

W. C.  
**TUTTLE**

*In this issue*

**CAPT. FRED  
MOORE**

# Short Stories

Twice A Month

December 10th

25¢

A novelette by

**H.**

**BEDFORD-  
JONES**

**"Blood - Black  
Gold"**

*An' the live ones  
is only a mite mo'  
dangerous than  
the dead ones*

**BEFO'  
AND AFTER  
KILLIN'**

*A complete  
novel by*

**Caddo  
Cameron**







## If you want the truth, go to a child

LATELY, Jepson had felt himself slipping as a salesman. He couldn't seem to land the big orders; and he was too proud to go after the little ones. He was discouraged and mystified.

Finally, one evening, he got the real truth from his little boy. You can always depend on a child to be outspoken on subjects that older people avoid.

\* \* \*

You, yourself, rarely know when you have halitosis (unpleasant breath). That's the insidious thing about it. And even your closest friends won't tell you.

Sometimes, of course, halitosis comes from some deep-seated organic disorder that requires professional advice.

But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle. It is an interesting thing that this well-known antiseptic that has been in use for years for surgical dressings, possesses these unusual properties as a breath deodorant. It puts you on the safe and polite side.

Listerine halts food fermentation in the mouth and leaves the breath sweet, fresh and clean. The entire mouth feels invigorated.

Get in the habit of using Listerine every morning and night. And between times before social and business engagements. It's the fastidious thing to do.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

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**J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute**  
The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

# Be a Radio Expert

## Many make \$30 \$50 \$75 a week

### I will train you at home for many Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs



**Set Servicing Systems**  
Spare time set servicing pays many \$5, \$10, \$15 a week extra while learning. Full time servicing pays as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.

**Broadcasting Stations**  
Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for fascinating jobs and pay up to \$5,000 a year.



**Loud Speaker Systems**  
Building, installing, servicing and operating public address systems is another growing field for men well trained in Radio.



**HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS**

**\$80 Monthly in Spare Time**  
"I work on Radio part time, still holding my regular job. Since enrolling five years ago, I have averaged around \$80 every month."  
—JOHN B. MORISSETTE, 775 Silver St., Manchester, N. H.

**Makes \$50 to \$60 a Week**  
"I am making between \$50 and \$60 a week after all expenses are paid, and I am getting all the Radio work I can take care of, thanks to N. R. I."—H. W. SPANGLER, 608 Walnut St., Knoxville, Tenn.

**Operates Public Address System**  
"I have a position with the Los Angeles Civil Service, operating the Public Address System in the City Hall Council. My salary is \$15 a month."—R. H. ROOD, R. 132, City Hall, Los Angeles, Calif.

Do you want to make more money? Radio offers you many opportunities for well-paying spare time and full time jobs. And you don't have to give up your present job or leave home and spend a lot of money to become a Radio Expert.

**Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week**  
Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as \$30 to \$50 a week—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio and loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I have trained are holding good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read their statements. Mail the coupon.

**There's a Real Future in Radio for Well Trained Men**  
Radio already gives jobs to more than 300,000 people. In 1933 over \$30,000,000 worth of sets, tubes and parts were sold—an increase of 30% over 1931. Over 1,100,000 auto Radios were sold in 1933, 25% more than in 1931! 23,000,000 homes are today equipped with Radios, and every year millions of these sets go out of date and are replaced with newer models. Millions more need servicing, new tubes, repairs, etc. Broadcasting stations pay their employees (exclusive of artists) more than \$23,000,000 a year! And Radio is a new industry still growing fast! A few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75-a-week jobs have grown to thousands in less than 20 years!

**Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning**  
Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you

Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly! Throughout your training I send you plans that made good spare time money—\$30 to \$60 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My training is famous as "The Course that pays for itself."

**I Give You Practical Experience**  
My Course is not all book training. I send you special Radio equipment and show you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud speaker installations. I show you how to build testing apparatus for use in spare time work from this equipment. This 50-50 method of training makes learning about home interesting, fascinating, practical.

**You Get a Money Back Agreement**  
I am so sure that I can train you successfully that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. I'll send you a copy of this agreement with my Free Book.

**Find Out What Radio Offers You Act Today.** Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

**J. E. SMITH, Pres., National Radio Institute**  
Dept. 6N M, Washington, D. C.

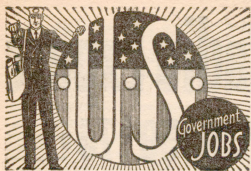


**This Coupon is Good for One FREE Copy of My Book**

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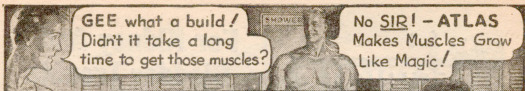
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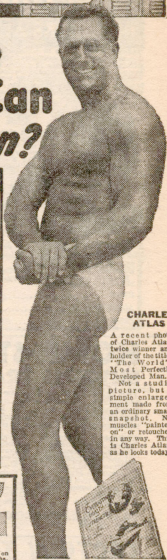


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"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1 1/2 in., chest 2 1/2 in., forearm 1 3/8 in., gained 4 lbs."--C. S. W., Va.

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**Here's what ATLAS did for ME!**

John Jacobs **BEFORE**      John Jacobs **AFTER**

**For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS**

"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"--W. G., N. J.

**GAINED 29 POUNDS**

"Your method gives me strong, smooth muscles. When I started weighed only 141. Now 170."--T. K., N. Y.

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Find out--at my risk! Right in first 7 days I'll start to PROVE I can turn YOU into a man of might and muscle. And it will be the kind of PROOF you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

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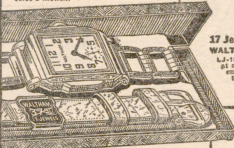
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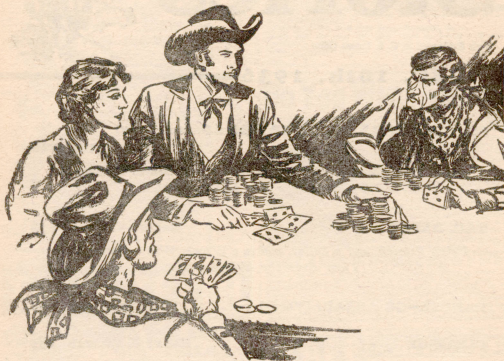
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# BEFO' AND AFTER KILLIN'

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "Rangers Is Powerful Hard to Kill," etc.



## CHAPTER I

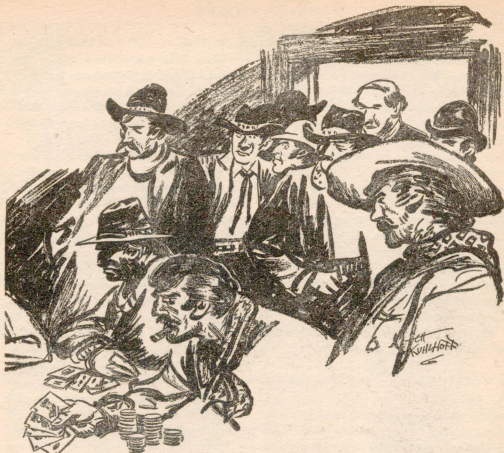
"WHY DID YOU KILL HIM?"

**T**HERE were five men at the poker table, four of whom were known to be dangerous. The fifth was a stranger, a fastidious individual expensively clothed in black that fitted his lean body to perfection.

Many hard-bitten citizens of the outlaw town of Tomahawk, Texas, neglected the bar in the Long Chance Saloon and crowded around this stiff game at the rear of the room. They watched the players attentively, especially the unknown gambler, and their tight faces announced the fact that trouble was expected at any moment.

With the ease of one who had done the same thing many times before, the stranger reached out with his long left arm and raked in a pot. The glare from a reflector lamp overhead filtered through the smoke and momentarily fell across his face as he made this motion.

It was a face which a man might briefly describe by saying, "That there jasper is proud as a wild stallion and ten times as ornery, but he's plumb square." A pale, slender face offering a striking contrast to his black sideburns and hair, which was silky and wavy and worn long enough to curl up over his ears in the mode of the day. A countenance that was designed to catch and hold the interest of women—promising chiv-



***Midnight Gives a Whirl to the Town of Tomahawk, Where the  
Live Ones Is Only a Mite Mo' Dangerous Than the Dead Ones***

alry, romance, intrigue, and all manner of deviltry.

"Who's the tinhawn?" cautiously whispered a newcomer.

"Done said folks call he 'Midnight,' answered Jingo Joe from the corner of his thick lips.

The other craned his neck. "Shore fits him puffed. How long has he been here?"

"Two three hours."

"Where'd he hail from?"

"They ain't nobody knows," declared Jingo Joe.

"Who's winnin'?"

"Midnight."

"Godamighty! I shore wouldn't want to be in his boots."

"Me neither," admitted Jingo Joe.

The tall gambler wore a silk shirt, flowing bow tie, brocaded velvet vest, broadcloth trousers, and calf-skin boots with filagreed tops—everything black and evidently the finest that money could buy.

Because of the quality of his clothing, some of the younger spectators classed him as a dandy and a tinhorn and nothing more; and they blissfully prophesied his early death, if he continued to win.

But some of the older heads who posed as shrewd judges of fighting men took note of his calm face and his two wood-handled Colts in holsters of hand-tooled, black leather—worn low and tied down—and they promptly looked wise.

Blacksnake Jones, the town barber, tugged at his mournful mustache and allowed to his nearest neighbor, "I done seen a whole slew of purty things that was all-fired pizen."

On the stranger's right sat a woman. She was banking the game for the house, and obviously watching his every move for her own amusement—or for some other reason. "Firefly" they called her in Tomahawk, because the name was suggested by her flaming red hair and fiery temper; and also because nobody had succeeded in finding out whether she had any other name. Except for coloring, Midnight and Firefly might have passed as brother and sister. They had the same regular, almost classical features, and a lofty expression that seemed to advertise their polite scorn for all creation.

Midnight studiously ignored Firefly; but he contrived to do it courteously.

COILED down on a chair at his left was lanky Slash Canton, whose swarthy face was twisted into a perpetual snarl by a scar that extended from temple to chin. Slash tangled with the gambler in a large pot and lost. The vicious glance he fired at his antagonist would have disturbed a person with less composure; but Midnight merely looked at Slash and grinned.

"Aces-up are good cards, Mistah," he drawled politely; "and a fella can't blame you for backin' 'em."

"Mebbe so," growled Canton. "But they ain't wuth a damn when you're a-nussin' three deuces."

"No sah, they ain't," Midnight agreed. "And it's jest such painful happenin's that make poker the grand game she is."

Next to Slash sat Injun Tom. He grunted. Those three deuces cost him money. Straight black hair dribbled over his forehead and ears, and his fat face was greasy and wooden; but his snaky eyes were very much alive. As he watched the gambler take in the pot, it was easy to imagine his pudgy hand creeping toward a knife inside his shirt.

At Firefly's right sat a wild youth named

Curly Hamp, one of those handsome pink-and-white fellows whom evil women spoil without half trying, and bad men lead astray with ease. Curly had notches on his guns, and craved more; and when the gambler took his money he looked to be at the point of trying to add another notch.

On the opposite side of the table slumped Red Krummer, big and sweaty and dusty. The three deuces worked no injury to Red; but they added fuel to the fires of envy that gnawed at him, for Midnight was giving Red a personal poker lesson.

He dragged a hairy hand across a face as savage as a bulldog's, and cursed the heat. The gambler nodded agreement, and slid his black Stetson to the back of his head. Flipping a white silk handkerchief from his sleeve, he swept it over his high forehead.

Red cautiously reached to a hip-pocket, keeping his hand well clear of his holster, and brought out a grimy bandana with which he mopped his heavy neck. He watched the gambler delicately touch the silk to an aristocratic nose, then his glance darted to Midnight's imposing stack of chips and back to the handkerchief again. Rage mounted swiftly in his red-rimmed eyes.

"I'd call that a hell of a place for a *man* to pack a bandana," he growled, placing significant emphasis on the "man." "Ain't them fancy britches got no pockets?"

The spectators listened. Cigarettes smoldered in midair.

Midnight regarded the handkerchief humorously for an instant, flirted it back into his sleeve, and grinned indulgently at the big man.

Presently he would kill Red. In fact, he had decided to do it sooner or later when first he met the gunman a few hours ago and recognized him from a description he had carried in mind for some time. Having risked his life by venturing into this outlaw nest to solve a mystery for his friend Captain Houston of the Rangers, he was pleased by this opportunity to pay off a score for his own satisfaction.

But he concluded that both Krummer and the mystery could wait for a while. There was some money left in the game and it would be a crime to let it get away; so he'd just be patient with Red for a short spell—not long.

**A**FTER a moment's thoughtful scrutiny of Krummer's flushed face, Midnight spoke in a voice that was a carefully modulated blend of the Texas drawl and cultured softness from the deep South. It somehow gave the impression he could use better language if he cared to.



"Yes, Krummer, they got pockets. And maybe you done noticed that I'm fillin' 'em with yo' money powerful fast."

The big outlaw growled something deep in his chest and appeared to be undecided whether to drive a huge fist at the grinning face across the table, or to take more serious steps.

"Red—you're dealin'!" Firefly's voice was low but penetrating, and it carried a note of authority that discouraged argument.

Krummer met her eyes. They were large and blue, and at the moment hard and steady. He averted his glance and sullenly began to shuffle the cards.

Midnight looked quickly at the girl. The downward curve of his lips changed to an upward twist that gave him a whimsical and altogether likeable expression.

The suggestion of a smile flitted across her face.

So Firefly was somebody in this den of thieves, he reflected. Should have suspected it, for she looked the part. Might prove useful, too. Probably knew plenty. But he'd

gamble it would take some powerful smooth work to make that woman talk.

Her gown of green silk generously displayed arms, shoulders, and a bosom of which she had reason to be proud—and evidently was. He permitted his glance to drift over her briefly, just long enough to exhibit a nicely calculated degree of masculine interest and admiration.

Her smile came in earnest, and her face was no longer hard.

Midnight thought of other red-headed women who had smiled upon him. After all, Firefly might talk.

The play continued. His winnings grew steadily and his opponents' anger swelled proportionately. The outlaws tried every trick they knew, and he consistently beat them at their own game. With possibly one or two exceptions, these four men were considered the best poker players in Tomahawk and they gloried in that distinction. Now they were being publicly disgraced, and it was a thing their pride wouldn't stand. This was especially true in the case of the volcanic Red Krummer; and the high tension of the spectators showed they knew it. They alternately muttered and fidgeted and stood stock still, waiting for the explosion.

The gambler's sensitive fingers caressed the cards as if they were fragile things, and made them perform incredible tricks under the noses of men who knew he was doing it and were dying to catch him. Once caught, the mob would promptly hang him. He knew it, which made the game all the more interesting. His long eyes appeared to flit behind their heavy lashes from Red to each of the other players with a species of sardonic amusement; beneath it might be discerned a subtle challenge.

**A**S time passed, from the way they were betting their cards Midnight concluded there wasn't enough money left in the game to buy him a new hat. It was no longer interesting, but Red might prove to be.

And that gang of hair-trigger outlaws!



His chips were stacked directly in front of him, so he carelessly slid his chair back a few inches and a little to the right. Through the smoke of his cigarette, he swept a glance around the ring of grim faces encircling the table. A hard bunch, and not a friend among them. No law in the town, and escape out of the question; a bluff was the thing! The thought sent a pleasant little tingle of excitement coursing up and down his spine; and it set him to humming mentally a snatch of song—a rollicking song.

Midnight lived for such moments as this.

Krummer was shuffling and taking his time about it.

Almost imperceptibly he fumbled. The gambler's languid drawl arose above the whispered protest of the cards:

"Excuse me, Mistah. For a thousand dollars cash on the bar'l head, I'll teach you that trick!"

And so he stole the play from Red—a daring move inspired by high confidence in the worth of a bluff. It caught everybody flat-footed, particularly Krummer. The cards dribbled from his fingers, his wide jaw sagged, and a shadow of uncertainty briefly obscured his evil temper.

As one man the spectators stared in blank amazement at the stranger, momentarily forgetting to move out of the line of fire; then fell over one another in a mad scramble.

Sitting within arm's reach of Midnight, Slash Canton slyly shifted his feet back to either side of his chair and tightened his coils like a rattler preparing to strike. The hilt of a knife showed inside his boot-top.

The racket died suddenly.

With no sound whatever, Firefly's fingers deftly riffled a stack of gold pieces.

Midnight's tantalizing voice drifted into a silence that was painful: "A thousand dollahs is my price, Mistah. And I allow it'd be wuth it to you, bein' a natural bawn cheat and all-fired clumsy to boot!"

For an instant he heard the ticking of his watch.

His hands lay supinely on the table like

dead things, and the smoky light brushed their pallid skin with a tint of blue.

Without warning, Krummer's paw dived at the gun beneath his vest.

Those pale hands came to life and vanished!

The roar of a gun was followed by the clatter of a chair and the jar of a falling body.

Slash Canton grunted and partly uncoiled. The gambler's left-hand Colt was boring between his ribs.

Out of the swirling smoke oozed Midnight's lazy voice—if anything, more flippant than ever. "Curly! Don't you try it, young fella, and maybe some day you'll be President."

Something resembling a concerted sigh arose from the crowd, that noisy release of breath that may signify anything. They craned their necks to stare down at Red. They saw the hole between his eyes, and cursed in whispers. They peered through the smoke at the gambler's nonchalant face, and said nothing. They saw the muzzle of a forty-five peeping over the edge of the table at his right, and shook their heads; for they knew that Red had been a mighty fast man with that quick-draw shoulder holster.

Midnight again felt that little tingle in the region of his spine. Would he get it in the back? If alone with any one of this gang in a secluded spot, he'd expect it; but he held to the theory that few men would publicly shoot or knife in the back. He was putting that theory to a test, and getting a thrill out of doing it. At that moment, he wouldn't have traded places with the Governor of the State of Texas.

And he owned another conviction: he could talk himself into or out of most anything by saying very little, and making the other fellow do the talking.

So he kept an eye on Curly, and politely said to Firefly, "Madam, I apologize for creatin' a disturbance in yo' presence."

A few grim chuckles came from the gang. Elbows on the table and chin cradled in

the cup of her palms, the girl regarded Midnight with eyes that suddenly were narrow and crafty. "Disturbance?" she inquired blandly. "We don't call this a disturbance in Tomahawk."

That brought a guffaw from the crowd.

He mentally thanked her. By making 'em laugh she was doing right well by him, and he was half convinced that she did it deliberately to help him.

Aloud he drawled softly, "Again I beg yo' pahdon, Miss Firefly. Reckon I sorta miscal'lated yo' city's appetite for blood."

A few men snorted.

He wished they would laugh.

She made no answer; but her calculating look persisted, and it might have made him uncomfortable had he nothing else to occupy his mind.

MIDNIGHT holstered his guns. Glancing at Slash and Curly in turn, he said smoothly, "If you gents feel called upon to revenge Mistah Krummer's untimely death, I won't hold it against you. But I may do a little mo' shootin'."

Curly tried to say something, stammered, got red, and gave it up. His hands bashfully crawled onto the table and looked as though they aimed to stay there.

The gambler realized that Slash was a different breed of killer. Slash wasn't scared, just smart. And at close range, Midnight had a heap of respect for the knife in Slash's boot. But he'd gamble that Canton didn't care two whoops for anyone except Canton.

So he wasn't surprised when the outlaw whined in a thin voice, "Hell man! I ain't killin' nobody else's snakes. But, Tinhawn, I shore do massycree my own!"

At a word from Firefly, four men staggered away with Red's body. Everybody else clustered around the table. The bar was deserted, and two bartenders with flour-sack aprons and pompous mustaches joined the crowd.

In a far corner where he had been dozing, a drunk balanced on unsteady legs and de-

manded to know who was celebrating and why. Receiving no answer, he pulled his gun and said he'd help—regardless of who it was or what it was all about.

Blacksnake Jones flung a beer bottle, and the drunk subsided.

The gambler turned to face Firefly.

A queer smile played at the corners of her full lips; and for once her hands rested quietly on the table—neglecting the chips and gold pieces. "Why did you kill him?" she asked in a clear voice.

He grinned. "Didn't it appear to you that I was sorta lookin' out for my own hide?"

The girl impatiently shook her head. "I'm askin' the questions. But never mind. I was watching you, and I'll swear you were far enough ahead of him to plant your slug anywhere you pleased." She bent toward him and lowered her voice. "Do you kill men just for the fun of the thing, Midnight?"

The gambler hid a smile behind his hand, and his eyes danced with deviltry. "Can't rightly say that I do, Miss. Fact of the matter is, I've learned that grizzly b'ars are a heap mo' fun 'cause they fight like gentlemen."

Several men laughed outright. The listeners were enjoying this tilt; and so was Midnight, although she was taking advantage of her sex by asking questions that no man would dare to ask.

Firefly lifted her eyebrows and tilted her head to one side. "Do you always fight like a gentleman?"

He answered a bit stiffly, "Certainly, Madam."

The gambler suspected she was laughing at him. "Now I can guess why you killed Red."

"I caught him tryin' to cheat. Wasn't that a-plenty?"

"No, I don't think you'd shoot a man for cheating," she insisted. "You'd merely beat him at his own game. I believe you killed Red Krummer because you thought you had a reason which a gentleman would consider good and sufficient."

Midnight grinned dryly. "Miss Firefly, you win. And to think that some folks swear brains and beauty never range together."

She waved the compliment aside carelessly. He admired her large diamond, and thought the hand fit to wear it.

"I'm listenin'," she said. "Go on."

HE shrugged and sent a droll glance at the men around him. Some grinned, others looked away with stony faces. "I allow this here lady could make a fella talk himself smack into a calaboose," he drawled. "However, Miss, I don't mind sayin' that when I shot Red Krummer I made a small payment on a debt of honah."

"A debt of honor?"

He nodded. "Yes'm. You see it's like this. A while back, a fella called Old Uncle Andy took me in and nussed me when I was shot up powerful bad, and he took care of my hoss, and when a posse came a-nosin' 'round—he hid us both and lied like a gentleman. Two three month ago I found out that the old man had been robbed and murdered by Red Krummer, so ever since then



I've been layin' off to settle up with Red. That's all there is to it." He paused and dragged thoughtfully at his cigarette. "Old Uncle Andy was a colod fella."

As though somewhat perplexed, Firefly intently studied the gambler's face. "I'm wonderin' whether you've got any more debts to pay off in this town."

Every man there appeared to cock his ears. Midnight knew he was the center of interest at the moment.

His bearing was aloof and his answer brusque: "Miss Firefly, my debts of honah are scattered far and wide."

In the pause that ensued, the gambler

swept the gang with an amused glance. He saw hard men inventorying their sins and finding plenty of reasons why their blood should be used as a medium of exchange in the payment of debts of honor. They were uncomfortable, and more than one man cast a longing eye at the bar.

He wanted to laugh.

Evidently Firefly felt the same way about it, for her mirth bubbled over in a healthy peal. She stood up. He arose and looked down at her. He didn't find it hard to do. Whoever made that green gown knew how to fit a small figure so as to display its curves to the best advantage without disguising its willowy slenderness. The bodice was snug, and the voluminous skirt drew up tightly across her thighs and hips and gathered behind in a bustle effect.

Midnight had an eye for women's clothes. Firefly would pass in any company.

She waved an arm in a gesture that included everybody, and her voice took on a harsher timbre when she sang out boisterously, "Gents—the house is buying! Mosey over to the bar and baptize your tonsils!"

Her coarse exclamation offended Midnight's refined tastes. He didn't exactly know why, but he thought it beneath her. Perhaps she was posing and did it for effect, he concluded. However, he fell into step with an equally marked change in his own language.

Lifting his voice above the racket that suddenly broke loose, he called out, "Listen to me, fellas! Give them tonsils a duckin' on the house, then plumb drown the critters on me 'cause I done win-a-plenty!"

A smattering of cheers and some enthusiastic promises answered his invitation.

He smiled down at Firefly and added softly, "I win in mo' ways than one."

She glanced up quickly. Her eyes were round and more or less innocent. "Yes, the boys had money and you got most of it. Roughly, I'd say you've won something over two thousand." She looked away. "What else did you win?"

Bending slightly at the waist with an ease and dignity that was wholly out of place in The Long Chance Saloon, he tried to catch her eye. "The pleasure of meeting you, Firefly."

She gave him a searching look. He experienced the strange feeling that the girl was measuring him for some definite purpose of her own. Her lids narrowed, then she shrugged indifferently. "You may change your mind and call it tough luck. Wait until you meet the boss of this place. He'll be here in the morning."

Midnight wondered what she was driving at.

He cashed in, leaving a deposit to pay for the drinks.

And after some idle conversation about nothing in particular, he walked away burdened with the conviction that Firefly would surely talk, and probably tell less than nothing at all.

## CHAPTER II

"I NEVER TASTED GUNSMOKE AS VILE  
AS THIS"

AMBLING down the sidewalk and keeping a sharp lookout for knives and bullets and things, Midnight reflected that if he had lived in the good old days when a handsome young gentleman climbed into a pair of tin breeches and a shirt of the same weave, and further protected his person with a steel Stetson and a mandolin, and jogged over the prairie punchin' holes in other armor-plated gents with a fence rail and makin' love to every good-looking woman he met—he'd have made a name for himself.

Then he thought of Firefly, enjoyed the sensation of a fat money belt nestling close to his skin, and concluded that even in this unromantic age—he was gettin' along.

He never took anything very seriously, except his pride in the fact that he was a gentleman and the obligations that conviction imposed. As for example—the time he got cleaned in a poker game at San Antonio,

having miscalculated the amount of money he had on him, and was confronted with the embarrassing necessity of giving his IOU when a leathery little man whom he didn't know from Adam, bent over his chair and whispered something in his ear while pressing a roll of bills into his hand. He'd never forget that memorable occasion; and he recalled that he took the stranger's money, and forthwith went to work in earnest and cleaned the boys who cleaned him.

He paid the money back at once, but the debt of honor remained unpaid from that day to this.

The leathery little man subsequently became his very good friend, and his name turned out to be Captain Henry Clay Houston of the Texas Rangers.

Thankful to have escaped assassination, Midnight arrived at his room and sat on the bed pulling off his boots, thinking of his last interview with Cap'n Hank a short while back.

At that time the captain described the raids that were taking place in territory patrolled by his company, raids involving murder and lesser crimes, and declared that he was convinced the mysterious individual behind those depredations was to be found in the vicinity of Tomahawk. Midnight had pricked up his ears when the town was mentioned. He had frequently heard of the outlaw settlement, and felt that he was neglecting the place. From past experience in similar communities, he knew there was always a stiff game to be found where long riders foregathered to squander the proceeds of their crimes; and also the prospect of a good fight, should he win.

The gambler shoved a six-shooter under his pillow, laughing to himself at the memory of how Cap'n Hank went on to say that the damned legislature had cut appropriations for the Frontier Battalion until he had no more than a skeleton force. Consequently there were but two men in his slim command to whom he would trust this delicate job of under-cover work, Badger Coe and Blizzard



Wilson. They were away on another scout, and that was that.

Midnight had thought he caught the drift, and allowed he'd like to mosey over to Tomahawk and take a look around. Without another word, Cap'n Hank poured him a big drink out of his personal bottle.

So now—two weeks later—the gambler carefully stood clear of the window, blew out the light, and went to bed with the impatience of a man who would like to hurry the coming of tomorrow.

**I**MMEDIATELY after breakfast he set out to locate the gossiping philosopher whom he knew he would surely find in any town worthy of the name, whether good or bad.

Having visited his horse at the corral, he returned to the general store next door to the hotel. Upon entering he was greeted by one of those men of mysterious age, anywhere from forty to sixty-five.

Looking up from a catalogue spread out on the counter before him, the proprietor spoke in a rich, resonant voice: "Mawnin' stranger."

Midnight answered the salutation and instantly realized he was being taken apart and reassembled by a pair of gray eyes that were wide and clear, and seemed to look out upon the world with a derisive understanding of what it was all about, accompanied by a sense of humor too obvious to be mistaken for anything else.

"Did you git yo' rest?"

The gambler assured him that he slept well, in the meantime thinking that the man's large face—without mustache or beard—had the appearance of roughly chisled stone, coarse in texture and burnt sienna in color.

"I'm wonderin' how you liked yo' bed."

"One of the best beds I ever dreamed in," lied Midnight with a grin. The straw tick was lumpy and a slat was missing under his knees. "Do you own the hotel?"

"Yep. She's mine."

"You got a right to be proud of her," stated the gambler seriously.

The storekeeper rested his elbows on the counter and leaned across it. Midnight saw that at one time his shoulders were very broad; now they stooped.

"Breakfast hit the spot?"

"Plumb center! Had some beef that was tender as prairie hen."

The old-timer nodded. "It oughta be. She was a fat heifer, trailed in here night time and kept hid in the bresh daytimes. Sun makes 'em tough."

Midnight stroked his long jaw and dryly concurred. "I done noticed that. Makes 'em hard to keep, too."

A faint twinkle showed in the storekeeper's eyes, but his face remained impassive.

"And the coffee?"

"Powerful good! It's got a mind of its own and it's frisky, like a bronc on a crimpy mawnin'."

The old-timer scratched his craggy nose. "Glad to hear you say that. But it's time she was good, solid coffee. Her bottom layer went into the pot—uhh, lemme see—it'll be two weeks come Sunday."

Midnight threw back his head and then laughed. He felt that he could like this old codger and not half try; besides, the cuss probably knew the life's history of two-thirds of the men in Tomahawk.

He put out a hand. "The fellas call me 'Midnight,' which more'n likely you already know."

The old-timer shook hands in silence, then waddled around from behind the counter. "Yes, sah, I knowed it." He glanced down at his right leg. It appeared to be permanently bent at the knee, and his boot heel was built up accordingly. "They call me 'Sidewinder,' which ain't at all surprisin'."

He planted a foot on the edge of a cracker box, and let a speculative eye slide quickly over the gambler from the crown of his

forty-dollar Stetson to the toes of his shiny boots.

Midnight held back a grin and waited to see what was coming.

"Reckon it's too bad 'bout Krummer," cautiously declared Sidewinder. "And likewise it's damned good for you."

The gambler chuckled quietly. "That's what I'd call a diplomatic speech. Much obliged."

"Dip-plo-mat-?" stammered Sidewinder. "Hell! I call it straddlin'-the-fence talk."

Midnight's long eyes held a humorous glint, but his voice was serious. "By dogies! That's a damned good name for diplomacy."

The old-timer shrugged. "Sounds a heap simpler, anyways. But whatever you call it—from tinhawns all the way down to politicians, a whole slew of fellas is right handy with it. Me, I gotta be."

"How come?" inquired Midnight, fetching out tobacco and papers.

Sidewinder tamped niggerhead into a vile old corn-cob. "Recollectin' they ain't no law in Tommyhawk, and that I got my old hide and right smart other property hereabouts, it's plain as the nose on yo' face, sah. Bein' deader'n hell, Red Krummer ain't no ways dangerous no mo'; but you're alive and peart and sorta techy, so you still are. On the other hand, Red might have some cantankerous friends and you might not live long. So there I set, smack in the middle of a sitiashun that calls for some straddlin'-the-fence talk. Onderstand?"

**A**MUSED at Sidewinder's warning, the gambler laughed and said he understood perfectly. "Havin' no law to scratch the orneriness out of her, who bosses Tomahawk?" he wanted to know. "Must be somebody ridin' herd on the boys."

The old-timer shook his iron-gray head in a manner that was both proud and emphatic. "Boss this here town? Mistah Midnight, it can't be did. It's done been tried so damned many times, we jest up and nominated one whole cawner of our Boot Hill to be the

last restin' place of tried-to-be bosses. It's sandy three and easy diggin'."

Midnight stroked his high-bridged nose to hide a grin. "I'm sorta wonderin' whether you've set aside another cawner for gamblers."



Sidewinder puffed rapidly at the corn-cob for a moment, then cuddled it in a large hand and stared calmly at the gambler through the smoke. "No sah, we ain't. Fact of the matter is, we aim to sorta scatter 'em 'round among the no-account dead men—kinda like cuttin' in some good bulls to grade up a scrubby herd."

Midnight laughed heartily. He took off his hat and ran a hand through the wavy black hair at which more than one woman had cast envious eyes. "Sidewinder you shore missed yo' callin'," he chuckled. "You're a bawn diplomat and yo' straddlin'-the-fence talk is jest made for international hoss tradin'."

The old-timer said nothing. His attention had suddenly switched to something across the street.

Looking through the door, Midnight saw a tall young man dismounting at the rack before the Long Chance. Both horse and rider showed the effects of hard travel. The big bay's coat was caked with dust and sweat, and the man beat dust from his clothing. When he swung onto the porch, his movements were quick and impatient.

A number of men came to meet him, and Curly Hamp strode hastily along the sidewalk toward the group. He called the newcomer aside and fell to talking earnestly, frequently sending a glance around them. Once or twice he furtively jerked a thumb toward the store.

The gambler wondered if this was the fellow to whom Firefly had referred. His bearing indicated he was somebody in Tomahawk—or thought he was.

Midnight turned to the old-timer. "That there fella looks very much like he'd been ridin' some."

"More'n likely. When he rides, he rides."  
"Who is he?"

Sidewinder puffed industriously. "That's Kansas."

"Kansas?"

"Yep, that's Kansas all right."

The gambler drawled suggestively, "I don't know many folks 'round here yet."

Sidewinder continued to puff and gaze through the door. "Reckon not. Takes time to git to know folks right well, then a fella cain't never tell about 'em."

Midnight grinned. "Is Kansas hard to get acquainted with?"

"All depends. I done knowed him to jest up and interduce hisself."

The gambler tried a more or less blind shot. "Wouldn't be surprised if he's got his hands full bossin' a place like the Long Chance in a town like Tomahawk."

The old-timer dragged blissfully at his pipe. "She's done throwed and tromped more'n one fella, but Kansas is a-settin' deep in the wood."

Apparently he had discovered a new interest across the street. Midnight followed his gaze.

Firefly stood in the door of the saloon.

Dressed in a simple little frock of light material, he thought she looked rather dainty and unquestionably pretty; but the rigid way in which she held herself told him she had something unpleasant on her mind.

"Yonder's a clever little woman," he declared.

Sidewinder's large, steady eyes met his. "Mistah Midnight, I allow you're a fust-rate jedge of wimmin."

The gambler's nimble fingers adjusted the tie at his collar. "Wouldn't go as far as to say that," he drawled modestly. "But I

did kinda take a shine to Firefly—jest off-hand, you know."

The old-timer's unblinking stare made him uncomfortable, and he didn't know why. There was nothing hostile to it; just the politely inquisitive look of one thoughtfully seeking knowledge.

"Mmmm-huh," mused Sidewinder. "Me—I never did cotton to no wimmin. Allus calc'lated a gal was sorta like a froze rattler; let her stay froze and she's right purty to look at, and plumb harmless; thaw her out, and she's damned pizen. Likewise, it's mighty nigh sartin that the old bull rattler comes a-nosin' 'round soon as ever she starts to wiggle some."

Another warning, thought Midnight. Stay away from Firefly.

Studying every line in the old-timer's seamed and weathered face, he remarked lazily, "I've ranged over some country in my day, and the biggest rattlers I ever saw were on the prairies of Western Kansas."

Sidewinder nodded slowly, like a thoughtful owl. "Yes, sah, I've heard tell that's where the fust rattler was borned."

His attention was again riveted upon the group across the street. He stopped puffing and smoke curled up from the bowl of his pipe.

Midnight turned to look.

KANSAS was facing the store. His lithe body seemed to have lost some of its pliancy. With fists closed and resting on his hips, he held his head stiffly and listened while Curly talked. Evidently the man was mad, and Midnight suspected the cause of it.

He spoke quietly over his shoulder: "Wouldn't be at all surprised if the bull rattler is a-fixin' to come nosin' 'round jest like you said."

Sidewinder puffed twice in rapid succession. "Never knowed it to fail." He eyed the gambler meditatively, and again puffed twice. "The back do' is open."

Laughing silently, Midnight swung himself around to face him. When he spoke,

his voice was light and carefree. "If Old Man Trouble pokes his snoot in, I'd rather kick him out of the front door. It'll be a heap mo' fun."

The old-timer looked at the floor, tugging at the lobe of his ear. "Maybeso. But Trouble's a aggravatin' cuss. Kick him out'n yo' front do', and he's shore to come a-ramps-in' through the back. Throw him out'n that, and he'll bust in a winder every time."

Midnight was positive the storekeeper's droll maxim carried a subtle suggestion, and the thought startled him. But he had to be certain that he wasn't mistaken. The old-timer's placid face resisted his penetrating stare as effectively as though it were a wind-worn sandstone cliff.

So he thoughtfully twisted at the fingers of the black gauntlets in his hand, and observed casually, "Such being the case, I calculate it'd pay a fella in the long-run if he jest up and salivated Old Trouble the fust time he came snoopin' 'round."

At last those large, clear eyes moved swiftly. They flashed from the door to Midnight and back again. "Mmmm-huh. Wouldn't be surprised if Kansas is a mosey-in' in to git him a bottle of machine oil for his guns. A while back he allowed he had plenty ca'tridges but was gittin' low on oil."

The gambler glanced quickly at the street.

Kansas had started across and Firefly was running after him. Her tiny slippers sank into the dust at every step. She caught his arm. He stopped and looked angrily down at her. In a voice too low to be heard at that distance, she spoke rapidly and with obvious anxiety, but there was no evidence of entreaty in her face or manner; she merely tried to persuade him. His hard features softened, but a look of grim determination remained stamped upon them.

For the first time, Midnight had a clear view of the young man's face and it wasn't what he expected to see. It was the smooth, light-complexioned face of a high-strung man whose hot temper rode him with spurs

and quirt; but there was nothing criminal or vicious about it.

While the gambler watched, Kansas took her hands from his arm and briefly held one of them before letting it go. He spoke in clear tones that could be heard across the street. "Lady Bug—most generally I listen to you, but this shore is one time when I can't. I got me some business over yander—a man's business."

He left her, and she watched him go. The sun kindled a glow in the red of her hair, and intensified the whiteness of her skin. A vagrant breeze whipped dust about her skirt and ankles, and tossed a curl across her temple. She paid no heed to either. Her hands clenched at her sides. She took a tentative step, then stopped. The persistent breeze flung the curl over an eye, and she brushed it away with a nervous gesture.

Men came tumbling from saloons and lined the sidewalk in the meantime, but none ventured into the street. Sidewinder knocked the ashes from his pipe and limped behind the counter. Whistling a tune off key, he reached to a shelf and brought down a vial of oil. Balancing it in his hand, he glanced over at the gambler with a face that was too serious; his eyes were smiling.

"Yes, sah, I betcha his Colts is a-needin' oil," he drawled.

Midnight chuckled.

**K**ANSAS came on.

His long arms swung easily at his sides, and his hands brushed the guns at his thighs. Over high cheek bones, his bold eyes gazed steadily at the front of the store. His strong jaw was set, and his firm lips drew tightly together. He looked every inch a fighting man.

Upon reaching the sidewalk near the corner of the building, he was momentarily out of sight. His firm steps rang on the boards, and his spurs jingled defiantly.

"Back do' is still open," said Sidewinder, "Go to hell," said Midnight.

He hummed a bar from a minuet.



Kansas came in.

Stopping just across the threshold, he returned Sidewinder's cordial greeting with a curt nod of his head. He looked at the gambler, who lounged at ease against a goods box on the right. Midnight's white teeth flashed in a smile. He was rather proud of those teeth, and the smile made him friends. But they had no effect upon Kansas. His upper lids came down slowly, like curtains partially drawn.

"Tinhawn, git outa this here town before sundown!" His voice was steady and he bit the words off crisply.

Midnight pulled a long face and consternation was written all over it. He straightened up and ambled a step or so toward the gunfighter, talking in the softest imaginable tone. "You sho'ly must be jokin,' Stranger. I don't even know you, sah."

"Don't make no difference. I ain't foolin' none. Git!"

Midnight shifted his weight to one leg and gently slapped the palm of his left hand with the gauntlets in his right. He quizzically studied the young man's face for a moment, and seemed to find it amusing, then he drawled, "Mistah, why must I leave yo' charmin' city?"

A muscle twitched at the corner of the gunfighter's eye. "'Cause I'm a-tellin' you to git. That's a-plenty."

The gambler's glance travelled carelessly over Kansas as if he were an inanimate object; disinterested and detached, it was the essence of insolence. And he asked a question as though he did it for want of something better to say, with no concern whatever as to the answer.

"Who are you, sah?"

A slow red crept across the young man's cheeks, and bathed his temples. "I'm Kansas! That's all you need to know."

The gambler lifted his eyebrows and shot a droll glance at Sidewinder's impassive face, as much as to say, "So this is Kansas!"

This little by-play served its purpose. Kansas let his attention waver for an instant,

Midnight's right hand flashed out with the gauntlets and their stiff, five-inch cuffs cut him across the eyes; a stinging blow that cracked when it landed. Kansas jerked his left hand up to protect his face, but the reflexes of a trained gunfighter whipped his right to his Colt.

The man was fast. Too late—Midnight sensed that he was about to keep an appointment with lead; an appointment made when he underestimated his antagonist's speed and composure, and overestimated the probable disconcerting effect of the blow. Given time to think, he might have cursed his foolish decision not to use his guns. But he had no time for thought. His downward slash with his left was lightning fast, but it barely caught the gunman's wrist in time; the Colt had already cleared its holster. Kansas' thumb slipped the hammer, a crash rattled cans on surrounding shelves, smoke enveloped Midnight and a bullet plowed into the floor at his feet. The force with which he struck sent the six-shooter spinning.

Kansas' left hand was slower than his right. When it reached his other holster, the gun was gone.

Midnight had it.

THE gambler stepped back quickly. His gauntlets lay on the floor. The Colt hung loosely in the fingers of one hand, and the other held a handkerchief over his mouth



and nose. Acrid smoke boiled up around him, and he coughed lightly into the silk. His mouth was hidden, but his eyes smiled

across at Kansas with a species of boyish malice.

The gunfighter stood like a man suddenly paralyzed. For a brief moment, his arms hung straight down from his shoulders. His face was criss-crossed with currents of varied emotions, and red and white came and went in his cheeks. He looked as if he didn't know how it all happened, and couldn't believe that it had.

Midnight nodded toward the gun on the floor and coughed again. "Pick up yo' Colt, Mistah Kansas. Its breath is powerful bad. Pore teeth, I imagine."

"Nope. Needs oil," calmly stated Side-winder from behind the counter. He watched Kansas stoop for the six-shooter. His face was a mask, but Midnight thought he saw a lurking contempt in his eyes.

There came a light step at the door, followed by the clatter of boots and the rattle of spurs on the porch. Firefly stood at the threshold.

Behind her, the porch was filled with men stretching their necks to see inside. She rested a hand on either jamb as though for support. Her face was colorless, she breathed through parted lips, and her bosom rose and fell rapidly. She glanced incredulously at Kansas and Midnight in turn. The former sullenly looked away, holstering his gun; the latter took off his hat and bowed slightly from the waist.

"Good mawnin', Miss Firefly," said the gambler cheerfully. "Better stay there until this here smoke clears out. In all my bawn days, I never tasted gunsmoke as vile as this."

"What—happened?" she managed to inquire breathlessly.

Without so much as a glance at Side-winder or Kansas, Midnight answered quickly: "We had a little accident—nothin' serious. Kansas was fixin' to show us his Colts and one of 'em went off accidentally, you might say. Then he dropped the dagoned thing, and so would anybody else in his boots."

Firefly looked sharply at the gunfighter. His smooth skin took on a deeper color. A cold smile flickered about her lips, vanishing as quickly as it came.

Midnight balanced the gun in his palm and grinned at Kansas. "Wish you'd take this here weapon off my hands, please sah," he drawled lazily. "Don't feel safe with it. Guns that jest up and go off promiscuous-like are shore to get a fella hurt sooner or later."

Kansas took the gun and jammed it into its holster. The man was almost beside himself with anger. His lips and nostrils were pale, and veins stood out on his temples and neck. He spoke with difficulty. "You caught me nappin'. But, Tinhawn, you better crow while you got a chance!"

Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked stiffly to the door. The girl moved aside and he stalked out as though she wasn't there. Following a moment's indecision and some curious glances into the store, the gang on the porch straggled after him.

Firefly half turned away, but stopped when her attention was somehow attracted to the old-timer. He eyed her with an amused, rather provocative expression and there was a suspicion of mirth in his face—like a seamed and weathered stone trying to laugh. She stood very straight, and her fearless eyes answered his ridicule with an odd look of contempt and cold hostility.

Chuckling to himself, Midnight watched this silent encounter. It was over in an instant, and she glanced quickly at him. In the procession of thoughts mirrored upon her face he read thanks, maybe a warning, and perhaps a trace of some deeper emotion.

She left without speaking.

The storekeeper hobbled around the counter.

A large, gray dog—wolfish and shaggy—boldly came in, padded over to him, wagging its tail, and sniffed at his feet. His right boot lashed out. The dog slithered through

the door snarling and looking savagely backwards.

Sidewinder rested his hands on his hips, cocked his head to one side, and stared thoughtfully into the street.

"Yes, sah, as I was sayin'—yander goes Kansas."

### CHAPTER III

"YOU'LL BE A DEAD MAN IF HE CATCHES YOU HERE!"

THIS mystery was guarded by something with teeth and claws and a murderous temper, reflected Midnight on his way from the store to the barber shop; something with brains. Having caught what he suspected was a glimpse of it, he was surprised and elated and somewhat perturbed—if the truth were known. But of course, no vestige of this uneasiness was exposed to the public gaze.

Sunlight danced in the sheen of his immaculate black clothing, accentuated the becoming pallor of his skin, and made him look very tall and lithe and altogether carefree as he swung along leisurely. He had an eye for everything that moved within his range of vision, and a nod and grin for anyone who seemed to harbor friendly inclinations.

A dance-hall on his left was waking up. A couple of frowsy-headed women to whom the light of day was most unkind, leaned out of an upper window and flung down the age-old salutation to a good looking stranger known to have money. He lifted his hat, smiled a smile he reserved for the opposite sex regardless of station, and went on his way.

One of the women called after him in a husky voice, "Mister Gamblin' Man, you better recollect that you'll be a long time dead!"

He looked up with a dry grin. "Yes'm. But this bright maw'nin' I feel like I'll be a long time livin'."

The other one whispered something to her

companion, but all he caught was "sun-down." They both laughed coarsely.

He went the long way around and took his time about it, occasionally stopping to pass a word with someone on the sidewalk, or to stand in the door of a saloon and chat with the bartender.

Midnight was surprised at the more or less cordial treatment he received from everyone, and it set him to thinking. He wondered whether Red Krummer had been disliked, and whether Kansas was really as popular as appearances indicated.

Fortified by a profound knowledge of this class of people, he employed all his cleverness in conversation with those who appeared glad to talk, and succeeded in learning exactly nothing with regard to why he was being everywhere greeted without visible evidence of hostility; and of still greater importance, he could elicit no hint as to who was Tomahawk's leading citizen.

He knew these folks were not cowards. Ordinarily they'd freely speak their minds. But they were shrewd customers, a shrewdness developed by conflict with organized society and its laws; and he sensed that their remarks were limited to harmless generalities by fear or respect for some dominant power.

The town wasn't running true to form: an uncomfortable situation, and Midnight didn't like it. Outwardly he remained the same debonnaire, devil-may-care dandy; but inwardly he grew more serious and alert with each passing moment.

When Lum Hawkey—the big, hearty, back-slapping owner of the Tomahawk Bar—invited him in to have a drink he thought he saw the light on one angle of the situation at least. He spotted Lum as a business getter; so he wasn't surprised to see men drift in for their morning's drink, and linger on to make it two or more. His progress along the street had been watched, and his visit to the Tomahawk constituted an attraction. He saw the drinkers cluster around, noting his every move and hanging on his

words, and a thought struck him with grim amusement: he was a fat beef on exhibition while the barbecue pit was being dug, and a bed of coals prepared!

Naturally the guests were kindly disposed toward the beef.

Blacksnake Jones the barber, was one of those tough, dried-up men who had been broken and knit together many times; but never in exactly his original shape, with the result that he was permanently knotted and twisted. However, his love of conversation was unimpaired.

While stropping a Wade & Butcher razor of a weight and thickness necessary to mow the stubble served up to it by men who lived in dust and shaved as infrequently as possible, the barber informed Midnight that he hadn't always been a barber.

"Fact of the matter is," he went on to say, "I started out to be a freighter 'cause my pappy was one; and then I went to hell complete and worked stock danged nigh all over Texas until 'bout six year ago, when a ornery leetle apron-faced buckskin put his foot in a dog-hole one night while we was ridin' out a stampede. 'Bout a thousand longhawns tromped me, and what I mean—they steers set me afoot permanent. But I always was powerful handy at shinglin' a mule, so I jest naturally took to barberin' humans. Ain't a heap of difference. Mules smells better'n most of 'em, and don't kick as vicious when you rip off a patch of hide."

Midnight spluttered through the lather, "That bein' the case, wouldn't you rather shave 'em dead than alive?"

Blacksnake delayed his reply. Exploring his head he pulled out a white hair as stiff as a hog bristle, squinted at it against the light, clumsily tried the razor, and sighed with satisfaction. "Uh-huh. Splits 'em every time, jest like she was a wedge and they was fence rails."

He went to work as though his hand was the maul, and the gambler's tender skin quivered. "Why, Mistah Midnight, I ain't overly partic'lar. I shave 'em all alike, be-

fo' and after killin'. Course, the live ones is a mite mo' dangerous; but I seen the time when I made corpses squirm and go for they shootin' irons."

Midnight gritted his teeth and silently swore that this was well within the realm of possibility.

He asked a more or less leading question: "I'll betcha it's a risky proposition shavin' some of the fellas in this here town, isn't it?"

Blacksnake wiped the razor on an Indian Herb Pain Killer circular. "Shore is! And Red Krummer was one of 'em. Mebbe you



recollect havin' some words with Red last night. This mawnin' is the fust time I ever shaved that there ranny without keepin' me a sawed-off double-bar'l right handy."

"How come you shaved him this mawnin'?"

"Huh! Hard as times is, it wa'n't none of my doin's. Some of the fellas got sorta sentimental down to the Tomahawk last night, and they allowed Red is so damned ugly they owed it to the town to do what little they could towards makin' a decent lookin' corpse out'n him."

Midnight ventured another question: "Was he the wuss one you had to shave?"

"Not by a damned sight," vehemently declared the barber. "They's a heap wuss men than Red Krummer in Tommyhawk a-pack-in' whiskers that ain't half as tough as his'n."

And that was as far as he would go.

**T**HEREAFTER all of the gambler's adroit inquiries and suggestions were fruitless. The barber deftly sidestepped when it came to naming names, or even intimat-



ing that there might be a recognized leader in Tomahawk; and Midnight secretly acknowledged a growing admiration for this mysterious person. So effectually to gag a man like the barber was an accomplishment of note.

But Blacksnake Jones wasn't backward about passing out a warning in his quaint fashion. While fishing in his pocket for change, he allowed, "A-shinglin' mules and a-barberin' humans, a fella shore comes across some peculiar critters, and they ain't all of 'em mules. I seen jaspers that was so finicky 'bout they looks, they'd git shaved and slicked up when they knowed damned well they was due to git plugged befo' dark. Jest a waste of good money, I'd call it. A fella with a fo'ty-five through his belly ain't no deader if he happens to need a shave than he is if he ain't got a whisker to his name."

Laughing into a piece of piebald glass that once had been a mirror, Midnight agreed.

Blacksnake straddled a chair, and watched his customer adjust collar and tie and carefully set his Stetson at the proper angle.

"Jest befo' you come in," he allowed presently, "I was takin' a squint at my almy-nac. This is one of the longest days in the whole daggoned year. Sun don't set ontill nigh onto bedtime for honest folks."

Midnight looked squarely into Blacksnake's mournful eyes, and a reckless grin lifted the corners of his lips. "Is that a fact?" he drawled. "Most folks like these long days, but I don't. Reckon I got some owl blood in me."

Blacksnake squirted tobacco juice into a corner devoted to that purpose. "Mmmm. Cain't tell. Never did shingle no owls."

He let an appraising eye drift over the gambler's long jaw. "Yo' whiskers grows powerful fast in this here Tommyhawk climate. Wouldn't be surprised if you'll be needin' another shave, come mawnin'."

Leaving the barber with the dry assurance that he'd get another shave in the morning—sitting up—Midnight continued his wanderings about town. Wherever he went he

met with courtesy, accompanied by knowing looks and veiled references to sundown. Everyone talked, and no one said anything worth while. Out of all this conversation, he gathered no crumb of valuable information. He had the impression that the town was laughing behind his back. It was a challenge to his wits, and an insult to his pride.

To make matters worse—from time to time someone told an anecdote within his hearing but ostensibly for other ears, having to do with a gunfight in which Kansas killed his man without half trying. And the hell of it was, most of these yarns bore the stamp of truth. He didn't fear Kansas, but he was too smart to take the man lightly; and he hated to wait.

Sundown would be mighty slow in coming.

This state of affairs continued until his usually even temper began to feel the strain. His sharp black eyes became sharper and more alert, and the sardonic downward twist of his mouth more pronounced.

The three old heads with whom he was playing pool in the Comanche at the time, recognized these dangerous symptoms and took refuge in silence. Figuratively they trod cautiously when near him, but curiosity as to what he would do next attracted them to him; and when he put up his cue, remarking that he believed he'd drift over to the Long Chance to see if there was a game going on, they made ready to follow.

A sunburned lad, blessed with freckles by the quart and shy a tooth, abandoned his post outside an open window and dashed off to spread the news. The gambler heard his shrill voice in the street, "Hey Tex and Calico! Midnight's a-goin' lickety-split to the Long Chance!"

THERE was no game in progress, and Kansas was not in evidence; but Firefly sat alone at a faro layout in a far corner. Two men were idly playing pitch at a table near the door. In a chair tilted against the

wall, another slept with chin on his breast and hat riding the bridge of his nose.

Midnight tipped his Stetson to the girl, and tarried at the bar no longer than necessary to buy drinks for his three companions. He took nothing and politely asked them to excuse him.

Their liquor remained untasted, while their eyes followed the gambler. Presently they fell to muttering among themselves, and casting expectant glances at the door to a room in the rear. One briefly questioned a bartender. He nodded an affirmative, and the three sat down at a table with the satisfied air of men making themselves comfortable to view a performance they expected to enjoy.

While crossing the floor toward her, Midnight saw Firefly making an attempt to disguise consternation with a smile of welcome. He admired the effect of the effort. It brought a becoming warmth to features that otherwise were somewhat cold and aloof.

Sweeping off his hat, he bowed and sat down facing her.

She jerked forward in her chair and spoke in a low, tight voice: "You're crazy to come in here, and you'll be a plain damned fool if you stay."

He looked intently at her for a moment, smiling faintly. Genuine fear deepened the color of her eyes. Wide and no longer steady, they darted continually from his face to some point over his shoulder. Whether she feared for herself, or him, or someone else, he wouldn't venture a guess.

"You're mistaken, Firefly," he objected softly. "By comin' here I'm doin' what any man would like to do, and if you let me stay a while I'll be mighty lucky."

She clenched her hands on the table before her. "Lucky—hell! You'll be a dead man if he catches you here."

"Kansas?"

The girl nodded.

Midnight thoughtfully fingered the black sideburn that lay in silky waves before his ear. "Jealous?"

Again she nodded.

His brilliant eyes boldly caught hers and held them. "I don't blame Kansas. He's got reason to be jealous."

He knew she was a woman who wouldn't blush readily, but nevertheless—color came and went in her cheeks. Her glance fled from his to a point beyond him, and timidly returned again. She sat back in her chair, as if drawing away from him were a defensive measure that brought a feeling of greater confidence.

"Curly Hamp lied to him." Her tone was low and uncertain. "That's what made him jealous."

The gambler's thin, proud face was softened by a winning smile, and his mellow voice carried a gently insistent note: "Whatever Curly said, regardless—Kansas better be jealous; hadn't he, Firefly?"

She looked away. He imagined that for one brief moment her thoughts drifted off through a side window, out across the sun-browned prairie, and over a distant range of hills; beyond it, those luxuries dear to women like Firefly. He caught a glimpse of the girl who dreamed and perhaps wept behind the mask of a faro dealer in an outlaw hangout, where few comforts of life and none of its luxuries were available.

And it didn't make his job any the easier.

Her fingers found and nervously toyed with a stack of chips. He saw a tiny brown ruffle the smooth surface of her forehead, and he heard her sigh. And he felt a twinge of sympathy when she jerked back to the present, and stared fearfully past him.

Beyond that door, someone whistled a mournful, cow-country tune. Its wailing notes came through the thin boards, loud and clear and unflinching.

Her expert fingers clumsily spilled the chips.

**F**IREFLY'S glance was a plea. "Won't you leave here before sundown?" she breathed, scarcely above a whisper. "Please go!"

He studied her troubled face for a moment in silence. Chivalry his heritage, and the instincts of sportsmanship a natural gift, he was moved to sacrifice his pride to ease her fears. What the hell! He'd given Tomahawk a whirl and had his fun. Get out and let the Rangers wrestle with their own problems. Then he thought of Cap'n Hank—a square man—and that roll of bills, and—

Midnight grinned wryly to hide his real feelings. "So you want me to get out 'cause Kansas is jealous."

Firefly earnestly shook her head. "No! Because he told you to go and he'll kill you if you don't."

She said the wrong thing. He thought she lied. Now, by God—he'd make her talk! His lids drooped ever so little and his words fell sharply, edged with sarcasm: "Is he the curly wolf of Tomahawk, or does he jest put in his time a-hazin' yo' admirers over the Divide?"

A quick answer rose to her lips, and hung there.

He watched anger and discretion fight for control of the girl, and he saw discretion win. He cursed silently.

In one of those lightning maneuvers of which clever women are capable, he saw her change her strategy and marshal her feminine resources. She shrugged with resignation, her shoulders sagged disconsolately, and the flame in her eyes dwindled to a soft warmth. He was prepared for the melting smile she gave him.

"I should've had sense enough to know you wouldn't run."

He brushed a handkerchief across his forehead and temples, and drawled, "It's too daggoned hot to run."

Again came that mournful whistle, accompanied by the rattle of tin against tin and the splash of water. Midnight visualized a dipper, a bucket, and a pan. Maybe Kansas was shaving. The barber's words ran through his mind, and a cold smile flickered about his lips.

Several men had sifted into the saloon.

Their cautious conversation died instantly. In attitudes of strained attention, they listened as though to catch and interpret the fainter sounds beneath the doleful music. More than one eye slyly crept to the gambler and the girl, and knowing glances were exchanged.

He saw the merest flash of panic sweep over her, followed by an appealing smile that he found hard to resist. A finished actress, reflected Midnight; and a brave woman to boot.

He knew that Firefly was desperately maneuvering against time, but she didn't show it now. And he admired the calm manner in which she let her eyes drift leisurely and comfortably over his face.

"I'm wondering if you always shoot to kill," mused the girl. "Do you?"

"Yes'm, providin' the other fella is gunnin' for me."

"You're so fast, why don't you cripple him instead?"

Midnight shook his head. "'Cause gunplay is a dead serious game, Firefly, and the fella who tries to win with fancy shootin' is due to lose—jest once; he can't lose twice." His face cracked in a fleeting grin, and he eyed her cunningly. "For example, settin' out to wing a jasper like Kansas would be mighty nigh fatal."

Firefly glanced furtively about the room. Suddenly she brought her face close to his and whispered fiercely, "You'd better chance it!"

His long features went perfectly wooden.

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't you understand? If you kill Kansas, this town will rip you to pieces!"

He seemed mildly amused.

She caught his hand in both of hers. Her face filled with color, and her voice lost its normal assurance. "Midnight, please believe me! I—it's you I'm— Oh, hell!"

A DOOR opened and closed. Firm steps came from the rear—stopped—and came on more slowly, but more firmly. Mid-

night didn't need to turn. The girl's face was a mirror.



For a brief space his thoughts had wings. Wait until sundown, and make a show of himself for Tomahawk? Hell no! He'd fight Kansas now.

Damned if she didn't look like a little tot, begging for something. Apparently she ignored the man coming up behind him. Her great blue eyes clung to his, trying to read his thoughts, sending him an unspoken message—begging.

Kansas was fast, maybe the fastest man he ever fought. But Firefly was a girl, a damned pretty girl—smart, and nery as they made 'em. She tried to trick him, but he didn't blame her for it. Had to fight that way, and she put up a hell of a scrap all by herself.

Hell! Nobody but a damned fool would try it, but he'd wing Kansas for her!

"Tinhawn!"

The voice was low, but it carried a sting.

Midnight squared his shoulders. Her eyes never left him. His pale, composed features were suddenly animated by a smile that offered reassurance and possessed other charms all its own.

He arose languidly. Turning to face Kansas—he moved aside a step, placing a window at his back. He'd recklessly gamble with life to please a girl, but he'd take every legitimate advantage he could get.

The light threw the gunfighter's youthful countenance into bold relief. His lips and nostrils were pale, but blotches of red showed in his cheeks. He breathed heavily.

"You git!"

This harsh command brought no immediate response. By way of reply, Midnight stared at him in a calm and detached manner; a contemptuous look fit to irritate a man of stone.

Firefly sat rigidly in her chair. Her fingers silently riffled the chips—monotonously, over-and-over, like living fingers attached to an arm that was dead. Her mouth clamped tightly. Her eyes followed every move made by the gambler's hands as though fascinated by them, but fearful of what they might do next.

Kansas glanced at her. Apparently she didn't see him. Muscles knotted along his jaw, and an artery jumped beneath the soft skin of his temple. He jerked his eyes away from the girl, and snarled at Midnight, "Git out, or I'll buffalo you and throw you out!"

The words came rasping from a tight throat. The gambler sensed that Kansas was now afraid; but it was that brand of fear which drives a courageous man headlong against odds, so he was dangerous as hell.

Midnight hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and drawled lazily, "Jest you keep cool, Mistah, and let's talk this here thing over."

He didn't want to talk. He knew the coming encounter was unavoidable, but each moment's delay operated to his advantage. The madder Kansas got, the slower he'd be.

During a brief instant the gunman fought to steady himself. But Midnight's supercilious grin, his haughty bearing, and the tender glance he directed at Firefly—all deliberately tormenting—were more than Kansas could stand.

He went for his gun.

A FINELY trained fighter, no physical movement forecast his draw; but Midnight caught those subtle warning signals that flash beneath the surface of a man, and knew it was coming.

He didn't follow his usual practice. In this fight there could be no hesitation to be sure



that he correctly divined the other fellow's intentions. Considering the task he had set for himself, he didn't dare. His hand went into action ahead of his antagonist's. His gun suddenly appeared at a point somewhat higher than his belt, and there it froze. He drew with incredible speed, and fired with suicidal deliberation. In a chivalrous attempt to place his bullet, he measured his own margin of safety in terms of split seconds—with disaster a known penalty for the slightest error in calculation.

Kansas' six-shooter snapped out. Two explosions jarred the room. He spun half around and lurched backward. His bullet shattered a lamp on the wall. In dazed fashion he fought for control of his right-hand gun, and his left fumbled uncertainly for his second Colt.

Like a lean, black panther charging through the swirling smoke — Midnight sprang at him. His six-shooter whirled in a vicious blow, and its barrel lashed Kansas across the temple.

He wilted to the floor.

Firefly crouched above him the instant he fell. No sound escaped her.

Smoke serpents rolled and twisted over her fiery hair, and it seemed to blaze in their midst. They writhed across her colorless face, and coiled sinuously around her throat.

She stared at the wound on his temple. Her fingers timidly made a move to close the gash.

"Damn you! You didn't have to hit him!"

She spat the words, and fell to ripping at Kansas' shirt.

Midnight's jaw hardened and his face got suddenly thinner. He retorted bitterly, "Reckon not. Been a heap easier to kill him."

Paying no further attention to Firefly, he holstered his gun and folded his arms. He knew what she would find. He had placed his bullet with the care of a man shooting at a mark. The lead should have glanced along Kansas' ribs beneath his right arm; a

painful wound that might knock a man down, but cause no permanent injury.

Midnight's eyes darted from man to man about the room, and searched out faces at the door and windows. His look was a challenge that went unheeded. At the moment he was in a fighting mood, but no one seemed disposed to commence where Kansas left off. If he was their chief, they felt no urge to avenge him; and if he were not, the unknown leader chose to remain in hiding. It turned out as Midnight suspected it would; they didn't know whether Kansas was dead, and they didn't give a damn if he was.

So Firefly lied.

He growled an oath under his breath, and walked straight for the door.

Sidewinder came in, followed by Blacksnake Jones.

Midnight wasn't in a cordial frame of mind, but he paused and nodded curtly.

The storekeeper shifted the weight from his crooked leg, and looked up with a harmless twinkle in his eye. "Heard somethin' that sounded a mite like shootin'."

"Me too," mournfully added Blacksnake; "and I smell somethin' that smells sorta like gunsmoke."

The gambler shot a quick glance at the bunch of men surrounding Firefly and Kansas. "War talk and shootin' and gunsmoke go together," he declared with a touch of rancor. "I'm sleepin' in Tomahawk tonight, and I'm gettin' a shave in the maw'nin'—a-settin' straight up."

"Allowed you would," stated Sidewinder.

"Me too," lamented Blacksnake.

AT SIGHT of these old timers, Midnight was struck by a sudden inspiration. They'd talk, and the town would listen to them. So he'd give them something worthwhile to talk about; and if it didn't smoke out the elusive person who ruled Tomahawk, he'd be greatly surprised. It occurred to him that in effect, he would be placing a bounty on his own scalp—just an-

other virtue attached to the idea, since it promised excitement.

"I'm takin' a shine to Tomahawk and calc'late I'll stay here a while," he told them convincingly. Each gave him a sharp glance which he pretended not to notice. "I may go as far as to buy out one of these here places and stock her up and fix her up so a fella with a thirst for good liquor can get it, and drink it in solid comfort."

"Purty good idee," mused Sidewinder.

"Durned good!" ejaculated Blacksnake. "Me—I like my liquor good, and my comfort solid."

"I figger there's money in this here town," continued the gambler; "so I'll run a square game with the stars for a limit, where honest poker is the only safe poker and good poker is the only brand of poker that'll win."

Both old-timers agreed there was a crying necessity for such a game in Tomahawk.

As he was at the point of continuing, Midnight's attention was attracted to the group around Kansas. At Firefly's direction, four men picked him up. She abused one for being careless, and ordered another to take his place. They carried the wounded man to the back room, and she slammed the door in the faces of the curious who tried to follow.

"So yander goes Kansas," muttered Sidewinder.

"Shore is," Blacksnake agreed. "Never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd shave that there ranny stretched out complete."

The gambler got no inkling of their real feelings with respect to Kansas' misfortune. The two old twisters were masters of their emotions, and he figured they were artful deceivers. He wondered how they'd react to the surprise he was about to spring.

"Yes—there he goes, and it ain't no credit to Tomahawk," he said sternly. "It's a hell of a situation when a peaceful visitor with money to spend, has to shoot up the damned town in order to stay here and spend it."

Both solemnly agreed he was right.

Midnight continued in a voice that was soft and even, but left no room for doubt as to his belligerent intentions: "Yes, sah, gents—what Tomahawk needs is a range boss, and I'm fixin' to elect myself to the job."

Sidewinder tugged at his lip, and watched a spider weave its web high in a nearby corner. "Mmmm-huh. They ain't but one way to celebrate elections and buryin's. Let's liker."

Blacksnake ran an expert eye over the gambler's jaw with keen anticipation. "You're durned tootin'! And I shave 'em all alike, candydates and corpses."

#### CHAPTER IV

"TAKE KEER! HELL'S A-FIXIN' TO BILE OVER."

MIDNIGHT expected trouble, and he wasn't disappointed.

Two hours after he left Sidewinder and Blacksnake, it became apparent that Tomahawk understood she had a new boss.

Things began to happen.

Neither by nature nor acquired habit was he a bully, and he secretly poked fun at himself while striding into the Comanche with that touch of swagger demanded by the role he had elected to play. The three old heads dogged his trail. It amused him to see them expand in the reflected glamor of the stranger who publicly admitted he was good enough to run the town. They bore themselves like men who traded in privilege and discouraged familiarity, or haughty bodyguards with whom it would be dangerous to tamper. But the gambler knew, and suspected that everybody else knew they were not there to protect him; merely to make sure they missed no part of the fun.

The first blow struck by the unknown leader in defense of his position, came from an unexpected quarter; and it was so cleverly disguised as almost to catch Midnight off guard.

He and his three companions were again

playing pool. The gambler deftly curled the money-ball into a side pocket, and ducked down behind a corner of the table in the nick of time.

At the bar a short distance away, loud and profane words arose suddenly and as quickly culminated in a burst of gunfire. Two men were ostensibly shooting it out, one of them standing so as to place Midnight directly in the line of fire. A bullet ripped a gash in the green cloth and ricocheted through the empty space he had vacated so precipitately. Other shots followed swiftly. Bullets chewed at the table, the floor, and a chair close by. A splinter grazed his cheek.

The fight ended quickly. Each combatant was on his feet, apparently without a scratch.

Midnight came up from behind the table with a hostile grin on his face, and a gun in either hand. Blood trickled down his jaw, looking very hot and dark against the cold pallor of his skin.

He wasted no words.

His right-hand Colt roared. Stub Peterson's stocky body lurched sidewise and he dropped his gun. Stub lost a boot heel, and the shock probably numbed his leg.



An instant later, Midnight's other six-shooter barked an echo. Slim Calkins staggered and slapped a hand to his head. A bullet had snatched his hat away and grazed his scalp.

Both men peered fearfully through the smoke at the gambler.

Midnight's voice lost its drawl, and its cutting tone carried a demand for instant obedience. "Drop yo' belts, quick!"

Their belts clattered to the floor.

The bartender stood with chin sagging

and hands palm-down on the bar. From where they were flattened against the wall, the three old heads viewed the proceedings with a certain amount of approval. Slim's bullets came perilously close to them.

In Stub's small, furtive eyes and Slim's bony, thin-lipped face Midnight discovered both treachery and cowardice. He marked them as the sort who would shoot or knife a man in the back for a hundred dollars or less, or maybe just to see him kick. Undoubtedly they had been hired to get him, and were too cowardly to go about it openly. He believed that if he had them alone and forced a choice between talking and fighting, they'd talk; provided their fear of the unknown leader wasn't greater than their fear of him.

He watched them twist and squirm and avoid his searching stare, and he racked his brain for a plan. Suddenly there came an idea that made him scowl to hide his mirth.

"D'you know these here coyotes?" he inquired over a shoulder.

"Yep, we know 'em," responded one of the old heads. The others nodded emphatically.

"Are they sorta friendly with each other?"

"Cain't say for shore whether they are now," was the cautious answer. "But I done heard tell that for years they been sleepin' in the same blankets. Some folks call 'em Dammit and Pitiful."

"Hub! Thought so," grunted Midnight.

His plan required an audience—the larger the better; so he killed time while pretending to think, occasionally shooting a sarcastic dig at the would-be assassins in an effort to make them talk.

A small crowd gathered quickly, and more came in from every direction. Sidewinder and Blacksnake appeared at the door, and men stepped aside to let them in. Firefly came and a place was quickly made for her on the inner circle of spectators.

Midnight tipped his hat to the girl. To his surprise, she smiled; but her face wore a strangely intent look. He decided she was

thinking fast and furiously about something.

Holstering his guns, he ambled out onto the floor and glanced about with cool confidence. Somewhere in that gang, probably looking him in the eye and secretly laughing at him, was the man he wanted to find. Very well—he'd give that fellow food for thought, and perhaps force the two outlaws to do or say something that would provide a clue to the identity of their chief.

**M**IDNIGHT spoke like one in authority. "This here promiscuous lead-throwin' has got to stop."

Several chuckles answered him.

He grinned maliciously. "Maybe some of you jaspers will die a-laughin' when I show you how I aim to stop it."

Keeping an eye on Slim and Stub, and speaking loud enough for everyone to hear, he addressed the three old heads: "Wonder if you fellas will sorta pass the word along that I'm fixin' to pull off a shootin' match with two of the most dangerous gunmen that ever shed blood west of the River."

Someone snorted. Stub and Slim got very red.

The gambler's lean face set in stern lines, and he went on mercilessly: "That there kettle-bellied runt and this here crooked lodge pole are both a-honin' to lift my scalp, so you can tell folks that they're goin' to swap lead with me simultaneous and forth-with."

This announcement brought a burst of laughter from the crowd, and assorted yells of approval. Its cruelty at once appealed to their appetite for bloodshed, and tickled their sense of humor. Evidently Slim and Stub were not popular, and the gang figured that two mediocre gunmen of their caliber would stand no show against a man like Midnight.

As for loyalty to the mysterious boss of the town, the gambler knew that its citizens would follow any man strong enough to lead them and probably refuse to betray him; but they'd promptly transfer their allegiance when a stronger man came along.

He read admiration—or at least approval—on a number of faces and imagined the unknown leader must feel his saddle slipping: so perhaps he'd show his hand by trying to do something about it.

Chuckling and elbowing their way to the door, the three old heads hastened out to proclaim the good news.

Midnight called after them, "Better say that the slaughter will take place in the middle of the street where there's plenty dust to soak up the blood."

The crowd laughed. This was its idea of a good time.

Stub and Slim were scared—no two ways about it. But, as far as Midnight could tell, neither by look nor word did they attempt to communicate with anyone in the Comanche. He had hoped they would, and cursed his luck because they didn't.

Better give them a chance to talk to him alone, he decided. "If you shrinkin' violets are afraid to take yo' medicine in public," he drawled quietly, "jest both of you buckle on yo' belts and we'll go into the back room all by ourselves. That way you can set out for hell in private."

Again he was disappointed.

Neither man answered or made a move to accept the proposal. As though seeking advice, they looked helplessly into the unsympathetic faces surrounding them; but apparently at no one in particular.

A chorus of protesting voices arose from the gang. They wanted to see a fight, preferably two fights if it could be so arranged. Ridicule was heaped upon the two disarmed men. They were urged to go after the gambler there and then, or to take him outside where they could play the game that coyotes played—one keep him busy while the other slipped around behind and hamstringed him.

This ridicule had no apparent effect. The two outlaws wore the apologetic air of men who were familiar with insults and would not openly resent them, although they might retaliate with underhanded deviltry.

Midnight glanced at Sidewinder and



grinned wryly. The old-timer said nothing. His seamed face was expressionless; but one eyelid drooped slowly and he shook his head almost imperceptibly, gestures with all the earmarks of a caution or an outright warning.

Firefly viewed the proceedings with set features. The gambler thought her delicately tinted face the coldest one there. Each time she looked at him, he intercepted that appraising expression; and he facetiously told himself that she was measuring him for a tough job, or a rough coffin.

At length Stub found his voice. "Who in hell are you to git so 'uppity?" he snarled with a show of bravado. "Secin' you think you're so damned good, me and Slim will make wolf bait out'n you. But we'll do it in front of everybody so's to keep you from pullin' any dirty work."

Slim growled a confirming threat.

The crowd applauded with yells and laughter.

Midnight's heart beat faster, and his nerves tingled. He felt like a man on a powder barrel, with a lighted match in either hand. Here was a challenge to those wits by which he lived and pursued his dangerous profession. Within the last minute or so, Stub had received orders from some source—proof that the real boss of Tomahawk was in the room!

**S**LIM and Stub buckled on their belts and reloaded their guns, and the gambler guarded against treachery by standing behind them. He also tried to watch everyone else so as to catch any further signals the two men might receive; but as far as he could determine, nothing of the sort transpired.

Jostling and laughing and yelling humorous advice, the crowd cleared a path for the duelists. Midnight heard one man growl to another, "What right has the tinhawni to boss things like he's a-settin' out to do?" And his companion drawled in reply, "Far as I'm concerned, all the rights

that there jasper needs is tied to his legs."

Over in a corner, Sidewinder chatted with a lanky fellow who looked like a cowhand in town to see the sights and spend his wages. His bull-hide chaps were old and scratched by hard riding through brush, and his Stetson had carried much water and fanned many campfires.

Firefly stood at the far end of the bar in cautious conversation with a young man whose weapons, flashy clothing, and alert, intense expression were the marks of a professional gunman.

Blacksnake hobbled close to Slim and Stub. Midnight couldn't get all he said, but did overhear him consoling them in a sad voice, "Fellas, jest make shore to recollect that I shave 'em all alike—befo' and after killin'."

The Comanche emptied quickly. Even the bartender deserted his post and joined the noisy procession. Evidently the news had swept through town like a prairie fire, driving men and women onto the sidewalks. They lined the street on either side, and competed for points of vantage with the enthusiasm of youngsters awaiting a parade.

Stub and Slim stalked boldly out to the middle of the street, and Midnight followed. He didn't like the situation. Looking sharply around him, he swore that somewhere something had gone wrong. A thing he conceived as a farce now promised to become a serious, if not fatal event. He had neither hoped nor expected these two cowards would fight. Long before this, they should have done something to betray their chiet.

Aware of the fact that his lean, black figure offered an excellent mark in the glare of the sun against the yellow dust of the street, the gambler felt little tremors coursing through the muscles of his thighs and calves. Narrowing in the bright light, his eyes suspiciously probed upper windows and examined the roofs of buildings within their

range; and he grimly reflected that he had no business in that exposed position.

But, having dealt himself cards, he'd back 'em for all they were worth.

Still another fact strengthened his conviction that a trap was being set for him, and he was walking into it. Slim and Stub were stalling for time, stalling while some unknown schemer spread the jaws of the trap; someone who thought rapidly, and cleverly seized upon unforeseen opportunities.

They insisted upon stepping off a distance of fifty yards, and did it leisurely. Then, having taken their position, they demanded a change because the sun was in their eyes.

The spectators laughed and yelled encouragement to the quibblers in an effort to prolong the entertainment.

Midnight was amused. But it was that brand of amusement which may prompt a recklessly courageous man to laugh upon discovering the ludicrous in a dangerous predicament.

His thin features twisted into a crooked grin, and there was an undertone of savagery beneath his drawl when he told them, "Suit yo'selves. I aim to salivate you rats, and I don't give a damn whether we fight with knives a-standin' on a saddle blanket, or with rifles a mile apart. But make haste, 'cause my guns are gettin' fidgety."

It was arranged that the combatants should stand with arms folded until Sidewinder gave the signal. He borrowed a six-shooter and limped to a point midway between them, but well to one side.

In the meantime, Midnight devoted more attention to his surroundings than to his antagonists. He swept the line of faces on either side with eyes trained at the card table to detect movements and interpret gestures invisible to the average man.

Sidewinder deliberately raised the gun until it pointed at the sky—

Midnight searched out Firefly. She stood behind the hitchrack. Her body pressed against the pole, and her small hands gripped it as if to hold her there. Lips clamped

tightly, she stared with strained intensity at something diagonally across the street.

The gambler glanced quickly in that direction. Instantly and without conscious effort, he whirled and spun aside.

Two guns barked viciously—Sidewinder's, and another from an open window in the upper story of Ryan's saloon!

THE speed with which Midnight whirled away upon catching a glimpse of a gun at the window, was all that saved him. A slug tore at the cartridge belt over his right hip with force enough to stagger him. While going down to one knee in a flurry of dust, he whipped out a Colt and sent two bullets ripping into the blossom of smoke at the window.

A moment later, the noise of gunfire rolled out of the building—men were fighting in there! In grim silence, the crowd



dashed at the front door and an outside stairway leading upward against the west wall.

But Midnight was interested in the back of the place. Running swiftly, he reached a point which gave a partial view of the rear.

A man jumped from a back window and darted away to the left, out of sight. Midnight cursed.

That man was Firefly's sporty gunman!

The gambler faced about in time to see the girl run onto the porch of the Long Chance. He grimly told himself that Firefly had some explaining to do, and made a move to follow her—but changed his mind. She could wait.

Growling an oath under his breath, Midnight hurried up the stairway on the heels of the crowd into a large room that extended the length of the building. Through a tangle of legs and boots he caught a glimpse of a man on the floor and others kneeling beside him. Giving no thought to the danger of a knife, he elbowed his way in.

A startling fact lay in wait for him, and he clamped his jaws and composed his face to hide his astonishment. The man on the floor was Sidewinder's lanky cowhand—dead.

Squatting at either side of it, Blacksnake and Sidewinder were examining the body as callously as though it were the remains of a horse. Everybody else crowded around and kept silent while listening to what they had to say.

"I allow this here fella has been in a shootin' scrape," observed the barber.

"Pears so," agreed the storekeeper.

"Wonder if that's what made all the racket up here."

"Might've been."

Blacksnake lifted a gun from the dead fingers and twirled the cylinder. "Two empty ca'tridges."

Sidewinder's large head nodded ponderously. "Shore 'nuff. And two holes in his hide."

"Is that a fact?" exclaimed the barber. "He's such a hongry lookin' cuss, mebbe he shot hisself to keep from starvin'."

Looking like a stone image in deep meditation, the storekeeper gave the matter some consideration. "Can't tell for sartin, but I allow 'tain't likely. My Cross N hands gits plenty grub, and I ain't never seen ary one of 'em actin' like he was tired of livin'."

Midnight breathed a little faster.

"Then you must calc'late somebody else drilled him," stated the barber.

Sidewinder scratched the back of his neck, pursed his lips, and gazed meditatively down at the dead man. "Wouldn't be at all surprised. I heard tell it's been done befo'."

Blacksnake creaked to his feet, shoved his

hat to the back of his head, and inspected the corpse with the eye of a connoisseur. "Regardless of how this here ranny come to git drilled—me, I know dead men; and in all my bawn days I ain't never seen ary one that was half as dead as this'n. He'll be needin' a shave, come mawnin'."

EVERYBODY fell to talking at once, and Midnight concluded it was time for him to take a hand. Aside from a slight lengthening of his eyes, his slender face displayed no emotion whatever; but he was on edge. Convinced that the key to the mystery lay before him, he thought desperately in an effort to make use of it. The fact that the dead man was employed by Sidewinder might or might not be significant; and the further fact that Firefly's gunman fled from the scene might mean a great deal or nothing at all.

He hunkered down facing Sidewinder, with the dead man between them. For a brief moment he gazed at the bony face with skin sagging beneath sharp cheekbones and death showing through its tan; and a strange thought flitted through his mind, "It took maybe thirty years to make this here fella, and thirty seconds to kill him." Was he an outlaw, or an honest man? Did he come there to kill Midnight, or to protect him? To those questions the gambler must try to fit an answer.

The gang pressed close and fell silent. Heavy blue clouds hung in the still air overhead, or crawled along the exposed rafters to gather in the peak of the roof and scowl down upon the bizarre scene beneath them. Midnight's nose was assailed by the conglomerate stench of alcoholic breath, gun-smoke, and unwashed bodies.

Sidewinder stuffed niggerhead into his corn cob.

He looked steadily at the old-timer for a moment, then drawled casually, "Secin' this is a mighty wild country, 'pears to me you'd hire better shots than this here fella to nuss yo' Cross N cows."

The storekeeper's large, unblinking eyes merely squinted in the fumes of a sulphur match and strong tobacco. "Chuck was a fust-rate shot," he replied between puffs. "Cain't no ways understand how come he clean missed that there bushwhacker. Reckon he was a mite upso't 'bout somethin'."

Midnight stroked his long jaw, and his eyes rambled leisurely up and down the corpse. "It's funny what crazy ideas will sneak into a fella's head if he don't watch 'em close. I sorta calc'lated this here pore cuss might be the bushwhacker."

The old-timer's head rotated slowly from side to side, but his eyes remained fixed upon the gambler's face. "Mistah Midnight—a fella never oughta belittle his ideas, 'cause they's powerful sceerce and the wuthless ones is a heap better'n none at all."

Midnight said nothing, but a sardonic grin gave his tight lips a downward twist. Pulling the dead man's shirt from his trousers he located the fatal wounds. The two bullets had struck low, proving that the gambler's shots didn't kill him. From the angle at which they were fired and allowing for the height of the window from the floor, they could not have hit the man near the waist line.

"Damned good shootin'," he drawled. "Not over two inches apart."

"Mmmm-hub. Good bushwhackers is good shots."

Glancing carelessly at the old-timer, Midnight asked a negligent question: "D'you reckon that Chuck sorta drifted up here to watch the shootin' match down in the street?"

Sidewinder exhaled smoke through his nose, and gazed up at the roof. "'Tain't likely. Recollectin' what you said 'bout bossin' Tommyhawk, and lookin' back over things I done seen happen to tried-to-be-bosses, I sorta calc'lated my ho-tel was due to lose a fust-rate boarder befo' long. Don't never aim to let no boarders git themselves kilt if I can help myself; they're too sceerce and hard to corral. So I kinda intymated to

Chuck that you was so-all-fired keerless you might go and git you'self mussed up, and he allowed he'd keep a eye peeled. Chuck was a right clever feller; didn't want to see me lose no boarders."

A ripple of laughter ran around the circle of listeners. This was good; a smart man trying to find out who took a shot at him, and getting nowhere. Midnight sensed the ridicule in that laughter, which made the situation all the more exasperating.

Inwardly he came as near to losing his temper as he ever did, but outwardly he remained as calm as Sidewinder. "I'm shore much obliged to you, Old Timer. Any fella with a bounty on his top-knot is a durned fool if he don't board at yo' hotel. Fact of the matter is—you'd probably get a heap mo' business if yo' shingle said, 'Bed and board comes high, but bodyguardin' is free.'"

Sidewinder actually grinned. The gambler half expected his skin to crack and flake off.

Before the old-timer framed an answer, Midnight continued: "Seein' that this here pore fella was tryin' to save my hide, I'm dead set on findin' out who drilled him. It's damned funny nobody saw the bushwhacker come up the stairs."

When he made it, Midnight felt the remark was wasted breath; and when he swept a glance over the wooden faces about him, he knew it was. They merely stared at him, at Sidewinder, and at the dead man; and they said nothing.

Some of them had surely seen Firefly's gunman entering the building, either through the inside entrance or the outside stairway; and some of them knew what part the fellow played in the affair; but to ask direct questions would be foolish. So he decided to take a chance which most men would have considered extremely dangerous.

He got up quickly and settled his belts on his hips. As he stood very straight and held himself somewhat stiffly, his immaculate black clothing and slender figure made him appear to tower above the motley array sur-



rounding him. The bitter expression he wore and the spark in his eye made him look the part of a stern accuser prepared to inflict punishment with no thought of mercy.

Old Moccasin Joe muttered through his whiskers to Tandy Crocker, "Take keer! Hell's a-fixin' to bile over."

Without raising his voice, Midnight spoke in a withering tone: "You can't blame a redskin for bushwhackin', 'cause he don't know any better; but when a white man does it, he's a notch lower down than a hydrophobia cat."

Pausing for a moment, the gambler seemed to look every man in the eye. They glanced away, shuffled their feet, squirmed and said nothing.

His lofty bearing was an insult, and his satirical voice ground the injury in. "I reckon Tomahawk loves her skunks, 'cause she shore hides 'em thorough and complete when a fella goes a-huntin' for 'em!"

His risky experiment failed. No high-tempered man blurted out the retort he hoped for. A sullen silence was his answer; but in more than one face Midnight read a solemn resolution to slip a knife between his ribs at the first opportunity to do it safely.

Sidewinder smiled with his eyes alone, and puffed contentedly.

Shrugging disdainfully, Midnight turned to leave. "Let's go downstairs and finish what we started. I'll sorta ease my feelin's by gettin' shed of two polecats, anyhow."

Blacksnake Jones attracted attention to himself by clearing his throat noisily. "Mistah Tinhawn," he whined in a voice that dripped misery, "I allow this shore is yo' onlucky day."

The gambler stopped in his tracks, and sent a fierce glance over his shoulder at the barber. "Yes, sah, you're dead right," he drawled. "I bought me a shave this mawnin'."

Several men snickered, and a few laughed outright.

Blacksnake teetered on his crooked legs,

and his sad eyes appeared ready to weep. Pointing with a knobby finger, he asked mournfully, "Yander through the winder, 'bout due west—see that there mile-high cloud of dust a-streakin' it for the skyline?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's their pussonal dust."

"Whose?"

"Dammit and Pitiful's!"

From beneath a halo of smoke, Sidewinder grinned across the dead man at Midnight.

## CHAPTER V

"THEY'RE GOING TO HANG YOU TONIGHT!"

THERE are occasions when a fellow thought to be glad he hasn't got eyes in the back of his head, reflected Midnight as he stalked out of the room and down the stairway. It's bad enough to know that folks are laughing at you behind your back, without having to watch 'em do it; and in such circumstances, to make a dignified departure tests the poise of any man.

He valued his dignity highly, and thanked his lucky stars that Firefly wasn't looking.

Before he reached the sidewalk, it dawned upon him that he was mighty near as mad as a ten-year-old maverick longhorn at the end of a hard-twist rope, and every bit as full of fight. However—he had no intention of kicking up as much dust, or making as much noise as the maverick; but he aimed to do a heap more damage than any maverick before they ran a brand on him, if they ever did.



Deciding that his first move should be to sit down and cool off, he directed his steps toward the hotel porch.

Midnight had learned a lot of things and surmised many more since morning, but at

the moment he didn't exactly know how to make use of the knowledge. Having deliberately agitated a hornets' nest by announcing his ambition to run the town, he discovered the boss hornet to be a lot smarter than a hornet was supposed to be; and he grudgingly admitted that if he didn't take the offensive at once the job of protecting himself might occupy a large part of his time and attention.

Although practically convinced that he had identified the boss hornet, he wasn't prepared to take an oath to that effect; and of course he wouldn't make a drastic move until he could.

The killing of Chuck and the flight of Firefly's mysterious gunman merely added another complication to the already complicated task of getting definite proof. He knew Sidewinder to be an accomplished liar; and he entertained a strong suspicion that, given the proper incentive, Firefly could lie twice as fast as the old-timer without exerting herself.

Undoubtedly she would evolve a more convincing tale than Sidewinder told, one of the marked differences being that Chuck was the bushwhacker and her gunman the hero who saved the gambler's life.

Midnight concluded he wouldn't even ask her about it.

On the hotel porch, in the doubtful security of a chair tilted back against a blank wall, the gambler reloaded his gun, and told himself that he was a damned fool. A sensible man would take his suspicions straight to Cap'n Hank and let it go at that, feeling mighty lucky to have gotten out of Tomahawk with his hair. But Midnight wouldn't think of doing such a thing, for a number of reasons—one of which was his conscience; he owed a debt, and it had to be paid in full.

Although he wouldn't have confided the secret to anyone for worlds, his interest in Firefly was another reason for remaining in Tomahawk against his better judgment. He had profound admiration for brains and

courage, and if clothed in feminine beauty, so much the better.

However, what he suspected about Firefly almost made him wish he had never met the woman.

With hat pulled low over his eyes—the gambler sat on the porch, courting lead, and thus impudently flinging a challenge at the town which he knew was laughing at him. Somehow, he contrived to look lazy and half asleep while permitting nothing that moved to escape his notice.

He watched the crowd straggle out of Ryan's Saloon; the same individuals, but not the same crowd that so recently swarmed up and down the street in high good humor to view a gunfight. The riotous mob had changed to knots of silent or muttering men.

The boy with the freckles and a missing tooth, shot from one of these groups and raced madly down the sidewalk to Jackson's Rio Grande Bar. He yelled through a window, and his shrill voice rose above other sounds: "Hey, Fat! Chuck's dead and Midnight's a-squattin' in front of the hotel. What'd I tell yuh? They can't skeer him off!"

Slash Canton, the knifer, who boasted that he "massycreed" his own snakes, came out alone, fired a sharp glance at the hotel porch, and slouched away alone. Midnight saw his lanky form disappear through the door of the Longhorn, and reappear at a table near a window affording a view of the hotel.

"Jest watchin' and waitin' for his chance," thought the gambler.

OLD MOCCASIN JOE came shuffling across the street and onto the porch. Hoping to make conversation, Midnight hailed him as he went past:

"Old Timer, d'you happen to know when they're aimin' to bury Krummer and Chuck?"

The old plainsman stopped, put his hands on his hips, and looked steadily at the gambler with the keen, clear eyes of his kind.

"The boys calc'late them daid men will keep until tomorrer, so they're a-savin' 'em up."

"Savin' 'em up! What for?"

"So's to save trouble."

Midnight looked bewildered. "Reckon I don't catch on wuth a damn these days."

Moccasin Joe combed his ragged white beard with crooked fingers, and inspected the gambler from head to foot with childish curiosity. "Bein' all-fired sartin' they'll have one—mebbe two—mo' corpses come mawn-in', they figger to plant 'em all to once. Durned good idee. Save theyselves a heap of trouble."

Old Moccasin Joe shuffled on.

Midnight grinned.

Gazing thoughtfully after the old man, he assured himself that he harbored no doubts with regard to the identity of the third corpse; but who was expected to be the fourth?

He was still pondering the question when a boy from the livery corral rode up on a beautiful, high-headed sorrel and a flashy Braunfels saddle—oxblood in color. The boy tied the horse at the rack before the store next door, grinned up at Midnight through a missing segment in the floppy brim of his straw hat, and went away whistling.

Minutes lounged slowly by, but Midnight remained undecided with regard to the fourth corpse that was expected to ride with his body to Boot Hill—probably in the same box, to save trouble.

One-half of his brain considered this problem while the other half took note of the fact that from time to time a man ambled out to the rack, mounted, and rode leisurely away. The very aimlessness with which these men moved, told him they had definite purposes in view.

And he looked on with some interest when another boy from the corral flourished a one-horse buggy up to the rack before the hotel, and sprang out. A racy black gelding with trim legs was between the shafts, champing the bit and fighting the check-rein for its

head, and otherwise showing that it didn't like its job. A picture of grace in black—the only spot of color on its glossy hide was the mark of a saddle gall which the back-band didn't cover.

The boy tied the horse, tickled its expanded nostril, laughed when it flung its head, and dashed off down the street—bare feet splashing dust at every jump.

Sidewinder came hobbling across from Ryan's Saloon. He slapped the sorrel on the hip, paused long enough to scratch the white diamond in the center of its forehead, and clumped on to the hotel porch.

"You got you a hoss and rigg'in,' Mistah," declared Midnight with an admiring glance at the outfit. "Betcha he can push lots of country behind him in a day's ridin'."

The old-timer looked back at the horse. His eyes lighted briefly, but his face remained impassive. "Yes, sah, he's my courtin' hoss and he's all hoss, 'cept what antelope he's got in him."

The gambler nodded at the black. "It's a damned shame to make a hoss like that'n pack a harness. He was bawn to be a saddle-hoss, that there fella was, and he knows it—pore cuss."

"No doubt about it," agreed Sidewinder. "But nobody ain't never rid him."

Midnight again glanced at the horse. "How come?"

"Huh!" snorted the old-timer. "That there anymal is Blacksnake's nag, and jest 'cause he can't ride no mo', the ornery old reprobate won't let nobody slap a saddle on his hoss. Swears he's shore to drill ary cuss that tries it."

MIDNIGHT stared at the horse with a far-away look in his eye, and changed the subject. "Too bad about Chuck."

Sidewinder's resonant voice carried a note of regret. "Shore is. As I said befo', Chuck was a right clever fella." He stroked his iron jaw, and gazed off toward Ryan's Saloon. "Yep, it's too bad 'bout Chuck. So me and Blacksnake is goin' a-courtin'. Got

us a purty slick pair of widders down south a piece."

The gambler grinned up at him. "Bully for you! Sisters?"

"Jest sorta," was the dry answer. "They live in the same lodge, and had the same triflin' scalawag for a paw. But his'n got a damned Tonkawa for a mammy. Mine ketched herself a clean Injun for a maw. She's half Caddo."

At that moment, Midnight's eyes were long and narrow, and they twinkled. "Why don't you ride with Blacksnake and save hoss-flesh?"

The old-timer looked fiercely at the buggy and growled an oath. "Hell's fire! I wouldn't be shot in one of them things! When I git so porely I cain't fork leather, I'll stick to the ground until I grow roots plumb down to Chiny."

Rumbling something deep in his chest, he hobbled to the hotel door. There he paused, stared queerly at the gambler over his shoulder and drawled in a low voice, "If you got you ary widder, I prophisy that this is goin' to be a oncommon fine night for courtin'—specially if she happens to live not less'n thirty to fo'ty mile from Tommyhawk."

Midnight looked as innocent as a man with his face could look. "I ain't got a widow to my name, but I aim to do some courtin' regardless," he said pointedly. "She lives right here in Tomahawk, and she's Mistah Trouble's oldest gal."

Sidewinder grunted impatiently, and clumped away like a man with no more time to waste.

As he was leaving, Blacksnake came hurrying from Ryan's Saloon. His crooked arms swung stiffly at his sides, and his sorrowful eyes peered from beneath a floppy old Stetson that drooped in keeping with the dejected mustache below it.

Midnight was amused by the thought, "Old Misery, a-hobblin' through the dust on bow legs and high run-over heels."

The barber muttered a short greeting

while untying his horse, and clambered into the buggy without another word. The black reared in the shafts when backing out, and tried to whirl; then whisked the vehicle away in a cloud of dust.

A moment later Sidewinder appeared at the door in a black coat with long skirts and a velvet collar. A new, black Stetson sat well on his large head, and a horse-hair chain dangled from an upper buttonhole to a lower pocket in his velvet vest.

An old Colt with wood handles that obviously had been whittled out by hand, swung in a worn holster at his thigh.

Midnight looked up with a sly grin, but said nothing.

The storekeeper limped to the end of the porch, then halted and faced about as though he suddenly remembered something of importance. His deep voice was serious. "Yes, sah, as I was sayin', it's too damned bad 'bout Chuck."

"Shore is," the gambler soberly agreed.

"And you ain't got no widder?"

"Nary a widow."

Sidewinder regretfully shook his head. "On a night like this'n, widders is powerful handy critters. So 'long."

Waddling out to the sorrel, he swung into the saddle with the ease of much experience. The horse whirled, and his body gave to its spirited lunge. He sat deep, his left leg straight and its foot shoved home in the stirrup; his right was bent, and its toe dangled in the hoop.

In the Long Chance door stood Firefly. The sun touched her hair and made of it a brazen helmet; beneath it a face as cold as marble. She turned quickly back into the room.

THE gambler smiled mirthlessly.

On a patch of hard ground where ponies' hooves had beaten away the dust beneath the rack, a wasp with reddish wings was stinging to death a small, black cricket.

Gazing meditatively at the winged murderer, Midnight reflected that if he read



sign accurately, there would be happenings before morning. So he glanced at the sun and wished it would hurry.

It seemed to dip and sway and teeter on the horizon, delaying its departure as though it longed to stay and see the fun. On either side of it, clouds climbed out of the earth like black monsters intent upon swallowing and extinguishing the blazing sphere before proceeding upon some dreadful mission of their own.

Presently the sun took fright and vanished, leaving a world at the mercy of the monsters.

The wasp sailed away with the cricket.

Tomahawk went to supper. Up and down the street, practically the only signs of life were contented ponies dozing at the racks, or neglected ponies flirting their ears, fidgeting, and casting hungry glances around for masters who were slow in coming.

But Tomahawk sat down to eat without Slash Canton. He stayed by the window in



the Longhorn, hunched over the table, a bottle and glass at his elbow.

Midnight arose, yawned and stretched, and waved a hand at the window—snapping his fingers in the teeth of the wolf that dogged his trail.

Slash sat motionless.

Midnight cursed under his breath. Well, in the meantime, a fella better eat when he had a chance.

Half an hour later the gambler cautiously crossed his unlighted room on the ground floor, and sat down near an open window with an unobstructed view. He saw the moon and stars engage in a valiant struggle with clouds for supremacy of the sky, and

he was pleased when the clouds rolled on to victory. He had things to do with the odds against him, and the darker the night the better.

As far as Midnight was concerned, the mystery had ceased to exist. With no running hither and yon, simply by saying little while using his sharp eyes and keen wits, he had gathered facts sufficient to solve it.

And his plans were made. He was prepared to strike; but if his conclusions were accurate, the next move would be suggested by someone else—whether friend or enemy, he wasn't sure.

He hated to wait, but composed himself to do it. Upon a square of thin, rag carpet, he sat in an old rocking-chair that fortunately didn't squeak. All his senses were keyed to their keenest pitch as he gazed into the thick darkness, wishing that he dared to smoke.

A gossipy breeze whispered secrets to the dry grasses and weeds outside his window, and he wanted to strangle it. A wolf was a-prowlin' and other dangers at large in the night, and he had to listen.

A lightning-bug floated past his window, and flashed its beacon in friendly salute. He hoped a nighthawk got it, for it made him think of Firefly.

And he thought of her too often.

A man who mingled with society from highest to lowest, and had no delusions with respect to either; a cynical person who stripped humanity of pretenses and abhorred hypocrisy, Midnight entertained no narrow prejudices against women who occupied Firefly's station in life. He had seen them killed while courageously fighting in defense of their men; whether right or wrong, it made no difference to them. He had seen them forsake luxury and go into the wilderness, enduring privation and facing danger, working shoulder to shoulder with their men while carving homes from a rugged frontier; fit mates for savage men in a savage land. He had seen them secretly guiding the hands of men who got the glory for writing fron-

tier history. And looking into the future, Midnight saw many Fireflies as white-haired grandmothers, their children's children playing about their knees, and memories of brave deeds and heroic sacrifices solacing their declining years.

If he ever fell seriously in love, mused the gambler, more'n likely she'd be a smart, tricky little woman with heaps of nerve like Firefly—damn her!

**S**UDDENLY a foreign noise crept in to join the confidential whisper of the breeze. The grasses protested, betraying the stealthy progress of the intruder from the rear of the building toward Midnight's window.

He held his breath.

As though in a friendly attempt to expose the prowler, the moon shoved a feeble beam through a rift in the clouds; but the soft light quickly perished beneath an overwhelming cave of darkness.

The lightning-bug dived into a weed. From the depths of the foliage, it blinked like a cautious eye—watching and flashing a danger signal.

The wolf a-prowlin', or—!

Creeping along the wall, the complaint of the grasses ended at the window. Midnight gathered his muscles and set his jaw. A hand materialized out of the black nowhere, and came to rest on the sill as lightly and silently as a moth.

"Midnight!"

The hand was small and white, and the voice as soft and timid as the breeze.

He relaxed and knelt eagerly at the window.

"Firefly!"

Dressed in black, about her head and shoulders the girl held a shawl of some dark material that accentuated the whiteness of her face. Like a wary night-bird, fearful of enemies and poised for flight, she darted a stealthy glance, first at the street and then behind her, and pressed closer to the wall.

He caught her hand and held it.

"What—?"

"Listen! Don't talk." Her words came tumbling out in breathless haste, scarcely above a whisper. "I may have to leave here before I've said what I want to say. If I do, will you meet me inside of an hour?"

So that was her game! Midnight had been wondering how she would go about it. He swore to himself that she was there to trick him; to lead or send him into a fight. Figured she'd come to try it, and was glad she did; for she was his kind of woman—smart, nerry, pretty, and tricky as hell.

"Certainly," he answered. "Where?"

Again she glanced furtively around, and her voice dropped even lower. "You'll have to walk. Go to that draw west of town. Turn left and follow it until you come to where the banks are high and close together. You can't miss the place. Lots of pecans on both sides and a tall sycamore on the right bank. A short ways further up the draw a spring branch cuts in from the left. Follow it to a log shack. Takes about three-quarters of an hour to walk it from here. That's all. Can you find it?"

"Shore, if I have to. But why not come inside and talk as long as you please? Here, I'll lift you through the——"

She jerked away. "No! No! I'm almost sure somebody followed me."

Resting his elbows on the sill, he cocked his head to one side and looked down at her. She must have known he was laughing, although he did it silently. "That there excuse is so old and frazzled a fella can see through it, even on a dark night. But I don't blame you, Firefly. Most women don't need to be afraid of me, but *you'd* better figger I'm powerful dangerous."

Her chin came up, and he thought she stamped her foot. "Dangerous men are my meat! Will you let me do the talking?"

"Talk."

Apparently Firefly didn't know where to commence. She obviously cast about for words, so he asked a question: "Who was yo' gun-totin' friend with the flashy clothes,

over in the Comanche? I'll swear that there fella could ha'nt me if I'd killed Kansas; looks enough like him."

"His brother," she whispered.

"Uhhh-huh. Thought so."

Again the girl peered fearfully into the darkness behind her, and listened with rapt intensity. The town was strangely quiet; no shouting, and very little music. An occasional burst of laughter arose, then broke off suddenly.

"I'm dyin' to hear yo' talk, Firefly," he drawled softly.

She turned quickly and came up on her toes, bringing her face close to his. Her hand gripped his wrist, and her breath brushed his cheek. "Midnight, they—they're going to hang you tonight!"

He laughed without a sound. "Who? Yo'—husband?"

The girl dropped back to her heels, and the shawl slipped from her head. "My—what?" she gasped.

"Yo' husband, Mistah Kansas," he answered evenly, as though it were a matter of common knowledge. "Maybe you're smart to keep it quiet for business reasons, but if I was Kansas I'd be so all-fired proud I'd say 'To hell with business'."

Firefly quickly got control of herself. "How did you find that out?" she demanded in a low, sharp voice. "Nobody around here knows it."

He chuckled softly. "By doin' some figgerin' and a heap of guessin'. But you haven't answered my question, Firefly. Reckon I'm sorta interested in that there hangin'."

Something rustled stealthily away through the weeds behind the building. The girl audibly caught her breath, and crouched against the wall.

"Jest a wolf a-prowlin'," he told her grimly.

"No! They're watching me. I've got to go!" she whispered desperately. "Honest—will you meet me at the shack?"

"Shore."

She continued in a small, hesitant voice, "I—I may not be alone. Will you take a good look before you come into the shack, and Midnight—will you please be awful, awful careful?"

"I'm the spookiest fella you ever saw."

Again Firefly stood on tip-toe and raised her face to his. The moon sent a shaft of light to reveal how beautiful she was without the worldly mask she habitually wore.

"Kiss me—will you, Midnight?"

## CHAPTER VI

### BUZZARD MEAT

WHILE Midnight's hand groped beneath the foot of the bed for his boot-jack, his mind struggled to revive the buoyant spirits with which he habitually took the trail of adventure. He wasn't himself. Setting out to go feeling his way through a black night in an unfriendly country, with one danger dogging his foot-steps while he went to meet another, he should have felt an urge to whistle or hum a tune; but he didn't.

Hooking one boot in the notch, he held the jack down with the other and pulled with unnecessary vigor. Tight boots and high heels would have no place in tonight's savage work. Stealth was demanded, and moccasins were the thing. And he grimly reflected that a breech clout and a head-dress of eagle feathers were better suited to his mood than the civilized clothing he wore.

Damn the luck! She didn't have to kiss him.

He placed a gold piece on the wash-stand beside the tin basin, and left through the window.

Convinced that Slash would have overheard Firefly's directions, for the time being Midnight had no fear of the knifer. Slash would lie in ambush on the trail to the shack. But there were others in Tomahawk who had reason to be concerned with his movements; so he went cautiously behind the buildings bordering the street, bedding roll

on his shoulder and saddle bags over his arm.

Nearing the corral he paused to reconnoiter. No coming or going, and no voices. The popular loafing place was silent, except for the grinding of jaws and the occasional stamp of a hoof. Here and there from points up the street, muffled sounds arose and combined to form a husky murmur; a town with a booming voice, trying to talk in whispers.

A few minutes later the pudgy corral boss swung open the gate with movements that were unusually fast for him. The gambler's demand for speed had a dangerous ring.

And Lightnin'—Midnight's big, black gelding—seemed to feel that every second counted. He went out tossing his head, and prancing, and doing his level best to dash away without concern for the pack horse at the end of a rope dallied about the horn.

The draw ran west of town, so Midnight took the eastbound trail. Onward they went at a lively gait until he calculated darkness had swallowed them, and the sound of their going had passed beyond the range of inquisitive ears; then he turned sharply to the right and circled back.

As though blessed with sight in his hooves with which to avoid holes in the ground that sped beneath him, Lightnin' swept across the prairie as fast as the led horse could travel. They passed abreast of Tomahawk. Lights blinked at them like bleary eyes, suspecting they were there and doing their damndest to find them. Presently there loomed up ahead, a blacker smudge in the thick darkness through which they plunged, and Midnight grimly told himself that his real work was about to commence.

Without guidance, Lightnin' found a way through the timber enveloping the draw and trotted confidently into the open prairie beyond it. Again they circled, swinging around

to the south and eventually approaching the draw at a point where it appeared to cut through a ridge.

Recalling what Firefly had said about banks that were high and steep, Midnight thought he wasn't far from the tall sycamore, the spring branch, and the shack; and he would get there well ahead of the time she named.

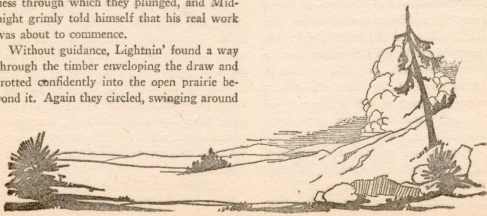
Reining into a slow walk, he sent the horses through knee-high grass with as little noise as possible. Somewhere in that black and secretive belt of timber was a man with a knife and a determination to kill him; and he thanked his luck for darkness to hide his movements until he reached cover.

But his feeling of security was short-lived.

Like former enemies uniting to perpetrate a malicious joke, the clouds liberated the moon and the moon released its pent-up energy in a sudden burst of light; a silvery deluge that swept away the illusion of distance, and brought the trees very near.

Midnight disappeared on the far side of his horse like a Comanche warrior. Off to the right a clump of sumac lifted its head out of a sag and seemed to beckon to him. He rode into it at a leisurely walk, hoping that a watcher in the draw might mistake the horses for riderless animals.

There he swung to the ground in bushes that came well above his head, drew a long breath, and shook his fist at the moon. Ordinarily he would have appreciated its joke,





greeted it with a laugh, and told it to go to hell. Tonight he cursed it viciously.

WHILE tying the horses, Midnight weighed his chances of having outmaneuvered Slash by circling and cutting back to the draw so near to the shack. He hoped the knifer was in ambush at some point farther down, but couldn't be certain of it. Slash was a pretty slick customer, and might be over there in the edge of the trees—laughing up his sleeve and waiting for him to show himself.

Standing stiffly at the border of the sumac he took stock of things. The air was never so still, or the moon so bright; just his luck. Should he undertake to walk or run to the draw, a man in the trees could pick him off without half trying. He'd have to crawl, and he hated the idea; but his better judgment told him to do it. Closing his eyes for a moment he held his breath and listened to the familiar song of the prairie night. No foreign note intruded, so he sank to the ground and started away.

Squirming along like a great, black worm resolutely pursuing a fixed purpose, Midnight felt every bit as defenseless as the worm. With no breeze to disturb the grass and thus disguise his progress through it, or cloud to cast a shadow over him, he imagined a man in the trees couldn't help but see him; and he resisted a wild impulse to spring to his feet and make a zig-zagging run for it. Weeds and grass stood with drooping heads—tired and listless—as though exhausted by an almost endless battle with the wind; and when he disturbed their rest they complained in cracked voices that he knew could be heard for rods. A man in the trees would surely hear the racket. Close to the ground myriads of insects raised a metallic chorus so monotonous as to escape an inattentive ear—a blanket of sound on the surface of the prairie; and a narrow strip of tiny squeals and screeches, followed by silence, marked his passage over it.

After covering what seemed to him a long

distance, Midnight reached a small mound that was moist and cool and had the pleasing odor of fresh earth. A first-rate blind from which to examine the dark line of timber which appeared to have come no nearer, for all his crawling. Taking off his hat, he cautiously lifted his head to look. From the grass beyond the mound—almost in his face, it seemed—there arose a violent rustling and a sibilant hissing that made him flinch. Spread on the ground like a furry rug was an animal with a light streak from the tip of its pointed nose to the end of its stubby tail. A badger—that grand little fighter who could give away twice his weight and whip anything on the prairie; a fearless lord, armed with claws like knives, and ready to defend his castle against any intruder—regardless of size.

Midnight cursed him and backed away.

A few yards further along he came upon one of those deep, narrow trails carved in the face of the prairie by countless hooves of buffalo and cows marching in single file. Since it was wide and deep enough to hide him, he crawled into it—wishing that the damned thing quartered off toward the draw instead of running due north and south. Warm dust in the bottom of the path clung to his hands; his palms were damp.

Looking south along the trail, he saw where it crossed a gentle sag that appeared to extend to the timber. Vegetation in there was taller and heavier, so he crawled through the dust toward it. Rounding an easy curve, he came face-to-face with Mother Polecat, taking her child for a walk in the moonlight. The kitten started in blank amazement, but the mother knew exactly what to do. Her bushy tail swept forward and lay flat against her back, its long hair flowing down her sides. Bravely facing an enemy many times her size, she threw her hind-quarters into the air and balanced on her forepaws with an ease that a human acrobat might envy.

Midnight scrambled out of the trail.

Haste made him careless. Something

brushed his cheek, and stung in twenty places. He thoughtlessly dashed the thistle aside with an oath. Its downy blossom exploded, and its tiny thorns retaliated by piercing his sleeve and burning like red-hot needles. Tenderly rubbing his arm, he thought angrily, "Plenty welts in the mawnin', if I live until mawnin'."

Smarting from the attack of the thistle, his fine black clothing covered with dust and his face smeared with it, the gambler crawled on—proceeding with greater caution as he neared the trees. While making his way around a spot where cows had bedded down and crushed the grass, a conviction suddenly struck him with startling force. Someone was watching him! He could feel eyes upon him. In vain he assured himself that such sensations were purely imaginative. What he could feel, he could feel! Pressing close to the earth with his ear against it, and his senses tuned to the highest pitch, he heard many strange noises—as though the grass roots were chattering in excitement and waiting for something to happen. The skin on his back crawled, a new experience. And he heard a footstep, as soft as a falling leaf; but he heard it. His hand darted to his holster, and he raised his head; and looked squarely into the round, inquiring eyes of an antelope!

Lying where the cows had lain, blending into a black and silver background, and nailed to the spot by the insatiable curiosity of its kind—it was fascinated by this strange worm that burrowed through the grass so clumsily. But when the man moved quickly, the antelope sprang straight up and literally whirled in mid-air. The white patch on its rump heliographed a danger signal as this, the fastest creature on four legs, melted into the moonlight.

Midnight got to his feet and walked leisurely to the timber.

Nothing happened, and he wasn't a bit surprised.

Damned fool—he told himself—sneaking through the grass like a coyote, running from

badgers and skunks, and getting scared out of his hide by an antelope. Of course Slash wouldn't be waiting for him this far up the draw. Even if he were, Canton was a knifer and wouldn't shoot. Probably couldn't hit anything if he did.

**F**IGURING that he had time to spare, Midnight stopped in the edge of the timber to get rid of some of the dust and burrs and to make sure that his guns were not fouled. Sitting at the base of a tree, he unloaded his six-shooters, tried the action, and reloaded them; and while morosely picking sand-burrs from his clothing, he reflected upon the vast number of groundless fears that haunt folks all the way from the breast to Boot Hill.

Now that he had pulled himself together, mused the gambler, all the sounds that reached his ears promised security and acclaimed the joy of living. From where he supposed the spring branch to be, came the sonorous booming of a frog—five times repeated; a big-mouthed, loud-talking, rollicking fellow, no doubt. Away off in the trees a jealous old barred owl awoke the echoes in competition with the frog, but he couldn't even tie the frog. Near at hand a screech owl lifted his quavering voice in a weird complaint because he couldn't make as much noise as the others, but he should fret. In his day he had caused more cussing and stood more hair on end than both of them together.

Down the draw a way dead leaves rustled



and a twig cracked; just a deer or something, thought Midnight.

He went on tenderly picking sand-burrs from his tight broadcloth trousers. Some of the pesky things had dug plumb through and grabbed a-hold of the hide. Next time he

went traipsin' around on his belly, damned if he didn't wear a buckskin suit.

Again came that cautious rustling; much nearer this time—very near, in fact. Another antelope, maybe. Curious little critters. Getting killed off fast, and curiosity was mostly to blame for it. He'd give this one the surprise of its life, just to get even.

Careful not to move quickly and scare the antelope, he scraped his back against the bole of the tree in an effort to dislodge some dry ragweed leaves that had crawled down his neck to a point between his shoulder blades. But he merely succeeded in crushing the scratchy things, and scattering the pieces so as to torment a greater area of skin.

Suddenly he stopped dead still. His ribs rose and fell, his thin nostrils expanded, and he sniffed the air.

A breeze had escaped from the place where the winds were imprisoned and come creeping up the draw, exploring every secluded nook in the timber, collecting the choice scents of the earth and bringing them along.

And the breeze had a whiskey breath!

A burst of savage energy surged through Midnight's sinewy body, but he clamped his jaws and sat motionless. For he remembered in the nick of time that he mustn't shoot. Have to find another way to get the best of Slash. He hated fighting knives, never carried one, and said no gentleman should. But he reckoned a knife would come in right handy now.

Damned hard to just sit there, doing nothing, while half-expecting to get eight or ten inches of steel between the ribs at any moment. But he had to let the ornery cuss come within striking distance.

The breeze flowed lazily past, and its whiskey breath grew steadily stronger. Midnight gathered his muscles. Moonlight filtered through the sparse branches and leaves of his tree from a point somewhat behind him, silhouetting ghostly shapes that danced over him and on the ground around him. Into this group of dancing figures slowly

crept a hulking phantom—swallowing those that failed to escape it; a shadow stalking and devouring its prey.

In a flash Midnight knew the knifer was almost upon him. With what seemed like one movement, he sprang suddenly erect, spun around, whipped out a gun, and jabbed its muzzle full into Canton's teeth. Aimed at his throat, the blow missed its mark by inches.

The wiry killer swayed backward from the waist, but his feet gave no ground. His hat flew off, and the moon painted weird shadows over the deep sockets where his eyes blazed wickedly. His lips were torn, and drew back in a savage grin that uncovered a gap where teeth had been.

Caught unawares, Slash nevertheless threw the knife with the speed of a diving hawk. Midnight had no time to dodge the blade or ward it off. He couldn't even see it, and scarcely felt the razor edge cut a shallow gash across the muscle where his neck joined



his shoulder. The fact that Canton was dazed was all that saved him, and he knew it.

Slash was lightning fast. In a twinkling his spidery arm swept up for the knife at the back of his neck. Instantly Midnight

sensed that he was about to die or go on living, with a fractional second to decide the issue. To hell with the noise! He lunged far out and low to the ground like a fencer. His gun was a foil that exploded the instant it touched the knifer's shirt.

A muffled crash rolled up and down the draw. The frog's stentorian voice boomed an accompaniment. Canton bent double, ran staggering backward, and measured his length on the ground. A thread of smoke and the smell of burning wool arose from a spot that smoldered in his shirt. Beneath it, blackened skin was visible.

The breeze drifted lazily past, and its whiskey breath grew steadily weaker.

**M**IDNIGHT darted away like a fleeing shadow. Uncertain whether the report of his gun was sufficiently muffled to arouse no curiosity, or whether the frog's booming call had disguised it, he aimed to take no chances upon having his way blocked by men coming to investigate. He proposed to get as close to the shack as possible before they started, if they did.

Taking to the open prairie at the very edge of the timber, he ran swiftly to the crest of the ridge. The tall sycamore caught his eye. Its branches sagging above a white trunk, it stood at the brink of a steep bank and gazed pensively down into the draw like a baffled ghost.

With scarcely a pause the gambler hurried on to where the bank sloped easily, and went quickly to the bottom through a growth of slender pecans. The spring branch cut in at a point almost directly opposite. Grimly resolved to shoot it out with anyone who tried to stop him, he took no time to reconnoiter. Going ahead as swiftly as the undergrowth and indifferent light would permit, he soon discovered the shack—squatting under a cut bank near the spring at the source of the little stream.

Through cracks where the chinking was gone in the sides of the crude log cabin, and between the boards over its windows, dim

light was visible. Midnight's heart beat a little faster. An open lean-to against the back of the place looked inviting, and he slipped cautiously from bush to bush toward it. A few yards away, he crawled beneath a screen of mustang grape vines to catch his breath and listen.

A restless horse tongued a bit and stamped somewhere beyond the cabin; and from inside it came the mumble of voices. Midnight listened with savage exultation. He neither could distinguish words, nor identify the speakers; but those voices marked the end of the trail.

And Firefly wasn't there. Hell, no! She'd never intended to meet him. Just a smart, tricky little woman, figuring to make him pull her chestnuts out of the fire. And he aimed to do it, too, simply because it suited his own plans. An instant later he admitted to himself that more'n likely he'd have done it regardless, 'cause Firefly was pretty, and had heaps of nerve, and he—

But damn it all! She didn't have to kiss him.

The gambler reloaded the gun that had killed Slash Canton. No telling how many shots he'd need before he got away from that cabin. Having failed to discover any sign of a guard, he concluded that those inside must feel mighty sure of themselves. Evidently his shot hadn't disturbed them. Probably mistook it for the frog, and he mentally thanked that noisy gentleman.

A breath of air shook the leaves on surrounding bushes and trees, and under cover of their soft rustle Midnight ran swiftly from the vines to the lean-to. While he crouched there for an instant, a tingle of satisfaction rippled through him. The back door was unfastened and almost ajar; and at eye level in the wall of the cabin light crept through a crack between the logs. He looked, and saw exactly what he had expected to see.

From its place on the windowsill, a fluttering candle sent its timid rays to touch the craggy face of one, and the mournful counte-



nance of the other—Sidewinder and Blacksnake!

**S**ITTING on his heels against the wall, frowning at the floor, Sidewinder no longer wore the innocuous expression of a simple old man and quaint philosopher. His was the hard, cruel face of the outlaw leader—the real boss of Tomahawk; the man who planned crimes and supervised their execution; a clever hypocrite who looked so harmless to strangers, and inspired fear in the minds of all who knew him for what he really was. The stoop to his shoulders had magically disappeared; they were broad and powerful. His boot heels were of uniform height. Midnight noted this fact with a touch of pride, for it proved the accuracy of his deductions. That supposedly-crooked leg first betrayed the old-timer when it kicked at the dog and flipped out straight; and later when its foot didn't reach the stirrup, suggesting that the two stirrups were of equal length.

Hunkered down near Sidewinder was the man who claimed he hadn't crossed leather in six years and wouldn't let anyone ride his horse; yet the animal bore saddle marks of unmistakably recent origin. A mighty clever fellow, fit to be Sidewinder's *segundo*. The gambler idly wondered where Blacksnake cached his buggy when he shed the skin of an honest barber and took to the outlaw trail.

They were waiting for someone—no doubt about it—but Midnight could merely guess who it was. He knew, however, that Firefly had decoyed him there for the purpose of meeting these two outlaws—a meeting which she hoped and believed would result in a fight. Since she didn't know why he came to Tomahawk, and could have no reason for thinking that he had anything against Sidewinder and Blacksnake, he concluded she must know that something would transpire there in the shack which would tell him that the old-timer was behind the attempt on his life. And he mentally took off his

hat to Firefly for having the brains to figure all this out so smoothly.

Midnight knew the smart thing would be to rampe in there and settle matters right away, then get back to his horses—if still on his feet. But he wanted to learn what was in the wind, and, if possible, the cause of the feud between Firefly and Sidewinder. It might throw additional light upon the lawless conditions that were troubling Cap'n Hank. Moreover, he had a hungry curiosity of his own.

The two old-timers hadn't said a word since Midnight arrived, and he wished they would talk. Blacksnake's sad eyes were fixed upon the opposite wall, while his jaws meditatively massaged their cud; and Sidewinder's forefinger thoughtfully traced mysterious lines in the dust with which the dirt floor was carpeted.

At length Blacksnake spoke up: "Durned slick idee, sēndin' word to the boys to go on to the Cross N and let Injun Jim fetch him here all by hisself. What folks don't know ain't likely to cause 'em no misery."

"Mmmm-huh. And that there redskin is mighty nigh as gabby as a snubbin' post," drawled Sidewinder without looking up. "But he shore knows a heap of ways to cure the lockjaw when other folks has got it."

Blacksnake chuckled and it sounded like a cackle. "Calc'late this here ranny may be a-sufferin' with it?"

"Cain't never tell, but I wouldn't be surprised."

The barber's jaws struck a faster gait. "I allow I'd git a sight mo' fun out'n what's due to happen tonight if I knowed whereabouts that there damned tinhawn is at."

**F**OR the moment Sidewinder seemed to be principally interested in arranging the tails of his coat over his thighs so as to keep it off the floor. "Course it don't never pay to be daid shore 'bout tinhawns and sech," he cautiously declared, "but I got a purty good idee what he's up to."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yep."

"Reckon he's a-settin' in a game somewhere," ventured Blacksnake.

Sidewinder's ponderous head nodded slowly. "Mmmm-huh. A-dealin' 'em off'n the bottom to Old Satan, more'n likely."

The barber's jaws stopped in mid-stride.

Sidewinder went on solemnly, "So if you hear tell that hell's a-gittin' hotter, you can jest betcha Midnight has done win her—lock, stock, and bar'l—and he's a pilin' on mo' wood."

Flabbergasted plenty, but no more than half-convinced, Blacksnake stared doubtfully at his partner. "Then he's gone and committed suicide for sartin. Outside of you, they ain't a livin' soul in Tommyhawk that could—"

"Slash Canton."

"Oh! That makes a heap of difference."

"You see it's like this," drawled Sidewinder complacently. "Furst off, I'm powerful suspicious of that there slick-lookin' jasper 'cause he keeps everybody else a-jabberin' fit to kill and don't do no talkin' hisself; so I sicked Slash onto him jest to watch him. Then when Chuck wasted his loop, I up and told Slash to carve Mistah Midnight a-plenty soon as ever it got dark. Been dark for quite a spell now."

With his head thrust out and teetering at the end of a wrinkled neck like a starving buzzard clacking its beak over a prospective meal, Blacksnake hugged his knees and chuckled. "And he done swore he'd git him a shave in the maw'nin', a-settin' up. Huh! I'll shave his corpse with a dull razor and no lather, so help me!"

HE had seen the time, mused Midnight, when it would've been fun to listen while those old scoundrels discussed his demise and the treatment of his remains; but tonight he was in no mood for such grisly levity. Damned if he'd wait another minute.

He tried his guns to make certain that they sled effortlessly from their well-oiled holsters, looked at the sagging door and

wondered whether it would swing open easily, or jam and have to be forced open—then breathed an oath and cautiously crept back into deeper shadows.

From the upper end of the spring branch came the sound of approaching riders!

"Here come Jim," he heard Blacksnake remark pleasantly.

"Mmmm-huh. And he ain't alone," casually observed Sidewinder.

Blacksnake's droll voice was mirthful. "'Pears like I'm due to be a powerful busy barber in the maw'nin'. Reckon I'll git me a early start by lamplight so's to shave 'em befo' they whiskers stiffen up."

"Might be a good idee," drawled Sidewinder. "Which reminds me—I'll set the boys to diggin' befo' sunup, 'cause it's damned hot on Boot Hill these days."

"'Tain't good buryin' weather, for a fact."

Backed into the lean-to as far as possible, Midnight crouched there until he heard the newcomers dismount before the cabin. A gruff order in a low voice was answered by a curse, and the front door slammed violently open. Again peering through the crack, he saw a man stumble over the threshold and stagger into the room. Injun Jim's bulky form was close behind him.

In spite of clothing that was torn and dusty, and blood that matted his yellow hair, Midnight recognized Firefly's fancy gunman—Kansas' brother. Evidently hurt, his arms bound, and utterly helpless, the young fellow nevertheless looked his captors in the eye in a way that aroused the gambler's admiration and caught his sympathy.

And Firefly came in for her share of credit. She had outfigured Sidewinder, going and coming. Must have a spy in the enemy's camp. The light that escaped between the logs glistened in Midnight's long, narrow eyes. And she sure as hell had known how he'd feel when he saw 'em dragging in the man who saved his life. But he could afford to wait a little longer, just to see what it was all about.

Injun Jim stepped aside to the wall, folded his arms, and stood motionless. His dark face was greasy with perspiration that rose to the surface and clung there, and his snaky eyes fixed upon the outlaw leader with an inquiring look.

Sidewinder got slowly to his feet, looking a head taller and inches broader as a dangerous outlaw than he did as a harmless business man. He inspected the gunman from head to foot with quiet animosity; a leisurely glance that was all the more ferocious because of its tranquility.

"A while back," he began, "I told you and Kansas that I could make somethin' out'n you if you'd gimme half a chance, and now I'm fixin' to do it. Buzzard meat."

His voice retained its deep resonance and his words fell slowly, clothed in the solemnity and finality of a judge pronouncing sentence.

The young man paled slightly, but his chin was firm and his eyes steady. "Oh shore!" he retorted with heavy sarcasm. "And this makes twice I done told you to go to hell."

Midnight wanted to slap him on the back.

Sidewinder affected not to hear. As though each word had to be chosen with extreme care, he continued even more slowly: "Figgerin' that there red-headed woman is so all-fired smart, you back her play against



me, so you cain't help but lose. Why you pore ignoramus—her cards is marked and I can read 'em better'n she can. Behaves like she's been to a camp meetin' and got religion all of a sudden, 'cause she aims to make a circuit rider out'n Kansas and he'll

be a-preachin' hell's fire and brimstone to sinners befo' long, if she has her way. Naturally she figgers that me and my boys has got to be blasted plumb off'n the earth befo' she can do it, 'cause we know too much about him."

The young fellow swore in disgust. "Huh! If she wanted to git shed of you, she'd jest send for the Rangers. Betcha they lick they chops every time they think of you."

Sidewinder nodded slowly and with unperturbed dignity. "She dassn't holler for the Rangers, 'cause they got Kansas on the list. So she up and sent over to The Nations for Smoky Turner and his bunch to come wipe us out, and you're one of 'em. Buzzard meat—jest buzzard meat."

THIS accusation plainly caught the gunman by surprise. Midnight sensed it and knew that Sidewinder also saw it, for he quickly took advantage of the situation.

"Not that it makes a hell of a lot of difference to me," he went on in the same level voice, "but I'm kinda curious 'bout when Smoky and his bunch figgers to hit Tommyhawk. Got any idee?"

"N-no! Don't even know Smoky Turner."

"Shore?"

The gunman clamped his jaws. Injun Jim shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

Sidewinder's hand rested on his hip above the handle of his gun. "Daid shore?"

No answer.

Injun Jim's eyes moved restlessly behind their lids like balls of polished ebony.

Sidewinder glanced at him and drawled lazily, "Jim, d'you reckon you could sorta help this here jasper to ontangle his ideas and onloose his tongue?"

Injun Jim's hands dropped to his sides and he came away from the wall with an eager step. "How! Got wood. Got knife. Got fire. Get splinters. He talk."

The gunman's lips turned pale. He moistened them.

Midnight again tried his guns in their holsters, and measured the distance to the door. Three yards or less, and nothing in the way. Turning back for a final survey of the room, he glued his eye to the crack between the logs.

And witnessed a tableau he'd never forget: the candle on the window, fluttering as though frightened by what it saw or expected to see; Blacksnake coiled down against the wall, methodically stropping a bowie knife on his boot, and wearing a grin that exposed big gums and old snags; Injun Jim gripping the captive's arm with one hand and holding a knife in the other, while gazing at Sidewinder with hungry expectancy; the tall gunman, bloody and haggard, but with a hard jaw and eyes that blazed defiantly above the pouches of bruised flesh beneath them; and the craggy profile of the outlaw leader, stern and dangerous and as barren of human sympathy as the stone it so closely resembled.

While Midnight looked for an instant at the bizarre scene, it changed so swiftly as to defeat any attempt to foresee the action. A man who gave the impression that never in all his life had he moved swiftly, Sidewinder suddenly became the personification of speed gone mad. His gun flashed up in the fastest draw Midnight had ever seen, and it seemed to drive a lance of flame between the logs—full into his eyes!

**T**HE gambler staggered. The upper half of his face felt as if partially torn away—fire gnawing into all that remained. Both hands flew to his eyes. His eyeballs were on fire, and his lids lined with hot sand. Blood crept down his temples and cheeks, beneath, between, and over his fingers; it too, was hot. He took his hands away. The light at the crack had gone. Again his hands flew to his eyes. And again he took them away—slowly, fearfully. The light had not returned!

Blind! Good God!

Dazed and stunned by the shock, the con-

viction strangled him and he nearly choked out the word—"Blind!" His head tottered weakly from side to side as he tested his eyes against an almost impenetrable mist, shot with tongues of flame—blue, orange, red. He threw out a hand to steady himself. The pain alone was enough to blind him, and it sapped his strength.

Through the roaring and screeching inside his skull, he barely heard Sidewinder's voice. "Got him, by God! Saw light a-glistenin' in his eyes through that there crack."

And he thought, "Light—hell! Ain't no mo' light."

Senseless panic held sway over him for the briefest instant, then Midnight's cold nerve hastened to his rescue. Thoughts were born in his splitting head, lived out their tumultuous lives, and died with incredible rapidity; and, as a measure of sanity returned, vague objects materialized in the mist. The corner of the cabin, a clump of bushes—but darkness threatened to engulf them again, so he'd have to hurry. Had a job to finish, a debt to pay. Couldn't see that damned door, but he knew where to find it.

Midnight tripped over the sill, plunged into the cabin, and went down. But he went down shooting faster than he had ever shot before. The blasts from his guns seemed to lift the roof. He lay prone, and cursed, and hurled lead at indistinct figures that bobbed and staggered through the mist.

"Caught 'em nappin'. Got ten shots. Shake 'em all out. Empty these damned Colts and throw 'em away. Last gunfight. Blind as a bat!"

Fired at the instant the door swung open, his first bullet sent Sidewinder reeling away. His second killed the outlaw leader while still on his feet. Blacksnake threw his knife. The gambler's fall saved him. The barber tottered to his feet a dying man, hit as he came up. When Midnight lunged in, Firefly's gunman threw himself against Injun Jim and they went down together. The Indian rolled clear and lumbered toward the front door. A bullet overtook him and flung



him against the wall. His bulky body sagged slowly to the floor.

Midnight's guns snapped on empty cartridges. One after the other, he viciously sent them spinning at the dark lumps out there in the mist. It was thicker now and harder to see through. He didn't even try. The smoke made his eyes hurt worse than ever, and he closed them tightly. His head sank to his crossed arms, and he lay face-down on the floor.

A thin, mournful voice broke the silence, mumbling deliriously, each word coming fainter. "Shave 'em—befo' and after—kill-in'."

Blacksnake, dying whimsically! He almost envied the man.

"Godamighty! Some shootin'!"

Firefly's gunman. He'd forgotten the gunman. "Sorry if I hit you," he muttered without lifting his head. "But—but I couldn't see—very good."

"Nary a scratch," came the hearty answer. "And it was more'n worth the chances I took. Fella, them Colts of your'n jest naturally went plumb loco. Git hurt bad?"

"I'm—somethin' in my eyes, that's all."

"Bully! I'll snake it out pronto," said the gunman. "Jest make a light and unloose my hands. When old Sidewinder cut down on you, he done blowed the candle plumb out."


Midnight jerked his head up, and peered at the window where the candle ought to be. Hell's fire! Never once thought about the candle. Course it'd go out. He clawed at his clothes for a match, found one, dropped it, and groped for another. Damned fingers were all thumbs.

At length the sulphur spluttered, and fried, and flared up. He shielded it lovingly with his hands. They trembled when he lit the candle.

"By dogies, he mighty nigh scalped yuh!" exclaimed the gunman.

Midnight scarcely heard. He looked joyfully around the cabin, and comprehension dawned upon him. A bullet that missed its mark—plowed between the logs and through the chinking, driving dust into his eyes and splinters into his forehead. So the mist was nothing but a curtain of tears, blood, and pain.

His eye fell upon his guns. Hell of a way to treat a damned fine pair of Colts!



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PROBAK JUNIOR

*First a Beachcomber, then a Chinese Schooner, Then a Coast Guard Ship—All Landing by Night at Jim Breamer's Island*



## PIRATE PEARLS

By CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE

*Author of "Trade Heads," "Gunfire at Battle Island," etc.*

**F**ENLOW moved furtively along the beach among the palms below the plantation house. He knew that Anne Breamer was watching him with field glasses from behind blossoming vines on the veranda. When Fenlow saw her, for brief intervals as she crossed the head of the steps, she was carrying a rifle.

Fenlow knew his danger. It was not Anne Breamer's rifle that he feared, but Tua, the big Malay who was boss of the house servants. By dark Tua would probably sneak beachward with his naked parang.

Anne's father had left the island a few days before for Lantu Vanna, sixty miles

away, in a desperate attempt to raise money. He was almost bankrupt. His copra prices did not pay the native labor for picking the nuts. So Anne was alone except for house servants, as all the plantation field workers had been discharged.

As he walked the beach, Fenlow was watching for the *Heavenly Justice*. That was Chi Lun's schooner. But Fenlow was not alone—two men were hidden in the plantation boat house. They intended to use Breamer's old coast guard whaleboat for a dangerous job.

The three white men were afraid that Anne Breamer would learn of the plan they had for the night. Tua might warn Chi

Lun by signal. The old Chinese bought pearls from the skippers of pearling luggers. The *Heavenly Justice*, on her way to Singapore with a fortune in pearls, was expected to anchor off the plantation. That was known by men in the fleet. Fenlow and the two men with him had accurate information.

It was a little before sundown when the *Heavenly Justice* appeared off the point. Chi Lun would anchor off the plantation for the night—and a coast guard cutter would be close behind. The sly old Chinese was being watched by the government.

Fenlow moved up through the palm grove. The sun was near the horizon, sullenly red, frying against the sky. For a beachcomber, the young man was well clad. His white suit was rumpled, his old shoes had swamp mud on them, his helmet was rain-streaked, and he needed a shave.

There were no field workers. Nuts littered the grove. The jungles were beginning to encroach upon the *padi* fields. Fenlow gave little heed to these signs of threatened ruin. He walked straight up toward the steps of the house.

Anne Breamer, cool and trim in a white linen suit and a straw hat, appeared with the rifle. Her dark eyes peered out, her face crinkled against the burning red of the sky as she gazed at Fenlow.

Sweeping the helmet from his head, Fenlow stopped. "You're Miss Breamer?" he asked.

"I am. What are you doing on this island?"

"My name's Fenlow. Thought I might ask the favor of having you signal for a coast guard cutter to take me away." He glanced at the mast at the corner of the veranda, with signal halyards falling from the tiny blocks of the yard.

"There's no cutter in sight."

"Commander Carson'll be along soon—he's following that Chinese schooner. See her? Just rounding the point."

She moved a little to get a view through the trees in the direction he pointed.

"Oh, the *Heavenly Rest!*" she said. "Maybe he'd take you to some port."

"No chance, miss."

"How'd you get on the island?"

"Down the beach beyond the taro swamp. Jim Odley's trepang boat put me ashore."

"Jim Odley knows better than to put strangers ashore here—he could be arrested for that." She plainly felt relieved at the news, for all her asperity, because she knew well enough that Odley would not put a dangerous man ashore. Still, she knew that beachcombers were full of tricks.

"Well, yes, it's against the law," said Fenlow. "Commander Carson'll arrest me, but I want to get to Lantu Vanna."

"You were wise to come up. My Malays might go down and kill you after dark. Had anything to eat during the day?"

"Nothing but some wild bananas—and they're bitter."

Anne laid her rifle against the railing. "Better come up and have a bite while you wait for the cutter—if you'll be kind enough to light those signal lanterns and run 'em up. White, red, white, that's the cutter call."

He moved toward the mast. "Thanks, miss. I don't want to worry you."

"I'm not worried. Jim Odley knows enough about our business to know that there's nothing valuable about this place. My father's in Lantu Vanna. Jim ought to know that, too." She spoke to Tua. The big Malay left by the end steps for the cook house. He shot a glance of disapproval at Fenlow, and hurried away. The young man noted the big parang, sheathed between strips of bamboo, on the powerful Malay's shoulder.

ANNE was clearing books and papers from a small table when Fenlow went to the veranda. She gestured him to a chair near an open *kajang*. His eyes caught an object hanging close to the open edge of the *attap* wall—a belt with ammunition and a pair of holstered revolvers. They were with-

in easy reach, and he would need them for the night's work.

"I heard Odley say something about your father being away, miss. And Oldey said that if I mentioned him, you wouldn't be nervous."

"It was Odley's name that brought you to supper." She sat back against the house wall.

Tua came with a tray. There was a glass pitcher full of yellow liquid, fish, bread and coffee. Fenlow covertly studied the Malay. He had enough Chinese blood to cut his eyes slantwise—and Chinese brains behind his black eyes. He looked like a Straits-born half-blood, who could pass himself off as pure Malay.

Fenlow lifted the filled glass. "Your health, miss! You're treating me a lot better than I'm entitled to." He drank the glass empty.

She smiled. "You can't be very dangerous, if you're out of Odley's boat."

"I'm not so sure. Three months on the beach have put me in a mean frame of mind. Fact is, I'd turn pirate for a lot less than you'd suspect." He began to eat.

Tua stood behind Fenlow. The three of them watched Chi Lun run up to her anchorage. The schooner had many Chinese on her decks—a far bigger crew than the average vessel of her size.

"Why's Commander Carson following old Chi Lun?" she asked.

"If you had a pearl worth five hundred dollars and you had to sell it to Chi Lun for fifty—or be killed the next time you put foot ashore—you wouldn't like it."

"Father says Chi Lun's not so bad as he's painted. He says that story of the pearlers of how Chi Lun has 'em murdered unless they sell to him at his own price, is all moonshine."

"Maybe—but he's got about a hundred thousand dollars' worth of pearls aboard now, so the gossip is. Odley has been along with the fleet the last couple of months."

"One fat old Chinese!" she protested.

"Pearlers are tough men, and he couldn't rob them."

"They say he's got powerful Chinks behind him—and secret agents in every island port, to kill for him or swear to anything. Why, he even carries a Chink lawyer with him."

She laughed. "You seem to know a lot about him."

"Oh, just gossip. They say, too, that he's got Bias Bay pirates for a crew. They learned their trade from their great grandfathers in China. Bad Chinks, anyhow, with Chi Lun."

They saw the *Heavenly Justice* let go her anchor a few hundred yards off the boat house. Darkness dropped swiftly. An anchor light glimmered from Chi Lun's fore-stay. The breeze was shifting. There was a smell of rain. The wet monsoon was nearly ready to break. The night would be dark with an overcast sky.



Tua began to clear the dishes. Anne handed Fenlow a box of cigarettes. He struck a match and lit one. The only gleam of light from the house came from the lanterns hanging from the yardarm over the eaves.

Tua departed with his tray for the kitchen. Fenlow pushed his chair back against the wall near the open *kajang* where he could reach the revolvers on the belt.

"How long were you with Jim Odley's boat?"

"Long enough to run a couple of loads of opium to the southern islands."

"Does he smuggle opium—really?"



"The coast guard think so." Fenlow was watching the light of Chi Lun's schooner. There were several flashes from a port hole. Swinging his eyes to the cook house, Fenlow saw the big square of an open *kajang* suddenly illumined. Tua walked across the opening with a lamp—and crossed three times.

"There's the cutter!" said Anne. "Over the palms of the point."

"You're right—those are her mastheads. She'll show her red as she clears the rocks of the point. There's my steel bedroom coming."

"Will Carson lock you up?"

"Sure. And it'll be a hot night."

She rose. "I'll have Tua fetch another pitcher of fruit drink." She went to the end of the veranda and called an order to the Malay.

Fenlow moved swiftly. He plucked the belt and revolvers from the hook of the inner wall and tossed them into the soft earth in the darkness at the side of the steps.

ANNE returned and they watched the cutter steaming past the point with her bright ports rolling to the side swells. There were a few sharp toots from her whistle to acknowledge the call lanterns. They heard the roar of a power launch as the cutter backed to her anchor.

A reflector lamp hung from a staunchion. Fenlow struck the match and lit it when Anne opened the lamp case. A beam of brilliance struck down the path toward the little jetty in front of the house.

In a few minutes a searchlight illumined the small dock. Then came the tramp of hurrying feet over the planking. Presently a white figure came striding up the steps.

Anne had spoken to somebody in an end room. Lights appeared, and Fenlow saw two Malay women moving about inside the house.

"Thank you for coming, Commander. A

man here wants to be picked up—I signaled at his request, sir."

Carson was breathing a trifle hard. It was an uphill climb from the jetty and the night air was heavy and damp, with the heat of the day still in the ground. A tall slim man, hard of jaw and tanned of face, the commander peered about into the veranda's gloom between the shafts of lights from inside.

"A stranger! Here on the island! You there— What's your name?"

"Fenlow, sir."

"How'd you come to be ashore here?"

"Jim Odley put me ashore this morning, sir."

Carson frowned. "Odley, eh? He's got to stop that trick he's got of unloading strangers all over these islands. I'll tell him a few things the next time I cross his hawse.

"Go on down to the jetty and report yourself under arrest."

"He was very nice about it, Commander—came up before dark and reported himself."

Fenlow moved toward the steps. "Thank you, Miss Breamer—for supper, and being so kind." He walked down the steps into the palm grove, Carson staring after him.

Fenlow, in darkness, waited until he saw Carson and Anne go into the living room. Then the young man moved close to the steps, approaching them from the side. The high veranda protected him from any chance of being seen from inside the house.

Carson had laid off his jacket with shoulder straps. It was across the veranda rail, his cap atop it. He always visited the Breamers when he was near the island and loafed about the place with old Jim Breamer. The officer's wife and children had been guests at the plantation more than once.

Picking up the belt and revolvers, Fenlow listened to make sure that Tua was really at the cook house. Certain that he was not detected in his thefts, Fenlow made a wide cir-

cuit that took him to a path through high brush and led to the beach.

He proceeded cautiously to the water's edge. The jetty, with the launch and the waiting men, was not far away. Carson's launch crew must be avoided at all costs, but the darkness was protection. Fenlow gained the boat house, then moved away from it, his direction being away from both boat landing and jetty.

He came upon the whaleboat. It had been put into the water by the two men in concealment, while he was at the plantation. The old coast guard boat had been bought at auction by Breamer for use when rafting coconuts from a distant grove on the beach.

"How'd you make out?" somebody whispered, as he climbed into the boat.

"All set, Jim. Here's your gun. Unless Tua was on the snoop more'n I think, I fooled him. We got to work fast."

**A**NOTHER man rose up and shipped an oar. "Well, damn me, if you ain't slick," he said with grumbling chuckle. He wore a white canvas cap, barely visible in the darkness, so that only his head could be made out. And as the man Fenlow had addressed, put his oar in place, he was revealed by canvas cap. They threw off jumpers, and their white undershirts in the faint light, suggested uniforms from the cutter, especially with the crew caps.

They moved off. The oars worked quietly. Fenlow put on Carson's jacket and cap and

buckled the belt with holstered revolver about his middle. He sat in the stern sheets.

The boat moved toward the *Heavenly Justice*. In a few minutes they were alongside the schooner.

"What boat you come this side?" came a hail.

"Coast guard boarding," said Fenlow curtly. "Drop a ladder, you, and quick about it."

A lantern lifted over the bulwarks. A wide yellow face peered down. Fenlow was revealed standing in the stern sheets, and what appeared to be a pair of cutter seamen at the oars.

Startled voices spluttered Chinese in the main cabin.

"Let go that ladder!" called Fenlow.

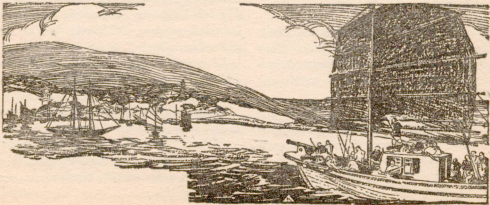
Slats rattled down the side of the hull. Fenlow went up swiftly. He was confronted by two big Chinese, naked except for breech cloths. The lantern revealed their yellow skins to be oiled—they were ready for conflict. They wore ancient cutlasses from their hips.

"I want Chi Lun," said Fenlow.

A little yellow man, in skull cap, stepped into the lantern light from aft. He wore blue trade pajamas. His eyes blinked through brass-rimmed spectacles. He bowed—and shook hands with himself.

"This obnoxious person is named Li. My master bids you come to cabin for his poor hospitality."

"Mr. Li, eh? His lawyer, ain't you?"



"That is true, sir."

"All right. I'll go below."

"Please walk before my useless personality." Li waved a hand aft and ordered the lantern to follow. Fenlow followed the lawyer to the companionway and down into the main cabin.

Chi Lun stood in the doorway of his room, his round face shining with sweat. There was a sweetish odor of opium about him. Across his bulging middle there was a yellow cord that cinched his blue sleeping robe. His queue was matted on his head with a tassel of red braided silk over an ear. His fat bare shanks showed above blue slippers embroidered with seed pearls. His hands were hidden in wide sleeves.

Mr. Li barked Chinese as a terrier harries a treed cat.

Chi Lun bowed to Fenlow. "It is an honor to have your august presence in my poor ship, sir."

"Just making a clean-up, Mr. Chi Lun. You've boarded several luggers in the past two months. Also, I want to warn you about a pirate vessel in these waters. Two pearlars have been boarded and robbed."

"Pirates! That news alarms me!"

"A Chinese pirate," Fenlow went on. "Main vessel not seen. Boarders sent in boats in a fog. You have a lot of pearls aboard. My job's to protect you. I'm the new skipper on this patrol, and Commander Carson's along on an inspection trip. He'll come aboard you in the morning. Dinnott's my name."

"Pirates!" breathed Li. "Bad trouble."

Chi Lun gestured to the transom cushions. "Have a glass of wine with me, sir. Your visit is a surprise—and the surprised man loses his manners. You must pardon my stupidity."

**I** SUMMONED the steward, calling for wine. Fenlow noted the steward's great hands as he cut the rattans that held the cover of the wine jar. They were hands of a fighting man, who could turn to and repel

boarders, if the *Heavenly Justice* were attacked.

The three drank with polite ceremony. Mr. Li was wary. Chi Lun leaned back against the cushions, hands across his bulging paunch, thumbs hooked in the yellow cord.

Fenlow put down his empty glass. "I'll take a look at your pearls."

Chi Lun sat up with the alacrity of a bogged camel fighting to escape a quicksand. Mr. Li gasped through his teeth.

"Is it necessary that you go over my master's pearls?"

"I just want a look-see, Mr. Li. Nice time I'd have explaining to the government if pirates got you and I couldn't swear you had pearls on board. Your property is my responsibility."

Chi Lun exchanged glances with his lawyer, then waddled to his room. He returned with a steel cabinet which had a brass handle. Brass straps secured the drawers in place. The locks opened, the trays were drawn out by Chi Lun, exposing pearls in damp moss under covers that held the moss in place.

Fenlow made a swift inspection of the ten trays as each was exposed in turn. Each tray had better than two dozen fine pearls.

"All right," said Fenlow. "Lock up, Chi."

The old Chinese gave a sigh of relief. The little lawyer shook hands with himself. The locks snapped shut.

Fenlow's left hand went to the brass handle of the cabinet and drew it to him. His left hand was close to the butt of his holstered revolver. "I'll take 'em to the cutter for the night," he said.

Li cursed through his teeth in Chinese. Chi Lun's great body suffered a momentary convulsion.

"I do not wish my pearls from under my hand," said Chi Lun.

"What? You don't fear the government?"

"We must not have trouble," said Mr. Li. "You must not take pearls my master would keep this side."

"Mr. Li, how'd you like to be pirated? Those bad Chinese are in these waters—and we know they are following you."

CHI LUN drew his breath in panting puffs that betrayed his distress, staring blankly at his cabinet by Fenlow's knee.

"Tomorrow we get the pearls?" asked Mr. Li.

Fenlow got to his feet. "Tomorrow. I am leaving now. If I do not get back to the cutter with these pearls, the cutter will send for me." He swung up the companionway and bounded out on deck.

He made for the lantern in the waist which marked the position of the side ladder. The two oiled men, lurking nearby, stared in astonishment at the figure in white with what looked like a small suitcase.

No cries came from the cabin, no orders to prevent Fenlow from leaving the schooner. Holding the brass handle with his teeth, he dropped down to the waiting boat.

The two rowers shoved off into the darkness. They rowed for a few minutes toward the cutter, then swung and made for the boat house.

Before they reached shore, they saw a lantern lift three times above the bulwarks of the *Heavenly Justice*. That signal was answered by a great square of light in the open *kajang* of the cook house. Tua was being warned of something, and for the second time that evening, he was making signals to the Chinese schooner.

The three made their landing quietly, drew the boat up on the sand, and listened. There was subdued but excited Chinese talk aboard Chi Lun's vessel.

"I'll get that old war club," said one of the men. "We don't want to use guns if we can help it—and it looks as if Tua'll be polin' around up in the dark of the grove." He went to the boat house and flashed a light to locate the great ironwood club once used by a native chief of the island.

One led the way up the path—he carried the war club. Fenlow was next with the

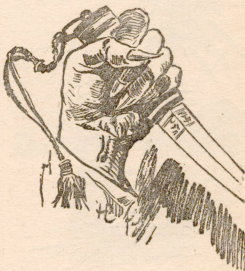
cabinet and his own gun in hand. The third man, also gun in hand, was last. They made for the path which led to the house through brush.

They were halfway through the deep brush when the man in the lead stopped and drew back against Fenlow. They all dropped to the ground.

The big square of light still glowed at the cook house *kajang*, like a luminous sheet. Against that distant light Fenlow caught an outlined figure close at hand. It moved. It advanced a few feet, then crouched expectantly.

The man with the war club tossed a pebble ahead of him. It struck in dry grass. The silhouetted figure threw up an arm. A hand held that great blade which Tua wore at his hip.

FENLOW saw a second shape rise against the silhouetted figure of Tua. The club lifted and swung. There was the sound of a terrific impact. One figure dropped from



Fenlow's sight. A heavy body crashed into the dry brush at one side of the path.

"Got him!" growled the man with the war club. "Like I told you, Tua's been in with Chi Lun all along. But for catchin' him



against that light of his, he'd ha' cut us to pieces." He turned on his battery light for an instant. Tua lay still, parang in hand. By the condition of his turban on his head, he would never move again.

"Come on," said the war-club leader. "We ain't done yet."

They pushed on in single file. As they approached the house they heard the voices of Commander Carson and Anne Breamer. The three crept under the flooring of the high veranda.

Fenlow turned Carson's jacket and cap over to Odley. The trepang fisher sneaked round to the steps and left jacket and cap on the veranda railing and returned to the hide-out.

The man with the warclub was whispering to Fenlow. "Put the cabinet into this old satchel—and we'll dunnage it with these old gunny sacks."

With the pearls left in the cabinet, it was strapped into the satchel. The warclub was



laid aside and the third man walked out from under the veranda. He moved around to the steps and walked to the door of the living room.

Commander Carson rose swiftly from the

table at the sound of footsteps and strode to the doorway. "Where'd you come from?" he demanded.

"Odley just put me ashore, Commander."

"Dad!" cried Anne, as she left the table. "I thought you were at Lantu Vanna!"

"I was," said Jim Breamer. He laid the satchel on the floor. He grinned at both of them, his deeply wrinkled face flushed to redness and damp with sweat. He threw his old felt hat to a chair.

"Why, Dad! You must have been with Fenlow! Odley put him ashore this morning!"

"Sure, we put him ashore. Then we went around the island. Odley didn't want to be spotted by the coast guard, so I stuck with him. He hates to be boarded and asked a lot of questions."

Anne was puzzled. "But if you came from Lantu Vanna—that's where Fenlow says he wants to go—"

"Where is he?" broke in her father.

Commander Carson answered. "Waiting for me at the jetty."

"I'll have Tua fetch a fresh pitcher of drink," said Anne.

Jim Breamer lifted a hand. "What's here will do. Don't disturb Tua—let him sleep—till mornin'. Then he shook hands with Carson.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Jim," said the commander.

"So you're follerin' around after Chi Lun, eh? Why don't you gover'ment chaps put that fat old pirate of a Chink out of business? Odley and me have heard that he's boarded twenty-two luggers and bought two hundred and forty-eight pearls for about a sixth of their value. No sale, dead lugger skipper next time he goes ashore. That's a disgrace!"

"We're doing our best to get evidence that will click, Jim."

"Oh, shucks! I could put the old hellion out of business."

"With a crew of trained Bias Bay pirates aboard the *Heavenly Justice*, Jim? They'd

cut you up for shark bait in two minutes."

"I don't know about that," said Bremer, as he took a glass of yellow liquid from his daughter. "The lugger skippers have made a proposition to Odley and me. We take Chi Lun's pearls away from him at the end of every buying season, send the pearls to the bank at Lantu Vanna, the bank sells 'em, and gives part of the money to Odley and me on percentage, and the rest to the lugger skippers. Say, if Chi Lun's got a hundred thousand pearls aboard tonight, Odley and I'd get about thirty thousand dollars if we took 'em, and the pearls the rest—and it belongs to 'em, by right."

"That'd be piracy," said Carson. "I'd have to arrest you."

Jim Bremer laughed. "Oh, we'd wait until you was out of the way, Commander. If you can't get evidence against Chi Lun, because he gets a bill-of-sale for the pearls he buys at steal prices, you'd have a fat time getting evidence against us. You wouldn't take Chi Lun's word against a pair of white men, would you?"

"Now, Dad!" objected Anne. You should not talk like that!"

"No, I guess I shouldn't." He drank from the glass, then turned his head to listen. Feet were hurrying up the coral gravel of the path.

"That must be Fenlow coming back," said Anne.

A SMALL thin figure in a blue gown and a black skull cap, queue trailing behind, mounted the steps. Mr. Li blinked through his glasses, opened a fan, bowed, and began fanning himself.

"Here, what's this?" demanded Carson, confronting the little Chinese. "You've no right to land here without a permit."

Mr. Li bowed again. "My master, Chi Lun, sent me to ask that back to him be returned the pearls brought to this island by your captain. I appeal to higher authority—and demand pearls, sir."

"What pearls?"

"Pearls Captain Dinnott take. He not go

to cutter—he come shore side. This is illegal. Very bad. Not honest. My master not fear law—but fear lose pearls." He told his story hastily.

"Listen, you!" barked Commander Carson. "Don't you come to me charging that the coast guard has stolen your pearls! And there is no Captain Dinnott."

Mr. Li's fan froze in his hand. "You say no, sir? I am lawyer. All on board my master's schooner see coast guard captain go with pearls away—and come ashore in boat. This is unfortunate for government."

"Very likely—and unfortunate for Chi Lun. I'm the government in these waters. You have two hundred and forty-eight pearls bought from luggers. If I find aboard you two hundred and fifty-nine pearls, you and your master will be in trouble with me."

"We no got pearls—any! Your captain steal from my master——"

"Nonsense! You don't get me yet. There's a Chinese pirate in these waters—took eleven pearls from two Jap skippers—that might make two hundred and fifty-nine pearls in your master's cabinet. And if two hundred and fifty-nine pearls, I might hang your master from his own bowsprit and use you for a makeweight at his feet, Mr. Li. Now, then—how many pearls you got aboard?"

Mr. Li's legal mind was nimble. He knew that his master's cabinet contained two hundred and fifty-nine pearls—and that the extra eleven pearls would hang all hands aboard the *Heavenly Justice*. He wondered how Commander Carson knew so much about the number of pearls in that lost cabinet. Mr. Li divined the fact that he was in a trap—and he visioned his own neck in the bight of a rope.

"Get back aboard that schooner! Shove off!" ordered Carson.

Mr. Li turned and fled. As he ran through the palm grove for the beach he wept because there was no justice under the white barbarian's rule.

"Hey, Odley!" called Jim Bremer. "Come on in the house!"

A young man in washed dungarees and undershirt, with a faded blue pilot cap, hurried up the steps. Sun and smoke had almost blackened his face. He took off his cap and his teeth grinned whitely at Commander Carson. "Good evenin', Commander! 'Ow's tricks?"

"Almost as good as trepang fishing—or opium smuggling. Ought to arrest you for putting men ashore on this island, but as you had the owner of this plantation aboard with you, the charge wouldn't stick."

"Listen, Commander," said Breamer, "I want Odley to take this old satchel to Lantu Vanna and turn it over to the bank. They'll know what to do with it."

Carson squinted at the satchel. "What's in it, Jim?"

Breamer grinned. Two hundred—and fifty-nine—berries."

"You mean dollars?"

"Have it your own way, Commander. Send Fenlow back up here. I'm giving him a job, and that takes him out of the beachcomber class."

"O. K., let's go," said Carson. He took his jacket and cap from the railing. Odley picked up the satchel. They said their good-byes and departed for the beach.

Anne's hand went to her father's arm. "Dad, you've been knocking around with beachcombers and smugglers—and you've been up to something!"

"Sure, I been up to something! I've got

ten thousand dollars to my order in the bank at Lantu Vanna."

"Ten thousand! You couldn't get a thousand there last month!"

"That was last month. And Fenlow's no beachcomber—I knew him when he was mate of a square-rigger in the northern islands. He's going to put in ten thousand as a partner on the plantation with us."

"Dad, you've been up to something illegal!"

"Don't you worry! Didn't you hear Carson mention two hundred and fifty-nine pearls to that Chink lawyer—and didn't I tell Carson there were two hundred and fifty-nine berries in that satchel. And Odley's putting in ten thousand dollars as a third partner. Now you can take that trip to the States any time you like."

"Odley—the smuggler!"

"Oh, well, that's what the coast guard calls him. Now, Anne, all I'm going to tell you is that Commander Carson himself put me in the way of raising that ten thousand dollars—and Odley and Fenlow were in on the deal. It was a little dangerous—but we got away with it. And I'm going to fire Tua—he's been too slick with Chi Lun." He stepped to the door. "Hey, Fenlow, might as well come in the house—you big island tramp! I'm going to put you to work just to keep you from turning pirate. You'd make a good one, or I miss my bet—and how'd you like to get hung?"

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*One Fellow Who Decided that He  
Had Had Just about Enough  
of the Mounted*

## BUSHED

By H. S. M. KEMP

*Author of "Black Salvage," "Gone  
Missing," etc.*

**A**FTER an hour of careful thought, Pete Nelson came to the conclusion that he was just a jug-headed fool. Here he was, seven years in the Police, still a buck constable, shanghai'd at Owl River, and cooped up with a bum like Webster. Webster was a sergeant, the gink in charge. It was just as well he was a sergeant. Had he been a buck such as Pete Nelson himself, Pete would have taken him apart long ago to see what made him tick. But that's the way it went; a feller joined the Police and went north to see the country, and the country was about all he ever did see. Seven months winter; a mail that came through whenever it could; a crowd of Chink-eyed Nitchies or Huskies for company; sow-belly, and grub outa cans. A swell life; but after seven years Pete had had enough. Next summer, when his leave came around, he'd show 'em! Town, the bright-lights, white men

who spoke a white man's language—and the girl.

Pete didn't know what caused his thoughts to switch to the girl; unless it was the radio over in the corner of the room. Through the loud-speaker came the strains of a dance orchestra, seven hundred miles away in an airline:

"Speak to me of love,  
And whisper these words to me—"

Pete stirred uneasily in his chair. Music like that got a feller; made him think of the things he missed. That dance out in Maplewood on his last leave, two years ago; with the lights shaded and a moon floating above. The girl was wearing a gauzy yellow frock that night, and when she clung to him in the waltz her hair tickled his nose. There was a perfume to it. Her fingers had tightened on his shoulder. "Gee, Pete, but it seems a long time to wait——" Then Webster,



sprawled on his cot, laughed uproariously at a joke he was reading in a magazine six months old.

The laugh broke Pete's musing short. He was back in the present—the log-walled detachment, the hissing of the gasoline lamp, the yelling storm that had cooped Webster and him together for more than a week. And the laugh sent something crawling up Pete Nelson's spine.

Damn Webster, anyway, the red-faced, slab-sided heel! But for Webster's pull with the O.C., Pete Nelson himself would have been in charge of the detachment. But Webster had been transferred from Indian Falls, Pete's chances of promotion had been washed out, and the girl, waiting in town, had had to keep on waiting and wondering if Pete Nelson really cared.

Pete ground his jaws — and Webster started to hum the tune the orchestra was playing.

Now if there was one thing that drove Pete to distraction, it was Clarence Webster's hum. The man hummed in the morning and he hummed at night—a tuneless dirge, off-key and off-balance. Mostly Pete Nelson closed his ears and bore it in silence; but now, breaking in on the orchestra's efforts, Pete's restraint snapped.

"Hey!" he roared at Webster. "You gotta moan like that—or is there something we can do about it?"

Webster quit abruptly, heaved himself to an elbow and scowled at Pete.

"You sayin' something?"

"Sayin' somethin,' hell!" snarled Pete. He pointed to the radio. "There's a high-priced band playin' a tune I like. Now, can I hear 'em, or do I have to listen to that bellerin' instead?"

Webster's scowl vanished. He studied Pete deliberately for a moment, then grinned and shook his head.

"Bushed," he muttered. "The feller can't take it any more!"

Pete clamped fingers about the arms of his chair.

"Who's bushed?" he demanded. "Me? Don't get funny ideas. I'm goin' crazy listenin' to you!"

With another chuckle that shook his vast frame, Webster stood up and began to roll a cigarette. With the flap licked down he spoke.

"If you ain't bushed, you got all the signs of it," he told Pete Nelson. "So long as Bill and Rusty were around, you got by. But now——" and he shrugged expressively.

Pete glared at him, jaw hard. He watched Webster light his cigarette and drop to his cot again.

"Never mind who's bushed and who ain't," Pete told him. "We're talkin' about that ungodly row you kick up. The way she is, I chop wood, feed the dogs and do the cookin'. All right; them three stripes on your arm say I got to. But no three stripes on any man's arm'll make me put up with that damned moanin' of yours."

Suddenly, Webster's eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened. To Pete Nelson it looked as though a fight was brewing. Well, let 'er brew! That's what Pete wanted.

"Listen," said Webster. "I've never used my stripes on you, and you know it. Forget it!" was his curt advice. "Quit acting like a kid, and try to grow up." He sprawled on the cot again, magazine in hand.

Pete glared at him, hungrily. What would you do with a bird like that? A feller that took it, and then lay down again? Hell, you just couldn't do a thing. Still, that infernal moanin' was finished—

THE next day the storm lifted. Pete routed out his six dogs from their kennels, hitched them to the sleigh and headed for a meat-cache ten miles out in the Barrens. In spots the snow was deep; in others it had drifted into high walls. The going was tough, but Pete gloried in it. Anything to get away from the cursed detachment and the company of Webster. He envied Bill and Rusty their job—a patrol over to Chesterfield Inlet. They didn't have to stick

around and get a bellyful of the stuff he had to take. Still, he guessed he could rough it out for another four months. Then the leave would come around.

He found the cache, dug with his snowshoes and unearthed the carcasses of a dozen Barren Lands caribou he had shot a month before. Loading his sleigh, he recovered the balance, then struck south again.

Around him was the dazzling vastness of the Barrens. Here and there a clump of dwarfed and wind-twisted jackpines heightened more than broke the monotony. Far away, on the horizon before him, was the dark smudge of timber-line—Owl River and the detachment.

He was looking at it when he caught sight of a dot moving rapidly to the west against the greenish sky.

At first he thought it was a raven, scouring the outlands for what it might discover; then he knew it for what it really was—a plane.

He yelled at the dogs, swung his whip. A plane meant mail; magazines and letters from home. He covered the return trip in record time, bedded the dogs and fed them from the frozen carcasses. Then he turned into the house.

Webster was there, surrounded by parcels, wrappings and general litter. As though forgetful of the display of feeling the previous night, the sergeant met him with a grin and a wave of the hand.

"Your stuff's all on your bed. Whole slew of it. Help yourself."

Pete wanted to dig in immediately, but he wouldn't give Webster this satisfaction. He brewed tea, ate a can of pork-and-beans and rolled a smoke. Then, at ease, he went through his letters.

An hour went by. There was the rustling of paper, the occasional striking of a match as a cigarette was lit; mostly, though, there was that silent, intimate atmosphere that descends on men heart-hungry for news from the Outside.

But Webster swung around at last,

yawned, and faced Pete with fat hands on fatter thighs.

"Good news?" he asked.

"Fair enough," grudgingly replied Pete.

"Well, I've some for you that ain't so good. Your leave's cancelled for another year."

Pete allowed a newspaper to drop from his hand while he stared at Webster with dumbfounded disbelief in his eyes.

"My leave's *what*?"

"Cancelled." Webster repeated the word. "They're re-organizing the Territories; and until then your trip is shelved."

Pete was breathing hard. "Can I see the letter?" he asked.

"Sure. Read it."

Pete did so; then returned it with a sudden harsh laugh.

"Ain't that sweet!" he jeered. "'Constable Nelson will have to forego his leave until a later date.' He will like hell!" he suddenly roared. Then, as something snapped in his brain, added, "Constable Nelson's hittin' south right now!"

Webster wore a vestige of a smile. It might have been of dry amusement, or of sympathy. "It's tough. Those fellers out at Headquarters——"

"You tellin' me?" sneered Pete. "Here, I get letters from the girl tellin' me the days are long; sayin' she's waited now——" He broke off at his admission of sentiment. "Yeah; well, she ain't waitin' no longer. Just as soon as I get my jag of stuff together, I'm on m' way!"

Webster's lips drew in. "Know how you feel, Pete. But don't go off half-cocked. You've had too many years in the Force——"

"To be a sucker any longer. I know it."

**I**N GRIM and purposeful silence, Pete Nelson walked to the adjoining kitchen. He dug out his grub-box, filled it with what he could find and procured the balance from the warehouse. Inside the living room again he packed his clothing into a kit-bag—socks, moccasins, a change of underwear.

Webster watched him narrow-eyed. Spoke at last. "You running a bluff at deserting, or d'you mean it?" And when Pete Nelson failed to reply, added, "You won't get away with it. As long as I'm in charge of this detachment, I'll handle things. Put a hand on that door-latch again, Pete, and I'll shove you under arrest."

Pete faced him, a thin, hard sneer on his lips. "And who'll help?"



"I don't need any help," retorted Webster. "You're big and tough, but I've handled bigger toughs than you. Another thing; I don't stand by and see a deserter walk off with Government property."

"I ain't walkin' off with it," snarled Pete. "Three months ago I transferred a wad of my salary into the bank, but there's three-four hundred dollars to my credit with the Force yet. That'll pay for the lousy dogs and a bite of grub."

He tied the kit-bag, shoved his robe into a sack, slammed the lid of the grub-box. Kit-bag under his arm and Service cap snugged about his ears he faced Webster challengingly.

"Well; here she goes!"

He strode to the door and grabbed the latch; but Webster was there as soon as he. "Now look here, Pete," protested the sergeant. "Use a bit of brains—"

"Outa m' way!" roared Pete; and shoved Webster from his path.

A scuffle started; flared into a downright fight. Hands free of the kit-bag, Pete drove a smashing blow at Webster's jaw. He

missed, skinning his knuckles on the door-jamb. Then Webster got in a blow.

In three minutes the interior of the detachment looked as though a cyclone had passed through it. The table went over, a chair fell apart. The stove-pipes canted at an angle as both men rolled, grunted and battled on the floor. Webster, despite his bulk, was a power to be reckoned with; Pete, outraged, disappointed and disillusioned, fought like the savage he had suddenly become.

With a cut over his eye and a split lip, Pete pulled away from the sergeant's throttling embrace. Webster made another grab for him; but he was too late. Pete's fist came up; exploded—and Webster dropped, dead to the world.

It took a moment for Pete to steady himself, then a harsh grin plucked at his lips.

"Yeah; you arrested me! Some sweet chance!"

He turned to the whitewashed wall and from there seized a pair of handcuffs and a leg-iron. He snapped these shut on Webster's wrists and ankles and shoved the keys in his pocket. After that he hitched the dogs, loaded his travelling gear, and entered the detachment again. Webster was coming out of his daze.

"You've handled tough guys, eh?" jeered Pete. "They weren't tough enough." He produced the keys and dangled them before Webster's blooded eyes. "I'm takin' these with me, for about a mile. Hop along, feller, and you'll find 'em."

He waited for Webster's reply, but none came. Webster merely glared at him, and swallowed hard.

"Okay," said Pete shortly. "Tell 'em to look for me, south!"

He went out, slamming the door behind him.

HE TRAVELLED that night until after dark. There was no trail, but Pete possessed an almost Indian-like sense of direction. Some time early the next day he would come to the Hudson's Bay outpost at

Red Mountain, and from there bear south and east until he struck the railway near Churchill. After that—Winnipeg, the girl, a honeymoon. He had five thousand dollars in the bank; and if any haywire outfit thought they could treat him like a husky-dog—work him, feed him, own him body and soul—well, they could guess again.

Of one thing he was pretty certain and that was that Webster would follow him. Despite his fat and his easy-going ways, Webster was a bullheaded sort of cuss. Stubborn. And if Webster said he'd arrest him, arrest him he would. If he could. But Pete laughed. He himself had the better dogs, was in finer shape, and knew the country. Let Webster come ahead and run some of the lard off him.

Pete pulled up next morning at the Hudson's Bay outpost. He found the door of the low log-and-mud store ajar, and his first intimation that all was not well came from his prick-eared leader. The dog sniffed within, backed away, hackles raised and whimpering. Frowning, and loosening the flap of the holster buttoned over his parka, Pete pushed past the dog and entered the store.

There was a rough counter, around the edge of which he suddenly saw a pair of moccasined feet. They were eloquently still. Beyond the feet was the body. The arms were sprawled in the stiffness of death, and the head was gory with blood.

In his seven years in the North, Pete Nelson had met death in many forms; but this was a grisly shock. He stooped down, rolled the body over and gazed into the bloody features of Louis Girard. Louis' trading days were over. The Company was shy a man.

Pete looked around the place. There was no need of questions. The shelves were practically looted and not a shred of fur remained. He walked outside, and saw the new toboggan track leading away to the west.

Standing there, frowning, with his whimpering leader at his feet, a sudden recollec-

tion came to him. It was a radio message, broadcast from distant Ottawa six weeks before. He recalled the voice of the announcer, almost the identical words:

"Big Joe Starmberg is reported to have escaped the custody of the Police at Churchill. From the report received, Starmberg was liberated from his cell last Wednesday night by two men, believed to have been his earlier partners—Weasel Ferris and the Banjo Kid. In the jail delivery, Constable Bruce was seriously wounded and Corporal Travers less seriously. Starmberg was under arrest for the suspected murder of another trapper on the Thelon River, in which he was no doubt aided by his two partners. Police Officers throughout the Territories are requested to be on their guard for these three men, and any rumors regarding their present whereabouts should be investigated at once."

Pete Nelson grunted. For some time after the receipt of the broadcast, those of them at the detachment had kept an ear to the ground.

He, himself, had taken a patrol to Leaf River, running down a report that had turned out to be merely an old squaw's tale. Webster, Bill Nevin and Rusty Ford had been equally active. But with the passage of time, the matter of Big Joe Starmberg had dropped into the limbo of things forgotten.

But apparently Big Joe was very real. Pete Nelson had run into the man three years before, and he remembered him as a hulking, truculent brute suspected of liquor-peddling amongst the Chips and Crees. And it was more than likely that Weasel Ferris and the Banjo Kid had lent a hand in this murder of Louis Girard.

Pete studied the new toboggan track, walked up it for a hundred yards or so. Yes; there showed at times three different sets of footprints. One set was big, and broad; another long and pointed. The third was small and showed only at the edge of the toboggan track. Weasel Ferris was doubtless travelling ahead of the dogs, with Big Joe



Starmberg and the Banjo Kid trailing along behind.

But back at his sleigh again, Pete gave a sudden, mirthless laugh. Why was he worryin' about tracks? Three tough eggs travellin' west meant nothing to him. He was through with the Force and all the grief that went with it. Let Webster handle the case. It'd give him more to worry about than Pete Nelson. And Pete laughed again. The sweetest red herring ever dragged across a trail!

But inside the looted store, Pete made one concession. He found a pad of counter blanks and scribbled a note:

*"Louis is dead, and Joe Starmberg is likely the one who did it. They went west, and all you have to do is to follow them. But look out! There are three of them, and they are probably a bit tougher than those other guys you were telling me about!"*

Then snapping the padlock on the door, he shoved his note through the hasp and swung his leader towards the south again.

But Pete Nelson didn't know himself as well as he thought he did. All that day thoughts of Big Joe Starmberg, Weasel Ferris and the Banjo Kid travelled with him. They were tough mugs; desperate. It might be too bad for the next man they met. Anyway, three killers on the prowl in the Barrens represented a sinister menace. It was a policeman's job to bring 'em in. Of course, Pete told himself, he wasn't a policeman any more. He was a deserter; a renegade, if you liked. But he was still wearing the red coat.

While he slugged at the tail of his sleigh or rode on it, he chewed his lip and told himself he was a weak-kneed fool. What had the Force done for him? Nothing. And what had he done for it? Too blamed much. He had starved, sweated, frozen himself and tightened his belt, just for carrying on a something men called tradition. Well, he wasn't doin' it any more.

But the worst of it was a feller lived a long time. Had to live with himself, and his conscience. Wouldn't be so nice, forty years from now, to look back and know you'd been a quitter. Then, out of nowhere at all, the girl came again.

She, now, was square. Pete couldn't imagine her going back on any job or on any thing. Her eyes were too level; her chin too firm. She knew nothing about tradition, but everything about loyalty. Her seven years of waiting for a tramp like Pete Nelson to come out of the North proved that. And if the girl ever knew that Pete had turned his back on the job in hand, well—— Pete wriggled inwardly when he thought of it.

HE TURNED his dogs into a bluff, hauled out his grub-box and lit a fire. As the snow in the kettle melted, Pete found himself facing another angle of the case. The angle that affected Webster.

Pete knew what would happen when Webster found Louis Girard dead and saw that new toboggan track. He'd turn up the track like a bloodhound on a scent. Yeah; and gum the whole works. Webster was that kind of a goof. More than that, he'd probably light in a jackpot himself. For all his crowing about the tough eggs he'd handled, he stood about as much chance of corralling Big Joe and his pals as he had of corralling the moon. Big Joe'd corral him! And then what? Something more on Pete's conscience; something more to keep from the girl.

"Oh, hell!" snarled Pete. "Feller gets himself so tangled up——"

But when he had finished his meal, he swung the dogs, and with a harsh yell started them on the back-track.

Now, for a reason that he could not have explained, he demanded the utmost in speed. He tried to tell himself that it was his desire to get the job over and done with. But that didn't account for the feeling of uneasiness that possessed him. And the feeling in-

tensified when he reached the outpost again towards dusk. For there; left in the snow for him to read, were the tracks of Webster's jumper leaving his trail to follow that of Big Joe and his mates.

Pete pressed on till long after dark; then paused to feed the dogs and take on a hasty supper. It was his intention to travel all night—as doubtless Big Joe would be doing—but the darkness thwarted him. His leader, Muhigun, was one of the best; but time and again, the dog went astray following the faint trail. Finally, after missing it completely for more than an hour, Pete grudgingly camped.

Dawn, however, saw him away again. He re-located the trail, and noticed that the double track before him was leaving the open Barrens and skirting through the ragged timber. Soon he saw old blaze-marks on the trees, and coming onto a little lake he suddenly got his bearings. Big Joe had hit the east-to-west Cree Lake-Athabasca road and was definitely heading for the big gold-strike on Athabasca Lake. Pete smiled grimly. Unknown to Big Joe, news of his escape had already flashed across the North; the Mounted Police at Athabasca would welcome him and his entourage with open arms.

But on the way was another outpost, one belonging to the French Company. It was still a good day to the west; but there, Big Joe might use the same mad-dog tactics that had characterized his visit to the outpost at Red Mountain.

Pete dug out his snowshoes and shoved his dogs to the limit.

In the northwest, snow-clouds began to bank. The wind sprang up, blew gustily through the trees. A blizzard was brewing, one of those sudden squalls that sweep down from the Arctic. Pete frowned dubiously. A storm might not be so welcome. There were plenty of open stretches to come—places where the trail might be wiped out. Pete hoped for the best; but his hopes were in vain. Within the hour the storm struck, howling about him with savage fury.

His dogs wanted to turn from it. He yelled at them; took the lead himself. Within ten minutes, except in the heaviest bush, the trail he was following had vanished completely and Pete was thrown on his own resources.

Once before, a couple of years ago, he had come down this trail. He remembered its main characteristics and its general direction. Now all he could do was to follow that direction and, should he miss the trail, to circle and pick it up again after the storm had ceased.

For an hour he fought his way on. Icy pellets stung his face and his eyelids froze together. Sleet hissed into the hood of his parka, and snow-devils twisted and whirled. Then, as abruptly as it had started, the storm died away.

Pete called a halt and took stock of his surroundings. With the trail gone, there was nothing to show that human being had ever passed that way. But ahead, five miles distant, was a faint notch in a low range of hills that Pete recognized from his previous trip. Big Joe—and Webster—were probably making for that notch.

Pete turned to his dogs. They were down, chewing the ice-balls from their feet. He chirped to them, struck off on his webs, leading the way. And when he reached the notch he found something that made him glow with excitement.

THE tracks were new, and had been made since the storm. That meant that while the storm had raged, both he and the others had been out in the open together. It made his nerves tingle. He might have blundered right onto them; might have had a bullet through his brain and never known from whence it came. But as he read the signs, he had another shock. The tracks were those only of Big Joe and his mates. There was the mark of the passing toboggan, but the clean-cut tracks of Webster's runner jumper had vanished completely. He scowled, looked around him; and a grin of savage sat-

isfaction wreathed his cracked and peeling lips.

"Lost the trail! Gummed it—just like I said he would." Pete chuckled silently. "Now mebbe he won't crow so much about all the tough guys he's pulled in. Tough guys! He couldn't arrest a cat up a blind alley!"

Pete wished he could see Webster now. He'd like to have a picture of him chasing himself in rings. He'd probably be lost for two-three days, but he wouldn't come to harm. Webster thought too much of his belly to travel with a slim grub-box.

"But him bein' out of the way," mused Pete, "sorta passes the buck to me. Well; we'll show 'em how a job should be done"

Now, within striking distance of his prey, he pressed on cautiously but speedily—and within a mile or so had his reward.

He was travelling ahead of the dogs, coming over the crest of a little hill. Down from the hill stretched a mile-long muskeg, bleak-looking, dotted with sparse and scrawny tamaracks. The three men were stopped in the middle of it, clustered around a loaded sleigh.

Pete went down on his face and crawled to the shelter of a clump of willows. The dogs stopped at his sharp command. From his place of concealment, he raised his head for a cautious survey.

It had been a close call. Even yet he feared he had been seen. But as he watched the clustered figures, he breathed easier. Leisurely they strung the dogs into line and took up the trail. Again one man took the lead, with a companion sprawling on the sleigh and a third following along behind.

Pete watched them as they crossed the muskeg and climbed the hill on the other side. For a moment he debated his own course. The proper thing to do was to skirt the muskeg, get ahead of his men, and lay up for when they came along. But this was hardly the place for such tactics. The muskeg extended for a mile or so on each side

of the trail. By the time he had made his circle, Big Joe would be far ahead of him again. He waited until he judged them to be out of sight and hearing, then led his dogs down the hill.

It took him ten minutes to make the crossing, and the minutes were fraught with suspense. He found himself debating whether or not he had done the wise thing. If the outlaws had seen him, they would be waiting in the timber on the other side. Waiting for him to come within killing range. But he made the crossing, and breathed easier when it was over.

Now his dogs showed their eagerness. Muhigun, the leader, sniffed the air, rumbled in his throat and trod hard on Pete's heels. Pete silenced the dog by a cuff over the snout, and continued his cautious advance.



Now, he told himself, was the time to make that circle; to get ahead of these babies and hold 'em up when they came along. A few hundred yards distant was the place to begin, a place where the timber was the heaviest along the whole route. But as he drew near to it, his leader whined, the wheel-dog barked savagely—and a high-powered bullet screamed over his head.

Pete froze; snapped a hand to the gun at his side. Again the rifle roared, and Pete felt the breeze of passing lead. A voice spoke, grating and harsh.

"Get 'em up, punk! One bum move, and I'll drill you—centre!"

Pete hesitated; but slowly obeyed as a mackinaw-clad figure stepped out of the spruce a dozen yards ahead.

It needed but one glance. Those hulking shoulders, huge hands and truculent face could fit nobody but Big Joe Starnberg. Big Joe acknowledged the recognition.

"Sure. The cop from Owl River, Seems like we met before."

Pete did not answer. He was too rattled even to think. Big Joe laughed immoderately.

"Slickest thing I ever see—th' way you stepped into it. Just like a fox in a trap." He let out a yell, spoke to Pete again. "Got some sidekicks I want you t' meet."

There was the crunch of footsteps, the growling of Pete's dogs, and two men stepped into the picture. These Pete did not know, but the hatchet-faced one he concluded would be Weasel Ferris and the dangerous-looking, cold-eyed youth the Banjo Kid.

"Yuh; meet th' boys!" chuckled Big Joe, and introduced them by name. He was still fondling his rifle, a Savage .303, and with this he pointed to Pete as he spoke to the others.

"Wearin' a gun, see? Grab it. He won't need no gun breakin' trail."

Pete frowned. Breaking trail? Just what did that mean? But the question was forgotten as the two advanced on him.

They grabbed his belt, loosened it and yanked the lanyard over his head. Pete was disgusted at his own shortsightedness, but back of the disgust was a healthy rage. He, Pete Nelson, hardboiled cop, was being frisked of his own gun. Yeah; and bein' frisked by a couple of mugs he had sworn to put behind the bars. Weasel Ferris made the mistake of putting the thoughts into words—and went flying back from a smashing blow in the teeth.

The Banjo Kid was due for the next, but the Kid saw it coming. The blow intended for his jaw grazed his ear; then he and Pete were fighting and gouging in two feet of snow.

The Kid was tough, and full of fight. So was Pete. But Pete couldn't cope with both the Kid and Big Joe Starnberg. Joe swung in, shoved out a ham-like paw and tried to pull the two apart. When this failed and his chance came, Big Joe swung the butt of his .303.

And Pete Nelson went out, as cold as a corpse.

HE CAME to earth again to find himself beside a glowing fire. His own dogs, two of them bloody-headed, were sprawled out in the trail near another five-dog string and a toboggan. The sight of those huskies of his was all Pete needed to bring him fully awake. Blood on their heads meant they had taken a hand in the scrap—and been beaten to submission by either Big Joe or the Banjo Kid. Snarling a curse, Pete faced the fire, to find the three outlaws drinking tea.

"Back, eh?" Big Joe threw his own dregs away and scooped another panful of tea. Into this he chucked a handful of chilling snow and passed the cup to Pete.

"Down 'er!" he ordered. "Because we need you, is why?"

Pete was glad of the drink, for his head swam dizzily. The hot liquid seemed to brace him, and he regarded Weasel's split lip and missing front teeth with a glow of satisfaction. But the voice of Big Joe broke in, savage and menacing.

"We ain't standin' for no foolin', Cop. Get that—straight. Fellers that beef a guy can't hang twice for beefin' another. You're the other—if you ain't good." He was silent a moment; went on. "We're tired of breakin' trail. Now it's your turn. You're hittin' out ahead of my dogs, with me ridin' the sleigh. Do a job of it, and when we come to where there's a real trail, we'll likely turn you loose and let you rustle what luck you can. But get canary, and I'll blow your light out with the .303."

He stood up, chucked his cup into the grub-box with the others and lashed the box to the tail of the toboggan. The Banjo Kid escorted Pete to a spot ahead of the dogs, handed him his snowshoes and nodded a silent command.

Pete was still somewhat dizzy, but his brain was functioning. He went over Big Joe's words, but did not bother with the man's promise. Big Joe was lying, anyway. He, Pete, was ordered to get out and break trail like an Indian; and then, when the



necessity of breaking trail was over, he'd get a bullet in the brain. Pete knew. That yap about being turned loose was all hooey.

At Big Joe's yell he started off. Behind him rode the outlaw, sprawled in the toboggan and cuddling his .303. At five yards, Big Joe wouldn't miss; but Pete Nelson wouldn't give up. Not yet, anyhow. He knew that Weasel Ferris and the Banjo Kid were riding his own sleigh, and the thought drove him to blinding anger. He was tempted to make a break for it; to duck into the heavy bush. Given ten seconds, and he'd chance Big Joe and his rifle. But ten seconds is a long, long time when you're hangin' on the lip of eternity. Pete figured he'd better set his teeth and bide his time. The chance would come. Big Joe'd grow careless; there might be a twist in the trail. In the meantime—up, down; up, down; he swung the heavy webs so three outlaws could ride in comfort. Humiliation mingled with his rage; hatred for Big Joe, disgust at himself. A helva fine figure he must look—caribou parka, red tunic, Service cap—Injunin' it for a cut-throat gang the rest of the Police were tryin' to run to earth. Pete swallowed the galling lump in his throat. The rest of the Police—Webster, Bill Nevin, Rusty Ford. If those babies ever heard of this, he'd never live it down.

**T**HEN slap in front of him, blocking the trail with his two hundred pounds of beef, stood the figure of Sergeant Webster himself.

There was an atom of time that gave Pete a chance to see Webster's hard jaw, his spread legs and the Service carbine in his hands—then Pete ducked as guns crashed all around him.

Webster had fired from the hip as Big Joe's rifle roared. Big Joe slumped back in the toboggan and the rifle dropped from his fingers. The Banjo Kid and Weasel Ferris went into action.

Webster must have realized his sudden danger, for he made a spring for the bush.

But he slipped, went asprawl, dropped his carbine.

Pete knew that death was due to strike again, for the Banjo Kid was pumping a shell into the chamber of his own gun. Pete lunged for the toboggan, dropped to his knees and grabbed Big Joe's rifle as a bullet roared inches over his head. The Kid was firing point-blank at the sergeant. Whether or not he got him, Pete could not tell. Neither could the Kid ever tell; for Pete drilled him between the eyes before the smoke had cleared away.

There was a yell from Webster. Pete stayed on his knees, wondering if the sergeant were hit. He couldn't turn to find out, for there was still Weasel Ferris. And Pete was staring at the man over the levelled sights of Weasel's gun.

There was a fraction of a moment to go. Pete, with a dead shell in the chamber of the rifle he held, knew he was too late; that before he could drop behind the toboggan's head, Weasel would get him. And the shuddering smack that hit his shoulder and flung him on his face told him that he had guessed correctly.

But out of the haze that followed, Pete felt somebody's hands grabbing him and lifting him onto a blanket. He heard the wheezing that accompanied the effort, and marvelled to think this was Webster. But his dominant thought was Weasel Ferris—and Weasel's deadly aim.

"Look out!" he screamed. "No sense in him gettin' us both!"

Then he heard Webster chuckle. "He's done gettin' anybody. You've been out five minutes, and in five minutes, things do happen."

Pete managed to sit up. His shoulder throbbled, and a numbing agony extended down his right side.

"Got 'em all?" he managed to ask.

"Yeah, we got 'em," corrected Webster. "Big Joe is the only one worth haulin' back. I creased him down the can, and he's wearin' the irons for safety."

Later, a fire was lit, where Webster boiled tea and ripped the blankets of the two dead outlaws into strips. He washed Pete's wound with strong iodine and bound it up, first with a piece of clean shirt and then with the blanket strips.

"Always travel with a first-aid kit," he counselled Pete. "Takes no room, and it sure pays."

Pete looked at him; grunted.

"How come you lost the trail—then found it again?"

"I didn't lose it. I knew we were comin' to heavy timber—the ideal place to drop on 'em. They were bad actors; feller couldn't take a chance."

Pete snorted. "Bad actors!" he sneered. "And you're a dam' poor liar. You lost yourself, and hit the trail by chance. At that, you only shaded me. I was just gettin' ready to do the same blamed thing." Pete waited a moment; then asked Webster a defiant question. "And where do we go from here?"

"Back," was Webster's unhesitating reply. "What else?"

"And me?"

"What d'you mean, and me? I'm takin' you along, if that's it. You've got a bum wing. And," grinned beefy Webster, "like I told you, no deserter gets away if I can help it."

Pete glared at him, gritting his teeth in agony and impotent rage.

"Cripes, if you knew how I hate you——"

**T**HERE was a plane standing in front of Owl River detachment when the three dog-teams pulled in. Pete Nelson couldn't see much more, for his shoulder was blind torture. But he found Bill Nevin and Rusty Ford on hand, with them the Airways pilot. And, unless his eyes were giving out on him entirely, the feller coming towards them in the lead was the O.C. of the District, Superintendent Hart himself.

Pete set his teeth. All the way up he had kept conscious by will-power alone. But now that the trip was behind him and the neces-

sity of hanging onto his nerve had passed, he felt himself slip.

They drew up to the door, and out of the murmur of voices he heard the anxious inquiry of the O.C. Came Webster's voice, blurry and indistinct. Then hands were lifting him, and he knew it was into the plane.

After that things became more vague. He heard the rattling as gasoline was drawn from one of the drums at the rear of the buildings and felt the swaying of the ship as the pilot gassed up. Then the droning of voices went on. This time he recognized the O.C.'s.

"—new detachment on the Churchill. Three constables and an N.C.O.—Nelson in charge, with corporal's rank."

Pete was suddenly and fully awake. He frowned, disbelieving his ears. Webster was doing the talking now.

"Good man. That patrol we took after Starnberg proved it. Saved my life, for a fact."

The O.C. gave a grunt. "Wants to get married, doesn't he? Then let him. The new detachment will be a married man's post. And I see no reason why he shouldn't get his third stripe within a year.

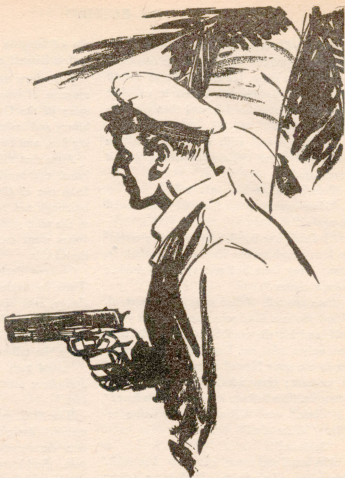
Pete's heart was pumping. Webster, heel that he was, made no mention of the attempted desertion. "*That patrol we took—*"

Then the O.C. again. "He'll be in hospital in less than four hours, and they'll fix him up. But in regard to my recommendation about his promotion. You're his immediate senior officer, and I'd like to give the Commissioner your frank opinion of Nelson. What may I say?"

Pete, breath bated, waited for Webster's reply. And when it came, it left him with burning cheeks, that were not due to his fever alone. Said Webster, in the wheezy chuckle that Pete had come to hate:

"Tell 'em that Pete's bushed as a jack-rabbit and crazy as a bat. Tell 'em they've kept him here too long. But tell 'em this, and it comes from me—he's the finest guy in the Force!"

*Young Joe Neal,  
Spending the For-  
tune of His Rum-  
running Uncle,  
Doesn't Do Any  
Turtle-Tasting*



## CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

By CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

*Author of "Queer and Hot," "The House of the Spear," etc.*

**J**EREMY, the black pilot from Grand Cayman, in the West Indies, knew the ten thousand reefs, rocks and channels from Eleuthera down to the Mouth of the Serpent even better than Captain Crede himself. The rum skippers of the old trade had said that Cayman Island men were the best sailors of the West Indies; and so, when Jeremy had hinted that young June turtle, simmered with bayleaf, thyme and other flavors was worth risking a

rich man's schooner for, the skipper had told him to find one.

Dan Crede called the Tobago cook aft for instructions when Jeremy put the helm over grinning confidently. The ninety-foot *Itara* lost her escort of shining, leaping porpoises when the water began to pale towards the shoals, and Dan picked up the binoculars from the drink stand under the awnings where Major Aylshire, the little pink Colony Briton, and Owner Joe Neal were laz-

ing the long afternoon away. A vast sea calm, the glacier clouds glimmering above the blue sea base, a thin thread of pinkish sands showing to starboard. Turtle weather.

"White wine—and the meat baked in the shell," said Aylshire. "Not sherry, m' lad—a sharp white wine, eh, Dan? Neal won't know; he's been a blinkin', cruisin' million-airre less than two years, y' see."

"I wouldn't know either," said Captain Crede. "Jeremy, look sharp for coral. Have a man for'ard with the lead. Now, Major, about turtles, I wouldn't know, except that I'm fed up on 'em raw."

Young Joe Neal laughed indolently and eyed his sailing master.

"Raw it was," drawled the Major. "Neal, the skipper is thinkin' of the full gale when we lost one of your uncle's rum ships among the Moon Reef. Dan and five of the crew made the sands. No fuel nor fire. They clawed the shell from young turtles with their hands and washed the meat down with rainwater caught in a broken tar butt for a week or so. Fancy that, now! Captain Crede, with an idler's gold braid on his cap!"

"It's a comedown for Dan," sighed the idler who paid the wages for eight black boys forward and one white, aft. The Major's berth was keeper of the winerom keys and he drew his wage straight from the bottle. "So we take a day off for roast turtle—"

Dan Crede passed the glasses to Jeremy. "What do you make of it? Far down—south—but this side of the east'ard hook."

The pilot watched intently. All young Neal saw was heat flicker with a faint crinkle of white now and then. The skipper eyed Jeremy's grizzled brown face which was taking the old wary look of the years when a rum pilot had to be right or else it was too bad. Jeremy had been with Crede through all that and come with him to these easy days on a white, keen schooner-yacht; brown man and white man found today a trifle dull.

Jeremy muttered. "Can't see, sir, why

anyone would be on the reef. No boat in sight; you can scan it all clear to that darker smudge beyond Wreckers' Pass. On the chart it's not named, but it'll be Allard's Island. The fellow there must have come from Allard's."

"Allard?" chuckled the little Major. "I jolly well recall the two Allard brothers of the West India Regiment—and neither came back from France. I say, Dan—"

Dan was over a chart in the cubby behind the helmsman. His finger followed along up the Leewards; he'd been through the old Spanish passage which the Plate ships up from Panama took when Morgan's pirates made the going too hot above the Virgins. He turned.

"Hold in, Jeremy. Half-speed. Castaway, eh? The man's groggy from sun. See that a boat's made ready, port side."

Dan was at the bridge-wing watching the clear water paling from green to yellow. The black men forward clustered by the falls but looking at a wavering figure on the treeless sand reef. The propellers ceased turning, the drone of the 140 h.p. Diesels died and the schooner lost headway till a light anchor went down.

Then everybody watched the stumbling castaway under the sun. Skipper Dan came back under the awnings. Now, beyond the bare reef, they saw thin pine trees on low brown hills which ran out to naked gray coral ridges among which the tide glittered. Dan went to the dinghy and called Jeremy.

"We'll talk to that bird ashore first. Fetch water along."

Jeremy went down, and the two stood while the oarsmen pulled the hundred yards to the beach. Neal heard them conferring.

"Why the precautions, Major? That poor devil's half dead!"

"Crede's way from old habits. M' lad, I fear for our turtle roast. A likely spot too. Well, as I said, a high dry sauterne—"

"They've given him a drink, they're talkin' to him alone. Well, they're fetchin' him aboard, Major, and he's yellin' crazy."



NO ONE aboard spoke till a thin black boy was shoved up to the rail and over. He stood with horny feet on the spotless deck glaring apprehensively at the well-fed, well-dressed, other black islanders about him. Crede snapped an order.

"Get the hook out. All of you, about your business. Jeremy, take this man for'ard. Buck him up with a drink if needs be. And stand by—he's to talk to no one now."

Joe Neal did not understand all that these sun-baked, waterless deserts of the sea may do to a man's mind if he sees no escape, but he guessed at the silence which fell upon them all. The castaway had babbled something to Dan Crede and the skipper now stood calmly watching his orders carried out. The *Itara* backed slowly from the shoal, came about and held south in blue water. The Major watched the course attentively, then glanced at the smudge of low brown hill pines off the starboard bow. Dan and the helmsman conferred in low voices, and the lookout on the stubby foremast scanned the water, now deep blue, now paling as the rippling shallows were traversed. Then the course changed south-southwest.

"The skipper is takin' your jolly little yacht places. The steward'll have to shift the side awnin' a bit, Joseph. Bit o' sun is gettin' to the drinks. A pannikin of ice, steward."

"It's commonly done for the master to consult the owner if he takes a boat into some unknown spot or other," said Joe Neal. "What about Allard's Island? Has it anything to do with my late Uncle John's old ventures? You know we came down the Indies to look into certain old investments of his—I'll call 'em that anyway."

"Y'd better — and say no more. Your Uncle John Neal had many a poker in the fire—one end hot and the other black. Investments for the old rum lord, meant many a thing you mightn't want turned up, m' boy. Old John left you plenty, clear and safe in the States."

"I'm havin' fun at this," grunted Joe.

"Dan's the only man who'd know the inside. The only skipper in the old fleet who was close to Uncle John. But why put into Allard's? What's there?"

"Rotten hole. I was there once, in 1916, when I was your age. There was talk of German U-boat bases among the Islands. Jolly nonsense but they had us Territorial chaps nosin' about. Now, Allard's plantations had been failures since the old sugar days ended. Sisal, coconuts, pineapples, I believe the family had a go at them all. Then the war. Seems to me that there were two tiny tots about the old house that dated from 1780. Boy and a girl—why the two will be grown now, eh what?"

THE Major mused on the distant island as the schooner skirted it southerly. Gaunt Carib pines were on the hundred-foot hills whose brown slopes seemed to come down to a hidden bay. But if this inlet was a harbor the *Itara* passed it far out. Crede held his glasses upon a shore that was utterly lifeless. Then he muttered to Jeremy.

"That boy told one thing true, at least. Keep the course till dark; then we'll work back. Fetch the fella aft, for he'll have to be sure of the shoals the other side of Allard's."

Aylshire was watching closely as the island came abeam. Then sat once more with the owner in the long chairs. "Bit odd."

"You wouldn't mind tellin' me?" grinned Neal. "Dan doesn't."

"Oh, no! But I'd say the sticks of a vessel showed as she'd sunk in the channel or close to it. The skipper's bothered."

Captain Crede turned at a word from Jeremy. Behind the bosun limped the bare-footed rescued islander rolling frightened eyes.

"Feel better, Cosby?" Dan's voice was kindly now. "This is Mr. Neal, who owns this American schooner. The other is Major Aylshire, a British subject like yourself—"

"A Crown officer?" The man's mouth

dropped. "Oh, I hope not, of all things! Missy Pat said the law must not be informed!"

Neal and Aylshire laughed slightly. The Major and Government House had had differences outstanding since the old rum trade years. Dan Crede looked grimly from his unserious friends to the black boy.



"Cosby," he said, "is a cattle keeper for the Allards. Miss Patricia Allard sent him away last night to find some other of the island field hands who'd gone beyond the north reef for turtles. He never found them and he lost his boat trying to drag across the coral. As he couldn't get back to Allard's he had a bad day in the sun—and his fright. Then he saw us and came up the reef. About all wrong with Cosby is what may be happening at Allard's Island now."

"And—" said the Major, "what could happen, Dan?"

The black boy twisted his frayed jipijapi hat to a sweated mass, unable to answer; keeping his swollen eyes astern to the distant isle. Captain Crede took it up for him. "Cosby says that John Allard came back yesterday with two strangers who had first arrived five weeks ago, in a rotten whaleboat, when they brought a message to young Allard. Cosby never knew what it was. His mistress, Miss Patricia, was away at Grenada, and when she came home on the monthly mailboat her brother had gone south with these two men. They'd outfitted an old schooner that had been derelict in Allard's Cove for three years. D'you recall the old *Aberdeen Lass*, Major?"

The Major's hand stopped with his glass halfway to his lips.

"You're not meanin' it? The old Belize runner that'd been wrecked, burned, rebuilt, and finally lost again? Sassoon was the swindlin' skipper that you and old John Neal put out of the rum fleet!"

Crede smiled distantly. Then pointed astern. "There's the old *Lass*—scuttled in the channel, Cosby says."

The islander found his voice: "They did it, sir! The party came back and finding Miss Patricia returned they were upset enough! Master John and the two strangers brought a third man. But that ship—no papers, no registry, no owners—an abandoned hulk till they patched her up. A schooner, forgotten, condemned; if the resident commissioner knew it, sir, he'd say she'd been stolen by Mr. Allard for some unlawful purpose and then sunk to cover the crime!"

"Crime?" the little Major whistled softly. "Oh, I'd say not! The Allards were a decent lot."

"Cosby says," put in Dan Crede, "that young Allard was in debt—desperate. His sister went to Grenada about the extension of some loan. Now she's home, and she believes that her brother's companions are escaped men from the French penal settlements in Guiana. *Liberes*, who got to Dutch territory, and then up here."

The Colony man shrugged. "Well, that's not uncommon. The custom is, if any poor devils have really made it through the swamps or by sea, to feed 'em a bit, shut your eyes to their whereabouts—but order them to move on. Devil's Island officials know that well enough. You and I, Dan, helped four *liberes* a bit, up the Maroni."

"Yes," said Dan, "but we never helped 'em back. Here were two escaped men, reaching Allard's Island, with a message—and they risked their necks to take John Allard south again. What'd you make of it, Major?"

"I jolly well don't make it. Priceless non-

sense. Cosby is tellin' some field hands' gossip about some affair they can't comprehend. John Allard's quite twenty-two—old enough to know better. Why, man, it's lumatic piracy, if they refitted that old hulk and put in any spot to do mischief against the law."

"Miss Pat Allard," said Dan, "thought of that too. So she couldn't call upon the colonial authorities."

"Nearest commissioner'll be old Dodd—a good seventy miles east'ard," mused the Major. "A customs patrol might pass here each fortnight. Wouldn't call in unless signaled, however."

DAN CREDE was looking at a thin shoal to starboard. "John Allard fetched back a third man—a man who keeps from sight. This man has taken over command at Allard Great House, Cosby fears."

"Bit thick," said the Major, "isn't done, y'know."

"Anything can be done once; and then what about it?" The skipper turned to his owner seriously. "Neal, I'm asking you a question—"

"I got one first," grinned Joe. "How old is this Miss Pat Allard?"

Dan eyed him curtly. "Nineteen. Now, Mr. Neal—"

"Kindly don't 'Mister' me, Dan; just put the schooner about—"

"The schooner's American registry, and you're owner, Joe. You might get in an expensive mess. I've nothing to lose but my papers, and maybe a shirt. You see, we're not answering a distress call. We're interfering where we're not wanted. So I put it up to the owner."

Owner Joe raised a small cheer and his highball. "I gamble another shirt for Pat Allard. Good lookin', Cosby?"

The Major chuckled, watching Jeremy at the wheel. The bosun had caught a nod from Dan Crede, and the helm had gone over. Dan said:

"I've got Cosby's word that there's five

fathoms a cable length from the cliffs on the south shore. Uncharted channel. Now any little mistake and your yacht is trapped as neatly as the *Aberdeen Lass* got it some years ago. Understand, Neal?"

"I'm puttin' up my spare shirt, too," retorted Neal.

Dan got up and went to the helmsman. Cosby followed more fuddled than ever. The steward grinned; the eight black men forward were accustomed to hearing the three white men aft quarrel complete nonsense. And then see swift action. So Neal noticed that the *Itara* was lightless as she held north under deepening twilight. The bright cabin ports were curtained at dinner. A man above called the lead soundings in a low voice. Joe Neal eyed the gun rack against a bulkhead. Three automatic rifles were gone from the stand.

Joe pointed. "Armed party from a Yankee schooner invades the King's domain. Big break for the newspapers and the state department if—"

The Major reached for a decanter and unscrewed a silver flask.

"I'm takin' along some Scotch ammunition, m' boy. Might get a frightful thirst explainin' to an angry young woman why we're trespassin'. The rifles are for the boat crew likely. Dan is no fool. It's the third stranger come to Allard's who's the problem. And a whisper that Cosby dropped to Dan, getting it from his mistress. Two *liberes*—getting through the Maroni swamps—fetched word to John Allard of a cache of Brazilian rubies up a jungle creek. No more, no less, m' lad. So back the young fella goes with a patched-up craft. Back he comes with a mystery man, and they put the leakin' old *Aberdeen Lass* down for good. John Allard and his three new pals—"

"Rubies?" said Neal. "Show me the goods."

"That's the point. Neat to tell a desperate chap needin' money, eh, what? Dan Crede doesn't believe it, but it sounds like

something he heard years back about the rum ports. But young Allard would."

THE skipper's lean bronzed face shoved down the companionway under the single dim light. He must have dined on his feet at the galley passage, for he motioned his friends above. The schooner was losing headway. Presently they heard the soft ripple of water along her plates, then that died. Forward came a stealthy hand-handling of a light anchor in the shore current. A boat was already down at the quarter, and Jeremy waited till the three white men were in it before he followed. The two oarsmen sent it shoreward in silence. When the bow grounded on sand Neal could just make out the white blur of his yacht against the low stars. Beyond the beach was a broken line of ancient coral rock, then a slope with a few Carib pines that crested the main ridge. Neal followed the Major who was tracking Dan Crede silently. The master was trying to piece together some of the confused directions which their guide had given reluctantly.

Cosby had crouched in the bow staring at his home island. On shore Jeremy held the cattle boy under close observance as he led up the short steep rock to the singing pines. Crede had given orders to his armed boatmen to stay at the shore regardless of events. Once on the sparse dry grass of the ridge top Cosby pointed down an inner slope which led to the saucer-like harbor of Allard's Island.

"No lights on this side of the house, sir. The front verandas face the cove. The cattle pens and the water catchment are to the right. There's a stone fence running to the higher land."

"Lead to the fence," said Crede. "Cosby, you stick with us. No breakin' away to inform your mistress. Stay with him, Jeremy."

The three white men followed the two till the pen fences were reached. They passed ancient rusty machinery abandoned decades

ago when hurricane tides combed the last good soil from the flats. Hardly a cow was left cropping the thin grass. Neal wondered why people stuck to such a plantation.

"Well," murmured Aylshire, "you certainly wouldn't understand unless you were born to it. Your fathers hold land won from the Spaniards in the old sea wars. Sea and rock and loneliness—but they get to your blood, m' boy. Why don't I go Londonward? Or Dan retire to his Texas beginnings? Or you to Broadway to spend what Old John left you? No answer, except freedom, eh—what?"

They followed the low stone fence, and where it turned past the great cisterns to the house Dan checked the guide. Cosby was confused and sullen. He had told all he knew and he was frightened. Last night there had been deep drinking and quarreling, and young Allard had been uneasy about his companions. That was when Miss Pat had told Cosby to find the other black retainers and bring them back. In the stone field hands' huts Cosby had a wife and child. He muttered he must go find them, warn them to be silent.

"No," said Crede. "You'll say too much. Now, Cosby, is that channel blocked to small craft? Was that why it was done?"

"I think not, sir. The boys took one fishin' sloop out day before yesterday. The schooner sank last night at anchor. A Government patrol could not enter, but a turtle could pass the wreck." Cosby watched down past the dark house among the mango trees and again stammered his fright to the tall American. "There's but one boat left, sir, now! A thirty-eight footer, and it's pulled to the beach. I see people about it; it's being made ready to leave!"

Dan's two friends were at his side now. The Major whispered with some serious concern in his voice at last. "Dan, the big house is silent—dark. What can John Allard be about?"

"The old *Lass* was sunk to avoid investigation later. To give out that her seams



opened as she lay at a hook is reasonable. And none of our business. But, Major, that turtlers' sloop could cross the South Atlantic if fitted and provisioned."

"West African ports, eh? But young Allard wouldn't leave his sister penned up here—oh, absolutely not!"

"Unless he couldn't face the game," said Dan Crede.

"Rubies," put in Neal. "Don't forget them."

COSBY moaned as he squatted by the wall. The three friends were silent. As Aylshire said, getting another chap in no end of trouble was no part for either himself or Dan Crede to play—they'd been in enough in their days. Young Neal was something else. The Major eyed young Joe carefully before he spoke.

"Rubies, now? Dan, you and I, in our foolish days, had a go in the Guiana diamond diggin's, but no rubies, eh? There's a sort from the Brazilian creeks but not excitin' in the world markets. So I'm thinkin' that John Allard has been neatly used to other ends."

"What, no rubies?" retorted Neal. "Then I'm a sucker too!"

Crede's lips set tighter. "Neal, will you be serious for once? It may be bad. Cosby, can you get us to that house unseen?"

The cattle boy pointed across the bare yard, wallowed by goats and pigs about the watering pool by the great cisterns. Crede nodded. They came past the scarred rock pillars of the house and could look up to the ancient slave-hewn beams below the floor. At the side was a rusted staircase winding to a veranda. Then, from the front veranda, came a sound. Low voices, heavy steps descending. Cosby gasped.

"Mr. Allard, sir! Going to the beach! He mustn't leave, sir!"

"Free, white and twenty-one," said Neal. "Who's stoppin' him?"

Cosby had stolen from the foundation piers to see the dim figures crossing the

broken rock line to the cove. Crede was watching the outline of the fishing sloop, her bow to the sands when he heard a sound. Aylshire nudged him, pointed. The black boy was writhing in the coarse grass.

"Knife was thrown—or a club swung from the veranda, Dan. Neat—now who have we ever known that had the trick so accurately? Neal, did your hardhead Scotch uncle ever show you his left upper arm? The last time he stood on Sassoon's schooner, that old *Aberdeen Lass*, in a bit of argument? Old John Neal lost it and the ship as well."

Dan Crede stopped the whisper. A light step was on the broad veranda above them. Then a sharp, steady voice, a girl's voice.

"What was that noise? Mr. Sassoon, what have you done out there?"

Aylshire whispered on: "Sassoon? A thievin', hijackin' skipper of the old days! Remember, Dan? On the side a smuggler of diamonds out of the Essequibo creeks; at least he sold what seemed to be!"

"And rubies, now?" Dan Crede smiled at last. "Yes, I recall Sassoon sold shares in a ruby mine to the Dutch in Curacao. He was good——"

"And before that swindling the Leeward planters on a stock-sellin' scheme—forty thousand acres of coconuts to be planted by his company. Dan, he did time for it, didn't he?"

"And escaped—or bought his way out. Be quiet, Major; I don't fit Sassoon into this picture—a getaway from the French prison settlements. Maybe the other two are. But young Allard——"

Dan stopped. Cosby had moaned and then was crawling feebly away through the grass. Above, unseen on the veranda, a young woman spoke again sharply: "Sassoon? What have you done? Who was that?"

"Go back in the house"; Sassoon's tone was coldly resolute. "I told you no one was to leave the place till I am ready to go. Nor interfere here."

"Go, then! You've destroyed every boat except one."

"Who told you that? Your crazy brother, eh? Miss Allard, go back in the house. Guessing things is poor business now."

Miss Pat Allard laughed excitedly. "No one fears you!"

"No? I ordered your black people here, the women and children, to remain in their



huts and close the doors. One didn't do it—he will obey now."

The men below heard heavy steps come to the rail. Sassoon was watching Cosby's slow crawl in the grass. Crede held Neal from the narrow stairway. Only one at a time could have gone up and he would have had no chance against Sassoon's gun. Besides, Dan Crede was curious. He heard voices at the beach, the loosening of gear as the canvas was hooked over in the light breeze. Dan studied the chance of the sloop making out the inlet. Sassoon was waiting for ebb tide and a freshening bit of air at daylight.

Crede turned back to his two friends. Jeremy had been left on guard at the rear of the house.

"That boat," said Crede; "got to stop it before they can work out to pick up a sailin' breeze."

"Stop 'em down outside with the schooner, Dan," said Neal, "they'll not have a chance."

"No," Grede looked along the ragged path to the shore rock line, "this thing must be stopped here—tonight—under cover. That girl's proud. Brothers' in a mess, and a word of it mustn't get outside."

"Neal," whispered the Major, "these

young people here don't know who Sassoon is. A Franco-Belgian international swindler who got into your Uncle John's employ years ago. Why bless you, the rummy lads were lambs for his games. And a killer, Joe."

"I'm thinkin' of that," said Crede. "Allard knows too much of something that happened down the islands. Dangerous knowledge, that's my guess. Sassoon sent the other men to Allard because his old schooner was lyin' up here. He got Allard to rig her up and take a chance at something. Allard was broke, ready for anything."

"Lie up quiet," muttered Aylshire, "the beach party is comin' back. Bit of an argument on—John Allard in no end of a pother."

THE three stayed back under the house pillars when the others went up the front steps of the veranda. Crede tried to count them, guess who might remain at the boat. Maybe a chance to get it; put any guard away and then face Sassoon. Once show the adventurer that he was trapped on the island and he'd talk compromise that would save the good name of the ancient colonial Allards. Pat Allard's name.

Then, above at the front door, her brother shouted angrily:

"The gems, Sassoon; what you waiting for? Show them, will you?"

"Come in, John." A girl's voice was steady, unafraid. "All of you—gentlemen. Mr. Sassoon is ready to settle as he promised."

Dan winced. He didn't like the talk. Was the girl in a racket?

"Gentlemen?" whispered Aylshire. "Bit diplomatic, eh?"

Crede was finding a climbing hold on the tough vines robing the veranda rail. "You two," he muttered down to his friends, "take stations on each side of the house. Sassoon's men may be looking about. We want the truth about this business before we interfere; we'd never get it afterwards with the Allards against us."

Neal didn't like staying behind. He heard Dan's footsteps creak as he crossed the veranda floor. The ancient island house had wooden jalousies—heavy slatted shutters—serving as windows from floor to ceiling, but without glass. Crede flattened to the wall where he could see into a great dim dining room. The huge crystal chandelier above the long table was dusty and unused. A big brass oil lamp showed the mottled walls, the faded portraits and ragged tapestries, relics of the early sea plantation days when slaveholding made wealth for colonial families now ruined.

Dan saw two young people, the last of their line by the middle of the table. Then Sassoon, broad-faced, impassive, in a soiled white linen suit, looking more a business man than the cold, shrewd outlaw he was. And behind the leader's chair stood the others that Crede studied closely. Two men yellowed from old fevers, pockmarked under their thin beards. The Guiana prisons and the Maroni swamps had marked them so deeply that they might have been brothers. Crede knew their kind. Beaten men; the spirit of hope not even astir at a chance for freedom, but dangerous as starved dogs. Armed, Dan saw; good automatics in their greasy holsters. One wore the heavy machete with which he had cut his way through the Guiana jungles. Beaten men—easy tools for a masterful one like Sassoon. Then the American looked at Miss Pat Allard. She wasn't exactly beautiful; the islands do not make for pink and white women. A trifle freckled upon a tanned skin, her hair burned by the tropics. But her gray eyes had something that her tall, weary brother lacked. John Allard was sullen and nervous, but Sassoon disregarded him.

The girl was the stronger force. When Sassoon drew from under his coat a dirty water-stained canvas packet and opened the straps he kept watching Pat Allard as if for an explosion. The girl stared at the stained packet under the glow of the lamp; there was dark splotches on the canvas, and she

seemed to shudder slightly. But her voice was cool and unfeeling.

"Well, Mr. Sassoon's word for it. If these other men are really French they don't speak my kind—or won't. They pretend not to understand me."

"Orders," Sassoon smiled. "Doesn't matter, does it? Escaped men wish neither names nor tales to tell. I helped them away from their hell, and the rest depends on me also, young lady. They know it."

The girl turned to her brother. "John, you were fooled. Why won't you tell what happened, where you went after these two men came for you? If I had been home they wouldn't have dared take the schooner out."

John Allard was sullen; he wished his sister was somewhere else. Sassoon interfered to check his tongue. "That doesn't matter either. Allard was promised a share. And I had a claim on that rotten ship."

"Rubies," muttered John, "but I never heard of rubies up the Maroni. But Lereau and Simon came here and said they had them."

Sassoon had opened the canvas flap. Under the lamp was a red glow from points of light. The girl gasped bewilderedly.

"Rubies? But they never came from a creek like that! Cut gems!"

JOHN ALLARD'S eyes glittered feverishly as he shouted, "What do I know about rubies? We took the schooner south, and fetched Sassoon here. I went through enough to earn them, but these are odd. You're right, Pat. But I did my part."

"Yes, you did," Sassoon went on after a warning look at his two impassive guards. "I sent these men to you because I needed a sea boat and I knew the old *Aberdeen Lass* might serve. I'd had her years ago. Well, you came south, Allard, under a promise of a reward. A share in certain gems. Here they are, my boy."

John Allard came again to stare at them. "Yes, but Lereau said they had washed rubies from a creek near the Maroni. They

changed their story at sea. They found you at Islamadura—Dutch territory. You brought these stones aboard secretly; you never showed them to me until now. Sassoon, they've been stolen!"

"A bad word." Sassoon glanced at Miss Pat who had grown calm. "I don't like it, Allard. You've agreed to furnish me with that fishing sloop to depart with. My men with me. And be paid for it. Right?"

John Allard looked at his sister, and his face hardened. "I want you to get out," he muttered. "Damn your rubies. You didn't dare sail from Curacao or any Dutch port, so you used me for a fool. In and out under cover of one night at Islamadura—a rotten little islet where you were hidden. Sister, that was it—all plain now."

"Better get to that boat, Mr. Sassoon," Pat Allard murmured.

Sassoon gathered up his canvas case, strapped it, lit a heavy cigar. "Sorry. You make it difficult, you two. I need some guarantees."

John Allard stood back. "What do you mean by that?"

"That I'm given at least ten days at sea before you blab. You will, even if you're wrong about the gems. Allard, you're going along."

Allard laughed. His sister's face tightened. Sassoon went on:

"You'll be put ashore somewhere. Unless some one on this island talks. I'll find out. If they do it might be bad—for you."

"Threats, eh?" Allard laughed a bit wildly. "Kidnapping, I'd say."

Dan Crede saw Miss Pat Allard's face change. She was near to the heavy shutters. She might have heard Dan moving.

Perhaps she thought that the faithful Cosby had dragged himself to the side veranda. She knew now that Cosby had failed to find the other black boys, and he had returned to be struck down by Sassoon half an hour ago. There was no boat in which anyone could leave the island save the one Sassoon had taken over. Cosby could do nothing

now. Crede read the girl's thoughts as Sassoon arose.

"Sorry, Allard. I don't trust you. You've made charges against me. Simon, you go to the boat. Lereau!"

"Yes, m'sieu," said the yellow-faced bearded *libere*, humbly.

"Your only chance is with me. Don't want to see Cayenne again, eh? Come along, Allard."

CREDE moved lightly to the rail, swung a movement and dropped free of the vines. Neal came fumbling at his arm. They heard chairs moving, Allard's angry voice, and then steps crossing the hall. Dan held his lips near Joe Neal's check. "One man is making to the boat. Get there, Neal, along the beach. Stop him from coming back when the break comes here. Take care of yourself—he'll be dangerous."

Neal nodded and vanished to the scrubby hedge. Aylshire stood by the house pillars, and Dan passed him. Dan was whispering a warning never finished, for the front doors were suddenly opened wide, a square of light fell out upon the steps, and down them came young Allard bewilderedly. Lereau was behind him, a pistol to his back. Sassoon stood on the veranda and Miss Pat Allard was framed in the doorway light. She called out determinedly.

"Go with them, John. Nothing else to be done. There will be in the end. Leave this house, Mr. Sassoon."

Sassoon laughed briefly. His vanity was getting a kick out of this mastery of a lonely islet of the Leewards. But he came down the steps half facing the girl above, watchful of every gesture.

"You've taken charge of every weapon in this house," she said. "So don't fear any game, Mr. Sassoon."

"I'm not." Sassoon was deliberate. He took a powerful flashlight from his coat, shot the beam ahead beyond Allard and his guard. Crede stood in the dark by the house corner, forty feet away. Too far for the move he



wanted to make against the burly leader when the *libere's* gun was at John Allard's back. Lereau would shoot and turn to Sassoon's aid. Then the light shifted, followed the broken beach. The single-stick of the sloop, its sail loose hung over the side, with Simon on the bow freeing gear from the scattered provision boxes was plain in the background. But nearer, his face turned to the light in surprise, stood Joe Neal. They all saw him, saw the gun in his hand.

Sassoon was a leader. He never hesitated. He crashed the few steps toward Allard and snapped to Lereau. "So, Crown officers are in on it. Go handle him or you'll swing."

Lereau dashed from the beach, gun ahead, raising it as he ran. Sassoon covered Allard, the flash in his left hand. Then, at a noise by the corner of the veranda, he shot the light that way—full upon Crede. Dan fired one shot at Lereau; then had to face the dazzle of the flash, and he knew how Sassoon could use a gun. Dan went weaving to the stone pillars, shooting above and to the right of the light.

The other man wouldn't be behind it as he fired. He let one slug go at Crede, and then swiftly, for a big man, set the flash upon the stairpost and circled back from it. Dan barely glimpsed his move. Then a bullet flicked on the stone by Dan's head, filling his eyes with dust, and then he stumbled down purposely, trying to clear them.

He saw pinges of light on the beach. Neal had dropped to cover and Lereau had also taken to the rocks. The other man, Simon, was stumbling over the plunder on the sloop's foredeck, shouting to his friend.

CREDE got to his feet, his sight still dim with stone dust. Sassoon was beyond the light beam in the dark. Dan would have to cross its glare to reach the boat, and hesitated to play the other man's game. Then the little Major touched Dan's arm. The years of soft living and drinking had done things to Aylshire as a gun-shooter, but he had ideas.

"That light, Skipper," he chuckled. "Here's my pistol; put the light out with it and go find your chap. I'm of no manner of use, I fear."

"Keep out of it, Major." Dan took the gun, weaved along the wall and drew sight on the flash upon the stairpost. Twice the gun barked and the next slug blotted it out. Crede dropped the extra gun and dashed across the yard for the shore rocks. He heard Sassoon now making for the boat but unseen in the starlight. Then Dan crashed into a man uprising from the broken hedge. John Allard, by the heavy pith helmet, and Crede shoved him aside. So he came first to the narrow beach between rocks and the tide line. Lereau was splashing over the sloop's bow to join Simon, but neither of the Guiana



*liberes* would shoot without their leader's order. They could see little of the moving figures on the shore, but Crede was ahead of Sassoon, standing knee deep by the sloop's head-line to await him.

Dan could look past to see the yellow lamplight within the door, and Miss Pat Allard framed there watching in puzzled silence. Sassoon had shouted that the colony officers were here, and of all things she feared this for the family's broken fortunes. Then, nearer, Dan saw John Allard closing on Sassoon's trail.

The big man was breathing hard but alert to every menace. He swung his gun to the colony man. "All right, Allard—take it!"

Dan fired at Sassoon's right arm; missed but Sassoon had to turn.

"Drop it," said Crede. "You'll remember me; and drop the gun——"

Sassoon knew the voice of the man who had driven him from John Neal's liquor fleet in the old days. He swung close enough to see Crede's face in the starlight. Crede shoved him away but Sassoon's arm came up. His gun blazed but Allard's clutching hand intervened. The maddened planter knew nothing of an old feud nor cared who was fighting for him now. Dan had to smash the younger man aside to watch Sassoon. And Sassoon fired again. The slug tore fabric from Dan's collar as his flesh scorched. He had one clear chance and took it coolly. One shot—and he stepped back from the splashing water as Sassoon fell. The big man was not moving when Neal and Aylshire came up. Dan had turned to the boat watchfully, but he knew the two beaten men were through.

"Come here, Lereau. Here's another job to handle."

Allard was too bewildered to speak till he heard a hearty British chuckle by his side. "Aylshire's the name. Major, once, in the West Indies Territorials. Knew your people, m' lad, when you were learnin' to walk. Poor old Reggy—capital chap—"

Allard had turned to stare at the lighted doorway where his sister stood. He shouted once and Dan Crede came nearer. "Get about Sassoon, all of you. No use in having the girl know exactly what's happened. Major, I'm sorry that I had to do it."

"Why should you? Sassoon would have potted you with pleasure. Or young Allard. Nasty chap—Sassoon. Well, a bit of diplomacy, eh? Not a black boy on the place will know a man's been chucked. Perhaps I'd best toddle to the house and introduce myself to Miss Patricia. And explain a bit—all this shootin'—what?"

"Beat it," said Dan Crede. "But wait! Lereau, nobody's askin' anything about you two. Except these rubies, and I've got them off from Sassoon now. But the truth Lereau?"

The two exiles came closer wearily. But Lereau laughed in hopeless bitterness.

"M'sieu, what is the use? This is no affair of ours but it will make no difference. We will not be believed whether we say truth or not." He looked at his friend dully, and tossed his gun at Dan Crede's feet.

"The truth," insisted Crede. "We will see of what use it is."

"M'sieu, Simon and I escaped by sea on a raft from the Cayenne coast. We reached Dutch territory. We were aided there—you know it is often done but we had to be off. We met this man, Sassoon, when we reached Islamadura Island. He needed a boat; he said he owned one at Allard's Island. He got us a small craft and means to get here with a message for M'sieu Allard. That is about all. We aided to refit the old schooner and took M'sieu Allard south—secretly."

John Allard interposed. "I don't think those poor devils know much more than I did. They must have guessed too late."

"Tell the rest, Lereau," said Crede sternly.

"Well, there was a robbery in Willemstad. A wealthy Dutch merchant on a cruise ship lost jewels he had brought from Java. We were uneasy; escaped men cannot afford to know too much. But after we met Sassoon we were helpless. It was a clever friend of Sassoon's who did the job. Sassoon offered to get him away, so there must be a ship, for the Dutch authorities watched everyone. When we brought the schooner to Islamadura Sassoon got his friend on board—with the rubies. M'sieu Allard was ashore when this happened."

"Where is that man who did the robbery?" said Crede.

Lereau shrugged. "To the sharks. Did you see stains on the canvas packet? Sassoon killed him in the ship's cabin. M'sieu Allard never knew of that. We did, but escaped men have no choice of action, eh?"

John Allard was staring at them. "I believe you, Lereau. You lied to me about the rubies and a lot else, but now I understand."

"Under the matting in Sassoon's cabin on the *Aberdeen Lass* you could have seen the

blood of the man he killed," said Lereau. "The schooner would have foundered in the first good blow so Sassoon must take your fishing boat here. With us to aid him escape. At sea, M'sieu Allard, he would have killed you, I am sure.

"And you and Simon in the end, when he was through with you."

**L**EREAU shrugged; it seemed to make no difference now, but he said listlessly, "I did my five years on St. Joseph's Isle—a small robbery in Marseilles. Simon knifed a man in Algiers. But we have paid ten times over to French law. Suppose now, M'sieu Allard had been arrested in Dutch territory with Sassoon and the rubies on his ship? An innocent man, but what would have saved m'sieu from prison?"

Allard smiled in a sickly way. "Nothing. I was an utter fool!"

Dan Crede had knelt on the sand to open the stained canvas. He carefully picked the gems from the compartments and put them in his pocket. Then he tossed the empty packet on Sassoon's body.

"There's your job, Lereau. Heave this dead man onto the sloop and pick a way out past the wreck. You've a tide now."

The two gaunt *libreres* stared at him uncomprehendingly. John Allard laughed. "The boat's provisioned for five weeks,

thanks to Sassoon. Stout little turtler but I've got others."

"You might raise the African coast with a bit of seamanship," chuckled the Major. "But put Mr. Sassoon overside fifty miles out from here—clear of inter-island currents, understand? We really don't want him comin' back on a tide. Just wouldn't do!"

Lereau still stared dumbly. Then found his voice.

"*Nom de Dieu!* You mean we shall go? You believe us?"

"All the luck in the world," said Dan.

"Hop to it," added Joe Neal. "We never saw you, heard of you."

"Priceless idea," chuckled the Major.

John Allard had started for the house. "Come on, Aylshire. I've another idea—a custom in these parts."

They all crossed the shore rocks, leaving the two escaped men staring after them, then at the boat. The soft free air was upon their thin cheeks, and still they didn't seem to comprehend. Crede's party was near the house when the sound of a creaky block, the slur of sail catching the first breeze, came to their ears. Then a weak shout from the dark inlet.

Dan stopped his friends and John Allard. The lamp glow in the big door showed Miss Pat Allard again; then she was gone. Allard laughed sombrely. "Put back to the drawin'

The big sturdy cops  
Have nerves to control—  
So Beech-Nut is "tops"  
In every patrol . . .

**Keep calm with**



**BEECH-NUT GUM**  
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... is so good it's the most popular flavor of any gum sold in the United States.

room—keen girl, Pat! You chaps won't understand."

"Oh, yes, I do!" said Dan. "Saves us explain' details. We'll just insinuate that Sassoon got away—hurriedly."

"Skipper," said Neal, "you won't fool her. She heard shootin'."

"My dear chap," smiled the Major, "Miss Pat Allard will merely conclude that she oughtn't to bother in a man's job."

"All right, gang," put in Neal, "hang the thing on me. The *Itara* will be a thousand miles south if the colony people start an investigation. But those rubies—Dan, mind if we have a look?"

"Come in the house," said John Allard. "I wouldn't have the bloody stones as a gift—all of them, now."

They went up to the great dining-room. Captain Crede sat at the head of the table and dumped damp, dirty tissue paper on the mahogany. Miss Pat Allard came out from somewhere and stood by her brother's chair. Major Aylshire was eyeing the sideboard, but all the others stared down at the deep red beauty of the gems.

"Twenty-six of them," said Crede, "but I wouldn't know a thing about rubies. Who does? Stop watching that sideboard, Major! Look at this stuff."

The Major sighed, pulled a worn brass-rimmed pocket glass out and held it on the

largest stone. "Oriental rubies are the only true ones I believe. A flawless one, above three carats, is worth more than diamonds. By Jove! These must run to thousands of pounds!"

He licked his lips and gazed at the Allard sideboard. Neal turned to young John. "What's the matter with you arranging a return of them to the Dutch authorities in Willemstad? No questions asked and none answered? There'd certainly be a big reward out. Eh, Captain Dan? We'll help fix it once away from here."

Dan Crede was looking out to the dark. "Right enough, It can be like the last cruise of the old *Aberdeen Lass* and her finish—one of those sea mysteries. Agreed, Major?"

The Major seemed in a trance. He'd heard a tinkle at his elbow, and there was Miss Pat Allard with a decanter and the slightest of smiles. Aylshire arose with a ceremonious bow, and sat again.

"Keen—what? Rippin' girl—not a question of any sort. Allard, by the bouquet your rum must date from '24 at least. Wouldn't mind if I made sure, eh? Custom about the islands, really. Dan, what was that you were saying? Mystery, and all that sort of thing?"

"Let's be going," said Captain Crede, "want to get Neal's schooner out on the mornin' tide—south."

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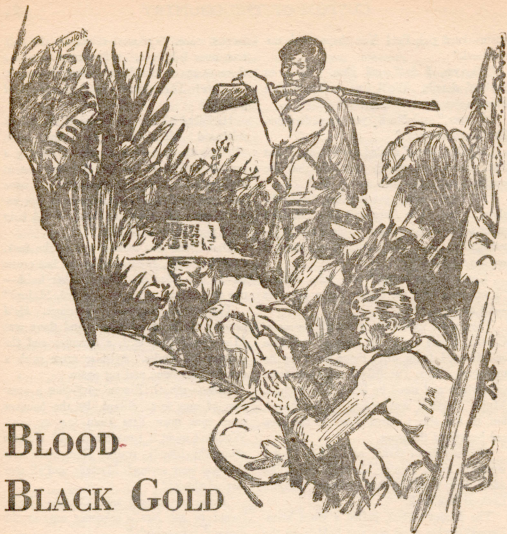
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# BLOOD- BLACK GOLD

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

*Author of "Hongkong Cabin," "Murder Below Decks," etc.*

I

**O**UTSIDE the hotel automobiles honked and traffic swirled—queer traffic too. Inside the hotel all was cool and silent and luxurious. Brown and yellow and black faces had vanished; here were white faces, white pith helmets, white clothes. Outside was Bangkok and all the roaring tumult of Siam. Here inside was the white race.

Smith was lean and wiry and tanned. He

came in through the cool lobby and paused, blinking a little, to accustom himself to the place after the blinding sunlight outside. Smith was not impressive, at first glance. He was not handsome; his face was angular, flinty, with hard gray eyes. And yet he was one of the most impressive characters in Siam, one of the best known men in the Siamese back country, the "outlands" that ran back to Burmah and China.

A man standing idly near the cigar counter turned quickly and strode toward Smith. He, too, looked lean and hard. A black



*Sometimes It Was Quite a Compliment To Be Called a Fool, Said Say-and-See Smith*

mustache edged his thin lips. He had light blue eyes under black brows, a clean, incisive profile like a bird of prey. He came up to Smith and spoke.

"You're Smith, aren't you? Say-and-see Smith? My name's Mangin."

Smith nodded and shook hands. "Well?" he asked laconically.

"Want to show you something." From his pocket Mangin took a little chamois bag and opened it. Smith, studying the man, noted the hard jaw, the predatory eyes, the powerful neck and jaw; this study, in one sweeping glance, gave him as much as though he

had known Mangin for a week or a month or more.

From the pouch Mangin took two flat, roughly round objects and put them into Smith's hand. They were heavy. They suggested huge coins, but were so covered with a filmy substance as to be quite hidden under it.

"Well?" said Smith again, weighing them in his hand.

Mangin took out a knife, opened it, extended it.

"Scratch," he said, imitating Smith's laconic manner.

Smith took the knife and scratched with the point. A gleam of yellow showed.

"Gold?"

"Gold," said Mangin in a low, impressive voice. "Big gold mohurs, Smith; seven hundred years old. Hindu treasure. That black stuff on 'em is blood, dried long ago. I've got a partner who brought these out of the jungle, away northwest of here. There's more where these came from, a lot more. Chests and bags of 'em. We've heard of you, we know that you're the best man for the job in this country. We want you to take charge, get us there and back. We offer you a third split. Interested?"

Smith handed back the blood-blackened coins and the knife.

"Interested? You bet," he said, without excitement. "But I've hired out for another job."

"Rats! Break it. Skip out with us."

"I don't do things that way," Smith said mildly.

"Listen" Mangin tapped him on the shoulder. "I hear you're going with this Ranket woman. It'll be bad luck for you if you do. The stuff belongs to us, savvy? We don't want any damned professors shoving into our game. We're giving you the chance; it means a fortune. Don't be a fool."

Smith's gray eyes twinkled slightly.

"Lots of people have called me a fool," he said gently. "Sometimes it's quite a compliment."

That took Mangin like a blow, when he got the force of the words. His face darkened under the mounting blood.

"Won't you consider it?" he demanded. "At least, think it over?"

"No," said Smith. He could put a whole volume into one word, and make every page of it sting hard.

"All right; then look out for trouble," Mangin rejoined. "I tell you, this is our stuff. We're not the sort of men to stand for any monkey work."

"Me neither," Smith said.

Then, with a quiet nod, he went his way.

BEHIND his calm exterior he was really concerned. He was engaged to take Myra Ranket up into the almost unknown Menoi River country—to the hills beyond the lower jungle. He had not yet seen her. He knew that Herbert Ranket, her father, had been up there in the past year or so; a famous ethnologist, Ranket. About the daughter he knew nothing. He did not even know the reason for her going.

What had it to do with Mangin, the unnamed partner, the blood-blackened gold? Smith did not like Mangin. Over in Indo-China he had heard of one Mangin, and heard nothing good; might or might not be the same chap. Mangin had been waiting for him here—that was sure. And the bait was tempting. Smith was no rich man.

He sat waiting in a cool, half-darkened room for Miss Ranket. He himself knew the hill country pretty well, but not this one strip. Nobody did. Smith lived his own life. He ran the outlands, usually alone, trading for queer things, but mostly for rhinoceros horn, enormously valued by the Chinese for its alleged medicinal properties. This was how he had come by his queer nickname.

She was in the room; she was coming forward. Smith rose and shook hands, choking back a feeling of sharp disappointment. What a woman!

They sat and talked; he decided she would do. Hair drawn primly back over her head, flat, fastened in a bun behind. Spectacles. A rather smallish woman, thin-faced, with decision in her manner but a pleasant way of speaking. She looked tired and drawn. He set her down as thirty-five.

"You just landed yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes. I must see the American minister at once; he's supposed to have everything ready for me—permission, government passes and so forth. If he has, we can get off in a couple of days. As I wrote you, I want to go by air to the closest point we can reach to the Menoi hills, and then go on. What have you done?"

"Enough," said Smith. "That's a month's trip; we can make it in a day by air. My boy's there now, with everything we need. When we arrive we can go right on. How many in your party?"

"I'm alone," she said. Smith swallowed hard, and stared at her.

He was vaguely aware of talk. She had come to push home to something her father had discovered up there; Ranket was at home in California, too ill to travel himself. She was carrying out his job. But—alone? To take a woman all by herself up into that country?

"Oh, gosh!" Smith said aloud, and then checked himself. She looked surprised.

"Just happened to think of something," he said lamely. "By the way, other folks have tried to hire me. Something about gold up there. Do you expect competition?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Treasure? Or gold bearing gravel?"

"Money," said Smith. "Hard gold coin."

She shook her head. "Father said there might be some gold, but of course we're interested only in the scientific angle. By the way, how did you get the very peculiar name of Say-and-see Smith?"

"Name's Silas Smith," he rejoined. "Si for short. The Chinese have two kinds of rhinoceros horn—my business has been hunting horns, for a long time. One kind they call "se," the other they call "si." Pronounced Say and See. I monkeyed around and finally discovered one kind came from a two-horned rhino, the other from the usual kind. The names sort of stuck to me."

"I see," she said, unsmiling. "Will there be any trouble getting a plane?"

"None. Plenty here. No airports up in that country, but it's no trouble finding a landing place. Want to get off day after tomorrow, sunrise?"

"Plan on that, yes," she said. "I'll know by this afternoon if everything's ready. One day here will give me a chance to buy what I need."

"Ever been up in this country, Miss Ranket?"

"No."

She waited. Smith gulped. "Well," he said awkwardly, "mind telling me exactly where we're heading for? I only know in a general way."

She hesitated. Then:

"If you didn't mind, I'd rather wait until we get well on our way. You see, father warned me about it. I mustn't let anyone at all know. It's all so strange to me here——"

"How on earth did you ever happen to hire me?" blurted Smith.

"Why, father had me write you. He knew all about you. I hope you won't mind, Mr. Smith, if I keep the exact destination to myself? It's not that I don't trust you, but I'm afraid of everyone here. These natives look so queerly at me——"

Smith took his leave. He went down to the hotel bar and ordered himself a drink, and cursed softly but in a heartfelt manner for maybe two whole minutes. A long time. Then he drank his drink, and ordered another, which was rare for him. But he felt that he needed it.

"And me hired out to that gal when I might be playing a man's game!" he reflected unhappily. "Parading her off to the Menoi hills—wow! Afraid of everyone here, huh? That's just it. Stiff and prim and scared



as hell; never been away from home before, I bet. Dressed like a scarehead. Looks all fagged out. No wonder she thinks the natives look queerly at her! Anybody would, with hair and those spectacles. Huh! Just



the same, she's got something on the ball."

His thoughts went back to those blackened gold disks, and Mangin. He frowned into the bar mirror, sorting things over in his mind.

Was Mangin going to the same place wherever it was? The man's words intimated as much. And Ranket had warned his daughter. Old Ranket, by all accounts, had a head on him. These scientific sharps did not think much about gold, just as this woman said; but men like Mangin thought a lot about it, especially if they had samples of it in their pockets.

"Her and her bun—my gosh!" Smith thought of some of the sights she would see in the hill-country, and grinned to himself. "She'll sure get educated this trip. Not that she's a bad sort, only why the devil is she all alone?"

He started slightly. Why, indeed? A woman new at this sort of thing, going where even men like Mangin wanted someone who knew the country and the natives—and why? Shoving through a job for her dad, of course. In a hurry. Desperately, with her courage screwed up. Smith whistled softly to himself and finished his drink.

"Something big!" he observed mentally. "Something big, you bet. Old Ranket dropped on to something before he got sick and cleared out of the country. And why, I'd like to know, was that gold covered with blackened blood?"

The thought was stimulating, and Mr. Smith felt better about everything in general. Unless he was very much mistaken, he was going to find some action ahead.

He was right about that.

## II

WHEN Smith found a government plane at their disposal, and was being whisked north at five thousand feet, he mentally complimented Myra Ranket.

This was something like. He was used to plodding along jungle trails, or taking to

boat and canoe, with thirst, jungle leeches and native food as omnipresent threats to comfort and existence itself. But this was sheer high-falutin' luxury, and a cabin plane at that. When he found that the woman beside him took it as a matter of course, he viewed her in a new light.

Bangkok was an hour behind them when she took a locket from around her neck and opened it up. From the locket she took a wadded thickness of fine rice-paper, and pressed it into his hand.

"Here," she shouted at his ear. "You can see for yourself now."

"Thanks," said Smith, and eyed her gray cloth dress. "You aiming to wear those clothes?"

"I have khaki in my grip," she rejoined. He thought she was rather offended by the personal question, and said no more.

Settling back, he unfolded the rice paper and found that Ranket had done a good job of map making. It was clear as daylight. When he got out his own booklet of government maps, and began to check up, his interest grew.

Where the official maps showed river-plain and jungle, Ranket showed a deep range of low hills; he figured they could get there in a week, by trail. Ranket had mapped out his own camps and track, and this ended at a spot marked Pnemh, which meant nothing to Smith and showed on no other map. Probably a local name, he thought. "Mois, hostile," was marked among the hills. Smith had heard of the Moi people, but was not worried by their hostility. His head boy and companion for some years, Ninh Bing, had been among the Mois and knew them well. Smith, indeed, seldom worried about anything, until the time came.

He looked out at the jungle flowing below, miles drifting behind with each minute. He gave Myra Ranket a glance, and frowned.

She was quite green in the face, was fighting air-sickness. She was an unlovely thing, but Smith's heart warmed to her. Doing

everything she hated and feared—why? To win her father's game.

Mid-morning droned on toward noon. The machine circled and dropped. The pilot, a brown-faced, cheerful Siamese trained in England, made a perfect landing. Half an hour here, on the far outskirts of a river town. Miss Ranket slept in the shade. Smith talked with a Chinese merchant, an itinerant who wandered all over the country and who had heard of him in Indo-China. Two airplanes in two days.

Presently Smith went over to the hut where Miss Ranket lay asleep, and woke her up.

"Tanks are filled; pretty near ready," he said, puffing at his pipe. "Machine stopped here yesterday to refuel, and went on to the northwest. Private plane. They are rare in these parts, you know."

She sat up and jammed her pith helmet over her flat-drawn hair.

"You mean it had something to do with us?"

"That chap Mangin, no doubt. Have you any objection to telling me just what it is you're going after?"

"Books," she replied. "A room full of books. Palm-leaf books. Bamboo books, like the ancient Chinese used. They're in one of the rooms of the temple."

"What temple?" Smith asked.

"The one my father found. He couldn't bring them away. He was very ill at the time, and the natives were fighting him. He and his secretary got away alive, but most of the party were killed. He was poisoned by an arrow."

"Oh!" said Smith, sucking at his pipe. "Now we're getting somewhere. Secretary, eh? Who was he?"

"A man named Atherton. He disappeared later," she rejoined. "Would you mind not smoking, please? That pipe smells horribly. I can't stand it."

"Right," said Smith. To himself, he added, "You'll wish you had the pipe-stink for relief before you get far into the hills."

They climbed aboard and went on, now heading more into the northwest.

Virgin country here, not unlike the Indo-China Smith knew so well. He looked down upon vast inland waterways, for the wet season was not long over and the rivers ran full. The jungle and the upland forests would be full of leeches, he reflected, which nothing could keep out from the skin; an unpleasant prospect for Miss Ranket. She might not be expecting these amiable little creatures. However, there might be none up there in the hill country that bordered the horizon.

HE stared out at those hills, green, inscrutable, and dreamed as the plane roared on. Mangin ahead, eh? Ten to one his partner was Atherton. They must have pitched on the same idea of taking to the air and joining an expedition awaiting them. After all, it was the most practical thing nowadays.

Mid-afternoon. The machine soared low now, following a river. It was the upper reaches of the Menoi. Smith touched Myra Ranket's arm and pointed, and spoke the name. She nodded, without excitement, quite calmly.

They circled, bore downward. There was the village, a big one, stockaded against man and beast. Smith did not wonder if his men were there; he knew. Ninh Bing and these sturdy little Tais hunters from the Tonkin country, six of them, men who feared nothing. Good men!

The pilot found one of the huge grassy openings which abounded in this country and skimmed the rice-fields. A jar, a bounce, another jar. Smith drew a long breath of relief. He was afraid of the air, but not of the ground. All was well now.

Natives came streaming out in wild crowds. Smith helped Miss Ranket out of the machine to the ground. Here came Ninh Bing, the six Tais boys behind him, all grinning widely. Farewells to the pilot, quick orders that sent the throngs out of peril, and

in two minutes the machine was roaring anew and lifting into the air, on its way back.

The first stage was behind them.

"It's like magic" Myra Ranket said that evening. She looked across their dinner table at Smith, her eyes wide. Blue eyes, he perceived; not light blue like the eyes of Mangin, but deep and rich and lustrous. Odd that so uncouth a woman should have such eyes.

"This camp, every detail perfect," she went on. "Even your guns waiting for you, cleaned and oiled and ready. These men of yours must be marvels."

"They've been with me a long time," Smith said. "Tomorrow we'll be off; these comforts will be left behind. We must travel light, move fast, accept hardship. Can you use a rifle?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I'm not a hunter."

"No need. I wasn't thinking of hunting."

Her gaze questioned him, then dropped.

Daylight and breakfast. She appeared in khaki—riding breeches, high-laced boots. All her primness was melted by the rough garments. She could even laugh with the gawking natives—until she found that only three of the Tais boys remained with them. These bore burdens, no more.

"Ninh Bing's on ahead with the other three boys," Smith explained. "Relays of two, well in advance. One tent, what essentials we need, no more. Carry your gun—it's the shotgun. We'll really need it more than rifles, to fill the pot. Ninh Bing has my spare rifle with him. Ready to start?"

"Yes," she said. "When?"

"Now."

If she puzzled Smith, he was of the greatest interest to her. Now she began to comprehend that this calm, laconic man was a master of efficiency in this chosen environment of his. They took the trail. Six days of it, said Smith.

"Six days!" She laughed bitterly. "My father was weeks and months."

"We all learn," said Smith. "Airlanes help, eh?"

He watched her that morning; she held up in excellent shape. He set the pace with her; the three Tais followed them. They saw and heard nothing from Ninh Bing until past noon, when one of the squat, powerful little brown men appeared from ahead and spoke to Smith in French.

"Word came back by smoke. Camp for tonight is arranged. We found this on a tree, fastened with a fresh-cut thorn."

HE handed Smith a paper on which were scrawled English words. The brown men squatted, resting. Miss Ranket, at Smith's elbow, stared at the paper. The message there was brief:

*"Go back, you fools! Last warning."*

An exclamation broke from her.

"English! What on earth—why, where did it come from?"

"Mangin." Smith's brows drew down. He spoke crisply. "Get this, now! Pinned to a tree by a freshly cut thorn; see what it means? Ninh Bing and another man went well ahead. The second pair got a smoke-signal from him that tonight's camp is arranged. He did not see this, however—it was pinned to the tree after he had passed. Mangin has cut in on us."

"But how could he know we'd pass that tree?" she asked, wonderingly. Smith laughed silently.

"We're following an invisible trail, which to these natives is like a paved road to us. Mangin has picked up somebody who knows this district; so much is clear. Now we'll put Ninh Bing to work on the job."

He spoke to one of the Tais hunters, who shifted his burden to the new man and listened, then set off at an easy lope. Myra Ranket frowned.

"But what could this man Mangin do? How could he prevent us going on?"

"With a bullet," said Smith. "Ready? Come along. We've nothing to fear until

tomorrow. Then, if Mangin tries shooting, we'll see."

And he took up the trail again.

That evening, camped in a village of curiously but friendly natives, Smith conferred with his six Tais hunters. Ninh Bing had completely disappeared. The flat-faced brown men talked at length. Smith turned to Myra Ranket.

"They agree with me. We must cut down the loads to bare ammunition and such essentials as medicine. Two loads only. That gives up one extra fighting man."

She was utterly dismayed, but made no protest. In silence, she weeded out her few cherished belongings, her extra shoes and clothes.

Morning saw them off, four men with them now, Ninh Bing still gone, two men off with him. They were among the hills. Smith, expecting anything, kept well in the lead with one of the Tais hunters.

To Smith, the stark simplicity of this expedition was rather appalling. This woman was going to a certain spot to pick up some ancient books and take them away; that was all. Mangin was apparently going to the same place, after gold. There was no reason for conflict, if Myra Ranket was not interested in gold. Underneath the surface, however, Smith could sense that there was a tremendous lot more to it all than appeared.

They had been out for an hour. They were crossing an open glade, waist-deep with lush grass and ferns, the Tais following an old, overgrown trail which even to Smith's trained jungle senses was all but imperceptible.

From the hunter broke a low grunt of warning. A vibrant, deep-throated "*twang!*" broke the sunlit silence. Smith, his rifle half raised, felt a terrific impact. He was knocked headlong into the grass. His rifle fell. He lay motionless, helpless.

Two feet from him, bending down the grasses, dropped the body of the Tais, dead before it struck the ground. The brown

man was skewered through the heart by an arrow, such an arrow as Smith had never seen. The cruel iron tip protruded a foot from the man's back. The shaft, close to three feet in length, was lacquered a deep blood-red.

A long silence filled the glade. The two bodies, lying amid the ferns and grasses, were invisible. From Smith's lips escaped an involuntary gasp, a low groan, as he lay, his features contorted with agony.

### III

**I**N the silence, a queer perception grew upon Smith.

Here under the horizon of grass and ferns he was in another world. A snake, a harmless green reptile, slithered past his face without a sound and was gone. He looked past the snake and saw his own rifle. In the tough wooden stock was a gash, a deeply gouged mark.

This showed Smith what had happened when those bow-strings twanged.

The shaft intended for him had struck his rifle-butt with incredible force, smashing the iron tip into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him, sending him down paralyzed and helpless for the moment.

His brain wakened. He reached out, caught hold of the rifle, drew it back into his gasp. The interminable silence was again broken by the vibrant "*twang-g!*" and one of those scarlet-lacquered shafts came whistling past his ear, with such frightful velocity that Smith promptly hugged the earth.

Then, almost upon the bowstring's hum, came a rifle-crash, and another, and a sharp yelp of exultation. Smith knew that voice. Ninh Bing! He had ordered his master hunter to double back on the trail to catch anyone who had cut in. Ninh Bing had done so, five minutes too late. Another shot. Smith uttered a shout, leaned on his rifle, and rose—but not at once.

First to his knees, then to his feet, fighting down the sickness and pain. It would pass



quickly, but was bad for the moment. His brain was racing. Miss Ranket and the bearers were not yet arrived; the shots would halt them. If that devil Mangin had been caught—

Loping from the edge of the clearing came Ninh Bing, rifle over arm, broad bronze features and intelligent eyes sparkling with animation. He changed countenance when Smith showed him the dead hunter in the grass. He touched the lacquered arrow.

"Moi," he declared. Then, squatting, told his story.

He and another of the Tais boys had come doubling back as ordered. A white man and two Moi hunters had been ambushed here. The two natives were dead. The white man was gone. Ninh Bing's companion was on his trail.

As he listened, Smith knew he was at crisis. Mangin, eh? Thanks to Ninh Bing, blood had paid for blood. He himself must get on Mangin's trail without a moment's delay if this senseless game of murder was to be stopped. As he had already discussed their destination with Ninh Bing, who was entirely trustworthy, he turned to the hunter.

"Take charge of the lady and the loads and bring the party on," he said curtly. "I'll rejoin you as soon as possible."

Then, turning, he strode away. The hills had no terrors for him; except for food, he carried everything he needed. Myra Ranket would probably throw a fit, he reflected, on learning that he was gone, but that mattered little. The main thing now was to catch Mangin and put an end to all this folly.

**F**IVE minutes later, he stood by the bodies of two Moi hunters. Stalwart hillmen, armed with massive bows of tremendous power and lacquered arrows. His eye caught the clumsy trail of the white man, and he turned to it. Presently he broke into a lope, easy and distance-devouring. Ninh Bing's companion was also following this trail, somewhere ahead.

Beyond a probable black and blue spot or

two, Smith himself was quite all right again. He had no trouble following the trail, which led straight on beneath the towering patches of forest giants and presently cut into a long valley beside a trickling stream. Trailing, to Smith, was old stuff.

The white man had gone fast. His trail was direct, too, as though he knew exactly where he was. And he was not Mangin. The sign showed a smaller man, one who limped slightly as he ran. This fellow knew his way around. Atherton, Ranket's secre-



tary, who had disappeared? Perhaps. Hard to say as yet.

An hour passed. The sun was high overhead, the white-hot rays beating down among the trees like rain. Ahead lay higher country, more hills, fewer and smaller trees. Smith, who had wasted little time, was astonished at the speed and agility of this lame white man.

Once he passed some hundred yards from a little village of natives. The trail went straight on without a pause; natives were standing all astare, some with old flintlock muskets.

Smith knew he was not far behind his quarry. Also, he was far from his own route, though this worried him not at all.

A whistle ahead, a warning voice. Here was the Tais hunter awaiting him. Smith slowed his pace as the little brown man appeared. Panting easily, lightly, he stood and fumbled for his empty pipe, and sucked on it.

"This man travels fast," he said, and the Tais hunter grinned.

"Yes, Master. But now he has halted. He is making a fire. He thinks he has

thrown us off the trail and is going to make a signal."

Smith nodded. "All right. Follow me, but stay out of sight."

He strode on, no longer running, but covering ground fast. When he looked back, the Tais hunter had disappeared from sight.

Ten minutes later Smith cautiously parted the giant ferns and looked at the opening before him.

A man was squatting there beside a tiny fire, into which he was feeding bits of brush to make a flame.

A slight, slender man with red mustache and a stubble of reddish beard under his sun-helmet. His rifle lay at one side. He rose and cast about for more brush, walking with a slight limp, as from some old hurt, since no wound was visible. Despite his fast travel, he scarcely breathed hard; in every movement he displayed a tigerish swiftness and agility. He came close to where Smith stood.

"Put 'em up—quick!" said Smith calmly.

The other froze, stopping dead still, then lifted his hands. Smith stepped out of the cover, lowered his rifle, and nodded amiably. He saw that the man stared at him with bulging eyes, with a suddenly white face, and chuckled.

"Nope, your arrows didn't hurt me," he went on easily. "In fact, arrows can't hurt me at all. I'm a wizard. Well, my name's Smith. I suppose you're Atherton?"

The other nodded and tried to speak, but the words stuck.

"Oh, put down your hands, by all means," and taking out his pouch Smith tucked tobacco into his pipe, with an air of perfect unconcern. "Glad I caught up with you. One of my men killed, two of yours; that evens it up, I suppose. We'll have to stop all this nonsense, so the quicker we have a palaver with Mangin the better. Were you going to send him a signal that would fetch him here? Then go right ahead."

Atherton gulped.

"By the lord, I believe you mean it!"

"Eh? Of course I do," said Smith. "Get on with your signal. The quicker I can make you chaps understand that we're not the least bit interested in your gold, the better. There's no cause for any trouble between us, you see."

He laid aside his rifle, went to the tiny fire, and squatted down with his back to Atherton. Taking one of the burning bits of brush in his hand, he held it to his pipe.

Atherton stood irresolute for an instant, his gaze flickering from Smith's squatting figure to his own rifle, as though weighing his chances.

Then he abruptly abandoned his attitude of poised hesitation, and began to pluck at brush and grass. Like Mangin, he had pale, light eyes.

"I don't quite know what to say, Smith," he uttered slowly. "Back there, after what happened—"

"Oh, don't be embarrassed," Smith said, rising and puffing at his pipe. His angular, bony features were entirely calm. "Think how much worse off you'd be if you'd murdered me. Here, I'll lend a hand with the fire."

Blood mounted in Atherton's pallid features. He was one of those men who do not tan, and who blush easily. Smith helped in building up the fire. When a slender column of smoke was ascending, Atherton squatted beside it with his helmet. In this he cupped the smoke for a moment, and let it go up in a puff. Three puffs altogether. Then, rising, he kicked the fire apart.

"Bit of a surprise for Mangin, when he finds me here, eh?" Smith observed mildly. "What's wrong with your leg?"

"I got one of those damned *Moi* arrows, when I was with Ranket. It gets bad at times," the other replied, rather sullenly.

"You gave me a chase, just the same. Well, suppose we get down to cases," Smith spoke cheerfully, casually, even lightly. "You, I gather, are after gold. Miss Ranket is after books. Instead of fighting each other, it'd be more sensible to combine forces."

**A**THERTON'S jaw dropped. "My lord! D'you expect me to believe that?" he snapped suddenly.

"Yes," said Smith, meeting his hot eyes.

"Well, I don't. How much do you know about Ranket's trip and what we found?"

"Nothing. Mangin says gold. Miss Ranket says books. I believe her."

Atherton produced cigarettes and lighted one.

"You're a queer one, Smith. Well, we opened up a hill temple that had been buried by an earthquake. We got into it. The Mois jumped us. Ranket and I got out alive; I had an arrow-point in my knee, he had amoebic dysentery and fever. I brought out some of the gold we found. Mangin showed it to you. Books? Maybe. I never saw any. Ranket was like a madman all the while we were there. I quit him cold."

Smith had the uneasy impression that the man was telling the truth.

"Why did Mangin try to hire me? You have Mois with you now. You don't need me."

"You're wrong. I met with some Mois last week and hired 'em. They don't know what we're after or they wouldn't have joined us. The Moi people around that temple don't want it broken into. They regard it as sacred and so forth—that's why they jumped us. I told our men you and Miss Ranket were going there, so they were glad enough to stop you."

"Clever man," said Smith, and at the words, Atherton flushed and his pale eyes grew hot again. Clever, in a way, and damned dangerous, thought Smith to himself.

He wondered whether Myra Ranket had told him all the truth. If not, she would suffer. He must gamble with what she had told him. Sitting on his heels, he bit at his pipestem and his gray eyes fastened on Atherton.

"We're after books. A room filled with books—bamboo and palm leaf. You know what those things are. Half a dozen men

could pack off the whole works, I expect. But half a dozen men couldn't pack off enough gold to make one man rich. Use your common sense."

"That's true," Atherton said. "But once we grab the place, I have fifty other natives of the downriver people ready to come along."

Smith's tanned, bony features showed a trace of scorn.

"It's men like you who've raised hell all over the world," he said calmly. "You figure on walking in with rifles, and doing enough killing to make yourselves secure. I can walk in among the Mois with one boy at my heels and no rifle, and the Mois will help me pack off whatever I damned please."

Atherton sneered. "Yes; I've heard of you. Little tin god and all that. Well, we needed you. We still need you. We want to get out with the gold through Indo-China, where you have a big pull with the authorities."

"I get you now," Smith said quietly. "To get this gold, you'd start a tribal war, let loose red ruin over this whole district, and skip out. Rather than hand over some of your loot to the authorities, and face the music for what you did, you'd want to cross the border into Indo-China and expect me to smooth things over. Nope. I don't work that way."

Atherton stared sulkily.

"Eh? But you proposed that we join forces. And if you're really after books, if any are there, you're welcome to the lot. Don't think you can negotiate with the Mois in this district. You can't. You're famous for handling natives, sure, but not in these parts. You don't know 'em."

"True." Smith spoke mildly. Then he simply ceased to speak at all.

**A**THERTON took heart and began to argue. He had been slow in recovering from the shock of seeing Smith walk out on him. Now he warmed to the idea of winning Smith over. He was no fool; he per-

ceived that Smith was entirely sincere in wanting books, not gold.

Smith, save for occasional nods or grunts, held his peace. He had said his say, but Atherton did not recognize the fact. Through the talk, he appraised this other man. Thoroughly unscrupulous, thoroughly determined on getting that treasure at any cost, and able to back up his determination with action.

Amid the occasional calls of birds from the noonday rush, pierced the insistent voice of a flying fox, and then fell silent. Atherton never noticed that queer barking note, so odd to be heard at noonday, but Smith caught it. That was the Tais hunter, warning him. Suddenly Smith lifted his head and spoke.

"Well, well, let the argument pass, Atherton. Your partner's here, and we can settle matters amicably."

"Eh? Mangin here?" Atherton glanced around, and frowned. "What d'you mean? He hasn't showed up yet—"

His voice died out. His quick eyes darted past Smith; behind Smith's back, the brush parted to disclose Mangin, rifle at the ready. Atherton came to his feet, startled.

"What kind of a devil are you?" he exclaimed. "Have you eyes in the back of your head, as the natives say of you?"

"Sometimes." Smith chuckled quietly. "Better tell him not to be hasty."

Atherton gestured. Mangin came forward, alone, and Smith rose and turned to meet him, without surprise.

"Hello, Mangin!" he said casually. "We were waiting for you. Might as well call in your men. We've decided on peace instead of war."

Mangin looked from one to the other in surmise, speculation, doubt. Atherton broke in upon the silence, petulantly.

"Oh, it didn't work. My two men are dead. One of his. Sit down and talk it over. They're not after gold at all, but books. Call in the men and let's have something to eat. I'm starved."

Mangin, recovering, gave Smith one look from his ice-cold eyes, and complied.

A dozen men in all, Smith perceived. Four were Mois hunters, wild, savage men of the hills with powerful bows and lacquered shafts. Eight men of a Menoi river tribe, most of them carrying packs. These two whites did not travel light.

In no time at all, a noon repast was made ready. The three men talked as they ate. As with Atherton, Smith laid down his cards very frankly.

Mangin listened, without committing himself. In the man's silence, in the icy glitter of his light blue eyes, in the heavy set of his jaw, Smith began to sense an uneasy peril. With Atherton, he might prevail, but Mangin was the stronger character, the definite leader. Across the border, Smith had heard queer stories of this man, and he recalled them most unpleasantly.

"You two seemed damned friendly when I showed up," said Mangin abruptly.

"Friendly?" repeated Atherton. "Why not? We've more to gain by playing the game with this outfit—"

"More to gain!" snapped Mangin, and swung on Smith. "I made you a straight proposition in Bangkok, didn't I?"

"And I refused it," said Smith calmly. "This is different."

Mangin's lip curled, to show powerful white teeth under his black mustache.

"Smith, I've heard a lot about you over the border. That's why I wanted you with us. The French say you can argue the devil out of hell. But you're not pulling wool over my eyes, understand?"

"You apparently miss the point," Smith said mildly. "It would be much more sensible for us to use reason than to be in conflict."

"And a lot nicer for you, eh?" Mangin sneered. "D'you think I believe one word you say? Not a word. You talk of books! A lie. You've fixed up a likely story with that Ranket woman; or has she tricked you? No matter. In such an affair as this, my



friend, there is just one law: the best man wins. I intend to win. The gold belongs to us. We'll have it."

"Conceded," said Smith, with a shrug. "We're not interested in the gold."

"You lie!"

The savage violence of the words brought Smith to his feet. He checked himself. A revolver was in Mangin's hand. The cruel, icy gaze challenged him.

"You lie in every word," went on Mangin. "I'm not to be tricked so easily. That woman? Bah! She's nothing. The other party, my friend, is *you*; and it's lost you."

"Eh?" Smith's brows drew down. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're going with us," and Mangin lifted his voice. Two of the natives came running, bringing hide thongs with them. "We've got you where we want you, and you stay put from now on. We'll make use of you yet, Say-and-See Smith, one way or another. Stick out your hands!"

Smith went very white under his bronze. Thoughts of Myra Ranket rushed upon him—the woman alone. Ninh Bing was a perfect marvel, but she could not know it. She would go to pieces. Heaven only knew what would happen.

"Mangin, you're a fool!" he said slowly. "If you do this thing, it means war. It's cruel folly—"

"I say it's wisdom," and Mangin laughed harshly. "Try your tricks with me, will you? By God, I'll stake you out over an ant-hill if you monkey with me! You sing low and you may come out alive, when I'm through with you. Stick 'em out! And give me any of your impudence and I'll knock your pretty teeth down your throat. Stick 'em out!"

Smith lifted his arms straight out in front of him.

The two natives lashed the thongs. Mangin inspected them, made sure they were not too tight, and stepped back.

"And now you'll be on a line with one of those Moïs—and lord help you if you try

anything! You're going to march, and march damned fast."

Smith said nothing. With this man, he perceived, words were futile.

#### IV

MANGIN was a brute, thinly veneered with civilization.

He possessed a brute force, a driving energy which impacted upon everyone around him. In another man, it would have been magnificent, but in Mangin it was sinister. His impulses, his actions, were all to savage violence.

Atherton, for all his superb physical power and endurance, lacked this tremendous force of character. He was under Mangin's dominance, hence these two men made a perfect team, of brawn and brain.

Long before twenty-four hours elapsed, Smith had realized this, and came to the despairing conclusion that his own case was hopeless. For such a man to reach such a decision, much was necessary. The very admission, from Smith, was significant.

All day, all night, long into the following day; and no halfway measures about it, either. Mangin watched him like a hawk. The Moï hunter to whom his bound arms were connected by a twelve-foot length of rawhide, took a savage pleasure in tormenting his white captive. Smith found himself unable to speak with the man. Atherton avoided him. The other natives rolled their eyes at him and concluded that Mangin was a mighty lord thus to enslave another white man.

Smith was very far from forgetting that one of his Tais hunters, at least, knew of his situation, but this helped not at all. He was driven along in the forefront of the party, and by the second day his wrists were raw and swollen and bleeding. During the night, his feet were tied.

With the calm philosophy that never forsook him, Smith wasted no strength or energy in complaints; he had said his say and

that ended it. He devoted himself to meeting the situation as calmly as possible, did as he was ordered, took what was given him to eat, and held his peace. But he did a lot of thinking. This meant war, and war to the death. No halfway measures on either side.

For one thing he was supremely thankful. Mangin despised Myra Ranket, probably knew that she had only a handful of boys along, and was ignorant that those Tais boys had been with Smith for years. Having Smith in his hands, he could dismiss Miss Ranket as a factor in the situation. From his viewpoint, the seizure of Smith was a bold and clever stroke which smashed opposition at one blow.

The second afternoon dragged on. Smith noted that Mangin disposed his march with care, two men well out in advance, two well to the rear, guarding against surprise from either direction; but he could not guard against heaven. With mid-afternoon a sharp word passed among the natives. Smith, dragged along on his line, noted for the first time the blackening sky, the thin rush of wind in the treetops, the increase of oppressive humidity.

The party halted. The loads were stacked and pegged down, and none too soon; the hush preceding the burst was upon them. Half the sky was ink-black, half in white brilliant sunlight.

Mangin, directing everything with cool assurance, brought two of the natives to Smith. The latter was seized and spread-eagled against a huge tree-bole, and bound there. Mangin regarded him with a laugh.

"You'll keep! When this blow is over, I'm taking you in hand and you're going to do some talking."

"Thanks for the information," said Smith. "What'll I talk about?"

"Gold, blast you!" Mangin came close, put heel of palm under Smith's chin, and shoved in with his weight, cruelly. "Arrgh! You don't fool me for a minute with your smart talk. You know all that woman

knows, maybe more, and you're going to tell it or have your feet burned off—"

The sky screamed. The upper trees began to bend. Men shouted. Mangin turned and ran for shelter.

Smith, feeling as though his head had been half wrenched off, twisted his neck painfully, gulped, and recovered breath. So Mangin



had never believed him! The man must have been inwardly maddened by his imperceptible air, his acceptance of his lot, his silence. And the fool thought that torture—

With a rushing fury that seemed to suck the world empty of air, the typhoon struck. A vast, terrible suction; Smith felt almost torn from the holding ropes. Then chaos—leaves, dust, sticks, as though half the jungle were whirling through the air in a solid mass.

And after that, the rain. And more wind. Wind incredible, that blew the rain into a froth of spray until it stung the skin like bullets. Wind that howled with infernal crescendo; such wind as these hills rarely saw, filling all the heavens with sounding uproar. Smith saw one great tree uprooted and falling, fifty feet away, and the crash of it was drowned in the din. Once in fifty years, perhaps, such a storm struck the hill-country and jungle. Smith felt glad that he was not facing the wind, but was protected by the tree that held him fast.

Darkness had come and gone. Now it came again, as the first madness of the typhoon blew out and the massed clouds descended upon the hills, rain streaming down in torrents. Darkness, merging imperceptibly into the coming night. What had become

of the men around, of Mangin and Ather-ton, Smith had no idea. Sheltered, no doubt, like the natives.

Out of season, this typhoon and rain; a cataclysm of nature hurtling terror and destruction over the hill-country. Creeks would become swollen torrents, trails would be washed away. Natives, homes and food-store destroyed, would be out on the prowl. Wild things would be savage, stark with terror. Everything, the whole course of life, would be different for a day or two.

The sheets of water poured down, water in solid masses, worse even than during the rainy season. It was a cloudburst. In the obscurity, Smith's pulses quickened and throbbed. These other men were sheltered, cowering hidden. They had deliberately tied him here, half exposed, in cruel resolve to break him. Good! So much the worse for them. It does not pay to be fools.

The bursts of water soaked everything, man and tree and ground. And the hide thongs that bound man to tree.

They were slimy, slippery with wetness, these stout thongs of bullock hide. They cut into Smith's hurt wrists and arms, as he tensed his muscles and set his weight against them. Imperceptibly, they gave; for wet hide stretches. His fingers groped, explored, caught at the line passed around the tree. He pulled at it, and here was greater length, more chance for slack. His nails tore, but the thong yielded.

THE deluge continued. The typhoon had passed now, but the cloudburst remained. Little by little, the length of hide loosened. Smith had his hand around it now, exerting a steady pull. After a long time, he was able to let go the slack and slip his wrist from one of the loops. Then another loop, then the last. The knotted end of the thong remained, but now his arm had freedom of movement, plenty of slack. He lifted the knotted end to his mouth and fell to work on it with his teeth.

It gave. It came loose. Now his right

hand was free, and he fell to work on the knotted thong about his left arm. Presently this, too, relaxed.

His feet, planted wide apart, had to go through much the same process, since it was impossible to stoop and reach them until he had slack on the line. But after a time he had it. Inching himself down, he got his fingers to the thongs.

He was free at last, flexing his hands, rubbing his bleeding arms. Intermittent bursts of rain showed that the downpour was coming to its close. Smith stepped away into the darkness and was gone. He could see no firelight, no sign of his captors. They must still be huddled close by, invisible.

Once he was clear away, the wet blackness was impenetrable. Trained to the jungle as he was, he had no liking for the prospect in store. He was free of man, but beast was another matter; night was the hunting time for many a rover. However, he knew his Tais hunter was somewhere close. That man would have dogged Mangin's party.

All of a sudden, the dwindling bursts of rain came to abrupt end. Smith lifted voice. The querulous bark of a flying-fox drifted on the blackness. From afar came other voices. The throaty scream of a black panther shocked the hills. Hushed bird and beast called to mate. Somewhere in the distance grumbled the reverberant vicious tiger throat.

Then Smith caught the answer to his own signal. Something wrong about it. He felt his way through the night, guided ever more surely by the Tais hunter, wondering that the man did not come to meet him. After a time the signal came no more, but Smith caught a low groan, a gasp of breath, an effort.

So he found the man at last, lying under a knotty tree-limb that had crashed down upon him, back broken, dying.

With the hunter's firebag, Smith ventured a light, clawed dry rotten wood from an old stump and had a fire going, a tiny one. He could do nothing except watch his faithful

servant die. Talking with the man, he learned that Miss Ranket's party would be to the north, perhaps half a day's journey.

The Tais hunter died, still pinned by that huge branch a dozen men could scarce have lifted away. The fire-flicker dimmed. The skies swept clear and starpoints glimmered to dispel the pitch blackness. Smith took the old Snider rifle and cartridges of the hunter, the fire-bag and betel-paste box, and set his face northward.

Two of his faithful men dead; the score was mounting. It hurt. To sit there and watch his man die, bit deep. Just to sit there—this took nerve and steadfast courage. Someone else would have flurried around frantically, but Smith had only sat, sucking his empty pipe, pouring heart into the dying man, helping him die. Now, as he started north, when he thought of Mangin and Atherton and their natives, it was with a grim chill in his brain. He knew every one of those natives, would know them again, and would see them again. As for Mangin—

Putting hatred away, Smith devoted himself to the work in hand. He had plenty. A couple of hours later, he had to give up. Forcing a way was almost impossible in the starlight, and a panther was coughing along his trail. He halted, managed to build a tiny fire, and relaxed.

**D**AYLIGHT grew gray at last, and he went on, hungry, through the havoc-ridden hills. No more native villages, for some reason. He had heard Mangin talking with the Moi hunters about it, and shortly after sunrise he found the reason. It must have happened the preceding evening. Smith came into a small empty village, houses blown flat, and saw dead men lying here and there. A few broken arrows, crimson-lacquered, told the reason. These Moies of the hill district were devils incarnate.

Still, thought Smith as he went his way, he might be able to handle these devils. Ninh Bing knew them, talked their lingo, and was

confident. Smith himself knew the Moi tribes farther east and could manage their speech fairly well, and he had hopes of getting on with this barbaric offshoot of the race.

Another village blown out of existence, a few remnants of people huddled about their houses, their rice paddy, their compounds. He got a scrap of food here, with news that Myra Ranket had passed through the previous day. He took up the trail of his own party a bit after noon had passed, following it fairly well by the upland course, above the steamy lower ground. What hell this cloudburst must have caused in the lower country!

A queer object brought him to incredulous halt. He rubbed his unshaven chin and stared. Caught in a high thorn-bush was a pith helmet, shining in the sunlight: Smith grinned. His own was gone. He had been stripped of everything except his pipe. Here was a gift from the gods.

He reached it, inspected it, and whistled. Myra Ranket's helmet. And, off to one side, whipped around the thorns, something yellow. Khaki riding breeches. Hers, also. Suddenly alarmed, Smith retrieved them, rolled them up, and took the trail more rapidly. No stopping now, although the leeches were bad in this stretch. Once he found the party, he could attend to them. A little salt and water would dissolve the hideous creatures. Smith was used to waiting.

He smelled smoke, and quickened his pace. Hereabouts, everything bore witness to the full force of the typhoon—trees and brush swept and twisted, wreckage on all sides. The trail plunged suddenly. Before him appeared a clearing beside a brook. At sight of it, Smith's jaw dropped.

Scattered about were a few articles of his camp gear and packs—a scant few. A small fire was burning near a hastily erected grass shelter. Not a soul was visible. At a glance, Smith saw that the sudden twister must have caught his party in the open, unprepared. But where was Myra Ranket?



"Hello the camp!" he called sharply, as he approached. "Ninh Bing!"

"Oh! Thank heaven you've come back!"

She came out of the grass shelter. Except for the voice, Smith would never have known her. She was clad in gaudy bits of silk—sarongs for ceremonial occasions which the Tais hunters carried about in their waist-cloths, Malay fashion. Beneath were her puttees and boots. Above, her hair floated in a mass, knotted back with a bit of cord. Her spectacles were gone.

She was the loveliest thing Smith had seen for years.

"Upon my word—it's really you!" he exclaimed, staring. He fought down his impulse to burst into laughter. "I'd never have believed it. Myra Ranket, how on earth did you ever disguise yourself before? Why, you look—you are—ten years younger! And beautiful—"

"You needn't make fun of me," she broke in sharply, angrily. "You're no beauty yourself, if it comes to that. You look like a human wreck."

"Well, you certainly don't, and I'm not making fun of you," said Smith. "My dear girl, look in a mirror! I give you my word, you're unutterably lovely. You've got dimples I never suspected—"

"That's enough! Don't be impertinent!" she exclaimed. Then, suddenly she drew back. Her face changed. She broke into a gale of silvery laughter. "Oh, it's no use trying to be dignified!" she gasped, in the midst of it. "After all, it's funny. Tragic things are usually funny, aren't they?"

Smith grinned. "By gosh, you sure are human! Say, what's happened, anyhow? Where are the boys?"

She broke into renewed laughter. All restraint, all affectation, was cast aside; she revealed herself a different person, a most charming person indeed.

"Oh, they're off looking for lost things. You see, we halted yesterday—the leeches had been pretty bad. I had to stop here and attend to them. Ninh Bing went ahead,

to get into touch with the Moi people. I was bathing and putting salty water on the leeches, when that hurricane struck. It carried off all my clothes—everything in camp!"

"What?" exclaimed Smith. "And the tent as well?"

Color came into her face. "Yes, if you must know; the tent as well. Fortunately I still had my boots on, and managed to save a few rags—"

Smith began to laugh. The humor of it hit him hard; but more than this, he saw the tremendous change in her. She had been whipped out of her existence, thrown bodily into a complete change of life and viewpoint. It had done wonders.

Anger flooded her eyes at his laughter, then she joined in it.

"It's funny, but it's tragic," she said at last, with a grimace. "I've lost everything—everything! The packs were scattered, too. Those four hunters were very nice, wonderfully considerate. They supplied these sarongs."

Smith sobered. After all, she must have had a pretty tough time of it, for a while.

"I can't say I'm sorry, Miss Ranket. The change is wonderful! I hope you don't get the specs back—distance glasses, weren't they? You can do without 'em fine. This topee is yours, by the way. And here are your riding-breeches. I found 'em along the trail. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get rid of a few leeches myself. See you later. I'll call in the boys."

HE fired the old Snider twice in the air, glanced over the few supplies that had been retrieved, and departed into the brush to strip and get rid of the pests that had fastened on him.

In one sense, this was disaster. However, Smith well knew how unessential can be the alleged necessities of life, in a pinch. They would get along somehow, and were close to journey's end. If Ninh Bing had remained, the party would not have been caught unprepared, but the head hunter

knew his business; if he had gone on, there was an excellent reason.

When Smith rejoined Myra Ranket, she had donned the breeches and was doing up her hair. He sharply intervened.

"Don't! Don't ever do it that way again! Braid it, do anything with it, but stay rid of that terrible bun for life. Why, your hair is lovely—it has golden glints in the sunlight!"

"I believe you mean it!" She looked at him, laughing. "Aren't you going to shave? I think it might improve you."

"Nope. Nothing to shave with. Hello! Here we are—"

Two of the Tais hunters came into camp on the lope. They greeted Smith sheepishly, but at sight of the fowl they carried, he gave over upbraiding them and ordered the birds cooked instantly. He was ravenous with hunger.

The other two boys appeared presently, bringing a small deer, and the camp was given over to feasting and reconstruction. There was no thought of taking up the trail. Ninh Bing had learned of a Moi village, and had gone in hopes of coming to some arrangement with the savage hillmen. As the destination was only a day's journey away, Smith thought best to wait here.

He made no secret of his own recent adventures.

"Gold?" the girl exclaimed sharply. "Father didn't know of any. If Atherton found gold, he kept it to himself. Smith, we've got to convince those men! We simply can't have antagonism—"

"That's hardly the word for it," and Smith chuckled. "They've lied to the Moies about their business here; now wait and see. Anyhow, I'll be off tonight. Got to visit Mangin and find a razor. And we must make sure about that temple of yours."

"You mean you're going to leave me alone?" she asked quickly.

"No. You'll have two of the boys with you, and I'll be back tomorrow night. But first, I must have sleep. I'm all in."

Smith went to where the Tais hunters squatted, and spoke with them. All four took their rifles and disappeared in the bush. He came back to Myra Ranket.

"Two gone to pick up Mangin's trail, two to find the temple. I'll sleep till sundown," he said, and checked his words, startled by the look in her face. She was trying hard to choke down emotion. Her lip quivered. Her deep blue eyes were suffused. "Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Only—well, I didn't know it'd be like this," she said unsteadily. "I thought we'd deal with the natives. But white men of this kind, and murder, and not a handkerchief or a bit of broken mirror to use—"

At sight of his astonishment, laughter mingled with her tears.

"Oh, go on and sleep," she said abruptly. "You wouldn't understand. Anyhow, I'm glad to find you can laugh. I thought you must be some kind of wooden man. Well, what are you thinking about? You have the queerest look!"

"Thinking about miracles," said Smith, and turned.

His actual thought was that it would be a very desirable job to take her in his arms and comfort her. But it was not a thought to voice. He found a shaded spot in the bush and flung himself down, utterly done up. Tugging off his tattered jacket, he flung it over his head, and was snoring in two minutes.

He was out of sight, but not out of mind. Left alone, Myra Ranket removed the gay sarongs, pinned them together, and so fashioned a serviceable covering for her upper body. She inspected the result with approval.

Then, taking up her regained helmet, she went up the brook a little way, knelt, and drank. As she rose again, there was a little laugh behind her. She turned, and found herself face to face with Mangin. She knew him at once, from Smith's description.

"Good afternoon," he said, very politely,

but there was no politeness in his avid, eager gaze. "And where, may I ask, is our friend Smith?"

## V

MANGIN'S question really defeated its own purpose. Otherwise, Myra Ranket would probably have called out or screamed, especially when Atherton appeared and those hot eyes of his surveyed her and struck terror into her heart.

As it was, however, Smith slept on, undisturbed and unseen.

Satisfied that, if Smith had really come here, he was out with his boys, Mangin affected to believe that Myra Ranket had seen nothing of him. With the two men was a single native, one of the Moi hunters, who helped himself to anything that took his fancy amid the scanty remnants of the camp equipment.

"It's not safe for you here," Mangin said quietly to Myra Ranket. "We trailed Smith, but we'll take you instead—for your own safety, understand."

"Right," said Atherton to the wide-eyed, helpless girl. "We couldn't leave you here, Miss Ranket. That fellow Smith is a scoundrel—"

"Oh, you—you beasts!" she flashed out, only to check herself. If Smith were wakened, it meant his death; they would kill him quickly. She could read it in the gaze of Mangin, and in his slow smile.



"Not at all. You're safe with us," he said in reply. "I don't conceal from you that we mean business, of course. You're the head of this party and we'd much sooner talk matters over with you than with Smith. Our

own men are on their way, so we'll cut along and join them before dark, with luck."

"I won't," she said angrily. "You can't carry me off this way—"

"But we can," said Mangin pleasantly, "if you make us do it. I could carry you myself. I'd be glad to do so. You might be more comfortable on your feet, though. What do you say?"

She swung on Atherton. "And you could do such a thing? You—"

What she read in his hot eyes frightened her, silenced her. He was not the man she had known as her father's secretary. He was another man, a man let loose, a man without restraints or habits in this new environment. Even Mangin was preferable, as she perceived instantly. He, with his civilized veneer, with his stronger character, was far less dangerous than this hot-eyed, slender man from whom the veneer had been stripped. Mangin was a brute, but he was a strong brute, and master of himself. Atherton was not.

It all came upon her in a moment—their words, the thing she read in their eyes, the murder of Smith if she fought back. The miracle of her wakened womanhood was far from finished, but she chose her part swiftly and surely.

"Do you mean," she asked, frowning a little, "that if I go with you we may talk over the situation and reach some mutual arrangement?"

Atherton laughed, and his laugh was hot as his eyes. "I could say it in less!"

But Mangin bowed to her, and caught at the bait.

"Precisely, Miss Ranket, precisely the idea! It is one of the utmost importance that we deal with you instead of Smith. We cannot talk here, for we must be away at once; besides, it is highly unsafe here for you. What would you like to take along?"

"I've nothing to take. We lost everything in the tornado."

"Then let us go immediately."

He spoke to the Moi hunter, who took

the trail at once. Myra Ranket's gaze fluttered to the thicket where Smith lay asleep; obeying Mangin's gesture, she followed the hunter. Behind, she caught a low exchange of words.

"This isn't the woman you described. Not the one I saw in Bangkok, either."

"She's changed," Atherton said helplessly. "My God, how she's changed! I never saw her like this. A raving beauty! A woman to make your heart turn over—"

"Silence, you fool," snapped Mangin. "Keep yourself in hand or I'll kill you."

Somehow, the man seemed to mean his words. The girl shivered; then he was up beside her, speaking pleasantly, smoothly, courteously. But his eyes spoke otherwise, and she was not deceived.

And yet, to Myra Ranket, there was a subtly delicious thrill even in her fear. Her old prim, dignified self fought against it, but could not prevail. The thrill lingered and warmed her heart. She did not know enough of such men as these to be utterly and wholly afraid.

**S**LOWLY the sun went westering. It was behind the hills when Smith stirred and wakened.

Beside him, chewing away at betel nut paste and expectorating blood-red saliva, squatted Ninh Bing, his head hunter. Smith came to one elbow.

"You! What word?"

"The word is good." Ninh Bing spoke stolidly. "I visited the hill-people. The storm was terrible; lightning struck in their village. Many are dead. I told them you had brought this punishment on them for killing our companion, back yonder. If we act swiftly, all is well. They avoid that temple and will not bother us. Many were killed there last season, when the white men fought them."

"Good for you!" Smith could read the unuttered story behind the laconic words. He knew this man well, more friend than servant. "I've sent two men to scout that other

party—but you don't know what has happened."

"Three men were here," said Ninh Bing. "One naked foot, two with boots, large and small. And she is gone."

Smith stared at him, then leaped up and led the way to the empty camp.

Even in the sunset light, Ninh Bing could read the sign very clearly; he could tell most of what had happened. Smith could guess the remainder. He took some of the hunter's black, stringy tobacco and stuffed his pipe. Myra Ranket gone—it was a stiff blow.

Luckily, Ninh Bing had his spare rifle.

The two sat talking while darkness gathered. Smith needed time; he must do nothing hastily, but his brain throbbed angrily. He went over details with Ninh Bing. To think of how he had lain like a log—well, it hurt. He had never suspected that Mangin would follow him hotfoot.

No trouble from the Mois savages? That put a new aspect on everything. And Myra Ranket? He tried not to think of her. Still, why not? She was no fool, no flighty creature to go into hysterics; she could play her own game. He tried to crush her out of his mind. He could not. A groan broke from his lips, so that Ninh Bing looked at him in surprise.

"Your woman gone, master?"

Smith's gray gaze narrowed. No use evading it. His duty was to her. It meant killing, and he hated killing, even while he burned with sheer inner fury. His calm common sense urged violently against it. He preferred to use wits and stratagem; but here he could not. Time pressed, and danger pointed.

"You are weary?" he asked. Ninh Bing reflected; he had come far and fast.

"Of course. But there is always sleep, master."

"Sleep for an hour, then."

Smith sat, smoking, watching, listening, as the darkness gathered and the stars pricked their pattern in the velvet sky. "If we act



swiftly, all is well." He must give up thought of action, where the temple was concerned. He must concentrate on Myra Ranket. At thought of that reptile Ather-ton, that brute Mangin, his heart burned again; cobra and tiger, those two. And he alone could save her, must save her. Those sapphire eyes of hers were like the night sky. He must!

Food remained; the visitors had disdained it. Smith stirred the sleeping Ninh Bing with his foot. They ate together. With sticks and leaves, Ninh Bing built a marker the other Tais would understand, bidding them come along. Smith took his rifle from the hunter, extra cartridges from what remained of the packs, and they started away in the starlight.

A new worry assailed Smith. One of the Tais hunters should have come in, to report on the trail to the temple. Another should have come, to bring word concerning Mangin's party. Neither had arrived. Smith had counted on these two boys remaining with Myra Ranket, when he gave the orders.

The night was full of sound. Here in the hills, the jungle left behind, wild life moved and roamed, free of the day's burning sun. Ninh Bing smelled tiger, he said; soon after, a rumbling cough close at hand proved his words true.

"There is no luck in this hunting," said Ninh Bing, without explanation.

None was needed. Smith felt the same way about the whole trip. Two of his Tais boys were dead; they had been with him for years. Oppression weighed down his spirit. Ill luck had dogged him, and worse. If Myra Ranket had known about the gold, if it had been his own objective all the while, he would have planned very differently. He was used to direct dealings. But somehow he felt cheated by destiny. In the darkness, he rubbed his sore, inflamed wrists and stifled curses.

Then it happened—suddenly, inexplicably.

Looking back at it afterward, Smith could

attach no blame. Alert as he was, no warning had reached him. None had reached the wary hunter just ahead of him. There was only the low, savage growl, the crashing giant shape above them, the fetid odor of tiger or black panther. No telling which. Great chatoyant eyes, luminous in the starlight, a cry from Ninh Bing.

Smith went down, getting in one bullet straight between those eyes. He got in another, as he came to his knee. Then a smash that knocked him headlong, and it was the end.

He awakened, after a time, and struggled up. His left arm was intolerably sore. He found the sleeve ripped away and two furrows in his arm, not too deep, but painful. His rifle lay beside him, broken off short at the stock by a terrific blow of those black paws.

And beyond, an inert mass. He was slow to realize the truth, in the faint light of the stars, but he discovered it. His bullets had gone home. Ninh Bing's long Malay knife had stabbed repeatedly. But the hunter was dead and crushed.

This hurt was acute, numbing, unbelievable.

Smith managed to tie up his throbbing arm. He dragged Ninh Bing's body clear and with the crimsoned, sticky knife made shift to dig a grave; it was the least he could do for a friend. He was without a rifle, now. He had only the Malay knife and his pipe, with Ninh Bing's pouch of tobacco, and a firebag. He himself was bruised and his left arm throbbled. Luckily, he knew what leaves the natives used for poultice—he had no medical supplies whatever. Above the grave, he left the broken rifle as a marker.

After all, he reflected, it was the sort of end the hunter would have desired. This did not lessen his own ache, his sense of loss, his abrupt loneliness. No luck in this hunting, eh? A true word there. No luck to the whole damned business. Gold brought no luck—blood-black gold.

Smith went on, for he could not miss the way now; Ninh Bing had followed the old trail of Ranket's party, still clear and plain. With dawn, he halted and cast about for the herbs he wanted, found them at last, and managed to make a little fire. Bark for a pot served his turn. Presently the bandage was on again and he went his way trusting there would be no infection from those accursed claws.

HE went on, steadily if slowly, holding doggedly to the trail, hour after hour. The morning was half spent when he stumbled into an open space, and a cloud of birds lifted at his coming, kites and a wide-winged vulture. Two things lay dead there, and premonition of evil leaped swiftly in his heart as he approached them.

He stood staring down. Inured as he was to the rapid sequences of life and death, the stunning force of this stroke was hard to endure. The two Tais boys he had sent to reconnoitre the temple lay here; they had been shot to death. Their rifles were gone.

Smith tucked tobacco into his pipe, made fire, and squatted on his heels, puffing away. He needed the narcotic. Here was tragedy redoubled; a sense of horror had settled upon him. At every move he was checkmated by death.

The tiger and the cobra had struck here; the realization of Mangin's uncanny and murderous ability was stupefying. What of the two hunters who had gone to find the trail of Mangin's party? Smith dropped his chin on his breast. He could guess that they, too, were lost.

He was alone, with only a curve-bladed Malay knife for weapon.

This was of no particular moment to him. The matter of odds against him was least in his mind. He scarcely regarded it at all. He would go ahead just the same; but it hurt to think how murder struck ruthlessly all around him. His own futility was maddening. Destiny seemed closing down upon him, fate against him, failure all around.

Now that he had been on the point of striking back at Mangin, he had lost the ability to strike. Keyed up to give bullet for bullet, he lacked even a rifle. And he could not live on air and tobacco for very long.

With despondency and defeat thus girding at him, he drove himself to the trail and made headway. The throbbing ceased in his arm, the inflammation died, the touch of fever passed. He was himself again. The blood-letting was good for him. It cleared his brain. If destiny closed in like a wall, he had his back to that wall now, and he must fight for it.

Mid-afternoon. He was striding along a high hill-flank, where the old, dim trail mounted before plunging into a valley beyond. Somewhere, the end of the trail was close, but he could not be certain of distances.

Off to his left, a rifle crashed, the echoes volleying. It was fairly close. Slipping out his Malay knife, Smith pointed for the spot. Presently he sighted birds lifting above the trees. He went forward cautiously, all alert, slipping through the brush silently and rapidly. This must be one of Mangin's party, hunting for the pot.

The man was squatting over a little hill-deer, cutting it up. Smith, peering from the leafy screen, recognized the native instantly; it was the man who had plundered his pockets, one of the party from the lower country. His rifle was an old rusty Snider, wired together.

The brown man jerked up his head. Instinct, or some sound, had alarmed him. He reached for his rifle. Like a flash, Smith was leaping in upon him. The native sprang up. His rifle exploded in Smith's face with searing powder-burn and nothing worse, but the long Malay knife drove home, and there was no need for second thrust.

With a grunt of satisfaction, Smith knelt. Here was his own back again—wrist watch, tobacco pouch, razor and other loot of his person. Match-safe and salt bag. A rifle, a sorry weapon but still a rifle, with half a

dozen cartridges. And best of all, fresh meat, food to sustain and last him!

The rest lay in the future.

## VI

"LOOK at it!" said Atherton hoarsely. "Dump it in a bucket of water. It'll come clean. Gold!"

"Hold on to yourself," Mangin said. "None o' that. Leave it like it is."

One felt that this man was no stranger to gold. He rose, nodded to Myra Ranket, and made a place for her at the breakfast table. Atherton lifted his pale eyes from the heap of dull blackish disks, rubbed one hand over his sweat-darkened red hair, and stared at the girl. Those eyes of his flamed on her, over her figure, her face.

The camp was pitched on the terrace of a sharp little hillside, running down with the bubbling waters of a spring to the brook below; on the other side of this tiny valley was a dense clump of huge trees, and the outlines of ruinous masonry. The temple, there.

Sheltered under the outspread tent flap from the morning sun, already hot, the girl looked from one to the other of the two men, as a native fetched breakfast. They looked at her, and words failed them. She was like the sunrise on a gray dawn, gay in her silken sarongs, her radiant self. Weariness was fled from her. Framed in loosely knotted masses of hair that held golden glints, her face held laughter and youth and woman's wisdom, and the vitality of her deep blue eyes mocked their fatigue.

They were pretty well fagged, and she knew why. From the little tent Mangin had assigned her, she had seen the flitting rays of flashlights during the night, dancing down the hillside and across to the temple. Then, when no savages could see, they had taken turns treading that path. The result lay on the blanket inside the tent—a huge pile of blackened round things.

"So you found the gold you sought?" she

said, without evasion. "What makes it so dark and black?"

"Blood," said Mangin, his dark brows sombre. "It's all that way. Why? I don't know. Spilled over it, maybe. Masses of it were caked together. Best to leave it like this so our men can't see it."

The three ate. Atherton seemed unable to take his gaze from the girl. She met his hot eyes and smiled, frankly, unafraid, perhaps with a challenge in her smile.

"I'd be afraid to touch such gold," she said quietly, casually. "It might hold bad luck. Perhaps I could tell you the reason of the blood. However, you're welcome to your plunder. It's not what I'm hoping to get."

"I believe she's right," spoke out Atherton. "You know, Pierre, I've been thinking over the matter. Perhaps Professor Ranket never did know about the gold I found. I didn't advertise it, you bet." He gave the girl a look. "Did your father say where to find those books?"

"In the room above the elephant doorway, he said."

"And we were below, on the other side," said Atherton slowly. Mangin nodded and drank his coffee down, then leaned forward, intent on the girl.

"In that case, wait," he said. "We had one Moi hunter left. He went yesterday to find his people. We can get what we want from the temple at night. We'll not go near it, so far as they know. We won't antagonize 'em. Tonight you can come over there and take a look. If you find any books, we'll give you a lift out with them."

"That's very kind of you." She smiled at him, and her smile brought a hint of bewitching dimpled softness into her face. "What about my guide, Smith?"

"We'll not discuss him," said Mangin curtly. "Atherton, we'd better get this stuff sacked up today. Must do a bit of hunting, too. Something's happened to that man who went out after deer yesterday."

Atherton merely nodded, and lit a ciga-

rette. He offered one to Myra Ranket, who hesitated and then accepted. A tension hung over the three of them. There was some electric quality in the air, a repression, a suspense, hard to define.

Their meal, their smoke, their relaxation, gave the two men new life. Beside them was success, heaped up and running over. Their spirits rose. They began to speak of what they had seen in the temple; gold, massed, incredible in amount.

"It was shattered by earthquake hundreds of years ago," said Atherton, who had at his fingertips all Professor Ranket's knowledge of the place. "Back then, the old Khmer race had cities through this country and a high civilization. No one knows what ended it. Like the Mayas in Yucatan. Plague, perhaps."



Mangin laughed harshly. "Plague doesn't stick to gold. Blood may; as for bad luck, I'll take all your gold and chance the result Mademoiselle, we brought all the guns from your camp. Would you like to take the shotgun and go out for a bit of shooting?"

Her eyes dilated a little. "What? Then I'm not a prisoner? You're not afraid I might shoot you?"

Mangin broke into a hearty laugh. "That's like the bad luck on the gold—I'll take the chance!" he said, showing his white, firm teeth under his mustache. "You're welcome to try. Prisoner? Not at all. A guest of honor."

"Our guest," said Atherton softly, as a cobra hisses in warning. Mangin swept him a look, hard, level, probing, but said nothing;

yet his very silence held a threat. Myra Ranket intervened.

"You don't think I could look at the temple today? There are no Mois around."

"True," said Atherton. "Why not? Why quit until we must?"

MANGIN reflected, glanced at the pile of blood-black gold behind them, and succumbed to the obvious temptation.

"Right you are," he said, and rose. "After all, it may be folly to play safe. That is, until the time comes. I'll send out all the men. If there's any sign of the Mois, they can signal. Leave one man here to stand guard. Back in a minute."

He swung off toward where the natives were camped, fifty feet away. Myra Ranket followed his powerful figure with her gaze.

"A positive sort of man, isn't he?" she observed. Atherton's eyes glowed upon her, then he spoke, suddenly earnest.

"Look here, Myra! We're old friends. You can trust me; you have to trust me. Look out for him. You don't know what a devil he is! Especially with anyone like you. Do you realize what you mean to men so far out of the world?"

She laughed—a silvery little laugh of amusement that was maddening. She came to her feet and was about to speak, when suddenly Atherton's arm shot out, gripped her, drew her to him. In his wiry strength she was powerless. He held her close, kissed her lips, her eyes—

They were suddenly torn apart. Mangin, tigerish in his swift leap, was upon them and Atherton went staggering a dozen feet away. Holding the girl about the shoulders, pressing her to him despite her struggles, Mangin stood glaring at his companion. The pistol in his hand was more eloquent than words.

"She—she's not yours!" cried Atherton, crouching, wary of the pistol.

"Nor yours, yet," and Mangin's voice was like steel. "Our guest, you fool! Will you respect her? Is she worth more than gold?"



Atherton denied the open challenge and drew back, relaxed, assented sullenly.

"I lost my head. It's nothing to pull a gun about."

"Right." Mangin laughed suddenly, and looked down into the girl's eyes as she vainly fought against him. "You beauty! Here's for tribute—" and he swiftly kissed her, and set her free. "Now, then, forget all nonsense! The men are going out. We can go over yonder in another half-hour or so; no hurry. Three shots for a signal if any *Moi* scouts come nosing around. Until then, get a bit of rest."

Flushed, angry, helpless, Myra Ranket sought her own shelter and hid herself. Mangin looked after her, then swung around on Atherton.

"Upon my word, I don't blame you for your madness!" he said slowly. "But I'll kill you if you repeat it."

"Two can play that game," Atherton spoke out, a deadly softness in his voice. Then he straightened up. "Nonsense, Pierre! Why make fools of ourselves? Remember, Smith's still alive somewhere. Scotched, but still alive. Time enough to fight over her when we've finished the job here. Or must we fight?"

Mangin eyed him, and then nodded, smiling.

"Of course. Why fight? Share the gold, share her. *Mon Dieu!* She is a miracle. Leave her alone, then, until we've finished. Here, I'll put her at ease."

He went striding swiftly to the girl's tent, stooped to the entrance, and looked down at her. She struggled up, tears on her cheeks. He laughed softly, gaily.

"Miracle! Well, little miracle, have no fear. You're a comrade, a companion, one of ourselves; nobody shall eat you, I promise, until we're all through here. So dry those tears, which become your loveliness all too well, and in half an hour we'll be on our way. What's past is past."

He withdrew abruptly, and helped Atherton get the gold stowed away. But behind

him, the "little miracle" sat most unhappily. She knew real fear now. She had read it in his gaze. She had tasted it in his kiss. Atherton was a reptile. This man had strength, had character, had ruthless mastery—and would use it. In the grip of his one arm, she had been totally helpless. And behind his apparent calm, his kiss had betrayed a seething turmoil of emotion.

And he had used the very word of Smith—miracle!

SHE might run away, true; she was in no way confined. Yet, to what avail? The savage hills formed a prison. She knew not where to run. She had no safety anywhere. Here was food, at least, and protection from wild beast and native. She must await some word, some sign, from Smith. He would not fail. Her heart warmed to the thought of his calm, sure spirit. And now she knew what the queer look in his eyes had meant; these others had revealed its meaning to her. This gave her a thrill of happiness, and brought her out with a fluttering smile to the hail of Mangin. He and Atherton awaited her. Atherton tossed a knapsack at her.

"Here. Put this on, to fetch away loot. We have sacks to shoulder."

She joined them without demur. After all, here ahead lay her objective, the goal of dreams; everything else fell away in importance, at the moment. The two men almost ignored her. They, too, were set on what lay ahead, as though their previous labors had but whetted their lust to be at the gold anew. Neither carried a rifle, but a pistol was at each hip.

"We smashed a way in last night," Mangin said to her, as they followed the trickle of water from the spring on down the slope. "Haven't looked around anywhere else. I'll have a look at those books with you. Sure you don't want to play with the gold?"

"I'd like to see it, yes," she said. "But first, the more important things."

Mangin laughed at this, and even Atherton grinned amusedly.

The temple bulked larger as they approached it. Atherton, suddenly voluble and eager, pointed out how in some far age an earthquake must have toppled the building and brought down the hillside from above, covering it, until the rains of successive centuries had brought part of it light. Huge trees pierced it and formed a green curtain above the mound.

Where Professor Ranket had obtained entrance, a doorway stood; two massive stone heads of elephants, supporting the stone work above. Atherton pushed in through this and was gone, lost to sight.

"Look!" The girl pointed quickly to the right, above the doorway. "There's the place father found! That hole. In beyond is another room, with the books."

"Let's have a look," said Mangin, his bony, predatory features all alight.

Myra Ranket preceded him, up the pile of rubble and into an opening above the entrance.

Sunlight sifted in through ruined roof and walls. Cleaned out to some extent by Ranket's party, the chamber was large. On two sides, the walls were mere sloping heaps of fallen stone and earth.

Quickly mounting one of these heaps, the girl went to a huge crack, peered through, and excitedly called Mangin.

"Here! Come here and look!"

He joined her, scrambling over the stones. A room beyond was visible, sunlight striking in through wall-cracks. From Mangin broke an exclamation. Ranged in neat piles along one wall were stacks of ancient books—a foot in length, two inches wide. Strips of bamboo or palm within wooden covers, lacquered with gold and red.

"You see?" exclaimed the girl. "We'll have to make a hole here. Father saw them but was unable to reach them."

"Easily done," said Mangin. "A rifle-barrel will do the trick. Come along and look at the gold. I'll take back a load, and

fetch a rifle. We've spare ones, thanks to your friend Smith."

They returned to the elephant doorway. Atherton had just emerged into the sunlight, partially filled sack over his shoulder. He readily yielded it to Mangin.

"Good! Come along and see the place, Miss Ranket." His voice was hoarse with excitement. "Gold! It's incredible, past belief. Enough for us all, enough for an army, enough—"

Mangin laughed harshly. "There's never enough gold, Atherton. Get yourself in hand. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

He shouldered the sack, staggered, and struck off in his long, firm stride. Atherton mopped his face, took the empty sack Mangin had dropped, and gestured.

MYRA RANKET followed him, in through the entrance. He turned sharply left, over a heap of debris that had closed the way here. She climbed after him, struck a sharp descent, and slid downward with a sharp little cry that re-echoed and filled the place with sound.

Large, cavernous, upheld by massive columns of stone, this vault-like chamber stretched away in gloomy obscurity. Amid this obscurity a tree had upgrown, a vast and enormous, horrible thing, white and lacking color, shoving upward through the roof and causing cracks in the masonry.

Sunlight filtered through these cracks, struck down in golden beams dancing with dust-motes, lighting an irregular space of floor. Here, heaped in huge piles where containers had rotted away or fallen to dust in past centuries, were masses of little blood-black disks.

"Gold! Look at it" Awe in his voice, Atherton advanced, and she followed. He kicked at one of the piles. It flew apart, and there was a glinting sheen of yellow. "Gold! But where'd the blood come from?"

Myra Ranket peered upward, but it was impossible to make out any details of the masonry overhead.

"Up there, very likely." Her voice, cool and rich and soft, rippled through the reverberant place in sharp contrast to his hoarse tones.

"These Khmers were a fierce and bloody people. Probably the blood of sacrificial victims ran down here and covered the treasure."

Atherton stared. "Likely enough," he said.

She moved forward. A shaft of the sunlight struck her hair and face and figure. She looked like some unearthly vision, against the gloom. She stirred the gold with her foot, glancing around. Strange dark shapes filled the obscurity.

"What's over there?"

"Haven't looked," said Atherton. "We didn't get past here, last night; too busy with the coin. And I didn't bring a flashlight, this trip."

"It's delightfully cool here," she said, and stooped. Picking up one of the coins, she rubbed at it, till the yellow metal came clear. "The place is creepy, though. Makes one think of huge snakes. And this tree—ugh! What's that? Listen—"

She started back abruptly, as something moved in the darkness. She struck against Atherton, and caught at his arm. He steadied her.

"Nothing. A slip of earth—ah!" His hands strengthened, his fingers sank into her. All the flame that was in him suddenly turned to this objective. "Myra! I tell you—"

She erupted in swift, savage resistance, striking him clear, turning to run. He reached out and caught her sarong-waist, and ripped it half away, caught her wrist, jerked her back to him.

"None o' that," he panted. "You glorious little fool, forget the world! We're alone here—"

"You're not," said another voice, a voice that echoed among the columns and from the vaulted roof like ringing steel.

It was the voice of Smith.

## VII

MYRA RANKET fell back against the ghostly tree as Atherton released her. For a moment, Atherton stood looking about, a snarl in his throat.

Then came another sound—a clash and clink of metal, from the left side. Like a flash, Atherton wheeled, whipped out his pistol, and flung it up to fire at the sound. A laugh came softly—from the opposite direction. Something moved there. The figure of Smith, a dim, vague shape.

Atherton jerked around. The pistol in his hand exploded. As it did so, something flashed in the thin rays of sunlight. Something glinting and golden, that struck him in the side of the head and knocked him all sprawling, so that only his empty right hand was visible, by the fallen pistol. A spot of light came down and touched this hand. The fingers stretched out spasmodically, clenched, stretched out again, and went limp and motionless.

"He's had his fill of gold for once," said Smith, coming out of the gloom.

He stooped and picked up the object that had struck Atherton. It was a lump of ruddy gold, unblackened, wrought in the shape of a Hindu god. Then he tossed it away. The sound of it, the sound of his voice, came sibilantly after the roaring reverberations of the pistol-shot.

"You—you're real!" With the choking cry, Myra Ranket moved, left the tree, reached out her hand and touched Smith. He was shaven and neat, despite the bandaged arm; quite his usual cool, precise self once more. He took the girl's questing hand and pressed it, smiling.

"Quite real, thanks," he said. "Got here last evening and took shelter. They kept me stirred up quite a bit with their gold-hunting, and I didn't dare risk a shot. Any sign of your books?"

She stood, her gaze dilating upon him.

"Books? Oh! He'll be back soon—Mangin. With something to break into the place where they are—I can't believe you're real,

that you're here! Where are the others? Ninh Bing and the rest?"

His face changed. He dropped her hand, leaned over, and picked up the fallen pistol. His fingers touched the face of Atherton for a moment, and he straightened.

"Ninh Bing? No use asking me," he said slowly. "This fellow knows by now, but he can't tell us. In the heaven of all good hunters, I suppose."

She started, peered down at Atherton. Her voice came with shrill horror.

"You can't mean—he's not dead?"

"Don't be so childish. Death's all around us." Smith spoke sharply, then the edge died from his tone. "I'm sorry," he added contritely. "Yes, I'm alone. Let's get out of here. This accursed place gets on the nerves. None too healthy, either. Tigers have denned in here. That's the real explanation of the blood, I fancy—tigers bringing their prey in here. Generations of 'em. Not so romantic, eh?"

She headed for the opening, only to check herself.

"Mangin—he'll have heard the shot!"

"Not likely," Smith rejoined. "Not if he was over at your camp. By the way, have you had any trouble with those chaps?"

"No," she said. "Not much."

"Your voices wakened me. I was having a bit of sleep. When I saw you there in the sunbeams, it was like a vision; thought I was off my head, at first."

She went on, without response, and Smith followed. With the pistol in his hand, he could afford to leave that old Snider with the broken lock. He wanted to meet Mangin, now, wanted to have the thing over and done with, for it could only have but one ending.

Over the rubble and at the entrance now, the elephant doorway looming above. Smith looked out. Mangin was on his way down from the camp, opposite, a rifle over his shoulder, walking with springy stride. Smith drew back out of sight, and found Myra Ranket beside him, catching his arm, looking into his face,

"No," she said. "No. You must not do that. Not you."

"Eh?" Smith frowned. "Do what?"

"Wait here, shoot. He might. You must not."

"Oh!" Smith laughed a little. "I'm no murderer, my dear."

He was startled by all he read in her face, her eyes, her voice. Warm pleading, swift anxiety for him, for what he would do; sudden outpouring of herself, yet with self forgotten; the blaze of her vivid personality astounded him, delighted him.

"Why should you care so much?" he asked gently.

"You stand high," she replied. "So high!"

She was against him, his bandaged arm about her shoulders; how it happened, he could not tell, but her face, upturned to his, was radiant and lovely. He touched her lips. They stood together for a long moment, wordless. Suddenly she moved.

"You must not kill him. Don't you see? I don't want you that sort. There are so many other ways, better ways, than using bullets."

"He murdered my Tais boys," Smith said slowly.

"I don't care what he did. I do care what you do."

"I see. Then you'll have to give up what you came for. We'll have to skip out, before he knows it. He'll do his best to shut our mouths. You'd not hit back?"



"Yes! It's not that. Fighting is one thing. This is another; you here, waiting for him, deliberately intending to kill him."

Smith shrugged. "The distinction isn't



obvious to me; but you win, my dear. Do we go?"

"Together, yes. Give up everything else."

He looked into her eyes, and his face changed, warmed, softened.

"By gad, what a woman you are! It's agreed, then. We can make it, easily—"

His words died, at a crashing of steps from outside the entrance. He drew farther back. The voice of Mangin came from close at hand.

"Inside, there! Miss Ranket? Want me to get to work?"

"Yes, yes!" she made reply, with a swift glance at Smith. "I'll be right along. In a minute!"

They could hear Mangin scrambling for the rooms above. She came close to Smith again, smiling, and spoke under her breath.

"He's going to break through into the place where the books are. Up above."

Smith nodded. "I was up there before they came, last night. Now's our chance, if you really mean it. Give up? Quit cold?"

"Yes." Her eyes searched his face. He nodded.

"Right. As soon as he gets to work, then."

They stood waiting. From somewhere above, as though in response to Smith's words, came a crash and tumble of dislodged masonry. At the same instant, Smith cocked his head. One after another, three distinct rifle shots, faint and distant, almost drowned by the noise above. He did not know what it meant.

"Ready, then. Anything you want from the camp yonder? We'd better go straight there, get a rifle—"

"One man's there on guard."

Smith tapped his pistol, as they came out between the elephant heads.

"A native? He'll not bother us. But we can slip away here, if you prefer."

"Yes. Do."

Another crash of rock and rubble. Smith, a step in advance, caught a scarlet flash against the sunlight and the green trees. With instinctive reaction he let himself go,

dropping backward, falling prostrate and sending Myra Ranket staggering back into the entrance. Something smashed on the stone elephant-head above Smith; a long scarlet-lacquered arrow. A second came after it with hiss and *whick* of impact. Already Smith was snaking himself back between the stone heads.

A tall figure darted forward, leaping for the entrance—a Moi warrior, naked brown body oiled, bow flung aside, steel in hand. Man followed shafts closely, darting in for the kill. A second was behind him.

Smith came to one knee. The pistol-shot smashed out. The Moi pitched forward, his companion, with a leap sideways, turned and was gone.

"Quick!" said Smith calmly. "Out and up—get into the upper room! We can hold out there. I've no spares for this pistol."

He blessed her swift unquestioning acceptance, her swift realization, in this instant of crisis. She darted past him and was outside, daring the shaft of other savages; but there were no others as yet. From above, echoed a rumbling crash of falling masonry. Had not Mangin heard that shot? Smith wondered, but had no time to waste in thoughts. He followed Myra Ranket quickly, and turned to mount the incline.

From the camp opposite lifted the crack of a rifle, and again, with a burst of shouts. No time to look. Smith went up the rubble like a monkey, and none too quickly either. As he hurled himself into the chamber beyond, one of those deadly lacquered shafts flicked past his cheek and was lost in the obscurity beyond.

SMITH struck some loose fallen rock, went head over heels, and the pistol was dashed out of his hand. Dazed, bruised, his wounded arm afire, he found himself being helped up by Myra Ranket. A burst of yells sounded outside. Another arrow flicked in at the opening, and another. None of the Moïs appeared, however.

"The pistol!" Smith panted, recovering

from his fall. "Look around for it—damn the thing, it can't be far."

Repeated rifle-cracks came from outside. But from close at hand sounded a mournful laugh, then words that brought Smith around, staring into the obscurity of the chamber. He had quite forgotten about Mangin.

"You won't need the pistol, Smith. Stand still."

Mangin was there, on the wall opposite the entrance hole. His own pistol was out, was covering Smith. A low, sharp cry burst from Myra.

Then Smith realized. Mangin was not leaning against the wall of rubble and fallen stone, as first glance had told. Instead, nothing was visible of the man except his head and one arm and shoulder; they protruded at an odd angle from the mass of masonry. Before him was the rifle he had used in prying the stones apart. It was distorted, and twisted out of shape.

A terrific fall of stone had pinned down the man.

"Good God!" exclaimed Smith, startled. "Here, I'll get to work at it. Myra, you watch the opening. Find the pistol—"

"Stand still!" Mangin's pistol jerked, the man's voice whistled. "None of that, Smith. I'm done, and you're done. I'm caved in. Before I go, you'll go. Damn you, I take you with me!"

Smith blinked at him, incredulous, unmindful as an arrow whistled past.

"You fool!" he burst out. "It's all of us together now—"

"Not much," cut in Mangin. His voice came with an effort. "I'm done, I tell you. Damned cheeky devil! I've hated you from that day in Bangkok. I said then I'd get you, and I mean to do it—"

Smith gathered himself, leaped. The pistol roared at him. He felt the impact of the bullet jerk him around. Then he was down, groping vainly, striving to regain his feet.

Something whistled above him. Again,

He heard the two shafts thud home with a sound unmistakable. He came to one knee and looked up. A pistol fell and slithered down the heap of rubble, almost to his feet—Mangin's pistol. Above him, Mangin's head fell forward a little, dead.

One of those two arrows had driven straight through the man's throat.

With a sense of ghastly unreality, Smith caught at the pistol, tried to get on his feet, found Myra Ranket helping him. He submitted blindly to her guidance. He was hit, he knew, but felt no pain whatever.

They were at one side of the entrance opening, where light streamed in. Smith sank down and aided her to pluck at his jacket, at his singlet. He winced, as she touched him, wiping away the blood.

"Bad?" he asked laconically. She began to laugh hysterically, but checked herself.

"Not bad, my dear, not bad," she answered. "But it might have been. Scraped across your ribs—ah! It looks nasty, but did little real damage. Here, sit still and let me get it bandaged up."

She ripped at singlet and jacket; and as she improvised a bandage from the strips of cloth, Smith looked past her at the dead face hanging on the opposite wall.

"Inefficiency doesn't pay, my friend," he muttered. "If you'd been efficient, now—"

Then he winced, and looked back at the entrance, as the bandage was wrapped in place. Wasting time, he thought; a waste of labor, too. Those Mois meant business, and had proved it.

"Sorry, my dear," he said softly, and touched her hand. "After all, you know, we're done. No way out of this."

She laughed a little, not hysterically but calmly and frankly, as she patted the finished bandage and took his fingers in hers.

"But we're together, aren't we?" she said.

"I'd sooner live together than die together, my dear," said Smith, and sighed. "Well, give me a lift—thanks. Find that other pistol, if you can. We'll need what's in it. And first—"

He looked down into her eyes, a smile touched his lips, and as she lifted her face to his, he kissed her gently.

"Hail and farewell, my dear!" said he in a low voice. "And now for the finish."

## VIII

THE rifle shots had all ceased.

Smith cautiously approached the opening. A crimson-lacquered arrow sang in and splintered on the rocks—an occasional random shaft, no more. The slope of rubble was not inviting to the enemy.

Out across the little valley, the camp swarmed with figures. It was quite clear that the Mois had wiped out Mangin's natives, and Smith frowned in puzzled wonder. All this was entirely contrary to the report Ninh Bing had given him regarding the Mois.

"Poor Ninh Bing! How was he so wrong?" he said to the girl. "I don't savvy it. Gad! There are a lot of these devils in sight! Once they make up their mind to rush us, they'll do the job properly. Hello—something's up."

Shouts rippled along the valley. Below the temple the Moi warriors began to assemble from all quarters. Smith eyed the gathering mob with grim suspense. Suddenly, to his intense amazement, he heard his own name shouted. Words in French came to him. Then a figure darted out of the

crowd, followed by a second, starting up the rubble slope. Smith's pulses leaped. The two hunters he had sent to trail Mangin's party!

"Look there! Myra! Look—my two Tais boys! I thought they'd been killed by Mangin—"

"M'soo Smith! Are you there?" called one of the Tais hunters. "Let them see you! Show yourself!"

Smith inched forward, came full into the opening. Eager voices greeted him.

"They are friends!" went on the Tais swiftly. "Do not fire! They came to kill these others. Ninh Bing told them what a great man you are—they are friends! We found them and brought them to destroy this camp, master. They want the head of M'soo Mangin. Where is he?"

In sharp, glad revulsion, Smith let out a yelp of delight.

"Good! Tell them he's here. Dead. They're welcome to his head. Mademoiselle is with me. She is safe?"

"All safe, master—"

Smith turned, put out his hand to the girl. He was radiant, overjoyed, unable for a moment to find words. Then:

"Won, my dear, the game's won!" he said softly. "Your books—everything. They can be managed. Everything can be managed—" She caught his hand and smiled at him.

"Everything," she repeated in a low voice.



# Adventurers All



## Last Shell

**E**ARLY in the summer of 1930 I found myself visiting one of my friends back in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee. I had just returned from South America where I had been on a small hunting expedition in northwestern Brazil, along the Branco River.

Very naturally my friend, Brooks, and myself let our conversation drift to hunting, and in due course to rifles and guns and their uses. Here we had a few differences of opinion, and especially as to the actual handling of a gun on a hunt. I spoke of a practice common to all big-game hunters. That is, never to fire the last shell in an automatic rifle or gun before reloading. And although I disagreed, Brooks contended that, while that practice might be perfectly proper for elephant or lion hunting in Africa, it would be practically a useless precaution for any hunting a person might do in the United States.

I had brought my high-powered, automatic 30-30 rifle along with me, and it so happened that Brooks had an exact match for it. Consequently, we decided to take a three or four day hunting and fishing trip into the mountains, with the idea that we would have a little shooting contest between ourselves if we didn't find the hunting good.

There had been several rumors of a large cougar that was said to be infesting the mountains about thirty miles to the north of us, and as we were going in that direction Brooks thought that we might even get a shot at it. The tale sounded a little fishy to me though, because I had never heard of anything more dangerous than a few wildcats in that part of the country. Still we had

talked to a man who claimed that he had actually seen its large tracks and several mutilated sheep as proof of its presence.

On the third day of our trip we gave up all hope of any success at fishing or hunting. We hadn't had so much as a shot or even a bite. We decided to return to camp early and have our little contest. We didn't have many shells, but since we didn't expect to bag anything we were quite free with our disposal of them. I enjoyed the match very much, but was forced to admit that Brooks had outdone me slightly in almost everything we had tried, except whirling and shooting at a target behind us. We became so absorbed in our shooting that we suddenly realized that we had only two shells left. Those were in my rifle, so I gave him one and we quit shooting.

That night we were lying awake in our blankets when the quiet of the night was suddenly shattered by the unmistakable scream of a mountain lion. And we had only two shells left! I will have to admit that we were both a little jumpy over the fact.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, however, and we arose early the next morning to break camp and prepare for our long day's walk back home. We found the going a lot harder on the way back, as we were taking a shorter way, but a much rougher one.

We walked all day but were still about ten miles from home when the sun touched the horizon. We were going to have a full moon that night though, so we decided to go on in after we had stopped for a bite to eat. Brooks remarked that he would like to have some fresh meat for supper, but I re-



minded him that he had only one shell left and that he had better be careful how he used it.

We found a suitable place to stop, and while I built a fire Brooks left with his rifle to "look around a bit." A few minutes later a shot rang out, but Brooks returned shortly and said that he had missed on a good shot at a rabbit, due to the poor light. That left us only one shell!

After our meager meal of biscuit and tinned sausages, we walked on. By nine o'clock the moon was well into the sky, and we had no trouble finding our way. I remained about fifteen feet behind and let Brooks lead the way, as I was not familiar with the country.

We were just crossing a small ridge when I froze to a sudden standstill. There on a limb over the trail, not five feet beyond Brooks, was the fiery glare of two huge eyes! Why I yelled no warning to him I as yet do

not know. Instead I jerked my rifle to my shoulder and, scarcely taking any aim, I fired. It was a lucky shot. Brooks was narrowly missed by the falling object as it tumbled to the ground.

Hurriedly we built a small fire to examine our kill, and there stretched out on the ground was six feet of dead mountain-lion. Yes, it was a lucky shot! The bullet had gone in through the left eye and torn about half the top of his head off on the way out. We later confirmed our belief that it was the killer we had heard the rumors about.

Brooks was unusually silent for the next few miles as we walked on in after hanging the cat to a limb out of reach of other animals. Finally, he said. "You win. I've learned something about shooting my last shell when I don't have to."

The cougar is now stuffed and one of the favorite trophies of my den in my home in Miami.

*William V. Sturte*

## Planked Miner

**T**HE engineer at the Gold Crown Pine, Cripple Creek District, Colorado, lowered the last load of the day shift through the hood, one man inside the bucket and three riding the rim, clinging to the cable. I had been a little late getting out of the dry room and would have to wait for another trip, as it was a company rule that only four men should ride the bucket at one time.

The shift boss came hurrying out of the boiler room. "I'm glad you missed," he said. "I meant to tell you to wait, so you could use the bucket to fix that lining plank."

"All right," I answered. I returned to the dry room, took off my heavy, white slicker, and put on a new denim jumper. I wanted handy pockets to carry nails. The jumper was far too big for me—it was marked 40 chest, and must have been 46, but it was the only size in stock at the com-



missary where I had bought it a few days before when I went to work as a timberman at the Crown.

I fastened every button on it, and turned up the collar.

I heard the shifter say to the hoistman, "Take it easy, Mac, so's you can stop him quick when he spots a loose board."

Mac grunted. He didn't need to be told that—or anything else about running a hoist.

The lining planks in the shaft were long two-inch boards. Constant rubbing and banging of the bucket against them had loosened some and split others, leaving ugly, splintery snags in places.

"Time we was fixing those boards," the shifter commented. "They been catching the men's slickers, and somebody might get pulled off a bucket!"

I put a hammer in my pocket and went down. About half-way between the first and second levels I rang a stop, got down in the bucket so both hands would be free, and went to work on some loose plank. I finished there, got up on the bucket again and rang two bells; Mac lowered me slowly. I kept one hand near the bell cord in readiness to ring the moment I saw another section of lining that needed nailing.

The bucket twisted and swung toward one corner of the compartment when the cable went over a roller at a knuckle in the shaft, turning my back toward the foot wall side.

**S**OMETHING hard and cold slid up my back between my oversize jumper and my shirt, and I was left hanging in that hole like a sock on a clothesline. The bucket went on down—down, and out of sight. The greasy cable snaked over my shoulder, rubbing against my neck, and almost knocked my hard boiled hat off.

I knew what had happened. One end of a long plank had sprung loose and was sticking out in the shaft. It must have just snapped out or else somebody on the four trips preceding would have been caught. Anyway, it had neatly lifted me off the bucket and left me hanging limply over a two hundred-foot drop.

I couldn't reach the bell cord. I was afraid to strain toward it too much for fear the buttons might rip out of the jumper. I was afraid to do anything. And on top of that I was scared.

*Flupp!* The neck button did come loose. I could hear my heart beating. I cautiously

lowered my chin against my chest to look at the other buttons. They were holding—drawn tightly against my body. But it seemed to me that the fabric looked rotten and frayed. I expected the seam up the back to rip loose, or all the buttons to fly off at once.

There was no use to yell for help. The men below, and above, were too far back in the drifts to hear. The hoistman or the top men could not have heard me. My only chance was to wait for the bucket to come back—and pray for the jumper to remain stout. If the bucket came up too fast—well, it would be mighty risky trying to board it.

It was a long time—twenty minutes, Mac afterward told me—before the cable moved again. There was a very slight tug as if Mac was saying, "What's the matter down there?" Then it began to go up. I hoped he wouldn't take it up too fast. Before long I heard the bucket bumping along below me. I grabbed the cable, letting it slide through my fingers. I spread my legs to catch the rim with my feet.

The bucket came slowly toward me, one foot found the rim, the bucket swayed, but I clung to the cable with a desperate grip and was lifted off the plank almost as neatly and gently as I had been put there.

I took no chances then. I rang one—stop, waited a moment, rang three—men on, then one—hoist.

"Got 'em all fixed, huh?" the shifter asked.

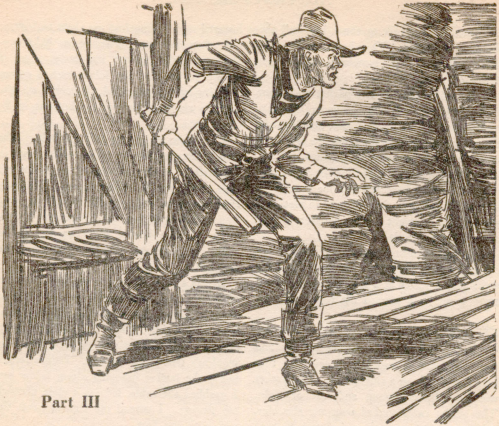
"There's one bad one down there," I answered. "It'll have to be nailed before any more men go down."

I told him exactly where it was. "You can fix that yourself," I said. "I'll take my time!"

*Steven Frazee.*

#### \$15 For True Adventures

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Part III

## SONTAG TRAILS THE TIGER

By W. C. TUTTLE

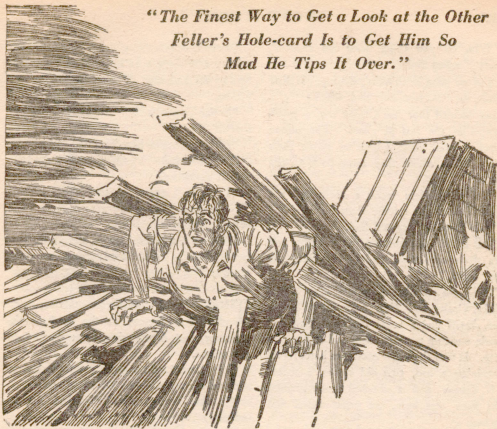
*Author of Many Stories of Sad Sontag and His Sidekick, Swede Harrigan.*

What Has Happened Before —

SAD SONTAG and Swede Harrigan, two of Tuttle's most popular characters, received a telegram from the Cattle-men's Association, telling them to see Frank Archer at a Los Angeles hotel. They go there, find one dead man in Archer's suite, one badly wounded one and a terrified young woman. They are convinced she had nothing to do with the shooting and help her escape; later in Santa Rita, where this Archer lives, they find it was he who had been knocked out in the hotel room, his companion

killed and that thirty-five thousand dollars in cash was missing. At the Circle C ranch they again encounter the girl, find her name is May Colton and learn that since the murder of her father, she, her mother and brother Rex, are having a hard fight to keep the ranch. Rex has just been accused of murdering two men, and of that crime Sad and Swede know him to be innocent. They learn of the two Archers, father and son, bakers, and meet the sheriff, Tobe Simmons and his deputy Smoky. Then Tobe is shot and once more suspicion is bound to point to Rex Colton. Sad and Swede are interested in the

*"The Finest Way to Get a Look at the Other  
Feller's Hole-card Is to Get Him So  
Mad He Tips It Over."*



shootings, but Archer insinuates that, being range detectives, they might find some stock missing from his SJ ranch. Rex Colton turns up missing, however, and Sad feels that there is a mystery there much more worth solving, so they go to Oasis, neighboring county seat, to look for clues.

## CHAPTER XI

### GETTING THE OTHER FELLOW MAD

**I**T WAS late that evening, when they rode into Oasis. An old Chinaman, who operated a little lunch-counter at the rear of the saloon, cooked them some ham and eggs for supper.

Ace Craley, Bill Neer, Sam Bridges and the saloon keeper were playing poker in the saloon.

"Just travelin', or goin' some place?" asked Craley.

"Just pokin' around," replied Sad. Bridges

merely grunted and looked narrowly at the two cowboys.

"Ain't lost any more sheriffs, have yuh?" asked Craley.

"They hadn't, when we left Santa Rita," replied Sad. "Anythin' might happen in an hour over there, yuh know."

"I believe that," grinned Neer. "Ace has drawn to an inside straight twice—and made it every time—so I believe anythin'."

"That's what *he* says," amended Bridges. "Prob'ly open at both ends."

"You fellers haven't seen Rex Colton lately, have yuh?" asked Sad.

Bridges shook his head, as he carefully discarded.

"Are they lookin' for him?" he asked indifferently.

"Not officially—since yore warrant went haywire."

"I still think he done the shootin'," growled the sheriff.



"Who do you think done the shootin', Craley?" asked Sad.

"I'm no good at thinkin', Sontag. If Rex Colton didn't—who did, and why?"

Sad decided that Ace Craley was as much puzzled as the rest of them. The saloon keeper showed them where to stable their horses, after which they came back to the saloon.

"Do you fellers want a room for the night?" asked the saloon keeper.

"We shore do," agreed Sad.

"All right. Go upstairs to the right, and take the room at the end of the hall—the front room."

The game soon broke up, and after a few drinks, Craley and Neer rode out of town. The sheriff had a room upstairs. Sad and Swede went up to their room and lighted the lamp. It was the usual cowtown hotel room, containing a bed, two old chairs, a make-shift dresser and a cracked water-pitcher. The floor was bare, the paper faded and cracked.

The one window, which opened on the main street, if it could be called a street, was covered with a thin shade. Sad looked the room over thoughtfully. The lamp was on a table in the exact center of the room. Motivating for Swede to stand near the bed, Sad picked up the rolled-up blanket, stood it on a chair and placed his hat on top of it. Then he removed his coat and draped it around the back of the chair.

Picking up the chair he carried it over beside the window, where he crouched below the window sill, and lifted the dummy between the window and the lamp. He held it still for a moment, and then slowly turned it around.

Suddenly a pane of glass showered from the window, and the shade danced violently. From out on the street came the rattling report of a gunshot. Sad dropped the chair and slid aside. A bullet had torn a long splinter from the bottom of the chair.

"Shot low!" grunted Sad. "Didn't miss my hand an inch."

Someone was calling from down in the saloon, and there was a sound of pounding feet in the hallway. The saloon keeper was yelling:

"What happened? Anybody hurt in there?"

"Nobody hurt in here," replied Sad.

"What was the shootin' about?" called the sheriff anxiously.

"I dunno," answered the saloon keeper. "These gents say nobody was hurt in their room, Sam."

"The shot was fired out in the street," informed Sad. "What's all the fuss about anyway?"

THEY heard the sheriff talking with the saloon keeper at the head of the stairway, and finally they went down into the saloon.

Sad grinned and sat down on the bed to remove his boots.

"Is this funny to you?" asked Swede soberly.

"Yeah—shore," admitted Sad. "Didn't it kinda strike you funny that they should all stampede to our room, askin' who got hurt? Or is this front room used as a target, when folks shoot off guns on the one street of Oasis?"

"Yeah, that was kinda funny, Sad. But who fired that shot?"

"Who knows? Mebbe it was Craley or Neer. And again, mebbe it wasn't either of 'em. Anyway, the sheriff and saloon keeper knew who was to do the shootin', 'cause they came to pick up the dead."

"That's right! How else would he figure the bullet came into our room? Sad, I'm beginnin' to suspect these folks."

"I'm beginnin' to suspect everybody."

"Except me," smiled Swede.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure that you didn't fire that shot."

No one disturbed their rest, and they were out early. The Chinaman gave them an early breakfast, before the saloon opened. The shot through the window was not men-

tioned, and after breakfast they rode out of Oasis.

"I'll betcha that fuzz-brained saloon keeper didn't lose any time in lookin' for a bullet hole in his walls," laughed Sad. "Him and that sheriff prob'ly laid awake a long time, wonderin' why we didn't yep about that shot."

"Yuh can't blame 'em for that, Sad. Where we goin' now?"

"Back to Santa Rita, I reckon. But not over the regular trail. There might be a dry-gulcher on that trail today. I don't know of any reason why we can't cut straight across the hills."

"Well, replied Swede, "we've got plenty of time to try it."

For the first few miles the going was easy. There was little brush, and the slopes were gentle, but across the divide, and on the Santa Rita side, the hills were brushy and broken. In circling the head of a small canyon, they struck a deep cattle trail, in which were the tracks of shod horses.

"This trail goes in the general direction," remarked Sad, "so we might as well follow it. Anyway, somebody's been ridin' it."

About a mile further on they came out on a mesa above a little valley. It was not over twenty acres in size, and had the appearance of having been cultivated at some time.

"Another monument to dry farmin'," said Sad, as they stopped to roll a smoke. "The blasted hopes of a hoc-man, goin' back to the desert."

"There's a rider," remarked Swede, and Sad looked up quickly.

The lone horseman was starting across the little valley from the opposite side, less than half a mile from them, riding a gray horse. Suddenly he stopped his horse, and seemed to be looking in their direction, where they were silhouetted against the sky.

For possibly ten seconds he sat there, and then reined to the west, a right-angle turn from his former direction. With no sign of haste, he left the valley at the west end and

disappeared in the brush of a small canyon.

"Meanin' what?" queried Swede.

"Meanin' that he didn't want to meet us, I reckon," replied Sad. "Let's take a look at this valley."

Further west they found an easy slope into the valley, where they discovered an old shack and a tumble-down corral. The cabin was unoccupied, empty of furnishings. Near the cabin was a small spring, enclosed in sagging barb-wire. They enjoyed a drink, and then sprawled in the shade of an old sycamore, keeping an eye out for the lone rider, who might not be friendly.

They had only been there about fifteen minutes, when they heard a horse coming down the slope through the brush. It came into view, as its rider urged it around the front of the cabin.

It was a pinto horse, bearing a tall, lean Mexican. Sad got to his feet and walked over to him.

"*Buenas dias*," he smiled widely.

"*Buenas dias*," replied Sad curiously, as the Mexican dug one brown hand inside his cotton shirt. Sad watches him narrowly, as he drew out a small package, tied in brown paper.

"For me?" asked Sad, as the Mexican held it out.

"He mus' be for you," replied the Mexican. "Theese man he geeve to me, and he say for me to geeve heem to the man I am to meet at theese cabeen."

"Yeah—well, thanks," smiled Sad.

"*Adios*."

The Mexican rode swiftly back up the slope. Sad looked at the package and walked back to Swede, who shoved his drawn gun back into his holsters.

"Keep yore eyes peeled, while I open this," ordered Sad. "I've got a hunch that I've got the package that was intended for the man we saw comin' this way."

INSIDE the paper wrapping was one thousand dollars in currency, in five, ten and twenty dollar denominations. There

was also a piece of white paper, on which had been penciled—80 flat.

"That's quite a nice present, declared Sad.

"I dunno what we've done to deserve it; but why look a gift-horse in the teeth? C'mon."

Quickly they mounted and went straight across the valley, where they entered the brushy hills again.

They were a mile away from the cabin, before Swede questioned Sad, who drew up and they talked it over.

"The Mexican said he had orders to hand it to a man he would meet at that cabin," explained Sad. "I don't suppose there would be one chance in ten thousand that anyone else would be there. That rider, who shied off, was the man to collect the money.

"From that west side he couldn't see the cabin. I don't reckon he even seen the Mexican. But it's a cinch he saw us cross the valley, and now he'll go and wait for the Mexican. I'm afraid he's goin' to have a long, long wait."



"But that money don't belong to us, Sad," reminded Swede.

"I realize that, Swede. But there's somethin' crooked, when men make a pay-off like that. A thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"Somebody," declared Swede, "is goin' to be mad as hell."

"That's the idea. Swede, the finest way to get a look at the other feller's hole-card is to get him so mad that he tips it over."

"I hope we'll be alive to look at it. When that Mexican don't show up to hand over that money, they'll know we got it."

Sad laughed. "Mebbe. I've got a hunch that they picked out a Mexican, who don't know either party. If they bring him around

to identify us, we'll make up a funny face, and he won't recognize us."

IT WAS late in the afternoon when they arrived at Santa Rita; so they ate supper before goin' over to Smoky's office. Smoky was there, with Doctor Cates, the lone physician of Santa Rita.

"I'm shore glad to see yuh!" blurted Smoky. "Where yuh been?"

"Oh, we took a ride over to Oasis," replied Sad.

"Nolan's dead," informed Smoky. "Died last night."

"Gee, that's shore tough! I hoped he'd live to tell us somethin'."

Smoky and the doctor looked queerly at each other.

"Somethin' wrong?" asked Sad.

"I think there was somethin' damn decidedly wrong, Sad."

The doctor nodded grimly, but let Smoky do the talking.

"It was like this," explained Smoky. "Doc has a housekeeper, who is also his nurse, when he has any patients. After supper Doc always takes a walk around town and he's mebbe gone an hour. Last night, when he's out, a Mexican comes to the house and tells the nurse that her sister, Mrs. Benson, who lives over the other end of town, is sick, and wants her to run over for a few minutes. Well, she—"

"Uh-huh," interrupted Sad. "And Nolan was dead when she came back."

"That's right."

"She wasn't sure, until I got home," added the doctor.

"And her sister wasn't sick," said Sad.

"Well, how'd you know?" demanded Smoky.

Sad ignored the question, as he turned to the doctor.

"Did yore nurse recognize the Mexican?" he asked.

"No, she did not. It was dark on the porch."

"What did they do to Nolan?"

"That would be difficult to prove," replied the doctor. "He was still in bed, his bandages soaked in blood. Apparently someone struck him a blow on the head. In his condition, it did not require much of a blow to finish him."

"Doc," queried Sad, "is there any way yuh can prove that someone murdered him?"

"No, I can't prove it, Sontag. The bandages prevent any additional cuts. He was in bad condition, anyway, but I did have hopes that I might save his life."

"It's shore tough," remarked Sad. "Smoky, that kinda bears out my theory that someone attempted to murder Nolan, and tried to make it look like an accident."

"Yeah, yo're right, Sad. But to sneak in on a sick man thataway—it shore sticks in my craw."

"Merely another case of dead men telling no tales."

"Well, Doc, do we hold an inquest over Nolan's body?" asked Smoky.

"I don't believe so. Everyone seems to consider it an accidental death. I can't prove murder; so an inquest wouldn't be of any use."

After the doctor left the office Sad gave Smoky the package.

"Put that in yore safe, Smoky; it's a thousand dollars."

"A-a thousand dollars," whispered Smoky, handling the package gingerly. "Why, that's a—hell of a lot of money."

"It won't bite yuh," grinned Swede.

"Well, why don'tcha put it in the bank?"

"Put it in yore safe, and I'll tell yuh where I got it."

Wide-eyed with amazement, Smoky sat there and listened to Sad's story of their trip to Oasis, where somebody tried to murder one of them through a window, and of the Mexican, who gave him the package of currency at the old cabin in the little valley.

"Well, I'll be related to a horn-toad!" he gasped. "Can yuh beat that? But what's the thousand dollars for, I wonder?"

"That's easy," smiled Sad. "Figure it out

yourself. There were twenty-five head of horses stolen from Archer's ranch. That paper says, 'Eighty flat.' Twenty-five times eighty is two thousand. Half of that is one thousand. Somebody was to get fifty percent of the sale price."

"Yeah, I reckon yo're right, Sad. But why did they try to kill you fellers in Oasis last night?"

"Maybe," smiled Sad, "they knew we was good at arithmetic."

## CHAPTER XII

### MINUS SWEDE

FOR the next two days Sad and Swede stayed in Santa Rita and kept their eyes and ears open. Smoky made several trips out to the Circle C, but Rex had not returned.

Sad had a talk with Clint Rawls, which netted him nothing in the way of information, except that Archer was not as wealthy as folks supposed.

"He ain't makin' a dime off the S J," declared Rawls, "and you know there's mighty little money in a cowtown bank. Anyway, I believe it's owned by Phoenix capital. I heard him tell Dick that hell was raised in Pheonix over him losin' that thirty-five thousand dollars in Los Angeles. I've got my force cut down to Len Hardy, Nelse Sorensen and Poco Sales."

"What about Dutch Block?" asked Sad.

"Dutch ain't showed up," replied Rawls, and Sad felt sure that Rawls knew nothing about the shooting of Dutch Block.

"I wonder what the devil became of Rex Colton," remarked Rawls.

"He seems to have faded out," smiled Sad. "That's kinda queer, too. There wasn't any warrant for him. I wonder if he killed Simmons?"

"I don't believe he did," replied Rawls. "I know Rex pretty well. Of course, yuh can't tell what a kid will do. Rex is plenty forked. If he really killed Pete Orey and Buck Long—well, yuh can't tell. If Tobe



tried to arrest him, he might start throwin' lead."

"Don't you think he killed Orey and Long?"

"What I think, or don't think doesn't make any difference. If I was pinned right down to an answer, I'd say no."

"Lots of queer things happenin'," remarked Sad. "They tell me that this was a quiet spot, until Dan Colton was murdered. And since then it's been one thing after another."

"That's right. I liked Dan Colton. He was salt of the earth. Mebbe he didn't like me any too well, but that was his privilege. Dan was a square-shooter, and everybody liked him."

"That job shore ruined the Circle C," said Sad.

"They shore did," agreed Rawls. "I'm no angel, Sontag, but I never hankered for gore, until that happened. If I knew who he was, I'd shoot the tripe out of the man who killed Dan Colton."

Sad nodded thoughtfully. For two days he had talked about Dan Colton to many men, watching and studying their reactions to his questions.

He was a keen student of psychology, although he did not know it by that name, and now he mentally marked Clint Rawls off the list of possible suspects.

A little later it occurred to Sad that Nolan's death might have been an aftermath of the Dan Colton murder. Nolan's heavy drinking might have been to steel his nerves to tell the truth. He was on his way out to the Circle C, when they murdered him—or tried to—to seal his lips. Jimmy Myers said that Nolan acted as though he was looking for someone—and had a gun in his pocket. Perhaps Nolan knew they'd try to kill him. But Nolan was dead now, his lips sealed forever.

SAD went over to the bank and engaged Frank Archer in conversation. They talked of Nolan, and Sad asked Archer if he

could give him a little information about Nolan.

"It's about that deal with Dan Colton," explained Sad. "I understand that Nolan witnessed the deal between you and Dan Colton."

"Mr. Nolan prepared the bill-of-sale," replied the banker.

"Had you bargained with Colton previous to this day?"

"Not at all. It happened in a few minutes."

"You sent for Nolan to prepare the papers and to witness the deal?"

"Nolan happened to walk into the bank; I didn't send for him."

"Uh-huh. Then it's a cinch that Nolan wouldn't have had a chance to tip off anybody about Colton havin' all that money."

"Not a chance on earth. You are not trying to connect Nolan with that deal, are you, Sontag?"

"I'm tryin' to figure out why Colton was killed. There were only three men in on the deal—and two are dead."

The banker nodded his head slowly. "That is true, Sontag."

"Somebody knew."

"How could they? No, I don't believe it. Some enemy killed Colton, and found the money on him. That *must* be the solution, Sontag."

Dick Archer left his cage and came over to them. Sad nodded to Dick.

"We are still puzzling over Dan Colton's death, Dick," explained his father.

Sad looked thoughtfully at Dick for several moments.

"Wasn't you here in the bank when that deal was made?" asked Sad.

"No, I wasn't," replied Dick. "I went out to the S J that morning to pay off the men. I never knew about the deal until Dad told me."

"There are many puzzles around here," sighed Frank Archer. "That shooting at the Box Eighty, the murder of Tobe Simmons."

"And the possible murder of Nolan," added Sad.

"What?" exclaimed the banker in amazement.

"Nolan wasn't murdered," said Dick. "His death was accidental."

"Recorded as accidental," said Sad rather dryly.

"Why, I didn't know there was any question about that," said the banker. "Who on earth would murder Nolan?"

"Search me," replied Sad. "Anyway, I'm much obliged, Mr. Archer."

"I'm afraid I haven't been of much assistance, Sontag. When you make up your mind to earn a nice sum of money, I'd like to have you take the job of finding out who is stealing my horses."

"I might do that—later," replied Sad. "It wouldn't be much of a job."

Leaving the banker staring at him blankly, Sad walked out.

"If you're goin' to insist that I'm a detective," he chuckled to himself, "I might as well act *real smart*."

THAT evening Sad and Smoky sat in a poker game at the Vaquero. Swede practised on a pool table, until about nine o'clock, when he told Sad he was going to the livery stable and take a look at the horses before going to bed. They always did that before retiring.

"I'll be along in a couple hours," Sad told him.

"Sooner'n that, if yuh don't throw away yore horseshoe," remarked Smoky. "Couple more pots, with yore luck, and we'll all go to bed."

Swede went down to the stable. A dim lantern hung on a wooden bracket beside the door of the tack-room. Jimmy Myers would be in the little tack-room, playing solitaire; so Swede went back there to speak to Jimmy before taking the lantern.

But Swede did not reach the tack-room. He heard a noise as he passed a stall, and before he could turn, something struck him

over the head, knocking him flat. Partly conscious, he tried to draw his gun, his hand was knocked aside, and another blow caused him to lose consciousness in a shower of metal sparks.

An hour later the poker game broke up, and Sad went to the room, expecting to find Swede asleep in the bed. Quickly he went down to Smoky's office, where Smoky was getting into bed, and they both went over to the livery stable.

Their horses were contentedly eating in their stalls, and the lighted lantern hung from its usual peg against the wall. There was no light in the tack-room; so they used the lantern.

"I wonder where the devil Jimmy Myers is?" said Smoky.

"It's doggone queer," remarked Sad anxiously.

A soft, thumping noise caused them to investigate. In a big oat bin, closed and fastened with a hasp, they found Jimmy Myers, tied hand and foot, and gagged. They lifted him out, cut the ropes and untied the gag, but it was several minutes before Jimmy could tell them that he didn't know what happened, except that two masked men tied him up securely and dumped him into the oat bin.

They left him, rubbing his sore mouth, and went over to the office to discuss plans.

"Somebody knew our habit of goin' to the stable, before goin' to bed," said Sad grimly. "It ain't once in fifty times that one of us goes alone."

"Do yuh think they aimed to get both of yuh?" asked Smoky.

"I'd bet that was their idea."

"What'll they do to Swede?"

"Who knows? They didn't want to kill him, or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of takin' him away. We'll have to wait for them to make another move."

"Yo're worried, ain't yuh, Sad?"

"Certainly, I'm worried. We've been together a long time. But I don't know where to look for him; so I'll have to wait."

## CHAPTER XIII

## REX RETURNS

**S**WEDE had no idea how long he was unconscious, but he awoke to the realization that he was utterly miserable. He was lopped across a saddle, his feet tied on one side, his hands on the other. A man rode behind the saddle, one hand clutching at Swede's shirt, keeping him balanced.

Swede's head ached violently, and his body felt as though he was being sawed in two. After a while he remembered what had happened in the stable. There was no conversation, and if there were other riders, Swede was not aware of that fact.

It seemed hours that they traveled up and down hills. At times Swede lapsed into unconsciousness, and when he awoke he suffered so badly that he wished he was unconscious. Finally they stopped, and Swede was taken off the saddle. There were two men, who took him into a house and dumped him on the floor and tied him up again.

One of the men held a lighted candle close to Swede's face.

"How'r yuh comin', feller?" he asked. Swede could see the two masked faces now.

Swede tried to grin, but it was only a slight grimace.

"He'll live," chuckled the man with the candle. "Let's have a drink."



They drank heavily from a bottle.

"How about a drink of water?" asked Swede huskily.

"Shore," agreed one of the men. "After you've told us what we want to know, we'll give yuh plenty water."

Swede spat and looked painfully at them.

"What do yuh want to know?" he asked.

"Plenty, feller. And if yuh try to lie to us, yore bones will rot in an old prospect hole back in the hills."

"A pleasant outlook for a liar," observed Swede.

"Yeah, and you better not lie. Where's that thousand dollars you got from a Mexican a few days ago?"

Swede blinked at him, and his puzzled stare of amazement was well done.

"A thousand dollars from a Mexican," parroted Swede. "Well, this whole thing is a nightmare, after all. Go ahead and ask me where I was at nine o'clock of the day that Dewey won the Battle of Manila Bay."

The masked men exchanged glances.

"Do yuh deny that yuh got a thousand dollars from a Mexican?"

"A thousand dollars from a Mexican," marveled Swede. "Well, that shore would be a novelty."

"I told yuh what we'd do to yuh, if yuh lied," warned one of the men.

"Then I'm safe," sighed Swede. "If yuh ask me a sensible question, I might be able to answer it."

"Do yuh deny that you and yore pardner came across the hills from Oasis and stopped at an old cabin in a little valley?"

"Why should I deny it?" countered Swede. "We stopped there and got a drink of water from the spring."

"And a Mexican gave yuh a thousand dollars."

"There yuh go," sighed Swede. "It don't make sense."

"I'll be damned," remarked one of the men quietly. "Do yuh suppose we've been double-crossed?"

"I'm wonderin' the same thing. If we have—"

"Drop it! There's a sure way to find out."

The last speaker took the candle and examined Swede's bonds. Satisfied that they were secure, he extinguished the candle, and both men went outside, where they mounted

their horses and rode away, neglecting to close the door.

FROM where he sprawled on the floor Swede could look through the doorway at the horizon, where the moonlight brought out the silhouette of the hills. It suddenly dawned upon Swede that he was in the old cabin, where the Mexican had given Sad the package of money. To Swede, that little spring under the sycamore was the most important thing on earth right now.

With his head throbbing and his body aching in every muscle, he got to his knees. Twice he fell sprawling, before he was able to stand upright. Taking short jumps he managed to reach the doorway, where he braced a shoulder and rested. It was only a hundred feet to the spring, but it seemed a hundred miles to Swede.

Time after time he went sprawling, but by hopping, rolling and finally hitching along he reached the spring, where he drank his fill. Unable to roll a much-needed smoke, he stretched out on the ground and went to sleep. Cows bawled dismally around the valley, and a chorus of coyotes chanted mournfully at the moon; but Swede heard none of it.

Sunrise was painting the hills, when Swede awoke. He was so stiff and sore that he could hardly move, but he sat up and painfully reviewed the situation. Without a doubt the two masked men would be back soon. Tipping over on his side he drank again, and as he struggled to sit up his eyes focused on something which caused him to grunt with delight.

It was a rusty section of old sickle-bar for a mowing machine, with a dozen of the old triangular knives still in place. It was leaning against the bole of the sycamore, just across the spring.

"God bless the hoe-men!" grunted Swede. "C'mon, body, we're goin' visitin'."

After considerable effort he got over to the tree. Cautiously he shoved the bar around to where he could inch himself backwards so

he could slip one of the knives between his wrists. It was rusty and pitted, but the saw-like blade cut like a razor.

In less than a minute his hands were free, and it required only a few moments to cut the ropes of his ankles.

"If I ever have a family crest," Swede announced, "it'll shore be stopped with a rusty sickle-bar."

He took time to bathe his sore head, and then sat down to consider his next move. He knew it must be at least fifteen miles back to Santa Rita, and he had no liking for a fifteen-mile walk in high-heeled boots.

"That's no good," he told himself. "Anyway, they've got my gun—and I need it."

Limping back to the cabin he picked up a split section of two-by-four, which he hefted in his two hands.

"All right, you money-hunters," he said grimly. "I'll be all set for the first head through that doorway. All this detective work of Sad's—tryin' to prove who killed Cock Robin! Lemme at 'em with this club, and I'll lay 'em out where anybody can tell who they are."

He poked out a section of the chinking between the logs at the rear of the cabin, where he could watch the slope. Apparently this was the way the two masked men had gone. Swede was crouching there, enjoying a cigarette, when he heard a noise behind him.

He turned his head quickly, and for a moment the hair seemed to rise on the nape of his neck. A section of the puncheon floor was slowly rising, being shoved from below.

Only for a moment was Swede distracted. He grasped his club and slid across the floor, ready to take a swing at anything that might come up through the flooring. The loose poles were shoved aside, and a man came crawling out, evidently from a concealed cellar. He was out on the floor before he turned and looked at Swede.

It was Rex Colton, dirty and disheveled, his hair matted with dirt and dried blood, his wrists swollen and rubbed raw.



"Is the name Colton?" asked Swede.

Rex squinted painfully. "Who are you?" he whispered.

"I'm the party on the first floor," grinned Swede. "You look like an accident that already happened."

"I'm about half dead," replied Rex. "I ain't had anythin' to eat or drink for a hell of a while. Who are you?"

"By the name of Harrigan," replied Swede.

"Harrigan! Oh, yeah. Where are we, anyway?"

"There wasn't no name on it," replied Swede. "Can yuh walk?"

"I think I can, Harrigan."

Swede steadied him and they went out to the spring, where Rex drank and bathed his head, while Swede watched the slope.

"I never expected to see daylight again," groaned Rex. "It shore was hell. I've been workin' for hours, tryin' to saw that rope off my wrists against a rock."

"I used that old sickle-bar," grinned Swede. "It's quicker."

"They had you tied up, too?"

"Somebody did. They hopped me in Santa Rita, draped me over a horse and brought me out here."

"Where are they now?" asked Rex anxiously.

"I dunno. They went away last night, tryin' to find proof that I'm a liar. They'll be back most any time, I reckon."

"They'll get us again, won't they?" asked Rex. "I shore don't want to be tied up in that hole again."

"Who put you down there, Rex?"

"I wish I knew," replied Rex grimly.

"Well, how did it happen?"

"I reckon it was years ago," said Rex wearily. "I went back to the ranch, after makin' a fool of myself at Tobe Simmons' funeral, and I seen a man in our house. He took a shot at me, as I came in, and dived into the kitchen. I threw one shot at him, as I followed him inside, and somethin' hit me—I reckon."

"Yuh don't know whether yuh hit him or not, eh?"

"I never had time to find out."

"And you've been down here all this time, without anythin' to eat or drink, eh?"

"Not all the time—just the last twenty-four hours, I reckon. A man came a few times with food and water. Hell, I was too sick to eat much."

"Yeah, I'll bet yuh was," remarked Swede. "Your head looks like it had been made by a jack-knife carpenter. But what was the idea in capturin' you, Rex?"

"Well," Rex smiled sourly, "the main idea seemed to be to make me tell where I cached the thirty-five thousand I stole from Frank Archer."

"And yuh didn't tell 'em, eh?"

"If I knew where it was, I'd get it for myself."

"Now I'll tell you somethin'," grinned Swede. "The man you shot at was Dutch Block, and you killed him too dead to skin. Somebody packed him down behind yore stable and covered him up in a washout. Smoky found the body—and when he took me and Sad out to look at it—it was gone."

"Dutch Block!" exclaimed Rex. "Are yuh sure—I mean are yuh sure I got him?"

"Somebody got him. 'Course he didn't have yore brand on him."

"I dunno," said Rex, shaking his head. "It's all mixed up."

"Oh—oh!" exclaimed Swede. "Hold still, Rex."

**A**LONE rider had topped the sky-line beyond the cabin, and drew rein for a moment. They he reined to the left, still in the general direction of the cabin.

"One comin' back," said Swede. "Stay where yuh are, Rex; mebbe I can collect some rollin'-stock."

He picked up his club and trotted back to the cabin, where he peered around the corner. It was about five minutes before the man rode down the slope. He was wearing a black mask, which completely covered

his head. As he neared the front of the cabin, Swede slipped around the other side.

The man dismounted, dropped his reins and entered the cabin. Gripping his club Swede went past the horse to the doorway. Peering around the edge of the doorway, he saw the masked man on his hands and knees, looking down into the hole in the flooring.

Slowly Swede shut the door, and quickly braced his piece of two-by-four against it, blocking the door solidly. As he turned and picked up the reins, he heard the man swear explosively. Swede sprang into the saddle and spurred out to the spring, where he drew up and took his left foot from the stirrup.

"C'mon, Rex; we've got transportation. Make it fast, 'cause that whippoorwill's got a gun, and that door might not hold very long."

Rex was weak and unsteady, but Swede helped him on, and they galloped across the valley.

As soon as they reached the heavy brush, Swede drew up and looked back. The door was still closed.

"I reckon we'll swap seats," he told Rex. "You ain't strong enough to hang onto anything—and I don't want to lose yuh."

With Rex in the saddle and Swede behind, they watched the cabin. Three riders, unhurried came slowly down the slope. Swede chuckled. There was no doubt in his mind that two of the three riders were his former captors, and the third was the Mexican who had given the money to Sad.

"We're stayin' right here in the brush, until they leave," Swede told Rex. "If they see us we ain't got a chance—two on one horse."

The three riders stepped up to the closed door, just as the lone occupant apparently knocked it off its hinges, because the door went flying, and the man went head over heels into the yard.

The three men jerked back, as the masked man came to his knees. Then they scattered. Two shots rang out, and the masked man fell sideways.

"This," declared Swede, "is gettin' to be a hell of a country."

"That's right," agreed Rex. "I'm shore goin' to be a good boy, if I get out of this mess."

"I know," remarked Swede. "I've sworn off lots of times."

"I'm goin' to keep my resolutions."

"Meanin' that I didn't, eh? That's a hell of a dig to give a feller, who has just saved yore life."

"You didn't save my life. I'd have walked out, anyway."

"You can git off and walk now if yuh want to."

"Aw, hell, my head hurts."

"So does mine, but I'm not braggin'. I come from tough stock."

"Some people ain't sensitive about the head."

"Go ahead. By golly, they're loadin' that feller on a horse! He must be a friend. Prob'ly takin' him to a doctor. Well, I'll say that's bein' right neighborly. There are some nice people left in the world."

"Who and where?" asked Rex wearily.

"Me and you—right here."

Rex twisted his face in a painful grin.

"They're pullin' out," informed Swede. "Goin' toward Oasis. As soon as they're over the hill, me and you are headin' for the Circle C. One of your ma's meals wouldn't go bad, eh?"

"He-e-ey! Keep yore head up, feller! Don'tcha try passin' out on me, now. Yea-a-ah! You'd git a hell of a long ways—walkin'. Why, dang it, you can't even set."



Rex slumped loosely in the saddle, and Swede was obliged to hold him tightly.

"And me with a head that don't weigh

an ounce over sixty pounds," sighed Swede. "Dang it, feller, I need bracin', too."

The sun beat down on Swede's sore head, as he guided that double-burdened horse across the hills, trying to keep a northerly direction. But he finally gave it up and let the horse pick its own way. He saw two riders, battling down through the brush, and in a dazed way he thought it was the two men from the cabin, until he heard Sad's voice calling.

"Hang on, Swede! Stick with that hull, cowboy; we're comin'."

Swede laughed foolishly and tried to cheer, but it was only a weak chirp.

#### CHAPTER XIV

##### SAD OPINES THINGS ARE KINDA UPSET

THE old doctor got to his feet and closed his medicine case, smiling cheerfully at Mrs. Colton.

"He's going to be all right. That scalp wound is not dangerous, and all he needs is food and rest. The boy was nearly starved."

Swede, his head swathed in bandages, grinned over his cigarette.

"I think you'll be all right, too Harri-gan," smiled the doctor.

"Thank you, Doc. But go right ahead and remark that some folks have harder heads than others. Rex mentioned it several times."

"Embarrassin', but true," statèd Sad, leaning against the wall of Rex's room.

At his shoulder was a small shelf, on which was a cigar box, sans top, in which there was an accumulation of cartridges. While the others were talking at the bedside he peeped closely at the butt-ends of several revolver cartridges. Slowly he turned away, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"You are not going back to the hotel tonight," May was saying to Swede. "You and Sad are staying right here with us."

"Bribe me with some biscuits," suggested Swede.

"Oh, you'll get the biscuits," assured Mrs. Colton.

"Man, I shore feel fine," grinned Rex. "I don't care a whoop what they do to me, if they'll only leave me in this bed for a week."

While Smoky was out in the kitchen, watching May mix biscuits, Sad and Swede went out on the shady porch. Sad had explained that he and Smoky were heading for the old cabin, when they had sighted the two men on one horse.

"I'm sorry I didn't swat that hombre with my club," said Swede. "But mebbe it's all right, 'cause I'd have had to fight three men."

Sad lowered his voice cautiously, as he said:

"Remember what I said about Simmons bein' shot with a forty-one?"

Swede nodded. "And nobody around here uses one."

"No? Well, there's a broken box of 'em on that shelf in Rex's room."

"No!" gasped Swede. "Are yuh sure, Sad?"

"I just looked at 'em a few minutes ago."

"Well, I'll be danged!" sighed Swede.

"What's to be done?"

Sad ignored the question, his eyes squinted in deep thought. After several moments he said:

"Oh, yuh mean the forty-one?"

"Well, I kinda had it on my mind," replied Swede dryly.

"I dunno, Swede. I've talked with Rex, and I'll be darned if I figure him out. Tobe was killed with a forty-one—and there ain't a forty-one in this country. And now," Sad shook his head, "we find forty-one shells in Rex's room."

"Planted there, yuh think?"

"Wait a minute."

Swede sat and smoked, while Sad went into the house. In a few moments he came out again, carrying something concealed in his hand. It was one end and the bottom of a cardboard cartridge box, the end plainly marked 41 Colt Revolver Cartridges. On the bottom of the box was the name of a

hardware company in Los Angeles, California.

"And Rex was in Los Angeles," whispered Swede.

Sad nodded and put the cardboard in his pocket.

"What's to be done?" queried Swede.

"I wish I knew. There's so many queer angles. Just when I'm beginnin' to untangle one, along comes somethin' to change my view. I believe that a couple fellers came here to search for the money they think Rex stole from Archer. Rex downs one—or somebody did. The other one knocks Rex out and packs him to that cabin, where he aims to make Rex tell where he cached the money.

"That much makes sense. They knew everybody was at the funeral, and didn't expect Rex back. All right. A couple men lay for me and you in the livery stable. They want that thousand dollars. These two don't know a thing about Rex bein' down in that cellar.

"The feller that imprisoned Rex don't know anythin' about the two fellers leavin' you at the cabin. When he busts out and sees them, he yanks a gun and they cut down on him. Then they find out that he's a friend, and hurry him to a doctor."

"That all makes sense," agreed Swede. "If they'd known about the cellar, they'd have shoved me down there, too."

"Certainly. But don't forget that they're still shy that thousand dollars; so we better keep our eyes peeled."

"Y'betcha," agreed Swede. "I feel that we're settin' on a keg of dynamite, and we don't know who's goin' to light the match."

"Well, we can eliminate each other," said Sad dryly.

"Did anybody find my hat?" asked Swede.

"Yeah—it's over at the hotel. Smoky will lend yuh a gun.

Smoky came out on the porch and sat down with them.

"We've been tryin' to make sense out of things," informed Sad.

"Sense!" snorted Smoky. "Do yuh know—I believe I'll resign. It's shore got Mrs. Woods' little boy plump down. If somebody fired a gun behind me, I'd jump right out of my Levi's. I find me, talkin' to myself, like a dad-burned shepherd. Shucks! If I was called on to draw and shoot, I'd prob'ly hurt m'self—bad."

"I notice yuh only got a piece of trigger-guard on that gun," observed Sad. "What's the idea?"

"My doggone finger is too big to go inside the guard. Why, I even had to quit playin' a gittar. Tobe said I ort to git me a cornet. Mebbe a drum would be all right."

"Are you musical, Smoky?" asked Swede.

"I hope to tell yuh, I am. But my fingers are agin me."

"Yuh don't happen to sing, do yuh?"

"Nothin' ever happens to me, except accidents. Do you sing?"

"I used to," nodded Swede soberly. "I sang in a church, up in Wyomin'—once. Right in the middle of the song, the organist stopped playin' and began investigatin' the innards of that organ, wonderin' where the hell that funny noise came from. Well, I didn't sing no more, and he didn't look no more; so we was all even."

"And you ain't sung since?"

"Oh, I tried it a couple times, when I was all by myself. But it was so different than anythin' I ever heard that I quit."

"What kind of a voice have you got, Sad?" queried Smoky.

"I ain't never got it classified, Smoky."

"You ain't never tried it out?"

"Once," replied Sad soberly. "You've heard that music soothes savage beasts, ain't yuh? Mebbe it does, I dunno. One time, up in Nevada, I was lookin' for some loose horses in fly-time. I rode up to an old cabin, and I think mebbe some broncs are in there, keepin' away from flies; so in I goes.

"There wasn't no broncs in there, but there was the biggest mountain lion I ever seen. I reckon he thought I was huntin' lions, which I shore wasn't. I can see right



away that me and him ain't got nothin' in common, but I remembers what's been said about usin' music on savage beasts.

"I didn't have anythin' to play on, except my vocal chords; so I starts right in, tunin' up. I kinda ran up and down the scale, fluttery-like, of course, but not bad, under the circumstances. That lion is between me and the doorway, plenty belligerent-lookin', so I opens my mouth and warbles, 'Listen to the mockin'bird.' That's as far as I got. Ever since then I've wondered what the hell grudge that lion had against a mockin'bird. When he got all through not likin' my song, I've got three slashes down my back, and one across my chest. Shucks, I never did get my shirt back."

"You prob'ly got off easy," said Smoky soberly.

"That's true. I wonder what he'd have done to me, if he'd listened to me sing the whole chorus."

May was standing in the doorway, laughing heartily.

"You and Smoky might sing a duet after supper," she suggested.

"I don't feel like singin'," replied Smoky, "I feel like eatin'."

SAD and Swede stayed at the Circle C that night, but Smoky went back to Santa Rita. Next morning Doctor Cates came out, and with him came John Evans, the prosecuting attorney, grey-haired and severe.

May and her mother were a little frightened over the lawyer's visit. While the doctor attended Rex, who was much better, Evans took Sad aside and they walked down by the stable.

"Doctor Cates has told me something of what happened here the day Tobe Simmons was buried," stated the lawyer. "I also talked with Frank Archer, the banker, and he intimated that you are a detective, Sontag, working for somebody here."

Sad smiled grimly and shook his head. "I am not workin' for anybody here, Mr.

Evans," he declared. "Just because I'm curious enough to ask questions, Mr. Archer spots me as a detective."

"I see. There is another matter I would like to discuss with you. Doctor Cates told me his suspicions regarding the death of Arthur Nolan. It looks very much as though someone decoyed the nurse away from the house, in order to kill Nolan. Your theory of the incident was that someone deliberately attempted to murder Nolan, and make it appear an accident, was it not?"

"It looked kinda funny to me," admitted Sad.

"But what would be the motive, Sontag?"

"Dead men can't talk."

"I see. Then you think that Nolan knew somebody's secrets, and they were afraid he might talk."

"Yeah. Mr. Evans, I believe Nolan knew who killed and robbed Dan Colton."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I reckon that knowledge got on his nerves so badly that he filled himself full of whiskey, nervin' himself up to tell the Colton family the truth. He was on his way out there—and they knew it; so they tried to murder him. When that failed, they put up a job on the nurse, and hit Nolan, while he laid in bed."

"What a damnable thing to do, Sontag. Do you think the same man shot and killed Tobe Simmons?"



"What motive would they have in killin' Simmons?"

"No known motive. Of course, there is a theory that—"

"I know that one," interrupted Sad. "Tobe Simmons had a warrant for Rex Colton."

"Yes,"

"But yuh must remember that Tobe's body was discovered at the Box Eighty spread, over in Tres Pinos Valley."

"Tied on a horse, which was raised at that ranch," reminded the lawyer. "Very often they will go back home, you know."

"Yeah, that's true. But you couldn't convict Rex on that kind of evidence."

"Just as easy as snapping a finger," declared the lawyer. "Any twelve men in this county would declare him guilty—even on such flimsy evidence. But that doesn't mean we are going to do it—at least, not until I have evidence enough to convict him before any jury."

"I reckon yo're a square-shooter, Mr. Evans," said Sad.

"I don't believe I have ever convicted an innocent man, Sontag. My record of convictions may not be impressive—but I can sleep nights."

"That's more than some can say," declared Sad.

"Perhaps. Archer asked you to help him discover the thieves, who he says are stealing his horses, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he talked about it, Mr. Evans. But I told him I wasn't interested in stolen horses—and I'm not. Horse-thieves are small game in a deal like this. Anyway, I'd a lot rather shoot tigers than gophers."

"I believe you would," smiled Evans. "I guess Doc is ready to go back; so I'll just say that anything you can do to help us clear up this situation will be deeply appreciated by the law."

As they walked back to the house Sad remarked:

"The loss of that thirty-five thousand must have hit Archer pretty hard."

"It hit somebody pretty hard, Sontag. As long as you are interested in this situation, I can give you a little information. Over a year ago Archer sold out his bank interests

to Phoenix capital, but continued to operate the bank.

"His SJ ranch has cost him a lot of money, because he stocked it with blooded animals. I heard rumors of discord, when it was hinted that Archer loaned himself a big mortgage on the SJ. There were rumors that Archer's bank lost a lot of money in a copper proposition, only a few months ago. None of this is authenticated, Sontag—only rumors. If you are thinking of making a big deposit of money, I would not advise you to select that bank."

Sad grinned slowly. "I've got a deep pocket for my four-bits."

AFTER Evans and the doctor went away, the rest of the folks were anxious to know what the lawyer wanted of Sad.

"Oh, me and him just talked over conditions," smiled Sad.

"Didja arrive at any conclusions?" queried Swede.

"Well, we agreed that things was kinda upset around here."

"Well, that kinda relieves my mind," said Swede. "I've been wonderin' if they was."

Sad went into the house and talked with Rex, but the young cowboy had little to say. As Sad and Swede were ready to ride back to town Clint Rawls came to the ranch. He said he came to find out how Rex was getting along, and incidentally to see Sad and Swede.

"Do you two boys happen to want a job for a few days?" asked Rawls. "Archer says he wants to find out how much stuff he's got on the SJ spread; so he's ordered me to make a count. Dutch Block never did come back, and Len Hardy's gone over to the Box Eighty. All I've got left is that wild-eyed Swede cook and Poco Salas. And that's a hell of an outfit to pull a roundup."

"You are a little short," agreed Sad. "How soon do yuh want to start?"

"Tomorrow mornin'—I hope."

"Well, I reckon we can help yuh out, Rawls."

"That'll be fine. The four of us ought to be enough. Better come out to the ranch to-night, and we'll start a drag early in the mornin'."

Swede was not enthused over the job. Since that bullet had been fired through their window at Oasis, Swede's bump of caution had grown alarmingly.

"I don't think there's any danger," said Sad. "And we can shore use a few extra dollars."

"Well, I'll take the chance, if you will."

They moved over to the SJ that night. It was the first time they had been out there, and, in a way, the place was disappointing. They had expected an up-to-date ranch.

"I wouldn't trade the Circle C for this layout," remarked Swede.

"Ay yust been looking for you fallers," grinned Sorensen, the cook. "Clint told me you would be ha'ar for supper."

They found Poco Salas in the bunkhouse, idly picking a guitar, and singing "Rancho Grande." He welcomed them with a smile.

"These ees going to be *mucho grande* roundup," he declared. "T'ree 'orse, two cow and one calf."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Sad. Poco shrugged his shoulders.

"Eet ees not ver' good," he declared. "These spreng roundup show ver' close to seven honnerd head cattle, one honnerd and seexty-five 'orses. Maybe I am not ver' good from gussing, but I mak' leetle bet we don't find half so much."

"Mebbe yore Mexican uncle ain't dead yet," suggested Swede.

Poco's eyes narrowed, but he laughed quickly and shook his head.

"My onkle was exclusive Mexican 'orse-thief," he declared.

Clint Rawls gave them a bed in the ranch-house, and they sat up late, discussing local conditions.

"Poco seems to think that a count won't show that the SJ has lost half of their spring count," remarked Sad.

"I think Poco's crazy," declared Rawls.

"Anyway, a count won't hurt, and it'll make Archer feel better."

THE next morning Sad rode with Rawls while Swede teamed with Poco Salas. They were to shove all the cattle into a fenced eighty at the ranch-house, where they would cut out the other brand. It was grueling work, but Sad and Swede enjoyed the work. Both men were handy with cattle, and Rawls had given both men good mounts.

It was evident that there would not be much cutting done in the horse herd, because there were only a few Circle C and Box Eighty horses. At dark that night they had corralled about two hundred head of cattle and possibly seventy head of horses.

"It don't look any too promisin'," declared Rawls at supper.

Frank Archer and his son rode out that evening, and had a long talk with Rawls, but they said nothing to Sad and Swede. Rawls went back to Santa Rita with them, and did not get back until after midnight.

The next day's work was a repetition of the first day, except that the take was smaller. There were possible a hundred and fifty head of cattle, but not over thirty head of horses. Sad noticed the lack of young stock, and mentioned it to Rawls.

"I've noticed that," nodded Rawls. "We've shore been robbed. I'll bet Frank Archer will go straight up, when I tell him. I'll probly go up with him. He'll fire me as sure as fate."

The next day the four riders worked like beavers. It was after dark, when they stabled their tired horses and went to sample some of Nelse's savory mulligan and hot biscuits.

"Well, that's the end of 'em," sighed Clint, as they sat down at the table. "I didn't think it was possible. Sontag, we've got about five hundred and fifty head of cattle, against a spring count of seven hundred. We've got a hundred and ten head of horses, when our spring count showed a hundred and seventy-five."

"Somebody," remarked Sad, "is gettin' fat off the S.J."

"They shore are. Well, I'm going in early to break the news to Archer. Figures don't lie. No use cutting out other brands. Just drift the whole works out in the mornin', come to town and get yore pay. And thanks a lot for the help, boys."

Clint Rawls had been gone an hour, when Sad and Swede ate their breakfast; so they saddled up and went out to the pasture.

"Just for fun, I'll make a count," said Sad. "Swede, you and Poco drift that herd past, and I'll see if I've forgot how to tally a movin' herd."

**S**LOWLY and carefully the two men worked the horse herd past the big gate, and then handled the cattle in the same way. Sad said nothing, until he and Swede were on their way to town, when he passed his tally-sheet over to Swede. It showed five hundred head of cattle, a shrinkage of fifty head of cattle. The horse tally showed a shrinkage of nineteen head of horses—over night.

"Fifty head of cattle and nineteen horses stolen from that herd since we threw 'em into that pasture," marveled Swede.

"I might make a mistake of one or two in the tally," admitted Sad, "but I wouldn't miss it that far. Somebody let us bunch 'em, and then helped themselves."

Clint Rawls was in the bank at Santa Rita, when Sad and Swede came in. The banker was white with rage.

"It is simply damnable!" he roared at Sad. "I'm being robbed wholesale, and no one will help me stop it. That sheriff is too fat to think. You!" He pointed a finger at Sad. "You're a detective! Why don't you find my stock?"

Clint Rawls shrugged his shoulders and looked at Sad.

"Well, Sontag, say something!" demanded Archer.

"Good morning, Mr. Archer," said Sad quietly.

"Good morning! My God!"

"Take it easy," begged Dick Archer.

"Easy? You say for me to—Rawls, you're fired. Take your stuff and get off my ranch."

"Firin' Rawls won't bring back yore stock," reminded Sad.

"He lost it."

"He wasn't keepin' yore cattle and horses in a vault."

"No, I—well, what can I do?"

"Shall I pay Sontag and Harrigan?" asked Dick.

"Yes, yes. Pay them and tell them to get out."

"You won't have to worry about us gettin' out," remarked Sad dryly.

Dick paid them from the cashier's cage, and they went down to Smoky's office, where they found the fat deputy trying to play chords on a guitar.

"Doggone, I'm shore glad you're back!" he exclaimed.

"Anybody been killed since we left?" asked Swede.

"Prob'ly a few bodies layin' around, here and there. How'd yore baby-sized roundup come out?"

Sad tilted back in a chair and told Smoky about the count at the S.J.

"Aw, shucks!" snorted Smoky. "I'm goin' to resign. Whatsa use, anyway? Crime has got Old Man Woods' fav'rite son down. Frank Archer will come down here and have his physical breakdown, I s'pose. Didja ever git in front of him, when he's upset? It's jist like tryin' to fry wet hominy in butter; yuh git spattered all up."

"He'll drop dead one of these days," said Sad.

"What'r yuh tryin' to do—cheer me up?" queried Smoky.

Clint Rawls came down to the office, a smile on his face.

"Well, I reckon the storm is over," he said. "Whew! That man can sure get mad."

"Are yuh fired?" asked Swede.



Rawls chuckled. "Oh, sure, he fired me. He fires me every time he gets mad."

"Well, yuh can't blame him for bein' sore," remarked Sad. "His next move is to come down here and climb all over Smoky."

"No, I don't believe he will. He says that Smoky's so ignorant that there's no use discussin' the case with him."

"That's the first time I ever appreciated my own ignorance," grinned the deputy.

"Anyway, that's Frank Archer's opinion," grinned Rawls. "Well, I've got to be goin' back. I'm much obliged to both you boys for helpin' me dig up the bad news. Come out any time."

Poco Salas was riding into town, as Clint Rawls went out to get his horse at the Vaquero hitch-rack.

"Didja turn everythin' out of the pasture?" asked Clint.

"Sure," nodded the Mexican. "We turn everytheing loose—and Sontag make a count."

"Made a count? What for?"

"*Quien sabe?* Hees make count from cow and hees make count from 'orses. I don't know w'at he feeger on."

"Uh-huh," muttered Rawls thoughtfully. "Didja come for somethin', Poco?"

"I mus' get-pair overall for myself personally, and some snoff for these damn Swid cook."

"Go ahead—I'll wait for yuh."

## CHAPTER XV

### OMAHA MAKES A PASS AT A GUN

OVER at the office Sad was questioning Smoky about the personal effects of Arthur Wells Nolan, the slain attorney.

"Well, they're all in his office, and I've got the key," said Smoky. "I ain't had no orders about disposin' of anythin'."

"I was just wonderin'," said Sad, "if there might be somethin' among his papers that would give us some idea of who wanted his scalp. Yuh never can tell what he might have written, yuh know."

"There might be, at that," agreed Smoky. "I've got a perfect right to make a search. Suppose we take a look?"

Nolan's office was in a small building near the east end of the street. It was a small office, with possibly a dozen law-books in a home-made book-case, an old desk, several chairs and a small safe, which was not locked, as it only contained a few old account books.

There was the usual accumulation of old letter-heads and envelopes. Apparently Nolan wrote all his correspondence in long-hand, as his copies all showed long-hand. Neither Smoky nor Swede were interested in Sad's search; so they sat on the sidewalk outside, and waited for him.

After a careful search, Sad pocketed what he thought might be of value, and went out to the boys.

"No good, eh?" queried Smoky.

"Well, yuh never can tell," replied Sad quietly.

"Anythin' can happen in Arizona," reminded Smoky.

"There's jist about as much news in that remark as if yuh said Merry Christmas!" snorted Smoky. "I'm gettin' so that I cover up my star every time I meet anybody."

"Yuh ought to get a black mustache and some false eyebrows," suggested Swede. "You'd look fine. Yo're gettin' thin, too."

"I know it. Another six months of this and I can give up my horse-trough baths for a shotgun barrel. I tell yuh, I can jist *feel* the fat fallin' off me."

"Mebbe yuh can feel it *start*," laughed Swede, "but yore clothes ain't started to feel relieved in the seams."

Later in the day, while Smoky was enjoying a siesta on the office cot, Sad and Swede sauntered over to the livery-stable, where Sad began saddling his horse. Swede looked curiously at him, but turned away and saddled his own mount.

"If yuh don't mind, Jimmy," said Sad to the stable-man, "we'll go out the back way."

Since Jimmy's experience in the oat-bin, and the undercurrent of gossip about Sad being a detective, he was delighted to be taken into their confidence.

"That's shore fine with me," declared Jimmy. "More'n that, I never seen yuh go out."

"Thank yuh, pardner," smiled Sad. "We're goin' out to see a sick man—I hope."

"Is somebody sick?" asked Jimmy very quickly.

"Yuh never can tell. *Adios*, Jimmy."

By going out the rear of the stable, they could ride away from Santa Rita, without being seen. Far out from the town, Sad led the way over to the road which led to the Circle C. He said nothing about their destination, when he turned off on the trail which led to Oasis.

"Goin' back and give 'em another chance to plug us?" asked Swede.

"No, I don't reckon there's any profit in that Swede. There's a bluff just north of the Box Eighty ranch-houses; and I'd kinda like to be settin' on that bluff at daylight, checkin' up on the old homestead."

"Expectin' to see what?" asked Swede, as he carefully rolled a cigarette in the breeze.

"Who knows? That's the fun of it, pardner."

"You shore get entertained easy. Anyway," Swede scratched a match on the leg of his bat-wing chaps, "it'll be a nice ride."

THE little settlement of Oasis was only a dark huddle, as Sad and Swede rode past. They had little trouble in making a wide detour, in order to reach the vantage point desired by Sad.

Ensnconced behind a tangle of brush and rocks, they watched the early activity at the Box Eighty. They saw Omaha, the cook, draw water from the well, the creak of the old pulley-wheel clearly audible at that distance. Wood smoke drifted from the crooked stovepipe in the lean-to kitchen.

A little later three men came outside to the wash-bench beside the kitchen doorway,

where they completed their morning ablutions.

"That would be Craley, Neer and Beck," said Sad.

"I can almost smell breakfast," sighed Swede.

"Always thinkin' of yore stomach."

"Bein' constantly reminded, yuh mean. You've heard of the pangs of hunger, ain't yuh, Sad?"

"Yeah, I've heard of 'em."

"Well, I'm bein' panged to death."

"Try and live through it," advised Sad.

For the next thirty minutes there was no activity around the house. Then the three men came out and went to the stable, where they saddled horses and rode southward together.

"My, that's shore interestin'," remarked Swede sarcastically. "We ride all night and set here, starvin' to death, merely to see the Box Eighty crew ride away to work. You shore do know how to figure out entertainment, Sad."

"I reckon I do," replied Sad. "It wasn't a very good show, at that. Suppose we ride down and see if Omaha feels like cookin' some breakfast for us."

"Well, that's the most sensible thing you've suggested this week. C'mon, before yuh git another wrong idea."

They mounted their concealed horses, circled the bluff and rode down past the sprawling pole corrals.

"I hope this will be a friendly welcome," remarked Sad.

"You ain't expectin' trouble, are yuh, Sad?"

"Don't forget that somebody shot at us in Oasis, and that a couple well-meanin' gents left you tied up in that cabin, while they came back to Tres Pinos Valley."

"I reckon I kinda forgot that—on account of bein' so damn hungry," drawled Swede. They came in behind the lean-to kitchen and dismounted very quietly. With hardly a sound they reached the doorway. There was no one in sight, but there was a murmur

of voices somewhere in the house. Sad's smile was frosty as he glanced sharply at Swede.

"Sounds like they had company," he whispered.

"Or Omaha is talkin' to himself," amended Swede.

GRUMBLING to himself Omaha came into the kitchen, carrying a plate, on which he balanced a cup. As he entered the kitchen he glanced at the doorway and saw the two cowboys. His hand jerked nervously and he dropped the plate and cup.

"Hyah, Omaha," greeted Swede.

"Huh!" grunted the frowsy cook. "I didn't hear—where the hell did you fellers come from—this early?"

Omaha was sober, but his eyes were blood-shot. He picked up the plate, slid it on the table and wiped his hands on his thighs.

"Sometimes we ride early," replied Sad. "Is somebody sick?"

"Huh? Sick?"

"Yeah," drawled Sad. "I notice yo're packin' dirty dishes from another part of the house. Or was the boss havin' breakfast in bed?"

"Ain't nobody sick," denied Omaha. He licked his dry lips, and sidled over nearer the table. There was a dirty towel thrown over some dishes.

"Ain't nobody sick around here," he repeated, and reached for the towel.

His big right-hand slid quickly under the cloth, and jerked back, gripping a gun. But before he could lift it and turn to face them, Sad's gun blazed from against his hip. It was only six feet between them. The heavy bullet whirled Omaha around, his gun fell to the floor, and his wide sweeping right arm flung dishes off the table, as he went to the floor.

Swede was into him like a flash, jerking the gun from under him. He glanced at it and turned quickly to Sad.

"This is my gun, Sad! The one them fellers took off me in the livery-stable."

Sad was making a quick examination of Omaha.

"Hit him high in the shoulder and killed him instantly!" exclaimed Sad. "The old son-of-a-buck must have had a weak heart."

With their guns ready they went into the main room. The air smelled of antiseptics. There was an open doorway to another room, where they found a man in bed, staring with wild eyes at them.

"Len Hardy, eh?" smiled Sad. "Quit his job with the SJ and went to work for the Box Eighty."

"What the hell do you want here?" rasped Hardy painfully.

"What's wrong with you?" countered Sad.

"Bullet through my shoulder—if it's any of yore damn business. What happened in the kitchen?"

"Omaha reached for a gun," replied Sad.

"And you killed him, eh?"

"Between me and the liquor he's been drinkin' for years. Who shot you, Hardy?"

"That's none of yore business, Sontag. And the sooner you two get to hell out of Tres Pinos Valley, the better off you'll be."

"Or planted in a cellar, and left to starve," added Sad grimly.

Len Hardy's jaw sagged for a moment and he swallowed painfully.

"Do yuh feel like tellin' what yuh know, Hardy?" asked Sad.

"I don't know a damn thing!" flared Hardy.

"If I was askin' yuh questions," smiled Sad, "I'd ask yuh what yuh done with Dutch Block's body."

Len Hardy sank back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," he muttered. "I'm sick."

"Certainly, yo're sick. If yuh ask me, yo're goin' to die."

"Yo're lyin'! I'm not goin' to die. And I don't know anythin' about Dutch Block. I ain't seen him since he left the SJ. They said he came here, and then pulled out again. Because I'm sick, yo're tryin' to make me tell things that never happened."

"It shore was funny," said Swede.

"What was funny?" asked Hardy.

"You fallin' out through that cabin doorway, and yore friends cutting' down on yuh with a couple guns. We shore got a laugh out of that."

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about," declared Hardy, as he painfully shifted his position.

Swede, who had been watching closely, suddenly dived headlong onto the bed, tore the blankets aside and came up, yanking a gun out of Hardy's hand.

"I seen him fussin' with that left hand of his," explained Swede. "I noticed the other day that he wore his guns on the opposite side; the danged rattler."

From outside came the sound of hoofbeats. Len Hardy, groaning painfully, seemed to prick up his ears.

"If that's my gang—" he muttered.

"One horse," said Sad quietly.

It was Sam Bridges, the sheriff of Oasis, blundering into the house without knocking. His eyes snapped wide, when he recognized Sad and Swede.

"You—two!" he grunted huskily.

"They murdered Omaha," declared Len Hardy.

"Murdered Omaha?" parroted the sheriff.

"Killed Omaha," corrected Sad. "We dropped in for breakfast and Omaha's trigger-finger itched. He had a planted gun."

"That's a damn lie," panted Hardy.

SAM BRIDGES looked keenly at Hardy for several moments, but turned to the two cowboys.

"Hardy's feverish," he declared.

He took off his hat, wiped his brow with his right forearm and replaced his hat. As he dropped his right hand, his fingers snapped back to his holstered gun.

But he failed to draw, because two cocked guns were covering him. He stared blankly, wondering how on earth they ever drew so

swiftly. He did not know that both men had their guns drawn, when he came in.

"Yore idea was fine, Bridges," remarked Sad. "In nine cases out of ten it would have fooled an old lady or a blind man. Take his gun, Swede."

"You know the penalty for resistin' an officer."

"Was we resistin' you?" queried Swede in amazement.

"You shore was. I was about to arrest yuh for murderin' Omaha."

"That was self-defense," replied Sad.

"They sneaked in and dry-gulched him," declared Hardy.

"Shut up, you crippled sidewinder!" snapped Swede.

"We seem to be kinda deadlocked around here," smiled Sad. "We came over here to kinda look around for a certain cripple—and we found him. He's wanted for kidnappin' and attempted murder—but we won't ask you to make the arrest. It would be against yore principles, and anyway, he'll die in a couple of days. If you'll walk out ahead of us, Mr. Bridges, we'll be goin'."

Bridges grunted an angry protest, but they prodded him outside, where Swede proceeded to unsaddle the sheriff's horse. There were no horses in the stable nor in the corrals.

"What the hell's the idea of that?" demanded Bridges.

"Oh, just as sort of a guarantee," smiled Sad. "It'll prevent you from chasin' us. We'll turn yore horse loose—later. Anyway, yore friend Hardy needs a nurse; so yuh might as well look after him, until the Box Eighty boys get home."

"I'll git both of yuh for this!" he shouted as they rode away, leading his unsaddled horse.

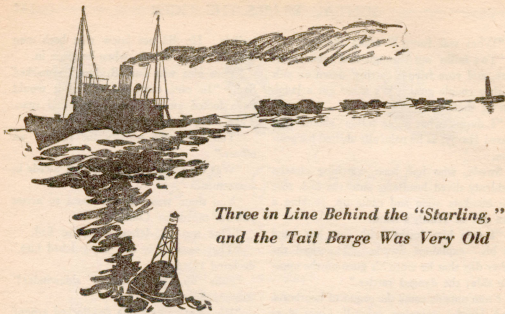
"We'll be in Santa Rita," replied Sad. "Come ahead."

"What about my gun?"

"We'll lay it on the last fence-post down the road. So-long."

*To Be Concluded in the Next SHORT STORIES.*





*Three in Line Behind the "Starling,"  
and the Tail Barge Was Very Old*

## TAIL BARGE

By BERTON E. COOK

*Author of "Ship's Doctor," "Long John Eames," etc.*

CAPTAIN LESLIE STROUT missed it. His mind was too full of grim memories, he saw only the sweet prospect of revenge.

Lost on him was the air of suppressed amusement that ran through his tow-boat crew.

Chief Irvin shifted his chew to murmur guardedly, "Dam' 'f he ain't a chip o' the old block!" The captain passed grimly and a sailor grinned at his back, then looked out over the stern at the tow. Three light barges were going to Philly for coal behind the *Starling*, three in a line, and the third, tail barge, was very old.

Captain Strout's eyes swept astern, but without the sailor's amusement. Each hawser out a hundred and fifty fathom, the heaviest barge in the lead, the lightest and worst one tailing the tow. All under weigh for the trip to the westward; but his gaze lingered on that ancient, three-masted schooner cut

down, that old *Pocatelle*, the last barge. Could he have been right about the master of the *Pocatelle*?

Ugly memories surged within Leslie Strout, conflicting emotions shook him. All the rank bitterness and rancid hate of ten years' standing welled and overflowed. Slowly a light of gloating triumph flashed in those eager eyes still scrutinizing the tail barge. Their usual genial blue turned to gray, to a dark, lowering slaty stare that was hard and cold.

"If I am right," he gloated, "what a revenge! Me at the for'd end, the top end, of the tow; me a captain in spite of him—and him away aft there in the meanest barge of all the Bird Company's fleet." Captain Strout chuckled savagely to conclude, "Wait till we dock him below Philly! I'll give him the goad. 'So you're Cap Hamm,' sez I. 'Yeah? Well I'm Cap'n Strout, the same Strout you cheated out of a First's ticket ten

years back—that's what I said, cheated, and damn your hide I'm master of this big *Starling* now in spite of you. So you're down to nurse-maiding an old hulk, eh? So-o-ome come down!" Leslie Strout would shave the goad into old Martinet Hamm's leather hide. Plenty!

Portland Lightship sank beneath the rim astern and the *Starling's* whistle blew a signal to the barges. Immediately the three hawsers along the length of the tow ran out from a hundred and fifty to two hundred fathoms and the monotonous grind to Philadelphia was on. Not a cloud blotted the blue, not a whitecap on the broad, fair-weather swells; only the throb of the *Starling's* engine, the rasp of steering cables, and the ever-present tension of the hawser on the stern bits.

So many hours to Highland Light, so many more over the shoals and into deep water again.

And Chief Irvin in his engine room shook a solemn head to his laughing fireman. "Mike, 'tain't funny," he warned cautiously. "You men think it's a big joke, but I don't feel right about this; oh sure it did seem funny in Portland, but you wait till the Old Man gets wise to it."

"Go on, Chief. Sure 'n he can't be blamin' you. Nor any of us. 'Twan't our resp'n'bility, was it now? We don't have to wise 'im, sir. Whether it's at sea or ashore, I figger men git into trouble breakin' bad news to any man. That goes fer us. We can't risk it to tell the Old Man that——"

"Maybe you're right, Mike, but I'm almighty uncomfortable. Y' see, Cap'n Strout 's always treated me O. K. Him and me hitch, and I happen to know he's set as hell on this very subject."

WHILE chief and stoker talked aft, the Old Man up forward kept eyeing the tow astern. That tail barge's captain! Had his imagination tricked him? He seldom forgot a face.

Mr. Eckhart, the mate, was writing in the

scrap log when the captain very casually asked, "Know the barge cap'n's this trip?"

Eckhart replied, "McGill 's in number one, Cap'n 'Stumpy' Flack has number two. Y' know, Cap'n, Flack 's too good a navigator to be slopping around in a barge, but that's the only chance he can get in these times, they tell me. Hell!"

The Old Man put in, "And that old schooner on the tail end?"

"Used to be a three-sticker in the hard pine trade. Called her the *Clara Jones*. Must be wormy by now. Yes, sir, a piece of old junk—like her cap'n. Hamm 's his name," the mate let go.

"Cap Hamm!" Leslie Strout's voice had an unfamiliar ring that made the mate grunt in surprise. Was the Old Man onto the game? Had he known it from the outset? Just how much did he know about that last barge? And the whole towboat's crew flattering itself that they had a joke on him!

"That 's old Ebenezer Hamm," Strout repeated, and every syllable came like a hard fist's blow.

The mate was puzzled. "Know the man, sir?" he asked carefully. As he stole a glimpse at the grim profile, he saw the helmsman also risk an uneasy, questioning stare at jaws that opened, snapped shut and bulged. Both mate and sailor were dumbfounded at the venom in the Old Man's voice when he answered, "Know Ebenezer Hamm? He is the only man on earth I ever really hated. A mangy, rotten old coal barge is too good for him. Yes, I know him; I sailed under him ten years ago."

Chief Irvin went below. He shook off a dollop of sweat and laid his expert hand on a bearing, but his mind was not on the heat. That third barge situation hung over him. So seriously, in fact, that he did not see Mr. Eckhart until—

"Listen, Chief, we're in a mean hole," the mate declared gloomily. If you'd told the skipper back there in Portland like I wanted you to——"

Irvin's arms went akimbo. He braced him-

self belligerently. "Me! Why didn't you tell 'im yerself? You've got a tongue, you're up there with him—and what's to hinder yer spillin' it to 'im now?"

"Aw, things 're worse now. The cap'n of the tail barge, Cap'n Strout knows him. That 's a fact. Used to sail under him; says it 's the only man on earth he ever hated. And how he hates him! You should have seen his jaw when he told me so. He 's rank poison on that bird."

"Oh good Lawd!" the Chief groaned. "And the barge cap'n feels likewise, I s'pose. Whadda you make o' Cap Hamm?"

"My helmsman says he used to run a tow-boat until he got tangled up in some mess. Has a rep. They call him old Martinet, a mean critter. Y' know, Chief, that barge he's in is no yacht; she 's an antique. The only reason he 's got her is because better men won't risk it in her. I hear she 's to be junked before another inspection."

"So this is her last trip," the Chief mused in awed tones. "Cripes, she ain't safe!"

"Exactly; so somebody 's got to tell Cap'n Strout. See?"

Irvin flung up his arms. "Oh all right, damn yer, I'll be the sucker. I'll stick my neck out. I'm the only man aboard that rates the guts to. Get the hell outa here, I've gotta think while I finish——"

Mr. Eckhart went before the chief could reconsider.

**B**EFORE the Chief finished either his chore or his thinking, a bank of fog came tumbling in out of the southeast. Constant blasts of one long and two short on the whistle tickled the steam gauge. The gray dampness hung snug to the rails outside his doors, and he to his throttle. Once at eight bells he did steal forward with a prepared speech on his reluctant tongue, but the Old Man was facing aft, trying to glimpse the tail barge of the tow when only the lead hawser was visible. And the Old Man's lips were framing curses for the last barge. Irvin read his lips, wheeled, and stole

aft again. The skipper's mood was too bleak for bad news. Not yet, not just yet.

Nor did the chief get to it after the fog mull. Mists turned directly into rain, swells became a chop. The chop grew apace to cresting seas racing before wind that had veered east. Green water piled onto the *Starling's* port quarter. The hawser surged, growled at the bits, slacked and slammed taut again.



On quartering seas the tow throbbled and rolled and pitched along the southwest run for Cape May and Overfalls. Half a thousand tons of bulldog *Starling* yanked and strained at three thousand laggard tons of light barges.

They were mostly above water where wind that increased with every blast kept shoving them to leeward. Their helmsmen fought against it while they looked to their towlines up forward, their lifelines in what promised to become a fearful blow.

Blow? It was half a gale before another night closed down like a hatch on a hold. A thirty-five-mile wind flogged and flayed the sea, piled it high, ripped off its white crests and blew them in spoondrift to leeward. The last stingy flicker of daylight shone upon an ocean gone mad beneath milky white suds. It yielded one final glimpse of three barges, too, and they were strung out in a crooked line more north than east.

And Chief Irvin stood in the lee of the pilothouse when the captain came out to snatch a bit of supper. The chief was the personification of anxiety.

"What 's wrong, Chief? This is a helluva

time for it," the Old Man barked, and the chief led the way below, inside, where they could hear without being interrupted. He dreaded it.

Irvin closed the door impulsively and spoke likewise. "Damn it, Cap'n, I was delegated to do this," he blurted.

"Do what!"

"Cap'n, do you know old Martinet Hamm that 's got number three this trip?"

"Oh," replied the skipper with a show of relief that only made Irvin's task the more painful. "Indeed I know him. Listen, Chief——" and Captain Strout lived again that ugly run to Philly when he had been second mate under the Martinet. It had come on to blow. Rain. Big seas. The tail barge had broken adrift and in it had been a woman, its master's wife. Second Mate Strout had joined the first mate in an earnest appeal to the Martinet. He must anchor the other two barges in the lee behind Henlopen and go to the rescue of that helpless barge before it blew ashore and lost its crew—and especially the woman. The unbending Hamm had refused; he had yelled, "Shut up! I shall not risk my tug out there for an old tail-end barge."

They had persisted, begged him to save at least the persons on her. They had waxed bold to declare, "That woman's life must be saved!" Then was when the Martinet had caught his mates unprepared. He had knocked his First's head through a pilot-house window, knocked it so hard that sash and all went out with his bleeding face. He had bowled his Second off his feet in the same wild swing in the lurching, narrow pilothouse and kicked him when he was down. He had logged both of them and prevented the Second from taking his impending exams for his First's license. "And I was that Second," Captain Strout declared hotly. "I lost two years for that piece of hellishness and all hands on that barge lost their lives. The woman was a neighbor of mine back home. Damn his soul, I could have shot the Martinet!"

Silence. A wave of embarrassment tied Irvin's tongue into a clove hitch. Here, thought he, was bitterness, a lust for revenge. Here, too, was another easterly gale, a tail barge slatting.

"Cap'n, can we still get a sight of number three, think?"

**T**HEY stepped out into the storm. Rather, they bumped and swayed and lounged out over the coaming into a sheet of water that had come over the house to pounce down upon them.

The skipper dried his eyes. The chief hunched his drenched shoulders, gathered his chilled nerve and yelled into the captain's ear, "Your kid 's a stowaway 'board that tail-end barge, Cap'n!"

Leslie Strout's face turned the color of fog. His *h* went slack in stunned dismay, in bewilderment and chagrin. His big hands—in a flash they gripped the chief's blocky shoulders. "What in God's name are you saying to me?" he demanded thickly while he swayed to the tugboat's motion, while the chief writhed in twin vises and yet managed to meet his eyes in the semi-darkness.

"Honest, Cap'n, it 's the gospel truth," he managed to say.

"What is that fourteen-year-old boy—what's Hamm up to this time? You! How do you know it? And you probably knew it 'fore we sailed——" The ideas flew off his tongue until the chief inched away from those powerful grips on his shoulders, back-stepped just far enough to brace against the *Starling's* gyrations anew, and dare to say:

"The kid hung round the docked barges, see? Wanted to make the trip. Along comes Cap Hamm with a sailor that wants a trip off, so the cap, he grabs the chance to get the kid one trip and not have to pay him wages. The kid ain't really a stowaway."

"I told him to keep clear of the waterfront. I've refused to take him aboard here time and again; he's going to college, in due time, not to sea," and the chief sensed that



this Old Man had made the speech around home many times.

Captain Strout gave a startled cry, "Look at the last barge! She's swinging. Why doesn't Hamm keep her nose up? Look—on her beam ends, masts awash," he cried out in sheer misery. Then he groaned, "My boy, my only son—and you fools didn't tell me."

In that heart-tugging moment, a flood of regret poured in upon Chief Irvin. "I—he thought he was playing a joke on you, Cap'n. We did, too, but when I seen your face, when you come aboard, I—I lost the joke in it myself. I'm sorry sir, I——"

The Old Man of the *Starling* went abruptly to the pilothouse.

NIGHT lays a double curse upon misery, a double dread of what might befall unseen. Under its eerie spell, the towboat dropped stern-first into deathly black valleys and squirmed out of them drunkenly. Three windswept, reeling barges slogged and plunged and wormed their reluctant way after her. They traveled farther up and down than they went ahead. They twanged ten-inch hawsers taut, whipped them adrip off tumbling mountains of ocean, buried them again.

And again. All night long the battle raged. All night the great seas, sharpening for a shoal coast, came on the double-quick, an unnumbered legion bent upon destruction. And only the twanging, yanking hawsers stood between barges and a greedy lee shore waiting for them somewhere in the blackness to starboard.

Captain Strout was no eel grass skipper, no fairweather man. He knew easterlies, he took them in his stride. But to-night—to think that boy was actually in the tail barge, the last barge on the string, the barge most likely to founder, the worst hull, the worst location in the tow! Why hadn't his men told him in Portland, or in the fair going east of Cape Ann, or even in the fog? He could have dropped astern any of those times

and taken Bobbie aboard the *Starling*. To-night it was too late.

Six bells in the midwatch. A pall lay over the crew that had thought to joke its skipper. Two mates hung to pilothouse windows and stared their eyes bleary for one gladdening blink of the wink of McCrie Buoy. They stared to starboard where it should be, they watched to port and dreaded seeing it there, while the Old Man became a Janus looking both ways, fore and aft. Mostly aft. He looked eternally but he could not see. At times the lead barge must have run up on her slack, because Leslie Strout's anxious gray eyes discerned sudden, spreading blots of white beyond the tug's stern, white that came abruptly beneath a blackness that must have been the barge's nose.

Then whurr—oomp! It was gone. The hawser had whanged taut once more and where the blackness had been, Leslie Strout saw—in memory—a nine-year-old replica of its dad at the latter's knee declaring loudly, "I'm gonna be a real cap-tin, I'll go 'wa-ay out to sea. Hey, Dad?"

"Oh God, what 've I done to log this awful——"

Captain Strout never completed that plea to Deity. Upon his murmurings burst Eckhart's taut-nerved yell, "McCrie Buoy! Dead ahead!"

Had the Old Man been softer than a downeaster, he might have yelled back at Eckhart in his joy. As it was, a smile broke the grimness on his face and his strained muscles relaxed. "Dead ahead, eh? We'll haul out a point to give it plenty of room and put for the lightship. That'll be nine miles. Then on to the Refuge. The worst is over!"

The next voice he heard was a shrill, insistent whistle. It came downwind—from a barge. It started another shrill plaint. Both persisted, both begged, cried out. Every man in the pilothouse felt his blood drain downward, felt the thrill of victory slap down to the—what?

In a flash, mate and skipper leaped to the doors. Rain drove in. Wind tore through. The *Starling* lurched viciously. Bang! Both doors closed.

And away aft on the towboat's leaping, thrumming stern, Leslie Strout, the father, counted those shrill blasts without breathing.

"Gone!" he gasped. "I knew it was coming. Gone!"

HE wheeled, made out Eckhart to windward, the chief behind him. "Third barge's gone adrift!" he howled at Eckhart, and the mate's tongue clung to his teeth.

Robert Strout's father howled it twice. A third time. No reply. Eckhart's silence drove him mad. He shoved his rain-flooded face at the mate's very nose and screamed the news that both knew all too well. "My boy's gone in her, gone in an old sieve with an old martinet. A lee shore"—his arm swept wildly to starboard. "South Shoal there"—pointing out ahead. "I tell you he's—*talk*, you deaf mute!"

Eckhart could not raise one syllable, not a sound; if only he himself had told the skipper in time!

Strout, the father, completely muffled Strout, the skipper. Something inside him snapped. He could not endure the silence, that Eckhart face. He hauled back a fist to crash the dumbness out of his mate—and Chief Irvin came in swiftly to lay a grimy hand on the ready fist.

"Cap'n," said he gently, "remember the Martinet——"

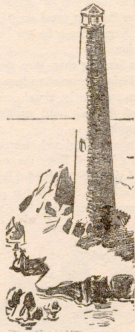
"Martinet!" shouted Bobbie's father. "You fool, he's got my boy adrift, I tell you. He'll drown like a rat!"

Chief Irvin persisted. "The Martinet used his fist on you and his First in a gale like this, sir."

The blazing light in the gray eyes softened, the fist opened, the arm relaxed. Leslie Strout became himself again under the gentleness of that voice and the humble reminder. He was Captain Strout of the *Starling* once more.

He laid one appreciative palm to the chief's shoulder, the other to Eckhart's. Then he turned away and it was he who was speechless now. He was brimful of gratitude and appreciation, with the realization that Eckhart and the entire crew—all of them—had been too sympathetic to speak.

Brimful, too, of a plan that was desperate, a plan that meant a fight. Ten years ago the Martinet had fought his mates to desert a lost tail-barge with a woman aboard. A decade ago old Martinet Hamm had allowed two men and a woman to die without even risking his towboat in an attempt to rescue them. And now, in the first gray edge of this tumultuous day, Captain Strout was going to fight, too, but his foes would be wind,



rain, sea. Above all, time. He'd anchor the two barges he still had astern, in the Refuge. He'd fight his treacherous way back, locate the lost barge somehow and get her, God only knew how.

THE *Starling* battled her way out to the safe, eastern side of McCrie Buoy. She turned west by south for Overfalls Light-

ship. She hauled out half a point to compensate for the storm's blast. She corkscrewed her bitter way for seventy-nine impatient, life-and-death minutes and spotted the Lump on the southeast tip of South Shoal. And it wasn't abeam yet.

"This is terrible. Slow!" Eckhart groaned. "Only this far."

The Old Man never spoke. He got a rough bearing on the Lump and hauled out another half point. Meanwhile, where was the lost barge? Had she anchored? Drifted onto flats. Foundered? Bobbie must be ghastly white, desperate. No longer could Strout endure this reduced speed, he rang for Full Ahead.

He got it. And when the *Starling* whipped the slack out of her lead barge's hawser over the next great sea, the shock of it made a fireman reach for the ladder—and curse the impulse.

Three miles like that, then the lightship showed. Twice it seemed to leap out of the frothing turmoil away ahead, only to reel dizzily and descend until nothing showed but the masthead.

A long one hundred and nineteen minutes after leaving McCrie Buoy, the tow rounded Overfalls Lightship and headed for the dangerous entrance to the Harbor of Refuge. Swift following seas fairly hove the second



barge at the first, the first at the tug. The second barge slewed into troughs, took whole seas on deck; the whole tow chased itself in that reckless struggle for an anchorage.

Yet, the Old Man yielded not one revolution of speed. Narrow and dangerous though the entrance to the Refuge would be today, nothing was going to stop him.

Nothing did.

NOR did he tarry. Exactly four hours after losing the tail barge, Captain Strout shoved the *Starling* out by the breakwater, into the gale again. At the very outset the elements challenged him. Sharpened seas picked up the towboat, bared a third of her coppered hull, played havoc with her, then dropped from under. They swarmed all over her—and the Old Man watched his lifeline gun and prayed it would stay with him this one momentous trip.

His relentless persistence got her safely outside the end of the breakwater and the fierce fight had only started. Racing piston rods and propeller blades matched force with wind and pounding seas—and the will of a frantic father who double-dared fate to declare: "We'll risk it to lu'ward of the lightship this time. No barges to consider. Mate, that barge will be drifting inside of the course we took coming in."

"That 's nerve!" Eckhart refrained from saying, yet he must have known how utterly afraid the skipper was—for the boy.

Right into the teeth of the fury, he made for the leeward side of Overfalls. He all but rolled and pounded the stack out of the *Starling*, saw Buoy 4 coming much too close on his port bow and swung out. From a pilothouse that was a madhouse he peered into the rain; despairingly he searched for the slightest sign on the seas of a black blotch that might conceivably be the lost barge. He peered and searched until his judgment almost told him that Cap Hamm hadn't drifted at all; then he must have anchored away off there or else— The deafening hiss coming off the torn seas warned him, reminded him, that the *Pocastelle* had been a shell of rotten timbers, of seams that would yawn wide open in this weather. She would fill quickly, she'd sink.

Waves of dread beset the father of young Bob Strout until he found himself searching no longer for the barge, but for anything that might be a bit of flotsam with lashings and a boy in them. Had Bobbie worn that blue serge? To the waterfront?

Buoy 4 dulled astern in the flying spray, the Lump on the southeastern tip of South Shoal must come next. Or would it come at all? Gone was the slatey glare of revenge in Leslie Strout's peering eyes; in its stead shone the bluer gray of profound anxiety while the father lived all over again certain golden moments. Aye, it had been heaven on earth when the tiny fingers had curled on his big, calloused thumb!

THE *Starling* shook that out of him, brought him back sharply. She slithered down a perilous slope. She lay away over and a veritable earthquake of water boomed down upon her. It entered her stack, it made rags of the tarp on a lifeboat, it bent a mast and tore the masthead lights away. Then it was gone in acres of greenish white and the towboat shuddered from under.

She quartered the next one. Up she came into the shrapnel blast of wind-driven rain that drummed her from stem to stern. Up and over and down again with bent and broken rails and glass out. But she went on and still on to find a rotten hulk, a bit of wood, anything—in a world almost devoid of visibility.

Her mate cursed that world and despaired of ever seeing the Lump. In his secret heart he knew there'd be no barge, no old Martinet, no boy. The kid had echoed his last contagious laugh on a pier-end; he had realized his boyish ambition to go out on a coastwise tow. Bobbie had gone out. Eckhart blew his nose at the thought and it vibrated like the twin horns on Cape Elizabeth.

The echo of his blast came as an electric shock. It was a whistle on the wind. A shrill, familiar whistle from a barge!

Eckhart yelled like a prize-fight fan. Chief Irvin came headlong. The helmsman forgot decorum and bellowed "Hoo-ray!"

But the Old Man pulled an answer on the whistle lanyard and bent his entire attention upon that dark, moving spot that came and went in the spoondrift upwind. He

made out its length, the three masts were there. It lumbered up into better view on a watery ridge and he recognized the *Pocatelle*.

But he recognized more. She was down to her scuppers; she was sinking! Had he arrived too late? He shoved the helmsman aside and put the *Starling's* nose directly for the wreck. He barked out, "Stand by to shoot a line!"

The *Starling* plowed her grim way up into the lee of that loggy hulk and the hulk grew. Details came out of the rain, a wobbling mizzenmast, a hawsepole gone. The anchor chain on this side had hawsed down through timbers, had cut a vertical slot that now reached under water. She must be nearly full; her minutes were already numbered. Come another one of those highest, fiercest seas and she'd vanish without sign or sound.

Captain Strout knew it, he had seen it at a glance. His eyes now were above the rail, they were looking for the boy. They looked in vain until a sea rose between him and the wreck and he groaned, "Oh Lord, he's only a kid, he's too young to—" The towboat lurched upward, the hulk reappeared—and Leslie Strout discovered a head of matted black hair. It was aft, at the corner of the cabin. It was Bobbie. Alive he was, for he waved. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted. And Cap Hamm's arm was holding him against the cabin.

But the chief, on the deck below, turned away from that glow in the Old Man's face. "How can he feel this way?" he murmured. "He hasn't saved the kid; he's only arrived in time to see him go down!"

Bells; the chief ran to his engine room and took over. Bells; he threw over the link. More bells; he worked the throttle. A prolonged, insistent jingler. She wound and twisted over hills closer to leeward of the barge. Closer than safe—then the gun shot a fine line into the rain. It arced over the seas. Its arc started for somewhere amidships to allow for the wind, but the gale curved it away aft. It came down on the



barge's taffrail and Hamm started for it. He lost his footing and fell and the line went over the stern.

"Again!" cried the skipper. "Lively down there. Aim it over her bows. Work fast!"

WHILE they worked, he maneuvered the *Starling* even closer; and Eckhart wondered how he was feeling now toward that aged has-been over there who had cursed him twice in ten years. Would the skipper avenge himself if Cap Hamm survived this? Eckhart looked off and saw that which made him doubt that cap would survive; he saw no more main deck on the barge, it was under. Only her fo'castle head and after cabin stood above the sea. "Powder!" he demanded.

Again the gun shot its line. It met a sudden blast of wind that shortened its long arc and carried it to leeward. It curved over the submerged deck. It came down on the cabin top and slid on over the aft end of it. Then the hulk rolled out of sight into another valley and Leslie Strout shouted a question that was a prayer. "Did they get it?" And nobody answered him.

The suspense held all hands spellbound. They forgot everything they had been through, forgot the sting of rain, the cutting wind, the eerie silence in a deep hollow between seas. Then they were up again on top of the world—and there stood Cap Hamm on the barge's stern. He was hauling in the line.

To the towboat's end of it Eckhart had bent on a stouter line that would endure the strain of two persons being pulled through the seas. Its end went over the rail and Hamm's motions slowed. The skipper saw the boy take a hand; together they were whipping it over the water.

Now they had it aboard them and they disappeared behind another wall of water.

CAPTAIN STROUT stifled a cry. Had Hamm knotted the line around himself or the boy? Had there been time for him to knot in both? Would he save himself in

those split seconds when Strout had seen the barge's nose go under? Before he could ask himself more, he was overlooking the scene once more and the barge was gone. He tried to shout and failed, he tried to turn away and his feet refused.

"Taut line! The winch!" screamed a man on the deck below.

The winch began its growl, the line began to come aboard, but the skipper knew what Eckhart must know: the line probably had fouled and was going to bottom with the barge.

The skipper shook himself and somehow came down on deck. With bated breath he counted the fathoms coming over the niggerhead. Five of them. Eight, and still it kept coming; it did not snap. Twelve piled up under the niggerhead and the skipper looked away to catch a momentary flash of black, shiny-wet hair coming through a sea. "Coming!" he roared hoarsely, while sudden tears streamed down his face with the rain.

Within minutes that seemed hours, the boy's head and shoulders inched over a wave and he was alongside. He was thoroughly battered, too, and half-full of water. But he was still conscious when they hoisted him in over the rail in the loop old cap had made in split seconds.

But the end of line behind him drew taut. It slacked again and another body washed against the towboat's side. For one brief moment it had neared the surface and Captain Strout had recognized it; the old Martinet had come all the way on a few turns of the line's scant end around one wrist and the nub of it in his fist. And Leslie Strout knew instantly what had happened aboard the barge while she took her final plunge. Old Cap had used what time there was to safely knot the boy into the line; that accomplished, he had managed to wind the brief end of it on his wrist as the barge went from under him. And now he was spent, the thump of his body against the towboat's side had knocked the last ounce of strength out of him.

Strout made one swipe at the line piled under the niggerhead, looped it on his wrist precisely as cap must have done it, and went overboard before anybody realized what was going on. He could see the old man's checkered shirt against the hull, but it was deep. He went down after it and met it coming up. The instant it brushed his foot, he went after it—and got one hand on it. His lungs were bursting, his head sang, but he kicked and fought his way to the surface with that checkered shirt in tow. Then the line pinched his wrist and his head came out. He had saved the Martinet.

NEXT morning the *Starling* lay at a Philadelphia pier and a reporter dropped aboard. He had missed the skipper, but he had gleaned, from men up the pier, the story of a lost barge and two lives saved. Now he was after that touch of "human interest

stuff" which nobody ashore had given him.

He found Eckhart repairing broken rails and windows, unwilling to talk. He went on aft, overheard voices somewhere inside the chief's domain, and stepped in quietly.

"Had it in for him ten years? And then jumped overboard, you say, to save him yesterday?" came the boyish voice of Bobbie Strout from somewhere below. "Gee, Chief, Dad couldn't really hate anybody—but he's got some queer ideas, though."

"Yeah? Now rake the clinkers out over the fire, kid—that 's it," Chief Irvin was saying irrelevantly.

"O. K. Chief. He thinks I'm going to college. That 's what *he* thinks, but that 's out now. I've been initiated, see? Been seasick and a sailor and in a wreck. Gee, that 's a better start 'n he ever got. I'm on the up-'n-up, Chief!"

*In Our Next Issue—*

**GORDON YOUNG**

**"Cap'n Bill Goes to Lalebo"**

**JACKSON GREGORY**

**"Dead Man's Vengeance"**

**W. C. TUTTLE**

**End of**

**"Sontag Trails the Tiger"**

**SHORT STORIES for December 25th**



## Danger—Go Ahead!

By BERTON BRALEY

("Isn't there *some* place where we can find peace and tranquility?"—Newspaper columnist.)

WHO wants tranquility?  
Who wants a life  
Full of contentment and ease?  
Give us mobility,  
Action and strife,  
Life was intended for these!

Who wants to snuggle  
In softness and sloth  
Dull as the cattle that browse?  
Give us the struggle  
Of labor and growth;  
Leave the contentment to cows!



Who wants tranquility?  
Only the Old  
Only the weary and spent;  
Down with futility  
Life's for the Bold  
Thrilled with divine discontent!

Doers and Drivers  
Who never go slow  
While there's adventure ahead;  
Life is for strivers  
And fighters, who know  
When you are tranquil—you're dead!



*What's a Five-letter Word  
Meaning Justice? Tripe!*

## CLEAN-UP

By

HENRY F. CHURCH

*Author of "When Dawson  
Roared," "In This Corner  
—Kid Steve," etc.*

LOOKING after the departing form of Alderman Sulking, as he left the office of the precinct captain, Detective Taber said, "You could spin that guy in a swivel chair, and he'd be a so-and-so from any angle you looked at him," or words to that effect.

Taber knew that, in a moment, the captain's buzzer would summon him in to be told to forget what he had found out in the Peachy Braddy case. Braddy was a key man in Sulking's ward, and he knew that the Alderman had come down to fix things. Sulking was a great little fixer. Taber went in to save the captain the trouble of ringing.

"Hullo, Joe," greeted the captain, looking at him from under heavy white brows. "I was just going to call you in about—"

"Braddy?"

"Why—er—yes. You didn't really find anything on him, did you?"

"Nothing to get steamed-up over. He had the Kabelac girl in his flat for a week, but she probably went there of her own accord. She was fifteen, last month, and oughter've known her own mind. The janitor said that a different one of Peachy's

gang was with her each night, which splits the blame, if any, seven ways. They found her half-naked body down in the areaway, four stories below, but it might have been she walked in her sleep, or, maybe, slipped on a cake of soap and popped out the bathroom window." Taber delivered the statement in a guileless tone, but the captain, noting that his invitation to be seated and have a cigar, had not been accepted, hunched his shoulders higher, and drew his white brows into a V-shaped frown.

"Go on," ordered the captain, not so cordial now.

"I'd practically finished, Captain O'Fallon, sir," said Taber, his round, red face clothed in a dead-pan expression. "That is as far as Braddy is concerned. Of course, her old woman was unreasonable, and, when one of the young men in the D. A.'s office tried to kindly explain that it was probably the girl's own fault, went out yelling something in bohunk, and jumped in front of a taxi. But that only shows what excitable nuts 'em foreigners are."

"Don't pull that line with me," the captain said, with suppressed anger, "or you'll go back to pounding the pavements. It's a



hell of a note that a city father can't drop in without one of my lousey dicks getting the idea that I'm boot licking. We're up against a wall. Sulkings agrees with the coroner that she bumped herself off in a fit of drunken remorse, and Braddy swears that she came there to get his help in finding work, and must have just hung around. He says he doesn't especially remember seeing her around, and, as his flat is a sort of social club for his business associates, he doesn't check up on the dames who come and go. Knowing how juries are picked in this town, you should know there's no use fooling with this case any longer."

"Yeah," agreed Taber, "I guess I better get back on important cases such as the wop peanut venders in the parks, and 'em kids skating outside the zones."

"You might as well," said the captain, savagely biting the end from a fresh cigar. "You and Bernstein, both."

**T**ABER found the stocky Bernstein in the recreation room, worrying at a newspaper cross-word puzzle. "What's a five-letter word, meaning 'justice'?" asked the latter, lifting his eagle's beak from the page before him.

"Tripe," said Taber, kicking a chair from his path on his way to his locker. Bernstein penciled in the word and promptly rubbed it out. "It doesn't make sense," he complained. Tiring of the pastime, he watched Taber vigorously emptying the locker of an accumulation of personal belongings. Like that of his big companion, Bernstein's face was devoid of expression. "Been on the carpet?" he asked.

"Who, me?" snorted Taber, unearthing an apple from the locker and hurling it into a waste-basket. "I'm a free soul, and I do my duty as I see it."

Bernstein retrieved the apple and twisted it in halves between his stubby paws. "I was just asking," he said mildly. "Getting ready for a one-man inspection?"

"One-man resignation," growled Taber,

and, pulling the newspaper from in front of the smaller man, dumped his belongings on it. "There's a good stick," he remarked, picking up a battered locust. "I took that chip out of it on a nigger's head fifteen years ago, when Tommy O'Fallon was a sergeant and I was a patrolman. He had a knife at Tommy's throat. Tommy used to be a man in 'em days—before he got ambitious and got gold braid on his cap."

Bernstein dug from the heap a grotesque head carved from a coconut hull, and examined the grinning features. "I've always wanted that to scare my kid with, when he acts up," he remarked casually. "How about it?"

"Nix," growled Taber. "Johnny Kabelac, who used to be doorman here, after he got shot in the leg, carved that out for me, just a month before he died. You didn't know Johnny."



"He was before my time, but the name clicks."

"It oughter," said Taber, tying the bundle with an old belt. "That was his girl that jumped out of Braddy's flat."

Bernstein ate the other half of the apple. "Maybe we could get jobs with the government relief," he finally said.

"We?" asked Taber.

"We're a team, ain't we?"

Taber grinned and knuckled him roughly under the jaw. "Keep your petticoat on," he advised. "The first of the year is time enough. We got turkeys coming from the commissioner, and a share in the reward pool."

"Oh, migawd!" exclaimed Bernstein, in

alarm. "I must be slipping. I forgot about that!"

**T**ABER, off duty and homeward bound, dropped into a poolroom for a glass of beer, and was accosted by a bandy-legged youth attired in a checkered suit, and a bright blue shirt and tie, topped off with a pearl-gray felt hat, and the whole modishly fashioned on a foundation of box-toed tan shoes, and pearl-gray spats. A blue handkerchief, drooping from his breast pocket, completed the ensemble.

"What's the woid, flatfoot?" asked the youth, with a leer, and tossed a nickel on the bar to pay for Taber's drink. The detective gingerly picked up the coin and dropped it into a cuspidor. "Any word to fit you, Braddy, would get me pitched out of here for using it," he answered. "Beat it, before I ram you into the spittoon, along with your dirty nickel!"

"Oke," said the flashy one, displaying yellow teeth. "I only wanted to find out if my old friend Sulkings had dropped a woid to you. I guess he did. S'long."

"If I was a dick," sneered the bartender, speaking out of the corner of his mouth to Taber, "I'd take that hunk of limburger outta circulation. I'd—"

"You'd take orders, like I do, if you was a dick," corrected Taber. "Now, if I was a barkeep, with the rights of a free citizen, and a bungstarter handy, I'd drive that fluzzy lid of Braddy's so far down on him he could wear it for a hula skirt. That ever occur to you?"

"Yeah, and have the Braddy pack at my heels from now on!"

"It's the same with us dicks," defended Taber. "We can't do anything about it."

At home he found Mrs. Taber baking a fruit cake. "Did you think, now, to bring a bit of brandy?" she asked. "Tommy always likes a kick in his cake, so he tells me."

"What Tommy?"

"Tommy O'Fallon, to be sure," answered his wife. "Who else has eaten Christmas

dinner with us for the past twenty years?"

"He'll not eat it, this year of our Lord!" said Taber with finality.

"Why?"

"Because I'll not break bread with a man who sells out to politics. He pulled me off that Braddy case."

"No, darlint!"

"He did that, and I'm quitting on the first."

"You're the man of the house," said Mrs. Taber, stirring the cake without enthusiasm. "But Tommy must have had a reason

"Sure. He couldn't think of losing his pretty cap with the gold braid on it. Me now, gold braid never matched my complexion, and, in all of my fifty-two years, no man has ever put a ring in *my* nose."

"A proud nose you've always had," comforted his wife. "Sit down, my lad, and stick it in that plate of corned beef and cabbage, I've been trying to save for you against the children."

**R**EJUVENATED by the dish, Taber left his wife to her baking and went out for a private prowl. He climbed into his dilapidated car and went in search of Denny Taber, a distant cousin, who worked in the coroner's office. He found Denny in a downtown poolroom, on the losing end of a run of kelly pool, and glad of the opportunity to quit. Denny had been the first from the coroner's office to view the body of the Kabelac girl, and his studied reticence, under previous questioning by Taber, had convinced the detective that Denny knew more than had come out in the press.

Over a snort of Scotch, Taber told his kinsman, "The heat's been turned off on the Braddy investigation, so you can speak freely. Between Taber and Taber, what is the low down?" Strong drink always made Denny talkative, and, as he was already fortified, the extra drink set him off.

Denny looked cautiously about. "She was pushed out!" he confided. "Else she wouldn't have been tied, would she?"

"Tied?" asked Taber, ordering a refill for Denny.

"Sure. Her hands were tied behind her, with a necktie. I've got it on," he said proudly. "Course, nobody but an expert would've noticed it, because it was dangling from only one wrist, but the loop was there where the other hand had popped out when she hit. The boss gave me hell for leaving the tie on her, so I slips it in my pocket before the inquest, and forgot about it."

It was the second tie of that peculiar shade of blue that Taber had seen that night. It gave him an idea. "It's pretty," he said, feigning admiration. "I'll trade you and give you four bits to boot." The trade was made, after which Taber bought Denny another drink and departed.

At a clothing store he bought a cheap tie to replace the one he had received from Denny, and took the opportunity to look at the label on the latter. It carried the name of an up-town haberdasher, and Taber immediately drove there. Before entering the place, the detective slit the band of the blue tie so that the lining bulged out.

"Listen, mugg," he barked, when the proprietor had been summoned, "Peachy sent me up to get a new tie for this piece of cheap junk you palmed off on him. Peachy's particular."

The proprietor seemed anxious to please. "Sure," he told Taber. "I'll make anything goot for Mr. Braddy!" He wrapped up an identical blue tie, and reached for the damaged one, but Taber beat him to it. "No, you don't," he growled, slipping both ties in his pocket. "My old woman can mend this one for me." The proprietor assured him that he was welcome.

Next, Taber drove over to see the district attorney. A butler blocked his way but to no avail, and the district attorney, displeased, but curious, received him. Taber told him about the tie.

"Why didn't you report this to your immediate superior, instead of to me?" the D. A. demanded.

"Because I wanted the news to reach you. Now that you know, what are you going to do about it?"

"Leave the tie, and I'll investigate," promised the official, rising to show that the interview was over.

"I don't like the smell of the investigations out of your office," Taber told him frankly. "That kid was murdered, and Braddy, or some mugg in his gang, did it, and exactly nothing has been done about it. The underworld is running this town. Why? Because any cheap crook that swings a hundred votes can get away with murder, or worse, and, from you on down, the law enforcement officers are scared to death for their jobs, or, maybe, for their lives. With all due respect, if any, for you, I ain't going to let that tie out of my hands. Now get this. If there ain't an arrest made in this case by tomorrow night, I'm going to turn over to the G-men all the evidence I've dug up. That Kabelac kid lived over in Brandonburg, just twenty miles away, but Braddy had to bring her across the state line to get her here. There's a Federal statute against that, thank God!"

THE D. A. sat down. "Joe," he said wearily, "you'd have got further in life if you weren't so disgustingly honest, but I envy you. I mean that. The old town is gang ridden. It has been a slow, insidious growth for which politics has been to blame, and it has reached the point where a decent official can't hold office unless he is willing to wink at crimes that nauseate him. Look here," he continued, taking a package of letters from his desk drawer. "There are over twenty anonymous threats in that bunch, warning me to lay off Peachy Braddy in the Kabelac case. They've even threatened my daughter. When I first went into office that sort of stuff only made me fight harder to get the man I was after, but now," he shrugged and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, "it whips me. There's another letter in that drawer, from a man so

high up, that, if I named him, you would be astonished. He doesn't threaten me. He simply suggests that I lay off the case. Do you get the picture?"

"I get a better picture than that," answered Taber. "I get a picture of you, Bill, when you were a young lawyer hanging around the precinct desk for whatever cases you could crib off the blotter. You were on the right side of the fence, and they let you, but many's the time I've heard you threaten, when justice seemed to miscarry, what you'd do if you ever got to be the D. A. You make eight grand a year, and I get by on twenty-four hundred, plus the pool split, but I've got the guts to back up my convictions, or quit. Since I can't carry the ball by myself, I'm quitting, but I want Braddy before I step out!"

On his way out of the district attorney's home Taber met Alderman Sulkings on the steps. The latter favored him with a smirk and went into the house. Half an hour later, Taber, while putting his car in his garage, was laid cold with a blackjack, and, when he came to, the incriminating ties were gone, along with his personal belongings.

Next morning, with a splitting headache, he spent two dollars, borrowed from his wife, on a long distance call to the nearest field office of the Federal Investigation Bureau, and, that afternoon, a keen-eyed young man, with a cultured accent, arrived by plane and called at his home.

Together they confronted the up-town haberdasher, who politely, but emphatically, denied that Taber had called on him the night before, disclaimed Braddy as either customer or acquaintance, and substantiated his statements by showing the operative that he did not have a blue tie in stock.

Denny Taber, when questioned by the G-man, could not remember finding a tie on the girl's wrist. Someone had found a tie in the alley, and handed it over to him, he recalled, but that proved nothing. Taber felt like a fool, but the government operative smiled at him sympathetically. "We'll have to start from another angle," he told Taber.

"Perhaps we can develop who took her from Brandenburg. We may get somewhere."

**T**ABER, after two days sick leave, reported for duty and blundered in on a conference between O'Fallon and Alderman Sulkings. As had been his custom for years, he walked into the captain's office without knocking, and, so heated was the argument



going on, neither of the pair noticed him. Troubled with no scruples against eavesdropping the detective cocked an ear and listened.

"It's persecution, I tell you," Sulkings was squeaking heatedly. "Someone tipped off the G-men and they've found out that the Kabelac girl left Brandenburg in a car the same make and color as Braddy's. That proves nothing. He drives a standard job, and there's millions of 'em rolling. Beside Peachy's got a sound alibi. A dozen witnesses will swear that he was at the fights that night. Now, this is straight from higher up. You guys have got a chance to help Peachy out of a jam. If the tip's straight, the G-men are going to raid Peachy's club tonight, at ten, and they're going to ring in the cops on it. It's just over the river, but in your precinct, so you'll get the call."

"Why doesn't Braddy take it on the lam?" asked the captain. "We don't want to tangle with the Federals."

"They're tailing him," explained Sulkings. "Beside every dime he's got in the world is in his apartment safe, and the building's lousey with operatives."

"I still don't see where we come in."



"Listen. These G-men have got something beside that car business on Peachy. Maybe it's only income tax evasion, but you know how 'em birds are. They're all lawyers, and slick. We figure that they want to get the club leaders. It's Peachy's annual directors meeting, but how they found that out I don't know. Peachy's got it all figured out swell. He's all set to blow, with his lieuts, after the raid is pulled. When you slap 'em in the wagon the contents of the safe rides with 'em. Get it, now?"

"No."

"Hell, I'll draw a diagram!" said Sulking, with forced patience. "You're to send the wagon, with a couple dicks who'll take orders, or who are too dumb to know what it's all about. When the pinch is made you'll see that the money goes along, with Peachy and his lieuts, in the wagon. You'll take the G-men in your car, and detour 'em back to the station by way of the north bridge, while the patrol goes over the south bridge. Now, get 'em Bridges straight! The patrol goes over the *south* bridge. The M. & O. barge tow blows for the south bridge to open up at ten-thirty, every night. You could set your watch by that. The draw opens quick but it's slow on the close, so you'll instruct your driver to time himself so as to dash across just before it opens. Your car, with the G-men will time itself so as to get *caught* by the north bridge draw, which opens for the M. & O. at about ten thirty-five."

"It still doesn't make sense."

"It will. The patrol isn't going to get any further than the west end of the south bridge. If it's the only car to squeeze past the draw that means the reception committee won't be crowded. Peachy and his pals, and the satchel, get off at that point and depart for parts unknown. There won't be any rough stuff if your men reach high enough. By the time you and your Federal get past the north draw it will be all over, but the extras. The G-men will be sore as hell, but they can't prove nothing. Beside,

you can save your face by pulling Peachy's stick-up crew after they make the delivery. They'll be spotted off to you. Charge 'em with kidnapping Peachy for ransom. That'll be right up the G-guys street! All we're asking is a break for a good set of boys. Take it, and name your own price, otherwise—"

SULKINGS' voice trailed off, and Taber, as red as a turkey gobbler, backed out of the office, yet unseen, and closed the door softly behind him. For a hopeful moment he stood by, expecting to see the alderman come sailing through the frosted glass panel, but, when Sulking came out smirking and on his two feet, Taber sighed and sat down to await orders.

He figured that neither he nor Bernstein would get a chance at the raid. O'Fallon would see to that. The captain called him in.

"Joe," said O'Fallon, and Taber had never seen him in a more elated mood, "have a cigar. Have two cigars!"

"What's on your chest?" asked Taber, ignoring the invitation.

"I want you to do me a favor. I'm going to clean-up the Braddy gang, tonight, along with the G-men. I want you to drive the wagon, and take Bernstein with you. I've got to have men I can trust."

"Or who are too dumb to know what it's all about," thought Taber, but to the captain he said drily, "Thanks, but when I want to haul slop I'll get a job on the garbage wagon. That goes for Bernie, also."

"You'll do as you're told, the two of you!" flared the captain. "I'll give you the details later. I understand you're aiming to leave on the first, but until you do, you'll take orders. Get me?" Then, in a milder tone. "I'll miss you around here, Joe. We've been together twenty years now, and I've never missed a Christmas meal at your house. You and I don't want to fall out."

"The family will be dining out, this Christmas," said Taber pointedly, and had the satisfaction of seeing that the shot hit

home with O'Fallon. God! The man was planning to send him on a job to risk getting knocked off when they tried to take his prisoners from him, and, in the same breath, was trying to cover up by talking about their annual Christmas dinner! Taber lashed out a stinging right that sent the bulky O'Fallon crashing over a chair and flat on the floor. He knew that he was in for it, now. The captain, when riled, was a bad customer to handle, but, to his astonishment, O'Fallon got up quietly and went to the corner washstand to swab a smear of blood from his cheek.

Taber was instantly remorseful, but his contempt for the man would not permit him to express himself. He waited, warily, but to his further astonishment, O'Fallon simply said, "Clumsy of me to trip over that chair! You and Bernstein get set for tonight."

"Right," answered Taber. As he left the office the captain's secretary came in and announced that the Federal operatives had arrived.

OUTSIDE, the detective found Bernstein at work on another cross-word puzzle, and told him of their mission, omitting, however, what he had heard in O'Fallon's office. "We'll take the wagon with the grated door," he told his co-worker, "and you'll ride in the front seat with me. Now, get this. I want you to slip a tommy under the lap rope. Someone might try to hijack us at the west end of the bridge."

"I'll put on an extra lock," replied Bernstein, returning to his puzzle. "What's a four-letter word meaning 'police,' huh?"

"Nuts," said Taber.

At ten o'clock O'Fallon and a squad of detectives assisted the Federal men in a raid on Braddy's hangout. They might have been raiding a Y. M. C. A. directors meeting, so carefully had the stage been set for their reception. Braddy, and seven of his lieutenants, faultlessly clad in tuxedos, were seated around a table. Not a drop of strong drink was in sight; not even a cigarette. The

lewd pictures that Braddy fancied were replaced on the walls by sedate etchings, and conspicuous on the table before the "directors" was a long list of names of poor families selected to receive Christmas baskets. Even Taber could not suppress a wry grin when he read his own name heading the T's. He was glad that Bernstein missed seeing it.

The leader of the G-men read a warrant, emptied the contents of Braddy's safe into a conveniently placed satchel, and motioned to O'Fallon's men, who herded the amused group down to the patrol and locked them in.

Taber spotted Alderman Sulkings on the edge of the curious crowd and saw him exchange glances with O'Fallon, who carried the satchel. The latter, over the evident protest of the leader of the government men, handed it to Bernstein in the front seat of the patrol, and Taber climbed in under the wheel.

Sulkings could not withhold a parting remark to Taber as the patrol rolled off. "The right man in the right place!" he said, enigmatically, and smirked. Taber's cheeks contracted, and, through conveniently spaced teeth, he ejected a stream of amber-colored fluid that hit the alderman neatly between the eyes, much to the amusement of the civilian onlookers. The cryptic words that followed the shot were not complimentary to the city father.

O'Fallon had given the detective detailed directions as to timing, and he noticed, by a clock in a nearby tower, that it was exactly twenty-five minutes past ten.

That would bring them to the bridge in time to cross the draw before it opened for the tow.

"Have you got that tommy?" asked Taber for the third time that evening.

Bernstein replied by cracking him smartly on the right shin with the butt of the evil little weapon, and Taber, reassured, looked into the side mirror and saw O'Fallon's car, which carried the G-men, turn into a side

street which would feed them into the north bridge route.

"You're driving too fast," commented Bernstein. "These babies won't be in any hurry from now on."

**T**ABER said, through set teeth, "We're going to beat the M. & O. to the draw and I'm taking this wagon over at sixty. If anyone pops up on the west end, let 'em have it!" He knew what was waiting for them, and he intended to have action. His better judgment told him that the whole thing could be avoided, perhaps, if he waited for the draw and went over with the jam of cars which would spew forth when the gate lifted, but he was determined to carry out his orders to the letter. He'd fill Tommy O'Fallon's prescription and put his own label on the bottle! He reached over for a reassuring touch of the submachine gun.

"Aw, for cripes sake!" growled Bernstein. "Quit worrying. I manned the daddy of this baby, in the Argonne."

As they climbed the incline to the bridge, the group in the patrol were singing, "Hail, hail, the gang's all here." "Cheerful, ain't they?" said Bernstein.

A mournful series of toots came up from the river. Gongs clanged, and a thin white arm, with black stripes, came down and barred their way. Already a segment of red was encroaching on the green lights of the draw, and it came to Taber that, for some reason, the punctual M. & O. was ahead of time.

The racing patrol was yet a hundred yards away when the red lights on the draw were fully visible, and the brakes shrieked under Taber's down-thrust foot. A moment of disappointment assailed him, and then a thought, as deadly cold as the wintry blast that whipped in from the river, knocked at Taber's brain and he accepted it. Bernstein, he knew, could take orders quickly. "Grab that satchel, and jump for it!" grated Taber, and lifted his foot from the brake. He waited until he saw his companion jump and roll

clear to the rail of the bridge, and then he turned on the dash throttle, and jumped also.

He felt a stabbing pain in his ankle and a smart crack on the head, and thought that he heard chimes ringing, but there was no mistake about the sound of the crash as the patrol hurtled through the thin white arm,



nor was he mistaken in the mighty splash that came up from the icy stream.

The tug howled, dismally, in a series of staccato blasts, and then the barges went through, jarring the bridge as they scraped against the piers. Upstream the tug tooted again, this time in normal tone, for the north draw. Tugboat men, on tow, were practical souls, with no time to waste on crazy motorists, thought Taber. The sound of the chimes grew louder, and then faded out.

**A**FTER an interne had wrangled him back to consciousness, and stuck court plaster on his forehead, Taber gingerly tried his ankle and found it usable. He persuaded the interne to drive him back to the precinct station in the ambulance. He had to settle with O'Fallon, he told the taciturn Bernstein, and then he was going to resign, and go home, turkey and pool split be damned!

As Taber limped into the lobby, G-men and detectives, with riot guns, were arraiging a group of battered and sullen hoodlums before the desk, and he recognized all of them as members of Braddy's gang.

"Caught 'em waiting at this end of the south bridge, with tommies and everything," one of the detectives was telling the desk sergeant. "They rolled into it pretty!"

Taber was yet puzzling over that when he

barged into O'Fallon's office and surprised him in the midst of a telephone conversation. "Yeah, Cap'n Matt," O'Fallon was saying, "I want to thank you right kindly for ordering out that M. & O. tow five minutes ahead of time. We needed that bridge for official purposes, but we must have got mixed up on our own time. Oh, no, Cap'n Matt, no fault of your men. No fault of anybody. Just one of those things. I'll

do as much for you, sometime. G'bye."

Taber and O'Fallon eyed each other, unflinchingly. "You think fast—when you think at all!" growled the latter. "What do you think, now, Joe?"

Taber grinned sheepishly. "I was thinking that, maybe, the old lady better bake another cake, with brandy, seeing you like it that way, Tommy."

"That would be nice," said O'Fallon.



## The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

### *Bushed*

"THIS stuff of being bushed," writes H. S. M. Kemp in connection with his story of the North in this *SHORT STORIES*. "Take a feller with any imagination at all, put him out on his own in the North for years on end, and one lobe of his brain seems to develop faster than another. He gets queer notions, cultivates strange dislikes; and loneliness, feeding on itself, makes him want

to be more alone all the time. You see it occasionally in some of the trappers back o' beyond. Eleven months of the year they are almost bereft of human society; one month they spend at the posts. And all the time they're at the posts they're itching to get back again. How do they put in their hours when not on the trap-line? Well; one man that I knew raised cats. He had dozens of 'em—black ones, gray ones, yellow ones. He



In our  
Next  
Issue

# Short Stories

for  
Dec.  
25th

*Both Fists Swinging—*



## **“Cap’n Bill Goes to Lalebo”**

*A Complete Novel by*

**GORDON  
YOUNG**

**JACKSON  
GREGORY**

A novelette of the High Sierras  
**“Dead Man’s Vengeance”**

**WALTER C.  
BROWN**

A novelette of Chinatown  
**“The Tears of Buddha”**

**W. C. TUTTLE**

The smashing finish of  
**“Sontag Trails the Tiger”**

**BRUCE  
DOUGLAS**

A bitter danger trail  
**“Death in the Mounted”**

**AND MANY OTHER FEATURES**

had a hole cut in the door of his shack, which allowed the mob to enter or go out at will. Another collected the wings of whiskey-jacks. His form of entertainment consisted of laying a twelve-foot pole on the door-sill, half in and half out the shack. The outside end was a bit longer than the other, so that this end touched the ground. To this end, then, he nailed a bit of fat pork and sat on a chair inside with an axe in his hands. The idea was simple. Jack, spotting the piece of succulent pork, swooped down to get it. All set on the pole with his bill driven into the pork, McGuffey smashed down the other end of the pole with a blow from the axe. The result was obvious. There was a death-squawk from Jack as he described an arc in the air, and another pair of wings for McGuffey. One more man of my acquaintance subscribed to the dual-personality belief. He was christened Peter Joseph; so, whatever he did, embraced Joe as well as Pete. 'Well,' he'd say, 'guess me and Joe'll mosey along home.' Or: 'Me and Joe come through the winter in pretty fair shape.' It was all right when you got the hang of things, but a bit disconcerting to sit in his shack with him and hear him include a third party who was little better than a ghost.

"These birds were all bushed, but they did no one any harm. But it's when a couple of men are shut up together that trouble starts. It's natural enough. As long as two active men can get out and expend their energy, they'll get by. But let flood, fire or weather coop 'em together for long and a squall blows up. A won't like the way B washes down his grub with a mouthful of tea. B objects to A's habit of picking his teeth with a fork. They become morose, surly. At best, it ends up in a free-for-all and a parting of the ways; at worst, another of those messy killings that the police have to investigate from time to time.

"Pete Nelson, in the yarn, became bushed; and to make matters worse he thought he had a legitimate grudge. That was bad. Like all other bushes, the kink in his brain made him place a wrong construction on

everything that Sergeant Webster did. But he, like the rest of 'em, only needed an outlet. Big Joe Starmberg supplied that—to the great good fortune of both Pete and the Girl."

*H. S. M. Kemp.*

### *Those Tail Barges*

AS seems to be pretty generally known, the recent world-wide depression in business licked a lot of business enterprises and washed them out of existence. One of the changes has been wrought in the coast-wise coal trade out of Hampton Roads ports and Curtis Bay and Philadelphia. The once familiar sight offshore of a string of barges on hawsers many fathoms long astern of a powerful towboat with a large rudder has well nigh departed from the American marine scene. The Reading tows still persist, but most of the fleets are gone.

They have been replaced by the faster colliers. Little ones carrying three or four thousand tons, larger ones loading up to ten thousand or better. Where the tows made five or six knots, these boats do eleven or more. Where the tows lingered in ports the colliers are out in a few hours and at sea again for another cargo. They have speeded up the trade, too. Already it is becoming the regular thing to expect a slack-off in the business during the late summers—and the colliers often spend this time in annual overhaul. The coal trade, like time, marches on, but in its wake it has left some good stories—such as Berton E. Cook's "*Tail Barge*" in this SHORT STORIES.

### *Pelorus Jack*

TO be specially protected by a great government is a singular experience to befall a denizen of the deep, but such was actually the case, Kenneth Wood tells us, with a certain strange fish, known as "Pelorus Jack." Many a passenger going to or coming from Nelson, New Zealand, by steamer via the French Pass, has seen this famous

white dolphin—for he has been classified as of the dolphin family—as he came out regularly to meet the coastal steamers making that port. For nearly thirty years this remarkable fish acted as a self-appointed marine pilot and guided vessels through the treacherous pass.

Jack usually appeared in the neighborhood of Pelorus Sound, and disported himself in front of and around the steamers' bows until he had brought his wards safely to the entrance of the French Pass. In case of steamers bound for Wellington he would join them near the pass and escort them until the Chetwode Islands were abeam. Then he returned to his secret home, to feed on cuttlefish and other life that abounds there, until the next vessel heaved into sight.

He seemed to be always on the watch, night and day. Even in the midnight hours, steamers negotiating the dangerous pass were joined by Jack. Swimming swiftly along in the phosphorescent waters, appearing and reappearing on either side of the ship's cutwater, or darting ahead like a flash of flame in the darkness of the sea, he was easily identified. He was, without doubt, the most singular creature inhabiting the sea, and the most beloved.

Ask any sailorman who went down to the sea in ships in that part of the world a few years ago, and he will tell you that Jack was the best friend he ever had. And the dolphin has a life-saving record, too—a record that is nothing less than astonishing. That is how he earned the distinction of being protected by a special proclamation by the British Governor.

Jack, a cetacean of the dolphin family, was about fourteen feet long. A blunt nose, a humped forehead, a high falcate dorsal fin, and a narrow fluked tail were distinguishing marks. In color he was bluish-white, tinged with purple and yellow, with irregular brown-edged lines running in all directions. His flippers blackish, mottled with gray.

For a long time the actual species to which Jack belonged was in doubt. He was often described as a white whale, sometimes as a

monster white shark, but later he was classified as Risso's dolphin (*Grampus griseus*.) It is said that a school of fish similar to Pelorus Jack was first noticed in the Sound many years ago, and that Jack was the only survivor.

In former days steamer passengers and others frequently took pot-shots at the big, harmless creature as he played around the ships. To prevent his destruction from all such murderers, a proclamation appeared in the *New Zealand Government Standard*, making it unlawful for any person "to take the first mammal of the species commonly known as Risso's dolphin in the waters of Cook Strait, or the bays, sounds, and estuaries adjacent thereto."

Pelorus Jack thus became a national ward.

Among the Maoris of the Marlborough and Nelson districts, this remarkable fish was as celebrated as he was among the white visitors—more so, in fact, for while the white man looked on Jack as merely an interesting kind of freak endowed with an acute and remarkable nautical sense, many of the natives had a veneration for him as a *taniwha*, or sea Deity, and they have even now, long and interesting legends concerning his habits and history.



### Concerning Juror No. 1

A FEW issues back we published a story by Bob Rohde called "Juror No. 1." It was a good story, but one point in it caused some of our readers to take pen or typewriter in hand and communicate with us and Mr. Rohde. Mr. Edward St. George, for instance, writes from Hollywood to know

"In what State, please, are jurors permitted to go home, mingle with people, circulate as usual—while a case is being tried? Yet the plot of *Juror No. 1* hinges on that one fact. Maybe there are States where jurors have all this freedom, and therefore can be 'reached', 'fixed', or 'killed'—but up to now I've never heard of them. Will you, or Mr. Rohde, please enlighten me?"

Then along comes a letter from Dr. B. F. Berry of Murray, Kentucky, who says he feels he's run into something in SHORT STORIES which cannot possibly be true. "Where, oh where," he asks, "does Mr. Rohde find a court in any State in these United States which allows jurors in a murder trial to run at large between court sessions, and to be taken to gangsters' meeting places and coerced, hired, threatened, etc.? I want this location," he goes on, "so if I am ever tried for murder I can make arrangements for this court to handle the case."

Also Mr. F. A. Mason, who lives on Long Island in such close proximity to Mr. Rohde that he might have run over and asked his question in person, wrote us instead to say, "I have always understood that once a jury is sworn in that they are not allowed to go anywhere except to a hotel, where they are guarded by a court attendant so they cannot have any communication with the outside world until the trial is over and they have given in their verdict. According to this story the jurors went home after each day's session, until the final day when the case is closed and the judge makes his final talk to them. How about it? Am I right?"

Concerning all of which, we hear from Bob Rohde—who, incidentally, has covered crimes and trials in many states as a newspaper man.

"Yours to hand, and may I say through the S. T. C. that the high-keyed emotional response from some of your readers to *Juror No. 1* is truly staggering. And what's it about?"

"I gather that *Juror No. 1* didn't quite click somewhere. Yes, that's reasonably

clear. Mr. Berry says he 'ran into something he knew couldn't possibly be true,' and others appear to think that he did, too. All want to know where anything like the jury doings chronicled in *Juror No. 1* could have happened. Well, unless I'm vastly mistaken—and along with me a number of law-informed friends who include a Long Island District Attorney and a keen young agent of the F. B. I., otherwise a G-man—his own New York is one of several states whose criminal law does not make mandatory the locking-up of a murder jury during trial. In New York it's left to the discretion of the trial judge whether a jury 'runs at large between court sessions,' puts it or, in the phrase of the statute, is 'kept together'—meaning fed and lodged by the state and attended at all times, from swearing of jury to return of verdict, by court officers.

"That's the short of it, and the fact of it, and the shut of it. I didn't make the law, but I used it. It's the common practice, as I myself well know, to 'keep together' juries sitting in major criminal cases, but practice is one thing, the statute another. Perhaps some of your readers are folks who've read so often about juries being locked up that they believe the locking to be a must? Or—no, I put aside the thought that they may simply be citizens who are inclined to be flaw-snappers by nature. Lawyers or whatever, I advise them to look in the book.

"I'm sorry, sincerely sorry, that they all didn't enjoy *Juror No. 1*. I wrote it to entertain, and in the effort to entertain I did take liberties with legal involvements. Plenty of them. Without a blush I admit it; for liberties of jurors regardless, writers of romance from far back have staked claim on liberties in treating of law and trials. But it seemed to me, and still seems, that when I deliberately omitted to name any one state as my theatre of action in *Juror No. 1*, I did all that was necessary to keep the story from grating on readers who might be conversant with some certain local procedures. That much I owed to my audience and that debt I discharged. Then I availed myself of



my well-charted privileges in developing action that seemed reasonable enough and logical enough not only to me but to a District Attorney of the State of New York.

"But the point which so excites your correspondents, I repeat and maintain, was no point of privilege. It's a straight, irrefutable point of law, and I did with the law what every lawyer seeks to do in every case he tries. That and no more. I twisted the law in the interest of my client, the reader.

"To be sure *Judge Felix O'Mara* missed a trick when he failed to order the *People vs. Engel* jury kept together, locked up. If he hadn't there'd have been a weaker story, perhaps no check for me, and also no letters to you. What *Judge O'Mara* did or failed to do was his business and mine. Just as much under New York law as by any dictate of the author's, full discretion was his. Why, just about the time when *Juror No. 1*

was coming through the typewriter, newspapers in New York City carried a story about a juror in Brooklyn. It was not a fiction story. The juror was a murder juror, and he reported having been approached by a fixer at his home.

"Again, the fact is that the law—New York State law cited—does not make the locking up of a murder jury mandatory until it has heard all the testimony and the Judge's charge and begins its deliberations. Wasn't the jury in *Juror No. 1* locked up then? You bet it was!

"That's that, and if ever a time comes when a permanent stop is put to tampering, then criminal lawyers will lose a great many more cases than they lose now, and many crooks who might in ordinary course be taking the sun in the open will be wearing their tan in plaids."

Robert H. Rohde.

## OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS



Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.



### Northward

LAST summer Mrs. Wiley Post flew from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Pt. Barrow, with Joe Crosson as pilot and five other passengers to plant on the bank of the Tundra River, where her husband and Will Rogers were killed in a crash on August 15, 1935, two five-foot iron crosses bearing the inscriptions "Will Rogers, a Man Beloved by All" and "Wiley Post, World's Air Pioneer."

Others in the party were Gen. A. D. McRae of Vancouver, B. C., Mayor E. B. Collins of Fairbanks, Mrs. R. H. Baker of Vancouver (General McRae's daughter),

Mrs. Joe Crosson and Charles F. Cann, of Fairbanks.

### Fresh Fish

CITIES in the vast interior of Texas now can get fish only a couple hours after they have come, gleaming and struggling, out of the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Indeed it is now possible for citizens of San Antonio, Dallas, and Fort Worth to enjoy fresher fish than those of many of the great East Coast cities, where the delay between the sea and the store is actually greater than the time between catch and sale in Texas. This condition has been made possible by the three-mile-a-minute air express service of Railway Express Agency, which has ar-

ranged to transport fresh fish from Corpus Christi to the leading cities of the state. A low rate makes it profitable for Gulf fishermen to ship.

### Hunter's Duty

**E**LEPHANTS, rhinoceroses, chimpanzes and hippopotamuses exported alive from northern Nigeria in Africa have to pay a duty of \$50.00 per head; ostriches \$25.00 and leopards \$15.00.

### "Two-Jacket" Weather

**I**N the old days all classes of China dressed by Imperial command, and when the Peking Gazette—the world's oldest newspaper—announced that the Emperor had put on his winter hat on a day prescribed by centuries' unvarying astronomical custom, all China did likewise and turned over the chair cushions, exposing their "winter side," for it was "two-jacket" weather.

## 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.**

**"The Last Frontier"—doesn't that sound like something out of the past? Who's going to be the first to find out about this almost inaccessible wilderness?**

Dear Secretary:

I am very anxious to join the Ends of the Earth Club. There is nothing so interesting as correspondence—especially from countries all over the world.

I live on "The Last Frontier" up here in the State of Washington. In this corner of the state remains the almost inaccessible wilderness that has not as yet been settled. This region consists of abundant wild life—deer, cougars, bears—and believe it or not this section abounds with half civilized Indians. The Olympic mountain range is in this district as well as a great many smaller ranges, lakes and springs. Recently a highway was opened up which circles this region and travelers claim that it certainly is "God's

country." The weather is the mildest in the world.

Recently two Seattle youths went into this wilderness of mountains and canyons equipped only with hunting knives and lived for some time—it was all because of a bet, but it was indeed an interesting wager.

I shall be only too glad to answer any questions readers of our club may have concerning this "Last Frontier."

Yours sincerely,

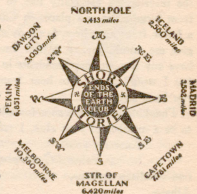
S. Edward Brautigam

908 State Avenue,  
Olympia,  
Washington

**There are all kinds of collections, but this is the first time we've heard of this particular kind. It certainly must be a very beautiful one.**

Dear Secretary:

I wish to become a member of the Ends



of the Earth Club. I am a collector. My collection is perhaps a queer one, but nevertheless it is one which gives me a great deal of enjoyment. I collect pictures of churches and at present have about nine hundred and sixty pictures of churches of about thirty-five denominations. If I could find some other "Ends-of-the-Earther" (if such I may call him) who would be willing to gather pictures of churches for me, I would be more than willing to collect anything for him.

I dearly love to receive letters. The more, the merrier. I especially like to get them from large cities and places in Canada, but a letter from anywhere, large or small, will give me untold joy. I do not know if you have any foreign correspondents in the club, but I would be glad to hear from them if you have any.

Thanking you in advance for allowing me to be a member of your club, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

*Howard G. Hageman, Jr.*

666 Madison Avenue,  
Albany,  
New York

***"The Paradise of the Pacific"—  
Well, it certainly sounds romantic  
and interesting!***

Dear Secretary:

I am twenty-two years of age and a soldier stationed in Hawaii. I have been here a little over a year and find the "Paradise of the Pacific" a very interesting and romantic place.

I have been a constant reader of SHORT STORIES almost as long as I have been stationed in the Islands and find your magazine full of adventure and excitement. My hobbies are letter writing, photography and sports. I shall gladly exchange snapshots and answer all questions to the best of my

ability regarding army life in Hawaii. I shall also describe the beauty of these Islands.

I assure anyone who may care to write that I shall answer their letter promptly.

Yours sincerely,

*Matthew J. McNally*

Battery "A,"  
16th Coast Artillery,  
Fort De Russy,  
Honolulu,  
Territory of Hawaii

***Imagine being a Forest Ranger  
stationed at the front door of Mount  
Rainer National Park and being lone-  
some! He says he is, so it's up to you  
to cheer him up.***

Dear Secretary:

By all means enroll me in the Ends of the Earth Club. I've been reading your magazine for the past few years and can say that I've been amply rewarded for every copy I've bought.

I can and am willing to correspond in Spanish or French and sincerely promise to answer all letters. I am stationed in the Cascades right at the very front door of Mount Rainier National Park. In fact, the entrance is just a half mile to the south of us. I've been working at this post for quite a while.

If any of my old pals around Paris, Texas, or San Antonio, Texas, see this letter, be sure to drop me a line.

Come one and all and cheer up a lonely Forest Guard's heart by dropping him a line. Let's see if you can give me a real initiation.

Very sincerely,

*H. L. Rowe*

Silver Creek Ranger Station,  
Parkway,  
Washington

## SAVE THESE LISTS!

*WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

- Herbert L. Adler, 48 Myrtle Avenue, Newark, New Jersey  
 J. G. Agnew, 3672 West 15th Street, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
 Frank Alona, 1925 Young Street, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii  
 Edmond Alcock, 810 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, New York  
 Frank J. Aller, V CCC 4718, Spivey, Kansas  
 Roy Anderson, 2410 Davidson Avenue, Bronx, New York  
 L/C W. E. Andrews, H. Q. Wing, 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters, Up Park Camp, Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies  
 Richard Armstrong, 1908 South Harrison Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana  
 Allan R. Barkiner, Battery E, Fort Ruger, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii  
 James E. Baron, 124 West 94th Street, New York City, New York  
 Bernard Bernstein, 845 East 176th Street, Bronx, New York  
 Gene D. Berryhill, 1805 Austin Way, Santa Rosa, California  
 Ned Bowman, Route 1, Box 52, Foulos, Louisiana  
 S. Edward Brautigam, 908 State Avenue, Olympia, Washington  
 Joseph P. Burgin, 25 Whinfield Street, Poughkeepsie, New York  
 Kenneth R. Burris, A & S Detachment, Fort Knox, Kentucky  
 G. E. Bustamante, Casa Filatelia, "El Sol," Philippines 518, Casilla 1949, Lima, Peru, South America  
 Jess Butcher, 5435—2nd Avenue, Los Angeles, California  
 William Buttner, 222 East Oliver Street, Baltimore, Maryland  
 Louis Carnail, 239 East 59th Street, New York City, New York  
 F. E. Carmichael, 1st Division, U. S. S. Lexington, Long Beach, California  
 John L. Carpenter, 15th Observation Squadron, Scott Field, Belleville, Illinois  
 Woods Carr, State Hospital, Jamestown, North Dakota  
 Ford Caudle, Hackleburg, Alabama  
 Hugh Clark, c/o Mrs. Stace, 1714 West Congress Street, Chicago, Illinois  
 E. C. Colker, Tallahassee, Alabama  
 Elmer H. J. A. Davis, Box 90, Red Lion Ranch, Lucerne Valley, San Bernardino County, California  
 G. Dickenson, 12 Commissioner Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
 Robert E. Dierken, 515 Fourth Street, Monongahela, Pennsylvania  
 Peter Dispensa, 512 East 12th Street, New York City, New York  
 Don Dissell, 1120 Douglas Avenue, Aurora, Illinois  
 Lionel R. Ducharme, 57 Lake Place, New Haven, Connecticut  
 Fred A. Dweley, Box 69, Freeport, Maine  
 Gerald Egan, 15 Morningside Place, Liverpool, 11, England  
 Lee T. Emery, 800 Rogers, Pawhuska, Oklahoma  
 Elton Faulkham, 124 Scio Street, Watertown, New York  
 Theodore Feild, Emerson Street, Suassa Park, Fort Jefferson, Long Island  
 James Fisher, 23 Ward Road, East Southea, Hants, England  
 Stanley Foster, 1176 Company CCC, Turners Falls, Massachusetts  
 Elwood Frons, R. D. 2, Cedar Grove, Conshohocken, Pennsylvania  
 Bob S. Garrison, Walhalla, South Carolina  
 Charles Gerndt, Room 203, Ward B, Essex Mountain Sanatorium, Verona, New Jersey  
 Donald Giberson, 14 Bullfinch Street, Boston, Massachusetts
- Victor L. Gotthaus, 511 Van Sclen Avenue, Brooklyn, New York  
 Jack D. Green, Jr., c/o Miss Theima Sullivan, Route 1, Marysville, Washington  
 Howard G. Hageman, Jr., 666 Madison Avenue, Albany, New York  
 Frank J. Hahnel, 132 West 15th Street, New York City, New York  
 J. N. Haidner, 5217 North Knox Street, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
 W. E. Harding, 1252 Fulton Road, Northwest, Elms Apartments, No. 6, Canton, Ohio  
 E. Harmer, General Delivery, Cadillac, Michigan  
 Harry L. Haywood, 815 North Lancaster, Dallas, Texas  
 James E. Haywood, 814 Martinique, Dallas, Texas  
 George Hentges, 505—11th Avenue, Southeast, Rochester, Minnesota  
 W. Garber Higginbotham, Box 23, Bethesda, Ohio  
 Bruce F. Hinman, Company A, Camp Stephen F. Austin, Dallas, Texas  
 Clifford Holder, 231 East 85th Street, New York City, New York  
 Everett C. Hollowan, 317 South Throop Street, Chicago, Illinois  
 Jack B. Hosea, 5822 North 28th Avenue, Omaha, Nebraska  
 Randolph Houston, General Delivery, Great Bend, Kansas  
 Nathaniel Humphrey, Jr., 1418 Avenue K, Galveston, Texas  
 Y. Jendvesch, 5036 Sunnyside Avenue, Chicago, Illinois  
 Harold C. Johnson, 113 Union Avenue, Belleville, New Jersey  
 Howard Jump, R.F.D. 1, Newton, New Jersey  
 Lee Kelly, 2973—28 West, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada  
 Duke Kenney, Camp A-118, Company 1380, Clearfield, Pennsylvania  
 Shannon King, 331 N. W. and 2nd Avenue, Miami, Florida  
 Raymond Kirk, 1915 South Harrison, Fort Wayne, Indiana  
 Fred. W. Koehring, 7007 Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois  
 Winton G. Koch, 561 Geiger Avenue, Southwest, Massillon, Ohio  
 Kenneth Kolina, 2155 Grand Avenue, New York City, New York  
 Andrew Lampros, 44 South 9th Street, Reading, Pennsylvania  
 Jack Langdon, 65 Elm Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
 Leo Lechleider, c/o Ocean Gate Post Office, Barnegat Pier, New Jersey  
 Cimet Le Clerc, 186 Hill Street, Manchester, New Hampshire  
 Jacques Leduc, Hotel Lac Vert, Conception, Comte Labelle, Province of Quebec, Canada  
 Harold Le Grow, 159 Bloomingdale Street, Chelsea, Massachusetts  
 Hans-Dietrich Leonhardt, Dobben 146, 1 Tr., Bremen, Germany  
 Joseph Lyons, 1761 McDonough Avenue, Scranton, Pennsylvania  
 Bernard Linden, 6019 North 21st Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
 E. S. MacGregor, Jr., 1502 Linden Avenue, Springfield, Ohio  
 William B. MacRae, Estancia "San Gregorio," c/o Menendez Behty, Magallanes, Chile  
 Joe Madrak, 109 Grove Street, New Britain, Connecticut  
 H. F. Mandastim, Troop B, Fort McIntosh, Laredo, Texas  
 Fred Manz, Jr., 691 Jackson Avenue, Bronx, New York



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28x4-38-20	2.00	30x4-38-20	2.25	28x4-38-20	2.25	30x4-38-20	2.55
28x4-36-20	2.10	30x4-36-20	2.35	28x4-36-20	2.35	30x4-36-20	2.65
28x4-34-20	2.15	30x4-34-20	2.40	28x4-34-20	2.40	30x4-34-20	2.70
28x4-32-20	2.20	30x4-32-20	2.45	28x4-32-20	2.45	30x4-32-20	2.75
28x4-30-20	2.25	30x4-30-20	2.50	28x4-30-20	2.50	30x4-30-20	2.80
28x4-28-20	2.30	30x4-28-20	2.55	28x4-28-20	2.55	30x4-28-20	2.85
28x4-26-20	2.35	30x4-26-20	2.60	28x4-26-20	2.60	30x4-26-20	2.90
28x4-24-20	2.40	30x4-24-20	2.65	28x4-24-20	2.65	30x4-24-20	2.95
28x4-22-20	2.45	30x4-22-20	2.70	28x4-22-20	2.70	30x4-22-20	3.00
28x4-20-20	2.50	30x4-20-20	2.75	28x4-20-20	2.75	30x4-20-20	3.05
28x4-18-20	2.55	30x4-18-20	2.80	28x4-18-20	2.80	30x4-18-20	3.10
28x4-16-20	2.60	30x4-16-20	2.85	28x4-16-20	2.85	30x4-16-20	3.15
28x4-14-20	2.65	30x4-14-20	2.90	28x4-14-20	2.90	30x4-14-20	3.20
28x4-12-20	2.70	30x4-12-20	2.95	28x4-12-20	2.95	30x4-12-20	3.25
28x4-10-20	2.75	30x4-10-20	3.00	28x4-10-20	3.00	30x4-10-20	3.30
28x4-8-20	2.80	30x4-8-20	3.05	28x4-8-20	3.05	30x4-8-20	3.35
28x4-6-20	2.85	30x4-6-20	3.10	28x4-6-20	3.10	30x4-6-20	3.40
28x4-4-20	2.90	30x4-4-20	3.15	28x4-4-20	3.15	30x4-4-20	3.45
28x4-2-20	2.95	30x4-2-20	3.20	28x4-2-20	3.20	30x4-2-20	3.50
28x4-0-20	3.00	30x4-0-20	3.25	28x4-0-20	3.25	30x4-0-20	3.55
28x4-0-18	3.05	30x4-0-18	3.30	28x4-0-18	3.30	30x4-0-18	3.60
28x4-0-16	3.10	30x4-0-16	3.35	28x4-0-16	3.35	30x4-0-16	3.65
28x4-0-14	3.15	30x4-0-14	3.40	28x4-0-14	3.40	30x4-0-14	3.70
28x4-0-12	3.20	30x4-0-12	3.45	28x4-0-12	3.45	30x4-0-12	3.75
28x4-0-10	3.25	30x4-0-10	3.50	28x4-0-10	3.50	30x4-0-10	3.80
28x4-0-8	3.30	30x4-0-8	3.55	28x4-0-8	3.55	30x4-0-8	3.85
28x4-0-6	3.35	30x4-0-6	3.60	28x4-0-6	3.60	30x4-0-6	3.90
28x4-0-4	3.40	30x4-0-4	3.65	28x4-0-4	3.65	30x4-0-4	3.95
28x4-0-2	3.45	30x4-0-2	3.70	28x4-0-2	3.70	30x4-0-2	4.00
28x4-0-0	3.50	30x4-0-0	3.75	28x4-0-0	3.75	30x4-0-0	4.05

\$1.85  
29 4.40 74

\$2.15  
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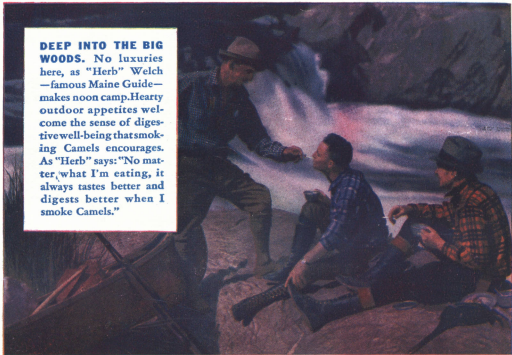
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*clears the skin*  
by clearing skin irritants  
out of the blood

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WHATEVER...  
WHENEVER  
YOU EAT—

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