far ahead."

"Don't argue," snapped Bertie, giving the fellow a poke in the kidneys with his gun. "I said catch that boat. If you can't, you had better come close enough for me

to shoot at it, or I'll shoot you instead."

"Man, do you realize what you are doing?" I asked.

"Much more than you do! Every *cash* I own in the world is in that cargo, and I'm



not going to fold my hands while the Customs gets it."

"You might have known you couldn't get away with a stunt like that," I said.

"Couldn't, eh? In one hour's time the cargo would have been jolly well on its way inland."

"So," I remarked after a bit, "this is the kind of business you went up country on so often."

THE launch plowed up froth in the yellow river, seeming to leap a few feet out of the water, every now and then. Arfent kept his eye on the launch ahead, but not so intently that he could not, at the same time, watch me, and the crew, crouched down in front of him.

"No matter how this turns out," I remarked, "you can't ever go back to Hing-moon, and you are washed out with the Formans."

"Say, will you keep your mouth shut?" he stormed at me. "Or do you want to swallow a bullet?"

It was no use trying to reason with the fellow, so I was discreetly silent, while he kept prodding the engineer for more speed. I don't know where he learned his Cantonese, but his teacher certainly provided him with a lurid vocabulary of abuse.

Some miles up, the river makes a sharp bend. When we careened around this

corner a bunch of shifting lights broke on our view; lights on land and lights on the water. The smuggler had dropped anchor, and a flock of sampans were sculling out to take off her cargo, while a coolie gang on shore waited to carry it inland. It was all quite evident; evident, also, that the show-down was at hand.

Both launches seemed to tear out more speed, but mine forged up nearer the Customs boat. When the steamer loomed up only a few hundred yards ahead, Arfent planted his feet firmly, braced himself with his left hand, and two spurts of flame shot over my head.

He was not the best shot in the world, and circumstances were not favorable. Kelly waved a white-sleeved arm, and let out a yell of derision that could be heard above the roar of the motors. Arfent pulled his trigger recklessly, until it clicked on an empty. Then he slammed down his gun, and cursed himself for not saving the last shot for closer range.

Kelly's launch rammed and scattered the sampans, as it slid alongside the steamer, a bob-tail coaster. The cursing sampanceers clung to the gunwales of their wobbling craft. Up the ladder in three leaps, Kelly confronted a group of men at the door of the compradore's cabin. Gesticulating wildly, he ordered the ship to up anchor, and go back to the Customs.

BEFORE my launch stopped Arfent was on the ladder. Shoving his discarded gun into my pocket, I followed. Kelly swung around to face us, and when he saw me, his jaw dropped.

"Marvin, are you in with these swine?" he demanded.

"Easy, boy, easy," I started to explain, but he had no time to listen.

Arfent swung a hammerhead fist at his face. Kelly sidestepped, and reciprocated, and they slugged each other right and left. I stepped back against the rail to face the other fellows. There was a half-caste, Macanese, or something, in dirty white trousers and singlet, evidently the skipper;

a chunky Chinese military officer, named Tang, whom I knew by sight, and who was said to have rebellious ambitions; clustered around the officer, his motley bodyguard fingered the triggers of their Mausers. The ship's crew, a piratical-looking outfit, lurked back in the shadows. The skipper had a wicked leer on his hybrid face, and seemed inclined to mix in the scrap.

"You bozo," I said, pulling out Arfent's gun, "stand still, there, and keep your hands in sight, or I'll plug you!"

He stood still. Arfent was too busy to notice this by-play so my bluff worked.

Kelly and Arfent pounded each other, and ripped the white jackets off each other's backs, trying to get strangle-holds. Kelly sent Arfent tottering to the rail, but Bertie rebounded, and knocked Kelly against the cabin, and so back and forth. Both soon had bloody knuckles and bloody snoots. They fought with little science, but with great determination, neither one was too much of a gentleman to use his knees. Bertie rather astonished me. He had never shown any signs of being a rough-and-tumble scrapper. Just another unsuspected side of him.

"*Ai ya! Ai ya!*" the sampancers below exclaimed in wonder at the unusual sight of two foreign devils mauling each other as they danced, and rolled on the narrow, grimy deck.

Once when they poised apart for a gasp of breath, Arfent shouted at the Chinese officer to get busy unloading the stuff.

"Keep your hands off everything!" belted Kelly, as they grappled again.

Kelly seemed to be the stronger, and was wearing Arfent down. I kept my eyes open for treachery on the part of the skipper and his crew, but they didn't budge. I should have guessed that their interest in the cargo ended when they had brought it to the designated spot. Watching them so closely, I paid little attention to the Chinese soldiers beside me. Mouths agape, and eyes bulging, they looked half-scared in spite of all their armament. I failed to

notice that the officer was getting fidgetty, so I was not ready for his sudden move.

ARFENT had just let loose all his reserve power in a smash that sent Kelly spraddling across the deck, off balance, and rushed up to finish him. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed the Chinese officer dart his hand to his belt, and jerk out a gun. I lunged, and grabbed his wrist, as he was bearing down on Kelly, but I was a wink too late to stop the shot.

The gun roared, and the bullet hit—Arfent! Square in the chest, as he was stooping over Kelly. It knocked him upright, and I saw a flash of surprise in his face. He staggered backwards, right into the gangway gap, and tumbled heels over head down the ladder.

"*Ai ya!*" blurted the officer, the first to recover after the splash. The gun dropped from his fingers, and he bounced down the ladder, and leaped from one sampan to the other, leaving his astonished bodyguard behind.

There was nothing to do now, but take the prize cargo back to the Customs. The Macanese skipper was sullen enough, but put up no resistance.

"Rifles," said Kelly, kicking an oblong case, "rifles and ammunition for that would-be War Lord."

I GOT into my launch, and chugged ahead to Hingmoon. We slowed up at the Customs jetty, where a group of white-clad figures stood in the moonlight.

"Is that you, Marvin?" queried Forman.

"Sure enough," I answered.

"Where is Kelly?" asked Evelyn, anxiety in her voice.

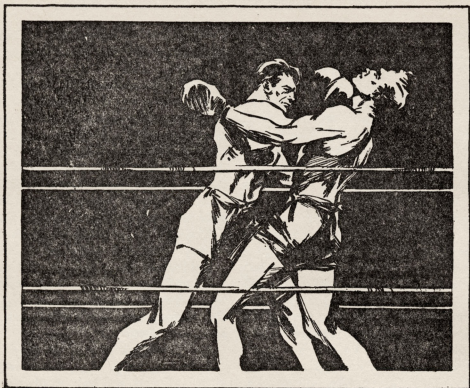
"He's all right, coming on the steamer."

"Oh," she said, "good!"

"Very good!" said old Forman. "Where is Arfent?"

"He'll be passing soon—on his way out to sea."

I glanced towards the Club. The lights were out. Bertie's farewell party was over.



PUG'S NOSE

By EDMUND DU PERRIER

JIM GRADY leaned back from his desk in the office of Fists, Incorporated, and stared at his star heavyweight with such wide eyes that wrinkles ridged nearly to the summit of his fat, bald head.

"Shades of John L. Sullivan!" he ejaculated from the side of a fifty-cent cigar. "I *was* a sap to let you out of my sight for a month! You wanted a vacation. A vacation, eh? Just a chance to go sissy on me!"

A gentle smile lifted the corners of Iron Man Murphy's lips; lips that had

stopped more punches than kisses in his twenty-six years.

"Sissy, hell!" he retorted. "Any guy is entitled to a decent schnozzle. Ain't I got one? Ain't it a pip? Just ain't it?"

Jim Grady closely scrutinized the nose. It was good. It was Grecian, perfect. It also brought out unsuspected classic lines in the fighter's cheeks and jaws. As a facial adornment it was much to be preferred to the pulpy mass of bone and gristle which had heretofore served Iron Man Murphy as a nose.

"It's a swell nose," agreed Grady, "for

*As Iron Man Murphy Proves When He Throws back the Razzberry at His Manager and the Merry Sports Reporters—
All Fighters Aren't Dumb.*

a movie actor or a gigolo. But for a fighter—phooey! And to think I've always claimed that you were the only fighter I knew that had brains. Nerts!"

"Just because I'm a fighter," protested Iron Man, "is no reason I have to look like a baboon. Besides, Minnie——"

"Minnie! You gone girl on me, too?"

"And how!" Iron Man grinned.

An angry light filled Grady's eyes. He threw up his pudgy hands in disgust. "It beats me," he grunted. "I betcha those Hollywood plastic surgeons work over more pugs than they do actors." He sneered. "How did you ever get out of there without getting an offer to play hot love scenes with Greta Garbo?"

"It's my nose," Iron Man said indignantly. "And what's more—I paid for it."

"You'll pay for it, all right," snapped Grady. "And you begged me to sign you with Slugger Keene right after your last fight. The toughest, roughest competition in the country. When he takes a crack at that——"

"He'll never get a crack at it," growled Iron Man. "I didn't spend a thousand dollars on this nose to let that mugg put a kink in it."

"That idea," murmured the disgusted Grady, "coupled with the plastic surgeons and the Minnies of this world, has put the skids under more fighters than you can shake a stick at. Now get out of here before I get mad and bounce a paper-weight off that snoot."

THE news writers, in the days that followed, turned the full weight of their pessimistic sarcasm loose on Iron Man Murphy. Grady had never been one to hold his tongue, and this time was no exception. "Murphy goes soft," they sneered. He was through, was their prediction. It never failed. When a fighter started hanging around plastic surgeons his days as a fighter were numbered. They backed up their arguments with names, dates, and circumstances.

This agitation in the press got under Grady's skin; but it never bothered Iron Man. Not even when stories drew the odds from even money to 2 to 1 that Iron Man would lose.

Grady, sore, saw a champion slipping from his grasp. He made a standing offer of fifty dollars to any sparring partner who would break the offending organ. Iron Man jeered at his manager, and knocked the boys kicking when they tried to collect on Grady's offer.

Too, he boasted long and loud that Slugger Keene would never lay a punch on his new nose. This spelled failure, for it would mean that Iron Man would fight a defensive battle. And defensive tactics had never been a part of Iron Man's fighting program.

Four days before the fight Iron Man Murphy ran into Slugger Keene and his retinue as they were leaving the gymnasium. Slugger Keene was a tough individual, a throwback to the old school. His battle-scarred face told the story of a fighter who would take two to give one.

"Hello, pretty boy," he growled contemptuously. "Wait until I get you in the ring. I'm goin' to smear that handsome snoot of yours all over your face."

Iron Man laughed. "Three grand says you don't even get a straight crack at it."

"You're on," snapped Slugger Keene.

The ballyhoo in the press increased by leaps and bounds after this meeting. It was a touch at Slugger Keene's pride. He had to make good on his bet—or suffer the laughter of the mob.

This agitation over Iron Man's nose had saddened the fans. They had seen in Iron Man a fighter of championship caliber. And a girl had spoiled his chances. Though the newswriters had not yet discovered the girl who had made Iron Man seek the beauty which might bring about his downfall.

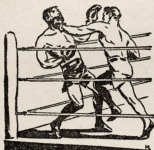
Yet, there were eighty thousand of the faithful crowded into the open-air arena when Iron Man and Slugger Keene

crawled through the ropes that night. They were positive Iron Man was on his way out—but the exit might be worth seeing. A last-day pessimism had brought the odds against Murphy to 3 to 1.

"Forget that snoot of yours," growled Grady as they waited for the opening gong. "You've got to outslug this guy to win."

"Yeah?" growled the fighter.

Sluggar Keene's opening sally disclosed his temper and intentions. He was aiming straight for that classic proboscis with malice in every blow. His determination was equalled only by Iron



Man's protective tactics.

To see a ripping, slugging fighter like Iron Man go on the defense was farcical. The crowd started to cheer Sluggar Keene. They urged him on—prayed for him to break that guard. And as the third round ended their boos and catcalls, directed towards Iron Man, swelled to a tremendous roar.

Iron Man took no notice of the impassioned pleading that Grady poured into his ears between the rounds.

He started the fourth with the same grim determination to save his nose. And Sluggar Keene, blind angry and cursing, drove in more viciously than ever.

Then Iron Man apparently slipped on a wet spot on the canvas. His hands dropped to his waist as he recovered his balance. Sluggar Keene gave a grunt of satisfaction that could be heard to row Z. He drove right and left, swift and sure.

Sug! Crunch!

The classic Grecian lines faded—gave way to a red pulpy mass. Sluggar Keene

took a momentary pause to admire his handiwork.

Iron Man took the blows standing—like the Iron Man he was. And as Sluggar Keene paused he went into immediate violent action. Right!—Left!—his fists drove wrist-deep into Sluggar Keene's body.

Sluggar Keene rocked on his feet, almost paralyzed by those thunderous blows. Iron Man never stopped. He rapped that loose chin, blow on blow, with all his shocking force.

Sluggar Keene's eyes turned glassy. He pitched forward on his face—and was counted out!

AND what about your nose? Don't you even care?" demanded Grady incredulously. Iron Man Murphy was chuckling as a doctor strove with tape and bandage.

"What's a nose to a pug?" Iron Man asked with a chuckle. "You said I had brains—thanks. Maybe I have. I never could fight a fellow good with Sluggar Keene's style. He hits from too many angles. So I had to get him to groove his punches. So I had that nose made just for him."

"You mean you spent four thousand dollars to get one wide-open shot at his body?"

"You've got it. But the odds going to 3 to 1, and me with ten thousand on it, I got paid all right. I couldn't tell you—you talk too much."

"Oh," grunted Grady. "But Minnie? What'll she say?"

"I don't think Minnie cares much," laughed Iron Man. "She was in a book they gave me to read at the hospital while they were fixing my schnozzle. An Indian dame by the name of Minnehaha. I had to have some reason for getting my nose prettied up. So I picked on Minnie, leaving off the ha-ha. I figured maybe Sluggar Keene could have that."

DARK BROTHER

By
DOUGLAS LEACH



*Three Fires in a Row
Mean Trouble; and
in This Case They
Certainly Said What
They Meant.*

Author of "Blue Treasure," "The Crimson Crocodile," etc.

SAY what you like about missionaries, but you gotta admit that them guys have plenty of guts.

Take the Reverend Peter Lamprey. When that bird left Port Moresby to carry the light to the heathen of Moravi, on the northeastern coast of New Guinea, he didn't have nothing with him but his Bible, a hymn-book, a few cases of trade goods, and a heart like a lion. But me and old Doc Sewell, who took him there in our launch, carried a forty-five automatic apiece, a coupla high-powered Winchesters and lashings of ammunition. Y'see, me and Doc had also done considerable enlightenment of the heathen in our time, but our system was different.

The first time we saw Lamprey was one morning outside the police barracks at the Port when we was reading the notices posted up on the wall. I remember that I'd just finished the bits about an inquest on a body washed up on Ela Beach and

a hundred pounds reward for the recapture of a native murderer, Bimasi—half-moon scar on right thigh, teeth-marks of a shark-bite on right ankle—and was turning to a WARNING about the penalties for shooting, trapping or trading for Bird-of-Paradise feathers—which sure made me and Doc laugh—when this here missionary come up to us.

"Mr. Sewell and Mr. Casaldy?" he asks.

We nodded and looked him over, interested. He was a new one on us; a thick-set, sandy-haired feller in white ducks and a parson's dog-collar. But though his face was plump and shiny and his pale-blue eyes round and innocent, there was a sorta tight look about his mouth. Yeah, he looked like if ever he said he was going fishing you could bet your neck fishing was exactly what he was going to do.

Well, he told us he was being sent by the Melanesian Mission to open up a new station at Moravi, and would we take him there, as he'd heard our launch was about



the only craft available. That was right, too. Port Moresby was plumb empty, all the suckers being away on a new gold-rush up to Edie Creek. Me and Doc wasn't suckers. We believed in letting the other feller dig out the gold, if any, and then prying it out of him afterwards.

DOC looked at me, glanced at the notice we'd been reading, then at the lieutenant of police who was standing in the doorway staring at us mighty suspicious, and grinned. I knew what the old hellion was thinking all right.

"Certainly we'll take you," he says. "Providing we can come to terms. And not only that," he says, "seeing that we also are interested in er, work among the natives, we might stop a little while with you and help you get settled down. Our experience of their dialect and so forth might come in handy. And we wouldn't charge you a cent extra either."

The Reverend beamed. "Why, that's most kind of you," he says. "It's always very gratifying to find people eager to help labor in the vineyard."

Of course the poor fish wasn't to know that there was supposed to be some fine Bird-of-Paradise country round Moravi, and Doc's idea was to sorta combine business with pleasure. Anyway, the deal was made, at a figure which showed that Lamprey wasn't no business man, and which must've give the Melanesian Mission quite a shock when they heard about it.

We got to know the Reverend Pete pretty well on that trip, believe me. He wasn't a bad guy, but he was awful aggravating and Doc took a dislike to him. You couldn't tell him nothing, but he'd tell you plenty. He'd spent five years as a parson in a little Australian bush town called Willamundra, and he never let us forget it. Seems like every experience that could happen to mortal man had befell him one time or another in that burg, and every other sentence begun with, "I remember once in Willamundra—" till Doc pretty near blew up.

"If he mentions that blasted place again I won't be responsible for the consequences!" raves Doc one evening. "I'll murder him, the blathering fool!"

"Take it easy," I says, "and them tough nigs at Moravi'll probably save you the trouble. Imagine sending him out there! It didn't oughta be allowed."

Then again, Lamprey was always giving us kind advice, like: "Better give the engine a little more oil," or "According to the map we should steer south of this island," and if there's anybody worse than the guy what's always telling you to do something you was just going to do anyway, I ain't met him yet.

FINALLY we got to Moravi. You couldn't find a prettier place, not even in the Fijis or Samoa. Big tumbling hills covered with jungle greener than any emerald, back of a dinky little bay so blue it fair made your eyes ache. The houses of the village, built on tall piles, was in the middle of a big clearing some way up in the hills, and you could see 'em plain from the bay, looking like a lotta huts on stilts.

The natives of Moravi had a bad reputation, but they seemed to be friendly enough, especially after Doc, who had all them native lingos down fine, had give 'em a few necklaces and handed 'em a real sociable line of talk. They was mighty curious, though, and a bit jumpy, especially when we was looking round the village and went near the *dhoru* and *kada* houses. The *dhoru* was a big place something like a church, where they held their secret meetings and kept their images, and the *kada* was a little house in the middle of a big open space where they'd put a victim before torturing and killing him. Something like the "murder" houses up in Humboldt's Bay.

For a guy what had learned nearly all of it out of a book, Lamprey didn't get on so bad with the dialect, and in a day or two he got so he could make himself understood pretty well. Things was made

a little easier for him by the fact that two or three of the natives had worked on plantations and could speak a word or two of English. One of 'em, a big, hairy bozo called Nakai, even wore a old pair of pants, and he seemed to cotton onto Lamprey from the start, and would follow him around like a dog.

MEANWHILE me and Doc was looking around on the quiet, and the signs and portents pointed to the chances of getting feathers being good if we could only find something in the trade line that the nigs really wanted. So after a bit, as Lamprey also was ordering a few presents—on behalf of the Mission—for his flock, we headed off for the nearest trading station, Morobe, a two days' trip down the coast. We was delayed there quite a while, though, through engine trouble, and it was nearly two weeks later before we landed back at Moravi.

This time we had a lotta cases on board that we unloaded and cached very careful so that Lamprey wouldn't find out about 'em. Missionaries are kinda narrer-minded as a class, and we knew he'd raise Cain if he discovered that while he was carrying light to the heathen in one hand we was bringing 'em firewater in the other. Sure, that's what it was. Booze. And there's more trade to be got outa one bottle of gin than a whole cargo of beads and doodads, believe me.

Yeah, I know, I know. Peddling booze to ignorant savages is looked upon as a horrible crime, but you gotta take the broad view, mister. After all, them babies don't get much fun. And as Doc said, "they might as well get good stuff from us, Casaldy, as drink that poison they make themselves."

He was right, too, because that dope they useta make from fermented coconut juice was simply terrible, and we felt that if we could educate

'em up to better things we was helping on the great work of civilization.

WE'D been wondering whether we'd find the Reverend still there, because, knowing New Guinea natives like we did, it was quite on the cards that a sad accident might 've happened to him, but as a matter of fact he was going strong. Besides his own little hut outside the village he'd got 'em to build a sorta mission hall outa poles and palm leaves, and every evening he was holding services. Wonderful, it was, to hear them black devils bawling what was supposed to be hymns at the top of their voices, and the Reverend Pete, his red face dripping with sweat, leading 'em and exhorting 'em.

Not that all them birds was converted. They seemed to be split into two camps, and while one half, led by Nakai, was all for him, the others was still strong for the old customs and sacrifices and so on. In fact, everything was all set for the helluva flare-up between the two parties.

"If we're going to get any plumes we'd better start in right now," Doc says. "Before the lid blows off."

Naturally it didn't seem no good approaching Lamprey's bunch, so we went to some of the old fellers, the sorcerers and head-men, and they was tickled pink—especially after they'd had a few sample snorts outa them cases of gin. Then, just when we was beginning to do well, and the feathers was coming in good, what Doc called "an unfortunate contretemps" came to pass.

It started when the Reverend noticed three of his flock missing from evening service, and when he went along to the village to find out what was the matter, there was the three of 'em laying under one of the houses, plastered to the wide! That started him off, and he nosed about till the wife of one of them bozos spilled the beans, and brung out a coupla empty bottles to show him. Trust a woman to cause trouble!

Well, when Lamprey found out what



our game was and what we'd been doing all the time, he just went up in a sheet of flame! The things he called me and Doc was something scandalous.

"I'll get you three years!" he finishes up. "I'll report it to the Resident Magistrate at Suai!"

"You'll have the hell of a time proving it," snorts Doc.

"You degrade the name of white men!" says Lamprey. "You're lower than the beasts that perish!"

DOC wasn't the kind to take a bawling-out from any man, and he begun to get ugly. "Let me tell you something," he snarls. "If you weren't a shortsighted fool that can't see beyond the end of your nose you'd know that you were only wasting your time. Converting the heathen, eh? You? Not in a thousand years! Just because you've got some of them coming to your meetings you think you're doing fine. Well, let me disillusion you. I'll bet you anything you like, these black devils are the same at heart as they have always been. You can't change something that's born right in them. You can dress them in pants and teach them to sing hymns, but you won't change them. It's just fun to them, something new, and tomorrow they'll be just as liable to dabble in sorcery or take a few heads as ever they were. They're only making a sucker out of you. Get wise to yourself, man. Get wise!"

"Your sneers and scoffing mean nothing to me," says Lamprey. "Our work in the Mission will endure long after you, and men like you, are dead."

"Have it your own way," snaps Doc. "Tonight you'll be handing them a sermon on the evils of drink, won't you? All right. Tomorrow evening I'll show you just what good that does them!"

Lamprey don't say nothing more, but stalks off.

I knew Doc was planning some hellery, and next evening he says, "Come along to the mission and see the fun."

Lamprey useta ring a bell for evening

service, but this time nobody don't turn up at all, and he begun to get worried. He looked around, almost like he expected to find his flock hiding somewhere, but there was only me and Doc, watching him. Doc was grinning, but I felt kinda uncomfortable. A man's beliefs is his own affair, and I don't hold with interfering.

"You can save yourself the trouble of ringing that bell," Doc says at last. "They won't come."

"What have you done with them?" asks Lamprey angrily.

"Unfortunately I happened to leave a few bottles of liquor lying around where they could get at them," says Doc. "I admit it was very careless of me, but I had no idea the results would be so lamentable. All your saintly flock are dead drunk. Snoring."

The Reverend's mouth tightened, and he went white. "May you be forgiven," he husks. "May you be forgiven."

Then his eyes brightened a bit at something he seen behind us. Me and Doc turned, and there was Nakai, in his old torn pants and with a book in his hand, coming up the path. Doc give him a dirty look, but the big nig was all smiles. Looked like there wasn't nothing would ever keep him away.

"We are all sinners," smiles the Reverend, "and among any gathering of converts there are sure to be some who will backslide. But if I'm able to turn from his heathenism even one of these dark brothers of ours, I shall not have labored in vain."

"Yes? Then you're very easily pleased," sneers Doc.

So we left them two to hold their service on their own. Doc, he was kinda sore.

"That black, woolly-headed, hypocritical devil!" he mutters, meaning Nakai. "He's no more a convert than I am. He's just playing along with Lamprey for what he can get out of him."

I didn't say nothing, seeing that Doc wasn't in any mood to be crossed, but all the same I had a feeling that he was wrong

and that Nakai was genuine. A bad Papuan can be more treacherous and cruel than the devils in hell, but when you get a genuine one you got something faithfuller than any dog. And another thing, even though it don't take but little to make a nig drunk, it seemed a sinful waste of good liquor to get those cannibals soused just to score against Lamprey.

A FEW days later a change come over the village. All the nigs begun to get that excited, nervous look that me and Doc had seen plenty of times before, and that, we knew, meant a feast in the offing, with maybe a head-hunt or a sacrifice thrown in. They got queer ideas about sport, them fellers. But the Reverend, not having had no experience with such matters, didn't see nothing wrong and carried on with his services same as usual. Nearly all them what had backslid and fell to liquor that night had come back to the fold, and he was looking a lot cheerfuller.

Then the drums begun to beat up at nights in the village, and once again Lamprey's flock shrunk very noticeable, until there was only Nakai and one or two others left. Yeah, and they had a queer, worried look about 'em, so that when they was supposed to be singing you could see their eyes rolling and their heads keep turning around, and a look on their black faces like they was waiting for something. Me and Doc useta watch 'em from the doorway, and one night Doc laughed.

"There won't be any service tomorrow, Casaldy," he says. "You see."

"That darned missionary 'll get that poor devil of a Nakai killed yet," I says. "And himself too. If we had any sense we'd get outa here while our luck was in. We got a few good plumes, and taking the trip on the whole we haven't done so bad."

"Hell, we can't very well leave Lamprey to it now," mutters Doc. "He's as helpless as a child. Blast these missionaries, they're always getting good men into trouble!"

It was terrible hot next day, without a breath of wind, so's we only had to move for the sweat to pour off us. Doc, he was so mean you couldn't get a civil word outa him. And the village was quiet—too quiet. Every now and then you'd see a black figure come outa one of the queer houses onto the pole platform outside, look up and down at the other houses, and scuttle back inside like he was scared. There wasn't no babies squalling nor women chattering—they'd all been sent back into the bush, outa the way. Not even a dog barked.

Me and Doc went to see Lamprey.

"There's trouble brewing," Doc tells him, cold and short. "You'd better clear out till things quieten down. We'll take you down coast to Korobe."

The Reverend was sitting in a home-made chair studying outa a big book and fidgeting with matches, breaking them up



in his fingers. He took off the tortoiseshell cheaters he used for reading and stared at Doc outa them china-blue eyes of his like he didn't hardly

understand. The heat had stewed some of the flesh off him. He wasn't so pink in the face as he had been, and there was lines about his eyes.

"I don't see how you're so sure there's going to be trouble," he says, "but even if you're right—are you suggesting that I should run away?"

"That very thing," says Doc. "Git, vamoose, beat it. Call it what you like, but get away from here, and *quickly!*"

Lamprey closes his book. "I've never run away from what I conceive to be my duty yet," he says, kinda dignified. "In all the years I was in the parish of Willamundra I never—"

"I know, I know," interrupts Doc

roughly, "but this isn't Willamundra! Be sensible for once. You won't be much use to the Melanesian Mission when your head is stuck up on top of that *dhoru*, nicely wrapped in pandanus leaves, will you?"

The Reverend shook his head. "You mean well," he says, "but you don't understand. I couldn't leave here now."

"You poor damn fool!" snarls Doc. "I don't know why I took the trouble to warn you. I must be getting soft. Come on, Casaldy!" And he stamped away, sore as a boil.

That evening matters sorta come to a head, and the darndest row you ever heard broke out in the village, with drums thumping, conches blowing, and the nigs howling like a lotta dogs. But there was the Reverend outside the mission ringing his little bell as though nothing unusual was happening, for all the world like a school-teacher ringing for the kids to come in from recess. Yeah, and with about as much chance of making himself heard as a old lady with a sore throat at a Yale-Harvard football game! Pathetic, that's what it was.

Of course nobody at all turned up, not even Nakai, though Lamprey waited a long, long time. Finally Doc went across to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I've had nothing to do with them not being here this time," he says, "but if you really want to see what they're up to, come along. But watch your step and follow us. We don't want to be seen."

MISTER, I didn't like it. The further we was from those howling devils the better I felt, but there wasn't no stopping Doc. He couldn't resist the chance of hurting the Reverend's feelings and he meant to rub it well in.

Like I said, the village was on the side of a hill, and a little way up the hill was a lotta small caves that we'd noticed previous, and from the edge of one of them caves we looked down on the *dhoru* and

the open space like looking down on a stage.

A sorcerer, with bones through his nose and his naked body marked out in red clay, was holding forth from the platform outside the *dhoru*, and gradually a man here and a man there walked up and went inside. And all the while, from somewheres inside that building, the drums was throbbing fit to drive you batty.

"Look! There's one of your 'dark brothers' now!" says Doc at last, as a fat nig with white, rolling eyes shuffled up the steps. "Kaladi, the Fat One. One of your first converts. Take a good look at him. See what that is hanging round his neck?"

There wasn't no mistaking it, mister. It was a human foot. A *fresh* human foot. Me and Doc had seen worse things than that, lots worse, and we was used to it, but Lamprey let a gasp outa him like a guy gives when he falls into cold water.

"And there's Okiri, and his brother, and that old man who used to sing so loud at your meetings," goes on Doc, as more and more of them converts, painted and feathered till they didn't look hardly human, pranced into the *dhoru* alongside them that had never even pretended to be interested in the Reverend and his mission.

I look at Lamprey, and his face was as gray as ashes. And it's a funny thing, but I felt kinda sorry for him, and I wished Doc would lay off him. Believe me, that old hellion was enjoying himself as he kept on pointing out nigs what was obviously back-sliding very serious.

"Papuans have very short memories," says Doc, "and these fellows seem to have forgotten everything you taught them. Very few white men have ever been inside a *dhoru*, but they say that some of their customs are almost unspeakable."

"Nakai—at least Nakai is not among them," Lamprey says hoarsely, his hands twitching.

"How do you know?" comes back Doc. "He may have gone in before we came."

Then a change come over Lamprey.

That stubborn mouth of his tightened and he stepped forward.

Doc saw what he was going to do and grabbed him by the arm. "Are you mad?" he snaps. "Interfere with them now and they'll have your head off your shoulders before you can wink. I'm not fooling. I mean these devils!"

"Let me go!" grunts the Reverend, and with a sudden jerk he broke loose and run towards the *dhoru*, stumbling down through the bushes, waving his arms and shouting.

This was the time for me and Doc to have beat it, but Doc wasn't yeller, whatever else you might say against him. He took after Lamprey, and before I knew what I was doing I was following them.

THE sorcerer on the platform and the other savages what hadn't gone inside yet was paralyzed with astonishment. At the foot of the steps Doc, running faster than you'd think possible for a guy as fat as him, had almost caught up with Lamprey when he tripped, and in a flash that fool of a missionary was up on the platform and had pushed past the sorcerer and ducked in through the dark opening. At the same time a woolly-haired cannibal standing by the steps let a howl outa him, snatched a bamboo knife from his belt and jumped at Doc. He must 've thought Doc was trying to break into the *dhoru* too instead of trying to stop the Reverend, and anyways, New Guinea natives are just like high-strung dogs—get 'em excited and they'll fly at anybody. Doc was still off his balance. There was only one thing to do to save him from being stuck like a pig, so I done it. I jerked out my automatic, fired at the nig's legs and brought him down yelping like a kicked dog.

Then all hell broke loose. Seemed like nigs come pouring from everywhere. Somebody clubbed Doc from behind and knocked him in a heap, while the sorcerer was yelling for 'em to take us alive and not kill us. I blazed away desperate and winged a few of 'em, but they was too

many for me. One of 'em grabbed me by the knees and threw me, and in a second a whole bunch of 'em had piled on top of me. Right away I begun to wish I'd been killed quick and decent, for I knew the kind of rough stuff them bozos handed out to prisoners when they was feeling mean.

MEANWHILE there was a terrible row going on inside the *dhoru*, a smashing and a crashing and a yelling, and I knew the Reverend was raising hell. But it didn't last long, and pretty soon some of 'em come out dragging him along onto the platform. He was struggling and bellering like a bull-calf till someone clouted him over the head with a *natu* club. I heard the crack of it from where I lay, and he went down like he'd been shot. He must've had a head like a lump of teak, or he'd have been killed sure.

They took us and chucked the three of us into a empty house. By the next morning both Doc and Lamprey had come to, though the Reverend looked pretty bad. But he was tough and he was game, and he only groaned a bit when he moved.

We was tied up against the center poles that run up through the floor, and from where we was we could look out to sea. The celebrations was still going on, and Doc said they was liable to last for another two, three days.

"They'll probably save us till last," he says. "We shall be the stars of this performance. The grand finale."

"Some means of escape will present itself," says the Reverend. "There is still Nakai. I'm sure he will not fail us."

"You can count Nakai out," I says.

"What do you mean?" says Lamprey.

I looked across at Doc, and I knew we was both thinking the same thing. "I mean that they probably bumped him off right at the start," I blurts out.

The Reverend shuddered. "But—but you can't be sure?" he jerks out.

"No, but I've got a hunch," I says. "A strong one. Do you remember the foot

hanging round Kaladi's neck? A man's foot. A big one. Well, it had to come from somewhere."

The Reverend was silent for a bit. Then, "May his soul find peace," he whispers.

ABOUT an hour afterwards Lamprey lets a shout outa him. "Look! A ship!"

Me and Doc woke up and stared, and sure enough, he was right. It was steaming along the coast, trailing smoke, maybe three, four miles out, and Doc said it was a naval vessel by the cut of it.

"Probably the Australian gunboat, *Narrabeen*, on coastal patrol," he says. "Making for Korobe."

"Do you think she'll stop?" says Lamprey.

"Why the hell should she?" grunts Doc.

"Couldn't we signal?" Lamprey wants to know, eager.

Doc gave that short laugh of his. "You might try shouting," he says, sarcastic.

Well, that darned boat never showed no signs of stopping. No sir, she didn't even hesitate, and pretty soon she went outa sight beyond the opening and we couldn't see her no more. And if the natives seen her they didn't stop their celebration none. Papuans have short memories, and they don't worry a lot about police patrols or gunboats. When they're making whoopee they make whoopee, and to hell with tomorrow. Not a bad system, neither.

IN A little while they come and took us out, and it looked like they was going to attend to Lamprey first, for they stripped him down to his pants and bundled him up into the *kada*, the little murder house in the center of the open space. They'd untied him, but he couldn't get away count of their being about a dozen savages with spears lined up around the *kada*. They flung me and Doc down on the edge of the crowd with our hands tied behind us and only a coupla big toughs to guard us, like they wanted us to watch

the fun, and they lit two big fires, one on each side of the *kada*.

Then ten of those black devils come outa the *dhoru*. Their bodies was painted in red lines and their faces was covered in great masks that had huge eyes and wide, grinning mouths marked out on 'em. Man, they looked like something out of a nightmare! The one in the lead, who seemed to be the main guy, had both our automatics strapped round his waist and the Reverend's wrist watch round his big hairy wrist. With the rest of him all painted and savage it sure looked queer. Seemed like Doc couldn't keep his eyes off them automatics. Probably the nig didn't know how to use 'em, but he was just copying our way of wearing 'em.

They begun dancing around, following each other in line, and as they passed us for the third time, capering and leaping, I saw some marks on the bare, shiny leg of the bozo leading them that took my mind flashing back to that day in Port Moresby when we'd first met Lamprey.

"Half-moon scar on right thigh, teeth-marks of a shark-bite on right ankle," I mutters. "Gosh Almighty, Doc, look there! D'you remember that reward notice outside the police barracks in the Port? Bimasi the murderer!



One hundred pounds reward!"

He wasn't a yard or two from us, and you could see them scars plain. Doc didn't say nothing for a bit, then he begun to swear slow and careful.

"That's right," he says. "That's right enough! There couldn't be two men with exactly those same marks, and though the notice didn't mention Moraka village, it said he was an Eastern Division man. They didn't know what village he came from, probably." Then he laughed. He had his nerve with him, Doc did, and though he was a mean-tempered hellion he could still laugh, even when the joke was

on us. "Well, Casaldy," he says, "I'm a public spirited man and all on the side of law and order, but we're not exactly in a position to do much about it, are we?"

Most folk in New Guinea had heard of Bimasi. He was the most cunning and cold-blooded native murderer that had ever been caught, and when he'd made his getaway he'd clubbed a native constable to death and pretty near killed a police lieutenant. One tough egg. We had lots of time to think about him, for he led that crazy dance for what seemed hours, till long after dark. Scared? You bet I was scared!

WE THOUGHT Lamprey was going to be the first victim, but in the end they give a sign to our guards, who pulled Doc to his feet and untied him, one of 'em grabbing each of his arms. Just then there was a shout from over by the *kada*, and everybody looked towards the murder house. From the roof a thin streak of smoke was going up, and pretty soon, the whole little building being dry as tinder, all one side bust into flame. It looked as though a spark from the big fires had set it alight, and it sure caused plenty consternation, believe me, for, next to the *dhoru*, the *kada* is the most important place in a native village. Immediately them rattle-headed heathen went plumb nuts, rushing about and getting in each other's way till it was just like somebody had kicked over an ant-heap.

The two huskies that had hold of Doc was took aback for a moment, and Doc, who never give up hope, knew Old Man Opportunity when he met him. Before they realized what was happening he'd wrenched loose and booted one of 'em in the belly with a kick that folded that poor savage up like he was a pair of pants. Then he hauled off and socked the other one below the ear and knocked him for a row of Abyssinian ash-cans. For all his weight Doc could move like a streak, and he dived for that escaped murderer, Bimasi, who was hopping about close to us,

and grabbed the automatics outa his belt before you could say s'cat. The nig whipped round, snatching at his bamboo knife, when Doc shot him down. If them heathen was confused before, they was plumb thunderstruck now, and while they was still recovering from the shock Doc slashed me loose with Bimasi's knife, and I was on my feet, ramming a fresh clip into the automatic which Doc pushed into my hands. When nigs take a guy prisoner they don't search him beyond grabbing off any ornaments or such that might take their fancy, so we still had plenty of ammunition in our pants' pockets. Not that them ignorant bozos would 've knowed an automatic clip if they'd found one.

At the same time we seen one side of the burning *kada* fall outwards in a shower of sparks, and a dark figure, that was Lamprey, break outa the flimsy sago stem wall on the other side and stagger towards us, blind-like, zigzagging in the smoke and glare. The spear-men had ducked outa the way when the blazing wall had fallen out, and they was blinded by the smoke, so that the few spears they flung at the Reverend missed him by yards.

"Come on!" yells Doc, and he started to shoot his way towards Lamprey, his automatic clattering like a machine-gun.

It was either them or us, and we had the whip hand of them. We aimed to kill. Man, we blasted a hole in that crowd of cannibals and scattered 'em plenty!

"The cave!" shouts Doc. "Make for the cave!" and he grabbed Lamprey by the arm and half-dragged him into the dark of the bushes.

THEN we was scrambling through the blackness up among the creepers and vines of the hillside. I can remember it like it was only yesterday—the nigs holler-ing, and below us the two big fires and the burning murder house lighting up the village, blazing and crackling.

Once inside the cave Lamprey collapsed. He was burned bad about the head and shoulders and nearly blind. "I managed

to do it," he mutters, and then something about "the third fire."

"Do what?" grunts Doc, peering out with his gun ready if they rushed us.

"Set fire to it," husks Lamprey. "Don't you see? They had two fires going, one on each side, so I set light to the *kada* to make the third fire. I just had three matches in my pocket. Three fires in a row is the bush signal of distress anywhere in Australia. I recall one time in Willamundra——"

"But you were inside the damn place!" breaks out Doc. "Did you want to get burnt alive?"

"It looked at though I were doomed anyway," says the Reverend, "and as I got you into trouble I felt I had to do what little I could to get you out. After all, neither of you is fit to die," he says. After which crack he gave a little sigh and fainted dead away.

Doc wasn't the sort to show his feelings, but presently he cusses a bit and says, "Darn his hide, he's got more nerve than I have. He's too good to be a missionary."

"And how!" I agrees, and while Doc kept watch I done the best I could in the dark to make Lamprey comfortable. He come out of the faint, but he was a bit delirious, rambling on about Willamundra and the Mission.

THAT was a long night, mister, and it was nearly dawn when they rushed us. First there was a crackling in the bushes and spears started whizzing against the lip of the cave. We could hear the black scuts scrambling about among the vines.

Doc stood up, flattening himself back against the cave wall. "Half a clip left," he says. "Well, it looks as though we're for it." He tried to make his voice sound calm, but if he was anything like me he was doing a lotta heavy thinking. "Maybe we'd be wise to save a shot for ourselves."

Something moved behind a clump of plantains and Doc fired. Then the bush

spewed nigs and this time we couldn't stop 'em. The front ones was only about twenty yards from us when down in the village there broke out the crack of rifles and a helluva hullabaloo that stopped 'em dead. They hesitated maybe three seconds, then they vanished. Yeah, vanished. One instant they was there, and the next they was gone. Boy howdy, I let a sigh of relief outa me that come right up from my boots.

Then, down below, we heard what was music to our ears—somebody shouting and cussing in English. Turned out when we got down there that it was a hard-egg Australian naval lootenant off the *Narra-been*, in charge of a landing party.

"What the hell's all this fuss about?" he bellers. "If there's any trouble with natives there's sure to be some dough-headed white men at the bottom of it! Think we've nothing better to do than spend the night tearing ourselves to rags crawling through this blasted jungle? What have you been doing?"

He calmed down a bit when we explained matters, though he was still grumbling and muttering.

"A good thing you saw the signal," says Doc.

"What signal?" snaps the loot.

"The three fires in a row," says Doc.

The loot stared. "You're crazy," he says. "The only reason we're here is that we saw a white man's launch at anchor in the bay when we were passing yesterday, and through the telescope we could see a lot of excitement in the village. We knew the reputation of Moravi, and the Old Man was doubtful and thought we'd better investigate. We anchored beyond the Heads, and then when we heard the shooting we thought we'd better hurry. But we didn't count any fires. If we landed a party every time we saw a native fire we'd need the whole damned navy on the job!"

"No such thing," says Doc. "The sole reason you came to our rescue was because

you saw three fires in a row," and he told the loot about the Reverend and how he'd set light to the *kada*.

The lieutenant wasn't a bad feller, and he laughed, and said that now he come to think about it that was the very thing that had brought 'em, and he sent two sailors up to the cave to bring Lamprey down and look after him. And you c'n bet the Reverend was tickled when he found out that he'd saved us. The poor fish. I expect he still believes it.

WELL, the first thing we done was to look around for Bimasi. As Doc pointed out, he was worth a hundred pounds to us, alive or dead.

We found him right where Doc had shot him, and though he was groaning from a badly smashed shoulder it looked like he'd live to be hung. A fine, big feller he was. Doc bent down and pulled off the mask that was still tied on his head, and right then we got a helluva shock.

"Nakai!" gasps Doc. "He's Bimasi! One and the same man! Of course, of course. I should have known. The similarity in the names, Casaldy. Nakai means the Tall One, and Bimasi the Great One.

We never saw those scars before because he was wearing pants. The crafty devil! I told you he was sponging on Lamprey for what he could get out of him. The old confidence trick in a different form." Doc gave that barking laugh of his. "Nakai the faithful! The one convert that wouldn't backslide!"

"It'll be a terrible blow to the Reverend," I says.

Doc looked up. "He need never know. He thinks Nakai is dead. We can keep him from seeing him."

And though we was all taken back to Port Moresby on the *Narrabeen*, launch and all, that's what we done.

The day we landed Doc says, "The Reverend 'll be up and about in a few days. Now listen! The first time he holds one of his services you and I are going along and we're going to sing hymns till we're blue in the face. Just to please him."

"Seeing as you're turning over a new leaf," I comes back, "maybe you'd like us to donate that hundred pounds reward that's coming to us to the Melanesian Mission?"

A shadder passed over Doc's hard mug. "That's different," he says. "Hell, a man must draw the line somewhere!"



The Ghost and Heir of a Dead Lord of the Underworld Meets Face to Face the Man Who at Present Aspires to that Position.



THE GHOST OF SCREWFACE HANLON

III—Face to Face

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "The Crooked Lake Killing," etc.

I

SPIKE" DELANEY, lord of life and death in all the city and half the state, stepped out of his big car and surveyed the house set back from the Drive, between two towering apartment buildings. His handsome, powerful features, his iron-hard

eyes, were intent. Two men, hands in pockets, followed him from the car. One on either side of him, all three entered through the open iron gate in the fence and slowly walked toward the house.

"Screwface Hanlon lived here for thirty years and died here," said one of Delaney's guards. "Being fixed up, ain't it?"

Obviously it was. The old house had

been remodeled into two apartments. The debris of the work was being cleared away now by laborers. Freshly painted, the old place looked spick and span. A brass plate beside the door of the lower apartment bore the words:

MARY BRENDAN

DESIGNER

"She's the woman who bought it off Crawford," murmured Delaney. "Curtains upstairs, eh? Let's see her. I mean to get a line on Crawford if it takes a million dollars!"

Telling his men to remain outside, Delaney walked to the door and pressed the bell. After a moment Mary Brendan opened the door, inquiringly. Delaney removed his hat.

"Miss Brendan? My name's Delaney. I'm interested in locating Mr. Crawford, who formerly owned this building. Can you give me any line on him?"

"Why, I understand he went West or somewhere, after I bought the property," exclaimed Mary Brendan. "Won't you come in?"

"Thanks, no." Delaney regarded her slender figure, her fine, level eyes, her quiet, poised features, with appreciation. "Is the upstairs rented?"

"Yes, Mr. Gilbert has just moved in—oh, there he is, coming up the walk now!"

"Well, that'll be all, thanks. Sorry to have bothered you," said Delaney, and turned away. He passed his two men, who fell in behind him, and strode out to meet the man coming up the walk from the Drive. A youngish man all dressed in gray. His face was queerly indeterminate, except for the eyes; these, behind thick-lensed spectacles, were enlarged until they stood out as the sole feature of the face one remembered.

"You're Mr. Gilbert?" inquired Delaney.

"Why, yes—that's my n-n-name," said Gilbert, stuttering.

"You're Mr. Harvey Gilbert of Roanoke, aren't you?"

"Oh, no! You've got the name wrong," protested Gilbert, still stuttering as he

spoke. "I'm from D-D-Denver. My name's Charles William."

"Sorry! I've got the wrong Gilbert," said Delaney pleasantly, and moved on out toward his car. When he got there, he turned to one of his two men.

"Get a line on this Brendan dame," he said. "Find out all about her. We've drawn blank, but I've got a hunch she might know something. She's smart."

MEANTIME, Mr. Charles William Gilbert mounted the stairs to his upper apartment. Once inside, he whipped off his spectacles, entered a closet of the living room, pressed a spring, and the back of the closet slid away. A twisting little flight of stairs was revealed. Descending these, he knocked three times at a door below. Mary Brendan opened it, and he stepped into her studio, littered with sketches, a drawing board, and a dummy model.

"Do you know who that was?" he demanded excitedly.

She nodded. "He told me. Delaney. The great Spike Delaney?"

Crawford nodded. "And looking for me!"

"Yes. He asked about you. Well, make yourself comfortable. What does it mean?"

Crawford sank into a chair, produced a cigarette, and lit it.

"Trouble. Let me think.

"Think all you like," and she smiled. "I have some tea ready. Back in a minute."

She left the room. Crawford wrinkled up his face, which made him look amazingly different, and puffed at his cigarette.

Without the thick spectacles, and in repose, this face of his was a blank. It had no memorable features or traits. "Putty-face," they had called him, back in the old gang days when he was working up from the bottom. Now he had inherited from his uncle, Hanlon, this property; with it wealth, information, and a life-and-death feud with Delaney. Old Screwface Hanlon, once a big man in the underworld, had left more than mere money to the nephew

whom he despised as a weakling. Crawford was no weakling. He had proven it by blocking Delaney, defeating him, maddening him. Now Delaney was after him in earnest—but did not dream that he had just spoken with the man he sought so viciously.

Mary Brendan—well, she had decided to help, that was all. Interested in this amazing man whose blank, expressionless features concealed such tremendous character and ability, she had chosen to aid him in his self-appointed war with all that Delaney represented. Vice, gamblers, rackets—Delaney had a finger in every predatory game going! And Crawford was using himself, his brains, the money he had inherited, to fight Spike Delaney. With a girl to help him.

Mary Brendan returned with a tea-wagon, poured tea, settled into a chair, lit a cigarette, and regarded her guest and partner.

"Delaney has ability," she observed. "He's no thug."

"Naturally not." Crawford caught an afternoon newspaper from his pocket, passed it to her, and pointed to a story. Then he devoted himself to his tea for a moment.

"Good heavens!" Startled, she laid aside her cigarette. "Only this morning——"

"Delaney's a fast worker."

"But he's not connected with this!"

"Go on. Read it."

She was right. There was nothing to connect Delaney with the story.

An expensive automobile found in a by-way of Central Park, close to noon. Two women lying in it, shot to death; Mrs. Sylvester Ponchon and her maid. The wealthy, eccentric widow, whose singular philanthropies were the talk of the town, had visited her bank half an hour previously, removing the famous Ponchon pearls from safe storage in order to wear them at a charity ball that night. Also, she had drawn ten thousand in cash, intending this as her contribution to the funds of the ball. Jewels and cash were

missing. So was her chauffeur, one Martin Wolfe—the obvious criminal. Police were combing the city for him.

"Well?" Mary Brendan looked up. "I knew Mrs. Ponchon. I saw her only last week——"

"A steady looking sort of man. I didn't notice him particularly. But anyone employed by her would have to be the right kind."

"Exactly! Remember, every crook in the city works for Delaney, directly or indirectly. Somebody else pulled this job, probably killed Wolfe and hid the body, so he'd get the blame. Delaney has brains, but damned little wit! Let's see your copy of the list Screwface Hanlon left behind him."

Mary Brendan rose, hurried from the room, and returned with the typed copy of that terrible legacy from Hanlon—that list and record of the principal people under the thumb of Delaney. People seldom suspected of crime, blackmailed by him. People without any police record; Delaney's helpers, officers, assistants. Names, addresses, telephone numbers, notations of the jobs pulled. The unseen underworld forces—the men and women higher up!

Crawford thumbed over the pages. An exclamation broke from him.

"Look at this! Ponchon, Agnes; Niece Mrs. Sylvester Ponchon, disinherited. Twice married, divorced. Expelled from France suspicion handling narcotics. Habitat, Miami and Palm Beach. When in city lives Corazon Apartments. Private telephone Stuyvesant 7091. Implicated Ash-ton affair. Works with Andy Lebrun. Socialite, Tuxedo Club."

Crawford laid down the pages.

"There you are, thanks to Screwface Hanlon! A wholly unsuspected person; disinherited, with nothing to gain from her aunt's death. She was with them in the car, and caused the car to stop at a certain spot in the Park—you see?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Mary Brendan urgently. "Impossible! No matter how

low such a woman might sink, she could not be a party to such a crime. It's impossible! And you have no proof. You merely jump at conclusions——"

"Exactly. I'm no policeman. I need no proof! I make my own." Crawford frowned. "Your argument is good; just the same, I stick to my theory. Now, let's see."

HE PICKED up the telephone at his elbow and called Agnes Ponchon's number. The reply was prompt. Miss Ponchon was ill, quite ill. Her maid was speaking. Who was this?

"This," said Crawford, with a smile at Mary Brendan, "is James T. Bramwell, general manager of the King's County Insurance Company. Mrs. Ponchon took out a very large policy with us in favor of her niece, some months ago—however, I had better drop around, if I may. Perhaps I could see Miss Ponchon briefly, within an hour?"

"Well—maybe," came the guarded response. "I'm expecting her secretary very soon, and you could see him about it, anyhow. Mr. Andrews could tell you whatever you want."

"Thank you," and Crawford rang off. He leaned back, lit a fresh cigarette, and chuckled.

"Andy Lebrun—now Mr. Andrews, secretary to the lady," he observed pleasantly. "A minor crook, confidence man, gigolo, who lives by his wits and blackmail. Lebrun is the rat who pulled this job. And he's to be reached only through the lady."

"Please!" Mary Brendan leaned forward earnestly. "I can't see you jump at conclusions like this, without protest! You're in a frightfully dangerous position——"

"And now we're dealing with murder," broke in Crawford. His voice held a steely note that checked her words instantly. "Those Ponchon pearls are fabulous; said to be worth a quarter of a million! It's a big stake, Mary. Nobody but

Delaney would go after it in such a big way. Danger? Nonsense! My one chance of doing anything is to work fast, and work hard. You don't come into this picture—not right now, anyhow. I may have to call on you later."

"What are you going to do, then?" she asked, as Crawford came to his feet. He met her anxious eyes, and smiled.

"I'm going to call on the lady before Lebrun gets there," he responded. Next moment he was gone up the secret stairs to his own apartment. Once there, he shed his unobtrusive gray attire and fell rapidly to work. If Lebrun, he thought, were really the criminal, if Lebrun had to arrange for the disappearance of the unfortunate chauffeur, then the man might be detained longer than was expected. And Crawford wanted to be in the Ponchon apartment when Lebrun got there.

II

THIS is Mr. Bramwell—I telephoned a few moments ago——"

"Oh, yes!" The maid took the chain off the door and opened it. "Mr. Andrews hasn't come yet but Miss Ponchon wants you to wait. She'll see you herself in a few minutes."

"Thank you." Mr. Bramwell entered, doffing his derby. His features were not flabby nor over-fat, but his figure was, to say the least, plump. When he spoke, a glitter of gold teeth was visible between his very full lips. Black-rimmed spectacles, a high standing collar that came almost to his ears, loudly checked tweeds that accentuated his stoutness, combined to make him a notable figure. He set his hat on a table, patted his stomach, and peered about the luxurious apartment salon with a benevolent air.

Five minutes later, Agnes Ponchon appeared. At his first appraising glance, Crawford reconstructed his entire theory, his whole plan of campaign; he was acting purely upon intuition and guesswork, and in a flash he knew that Mary Brendan had

been right. This woman had not been *particeps criminis*.

She was tall, slim, heavily blondined, in her early thirties, and wore a gorgeous negligee of pink velvet. Her features showed that she had recently suffered a terrible shock; she had even neglected makeup. However, she was keen enough upon the scent of money to see this visitor who told of an unexpected legacy. This fact was all Crawford needed to decide him. In two minutes he could discover whether his theory were correct.

"Miss Ponchon?" he said, with a bow. "Ah! Pardon me. One moment——"

He passed her and closed the door by which she had just come. Then he turned, with a smile.

"Sorry to have worked you up for nothing," he observed. "You see, things were devilish bad—I didn't dare tell the truth over the wire! Spike was being questioned——"

Her white face went even whiter. "Spike!" she murmured. "Are you—are you mad?"

"No," Crawford said, coming close to her. "I've got five hundred dollars here for you. Spike says to clear out for Florida instantly—get gone from this apartment inside of five minutes! Lebrun messed things up. Wolfe got away; he's telling his story at headquarters now. It's known that you were in the car. Understand?"

He was ready for anything, as he spoke. If anything went wrong with his bluff, if she were innocent, he must clear out quickly. She swayed, closed her eyes for an instant, caught at the wall for support—then was glaring at him like a tigress.

"You—all of you!" she burst out furiously. "Let me get my hands on that damned rat Lebrun—ah! To lie about it, make me a part of it—then turn it into murder—her murder——"

"Right! He was right!"

"Listen! Get wise to yourself!" exclaimed Crawford urgently, extending the five hundred in cash he had brought along.

"Stick, around here, and you're done! Otherwise, nobody will suspect you. Send your maid away, quickly! We'll plant another maid here and fix you up with an alibi. Don't stop to pack. Get into a dress and blow! There's an afternoon express for Miami—you can just about catch it! Either that, or face the music here!"

HE THOUGHT she would go to pieces on the spot. Then her lips drew shut, her distended eyes leaped with quick fear.



She pulled herself together, with a frightful effort. She was in no condition to weigh his words.

"Right," she said, and snatched the money. "Give

me five minutes."

She disappeared. Crawford lit a cigarette. If Lebrun arrived before she cleared out—well, it would be just too bad!

"She was in the car, acted as decoy," he reflected. "But she expected robbery, not murder. Give her credit for that! It has knocked her off her pins. My theory was correct. If she were pinched, she's the kind to tighten up, say nothing. The others would get off. Well, let her go! I'm the only one to know where she is. If the others are caught, then she can come along and let a jury decide whether prison——"

The maid appeared, hurriedly getting into a coat, carrying a big parcel under her arm, followed by the shrill voice of her mistress. One gone, at least! The door slammed. Then, at the bedroom door, Agnes Ponchon appeared, fastening up a dress.

"Here, you!" she stormed. "When do I get my split? You think this measly five hundred will last me——"

Crawford held up his hand. "It was all the cash Spike had on him when things

broke. He said to go to the Biltmore when you reached Miami. He'll send you a couple of thousand tonight or tomorrow. You see, Lebrun mentioned him in front of Wolfe, like a fool——"

"Oh, that accursed Lebrun! I hope he burns for this, even if Doyle did do the actual work!" she flashed out. "Well, one minute more——"

She disappeared, swearing fluently in French. Fast work of it; now she had a hat, a fur coat, two bags. Crawford came forward, picked up the bags, and followed her out of the apartment to the elevator.

"Better tell them downstairs that you're leaving for the week end," he said, as they waited. "Atlantic City—sanitarium—shock of your aunt's death——"

She nodded. The elevator halted, the boy took the bags. Ten seconds later, she was gone. Crawford sauntered back into the apartment, amazed at his own luck. Lebrun, supposed to be her secretary, would not ask for her at the desk, but would come straight up. With a smile, Crawford picked up the telephone and gave Mary Brendan's number.

"Oh, hello!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Just wanted to inform you, my dear Mary, that I was right! My theory, rather. You were also right, but I can't explain now. See you later."

HE HUNG up and then took a look about the place, but found nothing of the slightest interest. Opening Agnes Ponchon's writing desk, he sat down, took a sheet of her scented paper, and on it impressed the rubber stamp from his pocket—the ghost, arms outstretched, in red. Spike Delaney, and the police as well, knew this stamp for the mark of Crawford; who, however, had completely disappeared.

"The ghost of Screwface Hanlon!" murmured Crawford, when he had addressed the envelope to Delaney in feigned script. "Now, when Lebrun comes, I must throw him completely off the track—that'll be the

only way to gain my ends. Doyle, eh? He was the gunman employed. That must be Hoppy Doyle, the rat who got out on parole last month. Can't make any pinch till we get the goods, either. They'll have the best legal sharpshooters in the city back of them——"

Still no sign of Lebrun. Crawford glanced at his watch—time for the afternoon news bulletin. He went to the radio in the corner, switched it on, tuned it in to the desired station. He was a trifle late for the announcement, but the voice that leaped out at him suddenly held him stupefied.

"—developments in the brutal Ponchon murder. This mark, found impressed upon the windshield of the death car, is the same as that found in connection with the murdered and unidentified woman last month. It is said to have been used by a man named Crawford, supposedly the nephew of the late "Screwface" Hanlon. Turning to European news——"

Crawford switched off the radio, groped for a chair. A bodyblow, this! Delaney had used the ghost mark once before. Now the name of Crawford was used. The war was on with a vengeance!

"Thank heaven I've got all the Crawford securities and cash in my hands!" muttered Crawford. "I'm outlawed now; the police will be after me hotfoot, but they won't locate me. So, even though I've left town, Delaney means to wipe me out! He doesn't believe I've gone. Well, I'll let him know I've not, before today's over!"

Two quick rings at the doorbell, then a key shoved into the lock. Lebrun! Crawford's brain leaped, as though set in motion by the sound. In a flash, he knew what must be done, had his plans made. No pity for Agnes Ponchon; she deserved none!

The door opened. Lebrun stepped in, closed the door, then froze at sight of Crawford. The latter waved his hand negligently.

"Come in, come in, Lebrun! Unless you prefer me to call you Andrews."

"Who the devil are you?" snapped the other. Crawford looked him over deliberately. Lebrun was lean and dark, hard-jawed, wolfish. No weakling. Not the kind to buckle under stress. Handsome, well-dressed—a bird of prey who knew his way around.

"My name is Bramwell, James T. Bramwell, counsellor at law, and at present acting for my client, Miss Ponchon. Come in, Lebrun—been waiting for you. Sorry you didn't fetch Doyle along. By the way, where is Wolfe?"

LEBRUN'S face became pallid, dirty gray in hue, but his black eyes narrowed.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come! My client has repented; she feels frightfully sorry for this whole affair, especially as you lied to her in the matter. She is not here. She has gone to a private retreat in the Catskills, leaving me to handle affairs for her. While her first impulse was to confide in the police, I may say that I argued her out of this. She has consented to let me talk for her."

Lebrun's eyes darted about the room. Bramwell smiled reassuringly, beamingly.

"Oh, no trap! No one hidden. No dictaphone. Draw up a chair and let's have a chat, unless you prefer talking to the police? It might be awkward, I'm afraid."

Slowly Lebrun advanced, his gaze boring into the man in the chair.

"What do you want?" he demanded in a low, tense voice.

"What we all want, my dear fellow! Money, of course. And before you leave this room. The split promised my client is far from sufficient. I have no time to waste, either. We must have twenty thousand dollars at once, or duty compels me to interview the police. You see, you made a great mistake in letting a woman of tender conscience know the details!"

Lebrun stood looking at him, quivering like a bird-dog pointing game.

"Twenty grand? It's absurd. Think I'm a walking bank?" he snarled. "Besides—what if I don't? She can't tell anything."

"No? But she was in the car, you know. Accessory before the fact? You can't prove it. And she's finished with you, Lebrun. Remember the Ashton affair?"

Lebrun started. He reached into his pocket, produced a cigarette case, selected a cigarette, and lighted it, very slowly. Then, inhaling, he met the gaze of Bramwell.

"You win," he said laconically. "I'll have to telephone for the money."

In those deep dark eyes, Bramwell read desperation; the man was making a bold play of some sort—and Bramwell could guess what it was. He could almost read the thoughts flitting behind those eyes.

"Sure," he replied, and rose from his chair. "By the way, here's a note Miss Ponchon left for Delaney. You might deliver it; personal, I believe. I'll see if I can scare up anything to drink in the icebox. Don't think of any doublecross, mind! It wouldn't get you anything except trouble."

Lebrun pocketed the note without comment, nodded to the advice, and reached for the telephone. Mr. Bramwell, whistling placidly, stepped out into the bedroom—and closed the door behind him. Then, like a flash, he was at the bedside, snatching up the extension instrument there. Just in time to catch Lebrun's first words.

"Doyle? I'm in a jam. At her apartment—listen to me, damn you! Get over here in a hurry; I need you. A bird here has got me against the wall, knows everything. She's spilled it to him. He's holding us up—get me? No, he's not listening. She's skipped out. I'll keep him busy till you get here—what? Oh, hell! Leave it in the bureau drawer! Nobody can get in without my key; it's safe there until

tonight. You get here on the jump."

As Lebrun rose from the telephone, Mr. Bramwell sauntered back into the salon.

"Everything jake? Then, since you know this joint, come give me a hand. I can't find any liquor, and we ought to have a drink on it."

"Sure thing!" exclaimed Lebrun cordially. "Here's the kitchen—off this way, through the dining room. Come along. Know Delaney, do you?"

"Distantly," and Mr. Bramwell chuckled. "He'll know me better later on."

"Well, that's your funeral," was Lebrun's pleasant comment as he swung open the door of the kitchen. "The money will be here in no time. Now for the ice box!"

"Ginger ale, if there is any," suggested Mr. Bramwell.

Lebrun complied, handing out two bottles, then reaching for a bottle of gin next the ice. An unfortunate reach for him. Bramwell was already swinging one of the ginger ale bottles. It hit Lebrun on the back of the skull and the man collapsed, senseless, without knowing what hit him.

Mr. Bramwell pounced upon him with dishtowels, tied him up, searched him. A letter, sure enough, addressed to Lebrun—giving his address. With this, Mr. Bramwell went to the telephone and called police headquarters.

"Homicide squad, please—ah! Hello! Here's some dope for you on the Ponchon murder, Sergeant. It was done by Andy Lebrun and Hoppy Doyle; Doyle did the killing. The pearls, and probably the money, are in a bureau drawer in Lebrun's apartment—here's the address," and Bramwell read it off. "Lebrun is now in Apartment Eighteen, the Corazon. It is the apartment of Agnes Ponchon, niece of the murdered woman. Agnes helped with the job, but didn't know it involved murder. She caught the afternoon Miami express; better have her taken off at Atlantic City. Rush some men to the Corazon or you'll lose Lebrun. You may get Doyle there also, if you hurry."

Regardless of the frantic, explosive voice on the line, Mr. Bramwell hung up, and smiled happily.

"I think that is all," he murmured, glancing around. "They'll be nabbed, the loot will be found—and one of the three will talk to keep from burning! And Mr. Spike Delaney will discover that it wasn't wise to try to frame the ghost of Screwface Hanlon! All in all, a very neat job."

Picking up his hat—which was marked with his correct initials—Mr. Bramwell put it on his head, threw a last glance about the room, then started for the door. He put out his hand to it—

"Up!" crackled a voice behind him. "Up, blast you!"

III

IN THE kitchen doorway stood Hoppy Doyle, pistol in hand. He must have come up to the apartment by the back way.

Crawford recognized him instantly from his pictures, though he had never met the man. His hands went up. Doyle advanced tigerishly, a blaze of suspicion and anger in his face.

"So you're the guy, are you? What's the idea, leaving Lebrun in the kitchen that way? And what's it all about? Just walking out, were you? Come back here."

Crawford obeyed. Doyle had seen the prone figure of Lebrun, had swept silently

on into the salon—but as yet knew little. Still a chance! Desperation spurring at him, Crawford mentally cursed his folly



in lingering here, even as he spoke.

"What is this—are you a burglar? What are you doing with that gun?"

Doyle glared at him. "Come here!" The pistol jabbed into Crawford; a hand frisked him rapidly, found no weapon.

"Get out into the kitchen—step! Laid him out, did you?"

Crawford backed into the kitchen. He was caught now in his own trap, sought frantically for some way of escape, found none. A glance at the figure of Lebrun—the latter's eyes were open. He spoke feebly.

"Hoppy! Help me—get that bird—get him first! Damn him——"

Doyle whirled about. Deadly purpose in his face, in his attitude. No foolery here; the killer meant to finish the job

Crawford leaped at him. The pistol roared; the two men collided, grappled, went reeling across the kitchen. Life and death now—Doyle fought savagely, but he was no match for the terrific energy that blazed in Crawford. The pistol exploded again. The two stumbled into the twisting, writhing Lebrun, went crashing down across his body.

Doyle's head was split against the open door of the refrigerator.

After a minute, Crawford came dizzily to his feet. Doyle was not the kind to miss; he had not missed. Nothing in sight outwardly. With an effort, Crawford picked up his hat and staggered out of the room. No hesitation now. Across to the apartment door, out into the hall. Somehow, he must make it—he must!

He came to the elevator, rang, waited. Down the hall ran a man, then another; they paid no heed to the figure leaning against the wall by the elevator. Shooting! Someone shot! Crawford heard their voices dimly. The elevator door clanged open.

He stepped out into the lobby, walked steadily to the entrance. A taxicab was under the canopy; Crawford signaled it. As he stepped in, the long blast of a siren came down the street. A police car.

Agony seized him. He fell back on the cushions, gasped out his address, felt the hot blood soaking his clothes. Not far to go, luckily. When the taxicab stopped, he leaned forward.

"You'll have to give me a hand in," he said. "Heart seizure——"

The sympathetic driver took his arm, supported him. The door of Mary Brendan's lower apartment opened. Spike Delaney came out, strode up the walk.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Somebody hurt?"

Crawford adjusted his black-rimmed spectacles. "No, thanks," he responded. "A bad heart—can you tell me if my friend Mr. Gilbert lives here? I think this is his new address. Charles W. Gilbert."

"Upstairs flat," said Delaney, and swung on. Crawford chuckled. Face to face—and Delaney had not recognized him! That was a triumph.

Five minutes later he was in a chair upstairs. A tap at the secret door. Mary Brendan appeared, white-faced, anxious.

"What is it? You're hurt——"

"More or less. What did Delaney want?"

"Oh, nothing. He's sending me some designing—invited me out to dinner," she said impatiently. "Tell me! What's wrong! Where are you hurt?"

Crawford heard her voice die away. When he opened his eyes, he was stripped to the waist, bandaged, stiff. She stood looking down at him, stormy-eyed.

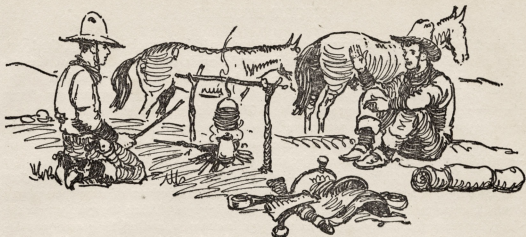
"Do you know you nearly bled to death? A bullet went between your arm and your side, not two inches from your heart—gouged across your ribs——"

Crawford laughed suddenly.

"Invited you out to dinner, did he? Confound his nerve! Well, he'll have other things to busy himself with. The police have got the right ones this time, Mary—got 'em cold! Only loss of blood, eh? And Delaney came face to face with me and never knew me——"

"It's no laughing matter!" she exclaimed angrily.

"But it is!" retorted Crawford, thinking of the note in Lebrun's pocket—the note addressed to Delaney. "If you only knew!"



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Up the Trail

NO-ONE as yet has written the complete saga of the great migration of Texas cattle to the railroads and to northern pastures that took place during the second half of the last century, but when it is written it will be one of the stories of the ages. There are, however, thousands of fragmentary accounts which such lovers of the epic as Bertrand Sinclair have pieced together in their minds to form the background for such stirring novels as *"The Man Who Rode by Himself,"* which leads off this **SHORT STORIES.**

As Stan Rickard points out when his mother characterizes him as reckless and undependable, a top-hand range rider is a king in his own right compared to a man who plods along for years at a steady job in office or factory. The trail-drivers were confronted with adventure at every point from the word go, and a thoroughgoing cowhand is faced with so many matters requiring skill and the power of decision that he soon develops a sense of his own worth and independence which marks him as a real man. And armed with the knowledge that he can shift for himself and live in comfort off the country, he is unusually well placed for the maintenance of his self-respect.

From Mexico to Canada, the trail herds were confronted successively with—the

hair-raising rounding up of wild cattle in brushy hilly country, problems of organization, the crossing of deserts without losing both men and beasts from heat and thirsts, the crossing of swollen rivers, raids by hostile Indians, raids by white rustlers, stampedes, opposition from local authorities and nesters who didn't want their lands crossed and feared the Texas fever ticks, crooked work in the trail towns, gamblers, robbers, killers, and farther north, blizzards and freezing. Those are just a few of the main difficulties. With minor troubles, their solving made up about as adventurous a life as the world has seen, a life in which man went back for a while close to the primitive state where every one was constantly faced by the need to survive by his own efforts.

Bertrand Sinclair has excellently caught the spirit of the times in *"The Man Who Rode by Himself,"* and we hope to give you another story by him in the near future.

Even the Dogs Are Wild

IN THE wanderings of Jim and the "Major," we often hear of the wild life they encounter. Indeed the zebras, the lions, and the other marauders of the jungle are the only creatures to which they return time and time again. "Don't be a bally cynic," the Major remarks to Jim

in the Major story in this issue when the Hottentot mildly asks if the punishment is for the man or the woman in the marriage which his Baas has so neatly arranged. So they fare forth once more on to the veldt, and disappear into the jungle fastnesses.

Of one sort of wild life in East Africa—and who knows if Jim and the Major do not reach that far in their wanderings—we had a very interesting letter the other day. It came to the Ends of the Earth Club, but we feel it really belongs in this part of the Circle:

The uninhabited regions of this East Africa are the habitat of a wild and vicious canine which is known as the Cape hunting dog. Hunting where and in whatever country he likes, without leave or license, this dog is not only a terror to many kinds of African game, but the despair of sportsmen generally. Once afoot with his prey, a kill becomes almost an absolute certainty. He needs no help.

He stands twenty-five to twenty-seven inches high, has good galloping quarters, rather long, but very muscular legs, and strong feet and toes. His ears are quite large and erect, beautifully formed to catch the faintest sound when working in thick coverts. Added to this he has a very keen sense of smell.

His jaws are wonderfully strong, with glistening white teeth; they can break

bones which few animals except the hyena could crack, and the strength of the latter's jaws and teeth are proverbial.

Their mode of hunting is very clever. Having found and started a buck, some of the fleetest dogs of the pack gallop forward ahead of the main body, keeping on either side to prevent the buck turning or doubling back. As these dogs tire they fall back, and others take up the running in their place. When the quarry tires the pack closes in, and all their energy is devoted to killing by tearing out the entrails.

It is said by some observers that the pack takes the form of a crescent when running their prey, gradually closing in as the game slows down. All agree that the short time taken in running down a buck is simply marvelous, a quarter of an hour being the estimated time in hunting, killing and consuming a buck under ordinary circumstances.

The wild dog is not at all fastidious as to what food he shall take, but he levies toll on any sort of buck or antelope he finds handy. Gnu, sable, and waterbuck are said to be his favorite food, but he has been known to pull down a buffalo when pressed for sustenance. Needless to say, when attacking a powerful animal like this some of the dogs meet with a sudden death, and these are consumed by the surviving members. They always seem ravenous

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____ 3 _____
2 _____ 4 _____
5 _____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____
NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SHORT STORIES

November 10th



W. C. TUTTLE

*Has a Complete Novel of a Murder in Town
with Reverberations on the
Ranges.*



Boots and Bread



*It all happened
in the North, but
it's called—*

"Gone West"

by

**B. W.
SINCLAIR**

DOMINOES OF DEATH

A Mystery Novelette

by

**ERLE
STANLEY
GARDNER**

and many other features

for food and their appetites nearly insatiable. There is no record of their having attacked a white man, however.

The Cape hunting dog is sometimes called the hyena-dog on account of his likeness to the hyena. The likeness, however, is only superficial, and the fact that he runs down and kills his prey in a sporting manner entitles him to a small share of our respect, which a scavenger like the hyena could never command.

Packs range from fifteen to forty in number. The note is bell-like and rather musical. Sportsmen say that it is like a "Ho-ho-ho-ho" sound, tending to run one note into the other. It is questionable whether or not they ever bark in the ordinary way.

The Cape hunting dog seems incapable of thorough domestication. They have been crossed with other dogs, but the result has never been satisfactory; the young retain the treacherous nature of the wild parent and never outgrow it.

Hotbed of Piracy

SOUTH CHINA is today the worst locality in the world for piracy, and there it still flourishes in spite of everything the European merchants and shipping men can do to prevent it. Practically every vessel goes armed, and even the most peaceful of sailing craft are not only armed but carry big "stinkpots" in order to cope with the pirates on their own terms.

The stinkpot is a vile invention, worthy of the Chinese in their vilest moments. It consists of an earthen pot with a heavy cover, containing a mixture something like the ancient Greek Fire and emitting a pungent, sulphurous odor. When smashed, the contents of the stinkpot bubble out, searing and defacing woodwork, and burning flesh almost like carboic acid, while suffocating every one within range by horrible vapors. These weapons are

carried in stops at the mastheads of the pirate junk, or at the maintopgallant truck of a peaceful vessel, ready at a moment's notice to be loosed and dropped upon the enemy's deck.

The West River district, and Fuchau, are the favorite haunts of the piratical junks, though they frequently attack merchant vessels as far south as Shanghai. No longer, however, do the pirates cruise in blue water endeavoring to seize large craft under sail. That is too dangerous an experiment these days.

Instead, they have created an exceedingly elaborate system of spies. Whenever a small craft, of say a thousand tons or so, is known to be loading a valuable cargo or carrying specie, these spies inform their masters of the name, destination, sailing date and other particulars of the vessels, and the junks prepare accordingly.

The attack is made whenever possible during a calm, for then the pirates, having large crews provided with tremendous sweeps, enjoy an enormous advantage. They spring upon their victims with a soul-scaring noise and clamor, bedecked in all the battle paraphernalia so dear to the heart of the Chinaman.

The struggle is usually short, if there is any, and the result in recent years, with one or two notable exceptions, has always been the same. The marauders open fire from a distance with small arms and "jingals," or wall-pieces, range up alongside, drop or hurl the inevitable stinkpot with precision, board quickly, and finish things with a few knife-thrusts if any resistance is offered, or, having cowed their victims, put them to all forms of devilish torture that a fertile Oriental mind can imagine.

Only cases which involve foreign craft are ever heard of at all because there are plenty of sharks in those waters to devour the dead.



OUTLANDS AND SEAWAYS

Questions of our readers
answered by Captain
Frederick Moore



What is the island in the Pacific owned by the United States which is used only for raising birds?

You probably refer to Laysan Island, some 800 miles west of Honolulu. It is a United States possession, but the birds are wild. It is only three miles long, and half that wide, and not much more than thirty feet above the sea, with a lagoon in the center. Millions of birds nest there. Their cries and songs are almost deafening. There is so little space that birds build nests one above another, so that tiers of nests remind one of houses of several floors. Every inch of the island is taken up by a nest. You will need cotton for your ears if you land there.

What is "floating gold" spoken of by an old whaler over the radio? I did not hear all of his talk.

Ambergris, a mysterious substance from the bodies of whales, is often referred to as "floating gold." It is found on the surface of the sea, or on beaches. Used in making perfumes. A London firm paid \$90,000 for 270 pounds of it. A fishing crew once found a great mass of it afloat, brought a bucket aboard, greased their boots with it, and not until they got back to port and somebody who knew got a sniff of their boots, did the fishermen know they had let several vast fortunes float away while they loaded fish out of nets. The bucketful would have built several schooners, but the cook dumped what was left after the boots were greased.

How can the captain of a whaling vessel be sure he will find whales?

Those who fail to find whales cease to be captains. Whales have regular feeding grounds. They follow tides and currents and the shoal water where fish may be found for food. They move according to schedules, seemingly like herring. Charts were once made showing where whales could be found at various times of the year. Whales move over fairly regular routes; also, at certain seasons they travel as family parties, are found near the equator. Having spent the summer in cold northern or southern polar waters, they lounge around in the tropics. Often a whaler meets a school of whales in the tropics which are all young males—"forty barrel bulls," full of fight, fun and wickedness, and might be called marine gangsters.

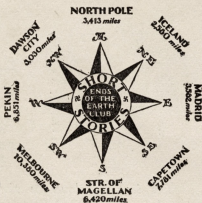
Why is Greenland, covered with ice, called Greenland?

Because pirates turned real estate developers, in a way of speaking. Erik the Red, of Norway, called it Greenland to make it attractive, and his son, Leif Erikson, "Leif the Lucky" went to Greenland, later discovering America, called by him Vinland, or Wineland. First he found Helluland, "Kingdom of Stones," or Labrador, then Markland, or "Land of Trees" which is Nova Scotia, then Vinland, Rhode Island.

Erik the Red started the thing off by calling a land of ice and snow at certain seasons, Greenland.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB

HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.



This member has picked a beauty spot to settle down in—but he's been around enough!

Dear Secretary.

Have been a regular reader of SHORT STORIES for about three years and should now like to become a member of your club.

I am English born, and have traveled a bit to Egypt, Ireland, etc.

We, in Bermuda, can now boast a "rail-way" which, during the construction was very difficult to lay owing to the foundations which are composed of coral. Con-

sidering the length of the Islands (nineteen miles long by about two miles wide) you see some of the most beautiful scenery anyone could wish to see anywhere.

I should like to hear from any member of the club. Am interested in music, any kind of sport, and reading. For reading matter I think SHORT STORIES is the best on the newsstand.

Sincerely yours,

Alex Carnohan

"Upton"
Off Clarence Ave.,
Pembroke,
Bermuda

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of SHORT STORIES, published semi-monthly at Garden City, New York, for October 1, 1933. State of New York, County of Nassau.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared John J. Hessian, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the treasurer of Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., owners of Short Stories, and that the following is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., Garden City, N. Y.; Editor, H. E. Maule, Garden City, N. Y.; Business Managers, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., Garden City, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., Garden City, N. Y.; Stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock are: F. N. Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y.; Nelson Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y.; Russell Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y.; John J. Hessian, Garden City, N. Y.; W. Herbert Eaton, 244 Madison Avenue, N. Y. C.; Henry L. Jones, 244 Madison Avenue, N. Y. C.; Estate of William J. Neal, Flushing, N. Y.; Harry E. Maule, Garden City, N. Y.; Daniel W. Nye, Garden City, N. Y.; Estate of Donald MacDonald, Garden City, N. Y.; Janet Doubleday, Glen Cove, N. Y.; Ellen McC. Doubleday, Oyster Bay, N. Y.; S. A. Everitt, Huntington, N. Y.; Mary Noble Doran, Stanley M. Rinehart, Jr., and Chemical Bank & Trust Company, Trustees

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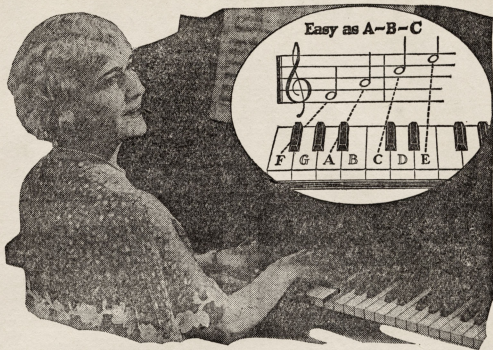
3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: The Title Guarantee and Trust Company.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

(Signed) John J. Hessian, Treasurer.
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of August, 1933.

[SEAL]

(Signed) Frank O'Sullivan,
Notary Public Queens County, No. 1384.
Certificate filed in Nassau County.
(My commission expires March 30, 1934)



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28x4.90-21	2.85	1.10	34x4 1/2	2.95	1.15
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28x5.00-19	2.75	1.10	36x4	2.95	1.15
28x5.00-20	2.85	1.15	36x4	2.95	1.15
28x5.00-21	2.95	1.15	36x4	2.95	1.15
28x5.10-18	2.95	1.15	36x4	2.95	1.15
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5 inches to my neck
... by using the
Jowett System of
Physical Training"
Signed:
Larry Campbell

Larry Campbell Student of GEORGE F. JOWETT, from Drawing by PRYOR

"I will add 3 INCHES TO YOUR CHEST TWO INCHES TO YOUR BICEPS ... or it won't cost you a cent!"

GEORGE F. JOWETT

WHAT I did for Larry Campbell—I am sure I can do for you! I wish you could see Larry in action today—see him lift more than 225 pounds overhead with one hand—and Larry is only one of hundreds of my pupils who have excelled as strength athletes. In no time at all, you too will be doing the one-arm-press with a 150 pound weight!

All I want is a chance to prove to you that I can add 3 inches of muscle to YOUR chest and 2 inches to each of YOUR biceps. And I don't mean cream-puff muscles either—you will get real, genuine, invincible muscles that will make your men friends respect you and women admire you!

Take my full course, if it does not do all I say—it won't cost you one penny, even the postage you have spent will be refunded to you. Try one of my test courses NOW—

Send for "Moulding a Mighty Chest"

A Complete Course for ONLY 25c

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I will not limit you to the chest. I can develop any part or all of your body. Try any one of my test courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only \$1.00.

Rush the Coupon Today

Mail your order now and I will include a FREE COPY of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON." It is a priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how you can build symmetry and strength the equal of theirs. Reach Out—Grasp This Special Offer.

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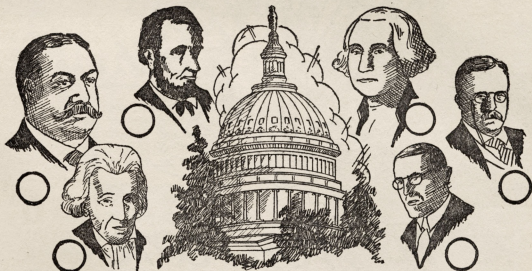


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IT PAYS TO BE PROMPT!

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PRIZE COUPON

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I have named the six Presidents and numbered each picture in the circle. I understand that the correct answer qualifies me for the opportunity to win \$3500.00. Tell me at once what to do to win this fortune.

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Most likely your income has been reduced. But—
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<input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman
<input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating
<input type="checkbox"/> Wood Millworking
<input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder
<input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman
<input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer
<input type="checkbox"/> Electric Wiring
<input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer
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<input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas
<input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineer
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<input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman
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<input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker
<input type="checkbox"/> Pipefitter <input type="checkbox"/> Tinsmith
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer
<input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman
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<input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Mechanics | <input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting
<input type="checkbox"/> Heating <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation
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<input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy
<input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining Engineer
<input type="checkbox"/> Navigation
<input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaker
<input type="checkbox"/> Textile Overseer or Supt.
<input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing
<input type="checkbox"/> Woollen Manufacturing
<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Growing
<input type="checkbox"/> Poultry Farming <input type="checkbox"/> Radio
<input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineer |
| BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management
<input type="checkbox"/> Office Management
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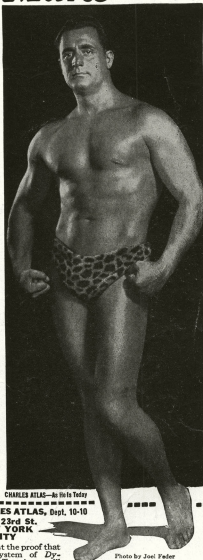
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