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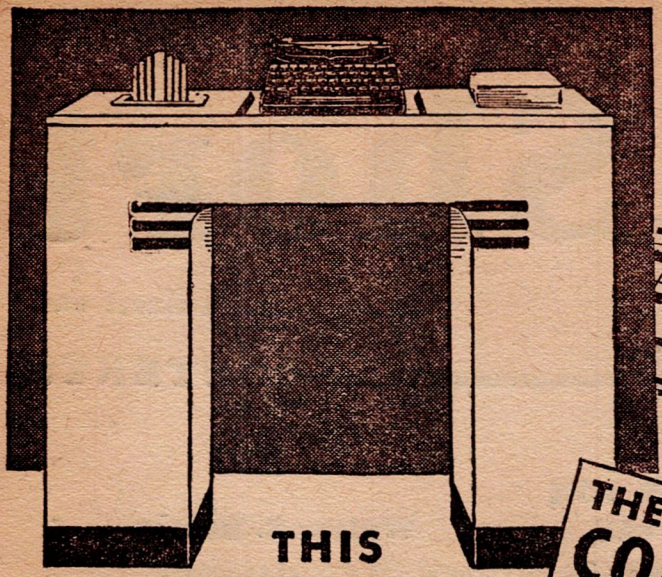

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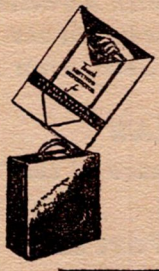

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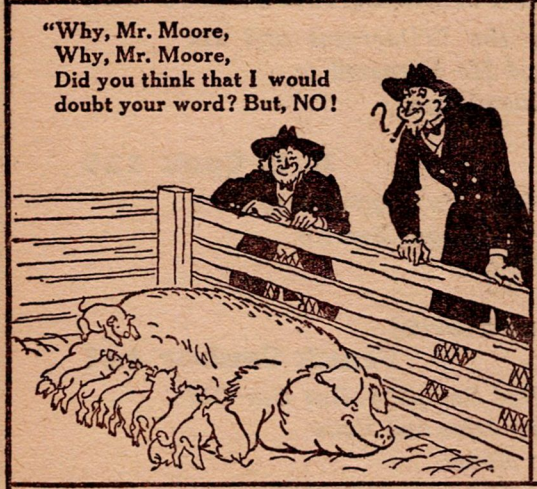

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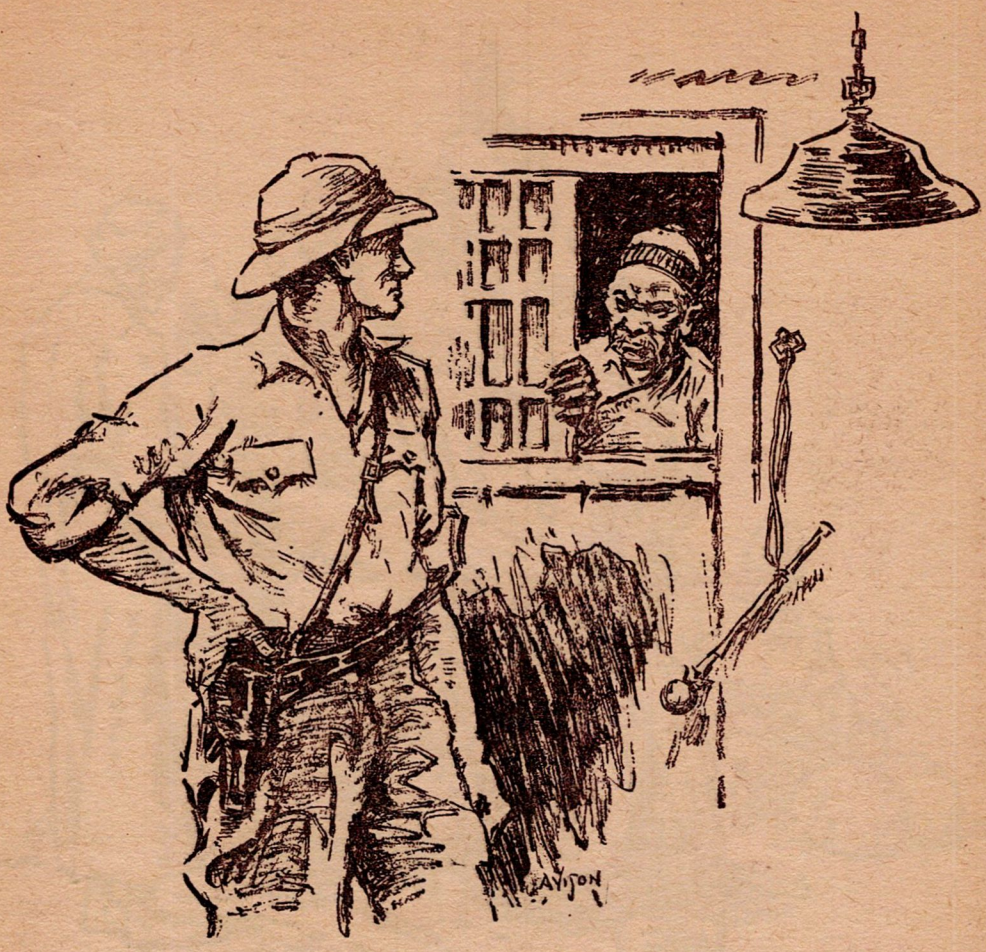


THE HOUR OF THE FOX

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "Red Lamps of China," "Red Snow," etc.

I

TWILIGHT was gathering as Roger Wayland presented his passport to the Japanese sentry at the North Gate of Kalgan. Roger had an official *hu-chao*, signed by Colonel Toyamo, the Military Commandant, for his duties as *khan*-master for Otto von Kragge's caravan trade kept him shuttling back and forth between the *yamen* in the city and the caravanserai beyond the ancient walls, on the road to the Gobi.

Nevertheless, there was the usual hocus-pocus and suspicious scrutiny of the paper, until Roger's temper was ruffled. "Don't

you recognize Toyamo's signature when you see it?" he snapped. His liking for the Japanese invaders was something less than zero.

"So sorry!" The little man in the nut-brown uniform flashed the copyrighted Jap grin. "Enter now, Mei-kuo-san."

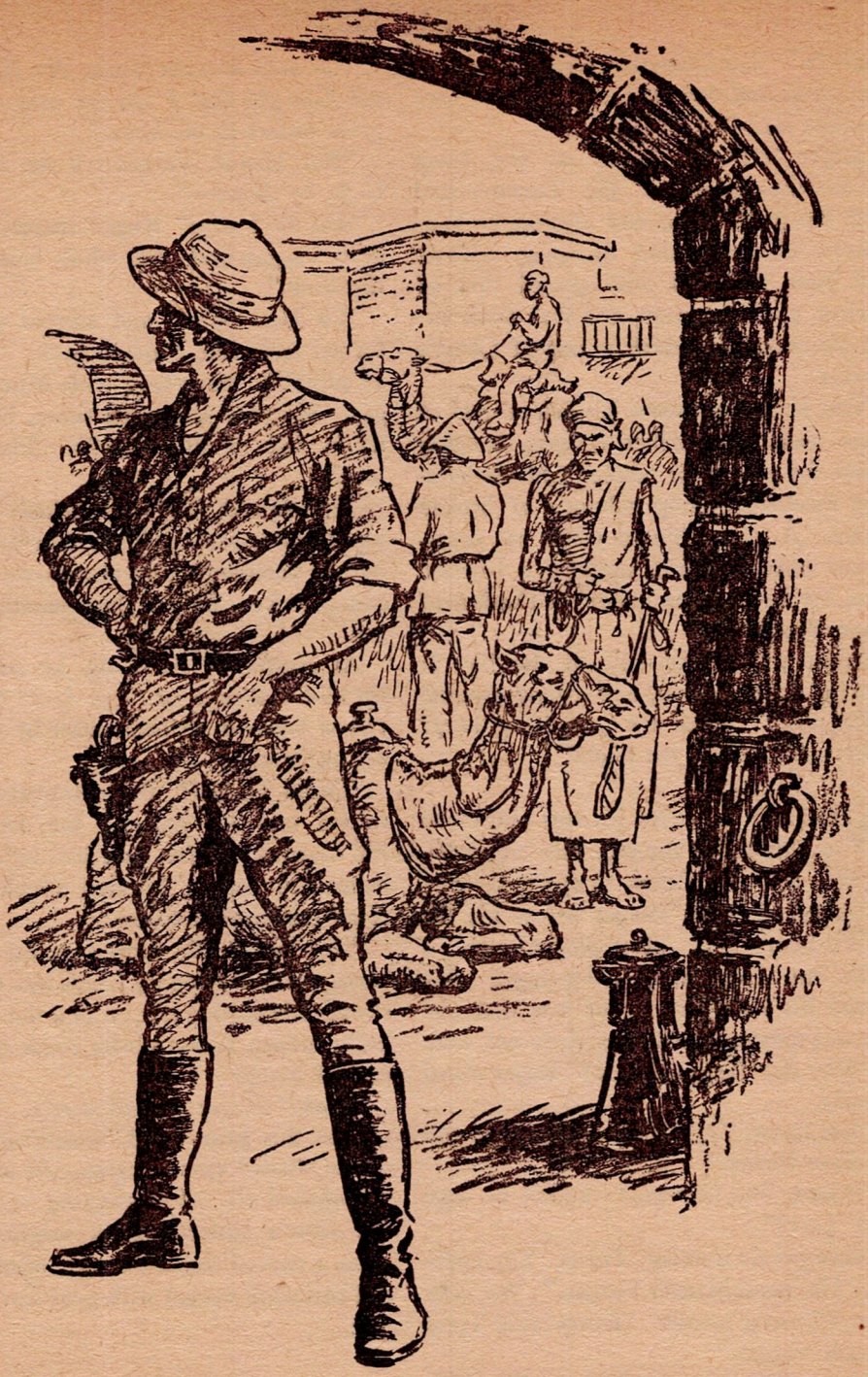
Roger set off across the wide avenue at a brisk stride, ignoring the whining sing-song of the ragged beggars and professional cripples who haunted the city gate, waving their wooden bowls at every passerby.

Suddenly came the ear-splitting clamor of an auto siren as a sleek limousine swung out from behind a lumbering Chinese ox-cart. Only an acrobatic jump backwards saved Roger from the hurtling car—cheating death by a split-second.

"Dura!" he shouted after the reckless driver, but the limousine whirled on with a shrill *"Hai!"* from the uniformed chauffeur and an insolent toss of the head from the passenger—a Japanese girl with painted eyelids and lips shining like red lacquer.

A slant-eyed vendor of *pao tzu* stopped and set down his charcoal stove to watch the tall American angrily brush the swirling yellow dust from his clothes.

"Happy good luck, Master!" he called.



"Tajen come very close to losing his shadow. *Aiee!* These devil-wagon make dust like the dragon-wind of the Gobi."

Roger answered his grin of friendly sympathy, and the yellow man lowered his voice. "Did Tajen's eyes fall upon the painted missee? Geisha-girl! She is the 'little mouse' of Colonel Toyamo." He spat into the dust.

"So that's it." Roger scowled after the vanishing car. "These Japs are a high-handed lot."

"Aiee, Tajen, but China is a long road, and there are sharp stones to trip the proud

walkers." The Chinese picked up his bamboo stand and departed, crying *"Pao tzu!* Red-hot ones! *Pao tzu!"*

Roger left the avenue at the Fong Ch'en—the Street of the Turtle—lined with top-grade shops and mysterious bungalows hidden behind drooping willows and high walls set with glazed tiles of apricot, green, maroon, and that shimmering peacock blue which is one of China's secrets.

Von Kragge's *yamen* lay behind one of these walls, with silken banners hanging above the gate, their painted Chinese symbols resembling long columns of broken sticks. A slim Chinese youth sat cross-legged near the gate, smoking a bamboo pipe, his face hidden under the shadow of a round black hat.

Roger glanced casually at the boy in passing, looked again, and swung around. "Wu Han! What are you doing here? Why aren't you at the *khan?"*

WU HAN uncurled his legs and stood up, thrusting the pipe into his girdle. "I wait for you, Tajen, to speak sorrowful story. Missah Vargas throw his fist in Wu Han's face. Hurt plenty much. I make run from *khan* chop-chop." He turned his head and Roger saw that one eye was almost closed by a puffy red welt.

"Why did Vargas hit you?" Roger asked quickly.

"Not know, Tajen. I swear by Tao and the Five Books."

"Where was Gan-ghi? Didn't he take your part?"

"Gan-ghi do nothing, Tajen. Say nothing. He 'fraid Missah Vargas." Wu Han drew a hissing breath. "Every'body 'fraid Missah Vargas."

Roger looked at the boy steadily. He knew Wu Han to be truthful and reliable, one of the best clerks at the caravanserai. Vargas was von Kragge's truck-master—a surly, red-haired giant with the muscles of a professional wrestler and the temper of a king cobra.

"Go back to your work, Wu Han. And tell Gan-ghi that I am the only one who gives orders at the *khan."*

"But Missah Vargas tell me not come back, by damn—"

"Do as I say!" Roger snapped. "It's time Vargas finds out who's boss-man at the *khan."*

Wu Han bowed and started off, then turned and came padding back. "Tajen," he pleaded, "have care with Missah Vargas. He very strong all times, but today he is full of drink-devils. Plenty bad joss."

Tight-lipped, Roger watched the yellow boy's retreating figure. For some time he had foreseen that a showdown was inevitable over Vargas' high-handed bullying.

As master of the *khan,* he must take up this challenge or "lose face" with his yellow boys—a serious matter by the code of the Orient.

"Damn Vargas!" Roger muttered as he turned into the gate of the compound. Sin Gow, the *mafoo,* was just lighting the hammered copper lanterns which swung from overhead brackets.

"Ala wah!" Sin Gow greeted the tall young man, slipping his hands into his wide sleeves and bowing low, so that the crooked knife hidden in his girdle stuck out in a curved hump.

"Wah!" Roger replied curtly. He distrusted this grim-faced, unsmiling *mafoo* whose slanted eyes were as cold and hard as polished jet. The swaying light from Sin Gow's lanterns drew bright flashes from a carved teakwood sign whose studded nailheads coated with gold leaf spelled out:

OTTO VON KRAGGE
MERCHANT

Roger stared at the winking name with a brooding thoughtfulness. In his six months' service with von Kragge, the young American had seen some strange

things, and suspected even more. There was a mystery about von Kragge and his activities, puzzling features which, taken singly, could be called "odd" or "queer," but added together hinted at "sinister."

HERE, for instance, was von Kragge's shop, extending across the compound from wall to wall, its shelves piled high with exotic and colorful wares. But why was there such a numerous array of clerks?

In Kalgan, as everywhere else, the Japanese conquest had put an abrupt end to the tourist trade. A little dusting with fans of dyed chicken-wings, and their day's work was practically over.

And von Kragge's clerks were armed—every one in the *yamen* was armed. It was an arsenal by day and a frowning fortress by night.

"More likely they're here as von Kragge's bodyguards," Roger mused. "The old man seems to have a deadly fear of something. Since I've been here I've never seen him leave the *yamen* at night—not once."

Roger crossed the compound and entered the shop, aware of the instant leveling of that battery of slant eyes—flat, blank faces which saw all and betrayed nothing. The row of yellow clerks bobbed from the waist with the precision of robots.

"Tajen!" they murmured, with a polite sucking of breaths, but it always gave him an uncomfortable feeling to trust his back to those watchful figures with the hidden thoughts and the hidden hands.

Roger pushed aside a leather curtain which was hidden behind the glittering panels of a dragon-screen and entered the passage to the inner courtyard of the rambling *yamen*. Sin Gow's room opened off this same passage—a dark hole, smelling always of stale incense and fresh opium.

His first glance was to the windows which looked out on the court, each protected by a web of wrought iron bars finger-thick. The window of Vargas' room was dark, and Roger cut across the shadowy court toward his own quarters.

As he entered a dark archway, the harsh voice of a parrot exploded in a sudden "Rawk—awk—awk!" followed by a swift flutter of wings as the bird's sharp beak drew blood from the back of his hand.

Roger spoke softly into the shadows. "One of these days, Shao, I'm going to wring your damned neck!"

"Not wise deed, Tajen," a silky voice advised. "Missah Kragge not like."

Roger swung around to find Sin Gow at his shoulder. Angry color whipped into his cheeks—a man couldn't take twenty steps in these crooked corridors without finding a yellow boy at his heels, noiseless as a ghost.

"Von Kragge can like it or not," Roger retorted. "The next time this damned bird nips me I'll wring its neck."

"No can do," Sin Gow replied gravely. "Devil-bird bad joss."

"Bad joss!" Roger gave a sharp laugh. "It strikes me that everything in this place is bad joss."

"Squaw!" the parrot snarled, rattling the thin chain about its scaly leg. Then it

whistled like a broken flute, blinking its yellow eye.

"Another thing, Sin Gow," Roger said crisply, "the next time you come sneaking up behind me, I'll wring your neck, too. Savvy?"

"This humble person only wish to make light for lamp," the *mafoo* murmured, and

held a match to a blue glass lantern. In the funnel of light his stolid features had the fixity of a bronze mask.

"Remember!" Roger warned.

"Tajen has spoken." Sin Gow made a formal kowtow and withdrew on padded footsteps. The parrot retreated to its open niche in the wall, still ruffling its gaudy plumage.

"If you could only talk, you feathered devil," Roger muttered. "I'll bet you've seen a thing or two in this *yamen*—"

"Tawk!" the parrot mimicked with startling clearness, and then, across the dark court, Vargas' window suddenly sprang into life.

Roger stared at the glowing square of oiled paper. "Might as well go now and have it over with," he thought. "If I know anything about Vargas, it'll wind up in a brawl." He shrugged and rubbed his hand across tight knuckles. "One of us has to lose face over this. Well, if I get the call, at least Vargas'll know he's been in a fight!"

II

ROGER had never before gone into Vargas' wing of the *yamen*. Twice he made false turnings in the crooked corridors before a pencil of light guided him to the right door. A heavy silence followed his knock, then the boards creaked under a heavy step and the door opened.

Vargas loomed up like a colossus, blotting out the lamplight by the sheer breadth of his torso. Roger, scaling 180 and topping six feet by a fraction of an inch, felt dwarfed by comparison.

"I want a word with you, Vargas!" he announced curtly.

The surly giant stood aside without reply, but his close-set eyes sharpened—tawny eyes flecked with greenish points. He had a stone bottle in his hand and a small cup of egg-shell porcelain.

Roger crossed the threshold warily, kicking the door shut behind him. This burly red-head was one of the prime mysteries of von Kragge's *yamen*, for despite almost daily association, the American had gathered only one fact about him—that he was dangerous.

"You beat Wu Han today," Roger said in a level tone. "I want to know why."

"Why?" Vargas echoed, and scowled. "Must I have a reason?"

"Wu Han is one of my boys, Vargas. I'm warning you—keep your hands off. I won't stand for it."

"You won't stand for it," Vargas repeated slowly. He made a rumbling noise deep in his throat, which might have been either a chuckle or a hiccough. "Sticking up for the little yellow-bellies, eh?"

"I look after my own, Vargas. It so happens that I'm running the *khan*—not you. Keep on your own side of the fence, or there'll be trouble."

"That has the sound of an order," Vargas rumbled.

"It *is* an order, and I'll back it up, now or any other time."

VARGAS gave a derisive snort and finished his drink. He smacked his lips approvingly and gently deposited bottle and cup on the table before he turned. The lamplight struck fiery glints from his bushy red hair and the crisp matting on his massive forearms.

"Wayland, I do not like you," he announced with a sort of amiable grimness. "From the very first I do not like you."

"That makes it mutual," Roger replied.

"And I do not take orders from you, my bucko. No, by damn! Do not grow too big for your boots, or I take you down a few pegs.

"Tomorrow, if I find Wu Han at the *khan*, I black his other eye."

Roger stiffened. "Try it, Vargas, and I'll knock you cold—big as you are."

"Ho! That is a good one! Some time we try it, eh?" Vargas' thick lips spread in a wet smile, but his tawny eyes were mere slits. "But not tonight, bucko. To-

night you are my guest. We have a little drink together—like good friends, eh?"

He ambled forward, grinning, resting his heavy paw on Roger's shoulder. The thick smell of *samshu* was on his breath. Then, with vicious speed, his hand clutched the American's arm, jerking him forward as he swung.

Half-stunned by the treacherous blow, Roger reeled as if he had been sandbagged.

The side of his head felt numb, paralyzed. He fell back, and his head made a sharp impact against the wall, but the jolt shook off his buzzing noises.

"How you like that one, my brave bucko?" Vargas snickered, and the sound of his cunning laugh flicked Roger like a whip.

He leaped back into action as if the wall were a springboard, swinging from behind his knees with a pile-driving right that exploded on Vargas' jaw before he could get his hands up.

The big man grunted and went down—swiftly, awkwardly—with a solid thump that shook the rafters. He sat on his haunches, glass-eyed, looking up with a puzzled grin on his face.

"Get up!" Roger taunted him through set teeth. "Get on your feet, you fat gorilla!"

MECHANICALLY the dazed Vargas obeyed the voice. As he pulled himself slowly into erectness, Roger kicked a chair out of the way and closed in, smashing again at the stubbly chin.

Vargas clubbed at him with short, choppy blows, but the American was too fast for him. Roger waited for his opening, found it, and drove one through straight to Vargas' fleshy nose. The big man charged like a wounded elephant. Roger blocked the flailing arms, hooked a hard right to the mouth and quickly sidestepped.

"I've got him!" he thought with a fierce exultation. "He's still groggy from that first wallop. He can't box. I could cut him to ribbons."

Roger licked his dry lips, bobbing and weaving in a narrow circle, wary of those ponderous arms. And when Vargas made another blundering charge he drove him back to the wall with a barrage of lefts and rights. Vargas swayed on his feet, guard down, his jaw hanging open, his face a bloody smear.

"Had enough?" Roger demanded.

Vargas grunted, glaring at his tireless foe, then gambled the hoarded remnants of his strength on one last vicious blow. Almost caught off guard, Roger ducked and rose behind the swinging arm, grim-faced and merciless now.

Gasping for breath, Vargas slithered along the wall, protecting his face with crossed arms as Roger followed in swift pursuit.

The furious American cornered him, brought down his guard with a smash to the short ribbs, and lashed out at the uncovered jaw.

The force of that finishing blow turned the big man completely around. He reeled blindly into the table, then sprawled on hands and knees. The stone bottle rolled off and lost its stopper. There was no sound in the room now save Vargas' hoarse breathing and a soft glug-glug as the thick *samshu* poured from the bottle like a thin green snake.

Roger waited, quiet but sharp-eyed, as the beaten man hoisted himself against the table.

Vargas wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand, looking at the American with a twisted grin.

"Today I am drunk, Waylan', and you are lucky. When I am sober—I break you in two pieces with one hand."

"Drunk or sober, Vargas, you'd better think twice before you try it."

Vargas planted both hands on the table, leaning forward, breathing noisily through his mouth.

"Wait, my bucko, wait! You

have not finish with Vargas. No, by damn!"

III

ROGER turned his back on Vargas and strode out, slamming the door behind him.

But wary of further treachery, he halted outside rubbing his split knuckles listening carefully as lurching steps crossed the room. The sleeping *k'ang* creaked as a heavy weight plumped down on it with a grunt.

"Well that's that—for tonight, anyway," Roger thought, but he was unaware that, by a strange twist of destiny, his blows were to leave their mark not only on the burly Vargas, but on all who shared the secret of Otto von Kragge's *yamen*—and on some who did not.

Roger followed the dark corridor, but when it turned abruptly to the left he knew he had again lost his way. A lighted match revealed a storeroom piled haphazardly with boxes, bundles and sacks of grain. But fresh, cool air was stirring in fitful draughts, and he heard the brittle tinkling of a glass wind-chime.

Puzzled by the sound, he groped his way through the tangle of merchandise and found a curtained doorway. Beyond it lay a courtyard, but not the one he knew and expected.

This one was smaller, narrower, with a high wall along two sides. He stared in surprise, for he had always supposed the *yamen* to be a rough square in shape, and here was a jutting wing whose very existence was unknown to him.

Across this court a round window glowed like a pale moon—a big window with sliding panels that also served as a doorway. His curiosity thoroughly aroused, Roger cautiously approached the lighted window.

No sound came from within, no stir of movement, no flitting of shadows across the opaque panels. He eased the thin blade of his pocket-knife into their juncture and twisted it carefully. The sliding panels gave with a slight squeak, opening a crack through which he could look directly into the room.

Roger's lips puckered in a soundless whistle of surprise. Here was a room furnished in the full splendor of the ancient Orient—brilliant with colored silks and the high sheen of lacquered panels, with massive furniture of hand-carved teak, Ming vases and Sung porcelain. A room complete from elaborate devil-screen to scented joss-sticks smoking before the ancestral tablets.

And there was a Chinaman in possession, a plump Celestial clad in a gaudy dragon-robe, sitting up stiff and motionless as an idol while a slender Chinese girl with the smooth painted face of an Oriental doll clicked a pair of chopsticks into a bowl of food and fed him like a helpless baby.

"Well I'll be damned!" Roger breathed heavily.

Then he noticed the Chinaman's hands—how the nails of the thumb, the index and the little finger had been cultivated into three-inch claws after the ancient custom of the mandarins who wished to indicate that any form of manual effort was unworthy of their exalted state. These long nails were covered with hoods or thimbles of gold and silver wires from which hung small red silk tassels.

"Enough of eating, An-yin," the fat Chinaman commanded, and gave a rumbling belch.

"My lord speaks, and his slave obeys," the girl murmured, putting aside the bowl, but her tone was that of mockery.

The Chinaman turned his head and spoke softly to a pair of crickets suspended at eye-level in tiny cages made of bamboo splinters, and the little creatures responded with a brisk chorus of "trik-trik-trik."

"What the devil goes on here?" Roger thought. The scene reminded him of a classic play he had witnessed in the Ching Theatre at Peking, except for one glaring

item—the cigarette which dangled from the ruby lips of the Chinese girl.

"That cigarette doesn't make sense," Roger said to himself. "No real *taipan* would permit the girl to smoke in his presence. He would lose face."

ROGER kept his eye glued to the crack, avidly scanning the fat Oriental from his brocaded slippers to the round skullcap with the kingfisher feather and milk-white button of a top-flight mandarin.

In sharp contrast to this colorful raiment, the girl wore a plain *shaam* of blue silk, severe of line and absolutely unadorned.

The Chinaman turned his gaze to a sandalwood stand holding an opium pipe, a little box of inlaid brass, and a spirit-lamp. "I would rest and smoke, An-yin," he ordered. "Prepare me the slow-burning pipe."

"It is not wise, my lord," the girl replied. "Did not the Old One say there would be work to do this night?"

"There is no danger in one pipe," the mandarin replied. "Afterwards, if need be, I can eat a bit of uncooked fish to rid away the—"

"No pipe for thee!" the girl asserted flatly. "If the word comes, and thou art lost in poppy-dreams, the Old One's anger will fall upon *me*. No, and again no!"

"Beware, thou daughter of the dog!" the mandarin hissed. "Thou painted bride of the bamboo! One day thy pointed tongue will stab thee!"

The girl smiled her lacquered smile and calmly flicked the ash from her cigarette, watching him with cool disdain. Then Roger heard a faint sound behind him and flattened himself hurriedly against the shadowy wall.

A dark figure padded across the court and tapped at the moon-window. The girl An-yin opened in response, and Roger saw that the visitor was Sin Gow. The *mafoo* bowed and spoke in his silky voice.

"The master sends greetings to the lord Chang Tai, and bids him make ready against the Hour of the Fox."

An-yin clapped her hands softly at the news. "Did I not foretell this, my lord?" She turned again to the *mafoo*. "Have you set eyes upon this new guest, Sin Gow?"

"It is a Russian," he replied. "A greedy Russian with a beard as black and shining as thine eyes, my Daughter of Delight."

An-yin smiled like the Sphinx. "Tell the Old One that my lord Chang will be ready and waiting at the hour." She stood silhouetted in the bright opening, watching Sin Gow's retreating figure. A moment later the stub of her cigarette sailed through the darkness in a brief red arc and she went in, closing the panels.

Roger's thoughts were racing. The Old One—undoubtedly that meant Otto von Kragge.

The Hour of the Fox—ten o'clock to midnight.

He knew about the Oriental division of the day into twelve units, each bearing the name of an animal.

His curiosity whetted by this cryptic activity, he re-opened the crack in the moon-window.

Chang Tai still sat stiffly in his chair, watching the girl as she lit the spirit-lamp, then picked up a statuette of the Belly God and twisted off the grinning head. From the hollow interior of the bright yellow figure she poured a small quantity of a blue powder into a shallow bowl, which she set over the flame.

"Measure with care!" the mandarin said sharply. "There is no more of the Blue

Dust to be had, now that Kow Loon has died and carried his secret into the Shadowland.

"There is enough, and more than enough, for all the Russians in Kalgan," An-yin replied, shaking the yellow container.

She poured a few drops of liquid from a stone phial into the porcelain dish, stirring it into the powder.

When it had turned into a bubbling paste, she removed the dish from the flame. Then, pulling the wired hoods from Chang Tai's fingers by means of the red tassels, she set to work, painting the bluish paste on both sides of the mandarin's long, sharp nails.

"*Hai*—it is finished!" An-yin announced. "Do not move until it is dry."

The Chinese girl lit another cigarette, surveying her handiwork with a critical eye.

She began to pace to and fro, with an occasional glance at Chang Tai's outspread fingers. Suddenly she noticed the open crack between the window panels, and glided across the floor.

Roger jerked aside, holding his breath as the moon-window slid open and the Chinese girl's shadow stretched across the ground.

But she cast only a casual glance around the court, and Roger exhaled a sigh of relief as the panels closed again with a sharp click.

"No more peeping!" he muttered, staring at the glowing yellow circle, which glared back at him like a great, blind eye. "Why does von Kragge keep this fancy mandarin shut up here in secret? Those long nails—phew! An-yin—Chang Tai—Blue Dust—a Russian with a shining beard! What the devil does it all mean?"

Wait! Wait and watch for the Hour of the Fox!

"I know this much," Roger said to himself, "I've got myself mixed up with the strangest *yamen* this side of the Great Wall!"

IV

ROGER made his way back through the maze of crooked passages, puzzling over the strange scene he had just witnessed in the secret wing of the *yamen*. A narrow blade of light shone under Vargas' door as he passed, but no sound came from within. The inner courtyard was cloaked in darkness, the light above the parrot's niche a dim blue island in a sea of shadows.

Noiseless as was his approach, the watchful bird moved alertly, rattling its chain, and suddenly he realized that the bird might be something more than simply an ill-natured pet—the noisy Shao might be a trusty sentinel placed here to challenge any one who set foot on the path to von Kragge's door.

"I'll find out, here and now," Roger decided, and struck a match to reveal himself.

The parrot quieted, regarding him with its drooping eye, but at his first step under the archway let out a shrill "Rawk—awk!"

"So that's the game!" Roger thought as he passed on. There was a murmur of voices coming from von Kragge's quarters—the thin cackle of Japanese and von Kragge's slow, gentle drawl.

One of the floor boards creaked faintly under Roger's tread, and instantly von Kragge's voice broke off. Roger gave a dry smile over the taut silence. "He's got ears like a cat. Always listening. Always suspicious."

"Is dot you, Vargas?" von Kragge called out.

"No!" the American replied. "It's Roger."

"Goot! I wish to talk with you. But later, Roger, later. Yes."

Roger knew that the German would sit there motionless, waiting for his footsteps to continue, his head tilted back and cocked slightly to the left. The old man seemed to have a fear of footsteps, an abiding fear

that haunted him in darkness or daylight.

The Jap voice—that would be Colonel Toyamo, probably. Those two are as thick as thieves.

Reaching his own room, Roger groped his way through darkness toward the hanging oil lamp, fumbling for a match. A moment later the details of the room leaped into view—smooth, painted walls and crisp matting of rice straw—an antique Soochow chest and a sandalwood cabinet—a folding screen to hide the sleeping *k'ang*. Two scroll paintings on black silk hung from ivory rods. A shelf held a row of many books.

Somehow or other, Roger always glanced toward that shelf whenever he entered the room. They were not his books—they had belonged to Jennison, the man who had preceded him as von Kragge's *khan*-master.

A MYSTERIOUS person, this Jennison. In fact, Roger had not even known his name until he found "Thomas Jennison" scrawled on the flyleaves of the books.

Even now he had no knowledge of the man's physical appearance, no clues to his character.

But Roger had never forgotten the curious feeling of unease which had kept him sleepless and alert all through the first night he had spent within these painted walls. It was a thing hard to explain, for at the time he had absolutely no knowledge that he had stepped into a dead man's shoes.

"Must have been a mental fluke," was the way Roger put it to himself. "Nobody ever accused me of being psychic before." But the sharp impression had never quite erased itself from his mind, and he thought of it now as he crossed to the window to close the panel of oiled parchment.

On the way his shoe caught up the edge of a strip of matting and kicked it aside. Roger bent down to replace the square of shining rice straw, then halted and froze into sudden immobility, his eyes riveted to the patch of bare floor. There was a stain—a dark, spreading stain which had soaked into the soft wood!

"That looks like a blood-stain!" Hastily Roger reached up and unhooked the hanging lamp. His shadow loomed enormously along wall and ceiling as he knelt beside the sinister marks. With the blade of his knife Roger pried out a bit of the darker stuff lurking in the cracks of the close-set boards, and examined it under the light. It was hard and caked, like the scrapings of dark red paint.

"It *is* blood!" he whispered. "Old blood—dried!"

Roger straightened up, went to the door, and quietly slid the wooden bolt into place. He came back slowly and sat down on the Soochow chest. With mechanical precision he took out a cigarette, tapped it three times on his thumbnail, and lit it, staring all the while at the telltale shadow on the bare floor.

His keen eyes were gathering in other details—how the boards had been scraped and scoured and scrubbed to bone-white smoothness. But that wide, shadowy circle had clung with stubborn tenacity.

"Look at the size of it!" Roger thought. "If Jennison lost all that blood—"

His mind balanced this mute evidence against von Kragge's story, meagre words told with an evident reluctance. According to the German, Jennison had died "by accident" on a caravan trek to the distant city of Ulan Bator and had been buried somewhere in the red wastes of the Gobi desert.

For some time Roger had had no reason to doubt this story, other than his growing suspicion of the German's furtive peculiarities, and the vague aura of mystery which haunted the dark corridors of the *yamen*.

Then, a little later, something tangible had turned up, a significant trifle—the finding of Jennison's pipe.

One day Roger had chanced to move the Soochow chest, and behind it, jammed

against the wall, was a black briar pipe, its cracked bowl and broken stem mended by silver bands.

"It must be Jennison's pipe," Roger had argued. "Vargas rolls his own and von Kragge smokes nothing but those Indian cheroots. Jennison must've thought a lot of this pipe, taking it to a silversmith for repairs. I wonder why he didn't take it along on his last trip?"

At first glance it seemed rather a small point, but somehow it fastened itself in Roger's mind and stuck fast, perhaps because Jennison's last charge of tobacco had only been half-smoked—under the top gray ash lay a hard dottle of caked brown shreds.

And now came this second oddity to give it a sinister significance—the man who had died by accident in the distant Gobi had left bloodstains on the floor of a *yamen* in Kalgan!

"Von Kragge lied to me!" Roger thought grimly. "Jennison didn't die in the Gobi. He died here in this *yamen*—in this room. And he was murdered!"

V

ROGER was as sure that murder had been committed within these painted walls as if Jennison's body still lay over that shadowy stain. "And I've been walking up and down over this spot every day!"

Then a new thought came to him, sudden and unpleasant as the touch of icy fingers.

"Watch your step, Roger, old boy. You've got Jennison's room and Jennison's job. There's danger in this place. How do you know it won't be your turn next?"

"But what can I do about it?" he muttered, pacing to and fro. "I've got no real proof to offer. The native police—fah! The civil officials are no better—mere puppets under the Jap military. And Colonel Toyamo, the Commandant, is von Kragge's friend."

Roger thought back over the checkered series of events which had brought him to Otto von Kragge's *yamen*. A year ago Kalgan had been only a name on the map. His employment had been with an export house at Nanking, a substantial job, one to be built on.

Then came the thunder of guns, the rolling tides of brown men, and the crashing of "iron eggs" dropped by the silver-winged Jap bombers. Roger had seen the Chinese capital blown into smoking ruin, his own place of employment blasted to a heap of rubble. The nameless horrors of the looting and sacking that followed still haunted his sleep.

To Roger the war meant two names—Nanking and Chen-li. At Nanking he saw the fruits of his past wiped out—Chen-li destroyed the hope of his future. At Chen-li Roger had met the girl—the girl of his dreams—and lost her again.

The Jap planes had been bombing along the Canal and an automobile had been buried under a collapsing wall. Roger helped dig out the occupants—a girl and her father.

Miraculously, the girl had escaped without a scratch, but the man was unconscious with a bad concussion.

Roger had knocked down a half-crazed coolie who was running past with an empty handbarrow.

They placed the wounded man on the barrow and started for the Mission Hospital up in the hills.

"My name is Arline Randolph," the girl had said, and then Roger gave his. That had been on the second day. Before that they were too busy for such trifling formalities.

Later the Japs returned and bombed the ruins of Chen-li, thundering explosions that shook the hills and raised a thick red pall of brick dust, bitter wtih the smell of lyddite.

Roger had raced to the Mission only to find it smashed and burning. A few of the patients had been rescued, but his

his frantic search yielded no trace of Arline Randolph and her father.

Only five days with Arline—five days of blood and smoke and terror—but time has no meaning under the black wing of death, and eye sees clearly into eye, and heart leaps to heart at danger shared and mettle tested under fire.

That tragic interlude had left a deep scar on Roger's heart, set a stern line about his young lips as he turned his back at last on Chen-li and joined the long ranks of the flight northward—alone.

The Consulate at Peking had put him in touch with Otto von Kragge, and at the time the German merchant's offer of employment had seemed like manna from heaven. But now—

"Rawk—awk!" the parrot's harsh warning from the inner court made Roger stiffen alertly. Dimming the lamp, he opened his window and peered out.

VON KRAGGE'S visitor was leaving, a wiry little Japanese not over five feet tall—a bandbox soldier in spick-and-span khaki, with a metallic sheen of polished leather from his boots, belt and holster. He made his exit through the passage beyond the blue lantern, a strutting brown shadow.

"Colonel Toyamo!" Roger murmured, and closed the panel. "That means von Kragge may be coming along soon to see me."

Quickly he returned the square of matting to its place, then softly unbolted the door, flashing a look around the room. There must be nothing to arouse the German's suspicions—

"Damn!" There was a smear of blood on the edge of the straw—his own blood this time, from the cut made by the parrot's sharp beak, split wider by his fight with Vargas.

Roger was pouring water into the hand-basin when he heard von Kragge's furtive approach—a faint, cautious footstep, then silence.

The American finished washing and reached for a towel, knowing that the German was standing outside in the passage, waiting, listening.

One minute passed—two—Roger wondered if there was a crack in the door which served as a spy-hole. Then the expected tapping came at last.

Roger gave a swift glance into the mirror. His face betrayed nothing—perhaps a certain grimness around the firm mouth, nothing more. He swung around and faced the door.

"Come in!" he called.

Otto von Kragge entered, clad in his usual sober black—a heavy old man with thick silvery hair soft as silk and plump hands of an incredible whiteness. His features were calm and bland, but their benign expression was denied by piercing eyes of a pale, burnished blue.

The German's probing gaze circled the room swiftly and came to rest on the towel in Roger's hand. A remarkable change came over his features. *"Himmel!"* he gasped. "Blood! You are bleeding!"

"I cut my hand," Roger said. Nothing serious."

Von Kragge took a hasty step backward as Roger exhibited his hand. "Quick! Wipe it away! I do not stand the sight of blood!"

"Liar!" Roger thought swiftly. "What happened to Jennison?"

But if the German was putting on an act, he did it quite convincingly. His eyes were dilated, his face became almost as white as his hands, and the strained look did not relax until the American had wrapped the towel around the wound.

"The sight of blood, it makes for me a cold sweating and a turning of the stomach," von Kragge explained. "Perhaps you think it is a great foolishness, Roger, but I cannot help it. Even as a little boy I was so."

"Shao nipped me," Roger said.

"I am sorry, Roger. It does not happen again. I will tell Sin Gow to make shorter his chain."

"I'd like to shorten it around his neck," Roger growled. "That damn bird's a nuisance."

THE pale blue eyes hardened, but von Kragge's voice kept its soft drawl. "I hope you will not harm him, Roger. Shao, he is like an old friend to me. If any hurt come to him, I do not like it—no!"

Roger did not miss the unspoken message which lurked under that velvety "no!" —a soft-voiced warning which seemed to echo in the silence that followed. Then von Kragge shrugged and smiled.

"But we talk of parrots while important business waits for us. I have good news, Roger. At last I have persuaded Colonel Toyamo to sign the *hu-chao* for our caravan."

Roger took the passport paper the German extended. "Okay. Everything's in good order at the *khan*. This *hu-chao* is all I've been waiting for."

"These Japs!" Von Kragge spread his puffy white hands. "They are impossible. In the old days one paid the Chinese *cumshaw* and there was an end to it, but with these brown monkeys—*ach, Himmel!*—everywhere now it is a military zone. One must have a special pass, and each time there is more delay, more red tape."

"That's the Number One item of Jap policy," Roger replied. "Their game is to put the squeeze on all outside interests—especially white interests. You were pretty lucky to get a *hu-chao* under any conditions."

Von Kragge gave a sly smile. "The old Chinese proverb says 'every lock has a silver key.' It is not the first time I have used that key with the good Toyamo. But I do not trust him, even now. Suppose tomorrow he change his mind—"

"We won't give him the chance," Roger said briskly. "All our goods are ready to be checked and loaded. I'll have Gan-ghi do that tonight. I'll have the caravan out of Kalgan by dawn."

"Goot! Goot!" von Kragge approved. "It will be better so. The shop-trade, it is nothing since the Japanese take Kalgan. The caravans, they are everything now. And you haf done well with them, Roger. I am very please with your work. Yes!"

Von Kragge snapped a long Indian cheroot in two and lit one of the ragged halves. "I wish to ask a question, Roger—how you like it here in Kalgan? And your work with me, is it agreeable with you?"

"The work's very interesting," Roger replied warily.

The German studied him with a slow, thoughtful look. "I want that you should like it here, Roger, but sometime I think you do not make yourself happy. I have say to myself, 'This Kalgan, it is a dull place for a young man. It is not gay. Roger wish to be back on the Coast, where he haf friends'—"

"Friends!" Roger said bitterly. "God only knows what happened to all the people I knew. Most of them have gone back home, I suppose, and the others scattered from Port Arthur to Singapore."

"It is very sad, this fighting." Von Kragge wagged his head sorrowfully.

Roger folded the *hu-chao* with sharp creases. "As a matter of fact, von Kragge, I *was* thinking of leaving Kalgan. I want to go back to Chen-li to see if I can find out anything more about the Randolphs."

"But, Roger, you haf already done everything. You haf search all around Chen-li. You haf written to all the Consulates. You haf look through all the lists of refugees. Dot is eight months past. What hope is there now?"

"Practically none," Roger agreed. "But I want to make certain, if I can."

"So, Roger! I see how the wind blows. This *fraulein,* she is young, eh, and pretty? *Ja wohl,* I fix it for you. Next month you will go to Chen-li, and I will pay the expense. It is a little vacation I gif you."

BEFORE Roger could reply, von Kragge abruptly changed the course of the conversation. "Tell me—how you get on with Vargas? You haf make friends with him?"

"Not exactly that," Roger answered crisply.

Von Kragge spread his slow smile. "Aha, you do not like our Vargas, eh? I read it in your face."

"I don't," Roger declared, "but that's just my personal opinion. Vargas works hard and he knows his job. Let him stick to his side of the fence—I'll stick to mine."

The German gave him a quick look. "He haf try to make trouble for you at the *khan,* yes?"

For a moment Roger was tempted to tell about his clash with the burly truckmaster, then suppressed the idea from an instinct of caution. "I think I can handle Vargas," he announced briefly.

"He is difficult, this Vargas," von Kragge said thoughtfully. "Always it has been so, but since he begin to drink the *samshu* it is worse. That *samshu,* it is poison for the white man, it is worse than the opium."

The German blew out a puff of smoke, looking past Roger to the black silk painting hanging on the wall. "For a long time now I am displease with Vargas. I think I make a change. Yes. I will send Vargas away. But I must be careful to choose the right moment. Vargas, he is a man of violence."

"Good God!" flashed through Roger's mind as he saw the German's cryptic smile. "Is this going to be Jennison's story over again?"

"I haf need for young shoulders to lean on," von Kragge continued. "My body, it grows old and weak, but the brain, it is still young, it is alive with ideas. I had great hopes of Mr. Jennison, and I am very sad when he meet with his accident. Yes. Then I turn to Vargas, but *ach,* he is all muscle, like a bull. It is not enough for me. So it comes your chance, Roger."

The American waited silently, watching the bland face with the hard, inscrutable eyes. The smoke of the cheroot spiraled upward past the crown of silvery hair like thin blue incense.

"What is he—saint or devil?" Roger thought.

"I haf observe you, Roger, very close. You watch and listen, and speak not often. Dot is goot—very goot. You haf a smartness like Jennison and you are strong, almost like Vargas."

Von Kragge carefully tipped the ash from his cheroot. "I haf great plans for you, my boy. Great plans. Yes!"

The German stood there with his benign smile, nodding gently. But Roger felt a cold tingle creeping along his spine, for as Otto von Kragge spoke, his feet were planted squarely over the spot where the blood of Thomas Jennison had soaked into the soft boards!

VI

AFTER von Kragge had left the room, Roger stood staring at the closed door, disturbed and uneasy. The German's soft voice echoed in his ears like a menace—he sensed danger and hidden pitfalls under those smooth words of praise.

These new discoveries crowded his mind into a turmoil—von Kragge and his morbid fear of blood—Vargas' mumbling threat through beaten, puffy lips—Chang Tai's long blue claws—and most sinister of all, that grim shadow of the dead Jennison etched into the floor.

"It's a crazy place," Roger muttered, "and loaded with dynamite. If I had any sense I'd pull out of here before the lid

blows off." But there was work to be done at the *khan*—urgent work to which he was pledged.

Roger took his hat and fleece-lined jacket from the peg beside the door, hesitated, then returned to the sandalwood cabinet and took out a black automatic. He snapped a shell into place and slipped the weapon into his pocket. No use taking chances with a man like Vargas.

The yellow clerks repeated their robot-bows as he went out through the shop, and Roger drew a deep breath of the clean air of the streets. It was a relief to get away from the brooding hush of the *yamen,* even for a short time.

"I'll hurry back from the *khan,*" he thought. "I want to see what goes on here tonight at the Hour of the Fox."

STRIDING along at a brisk pace, Roger left Kalgan by the North Gate, crossed through the Russian Quarter which lay outside the ancient walls, and followed the Gobi Road to the *khan.*

This was a two-story building with high, blank walls, square and solid and sombre as a prison. There were no windows, only a series of narrow vertical slots for ventilation. The single entrance was built wide and high to accommodate the passage of laden camels.

"Hola, Tajen!" At Roger's approach the gate-*mafoo* sprang up to unfasten the massive chains which barred the entrance. "Has Tajen seen the Russo who ask for him?"

"Russian?" Roger echoed. "What Russian?"

"Three time he come here, Tajen. I tell him better luck to try at *yamen.*"

"Well, he didn't arrive there. What was his name?"

"Not know, Tajen."

Roger's mind had flashed back to the puzzling words he had overheard at the moon-window of Chang Tai's secret quarters. Sin Gow's Russian had a "black and shining beard." Damned odd, that phrase.

"Did this man have a beard?" Roger asked abruptly.

The *mafoo* smiled. "Tajen, all the Russo have beards."

IT WAS quite true—all the Russians seemed to have beards. Probably the incident meant nothing—Kalgan was overrun with Russians. Roger shrugged and entered the *khan.*

The ponderous medieval gates folded back into a flagged passage. To one side a traveler's shrine had been hollowed into the wall, blackened by the scented smoke of joss-stick and incense and countless paper prayers, but its fragrance was blotted out by the pungent and all-pervading odor of camels.

The great open courtyard beyond, with its stone well and carved drinking troughs in the center, was filled with the kneeling beasts, reddish-yellow and morose of eye, chewing their fodder with haughty disdain. There were also pack-mules and sturdy Mongolian horses, tethered in scattered groups.

Roger looked around the bustling courtyard, noisy as a bazaar. The caravan season was at its peak, and the *khan* was crowded to capacity. Open fires blazed in the corners of the court, and Mongols, Tartars, Manchus, Kalkas and Buriats crouched beside their cook-pots as black silhouettes.

"Gan-ghi!" Roger shouted above the hubbub. *"Hola,* Gan-ghi!"

"Hai, Tajen!" A wiry yellow man with leathery face and a shaggy fur cap appeared as if by magic.

"Gan-ghi, I have the caravan passport. We must work fast—load tonight, and away at dawn."

The *bashee's* face fell. *"Ai-yee,* Tajen, it is a short time for long work."

"It must be done, Gan-ghi. Drive your coolies to the limit. Double pay all around if you beat tomorrow's sun."

"Can do!" Gan-ghi replied wtih alacrity, and raised a wooden whistle to his lips. The crew-boys rallied to the shrill sum-

mons, and the *bashee* poured out his orders in a hissing crackle.

There was some suggestion of monkish cloisters in the open galleries which ran around all four sides of the inner court. The lower tier were store-rooms—the upper made sleeping quarters for yellow travelers, out-riders and porters.

Roger followed Gan-ghi to the store-rooms that were leased by von Kragge, and together they made up the bill of lading as the crew-boys carried out the merchandise—neat bundles in coarse brown wrapping, marked with strange hieroglyphics — colored silks, nankeen cloth, and porcelain.

And there was tea, a veritable rampart of tea—the choice long-leaf variety carefully packed in woven catties, the commoner quality pressed into dark, hard bricks.

"Enough tea-bricks to build a *yamen,*" Roger thought. Tea was still the standard stock-in-trade. In the old days there had been no such thing as coined money in the Gobi trade, all values being reckoned in terms of tea-bricks.

Roger crossed to the open fire where Gan-ghi's riders were gathered—sturdy Buriats with sheepskin cloaks and shaggy fur caps, silent men with shaven heads who smoked vile black tobacco called *mahorka* and drank *koumiss,* which is fermented mare's milk. They saluted him gravely, with none of the smirking and kowtowing of the South.

"Happy good luck on the Long Red Road!" Roger said.

"May it be so!" their spokesman replied.

Roger studied the circle of brown, slant-eyed faces, with their high cheek-bones and stringy beards. Mongol horsemen, born to the saddle; direct descendants of those savage hordes against whom the ancient Emperors of China erected the Great Wall as a protection—but in vain.

In the morning they would be riding off through historic Kalgan Pass, "the Key-hole to an Empire," and onward by the long Gobi trek to Ulan Bator, the sacred city of a Living Buddha. Thence to Maimachin and Kiakhta, the very outposts of civilization.

And on the return journey the plodding caravan would bring back smooth-grained Russian leather, crackling sheepskins, thick-haired Siberian furs, and cattle-hides filled to bursting with the prized Mongolian wool used in the weaving of Tientsin rugs.

"This may be the last caravan I'll send out," Roger thought, and felt a real twinge of regret, for this was exciting work, with all the flavor and color of the Old Orient. The ghosts of Genghiz Khan or Marco Polo might have stood at his elbow and found nothing amiss with the scene.

"Tajen!" The harsh voice of Gan-ghi scattered his reflections. "Here is the paper for Missah Kragge."

WITH the cargo-list in his hands, Roger's work here was finished. Gan-ghi needed no supervision for the packing and loading of the camels. Roger lit a cigarette, staring at the yellow man over the spurt of flame. "Gan-ghi, were you *bashee* of the caravan when Mr. Jennison died?"

"Yes, Tajen."

"He was buried in the Gobi, along the route, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Tajen."

Roger blew out the match. "Could you find his grave again?"

Gan-ghi hesitated, wooden-faced, his black eyes remote and withdrawn. "It

would be very difficult, Tajen. There was a storm—a great storm of sand, and we lose our way. Missah Jennison is kill when a camel fall on him. We bury him very quick, for it is far to the next water-hole."

"Didn't you put up a marker?"

"Yes, Tajen, I make big pile of stones on grave, but when the sand-devils of the *Sha-mo* are angry, it is like the waves of the Great Sea—they cover everything."

Roger nodded, his own face a mask. "It is a lonely place for a man to lie buried, Gan-ghi. Suppose that Mr. Jennison's family wanted his body brought out and sent over the water, so that he might sleep beside his ancestors—could you find the spot again?"

"I do not think so, Tajen."

"But suppose, Gan-ghi, a price was offered—say 500 pieces of silver. Would that stir up your memory?"

The *bashee* drew a quick, hissing breath, but shook his head. "No can do, Tajen—not even for 500 silver pieces. I go now. Plenty work."

Roger followed him with a grim look. "No, I'll bet you can't—not for five million pieces of silver. Something tells me Jennison isn't buried in the Gobi!"

On his way out he stopped to speak to the clerk Wu Han. The yellow boy's eye was less angry-looking now, but it was still swollen and beginning to darken.

"I don't think Mr. Vargas will strike you again, Wu Han, or any of my boys. If he tries it, let we know at once—"

The yellow boy bowed and murmured "*Kan hsieh,* Tajen."

On a sudden impulse, Roger questioned him. "Wu Han, were you working here when Mr. Jennison was *khan*-master?"

"Yes, Tajen."

"Did you get on all right with him? Tell me the truth!"

Wu Han shrugged. "Missah Jennison no good, Tajen. Not so big like Missah Vargas, but plenty more devil. When he is drunk, coolie-boys run and hide. One time he hit Missah Vargas top-side with iron stick and Missah Vargas fall down and sleep like dead man."

ROGER was startled by this unexpected insight into Jennison's character. Worse than Vargas! He glanced keenly at the yellow boy. Wu Han, grateful for his protection, might be able to tell him much, but it would require time and patience.

The Chinese mind resents blunt questioning—one had always to approach on the oblique.

"Wu Han, would you like to come over to the *yamen* as my houseboy?"

The boy shifted uneasily, scuffing at the flagstones with his padded slipper. "Tajen, it is Number One honor for this insignificant person, but I like better to stay at *khan.*"

"What's the matter—still afraid of Mr. Vargas?"

"No, Tajen."

"Is it Mr. von Kragge?"

"No, Tajen."

"Well, what?" Roger asked sharply. "Speak up!"

"The *yamen,* Tajen, it is Number One bad luck." Wu Han's voice dropped even lower. "There is whisper-story of a mandarin-spirit who walks in the night. A very evil spirit, Tajen."

Roger gave a dry laugh. "I've seen this mandarin. He may be evil, but he's certainly no ghost."

"Tajan has seen!" Wu Han shrank back with a startled gasp. "To look upon his face is to die!"

"Coolie-talk! Do I look like a dead man?"

Wu Han made a mystic sign in the air with two fingers, then fumbled inside his quilted robe. He held up a small wedge of dark green jade, worn thin and smooth with handling.

"This *choy,* Tajen—I have it from the hand of my honorable father, who receive it from his venerable sire. Always it keep evil from the House of Wu. I would not

sell it for a hundred *pu* of yellow silk."

With a sudden generous gesture Wu Han held out the good-luck charm. "You take it, Tajen—you need!"

VII

"WU HAN and his jade *choy!*" Roger chuckled as he crossed the *khan*-yard toward the exit. "I'll stick to my own luck-piece—.38 calibre!" and he touched the black automatic which lay in his pocket.

A young Mongol was exercising a lame camel, hissing *"Ikh!"* and *"Nak!"* to make the limping beast rise or kneel. Somewhere in the shadows yellow fingers plucked on a one-string *samisen,* and the crew-boys caught up the words in a sing-song chant:

"O dark-eyed Daughters of Delight
Who dwell on the Boat-that-never-Sails—
The Flower-Boat of Chang-chia-kow:
Hai—hoi—hai!"

Over at the Buriats' fire a wandering *shaman* had spread his magic mat and was thumping a two-headed drum. Presently he would shake up a bowlful of red Gobi sand and read the future in its whorls and ridges.

"China!" Roger thought. "The puzzle of the ages. Is it silk or sand—Confucius or coolie—incense or camel-smell?" He glanced at his watch by the light of the *mafoo's* lantern. Still time enough to reach von Kragge's *yamen* before the Hour of the Fox.

Within a hundred yards of the *khan*-gate he became aware of footsteps trailing him on the dark road. He quickened his pace and the footsteps clicked faster, gaining on him. Roger halted at the first road-lamp and faced around, his hand on the automatic.

A stocky figure joined him in the circle of light—a Russian in a heavy overcoat, his face almost buried between an Astrakhan hat and a thick beard which seemed to start under his eyes.

"Mr. Waylan'! Sir! I am the merchant Rostikoff." The Russian bowed, his breath rising frostily in the chill air. "Gregor Gregorovitch Rostikoff—dealer in jade, lacquer and paintings on silk."

Roger gave him a swift appraisal, and found the general effect unpleasant. The man had an oily voice, a crafty manner and a shifty eye. "I don't think we've met before, Mr. Rostikoff."

"We have not. That is my loss, Mr. Waylan'," the Russian paused and added with a sly smile, "and perhaps it is also yours. Today I have ask several times at the *khan* to see you—a matter of business."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" Roger suggested. "I haven't much time now."

"I do not keep you long, Mr. Waylan'. Five minutes—ten—no more. But it is cold on the streets. Will you share a bottle with me where it is warm and we can speak freely? *Spossibo!* This way, Mr. Waylan'."

ROSTIKOFF left the Gobi Road and led him into a silent street of close-shuttered shops and dark warehouses. He halted at a house which showed not the faintest glimmer of light, tapped on a shutter, and then guided Roger to an unseen door.

"Excuse, please, the secrecy," he whispered. "The Japanese have made a law for the Russian Quarter. They have order our inns to close at the setting of the sun."

The inn-door was opened by a *muzhik* in a long blue shirt, and Roger found himself in a brightly lighted room filled with chattering Russians, floating blue smoke, and the thin, sour smell of *kvass.*

"Two vodkas, Little One," Rostikoff said to the strapping *muzhik.*

"No vodka for me," Roger cut in. "Whiskey and soda."

Rostikoff waved his hand. "You have

ears, Little One? Whiskey for my friend —and of the best!"

Roger studied his host, and found him even less prepossessing by the full light. Rostikoff took off his Astrakhan hat, revealing lank hair with a center parting that zigzagged. He threw open his overcoat and unwound a woolen muffler, smoothing his bushy black beard.

The American stared at that beard with an almost hypnotic fascination. Sin Gow's words flashed into his mind—"a Russian with a shining beard." Beyond a doubt, this was the man! It was an Assyrian beard, long and full and square-cut. And it shone—positively shone—with a wet, oily sparkle.

But Rostikoff was speaking, and Roger forced his attention back to the man's words. "It is clever, how you have steal the march on us. We do not smell out the Japanese plans like you, and we are caught when Colonel Toyamo gives order that the railroad haul only soldiers and guns. To move our goods, there is nothing left but the camel, and Mr. Waylan' have fix it so that all the camel work for Herr von Kragge. *Hoya!* How that was clever."

Roger shrugged. "If you want to hire camels, Mr. Rostikoff, I can let you have a train of twenty or so in about two weeks —at the regular rate," he added dryly.

Rostikoff smiled. "I speak of the camel only because you have make with them a large profit for Herr von Kragge. I hope he have share it with you."

"I'm satisfied," Roger answered shortly.

"You are satisfied," Rostikoff echoed, nodding and stroking his beard. "I do not think so. I know this Herr von Kragge. He is a sharp one—always he drive the hard bargain, with you, with me, with every one. But maybe this time, Mr. Waylan', you and I put our heads together and teach him a little lesson, eh?"

Roger waited in silence, covering up his curiosity. The *muzhik* returned and set down their drinks, with a little dish of salted sunflower seeds.

"I will explain it, Mr. Waylan'." Rostikoff picked his words slowly and carefully. "Tonight—in three, four hour—I go with Herr von Kragge to a Certain Place. It is my wish to go there—alone—before the hour that is fix with Herr von Kragge."

"Well, why don't you?" Roger asked.

Rostikoff leaned forward. "I do not know where it is. That is Herr von Kragge's secret. For the information I will pay a beautiful price. Cash!"

"Sorry, Rostikoff, I can't help you. I don't know anything about Herr von Kragge's private affairs. My business is at the *khan*, not the *yamen*."

The Russian smiled craftily, unbelieving. He brought out a plump wallet and extracted a number of banknotes. He placed them on the table under his hand—crisp, new bills, spread fanwise—a tempting sum.

"So much will I pay, Mr. Waylan', and I make it easy for you. I ask you nothing

—nothing. Here is paper—a pencil. You will write the name of a man—the name of a street. I ask not one question, and the money is yours."

"What name? What street? Stop beating around the bush, Rostikoff, and put it in plain words."

Rostikoff picked up the pencil and drew a Chinese hieroglyphic with bold, black strokes.

He pushed the paper across the table and watched Roger's face with an intent, greedy stare.

The American studied the broken marks and shook his head. "That doesn't mean

anything to me—it might as well be in Greek."

ROSTIKOFF gave him a long look, sighed, and slowly added another sheaf of bills to the crisp fan. "So much I will pay, Mr. Waylan'. No more. It is the final offer."

Roger finished his drink and put down the glass. "It's no use, Rostikoff. I don't know what you're talking about."

The Russian's eyes were stormy with baffled fury as he snatched the paper from Roger, scooped up the bills and crammed them back into his wallet. *"Dura!"* he snarled. "You are one big fool!"

Roger stood up abruptly and dropped a coin on the table. "That's for my drink. Good night, Rostikoff."

While the *muzhik* unbolted the outer door, Roger glanced back and saw the Russian holding a match to the slip of paper. He held it while it blazed, then crushed the brittle black ash under his palm. His beard was like a shining black web.

Outside, Roger drew a deep breath, clearing his lungs of the stale fumes of Russian tobacco and *kvass*. On the Gobi Road he hailed an empty taxi speeding toward the city. "The Chinese Quarter!" he directed. "Street of the Scriveners!"

Roger got out at the first lighted "word-shop" they found, and entered. The scrivener sat behind his foot-high desk with its assortment of inkpots and camel-hair brushes and long strips of colored papers. To add a touch of dignity, the scrivener wore steel spectacles which had no lenses.

"Does My Lord wish a writing to be made?" he inquired, after his Number One kowtow

"No," Roger replied. "I want one read." He picked up one of the brushes and attempted to reproduce the symbol Rostikoff had drawn.

"No catchee," the scrivener said, shaking his head.

"That's not quite it," Roger admitted. "I'll try again." He tried a dozen times before he was satisfied.

The scrivener studied it, with a great deal of professional squinting and grimacing. "It is the *Wen-li* writing, Master. There is the sign for fire or flame. There is the sign for the Peaceful One. Master, this writing say in speech, the Red Buddha who Sleeps."

"The Sleeping Buddha!" Roger repeated. "That doesn't mean a thing to me." But Roger was destined to meet that cryptic sign again, and soon—before the Hour of the Fox had given way to the Hour of the Rat!

VIII

WHEN Roger returned to von Kragge's *yamen* he was surprised to find the gates closed and locked—a most unusual thing at this hour of the evening. He tapped briskly on the bronze gong which hung beside the gate and waited. The *mafoo* did not appear. With growing uneasiness Roger began to pound the gate with his fist, shouting *"Hai!* Sin Gow! Open!"

Eventually the little grille slid back and a yellow face looked out at him—not Sin Gow, but one of the shop-clerks. A moment later the gate swung open and he stepped inside. The clerk looked breathless, as if he had been running.

"Where's Sin Gow?" Roger demanded. "I've been hammering on this gate for five minutes. What's going on in here?"

"Excuse, please, Tajen. We did not hear you. There is a robber hiding in *yamen*. Sin Gow lock the gate and help with look-see. Ever'body busy with look-see."

Roger cast a swift glance around the compound. The shop was fully lighted, as usual, but quite deserted. He strode on

toward the inner court while the yellow clerk carefully reset the bolts of the gate.

There was no one in the dark inner court, but in the distance Roger heard a medley of voices, shrill and excited, and a furious pounding and battering against wood.

Von Kragge's parrot, stirred by the excitement, hopped about in his niche and filled the blue shadows with his strident "Rawk—awk—awk!"

Roger's eye was drawn at once to the stark light that streamed from Vargas' window. The iron bars were still intact, but the parchment panels had been slashed into ribbons. He collared a Chinaman who came dashing across the court, a lighted lantern in each hand.

"Where's the robber? Has he been caught?"

"No catchee," the yellow man chattered. "*Ai-ee!* He have kill Missah Vargas!"

"Vargas dead!" Roger gasped. "When? How?"

"Not know, Tajen. Sin Gow say he is dead." The man waved toward the slashed window. "Sin Gow climb up there and cut hole to see in room Missah Kragge, he try to break door."

At that moment the battering sounds ended with a wrenching crash, and the excited chatterings plummeted into silence. Roger snatched one of the lanterns and ran on ahead into the left wing.

The shattered door of Vargas' room hung crazily by one hinge, and a knot of Chinese were huddled outside, apparently unwilling to cross the threshold. Roger elbowed his way through the hushed, staring group. Inside the room, Otto von Kragge was bending over Vargas' body, trying to lift and shake those massive shoulders.

"What's all this talk about a murder?" Roger asked, in a calm tone.

Von Kragge spun around at the sound of the American's voice. His face was the color of rice-paper, and his hands trembled. "Roger!" he cried. "*Gott sei dank* you haf come! Look! It is Vargas! He is dead!"

"Nonsense!" Roger replied, glancing at the ponderous figure sprawled across the *k'ang*. "Can a man be murdered inside a locked room? Vargas isn't dead—he's dead drunk, that's all. Take a smell—the place reeks with *samshu*."

"But there is blood, Roger. Look! His face, it is all blood!"

"Nothing serious in that," Roger explained quietly. "We had a fight in here earlier this evening, and I gave Vargas a punch on the nose."

The German gaped at him. "You haf fight with Vargas? So big and strong as he is?"

"Well, I'm not exactly a lightweight myself, von Kragge—and I happen to know something about boxing."

"And you haf beat Vargas—with your fists alone?"

"With nothing but these two fists," Roger declared. "He beat up one of my boys at the *khan*, and I gave him back some of his own medicine."

"*Du lieber Gott!*" von Kragge said softly, and looked at the American with something akin to awe.

"So don't worry about Vargas," Roger continued. "Just leave him here to sleep it off. He'll be all right tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" von Kragge exploded. "It is tonight I haf need of him. He must not be drunk! No! I will tell Sin Gow to give him black coffee, mustard-water, anything—"

"Raw fish is the best thing for a *samshu* drunk," Roger suggested. "But I doubt if anything will get Vargas on his feet tonight."

THEN for the first time Roger saw the German's bland face drop its benign mask. "*Schweinhund!*" he hissed furi-

ously. *"Verschlechter Kerl!"* In his blind rage he slapped at Vargas' face, forehand and backhand, until Roger pulled him away.

"Here! Here! No sense to that, von Kragge. The man's out cold, and that's all there is to it. Calm yourself."

The German stamped to and fro, waving his arms furiously. "How he haf throw me down! There is work to do—a delivery of goods for which I haf give my word of honor. Now the *schweinhund* makes himself drunk and the truck does not leave the *hutung.*"

"All right, von Kragge, keep your shirt on. If it's that important, I'll take the truck and deliver this stuff myself."

Von Kragge pulled himself up short, and the American sensed a swift balancing of thought behind the frosty blue eyes. *"Ja wohl,* Roger, dot is fine—fine. I do not forget this. And that Vargas, we deal with him later. Yes!"

"Let me have the details," Roger said briskly, "and I'll get started."

"The goods haf already been load on the truck, Roger. You will drive to the Fong Tao and deliver them at the fifth house on the right-hand side. Take Vargas' boy with you—he know all the streets of Kalgan."

So Roger went to the garage in the *hutung* which lay back of the *yamen.* The truck was there, and von Kragge's big limousine, which Roger had never seen in use. Vargas' yellow boy materialized out of the shadows.

"Your boss-man is sick," Roger explained, "so I'm taking out this load."

The yellow boy made a polite bow, his face impassive.

"Do you know the way to the Fong Tao?"

The boy bowed again.

"Climb in, then. This is a hurry job. What's your name?"

"Yuen, master."

Under the boy's direction, Roger drove clear across the city to a shaded street in the very shadow of the ancient walls. The houses were well spaced, and discreetly hidden behind high walls and dusty rows of persimmon trees. The fifth house had a dark-blue gate with a unlit lantern.

"Tajen wait—Yuen fix," the boy said, and hopped down. He tapped three times on the blue gate and then began to open the back of the truck. Two Chinese came out quickly in response to the knock at the gate and started to carry the goods inside.

Roger sat watching as the men carried in a carved table, chairs, a cabinet in red-and-gold lacquer, two inlaid screens, silk draperies, a tall Kang-hsi vase, a folding shrine of Kwan-yin, a pair of *foo* dogs in green stone—and finally, a painted Soochow chest very like the one he had in his own room at the *yamen.*

"All Number One quality," Roger thought. "There's an order must run into a nice bit of money."

The curious part was that the Chinese returned so swiftly from each trip that Roger knew they were not carrying the furniture into the house—they must be piling it just inside the gate.

"Queer!" Roger reflected. "They seem to be in a devil of a hurry, like men working against time. I wonder why?"

It was only when they were carrying the bulky chest that Roger got a good look at the faces of the two blue-robed servants of the house. He stared hard at the taller one. "I've seen that lad before," he muttered. "Yes—over at the *khan!* That's one of Gan-ghi's men—or his double."

Then the gate clicked shut behind the men and a bar slid into place. Yuen threw a swift glance up and down the empty street before he climbed in beside Roger.

"All finish, Tajen," he announced. "We go now."

Roger gave him a sidelong glance at he put his foot on the starter. It had suddenly occurred to him that during all the work

Yuen had not exchanged a single word with the two servants.

"This certainly is a quiet quarter," Roger remarked. "Not a soul on the street—not a light—not a sound. It might as well be the Ming Tombs."

"Yes, Tajen."

"Who lives in that house, Yuen—white man or mandarin?"

"Not know, Tajen."

"Ever been there before?"

"No, Tajen."

"Yes! No! Don't you know any other words?"

"Missah Vargas not like talk, Tajen. He say Yes and No make answer to everything."

VARGAS' wooden-faced boy tucked his hands into his sleeves, staring straight ahead. They finished their ride in silence and Roger put away the truck. Yuen vanished into the shadows from whence he had appeared.

Meanwhile, the *yamen* had returned to its normal aspect—the gates wide open, the yellow clerks in their appointed places. They bowed their usual bow, and in the courtyard Shao screamed his usual warning as Roger passed.

There was a light in von Kragge's quarters—the door was open—but the German was not within. Roger waited a few minutes, then scribbled a mesage on the desk pad: "Made delivery to Fong Tao okay. R." He glanced at his watch. The Hour of the Fox had come!

The mystery of Chang Tai's presence in the *yamen* drew him like a magnet through the dark corridors, alive with a nocturnal hush which was more like a caught breath than true silence. In the crowded storerooms rats scurried behind the grainbags in the dark, but the cool draught of air blowing from the hidden court guided his groping steps.

The huge moon-window made a glowing circle in the night. A shadow passed to and fro across its surface, as of someone pacing impatiently within. Roger weighed the risks of another attempt on the sliding panels, and as he hesitated, an interruption occurred, and from an unexpected quarter.

He heard an automobile draw up outside, in the *hutung* beyond the wall, and someone rapped on a gate which had escaped Roger's notice. Instantly the moon-window slid open and Sin Gow came out, hastening across the court.

It was Otto von Kragge who came through the gate, and Roger saw the big limousine standing in the *hutung*, motor purring.

Chang Tai stepped out through the lighted window, a gaudy figure in a shimmering dragon-robe and an embroidered mandarin's hat.

Sin Gow made a series of profound kowtows and helped him into the back of the car. The mandarin sat up rigid and stern as an idol, his tasseled claws buried in his sleeves as Sin Gow covered him to the chin with a black blanket.

In the meantime, von Kragge had gone into the room and now returned, carrying a large and somewhat bulky object wrapped in a piece of yellow silk. Roger could not guess its identity, but it seemed to be heavy, and the German deposited it with great care on the seat beside the mandarin.

"We make no change in the plan," von Kragge said to Chang Tai. "You will wait for the signal—"

"Wah!" Chang Tai replied, with a haughty nod.

Then the girl An-yin made her appearance, scarcely less gorgeous in her guise of a Manchu princess, in a robe stiff with seed-pearls and a high crowned headdress that glittered like a tower of jewels. And, as before, a cigarette drooped from her lacquered lips.

Von Kragge whispered something to her, and she nodded. Then, to Roger's astonishment, she laid aside the Manchu headdress for a chauffeur's cap, bundled into a man's topcoat, and climbed in behind

the wheel. The big car rolled silently along the *hutung*.

The German lingered in the gateway, watching its departure. When he struck a match for his cheroot, Roger saw that he

was smiling. "*Ach*, Sin Gow, it is fine to be at work again. Fine! Yes!"

The *mafoo* hovered around him uneasily. "Master, I not like you to go alone tonight. Three time I have cast the prayer-sticks, and always it make the sign of evil."

"Haf no fears, Sin Gow This Russian, he is nothing—nothing."

"But master," the *mafoo* persisted, "the streets are dark, it is the hour for robbers—"

"Robbers! Ha! I laugh! Our good friend Rostikoff, he will shoot them with his pistol. I myself haf tell him to bring his gun. That is one for laughing, eh?"

Sin Gow straightened. "It's dangerous, Master."

Von Kragge chuckled. "To each man his own pleasure, Sin Gow. With you it is the smoke of the dream-pipe. Vargas—he like the *samshu*. For Otto von Kragge it is the feel of danger! Yes! Now it is time to go. If I am late by two minutes, that Rostikoff will be eating his beard."

Roger stood rigid in the shadows as von Kragge vanished into the *hutung*. Sin Gow was taking his time over the closing and bolting of the gate. Roger was intent on trailing the German, but it was too late now to reach the *hutung* by going all the way back through the *yamen*. If the *mafoo* would only hurry and go inside, he could climb the wall.

But Sin Gow did not go inside. He waited by the gate, silent, motionless, listening to the fading sounds of von Kragge's footsteps. Roger listened, too, burning with bitter resentment, his hands clenched.

"Damn that pig-headed *mafoo!* There goes my one big chance—ruined!"

IX

BALKED of his chance to follow Otto von Kragge's mysterious activities, Roger returned to his room, to begin a restless pacing to and fro as he tried to fit the new pieces into the baffling puzzle. It was evident that the German had gone to meet Rostikoff, but what was so damned funny about the Russian arming himself with a gun?

And then there was the gaudy masquerade of Chang Tai and that painted doll with the cigarette. What the devil were those two after? A separate business from von Kragge's apparently, else the German would have gone with them in the limousine.

"My big chance gone *kapoot!*" Roger growled. "What I'd give for five minutes' talk with Mr. Thomas Jennison!"

His thoughs veered to the dead man, and Wu Han's report of his character. Where had Jennison stood—with von Kragge or against him? It wasn't easy to draw the picture of a man when all one had in the way of clues was a half-smoked pipe, a blood-stain on the floor, and a row of books.

Roger halted before the wall-shelf and ran his eye along the titles. Jennison's taste in reading matter ran to the sensational, and the little shop-labels pasted inside the back covers told of a wandering career in the East—Manila, Hong Kong, Saigon, Singapore, even far-off Bombay.

His eye halted at a book in blue covers—The Nigger of the Narcissus. Roger pulled it out, thinking "Here's an odd number to be in such company. I'll bet Jennison never bought this one." But there was the man's name scrawled across the fly-leaf.

Roger idly riffled the pages, recalling the hours of pleasure he had found in Joseph Conrad's pages of far places and wide horizons and the clean breath of the sea. Suddenly he stiffened, stared, and hastily turned back through the pages. His eye had caught the flash of writing.

Here it was! A chapter end—four or five lines of printed type, and in the blank space below, a drawing. The same Chinese symbol Rostikoff had drawn—the sign of the Red Buddha who Sleeps!

Instinctively, Roger straightened up to glance into the corners of the room—to listen. There was not a sound in the *yamen,* only his own heart pounding with the thrill of discovery. For there was more than the bare symbol; there was writing in Jennison's hand—eight lines of writing! Each line consisted of a date, an address, and then a round number followed by either a capital S or a capital M.

"Money!" Roger thought. "Dollars Shanghai and dollars Mex." But it was the eight addresses which startled him. The Wu Lung Hutung, repeated three times—the King Shan Way, also three times—*and the Fong Tao, twice!*

THE Fong Tao! Jennison"s secret record of the Sleeping Buddha was connected somehow with the street where Roger had delivered the truckload of furniture—where one of the servants bore a striking resemblance to a crew-boy at the *khan!*

Roger closed the book with a decisive bang, returned it to its place on the shelf and reached for his hat. "I'm going back to the Fong Tao and take another look at that house! It's only a hunch, but I'll play it to the limit!"

Impatient now of every passing second, he hailed a taxi within a block or so of the *yamen* and got out at the fist intersection of the Fong Tao. But having arrived, he could only stare at the high wall with its blue gate, and the row of persimmon trees which hid the house itself from view.

THE moonlight on the roadway was like a thin silver dust, and there was no sound save the dry whispering of leaves in the night wind. The only break in the monotony was the brief appearance of a *mafoo* at one of the other houses, to light an orange gate-lamp and vanish again.

Then the two servants Roger had seen on his previous visit came out of No. 5, locked the blue gate, tried it carefully and marched away, leaving Roger to walk to and fro in his orbit of shadow. He wanted a cigarete to relieve the tedium, but decided that even the brief flare of a match might damage his chances.

He smiled at his own caution. "Probably I'm being just a plain damn fool. Maybe I'm standing guard over an empty house. Anyway, I don't even know that Jennison was referring to a house when he wrote Fong Tao in his record."

But that particular doubt was soon dispersed by the sound of footsteps—two sets of footsteps—brisk and sharp in the quiet street. A patch of moonlight revealed two figures as they crossed the road and stopped before No. 5.

Von Kragge and Rostikoff!

The German tapped softly at the blue gate, while Rostikoff looked about him curiously.

After a short delay the gate was opened and von Kragge stood aside with a courteous gesture, inviting the Russian to precede him. The gate closed silently behind them.

"Now I've got the jump on them!" Roger told himself exultantly. "I'll get to the bottom of this if I have to stick it out till the sun comes up!"

But he found his curiosity growing sharper and bolder as the minutes dragged by so slowly. What was happening behind that blind wall and its locked gate? If the German had led Rostikoff into a trap, why had there been no sound of struggle, no muffled cries, no echoes of a shot? Roger was ready to swing into action at the slightest sign, but there was nothing—

nothing but silence and the whispering of the leaves.

Roger measured the wall with his eye—too high for scaling—but by climbing one of the trees he might be able to look in over the wall. In a moment the thought had been turned into deed, but he had to climb gingerly, for the thin branches bent under his weight. From his new post he could see the compound, bare and unadorned, and the dark outline of a low-roofed bungalow. Only one window showed a light.

IT WAS small gain for his trouble, and Roger was about to climb down again, when a truck came rumbling down the Fong Tao and pulled up so close to the tree in which he was concealed that he could have jumped out onto its roof.

Von Kragge's truck! And no one got out! The truck simply came to a halt in the shadows, its lights winking out as the ignition was turned off. Roger hooked both arms around the slender trunk of the tree and waited.

Perhaps ten minutes later von Kragge left the bungalow and crossed the moonlit compound. He came out through the blue gate, and as he walked toward the truck a bulky figure climbed down to meet him. It was Vargas!

The red-haired giant moved with a slow, lurching gait, but Roger was astonished to see him on his feet at all. Ordinarily it took a man from twelve to twenty-four hours to shake off the effects of *samshu.*

Von Kragge and Vargas met, practically under Roger's feet, and he heard their conversation, which consisted of one word, spoken in a low voice by the German.

"Yes!" von Kragge said. Vargas nodded and ambled off down the street, while the German returned to the bungalow. A little later Vargas came back, driving von Kragge's limousine, which he parked at the blue gate.

Roger waited, tense with expectation, but to his amazement, what followed was already familiar to him—a repetition in reverse, as of a film run backward. The mandarin Chang Tai came swiftly from the bungalow to the waiting limousine, his silvery robe glinting in the moonlight.

The girl An-yin followed, wearing again a man's topcoat and chauffeur's cap, carrying the Manchu headdress in her hand. And as before, von Kragge carried out the flat, bulky object carefully wrapped in yellow silk, and placed it beside the mandarin. The Chinese girl lit her cigarette, slid into the driver's seat, and drove off.

Then Vargas opened the back of the truck, and with von Kragge's assistance, began to carry out the furniture Roger had delivered earlier that evening. There could be no mistake, Roger recognized every article they loaded into the truck—the carved table and chairs, the red-and-gold cabinet, the screens, the shrine of Kwan-yin, even the pair of green *foo* dogs.

Von Kragge lent a land with the Soochow chest, but Vargas failed to manage his end of it properly and it crashed from the tailboard, smashing the tall Kang-hsi vase.

"Dummkopf!" The German snarled, picking up the broken pieces and flinging them into the truck.

"Stand back! I do it better alone, by damn!" Vargas growled. With the help of a baling-hook and a great deal of heaving and grunting he wrestled the bulky chest into the truck single-handed.

"Our Vargas, he is so strong—like the ox," von Kragge drawled, lighting a cheroot. "But you will please to drive slowly and with care, my friend. You are still a little drunk."

Vargas gave an angry snort, and his reply was too low for Roger to catch, but the German took a hasty step backward.

"Later, my goot Vargas. Later. Do not make such an impatience. Perhaps you do not trust me?"

"No, by damn!" Vargas snarled.

Von Kragge laughed his easy, chuckling laugh that was almost soundless. "You are

wrong, my goot friend. At the *yamen* we will talk together, and you will haf not one word of complaint. I swear it on my word of honor. Yes!"

ROGER clung to his perch in the tree until the red tail-light of the truck faded into the distance. They had gone, that strangely assorted pair, leaving behind them a locked gate, a compound paved with moonlight and a house silent and dark as a tomb.

Was it a tomb? With his own eyes Roger had seen Gregor Rostikoff go into that house, and he had not come out again. The stark implications of that fact stared Roger in the face.

"Rostikoff is dead! Murdered!"

If he raised an alarm, summoned the night-watch or a military patrol, they would break down the gate and search the house. He could accuse von Kragge of the crime, but first of all they would arrest him as the key witness.

"Think twice!" caution counseled. "The case would be handled by the Jap military. Suppose von Kragge makes another little deal in silver with his friend, Colonel Toyamo? Instead of being the star witness, you may find yourself standing in the prisoner's dock, charged with Rostikoff's murder!"

Roger hesitated, staring at the dark house. Did anyone live there? Why had von Kragge sent out that Chinese furniture and then hauled it away again? What part had the mandarin played? And if the Russian was dead—how had they managed the job so silently?

Coming to a decision, Roger climbed a little higher in the tree and edged out along one of the branches. It sagged dangerously, but he was still above the level of the wall. Then he swung out with all his force and landed inside the compound on hands and knees.

Scrambling to his feet, he made sure of his line of retreat by unlocking the gate before he crept toward the silent bungalow. He circled the dark walls, returning to the window where he had seen the light.

A twist of the knife-blade forced one of the panels, and Roger climbed over the sill into a room pitch-black, silent, and pungent with a spicy incense. He closed the window softly and listened for a long time before he struck a match—prepared for almost anything but the sight which met his eyes.

The room was entirely empty!

Roger stared at the bare walls—the bare floor. There was nothing but a hanging lamp, still warm to the touch. He lit it with the expiring match, unhooked it from the frame, and carried it with him into the next room—and the next—and the next.

They were all the same—stripped and bare. There was not a single piece of furniture in the house, nothing but silence and the musty smell of long disuse and dust so thick upon the floors that he could see his own footprints.

There was no sign of Gregor Rostikoff—no body and no place to hide a body—no slightest evidence anywhere of a deed of violence.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Roger said slowly.

X

AND so the Hour of the Fox, which Roger had awaited so impatiently, ran its appointed course and gave way to the Hour of the Rat, as the Chinese call the period following midnight.

The *yamen* of Otto von Kragge lay wrapped in silence, if not in slumber. Its gates were closed and barred, the lamps of

the shop extinguished, and in the inner court a creeping wedge of moonlight fought against shadows which gave ground slowly and reluctantly.

Roger's own window was as dark as the others, but he was not asleep. Alert and wide-awake, he sat pondering in the unlighted room, the tip of his cigarette like a staring ruby eye in the darkness.

"Body or no body, I still think Rostikoff is dead—murdered!" he told himself flatly. Up to a certain point he felt quite sure of his ground. He was convinced that von Kragge had lured Rostikoff to a fatal rendezvous at No. 5 Fong Tao. The one room which had been decked out with Oriental splendor had been merely a stage setting. But what had happened *after* Rostikoff walked into the prepared trap?

"If they killed him, why didn't I find the body? They couldn't have picked a better spot for a murder. The body might have lain there for months before any one discovered it. There'd be nothing whatever to link von Kragge to a house in the Fong Tao."

It was maddening to think that he had been practically an eye-witness to the whole affair and yet was so baffled by the German's cunning methods that doubt and uncertainty persisted in spite of his deepest conviction of foul play.

Conflicting elements tipped the scales of his judgment now this way—now that. He knew Rostikoff carried a well-filled wallet—but he had also carried a gun. Von Kragge was a man without conscience or scruples—yet he had a morbid horror of the sight of blood. Could such a man kill?

And further, if violence to Rostikoff had been planned, surely von Kragge would have found Vargas' brute strength more useful at the final crisis than the mandarin Chang Tai, so fat and useless that the Chinese girl had to feed him like a baby.

"If I only had some sort of clue to von Kragge's motive," Roger thought. "Rostikoff—alive or dead—is only one part of this mystery. It goes all the way back to the time of Jennison's secret record. Nearly two years ago they were using that same house in the Fong Tao. The Sleeping Buddha—what the devil does it mean?"

Roger shook his head. "Well, I'll sleep on it. No use crossing bridges at one o'clock in the morning. Tomorrow I'll go to the Russian Quarter and see what I can learn about Gregor Gregorovitch Rostikoff."

He had taken off his coat and was loosening his tie when he heard a most peculiar noise from the parrot Shao—a sharp, muffled squawk quite unlike its usual raucous challenge. Roger paused, listening, then quietly opened the window and looked out into the court.

His eyes probed the shadows without success, but his ears caught a swift sound that began suddenly and ended even more abruptly with a soft thump. Something more solid than shadow glided along the wall and disappeared.

Roger moved with equal swiftness and silence, pulling on his coat as he went along the passage. The blue lantern burned dimly above the archway, but Shao's niche in the wall was empty. The bird lay on the ground, a limp bundle of ruffled feathers with a twisted neck—silenced forever.

A few feet beyond the dead parrot a figure lay sprawled on the hard-packed earth of the courtyard. Roger bent down and pulled the body back into the radius of the blue lantern. It was von Kragge's *mafoo!*

"Sin Gow!" Roger whispered cautiously, shaking him by the shoulder. The *mafoo's* heart still beat, but his body was limp and unresponsive, as if his neck, too were broken. His curved knife, half-drawn, fell from his girdle.

ROGER straightened up. The parrot dead—Sin Gow knocked unconscious—storm signals that pointed to danger for Otto von Kragge! A light still shone in the German's window.

Pulling out his gun, Roger moved

swiftly toward von Kragge's quarters. As he drew nearer he heard a murmur of voices—sharp, angry voices, and the half-open door revealed a strange tableau.

Vargas held the center of the floor, towering like a colossus above the smaller but defiant figure of von Kragge; red-eyed and scowling, a gun in his huge fist. The mandarin Chang Tai sat over to one side, silent and impassive, his hands buried in his sleeves.

Roger halted at the doorway, more inclined now to overhear what was being said than to interfere.

"You and me, Herr von Kragge, we are finish," Vargas snarled. "I do not wait for you to play your little games with me. No, by damn!"

The German ignored the leveled gun which threatened him, his hard blue eyes fixed unwaveringly on the hulking giant. "You are a fool, my goot Vargas," he drawled. "Worse, you are a drunken fool. Do you think the gun make me afraid? I haf only to raise my voice in this *yamen,* and you are finish!"

"Try it, *mein Herr!*" Vargas sneered. "One little noise from you and I take your neck and twist it around and around like I have fix your devil-bird."

"You kill my Shao, eh? You will pay for that, Vargas."

"I think not, Herr von Kragge. It is your turn to do the paying. I have finish with you, yes, but by damn I do not go away empty-handed!"

His thick arm shot out, pinning the German against the wall as if it had been an iron bar. With his other hand, Vargas pulled some papers from von Kragge's inside coat pocket, threw them to the floor, and reaching again, drew out a leather wallet.

All this while Chang Tai sat perfectly still, not moving a muscle, entirely aloof and indifferent. But as Roger quietly pushed the door wider, his black eyes slanted in that direction, stared briefly, then shifted back to Vargas. Neither sound nor motion gave evidence that he had seen the American.

Vargas flipped open the German's wallet, looked inside and grinned. "A thousand thanks, *mein Herr.* We call it a little loan, eh? I pay it back when we meet again—in hell maybe!"

Von Kragge straightened his collar and shrugged his coat into smoothness. "It is a cheap price to be rid of you, *schweinhund!* And if you are wise, my Vargas, I do not find you in Kalgan when morning comes!"

"Not so fast, *mein Herr.* Do you think I am big fool like that Jennison? *Hoya!* You will walk before me all the way through the *yamen*—yes—and we say our good-byes in the street."

"I do not move from this room," von Kragge replied flatly.

"So it is no, *mein Herr?*" Without warning, Vargas' arm lashed out and knocked the German halfway across the room. "Get up!" Vargas snarled, standing over him. "I say you will march! Tonight it is my turn to give the orders—"

"Don't move, Vargas!" Roger stepped across the threshold, his automatic leveled. "I've got a gun at your back, and I'm ready to use it! Now—drop everything and get your hands up!"

Vargas stiffened at the command, and for a split second Roger thought he would whirl around and meet the challenge. But the massive shoulders relaxed, he dropped the gun and the wallet to the floor, and his hands went up in surrender.

VON KRAGGE came slowly to his feet, his face livid, blood running from a split lip. There was a coiled tenseness about him, a baleful fury that reminded Roger of a cobra ready to strike.

"Are you hurt?" Roger asked.

The old man made no reply. He kept running his tongue over the cut in his lower lip, his eyes staring straight past the American. One of his plump white hands jerked in a peculiar gesture.

"Punch-drunk," flashed through Roger's mind. "Vargas hit him—"

Roger never reached the end of that thought, for a crashing blow on the back of his head blotted out everything in an explosion of blackness where the only sensation was that of an endless fall into a bottomless depth!

XI

WHEN Roger opened his eyes again he found a shaft of pale golden sunlight slanting in through an open window. Lazily he stared at a painting on black silk, hanging above a shelf of books — then memory stirred and he sat bolt upright on the *k'ang*. He was back in his own room!

The sudden movement made his head swim, and he put his hands over his eyes until the spinning stopped. When it did, the bland face of Otto von Kragge nodded and smiled at him from a wreath of thin blue cigar smoke.

"Goot! Goot!" the German exclaimed. "You are awake again. Dot is fine—fine. I haf worry so much about you, my Roger."

"What—what happened?" Roger stammered. "It's morning!"

Von Kragge chuckled. *"Ach,* yes it is morning and also afternoon. Soon it will be dark again. For fifteen hours, Roger, you haf lie here like a dead man."

"Fifteen hours!" Roger's thoughts broke through the drowsy fog and flashed back to the scene with Vargas, and his hand went automatically to the back of his head. "Tell me what happened, von Kragge!"

"Do not excite yourself, Roger," the German replied soothingly. "Everything is fine. Yes. We will talk, but first you will drink the coffee I have prepare."

Von Kragge lifted a steaming coffee-pot from a primus stove and poured out a cupful, black and strong, to which he added a liberal measure of brandy.

Roger pinned him with a level gaze. "The first thing I want to know is—who struck me?"

"The *mafoo,* Roger. Sin Gow."

"But why?" Roger shot back. "Was Sin Gow helping Vargas?"

"No—no—it is all a big mistake. That stupid *mafoo,* he see the gun in your hand and think it is you who make the trouble. He hit you so hard I fear he haf break your skull. *Gott sei dank* it is not so!"

The German shook his head. "All day Sin Gow is shut up in his room making kowtows before Kwan-yin and burning paper prayers for your recovery." Von Kragge's voice hardened. "I haf warn him that if you die I kill him with my own hands, like a pig in the market."

"Okay, I've got that much straight. Sin Gow hit me. But what about Vargas? What happened to him?"

"Vargas run away quick last night," von Kragge explained. "This morning, when he is more sober, he haf return. He ask for his job back, but I do not gif it. No. We are finish. I haf sent him away—bag and baggage."

As Roger sipped the hot brandy-and-coffee, the fogginess cleared from his brain. The German reversed a chair by the bed and sat down, leaning his arms across the back.

"My boy, I am most grateful for your help last night. Perhaps you haf save my life. That Vargas, he was crazy-drunk, and he haf a pistol. Perhaps you will tell me how you make your appearance so exactly in the nick of time?"

Von Kragge's voice had the same soft drawl, but his glassy blue eyes were sharp as gimlets. Roger kept his voice casual. "I heard a noise down in the court—from the parrot. I found the bird lying there with its neck twisted. Then I found Sin Gow a few feet away. It wasn't hard to figure there must be trouble afoot."

THE German nodded, puffing quietly on his cheroot. "Roger, you haf ask me no questions about the Chinaman who was my guest."

Roger shrugged. "That's *your* business, von Kragge."

"Ja wohl! Dot is a fine answer, Roger. I think it is better I tell you about this Chinaman. His name is Chang Tai, and he is a great mandarin. He is also a great patriot who risks his life to serve his country. The Japanese haf set a price upon his head. Our good friend, Colonel Toyamo, he would be very please to put his hands on Chang Tai."

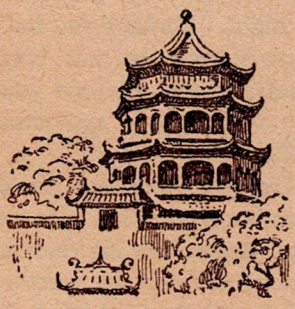
Roger waited quietly, his face betraying nothing of his thoughts.

"I tell this secret to you, Roger, because I know you haf no love for the Japanese. You do not forget Nanking, eh? And Chen-li, where you haf lose your friend Herr Randolph and the pretty *fraulein?* I, too, in my small way, fight for the cause of China. I have hide Chang Tai in a part of the *yamen* where no one ever goes but my faithful Sin Gow."

"In other words, Chang Tai is a spy?" Roger asked bluntly.

"A spy? No, No!" The white hands lifted in protest. "Does a Manchu Prince become a spy? It is only that his work must be done in secret—"

"You're playing a dangerous game, von Kragge. If your're caught, it'll take more



than a 'silver key' to get yourself out of Toyamo's clutches. Suppose Vargas should talk—"

Von Kragge smiled. "I think Vargas will keep his tongue behind his teeth. Chang Tai has many friends. They watch Vargas night and day, and if he go to the Japanese, we know it instantly."

"And then, no doubt, something very unpleasant will happen to Vargas?"

The German shrugged. "That is not my business. I haf warn him in plain words."

Roger finished his coffee. "I suppose Chang's friends will be keeping an eye on me now?"

"Not so, Roger. I haf tell you story to Chang Tai. I tell him you are my friend and a friend of the Cause."

Otto von Kragge proceeded to hold forth on the subject of the Japanese war, speaking with indignant fervor of a man roused and shocked by the ruthless aggression of a brutal foe.

And while he talked, Roger was thinking, "Is this the truth, or only a smoke-screen he's throwing out? I'm still not satisfied about what happened last night. Von Kragge must have seen Sin Gow creeping up behind me, yet he didn't lift a finger to stop him. Why? And if he thought I had a fractured skull, why in hell didn't he send for a doctor?"

Part of the answer came to him a little later, when the German had departed, and Roger swung himself rather shakily out of bed to wash and dress. The bump on his head had left only a local soreness and a dull headache, and he was puzzled by a certain soreness in his upper arm. Tracing it, he discovered a little red mark with a pin-point of dried blood in its center.

The mark of a hypodermic! Otto von Kragge had given him a drugged needle to keep him unconscious after Sin Gow's blow! And again, why? Almost instantly the answer shaped itself in his startled mind.

"By God, they've killed Vargas! Von Kragge wanted me out of the way while they disposed of his body!"

XII

LATER that day, Roger crossed the inner court and made his way to Vargas' vacated room. He stood in the doorway, looking at the interior by the fading twilight. It was now as bare and impersonal as a hotel room, waiting for its next transient guest.

Vargas! Rostikoff! Jennison! Were there still other names on this secret roll-call—names he had never heard? The more he tried to untangle the strange events in von Kragge's *yamen,* the more baffled he was by its inner purpose.

"It's like one of those Chinese puzzle-locks," he thought. "You twist and turn it into a thousand shapes, but the confounded thing won't come apart."

He felt a deep-rooted repugnance at the thought of facing von Kragge across the table at their evening meal. In his mind's eye the German's silvery hair and bland features were beginning to take on a sort of satanic quality.

But the meal passed as usual, with a silent-footed yellow boy to serve them swiftly and deftly. Von Kragge appeared in excellent humor, keeping up a smooth flow of small talk, quite unaffected by Vargas' empty chair which stood between them.

When they had reached their coffee and liqueur, von Kragge asked courteously, "And now, Roger, how goes it with your head? I hope you haf feel no bad effect of the little accident?"

"Nothing to speak of," Roger replied.

"Goot!" the German exclaimed, and clapped his hands. The *mafoo* appeared at the signal, grim and unsmiling as customary.

"Roger, Sin Gow wish to make you his speech of apology."

The *mafoo* halted before the American, tucked his hands inside his sleeves and made his Number One kowtow. "Tajen, the spirit of this humble person is weighed down by ten thousand sorrows from recent unhappy deed—"

"Skip the rest of it," Roger broke in curtly. "You're sorry, and I'm sorry—that I didn't hear you coming!"

Von Kragge sat there with his sardonic smile, turning the liqueur glass in his fat white fingers. Roger rose abruptly and pushed back his chair. "I think I'll turn in early tonight, von Kragge. My head still feels a bit foggy—almost as if I'd had a shot of dope."

If Roger's quick thrust hit the mark, the German's smooth face betrayed no evidence of it. He merely nodded and smiled. "*Ja wohl.*"

But, once more in his own quarters, Roger found that sleep was out of the question. He could not even relax on the comfortable *k'ang.* There was a gnawing unease and restlessness in his blood which gave him no peace.

The *yamen* was utterly quiet—too quiet for taut nerves. Roger looked out into the dark courtyard, filled with a brooding hush, then closed the window again with a wry smile. "I never thought I'd miss the squawking of that damned parrot—but I do!"

He sat down in the lamplight with Jennison's book, staring at the written record of the Sleeping Buddha, but his thoughts kept returning to the puzzling personality of the mandarin Chang Tai.

Giving way to an almost irresistible urge, he left his room and went stealthily toward the hidden lair of the long-nailed Chinaman.

Chang Tai's quarters were a blaze of lights, the great moon-window standing half-open. From within came the nimble plucking of a *samisen* and An-yin's voice raised in a song whose words were bold and risqué. Between the verses he heard von Kragge's smooth chuckling and Chang Tai's squeaky laugh.

Roger dared not venture farther, on account of the light streaming through the open panels, but the sounds were unmistakably those of a gay party, a celebration.

"Of Vargas' death?" Roger thought grimly. "Wait, von Kragge! There's a loophole somewhere, and I'll hunt till I find it!"

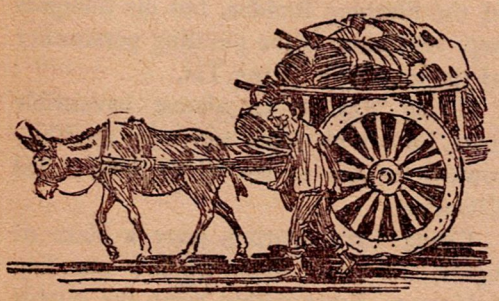
AND in the morning he set about his determined search for that loophole. At his usual hour he left the *yamen* and went to the *khan,* but as soon as he had put the

coolie-crew to work he slipped away and headed for the Russian Quarter.

It did not take him long to learn that Gregor Rostikoff kept a shop on the Orlovskaya, but when he arrived there the place was tightly closed up, its windows covered with heavy wooden shutters.

Further inquiries at the neighboring shops drew only evasive answers and stolid shrugs. As one bearded Muscovite told him, *"Barin,* these are days of strange happenings. One does not turn the head to see what goes on, even in the next house."

Nor did luck prove any better in his attempt to pick up Vargas' trail—if, indeed, such a thing ever existed. According to von Kragge's account, Vargas had left the *yamen,* "bag and baggage," in broad daylight, and Vargas' towering bulk was not something that would pass unnoticed, even in a crowd.



Yet Roger could find no one who had set eyes on the Big Red One, as the Chinese called Vargas. With painstaking thoroughness he made inquiries at the railway station, the military posts at the South Gate and the Pass, the hotels on the Avenues, the taximen of the Fong Ch'en. He even covered the boatmen of the Hun-ho.

"Dead or alive—Vargas is still in Kalgan," Roger said to himself as he returned thoughtfully to the *yamen,* planning another surprise thrust which might startle von Kragge into a guilty reaction.

"Von Kragge, did you ever hear of a Russian merchant called Rostikoff?" he asked as they sat at dinner.

"Yes, I know him," the German replied without the slightest sign of hesitation. "Gregor Rostikoff. He boasts that he haf the finest beard in all Kalgan. Why do you ask, Roger?"

"Well, he's been over to the *khan* several times, asking for me. I thought it might be something important, so I looked him up today. His shop's closed—been closed for several days, according to the neighbors. Rather odd, don't you think?"

Von Kragge cocked his head. "Dot is bad, Roger. Bad. It must be look into. Maybe something haf happen to Gregor Rostikoff. We will send Sin Gow with a letter to the police captain. If he find nothing out, we speak to Colonel Toyamo."

Roger stared across the table, completely baffled by this bland proposal. Was this a man of ordinary flesh and blood, or was he compounded of steel and brass, that nothing could make a dent in his unshakable poise?

And suddenly Roger felt afraid of this soft-voiced old man with the silvery hair who sat there so calmly, cracking leechee nuts and picking out the spicy kernels with his plump white fingers. It was a cold, creeping fear that made his scalp tingle and stiffen.

"Jennison had brains," he thought swiftly, "Rostikoff was crafty, and Vargas had strength, but this fat spider was too much for them. No more for me. I'm through—I'm clearing out of here before my turn comes!"

XIII

CALM and uneventful days followed, and Roger marked time, unable to chart a clear course. His mind was divided between a strong sense of loyalty to his work and its responsibilities, and an equally urgent desire to shake himself free from the sinister mysteries of von Kragge's *yamen.*

There was plenty of work to keep him busy, at the *yamen* as well as the *khan,* now that Vargas had gone. And before he reached a final decision, the unpredictable

forces of Nature stepped in to break the stalemate and gather all these diverse factors into one smashing climax.

It began in the night. Roger was awakened by the crash of falling tiles, blown from the roof by a high, bitter wind. It blew in wild gusts, raking down from the northwest, making an eerie whistling at the eaves and scrolled cornices, and clawing the dry leaves into a sound like foaming surf. In the morning it was still blowing, with a sullen brownish haze mounting above the horizon.

"Ai-yee!" the Chinese chattered, and hastened their steps. "It is the Dragon-Breath! The Lords of the Upper Realm are angry!"

The shrill wind was the forerunner of a dust storm, far ahead of its due season, rolling in from the vast desolation of the Gobi. That night it settled down over the city like a brown pall, and for three days following the sun rose and set almost unnoticed behind the hellish twilight created by the storm.

Kalgan became like a city of the dead, its streets empty and deserted, every door and window shut tight against the drifting red dust. Finer than sifted flour, it stung the eyes and made breathing a torture.

Roger thought of Gan-ghi's caravan, plodding on into the teeth of this "dry typhoon." Von Kragge hovered at his shoulder while he made calculations of time and distance and stuck pins in a map of the Gobi.

"How you make it, Roger?" the German asked anxiously.

"Well, Gan-ghi travels fast. He may have reached Mingan before the storm caught him. If not, he could take cover at the Bash-khub Waterhole. I'd give him better than an even chance."

"I hope it is so," von Kragge muttered. "It is a bad storm—bad."

"Wasn't it a freak storm like this that cost Jennison his life?"

"Ach, yes." The German looked at him steadily. "Poor Jennison!"

Thus Roger, impatient and chafing under the siege of the dancing red dust, feeling himself a prisoner within the four walls of the *yamen,* and quite unaware that this dreaded "Dragon-Breath" was also his wind of destiny.

BECAUSE of the storm, a man and a girl, who had been making a leisurely tour of the Great Wall, hastily turned their car around and headed for the nearest point of refuge, which happened to be the city of Kalgan. Such is the secret working of Kismet.

So it was that Roger, returning from his first visit to the *khan* after the storm had passed over, found visitors in the *yamen* shop. Von Kragge and a gray-haired, broad-shouldered man were conversing earnestly before the sheet-iron vault in which the German kept his choicest treasures.

While they talked, a slender girl in a tailored suit was exploring the crowded shelves. She picked out a porcelain group of the Eight Immortals and examined the detail. Roger, entering, glanced casually at the trim figure, then stopped in his tracks and stared in amazement.

"Miss Randolph!" he cried. "Arline!"

The girl turned swiftly at that joyful cry, and her whole face lighted. "Why—Roger!" Her voice rang like a silver bell as she came to meet his eager advance, both hands outstretched, her dark eyes shining like stars.

"Arline! I can't believe my eyes! Thank God you're safe! I searched for you all over Chen-li. Not a trace. I'd given up hope. And now we meet here—like this! It's a miracle, a Number One topside miracle!"

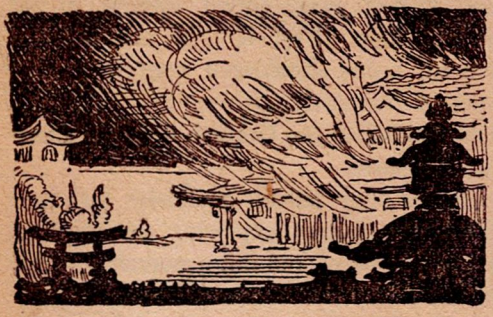
"Oh, Roger, it is a miracle! Oh, I'm so glad! We tried to find you, too." In breathless eagerness Arline Randolph led him by the hand toward the broad-shouldered man with von Kragge. "Dad! Dad! Here's Roger! Roger Wayland!"

Theodore Randolph turned quickly at

his daughter's call—a sturdy, keen-eyed man with a ruddy complexion and a hearty manner.

Roger smiled and said, "I'm certainly glad to see you again, Mr. Randolph. I don't suppose you remember me—you were unconscious all the time I was with you at Chen-li."

Randolph seized his hand in a firm grip. "This is marvellous luck, my boy, marvellous. I was afraid you'd lost your own life in saving ours. Arline has told me all you did for us at Chen-li. All I remember is the terrible blast of air when that first bomb went off. It pulled all the breath out of my lungs, and I couldn't move when I



saw the building crack open and begin to fall. The next thing I knew we were on a boat on the Canal—five days later, Arline told me—"

"A boat? Well, no wonder I couldn't find a trace of you," Roger replied. "The second bombing left the hospital in ruins. I was helping the Chinese dig around in there when the Jap infantry attacked and we had to clear out. I tried to trace you through the Consulate lists, but no luck."

"We tried that, too," Arline said. "Your name was down on the list as unreported, Roger."

Herr von Kragge edged into the happy scene, urbane and smiling. "I am indeed most happy that you haf all found each other again under my roof. It calls for a little celebration, eh? Roger, will you not ask your friends to honor us with their company at dinner?"

The invitation was cordially accepted by the Randolph's, and von Kragge turned to Roger. "No more of work today, Roger. While Ah Foo makes ready the dinner, why not take the limousine and show our Kalgan to Mr. Randolph and the so pretty *fraulein.*"

"That's very kind of you, Herr von Kragge," Randolph said, "but Kalgan isn't exactly new to me. I've been here a dozen times."

"But I haven't, Dad," Arline replied.

Her father smiled. "I was coming to that, my dear. Suppose you go riding with Roger and see the sights—I'm sure you two youngsters will have plenty to talk about—and I'll just finish my business with Herr von Kragge. There are some mighty fine things in this iron vault of his."

So Roger and Arline set out together to explore the ancient city. They saw the native Quarter, where the houses had roofs of living grass sod, and the famous seven-arched bridge over the Hun-ho on the Peking Road, with its series of carved animal figures. They visited a Chinese bazaar, a Buddhist temple and a Russian inn, where bearded men sipped scalding tea through a lump of sugar held between the teeth.

Arline had her fortune read from a sand-bowl by a *shaman* at the North Gate, and shrank from the ferret-eyed old man when Roger told her that the drum-head of his *tungur* was made of human skin. She wrinkled up her nose delicately at the camel-smell of the gloomy *khan,* and was charmed by the smiling kowtows of the clerk Wu Han.

THEN Roger drove out through the Kalgan Pass and along the Gobi trail. Behind them, the Great Wall writhed across the hills like an endless stone serpent—beyond them the rippling dunes of the vast red desert, as if the waves of a sea had been stilled by sudden magic.

"The Chinese call it the Sha-mo—the Dry Sea," Roger said. "Those big dunes shaped like horseshoes are called *barkhans.* Out in the wilder parts some of them

are 300 feet high. And the horizon is always changing color, it never holds the same shade for an hour."

"It's wonderful, Roger," Arline said.

"Yes," Roger agreed, "wonderful!" But he was looking at the clear, delicate beauty of the face so near his own—the face that had haunted his dreams. And now the dream had come true.

"It's so quiet and peaceful out here, Roger." Arline caught her breath. "I can't forget that terrible flight from Nanking—the dust rising like smoke from the crowded roads—all those poor homeless people trudging along watching the sky—the look of terror on their faces, even the children—"

"I hope you will find happier memories to carry away from China," Roger said.

Arline looked at her watch. "Hadn't we better turn back now, Roger? If I know anything about Chinese cooks, it will never do to be late for Ah Foo's dinner."

Their return to the *yamen* cast a shadow over Roger's happy mood, gave him an uneasy feeling of foreboding that sharpened his senses like a whetstone. He was suspicious of the German's smiling geniality—behind the old man's bland exterior Roger thought he detected an air of calculation.

But all through dinner Otto von Kragge was the perfect host, and for the occasion even conjured up two dust-covered bottles of Cordon Rouge. During the course of the conversation Roger discovered that Mr. Randolph speculated in Oriental art—making an annual trip to select his wares personally, and then taking them to San Francisco and New York for re-sale.

"I rather imagine this will be my last buying trip," Randolph told them. "For some time now it's been more and more difficult for a white man to do business in China, and if the Japs win out here, conditions will be absolutely impossible."

THUS, inevitably, the talk drifted into China's number one topic—the war—but Roger was busy with his own thoughts. Arline would be going away soon—within a few weeks—perhaps never to return, and Roger found the prospect as bleak and cheerless as twilight on the Gobi.

"Walk over to the hotel with us, Roger," Randolph invited when the party broke up. "We'll have a glass of Scotch and a cigar and talk a while. I want to make the most of this opportunity."

"There's one thing on my mind, Mr. Randolph," Roger said when they had left the *yamen*. "I gather that you've picked out quite a lot of von Kragge's stuff. I hope you're not doing that because of any fancied obligation to me over that Chen-li business."

"Not at all, Roger," Randolph laughed. "As a matter of fact, Herr von Kragge has given me splendid prices—genuine bargains."

Later, over tall glasses of tawny Scotch and Sumatra perfectos, Randolph asked abruptly, "Do you like it here in Kalgan, Roger? Are you satisfied with your work?"

Roger stiffened. "The job's all right, I suppose. Why do you ask, Mr. Randolph?"

"Well, Roger, I've been planning to open a shop of my own in San Francisco or New York, and I could use an assistant who has experience in dealing with Oriental firms. If you ever get fed up with China, I can make an offer that might interest you. And that isn't gratitude speaking, my boy—Herr von Kragge gave me a splendid account of your abilities."

Roger glanced quickly at Arline, his heart leaping. "I'd jump at the chance, Mr. Randolph. I'm wide open to any proposition that will take me away from Kalgan."

Randolph gave him a searching look. "I thought your prospects here were rather good, Roger. Herr von Kragge seems to think a lot of you. He told me he looked on you almost as a son."

Roger's lips tightened in a dry smile. "Yes—well, we'll talk about that some other time, Mr. Randolph."

Randolph saw his serious mien, and nodded. "Then we'll mark it down as settled, Roger. As soon as my plans are definite, we'll get together and talk over the details—"

They shook hands on the matter, and when Roger took his departure, Arline went with him to the door. "Hasn't this been a glorious day, Roger? I'm so happy over the way things have turned out. And your Herr von Kragge, he is a charming old gentleman."

"Yes—charming!" Roger bit down on the words. He paused a moment, then spoke in a lowered voice. "Arline, there's something I must tell you about Herr von Kragge—a warning. He's mixed up in some sort of intrigue with the Chinese, and that's dynamite in these days. If von Kragge makes any appointments with

your father, promise to let me know immediately, either at the *yamen* or the *khan*."

"I promise, Roger—but dad isn't interested in politics."

"That doesn't make any difference. One thing more, Arline. There's a street in Kalgan called the Fong Tao. Your father must keep clear of that street. It's dangerous."

Arline nodded. "All right, Roger, but dad isn't a *griffin*, you know. He's well able to take care of himself. He never goes into the native quarters without a gun in his pocket."

Roger gave her a steady look. "There are dangers that can't be handled with a gun!"

XIV

WITH Arline Randolph and her father continuing their stay in Kalgan, Roger found his days filled with constant activity, a triangular pattern that ran from *khan* to *yamen*, and thence to the hotel where the Randolphs were staying.

An incoming caravan brought word to the *khan* that all was well with Gan-ghi's camel-train—he had beaten the dust storm to the Bashkhub Waterhole. Von Kragge received the good news with an absent-minded nod, and his brooding quietness had a spider-in-the-web quality that made Roger uneasy.

As a result, the American held a whispered conversation with Wu Han in a quiet corner of the *khan*, and the faithful yellow clerk took up a new duty—that of secret sentry over the house on Fong Tao.

"Just in case!" Roger thought. The extra precaution eased his mind, so that he could relax and enjoy Arline's presence in Kalgan with unshadowed delight.

Randolph explained the reason for their lengthening stay. "Roger, I've picked up a rumor of red jade. Rare stuff, as you know—I'll buy it at almost any price. I've been quietly combing all the dealers, Chinese, German and Russian, but I haven't had any luck. Have you heard anything about it?"

Roger shook his head. "If there was any red jade around Kalgan, it'd soon be in von Kragge's vault. Jade is his specialty."

"He told me he'd heard the rumor, too, but that's all. Well, I'll look around a bit more, then back to the Tientsin warehouse to catalog my purchases. After that, Roger, you and I can make our final arrangements. Have you said anything to Herr von Kragge?"

"Not yet," Roger replied.

On the following day, Roger received instructions from von Kragge to drive the truck to the city of Ta-tung and pick up a load of merchandise at the bazaar of a certain Kuen Loh. He planned an early start, intending to be back in Kalgan by the next morning, but there were unexpected delays, and it was late afternoon before the truck rolled from the *hutung*. Vargas' boy, Yuen, sat beside him in the cab, blankfaced and silent.

Pushing the truck to the limit to make up for lost time, Roger followed the winding road over the hills. Twilight filtered into the dells and valleys like a rising purple tide, and a squadron of Jap planes went by with the buzz of giant hornets, flying fast and low.

Darkness came — and suddenly there were soldiers in the road ahead, waving lights and shouting. A warning rifle-shot rang out, and Roger jammed on his brakes. He climbed out to present his passport, but the slim, spectacled Japanese officer waved it aside.

"Sir, the *hu-chao* no good. The Ta-tung Road is close. At darkness the Chinese come from hills, blow up bridge and set fire to village of Ning-sien."

Roger noticed a dull pinkish glow rising above a cleft in the hills ahead. "So General Chu Teh's troops are on the loose again, eh?"

"Sir, by Imperial order he is call the *bandit* Chu Teh," the Japanese corrected. "Now you make turn-around please. Not safe here for Mei-kuo-san. So sorry!" The officer made a stiff, clicking bow.

"Okay," Roger said, but Yuen whispered anxiously, "Better we make stop, Tajen. Sleep at tea-house on road and try tomorrow. Missah Kragge not like we come back with empty hand."

"We're going back to Kalgan!" Roger snapped. "How do you suppose we'd get across the river in the morning—make the truck do a running jump?"

Yuen relapsed into a sullen silence which endured all the way back to the *yamen*. Roger left the truck in the *hutung* and went to make his report to von Kragge. The German's quarters were in darkness. He felt the oil lamps. They were cold to the touch.

"Sin Gow!" Roger called, but no *mafoo* appeared. Uneasy over the continued silence, Roger made his way to Chang Tai's hidden wing. The moon-window was dark.

Casting caution to the winds, he strode across the court and rapped briskly on the panels. A moment later he had jerked them apart, and the black shadows of a deserted room leaped and fled at the spurt of his match-flame. Uneasiness became downright alarm.

A swift thought flashed through his mind. "The limousine! If von Kragge has taken the car—"

He sprang to the secret gate and let himself out into the *hutung*. In half a minute his suspicions were confirmed—the German's car was not in its place.

"I've been tricked!" Roger muttered. "The old devil sent me off on that trip to Ta-tung so I would be out of the way. He's ready to strike again—tonight!"

THEN Roger cast aside thought and turned to swift action. Breathless, he burst in upon Arline Randolph at the hotel. When, she saw his face she cried out startled, "Roger! What is it? What's happened?"

"Where's your father? Is he here?"

"Why, no—he went out, Roger, about a half hour ago."

"With von Kragge? Has von Kragge been here?"

"No, Roger. We haven't seen Herr von Kragge for several days. What on earth is the matter?"

Roger let out a deep breath. "Well, that's something, anyway. Von Kragge isn't at the *yamen*, and for a moment I was afraid that he—Arline, do you know where your father went?"

"Yes. He was to meet someone at the Golden Dragon on Peking Avenue—a Chi-

nese merchant, I think. Dad was quite excited when he received the telephone call this afternoon. He's on the trail of that red jade, Roger—a Buddha, carved all in one piece. If it really *is* red jade, dad says it's absolutely unique and practically priceless."

A Buddha in red jade! Roger heard again the voice of the Chinese scrivener, translating the symbol Rostikoff had drawn—the Red Buddha who Sleeps! His head jerked up under the impact of realization. The whole secret of von Kragge's *yamen* flashed past his mind like the riffled pages of a book. His voice came out harsh and strained.

"Arline! I've got to find your father! At once! There's no time to explain now, but that red jade is a trap—a death trap. Your father is in danger of his life."

The girl's dark eyes dilated with her quick gasp. "Roger! Oh—wait! I'm going with you!" Arline darted off for her coat, disregarding his swift protests. They ran down the stairs and jumped into a taxi.

"The Fong Tao!" Roger ordered. "And drive *fang si!*"

"But, Roger," Arline protested, "father went to Peking Avenue—to the Golden Dragon!"

"That was half an hour ago," Roger replied grimly. "Trust me, Arline. Every second counts now."

While the yellow chauffeur streaked his way across the city, Roger tried to make clear to the tense and startled girl beside him his sinister suspicions about Otto von Kragge's activities. They pulled up at the Fong Tao with a furious screeching of brakes.

"Wait!" Roger commanded as he jumped out and raced toward No. 5. Wu Han's figure detached itself from the shadow of a wall, and Roger gripped his arm.

"Quick, Wu Han! Who went inside No. 5, and how long ago?"

"Nobody come here, Tajen. No foot-walkers. No devil-wagons. Nothing."

"What! No one! Are you certain of that?"

"Tajen, I have not move from here since dark."

FOR a moment Roger's mind went blank under this unexpected jolt to his plans, then his memory called up the three addresses listed by Jennison in his secret record of the Sleeping Buddha.

"Come with me, Wu Han. There's trouble. I may need you." They hurried back to the taxi and Roger directed, "The King Shan Way, and plenty *fang si!*"

Roger patted Arline's hand, which clung to his with a terrified grip. "Keep your chin up, Arline. Everything will be all right." But he didn't feel any too hopeful himself. Not knowing which house it might be, he would have to depend on finding von Kragge's limousine.

The King Shan Way was more like a mews or English court than a regular street. Roger's eyes searched in vain for the German's car, and he hurried back to the taxi, cursing Otto von Kragge under his breath.

"The Wu Lung Hutung!' he cried to the driver, and thought with the chill of despair, "Our last chance!"

Arline shivered. "If we're too late, Roger—"

"It's not far," Roger replied soothingly. "We'll be there in a minute."

The *hutung* deserved its name—Black Dragon Lane. Like a wounded snake it writhed its dark length behind the crooked tangle of the Chinese Market. Arline

shuddered and pulled her coat close as they plunged into a gloomy opening that was like a tunnel into the night.

"Look-see, Tajen!" Wu Han whispered. "There is a devil-wagon waiting."

Recognizing von Kragge's car, Roger sprang forward. There was some one on the front seat—Sin Gow! In an instant Roger had wrenched open the door and was dragging him out.

"Where's your master?" Roger demanded, shaking the startled *mafoo.* "Which house is he in? Speak up or I'll break your neck!"

"Not know, Tajen, I swear by Tao!" Sin Gow gasped. "Master say for wait. I wait."

"You lie!" Roger drew his gun and jammed the barrel against the *mafoo's* ribs. "Speak up, Sin Gow, or I'll send you to your dishonorable ancestors! I'm giving you ten seconds to live. One—two—three—four—five—six—"

"Ai-yee, Tajen, stop! I tell you. It is there—there! That house, Tajen!"

"Good!" Roger reversed the gun with a quick movement and brought the butt down hard on the *mafoo's* shaven skull. Sin Gow jerked once and went limp as a rag doll.

"Quick, Wu Han! Strip off his girdle and tie him up—plenty tight!"

The house Sin Gow had pointed out crouched behind a mud wall whose gate was solid and close-barred. "Up you go, Wu Han!" Roger ordered, and boosted the yellow boy to the top of the wall. He dropped down inside and silently opened the gate.

Their footsteps made no noise on the sandy earth of the compound. The front of the house was dark and silent, the door locked. Roger moved around to the side and found a lighted window. He listened to the murmur of voices within. Von Kragge was there!

He tried the window, but it was locked. Drawing back his fist, he smashed at the frail wood panels. They splintered and broke, and a second blow knocked away the whole frame. Roger swung his legs over the sill and jumped into the room, his gun leveled.

"Don't move—any of you!"

They stared at him, open-mouthed—Otto von Kragge, the mandarin Chang Tai, and the doll-faced An-yin in her glittering Manchu robe. There was no one else in the room.

"Roger!" the German stammered. "How comes it you are here? What means it, eh?"

"Stay where you are, von Kragge!" Roger commanded, holding the steel level. He heard Wu Han scrambling through the window and spoke without taking his eyes from the strange trio. "Open the door for Missee."

He heard Arline's hasty steps and the gasping catch of her breath as she stopped on the threshold of that brilliantly furnished room. "Roger, where's father?" she cried. "He's not here! We're too late! Oh, what have they done to him—"

"Speak up, von Kragge!" Roger snapped. "Where's Mr. Randolph?"

But in those few seconds the German had pulled himself together. "My goot Roger, you speak with riddles. I know nothing of Herr Randolph. I haf not seen him. Perhaps you will be please to explain this madness, eh?"

"When we get through here, von Kragge, I think *you'll* do all the explaining. We're going to search this place."

"Goot! Goot! Search well!" the German mocked. "Perhaps you think I haf your Herr Randolph hidden in my coat-pocket, eh?"

Suddenly Arline pushed past the Chinese girl and whipped a crumpled square of yellow silk from a teakwood stand. Under it lay a statue of the Sleeping Buddha, carved in jade of a deep glowing red—the god reclining on his right side, with one hand under his cheek and the other holding a string of prayer-beads.

"Look, Roger, it's the jade Buddha!

Dad must have been here!" Arline whirled toward the German, her hands clenched. "Herr von Kragge, if any harm has come to my father, I'll—"

"Fraulein, make yourself calm, I beg. I gif to you my word of honor—"

"Save your breath, von Kragge," Roger cut in, sharp and decisive. "Wu Han, search the house. Look everywhere!"

WU HAN took one of the lamps and went out. "Wait, Wu Han, I'm going with you," Arline announced.

Roger held the trio with steady eye and unwavering gun. In the silence he heard the searchers moving from room to room. The mandarin Chang Tai sat with his hands buried in his sleeves, his face cold and expressionless. An-yin lit a cigarette and flipped the match away with a careless gesture. Von Kragge perched comfortably on the lid of a painted chest, puffing on a cheroot, a sardonic smile on his lips.

Arline and Wu Han returned from their search. "There's nothing—no one!" the girl cried. "The rest of the house is empty—not even furniture—nothing but dust and dirt." Her voice broke. "Oh, Roger, tell me what to do! We must find my father—we must!"

Roger winced at the desperate cry. Names slipped through his mind in a rosary of death and destruction—Jennison

—Rostikoff—Vargas—and now, Theodore Randolph. Arline's father. The sinister mystery of the Fong Tao was being repeated here in the Wu Lung Hutung and Arline was crying out to him for help!

"You are surprise, eh?" von Kragge taunted. "What you do now, my young hot-head with the pistol? I think it is your move—"

But the German overplayed his hand with that taunting challenge. Something in word and tone fused in Roger's brain, brought a sudden gleam into his eye. He leaned forward, his voice as tight as his trigger-finger.

"No, von Kragge, it will be your move! *Get away from that chest!"*

Otto von Kragge started at the crackling command, and the cheroot fell unnoticed from lax fingers. The bland smile was gone and from those clear-cut features—they seemed to crumble and sag, so that he was suddenly an old man, years older, and haggard as death itself.

"Move, damn you!" Roger shouted, and fired a warning shot at his feet. The German scrambled away in a hurry and Roger sprang to the chest and flung open the lid.

Theodore Randolph lay wedged inside, his knees doubled up to his chin, his face white and still.

Arline flew forward with a strangled cry as Roger lifted the body upright. In the confusion he heard Wu Han's shrill warning, *"Hai,* Tajen, *hai!"* and threw a swift glance back over his shoulder.

The mandarin Chang Tai was gliding toward him with eyes like jet buttons, hastily pulling the tasseled guards from his long claws with his teeth. The sharp, painted nails stood out like blue fangs—

"Die, Rice-face!" the Chinaman said.

Roger twisted aside as the blue claws raked toward his face. Chang Tai hooked at him again with the other hand, but the automatic spoke first. Roger fired once—twice—three times. The fat mandarin wavered, pawing the air. His mouth opened, but no sound came out. He seemed to rise up on his toes then crashed headlong, stiffly, like a tree falling.

Arline's face swam into Roger's vision, her eyes twin pools of horror. Her voice reached his ears, a broken whisper. "Oh,

Roger, they've killed dad. He's dead—dead!"

Roger didn't say anything. He looked at Arline, straightened, and went after von Kragge. The German saw his face and sidled along the wall like a cornered rat. He gave a guttural cry when Roger's hands pinned him by the throat.

"Wait, Roger, wait! *Lieber Gott*—listen! He is not dead, no! It is a drug we haf give him. Quick—a doctor—and he will come awake again."

Roger's eyes burned at him. "God help you, von Kragge, if you're lying!"

XV

ARLINE put an extra pillow behind her father's head, and he smiled and patted her hand. Roger stood at the side of the bed. "How are you feeling now, Mr. Randolph?"

"Much better, Roger. I'll be up and around in a day or two." Randolph pulled open the collar of his pajama shirt and exhibited two deep scratches on the side of his neck.

"See those marks, Roger? That's where Chang Tai jabbed me with those poisoned nails of his. He crept up behind me and held on like a snake till I lost consciousness. It didn't take long, either."

"The stuff is called Blue Dust," Roger said. "I knew Chang Tai's nails were painted, but I didn't realize why until I saw him coming at me with those claws spread out wide."

Arline shivered. "I can't believe yet that he was human. He must have been a fiend—a vampire!"

"Well, he'll never try that trick again—nor any others. But I'd say von Kragge was the real fiend. Chang Tai was only the cat's-paw. It was von Kragge's brain that hatched out the scheme."

Randolph made a grimace. "Where is the old devil?"

"He's locked away in the strongest cell in the military jail, and he's scared to death."

"He should be!" Randolph said bitterly. "Hanging'd be too good for him."

"It's not only that," Roger continued. "Word has leaked out that the red jade is the famous Sleeping Buddha, stolen from the temple at Ulan Bator. Von Kragge is afraid that the *lamaserie* priests will find a way to have his throat cut, even in the jail."

Randolph nodded. "I recognized the statue at once. I told von Kragge I'd seen it in the sacred shrine at Ulan Bator and that I'd have no share in handling stolen goods. Then the German dropped his mask and the trouble started. My suspicions had been aroused when he met me at the Golden Dragon, instead of the Chinaman I expected to find there, but I made the mistake of keeping my eye on von Kragge, instead of Chang Tai."

"I don't think you were the first to make that mistake, Mr. Randolph. I have an idea you were the *tenth* man to whom von Kragge tried to sell the Sleeping Buddha—and the only one to come away alive!"

"Ten!" Randolph exclaimed. "Good God!"

Roger's voice hardened. "Before I came to Kalgan, a man by the name of Jennison worked with von Kragge. I found a record kept by this Jennison, and there were eight entries in it. I believe that each entry marked a death. A Russian merchant called Rostikoff was the ninth victim. You were scheduled to be the tenth—"

"It's incredible!" Randolph muttered. "Fantastic!"

"I don't think so," Roger replied. "We're beginning to get the details from Sin Gow and the girl An-yin. Von Kragge's scheme was to tell his victim that a magnificent piece of red jade could be bought from an impoverished Chinese mandarin, but that he hadn't the cash to swing the deal alone."

"Correct!" Randolph cut in. "That's

the story he told me at the Golden Dragon."

"If the other man agreed to supply the additional money, von Kragge arranged a meeting, secretly and at night, to show him the red jade. Chang Tai played the mandarin's part, of course, ready to strike with those poisoned claws whenever the German gave the signal."

"But ten murders!" Randolph argued. "That raises a stir, even in China. There would be talk, investigation—"

"That's where the old devil was shrewd. He didn't leave the bodies lying around to cause talk. His victims simply disappeared without a trace. A Chinese missing here, a Russian there, perhaps a traveling German—who can do anything about it, with a war on, and everything unsettled?"

"Haven't any of the bodies been found?" Arline asked.

"Not yet," Roger replied, "but we found a curious thing in searching through the *yamen*—a room filled with sacks of common, ordinary dirt. We know now that von Kragge packed his victim into chests, so it looks as if they're buried somewhere in the *yamen*. We're going to dig and find out."

"How awful!" Arline said with a shudder. "That terrible old man, with his white hair and kindly face and soft voice. It doesn't seem possible."

"He's a cold-blooded snake!" Roger declared. "Perhaps the man is insane. I don't know. The craziest point of all is that von Kragge himself has a deathly fear of blood. One time I cut my hand and he nearly fainted when he saw the blood. I think that's why he chose the method of shutting a drugged man into a chest and letting him die by suffocation."

THEODORE RANDOLPH exhaled a deep breath. "Almost my fate. That's twice you've saved my life, Roger. I don't know how I'm going to thank you."

Roger grinned. "Don't worry about that part, Mr. Randolph. I'll ask for my reward a little later." Arline's dark eyes smiled at him.

Randolph looked at the tall American, then he looked at Arline, and the meaning of Roger's words dawned on him. "Ha! So that's how it is! I'm to lose my daughter, eh?"

Roger smiled and grasped the hand Randolph extended to him. "I'd like to put it in a different way, sir—let's say you're gaining a son."

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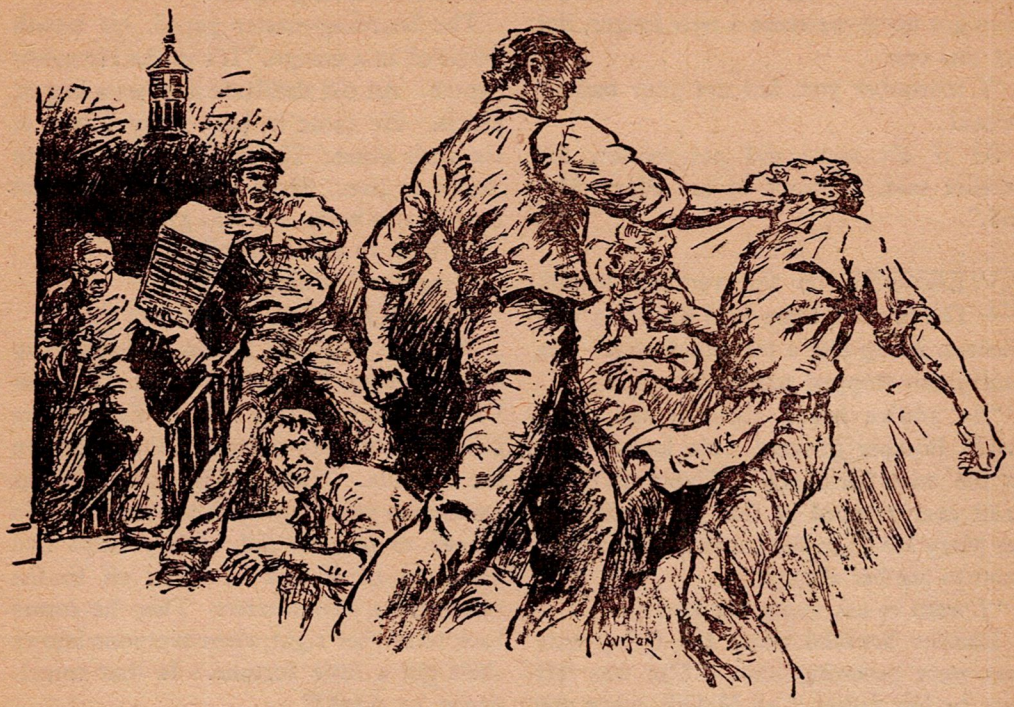


PEARL FEVER

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Questing," "You Can't Swim the Styx," etc.

THIS derelict had been here before and Mary McGill had fallen in love with him. Blubber Hoag had never seriously entertained the notion of getting rid of a drinker at his bar, or a lodger in his boarding house. But now the notion struck him hard and with such horrid clarity that he was frightened.

He could see the marks of the derelict's descent from a better life to the beach; an expensive belt too scratched to pawn, the best of tennis shoes although they needed pipe-claying, and whites that were patchy and salt stained, but tailor made. His leanness made Blubber feel the cutting pressure of his own pants across his enormous stomach.

He also made the other men on the veranda look squat and thick boned. Four of these men had hoped that Mary McGill would choose one of them—the mate of an Island trader, a pantryman third class, a ship chandler's clerk, a bosun's mate from one of the liners. They were not the only ones who wanted Mary McGill. Honolulu's waterside called her Mary Ko, as the kanakas would say, Mary Sugar.

When this derelict with the black curls and bronzed face stepped up to the veranda, Blubber Hoag settled back in the squeaking rattan rocker and unbuttoned the top

buttons of his pants to give his massive waist freedom to sag. Ordinarily he would have got up to welcome a new lodger, but not this one.

"I remember you, but not your name," he said.

As if his name did not matter, the derelict said, "I want to see Mary McGill."

EVERYONE on the veranda tensed. The bosun's mate held his cigar motionless, its tip like a trapped firefly. The pantryman stopped puffing his pipe.

"So you've heard about it too, have you?" Blubber grunted. He looked over to the other drinkers. "Every fo'castle hand ever stopped at this joint wants to see Mary Ko since she got rich. What you want to see her about?"

"I want to ask about her kinfolk."

Blubber brushed away the flying ants that were pestering him. "She was left here by her father, Cap McGill, when she was two years old and motherless."

"And what happened to McGill?"

"What you want to know for? He had a steam schooner trading for copra and gambir and was wrecked. He left the baby with me because we were friends back in 'Frisco. I had a wife then and she mothered the girl. What else do you want to know?"

The derelict sat on a whiskey barrel and smoked a cheroot. He had no cigarettes, but he dried some black native tobacco with a match and twisted it into a strip of pandanus. Blubber had the feeling that he was smoking a monogrammed cigarette.

"And she has no kin?"

"Why you keep asking that? Sure she's got kin. Back in the States, down East, Kittery. Mother and father both from down East. Who the hell are you anyway asking me these questions? I been a father to her and treated her right."

The visitor did not seem to be interested in this point. "If she has no other kin, then who was it left her this fortune everyone's talking about?"

The boarding-master gaped, his mouth flesh-red as a mango. "It's in the Honolulu papers. An old shellback left her a bag of pearls. He came in here when I was at the desk alone. He said he had a month maybe to live. She'd nursed him the last time he was here. He was grateful."

"I want to talk to her."

"I said, what about?"

"I'll tell her that, Mister, not you."

With an infallible genius for sizing up men, Blubber Hoag said aloud, "I know what you're here for, sailor. You got the pearl fever." He turned to the others on the veranda. "Look. This lubber comes here three years ago with the shakes. No money to pay his bill. Mary helps him snap out of it and he ships off to the South Seas somewheres. Then he comes back to see her right when everyone knows she's got a little fortune. Is that coincidence, or what?"

"What's wrong with throwing him out, Blubbs?" someone suggested calmly.

The derelict swung around to face the group of men behind him. He could not tell just which one had spoken. The eyes of one slipped over to the boarding-master. Another looked down as if caught in a covert act. The third got up and went in to the bar, but turned at the door and stood there. The fourth went to the potted plants at the veranda's edge and knocked out his pipe.

In a casual way the group had changed. One scene dissolved into another that was more tense, more patterned. The pattern was of four men posting themselves, one at the door, others deployed at the veranda's edge. Counting the enormous hulk of a body in the rocker, the derelict was surrounded.

He turned for the door and found himself staring at a tall young girl.

Mary McGill did not look much like an orphan abandoned in a waterfront lodging house. She looked like a girl that had

come from San Francisco—from Pacific Avenue, not from Pacific Street. She had money now, enough to buy a wardrobe to go back to the States. It was quite possible that she had been trying on one of her new frocks. Certainly there could have been no other reason for her wearing it at Hoag's boarding house.

She said, as the derelict gaped at her, "Don't you remember me?"

He shook his head vaguely.

"I'm Mary McGill."

"You don't even remember her," Blubber Hoag jeered. "All she does is fix her hair instead of tying it in a reef knot and you don't know her." He looked up at the girl. "Says he came here to see you. Can't imagine why. Less he's been reading the papers. Get it?"

IT WAS the hair that changed her more than the dress. She had had it fixed at a hair dresser's in town, bobbed and brushed around her tanned face as if a kona were blowing it and mussing it.

But the beach comber, Blubber noted carefully, was not looking at her hair, or even at her face. He was staring at the string of *perles baroques* on her wind browned chest. She was almost as tall as he, so that he did not have to look down far. He breathed faster as if the ginger flowers about the veranda were too strong. Yes, pearl fever, everyone saw, smoked in his eyes.

And in the girl's eyes there was fire too, that kind of sea fire that lights the Waikiki combers. It was excitement and joy. All the lodgers at Hoag's boarding house came from the forecastle or glory-hole, but this one came from the after guard, a while ago perhaps from the bridge. He told her that day three years ago that he had a ticket, mate of steam and master of sail, but that he was going in for pearling. The last she heard of him he had got a berth, a "Number 10" which meant one way, on a freighter that was bound for the Solomons for ivory and pearl shell and sandalwood.

And here he was again, just as she'd last seen him, ragged, without doubt penniless, his eyes glaring, fevered with that same vision; a reef and an uncharted motu that would make a man rich for life! Pearl fever, instead of the shakes—one was as bad as the other. Once again, Mary believed, this man needed her help.

She said smiling, "What did you want to see me about?"

He looked as if he had forgotten the excuse he had made up. Any man would forget things, looking at Mary McGill the way she was that night. Then he mumbled something about a deck locker he had left on a freighter down in Vanua Levu.

Blubber gasped. "You lose a box down in the South Seas and ask for it in Honolulu! What the hell's bells!"

The pantryman and water-clerk snickered. The bosun's mate scratched his huge jaw then guffawed.

But Mary McGill said, "Did you trace it here?"

"My freighter sailed for Honolulu, taking the box along after I was left ashore. At sea the skipper heard from some of the forecastle I was killed in a fight. The forecastle hands thought so. It was a fight, yes, but they were all snowed under with rum and didn't know what happened. I got passage here and learned from the ship's husband in Honolulu the box and its effects were set down in the log same as if a dead seaman had left them on the skipper's hands. He sold them according to custom and logged the amount."

"Then the money for the sale belongs to you," Mary McGill said, assuming her usual role of championing a wronged sailor. She turned to the boarding master. "You're always going to those sales, Uncle Blubbs. You bought a locker last week."

"Can't remember. Maybe I did. But how do I know it's his?"

The girl asked the derelict, "What was your ship?"

"*Pedro Gull.* Bringing sulphur and rock salt from Borneo."

"I'll show you where the locker is," Mary said. "Come upstairs and identify it."

When the derelict followed her into the house, every man on the veranda stared a moment stupefied. Blubber Hoag swatted at the night beetles and swore. The box, of course, was only an excuse. Although, perhaps, he did have a claim, it was a piece of infernal good luck. It give him an entrée.

The pantryman said, "Looks like he's won a trick, ay, Blubbs?"

The mate said, "He's on starboard hand, and we got to make way for him—*he* thinks."

The boarding master fanned the wet tallow of his neck slowly, then heaved himself out of the rocker. "I'm drinking. You four boys join me. It's on the house."

They followed him into his office. Squeezing himself into the chair behind his desk, Blubber opened a cigar box, passed it around and sent a Filipino houseboy for glasses and a bottle.

He did not have to say anything. All he did was to listen, for the younger men broached the subject themselves. That old Blubber Hoag would do anything for the girl he had adopted was understood. He was a fairly honest man, but for her sake he would commit theft, and even condone violence.

The pantryman said, "What do you want us to do with him, Blubbs?"

HE ANSWERED noncommittally. "Course his only game is to try and marry her."

"And then ditch her," said the water-clerk. "And who gets those pearls. Who do you think?"

Blubber groaned. His feet were swollen with the damp heat, their torture merging into the torture of his spirit. "There's to be no knifing. Nothing like that."

"You can get him a berth yourself, Blubbs," said the pantryman, "on one of these tramps in port. We'll take him aboard ourselves. Snook here has a skiff."

Blubber gasped. He gasped because of the shock of finding someone else thinking his thoughts aloud. "That don't pay. A shanghaied drunk may turn up some day and I get into a jam with the Honolulu District Court. I mean the U. S. Court at that. I've never done that all the twenty years I've run this joint. I've gotten drunks jobs, yes. But I sober 'em up first so they can sign papers stating the nature and duration of voyage. I did that even for this beachcomber three years ago and look at the thanks I get. He comes back with his weather eye on Mary's pearls."

"Hell!" the pantryman said. "Any agent getting a seaman a berth is doing him injury. He signs papers saying his wages can be forfeited by desertion, and that makes it regular and not plain shanghaiing. Get him a job without papers."

The mate of the island schooner was smoking fast and thinking hard. "I take him aboard—"

They all looked at him, knowing that his brother was skipper of the little steam schooner. "Dump him over in Maunalua Bay. Well then, I don't mean dump him over. We're taking on sugar and pineapples at Keamuku Landing, then at Kihei. What's wrong with taking him all the way down to Hawi on Hawaii?"

"It would take him four or five days to come back and complain to the police," Blubber objected. But he was thinking aloud. "By that time Mary McGill is on

her way to 'Frisco. Of course some of us would go to jail."

"Wait," the mate said. "My brother tells how it happened. The lubber got into a scrap here in your joint, see, Blubbs? Everybody in the house testifies to that because he *is* going to get into a scrap. My brother says he swam aboard and begged him to hide him and put him off at the next island. That would be Molokai."

"No! Further than that. Across Alenuihaha Channel. Take him to Hawaii," the pantryman said.

Blubber was thinking this himself. He felt that it was his own idea. "But steamers to Portland and Frisco and Los Angeles are always standing through Kaiwi Channel. You'll have to keep him quiet."

"There's ways to keep a man quiet if he drinks," the pantryman said.

Blubber gave him a terrified look. "Drinks? He ain't drinking. I don't keep no chloral hydrate in this house, if that's what you mean. What sort of a house you think I'm running here."

"If we beat him and knock him out," the bosun's mate said, "will you call the police?"

BLUBBER drank, thought it over until he belched. "Why call the police and give my house a bad name?"

They all drank.

Blubber Hoag waddled upstairs. Habitually he stayed out of the necessary brawls of his hard-drinking guests. He liked comfort and he liked his three hundred pounds. What fights there had been in his house flared suddenly and went out like these alitaptaps streaking their heatless insect light against the darkness of plantains and palms. Violent though they were at times, the fights lacked the terrible suspense of premeditation. The deliberateness of this thing that was to happen sobered him and frightened him.

But he remembered that it was for the sake of the two-year-old babe that had been left for him to bring up. It was for the five-year-old child whose smile charmed him even with her front teeth out. It was the gangling girl of twelve, the innocent temptress of sixteen. All these years flashed through Blubber's confused and axious brain.

There might yet be another way.

He found Mary McGill and the derelict in a room in the middle of the upstairs hall. She was looking down at the man as he knelt, her hands at her breast, but he acted as if she were not there. He was examining a tattered old brass-bound box.

Blubber said, "There was some stuff in the box—a compass and such. That's what I bought it for. My lodgers are always asking me, 'Where can I get a sailknife cheap?' I sell things to 'em."

The derelict looked up, his eyes narrow and hot.

Blubber flinched. "Mary, you go down and ask Jock Toller was it him that bought that compass. We want to do what's right. This man here's making a claim and it's just."

Mary McGill saw the boarding master's eyes and she sensed something wrong. This was not just a case of a sailor coming to make some petty claim. Blubber was frightened about something. It frightened her. "Go on, bear a hand!" Blubber said, shooing her out with his fan. "See if Jock's down at the bar." When she went out he flopped heavily to a chair, for the walk up the stairs had exhausted him and his feet burned.

"I want to tell you something, sailor."

"You aren't telling me. I'm telling you."

"Sure, but wait. Some of those wharf rats down below, they're going to jump you soon as you go down those stairs. Now will you listen?"

The derelict got up. He seemed exhausted too. He panted. And when he lit his dead cheroot, he had the shakes. Pineapple rum had knocked his nerves galley west. Hoag remembered, but that was three years ago. This shaking of his hand was caused by something else.

"They don't like the idea of you coming here to see this girl," Hoag explained. "Neither do I. You came here to get her pearls. You saw a list of them in the papers. Seventy perfect ones, averaging eight pearl grains. You read that. Enough seed pearls to fill a cocoanut. It gave you a hunch."

THE man inhaled. "Is that all you wanted to say?"

"One thing else. You better think it over. You can't send for the police. No one will go for the police without asking me first. My houseboy and cook, they've been sent for the police before, but they never go. You're in a trap. Maybe I can get you out, but first I'm thinking just what happens if that bunch down there manhandle you a little and you wake up a long way from here. This is what happens. Mary McGill gets out of this joint and goes back to the States and home to her kin. That's what I want. That's what my wife wanted when she died. 'Get Mary out of here,' she said, dying. 'She'll be the only woman in the house and she's too good looking. She's a skipper's daughter and her kin ain't the forecastle scum she's growing up with here.'"

The man broke in, not listening, "What else did you sell besides my compass?"

"I'm talking about this bunch that's going to jump you, not about a fool compass. Get this: the girl's my daughter now, I say to myself, and she's going to get what other girls get. Hotel Street's just around the corner, and Hotel Street is the same to Honolulu that Dupont and Pacific is to 'Frisco's Coast. It was all right when she was fourteen, but she gets to be sixteen and boys from the black gang of these steamers grin. Mess punks watch every move of her. There's more drinking when she's around. But, hell, do I want to use Mary for a percentage girl? My wife was right. She's got to get out."

"And you want to get me out of this house before I get what I came for? Otherwise there's to be a fight. Is that it?"

Blubber's fan stopped swinging. "All right," he said in a different tone. "I won't talk about her any more. It's all right with me. You won't go peaceable, but I gave you the chance. All right."

It was at that moment that Mary McGill came in. The hot little room with its washstand, cot, rattan chair, seemed fresher as if the Trades had brought a fragrance from across the Island. The illusion was partly due to the giant plantain leaves parting with the wind, admitting moonlight. The light glowed on Mary McGill's shell-white face.

"They're coming upstairs! They're going to fight! Uncle Blubbs, can't you hear me! They're after this man!"

Blubber fanned himself. "I don't mix in these fights." She was wringing her hands. "The police—you can send for the police!"

"They'd get here after it's all over. Let him fight his way out."

"He can't! There's four of them!"

The stairs squeaked.

The trapped man whirled to the door, but Mary clutched his arm. "Don't go out! That's just what they're waiting for. Stay in here and I'll call the police myself."

Blubber tried to get up but his seat stuck to the varnished rattan. He decided to sit where he was. He was in a position to give the cornered man some good advice. For example, he could point out that to jump from the window would mean a broken neck, at least a broken leg.

The girl meanwhile whisked to the closet and got out a pair of dungarees and a coat of whites.

The stairs creaked again. Evidently more than one man was coming up into that dark hall. Someone walked past. There would be men on both ends of the hall now ready to jump the trapped man when he stepped out.

The girl took off her dress, tossing it over her head like a cloud, as filmy as pineapple fiber. She drew on the dungarees and the ragged coat of white drill. Before Blubber knew what she was doing she put out the lamp and slipped into the hallway.

FEET thumped and banged on warped damp wood. A sudden rush of men passed the door, chasing the white-clothed figure down the hall.

Blubber tried to yell but he could only lumber to his feet. "They think she's *you!*" he managed to squeak in the derelict's ear. "Can't you see her game!"

Both men rushed to the door. Blubber choked, "She'll be knifed! Mary! It's Mary-Ko, you murdering scuts!"

The derelict was out in the hall now. Enough moonlight slanted through the veranda door at the end of the hall, for Blubber to see. He saw the derelict jump the last man to rush past the room in pursuit of the white-clothed figure. This man fell, clipped on his square jaw.

"B'God, there's two of him!" someone shouted.

The girl's gasp came from further down the hall as three men jumped her. Blubber Hoag screamed in a higher voice. A lodger poked his head out of a side room admitting a band of yellow lamplight into the hall. Blubber saw Mary McGill, a small heap on the floor. He saw the derelict drop another man. And he saw the two who were left—the bosun's mate and the pantryman—stand a moment chagrined at finding they had knocked down the girl instead of the man they were after. One turned abruptly and fled to the back veranda of the old shack. The other—the bosun's mate—put up a good fight. The men rolled.

The hallway was full now. A houseboy, the Chinese cook, the kanaka bartender, lodgers—all came up the stairs cautiously, one by one.

Mary struggled up dazed. One of the fallen men had evidently armed himself with a bottle for it had rolled almost to Mary's feet. She picked it up.

The bosun's mate had the derelict on his back now, his hand gripping the black curls, another hand choking him. But a bottle broke on his own head. And this brought quiet.

WHEN Blubber Hoag told his servants to clean up the mess, he saw the derelict helping Mary McGill into a room. Or perhaps she was helping him. Blubber followed, gasping heavily for breath. He was as badly winded as if every blow of that fight had landed on his sagging stomach. He flopped exhausted to a chair and looked at Mary McGill who sat on the edge of the cot rubbing the side of her head.

"You little fool!" the derelict said. "Didn't you know you'd be slugged going out there?"

He got some water and bathed her forehead. Blubber reached for the pitcher. He was badly in need of a drink. As soon as he could get his breath, he called the houseboy to bring gin. Then when the derelict caught his eye, he started whimpering, "Listen, Mister, I—"

"I ought to kick your guts through your head. This girl pretty near got killed."

Mary McGill sat there, a beam of moonlight shattering on her open mouth. Tilted upward, her face was as luminous as if the moonlight came from beneath her skin.

"Sure she pretty near got killed," Blubber said. "Throws herself out there just to save *you*—you, of all men, who came here to wreck her life."

"What do you think you're talking about, Uncle Blubbs!" the girl exclaimed.

"Let him tell it," Blubber went on. "He wants your pearls. Well, the money for the sale is in the bank, all except what she spent for her clothes and what I spent getting her a ticket to 'Frisco. You'll do anything to lay your hands on that, won't you?"

The derelict looked down at her. Her

eyes had narrowed, puzzled. But when he grinned, they turned big again. The *perles baroques* had been torn from her neck so that they dangled on the open lapel of white drill.

The man gave a shrug, as if he had lost a big stake at a game. "All right, let her go back to the States." Blubber saw him reach down for her hand. "Good-bye. And thanks for helping me out of this jam."

She said, "But where are you going now?"

"Back to the Coral Sea to grub for pearls."

The girl said, "But how can you get there?"

"Charter a schooner. Any man from here to Manila who hears about it will back me."

"Hears about what?" she asked.

"The motu I found down there. Pearls in the fringing reef. You've heard beachcombers talking like this before—to cadge a drink?"

The Filipino came with gin. Blubber was watching the beachcomber like a cat. The girl said, "Go ahead. I believe you. Where is your motu?"

Blubber swigged from the bottle. Then, "Here's your gin, sailor. You and me'll drink. She don't drink."

"There are lots of oysters and no octopuses," the man said, swigging deep. "The Japs had fished out the octopuses for eating, even though it was the Australian mandate, this island I'm talking about." He took another swig then made a cheroot as he talked. "One octopus will suck out the oysters from a whole bed. It was a perfect set-up. I grubbed the reef for a year." He shrugged, snorted his smoke.

"What did you do with them—all the pearls you grubbed?" the girl asked.

A moment passed as if he were trying to remember. "They were stolen. I lost them in that fight I told you about down in Vanua Levu."

"But couldn't you trace the robbers?"

"It would be easier to go back to the island. There are more pearls there."

His eyes focused for a single moment on the brass bound locker on the floor.

"Yes, your locker," Blubber Hoag said as if all this time he had held his breath. "You'll be taking it with you?"

"It's no good any more," the derelict said, "what with the lining ripped out."

"Then I'll pay you," Blubber said affably. "I bought it for seven dollars Mex, including the compass and sail and knife and other stuff. Is seven dollars enough?"

"Enough to pay for a few drinks," the derelict said grimly. He reached for the bottle. "Here's to that old shellback who left Mary McGill her fortune." He drank to Blubber Hoag.

Blubber had just taken a drink, but he choked on it. His eyes dropped guiltily, then he changed the subject.

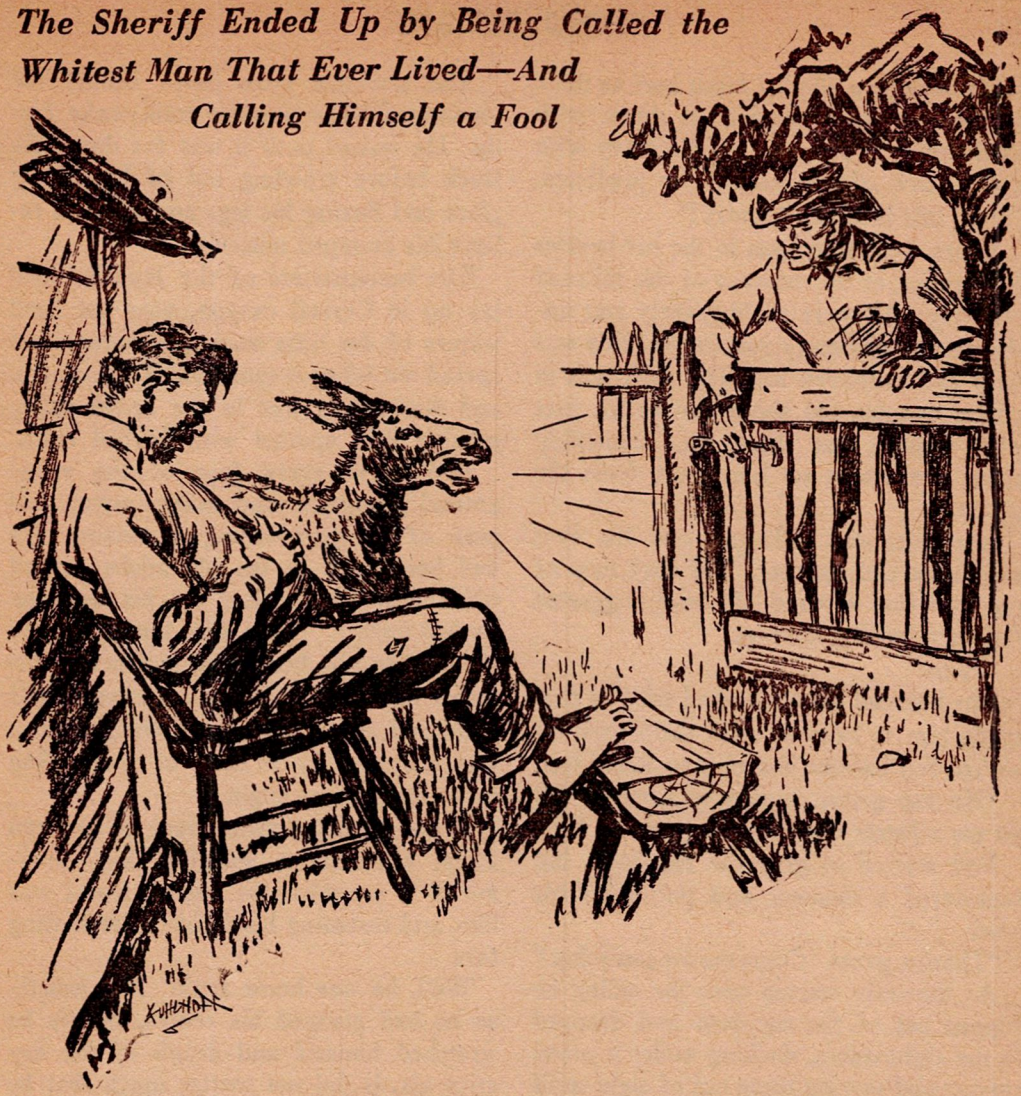
"There's a fifty ton schooner, the owners being planters up on Kauai. You come here day after tomorrow. Maybe the boat can be chartered, cheap. Satisfied?"

The man's eyes went from the box to Mary McGill's face and held there a moment. Lamplight and the moon lit her hair which was fine and silky. In one spot it stuck, darkened, to her temple where she was bruised.

"Sure," he said. "I'm satisfied."

Blubber Hoag gave an enormous sigh. He started to fan his wet jowls, smiling gradually. Mary McGill was free. At least she was going to leave this dive very soon. But judging from her eyes shining bright as she held the derelict's hand, it was to be doubted whether she would be sailing for the States.

The Sheriff Ended Up by Being Called the Whitest Man That Ever Lived—And Calling Himself a Fool



JUSTICE WESTERN STYLE

By HOMER KING GORDON

Author of "Border Duty," "A Suicide Job," etc.

AS THE long drag rolled down from the pass and stopped at the switch siding half a mile out of Hangtree, Red Jackson edged up to the open door of his box car Pullman and looked eagerly out over the flat valley towards the distant mountains.

"Better come on with us, Red," a bearded hobo urged, looking out over the desolate range and instinctively crowding back against the side of the box car. "A human bein' would starve to death out there."

Red tightened the rope threaded through the belt loops of his greasy overalls and grinned at his companions.

"Before morning I'll be puttin' a sharp

knife through a slice of fresh beef as thick as this car door, washin' it down with black coffee and soppin' up the gravy with a big stack of hot cakes," he predicted. "Man, this is God's country!"

There were four men in the car besides Red, riding at the expense of the railroad company. All were shabby, dirty and unshaven and obviously just hobos. Red was dirty and unshaven too. His shirt was in tatters and his old shoes tied to his feet with strings, but there was something about him which set him apart from the others.

His chin was different, and his eyes were alive and fighting. The wiry mop of red hair that covered his head suggested stubborn bulldog courage.

"Here."

The bearded hobo who had tried to persuade him to keep on with them took off his old felt hat and tossed it to Red's feet.

"No use gettin' sunstroke anyway. I'll git me a better one the first town we hit."

Red started to give the hat back, but considered a moment and put it on his head.

"Thanks, gents. Come see me some day."

As the train started onto the siding he slipped out of the car door and dropped to the rightofway, ducking under a metal culvert and staying there out of sight until the caboose had rumbled over him and on down the track.

FROM the position of the sun, he knew it was still early afternoon. And although he had many miles to make before morning, he had good reason to want to keep from being seen. The metal culvert was dry and shaded from the sun. He had enough tobacco left for a few cigarettes if he used it sparingly. A passenger train coming from the west roared overhead, and in the distance he heard the freight pull back on the mainline and go into silence in the distance. Finishing his thin cigarette, he leaned back and went to sleep.

The sun had gone down behind the mountains when another train woke him up. He waited until it was far down the track before crawling out of his hiding place and flexing his legs and arms to relieve his cramped muscles.

The headquarters of the Jaybell ranch lay up in Crystal canyon, near the head waters of the little mountain stream that spread out when it came out of the canyon and was finally lost in the broad valley grazing land spotted with Jaybell cattle.

Red knew every foot of the range around Hangtree, and every canyon and peak of the surrounding mountains. He had been born in the old adobe Jaybell ranchhouse and he had cut his teeth on Jaybell leather. Those were the days when his mother had been alive and before his father had become a hopeless cripple, half blind and almost deaf from being thrown and trampled by a herd of stampeding cattle one stormy night.

It had been ten years since he had run away, a rebellious, gangling kid, determined to see what the outside world was like, and resenting his father's dominating care.

Well, he was home again. Not exactly as he had planned his return, but as he stretched himself and drank in the dry crisp air, it did not matter much that he had not eaten a full meal for days, and that it might be a long time before he could show his face in any public place.

A dry wash led away from the culvert and towards the mountains. With the old felt hat pulled down over his red hair, Red took another hitch in the rope around his waist, and started walking up the wash.

He had no trouble keeping out of sight before darkness settled down over the range. The only human he saw was a cowboy galloping in towards town and so anxious to get there that he was riding straight across the range towards the Hangtree water tank, looking neither left nor right.

Dawn was just breaking when Red came

to the top of the ridge overlooking the Jaybell ranch. His feet were rubbed raw and he was shivering from exposure, but with the caution of a hunted animal he lay concealed on the ridge for many minutes, looking down over the familiar buildings before venturing closer.

The ranch seemed to be in excellent condition and prosperous. Fences were all tight around the corrals and the barns and sheds all painted. All the stock that Red could see looked in excellent condition. Smoke curled out of the cookhouse chimney, reminding Red of the big breakfast he had described for the benefit of his boxcar companions.

It had all seemed very simple then; now he was not so sure. His father might be dead. The ranch might be in other hands although he could make out the old brand on some of the riding stock in the corral.

It was wiser, Red concluded, to do a little investigating before he announced himself and demanded food. Taking advantage of an old trail he had used in his boyhood, he crept down the steep cliff until he gained the shelter of one of the feed barns. Up in the hayloft he put an eye to a crack in the boards and watched the ranch slowly come to life.

Several riders came out of the bunkhouse and washed in the basin trough at the side of the cookshack. Red recognized none of them. A strange cook came out and beat on the angle iron that served as the mess call.

Red's mouth was watering, but some instinct warned him that danger lurked out there in the open, and he remained hidden until two men came slowly out of the back door of the ranchhouse and across toward the cookshack.

RED recognized one of the men instantly. It was his father, leaning heavily on a cane, dark glasses concealing his eyes as he made his way slowly across the barnyard, being guided partially by his companion.

The ten years he had been away had aged his father more than Red had expected. His hair was white and he looked like a feeble old man. Red paid little attention to the younger man at first.

Then something familiar in the swing of his shoulders, some long forgotten mannerism caused him to stiffen and clench his fists.

The younger man was about Red's own build and age but better fed and broader about the hips and shoulders. He was well dressed, almost foppishly dressed, and carried his head with an arrogant chin thrust forward.

Some of the riders came out of the cookshack, and waited, evidently for their riding orders. The young man with his father took his hat off and Red rubbed his eyes in astonishment.

It was Max Sample. Red would have sworn to his identity and he had good reason to remember that face, even in his dreams. Hatred and bitterness had pictured it to him often enough, but when Red had known Max Sample, they were back in Montana, and Max Sample had had coal black hair.

His presence now at the Jaybell Ranch, and with red hair, did not make sense. Or did it? Red's jaw set. He realized now that he would have to wait a little longer for breakfast.

Covering himself with loose hay Red waited until the ranch yard was cleared and his father and Max Sample had gone back into the ranchhouse. Then with as much stealth as he had used getting into the barn, he wormed his way back up the trail and over the ridge until he hit the narrow trail that led up into the high back country.

Unaccustomed to the high altitude and with his feet blistered and crippled by the broken old shoes, he had to travel slowly, watching each turn and hiding himself at each strange noise.

Noon passed. An hour or so later Red limped wearily into a small cleared meadow

and cautiously approached an old rough board shack that was set back under some shade trees and surrounded by a palisade of rough, home-made pickets.

An old man was sprawled out in a rickety rawhide bottomed chair beside the door of the shack. His boots were off and his bare feet propped up on a split log stool in front of the chair. A stubble of gray beard covered his face.

His hat was off and his head leaned back as he slept with his mouth open and his big stomach rising and falling with each gentle snore.

Pap Sheehan had not changed a hair from the way Red remembered him. He was wearing what might have been the same old flannel shirt and the same patched khaki pants. Red had never seen him dressed otherwise.

No one else was in sight. With a sigh of relief, Red reached over the fence gate to lift the latch. Instantly a cascade of sound filled the meadow and re-echoed from the surrounding cliffs. Red stopped, his hand in midair, unable to realize for the moment where the hoarse noise originated.

IN THAT split second Pap Sheehan came to life. Without a wasted movement his hand reached inside the doorway and Red found himself looking into the old man's clear blue eyes over the muzzle of a long barreled rifle.

"Don't shoot, Pap," Red gasped.

Slowly the old man lowered his rifle. His eyes bulged as he stared at Red. A small pack burro trotted out from under one of the trees and eyeing Red, brayed again, filling the meadow with discord for the second time.

Red suddenly broke into laughter.

"So help me, Pap. Nellie nearly scared me to death. I'd forgotten she was your watchdog."

Pap set the rifle carefully against the wall of the shack and brushed his hand over his eyes.

"Red," he said, his voice unsteady. "I'm all right, ain't I? I'm not drunk. I haven't had a stroke or anything?"

Red unlatched the fence gate and limped up the stone paved walk to where Pap was sitting, still motionless and wide eyed.

"I hope not. Why, you old wart, you haven't changed a whisker. You and Nellie don't look a day older than you did ten years ago that afternoon I come up here and told you good-by."

With agility surprising in a man so big and old, Pap leaped out of the chair and grabbed Red around the shoulders.

"I know'd it wasn't so," Pap shouted. "Doggone, I wasn't took in, not once."

Things went hazy and blurred before Red's eyes. When his head cleared he was sitting in Pap's old chair and drinking clear cold water out of a gourd Pap was holding.

"Doggone, Red, you looked starved," he scolded.

"I just about am, Pap," Red admitted.

"And here I am gabbing like an old woman," Pap moaned. "Git away from here, you old windbag."

Nellie had come up to stand beside the chair eyeing Red complacently as she flapped her ancient ears back and forth. Pap emptied the gourd in her face and she stalked off, every joint cracking with insulted dignity.

"Not a word. Set right there," Pap stormed, rushing into the shack and beginning to throw pots and pans around. "Time for gabbing when grub's down. Here—"

He rushed out with a cracked tea cup filled with thin white fluid.

"Warm your innards with this. I got deer liver fryin'."

Red emptied the cup at a gulp and then coughed and gasped.

"Sheehan's mountain dew," he gasped.

"Aged in the stump," Pap roared. "Boy, you're a treat for sore eyes."

"Pap, there's poster out for me," Red warned.

The old man straightened up and looked at him keenly.

"And me yelling till they could hear me clear down to Hangtree," he exclaimed. "You come on inside. Nobody gets by Nellie unannounced."

"I guess I'd better," Red agreed.

They did no more talking until Red had eaten and was on his second cup of coffee. Then Pap loaded his pipe and tilted his chair back against the wall.

"Now, son," he invited, "you're home. I don't care what you've done, or what the posters say you've done. If you want to make it that way, I ain't even curious. Suit yourself."

"I broke out of the big house up in Montana two weeks ago," Red explained quietly and meeting the old man's eyes. "I was in there for life."

"I don't blame no man nor beast for breakin' out of iron bars," Pap growled. "I'd do the same if I was put in jail and could. Life's a mighty long time to be locked up."

"It was for robbing a bank and killing a man," Red continued.

Pap's face contracted and he looked out towards the mountains with his lips working wordlessly for a few moments.

"What I said still goes," he said roughly, when his lips would form the words. "You're home."

Red grinned.

"A crime I didn't commit."

Pap's face broke into a big smile and he let out his breath with a huge sigh of relief.

"Red, you had me right worried. I oughta know'd better, half bringin' you up myself like I done. You never was cut out for bank robbin'. How'd it happen?"

"My own fault, mostly," Red admitted. "When I left here I went plenty wild. I throwed in with a gent up there in Montana about my own age. He had money an' we did some spending. One day I got drunk. A posse woke me up. There was blood on my hands. There was a sack of bank money in my saddle roll. Men swore I'd rode into town on my horse, with a handkerchief over my face, held up the bank, split the teller's head open and hit the trail. My gun had blood on it. My horse had been ridden hard."

Red spread his hands and shrugged.

"What happened to that pard you'd been throwin' in with?" Pap asked.

"He disappeared," Red said, his jaw grim. "My own wallet and papers were gone. I had his in my pocket. I was convicted and went to jail in his name, Max Sample."

"Why didn't you let your pa know?" Pap asked.

"What could anyone have done?" Red demanded. "Least I could do was keep his name clear. Sure, I know Max Sample framed me. How could I prove anything? No, Pap. I was trapped."

Pap got up and walked around the room, his big hands working absently and a frown on his weathered face.

"That Max Sample. What color hair did he have? About your size you say."

"Black hair," Red answered. "That's why I wasn't hung. Some witnesses saw this bank robber and noticed his hair was black. They couldn't deny mine wasn't. Prosecutor said I probably had a wig."

Pap continued to pace around the room, rumbles coming out of his throat.

"Now if his hair had been red," he suggested, "he'd look a little like you mighta looked."

"His hair is red now. I saw him this morning. What's he doing with my father down at the old ranch? What name does he go under now?"

"Yours," Pap exploded. "He come in here four years ago, and with your pa half blind and deaf as a post, he passed hisself off for you. Come on. Let's go down there and blast the skunk right into hell."

"Wait, Pap," Red protested. "Sure I can prove he's an impostor and I'm Red Jackson, but what then?"

"We'll hand him over to the sheriff; why——"

"Listen, up in Montana they convicted

me for robbing a bank and killing a man and now I've broken out of the pen. If I go back, what proof have I got except they convicted me under an assumed name? They're satisfied they got the right man."

"But—but what're you gonna do?" Pap demanded.

"I've been asking myself that same question ever since I saw him down at the Jaybell this morning," Red declared. "I reckon it'll take considerable figuring. One thing I won't do. I won't go back there and let them lock me up while some lawyer takes his time about gettin' me free again."

"How'd he ever have nerve enough to come down here and pass hisself off?" Pap marveled.

"I told him plenty. He must have found out I went to the pen without letting my name get out and he could find out I was in for life. With my papers, and what I'd told him about dad——"

"The dirty skunk," Pap growled. "Listen, Red, your old bunk's still up in the loft. Pull the ladder up after you an' get yourself some sleep. You look tuckered out. We'll deal with that highbinder somehow, an' we'll do it ourselves."

"How is dad?"

"Changed. Hardly ever gets away from the house an' he ain't sociable like he used to be," Pap shook his head. "I ain't been down there recent. Last time I was made aware I wasn't welcome. Doggone, I oughta had sense enough then to know it wasn't you."

"Where you headed for now?" Red asked uneasily.

Pap grinned and scratched his ear.

"Well, I figger maybe a change of clothes won't hurt you none. Maybe I can rake up a six-shooter an' a saddle an' a ridin' horse. I got prospects and it's none of your business how. Git on up there. Nellie'll give warnin' if company comes. There's a hand ax up there if anyone sticks his head up. I reckon that ain't likely. I'll be callin' you for breakfast."

ED TOOK a home-made ladder from under Pap's bunk in the big room and set it against the wall under a trapdoor in the board ceiling. Climbing up the ladder he pushed the trapdoor open and crawled into the low room under the roof. Reaching down, he got the ladder and pulled it into the loft, waved to Pap who stood below watching, and then closed the trapdoor again.

He had spent many an afternoon and night in Pap's upstairs bedroom. Strings of peppers and dried onions and jerked meat hung from the rafters. A pallet of sheepskins and old blankets was laid on the floor over next to the fireplace chimney.

The room was clean and dry, with the odors of the old cedar shingles and dried things giving the air up there a spicy tang.

Red slipped out of his rags and wrapping himself in a blanket dropped off to sleep almost immediately.

Sounds of pans rattling downstairs woke him up. Sunlight filtered through the spaces between the shingles. Pap heard him dressing.

"Time for meat," he shouted.

Opening the trapdoor and lowering the ladder Red descended to the big room. A pile of clothing lay on the floor by the door and was topped by a coarse towel.

"Git out there to the spring and scrub yourself an' see how them fit," Pap ordered. "Make it pronto, too. There's bear steak and hot cakes and coffee ready to eat."

Red found a slab of home-made yellow soap wrapped in the towel and although the water at the spring was icy cold, he scrubbed himself until his skin glowed and then put on the clothes Pap had brought.

They were not new and they were a little too large, but they were a vast improvement over the rags he had been wearing. Levis, boots, a checkered flannel shirt and worn cowhide vest made him feel like a man again. Wrapping his old clothes into a bundle, he went back to the shack just in

time for breakfast. Pap looked at him approvingly.

"Figgered about right for size," he declared. "Maybe a little loose now, but we'll fill you out soon."

He took the old clothes and threw them through the back door into the woodshed, holding the door open for Red to see a saddle, bridle, blanket and cow rope.

"Got the horse up in the high pasture," he explained. "Nellie don't git along with horses next to the house. She's as jealous as an old maid."

"How in the world, Pap?"

"Maybe I got money loaned out. Maybe I played poker. Maybe I stole 'em. That's my business. Yours right now is to do some belly stuffin'."

Red's transformation was not finished. After breakfast Pap produced some tobacco and cigarette papers, and then a pair of hair clippers.

"Come on out here in the light," he ordered.

The haircut he gave Red might not have been artistic, but it was thorough. Handfuls of red hair lay around the footstool when he was through. Red took a look in a cracked looking glass and complimented Pap on the haircut.

"Jist set there," Pap ordered.

He came back from the shack with a black bottle and an old scrubbing brush.

"What's that?" Red protested.

"Hair dye," Pap answered. "And don't argue. If there's posters up they're for a red-haired gent. If that skunk down at the Jaybell can dye his hair red, I reckon you can make yours black."

Red hardly knew himself when Pap had finished with him and he had washed traces of the dye from his scalp and face. Black hair and black eyebrows gave him an entirely different appearance.

They had gone back into the shack when a girl's voice was heard outside the door.

"Nellie—here—mind your teeth now."

Red looked questionably at Pap, who groaned.

"Doggone—I mighta knowed. Let me talk. No time to hide now."

"Pap—where are you?"

"Right here. Hi, Betty." Pap went to the door. "Come on in; I got some company for you to meet."

Pap was trying desperately to be casual and hearty, but to Red his voice sounded worried and forced. A slim, pretty girl with a tangle of black curls, and impish blue eyes came into the shack, followed to the door by Nellie who stamped stubbornly and refused to budge until the girl had given her the last half of an apple. The girl was dressed in riding clothes.

"This is my nevvy, Betty," Pap explained miserably. "Rode in from up Wyoming way. Betty Hogan, er—er—Rusty Sheehan."

Pap wiped his face with his shirt sleeve and looked imploringly at Red. The girl looked at Red and then at Pap.

"You—you sort of look like someone I used to know," she told Red. "I don't know him, do I, Pap? This isn't just a joke?"

"Always did say he took after me," Pap laughed—or tried to.

"I hope not," Red protested. "Pap, you've got me plumb discouraged."

"Pap's the finest man in the world," Betty said stoutly.

"Don't I know it!" Red agreed. "How'd you happen to get by Nellie unannounced? She nearly scared me over the mountains when I rode in."

"Nellie's a pal of mine," the girl declared.

THE girl did not stay long and while she was there Red tried his best to keep up a bantering conversation that would give Pap a chance to collect his wits. When she had gone, Pap threw himself down in the chair outside the door and groaned some more.

"That couldn't be the skinny little shrimp of old Cal Hogan's, could it?" Red

asked. "Why, I used to ride her around the range in my lap."

"It ain't nobody else," Pap informed him. "And Cal Hogan jist happens to be sheriff here, as well as smart as a steel trap to boot."

"Meaning what?" Red questioned.

"I reckon you'd better ride on west for a spell, son," Pap said. "I'll raise you a grubstake. When things git cleared up here you can come back. I've got some plans."

"So have I," Red declared grimly. "As long as Max Sample stays at the Jaybell, I stay around here, too. You didn't by any chance find a six gun last night to go with these clothes?"

"Yes, I've got a gun and belt," Pap admitted. "But, Red, a shootin' match won't clear your name none."

"I don't figure to do any shootin' just yet," Red told him. "Not unless I have to, but I might need a gun."

Pap went into the house and came back with the gun and belt and dragging the saddle and other equipment.

"I ain't changed my mind none," he explained. "This is your home as long as you need one, but during the day, Red, I reckon you'd better keep to the hills."

Red nodded.

"It'll be dark when I get back," he promised. "Today I'm just lookin' things over."

"Where y' goin', Red?" Pap pleaded.

"Pap," Red said slowly, "maybe you've never known what it was to be afraid, to be hunted, to want to hide at the slightest strange noise. I do, and so help me, Pap, I never did a dishonest thing in my life. Think what fear means to a man that has robbed and killed."

Pap nodded. "I reckon he'd be worried some. He's been hangin' around Hogan's place plenty, but I thought he was after Betty more'n information."

"Maybe I can break him wide open with the same kind of fear that's gnawed on me for the past two weeks," Red declared. "It's just an idea. I've got to get some proof someway before I can show my own face in public."

"If I git my fingers around his neck I'll twist it out of 'im," Pap growled.

"Anyway, I'll see you tonight," Red promised.

HE FOUND a saddle horse in Pap's upper pasture and had no trouble getting it caught and saddled. Mounting, he rode up into the mountains, coming down hours later to the ridge overlooking the Jaybell Ranch. During his ride he had seen no one, but a half formed plan was slowly beginning to crystallize in his mind.

An old election poster that he had torn from a tree alongside one of the trails gave him a piece of stiff paper. A small fire over which he charred a whittled stick, gave him a crude pencil.

Laying the poster on a flat rock, he printed a few words on the back, large enough and heavy enough to attract attention.

MAX SAMPLE
HAS
BROKE JAIL
BEWARE
X

Leaving his horse on the ridge, Red climbed down the trail to the ranch barns again, and watching for a chance when no one was in sight, he hung the warning on a barn door where he was sure it would be found. Waiting back on the ridge again, he saw one of the Jaybell riders notice the poster, read it, and after looking curiously around the surrounding mountains, carry the poster up to the main ranchhouse.

He was satisfied that it would reach the man for whom it was intended. What happened after that time alone would disclose. The sun was down and he was hungry enough to want to reach Pap's shack before the fire went out.

Leaving his horse and gear in the upper pasture he walked cautiously down to the shack. Nellie was not to be caught nap-

ping. Her bray brought Pap to the door, motioning Red to come on in.

Over the supper table Red told what he had done, and how he planned to continue, hammering on the impostor's nerves until he got him into a panic of fear.

"Probably git yourself shot first," Pap predicted glumly.

Nellie brayed again, long and loud.

"Git upstairs," Pap warned.

RED was able to get up the ladder and into the loft with the ladder drawn up after him and the trapdoor closed before someone hammered on the door of the shack. In the meantime Pap had been hiding the dirty dishes that had been on the table. Lying on his stomach with his eye pressed against a crack in the boards over the room underneath, Red watched Pap walk unhurriedly across the room and fling the door open.

"Hi, Cal. Come on in," Pap boomed.

A big square shouldered man, with a stubby chin and carefully clipped gray hair tramped into the room and took the stool Pap kicked toward him in front of the fireplace and almost directly under the spot where Red was watching.

Red recognized him instantly. It was Cal Hogan, the county sheriff, Betty's father.

"You're gettin' mighty stylish, Pap," Hogan declared, slowly filling his pipe.

"How come, Cal?"

"Eatin' this late."

"I've been out," Pap lied. "Kain't time myself like I used to."

Hogan glanced around the room, but kept his eyes carefully away from the ceiling.

"You're gettin' too old to try new tricks, Pap," he commented quietly.

"So are you," Pap declared. "Quit beatin' about the bush an' tell me what you're up here for."

The sheriff took a folded paper from his pocket and spread it out on the table. Red could look down and see enough to know it was the kind of flimsy poster sent out to all sheriffs describing wanted men.

"Feller by the name of Max Sample busted out of the pen up in Montana. Wanted for robbery and murder. A lifer. About six feet tall, red hair, weighs about one fifty or so. Here's his picture."

Pap leaned over and studied the poster.

"Looks like they send them things out a long ways from Montana," he commented.

"I got several," Hogan informed him. "Got a tip, too, that he was seen headed down this way in a box car, wearin' some greasy old pants, tattered shirt and an old felt hat. Got that from some hobos they picked up down the line."

Red remembered the bundle of old clothes Pap had tossed back in the woodshed. They were probably still there.

"Well, much obliged for warnin' me," Pap grumbled. "I see there's a reward out but I ain't after any blood money. Never heard of anyone named Sample."

The sheriff scratched another match and relighted his pipe, puffing vigorously for a few seconds.

"Neither did I, Pap, but I'd know a picture of Red Jackson, even if it was labeled Max Sample. What'n hell's goin' on around here, that's what I want to know?"

"I kain't see what you're drivin' at," Pap protested feebly.

"You oughta know I'm no damned fool," the sheriff stormed. "Why, you old hedgehog, you ain't got a livin' relative in the world, but Betty comes up here this mornin' and you drag out a nephew, don't hardly know his own name, but he looks mighty familiar to Betty. He's dressed okay and he's got black hair, but there's a wad of red hair layin' outside your doorstep and his hair's just been cut, and furthermore, the place stinks of hair dye. What'd you figger under similar circumstances?"

"I didn't know the danged stuff smelled," Pap declared, fingering his own wispy hair.

"Neither did I," the sheriff admitted.

"But women ain't fooled so easy. Furthermore, I found out today that last night you bought a horse and saddle and a complete outfit of clothes you couldn't get into with a shoe horn."

Pap mopped his face and looked appealingly at the sheriff.

"Cal, you know I never done a crooked thing in my life."

THE sheriff nodded, and continued talking.

"For a long time I've also suspicioned that gent paradin' down at the Jaybell as old man Jackson's son, wasn't any more related to him than I am, but Jackson as good as told me to mind my own business."

"I reckon that's right," Pap admitted.

"I've been bidin' my time," the sheriff said calmly. "Looks like things is about ripe for a showdown."

"Cal," Pap pleaded, "if I promise I'll play fair and square with you, couldn't you go on bidin' jist a little mite longer."

"I'm reasonable," the sheriff growled. "Only I don't like old fogeys like you thinkin' you're bamboozling me. Look at them things."

He reached over with the toe of his boot and touched a couple of cigarette butts that Red had thrown on the fireplace hearth.

"You that brags you've never smoked a cigarette in your life. If I looked around here I'd probably find clothes like I described, that horse in the upper pasture's been rode today. I reckon you've been out cow punchin'."

"Cal, you make me feel plumb miserable."

"I'll make you feel worse'n that if you get me and yourself in a mess," the sheriff warned grimly. "I'll give you twenty-four hours, an' that means from right now the trails and trains out of this county is bein' watched."

"It'll be all right," Pap promised. Only I hope Cal that you hain't spread any word——"

"You handle your own wind trap. I keep mine shut," the sheriff informed him. "And I told Betty to keep shut up, too."

He got up and stamped out of the room without looking back. Red waited until he heard him mount and ride away before lowering the ladder and coming down into the big room again.

Pap was disconsolate.

"I mighta know'd we couldn't git away with it," he mourned.

Red picked up the poster the sheriff had left lying on the table and studied it thoughtfully. It had given him an idea, impractical, maybe, but he realized that he was in a desperate corner and had to take chances.

"Might as well go down tomorrow and tell Hogan the whole story," Pap counseled. "He'll do what's right. Maybe they won't send you back."

"I may have to," Red agreed. "But I've got one more thing I want to try first."

He picked up the poster Hogan had left and started for the door.

"I'm going down to the Jaybell right now. If I'm not back before morning, better come on down there."

"I'll go with you," Pap offered.

Red shook his head.

"I do want that bundle of old clothes, though, if you've still got 'em."

Pap brought the bundle of clothes out of the woodshed.

"I meant to burn 'em but I forgot. Drop 'em in some deep canyon."

Red left, letting Pap think he was simply going to destroy the clothes. Instead, he tied them on behind his saddle when he started for the Jaybell Ranch. He was not sure himself just what he intended doing with the clothes. What the sheriff had said however about those old clothes had given him a hazy idea.

Leaving his horse again on the ridge above the ranch, Red carried the bundle of clothes and wormed his way down to the ranch yard. The bunkhouse and out-buildings seemed to be deserted, but a light was

burning in the living room of the main ranchhouse.

ED crept around the house and up on the porch to a curtained window that opened into the living room. A fire burned in the fireplace. His father sat at his desk across the room, his hands clasped in front of him on a pile of papers. Max Sample stood in front of the desk, staring down at the old ranch owner.

"It won't do you a bit of good to yell," Sample said, his voice raised so that Red could hear everything he said. "I sent all the boys into town on a holiday. You might as well shell out."

"Yes," Red's father said, his voice flat and high-pitched with the involuntary loudness of the near deaf. "I've got money in the safe. I've been keeping it there, waiting for this to happen."

"It's happened," Sample said savagely. "I want every cent you've got."

"You see," the old rancher ignored his impatience, "I knew the minute you came in here that you were not my son. I've been waiting to make a bargain with you."

Sample looked around uneasily and Red ducked back away from the window.

"What bargain?"

"I'll give you the money when you've told me what happened to my boy," Red's father proposed. "You'll not get a nickel otherwise."

Red got back to the window in time to see Sample put his face down close to the old man's eyes.

"I've got ways. Indian ways of makin' men do what I want," Sample threatened.

"Maybe. It would be simpler just to do a little talking," Red's father said, unmoved by the threat. "I just want the truth."

Sample hesitated, then looked around the room and laughed.

"Quicker, too," he admitted. "Okay, here's the story. I got him drunk, used his horse and traps up in Montana, robbed a bank and killed the cashier, planted a little of the stuff back on Red after taking his wallet and papers and then tipped off the posse where they'd find him. How's that?"

Red's father nodded slowly.

"It sounds like the truth. Where is he now?"

"Up there in the Montana pen servin' a life sentence under my name," Sample boasted. "He knowed he was caught and he had too much pride to let you know the jam he was in."

"What's your hurry about getting away from here, then?" Red's father asked.

"That's my business," Sample growled. "Open that tin box now and hand over what cash you've got."

"Your right name might be Max Sample," Red's father said thoughtfully. "That might explain about that notice the boys found on the barn. Yes, they told me even if you did tell them not to. That would mean my boy might have escaped."

"Well, what of it?" Sample demanded.

"If he's around here, you'd want to get as far away as possible."

"Don't forget, if he is, he's broke jail and he's still wanted for robbery and murder in Montana," Sample snapped. "Try and prove anything else."

"I will," Red's father said quietly. "It'll be worth all I have to pay you."

AS RED watched, his father took a pen and piece of paper and began writing slowly, his eyes held down close to the paper.

"What's that?" Sample said suspiciously.

"Your confession," Red's father explained. "When it's signed, I'll open the safe."

Sample's hand dropped instantly down to his gun. At the same moment, Red moved for his. But with his gun half drawn, another idea seemed to hit Sample. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure, I'll sign," he offered. "But I'll be mighty hard to catch."

"I suppose from my son's papers and

what he told you, the job of fooling me didn't look too hard," Red's father said pleasantly, as he continued to write.

"I've done all right," Sample bragged.

"I've been afraid to force your hand," Red's father agreed. "Here. Read that over."

Sample took the paper and read it swiftly.

"Sounds legal enough," he growled. "Gimme a pen."

He signed the paper and tossed it back on the desk. Red's father looked at the signature, blotted it carefully, and then folded the paper, putting it in his vest pocket. As he got up from the table, Sample drew his gun.

"Don't try any tricks," he warned. "Just remember this place is deserted."

Red's father picked up some other papers from the table and walked over to a wall bookcase near the window where Red was watching. Kneeling down he pulled the bookcase toward him. It swung on hinges disclosing a heavy iron wall safe.

Red could see his father twirling the combination dial and could see Sample leaning over his shoulder. The door swung open.

Red's father fumbled in his pockets for a key and, leaning into the safe, unlocked the cash box. As he did so, Sample pushed him over backwards. The papers in his hands were scattered on the floor. The folded sheet was still in his pocket.

Sample's gun covered him.

"Lay where you are," Sample ordered.

Red watched him pull a bundle of currency out of the cash drawer, look through it quickly and tuck the money in his pocket. He then took the scattered papers from the floor and put them back on the desk.

RED'S father continued to lie on the floor, watching silently, as Sample relocked the cash box, then closed and relocked the safe and swung the bookcase back in place.

"Now old man," Sample declared jubilantly, "you know what you're going to do?"

Red's father sat up and shook his head.

"First, give me that signed paper back, and then you're gonna shoot yourself through the head," Sample informed him. "Think I'd be sap enough to let anyone see that paper? The safe's locked. Nobody but me knows you had money there. Everything's shipshape. You just got tired of bein' a cripple and shot yourself. How's that?"

Red's father nodded slowly.

"You're a smart crook."

Holding his gun in front of him Sample reached over and snatched the folded paper out of the old rancher's vest pocket.

"Now get over there behind your desk," he ordered.

Red's father got stiffly to his feet and walked over to sit down behind his desk. His face looked curiously peaceful. Sample looked at him gloatingly and leaned over, his gun extended, approaching the old man's head.

Red took careful aim and fired. Sample's gun jumped as a bullet screamed off the steel. In an instant Red was breaking glass out of the window and had leaped into the room. His father opened his desk drawer and fumbled for a gun Red knew was always kept there. Sample backed up against the far wall, dazed and for the moment, too surprised to move.

"It's me, Dad. Keep out of it."

Recognition crept into Sample's eyes. He was still holding the folded paper he had taken from the old man's pocket. Taking a step towards the fireplace Sample swung his arm to send the confession into the blazing fire.

Red tried a snap shot, but his gun was jammed with broken glass and misfired. Throwing the gun aside Red tried to catch Sample's arm in time to prevent the paper from being destroyed, but he was too late. It fell in the midst of the flames.

He tried to reach in, but it was blazing and Sample's kick knocked him back away

from the hearth. Sample grabbed the heavy poker and aimed a blow at him as he staggered to his feet, but Red ducked under the iron flail and butted his head into the outlaw's stomach.

The poker flew out of Sample's grasp as his wrist hit Red's shoulder. The bullet with which Red had disarmed him had cut his fingers, which probably made his hold on the poker insecure.

As they staggered apart Red swung his fist at the outlaw's jaw and felt it crack home on bone. Sample's head jerked back. Red swung again, dancing away out of reach and flailing with both fists.

The outlaw outweighed Red by fifteen or twenty pounds, but Red had been worked down to bone, muscle and sinew and for years he had been dreaming of the day when he could get his hands on the man who had sent him to the penitentiary for a crime he had not committed.

Blood was splashed on the walls. Furniture was ripped to pieces. Sample was fighting in desperation, but Red slowly wore him down until a bloody, mumbling mass, the outlaw finally sank down against the wall and refused to get up.

"Write that confession out again, Dad," Red panted. "He'll sign it again or I'll kill him with my bare hands."

"Is he whipped?" Red's father asked.

"I'll sign," Sample mumbled. "Don't kill me."

"Don't kill him," Red's father warned. "He's caused you enough trouble already. And that confession, it's in the safe. That paper he burned was blank. I figured he'd want it back. I meant to close the safe myself, no matter what else happened, but he saved me the trouble."

"Give me a chance," Sample whined.

"I'll call the sheriff," Red's father offered.

HE CRANKED at a wall telephone behind his desk, but nothing happened.

"I cut the wires," Sample confessed. "You know what the pen's like, Red. Here, give me a chance to get away."

Sample took the bundle of money out of his pocket and threw it at Red's feet. Red picked it up and then picked up his gun and shook it free of glass.

Tossing the money on the desk, Red backed over to the window, keeping Sample covered with his gun.

"Don't try moving," he warned.

The bundle of old clothes that he had carried down from Pap's shack was out on the porch. Red picked it up and stepped quickly back into the room. Sample was still sitting on the floor with his back propped against the wall.

"Get out of the clothes you're wearin' now and into these," he ordered. "I'm givin' you a chance, not because you deserve one, but because I want you to feel like I've felt, a hunted animal afraid to look anyone in the face. They'll catch you an' you'll hang, but before you do, I want you to suffer some of the torment you made me suffer."

The outlaw started to beg, but after one look at Red's face, hurriedly changed to the rags that Red had worn the day he showed up at Pap's shack.

"The sheriff's lookin' for a red-haired man wearin' clothes like these, for breakin' jail after robbin' a bank and killin' a man," Red said grimly. "You dyed your hair red and you robbed and killed. Now you go out of here like I come in, on foot."

Wearing Red's old shoes and clothes Sample stumbled out of the door and down the trail. Red followed him until he was lost in darkness, headed down the trail towards Hangtree.

When he got back to the house Pap Sheehan was there, sitting on the corner of the desk and talking to Red's father. Pap's old rifle was across his knees. His eyes were beaming.

"Saw every blow that was struck," Pap declared. "I had a bead drawed on that skunk's head an' if you'd slipped once I'd a blowed him all over the map."

"I thought I told you to stay up there at the shack," Red reminded him.

Pap chuckled.

"Shucks, I promised the sheriff we'd clear up this mess. I bet I got down here before you did. Leastwise, I saw you creep up on the porch."

There was no sleep for anyone at the Jaybell Ranch that night. Red went up on the ridge and got his horse while Pap sat on the porch with his rifle, to make sure that Sample did not try to sneak back and get a gun and other clothes.

THEN the three of them sat before the fire talking until hours later the sheriff rode up to the porch and came stamping into the house.

"Just come up from Hangtree," he explained gruffly. "A man got killed there tonight tryin' to hop a fast freight pullin' out for the East. Red-haired gent in worn-out clothes. Fitted the description of a Max Sample wanted up in Montana. Anybody want to do some explainin'?"

Red told him the complete story, omitting none of the details. His father opened the safe and after the sheriff had read Sample's signed confession he tucked the paper in his wallet and studied the fire a few seconds.

"I had men watchin' the trains," he explained. "Reckon that's why he waited till it was movin' to try an' get on. Saw a loose Jaybell horse down there. He probably caught one and rode in Indian fashion."

"I suppose I'll have to go back up there, and wait on some red tape to get me free," Red commented. "I hope it won't take too long."

"Nobody recognized who it was killed, did they?" Pap asked.

"He was messed up considerable," the sheriff replied. "Considerable messed up."

"He was when he left here," Pap said confidentially.

The sheriff sighed and took an ink pad and some plain white paper out of his pocket.

"Come over here," he ordered Red.

Spreading the paper out on his knee he took a rough impression of Red's fingers after inking them on the pad.

"As though I didn't have enough trouble, now I've got to lie an' make myself liable to be sent to jail myself. Max Sample robbed a bank and killed a man up in Montana and then broke jail and come down here and got run over by a train. Nobody up there ever heard about Red Jackson. These fingerprints prove the guy that was run over was the guy they had in the pen."

"Cal, you're the whitest man that ever lived," Pap declared.

"I'm probably the biggest fool that ever lived," the sheriff corrected him. "But this oughta satisfy Montana, an' it satisfies me, besides saving the taxpayers a lot of money. Red, you've just come home after wanderin' around several years. Either keep your hat on or wash that hair dye off. You found an impostor here and kicked him out. Nobody knows where he went. Nobody cares. Red, I reckon I can trust you and your father to keep your mouths shut. Pap, you keep sober."

"What'll you tell Betty?" Pap asked. "She done all this detectin' you're takin' credit for. I'll bet she even put you up to this fingerprint business."

"Probably have to tell her the truth," the sheriff groaned. "An' lay myself wide open for blackmail the rest of my life. That's justice they all talk about."

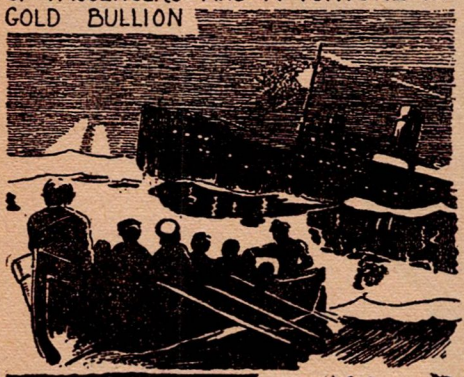
"I'm glad to be home, where they hand out this brand," Red said thankfully. "I'm back on the home range for the rest of my life."

MEN SHIPS SEAS

THE TREASURE OF THE EGYPT

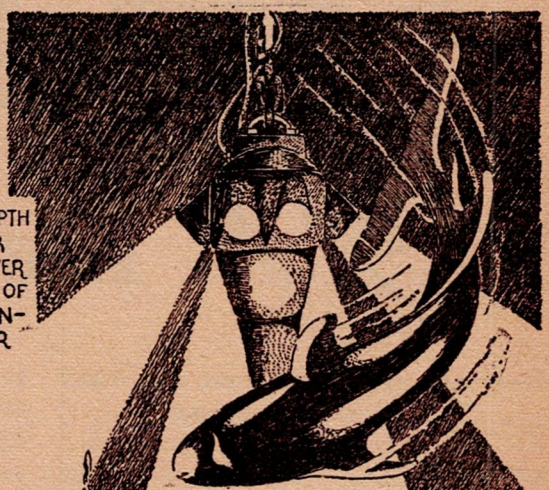
J. GREGORY CLAIRE

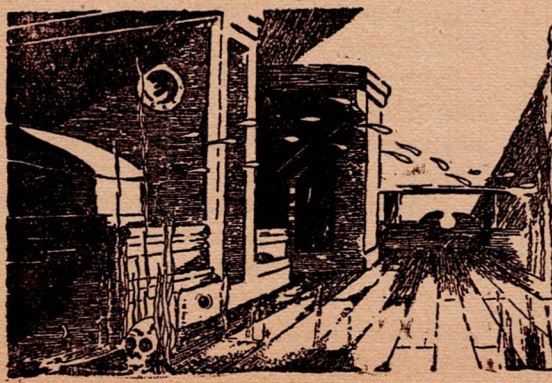
DURING A THICK FOG THE P&O LINER EGYPT COLLIDED WITH THE FREIGHTER SEINE, AND WITHIN A FEW MOMENTS SANK, CARRYING DOWN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA A LARGE NUMBER OF PASSENGERS AND A FORTUNE IN GOLD BULLION



IN SPITE OF THE INCREDIBLE ODDS PRESENTED SALVAGE OPERATIONS BEGAN BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL MANY YEARS LATER THAT THE CREW OF THE ITALIAN SHIP ARTIGLIO WERE ABLE TO LOCATE THE SUNKEN VESSEL. AS SOON AS THE SEAMEN ANCHORED A BUOY TO THE WRECK, OPERATIONS FOR THE ACTUAL RECOVERY OF THE GOLD BULLION WERE UNDERTAKEN.

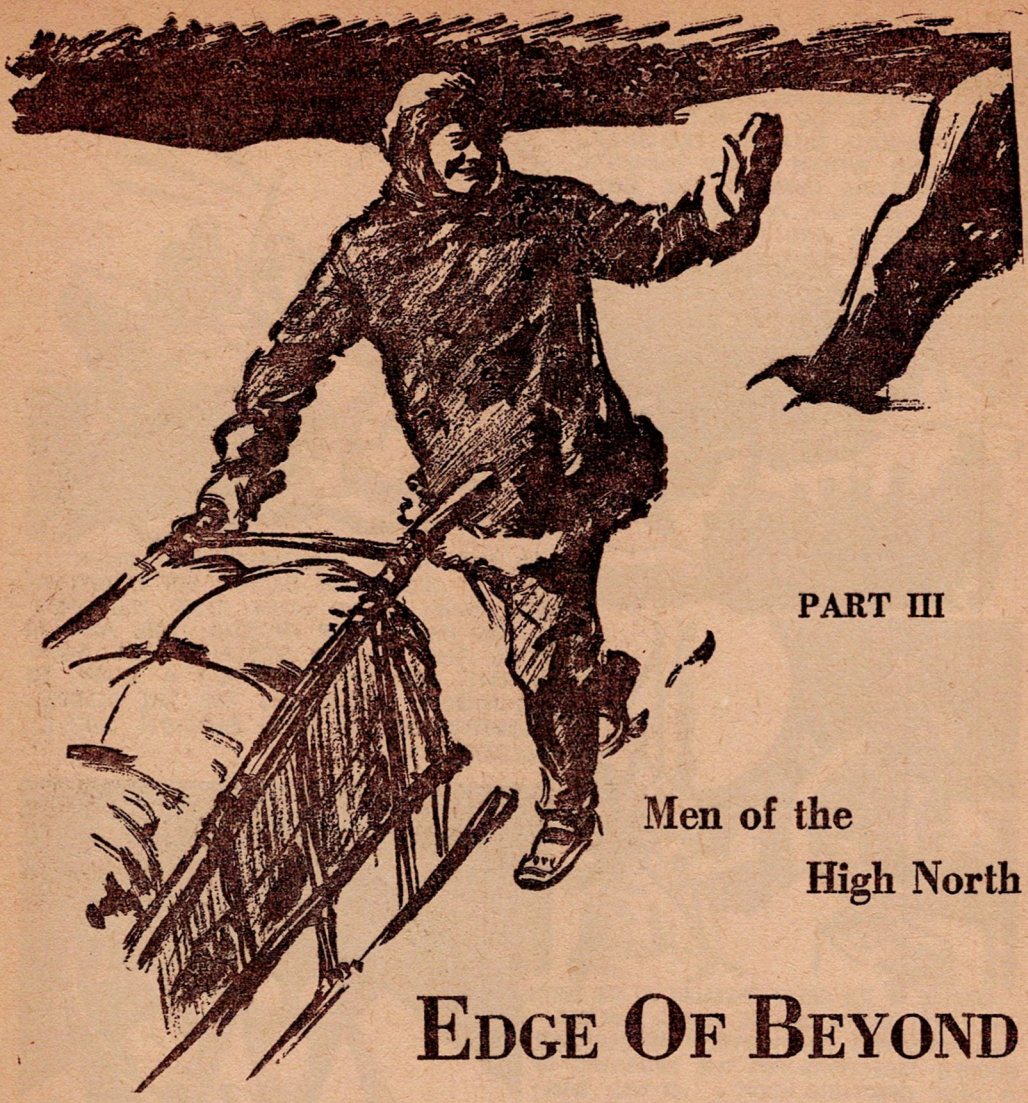
BECAUSE OF THE GREAT PRESSURE AT THE DEPTH THE EGYPT LAY A SPECIAL DIVING CHAMBER WAS EMPLOYED FROM WHICH AN OBSERVER PHONED DIRECTIONS FOR THE LOWERING OF A HUGE GRAPPLING HOOK. IT WAS DANGEROUS WORK, ESPECIALLY FOR THE DIVER WHO HOVERED RIGHT OVER THE WRECK. AFTER MANY EFFORTS THE SHIP'S SAFE WAS SEIZED AND RAISED.





THE STEEL GRAPPLE WAS LOWERED TIME AND AGAIN AND A FORTUNE WAS REGAINED FROM THE DEPTH ENCASED LINER. BUT THE SEA CLAIMED A SALVAGE SHIP AND A NUMBER OF DIVERS WHEN AN EXPLOSION OCCURED. BUT IN SPITE OF THE GOLD RECOVERED, A VAST WEALTH IN PASSENGERS' PERSONALS AND SHIP'S CARGO STILL REMAINS IN THE EGYPT ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

J. Gregory Claire



PART III

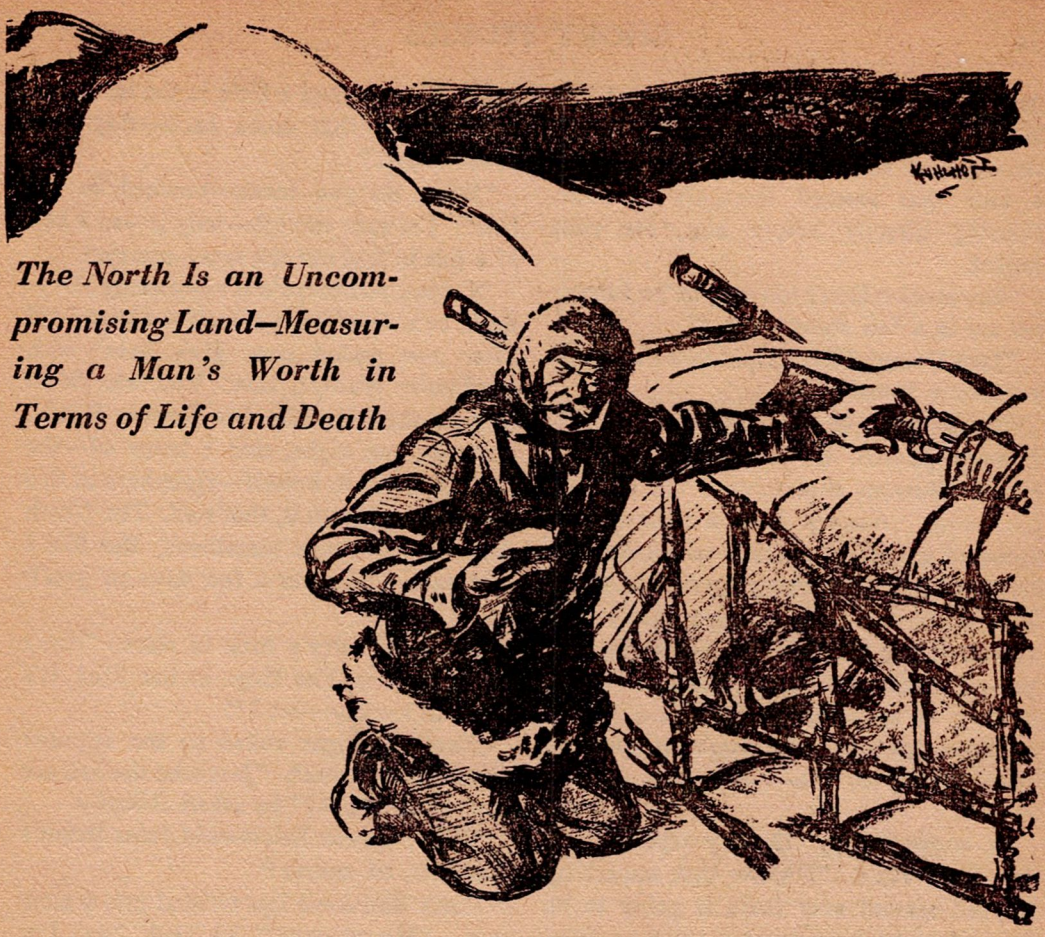
Men of the High North

EDGE OF BEYOND

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

YOUNG JACK DREWRY is the best of the chechakos at the Edge—a roaring gold camp of the Yukon. He is accepted by the sourdoughs and feels he really knows the North. Nevertheless he is taken in on a deal by Dryden and loses all the money he brought north with him. He has been working for wages, but when the claim peters out he resolves to strike "back of beyond" into a legendary country of black gold, which has been penetrated by Corporal Downey of the Mounted Police and one or two others, but which is feared by most men of the high North. Dryden alone encourages Drewry to go, thinking he'll never return to discover his crooked deal.

Drewry sets out and meets the strange land of glaciers and crevasses and ice mountains that the sourdoughs dread so. He has a rough map given him by Corporal Downey, but meets with an accident while trying to reach timber and is rescued by the Beloits. Jules Beloit, discoverer of black gold in this region, has established himself and his daughter Helene in almost feudal state, and to their house Jack is taken and recovers his strength. He falls in love with Helene, but cannot understand



The North Is an Uncompromising Land—Measuring a Man's Worth in Terms of Life and Death

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Famous Stories of the Land of the Strong Cold

her withdrawal from him; actually because the girl knows of her own Indian blood. Then Jules suffers a broken arm, supplies run short, and Jack undertakes to return to the Edge for necessary food for the household.

XIX

DRYDEN COMES ACROSS

IT WAS early evening. Men trickled into the Igloo Saloon singly, and by twos and threes in search of entertainment. The chair warmers sat about the stove, or sauntered back to watch the play of their more fortunate brethren at the wheel, the faro layout, and the poker tables. The newcomers, pausing for a drink at the bar, and a chat with Hank Blossom, who stood, a half-smoked cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth, before the big iron safe, passed on to seek entertainment among the various games of chance.

The door opened and into the room stepped a man whose frost-rimmed parka hood bespoke the traveler of a long snow-trail. Strangers were few in The Edge. The Dawson trail had not yet been opened, and only an occasional sourdough had ventured to make the journey to the big river. Thus it was that Blossom glanced with interest toward the stranger who approached

the bar, shaking his hands free of the heavy mittens that dangled at his parka sleeves, and shoving the hood back from a face that seemed strangely familiar. Pausing directly before him, the man smiled.

"Hi, Hank! Don't tell me you've forgotten me in a few short weeks!"

"Jack Drewry! Fer Cripes sake! Where'd you come from?"

"From over in the country beyond." Drewry paused, his eyes following the glance Blossom shot toward the rear of the room. Among half a dozen men crowded about the roulette wheel, he saw Dryden intently watching the course of the little white ball. The younger man's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched as he half turned from the bar. Blossom spoke quickly, in an undertone.

"Turn this way so he won't see you," he said. "Now tell me—how much do you know?"

"I know plenty," Drewry replied, in a dry, hard voice. "I know that something Dryden started over there is going to be finished right here in this room—now—tonight."

"Started over there?" asked Blossom in surprise. "You mean—in the country beyond?"

"That's exactly what I mean! The damned dirty—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Blossom. "I don't git you. But—have you saw *her?*"

"You bet I've seen her! And I'm going to marry her—despite anything Beloit can do—despite herself, even!"

"Beloit? What's Beloit got to do with it? An' how about her bein' married a'ready?"

"Married!" Drewry's heart turned to lead within his breast, and the word fell dully from his lips.

Blossom regarded him intently. "You've changed, Jack," he said quietly. "Yer eyes—an'—an' yer face. You was a kid a few weeks ago—before you crossed the divide. Yer a man—now. But you'll be all right in a few days. Yer damn lucky to git back, at all. Yer touched a little in the head, but them others that come back—they was ravin' crazy."

"What do you mean—touched in the head? I'm sane enough—only it was a hell of a jolt to find out she was—married."

"Cripes, you know'd it right along! Dryden's be'n livin' with her all the time—till after you pulled out. He's livin' with Grubstake Walters, now. You was down to their shack on Number Twenty Below, anyways one night, that I know of—she told me about it, herself—right here in this room. You fergot it, that's all. The North does that to a man sometimes. But like I said, take it easy fer a few days an' you'll be all right."

It was Drewry's turn to stare. "She's never been in The Edge in her life! It's you that's crazy—not I!"

Blossom's cigar rolled to the opposite corner of his mouth. "Jest who the hell are you talkin' about?" he asked abruptly.

"Why, Helene Beloit—old Jules Beloit's daughter, of course!"

Hank Blossom's lips twisted into a slow grin. "My mistake," he said, "an' I'm buyin' a drink. I'm shore glad it ain't her you meant. 'Cause—if anything should happen to Dryden— Well, she's a damn fine woman, finest I ever know'd—Dryden's wife, I mean."

Drewry's heart felt suddenly light. He laughed. "I wish you luck, Hank," he said. "But—why did you ask me if I'd seen her? Did she get well?"

"Well? If she was sick, I guess she did. She's be'n takin' care of that pore devil that got busted up by that tree, an' doin' a damn good job, too. It was the day you pulled out, I rec'lect, the boys fetched him in. The next evenin' Mrs. Dryden come here huntin' fer you, an' told me her an' Dryden had split up."

"Why was she hunting for me?"

"Better go have a talk with her. I'm thinkin' she'll spill you an earful."

"I haven't time now, Hank. I'm in a hurry. I've got a score to settle with Dry-

den, and then I'm going over to the store and load on a sledful of supplies and hit out."

"Hit out! You mean yer goin' back—acrost the divide?"

"You bet I'm going back—back to Beloit's as fast as God will let me!"

"This here score you aim to settle with Dryden—is it about that money?"

"No, I doubt if I can do anything about that. I've been thinking it over, and he's probably fixed it up to look all fair and regular. Maybe it is, for all I know. Knowing Dryden as I do now, though, I doubt it."

"Might's well settle both scores to onct," advised Blossom. "Like I said—you better slip out an' see his wife—she's in the shack next door. I had her move up here, not only so she could look after the fella that got hurt—but likewise, 'cause I'd be a damn sight easier in my mind with her right here, than if she was livin' alone way down on Number Twenty Below, with Dryden havin' good reasons fer shuttin' her mouth fer good. It won't take you but a few minutes to slip over there. You'll never make eighteen thousan' dollars no easier."

"Thanks for the tip," Drewry smiled. "As you say, I might as well kill two birds with one stone. If she'll talk, maybe I can get my money back—unless Dryden's spent it all."

"He ain't touched a nickel of it. It's right here in the safe. He don't dare to draw it out as long as she's here. He's afraid she'll squawk."

ABRUPTLY Drewry left the saloon to return a half-hour later. With a nod to Blossom, who still stood at his place behind the bar, he advanced to the stove, unsnapped the heavy mittens from his parka sleeves, tossed them onto a chair, and walked slowly toward the rear of the room where a crowd rimmed the roulette table. No one had noticed him, the eyes of all being focused on the wheel. He caught a glimpse of Dryden's profile. His face was tense. Several stacks of chips were piled before him. Evidently he was the only one playing—and the play was high.

The little ball clicked and settled into a slot, and the croupier raked in a pile of chips.

Drewry caught sight of Corporal Downey among the spectators watching with interest as Dryden placed his bets for the next play. He noted that the stack of chips Dryden held in his hand were big money chips—yellow ones. The hand hesitated, and was withdrawn, leaving a whole stack on a single number—seventeen.

As the croupier spun the wheel, Drewry unobtrusively moved around until he was facing Dryden across the table. No one noticed him. All eyes were on the purring wheel. It slowed, the ball clicked, bounced, hesitated, and dropped into Number Twenty-Four.

It was then Dryden looked up to meet the cold, level stare of a pair of narrowed blue eyes. The glances held. Neither spoke, as unheeded the croupier raked in the stack of yellow chips. Men sensed a sudden tenseness in the atmosphere as they stared at the two who faced each other across the painted board. Dryden's glance faltered—dropped. He moistened his lips with his tongue, and with a swift nervous motion, shoved the chips stacked before him toward the croupier.

"Cash 'em," he snapped, and once more raised his eyes to meet Drewry's level stare. "So you got back, did you?" The tone was an ill-concealed sneer. "And I suppose you brought back a sled-load of black gold."

"No, Dryden—no gold." The narrowed blue eyes never wavered, and the words struck cold as green ice on the surcharged air. Dryden felt a chilling sensation in the region of his stomach. Here was a different Drewry—a threatening, menacing figure, come to demand a reckoning. Other men recognized him, and the name of

Drewry passed from lip to lip, as men crowded closer.

Dryden could stand the tension no longer. "Well—what do you want?" he rasped suddenly.

"Several things," replied Drewry. "And I haven't much time. I'll be starting back directly with a sled-load of supplies for my friend, Beloit. He couldn't come, himself. He met with an accident."

At mention of Beloit's name, Dryden seemed to wince. "If you want to see me, you're sure as hell getting your money's worth!" he remarked.

"Yes—I'll get my money's worth, Dryden. And aside from that, I'm going to finish a job that Gauche began. You remember Gauche, Dryden. You won't have forgotten the time he hurled you over the cliff, and you lodged in a tree, and he threw rocks at you, while you howled and whined, and begged Helene Beloit to call him off. But first, Dryden, there's a personal account to settle—a matter of some eighteen thousand dollars that you nearly fleeced me out of."

Dryden's laugh was a taunting sneer. For the moment he forget Drewry's reference to the Beloits, and to Gauche, the idiot. "You fool!" he said. "You damned fool! Who says I fleeced you out of eighteen thousand dollars—or any other amount? You handed the money to me voluntarily—invested it in a mining proposition in partnership with me! You took a receipt for it, and a memorandum of our agreement. I've got a duplicate memorandum. You put up eighteen thousand, and I put a like amount into the venture. And now, you piker, you tinhorn, you've got cold feet, and want to welch!" Apparently sure of his ground, and his courage bolstered by the sound of his own voice, he fairly hurled the taunting words into Drewry's teeth. "The papers are regular—and the deal will stand in any court."

Men listened aghast at the vitriolic onslaught, and tensely they waited for the smashing thud of blows—for upon the rim of the Arctic words of studied insult are fighting words. But no blow was struck. The venomous tirade seemed to fall on deaf ears. The gaze of the narrowed blue eyes never so much as flickered. A smile twisted the corners of Drewry's lips—a smile that held nothing of mirth, and which caused those who saw it to wait even more tensely—more expectantly. Here was no cheap barroom brawl. There was something of deadly menace in those unwavering blue eyes, and in the peculiar, twisted smile. The man's lips moved.

"Yes, Dryden, I hold your receipt for the money. And the memorandum of agreement, if uncontradicted by other evidence, would undoubtedly stand up under the scrutiny of a court. But there are several little things, Dryden, that have a bearing on the case, which the papers do not show—for instance, the gold you represented as test pannings never came from the claim the memo describes. That claim you bought outright from one, Stanley Dean, for three hundred dollars. It had not been, as you told me, turned over to you as an agent to sell. You never took any test pan from it. It's as worthless as a cinder dump—and you knew it at the time of our agreement."

"It's a lie!" cried Dryden. "Who told you that! It's a lie, I say!"

"Never mind who told me, Dryden. It isn't a lie. It's the truth. You played me for a sucker, and I was one—then. Do you want to hand over my eighteen thousand, Dryden—or shall I take it out of your hide? And remember, Dryden, it

will take a lot of hide like yours to make eighteen thousand dollars worth. If I were you, I believe I'd come across."

"It's a damned lie, I tell you!" roared Dryden. "Who told you—?"

"I did!" The words rang sharp and clear from the lips of a slight, fur-clad figure that had wormed its way unheeded to Drewry's side. "I told him!" the voice repeated, as men stared astounded into the tragic eyes of Wilma Dryden, who faced her husband with tense, drawn features. "And every word of it is true! Tell *me* it's a lie, if you dare! Just say once more that it's a lie—and I'll start talking! And by the time I've finished The Edge will know a lot of things about you that it doesn't know now—and Corporal Downey, there, will probably hear plenty that will interest him greatly."

FOR only a moment Dryden remained speechless as he stared wide-eyed into the tense, white face. "You?" he roared. "You—you fool!"

"Yes, I've been a fool all right, and no one but you and I know just how big a fool I've been. But I'm through, now. I'm going to make what reparation I can, and then—if the police will let me—I'm going away." Her voice faltered, and, ignoring the onlookers, Dryden leaned forward, his face livid with rage.

"I'll fix you for this!" he threatened in a husky whisper. Then turned toward the bar. "Hank," he called, "bring me that long envelope I deposited in your safe a couple of days before Drewry crossed the divide. I'll show you I'm on the up and up. If the damn piker wants his money back, he can have it!"

Elbowing his way through the crowd, Blossom handed over a long envelope, which without a word, Dryden passed to Drewry. The latter broke the seal and counted the eighteen one thousand dollar bills.

"The change is right, Dryden," he said, as he slowly tore the memorandum into tiny pieces. Then he counted off nine of the bills and extended them to the woman, whose face showed pallid in the smoke fogged lamplight. She made a motion of protest as her fingers shrank from the touch of the crisp new bills. When he spoke the note of hardness was gone from his voice. "Take 'em," he said. "I believe you told me Dryden promised you a fifty-fifty split on the deal. You earned the money. Dryden couldn't have put it across, alone. And when you found you'd been doublecrossed, if you hadn't put me wise, I'd never have recovered a dollar. If Dryden could afford to split with you, it's a cinch I can. The only difference is—you're getting money from me, instead of a promise."

"Playing both ends against the middle, eh?" sneered Dryden, his eyes on the woman's face. "Couldn't wait for your share of the profit on a legitimate deal—"

"Legitimate deal!" scoffed the woman. "You never made a legitimate deal in your life, Sam Dryden! And I'm not touching a penny of that money!" Turning abruptly, she hurried from the room, the crowd parting to allow her to pass.

XX

DREWRY COLLECTS AN INSTALLMENT

POCKETING the money, Drewry moved slowly around the table to face Dryden at arm's reach. "And now, Dryden," he said in a voice that cut hard as chilled steel, "the time has come for you to settle another deal—to pay something on account for the part you played over in the country beyond. For the days you lived under a man's roof, and ate his bread, and trailed him like the coyote you are in the hope of discovering the source of his black gold. For trying to force the secret from Gauche, the idiot. But most of all, Dryden, for your contemptible conduct in trying to win the affections of the daughter of the house, and when you realized that she knew you for what you are, for

knocking her down and trying to choke the information out of her, even as you threatened to throw her over the cliff so that when her father returned he would never know of the assault, but believe she had been killed as the result of an accident.

"But you reckoned without Gauche, Dryden—which was a mistake. And also you reckoned without me—which was even a greater mistake. So now the time has come to pay something on account, Dryden—the balance will be paid in installments—one each time I meet you."

Dryden's face had paled and his teeth clenched as the words fell from Drewry's lips in a tone of flinty hardness—a tone that conveyed to the listening men of the North a menace more deadly than any tirade of loud-mouthed invective.

The man ceased speaking and the voice of Dryden cut sharply upon the silence. "What's all that to you? Who the hell do you think you are—to jump me about something that's none of your business? Just a damn fool chechako that's let a doddering old man and a breed girl fill him full of lies!"

"Breed girl!" The words leaped from Drewry's lips as an involuntary cry of pain. He stared speechless, as with the vivid intensity of a lightning flash came the memory of that evening in the great living room at Beloit House—the girl's questions, his own replies, replies that he now realized had raised the barrier between them.

Quick to note the horror that showed in the other's eyes, Dryden laughed. "Ha, ha, ha! So you fell for the breed girl, eh? Klooch man, they'll be calling you! There's plenty of men that recollect Beloit's Dog Rib wife. They used to trade in Dawson—and over on the Mackenzie."

With the taunting words the world swam red before Drewry's eyes. He lashed out straight for Dryden's chin, but the man deftly side stepped and swung a left that caught Drewry flush on the jaw, nearly flooring him. Before he could recover he stopped another that sent his brain reeling. Dryden, no mean boxer, and long experienced in the fighting technique of the gold camps—a technique that calls for battering, gouging, and booting an opponent into insensibility in the shortest possible time—followed the two initial blows with a terrific barrage of short right and left jabs that landed with cutting, stinging twists, that laid Drewry's cheek open to the bone, and drew blood from the corner of an eye.

GIVING backward, Drewry sought to stem that staccato rain of blows with rights and lefts that landed harmlessly against the other's body. While Drewry had a slight advantage in height and weight, Dryden was lightning fast with his fists, and quick as a cat on his feet. Also he was unhampered, having removed his heavy outer garments earlier in the evening, while Drewry's movements were slowed by his parka. The garment gave him one advantage, however, as it forced Dryden to fight high, going for the face, as body blows landed harmlessly against the heavy caribou hide garment.

As if to finish the fight in the shortest possible time, Dryden threw all caution to the wind and bored in, never for an instant slackening his pace. The very fury of his attack, however, militated against him. The unwonted exertion had him gasping for breath, and it was just at this moment that Drewry managed to drive a powerful right that landed full upon the other's laboring diaphragm. With a whistling gasp, Dryden's arms dropped momentarily, and through a film of blood Drewry struck for the sagging jaw, and again he landed. As Dryden's knees sagged, Drewry stepped swiftly in—and the next moment measured his length on the floor, as Dryden kicked his feet from beneath him. As he strove to rise, Dryden's pac struck him a glancing blow on the side of the head—but the parka hood saved him. He was on his feet in an in-

stant, and before the tiring Dryden could regain his balance, landed a long right squarely on the point of his chin that sent him crashing against the roulette table, from which he slipped slowly to the floor, as the voices of the onlookers were raised in mighty shouts of approval. As Dryden struggled weakly to his knees, Drewry stooped and, twisting his fingers into the back of the man's shirt collar, jerked him roughly to his feet. "Gangway!" he cried, and as the crowd parted, he rushed the glassy-eyed man to the door which he jerked open with his free hand. Shoving Dryden outside, he propelled him across Front Street to the edge of the creek where a mighty kick that landed with power and precision upon the man's fundament, sent him sprawling down the steep slope to bring up on the snow-covered ice of the creek-bed.

As Drewry turned to reenter the saloon, a blue-black object slipped unnoticed from beneath his parka and slithered down the steep bank to bring up against the inert form of Dryden.

XXI

A PARTNERSHIP IS FORMED

THE following morning Dryden peered through a small patch of glass from which he had scraped the frost of Grubstake Walters' window, across the creek from the Igloo Saloon, and watched Jack Drewry, his sled loaded with supplies, head Beloit's dogs for the divide. Faintly to his ears came the shouts of the cap-waving crowd that had swarmed from the saloon to watch his departure. Dryden cursed under his breath.

"They're calling him a sourdough now," he muttered. "And by God, he is! Believe me, a man learns fast over there in the country beyond—or he dies. He isn't the same Drewry that handed me over that eighteen thousand that morning in the Igloo—by a damn sight!" At thought of the eighteen brand new thousand dollar bills he had turned back to Drewry the night before, his cursing flared up anew, and his glance shifted to the shack next door to the saloon. "When a man's down on his luck, everything breaks against him—if that damn fool hadn't got busted up

with that tree, she'd never have moved up from Number Twenty Below, and I'd have had plenty of time to fix her so she couldn't have squawked to Drewry—or anyone else. If she hadn't spilled what she knew, if she'd played along with me, no one on God's earth could have proved that deal wasn't on the up and up! Maybe I was a fool to hold out on her—but how the hell did I know she'd dare squawk. She was in as deep as I was. By God, you can't trust a woman!"

Turning from the window he crossed the room, seated himself on the bunk, drew from beneath the blankets a blue-black object and sat for several moments balancing it in his hand. It was the object that had slipped from beneath Drewry's parka the night before and had come slithering down the bank—the revolver that Hank Blossom had handed Drewry on the morning of his departure for the country beyond, with instructions to keep it on him at all times. "The game's run pretty much his way so far," he muttered, "but from now on, I hold the cards. The final showdown will come somewhere beyond the divide—and when men find what's left of him, there'll be more talk of the curse of black gold." The latch rattled, and Dryden hastily slipped the gun beneath the blankets as Grubstake Walters entered, stamping the snow from his feet.

"Well, sir," he said, "Drewry's went. Yump—pulled out jest a few minutes ago with a big sled-load of grub—hittin' back fer the country beyond—an' all the boys yellin' an' wishin' him good luck. Got the grub to the store, an' busted one of them thousan' dollar bills to pay fer it. I stud right there an' seen him. He shore raised hell with you, what little time he was here, didn't he? Got back all them nice new thousan' dollar bills you'd took off'n him—an' knocked hell out of you, to boot."

"Shut up!" growled Dryden. "Can't a man sit down to think without your running off at the head?"

"Oh, shore, shore, Dryden—go right ahead—but it looks to me like it's goin' to take a hell of a lot of thinkin' to git back them eighteen thousan' dollars."

"I'll get 'em—an' enough more along with 'em to make the eighteen thousand look like chicken feed," Dryden said. "It'll take two of us. Want to get in on it?"

"We-el, that's accordin'. This here eighteen thousan' you got—you only slipped me a hundred fer tippin' you off to it, an' I wouldn't of got that if I hadn't threatened to wise up yer woman that Drewry'd come acrost with it."

"This time we go in fifty-fifty—and it's a damn sight bigger stake than that eighteen thousand."

"Yeah? Well, that's what she claimed you promised her—fifty-fifty—an' she never got nothin'."

"Listen, you!" growled Dryden savagely. "What goes on between a man and his wife is nobody's damn business—see?"

"Oh, shore. But like I allus say—honesty is the best policy, even if it is a man's wife. If you'd of come acrost with her share, you'd still be nine thousan' to the good, instead of which you ain't got nothin', an' yer out the hundred you slipped me, besides. That there ought to be a lesson to you, Dryden. What I claim, an honest man's a damn fool to let a woman in on any crooked deal, wife er no wife—'cause they'll doublecross him, every time."

"Keep your advice to yourself," growled Dryden. "Do you want in on this deal—or not? If you don't, there'll be plenty of men who'll grab at the chance."

"What kind of a deal is it?"

"It's a play for Beloit's gold, primarily. Incidentally, we'll get back that eighteen thousand that Drewry as good as robbed me of last night."

"An' we go in fifty-fifty?"

"That's what I said."

"Who handles the money—the money an' this here gold?"

"What difference does that make?"

"We-el, it might make quite a bit."

"You mean, you don't trust me—you think I'd doublecross you?"

"Oh, hell, no—nothin' like that, Dryden! I was jest kind of wonderin'—that's all."

"We'll both handle it—we'll be going in there together."

"In where?"

"Why—into the country beyond, of course. That's where Drewry's gone, isn't it? And that's where Beloit's gold is."

"Y-E-A-H," the word drawled from Walters' lips without enthusiasm. "Tellin' you about me, Dryden, I can't seem to work up no appetite fer that there country beyond. I seen them fellas what come back when the police fetched 'em down to Dawson. They was blabbin' about devils, er ghosts, er whatever it was they seen over there. An' there was others that never even come back."

"To hell with them!" exclaimed Dryden impatiently. "I've been over there, and I came back. And so has Downey. Old man Beloit comes and goes as he pleases. And how about Drewry? He just got back from there yesterday. He don't look very crazy, does he?"

"Well, not the way he went to work an' got back them bills, an' handled his dukes, he didn't," admitted Walters, "but I don't aim to git chased by no devils, nor yet by no ghosts."

"That's a lot of bunk! I've been clear to

Beloit's and I never saw any ghosts or devils. So has Downey—if you won't take my word for it, ask him. Listen—I know the way to Beloit's by his short-cut trail. I trailed him clear through to his house."

"But—you didn't fetch back no black gold," reminded Walters.

Dryden scowled. "I got a bad break—that's all. You heard Drewry say last night how that damn idiot, Gauche, that lives at Beloit's, tossed me over a cliff and how I caught in a tree, didn't you?"

"Yeah—an' believe me I ain't huntin' fer no chanct to git tossed over no clift by no idiot, an throw'ed rocks at, no more'n what I want to git chased by no ghosts an' devils. There mightn't be no tree there fer me to git hung up on. You was lucky."

"Yes, in a way—but I was unlucky, too. When Beloit came home he tossed me a rope and drew me up—and then he sent me on the long traverse. Turned me loose, damn him, to find my way back as best I could, without any grub or outfit—without even my rifle. And if I hadn't been lucky enough to find a caribou the wolves had brought down, I'd never have made it. I had my belt knife, and I packed enough meat and dry wood on my back to see me through—made it in three days, the way I went in.

"But this time there'll be two of us—and we'll get the breaks. The reason I couldn't find Beloit's claim was because he was too foxy for me—he knew the country, and I didn't. He visited the claim a couple of times while I was there—but he always threw me off when I tried to trail him. But now he's laid up with some kind of an accident—you heard Drewry say so last night. That's why he had to make the trip for supplies.

"The fact that he paid for the Beloits' supplies with his own cash shows that Beloit hasn't got any gold on hand, at present, or he'd sent some along with Drewry. That means that someone has got to go to the claim before long for some gold. And it will have to be the girl, because I don't believe they'd let Drewry in on the location. And believe me, she won't be able to throw us off her trail like the old man did. She's not foxy enough. I know the claim lies somewhere north of Beloit's. I'll camp on the short-cut trail where it bends south, about thirty miles north of Beloit's and you can trail her to the claim, then join me, and we'll hit back here and file the location as partners."

"Yeah—but how about both of us doin' this here trailin'?" Walters asked uneasily. "Looks like, bein' as we're pardners, we ought to kind of stick together, don't it?"

"What's the matter—you got cold feet? Haven't you got any guts?"

"Hell, no! I ain't afraid, ner nothin' like that! You got me wrong. Cripes, guts is my middle name! I jest was thinkin' that mebby two might be better'n one—jest in case."

"Well, they wouldn't. The reason I didn't locate the claim that time is because I overplayed my hand. Sort of lost my head and tried to choke the information out of the breed girl. I ought to have waited. Old Beloit couldn't have outfoxed me forever. But they know now why I was in there. They know I was making a play for Beloit's gold. That's why it would be poor policy for me to show up. If any of 'em saw me they'd be on their guard. They don't know you. If they saw you, they'd think you were just a prospector. They'd never connect you with me. Then you could trail the girl, or Drewry or the idiot to the claim, and as I told you, connect up with me at the bend of the short-cut, and if it comes to a race, we'll have my fresh dogs to hit for the recorder's with. You see," he added, "I'm trusting you, even if you don't trust me. Because with you doing the trailing, you'd be the one who knew the location."

"That's right," Walters admitted. "It might be a good way to work it."

"There's only one thing—if Drewry should see you, he might suspect something crooked, because he'll remember

about that thousand you gyped him out of, back in Dawson."

"Nope," Walters replied, "he won't think no sech a damn thing. Fact is, I rec'lect him standin' there at the bar in the Igloo, one night when Tollifson was offerin' to grubstake me fer a trip into the country beyond, an' I turned him down flat. If I'd run onto Drewry in there, I'd tell him that Tollifson had kep' at me till I give in. An' I was jest in there prospectin', like anyone else."

"All right, then, it's a deal," Dryden said. "I'll put up the dust and you get the supplies together. Your dogs are all right, and so are mine—so that gives us two good strings." Drawing a pouch from his pocket, he tossed it to Walters. "There's the dust," he said. "It's what I had left from bucking the wheel last night when Drewry came in and busted up the party."

"Guess anyone could tell you was the party he busted up," grinned Walters, with a glance at Dryden's swollen jaw, as he pocketed the poke. "I'll git the grub an' be back later."

Dryden had planned shrewdly. He reasoned that with Beloit laid up, no one would be traveling the short-cut trail, and he could camp there, while Walters watched Beloit House, ready for a swift run back to the recorder's at The Edge, as soon as Walters succeeded in trailing one of the three occupants of the house to the claim. Then, too, camping on this short cut precluded any attempt on Walters' part to find Beloit's claim and slip back to The Edge to record it in his own right, leaving him, Dryden, holding the bag.

DRYDEN knew nothing of the trail to Beloit House used by Drewry, and believed, of course, that Walters would know only the short cut. Yes, he thought, as he went over the scheme in his mind, he had planned well. But his plan took no note of the fact that Walters, stopping in at police detachment just to make sure that Corporal Downey had seen no ghosts or devils on his trip into the country beyond, had found the little office deserted, and had purloined the hand-drawn map he found on Downey's desk. Nor did the plan take cognizance of the fact that his own memory of the short-cut trail was not as perfect as he thought, and that several days would be lost in futile wandering because he was head down a wrong valley. Nor that they would be delayed for another four days by a furious blizzard that held them cowering in an ice fissure while the howling wind drove an opaque smother of flying snow past the door of their tiny cavern.

XXII

GONE!

JACK DREWRY made good time. He had negotiated without incident, and without recourse to his map, the trail that had so nearly cost him his life only a few short weeks before, arriving at The Edge on the evening of the fifth day out from Beloit House. The return journey with the supplies also made without incident required six days, and so, under a million stars that winked brilliantly despite the ropy looking clouds that scudded across the heavens riding the rising wind, he swung through the pass and headed down the long slope to Beloit House, which stood silent and grim on the verge of the high cliff overlooking the lake.

He cracked his whip and yelled loudly at the dogs, his eyes on the doorway which each moment he expected would fly open to reveal the outline of the girl against the rectangle of yellow lamplight. But the door remained closed, and only a dim, sickly glow showed at the frost-coated panes of the windows.

Surely Helene would be expecting him! This was the day he had promised, barring storm or mishap, he would be back—and there had been no storm, no mishap. All during the days of the snow trail he had pictured Helene running to meet him up

the slope to the pass. And far into each night he had planned what he would say to her—there under the stars. How he would tell her he had been a fool who hadn't known his own mind. That he had

reckoned without the power of love when he had told her he would never marry a woman who was even half Indian. That her Indian blood mattered not at all. That in all the world nothing mattered but their love. That there was no barrier—nor could ever be any barrier between them.

But the girl was not running to meet him across the snow. There was only Beloit House, standing sombre and silent in the starlight, with the smoke rising lazily from the huge chimney, and the dull glow of the frost-coated windows. He was almost at the house, now. Filling his lungs, he called loudly, but the door remained closed. With sudden fear gripping his heart, he rushed on ahead, threw open the door, and stamped into the great living room.

Beloit, his arm in a sling, laid aside the book he had been reading. Ah, Monsieur Drewry, it is you! And you have returned with the supplies?"

"Yes—and this time without mishap."

"A good trip," approved the old man. "You have learned much by experience." Drewry felt instantly relieved, surely nothing could be amiss with Helene, or the old man would not be sitting there calmly discussing his trip to The Edge. "We are deeply indebted to you, both for this journey, and in the matter of my arm."

"Forget it!" smiled the younger man. "Good Lord—it is I who am indebted to you, far more than I can ever repay. Don't forget that, but for you, I would not be living."

WITH a motion the oldster dismissed the subject and picked up his book, as Drewry stood for a moment regarding curiously this strange, highly educated man who was in the North—but not of the North. In his personality was nothing of the hearty bluffness of the men of the gold camps. There was a natural reserve about him that did not so much as hint at a studied aloofness—a sort of impersonal coolness that held others at a distance, a detached fineness that bespoke the gentleman born. And yet he had married a Dog Rig klooch! Drewry turned abruptly to the door, unharnessed the dogs, turned them into the corral, fed them, and began to remove the supplies from the sled.

As he stepped into the room with his first armload, old Ishka waddled in from the kitchen, accorded him a stony stare from her black eyes, and announced supper.

Again Beloit laid his book aside, and rose from his chair. "Do not bother with the supplies," he said. "Ishka will attend to them. Come, we will eat."

As they stepped into the kitchen Drewry saw that the table was set for two. "Where's Helene?" he asked.

The old man regarded him keenly for a moment as he detected the note of anxiety in the voice, and seated himself at the table. "My daughter has gone," he said, and bowing his head, launched into an interminable grace in the French tongue.

Curbing his impatience with an effort, Drewry waiting till the other raised his bowed head. "Gone!" he cried. "Gone where?"

"To carry meat to a band of starving Indians."

"Indians! She hates Indians!"

Beloit's eyes met the other's gaze squarely. "It seems," he said, "that you know my daughter well."

"Know her! Good God, man, I love her!" he cried. "She's the finest, the most beautiful, the most altogether adorable woman I have ever known! Tell me—where did she go? And when?"

"She went to Carcajo Lake. It seems that an Indian came in the night time, while I slept, and reported that his people, a small band of Loucheux, missed the caribou herd, and are sore in need of meat. Fearing that, should I hear of it, I myself would go to their assistance, and believing that I am in no fit condition to do so, she took a quantity of meat from the cache, and returned with the Indian. She left a note to this effect, which I found on the table next morning."

"Where is Carcajo Lake?" Drewry asked.

"It is some fifty miles to the northeastward."

"When did she start?"

"Sometime during the night before last."

"Has she ever been to this lake before? Does she know the trail? Suppose she were to meet with an accident?"

"I think she has never been to Carcajo Lake. The Indian who came for assistance will guide her. As for an accident," the old man paused and shrugged expressively, "who can tell? My daughter was born in the North. All her life she has lived in the North. She is wise in the ways of the trail."

"But what did she do for dogs?"

"She took those four of yours. They have recovered from their injuries, and the two old ones of ours."

DREWRY bolted his supper in silence, rising abruptly from the table he put on his cap and began rapidly to unload the sled, stacking the supplies just within the door of the living room. Beloit finished his meal, and stepped into the living room just as Drewry swung a sack of flour from his shoulder.

"Do not bother with the supplies," he repeated. "As I told you, old Ishka can attend their disposal. You are just in from a long trail. Come, you shall rest as we smoke by the fireside."

"I need no rest," Drewry exclaimed. "There's no time to lose! The wind is rising—and already the clouds are gathering. Before morning the storm will be on us."

"Aye, the feel of snow is in the air. It is a night for the fireside."

"Fireside!" cried Drewry, facing the older man with blazing eyes. "Do you think I could sit by the fireside while Helene is out there somewhere on the trail with a decrepit dog team and a half starved Indian? That's all right for you—you're not fit to travel. But I'm fit! And as soon as I can harness the dogs I'm off for Carcajo Lake."

Beloit regarded him gravely. "How can you expect to find Carcajo Lake?" he asked. "There is no trail."

"No trail! I'm not the raw chechako I was when you found me there on the snowbank. I can follow the trail of two people and a loaded sled."

The old man stepped to the open door and peered out into the night. No stars were visible now—and the wind soughed and moaned about the eaves, and among the spires of the spruce trees. A sprinkling of powdery snow swirled in through the doorway, sparkling in the lamplight. Beloit turned to the younger man. "Your storm," he said, "is upon us. In an hour all tracks will be obliterated. No man living could start out this night and reach Carcajo Lake until after the storm, even though he knew the way perfectly."

"But Helene!" cried Dewey. "She's out there somewhere—facing the storm! Do you think I can sit quietly here in comfort when she may be freezing—stumbling blindly along to plunge over a cliff, or to—"

"You forget, Monsieur," interrupted Beloit, resting a hand upon the younger man's arm, "that she has been gone two days and a night, and part of another

night. Undoubtedly she is at this moment safe and snug in some tepee of the Loucheux. If not, she will be so near to them that her arrival there will be but a matter of a few miles. She has plenty of meat on the sled. The Indian who is with her knows the trail. I am her father. I love her dearly—she is all I have in this world. Think you that if I believed her to be in danger, I would seek to detain you from going to her assistance? I would not—in fact, arm or no arm, I, myself, would go to her rescue. But she is a child of the wilderness. She has weathered many a storm, and at times with a far scantier outfit than the one she has with her. This storm is a nor'easter and will doubtless last for days. For you to start out tonight would accomplish nothing except to throw your life away upon a fool's errand. Come, leave the unpacking to Ishka. We shall sit by the fire and smoke."

STEPPING outside, Drewry was met by a blast that eddied around the corner of the house in an opaque smother of whirling snow fine and dry as powder. Beloit was right—neither man nor dogs could face the fury of that storm and live.

He turned back into the room, closed the door and advanced to the fireplace where Beloit was stuffing tobacco into the bowl of a long-stemmed porcelain pipe. Seating himself, the younger man filled his own pipe and lighted it with a sliver he thrust into the fire. Beloit picked up his book, dropped his eyes to the page, and for a long time the only sounds in the room were the low, steady roar of the flames rushing upward into the chimney, the heavy padding sounds of moccasined feet as old Ishka moved about in the kitchen, and the muffled voice of the wind. In the far corner, Gauche played silently with his little piles of black gold.

Drewry relighted his pipe a dozen times, rose restlessly and selected a book from a shelf, but his attention wandered from the printed page, and at each fierce gust that threatened to tear the very roof from the house of logs, his lips pressed tight, as he thought of Helene—somewhere on the trail, battling the storm, or at best, crouching in the dubious shelter of a skin tepee.

Presently the old man closed his book and spoke abruptly. "Why did you venture into this country beyond the divide, as the men of the Yukon call it?"

"Why, to prospect. To try to find gold."

"Had you not heard of others who had tried—and failed?"

"Yes, of two or three who wandered back babbling of ghosts and devils. And of others who never returned."

"And yet you ventured to cross the divide alone, and in winter?"

"Certainly. I'm not superstitious. I don't believe in devils and ghosts. And I knew that others had crossed who had returned—Corporal Downey and Dryden."

"You talked with those two?"

"I talked with Downey—yes. He allowed me to copy a map he had made. Dryden wouldn't talk. But from others I had heard that you came and went as you pleased—and that somewhere in the country beyond you had found gold."

"And you thought you could locate that gold?"

DREWRY flushed to his hair roots. "No!" he cried angrily. "I wouldn't touch a damned ounce of your gold, even if I knew where it is! And I could have known—Gauche offered to show me; ask Helene, she will tell you. But I refused, because I don't want to know. And that reminds me," he added, reaching into his pocket and tossing the little gold pouch onto the table, "here's the gold she handed me to pay for the supplies. I bought them myself to repay in some measure your hospitality."

"You owed us nothing."

"Perhaps," retorted the younger man a bit haughtily, "I'm the better judge of what I owe. But about the gold. Go out on any clear night and look up at the stars;

and then see if it seems reasonable that among all those thousands, millions maybe, of worlds, ours is the only one that's inhabited by rational beings. It doesn't seem so to me. And I applied the same reasoning to this country beyond. It's a big country—it's very vastness precludes any thought that if one man found gold somewhere in this tangle of peaks and passes, he had found the *only* gold in the whole vast expanse. It isn't reasonable—it don't make sense. If one man made a strike in here, others can also make strikes."

"And since you came, have you prospected for gold?"

"No." Again the younger man flushed, but this time there was no anger in his tone. "I found Helene," he replied simply. "I found the one woman in all the world

I have ever loved. I—we—hunted together, and in the evenings we sat and talked, or read aloud to each other. I learned that in the measure of human happiness love outweighs all the gold in the world."

The eyes of the old man were fixed upon the flames. "You are not the first to come here with words of love upon his lips."

"Yes, I know. Helene told me."

"He returned empty handed—that other."

"But I'll not return empty handed, if I never find an ounce of gold. I have found love."

"Has Helene told you of her love?"

"Yes, and in the same breath, she told me she could never marry me. She said that an insurmountable barrier lay between us. That it is stronger than we are. That it will keep us apart, forever."

"A barrier? Did she tell you what this barrier is? Did she say why she can never marry you?"

"No. Nor did she tell me why she hates all Indians. But I know now that the reasons are the same. I learned it quite by accident, the other night in the Igloo Saloon, when I faced Dryden to collect something on account for his contemptible conduct in spying upon you, and his murderous attack upon Helene."

"And did you succeed in collecting this —this payment on account?"

THE younger man wondered whether just the shadow of a smile hovered at the corners of the lips concealed by the gray mustache. "Yes," he answered, "a slight payment. I promised him to collect further payments, each time I see him. Eventually, maybe he will pay in full."

"Aye," answered the old man, his eyes once again on the fire. "It is the way of life. We always pay—in full. But this barrier; you said it was from Dryden you learned of the barrier?"

"Yes, when he taunted me for falling for a breed girl. The realization came as something of a shock, for I had not suspected that Helene was half Indian. I should have suspected, though. I must be very dense. Because one evening as we sat here talking, she asked me whether I would marry an Indian. I laughingly told her that I would not, and she persisted with her questions—would I marry one who was only half Indian. And entirely unsuspecting, I told her that I would not marry even a half Indian—that I believed that the children of a white man had the right to be born white. Suddenly I realized that somehow my answer had disturbed her mightily—but even then I didn't realize the reason. She said, 'Yes, you are right. It is always the children who must pay.'

"I chided her about taking her abstract problems too seriously, and—well—somehow—she looked so—so—disturbed, and tired—and—and altogether so lovable and

desirable, that my love for her burst all bonds of restraint, and I caught her in my arms and crushed her to me, as I told her of my great love for her. And then Ishka tried to tear me away from her, and Helene flew into a rage and bore Ishka to the floor with a hand at her throat. I pulled her off, reminding her that Ishka was only doing her duty. Then she cried that she hated all Indians. That she loved me—even as I loved her—but that we could never marry, because there was an insurmountable barrier between us. I didn't know what the barrier was. I stood there like a fool—not realizing I had raised it with my own lips." For a moment he paused, then words poured in a torrent from his lips. "What do I care whether or not she is a half-breed? I love her as I can love no other woman in the world! I was a fool when I told her I would not marry a half-breed! I thought it was only a hypothetical question, and I answered without knowing my own mind. There is no barrier! I'd marry her if she were all Indian!"

A peculiar expression had crept into the old man's eyes as the words torrented from Drewry's lips. He answered nothing, and a few moments later, he laid aside his porcelain pipe, rose, walked to his room, and closed the door behind him.

XXIII

CHESS

FOR four days and four nights the blizzard raged unceasingly. In the huge living room Jules Beloit read hours on end, pausing now and then to refill his long-stemmed porcelain pipe. Gauche, the idiot, played unceasingly with his little piles of black gold.

Old Ishka padded silently about her household chores. And Jack Drewry chafing under the enforced inaction, mended dog sleds and harness, restrung his snowshoes, cleaned and oiled guns, and made up a light trail pack which he placed beside the door ready to throw onto a sled the moment the storm broke.

On the third day Beloit produced a board, and a set of chessmen. "Do you play?" he asked.

Drewry who, having found nothing further to tinker with, and had vainly tried to concentrate upon books, jumped at the chance to while away the interminable hours. "I used to play a little," he said. "Never was much of a player. It's a great game."

"Aye. We play much—my daughter and I. It has got so that she now wins more often than I. It is a logical game—a game in which impetuosity has no chance against sound reasoning. And thus, it is a good game, for such is the way, also, of life."

The first game was won by the old man in a very few moves—one of the simpler standard plays. The next game, he gave Drewry a pawn. Then it was two pawns, and then a bishop. Then a bishop and a knight. At the end of the second day, Drewry had not won a single game, though the oldster was using only his queen, a knight, a bishop, a rook and six pawns.

"It is a game of forethought," Beloit said, as he replaced the pieces in their box at the conclusion of the last game. "One must learn to look ahead—anticipating the move of his opponent, and also be quick to take advantage of his opponent's error in judgment."

Drewry smiled. "I don't think I'll ever make a chess player," he said. "The moves of yours I thought I was anticipating were never made. And I found no errors in judgment."

"Helene," said the old man, with apparent irrelevance, "is even a better player than I. Good night, Monsieur Drewry. When we awake in the morning I think we shall find that the storm has broken."

WHEN Jack Drewry awoke he lay between his blankets vaguely aware that he missed something, and it suddenly

dawned upon him that it was the incessant deep-voiced roar of the wind. Leaping out of bed, he dressed hurriedly, crossed to the door of the living room and threw it open to gaze out upon a snow-buried world. The wind had died down. Snow had ceased to fall, and overhead glittered a million winking stars. Sounds of snarling and growling attracted his attention and he peered through the half-light to see Beloit's seven big malemutes at the meat cache worrying at the heavy tarpaulin that covered the huge pile of stored fish and caribou meat. He wondered at this as he turned hurriedly into the room, donned cap and mittens, and picked up the shovel that stood behind the door, for he knew that the platform of the cache was elevated on poles a good fifteen feet above the ground. Wallowing through the snow he soon found the answer. A huge drift, formed by the swirl of the wind about the corner of the house, had completely buried one side of the six-foot dog corral fence and slanted upward to the platform of the cache a good forty feet distant. The dogs, making their way up this ramp of snow, were tearing at the heavy tarpaulin in an effort to reach the meat.

Beating them back, Drewry set to work with the shovel, and after an hour's hard work, succeeded in clearing the corral of snow sufficiently to impound the dogs.

Just as he finished, Beloit summoned him to breakfast. "It was a great storm," said the old man, eyeing from the doorway the huge drift that reached to the level of the cache. "The worst in several years. The hunt pack will run tonight, their appeties whetted by four full days of fasting. We must shovel the snow from the cache, else our meat and fish will become fodder for the wolves."

Drewry glanced toward the old Indian woman as he threw off cap and mittens. "Ishka will have to look after that!" he exclaimed. "As soon as I finish breakfast, I'm off!"

"Off? Where would you go?"

"Why to Carcajo Lake, of course! Do you suppose I can stay calmly here and shovel snow while Helene is out—God knows where in this frozen wilderness? Do you think I can remain here in comfort not knowing what has happened to her, not doing anything to find out, not going to her assistance?"

THE old man held up his hand. "Patience, Monsieur Drewry. Youth is prone to act upon hot impulse rather than upon cold reason. The North is a grim land. Hither and yon among its fastnesses bleaching skeletons each mark an error in judgment. It is an uncompromising land, measuring a man's worth in terms of life and death. It is a game of chess—in which sound judgment wins over rash impulse. Emergencies arise and must be met in the order of their relative importance. We may assume that, in all probability, taking into account my daughter's experience, and the experience of her Indian guide, she concluded her journey without mishap, and is now safe in the encampment of the Louchex. If God has willed otherwise—if disaster has overtaken her," Beloit paused and indicated the huge drifts that everywhere met the eye, "the North will guard her secret well. What has happened; has happened.

"I am crippled, and Ishka is too old and too fat to accomplish much with a shovel. It would be impossible for us to remove the snow from about the cache before nightfall. If it is not removed, the wolves will surely devour our supply of meat and fish, without which neither we nor our dogs can winter through in safety.

"Consider, now, what good could come of a journey to Carcajo Lake, even granting you could find it, which is very doubtful, as it is a small lake situated in a country so rough that one who was ignorant of its location might well pass it by even at the distance of a mile? Admitting, however, that you should find the lake, you would only find out a little sooner,

what we shall know eventually. You would merely satisfy your curiosity, and assuage your consuming impatience. You would have thus accomplished nothing of value.

"If you did not find her there, you would institute a search that, owing to the vastness of the country and the masses of new snow that cover it, would be doomed to almost certain failure from its inception. It might well wind up in your own demise —another skeleton to mark another error in judgment.

"We will admit, however, that you would find her with the Louchex, which is undoubtedly the fact. Then you would merely accompany her back here—to which place she will come anyway. Is it not better that she should return to find the meat intact upon the cache, than that she should find it in the bellies of the hunt pack?"

As Drewry listened to the words of cold reason with which the older man analyzed the situation, hot anger flared in his heart, while his brain was forced to admit the logic of the argument. When the man finished he regarded him with flashing eyes.

"Are you entirely bloodless and heartless?" he heard himself saying. "Are you only a brain?"

The old man seemed to wince at the words. Slowly he shook his head. "No, Monsieur. I am neither bloodless nor heartless.

For my hot blood, and for the ardor and impetuosity of my heart, I have paid a heavy price. Long years if atonement have failed to justify a few short hours of impulse. It is through long and bitter experience I have learned that the judgment of the brain is far more dependable than the judgment of the heart."

"I'm sorry!" exclaimed the younger man impulsively. "I had no right to—"

The other interrupted with a gesture.

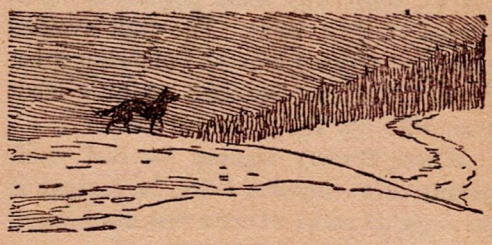
"You had the right. I take no offense."

"I have learned a lesson."

"Ah then, mayhap, the long years have not been in vain. If one may pass on to another that which bitter experience has taught to him, his existence may be excused—may even be justified. You have lightened my heart, Monsieur. Come—Ishka is waiting with breakfast."

All that day the three worked, for despite his injury old Beloit insisted upon helping, trampling back the snow with his feet, even wielding a shovel with one hand, and at nightfall the cache stood once again safe from the marauding hunt pack.

When the old man stepped from his room the following morning to find Drewry gone, an unwonted smile hovered at the corners of his stern lips. "Had he really learned the lesson," he muttered to himself, as after breakfast he filled his porcelain pipe and settled himself with his book before the huge fireplace, "he would



have curbed his impatience, and remained here in comfort, or gone about his prospecting, until my daughter's return, or until events proved that she would never return. However, he remained until that was done which had to be done. Mayhap 'tis better so. In theory, conduct guided by pure reason should work out for the best. But in practice it would be a cold, drab existence—a poor substitute for love, and for romance, and—happiness. Mayhap——" The old man paused, and for a long time stared into the fire. "But first he must prove his worth!"

XXIV

BLACK GOLD!

EARLY as was Drewry's departure from Beloit House, Gauche had preceded him. Sometime during the night the idiot had slipped out, and Drewry noted

that the trail he left in the new-fallen snow led northward. "He's gone to find her!" he exclaimed. "Gone to her aid, as he went that other time when Dryden would have thrown her over the cliff! Good old Gauche! Anyway," he added with a grin, "that makes two of us who act upon impulse, rather than reason!"

Beyond the mountains that encircled the lake, the trail of the idiot swerved slightly to the eastward. Hour after hour Drewry traveled behind his lightly loaded sled, hand on the tail-rope, urging the dogs on. The country was barren of timber with low, rolling hills, and long stretches of frozen muskeg. The idiot's trail held an unswerving course, and after ten hours of mushing the terrain became rougher. Rock ridges, ending in abrupt escarpments appeared, some with small patches of scrub spruce at their bases. The trail avoided some and crossed others. Following it became a feat that required no little labor even with the lightly loaded sled.

When Drewry figured he had made twenty or twenty-five miles, he camped in an angle of rocks where a few dead, wind-gnarled trees furnished firewood.

"Ought to make it by tomorrow night," he muttered, over his caribou steak and tea. "The old man said it was about fifty miles. But what a hell of a time she and the Indian must have had with their loaded sled, and those old and crippled dogs. I hope the Indian knew a smoother trail than this one—but Beloit said the lake lay in a rough country. Maybe there is no smoother trail. If not—maybe they didn't make it." And with this thought, tired as he was, Drewry had difficulty in restraining himself from hurrying on. "It would be an error in judgment," he muttered, grimly, "like that time I hurried on ahead of the dogs toward that timber. A man needs his rest. The old man is right. If they hadn't been camped that day within hearing when my dog howled, there'd have been one more skeleton bleaching among these damned hills."

EARLY morning found him once more on the trail, following the idiot's peculiar intoeing footprints up narrow valleys, and over steep rock ridges. The sun peeped above the southern horizon, throwing long shadows on the foretrail—the shadows of himself and his dogs, moving grotesquely like elongated monsters from another world.

He was following a valley that was the bed of a stream of considerable size. Alternating strata of gravel and sand showed in the cut banks at sharp bends, and upon several stretches exposed to the sweep of the wind the ground had been swept clear of snow exposing broad gravel bars. He wanted to stop and examine those cut banks, but thought of the girl drove him on. He determined to return and prospect the valley later. The small patches of scrub spruce promised wood enough for thawing out a few prospect holes.

Suddenly Drewry halted his dogs and stared in amazement at a new trail—the trail of a man and a dog team. Following the back trail with his eyes, he saw that the outfit had slanted into the valley from the westward down the slope of a low hill, and had immediately struck into the trail of the idiot. For long moments he stood staring down at the tracks in the snow. What was a lone man doing here in the country beyond? And what man? Lucky Jim Dalbert, the man whose claim on Catterson Dryden had bought and resold to Tollifson, the man Mike Haney believed to be dead because he had long overstayed his month's supply of provisions? Was it possible that Dalbert had survived—had managed to live off the country? Could it be Dryden, himself, returning to have another try for Beloit's black gold? Could it be Corporal Downey? Was it possible that the starving Indians on Carcajo Lake had got word to The Edge? And was Downey hastening to their relief? The Mounted did things like that. It was all in the day's work. Whoever it was, he had swung into Gauche's trail.

At his shout of command, the dogs leaped forward, and with a firm grasp on the tail-rope, Drewry urged them on. The sun sank behind a ridge and the shadows faded just as the trail swerved from the river and headed up a narrow, canyon-like valley whose sheer rock walls rose perpendicularly from the snow-covered bed of a small stream. The canyon twisted and turned, and the trail threaded among jagged rock fragments that had broken from the walls, and in places, almost blocked the way. The pace had slowed to a walk, and for hours Drewry traveled ahead of the dogs, not daring to risk smashing his sled.

AS HE approached a sharp angle of rock a figure catapulted around it and crashed into him, knocking the breath from his body and hurling him backward into the snow. The impact had thrown the other off his feet, and as Drewry lay gasping for breath, he saw Gauche scramble to his feet. For a moment he found himself staring into the wide, flat face with its mop of mane-like hair, and its wide-spaced, protruding eyes. Unintelligible sounds poured from the shapeless, loose-lipped mouth, and before Drewry could regain his feet, the idiot had leaped past him and disappeared around another bend of the canyon.

When his lungs once more began to function, Drewry pushed on, his brain in a chaos. Why was Gauche rushing at top speed back from Carcajo Lake? Had he learned that the girl had never arrived there? And was he rushing back to acquaint Beloit of the fact? Or had he found—? An involuntary cry of anguish escaped Drewry's lips as a horrible vision seared his brain—Helene, stark and rigid, half buried under the snow. He started to run, forgetting the dogs—forgetting everything in his frantic haste. After a few yards he halted and turned to look at the dogs. They were plunging against the collars in a vain effort to move the sled which had jammed against a rock fragment. Deliberately he returned, released the sled, and pushed on at a walk, the dogs following. Jack Drewry was learning the North.

A QUARTER of a mile farther on the canyon ended abruptly in a blank wall of rock. An icy chill gripped his heart. Where was Carcajo Lake? How did one get out of this cul de sac? And where was the man who had followed the idiot's trail?

Then among the rock fragments, close against the base of the wall, he saw a sled to which were harnessed six dogs. The man was nowhere in sight. Pushing on, he perceived a low opening in the wall just above the ice of the creek, from which the snow had evidently been recently pushed aside.

Through this opening the creek issued, full sized, from the bowels of the earth! He was about to drop to his knees and peer into it when a white face, its terror-stricken eyes staring wildly, was thrust out through the opening and a man wriggled bellywise from the aperture. For a long moment the horror-wide eyes of the bearded face stared straight into Drewry's own, then with a shriek of mortal terror the man's form went limp and the face sank to the ice floor.

With an effort Drewry dragged the man free and propped him against his own sled. Not until then did he recognize him as Grubstake Walters, the man who had fleeced him out of a thousand dollars in Dawson, the summer before. But what was Walters doing here? He remembered the man's flat refusal to venture into the country beyond when Tollifson had offered to grubstake him for the trip that evening in the Igloo Saloon. He remembered that Walters had talked of devils that lurked beyond the divide, and laughed shortly, as he remembered the precipitous flight of Gauche. "I guess he saw his devil," he muttered. "But what's all this got to do

with Helene? And where is Carcajo Lake?"

Turning from the inert form propped against the sled, its bearded chin sagging against its breast, Drewry dropped to his belly upon the ice and wormed his way through the eighteen inch opening. Instead of the black darkness he expected, he could see dim light ahead, and after traversing a half dozen yards of the low passage, he emerged into a cavern of considerable proportion. A bunch of moss burned in a shallow pan rudely fashioned from a piece of soapstone, and filled with grease. It burned with a dull flame and threw off a cloud of heavy, stinking smoke. By its light, Drewry estimated the width of the chamber to be forty feet, with a height of some ten or twelve. Of its length he could form no estimate, as the creek ice extended on into darkness. There was no snow in the cavern, and the man saw that the creek seemed to flow across a nearly flat floor of black, flaky gravel. Caribou bones from which the meat had been gnawed lay here and there. A pile of dry coarse grass resembling the bed of some animal occupied a corner of the cavern, and beside it, he could make out several caribou hide robes. Gauche's bed! And it was Gauche's lamp, or fire, that flared in the stone basin! Drewry remembered that Helene had told him that Gauche could build a fire.

In the deep shadow of another corner his eyes, becoming accustomed to the semi-darkness, made out a shovel, a light pick, and a gold pan.

SUDDENLY, with the force of a blow, the truth leaped into his brain. This was Beloit's mine—the source of his black gold! Gauche had had no thought of Helene when he had struck out on his lone trail! He had merely wanted some more gold to play with—so had hit out to get it! For a long time, he stood staring about him as one in a trance. In the slight depression in the gravel near the bed, Drewry saw a little pile of the flat flakes and stooping, he gathered them into his hand. Their weight told him instantly that he was right. The flakes were black gold. Tossing them to the ground, he stared at the gravel, scraping at its surface with the sole of his mukluk. Several pieces of the frozen mass loosened, and he picked them up—there were flakes of black gold among them! An unbelievably rich strike, extending God knew how far back under the mountain—its floor nearly solid gold, Beloit's black gold! And outside was Grubstake Walters!

Dropping to his belly he wriggled from the cavern. Grubstake Walters was nowhere in sight. Drewry had no idea of how long he had been in the cavern—but it couldn't have been long. The man couldn't be far on his back trail. He must overtake him! Must somehow prevent his returning to The Edge and recording Beloit's claim.

His own dogs stood close at hand, the sled again jammed against a rock fragment. As Drewry leaped toward them, his attention was attracted by a stake—a stake with two sides hewn flat, firmly planted in the snow, its face braced by rock fragments. He stepped close, and by the pale light of the stars saw writing upon the flattened sides. Walters had staked Beloit's claim!

Leaping to his sled, he got his ax and attacked a stunted spruce. Fifteen minutes later, he stepped back to survey the other stake—his own, that stood side by side with Walters! And slipping his ax beneath the lashing of his load, he headed down the creek. He must overtake Walters at any cost! Must save Beloit's gold!

XXV

GRUBSTAKE WALTERS

DREWRY had no slightest doubt of his ability to overtake Grubstake Walters on the trail. He had Beloit's seven superb dogs, fresh after their five days' rest from the trail, as against Walters' six dogs, no doubt trail-weary from their

trip from The Edge. Moreover, his own load was light, consisting of only four or five days' provisions, his primus stove, a can of petrol, and his bed roll. Whereas, Walters must have brought a big load of provisions into the country beyond. But when he did overtake the man—what then?

He couldn't kill him—couldn't very well seize him and take him a prisoner to Beloit House. He must beat him to The Edge and record ahead of him—record for

Beloit. Suddenly the lightness of his load loomed as a liability rather than an asset. Two of his four or five days' provisions had been used! And the trail to The Edge was long—seven or eight days, at the least. Maybe Walters had come by the short-cut—maybe Dryden had given him a map of the trail and sent him in to locate Beloit's mine! That seemed reasonable. Hank Blossom had told him that Dryden had moved in with Walters. And Walters would excite no suspicion—while Beloit had threatened to kill Dryden on sight, should he ever again venture beyond the divide. Well, he could follow Walters through by the short cut, then—if his provisions held out, beat him to The Edge in a final sprint from the divide. "They've got to hold out!" he cried savagely. "By God, Dryden and Walters will never beat the old man out of his claim as long as I can keep going!"

He chafed at the slow pace necessitated by the narrow, rock studded canyon, but held to a walk to avoid accident to the sled, figuring on overtaking Walters on the easier going of the wider valley.

Thoughts of Helene nearly drove him mad until he remembered the words of wisdom from the lips of Jules Beloit: "Emergencies arise and must be met in the order of their relative importance. What has happened; has happened—what good could come of a journey to Carcajo Lake?" Yes, whatever had happened to Helene, had already happened, he admitted, and Walters' appearance at the mine certainly constituted an emergency that must be dealt with forthwith. What good, indeed, would a trip to Carcajo Lake do—if he were to find the girl safe among the Loucheux? It would alleviate his own anxiety, yes, but at the expense of her father's gold—her gold. Somehow, he couldn't feature old Jules Beloit being forced by poverty to return to the life of an ordinary trapper. The role just didn't fit.

THE sign in the snow showed that Walters had thrown caution to the wind, and was tearing down the canyon with all possible speed. Drewry grinned to himself as he noted where the man had overrun a sharp turn, and jammed his sled among the rock fragments. And again, where his load had overturned by running foul of an ice hummock. He paused and retrieved a ten-pound bag of pemmican that Walters had either overlooked or thrown away to lighten his load. "It won't be long, now," he muttered. "With the light bad as it is, and at the rate he's going, something's bound to happen."

The soundness of the prediction was demonstrated a half hour later when, rounding a turn, he came upon Walters kneeling in the snow mending a broken runner with a lashing of babiche. Walters

made a grab for his rifle and Drewry laughed.

"Don't shoot, Walters! It's me—Jack Drewry!"

"My God, Mister Drewry!" cried the man in a voice that trembled with terror. "Did you see it, too?"

"See what?"

"The devil—an' worst than the devil! All hair an' eyes, an' no nose, an' chin—an' a mouth clean acrost his face! Damn Dryden! I told him they was devils in the country beyond like them crazy men yelled about. But he claimed there worn't!"

"Dryden? What's he got to do with it?" asked Drewry.

"Him an' I's pardners, that's what, an' we're rich! We're rich, I tell you—with the black gold layin' all over the floor!"

"Where is Dryden?"

"He's—" The man ceased speaking abruptly, and leaned the rifle against the sled.

"Where is he?" demanded Drewry.

"Who—Dryden? Oh—him? Yeah, why—he's back to The Edge, I s'pose. Old man Beloit, he agreed to kill him. He don't dast to cross the divide."

"So he sent you, eh? Sent you to sneak around and spy on Beloit or the girl, or the idiot? To trail them to the source of Beloit's black gold?"

"Shore he did! A man can't hold no claim till he records it—Beloit nor no one else! That's the law. The first one to record a claim gits it. But—what you doin' here? How'd you git here?"

"I followed your trail."

"Then you seen it, too! You musta!"

"Saw what?"

"Why that devil—er ghost, er whatever the damn thing was! You had to see it, if you followed me up this here canyon! It couldn't of got by you!"

Drewry smiled. "Maybe you've been traveling too fast, or something, Walters," he said, eyeing the man with evident concern. "Does your head feel all right? Haven't been worrying about anything have you? Or you haven't been drinking?"

"Oh my God, Mister Drewry! You—you don't think I'm—I'm crazy—like them others?"

"W-e-e-l-l," I wouldn't say you were exactly crazy—yet. But you mustn't think too much about ghosts and devils and things like that. First thing you know you'll get to believing that you really did see them—and then—"

"But I did see it! I tell you I did! I seen it as plain as I see you, right now. In the cave, it was. I crawled in to have a look, an' there was a light in there, an' I couldn't hear nothin'. I wiggled in further, an' seen a kind of a room, an' I stud up—an' there was the black gold layin' thick on the floor. I picked some up, an' was heftin' it, an' puttin' some in my pocket—when the thing riz up from a kind of a bed in the corner and gowked at me! My God, what a face—all eyes an' hair! An' it let out a hell of a noise—like a yowp, er a squeal, an' it come at me. I knocked my head agin the wall an' fell down, an' next thing I know'd I was in there all alone; the moss was burnin' in the platter of grease, an' the thing was gone. An' I made a dive fer the hole, an' wiggled out. an' when I stuck my head out—there it stud, awaitin' fer me! Only this time it had changed into a man an' a dog team! Yessir, a man that stud a good ten foot high—an' his dogs was as big as moose! An' the next thing I know'd he was gone! But there was another dog team there—but no one was with 'em. They was jest common dogs—like yourn. So I socked in my stake an' got to hell outa there. An' I ain't tellin' you no lie, neither. By God, I know when I see a thing, an' when I don't! An' you musta saw 'em, 'cause they couldn't git outa this box canyon only this way!"

"Maybe we better make a fire," suggested Drewry, eyeing the man pityingly. "Some hot tea might do you good."

"But didn't you see nothin', Mister

Drewry?" begged the man, a plaintive note in his voice. "A ghost, er a devil—er the big man with dogs like moose? Honest, didn't you?"

"No, Walters, I saw no devil, or ghost, nor any big man, nor any dogs as big as moose. But if you did see a devil or a ghost in this cave you mention, it wouldn't necessarily have to come back by the trail, you know. If it could change into a big man and a team of big dogs, why it could just as easily change into a bird, when it got ready to go—and fly out."

"Oh my God—that's what it done. That's shore as hell what it done, Mister Drewry! But I ain't agoin' to build no fire. I'm agoin' to finish fixin' my sled, an' then I'm agoin' to git to hell outa this damn country as quick as I kin. I wouldn't camp in this here canyon fer a million dollars! Not with them devils an' ghosts rompin' up an' down it, I won't!"

"If you're hitting for The Edge," Drewry said, "you've got a race on. I found your stake up at the head of the canyon and put mine in beside it. The one that reaches the recorder's first, locates the claim."

"You hittin' fer The Edge to file that there cave?" Walters asked.

Drewry grinned. "What do you think —that I'd hang around here and let you go on in and record it?"

WALTERS was silent for a few moments as he worked feverishly at his sled. A plan was formulating in his mind —a plan that, if successful, would leave Dryden waiting indefinitely at the bend of the short-cut trail. Of course, later he would have to answer to Dryden—but there would be time to worry about that. Then again, Dryden might never come back. He might wait in his camp at the bend of the trail too long. The country beyond had got other men; maybe it would get Dryden, too.

His outfit was blocking the narrow trail, and as the other started to work his own sled among the rock fragments to pass, he paused.

"Look ahere, Mister Drewry. How about me an' you goin' pardners on this here proposition? We was pardners onct before—but we didn't do so good, that time. What I claim—onct pardners, allus pardners! An' this time we can't lose. Hell, man—we're right now rich! What's the use in me an' you racin' clean to The Edge? Chances is I'd beat you—an' then you wouldn't have nothin'. It stands to reason; me, I'm a sourdough, an' you ain't nothin' but a chechako. But if we go pardners we kin take our time an' hit fer The Edge by the long trail, an' not kill neither us nor our dogs."

"The long trail!" Drewry exclaimed. "Do you know the short cut?"

"Shore I do! Dryden he—he draw'd me a map. That's the way I come."

"But how about Dryden? You're a partner of his on this venture—if he grubstaked you."

"Listen, Mister Drewry, I kinda mistrust Dryden ain't on the level—what with him damn near doin' you out of that there money, an' all. We kin tell him that you found the location 'fore I got to it, an' you jest let me in on it fer old times sake. Then he wouldn't have no claim on it—see? Tellin' you about me—I'd ruther have an honest man fer a pardner than a crooked one, any day!"

Drewry laughed. "I feel the same way about it, Walters," he said.

"Then it's a deal, eh?"

"No, Walters, it isn't a deal. There'll be no partnership about this proposition. Either you'll file; or I will. It's each man for himself—and the devil take the hindmost!" He ceased trying to get around the other outfit, and seated himself on his sled to wait for the man to finish his repair job. "And, seeing that you know the short cut, I'll just let you lead the way. I'll be right on your tail, Walters, until we git in sight of the divide. After that, you'll be on mine!"

The other shrugged. "Suit yourself," he replied in a surly tone. "Remember, I give you yer chanct. It hain't my fault if you turned it down."

Had Drewry known of the one-man camp at the bend of the short-cut trail where Dryden waited, with hate in his soul, vengeance in his heart, and a gun in his hand, he would have given heed to the sinister gleam in the glance that accompanied the other's words. But when Walters' task was finished, and he pushed on, Drewry followed him, little knowing that the man was decoying him to certain destruction.

XXVI

WALTERS FORMS A PLAN

WALTERS, his panic subsided by the assurance that whatever of ghosts or devils should seek to slip up behind him must first encounter Drewry in the narrow canyon, slowed to a pace more in keeping with the rock-strewn trail. He had nearly reached the mouth that gave out onto the wider valley when, upon rounding a bend, his lead dog stopped abruptly and growled savagely at a dark object that lay squarely across the trail, blocking the narrow passage between two upstanding rock fragments. Drewry's dogs halted at

the tail of the leading sled, and both men hastened forward to examine the parka-clad form that lay, face downward on the snow.

Reaching down, Drewry grasped a shoulder and turned the inert form upon its back. At the same instant a shrill scream of terror issued from Walters' lips, as he stared in wide-eyed horror at the broad, flat face, with its wide-spaced, lashless eyes, and mop of coarse hair.

"It's him! It's the devil that come at me in the cave, and what'll we do?" The shrill voice shook with abject terror, and Drewry saw that the man's knees were trembling violently.

Kneeling beside the form, Drewry slipped a hand beneath the parka. "He's alive," he said. "We've got to do something for him. There's a patch of spruce in the valley ahead. Come on, give me a hand, and we'll get him onto my sled. Look at that big blue bump on his forehead. He was running hell-bent down the trail and when he rounded the bend, here, he crashed into one of these rocks."

"Not by a damn sight, not me! I wouldn't touch him fer no money! Drag him off the trail, an' we'll git to hell outa here. Don't take him alone. Leave him lay —an' mebby he'll freeze to death!"

Drewry slanted the man a glance. "Come on, you damn coward—give me a hand! You wouldn't go away and leave the poor devil to freeze?"

"The hell an' I wouldn't! You thought I was lyin'—er had went nuts, er somethin'. But now you kin see fer yourself! Roll him to one side, an' let's go!"

"Get hold of yourself, Walters," said Drewry. "He's only a harmless idiot. He lives at Beloit's. It was he who found the black gold and showed it to Beloit. He goes back to the cave now and then for more."

Walters' eyes widened. "My God—was it him I trailed in there? Me, thinkin' it was a man! He looked like a man from the hill, when I took out after him! If I'd know'd what made that trail when I run onto it, I'd be to the Edge by now—an' to hell with Dryden an' Beloit's black gold!"

Drewry grinned. "Come on, be a sport. We've got to get this man to Beloit's. Then we can start our race from there."

"He ain't no man, he's a devil! It's a trick—a trick of yorn an' Beloit's to git me to Beloit House an' then set me on the long traverse without no dogs an' no grub—like he done Dryden that time!"

DREWRY'S face flushed with anger. "You're yellow, Walters. Yellow as hell! You haven't got the guts of a rabbit. Why don't you try being a man—just once—to see how it feels? I can't leave this poor cuss here to die. I'm taking him home—to Beloit House. I'll lose a whole day, doing it. And when I get there, I'll have to hit for The Edge by the long trail. That will give you a good three days' start. Be a sport and come on with me—help save this poor fellow's life."

"Like hell I will! I ain't no sport—when it comes to reskin' the best damn strike in the North! Nor neither I ain't no damn fool. Why would I try to save his life—so he could scare hell out of me the next time I seen him? Not me! If yer damn fool enough to monkey with him, that's yer lookout—not mine. I'm hittin' fer The Edge. An' what more, don't try to take me up on that pardnership, neither. You turned it down when you thought you could outrun me with yer seven dogs agin my six—an' now when the odds is my way, I'll turn you down!"

"I wouldn't be a partner of yours, Walters," said Drewry, "if you were the last man on earth! And what's more—you haven't beaten me yet! You'll have three days' start, but that don't mean you'll win! Lots of things can happen to a man like you—in a country like this. Maybe the big man with the moose-sized dogs will get you—and you'll spend the rest of your life babbling about it in some padded cell. But even if he don't, Walters—when you hit The Edge, you'd better keep right on going! What I did to Dryden that night in the Igloo, won't be a patch on what I'll do to you!" With which dictum, he rolled the unconscious form of the idiot in a blanket, carried it back, and lashed it firmly onto his sled, while Walters, with loud shouts to his dogs, disappeared down the canyon.

When he swung out into the wider valley, Walters redoubled his pace, slanted up over the hill on his own back trail, and put many miles behind him before he finally camped.

WITH his courage somewhat revived by the miles of open country between himself and the narrow canyon with its cave of horror, Walters spread his bed close beside his fire, and as if the way of the men of the silent wastes, gave voice to his thoughts. "What's the use lettin' Dryden in on this here proposition?" he muttered. "I do all the work an' git hell scairt outa me, to boot—an' he gits half the gold! It ain't right. An' he's a damn crook, besides. He's smarter'n what I be, an' he's liable to beat me outa my half. They's ways them smart ones works it. But with Drewry goin' around by Beloit House to leave that devil there, I kin swing wide of Dryden's camp at the bend of the short-cut trail, an' keep on headin' south till I pick up the longer trail. Dryden, he might be watchin' with that there spy glass of his'n, over at that rock pile we made fer a marker, but if I wait till dark to pass there, I kin keep goin' on down that river till it cuts Downey's trail. If I figure to pass along about dark, Dryden, he'll be back to his camp cookin' supper an' feedin' the dogs. He'll hang around there a couple of weeks er more before he'll start huntin' me—an' then it'll be too late. I've got Downey's map here, an' I kin foller it all right. Drewry follered it, an' he ain't nothin' but a damn chechako. I'll have a hull day's start on Drewry, an' I kin easy beat him to The Edge; that is, in case nothin' happens—like that big man with them dogs as big as moose. What in hell did he have to bring that up fer? I'd almost fergot him—what with findin' that devil layin' there in the trail! I gotta be careful, but hell—a rifle'll kill a big man

as easy as a little one, an' the big ones is easiest to hit." Producing Downey's map he held it close to the flickering light of the fire, checked the fact that the river crossed the trail, returned it to his pocket, and slept.

XXVII

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

IN a copse of stunted spruce that afforded firewood and some slight protection from the wind, Dryden had pitched his tent near the bend of the cut off trail. His futile attempts to trail Beloit to the mine during his sojourn at Beloit House, had convinced him that the source of Beloit's gold lay to the northward. So when he made his own camp he sent Walters on to establish his camp some eight or ten miles to the eastward which would put him nearly due north of Beloit House, and some thirty miles distant from it. Walters was to conceal his camp as best he could, and from the crests of hills and ridges he was to watch for, and follow anyone he saw heading north. Should he succeed in trailing him to the mine, he was to hasten immediately to Dryden, and together they would hit for The Edge and record the claim. A mile to the westward of Dryden's camp, the mountains gave place to a broad, rolling plain, with level stretches of tundra, interspersed between the ridges and hills, and several rivers and creeks wound their way to flow into some tributary to the Mackenzie.

That Walters should have no difficulty in finding Dryden's camp upon his return, the two had built a stone cairn on the point of a spur of the hills that jutted out into the plain, and it was to this cairn that Dryden repaired two or three times a day to search the plain with his glass for sight of the returning Walters. He did not really expect the man so soon, but the walk back and forth to the cairn gave him something to do. He knew that it might be a week, two weeks, or even longer before anyone from Beloit House would visit the mine.

The last glow of the early winter sunset still lingered in the west as Dryden rested his elbows on the cairn and swept the plain for the last time with his eight-power glass before returning to his solitary camp in the spruce copse. The glass halted suddenly in its slow sweep of the plain to the north-eastward and focused upon a tiny moving object barely discernable in the slow-gathering darkness. In time the figure resolved into a man walking rapidly at the head of a dog team, following the southward course of a stream that wound among the low hills. The figure would disappear behind a hill to emerge a few minutes later, again to disappear behind a nearer hill. The river curved westward before continuing its southward course, so that one following it would come within a quarter of a mile of the cairn which would be plainly visible upon its jutting promontory.

Could it be possible that Walters had already succeeded in trailing someone to the black gold? Dryden could scarce restrain himself from rushing out to meet the man, but curbed his impatience with the thoughts that it might be someone else —Helene, or Beloit, or even Drewry. He certainly had no wish for the girl or Beloit to know that he had dared return across the divide—but Drewry! "Damn him!" he muttered, under his breath, "I wouldn't want anything better than to run onto him! It wouldn't take long, out here, to square things up for that night in the Igloo!"

THE man on the river was making good time. "Maybe Walters is backing out. Maybe he's got cold feet thinking about those ghosts or devils he's always talking about. The damn fool's afraid of his own shadow. It won't be long, now, till I know."

The man was almost at the point where he must leave the river to head for the

cairn when Dryden returned the glass to its case and waited with consuming impatience. Suddenly he leaned forward and stared at the moving outfit, straining his eyes in the semi-darkness. The man had passed the turning off point! He was proceeding on down the river to the southward, without so much as hesitating, although even in the waning light, the cairn must have stood out distinctly. Surely Walters could follow his own back trail, even if he hadn't seen the cairn! But he had passed the point where the trail led from the river. He was about to call, to rush out and overtake the man, when a sudden thought stayed him. This man was not Walters—it was Drewry. Shaking off his mitten, Dryden's hand flew beneath his parka and felt the gun—the blue-black object that had come skittering down the steep bank to him the night Drewry had kicked him out of the Igloo. The river made a horseshoe bend around the point of a low ridge, so that one following it must again come close to the promontory.

Unhesitatingly Dryden dashed down a shallow ravine that would bring him out on the river where it once again straightened out to the southward. A sinister, almost a maniacal gleam flickered in the gray-green eyes as a few moments later he concealed himself in a thick bunch of scrub willows on the bank of the river.

Luck favored him. The sky had become slightly overcast so that the stars shone dully, giving little light. The conformation of the opposite bank was such that a huge snowdrift had formed on the river ice—a drift that would force anyone following the river to hug the west bank at this point—to pass almost within arm's reach of one waiting in the willows.

Tensely Dryden waited, the hand beneath his parka gripping the butt of the cocked gun. "I'll give it to him with his own gun!" he rasped under his breath. "And jerk off his mitten and leave the gun in his hand, and if anyone ever should happen onto him, they'll call it a suicide—another fool that crossed into the country beyond, and didn't come back!"

The low crunch of footsteps came to his ears, the softer padding of the dogs, and the squeak of sled runners on the cold snow. Then a form loomed close, brushing the willow boughs. Dryden clawed the intervening branches aside with his mittened left hand, as his bared right shot out. A white face turned toward him rimmed by a parka hood. Dryden thrust the gun almost against the face and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report, a dull reddish yellow flash, and the soft thud of a body falling at full length upon the snow. Behind the twitching form the dogs drew back, cowering against the sled, snarling, as Dryden stood gun in hand, peering out from the willows at the still form in the snow.

HIS fingers were numbing with the cold, and he made to return the gun to its improvised holster beneath his parka, when he remembered that he must leave it with the body. It would be evidence in case anyone should accidently stumble onto the corpse. He must pull off the man's mitten so it would appear he had used the gun. And surely someone in The Edge would be able to identify it as Drewry's, Mike Haney, probably; certainly he couldn't help but know Drewry owned the gun.

As he moved from the thicket a dry branch snapped sharply and Dryden jumped. Whirling, he glared nervously about him—only silence, silence and the low-voiced snarling of the dogs as they cowered against the sled, their eyes glaring greenly in the little light of the stars. "My God," he mumbled, "it's murder! They'll call it murder—and—and——"

His voice trailed into silence and he realized his hands were shaking. With an effort he pulled himself together. "Rot!" he muttered, viciously. "First thing I know I'll be as bad as Walters! There isn't a chance in the world that

anyone'll ever find him. But even if they do, they'll call it suicide—his right hand bare, shot with his own gun. And by God, I'll go through his pockets for those dollars he made me give back to him. No use leaving them for the wolves to chew up."

Stepping from the willows, he stooped down and jerked the mitten from the right hand of the form that lay sprawled on its belly, its face buried in the snow. As he did so, some black, lozenge-like flakes fell from it and lay upon the snow. Reaching down, Dryden picked up several of them and examined them.

"Beloit's black gold!" he cried. Then regarded the silent body with a sneer. "Probably a more convincing love maker than I am, but what did it get you? Or maybe old Beloit told you the secret—to repay you for making that trip to The Edge for supplies while he was crippled. But either way, you damned crook, you were doublecrossing them! You were cutting back to The Edge to record the claim!

It's a cinch you weren't hitting back to Beloit's. This spot isn't on a line between Beloit House and the claim—by a damn sight! You dirty doublecrossing skunk, you got just what was coming to you!" With which righteous dictum, Dryden tossed the gun into the snow close beside the bared right hand.

He was about to turn away when a thought occurred to him. It would be well to make sure that the bullet had entered the man's head at a spot, and from an angle compatible with the theory of suicide. He had fired from the west at the man heading south, so it wouldn't have entered from the left—yet the man had turned to face the sound as he had brushed the bushes aside—better make sure. Stooping, Dryden turned the body. One glance into his face partially masked by crimson snow slush, and he leaped back with a cry. "My God! It's Walters!"

For long moments, as he stood there staring down in horror at the still form, his brain refused to function. Stark terror gripped him. He curbed an insane desire to rush shrieking from the scene. Gradually the panic gave place to anger. "Damn you!" he muttered savagely, "you were trying to doublecross me! You found Beloit's gold, and you were trying to slip on past me and hit for The Edge and locate the claim in your own name! Good God—can't a man trust anyone in this damned country?"

His eyes rested for a moment on the gun, then lighted with an unholy gleam. Stooping swiftly, he replaced the mitten on the stiffening hand. "There, if anyone finds you now—Drewry'll get the credit for the killing! They'll find his gun, and it'll be logical, too! Walters found Beloit's mine, and Drewry knocked him off to keep him from recording it! All I've got to do now, is to load my outfit, back-track Walters to the gold—then hit for The Edge and record the claim! I'll get a night's sleep, and hit out good and early. It looks as though things had broken for me at last. Let Wilma squawk her head off now—I'll have plenty of gold to settle any complaints! I knew my luck would turn—sometime!"

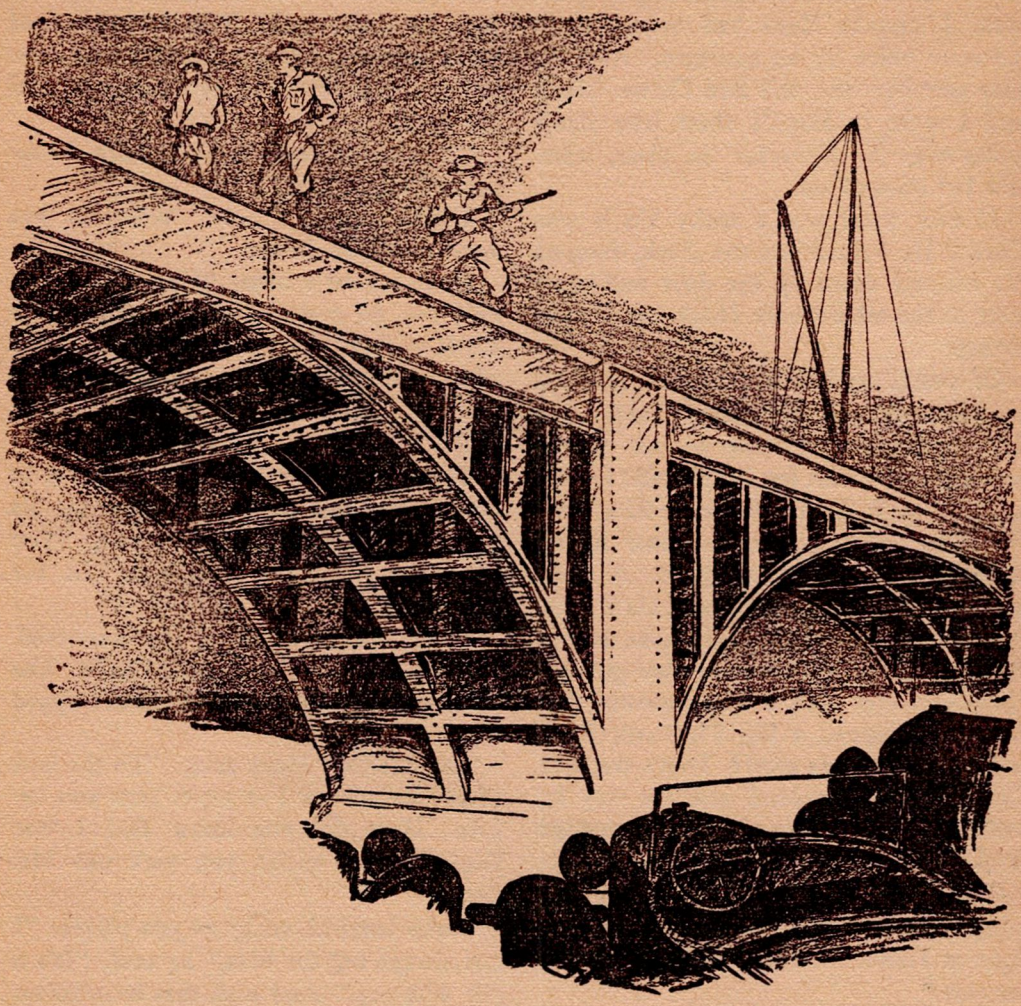
(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

A young American aviator sits down on a South Seas island, and finds himself in on a treasure hunt of sinister proportions

FRENCHMAN'S GOLD

In the next SHORT STORIES by R. V. GERY

What Are You Going to Do with a Fellow Who Brags, and Then Makes Good on His Bragging?



THE GLORY HUNTER

By BENNETT FOSTER

Author of "Steers," "The Old Man," etc.

I HATE a four flusher worse than the Devil hates Holy Water. Sneak thieves, liars and braggarts all come in about the same class with me, but what are you going to do with a fellow that brags and then makes good on his bragging? I don't know. I never ran into but one like that and thinking about him still makes me jumpy. His name was Ben Curtis and he was Hank Burke's assistant on the Apesta bridge job.

This was in 1928. Hank was in charge of the bridge for the Harwell Construction people and Curtis was sent down by the main office in L.A. Hank always had a green engineer or two working with him

on the jobs he bossed. He liked to have them and he turned out some mighty good men. I suppose Hank had written in to the main office for an assistant. Anyhow they sent him one, this Ben Curtis. Hank and I were in Hank's sheet iron shack going over the plans for the piers, when this lad showed up.

If ever there was a cocky kid it was Curtis. He walked into the shack, dumped his suitcase down by the door and came over to the table where Hank and I were sitting.

Of course we had both looked up when he came in and I'll never forget the first impression he made on me. Curtis was about five feet ten inches tall; he had a pair of good shoulders, and walking even the short distance from the door to the table he managed to swagger. A good looking kid, he was; black hair, black eyes, a good jaw, and not too much nose. It was the way he carried his head, that got me. Have you ever seen a banty rooster that has just whipped a big Plymouth Rock and is strutting his stuff? That's the way Curtis carried his head and the way he walked. He came over to the table, nodded to me, and spoke to Hank.

"They said you needed help on this bridge, Burke," he announced, looking right at Hank. "I came down to build it for you."

Hank is slow and easy going, for an Irishman, and it took a couple of seconds for the kid's announcement to sink in. He looked Curtis up and down and across before he spoke. When he did speak he was decidedly cool. "You are Curtis, I suppose," Hank said. "I had a letter from the office saying you were coming. This is Mr. Leniger, Mr. Curtis. He is the railroad's inspector for this job."

Curtis stuck out his hand. "How are you?" he asked casually. "So you are the fellow that watches us put the rivets in the right holes?"

I shook hands with him and nodded. I did not like the way he talked.

Hank was watching the kid while this took place and when Curtis had let go my hand he spoke again. The kid had one of those rock crusher grips and I was none too sure that my hand would ever be useful again.

"You are all ready to go to work, I suppose?" Hank said.

Curtis nodded. "Sure. What do you want me to do first?"

Hank smiled a little. "First I'd suggest that you go down to camp and get McBride to show you a tent," he said. "Then after you change clothes you can come back up. McBride will be in the cook shack."

Curtis nodded to me again, nodded to Hank and went over and picked up his grip. "I'll be right back," he said. "You can leave those pier blueprints out for me to look at."

Hank hid his grin as he answered. "They'll be here," he assured Curtis. The kid started out the door and Hank stopped him.

"Oh, Curtis," Hank said. "To the best of my knowledge I've never seen you before. How did you know that I was Burke? Why didn't you pick out Mr. Leniger?"

Curtis laughed, cocky as you please. "I can always tell the boss," he said. "It's a gift with me." And with that he went on out.

YOU can imagine how I felt about that and about the sly grin on Hank's face.

Hank and I were still checking plans when Curtis came back. He had shifted from his suit into a pair of khaki trousers, a blue shirt, and some field boots. He looked like the picture of a maiden's dream of a bold engineer. He came right on over to us.

"Did you see McBride?" Hank asked.

"Sure," said Curtis. "Say, he wanted to give me one of those lower tents, but I had him shift some stuff from a tent on the hill and moved into that."

"And whose tent was it?" Hank asked, his eyebrows going up.

"A fellow named Larson had his stuff in it," answered Curtis. "Say, are those the truss designs?"

Hank said that they were, and looked at me and grinned. Ole Larson was Hank's erection boss. He was a case hardened Swede and just as peaceful as a wild bull. Both Hank and I could see where this Curtis kid would get himself slapped flat when Ole found that his stuff had been moved.

Curtis bent down over the blueprints, turning them around so that Hank and I had to look at them upside down.

"What high school kid made this design?" Curtis asked, after he had studied the blueprints for a minute. "You'll never tell me that these came out of a drafting department."

That rubbed my hair the wrong way. It happened that I had had a lot to do with the Apesta bridge designs and I didn't care to have a green kid run them down.

"Those came out of the C&T office," I said, with all the sarcasm I could muster. "Perhaps you can point out what's wrong with them."

The kid was studying the plans. "You're right, I can," he said. "Look here!" He put a finger on the blueprint.

We looked. The kid had pointed out the deck structure. He had unerringly picked out the thing that I was doubtful about. I'd had plenty of trouble with the design department over it, too. Nowhere was this fresh greenhorn, landing right on the weak spot.

"That's hot," the kid said. "I'd say that your high school draughtsman fell down plenty." He went on from that. He picked that carefully drawn and figured plan to pieces and he was logical about it. When he had it pulled apart he started putting it back with variations. And he knew his engineering. I felt just as though I were back at C.I.T. with old Prof. Mather laying down the law. It took me a minute to catch my breath.

"That's what I'd do," Curtis finished with a flourish.

I suppose my face was red. I know my temper was. "That may be what you would do," I told him, "but what *we* will do is go according to design. Rolling mills are odd that way; they put out the stuff that has been ordered and I'm afraid your improvements wouldn't quite fit in to their schedule."

Curtis was just as cool as a cucumber. "I suppose not," he returned, looking at me. "Too bad I didn't see these before the orders went in."

Just then McBride, down at the camp, started beating on a piece of bar iron with a rod. McBride used the combination for a dinner bell. It was noon and time to call off.

Curtis turned to Hank Burke. "Dinner," he said. "I told McBride I wanted corned beef for dinner. He was cooking stew. Are you coming, Burke?"

He didn't wait for an answer but turned and went out, leaving Hank and me standing there with open mouths. Hank got his closed first. "He told McBride he wanted corned beef," Hank sputtered. "Of all the fresh——"

"Dinner," I said, interrupting. "Corned beef for dinner. Are you coming, Burke?"

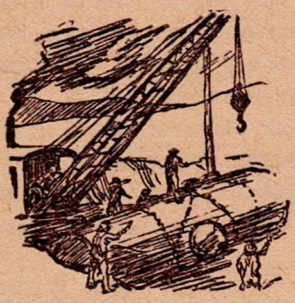
What Hank said then was plentiful but not in good taste.

We had corned beef for dinner. Hank was so sore he couldn't eat. He sat at the table and looked at his plate and built up pressure, but Ben Curtis enjoyed the meal. He stowed away plenty of beef and cabbage and all the trimmings, and then rolled and lit a cigarette. Hank didn't say anything to him at the table. After all, Curtis was Assistant Engineer.

WHEN the meal was over Hank got Pete McBride to one side and to McBride's hairy ear conveyed the tidings that he, Hank Burke, was the boss and giving

orders around the camp. He was so emphatic that McBride almost blushed and Pete had been cooking for construction camps for ten years. When that was done Hank and I went back to the office and Hank called Curtis in.

"It may not have occurred to you, Curtis," Hank said when the kid arrived, "but I am in charge on this job. I have no doubt but that you mean well and that your efforts to date have been simply to take details off my already over-burdened hands,



but I'm frank to say I don't appreciate them."

Curtis looked puzzled. "I don't get you," he said.

Hank was still being polite. "I'll make myself plainer," he said. "Every man in this camp has a job. Mine is to run the work. McBride is the cook and makes up the menus."

"Oh," said Curtis. "I get you now. I didn't think that——"

"Probably you didn't" Hank's voice was just loaded with sarcasm. "Now if you will take the transit from that corner, yonder, and go out and line in the stakes for the west pier, I'll be obliged. Thank you."

Curtis looked at me, looked at Hank, and then walked over and picked up the transit. He didn't say a word; just took the instrument and left.

After a while I left Hank and went out to look things over. Curtis had his instrument set up and was doing business. He had impressed a man from the steel gang for a rodman, had found his stakes and was hard at it. Evidently he knew his stuff. I went on down to where the hole for the first pier was going down and watched the work, and then went back to Hank's office.

We had a nice job at Apesta. The town itself is a little collection of adobe shacks up on a hill. West of the hill the mesa drops away into a wide cut, and against the west bank of the cut the Jicarilla arroyo has its channel. Arroyos are treacherous things and we had a two-span, three-pier design to cross this one. Hank had false work out across the arroyo, having driven double piles for the false work to sit on. In the middle of the false work the pile driver was set up and the men were driving sheet steel piling for a coffer dam. There was twenty feet of quicksand over the bedrock in the middle of the arroyo, and we were going to the bedrock for footing for our piers. On the east end of the bridge we had a mile and two-tenths of fill. There was a sub-contract on the fill job and Luz Hermanos, a sub-contractor, had twenty slips and fresnoes working there. The graders had a camp on the south side of town. It was just a collection of shacks made from whatever the men could find or steal. Every grader had a family ranging from three to ten kids, and a woman or two. I have never seen such a bunch of kids.

IN SPANISH Apesta means, "It stinks." The town did stink. There were two or three sulphur springs down below the hill and the grader camp, and they had made a swamp of the desert. Salt grass grew around the edges and the place was an evil smelling bog. Down below the swamp was the international boundary and on the other side of that was another cluster of houses. That was the Mexican town of Apesta. Almost every night, after work, the graders and some of Hank's men would walk down to the Mexican Apesta and get a drink or two in the cantina that Pablo Labita ran. It was convenient, that is if you like the kind of stuff that Labita sold.

The whole place, Apesta and the bridge, was fifty miles from anywhere. Concho was our closest railroad point, and it was on the PS&C. We got all our materials by truck. I don't know now why the C&T built the bridge or started the branch line that was supposed to run to it. The steel never reached the bridge and now it just sits out there like a monument to waste.

Ben Curtis came in a little before five o'clock and put the transit back in its corner. He had finished the layout for the west pier and when Hank and I went out to look it over we found that he had lined it in all right. I considered that pretty good for a youngster without help, but I didn't say so. It wouldn't do to compliment Curtis. His head was big enough without me adding to the swelling.

At six o'clock we knocked off for the day. The three of us, Hank, Curtis, and myself, filed out of the office and went to camp. Hank and I had a tent together. We were in our tent washing up when we heard some excitement and went out to see what was going on. There was a crowd of men gathered close to the mess tent and Hank and I ran down. Right in the middle of the crowd were Ben Curtis and Ole Larsen.

Ole Larsen was the biggest Swede I've ever seen on two feet. He must have been six feet six inches tall and broad in proportion. He had hands like the dipper on a three-quarter yard shovel, and shoulders like the drive beam of an oil well rig. When Hank and I got there Ole was spitting disgruntled Swedish and walking around Curtis. Both men had their shirts off and I noticed that Ben Curtis had a nice pair of shoulders, but he looked like a pink and white baby beside Ole. We gathered from Ole's broken and interpolated speech that he resented being moved from his tent. It looked bad for Curtis. Both Hank and I had seen Ole fight and not wanting the kid to get himself killed the first day on the job, we started to butt in.

CURTIS wasn't looking for help, though. When Hank came between him and Ole, the kid put one hand on Hank's shoulder and pulled him back.

"If I'm going to boss this layout," he said very calmly, "I might as well start with this dumb Swede."

Well, what could you do with that? Hank backed out and joined me. "I hope that Ole knocks his head off," he said. "Of all the swelled headed kids I ever saw——"

Right then it started. Ole took a roundhouse swing at Curtis with one of his big fists. Curtis stepped inside that swing and moved his hand about six inches. I'll bet that they heard the smack of that blow and the grunt that Ole gave, clear down across the border. Ole, all six and a half feet of him, sat down on the sand and then came up roaring.

It was just pitiful. The kid walked around that big Swede like a cable goes around a winch, smooth and easy and effortlessly. He hit Ole wherever and whenever he pleased and never once did he hit him in the face. Finally, with Ole gasping, the kid parted with a straight left to the solar plexus that must have shocked Ole's Viking ancestors. Ole passed out of the picture and some of the boys took him to the cook shack for water to revive him. The kid came over to Hank and me, dusting his hands.

"You never want to hit one of those big squareheads in the head," he remarked instructively. "You'll just hurt your hands."

Hank managed to gasp out a question. "Where did you learn to fight like that?" he demanded.

Curtis shrugged. "I was middleweight intercollegiate champion," he said. "That Swede wasn't much of a hill to climb."

"And were you anything else?" Hank asked politely.

"Oh, yes," Curtis told him. "I was captain of the swimming team and of the football team, and I did some work in the gym."

"I see," said Hank. "In your spare time, I suppose?"

"Why, yes." Curtis bent down and picked up his shirt. "I didn't have much time to go out for anything else. You see I wanted to be valedictorian so I spent a good deal of time studying. I would have made it, too, but a couple of profs didn't like me."

Neither Hank nor I had anything to say about that. We watched Curtis put on his shirt and after awhile we went in and ate the stew that had been meant for dinner. All in all, Ben Curtis had had a fair first day in camp.

OF COURSE things couldn't go on like that. Hank Burke took Curtis in hand and tamed him down a little. Hank never succeeded in taming him entirely. It was in Curtis' nature to boast and it was also in Curtis' nature that having boasted he would make good on his boasting. There wasn't much likable about the youngster, but he did back up his tall talk.

I think that it was his third day in camp that he saw Lolita. Lolita was Luz Hermanos' girl. She was the prettiest Mexican girl that I have ever seen anywhere. Coal black hair with a blue sheen in it when the sun was right, midnight eyes, soft and velvety, red lips, a clear olive skin and a body that moved like a wave. She was about sixteen and she lived with Luz in one of the adobes up on the hill.

Ben Curtis saw her one evening after we had knocked off. I remember his comment. "Oh-oh," he said, "and who might that be?"

He was stroking an incipient mustache as he spoke. Curtis had arrived in camp clean shaven, but had immediately begun to grow a beard. He announced when he started that hair grew on his face faster than on the face of any other living human. As usual he overestimated a little and the mustache was visible only in profile, but I swear that he gave the effect of twirling it when he saw Lolita.

"That's Lolita, Mr. Casanova," I told him. "She's Luz Hermanos' girl and if you value your liver you'll lay off. Luz carries an eight-inch knife and he has a reputation for using it."

I don't think that Curtis heard anything but the name. "Lolita," he said musingly. "Nice little dame. Where does she live?"

"She lives with Luz," I answered. "She has the disposition of a wild cat and she doesn't speak a word of English." I wanted to discourage him.

"That's all right," he said absently. "I speak pure Castilian. I like 'em wild, anyhow."

"You'll lay off that girl," I told him. "If you don't, Luz will kill you, and if he doesn't Hank will. We can't afford to have any trouble with the graders, and Hank won't stand for your playing around."

Curtis smiled at me, gently. "I just work eight hours a day on this lousy job," he commented. "The rest of the time is my own. Lolita, huh?"

Well, it wasn't any use. I might have known that.

Still, I didn't see anything between Ben Curtis and Lolita for quite awhile and, foolishly, I believed that he had taken my warning. It wasn't until two weeks later that I saw him with the girl.

A lot happened in those two weeks. The forms were in the east hole and we poured the cement. The coffer dam in the middle of the arroyo was down to bedrock and the sand was coming out. The powder man had his air compressor over at the hole for the west pier and was shooting through the shale that lay above the granite bedrock. We were coming along fine. Up until that time nothing had hampered us.

There had been no rains and the arroyo had not come down. There had been no trouble either in our camp or the grader camp. We had had the usual number of Saturday night drunks and that was all. Except for the fact that the men did

not like Ben Curtis, we had a regular Sunday School.

THE men working in the coffer dam got the last of the sand out and the carpenters finished the bracing. That was in the forenoon. Just before one o'clock Ole Larsen went out over the false work and climbed down into the coffer dam to inspect the footing. The hoist man had left his cable dangling down into the dam and we couldn't see the lower block. Hank and Curtis and I were on the bank close to the false work, and there was a bunch of men sitting or lying down a little farther up the bank toward the north. Curtis was right in the middle of a tall tale, when a man yelled.

At the yell everybody instinctively looked toward the north. There, coming around the bend of the arroyo, a quarter of a mile above the bridge site, was a six-foot wall of water.

There was a mad scramble for a moment and in the excitement Larsen was forgotten. The wall of water swept on down, dirty, and turbulent and foam flecked, and struck against the piling for the false work and against the coffer dam. It formed an eddy around the coffer dam, a whirlpool, and then began to mound up. Looking up the arroyo I could see another wall of water coming on top of the first one. Another arroyo emptying into the Jicarilla had added its bit. Then there was a scream and looking out toward the coffer dam I saw the top of Larsen's blond head. He was in the coffer dam and water was already piling up and going over the top. There was a lot of confusion. Everybody yelled and the hoist man ran over to his winch and started the motor. The second wall of water hit and swept over the coffer dam. Ole went out of sight. A poorly set pile gave way and a little section of the false work sagged, then Ben Curtis, nimble as a monkey, ran out over the falsework and reached the coffer dam.

The hoist man was bawling to Hank, "Shall I take her up? Shall I take her up?" But Hank wasn't paying any attention. We could see Curtis at the edge of the coffer dam. He was standing there, one hand on the cable which had been swept to the lower edge of the dam by the water. Then, after what seemed an hour, Curtis started down into the water. He went down until only his head and shoulders showed, and stopped and braced himself. We could see him working furiously and then he pulled Ole Larsen up until Ole's head was out of the water. He held Ole there and, freeing one hand, gave the hoisting sign.

The hoist engine sputtered and the winch growled and the cable started up. Curtis grabbed that cable with his free hand. Out of the water they came, up level with the top of the false work. Men were running out over the false work and they reached Curtis as he cleared. Curtis had his legs wrapped around Ole and his arms held the man while his hands were clamped on the cable. He had used that rock crusher grip to good advantage. It seemed impossible, but he had suspended his weight and Ole's, and at the same time had fought the suction of the water.

The men carried Ole in. He was one damp Swede. Ben Curtis walked in. He didn't need help and his progress was a triumphant swagger. On the bank they emptied the water out of Ole and flocked around Curtis. He pushed through the men and came to Hank and me. "These damn' Swedes are heavy," he remarked. "If I didn't have a strong grip I couldn't have done that."

"What was the matter out there?" demanded Hank. "How was Ole caught?"

"He was fouled in the cable," Curtis answered. "Had his arm caught."

HANK took a long breath. "Well," he said, "you saved a good construction boss, but it was a fool thing to do. Suppose you had lost your grip on the cable?"

"There wasn't any danger of that," Curtis said calmly. "Anyhow, if I had I'd just have swum on across."

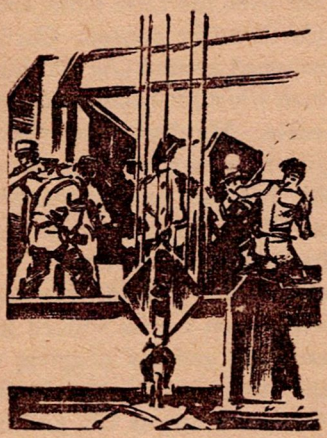
I looked at that raging, roaring torrent under the false work. The coffer dam was clear out of sight and two or three more piles had gone.

"You couldn't swim that in a million years!" I blurted.

"Want to bet on it?" Curtis took me up. "I can swim that for fun. I believe I'll just do it to show you."

He began to unbutton his shirt and Hank Burke picked up a little bar that was lying at his feet.

"I have no doubt that you can swim it," he said. "Just the same, Curtis, if you are a damned fool enough to try I'l bend this bar over your head. You stay on the bank. That's orders!"



Curtis shrugged. "All right—" he agreed, "if it's orders. I could do it, though."

He strolled off to where the men were working over Ole. When Hank and I went up to the office we saw Ole sitting up and Curtis was giving a lecture on first aid and resuscitation of drowned men. There were a bunch of men grouped around him.

"Is there anything he can't do or doesn't know?" Hank asked when we were in the office.

"Not that he will admit," I said.

We didn't say anything more about it. We didn't even have much to say when Curtis came into the office some time later. That night I saw Curtis and Lolita walking along the arroyo which was still running. The man and the girl had their heads close together. Maybe it was pure Castilian he was talking to her; I don't know.

I suppose that Curtis was enjoying himself. Men get a kick from fooling with the forbidden and dangerous things. I suppose that Curtis was no different from the rest of us. I know that instead of sticking around with Hank and me after supper and regaling us with tall tales in which Ben Curtis was invariably the hero, he took to disappearing from the camp as soon as night fell. Curiosity got the better of me and I made a few inquiries. I knew one of the graders pretty well, a chap named Juan Batista, and talking to Juan I asked how Luz Hermanos was coming along.

He grinned. In his decidedly original English he informed me that Luz was spending a good deal of time at Labita's cantina, below the line. "He ees get dronk," suggested Juan, and then, with a knowing leer, "I theenk Lolita ees not too kind to heem."

Well, that was that and it was none of my business. Just the same I took another round at Curtis. I told him that knives went with Spick girls and that he had better stay in his tent. He grinned and told me that I was jealous, and I left him in a huff.

So things went along and we were getting close to the end of the month and estimate time.

You know how it is when a job is being paid on estimate. The contractor is always anxious to get in as much as he can on the estimate so that he will get as much money as possible. Hank was no different from the rest and the home office was crowding him pretty hard. Hank was driving. So was Curtis. Since he had pulled Ole out of the coffer dam the attitude of the men toward him had changed. An erection roughneck doesn't mind a man telling how good he is if he will produce,

and Curtis had produced. The men followed his orders willingly enough and when he sounded off about the abilities of Ben Curtis, they grinned and went right ahead. I suppose they thought that there was no harm in bragging.

BY THIS time all the piers were poured and the forms pulled. The mixer was set up beside the bank, pouring for the cribbing. The bottom cords for the first span were in place and some of the upper truss had been erected, just set in and bolted in place. We were making mighty good time.

It was right at this point, with the estimate date only a few days away, that there was a tie-up of materials. Burke used the phone to Concho and, not getting any satisfaction with that, took a car and went in to town. That left Curtis in charge, for the day at least.

Things went wrong as soon as we started work in the morning. The hoisting engine broke down and had to be fixed. That took a while and by noon we had lowered only one bottom member for the second span and set it in place.

After dinner Curtis shot off his mouth. He said that he could set steel faster with a bunch of kindergarten kids than he could with the crew he had. He was ugly about it and the men responded just as you would think; they were sore and ugly, too.

The crew got the second member ready to hoist, the slings rigged and the hand lines fastened on the ends. Ole Larsen got out in the middle of the beam, ready to ride it up. He wanted to speed things. So did Curtis.

"You don't need all outdoors to hoist in," he told Ole. "Take this up some place close to where you are going to land it."

Ole grunted and gave the sign to go ahead.

The hoist engine was on the bank with the cable running out to the crane on the middle pier. The hoistman caught the relayed signal and took her up. Ole and the beam swung skyward. Curtis, who was on the bridge, called for a hand line to be passed up to him, and the man who was holding it coiled the bight and threw it up. Curtis caught it. By that time Ole and the I beam were above the tops of the piers. Ole had his hand raised to signal to stop hoisting. Curtis, seeing that the end of the beam was out too far, pulled hard on his hand line. The man on the other line had slack. The beam swung slowly, Ole yelled, Curtis yelled, and the man with the other hand line tried to check the swing, but too late. The beam bumped into the steel bolted on the first span. It bent that steel, for the stuff was just set up, without braces or tie rods. Having done what damage it could to the bridge, the swinging beam caught and fouled momentarily. The cable snapped at the upper block and began to slither through the sheaves. Ole gave a queer squawk and jumped for the sand in the bottom of the arroyo, twenty-five feet or more below him. He hit, sprawled and rolled like a barrel. The beam crashed down, missing Ole by luck. Curtis turned his line loose and started to the end of the bridge and the man on the other line, not having good sense, held his rope so that is was snatched through his hands, burning clear through his gloves. There they were. I think everybody swore at the same time.

Of course it was a mess. The upper stuff on the first span had been bent and was useless. The dropped beam had a battered end.

Ole Larsen had a sprained back but otherwise was more mad than hurt. The cable was broken and would have to be spliced—a mean, time-taking job with a wire cable. But, worse than all this, Ben Curtis passed the buck. If he had admitted that it was his fault, that he should have left Ole, an experienced erection man in charge, and let the hand line alone I think he would have got by. Instead, he cursed the hoisting engineer, the man with the burned hands, and Ole Larsen. Not one

of the three answered him, just took the cursing sullenly—which was a bad sign.

WHEN Hank got back that evening Curtis made his report. Ole, the hoist man and the man with the hand line were to blame. Curtis didn't even mention that he had been handling a line himself.

Hank heard him out and then took a flashlight and we went down to the bridge. We inspected the damage, looked over the crane and hoist and then went back to the office. After we were there Hank turned to me.

"Now," he said, "what happened, Tom?"

I hated that like hell. I wasn't working for Harwell and really it was not my business. Still Hank had asked and I told him, trying to give an unbiased report. I think I was fair. When I finished Curtis was full of explanations. From what he said I must have been blind. He did a nice job of making me out a liar and finally I called him. I told him we'd step outside and settle things.

Hank stopped that. "There'll be no fighting," he said, and then paused a moment. "Curtis," he said after the pause, "I think I have you sized up. As long as things go right and you get by with your bragging you're fine. As soon as something slips you pass the buck. You want all the glory and none of the blame. Now, in the morning, you take a crew and send that damaged stuff down into the arroyo. I'll have to order new steel sent out from the mill. You've tied us up in fine shape. Ole is hurt and I'll take a crew and see what can be done about getting the steel that's left us in place. That'll be all."

For once Curtis had nothing to say.

WE WENT to work in the morning. Hank sent in an order for material to replace that which had been damaged. Curtis took a crew and pulled the bent stuff. I helped as I could, but there wasn't much I could do, just keep the material moving to Hank, who was placing it. Fortunately it hadn't taken long to splice the cable. Still, with material missing and having to be replaced and with the feeling that existed we were tied down and slowed up. There was nothing for me to do but put it down on my sheets and when I sent in the estimates I had to report both spans incomplete. Railroads pay off on work done, not on intentions. Hank was pretty grave when he saw the estimates.

It didn't take Curtis long to get over the talk Hank had given him. By the end of the week he was as cocky as ever. Apparently he hadn't learned a thing. The men had learned though; they were wise to Curtis. They obeyed him, but they were sullen about it. A man can't work cheerfully when he knows that the boss won't back him up and will pass the buck when anything goes wrong.

A week after the monthly estimates had gone in we were still waiting for stuff to replace the damaged steel. Hank Burke was not cheerful. Whenever he got a letter from the main office his gloom deepened. Curtis had reverted to type and was telling about past accomplishments and bragging about what he would do if he were in charge. I got that last accidentally, happening to hear two of the crew talking about it. Of course, I said nothing to Hank. I'm not a tale bearer.

Thursday night when I was sitting in my tent, smoking, Juan Batista came up. Hank was in the office, working, and I had the tent to myself. Juan had something on his mind. He accepted my papers and tobacco and rolled a smoke. Then he squatted down by the tent pole and let the smoke trail out of his nose and looked at the sky. Finally I asked him what he wanted to see me about.

Juan beat all around the bush. After awhile he came out with it. Luz Hermanos was wise to Curtis and Lolita and was sore as a boil. He was slopping up the liquor, half drunk all the time. Worse than that, word had gone around that Burke wouldn't

pay off when the fill was finished, and there was some mighty ugly talk in the grader camp.

IT WORRIED me, of course. Still, I didn't think there was anything to the rumor, and I told Juan. Juan shook his head. He liked me, that Mexican did, and a Mexican can be a mighty good friend. Juan told me the rest of it. From what he said, Labita, the fellow who owned the cantina, was a Mexican Red, a sort of agitator. He had quite a crowd down in Apesta, Mexico, that followed what he said. Labita and his bunch were largely living from the money they got from the graders. Things were stirred up and Labita had told Luz that if the company didn't pay off when the fill was finished, they never would pay. Luz was ugly and Labita was egging him on.

As I have said, I'm no tattle-tale. Still, this was bad. It was something that Hank ought to know, and so after Juan had smoked another cigarette or two and gone back to his shack, I went to the office. Hank was there and I told him what I had heard.

Hank listened until I finished. Then he shook his head. "I'm afraid we're in for trouble," he said. "The office has been writing me and I don't believe they will pay Hermanos until the next estimate goes in. I happen to know they are short of money and were counting on a good big payment last month to take care of this."

There we were. I had to swear. Ben Curtis had tied us up with his fancy work. I lost my head and said what I thought about him.

Hank didn't pay any attention to me. He was busy with his own thoughts. When I stopped my ranting he looked up and grinned. "A bunch of trouble-makers," he said. "I think I'll go down and have a talk with Labita."

"You'll just be making trouble," I told him. "If you go down there now they'll know something is wrong. The thing to do is to wait. Maybe the company can pay off when the fill is done. You aren't sure about that. What's the use of starting trouble before you have to?"

We argued back and forth and finally I got Hank to see it my way. We went on down to the tent then and went to bed.

Friday was just another day's work. Saturday was payday. Saturday the fill was finished. I checked it completed. Saturday afternoon Luz Hermanos came to Hank's office and asked for his money. He had Labita with him. Luz could speak as good American as anyone and could understand it, but he chose to act as though he couldn't. He made Hank talk to him through Labita. When Hank would address Hermanos directly Luz would grunt, "No sabe." It was maddening. Hank held his temper and told Luz that the checks would be in within a week, and reasoned with him. Luz was ugly and Labita was smug. I wondered why Hank didn't bust that fat Mexican right between the ears. Finally they went out, Luz still growling and Labita smirking. Hank wiped his forehead and said, "Whew!" It had been a trying session.

AT SIX o'clock the bridge crew came up for their checks and Hank passed them out. It wasn't a wise thing to do, I thought. The bridge men got their checks and the graders didn't. There might be some friction.

A lot of the bridge crew were going to Concho for Saturday night and Sunday, and after they had eaten and cleaned up, they pulled out. There were perhaps ten men left in camp, excluding Curtis, Hank, and myself. Curtis came up to the office with Hank and me, a thing he had not been doing recently. I was sore. I suppose I should not have done it, but I ribbed him a little.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "No date tonight?"

Curtis grinned. "Later, my boy," he said. "Later. I like these late dates. Some

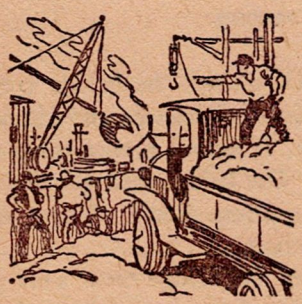
day I'll take you along with me and show you how to strut your stuff."

It burned me up. I was trying to think of a comeback when there came a scream from among the adobes in Apesta and a woman broke from around a building and ran toward us. Right behind her was a man. The woman was Lolita and the man was Luz Hermanos.

The girl gained, running down the hill. She was a good twenty steps ahead of Luz when she reached us. She ran straight to Ben Curtis and dodged behind him, spitting out frightened Spanish. Luz had a knife in his hand. He held it about level with his belt like a man holds a sword. He wasn't making a sound as he ran, but his face was deadly.

The whole thing happened too quickly for either Hank or me to take a hand. Lolita dodged behind Curtis and crouched. Luz arrived, made a pass at Curtis with his knife, and Curtis hit him.

He hit Luz hard. The big Mexican went back on his heels and rocked and Curtis took him again. This time Luz slumped and went down. I expected to see



him get up, but he didn't. The graders were pouring over the hill and the men from the camp, those that were left, were running up toward the office. Curtis stood with his fists clenched, waiting for Luz to come again. Luz didn't get up, and I went over to him and turned him over. He had fallen on his knife, and the haft was sticking up out of his back. He was dead as a mackerel. The graders and the bridge men arrived and Hank dived into his office. He came out with his six-shooter in his hand. Lolita had run over to Luz. She crouched down beside him and began to scream: "Muerto—muerto—muerto!"

The graders took it up. The bridge men didn't know what it was all about, but they saw the gun in Hank's hand. They stood back. Hank yelled orders in Spanish, trying to make himself heard over the noise. I clapped my hand over Lolita's mouth and the little hell cat bit me, clear through to the bone. I let her go and she came up, jabbering and pointing at Curtis. The kid's face was pale. One of the graders pulled a knife and started for Curtis and Hank shot him, right through the shoulder.

THAT did the trick. The man whirled half around and ran. The bridge crew started to move forward and the rest of the graders began to crowd back. They didn't want any of that medicine. Lolita, still screaming invective, went with them. Within five minutes after the thing started, Hank and Curtis and the bridge crew and I were all that were left. That is if you didn't count Luz.

Hank told the men what had happened, answering questions. Curtis had his color back. I heard him tell one of the men how hard he had hit Luz. It sickened me. He was still bragging. Hank had Luz carried to a tent and put on a cot. He told the men to break out any guns that they had or that they knew about. All this time he hadn't said a word to Curtis.

The men came back up from the camp, some of them with rifles. There were two twenty-twos, a thirty-thirty, and three six-shooters. I got my gun out of my grip and loaded it. Hank told off a guard to watch the camp. It was beginning to get dark. We waited. After a while I heard someone call me. It was Juan Batista. He had slipped around and was coming into the camp from the rear.

I took Juan up to the office where he could talk to Hank. Curtis was there, looking white again. I judged that Hank had told him a few things. Juan wasn't

bringing good tidings. He said that Labita was running things, that he had brought up a bunch of men from below the border and that there was plenty of liquor. I asked him how many men and he held up his fingers and wiggled them.

"A hoondred," he said.

"What's Labita telling them?" Hank asked sharply.

"He talk," said Juan. "All the time. He esay they don' get their money an' Luz ees kill. He esay they blow up the bridge!"

Curtis came up to his feet when Juan said that. He was really white now, just as white as a sheet. Hank wasn't looking at Curtis but I was.

"The powder house——" Curtis exclaimed.

Hank looked at him then. "What about the powder house?" he snapped.

"I didn't lock it!" Curtis gasped. "I——"

"They got thees powder," Juan said. "Me, I see eet."

Hank gave Curtis a look, and Curtis cringed under it, but there was no use in recriminations. Too many things to do. Hank started doing them. Juan said that he was going to stick with us and Hank put him to work with the rest. He had the men drive the five trucks and my car down the hill from the camp and arrange them so that their lights would show on the bridge. He posted three men on the bridge. He put the rest on the banks, telling them to get under cover. Then he put in a phone call for Concho and talked to the law there. It didn't look as though Hank overlooked anything.

After he had made his dispositions Hank and I were standing on the bridge approach. It was full dark now. Juan and two more men were at the trucks with orders to turn on the lights when a shot was fired. All the men with guns were placed where they could do the most good. Hank stood there, waiting. He didn't want to talk and I knew it. I kept still. We heard feet crunching on the gravel and Curtis came up.

"You ought to move the trucks up closer," he said without any preliminary. "I don't think the lights will hit the bridge. I'd leave one headlight on. I—"

"You!" said Hank. Then he unloaded. He told Curtis just what he had on his mind, and it was plenty.

"You tied us up with your grand-standing," Hank said bitterly. "I'd have had the checks for those men if you hadn't been trying to show off. Then you had to fool around with that Spick girl. You wanted to be the big boy around her. Look where it got you. You've killed a man and started all this, and now you come around telling me what to do! You and your four-flushing! Get to hell away from me!"

Curtis got a word in then. "To hell with you!" he shouted. "You think you're God Almighty. Worried about your two-bit bridge. I'll take care of your bridge for you. I'll——"

"Shut up, you damned Glory Hunter!" Hank yelled. "Shut up and get out!"

CURTIS left. He had never run into Hank clear mad before. I tell you it wasn't pleasant. I'd known Hank Burke for years, but I'd never seen him like this. I tried to cool him down, but I couldn't do anything. Hank tramped back and forth across the approach and as he tramped he talked.

"Wants the spotlight," Hank said. "He brags about what he can do, but in a pinch he falls down. The damned Glory Hunter! That's all he is. Wants the glory but won't stand the gaff. Left the powder house unlocked. I'll bet they have all the powder we had left. I wish to hell I'd killed him. I wish Luz had got him with that knife—"

It was pretty bad. Hank was keyed up, of course, or he wouldn't have blown up so. It got me.

"What are you?" I yelled at Hank. "An engineer or a talking machine. Raising hell isn't going to get you any place."

I must have got through to Hank with

that. He calmed down. He quit his pacing and came over to me and took hold of my arm. "I guess I'm nuts, Tom," he said. "But that glory hunting fool got me. Come on. We'll go out on the bridge."

We were about thirty feet back on the approach when he said that. Hank still had hold of my arm and we started toward the bridge together. We hadn't gone three steps when one of the guards yelled and fired a shot. Hank and I stopped.

The lights of the trucks and my car went on, one after the other. They flooded the bridge and the arroyo with light. Down the arroyo, toward the south, we could see a ragged sort of crowd coming up the draw. The men in front threw their arms over their eyes to shield them from the lights, and hesitated. For a moment it looked as though the lights alone were going to stop them. Then Lolita jumped out in front of them and we could hear her shrill yells. They came on again. The bridge guards and the men along the arroyo began to shoot, not at the crowd but over their heads, according to orders. That didn't stop them any more than the lights had.

They came right along, getting closer and closer to the bridge. The gap narrowed down, fifty yards, thirty, twenty; they were almost against the bridge.

The men with guns were shooting at the men in the arroyo now and the men in the crowd were shooting back. I picked out Labita, well back in the bunch, and lined my revolver sights on him. Then a yell went up. It made me flinch as I squeezed the trigger and I knew that I had missed. I looked at the bridge. Ben Curtis was running out across the west span, carrying a box. He reached the middle pier and stopped. The box he carried was dynamite, I could tell by the the size of it, and the top was open. He threw up his hand toward the crowd and yelled at them.

It was like a play. The shooting stopped. All we could do, it seemed, was to stand and look at Curtis out there on the bridge. He was shouting something in Spanish, standing there, silhouetted by the car lights. Down in the arroyo Lolita screamed back at him and pointed up toward him. A shot sounded from the crowd in the arroyo and Curtis staggered. He almost dropped the box.

Beside me Hank Burke was swearing, yelling in my ear. "He's got dynamite and caps in that box, the fool!" Hank yelled. "If he drops it, it's good-by bridge!"

Well, that was so. If Curtis let that box go he would damage the middle pier. He might do worse than that.

There was another shot from the crowd I could see Labita with a gun in his hand That seemed to start me again. I took another sight at Labita. I didn't miss that time. He went down and I looked toward the bridge again.

Curtis was still standing on the middle pier. As I looked at him he staggered and then caught himself. He was trying to lift the box he had. Wanted to throw it, I suppose. He couldn't get it any higher. Down in the arroyo two men broke from the crowd. They were carrying a box, too, coming toward the pier. Hank groaned, and we both began to shoot at the men with the box. We couldn't seem to hit them. My gun snapped on an empty and I broke it open to reload. This was all in just seconds. It takes time to tell, but it didn't take any time to happen. When I broke the gun I glanced up at the pier. Curtis was clear on the north edge of it. I thought that he was going to drop back into the arroyo and get clear. I was wrong. He ran, with little, mincing steps, across the pier, and then like a diver going off a board, went down into the arroyo. He was clutching his box as he jumped.

WE DIDN'T see him strike. There was a roar and sheet of flame and then another roar and more flame. After that there was quiet for a moment and then a lot of yelling as the crowd in the arroyo ran. The bridge men were run-

ning down the bank and from the bridge, and Hank and I went with them.

The officers Hank had phoned for got out from Concho about an hour after the explosions. We took them down into the arroyo and showed them the hole there. Some of them seemed to be a little disappointed. The next morning Hank and Ole Larsen and I went over the bridge. It was all right. The pier hadn't been touched. Curtis had jumped far enough out so that the explosions were clear of the pier. The deputies took Luz Hermanos' body and the the bodies of Pablo Labita and Lolita, and a couple of others back to Concho with them. I didn't say anything about Labita. There wasn't any point in that. We never found a thing of Ben Curtis. He must have been on top of the box when it landed.

Hank Burke finished the bridge. I turned in the final check-up on it and the company paid Harwell, and Harwell settled with some of Luz Hermanos' people. I suppose they paid the graders, those that they could find. Hank and I gave Juan Batista some extra money and he went to El Paso. The C&T abandoned the branch line building when the stock market blew up in 1929. The steel never reached Hank's bridge.

I said I hated a braggart and a four-flusher. Maybe you can understand why they give me the creeps. I'm never sure any more, never sure that they are just bragging. I'm afraid I'll run into one like Ben Curtis. Curtis bragged and he boasted but he made good, I'll say that for him. He was a glory hunting fool and he sure went out in a burst of glory.

And talking of doing things—or at least talking of doin' 'em—in the next SHORT STORIES *meet the biggest liar in the Legion in*

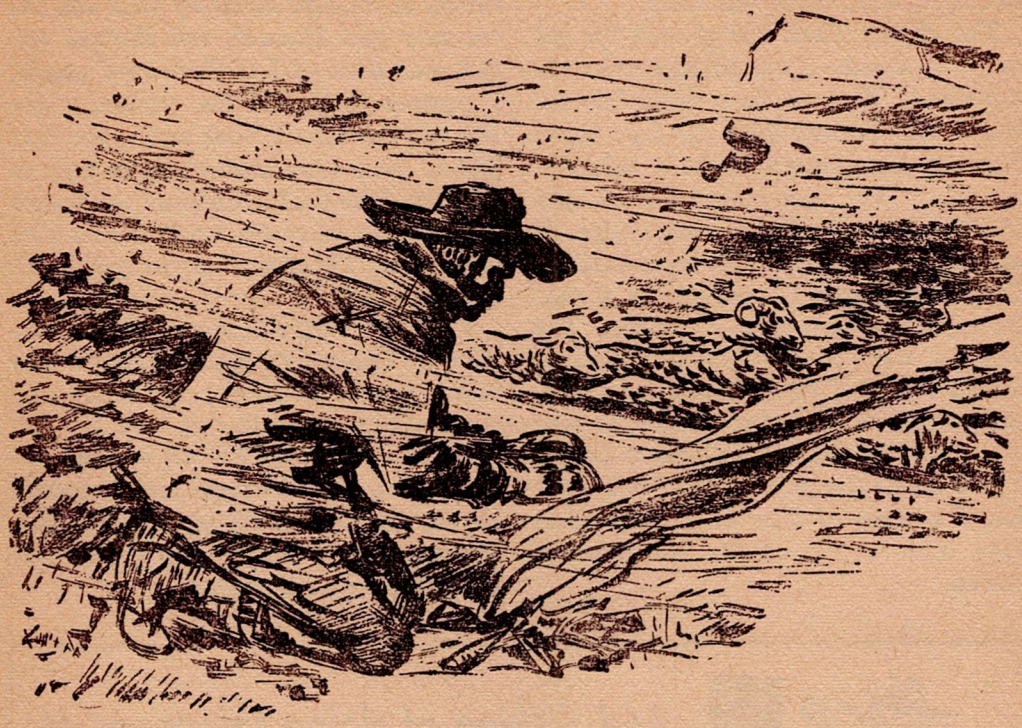
ROBERT CARSE'S HIGH and WIDE

In Texas in those days, it wasn't so much what a fella had done, as what he figgered to do from then on. And they did aplenty—

THEM DAMNED TWINS AGAIN

A NOVELETTE in the next issue by **CADDO CAMERON**

Dan Maxwell and Lew Barton Had Begun to Get on Each Other's Nerves At Once; Then the Blizzard Struck



SHEEP CAMP MADNESS

By O. A. ROBERTSON

Author of "The Paper Wad," "A Taste For Leather," etc.

THOUGH still feigning sleep, the herder had been awake ever since his companion had crawled out of bed and started the fire. Still feigning, he slightly opened one eye and caught the baleful, hate-filled gaze of the camp mover full upon him. To conceal the identical look which he knew was coming over his own face he rolled over quickly and faced the wall. How long would it be, he wondered, before one of them was overcome and put a bullet into the other?

During his ten years of sheepherding Dan Maxwell had hated, and experienced murderous impulses several times before toward men with whom he had been thrown into too long, unbroken, and intimate contact. Always before those impulses had been spasmodic and of short duration. But this silent, bitter feud between himself and Lew Barton was constant and growing. They had begun to get on each other's nerves immediately after being thrown together.

It was not unusual. Any two men forced to endure the monotony of each other's company day after day were bound to get sick of the sight of each other. No doubt every sheepherder was familiar with the feeling, but usually there were enough interruptions to ease the tension. Dan

knew. He had been through the experience before, and often a casual visit from some other shepherd had been sufficient to abolish strained relations for weeks at a time.

Yet it seemed that nothing could ease the strain which existed between Dan Maxwell and Lew Barton. For two months now they had not seen another soul, and for the past week every minute had been charged with menace. Strong-minded, experienced, and self-disciplined as he was, Dan was finding it harder every day to restrain himself. His endurance was cracking. He knew that a complete break was inevitable. No man could go on being hated with the murderous hatred which the camp mover constantly displayed without doing something about it, or going insane. Why not, he had asked himself a hundred times during the last week, give full vent to his feelings and get the thing over with?

The answer was the same as before. He was yet a little too sane to try. Lew was armed. The six-shooter under his arm was always loaded and ready for use. Sometimes Lew would take the gun out of the holster and hold it in his hands for hours at a time—cocked. No one but a crazy man would have done such a thing. Not that there was any fundamental softening of the brain, or anything like that. With others Lew could, and would, be perfectly rational. But toward Dan his mind was completely unbalanced by futile and baffled rage. Neither did the responsibility for the herd of two thousand sheep weigh heavily upon him. Dan could all but read his mind. "Murder in self-defense." Ah! How he had smirked and licked his chops like a hungry dog when he had, during their last quarrel, mentioned that, to him, desirable culmination of the feud.

Indeed, Dan knew that it was only the desire of each to force the other into appearing to be the aggressor that had kept them from each other's throats this long.

Silently Dan rolled out of bed, dressed, and washed himself with warm water from the little tea kettle on the back of the camp stove. Then he seated himself on the bed, but breakfast was already being placed upon the table.

"Set to her," Lew invited, his voice expressionless with the paralysis of utter loathing.

"Good God, I can't eat raw mutton!" Dan exploded as he eyed the mess that he knew had been made as unpalatable as possible. "I've seen sheep get well that was hurt worse than that," he added.

"All right, if you don't like it raw give me time to cook it," Lew returned in a surly tone.

"I wasn't hurrying you," Dan disputed in a mild tone, in an effort to control himself. But a red rage was slipping into his mind. Suddenly he broke. Seizing the frying pan he hurled its contents into the snow outside.

But he was not through. He whirled to smash the hot and empty skillet down upon his companion's head, but the ever-ready six-shooter was out of the holster, and there was a savage snarl upon Lew Barton's face. Instinctively Lew dodged to avoid the heavy iron skillet, and it delayed his shot just long enough for Dan to strike the weapon away from his breast just as the gun roared. He caught the camp mover's wrist and kept the gun pointed toward the door. The frying pan caught Lew a glancing blow on the shoulder.

THEY were evenly matched in size. For a moment the veins stood out on their foreheads as they matched muscles. Then, abruptly, Lew let the six-gun clatter to the floor; not because he had to, but because it was the easiest way to bring to an end a struggle which was getting them nowhere. Each man let go his hold. Dan kicked the gun back toward the bed, and a moment later Lew picked it up unmolested and thrust it back into the holster.

The tempest of wrath had subsided, but both men knew only temporarily.

Without a word being spoken Dan prepared and ate his own breakfast while Lew sat and watched him in poisonous silence.

Dan felt beaten and baffled. Again the way out battered at his aching and seething brain. Murder would be easy to accomplish.

He still retained possession of the camp rifle. It would be easy to drill the camp mover when he was not looking. But he had not yet sunk to that degree of madness. And, besides, there was a sort of tacit understanding between them that neither would shoot the other in the back, or while asleep. With Lew the restraining influence was fear of consequences. With Dan it was something else.

And another thing; Dan was responsible for the sheep—twenty thousand dollars worth of them. He had never reneged on a responsibility. He could not handle them alone, and he was already taking desperate chances, and had, in a measure, overstepped the bounds of his authority.

From where they were supposed to winter he had moved over to Verdant Island, a high range of hills completely surrounded by a wide expanse of level and feedless desert. Up here the feed was abundant, but the country was subject to deep snows. Anyone attempting to winter sheep here might bring them through in extraordinarily good condition. On the other hand one of the great snows which occurred every ten years or so might cause the loss of the entire flock. Dan had chosen to make the gamble.

Already the snow was dangerously deep and all night a moaning wind, accompanied by ever thickening flakes had presaged a blizzard. The situation was precarious, but with a good meal and a couple of cups of coffee under his belt, Dan had regained his temper and his confidence.

"I've changed my mind about movin' the camp today." He brought himself to address his camp mover casually. "It looks like a blizzard comin' up. There's good shelter here, and we'll just have to wait it out."

"If there is a blizzard old man Keifer will be out one herd of sheep," Lew returned with gloating satisfaction. "Fool trick comin' down here in the first place."

"We'll see about that when it happens," Dan retorted, and tried to rob the other of the satisfaction of knowing that he was worried. "Anyway, we're not goin' to try to cross the flats till it blows over."

The sheep had left the bedground, and still in a compact huddle were going with the wind. They were soon out of sight in the driving snow. But with malign satisfaction Dan remained in camp long enough to smoke his oldest and vilest pipe. Lew was a non-smoker, and hated tobacco smoke of any kind. Dan usually smoked cigarettes, but now, with the door and window tightly closed he puffed at the odoriferous old pipe until the wagon was thick with smoke, and Lew was getting white around the gills. The camp mover several times made as though to let in some air, but each time desisted, and bore his discomfort with inward fury. To have gone outside would have been to concede a victory. To have opened the window would have precipitated a clash which both strangely enough, were eager for, and yet shrank from.

When the pipe was finally smoked Dan felt a little ill himself. However, he had to go outside now, and the fresh air would soon revive him.

The wind was increasing in velocity, and the weather, which had been in-

tensely cold all night, was sinking farther and farther below zero. They were in for a real blizzard—there was no question about that. It might not blow itself out for days. There was nothing to do but hole up, and keep the sheep as sheltered as possible. It would be impossible to bring them back even a short distance against that cutting wind.

Dan decided against taking the rifle. It would be too cold and heavy to carry, and in that storm one couldn't see to shoot anything anyway. Besides, he was beginning to dread the temptation to do murder. In one of those blinding flashes of unrestrained anger, such as he had recently experienced, there was no telling what might happen. He had to hang onto his sanity, and hope that Lew would do the same.

The sheep had travelled perhaps a mile when he overtook them. Even going with the wind it was bitterly cold. Though he poured his dogs into the herd relentlessly the sheep at first stubbornly refused to turn. At last, however, he got them headed into a sheltered draw from which they were unlikely to stray of their own accord. So far as the sheep were concerned it was safe enough to leave them and go back to camp, but almost any discomfort was preferable to the companionship of his camp mover. By main strength he succeeded in breaking down a few scrawny little dead junipers, and with skill little short of legerdemain succeeded at last in building a fire.

There was little warmth to it, and best it tended only to keep his face, hands, and feet from freezing, but for several hours he alternated between squatting beside the fire in shivering discomfort, and dragging in more fuel, while the blizzard shrieked and howled above the sheltered nook he had selected.

It was well past noon when he yielded to the unendurable discomfort and started back to camp. The herd would need no more care that day. Unless the wind shifted and drove them out of their sheltered retreat they would not move. To get them back to the bedground in the face of that marrow-freezing blast was impossible. With his dogs tramping at his heels Dan bowed his head and bored into it, through ever deepening drifts.

Quartering into the wind as he was obliged to do, was tough going. At times he felt that he was being blown off his course, but he had full confidence in his range instinct and experience to find his way. At times he had to turn his back to the gale in order to draw his breath. Once, when one of the dogs got ahead of him and tried to break trail Dan was all but smothered in the resulting flurry of snow.

He had been a full hour on the trail, and was exhausted and breathless when he reached the edge of last night's bedground, and the dogs scampered ahead of him to reach their shelter under the wagon. But in a minute they were back, leaping upon him, and whining with bewilderment and alarm.

Dan peered ahead to ascertain the cause of their strange actions, but he could discern nothing. Nothing! The wagon was gone!

DAN never knew just how long it took for full realization to dawn upon him. It might have been minutes, or it might have been only seconds. But when it did come he was calm and composed. If he was surprised he did not know it. The thing had happened, and it was so in keeping with Lew Barton's vicious hatred that he only wondered why he hadn't considered the possibility and guarded against it.

Lew had cut him adrift with the full and calculated conviction that he would perish in the blizzard, as many another herder had died in similar storms. And the man would have the diabolical assurance that no blame could ever be fastened upon him.

For a long minute Dan stood where the

wagon had been and mechanically stroked the ears of his whining and cowering dogs. He wondered if they instinctively possessed some knowledge of his impending fate. He had often heard that dogs did possess such an instinct, but he had never believed it.

He was neither frightened nor alarmed. So far as he knew no man had ever got lost in such a blizzard in this country and survived, but he would. He was not excited. He even seized the opportunity to execute an old trick of tripping one of the dogs head first into the snow. He was not surprised at his own calmness, and wondered idly if it could be an indication of encroaching insanity. It did not matter. Sane or crazy, he would live long enough to encounter Lew Barton once again, even if that were to be the last act of his life.

Turning, he retraced his steps to the herd. There was no use seeking the wagon. In that welter of swirling snow the tracks would have been instantly obliterated. Lew would be careful to take it to a place where it could not be found. Possibly the camp mover hoped that Dan would attempt to follow the wagon until he became lost from wagon and herd alike. Besides, Dan owed a duty to his charges. That, he told himself, was what he had to think about if he was to retain his sanity. There would be time enough to think of revenge when the two should meet again.

The sheep had not moved, and the fire had not yet died out. But when morning came Dan knew that he had escaped freezing to death by the narrowest of margins, and there was no sign of let-up in the storm's fury. He knew that he could not survive another night under the same conditions. He still managed to keep the fire going, but it gave little warmth, and succeeded only in melting the snow that constantly fell upon him, and keeping his clothes soaked to the skin.

Something else would have to be done. Hungry, frozen, and exhausted, he doubted if he would be able to stay on his feet throughout the day, to say nothing of another night. And fuel was becoming increasingly hard to get.

Resolutely, and with quiet ruthlessness he set to work. He slit the throats of half a dozen sheep and removed the pelts. Three of the hindquarters he hung in a juniper, and a fourth he placed to roast under the coals of his fire. The dogs were already helping themselves to what remained. He spread some of the pelts on the ground close to the fire, drew the others over him, and went to sleep.

Darkness had again settled down when he awoke, but he was not uncomfortably cold, and he felt rested. By the light of the fire he made a not too satisfactory meal of roast mutton. The sheep had not moved, and the blizzard had not abated. His pelts, when he had lain down were still soft and warm from the animal heat. Now they were frozen as stiff as boards. To get them to fit snugly around him again he thawed them out by the fire.

THE third morning dawned bright and clear. All that could be seen of the sheep were innumerable little geysers of steam rising from beneath their blanket of snow, but presently they began to struggle to their feet and shake themselves. Aside from their three day fast they had not suffered greatly, but in their present position they were completely snowbound.

For many hours, Dan tramped trail, cursed, dogged, and struggled with the dumb, stupid creatures to get them out onto an open ridge, but he at last succeeded. Before sundown they were scattered over windswept points and ridges for as far as the eye could reach, and grazing as though they were staked. A cold wind still cut sharply, but incrusted as they were in their heavy wool and an armor of ice, the sheep would not suffer. There was bound to be some losses from predatory animals, but that was something that was never effectively contended with anyway, and Dan's experience had taught

him that coyotes seldom went on a killing spree unless the sheep were close-huddled, and then only when they possessed a sure knowledge as to the whereabouts of the herder. If the herder was not to be seen, they were wisely wary of a trap, scouting far and cautiously before making an attack.

Dan spent one more night in his sheep pelts, and at daylight started the long trek for assistance. That Lew had not stopped on Verdant Island he was certain. Having once started, the camp mover would have had to circle wide to get to the other side of the range of hills at the foot of which they were camped. By that time he would have been caught by the full blast of the blizzard and forced to travel with it. It was twenty miles across the unbroken, wind-swept flat to the nearest sheltering hills, and not until he reached them would he dare to stop. There, too, would be other sheep outfits. If he failed to find

his own wagon, he would at least be able to secure help. The sheep and his own survival came first. After that would come reckoning with the treacherous camp-jack. For the sake of his own sanity he kept that thought as much as possible in the background of his mind.

He was far from being out of danger. The knee-deep snow, loose as it was, hampered his progress, and his great ordeal had weakened him. Only his stamina, and a great purpose kept him going. All day the distant range of hills that were his destination were in plain sight, but there were times when he despaired of ever reaching them. Step by weary step he seemed to be drawing them laboriously to him, and just past mid-afternoon he made out a sheep camp.

HE PLODDED on, dragging his feet through the snow instead of lifting them up. It would have been easier to step high, but he was too tired. Anyway, the end of the trail was in sight. And then, suddenly, he stopped. Smoke was curling up from that camp wagon, inviting food and warmth. But that was not what held his eye. *It was his own wagon.*

This, then, was the end. He had survived almost superhuman hardships only to meet an assassin's bullet at the final showdown. There could be no doubt of that. Lew Barton dared not let him live now.

He gave only passing notice to the idea of turning aside. No doubt Lew had been watching his approach for the last half hour. Besides, he had not the strength to try to find another camp, even if Lew didn't head him off. He clamped his jaws and moved steadily on.

He was unarmed and helpless, but a grim smile tightened his lips. This would be murder, pure and simple. The Judas wouldn't get from under that. The story of the herder becoming lost and dying in the storm wouldn't do.

Now the distance seemed to decrease rapidly. Dan found himself wondering if Lew's first shot would be accurate. Would one shot bring him down? He hoped not. He determined that it should not. He didn't want to linger too long in agony, but there was something to be said to this murderer, and he meant to live long enough to say it.

He only hoped that Lew wouldn't try a long shot with the rifle, but would wait until he could use his more favored weapon, the six-shooter.

He was within a hundred yards of the camp when the door opened, and Lew Barton leaped to the ground and came to meet him. But what a Lew Barton! Unshaven, hair tangled, eyes red, face working grotesquely he came on half running, half stumbling—hands outstretched and empty.

DAN stopped and braced himself. Normally he was the stronger man, but in his exhausted condition he knew that he was no match for this insane apparition that was bearing down upon him. He had no time to divest himself of his once soggy, but now frozen and hampering coat.

But Lew didn't attack. Tears were streaming down his face as he grasped Dan's hands and wrung them. His features continued their grotesque contortions He struggled for words that would not come.

"Thank God you're alive," he got out at last. "Good Lord, am I glad of that!"

"Sure I'm alive," Dan said wonderingly, "but what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I've gone crazy," Lew cried. "I drove off an' left you to die. I don't know why I done it, but I done it on purpose. My God, Dan, if you only knew what I've been through these last three, four days."

"What I've been through ain't been exactly a valley of sunshine and roses," Dan told him, but, somehow, pride in his achievement rose above rancour. Strange, too, he didn't feel any particular urge to talk about it.

"You—you must be hungry," Lew said in a subdued tone. "Come on in an' rest while I cook you somethin' to eat."

"I'm damn' near starved," Dan said laconically, as he sank onto the bed.

Strange, he thought, the man acted sane, but he was crazy. He's not crazy now, but he acts like he is. You can't blame a man for what he does when he's insane. He wanted to kill me—Dan remembered the times when he hadn't dared to trust himself with the rifle, and stopped thinking.

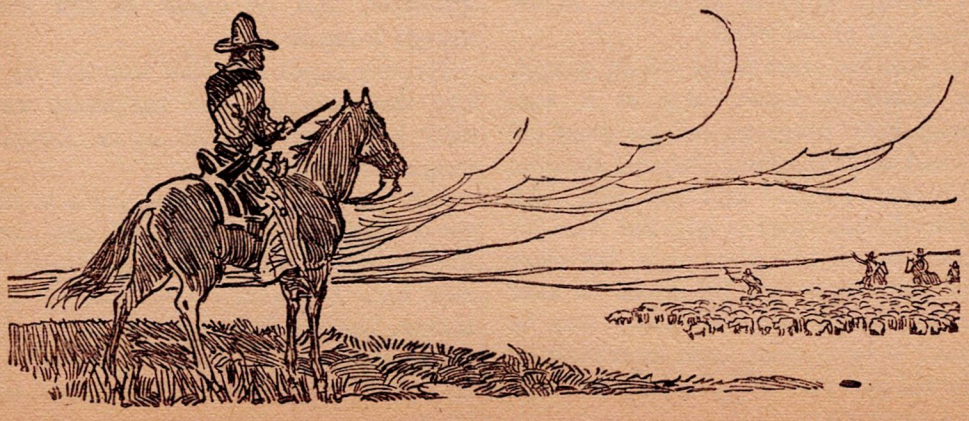
There was no conversation until Dan had eaten his fill and pushed back from the table. Lew had regained his composure.

"I don't know why I did it," he said. "Just crazy, I guess. As soon as I'd got over here I'd have went back if I could, but nothing could face that blizzard. What are you going to do?"

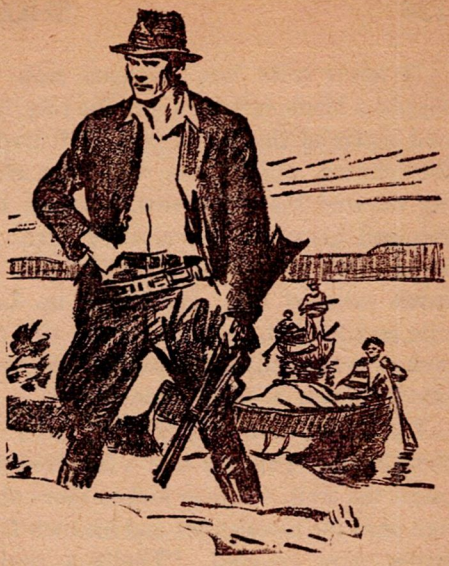
Dan fumbled for his pipe. He had been without a smoke for three days, and there was nothing he wanted so much as that villainous old pipe. He looked up, then fished in his special oil cloth pocket on the side of the canvas cover and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Let's forget it," he said. "The horses are fresh, and tonight will be moonlight. We'd better be gettin' back to the sheep."

As the wagon wheels ground and jolted through the snow Dan lay huddled under a pile of warm blankets and peacefully slept.



Queer How Fate Sometimes Stacks the Cards When a Man Sits Down to Play Out His Hand



DEATH CALL

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "A Stitch in Time," "A Natural," etc.

GANNON crouched a hundred yards above the trail and watched it through a screen of young birches. His rifle rested on a convenient rock directly in front of him. A murderous gleam filled his hard, glassy eyes. In a few minutes Lee Madden would trudge along the trail and Gannon would put a thirty-thirty slug through his heart. Then Gannon would arrange matters so murder would appear to be accident. After that he would plan a safe way of killing Lee's brother Ace. He might be forced to kill the Madden's packers, also. Gannon wasn't particularly worried. No man knew the wilderness and its tricks better than he. He cashed in on this knowledge.

He had warned the Maddens to keep away from the Big Bend country. If they persisted in cutting in on his fur trade they must expect trouble. For years he had kept the region under his thumb. Bad whiskey dulled the Indians' sense of values and enabled him to drive sharp bargains. The shoddy goods he exchanged soon wore out and must be replaced. That meant more fur. It was a profitable circle for Gannon, a vicious circle for the natives. The latter had quickly turned to the Maddens when they came into the country without whiskey, but with substantial trade goods.

The stillness was brokn by the brush of a heavy boot on shale. Lee Madden appeared beyond the screen of birches, trudging slowly under a heavy pack. Apparently he sensed no danger. Instead, he seemed to be enjoying the rugged beauty of his surroundings. Then abruptly his danger instincts whispered a warning. His head jerked up and his eyes widened in amazement. Gannon pulled the trigger and Madden staggered, his eyes filming gray as the light faded from their depths. His legs buckled and he slumped to the trail. The weight of his pack pulled his body over and left it with the face upward.

"I never miss 'em," Gannon said. He slipped a blank cartridge into his rifle, hurried down to the fallen man and fired at the crimson, ragged spot where the clothing covered his left breast. Gannon bent low and examined the powder burns the blank cartridge had left on the fabric. The result satisfied him. He picked up Lee's rifle and fired it, then he shoved rifle and man over the trail and watched them move heavily down a shale slide.

The shale continued to shift after the body lodged against a tree a hundred feet below the trail. Gannon kicked more shale free until the bloodstains and his own footprints were covered. "That's a perfect crime," he reflected. "It's evident Lee Madden slipped on the shale slide, his rifle exploded and killed him as he fell. And when the investigation is over, if there is any, the marshal's records at Valdez will show it."

Gannon climbed slowly up the shale slope, worked his way to a ledge screened by brush, sat down and waited. He wanted to make certain the others weren't close enough to have heard the three shots. Three shots would effectively smash any suggestion of accident and Gannon might have to go into immediate action and wipe out the entire party.

THE crispness of autumn was in the air, there were traces of ice along the edges of the quieter pools and sounds carried far. But Gannon had a pretty definite idea the others were in the lower country with the roar of a river in their ears. In the distance he heard a cow moose's mating call, "Ah-hooo-aaah! Ah-hooo-aaaah!"

Gannon smiled, as the call reminded him of his own cleverness. Often he had lured a bull moose within range of his rifle by using that call. He had brought out one of the biggest brown bear pelts in Alaska by the simple trick of trapping her cub, then using the cub to decoy her within rifle range.

Two hours passed before Ace Madden, followed by several packers, appeared. His wide shoulders supported a hundred and twenty pound pack, and he moved with the flowing grace of the physically perfect in spite of the weight he carried. He floundered through the shale, gained the trail on the other side and would have gone on, but for a native's sudden cry.

Gannon had his binoculars on Ace Madden's face as the native shouted something. He saw it drain of color, then he saw Madden shed his pack and go swiftly down the shale slope. The natives followed and one of them said, "He fell and shot hisself. See, powder burns. But I heard no shot!"

"We were down by the river," Ace answered. "Too much noise from the rapids."

That was all Gannon heard for some time. He grew nervous. "Why don't they bring him up and bury him?" he asked himself. "He couldn't have lived. I aimed at his heart. The bullet must have torn it apart. There was blood enough on his clothing."

His alert eyes caught a movement in the lower country. A native, without a pack, was trotting steadily towards the nearest trading post. It could mean but one thing—Ace Madden was suspicious, and was sending word back by one of his packers.

It was too late now to think of wiping out the entire party. If he did manage to finish those around Lee Madden's remains, he could never overtake that native.

AFTER awhile Ace Madden's voice drifted up. "Sure Gannon did it," he said. "Who else? That settles it. There isn't room enough in the country for Gannon and me. I'm going after Gannon."

"It was a perfect crime," Gannon muttered. "I'm a dead shot. And I fired at his heart. I fired a loaded cartridge and a blank one, and put the empty shells into my pocket. So empty shells didn't give me

away. The shale covered up all tracks. And yet he knows I did it. How?"

He shifted his position and saw Ace Madden stuffing jerky into his pockets. Ace was getting ready to take the trail. He covered Ace with his rifle, and the temptation was strong. If he fired he would kill Ace, but the natives would vanish before he could get in a second shot. No, better let Ace trail him a few miles, then finish him off. With Ace out of the way, he could escape a murder conviction. It would be his word against that of the natives and the law would favor him, because the presumption of innocence would be on his side.

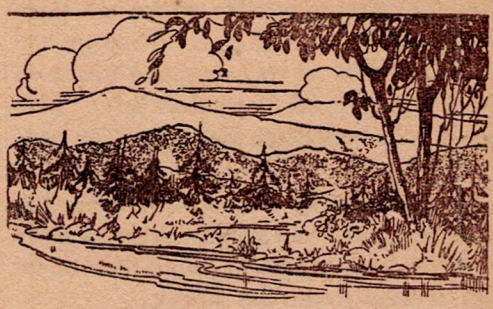
He climbed quietly up the mountain, crossed over to a bench and headed for Barren Valley. He knew of a perfect setup where he could lie in wait and Ace would walk right into his lead as Lee had done.

Gannon stopped a mile from the scene of his crime and looked back through binoculars. It seemed as if the natives were digging a grave, but he couldn't tell. Ace Madden was nowhere in sight. He had probably taken up the trail. Gannon shouldered his pack once more. Of course the weight of provisions on his back would cut down his speed, but this would be more than offset by the time Ace lost in locating his trail.

GANNON built a fire seven miles from the scene of Lee's murder. He dumped green, wet brush onto the blaze and watched the tell-tale column of smoke spiral into the still air. "That should bring him!" Gannon said in a confident voice. "He'll figger I don't know he's learned it was murder, not accident."

Gannon cooked a meal, ate it, then took up a position on a brushy ridge fifty yards from the fire. An hour passed without incident. Vague fears gripped Gannon. Perhaps he had overdone the smoke trick and put Madden on guard. Perhaps even now the man was still hunting him—moving with the silence of wind-blown vapor through the trees.

He turned his head slowly, desperately striving to pick up the snap of a broken twig, or the swish of a bent limb whipping back to place. No sound, save the distant



roar of the river, broke the silence. Gannon wiped his forehead which perspired in spite of the cold and his inactivity.

Darkness was long in coming, though the days were short. Each minute was an eternity. He moved slowly from the brushy refuge, conscious that his flesh winced as if momentarily expecting the tearing impact of a bullet.

"You're a fool," he snarled, "he didn't even see the smoke." Gannon circled back to a point where a mossy log spanned a deep, narrow creek. Any one entering the region would logically cross this log. He studied the moss. Someone had crossed within two hours. "He's changed from boots to moccasins," Gannon said. "He's still-hunting me. That's likely the way he hunted deer down in the States."

Gannon made his way to a dense thicket and crawled in for a rest and sleep if he could get it. He told himself Ace Madden was somewhere ahead, wandering in circles. Then almost immediately asked himself the disturbing query, "But is he?"

Perhaps Ace had doubled back and even now was crawling slowly towards the thicket. In the gray of dawn Gannon slunk from the thicket, moving carefully, guarding against snapping twigs and swishing branches. The grass was crisp and covered with frost.

He waited until the sun had melted the

frost from the grass. Footprints show on frost. Then he struck off towards the range of mountains forming the northern barrier of Barren Valley. Somewhere a cow moose bawled plaintively.

Gannon crossed his own tracks of the previous afternoon. He stared at them with nervous, startled eyes. Someone had followed them, leaving moccasin prints on the impression his boots had left. "Less than a mile behind me last night," he muttered.

He crouched, as if inclined to wait, but his tense nerves sent him hurrying towards the mountains where he could look down and perhaps locate his enemy.

GANNON gained the lower ridges shortly before noon. He ate cold food and studied the country, his eyes roving the open stretches where he knew his pursuer must pass. No living thing passed, but every instinct told Gannon that Ace Madden had not turned back. His breed didn't quit a trail leading to revenge. "He's quartered the lower country, the damned bloodhound," he said thickly, "and he knows I haven't gone up the valley. I've got to work out something different. But in murder nothing is sure. A man plans everything, then there's a slip. I didn't think there was a chance Lee could've lived a minute after that shot."

Gannon tucked a pinch of snoose under his lower lip and went over the entire situation with the same animal craft that had proven so successful on other occasions. "He had two days' grub," he mused, "and a man can't live off'n the country in this valley. The rabbits all died off and larger game left. Only an occasional moose. So —he'll either have to eat or he'll get weak. And when a man weakens it slows him up. He can't travel as fast or think as fast."

He checked his own food supply, mostly dried fish, moose meat and a piece of bacon. There was flour, salt, some sugar and tea. A week's supply, that could be stretched to ten days. "I've got the edge on him in grub," he reflected. There was decision in his manner when he stood up and slipped the pack over his shoulders.

Gannon picked up an old game trail that followed the ridges and was screened by small trees and brush. He pushed on, determined to put as much distance between himself and pursuer as possible. He camped briefly at dusk and pushed ahead under the moonlight until nearly midnight. He slept soundly until daybreak, then ate a cold meal and plodded steadily throughout the day. The following day he dropped into the valley and crossed it. There was no trace of Madden's moccasin tracks.

"He's behind," Gannon said crisply. From that instant his actions were those of a man who believed he had shaken off pursuit and had relaxed his vigilance. He hoped Madden would be tricked by this attitude. He built small camp fires, ate warm food twice daily, and slept in exposed places. Confident of his better condition, Gannon traveled from thirty to thirty-five miles each day.

The seventh day snow fell lightly, covering the tracks he had left on abandoned game trails and sand bars. He cached his food and doubled back, again keeping to the ridges. Nothing visible moved on the vast, white carpet covering the valley. When the storm slackened and the moon came out, Gannon dropped into another valley. He crossed it slowly, searching for Madden's tracks, but hardly expecting to find them.

Suddenly he stopped and stared. The snow was broken by moccasin prints and in them Gannon read a story of hunger and weakness. The space between each footstep was short. The span of a man's stride lessens in proportion to his waning strength.

"He's weakening!" Gannon exclaimed. "And he's getting pretty desperate for food. He'll do anything to get it."

The urge to follow the tracks was strong, but Gannon had a better, a safer plan. Madden was probably sleeping the

sleep of the exhausted. Then again, he was a still-hunter, and he might be waiting.

By noon the following day Gannon had relayed his remaining food to a safe point and selected a setting of his own choosing for the final drama. "He'll still-hunt," he reflected. "That's what he's always done. And he'll do it again!"

When the moon came out he broke the film of ice covering a spring, then placed his rifle where it would cover all approaches to the point. A small, abandoned moose pasture spread out immediately in front of him. Gannon fashioned a cone of birch bark and placed it to his mouth. He filled his lungs, then gave the mating call of the cow moose. "Ah-hooo-aaaah. Ah-hooo-aaaah!"

A neighboring cliff echoed the call. "Ah-hooo-aaaah. Ah-hooo-aaah!" That call would carry far on the crisp air, and it would set a hungry man to thinking less of revenge and more of moose steaks. It should bring the still-hunter to the spot.

From time to time he repeated the call. He reasoned if he could deceive scores of romantic bulls in his time it should not be difficult to trick a hungry white man. An hour passed. Two, then three. He heard the howl of a distant wolf. Wolves usually streaked through the valley in their pursuit of game.

And there was nothing like a wolf pack to cover up a murder. Wolves left nothing but shredded clothing and bones with the imprint of their fangs.

"Ah-hooo-aaah! Ah-hooo-aaah!" Again the echo came, as if in answer to the call.

Gannon listened for the soft fall of mocassins on the snow. And he heard the deep roar of an oncoming bull. He swore at this unexpected element in his plans. The wolves, no doubt had chased the bull into the valley, and he had drifted about, brooding and resentful. In a moment he had become one of the most dangerous creatures in the North—a bull moose in the running season. Tremendous of strength and weight, fearing nothing, and charging with reason or without, he was a foe with which an armed man might well reckon.

"Damn him!" Gannon exclaimed. "Maybe he'll pass by the spring. Maybe. . . ."

Brush crashed and the crunching of hoofs breaking through the ice crust of shallow puddles filled the valley with a terrible din. Gannon held his breath and crouched low, his eyes on the moonlit pasture. The brush fringing the opposite side gave way under the flying charge and the bull stopped dead.

His antlers measured a good sixty inches across and as he stood, red-eyed, with swaying head and white plumes of vapor bursting from his nostrils he presented an incredible sight. The pounding of his mighty heart was visible against his ribs as he searched for the cow.

Gannon's finger crooked around the trigger. He tried to smother the white vapor from his own lungs and partly succeeded. Suddenly the moose's attitude changed. He caught the man scent and his only impulse now was to charge and kill. He roared as a sudden wave of red anger swept him. Then he charged—charged straight for the crouching man.

Gannon's hands were steady enough as he aimed the rifle at that pounding heart. He squeezed the trigger and felt the recoil. Orange flame coned about the rifle muzzle and with the flat crash of expanding gases came the sickening impact of lead against hard flesh. Blood spurted from the bull, but the brain had already willed a charge and he came on.

GANNON levered a second, then a third cartridge into the rifle and sent the lead true. Twice blood spurted from new wounds. Gannon got up and fired a fourth shot between the eyes. The massive head dropped, then lifted. Less than thirty feet separated them. Gannon shook in sudden fear. "I can't stop the devil!" he screamed. "I can't——" He fired again, wildly, and yet it was impossible to miss. A piece of antler, clipped by the bullet fell into the snow.

Gannon turned and ran. He cut around a clump of birch trees and looked back. The bull struck the birches and mowed them down until they stopped him. He backed off, his nostrils blowing crimson vapor, and charged again. The birches gave way and he came stamping through. The next thicket scattered and broke up as his antlers cleared a path.

The bull's strategy was successful, he had driven the man into the open. Gannon sped towards thicker timber. His breath came in convulsive sobs and his heart pounded terribly in his ears. But there was a louder sound that drowned out the heartbeat and the sob of his lungs—the thundering hoofs of the bull.

The horns dropped lower and lower until the hard head was level with the man's hips. Then they struck, half lifted Gannon from the ground, then dropped as strength left even that powerful neck.

The bull's hind quarters catapulted over his head and struck the ground. In his death struggles, he lifted his head again and again, pounding life from the manthing that had lured him to the scene.

Presently the crimson vapor breaking spasmodically from his nostrils stopped, as if someone had closed a valve, the muscular twitching ceased, and peace settled over the valley.

Minutes passed and the silence was broken by the light fall of a moccasin. A man stepped through the birches—a big man with a wasted, bearded face and bloodshot eyes. He carried only a knife in his hand and he circled the spot warily before stepping into the open.

"So that was it," he said in an odd, strained voice. "He knew I was hungry and would probably stalk a cow moose to get food. It wasn't a mating call, it was a death call, but a bull answered." He grasped the antlers and tried to remove the massive head from Gannon's body. In his weakened condition the effort was too great. He sat down and warmed himself with the heat from the moose's body.

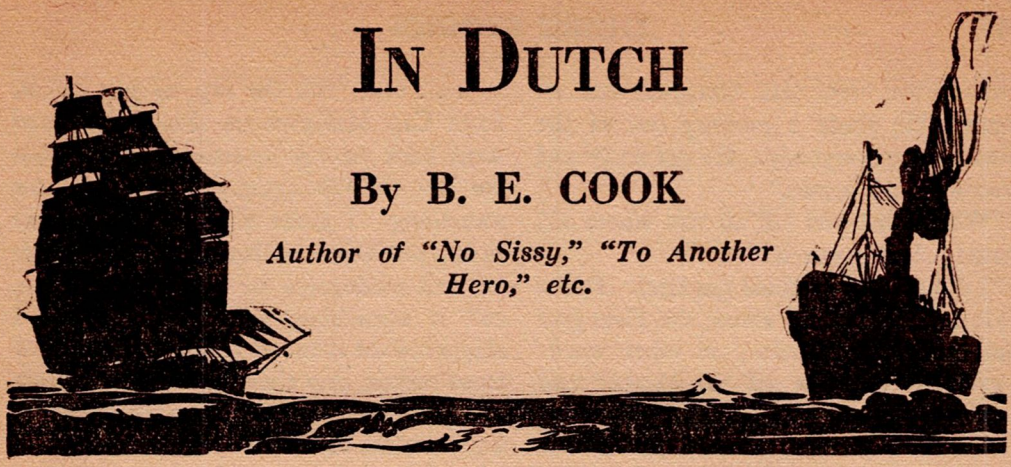
Presently he cut out a slab of meat, tossed it into the snow to cool and began gathering fuel for fire. He located Gannon's rifle and placed it near the moose. When the animal heat was gone from the steak he broiled it on the end of a forked stick.

After he had eaten and rested Ace Madden found a small dead tree and using it as a lever lifted the bull's head and dragged out Gannon's remains. He cached them in a tree beyond the reach of wolves and sat down to rest again. "The marshal will come for the body later," he mused.

He built up the fire again and prepared for a good long rest before heading back to the trading post. "Queer," he reflected, "how fate sometimes stacks the cards when a man sits down to play out his hand. Gannon never knew the bullet he fired into Lee's body struck a birch, partially split and carried away a splinter. There was wood in the slug when I removed it. And he never knew the bullet, with its penetrating force spent, glanced off at Lee's ribs and ripped deep into the flesh. The bit of green wood in the slug was proof it was attempted murder and not accident."

He would have given anything for a smoke, but lacking it, he decided to broil another steak before sleeping a few hours near the fire. "Nor did Gannon know I was trying to arrest him for criminal assault instead of murder. Nor did he even dream I fell four days ago, broke my rifle and *had* to run him down or starve."

In Dutch



By B. E. COOK

Author of "No Sissy," "To Another Hero," etc.

And One Young Ship's Officer Was Cured of Bulling Into Jams

I WAS a fool to let my own kid have a boat. They've told me—since—that a kid's toys'll point him like a gun to his career. Didn't realize it then—he got the boat.

That had been some twenty years back, and now he was a second mate stripped of his license. I mean the commissioners took it away from him; he was in dutch.

Not the first time in dutch, either. You don't often see a Second getting so friskly; aw well, there's not many Seconds, or Thirds either, whose fathers've sat on the board of inspectors. Not in this district anyway.

Showing off, you say? Taking advantage of the fact I'd served on the board? Search me, he's a willful young man, is Bayliss Larkin.

Says he, "You've got the drag, not me. A word from you, see, and they'll return my license. How about it?"

Sounds brazen, eh? Well, it's not; he's bluffing it out—to me. Deep down, he rates me a big shot in marine circles despite the fact he pretends I've lost face by becoming executive head of a sizable coal firm. Not so brazen as he likes to make out.

He's a grand skipper-to-be, thinks I, if he ever's lucky enough to get the experience and get the rough corners knocked off of him before it's too late. Of course, I'm prejudiced, we spoiled him years ago—and I got him a boat once.

"How about it, eh?" I repeated, playing for time. "You're asking me that was once a commish myself? Kid, you've been asking for this layoff ashore. It's due you."

"Whadda you mean, due?"

"You're only a Second and already you've cut three shiners aboard ship. In broad moonlight—I'll do the talking now—when you were only a Third you crossed the bows of a passenger ship with a hundred people asleep in her staterooms. You laughed that one off—to me—when your skipper took the complaint; probably because—"

"Yeah, because you were a commissioner then and you saved his license. Right?"

I elected silence.

"So why not save me mine? I'm your own flesh and blood."

I held my temper and went on. "The second time, you entered a wall of fog and ran full speed into it without calling the Old Man or even blowing your siren once. Only a fool's luck saved your slicing that lumber schooner in two—yes, I know, you had a very sick wireless op you were rushing to hospital, but you were in the wrong. And now you've sided with a bunch of men against your skipper—"

"I tell you the Old Man was drunk

most of the time. He scrapped with all hands. He made a monkey out of the First before everybody. He got nasty and came out with a gun."

"Why didn't you tell all this where it'd count? And prove it?"

"I did tell it, I testified the facts. Damn it all, I can't prove it alone; the First just said, 'I don't remember,' in other words I grabbed that gun off the skipper and saved the First's life. Then he crawled out on me. I tell you they pinned the whole row onto me. Why not? I'm young, I can take—" He jumped to his feet. "Aw, hell," he let go and headed for the door.

"Sit down!" I yelled. Why? Because the kid had been in the right. He'd been framed because the press had a spotlight on that hearing; somebody had to be blamed; neither a ship's owners nor the public want a punk skipper's weaknesses aired. He's a tradition, he's got to be. Most skippers fill the bill and more too, but that Cap'n Case— Aye, the kid was in the right for once, I couldn't see him walk out in this "aw hell" state of mind, it might break him forever. I know because I've been in holes—only I took a different way out of 'em.

He comes back like a smart aleck condescending to listen to a boresome tale, the price for me getting his license back. What he doesn't realize yet is that his name's already smooched; what's his license to him if nobody'll hire him? And I couldn't forget we'd spoiled him years ago.

"I see you're bored. Listen, maybe you realize you're asking somebody up top to call himself a liar?"

"No. You're dramatizing."

"You're wrong. Now just forget you're being bored or abused or something. Wipe off that nasty look, too. I'll wait."

He cooled off some. Then I talked——

My office clock said 6:23 when I reached the last of my story. Maybe he was hungry; I wasn't.

". . . so I took the rap, as you call it, from Cap McKown on the towboat and went back on my knees—you'd call it—for my old job again. That taught me something. I mean a fellow can't climb in any profession without taming his ideals or bull-headedness or self-righteousness, call it something, sometimes. When I skippered the *Altmont* I accepted cumshaw from certain ship chandlers and gave them our business. I paid protection money to night watchmen on East River wharves to keep river gangs away from our cordage, just as I've been telling you.

"You see, kid, I got my lesson early too, aboard the towboats. Oh, I had my big ideas, I was a simon-pure and all that; but a man gets nowhere that way and I was—I was going to say lucky—I was sharp enough to learn my lesson before I ran afoul of what you got."

"In all this line of talk," says the kid, "you're telling me not to be too squeamish about what's right 'nd wrong, are you?"

THAT made me mad. I roared, "I'm telling you for your own good, don't take so much onto yourself, you young fool! Don't bull through fog without your skipper's orders too, just because there happens to be a sick Sparks aboard; that's your skipper's responsibility. Don't butt in on a quarrel between the Old Man and another mate. If Cap'n Case pulls a gun on the First, that's up to the First, not you. Hell, look at me! How do you think I got money enough to buy stock enough in this firm to become its manager? By bulling into tight spots? By sticking my neck out instead of getting orders by wireless from my owners?"

The kid was really interested now; he really listened to me. As soon as I finished that final blast at him he said quietly, "So that's how you landed where you are! And bought the big place on Brighton Terrace and put sis through college—Hm-m."

I was satisfied now. The kid would go

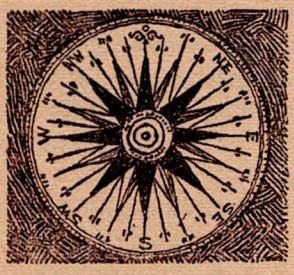
about his business as a second mate in a better way. He'd be what you call more circumspect. Oh, I know it's all wrong; it's not nice to whittle down your ideals a bit. But, thinks I, that is life. That's the difference between theory and practice. After all, a man's got to better himself—even though it's going to haunt him at times.

So we went out. But we didn't eat supper together. No, the kid elected to go somewhere on his own. I didn't crowd him.

IT'S a good thing for most of us we can't see ahead. When the kid left me that night, he really did leave me. So did my luck, in a way. I wrote to the chairman of that commission, the one that had suspended his license. I waited ten days or more for an answer and the license enclosed.

I didn't get the license, not even a reply.

I wrote, then, for an appointment. I had a right to expect that much of him, our firm charters several well-known colliers and the business weaves our affairs into the web of Cap Blunt's commission as well as the webs of two others down



the coast. Sure it was a personal matter, but——

His secretary advised me; the captain would reserve me twenty minutes of his valuable time on a certain date upon receipt of my assurance that I'd be there. A letter like that can take the steam out of your self-esteem. But I had to swallow my pride, I'd be there on time.

I was. I read a marine magazine through in his outer office. I saw three men go in and out before my turn came.

"Sorry for the delay, Cap'n," said Blunt. "We've got two hearings on our docket and a national hookup is going to broadcast one of them. It's got to go over right. Now let's see—oh, yes, you're here about your son's losing his license—er, temporarily. Right?"

"You mean the 'temporarily' part?" I asked. "I should hope so! That lad's a capable mate, Cap'n, but he was framed. He probably saved the First's life when he grabbed the skipper's gun. Of course, I've been a skipper myself, and a commissioner, too. I realize that some funny things can be staged in a hearing; that's why I've come all the way here to ask—"

"Wait. I recall the details now. But have you seen your son lately?"

"Me?" It sort of upset me. "Why, he lives at home with us when he's ashore. He's not always there when I am. I—he—no, come to think, I haven't laid eyes on him in a week. My wife always says, 'No, he's out,' whenever I've asked."

"Quite a character, that boy of yours, Cap'n," says he. "A most forthright fellow. Came before the commission here last Thursday with records and affidavits like a regular lawyer. Got his license, too."

I was dumbfounded. I recalled the afternoon in my office, the way the kid took my medicine, the way he went on alone. I asked myself now, just how had he taken what I'd said to him? What had I done to the kid anyway? And what did he think of my own life at sea as I'd given it to him there in my office? I remembered his saying, "So that's how you landed where you are! And bought the big place—put sis through— Hm-m."

And today, in the commissioner's office, I asked myself time and again, "Have I got the kid right in this?"

I went outside in a daze.

All the way home I worried about the kid's whereabouts. Back at my desk I

phoned his former owners. They said they had not rehired him or the others involved in that gun episode. I tried the M. M. & P. headquarters with no results. Where was the kid?

By-and-by I figured it a different way. The kid had taken a leaf out of my experience, after all. Certainly he'd been impressed with how I'd got enough money to buy our big home on Brighton Terrace and put his sister through college. So, said I, he was pulling a few strings for himself; he was cashing in on my connections to land him a Second's berth in a collier. Yeah, one of the colliers we charter, a thing he'd always been to stuffy to come to—until now.

So I expected any day to get word—or to see him walk in when one of the boats we charter brought us a cargo here or up the coast.

Fancy then, the let-down when five weeks passed without a word.

Fancy the shock when the radio reported the tanker *Maturin* caught on the southeast end of Block Island in fog, rain and a heavy sea—with Bayliss Larkin in command!

YOU'VE seen people collect stamps? They'll hunt for months for some particular issue. When they finally get it, they've got a lot more than a little square of paper. Plenty more.

That's the way I went after the details behind this radio news story. And did I finally get all the details? Listen:

The Coast Guard boat went out to assist the *Maturin.* She found no ship there. Repeated attempts to contact the *Maturin* by wireless drew no replies from her; it was people on Block Island who'd given a news service the story.

The *Maturin* was not the usual spic and span tanker. She was an older model, a rebuilt affair. The rebuilding had done her no good. I mean she handled awkwardly. She was almighty slow to answer her helm. Run her astern and she'd fairly spin herself to starb'd. I ran afoul of a fellow who'd been mate of her; he swears if they ever cut her lengthwise she'll never go together again because the people who rebuilt her had figured her port and starb'd sides on the basis of different stress factors. Sounds screwy, but—

So she was known by those in the know as the "Invalid." But like a lot of people on this rating, she was never really out of commission. In fact, the only question of her going depended more on who'd take her out. Her reputation made her a shunned ship, an outcast.

Do you see what that fetches? Why, only outcast officers would sail in her. That's why Cap'n Case was her latest master. That's why Louge was her first mate; Case always took Louge with him, for Louge was the only First that'd put up with his drinking and keep quiet—and the coal boat episode had cost the both of them their jobs. If Louge had come clean at the hearing, there just wouldn't be any Cap'n Case at sea any more. But the old *Maturin,* as usual, had been deserted, and that pair was on the beach, so——

That accounts for the kid. After clearing himself and reclaiming his license, he found out what it does to your rep to feature in a hearing the way he'd been featured—and vindication later on, somehow, doesn't remove all the effects of the dirty advertising. So the kid just about had to locate Cap'n Case to get a job; and Case took him along, rather than recommend him where he might get careless and talk. A very peculiar man, that Case.

Mind, this is how I figured it out as I put my pieces of information together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Now the tanker trade is not the coal trade. Far from it. The collier is in port often. She's in from two to five days while a tanker's crew might as well figure on about one hour in port for every day or more at sea. Another difference, coal is safe cargo while petroleum products are not. You often see the red flag of

danger up the halyards on a tanker; you never do on a collier discharging.

"Now," says the kid to me in an impulsive moment weeks later, "you'd suppose Cap'n Case would've been so glad to get a ship that he'd adjust himself and his habits to the new chance. You'd think, with gasoline and casinghead being so touchy, he'd add the danger to his extra care and make a go of things and not dump so much of his responsibility and abusiveness on the First.

"Instead, he acted like a terrier that's too old to learn new tricks. He resented the long sea runs and the short hours in port. He fretted about matches, smoking and casinghead to officers and men both for'd and aft. And when he really found out how cranky the *Maturin* was, he blew up. Drink? Say, he'd come out of his bed all standing, haunted by the slightest sound. Several times a night like that, until I caught onto him; he was taking a slug of rum every time he turned out—"

The kid isn't familiar with booze, he dislikes the very smell of alky. So he didn't fully realize what seven or eight tots of rum in twenty-four hours will do to a man's judgment—to say nothing of his disposition. Mind, any man that far into his cups gets to seeing things; a lot of times the little things look more important than the big ones.

Remember, I didn't get the whole story from the kid. Ah, no; he'd start talking, but suddenly he'd close like a clam. Always he'd leave off before I could guess whether he'd found out my way was best; and deep down inside me, that was what I most wanted to find out. I mean, would the kid take cumshaw? Would he let his superiors aboard or ashore make the critical decisions—and let them take the rap if they proved sour? In short, was he my kid or was he still the knight in shining armor hell-bent for trouble? Was he still sticking his young neck out?

Now that Case and Louge had him where he couldn't talk to the whole wide world, they gloated over it. They treated him as a sucker they'd used in court. All the way south like that, and the kid took their dirt.

On the way north again, sixty-three hours out of Sabine Pass, they got Loggerhead Key abeam for the run east up the Straits of Florida when Case came out of the port wing. He was scarlet. His pulse beat in the side of his neck. His eyes had that china blue stare that's unfocussed and wavers. He blew a blast of second-hand rum vapors into his second mate's face and bawled thickly, "What the hell're you doing 'way off here instead of close in by Loggerhead Key for the new course?"

The kid could not say a thing, the skipper himself had been running the ship all watch. He'd nagged the helmsman until the fellow was feeding spokes like a novice.

"Say, you, I spoke to you!" the skipper howled in another one of his tirades that the kid could not fathom. He'd never heard a captain let down so. And when the kid still held his tongue, remembering the gun episode and what it had cost him, Case stuck his rummy face close and said evenly, "When I ask questions, you answer or else——"

The kid's got a lot of pride. That "or else" came as a challenge. He gave the skipper eye for eye, watched him swaying there unsteadily—but he managed to say only, "Yes, sir. The course is due east, sir."

"Humph," Case rumbled, "that's better." To the helmsman he gruffed, "You heard, due east. When she's on, report it."

The kid lost sleep after that. He never could forget the gun. He began to wonder when it would be his turn to look into the wicked end of that weapon, for the Old Man had begun to threaten him.

The *Maturin* did her vicious best to harass master and mates. With a cargo of ninety-two thousand barrels in, and part of it casinghead in the two big tanks abaft the bridge, she roamed the ocean between

coast and Gulf Stream. One hour she'd log seven knots, the next it'd be eight and a half. Sometimes she steered in perfect trim, then off she'd go as though by the head.

The effect on the men was nothing, they took her for a joke. But her officers were worried, because a ship like that is anything but funny to handle in any weather. The third mate, a brand new license, was all adrift about what he had to log in his eight-to-twelve watches. He eyed the weather like a child dreading lightning.

The First tried his best to learn her vagaries. The skipper seemed never to turn in. The kid was so everlastingly bedevilled with charting the erratic courses, double-checking sights and avoiding more clashes with the skipper that he lived in an endless nightmare.

ALL the way up to Hatteras, the Old Man picked flaws in the lines he drew on the chart. Every twelve-to-four watch, those china blue eyes pretended to see exactly what the ship had done so far and where she was now. And almost every time the skipper came up in the kid's watch, he tried to get a rise out of him. Give the kid his due, he held in like a veteran, but he wondered what the tyrant was aching to spring on him in a quarrel. He still marveled that a skipper'd stoop to such stuff, throwing dignity and tradition overboard this way. What was Case heckling him for?

He found out. The *Maturin* was somewhere in the vicinity of Diamond Shoal Lightship. It was three bells in the kid's watch and a fog rolled in from the east before the kid could get one glimpse of the lightship and take off the new course in the fog. Should he haul in or haul out?

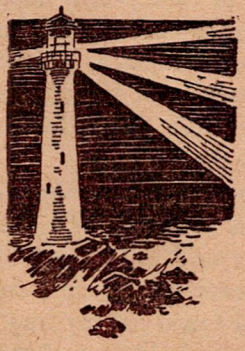
He'd blown the siren half a dozen times, where was the Old Man? By his charted course, based on the last sight figured, she should be not more than a mile to a mile and a half east of the beacon; but of course he couldn't hear it because he stood well to windward of it.

Into the midst of his quandary came the sounds of voices up the narrow wheelhouse stairway. The skipper was bawling again—and Louge was handing him as good as he sent! What had come over the First? Had the worm at last turned?

He had. Louge came onto the bridge, shouting in his high, nasal twang, "I sent that ordinary on lookout because the fog was coming in. Damn it, you saw the fog, you know the rules for thick weather, you—"

"I'm running this crew and I won't have a greenhorn on lookout in this cranky old scow. By God, I've given you every mate's job you ever had, mister! I expect you to——"

Meanwhile, the kid pictured the lightship going somewhere in the fog astern. He had to locate her or take radio bearings or soundings—and you didn't do any of those things, that trip, without Case's say so. "Pardon me, sir," he butted in, we've got to lay the course to Southeast End and I haven't seen or heard Diamond Shoal—"



Woof, what a remark to make! Case interpreted it as a criticism of himself. He turned on the kid. Louge gave the siren lever a vicious yank; it blotted out most of what Case was saying. As it ended, however, Case was snarling, "—so cocky, you brazen kid. You forget something. I've been just waiting for this insubordination to spill it."

"Insubord— I had to tell you, sir, we're—"

"You had to tell me, eh? Listen. Don't you forget what we told *you* in that hearing, you simple fool! I need a couple of mates I can depend on. I knew you'd have to come to me for your next job—and your next and the next." He included both the kid and Louge, now, to go on with "You two are my mates. Do you understand that? Mine! Remember it, and if I ever catch you double-crossing me—— Now what about Diamond Shoal? You're navigating officer, it's your watch, where are we?"

The kid was so full he could scarcely talk about the ship's position. For he had already been to a commissioner and cleared himself of that boasted frame-up. What if Case should meet the men he'd contacted? The engineers, the bosun, the third mate on the collier when the gun episode had occurred? And now that Case had boasted of his hold on the kid and Louge, what was to prevent his using the gun again? He was sure that neither'd dare to report it, much less log it.

Somehow, in his daze, the kid worked the directional aerial wheel over the radio compass. He got cross bearings. He plotted them on the chart. But they did not converge on a point, they made two intersections miles apart. They meant nothing.

The skipper filled the wheelhouse with his fury and foul breath. He cursed the kid. He ordered Louge to take bearings. Louge got no better results. The skipper put on a light to eye them suspiciously. "Just what is going on here?" he demanded. "Slow ahead. I say—"

The kid jerked the levers to Slow Ahead. Then Louge announced through his hawklike nose, "The radio compass is shot."

FOR two solid hours in the night and fog the *Maturin* lingered there. When they gave her sternway, the helmsman watched the compass card go round and round and hummed, "——and it comes out here." Point after point passed the lubber's mark until he gave up trying to catch it wheeled to the Second with a smirk on his face and reported it. You remember, the crew was taking the *Maturin* as a joke; you know, as though bose had given them scrapers and told them to sound his tanks.

Mister, that's when Case blew up. He himself could not read the work on the chart nor see the details inside the radio compass. He was a man pretending his eyes were twenty years younger than he was. He was in a jam, for two good men had just taken bearings that he doubted. The ship was wheeling stern first in a soupy fog, somewhere in the vicinity of a shipping graveyard. Without another word to Louge or the Second, without even hearing Thoms, the Third, coming up the stairway where he'd been witnessing it all for some time, Case marched to the sounding machine. Instead of reaching for the lever, the handle, he struck it a walloping blow with the flat of his hand. The box rang. Having hurt his hand on the handle, he drew off and gave it his fist. The box rang again and something inside rattled.

But they finally computed the *Maturin's* position by soundings. Somehow. She went on into the north in the fog, heading for Southeast End on Block Island and Providence beyond.

The kid went below at midnight, a changed kid. In fact, I doubt if he was a kid any more.

MAYBE you've heard of "tankeritis"? It's supposed to be a state of mind that comes from long service in tankers. They say if you last twelve years in the tankers you're not much better off because by then you'll be screwy anyway. Talk of this sort is not made by men in the tankers, understand, it may therefore be sour grapes. The oil fleets, you know, have been paying better wages than the other trades scale.

Do you see what I'm getting at? It's

that run up the chart from the Diamond Shoal soundings. Although it was his first trip in gasoline, Cap'n Case showed the symptoms of tankeritis. So did his First and Third. As for the kid, he got the lesson of his young life in the practice of self-restraint. He saw the Old Man scold the fog while he'd come and go aimlessly and load the grind onto his first mate Louge. He heard the Old Man order Louge aft three and four times, day and night, to spot somebody smoking. He smelled more and more rum. He took increasing doses of Case's ill temper. He saw Louge take his, too, until he'd boil over with resentment, give in, and lose the argument; nobody was anybody since Case blew up off Hatteras.

The kid heard the Third mutter on and on about the casinghead cargo. It was volatile as naptha, he complained, it would blow ship and crew to green pastures if the *Maturin* had a collision, struck sparks or met with a sudden shock. It became increasingly plain to the kid that the Third was scared of this endless mingling of fog and casinghead gasoline cargo. He reminded everybody of a vulture soaring overhead, waiting—ever waiting.

For thirty-two hours the tension hung on, the siren screamed, the southeast wind followed, the sea built up. By then the storm broke over the *Maturin*—in the black void of the kid's midnight-to-four watch. It came as a squall. Rain swept the ship from stern to stem. Thunder boomed, lightning blinded, the very fog and wind quivered.

The kid ducked inside the wheelhouse for his oil clothes, expecting to see the skipper on the settee, waiting for the evil moment the kid dreaded; I mean, when the ship'd run out her time to Southeast End. If they didn't pick up the buoy or hear the foghorn beforehand, there'd be another session like the one off Diamond Shoal, sure as hell.

He switched on the light for a glimpse at the clock over the chart. He murmured, "Less than an hour to go." He glanced around to the settee and beheld Louge nodding there, trying to stay sitting up. He was doing Case's job tonight, back in the old ways of the collier routine. Louge had changed lately, and yet here he sat tonight, carrying the master's load. Was the Old Man drunk? Asleep?

The kid hurried into his oil clothes and outside. He moved anxiously from wing to wing in the driving rain, peering into mists that the rain had failed to dissolve, listening between thunderclaps for the foghorn, looking for the buoy. He might even pick up the bawl of Gay Head, the *Maturin* had come north so erratically.

One moment he wished the Old Man would come out here where he belonged; the next he hoped not. If he came—the way things were going lately—he and Louge would have a set-to over some senseless matter that only jangled nerves would make so much trouble over.

Presently the kid heard their voices inside. The skipper's harangue got so loud it interfered with the kid's listening for shore sounds. It became evident that the skipper had caught sleep-starved Louge asleep on the settee instead of outside—where the skipper himself should be right now. Evident also that Louge had sailed his last trip at doing his own and Case's duties. He said so in there now; he sounded defiant, self-confident, almost mutinous!

The noise reached top pitch when three bells struck, when it was absolutely dangerous to run that explosive cargo farther into the fog and dark and wind without having located buoy or light.

So the kid went inside to report it and get his orders to slow down or turn about. Block Island must be located. He took a deep breath and broke in on the quarrel, just as he'd been forced by similar circumstances to do off Hatteras. It was odd that the two situations should be so alike; would they turn out the same way?

"Cap'n, we've run out our time and I

haven't seen or heard a cussed thing yet," he reported.

"When did you take radio bearings?"

"I can't, sir."

"You what! You can't take a cross bearing on the ra—"

Louge cut in, "Nobody can, sir; the radio compass is conked. Sparks says it's got to be completely overhauled, all new parts and everything ashore. I reported that to you myself yesterday morning."

The skipper only snorted and went to the engine room telegraph to ring for slow speed or dead engines. "No, not yet," he said as though his lips were heavy, and went on to the light. He switched it on, read the time and exclaimed, "Hell! Get Sparks. He's got to call for our position right away!"

The kid broke into a cold sweat, for the *Maturin* was ramming right on into the fog! He pressed a button beside him, calling Sparks to the wheelhouse.

The *Maturin* bulled on.

Next the skipper thought of the sounding machine. He swayed to it, struck it a light blow and closed his fist onto the handle.

He pulled, there was a rattle, the dial registered forty-seven fathom.

"Forty-seven — damn lie!" he blurted. He worked the handle again. "Sixty-three," he read aloud and wheeled on his mates. "What in hell is right aboard here?" he demanded, the eyes popping out of his head. "Radio compass, sounding machine, steering, trim—where the hell is that radio op'rator?"

He tried the sounding machine again and again with the wildest possible results until Louge's voice rose above the drum of rain and the whistle of wind to say impatiently, "No use, Cap'n, that's been no good ever since you punched it off Hatteras."

The kid was nearly bowled off his feet by it; where had Louge found such independence? The skipper took Louge's apparently casual remark for an insult. But this time, instead of tongue-lashing the First, Case reached for his hip—

And Louge said, just as smoothly, "Not a second time, Cap'n Case. You pulled your gun once, I'd be a fool to let it happen to me twice. What's more, I'm no longer your stooge or your flunky."

"Where's that gun?" Case roared.

The *Maturin* bulled right on blindly. The kid, outside on the bridge, reached through the downpour for the telegraph levers. He was going to stop her on his own responsibility; he had become too alarmed to stand it any longer.

But inside the wheelhouse Louge replied to the skipper, "The gun? It's on my hip this time, and listen, Cap'n, your ship is running blind."

"You brazen—" Case began. He rushed the First. The kid saw Louge reach back; he ducked inside yelling, "Don't do that!"

Yes, sticking out his young neck again.

All at once those two nerve-wracked victims of their long-standing feud forgot everything except the issue that had reached its climax. They went mad with venom—or was it tankeritis?

THE kid's hand was groping for the lever, ordering "Right wheel, hard over." He heard Sparks enter the narrow stairway in there, saw those two madmen close in a desperate fight—

He ran inside, flew past the wheel and tried to break his way between them. He clean forgot his own safety to stop it before the ship met disaster, before Louge could shoot.

Meantime the ship slowed because he had moved the lever to the telegraph on the bridge, had moved it to Slow Ahead as he sprang for the fighters inside. The *Maturin* was moving now in an arc, at reduced speed. But moving!

And the kid couldn't separate the Old Man from that gun. It was in Louge's fist, halfway out of his hip pocket. Both men were frozen to it. At any moment it might go off—the kid drew back and

planted a fist to Case's midriff. The blow knocked the wind out of him in one abrupt gasp, it bowled him along the edge of the chart locker. A second blow sent him on and finished him.

Before Louge could cash in on the unexpected advantage, the kid feigned a swipe for the weapon. It drew Louge's hands both down. Instantly the kid launched a storm of blows. They came so everlastingly fast to belt and face that Louge instinctively brought up his hands to defend himself. The kid snatched the weapon from those hands before Louge ever got around to aim it. All in one swift motion, the kid rapped the First on the skull with it, led to the chin, and dropped him to the wheelhouse floor.

It was all accomplished within a few seconds. It was amazing speed. It had to be that quick because the *Maturin* was turning to starboard. She must be straightened out into the southeast, headed for the open sea until the weather cleared or her position could be determined.

And right here I trust you haven't overlooked this: in the collier scrap, the kid had only snatched the gun; this time he'd done that, dropped both scrappers and taken over.

He'd scarcely turned his back on the two to run outside, he'd barely opened his mouth to order gaping Sparks down that stairway and to his machine for bearings, when the whole world rose abruptly. It quaked beneath him. It came to a sudden stop in a crunching, muffled sound amid the smash of breakers.

Yes, the *Maturin* was on the rocks, the only rocks on the shores of Block Island. Her nose was a crumpled bash of plates and frames, up on the ledges on Southeast End. And the foghorn's futile bellow came and went on the veering wind, over there behind the mists, unseen.

The kid rose off his knees—and Sparks wasn't there in the stairway. He heard the cannonade of big seas crashing on ledges, aboard the ship; and when the foghorn filled the night, the seas shook rocks, ship and everything aboard her. He felt the *Maturin* halfroll away jerkily from the attack on her starboard side—she came back uncertainly.

Just as the Third made his presence known by crying out, "Sparks is busted up

down the stairway," the kid awoke to the startling fact that he, Bayliss Larkin, was acting captain of the *Maturin*—perched on a ledge!

He hurried outside. He found out that the forepeak, chain locker and dry tank up forward all were junk. But the bulkhead abaft them, somehow, had held—so far.

He talked rapidly with the chief and the chief declared, "This looks like her finish. These big seas'll break her to pieces in a few hours. Maybe less. Anybody called the C. G.?"

"Can't," acting Captain Larkin replied shortly.

"Can't? Where's Sparks?"

"Busted up. Caught in the narrow stairway up top. It hove him down into the cross alley. And besides——" But the kid did not say it, he was not telling anybody his bigger reason for not calling the C. G., for not calling anybody. Because he was guilty. His were the orders that'd put the tanker on Southeast End. He had assumed command while both of his superiors were standing in the wheelhouse — fighting. Yeah, that was reason enough to hold his tongue, reason enough not to call help. Above all, reason to avoid the commission; well he knew that they'd take his license, for this time they'd keep it indefinitely. You see, the kid—technically—rated mutiny. Almost piracy.

But the *Maturin* looked as though she'd send him up anyway. Larger seas were breaking aboard, the ship was doomed—while master and mate startled the helmsman, still standing by, by slatting soundlessly on the floor. You'd think they were corpses. You see, the kid had done a thorough job on Louge; as for Case, the kid only started what the rum was finishing. I mean, Case was rumsick.

YOU may have guessed it by this time; the fellow who was the *Maturin's* Third, that trip, is sitting in the chair where the kid sat when I warned him not to bull into jams if he wanted a career. This Third wants a collier job, see, and I know collier skippers that don't swill rum or tote guns or punch sounding machines. This fellow's short on experience and long on peace; he's still strung taut when he talks about that night on Southeast End. Listen:

The kid might 'ave taken valuable time to decide what to do first. He didn't, because somebody ashore yelled to the crew; curious cranks, I guess, nosing into somebody else's hard luck in the rain and wind. The kid sent the Third on deck to silence his men. Then a flashlight ran along the ship's name on her port bow. Determined people, those.

That light startled the kid, that and the talking he'd squelched. For somebody ashore now had the *Maturin's* name and they'd been told who was on watch. What more? The kid didn't have time to investigate. If the Coast Guard should be notified, he was ruined—provided the C. G. boat found the tanker here on the rocks. For he had put her here. To be sure, he hadn't ruined that sounding machine or the radio compass; and if he had let her run on and on, she'd 'ave beached hard and fast to the west'd. But he had taken command!

The flashlight wasn't gone before he was ringing for Full Astern. It was haste born of necessity, yes, but it was downright brilliance on his part, too. It was cashing in on one of the *Maturin's* many peculiarities. Do you recall that when her engines were reversed she'd almost spin a circle to starb'd? The engine gave her an almighty shaking down; you'd think it'd break her in two under the combined vibration of the screw, the hammering seas and the dubious condition the rocks may have put her in.

She made a terrific fight to get off, but the seas kept working against it. The kid held his breath in his haste and anxiety. He consulted his tide book and swore; the tide was starting ebb! It was going to leave her here, high as a goose.

He ordered the for'd tanks pumped out to lighten what was left of her nose and to lay a slick on the seas. He called for ballast aft. He pleaded with the chief for more steam, more r.p.m., more swing to starb'd.

Twenty minutes of that crisis. The rain ceased, the fog came solid. The old *Maturin* groaned and torqued and twisted. Her stern was under one moment, out the next. Her funnel jerked indifferently, leaned, came back ashudder. Her masts quivered like whips in sockets. She was fighting to—to what?

The kid wondered about that. If she stayed here, she'd surely break up. If she got off, would she open up like a sieve?

Forty minutes. The Old Man began to groan in a fit of nausea. Louge sat up, demanded his gun in a dizzy, futile way.

"I've got the gun. I'm keeping it," the kid snapped. "Get out of here. Go turn in, you're a mess." He had no more use for either Louge or Case, no use for men who'd frame a guy to clear themselves of guilt, only to go right back to sea to repeat the same quarrel while he, Larkin, got so desperate in the pinch that he'd given belated orders that had gotten him into this. The kid was boiling like the seas coming over her side—"I said get out!" he yelled.

Forty-seven minutes by the wheelhouse clock. Fierce, shuddering minutes

that shook her like a Chilian quake so that Larkin, Thoms and the helmsman stood on their toes. It was a tremendous strain for a twenty-five year old kid who'd lost his papers so recently and stood to lose them within—

It came like the brush of a hand over soft velvet. A slight scraping sound, but a smooth, sternward slide into the dark and fog and sharpening seas. Then she was clear. In deep water. But she was swinging to starb'd, the very thing that had worked her free. And she was leaking.

The kid got headway on her, had the pumps run at full tilt, stationed men the length of her to sound and keep sounding. That's how she ran around Block Island for Providence at top speed, pumps racing, bashed nose plowing. She made the bid of her checkered career to make port once more before some C. G. boat should overhaul her in the fog, before some commission could put the kid on the spot.

Steer? She handled like a plank. She went up by Connimicut like a wounded hippo, but she went up. The kid saw to that.

But you'd never know he did it when she docked. He had the skipper sick abed, had Louge well acquainted by then with what he'd lose by taking over. Louge had bruises on his face to show that he, like Sparks, had been thrown headlong when she struck. But to the outside world it was Louge who'd brought the ship in, understand. He made up the log as directed; he reported that after starting south he and the skipper, in turn, had discovered that radio compass and sounding machine were out of repair. That's how the kid kept himself out of the limelight, out of another disastrous session before a commission, how he worked his way out of the net that Case and Louge had woven around his future.

Aye, he'd learned his lesson, too. It cured him of bulling into jams. No, he has not gone as far as I did; he takes no raps like I took for Cap McKown nor accepts cumshaw like me on the *Altmont*. He is the next generation. He is a better man than his dad. He's got to be because he's going senior second in a cruise liner on the Havana run.

Yes, I gave the kid a boat once.

A tabu was over the jungle; evil moved, but eyes saw it not; death was on the trails, but no man reported it; drums sounded but said no word of peril—

THE ISLE OF SILENCE

A long novelette of the Major

in the next **SHORT STORIES**

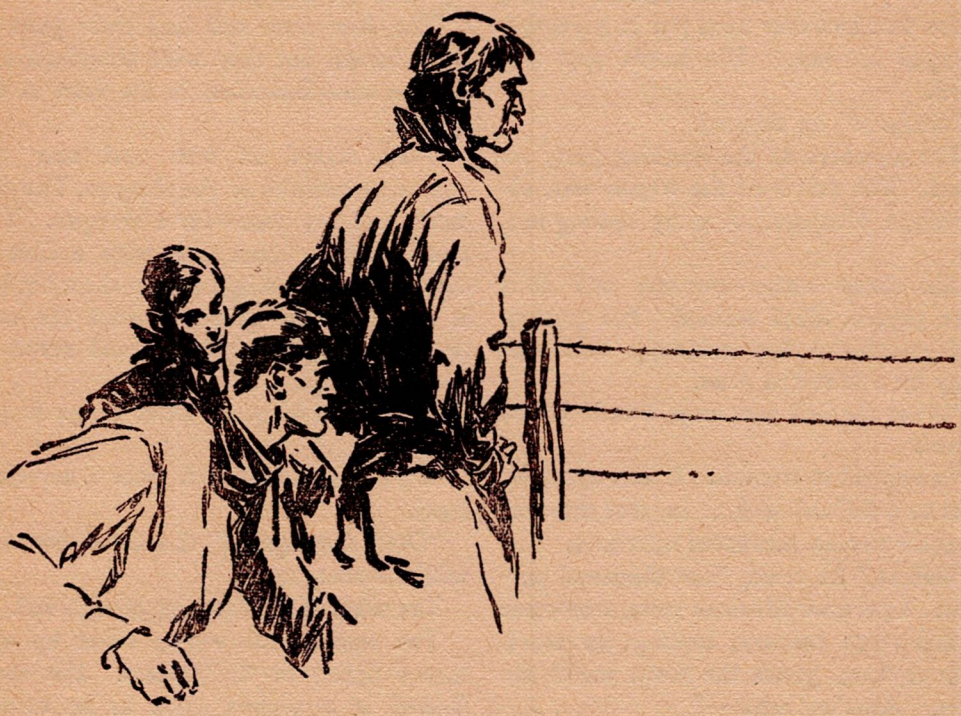
by

L. Patrick Greene

That Roving Citizen of Hungary—and Five Other Countries—

Demonstrates the Fact That All Cattle Rustlers

Should Have a Sense of Humor



ROPE FOR RUSTLERS

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of "Guerrilla Range," "Surrender," etc.

THEY were hanging Sam Cragg. His hands were tied behind his back, he sat on his black gelding—and the noose was already around his neck.

The four men were drawing straws, to determine which should slap Sam Cragg's horse and make it leap from under him. Pete Devoe, who had no taste for it, drew the shortest straw.

"You win, Pete," said a vicious looking man with a stubby beard.

Pete Devoe looked uneasily in Sam Cragg's direction. "I ain't never done this before, Dillon," he said, "what do I do?"

"You hit the horse with a rope end," snapped Dillon, that's what you do. The horse'll do the rest."

Devoe took the lariat from his saddle horn and shook out a length of it. He turned toward the doomed man, sighed and walked forward.

At that moment, a wagon came around the turn in the road. It had been concealed up to now by the cottonwoods, and had the group not been so intent on their task, they would have heard the creaking of the wagon before it appeared. As it was now,

they gaped in astonishment. Then four hands went for Frontier Models.

The driver of the wagon—and it was pulled by two of the crummiest looking mules that had ever been put in harness—dropped his lines. His hands shot skyward.

"Amigos!" he shouted.

The members of the lynching party relaxed. The driver of the wagon was, obviously, a Mexican. A sorry looking one, too.

His cheap cotton trousers and shirt were ragged, alkali stained. His tremendous sombrero had evidently been cast away by a Mexican *peon.*

"What the hell you want here?" Dillon roared.

He seemed to tremble. It was apparent even to a dullard such as he, that this was no place for an unwanted spectator.

"Señors," he cried, "one thousand pardons. I am poor Mexican peon, who come to this reech country, looking for work. I do anyt'ing, ponch the cows, watch the sheep. Anyt'ing what—"

Dillon snarled. "I got a good notion to let you have it, on general principles. Dead men tell no tales—"

"I am blind!" cried the Mexican. "I am deaf, dumb and blind, I see not'ing, hear not'ing and cannot talk so good."

"Aw, let him go," said Pete Devoe. "He's so scared now, he'll breeze through this country like a cloud of dust."

"Oh, t'ank you, señor! *Gracias!* I go—"

The Mexican's hands came down in a flash. He caught up the lines, fumbled them in his eagerness and reached down into the box of the wagon.

His hands came up again—and there was a double-barreled shotgun in them.

And he was a different man. His figure that had been so trembling a moment ago, strained against his shabby clothes; he seemed whipcord and steel. The stupid expression on his face, became in a flash, the look of an eagle. He was swarthy, but muscle rippled in his lean face and his long nose gave him a satanic appearance.

"Hola!" he cried. "Up with them, or by God! I keel you all!"

The four men still had their guns in their hands, but they were thunderstruck by the transformation in the man in the wagon.

They stared at him and saw the menacing muzzles of the shotgun. The distance was too close—for a shotgun. You could make a clean miss with a Colt at twenty feet, you might even make a hit, but it wouldn't stop quickly enough the contraction of a finger that would result in spewing death.

A shotgun blast at short range *is too sure.*

A Frontier Model fell from a nerveless hand.

"Drop them guns!" thundered the man with the shotgun.

The other three Frontier Models fell.

The man in the wagon stood up and leaped lightly to the ground. His teeth flashed in a wicked smile as he turned abruptly away from the men on the ground.

He yelled, "Jump!" and the shotgun roared.

Sam Cragg's gelding leaped forward when the shotgun blasted, but the charge of buckshot had severed the rope and Sam Cragg, his hands still bound behind his back, hurled himself sidewards to the ground.

THE four lynchers started reaching for their guns, on the ground. But the man who looked like a Mexican swung his shotgun back, carelessly.

"Ha!" he said, "I have got one more bullet in thees gun!"

The lynchers promptly straightened.

The newcomer picked out Pete Devoe. "You, señor, you will taking your knife and cut from this man his ropes. And—careful!"

A moment later Sam Cragg sprang to his feet. His first act was to rush for-

ward and scoop up a gun. "Now, you dirty rats—!" he began.

"But wait, my friend!" commanded the Mexican. "I do not like this. I have save your life, so——" He edged the muzzle of the shotgun toward Cragg. "I am a man of peace," he went on amazingly. "I do not like bloodshed—unless, I have to let it, myself."

He smiled indulgently at the entire group. "Therefore, señors, shall we all go in different ways—friends?"

"Yeah, sure," said Dillon, the man with the stubby beard. "Friends."

HE STOOPED to retrieve his gun, but the man with the shotgun, called softly, "But no, we be better friends if *I* take the guns! You climb up on your so-fine horses and go away, yes?"

It was the only thing they could do. Although he talked of friendship, the swarthy man's actions had been anything but those of a friendly, peaceful man.

The four would-be lynchers, muttering among themselves, mounted their horses. But when they were off a little distance, Dillon turned and shook his fist. "I'll be seein' you, both of you!"

"But do not come too close to my shotgun!" the Mexican yelled back.

He turned to Sam Cragg and chuckled. "Just in the neek of time I come, eh?"

"You did, stranger," Sam Cragg said slowly. "But why didn't you let me perforate them? They'll be after me again, now."

"But why? I do not see the star or the badge. They are not sheriffs or policemen."

Sam Cragg snorted. "Them? They're scum. Lord Cecile's hired gunslingers, that's what they are."

The Mexican's eyes widened. "Lord Cecil? You have here in this country an English lord?"

"He ain't really a lord," replied Cragg. "But he acts like one, that's how he got the name. But for all his high and mighty actin', he's as crooked and bloodthirsty as any guntoter in this country. Well—" he looked sharply at the other, "you saved my life."

"Is nothing. I have saved many lives."

"Yeah? Where, in Mexico?"

The swarthy man shrugged eloquently. "In Mexico, maybe in Europe."

"Europe?" exclaimed Cragg. "You're not—a Mexican?"

The man with the shotgun looked down at his ragged clothes, then suddenly drew himself up to his full height — and he reached to six feet.

"You make joke of my poor clothes, no? Sure, I am not Mexican. I am American citizen. My name it is Taylor, Stephen Taylor." He bowed.

Sam Cragg still stared. "Stephen Taylor! Why—why, you don't look it. And your accent—"

"Oh that!" The man who called himself Stephen Taylor, snapped his fingers. "Is simple. I am naturalize citizen. In Germany, my name is Stefan Schneider. You see, a *schneider* is a tailor, so when I come to this country, I make the change in the name—Stefan Schneider. In Mexico, I am Esteban Sestra, because *sestra* also mean tailor. See? Is simple!"

"Be damned if it is!" swore Sam Cragg. "Even so, you're not a German. You don't look like one."

"No? But of course, I am naturalize German citizen. I am not born in Germany. I am born in Hungary. My name is Istvan Szabo, because in Hungarian, *szabo* mean schneider, I mean tailor——"

Cragg clapped a hand to his forehead. "That's four countries of which you're a citizen. How many more?"

Taylor shook his head sadly. "Only one more, England. I am also living in France and want to become citizen but before I get the papers, the *gendarme*—I mean, I do not like France, so I leave him flat. Is sad, because I like being citizen."

TEN minutes ago, a rope had been about Sam Cragg's neck. Black despair had gripped him. And now—now he roared with laughter.

The amazing Szabo grinned. "Is funny, no? I am astonishing man. Look at these clothes. Phooey! You would not t'ink that only one week ago today, in Mexico, I am selling gold mine for twenty-five thousand dollars American gold!"

Sam Cragg stopped laughing "What?"

"I am selling gold mine. And what do these Mexicans do to me? They take my twenty-five thousand American dollars and t'row me in the crummy calaboose! That's what they do to me, a good Mexican citizen!"

"But what'd they do that for?"

"Phooey! The *jefe* say the gold mine I sell do not belong to me."

"Did it?"

Szabo looked soberly at Sam Cragg. "No."

Sam Cragg's mouth fell open. He took a step back and inhaled sharply. "What the—you mean to tell me you sold a mine that didn't belong to you?"

"Yes. In Sonora I am meeting this rich New York man who want buy gold mine. Nobody want sell him mine, so I sell him. Is good mine, too."

Cragg's teeth clicked together. "I don't get you, Mr. Taylor-Schneider and so on."

Szabo made a clucking sound with his tongue. "Lots of men don't get me. I am bad man, what you call—scoundrel!"

He chuckled and began gathering up the hardware the frustrated lynchers had left behind. He tossed the guns into the wagon, grinned at Sam Cragg.

"Is fine country, America. I am coming back with poor clothes, because is all I can steal in hurry. I got not'ing, only one broken wagon and two no-good mules. I am here only little while and already I got plenty guns. I sell him, take money and get rich. No?"

"I think," Sam Cragg said slowly. "I'll fork my horse and ride home." He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled shrilly.

The black gelding which was grazing a little way off jerked up its head and galloped toward Cragg. He looked at the gun he had appropriated a few minutes before and stuck it in his empty holster.

Istvan Szabo vaulted lightly into his rickety wagon and caught up the lines. "I go with you ways. Is town near?"

"Straight ahead, four miles," said Cragg, "there's a wide spot in the road. They call it Bad Ax. You'll probably find Dillon and his boys there, liquoring up. But I wouldn't go there, if I were you. You got the drop on Dillon here, but he's bad medicine, probably the worst killer ever hit this country."

"So? Is fine. In Hungary, I am called the Killer of the Rhine. No, that is in Germany."

HE SHOT a quick look at Sam Cragg and saw the cowpuncher's teeth grit together. Szabo's mouth twisted.

"Well," Szabo went on, "I go see what make Bad Ax bad."

Sam Cragg rode beside the wagon. A half mile beyond, they topped a rise and saw a rider coming toward them. In a minute or two, Szabo said, "Is a woman!"

"Yes," said Cragg shortly.

When the approaching rider was fifty feet away she stopped her horse in the

middle of the rutted road. "Sam!" she exclaimed. "You're—all right!"

Sam Cragg's face was bitter. "Yes, but it's no fault of your father's."

The girl, for she couldn't have been more than twenty, exclaimed sharply. "Sam! What do you mean by that?"

Sam Cragg shook his head stubbornly, but made no reply.

For a moment the girl stared at him, then she said, "I hate you, Sam Cragg! I hate you!"

She whirled her horse and galloped it away.

"So!" said Istvan Szabo. "Is one mighty pretty girl. What is her name?"

"Vivian Poff. Her father is Cecil Poff."

"The English lord? And you are not friends with Lord Cecil?"

"I am not. He's the biggest rancher in these parts. Because his family set him up over here and he's got all sorts of money, he thinks he owns the whole country. Dillon and those men—they were paid by Lord Cecil."

Szabo's eyes widened. "And he has such a nice daughter! Is shame. I am liking her. Maybe I am settle here and marry her."

Sam Cragg snarled, "Shut up, you damn fool!" and then he caught himself. "I don't give a damn who she marries. She can marry Dillon for all I care. Or Charles Springer."

"Or me. I make good husband. In Hungary——"

Sam Cragg snorted. "Ah, the hell with you!" He jerked his horse sidewards, touched its flanks with his spurs. The animal leaped away.

Istvan Szabo looked after Sam Cragg. "And I am saving his life!" he said aloud. Then he shrugged and his eyes went eagerly toward the road ahead.

THERE were probably forty buildings in the cowtown of Bad Ax. Four of them were saloons. Istvan Szabo picked out the biggest saloon and drove his decrepit old wagon up to the hitch rail. He jumped to the ground, reached back into the wagon and scooped up the three Frontier Model Colt's.

Carrying them in his arms, he went into the saloon, which boasted on a large sign over the entire front, the name, *"New York Saloon."*

Dillon and Pete Devoe were in front of the bar. So were a half dozen other men. Dillon saw Szabo and roared, "The dam' Mexican!" and started forward.

Szabo did a little juggling and one of the Colt's nestled snugly in the palm of his right hand. "I am meeting you before, señor?"

Dillon's holster was still empty. He looked at the guns in Szabo's hands. "You know damn well we met before—"

Szabo's eyes brightened. "Oh yes! Now, I am remember. You are one of the men who try hanging Mr. Cragg with rope by the neck."

Dillon winced. A tall man of about forty, with bristling mustaches, left the bar. "What's this, Dillon?" he asked crisply.

"Nothin'," growled Dillon. "This is a lousy Mex—"

"Ha!" said Szabo. "I do not like that. I am mad. I want fight, now."

Dillon's big jaws clamped together. "How do you want to fight, you dirty greaser?"

Szabo's eyes glinted. "I fight any way. With gun, knife or the fist. I am good with all."

"Then put down the guns and come on," invited Dillon.

Szabo appealed to the tall man beside Dillon. "You, sir, look like gentleman. To you, I give these guns. After I beat this man you are giving me guns back and maybe I sell them. Yes—?"

The tall man nodded. "I'm Charles Springer. My word's good around here. And it'll be a fair fight—if you're sure you want to fight Jack Dillon with your fists."

"I am sure." Szabo gave the three Colts

to the man who had introduced himself as Charles Springer.

He turned and Jack Dillon was rushing him. He ducked swiftly and Dillon's big fist raked the sombrero from his head.

"Ha!" cried Szabo, leaping to one side.

Without the ridiculous sombrero he was a tall, cleancut man in his middle thirties. He weighed perhaps a hundred and seventy-five, at least thirty pounds less than Jack Dillon.

Dillon whirled and charged again. Szabo, crouching slightly, seemed to hesitate a moment. And then—then his right fist smashed forward and caught the bigger man squarely on the point of the jaw. The contact made a sharp *smack*.

Dillon's forward rush was halted violently. For a moment he rocked in midair, then he fell—forward. His face hit the floor and he lay still.

"Gawd!" someone at the bar exclaimed.

Szabo looked at Charles Springer. "I think there will be no more fight."

Springer looked steadily at Szabo. "That was nice work," he said. "I don't believe I ever saw it done better."

Szabo shrugged modestly. "I am fine fighter. In Hungary I am best pistol shot in all the army. With the sword I am also master. I like fighting."

SPRINGER'S eyes roamed over Szabo's shabby clothes. "You say you're an army man—from Hungary?"

"Ah, yes, I am captain in Hussars. Captain Istvan Szabo. In this country, I am called Stephen Taylor. I am American citizen."

"Amazing!" murmured Springer. "Then he shook his head. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Charles Springer. Will you join me in a drink?"

Szabo clicked the heels of his battered shoes and bowed. "Delighted, sir! And after I get some money, you must let me buy you drink."

"Certainly. Here are your weapons."

"Ah yes." Szabo took the Colts, then turned to Pete Devoe who was still standing by the bar. "I have here your gun. You have money? I sell him back your gun."

Devoe wet his lips. He looked at Jack Dillon, still lying motionless on the floor. "How much—you want?"

"Poof! I get him easy, I sell him cheap. Twenty dollar for one gun. Fifty dollar for all three."

"I'll buy all three," said Devoe. He pulled a thick roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off two twenties and a ten. As Szabo took the money and passed over the guns, Springer said, "And until he is armed with his own weapons, Captain Szabo is my guest. Understand that, Devoe?"

Devoe nodded. Dillon moaned at that moment and Devoe went toward him. A couple of other men left the bar and went to help Devoe. They got Dillon out of the saloon, while he was still half unconscious.

Then Szabo and Springer had their drinks. When they had drained the glasses, Springer said, "As I told you before, I liked your work. I could use a man like you. How would you like to work for me?"

"For how much money?"

"Usual wages, forty a month."

Szabo shook his head. "I am good man."

"Fifty!"

Szabo smiled pleasantly. "I have fifty dollars now. Maybe I don't work for awhile. Yes?"

"Suit yourself. The offer stands. Whenever you're ready, just ride out to my place. Anyone can tell you how to get there."

"Thank you, sir."

SAM CRAGG was in a bitter mood as he rode toward his ranch. He had escaped with his life, but he knew that he hadn't heard the last of Jack Dillon. Dillon and his henchmen had been so sure of themselves they hadn't taken the trouble to mask themselves. Cragg knew their identity and they had to eliminate him.

And, of course, there was his ranch. The little two-bit spread he had inherited from his father. It had been a small ranch. The range had been open then. You ran your steers where you wanted. There was enough grass and water for everyone.

But times had changed. An Englishman, Cecil Poff had come to Bad Ax. He bought land to the right and left, stocked it with shorthorns. Not requiring money immediately, he did not sell off his annual increase and in a few years his stock was over-running the range. Grass became scarce, but more scarce, water.

Ranchers, to protect their own herds from the influx of Lord Cecil's shorthorns began fencing in their land, and their water-holes. Cecil Poff learned then that he did not have sufficient land or water for his vast herds. He bought more land, but knowing they had him, now, the ranchers kited their prices.

So trouble came to the Bad Ax range.

Young Sam Cragg was caught in the middle of it. In common with the other ranchers, Cragg had fenced in his land and his water-holes. It so happened that he had the best water-holes in the valley, enough water actually for a hundred times the number of head he owned. Cecil Poff knew that and part of his range adjoined Cragg's.

Wire became mysteriously cut, steers followed their noses to water. Sam Cragg didn't mind so much. There was Vivian Poff — but business was business and Cragg thought her father should pay *something* for water rights. Cecil Poff had other ideas.

And today, Jack Dillon and his gang had tried to hang Sam Cragg. It was open war, now.

Cragg rode down on the red adobe brick house that was his home. He dismounted from his gelding and a lean, bow-legged man came lazily from around the house where he had been lying in the shadow.

"Hi, Boss!" he greeted Cragg.

Cragg looked angrily at his one and only hired hand. "What you been doin', Missouri? Lying in the shade all day?"

Missouri grinned. "What was I s'posed to do? Everythin's goin' fine, ain't it?"

"Yes, everything's going fine. An hour ago Jack Dillon, Pete Devoe and a couple of others put a rope around my neck and threw the end of it over a cottonwood limb."

Missouri's weatherbeaten face became suddenly taut. What they pull a bluff like that for?"

"It wasn't a bluff. Devoe was just going to slap my horse from under me when a Mexican came along and threw down on the crowd with a shotgun."

"I think," Missouri said softly, "I'll go to town."

He hitched up his cartridge belt.

Cragg shook his head. "What good'd that do, Missouri? You might get Dillon, but the others would get you. It wouldn't solve anything, at all. Dillon was only paid to do a job. The fellow that paid him—"

"All right," said Missouri. "I'll go see him."

Cragg scowled. "You can't do that. You know, and I know, who it is, but we can't——"

"Why not?"

Cragg sawed the air impatiently. "Because I don't fight like that. That's why, Missouri."

Missouri looked steadily at Sam Cragg. He wondered sometimes, why he worked for Cragg. Certainly it wasn't for the wages. Missouri had been places and seen things. He never talked about it, but Cragg, who had been with him in Bad Ax on occasions, knew that the bowlegged man was extraordinarily capable. In everything he did. He had a hunch about Missouri. One of the odd things about his hired man, was that he had never told his employer his name. "Just call me Missouri," he said, when questioned.

Which made Sam Cragg think that Missouri might have left some place rather hastily.

Missouri rubbed his jaw. "So what do we do—just sit tight?"

"I don't know," said Sam Cragg slowly. "I've been thinking somewhat lately of selling out and going elsewhere."

"Yeah? Well, here comes your chance. Lord Cecil——" Missouri nodded with his head.

Sam Cragg turned and his lips tightened. The Englishman wore riding breeches and highly polished boots, a white shirt and a stiff brimmed hat. He was a well preserved man, looking ten years younger than his fifty-odd.

He rode a splendid bay, from which he dismounted lightly.

Sam Cragg said nothing. Missouri whistled softly and stepped out of sight behind the adobe house.

"Stifling, this weather," Cecil Poff went on. "I don't see how you stand it in your house. Not built for comfort, you know."

"I like it," retorted Sam Cragg. "And it's mine."

"Oh certainly, old man. Sorry," apologized Cecil Poff. He shook his head and smacked his lips, a habit that made Sam Cragg grit his teeth whenever he heard it.

"I need a bit more grass for my stock," Poff said. "Thought I'd ride over today and make you an offer for your ranch. I've been thinking it over and have decided to make you a handsome offer."

"No," said Cragg.

"Of ten thousand dollars," Poff said. "Which is twice what the ranch is worth, you know."

Cragg shook his head.

"And that doesn't include your cattle," the Englishman went on. "If you wish, I'll take them off your hands at another ten thousand."

"Dillon will handle it cheaper," Cragg said. "Even if he did miss today."

"Dillon?" Cecil Poff asked. "Is he trying to outbid me?"

AT LAST, Sam Cragg exploded. "You know damn well what I mean, Poff. You paid Jack Dillon to get rid of me. You know you did. He tried it today and almost succeeded. Maybe he will the next time.

"Save your money, Poff—and get to hell out of my sight."

"Oh, come now!" exclaimed the Englishman. "I don't know what you're talking about. I know this Dillon, yes, but I haven't paid him any money for anything. He doesn't work for me, you know."

"I don't know it! I only know that you've been trying to get this ranch for a long time and that you've done all sorts of things to make me sell to you."

"Mr. Cragg!" Lord Cecil drew himself up stiffly. "I resent your attitude—"

"Resent and be damned!"

Cecil Poff turned to his horse. He mounted and looked down at Cragg. "I quite understand. Because I discouraged your attentions to my daughter, you bear me animosity. But I don't see why that should stand in the way of our concluding a business deal. So—I will make you one last offer. Thirty thousand dollars for your ranch and cattle."

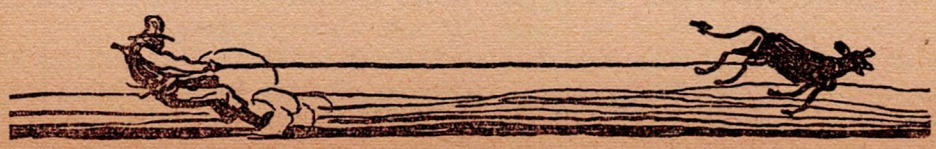
Cragg shook his head, violently.

The Englishman nodded and turned his horse. Cragg watched him ride off until Missouri came out from behind the house and spoke to him.

"That's a lot of money his lordship talked about."

"It's not enough, though," retorted Sam Cragg. "Not after what happened to me today."

Vivian Poff did not get an opportunity to speak privately to her father until after



dinner, which they had in the dining room of the rambling adobe ranchhouse.

But immediately after the meal Cecil Poff retired to the coolness of the veranda and Vivian followed him. "Father," she said bluntly, "what's the trouble between you and Sam Cragg?"

Cecil Poff looked sharply at his daughter. "Trouble, Vivian?"

"You know very well what I mean."

"Yes, of course. But I really don't know. I rode over to the chap's place only this afternoon. Made him a rather decent offer for his ranch and he almost bit off my head. Downright nasty, he was."

"Perhaps he had a right to be."

Poff's head jerked up. "Eh?"

"I was in Bad Ax this afternoon," Vivian said. "I heard some odd talk there. That this ruffian, Dillon, and some others, had attempted to hang Sam—Mr. Cragg."

Cecil Poff's eyes widened. "I say now, that's carrying things pretty far, isn't it? I've heard talk myself that this Cragg chap is a—well, that he sells more steers than he raises, but hanging, now that's pretty stiff."

"Is it? Well——" Vivian gathered her breath. "Well, the talk is also that *you* paid Dillon to do the hanging job."

A RED flush spread over the Englishman's face. "I? Come now, Vivian That's—"

"Pretty stiff!" Vivian cut in. "That's what you say every time I question you about something. The fact remains that you've been persecuting Sam Cragg."

"The fact remains," Poff retorted angrily, "that this Cragg is an ambitious young whelp who doesn't care how he gets ahead. He'd just as soon marry money as steal——"

"Father!" exclaimed Vivian hotly. "That's not true. Sam has never asked me to marry him."

"Ah, but *you've* thought about it?"

Vivian bit her lower lip. Defiantly she faced her father. "I have thought of it and what's more, if he ever asks me I intend to accept."

"And live with him in that hovel he calls a home? On the income he makes from stealing cattle?"

Vivian turned abruptly from her father and went into the house. Cecil Poff looked after her a moment, then shook his head. Sighing wearily he let himself down into a creaking rocking chair and drew a short pipe from his jacket pocket.

Before he lit it, hoofs clopped on the sunbaked earth and a rider approached the veranda. It was a tall, well built man who rode like a cavalryman. He was swarthy, hawkfaced and had flashing eyes.

He leaped lightly to the ground and came toward Cecil Poff.

"Lord Cecil?" he inquired in an accented tone.

Poff scrutinized the swarthy man. He saw that the latter was wearing a complete new outfit, consisting of thirty-dollar boots, broadcloth trousers, flannel shirt and a flat crowned cream-colored Stetson. And a new Frontier Model Colt, hanging low in a holster on his right thigh.

"My name's Cecil Poff," he said, "but I'm not a lord."

"Ah, but you are an English gentleman!" exclaimed the hawkfaced man. He clicked his heels together and bowed elaborately. "Permit me to introduce myself. I am Captain Istvan Szabo, late of the Royal Hussars—"

Cecil Poff got up abruptly. "Royal Hussars?" he exclaimed.

Szabo chuckled. "Yes, but I am—what you call—cashiered? So I come to America to make million dollar. When I get him I go back to Hungary and become maybe general."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Cecil Poff.

"Me, too," grinned Szabo. "Anyway, we are both gentlemen, yes? When I hear about you I think to myself, I am coming see this Lord Cecil. He is English gentleman and will understand Hungarian gentleman. Perhaps we do business together.

I am one damfine rustler. We work together, yes?"

Cecil Poff's mouth fell open and he stared at Szabo in amazement. "Are you pulling my leg, fella?" he managed finally.

Szabo cocked his head to one side. "Pull leg? I do not understand."

"I mean, are you serious? You admit you're a rustler and you come to me?"

"Why not? Ever'body say Lord Cecil plenty big rustler. So maybe he can use one other big rustler."

The crimson that had left Lord Cecil's face, returned. "Mr. Szabo, or whatever your name is—*get off this place!*"

SZABO attempted a smile, but when he saw the grimness in the Englishman's face he became serious. "I have said wrong thing? I make you mad, eh?"

"Damn right, you've made me mad!" said Lord Cecil savagely. "Now get up on that horse and take your jokes somewhere else. I'll give you just three seconds—"

Szabo hunched his shoulders; his right hand made a swift movement and the new Frontier Model seemed to leap into his right hand.

"Now, *you* make mistake," he said coolly. "When you talk about give me three seconds, I don't like that. I am fighting man and always take dare. You don't run me off place, no? I go when I am ready, yes?"

Lord Cecil glared at Szabo. Then his eyes shifted to the right and rear of the Hungarian. He showed his teeth.

"Shall I let him have it, Boss?" a voice called from the door of the bunkhouse.

It was apparent instantly to Szabo that he had not taken into consideration the men at the bunkhouse who had undoubtedly watched him ride up. Someone had him covered from the rear now.

He said, "Your man shoot me he make big mistake. Because I shoot you—even if I am killed!"

For perhaps three seconds Lord Cecil remained immobile. Then he gestured toward the bunkhouse. "It's all right, Harry! he called.

Szabo slipped his pistol as smoothly into its holster as he had drawn it. Then he took a step to the side and turned so he could see the bunkhouse as well as Lord Cecil.

"Then you not wish to hire me? I am good working man. I ponch the cows, ride the bronco—do anyt'ing and I work cheap."

Lord Cecil squinted thoughtfully. "Damme," he said, "by your own admission you're a blackguard."

"I make the joke," Szabo grinned. "I t'ink to myself, this Lord Cecil he want only good man. I get him mad, then draw the gun and show him how good I am. I make the joke about rustling. I am honest man. Have much experience with—in police work. In Germany, France, Mexico—America!" He did not add that the police work had consisted of outwitting police.

"You've traveled a bit," Lord Cecil said. He shook his head. "There's something strange about you, Szabo. But something fascinating, too. I'll probably rue it—but I'll give you a chance."

"Is fine!" exclaimed Szabo. "Where I sleep?"

"Over there in the bunkhouse. But I warn you, don't go trying any of that fancy gun pulling. Some of the boys are pretty fancy themselves."

Szabo shrugged easily. "Am good man taking care of myself. You be glad I work for you. I hope."

Before the Englishman could figure out that remark, Szabo turned away. He walked toward the bunkhouse and the gelding he had ridden up, followed him.

A man who was leaning against the doorpost of the bunkhouse straightened when Szabo approached. "What was that gun business about over there?" he asked.

Szabo crooked both arms and turned the palms of his hands upward. "Mr. Lord Cecil want see how fast I make the draw before he hire me," he explained.

"Hire you?"

"Sure. I am tophand now. Pretty soon maybe I be foreman. I am damgood cowpuncher."

"*I'm* the foreman," glared the other. "My name's Plunkett. I've been foreman here a long time. Ain't no cow waddy yet beat me out o' the job!"

"Always first time," said Szabo cheerfully. "Where my bunk? Maybe we have poker game. Am good poker player. Also fine with craps—faro—monte!"

Plunkett regarded Szabo craftily. "Seems like you're good at most everything—talk, too. And you play poker. Well, well!"

IT WAS nothing unusual for Sam Cragg to see half a thousand shorthorns on the other side of his fence. There was water on his side and the steers could smell it. They gathered at the well-built fence and stood there all day long, lowing plaintively.

Sam usually kept away from there. He knew that Lord Cecil did not have enough water for all his steers. But he knew, too, that if he let the shorthorns at his water, his own stock would not get sufficient. And Lord Cecil could better stand a loss than could Sam.

Today, Sam stopped his horse on top of the knoll and looked down toward the herd of shorthorns. He was about to turn away when he saw the man at the fence.

Sam exclaimed and kicked his horse's belly. The animal leaped forward and broke into a downhill gallop. Sam yanked out his Frontier Model Colt and when still some distance from the fence fired a couple of shots into the air.

"Get away from that fence!" he yelled.

It was too late. The thirst-maddened cattle surged forward, seemed to envelop the man on the ground and then burst into Sam Cragg's land. He had all he could do to avoid the stampede as the cattle headed for the water-hole.

When the herd cleared him Sam turned his horse again toward the fence. A tall cowpuncher was just mounting his horse.

"Throw up your hands!" Sam Cragg ordered savagely.

The man whirled, his hand going for his gun. But with his hand on the butt of it, he stopped, "Mister Cragg!" he exclaimed. "I am glad to see you once more. You remember me, ha? I save your life yesterday."

It was the Hungarian, Szabo. But Sam Cragg was unrelenting. "What was the idea of cutting my fence?" he demanded.

"Is all right," replied Szabo cheerfully. "I fix him again, after thirsty cow drink plenty water."

"Damn you!" snarled Cragg. "They'll drink my water-hole dry."

"Your water-hole?" Szabo asked. "By golly, they don't tell me that."

"Who didn't tell you?"

"The foreman, Plunkett. He say, Mister Szabo, you go down give cow one big drink then bring him back. He don't tell me it is your fence. I don't find gate so I cut wire. I fix him again."

"You'll fix hell!" cried Sam Cragg. "I'm takin' you down to Bad Ax and turning you over to the sheriff. The judge'll have something to say about this. It's against the law to cut wire in this state."

"Ha! You make the joke. You don't really give me to sheriff, do you? Sure, you forget, on'y yesterday I saving your life."

Sam Cragg lowered his gun. He hadn't forgotten. His rage had merely swept him away for the moment. He holstered his weapon.

"So you're working for Poff now," he said coldly.

"Yes," replied Szabo, in satisfaction. "He is fine English gentleman and I like work for him. I am making good money, too."

"Forty a month—"

"Oh, that! Poof!" Szabo snapped his fingers. "I make seventy-three dollar last night, playing the poker. These cowboy,

they are very bad card player. I am making much money, soon. Maybe I buy the ranch and marry nice girl." He cleared his throat. "She is one fine girl."

SAM CRAGG'S nostrils flared. "That makes us even now. I could have killed you for cutting my wire. I saved your life. You saved mine yesterday. We're quits now. The next time you do anything to me—you better be ready to shoot." He jerked viciously on the reins.

"Wait!" cried Szabo. "I want to tell you something."

Cragg stopped. "What is it?"

"This Lord Cecil," Szabo said. "You make mistake about him. He don't like rustler."

Sam Cragg swore and raked his mount's flanks with his spurs. The animal leaped away.

He rode toward his ranchhouse, in cold fury. Missouri was just dismounting at the corral. "Bad news, Sam," he said.

"You've got bad news?" Cragg snapped.

Missouri spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "You've got fifty steers less today than you had yesterday."

Cragg stared at Missouri. "Dillon!"

Missouri shrugged. "Don't know. The wire was cut and fixed."

"But they can't just have disappeared."

"I know they can't," Missouri said cheerfully. "But they have."

Cragg bit his lip and looked off toward the hills in the West. "They've gone that way. It's the only way out of the valley. We'll trail them—"

"How? You'd have to cut through Poff's land. Remember, he owns even part of those hills. And how you going to follow the tracks of fifty steers over ground grazed by ten thousand steers? The hoofs of your fifty don't look any different than any others."

"But whoever took my steers had to cut through Poff's place. That would seem to indicate——"

"That it was Poff's men?"

Sam Cragg hesitated. Then he said slowly, "I don't particularly like his lordship but I don't think he'd stand for that."

"How about Springer?" asked Missouri. "He could have done it by cutting just across a corner of Poff's place."

"I wonder," Cragg said thoughtfully. Then suddenly he took a deep breath. "Stay around here, Missouri. I'm going to see what I can see."

He turned his horse southward and put it into a canter. After awhile he cut through a small grove of cottonwoods. When he came out he could see his south fence. He rode up to it, then turned eastward and rode slowly, his eyes on the ground.

He found the place inside of five minutes. The wire had been cut here and a small herd of cattle driven through, after which the wire had been repaired. The steers had entered Poff territory, approximately a mile from the line of Springer's land. They could have been driven diagonally across into Springer's holdings.

Sam Cragg frowned for a moment at the barbed wire fence. Then, clamping his jaws, he took a pair of wire cutters from his saddle pocket and dismounted.

He snipped one strand of wire and it parted with a "zinging" sound. He put the cutters to the second strand. Before he could cut a voice yelled at him.

STARTLED, he jerked erect. A horse was galloping over the crest of a small knoll. On it rode Vivian Poff. Cragg winced when he recognized her. But he

remained stubbornly holding the wire cutters.

She pulled her horse up on the other side of the wire. "I suppose you were just repairing that wire," she said coldly.

"No," Cragg replied. "I was cutting it."

"Indeed!"

Cragg looked at her sharply. He didn't know why it was that he could not encounter Vivian Poff without quarreling with her. He knew deep within him that he didn't want to quarrel with her, that every word she said was like a barb in his flesh—but it just always seemed to happen.

He said, "Some of my steers were stolen last night."

"So naturally you're going to look for them on my father's ranch. Because he's the only rustler around here."

A sudden frenzy shook Cragg. "Stop it, Vivian!" he cried.

Her eyes popped wide open. Her mouth trembled. And if Sam Cragg had stepped across the fence at that moment and swept her off her horse, their feud would have been over.

But Sam let his opportunity pass. He took a step back and mumbled. "Sorry—"

She said nothing.

After a moment he fumbled for a strand of the cut wire. Vivian turned her horse and he let her ride away. A shudder ran through him. He remained stooped until she was out of sight, then went to his horse and got a short length of wire. With it, he spliced the fence.

THE Poff cowboys rode to Bad Ax in a body late Saturday afternoon. There was a dance in town and the boys had donned their best boots and ten gallon hats. Some even wore coats with their flannel shirts and denim trousers.

When they descended upon Bad Ax they scattered, each going to his favorite saloon to tone up for the evening's sport. Szabo, Plunkett and two other cowboys chose the New York Saloor

"If it's gambling you want," said Plunkett, "this is the place you'll get it."

"Is fine," said Szabo. "I like big game."

But when they got into the place, there wasn't a card game going on. The reason was a big dice game. Twenty or thirty men were crowded around the pool table on which had been spread a blue army blanket.

Jack Dillon was running the game. He shot a baleful look at Szabo as the latter came up to the table with Plunkett. "Your friend, Harry?" he said to Plunkett.

"Works on the ranch," replied Plunkett. "He's quite a gambler."

"Yes, but I'm liking poker," said Szabo. "Damgood poker player. Don't like craps."

A cowboy slammed the dice cup spinning across the table to Jack Dillon. The big gunman-gambler snarled at the cowboy for throwing the cup, then tossed it to the next man.

"What're you shooting?" he asked.

"A dollar," said the man, tossing a cartwheel across to Dillon. A half dozen men quickly threw money to cover the bet. Dillon picked up only one of the dollars, shoved the rest back.

"It's only a piker bet."

The shooter rolled a point, made two rolls and sevened out. Szabo caught the dice cup from his hand. "I shoot," he said.

"Wait your turn," growled a cowboy.

"It's his turn," said Dillon shortly. "What're you shootin'?"

Szabo shrugged. "I don't knowing this game ver' well. What I do? Only lose, not win?"

"Of course you can win. If you're lucky!"

Looking dubious, Szabo brought out a handful of money. He counted out twenty dollars, looked up at Dillon's sneering face then tossed the entire handful across the pool table. "I'm shooting all!"

Dillon counted the money. "A hundred and forty-two. All of it open."

Money began showering down from all

sides, but when the cowboys were all finished, there was still sixty-eight dollars left. "Shoot," said Dillon, "I'll cover it myself."

He picked up the dice, dropped them into the leather cup and shoved it across to Szabo. The latter shook them up mightily, banged the cup on the table, then rolled the dice out.

One of the cubes stopped halfway across the table, a single white spot on top; the other hit the cushion on the far side, bounced back, spun a couple of times and stopped with one spot up.

"Crap!" the cry went up.

"Ha!" said Szabo. "I win?"

Jack Dillon snorted. "You lose!"

Szabo stared across the table. "What? Already I lose—all that money?"

"Sure. You wanted action and you got it. You lost. If you're broke, pass the dice."

"Wait!" Szabo jammed a hand into a pocket, brought it out empty. He reached into another pocket and came out with a crumpled bill. "Ha!" he exclaimed. "I am not broke—yet. I'm shooting this!"

"Twenty, huh?"

THE money was instantly covered. Szabo reached for the dice and got one. Dillon rolled the other across the table. Szabo dropped both cubes into the leather dice cup, shook them and rolled them out.

"Seven!"

"If I'm winning, I shoot," Szabo said.

The money was covered and Szabo gathered in the dice. He rolled them out and they stopped again at seven.

"Shooting!" Szabo said, coolly.

"Eighty bucks?" Dillon growled.

Szabo shrugged. The money was covered by the various players, but not as quickly as before.

"Shake 'em up good," someone complained.

Szabo rolled out another seven and howls went up around the crap table.

"I'm shooting," Szabo said.

Under Dillon's urging one hundred and thirty dollars was covered. Dillon faded the balance. "Let's hear some noise," he snapped.

"This time I make it with eleven," Szabo grinned. He shook up the dice, rolled them out and they showed up—six-five!

Dillon swore furiously, but his words were drowned in the groaning that went up.

"Three passes!"

"What're you shootin' this time?" Dillon demanded angrily.

"Three hundred and twenty dollars."

The cowboys faded less than fifty. Dillon covered the balance. "You're about finished," he said. "Rattle them good."

Szabo did. He rolled them out and they stopped at four-three.

"Six-forty, I shoot," he said calmly.

Murmurs of awe went up. Dillon was tight-faced. He scooped up the green dice and examined them closely.

"They are your own dice," Szabo said. "I t'row crap with them, no?"

Dillon reached clear across the table and dropped them into the leather cup himself. "I'll cover it all," he said, "and don't take them out of the cup!"

For a moment Szabo studied Dillon across the table. Then he covered the leather cup with one hand, picked it up and shook it lustily. "This time I make point," he said.

He banged the cup on the table, rolled out the dice. One slid half across the table, stopped with a three up. The other hit the cushion on the far side, bounced back, spun and stopped with one spot showing.

"Little Joe!" the cry went up.

"Let's see you make *that*," Dillon said, sighing heavily. He reached out for the dice, but Szabo beat him to the one in the center of the table. He caught the other from Dillon and dropped it into the cup.

He made a terrific racket with the dice in the cup, rolled them out—and the result was three-one.

Dillon lunged for the dice and examined them again.

"They are still your dice," Szabo said coldly.

DILLON continued to examine them. But finally he dropped them to the table. "What're you shootin'?" he asked hoarsely.

"All of it."

Dillon exclaimed. "What? Twelve hundred and eighty dollars?"

"Yes!"

"I haven't got that much. I'll—I'll cover four hundred."

Szabo reached across the table and hauled back the huge stack of bills and silver. He sorted out the silver, threw a fifty cent piece toward Dillon. "I shoot fift' cent!"

Dillon roared and his hands went down.

"Keep hands up!" Szabo said sharply.

Dillon looked across the table and licked his lips. "What the hell kind of game you call this."

"Crap," Szabo replied. "With *your* dice!"

A cowboy threw a half dollar on the table. "Shoot, pardner," he said, "I got your half dollar covered."

Grinning crookedly, Szabo tossed the dice into the cup, shook and rolled them out. They came up one-one.

"Crap!" everyone yelled.

"My luck she's gone," Szabo said, "I pass the dice!"

He stuffed the money into his pockets and backed away from the table. Dillon stared after him.

At the bar, Plunkett joined Szabo. "You're the luckiest fella I've ever seen," he said in a tone of awe.

"No luck. What you call—skill."

"I don't get you."

Szabo chuckled. "Dice crooked—loaded."

Harry Plunkett exclaimed softly. "But they were Dillon's—he examined them."

"Sure. They belong Dillon. But they loaded just same. Fix to throw crap. But me, am very smart about gambling. When I learn dice are crook, I say to myself, ho-ho, I teach this fella trick. In France, I am practise much with dice. No, that is in Hungary. See—I hold one dice in hand, so, put other in cup and make plenty noise. Sound like two dice. I t'row out; one dice bump wall and stop either one or six. Other dice, the one I hold in hand, I slide out, keeping safe on three or five. Can't t'row crap that way."

Harry Plunkett was wide-eyed. "You did that to Dillon? Why—you pretended not to know anything about dice at first."

"Ha! I make fun. Am best gambler in Hungary. Sometime I show you how deal card from bottom of deck."

"Not me, you won't!" snorted Plunkett. "I've played my last poker with you!" He dropped his voice suddenly. "Here comes Dillon."

The big gambler was coming toward the bar.

Before he reached it, however, the batwing doors of the saloon swung inward and Sam Cragg entered the saloon. Behind him, walking on the balls of his feet, came Missouri.

Cragg called out, "I want a word with you, Dillon!"

Dillon's eyes went to Cragg, passed him and stopped on Missouri. He moistened his lips.

"I haven't got anything to talk to you about, Cragg," Dillon said, backing away a step.

Beside Szabo, Harry Plunkett whistled softly. "He's backing down to Cragg!"

Sam Cragg came forward. "Dillon, you're a dirty rustler. But you're through. This is a showdown. Reach for your gun!"

"Hey!" cried Szabo. "Don't do this, Sam."

"You keep out," Cragg snapped. "Dillon—"

Dillon backed to the bar. His eyes shifted from Cragg to Missouri and back

to Cragg. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you don't draw, Dillon," Cragg said in a deadly calm voice, "I'll pistolwhip you."

Still Dillon wouldn't draw.

"Go ahead, Dillon," urged Szabo cheerfully. "Can only kill you. Better than be yellow."

Dillon began to mumble. Sam Cragg sprang forward, suddenly, and smashed Dillon in the face with his fist. Dillon yelped and covered up. Cragg hit him again, in the stomach, then as Dillon's guard came down Cragg planted himself squarely on his feet and swung a terriffc blow to Dillon's jaw.

Dillon dropped to his knees and with his hands on the floor refused to get up. Cragg cursed him roundly.

"He won't fight, Sam," Missouri said softly.

"Talk big, but don't fight big," Szabo said.

Sam Cragg turned and strode out of the saloon. Missouri followed him, walking as softly as a mountain lion.

Dillon climbed to his feet, wiped blood from his mouth. "I'll kill him for that," he muttered.

"You try that yesterday," Szabo taunted. "You have three men with you, then."

"Let's get outta here, Steve," Plunkett said in disgust.

ACROSS the street from the New York Saloon, Plunkett and Szabo went into a restaurant. Charles Springer got up from a table. "Hi, Plunkett," he said, "how's things on his lordship's ranch?"

"Lousy," said Plunkett.

Springer pursed up his lips. "Rustlers?"

"We lost at least two hundred head this week."

Springer's eyes gleamed. "Well, what do you know about that? I lost about that many myself."

Plunkett bristled. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. And some of the other ranchers are losing pretty steadily. We're calling a meetin' for Monday. We figure to buy a lot of rope. For the rustlers."

He went out and Plunkett seated himself angrily. Szabo sat down opposite the foreman of the Poff Ranch. "Lots talk about rustlers. Why nobody catch rustlers?"

"Because nobody knows who's doing it, that's why. Lord Cecil claims it's Sam Cragg. Sam Cragg blames Jack Dillon. Now Springer's throwin' out hints that it's Lord Cecil."

Szabo shook his head. "This Dillon—who he work for? I don't seeing him on the ranch."

"Of course not!" snapped Plunkett. "He doesn't work for us. He doesn't seem to work for anyone. My guess is he's been makin' his livin' from the saloon—and the gamblin'."

"Yes," agreed Szabo. "But Cragg—why Dillon try hang him yesterday."

"I've heard that talk," Plunkett said. "Cragg spread it himself. I don't believe it."

"*I* believe it," cried Szabo. "Because I'm saving Sam Cragg's life. That's how I get those gun I sell back to Devoe yesterday."

Plunkett's forehead creased. "Then I don't understand it. Unless Springer is the one who hired Dillon——"

"Or Lord Cecil, maybe?"

Plunkett looked sharply at Szabo. Then after a moment he shrugged. "*I* don't know anything about that—I think I'll go to this dance."

"You go," said Szabo. "I come later."

BUT after Plunkett had gone to the dance, Szabo left the restaurant and got his horse. He rode out of Bad Ax, back to Lord Cecil's Ranch.

He did not go to the bunkhouse, however. Instead he skirted it cautiously and rode quietly in the general direction of Sam Cragg's ranch.

The moon was almost full and bathed the rangeland with an eerie light, almost

sufficient, Szabo thought, to read a newspaper. But it left black shadows in gullies and near the trees.

Szabo rode up to the barbed wire fence and cut the wire between two fence posts. He rode blithely into Sam Cragg's acreage and began rounding up steers. He made no particular attempt to be quiet. He knew enough about cattle to know that sudden noises frighten them at night. He whistled softly as he headed steers through the gap in the wire.

There was a herd of about a hundred in this section and he drove them onto the Poff ranch. He started them westward, but had gone less than a quarter mile when he heard the drumming of horse's hoofs behind him.

He jerked around in his saddle and saw a single shadowy horse and rider coming toward him at a terrific pace. He shot a look toward the cottonwoods to the left, but saw that he couldn't make them before the approaching rider would be on him. So he dismounted from his horse. He drew his Frontier Model and rested it lightly across the saddle, standing on the protected side.

When the rider was fifty yards away, Szabo saw moonlight flash on metal. A gun roared and lead sang through the air within three feet of Szabo's head. He muttered and returned the fire, aiming at the horse rather than the rider. Better to shoot the horse than the man, for he knew that he couldn't argue this time.

The horse broke in its stride and the rider plunged over its head. Szabo rushed around his own horse and ran toward the man on the ground.

The fall had not incapacitated him, but had evidently knocked the man's gun out of his hand. He was scrambling about on the ground, seeking it.

Szabo ran up. "Stop!" he exclaimed.

The man on the ground snarled. Then he recognized Szabo. "You!" he cried and launched himself toward Szabo.

It was Cragg, of course.

"Wait—!" Szabo began.

That was all he could get out. Then Sam Cragg's head and shoulders hit him in the stomach and he went backward. Cragg swarmed over him, driving him down to the ground and tearing at the gun that Szabo still clutched in his grip.

"You damn rustler," gritted Cragg. "I'll kill you for this."

Gasping, Szabo jerked his hand out of Cragg's grip and with a quick flip threw his gun away. Cragg yelped and started for it. That gave Szabo an opportunity to get out from under and he promptly caught hold of Cragg's ankle and tripped him.

Cragg landed heavily on his face, but was up instantly, cursing. Szabo smashed him in the midsection, made him gasp. But Cragg did not retreat. He lowered his head and charged Szabo again.

The tall Hungarian lashed out with both hands and landed heavily, but the blows scarcely shook Cragg. The rancher was too enraged to feel their full sting. He was taking out on Szabo all his pentup hatred of the past months, engendered by Jack Dillon, Lord Cecil—the frustration resulting from his constant quarrels with Vivian Poff.

A fist crashed against Szabo's jaw; he staggered back and Cragg followed, hitting him in the throat. Szabo choked horribly and before he could recover Cragg smashed him in the stomach and folded him forward.

Szabo saw Cragg step back for a finishing blow and dropped to the ground. Cragg exclaimed and leaped forward. At that

moment Szabo's hand touched, cold, smooth metal. His gun that he had tossed away a moment ago.

He twisted it up. He could have killed Sam Cragg then, but he hesitated. And Cragg hit him with a pile-driving fist.

When Szabo regained consciousness less than thirty seconds later, Sam Cragg had already twisted a rope around his wrists—behind his back.

Szabo groaned.

"And now," snarled Cragg, yanking on the loose end of the rope, "you're going to jail."

"To Bad Ax?"

"To Bad Ax. Climb up on your horse."

His hands tied behind his back, Szabo managed to mount his horse with some difficulty. Sam Cragg got his own animal and mounted. He retained the loose end of the lariat which bound Szabo's wrists.

Szabo rode ahead, leading through the gap he had cut in Sam Cragg's wire. He said as he passed through:

"Maybe better fix wire before go."

"It'll hold," grunted Cragg.

"Maybe. But maybe rustler come—"

"I've got the rustler," cut in Cragg. "And I'm takin' him to jail."

"Ha. You forget one t'ing, my friend. That rustling going on long time and me—I just come to this country."

"That's what you say. For all I know you've been hanging around in those hills for six months."

SZABO shrugged and rode for a few minutes in silence. Then he said, in an injured tone, "This come from saving man's life."

"Cut that!" snapped Sam Cragg. "I told you this morning we were even on that score."

"Ah, yes, but you don't understand. You see, my friend, I like you. You think I am rustler. Yes—I take your few cows, but why? Because I want find real rustler. I drive cow in hills, meet rustler, then grab him. Yes—"

Sam Cragg swore softly. "Taylor, Szabo or whatever your name is, you're the damndest scoundrel I ever came across. You've got no more conscience than—than—"

"Than wolf?"

"Than a coyote!" snapped Cragg. "You know it's tough for me to turn you in as a rustler. That's why I'm going to give you another chance. Promise me you'll clear out of this country, right away, and I'll turn you loose."

"But I don't want to leave this country!" exclaimed Szabo. "I like it here. I have fine girl and I t'ink——"

Behind him, Sam Cragg choked in his anger.

Szabo twisted his head around and grinned. "Shakespeare, or maybe it is Nietzsche, he says, 'All fair in love and war.' You t'ink Vivian your girl. I t'ink she like me, too. So—"

Sam Cragg rode up behind Szabo. He reached out with a knife and cut the rope that bound Szabo's wrists. "Go on," he said hoarsely, "but keep out of my sight or I'll kill you."

Szabo waited. "My gun—"

Cragg thrust it at him.

Szabo took the gun, laughed and suddenly dug his heels into his mount's belly. The animal sprang away.

Sam Cragg, head hunched down on his shoulders, continued toward his ranch-house. He was almost there, before he remembered the cut wire, his steers on Poff's ranch. He turned his horse and rode back.

The little herd had moved only a short distance, closer to the cottonwood grove. Half of them had bedded down. Cragg rode around and stirred them up. He was moving near the trees when he heard the loud snapping of a branch. He turned that way and something snaked out and shot toward his head. He threw up his hands and a lariat wrapped itself about him.

He tried to brace himself in his saddle

but before he could do so he was whipped out of it.

SUNDAY was a quiet day on the Cecil Poff Ranch. The English owner required his men to perform only the necessary chores; otherwise they were left to their own devices. Most of the cowboys slept late, others lolled about outside. One or two looked rather green about the gills, the result of a hangover from the Saturday night spree in Bad Ax.

It was shortly before noon that Missouri rode up to the Poff ranch-house. He spoke to Lord Cecil a few moments, then came over to the bunkhouse and addressed the foreman, Harry Plunkett.

"Seen Sam Cragg since yesterday?"

"Saw him last night in town when he tried to pick a fight with Jack Dillon," Plunkett replied. "Why?"

"'Cause he didn't come home last night," replied Missouri. "This mornin' I found our fence cut and about a hundred of our best beeves missin'."

Szabo, who was idling near by, winced. He was about to slip into the bunkhouse when he saw Lord Cecil, who had gone into the ranchhouse come out, with a gun strapped about his waist. He called to Plunkett:

"Harry, get out a few men and take a look in the north section. See if anything's —happened!"

Plunkett called three or four men. Szabo quietly joined them. They got their horses, then following behind Lord Cecil, Plunkett and Missouri, they rode to the section of the ranch closest to Sam Cragg's.

They saw the cut wire. But that was all they saw. There wasn't a steer within a half mile, either Cragg's or Poff's. Harry Plunkett whistled. "We had four hundred here yesterday."

"That settles it," declared Lord Cecil. "It accounts for Cragg's disappearance."

"I don't get you, Mister!" Missouri said softly.

"It's quite apparent," Lord Cecil replied coldly. "The steers are gone and so is Cragg. He got wind of the meeting the ranchers are holding tomorrow and he knew he couldn't keep up his stealing any longer. He took one last big herd for a cleanup—"

"You think one man could rustle five hundred steers?" Missouri demanded.

"Two could," Poff said pointedly.

Missouri looked steadily at the Englishman a moment, then wheeled his horse and rode off.

"Tomorrow," Cecil Poff said, "I'm getting a crew of men and we're going to settle this rustling once and for all."

"Why you don't offer reward for these rustler?" Istvan Szabo asked. "You pay five-ten thousand dollar, maybe wort' while catching him."

"The result might be surprising," Lord Cecil replied curtly. "Which reminds me, Plunkett, I want an account of every man's whereabouts from six o'clock last night until this morning. I want a substantiated report on every man who went to Bad Ax."

They rode back to the Poff Ranch. Lord Cecil went into the house. After a few minutes he came over to the bunkhouse. He picked out a man. "Tom, where did my daughter go?"

The cowboy hunched up his shoulders. "I dunno. She came out a couple minutes after you folks left, got her horse and rode off."

"In what direction?" Poff asked, looking toward the Cragg Ranch.

The cowboy said, "In that direction."

LORD CECIL'S mouth tightened. After a moment he said, "Get me my horse."

Before the owner of the Poff Ranch was out of sight, Szabo was getting his own horse out of the corral. Plunkett headed him off. "Where you goin'?"

"To catch rustler," Szabo retorted.

Poff was riding his horse at a swift gait. He was almost to Sam Cragg's adobe house before Szabo caught up to him.

Poff snapped angrily at him, "Go back to the ranch."

"No," Szabo refused cheerfully. "Maybe you will need help."

"Not if I catch that young whelp," Poff snorted.

Missouri came out of the adobe house as they approached and sat down on the veranda. Szabo had dismounted before he saw the object on the veranda beside Missouri. A short barreled shotgun.

"Hello, Mr. Poff," Missouri said.

"Has my daughter been here?" demanded Lord Cecil.

"Here? Why, I dunno, I just got back myself a few minutes ago."

Lord Cecil's eyes narrowed. "She headed this way. You must at least have seen her."

"Uh-uh," said Missouri. "I didn't set eyes on her."

Lord Cecil looked off toward the hills, a scowl on his face. Szabo stepped a little closer to Missouri. He said, "Mr. Missouri, you come home from Bad Ax last night with Mr. Cragg?"

Missouri pursed up his lips. Then he nodded. "Yep. Why?"

"Because I like to know where you were after you come home."

"Right here. Sam went out for a ride and that's the last I saw of him."

"He don't come back from the ride?"

"Nope, I was awake for a couple of hours."

"Ah," said Szabo. "And you don't hear nothin'—shooting, maybe?"

Missouri's restless eyes came to a full focus on Szabo. "No," he said, "I didn't hear any shooting."

Szabo smiled pleasantly. "Mr. Missouri, you are damn liar!"

BESIDE Szabo, Lord Cecil gasped. He had been in this country long enough to know that the words were fighting words and he'd heard, vaguely, of Missouri's reputation.

Yet Missouri did not budge from where he was sitting. He said, softly, "How do you know I'm a liar?"

"Because last night, I'm cutting fence back here. Sam Cragg come riding like hell and we shoot at each other. Have fight. On'y half mile from here—and you don't hear shooting?"

Missouri said, "Mebbe you better tell Mr. Poff what you were doing cutting Sam's wire last night. He order you to do that—"

"I did not," Poff declared tightly. "This is the first I've heard of it, Szabo——"

"It's right, Mr. Poff don't knowing. I do it on my own—what you say, hook. I cut wire and rustle cows. Sam don't like and——"

Missouri's right hand dropped to the shotgun at his side. Szabo snapped, "Don't!"

Missouri's hand froze. He looked speculatively at Szabo.

Cecil Poff exclaimed, "Szabo, do you realize that you've admitted rustling cattle?"

"Sure, I admit it. Why not? Mr. Missouri rob——"

Glass tinkled behind Missouri. The muzzle of a Frontier Model appeared through a broken window in Sam Cragg's ranchhouse and Jack Dillon cried, "Just give me a chance to shoot, Hunyak!"

Lord Cecil cried out hoarsely. Szabo became crestfallen. "I am fool. I'm counting horses in corral and should guess——"

Missouri picked up the shotgun and rose to his feet. "You're altogether too damn smart as it is," he said. He covered Lord Cecil and Szabo with the shotgun. Jack Dillon, followed by Pete Devoe, came out of the ranchhouse.

There was a wicked expression on Dillon's face. "Why don't you go for your gun now?"

Szabo shrugged. "Am not foolish."

Pete Devoe circled Lord Cecil and Szabo and coming up from behind relieved them of their guns.

WHEN Sam Cragg regained consciousness he discovered that he was bound hand and foot and lying on the ground. Red pain throbbed in his head and it hurt him to even try to concentrate. But after a while, light nearby caught his eyes and he focused them on a small open fire, a dozen feet away. A couple of men sat by it—two of the men who had put a rope about his neck earlier that week.

Cragg winced and the effort caused the pain to shoot from his skull down into his spine. He groaned.

One of the men got up and came over. He stooped and chuckled wickedly. "Come 'round, huh?"

"What's the idea?" Cragg demanded.

"The idea," was the reply, "is that you didn't know when you were well off. When you got away from us the other day, why didn't you take the hint and skin out of this country?"

"Because I didn't feel like running from a bunch of yellow murderers!" retorted Cragg.

The cowboy kicked Sam viciously in the ribs. The second man came over. "Tsk, Tsk! He ain't as tough as he was last night in Bad Ax, is he, Mort?"

Mort sneered. "He figured Missouri would back him up. If he only knew."

"Hey!" exclaimed the second man. "Dillon said to keep quiet about that."

"What for? You don't think he's going to get away from us, do you?"

"Are you trying to say that Missouri's in with your crowd?" Cragg demanded.

"You're the dumbest smart guy I ever ran across," Mort said. "Missouri's been robbin' you blind and you didn't even know it. How the hell did we know where to find you always if Missouri wasn't one of us?"

Sam Cragg cursed. Mort raised his big boot and sunk it crushingly into Sam Cragg's midsection. Sam gasped and fought for air. Mort's boot lashed out again and unconsciousness swept over Cragg once more.

"He can't take it, Luke," Mort snorted.

Luke protested. "Dillon said not to kill him. He wanted that pleasure."

"He can have it. But he's safe, unconscious."

The two returned to the fire and squatted down on their haunches. It was getting light in the east. They rolled cigarettes and then Mort said, "You figure we're finished around here?"

"Dillon seemed to think so. The ranchers are having a big meeting tomorrow. He figures it'll be too risky after that. The idea is to take this batch and clear out."

When Sam Cragg's eyes opened the next time the sun was high in the sky. He lay still for a while, his face turned sidewards. He saw the herd grazing off to one side and from the topography of the country guessed that he was well into the badlands.

HE HAD been on the borderline between consciousness and coma for some time, he guessed. He shifted his head slightly and saw both Luke and Mort standing and looking toward the north.

Cragg heard hoofs ringing on hard ground and rolling his head around saw a small group of riders approaching. He looked at them for a full moment before he suddenly gasped.

For one of those riders was—Vivian Poff. And on either side of her rode Szabo, the wily Hungarian, and Lord Cecil.

Behind them rode Missouri, Jack Dillon, Harry Plunkett and Pete Devoe. The men riding in the rear were heavily armed, but the two with Vivian did not carry a single weapon. The meaning was clear to Sam Cragg.

When Vivian Poff saw Cragg on the ground she urged her horse ahead of the others, dismounted and ran toward Cragg. Luke stepped in her path.

"Take it easy," he growled.

"Sam!" exclaimed Vivian. "What have they done to you?"

He ignored her question. "What's happened—?"

Cecil Poff dismounted from his horse. "So, you're not in with these rustlers, after all." He bit his lip. "This is darned awkward, you know. I thought sure—"

"I always told you he wasn't one of them," Vivian Poff retorted.

"Maybe we c'n have a party," sneered Jack Dillon.

Szabo said brightly, "Everything is clear like day, now. Mr. Plunkett and Mr. Missouri are the bad men who steal the cows. They help Mr. Dillon and his friends."

Sam Cragg caught Missouri's eye. "You, Missouri, I didn't think you'd do this to me."

Missouri's mouth twisted. "You figured I liked nursin' a flock of lousy steers—for forty a month?"

"Is right!" exclaimed Szabo, "forty dollar a mont' no make man rich. Take me, I like lots of money——"

"You keep your mouth shut!" said Jack Dillon, threateningly. "I'm going to take care of you in just a little while."

"Poof!" retorted Szabo. "You are not so much. You are not even good crook. You try cheat me with dice and I fool you, I take your crooked dice and stack them on you and you don't even knowing it——"

"You stacked *my* dice?" cried Jack Dillon.

"He's right, Jack," cut in Harry Plunkett. "He told me about it right after he took your money from you."

"He told you that," scoffed Dillon.

"Ha!" said Szabo. "You don't believe. If you have pair dice, I show you."

"What the hell!" exclaimed Missouri. "Is this a time to shoot craps? Let's get this business over and done with and clear out of here. We've got five hundred head of steers——"

Szabo brought a huge roll of bills from his pocket. His eyes flashing, he threw the roll on the ground. "I shoot all this against your money," he said to Jack Dillon.

Dillon scooped up the money. "This is mine. I don't have to shoot for it."

Harry Plunkett protested. "You lost that money yesterday. Today it's part of the loot. We split it."

"Nothin' doing. It's my money and—"

Jack Dillon stopped. Harry Plunkett's hand had dropped to his gun.

Szabo cut in. "Is *my* money! Why you think I win it yesterday? I take it because I t'ink if you broke you go out and steal lots more cows right away, then I join you—no?"

"I did see him running off a bunch of Cragg's stuff," said Plunkett, "that's how we were able to get Cragg."

"I know that," said Szabo. "I see you follow me. I t'ink, well Harry know and I join him up and become rustler."

"Szabo," interrupted Cecil Poff. "Just whose side are you on?"

Szabo grinned. "My own side. Always look out for Number One, first. I coming to this country on'y this week from Mexico. Am poor and I don't like it. I say I get rich and—"

"You've done all right for yourself," said Harry Plunkett dryly.

"Sure, but I want my money. I win him——"

"It's my money," Dillon asserted.

Szabo's voice became challenging. "You are sport, no? I make proposition. We shoot dice for that money—"

"I don't have to," snapped Dillon. "It's mine, now."

Szabo shook his head at the interruption and went on. "You put up the money and I put up—my life! You win, I let you take shot at me."

"I was figurin' on doing that anyway," said Dillon.

Harry Plunkett cut in. "Now wait a minute, Dillon. I've got something to say. The Hungarian's made you a sporting proposition. Take it or—divvy up the money with us."

Dillon shot a look at Pete Devoe. Plunkett intercepted the look. "Don't try anything like that with us. Missouri sticks with me and so do Luke and Mort."

Missouri nodded. "You weren't so tough last night when Sam Cragg slapped you down."

"You were with him," growled Dillon. "How was I to know you weren't double-crossing me?" He hesitated and threw down Szabo's money. Then he extracted a pair of green dice from a pocket and tossed them to the ground. Szabo pounced on them.

"Same loaded dice!" he cried. "Fix to t'row crap. All right—I make seven and win, no?"

"If you can roll these dice out—'way out—and throw a seven with them you're good," said Plunkett.

With the toe of his boot Szabo scratched a line on the ground. Then he stepped back, about five feet. "I t'row them over that line and make a seven—with four-three!"

Jack Dillon's eyes lit up. "I don't believe it."

"Neither do I," offered Lord Cecil.

From the ground, Sam Cragg called, "Don't bet anything against him. I've had some dealings with him."

Szabo winked at the white face of Vivian Poff, then cupped the dice in his right fist and clicked them vigorously. "Am very good at anyt'ing crooked," he boasted. "So—three-four!"

He threw the dice out with a sidewise motion. They sailed clear across the line marked on the ground, landed, spun once or twice and stopped—on four and three!

Exclamations of awe went up.

Szabo chuckled and scooped up the money from the ground.

"Is mine now, no?"

"Yeah," said Missouri. "It's yours, no, so—we'll just take it from you."

"Hey!" protested Szabo. "Is no honor among t'ieves?"

"What do you expect us to do—let you go now?"

Szabo's face became suddenly sober. His eyes darted around the group. "I don't like this," he said, slowly.

"You've used up your bag of tricks," snarled Jack Dillon. "If you haven't got any more, we'll—"

"I got one more!" snapped Szabo. "A good one. You never see one like it before."

"I've seen enough," said Missouri. "Plunk—we can't hang around here all day."

"Just one more trick," Szabo continued. "I'm throwing the dice ten feet in air, catching quick and throwing them on ground and making eleven, much harder than seven. Watch!"

HE CAUGHT up the dice, shook them and with a flip, tossed them at least ten feet into the air. They separated and he had to make two quick jumps to catch both. Instantly, he stooped and rolled them out on the ground—a long roll.

"Eleven!" he cried and ran to get the dice from behind Jack Dillon.

Dillon turned to look at the dice and Szabo brushed against him. He stooped—and came up with Jack Dillon's gun in his hand.

He caught everyone completely off guard. Missouri was the first to see the gun in Szabo's hand. He yelped and then a bullet from the gun in Szabo's hand hit him in the chest and staggered him back

against Cecil Poff. To give the Englishman credit, he was quick.

He caught hold of Missouri and using him as a shield, ripped the gun out of his holster.

"Yow!" screamed Szabo. He smashed the long barrel of Dillon's own gun along the base of Dillon's skull, whirled even as the big killer was falling and threw down on Harry Plunkett.

But Plunkett was already in it. His gun was in his hand. It thundered. Fortunately, Plunkett fired too quickly. The bullet merely grazed Szabo's right thigh. The second bullet from Szabo's gun ploughed through Plunkett's shoulder, the third kicked up dirt at the feet of Pete Devoe.

Devoe bleated and leaped out of the way. Luke and Mort had their guns out now and were firing at Szabo. Lord Cecil fired at Luke and the latter screamed and fell over backwards.

Mort fired wild, his bullet hitting Harry Plunkett in the foot. Plunkett down, was clawing for his dropped gun with his left hand.

Lord Cecil rushed over and kicked it out of the way.

"Look out!" screamed Vivian Poff.

Szabo whirled and saw Jack Dillon, on the ground, swinging around with the shotgun that he had previously put down. Blood was streaming from a terrible bruise on Dillon's head, but there was dogged determination in his eyes as he brought up the gun.

Szabo fired and the bullet smashed Dillon backwards. His dying fingers contracted on the triggers of the shotgun and the double charge roared into the air, missing Szabo's head by a foot.

It was all over then. Mort threw his gun to the ground and Devoe a dozen feet away, was on his hands and knees, begging for his life.

"Good trick, no?" Szabo roared.

LESS than a week ago, Istvan Szabo, citizen of five countries, had entered Bad Ax, wearing rags and driving two flea-bitten mules. There hadn't been a cent in his pocket.

Now he was mounted on a fine horse, wore a brand new Prince Albert, a hat that had cost him $40 and the most expensive pair of Justin boots in all Bad Ax.

Cecil Poff stood beside Szabo's horse. "Captain Szabo, I still think you're a scoundrel but—if you'll stay I'll make you foreman of my ranch."

Szabo grinned and shook his head. "Is true I am scoundrel. That's why I go. Your daughter, Vivian, marry Sam Cragg. But poof, he is dull fellow! Too serious. I stay on your ranch, I make love to Mrs. Cragg and steal her from Mr. Sam. Is better I go."

Sam Cragg, with Vivian Poff on his arm, came out of the general store. He was beaming, but then his eyes fell upon the horse that Szabo was riding.

"Say, isn't that one of my horses?" he asked.

"Ha," cried Szabo, "you make joke, no?"

"No," said Sam Cragg, moving around to the horse's head. "This is Stonewall——"

Szabo jerked the horse's head to one side, dug his heels into the animal's belly and as it leaped away, yelled, "Good-by, my friends!"

"He's stealing my horse!" cried Sam Cragg.

Lord Cecil scowled at his son-in-law to be. "The trouble with you, Samuel, is that you have no sense of humor."

Adventurers All

Monkey Hunting

RECENTLY I had the pleasure of accompanying an explorer friend of mine for a month's trip into British Honduran wilds, for the purpose of securing a cargo of animals, snakes and curio.

My friend is the owner of a place designated as "Monkey Land," situated close to Jacksonville, Florida. We secured passage down in a small banana boat that plowed five days through tropical waters and landed at Belige, then hopped a plane to Banque Vigo—pronounced Bankey Veeho. We had heard that monkeys, Pacas and other animals were thick in the section near the Guatemalan border and the only way to get in quickly was by one of the planes that flew chicle out of the jungles to seaports like Belige.

In Banque Vigo we rounded up some of the native monkeys, honey bears, snakes or anything strange we could find. Short, light-skinned and stocky the Indians of that section are descendants of the high type Mayas, now degenerated into a slovenly sluggish race. They were too lazy to join an expedition to hunt for animals, but one by one they brought in spider monkeys, honey bears and a twelve-foot boa constrictor, which after considerable wrangling and pow-wows, they would sell ridic-

uously cheap and head out into the jungle for more. At one time they took us to another far village to see a rare rabbit that turned out to be a common white bunny. Another time we trekked back-breaking miles only to find guinea hens. My friend patiently explained that he didn't want these, but wanted monkeys. They couldn't understand this, and kept only parrots for pets.

The monkeys brought from 50 cents to $4 apiece. The honey bears slightly more. One Indian hunter wanted a written guarantee that we would buy fifty monkeys from him if he would get them. He got the agreement and next day he and a small Negro boy went off along jungle trails on their bicycles. They returned ten days later empty handed and convinced that their scheme of getting monkeys drunk on a native brew and then picking them up wouldn't work. They had also walked about twenty miles. We got back safely with twelve spider monkeys, six very rare Honduran wild turkeys, four baby aqutis (rabbit family) five wild rats or pacas and a pair of honey bears.

Unfortunately, on the ship returning, the twelve-foot snake got loose and tragedy was narrowly averted. A Negro boy—who we had cajoled into making the trip as special attendant to the big snake, promising him sight-seeing trips in the U. S. A. before return to his native and beloved wilds—was a bit careless on the boat. The result was that the snake coiled itself around the boy's own body, and with a wild heart-rending shriek he dived into the water from the ship's side. He stayed under so long we feared for his life, but after putting out in one of the small boats, however, we happily rescued the badly frightened youth. Twelve feet of dead boa constrictor were wrapped as snugly and concisely around him as if wound by hand. The snake, of course, had been drowned quickly underneath the water, but its body was coiled so tightly around the Negro boy's torso that a sharp-bladed knife was necessary to sever the coils to prevent strangulation.

The rest of our cargo we landed safely in "Monkey Land."

H. H. Armstrong

$15 For True Adventures

***UNDER** the heading* Adventurers All, *the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid $15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

In the next issue of **Short Stories**

The Major sets about fighting evil with evil—always a dangerous game, and especially among the unknown jungle gods:—

THE ISLE OF SILENCE

A long novelette by **L. Patrick Greene**

CADDO CAMERON

A whole town thought they'd got them a couple of Texas Rangers, but it was only—

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C. F. KEARNS

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Sunken treasure—the greatest lure of all—

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ROBERT CARSE

The greatest liar in the Foreign Legion!

"HIGH AND WIDE"

AND OTHER FEATURES

Gypsies of the Sea

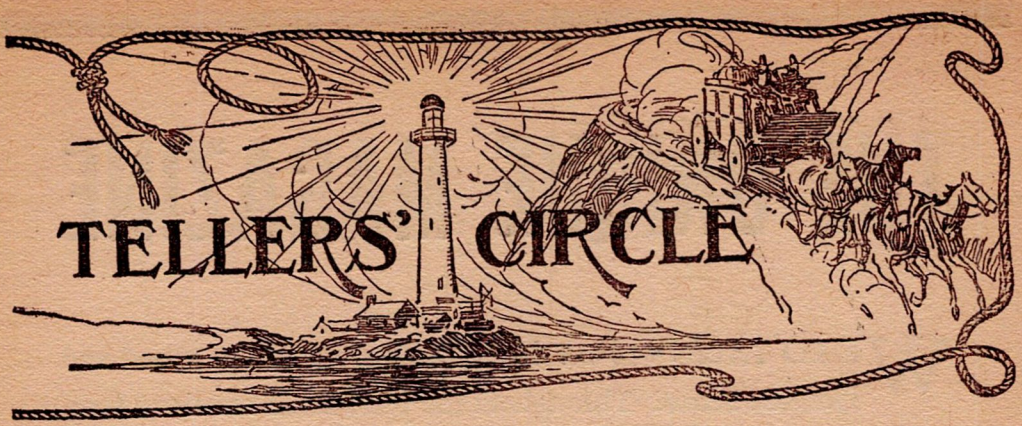
THE headhunter, the Pygmy, and the Bushman are well known to readers of adventure fiction—we meet them in many of our stories—but one of the strangest peoples on the face of the earth are the Bajaos, a "lost" tribe of primitive sea-roving Asiatics whose allotted span of life is spent wandering about the Sulu archipelago. The tribe is without civilized guidance, has never been tamed nor exhibited for that matter, yet it is older perhaps than the Chinese. Crude houseboats are their only homes from birth to death, so life afloat has been reduced to its simpliest form. The boats often cluster together forming a floating island usually anchoring off the island of Sitanki in the Sulu Sea between Borneo and the Philippines. This locality seems to be the favorite rendezvous, but frequently their odd-looking craft are seen cruising as far south as the Java Sea, and thus they have been dubbed "sea-gypsies" by Anglo-Saxon sailormen.

As a remnant of a once powerful race who appear to be a mixture of Malay and Phillipine blood, the features of the Bajaos are decidedly Caucasian, however, and their strange jibberish is foreign to all the neighboring islanders. Therefore little has been elicited regarding the origin of the sea-gypsies which is lost in the remote antiquity of migratory Pacific peoples. A scanty folklore remains, but it is so tinctured with sea legend that only the wildest conjecture can be made as to the ancestry of these wanderers.

For a people whose entire life is spent upon the water, they are notably poor sailors, navigation apparently being one of their lost arts. Invariably they will seek refuge in coves at the slightest squall or first indication of rain, and become hopelessly sea-sick in rough water. Bajaos wrest a meager existence from the sea, but strange to relate, they are equally bad fishermen. They know little of the everyday customs of land-dwellers and care less, contacting the shore only out of necessity or when good fortune permits them a surplus catch of fish to sell, which is not often.

However, their one accomplishment is wood carving. With the simplest of tools, boats are hewn from giant trees and artistically painted and carved, the prows of which frequently display a wealth of intricate tracery and rampant dragons, that might well be the envy of any Chinese junk. Although they are called houseboats, they are little more than glorified outrigger canoes, equipped with a low thatched roof hut and great flapping lateen sails. Added to this is usually a line of multi-colored laundry waving in the breeze like signal flags, and numerous strings of drying fish. This completes the Bajao picture of home.

These sea-rovers marry off their children at a very early age, a headman act-



ing in the capacity of priest. The event is not accomplished by much ceremony, although the groom receives a dower from the bride's parents—a boat, perhaps, a few mats, and some cooking utensils—the barest necessities required to shift for himself and raise a family. When the family head dies, he is buried in a great coffin made from the wood of his boat, which is never used again. Interment takes place on an obscure island in the depth of the Sulu Sea, and includes the most barbaric rites, for the sea-gypsies are without a religion, a nation, or a homeland.

Soundings

TALKING of backgrounds for stories, Berton Cook writes us in connection with *"In Dutch"* in this issue:

"Not long ago a tanker went aground on Block Island and the commission, during the hearing, made a point of the fact that the officers did not get soundings, especially after their radio bearings had not crossed with sufficient consistency to rely upon them for position. The case was not far from our location and I watched it closely as I could with the hope that from it a yarn might be invented. It was, and *'In Dutch'* is the yarn.

"Please note, however, that nothing in this yarn has anything to do with the actual grounding of that ship. It is pure invention inspired by the accident. And what is a better way to devise plots than this one?"

Natives Take Over First Reindeer Herd

IN THE new North—new in date only, we imagine, from the North of the Jim Hendryx stories in 1929, in fact, the Canadian government purchased 3,000 head of reindeer and drove them over 1,200 miles from the west coast of Alaska across the Mackenzie river delta in Northwest Territory. This herd was to be the beginning of large herds the Government hoped to establish in the north for the use of the Eskimo and other natives.

In December, 1938, the first herd to be placed in charge of the natives was driven 150 miles to the Anderson river area and there placed in charge of two Eskimos, who had had previous training in reindeer herding. The Government only loans the animals to the natives, first to see how they make out as reindeer ranchers and second to provide them with the means of starting a herd of their own. If all goes well the herd will be left with the natives until such times as the increase will provide the starting of a new herd in some other locality. In addition to lending the reindeer, the Government also provides herd dogs, equipment and a quantity of rations to assist in keeping the herd the first year.

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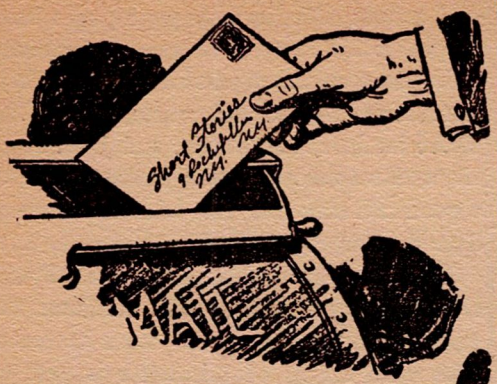

SEZ YOU!

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York City, N. Y.

I have never written to any magazine expressing my views, for the reason that I figured my opinion one way or the other wouldn't hinder or aid the magazine, as most probably my letter would quickly find its way to the waste basket as having nothing worth publishing. However, I want to let you know how much I enjoy reading SHORT STORIES over and above all other magazines, because the subjects are well varied and my interest is held from cover to cover. I never tire of the Black John and Cush stories, the Major and Jim, etc. Of course, there are many others that are quite interesting, but the above top the list for me.

Stories of the World War are still full of interest for me, as are also the stories of the Foreign Legion; I enjoy all those stories of the China Sea and of the Pacific Islands, of India and the Malay Seas. I know I am not alone in this selection because of the comments from other readers living nearby.

All your fine authors deserve a big vote of thanks and in expressing mine, I am voicing the feelings of other readers and fans in my neighborhood—such men as W. C. Tuttle, H. Bedford-Jones, Karl Detzer, J. D. Newsom, Talbot Munday,

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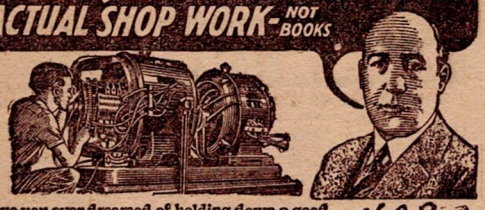

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and a host of others on your pages have helped to kill long tiresome watches, long rainy days, and many dull nights with their interesting stories. Of course, besides the above authors, Pat Greene and J. B. Hendryx, there are many who just appear with a good tale now and then who also deserve that same vote of thanks.

I know your time is limited, so I will close, hoping that you will continue the good work for a very long time to come. The main object of this letter is just to express my appreciation of your truly great magazine. *J. M. Santos*

The Editor, SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

Back in 1929, I became a member of the Ends of the Earth Club, my number being 232. As my card is beginning to show signs of wear I will ask you to send me a new one, as I am proud of being a member of this international club.

In conclusion, keep your magazine at its present level, and you will have a life-time reader in. *George P. Krick.*
Port Washington, Wis.

The Editor, SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

This is the first time I have ever emerged from my shell of "gentle reader" to praise or criticize any magazine. You may know that I am sincere when I say I like SHORT STORIES especially for these reasons:

1: I find the stories interesting. Well written and, with few exceptions worked out in refreshingly new ways.

2: SHORT STORIES is a man's magazine any woman can read and enjoy. The literature is clean and free from oaths sprayed here and there. No sexy comments, and slants to bend weak-minds the wrong way. Your advertising, which I read (don't you expect them to be?) is businesslike and respectable. There are no matrimonial ads displayed, no French photos and such bait for those with more money than sense.

3: I find a definite patriotic trend in the stories. If there really isn't, please do not disillusion me, as I despise stories with a hidden sneer at anything American.

4: SHORT STORIES has variety. Being a woman I have moods. While I usually prefer Westerns before any other kind, some days they lose their punch. Then there is mystery, sea, Oriental, Northwest, animal and spy stories to choose from. I think Foreign Legion stories have been neglected lately.

5: The magazine itself is large enough to hold in the hands comfortably. The book has stories enough to satisfy one full session of fiction hunger. I am a rapid reader, but with SHORT STORIES I can depend on being pleasantly occupied most of the evening. I even like the type you use, it does not weary my eyes, searching for the place I left off.

6: I'm glad you don't feature serials.

Specific praise—*Red Clark—Two Gun Man,* is just about the best Western I have ever read. It was a bit different, easy to reason out along with the hero, who, by the way, was a hero, not an amateur with lots of luck.

To the Victims—was keen—Charley's mind and the author's. Mine was sharpened some after I finished the tale. I like clever yarns like that. It is something like the Major stories, which I read first of all in SHORT STORIES. I was about sixteen then, and I've added other favorites, but never discarded one. Your stories of Chinatown along with the Major, were wonderful gates into enchanted gardens of weird mysteries where delightful complications were brushed off the crouching trees by the wily but honest, perjured but fighting, cold but chivalrous character who, alone, had power to subdue the evil forces.

Black John is *real* to me; I prefer S. Omar Barker, Tuttle, Kemp, Hendryx, Greene; Young and Batson too. Stories by new authors are welcomed, too, but don't let any of the old favorites go, just enlarge the magazine.

I prefer bold Western illustrations, or

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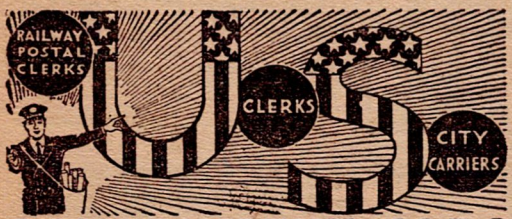

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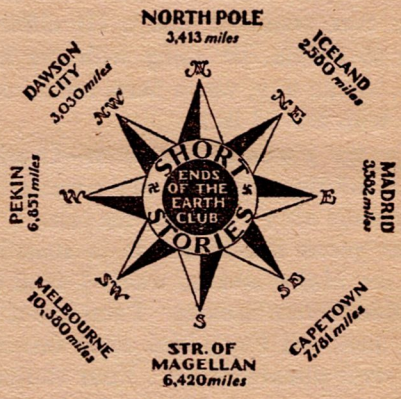

HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

We welcome a member from far off Africa.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to be enrolled as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I want to know something about the places where I

don't think I can go, so I am hoping you will publish this letter. My hobbies are sports, especially swimming, tennis, boxing and exchanging snapshots. I want friends from all over the world, especially in North and South Americas and India.

Sincerely,

Frederick C. Jones

c/o C.M.S. School,
Freetown, Sierra Leone,
West Coast of Africa.

Here is a chance for you to try out your French and Spanish.

Dear Secretary:

I wish to register my name and address to obtain membership in the Ends of the Earth Club. I have no special hobby, but like sports, travel, pictures and radio.

If anyone prefers, I can write French and Spanish.

Wishing the Ends of the Earth Club and SHORT STORIES continued success.

Sincerely,

M. H. Ulotta

R. Canada 591,
Sao Paulo, Brazil.

And here's another member from Africa.

Dear Secretary:

I am an African boy of seventeen years. I would like to join the Ends of the Earth Club and correspond with friends all over the world. I am interested in newspapers, magazines, books and picture views.

Sincerely,

Kweku Bentum

c/o E. P. Bennis, Esq.,
415 Okukudu St.,
Anomabu, Gold Coast, Africa.

Another stamp collector joins our circle.

Dear Secretary:

I had been a reader of SHORT STORIES for quite a number of years, but since I've been in Belgium it was almost impossible to find any.

I sure would be glad if you could find room for me as a member of the Ends of

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writes E. T. of Pa. "The PRAYER you sent me with my RABBIT'S FOOT has helped me wonderfully," says Mrs. L. C. of Ohio. "Results have been amazing," reports S. G. of Florida.

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the Earth Club. I have been over many countries and have had many friends who read SHORT STORIES. If any one would care to write me, they can be sure of an answer and they may ask questions about this country. My hobby is stamps.

Sincerely,
Jules Montagne

187 Rue du Trone,
Brussels, Belgium.

Have you any odd pipes you can pass along to this chap?

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me in the Ends of the Earth Club. I would appreciate a few friends from all parts of the globe.

My main hobby is writing although I am an ardent fisherman and hunter. My pet passion is collecting pipes.

I am twenty years of age and would like to hear from someone with tastes similar to my own.

Your magazine is great, but please—can't we have a few more yarns by Frank Gruber? Sincerely,
Frederick J. Way

31 Pansy Ave.,
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