

"The Four Secret Words"—A Novelette—A. R. WETJEN

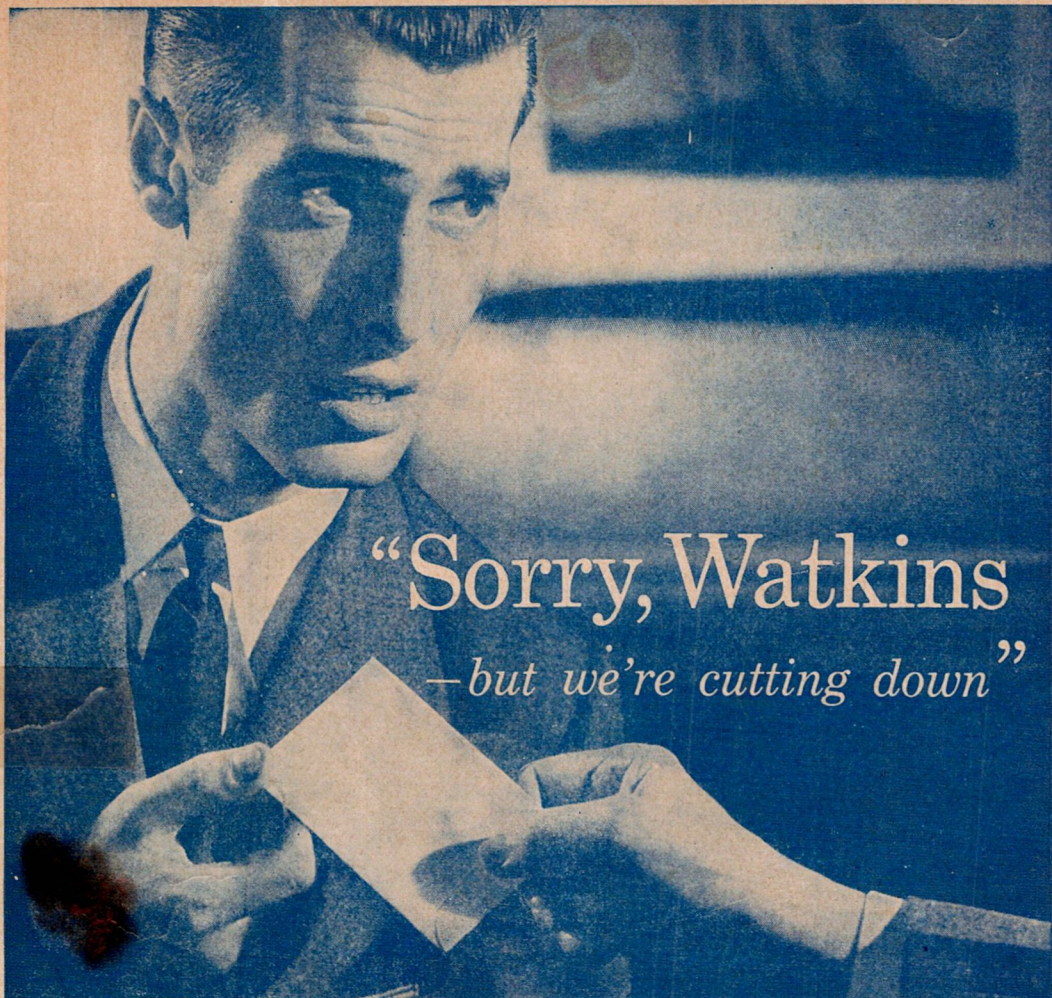
Short Stories

May 10th

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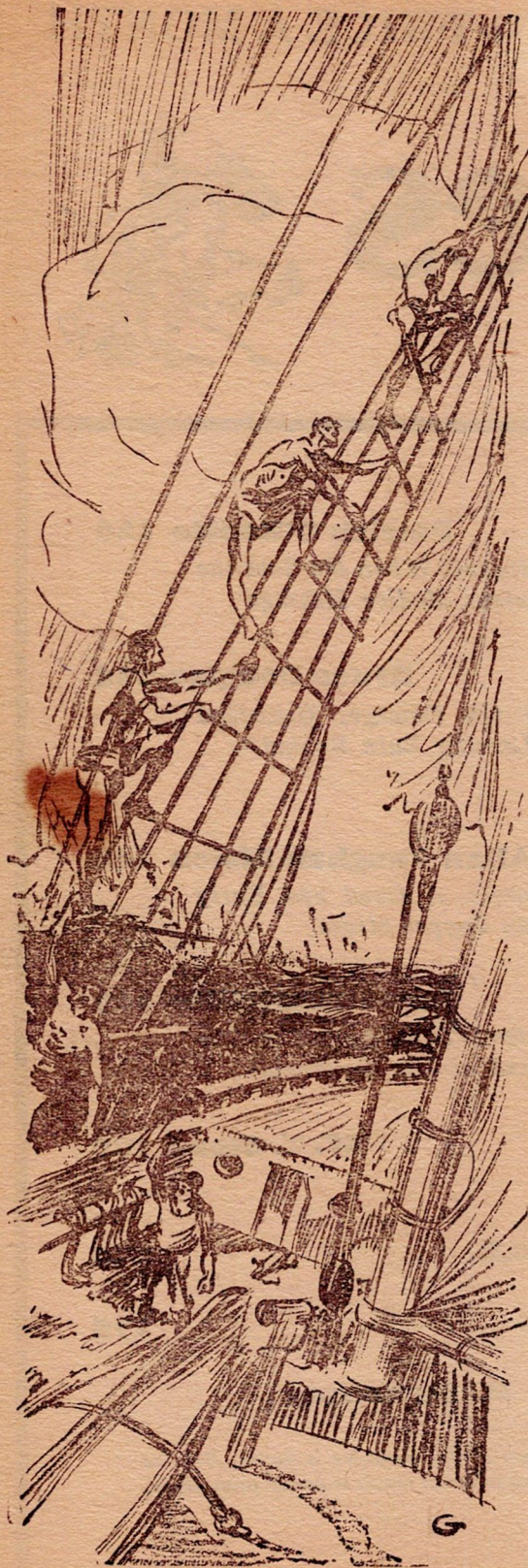
COVER—Edward M. Stevenson

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

THE FOUR SECRET WORDS

By ALBERT
RICHARD WETJEN

Author of "Full Payment,"
"The Small Man," etc.



HE DID not remember either his father or his mother. Their obituary was in the South Pacific *Pilot*—Comus Island—hostile inhabitants—the recruiting bark *Parakeet* was cut-off here with all hands. But the "all hands" was not entirely correct, for Peter Soames was raised by a black woman with filed teeth, who had lost her baby only the day before the cutting-off, and bitter with the memory of small hands beneath her heart had saved the little white boy from the long-pig ovens. Peter remembered her only very dimly, for a shark took her soon, and after that Father Danton, the red-haired missionary came.

"This is a sign," he said, delighted, as soon as he understood. "I was undoubtedly sent to turn you from these naked ways." He was a very young and a very earnest missionary, and also a very foolish one to settle on Comus Island. But he christened Peter and took him to his house, and he taught him English, and he made him wear clothes. And Father Danton incredibly survived for two whole years, before he was tomahawked behind the village taro patch by a sub-chief from

***Four Secret Words Bring
Peace to the Dead; but First
Time Must Come.***

the lower hills, who needed his head as a wedding gift.

And when that was accomplished Peter Soames cried a little, for he had loved the good Father, and he tore off his clothes, and he made the ordained marks with white wood-ash on his body. And he set forth in a hollow-log canoe to visit the Isle of Ghosts where, as everyone knows, it is proper to make ceremonies for the cherished dead.

"Ai!" he said as he bent to the leaf-shaped paddle. "Ai! He was *mata ariki*. A great chief. So when I have made the sacrifice his spirit will enter me."

But *aitu matangi*, the wind devil, took the canoe and sped it toward the moon, which, as everyone also knows, swallows men whole and spits out their souls to become stars. And there was no food in the canoe, and there was no water, and the great moon went down and the sun came up, and it hammered with brassy arms upon little Peter Soames. So presently his head began to walk about, and his eyes grew furry, and he laughed and waved his hands; and he talked of deep matters with strange visions that ran along the purple water. Until at



last he saw a great gull swimming in the sea, and flapping many wings, and making certain noises; save it was not a gull at all but the black bark *Connie B.*

"And why should a canoe be here?" considered Sam Joe, the little half-caste mate. He shaded his eyes against the sun-wash with quick hands, and he watched the speck of wood that tossed upon the swells. "A hundred and a half miles from land," he wondered; and he spat scarlet betel-juice over the black bark's rail and considered again, very awed. "Certain it is she carries the dead!" But his own mother had been a woman of Niue, and he remembered her people often made far passage, to visit or for war, so being a curious man he changed the *Connie B's* course and drew the canoe close. Then he looked sideways at Captain Lemaire who came tramping angry from below, his flaming red hair abristle, his face seamed and hard as teak; and his great chest rumbling with wrath.

"It is only a boy," said Sam Joe soothingly. "And very sick, I think. A little pickaninnie, blown far—blown far!"

"Do I turn and stop for any Kanaka!" swore Lemaire, who was already half drunk; and heavy with brooding from bad luck in the archipelagoes. And he talked half Kanaka and half white talk, as they all did on the *Connie B.* For she carried a Kanaka crew and she had been long in the South. "Trim the yards and let him go!" said Lemaire, scowling. And he took a drink from the black bottle he carried in his pocket, and the wind whipped open his white shirt to stir the red hair of his chest.

"It is an evil thing to be sick, and a hundred and half miles away," said Sam Joe. "Also mayhap we could use another man. There were four who died under the spears at Dargarvia. So you remember."

Which was an ugly matter to raise with Lemaire, for he had raided into Dargarvia for sandalwood and forced labor, and the tribes had met his whaleboats at the water's

edge and driven him away with slaughter. His own raw neck-wound ached still.

"There will be no flotsam here!" he roared. "Sick as you say! Trim the yards and let him go. Is the black bark a mission ship?"

"Nay," soothed the big Raratonga man, who was bosun. "But it is truly as Sam Joe sees. Only a little one, blown far—blown far!"

But Lemaire reached out a great fist, and he struck the Raratonga man, and he knocked him to the deck. "So you speak only when it is an order," he snarled. "Or should I hand you command?"

"Such talk for such time," chided Sam Joe, who had sailed long enough to speak what came. "We will bring him aboard and see if he lives." And he nodded to the Raratonga man, who rose dark and sullen, and wiped the blood from his mouth, and hitched up his scarlet *lava-lava*, and swarmed down a rope overside to grasp the canoe. Captain Lemaire swore again, and he took another drink from the black bottle in his pocket, and he looked hard at Sam Joe from flinty eyes with the wind-crinkles about them.

"You are a good mate," he said, through his teeth. "But you forget mayhap. I do not care to be crossed. This time it is only a boy. Next time it may be a greater thing. Take care, Sam Joe."

BUT Sam Joe laughed very softly and made quick soothing gestures with his hands. For he had been a long time with the *Connie B.*, and he was a loyal man, and Lemaire needed him. And he knew that. As he knew it was often the black bottle that talked, more than it was Lemaire.

So the Raratonga man brought Peter on board, and Sam Joe made a mixture of trade-gin and water; and he trickled it past Peter's swollen tongue, and he smoothed the boy's hot forehead. But Lemaire only drank again from his bottle and brooded sourly upon them all, rumbling to himself.

So at the last Peter opened his furry eyes, and he saw the blue sky above him; and he saw the white clouds that hung above the masts; and he heard the low, humming boo-oom, boo-oom, boo-oom of the Trade in the stiff white canvas. And stirring restlessly, and wondering, he half-raised on Sam Joe's arm and looked again. And he saw the flaming red hair of Captain Lemaire, wind-lifted as a halo about the giant sailor's head. And he smiled.

"*E pule le Atua,*" he said weakly. "It is God's will if I die!" And he smiled happily, for he thought he had found again the red-headed Father Danton, and he had forgotten he had never reached the Isle of Ghosts, nor ever made the ordained rites for the cherished dead.

"So what talk is that?" demanded Lemaire, frowning, and Sam Joe spat scarlet betel-juice aside and ran brown fingers through his hair.

"Kanaka talk," he said, wondering. "He wills to die if the gods favor so. But he does not talk as a Kanaka should—what you say?—the accent. Ai, yet he has the patterns."

And indeed, there were the initiation tattooings of manhood upon the chest and thighs of Peter Soames, making plain to all men that he ran with the tribes. But he gazed without fear though with a tenderness at the red halo about Lemaire's head, and he said in English, and very haltingly, "I am very glad — to see you again, Father."

And it was not for Lemaire nor for Sam Joe to understand that Peter Soames meant Father Danton, and not any earthy father at all. So Sam Joe laughed a little and jested, "It seems you traded this way many years ago, Lemaire." But Lemaire's sudden narrowed eyes warned him and he ceased to laugh.

"So what is a naked heathen to me," said the big captain, and his voice was iron. "The boy's mad!" He swore at them all and he lifted the black bottle he carried in his pocket. "Throw him to the sea

again, as I ordered. Should I be a laughing stock along all the waterfronts. Should I be called father!" He drank again and spat. "He is quite mad!"

But Sam Joe shook his head and stared down. And he looked close into Peter's enormous dark eyes, that questioned now and were afraid; and he looked close at the palms of Peter's hands, and he looked close at the soles of Peter's feet.

"Not mad, Captain," he said at last, and very gently. "In no way mad. Save perhaps his head walks a little from the sun, and he thinks of another father. This is not any Kanaka, but a white boy."

So Captain Lemaire, for he was a moody man and gusty with change, looked again and with new interest; and at last he shrugged. And he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and a vagrant wisp of benignity came to him with the glow of his liquor.

"White as you say, Sam Joe? Then take him to the spare room and tend him. Should a white boy berth for'ard with Kanakas?" He shook his head and considered, and drank again. "That is a deep matter. Yet he will be a grief to us, and there may be questions asked. I do not like questions."

"And should any ask questions?" said Sam Joe simply. "It is only a lost pick-aninnie; blown far—blown far!"

"Blown far," echoed the big Raratonga man. "Ai! The sea gives him. And who shall question the gods?"

SO THEY carried Peter Soames to the spare cabin. And they washed him clean; and they killed a chicken from the coop inside the longboat; and they made him fat soup. So after a time Peter Soames' head grew clearer, and he understood he had not died at all; and he had not found Father Danton but another god with red hair. And gravely, calling Sam Joe *meitaki teina*, his very good brother, he at last fell asleep.

"The black bark is an evil ship for a

little one," whispered Sam Joe. "And the more evil to him if he grows whiter with the years. Yet mayhap he will remember the tribes and remain Kanaka instead, and so be happy here. And I think that will happen, at first. But, ai, it is a question."

It was a question indeed, for what were two years of Father Danton and his teachings beside over half a score at a black woman's breast and a running with the tribes?

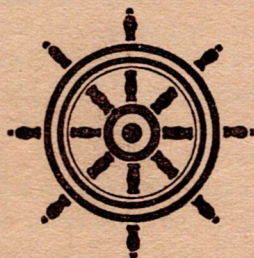
For it fell out only two nights later, when the *Connie B* was shaken in the jaws of the gale, that Peter crept fearful from below to peer through the splinters of the wrecked main cabin scuttle. And he saw the screaming white seas lift clawing from under the moon, to run swallowing along the black bark's decks. And he saw Lemaire, upright and broad and defiant, by Sam Joe at the fighting wheel, his clothes wind-split, his arrogant hard face streaming with the spray; his flaming red hair blown up about his head, and shining clear as a halo in the moonlight. Brave he looked! And massive as an oak! And as inevitable as death! And the instinctive adoration rose and whimpered in Peter Soames' throat. So, he remembered, looked the great chiefs of the villages when they led the war chants; and when they dealt justice and the people crawled in the dust.

"Ai," he whispered fearful, "he is truly *mata ariki*, a great chief." And he came trembling from the ruins of the sea-torn scuttle. And he crawled along the reeling wet deck of the poop. And suddenly Lemaire looked down to find a naked brown boy patting his feet with quick hands and murmuring with bent head.

"And what is this?" said the astonished Lemaire, though the giant wind drove the words "this-this-this" whispering back in his throat. And Sam Joe leaned sweating from the wheel and roared in his ear, "You are his master, and his life is under your hand. They do such things too on Niue, where my mother was. It is a great honor,

Captain. He will die for you if time comes."

"It is a great nonsense!" roared Lemaire, who had other things on his mind at the moment. And he kicked Peter aside. "Let him stay below where I said. Should a white man act as a heathen!" And he savagely kicked Peter again and took a drink from the black bottle he kept in his pocket. And Peter went away; and he nursed a bruised face and was content. For so it was all great chiefs acted. Heavy-handed and inevitable. And no pride had yet come to Peter Soames that he was white, for his growing had been a Kanaka growing and he was content in that.



"So he shall leave us when we reach port," swore Lemaire, after some days, when he had time to think back up on the matter. "There is no need for him here. Besides, he will talk, and we do things on the black bark it is not good to talk of." Then he considered again and frowned, and he muttered, "Yet mayhap we can use him. A little pickaninnie; blown far—blown far!"

And Sam Joe said nothing, but he clucked to himself, and he smiled. For he knew Lemaire was thinking of that gale-ridden night, and a worshipping boy patting his feet, and the big captain was flattered and very pleased inside. So the matter would rest. For Lemaire stood sore in need of a worship and a regard, if only from a boy. Since was it not common knowledge that all men hated him, and from Samarai to Sydney, and through all the Islands between, men were aware the black bark was an evil thing. Why else should she carry a fighting Kanaka crew,

and why else should there be dark stories creep in from the archipelagoes? And was it not known that in the Outer Islands the very sight of her topsails sent Kanaka mothers hiding in the bush with their children, and sent the fighting men for their war spears? Certain it was that an outlaw blackbird and sandalwood ship gave no credit to any master, least of all to the iron-handed Lemaire. Not with the night-raidings, and the bloody forays against the villages. Not with the selling of women and the slavery of conquered Kanaka men. Nor with the whispers of little ships looted and sunk on lonely sea-lanes. Sure it was then, that Lemaire needed a worship and a regard. And Peter remained on the black bark. And it was his need too, so long as he was Kanaka, to give a worship and a regard. But only Sam Joe, who was half-white and half-Kanaka, fully understood both matters.

SO TIME ran on, and many things came to pass. On their appointed days the great hurricanes swept the atolls, so the reefs ran white and the wind was a scream in the stricken palms. And on their appointed days, the vast calms fell, so there was no breath in the air, and the sun was a ball of brass, and the sea crawled like warm green oil. And between the shouting days, and between the listless days, there ran the clean, sweet Trades, and all the little winds that whispered in the sails; and all the vagrant airs that teased between the shores. And the black bark wandered as became its destiny, running this way and that way, and beating back and beating forth. And she reached into secret rivers and into hidden lagoons. And she sighted coasts that were not upon any chart; and she made passages that would have been history had they been known, for if Lemaire was a man of darkness and of evil, and mayhap one with the pirates, he was also *moana patu-iki*, a king of the sea, and a wide-farer in the South.

"It is good, it is all good," said Peter Soames happily. For life ran large and filled his heart. And he began to grow tall and broad and very fair; and his eyes began to gather sun-crinkles, and his mouth grew strong, and a calm sureness came to his speech. So men looked at him and nodded and there was little talk further of a small pickaninnie. And the women of the Islands looked at him sideways and from under their lashes, and laughed softly as he passed. But this too he did not understand as yet.

He was filled with the glamor of incredible things, and with his first excursions into the great world. And his dumb worship for Lemaire, who beat him and cursed him, and jeered his Kanaka ways, did not falter for a long time. For was it not Lemaire who led the wild roaring forays as a great chief should, daring and unafraid, to quicken the eager blood and bring courage to the heart? And all this he talked of with Sam Joe, and Sam Joe laughed a little sadly.

"Ai, for this it is mayhap we follow him," he said once. "We be men of blood and of folly here. For it seems sweet to us to know what is beyond the outer Islands. And it is good to tear our meat from the lesser tribes. That is the law of the South, which Lemaire understands."

"Yes, it is good," said Peter Soames. And life ran fast. He saw many times the anchor lowered—softly, softly—in the dark, hot night off strange beaches. And he saw the village fires flickering ashore, and heard, soon after, faint and far, the sudden crackle of carbines; and the blood-lust howling of the black bark's crew, with Lemaire's voice roaring above all as his fighting Kanakas drove in and swept the screaming, terrified village. It was not given him to follow the raids at first, when he was too small, and perforce he remained with the *Connie B*, on guard with Sam Joe, leaning over the rail, his nostrils twitching, his blood on fire, his whole body quivering, and his fingers clasping

and unclasping upon his sheath knife as he remembered the tribes and felt the lust of slaughter.

"Not yet," Sam Joe would say gently. "Not yet, little one. It is well to be grown first."

Then, "I am a man!" Peter would choke passionately. "I have the patterns of initiation. And I have seen the rites. It is time I took my head!"

"Did Father Danton say that too?" Sam Joe would inquire. And Peter's shoulder would cease to quiver under the old half-caste's hand. And there would come a tight-drawn silence until Peter would whisper, "No, I remember now. It is wrong to kill. And I am a white man."

"That should also be remembered," Sam Joe would agree gravely. For he loved the boy, and his own half white, half pagan heart was troubled. In a curious vague way he had no wish to see Peter follow the tribes. Yet neither had he any wish to see Peter grow wholly white and still follow Lemaire. But he did not fully understand why he should be troubled so; and he did not fully understand why matters that had seemed just before, according to the law of the South, should fail of justice when he thought of Peter.

And this warring within was Peter's, for when Sam Joe counseled patience and recalled Father Danton for him, he would be calm for awhile. Until the triumphant raiders returned aboard the black bark, the sweat of slaughter upon them, and their limbs flecked with blood, and their eyes burning with unholy fires while the trembling captives huddled under their blows. Lemaire would be laughing then, uproarious, rumbling deep in his chest. And drinking from his bottle, and more blood-flecked than them all.

"A good raid," he would bellow. "Thirty men and seven squab. So should we be rich when we sell them to the plantations."

And Peter would regard the wild scene with envy, the squab—the young girls—sent to the main cabin to serve Lemaire's

pleasure. And the whimpering male captives driven below by the flickering lights of hurricane lamps, to rest upon the cargo of sweet smelling sandalwood—and that also was gained by blood—and Peter would grit his teeth and repeat passionately, all Kanaka again, "It is time I took my head!"

So at last Lemaire would lose patience and reach out a great hand to knock him brutally aside. "Should you be a heathen still!" he would snarl. "Such talk of heads and blood. So I shall make you white if I kill you."

For it was a strangeness out of the perversity of Lemaire's nature, that he would drive the Kanaka from Peter Soames. And the more so as Peter Soames desired to be Kanaka, following the teachings of the tribes that had swallowed his boyhood. And such was Lemaire that had Peter Soames striven to be white he would have driven Kanaka into him. For he was an evil man and a moody man, and his totem was the black bottle. And time hung heavy between the wild raids and the blood-mad forays, and any sport was good.

So he had pleasure of Peter. And though in the heat of sultry days, and far at sea, he would dress Kanaka fashion himself, going bare-foot and in a waist-high sarong, or perhaps only in a lava-lava, as the mood took him, Peter must be full clothed, with shirt and duck pants, and rope-soled canvas shoes. And even a white-topped officer's cap which Lemaire had bought for him with a jeering, "So now you are mate to me. And the Kanakas of the black bark shall listen when you talk."

And it fell out as was ordered, and the men of the *Connie B* called Peter "sir"—Though he was at first shame-faced and embarrassed when the fighting Kanakas laughed at him as they humored Lemaire. And he gave command as became a mate—and indeed, for all the jest, he was an able sailor now, what with the years and the teachings of Sam Joe—and he per-

force wore his clothes, although he hated them with all the hatred possible in one who had spent his boyhood running naked with the tribes. And that hatred was a delight to Lemaire, and a thing to foster.

There might have been an influence to soften all this had the *Connie B* carried a white crew, or even had Peter known proper white men when the black bark touched shore. But Lemaire was not welcome in the bungalows of fair traders. Nor was he welcome in the main cabins of honest ships. Nor even in the friendly bars of the quiet Island ports. So if he often took Peter with him on his pleasures ashore—and this was so he could make sport of the boy, and so Peter could get him aboard when he became very drunk—the only white men Peter met were such as Lemaire, bloody-handed and notorious, and their names a bitterness through all the South. And the ways of these men Peter saw. Their drunkenness and follies. Their treacheries and fights. And they would try to make him drunk too, or force him to a laughing woman's arms, and when he would escape, pale and sick, they would laugh and jeer at him with Lemaire. And Peter would wonder, very bewildered.

"I do not understand," he told Sam Joe. "Is it greater shame to be Kanaka than to be white? For we are a clean people who run with the tribes. Our law is straight and we hold our taboos. But the white men are like frightened mullet trapped in their inner shoals, swimming this way and that way, and understanding nothing. Also they say this thing when they mean that thing. And they drink in friendship and end in war. It is all a great folly. I shall stay Kanaka, Sam Joe."

"It is all a great folly," agreed Sam Joe, smiling. "And you will stay Kanaka. But time mayhap comes when you shall consider again. For that is also a deep matter."

It was a deep matter indeed, and there were many times when Peter was uneasy

by it. For sometimes level-eyed, crisp-speaking white men, of a different breed to those he met with Lemaire, came and summoned the black bark's crew, and questioned them. And they questioned Peter Soames as well, asking him of the fat brig that had vanished between Cassel Island and the Banda Strait; and about the charred ruins of the trading post of Cullam on Lark Island. And about certain Kanakas who had vanished from Pelew Lagoon and had been sold, it was whispered, to the plantations. Thus and so, said these strange white men. And they offered money and honor, and talked vaguely of his father and what he would have wished. But Peter only stared blankly at them and said, "No, no, no," and, "I do not understand," and, "You have heard but a wild tale from the archipelagoes." And sometimes he would pretend he had forgotten English entirely and would lapse into the dialect. Until the level-eyed white men would swear and mutter and shrug. And they would say, "You can't get a damned thing out of the boy! Lemaire's trained him!" Not understanding it was not Lemaire who had trained him, but that it was taboo to bring evil upon a great chief, and that Peter Soames was Kanaka still. And it was well for Lemaire, though Lemaire did not understand that, and labored as ever in his folly to change Peter's heart and his ways.

THERE came one time, in the Bass Channel, when the black bark came close to a great canoe making passage from island to island with a marriage party. And Lemaire said, "Shall full twenty head of good natives go free? And should they escape us when our holds are empty?"

And the fighting Kanakas of the black bark lined her rails and laughed, and shouted, "Ho, ho, ho! They shall not escape us. Be not afraid, you lesser people. We only deliver you to the plantations!" For it seemed an easy and a rich conquest,

and Lemaire took another drink from his black bottle and took out his guns; and he roared an order to stop. So the marriage party in the great canoe was afraid, and the men began to wail, "Ai, ai!" and they paddled faster and would have turned from the black bark's course. But Lemaire said, "Should you stop or should there be death instead?" And he fired three times at the great canoe, but it fled the faster and would have escaped. But Lemaire shot again and he killed the tall young man with flower-crowned hair who was bearing on the steering paddle; and when another scrambled to his place Lemaire roared, "Turn the ship! So we shall see there is no more canoe!"

But Sam Joe laid a hand upon his arm and said soothingly, "That would be an evil thing, Lemaire. It is a party from the Friendly Islands bound in peace and to a marriage, and they are a kindly people. And there will be anger in all the missions if we take them."

But Lemaire tilted his black bottle again and swept Sam Joe aside, for he was very drunk. And he roared to the man at the black bark's helm, and the big ship swung and sheared clean into the canoe's center. So there were wild cries from the water, and a tossing of terrified faces, and a thrashing of quick arms, and a sheen of heaving wet shoulders. And then the sharks came, and there was blood in the foam; and when it was all accomplished there were only two Kanaka men and one slender squab that were hauled on board. And Peter Soames, for all he was Kanaka and knew such things, grew empty inside him and turned away his head. For this was not the swift, clever raid; nor the hot fighting with warriors. But a cold thing. Cold, cold, cold! Yet Lemaire was laughing and triumphant, slapping his guns as he hoistered them.

"So shall the Islands know my word," he swore. Should a canoe run when Lemaire calls to stop?" And he caught the frantic, crying squab by her arm and

swung her to him. So her black hair fanned with the wind. And her torn, wet sarong fell away.

"No tears to me," he roared. "It is good to smile for Lemaire. Or should you need aid, little one." And he laughed again and bent to kiss the frightened girl, but she wrenched free and ran blind, and naked. And she fell against Peter Soames, with the big captain lunging after her. And Peter Soames felt something draw tight inside him and he held the girl; and he stood forward, while Sam Joe and the big Raratonga man, and all the crew, drew breath and waited.

"This is an evil thing, Lemaire," he said. And his face was frightened and set. "She has seen her people die. And it is not fitting for love after that."

So Lemaire stopped short, and his flinty eyes opened wide within their sun-crinkles from sheer astonishment. And his mouth fell apart until he had caught a great breath.

"And is it a white man talks to me? Or a *mata ariki*? A great chief, perhaps. But there is an error. For you are Kanaka and so you will have it. Stand clear, boy!"

And he drew one of the heavy guns from his belt and his wide mouth lifted in a snarl. And Sam Joe, watching, felt the sweat stand upon his own face. And he thought time had surely come to change loyalty entire, from one to another; and his hand slid to his knife, for he loved Peter Soames. But Peter was still for scarce a moment. And then the stiffness went from his shoulders, and the level glance from his eyes; and his arm fell from around the shivering girl.

"Ai—I stand clear," he muttered, and moved back against the rail. And Lemaire showed his strong teeth in a great laugh. And he reached out with the gun and whipped the steel barrel across Peter's face. So the blood spurted from his cheek and he held a great cut with his fingers.

"Not any white man even yet," grated the big captain. "Should you stand to me

and fight? Get back to the tribes—Kanakas!"

Then he cursed and he flung the crying squab down the companion to the main cabin. And he took a drink from his black bottle. And he stared them all down; Sam Joe; the big Raratonga man; and all the fighting Kanakas. And contemptuously he turned his back, arrogant, brave and inevitable; and he went down to the main cabin, too, and slammed the scuttle shut behind him, and they could hear his laugh roaring clear. And after that there was a silence. Until Sam Joe's voice came thin and bitter.

"Did they eat blows in your tribe, pickaninnie?" he asked. "Ai, his back was turned for the space of two breaths. And you had a knife."

But Peter stared at him; and then slowly stared at the blood that was upon his fingers; and then slowly stared at Sam Joe again. "It is known there is *taboo* for all great chiefs," he said simply. "Ai, but what thought was almost in my heart.



And for a woman. Should a man break *taboo* for any woman? The tribes would laugh at that."

"Woman or no," muttered Sam Joe, "I would have loosed my own knife if he had drawn the gun hammer back. So what was almost in my heart, too?" And remorse came to him and he struck his forehead. "Ai," he whispered under his breath. "I have followed Lemaire half a score years but this pickaninnie only a few. Yet my strength went out to him alone. Mayhap I grow old."

"You say what?" asked Peter Soames in haste. For he was wincing a little as the muffled woman-screams came from the main cabin, where Lemaire made sport as became a great chief. "You say what, Sam Joe?"

"I only say time comes, pickaninnie. Time comes." And he would speak no more.

SO INDEED, Lemaire hurried fast along the path to his folly. And since his totem was the black bottle, and his destiny was the sea, it was the black bottle and the sea that aided him. For so it was, as time ran, the black bark opened the seams in her hull and leaked in distress. And the fighting Kanakas laid aside their carbines. And they laid aside their whips and their knives. And they labored at the pumps. Then later they made sacrifice to the sea gods, and later to the wind gods; and lastly they slew a white chicken to the gods of death, asking a mercy. But there was no worth in things, and the *Connie B.* was low in the water when at last they came to the great Laboagna Lagoon, where there was safety; and full time for renewing the black bark's youth. But Lemaire looked darkly at the trade-whipped palms, and he looked at the long white beaches; and he looked at the troubled water that told of safe channel through the reefs to the wide, placid lagoon.

"Should it be my luck to find haven in Laboagna," he said grimly. "There is no welcome there."

"Is it time to question that?" asked Sam Joe. "The ship is ill and needs must we beach her for repair."

"That is sure," muttered the big captain, and unwillingly he gave order to turn the helm; and then he summoned the fighting Kanakas aft; and he summoned Peter Soames. And he said, "Caradoc of Apia is master of Laboagna, as all men know. Nor will he see us in friendship, and it maybe there are warrants running for our

lives. So it is very well no man should talk, and we make sea again in haste. So shall we be honest men in Laboagna, which is not of the Outer Islands." Then he looked narrow-eyed at Peter Soames and his mouth grew hard. "And for you! Should there be questions, there is nothing you shall know," he said thinly. And Peter looked back at him and straightened. "Have I spoken before?"

So Lemaire scowled and turned away, yet turned back for a moment and cursed. "Not ever before—Kanaka. But it comes to me there was mayhap a hasty blow in the Bass Channel. And a matter concerning a great canoe." And he looked at the still livid scar on Peter's face.

"*Kim eta kiapa,*" Peter muttered sullenly. "We have not forgotten how to tell a lie." And a thin, faint anger ran through him, for his loyalty had not been questioned before. And the scar on his cheek leaped and throbbled. And there were hot words on his lips. But Sam Joe laid hand lightly upon him and laughed. "Let it be as may, pickaninnie. For indeed Lemaire is troubled. Caradoc of Apia is a hard man for such as sail the black bark."

So Peter drew breath deep within him and turned away, and they brought the *Connie B* into the great lagoon of Laboagna. Two ships were at anchor there; a swollen-sided brig riding heavy and sure, and a schooner, trim as the swift bonita and glistening with white awnings. But for these ships the black bark had no eyes for her Kanakas brought her fast to the white beach. And they ran her on, so she rested quiet as a tired gull. And they made ready to haul her down; to tilt her so men could labor upon her strained seams.

Then there came from the clean-lined schooner a small white boat, walking across the water with her oars, and from the boat there came a white man tall and lean, tight-lipped and level-eyed. Such a white man as had come on occasion with authority and short words to question the

black bark's crew. And it was Caradoc of Apia. So that even Lemaire wiped clean his mouth and steadied his speech, and dressed in new whites, and put away his black bottle, and put away his guns. For Caradoc was a power in the South and he stood upon the black bark's deck, unheeding the smiles and soft words of Lemaire. And he looked hard-eyed up and down, his hands on his hips and his sun-helmet throwing black shadows across his face.

"Never yet was a fair day that brought Lemaire," he said crisply. "Yet luck and the devil run with you. I am magistrate in this archipelago, but on a private business now. Had I my police boys with me you would go in irons to Apia."

"Is it a wish of mine to beach here?" said Lemaire savagely. "My ship is sick and a great need presses. Yet I shall sail within three dawns."

"Two dawns would be a better thing," said Caradoc shortly. "And let it be no man of yours is ashore to the villages, or goes near my trading post, or goes near my ships. That is in order. Get the black bark well and back to the Outer Islands. There are warrants running, Lemaire, and some day there will be a hanging. It is your luck perhaps that my police are not here, and I have no wish for a red killing in Laboagna."

"Of a certainty it is my luck," agreed Lemaire, smiling and easy, now he knew that safety stood beside him. And he turned his head and stared at four whaleboats that drifted upon the face of the great lagoon, between the swollen-sided brig and the clean-lined schooner.

"There was talk in Samarai of shell new-found in Laboagna," said Lemaire gently. For from the whaleboats brown men were diving and appearing with laden, wet baskets, and diving again. "Should the find be rich, Caradoc?"

"That is no matter for you," said Caradoc shortly. "Take the black bark to sea again and give thanks for your luck. I sail for Apia in three days and I shall not

be without police when I return. This archipelago stays clean, Lemaire. Get back to the Outer Islands."

So Caradoc of Apia went back to his boat, and back to his clean-lined schooner. And Lemaire watched him and cursed through tight lips, the little muscle-knots crawling along his jaw.

"Fat shell in Laboagna Lagoon," he whispered. "So they said in Samarai. What is my luck to stand beside Caradoc? Ten ships in the Islands break his house flag. Three atolls and seven trading posts carry his name. Full and enough for any man. Yet he must find fat shell in Laboagna." And his face darkened, and his flinty eyes narrowed within their sun-crinkles. "Why should Lemaire and the black bark face death in the Outer Islands for chance fortune?"

But Sam Joe shook his head and spat scarlet betel-juice overside.

"It is well that thought dies, Lemaire," he said dryly. "For raid on Laboagna there would be judgment through all the South.

"This is not the Outer Islands, Lemaire, and Caradoc is not master only of a frightened lugger running into hidden bays; nor lord only of little trading posts on islands where the law is a jest. Let that thought die, Lemaire."

But Lemaire shook his head, unheeding. And he brooded upon the matter. And he sat in his cabin and tilted his black bottle. And he drank at length and he pondered, while his fighting Kanakas probed along the black bark's hull and made her well. And at the last he went on deck again and called Peter aside.

"This is my order," he said. "You will take the dinghy when the moon is hidden. And you will take the big Raratonga man, who is a clean diver. And you will bring me shell of the lagoon floor. Softly—softly—softly. And if there are questions, should the moon come sudden, you will say you have been fishing. Also for that reason it is well to take line and hook and

make pretense. I wish no alarm to visit Caradoc of Apia."

"That is an order," said Peter gravely. "So tonight, when the moon is hidden."

Then he took the dinghy in the early night. And he took the big Raratonga man. And they pulled softly—softly—softly into the lagoon, while the moon was covered by a great cloud. And the Raratonga man slipped overside and went eddying down through the warm water, so the phosphorescent fires played about him. And Peter set his fishing lines so the pretense would be just, if question came. But there was no question in the warm, soft, dark, while the moon stayed hidden, and five times the big Raratonga man went down to grope along the lagoon floor. And the fourth and fifth time he came up with moss-grown pearl shell. And this Peter hid in the dinghy's bottom, beneath tapacloth mats, upon which he set such fish as came when the Raratonga man breathed awhile and let the water grow still.

But after the fifth diving the moon came sudden from the clouds, and there was a shiver of pale silver across all the waters of the lagoon. And there came a soft voice, speaking surprised and in the Kanaka. "So what should you do here? Ai, it is a boat from the black bark." And Peter looked. And he saw a dinghy like to his own. And there was a girl within it, a white girl, in a white dress, and with great white flowers in her hair. Slender she was, and eager and alive; not as full-blown as the ripe coco-palm, no yet as slender as a young bamboo, but holding a just measure between. There were two Kanaka girls in the dinghy for her, and she sat idle and amused while her fingers trailed the water.

"Ai, that is fair for the shark," said Peter, startled, and before he thought. And the girl in haste set her hand in her lap and her blue eyes widened. "That should I know," she said contritely. "For my father has said it. Should one grow overbold on such a night when the shark mayhap is hungry? Ai, that is indeed a folly."

"Indeed a folly," echoed Peter. And again before he thought he put out his hand and drew the other boat alongside. So the girl looked at him very close and put her startled hand to her mouth. And she said, "But you are a white man. I did not know. Else I would not have spoken the dialect." And Peter felt a sudden redness and he answered in English, and very gravely, "I am Peter Soames, mate to Lemaire of the *Connie B.*" And for some reason he could not fathom, he felt shame at the admission. Remembering mayhap the short contempt in the voice of Caradoc when he had come to the black bark. But the girl was laughing.

"That is a very wicked ship for you to be mate of. And so young. I have heard many stories. But you may call me Tamroa, as my Kanaka women do. And my father is Caradoc of Apia. Also," and she lowered her lashes suddenly and looked at him and laughed again, "you do not seem a very wicked young man." And before Peter could answer, she added swiftly, in the dialect, "As if such a handsome man could be wicked."

At which one of her Kanaka women started to laugh. "Oe, oe!" she said. "And for shame, Tamroa! You have learned bold speech from the tribes. It is not white fashion to call a man handsome." And though she spoke in the dialect of a far archipelago Peter caught her talk a little, and he answered sharply, not thinking again, "Does the wood-dove question the bird of paradise, O shameless woman? Be still!"

Yet Tamroa understood him too, and laughed, and said also in the dialect, "Who is the shameless one? She spoke only in jest and in reproof. But we two be white, so let our speech be that way." And her voice was prim. And she ordered her Kanaka woman to be still. For a slow redness had come upon her too.

And the full moon flowed silver-clear from over the great cloud; and the great

stars pulsed in the utter velvet of the sky. And the still waters of the lagoon were swept clean of any dark, and sat bright and unmarred, save where leaping fish broke forth on occasion in a shatter of silver; and the face of Tamroa was pale and clear. And her eyes were like stars, and her lips were softer than the mists of a tropic morning. And she was fairer than all the pearls of the sea. And there came a new warmth to Peter Soames and a strange new fire to his blood. And for the first time of all a clear pride grew within him that he was white, and not any Kanaka at all. For assuredly Tamroa would order a Kanaka as she had ordered her women, but she had asked Peter Soames for white speech. So he held the boats together, unwearied, and their eyes saw, yet without seeing. And they talked of light things, scarce knowing that they talked.

There was first the matter of the fishing in the lagoon, and then the sounds the frigate birds made when they swooped upon the glutted gulls and made them disgorge caught fish. And they laughed about that, and they wondered where the winds went to, when they had blown clean across the world. As if the world mattered any more. So they spoke of their lives; and she of earnest days in the great school at Sydney, and demure days in the convent at Ponape; and of the Marshall Island woman who had nursed her and taught her strange things that little white girls were never supposed to know.

AFTER which, and her story being accomplished, Peter told her of strange things too, and of his running with the tribes. But very carefully, for so Lemaire had trained him, and so Sam Joe had warned. It was not good to spread all truth upon the hands, for the world to see. And time raced incredibly, and the two boats clung side by side, and the big Raratonga man jested with the Kanaka women of Tamroa, in the broad, easy

Island fashion, until the night wind began to crisp the lagoon waters and the great moon slid behind a cloud again. Then Tamroa said, "It is time, Peter. Time to go. My father will be angry should he know I talked with a man of Lemaire's. It is better then to hide the matter."

"Ai, it is better," Peter agreed eagerly. And the more so since she asked this a secret between them, making them one in a hidden pact, something only to themselves. And his heart was burning inside him; and there was a singing in his throat that could hardly be stilled. But he whispered, "And shall I see you again, Tamroa. It is lonely on the black bark. But I did not understand that ever before. Shall I see you again?"

"That is a question," said Tamroa severely, but she laughed, so the moon shone white upon her whiter teeth. "I am daughter to Caradoc of Apia, and many men wish to see me again." Which was a truth, as all the Islands knew. For she was lovely as the shimmer of dawn sun across the purple sea, and some day she would be mistress of ten ships in the Islands, and of plantations, and of trading posts, and of the pearl lagoon of Laboagna. And this she knew, and she was careful of her heart. But there was little to give pleasure in the great lagoon of Laboagna, in the pulse of the hot night; and it was pleasant, and mayhap more than pleasant, to speak in whispers with a young bronze god the sudden moon had shone on. Also her heart was no longer in her hands and she was afraid, for such a thing had never happened before. So she pushed the boats apart and ordered the Kanaka women to take the paddles.

So the boats drew apart and there would have been no other word. But there came to Peter in swiftmess a memory of the tribes and of such courtships as he had seen. And he threw away the white-topped cap Lemaire had given him. And he tore off his white shirt. And he went cleanly into the water and swam after the boat of

Tamroa. And her Kanaka woman laughed as he drew alongside and took Tamroa's hand.

"There will be shark," she said breathlessly, terrified yet pleased. "So you told me when I trailed my hand. Get back, Peter Soames."

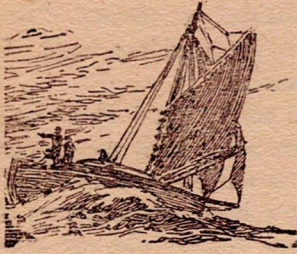
"I am sorry," said Peter passionately. And then, since such speech came easier to him, he ran into the dialect. "There is that in my heart which brings me. And should any shark make me afraid? You are lovely as the dew under the green pandanus leaf. And you are the song of the outer reef, and all the whispers that run along the swells of the sea. And your voice is the rainbow that lifts above the black bark's bow when she drives into the sun. I love you, Tamroa. Or is that too deep a folly?"

"Not any folly, nor too deep, Peter Soames," she said gently. And she let her white hand smooth his wet cheek as he stood in the water beside her. "I shall not forget you, Peter, and your words will stand strong within me."

"Ai, my life is yours," said Peter simply. And they looked at each other again and the world was lost. And she bent, and she said, "Kiss me, Peter Soames," and he strained up in the water and kissed her, and there was nothing more to anything at all. And he swam back to his own boat and the big Raratonga man hauled him aboard and laughed. And he would have made a jest but he saw Peter's face and so closed his mouth.

So the dinghy went back to the black bark, and Peter looked at the Raratonga man and said, "There shall be no word to Lemaire!" And the Raratonga man smiled a little and answered, "So why should I speak, pickaninnie?" And Peter looked at him again, thin-lipped and straight-eyed, and he said, very quietly, "As the turtle is my taboo and the frigate bird my totem, so surely there shall be judgment between us should you speak." And the Raratonga man shook his head and smiled again and

said, "Am I less loyal than Sam Joe? I also cared when you were a little one; blown far—blown far."



"Ai, I know," muttered Peter, resting a hand on the other's arm. "Ai, I know." And they came at last to the *Connie B*, where Lemaire stood impatient upon her deck.

"What shell?" he demanded. "And what matter was the talk with the schooner's boat I saw?"

"A talk of fishing," said Peter, and he shifted his eyes. "But we gained shell before that time and there were no questions." So Lemaire forgot to ask further, and he did not notice that Peter was but half-clothed now, and wet from the lagoon. And starry-eyed and radiant, and a new throb to his voice. For Lemaire reached eager for the shell, and he weighed it in his hands, and he opened it. And out of the great oysters he found one pearl of baroque, discolored and ill-shaped, but mayhap of worth when the outer skins were stripped; for there was no sureness in new caught stones until the experts had tended them. And it was marvel to find even baroque so soon, for it was known in the South that a full hundred oysters will run barren of pearl, and as often a full thousand.

"Rich, rich," muttered Lemaire. "So I heard. Should all the bed yield as this there are fortunes in Laboagna."

"Should we raid here?" said Peter, and he licked sudden dry lips. "Not here, Lemaire."

"Should a Kanaka tell me what I do?" snarled the big captain. And he looked at Peter and cursed. "Throw the shell over-

board so there be no trace if Caradoc comes again. I will order what else comes to me."

So he went below to his main cabin and to his black bottle. And he turned the baroque pearl between his fingers, and his flinty eyes were bright as greed shook his throat. And Peter looked at Sam Joe and Sam Joe shook his head. And he was troubled.

"I know not what comes," he said. "Also my eyes are old but mayhap still clearer than Lemaire's. And tell me, pick-aninnie, was it not a girl who laughed across the water when the moon came clear?"

"That is a matter of my own," said Peter shortly. And he went to stand at the black bark's rail to watch the ports of the trim schooner glowing like great eyes. So he thought of Tamroa, and his heart was full. And the big Raratonga man took Sam Joe aside and talked very softly and at length. And they made agreement together.

SO IT fell out the black bark was made whole again in haste. And that was a great wonder, for the fighting Kanakas wasted not any time in laughter or in jest, but labored as became men of the lesser tribes who are only fit, as all the Islands know, for a taking captive and a sale to the plantations. So that Lemaire was astonished and laughed deep in his chest. "Should we be afraid of Caradoc of Apia that we hurry from this place?" he demanded. "What manner of weakness comes to our blood?" And he laughed again, not understanding it was Sam Joe and the big Raratonga man that drove his crew, having made agreement. For they wished for the clean sea beneath them again, and a steering for the Outer Islands before a great madness could flower in Lemaire. Yet it was three days and full three nights before the ship was sound again and they were ready to go, while Lemaire brooded in his main cabin and

fretted at the delay, filled with dark reasons of his own. And twice Caradoc came to demand when they would leave, for he would not sail for Apia himself until the black bark had fled across the sea rim. And three times after dark Peter had gone fishing into the lagoon, and of a surety it was chance that brought also forth the trim schooner's boat. And a white girl with white flowers in her hair.

Of a surety it was chance also that made Lemaire nod so heavy each night. Nor could he find any fire in the black bottle to keep his eyes apart. Nor could he understand why he should sleep so sound and for so long. So it was an uneasy fear to him that mayhap his strength failed and he grew old. But Sam Joe only laughed to himself when Lemaire complained. And he said to the big Raratonga man, "That is a good medicine my mother brewed on Niue. Lemaire has never slept so sound and well." And they looked together across the night-hung lagoon, where two boats drifted for a fishing that was yet not a fishing at all.

But at last all things were accomplished and the *Connie B* shook free her sails and stood out from Laboagna. And her decks lifted joyous again to the thrust of the groundswell. And the shouting wind raised the hair as a halo about Lemaire's head, though the red flame of it was touched with gray now. But there was no pulse of gladness within him to be at sea again, for he stood brooding and dark, staring back at the great lagoon.

"Many fortunes," he muttered. And he fingered the baroque pearl in his pocket and stared at Sam Joe. "It is time for one last venture," he said. "And a sufficient one to end our days upon."

But Sam Joe shook his head. "Let that thought die, Lemaire. As I warned. Laboagna is not the Outer Islands."

But Lemaire drank long from the black bottle he carried in his pocket, and he swore through his teeth. "Should I hear woman's talk after the wild years?" he

demanded savagely. "It may be well perhaps for Sam Joe to leave us when we reach port again. So he can fashion a hut and die easy in the shade. As for me, I am still Lemaire of the black bark."

"Should there be question of that?" asked Sam Joe. And Lemaire cursed again and said, "Let it be remembered then. And my orders still run!" Then he chanced to look at Peter standing by, and his flint eyes narrowed in the sun-crinkles of his face. "There is a strangeness of late to that one also," he said moodily. "His speech is short and there is no jest left within him. Yet he walks as if the wind were a lift to his feet." And he added, filled with a vague uneasiness, "What comes, Sam Joe?"

"Time," said the little gray mate very softly. "Time comes, Lemaire."

NOW indeed it seemed his age grew upon Lemaire. Or mayhap it was the black bottle, which was his totem, had entered fully into him at last, making sour his judgment and bringing uncertainty to his heart. And mayhap, that beside these things, uneasy fear ate into him that Sam Joe and all the others were growing away from him. And he was no longer *mata ariki*, a great chief. Such as a little brown boy would kneel before and pat his feet in worship. Of a surety all this was so, for after the great lagoon of Laboagna was sunk in the sea behind the black bark, Lemaire considered again, setting the warning of Sam Joe and the warning of his own inner voices against the memory of the fat shell ready for harvest. And plainer yet, against the feel of the baroque pearl as he rolled it from hand to hand. And his madness was delivered.

"So shall we heave to," he said shortly. "And we shall rest upon the sea a full day. Caradoc takes schooner to Apia and the fat brig will be alone at Laboagna. Shell in her holds, Sam Joe. And pearl in her main cabin. It will be a good raid, a last raid before we quit the sea."

"It will be a madness," said Sam Joe grimly. "And it comes to me that the men of the black bark will not care for such a raid. For judgment will run against us through all the Islands."

"I order as I choose," snarled Lemaire. And his hand dropped to his gun-butt and his flinty eyes were cold as death. "You have been a good mate, Sam Joe, but give care. I do not like to be crossed."

And Sam Joe gave no answer to that. And he went on deck and hove the black bark to in the mouth of the sea, so she lifted and fell tranquil as time passed. Nor was there need of speech with the fighting Kanakas, for they looked long at Sam Joe's face. And they took note the ship waited. And all unbidden, and though there was no spirit to them, they brought their carbine and their knives from hiding and made them ready again. But Peter Soames made no move at all, and he did not speak, though there was a new grayness to his face and his mouth was tight.

"Should you be a white man yet," Sam Joe ventured at last, looking sideways at him. "An order comes soon, I think."

"Lemaire is master here, muttered Peter desperately. "And I am Kanaka. So I follow him; for that is my oath." But the sweat stood hard upon his face, and there was pain in his eyes. "Ai, I am Kanaka yet! It is not easy to forget the tribes." And he added in smaller voice, "Glad yet I am Tamroa goes to Apia, unseeing our shame. But this will make end to love talk, Sam Joe."

"This will make end," the little mate agreed. And there was a sadness upon him, and pain for the pain his pickaninnie felt. But he was Kanaka too, just as Peter, who could not wholly change it seemed. And he knew he would also follow Lemaire. For that was their destiny. *Tau-tolu mate!* So we die! And Sam Joe looked at the sky, and he looked at the ancient sea. And he thought of the gods of his mother on Niue, and calm resignation came to him.

And there was not anything to say, and not anything to do after that. Not for all the rest of that day. Not until the hot sun dipped heavy towards the sea, and the wind veered and grew stronger with the coming of night. Then Lemaire came on deck with his guns belted about him, and his face dark with his brooding. And he turned the black bark towards Laboagna again, so she ran slowly—slowly—slowly—with a planning not to lift the great lagoon before the false dawn. And Lemaire strode up and down the slanting poop of the *Connie B*, and he muttered to himself, and sometimes he cursed aloud at all of them. For heavy about him he felt the unwillingness of the fighting Kanakas, and the sullen unwillingness of Peter and of Sam Joe. And because of that he drank even deeper from his black bottle; and he cursed again; and he slapped his gun-butts in anger and with twitching hands as he watched the dusk-hung water slide past.

"Should the last raid of Lemaire be a funeral thing?" he snarled. "Where is the war chant my Kanakas lift for any fight?"

"There is no tongue in them," said Sam Joe bitterly. "And no joy for Laboagna. As I warned, Lemaire."

"As you warned!" roared the big captain. And he struck Sam Joe with the back of his hand, so he all but fell, and held to a back-stay for support while the slow blood ran from his mouth. And there was a sharp breath in-drawn from all the watching crew. For such a thing had never been before. "I am sick of woman talk and the whining of children! Has the black bark grown to a mission ship? You are not any good mate now, Sam Joe!"

And the little gray mate steadied himself by the back-stay. And he wiped the blood from his lips. "That as is maybe," he said gently. "But I have been loyal man to you, Lemaire. Ai, even for times when my stomach grew sick." And the face of Lemaire grew livid as full anger took him, and his voice grew small in his throat.

"There is easy cure for sick stomach," he whispered. And he set a hand on his gun. "Speak again, Sam Joe. Do we raid Laboagna?"

And the shadow of death hung heavy upon the black bark's deck. Until Sam Joe wiped blood from his mouth again and said, "We raid Laboagna, Lemaire. There was no question about that order."

So Lemaire laughed deep in his great chest, and his voice broke full again and he sneered. "Should I doubt that, to see such an eagerness!" And his flinty eyes blazed as they swept the breathless, waiting crew.

And he stood wide-legged on the heeling poop and challenged them, man by man, and name by name. And he called forth the faults of each in words of acid and of iron. And he spat on their *taboos*, and he ground the names of their ancestors beneath his heel. But there was not any answer, and at the last he even offered to throw his guns away and meet any man of them knife to knife. And there was still not any answer.

So it came even to Peter Soames, standing straight and rigid by the black bark's rail, that here of a surety there was that *mata ariki*. That Lemaire who had led the great raids, and the wild forays. That Lemaire who had sought strange coasts, and steered the black bark into unknown bays. Taming the South. And he felt pride stand stiffly within him that he had followed such a man and was of his breed. And this he understood even as he grew by turns crimson and then white, and was shaken with anger and with shame that even Lemaire should talk so to fighting men. And that not one of them all—no, not even Sam Joe—should give answer back. And then Lemaire's flinty eyes came to Peter himself.

"So not even you—Kanakas!" jeered the big sailor, livid still with his rage. "Is your knife also a toy to play with? So it seems. But I shall give it work at Laboagna, even if the sick stomach of Sam

Joe troubles you. For this is one raid you shall lead."

"I have no will for this raid," said Peter grayly. "*Fia ola!* Mercy! Let me rest, Lemaire. For Laboagna is my *taboo*."

"That is surely a jest," laughed Lemaire. And he drank again from his black bottle, and sudden his good humor returned. For he was a moody man and gusty with change. "Your *taboo* is the turtle, Peter Soames. Should I never know, when I have flayed you a score of times that you should eat it. There is no more *taboo*, Peter Soames. Not even Laboagna. So I shall make you white if I kill you!"

And Peter drew a long, deep breath and his mouth grew very thin. "So there is no more *taboo*, Lemaire," he said quietly. "Ai, you have said it. And let that be remembered."

"Let that be remembered," whispered Sam Joe. And his eyes burned in the brown of his face. "I think time has come, Lemaire."

But Lemaire struck him with sudden rage again. And he drank from his black bottle. And he spoke to the big Raratonga man. "Sheet home all sails now, so the ship may run, for I am still Lemaire of the black bark. And we raid Laboagna at dawn!"

And so, fast indeed, Lemaire hastened to his folly. *Tau-tolu mate!* So we die! For that was his destiny too.

AND there was a fair morning across the reefs of Laboagna. A young lavender; and clear-barred with purple, and spanned with pale gold. And the dawn Trade was but a murmur in the rigging and a stirring in the palms. And the deep-sea channel into the great lagoon shone purple-dark, with the sea birds, new awake and rising, and circling above it in the early light. And Lemaire made ready, and swung his whaleboats clear. And he brought the black bark in—softly—softly—softly—as it were a raid through the

Outer Islands. And he let the ship drift when she was full in the lagoon, with the pearling brig anchored quiet before her; while from the beach villages there rose not yet even a morning smoke.

"As we should know," purred Lemaire softly. And he rubbed his hands. "Laboagna sleeps still. And the schooner of Caradoc is gone to Apia, as he straightly told us it would. So what harm comes? We take clean shell from the fat brig; and pearls mayhap from the main cabin. And mayhap we take her Kanakas too, for sale in the plantations. A rich raid, Sam Joe. The last raid of Lemaire!" And he drank deep from his black bottle. And he moved his guns along his belt the closer to his hand. But Sam Joe said nothing. And there was nothing Peter Soames could say. But after awhile, as the black bark drifted closer to the sleeping brig, Lemaire looked at Peter and said, bitter and malevolent through his teeth, "You lead this raid, Peter! Take the boats away!"

And as a man in a dream Peter stood in the first boat, and unbidden Sam Joe stood beside him. And in the next boat, with Lemaire, stood the big Raratonga man; for he had pain also in his heart as he watched Peter come to the brig. And the black bark drifted quiet, her sails folded to the dawn wind; and the whaleboats oars were muffled, so there was small sound save for the quiet lap-lap of the water, and the distant splash of a leaping fish. Nor would there have been any alarm at all, save a drowsy watchman rose on the fat brig; and he yawned. And as he stretched he gazed up at the young dawn. But presently his eyes came down; and he saw the black bark. And he saw the creeping whaleboats, filled with the fighting Kanakas, armed with carbines; and their savage teeth bared for the charge. And he opened his mouth and screamed!

Then Lemaire stood up in his boat and drew clear his guns. "Shall we wait now while a fool gives noise!" he roared. And

he shot once and the man dropped; and as the blood-lust gripped them his fighting Kanakas shouted and drove in.

So there arose a flutter of frightened cries, and there came startled faces along the fat brig's rail. And at the last, as the men of the black bark swarmed over the brig, there appeared her white captain, two spouting guns in his hands; his hair ruffled from sleep, and his pajamas plucked by the wind.



"So they fight!" snarled Lemaire. And he shot fast again. And the brig's captain toppled and fell; and his white mate, who came fighting to him, toppled and fell also. And there were darker bodies on the deck as the fighting Kanakas ran free with their knives. Nor was there aid from the villages of Laboagna, for the carbine crackle drove the brown men deeper into their huts rather than to the war canoes. And so it was shortly over, and Lemaire strode the brig's red deck, rumbling and laughing in his chest and holstering his guns. Then he looked at Peter who stood white-lipped beside him, and had taken no part in the fighting at all. And Lemaire spat with contempt and with the unreasoning hate that was within him. "Is your stomach now sick too, Kanaka?" he sneered. Then he spat again and spoke to Sam Joe.

"Lift the shell from the holds," he ordered shortly. "And load it to the black bark. An easy raid as I said, Sam Joe. And pearl there should be in the main cabin. So we be rich men when a settlement is done." Then he slapped Peter hard upon the shoulder and he sneered again. "Rich enough so you need the sea no more, and the raids grow faint in memory. And you shall return to the tribes and be a great chief, Kanaka."

"I wish no share of Laboagna," said Peter bitterly. And Sam Joe spat scarlet betel-juice overside and shook his head. "There will be no share for any," he muttered, uneasy and dark. "The word of Caradoc of Apia runs far. And where should a black bark hide?"

"That is my reckoning," said Lemaire savagely. And with a great oath he drank deeply from his black bottle. "We strip the brig and sink her, so no man follows us from here. And we take the black bark north, far north and by east. Through all the archipelagoes, gathering sandalwood and Kanakas as we run. Until we come mayhap to China, where the law is hidden, and make settlement of all things. So there shall be no more black bark." Then he slapped his thigh as at a great joke. And he laughed and he drank again. "Ai, I tell you the last raid of Lemaire shall stand for a legend in the South! And that is all your Caradoc will have, Sam Joe. Let him catch a dream if he can, for he'll never catch Lemaire!"

But no one answered him and presently there came the big Raratonga man who had been combing the brig. And he sheathed his red knife; and he wiped the sweat of slaughter from his throat; and his face was drawn and a little afraid.

"Pearl there may be in the main cabin," he said low-voiced. But there is a trouble first, Lemaire. A white girl." And he looked quick at Peter Soames, and then shifted his eyes away and whispered. "The daughter of Caradoc of Apia, so her women say. As if I did not know. A laughing girl with white flowers, and the stars in her eyes. But sick now. Sick, sick, pickaninnie!" And Peter stood very still and his face was gray.

"Tamroa?" he muttered. And he came sudden to life. And he took the Raratonga man's arm, and he held it until his fingers had driven the bruises in. "Not ever Tamroa! Shall this be a lie for me there will be one Raratonga man the less in the Islands! For it is known," and his

voice grew harsh, "the daughter of Caradoc has sailed for Apia."

"Ai," said the Raratonga man, very gently, "that was the word, pickaninnie. But she was sick, too sick. And it was the wisdom of her father that she remain. There is no lie, pickaninnie; or so her women say."

And Lemaire looked quick from one to the other; and his flint eyes were narrow with shrewdness and suspicion. And his lips drew back from his teeth. "Should there be any strange thing hidden from me?" he purred. "A white girl? On this brig we have taken? And daughter to Caradoc? What manner of talk should that be?" And he looked quick again from one to the other. "Should there be men on the black bark with secrets from Lemaire? It was not even given me to know Caradoc had a daughter." And the Raratonga man turned his head away and uneasy moved his feet, but Peter met the big captain's eyes full and clear.

"It is my own matter, Lemaire," he said thinly. And he thrust the startled captain aside and left him. And Lemaire stared after him, open-mouthed and astonished. Until the raw rage grew and exploded within him. And he turned upon the Raratonga man and smashed him with a heavy fist. "Now should you talk!" he choked. "What tale is there hidden, dog!"

BUT in the main cabin of the raided brig, Peter had found Tamroa, full-flushed, and short-breath'd; and tossing with the Island fever. And his knees were like water; and an aching came to his throat; and a slow pain ran through his heart. "Ai," he whispered, "evil indeed comes to Laboagna. For I loved you, Tamroa, and of a surety that was too great a folly. There are jealous gods in the Islands!" And he would have fallen to his knees, and beaten his breast, and wept, and cried aloud after the manner of the tribes. But the Kanaka women laughed, and then stilled their laughter from the

kindness of compassion. For of a surety this was a very earnest and a very young lover indeed.

"Nay, rest," they told him. "This is not any great matter of a death, Peter Soames. But a sickness that passes. Though it came to her sudden, as it does with us of the Islands. She will be well again in the space of days."

And of a surety Peter could see that was so, when he looked closer and thought upon the matter. For indeed Tamroa shook and burned in the jaws of the Island fever, which was no serious matter though a very uneasy one. And her lips were parched, and she turned her head this way and that way in her dreaming. And she whispered and smiled to herself, as if she knew Peter had come. And he was made strong again and glad as he listened.

"Not any folly, Peter Soames. Not any folly at all," she was whispering. "And truly very dear. So you will kiss me, Peter—from the water. Tall and brave! And you must not forget me any more at all."

And Peter bent and kissed her, and all trouble and all doubt vanished from his face. And he stood straight again; and his mouth was drawn with a new firmness. And he looked at the Kanaka women of Tamroa, and he said, "*Oatu taringa, fifines!* Give ear, women! There shall be flowers, fresh for her hair. And tend her as custom is. And see you that happens, for such is my order." Then he looked hard at them, and he said through his teeth. "This woman is my life! And if harm comes to her there will be full payment!" And he laid hand on the knife at his belt and his eyes were bitter with promise. And the Kanaka women of Tamroa spread their hands, palms up, and answered hesitant.

"Ai, *amta ariki*. That is your word. And we know that she loves you. But we be captive to Lemaire of the black bark and what speech do we give him?"

But before Peter could answer there

came Lemaire's voice, very cold and grim. "Should that be a trouble?" it said. And Peter tightened as he turned. And there stood Lemaire in the main cabin, with Sam Joe and the Raratonga man behind him, their faces drawn with worry. So the Kanaka women whispered, "Ai, ai!" and took sharp-drawn breath. For Lemaire had thumbs hooked in his gun-belts, and there was death in his eyes. But Peter stood straight and faced him, and he answered very slow but very clear.

"There is no passage to this cabin, Lemaire. For here is your *taboo*."

And Lemaire looked at him for a long time, his shoulders tight and his face swelling with his rage. But yet he weighed the matter and grew easy little by little. For he was a moody man, and gusty with change; even when his blood was hot. So of a sudden he laughed, though without any mirth.

"So a love-making grew in Laboagna," he sneered. "As I have learned from the Raratonga man. And there comes to me an understanding of things that seemed strange before. As why I slept so heavy and long of nights, and why it seemed the wind gave a lift to your feet." Then he ran his thumbs back and forth along his gun-belts, and his voice became a silken purr. "So a love-making brings you boldness, eh? Or so you think. There should be a lesson for that. Not any chance-flotsom of the sea calls *taboo* for Lemaire!" Then he leaned forward a little, and his hands stopped close to his guns. And his voice became iron. "Stand away—Kanaka!"

And without a wish to, Peter swayed a little; and his eyes faltered; and his fingers twitched uncertain at his knife. For there was upon him still the instinct to follow this man; and strive against it as he might there was the memory of his oath, given long ago when the sea had delivered him. And there was upon him too the iron habit of Lemaire's discipline, so for the space of a long breath he wavered to obey again.

And Lemaire saw the uncertainty that swept him, and as an old leader of men he understood. And putting out a great hand he hurled Peter aside and strode contemptuous forward, kicking the Kanaka women out of his way, to stare down upon Tamroa.

"So a daughter of Caradoc mothers big thoughts for a mate of mine," he mused aloud, uncaring. His back was to Peter and Peter crouched against the bulkhead struggling with his anger. "Tamroa, as you say. Sometime mistress of ten ships in the Islands, and of plantations and trading posts; and of the pearl beds of Laboagna here."

Then he stared the closer and saw the beauty of her; and a dark thought came to him; and he drank deep from his black bottle as he considered. "A fair girl and rich," he muttered, half to himself. "And I know a missionary on Paranga who marries without question. So what could Caradoc do then? Ai, that is a good thought. I am Lemaire of the black bark and it is time mayhap I settle down."

And he drank again and laughed deep in his chest. And he reached out to turn the blankets back so he could see the white body of Tamroa. But a hand took his arm and wrenched him around; and the face of Peter was ghost-white and near to his own. "Let be, Lemaire!" he choked passionately. "There will be no matter of a girl screaming in this cabin, as was when we sunk the great canoe. For look close, Lemaire. I am not any Kanaka now! Nor your dog! There is room on deck for knife work, so come out and leave my woman be!"

AND Lemaire saw on that instant, and very clearly though the liquor still danced in his mind, that a chain had indeed broken, and a measure was over-filled at last.

"Would you lift hand against me?" he said calmly. And he stood unafraid, and wide-legged and ready. "Or is it a drunk-

ness of love? I am *mata ariki*, and there runs still a *taboo* in the tribes."

"There is no more *taboo*," Peter told him. And his teeth grinned tight between his drawn lips. "And so no longer a great chief it is evil to war with. Your own speech, Lemaire, when I cried in my pain that Laboagna was forbidden me. Your talk was bitter then; and you thrust it upon me there was no more *taboo*! And I bade you remember such words, Lemaire. And you swore, 'So I shall make you white if I kill you'! Ai, you have not killed me, but I am white from this hour!"

"That is fair to learn," grated the big captain, and the red rage exploded within him. "Should it come I take black speech from any man of mine? Ai, have I raided thirty years to reach that end? That would be laughter indeed through all the South. So I make a finish—Kanaka, as I still say!" And he started to draw a gun from his belt, and the hammer clicked back under his thumb. And then Sam Joe set Peter gently aside. And he stood before him as a shield, and his hand too was upon a gun.

"Let that thought die, Lemaire," he said hoarsely, and the sweat was big upon his face. For he struggled also with an instinct and an old discipline. "I have been loyal man to you through dark and bloody years, Lemaire. What matter if a white girl be your *taboo* for the pickaninnie's sake? There are many women in the Islands. Let this thing be."

But the big captain's eyes moved quick and narrow to Sam Joe. And there came a foam to his lips. And his madness swallowed him.

"Should a spawn-fed half-caste order me?" he spat. "So I have warned you, Sam Joe."

And he shot fast before the little mate could get his own gun clear. And the Kanaka women screamed. And the Rarotongian man made a whimpering in his throat. For Sam Joe went to his knees, as if he would pray, but they saw the bright

blood spurt from between tight fingers pressed upon his chest.

"Should your stomach be sick still?" roared Lemaire. And he waved his smoking gun. And his flint eyes were merciless and red-rimmed within the sun-crinkles of his face. But Sam Joe gave little heed to that, for he coughed; and the red bubbles came from his mouth. "Time comes, Lemaire," he whispered. "As I said. And the black bottle is an evil totem." And he looked at Peter Soames, stricken-eyed and quivering near him. And there came a faint smile to his lips, and he tried to touch Peter, but there was no strength left in him and his hand dropped away. "Ai, pickaninnie," he whispered. "Blown far—blown far! I have loved you, a little—and I say, do that which is in your heart. Ai, remembered me, pickaninnie—" And then he toppled and fell hard upon the deck. And he was still. And Lemaire cursed him even as he died.

"A judgment runs," Peter whispered then. And his voice was as thin as the long-bladed knife he balanced on his palm. And he spoke as a man speaks in a numbed dream. "Ai, a judgment runs, Lemaire! Lift the gun and stand fast again. There is no will in me to kill a man unarmed."

But Lemaire laughed without mirth and deep in his chest. And he said mockingly, with his madness still upon him, "It was in my mind you die, also, little one! Of a surety, it is still known that a bullet outruns the thrown steel." And he lifted the gun-hammer as the death-light flamed in his eyes again. But there was no fear now in Peter either, and he drew steady back his hand.

"Let that be as it may," he said shortly. And then he remembered the tribes, and the way of the tribes, and he made the killing-jest. "My love-greeting, Lemaire!" he said and he laughed again. For as the big captain drew back the hammer and swung his gun fast up again, there was a whisper through the main cabin. And there was a flicker of light upon steel.

And at the end there was a soft *thlock!* noise, drowning in the gun roar. So a long splinter shot sudden from the bulk-head behind Peter Soames, and a fleck of red grew upon his ear, and no other hurt at all. But for Lemaire there was a knife-haft standing clear from under his heart; and his gun dropped slow from his spread fingers.

"Ai," muttered the big Raratonga man. "Truly a judgment runs!" And the Kanaka women of Tamroa screamed again, and then fell quiet and wept. But Peter Soames said no word at all but waited, his face ghost-white, and his eyes bleak as he watched.

For Lemaire stood straight and unswaying upon his wide legs, though the knife was eating into his heart, and breath came bitterly to him. And his madness had fallen away and vanished. And his flint eyes looked clear and unafraid, and his face was lifted as it should be with a great chief. And he even essayed to laugh a little as the shadow of his death swept over him.

"Of a truth it seems sure judgment," he managed. "That Lemaire should die of a flotsom saved from the sea. Ai, it is a strange end after the raids. "Then he breathed hard through the pain that shook him, and he tried to laugh again. And then he straightened his face and it seemed the years fell away from him; and it seemed the liquor-bloat was gone. And he stood that Lemaire, as he had been on the tossing poop of the black bark, long years and years ago—the wild spray wet upon his face! And his red hair lifting a halo about his defiant head! "I have been *mata ariki* for you, little one," he said. "Mayhap that also will be remembered!"

And then he fell. As a great wharf-pile eaten by the sea-worms through all the years; or as a giant palm at long last rotted by the wet sand; or as a ship's tall mast, leveled by the hurricane that overwhelms all things. And he lay upon the deck near to Sam Joe, and his gray-shot flaming hair stood out as a halo still. And

Peter shuddered and put his hands to his wet face and drew in his breath.

"Of a surety," he said. "He was a great chief. Ai, that shall be remembered, Lemaire." And he drew himself up to set all matters clean. And he stilled the whimpering of the big Raratonga man who stood behind him. And he said, "Bring the Kanaka women of Tamroa on deck to me. So I shall give order what is done next." Then he went away in haste. For he felt need of the wind upon his face, and his heart was split inside him.

BUT it came about that he was ready at last. For sure it was a great chief could not grow weak as other men grew weak. So Peter set aside his grief and his sadness. And he set aside his thought of Tamroa for a while. And he set aside the gray shadows that came to him, troubling him for the killing of Lemaire and his rending clean from the law of the tribes. He remembered also that he was



a white man, and not any Kanaka any more, as he had given proof. So he belted Lemaire's guns about him, standing wide-legged upon the deck of the conquered brig. And he looked at the fighting Ka-

nakas from the black bark, and the beginnings of wisdom were etched in new lines upon his face.

"Now this is my word," he said clearly. And he picked them each with his eyes, and one by one, as if he had been Lemaire, so their questioning gaze fell and they listened submissive to obey. "All things change; as the coral that grows; as the palm that waxes. And as men that depart. So full time has come for us also, and the raids reach an end. So you will take whaleboats of the black bark, all you fighting men. And you will take what goods are yours. And you will sail into the archipelago and seek the beaches of peace, where it would be well to forget the Outer Islands and all the madness that has been. And you shall forget the black bark; and you shall forget Lemaire. And you shall tell what lies come to you, to escape the wrath of Caradoc should it follow after, seeking also a judgment."

Then the fighting Kanakas of the black bark looked one to the other, and they said the order was fair. And they departed; and in short time their whaleboats faded into the sea beyond the great lagoon of Laboagna, for they feared a judgment that might come.

But the big Raratonga man touched Peter's arm as they watched the boats go, and he said, "You have saved them a hanging, pickaninnie. But what comes to us? Ai, I was blood-brother to Sam Joe. And for that he loved you, I love you also. So I remain with gladness. But what comes?"

And Peter laughed. "Is your neck such a great matter that Caradoc should bring new rope for you alone? Ai, but I jest!" And he looked hard at the big Raratonga man. And he looked hard at the Kanaka women of Tamroa who remained now alone with him on the brig's deck.

"Now this again is my word," he said grimly. "This brig shall be made clean again, to the last stain upon the deck. And the dead shall be put in the water and for-

gotten. All save the white men who died before Lemaire's guns. And all save Lemaire and Sam Joe. For they shall be set upon the black bark, which shall be gone from Laboagna before night comes to us."

Then he looked hard again at the big Raratonga man; and the women of Tamroa. And he said, "The fever holds the daughter of Caradoc, and that which has been, has not been for her at all. Nor shall it be. We make a clean story of a raid taken in madness, the madness of Sam Joe." His voice broke a little but he went doggedly on. "And Sam Joe led the Kanakas, drunk as it may be with blood, and against the will of Lemaire. And when he would have forced way to the side of Tamroa, in the madness that had come to him, Lemaire stood between. And for that he died, though he carried Sam Joe with him."

"Is this another jest?" muttered the Raratonga man after long silence. But Peter shook his head and stared desperately at him, and at the wide-eyed women. "No," he said brokenly and through dry lips. "Not any jest. But a lie as I would have it. For it is not any will of mine that the Islands gain a laughter or a scorn from the death of Lemaire."

"Ai," muttered the Raratonga man. "I also followed Lemaire and your word rests clear in my heart. He was a great chief. But what of Sam Joe?"

"Would he not understand too?" asked Peter simply. "Of a surety, I know! There was that love between us." Then the big Raratonga man drew breath, and smiled after he had considered.

"That is true talk, pickaninnie. So we understand all three." Then he looked at Tamroa's Kanaka women and he said harshly, "So the matter is plain and accomplished, *fifines!* And the story is clear."

And they struck their hands softly together and answered, "Ai, it is clear!"

So they went down then to wait upon the sick Tamroa again, and Peter

set free the Kanakas of the brig who had been spared the slaughter and fastened captive in the hold. And he ordered them to make the brig clean. But first he bade them to take the bodies of Lemaire and of Sam Joe, and the bodies of the brig's white men Lemaire had killed, across to the black bark. And when that was accomplished Peter sent the Kanakas away and to their labor. And with the big Raratonga man he set the bodies of the brig's white men upon the black bark's fore-deck, but Lemaire and Sam Joe they placed carefully side by side upon the poop. For assuredly that was the place of command!

AND there was no need of speech. So Peter took the guns of Lemaire from about him and fastened them again upon the big captain. And he folded the hands of Sam Joe. And he would have folded the hands of Lemaire, but a thought came to him and he laughed a little. "Should a great chief go without his totem?" he said. And he brought a black bottle from the main cabin and he set it within Lemaire's hands; neither in mockery nor in jest, but according to the law of the tribes. Then the big Raratonga man aided him to draw canvas over the dead, and they set wood upon it and poured oil. And they made such sail as was needed; and they knocked the shackle from the anchor chain, setting the black bark free. Then they steered her clear of Laboagna. And they lashed the helm midships to hold her full before the off-shore wind. Then they set a fire to her for'ard. And they set fire to her midships, and a fire to her aft. And last of all they lighted the pyre over the dead men on the poop.

And when that was accomplished they dropped overside to the dinghy, and they went back to the great lagoon, and back to the brig. And on her decks they turned, and they could see far-off the black bark sailing into the night, and lifting a pillar of fire towards the new stars.

"So it was done in the tribes I knew," said Peter gently. "For a great chief."

"Ai, so it was done," agreed the big Raratonga man. And then a thought came to him and he asked, "But for you, pick-aninnie? We wait for Caradoc and there will be a reckoning." But Peter folded his arms and laughed, untroubled.

"I fear not any man now," he said simply. "Nor any reckoning. And I shall give straight talk to Caradoc. Save, mayhap, for the matter of Lemaire." And the big Raratonga man stared at him, upright and calm; sure and inevitable as death. And unbidden, the Kanaka tribute rose to his lips.

"Ai, *mata ariki!* Should Caradoc of Apia not wish a great chief for son? It comes to me he will love you indeed, once the first anger has passed. And assuredly," the Raratonga man laughed a little, "after Tamroa has had speech with him."

"Shall any woman hold shield for my head," said Peter swiftly. "I rule in my own house!" But one of Tamroa's Kanaka women came to him then and touched his arm.

"She is awake," she said. "And the

fever has gone from her. So she calls for you. And she wishes true word of what this tale is."

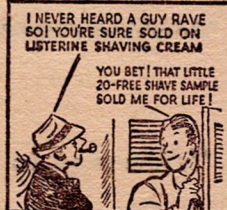
"So she grows well," said Peter happily. "Ai, my fortune grows greater than I can hold. And she wishes I give her this tale?"

And the woman laughed a little and looked from under her lashes. "Ai, *mata ariki*. I did not daresay at first. It was not any wishing of hers. For she bade me say, very clear, that it was her order."

After which the woman laughed again and fled, and the big Raratonga man smiled behind his hand. But Peter was never aware of this, and he spared a last look at the black bark small and far away, a pillar of fire sailing into the night. "Ai," he muttered sadly, "*mata ariki*. I have been faithful too. Though mayhap in a strange fashion." And he made the secret gestures which are given in the tribes at a man's initiation; and he said the four secret words that bring peace to the dead. And then with a wide-flung gesture, and a stirring of his shoulders, as if once and for all he shook off a hidden cloak, he went down to his gladness.

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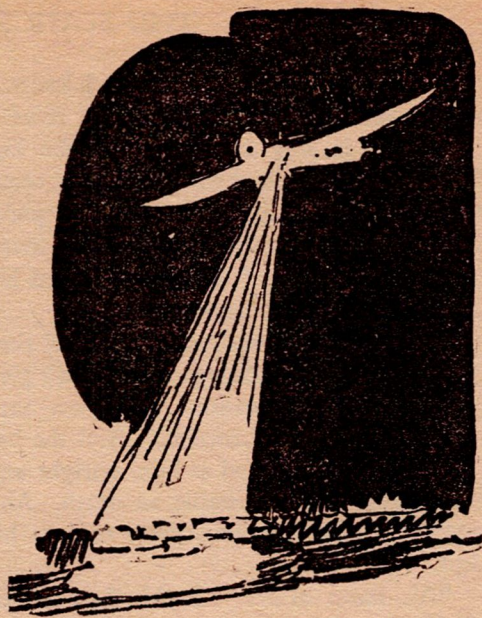
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**CLIP
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COUPON**

DIESEL WINGS

By RAY MILLHOLLAND

*Author of
"Flaw Test," "Crow Mountain
Diesel," etc.*



SIXTY thousand in cold cash was what the Super Blazer Aviation Engine Company paid Bill Fraser for his cross-flow carburetor patents. On top of it, Lucky Dowd, Super Blazer's flying general manager, offered Bill a three-year contract, starting at seven thousand a year, to take charge of their experimental engineering department.

"Let me build you a Diesel plane motor and I'll go to work tomorrow," Bill said to Lucky Dowd.

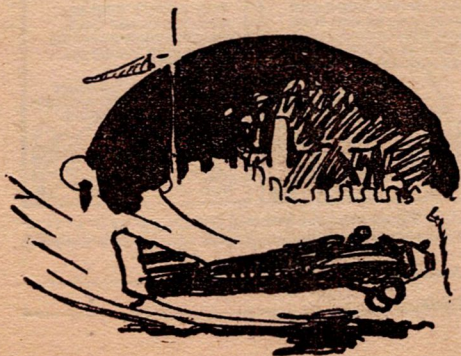
Right there Lucky Dowd made the mistake of leaning back and giving the idea of flying a Diesel engine the laugh. Why, with Bill's carburetor on the new Super Blazer gas jobs nothing in the way of a Diesel—even what Germany was putting

out—was going to have a chance in either the domestic or export markets.

"Okay, Lucky," said Bill, reaching for his hat. "What Germany has built in the way of a Diesel isn't a circumstance to one that's soon going to fly right here in the good old U.S.A.—Bill Fraser Diesel, in case you want another laugh."

Lucky Dowd lost his smile and said, "What about Pat? You can't keep a swell girl like that waiting forever. Nix, Bill. You come with us. I know of a nice Cape Cod bungalow that Pat could make into just the kind of a home you two ought to have."

It was Diesels or nothing with Bill. That part he couldn't help. Besides, with sixty thousand dollars there would be enough to buy Pat the swellest diamond



*"Non-stop to Yucatan; and No
Gas Job—Diesels Every Time."*

ring to be had in the East and a nice bungalow back in Central City. Yes, and there would still be enough left to build that Diesel from the drawings he had already made.

So, before he climbed into his plane and flew home, he put a big nick in his new bankroll for that ring for Pat.

"Bill, I could box your ears for being so extravagant," sighed Pat when she saw it.

Then Bill had to tell her of his plans to build that Diesel plane motor he had been designing between trips East to sell his cross-flow carburetor patents.

Pat smiled as if it didn't hurt, but said, "All right, Bill. After the Diesel, it's going to be my turn—bridesmaids, frills, trimmings and a honeymoon. But not before."

"Look, Pat," argued Bill miserably. "I've just got to build this Diesel. But that doesn't have to stop all our other plans. We can get married now and take our honeymoon later. I promise you that inside of a year—"

It was harder now for Pat to keep her smile. "No, Bill. When you're designing something, there's no more romance in you than in a slide rule. In the meantime, I'll keep the books and answer the telephone and do everything I can to help. And just hope, Bill, you'll finish your darned Diesel before all your money is gone!"

For weeks and months after that, just like Pat said, all Bill could talk about was atomizers and fuel oil pumps and brake horse power figures. Finally he had his sparkling new Diesel roaring on the test block.

Then the next step was to jerk the gasoline motor from his low-winged monoplane and announce to Pat that he was ready to show the cockeyed world what a real Diesel could do in a ship.

"Will you please listen, Bill," begged Pat in what had grown to be almost a hopeless prayer. "Go easy on expenses

for the trip East, please. Last time you spent—"

Bill leaned down from the wing step and gave Pat's hand a last squeeze. "That's my line too, Pat. Economy. The Bill Frazer Diesel is going to make the Army crowd get down on their knees and worship it when they see how little fuel it needs."

BUT Bill's confident smile was gone when he returned from that trip. Pat watched him dump his hat on the hat rack and start pushing blueprints around on his drawing board.

"What did the Army say this time, Bill?"

Bill tried to force his eyes to meet hers but could only shrug and go on pushing blueprints around. "Same old stall. They flew it, but not a brass hat would cut the red tape and say 'I'll buy it.'"

"What's the matter with everybody?" Pat suddenly exploded indignantly. "Wouldn't *anybody* even say you had a good engine?"

Bill smiled feebly. "Oh, sure! A general patted me on the shoulder and told me I had the cutest toy Diesel in the world. Said if I'd come back with a couple of big bomber motors, that performed as good as my little job, I might get a trial order for a pair."

"Well, at least the commercial transport people are interested," said Pat cheerfully. She flipped a telegram across the drawing table at Bill. "Came in yesterday. A Mr. Buxton wires he will see you, tomorrow."

"Buxton? Give me that!" Bill snatched up the telegram and read it eagerly. "This is from Spig Buxton. Runs the biggest air transport system in Mexico and Central America. My Diesel is what he's got to have to compete with those new German air freighters down there"

Bill started sweeping engineering reports and blueprints into his briefcase. Pat frowned suspiciously and said, "Now what, Bill Fraser?"

"Flying Buxton to Mexico City in my little Diesel ship," grunted Bill, reaching for his flying atlas. "On the way down, tomorrow I'll give Buxton a sales talk that will knock his eye out."

"On what for money?" asked Pat wearily, reaching for the ledger and pushing it under Bill's eyes. "Do you realize that you're overdrawn at the bank?"

"Overdrawn?" Bill's jaw dropped as he saw the red figures of his bank balance. "I thought you told me—"

"When I told you the balance was two-fifty," explained Pat patiently, "I didn't know you had cashed two extra checks for a hundred fifty each."

Bill fished out his wallet and counted what was left of the expense money he had taken East. "Well, I've got sixty dollars left out of that last hundred and fifty. Good thing fuel oil is cheaper than gasoline."

"You've only got ten left, you mean," Pat corrected. "I've promised the bank you would take up that overdraft the first thing tomorrow morning. And not even *your* Diesel, Bill Fraser, can fly to Mexico City and back on ten dollars worth of fuel oil!" Pat dropped her eyes to Bill's large diamond on her appropriate finger. "If it's terribly important, Bill—"

"Not that important," Bill grunted hastily. His eyes suddenly lighted with one of his buoyant smiles. "What's the big idea of swell guy like you, Pat, wasting your time on a screwball engine inventor?"

"A terribly big idea, Bill," was all the answer Pat had for that, but the rest of the day she went about her work, humming little snatches of song and smiling Bill's way every time their eyes met.

At ten forty-five the next morning, Bill was at the airport, anxiously scanning the sky for the transcontinental ship on which Buxton had wired that he would arrive. Mike Murphy, the airport manager, was stirring up his ground crew and getting ready for a quick refueling. He

paused to nod toward the hangar apron, where the hangar crew were washing down Bill's Diesel powered monoplane.

"That's the sweetest little crate I ever saw fly, Bill. You got something."

"Yeah, if I could raise the money to put that engine in production, you mean," retorted Bill without taking his eyes from the sky. "What's holding the westbound, Murph?"

"Held up fifteen minutes at Pittsburgh," replied Mike Murphy. "Been a bad earthquake down in Guatemala and the westbound waited for a case of serum from Philadelphia. Here she comes now."

Bill, still looking up, shaded his eyes with his hand and then pointed at an old training plane skidding through a sloopy turn directly above the administration building.

"That looks like some of Hack's fancy flying, Murph."

"Hack up there?" Mike Murphy snapped back his head and emitted a snort. "Yea, and drunk as a coot. Will I burn that guy when he sits down!"

Meanwhile, in came the big transport, her wheels down and her propellers churning over slowly.

Suddenly Mike Murphy waved his arms at the old plane, then let out a growling sigh as it veered away to leave the air clear for the big transport. "Sixteen people in that transport, and a souse has to play tag with it!" he snapped.

The first passenger to alight was a tall, bronzed man in his middle forties, wearing a broad brimmed felt hat.

Bill walked up to him and said. "You're Buxton. I'm Bill Fraser, the man you wired to meet you here. I assume you want to see my new Diesel engine. Just step over to the hangar and I'll give you a ride."

"Not interested in Diesels," said Spig Buxton bluntly. "My German competitors down yonder got 'em. After a couple of hundred flying hours, back into the

shop they go for a complete overhaul." A pair of keen gray eyes fixed themselves on Bill. "The Super Blazer engine people say you're the last word on Fraser carburetors. That's what I want to talk to you about. What makes 'em so hoggish



on gasoline when a ship is bucking a stiff wind at high altitudes? Got six new ships equipped with Super Blazers and your carburetors. I'm burning ten per cent more fuel than my old planes, and it's playing hob with my operating expense."

"I couldn't be sure without seeing all your data," replied Bill, with almost a superhuman effort to talk about gasoline motors at all, "but it strikes me your new engines are equipped with the wrong carburetor jets. Number Sixes should be about right for freight transport service. The number Eights the Super Blazer people insist on using can only show their best performance in highly streamlined ships like the new military bombers. That's just a guess, you understand."

Spig Buxton's eyes, all during Bill's explanation, had been fixed on the big transport plane with a hawklike intentness that missed no detail of the unloading of baggage and freight from the cargo compartment.

Suddenly he strode forward and caught the end of a large packing case which one of the airport crew was about to allow to drop from the plane door onto a baggage transfer truck. "That's full of little glass tubes of serum, hombre," he snapped curtly, then turned back to Bill Fraser with a nod for the packing case. "I'm rushing that stuff down to my friends in Guatemala. Bad shake down there, and they're counting on Buxton Air Lines keeping its delivery promise."

Bill thought Spig Buxton was all

through talking about engines and carburetors and tried to smile casually as he said, "It's been a pleasure to have met you, Buxton. Next time, I hope you'll have more time to listen to my Diesel talk."

"Just a second, Fraser." Spig Buxton pulled out his wallet and turned his eyes on Bill. "Your carburetor dope means dollars and cents to me, hombre. I tried to tell the Super Blazer crowd the same thing but I guess I didn't hit center. I figure I owe you at least a couple of hundred for the information."

Bill drew back a little stiffly. "You don't owe me a cent, Buxton."

A THIN smile cracked the corner of Spig Buxton's mouth. He tucked his wallet back into his pocket and jerked a nod toward Bill's Diesel plane on the hangar apron. "You got me on the hip, so I'm listening to your Diesel story. But make it snappy. Transferring to the Southwest Express here, and she's due in another ten minutes."

Together they walked over to the hangar.

Bill swung back the cowling over his Diesel engine and let the fine workmanship on its parts speak for itself. Spig Buxton squinted sharply but merely grunted and moved around to the other side.

"I've just completed twelve hundred miles of test flying," said Bill, warming to his subject. "Used the same speed and load as I did on a previous test flight with a gas motor of the same horse power as my Diesel."

"M'nn—nice clean looking job," grunted Buxton as though speaking to himself. "Not a lot of junk and gadgets plastered all over it. What did you say your economy figures were for that test?"

Bill whipped out his notebook and pointed his pencil to a double row of figures. "Here's the Diesel figures—one hundred forty gallons of fuel oil for the

twelve hundred miles. Here's the gas motor figures—one eighty-seven."

Spig Buxton was making some rapid calculations of his own on the back of an envelope. His eyes snapped up to Bill. "Figuring the difference between the cost of fuel oil for your Diesel and the gas consumption of my twenty freighters, you're telling me I'm losing a hundred fifty dollars a day."

Off to the east, Bill could see the tiny silhouette of the big Southwestern Express heading for the airport. He knew he was going to have to work fast if he got anywhere talking Diesels to Buxton. "Suppose you give me a chance to prove my figures," he said, struck with a sudden idea. "I'll fly you and your case of



serum, non-stop, from here to—well, any place you name within sixteen hundred miles."

"That would be my new base at Merida, Yucatan," said Buxton quickly, then shook his head. "No dice. Trick flying doesn't pay dividends in the commercial transport business. Besides, I've already wired ahead for a charter plane to meet me at San Antone, so I can make connections with one of my own ships across the line at Nuevo Laredo."

BILL FRASER wasn't ready to give up yet, but Mike Murphy suddenly weaved from the steps of the administra-

tion building and called: "Long distance call for Mr. Buxton!"

With a quick handshake, Buxton said to Bill, "Sorry, but I'll have to mosey along. *Adios.*"

Slowly, Bill walked back to his car parked behind the hangar. He drove on past the administration building and took the paved road that ran the length of the airport. Then, when almost at the west boundary, he heard the siren on top the administration building let go with a crash warning. He jammed on his brakes and leaned out the car window, to gaze skyward. Hack, up there in his haywire crate, had gone into a spin. There went a wing! A drunk for luck every time—Hack had bailed out and had pulled the whip cord of his chute.

For another breathless interval, Bill watched the old plane disintegrate in the air and plunge earthward. He heard the dull crash from somewhere beyond the administration building and saw a cloud of dust and smoke rising. Hack was floating down to earth at the far corner of the landing field.

With a shrug, Bill slipped into gear again and drove back to his mechanical laboratory. Pat smiled a welcome through the office window as he drove up. But after he came inside and went directly to his drawing board, to pick up a pencil and make aimless marks on a scratch pad—like a good sport, Pat didn't ask any embarrassing questions.

After an hour, Bill threw aside his pencil and said, "It's noon. Let's go down town for lunch and a picture show. This place gives me the creeps."

It was four o'clock before Bill and Pat turned to the laboratory again. The telephone was ringing as they drove up.

Bill said, "Catch that call, Pat. If it's a bill collector, tell him I'm in Yucatan or some place."

"Fraser Mechanical Laboratories," said Pat sweetly into the telephone. She glanced quickly toward Bill. "Long dis-

tance. San Antonio calling. . . . Yes, Mr Fraser is right here. . . . Take it, Bill."

It was Spig Buxton calling. He told Bill that he had been making a long distance call when the old plane of Hack's crashed just outside. The motor of the wrecked ship had barely missed the big Southwestern Express refueling at the gasoline pit.

Buxton was in a terrible stew over the fact that, in the excitement which followed, he had forgotten to make sure his case of serum for the Guatemala earthquake refugees got aboard. It hadn't. Would Bill fly the serum down to San Antonio for three hundred dollars? And how long would it take?"

Bill dragged his flying atlas across the drawing table and thumbed through its pages, to measure off the distance with a pair of navigating dividers. "Five hours. Possibly four and a half if I don't hit a stiff head wind."

"Damn your slow Diesel ship!" burst from the receiver against Bill's ear. "I've promised those poor devils down there they'll get that serum tomorrow. It'll be dark before you get here, and this chump I've hired to fly the stuff to Nuevo Laredo won't make a night hop. Forget it. I'll call Murphy and see if he can dig up a fast gasoline job to make connections."

"Listen, Buxton," rapped Bill into the telephone, "I offered to fly that case of serum, non-stop, from here to Yucatan. I'll be there with it by daylight. That's twelve hours sooner than your damned gas jobs can make it. One thousand bucks. No delivery; no pay. Take my offer or leave it!"

Pat watched Bill slam down the receiver with a grunt of triumph and reach for his hat and flying atlas.

"Bill, I'm going with you!"

"As far as the airport, you mean," said Bill gruffly.

At the airport, Mike Murphy grabbed Bill's arm. "Have I pulled a boner, Bill?"

Let Buxton get away without his case of serum—"

"I know the whole story," broke in Bill impatiently. "Is my plane ready?"

"She's all loaded—fuel, oil, lube, and that case of serum." Mike Murphy squinted sidelong at Bill. "Not figuring on a long water hop that the newspapers might like to know about, are you?"

"Certainly not," said Pat quickly, taking Bill's flying atlas from him and giving him a push. "Run along up to the control tower. I'll put your things on the other seat while you're getting your weather reports."

Bill turned slow, anxiously commanding eyes on Pat. "You're not going. Understand?"

"Yes, Bill," said Pat meekly.

At five o'clock to the minute, Bill came back to his plane, a sheaf of the latest weather reports fluttering in his hand. Mike Murphy was leaning against the plane wing, talking with Paul Shaler, the staff photographer of the *Central City News Times*.

"How about a picture, Bill?" drawled Paul Shaler, opening his camera. "Got to have something for the Sunday edition, so it might just as well be you. Maybe we could get Pat to pose, too. A pretty girl always adds punch to a picture."

Bill jerked his eyes round to Mike Murphy. "Yea, where is she?"

Mike Murphy looked elsewhere and mumbled. "Aw, you know women, Bill. Now my wife, she never would watch me take off for a long hop."

Just then Paul Shaler's camera clicked. Bill scowled at his watch and climbed aboard his plane, leaning out to say to Mike, "Tell Pat I couldn't wait. So long!"

Tail up and wanting to leave the ground right now, for all the heavy load she was carrying. Mechanically, he checked again—case of serum lashed down behind the passenger seat—flying atlas just where Pat said she would put it—wiping rags for the

windshield in the side pocket, in case an oil line sprung a leak. Okay. Okay, everything.

Ten minutes to six, and everything going sweetly—Bill leveled off at three thousand feet and cut his throttle to make his voice heard inside the cabin and called back over his shoulder. "Okay, stow-away, you can crawl out of your hole back there!"

With her nose smudged with graphite grease from the control cables, Pat humbly crawled out of the tail and slid into the passenger seat beside Bill.

"Wipe," said Bill, passing over a clean rag from the side pocket.

Pat threw Bill a sharp frown. "Even if you did know, you could've at least waited for me to come out and surprise you. Just wait till I see Mike Murphy again. I hate squealers!"

"Didn't need Mike to tell me when this ship is tail-heavy," retorted Bill, revving up his motor and settling down to business.

Pat assumed a crushed look and remained meekly silent. At the proper time, she produced a lunch box and a vacuum bottle filled with coffee. The plane droned on. Darkness. Those yellow lights below were Jackson, Tennessee.

Bill flew in tight-lipped silence until the sweeping air beacon of the New Orleans airport stirred the blackness ahead with its brilliant finger.

"New Orleans," he announced. "Where you're unloading?"

Hair-trigger answer from Pat. "You can't! I telephoned the whole story to the *News Times*, while you were up getting weather dope. That's why Paul Shaler was there to take your picture."

"Newspapers or no newspapers, you're getting off here."

Bill nosed down for the airport, but Pat gripped his arm. "Bill, you can't. You haven't any passport—no government permit to make this flight—no foreign registry papers. You remember what the Govern-

ment said after that last flight to Ireland, don't you?"

Something else was bothering Bill just then. His sixth sense as a flyer gave him the eery feeling that he was flying wing and wing with another plane in the darkness. He turned his head to peer out the side window just in time to be momentarily blinded by a brilliant flash.

"Flash-light of a press camera!" exclaimed Pat, looking over Bill's shoulder. "Do you see why we can't land now? The story of your flight has been wired ahead of us."

THE second flash convinced Bill. Pat, darn her, was right. If he set his ship down on United States territory there would be officials on hand to keep it grounded. In a fog of indecision, he held straight on his course—due south. With every rhythmical beat of his Diesel out front, spinning its glittering propeller in the brilliant moonlight, he knew that the New Orleans air beacon was dropping behind. Below, the silver fan of the Mississippi delta was now gliding back under the ship. Bill rocked his wings to attract Pat's attention and leaned over and shouted in her ear, "Six hundred miles of nothing but water ahead! Do you realize there is only *one* life preserver aboard?"

Pat scribbled a note on the corner of Bill's flying atlas and pushed it over where he could read it under his navigating light: "*Are you afraid your engine will fail?*"

"I'd fly the Atlantic behind that Diesel out there," Bill yelled back wrathfully. "Alone, get me? But with you along, I'm scared silly. I'm turning back!"

Pat pointed downward as she bent close to Bill's ear and said, "The moon on the water is just too romantic for words. It's the Gulf, isn't it?"

"Yes, and we're turning back," Bill threatened. He said that same thing an hour later. But somehow those hands of his on the controls rebelled; the softly illuminated dial of his compass continued to

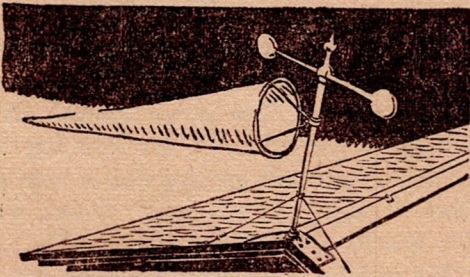
show the plane on a due southerly course. Then it was too late to turn back. Safer to fly straight ahead—

"Look, Bill!" Pat's fingers were joyously squeezing Bill's arm as she gazed out the window to the east. "Sunrise! Isn't it gorgeous from up here?"

Bill grinned and pointed dead ahead. "Land ho! We're hitting Merida, smack on the button. How's that for navigation, Pat?"

A great white ship below them sent up a long plume of steam from her siren. Tiny dots on her deck scurried about, waving excitedly. Bill spiraled down, to bank and show his registration number, then straightened out for Merida again.

"Crawl into your safety belt, Pat. That field down there may be worse than the rocky road to Dublin." Bill banked steeply and studied the square patch of brown earth below. "Not bad looking at that. This Buxton guy seems to know how to lay out a landing field."



Bill's Diesel plane came skimming in to an easy landing. He taxied across the field and swung alongside a big transport, with its engine ticking lazily in front of a single corrugated iron hangar.

A lanky, bronzed American in flying breeches and floppy Panama hat strolled out from the hangar and nodded up to Bill. "You're almost ten minutes late, fella!" A quick smile broke as he extended a big hand. "You're a hell of a flyer. Hasn't been an hour since I got Spig's cable to stand by for you and that case of serum for Guatemala. Sorry, ma'm! I didn't know there was a lady aboard."

"My assistant pilot, Pat Ross," said Bill dryly, jerking his head in Pat's direction. "We wouldn't be here yet if it wasn't for some of her work on this flight."

THE lanky American flicked the brim of his Panama with a reluctant sigh. "Sorry I've got to tear out like this, people. But that case of serum just has to be over the hill, pronto. Hi, you Pedro—Juan—grab this. Well, *adios, amigos*, as we say down here."

In another few minutes the Buxton air freighter had taken off and was winging its way on the last leg of the journey for the case of serum.

"It's all over—thank goodness!" sighed Pat limply.

"All over, nothing," grumbled Bill, fishing out his wallet and waving one limp ten-dollar bill under Pat's nose. "See this? When it's gone, our diet changes to bananas exclusively." He scowled long and hard at the sleek engine cowling of his plane. "This is one time I almost wish you were a gasoline burner, so I could mooch enough gas to hop home on. I'll bet my shirt there isn't a gallon of Diesel fuel nearer than Tampico."

"Oh, Bill," Pat was saying, tremulously happy. "Bill, isn't it thrilling to be alone together—millions and millions of miles away from everybody, and—and safe after that horrid moonlight ride?"

"Who was saying moonlight was so romantic?" demanded Bill gruffly. "Good grief, stop that! Here, use mine; yours looks like you've been wiping out a crankcase. Scared were you? You certainly had me fooled. All right. All right. Just one more kiss, then I've got to get busy on the plane."

Suddenly a prayerful voice from behind them begged.

"Hold the clinch, people. If you love newspaper men and newsreel laddies, hold that—"

Bill whirled wrathfully—just in time to look squarely into the lens of a newsreel

camera. "You birds sure have your nerve, butting in on us like this!"

"Swell!" beamed an American whose nose was peeling from a recent bad case of tropical sunburn. "Did you get that dialogue on your sound track boys?" He walked up to Pat and Bill standing beside their plane and extended a hand to each. "I'm Carter of the *World Press*. My two camera fiends are Pug Remster and Lefty Kyle of *First Feature Films*. Rest on your cranks, boys, while I garner a few quotes from the latest American flying hero."

Bill stared in exasperated amazement at Carter. "How the devil did you fellows know?"

"Simple," grinned Carter, waving carelessly in a general southerly direction. "The picture fiends and I were covering the quake over in Guatemala. I got a cable flash that you had hopped off from Central City, good old U. S. A., with a case of typhus serum for the refugees. So we chartered that Buxton freight plane that just left a minute ago and hopped over here." Carter dug around in the pockets of his wrinkled linen suit and passed over an envelope. "Almost forgot. A fruit liner picked a radiogram off the air for you just before it left port this morning. Promised her skipper I'd pass it along to you."

Bill ripped open the envelope and unconsciously began reading it aloud. "Dated Los Angeles, midnight. From—Lefty Dowd. Hunh!"

"Oh, read it," begged Pat in a dither of suspense.

"'Dear Screwball'—starts right in calling me names, unh?—'your Diesel flight is in all the papers. Been up all night, soothing my board of directors over long distance phone. Promised them I would not let your Diesel make an empty barn out of the Super Blazer engine plant. Meaning you can write your own ticket for your

patent rights on that Diesel and take charge of Diesel department for us and run it like it was your own business. Do I start taking orders for Fraser Super Blazer Diesels in the morning? Yours in sorrow for making me eat crow. Lucky Dowd.'"

Bill folded the message and handed it to Pat. "It's up to you, guy."

"Of course we're going to accept," said Pat briskly. "Super Blazer has the factory and the equipment and the money to go right ahead. Everything we haven't got. Besides," added Pat with a shrewd nod and a long scheming sigh, "you can ask a perfectly frightful price for your patents. And on the big salary, Bill, we can—"

Carter of the *World Press* stopped patting his sunburned nose with his handkerchief and coughed discreetly. "Please, folks, I've got a tough boss sitting beside a cable desk and waiting for an answer to just one question. Uh—are you two getting married, as reported in the first news flash of this flight?"

Pat shot Bill a guilty look, then nodded serenely. "I was quoted correctly on that by the Central City *News Times*. We thought it too romantic for anything to fly down here and get married in one of these beautiful old missions. Didn't we, Bill dear?"

Bill grabbed Pat's arm and gave her a none too gentle shake. "On what for money? You know I've only got ten dollars."

Out came a small purse from the pocket of one of Bill's old flying jackets Pat was wearing. "With this fifty dollars I borrowed from Mike Murphy, silly! Now where's your alibi?"

"Somewhere back there in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico!" grinned Bill. He took time out, right then, to growl over his shoulder: "Hey, shut off that camera, you ghouls. This part is strictly private—"

Curioddities ^{By} Weill

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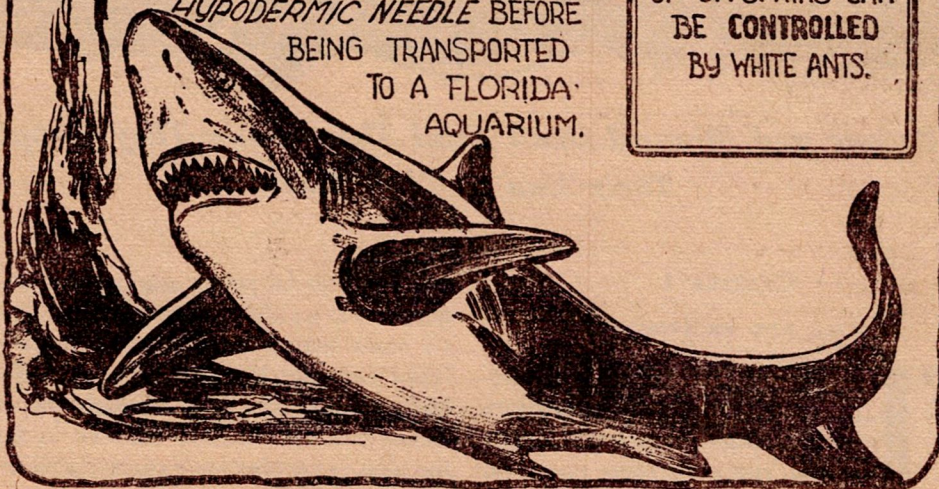
THE HUMAN FAMILY'S
MOST PRIMITIVE MEMBER,
THE JAVA APE MAN,
LIVED AT LEAST
**ONE-HALF
MILLION
YEARS AGO!**



It IS BELIEVED THAT

SEX.
CHARACTER
AND
BODILY STRUCTURE
OF OFFSPRING CAN
BE CONTROLLED
BY WHITE ANTS.

SHARKS, PORPOISES AND
GIANT RAYS WERE RENDERED
UNCONSCIOUS BY INJECTION
OF A DRUG THROUGH A
HYPODERMIC NEEDLE BEFORE
BEING TRANSPORTED
TO A FLORIDA
AQUARIUM.

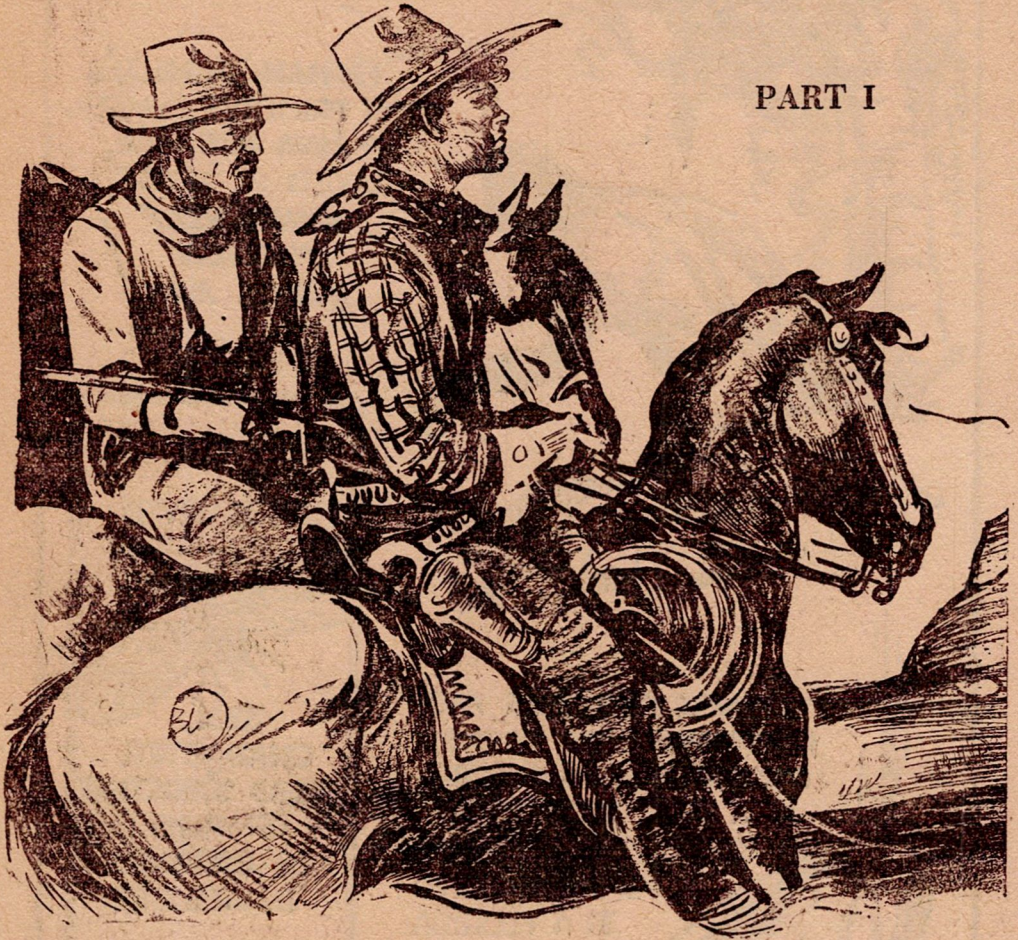


WHAT IS THE SPEED OF THE FASTEST BIRD?

See Curioddities in our next issue

GHOSTS ON THE RANGE To-NIGHT

PART I



*Badger and Blizzard Don't Trail Their Man—They Tempt
Their Man to Trail Them*

CHAPTER I

HELL AND EXCITEMENT

"**H**OWDY, Mistah! Whereabouts in this Godforsaken country will a fella run onto some powerful strong liquor and hair-trigger fightin' men, please sah?"

Private Badger Coe of the Texas Rang-

ers, a big, jovial young scamp, boomed the question at an old man on a rawboned sorrel mule whom he and his partner—the lanky Sergeant Blizzard Wilson—met at a blind turn in the trail through the hills. Gaunt but nevertheless massive in build, the stranger settled back comfortably in his Mexican saddle and balanced his rifle across its horn. The weapon, a modern repeater, looked out of place with the man

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "Due for a Hangin'," "At the End of a Texas Rope," etc.



himself and the buckskin clothing he wore. His moccasined feet slid from his stirrups and dangled ludicrously at the ends of his long legs. He made no answer.

Badger waited for a moment, grinned in his boyish fashion, and added, "I got me a burnin' thirst and a gnawin' appy-tite for excitement, Mistah, so that's how come I'd sorta like to find out."

If surprised by the nature of the ques-

tion or the suddenness with which it was fired at him, the man on the mule gave no sign. He pushed back the sagging brim of his hat and meditatively stroked his beard—snow-white, matching the hair that fell in heavy waves to his shoulders. As he sat there his large head seemed to thrust slightly forward, while his keen blue eyes looked the Rangers over as if he were reading sign on a hunting trail or warpath.

His glance sped rapidly from Badger's old Stetson which sat rakishly upon a mass of curly black hair, to the young Ranger's broad smooth-shaven face, big shoulders and long arms. Those sharp eyes took in every detail of Badger's clothing, the working garb of a cowhand, paused briefly at the two six-shooters tied down on his thighs, and lingered in admiration upon Badger's giant black thoroughbred—Belial, who held his small head high and appeared to look with blueblooded disdain at the bony mule. Presently the old-timer nodded like a man pleased with what he saw.

He spoke—his voice deep, resonant, and free with the freedom of untenanted mountains and plains, a stranger to confinement within walls. "All depends," he said slowly. "Yes, sah, young fella, it all depends on how much liquor and how much fightin' men you're a-honin' to tangle with."

Blizzard snorted through his long, hooked nose.

The stranger quickly switched his attention to the redheaded sergeant. His glance met the Ranger's cold gray eyes and drifted speculatively over his high-boned face, long hard jaw, and thin lips that locked tightly beneath a drooping red mustache. He ran an appraising eye up and down the length of Blizzard's angular six-foot-six of bone and muscle, noting with obvious interest the long brown rifle that nestled in the crook of the sergeant's left arm, the six-shooter and knife at his belt. Momentarily it appeared that a smile might soften the old man's rugged face while he inspected Blizzard's tall, bony, Roman-nosed roan—Solomon, a horse who somehow seemed to resemble his master. And again the gaunt stranger nodded to himself—doubtfully this time, as if impressed but not warmed to instant friendliness.

SPARKS of devilry danced in Badger's dark eyes, but, sensing that the old-timer had not finished speaking when interrupted by Blizzard's outburst, he kept a straight face and waited in silence to see

what followed. As usual, he and the sergeant were working under cover and his foolish question was in line with their plan to behave unlike officers of the law with a load of responsibility and to pretend ignorance of a country with which they were more or less familiar.

Suddenly the old man's bushy white brows came down in a ferocious scowl. Stabbing a knobby forefinger at Badger, he rumbled sternly, "But I'm here to tell you—you big sinner!—yo' appytite for excitement is plumb healthy and nacheral for a young scamp like you, but yo' cravin' for liquor comes straight from hell!"

His jaws clamped shut hard upon the heels of the last word. Lifting his rifle to the crook of his arm, he shook his reins and kicked the mule from its slumbers. Badger kned Belial aside to let him pass.

He paused abreast, jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and said grimly, "A purty far piece down the trail you'll run onto a den they call 'The Dog Hole.' They's plenty hell and excitement there."

The big Ranger chuckled. "Bully! I'm on my way and when I git there I'll dive head-fust into The Dog Hole jest to make the leetle dogs scatter—so he'p me!"

He thought he caught a twinkle in the old-timer's eye but couldn't swear to it. At any rate, he leaned over and put out his hand. "We're shore much obliged to you, Mistah, and in case you don't know who we are—I'm Ezekial Jedekiah Coe in pusion and that there sorrel-topped santypepe is Dan'l Shadrach Wilson. Most folks jest call us Badger and Blizzard so's to save their breath."

The old man solemnly shook hands with Badger and nodded to Blizzard. He spoke with dignity, "And I am Liveoak."

"Is that a fact?" exclaimed the young Ranger as though everybody had heard of "Liveoak."

But his deception apparently missed fire. The old hunter's keen glance searched his face. "So you're a-dyin' to find out who I am and how come I got that there name."

Badger got slightly flustered. He carefully avoided looking at his partner and fumbled in the wrong pocket for the mak-in's. Tiny creases came and went at the corners of Blizzard's deepset eyes.

The old-timer's voice sank to a confidential level, taking on a funereal tone. He continued, "And young fella, I'm a-mind to tell you. Fo'ty year ago come Fo'th of July, a posse up and hung me to a liveoak limb. I never was dead sartin why they done sech a thing. Anyhow, bright and early next mornin' they cut me down and laid me to rest in a shaller grave, but I didn't stay there long 'cause wolves come and dug me up and turkey buzzards picked my bones."

He paused dramatically, shot a cautious glance through the scrubby timber that lined the trail and clothed the hillsides upon either hand, and added, "So, young fella, you been a-talkin' to my ghost!"

Blizzard coughed in the smoke from his cigarette.

Badger spilled tobacco. For the life of him, he couldn't decide whether Liveoak was poking fun at him or just a little bit off. Accordingly, he tried to play safe by pulling a long face and remarking seriously, "'Tain't the fust time I shook hands with a ghost," he glanced at Blizzard, "and for years I been ridin' with a skeletin. Bein' a ha'nt you ain't got no special place to go nohow, so why don't you jest turn 'round and rack up the trail to The Dog Hole with us? Mighty glad to have you, sah."

"Oh, yes, I got a place to go," objected the old man. He glanced at the late afternoon sun, then clucked to the mule. "I'm a-headin' for nowhere and I'm dead sot on gittin' there befo' dark. Likewise, my medicine tells me to stay clean away from The Dog Hole 'cause they shore got hell and excitement there!"

The mule fell into a leisurely pacing gait, its ears flopping in half-time to the movements of its slender legs, and the gaunt old giant rode away without a back-

ward glance. He carried himself as if the saddle were silver mounted and the mule an Arabian stallion.

The Rangers watched him in silence until he rounded a turn where dwarf cedars hid him from view. Badger frowned at the empty trail. He took off his hat and slowly ran a hand through his curly hair.

"Well I'll be everlastingly damned!" he exploded.

"Wouldn't be at all surprised," drawled Blizzard.

Badger glared at him. "Hush yo' fool mouth! Who in hell is that old codger?"

The sergeant thoughtfully pinched out his cigarette. "The Good Lawd only knows. Reckon he's one of them bunch-quittin' drifters that ranges far and wide and alone, half crazy and half smart."

"Then he done showed us the crazy half."

Blizzard shook his head. "Don't you go and gamble none too strong on that. Chances is he was damned smart when he allowed he'd stay clean away from The Dog Hole."

The young Ranger shrugged carelessly. "Huh! Let's us go find out for shore."

SO THEY resumed their journey up the trail that staggered across the broken Edwards Plateau in a northwesterly direction toward the far-flung prairies and plains beyond. From time to time Badger whistled, hummed and sang snatches of song, but Blizzard rode in silence. For some strange reason, their meeting with the peculiar old-timer had left him in a sober mood. Moreover—of the two Rangers he was the senior in years, experience and rank, and therefore largely responsible for the outcome of the difficult undertaking to which they had been detailed by their commanding officer.

As Solomon's easy foxtrot carried him through the hills, Blizzard's alert eyes let nothing suspicious escape them; and while one half of his brain identified and recorded the things he saw, the other half

ruminated upon what Captain Henry Clay Houston had said across a campfire on the banks of the Medina almost a month ago.



Cap'n Hank had declared, "Dick Roe or Richard Randolph Roe or Rannicky Roe, whatever he happens to be callin' hisself, is the most dangerous outlaw alive in Texas today. He kills lawmen right and left and brags that he don't notch his guns for nobody else; and fellas, he packs plenty notches on them two six-shooters of his'n. He's educated and he's smart as a whip to boot, and they ain't never been able to convict him 'cause he wiggles out or shoots his way out every time. From Galveston to the Panhandle he's been snappin' his fingers at the law until the Gov'n'r finally sets in the game and swears the law's gotta hang Rannicky Roe to save its face. Hang him, mind you! Maybe you could get shed of the cuss by smokin' him up or carvin' him down, but the law wouldn't get any credit for it 'cause you dassn't let on that you're Rangers. That's the hell of it. You're undercover men and you gotta stay thataway. So go get me hangin' evidence, air-tight and lawyer-proof, then I'll fetch the company and corral the coyote. But, boys, if you have to do it to save yo' hides, wipe him out and to hell with the evidence!"

Solomon tirelessly foxtrotted onward. A buck and his doe faded away into the scrubby timber and a flock of wild turkeys made tracks for the brush, sunlight glancing from their bronze feathers as if they really were metal, for Badger had boomed into a rollicking song about his "redheaded gal from Gallatin." A trail cut in at an angle from the south. Sign showed that a northbound horse herd had traveled that trail within the last few days—maybe an honest herd from some outfit in Southwest Texas, but more likely wet stuff from beyond the Rio Grande with a band of thieves

a-shovin' 'em north to swap or peddle in The Nations.

Blizzard's lean body flexed to Solomon's rhythmic movements, but his thoughts set his long face in hard lines. Dick Roe was a horse-thief, none better or more daring. During the past three weeks of hard riding and cautious investigation, he and Badger had learned this and many other things about Roe. The man was no hit-and-miss bandit. His crimes bore the stamp of intelligent planning both as to execution and covering up, and the behavior of his band proved him to be a strict leader whose men nevertheless worshiped him. Spies served him effectively—honest as well as dishonest folks—some because they liked and believed in the man, others because they feared him. Notwithstanding the fact that he was a tough customer and a thoroughly bad egg, he had a way with men and women—good and otherwise—which made him mighty hard to resist when he set out to get something by peaceable means. Many doors were therefore open to him and his gang, and when his name was mentioned many lips were sealed or had nothing but good to say about him.

AWAY down on the Nueces south of San Antonio, there was a good old sister who sat straight and prim in her rocker beneath a Chinaberry tree on her clean-swept front yard, and indignantly told Blizzard, "Why, Brother Wilson, the very idea of anybody thinkin' that Dicky Roe is a bandit! He's a gentleman if there ever was one and I just know he comes from fine quality folks, the precious boy! D'you know what he did?"

Blizzard now remembered that he didn't answer the old lady's question, but recalled how he thought he wouldn't be surprised at anything Rannicky Roe might have done.

She had gone on enthusiastically, "Brother DeVilbiss was holdin' a camp-meetin' in Parker's Grove down the river a piece and one day—it was Sunday afternoon services, I never will forgit it—Dicky

Roe and three of his boys come in and set right down on the bench with me just as nice as you please. And when the pahson led us in singin'—Number Sixty-six it was, I recollect it same as if it was yesterday—Dicky threwed back his head and opened his mouth and that blessed old hymn rolled out like thunder. Never in all my bawn days heard sech a voice. Purty soon everybody else stopped singin' just to listen to him. Lawsy me! He made the leaves in the arbor tremble and he had the congregation a-weepin' — men, women, and chillun. When he got through with that song, Brother DeVilbiss asked him if he wouldn't come forward and sing some more for us. Dicky just laughed in that happy way of his'n and allowed he didn't mind. So he went and taken a stand by the pulpit—straight as a Injun, I'll remember him to my dyin' day—and he sung and sung, and we-all shouted and praised the Lawd and shed tears. He wound up a-singin' somethin' 'bout the Messiah—he said a Dutchman by the name of Handel writ it, I can't *never* forgit that—and it shore was soul-stirrin' music. It shook the very earth and it jarred some of our sinners out'n their seats of iniquity and sent 'em a-moanin' and a-prayin' to the mourners' bench. Brother, that was a feast! Me and Pa taken Dicky and his boys home with us that evenin' and they stayed all night. I'll never forgit how he done my milkin' and strained the milk and carried the crocks to the springhouse for me. And when we heard a week or so later that Dicky shot a deppity over in Gonzales County, I didn't believe a word of it. No sah! Nary a word!"

And that was the hell of it, grimly reflected Blizzard while Solomon's steady gait bore him farther along the trail of the evidence he had to get. Roe's friends wouldn't believe what they heard and his enemies were afraid to testify. You couldn't much blame a man for not testifying against him. While Rannicky was in jail in Goliad County awaiting trial for

the murder of a town marshal, his devoted gang turned to night-riding. Although it couldn't be proved, everybody was positive that it was they who dragged one State's witness from his home and hung him in his own front yard and intimidated others to the point where their testimony did the defense more good than harm. So once more, Richard Randolph Roe had snapped his fingers at the law.

THE more he had learned during the course of his preliminary investigation, the more impatient Blizzard had become to get a look at this strange man whose genius for good and evil left such an unusual trail of friendship and hatred behind him; and he fully expected to meet the outlaw at The Dog Hole tonight, having learned that he was lying over there with some of his men. Old Liveoak hadn't told the Rangers anything they didn't already know about the place. Moreover, they knew that Dick Roe owned The Dog Hole and other similar dives scattered along Texas cattle trails and across Red River in The Nations.

Badger suddenly ended his song on a deep bass note. He shifted his weight to one stirrup, and growled at Blizzard, "Why in hell don't we git a move on us? Is it 'cause that there bonepile of your'n is rid plumb out?"

"Don't you fret yo'self, big fella," calmly retorted the sergeant. "When we git to where we're goin' you'll swear we done traveled too damned fast."

"Fiddlesticks! Here we are—a-standin' still, and me so hongry my stummick is callin' me bad names."

"What with the way you treat the thing, I don't blame yo' stummick a particle," drawled the sergeant. "And likewise—by the time that there Dog Hole bunch finishes with you, yo' *hide* will cuss you out for doin' it dirt."

The young Ranger grunted a mild oath, pretending to ignore his partner's prophecy. "A-lazyin' along like we are, night

is due to ketch us flatfooted on the trail."

Blizzard's long face got even longer. "The darker the better, but it won't be dark enough. We'll have a full moon, wuss luck."

The prospect of trouble was a minor matter as far as Badger was concerned at the moment, but his appetite was an important thing. He went on grumbling, "We could throw off and fix us some grub if you hadn't been fool enough to send our pack on ahead to hell and gone up the trail."

"There's where you're wrong," declared the sergeant. "It shore was luck that we run onto them CD cowhunters and got 'em to take old Buck off'n our hands without makin' 'em suspicious. If we *do* git a chance to run from these here Dog Hole rannies, you'll be mighty glad we ain't got no packhoss a-holdin' us back."

The sun was hiding its red face behind a timbered skyline when the Rangers at length topped a hill overlooking the junction of the North and South Llanos. At that time the rivers were on their good behavior—vigorous and lively but peaceful, beautifully clothed by pecans, maples, hackberries, and other stately trees through which the mustang grape wove its vines in a wild tangle providing excellent cover for man or beast; but huge piles of debris, gouged banks, and uprooted timber betrayed the fact that these deceiving streams could be as lawless and wicked as the criminals who sought and found seclusion in their valleys.

Upon some sparsely timbered ground that rose to a slight elevation between the forks of the river, a small group of buildings were faintly visible.

Blizzard pointed. "Yander she is," he said gravely, "'bout the toughest spot between the Gulf and Fort Griffin."

Good though it was, Badger's sight was no match for that of his hawk-eyed partner. "I'll take yo' word for it. The wind is right. Does that wolf nose of your'n ketch the scent of vittles?"

"Uh-huh," grunted the sergeant, "two three hours away. We don't go nigh the place until it's so daggoned dark nobody sees where we cache our hosses and likewise, we don't do no eatin' there nohow."

BADGER cursed him for being an old woman and a coward, simply as a matter of principle and not because he believed it to be true. But Blizzard accepted the insults in silence, staring toward the cluster of log houses that were rapidly disappearing in the failing light. He had no reason to believe that this was the beginning of a town destined to grow in size and sinfulness, later to pass through a baptism of Ranger fire in which he himself participated, and to emerge a clean and lawabiding community that ultimately became an up-and-coming little city.*

The Rangers rode down into the valley where they remained under cover on the banks of the South Fork until stars took command of the cloudless sky pending the arrival of the moon. While waiting there, they watered their horses and fed them all that remained of the shelled corn Blizzard had been carrying. He folded the small sack and secreted it inside his shirt.

Asked Badger, "D'you figger to fool them Dog Hole gals into thinkin' that you're a-packin' taller on them nekked ribs of your'n?"

Answered Blizzard, "Nope. Calc'late I may have to blindfold you to git you to where we're goin'."

At length the sergeant consented to move on. Proceeding at a walk, they circled through scattered timber to a point on the trail beyond the opening in which the settlement was situated. From there they returned to within a hundred yards of the nearest building and tied their horses in a clump of Spanish Oak.

* Kimble County's Junction City. At one time it got so tough the District Judge refused to go there to hold court. Major Jones secretly concentrated his Ranger forces and swooped down on the place from all sides. He combed the country in a general roundup, cut the badmen, then discovered that—aside from those sitting on the grand jury—he didn't have enough good citizens left to try the bad ones.

The next thing Badger did was to adjust his holsters to the proper height and angle and try his guns to make sure that they slipped from their leather freely. Then he lifted his head and expanded his great chest in a long breath.

"By dogies!" he exclaimed softly. "I smell beef and onions a-fryin' and I hear eggs a-cussin' the skillet. Let's us ramble."

"Take keer," cautioned the sergeant, "or you'll smell sulphur and brimstone and hear old Satan a-callin' you."

He settled his rifle in the crook of his left arm, pulled his hat low over his eyes. Standing perfectly still in the darkness beneath the trees, he gazed out through the starlight in the attitude of a man looking and listening for all he was worth.

And Badger, too, strained his eyes and ears, at the same time realizing that it was wasted effort because Blizzard could see things and catch sounds that were beyond the reach of *his* senses; but the young Ranger nevertheless saw and heard a-plenty. He saw a low, L-shaped building whose open doors and windows poured out light and the raucous noise of mixed voices—drunk and sober, the thumping of a guitar and the screech of a fiddle; an empty hitchrack which indicated that the men inside had put up their horses, perhaps for the night; a circular pole corral tied onto a row of stalls, loose ponies bunched near the watering trough; two freighters' wagons whose white covers stood out in the darkness like misshapen ghosts crouching near the corral gate; and he counted five log cabins grouped in the rear of the main building, each with a light behind its curtained window, a man staggering drunkenly from the door of the nearest of these shacks pursued by a woman's shrill scolding.

There came a momentary lull in the racket. The voices of fiddle and guitar died in a discord. From a hill overlooking the valley arose the bugle note of a wolf, prolonged, weird, melancholy, followed by the insane yapping of coyotes—cowards

who dogged his red trail through the night, devouring the remnants of his kills. Suddenly—as if he were a kindred spirit answering the call of the wolf, a man in the saloon lifted his voice in a song as wild as the lament of that nocturnal killer; a song wicked as to both words and music, like the voice of an untamed wilderness raised in savage defiance of civilization and its restraints.

Badger growled an oath, deep, harsh, like the growl of a bear, for that grand voice thrilled him to the bone and the primitive music gripped him. It rollicked along his nerves and set them to tingling. It raced through his veins and set his blood afire. He forgot his hunger. He breathed hard. Rannicky Roe!

"Come on," said Blizzard quietly, coldly.

"Godamighty!" rumbled Badger. "What singin'! Makes a fella want to do somethin' mean and dangerous. Let's go!"

They strode quickly from the seclusion of the trees into the open. Before they had covered three rods a girl came from one of the cabins, drawing a shawl about her bare arms and shoulders. She chanced to look their way, evidently saw them, stopped in her tracks. After a moment's pause she went ahead swiftly, entering the saloon through a back door.

"Damn the luck!" muttered Blizzard. "Now she knows where we left our hosses."

He lengthened his stride.

There was no opening in that end of the building, which constituted the upright stem of the L. The Rangers went around the corner and halted just outside the column of light from the nearest front window. Through it they could see most of the main room and a portion of the smaller one that extended back at right angles, forming the base of the L. Against the opposite wall was a bar of crudely worked pine with a two-by-twelve for a backbar and no mirror. In front of the bar at its far end stood the singer. Twelve or fifteen men and several women were grouped

before him, a number of them drunkenly waving bottles or glasses in imperfect time to the music.

WITH one quick glance Badger took note of the silent audience, two faro layouts with stacks of gold pieces upon them and hard-faced dealers behind them, a quick-fingered Mexican monte sharp with a heap of money on the stand before him, and two deserted poker tables holding the players' stacks and the bankers' piles of gold. This display of wealth didn't surprise the Ranger, for he knew that outlaws, who gambled with their lives to get it, gambled it away in a hurry when they had it.

Badger saw all these things but gave them no more than passing notice, for it was the singer himself who caught and held his interest. Although probably no more than six feet in height, the man looked to be taller than that. Broad shouldered, deep chested, but slender in waist and hips, he somehow gave an impression of bigness which his one hundred eighty-five or ninety pounds did not justify. His clothing wasn't responsible for this illusion, since he wore the quiet business dress of a prosperous cowman who had no need for working clothes and wasn't addicted to range finery. It was Richard Randolph Roe's personality that added height and breadth to his stature—the unconquerable spirit that blazed in his clear blue eyes; the animation of his rather large smooth face with its slightly hooked nose and full, expressive lips; the total absence of fear in that youthful face, its utter recklessness, its freedom from care, responsibility, and respect for others—their moral codes or temporal laws. And there was dominance and arrogance in every line of him; in the angle at which his low-crowned, straight-brimmed black Stetson sat upon his large blond head; in the flash of his strong white teeth when he smiled while singing; and in the proud pose he struck, the way he swaggered and gestured as his great voice

rolled out in a song recounting the deeds of "Ramblin' Rannicky Roe"—an outlaw boasting of his crimes.

"Reckon it's one of them grand opry tunes," thought Badger, "but he shore as hell made up the words hisself."

The song ended with a ribald jest about the girls who had loved him and lost. An uproar ensued. The audience clapped, yelled, stomped, whistled, and milled about him, but no one slapped him on the back or so much as touched him. A half-tight young fellow climbed onto a chair and crowed like a rooster. Another weaved out onto the floor, lowered his head and bellowed like a bull buffalo. And at the end of the bar nearest the Rangers but out of their sight, a stentorian voice howled in a fine imitation of a lonesome wolf. Badger chanced a quick look around the side of the window.

Liveoak! Flourishing his hat in one hand, a bottle in the other, the gaunt old giant had thrown back his white head and flung his hunting call at the ridgepole.

Rannicky Roe snatched a pair of black gauntlets from his belt and waved them in a gesture that included both rooms. "Ladies and gents to the bar! Rannicky and his boys are celebratin' and your money ain't worth a damn!"

Badger suddenly became aware of Blizard's breath on his ear. "See that there snaky lookin' rat with locoed eyes and a bluish tinge on his face?" whispered the sergeant. "Know him?"



Know him! Badger unconsciously clenched his big fists. Of course he knew Blue Jack, the gunman who shot down Ranger Billy West, widowing a good hard-working woman and making orphans of two fine little boys. The entire Ranger force had been looking high and low for Blue Jack, dogging his trail with the savage persistence of lawmen in pursuit of

one who has killed a brother officer. And there he stood, no doubt a member of Rannicky Roe's band of hand-picked killers!

Badger whispered hoarsely in Blizzard's ear, "Has Cap'n Hank ever said anything 'bout savin' Blue Jack for a hangin'!"

"Nope."

"Bully!"

The sergeant's long fingers closed on Badger's arm and drew him over to the wall, away from the window. The young Ranger moved readily and listened eagerly, for he knew that Blizzard was about to start his play. He could only guess what it was going to be, since the lanky red-head rarely disclosed his plans until shortly before the time for action arrived; always said a fellow ought to be fixed to change his mind at the last minute.

"We gotta convince this here gang of cutthroats that we're jest as tough as they are, mebbe a mite tougher," whispered the sergeant, "and if we pull somethin' that ketches Rannicky's fancy, so much the better. He dotes on takin' chances his ownself and admires to see the other fella do it. Don't you forgit that. Likewise, the ornery cuss is so all-fired smart he can laugh when the joke's on him."

Blizzard paused to listen and to shoot a quick glance about them. Badger almost held his breath, waiting impatiently. His heart pounded in his chest. He wanted to throw his hat in the air and sound a big yell. This was due to be good, whatever it was. When cautious old Blizzard did cut loose he went it whole hog or none, plumb reckless, and a fella had to ramble to keep his dust in sight.

The sergeant went on calmly, coldly, "It's time Blue Jack was a-payin' his debts. He's slippery and hard to ketch, so we dassn't let him git away. And recollect he's powerful bad. I'll hold Rannicky and the balance of 'em."

"I savvy," muttered Badger.

"After that jest you foller my lead and

keep a eye on Rannicky. Make shore that he don't git the drap on you so's you have to shoot it out with him. I ain't dead sartin what we'll do, but we'll do it quick and leave in a hurry."

They strode into the saloon, Badger leading. The sound of his heavy tread jerked every eye toward them. More than one hand closed on a weapon, for most of these men were fugitives who lived lives of endless vigilance and looked upon all strangers with the hostile suspicion of the hunted. Blizzard moved quickly aside from the doorway and halted with a blank wall at his back—an action suited perfectly to the part he was playing, a precaution readily understood and appreciated by men accustomed to dodging lead. Towering over everyone there—even Liveoak—he stood with rifle in the crook of his arm and hat well down on his forehead while his hard eyes swept the room with a glance from which nothing important escaped. Badger swaggered to the middle of the floor and stopped with hands on his hips, old Stetson on the back of his curly head, and a contagious smile on his large face. He had no difficulty in assuming the devil-may-care air of that quick-shooting, hell-raising breed of outlaws who took their fun where they found it, defied society and died young. In fact, Blizzard sometimes declared that it came natural to the big scamp and the luck of the draw was all that made him a Ranger rather than a bandit.

"Howdy, fellas!" boomed Badger. "We was a long time comin' but here we are."

The crowd noticeably relaxed and several of the more exuberant ones answered his greeting in kind. Dick Roe stood with one elbow resting on the bar, the fingers of his right hand hooked in a vest pocket. When the Rangers came in he had made no move toward either of the wood-handled six-shooters that hung low on his thighs, and he now looked them over as if he found them interesting but not at all disturbing—a bit speculatively, perhaps, with

slightly narrowed eyes and a whimsical grin.

In that brief space of time Badger was able to take a hasty measure of the men in the room, most of whom he identified from descriptions that had reached the Rangers. There were the regular members of Roe's gang—Slim Sanders, Black Jack, Little Joe, and Blue Jack, all of them young in years but old in crime; and the worst of these was Blue Jack, a man whose guns "packed many credits," a gunman who killed for the love of it and the fame it brought him. It was common knowledge that Blue Jack, jealous of another killer's growing reputation, once rode two hundred miles to fight the other man and prove himself the more deadly of the two. Slender but wiry, with a sharp face and very light colored eyes that were made to appear even lighter by skin so unhealthily ashen as to seem blue, he now stood near his chief with his back to the bar and his nervous hands on his hips, looking almost hungrily at Badger.

A moment later Roe spoke pleasantly and without lifting his cultured, resonant voice above a conversational tone, "Glad to see you, but I'm wonderin' why you killed so much time out there by the window."

This surprising remark caught the big Ranger flatfooted and he instantly thought of the girl who saw them, but he didn't turn a hair. He chuckled appreciatively, and answered immediately, "We was askeerd to come a-bustin' smack into the middle of yo' song. In all my bawn days I ain't never heard anything that could tie yo' singin'."

Blizzard spoke up quickly, his sharp voice carrying to all parts of the saloon, "He's a liar, Roe. We done heard tell that the Rangers is on yo' tail and soon as ever we found out that you was here, we took time to make sartin that none of the scalawags was a-snoopin' 'round. Don't want no truck with 'em our ownelves."

This brought a burst of mirth from the

crowd. Roe himself laughed quietly, then said, "So you know me and you figure I'm bad company."

"Ain't fixed to say how bad you are," snapped the tall sergeant, "but we're damned shore you're dangerous."

And Badger added with an innocent grin, "'Cause you draw lawmen wuss'n sorghum draws flies."

Again the outlaw laughed, a bit grimly this time. "Did you ever notice that when a fly gets bogged in sorghum he's in a hell of a fix?" he inquired smoothly, going on to say, "But you two pilgrims haven't got anything on me. I know you!"

The young Ranger's heart missed a beat, but his glance didn't waver a particle and his voice was casual, "Is that a fact? 'Tain't no ways surprisin' that you do 'cause a whole slew of folks has got to know us while we been traipsin' 'round, jest a-scoutin' for a quiet range where we can sorta settle down and go to buildin' up our brand."

Rannicky Roe's white teeth showed in a smile of pure amusement, but there was a crafty look in his eyes. At the moment Badger had the uncomfortable feeling that he was a nice fat mouse, the outlaw a sleek cat with a self-satisfied purr, and Blue Jack a lean and vicious hydrophobia skunk with an appetite for mice. From the side of his eye he saw that Blizzard's rifle had moved from the crook of his left arm to both hands, held waist high.

Dick Roe glanced from Badger to Blizzard, down at Blue Jack, and back to Badger again. He said softly, "I don't *know* what your brand is, but I'll lay a small bet that it's the six-shooter brand and your redheaded pardner's stuff is in the rifle or knife brand. Do I win or lose?"

The young Ranger chuckled as if in appreciation of a joke on himself. In the meantime he carelessly moved to within arm's reach of Rannicky and almost as close to Blue Jack. His deep bass had a lazy drawl, "I reckon you're jest a-guessin', Mistah, but you're gittin' powerful warm."

THE handsome outlaw negligently leaned back against the bar and folded his arms. His smile was even more cordial, but the crafty look persisted. He shook his head. "I wasn't guessin'. I've heard that Blizzard Wilson is about the meanest knife fighter and best rifle shot in Texas, and you—"

Again his eyes flickered to Blue Jack and back to the big Ranger. "They tell me that Badger Coe is the fastest man who ever buckled on a brace of shortguns and set out to make a name for himself!"

In a flash Badger saw through the outlaw's game. With cruelty characteristic of the frontier underworld, Dick Roe was trying to do something he had been accused of doing upon other occasions—deliberately starting a quarrel between two dangerous men, simply for the fun of watching them shoot each other to pieces! He could have no other reason, thought the Ranger. Rannicky Roe was an artist with a gun, and no coward. Had he wanted to get rid of Blue Jack, he'd have shot it out with the killer.

At any rate his murderous trick worked to perfection, for his praise of another gun-fighter was a red rag to Blue Jack's vicious envy. The gunman's thin face went utterly cold, colored like the ashes of a wood fire long dead. His pale eyes lost what little luster they ever had. Hooked in his belt above his holsters, his nervous fingers—thin and ashen like his face, suddenly stopped as motionless as if frozen there.

Badger read the sign. Instantly he took the offensive. Fixing his gaze upon the gunman, he growled at Roe, "Maybeso, but I ain't out to git the name that this here blue-bellied rat has got!"

Coming at a time when he was all set to get the jump on his man, this challenge was like an unexpected slap in the face to Blue Jack. It did what Badger had intended it should do—disturbed the gunman's finely tuned and tightly drawn nerves, causing him to hesitate for that

fraction of time which determines whether a man shall live or die when it is a question of speed alone. Moreover, Badger drew with his left hand—another disconcerting move.

The young Ranger's gun roared at the top of its holster. It flipped up and down almost faster than the eye could follow and a second roar came after the first so quickly as to form one deafening crash. Blue Jack was suddenly enveloped by swirling smoke through which flames darted at him, fastening upon his shirt and vest. The force of the explosions, like an invisible fist with tremendous power behind it, drove him against the bar and for an instant appeared to pin him there. A moment later his slender body broke at the middle and he fell face-downward to the floor. Angry clouds of smoke wove and twisted sinuously above him while his ashen fingers groped for the gun that escaped them, clawing blindly at the rough pine boards.

Richard Randolph Roe stood perfectly still, arms folded. His eyes darted from the man on the floor to Badger, swiftly, a bit incredulously. Then he grinned and folded his arms tighter.

He nodded, coughed in the smoke, and said huskily, "Mighty fast shootin', big fellow, mighty fast. But believe me, I'd just about as soon stop your lead as to stop that man-killin' fist you had all cocked for me. I'm no fool. You won't need it. Put it away!"

Badger relaxed his right arm and holstered his gun.

Blizzard's hard voice came ripping through the moment of silence that followed, "Steady men! I'll drill the cuss that makes a move!"

Instantly all eyes were focussed upon him. A yard from the wall, left side to the room, he loomed through the smoke a grim and forbidding figure, his rifle at waist level, cocked, his finger on its trigger and its muzzle staring unwaveringly at Rannicky Roe. The blond outlaw calmly

looked Blizzard in the eye, then carelessly shrugged his shoulders in a gesture that was eloquently insolent. Afterwards he glanced down at Blue Jack who lay almost at his feet, dying in a fit of feeble coughing.

A couple of yards away, a burly man stood at the bar with one arm upon it and a bottle of beer in that hand. For no apparent reason he lifted his other hand to his hip above his holstered gun. Blizzard shifted his rifle as quick as a flash. An ear-splitting crack! The burly man stared open-mouthed at the shattered fragment of bottle in his fingers. A trick shot, just a grandstand play with which the tall Ranger hoped to impress his audience; and it did. The spectators remained utterly still, some staring fearfully at the tall rifleman, others eyeing him with watchful hostility.

Into the silence came Blue Jack's faltering cough and the tinkle of his spurs.

At the far end of the bar Liveoak appeared suddenly to awake from a dream. While the crash of Blizzard's rifle still reverberated through the place, the scraggy old hunter crossed the floor with long strides. His moccasined feet made no sound. He moved as silently as the ghost he claimed to be. He went to Blue Jack and bent over him. Smoke shrouded his massive frame, crawled through his white hair and beard. He muttered something, then jerked erect. Thrusting an arm aloft to the limit of its great length, he pointed with a bony finger that trembled.

"Yander it goes!" he exclaimed in a hush voice. "His ghost! I see it plain as day. It's blue—blue like a mountain sky. And it's lookin' back at us, a-cussin' and a-coughin' and a-holdin' its belly. God! It's a-p'intin' at Rannicky Roe! There now. It's gone! Swallowed by smoke."

BADGER looked where the old man pointed. He saw warped poles and rough slabs, and beneath them blue clouds writhing in strange shapes, slithering here

and there as if seeking a way to escape. And he felt the hair on his neck rise.

The gaunt old giant let his arm fall. He looked down at the dead man, then fixed his gaze upon Badger as if the three of them were alone in the room. His voice rolled up from his great chest, deep, resonant, and his words fell slowly, ponderously, like the speech of an Indian orator.

"Big man, you're a maker of ghosts! I knowed it right away when I met up with you on the trail 'cause I seen ghosts a-follerin' you. They was a-walkin' and a-ridin' and a-traipsin' after you—bad ghosts, every last one of 'em bad like this here blue ghost that I jest seen. You need a new name. I'm a-givin' it to you. Ghost-maker!"

He put out his hand. Badger took it and they shook hands across the body of the dead gunman.

For the first time, Richard Randolph Roe's even calm deserted him. His face lost its youthful good looks, at once became years older, hard, cruel, enraged.

His melodious voice now rasped viciously, "Get to hell out of here—you crazy old devil, or I'll make a ghost out of you!"

And plainly he meant it. Badger saw murder in his eyes.

"Better go sorta slow," drawled the big Ranger. "Liveoak is already a ghost, and you cain't kill 'em." He paused briefly. Looking the outlaw squarely in the eye, he went on in a mellow voice, "And likewise he jest gimme a name, so he's a friend of mine."

The slightest sound was noticeable in the room. Boots scraped nervously, spurs jingled timidly, and a woman giggled. A stray breeze galloped through the door and an oil lamp fluttered overhead.

Rannicky Roe's blazing eyes dropped from Badger's face to his massive shoulders, long powerful arms, and big hairy fists that now rested significantly upon his hips as he stood so close—but a yard or so away. Perhaps the outlaw had heard

stories about Badger's fists, what they could do to a man, and he may have thought of his own handsome face of which he was obviously very proud. Perhaps he knew that such fists were faster than a gun. Or probably, as a man who had disciplined his emotions, he was ashamed of his momentary loss of self control.

At any rate, he changed instantly. He smiled his boyish smile, and said lightly, "Of course I'd ought to have sense enough to know that you can't kill a ghost. The drinks are on the house. Everybody to the bar—men, women, and children!"

Surprised by this quick change, Badger couldn't help thinking, "The ornery cuss ain't noways askeerd to take kivver when it's the sensible thing to do. Smarter'n Old Satan hisself and nine times as dangerous."

Those not already at the bar hesitated, looking inquiringly at Blizzard. He nodded curtly, lowered his rifle. One could almost hear the concerted sigh of relaxation. The crowd came to life, talking, laughing, making unnecessary noise. Two men picked up Blue Jack's body and hurried to the door with it as if anxious to get rid of it and return. A large swarthy man who had been standing in the small room with a girl, glanced furtively at Blizzard and slipped out through the back door.

Badger saw this maneuver and instantly thought of their horses. Hell of a place to be set afoot!

WHILE standing at the bar waiting for his drink, the young Ranger noticed that his lanky partner was sort of hanging back. He seemed to have trouble in getting his cartridge belt and holster to hang just right, and his knife sheath was acting contrary. Badger grinned to himself. Blizzard had worn that rigging for years and it just naturally fell into place when he buckled it on. However, by the time the two men returned from disposing of Blue Jack and found places at the bar the ser-

geant had everything fixed to suit him. He set his hat squarely on his head and pulled it well down. Again he lifted his rifle to waist level, cocked it, and aimed at the small of Rannicky's back.



"Roe!" he barked. "Looky here!"

There and then Rannicky Roe showed some of the stuff that had earned him a reputation up and down the frontier, and made him a terror among gunfighters. There was no mirror to tell him what was going on behind him and he had no time to think. He acted as if moved by the instincts of a wild animal, a hunted creature. Spinning around, he swayed his body enough to distract the aim of anyone who might have him covered and in the same motion his right hand flashed to its holster with unbelievable speed.

Standing beside him, Badger was behind him as he turned. The young Ranger's heavy fist crunched down upon his wrist in the nick of time and his six-shooter clattered to the floor. Had Badger been a split second slower, Blizzard would have been compelled to shoot to save himself.

Already keyed up and on the alert for some daring move by his partner, Badger instantly caught onto what Blizzard was fixing to do and guessed the part he'd have to play. He jerked both his guns before Rannicky had time to bat an eye, backed quickly away from the bar.

"Put 'em up!" he bellowed. "Everybody!"

A row of startled faces stared at him. He moved his weapons from side to side enough to create the illusion that every man there was looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter. Oaths burst out but hands went up—some in haste, others more slowly; and there were some that didn't move at all, Rannicky Roe's among others.

Blizzard kept his rifle trained upon the outlaw leader. He repeated the command, snapped it in a high-pitched voice with a cutting edge, "H'ist 'em, Roe, or I'll shore as hell earmark you and sp'ile yo' good looks. Reach!"

And the hard-bitten sergeant meant every word of it.

During the space of several seconds Rannicky Roe did nothing but stare at the Rangers, first one and then the other. Amazement and disbelief, then conviction showed in his handsome face. This quickly gave way to a red rage that for an instant defied the guns that threatened him. But he must have read Blizzard's intentions and weighed the possibilities for, after a visible effort, he got control of himself. He lifted his hands as if it were painful to do so. The others followed his lead and soon the bar was lined with men and women, too, who held their hands in the air and flung curses at the daredevil team that caught them napping.

"What the hell?" snarled Roe. "Is this a stick-up?"

"Yep, she's a stick-up," barked the lanky sergeant. "Jest a dram from yo' own bottle."

He jerked his head at Badger. "Slide over here where you can git a good sight on all of 'em. And recollect—we dasn't take no chances. No fancy gunplay. Shoot to kill!"

BADGER moved over to where he had a clear view of the lineup at the bar and end bar. He thanked his lucky stars that Blizzard had sense enough to wait until they bunched like that before starting his fool play. Two men holding up one of the meanest dives in Texas, a thousand miles from nowhere, no help, no nothin'—just plain gall! He was scared clean through and through, but he wanted to laugh and yell and shoot out the lights, and he wouldn't have swapped places with the Governor of Texas.

Blizzard moved fast. In no time at all

he gathered the gold and small amount of paper money on the gaming tables, and his little feed sack was heavy when he finished.

Badger got plenty of amusement from watching the crowd's reactions while this was going on. At first they were fighting mad, ready to explode, but they needed someone to touch them off. Rannicky Roe was the man to do it, but evidently he figured that it would mean certain death for him, since one of the young Ranger's guns kept him covered. They soon calmed down noticeably and began to see humor in the situation, and before the sergeant had completed his collections several men were grinning wryly while poking fun at themselves and their neighbors. To Badger's surprise, the outlaw leader experienced or at least affected a change of heart. He was one of the first to relax and go to smiling. His sharp eyes followed every move Blizzard made while sacking the money, and he had the look of a man who was somewhat doubtful about what he ought to say.

Presently he sent a humorous glance up and down the bar, and sang out, "Boys and girls, don't you admire their guts even if they are crazy as hell to think they can get away with this?"

A babble of mixed voices were lifted in a hearty affirmative. One slim blond girl brazenly asked Badger to take her with him when he left, swearing that she could ride and shoot like a man and cuss a heap better. Another—neither slim nor blond—told Blizzard in rough language that she once trailed with a band of horse thieves and with nothing better than a campfire she could cook victuals that would put meat on his bones. His long neck and large ears got redder than ever. The crowd laughed, Rannicky Roe the most heartily of all.

The sergeant halted near the door and placed the sack on the floor so as to have both hands free. He stood erect, facing the room. Embarrassment made him look even fiercer, more cruel, more like a man

with whom it would be dangerous to tamper.

The gang sobered. Laughter died to pale grins. Many eyes were fastened upon the muzzle of his rifle. It seemed to catch and hold them. Again it stared Rannicky Roe in the face, but the outlaw made a good pretense of ignoring it.

Said Blizzard quietly, coldly, "We're leavin'. I'm mighty nigh shore that a big black skunk has done lifted our hosses. We aim to find 'em. While we're a-scoutin' round outside, this here room is the safest place for you-all and don't you forgit it!"

Badger backed slowly toward the door, keeping out of his partner's line of fire.

Rannicky Roe looked steadily at Blizzard, frowning thoughtfully. When Badger reached the door and the sergeant stooped to retrieve the money sack, the outlaw said smoothly, "I'm letting you get away with something this time, High Pockets, simply because I'm too smart to risk my hide for a little money that came easy. But I fully expect to see you again sometime."

He put a world of meaning into that last sentence. Smiling whimsically, he went on to inquire, "If it's a fair question, where do you two hellbenders expect to squander all that money?"

EVIDENTLY he didn't anticipate a straightforward answer and was surprised when he got it.

"I reckon The Flats* will git mighty all of it," drawled Blizzard with the utmost frankness, "so if you was to roll in befo' it's all gone, maybe we can play a few friendly keerds jest to see can you git some of it back."

Rannicky laughed heartily. Up and down the bar other men joined in. The brawny, heavy-faced woman with disheveled black hair again spoke up, "There's the man for me!" she exclaimed huskily, "and damned

if I won't trail him to hell and gone to catch him."

"I'll be there!" declared the outlaw, speaking loudly to make himself heard above laughter. "But *you* won't. You've got too much sense to take chances with me again."

Blizzard backed through the door without another word.

But Badger took the time to grin at the crowd, and rumble, "Huh! Don't you fool yo'self, Rannicky. That there amblin' ally-gater ain't got nary a brain in his haid."

He waved a gun at Liveoak, who stood straight and still near the blood on the floor where Blue Jack died. "So long, Old Timer! Take good keer of my ghosts."

The Rangers ran to the end of the building, stooping to pass a window on the way. There, to Badger's surprise, Blizzard stopped. He looked back around the corner, holding his rifle in readiness. Pandemonium had broken loose inside but Rannicky's voice was clearly audible above the racket, cautioning everybody to stay away from doors and windows. Presently a measure of quiet returned, there was some whispering which the sergeant couldn't catch, then they commenced to put out the lights!

Blizzard turned and whispered rapidly in Badger's ear, "Run 'round behind them cabins and hit for the corral. 'Tain't far and they won't be lookin' for you on that side. I'll go to where we left the hosses. If they're gone I'll sound my warwhoop. You find 'em. I'll keep these here polecats busy. If you don't hear me squall, circle back to the nags and git 'em out onto the trail. Then holler and I'll come. Now scoot and take keer!"

Badger ran, bending low and putting all he had into it. The full moon had climbed to a point well above the hills and was going strong, as if determined to make up for lost time. The young Ranger couldn't recall when he'd seen a moon so all-fired bright, and he swore to himself that a blind man could see him dashing behind

* Old Fort Griffin. The flat was level ground at the foot of Government Hill on the banks of Clear Fork of the Brazos, where most of the town and all of the saloons and brothels were situated.

the cabins and across fifty yards of open ground to the corral. He had to pass within range of the back door of The Dog Hole and two of its windows, but Blizzard had guessed right. He was within ten feet of the shed-roofed stalls when the first shot cracked at a window in the small room. A bullet slapped the boards three feet from his head as he went around the corner. He jerked his hat down over his forehead and pulled his bandanna up to his eyes to hide the white of his face, then dropped to the ground and squirmed back to where he could see the saloon. With an effort he resisted a temptation to pump lead into the two windows in the south side of the building, but that would be foolish. It would merely give him away to the man outside and moreover, he might hurt some of the girls.

So he lay still, breathing hard and listening. Shore as hell hoped Belial and Solomon were there. He could get all the ponies they needed 'cause the stalls were full of 'em, but damned if he'd ever leave without Belial! Raised the ornery scamp from a colt, l'arned him a whole slew of good things and a heap of his cussedness. No sah! He'd go up the trail on Belial in spite of Satan hisself!

He had lain there for just a moment but it seemed like a long time. Maybe Blizzard wasn't going to sound his yell. Maybe the skunk that sneaked out of The Dog Hole wasn't after the horses, or failed to get away with them when he tried. Neither of them would permit a stranger to mount, but Solomon would suffer himself to be lead and Belial *might*—depending upon the state of his temper at the time. With each passing second Badger's hopes soared. Old Blizzard should've been there long before now 'cause he was mighty fast on his feet, and—

Suddenly the sergeant's yell arose from underbrush in front of the saloon, to the east rather than north of it where they dismounted—a piercing, hair-raising cry that ripped the night apart and left a mo-

ment of silence in its wake. Badger grimly muttered an oath. Naturally Blizzard had circled to where he could command the front and one side of the dive so that the gang would be forced to pass within range of his rifle to reach the horses in the corral. Hard upon the heels of the yell came the crack of his Winchester. A man cried out, swore viciously inside the saloon. Some pore cuss got careless, thought Badger, and found out what that there redheaded devil could do with his rifle and cat's eyes in bright moonlight.

The big Ranger went to work. He moved fast, realizing that Rannicky Roe wouldn't be able to hold that gang of young hot-heads under cover much longer and Blizzard couldn't keep them there if they made a run for it. Badger first made certain that Belial and Solomon were not in the stalls. By slipping through the fence at the far end of the shed and hugging the shadows beneath it, he was able to do this without exposing himself to fire from the saloon windows. Returning to where he entered the corral, he paused briefly to consider his next move. An idea came to him, a devilish thought that brought a chuckle with it.

The fence was typical of that region; posts planted at frequent intervals in pairs, side by side at right angles to the line, a few inches apart; four horizontal poles with ends inserted between the posts and originally secured there by strips of green hide which subsequently had shrunk and hardened. A large gate opened into the corral directly across from the stalls, but it was in plain sight of the saloon and therefore of no use to Badger. So he made an opening by cutting the hide fastenings with his bowie knife and removing a section of poles where the fence tied onto the shed, careful to avoid discovery by keeping down and working from the outside. He then untied thirteen of the fourteen horses in stalls, the fourteenth being a half-broken little gray—the snortiest one of the lot. A couple of the animals backed

out into the corral, but the remainder continued to munch hay in their stalls for which the young Ranger was thankful. He next found a saddle blanket and fastened it securely to the little gray's tail in spite of the pony's vigorous protests, escaping destruction by keeping a stall partition between him and the horse. While this ruckus was in progress three more ponies backed out of their stalls, but they blended with the loose stock in the corral so quickly as not to alarm the saloon.

Badger then hurried from stall to stall, shoving the remaining ponies into the corral. Before he had finished, shouts arose in The Dog Hole and Blizzard's rifle cracked four times with great rapidity. When all the horses had left the shed, the big Ranger reached through the partition and slipped the little gray's hackamore. He afterward declared that wild-eyed pony turned a back somersault out of its stall. At any rate it hit the corral squealing and pitching and fighting the earth and everything else that came within range. It spread panic and when it went to circling the corral in a mad race to escape the blanket the other horses joined in. On their second dash around they hit the opening in the fence and went tearing across the valley toward timber on the South Fork. Badger stood in the shadow of the shed and watched them fade away, thinking that they'd probably run ten miles and scatter to the four winds, and thankful that the freighter's remuda of mules wasn't in the corral to get caught in the stampede.

"There now," he mused, "everybody's afoot. And by the Eternal, I *gotta* find our hosses!"

AS IF to emphasize the seriousness of the situation, a burst of angry yells and a fusillade of shots came from the saloon. Bullets ripped into the shed and gnawed at corral poles, but Badger knew that they were fired blindly and could find him only by accident. Dropping to his

knees, he crawled away at right angles to the stalls through a patch of jimson weeds to an old stump fifty feet west. From that point he had a clear view of The Dog Hole and the cabins behind it. While he crouched there, two men suddenly darted from the back door of the saloon and raced toward the cabin nearest the corral. Blizzard's rifle barked viciously, twice, farther around to the south and much closer to the corral. One of the runners stumbled and fell, then crawled back toward the saloon dragging a leg. The other staggered to the cabin door, sank down against it and reached up as if groping for the latch string. Six-shooters roared from the windows of The Dog Hole, no doubt firing at the flashes of the sergeant's Winchester; but Badger knew that his plainsman partner would keep moving and find good cover wherever a wolf could hide himself.

Something over thirty yards away on the young Ranger's left ran a line of timber which extended northward behind the cabins, apparently reaching to the clump of Spanish oak where they left the horses. There was no cover to be found between him and the timber, but he made a dash for it regardless. Before he had gone ten feet someone in the saloon saw him, someone who could shoot like the very devil. As he bent low and ran, a bullet swished over his back so close he could feel it. Another split the air almost in his face. He strained every muscle, swore that he was standing still and the timber a mile off. A third slug dusted him, tore through his shirt sleeve and tugged at his vest where it flared open. He made a fine pretense of falling headlong, tumbling and rolling into the trees.

Rannicky Roe's great voice boomed from a saloon window. "So 'long, Badger! Take your ghosts to hell!"

So the trick had worked. The outlaw thought him hit. Bully! The others would think the same thing—the man who lifted the horses, if within hearing, and any

who may have slipped away through the back door before Blizzard got around to where he could cut them off. Badger cautiously retrieved his hat, tried his guns to see that they were not fouled by dust, and made certain that his knife was in place. Might need that knife before he got the horses. He stood still for a moment to get his breath, thinking fast. Solomon and Belial would be mighty hard for a stranger to handle, so the fellow that sneaked away from The Dog Hole couldn't have gone very far with them; probably holding them under cover some place near by, if Belial hadn't killed the cuss. Better scout the timber bordering the clearing and find out for sure; take chances on meeting up with some of The Dog Hole bunch.

The young Ranger went northward through the trees as swiftly and quietly as he could, knowing that he had no time to waste. In the rear of the cabins and not more than fifty feet from the nearest one, he paused to listen. During a momentary lull in the noise from the saloon the voices of two men came indistinctly through the cabin window, warning him that some of the outlaws had escaped from The Dog Hole. Perhaps others were at large in the timber. He proceeded with greater caution, keeping away from the edge where the moon insistently peered in as if determined to expose him to his enemies.

Having at length reached a point near where they left the horses and as yet heard or seen nothing of them, Badger muttered an oath and abandoned all thought of caution. To hell with Roe and his bunch! He'd fight any of 'em that were runnin' loose in the woods and he'd find his horse in spite of 'em. He whistled through his fingers—a shrill sound that penetrated all other sounds and carried far—the Pawnee whistle which Blizzard had learned from those master horse thieves and taught to his young partner. Belial would recognize it as far as he could hear it and he'd be

sure to come, or answer if he couldn't get away. Badger stood rigid, holding his breath, listening. He imagined that every living thing between the prongs of the river must have heard that whistle, and he knew that night sounds around him sank to a lower level or died out as if awaiting to hear it again. But nothing from Belial. The silence seemed to mock him, to dare him to break it. He drew a long breath. Once more he whistled, longer, louder, even more penetrating.



Belial answered sharply, wrathfully, an explosive nicker that ended in a surge of power; but for all that, it carried an appealing note. Sound was tricky in the valley, glancing from the hills, darting here and there as if trying to lose itself in the timber; but Badger was prepared for this and located his horse somewhere to the westward, below him, and not far away. With a low growl of mingled anger and satisfaction he turned abruptly to the left and strode rapidly through trees and undergrowth, making little effort to go quietly. Badger Coe was hunting trouble. The call from his horse had done more to arouse his fighting blood than anything that had happened since he left The Dog Hole.

And the big fellow was neither surprised nor chagrined when presently he heard something moving behind him. He knew his whistle would fetch 'em, so let 'em come—damn their hides! Swinging over the trunk of a fallen burr-oak, he crouched down behind its dead branches and waited for his pursuer. A few moments later the rustle of leaves and the cautious scraping of twigs stopped. Badger found a piece of bark and tossed it ahead

as far as he could through an opening in the timber. The trailer came on, but much more slowly now. Suddenly the roar of six-shooters and the crackle of Blizzard's rifle again rolled over the valley, putting to flight all other sounds. The big Ranger cursed under his breath. He hoped old Blizzard could keep 'em penned a little longer, but he wished to hell the racket would stop so a fella could hear something. It was plenty light in the timber, for the trees were widely spaced and the undergrowth was bunched, so he got a glimpse of his man before the echoes died away—a lanky cuss with a six-shooter in his hand: looked seven feet tall in that tricky light. Badger gathered his muscles for a leap. This was no time or place for gun play; and besides, he was in a mood to get his hands on something after all this duckin' and dodgin' and runnin' from trouble.

The tall outlaw halted before reaching the Ranger's tree, six feet distant. He peered ahead, listening, and he scanned the shadows about him. Badger stopped breathing. He thanked the old moon for filtering through leaves and branches and dabbing spots and stripes on things until nothing looked anyways natural. At last the lanky man moved on. He bent at the waist, thrust his head forward at the end of his long neck, and shambled awkwardly like some gaunt four-legged thing walking on its hind legs.

One long step, a leap, and Badger landed on the outlaw's back. His two hundred odd pounds drove the fellow headfirst into the leaves that carpeted the floor of the forest, and his powerful arm stifled any outcry by clamping around his victim's throat like the coil of an anaconda. But the man proved to be as slippery as an eel and as vicious as a water moccasin. As if warned by some mysterious instinct, at the very instant Badger sprang upon him and aimed a blow at his gun hand with the barrel of a six-shooter, the fellow whipped his weapon upward and fired blindly over his own shoulder. And that

came near to being the end of the Ranger's trail. The blast burned one side of his face and singed his hair. The terrific concussion temporarily deafened his right ear. Dazed and partially stunned as he was, his mind was numbed but through it with leaden feet staggered the thought that one side of his head had been blown away.

Taught to fight by years of incessant training, Badger's limbs carried on the struggle without orders from his brain. The iron fingers of his right hand released their own weapon and clamped onto the wrist that wielded the outlaw's gun. His legs closed about the man's gaunt body with crushing force, like massive wire cables. The clothing on his back failed to hide the great muscles that rolled and twisted and knotted there. Every ounce of his magnificent strength went into a backward, joint-breaking jerk by his right hand and an upward heave by his left arm and shoulder. A body having Badger's weight and muscular development might have withstood the strain inflicted upon it, but the outlaw was a slender man.

The moon filtered through the leaves, painting black and silver spots upon them as they lay there like leopards exhausted by mortal combat. After a moment Badger staggered to his feet, leaving a dead man on the ground.

While he groped for his hat and gun, one thought pounded mercilessly inside the young Ranger's throbbing head—"Gotta find the hosses—down yander a piece—gotta find 'em quick!"

A sharp exchange of shots—six-shooters and Blizzard's rifle—ripped through the fog that still dulled his senses, and he went lumbering down a gentle slope toward a dense line of timber in the sag below. The clean, cool night air rapidly cleared his head. Soon he began to think lucidly and realized he was making a fool of himself, tearing along blindly that way. Everybody must have heard Slim's shot, so they all knew he was alive and a-poundin' dust. He stopped, listened for a moment, then

swore a round oath to himself. For up from the sag came a horse's angry snort, Belial—he'd known it anywhere; and much nearer, the sound of a man's running feet a-headin' his way!

That would be Blackie, the cuss who stole the horses. Bully! No need to keep quiet any longer. He'd go to meet Blackie and he'd shoot it out with the skunk, damn his dirty hide!

They met in an opening—a tiny park surrounded by oaks whose waxen leaves shimmered in the silvery light; and in full view of a heartless moon that had sent its rays to facilitate numberless tragedies upon a bloody frontier, they fought to the death. The big outlaw jerked his gun and fired when they were all of fifty yards apart. He hurried the shot, desperately, almost fearfully. He missed cleanly. Badger drew swiftly, then fired with deadly deliberation. His first bullet may have killed the man, but he sent two more into the hulking body before it had time to go down. It sank wearily onto a bed of soft grass.

Belial nickered frantically, almost a scream.

Growled Badger hoarsely, "Steady, old fella! I'm on my way."

CHAPTER II

THE TOUGHEST TOWN ON THE FRONTIER

THE Rangers held their horses to an easy lope on the northbound trail, neither having a word to say. Since he placed a high valuation upon human life—his own and the other man's—Badger suffered a period of despondency following the recent violence and bloodshed. Throughout his career as a frontier fighting man it had always been that way. He couldn't help it. The fact that he had fought in self-defense or taken the offensive with the law at his back didn't make a particle of difference after the fire of battle died down. Gruesome scenes re-enacted themselves before his mind's eye. Above

the pounding of their horses' hoofs he heard Blue Jack a-coughin' on the floor at his feet, and the dying jingle of the outlaw's spurs accompanied the tinkle of his own. The feel of Belial's muscles between his thighs reminded him of how Slim's body jerked and quivered and went limp. Scowling straight ahead up the empty trail he again saw Blackie's face with its surprised look following the shock of a bullet, and he saw the big thief stiffen and lift himself on his toes before wilting to the ground.

Badger stole a glance through the dust that hovered over the trail behind him. Damn old Liveoak and his ghosts!

He rode on in silence, cursing himself for a chicken-hearted fool, and by the time they reached the trail that pronged off toward CD ranch headquarters the resiliency of youth had in a great measure revived his spirits. Outwardly the big fellow was again his happy-go-lucky self, eager to torment his close-mouthed friend into talking when he had things to think about and didn't want to talk.

"I'll admit that we done pulled some fool plays in our day," observed Badger without preamble, "but that there Dog Hole shenanigan lays 'em all in the shade. What in creation got into you anyhow?"

"Smart play, mighty smart."

The young Ranger snorted. "Huh! Powerful dumb you mean. If I hadn't fit, bled and died the way I did, we'd a-left our bones back yander in the forks of the Llanos."

Blizzard ignored the remark, going on to say, "That there play of our'n was what old Cuhn'l Pat Dolan used to call a stratygim. Trouble with you is, you don't know a stratygim when it kicks you in the face."

Badger tenderly cupped a big palm over his scorched ear. "Maybe not, but I shore as hell know when one of 'em earmarks me for life. What in thunderation is a stratygim?"

"Simple as ABC," declared the sergeant. "It's jest a po-lite name for a brace game

where you're fixed with a holdout so's to run in a cold deck and deal some cuss a fistful of powder or a set of marked tickets. But honest folks and army men call it a stratygin."

The big Ranger retorted quickly, "Wa'n't nothin' polite 'bout that there Dog Hole rumpus, and I ain't talkin'."

"Oh, yes, they was," asserted Blizzard. "Rannicky Roe was powerful po-lite and plumb sociable."

"Fiddlesticks! That's jest his way of bein' ornery."

"And they wa'n't many hard words passed, considerin'."

Badger screwed a finger through the bullet hole in his vest. He growled, "But a heap of lead passed me a-travelin' to beat hell."

"Come to think of it," drawled the lanky redhead, "the boys did do a leetle moonlight shootin' when they seen their ponies a-lightin' out for the south pole thataway. Betcha they'll be a whole slew of sore cawns in The Dog Hole befo' sundown tomorrer."

He chuckled. Badger heard him and wished to the devil he was as cold-blooded as Blizzard, who shot to kill when enforcing the law and had no ghosts a-trailin' him.

Aloud the young Ranger demanded, "Get back to this here stratygin thing befo' you forgit why we done it. What good did it do us?"

The sergeant reined in to a foxtrot. He spoke like a man well satisfied with the way the world was treating him. "Done us a heap of good. It's our job to out-figger one of the slickest scalawags that ever raised hell in Texas and I calc'late we got a mighty fine start."

"We got two three thousand dollars of good hard money, if that's what you mean," admitted Badger, "and when we hit The Flats I aim to use some of it to drown my sorrows and wash my sins away."

"Nary a dime of it goes for drownin'

and washin' pu'poses," retorted Blizzard firmly. "Billy West's widder and chillun get every last cent of it. With good land dirt cheap the way it is, she'll have enough to buy herself a right nice farm and keep her young'uns to home. Fact is, that's one reason why we taken the money off'n old Rannicky."

THE young Ranger voiced his hearty approval, and wound up by saying, "Far's I'm consarned we didn't need no other reason for stickin' up the dive, but if we had one I wanta know what it was."

"Plain as day," drawled the lean sergeant. "We looked the situation square in the face and made up our minds we'd better run."

Badger struggled with this cryptic statement for a moment, then exploded, "Damn it man! Talk sense if you know how."

Blizzard answered with exasperating calmness, "Sense is all I ever talk. The whole trouble is—that there knot you call yo' haid ain't no more use to you than a wart on yo' thumb. You'd be a heap less bother to yo'self and everybody else if you was to soak a string in coal oil and tie it round yo' neck and burn that blasted wart off'n yo' shoulders. I got matches."

In spite of all he could do to keep from it, Badger grinned. He hoped that Blizzard didn't catch him at it. "You got misery a-campin' on yo' trail," he growled. "I'll make you suffer when they's plenty folks around to watch you squirm. Go ahead."

"As I was fixin' to say," continued the sergeant as if his young friend hadn't spoken, "some of the best lawmen in the country has been chasin' old Rannicky for no tellin' how long, but they ain't never got close enough to taste his dust. He gives 'em the slip every time. I happen to know that the Pinkertons had their noses to his trail and one of 'em even got as far as to j'in up with his bunch. That there detective sent one letter in to his office from som'eres up in the Wichitas,

but the next news they got from him come to 'em in a more or less roundabout way."

"How was that?"

Blizzard pulled Solomon down to a walk and went to rolling a smoke. "Oakville woke up one mawnin' and found a man a-hangin' on a limb smack in the middle of the town square. Somebody taken his picture and sent it off to the newspapers, and that's how the Pinkertons got more news from their man. Rannicky jest dotes on stringin' his enemies up in public places thataway."

Badger grunted. "Now I'm able to understand why we done made ourselves his best enemies. Go ahead."

"That's it exactly," drawled the sergeant. "If all them smart manhunters run after Dick Roe and cain't get enough on the cuss to hang him, what chance have we got? They spy on him and get hung, and they chase him and get saddle sores. So we make *him* chase *us* jest to see what happens. I done noticed that a fella is powerful keerful when he's on the dodge, but when he goes to chasin' somethin' he's shore to get a mite keerless off 'n' on—like for instance, you runnin' after a gal."

The sergeant paused to light his cigarette.

Badger had nothing to say for a moment, thinking all these things over. Pretty soon the humor of the situation struck him. A chuckle started in the region of his stirrups and grew to be a man-sized laugh that exploded from his big mouth and rolled out across the prairie. A large white owl abandoned its rabbit supper and took wing from a point near the trail, screaming blasphemies at the laughter.

"Damn yo' cussed hide!" roared the young Ranger, "you're too slick to live but I ain't got the heart to kill you. Jest eemagine it—Rangers a-hittin' for the tall timbers with bandits a-yowlin' for their hair. The law's on the run with sinners a-nippin' at its heels. Let 'er rip, old Hossface! I'll hang and rattle until my bones clench in the leather. What next?"

"Wimmen!" Blizzard almost snarled the word.

"Huh?"

"Yep—wimmen!"

"Bully! How many and where at?"

"Too damned many and the woods is full of 'em," snapped the woman-shy red-head, "but Rannicky's pussonal gal is the one we're after."

Badger slid over into one stirrup so as to face his solemn companion. "Whoaup!" he exclaimed. "We can stick old Rannicky up and take his money and maybe get hung jest once, but if we was to go to pesterin' his gal I betcha we'd get hung twice at both ends simultaneous. Where is she and what does she look like?"

"She's at Griffin and men fight over her."

Badger straightened in his saddle. "Let's us get along to Griffin. I'm a-honin' for a fight."

"Jest you sorta muzzle yo' ambition, Big Fella," dryly cautioned Blizzard. "Befo' we finish this here scout you'll be squallin' for peace. And likewise, we ain't in no sweat to get to Griffin."

"How come? Are we askeerd 'cause we know Rannicky'll be there?"

The loose-jointed sergeant slouched in his saddle, looking straight ahead at Solomon's ears. He spoke thoughtfully, "Yep, we're mighty nigh skeerd enough to shake our spurs off, but that ain't why we're lazyin' along jest admirin' the country. We want the news of that there Dog Hole fracas to get to Griffin and be lied about and stretched a-plenty befo' we roll in."

"Hell, yes! I understand. We wanta make shore that old Rannicky hangs us high and fatal."

Blizzard continued a bit sternly, "I'm hopin' and prayin' he tries it hard and frequent, and that's one reason why we're a-takin' our time. Mistah Richard Randolph Roe is somebody on the Camp Griffin range and clean on up into The Nations and he's right proud of his reppitation for bein' a bad man to monkey with,

so the stories 'bout what a pair of peaceable pilgrims done to him and his bunch will work on him wuss'n hokey-pokey on a green bronc. I calc'late he'll be a-steam-in' good and maybeso plumb reckless by the time we get there if we don't hurry none."

"Sounds mighty likely and damned dangerous," admitted the big Ranger, hiding his enthusiasm for the plan. "Have we got any more good reasons for takin' root out here on the prairie?"

"Off hand I can think of one powerful good reason," declared the sergeant. "If we jest hang back and give them Camp Griffin liars half a chance they'll have everybody thinkin' we're ring-tailed snorters from who laid the chunk, then when we show up some of Rannicky's enemies will come a-edgin' over confidential-like to see if they can't get us to do what they'd love to do to him but dassn't. Maybe we'll stumble onto somethin' thataway."

"Nary a chance of it," grunted Badger. "You won't never l'arn nothin' from Dick Roe's enemies. He's so damned smart he watches 'em too close for 'em to get anythin' on him."

"You *could* be right, but most generally you're wrong," observed Blizzard. "If Rannicky has got as many cussed brains as I figger he has, he puts in mighty nigh all his time a-watchin' his *friends*, 'cause he can bank on what his enemies are a-hankerin' to do to him, but you can't never tell 'bout friends."

IT WAS well after midnight when the Rangers aroused the half-dugout CD bunkhouse. Old Tom Wilson, the foreman, opened the door, rubbing his eyes and cussing. In response to Blizzard's question he said that old Buck, their pack-horse, was out in a stall eating his head off and why in hell hadn't they just come on in and spread their blankets on the floor and kept their damned mouths shut instead of disturbing everybody's peace this way.

The scheming redhead was quick to take advantage of an opportunity to start rumors. "Much obliged, sah, but we gotta keep on a-ramblin'."

Old Tom noticeably picked up his ears, but he glanced at the moonlit sky and



drawled carelessly, "'Tis a fine night for ridin', 'specially when a fella's leavin' one place and goin' to another'n."

Badger swallowed a laugh.

Blizzard nodded solemnly. "Shore is. If a man keeps a eye peeled he can see a long ways in front and behind, mostly behind him."

He swung back into the saddle, having dismounted to pound on the door. "Come to think of it," he drawled lazily, "d'you-all like buryin's?"

Old Tom crossed the threshold, closing the door at his back. "Yes sahree I'm a two-fisted mourner, pervidin' I ain't the party of the fust part." He cocked his white head to one side and squinted up at the Rangers. "So I'll take it kindly if you'll tell me where I can run onto a frustrate buryin' 'cause I'm shore hongry for one of 'em."

Blizzard shifted his rifle from theommel of his saddle to the crook of his left arm. "They had a leetle shootin' scrape down to The Dog Hole this evenin'."

"You don't say!"

"Uh-huh, but it didn't amount to nothin' much," continued the sergeant casually. "A ranny by the name of Blue Jack is fixed for plantin' and—"

"Blue Jack! Why—he was bad, mighty bad!"

"Uh-huh, but he ain't bad no more. I wouldn't be surprised if Rannicky buries the three of 'em all at once in one grave—cain't say for shore."

"Three of 'em? Hell! Did Roe wipe out three men?"

The lanky sergeant twisted the trailing ends of his mustache, first one side and then the other. "Nope, but I reckon he'll boss the buryin'. Chances is he won't put on much of a celebration though, 'cause he may be a leetle short of cash money 'bout now."

"Got thrown in a big game, huh?"

"Got stuck up," stated Blizzard in off-hand fashion. "Stuck up slick as a whistle, no foolin'."

"Cain't hardly believe it," declared the old foreman skeptically. "No Texas man has got guts enough to stick up Rannicky Roe's place, and if ary one was to try it he'd spend the balance of his days a-countin' grass roots."

"Betcha you're right all right," agreed the solemn Ranger, "but a pair of driftin' strays didn't have no better sense than to do it and two three thousand dollahs of Dog Hole money is a-hittin' the trail on its way to a new and better range. Calc'late we better mosey on."

He swung Solomon around. "We're shore much obliged to you-all for takin' keer of our—"

OLD TOM'S curiosity declared itself with a roar, "Hold on a minute, you tick-ridden sandhill crane! You dassn't go off and leave me a-hangin' 'by my toenails this way, 'cause my boys'll rip me apart if I ain't fixed to give 'em all the news."

"Shore hate to see that happen," drawled Blizzard, "but they ain't no more news. We have to amble along. Still got lots of country to see and we'd a heap ruther look at it by moonlight. So 'long, boss. Maybe we'll be hittin' you for a job of work some day, cain't never tell."

The old-timer took two long strides which carried him to the top of the short flight of dirt steps. "Jest you dast to try it! I'll fire you befo' I hire you, durn yo' cussed hides! What did Rannicky Roe do when you—when he got stuck up that—away?"

Badger couldn't keep still any longer. He answered with a deep chuckle, "Old Rannicky made a pass at his guns but he was jest a mite slow. Then he made some fightin' talk but nothin' come of it. After that he was as harmless as a leetle calf and as po-lite as a politician."

Old Tom just stood there in hickory shirt, red flannel drawers and bare feet, muttering an incoherent admixture of amazement and disbelief.

As the Rangers moved off toward the corral, Blizzard gave him a parting shot. "By the way—if you got any extry saddle stock you wanta sell off I betcha you can get top prices for 'em down to The Dog Hole in the mawnin'. Them two strays didn't know no better'n to set Rannicky and his boys afoot befo' they lit out."

"Looky here!" the foreman growled after them. "D'you lyin' pilgrims expect me to believe all that?"

Badger blandly inquired over his shoulder, "Why not? Down in the border country where we hail from sech things is all in a day's work."

The old-timer turned and went slowly down the steps, shaking his white head and talking to himself.

And this episode recurred a number of times—varied, of course, to fit the men and circumstances — while Badger and Blizzard were covering the two hundred miles which separated The Dog Hole and Fort Griffin. Two northbound trail crews with whom the Rangers camped at night, succeeded in dragging the story from Blizzard bit by bit. They would, he hoped and expected, embroider and embellish it and tell it along the cattle trail all the way to Kansas. While the officers were nooning at an isolated stage station, the keeper and his helper, the driver and passengers of a westbound stage heard the redheaded sergeant's cautiously rendered account of the affair—which simply meant that Rannicky Roe's disgrace would be talked about and laughed over as far west as El Paso, and perhaps beyond. However, when the Rang-

ers intercepted a San Antonio bound stage and dispatched twenty-eight hundred dollars to Ranger Billy West's widow at Beeville, they offered no explanation and, of course, no questions were asked.

SIX days after the Dog Hole encounter, Badger and Blizzard spent a night in camp with some woodcutters who supplied fuel to the army at Fort Griffin. Their hauler, an old freighter, had that day arrived with his wagon and trailer, six span of mules and a lurid account of the hold-up. The Rangers listened with perfectly straight faces while the old liar told how two stem-windin' strangers walked into Rannicky's den, shot bottles out of hands and ashes off of cigars, bulldozed two of Rannicky's best girls into promising to meet them in Griffin, killed five men and pistol-whipped Rannicky himself, gathered up all the money in the joint—anywhere from five to ten thousand—told Rannicky they were a-headin' for The Flats and dared him to meet 'em there; and the meanest trick of all, they stampeded every last hoof on the place and set the Dog Hole crowd afoot.

Badger never was able to make up his mind whether the freighter recognized the two strangers in his audience. At any rate the old cuss squinted shrewdly at them through the smoke from a smoking fire-place in the woodcutters' hut and wound up by describing the supermen who made Rannicky eat crow and like it.

"I ain't never seen 'em, mind you," he admitted, "but Sonny Tatum was there and a-drinkin' straight whiskey at two bits a dram when it happened, and Sonny swears that one of them human tornaders is seven foot high if he's a inch, no thicker'n a fence rail and twice as splintery. Sonny had good bringin' up and he's mighty keerful how he handles the truth, so he won't say for shore how wide-out the other fella is, but he's damned sartin that the cuss has to go through doors side-wise and he'll heft nigh onto three hun-

dredweight in good fightin' trim. Shore would like to meet up with them two wild-cats befo' I die, and I done heard tell that a whole slew of folks in The Flats is on the lookout for 'em — Rannicky Roe amongst others. He's a-makin' out to pass the whole thing off as a joke. Even went as far as to build hisself a song 'bout what happened to him down yander and it winds up a-prophecyin' what's due to overtake them two ragin' demons that was the cause of it all. I heard him sing his song t'other night and gents, he shore put a heap of feelin' into the last verse."

This stirring news brought a pleasant tingle of excitement to Badger and it convinced Blizzard that the time was ripe for their next move in the dangerous game he had elected to play.

Accordingly, the Rangers hit the saddle at the crack of dawn. There was a nip in the air and a cold drizzle dripped from a leaden sky on this spring morning, so Belial was feeling his oats. Badger let him pitch. Enthused by the knowledge that trouble was lying in wait for him up the trail, the young Ranger got a savage pleasure out of matching his wits and strength against the wild exuberance of his horse. There followed a series of jolts and twists fit to rattle his bones and knot his spine, but he liked it. He snatched off his hat and yelled an accompaniment to the pounding of hoofs, the snap and creak of saddle leather. Presently Belial stopped, breathing hard, tossing his little head. He rolled an inquiring and somewhat apologetic eye at the grinning man on his back. Badger cussed him affectionately and he ambled off beside Solomon, the packhorse following.

Said Blizzard, "That was a long ways from bein' a purty ride. You pulled every last thing they was to pull."

Growled Badger, "You're a damned liar on a rainy mawnin'. I never once teched leather."

"Nope," dryly, "not even with the seat of yo' britches."

THROUGHOUT the day a chilling mist bit at the leathery skin of their faces, dribbled disconsolately from the broad brims of their hats and discovered all the vulnerable points in their old yellow slickers; but Badger's spirits were proof against cold and damp and with so many important things to think about, Blizzard couldn't be bothered by a little Texas weather. They jogged along steadily, making no stop at noon, and by four o'clock reached the valley of the Clear Fork at a point a short distance west of Fort Griffin. Here they took the main trail into town, riding through gnarled postoaks which had always been there and feathery mesquites that were moving in from the south.

The trail entered the principal street—Griffin Avenue—a long straight thoroughfare extending almost to the west bank of the river. On the right of the avenue near the western limits of the town, Government Hill rose one hundred feet at a sharp angle. Its summit was a flat plateau upon which the army post was situated—long low stables and barracks, and other miscellaneous buildings of gray stone—bakery, store, officers' quarters and all facilities necessary to accommodate a fairly large body of troops.

When they reached the point where the trail became an avenue, Blizzard reined Solomon aside and halted in the shelter of an oak. Badger followed, leading the pack-horse.

"Well," growled the big Ranger, "why don't we keep movin'? I'm hongry as a wolf and nine times as mean."

For fully a minute the tall sergeant slouched in his saddle beneath his slicker, staring somberly down the long street, saying nothing. Rain beads found the crevices in his lantern-jawed face and clung unheeded to his mournful mustache. Presently he looked thoughtfully at Badger. The latter's rugged but youthful features maintained a morose expression, but his dark eyes held a devilish twinkle which made a liar out of his face.

At length Blizzard spoke. His words came slowly, deadly serious, "Strikes me I didn't have no right to drag you into this here mess, but I done it and they ain't no he'p for it now. Recollect that this ain't no time for foolishness. We got us a job of work to do. Cain't do it if we don't stay alive and stayin' alive is goin' to be the toughest part of it. You figger you're a salty jasper and I reckon you are, but this here town has unsalted many a saltier man than you'll ever be. I ain't sayin' this to hobble you or make you gunshy. We gotta live up to our tough reppitations—maybe go 'em one better, but we ain't after no reppitation for bein' damned fools. So we raise hell cautious-like. Savvy?"

Although this fleeting glimpse through the icy shell with which Blizzard habitually hid his feelings got under Badger's hide, he didn't let on. Instead he grumbled, "Powerful peculiar brand of hell-raisin', if you ask me. But I'll tackle anything that's got a square meal in it. Line out!"

Again the lean sergeant turned his hawk face toward the avenue, which seemed to reflect the spirit of the sky that hung so low above it—drab, sodden, cold, frowning and forbidding. Upon either side of the street crouched buildings of all descriptions — picket, log, adobe, frame, rough stone, dirty canvas and brush huts, rain soaked and forlorn—devoted to every conceivable purpose, legitimate and illegitimate, providing poor shelter for all manner of men and women.

ALMOST every square rod of vacant ground was covered by ricks of buffalo hides — dried as hard as flint and stacked flesh side up—hauled in from the range of the southern herd west and northwest of Fort Griffin, and awaiting transportation to railhead at Fort Worth. The winter kill was over, hunters and skinners had received their money from hide buyers so now The Flats were taking it away from them—most of them at any rate.

Evidently the town had experienced a

soaking rain, for the street was a quagmire. But traffic struggled and fought its way along, regardless; a bunch of cowhands from a trail herd bedded down four miles away, hardened to weather and hungry for excitement after weeks of monotony, spurring their tough Spanish ponies through the slush—splashing, laughing, yelling; one and two-horse rigs, some with tops and curtains up, worming through the jamb; freighters' outfits loaded with merchandise from the east or hides from the west, one of these latter—a great boat-shaped wagon with a lighter trailer, drawn by fifteen yoke of complaining oxen—mired to the axles in the exact center of the street; a squad of Negro soldiers in blue uniforms, astride fine cavalry horses; and a homeseeker's covered wagon with a gaunt and sallow man whipping a worn-out team, timid and bewildered women and children with pinched faces peering from openings in the sheet at front and back, followed by an undernourished boy whose thin face and bare hands were blue with cold, his homespun pants plastered with mud to his thighs so that it was impossible to see what he wore on his feet—if anything, driving two Jersey cows into a land swarming with cows!

Up and down the board and dirt sidewalks flowed a stream of humanity, an admixture comprising men and women of many races, vocations and grades of morality—highest to lowest. Legitimate business men from the east rubbed elbows with bunco artists from the large cities and professional gamblers from everywhere.

The thug from the city met the thug from the plains and found that their purposes in life were identical, but they spoke different languages. Fugitives from eastern justice found sanctuary here, meeting fugitives from the west and forming alliances to which might be traced some of the country's most revolting crimes. Here the colored soldier in blue often clashed with the fiery southerner who had

so recently worn the gray. Lousy and besotted Tonkawas — last remnants of a mighty tribe which at one time commanded fear and respect wherever redmen roamed the plains—here met and drank from the same bottle with white men and women who were lower than the Indian. Attracted by the big money that flowed so freely in this prodigal town, harlots of all races left their cribs and parlor houses in the cities and came here to compete with their sisters from the dives of cow towns and cattle trails.

Thus Old Fort Griffin so lived as to have inscribed on her gravestone, "In her prime she was the toughest town on the frontier."

Blizzard's searching eyes saw all these things and many more, and the longer he looked the harder his lean face became. For several moments it appeared that he was loath to ride on. Badger read the sign and it brought a tingle of warmth beneath his cold slicker. The durned old longhawn figgered he'd mixed 'em a dose that'd be hard to swallow and he hated to go ahead and dish it out to his pardner—that was the size of it.

So the young Ranger pretended ignorance of the state of his friend's feelings, and growled, "This damned postoak leaks to beat hell. Why don't we hunt shelter?"

"You been here befo'," said the sergeant as if speaking his thoughts, "but I'll gamble that you know less'n nothin' 'bout the stinkin' sinkhole, so jest you listen to me. She ain't no ways like no other Texas town. Her cussedness ain't the Texas brand of cussedness that you savvy too damned well for yo' own good. She gethered it from New Yawk and Saint Louie and Kansas City and up and down the Mississippi clean to New Awleens, and it's the kind of dirty meanness that the average Texas badman never thinks of. All the crooked plays you know is jest primer stuff far as The Flats is consarned, and don't you forget it."

Badger interrupted with a superior

grunt, but he nevertheless knew that Blizzard was talking straight.

The stern manhunter went on to say grimly, "Rannicky Roe comes as close to bein' somebody 'round here as any man could in a town with five thousand folks that're here today and gone tomorrer, and don't give a damn for nobody. He's in all this cussedness up to his ears. He bosses a gang of twenty-five or thirty toughs that hole up over in the Wichitas and raise hell from here to yander in Texas, and the law in this country ain't never had men enough



to round 'em up.* Whenever he ranges into other parts of Texas he jest takes fo' five picked scalawags with him, so folks down there don't know nothin' 'bout the big bunch he's got up here. But we know and we shore as hell gotta keep a eye peeled for 'em."

The big Ranger took pains to appear unimpressed. He rumbled pugnaciously, "All I gotta say is—they'd better not stand between me and my vittles. Let's go!"

Blizzard swung Solomon out into the trail. "Come on then, if yo' eternal gut means more to you than yo' neck."

CHAPTER III

"FIGHT, DAMN YOU! FIGHT!"

AFTER a hot toddy at the Bee Hive Saloon, a lusty meal at Uncle Billy Wilson's stage stand and grub emporium, a shave and a shingle at Tony Bustamente's picket house barber shop, and a drink of "Kentucky" whiskey that was no

* Suggested to the author by the activities of the McBride-Townsend-English-Brownlee gang which hung out in the Wichita Mountains near Fort Sill, Indian Territory, and operated extensively in the vicinity of Fort Griffin.

This outfit was too strong for the local sheriff, and they frequently went up and down the avenue blowing about the easy money they were making and telling how they got it. Vigilantes finally brought 'em to grass. It became a habit—more or less—for the town to wake up and find a man hanging on the banks of Clear Fork or Collins Creek, and not infrequently he'd have a label pinned on him; e. g., "Horse thief Number Seven."

doubt concocted somewhere in Texas or the blackjack hills of The Nations and never saw Kentucky, Badger stood in the door of Conrad and Rath's big store at the base of Government Hill, looked through a black night at the bleary lights of The Flats and squared his shoulders and told Blizzard to bring on Rannicky Roe.

Just to emphasize his sentiments, he added, "And I wish the cuss had been bawnd twins."

Blizzard scowled and glanced over his shoulder into the room to see whether the remark had been overheard. Reassured, he grinned down his long nose at his enthusiastic young partner.

He drawled, "By the time he finishes with you, betcha you wish old Rannicky had been bawnd without arms or legs. Get away from the light befo' some fella drives a bullet through yo' supper."

The Rangers ambled down the avenue as if they had time to kill and nothing of importance on their minds. Aside from their unusual physiques, one so tall and the other so big all over, there was nothing in their appearance or actions to attract attention. The fact that Blizzard had a rifle under his arm probably received no more than passing notice in this community where every man was accorded the privilege of carrying his weapons where and when he pleased. Anyone might have seen that their old flannel-lined ducking jackets were not long enough to interfere with quick access to their side arms, but no one would have attached any significance to it because such garments were common.

They might easily have passed as cowmen in town to see the sights, or as hunters who grew up in high-heeled boots and bullhide leggings which they didn't shed when they quit guarding cows and went to killing buffaloes. However, they hadn't gone far before men and women, too, commenced to point them out openly as well as surreptitiously.

Blizzard pulled Badger to a halt across

the street from the Bee Hive Saloon, in front of a picket shack where Hurricane Bill lived with Hurricane Minnie when the two of them weren't out somewhere contributing to the disorderly conduct of The Flats.

Said the sergeant, when he saw that they had that part of the sidewalk to themselves for a moment, "It's jest like we figgered. Mighty nigh everybody knows us."

The young Ranger teethered back onto his heels, grinning. "Shore enough, and we couldn't ask for nothin' better. Befo' mawnin' every last gal in camp will be callin' me by my fust name."

"Foolishness!" snapped Blizzard. "If you ain't keerful the gals will be callin' yo' corpse by its fust name. Now shet up and listen to me."

He sent another hasty glance about them, then continued rapidly, "Calc'late we'll run onto Dick Roe at The Opery House down the street a ways. He owns the honkytonk and his woman bosses it. Her name is Marguerita Loya but everybody calls her Margie. She's half Mex and half Kaintuck, and she ain't the kind of a gal a fella would figger she'd oughta be in that there dive. Rannicky's her man and she don't never bend a ear to nobody else."

"How come you to know so much 'bout old Rannicky's pussonal business?"

The sergeant lowered his voice, "Adjutant's office. Somehow or other Roe has done rile the Gov'n'r and they been lookin' him up a-plenty. And as I was 'bout to say, if Margie makes a pass at you *don't* run."

Badger pretended to bristle. "Who? Me run? I'll never live to see the day when I run from a gal—if she's purty. But you jest got through sayin' Margie is a one-man woman."

"Yep, Rannicky's woman. That's why I'm on the lookout for passes," dryly answered Blizzard. "'Cause I betcha he's got you figgered—pizen for men and a sucker for wimmen. So they's bound to be some

passes made. If she *don't* make 'em, you do. Savvy?"

The young Ranger shrugged his big shoulders. "Oh shore! I savvy that you're a-baitin' yo' hook with my romantical carcass. But let's hear the balance of it."

"Ain't no more. That's the end of it." Badger groaned. "Uh-huh, and it's likely to be the end of me. How much farther have we got to go to get to this here Opery House and why don't we git a move on us?"

"Things don't warm up good until nigh onto midnight," the lanky sergeant pointed out, "and likewise we're a-takin' our time so's to let everybody get a good look at us—"

"Huh! You ain't wuth lookin' at."

"—'cause if we give 'em half a chance, somebody may whisper somethin' in our ears. Cain't tell."

"Me—I can smell gunsmoke and hear the angels a-whisperin' already. Let's ramble!"

THE Rangers resumed their leisurely walk down the avenue, frequently halting to listen attentively and talk pleasantly with the birds of prey who accosted them. And they frequently saw dark figures skulking between buildings, behind ricks of hides and piles of firewood, avoiding the lights while on the alert for an opportunity to throw a blanket or sack over an unwary pedestrian's head and rob him on the spot; bandits from cities, most of these, owning neither the nerve nor the skill of the average Western road agent who would consider such cowardly methods beneath his calling.

Presently the Rangers halted at the front window of a combined saloon, restaurant, gambling establishment and dance hall—a single very large room with a small private office in the rear, one of the most popular places in The Flats, owned and managed by the ex-prizefighter John Shanssey. After a moment's survey, Blizzard opened the door and went in with

Badger at his heels wondering what was up. The sergeant appeared to know exactly where he was going. Avoiding that part of the floor devoted to dancing, he led the way through the motley crowd that milled about the various games and went straight to a poker table just outside the door to Shanssey's little room. Seven men were seated there, one of them being a house man who banked the game, took a percentage from each pot and didn't play.

Here and there about the room, men and women who were not too engrossed with their own affairs took notice of the new arrivals and nudged or spoke to their neighbors; and those who saw them seemed at once to lose interest in everything else. Soon a murmur of expectancy, just a faint undertone, rippled through the conglomeration of sounds that filled the place.

Of course Blizzard could see over the heads of the crowd, but Badger had no idea where they were going until he got there. Then he pulled up short, muttering a healthy oath under his breath.

Directly across the table sat Rannicky Roe!

At the moment the outlaw was studying his cards, his head tilted slightly forward, his face in the shadow of the wide brim of his fine black hat. Presently he looked up, smiling at a man on the far side of the table, apparently oblivious to the spectators packed closely about the game. Badger was struck by the whiteness of his teeth, also the silkiness of the blond hair which curled up over his ears and the velvet collar of the black broadcloth coat he wore. And the big Ranger wondered, with a faint thrill of anticipation, what the ornery cuss would do when he caught sight of him and his partner.

Said Roe, ruefully but nevertheless humorously, "There's over a thousand in this pot and I hate to lay 'em down, Doc, but I know when I'm licked."

Instantly Badger acted upon one of those devilish impulses of his. He chuckled

loud enough to call attention to himself, and drawled, "So he'p me, Rannicky, I'm powerful glad to hear you say that."

The outlaw's clear blue eyes darted to the speaker, narrowed ever so slightly, while the smile vanished from his face leaving it utterly cold. His glance of course included Blizzard, for the Rangers were standing side by side. Momentarily the man's violent temper had control of him, then he showed the strong stuff of which he was made and did some of the quick thinking which helped to make him the dangerous fellow he was. Slowly he settled back in his chair, clasped his hands on the table before him, and grinned up at Badger.

His grin widened a trifle while he looked from one to the other as if the Rangers were mildly interesting curiosities, "I heard you were in town," he said smoothly, "and it was something of a surprise because I thought you'd have better sense than to come here."

Blizzard spoke up, his voice sounding sharp and high-pitched in contrast to the outlaw's resonant tones, "Allowed we'd come, didn't we?"

Roe nodded.

"So here we are," snapped the tall sergeant. "What you figgerin' to do 'bout it?"

There followed some muttered exclamations and nervous shuffling of feet among the spectators. A few of them moved away from behind the Rangers.

Rannicky's eyes shot sparks for just an instant, then he laughed quietly. "Still on the prod, I see." He glanced humorously at the players and up at the men surrounding the table. "Fellows, you'd ought to get acquainted with Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson while they're still with us because you'll never meet another pair of humans like them. They're the damned fools who held up my place down on the Llano and raised hell generally before they lit out and left us all afoot."

The outlaw paused. Badger felt a hun-

dred eyes upon him and suddenly realized that instead of being a hero, he was uncomfortable. He hitched his weight from one foot to the other and back again, and swore to himself that old Rannicky was giving him a larrupin' lesson on how to make the most of a tough situation. Why, the slippery cuss! He wasn't behaving as if it hurt him to know that he was the laughing stock of the country. Damn Blizzard and his fool notions!

Naturally Roe detected the young Ranger's embarrassment. He met Badger's deep-set, snapping black eyes for a moment and grinned maliciously. Afterwards he glanced at Blizzard. That which he saw in the sergeant's long hard face sobered him temporarily, but he quickly recovered his poise and resumed his nonchalant bearing. He looked humorously around at the expectant faces of his audience.

"I need advice," he said blandly. "If you were in my place, gents, what would you do with these two fellows?"

Punctuated by laughter and chuckles, all manner of suggestions arose from the spectators: "Give 'em a medal. Shoot 'em and let's watch 'em kick. Strip 'em naked and turn 'em loose on the prairie. Peg out their hides. Hang 'em!"

Suddenly a thin rasping voice cut through the noise, "If I was in your place, Roe, I'd play poker or give my chair to somebody who would!"

The speaker burst into a fit of coughing which hunched his thin shoulders and shook his frail body. He wore no hat. When he bowed his head, heavy ash-blond hair fell down over his forehead and sunken eyes. He angrily swept it away. Presently he stopped coughing and sat gasping for breath, his face haggard. After touching his lips and sandy mustache with a clean white handkerchief, he picked up a water-glass filled with whiskey from its place near his stack of chips and emptied it at a single draught.

"Hurry up and deal 'em, Roe," he

snarled huskily. "Some of us haven't got long to live."

Badger instantly recognized the man—"Doc" Holliday whose description and record were known to most peace officers, a Georgia dentist christened John H. Holliday and sent West to die. By his affliction denied the opportunity to practice an honorable profession which he loved, Doc turned to gambling and gunfighting and fooled his doctor and himself by living to shoot his way to fame with a nickel-plated Colt's revolver, which he carried most any place about his person and produced with amazing speed upon the slightest provocation.*

Richard Randolph Roe did what any sensible man would have done. He permitted Holliday's irascibility to pass unchallenged and went to shuffling the cards. While waiting for the cut, he glanced carelessly at the Rangers.

"I'll see you boys later," he declared smoothly. "Don't get reckless with that money of mine before I get a chance at it."

"We don't never get reckless with nothin' nowheres no time," drawled Blizzard.

The outlaw grinned dryly. "I've noticed that, but I just wanted to make sure."

After watching the play for a few minutes, the Rangers left the game. Badger saw two half-tight men regarding them owlshly and obviously talking about them as they made their way through the crowd, so he hung back long enough to overhear part of what the tipsy fellows had to say.

Said one, "Betcha we have a man for breakfast."

* Stuart Lake, writes, in WYATT EARP, that here in Shanssey's is where the evil-tempered killer first met two of the comparatively few friends he had in the West: Kate Fisher, a dancehall girl—"Big Nosed Kate"—a roistering, hell-raising, courageous woman who stood by him through thick and thin, risked her neck to save his life upon at least one occasion; and Wyatt Earp, the famous peace officer with whom he afterwards rode and fought and made history.

For years Holiday survived from two to three quarts of liquor daily, exposure, fatigue, deadly gun and knife fights, mob violence and ambushes, at last to die in a Denver hospital bed a victim of the malady that drove him to the frontier; and it is said that just before he passed out, Doc downed a tumbler of whiskey, remarking, "This is funny!"

Said the other, "Nope, *two* men."

Whereupon the young Ranger hurried away to catch up with his partner, sort of wishing that he hadn't stopped to listen to those drunks.

Regardless of Badger's impatience to get to The Opera House, Blizzard insisted upon continuing their leisurely jaunt about town. He maintained that sooner or later someone would come a-talkin'.

"Fact of the matter is," he declared while they were ambling along toward the entrance to Charley Meyers' saloon, "a leetle runt has had his nose to our trail mighty nigh ever sence we started out. Jest take a peek over yo' shoulder keerless-like and I betcha you see him back yander someplace. Looks like he was a-tryin' to hide onderneath his coat."

Badger saw a man hunched beneath an overcoat that was too large for him, shuffling through the light from a barroom window a short distance behind them. A chill crawled up his spine and he knew it didn't come from the soggy night air.

"Hell's fire!" he exploded. "You don't know but what that there cuss is just a-lookin' for a chance to plant lead in our backs."

"I'll swan I believe yo' brains has been tied down so damned long by kinky hair they done stiffened up permanent," drawled Blizzard. "If he was out to plug us he'd stay clean away from the sidewalk, and besides he's had a millyun chances already."

"Why ain't you told me 'bout him befo' now?" grumbled the big Ranger, simply to have something to say. "My backbone is jest as tender as your'n and a heap easier to hit."

"'Cause I was askeerd you'd spook and leave me alone in the lion's den."

MMEYERS' place was comfortably filled but not crowded as most of the other saloons had been. The Rangers found a vacant table in a corner to the left of the door where they had a blank wall at their

backs and a clear view of the room. A waiter in a dirty apron and a derby hat lounged over to take their orders. He treated them after the bored fashion of such waiters while making a pretense of wiping off the table top with his bar-towel, then something seemed to click in his brain and he looked closely at his customers. From that time on they received first-rate service.

Ten minutes later the man in the overcoat staggered into the saloon. He slammed the door behind him and sagged back against it, drunk or doing a fine impersonation of a drunk. After sizing up the room and its occupants as if to get his bearings, he steered an uncertain course to the bar, leaned far over it and apparently tried to make a confidential talk to one of the bartenders. The latter unceremoniously waved him away, pointing at the door. He moved off, shaking his head and talking to himself, and wandered across



the floor to the pot-bellied stove which stood near the wall on the Rangers' side of the room. Almost apologetically he held out his hands to warm them, meanwhile looking wistfully at a vacant chair.

The waiter still hovered near the officers' table. Blizzard signalled him with a backward jerk of his head.

"Every fella needs a drink and a warm chair on a night like this," observed the sergeant. "Go fetch us a pint and a glass and that pore cuss over yander by the stove. Got any idee who he is?"

"Just a bum," answered the calloused waiter. "Town's full of 'em. They hang out in shacks along the river and some of 'em are plenty tough. Better watch out for him."

Badger chuckled. "We'll keep him kivered and squall for help if we need it."

In due course the waiter returned with the liquor and the man, then left in re-

sponse to calls from other customers. The stranger dropped into a chair half facing the front door, mumbling something that passed for thanks. Badger filled his glass. He seized it with a shaking hand and emptied it without drawing a breath.

"You ain't tight but you will be if you keep that up, Mistah," drawled Blizzard in a low voice. "We're a-listenin'. Make yo' talk."

Instantly all signs of drunkenness vanished from the man's sharp face. It showed a ratty sort of fright instead. His beady little eyes stared in amazement at the sergeant from beneath the sagging brim of his old hat.

He swallowed hard, and stammered, "What—how d'you know I want to talk?"

"I didn't, but I do now. Let's have it."

The little man looked about him in a furtive manner that reminded Badger of a prowling skunk. He poured another drink, gulped it down, and said scarcely above a whisper, "You fellers cleaned Rannicky Roe once. D'you want to do it again—big money this time?"

Blizzard's long face didn't change a particle. "We like big money. Go on."

"But you'll have to cut me in."

"Ain't many things we *have* to do," said the sergeant coldly, "but there's no hog blood in us. Talk fast."

The man seemed to crawl back into his misfit overcoat. "I'm takin' one hell of a chance. I'm gamblin' my neck. Roe hangs men that cross him. See? But I need money. I've gotta get away from here. Understand?"

"Reckon I do. You're short in this country. The law?"

The stranger shook his head. "It ain't the law this time. It's something a damned sight worse. It's Rannicky Roe!"

"What's he got agin you?"

"I know too much. See?"

"Mmm-huh," observed Blizzard. "You're lucky. Me—I ain't never knowed half enough for my own good. What d'you know that's so much?"

"If I talk will you split with me?"

The sergeant lifted his whiskey glass to the light and slowly rotated it in his fingers. He appeared to be admiring the liquor, but Badger suspected that he was in reality watching for two men who had briefly showed their faces two or three times outside a window in the opposite wall.

"All depends on whether yo' talk makes us money," declared Blizzard. "If it does we'll ante. Go ahead. Better talk fast."

The stranger poured himself another drink, a big drink. He gulped it down. Pulling his hat even lower over his face, he sat with elbows on the table and let his head sag forward as if about to fall asleep.

Again he spoke, his voice whining and slightly above a whisper, "I'm a judge of men and I'll gamble that your word's good. If I help you to get ten thousand will you cut me in for two of it?"

The sergeant nodded curtly. "She's a bargain." His eyes darted to the window and away. "Hurry up."

The stranger now spoke rapidly, fearfully, and with scarcely any lip movement, "You heard how that Galveston bank was hoisted last February, cashier killed, and twenty thousand and some paper lifted. Roe pulled the job and made a clean get-away. Nobody knows him down there so he wasn't spotted. I'm a Galveston man. He took me in to show him the ropes, then he left me flat. See? I didn't get a dime!"

The informer stopped long enough to steal a sly glance about the room, in the meantime warily keeping an eye on the front door. Badger held his breath while waiting for the fellow to continue and he knew that Blizzard must feel the same way about it, but the stern redhead gave no sign that he was overly interested.

He merely fingered one side of his drooping mustache, and drawled, "Old Rannicky shore done you dirt and I'm surprised that he ain't got no more sense than to doublecross one of his men thataway."

"Damn his black heart!" snarled the little man, "he knows I'm afraid of him and he thinks I ain't got the guts to squeal. And besides he's got an alibi that's tighter'n a drum. The law can't hurt him and it wouldn't do me any good if it could, so I'm bankin' on you fellers. I'll take your word."

He stopped, looked hard at the bottle, moistened his lips and went on in the same panicky way, "I follered Roe, see? I spied on him and found out that he split fifty-fifty with the other boys. They blew theirs but he's hangin' onto his and I know where he's got it hid, along with all the good bonds we lifted. The fellers wouldn't touch the paper, so he's got it all."

The stranger rolled his head drunkenly. He peered suspiciously up at Blizzard. "You're a straight shooter. You'll keep your word. I'm gamblin' my neck and my money on you. Roe hangs men and— But we gotta hurry like hell!"

"Why?"

The man slid his elbows along the table toward Blizzard, moving closer without shifting his chair. "'Cause I caught another feller spyin' on Roe. He talked a little. He knows about the money, and the old cuss is—"

THE front door swung open. The speaker stopped instantly. His head sagged forward onto his arms for all the world like a man in a drunken stupor. Two men strode into the room and slammed the door behind them; one tall, broad and powerful with the big jaw and battered features of a barroom brawler, pugnacity in every line of his huge body; and the other a slender man with a thin, light-complexioned face, a fellow as lithe and vicious in appearance as a hungry rattler. Dressed in the nondescript clothing of hunters or bullwhackers, the newcomers nevertheless wore high-heeled boots, walked like horsemen, and were armed to the teeth with knives and short guns.

The stranger at the table coughed, groaned, muttered something into his arms and went to snoring raucously.

Blizzard's fingers closed on the barrel of his Winchester, leaning against the table beside him. Badger pushed his chair back a trifle, gathered his muscles, folded his arms and grinned at the newcomers.

They came straight toward the Rangers, the burly man leading. Without a word to either of them, he seized the informer by the scruff of the neck and hoisted him from the chair as if his weight were nothing.

"Come'ere you lousy bum!" he growled. "You can't fool me by playin' drunk." He shook the smaller man until his hat fell off, colorless hair straggled down over his face and his head flopped limply. "You lifted my roll while I was a-snoozin' over to the Adobe. What'd you do with it? Talk straight, damn your dirty hide!" He slapped the informer's face viciously. His thick, hairy hand brought red to the other's bloodless cheeks. "Talk or I'll rip you apart!"

But the little man stuck to the part he was playing. He mumbled incoherently, cried out a plaintive drunken protest and made no move to defend himself. Badger gave him credit for the nerve to take it this way. The big Ranger was dying to horn in, but he caught a warning glance from Blizzard and figured that the slippery cuss had something up his sleeve.

In the meanwhile the slender fellow stood a little to one side with fists on his hips above the handles of his guns, having nothing to say and never for an instant taking his hard gray eyes from the Rangers. Badger branded him a first-rate gun sharp and maybe a knifer to boot, and he wondered how in hell he could get the drop on the skunk with Blizzard sitting smack in the way. Maybe Blizzard would do the trick himself. Maybe that was why he had signalled to wait. But regardless—one or the other of them had to do it right away, thought the young Ranger, 'cause damned

if he'd sit still and watch this dirty business much longer.

Most of the men in the saloon came over to watch the bully chastise the alleged thief, forming a semicircle which corralled the Rangers in the corner. The blond gunman made it a point, however, to let no one get in front of him. Badger didn't let this fact escape him, and he wondered a little bit harder than ever. This thing started out to be a more or less harmless little rumpus, but it might wind up in a powerful ticklish situation. No two ways about it, that there yaller-headed gladiator was bad!

All manner of humorous advice was offered to the big man and his partner whom the spectators addressed as "Bull" and "Pinky," respectively. This was the sort of brutal performance that appealed to the majority of them. Moreover, things were booming and money was plentiful, and temporary prosperity had elevated some men to the point where they looked down upon the bum, forgetting that they once had been or soon might become worse off than he.

The swarthy bully released his hold and cocked his fist. The little fellow collapsed before he could strike—a fine bit of acting, thought Badger, for he went down as if he didn't have a bone in his body. In a thoroughly natural effort to break his fall, he threw out a hand and clutched the back of his chair. The chair toppled over with him, striking a leg of the table and giving it a jar which threatened to capsize the whiskey. Evidently on the alert for something like this, Blizzard leaned forward and grabbed at the bottle with his left hand. Simultaneously his right slipped to his holster, unnoticed under cover of the diversion. Bull drew back his boot to launch a kick at the man on the floor.

"Stop it!" roared Badger.

"Pinky!" snapped Blizzard. "I got you kivered. Fold yo' arms. Quick! Outside yo' coat, damn you!"

Pinky obeyed without protest, verbal or

otherwise. A man with less experience in this dangerous business of gunfighting might have elected to take a chance rather than to be shown up before an audience that had no sympathy for a loser, but Pinky evidently read the sergeant's stern face accurately. He stood unmoved, watchful.

Meanwhile Bull turned on Badger, making a pass at his gun; but he was slow, mighty slow in comparison to a man who ranked with the speediest of gunfighters. Badger's draw was so smooth and effortless as to appear lazy. The bully looked into the muzzle of a .45 and stopped right where he was.

THE young Ranger leaned back in his chair and grinned at the big bruiser. He even went so far as to wink at a tough little bullwhacker who stood on the inner circle of spectators, taking in everything with fine relish. This was Badger's idea of a good time. A hater of injustice in all its forms, he dearly loved to punish a bully before witnesses and invariably went about it in the most ruthless manner by making his man suffer both mentally and physically.

"Jest shed yo' belts, Big Fella," he drawled, "and put 'em on the table. Ary cuss that's as slow as you are ain't got no right to pack a gun. Make 'aste!"

This was a bitter dose for a man like Bull to take. Momentarily it seemed that he might risk his life to save his pride. His dark face got darker, veins stood out on his neck and temples, his hand clenched where it rested on his hip above his holster.

Evidently Pinky sensed his partner's dangerous indecision. As if the issue at stake were a trifling one, he said casually, "Don't be a damned fool, Bull. You're caught short. Take your medicine."

Badger's grin widened. "Jest let him try somethin'. I been hopin' and prayin' he would."

The big man cut loose with a string of

foul language aimed at the Ranger but, nevertheless, he went to unbuckling his belts.

Badger gestured imperatively with the muzzle of his gun. "Hush yo' dirty mouth befo' I shingle yo' hair with a forty-five. It shore needs roachin'."

Bull dropped his weapons onto the table and folded his arms. The little man on the floor lifted himself to one elbow, looked about in dazed fashion, then he crawled under the table. He cowered there, timidly groping for his hat which had fallen nearby. The crowd, many of whom were drunk or getting that way, poked cruel fun at him and the bully and called upon Badger to throw 'em both out. Badger stood up, holstered his gun and took off his coat. Before anyone realized what he was doing, he had unbuckled his belts and placed them on a chair.

A moment later he confronted Bull. Speaking calmly but loud enough for everyone to hear, he said, "You got plenty tough with a pore leetle cuss that couldn't he'p hisself, but I claim you're jest a cross between a big wind and a yaller dog. Now, by the Eternal, you gotta fight or run! Here come!"

The bully let out an exultant roar and lunged at his smaller antagonist. This was the style of combat preferred by men of his type—the most cruel, vicious, painful form of bloodshed to be found in a region where the shedding of blood was common. Cowmen as a rule avoided it, settling their differences with weapons. Hunters, mule-skinners, bullwhackers and unclassified denizens of the frontier fought in any fashion; but the bully—there were comparatively few of them in the Southwest of this day—clung to the traditions of his breed—mauling, biting, kicking, gouging—until his man was helpless, maimed or crippled for life, or dead.

Very light on his feet for a man of his weight, Badger easily side-stepped the lunge. He set himself and sank his right to the wrist in the big man's belly, a blow

calculated to finish the average fighter, for it was well timed and had most of the young Ranger's two hundred odd pounds behind it. But this was like thumping the ribs of a cow. There were hard muscles beneath the bully's fat. He didn't go down.



He grunted explosively, stopped in his tracks, launched a haymaker that swished over Badger's head when he ducked low. Quick as a flash Bull whipped up his knee, catching the Ranger squarely in the face—a terrific jolt which sent him staggering, momentarily blinded by pain, bleeding from nose and mouth.

First blood! A roar went up from the crowd. Having no sympathy for anyone, it would trail with the winner. It bellowed encouragement to Bull. It demanded more bloodshed. It wanted to see a man die.

Through the pain that thundered inside the Ranger's skull, a hoarse and insistent voice hammered at his senses, "Stay on yo' feet! Go down and he'll kill you! It don't hurt! You ain't licked! Don't be yaller, damn you! Go git him!"

With victory in sight, the big man displayed the killer instinct characteristic of his kind. He mercilessly gave his crippled antagonist no rest. His huge fists swung in ponderous blows that jarred when they landed. One struck Badger on the top of his head, drove him against the wall, shook him to his heels. Another smashed a shoulder muscle, sent fiery needles darting down his arm and temporarily paralyzed it. A kick aimed at his groin caught his thigh when he twisted aside. The wall kept him from falling, but he had the sickening feeling that his leg was broken. He reeled about the floor, going away from those crushing blows as best he could, covering up. Sledgehammer fists battered his arms until they were numb. Somehow he managed to avoid a clinch. To close with Bull now

would be fatal. He kept telling himself that he had to hold out for just a few seconds longer. His head was clearing. The room had stopped spinning. Faces were no longer a blurr. The thunder in his ears died away and the roar of the crowd replaced it. Just a few seconds longer!

Suddenly a sharp voice penetrated all other sounds, cut him like a bullwhip, "Fight, damn you! Fight!"

Blizzard!

That scornful command served its purpose well. A red rage flamed up in Badger, set his mind to work with almost its usual clarity and rapidity, killed all thought of pain. He was so infernally mad nothing could hurt him. His fine vitality came racing to the rescue and he tore into his man with a sudden ferocity that bewildered the bully and astonished the spectators.

Satisfied that he could hit harder and faster than the big man, Badger swarmed all over him and traded punches two for one. This time he wasted no effort on that iron belly. He split the skin on his knotty fists and took the risk of broken bones, driving blows into Bull's heavy face and massive neck. The outlaw gave ground slowly at first, taking punishment that would have killed a weaker man, fighting back with little effect and no effort to defend himself, suffering his face to be cut to shreds. Badger was even less merciful than the bully had been. Instead of sending the man down with a knee or a kick,

which he might easily have done now, he allowed him to stay on his feet and deliberately slashed him to pieces. Blinded, his swarthy face battered beyond recognition, coughing, his mouth hanging open and his great chest heaving, Bull at length stopped with the wall at his back. His arms hung straight down from his shoulders, his head lolled idiotically from side to side, and his knees sagged; but he stayed erect, and from his throat rumbled incoherent defiance. The man was out on his feet, but he wasn't whipped!

Badger cocked his bloody fist for a finishing blow, then let it fall. He shrugged and turned away.

The crowd had been holding its breath, awaiting the kill. Now it cut loose in a bellow of disappointment. Some men cursed the young Ranger for being a white-livered fool. One swore that Bull would've killed *him* had the fight gone the other way, and several assured him that the big man would now be certain to do it sooner or later.

Badger snarled hoarsely at them, "I'll make it a p'int to be there when he does it!"

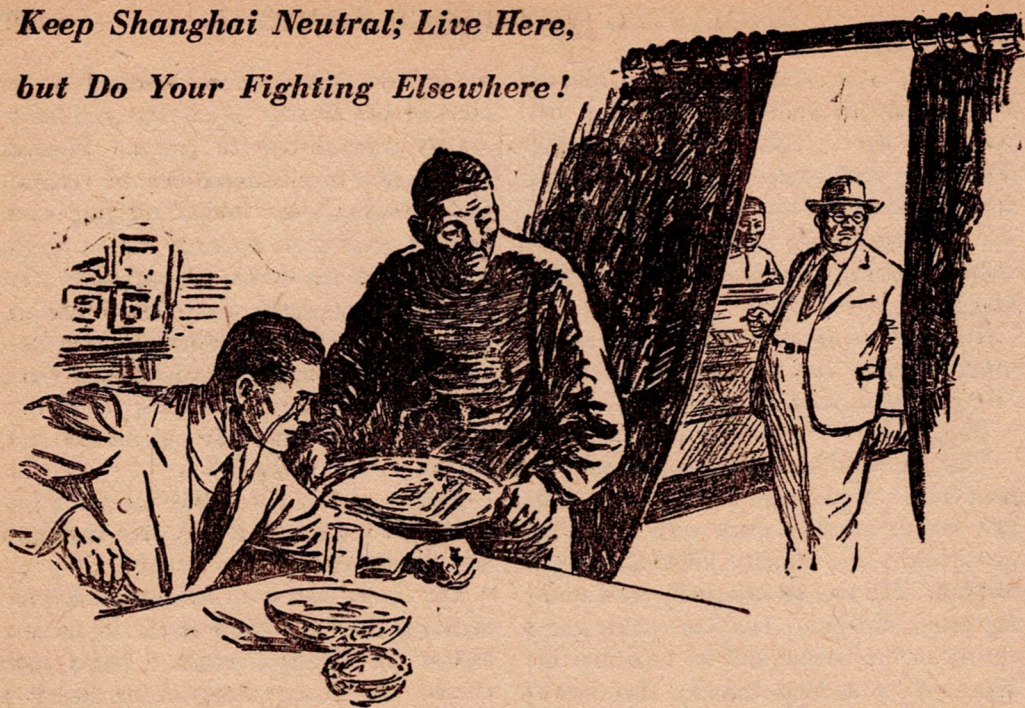
He stood still for a moment, glaring at Blizzard. He saw the sergeant gesture with his gun and heard him tell Pinky to take Bull away and patch him up if he could. Then Badger recalled the cause of the fight, the little man in the overcoat. He glanced under the table and about the room.

Gone!

(Part II in the Next SHORT STORIES)



*Keep Shanghai Neutral; Live Here,
but Do Your Fighting Elsewhere!*



OIL FOR TROUBLED WATERS

By ALFRED BATSON

Author of Many Stories of Charleston Charley

THE foreigner in the Seoul Restaurant's most secluded booth inched aside the curtain and watched a stunted, rotund Jap buying cigarettes at the counter by the door. He smiled grimly to himself as the man lingered after the transaction was concluded, then he beckoned the waiter.

The waiter took a quick glimpse and spat derisively. "Him Tomashi Uri, Japanese dog and navy spy," he whispered. "Him take risk on life in coming here where owners are Korean." The foreigner laughed, sighed and accepted the steaming hot towel which marks the completion of meals in the Orient. He was running it over his face when the waiter interrupted.

"He go now. You know him?"

"I should. He just followed me from C.I.D. Headquarters. But he's Jap army, not navy."

The waiter's mouth dropped open. "How you know?"

"Simple. As soon as I discovered I was being tailed I paused to study him in the reflection of a store window. At that moment three Jap soldiers in uniform came along and saluted him. He returned their salute. Then he got as red as a sweet and sour roast duck when he realized what he'd done."

The waiter's black eyes lighted. "Him stupid bungling fool like all Japanese. To wear plain clothes and follow man, then salute soldier! Ha ha, ho ho!"

"We're in a great city," the foreigner put in. "You run a restaurant and fly a forbidden Korean flag. The Japs don't dare stop you however much they might like to. And almost in the shadow of the British Consulate the Irish Republican Army has an office. That's cosmopolitan Shanghai, a haven for everybody, exclud-

ing no one who obeys its laws. Live here, but do your fighting elsewhere, is the rule. With fourteen nations making us international, we've got to be neutral if we'll endure."

The waiter voiced his agreement. Meanwhile he studied the man before him and saw a six footer well set up, blue eyed and casual, yet giving a hint of a razor sharp brain behind a bland appearing face. "You are Charleston Charles Prowell the great confidence man," he said finally.

"Certainly. You probably placed me the second time I came in. And that's Shanghai, too."

"This right. Ev'body here know ev'body else and business. I know about your oil purchase."

Charleston Charley Prowell roared with laughter. "I'll wager the twenty ricscha coolies out front can tell how many gallons I have and how much they cost. They'll even know the rental price of the hulk it's stored aboard."

When he glanced up this time the waiter was not smiling. Rather, his face was set in deadly earnestness. Then of a sudden he bent forward, sucked his breath and after dusting off the empty chair, sat down.

"Mr. Prowell, you no like Japanese pigs, no?"

"No foreigner who has lived long in the Far East can," Charley said.

"True. So mebbe you help small nation in fight against aggression. You hear of Korean fights for independence?" Without waiting for an answer, he plunged on. "I am Ituki Dan, head of Korean Freedom Party, not waiter like I appear. We are ready to strike now Japan is engage in China. If we pay will you help us?"

CHARLESTON CHARLEY PROWELL drew a long breath. Inwardly he was asking himself just how much was already known of the meeting that had taken place at the C.I.D. an hour before. Outwardly he said, "At least I won't talk

if I refuse. You have my word. What is your proposition?"

"What you can do for us is simple. You sell us oil you have anchored in Whangpoo. We pay one dollar American each gallon."

The most nimble brained adventurer on the China Coast found refuge behind an enigmatic smile. One dollar U.S. per gallon was more than four times what he had paid for that oil on a speculative flyer just previous to the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. He'd thought that if he held it a year the price might double. But this? Quadrupled and from a Korean waiter! Yet at the same time he appreciated that much more smoldered beneath the surface in Shanghai than was apparent to the casual eye. Therefore it would not be strange if the Korean freedom movement was headed by a squat, muscled little man who shrouded his true identity behind a front as a menial in a small, side street eating house.

"What can you do with a thousand gallons of fuel oil?" he sought, nonplussed. "Flame throwers—"

Dan looked carefully around before replying in a voice scarcely audible. "We have submarine."

"Submarine?" It was as much a bombshell as though the hitherto poverty-stricken revolutionists had a battle cruiser.

A toothy smile broke through the yellow immobility of Dan's face. "Presented by nation not friendly to Japan. We have been at sea training and need oil."

"Why not Vladivostock?"

"No. That Soviet city full of spies. They see strange submarine enter and make questions. But in Shanghai with American, British, French, Jap submarines come and go all time this one look natural. Like you say, Settlement only place in world where real cosmopolitan. This good for people who live here. We must keep so."

"I have a gentleman's agreement with the C.I.D. that I'll retire from my line

until the war ends abroad," Charley spoke up at long last. "I bought the oil as a hedge against inactivity. But it seems I can't be inactive—"

"You accept, eh? I get half money now, other half when oil delivered."

Dan shot to his feet and went through the curtain. For a barrel-bodied man he moved fast and catlike. But it wasn't this that made Charleston Charley Prowell's breath catch midway in his throat and blood pound into his temples as his eyes widened.

HIS concern came from something he caught in the ex-waiter's rapid stride, and to which he could find no answer.

Yet he'd bide his time and wait. He had a sudden suspicion there was more to this than a deal in oil, much more, and if what he abruptly surmised were true the ramifications might involve half the world.

"By George," he ruminated to nobody in particular, "I was a business man exactly three days. Now I'm back in harness again. I'm afraid Fate is conspiring against a commercial career at a desk for me."

He was interrupted when Dan returned with five one hundred dollar American bills. "You seem to be in quite a hurry," he suggested with a smile.

Dan grinned. "For sure. Fine reason. Jap fleet anchored off Yangtze mouth. We want for use submarine before they sail away. This great chance. We get oil tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, yes?"

Charley was on the verge of refusing because an intuitive sixth sense told him he was being rushed into something. But when he reflected that often the best way to hang a man is to give him enough rope, he acquiesced.

"All right," he said as he pocketed the money. "Come alongside at ten. I'll be there with a lodah." Then a thought struck him. "The Whangpoo is narrow and Jap navy launches are always dashing about

in the most frightfully efficient manner. Suppose your sub is seen?"

"Whangpoo narrow but she also dirty and water full of silt," Dan explained. "Nobody can see two feet under surface. So we not come up. We show only periscope and screw hose on vent in side. You pump oil aboard. Anybody passing and notice not able to tell who submarine she is."

Charley lighted a cigarette to mask his feelings. If his hunch was right he had an inkling of what could happen there under the impenetrable Whangpoo. He could put two and two together and get four. Yet here there was a piece missing. That bothered him. It was a puzzle without an answer and rack his brain as he would he could not find one.

Nevertheless, he agreed. "Where you go now?" Dan asked abruptly.

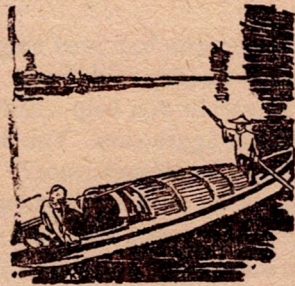
"To the river to look at my hulk. I want to be sure everything is ready for tomorrow."

"Good. I be there."

Charley brought himself up short. "Where? In the sub?"

"No. On boat with you."

"Ah, yes. Fine." Only it wasn't so fine as he pretended it was.



As he stepped over the threshold he was heartened to discover that a thick, afternoon haze had set in and the eerie hooting of vessels a dozen blocks away rose above the clatter of traffic in the street.

He went to the river via the Bund landing jetty and found his favorite lodah, a grizzled native boatman who only recently had been decorated by the commander of

the Third Ningpo Regiment. It was that unit of the Chinese Army which was making "victory" a hollow mockery for the Japanese in the Shanghai area. No man in it had a uniform, but was in the cheap denim of a destitute coolie, yet behind him was a highly efficient organization whose many tentacles not infrequently touched off the Jap gas dumps on the Pootung shore, or stupidly collided with Jap navy launches after dark on the river and were responsible for "missing" notices being posted aboard Nipponese battlecraft. They struck like meteors and as quickly lost themselves in the teeming civil population of Shanghai once their missions had been accomplished.

Charley saw his hulk at its anchorage in the "Dangerous Area" set aside by the foreign-run River Control Board of the Settlement administration. But he did not pause.

Instead, he had Ling scull him a mile up-river through the impenetrable blanket of mist until suddenly with an accuracy that aroused his admiration the Chinese bent forward from his place in the stern and whispered, "Now, Master. You catch."

Charley stepped in the bow of the frail craft and almost simultaneously a white iron landing stage loomed up not a foot from his face. He grasped it and the rhythmic tramp of the watch halted suspiciously on the steel deck above. Then a nattily garbed rating appeared and saluted.

"Will you tell Colonel Byrne-Smith Mr. Prowell is here?" Charley asked. "I suggest he bring an ulster."

"Very good, sir."

The youth vanished, to reappear after a few moments following a lean, mustached man in the blue uniform of a Royal Marine.

"I say, Prowell," he said. "How are you? Come aboard for a spot, chap."

"Come aboard here," Charley countered. "We're going visiting."

BYRNE-SMITH saw something in Charley's face that made him lose no time in complying. An order was given Ling and they dropped back on the current.

"What's this all about?" the Britisher sought.

Charley motioned him to silence. A few hundred feet lower down in the river the landing stage of the U.S.S. *Augusta* broke through the blanket of wet murk. Again as before they were quickly detected and saluted and Charley asked for one "Mr. George Claxton."

Claxton, when he appeared, was about Byrne-Smith's age, alert and nimble as he dropped into the sampan and took the bow thwart opposite his sudden caller.

"Do you gentlemen know each other?" Charley asked with a smile.

"Raw-ther," the Marine replied. "We exchange information frequently. But I say, Prowell, what's up?"

Instead of answering, Charley turned to Ling. The Chinese raised his oar and the sampan lost itself in the clammy wetness until they came up against the *Augusta's* stern mooring buoy which he grasped and held. Charley bent forward and three heads were in a whispering conference.

"I want to make a loan," he said.

Byrne-Smith placed a hand on his knee. "Bar chits somewhere? Bother, chap, I'll guarantee you—"

"Poker?" Claxton sought. "How much?"

"It isn't money," Charley said. "I—'er—I want to borrow a submarine!"

The Britisher's mouth dropped open. The American blinked his eyes and wondered if he'd heard right.

"Why?" they asked in unison.

"I'll go back first," Charley continued. "You've probably seen the reports of the meeting at C.I.D. this morning. It was purely civilian with representatives of the various nationalities of Shanghai in attendance. A Japanese merchant was chair-

man. The C.I.D. chief and I were there to listen. We did. The problem was how to keep Shanghai neutral. Yet behind all the words certain of us knew the little brown brothers were hoping for an 'incident' whereby they can blast to the world that Shanghai can't govern itself and in the interests of peace must be taken over by the rising sun flag."

"I had a man there," the Britisher said. "I sent my report to Claxton chop chop."

"It tallied with the one I got," Claxton smiled. "We don't miss much, what Colonel?"

"Right-o," Byrne-Smith said with tongue in cheek.

"Good thing you don't," Charley put in. "It appears the chairman is more of a Jap than a Shanghailander. Leaving Headquarters I was followed by a Japanese in plain clothes. He turned out to be one Tomashi Uri, an army spy, and his identity was made known to me by a waiter in a restaurant, Ituki Dan, who claimed to be head of the Korean independence party. Later this Dan bought a thousand gallons of fuel oil I own, tanked on a hulk anchored below here. I'm to deliver it to a submarine he claims the Soviet gave his crowd to use against the Jap fleet."

"Absurd," Byrne-Smith scoffed.

"But the Far East is where absurd things have a knack of happening," Charley interrupted.

"Is this Dan a Korean?" Claxton asked.

"Who can tell a Korean from a Jap?" Charley countered. "I've been out here twelve years and it's beyond me. But he professed to be. He told me who my trailer was and had a lot to say about how he hated the Japs. Then he insisted on paying me for half the oil. It all listened well—until he went out of the booth where I was eating."

"Yes?" Byrne-Smith broke in.

"So?" Claxton said.

Charley took a long breath and threw the bombshell. "*He walked with the rolling gait of a sailor,*" he said. Now Ko-

reans aren't sailors. Japs are. Then he said his crowd had this sub outside here practicing. That didn't ring right. It takes months if not years to learn how to handle a pig boat. Yet these revolutionists want action tomorrow."

"I fancy I know what you're getting at," Byrne-Smith interjected. "A couple of British ships have disappeared lately outside here."

Claxton grinned and shook his head. "So," he grunted. "It might be a sub—and it might need refueling? I catch on."

"But there's one flaw," Charley put in. "If this Dan is a Jap secret service agent why did he tell me the identity of Uri?"

The two men were nonplussed, and said so.

"There's more," the ex-confidence man proceeded. "Dan says this sub won't come to the surface. She'll refuel underwater. That might be a herring to throw me off any suspicions I might have. I don't take it seriously. But what I do take damn seriously is the possibility that if this sub should come up and pictures were snapped of her, what a field day the Jap publicity channels would have telling the world an American citizen hid behind the neutrality of Shanghai to refuel a German submarine.

"Tokyo would have its excuse to grab the Settlement overnight. To prevent that I want an undersea boat with an especially capable crew—"

"If I arranged for one and the story leaked," Claxton growled, "I'd hear Congress yelling away out here in China. Then again, we've barred submarines from the river."

"London would have my commission in a twinkling."

"Not if you handled it right," Charley protested. "Your admirals would stand behind you—"

The Marine hesitated. "What do you want to do?"

"I'm not promising anything," Claxton spoke up, "but what's your scheme."

Charley bent forward and under shelter of the eerie, blanketing haze told them.

A half hour later as he was en route back to the jetty, the wrinkles in his forehead vanished as if by magic. He slapped his thigh in high glee, then gave Ling a dollar for a dinner of bear's claws. "I got it," he said to nobody in particular. "I got it."

He had an abrupt hunch that he knew the reason Ituki Dan, the alleged Korean patriot, had blatantly revealed the identity of Tomashi Uri, the Japanese dog and army spy. It was as typically Japanese as anything he had ever come upon and he would meet it by the inclusion of several cans of waterproof paint in his borrowing of a pig boat.

PRECISELY at nine-thirty the following morning Ling was sculling Charleston Charley Prowell down the sun-drenched Whangpoo toward the "Dangerous Area" where lay stored his thousand gallons of fuel oil. An itinerant mechanic went along to handle the pump.

But as he stepped aboard, Charley's concern was rivetted farther down river where two navy tugs, American and British, with lighters in tow, appeared to be anchored just inside the Settlement limits. On seeing them, a smile grew at the corners of his mouth. It stayed there until a grinning Ituki Dan suddenly dashed up on a hired launch. He was in the cheap attire of a waiter dependent on tips, yet over a shoulder was slung a high-speed, candid camera—an anomaly the late confidence man thought best not to question.

"She ready?" he was asked out of a craftily grinning face.

"Perfect," Charley responded. He beckoned Dan in the housing where the engineer ran the pump engine for his approval. Then they carefully inspected the long hose reeled on deck.

"This fine," Dan enthused. "I hope submarine not late. But I think she be on time." With that he motioned Charley

aside and whispered. "If this happen with no accident by night we have Jap fleet at bottom of river."

He was interrupted when the slowly moving periscope of an undersea craft threaded between the two tugs and approached the starboard side of the hulk, between it and the Pootung shore. As the sub drew alongside Dan busied himself making the lines fast, despite that he had to stand knee-deep in brown, swirling river water to do so. Yet Charley noticed with smoldering satisfaction that even then Dan's feet were hidden from sight, so dense was the silt being borne toward the Yellow Sea. A moment later the Jap had grabbed up the hose and was screwing it in a vent he located in the sub's side with an uncanny knowledge of its position.

"Hokay," he gloated finally. "Commence beginning."

Charley signalled the mechanic. There was a grinding of gears, a heavy throbbing, the hose leaped alive and a thousand gallons of fuel oil began moving from the anchored hulk into a submarine which had not needed to rise above the surface. Yet if Charley's hunch was right that sub *would* come above the surface—it would have to. But it was part of his artistry that the better to mask his scheme the rise should be forced by the Korean patriot. Meanwhile the wave-washed periscope glass turned this way and that, like an eye in a fantastic sea serpent.

Dan appeared to grow increasingly nervous as the pumping drew to its conclusion and he saw the needle in the tank dial swing from a thousand gallons past eight hundred, then around through six and four. Charley had been watching him avidly and threw in the question he had been saving for such an emergency.

"I say," he ventured, "have you got the remainder of the money?"

"For certain. I pay when finish."

Charley dropped that angle when abruptly Ling drew his attention to a man standing on shore and staring brazenly out

at the panorama in mid-river. He was dressed as a Chinese coolie but in his hands, Charley saw as his pulse mounted, was a high speed candid camera of the same type carried by Dan. Charley's eyes narrowed. He ambled indolently up the hulk to have a better look, and as he did his suspicions were confirmed. The man was Tomashi Uri.

As he returned to the housing chuckling to himself he noticed that Dan had not seen what drew him forward. Rather, the Korean was throwing over the side the bilge can of wastage from under the engine.

"Here," Charley shouted, "what are you doing?"

Dan grinned toothily. "Pumping almost done, I want for ask sub if hokay. But cannot talk inside, so throw oil in periscope glass. This bring up for wash off and I find out."

Charley knew then that Dan had fallen into the trap. At the same time he had a high regard for the ex-waiter's avid brain. He'd known all along how he was going to bring that sub up. Charley had racked his brains to the same end, but without success. Now Dan had done it, and it was working.

OF A sudden the sub shivered. Silt filled water boiled around her as her tanks were blown, and she broke the surface. Charley held his breath at that and did his best to be interested elsewhere.



Yet he heard Dan's scream—the whole river must have heard it. Charley swung around and saw that the Korean's face

was deathly white. Tears of rage coursed down his fat cheeks. He raised a trembling hand as words grunted through his thick lips.

"Look! Look! What this? Double cross!"

Charley followed his pointing fingers and saw painted on the side of the conning tower the white ensign of the British Navy!

"What are you up to?" he stalled in a rage. "You've double crossed me! I'll be arrested! What's behind all this?"

Dan made no answer. His eyes glared like pools of black venom. His fists clenched and his breath gushed out in a hissing fury. Then he lunged forward with the speed of a striking cobra. Ling leaped between them with an oath.

Charley instinctively stepped back to avoid the rush, and in that split second something seemed to mesh in Dan's fertile brain. He caught himself. A grin spread over his face and he swallowed hard.

"This better," he gloated. "This better."

"What?" Charley sought. "What?"

"Foreign nations have agreement no submarines come in river during war. Yet this British submarine here. Refueling her all same as bad violate agreement as if she German."

"That's true," Charley admitted, "but this deal was never on the up and up. You knew it when we made it. We're both involved. You've double crossed me—"

"Pay no attention to crazy talk of double cross," the Korean exulted. "I talk crazy. I big damn fool—"

He wasn't acting crazy. Feverishly he was unstrapping his camera and a moment later snapping picture after picture of the sub's conning tower. And Charley noticed as he grabbed the shots with a calculating eye that included in each background was the Cathay tower and the Bund skyline. Here was a British submarine without a double, and with equal sureness for anyone to see she was refueling within the

limits of the International Settlement at Shanghai.

Charley saw something else that evaded Dan's sharp eyes. From the nearby bank of the Whangpoo, Tomashi Uri was working his miniature camera with the same nervous haste that actuated Ituki Dan. From the way he danced about he might have been the happiest man alive.

Yet Dan was in for a disappointment. As though conscious of her identity becoming known, the sub abruptly turned her engines over, strained against the moorings and with a convulsive heave broke free. Then she swung into mid-river and started out to sea without a man of her crew being seen. It was a bit of navigation in a muddy river that excited Charley's admiration.

A crash from the hulk's stern broke in on his thoughts. He wheeled around and saw Dan in the sampan, sculling furiously toward where a Jap destroyer lay anchored below the U.S.S. *Augusta*.

Then Charley turned to Ling. "You swim ashore. Tell the manager of the Cathay where I live to give you a hundred dollars for a new sampan."

"I no need," the Chinese said from out of a toothless smile. "Me got fi' hund'erd." To Charley's astonishment a hand appeared holding five one hundred dollar American bills.

"I take from him when he try hit you," Ling gloated. "I pick pockets. I no like Japanese pigs." Then his smile vanished. "What happen to you, Master?"

"I'm waiting here for the next to the last act in the drama. But you get ashore and keep the money. Get ashore!"

Suiting action to the command, Charley helped the Chinese over the side. Yet before Ling started shoreward, he glanced back. "What happen for you, Master?"

"They're going to arrest me," Charley beamed. "The Jap navy launches will be down here chop chop to take me in."

He was right. Within fifteen minutes he was seized by a squad of Japanese sailors

on a charge of violating the neutrality of Shanghai.

"This trial for whole world to hear," the officer in charge grunted. "Because Japanese great honest pipples we try you before all foreigners in Shanghai and show why my country deserve for take over Settlement for protect peace and save lives from war."

Oddly enough the ex confidence King of the China Coast did not appear to be unduly downcast at the gloomy prospects ahead.

TWO days later Charleston Charley Prowell was pushed into the huge auditorium of the Municipal Council. The thousand or more seats were filled with people of every nationality that make up the International Settlement, from the head of the Italian Chamber of Commerce to the leader of the Sikh money changers. Presiding over the tribunal was a Swede, Mr. Ivor Andersen, Administrator General of the City; behind him the elected members of the Council. Flanking them on the platform were uniformed commandants of all foreign forces and fleets in China, and to one side the ranking admiral of the Japanese navy and the general of Japanese troops.

Charley saw with a grim smile that the two kept a careful distance apart. For forces supposedly unified in a common cause, a distinct air of cool aloofness hovered over the groups as though an iceberg intervened.

The room was called to order by the banging of Andersen's gavel. K. Ogaki, admiral in the Japanese navy, clanked his sword and strode forward. Briefly he recounted the agreement entered into that during the war in Europe no submarine of any nationality would enter the Whangpoo. Then after satisfying himself the Oriental and Occidental newspaper correspondents were listening with bated pencil, he puffed out his chest and continued.

"When Japanese navy have assure life

of foreigners in Shanghai by driving Chinese away—"

An unlooked for interruption came when M. Miki, general of the Japanese army, leaped to his feet. "Japanese army do this, excuse pliss," he said with a mocking smile.

"Navy have beat Chinese," Ogaki retorted, aping the smile. "Navy bombard trenches—"

"Ver' sorry but army catch after leave the trench," Miki retorted, his voice rising slightly.

Ogaki's rebuttal did not come until he had consulted with the group of navy officers behind him. "Navy marines ashore first and drive Chinese away," he shouted.

Someone in the group of army officers behind General Miki tugged at the tail of his tunic and whispered to him. "Army ashore before marines arrive, eve'body know," he roared in return.

"Navy capture Shanghai," Ogaki screamed in a frenzy.

"Army," the diminutive Miki bellowed. "Army! Army! Army!"

The stoic British admiral ran a hand up the side of his face and smiled briefly at the colonel of the Fourth U.S. Marines who sat beside him. The smile was returned with a wink. Someone among the publicans had the bad grace to titter and almost instantly the room broke into a loud laughter.

Meanwhile Andersen banged with his gavel like a man possessed. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please. For the moment let us lay aside the question of who captured the native city surrounding Shanghai and proceed with this matter. Admiral Ogaki is being heard."

"Army," Miki shouted as he sat down.

Ogaki drew himself to his imposing five feet two. "I am too much well bred for argue," he spoke up behind a stiff smile. "But eve'body know navy——"

Andersen ran a finger inside his collar and banged again with the gavel. When peace had eventually been restored, Ogaki

rattled his sword, fingered the medals on his chest and continued.

"Two days ago," he went on, "this notorious crook, thief, robber Charleston Charles Prowell, a American citizen, was caught refueling a foreign submarine inside nootral water of Whangpoo river. This prove for whole world to hear how certain foreign power abuse and not keep agreement."

"Does the admiral know the nationality of the submarine?" Andersen asked.

Ogaki beamed. "Through great work of Japanese secret service, Navy branch, Navy have proof this submarine is British."

He was cut off when Miki leaped up. "Navy is what Americans calls 'cockeye'," he gloated. "Army secret service have cleverly able to tell this submarine United States—"

"Navy have proof this ship British," Ogaki's voice rose. "Navy have picture for proof."

"Army have picture proof this ship American," Miki yelled.

As each screamed at the other their various aides dove through briefcases innumerable. Gloss coated pictures were produced by the score and soon the admiral and the general, their underlings behind them and partisans in the audience were drowning out the laughter of everyone else with shaking fists, rattling swords and screaming invectives.

Again as before Andersen banged his gavel. When it broke he borrowed the steel helmet of a nearby Polish army officer and rapped on that.

"If the gentlemen will submit their pictures to the Council," he said, "perhaps it can be decided in which fleet this alleged submarine belonged."

The pictures were submitted by a glowing Ogaki and a beetle-browed Miki. They ran up and down the line of Council members, but the decision was not made immediately for the Councilmen were too overcome with laughter. Finally the

spokesman approached Andersen, showed him the pictures and talked considerably in a low voice. Meanwhile he had pointed out various features.

"It would appear," Andersen said in wonderment at length, "that this alleged submarine was both American and British. What I mean is, she would appear to have a white British ensign on one side of her conning tower and the starred and barred flag of the United States on the other. It all depended on where the cameraman stood. That is, of course, unless there were two submarines."

The howling of the spectators rose in a crescendo that drowned out whatever else he might have wanted to say. Charleston Charley Prowell was so overcome at their mirth that he slapped his thigh and joined it. The British admiral loudly blew his nose into a handkerchief which covered his face and the American colonel dug at his eyes with a gloved hand that hid his features.

ANDERSEN found a possible solution to the affair in calling Charley to the bench. "Did you or did you not refuel a submarine as alleged?" he asked.

"I did," Charley said.

"Was this alleged submarine American or British?"

"Blessed if I know," Charley replied in all honesty. "The crew never came on deck."

The roof of the building seemed to rattle as a thousand voices went into convulsions.

Miki leaped up and shook a finger in his face. "Are you American citizen?" he roared.

"No," Charley said. "I'm a Mexican. Here's my passport."

He brought a small, black-covered book from his pocket and passed it into the avid hands of the Japs. "I know this trick," Miki shouted. "You great confidence man, have ten passports or more. This your picture, but how I believe?"

Charley shrugged his shoulders. "The date is last week," he said to nobody in particular. "I just got it."

Ogaki was not to be outdone by Miki. He jumped up and aped the general's gesture. "You know about agreement no submarine should be in river?" he sought.

"Certainly," Charley said. Then he looked toward Andersen. "If I can make a statement perhaps I can clear this matter up."

Andersen consulted with the jury of Councilmen. Finally he gave permission.

"I was approached by an alleged Korean the other day," Charley said, "after I had been followed by a Japanese from C.I.D. Headquarters. The Korean told me the Japanese was a Japanese navy spy, but I discovered he was from the army when he saluted a trio of Jap soldiers. Also I discovered the Korean was a Japanese navy spy. Nevertheless he wanted to buy some oil I had stored on the river. It was to be delivered to a Korean submarine. The submarine appeared on schedule and the oil was pumped aboard. Then the sub came up and as I was on the far side of her I saw the British ensign on her conning tower. You can imagine my surprise, gentlemen. But it appears that the army spy was looking at her from the shore and he saw the U.S. flag on the other side of the conning tower. Somebody was up to a practical joke. Then the sub broke her moorings and vanished out to sea."

"Who is name of this navy spy?" Ogaki bellowed. Charley gave it. "Nobody of such name in navy secret service," the admiral shot back.

"Not now," Charley admitted. "You've probably flown him back to Japan. You boys shouldn't be so jealous of each other."

"Who this army spy?" Miki shouted. Charley gave that. "Nobody in army secret service," the general retorted. "We too smart for keep here where mebbe you see."

His face blanched when he realized the

mistake he'd made, but few people noticed. They were holding their sides in mirth.

Finally Andersen spoke. "Gentlemen, there's something we're forgetting in all this. A man can't be convicted of murder unless the body is produced. Mr. Prowell, where is this submarine now?"

"Bless if I know," Charley said once more. "But I know where there is a submarine in the Whangpoo."

THE room stilled on the instant. "Where," Anderson asked.

Charley indicated the British admiral who walked forward.

"Some of my men were engaged in net dropping practice on the edge of the Settlement the morning this alleged refueling took place. We were working in conjunction with men of the American fleet in the Orient. You can imagine our surprise, gentlemen, when a submarine was caught."

"Whose?" Miki and Ogaki asked almost in unison.

"It bore the swastika of the Reich on its conning tower," the admiral said. "My suspicion, naturally, was that it was being used to infringe on the neutrality of Shanghai. But unfortunately it escaped us once it reached the surface."

"Ha," Ogaki laughed. "I catch you hint. You suggest this submarine belong my government, we try for spoil great freedom of Shanghai so we can take over, eh? Anybody can paint something on conning tower. It is nationality of men inside who more truly determine ownership."

"That's what I was getting at," the Britisher said dryly. "When this sub was awash the men inside broke out like scared rabbits and dove overboard to a man. Naturally we rescued them and put them in sick bay. Thus we have twenty-seven Japanese sailors, Admiral, you can have willingly whenever you send a launch to my ship."

The bellowing guffaws of the spectators were interrupted when Andersen rapped excitedly on the Polish helmet.

"After consulting with the jury," he said, "we have come to the conclusion that this case is as much a mystery now as when it commenced. There is alleged to have been a submarine which might have been British or American. Nobody knows. The alleged culprit in it all was held up as an American whereas he produces proof he is a Mexican. Then there is another submarine giving every indication it is German, whereas it is alleged to have been manned by a Japanese crew. Therefore it is the unanimous decision of the court that this case be thrown out. In concluding I might add that if anybody was interested in voiding the neutrality of the International Settlement, they seem to have failed.

"I am certain that the foreign powers concerned here would not look lightly on any attempt to take the Settlement over based on the flimsy grounds we have heard. The court is closed.

As Charley stepped from the prisoner's box he was confronted by Miki and Ogaki rowing over who had been the bigger bungler in the mess. Then the British admiral and the U.S. colonel came along.

"I say, Prowell," the Britisher said with a wry grin, "you seem to have lost five hundred gallons of oil."

"It didn't cost much," Charley countered with a wink. "But if you gentlemen would like to send me a couple of cases of champagne from your messes, I'd be appreciative. We Mexicans like champagne."

"That might be arranged," the Yankee said. "But on the level, Charley, whose submarine was it you used?"

"Blessed if I know," Charley spoke up. "If I did I wouldn't tell you—then you couldn't answer any questions from Home about it."

BEEF HEARTS FOR HUSKIES

By REECE H. HAGUE



Derby Rules Said That a Musher Had to Finish With His Full Team Either in Harness or as Passengers

A WIND which had started in a modest way in the region of the North Pole and by gathering to its bosom a lot of other little winds on its journey across the Arctic Ocean and the Barren Lands had ultimately attained the prestige of a gale, swept its howling way down the single, snow-piled street of Pelican Portage.

Sandy Patch's generously upholstered frame slumped a little more snugly into the folds of the dilapidated leather arm-chair standing near the great heater in the center of the lobby of the Northern Lights Hotel.

About the round belly of the stove heat waves shimmered. The equally round belly of the establishment's proprietor rose and fell in stately rhythm. Each inhalation was accompanied by a gentle, inharmonious gurgling gradually attaining raucous volume. Each exhalation was the signal for a combination snort and whistle which set the hairs of his nostrils quivering.

The strained eyes of a mounted moose head high on the wall gazed with mute disapproval upon Mr. Patch's gaping mouth and pudgy nose. The malicious eyes of a stuffed timber wolf propped in inanimate splendor in a corner seemed to find the contours of Sandy's sparsely covered dome

singularly distasteful. Its lip was curled in an expression of intense disdain.

Weird contortions twisted Patch's normally placid countenance. His dreams were not pleasant ones. A large and menacing form had intruded itself into his slumbers. A dark and ominous shape which bore the semblance of a human yet was equipped with a tail and horns and which threatened to impale Mr. Patch on a particularly nasty looking pitchfork. The form was undoubtedly that of the devil; but the face was just as unmistakably that of Max Bartley. Even in sleep Patch could not rid himself of the menace of Pelican Portage's most prosperous and most detested citizen. Max Bartley, the octopus, one of whose tentacles was now reaching out for the hotel proprietor.

One of the sleeper's stubby legs gave a convulsive jerk. A foot encased in an ancient moccasin slipper made sudden contact with the red hot stove and the air was befouled by the smell of singed hide.

One of Sandy's most ambitious nasal efforts died abruptly in its prime. His eyes opened wide in fear and consternation. Heaving himself up in his chair he hastily removed the scorched slipper, massaged his tingling toes, gazed reproachfully at the stove, replaced the slipper and hobbled over to the lobby window facing towards the north.

With a fingernail he scraped a small section of glass free of the frost engendered by excessive heat within and excessive cold without and peered into the outer dusk.

Worst blizzard so far this year, Sandy reflected, as he gloomily watched the wind-whipped snow swirling madly along the deserted street. Wasn't likely to be anyone in from the trappin' country today.

Sandy was turning away from the window when the piercing howl of a husky tethered in the nearby bush rose above the shrieking of the wind and was echoed by the wild cacophany of a full canine chorus.

AGAIN Sandy stared through the glass. This time in the distance dark shapes could be dimly seen approaching on the Northern trail.

Slowly the dog team drew closer. The form of the fur-swathed musher was still unrecognizable when Sandy gave a start of astonishment and his chubby cheeks expanded in a grin of pleasure. There was no mistaking the huge black and gray lead dog which, head low and tail high, was plowing its way through the snow drifts.

"Don Melton's Bimbo!" ejaculated the portly host of the Northern Lights and with unaccustomed haste waddled to a door at the rear of the lounge, opened it a crack and bawled to the Chinaman who was presumably in the kitchen somewhere in the back quarters of the premises. "The two biggest steaks you got, Toy; medium rare with plenty onions and fried potatoes and half a dozen eggs on the side."

Savory odors were already seeping into the lounge when the outer door opened and a tall, rangy backwoodsman entered, stamping clinging snow from his moccasins.

"How come you left your line right in the middle of trappin' season?" Sandy demanded, noting with satisfaction that the newcomer's nostrils twitched with anticipation as the smell of steak and onions reached them.

"Woods are lousy with trappers this year." Don Melton removed the icicles which had formed on the lashes sheltering his steady, wide-set gray eyes and regarded Sandy with affection and simulated concern as he added, "Man, you must have put on fifty pounds since I left in the fall! Soon be able to hire yourself out as a snow plow."

Sandy ignored the reference to his obesity. "So things have been breakin' tough, eh?" he enquired sympathetically.

"For all the fur I've been getting I might as well have run my trap line down the main stem here. Too many trappers. Seven years' plague hit the rabbits and you

know what that means in the fur game. Got any dog feed on hand, Sandy? Only packed enough for the trail. Guess I'll tie my huskies up at the back of the hotel here and give 'em their supper before I start in on that grub I can smell Toy cookin'."

"There ain't a tree out there without a dog tied to it already. Only three weeks to race day, Don, and the town's full of mushers and huskies. The old Parton barns are empty, though. You might as well put your dogs in there. I've got enough beef hearts to do 'em for one meal."

"Beef hearts!" Melton eyed Sandy quizzically. "Sounds like high living for huskies."

"A carload come in from Winnipeg," the hotel proprietor explained. "Right cheap they were, too. They say they're nourishin' for huskies. I bought a few of 'em and Bartley bought the rest of the shipment. He's feedin' about thirty huskies, Bartley is. Figgerin' on runnin' two trains in the race this year. Looks like it's a sure thing for him. That slimy breed Hicks is drivin' his second string team."

Melton's eyes narrowed. The muscles around his lean, strong jaw tightened. "That so! Bartley might be up against a bit more competition than he counted on."

"You ain't thinkin' of trying your luck in the race are you, Don?" Sandy's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Thought you was dead ag'in dog racin'?"

Melton frowned, rolled a cigarette with long, lean brown fingers, regarded it thoughtfully before flicking a match with a thumb nail; puffed slowly several times before replying. "Two hundred miles is a long grind for huskies and I think a heap of that train of mine, Sandy. They're in mighty good shape though and I'm entering 'em in this year's Derby."

Sandy studied his friend thoughtfully. "The prize money look pretty good to you, Don?"

Melton nodded. "No money in trapping

these days. Only way I can repay you the dough you dug up to fight Bartley in the Courts when he gypped me out of the Gold Stud mine is by winnin' the purse. If we could raise some cash for bets we might make enough to clear the Nancy Bell title, or Bartley'll have that too, come spring."

The trapper eyed Patch ruminatively. "News travels in this country, Sandy. I heard tell Bartley'd got his hooks into you and was just about ripe to foreclose on this joint."

PATCH'S expressive face indicated the truth of the rumor. "We both got plenty reason to hate Bartley's guts," he said somberly. "The only ways to hurt a skunk like him are through his pocket and his pride, Don. If you can lick him in the Dog Derby it'll be a jolt to both. But you sure got a tough proposition ahead of you. Bartley's spent a lot buyin' dogs and he's bettin' plenty money his entry'll lick the field."

Melton's tone suddenly became brisk. "Well what about them hearts you were beefin' about, old timer? Want to get my dogs fed and bedded down. They'll need plenty good grub if they're goin' to win this race for us."

Later that evening Don and Sandy were seated with a group of other men at a table in the beer parlor which formed an annex to the Northern Lights Hotel.

Closing time was drawing near when the street door swung open and a heavily set man over six feet in height, strode into the room. The collar of a finely matched beaver great coat was turned up around his ears. An arrogant face stared out from beneath a cap of the same material.

A hush fell over the smoke-filled room. Hardly a man present who did not detest Bartley; but detestation was mingled with fear. Bartley was an all-powerful figure in Pelican Portage.

The newcomer's jaw stiffened as his gaze encountered the group which included

Melton. Moving directly to the trapper's table he seated himself. Throwing down a bill he instructed the bartender in a stentorian voice to "Set up drinks for the gang."

"You can leave me out!" Don's quiet-voiced refusal cut into the temporary hush which had followed the order.

"On the water wagon are you, Melton?" the man in the beaver coat enquired with assumed affability.

"Not so as you'd notice it, Bartley." Don's voice was expressionless. "It's just that I'm a mite particular who I drink with."

Max Bartley's laugh was forced. "Don't be like that. I'm here to talk business."

"What's your proposition?" The unaccented steadiness of Melton's tone was ominous.

"I'll give you six hundred for your dog team. Or if you don't want to sell the whole string I'll give you a hundred and fifty for the lead dog. And that's fifty bucks more than any dog's worth!"

"Bartley," Don's voice was not raised but it cut knifelike through the heavy smoke-clouded air, "I wouldn't sell a dog of mine to a mangy, double-crossing skunk like you if you offered me a thousand dollars for it. My dogs ain't for sale. Get that! If they were I'd shoot 'em rather than let you lay a hand on them. You made a sucker out of me once, Bartley. On race day my dogs and I'll make a sucker out of you!"

The smile of good fellowship faded from Bartley's face. His expression grew tense and his eyes bored into the trapper's. Slowly he rose to his feet. "If you think that because I was willing to buy your dogs I've got any notion you might beat me in the race, you're crazy, Melton! I happen to want a spare dog to spell my own leader for part of the distance and I figured that Bimbo dog of yours would fill the bill; but for all the chance you've got in the race you might as well head back to your shack right now."

"You always were a convincing talker, Bartley," Don drawled. "But I've always heard tell that a race isn't won till the numbers are up. You've got to win a race; you can't steal it. That'll sorta crimp your style, feller."

Bartley kicked back his chair; knots appeared in his forehead; he half raised one fist and took a threatening step towards Melton who leaned back in his chair regarding him through narrow, speculative eyes.

"Hop right to it if you want to start somethin'." There was invitation in Melton's tone; but still he made no move to rise.

Suddenly Bartley laughed harshly "I don't pot sitting birds," he said contemptuously, turned on his heel and left the beer parlor.

IN THE days that followed Melton's undivided attention was devoted to preparing his dogs for the gruelling two hundred mile race.

An unexpected thaw set in and the animals splashed their way through the slush on the frozen lake surfaces. A bitterly cold spell followed and the honeycombed ice was converted into small, sharp pointed icicles, so he manufactured canvas moccasins in which to encase the huskies' feet before taking them out on the trail.

It was the dogs' feet that bothered him most. No use expecting a dog to work well if his feet were troubling him. Ginger, the youngest dog on the team, was always getting snow balled up between the pads, necessitating the musher stopping to pry it loose. Unless the trail was in good shape on race day it might be best to leave Ginger out of the string. Moccasins wore through quickly and changing them took valuable time. But one dog less would throw an added burden on the rest of the team and might make all the difference between victory and defeat.

"Bartley covered a hundred miles in under ten hours." Patch told the trapper

one evening as he returned from bedding down his dogs. "Think you could do as good as that, Don?"

"I'm not trying," Melton responded. "In this race it's not going to be the speedy dogs, but the dogs that can keep up an even pace without tiring that're going to bring home the bacon."

Less than a week before the race Pelican Portage was buzzing with the news that in a trial run over the 200 mile Derby course to the Gold Stud Mine and back Don Melton's dogs had covered the distance in twenty-six hours, including rest periods, or nearly an hour better time than the existing record for the trip.

It was Angus Hicks who took the news of Melton's trial run to his employer.

"Twenty-six hours!" Bartley was at first plainly incredulous. "Somebody's been pulling your leg, Angus!"

"A feller in town timed him, Mr. Bartley," the halfbreed insisted.

Bartley studied the beady-eyed breed in silence while he digested the information. His brows knitted in thought. At length he came to a decision. "Angus," he said slowly and menacingly, "I've got too much on you for you to take a chance on letting me down. We've got to see that Melton doesn't even start in this race."

The halfbreed's swarthy face turned gray as he listened to his employer's low-voiced, vehement instructions. When Bartley ceased talking, Hicks nodded his head twice.

Yet his voice held fear and his forehead was moist when he said, "I fix it like you say, Mr. Bartley."

THE clock in the hotel lounge struck midnight.

Sandy Patch yawned. "Thirty-four hours before the race starts, Don. You'd best turn in. If you get a good sleep tonight and tomorrow night it'll help you keep awake when you hit the trail. Well, I borrowed every nickel I could lay hands on and Bartley gave me odds. We'll be in

the clear if you win, Don. If not—well, best forgot about that!"

Melton, who had been half drowsing in the heat from the pot-bellied stove, stretched himself, rose and walked over to a barometer which hung on the wall beneath the moose head. "Guess this thing's got itself fooled by the room heat," he said with a grin, as having tapped the glass he watched the needle vibrate and return to the sign, "fair and warm."

"It never says nothin' else," Sandy remarked equably. "Either it's insides is bust or it's what they call a perennial optimist."

"Think I'll mosey down to the barn and give the dogs the once over before I hit the hay," and Don strolled over to the hook where his parka was hanging.

"Thought you sung them their good night lullaby a couple hours back," Sandy remarked. "There ain't no kidnappers this far north, Don. Leave them dogs sleep in peace."

Melton merely grinned as he opened the door and stepped out into the bitterly cold night.

The moon was obscured by heavy clouds. Whistling softly between his teeth Don leisurely approached the ramshackle building where the dogs were quartered.

Abruptly his whistling ceased and his pace accelerated.

A shadowy form had slipped out of the barn door and was hastening away from him down the road.

Who could be visiting his dogs at this hour of the night? Don's first impulse was to pursue the fast disappearing figure silhouetted against the snow-enshrouded landscape. Then, excited barking and snarling from within the barn caused him to forget everything but his dogs. There was something hysterical in the timbre of the canines' nocturnal outpouring.

Rushing into the barn, flashlight in hand, he stumbled over the taut chain of Ginger, tied near the threshold. The young dog's limbs were already stiffened. Shivering convulsively, the husky gazed unsee-

ingly at his master through rapidly glazing eyes.

Tiger, tied next to Ginger, was nosing a beef heart. The dog made a motion to snap it up as Don sprang forward and kicked it out of the animal's reach.



Bimbo, the lead dog, and the rest of his team mates were straining at their chains to reach other hearts strewn around the floor.

Feverishly Melton gathered up the meat; thrust it into a pile in the center of the building; then went the rounds, patting each husky, speaking softly and reassuringly.

Returning to the dog Ginger, he stared at the now motionless form in tight-lipped silence before gently raising it in his arms and carrying it out into the snow.

Sorrow at the death of the dog was accompanied by smoldering, deadly rage. No use trying to catch the man whom he had seen leaving the barn.

A slight man, Don recalled. Not Bartley, who was both tall and burly. But Sandy had said that Bartley had brought up a supply of beef hearts. Bartley, too, would have access to cyanide potassium from the assay plant at the Gold Stud Mine, and the rapidity with which the poison had worked indicated cyanide.

Bartley was behind this, and Hicks, the mine owner's satellite, was capable of doing Bartley's dirty work.

Should he go to Bartley's house and choke the truth out of him? But if he left the dogs Hicks might come back. Hicks might have more poison, and there were other ways of incapacitating dogs.

Better to stay with the dogs. Never leave the stable until race time. Perhaps it would be wise to withdraw from the race. If anything happened to his other huskies he'd never forgive himself. No, he couldn't do that. It wasn't only the purse; there were the bets Sandy had made. Unless he won this race Sandy would lose the Northern Lights; Bartley would get the Nancy Bell claim. And Sandy was too old to start afresh, penniless and in debt. A new thought occurred to him. The shadow of a grim smile appeared on Melton's set face.

Let Bartley think the poisoning stunt had worked! Sandy would be down at the barn looking for him when he didn't show up at the hotel in the morning. Sandy could bring him his meals and he would stay right here with the dogs. Sandy could tell everyone he was nursing sick ones. Convey the impression they were in bad shape. Bartley would think he was out of the race altogether. Then when he arrived at the post with seven of his dogs all pulling their weight, what a jolt the mine owner would get! After the race—well, that was another matter. But win or lose he'd make Bartley pay in blood and suffering for the loss of Ginger. And he wasn't going to lose—he couldn't afford to lose!

Before noon that Sunday everyone in Pelican Portage knew that Don Melton had taken up his quarters with his dogs in Parton's barn. The dogs had been taken suddenly sick, probably distemper, was the rumor that spread through the Northern settlement.

TEN minutes before the scheduled starting time for the race six restive dog teams were lined up on the frozen surface

of the Stillwater River which marked the western boundary of Pelican Portage.

Dog Derby officials were bustling around filling in competing mushers' race cards with descriptions of their dogs, in order that a check-up could be made at the turning point of the race and also when the canines arrived home to see that no substitution of fresh dogs had been made along the route.

The one train a week which connected Pelican Portage with the more populous world to the south had brought an influx of visitors for the great Northern dog racing classic.

Newsreel cameramen were busily grinding away pictures of the teams and their mushers. Sporting writers from cities to the south were circulating among the crowd of Northerners collecting local color.

Someone on the outskirts of the crowd cried shrilly, "Here's another train comin' down the river bank! Must be a dark horse! There's only seven entries and Don Melton's out of the race."

"Why, it's Melton himself!" another voice rang out. "And he's got a full team! No he ain't, he's only got seven dogs and he usually drives eight."

"What's this, Don? I heard half your dogs were dead." Bob Elton, the Derby secretary, at first glimpse of Melton and his huskies had made his way through the crowd to the musher's side and was running alongside him as he drove towards the starting line.

"Someone must have been exaggeratin'," Don drawled. "The dogs look all right to you, don't they, Bob?"

Incredulity and consternation struggled in Bartley's expression. Melton's dogs looked in the pink of condition. Melton could not, must not, win! It wasn't just the blow defeat would mean to his, Bartley's prestige. He'd laid heavy odds that his team would win, being certain Melton was out of the race. Defeat wouldn't just put a crimp in his bankroll; it would

mightily near ruin him. He'd extended himself more than anyone but his banker knew; figuring he was riding high on a wave of luck. If he was beaten he wouldn't be King of the North any longer.

With assumed nonchalance, Bartley left his dogs in charge of a bystander and stalked over to Angus Hicks.

Only Hicks saw the menace in his employer's eyes. The halfbreed cowered as Bartley addressed him softly in rapid, urgent sentences.

"Bartley!" the starter's voice rang out. "Get back to your team, you're holding up the parade."

"There'll be no mistakes this time!" Bartley's eyes bored hypnotically into those of the halfbreed.

Hicks shivered, moistened his dry lips and nodded as the mine owner gave him one last menacing glance before retracing his steps to where his team awaited him.

Bartley's consultation with Hicks had not gone unnoted by Melton. Bartley would stop at nothing to win the race; he'd have to watch his step. A lot of things could happen to a man on the trail.

Less than a minute after Bartley took his position at the handle bars of his racing sleigh, there was a roar from the assembled crowds as the seven competing teams went speeding away up the river.

Hicks forced his dogs ahead of the other teams, gradually increasing his lead until he disappeared from sight where the river trail turned into a portage.

It was an ideal day for racing. Don reflected as his and Bartley's teams loped almost abreast along the packed snow surface which overlay the river ice. The air was chilly but invigorating. There was hardly a breath of wind. The trees along the shore stood out in clear relief against a cloudless sky.

In addition to Hicks another musher named Bergstrom was ahead of the mine owner and the trapper. Gregson, Hawkins and Black, the other contestants, were following close behind Melton and Bartley.

Of these three men only Hawkins was an unknown quantity. He had arrived in Pelican Portage a few days before with an enviable reputation as the winner of point to point races in other sections of the country; but this was his first appearance in a long, non-stop event.

AS THEY neared the portage, where it would be necessary to proceed in single file, Don slowed up his team to allow Bartley, his heavy features now impassive, to pull ahead of him into the trail.

Hawkins, who had taken the lead from Gregson and Black, appeared satisfied to let his huskies lope along a few yards in the rear of Melton, who himself trailed closely behind Bartley.

When halfway to the Gold Stud, Bartley pulled up his team for a rest and threw his dogs balls of ground meat and tallow, Don and Hawkins followed suit. When, after a brief rest, the mining man started off again, the trapper and Hawkins did likewise.

Darkness set in and Bartley's team ahead became almost indistinguishable to Don only a short distance behind. When the moon appeared in the star-littered sky, Don, glancing back, saw that Hawkins was still trailing along less than fifty yards in his rear.

It was around ten o'clock at night when Bartley, Don close on his trail and Hawkins a few yards in the rear, reached the half mile portage leading to the Gold Stud mine.

The mine owner slowed up his team alongside the heavy clump of brush where the portage commenced, glanced behind him, then peered into the shadows.

It appeared to Don Melton, approaching very rapidly, that he made a vague gesture before shouting to his huskies to mush on.

A few minutes later the three teams pulled into the brightly lighted open space in front of the mine buildings. The dog race official stationed there marked their

race cards and announced that supper was set for them in the cook house.

Bartley, handing the care of his dogs over to a waiting mine employee, disappeared in the direction of the mine superintendent's residence.

As he fed and rubbed down his huskies, Melton mentally resolved that never again would he ask of them a task such as this race. The dogs seemed in fine condition, though; all except Tiger. The snow was red around one of the wheel dog's fore-paws. Carefully Don examined the cut, swabbed it clean and bandaged it. Only a superficial scratch, but how he hated making the poor brute travel another hundred miles!

Hawkins, having attended to his own dogs, inquired if Don was going along to the cook house for grub.

The latter shook his head. "I brought my grub with me," he announced, "and I'm eating it right out here with my dogs."

The Derby official was squatting beside a brazier and over the glowing coals Don made coffee.

While he sipped the scalding liquid and munched his food, the trapper chatted with the official. Hicks, he learned, had arrived at the mine an hour and a half before, his dogs almost exhausted. Bergstrom, whose huskies were also in bad shape, had pulled in an hour after Hicks.

His meal finished, Don removed his feather robe from his sleigh and laid on it in the snow beside his team. Studying his watch by the light from the brazier he said to the official, "Think I'll tear off an hour's shuteye. Rouse me up at midnight, will you?"

IT ONLY seemed five seconds later that he became aware that somebody was shaking him by the shoulder and heard a vigorous voice shouting in his ear. "Come on, snap out of it. It's twelve o'clock."

In answer to Melton's questions the official told him that Black and Gregson had

pulled in a short time before, both carrying exhausted dogs on their sleighs and that Hicks, his huskies still shaky on their feet, and Hawkins, whose team seemed in fairly good fettle, had already started the return journey.

As Don was adjusting his dogs' harness, Bartley appeared and started off on the homeward journey. Close on his heels Melton took the back trail.

As he reached the end of the short portage and was about to turn out on to the lake, his senses alert, Don detected a rustling behind him in the bush willows crowding either side of the narrow trail. He half turned. A dark form had materialized immediately behind him; was springing at him, one arm upraised, the hand gripping a formidable bludgeon.

No way of avoiding the blow. The club whistled through the air. Automatically Don threw up his left arm, hunched down his head and plunged towards his assailant.

A sickening thud as the bludgeon connected with the trapper's left shoulder. A split second later Don's head came into contact with terrific force with his assailant's stomach.

The man grunted and staggered backwards. Don fell forward to his knees. First to regain his balance, Melton's attacker again raised the club on high. Once more it came smashing down at the spot where the trapper had been a second before.

But the blow failed to reach its objective. Don threw himself sideways. The bludgeon swished futilely past his ears as he gathered himself into a compact mass and sprang.

Thrown off balance by the force of his mighty swipe, the man with the bludgeon was momentarily defenseless. Don's haymaker landed with a resounding thwack on the point of his bristly chin.

As his assailant's legs were crumbling beneath him, the trapper's right arm again shot out like a piston rod. His weather-beaten fist crashed for the second time

into the man's face. His big frame seemed to crumple as he sagged face forward in the snow; then lay motionless.

His breath coming in quick jerks, Don bent down and rolled his assailant on his back. A spasm of pain shot through the shoulder where the club had struck as he brought his left arm into use.

Black Jack Forgan! Melton recognized the bearded man lying inert at his feet. One of Bartley's hirelings. That was why Hicks had worn out his dogs getting to the mine. Carrying a message to Forgan from Bartley. Probably Forgan had been crouching in the bushes when he had passed on the way to the mine; but Hawkins was right behind him then. That gesture he had thought Bartley made when he slowed his team must have been a signal to Forgan to bide his time until there was no witness to the bushwhacking.

Don looked out over the lake. Bartley and his team were stationary a short distance away. The mine owner was staring back at him. Don shouted to Bimbo, who with his teammates had stretched themselves out in the snow, and heard the whistle of Bartley's whip as the mine owner, too, got his dogs into motion.

Without even a backward glance at the still recumbent form of Black Jack Forgan, Don mushed on.

Bartley was pushing his huskies hard; was gradually increasing the distance between himself and Melton's train; but Don made no attempt to increase his own team's pace. Their steady lope would eat up the miles. He might have to call on them for greater effort later; but with nearly one hundred miles still to cover, the dogs' strength must be harbored. Bartley's premature speed would tell on his team before the race was ended.

STEADILY on through the silent night, over lake and portage, the team mushed; Don alternately riding the sleigh runners and running behind to relieve the huskies of his weight.

All the way to the fifty mile camp Don saw no trace of another team; no sign that the world was inhabited by any living things save himself and his huskies.

Pulling at last in to the glow of the welcoming fire which had been lighted by the solitary occupant of the fifty mile camp prior to his departure for Pelican Portage to see the finish of the race, Don found Hawkins and Hicks warming themselves at the blaze while they rested their teams.

From Hawkins, Melton learned that Bartley had gone straight through without a stop, carrying one dog on his sleigh and the rest of his huskies looking tired. It was evident to the trapper that Hicks' dogs were utterly exhausted, while Hawkins' huskies were standing up well under the strain.

Having examined Tiger's foot and encased it in a fresh padded moccasin, Don gave a pat and word of encouragement to each of his huskies before purposefully striding over to Hicks, who was squatting on his haunches peering enigmatically into the fire.

The halfbreed started and jerked around his head, consternation apparent in his eyes.

"The poisoning stunt didn't work so good, eh?" Don remarked ominously. "And Black Jack Forgan was lying on the trail dreaming of home and mother when I left him."

"I don't know what you mean, Meester Melton!" But Hicks' whining voice failed to carry conviction.

Don stretched out a sinewy arm, was aware of accentuated pain in his throbbing left shoulder, grasped the breed by the collar of his mackinaw coat and yanked him to his feet.

Desperation had taken the place of fear in the halfbreed's heart. With a sudden jerk he pulled loose from Don's grip. Simultaneously he wrenched a long-bladed hunting knife from the sheath at his belt.

Lips drawn back like a lynx at bay, the firelight gleaming on the blade in his ex-

tended hand, Hicks crouched, facing the trapper.

Hawkins, an astounded spectator, rose to his feet as though to intervene, but Don flung over his shoulder, "Just a little personal tiff, stranger. Listen close and you



might hear somethin' interesting about how Bartley tries to make sure of winning dog races."

Slowly Don advanced on the halfbreed.

Hicks retired a few paces, the weapon still extended before him. Then, his backward progress impeded by a clump of brush, he leaped snarling at Melton.

Hawkins drew in his breath sharply as he saw the twinkling steel plunging towards Don's breast, then relaxed as he realized that just in time the halfbreed's wrist had been encircled by Melton's right hand.

Hicks' fingers slowly opened as the trapper's relentless grip bit into his arm. The knife dropped from his nerveless grasp to fall silently into the snow.

Don's grip suddenly shifted to the muffler wound around the halfbreed's throat; he drew Hicks towards him, brought back his clenched left fist and grinned wryly as he realized that all he could administer with his injured arm would be a love pat.

But the gesture was sufficient. "Don'

heet me, Meester Melton!" Hicks screamed. "Don' heet me! It was Bartley! Bartley made me do ect."

"Bartley fixed up the baits and you threw them to the dogs? Bartley gave you a message telling Forgan to lay for me?"

Hicks nodded his head. Melton suddenly released him with a backward thrust that sent him groveling in the snow.

Inwardly chafing at the delay, Don forced himself to remain at the camp spelling his dogs for the half hour rest period he had decided upon. Questioned by the curious Hawkins he told of Bartley's efforts to put him out of the race.

The moon had gone down, but two hours remained before daybreak when Melton, Hawkins trailing him, started off on the last lap of the two hundred mile grind. Hicks, skulking in the shadows, made no effort to resume the race.

At length the eastern horizon commenced to lighten. The bushes and stunted timber took definite shape. A wan sun put in an appearance and contributed the impression, if not the reality, of warmth. Don's dogs, too, appeared to brighten up with the coming of daylight and courageously strained forward in their harness.

THE hands of Don's watch showed that it was ten o'clock, just twenty-four hours since the start of the race, when, turning on to Loon Lake, he saw a dog team which could be none other than Bartley's less than a mile ahead of him.

So intent was the mine owner on whipping on his flagging team that it was not until Don was almost up to him that he became aware of his former partner's proximity.

Two of Bartley's dogs were being carried on the sleigh. The six remaining in harness showed marked signs of distress; but when he realized that Melton had intended to pass him, the mine owner sent his whip slashing in among the weary animals; hoarsely and profanely urged them to still greater effort.

Don's Tiger was limping badly now; his tail dragging in the snow, impeding the progress of the other members of the team. The wheel dog cast a fleeting, reproachful glance over his shoulder at the master, usually so humane, now testing him beyond his powers of endurance.

Don shouted to Bimbo to stop, fumbled with chilly hands at Tiger's harness, lifted the lame, exhausted husky on to the sleigh. It licked his hand as it curled down with a grunt of pleasure on the feather robe.

Tiger had done his bit. It was up to the other dogs and Don himself to finish the job. No more riding on the sleigh runners. Only a few more miles to go. That left shoulder sure was throbbing. Every step he took seemed to make it rasp in its socket.

Bartley had increased his lead again. Hawkins had drawn into second place while Don was attending to Tiger.

Head down, his one good arm showing at a handle bar, his weary, moccasin-clad feet pounding up and down on the well-packed snow, Don plodded doggedly on. Movement became automatic.

He was gaining on Bartley and Hawkins. Only two miles to go—less than a mile now. Faintly he could hear the shouting of the crowds at the finishing line.

One of Bartley's dogs had dropped in its tracks. The rest of the team had stopped. Yelling and cursing, the mine owner was frenziedly dragging the fallen dog out of its harness; throwing it on the sleigh with its two teammates who had earlier collapsed. A musher had to finish with his full team either in harness or as passengers. Derby rules were adamant on that point.

Don's brain seemed numbed, but he plodded on. Bimbo, the lead dog, seemed to sense what was expected of him. He strained, low in the harness; drew level with and passed Hawkins' string; gave a brief yelp of triumph as Bartley's team, just getting into motion again, was left behind.

Don was only dimly aware that victory was attained at last. Why, this must be the finishing line! It was Sandy Patch who was pounding on his aching shoulder. A Sandy almost hysterical with jubilation.

"Did we show 'em, feller? Did we, I ask you? You with the megaphone there! Tell the gang there's free beer for the asking at the Northern Lights from now until closing time. Come on, Don, you dog-chasin' fool! Lead the way and we'll empty a keg before the mob gets started!"

The fog in Don's tired brain cleared; he became aware of his aching limbs, of an overwhelming desire to sleep. But there was something still to be done—one more job before he could call it a day! "Get someone to take the dogs up to the barn," he instructed Sandy. "I got to have a word with Bartley."

Their lead dogs neck and neck, Bartley and Hawkins were battling it out for second place. Only a matter of inches separated them as Hawkins pulled home in second place.

"Bartley!" Don's shout reached the mine owner above the uproar of the crowd.

Bartley's arrogance was a thing of the past now. He was tired and defeated. His stature appeared to have shrunk with his deflated ego.

There was something uncanny about the way Melton had eluded the pitfalls dug for him. He, Bartley, was a king dethroned. Settling those bets surely meant a nasty interview at the bank. Might even entail selling the Gold Stud. He'd be a laughing stock in the North now! No, there was one chance to at least save face, even if fortune was gone!

Bartley summoned the last remnants of his waning courage and moved towards Melton. The crowd fell silent as the two men faced one another.

"It's pay day, Bartley!" Don's useless left arm was hanging at his side; his right drawn back, muscles tense, jaw set, eyes blazing.

The hush was broken by the thudding of flesh striking flesh. There was no blocking, no side stepping, no weaving, no ducking.

Toe to toe, the mine owner and the trapper crashed blow after blow into one another's faces, ribs, stomachs. Their labored breathing sounded above the shrill cries of excitement emanating from the boys of Pelican Portage, who had forced their way between the legs of their elders to get into the front of the circle surrounding the combatants.

The timekeeper for the race had glanced at his watch when the first blows launched by Bartley and Don landed simultaneously. When the mine owner, his face bleeding and battered almost beyond recognition, suddenly spun on his heels and fell soundlessly forward into the snow, the timekeeper again looked at his watch. Two minutes had elapsed.

A man whose sartorial make-up identified him as a visitor to the North and who had been a breathless spectator of the encounter, stepped impressively forward. "Ah, Mr. Melton," he said pompously, "I am a director of the Supreme Features Film Company. We contemplate making a dog race epic. I wonder if you——"

Don's right knuckles were raw and bleeding; spasms of fire were shooting down his left arm; his knees threatened to buckle beneath him. His hand sought the support of Sandy Patch's shoulder. Nevertheless his battered lips formed the travesty of a grin; one eye encircled by a dark shadow was closing rapidly; the other held a glint of merriment.

"Guess you've got the wrong party, Mister. I'm not even a bad actor like Mr. Bartley havin' a little nap in the snow there. He'd make a real lifelike villain in any man's picture. You could feature him as the man who introduced beef hearts for huskies. Come on, Sandy, let's visit the butcher. Those dogs of mine are going to exercise their fangs on the seven biggest, juiciest steaks in Pelican Portage."

TIGHTEN UP YOUR CINCHES



*Jimmy Started in on
a Crooked Farce and
Cleaned up the
County*

By **RAYMOND A. BERRY**

Author of "Crimson Avalanche," "The Crooked Trail to Justice," etc.

ADUSTY haze, shot through with saffron rays from the setting sun, still hung above the emptying bleachers and grandstands of the Sarpy arena. Through the murk came bronco riders, bulldoggers, steer ropers, Indians, jockeys, and horses. The salty, ammonia-laden odor of sweaty mounts was everywhere. Jimmy Upton breathed deeply of that pungent, long-familiar smell and tried to forget the crooked farce which Alf Buckner, promoter of the Sarpy Valley round-up, had dished out to a disgusted public.

As he limped along with the crowd, someone nudged him gently in the side, and he turned to find Bert Cheesley smiling at his elbow. First glimpse of Bert al-

ways made strangers think of a mummy endowed with powers of locomotion. Later they conceded plenty of life to his emaciated form, but maintained that he must have lived a thousand years to have acquired such a penetrating insight into mortal cussedness.

Now Bert asked, "How's your leg, Jimmy?"

"Not too bad."

"Thought maybe you were going to have it pulled off the way that bronc scraped you against the fence. It's a bit worse than ordinary tough luck to draw the meanest buckers on three successive days."

Bert meant that there was shady work in the handling of the contests. But how could one prove it? Hadn't he been trying

for three years to find some way of heading off promotor Alf Buckner? The man was smart.

Bert Cheesley lit another cigarette and flipped a match singing into the dust. When he spoke, his words conveyed a complete understanding of the problem. "We can't none of us blame a coyote for acting like one. Having him succeed in stealing our pants off year after year is what ropes and hogties a man's self respect. 'Tain't long since he came to this town and you lent him the five dollars that started him toward fame and fortune in the poker game at the back of the Rocky Mountain bar. Since then he's been taking in more country with every whirl of his loop, and makin' the rest of us pay through the nose for the privilege of cheerin'."

What Bert said was gallingly true. First Buckner had trimmed the ranchers at cards and horse racing. After that had come the sponsoring of the roundup, which was a shady headache. It didn't look well for the valley, or for the ranchers whom he had roped into helping him.

"Hi, there, Jimmy! You and Bert come inside and hoist one with us!"

It was Buckner, shouting from where he stood with one Number Fourteen shoe on the rail of the Rocky Mountain bar, an elbow resting on the polished top, while he twirled a glass of iced whiskey between his fat thumb and forefinger. In his rodeo get-up Buckner loomed like a black steer in a snowdrift. The pink silk shirt sagged around his huge belly like the bag of a half-deflated balloon. His white sombrero was tilted rakishly back from a head something smaller than a beer keg—a head as devoid of hair as a vulture's, but wrinkled by scheming from the sandy tufts of his eyebrows back to the mole on his neck. Small, shrewd, malevolent eyes were set in the pink putty of his face. When he laughed, it was like thunder coming from a cave.

"Well, boys," he boomed. "Great show, wasn't it? Lots of the old hands, that have

been used to pullin' down the prizes, didn't get 'em, but then that's as it should be. We need new blood. Come on, boys. The drinks are on me."

Jimmy refused, but not Bert. In his friend's ear he muttered, "'Tain't sense to turn down the only free thing I'll ever get off Buckner."

When his glass was filled he lifted it toward Buckner and said so plainly that it carried across the room, "Here's to gravel in your boots, Alf, and plenty of it."

Buckner, flushed by the fawning praise of his retainers, and still glowing with the memory of the camera's click while he led the grand parade, tossed down his own drink before the significance of what Bert said soaked in. When it did, he scowled and demanded, "What was that crack you made, Bert?"

Bert repeated it, his voice deceptively soft as he ended with the query, "Want to make anything of it?"

BUCKNER didn't. Not today, at least. Later he might, in his own devious way. Now he chose to ignore Cheesley and turned his nasty, heckling voice on Jimmy.

"You didn't do so well today, Upton," he sneered. "Visitors were expectin' more from a rider of your reputation. Hell, anybody can get bucked off."

Jimmy stifled an impulse to smack the man and said, evenly, "That's only partially true, Buckner."

"Partially true? What d'ye mean by that?"

"I just meant that none of the boys who agreed to split with you had any trouble. They drew broncs too tame for a merry-go-round. If it was bulldogging, they got steers so tired they fell down when the bulldoggers' shadows hit them. Same with the calf roping. Your gang had undersized calves, tired calves, weak calves—any kind of calves but the ones that make trouble."

Buckner's face took on a mottled purple as he listened. "You'll pay plenty for that

kind of talk, Upton. When I'm through with you in court, you won't have a shirt left."

The two men's eyes clashed in a stormy duel of wills. In the end, it was Buckner who looked away. Jimmy's hands fell to his belt and hitched his levis a trifle higher. Slowly he said, "You're not taking this to court because I have three witnesses who heard your hand-picked performers talking it over."

"Like hell you did. Who were they?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm not telling. Not now. Something might happen to them like overtook the boys who caught you doping horses before the race last year. Seems like there's nothing too small for you to make a racket of it."

The atmosphere in the Rocky Mountain bar was growing tense. All the local people in the vicinity crowded close. So did strangers there for the roundup. Buckner shook his head like a Burma steer. Perhaps he was going to fight. Jimmy hoped so. But the promoter had other plans. Veiling his anger behind a contemptuous sneer, he said, "Bickering doesn't do Sarpy any good. Citizens of this valley better settle their differences private. I'll tend to your case later. Now get out of here!"

"Not so you'll notice it. This is a public place."

"Curse you!" bellowed Buckner. "I own this joint and when I tell any dirty bum to leave, he—"

Clear on the street they claimed to hear the collision of Jimmy's knuckles with Buckner's jaw. The latter was six-feet-four and correspondingly thick, but he went over as though a box of dynamite had exploded under his chin. Hardly had he crashed a chair in his fall when Sheriff Stickney elbowed through the crowd, shouting as he came.

Stickney was fairly dignified in appearance when calm, but any emergency tended to make him as hysterical as an old woman. His belt was like a strap cinched tight about the center of a bulging wool bag.

He chewed tobacco and, when excited, the juice made chocolate rivulets through the blue stubble at either corner of his mouth. On seeing Buckner stretched flat, his eyebrows threatened to jerk loose from his forehead. Knowing the name of the man



who had laid the promoter low only increased his perturbation.

"Hey," he wheezed, "nobody, I don't give a damn who, can get away with that kind of stuff in Sarpy. Upton, you're under arrest. Come along now, and don't make any fuss!"

Jimmy was ready to resist but Cheesley's voice drifted advisingly into his ear. "No use actin' like a bull in fly time. Play along with the sheriff till we're clear of the Buckner gang."

Jimmy bowed to the common sense of his friend's advice. As the sheriff hustled his prisoner toward the county jail he wheezed and hissed with excitement. "Can't see why in damnation you had to do that. I don't want to arrest one of Sarpy Valley's best known stockmen, but law's law, and you can't go stompin' promiscuous in the faces of men like Buckner. He's the works in this sheebang. But I hate like blazes lockin' you up."

Cheesley had fallen into step beside them and now he injected his long, low drawl. "Sure is one helluva fix for you, Stickney, with election coming up. Boys ain't goin' to like havin' Jimmy corraled for renderin' a public service. But you've got to please Buckner because he's the gent that dishes out both the jobs and the gravy. I see how you feel, and it's goin' to be tough for you either way."

The sheriff wiped a perspiring face.

When he answered, his voice was a bleat of misery. "Don't see what in hell you had to mess things up for. Everything was goin' smooth till you smacked him."

Ahead the jail loomed, gray and forbidding. Stickney fumbled for the keys to the cell block as he walked up the steps.

"No use making things worse than you have to, Sheriff," advised Cheesley. "If you let Jimmy arrange for bail before shutting him up, it's goin' to sit better with the stockmen."

"I don't know where the judge is," sputtered Stickney. "Gotta handle all this legally, you know."

"Likely he's with Buckner," suggested Cheesley. "They team around together lots."

The telephone in the sheriff's office buzzed and Stickney jerked down the receiver. "Hello. Hello. Sheriff's office," he barked. Then, as a rasping voice came over the wires, his tones dropped to a fawning whine. "That you, Mr. Buckner? Yes, sure, I got him. Nobody can pull rough stuff while I'm sheriff. What's that?"

Stickney listened for half a minute to the filing voice, then hung up, a sweat of desperation oozing from his face.

"You can't get bail, Upton," he wheezed. "You're gonna be held right here until you tell who overheard that talk about a dirty deal between Buckner and some of the winning riders. Buckner says that if you don't either give the names or confess that you were lying, he'll keep you locked up all winter. And he can do it, too."

There was more truth than poetry to Stickney's statement, if taken from a strictly technical angle. Buckner owned the legal machinery of Sarpy County—lock, stock and barrel. Jimmy exchanged a quick, questioning glance with Cheesley. The latter wagged a cigarette thoughtfully on the tip of his tongue, and remarked, "The boys are goin' to be considerable riled, Jimmy, if you're bedded down permanent in one of the sheriff's stalls. Like

as not, some of the old-timers will decide to blast you out. Make a mighty smoky mess if they do."

Jimmy shook his head. "Can't have that happen, Bert. Got to get the goods on Buckner first. If we don't, he'll have the jump from the start." From Cheesley, Jimmy's gaze roved to the sheriff. "Stickney," he announced affably, "I guess it's up to you to spend the next while in the bull pen instead of me."

"What?" blustered Stickney.

"You heard me. Hand over the keys. I'm going to lock you up so you won't be tempted to interfere with my leaving town."

FOR once the sheriff was decided. Nothing was going to menace his dignity. With surprising speed he reached for his revolver, and had his gun arm practically paralyzed by a blow from Jimmy's fist. Swiftly, unceremoniously, he and Cheesley overcame the officer and, after binding him hand and foot, carried him into a cell. As a last precaution before leaving, Cheesley stuffed a part of the sheriff's shirt in his mouth."

"Just relax, Sheriff," he advised from the doorway. "And if you have to spend most of the night before anyone finds you, don't make no complaints. Wouldn't sound good, after the way you've always bragged on your hotel."

On the street the two men paused uncertainly. "Where now?" asked Cheesley.

Jimmy glanced eastward, where the frost-browned grasses of the valley ended against the blue rampart of the Powder Moon Mountains. Already in September the higher peaks were dusted with snow. Up where the elks were bugling and the aspen turning yellow.

"This," he said slowly, "would be a mighty auspicious time for you and me to go on a long hunting trip, but I don't reckon we can leave just yet."

"Why not?"

"Buckner's got himself out on a limb

with this last rodeo. He's run behind twenty or thirty thousand dollars and some of the creditors are getting ugly. If we can keep him from raising that money, they'll close in, and his boom will flatten out like a thrown steer."

"How do you figure on keepin' him from raising the money?" demanded Cheesley.

"Bulls are his racket. Somehow he talked the Cattle Association into buying the bulls through him."

The cigarette fell from Cheesley's lips. "Great guns! Did Pope fall for that crook?"

"Seems he did. You've got to remember that Buckner's a mighty persuasive gent when he wants to be."

Cheesley nodded. "But if Pope's gone ahead, what's to be done?"

"Not all the ranchers have okayed the deal. What we've got to do is to call them together somewhere for a secret meeting and put the facts squarely before them. We'll tell the boys to watch these bulls mighty close. If there's anything wrong with the animals, they can refuse payment."

"And there will be, of course, with Buckner engineering the deal. When do we call this bull session?"

"Set it for Saturday night, out at Killdare's place. You notify the cowmen and I'll rustle more facts. I know the breeder Buckner's buying them from and I'm going out there. Guess I'll get my horse from the livery stable pronto, and start."

"Okay," agreed Cheesley, "and I'll just pass the word around Sarpy that you're all locked up proper, so that Buckner won't be makin' any inquiries. After that, I'll fade. But what about those three who listened in? Did you make that all up?"

Jimmy grinned. "Might just as well have. They were Indian kids and no two of them could tell the story the same way."

Cheesley whistled. "Anyhow, it kicked plenty of dust in Buckner's eyes. That bird's worried, what I mean. Well, *adios*,

Jimmy, and don't make the mistake of riding along the skyline. Buckner might send word ahead and have your chips cashed by proxy."

IT WAS nearing sundown of the following day when Jimmy crested the divide on the west side of Sarpy Valley. Below him, in a blue haze of depth and distance, he could see the silver meanderings of Loop Creek, together with the scattered clumps of trees that marked the far-spaced ranches. Carter's was one of these, but so far away he could not make out which.

A lot depended on his visit to Carter. Unless he obtained definite proof of trickery on Buckner's part, the promoter would surely force Pope into purchasing the bulls. Pope was no man for the job of Cattle Association president. He was agreeable, but weak. There was nothing soft or yielding about Carter. Loop Creek was notorious for its hard-boiled ranchers, and Carter was the toughest of them all. Before taking up cattle breeding, he had been a professional cow town and mining camp prizefighter. He had never entirely got over a craving for seeing fresh blood, or yearning for the smell of it. When the hunger became too strong, he would either pick a fight with some stranger, or goad one of his own men until the victim lost his temper, then beat him to a pulp.

In spite of this, those who did stay on at the ranch stuck by him with a savage loyalty. Hard citizens themselves, they respected a man still harder. In addition to his nasty temper, Carter was notoriously tight-lipped, and demanded the same silence from his cowboys. Yes, getting the facts from Carter would be a job.

After resting his sorrel for a few minutes, Jimmy tickled the animal's ribs with the spurs. The wind was cold and, if he expected to reach Carter's before morning, he needed to keep moving. Ahead lay several small mountain meadows, surrounded by stands of evergreen. On entering the

first of these Jimmy reined up sharply. In the flat was a herd of bulls while the three riders who herded them had dismounted and were establishing a camp beneath a giant fir. One quick look was enough to tell a man, who was accustomed to counting stock, that there were almost exactly forty head in the herd. Forty was the number for which the Cattle Growers' Association had contracted. Some time Friday, if nothing interfered, those bulls would reach Sarpy, ready for turning over to the Association. When they arrived, Buckner would demand his pay at once and, all probability, Pope would write out the check.

The three beneath the fir were watching him intently and there seemed nothing for Jimmy to do but ride forward and greet them. Stony-faced, they watched him approach, barely jerking their heads in answer to his salutation.

Twisting sidewise in his saddle, he leisurely rolled a smoke, conscious every instant of six hostile eyes boring into him. With the cigarette drawing, he jerked a thumb in the direction of the bulls and asked, "Carter's?"

"Sure. And what of it?" growled the nearest of the three. The man was squatted on his toes beside the fire, shoving bits of dry pine upon the blaze. A repeating rifle was within easy reach of his hand and a holstered revolver swung from his hip. His comrades were similarly armed.

When Jimmy made no further comment the fire tender jabbed savagely at the flames, then asked, "What made you ask?"

"Nothing in particular. I was just wondering if they were for sale."

"Why? Are you in the market for forty bulls?"

"Is that the smallest parcel you sell 'em in?"

"We don't sell these at all, Sonny. They're already bargained for—at a helluva good price, if you ask me."

The speaker's companions grinned in agreement. Jimmy yawned and stretched

his arms heavenward. There wasn't the least use in the world of asking these three what the price really was. Instead, he observed, "Can't see what would make the price of baloney go up now, with other beef down."

"Baloney? Say, are you off your nut?"

Jimmy laughed. "Not so you'd notice it. For what else would anybody buy that bunch of scrubs? Not for breeding, that's certain."

The firetender stood upright, his crooked arms held belligerently out from his side. "Yeah?" he growled. "You think they're not worth much. Listen, buddy. The Cattle Association over in Sarpy Valley is paying one thousand iron men apiece for these bulls. That's more money than a saddle tramp like you ever heard tell of. Why, damnation, if Carter heard you make such a crack, he'd cut off your ears— Say, what you aimin' to do?"

Jimmy spurred his sorrel toward the speaker and spoke evenly. "I'm going to slap your head to a peak and then knock the top off. If you try to interfere, I'll shove a gun barrel down your throat."

THE trio reached for their weapons. Fire lashed from Jimmy's hip. One of Carter's punchers jerked bleeding fingertips away from his gun butt. The second cowboy and the firetender froze with their weapons half drawn as Jimmy's cocked revolver swung back and forth between them.

"Just hold that pose, tough guy," Jimmy ordered the firetender. "I'm going to operate on your nose. It may hurt a bit, but it won't stick out like a red light when I'm done."

The smack he gave sent the Carter cowboy staggering back against a big boulder, where he stood panting. Jimmy, still unruffled, rolled a second cigarette and smoked for some moments before saying, "Now that you gents have had time for your nerves to quiet down, I want you to tie each other up so you won't be tempted

to fool with firearms any more. Tough mug, that gusher above your upper lip is done flowing. Suppose you do the roping. And make it good!"

The fellow worked fast. When he was finished, Jimmy did the same for him. As he jerked tight the last knot, his prisoner said, "Mister, I'd hate to be filling your boots. You've done plenty right now to land you in the jug."

"Sure," agreed Jimmy. "And I haven't started yet. So long, boys. When you get right hungry, you'll shrink enough to wiggle out of those ropes real easy."

Whistling, he started gathering up the bulls. While he worked, the man he had just tied twisted up on his elbow and shouted. "I was wrong about your going to jail. Carter will have you shot before you get that far."

The prophesy was not a pleasant one, but Jimmy could not allow it to stop him. He was already outside the law. One could not stay within it and fight Buckner. Not while the promoter told judges, officers and jury members what to say. But he didn't want to steal the bulls. All he cared about was making certain they didn't reach Sarpy before he did. And he was not yet ready to return. So far what he had learned would not be worth a broken cinch strap as evidence. When he faced the other stockmen at Killdare's, he wanted some direct evidence of just how badly Buckner was attempting to swindle them. Carter had this evidence and Jimmy believed he could get it out of him. Anyhow, he was going to try.

A mile or so north of where the bulls were feeding was the upper end of Pinyon Breaks. These made a labyrinth of eroded rock that stood up in a thousand grotesque pinnacles with countless tortuous trails twisting between them. At this time of year the bulls would naturally work downhill, and that would mean getting still deeper into the maze. As Jimmy watched the last animal disappear, he grinned. It would take Carter and all his men a week

to get them out, once they were scattered. Detouring so as to miss the men he had tied, Jimmy swung west again and dropped rapidly toward Loop Creek and the Carter Ranch.

AT TEN in the evening he cantered up a stream-side road with willow growing along one side and giant sage upon the other. Ahead he could see the lamplight blurring from the windows of Carter's dwelling. Carter was a surly woman-hater who had never allowed a woman to cross his threshold. Not liking the society of other men too well, he had built the bunkhouse a long way from his own clay-roofed log residence. These points were very much to Jimmy's liking. It increased the chances of transacting business, uninterruptedly, with Carter.

Dismounting, he tied his horse to a hitching post beneath a willow tree and, after a quick survey of the inky grounds, sauntered up the gravel path to the dwelling. Before stepping upon the warped wooden porch, he waited at one side to glance within. Carter was hunched over a battered wooden desk in the corner of the big combination living room, office, bedroom and kitchen. His back was to Jimmy and he was thumbing through a dog-eared account book.

Satisfied that the man was alone, Jimmy tiptoed to the porch and tried the door. Unlocked! Quickly he turned the knob and stepped inside. Carter heard the lock click and, without looking up, grumbled, "Thought I told you damn coyotes to stay away from here at night!"

When Jimmy, without speaking, moved across the room toward him, Carter shoved the ledger aside and, spinning in his chair, faced the cowboy. It was a hard countenance to turn on anyone. Big features, set in a wide face that, during his years of fighting, had been hammered into an ugly distortion. The lips were thick and permanently swollen, the nose was flattened until the nostrils were almost closed. Scars

were thick on his skin, from chin to scalp. His eyes were a pair of baleful red balls that rolled in deep-set sockets. Wonder at seeing a stranger so close made him blink, but without sign of fear. With one sledgehammer fist resting on the desk top, he



gripped the arm of his chair, ready to spring, and growled, "Who in hell are you?"

JIMMY smiled. "I'm a gent from Sarpy Valley, come to talk with you about bulls."

"Yeah? What about 'em?"

"I want to know what Buckner paid you for the forty head he's buying from you?"

A sneer streaked Carter's unlovely visage. "Is that all you'd like, Sweetheart?" he asked softly.

"Not quite. I want a signed statement from you as to the amount."

Carter snorted. "Just like that, eh? You come spraddling in and think by threatening me with a gun you can get anything I've got. Listen, young fellow. I don't scare worth a damn. Go ahead and use that popgun and I'll guarantee to pop enough lead back to settle your hash before I'm off my feet."

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm not trying to get the information by force. It's a straight out and out business deal that I'm offering."

Carter relaxed slightly and leaned back in his chair, his hairy thumbs pulling his suspenders out from his body and letting them fly back with audible snaps. "A deal, eh? Just what kind of proposition you got to offer?"

"Don't get jittery when I mention it," warned Jimmy. "Remember the night you drygulched Otto Swartz last fall?"

Carter's chair creaked as the cowman shot violently to his feet. Rage and amazement were stamped in equal proportions upon his crass features as he roared, "What in damnation are you talking about? Say, I'm goin' to—"

"Take it easy," Jimmy advised quietly. "I've got some things to say that you'll want to understand. The night you had your settlement with Swartz, you were partly drunk. That made you careless of just where you were when you put the bullets into Otto. If you had been in Sarpy County when it happened, nothing much would have mattered. Stickney would have stuck Swartz underground without letting the coroners have more than a look and he'd have called his going good riddance."

"Swartz was a louse," Carter observed heavily.

"If he hadn't been, I wouldn't be offering you this chance. But thinking you were in Sarpy County made you over-confident. When Sheriff Graff of Grand County made the investigation and had a coroner set on the case, you were likely a bit worried.

"Still, as long as no mention of a lost revolver's being found and no accusations were made, you began to rest easier. You decided the revolver would never be recovered. That was your mistake, Carter. I stumbled on to the gun. More than that, I fired some bullets from it and compared the slugs with ones taken from Swartz's body. The markings are identical and would convict you in any court. Either you give me the dope on the forty bull transaction, or the gun goes to Sheriff Graff."

"And if I do?"

"You get it, with a promise never to say a thing about it."

A weaker man, in such a predicament, would have buckled in, but not Carter. For a time he mulled Jimmy's ultimatum without betraying his emotions by the slightest twitching of a muscle. Finally he asked, "Got the gun along?"

"Not in this room. But where I can find it quick."

"All right, buckaroo. Here's my answer. I believe you're telling the truth about the gun. But, unless I'm willing, you'll never leave this place alive to use the evidence. You could probably kill me and I could do the same for you, which would leave matters a draw, without ringing either bulls or pistol into the argument. To settle that, I'll make you a sporting proposition. I'm bigger than you and probably a lot stronger, but you're young and mighty wiry looking. If you want to husk off your artillery and coat, we'll scrap bare-handed. If you win, I promise to give you a full statement of everything that went on between me and Buckner regardin' the bulls. If I win, you agree to hand over the pistol and keep your trap shut. Are you game?"

A crafty smile touched the corners of Carter's mouth as he waited for the younger man's answer. Jimmy was not deceived.

Carter, for all he tried to make it appear that he thought the two of them were fairly evenly matched, was absolutely confident of his ability to win. But this was the only type of bargain that the breeder would ever make. Moreover, as far as Jimmy knew, Carter was not given to breaking his word. Most men, no matter how depraved, cling to some virtue as a symbol of decency. Living up to his agreements was Carter's. Jimmy decided to gamble on it now.

"All right," he said. "It's a bargain. Shake."

CARTER all but pulverized the younger man's hand in his bone-crushing grip. Swiftly Jimmy unbuckled his gun-belt and tossed it to one side. His jacket followed and, by the time he had it off, Carter was moving the last chair from the center of the room.

"There's only two rules to remember," he warned. "Neither one of us is to leave

the room and the fight goes on till one man owns he's licked. Ready?"

Jimmy nodded. Carter threw himself into a crouch. The action transformed him from an unusually ugly human to a knuckled juggernaut. His great shoulders bulged forward, his neck pulled back until his head was invulnerable to anything but a blow from the front, and there a pair of ham-sized fists formed a moving screen through which Jimmy caught but broken views of malignant eyes and a cruel mouth.

"I hope, cowboy, that you last quite a while. I'm hungry for a fight and—"

Jimmy leaped forward and, ducking under Carter's guard, reached the latter's jaw with an undercut. A terrific wallop of Carter's caught him in the chest and threw him half across the room, but he did not mind. He had heard the click of Carter's teeth and knew he was hurt.

Carter, instead of following, stood braced at the center of the room, shaking his head. He coughed and blood spurted from his mouth. "Curse you," he choked. "You made me bite off the end of my tongue. I'll beat your head to a pulp for that!"

"I thought you liked the taste of blood," taunted Jimmy.

With a roar Carter leaped to the attack. Jimmy found himself trapped in a corner between stove and table. In escaping he barked his leg on the stove and had the wind knocked from his body by a blow that caught him between the shoulder blades. After that, for a time, he was satisfied merely to keep out of reach. When he eluded several charges, a torrent of profanity came from the breeder.

"Stand up and fight!" he yelled. "If you're goin' to make it a foot race, I'll hammer you to death when I do catch up!"

Jimmy grinned. "Better save your wind, partner. You're going to need it in just a minute."

Jimmy began closing in. He was hit repeatedly, but that mattered little as long as the blows did not reach his head. From

being the aggressor, Carter fell back to the defensive. Above the scuffle of feet and smack of fists, Jimmy could hear his opponent's labored breathing and he uncorked another burst of speed that smothered Carter in a barrage of exploding knuckles. He sank his fist to the wrist in the stockman's middle and, when the breeder's arms dropped to his stomach, Jimmy blasted his chin with first a right, then a left.

Carter bellowed with pain, but he did not fall. Backing into a corner by the cupboard he covered up. Jimmy followed, sharp shooting at chin and ribs, but he could do little in such narrow quarters.

Dropping his hands, he said harshly, "Come back out in the open and fight, you big bum! Nobody said anything about rounds."

Carter's only answer was a wheeze of labored breath. If he recovered his wind, Jimmy would have his work to do all over again, and perhaps he would lose, for the man was tough as bullhide. Reaching out, he seized hold of Carter's mustache and dragged him, hurling curses, out into the open. Letting loose the whiskers, Jimmy straightened Carter with a jolt beneath the chin, then aimed a punch that traveled from his toes clear up through thighs, shoulders and arm. The blow landed square on the point of Carter's jaw and knocked him to his knees.

Jimmy paused for a moment to wipe the sweat from his eyes, and panted, "Better yell quits, hombre. I'm starting in to ruin your beauty."

The breeder growled like a wounded animal and neither the sound, nor yet the look of his agonized face, was a pretty thing. Systematically Jimmy went about the business of finishing the fight. He beat the man flat, watched him rise to his feet and knocked him down again. The punishment Carter could absorb was almost unbelievable.

Then, without warning, Jimmy was tackled from behind, and thrown violently to the floor. As he lit, a boot struck him

in the side. Next a whole universe exploded in his skull and the world went black.

When he came to he heard Carter's voice, broken and thick. "You rannies had no business interfering. Him and me had an agreement and I'm goin' to live up to it. Douse some water on him and give him a swig of whiskey."

Jimmy's brain cleared and someone helped him to a seat. From only a few feet away Carter stared at him from another chair.

"Cowboy," he wheezed, "I didn't think you nor anybody else in this part of the country could do this. You licked me fair and square. When my boys pulled you off, I didn't have strength enough left to spit. You knocked my eyes plumb out of focus, but just the minute they track again, you can get the dope on the bulls down in writing. But what in the blue, blisterin' blazes is your name?"

Jimmy told him, and Carter nodded. "Uh-huh. I've heard plenty about you. 'Tain't so bad bein' licked by a man of your calibre. Maybe I wouldn't have made that deal so brash if I'd known. Anyhow, if you can use this information to get the best of Buckner, I won't kick. Never have liked him. He's just too infernal slick. Here, I'll show you."

CARTER turned back to his desk and, reaching into a pigeon hole, pulled out a paper which he handed to Jimmy. "That's his agreement to pay me four hundred a head for the bulls. He's gettin' a thousand apiece from the Cattlemen's Association but what the hell! If I didn't let him have them, someone else would. So I picked out scrubs that weren't worth two hundred head apiece, and I'm not doin' so bad. Now then, I'll try to write you out that statement."

With painful slowness Carter scribbled the information, then signed the paper and handed it over to Jimmy. "There you are," he said heavily. "I hope it does you some

good. Will you put up with us till morning?"

"Sorry, but I'm in a big rush."

"If it's about them bulls, you don't need to hurry. They'll be delivered before you get there, anyhow."

Jimmy grinned. "Don't think so. You see, I started them down the west brakes on my way over."

Carter's mouth flew open. "How about my three men?"

"I tied them up. That's one reason I want to drift back. They're likely getting pretty stiff. Any word you want me to take them?"

"Nothing," Carter answered sadly, "except that I'm thinking of taking up knitting and want them to come and join me. Great hell, we'll be a month gettin' the bulls out of that country!"

"You haven't asked any more about that revolver you lost," reminded Jimmy.

"And I don't aim to," was the grim retort. "I made the bargain myself and I'll stick to it."

"Wait a second," said Jimmy.

He stepped outside into the darkness. On coming back a minute later, he handed Carter a rusty forty-five. The breeder seized it eagerly.

"Thanks a lot, young fellow. That sure takes a lot off my mind. Believe it or not, I killed that human cootie in self-defense. And say, how about a fresh mount if you're starting back tonight? I'll see that yours gets returned."

"I'd be much obliged," accepted Jimmy.

"You don't owe me anything!" retorted Carter. "I'm the one that's in debt. But maybe sometime I can square it."

AT EIGHT o'clock on Saturday night, Jimmy pulled up his mount among the score or more already in the Killdare yard. Sliding stiffly from his saddle, he walked toward the door on half numb legs. Inside a soft, persuasive voice was saying, "Men, I'm afraid that Upton's not going to arrive. With the sheriff waiting for a

chance to arrest him, it wouldn't be surprising if he had decided to leave the county. I suggest that we get along with our business."

"No use crowdin' things, Pope. Jimmy'll get here yet. Give him another ten minutes."

Jimmy smiled. That was Cheesley speaking.

"All right," Pope retorted shortly, "but I don't think it'll do any—"

As the door swung open and Jimmy stepped into the lamp light, Pope stopped short, a still redder glow of embarrassment sweeping across his normally ruddy face.

Cheesley let out a whoop of triumph. "I told you he wouldn't let us down."

After first greetings, Pope sat back in his chair, fidgeting. After clearing his throat several times, he spoke in the low, secretive voice for which he was noted, "Jimmy, I understand you called this meeting sort of over the heads of myself and the other directors, to consider the advisability of going ahead with the purchase of the bulls through Buckner. Of course you understand that, after a contract's been entered into, it's extremely difficult to back out. One would have to have very strong reasons for—"

"The fact that Buckner has his fingers in it ought to be reason enough," one rancher interposed angrily.

Pope peered reprovingly over the top of his glasses, and rapped sharply on the table beside him with the stick of stove wood which he was using for a gavel. "Quiet, please! Let's be orderly about this. Upton, did you find out anything that would constitute a good and justifiable reason for breaking our contract?"

"Yes. The bulls are scrubs. You are paying our forty thousand dollars for a bunch of Herefords that aren't worth more than two hundred dollars apiece. In fact, I wouldn't want them in my herd at any price."

Pope lifted a placating hand. "Aren't

you just expressing your own opinion? I have a recognized stock judge's report on them. He certifies that the bulls are exceptional and well worth the money."

"Buckner has a man in his employment for every dirty job!" retorted Jimmy. "But I have the word of the breeder who sold them to Buckner that they're not worth over two hundred dollars apiece and that Buckner paid him only four hundred, which would leave Buckner a profit of six hundred dollars per bull."



Pope winced as though struck. The piece of stove wood fell from his trembling grasp. "I—I don't believe it. There must be some mistake."

Jimmy took Carter's statement from his pocket and shoved it in front of Pope. To the others he said, "That paper tells exactly what the deal was between Carter and Buckner and why they made it. The bulls are Buckner's way of making good his rodeo losses at our expense. It figures up something like twenty-four thousand that he hoped to bleed us for."

Hoots of angry amazement came from the crowd.

Cheesley voiced their sentiments as he said, "When the bulls get here, we'll tell Buckner to peddle them to a packing plant. Nobody is going to use my money for a swindle like that."

A dozen voices joined in the chorus. Pope, his features jerking with agitation, rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he quavered, "Just a minute. You can't take this stand."

"Can't?" demanded Cheesley. "Why not? We'd be plumb crazy if we didn't."

Pope's hands twisted as though he were wringing out a shirt. "But—but it's too late," he bleated.

"Too late?" echoed Jimmy. "Why is it too late? The bulls haven't been delivered yet."

"I—I know," stuttered Pope, "But I paid for them this afternoon."

A groan of astonished wrath came from the stockmen. Cheesley all but swallowed his cigarette. "You mean that you handed over our money to Buckner without even gettin' the scrubs?"

POPE'S face purpled with embarrassment. "Gentlemen," he croaked, "there's no use getting excited. We'd better have Buckner for a friend than for an enemy. The deal had already been arranged for. The time for turning over the money was merely a formality. I had no reason to suspect the irregularities Mr. Upton has suggested."

"Suggested? You blasted old flannel mouth! He's proved them. You've let the rest of us down. A man that's got no more guts than you've shown ought to be drowned in a tank of stock dip!"

The bunch of men started crowding toward Pope. Jimmy jumped upon the table. "Hold on a minute!" he called. "No use getting too hostile with Pope. When you come to think of it, we've all been kind of like putty in Buckner's hands. Take me. I rode for the rodeo when all the time I had a hunch it would be crooked. It took a lot to cure me. Maybe this will be the jolt to wean Pope. Frank, did you pay him in cash or by check?"

"A check, as we always do. But he wanted it before banking hours. Said that he had to have the money for Carter's men when they arrived with the bulls. That's why he hurried me up."

"He cashed it right enough," vouchsafed another rancher. "I saw him going up the street with the sheriff just before the bank closed. His pockets was stuffed like he'd been stealing groceries."

"Where did they go?" queried Cheesley.

"Into the *Chronicle* Building. Reckon they were goin' up to Buckner's office."

Cheesley glanced at Jimmy and he nodded. "Sounds about right. Stickney went along to make sure Buckner got it locked up all safe. Thanks to Frank's cooperation, we've been fleeced again."

The meeting broke up in bitter silence. The ranchers felt defeated and sold. No one accused Pope of being actually dishonest.

That is, none of them thought he had any sort of cut or expected to get one. He had merely let a stronger personality have its way. Cheesley probably voiced the sentiment of the men when he remarked after he and Jimmy were alone, "If there's anything I hate in this world, it's a damn weakling. They do more harm than out and out crooks and badmen. You can kill the last."

"We'll have to elect a new Association president if we're to keep on doing business."

"Yeah, we'll have to. But there ain't a helluva lot left to save. Pretty tough your making that trip for nothing. Of course you got some evidence, but it won't do much good now that Buckner's in a position to stave off his creditors. He's all fixed to bleed the stockmen for another year at least."

"Looks like it," agreed Jimmy. "Want to ride down town with me?"

"Tryin' to get arrested?"

"No. Just thought I'd like to look around a bit. We'll keep away from the bright lights."

In the shadow of Bagley's implement store they tied their horses to the wooden rail and walked south on the board sidewalk toward Main Street. The street they were on was narrow and in the gloom of two of Sarpy's largest buildings. Next to them was the Stockmen's Hotel and on the opposite side the *Chronicle* Building—a four story structure, fronting on Main

Street. Jimmy stopped and, placing a hand on his companion's shoulder, pointed to a light that came from two adjoining windows in the third story.

"Bert, isn't that the floor that Buckner's office is on?"

"Sure. And that's the right location. Why?"

"I was just wondering. Bert, if that forty thousand happened to get stolen before Buckner had a chance to use it, he'd still be in a plenty hot spot."

Cheesley emitted a low whistle. "And how about the bird that took it? With Buckner eggin' him on, Stickney would just naturally turn himself inside out. He would. No foolin'."

"But if the gent that did it could keep away until Buckner's creditors flattened him out, he wouldn't have too much trouble with the law, would he?"

"I—Thunderation! He shouldn't have, but who knows? Seems like justice is a cockeyed proposition sometimes."

"If a man held on to the money till Buckner went broke, he'd be all right," argued Jimmy. "There'd certainly be a clean-up of the politics and an entire new set of officials elected. It's a cinch that, when the members of the Cattlemen's Association got their money back, they'd do everything in their power to help the man who helped them."

"Jimmy, you're not intending to rob Buckner?"

"It wouldn't be robbing Buckner. He hasn't turned over the bulls yet. I'd be just keepin' the money for him till he made good on the deal. It's one or the other of us at present, with the odds a little bit in his favor. I'm already wanted by the sheriff and this would only make him hone a little harder to get me. You stay down here and, if anyone starts upstairs, you whistle to me."

Cheesley grabbed him by the arm. "What's gone wrong with your head, Jimmy? You can't pack off a safe."

"They have combinations, don't they?"

murmured Jimmy, starting off against Cheesley's awed protests.

THE worn stair runner rustled softly beneath his boots as he tramped upward. From the offices on the second floor came the scent of stuffy rooms that had cooked all afternoon without ventilation. A black cat, working on a sustenance basis, attempted to glide in front of Jimmy. With swift expertness he kicked the animal back, thereby preventing more bad luck than that which had already dogged him. At the third story landing he paused and looked cautiously up and down the hall. Nothing stirred and, from a frosted glass bearing the words, BUCKNER PROMOTION COMPANY, came a subdued gleam of light. Inside he could make out a dark blob that might be a man. He tried the door. It was locked but, from the other side someone, who resented being disturbed, snapped, "Who's there?"

It was one of Stickney's deputies. Jimmy would have recognized the voice anywhere. Disguising his own, he asked, "Is Buckner there?"

"No, he ain't. Who are you? Whatcha want?"

"I gotta see Buckner. Know where I can find him?"

"Down at the Rocky Mountain Bar."

"Where?" repeated Jimmy.

"Down at the *Rocky Mountain Bar!*" the deputy half shouted. "Now git the hell away from here! No one's allowed to hang around this office. Savvy?"

"Speak a little louder."

A roar of disgust shook the transom as the deputy moved heavily across the floor. With a wrench that threatened to tear the door from its hinges, he jerked it open and thrust out a belligerent face. "Yuh deaf nit-wit! I said Buckner was at—"

The muzzle of Jimmy's revolver, shoved fairly against his teeth, cut short the tirade. "Come on," snapped Jimmy. "We're going for a walk. Make a squeak and it's curtains."

At the foot of the stairway Cheesley was waiting. "Who you got there, Jimmy?"

"Dennis. Stickney's right bower."

"What we goin' to do with him?"

"We? You're not in on this."

"Wasn't," Cheesley corrected grimly. "But while you promenaded upstairs I made up my mind I was a piker not to set in. So you're dealin' me cards from now on. What next?"

"Take Dennis here and put him in storage in some good place while I hunt Buckner."

"Then what?"

"Get on your horse and lead mine up close to this side entrance. Don't be longer than you have to."

"Okay, partner. Good luck."

WITH his hat low on his forehead Jimmy moved on to Main Street and toward the Rocky Mountain Bar. By keeping in the shadows whenever possible there was little danger of being recognized. Tonight, under pressure applied by Buckner, Sarpy was celebrating the close of its bogus rodeo. Saloons, poolhalls, and the town's two dance halls were going full blast, with practically all of Buckner's satellites gathered at one or the other of them. When Jimmy was close to the Rocky Mountain Bar he saw Stickney barge in to the saloon with a half-drunk wobble. Waiting until the sheriff had vanished, Jimmy approached a newsboy, who sat on the curb, counting his unsold papers.

"Want to make fifty cents?" he asked.

"Sure. How can I do it?"

"Just go inside and tell Buckner that Dennis, who is on guard over at Buckner's office, wants to speak to him. Right away. Get it?"

The boy repeated the message and, taking the money from Jimmy's hand, darted inside. Jimmy walked swiftly back toward the *Chronicle* Building. If Buckner was not inebriated past travel, he would certainly

respond to a message from his guard. That forty thousand would be much on his mind.

When Jimmy reached the side entrance Cheesley had not yet returned. Jimmy hoped he would not until after Buckner came. Hurrying up the stairs he entered the Buckner office and pulled the door shut. Instantly he realized that this waiting for the promoter to come was going to be the hardest job he had so far encountered. It gave him time to think of all the dangers connected with his and Cheesley's actions. This was the farthest step outside the law that he had ever made. A hundred times farther than he had ever expected to go. Buckner had driven a lot of good, sound men into doing suicidal things in the past years. Would he and Cheesley turn out just two more in the long list of ranchers, broken by the promoter, or would they succeed in destroying him?"

The minutes crept like cows through a swamp. Jimmy's heart thumped until he wondered if it echoed in the hall. Mentally he could see headlines of the Buckner-dominated *Chronicle* announcing that he had become a safe-robber. Cheesley's name, also, would be there in large type. He felt sorry for having got Bert into this mess. Their reputations would be pretty black for a while—would always be, if Buckner succeeded in catching them before his wildcat business blew up. Why didn't Buckner come? Couldn't the kid find him? Was he suspicious?

Supposing he had the building surrounded? He sighed softly and wiped the moisture from his palms. Suddenly his heart flopped. From below came a rumble of voices. Buckner wasn't alone. Pulling the door ever so slightly ajar, Jimmy laid an ear to a crack and listened. He could hear but two men. Stickney had accompanied Buckner, and now he was saying, "Dennis is a damn good deputy. Never takes anything for granted. Either he's seen some little thing that he thinks will

bear watchin', or he's not feelin' too good. Sometimes has stomach attacks. See? He's the kind that won't stay on a job unless he's feelin' top hole. Responsible? Nobody ever lost anything through Dennis' fault. Say, Alf, how about a little loan? Had a lot of hard luck this month and the grocery's riding me with sharp spurs."

"You lost your money gambling," accused Buckner.

"Sure. At one of your tables, helpin' to stimulate business."

"Well, I can't spare any money now," retorted the promoter, "but I'll let you have one of the steers left over from the rodeo. You can turn it in at the butcher shop on your bill."

"Sure," sighed the sheriff. "I suppose it's just as good as money. Still, I'd a damn sight rather have the cash."

The heavy footsteps drew closer. Jimmy tensed himself. It was the sheriff who pushed the door open and stepped across the threshold, exclaiming as he did so, "Hey, Dennis!"

Jimmy was concealed by the door and the sheriff, staring about, gave a grunt of astonishment. Buckner shoved in after him, his burly frame radiating suspicion. "What's wrong? Isn't your deputy here?"

"No. That's funny. After calling you. Reckon there must have been a robbery. Something must have happened to Dennis. He's a good—"

Buckner snarled like a buzz saw cutting knots. "Shut up your infernal gibberish! We'll soon see about that money. If it's gone, you're fired!"

The two crowded close into the room that contained the safe. On tiptoe Jimmy followed. Buckner squatted like a huge toad before the square iron box, with Stickney standing close behind him, still pleading.

"Alf, you can't kick me out after I worked the way I have? It's not my fault. See? If you've been robbed—"

"Your deputy probably had a hand in it. Now shut up so I can think!"

Buckner twisted the knobs on the dial. From inside the safe came a faint whirring and finally a definite click. With a grunt of eagerness Buckner pulled open the door. A whoosh of relieved breath escaped his lungs as the electric light fell upon several bundles of bank notes, held together by rubber bands.

His relief was a form of elation. "It's here," he chortled. "Man—if it hadn't been!"

"You didn't need to worry with one of my deputies on duty," boasted Stickney. "Ain't one of them that wouldn't rather be killed than lose anything they're supposed to protect. I'm that way myself, and I demand guts of my—"

The sheriff stopped short, transfixed by a paralyzing horror. He had caught sight of Jimmy's leveled revolver.

"Grab for the ceiling—both of you!" The crackled order sent two pairs of hands stretching upward, but the promoter reached out a foot in an attempt to push shut the safe. "Touch that door and I'll blow your toes off!" warned Jimmy. "Now turn your backs to me and don't talk!"

THE men obeyed and Jimmy removed a revolver from Buckner's pockets, then took one from the sheriff's holster. Down on the street he could hear men talking. Some were calling Buckner's name. In a minute or two they would be upstairs. There was no time for tying these two up.

Stuffing the bank notes in his pocket, Jimmy backed to the door. "I'm going now," he announced tersely. "But if I hear a yap out of either of you, I'll come back and commit murder."

Swiftly he ran down the stairs. At the street entrance several men were gathered. Beyond them a short way he could see Cheesley and the horses. One of the bunch on the board sidewalk recognized Jimmy and exclaimed, "Hey, Upton, what in blazes you been doin' up there?"

"Having a conference with Buckner,"

he answered, shoving through to his horse. "All of you go on up, if you like. Maybe he'll set you up. Both he and Stickney are yelling drunk."



As the men crowded up the stairs bel- lows of agonized fury came from above. Jimmy touched spurs to his mount. "Come on, Bert. The lid's off now."

They galloped down three dusty blocks to the Sarpy bridge and raised hollow thunder from the planks as they sped across. The marshy ground and willows fell behind in a dark blur. The sweet smell of the meadows rushed to meet them, then they were out in the sage-dotted rangeland, with frosted pinnacles of the Powder Horn Range, ghostlike in the darkness ahead.

The two were riding stirrup to stirrup when Cheesley drawled, "Guess there's no doubt about your gettin' the money, the way Buckner bellowed. But what you goin' to do with it?"

"Take it into the hills."

"It's getting cold up there. You can't get along without provisions."

"I know it. But there's no time to stop for them now."

"Tell you what," suggested his friend, "Supposing I leave you somewhere soon and fog up the valley, telling some of the ranchers what we've done. We can arrange with them to have supplies smuggled up to a dozen different places that none of the sheriff's force know anything about. Then, when the man hunt gets started, we can decide which location looks like the best bet."

"That's sense. Grouse Flats, Indian

Spires, Seepage Meadows—all would be good places for caches.”

“O. K. I’ll see that groceries get headed for everyone of those spots pronto. Where shall I meet you? I’ll have to lie low in the day time. Won’t be able to get into the mountains before tomorrow night.”

Jimmy hesitated. Meeting at any particular spot twenty-four hours later might be a difficult matter. No telling how many deputies Stickney and Buckner would appoint, or where they’d look. “Better try Seepage Meadows,” he said at last. “If I’m there, you can meet me in the aspens north of the big beaver dam at—say—ten P.M., and, if I’m not there, we’ll try to join up over at Indian Spires the following night.”

“Good enough,” assented Cheesley. “If we don’t make connections the first try, I’ll be watching for you at the Wigwam Rock the next night. Well, guess I’d better turn off here.”

They shook hands and Cheesley melted into the darkness to the northward, while Jimmy rode on toward the Powder Moon Mountains. Every mile increased his gravity. Partly it was the icy wind whistling off the peaks that chilled his spirits, but that was not all. He was launched on a desperate program, for which there had been no planning. By morning Buckner and the sheriff would have the news of what he had done scattered far and wide. The *Chronicle* would play him up as a desperate character, and only the relatively small group of stockmen, who understood the real situation, would be in a position to separate truth from falsehood.

Tomorrow, for the first time in his life, he would be compelled to look on every human as a potential enemy. Tomorrow he would likely watch possemen scatter through the hills in search of him. It was he or Bruckner now.

WHEN the first pearly quiverings of dawn appeared on the eastern ridges, Jimmy was well up Snowslide Canyon.

Where it branched into three prongs, he hesitated. By taking the left hand fork he could get back into the peaks much faster, but three or four miles farther on was a large tract of wet land where his horse would leave tracks that a drunk posse could follow in the dark. The right hand fork was little more than a granite gutter, leading into some extremely rough country. No one could track him that way but, if a posse did surmise he was there and enter the region in any numbers, the chances were good that they would find him before the day was over.

In the end he chose the middle fork, thinking to take refuge for the day in the spring-watered wilderness of aspen-covered hills and hollows at its head. To avoid being trailed, he rode up the creek bed for two miles, where he ran into a bunch of horses feeding alongside the stream. Among the animals was a black gelding that took Jimmy’s eye. He did not fancy keeping the animal he was on indefinitely, because some of the men in Sarpy had undoubtedly caught sight of it by one of the scattered street lights. There was a rope on his saddle and, after a little maneuvering, he succeeded in dropping a noose over the gelding’s head. It took but a moment to transfer the saddle and, mounting his new horse, he hazed the entire herd up the canyon. When the band split some distance farther on, Jimmy had the satisfaction of knowing there were fifty possible sets of tracks for the sheriff’s men to follow.

Instead of holing up for the day in one of the ravines, he drank at a spring, then made for a high-timbered point far from any water. All sides of the ridge he chose were covered with brush and scattered pine. If pressed, he would have a chance to retreat in any of several directions without appearing in the open. Tying the gelding in a small, maple-surrounding clearing, he moved cautiously toward the brow of the ridge and took up a position on top of a little bluff, which enabled him to look

over the spruce below and far out across the Sarpy Valley. From his vantage point he could see down both the right and middle forks of Snowslide Canyon, and get glimpses of the main canyon, miles farther on. If he used both ears and eyes, he could surely ward off surprise.

When Jimmy caught his first glimpse of pursuing possemen it did queer things to his vitals. He had a strange, smothered sensation, accompanied by a wild desire to flee. Instead, he compelled himself to lie still beneath a screening cedar. He counted the men in the middle fork as they passed through the meadow where he had roped the gelding. Ten men went through before noon. They came in three groups and each one spent some little time in the Flat. Although he was too far away to see, he felt certain they were scanning the slope with field glasses. It was disconcerting to know that so many men were after him, but one thought was cheering. So far the men were acting more or less independently, which meant that Stickney had no idea which of the many trails leading into the Powder Moon Mountains he had used. Probably similar groups were scattered through every canyon for twenty miles each way. The idea of how many that must mean in the aggregate was staggering. He had expected Buckner to stir up a lot of feeling but how a forty thousand dollar robbery had resulted so quickly in such a wholesale search was beyond him.

For the first time he began worrying about the horse that he had discarded. If any of the searchers recognized the animal as the one he had ridden out of Sarpy, the entire search would likely narrow in on him. Still, he had given the horses a good scare and they would likely try to keep out of sight for a while.

MID AFTERNOON found him hungry and dry. He dared not go near the water but he ate a few chokecherries. Once a party got close enough so that he heard men calling to each other. He was

preparing to move down the far slope when another of the searchers shouted, "It's just one more of them damn ponies we've been trailin'."

Grumbling, the party retreated down the hill. Jimmy drew a sigh of relief. Whatever else happened, he did not want to be compelled to fight in order to retain his freedom. The robbery was burden enough without having gun play added to it.

After that no one came to his hiding place and, as soon as it was dark, he started for Seepage Meadows. At a spring he watered the gelding and filled his stomach with liquid, but it did not take the place of food. Twice, as he moved along the mountainside, he caught the scent of campfires, with whiffs of cooking meat. The smell made his mouth water. If only he could have secured a grouse or rabbit, he would gladly have eaten it raw. But he dared not fire a gun.

A little before ten he reached the Seepage Meadows. A hundred warm springs bubbled up in an area half a mile wide by twice that length. Jimmy sniffed for wood smoke. He could not catch any but it did not quiet his distrust. The air was still and smoke would carry but a short distance, besides, the evening fires would be dying down. Eyesight helped but little, for the warm waters produced a blanket of vapor. His best chance of discovering whether the meadow was occupied or not was to look for horses. It was still enough to hear them cropping, if any were around. But he encountered none nor did his own horse show any sign of smelling other animals.

When he reached the big pond, several beaver were working on the dam, but he saw no sign of Cheesley, though he rode clear around the lake. Later he headed into the aspens on the north shore. Hunger made him reckless, and he whistled. The only response to this was the hooting of an owl.

Cheesley had not come. A few trout

jumped in the pond but Jimmy could only lick his lips. A lariat was too large for fishing and a lasso could not well be substituted for a hook. Disgusted, he rode into the trees where he would not be tantalized by their jumping. Using his coat for a pillow and the saddle blanket for a cover, he tried to sleep, but the sound of the gelding's browsing reminded him too strongly of his own hunger.

Getting up again, he moved farther away. Passing under a pine tree he heard the drowsy chitter of grouse in the branches above. Probably some hen had crowded another from its perch. He tried desperately to see the birds by looking toward the stars, but it was no use for the foliage concealed them. Perhaps if he waited beneath the tree until the first crack of dawn, he might succeed in knocking one out.

For some time he busied himself searching through the blackness for suitable stones to use in throwing. Then he settled himself against the trunk of a tree and once more attempted to sleep. This time he drowsed, but the cold would not allow him to slumber long at a time. A fire would have been the height of luxury, but he dared not take the risk.

When the dawn wind first moved the trees, he heard the pine grouse stirring. Soon they would be leaving. Getting stiffly to his feet, he tried again to see them. At last he picked out their forms high up like a string of jet beads on a slender bough, with a background of paling sky. He threw one stone and missed. Three of the grouse flew with a whir-r-r of wings. The rest teetered on their shaky limb and craned their necks.

Putting everything he had into the effort, he threw a second time. One of the grouse toppled like a pin in a shooting gallery. Jimmy waited for it, ready to spring. The grouse hit the ground in a strugglign swirl. He sprang, missed it, and followed the crippled bird across a rotting log and into a briar patch. There

he caught it and swiftly wrung its neck. Ruefully he realized that the bird was old and tough. Somehow he must find an opportunity to cook it.

All that day he remained holed up. Twice during the forenoon he heard the sound of distant shots. A little after noon a bunch of possemen camped at the lower edge of Seepage Meadows and had dinner. After eating they fanned out and made a search of the region. Jimmy had his horse hidden in a deep, narrow wash, completely roofed with bushes. Men rode within rods of his hiding spot, yet failed to find him. That was a dividend he drew from knowing the country perfectly.

AT FOUR in the afternoon all sounds ceased and Jimmy judged the men had gone. Leaving the horse hidden, he crawled out of the wash and investigated. No one was in the meadow and soon he saw a file of riders crossing a shale slide far up the ridge separating Seepage Meadows from the right fork of Snowslide Canyon. Relieved, he made his way down where the men had camped. There was nothing left that a man could eat, although a dozen empty cans of one kind and another were scattered around. But the fire was still hot and he roasted the grouse over the coals.

Before he was through eating blue jays screaming part way up the hill caused him to retreat into a nearby alder thicket. Hardly had he concealed himself when two horsemen rode into the clearing. One was Alf Buckner, the other, Sheriff Stickney. On seeing the blaze, the two spurred swiftly forward.

"By hell, Stick," ejaculated Buckner, "looks like we're on a warm scent. Somebody's been here just a few minutes ago. Suppose it was Upton?"

Stickney pursed his lips and blew out his cheeks with importance as he rode round the fire. "No, sir, Alf, I don't think it was him. Tell you why. He knows my record for gettin' my man. Upton's holed

up in a cave somewhere, shiverin' the soles off his boots."

"Bull chips!" snarled Buckner. "If it wasn't Upton, who was it?"

"Some of our deputies, Alf. See how many horses have been picketed around here? And look at the grub the beggars ett? Nope, we ain't goin' to find Upton this close to Sarpy."

"Then why in hell's bells are you wastin' time looking for him here? Don't you understand that I've got to have that money inside of three days, or I'm sunk? And you're sunk, too. So is every lazy son-of-a-gun that's holdin' office through me. What do you think's goin' to happen to that fat belly of yours if I lose out? Hey? I'll tell you. You're goin' to get so gaunt you can wipe your mouth with the slack. That's what!"

Buckner was fairly yelling as he finished, and Stickney backed away from the blast.

"Why—why—why, you can't have us lose our jobs! I just gotta keep mine. I couldn't keep runnin' pants on a midgit without that pay check comin' in regular. Can't you stall 'em off, Alf? That's the way I do. Hell, I've stalled off a lot of collectors. That's one of the things I like about a man hunt. Collectors don't keep on your trail when you're out after killers."

KILLERS. The word had an ominous ring in Jimmy's ears. Was Stickney classifying him as one? And, if so, why?

"Won't you ever stop that senseless yapping?" snapped Buckner. "I tell you, Stick, my creditors won't wait. They're sore at me already about some other deals. They want to put me on the spot. If we don't catch Upton and recover that money, there's goin' to be all hell to douse with a tin cup."

Stickney mopped his flabby jowls and nodded. "I get your point, Alf," he wheezed. "We gotta catch him, but you know I feel sorta bad about it. Jimmy

Upton wasn't a bad actor. He was a good scout. He must have been crowded pretty hard to shoot young Barstow."

Jimmy's vitals did a sunfish. Young Jack Barstow dead! Why, he was about the best-liked youngster in the valley! Only eighteen years old and full of life as a frisky yearling. Now they were claiming that he had killed him. No wonder that the hills were full of possemen. Rage leaped in him. Some more of Buckner's dirty scheming. He wanted to step out and choke the truth from the crooked liar.

Quivering, he fought to retain his sanity. It would not do to expose himself. The final result of that would certainly be capture. No, he must play the game as he had started it, and stay hidden, if possible, till Buckner's creditors closed in on him. After that Jimmy would try to clear himself. Perhaps, then, he could. But only, perhaps.

The sheriff and Buckner moved on. Jimmy remained where he was until dark, then started again for the granite spires ten miles farther east, along the face of the range, and well up toward timberline. Need of caution was even greater than on the night before, but he was nowhere nearly as well prepared to exert it. He had had no sleep worth mentioning for forty-eight hours and the nourishment he had worried from one ancient, half-cooked grouse had merely sharpened his appetite. He felt weak and sleepy and found himself dozing in the saddle.

WHILE crossing Hobble Creek Canyon the numbness of his faculties nearly cost him his life. He almost rode into a camp of possemen. Someone shouted and the yell jerked him back to life. Digging the spurs into the gelding, he cheated the officer who fired at the spot where he had been but a pulse-beat earlier. After he gained cover on the far side of the canyon, he heard some threshing around in the brush behind him. This, however,

did not last long, and he continued on toward the Indian Spires.

Thinking back over the incident, he doubted if the man at the camp in the canyon had really seen him. The night was as dark as a horsethief's future. There had been no blaze from the campfire. No, all the man could have done was to hear him. They might wonder if it were he, but they could not be certain. If this was like any other man hunt, people were thinking they had seen him for fifty miles each way.



But the incident served one purpose. It helped to keep him awake until he turned the shoulder of Tabiona Mountain and reached the first of the Indian spires. There were perpetual snowbanks near the top of Tabiona and a down draft sent a frigid wind whistling through the strange, conical formations. The blasts that drove under his jacket were sharp as steerhorns. Within five minutes his teeth were chattering. If Cheesley had brought some coffee, he was going to brew a pot. Up here it would be perfectly safe. No smell of any kind would carry ten feet through such a gale. Anyhow, the possemen would do their camping much farther down, where it took less blankets to keep a man from solidifying.

The wigwam rock was a natural curiosity. Not only was it shaped like a giant tepee, but it had a hole in one side that led into a fair-sized chamber. Jimmy and Cheesley had first found it when hunting elk.

Afterward they had used it on several trips. It made better protection than any tent and, as far as either of them

knew, had never been visited by anyone else. Surely Cheesley would be there now.

He approached the rock expecting to see the light from the campfire beating upon the pine tree that stood just outside the entrance. When he found the place black, his spirits fell. Dismounting stiffly, he leaned against the howling gale and walked toward the opening. Everything inside was dark as a coal mine.

Getting out of the wind, he called Cheesley's name, knowing, as he did so, that there would be no answer. The place felt lonely and deserted. Nor had his feet encountered any article of a rider's equipment. Cheesley had never camped without scattering his belongings.

Jimmy called twice, then scratched a match. Two packrats scurried into a shadow and in a corner he saw a tied sack. Something of his gloom departed. Food was what he needed most. It was even more necessary than human society. Striding over to it, he slashed the string with his pocket knife and pulled open the mouth. His match had gone out and he reached a hand inside. Instead of tin cans and packages, his fingers closed on a rock. Disappointment almost nauseated him. With an effort he struck another match and stared into the sack. It was rock, right enough. Rocks and chunks of wood. But on top was a piece of cardboard, torn from the end of a box, and on it something was written. He used a third match and read:

"Upton, this is a trap. Get out quick."

Jimmy backed from the place as though bitten and, fighting his way to his horse, pulled himself into the icy saddle. As he started to ride away he saw a light bobbing toward the wigwam rock.

So the warning was genuine. The place was being guarded day and night. Only the fact that he had arrived when it was so beastly cold had kept him from being captured.

But who among the possemen would want to help him? Cheesley had not left

the message, for the handwriting was not his.

Jimmy did some desperate thinking the next few minutes. His case was rapidly shifting from bad to desperate. A man could not live indefinitely without food. The only alternative to having it brought was to kill it himself. But he dared not shoot a gun with possemen all over the map. As he saw it now, he must either hit for the valley and try to pick up food at some ranch, or strike for still higher country.

In the end he decided on the latter. There were mountain sheep around timberline and above. He would ride up there and stake his chances on being able to kill a sheep. No one would expect a man to go where food was so scarce and the weather so cold. He might be a fool to risk it, but anything was better than allowing Buckner to lay hands on this money again.

Afterward Jimmy was rather hazy himself about the events of the following days. During all the daylight of the following forty-eight hours he hunted sheep incessantly. In that spell he had nothing to eat but the grouse he had killed at Seepage Meadows and one rock rabbit. There was very little of the latter for he blew it almost to pieces with his rifle.

WHEN the cold became so intense he could stand no more exposure, he would move down the slope to the highest of the wind-dwarfed trees and build himself a fire in some protected hollow. On the third day he killed his sheep and carried it off the crags where he could cook it. That night he really ate. Rest was difficult due to cold and insufficient blankets, but sleeping on fire-heated ground did much to help him. The sheep pelt made an added covering for his body.

When he woke the sun was shining and wood smoke drifted across his nostrils. Lifting himself on an elbow, he stared. Some one, with his back toward Jimmy, was squatted by the fire, roasting a chunk

of mutton and downing another one at the same time. From the way the man bolted his food, it was evident he was as hungry as Jimmy had been the night before.

Slipping his revolver from beneath the coat he had used for a pillow, Jimmy let out a yell. The newcomer showed no sign of surprise, but turned leisurely, still tearing at the mutton. His face was all but entirely hidden by a thick growth of curly, reddish whiskers, but there was no mistaking the quizzical expression in the eyes or the humor about the mouth.

"Bert!"

"Hello, Jimmy. I told you I'd help out with the provisions. Took me a long time to get round to it, though. This billy goat tastes better than spring grass to a starving steer. Man—was I gaunt!"

"Where have you been since we separated?"

"Spookin' round in the hills, tryin' to catch up with you and keep the other birds from gettin' me at the same time. I had guys on my trail twenty minutes after we separated, and it's been that way most of the time since. I never knew before that tryin' to be a public-spirited citizen could get a man into so much trouble. And I haven't had forty thousand dollars in paper money to make a comfortable pillow for my head, either. It's been hell."

Jimmy grinned.

"That's about the longest speech I ever heard you make, Bert."

"I had a lot of time to think it out. You know, practically everyone is out after us. 'Tain't every year there's an open season on cowpunchers. Why, even old Carter is over here goin' to see if he can bag himself a head. Neither of us is goin' to look very damn pretty mounted."

"Someone warned me about a trap at Indian Spires," observed Jimmy. "They left a note."

Cheesley was instantly alert. "Is that a fact? Funny, but you know one fellow on this hunt has tipped me off two or three

times. Done it by firin' a gun off and holdin' back so I'd have plenty of time to run. Once I watched from a bush way up on the mountain and I seen him motion the other possemen to go in the other direction from what I took."

"Any notion who it was?"

Cheesley shook his head. "Too far away. But he's sure my idea of a gentleman and a scholar. Well, what's the program for today? Some more hide and hunt?"

That was what it turned out to be—not alone for that day, but for several more. Then, on the fifth day, as they were riding fast around a spur of hill to keep from being seen by a bunch of possemen, Cheesley's horse slipped on the frozen ground that had thawed along the surface. Cheesley tried to kick free, but one leg caught beneath the horse and was badly scraped. In addition his head got a nasty rap on a rock. Only the fact that he clung to a rosebush prevented his sliding over a fifty foot ledge after his mount.

By the time Jimmy reached his side, Cheesley was unconscious. Jimmy tried to lift him on his own horse but the animal was nervous and would not stand. Besides, he was so weak from loss of sleep and poor food that a hundred and seventy pound man was more than he could manage.

While he sweated, two of the pursuing riders flashed in sight far above. Apparently they had not seen him, for they rode directly past. Jimmy's mood was desperate. Cheesley was badly hurt and help was needed for taking care of him. He watched a little longer but no more riders came in sight.

Acting on a mad impulse, he swung back upon his horse and cut, angling, along the face of the mountain to intercept the pair. Two minutes later he reined up in a stand of lodgepole pine and waited. From the green ahead came Buckner, his voice, as usual, hoarse, and high-pitched with rage.

"I don't see how in damnation he's escaped this long unless you've been helpin' him, Stick. If I thought you had, I'd kill you like I would a coyote!"

"Don't get so lathered up, Alf," whined the sheriff. "We've all been doin' our best to catch him. It's no cinch. Jimmy Upton knows this country. If I could just meet up with—"

The sheriff left the statement incomplete as Jimmy spurred his horse from the brush. Automatically his arms went upward. Buckner's reaction was different. With an oath he lifted the rifle, which lay across the saddle in front of him, and fired. It was an idiotic thing to do. Never a good shot, he even failed to take aim. He missed by a yard. As Jimmy's revolver flashed, the promoter's mount threw up its head and received a ball in its temple. The animal reared straight upward, then toppled. In the fall Buckner lost his rifle and his desire to fight. Perhaps Stickney's idea had not been so bad after all. Both his hands groped skyward. Jimmy glared at him from fatigue-reddened eyes.

"I almost wish that slug had hit your fat skull instead of killing a good horse," he stated grimly. "Now drop your revolver and move off down hill. I'll tell you which way to head. Sheriff, you follow him!"

When they reached Cheesley he was still unconscious.

"Look at him, Sheriff," directed Jimmy, "and see if his leg's broken."

Stickney made a fumbling examination, followed by a characteristic answer. "I can't tell. But he's sure mussed up."

"Bert's tough," opined Jimmy. "Once we get him to a sawbones he'll be all right. You birds put him on the horse. Sheriff, you lead the animal and pick the smoothest trail down. Buckner, you hold Bert on. If you let him fall, I'll murder you."

"You mean you're goin' down to where people are?" Stickney sputtered in amazement. "Ain't you understanding you'll get arrested?"

"I had thought of that possibility," Jimmy observed dryly. "But I'm going to see that Bert reaches a doctor in good shape."

THE sheriff moved toward him, winking as he came. On his features was a look of knowing secrecy. "Just let me talk with you a moment alone, Jimmy," he wheezed. "Over this way a bit, so Alf can't hear."

"Okay," agreed Jimmy. "But what is it?"

"It's about this busniess of takin' Bert down. I could do that alone. I'd be careful with him. Nobody's got much against Bert. They hold you responsible for stealin' the money, and they ain't blamin' you, either, as much as they did. If you'd keep Buckner with you and drop him somewhere else later on, I'd handle the rest and you'd be free. But I don't want to be left with him any longer. Ever since he came out from town last night, he's been like a mad man."

"Sheriff," answered Jimmy. "I'd be suited fine if I knew you had to sleep with him the rest of your life. Anyhow, it's going to take both your efforts to get him down in good shape."

The trip proved anything but easy. With each mile Cheesley's pain increased until Jimmy could think of little but his friend's suffering. In fact he had temporarily forgotten about being a wanted man, when Cheesley turned an anguished face back toward him and yelled, "Beat it, Jimmy! Here's the posse!"

Jimmy whirled his mount. He hated to desert Cheesley, but once Buckner got possession of the money, everything was lost. With a farewell wave to his friend, he spurred back up the trail, only to have his way blocked by Carter and two other men. Strangely, there was no hostility in Carter's battered features. Instead of raising his gun, he lifted a hairy paw in friendly salutation.

"Take it easy, Upton," he grinned.

"You're not goin' to have any more trouble. I just cut round behind to prevent you from spendin' another night in the hills when there was no use."

Jimmy wondered if he were hearing right, so he asked, "Just what do you mean?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all," retorted Carter, "exceptin' that Buckner's run slap into the arms of some Federal officers that are sure honin' to meet him. Say, Upton, that fellow's wanted for cverything from cheatin' squaws out of money made in the squaw races, to usin' the mails for swindlin'.

"His creditors say they've got enough stuff on the crooked devil to keep him in jail till he's older than Methuselah. The sheriff's in danged near as deep. So are most of the other county officials. When you get home, folks are goin' to welcome you as Sarpy Valley's first citizen."

"But how about young Barstow's death?"

Carter made a grimace of disgust. "So you heard they was tryin' to frame you on that?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Well, there wasn't a chance in the world of makin' it stick. The kid accidentally shot himself while out huntin'. Buckner's been so lucky in makin' folks swallow anything that he figured he was smart enough to lay that on to you. Right at first he made it stick, but me and some of the other members of your Cattlemen's Association did a bit of investigatin' and found out just how bum a plot it was. That's goin' against him, too."

JIMMY stared at the unlovely countenance that still carried marks from the beating he had administered, and he marveled. He had been thinking a lot that needed to be retracted about this man. Awkwardly he searched for a beginning. "Say, I—I—"

"Say, what?"

"Why, all this time I've been taking it

for granted you were out after my scalp. I want to apologize—”

“Forget it!” interrupted Carter. “But how about that note I left in the sack of rocks at Wigwam Rock?”

“I read it. Did you put it there?”

“I sure did. Hell, I come over to try and pay back a little of what I owed you. I kept Buckner’s stool pigeons from gettin’ one or the other of you several times. Mebbe I’m tough, but I don’t forget a kindness.”

IMPULSIVELY Jimmy shoved out a hand. “Shake.”

Carter caught it in a crushing grip. “Maybe,” he suggested hopefully, “after you get everything squared up in the val-

ley, you’ll have time to come and visit me again. You’ve got a trick with your right hand that I’d like to have you teach me. How about it?”

“Sure,” said Jimmy. “When Bert gets better, I’ll come and spend a week.”

Carter slapped him on the back. “That’s the stuff. Mebbe we can get in a little hunting, eh?”

Jimmy’s eyes lit up. “That would be swell.”

The whole idea of being free and able to look other men in the face again had taken on new value. Carter understood something of what he was thinking and rumbled, “You sure took one helluva chance, Upton, but you’ve cleaned up the county by doing it.”

“Can you figure that?” the storekeeper asked the world at large. “Mark Smith comes in an’ says a sea serpent tried to swallow his boat. Danny claims he’s blasted a submarine. What makes fishermen such damn liars, anyway?”

Well, it’s wartime, and although British Columbia waters are far from Europe, Canada is at war, so who knows just what the salmon fishers did see in their day’s work?

The Thing That Couldn’t Happen

An extraordinarily interesting story in our next issue by

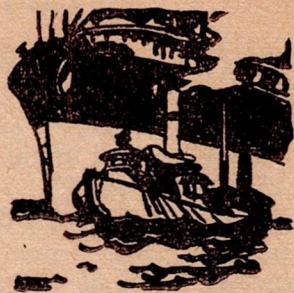
BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR



MEDICO MESSAGE

By PATRICK O'KEEFFE

Author of "Soundless Ship," "Island Occupied," etc.



HARTLEY paused outside the chief mate's open doorway and glanced in. The smell of lubricating oil filled the cabin, and he saw that the chief mate had just finished cleaning an automatic, apparently a Webley .32. He was holding it in his hand, finger curled round the trigger, and staring at it with an expression that for the moment startled Hartley by its intense malevolence.

The chief mate had seemingly been too engrossed in his black thoughts to have heard Hartley's approach, for he glanced up with a start. He was ruddy and handsome in a sleek way and had affected a Gable mustache. His squarish face with yellow eyes and jutting brows were vaguely familiar to Hartley. He gave Hartley an inquisitive scowl.

"Morning," said Hartley pleasantly. "Could I have the radio-room key? I'm the new operator."

In a surly manner the chief mate put away the pistol in the top drawer of his desk and then reached over oil can and smudged rags for a key lying in one of

the pigeon-holes. Hartley stepped inside and took it, and then held out his hand.

"Hartley's my name."

The chief mate ignored the friendly gesture. He ran his eyes quickly over Hartley's heavy set figure and genial face. "Say," he said suspiciously, "were you on the *Western Bay*?"

Hartley hesitated, dropping his hand and trying to place him. He nodded reluctantly.

The chief mate's lips twisted sardonically. "My name's Grabe. My brother's still on that ship."

The friendly light in Hartley's gray eyes faded somewhat.

"I thought your face seemed familiar," he murmured.

"Didn't figure on seeing me here," remarked Grabe. "What sent you back to sea? Couldn't stay sober on a job ashore either, I guess."

"I quit a job to come here," answered Hartley resentfully. "I like the life, that's why."

"Life!" derided Grabe. "Existence is more like it. But I guess it's good enough



*Another Case of Giving a Seadog
a Bad Name—in This Case
a Radio Operator*

for rummies like you—until someone catches up on you.”

Hartley's eyes glinted. “You don't have to keep bringing that up.”

“So you figure I ought to keep my trap shut!” sneered Grabe. “You think I didn't ought to put the bunch here on to you so they won't get mixed up in any of your drunken sprees.” His lips curled. “We sail at six tomorrow morning, so don't let's have to pour you aboard.”

Hartley went out with his eyes blazing, and going aft to the radio quarters he began to unpack his bags. His anger presently gave way to resignation. He'd only himself to blame, he reflected morosely. Others had suffered as much grief without going haywire. True, it had been a terrible shock getting the news his dad, mother, and kid sister had been killed in that air-liner crash, he out at sea and not even able to go to the funeral. But he'd been crazy to hit up the bottle that same night, knowing he had to go on watch at four in the morning. Maybe it had been a pretty stiff shot he'd taken to straighten him out after he'd gone on watch. Maybe he'd taken more than one. He'd been in no mental state to know much of what he was doing at the time.

All the same, anyone except Grabe's brother finding him like that would have got him into his bunk and called one of the other operators to take over. That louse had to waken the skipper and tell him he couldn't get radio bearings in the fog because the man on watch was dead drunk. All out of spite because he'd plugged him once for being too free with his insults.

It had cost him his job as chief in the trans-Atlantic passenger service and got his license suspended for a year. He might have lost it for good if it hadn't been for the circumstances. But it had been a lesson. In all the time he'd spent ashore in radio-service work, he'd done no hard drinking. Shore work was all right for a guy who could stand the monotony and

the subways. Give him the sea! Here today, some place else tomorrow. And the radio superintendent had given him a break, assigning him to the *Goshawk* when her last operator had quit in New York instead of waiting until she finished her voyage at the home port of Frisco. An eight-thousand tonner like this, good-feeding and on a round-the-world schedule, was better than some old tub of a collier. It was a good start on the way to a comeback.

He hadn't counted on finding another Grabe here, though. He remembered now; the other Grabe had talked about having a brother chief mate in the Oriental Line. Hartley grimly threw some shirts into a drawer. If this one didn't stop throwing that *Western-Bay* affair in his face, he'd better carry that gun around with him, or there'd be another black eye in the family collection.

IT WASN'T long before Hartley learned that Grabe had talked about him. The day after sailing the captain came into the radio room with a message for the Frisco office. He was a spare, austere-looking man, and after Hartley had checked over the radiogram the captain eyed him sternly.

“I want you to know I don't allow drinking on board, or drunkenness in port.”

Hartley dropped his eyes and made no reply. The captain then strode out. Hartley stared with bitterness at the floor. It was the old story. Give a dog a bad name—

As the voyage grew on, it seemed to him that there was bad blood of some kind between the captain and the chief mate. At meals they seldom spoke to each other, and they never paced the bridge together or leaned over the fore part in friendly fashion. If they exchanged any words at all, it was generally about ship matters, and the captain's manner was invariably curt, Grabe's mostly sullen.

It was not until the *Goshawk* was lying

alongside in Cristobal, due to pass through the Panama Canal on the following day, that Hartley heard of their quarrel. The ship had enjoyed a smooth passage southward, and this stage of the voyage had been uneventful as far as Hartley was concerned. His new shipmates were on the whole friendly toward him, apparently unprejudiced and taking him as they found him. None of them ever referred in his presence to what Grabe had told about him, and once when Grabe said that Colon was a place where rummies usually fell by the wayside, his jibe went flat because no one even smiled. So that Hartley was beginning to feel that he might be happy enough on the *Goshawk* in spite of Grabe.

During the evening in Cristobal Hartley went ashore with the third mate, Britton, a high-spirited young man eager for a gay time. Britton led the way into one of the Colon music-blaring cabarets, but when he beckoned to a waiter Hartley said:

"Make mine a cola or something. I don't want to give Grabe a chance to tell the Old Man I was knocking 'em back. He might get rid of me in Frisco."

Britton nodded. He ordered a scotch and soda for himself. "It was pretty mean of Grabe to spill that about you. I s'pose we all are liable to slip up some time or other."

The third mate glanced at Hartley as if he expected he would say something in his own behalf. But Hartley kept silent. He had never made excuses for himself on that account, and he didn't intend to begin now.

"I like to get a jag on myself once in a while," admitted Britton with a grin.

"From the gentle hint he gave me, the Old Man doesn't like you to come aboard with a skinful."

The third mate chuckled. "He'll be in bed by the time I go back. That's one thing about old Cap'n Simmons—he doesn't snoop around or wait up to smell your breath. Don't let him see you pickled, that's all."

"There doesn't seem much love lost between him and Grabe," remarked Hartley curiously.

"Old Simmons is a strict moralist," said the third mate with a grin. "And Grabe is a red-hot Romeo, and the two don't mix. The Old Man's father was a preacher, I think. When Grabe first came to the ship he talked nothing but the women who were supposed to be crazy about him until the Old Man made him cut it out. But he sure gets his pick of the women. Take a look at him now."

THE square in the middle of the hot smoke-filled cabaret was crowded with perspiring dancing couples, and from among them Hartley easily picked out the tall white-clad figure of Grabe. His partner was an olive-skinned beauty, gazing up with rapture into his smiling face.

"Another of his conquests," chuckled Britton. "She works in a drug store. Grabe met her down here last trip."

"First time I've seen him smile," grunted Hartley.

The third mate sipped his drink thoughtfully. "He's been sour ever since we left New York. I think it's because of a thundering row he had with the Old Man the day before we sailed. The Old Man had just come back from the agents with some mail. There was a letter from my girl, and I was reading it in my cabin when I heard the Old Man come to his door and call Grabe in. I went on with my letter, and all at once I heard Grabe yell that it was none of the Old Man's damned business, and the Old Man snapped back that he'd give him to Frisco to think it over. Then I heard Grabe come out and stamp back to his cabin."

"It must have been just after that when I first saw him," remarked Hartley. "He'd finished cleaning his gun, and looked as though he'd like to shoot someone."

"He sounded mad enough for it," said Britton. "That same gun was a gift from another of his admirers, a Eurasian in

Singapore. She's the widow of a rich Hindu silk merchant. It was his gun, and she gave it to Grabe just for the asking. She's nuts about him. It wouldn't surprise me if Grabe married her, from the way he talks. She's not bad to look at, she's got the dough, and Grabe hates the sea like poison."

For the first few days of the run up the Pacific side, Hartley's work was routine—on the lookout for distress calls, sending and receiving weather reports, giving the time tick for the check on the chronometer. Late one afternoon, however, the captain was stricken ill, and Hartley thought he might be called upon to summon medical aid or advice. According to Britton, who had helped Grabe to put the captain to bed, he was suffering burning pains in his stomach and vomiting a lot, and saying his leg muscles had cramp the same as once when he had had cholera.

"Wouldn't that be something?" murmured Britton. "An outbreak of cholera. But he's feeling better and told Grabe not to radio for medical advice unless he gets worse. I hope he don't go sick on us, because Grabe might then be skipper for next voyage, and I kinda think she wouldn't be a very happy ship."



Indeed, it wasn't long before Hartley felt he was being given a foretaste of what to expect if Grabe took command. After the third mate had left, he went on the air to find out what ships carrying a doctor were in the vicinity. A passenger ship about two hundred miles to the southward responded, but she had scarcely finished answering when the loud signals from a coast guard cutter split the room. She was only fifteen or so miles astern, proceeding to San Diego at the easy speed of twelve knots, roughly that of the *Goshawk*. Hartley asked her to keep a close watch

for him, as he might have a medico message later.

He then went forward to Grabe's cabin and told him. "The cutter can come up in quick time if necessary and put her doctor right on board," he commented.

To Hartley's astonishment Grabe flew into a rage. "Who gave you orders to do that?" he shouted.

"Orders!" exclaimed Hartley, staring. "I don't have to wait for orders to do a thing like that."

"Then you'll begin waiting right now," fumed Grabe. "I'm in charge while the captain's sick, and don't do any more radioing without orders from me."

"Okay, if that's how you feel about it," rejoined Hartley, heading for the door.

IT LATER seemed as if Grabe, on cooling down, regretted his officious outburst, for toward nine o'clock he called Hartley on the chartroom telephone and asked him to come along for a minute. Hartley found him waiting with a bottle of whiskey and some ginger ale and ice on his desk, and two glasses with drinks already poured into them.

"Sit down," said Grabe agreeably. "I'm sorry I got hot a while back, but I guess I was worried about the captain. I didn't know what I was saying. You only did the right thing. He's a lot better, and it's a load off my mind. I felt like a drink, and thought maybe you'd like one too."

Hartley remained standing. "Thanks," he said with a pointed look, "but I'm off that stuff at sea."

"I guess you're sore at me," said Grabe penitently. "Maybe I oughtn't to have talked. But I only knew you through my brother. He must have owed you a grudge, the way he wrote about you. You've shown yourself to be a pretty white egg here. Anyway, I figured you might not want liquor, so I didn't put any in this one yet." He held out one of the glasses. "Just to show there's no ill feeling."

Hartley took it. He couldn't make up his mind whether Grabe was sincere, or whether he had some hidden reason for wanting to be friendly with him; but he was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He emptied the glass quickly and then turned to leave, just to let Grabe see that though he might be willing to let bygones be bygones, he wasn't anxious to make a pal of him yet awhile. He thought the ginger ale had a peculiar flavor, but did not remark on it.

"The captain ought to be all right again by morning," said Grabe, taking his drink more leisurely. "He was scared it was something serious at first. Now he thinks it was only something he had for dinner. He got me to give him some stuff out of the medicine chest to settle his stomach, and it's done him good. I'll stick around until midnight, in case he wants something. I guess you can tell the cutter we won't be needing her."

Hartley returned to the radio room and passed this information on to the cutter. Then he leaned back in his chair and began to speculate on Grabe's change of attitude. Somehow he distrusted it.

The ship was somewhere off the Mexican coast, cleaving through a quiet sea, and the night was oppressively hot. A babel of code signals sounded continually from the loudspeaker, Hartley's trained ears subconsciously alert for anything intended for him. Presently he began to feel drowsy, and he stood up to keep from falling asleep. His eyelids drooped. He struggled to hold them up. But darkness closed in upon him, and his last act of will was to clutch at the desk edge as he sank back into the chair.

When he came out of his stupor he was lying in the next room on his bunk, clad in his underwear. Bright sunlight was streaming through the ports. He started up, trying to collect his thoughts. He sniffed.

The cabin, his underwear—everything

smelled of liquor. Something was rolling from side to side with the gentle sway of the ship. It was an empty whiskey bottle, and on the floor also were pieces and fragments of a glass, as if it had dropped from a drunken hand.

His mind still sluggish, Hartley thought that someone had played a practical joke upon him. But as his head cleared he recalled the strange drowsiness that had overpowered him. He'd never gone out like that before. A sharp suspicion gripped him. Grabe! Was this why he'd turned friendly all of a sudden? And that drink. There'd been a queer taste about it. Grabe must have doped it. Then fixed him up to look as if he'd been on a drunken bat.

HARTLEY tumbled uneasily from his bunk and looked in at the radio-room clock. It was nearly nine-thirty. He'd been out almost twelve hours. The receiver was still switched on, as at the moment he had passed into oblivion, and the wobbly note of a Jap freighter calling CQ issued from the loudspeaker.

Footsteps sounded on the deck, and the third mate went past the screen door.

"Britton," called out Hartley, hastening to open it. The third mate halted and stared back grimly.

"You'd do well to keep out o' sight. The whole ship is fit to lynch you."

"Lynch me!" exclaimed Hartley. "But what—"

"The captain had another attack during the night. Grabe came along to get you to call for medical aid. He found you in your bunk soused to the gills and couldn't get even a grunt from you. We're goin' to bury the Old Man at eleven o'clock."

Hartley gazed at him blankly. "Britton, you don't believe—"

"Maybe I wouldn't if I hadn't seen you myself. Grabe did his best to cover you by trying to work the radio set himself. When he couldn't get any results, he had to give you away."

"It was all a frame-up," protested Hart-

ley frantically. "I wasn't drunk—I was doped—Grabe—"

With a scornful look the third mate turned his back and headed for the bridge.

Hartley stood dismayed. He had no doubt now that Grabe had doped him. He had wanted the captain to die, and fixed him so he'd not be able to get medical help if the captain had another attack. And done it in such a way that no one would believe him if he said he'd been doped.

Impulsively Hartley rushed into his sleeping quarters, where his clothes had been thrown on a chair. Hastily he pulled on his duck pants, thrust his feet into his shoes, and hurried out on deck. His longish brown hair had been disheveled to match the empty whiskey bottle, and only half dressed and with a wild look in his eyes, he had the appearance of one about to go berserk. On his way forward he met a sailor, who stopped threateningly.

"Take it easy, Larsen," warned Hartley between his teeth and making a fist. He got by unmolested and burst into Grabe's cabin. Grabe was standing by his desk, about to light a cigarette. He lowered the unstruck match.

"So you've got over your drunken bout," he said in a loud, stern tone.

"You doped that ginger ale last night," charged Hartley fiercely. "Then you put me in my bunk and spilt—"

"Mr. Thomas," called out Grabe, looking past Hartley. The second mate came out of the cabin opposite and stood in the doorway. "Hartley is making wild accusations, apparently to cover himself," said Grabe curtly. "I want you as a witness."

"I heard him," said the second mate, grimly folding a pair of powerful arms across a wide chest.

Hartley glanced in desperation from one to the other. "Let it go," he raged. "I'll wait until I'm where I can get a fair hearing." He fixed his blazing eyes on Grabe. "What you've done amounts to murder, and don't think you'll get away with it."

Grabe shook his head sadly at the second

mate, as if to say that Hartley must be completely out of his mind. Grim-faced, Hartley swept past the second mate and strode back to the radio cabin.

Here he set the rolling whiskey bottle upright and then sank bitterly into a chair. It was the old story again—a dog with a bad name. Even Britton, who had seemed to take to him, hadn't waited to hear his side of the story.

He thought cheerlessly of his framed license in the other room. He might as well tear it up now. He'd never get another one as long as he lived. They'd do more to him this time. They'd probably hold him responsible for the captain's death and bring a criminal charge against him.

With that *Western Bay* affair on his record, he'd never be believed anywhere. No one had seen him take that drink in Grabe's cabin. The third mate had been on the bridge, the second mate turned in. Grabe had even put himself in a good light by pretending to try and work the radio set himself so as to cover him. If he'd been so anxious to get medical aid, he could have turned the ship around in hope of meeting the cutter. But there again Grabe was safe. No one had heard him tell Grabe about the cutter.

Grabe stood to get away with it, all right. He'd played his cards well. He must have been pretty sure the captain would have a second attack to have gone to the length of doping that ginger ale beforehand. He must have got the stuff from the medicine chest, the captain having given him access to it.

With this last thought suspicion began to form in Hartley's mind. He pondered over the fact that Grabe should have expected the captain to have another attack. With access to the medicine chest, he was in a position to make sure he did have another attack—a fatal one. Then Hartley remembered Grabe's rage when told the cutter was near enough to put a doctor on board in short time.

Excited by his mounting suspicion,

Hartley jumped up. Sounds of activity were coming from the well deck, and he looked through one of the after port holes. The carpenter and two sailors were putting up a rude sloping structure of hatch covers and spare lumber, on which the captain's canvas-wrapped body would lie while the burial service was being read. Once it had been committed to the sea, all chance of proving his suspicion would be gone forever. But it would be hopeless to try and stop the burial by revealing them on the ship.

Feverishly Hartley began to think of some other way. From the loudspeaker in the next room came the coast guard cutter's note calling a shore station. He stared thoughtfully in that direction for a few moments. Then suddenly he darted into the operating room. With a hasty glance at the clock, he threw himself into the chair before the desk and pressed a button. Instantly a motor-generator hummed, and the tubes of the transmitter glowed red. He reached for the key and began tapping urgently.

At the end of several minutes he shut off the transmitter and then stood just inside the screen door, watching. In a while he saw Grabe and the second mate go past. As soon as they had gone down the ladder to the well deck and were inspecting the carpenter's handiwork, he slipped out and hurried forward.

WHEN the time for burial service drew near, Grabe and the second mate, together with two sailors, came in off the deck and made toward the captain's cabin to carry out the body. The third mate was on the bridge, but someone emerged from behind the partly closed door of his cabin. It was Hartley, and he was gripping an automatic. He blocked the way to the captain's closed door.

"There's going to be no burial yet awhile," he said.

The four men halted, staring at the pistol. Then Grabe suddenly cried, "He's

crazy drunk. But that's my gun and it's not loaded. Rush him."

"It's loaded," warned Hartley. "Take a look at your box of cartridges, Grabe. And I'm cold sober. I'll shoot if any of you come closer. I don't think the captain died a natural death. I think he was poisoned. I've called a cutter. She's only a few miles astern. She took a radio bearing on us and is coming up at full speed."

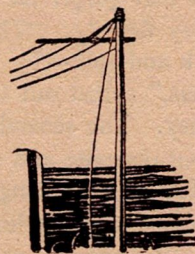
His voice was tense. It was a mad gamble he was taking, and he knew if it failed, or his suspicions proved false, he'd find himself in irons with no hope whatever of clearing himself.

All the blood had gone out of Grabe's face, but only Hartley's eyes were on it.

"It's the d.t.'s," declared Grabe excitedly. "We've got to get him in a strait-jacket quick."

But he made no move to lead the attempt. He was in front of the two staring sailors and behind the second mate. The latter uneasily eyed Hartley, who, only partly dressed and disheveled, looked like some reckless pirate cornered.

"He might be crazy enough to shoot," he muttered. He looked back over his shoulder and spoke under his breath. "In my bottom drawer—"



The third mate suddenly appeared in the doorway behind them. "There's a cutter racing up astern, signaling to us—"

His eyes widened as he beheld Hartley. Grabe suddenly rushed into the second mate's cabin. He came flying out a moment later. But Hartley had caught the second mate's whisper. His pistol blazed as Grabe's arm came up. Grabe screeched and clutched at his shoulder, a revolver

dropping to the floor. The sailors caught him as he staggered. The second mate cast his eyes down at his gun.

"Don't reach for it," warned Hartley. "I don't want to shoot you. Stop the ship. I'll put down this gun when the cutter comes up."

The second mate looked at him uncertainly for a moment or so; then glanced round. The sailors were helping the whimpering Grabe into his cabin. The third mate still stood aghast in the doorway.

"Stop her," the second mate said to him.

SOME three hours later the *Goshawk* resumed her way northward with only two mates on board, the second mate in command. Hartley stood gazing through one of the radio-room port holes at the white-hulled cutter astern. On the well deck beneath him the carpenter was taking apart the unused hatch covers and lumber.

Hartley glanced round as the third mate came in looking uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry about this morning—" Britton began.

Hartley, overjoyed at the turn of events, quickly put him at his ease. "Forget it. I'd have felt the same way under the circumstances."

They sat down. "It beats anything I've ever run into before," said Britton wondrously. "And I still haven't got to the bottom of it all. What were you and the coast guard officers doing shut up in Grabe's cabin all that time?"

"Listening to Grabe's story," Hartley told him. "He went to pieces, hysterical almost, and blabbed out everything. He

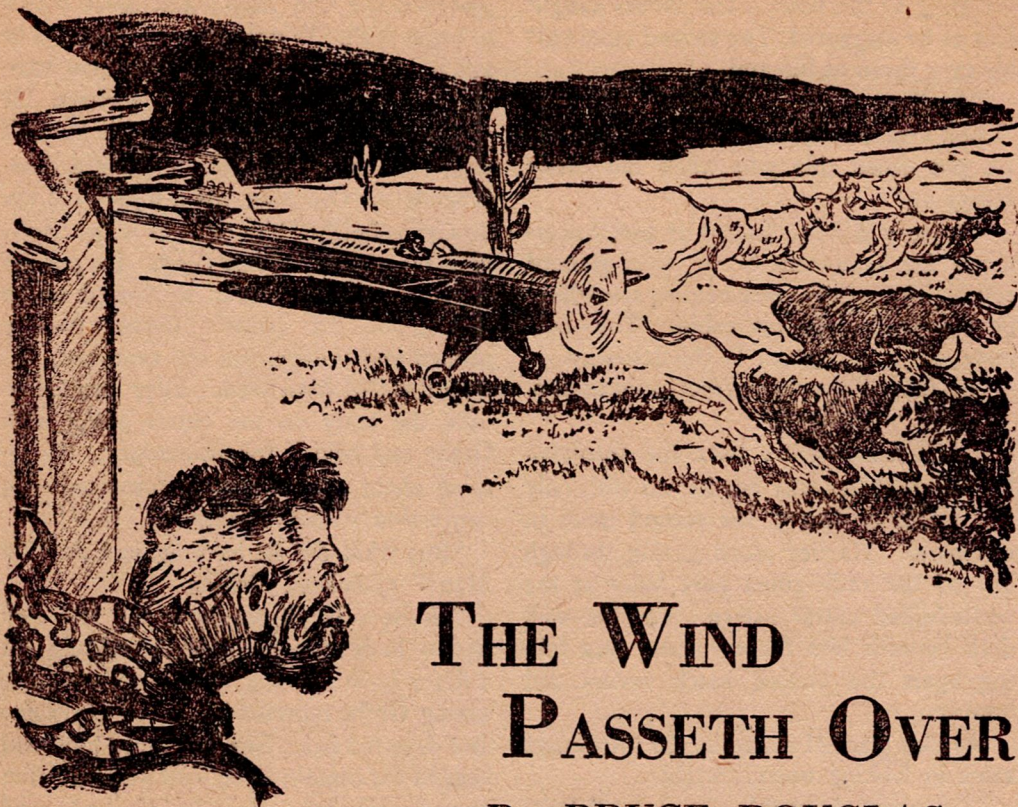
poisoned the Old Man's afternoon coffee to begin with. Watched for the steward to put it in his cabin when the captain happened to be out on deck somewhere. It was arsenic. According to the cutter's doctor he must have used too big a dose. It made the Old Man vomit most of it up. So Grabe finished him off later with strychnine from the medicine chest. He put me to sleep with laudanum, so there'd be no danger of the cutter's doctor coming aboard and recognizing the symptoms before the Old Man died. They decided to take the body on the cutter along with Grabe and hold it for an autopsy. Something about a man can't be convicted on a confession without evidence."

"But what did he have against the Old Man?" ejaculated Britton.

"Grabe was all set to marry the rich widow in Singapore. But the captain got a letter from a young woman up in Seattle saying Grabe married her a few years ago and deserted her. She still loved him, and begged the captain to try and persuade him to go back to her. He called Grabe in, and that was the row you overheard. Grabe was afraid he'd tell the Singapore widow he was already married. He'd planned on marrying her next trip and staying out East."

The third mate shook his head thoughtfully. "It just goes to show—you can never tell who you're sailing with. Who'd have thought Grabe was such a schemer? I wonder what trick he used to get the arsenic from the medicine chest. Captain Simmons would never—"

"What about the drug-store girl in Colon?" Hartley reminded him.



THE WIND PASSETH OVER

By BRUCE DOUGLAS

Author of "Nester," "Home Range," etc.

THE road was wide and paved, but Reid Marable drove the little Government sedan at a cautious thirty miles.

"Sand," he explained to the thin, bespectacled man beside him. "It drifts onto the road. The WPA gangs are fighting it all the time, but they can't keep up with it. You hit the edge of one of those drifts going fast, and it'll jerk the wheel right out of your hands."

He glanced briefly at his companion. The Examiner of Local Administration of Federal Projects was looking out of the window, peering through the dust haze.

The pall of dust was brownish gray, but on the ground the drifted sand was yellow, almost white. It rose and fell in waves; and in the low troughs fence posts stuck through, and the top strands of

barbed wire. The wind was hot, and gritty in the mouth.

The Examiner spoke without turning. "A desert," he said. "Why in the world people ever tried to live in this region—"

Reid Marable cut in. "Used to be as pretty a cattle range as a man could ask for. Good grass, and water enough to pull a herd through. Winter rains, and seven months of drought in summer. But the grass was native, and knew how to live through the dry months."

"Then what caused—"

Again Marable cut in, as though he had thought this all out a long time ago and had the answers ready before the questions were asked. "Wind," he said shortly. "It blows all the time. You'd think the sod-busters would've noticed that, but they didn't." After a moment he added, "Only reason they ever got out this far was that

they had failed on better land. That tells a lot."

He caught a glimpse of motion in the dim dust haze to the left, and turning the car, drove straight out across ground scraped bare by sand and wind. The Examiner let out a little grunt of surprise; but Marable was busy with the jiggling wheel and did not speak until he had brought the car to a halt close to a barbed-wire fence.

"Might have known Eldred would do a thing like that," he muttered, anger surging warmly within him, and sat motionless staring at the desolation before them.

The sand had drifted through the fence and was pushing against one side of the deserted cabin. Scudding sand hissed against the grayed boards, which were smoothed and polished to a dull patina. The front door sagged on one hinge, and its lower corner was buried in a drift. On the sheltered side a rusted plow leaned close to the wall. A windmill with only three leaves remaining unbroken clanked and squeaked and clanked and squeaked. At the half buried and utterly dry metal tank below it, a gaunt cow stood spraddle-legged, its black tongue protruding. Behind it Marable noted a half dozen tracks leading back to a hollowed spot in one of the drifts. The dying cow, rising and struggling forward to the empty tank, had supplied the motion which he had seen from the road.

NEAR the tank was a spindling pear tree which had somehow managed to run a thin tap-root down to the rapidly receding moisture and so was not yet quite dead. Aside from this, and the gaunt cow, there was no sign of life on the place save for a single tuft of native grass close to a fence post, seared brown, but still battling for life against wind and sand.

Marable sat silently, his sense of futile inner resentment reaching out beyond this wispy little man beside him to include the barren landscape, and the absent Eldred.

Sight of the desolate ruin, and the tree with wilted leaves still clinging to it, brought verses surging into his mind, upward from old memories of his childhood, vividly, and with a moving image of his father's shaggy head bowed over a Book. A confusion of verses: about the wicked, flourishing like a tree, then perishing; about man, whose days are as grass. "For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more."

"The wind passeth over. . . ." But, he meditated sombrely, it was not the wind which destroyed this rangeland grass. It was native, and could withstand everything which this climate had to offer of wind and drought. It had been destroyed by the sod-busting nesters. They had come in where they did not belong. They had plowed under the native grasses, which covered the earth from the searching wind, and had sown their grains and prospered for a handful of seasons—and now the place was a desert of wind-blown sand.

He closed his eyes, remembering how it had been on that day nearly thirty years ago when his father had taken him along to ride out and see Ben Quilliom about a loan. They had ridden for hours through grass that was ankle deep, and in the midst of the valley round-up had found Quilliom, sweaty and streaked with dust, sitting his horse and bellowing his orders like the king he was. He turned aside at Henry Marable's nod, and rode over to them, pushing back his wide Stetson and mopping his brow with his bandanna.

"Hot as hell, Hank. Howdy, lad. What brings you out here, Hank? Thought you shipped a week ago."

"I did." Henry Marable rolled a querley and passed over the bag and papers. "Twenty cattle cars piled up in a wreck fifty miles this side of Kansas City. My train load is sittin' on the track waitin' for the mess to be cleared off. Been there two days. That delays my delivery and my check; and my note comes due at the bank

today. Six thousand dollars, and ten per cent."

Ben Quilliom had puffed his smoke and handed the makings back. He nodded toward a clump of cottonwoods.

"Round-up money is over yonder by the cavy, Hank. Go count out what you need."

That was all there was to it. There had been a Wall Street panic, too, the year before. But there was grass; and where there is grass, cattle can eat. Reid Marable and his father had ridden over to the cottonwoods to the round-up money, a pile of gold coin on a blanket under a tree. The cowboy on cavy guard had moved off into the cavy after greeting them, leaving Henry Marable to count his gold alone and carry it away.

And now there had been another panic; but this time there was no grass, for the plows of the homesteaders had murdered it.

The Examiner shifted in his seat and said, "Well?" Reid Marable felt again the surge of impotent anger. This man—this prim, bespectacled little outlander—what did he know of the former cattle king Ben Quilliom whom he was bent on humiliating in his old age?

He drew a six-gun from the pocket of the car and shot the gaunt cow. It shuddered, then slumped down to earth where it stood, its bony legs buckling beneath it. Marable's ears rang, and the car was filled with acrid powder smoke which tingled in his dust-tortured nostrils. The Examiner said, reprovingly:

"That cow was private property, and on its owner's land. He could sue you. You should make the proper arrangements first. As a government agent you should avoid actions which—"

Reid Marable flushed. "It's what you want to do to Quilliom's cows. I'll send Eldred his ten dollars from the cattle buying fund tomorrow. He'll be ailin' while the money lasts; an' that'll give Roy Lofton a chance at a couple weeks' WPA work."

The Examiner spoke precisely. "You have lent this old rancher Quilliom three hundred dollars to buy gasoline to burn the spines off of prickly pear on land he doesn't even own. There is no fund for such a purpose. If there is a government agency which is authorized to make a loan like that, I haven't heard of it."

MARABLE answered wearily. They had been over all of it before. "Are we trying to make paupers, or prevent them? When he gets the spines burnt off, that cactus will be both food and moisture to pull his remaining twenty steers through to the fall rains. Then he can winter them and sell them. That way, he can repay the loan and have a good stake on hand besides."

There was finality in the Examiner's tone. "The note is irregular and must be repaid and cancelled at once. Otherwise I shall have to report the incident, and that means that you will be—"

"Out of a job. Yes, I know." The thought of his wife and young daughter, and what would happen to them if he lost this Federal job had sat like a chunk of ice at the pit of his stomach ever since this trouble came up. "But you don't understand. You can't make a public dependent out of this man. He's an old-timer, and—"

The Examiner snorted. "An old-timer! Every time I come across a superannuated, stubborn old fool who won't listen



to reason and acts as if he were a king instead of a penniless public charge, some local agent calls him an old-timer and acts as though that explained and justified every irregularity of procedure. That note must be cleared. We can give him ten dollars apiece for his cattle and shoot them, and he's old enough to go on old-age pension. With State and Federal aid he can get thirty dollars a month, pay off the remaining hundred at five dollars a month, and have thirty a month clear from then on. He's got to do it. It's the only reasonable thing to do."

Marable wanted to say, "Is there a law now that folks have got to be reasonable?" But he didn't. He started the engine and began turning around. "All right," he said. "But remember. If this dirty job has to be done, you're to let me handle it in my own way. When we get there, you just sit still and keep quiet."

THEY arrived at noon. Old Ben Quilliom came out of the ranchhouse to greet them, his leathery face beaming.

"Howdy, son. Howdy, sir; glad to meet you. I thought at first you-all was Sheriff Joe Ross a-comin', though Joe most generally rides his hoss unless he's in a sweat-larrupin' hurry. Light down. You're just in time for dinner."

Reid Marable took the gnarled hand. "What's the matter?" he said. "Sheriff after you with an attachment?" He made the tone of the question light, but there was an icy tug of apprehension at his vitals.

The old man grinned. "Nup. My evil deeds ain't caught up with me yet." He waved an arm toward a row of gasoline drums and a pair of blow-torches lined up alongside the ranchhouse. "Nup. Joe just sent word that he was headed up into the Thunder Mountains an' would drop in on me today for a *wau-wau* while passin' through. Joe started out as a cowhand on my spread, you know, afore he backslid an' went in for man huntin'. Come on in.

Billy shot a rabbit with that twenty-two he got last Christmas; so we've got meat with our beans. For a ten-year-old that grandson of mine is gettin' to be a right good shot."

They went in, Billy Quilliom greeting them gravely at the top of the steps. He took Reid Marable's hand, and whispered proudly that he had shot the rabbit right through the head. The big dining room seemed empty with only four to sit at the table; and when Ben Quilliom went to the kitchen to bring in the food, his steps echoed hollowly. Marable glanced around, remembering the post-roundup *fiestas* which had crowded the place to overflowing.

The Examiner voiced a doubt when the rabbit stew was offered to him. "Aren't you afraid of tularemia?"

"Rabbit fever?" Ben Quilliom shook his gray head. "Not any more. Rabbits we've got left around here now are too healthy to take rabbit fever, or they wouldn't be alive. Nature is a mite harsh; but her method of strengthenin' the breed by killin' off the weak ain't never been improved on."

REID MARABLE ate silently and sparingly, with no stomach for the eating. They had come to kill something, to destroy something infinitely valuable; and the Examiner was waiting for him to act. He looked out of the window. The dust pall was not so heavy here in the foothills; and there was not so much of the drifting sand, though the big empty bunk houses and the other buildings were weathered gray and paintless. Some distance away, in the sparse shade of a trio of gnarled mesquite trees, a group of gaunt steers surrounded a stand of prickly pear, munching the thick pads eagerly.

Ben Quilliom spoke, nodding out toward the cattle. "I got the stickers burnt off of half a dozen big clumps this mornin'. I figger there's just about enough cactus an' gasoline to pull us through to the rains. Then we'll have grass every-

where the land ain't been plowed or the sand drifted."

He paused, as if considering a question, then went on. "There'll be more'n enough grass for that handful o' steers. If you c'd lend me five-six hundred dollars more when the rains come, I could buy a passel o' yearlin's to winter through an' sell as two-year-olds."

Marable flinched inwardly. The thing could not be put off much longer. And yet, he thought, with a flare of sudden defiant resentment, the loan which the old man had and the one which he asked were perfectly sound. He could winter the yearlings and pay off with a good profit on the deal. But there were rules; and the government did not deal in such loans, but only in charity, open or disguised, and only with those who would take it. . . .

The Examiner was speaking. "Isn't that the sort of loan you should get from a bank?"

MARABLE flashed him a look of gratitude. After all, the man had to uphold his rules. But he was being decent about it, leading into it gradually, trying to make it easy for the old man when they brought up the question of his present loan and told him that he would have to get that at a bank too, or become a pauper and receive money from the government as charity and in no other way.

Ben Quilliom's answer crackled with dry, incisive irony. "Bank? Ever since the bank was closed in thirty-three and they sent in that outlander to open it an' run it, don't seem to be anybody hereabouts that can get a loan. Banker calls it keepin' the bank liquid. Way he runs it, though, outside of the fact that them that already have money can deposit it an' write checks, 'stid o' carryin' it around with 'em, looks like there ain't a mite o' difference between a liquid bank an' a closed one."

The Examiner took off his glasses and began polishing them. He cleared his

throat. "Perhaps our friend Marable can tell you the situation we are in."

Looking down, Marable could see his knuckles go white as he clutched the arm of his chair. Old Ben Quilliom was turning inquiringly toward him. He swallowed, opened his mouth to speak. And then, suddenly, they were enveloped in a roaring thunder of sound, and Ben Quilliom was leading the way out onto the ranchhouse gallery.

A little red monoplane, indistinct in the dust haze, was circling low, apparently jockeying for a landing on the level stretch to the south of the ranch buildings. The motor stopped, roared once more, then sputtered and stopped again. Ben Quilliom turned to his guests with a puzzled smile.

"I thought mebbe Sheriff Ross was in your car; but I know damn' well he ain't comin' in one o' them things. Who d'you reckon it could be?"

Grateful for the interruption, Marable watched the little plane curve downward. "Whoever he is," he stated, "he's in trouble and making a dead-stick landing. I think he's run out of gas."

THE plane hit the ground, bounced, then coasted to a stop close to the clump of cactus and mesquite. The frightened steers rolled their tails high and stampeded off to disappear in the dust haze. Marable led the way toward the plane. It was a single-seater open-cockpit job, and, he judged, built for speed. While they were still some twenty paces away, the flyer climbed out, pushed his goggles back on his helmet, and peered inside. When he straightened up, he was cursing. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his flying jacket and turned.

"Got any solder around this God-for-saken dump?" he demanded.

Little Billy trotted joyously forward, wide-eyed for his first close view of a plane. The man stopped in front of him. "Don't get too nosey, bud. It ain't healthy."

The boy's face flushed; and without a

word he backed up to a position behind his grandfather. Marable stared at the man through narrowed lids. "What seems to be the trouble?"

The man swore again. "Look in there."

The three pressed forward and looked. About two inches up from the bottom of the gasoline tank there was a round hole, with the torn metal bent inward. Near the top on the other side the metal bent outward from another hole. There were other holes through the body of the plane.

"Hell of a note," the man growled. "The gas drained out down to this lower hole; an' I didn't know it until I'd burnt up those bottom inches and she quit on me. How about it; got any solder?"

Old Ben Quilliom broke into action. "Shore. An' a blow-torch to melt it on with. We'll have you fixed up in a couple o' shakes, stranger."

He disappeared into the smithy, came out with a bar of solder, and took one of the two blow-torches from its place near the gasoline drums. Marable felt a tug at his sleeve and turned. The Examiner, somewhat white of face, was motioning him backward. He stepped back a pace and leaned close.

"Those holes," the Examiner whispered, "were made by a bullet!"

MARABLE nodded, keeping his eyes on the flyer. "Keep quiet, and let the old man handle this." He added with a touch of bitterness, "He's not on relief yet. He's still boss on his own place; an' he wouldn't welcome meddling."

He wondered if the Examiner understood anything at all of what the old man was doing, of the code of the old West by which the old-timer was acting. Ben Quilliom knew that those holes were made by a bullet; trust his keen old eyes for that. But unless the man harmed him personally, he was just a stranger in trouble, to be helped and sent on his way, with no questions asked.

The old rancher was busy with the

solder and blow-torch. The flyer stood by, fuming at the passage of time, and never once removing his hands from the pockets of his flying jacket. When the job was



done, he nodded toward the gasoline drums.

"Now fill her up with some of that gas," he commanded.

Old Ben Quilliom straightened up and extinguished the blow-torch. He turned and handed the torch and solder to his grandson. "Billy," he commanded mildly, "take those into the kitchen an' wait for me there. I've got a solderin' job to do on the stove pipe. This here just reminded me."

Billy looked startled and was about to speak; but the old man's steely gray eyes held the boy's, and he finally turned away. Ben Quilliom watched until he was in the house. Then he turned slowly.

"Stranger," he said, in his soft, quiet voice, "I'm pow'ful sorry, but I can't let you have that gas. It don't rightly belong to me. Not thataway. It was bought on borrowed money an' agreed to be used for just one purpose."

Reid Marable's muscles tensed, ready for action; but the flyer moved too quickly. Ripping out an oath, the man withdrew his right hand from the pocket and covered them with an automatic.

"Stand back!" he commanded. "All of you!"

Marable took a step backward and the Examiner huddled behind him. The flyer's face was seamed and hard, and his black eyes glowed. He centered the automatic on Ben Quilliom.

"Get that gas, you old fool!" he snarled. "Get it quick, if you want to keep on breathing."

Without a word, the old man walked over toward the drums. Beside the nearest drum was a large watering can with the sprinkler top pulled off. He filled it, brought it to the plane, and poured the gasoline into the tank. He took another trip, and another, while the flyer stood grimly beside the plane, covering the trio with his gun. On the third trip, something clanked into the cockpit, and the old man buried his head and shoulders beneath the cowl. With a snarl the flyer grabbed with his left hand and hauled.

"What th' hell?" he snarled.

Old Ben Quilliom blinked. "Dropped my pliers," he stated mildly; displaying them. "Don't get your tail in a knot, stranger. Another trip an' I'll have the tank full."

HE TROTTED back to the gasoline drum and returned with a full can. When it was in the tank, the flier herded the trio back from the plane. Step by step they gave ground, under the ominous black eye of the automatic. They were more than fifty feet away when the man jammed the gun into his pocket and scrambled into the plane. And at the very beginning of that motion, Old Ben Quilliom scuttled toward the house.

"Hit for cover!" he commanded over his shoulder, and now his tone was no longer mild. Marable grabbed the Examiner and hustled him across the open space and up onto the gallery. Ben Quilliom was already coming out, a long-barrelled rifle in his hands. He was giving vent to a string of rangeland curses.

"Lousy coyote!" he chanted. "Stoppin' for help an' then vi'latin' a man's hospitality. Holdin' him up with a pop-gun. Sit where you are, you two-legged polecat! Sheriff's already in sight out yonder. Sit there an' find out what happens to thieves in Texas!"

A piercing yell erupted behind them. "Kill him, Gran'pop!"

Marable spoke up quietly. "He's turn-

ing over his starter, Ben; and his tank is full of gas. Unless you want to put another hole in the tank, you can't hold him for the sheriff."

"Not with my gas in it I don't plug that tank!" the old man countered. "But he won't fly away, don't worry. I jerked a handful o' wires loose when I pitched them pliers in. *Sit* there, you!" The rifle cracked, and a bullet went screaming close to the ear of the flyer, who was just starting to climb out of the plane. The man ducked down, turned toward the rear and fumbled for a moment, then came up again.

Reid Marable gasped, and slammed the Examiner and Billy flat on the gallery floor. "Down, Ben!" he shouted. "He's got a machine gun!"

Already the sub-machine gun was tap-tap-tapping out the first of a stream of bullets; but the old man stood his ground. Above the clatter of the shooting, Marable heard three words, spoken flatly, as though through clenched teeth, "Take it, then." The rifle cracked again, with a note of finality. Ben Quilliom grunted, and lowered the butt to the floor. Peering through the lifting smoke, Reid Marable saw the flyer slumped forward over the back of the seat. Blood was oozing down over his face from a round hole in his forehead.

THE sheriff dismounted beside the plane and peered inside, glancing briefly at the body, then nudging it aside. He leaned deep into the cockpit. When he stood up, he had an open satchel in his hands. He snapped it shut and came walking slowly toward the group on the gallery.

"Well, Ben," he drawled, "I got here just too late to pitch in with you. I don't know who this hombre is, nor what your quarrel with him was; but he's worth a thousand dollars to you."

The Examiner gasped. "A thousand dollars!"

The sheriff lifted the satchel. "The

money in this was stolen from the National Bank of Llano Grande, Texas. The bank's name is on the wrappers. Texas Bankers Association has a standin' offer of a thousand dollars for each dead bank robber brought in, not one cent for a live one. Good thing you plugged him square center, Ben. Turned him into a valuable piece o' proppity."

Still shaken by his experience, the Examiner turned toward Reid Marable and beamed. Marable glanced at the old rancher. His heart sank. He had known even before looking, but against his sure knowledge had desperately hoped. But the hope died. He knew what was coming—had heard his father say the same thing, and his grandfather. It was part of that strange and rigid code by which such men had lived and tamed the West.

"Some ways," old Ben Quilliom stated, "a man can't take money. Charity is one. Blood money is another. Blood money is all right for a law man; it's part of his pay for the chances he takes on his job. But it ain't right for an ordinary citizen to take pay for killin' his fellow man. I've hunted wolves and brought their ears in for the Cattlemen's Association bounty; but I've never took blood money for killin' a two-legged critter. Them that I killed deserved to die, and I took my pay out of bein' shut of 'em. I've got my gasoline back. That covers my interest in this hombre."

The Examiner turned on Marable with an exclamation half angry, half incredulous. "Do I understand that this old fellow is refusing to— Why, he can't! It isn't sensible! And we've got to arrange for—"

Reid Marable's fingers closed in on the little man's arm until he winced. "Shut up!" he commanded. Then he drew the sheriff aside and conversed with him in low tones. Returning, he again took the Examiner's arm and headed him toward the car. Pushing him into the seat, he turned.

"So long, Ben," he called. "We'll have to be rolling back. About that loan for feeders; come in when you want it. We'll arrange it all right."

He waved to Billy, then started the engine and turned back along the dusty trail. The wind was still blowing, and they were heading into the ever-present dust pall. Reid Marable was smiling quietly as he glanced at the irate little outlander.

"You not only didn't make the arrangements we came out here to make," the Examiner accused, his voice rising to a high note, "but you promised him another loan! He can't have it. And he'll come to terms on this one as soon as I report you and have you fired."

"Hold on there." Marable was smiling. "Don't climb out on a limb. All you want is to get that note off the government books, isn't it? Promised I'd hold the job if I managed that, didn't you? All right, I'll buy the note. And when he pays off after the rains, I'll lend him a thousand to buy feeder stock."

He paused, amused at the outlander's mystification, then explained. "Old Ben Quilliom wouldn't touch that reward money. He's an old-timer. So I told the sheriff to claim it and give it to me. After old Ben is on his feet again, I'll use the thousand and the interest he's paid me to buy a share in his spread and hold it in trust for Billy."

The Examiner took off his glasses and polished them, digesting the information. Finally he spoke.

"All right, you win. But I still don't see why you local agents insist on backing up these old-timers in their nonsense. Look at that reward business—his turning it down. Absolutely unreasonable. For a man in the financial shape he's in, it was plain crazy."

This time, Reid Marable did not restrain his impulse. He said dryly, "Is there any law that says folks have got to be reasonable?"

GAFF GAME

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Author of "Enough Rope," "Joker Wild," etc.

THE change in Don Carlos shocked Nugent. He remembered Charlie Giles as a ruddy, commanding Britisher who for half a lifetime had operated a copper mine here on the Chilean pampa.

Clearly the mine was shut down now. The dumps of greenish slag were deserted; shaft shed and mill and sheet iron native

quarters made ugly lumps of rust out there. Only this main residence, on whose veranda Don Carlos now sat sipping warm beer from a pitcher, had to any fair degree survived the torture of pampa winds. Most of all it jolted Nugent to find Don Carlos shabby, gross, with a face red and bloated and blotchy. No vestige of his dignity remained. Wavy, iron-gray hair had given



way to an oily baldness. Eyes which had been piercing were now fat-pinned windows of defeat.

But Nugent himself being the same sleek Nugent, Don Carlos knew him at once.

The Englishman gave them an uncordial smile, then clapped his hands. To a mozo who appeared he grunted, "More beer, Alfredo."

Of the guest he inquired, "Hiding out again, eh, Nugent?"

Ten years ago, while a certain wire-tapping scandal became quiet in California, Nugent had found it discreet to spend a

season in Chile. And Don Carlos Giles, always with an open house in those days, had harbored him here.

"I'm clean, Charlie," Nugent grinned. "And you?"

"I'm stoney. Don't I look it?" The response was peevish.

Alfredo, his dark bullet head bobbing from a poncho, came with more beer. "There is no ice, Don Carlos."

"Skip me, then," Nugent inserted quickly.

So Don Carlos continued to drink alone, and from the pitcher. It left an unkempt ring on the stubble of his triple chin.

You Can't Gamble With Murder; When You Stake Your Neck Against It You Lose Every Time



"I see you're shut down, Charlie."

"Aye," Don Carlos muttered. "The blasted mine's worked out. It was an old mine when I took it over. Last vein's shot, now."

"Copper's on the up, too, isn't it?" Nugent suggested. "What with a war due to break in Europe at any minute."

Don Carlos curved his lips over the pitcher and took another long draught. He wiped them on his sleeve to assent querulously. "Right, blast it. When copper was thruppence a pound I bled the tunnels clean. It's a shilling now, and I'm all finished."

"Your neighbor over the hill seems to have plenty," Nugent murmured. He gazed off some five kilometers to a lumpy, gray-green hill studded with test drills and ribbed with shovel benches. A faint roar of ore trains came from there, and a rumble of gyratory crushers. The lay of that great plant was well known to Nugent. Chuquicamata, mammoth project of American capital on the Chilean desert, was reported to be dumping thirty thousand tons of ore into leaching vats each twenty-four hours.

"Aye," Don Carlos admitted sourly, "those blasted Yankees are riding high. They dig up a mountain with steam shovels and suck the copper out with acid. Spent a hundred million just getting ready, and now they're cleaning up."

"Never mind how they do it," Nugent smiled. "Point is there's money over there. Buckets of it. Coin worth rolling the bones for, what?"

HE WINKED at Don Carlos. The Englishman flushed, for suddenly it was clear that Nugent knew just how he'd been living these last eight years.

"Not that I blame you, Charlie," Nugent grinned. "I'm not bad at that myself, you know." He produced a pair of big, amber dice and gave them a roll on the floor.

"Well?" Don Carlos challenged.

"Don't get sore, Charlie. I heard about it when I got off the boat at Antofagasta. It's been like this—stop me if I'm wrong. Your little independent plant played out, eight years ago, and you shut down. Always a spender, you'd never saved a shilling. And so ever since then you've been living off the gallopers and the pasteboards. A few of those high-salaried engineers from Chuqui drop in on you every now and then—they get bored, you know—and you take 'em on at bridge or poker or craps. Slim pickings. Just enough to keep you in beer and skittles."

"Is that," Don Carlos flared, "any of your blasted business?"

"Not unless you say so, Charlie."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there's a hundred and fifty staffmen at Chuqui, all aching for excitement, no shows to go to, no women to chase around with, and each of 'em drawin' down an average of five hundred a month. Figure it out, Charlie. Seventy-five grand a month, cravin' for a play!"

"You can't win that much in a dice game," Giles argued.

"Which brings me to why I'm here. Listen, Charlie. I've been operating a gambling ship anchored off Santa Monica, California. The attorney general decided I was illegal. He issued confiscation papers against my equipment and sent deputies out to board me. But I was tipped they were coming. So I shifted the pick of my stuff to a southbound tramp, and got away with it."

Nugent scooped up the big amber dice and stored them in his vest pocket. Then he produced two cigars, offering one of them with a wise smirk to his host.

"I looked Lima over on the way down, Charlie. But too much competition there. Next the tramp stopped at Anto to take cargo. There I heard about you. So I hopped the narrow gauge and took a run up here. How about it, Charlie? We could set up my layouts right here in your house. **Everything from chuckaluck to roulette. I**

got three wheels, Charlie, that can do tricks."

Don Carlos was not impressed. "It's no go, Nugent. Trick wheels wouldn't fool those Yankees. They're smart. And tough, too. They'd take those trick wheels apart, and us with 'em."

"They might," Nugent conceded, "if we were suckers enough to use levers or wired magnets. But I've got that beat a mile. Listen." He flicked an ash from his cigar and went on to explain certain especial virtues of his equipment. "And even if we played the games straight, Charlie, we'd still win on percentage. House always wins on percentage. We can put in a bar, too. Wish I could furnish some of those slinky hostesses I had on the ship. But I couldn't bring 'em along. Maybe I can round up some Chilenas down at Anto. Bar girls and dancers. Doll 'em up for bait. Gambling boys like to show off before women, you know."

Night closed in as Nugent purred persuasively on. Don Carlos gave ear, starting off toward the shovel benches at Chuqui. A thousand lights came on there, stars of industry blinking down the desert night. Don Carlos resented them. The winking lights mocked him, for the mighty plant at Chuqui had dwarfed his own here; those mammoth mills, grinding riches from the dust of his own defeat, had for years filled him with cankers of bitterness.

"We can take 'em to a cleaning," whispered Nugent.

WAR came to a continent far away and the Chuqui plant waxed even mightier. Its roster of engineers doubled. Night and day, a legion of steam shovels clawed at a mountain which was ninety-eight percent rock and two percent copper.

Copper for shells; copper for guns; copper for ships and machines. Copper swallowed from the earth by giant dippers, dumped into long ore trains to be hurtled down mountain to the crushers and poured

into lakes of sulphuric acid. Acid which ate the copper from the rock and rushed off with it through lead-lined pipes to be dechlorinated, and finally to be electrified into plates of pure commercial copper.

A job like that needed men. Bold men. Tough men. Men like Big Bill Brannigan.

As an ore train pulled away from the shovel line on Bench D, Bill Brannigan hustled his crew of two hundred track shifters into action. They were burly Bolivian laborers, none burlier than Bill himself. Bill stood six feet three in his boots, and it was said of him that he could toss his weight in steel rail over a steam shovel.

"Cut her at the frog," he bellowed. "And there. And there. Pinch her over, *ninos*. All together. Heave!" Bill snatched a pinchbar himself and began heaving. His crew heaved in unison down a long section of track. Ties and all, the track was inched twenty meters toward the cliff.

In thirty minutes it was ready for the shovels again, and for the next ore train. It was Brannigan's job to see that bench tracks were always close enough for dippers to bite into cliffs. Ten times a night, upon occasion, he built a railroad a hundred meters long.

But tonight, after the first track shift, he turned the job over to an assistant. Hopping an ore train, Bill rode it down the mountain. Archie Winburn, his room mate, was leaving tomorrow. Archie's three year contract having expired, the boy was going home to the States. And because they had been more than ordinary chums, Bill wanted to spend this last evening with Archie at the camp club.

Dropping off the train at staff quarters, Bill expected to find Archie waiting for him there. He failed to find Archie at the club, and so Bill hurried on down the camp street toward a cabin the two had shared for three years. Lucky kid, Archie. Going back to God's country. Big Bill sighed a bit enviously. Bill had had seven years of it down here. Somehow he

couldn't pull himself away from this job. Where could he find a bigger one?

But with Archie, it was different. Archie had a girl waiting for him in Maryland. They'd be married, Bill knew, just as soon as the kid got home. Although Archie was only five years Bill's junior, the big track foreman always thought of him as a kid. Twenty-six, Archie was. Well, he'd cut his teeth on raw copper down here and made good. Time he was getting home to that girl. Bill would miss him like the devil. No place for a kid like Archie, though. Too many pitfalls. Bill was thankful that Archie had missed them. The kid had saved his money. Seven thousand dollars salted away in the company bank here. Nice little stake to take up to that girl.

Turning in at the cabin, Bill found it deserted. Where was Archie? Bill stopped in at the next cabin to inquire.

"Don't know," the inmate told him. "Bunch of the boys went over to Don Carlos', though."

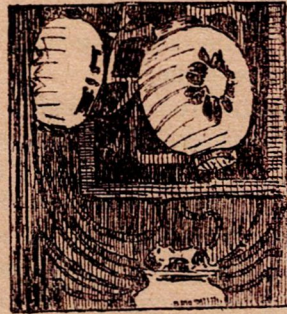
Bill frowned. Had Archie been lured over to that gyp joint? Bill himself had steered clear of it. Many times he had advised Archie to do the same. Not that Bill Brannigan had any objections to an occasional little stud game among comrades at the camp club. But definitely he mistrusted the dice over at Don Carlos'.

This being Archie's last night here, the boy's inclination would be to celebrate. And others of the staff, Bill realized, would be wanting to stand treat. A few treats and they'd begin looking for excitement. And quite the most exciting place on all the pampa, these last several months, was a miniature Monte Carlo established just over the hill by Don Carlos Giles.

It worried Bill. He hurried to the camp garage, backed his flivver out and went chugging over the hill.

Five kilometers brought him in sight of a long, brilliantly lighted house. About it stood the skeletons of a decadent mine. The only vegetation was a single, half-

dead pepper tree directly in front of the main building. A pipe line conveying water from Andean snow to Chuqui ran by here, and as a courtesy the big American plant



had permitted Charlie Giles a valve for his own domestic water supply. Leakage at the valve made the pepper tree possible here in a land where rain was unknown.

TONIGHT the pepper tree was aglitter with Japanese lanterns. Other lanterns were strung on the verandas. Bill saw a dozen cars of Chuqui staffmen parked outside, and as many riding horses. Of late the engineers and clerks from Chuqui had been flocking over here like flies to honey.

And losing their shirts. The boys were saps, Bill brooded, to let themselves be fleeced like that.

His sole concern, however, was for Archie Winburn. If Archie was in there, Bill meant to drag him out and home. He parked his car and hurried inside.

A chatter in English and Spanish greeted him.

"Hi, Bill."

"Roll you for the drinks, Bill."

"Stake me, Bill. I gotta get even."

A sirenic Chilena tripped up, took Bill's arm and tried to coax him to the bar. The bar and all this machinery of chance, Bill knew, had been furnished by a smoothie named Nugent. Bill shook the charmer from his arm and glared about the room.

Groups of Chuqui staffmen were at play. In the main room Bill saw two roulette wheels, one needle wheel, one rouge

et noir board, a wheel of fortune, as well as faro, chuckaluck, monte—dice and card games of every description. The bar occupied a room to the right, which had been a staff mess hall in days when Don Carlos had employed engineers of his own.

Red-sashed Chilenos, imported from Antofagasta, were operating the games. Except that the needle wheel was presided over by Don Carlos's mozo, known to Bill as Alfredo. A half dozen Chilena girls were serving drinks. One of them was dancing on a table of green baize, with a group of customers tossing dice at her heels.

Nugent, in immaculate dinner dress, was gliding from game to game to coach his dealers. Don Carlos himself was not in sight.

Neither was Archie Winburn. Relieved on that score, Bill strolled about the room. Its walls of adobe plaster had been tinted green. Light globes were green, too, shimmering on jaded young men who too late regretted having sought excitement here.

Among them, Bill recognized several who weren't the kind to be easily duped. One of these was a knobby-jawed accountant named Dutch Goutch.

Dutch had just dropped ten dollars at Alfredo's needle wheel when Bill called him aside. "Wouldn't expect to see you falling for this, Dutch. These are gaff games, aren't they?"

Dutch thumped away his cigarette. "That's what I'm trying to find out, Bill. And how can I find out if I don't hang around?"

"I getcha." Bill's eyes gleamed. "It *would* be fun wrecking the joint, Dutch." He realized now that only about half the customers were here because they lacked better judgment; the other half were here in anticipation of an exposure which would end in a glorious fight.

"Been hanging around with my eyes open," Dutch growled. "But I can't spot a thing."

"No wires?" Bill squinted shrewdly at the roulette layouts.

"No wires, Bill. And no levers. I've taken a gander at all three of these roulette wheels."

"How about the dice?"

"I swiped six pair out of the joint last night, Bill, and X-rayed 'em over at the Chuqui lab. They're clean."

"You'll be clean, too, Dutch, if you don't stay away." Bill turned to a roulette wheel to watch an ivory ball spin there. Was the ball really ivory, Bill wondered? Or did it have a metal core attractable by some hidden magnet?

"Hold on a minute, Dutch," Bill muttered. "You mentioned three roulette wheels. I only see two."

"The other one's back there." Dutch nodded toward a portal of green draperies at the rear. "That's where most of the big play is, Bill. By the way, that kid roomie of yours has been taking it on the chin."

Bill whirled instantly. "You mean Archie's here? Why didn't you say so?"

"You never asked me. I tried to make him go home, Bill. But he's whacked. The boys fed him too many rickies."

Bill was already charging toward the draperies. He pushed through them and saw Archie. Archie stood before a roulette wheel, flushed and eager. Clustered about him were a half dozen of his friends who, because Archie was leaving tomorrow, had been regaling him with treats. Most of them had lost all sense of values. Archie had just placed a bet, and the wheel was spinning.

A mascaraed Chilena clung to Archie's arm, whispering, "This time you win, *mihito*, yes?" Then the room was breathless, as all eyes followed the spinning ball.

Bill Brannigan, bursting in on them, saw that it was too late to halt this particular play. The bet having been placed, the wheel must spin on to decision.

Across the table Bill saw Don Carlos Giles. Giles was presiding as croupier

here. By him were heaps of chips and currency. No checks, Bill noted. Therefore Archie couldn't have lost any more than his pocket money. Bill relaxed slightly, his eyes shifting from the ball to Don Carlos. His face red and blotchy, his paunchy figure encased in a stiff shirt and dinner jacket much too small for him, Don Carlos seemed to Bill like a great, bloated spider hovering over this whirling web of chance.

Archie's bet had been placed on the red. Slower the wheel turned, in counter direction to the spin of the ball. And as the wheel stopped, the ball came to rest in a black pocket.

Don Carlos raked in the bet.

A pallor replaced Archie's flush. He swayed, clutching at the table to keep his feet. But because no checks were in sight, Bill Brannigan still failed to sense any irreparable calamity.

"Does that bust you, Archie?" a companion asked thickly.

Archie stared at him with glazed eyes. "Bust? Yes, that's right. I'm bust." All at once, the realization shocked him sober. He whirled savagely upon Don Carlos, yelling, "You cheated me. You won every time. Your wheel's crooked." Archie reeled around the board and made a snatch at money in Giles' hand.

Giles backed away. "No use welshing, boy," he retorted. "We've got no room here for a poor loser."

The retort maddened Archie. He swung with both fists at the man's face. Bill caught him, pulled him away. A brawl wouldn't gain anything, Bill thought. Archie kept shrieking that he'd been cheated. His cries brought a crowd from the front room with Nugent and Alfredo in the van of it.

"If the joint gypped you, Archie," Bill shouted above the bedlam, "we'll make him cough up. Calm down and we'll find out about it."

But Archie couldn't be calmed down. He jerked away, again charging Giles like

a tormented tiger. His hands clawed furiously at Giles and then something struck sharply on Archie's head.

Alfredo had pressed forward in defense of his master with a short, white stick in his hand. It came down with a swish and Archie sagged to the floor.

Bill stooped to pick him up and found that he had been stunned. Straightening up, Bill drove one pile-driving punch at Alfredo. It sent the mozo reeling across the room.

"That's right, Bill," Dutch Goutch shouted. "Clean up on 'em. You heard what Archie said. The game's gaffed!"

Other staffmen took up the cry. "Smash that wheel." "Look for wires. Look for levers." "Grab the money, Joe."

Don Carlos, eyes defiant and bloodshot, backed to the wall. His hands hugged a sheaf of currency against his shirt front. A dozen brawl-hungry engineers were closing in on him when Nugent slipped through to stand in front of his partner.

"Everything's on the level," Nugent assured them smoothly. "If you don't think so, take a look and see. We've nothing to hide, gentlemen, and so we invite your inspection."

Bill broke in on a hubbub of retort. "Archie's out cold," he announced. "Pete, you and Joe take him to the Chuqui doctor right away. Ed, you grab that mozo that socked him. We'll shake him down. Rattle his teeth till he squeals about the gaffs here. The rest of us'll turn the joint inside out. If we find a single gaffed game, then all bets are off."

The customers, especially the ones that weren't sober, cheered. Bill helped two of them carry Archie outside to a car. When Archie was started on his way to Chuqui, Bill returned inside and took charge.

"Help yourselves, gentlemen," Nugent invited. He lighted a cigar and stood by with cool assurance.

"Begin with the roulette wheels," Bill instructed. "Look for wires, levers, mag-

nets. Sam, you take one of these ivory balls and smash it with a sledge. See if it's got a metal core. Chesty, you corral all the dice. Smitty, grab every card in the house."

All details set zealously to work. And Nugent, uptilting his cigar to a derisive angle, smiled. "If you wreck my property," he purred, "get ready to defend damage suits. We're licensed to do business here, you know."

Ignoring him, Bill turned to Don Carlos. "How much did you gyp that kid out of?"

"What he lost was in fair play," Giles retorted.

A junior chemist spoke up. "Archie lost his whole pile, Bill. Seven thousand dollars."

"And you stood by and let him?" Bill exploded.

"He was plastered," the chemist said. "We all were. Archie only meant to play a hundred bucks; when he lost, he tried to get it back. He kept doubling to get even, until it was all gone."

"Then he must have played checks!" Bill exclaimed. "Soon as we spot a gaff here, we'll stop Archie's checks at the bank."

"But we can't, Bill. Because the house here didn't cash 'em."

"Who cashed 'em?" Bill demanded.

"It was like this, Bill. Archie's drawn out a thousand to buy his passage home, and to buy some chinchilla furs for his girl up there. He came over here tonight, got plastered, and before he knew it he lost that thousand in cash."

"At roulette?"

"No, he dropped it at Alfredo's needle wheel. Then he tried to get it back at roulette.

"But Don Carlos wouldn't let him buy chips with a check. So Archie got the rest of us to cash checks for him. Fifty here, a hundred there. Forty-odd of his best friends were around, and nobody wanted to turn Archie down."

Bill winced. Stopping checks, he real-

ized, would only penalize friends who had meant to accommodate Archie.

BILL turned bitterly to Don Carlos. "Do you know what that means, you bone-picking vulture? The kid worked three years to save a stake. He was going home to get married. Now he can't go. Or if he goes, he'll go broke. You've wrecked his life."

Don Carlos curved his puffy lips derisively. "What do you want me to do? Break down and cry?" He swaggered to the bar and mixed himself a drink.

Bill leashed his temper. Getting himself jailed for assault wouldn't help any. Thing to do was to find proof that the games were gaffed. In that case every cent in the house could be seized, with justice, and restored to the losers.

A driller named Ed McCoy came up to report, "You told me to grab that mozo. But I can't find him, Bill. He ducked outside in the dark."

"Let him go for the minute, Ed," Bill growled. He went to the bar and found half a dozen Chilena entertainers there, whispering nervously. Bill questioned them one at a time.

They claimed to know nothing. "I am hired to be hostess here, senior," a girl pouted. "I dance and make laughter, that is all."

"But what's the trick in it?" Bill demanded. "Why do all the customers get trimmed?"

"There is no trick, senior."

The entertainers, as well as the red-sashed Chileno dealers, were finally dismissed to quarters which Don Carlos had provided for them in outbuildings. Only Don Carlos and Nugent remained to observe the shake-down of equipment. Nugent continued to uptilt his cigar and blow insolent rings. Don Carlos kept drinking at the bar, sullen and defiant.

"The roulette wheels look okay, Bill," Chesty reported. "We've shaken 'em down, inside and out. No wires, no mag-

nets, no levers. And the balls are pure ivory."

"Not a daubed card in the house, either," Smitty announced. "Nor any strippers."

"Nor any phony dice, Bill."

Nugent challenged with a smile, "Maybe you'd better look at these. He exposed a pair of big amber dice, sets which he always carried in his vest pocket. But Billy ignored them, since they could not have figured in the fleecing of Archie.

"Why not wreck the joint anyway?" Dutch urged.

"We'd only make it worse," Bill gloomed. "The joint's licensed and we haven't found any gaffs. So we're not justified either in smashing the equipment or in confiscating what the boys lost here."

"That's right," Chesty admitted.



In the end the committee of engineers withdrew in dejection to cars parked outside. Just as they were embarking to go home, Pete and Joe came driving up from the direction of Chuqui. "Archie's in a bad way," Joe reported. "Skull's fractured."

Pete added hastily, "He'll pull through, though. Doctor says he'll only need to miss one boat. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime," Bill broke in savagely, "I'm gonna bash that mozo's head in." He was turning back to scour the premises for Alfredo when Chesty caught his arm.

"I know how you feel, Bill," Chesty argued. "I'd like to do the same myself. But Archie was punching at Don Carlos when Alfredo hit him. The courts'll say that Alfredo was only defending his master. Better sleep on it, Bill, before you start any homicide."

"You couldn't find him in the dark any-

way," Smitty put in. "You can pick him up tomorrow, Bill, and work him over."

"That's an idea," Pete agreed. "You can spin him on his ear, Bill, and then tell him Archie died in the hospital. He'll think it's murder. Then you can offer to let him go if he squeals about gaffs over here."

Bill Brannigan permitted himself to be persuaded and they all drove back to Chuqui. When the caravan of cars pulled up at staff quarters most of the men retired to their cabins. Bill drove on toward the hospital. He knew he couldn't sleep. He'd sit up all night by Archie.

Archie would miss his boat. Which meant that Bill would have to cable a girl waiting in Maryland. The thought lashed Bill. Archie had read him many letters from that girl—lines rich in hope and dreams long cherished. She'd waited three years for Archie to make good down here. The kid *had* made good, only to lose everything in one hour of folly.

If there was only some hint of evidence that the games weren't on the level!

Turning a corner toward the hospital, Bill passed the camp club. The club, at this hour, was dark and deserted. But sight of it pumped an idea into Bill's brain. He barked to a halt, got out and went into the club.

SNAPPING on lights there, he moved to a wall lined with books. They called it the club library. Friends in the states for years had been sending books to the boys down here. When a staffman left to go home, he always presented his books to the club. And so hundreds of odd volumes had accumulated.

Mostly fiction. But Bill happened to remember a certain curious volume of non-fiction he had run across once, here. It was entitled "Fools of Fortune."

He brought it down from a high, forgotten shelf where, by the dust on it, it had long been undisturbed. Bill took it to the light and thumbed through it. By

its title page, it had been written by a life-long gambler for the purpose of exposing to the world every trick and gaff practised by the gambling fraternity.

Bill skipped the chapters on bunko steering, circus games, dice games, card games—and turned to the chapter on “short games.” A short game being one which requires comparatively little time to strip a victim. Here Bill found detailed descriptions of *rouge et noir*, roulette, keno, rolling faro and high ball poker. In each case gaffs practised in all parts of the world were reviewed in cold characters.

Bill was mainly absorbed by the pages on roulette. And among the trick devices used to control roulette he found one which requires neither lever nor wire nor magnet. Bill read verbatim:

In this method of gaff, one-half the small pieces of metal which form the pockets for the ball are made a trifle longer than the others. After the stakes have been placed, if the proprietor wishes the ball to fall in a red color, it is necessary for him merely to throw the ball around to the right; and if he wishes the ball to fall in the black, he casts the ball toward the left.

After a moment's thought Bill's engineering mind saw why this would be so. Then he remembered that Archie had lost his first thousand at a needle wheel operated by Alfredo.

He turned to a chapter on needle wheels. This wheel, he saw by the diagram, differs from roulette in many features, but especially because the outer rim, which contains the numbered pockets, is stationary. Which makes the use of a table magnet, as an attraction for the ball, more practical than in roulette where numbered pockets revolve with the wheel.

A study of gaffs listed for needle wheels gave Bill an idea about what might have happened to Archie Winburn.

Delaying only long enough to supply

himself with a pair of calipers, Bill embarked in his flivver and drove back to Don Carlos's.

Once more he parked by the pepper tree. His watch registered three in the morning as he rushed into the house.

It was chilly at this hour, here on the high pampa, and Bill found Don Carlos seated before a hearth with chunks of yareta burning there. Nugent was seated opposite him. The two gamblers, over whiskey and sodas, were counting their winnings of the night.

Near them squatted Alfredo. Fear flickered in Alfredo's eyes as Bill entered; then the mozo produced from his boot a long knife and began honing it on a hearth stone.

Bill ignored him. “I'd like one more look at your roulette wheel, Don Carlos. Any objections?”

The fat man's stare was hostile. But Nugent waved a careless hand toward the back room. “Help yourself, Brannigan.”

They did not follow as Bill pushed through the draperies into the back room. Bill immediately began applying his calipers to partition plates separating the numbered pockets of a roulette wheel there. In addition to the thirty-six numbers, there was a zero, a double zero and an eagle, making thirty-nine pockets in all. Even if played fairly, this wheel would return a handsome percentage to the house.

But Bill soon discovered that Nugent hadn't been content with that. For each alternate partition plate was slightly longer than the adjacent one, precisely according to the gaff outlined in “Fools of Fortune.”

Returning to the other room, Bill concealed his elation.

“Satisfied?” Nugent challenged.

Evading, Bill went to the needle wheel where Archie had lost his first thousand. “Where,” he inquired, “are the chips for this game?”

Don Carlos seemed startled. Bill saw him exchange glances with Nugent. Nugent answered cagily, “When we close up

for the night, we lock all chips in the safe."

"Are you sure they were chips?"

"What do you mean?" The question came with a cracked twang from Don Carlos. Bill could see that he was taut. Alfredo was standing now, knife in hand.

"I mean," Bill said, "that Alfredo hit Archie with a white cylinder about a foot long. It must have been heavy, because it fractured Archie's skull. How do I know it wasn't a steel magnet, ringed to look like a stack of white chips?"

Through a tense moment, threat charged the air. Bill braced himself in case Alfredo should rush him with the knife.

"You're crazy," Nugent shrugged. "You couldn't use a magnet like that on roulette."

"Right," Bill admitted. "But you could on a needle wheel. A tall magnet, made to look like a stack of chips, could be shoved close to a losing pocket. And so steer a metal marble from a winning pocket. Let's see your chips, Alfredo."

Alfredo did not answer. Bill didn't expect one. He was playing a game of his own now.

Don Carlos and Nugent again exchanged glances. Then Nugent crossed to the safe, opened it, produced a box of chips, rattled them, exposed them to Bill Brannigan.

"Not those," Bill said. "I mean the phony chips this mozo crowned Archie with. Alfredo was operating this needle wheel when a riot broke out in the back room. Running back there, he'd logically pick up his gaff in order not to leave it alone here. And having it in his hand, he'd use it to crack down on Archie."

"A pipe dream!" Nugent derided.

"Just the same," Bill warned him, "I'm off to rout out the Chuqui boys. They'll be over here, a hundred strong, to turn this joint inside out. When they find that phony stack of chips they'll impound every cent in the house. The courts'll back us up, too, when we show 'em the evidence."

Bill turned abruptly and went out.

He drove noisily away, but only to a short distance. Stopping in the darkness back of a slag heap, he returned cautiously afoot. Bill was reasonably sure what they'd do. They'd send Alfredo out to get rid of evidence.

Having baited them to do just that, Bill took ambush behind an old powder bin and waited. In a very few minutes he saw Alfredo's ponchoed figure slip from the house. In one hand the mozo carried a lantern. In the other he carried the blunt, cylindrical implement with which he had struck down Archie Winburn. The lantern light revealed it as white, ringed with circles, about a foot long and an inch in diameter. Standing on end back of a needle wheel, it would without question pass for a stack of white chips.

Bill exulted. He need only watch to see where Alfredo disposed of this artful magnet. Then he, Bill, could reclaim it. He could display it to the Chuqui staff and they'd come swooping down, amply justified, upon Don Carlos.

He saw Alfredo proceed directly to a sheet iron shaft house. Right away Bill guessed his purpose. The Chileno could toss the evidence down a deep, deserted shaft in there.

To spy on him, Bill followed softly to the shaft house door. He peered in, saw a cobwebby interior long in disuse. In its center was the open mouth of a shaft house with a winch spanning it. Alfredo's lantern gave fair light, and Bill was just in time to see the man toss his faked stack of chips into the shaft.

BILL drew aside into darkness as Alfredo emerged. As the mozo returned to his masters, Bill himself entered the shaft house. He closed its rickety door and struck a match. As a mining engineer Bill knew all about shafts. This one was just as when operation had been abandoned eight years ago. At its top was a winch drum with rope coiled about it. One end of the rope went down into the shaft,

no doubt to an ore bucket at the bottom. A second bucket, affixed to the other end of the rope, stood empty on the shaft house floor. In operation, one bucket came up as the other descended, the weight of the empty descending bucket thus helping to hoist a bucket of ore.

In an old tool box Bill found some candles. He lighted one and inserted it under the outer band of his hat, miner fashion. Then he pushed the upper bucket into the shaft opening. It swung there, ready to descend if Bill should begin winding the winch.

There was, Bill decided, a fair reason to wind on the winch and draw the lower bucket up. Because the shaft being only two meters square, there was a chance that the evidence had landed in a big, forty-gallon bucket at the bottom. Reclamation of that evidence being vital, Bill began winding on the winch.

As the drum revolved, Bill counted the turns. By the number of turns he could calculate how deep the shaft was. He wanted to know that because as a last resort he might have to bring Dutch Goutch over here, and Joe and Pete. Then one of them could be lowered in a bucket by the others, to reclaim the evidence.

Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three—Bill continued to count the turns as one bucket went down and the other came up. At the thirtieth turn he heard the two buckets clang together in passing.

And at the sixtieth turn the ascending bucket arrived at the top. It was empty. The magnet had failed to fall therein. Bill gave a grimace of disappointment, for this meant delay while he went for help. He could, of course, easily lower himself in one bucket by letting the opposite rope slide through his hands. But he'd be stranded down there, two hundred feet below ground. Bill now knew the depth to be about two hundred feet because this winch drum was a foot in diameter. Sixty times one times π made approximately two hundred feet.

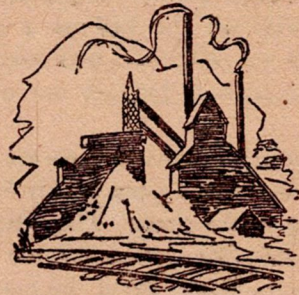
Not much chance of climbing a rope that long. Still, the idea tempted Bill. He toyed with it doubtfully, kneeling on the rim of the shaft and peering down.

Then someone gave him a push from behind.

Bill was toppled forward into the shaft. He fell, snatching desperately at the rope which hung there. A dozen yards down his hands caught a grip on the rope. It checked his fall, and he swung there in darkness.

Looking up, Bill saw the flicker of a lantern. Alfredo was peering down at him. A knife gleamed in Alfredo's hand. The mozo's voice came harshly, "You will be wise not to climb out, Senor."

Instantly Bill knew that Alfredo, returning to his masters, must have heard the creaking of a winch at the shaft here. So he had returned to find an intruder kneeling at the shaft's rim. Evidence of fraud had just been tossed down there. Foreseeing trouble for his master should that evidence be exposed, and remembering a jolt to the jaw administered by Bill earlier tonight, Alfredo had crept forward to push Bill into the shaft.



Bill considered climbing out. It was only a dozen yards. But the climb would exhaust him; he'd have to cling to the rope with one hand and use the other to fight Alfredo. Alfredo, slashing downward with his knife, would have all the advantage.

Or if the mozo preferred, he could cut the rope and let his victim fall two hundred feet.

To avoid that certain death, Bill began sliding down the rope. He was in inky

darkness, the candle having been jolted from his hatband. Bill slid on down with the rope burning his flesh. Fifty feet; a hundred; and on down. Finally his boots struck a bucket at the bottom.

BILL released his grip and stood dizzily on the mine floor. In a moment he lighted a match and stooped to grope for the fallen candle. He found it, lighted it, reinserted it in his hatband. Then he saw what had passed for a stack of white chips. He picked it up, and by the weight knew it to be a metallic cylinder.

Bill made a face at it. The evidence was in hand now, but what good was it? To make sure it was a magnet, Bill looked about for a bit of metal to test it with. Tunnels led in four directions from the shaft. Down one of them ran a rusty line of mine track. Push cars, in the old days, had been pushed along this tunnel from heading to shaft. Bill moved along the track until he found a stray rail bolt by one of the joints. He touched the white cylinder to the bolt, and the bolt clung there. Even when Bill shook it, the bolt did not fall off.

A magnet of such power could, he knew, pull decisively on the ball of a needle wheel. So the evidence was complete. Nothing to do now but get out of this mine.

Bill returned a few steps to the shaft and found the bucket gone. Dimly he saw it ascending in the shaft. Then darkness swallowed it. Bill waited for the other bucket to come down, but it did not come into sight.

Then Bill realized that Alfredo, winding on the winch, would need only to draw the bottom bucket halfway up. The other bucket, descending, would meet it in mid-shaft. And there the two buckets could be left suspended, both of them a hundred feet beyond reach of Bill Brannigan.

Alfredo covered the shaft with planks. They were thick planks made to fit the frame of it, with notches for the bucket

ropes to pass through. On the planks, Alfredo heaped bales of old sample sacks as well as all the debris he could find in the shaft shed. This would help to muffle cries of distress from below. The mozo was shrewd enough to foresee that searchers from Chuqui would be over here tomorrow, inquiring for Bill Brannigan.

Alfredo now withdrew to the main house where he reported to Don Carlos. "I have pushed him in the shaft, my master."

Don Carlos stared at him. "Pushed who in the shaft?" He had presumed that Bill Brannigan was on his way back to Chuqui.

Now, upon hearing that Bill was immured in the shaft, both Don Carlos and Nugent were startled.

"What," Nugent worried, "will we do with him?"

Don Carlos muttered, "Serves him right, the blasted meddler!"

"They'll find him," Nugent protested. "His car must be parked close by, somewhere."

Don Carlos twisted his bulk toward Alfredo. "Go find the car," he directed, "and tetch it here."

The mozo slipped out on the errand. Don Carlos lumbered to the bar and came back with whiskey and sodas. He drank his own at a gulp, while Nugent sipped nervously.

"See here, Charlie. I've been around a lot. I've found out there's one thing it don't pay to gamble with—and that's murder. No matter how many suckers you shake down, you always lose in the end if there's a croak in it."

The eyes of Don Carlos gleamed slyly from under puffy lids. "We haven't done anything, have we? We didn't touch the blighter. We don't even know he's there."

"But we *do*. And if he croaks, it means a murder rap for both of us."

"How will they find out?"

"They always find out—about murder."

The fat man flushed with impatience. He had been drinking steadily all night,

and each drink had made him bolder. "Suppose they do! Alfredo pushed the blighter in. We didn't tell him to. It was a private fight between that blasted Yankee and Alfredo."

A car chugged up outside. It was Alfredo bringing Bill Brannigan's flivver.

When the mozo came in Don Carlos gave precise instructions. "The Yankee engineers may make trouble for you, Alfredo. They know you hit Winburn and fractured his skull. So it is best that you disappear for a little while."

"Yes, my master."

Don Carlos handed him five hundred pesos. "Drive the flivver down to Calamidad, Alfredo."

"Yes, master." Calamidad was a desert village fifteen kilometers down the pampa. Through it ran the narrow gauge Antofagasta and Bolivia Railroad.

"You will leave the car on a dark street near the depot, Alfredo. Then you will ride the first train to Antofagasta, where you will hide among your people."

The mozo bowed. "Shall I start now, Don Carlos?"

"Right. Off with you."

Ten minutes later Alfredo drove away in Brannigan's car.

Don Carlos explained his strategy to Nugent. "And now to bed," he finished. "We don't know a blasted thing about it."

BILL BRANNIGAN being on the night shift it had been his habit to sleep until noon. So he wasn't missed by the staff at Chuqui until after midday.

Early in the afternoon two carbineros from the Chuqui barracks, supported by a dozen mystified engineers, came over to inquire of Don Carlos.

Don Carlos blinked at them stupidly. "Brannigan? Haven't seen him."

The ranking carbinero took charge. "I am informed, Don Carlos, about a fight here last night. Your mozo, Alfredo, has hit a customer named Winburn on the head. Because it makes a fracture of the

skull, a friend of Winburn named Brannigan is very mad about this. He has the desire to punish Alfredo. Today we cannot find him. So now I must talk with Alfredo."

"For striking a customer," Don Carlos asserted, "I discharged Alfredo. Paid him off, and Alfredo caught a train to Anto."

Dutch Goutch edged up. "We can check on that," he said to the carbineros, "at Calamidad."

Off went half the posse to Calamidad. The other half remained to question dealers and bar girls who were now appearing sleepily from quarters.

None of them had seen Brannigan.

IN TWO hours a carbinero returned from Calamidad. He reported that Brannigan's car had been found on a back street there. He also verified that Alfredo had boarded a train for Antofagasta.

Goutch scowled. "Looks like Bill chased the mozo to Calamidad, to work him over. Think I'll take a look down that way."

When they were all gone, Don Carlos mopped moisture from his bald head. He leered at Nugent. "So you see? The search for Brannigan will center about Calamidad, and not here."

"I still don't like it," Nugent worried. "If we're wise, we'll lam out of here."

The Englishman flushed impatiently. "I thought you were smart, Nugent."

"I'm just smart enough, Charlie, to know you can't gamble with murder. When you stake your neck against it, you lose every time."

Don Carlos poured liquor. "Don't do a funk, Nugent. We don't know a thing about it."

"You mean you got the nerve to stand pat," Nugent challenged, "and let Brannigan starve in the mine?"

"I got the nerve to forget about him," Giles retorted. "And too much sense to run away. If we run, they'll get the wind up."

That much Nugent had to admit. Flight

today would be construed as implication in the disappearance of Brannigan.

"Tell you what," Don Carlos suggested shrewdly. "This is Wednesday. Saturday 'll be payday over at Chuqui. What say we keep the house open during the week, and finish with a big **clean-up** Saturday night. Sunday we can sack all the help and shut down."

"If they don't raid us on suspicion before Sunday," Nugent worried. "We've got a lot of cash on hand, Charlie. Those engineers might get out a court order, impounding it. Or someone might try cracking the safe."

This point impressed Don Carlos. Cash accumulated from the winnings of several months needed a more secure hiding place than the safe here. Outlaws might hold them up for it. Neither would it be discreet to deposit the money at Chuqui or Calamidad.

"We might need to lam any minute, Charlie. I think we'd better hide it outside someplace, where we can get our mitts on it quick. Sunday we can divvy and each man go his way."

"Which way for you, Nugent?"

"Australia. There's a boat leaving Sunday night."

They settled on a cache outside the house, and agreed to keep just enough money in the safe for an evening's play.

"After what happened last night," Nugent murmured, "maybe there won't anyone show up."

A CROWD from Chuqui *did* show up, however, when evening came. More even than usual, for the very rumor of danger and mystery made a lure. If the games were fair, well and good. If the games were gaffed, it was bound to end in a roughhouse. And to men like the Chuqui staffmen, nothing could more allure them than a fight.

So it was another big night. Don Carlos presided at the back room roulette, tossing the ball to the right against bets

on the red, tossing it to the left against bets on the black. It was all so simple.

In the front room, Nugent cat-footed from game to game coaching his dealers. Six charmers served at the bar, danced to guitars or blandished the customers with synthetic romance. Dice galloped across green baize and the cards riffled—all to the profit of Don Carlos Giles.

When the customers were gone and the help had retired to quarters, Nugent and Giles transferred all winnings to a cache outside. It was a concealment never likely to be found by either bandits or the law. "Three more nights of this," Don Carlos chuckled, "and we'll call quits."

He went up to bed, leaving Nugent by the hearth fire. As Nugent sipped a highball there, he brooded and was tempted. He might strip the cache and make off. Trouble was that eyes could be watching him. A spy posted by Don Carlos. Too much risk, Nugent decided. Better half the money than a knife in his back.

But one thing he could do. He could keep on the lee side of a murder charge. Bill Brannigan, right now, was starving to death directly under this house. A few more days and he'd be dead. Nugent shivered. He was a bold gambler, but murder frightened him. You couldn't hide it. Its skeleton always came to light. Nor was the world ever wide enough for guilt to escape in.

Nugent fretted over this angle until an answer came to him. Sunday night, just before boarding a ship for Australia, he could mail a card to some staffman at Chuqui. He could sign Alfredo's name and write the card in Spanish. It would say that Brannigan was in the shaft here.

But this was only Wednesday. Brannigan must be kept alive until Monday, when Nugent would be well at sea. His rescue then might get Don Carlos in hot water, but not Nugent.

Nugent now slipped into the kitchen, where he put six cans of corned beef in a grain sack. Also in the sack he dropped

three tins of hard tack, some candles and a two-gallon canteen of water.

Then he carried the sack out to the shaft shed. Removing a few boards to expose the shaft opening, he dropped the sack in. Far below him, he heard it crash on the bottom. Nugent then replaced the boards and went to bed.

WHEN Bill Brannigan heard the crash, for a moment he thought it was shale collapsing from a tunnel roof. Bill, in a stupor and half famished, sat with his back to a rock wall. There was no timbering in these tunnels. And as a rule no need for any, in this desert of rock.

Having expended his candle in explorations, Bill was in darkness. His throat was dry and sore not only from thirst but because he had shouted himself hoarse through long hours at the shaft. For minutes more he sat slumped against the tunnel wall, in hopeless lethargy. Then he realized there was no odor of dust in the air, as would be the case had shale crashed from a roof.

He got up and groped in the direction from which the crash had come. In a little while he stumbled over an ore bucket and so knew he was at the shaft. Stooping, his hand touched a canvas sack. He struck a match, staring. Why had this sack been dropped to him?



From it he brought a full canteen. Bill uptilted it and drank eagerly. It sent strength coursing again through his veins. Someone, evidently, wanted to keep him alive. Bill didn't stop to question motives. Here was water. Here, too, was food and

light. He brought a candle from the sack, lighted it, stuck it in his hat. Tins of beef in the sack were battered by the fall, but it didn't matter. Bill wolfed a pound of beef and some hardtack, then sucked again from the canteen.

A quick estimate assured him that this ration could keep him alive for a week. But unless they hoisted him out, what good was a week?

At any rate he was refreshed and could resume his explorations. Of the four tunnels, Bill had already explored two to blind ends. For a while now he stood shouting upward, hoping that whoever had dropped the sack might answer. When no response came, he went exploring into the third tunnel.

It led him a long crooked way through clammy gloom. In spots it widened into cavernous *llamperas*, where high-grade ore pockets of copper had been exploited in the old days of the mine. At times he came to old shafts through which ore had been hoisted, but which were now sealed by cave-ins.

At last the tunnel led him to a blank wall.

It was the same in the fourth tunnel. Bill explored every stope and cross-cut leading off, always with the vague hope of finding an exit on the slope of a hill. But there was no such door of escape. No way out except by the route he had come.

Weary and disheartened, Bill returned to the main shaft. Again he shouted there. No answer.

THURSDAY night brought another big play to the house of Don Carlos. But if chips were on tables, chips were on shoulders too. Eyes looked askance at Don Carlos. Eyes which questioned: "Where is Bill Brannigan? Did Archie Winburn really get gaffed over here?"

They were spoiling for a showdown, these engineers. Any exposure of gaffs would, Don Carlos knew, instantly start a riot. Dutch Goutch and his cronies were

like vigilantes, using their chips to challenge, daring Giles and Nugent to cheat them of a farthing.

But nothing could be proved. A deserted flivver at Calamidad seemed to tie Brannigan's disappearance to the flight of Alfredo. Alfredo was known to have taken a train to Anto, and the local law was looking for him there.

"Looks like they're just winning on percentage," Goutch grumbled.

"House always wins on percentage," Chesty gloomed. "We're saps to come over here at all."

Yet Friday night they were over again. And the house won handily as usual.

"We're closing shop after tomorrow night," Don Carlos announced. "Nugent's leaving me."

"This high altitude doesn't agree with me," Nugent smiled. "So it'll be your last chance to break the bank, gentlemen."

Saturday evening, payday, found the Chuqui men flocking over in full force. A last chance to get even. And so play was eager. Eyes, too, watched more alertly than ever for daubed cards, loaded dice or controlled wheels.

Chips were issued only for cash. And the cash flowed briskly into the tills of Don Carlos. Liquor flowed no less freely. It was a busy night for the bar girls. The house kept open until two in the morning, when as a last touch to promote good feeling and to better secure his own getaway, Nugent permitted Dutch Goutch to win four hundred dollars at dice.

The dice used were the amber pets which Nugent always carried in his pocket. "First time they ever let me down," Nugent grimaced, and restored them to his vest.

A bus from Calamidad was waiting in front. When all the customers were gone, Don Carlos herded his dealers and his bar girls into it. Their baggage had all been made ready and their wages had been paid. "Off with you now," he said to them. "You've just got time to catch a train for Anto."

The bus rumbled away, leaving Nugent and Giles with the winnings of a three months stand here. All of it except tonight's take was safely cached outside.

"Count up what we took 'em for," Don Carlos grinned, "while I go out and fetch in your share from the cache. Then we'll divvy up, and you can pull out any time you're ready."

Nugent piled the contents of all tills on the bar. He began counting as Don Carlos shuffled outside.

Don Carlos did not go to the cache. He went instead to a tool shed and there took a spanner. A monkey wrench, those Yanks over at Chuqui would call it. Hiding the spanner under his coat, Don Carlos slipped back to the house.

From the doorway, his murky eyes peered in upon Nugent. Nugent stood at the bar, counting money, his back to Don Carlos. Why divide with Nugent? Why not keep everything for himself?

A second motive, too, ruled Don Carlos. There was the angle of Bill Brannigan. Brannigan lay immured, dead or dying, two hundred feet below ground. How did Don Carlos know that Nugent wouldn't welsh out of it some way? No nerve, Nugent, when it came to gambling with murder.

Would Nugent hang that crime about Giles' neck, to save his own? Don Carlos Giles was in no mood to chance it. Plenty of room for two in that shaft.

So Don Carlos slipped quietly up behind Nugent, as the man stood there at the bar, and cracked down with the spanner. Nugent fell, stunned.

Don Carlos dragged him outside. There he picked the man up and carried him to the shafthouse. He removed a plank there, exposing the deep, dark shaft. Into it he dropped Nugent.

He heard the body fall far below in the mine.

Don Carlos still had the spanner. No good to let a murder weapon lie around to be found. So he tossed the spanner also

into the shaft. Then he replaced the plank and went back to the house.

A GAIN Bill Brannigan heard a crash. The lambency of his candle revealed a dead man on the shaft floor. Nugent! Murdered and tossed into the mine here! Nothing could have sealed with a more sinister shroud the despair of Bill Brannigan.

Then the weapon of assault fell, barely missing Bill. He picked it up, a spanner.

When the shock cleared from his mind, Bill sensed a quarrel between Nugent and Giles. He stooped in revulsion over the body, searching it with the vague notion of gleaning some clue as to motive. All he found was a pair of oversize, amber dice in a vest pocket.

Here were dice, the tool of a gambler; and a spanner, the tool of a builder. Bill stared upward into the darkness of the shaft, raging and yet impotent. In one hand he balanced the spanner, in the other the dice. The one made him think of Archie Winburn and the builders of Chuqui; the other made him think of Don Carlos, the despoiler who had stripped Archie by tricks of chance.

And nothing could be done about it. Bill shouted up the shaft only to be mocked by futile echoes. How long he'd been here he didn't know. It seemed weeks. It couldn't have been more than four or five days, though, because his canteen was still a third full. Two more days he could survive here—but what then? Must his own bones rot here with Nugent's?

Bill looked down at Nugent, and shivered. Because the corpse had been crushed hideously by the fall, Bill wanted to hide it from his sight. He dragged it a little way down one of the tunnels.

Then, returning to the shaft, Bill Brannigan tripped. The obstacle that tripped him was a mine track. A toy rail line threading through the tunnel here. As he sprawled face down on the mine track, Bill thought of his own job on the Chuqui

benches. He was used to wrangling heavy rail up there, ninety pounds to the yard. Now it stung Bill to think he must end his career stumbling along these puny, push-car rails of a derelict mine.

Then, suddenly, an idea lashed him. The shifting of rails was his job. Why not shift these? He was a builder. Why not build a railroad of his own, upward through the shaft?

The idea, at first, seemed barely better than fantastic. It would be like Jack of the Beanstalk's magic ladder to the sky. Two hundred feet up that shaft. Two hundred feet, Bill calculated, would be as high as an eighteen story skyscraper. No, it simply couldn't be done.

Then he realized it would only be a hundred feet. Because twin buckets hung halfway down the shaft, suspended in balance there from the winch above. If he could only get to the buckets, he could stand in one and pull on the opposite rope. With the winch as a pulley, he could hoist himself up and out.

But one hundred feet! It might as well be a mile. Bill was in a temper to fight, though. This mine track was light. It was bolted together, he knew, in sixteen foot sections. Each section would weigh about one hundred and fifty pounds. The rails were spaced by thin plates, acting as ties, which would serve as the rungs of a ladder if the section were stood on end.

Seven sections, each leaning from wall to wall and staggered like the flights of a staircase, would ascend a hundred feet up the shaft.

Bill picked up the spanner. The tool of a builder! His other hand gripped the big, amber dice of Nugent. It would take a builder's might, and a gambler's luck, to hoist a rail line up that shaft.

A complete blueprint of construction flashed to Bill. He wouldn't connect the sections, of course. They must be handled one at a time. Seven sections. The first aslant from east wall to west wall, and above this a section leaning from west to

cast. And so on. If he did it at all, it must be while food and water remained to fuel his strength.

BILL lighted a fresh candle and put it in his hat. With the spanner, he assaulted the first joint of the mine line. The bolts were rusty and stubborn. Hammering, wrenching with his spanner, he disjoined the first track section and dragged it to the shaft.

What he had in effect was an iron ladder sixteen feet long and fifteen inches wide. Hoisting it upright in the shaft wasn't difficult. Bill leaned it firmly so that the top end rested against the west wall.

He went back for another section. Dragging it to the shaft, the real and Herculean labor began. Bill ascended the first ladder with the second one on his back. The burden was not only crushing but awkward. It made him rest and readjust his balance between steps.

Doggedly he staggered on up, reaching at last the top step.

Then he began hoisting upward. Inch by inch he pushed, straining until the veins stood out on his neck. Up. Up. A hundred and fifty pounds of awkward burden. The top end of it swung crazily above him, toppled against a wall and jambed there. Not high enough yet. Bill heaved again, straining, sweating. His breath came in gasps.

At last he had the section thrust completely above him. He managed to wedge the bottom end against rock of the west wall, with the top end supported against the east wall some fourteen feet over his head.

Bill climbed down to the mine floor and stretched out there, exhausted. For half an hour he rested. The next section, he knew, would be infinitely more difficult. Each increment to his staggered and weirdly switch-backed rail line would become more difficult than the one before.

But it *must* be done.

Bill dragged a third section to the shaft.

Up he went with it, step by step, his feet groping for the rungs. At the top of the first section, he skewed himself awkwardly to the second. The swaying, stubborn weight of the third section dragged at him; its jagged edges bruised his knuckles and drew blood there. But up, up! Always up. Groping for a footing none too secure. Almost at the top, the burden unbalanced him and he fell. His hand snatched a grip on the second, secure section and he clung there, swinging. But the third section crashed to the floor below.

It discouraged Bill. He climbed down and lay panting on the rock with small heart to carry on.

Then he thought of Archie. And Carlos Giles. Getting out meant the restoration of Archie's savings. And the conviction of Giles.

Bill sat up savagely. He gulped a pint of the water and ate some bully beef. Then he steeled himself to try again.

THIS time he went slower. Slow but sure. Up. Up. Rest a minute. Then up. It took a solid hour of back-breaking toil, but at last he got the third section hoisted into position above the second. New courage surged through Bill. His ladder was nearly halfway to the buckets.

He dragged four more track sections to the shaft, to have them ready. Doggedly he began his climb with the next section. Of course he could do it. Who said he couldn't? Up, up. A railroad straight up out of hell. Nothing could stop him. Archie was in the hospital with a broken head, wasn't he? That girl was waiting for him in Maryland, wasn't she? Bill skewed from one ladder to the one staggered above it. And on up. Slow. Sure. A rest now. He must save his wind and keep balanced.

He reached the top of the third section and began hoisting the fourth straight overhead. He had the knack of it now. Soon he had the thing in place, aslant from

wall to wall. He made sure its bottom was well wedged against rock.

Before descending, Bill climbed to the top of the fourth section to test its rigidity. And from there he could see, by the flare of his candle, twin buckets not so far above him. Three more sections and he'd be at them.

Bill went down and took a long rest.

Ascending with his fifth section of track, he jostled the candle from his hat. It fell, leaving him in darkness. With desperate, blind gropings he managed to wedge his burden between the walls. Then he went down for a new candle.

An hour later his fifth section was in place. Weariness made Bill sleep, then. He awoke refreshed, but with stiff joints and sore muscles. He sipped from the canteen and ate almost the last of his hard-tack.

Then up with section six.

If getting section five up was gruelling, six was torture. Through sweating hours the hoisting of it punished Bill Brannigan. When at last it was in place and he was at the top of it, Bill could almost touch the buckets. His impulse was to jump for them. Resisting it, he went wearily down for the seventh section of track.

Staggering up with it, he wondered if he would emerge into night or day. His guess was that about twenty-four hours had passed since Nugent had been dropped into the shaft. That had probably been night time, so it would again be night now. Would the games of Don Carlos be in full play?

Step by step Bill inched upward with his last section. Warily he kept balance as he shifted from ladder to ladder. Three sections up, four, five, six. At the top of flight six, he pushed the seventh to a wedged position above him.

Bill climbed it with his heart thumping. Now he was abreast of the buckets. Gingerly he stepped into one of them, careful to grasp the other bucket's rope at the same instant. Otherwise his weight

would have sent one bucket down and the other up.

Standing now securely in one bucket, Bill began pulling hand over hand on the opposite rope. Up he went. This, after the labor of heaving those track sections, was child's play. Like riding in an elevator.

The winch overhead gave him a pulley leverage and had the effect of reducing his weight one-half.

On upward Bill rode, fifty feet, a hundred feet. His head bumped planks. Bill pushed mightily and tilted the plank back.

Another pull on the rope. Then his head emerged just below the winch, in the shaft house of Don Carlos Giles.

BILL climbed out upon the floor of it. He rested for minutes there, regaining his breath. Then he peered out into night and saw no human life. No horse or vehicle stood before the house of Don Carlos. Therefore no play was on. Except for the evidence of firelight glowing from the main door, the premises seemed to be deserted.

Bill slipped from the shaft house and toward the main building. He mounted the steps there and looked warily in. By a hearth fire in the front room, Don Carlos sat alone. His thick legs were stretched toward the fire. The man's hands were clasped over his bulging belly and Bill saw that he was asleep.

Gross and ungainly the man sat sleeping there, in the stiff white shirt and dinner jacket far too tight for his girth. Sweat was beaded on his fleshy face and there was a whiskey and soda on the arm of his chair.

Like a bloated spider, full fed and now asleep in the snugness of a deserted web.

Bill's first impulse was to shake the man awake, to confound him with proof of crime and to demand back the money fleeced from customers. Then Bill glanced beyond Don Carlos and saw the safe. The safe door stood open. Without arousing

the sleeper, Bill moved to it and saw that it was empty.

It meant that winnings had been transferred elsewhere. Bill wanted to know where. It wouldn't do Archie Winburn any good merely to convict Don Carlos. Whatever else, Archie's losings must be refunded.

An idea came to Bill and he moved softly toward Don Carlos. From his pocket Bill drew forth the amber dice he had taken from Nugent. Bill had brought them up as proof that Nugent had been dropped into the mine.

And now a final casting of these dice could expose the last secret of Don Carlos Giles.

With a grim smile Bill dropped the dice into the whiskey at Giles' elbow. Then Bill withdrew to a screen of draperies, to watch from there.

The fire died down. A chill of desert night came to the room and aroused Don Carlos. The man stretched, yawned, tossed another chunk on the fire. Then he took up the glass at his elbow. He drank deeply, until the liquor was all gone.

Then Bill saw him stare into the glass. He saw a beefy red face fade to ghastly pallor.

Dice were exposed in the glass. Big amber dice which had been Nugent's.

How could they be here, unless Nugent somehow had emerged from the shaft?

Had Nugent come back, by some magic, to taunt him with these dice? Don Carlos stood up, his flesh flinching; his eyes darted suspiciously toward a cache outside.

The cache of money! Had Nugent taken it and gone?

Don Carlos went quickly to find out. In nervous haste he dragged a ladder from beneath the house.

He leaned it against a pepper tree and went scrambling up, toward the dead, upper bole of the tree.

Bill Brannigan came softly from the house, with a sardonic smile, and stood in the shadows there. When Don Carlos slid down, relieved to find the cache safe, it was into Bills waiting arms.

"Let's ramble over the hill," Bill murmured. "You carry the cash. I'm tired."

There was a war on in the deep jungles of a Southern continent, with two American aviators waiting and waiting for wings to give them a chance against a wily foe. And when they unpacked the crates—they found they'd been shipped a racing plane, *a perfect lady, but no fighter*. Well, they made her one!

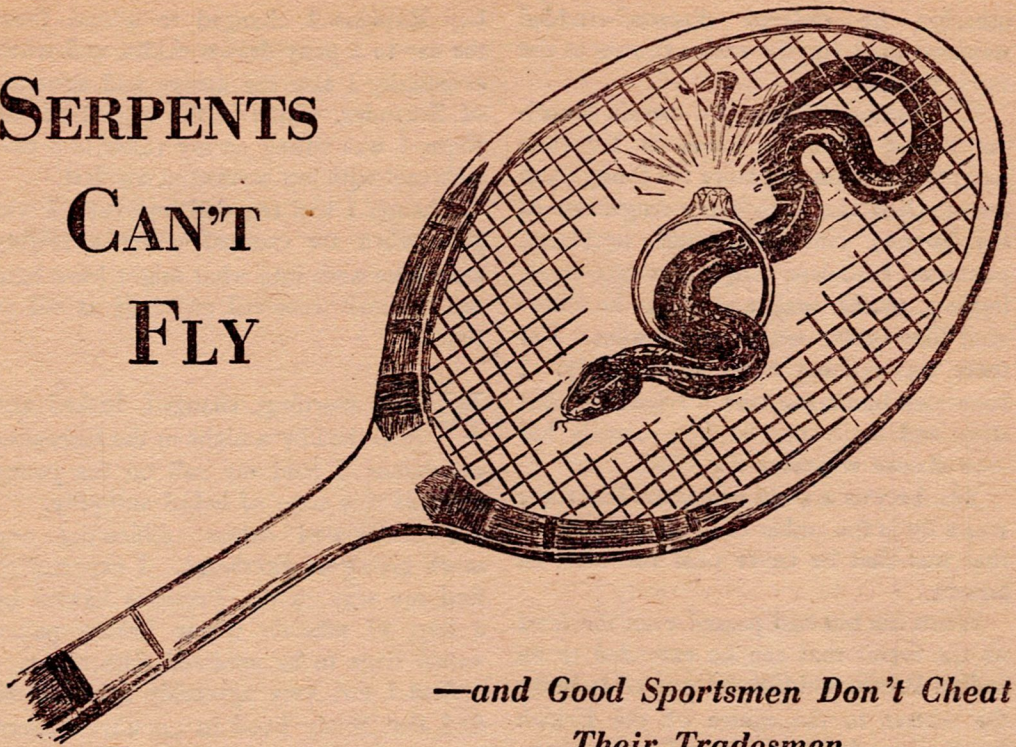
A MISTAKE IN CRATES

by Luke Short

In the next issue of **SHORT STORIES**

By GARNETT RADCLIFFE

SERPENTS CAN'T FLY



—and Good Sportsmen Don't Cheat
Their Tradesmen

SO His Royal Highness the Rajah of Sindapure, Prince of Islam, Ruler of the Red Cities, Knight of the British Empire and heaven alone knows what else is dead! I see in this morning's *Telegraph* he has been burned to death in a car smash on the Italian Riviera at the age of thirty-two.

He will be mourned in English sporting circles. Especially at Wimbledon. The centre court fans will remember him as a lithe sportsman who hailed victory and disaster with the same flashing smile. They will recall his leopard-like agility, his thin brown, braceleted arm that could out-smash Borotra, his unerring back-hand drives and his electrifying service. A great player who might have become a second Tilden had he had more time to devote to the game.

Even more than his tennis will they recall his charming personality. As long as tennis is played "Sindy" will be spoken of with affection as a great sportsman.

Well, I don't know. One doesn't like to knock a popular idol especially after he's dead, but I personally didn't feel any inclination to weep when I read that paragraph this morning.

What I remembered was how I was once his guest in his own Independent State in Central India and was there a witness of the hardest game he ever played.

And what I said to myself was, "Serpents can't fly."

I'll tell you the story even though it is in some respects against myself. At the time it happened I was a junior partner in the firm of Gabriel and Sage, Jewellers and Watchmakers of Calcutta.

We were the best and most expensive firm in that line in the Orient. If we hadn't been, Sindy, who was reputed to be the fourth richest prince in India, which is saying a lot, wouldn't have honored us with his patronage.

He was a good customer. Out and away the best customer we had. I remember the

occasion he ordered diamond-studded wrist watches for the entire chorus at the Paris Casino.

The Antelope diamond a certain beautiful Italian marquise wears in her tiara went to her from our store *via* Sindy. And we supplied him with every single one of the tie-pins, cuff-links, studs, necklaces, pendants, bracelets, rings, cigarette cases, lighters, pearls, seals and clocks he showered like sparks wherever he went. For there was nothing mean about Sindy. I have seen him come with a friend into our store and invite him or her—usually her—to choose whatever she liked.

Yes, he was a good customer. But there was a fly in the amber of his custom. And that was that he never paid for what he bought.

When his bill had passed even the limit of the credit that can be extended to an Indian Prince, old Gabriel wanted to bring the matter to the notice of the British Supervisor of the Sindapure Revenue, having been legally advised that was his only hope of getting the money.

I was against taking that extreme measure. You see at that time I shared the general opinion of Sindy. He was a good sportsman. And good sportsmen don't cheat their tradesmen.

Probably the delay in the settling of the bill was not Sindy's fault at all. He might have paid it several times over—and the money had gone to swell the banking account of some minor official in the treasury department.

And I urged old Gabriel to let me go to Sindapure that I might bring the matter to his own personal notice.

In the end old Gabriel agreed. I don't think it was my eloquence so much as his own knowledge that to dun an Indian Independent Ruler would be about as easy as to dun the Pope.

It was a long journey to Sindapure from Calcutta, made in descending degrees of comfort.

From my first class carriage in the Bom-

bay Express I changed to a car, from the car to a pony-drawn ekkha, and when eventually I saw the domes and minarets of Sutander, which is the capital of the State, I was sitting on my valise in a bullock cart with my servant at my feet.

Though I had traveled hopefully I was glad when we creaked under a mighty sandstone arch into what might have been the original "rose-red city half as old as time."

NEXT morning, changed, bathed and refreshed by a night in the European rest-house, I paid my call on the young ruler of this mass of baked antiquity.

I anticipated delays, difficulties and much giving of *baksheesh*. I expected to find my way to the Presence barred by a host of officials whose itching palms would have to be anointed with silver.

And I was very agreeably surprised to find that Sindy lived in an ultra-modern bungalow where all I had to do was to hand my card to a smiling major-domo.

And the major-domo didn't even have to usher me in the room where Sindy was. He came out himself, shook me by the hand, told me how glad he was to welcome an Englishman—I'm not sure that he didn't say another Englishman—in what he called this God-forsaken dustheap, and asked me if I'd rather have a gin swizzle, a chota peg or an iced lager.

A prince charming indeed! I decided the ultimatum Gabriel had told me to shove into his hand directly I saw him must wait. To have produced it then would have been boorish in the extreme.

At tiffin he asked me if I played tennis. And when I told him I did and had in fact been runner-up in the Calcutta tournament that year he cheered like a happy school-boy.

"What luck! You're just the chap I was longing for. You see I want some hard practice; my professional has gone ill and there's no one else in Sindapure knows one end of a racquet from the other. And

Brill—you've heard of Brill the American?—has challenged me to a return match."

I hadn't heard of Brill the American, but I was delighted to oblige. He lent me kit, and that evening we played singles until it was too dark to see.

If Sindy was hot stuff at Wimbledon, on his own court he was devastating. I could only take seven games off him in four sets although I was playing above my usual form.

As we walked back to the royal bungalow for a sundowner he consoled me for my defeat.

"Without boasting," he said, "I think I can say truthfully there aren't three players in the world could beat me on my own court. And," he added with a smile, "Mr. Brill is not one of them."

I WAS still at Sindapure when Brill arrived. Sindy had pressed me to stay. He'd been good enough to tell me he enjoyed having me there, that I gave him as good practice as his professional could have done and that if he beat Brill the credit would be mine.

As a further token of his regard he had given me a gold cigarette case, the property of Gabriel and Sage.

But that didn't matter. I'd shown him the account and he had promised to settle it.

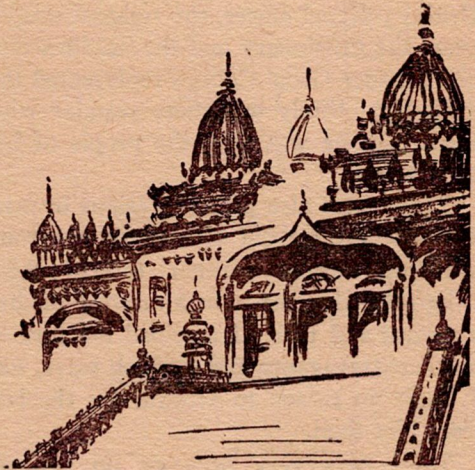
He'd been charmingly apologetic; that it had not been settled before he explained had been the fault of some minor secretary.

Anyway, he'd see to it immediately. In a month—certainly not more than a month—Gabriel and Sage would have his check. They would have had it on the dot only—as he explained with charming frankness—the taxes had not been collected yet, the priests wouldn't let him touch the temple treasures that were really his, and in consequence he was temporarily embarrassed for ready cash.

And I, forgetting what Lord Stafford is

reputed to have said on his way to the block, was quite satisfied to wait.

Brill didn't arrive as I had done in a bullock cart. If Sindy was a prince of the East, Brill was a prince of the West, his



father being in Wall Street. He arrived in the high-powered, single-seater monoplane in which he was touring India.

Which sounds as if he were a very grand person, but he wasn't. He was a simple, unaffected young man with sandy hair whose two passions were flying and playing tennis.

This match was the outcome of long standing rivalry between Sindy and himself. They had played against each other in California, at Cannes, at Wimbledon, Paris and Berlin. Sometimes one had triumphed, sometimes the other.

There was nothing in it. But Brill was as firmly convinced he could beat Sindy as Sindy was that he could beat Brill.

The year before Sindy had been Brill's conquerer in an open tournament at Cannes. And at the subsequent dinner Brill—I think he must have been flown with champagne—had backed himself to beat the Indian on any court in the world for a sum of five thousand pounds.

And Sindy had taken up the challenge provided the match was played at Sindapure.

And over and above the wager—despite

their apparent friendliness — I thought I could detect a strong feeling of personal rivalry between those two young men.

SUTANDER society such as it was turned up in force to see the game. The British political officer, the resident magistrate, the missionary and the headmistress of Sutander Girls' College represented the sahib-log. Sindy was more popular with them than he was with the people of his own race.

There were also present various brown-skinned Government officials in gorgeous uniforms, whose manner toward their ruler seemed to me to be a mixture of disapproval and fear. I ascribed the former to his extravagance and English ways, but I knew no reason to account for the latter. Not then.

There was very little or no betting. Sindy's victory seemed a foregone conclusion.

I, having given Brill several practice knocks to accustom him to the court, expected it myself. Although the American was a savagely powerful player, Sindy was faster, had better mastery of the ball and knew more of court strategy.

But I knew it would be no walk-over. Brill was in better physical condition and he struck me as a man who would fight to the last ounce.

It was a perfect tennis evening. The sun was in the right quarter and the court firm and even as a slab of red marble.

Sindy took the first set, six-two, without extending himself. He played with Brill as a matador plays with a bull. He was cool as a snake in running water, an epitome of grace and skill.

When they crossed over Brill looked tired and his shirt clung to his body. He must have run many miles trying to retrieve the Indian's beautifully placed shots.

It was to be a five-set match. The second was a repetition of the first except that Brill only got one game.

Again they crossed for the third. Sindy

was smiling as one who feels certain of victory.

He took the first four games of the third set in a row. It seemed as if all was over but the shouting. And then Brill did what he should have done long before — he changed his game.

He stopped trying to beat the Indian by the sheer force and fury of his shots. He stopped racing to the net for a kill and began to lob.

And then it was Sindy's turn to begin to send them out. He was one of those players who would far rather deal with a fast return than a slow. Those high, well-placed lobs seemed to disconcert him utterly.

Brill made it five-all. Then he lost his head for a moment and Sindy captured the eleventh. The next game was an interminable succession of deuce and van-tages, but Brill was now the cooler. He won it, and Sindy gave him the last by double-faulting twice.

The fourth set also went to Brill. He was playing now with machine-like accuracy. It must have been heart-breaking and infuriating for Sindy to find his most perfect shots lobbing back as if he were driving against a stone wall.

In the final set he lost his head a little. He became wild and Brill went to four love. And then Sindy made his supreme effort. He steadied himself and by sheer court wizardry evened the score.

He took the next and went to forty love in on one after. But Brill fought back and with the aid of a lucky net-shot took the game.

His temperament and physique had told. He took the next two games with comparative ease to run out a most worthy winner.

Sindy took defeat like a prince and a sportsman. He was laughing as he shook the American's hand across the net.

"The best man won," I heard him say.

All of which seems to show that the popular estimation of Sindy as a great sportsman was not far wrong.

But— Well, I happened to see Brill's body after he had crashed a few minutes after taking off from the *maidan* outside the walls of Sutander.

And the cause of death had certainly not been multiple injuries and shock as the Eurasian court physician declared.

Brill had been a dying man when his monoplane had nose-dived into the jungle from a thousand feet. And what had killed him had been the bites of at least four *kraits*.

And since *kraits* cannot fly they must have been concealed in the plane before he took off.

Beyond doubt Brill was foully murdered, and the Eurasian doctor had had instructions he was not to notice the little red dots in purplish rings on the dead man's hand and arm.

I noticed them, and I kept my own counsel and cleared out of Sindapure with all speed.

Queer devil, Sindy! He didn't mean to pay that five thousand pounds to Brill any more than he meant to settle our bill.

Now that he's dead himself I suppose his executors will settle the account—and I hope that Brill will have a chance of settling his.

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WHEN, to an adventure that is thrilling enough, in all conscience — if by thrilling is meant terrifying — is added the unintentional saving of one from a horrible death by a would-be thief and potential assassin, well— But let me tell the story.

I had been spending a couple of weeks with my old friend David Trask. Dave raises horses—polo ponies—and during the season runs a dude ranch in Deaf Smith County, about forty miles southwest of Amarillo, Texas. Dave's brand, suggested by his initials, is the Diamond T, but throughout that section his spread is known as the D.T.'s., or more briefly as the Delirium outfit.

Deciding to go into Amarillo one day, I saddled up one of Dave's horses and was just about to mount when a Mexican who worked on the place came up and started to admire a belt I was wearing. It was just the thing to catch the eye of a Mex—snake skin, with a double row of silver dollars and a line of turquoises down the center. The buckle was a beautiful example of the silversmith's art—chased and inlaid with gold. It had been given me by a friend in Hollywood, whose success in Western rôles in pictures had brought it to him as a gift from one of his many fans. Ordinarily it reposed in my bag, but today I had donned it for my trip to town.

The man finally ventured to ask if the Senor would consider selling the belt? The Senor decidedly would not—and couched

his refusal in terms perhaps unnecessarily strong—for there was something about the fellow I just didn't like. However, he took the rebuff civilly enough, though there was an ugly look on his far from prepossessing face as I rode away.

Forty miles plus may be okay with some he-men, but a little over half that distance constitutes a day for me. I had started rather late, knowing I would sleep out in any case, and about five-thirty decided to call it a day. I had come straight across country, partly because it was more direct, but mainly because I thus avoided meeting automobiles. The horse I was riding was a good one, but he had two faults—he'd shy at cars and, if turned loose, would vamoose for home pronto. The first of these failings I'd already catered to, by avoiding the road. The second I proceeded to nullify by tethering him with the lariat that hung from the saddle. I'd watered him a short time back at a spring we passed, and now gave him the feed I'd brought. Dave fed his stock regularly—said grass was not enough for polo mounts in training. Then I proceeded to light a fire and make camp.

As I'd brought a liberal supply of sandwiches and a thermos full of coffee, I was saved the chore of making flapjacks and frying bacon—as I'd have to do if I'd made the trip some forty years ago. So the fire was rather a concession to cheerfulness than the satisfying of any real need, though it does get chilly toward morning in that country.

About eight-thirty, I banked up the fire

with a green log, pulled on the heavy canvas jacket I'd carried strapped behind my saddle, wrapped myself in the blanket, I'd brought with me and with my saddle blanket for a mattress, turned in. I must have dropped off almost at once, and slept soundly until disturbed by a dream. In my dream it seemed the horse had broken loose and instead of starting for home, he came and put a fore foot on my chest.

Finally I forced myself to wake. As I started to raise my head, I suddenly froze—this time with real terror, not the imaginary fear of a dream. Not a foot from my face was the ugly flat head of one of the biggest rattlesnakes I have ever seen. Chilled by the night air, the reptile had crawled up on my body for warmth, and it was its coiled weight on my chest that had induced the dream.

I'd heard of the same thing happening to others—indeed, Dave had told me of a friend of his who had had a similar experience, and who had been saved by a companion, who shot the snake's head off.

But here was I—with no friend to help out. The snake was evidently sluggish from the cold, but still alert enough to strike at my slightest movement.

What was I to do? Probably if I remained quiet, the snake would leave of its own accord when the sun had warmed it. But judging by the stars, sunrise was some hours away, and I knew I'd never last out. I simply can't express my utter terror.

Suppose I sneezed? At the thought, I seemed to feel premonitory symptoms. God in heaven, what was I to do? True, the snake had lowered its head and ap-

parently had gone back to sleep, lulled by the warmth of my body, but I knew that at my least movement it would be wide awake.

I think I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew there was a wild scream and the sound of wildly stamping feet. The weight was gone from my chest, my blanket was pulled aside. I sprang up. The snake had disappeared, and rapidly retreating in the distance was a figure that even by the faint light of the stars I recognized as that of the Mexican who had been so interested in my belt.

With the dawn I confirmed this, for some ten feet from where I had been sleeping, I found a knife, evidently dropped as he fled, and a hundred yards away was a hat, also evidently dropped. Both of these articles were later identified as having belonged to him.

Apparently the man had followed me with the intention of stealing the belt as I slept, had disturbed the snake when he tried to pull the blanket aside and had been struck. That was how I doped it out later—a good deal later. At the time, all I could do was to be violently sick, and it was hours after sunrise before I was able to mount and head for the Diamond T.

What happened to the Mexican I never learned. He didn't show up at the ranch, but as I never heard of anyone finding his body, I presume the snake bite did not prove fatal.

The implication of the dropped knife was just an added bit of horror.

W. T. Stead.

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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.

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE



Background

"IT'S a heap safer to have your head tore clean off than to have yo' face mashed in."

Well, that was Badger's opinion—and many people don't want to lose face at that. We feel that we'd lose face if we didn't have a Caddo Cameron serial for our readers every now and again, so we are proud to commence in this issue, "Ghosts on the Range To-Night." In connection with the story, Mr. Cameron writes us this very interesting letter:

Old Fort Griffin died before I was born. Accordingly, I gathered material for this story from the memoirs of those who knew her when she was the so-called Dodge City of the southern buffalo range, or from personal contact with them.

It so happens that very few of the men who lived in the Old West of the Sixties and Seventies have ever become successful writers of popular fiction. This unfortunate situation is mainly attributable, I believe, to something I call "factitis." They saw, heard, and experienced the very things that we fictioneers employ in weaving our yarns—facts; but, in their case those facts are so fixed in form, time and place as to prevent the oldsters from adapting them to the requirements of fiction as we do. They may turn out a fine narrative of exciting events and find that it has no appeal to the tastes of a fiction reader.

Having the foregoing in mind, I sometimes feel like a horse-thief when I take the experiences of others and from them

fabricate a story that sells. Of course, we fiction writers buy their books—sometimes rare and expensive items, dig through libraries, old court-house records, newspaper files, travel hundreds of miles to talk to them and to visit the locale of our yarn, and frequently one story will contain material drawn from many different sources. Regardless of all that, I still feel like a horse-thief when I think that some of the old pioneers who wrote those narratives for which they received little or nothing, could have used the money they would've earned had they been able to weave their facts into fiction.

The least I can do is to mention some of the sources from which I have gained such knowledge of Fort Griffin and environs as was used in the building of this story; but I can't begin to cover the ground, for, as a boy born in the heart of the buffalo range ten years after they were killed off, I often listened to the reminiscences of men who took part in the slaughter.

There were my father and grandfather who freighted supplies and hides, and later hauled bones to railroad shipping points. There is Harvey Herron, son of Marshal Herron of Old Fort Griffin, who took me over the townsite and pointed out the location of many of the interesting establishments; and told me some good stories, too. There is J. Marvin Hunter and his *Frontier Times*, each an encyclopedia of frontier lore; Stuart N. Lake's excellent life of Wyatt Earp; the writings of Edgar Rye, John R. Cook, Olive K. Dixon—wife of one of the greatest hunt-

ers, J. Frank Dobie, Roscoe Logue, Colonels Wheeler and Crimmins and Dodge, Floyd B. Streeter, J. Evetts Haley, and many others whom I do not now recall: also various articles and memoirs in publications, of historical societies, notably West Texas and Panhandle Plains societies.

Having confessed that what little I know about Old Fort Griffin and the buffalo range was acquired from others, I feel better; and I do hope you like my story, regardless.

Caddo Cameron

Those Curioddities

WITH this issue of **SHORT STORIES** we introduce you to a new feature—Curioddities by Weill. He is an interesting person this Weill—studied art at Pratt Institute Art Students League; got a scholarship with Naum L. Los, professor of the Royal Italian Academy; and worked at illustration under the eminent illustrator, Harvery Dunn. He came to call on **SHORT STORIES** with a portfolio under his arm, and some facts about head hunters at his fingertips. He tells us that he turned from portrait painting to illustration and was a staff artist for eight years with the American Museum of Natural History. There Mr. Weill worked on various exhibits for the Department of Anthropology's "Hall of Man." It was his interest in the remarkable feats of Nature that led to the beginning of "Curioddities"—which will bring you pictures and facts about many queer things and beasts.

About the head hunters? Well, Mr. Weill remarked that his last chance actually to come in touch with them was an opportunity to visit the Jivaro tribe in South America—their popular pastime is the shrinking of human heads to about the size of tennis balls—but that he decided to get married instead. So of late his exploring has been more of an indoor variety, but some shrunken heads will

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"The Happy Hungarian"

NEIL MARTIN

A long novelette of a stirring voyage from Africa

"First Command"

And other favorites in our May 25th issue out May 10th

surely appear in his page in **SHORT STORIES**.

We hope you like "Curioddities"—some good ones are lined up for the future. If you have any to suggest, let us have them—we'll see if Mr. Weill can draw them.

Dog Derbies

FROM the general direction of the great Northwest, there came to our office a story of the North—Reece Hague's "Beef Hearts for Huskies" in this issue. We are glad to have Mr. Reece join the Circle, and here's a letter from him:

How I happened to find myself in Northern Manitoba managing Canada's dog-racing classic—the 200 mile non-stop Derby at The Pas—still remains somewhat of a mystery. Six months before, I had been organizing a commercial publicity campaign in London, England, for the Australian government. A few months before that I had been serving with the Australian army in France and a year or so before that I had been a youthful newspaper man in the Antipodes with no idea of stepping beyond the bounds of my native island continent.

However, I suppose all newspaper men like to ramble if the opportunity occurs, and having had a taste of France and England it isn't altogether surprising that North America seemed the logical next stop; and after London I presume the barren wastes of the Hudson Bay area appeared to offer something rather attractive in the way of contrasts.

In any event I found myself in The Pas in the summer of 1919 and for the next few years busily occupied myself in participating in gold rushes—where someone else always succeeded in getting the gold and I had to be satisfied with accumulating the frost bites—and handling Canada's major dog racing classic during the winter months when prospecting was suspended on account of snow conditions.

As was only natural, I drifted back to

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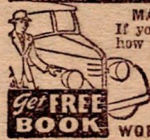
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Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	\$2.15	1.05	\$1.75	30x3 1/2	\$2.55	1.25	30x4 1/4	\$3.45	\$1.45
29x4.50-20	2.25	1.05	1.75	31x3 1/2	2.95	1.25	31x4 1/2	3.45	1.45
30x4.60-21	2.40	1.15	1.85	32x4	3.25	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
28x4.75-19	2.15	1.25	1.85	34x4	3.95	1.25	30x5	3.75	1.75
29x4.75-20	2.20	1.25	1.85	32x4 1/4	3.35	1.45	32x5	3.95	1.75
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.25	1.85						
30x5.00-20	2.65	1.25	1.85						
6.25-17	2.00	1.35							
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.30							
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35	30x5	\$4.25	\$1.95	\$2.17	\$10.95	\$4.65	
30x5.25-20	3.05	1.35	30x5	4.25	2.25	32x7	10.95	4.65	
31x5.25-21	3.15	1.35	34x5	4.25	2.25	30x8	11.45	4.95	
5.60-17	2.50	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
28x5.50-18	2.55	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
29x5.50-19	2.65	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
6.00-17	2.60	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
31x6.00-19	3.50	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
32x6.00-20	3.60	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
33x6.00-21	3.70	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
34x6.00-22	3.80	1.40	32x6	3.95	2.25	30x8	13.25	4.95	
6.00-18	3.75	1.45				3.75-20	13.95	6.45	

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 (High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x8	\$10.95	\$4.65	32x7	10.95	4.65
30x8	11.45	4.95	30x8	13.25	4.95
30x8	13.25	4.95			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x8	\$3.75	\$1.65	30x20	\$6.95	\$3.75
30x8	4.45	1.95	32x20	6.95	3.65
30x8	5.95	2.95	30x20	6.95	3.65
30x8	6.75	3.25	30x20	6.95	3.65

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Australia a few years later to get myself thoroughly thawed out; but North America seemed to have got into my blood and by 1930 I was back once more on this continent. Since 1931 I have ambled over a great part of the Canadian Pacific Coast area from Vancouver to the Alaska-British Columbia Boundary.

I have in this period visited and written about a great many mines and prospects for a wide range of publications; for writing facts on mining has become my principal occupation, with a little fiction once in a while when fact seemed too monotonous.

I still harbor a sneaking hope that some day I may stumble over a gold-bearing lead myself before the nations of the world decide that gold will in future be regarded merely as a more or less satisfactory medium for filling dental cavities and not as a monetary standard.

However, up to the present every time I have encountered anything that looked like a mine it has always already had posts on it that bore some name other than Reece Hague.

Reece H. Hague

From the Beginning

BEFORE our 50th anniversary number was published, we asked if any reader could say that he'd been with us from the first issue. We wish we had had this letter to print in the anniversary issue, but it reached us too late:

The Editor,
 SHORT STORIES,
 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City.

We have never subscribed to SHORT STORIES, but have bought every issue, beginning with Number 1—wouldn't miss it for the world. I buy the magazine from newsstands, because I am a superintendent of construction—steel machinery—and never know where I'll be by the next issue.

M. L. Allen

Brimfield, Mass.

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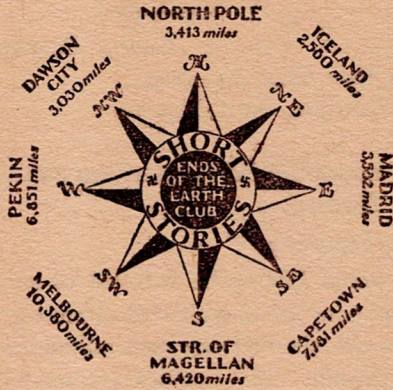
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Thinks we're "horky-dorky."

Dear Secretary:

During the past month I have read a lot of your SHORT STORIES magazines and I do really think they are horky dorky and I found your club just about perfect, so much so that I would like to join if I may.

I am eighteen years young and would like pen pals in all foreign countries and, what is more, I promise to answer every single letter I receive; no matter if I receive a hundred.

So please all you guys and gals in foreign countries, won't you write nice long letters and make a lonely member's life just a little brighter.

Till I hear from you all, I remain

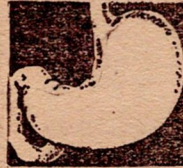
Yours sincerely,

Pat Healy

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Dear Secretary:

Please! If you can find the space in one of your issues, print this appeal for pen pals. I am twenty years old. Will answer all letters and cards.

Sincerely,
George Economy

1300 East Gold Avenue,
Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Paging the Pan American countries and Hawaii.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to be enrolled as a member of your nationwide club. I am eighteen years old, six feet one inch tall and weigh 165 pounds. My hobbies are model airplanes and science-fiction. I build the former and read and in a small way, write for the latter.

I am a freshman at the University of Miami and am interested in science and photography. My home is in Miami, Florida, and I would like to correspond with anyone in Pan American countries and Hawaiian Islands. All other correspondents will, of course, be more than welcome.

Sincerely yours,
Charles W. J. Whiteshield

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