

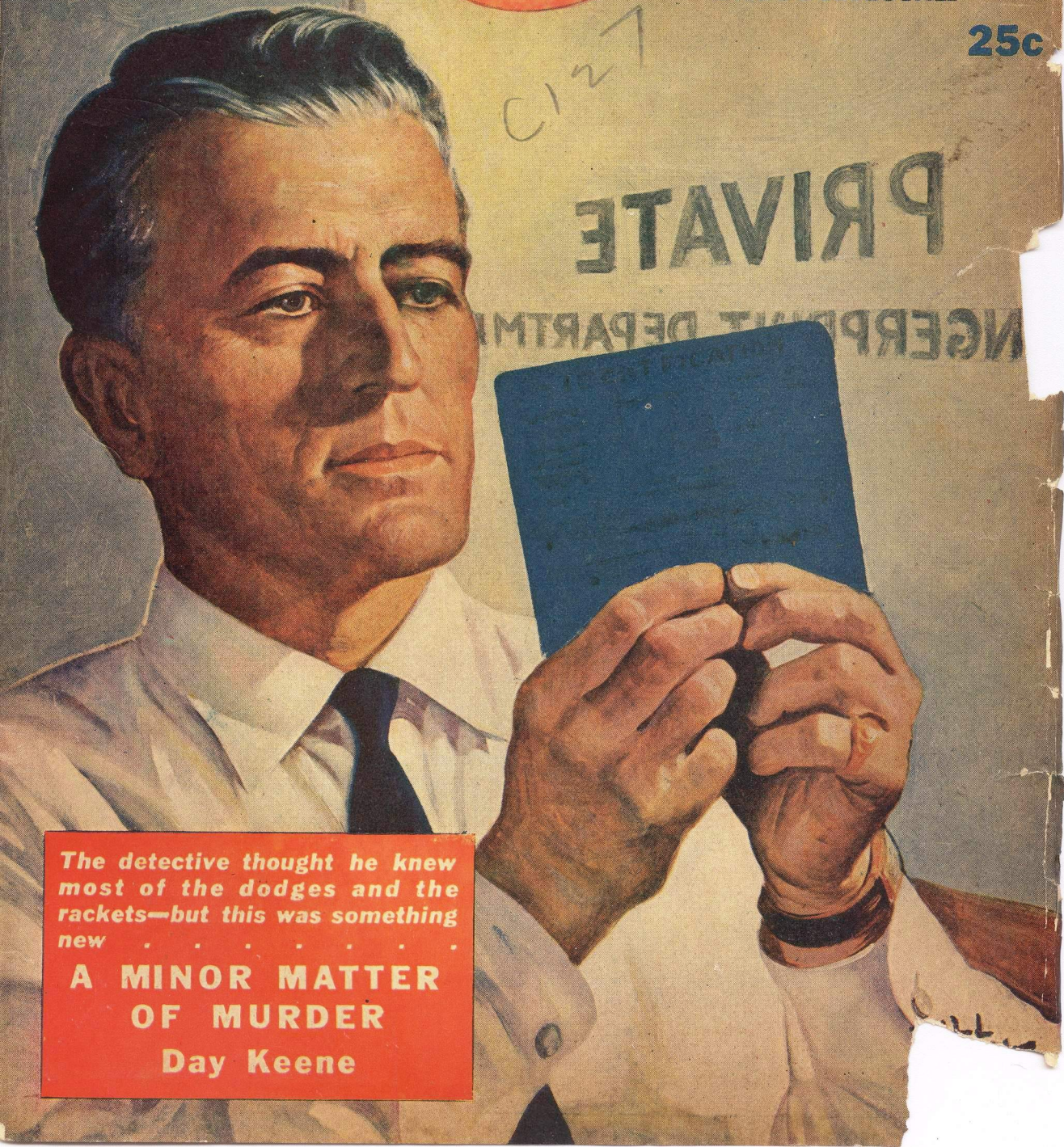
"High Country"—where desolate wind-eroded pinnacles sent back unexpected atomic echoes—by H. BEDFORD-JONES

Short Stories

December 25th

Twice A Month

25c



The detective thought he knew most of the dodges and the rackets—but this was something new

**A MINOR MATTER
OF MURDER**

Day Keene

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THE

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OF

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THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

4

HIGH COUNTRY

(Complete Novel)

H. Bedford-Jones 10

*Atomic Echoes Sound from Wind-Eroded Pinnacles and
Bleak Waterless Hills. Experimental Areas Are
Dangerous Areas, and It Is Well to be Alert*

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D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

December 25th, 1945

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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.

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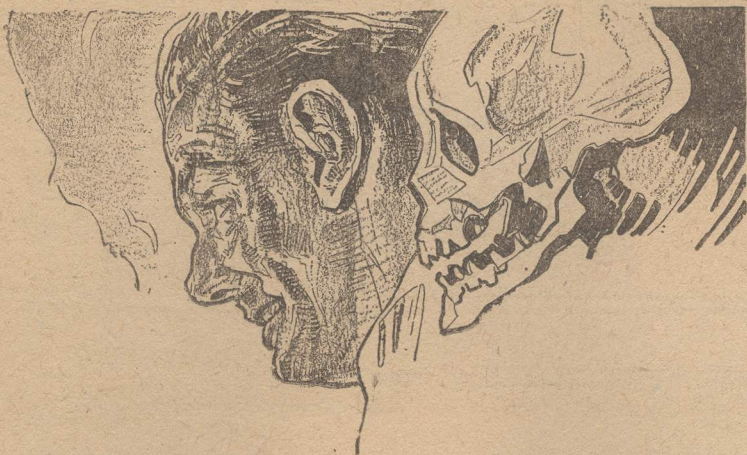
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AUTHOR'S
FINEST
AND
LATEST
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REPRINTS

The Story Tellers' Circle



Minor Matters About Murder

DAY KEENE, who has moved his base of operations from the Gulf of Mexico to California, has the following points of interest apropos of his "Minor Matter of Murder" in this issue.

Incidentally, all his current thinking and writing, Day tells us, is done to the accompaniment of "four carpenters banging over my head as they remodel this 'jernt.' And I find myself attempting to calculate what each thud of the hammers are knocking off the old bank balance."

At least you're getting the work done, sez us, which is something in these days of shortages in men and building materials, when, again according to Day Keene, "one almost has to serve an eight-course breakfast with an obligato by Guy Lombardo to get them to work at all!"

"But from carpentry to crime and his story, Day comments:

"Re 'A Minor Matter of Murder.' Picked the 'missing soldier' in this one straight out of the daily papers. Hardly a day goes by without some family being able to rejoice over some one near and dear to them showing up as a prisoner of war. The tragic part, to me, is that each case inspires hope in other hearts, hope that is almost certain

to be unfulfilled. On the other hand I recall reading of a soldier reported missing in action who turned up as an amnesia case some twenty-three years later. There is a saying that where there is life there is hope. I believe that could well be turned around to read 'while there is hope there is life.' Because a person near and dear to us is never really gone unless we think them so.

"While the 'missing' boy in 'A Minor Matter of Murder' is incidental to the main plot or story, I believe it does suggest how the past catastrophe has, in one form or another, reached into all of our lives, and will continue to do so for years. There just can't be another."

Day Keene

Ends of the Earth Club Sets Up Shop Again

OUR Ends of the Earth Club was a war casualty, the War Department having asked periodicals to discontinue correspondence clubs—unknown strangers were to be discouraged from writing to people in the armed services. Now, however, we can print club news and letters again. You will find some on page 8 and from time to time we shall be printing others as space permits, as well as names and addresses of readers who have hobbies in common, who want to

(Concluded on page 8)

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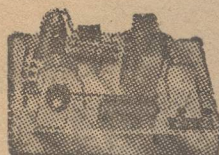


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The Story Tellers' Circle

(Concluded from page 4)

exchange news and views and follow other activities of the club members.

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outfit ...\$100

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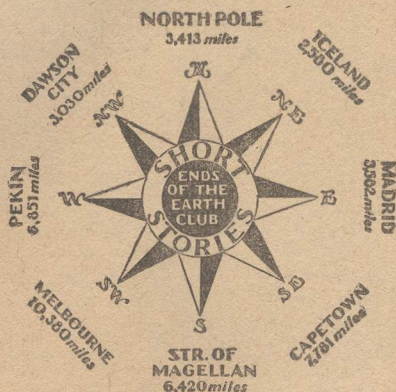
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Raymond S. Spears

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(Concluded on page 137)

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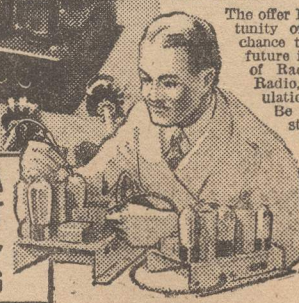
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HIGH COUNTRY

By H. BEDFORD-JONES



I

LOOK at Johnny Devine, now—tall, raw-boned, straight-eyed, with a lift in his step and a lurking twinkle in his thin lip-corners, and a whipcord pull in those long arms that would astonish you.

What did you do in the war, Johnny? The hell with it; save it for the papers, he would reply, and left it at that. This was no answer, as he knew in his heart, for there were echoes that would outlast all questions, but he did not expect to run into such big echoes that morning he got the Tres Piñones call, especially atomic bomb echoes.

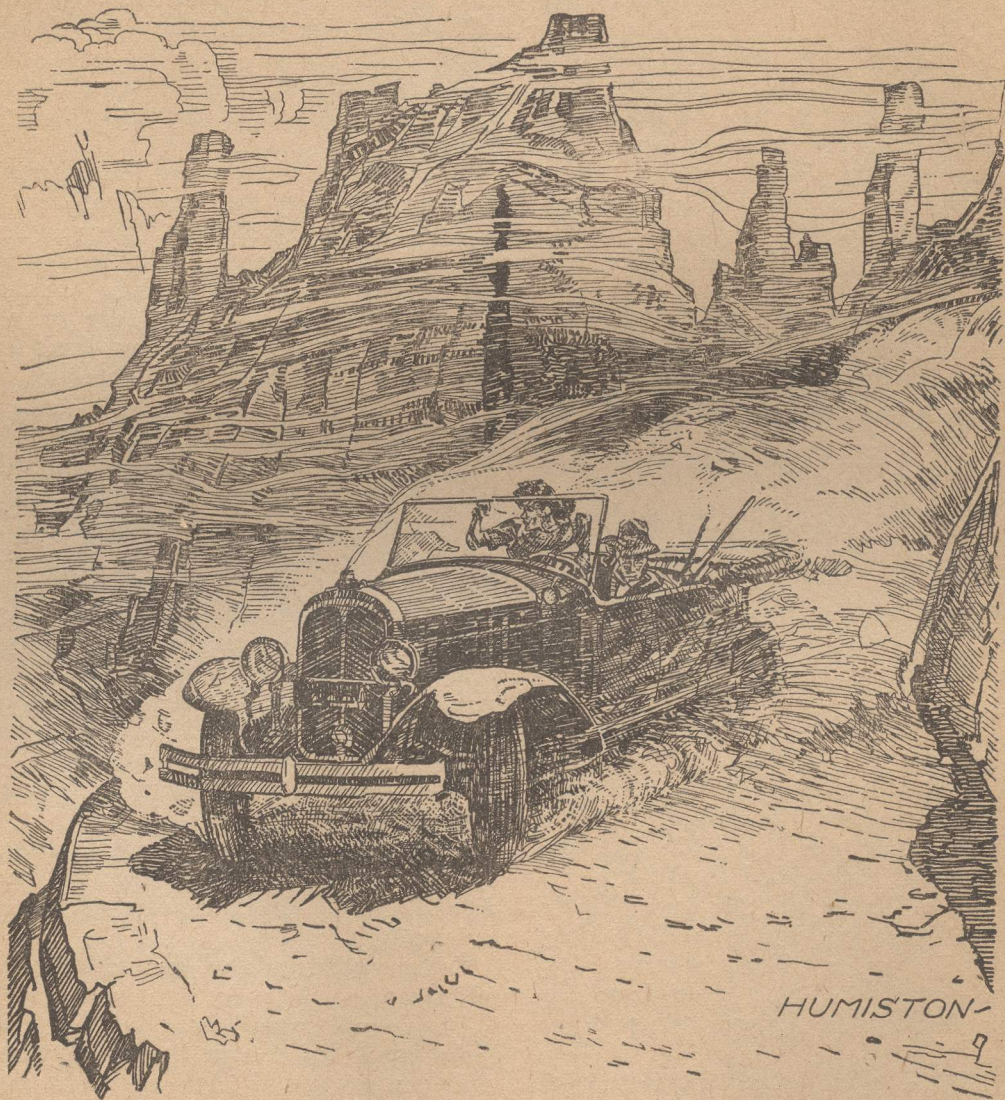
He left the garage in charge of Mike, who was competent to handle all comers, and drove off in the trouble-shooting repair

coupe. He was quite cheerful, as usual; the garage was making money, he was planning to get a new car agency, and the future looked good as it often does. Recently as the war had ended, its memories were already dying out.

Tres Piñones was eighteen miles away, in the higher country. As he drove up the Green Cañon road, he was thinking, not too hard, about that girl over in Las Vegas. She was interesting, certainly, but Devine could not quite convince himself that he was in love. Actually, he found this southwest country far more interesting. Ever since he had been stationed at Camp Percival he had promise himself that he would return here after the war and settle down. Now he had done it.

Green Cañon fascinated him, with its desolate wind-eroded pinnacles and bleak

*It's Quite a Picnic When They Carry Guns in the Lunch
Basket—and Atomic Echoes Are All Around*



waterless hills, as he headed up for the mesa beyond. Tres Piñones was a railroad water stop, little more, but there were dude ranches in the vicinity and the hills around were dotted with luxury-camps of wealthy folk who sought the bright winter sunshine. These were usually serviced and supplied from Morgantown, twenty-odd miles north. The car that was broken down lay this side of Tres Piñones.

"Some day, I'll have a place over there where the money lies," Devine told himself as he emerged from the upper cañon

to the mesa upland. "Meantime, I'm doing all right. Good dividends in a distance call like this, too."

He would not have left the desert country on a bet, just now. He loved its hot dryness, the brilliant sunlight, the electric tang in the air even when it was blistering. Still, the high country was mighty fine, with its green hills and trout streams; a man might do worse. It depended partly on human contacts. Johnny Devine, who had left all his contacts back in Jersey, was content to make haste slowly. He was mak-

ing money and was not pestered by the urge to shift too rapidly. He had shifted from Germany to Okinawa, which was plenty.

The call had come from Bill Edwards' filling station and chow house five miles this side of Tres Piñones. As Devine approached across the flat mesa, whose only horizon was the sky, the filling station came into focus and he saw the car standing beside the pumps. A luxury car, big and black and powerful, of pre-war vintage.

Bill Edwards was putting oil and water in the car when Devine drew up, halted and jumped out with cheery greeting.

"High, Bill! Here we are. Is this the wreck?"

"Hello, Johnny. Nope, the wreck is inside, laying down.

"What's the big idea?" Devine stared. "Getting me away up here for nothing—"

"Don't start beating your gums, Johnny. The guy is laid out; altitude got him. He'll pay well to be driven to where he's going. I can't leave; my wife's sick, I'm alone here."

"Oh!" said Devine, comprehending. He walked into the building.

The man was lying on the old couch under the tire-rack. He nodded to Devine. He had bright eyes in a white face, was well dressed, and looked about forty.

"You're Devine, eh? My name's Carter. I heard what you just said; don't blame you." He spoke without moving. "My heart's given out. I must be driven to Horton's place at once. Set your own price."

DEVINE asked where Horton's place was. Carter informed him; one of those luxury cabins in the hills. Devine set his price and made it a good one. Carter, without rising, produced a stout roll of bills and peeled off the cash; he peeled off another bill to pay Bill Edwards, and asked no change.

"Gimme an arm into the car, will you?" he said.

Devine complied; the man was all skin and bone, apparently. Devine wanted to grab a cup of java at the counter but Carter dissented. There were sandwiches and coffee in the car, he said. He got placed comfortably in the big back seat, a rug

drawn over him to the eyes, and Devine climbed under the wheel. A wave of the hand to Bill, and they were off.

"I suppose you were in the war?" Carter asked.

Devine grimaced. "No. I was taking a course at Oxford when the incident happened."

True enough, in a way; he had enjoyed a six-weeks' course there, anyhow.

"I didn't ask for sarcasm," snapped the man behind. "Stop at the top of this grade and we'll have a bite and a sup. On the seat beside you is a briefcase. Take care of it at all costs; if anyone stops us, don't let them get it. Horton must have it today."

DEVINE had noticed the leather case, almost flat. He investigated the seat and found it moveable, and slid it back a notch to give his long legs more room.

"If anyone stops us!" Not likely, he thought, with a sniff. The endless brown country had no life. At the top of the long grade he could see on ahead. Nothing moved, except the heat-shimmer. He pulled out of the road and stopped. Carter made an effort, pulled himself up, and looked down at the empty front seat.

"It's gone!" he exclaimed sharply. "Where is it?"

Devine chuckled and pointed down. "Under the seat. Put it on the floor and slide it under. Nobody would ever suspect or look there."

Carter sighed, relaxed and seated himself again.

"You're all right," he said. "In this basket you'll find thermos bottles and grub. Will you get it out? Any movement sort of gets me."

No conversation was made; both men were hungry. The sandwiches were good, the coffee was better. Carter indicated a carton of cigarettes and told Devine to help himself, which he did, then broke the silence.

"Horton's my lawyer. He's a bang-up lawyer, too, on his vacation just now. I feel pretty shaky, and there's more altitude ahead; if I blackout, just leave me alone and get there. Minnie Horton will know what to do; she was a nurse. Savvy?"

Devine nodded. "Okay. I forgot something. How do I get back?"

"One of them will drive you back to your car."

Carter leaned back and closed his eyes; he was not garrulous. Devine sent the powerful car whirring up the long road toward the hills that opened ahead. Up there it would be a seven thousand foot altitude; the engine told him they were climbing all the time.

A rum go, he told himself. Why was Carter alone, in such condition? On the lam, perhaps, running to his mouthpiece? Maybe. Hard to say. Anything was possible in this cockeyed world—even here out of the world. The old car was a beauty; it made his heart sing to rev her up thus, between road and sky!

But ahead, the highway ended and he must take to dirt roads. He neared the turnout and glanced around; Carter seemed asleep, and he made the swing gently and was away on a rising yellow road that bored in among low hills, higher ones beyond, crowned with trees. No more speed; the curves became acute and must be negotiated with care, since there was barely room for two vehicles to pass.

Devine passed a couple of turnouts, and knew he must be within two or three miles of his destination. He drew the air deeply into his gratified lungs; these pine-clad heights were very different from the desert mesa they had left far behind! An instant later, however, he caught his breath with a gasp and stepped on the brake hard.

The road-block was tiny but efficient—a ditch six inches deep dug across the yellow road. On either side a man came out into view; both men were armed with rifles, and the weapons were levelled. A third man stepped forth, waving his hand.

"Take it easy," he said, quite unnecessarily, and came forward to the side of the car. A massive, roughly dressed man with rocky features and hard, glittering eyes that flicked over the car and bored into Devine.

"Well?" said the latter coolly. "What's the meaning of this?"

THE big fellow looked in at the open window. Devine glanced around. Carter lay with eyes closed, breathing heavily; he had passed out.

"Playing possum, is he?" came the response. "Who are you? Talk fast."

"You're nuts," said Devine. "The altitude got his heart and I was employed to drive him where he's going. Who the devil are you?"

"Jess Gorham," said the big man amiably. "Carter's up to his old tricks, eh? Well, young feller, you hop out and you won't be hurt. Hop out!" He turned as he spoke and waved his hand. "Come on, boys! This is it."

Devine scowled. "Listen, whoever you are—is this a holdup? You're not setting me afoot if I know it."

An automatic was thrust up at him and over it glittered Gorham's eyes.

"I said you won't get hurt. Act foolish and you will. We don't want you; we want him. Hop out and walk across the road and stay there till we're done; then you can take the car and go where you like. Move!"

The safety catch was pressed off, the automatic was alive. Devine pushed open the car door and got out. The two men with rifles were approaching the car. He wisely did as ordered, walked across the road, and stood there watching.

The whole thing was crazy; it did not make sense. The three conferred briefly, then Carter was hauled out of the car, still unconscious. Two of the men lifted him away in among the trees. After a moment they returned, shaking their heads. The three fell to work at the car.

Two suitcases were taken out, then they went through everything. The leader, Gorham, struck Devine as being distinctly bad medicine; the other two were ordinary rascals. What puzzled him was his inability to place them. Neither clothes nor speech indicated them as local inhabitants; certainly they were not dude ranchers. He tried to catch what they said but could not, but he had the notion that they were not talking English. Spanish, perhaps? He could not say.

They searched the car rapidly. Devine understood that they must be looking for the briefcase, thanks to Carter's words. It was not turned up. Then Gorham came over to him, and the other two, with the grips, went back among the trees.

"You can pull out in five minutes," said Gorham. Now Devine sensed a faint trace of accent, or fancied it. "Carter's staying with us. You're going to Horton's place?"

"Carter was going there," said Devine. "I expect I'd better deliver the car with news of him. You know that kidnapping carries the death penalty."

Gorham laughed silently. "Don't be a dumbhead. You tell Horton I said to come across with what belongs to me, or he'll be next; and any police interference will be very bad luck for him. That's all."

He turned and strode away. Dumbhead! That sounded foreign, too; for the moment, Devine could not place the word at all, but somehow it had a familiar ring. Gorham had not spoken with bluster, but with a cold, steely flatness that showed he meant his words literally.

Devine went over to the car, which was in considerable disorder. He did not look under the front seat; he had no need. He straightened things up a bit, then got under the wheel. As he did so, he heard the thrum of a car starting, somewhere nearby. So Gorham and his friends had their own car among the trees!

He started the engine, drove into the road, passed the ditch slowly, and quickened speed. He had to watch now for the turnout marked with Horton's name; the house would be a quarter-mile off the road.

"I've done my job. Wasn't my business to protect Carter; I'd have needed a machine gun," he reflected. "Horton gets the briefcase and the message, and drives me back to my car, and I'm done. No police interference, eh? The whole thing looks screwy, if you ask me."

Nobody, at the moment, asked him; but, in point of fact, as yet he hadn't seen nothing. Nothing!

II

HE TURNED into Horton's short, curving road. The place was fenced in with wire, and before he had gone fifty yards, he was halted by a State trooper sitting his bike in the middle of the road.

"Name and business," said the trooper.

"Message from a Mr. Carter to a Mr. Horton," said Devine curtly.

"Go ahead," said the trooper, removing himself.

Devine drove on, reflecting that the cop was placed where, unseen, he could see the road entrance. More funny business.

The house came into sight, and astonished him with its size. It was large, sprawling along the hillside, and was built of logs. Garage and stables stood close by. It must have cost a small fortune, he thought. The road looped around; he made the turn, headed the car for the return trip, and halted it. Then he got out and looked for the briefcase. In order to retrieve it, he was forced to slide out the front seat entirely; there it lay, a plain leather case stamped with no name, apparently empty. He picked it up and worked the seat back into place.

"You'd better bring it up here," said a voice.

He looked up, saw a young woman standing on the log porch, and waved a hand.

"Coming." He started for the porch. She spoke again.

"You're not Mr. Carter. Where is he?"

"Detained en route," said Devine. "I'm looking for Mr. Horton."

"So am I," she rejoined. "I'm his daughter, Minnie Horton. He drove out two hours ago to meet Mr. Carter. Didn't you see him?"

Devine stood on the top step, looking at her, and it was no waste of time. She wore khaki blouse and skirt; she was dark, trim, efficient and despite a worried gaze had a charming dimple at the corner of her mouth.

"There wasn't a car on the road anywhere," he said, and caught the flicker of alarm in her eye. "Why didn't he take that cop along with him?"

"He was afraid for the place. For me." She held out her hand. "I'll take that."

"Nope. For Mr. Horton, said Carter. That's funny! Only one road—hm! Maybe Gorham got him, too."

She made a helpless gesture. "You'd better sit down and talk—fast."

Wicker rockers stood on the porch. She took one, Devine another; he gave his name and told how he came to be here. She listened without a word, but her dark eyes were eloquent, and flashed again as he told of the meeting with Jess Gorham, and what had happened to Carter. But her anxiety, he thought, was stilled.

"I see," she said, when he had finished. "Then you didn't come from Morgantown; that explains it. Father thought you would

come that way. He must have gone there."

He nodded. "Maybe. I wouldn't know."

From within the house came the insistent reiteration of a telephone ringing. She rose.

"Wait—no, come along. That must be father calling."

Devine followed her into a big room garish with Indian rugs. A phone stood on a table and she picked it up. He lighted a cigarette and waited. She broke into a laugh.

"Oh, good! I thought it would be you. Mr. Carter's car came—his driver said they hadn't sighted you. No, from Tres Piñones. That explains it—what? No, just the driver. Mr. Carter was taken off by some men, on the way here. The driver brought his briefcase and won't give it to me. Says it is for you only."

She broke off, listening. Her eyes went to Devine. She beckoned him.

"Will you speak to my father, please?"

Devine nodded, took the phone, and answered. A harsh voice barked at him.

"I'm Horton; my daughter vouches for me. Will you let her look at the contents of that briefcase?"

"Oh, sure," said Devine.

"Do it, then. Was Carter hurt?"

"I think not. He had blacked out—his heart."

"The blasted fool! You don't know who the men were?"

"One Jess Gorham was the boss. Sounded foreign, somehow; a very bad actor."

"Huh. I thought so. All right, put my daughter on."

DEVINE complied, but first gave Gorham's message about the police. Minnie Horton took over, accepted the briefcase from him, and slid it open. There was nothing inside except an envelope addressed to Horton. She so reported, then, evidently on demand, opened the envelope and drew out a check. Devine looked down at it and caught his breath. It was a cashier's check, issued by a St. Louis bank, for three hundred thousand dollars—and it was payable to Bearer.

"Worse fool than I thought him," came Horton's voice. "Now we're in for it. All right."

"Tell this man to stay. Send the cop away—no use now. I'll be back before sun-

set. Better tell that cop to come over here and escort me back—"

Devine moved away, not wishing to eavesdrop on the conversation. He smoked, looking about the luxuriously rough big room. No lack of comforts here, evidently; Horton must be a bigshot lawyer, because a place like this spelled money. Hm! Three hundred thousand—and payable to Bearer! No wonder Gorham had wanted that check—

She hung up, and faced him. "Did you hear what he said? You'll stay till he gets back? Better still until morning."

Devine lifted an eyebrow. "Not on orders, Miss Horton."

"Oh!" Her dark eyes warmed a trifle.

"Will you, please?"

"With pleasure."

"Then I'll get rid of that cop. Make yourself comfortable."

He took the envelope and check from her, slid them into the briefcase again, and she was gone—out to the porch and the road below. Devine laid the briefcase on the table and took a chair. His garage shirt and jeans were, at least, clean.

He was, quite naturally, curious. Anyone who would buy a check of that size made out to Bearer should have his head examined. This affair seemed to be an odd mixture of police, lawyers and crooks; it made no sense.

"But this Minnie Horton—she's really something," he told himself emphatically. "I'd better stick around, sure. She's not the kind to be mixed up in a mess with crooks. Gorham was one if I ever saw one."

He rose, walked about the room, looked at the bright pictures by Indian artists, and caught sight of something standing in the corner half behind a curtain. It was a Marine rapid-fire carbine and the magazine was loaded; he examined it with interest.

"You seem to know your way around with it," she said.

He looked up, grinning cheerfully. "You sure sneak up on a guy. Yeah, I ought to; could take it apart in the dark, you bet."

"It belonged to my brother. I left him on Okinawa."

"You left him? Not likely. Oh!" he checked himself. "That's right. Carter said you'd been a nurse. Well, never mind; I haven't sprouted gray whiskers yet."

Her eyes were half puzzled, half laughing, as he replaced the carbine.

"What have whiskers got to do with it?"

"With me. I took a vow, cross my heart and hope to die, I'm never going to open my face about it until I've got long gray whiskers and a couple of grandchildren to scramble over my knee."

"What on earth are you driving at? About what?"

"That thing they called a war," said Devine, and chuckled. "This is a nice place. I like it. This is the sort of place I'm going to have for my own, some day. But you must get mighty lonesome, here by yourself. I take it the house is empty. D'you think that's wise?"

SHE took a chair, lighted a cigarette, surveyed him for a moment and then yielded to the twinkle that had carried Johnny Devine past many an icy barrier.

"Not just at present, certainly," she replied. "We came here in order to meet and talk with Carter. He's a client."

"So he inferred. Hm!" Devine frowned. "That fellow Gorham—dumbhead, he called me. The word's vaguely familiar, in an odd way."

"It ought to be, if ever you heard much German spoken."

"Oh-oh!" Devine stiffened slightly. "I believe you've hit it! German, sure! How come?"

Smiling a little, she shook her head at him. "I don't see any whiskers."

"Meaning what?"

"It's one of the things you're sworn not to mention, Mr. Devine."

"I'd feel more natural if you'd make it Johnny, just to be formal."

"Johnny Devine? A nice name. It trips off the tongue. I suppose you're just dying to ask questions?"

"So you can be happy giving the answers? I never said so. But you came a long ways to meet with a guy who had to bust his heartstrings getting here. It's all cockeyed."

She nodded. "Sure. We thought this was the safest place of all, I mean for Carter, and it turned out just the opposite. We came for only two or three days, and now look at us!"

"I am. It's very easy. I've missed a lot," Devine said gravely. "But if I'm not

leaving till morning, I'd better put away that car, since it's blocking the drive."

"While you're doing it, I'll mix a drink." She rose. "We've a room ready for Mr. Carter, so you can occupy it. I doubt if he'll be along. But—Johnny!"

"Yes?" On his way to the door, he paused.

"We won't mention the war; that's all over."

"So they say. Seems to have left a lot of echoes, though."

"That's the word; echoes! The greatest thing in all history is bound to leave echoes, good and bad. This affair of Carter's is a very big one, in a way." She was speaking seriously, even earnestly. "And we're not sure where it will end."

Devine nodded. "Echoes die away if you don't stir 'em up with another holler. See you in a jiffy."

He went out, thoughtfully, to the car in the drive. An echo of the war? Three hundred thousand dollars was no slouch of an echo, as she had just said. Once he got the full story, it might make sense, but at present it did not. Carter could be held up, robbed, kidnapped, and nothing done about it—why?

Having put the car out of the way, Devine came back into the house, to find cool iced drinks waiting and Minnie Horton thumbing over a fatly folded blueprint map. She found what she wanted and opened it.

"Ever hear of the Casa Escondida?" she asked casually.

"Hidden House? No. What is it—hello, wait! I have heard of it, too," exclaimed Devine. "Somewhere over in the back country. An Injun cliff-dwelling or something of that kind, eh?"

She nodded. "Correct. No one knows much about it. A prospector looking for tellurium ore found it during the war and reported it. He went back there and never returned. It's a bad bit of country, impossible for a car. This is a government hydrographic chart."

Devine fingered his drink, watching her. "So what?" he asked. She tapped the map.

"Nobody is aware of it generally, but there's a road within ten miles of it," she said. "Army-built, during the war; very hush-hush stuff. It ran to where some

atomic bomb experiments were being made. All over now, of course, and the road's disused, since it leads nowhere. But we could reach it by car and follow it to Cañon Escondido, as the spot is marked on the map, and take the last ten miles afoot."

"We?" repeated Devine? She smiled at him and sipped her drink.

"I certainly wouldn't take that trip alone. Father can't take it at all; he's lame. But you and I could do it handily, I think."

"Why?"

SHE cocked an eye at him. "You're good at one-word questions, aren't you? Well, I'm just thinking out loud, Johnny. Naturally, those atomic bomb investigators picked the most desolate, hidden, unknown back-country spot they could find. So might others."

"Oh!" said he, and wondered. "Meaning you and me? The prospect would be alluring, but not with atomic bombs in mine. I'm not having any of those babies, thanks. I saw what they did in Japan; it was plenty. If you want to go somewhere, pick a spot that's got hot-dog stands and picture shows."

She paid small attention to his words but went on, musingly.

"That experimental area is still under guard, I hear, but Cañon Escondido is well this side of there. Hm! You know, those atomic bombs are part of the biggest thing that ever happened, and lots of people who shouldn't might be very much interested in them. I'd not be a bit surprised if the men who grabbed Mr. Carter might not be there, somewhere."

Devine said nothing. She was aiming at something definite, he perceived, and he gave strict attention as she went on speaking.

"You know that before the war, Germans or German agents were everywhere, even here in the Southwest. Plenty of our Nazi prisoners were thoroughly acquainted with all sections of this country—not necessarily as spies, either, but as scientists. They spoke English fluently. Some of those agents were not even Germans. Eh?"

"Conceded," Devine said cautiously. "So far, no argument."

"There might still be something to be learned from the experimental areas, here

and elsewhere," she mused. "That's probably why they're still guarded. Let's go on to another fact. Not all our Nazi prisoners were sent back to Germany. Some had escaped. Others were freed with the peace. Some of their agents here were not even suspected."

"Might be," Devine assented, conscious now of keenly awakened interest.

"Take another fact. The Germans made desperate efforts to plant their money outside of Germany, and a good many managed to do it, in Switzerland and elsewhere. Now, if some of those Nazis could get to this country and settle down here—and if they could get hold of their planted loot—they'd be nicely fixed, wouldn't they?"

"Sure." Devine nodded. "But that isn't possible; international money transactions are watched too carefully."

Minnie Horton broke into a laugh, finished her drink, and rose.

"I've dangled a lot of strings before your eyes, Johnny Devine; maybe you can pull them all together—later on. May I sweeten your drink—no? Then I'll get supper started. You make yourself at home; no help needed, thanks."

She departed.

Devine smoked thoughtfully, startled and alerted by her remarks. With the return of peace, war-time restrictions of all sorts had gone by the board. It was quite possible that many an ex-Nazi might be at large here in the United States; there was nothing to fear from any such, of course. As to their money—hell's bells! He sat up suddenly. Could she have been referring to that three hundred thousand grand? Jess Gorman and his dumb-head expletive—was the fellow a German?

"Boy! Have I stepped into something sweet, or haven't I?" he asked himself. "She wasn't trying to snow me; she was laying out facts, and they meant something. Sounds real fantastic and absurd, but who knows? That atomic bomb business—ugh! Still, Germans and Russians were working on that, too. Even if we've got the thing locked up, scientists of all sorts will still be working on it for the next thousand years. Hm! Let's see that map."

He reached for the folded map, which lay where Minnie Horton had left it, and opened it up.

Some search was necessary before he located the road she had mentioned; this was no more than pencilled in with dots and led to the experimental area described, also marked by pencil-dots, comprising the huge, desolate, waterless region about the Skeleton Hills.

A rough third of the way along the dotted road to this area, he finally discovered vaguely indicated hills, marked: "Escondido or Salispuedes?" Hidden, or Get Out If You Can, he translated. The cañon in question would lie about there, then; the map was frankly uncertain.

Devine studied the chart thoughtfully. It was absurd to think that he would go chasing off on such a trip, even to accompany this very charming creature; he had work to do back at the garage, a living to earn. Yet, figuring the distances, it looked like only fifty miles to where the car must be abandoned, if it were a question of exploring Cañon Escondido.

"Echoes of the war, my eye!" he reflected. "I don't want any atomic bomb echoes, if that's what's up. Not even to please Minnie Horton. Not at any price. Let somebody else have 'em."

He scowled, as he heard Minnie Horton singing while she set the dining-room table. No dark-eyed beauty was going to run him into a mess like that—no, sir! Johnny Devine had too much sense.

TWENTY minutes later Horton came home. After that, Johnny Devine hung on hard to his good resolutions with both hands; but he finally had to let go. Much as he might have hated the admission, the dark-eyed baby had too much on the ball.

Horton was a pleasant man who walked with a limp and a stick. He was brisk and Big Business all over, from his hard-hitting dark eyes to his pepper-and-salt suit. Devine liked him at first sight—but, equally at first sight, was aware of something he did not like and could not put his finger on. Irresolution, perhaps. He was to learn quickly enough what it was, though at first it puzzled him.

The three sat around a cold supper. Devine told his story and gave the message from Jess Gorham. After that, Horton talked for a while, with the air of having appraised Devine and knowing exactly

what he was after. He had an extremely positive manner.

"I'm going to put you to work, Devine. The situation demands prompt action, there's no time to get any of my own men here, and this bad leg puts me out of it. First let me give you the picture. Carter is a client of mine. He's a go-between for some former Nazis, now loose in this country. His business was to get hold of their money, cached abroad, and get it for them here. He's done it."

"The three hundred thousand?" queried Devine. Horton nodded.

"That's only part of it—a mere bite out of it. They got the idea that he was gyping them; maybe he was. Anyone acting for gangsters has the same temptation. Things got so he was afraid for his life. He made an appointment with me here, thinking it would be safe—but evidently they found out about it. They have spies."

"Why didn't he have sense enough to stick that check in the mail?"

"Oh, he didn't come to deliver it; that was incidental. He had to confer with me. He wanted to turn those guys in and be done with it. I agreed. He had to discuss with me how it could be done safely. There's the picture in a general way. Now, to judge from Gorham's message, they want that money or they'll get after me. Unfortunately, I'm vulnerable."

"Are you letting those yellow-bellied thugs get away with it?"

Horton bit at a cigar; he had the grace to flush.

"They're more than thugs, Devine. Smart men, scientists and so forth, not mere war criminals; it took brains to get where they now are. I never imagined they'd be around here so our rendezvous must have leaked. They want their money; that's natural. My job, now, is to save my client Carter from them, if possible, also to protect myself. I'll turn over every cent Carter has paid me, gladly, to get rid of the whole thing—and turn them into the F.B.I. into the bargain, if possible. But I'll have to negotiate with them, gain a bit of time—and I can't go where they are, with my bad leg. They won't come to me."

"Why not?" struck in Devine. "They came where Carter was, today. And how does your daughter, here, know where they

are? If she knows and you know, why not let the F.B.I. know and end the matter?"

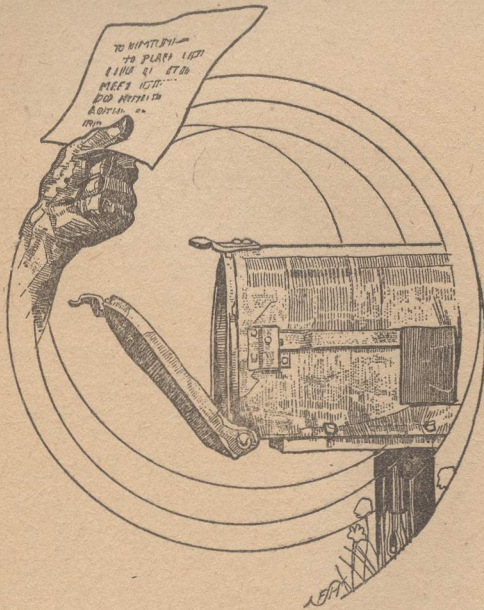
Horton nodded, as to reasonable questions.

"We'd not find them; they have spies everywhere. They're here today, gone tomorrow. I found word in my mail-box today, advising me to meet them at the Casa Escondida. Took quite a while to figure out where that is."

Devine surveyed his host with mingled feelings. Probably, he thought, Horton was honest enough in wanting to turn in Gorcham's outfit, but—

"How many in the gang?"

"I imagine a very few, just the cream of the crop, from what Carter has said. They have no business being in this country, of course; the government will be delighted to deal with them, but it's no ordinary police matter, as you can see. I must parley with them, first, on Carter's behalf; second, with a view to saving my own neck and also turning them in. Minnie can do this for me. They'd trust no one else. So, you go along to protect her."



"You're an optimist," said Devine. Horton was assuredly not a man to despise, but waked no enthusiasm in him. He could see the man had simply got into too deep water, was unable to deal with the sort of thing that threatened him, and was panicky.

"Why do you think I'm taking any part

in this nonsense? I've got a job of my own to look after."

"You're willing to earn money, aren't you? I'll pay you well."

"Hell! You city folks from back east think money is the end of all creation! You think it'll buy anything. And you'd let your daughter—"

"I'll speak for myself, Johnny," broke in the girl, a spark in her eye. "I offered to do this, and I can do it. And you're going along for two reasons. First, because father will pay well. Second, because I ask you to go."

"Why ask me?"

"Because I want you along."

Devine met her gaze and fancied he read in it unuttered things—things that stilled his arguments and protests. He could check off Horton as being a somewhat weak sister; the daughter was far different. She was no product of city business; she could do things on her own, had been an army nurse, knew her way around among men.

AT THIS moment the telephone in the front room rang. Horton went to answer it. The girl spoke quickly, softly.

"What's in your mind?"

"Huh!" grunted Devine. "I've no notion to let a gang of dirty outcast Nazi gangsters run circles around me!"

"Neither have I," she said. "I'm thinking of my brother, back on Okinawa. I had an idea you and I might think the same way about a few things, Johnny."

"Oh!" he said, startled and a little delighted. "Oh! By gosh! I get you, baby."

"Hope so." She leaned back, as Horton returned.

"Okay, Mr. Horton," Devine said. "I'll go."

"Splendid! That's fine! Just one thing—you must be very careful, you know. Don't do anything foolish. Don't lose your head."

Devine, from a corner of his eye, saw the girl's lips twitch slightly, and nodded.

"Oh, yeah; that's right," he said solemnly. "I'm always careful, sir. I wouldn't want to get into any trouble, not for anything at all."

Horton perceived no sarcasm in this, and beamed.

"Very well, then, we understand one an-

other. Minnie will represent me; you'll see to it that she's protected—"

"What'll I do if the gang starts to shoot-in? Just whistle?"

"No, no, nothing like that will happen. After all, these fellows are basically all right—inclined to be desperate, of course, to save themselves—"

"I never knew Nazis to be basically anything that I could say in front of a lady," put in Devine. "But have it your own way. You're giving the orders."

"That's the stuff. You'd better get off early, then." Horton turned to the girl. "My dear, I'll put the negotiations into your hands. Take my car in the morning; take Carter's check—it will serve to release him from their clutches. Make what arrangements seem best to you for a future contact with this Gorham—secretly, of course with the idea of having him and his friends laid by the heels, you understand."

"I understand, all right," she said, and Devine read in her voice what was lost on the other man. He could have hugged himself. He could have hugged her, too.

III

CARTER'S big car was left behind, and Devine drove Horton's agile runabout. He and Minnie got away early, after a sunrise breakfast. Even with a clear run of fifty miles ahead, Johnny Devine wasted no time in getting down to brass tacks.

"You come clean, sister," he said, almost before they were out of sight of the house. "You didn't get me into this mess just to play marbles. I saw you slide those guns into the lunch basket when we were packing things. Open up."

The girl beside him laughed. "All right. You don't think father is very forceful, do you?"

"Back of a city desk, I expect he is. Right now he's nervous as hell. And he didn't mention any atomic bomb business."

"That's my own bright little idea, Johnny. One of the men with Gorham, as he's now known, is a German scientist named Vogel. He was working at Bornholm on atomic experiments when V E Day intervened. It occurred to me that this gang might be here for some definite purpose, and not by accident."

"Might be," agreed Devine. "With that experimental area so close, yes. But you're packing along two guns. That doesn't tally with your dad's plea for caution and more caution, does it?"

"Father can't play this game," she rejoined. "You can. So can I. He knows that he's up against a gang of desperate rats. His idea is to holler for the cops. He's all right, but old-fashioned. Let George do it, is his motto."

Devine chuckled. "I get you, sister. He's right about one thing; this bunch of rats are smart guys. I'd say they must be tops, with quite an organization behind them."

"I've gathered as much from hearing Mr. Carter talk," she assented. "And, between you and me, I think he's about as bad as they are. I've no sympathy for him. From your story, I infer that Gorham and his friends must be comfortably settled; for instance, they passed up the big hamper of food in your car, yesterday, so they must have plenty on hand."

"Head of the class, little brighteyes. Further, they had a car of their own. And they were not afraid to let your dad know where to meet up with them."

"But that doesn't say they're camped in Cañon Escondido. For one thing, there's no water anywhere in that district. That's why it's so little known."

"Cañons were formed by water; therefore water might be found. Well, you've cleared up things a good deal. And you can bet I aim to be mighty careful, too—up to a certain point. If things go all right, let 'em stay that way."

"Right; we're agreed," she said. "But they may go wrong, in which case I'll be glad to have you along, rather than some cautious soul."

"Gal, when it's a question of my neck, nobody can be more cautious than Johnny Devine! Any guy who has been shot at by Krauts and Ringtails both, can say as much with truth. So bear down heavy on that. But if a rat bites my hand, I aim to make him pay for his bite, and pay quick. And now we can enjoy the scenery."

They struck into the main highway that would take them to the branching dirt road farther north, and made speed.

With every uncertainty ahead, the car was loaded with canteens, bottled water, food,

blankets; the big lunch-basket alone would last them for a couple of days if need were. Devine had thrown in the M-1 carbine at the last minute as a general precaution. He was uneasily conscious that Gorham and his friends were efficient men, and now that he knew who they were, and what, he was by no means sure of the wisdom of this trip. However, it was not his affair, and he had to make the best of things.

They came to Morgantown, a small but prosperous town, and here Minnie demanded a brief halt at the Western Union office. They resumed the road once more and it took them into the hills. Unexpectedly, they came upon the Army-built dirt road leading away toward the badlands and the desolate Skeleton Hills; it was still barred off, with signs prohibiting its use, but guards were no longer stationed here as in the past.

Devine got out, examined the spot, and came back with a nod.

"We can get around okay. Another car has done so—Gorham's, no doubt. Sit tight."

THEY bumped their way across rough ground, swung into the dirt road, and were off anew. Fifteen minutes later, all other signs of civilization were gone, and before them stretched the prophetic vistas of what they would find farther on—desolate volcanic slopes, black reaches of old lava beds, pallid sulphur bottoms.

"I can't take your atomic investigation thing very seriously," observed Devine. "That area's been abandoned for a long time."

"It's just a hunch," she admitted. "They might hope to learn things from the soil, or from the scene of the experiments. Like picking up clues where a murder took place."

"Maybe. Anyhow, the whole thing makes better sense than it did at first. You know, if they left word where to meet 'em, they'll have the road watched. Anyone can be seen coming for miles in this country. D'you know where to look for this Cañon Escondido?"

"No more than you."

Rough as it was, this dirt road was little short of a miracle; the terrain was frightful. The thought of fighting afoot for ten

miles over a jumble of lava and sulphur sinks and cactus was not joyful. Devine was keeping his eyes open, and well that he was; he braked suddenly, halted the car, then backed.

Nothing was in sight, the hills around were bare and empty. Halting the car again, he pointed off to the right.

"Look past that big bunch of cactus—to the left of it."

The ground descended from the road in a black smother of basalt and lava, into a dip; at the farther end of this dip, which was overgrown with cactus, appeared an abrupt wall—the side of a lava stream cooled a million years ago. There, neatly out of sight and revealed only by the track it had made through the cactus, was a car.

"All out," said Devine. "Better leave our bus in plain sight. Here's where we take to shank's mare, sister—I guess we can pick up their trail."

The car was parked off the road, and now began load-making; with this, the presumed ten miles to Casa Escondida looked more like a thousand. Young as the morning was, the sun was already blistering. Canteens and blankets were simple; the lunch-basket, weighted down with its two automatic pistols, was something else. Devine finally roped it on like a knapsack. The carbine he tucked under the front seat of the car and left.

"Two canteens each is a hell of a load, but necessary," he said, with a sigh. "Well, not so bad as combat kit at that. Ready? Our base is well supplied with everything, and we can always come back for more—maybe. All aboard for the mountains!"

Minnie Horton bore her share of the load, and, he noted, voiced no complaints. At this point, the shimmering hills opened and spread out, a couple of miles away; where to head for was a question. The ground was rough in the extreme and there were no trails of any sort. After searching for half an hour, they picked up signs where others had passed—a broken cactus, a cigarette butt, the scrape of boots.

Devine sighted back to the cars; then on ahead. The line pointed in between two hill-slopes.

"Might as well head there," he said. "Those slopes might widen out from a cañon, sure enough—it's all a mass of hills

up beyond. We can't hope to follow their trail—at least, I can't. How does it strike you?"

"Lead on," she replied cheerfully. "Looks okay to me."

SO BEGAN a march to be remembered, across atrocious ground that was all ups and downs. It improved as they approached the hills; the sun, also, mounted higher. With the veteran's reflection that the first time over bad terrain is always the worst, Devine plodded along doggedly. The discovery of a number of small scraps of paper delighted him tremendously, indicating they were on the right track. Farther on, more scraps appeared.

"Carter must have done that," said Minnie Horton. Devine shook his head.

"Nope. They'd catch on in no time. More likely, Gorham left it as a trail, knowing your dad would be along or send some one. Well, we're heading right, that's a comfort, even if there's no sign of a cañon."

"It wouldn't be called Hidden Cañon for nothing," she declared. "Look! Ahead and to the left—see that spot of color?"

Devine sighted a faint red dot against the hillside, and could not understand it, but they made for it none the less. The naked, sun-refracting rock masses were all in a jumble, losing their regular lines at close approach. The valley into which they had entered could be seen for miles ahead, and certainly was not narrowing into any cañon.

Noon had come and gone. They made a cheerless halt in the shadeless waste, opened the lunch basket and made a meal of a few sandwiches, washed down with water from the canteens in scanty gulps; after a cigarette, they went on toward the red dot.

This had obviously been left as a marker; the rock underfoot gave no sign of any footprints or faintest trail. When Minnie, with pardonable vexation, declared that the only sane way of getting here was by air, Devine laughed.

"No use beating your gums, sister; others have done it, we can do it. And that thing looks like a red bandanna, yonder. Bet you it marks the entrance to the cañon!"

Cheered by this hope, they quickened pace, struck a patch of sand, and sighted

undoubted foot-marks. A bandanna indeed, tied to a cactus, the red dot proved to be precisely what Devine had guessed. An opening showed among the rocks; without the marker they would never have sighted it. The opening widened. It was the outlet of a small cañon piercing into the hills. It remained narrow, but the walls on either side became higher.

There was not the least sign of any rainy-season water on the cañon floor, nor did any green thing show along the high rocky walls; all was cheerless, colorless, sun-blasted. With the breeze shut out down here, it was an inferno of oven-like heat. Tangles of cactus grew here, nothing else.

Devine, in the lead, quickened pace anxiously. He had long since learned that the desert sun held far less danger than did mere heat; to get "overhet" meant collapse. This, however, was certainly their goal, for a way had been hacked through the cactus, which towered overhead, and gave a clear path to follow. Also, the cañon was ascending and would probably be more bearable ahead.

Suddenly aware that he was alone, he halted, spoke, had no reply, and turned back. He came upon Minnie Horton sunk on one knee, a hand reaching down to hold herself up, her features suffused with blood.

"Sorry," she murmured. "It—it's the heat—"

As he reached her, she went to pieces and lay with eyes closed.

Devine knelt beside her. He worked fast, wetting his handkerchief recklessly, dabbing her face and neck, pouring more water over her head; then with his hat he began to fan her with long, powerful strokes. Clumping steps sounded on the stones; he was not surprised when, looking up, he saw a man approach from up-cañon.

"You picked a poor time to come," said the man. "You should come through here in the cool of the day or at night. Oh, it's you!"

Devine recognized one of the men who had been with Gorham the previous day, a young, big-nosed, hard-eyed man.

"Came to see Gorham, on behalf of Horton," he rejoined. The other nodded.

"Thought so. I'm Hans—Black," he said, pausing slightly before the last name,

which was evidently assumed. Germans were not named Black. "The lady is coming around; I'll give you a hand with her. Farther up there's a breeze and she'll find it fine at the camp. Down here, the hillsides around make it like a bake-oven."

Minnie Horton stirred, opened her eyes, and with Devine's aid got to her feet. Black took her other arm. She was groggy, but made progress. The wet handkerchief at her throat was dry as a bone in two minutes. Devine realized that he himself was in pretty bad shape, but he kept at it with savage resolve. That Hans "Black" was an outpost guard, was quite obvious. Indeed, the man now said as much.

"We weren't expecting anyone quite so soon," he said, in his perfect English. They had halted; Devine was wetting the handkerchief again, dabbing at the girl's forehead. She took it from him and with a word of thanks continued the dabbing herself.

"I can get along now," she said, more steadily. Her flush had departed. "It just got me under for a minute—"

"Then I'll go on outside and remove the marker," said Black. "If you'll just keep going straight ahead, you'll find the worst of the heat is over; you can't miss the camp. You'd better lie down when you get there, miss."

Apparently he was not armed, but Devine took note of the bulge under his shirt. He turned and left them, going back toward the cañon entrance.

"All right," she said briefly, and struck out in advance. The path had become well marked now and the air was distinctly better. Devine followed her closely, but she showed no further need of assistance and his alarm decreased. When, presently, she stopped to rest, Devine gave her a drink, and she even forced a smile.

"Thanks. You look rather done up yourself, Johnny. Queer, isn't it—how casual it all seems? That man and his pleasant manner."

"Too pleasant," said Devine. "We're in for it."

"Let's get on, then. I'm still dizzy." She paused, eyeing him. "You look worried."

"I'm scared as hell. I wish we hadn't come. I don't like it. Something in the look of that guy Black—well, it got me.

He's sure of himself. I'm awful homesick."

"Quicker we get it over the better, then," said she, and started on.

JOHNNY DEVINE followed. He was not joking; there was a real scare inside him, almost a panic. Why, was impossible to say. He could feel something eerie and terrible, that sent a lump in his throat and a prickle along his spine—same as going into a sniper-ridden patch of jungle. All nerves, he told himself angrily, and tried to shake off the feeling, and could not.

Perhaps, without being aware of it, he had glimpsed the black object ahead and from it had received a subconscious shock.

After a little, he did catch sight of it swinging there, hanging from a big jutting rock across the cañon and turning in the breeze. He crowded up alongside Minnie Horton so as to hide her view of it, and took her arm.

"Hey! Watch that cactus ahead and to the left—see it?" he exclaimed. "Thought I saw something move there. . . ."

She watched, intently. He kept her in hand, playing her so that she would not look at the thing across the cañon. There was nothing in the cactus clump and he knew it. When they had passed it, he did sight the Casa Escondida, ahead and high up; he kept her attention fastened on it. Holes in the rock, big open-faced holes, a cliff-dwelling from ancient days, with a zig-zag path that crawled up toward them. It was something to see, sure enough. And while they looked, the thing opposite them fell behind and was gone from sight.

Devine knew what it was, swinging and turning there. His stolen glimpses had shown him the bound hands, the long gangling figure, the convulsed features, of the man who only yesterday had employed him.

Carter had been hanged and left swinging as a hint to others that his captors meant business.

IV

MINNIE HORTON was close to collapse again when the camp appeared.

Two tents of some size were stretched. Jess Gorham and another man sat playing

cards under the shade of a tarpaulin propped on poles; a campfire smoked close by. As the visitors appeared, the two men leaped up.

"Hello, Gorham," said Devine. "Black sent us along. Miss Horton went under with the heat, back there. Any place she can rest for a bit?"

As he spoke, he was getting rid of Minnie's load and his own—blankets, basket, canteens—and dumping them together. Gorham, his massive rock-like features changing from surprise and suspicion to quick comprehension, ducked his head to the girl.

"Oh—Miss Horton, eh? We weren't looking for anyone to come along until later. Yes, of course; the lady can have a tent all to herself. It's cooler up in the Casa, but she might find it hard work getting up. This way, Miss. Your canteens are pretty hot—get some cool water, Morris—"

The two men bustled about with swift geniality and polite concern which astonished Devine; all was matter of fact, even casual, where he had anticipated covert hostility at the very least. The opened tent showed itself neat as a pin, cots made up and clean. When Minnie Horton had dropped with a sigh of relief, water was placed handily for her and the flaps lowered again; leaving her to privacy, Gorham and Morris rejoined Devine in the shade of the tarpaulin. Gorham came to him and passed a hand over his garments.

"After what happened yesterday," he said dryly, "I wouldn't be wearing a gun."

Gorham grinned. "Okay, relax," he said. "How does it happen you and she came? We were expecting Horton."

"He's lame and couldn't make the trip. His daughter can speak for him."

"Hm! Didn't know that," said Gorham, and exchanged a glance with Morris. "Else we might have tried to see him yesterday."

Free of his loads, Devine stretched out on the hard ground and lit a cigarette. The other two shoved their cards away and eyed him.

"Let's not pretend, boys," he said. "My job was to come along with Miss Horton and look after her. I don't think she saw Carter, but I did. He didn't hang himself."

"He did, in a way," said Morris, gravely. He was young, hard-bitten, certain of himself, like the man Black. Odd, thought Devine, how all these men seemed to be using their assumed names; they made very passable Americans, too. Since it was not his place to pry into their past, he had best keep his knowledge to himself, he reflected.

"Carter was a thief and a traitor," Gorham said bluntly. "He got what was coming to him."

"Well, it's not my funeral," said Devine. "Are you the guy in charge here?"

Gorham shook his head. He was by nature a solemn, massive, scowling sort of man, ready at any instant to erupt into action. Devine figured him as potentially dangerous; those deep-set, glittering eyes were gloomy and brooding.

"I am only second in charge. The man she must talk with is Dr. Bird. He has been gone since last night, but will be back at any time now. Tell us about yourself. You are a lawyer, perhaps? One of Horton's associates?"

Devine laughed, gave his name, told how he came to be here. Morris was obviously satisfied, he felt less at ease with Gorham. The man gave the impression that he might explode at any moment into unexpected activity. Morris stood up and yawned.

"The doctor said Carter must be looked after—he's been hanging since last night, remember," he said. Devine caught a faint wink directed at Gorham. "Shall we see to it?"

Gorham assented and got up. "The sooner buried the better, yes," he said.

They moved away together.

Devine finished his cigarette, unhurried. As he lay, he could look up at the cliff-dwelling almost above the camp. Casa Escondida—Hidden House—a good name for it. He saw long ropes dangling across the zigzag approach; evidently the place had been explored and the ropes had been left, perhaps for further explorations. This seemed to be a permanent hideout; at least, it had been prepared for such, with German thoroughness.

Devine flipped his cigarette stub into the dying fire, and yawned. He quite understood that, while Carter would probably get buried, the idea of Morris had been to keep a sharp eye on him and his actions.

He rolled over lazily, pulled the lunch basket from the pile of their loads, and opened it. Taking out a packet of sandwiches wrapped in a damp napkin, he tossed the napkin carelessly back and began to munch.

Dr. Bird, eh? That would be the Vogel she had mentioned, the Nazi physicist. Where had he gone? This was curious. Went away last night, would be back anytime.

"He didn't go to town anywhere, or to the road, or we'd have met him," Devine told himself. "Nor up to that cliff house, or they'd be in touch with him. Boys and girls, there can be only one answer—the experimental area! Minnie's hunch was right. Since the war, any guarding of that area has probably been a mere formality; yet there must be something to guard. They didn't expect Horton to show up before evening, so this was Vogel's chance to get there and back. Why? Perhaps they mean to pull out, especially after having settled with Carter. They don't know much about Horton, since they were ignorant of his lameness, but they have some reason to think he wouldn't be hard to settle with—in which they are right. Johnny Devine, you'd make a first-chop detective! But are these guys, with their own necks at stake, going to let you get clear, knowing as you do that they've murdered Carter? Watch out. If they also suspect that you know 'em for what they are, you're a gone coon. Your best bet might be to get one of those guns from the lunch basket and shoot these two gents, and get Black when the shots draw him—huh! Better still, crawl into your fox-hole and keep your head down. Maybe it'll blow over."

HE STRETCHED out on his back, tipped his hat over his eyes, and relaxed. This was Minnie Horton's game to play, at the moment, and he had better keep out. Upon this sage reflection, he let nature take her course and dropped off to sleep before he knew it.

He wakened to voices; and with caution riding him, lay quiet. A mutter of low voices close by—and not speaking English, either. One was exultant. Devine's German came back to him as he listened.

"It was marvellous, wonderful!" said the

exultant voice. "After sunrise, we got splendid pictures. There was no trouble. I have the soil samples; they are practically certain to give us—"

The rest was lost. Devine opened his eyes, the merest trifle. Gorham, Morris and two strangers were going over the loads, carefully examining the blankets. Gorham glanced into the lunch-basket, carelessly.

"All safe. No weapons," he said. "Better have nothing but English speech, remember."

Devine stirred, yawned, and sat up. "Oh, hello!" he said, and rose.

"Dr. Bird, this is Mr. Devine," said Gorham. "And Mr. Lincoln."

Bird and his companion nodded. Lincoln was a stalwart fellow with a broken nose and heavy jaw. Bird, on the contrary, was slender and spectacled, obviously a man of great intelligence; his rounded dome was nearly bald, and he looked a bit older than his companions.

"Guess I dropped off," said Devine amiably. "Miss Horton up and around yet?"

"Hello, Johnny!" came her answer from the tent. "I'll be with you in a jiffy."

Gorham and Bird sat down, Lincoln disappeared with Morris. Devine jerked a thumb toward the cliff-dwellings, above.

"To judge by the ropes, you've explored the Casa Escondida. Find anything?"

"We made a superficial examination; as yet, the rooms haven't been explored," Bird replied rather stiffly. He was sallow, skinny in the face, deadly serious; apparently those tight lips never smiled. His gaze studied Devine probingly. "I understand you are merely a companion for Miss Horton?"

"Correct. Any objection to my having a look at the cliff house?"

"Objection? Certainly not," Bird responded, indifferently. "The path is not good, but the ropes make it quite practicable."

Minnie Horton emerged from the tent. Devine went to meet her.

"Hello! You're looking quite yourself again—worth a second and a third look!" he said cheerfully. "Here—let me present Dr. Bird and Mr. Gorham."

The two men rose and bowed.

"I suppose I'd better clear out while you're having your talk," Devine went on

cheerfully. "Carter, by the way, isn't here. It seems he met with an accident yesterday."

"His heart," added Dr. Bird gravely. Devine met the girl's startled gaze for an instant and saw her face pale slightly.

"If you get your talks finished before dark," he went on, "we'd better go back after that—they tell me night is the best time to get out of the cañon."

"There is no hurry," struck in Bird, rather hastily. "The negotiations may require some little time. I shall have to consult with my—er—associates. If you wish to visit the cave dwellings, by all means do so."

The girl, at Devine's glance, nodded. "Why not? I'd like to have a look at them myself, Johnny. We might plan to stay over and visit them tomorrow."

"Certainly. We can make you comfortable," Bird said, "and Morris is an excellent cook. Will you sit down, Miss Horton?"

Devine felt himself shouldered out of the talk; he had anticipated nothing else, and turning away, sauntered past the heavy thickets of cactus up the cañon. After all, the show belonged to Minnie Horton; if everything passed off amicably, so much the better.

He was somewhat surprised to find that it was past four o'clock. Also, Lincoln appeared from nowhere and joined him, with an amiable nod. Devine provided cigarettes. His chief effort must be to keep his actual knowledge unguessed.

"This cañon is certainly a cockeyed sort of place," he observed. "Where does it start from, up above?"

"That's what Dr. Bird and I have been trying all day to discover," said Lincoln. "We've been climbing since daylight, and I'm done up. And we got nowhere."

Devine eyed the rocks close ahead. An ancient path was worn in the cliff, running off to the right, then angling back. There was no difficulty about it, here at the bottom, but the cliff bulged up above and the ropes would obviously be necessary.

"I've a notion to go up there now," he said.

"Don't," advised Lincoln. "It's getting late, and up there one needs daylight, let me tell you. It's a spooky place. I made

those ropes fast—climbing used to be my business before the war—but we've not had a chance to explore much, as yet. Too busy getting the camp established."

"Might be just as well to wait till morning," agreed Devine. "Any water here?"

"We have found a spring, a very small one, farther up the cañon. Shall we see it?"

Devine agreed, and strolled along, chatting about cliff dwellings, careful to ask no questions. Mentally, he was far more busy than appeared.

There seemed no way out up-cañon; the only way in or out lay from below. He had seen no weapons about, but Gorham and his friends had been well armed when they held up Carter. Five of the gentry in all, and except for Vogel, or Bird, they were a tough crowd.

Time passed. Hans Black made his appearance. Gorham came and spoke with him and with Lincoln, low-voiced and apart. Morris showed up and took part in the discussion. Presently Gorham left the others and approached Devine.

"Come along," he said gloomily. "You're needed."

Astonished, Devine accompanied him back to the camp. At first glimpse of Minnie Horton, he perceived something had gone wrong; she was flushed and angry. The depths of the cañon were by this time filled with gathering shadows, though sunlight was visible high above.

"Sit down, Mr. Devine," said Dr. Bird, then looked at Gorham. "Better tell Morris to get started with supper." Gorham nodded and departed again. "Now, good sir," Bird went on to Devine, "It has been decided that Miss Horton shall remain here for the present, while you go back with one of us to confer with her father."

"Oh!" said Devine. "Who decided that? We came here to settle matters with you."

"I've given in everywhere," broke out the girl hotly. "They demand this silly trip."

With an effort, Johnny Devine fought down the hot words that came to his lips. Now, if ever, headwork was needed, and badly needed. He perceived instantly that, for some reason, Minnie Horton was to serve as hostage. There was something behind it, something he did not know—and he could make a guess at it. He had to re-

gard these men, not as what they appeared, but as what they actually were.

"It is a bit unusual, isn't it?" he asked mildly, as Gorham came back and sat down. "Why, Dr. Bird, should you want to detain a lady here? Why not detain me?"

Bird spoke smoothly. "Miss Horton is entirely safe. She is among gentlemen of honor.

She shall have one tent entirely to herself, and shall be molested in no way; she is an honored guest. It will save much discussion and trouble if you consent to the plan, and leave after we have eaten."

Something in his words, something unsaid and yet hinted at, pricked Devine into active suspicion.

"Well," he said amiably, "perhaps you may be right, Dr. Bird. I know that Mr. Horton expected to make every concession necessary. Certainly I do not want to be the one to start any trouble. Let me think a moment."

H HE GOT out a cigarette and lighted it. Minnie was staring at him in dismay and angry surprise. He rubbed his nose, and, invisibly to the others, tipped her a wink. It was obvious that his attitude was gratifying to Bird and Gorham. Morris appeared and began to break out dishes from the closed tent.

"Why," Devine asked, "don't a couple of you guys go on the errand to Horton? Why should I go along? I'm not a principal in this affair."

"He'll believe you," said Gorham. "He'd not believe any of us, I fear."

"Eh? What about?"

"That Miss Horton is quite unharmed, is in no danger, and has sent you with word."

"Oh, I see! That makes sense, yes." Devine nodded. "Who's to go with me?"

"Gorham will go," Dr. Bird replied.

"Well, Miss Horton doesn't seem to like the idea. I'd prefer having my orders from her; why not let us talk it over?" suggested Devine pleasantly. "We've plenty of grub in our own basket. You go ahead with your supper, we'll go ahead with ours; perhaps I can persuade her that your request is reasonable."

He beamed around. Inwardly he was acutely conscious of the glitter in Gorham's

gloomy eyes, and it frightened him with its implications. The feeling of crisis was strong upon him. Then Dr. Bird nodded, his thin, sallow features quite pleased.

"Why not, indeed? I regret we have no tables to offer you. Pray retain this place. We usually have our meals outside the tent yonder. Perhaps you'll permit us to offer a few items to enhance your slender meal—coffee, eh? A bottle of wine?"

"Oh, sure! We'll be glad of coffee," said Devine gladly. "We brought only water. But we've everything else we need, thanks. We'd be glad to spare you some sandwiches; they're really excellent—"

BIRD and Gorham refused, very politely. They rose and joined Morris, who had brought a packing-case into sight and was arranging it as a table.

Devine pulled over the lunch-basket, spread out one of their blankets on the ground, and began to get out napkins and sandwiches, keeping up a running fire of small talk as he did so. Minnie Horton sat motionless, angry, perplexed.

"They're leaving us free to talk," said Devine, fixing a paper plate from the basket for her. "So do it. Looks like they don't expect any message from you to be delivered anyhow—at least by me. Better speak up and do it fast, though."

"Oh!" She wakened from her angry abstraction. "How do you—but you can't know that!"

"I can guess. You couldn't settle matters for your dad?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Only, this silly trip and message! And it's all my fault."

"Not silly; not a bit of it. Bird, or Vogel, has got everything he wanted over at the experimental area. Don't figure these guys for silly."

"My fault, all of it," she repeated. "I let slip that you knew everything about them. I'm sorry. I meant it to help us—"

"Oh!" Devine's brows went up. "So that's what tore it! Okay, sister. Just you sit tight now. We'll have to take the lid off—but you let me do it."

His consternation was acute at her disclosure; but so was his relief. Everything was now clear. He knew exactly what he was up against. And, he thought grimly, he could take it.

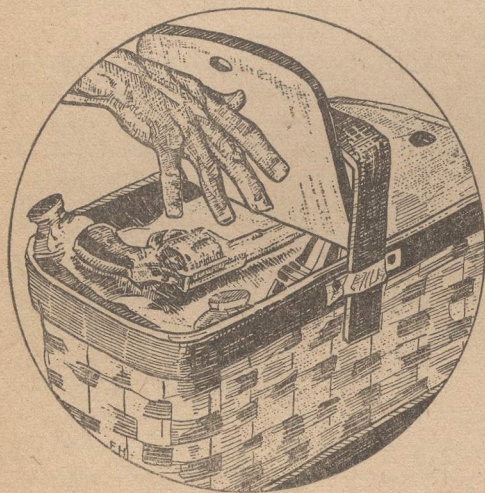
V

NO, NOT silly at all; things fell into proper focus now.

Bird and his friends had accomplished their errands here. Accounts with Carter had been squared. Minnie Horton, for her father, had turned over their money to them.

Dr. Bird had obtained photographs and other data from the experimental area, which he could no doubt translate into the scientific terms he desired. And then, from the girl, had come the revelation that Johnny Devine—and she, as well—knew precisely who they were and what they were doing here! The smooth Dr. Bird, no doubt, had goaded her into some angry threat.

Alert, suspicious, fully aware of their danger, they had taken instant resolve. Devine would be sent back, presumably; but he would also be sent to keep Carter company. Minnie Horton would be retained as hostage, perhaps by one or two of the group, until Bird and the others made their getaway and were in safety with their precious secrets. These remnants of the shattered Nazi empire had their hopes and plans; let the physicist Vogel light on the secret of the atomic bomb, and only God



knew what might happen. His very exultancy proved that he had located something worthwhile.

"I'm afraid," murmured Minnie Horton, staring at him in the gathering darkness. At one side, Hans Black was fussing with a gasoline lamp, trying to get it alight. All

five of the company were here now, talking among themselves, careless what passed between the girl and Devine.

"I'm afraid—for you, Johnny! I don't think they—they mean to let you go—"

"Sure not." Devine laughed cheerfully and leaned over the lunch basket. He raked about in the bottom of it, found one of the two pistols there, and slid it into his unbuttoned shirt. "Now, listen to me, sister. Have no arguments; just be good. Play the game. Let's see, now—"

He lit another cigarette. Black had the lamp going now, sputtering, spreading a white glare over the scene.

"Gorham goes with me. Lincoln and the Doc are dead beat; they've been on the go since last night. Once they hit the hay, they'll be dead to the world. That leaves Morris and Black to look out for—see here, now! You turn in, but don't sleep. Give 'em an hour to quiet down, get me?"

"Yes. But it's no use, Johnny. You mustn't do anything desperate. I've snafued everything—"

"Rats! You've only hurried up what was bound to come anyhow. Don't worry about me; I'll be okay. Soon as things are quiet, get a canteen—take it to bed with you, rather. Slip out. If Morris or Black is on guard and stops you, say you can't sleep and need air. Be pleasant. Kid him along to where those ropes come down and stop there. If there's no guard, make for the ropes and see if you can climb to those cliff houses. It'll be a hell of a job in the dark, but try it anyhow. That path is good for part of the way, no loose shale or rock to fall. Got it?"

"Yes. But—"

"No buts, sister. Now play like you've come around and want to send your dad a note, and we'll be set. Getting chilly here, sure enough—that's grand!"

It was, indeed, growing cold; in these altitudes the nights were cold as the days were hot. Devine called Dr. Bird over to join them, and requested the loan of a coat.

"Take mine," said Gorham, bringing it to him. "I'll not be needing it. Well, what's been decided?"

"Oh, there's no objection," spoke up Minnie Horton, with a smile. "I'll send

a note by Mr. Devine to my father—have you a pencil and paper, Dr. Bird?"

"Yes, indeed," replied the latter, producing them. "It is nice to find that all is pleasant. Morris, where's the coffee for our guests?"

A PLEASANT gathering, indeed; hot coffee, jests, much politeness evidenced toward the girl, and Devine wrapping the coat thankfully about him to conceal the pistol-bulge under his shirt. Gorham, it appeared, was actually going on to see Horton, for he took commissions from Lincoln and Black to bring them various small articles from Morgantown, and put new batteries in a flashlight with which to light the way down the cañon and on to the waiting cars. There would be a moon, said Bird, but it would not penetrate into the cañon depths.

Minnie finished her note. Devine took it, slung a canteen-strap across his shoulder in case they needed water, and pronounced himself ready for departure. Bird insisted on shaking hands with him—a note of Nazi falsity which he did not forget—and after a casual farewell from Minnie, he waved his hand and strode away with the gloomy Gorham.

"You have the light, so you'd better go ahead," he said, and Gorham complied at once, the radiance of the gasoline lamp dying away behind.

The pencil of light probing the blackness, they tramped along in silence. Devine calculated that he was in no immediate danger; Gorham, he reflected, would probably wait until they were out of the cañon, perhaps at the cars, before killing him; but he had no intention to leave the cañon. And yet, he realized, he could not take action on mere suspicion alone, even were that suspicion a certainty in his own mind.

As they clattered along, he took off the canteen hanging at his hip, and held the strap in his hand, close to the container. He had chosen it purposely; it was his own, and was barely half full. He hefted it with satisfaction.

They came to an open stretch, free of cactus, and he came up beside Gorham.

"I suppose a shot would cause echoes to wake the dead, eh?" he said.

"A regular volley, yes," Gorham assented.

"It'd be a pity to alarm Miss Horton."

Gorham halted. "What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you see those rabbits jumping away from the light?"

"Oh. No time to be hunting rabbits," growled the other, resuming his stride. "Come on. We must reach Horton by morning."

"I thought Vogel gave you other orders about me?"

"I don't know what—Vogel!" Gorham halted, his voice breaking out as realization came to him. "Vogel! Who told you? Who told you his name?"

"Oh, he was quite famous for his work at Bornholm—"

"Ach! You dumbhead!" Sudden furious passion took hold of the man. He halted and shifted the light to his left hand. His right darted under his shirt. "So you must have it now—all right, all right—you and Carter alike—"

Devine swung with the canteen; it struck light, man and pistol. The light fell and went out. The man staggered back. The pistol exploded, echoes roaring up the canyon walls. Devine fell back a pace or two, and dropped.

"Ach! American swine are all alike!" came Gorham's voice from the darkness. "And Vogel said to wait till we were at the cañon entrance—have to make sure of him now."

He took a step, cursing the darkness, fumbling about for the flashlight. He found it, rose, and tested it. The light flashed on—

Devine shot him from the ground. Again the echoes soared, as Gorham fell. He still clutched the light, whose beam went wild. His pistol clattered on the stones. Devine was upon him instantly, snatching the light, locating the fallen pistol, kicking it away. But there was no danger. Gorham lay clutching his breast, where blood jumped. Fright and horror were stamped in his face as Devine flashed the light on him.

"A mistake—I said it was a mistake—kill him then and there!" groaned out the dying man. "Vogel, damn him—ach, a blind fool—I said it was a mistake."

"You were right," observed Devine,

switching off the light. Only a groan, and a rush of escaping, gasping breath, made reply. Gorham had gone to find his victim, Carter.

Sitting on his heels, Johnny Devine lit a cigarette—his last for a while, he reflected—and calmed down. He had taken risks, absurd risks, in the endeavor not to act upon suspicion alone; and he had been entirely justified.

He heard nothing, saw no light behind them; no one had followed, then. Those two shots would be heard, of course; it would be taken for granted that Gorham had fired them, had killed his man and gone on. Best pull him out of sight into a cactus patch, then, before going back, just in case all went well and it was possible to get Minnie Horton off and away. No hurry, now. Give Bird and the others a chance to discuss those shots and get to sleep, reassured.

HIS smoke finished, Devine remained listening for a little; he heard nothing. The temptation that hit him was logical enough. He was on his way out. He could keep going and reach the car and by morning be back with help—either from Morgantown or from the guards at the experiment area. Bird and the others would be like rats in a trap. He grunted as he rose, and grinned in the darkness.

"Sure would be nice, if I were alone; can't go back on a pal, though," he told himself.

He went to Gorham, flashed on the light; the man was dead. A cactus tangle was close by, and he dragged the body to it and around it, out of casual sight. Then he started on his return journey.

For the moment, he could use the flashlight, with care; but not for long. Up above the cañon ran straight, without a twist or turn; any stabbing finger of light might be seen by anyone on guard at the camp. His approach must be silent, too—damn! It was going to be a ticklish business. He remembered the other name for this cañon on the map.

"Salsipuedes—Get-out-if-you-can! That's a good name for it right now, he said. He always had liked the sound of his own voice in the darkness. "Hot damn! I'm a *dumbkopf* and no mistake—"

He turned and went back, cautiously retracing his steps, until he found Gorham's pistol, which he had forgotten. Then he went to the man's body and searched the shirt pockets, finding a number of folded papers. He pocketed these without examination, then once more took up his way toward camp.

While he could do so, he covered ground at a good pace. Once he took on caution and kept the light doused, it was a different matter; he had to watch his footing, and he also had to keep from running into cactus, as painful experience taught him. This, however, became less difficult as he advanced.

To his surprise, the pitch darkness at the bottom of the cañon proved not so impenetrable as he had thought. When no longer dazzled by the flashlight, his eyes found differences in the obscurity and the masses of broad, flat cactus leaves could be made out, dimly. He figured that the starlight glinting overhead must be reflected by the rocky walls of the cañon, imperceptibly yet reaching the depths with a certain faint radiance that aided him enormously in avoiding the spiny contacts.

He kept on interminably, as it seemed. There was nothing to guide him; he had to feel for each step. The white radiance of that gasoline lamp had long ago vanished.

Only when his nostrils caught a thin suggestion of odor, did he halt, sniffing, to know that he must be close. Coffee! The fragrance lingered, of course.

He had given Minnie an hour; much more than this time must have elapsed. He thought with regret of the carbine left in the car. With that in hand, he might have walked in on the camp and let them have it hot and heavy. True, he had two pistols—

"Hell, I'm no bloody hero," he reflected disgustedly. "If I was, I'd been dead long ago. Keep your pants on, Johnny Devine. Your job is to locate Minnie and snake her out of here—what's that?"

The sound stiffened him; then he relaxed. A snore; a good, lusty snore. Perhaps from the broken-nosed Lincoln. He continued his cautious progress; that black mass must be the tents and cactus-thicket beside the camp. He skirted it, foot by foot, each

step an adventure, and nothing happened. How that flashlight would help here!

The snores continued, came closer, fell away. He set himself to remember now, the aspect of things at the camp, on up to where those dangling ropes came down; it came back to him enough to help, and new hope rose in him as he crept along. If he could manage this, certainly Minnie could; and, barring accidents, they ought to be able to steal away and get into the open and reach the car.

No guard here? With him gone and accounted for, to judge by the two shots, they well might have felt no guard necessary; or, if guard there were, Minnie might have drawn him off. Ready for anything, Devine kept going; he was in the path now, leading to the spot where the ropes came down. They were not a hundred yards away, and she must be there; Black or Morris too, perhaps. But he could hear no murmur of voices.

What if she had not left her tent? Startled by this contingency, he forgot his caution; a stone rolled underfoot with a faint crash. He tensed, heard nothing, and kept going—

"Johnny?" That was her voice from ahead, controlled, barely heard. A breath of relief escaped him. She was there, she was waiting!

"Yeah," he grunted. "Okay?"

"All clear," came response.

He strode ahead, and even ventured a darting ray of the flashlight—small danger, when they were all tented and asleep! It showed her, and he doused it instantly as he came to her. He reached out, and her hands clutched at him.

"Johnny! Those shots—"

"Everything all right, sister," he murmured. "They're snoring, and no guard out."

"But Gorham—"

"Never mind him. Heard two shots, didn't you?" He laughed, under his breath. "We've got clear sailing, Minnie. I'll lead you back past the camp, then all's clear and we can be out this muck before you know it—"

She caught her breath in the darkness. The clasp of her hands tautened.

"I can't, Johnny—I can't!" Her low voice was desperate. "I can't walk. I

took a fall getting here, a mean one. My right knee and ankle are swollen and I can barely stand on that foot at all—oh, Johnny, you go on and get out, and bring back help! You go on, and I'll be all right—"

Devine stood motionless. His hopes crashed; everything crashed. He might carry her, but not in silence—certainly not all the way to the car.

"Boy!" he muttered. "What would I give, right now, for a couple of grenades!"

VI

HOW long they stood there clinging, Devine did not know; at length the night chill roused them, and he had come to decision.

"Only one way out, sister—up," he said quietly. "No talk, now; I'm giving orders. This path isn't half bad, here, but it goes to pieces farther up. You can't walk on that foot, but you can use it a bit, with the help of the rope. I'll go first, you follow. I can save you a lot by hauling you up, from time to time. Savvy?"

"I'll try," she said.

"You won't try; you'll do it. You've got to do it, sink or swim! Those cliff houses are about a hundred feet up, and not far from the top. There are two ropes—why two? I've got a hunch, but never mind now. Stick to this one beside us. I noticed today that it seemed to be the best approach—yep, this is the one. I'll go up and back on the first zigzag, and haul you smack up. Farther on, you'll have to scramble. Can't do much talking up there, so use signals on the rope—one for ready, two shakes for stop. So long."

Giving her no chance to protest or argue, he started up.

The shock of finding all his plans knocked into a cocked hat had not passed; he had been unable to readjust himself, and had taken this as the quickest and only visible way out of the dilemma. New plans could wait. Safety, at least, lay up above if they could reach the cliff dwellings, and for the moment nothing else mattered. He was thankful now that she wore serviceable khaki garments and not some flimsy sports outfit—the going was going to be bad ere long.

The path was narrow but practicable—

not for anyone with a sprained ankle, though. Upon gaining a spot above the girl, Devine exchanged a pull of the rope with her, then hauled away. This first lift went off perfectly—he almost walked her up, though the touch of the hurt leg and foot drew gasps from her. When he had her safely esconced at his side, he went on and found a spot above, venturing a look with the flashlight. This was a bit to one side of her. As soon as her weight came on the rope, she swung, struck the rock, and he heard a muffled cry come from her; he hauled away furiously, and next moment had her up.

"It won't work," she gasped softly.

"It must," said he. "Let the rope fall, now, and grab it right here. Then, if you slip or fall back, you'll only go this far—get it? Otherwise, you might fall to the bottom, and we're on our way up so that won't do."

He went on. The thing was getting hard, now; he figured mentally that there must be about ten of these lifts, and stifled a groan. That bulge in the rock was just above, and it would be bad; but he was savagely resolved that they must see it through now. As he went, aided by the rope, he referred to the mental picture of the place as he had seen it that afternoon. The two ropes did not go up to the midmost of the chambers above, but to those at the up-cañon end; why? Because, obviously, the path must go there.

A good spot for the pull. He got her ready signal, and hauled in, slowly this time and steadily; she was no lightweight, even if she was helping herself. "Wait!" lifted her voice faintly, and he obeyed. "Okay!" He drew in again. Foot by foot, she mounted, and at length he caught her hand and had her up beside him; for an instant he thought she would collapse, but with a shaky laugh she got herself in hand.

"I can use the bad foot a little," she panted. "But it's tough."

"Fine! This time you'll learn what tough is," he rejoined. He waited, listening. No sound rose from below, no flicker of light showed at the camp. He ventured to use the light again, and grimaced; this time it would be the rope and a scramble for him. The path was practically gone. Worse than clambering up the side

of an LC by means of those damned steel nettings, he thought; lucky thing he had learned how to save his fingers.

He went at it with grim resolve, keeping his feet in the remnants of the path, holding out the rope and pulling himself along. Then the path went out and things really got bad. Inevitably, his hands were pinched against the rock. The canteen hampered him. He fought savagely ahead, inch upon inch, until every instant became a blind and furious struggle against the impossible. Nails and fingers and palms torn he had need of all his powerful shoulder-muscles, threw them into it—and suddenly everything eased. He was over the worst of the bulge.

He crawled on and felt a ledge ahead. He rested there, tried a flash with the light and was aware of a path again, a wider one. For a moment he relaxed, cursing softly at the bite of his torn skin. Then he was up and signaling. Her reply came. Gripping the rope he began to haul anew—and this time put his back into it.

As he worked, he could hear her short, sharp gasps of pain. Even by daylight, he thought, this approach must mean real effort, and his hunch regarding those two ropes took vague shape, but he could not stop now to think about that. He put everything he had into the slow, powerful draws on the line.

She was almost up now. He spoke to her, heartened her, finally reached down and had her by the wrist. His fingers slipped; he was nearly overbalanced, but up she came until her good foot found purchase—and she was beside him, gasping. His arm around her, he held her close and she clung to him.

"Okay?"

"No! But I'm here. What makes your hands wet?"

"Sweat," he lied. "Easy now. Relax."

"Better keep at it," she dissented. "Damn it! I'm scraped all over. Keep at it, before we stiffen up!"

"We're over the worst."

"I don't dare relax! I'm afraid I'll go bang. Keep at it, Johnny!"

He rose and cupped the light in his hand. The dimmed ray showed that the path was fair enough. He went on to the next angle. She could hobble, clinging to the line, and

managed to do so; but once more the ancient path went out and he had to haul. It was not as bad as going over the bulge, however.

The last lift was the worst of all. Devine reached the crumbling opening of the cave house, crawled in, and found that the line was made fast to a jutting bit of rock. He stood on the lip of the opening and drew her up, but getting her up and over that lip took his utmost. He was finished, and knew it. However, she came up, was over to the waist, then got her good knee up and over, clutched at him, and pulled herself inside. When she was safely in, he dropped beside her.

"I'm about done," she said. She was trembling, shaking with exhaustion, but managed a faint laugh.

"We made it, Johnny! That's the big thing. Made it!"

"Better look after our hurts, then. We can afford to use the light, well back from the edge." He came to his feet stiffly, and tossed out the rope so that it slithered away in loose coils; he left the end fast, however.

The low chamber ended in a hole at the edge; the light showed another and larger room beyond, piercing back farther into the cliff.

They gained this and sank down on a pile of débris at the back. He switched the light on and headed it at the rock, to throw a suffused glow around. Devine was badly scraped and torn, but sight of Minnie Horton appalled him. Her hands were bleeding, her clothes half raked away, even her face was streaked with blood.

"Gosh! We'd better repair damages, sister," he said. "Let's have a look at the bad leg. Hello! You've still got your canteen! That's good. We'll want all the water we have. I crammed some sandwiches into the pockets of this coat, to help hide the pistol bulge under my shirt—pretty badly squashed up now, but they'll still eat."

She made no answer. Her head had fallen back, her eyes were closed; she had blacked out.

Devine went to work, baring her swollen leg. He tore up Jess Gorham's coat and used the lining for bandages. He worked awkwardly; his left arm and hand were badly torn, but his right was in working

order. Presently he had her fixed up, bandaged her hands, and washed his own hurts. Bandages could wait.

The second rope, he perceived, came up into this chamber and was made fast. He put out the light, went to the edge, and looked down. No sign of alarm, no sounds of any sort. Satisfied, he relaxed, got a cigarette alight, and stretched out his aching body.

LITTLE by little, his thoughts took shape. These two ropes, left in place—why? Dr. Bird apparently cared little about exploring the cliff dwellings. But how had he and Lincoln got out of here to reach the experimental area and do their work? Not around by the lower cañon—too far. These ropes, coming up to the end of the cliff-dwellings—the devil!

Devine forced his stiffened frame erect. With the flashlight carefully dimmed, he stepped back into the first room they had entered. Stooping, he followed along to the far end, where it ended in another low cavity. He peered through this, shot the light through, and swore delightedly at sight of steps cut deeply in the rock. Steps, a trail up to the top, of course!

He hurried back to the second chamber, heard his name called, found Minnie sitting up. He plumped down beside her and produced cigarettes.

"Here, smoke up! It's all clear now. You sit tight and absorb the good news, and then we'll get going," he broke out impetuously. "The Injuns who made this place didn't go down into the cañon for their water and morning doughnuts—not much! We're close to the top, and they had a way up. It's still there, and it's good. Foxy old Bird took advantage of it, too.

"Those ropes let him get up here and then reach the top—a quick way out, a quick way back, with the ropes to help. Get it, sister? To get out and around by the lower cañon would be long and tedious; but this is a short cut. Once out, I don't know where we'll find ourselves, but it'll be a damned sight safer than this hole. We can reach the road, anyhow, or I can get you there—we're out of the woods, Minnie, get it? Nothing to do now except to keep going and reach the top and be gone!"

"Sounds mighty good, Johnny," she said. "Can I walk on my hands?"

"You can try. Oh, that leg's bad, I know; nothing seems dislocated, though, and pain doesn't hurt anybody. Food will buck you up—here, we'll gobble what's left of these sandwiches, then I'll strip up the coat and tie your leg up good and solid, and you can hobble on it with my help. Say yes?"

She laughed a little. "Johnny, you're an incurable optimist! Well, I won't let you down. I'll have a try at it, even if it does seem impossible. Only, I warn you, that leg hurts at a touch—the blinding pain is just too much to bear. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, darned weak."

"Atta girl!" he exclaimed heartily, and fell to work.

What remained of the now messy sandwiches was divided, and washed down with the water remaining in Devine's canteen. With his pocket-knife, Devine slit up what was left of the coat and bound the swollen leg firmly with the strips of cloth.

"There!" he said. "If you can't do any better, slip an arm around my neck, and hop on your good foot. That path isn't such a boulevard that I could carry you, but maybe I can farther on, than that. We're going to make it, sister—let's go!"

He did think of getting her aboard pickaback and carrying her—but common sense forbade; it would be impossible to keep balanced on that trail up the steep face of the rock. True, the trail angled up instead of going straight, but thought of pitching off at any bad step, made it out of the question.

He caught her hands and pulled her to her feet. She grunted with pain but said nothing. By help of the guarded light, they got to the hole and crawled into the next room, then got across to the exit hole. There they paused; Minnie was clinging to him, her whole body in a tremble. The light showed she was white as a sheet and sweating from sheer agony. Her contorted, twisted features frightened him.

"Can you make it, sister?"

"Don't want to let you down, Johnny. Keep going. If I have to quit I'll say so," she rejoined shakily.

To get through the hole, they had to crawl. Devine went first, got his footing,

and took her hands. He practically pulled her through. Up above, moonlight was sil-
vering the peaks but it did not reach here.

"We might wait till the moon gets higher," he said, "or we can chance using the light. Which?"

"I can't make my mind up to it again, Johnny," she answered simply. "Now we are this far, let's keep going."

"Okay. I'll shield the light so it'll hit down at the path. Grab my arm, put your weight on me, and we're off—"

He began to sidle along the cut steps, one arm behind him to which Minnie clung, the other hand cupping the light so that it illumined the path and little else. She tried to put her weight on the bad foot, but could not bear the excruciating pain, and hopped instead. At every hop, Devine's heart turned over—it would take so little to unbalance them both and send them down!

They made progress, but slowly. Then, so suddenly that it startled them both, a voice rose from the dark depths, a shout of alarm followed by a burst of German, so confused and multiplied by reverberant echoes that the words were lost. What had happened was clear enough; discovery had been made that the girl was gone.

From Minnie Horton came a gasp, followed by a sharp cry. Her clutch on Devine's arm tightened desperately. He swayed, saw that she was falling toward him, and in frantic horror caught her and held her.

He wavered under her weight. Acute terror sent shivers down his back, clear down to his heels, as he felt himself going. She had tried to step on her bad leg, and had collapsed under the stab of agony. How he managed it Devine never knew, but somehow he got his balance again and fell back against the rocky wall, still clutching her. The flashlight escaped from his fingers. It went down, sending out whirling rays like a starshell, and then smashed in a tinkle of blackness. The light had been seen; a chorus of hot and furious voices pealed up in multitudinous echoes.

Devine stood there, aghast and panicked. He got his nerve back and realized that Minnie was a dead weight, unconscious. Inch by inch, he shifted his hold upon her, each movement piercing him with new terror. What lay ahead he could not tell

and dared not risk, but the way back was stamped in mind.

He got her head and arms over his shoulder on the inner side, as he faced back down toward the cliff-dwellings. Holding her about the knees, he ventured a step, then another, feeling for each foothold. He was deaf to the tumult of voices below; every sense was bent upon retaining his balance. Sweat of sheer fright poured from him. Her body began to slip down his shoulder. With a paralyzing access of horror, he realized that she was going, that they would both inevitably go down—

Then a level space ahead; they were back at the opening of the chamber. Devine lowered her body, carefully. He was unnerved, shaking, and for a little while could not move. He bent to the task, after a moment, and got her head and shoulders through the hole, squeezed past, then pulled her through into the first chamber.

This done, he dropped like a log as the reaction hit him.

VII

HOW long he lay there, Johnny Devine never knew. It must have been quite a while. When at last he sat up and wiped cold sweat from his face with his sleeve, he was vaguely conscious of a voice close at hand, but only vaguely. He was still in the grip of his unhappy thoughts.

But for the accident of that searchlight falling, all might yet have been well. Bird and his gang would not have known where Minnie Horton had flown—but now they knew. His hope of evasion had gone glimmering; that crowd had rifles, and anyone trying to get up that path in daylight would be picked off like a sitting pigeon.

"Salsipuedes! Damned Spanish jinx, that's what you are," he muttered. "Get out if you can, yeah—"

He pricked up his ears at hearing that voice again, close now; German words that jarred him to himself. He pulled himself over to the lip of the chamber and peered out into the blackness. Something moved—something only a few feet away. The rope was shaking and quivering. They were coming, of course—they were all but here! Another voice made response, from the second rope.

"Okay, boys, you asked for it," reflected Devine, and with a thrill of savage joy got out his pistol and slipped off the safety catch. Then he paused, fumbled in his pocket, and brought out a match.

With his left hand, he trailed it across the rock and flipped it up and out. He had one glimpse of the startled face of Hans Black, so close that it astonished him, and that of the broken-nosed Lincoln, on the other rope. The flare died, and as it died, the pistol in his hand exploded. He fired again, in the direction of Lincoln.

Through the reverberating echoes of the shots pierced frantic trailing-off screams that died into sudden silence. Devine reached out to the rope and tested it—it hung limp and clear of weight. He crawled into the farther chamber and tested the rope fastened there. It, too, was clear.

"My compliments, Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Schwartz, alias Black," he said, and chuckled. "That leaves Vogel and Morris, and if they're wise birds they'll pick up and go away. Might be a good idea to remove temptation from their path."

He hauled in on the rope here; finding it wet and sticky at one point caused him no qualms whatever. When it lay in loose coils, he went back into the first chamber and hauled up on the other rope.

"That you, Johnny?"

"Sure is," he replied cheerfully.

"What happened—oh, I remember. I blacked out, dammit!" she said mournfully from the darkness. "I tried to push it through regardless of the pain. Where am I?"

"End room, Angels' Flight," he responded. "I dropped the flashlight and messed things up; gave us dead away. So the late Mr. Lincoln and the late Mr. Black came along to grab the defenseless gal who had run out on them. They're probably sitting around hell's gate now, wondering what hit them."

"Oh! Were those shots I heard? Was that what waked me up?"

"Shouldn't wonder." He brought in the last of the rope, and went over to where she lay. "How's the leg? Maybe I'd better take those bandages off—may help the swelling to go down. You ought to be able to hobble along by tomorrow."

He suited action to words; then, telling

her to sleep, went into the adjoining chamber and settled himself by the front opening to keep watch.

Moonlight drifted down; all was quiet below, and it was hard to keep awake. He was fairly confident that their troubles were at an end. With Dr. Bird and Morris alone remaining of the gang, their best course, obviously, would be to skip out and get to some safer place before any general alarm could be given.

So Johnny Devine felt very cheerful about everything, being ignorant of what he had in his pocket—indeed, having quite forgotten he had anything in his pockets, except the extra pistol he had taken from Gorham.

Watch must be kept, however, and cigarettes helped keep him awake, hour after hour, until the faint grayness of dawn stole down from the rocks above. The light grew stronger, until he could discern the shape of the camp down below, and nothing stirred there.

He went into the other chamber and wakened Minnie Horton, who was sleeping soundly.

"Guard mount," he said. "I'm all in and want to get some sleep. How's the leg?"

"It really feels pretty good," she responded, and sat up.

"Well, we've got your canteen, so bathe it a bit; that'll help. Don't use too much water; we'll need all we have left. All seems quiet. Take this pistol and it'll make you feel better. I think they've cleared out, though, for keeps."

"What are you going to do?"

"Sleep. Wake me up in a couple of hours, and we'll be on our way. I've got everything figured out. I'll get some sleep, your leg will be in better shape, and everything will be jake."

"If I don't snafu it all again," she said bitterly. He laughed.

"Bosh! It was my doing, when I dropped the light, so forget it. We're okay now. Mind you save some of that water. We've nothing to eat, and that canteen must run us till we get back to the car. Dr. Bird may have taken our car, too, but we'll worry about that when the time comes. See you later."

He went back into the second room,

stretched out his cold and aching frame on the earth and débris at the back of the cave, and with one long sigh dropped off to sleep.

What roused him was a blaze of warmth and light. He opened astonished eyes upon white noonday sunlight filling the cañon outside, beating in waves of heat from the high rock walls. Blinking, he sat up. Minnie Horton sat close by, pinning together some of the worst rents in her very battered garments and laughing at his expression.

"You didn't wake me! It must be noon!" he exclaimed.

"Didn't have the heart, Johnny," she replied.

"My gosh! How do you manage it?"

"Manage what?"

"You. Last night you looked like a last year's bird's nest, your hair all down and everything galley west, and now you're neat as a pin. Hello! Even got your stocking back on the bad leg. Must have been licking yourself like a cat."

"I didn't know you were so observant last night."

"I'm always observant; better watch out in future. How's the leg?"

"Much better, and the swelling's going down. How about breakfast?"

SHE extended the canteen. He shook it, found it nearly full, and drank briefly; found he had two cigarettes left, passed one to her, and struck a match.

"No alarm?"

"Not a sound from anywhere," she replied, exhaling with obvious pleasure. "You really think they've gone?"

"Sure of it. I'll prove it pretty quick, too." He stood up, straightened his ragged clothes, and was aware of rustling paper. He reached into a pocket. "Hello—I clear forgot about it! Some papers I took off that guy Gorham."

"You never did say just what happened—"

"Check it; he was out of luck, that's all." Devine opened out the papers and looked at them. "Look here! That check you brought him—Carter's check! And another one—"

"Father sent along a blank check and I filled it in—buying them off."

Devine handed her the checks, then rubbed his cheek, thoughtfully.

"Darn it, I need a shave—makes my brain dusty. You know, I thought sure Bird would have the money. Evidently Gorham was the boss of the crowd and Bird was just a scientist—huh?"

"You don't seem pleased over recovering the three hundred thousand."

Devine started to speak, then checked himself. This put a different aspect on things, but there was no use causing her alarm that might prove needless. He had figured that with their money and their secrets safe, the ex-Nazis would gladly skip out. Well, perhaps they had done so. He would soon know.

"It's no money of mine," he rejoined lightly. "Well, you all ready to go?"

"I can't fly yet," she retorted.

"You can hobble; anyhow, you'd better. We've got these two long ropes," and he indicated the one he had pulled in last night. "Come along; I'll show you what I have in mind."

Although leaning heavily on him and hobbling badly, she could cover ground. Together they passed into the end chamber, and to the opening on the path to the top. Devine pointed out how the rock above the cliff-dwellings sloped back, instead of being an abrupt rise.

"I'll go up with the rope, or one end of it," he said. "If there's anybody left down below, they'll take a pot-shot at me with the rifle. Otherwise, it's a cinch they've pulled out for good, see? Then I'll get over here, directly above, and pull you up. You can simply hop if you like; if you don't make it, I'll haul you up end over end. I'll tie the rope around you, first—"

She laughed; but, crouching beside him and peering up, she realized that the scheme was feasible.

"But you're taking an awful chance—what if they're not gone?" she asked.

Johnny Devine was thinking the same thing, but he laughed confidently.

"With three gone, you think the other two are sticking around? Not much! Stand still, now; let me get you well hitched."

She obeyed; he knotted one end of the rope firmly under her arms, then cast loose the other end still fastened to the rock.

"I'll just take the end with me, and

save weight." He slipped the canteen-strap over his shoulder. "Better come along outside and pay out the rope, for luck. Will your hands work?"

She glanced down at her hands, still bandaged, and flexed her fingers, then nodded and crawled through the aperture. Devine helped getting the coils of the stout inch-thick hemp outside, and followed. The idea of going up that path in the open sunlight, with two rifles possibly waiting below to pot him, was unpleasant; he flinched a little, then stepped out.

"Here goes. If you hear anyone shooting, tell me," he said jauntily.

Just the same, he held his breath; this path was in full sight of the camp below, he knew. Every sense was strained to catch the crack of a rifle. Crouching, he climbed the rock as fast as possible. The path angled up at an easy gradient; the crest appeared, nothing had happened.

HE WANTED to fling himself over and repressed the impulse in quick relief. They had gone, they had gone! This was now certain. The path ceased—here was naked weathered rock that ran back into pines and manzanita brush, a plain hillside like any other. A laugh on his lips, Devine turned and made his way back until he was above Minnie. He could not see her, but there was no doubt that she could come straight up the sloping rock, with his aid. The brush came quite close at this point.

For surer footing, Devine stepped back into the brush, and signaled. Response came—one tug. He began to haul in, steadily, careless of his hurt hands. An overflowing joy had hold of him; all was going well, the nightmare darkness was only a bad memory, they were on their way out!

Then he caught sight of her—hobbling along as he pulled, limping badly but on her feet, coming over the rise. No more need of the rope now; she dropped it and hurried on to meet him. She was radiant.

"Made it, Johnny!" she cried. "I can get along pretty well! Isn't that wonderful?"

"Fine," he rejoined. "Here, take my arm, lean on me—we'll cut through this brush, looks like we can get a view beyond it and see just where we are—"

She caught his arm, gladly enough; he shifted the canteen around in front to get

it out of her way. Might as well have a drink, he thought, and reached for the stopper. In the very act of unscrewing it, he froze—

"Raise your hands—up!"

A face, a head, was framed in the greenery six feet away; he recognized Morris, looking over a leveled pistol as he rose into sight. Behind him showed the bald head of Dr. Bird. Both faces were agleam with crafty triumph.

In that frightful frozen instant of time, a very split-second, Devine knew only that he was caught and done for. They had stolen down the cañon and around, guessing he must come out here. He had not an earthly chance. Be damned if he would let them murder him—

A convulsive effort—his hand sent the girl backward, pushed her off her feet headlong into the brush. His other hand gripped at his pistol and found it. Not a chance, and he knew it. The glittering eyes of Morris dilated, the pistol jerked and erupted flame. Devine felt the bullet hit and jerk him around—but his own pistol was out.

"This is it! This is it!" came the realization. He was going down, was doubling up—he did not know that he fired twice until the pistol recoiled in his grip. But he knew both bullets had gone home. He had the savage satisfaction of seeing Morris flop forward in a crumpled heap.

Then the pistol fell from his hand and he put down his fingers to the earth to stay his own drop. He remembered Dr. Bird. The memory spurred him. He tried to grab at his weapon again, and could not.

"Up, you! Up with 'em!"

A groan escaped him. Where Bird had been, now stood a stranger, a rough, hard-eyed man covering him with a Tommy-gun. Another of them, unguessed! Then the swirl of pain hit him; he pressed both hands to his stomach and went down in a heap.

VIII

THE pain passed, miraculously. Devine stirred, sat up, still holding himself.

The stranger stood there, gun still leveled. Behind him was a thrashing in the brush; other voices sounded.

"Got him!" one of them exclaimed. "This is Vogel, all right!"

Here was Minnie Horton, crying out frantically; Devine found her stooping above him. The voice of the hard-eyed stranger broke in upon them.

"Which one of you is Horton? Speak up quick!"

"I am!" The girl straightened up.

"The hell you say! Is this one of 'em?"

"No, no! He's a friend—here, help me with him—"

Devine found himself trying to scramble up. He was on his feet, clinging to the girl; two other men appeared behind the stranger. They had Dr. Bird with them.

"Whoosh!" Devine got his breath back. He looked down. Minnie Horton had seized the canteen and was holding it as it spurted water. The stranger stepped forward, staring curiously, and uttered an exclamation.

"Look here, boys! Damned if the bullet didn't hit the canteen and deflect—went out the side and missed him clean—"

Johnny Devine was staggered as Minnie Horton flung her arms around him with a cry. He caught and held her. A grin came to his lips.

"By golly, I thought I was dead! What's it all about?"

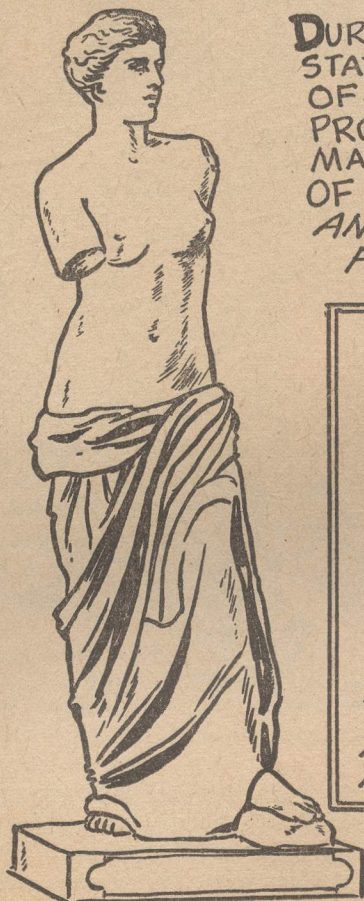
"Me, Johnny!" Tears on her cheeks, radiant laughter in her eyes, Minnie released him. "Remember we stopped in Morgantown, coming here? I sent a wire to the F.B.I. that Vogel and others were here—that they'd better look after the experimental area—they must have come—"

"You bet they came!" broke in the stranger, lowering his gun. "Uncle Sam isn't letting go of any atomic bomb secrets, you bet! We been looking a long while for this Vogel—heard he was loose in this country. Yes, sir, we picked up these two birds as they were working up through the brush, and followed 'em here—couldn't discover just what they were up to, till the shooting started—"

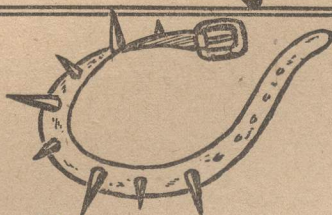
"Oh, hell!" said Johnny Devine, suddenly himself again. "You guys are all right, but it takes the Army to get results. Come on, sister, let's go home."

He met her laughing eyes, drew her to him quickly—and she kissed him back.

Curiosities ^{BY} Weill



DURING PAST CENTURIES MARBLE STATUES HAVE BEEN THE SUBJECT OF A NUMBER OF CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS! IN 1853 IN MANNHEIM, GERMANY, THE STATUE OF VENUS DE MILO WAS TRIED AND SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR **NUDITY!**

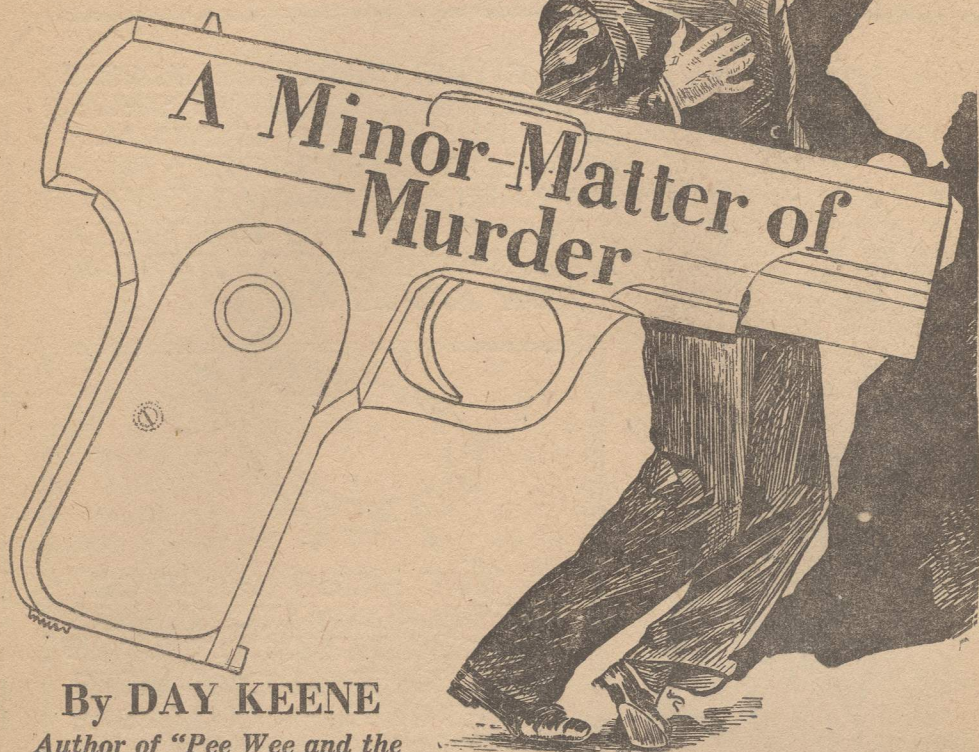


THE BRASS KNOBS ON PRESENT DAY DOG COLLARS ARE A THROWBACK TO THE DAYS WHEN EUROPEAN DOGS WORE SPIKES ON THEIR COLLARS AS PROTECTION AGAINST WOLVES WHO ALWAYS ATTACKED AT THE **NECK!**

IN ENGLAND DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, RUFFS BECAME SO LARGE THAT THEIR SIZE WAS LIMITED BY AN ACT OF **PARLIAMENT!**



*Murder Is a Funny
Business—and We Do
Mean Business!*



By DAY KEENE

*Author of "Pee Wee and the
Nazi Ice Man," etc.*

IT WAS a nasty day, cold and wet and grey. I had been in Criminal Court all morning and most of the afternoon waiting to testify for the State in an arson case that was tabbed on the court calendar as *Illinois vs Monelli*.

When I got back to the office there were two lads waiting for me, a husky youngster in his middle twenties and an older man, shabbily dressed, who looked as though he might be a farmer.

Both looked up as I came in but neither spoke.

They both were strangers to me. I shook the rain off my hat and walked on into my own private office with Elsie close on my heels.

She told me, "Barney Connell has phoned four times in the last half hour. He phoned, the last time, less than five minutes ago. And he says it is vitally im-

portant you call him the moment you come in."

I digested the information as I hung up my dripping top coat. Barney was not a bad lad. But he was a member of the law firm representing Monelli. And my testimony not yet having gone on record I had, or thought I had, a fair idea of what he wanted to talk about.

I said, "The devil with Barney, how about the lads in the outer office?"

She didn't have to look at her notebook. "The young one's name," she said smiling, "is Benny Schermerhorn. He has just been discharged from the Service, he's twenty-four, his home is in Brooklyn, he prefers brunettes to blondes, and he wants to take me to dinner."

I asked, "He didn't by any chance mention why he wanted to see me?"

She said that he had not.



"And the older man?"

She said, "He wouldn't even give me his name. I think it's a shake-down of some kind. I mean I think he wants to sell you some information."

I said it was likely. Most lads with shady information regard private agency men as a sort of verbal pawnshop. Then she wanted to know, it being almost five o'clock, if she could take off a little early as she wanted to change her dress and do a re-paint job before keeping her dinner date.

I said that was all right with me if she would delay her departure long enough to gimmick the board so outside calls would come through. She said she would and would also send Schermerhorn in.

HE CAME in, grinning, a big lad with the friendly eyes of a cocker pup, just as my phone rang.

I nodded him into a chair and picked up the receiver.

"Tom Doyle speaking."

"This is Barney, Tom," Connell told me.

He sounded worried. "Have you anyone in your office?"

I glanced at Schermerhorn. "I have."

"Know him?"

"No."

"Then watch him," Barney warned curtly. "I don't know just what the caper is. But I think I have bumped into something big." His laugh was a trifle forced. "And if we're both alive by morning maybe we can make a deal."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I asked him.

"Murder," he said succinctly. "I—"

His voice trailed off.

I told him to speak up, I couldn't hear him. There was a moment of silence, then a feminine voice broke in. "I am sorry, State 2121 has hung up. Do you wish me to ring them again?"

I thought it over, told her not to bother, and hung up. To hell with Connell and his trades. The more I thought about it the more it sounded like a rib. I was supposed to get all hot and bothered by his pitch—then he'd sell me a bill of goods in an attempt to get me to lay off Monelli. On the other hand—

I looked at young Schermerhorn. His eyes curious but friendly, he was waiting for me to speak. He didn't look hostile to me. I walked by him to the door. Elsie had taken me at my word. But the older lad who looked like a farmer was still holding down a chair.

"It may be some time before I can see you," I told him.

He refused to be discouraged. "That's perfectly all right." The chair was four legged and solid but he gave the impression of rocking.

I closed the door again and looked over Elsie's date. "Okay. Let's have it, Schermerhorn. How did you hear of me? And what kind of a jam are you in?"

He said Phil Dew at the V.F.W. Hall had recommended me as the private agency man in Chicago most likely to give an ex-Service man a break. "But I'm not exactly in a jam. Look. Let's get this straight, Mr. Doyle. This is the first time I ever hired a private detective. Just how do your charges run?"

I told him, straight-faced, that it all depended on whom he wanted me to kill. If it was State's Attorney Beamer, for ex-

ample, who was a sad sack to begin with, I would make him a reasonable rate.

HE DIDN'T think I was very funny. His name may have been Schermerhorn but there was a kilted McTavish somewhere in his ancestry. "Nix. I ain't kidding," he said. "I want to do what is right on account of I was pals with Jack. But I don't see why it should cost me a lot of money."

I brought us both a drink in lieu of an apology, saying that we could settle the fee once I knew just what he wanted me to do. He told his story slowly, sipping at his rye.

I sat watching the rain scour the accumulated summer dirt off the L girders and the cornices of the building across the way. It was quite a system. Puddles of dirty water would gather on the ledges and the beams, then a gust of cold wind off the Lake would pick it up and spray it on the already sodden pedestrians picking their way through the puddles.

I spotted his yarn as a phoney before he had said ten words. But I couldn't spot the gimmick. Boiled down to its fundamentals, his story was that he and a lad whom he called Jack had enlisted in the Marines at approximately the same time. They had been buddies all through boot camp and later in the Islands.

"Like those two guys Damon and Pythias that I read about in high school," he told me.

He continued. A handy lad with a deck of cards and the 7-11 point system, Jack had built up a bankroll of eight thousand two hundred dollars. But it had been unlucky money. He had been killed during a landing. Before dying, however, he had passed his roll to Schermerhorn making him promise to deliver it to his, Jack's, aged parents in Chicago.

His spaniel eyes slightly misted, Schermerhorn concluded, "So I tried to. I stopped off here on my way to Brooklyn. I went to see his parents this morning. I argued with them for two hours. But they wouldn't take the money."

I played along. "Why not?"

He told me soberly, "They claim that Jack isn't dead. But they know better than that because his father showed me the offi-

cial notice from the War Department, also a dozen uncashed insurance checks."

I thought I knew most of the dodges and the rackets. But this was a new one to me. I asked, "And just what do you want me to do?"

He unbuttoned his shirt to get at a money belt and laid a thick sheaf of bills on my desk. "I want you to take the money and find some way to make them take it. You can give me a receipt to put me in the clear." He took a slim roll from his pocket and added two ten dollar bills to the money. "It's worth twenty bucks to me to be able to get on to Brooklyn. How about it? It's a deal?"

I fingered through the sheaf. The bills were genuine, mostly fifties and one hundreds. I couldn't spot any obvious markings. I let it lay and walked over to the window. It was a new approach. Connell's phone call was beginning to make sense. It had been a part of the build-up. I took the money, I signed the receipt, and if I persisted in testifying in the Monelli case I kissed away my license. No sane jury of twelve men would believe any such fantastic story.

"It's a deal?" Schermerhorn repeated.

I walked back and slapped him so hard with my open palm that the outline of my fingers showed red against his cheek. "No. It's not a deal," I told him. "I'm not that money hungry. Now pick up the dough and go back to Barney and tell him—"

My back was to the door. It opened suddenly behind me and the husky lad's eyes went wide. But before I could turn, he pushed me backwards, off-balance.

"Down!"

The light went out as he shouted. I lit on my haunches clawing for my gun. Then a gun in the doorway began to bucket. A slug nailed me flat to the carpet. Another one creased my forehead. It had been a long time in coming. But—this is it, I thought.

I HAD been unconscious perhaps twenty minutes. State's Attorney Beamer and Morgan and Lupe, the aging Mexican fireball, along with a half dozen prowling cops and the manager of the building had been there when I'd come to. Lieutenant Nobby, of Homicide and his squad had

arrived less than five minutes later. Schermerhorn, so they told me, was dead. So was the lad in the outer office. And the eight thousand dollars were gone.

Assistant Deputy Coroner Terry was working on my shoulder. No bones, it seemed, were broken. The slug had gone through the muscles and was more painful than serious. It had been the bark on my head that had knocked me out.

Terry wanted to know how I felt.

I told him, "Lousy."

He said that was to be expected, dusted some sulfa in the wound and began to pack it. Nobby came in from the outer office and sat down beside me. "And that's all you can tell us, Tom?"

I said it was. "I was in my own office, minding my own business, when—"

State's Attorney Beamer sniffed, "Ridiculous." A little man with slightly popped eyes, a receding hair line, a blonde eyebrow mustache, and a Little Flower complex slung on a Model T chassis, we the people had picked ourselves a daisy when we had elected him queen of our Mayhem. He high-lighted the story I had told concerning young Schermerhorn and the proposition that he had made me. "And you expect me to believe that?"

I said I didn't give a damn what he believed, that it was bad enough to play clay pigeon without coming to find his ugly face staring down at me. "How do I know? Maybe you shot me," I accused.

He purpled just short of apoplexy.

Cal Morgan chuckled. "No. You have it all wrong, Tom. It wasn't the State's Attorney. I'm the lad who shot you. I did it for the eight grand." He tapped the breast pocket of his coat. "I have it right here now."

Even Nobby smiled at that.

A local paving contractor, and amateur night club entrepreneur, eight grand meant less to Morgan than eighty bucks meant to me.

Looking as expensive as ever, and smelling twice as sweet, Lupe wrinkled her nose at me. "He ees not fonny, no, you theenk?" She patted Morgan's pockets. "Besides he ees not have a machine gun." She imitated one by putting her tongue to the roof of her mouth. "An' thees I am hear weeth my own ears."

It seemed that she and Morgan and Beamer had been on their way to a 1st Ward dinner and rally at the Club Cherie, which Morgan owned, and at which she was the star attraction, when Lupe had remembered that Pete Cooper, whose office was below mine, had promised to have a new orchestration ready. Morgan had come up for the music to find Pete gone for the day. And before he had gotten back to the lobby all hell had burst loose on my floor.

Terry said, "Leave him alone. The guy's been shot."

Nobby shooed them into the outer office and came back mopping lip-stick off his under lip. "That dame will kiss anyone," he complained.

I ASKED if I had to go through a bull session with Beamer. He said I did not, that they had gone on to the rally, and that if there were any points at which we were at variance we could straighten them out at the inquest.

Terry finished with his job and left. I walked out in the outer office and looked at the lad out there. Death hadn't changed him. He still looked like a farmer. I pawed through the stuff Nobby's boys had taken out of his pockets. His name was Fred Able and his draft card was stamped—Local No. 2, Mears County, Cloverdale, Iowa.

Nobby asked if the name meant anything to me. I said it rang a bell, but faintly. To the best of my sober knowledge I had never seen him before.

"And you're not holding out?"

"No. Nothing important," I told him. I wasn't. I didn't *know* that it was important. I merely wanted to talk to Barney before I whacked up his phone call with the law. Someone owed me plenty. I meant to collect.

We walked back in and looked at Schermerhorn. Two wagon men were lifting him into a basket. His face relaxed in death, he looked more like a kid than ever. Benny had fought a man's size war—and come home to this.

Nobby asked, "And that yarn you told us was true? You didn't dream it up to rip the S. A.?"

I lifted my good hand. "So help me.

According to Benny he stopped off in Chicago to give the eight thousand bucks to his dead buddy's parents. And they wouldn't take it, probably because they're trying to kid themselves that maybe their boy will come back."

"But he didn't mention their name?"

I said, "He didn't get that far. I thought he was fronting for Monelli. I thought he was trying to bribe me and I tried to slap him off his feet."

Nobby looked at me over the tip of his cigar. "So—?"

I told him, "So I'm going to get that eight grand back and see that it goes where he wanted it to go. I think I owe Benny that much."

CHAPTER II

DEATH WORKS LATE

JIM CURTIS, one of Nobby's boys, was in the lobby putting the strong arm on Kip the elevator starter. I asked him if he had found out anything.

He said he had not. The lobby had been jammed with home bound office workers. But while everyone had heard the shots no one remembered seeing anyone carrying a golf bag or a violin case that might have contained a machine gun.

Kip wanted to know how my shoulder felt.

I told him, "Lousy," and walked on out to the street. Night hadn't helped the weather. It was raining even harder than it had been. I tried to get a cab, and couldn't. So I walked.

Connell's office was on the fifth floor of 221 N. LaSalle, Adams, Burson, and Connell. The lights were on but the desks were cleared and a scrub woman was emptying ash trays.

She shook her head at me. "Nobody here. All go home five o'clock."

Barney's office was at the far end of a little hall. I could see a light through the glass and I asked her if she had cleaned it yet. She said she had not.

"Then if you don't mind," I told her, "I'll just look in while I'm here. Sometimes Mr. Connell works late."

Her eyes followed me down the hall.

The door was closed but unlocked. I

looked in, closed the door, then opened it again. Barney wasn't at his desk. But his briefcase, hat, and coat, were still piled on a chair by the door.

I crossed the office, looked in his private washroom, then went back to the waiting room, plugged in an outside line and called my office. Nobby was still there.

"This is Tom, Nobby," I told him. "I'm over at Adams, Burson, and Connell. I wasn't holding out. I just wanted to check with Barney before I told you. But shortly before Schermerhorn, Able, and I, were shot, Barney gave me a buzz and warned me to keep my eyes open." I gave him the conversation verbatim.

He said it was a fine time to tell him and to put Barney on the wire.

I said, "I can't. He's dead. He's sitting in his washroom with a slug through his left eye."

He was still swearing when I hung up.

THE scrub woman stood staring at me pop-eyed, holding an ash tray in one hand and crossing herself with the other.

I debated waiting for Nobby, went down stairs instead, walked through the side door out into the parking lot and cut through the alley to Dearborn. Elsie met most of her dates in the Sherman lobby.

I found her in the arcade standing in front of the flower shop, doing a tap tap on the tile. "That big lug stood me up," she told me. Then she saw the sling under my top coat and gasped.

I guided her on into the bar and one of the wall tables. "There's been some trouble at the office. But if you faint, I'll fire you." I ordered two double ryes and waited until they were served to tell her that young Schermerhorn was dead.

Her face went white but she didn't cry. It would have been better if she had. I nodded at her drink. She said, "I don't need it. How—why—?"

"That's the eight thousand dollar question," I told her. "Some lad walked in, they say with a tommy-gun, and let all three of us have it. Did Schermerhorn tell you that he was carrying eight thousand dollars in cash?"

She shook her head. "Why should he?"

I said, "It's a temptation to flash a roll."

She caught the possible implication and

her eyes went wide. "Oh, Mr. Doyle. You don't think—?"

I patted her hand. "Emphatically not. You going to drink your drink?"

She said she was not. I drank it, then asked her if Schermerhorn had happened to mention where he was staying.

She told me the Devon Arms, a flash joint across the river, and wanted to know what she could do. I asked her to call Sue, tell her I was on a case, and not to expect me until she saw me.

Elsie protested, "But we haven't a client."

"This one is on me," I told her.

I left a bill to cover the check and sweated out a cab under the Sherman marquee. A half dozen police cars, Nobby's car among them, were parked in front of 221 N. LaSalle and the usual crowd had gathered. My driver asked if he should stop and find out what had happened. I told him not to bother.

The desk clerk at the Devon Arms remembered me from a chorus-girl straight man case that I had been called in on some time before. Before I could dig the rain out of my eyes he wanted to know what Schermerhorn had done. I asked how he knew why I was there.

He told me, "Because an H.Q. man just asked for his key and went up to the room." He glanced at his scratch pad. "A Sergeant William Harris."

I thought that over. Bill Harris wasn't from H.Q. He worked out of the S.A.'s office.

The clerk added, "He's checked into room 705. But I doubt that you'll find very much. I was on the desk when Mr. Schermerhorn checked in. And all he had in the line of baggage was one of those little canvas over-night bags of the type soldiers and sailors carry."

A good looking colored girl ran me up to the seventh floor between dips into a True Love Romance Mag. "Does her husband know that she's seeing this other guy?" I asked her.

"Not yet," she told me soberly. "He—" She gave me a dirty look and banged open the door of the cage. "Seventh floor. Out, please."

Room 705 was one of those rooms they always palm off on the rural trade and

lads who aren't apt to be too particular. It was right next to the elevator and its only window opened on an air shaft.

The door was closed and either locked or bolted. I rattled the knob. "Open up, Bill. It's Tom Doyle."

Feet crossed the floor. Someone shot the bolt. I started in, stopped. Whoever the lad in the room was, he wasn't the Bill Harris I knew.

A big man, six feet and better, with black hair and black eyes, he looked like he might be a Greek. He was wearing his hat and top coat but his top coat was unbuttoned and being one of those big bellied lads plenty of white shirt front showed. "I'm afraid you have the advantage," he said. "So your name is Doyle. Am I supposed to know you?"

I said it looked like I'd made a mistake. He wanted to know what room I was looking for. I told him 705.

"Then you banged the wrong door," he said. "705 is next door. This is Room 709."

I turned, instinctively, to look at the plate on the door. It was a mistake. I sensed the blow and turned in time to take the down swing of the sap on my good shoulder instead of on the head.

Breathing hard but saying nothing he lifted the sap again.

I said, "To hell with that heifer dust," and shot him through my pocket twice.

The lead stopped him but not the sap. It slapped into my wounded shoulder and pain turned the whole room green. I leaned against the wall retching, waiting for him to sap me again.

Instead, his face grave, he laced his fingers across his belly, blood welling out between them, and walked soberly from the room. I staggered out in the hall to watch him. He considered the elevator and walked by it to the fire door. Then still holding his belly with one hand he used the other to tug at the steel door. He got it open two inches or so, fell against it heavily and slid down the door to the floor, his hand reluctantly releasing the knob.

A skinny red head in panties and bra, a hair brush in one hand, had come out into the hall. She pointed the hair brush at me and screamed, "You've killed him!"

Other doors were opening and faces peering out. I went back into Schermer-

horn's room and sorted through the stuff the Greek had dumped on the bed.

THERE was a shaving kit, a change of underwear, some socks, two campaign ribbons (both with battle stars) a presidential unit citation, a soldier's medal, and the purple heart. There were also a half dozen letters from girls with Brooklyn return addresses, a Japanese imitation of a German Walther P38, a gold handled Kamikaze dagger, and a small blood stained Japanese flag that looked like it might have been worn as a turban. It made me sick to handle them.

Benny would never tell the boys in Brooklyn how he had done it.

I went through the stuff again. What I was looking for wasn't there. I picked up the phone that had been ringing for some time.

"Yes. There were shots up here," I told the clerk. "But shut up and listen to me. Did Schermerhorn make any calls from this room?"

He said he would check and informed me a moment later that a call to Nagle 4531 was charged against him. By calling the Nagle exchange I learned the phone was listed in the name of Mr. John H. Thompson at 6007 W. Avers Avenue.

The name didn't mean a thing to me. Before I could hang up the clerk broke in again saying he had called the W. Chicago Avenue station and wanting to know if he should call the Bureau. I gave him Adams, Burson, and Connell's number and told him to call there instead. Then I went out to check on the hood.

There were ten or fifteen people in the hall but the big lad by the fire door was gone.

A nervous little man who was polishing his eye-glasses briskly told me, "He wasn't dead. He got up and walked down the stairs."

I asked why he hadn't tried to stop him. He asked, "Who, me?" He meant it.

I opened the door a crack. The Greek wasn't on the landing. Splotches of blood led down the stairs. I followed them to the basement where a frightened colored fireman was staring out the boiler room door into the rain.

"A man all shot to pieces and bleeding

something awful just walked through here," he told me.

I asked him how long ago.

He said, "Not two three minutes ago."

I thumbed the safety off my gun, turned out the boiler room light and stepped into the areaway. It was ankle deep in water. The rain slanting in silver sheets made it impossible to see two feet ahead. I walked slowly up the stone steps to the alley.

The wind on the level was worse. I had to brace myself against it. I doubted the Greek could have gone very far. He hadn't.

I found him twenty feet from the mouth of the alley, face down in a puddle. He was dead. But someone had gotten to him before I had. His pockets were tugged inside out. His sap, his gun, if he had had one, his papers, his wallet, his money, were gone. He was a stranger to me. There was nothing to give me the least inkling of who he was, what he had been doing in Schermerhorn's room, or why he had posed as Bill Harris.

CHAPTER III

CALLING ALL CARS

THE building was a two story yellow brick four-flat in a neighborhood of modest homes. The houses were rather widely spaced. A row of Lombardy Poplars that had lost most of their leaves lined the curb. I sat a moment listening to the rain on the steel roof of the cab and looking into one of the lighted windows. The living room I could see into was comfortably furnished but distinctly working class. I didn't know who the John H. Thompsons were, or thought I didn't at the time, but I did have a fair idea of their connection with Schermerhorn. Their number being the one phone call he had made it seemed logical to assume they were the parents of his dead buddy, Jack.

"You want me to wait?" the driver asked.

I told him I'd get his license if he left me stuck out in the sticks.

"It's a nasty night," he agreed.

Sitting had stiffened my shoulder and the rain hadn't helped it any. It was a job to get out of the cab. As I opened the

door a stream of water ran off the roof and down my neck. But it didn't make much difference. I couldn't be any wetter.

The name was hand-printed on a card under one of the bells. I pressed the bell three times and the inner door of the entrance hall clicked as someone in the Thompson apartment pushed a button. I missed the door on the first try and had to go back and ring again. When I did get in a tired-eyed, grizzled, man some years this side of fifty was standing in the open doorway of the left hand first floor apartment. I had evidently called him from his supper as he still held a napkin in one hand.

"Yes—?" he asked me.

His wife, a pleasant-faced woman a few years younger than he was, peered at me over his shoulder.

I knew them as soon as I saw them. It hadn't been the name Fred Able that had rung a faint bell in my mind. It had been his Cloverdale, Iowa address.

"Yes—?" Thompson repeated.

I told him, "You don't know me, Mr. Thompson. But my name is Doyle, Tom Doyle. And I was one of the private agency men called in on the Johnny Doll-Fanchon case."

He said, "Oh, I see. A detective."

He wasn't pleased. I didn't blame him. Both he and Mrs. Thompson had taken quite a pushing around from various sources for merely having the simple courage of their convictions and for refusing to be dissuaded from telling the 'truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'.

MY PART in the case had been minor. It had broken the year before when, racket rivals for years, Johnny Doll had burned down Frenchy Fanchon in Frenchy's office at the Club Cherie over Lupe's alleged affections.

The shooting had not been entirely unexpected. There had been the usual threats on both sides. But, after the smell of the cordite had burned away, it had been only natural that Johnny Doll had pleaded 'being elsewhere at the time'.

More, his alibi seemed tight. None of Frenchy's employees had seen him at the club that night. The murder gun, left at the scene, could not be traced to him. Johnny maintained that at the time Frenchy

had been killed he had been in Cal Morgan's apartment sleeping off a three day drunk. Morgan had sworn on the book this was so.

It had looked like one of those things. Then, several days after the shooting, one of State's Attorney Beamer's bright young boys uncovered the fact that on the night of the shooting a Mr. and Mrs. Thompson had reserved and occupied table No. 26 which, while well back among the potted palms and away from the dance floor, commanded an unobstructed view of the corridor leading to Frenchy's office.

An extensive press and radio campaign had brought them into Beamer's office, timid in unfamiliar surroundings, but willing to tell what they had seen.

A farm couple from Iowa, unable to work their acreage after the induction of their only son into the Armed Forces, they had recently sold their farm and settled in Chicago. Their visit to the Club Cherie had been their first and, they vowed, their last visit to a night club. And while they hadn't seen Johnny shoot Frenchy they had seen him enter the office, they had heard the shots, and they had seen him leave. They picked his picture from the gallery. They picked him out of a line-up. And he was indicted, convicted, and sentenced to die on their unbiased testimony.

I had come into the case, briefly, when Cal Morgan, admitting to me that he had merely alibied Johnny because they had been boys together and Johnny had sworn on his word of honor that he had not killed Frenchy, had hired me to check the Thompson's background for some possible flaw in their characters at which the defense could pick. But I had been unable to find one. They had lived on the south side then. And while their new neighbors had known very little about them, what they had known was good. A phone call to the sheriff of Mears County had established them, beyond doubt, as a hard-working, religious, prosperous, farm couple whom their former community had been very sorry to lose.

THE whole affair had been a headache for Morgan. Due to his political pull he had wriggled out of a perjury rap but it had cost him God knew how much money. His only gain for attempting to

give his former boyhood pal a break, had been the dubious privilege of buying the money losing Club Cherie from Frenchy's heirs at about ninety cents on the dollar, and having the fading Lupe choose him as her new 'protector'. He had told me frankly after the trial that if Johnny had been acquitted he believed that he would have shot him for getting him into the mess.

Thompson cleared his throat. "If it's something concerning Mr. Doll, I'm sorry, but—"

I got my foot in the door before he could close it. "I'm not here on Doll's behalf," I told him. "I merely want to know if a young man named Benny Schermerhorn called on you this morning."

Mrs. Thompson spoke for the first time. "He was here right after lunch. I mind I'd just cleared the dishes away." She was indignant about it. "He tried to tell us our Jack was dead. He tried to *pay* us to believe it."

"Wanted to give us eight thousand two hundred dollars," Thompson added.

I said, "But you wouldn't take it because your contention is that your son isn't dead."

"That's right," Thompson nodded. He confided; "You see that telegram from the War Department was a mistake. Oh, there's some reason for us not hearing from Johnny. Might even be that he was took a prisoner." His voice cracked slightly but his chin jutted out to compensate. "But mother and I both know that he is alive and well."

I said I was pleased to hear it. "But about young Schermerhorn. I wonder if I might come in and ask you a few questions concerning his visit here."

He looked dubious. She told me, "Of course you can. Why, you're sopping wet." What with the sapping and the jolting it had taken my shoulder had done some bleeding, enough to soak through the bandage and my shirt. "And you've been hurt. You come right in and dry out and rest yourself a piece."

"Yes'm," I said meekly.

I followed her into the Grand Rapids parlor. Thompson helped me off with my coat. She clucked like a setting hen. "Now you sit here right next to the radiator, Mr. —what did you say your name was?"

I told her, "Doyle."

Thompson brightened a trifle. "We knew a Doyle back home. Fine fellow. And a mighty good farmer, too. Could be that you are related."

I admitted it was possible. "But, now, about young Schermerhorn—"

Thompson sat down on the sofa and leaned over and tapped my knee. "You know what we been thinking?"

I said that I did not.

"We been thinking," he confided, "that money could have been an attempted bribe to get us to change our story about Mr. Doll, now that his end's come so near."

IT WAS an angle I hadn't considered. I didn't think much of it. In that case young Schermerhorn would hardly have come to me. On the other hand, Burson of Adams, Burson, and Connell had been Johnny Doll's lawyer. And the last time we had discussed the case he had admitted the office was still working on several angles in hope of at least a commutation of sentence. I asked if an Attorney Burson had contacted them recently.

Both said that he had not.

I described the Greek I had killed and asked them if they knew him. They said they did not but both brightened perceptibly when I mentioned Fred Able's name.

"Yes, we know Fred well," Thompson told me. "He farms a hundred and sixty acres just the other side of Cloverdale, up near the county line." He looked at me expectantly. "But what about Fred, Mr. Doyle?"

I told them the story as I knew it, exactly as it had happened. When I finished, her eyes were bright with tears.

"Oh, the poor boy, the poor boy."

Thompson spread his hands in a futile gesture. "It beats me," he admitted. "No one had any call to kill Fred that I know of, or the boy either for that matter." His jaw jutted out again. "But that couldn't have been Jack's money that he tried to give us. 'Cause our boy Jack ain't dead. And the War Department nor anyone else can make me believe it neither."

His wife nodded staunch agreement.

I made no comment.

"Why, say," Thompson continued. "I guess we'd know it if he was." He fished

a fat scrap book out from under the table. "And when Jack comes home he's going to get a big kick out of 'em trying to worry us so. Here, lemme show you—"

He turned a dozen pages of baby pictures, stock prize ribbons, 4H write-ups, and diplomas, pausing briefly at a page containing a picture of a good looking lad in a Marine uniform.

"That's our boy," Mrs. Thompson said proudly.

I said he was a fine looking boy and glanced at a news clipping on the opposite page.

It was a clipping from the Mears County News regretting the sale of the Thompson farm and the removal of the Thompsons to Chicago.

Thompson continued to turn pages.

"Farm work's awful hard," Mrs. Thompson told me. "That's the main reason we sold.

We didn't want Jack to have to feel obligated to work the home place when he comes back from the war."

Thompson found what he was looking for. It was an official telegram from the War Department beginning—

The Secretary Of War regrets to inform you that your son Pfc. John Thompson, Jr.—

Thompson said, "We're saving it to show Jack."

He turned the next twelve pages slowly. Each page contained a monthly government insurance check. "Just like we're saving these." His eyes were wet. "Ought to give him a laugh, eh, Mr. Doyle?"

I didn't say anything. Neither did his wife. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and looked down at his shoes. I had it then.

HE KNEW. She knew. They both knew their boy was dead. But miracles did happen. And as long as they refused to admit death openly they had a faint ray of hope to which to cling. The money didn't matter. They had plenty of money. But if they had accepted the money from young Schermerhorn, if they cashed even one of the insurance checks, that last ray of hope was dispelled. Then their boy was dead and paid for and all of their dreams

for him were dust. It was easier to pretend.

But I couldn't pretend. Four men were dead. And the Thompsons, pathetic in their grief as they were, were the only common denominator. Young Schermerhorn had been a friend of their dead boy. Fred Able had been a friend of theirs. Burson of Adams, Burson, and Connell, was Doll's lawyer.

I made one last attempt by asking, "When did you last see Fred Able?"

Thompson thought a moment. "It must be over a year. Yes, maybe fourteen, fifteen months. The last time I saw Fred was when we auctioned off our stock. He bought the bay team, and, I think, a couple of Jersey heifers."

"And you know of no reason why he should have come to see me?"

Both said that they did not.

I got up and picked up my coat. "Well, thanks for talking to me."

"Not at all. Glad to help," Thompson said. He helped me on with my coat and both he and Mrs. Thompson walked to the door with me insisting I come again. I said I would, crossing mental fingers.

The rain was still beating at the few leaves on the poplars. The hacker was slumped in his seat listening to police calls.

He straightened, grinning, as I climbed into the cab. "I was beginning to think you'd ditched me. Where now, chum?"

"That's the problem," I told him.

I WANTED to check with Nobby on both Barney and the Greek. But I needed a change of clothes. If I went home, once Sue had seen my shoulder, there would be no getting out without a scene. Then I remembered that I had a packed bag at the office and gave him the address.

He switched off the radio and ground the starter. "Some guy named Doyle," he informed me over his shoulder, "is running the cops nuts. There's a Code 32 out on him but they can't find him anywhere."

Unless it had changed in the last few hours Code 32 was murder. I said, "No kidding? Who did Doyle kill?"

The tires made soft sucking sounds on the wet pavement as he swung in a U turn.

"Some guy named Bill Harris," he told me. "A lad out of the S.A.'s office."

CHAPTER IV

H. Q. PARLEY

THERE were, perhaps, a half dozen plainclothes men in the lobby of H.Q. Several looked up as I passed but no one attempted to stop me. I rode as far as Nobby's floor with Sammy Gleason of Morals.

"I hear you killed someone, Tom," he told me pleasantly.

"So I hear," I said. "As a matter of fact, I did. But it didn't happen to be Bill Harris." I gave him the lad's description and asked if it rang any bell. He said not in particular.

There was a cluster of reporters and pic men in the corridor outside of Nobby's door. I told them I had nothing to say at the moment but would make a statement later.

Jim Cooper was on the door. He squeezed my arm as he eased me in. "Give 'em hell, Irish."

I said I intended to.

There was a tight ring of men around Nobby's desk, one of them talking earnestly and banging the wood lightly with his fist to emphasize his points.

I walked up and split the group. "Okay. Here I am," I told Nobby. "What's the idea of putting out a 32 on me? I turned that stiff in the alley in to West Chicago Avenue. And what's more, I told the desk clerk at the Devon Arms to call you at Barney's office."

He pointed the mangled butt of his cigar at Beamer. "It seems to have been his idea."

The sad sack's face turned as white as his shirt. "Now just a minute, Doyle. Let's not be hasty. It just so happened that I got there before Nobby did. And when the desk clerk told me that Sergeant Harris of my office had been killed—"

I said, "You couldn't wait to check. You had to put out a 32 on me. Why I ought to—"

I started to give him the back of my hand across the lips and someone behind me caught my arm.

"Ah ah. Mustn't hit State's Attorneys. Remember you are a papa bird now."

Sue had been crying. I took her in my

good arm. "Baby, what are you doing here?"

She said she had been listening to the radio ever since Elsie had called her. "She told me you were wounded."

"When we get home I'll prove it," I promised. "But it just so happens that I stopped in at Doc Fabers for a gauze recapping job. Also at the office for dry clothes."

The S.A. gave Nobby a dirty look. "I thought you told me you posted Turk Ginis at his office?"

I said, "He did. But Turk and I were born in the same block back of the Yards. And he was willing to take my word when I said I was on my way here."

Nobby wanted to know how my shoulder felt.

I told him, "Lousy."

BILL HARRIS had been the lad who had been pounding on Nobby's desk. He insisted on shaking hands. "Kill me again some time, Tom. I'm over in Marty's back room eighty bucks winner playing stud and the cards are just beginning to run against me when the flash comes over the band."

Beamer had recovered his composure. "So I was too hasty in putting out a wanted on you, Doyle," he admitted. "But that doesn't explain away the dead man in the alley. Why did you kill him?"

I said, "Because he tried to kill me. And don't give me that kill-crazy veteran stuff." I told them what had happened, adding nothing, leaving nothing out.

Harris suggested that after the Greek had reached the alley someone had rolled him for a drunk.

I said it sounded more logical to me that someone had been waiting for him and had turned him inside out in an attempt to delay identification.

Nobby agreed, saying that the big Greek's fingerprints weren't in the B. of I.'s files but they were checking with Washington. He wanted to know, "But why should he pick Bill Harris to impersonate?"

Beamer said that seemed immaterial to him.

I said, "Nothing is immaterial in murder. Who knew you were off duty, Bill?"

He shrugged. "Who didn't. I'm work-

ing the eight to four. Maybe fifty guys saw me over at Marty's. I think the question is, who knew that the desk clerk at the Devon Arms didn't know me?"

"We could kick that around all night," Nobby told him. He turned back to me. "The squad I sent out to Avers Avenue got there about ten minutes after you'd gone. Are those old folks really that pair of farmers who sat Johnny Doll in the chair?"

I said they were.

He reached for his phone and called the squad room. "In that case I'd better put a stake-out on the building. Although I'll be damned if I can see how anything that has happened tonight could possibly help Johnny."

WHEN he had finished with his arrangements to have the Thompsons guarded, he asked if I thought they were really crazy.

I told him, "Not in the accepted sense of the word. They know their boy is dead, has been dead for twelve months, but—"

"Fourteen months," Nobby corrected. "I checked that angle with the War Department when I checked on young Schermerhorn to make certain his papers were genuine."

I continued, "Their turning down the money that young Schermerhorn tried to give them is merely a defense fixation of some kind. By refusing to believe he's dead they're kidding themselves that—" It dawned on me what he had said. "How long did you say young Thompson had been dead?"

He fished through the papers on his desk.

"Fourteen months. I've got the exact date somewhere. Why?"

I asked Sue if she had a cigarette. She fished a crumpled one from her purse that tasted like perfume.

"Why?" Nobby repeated.

"I just wondered," I lied. Something was screwy somewhere. There had only been twelve insurance checks in the scrap book.

Beamer hooted. "Now don't try to tell me you think the Thompsons killed Barney Connell and the two men in your office."

I said frankly that I knew they had not.

Bill Harris asked, "How about a Monelli angle?"

I asked what he meant by the Monelli angle.

He said, "It's common knowledge that your testimony will send Monelli over the road. But with you out of the way he has a chance of beating the rap."

I said that might explain the attack on me but why kill young Schermerhorn and Fred Able?

He said, "You fry as hard for one as for three. And if Schermerhorn and the farmer saw Monelli burn you down—" He shrugged.

I admitted what he said was possible, but pointed out that after all it was only an arson case. The most Monelli was facing was two to ten and it hardly seemed plausible that he would go out on the big limb for that. Besides, Barney had been his lawyer. At least he'd been one of the firm.

Nobby reached for his phone.

Beamer said, "By all means bring Monelli in for questioning." He looked at me. "But I am beginning to wonder if it is possible that we haven't been able to see the mountain because it is in front of our noses."

I asked what he meant by that crack.

He addressed himself to Nobby. "A young man, a stranger to our city, walked into Doyle's office with eight thousand dollars and a fantastic story. At least, so Doyle says. A few moments later a mysterious killer, whom no one in the building saw, walked in, still according to Doyle, and for no apparent reason shot to death the young man and a client in his outer office, but only mildly injured Doyle. Cal Morgan and the police and I arrived a few minutes later to find him conscious but the eight thousand dollars gone. And not half an hour after Doyle is on his feet again, he discovers a third dead man, where again there is no known motive for murder, where again no one saw the killer. Still later a fourth man is killed. And who is on the scene this time? Who indeed but Thomas Doyle."

It was inane. It was stupid. It was Beamer.

My throat tight, I said, "So—?"

He looked at me down his nose. "So I'm beginning to wonder whether I wasn't

right in putting out a wanted on you, beginning to wonder whether it might not have been wise to search you when we first entered your office."

I told Sue, "I'm going to do it."

She said, "If you don't, I will."

Harris caught at my arm. I shook him off and hit Beamer so hard he bounced. He got to his feet with a bloody Chinese mustache screaming for Nobby to arrest me.

Nobby shook his head. "You had that coming. You've no reason to make a crack like that about Tom."

Beamer attempted to dam the claret streaming out of his nose. "He's a kill-crazy vet," he screamed. "He's money mad."

I admitted I liked money. "I like to make it. I like to spend it," I told him. "But I don't see that I'm any different from you. How many of your monthly checks have you turned back to the city?"

He screamed he'd get my license.

I said that was possible. "But you make another crack like that and I'll clip you again. I'd clip you if you were the Attorney General of the United States."

Nobby stood up behind his desk. "Cut it out, you two."

Beamer got his nose under control. "You are still suspect in my book," he told me. "And until my office has had a chance to make a thorough investigation, you stay out of this case."

I said, "No dice. That wouldn't be fair to my client."

He screamed, "You have no client."

"Oh, yes, I have," I told him. "Young Schermerhorn paid me twenty bucks to deliver the missing eight grand two hundred to Jack Thompson's parents. And until I do I still have a client and a case."

Beamer said, "You're crazy."

"Indubitably," I agreed.

Sue told him, smiling, "But he is sweet when you get to know him."

He gave her a dirty look, nodded curtly at Harris and stalked stiff-legged out of the office. Harris spread his hands in a futile gesture and followed.

Nobby sat back of his desk again. "You shouldn't have hit him, Tom. After all, he is the State's Attorney."

"It's only a matter of time," I admitted. "If he gets in this coming election I can kiss my license good-bye."

I ALMOST felt sorry for Beamer. He was a living example of the adage, to make a friend let a man do you a favor. To make an enemy do him one. He'd been grand when I'd first gotten out of the Army and opened up on my own after ten years with Inter-Ocean. But he knew, the Force knew, most of the newsmen knew, that the only reason he had gotten a second term was because when I cracked the Hartley and McDonald case I took the cash and I let the credit go—to him. And he'd hated my intestines ever since.

Cole Hooper, Nobby's second in command, cleared his throat softly. "Now—where were we?"

"Right where we started," I told him. "We have four stiff on our hands. I know why one of them died. I killed him. But I don't know what the Greek wanted in Schermerhorn's room, or what his connection was to Schermerhorn, Able, and Barney."

Nobby bit the end from a cigar. "Just what did Barney tell you over the phone?"

I repeated what I had told him earlier, adding, "I asked him what he was talking about. He said, 'murder'. Then his voice trailed off. I thought at the time it was a rib. But whoever killed him must have walked into his office right then, forced him to hang up and let him have it. No one heard the shot?"

He said they had not. Adams was out of town. Burson had stopped in to say good night a few minutes before five. Barney hadn't been at his desk. But as his coat and hat and briefcase were still on a chair in the office, the presumption was that he was somewhere else in the building and Burson had made no further effort too find him.

"Barney was dead in the washroom then."

"That's what Terry figures."

I said, "Those office walls are practically soundproof. That, and a silencer, could explain why the shot wasn't heard. But how about the receptionist? She must have made a list of his callers."

Nobby said she had. But Barney had no callers after four. However, he pointed out, that meant little as the library door opening into the hall was habitually left open during working hours so the partners

could come and go without appearing in the reception room. Anyone knowing that could have come and left unseen by the office force.

"And there is no dissension in the firm?"

"None on the surface." He bit the mangled end off his cigar and chewed it thoughtfully. "Also no fingerprints and no brass. That goes for your office, too. Damnedest case I've ever seen."

I asked if he had checked on Fred Able.

He said Cole had.

COLE told me, "His county sheriff gives him a clean bill of health. The worst thing he could say about him was that he was tight, financially, and drove a pretty shrewd bargain."

"But why should he come to see me?" I thought of what Elsie had said. "What could he have to sell me?"

Cole shook his head and said he was damned if he knew.

"The Thompsons knew him?" Nobby asked.

I said they did, at least so they had told me. I also said it seemed a trifle odd to me that if Able had known them in Iowa that he hadn't looked them up."

Cole said, "He probably intended to. As far as I could ascertain he only reached town this morning."

Nobby swore under his breath out of respect for Sue. "Which brings us right back to where we were. We have four dead men on our hands and all we really know is that they are dead."

"Well, that's a start," Sue said brightly.

She wanted to know how much longer I'd probably be, as she had called in the girl downstairs to sit with the twins at a dollar an hour. I told her I hadn't the least idea.

"Let's go back to the beginning," I suggested. "You can help us there, Jim. You talked to the starter and all the elevator boys."

Curtis said he had.

"And while no one saw anyone carrying a machine gun, they all heard the shots."

He said that was correct.

"And they are positive it was a machine gun they heard?"

He said they were, that there had been two separate blasts, a burst of three and

four the first time. And two and three the second time.

"Then where's the brass?" I asked him.

Nobby said that had been bothering him.

I pointed out, "The average person does not know the difference between the sound of a machine gun, an automatic, a revolver, and a back-fire. Where were Lupe and Beamer and Morgan while all this was going on?"

He consulted his notes, said, "Lupe was in the car. Beamer was in the lobby buying a cigar. And Morgan had walked upstairs to—"

I said, "He walked?"

Curtis looked at his notes again. "That's what I have written here. After all, the cages are pretty busy around five and Cooper's office is only up one floor."

I asked if Morgan had made a statement. He said he had. I asked him to read it to me.

He began, "I tried Cooper's door. It was locked. As he had obviously gone for the day I started to return to the car. But on reaching the stairhead I was alarmed to hear a burst of machine-gun fire on the floor above. I debated investigating and decided I had better inform the State's Attorney first. But before I could reach the lobby I heard a second burst of machine-gun fire."

I ASKED how long a time elapsed between bursts.

"Morgan says maybe ten seconds," he told me. "But other folks who heard the shots say longer."

"What the hell?" Nobby asked. "You trying to pin this on Cal?"

"Not particularly," I said. "There's no bad blood between us. But in your opinion, do you think that a former paving contractor would know the difference between machine-gun fire and a rapidly fired revolver?"

He said he doubted it.

"For the record," I told Curtis. "Just where was Morgan when this second burst was fired. How far from the lobby?"

"He was practically in it," Curtis assured me. "Kip, the starter, said he burst out the door almost simultaneously with the second burst of shots, calling that something was wrong on the third floor."

I said, "Then that takes any possible onus off Morgan. Aside from having no motive for being mixed up in this, he couldn't be in two places at the same time. But I still don't understand why there were two spaced bursts of shots."

Cole explained, "That's simple. The killer got you and young Schermerhorn with the first one and Fred Able with the second."

I said, "The hell he did. The first shots that were fired were fired at young Schermerhorn and me. And taking Cal Morgan's estimation of a lapse of ten seconds between bursts, where was Fred Able all that time, still sitting in a chair in my outer office waiting to be shot?"

Nobby pressed his palms to his forehead and ran them back over his hair. "My old mother, rest her soul, wanted me to be a priest. She—" He broke off to answer his phone, said yes three times, I see twice," and banged the receiver back into its cradle. "That," he told us, "was Washington with the report on the Greek. His name, it would seem, was Bala Gediz, alias Joe Gediz. He wasn't a Greek. He was a Turk. At the time of his arrest he gave his profession as a fry cook. And his only criminal record consists in having been picked up on a Mann Act charge in New Orleans in 1942."

I said, "Well, that clears up everything. When I surprised him in 705, Gediz was undoubtedly looking for Schermerhorn's mother's recipe for wiener schnitzel."

Sue asked Cole, "This goes on for hours."
"And often," he assured her.

I TOOK stock of what we knew. It wasn't much. But it was a start. And the solution of an involved murder case seldom springs phoenix-like from the smouldering ashes. More often than not, you have to sift through ashes and clinkers for days, damn cold ones at that.

"I'm going to call it a night," I told Nobby. "But before I do, there are three things I want to know."

He wanted to know what they were.

I told him, "Why, young Thompson's parents have only saved twelve of his fourteen insurance checks. Why the State's Attorney, who was supposed to be at a political rally at the Club Cherie, got the flash on Gediz and arrived at the Devon Arms

before you did. Third, and most important, I want to ask Cal Morgan to allow me to check through the social security records of the Club Cherie in an attempt to find out if Frenchy Fanchon ever employed Bala Gediz in the Club kitchen."

Nobby accused, "You've something on your mind."

I admitted I had, but said it was too nebulous to outline. Then I asked Sue if she could eat something.

"At the Club Cherie? Anything," she assured me.

Nobby started to argue with me, changed his mind. "Watch him, Sue," he said. "There's a lot more here than has boiled to the surface so far. In fact, I've a hunch we're handling dynamite."

She brushed my cheek with her lips. "Did you ever try to talk sense to a crazy Irishman?"

"I married him because I was tired of being alone nights. I thought we'd sit home and read to each other and talk and listen to the radio like any normal couple. And what did I get out of marriage?" She saw my grin and added, "I'll slap your face if you say 'twins'."

CHAPTER V

COLD ASHES

A THREE-STORY gray stone front not far from the Drake Hotel, the Club Cherie had begun as a speakeasy under Moran protection sometime during the '20's and had merely continued after repeal, the major changes being in the quality of the whiskey sold and a neon sign instead of a peek-hole.

As the doorman bowed us in, Lupe was singing "Laura." The crow's feet didn't show in the spotlight and she still had all of her curves. She looked like a million dollars in War Bonds. What was more, she could sell a number.

It had been some time since I had given the club a play and the new headwaiter didn't know me. He was *desolado* but if the *señor* had not made a *reservación* he would be *incapaz* to seat us.

Sue wanted to know what he had said. I said it sounded like "no."

A not too large club catering to the limou-

sine trade, most of the tables were occupied but there were a few bare covers.

She said, "Tell him you know Cal Morgan."

I said he heard that in his sleep and creased a ten dollar bill lengthways. "Stupid of me," I lied. "I remember now. I did make a reservation. The name is Doyle. Remember, I told you over the phone that I didn't care about the location of the table, that in fact I preferred it away from the dance floor."

He palmed the bill and struck his forehead with the back of his hand. "*Sí, señor.* I, too, remember now. How *estúpido* of me."

I peeled off my topcoat, gave it with my hat to the shapely blonde bandit in the check room and followed him through the potted palms to a table for two with a better view of the corridor and the kitchen than it had of the floor show.

"The steak better be good," Sue muttered. "I thought you said Morgan was losing money."

"His help make more than he does," I told her.

That was factual. He had, considering its seating capacity, paid too much for the club in the first place. The food, the floor show, the service was excellent. But name bands and good floor shows come high. And O.P.A. ceiling prices had cut his net to even less than Frenchy had taken in. And Frenchy hadn't even pretended to make a profit. His specialty had been blackmail. Trying to run the club on the level, Morgan had gone deep in the red.

Eduarado wanted to know if the table was satisfactory. I told him it was fine. It was. It was table No. 26, the one at which the Thompsons had sat on the night that Frenchy had been killed.

AS HE pulled out a chair I remarked it must be nice for Miss Lupe to have a countryman to talk to.

He told me rather wryly, "*Perdóneme, señor.* But the *Señorita* Lupe *no hablo español.*"

When he had gone, Sue asked, "Whose canary did you eat?"

"He just told me the whole thing," I told her. "And is this going to be a blow to Morgan!"

She said, "You mean Lupe is mixed up in this?"

Before I could say yes or no, a waiter put water before us and stood by to take our order. I ordered two steaks medium rare, a bottle of rye and ten shot glasses.

He took it in his stride. "Yes, sir. Very well, sir."

Sue warned me that if I got high she was, steak or no steak, going straight home to the twins. "Besides, you don't dare drink too much. You know what Nobby said."

I told her that I had no intention of pitching one.

She said, "You ordered ten glasses."

"Those are the ten little Indians," I said.

The waiter returned with the bottle and the glasses, put them on the table and started for the kitchen. I called him back, "*Garçon.* Tell Joe to rub my steak lightly with garlic before he puts it on the broiler. He knows just how I like it. Tell him it's for Mr. Doyle."

I could read his mind. He had me tabbed as a tin horn sport showing off before his girl. They get them all the time. They're the same breed of *homo sapiens* as the lads who are willing to pay twice as much for a pair of punched Annie Oakleys as they are for two on the aisle. I could see him debating calling me, then remember that tin horns tip well. "I'll be pleased to tell the cook to rub your steak lightly with garlic, sir. But our present cook's name is Leo, sir. Joe must have cooked here before my time."

Sue said, "I thought you were going to ask Mr. Morgan for permission to look through his social security records."

I said I was taking a short cut and arranged the shot glasses to suit me. A few minutes later Morgan came out of his office, started up toward the front of the place, saw us and came over to the table.

"Why didn't you have someone tell me you were here, Tom?" he complained. "I'd have had them squeeze another table in where you could see the show."

I said our table was fine.

He looked at the shot glasses and grinned. "What's the big idea?"

I said, "I'm detecting. Some lads grow orchids to stimulate their minds. Some take it in the arm. Some even write on

dominoes. But I do my best work with glasses."

He told Sue I was a card. Then he wanted to know how I felt. I told him I still felt lousy."

HE PULLED up a chair and sat down. "With your permission. Anything new on the shooting, Tom?"

I said not on Schermerhorn or Able or Barney and asked him if he had heard of the affair at the Devon Arms.

"Shortly after it broke," he admitted. "In fact I took the phone call for the S. A."

I asked him, "From whom?"

He shook his head. "The lad on the other end didn't say. All I know is that it was a man's voice and he asked me to tell the State's Attorney that there had been a shooting at the Devon Arms and he had better get over there as quickly as he could."

I poured whiskey in one of the glasses, telling him, "The dead lad's name was Bala Gediz, alias Joe. And according to the files of the F.B.I. he seems to have been a cook. You wouldn't know, offhand, if he ever worked here at the Club?"

He rolled the name on his tongue. "Bala Gediz. It's not a common name. But I can't say that I recall it. However, he might have worked here while Frenchy was running the Club."

I asked if the name would show on his social security records.

He nodded. "On Frenchy's records, yes. But they are all down in a storeroom in the basement. When I took over, I made a clean sweep. I didn't want anything that even smelled of that blackmailer." He glanced through the potted palms to where Lupe was just finishing her number. "In fact Lupe is the only hold-over. It may be she will know if this Gediz ever worked here. We'll ask her."

A waiter brought a check to the table for him to okay. He initialed it without looking at the name or the amount. "It's probably rubber," he told me. "Such a business. I wish I was back paving streets."

I said I had often wondered why he had given it up. He said he had not but that he was making more money renting his heavy road equipment such as bull-dozers and tractors and earth-moving equipment

to the government for out of the country jobs than he could make by bidding on local contracts. "They're suckers to pay the rentals, they are," he told me. "But who am I to kick a dollar in the nose?"

Lupe squealed with pleasure when she saw me. "Ees Meester Doyle." She hugged and kissed me soundly, then smiled at Sue. "An' thees ees Mrs. Doyle. I am ver' pleased to know you."

Sue said, "How do you do?"

Lupe wanted to know how I felt.

"He still feels lousy," Sue told her.

Morgan got a chair for Lupe, then nodded at the shot glasses. "Tom is detecting. He says that he does it with glasses."

She nodded brightly. "Eech glass ees stand for a suspect or for a dead man, no?"

I said she was a bright girl and she wanted to know which was which.

I touched a glass standing by itself. "This is Barney Connell," I told her. "These two over here are myself and young Schermerhorn. This is the farmer in my outer office. These two way over here are the Thompsons, the couple who saw Frenchy shot. This lone one is Bala Gediz. And these three in a line are yourself, Cal, and State's Attorney Beamer."

Morgan said testily, "I wasn't aware I was a suspect."

I LET him sweat while I sipped at the whiskey in the glass that I had designated as myself. "No, you're in the clear with the department," I told him. "In the first place why should you shoot me, young Schermerhorn, and Able? In the second place, you couldn't very well have been in my office playing trigger man and in the lobby at the same time."

He punched me lightly on the shoulder, grinning. "You son of a gun. You had me going for a minute."

"But tell me this, Cal," I asked him. "Could those shots you heard have been fired from a revolver, possibly two revolvers, rather than from a machine gun?"

Lupe said, "Positeevly not." She imitated a machine gun again. "Thees I am hear weeth my own ears."

Morgan wasn't so certain. All he would commit himself to was that he had heard a lot of shots fired in two separate bursts."

I took his glass from the three in a row and put it to one side. "Okay. We'll pull you out of the picture. Now, Luke, you tell me this."

She said, "Yes—?" uncertainly.

"You didn't get out of the car until after the shots were fired?"

"I deed not."

I picked her glass from the table. "Which would seem to eliminate you. Now, tell me this." I tapped the glass standing for Beamer. "Where did you and Cal pick up the State's Attorney?"

She wrinkled her forehead in thought. It wrinkled easy. She admitted being thirty but she was closer to forty and despite the fortunes she had spent on them, her face and her curves were beginning to sag. "Eet was not at his office," she admitted. She looked at Morgan.

He sat staring at me intently, trying to read my mind. "Tell Tom the truth," he told her without taking his eyes from my face. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

She said, "Eet was een front of 221 N. La Salle."

"But the State's Attorney was with you in the car all the time you waited for Cal?" I poised my hand over his glass.

Her eyes widened slightly. "No. He was not. He went eento your office building, he said to buy cigars."

I asked Morgan, "But he was in the lobby when you heard the second burst of shots?"

HE WAS perspiring now, sweat standing out in tiny beads on his forehead. "For God's sake stop beating around the bush, Doyle. What are you driving at?"

I repeated my question.

"I don't recall where Beamer was," he said flatly. "I do remember running out to the car to tell him about the shots and hearing Lupe say that he had gone into the building to buy cigars. Then, I believe, he joined me at the car and we went up to your office together with the building superintendent and a pair of radio car men who happened to be passing by."

I tapped the glass that was Beamer. "Now tell me this, Lupe. Was State's Attorney Beamer here in the club on the night that Frenchy was shot?"

She said she could not remember dis-

tinctly but she had a faint impression that he was.

"And what hold did Frenchy have on him?"

MORGAN pushed back his chair and got up. "That's enough of that talk, Doyle. The State's Attorney may not be perfect but—"

I pounded, "Think back. Johnny Doll was practically in the clear. He couldn't prove he hadn't shot Frenchy, but the State couldn't prove he had. The case could and undoubtedly would have dragged on for months with a lot of soiled linen being aired. Then, out of nowhere, the couple who sat at this table appeared in Beamer's office and put the finger on Johnny. When he burns next Tuesday night, the case is closed forever. If the real killer confesses Wednesday morning no one would dare to bring him to trial because of the howl that would be raised when the public learned that an innocent man had been executed."

Lupe studied my face thoughtfully.

Morgan poured himself a drink, his hand shaking so badly that he poured most of it on the table. "But I had you check on the Thompsons," he protested. "And they aren't the type who would perjure themselves."

"No. I doubt the Thompsons would perjure themselves," I agreed. "But they naturally were excited at the time and you know as well as I do that no two witnesses to a shooting ever agree on just what happened or what the lad who did the shooting looked like. And suppose they had been shown pictures of Johnny, been allowed to read his record, been told that he was a hoodlum who, having killed before, might even kill again, and that in the opinion of the State's Attorney's office, an office which they respect highly, he was most likely the man whom they had seen."

"I don't know what to say," Morgan admitted. "Johnny still swears he didn't kill Frenchy. And I saw him just the other day after his last appeal had been denied."

Lupe wet her lips with her tongue, then blew up at a wisp of loose hair. "Now I theenk back, ees come to me. Frenchy deed have, how you say, sometheeng on Meester Beamer. But what thees ees, I cannot say."

I tapped the glass that stood for Gediz. "How about Bala Gediz? Do you remember him, Lupe? Was he a cook here at the time."

She considered her answer, nodded. "Y-yes. He ees cook here on thee night of thee shooting. But we are call heem Joe. He ees beeg man, seex feet an' dark."

I nodded at the glass in the kitchen door. "And he could have seen everything that the Thompsons saw?"

Morgan said sharply, "Of course he could. My God, how blind we've been. What are you going to do, Doyle? Lay your facts in front of Nobby?"

I SCOWLED at him. "What facts? I haven't any. All I have is a theory. And it takes more than theory to pin a murder on a State's Attorney. Maybe I'm right. Maybe I'm wrong. But before I pull the cork out of the bottle I still have plenty to do."

"Yes—?" Lupe asked.

"One thing that I want to do," I said, "is check on that eight thousand dollars that was taken from my office when Able and Schermerhorn were killed. And if it was Beamer, it shouldn't be too difficult to trace the money to him. He'll be afraid to bank it, so the chances are that he'll stash it in his apartment at least for the time being. All I'll have to do is lure him out of the apartment some way and then go in and pick up the evidence."

Morgan protested, "But assuming it was Beamer who shot Frenchy, supposing he did over-persuade the Thompsons to put the finger on Johnny Doll, why should he have attempted to kill you?"

I pointed out, "Lupe said you picked him up in front of 221. That's Barney's building. Barney was talking to me when he was killed. And it could be that his killer did not know just how much Barney had told me."

The waiter brought in a heavy tray, set it on a service table and looked, hesitant, at the glasses. I told him to take them away.

"You said all you had was a theory," Morgan said. "What would you say would constitute a case against Beamer?"

I said, "Finding the money in his apartment and hearing the Thompsons admit

that he had shown them pictures of Johnny before they identified him."

"And your next move is going to be what?"

I said I was going to eat, but that if he wanted to be of help he could send someone to check through Frenchy's records to bear out Lupe's oral assertion that Gediz had worked at the club during the period in question.

"I'll do it myself," he told me.

Lupe stopped to run her fingers through my hair. "You an' your wheeskey glasses. For wan leetle minute you 'ave Lupe worried. I am theenk you theenk I do thees theeng."

She followed Morgan down the corridor.

Sue said, "I don't like that woman."

I said there was no law compelling her to like Lupe.

She persisted, "What's more, your theory that Beamer is back of all this doesn't hold water. Granted he is a skunk. Nevertheless—"

"Hush. Eat your red points," I told her.

She poised her knife over her steak. "Besides, when the headwaiter told you that Lupe didn't speak Spanish you grinned like a Cheshire cat and—"

I pointed out, "It cost us ten dollars just to sit down. The steaks and drinks will probably cost fifteen more. Then there's the tip. Now hush and let daddy gorman-dize in peace or the check comes out of your household allowance."

She gave me a dirty look. "Over my dead and bleeding body."

I glanced over her shoulder down the corridor. Lupe was standing in the doorway of Morgan's office regarding me thoughtfully.

VI

JOURNEY'S END

DAWN was a bleary-eyed dishwasher blonde climbing out of the Lake when Curtis and Cooper brought Beamer in. I could hear the little man cursing as soon as they stepped off the elevator.

Morgan cleared his throat nervously.

"I still think you ought to go home," I told Sue.

She pointed out that she had been home for some hours and that before she had re-

turned to Nobby's office she had phoned Elsie to come over and sit with the twins and the dollar-an-hour sitter from downstairs who had been sleeping so soundly that she had been unable to wake her.

Nobby said, "Let her stay."

He was nervous. He had a right to be. All I could lose was my license. He had his pension to think of.

Beamer came in handcuffed to Cooper, shaking his free fist at Nobby.

Nobby asked Curtis if they had found the money.

"Yeah," Curtis told him. "We did." He took a sheaf of bills from his pocket and laid it on Nobby's desk. "I make it exactly eight thousand two hundred and twenty dollars. We found it back of the radiator in his bedroom."

Nobby asked me if it was the same money that you g Schermerhorn had attempted to give me. I said the amount was correct, but as I didn't have the serial numbers of the bills I couldn't swear it was the same.

"Let's not bother with that right now," I said. "Maybe we do. Maybe we don't. How do you explain the money being found in your apartment?"

"I can't explain it," he admitted. "I never saw it before Cooper fished it out from in back of that radiator."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

"And I suppose you also deny that you shot Frenchy Fanchon at the Club Cherie some eleven and a half months ago."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I do."

"And of course it wasn't you who shot Barney Connell, young Schermerhorn, and Fred Able."

The little man stood on his dignity. "Don't be absurd."

"I'll try not to be," I assured him. Cole was standing in the door of the squad room. I asked him for Mr. and Mrs. Thompson.

They came in, eying Beamer warily.

I said, "You, of course, recognize the State's Attorney."

Thompson cleared his throat and said he did.

"And you don't mind repeating in front of State's Attorney Beamer the story that you told Lieutenant Nobby and myself?"

He said he did not. His story was practically verbatim with the supposition that

I have outlined to Morgan and Lupe at the Club Cherie. He and Mrs. Thompson had not intended to "come forward," as he phrased it, in the Fanchon-Doll case. But on reading that a city-wide search was being made for them, their sense of duty had won over their dislike of publicity. At their first meeting with the State's Attorney they had told him frankly that their only glimpse of the killer had been a hasty one. But, after he had shown them some dozen pictures of Johnny Doll and had told them of his previous record, they had agreed with the State's Attorney that Johnny Doll, the man already accused of the killing, had been the man whom they had seen.

I said, "And you realize that it was your testimony that convicted Doll and caused him to be sentenced to die?"

Thompson's chin jutted forward. "We do."

"And since then you have had no cause to regret your testimony?"

He started a belligerent denial of regret, changed his mind, and rubbed his chin instead, as Mrs. Thompson whispered something in his ear.

I asked her what she had said.

She hesitated, told me, "Well, it just come to me this minute that the man we identified in court and the State's Attorney are not dissimilar in looks. They are both short, slight-built, light-haired men. And we both remarked to each other the first time we saw him in his office that his face was vaguely familiar.

I expected Beamer to scream that he was being framed. He didn't. His face merely turned a dull brick red as he stared, seemingly puzzled, at Mrs. Thompson.

Morgan got to his feet. "Well, there's your case, Doyle. I'm going to get a little shut-eye."

I told him to stick around while we nailed it down a little tighter. "After all, Johnny Doll was your pal."

He said, "Yes. Of course."

I turned to Lupe. "Now you tell us, Lupe, just where it was that you picked up the State's Attorney this afternoon, rather yesterday afternoon on your way to the rally?"

She looked Beamer in the eyes as she told me, "Eet was een front of 221 North La Salle Street."

"He was just coming out of the building?"

"He was."

"Then the three of you started for the rally at the club. What caused you to turn back?"

"Meester Beamer," she said quietly. "He said he wanted to buy some cigars." She shrugged. "So, while we were in front of the building I asked Cal to go up and peek up some orchestrations that Joe Cooper promised to have ready."

"So both Cal and Beamer went into the building. But you remained in the car."

"That ees correct."

"Then how," I asked her, quietly, "did you hear the shots? How did you hear the, you know—" I put my tongue to the roof of my mouth and imitated a machine gun.

"I—" she began, and stopped.

I said, "Hard to explain, isn't it? Especially when we have ascertained by actual test while shots fired in my office can be heard in the lobby, the sound does not carry to the street."

Her palm snaked out and slapped me. "Damn you. Damn you to hell, Doyle. You've been playing cat and mouse with us all the time. You knew when you were at the club. And you'd have made the pinch right then. But you wanted to recover that lousy eight thousand dollars."

I told her, "You're forgetting your accent, Lupe."

She shook her head. "What difference does it make? What?"

I saw the knife in time to slap it from her hand. That finished it as far as she was concerned. She sank down in a chair, buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Mr. Thompson cleared his throat. "This—er—doesn't seem to concern us. So, if you don't mind—"

I pushed him into a chair so hard that its rungs creaked. It was all I could do to keep from clipping him. "Stick around. So the official telegram was a mistake, eh? So you are saving his insurance checks to give your boy a laugh."

Beamer cleared his throat. "Are you out of your head, Doyle? What's this all about?"

"A minor matter of murder," I told him. "Frenchy Fanchon's to be exact. At least Frenchy's death was the torch that touched off the whole affair."

Beamer protested, "But I didn't kill Frenchy."

I said, "I know you didn't. But you've been as big a sucker as the rest of us. A bigger one in fact. Because you convicted an innocent man on perjured testimony and when this affair breaks in the paper it will probably cost you your re-election."

He stared wide-eyed at the lad I'd pushed into the chair. "Do you mean to tell me that he, that Thompson—"

I said, "I don't know what it is but the chances are that his name isn't Thompson. And if you mean, do I mean that he killed Frenchy, the answer is don't be absurd. Cal Morgan is the lad who killed Frenchy. How about that, Cal?"

He shook his head. "No." It was difficult for him to speak. "No. I didn't kill Frenchy."

I gave him the back of my hand. "The hell you didn't. What's more, it was you who shot young Schermerhorn, Fred Able, and at me. You even had the nerve to confess it because you knew how absurd it sounded. You weren't after the eight thousand dollars. Your hide had begun to smoke and you were trying to turn off the current."

Beamer said, "But he couldn't have shot you. He was in the lobby when the second burst of shots were fired."

I shook my head. "No. He was just the other side of the lobby fire door. And he muffled the shots by shooting into a barrel of sweeping compound." I tossed the six slugs on Nobby's desk. "There's his alibi. Cole and Jim dug them out of the barrel before they went out to pick you up."

Nobby said, "Tell him about Barney."

I said, "It was Lupe who shot Barney. She was as hot as Cal was. So she walked into his office and shot him while she and Cal were supposedly waiting for you. It was Lupe without the phoney accent who told me that State 2121 had hung up and who wanted to know if she should ring them again. When I told her not to bother she recognized my voice and I automatically went on their list, they not having any way of knowing how much Barney had told me. I should have spotted it at the time but I muffed it. *I hadn't called Barney. He had called me. And there was no way on earth that any operator could tell to which num-*

ber I had been speaking unless she was reading it from Barney's dial."

Beamer persisted, "But the machine gun?"

I told him, "There was no machine gun. That was just dust in our eyes. Morgan was carrying two guns, both revolvers that wouldn't eject any brass that might be traced back to him. What's more, he has them on him now."

Morgan got to his feet, both hands plunged deep in his pockets. "That's right. I still have two guns." They said later that he was crazy. I knew it at the time. "And I'll use them if I have to," he warned us. "Lupe warned me at the club that you knew. But you threw me off with your phoney glass act. I thought you really thought it was Beamer."

I said, "So you made arrangements to confirm it, that unfortunately, for you, were observed."

He said bitterly, "More fool I did."

Beamer planted an accusing finger at Lupe. "You planted that money where Cooper found it."

Nobby shook his head in admiration. "Yes, sir. That dame will kiss anyone."

The S.A. admitted. "Okay. So when this breaks in the papers, I'm through. I've been a sucker. But if it was Cal who killed Frenchy why didn't he sit tight? What torched off this whole thing?"

I told him, "Young Schermerhorn and Fred Able." I told the story as I saw it, admitting a lot of it was guessing. "It began at the Club Cherie a year ago. Frenchy was blackmailing Cal. I wouldn't know what about. That is immaterial. What matters is that Cal stood as much as he could and then he shot him. Unfortunately there were witnesses. The Thompsons for two. Bala Gediz the cook and Lupe for two more."

Maybe Cal wanted to give himself up. I wouldn't know. But I do know that Gediz and Lupe wouldn't let him. They had found themselves a gold mine. So Lupe, I imagine, began to arrange things.

"It was easy to pin the shooting on Johnny. They did. But to make it stick they had to get rid of the Thompsons. So they did. And a pair of ringers were brought in. It wasn't difficult. The Thompsons had only been in Chicago a few days."

I STOPPED talking and there was no sound in the office but Lupe's sobbing. "Gediz killed them," Morgan said grimly. "And Lupe found this pair of half-witted, small-time, tent show actors to replace them."

Thompson showed his first flash of spirit. "We gave a good show. And if that damn farmer and that soldier hadn't shown up—"

Beamer got it and gasped. "But why didn't they just take the eight thousand dollars?"

"For the same reason they didn't cash young Thompson's insurance checks," I told him. "Young Schermerhorn wasn't a fool. He wanted a receipt. And Lupe or Morgan or Gediz had warned them *never to sign anything*. One forged signature could burn them all."

"And Able—?"

"He spotted the Thompsons as phoney the moment he saw them. But he was looking for a pay off. He tried to get them to pay off with the threat that if they didn't he would go to Johnny Doll's lawyer. He did go to Barney. He told him just enough to intrigue him. He came to me for the same reason. He wanted a three way pay-off. But the alleged Thompsons had called Morgan and he and Lupe and Gediz were caught in the same old trap. They had to kill again to cover the earlier murders."

"They killed Barney." They shot the three of us. They sent Gediz to Schermerhorn's room to make certain that his dead buddy along with the money hadn't given him a picture of his parents. I imagine Morgan saw me go in. He undoubtedly stripped Gediz later to delay identification. And he rushed Beamer to the hotel in the hope he would ball up the issue. They were working against time."

Morgan wasn't a clever killer. His eyes telegraphed his intentions. He said, "Damn you, Doyle!" and shot through his pocket—a fraction of a second too late.

"Justifiable?" I asked Nobby. He nodded. "I jammed my gun back in my pocket. All right. Let's go home," I told Sue.

She squeezed my arm hard, her eyes bright with tears.

Nobby walked to the door with us. "You look pretty white, Tom. How do you feel?"

I told him I felt fine.

*Ever Hear of a Man Getting a Blue
Ticket from Santa Claus?*



ON
COMET!

ON
CUPID!

ON PANHANDLE PETE!

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

ME AND Bulldozer are setting in the Westward Hotel coffee shop in Anchorage with Jefford and Hooper of the CAA, shooting the breeze when Jefford suddenly asks, "What's the matter with you, No-Shirt, you're as restless as a grounded pilot?"

"Me and Bulldozer just got back from the war," I answer, "and we're supposed to be changed men—nervous cases. It's

something like Alaskans who miss too many boats for the Outside, I guess."

"Nuts!" Hooper says. "A man your age is too set in his way to be changed by a war. I think I know the trouble—the war ended suddenly and after many months of high tension you feel let down. What you need is action."

"That's about the size of it," I admit, "but by the time me and Bulldozer got back here, the freeze-up has come, and everything



is shut down for the winter. In the old days a man could get a job mushing mail, but you pilots take care of all that. It's too late to put out a trap line. Most of the good trapping areas are taken. A man would have to fly in an outfit."

Jack Jefford rubs his birdman mustache and grins. "What you need is action—something a little short of war. You should taper off gradually like a man who quits drinking."

"Lead me to trouble," I answer. I'm just wise cracking, you understand. But there's a newspaper man setting next to Jefford. He don't look like he's hearing a word. He just works away on a stack of sourdough flapjacks and says nothing. But later I find out he's wired a story to his press association about a sourdough who

wants to get involved in trouble as part of war's tapering off process. You might say he must've been up against it for news to write a piece about me.

No doubt, he was, but a good newspaper man can take less and make a headline story out of it. The way he writes the piece, it is good for a laugh. His syndicate puts it out and the first thing I know it's in the Alaska papers.

Two or three days later I go over to my postoffice box expecting to find the usual bunch of bills and the box is jammed with air mail letters from Outside. I run through the return addresses fast to find out if any old friends have written, and sure enough there's one from Buck Seaton, ranger, at Rainier National Park.

Buck and his wife, Mary, took a long

and well deserved vacation once, and I guided them on a pack train trip through McKinley Park. Showed 'em Mount McKinley, the mountain sheep, the mosquitoes, and several tough bears that would have scared his pet bear, Old Lady Riley, stiff. We became good friends. Buck's letter reads:

Dear No-Shirt:

Remember Panhandle Pete, the park's buck deer? You should. You gave him a corn silk cigarette and he butted you into the Nisqually River. Well, a bunch of soldiers kidnaped him for a mascot, and he was washed overboard from an army transport off the Alaska coast. He landed on Bronson Island and is said to be alive.

Tourists are returning to the park in droves. The ski crowd is back, and the oldtimers ask about Pete. They're beginning to throw away cigarette butts a half-inch long. If Pete knew it, he would swim home.

Inasmuch as you wish to gradually reduce your speed from war's pace to normal, it seems to me that locating, capturing and returning Pete is the very thing you're looking for.

With best wishes for a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, I remain,

Yours,
Buck.

I hand the letter to Bulldozer. He reads it and says, "That's a breeze, No-Shirt. We land on Bronson Island, grab the deer and ship him south. Then what do we do? That's just a warm-up."

"I don't know about that," I answer cautiously. "I ain't so sure I want any part of Panhandle Pete. He's no ordinary deer. Some people go through life and nothing ever happens to 'em. Then others can't turn around without all hell breaking loose. That's the way with Pete—always something happening. There're other deer in the park, but *he's* the one they captured and took north."

"Let's flip a coin for it," Bulldozer says. "Heads we collect Pete and ship him south. Tails we hang around the Westward Hotel and rust." Up goes the coin. Down it comes. "Heads!" he yells.

Right then and there I should've remembered that Bulldozer has a coin with heads on both sides. "You win," I tell him, "but I don't have to consult a soothsayer to know I'm going to regret this. Jack Jefford has his personal plane, maybe we can talk him into a duck hunting trip on Bronson Island. While he's missing wing shots we'll look over the Panhandle Pete situation."

"Didn't Buck Seaton jump the gun when he wished you Merry Christmas?" he asks.

"You still do your Christmas wishing early," I tell him. "There are plenty of places in Alaska where mail can't reach a man for weeks."

That evening I write Buck Seaton, telling him we'll do our best to return his buck deer in good shape, but that there's many a slip between the cup and the lip and not to get out the band and welcome mat until they see Pete.

THE following evening the swellest voice I ever did hear asks over the telephone: "Mr. McGee, could I see you in the lobby for a few minutes? It is—quite important."

I'm old and broken down, but not so old and broken down that the knight in me doesn't want to gallop to a fair lady's aid. And this girl's plumb full of distress, though I can tell by her voice that she's making a brave effort not to show it.

I take a quick look at myself, brush off a couple of bits of dust from my shoulder, yank my necktie into place, then hurry to the lobby. She's standing at the window looking at the thermometer which is outside. She's slim and dark and not very big. She has a parka over her arm. Her suit is smart looking, and she is wearing overshoes. Well, that isn't being dressed for the trail. "I'm McGee," I tell her. "Shall we sit here and talk, or go into the coffee shop and drink black coffee?"

"It is good of you to bother with me," she says, "let's sit here, please. This Alaska black coffee makes my head swim."

We set down and she keeps twisting her gloves, and I notice an engagement ring on her finger. "First," she says getting to the point, "where is Chow Line Creek?"

"Never heard of it," I answer. "And that's an admission, coming from me. I'm

supposed to know most creeks in Alaska by their first name. Chow Line—sounds like the army."

A soldier edges over and says, "It empties into Jackpot Creek. The army had a weather station and radar deal there. According to what I've heard, the boys were lined up for chow, and got to kicking their GI boots, the way impatient men do. One of 'em kicked out a nugget. It wasn't long until the line was prospecting with their hobnails. An Alaskan dogface quit the chow line, got four empty tin cans from the garbage dump and staked a claim. The tin cans were corner monuments. He called his ground, Discovery Claim, and because the creek wasn't named, he called it Chow Line."

Somehow that warms me up all over. Alaska is still the magic land for thousands of people; and hundreds of soldiers came north with the idear of staking themselves a gold claim. I know all about the Jackpot Creek country. Years ago a cuss hit the jackpot there. A stampede follows, but it blew up because the values were spotty, and after punching several hundred holes to bedrock the stampederers concluded the values was all in the jackpot.

The creek they called Chow Line wasn't supposed to have anything. And I've a sneaking hunch the soldiers have staked hungry ground, but then again, gold is where you find it, and the old stampederers might have missed striking the Chow Line Creek gravel. As I remember, the formation was all against there being values up that way.

"What's going on up that way now, soldier?" I ask.

"The boys have enough points for discharges, so they went back to their claims whenever they could get time off, hoping to pan a little money. You know how it is, it takes time to discharge men in some of the remote spots. They figured they'd have just that much more money to spend when they got home. For once they were wrong. Mr. Whiskers worked fast. He closed the station, leaving only a guard detail to keep thieves from running off with everything, and to shovel snow off the roofs in winter."

"So the boys headed for home?" I suggest.

"That was the main idea, but some rugged-looking gents moved into the country about that time," he continues. "They were respectful as hell as long as the boys were in uniform, but as soon as they got into civilian clothes their attitude changed. They began circulating yarns and getting the boys suspicious of each other."

"The old Hitler idear," I tell him, "divide and conquer."

"Right! There were a couple of nasty fights, and when men fight, other men take sides," this soldier continues. "Now guys are afraid to go home because they're sure an old buddy will jump his ground. And some of them have been up here three years."

As a cuss who learned about claim jumpers the hard way, I can see that the tough gang that's moved in is playing a very smooth game. The bunch knows it hasn't a chance to lick a bunch of former soldiers sticking together, so it is taking advantage of nerves on edge from long association, home sickness. A few good fights will disgust some and they'll pull out. A card game here and there, with claims shoved into the pot, will get rid of the losers. Then when the veterans are in the minority the gang gets really tough and runs them out of the country.

My guess is that the Rainier Park folks will have to get along without Panhandle Pete, there's a bigger job on hand. I turn to the girl. "Where do you come in on this deal? My guess is you're engaged to one of the boys and have been waiting a long time."

"That's right," she answers. "Two years is a lifetime when you're young and full of plans."

She tells me that her name is Marie Douglas and that she's engaged to Bob Bradley, who has staked a Chow Line Creek claim. I hear the soldier mutter, "That so and so!"

I turn to him. "You haven't mentioned your name."

"Sam Kennan," he answers. He starts to add something, then chokes it back, as if it's something the girl shouldn't hear.

I can feel myself lining up with Marie, but against Bob Bradley. Why? Well, because Sam Kennan is against Bradley, and one good look is enough to convince me

Sam is a right guy. "What are your plans, Miss Douglas?" I ask.

"We planned to marry last Christmas," she answers, "but his leave was canceled. We were sure we could make it this Christmas, then this mining business came up. He's afraid someone will jump his ground if he leaves."

"Damned right they will and it'll serve him right," Sam Kennan mutters. I can see he's getting madder every minute.

"And you're coming up here to marry Bradley?" I suggest. "Well, you won't be the first girl to come along into Alaska to marry the man she loves. Deep inside you are a little scared because it is all so strange?"

"That's true," she admits, "but I'm not going back just because I'm—scared." The last word comes out hard. She hates to admit she's scared, but she's going to be honest about it. I can see Sam Kennan falling in love with her by leaps and bounds. Hell, if I was young I'd fall in love with her myself.

"Marie," I tell her, "just suppose you quit worrying. I'll find some way to get you to Chow Line Creek. Fact is, business may take me up that way."

"And fact is," she says, using my tone of voice, "I read where you wanted action, and I said to myself, 'No-Shirt McGee is our man. With him on our side, Bob will lick those claim jumpers and everything will come out okay. We'll have a Merry Christmas in the biggest sense of the word.'" Worry drops from her shoulders and she's like a little girl. "I brought along a Santa Claus outfit, thinking the boys would like the old touch of Christmas at home. And certainly we can find reindeer up here. You know, 'On Comet! On Cupid!' and Dasher and all that."

"You'll have reindeer and Santa Claus if I have to be Santa myself," I promise her.

Bulldozer speaks for the first time. "With your shape, No-Shirt, you'd make a better reindeer than Santa Claus."

"Enjoy yourself, Marie," I tell her, ignoring Bulldozer's remark, "while I get organized." Then I motion Kennan to follow me to my room. I give him a drink and a good cigar, then say, "Now give me the lowdown."

"BOB BRADLEY and I used to be pretty close," he says. "I know all about Marie. I've seen her picture above his cot a thousand times. Maybe it is because in the army someone does your thinking for you. You're told what to do, and you can't make any personal plans. But it seems to me Bob Bradley's true character didn't come out until he was honorably discharged. Then he's another guy entirely. He forgets that he's no longer a sergeant, but just another civilian. He gets annoyed when the guys won't fall in line with his plan to pool their claims, form a company and work the claims as a unit."

"I think it is a good idear," I tell him. "It cuts down the overhead and you save duplication, which means a bigger pay-off."

"Yeah," he answers, and there's plenty of intelligence in his eyes, "it's a good idea when a man's claim isn't worth a damn. And, as you miners say, Bob Bradley staked hungry ground. Well, seeing Marie has changed my mind, I'm going back. I'm going to lick that guy, show him up for what he is and keep her from marrying Bradley."

"She's got plenty of horse sense. If she sees what he really is, she'll change her mind. The hell of it is, though, if I hang around her too much, I'll fall in love with her."

"And if you're the man I think you are," I tell him, "and she sees enough of you, she might fall in love with you."

"No such luck," he says. But I can see the idear pleases him.

"Now, Sam," I tell him, "you've given me a fair picture of a couple of veteran factions making a play for control of a nice bunch of mining claims. But you haven't said much about the tough mugs that you expect is going to jump the veterans' ground."

"Bob Bradley's thrown in with one outsider," Sam answers. "He's probably not a claim jumper, though. He's a mild little man. He looks like the oldtime vaudeville rube, even to chin whiskers. Has a kind of dumb, innocent expression in his eyes. He knows the practical side of mining, and he's the one who tipped Bradley off about his claim being worthless."

I take a long pull at my cigar, then open a bag and dig out a well-worked leather

case. It is the No-Shirt McGee Rogues Gallery. In it are pictures of men who will cut your throat with a sharp knife blade and make a neat job of it; and of other men who'll use a rough blade and have no sense of neatness. There are birds you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley; and others who wouldn't double-cross their own mother—unless she had a poke of gold.

I've an idear Bradley's man is in there. "Look through these pictures, Sam, and tell me if you recognize any of those faces."

He works through them slowly, because there are some mighty interesting faces among them. "Here he is!" Sam exclaims. "His name is Kenwood."

"That's as good as any," I admit. "Us oldtimers know him better as Deacon Davis."

"A crook, eh?"

"He never served a day in jail in his life," I answer. "You must be careful who you call a crook or they'll sue you for slander."

This Sam is pretty smart. He gives me a long, searching look, then says, "Okay, he's a pillar of the church, but for my dough he's a crook that hasn't been caught. When I arrived in this man's town, my whole thought was to get home for Christmas. I've changed my mind. I'm taking a plane back to Chow Line Creek. What'll it cost? I've got three years' pay salted away. I can swing a plane ride."

"The thing to do," I tell him, "is to look up some charter pilot. You'll find 'em in most Alaskan towns—good, reliable men who know their business. If you can find three or four more heading for Chow Line, it'll cut costs."

"Thanks for tipping me off, Mr. McGee," he says, "here's where I start rolling. I'm going to gamble. I'm suggesting that Marie Douglas fly in with me. The sooner she meets Bob Bradley, the better."

"Son, you are gambling," I tell him. "She's planning to be married by Christmas."

"There're no padres, civilian preachers nor United States commissioners at Chow Line," he answers, "so they'll have to fly out to get married. And my hunch is, Bob Bradley is going to be too busy to fly out—even to get married." He shakes hands and disappears. When I see him

again, he and Marie are talking to an Alaska-Asiatic Airways pilot, Eddie Zale. It is a small line with a big name and some of the best contact and instrument pilots in the North.

JACK JEFFORD pokes his head into my room late that night. "I'm out to Bronson Island," he says. "A friend has a deal to round up some of the beef on the island, butcher the fattest critters and fly the meat to mining camps. He wants my opinion on possible airstrips. It's a chance to check on Panhandle Pete. Or are you flying to Chow Line Creek—and trouble?" He grins. "When you let it be known you were looking for grief, you sure got service."

"I may not have another chance to dead-head it to Bronson Island," I tell him, "so I'll go with you. The trouble at Chow Line will keep."

"It'll get better with age," he predicts.

You never can tell when Jefford is going to take off, so I leave a note to Bulldozer and head for Merrill Field where my teeth chatter and my brain kicks the Chow Line deal around. The days are mighty short, and it's still dark when we take off and head for the Gulf of Alaska. At twelve thousand feet we put on oxygen masks, then he pours on the coal and we really climb. Somebody's told him about a hundred-mile-an-hour breeze at seventeen thousand feet. There must've been something in the report because we come down just about the time I'm comfortable, and there's Bronson Island—a bleak, ragged hunk of land surrounded by a gray sea.

When I think of how much more cheerful it is at Rainier National Park, damned if I ain't sorry for Panhandle Pete. We drop down to three hundred feet and circle the island three, four times. We see some wild cattle, but no buck deer.

Something could have happened to the buck. A fishing party might have landed, looking for fresh beef, and knocked him off. Or he might have started an argument with a wild bull and got the worst of it.

We land on a sand spit and walk to a low bluff, which is washed by the sea at high tide. "A plane, heavily loaded, could take off from here at low tide," Jack says. "Let's see what it's like on top—whether beef could be driven to within a few yards of the

spit. You can't do much back packing and make a profit."

"Who is the man with this bright idea?" I ask.

"A pilot friend, who served in the war, and wants to start a little feeder airline," Jack answers. "If he can work up a little business among the islands his future is okay."

"There're plenty of chances up here for the right kind of people," I answer, "but if the wrong kind show up, the kind that can't take it, they're licked at the start."

He takes off his coat and puts it on a rock. There's plenty of raw chill in the air, but no red-blooded guy wants a coat on during the climb. I shed mine halfway up, my red corpuscles having got redder and starting to race through my veins.

We stick our heads above the rim of the cliff. There are patches of fresh snow and a lot of good grazing land. The wild hay is pretty well flattened out by wind and rain and hasn't been touched. There're several hundred acres of it. "It sure ain't overgrazed, Jack," I tell him. "Where're the wild cattle?"

"Don't move," Jack whispers. "There's a mean-looking bull two hundred yards downwind. He smells something and that smell is us." We crouch down there and wait. My legs go to sleep, but the hell with 'em. Fishermen, getting meat, tell pretty grim yarns about the fury of the Bronson Island bulls.

"If the cattle can get this far," I whisper, "they can be slaughtered here, and the quarters lowered to the sand spit and packed to the plane."

"That problem is settled," he says, "shipping meat will depend on the tide. I wish that bull would take off."

And that's just what he did—in our direction. I went down a steep slope and into a gulch. Jack lands near by. It's an hour before we dare show ourselves. Then we have to because the tide is coming in.

"Wait'll I get my coat," Jack says, "I could have used it, crouching up there." I'd been lucky enough to grab mine as we ran for cover. He legs it up the beach and I hear him yelling. When I get there, he's pointing. The coat is torn in several places.

"Something with teeth done that," I tell him.

"My cigarettes are gone!" he exclaims.

I let out a howl of joy. "In all Alaska there's only one critter that will steal cigarettes—Panhandle Pete. Look! Hoof scrapes on the rock. But why didn't he stick around? He's crazy about human beings!"

"Probably wilder then hell," Jack answers. "He's been away from people for some time and his normal, wild instincts have taken control. Well, let's get out of here before our airstrip is covered with water."

We fly over Pete's probable hideout, but there's no sign of the deer. Trapping the big boy is going to be a problem. It's late when we arrive at Anchorage, but Bulldozer is down to the airport to meet us. "Eddie Zale took off for Chow Line Creek around noon," he says, "with Sam Kennan, Marie Douglas and a couple of miners as passengers. He'll stay there over night and return tomorrow if he can pick up a load. I told him he could fly us in there on Friday. The sooner you can cut yourself a hunk of trouble, the better. Okay?"

"Okay," I answer.

I'M packing my prospecting outfit the next day when Bulldozer barges in. "Eddie Zale didn't make it to Chow Line Creek," he says. "The plane made one stop, put off mail, took on gasoline, then headed for Frosty Pass. Eddie reports fair visibility, but icing conditions. His de-icers were going, the air was a little rough, but nobody airsick. And—that's the last heard from the plane."

Naturally I think of those famous Alaskan down drafts that sometimes make a plane lose altitude suddenly. "They're out looking for him?" I ask.

"Yes, but the Frosty Pass country is socked in. If he piled up on one of the icy ridges it may be days before the weather clears enough to sight the wreckage," Bulldozer answers, "and by that time snow may have drifted over it."

"Wheels or skis?" I ask.

"Skis," he answers. "The Chow Line strip is a make-shift, and it lacks rollers to pack the snow so Zale took a ski-equipped job."

"He'll have a better chance to set her down in bad country," I tell him. "Skis will go over places that would smash wheel.

landing gear. Marie Douglas is getting Alaskan adventure in large, sudden doses."

The next day me and Bulldozer charter a ski-equipped plane to fly us to Chow Line Creek. Frosty Pass is socked in so we fly over the mountains in a blinding snow storm, find a hole over Chow Line Creek and the pilot sets her down. A couple of charter planes are there waiting for weather to clear to resume the search. While me and Bulldozer are packing our gear to an empty cabin, a rugged fellow, with face white and drawn from worry comes in. "I'm Bob Bradley," he says, "and I'm nearly crazy. Did you see anything looking like wreckage? My girl, Marie Douglas was aboard. Game, sweet kid—coming clear up here to marry a lug like me."

He's so worked up it's sometime before we can get in a answer. "I know it's hard," I tell him, "but the chances are good somebody will spot the plane as soon as the weather clears. Hell, they may even be walking out right now. Planes pack grub, sleeping bags and camping gear."

"Yes, I know," he answers. "And I know this blasted weather can hang on for weeks without a let-up." His face grows bitter. "I should know. I've been up here long enough. I'm hitting the trail right now. I've got to do something."

"Yes, you're right," I admit. "And that *something* is conserve your strength so that you can act when the time comes. There's no sense in wasting it on wild goose searches. You go to your cabin and hit the sack."

"Me? Sleep? Hell!" he sneers. "Don't be silly." He stalks away, and I notice he keeps looking at the sky as if expecting the plane to suddenly break through the fifty foot ceiling.

"What do you think of Bob Bradley?" I ask Bulldozer.

"He's one tough cookie," Bulldozer answers. "It's too bad he ain't on the right side in this mining claim brawl. It looks as if another visitor is headed this way."

I take one look and start cussing. "It's Deacon Davis," I tell Bulldozer. "He's the dealer in this game. Bob Bradley and the others are just chips. Blue chips, maybe, but chips just the same."

Davis, looking as pious as ever, comes to our cabin, and without saying a word

looks through the window. "Huh," he sneers, "just as I thought. You're here for a long stay. Your grub pile proves that. I figgered maybe you'd learned your lesson. I've licked you enough times in the past. Guess you're just dumb."

For some reason this pleases Bulldozer. He throws back his head and roars with laughter. "And all the time, No-Shirt, you've been telling me there was one cuss in the world you could lick—Deacon Davis."

"I never told you any such thing," I yelp. "I said Deacon Davis was and is as crooked as a snake; that we'd had several run-ins and he never won out yet."

"You lick Deacon Davis?" Bulldozer roars. "That, I've got to see." Of course down deep inside I know the big cuss is having fun at my expense, but he don't know the crooked deals Davis has pulled off, and how he gets me all stirred up.

"Your own pardner knows I've licked you, McGee," Davis says. "For once in your life, be smart, and get the hell out of camp. All you'll cause around here is trouble."

"That's the stuff, Deacon," Bulldozer yells. "Tell him off."

I glance around, and notice a couple of dozen men are heading my way. Now they're not coming in ones and twos, as men do when a camp is peaceful. They're coming in two groups. It's a divided camp and there's no neutral spot for anybody. Each man has to take one side or the other.

I can tell they're mostly World War II veterans. They have a military bearing even if they ain't in uniform. I turn to Bulldozer and say in a low voice, "This kidding has gone far enough. Can't you see this is shaping up into a brawl? We aren't ready for it yet. Now get smart!"

"Sorry, No-Shirt," he answers, "I just wanted to see you two birds start swinging—and missing."

I walk over to Deacon Davis. "You ain't ready for a showdown yet," I growl. "You haven't had time to get your men stirred up to a fighting pitch, and I know it. Now get the hell out before I catch you off balance."

He's got a mean, nasty face, and crafty eyes. "Take my advice, McGee," he says, "and stay out of this game. You've no

business here." Then he walks off, but every once in awhile he looks over his shoulder and pretends to be telling me off for the crowd's benefit.

I say little as me and Bulldozer start unpacking our outfit, and finally he says, "I don't know what got into me when that buzzard tangled with you awhile back. I'm always on your side, win, lose, draw whether you're right or wrong."

"I'm glad it happened," I tell him, "because it shows how easy it is for Deacon Davis to divide good friends. Trouble starts when he shows up. It's something about the cuss. Here we have fellows who have soldiered together for years, squaring off against each other. Bulldozer, if the two factions ever start rioting it'll be the worst brawl the North has ever known. Why? Because they were trained to fight Japs. And they haven't forgotten the tricks they learned."

"What's the answer?" he asks.

"I've got to get on the right side of each faction before the blow-up comes," I answer. "And while you're putting things in order I'll start playing my hand."

THERE'S an empty building they once used as a mess hall. I find a blackboard, hang up on the outside wall, and scrawl:

MINERS' MEETING TONIGHT—

8:00 O'CLOCK.

NO-SHIRT McGEE, Temp. Charmn.

When I get there, the hall's jammed. I enter the back way and climb up on a table. One glance at the crowd is a liberal education in Deacon Davis' methods. The Davis hatchet men are scattered about the hall. Bob Bradley and his bunch are on one side, and the opposing crowd is on the other. Davis is in a corner, leaning against the wall. He's got things so well organized that he won't have to give orders. Each man knows what he's supposed to do.

"Boys," I say, "this meeting is called——"

"Who in the hell are you? What business have you got in this camp? What right have you to call a meeting? Tell us that. And don't forget to tell us about the axe you've got to grind." A red-faced

bucko I recognize as Grudge Griffin is glaring at me. He ain't Davis' ace, but he ain't lower than a jack of spades in his deck.

"The purpose of this meeting——" I begin.

"Tell us who you are," Griffin bellows.

I notice Bob Bradley slip quietly along the edge of the crowd. He comes up from behind, grabs Griffin and heaves him through a window. Bulldozer gasps in astonishment. It was done so easy. Then Bradley's cold eyes move about the room. "I don't know what this meeting is about," he says, "but we aren't going to have interruptions."

Now this isn't any part of Deacon Davis' plan. He ain't expecting Bob Bradley to give one of his ace cards the heave ho. He's sure he's tricked Bradley into thinking he's on his side. A couple of Davis' ten spots edge toward Bradley, but Davis shakes his head.

"The purpose of this meeting," I say, "is to organize searching parties to find the Zale plane as soon as the storm breaks. No sense in starting now. It's wasted effort,



but it's also a mistake to wait until clear weather to organize. You ex-service men know each other. You may have your disagreements, but in this deal you're together. You know which the rugged men are. Form them into parties to climb mountains and ridges. Let the faster, lighter men work up the frozen creeks. All of you

watch out for trees with broken tops—the sure sign of a crashing plane. Whenever you can get on a high ridge, look down for freshly cut boughs on top of the snow. Drifts may cover a wreck, but if the survivors have strength enough, they'll put out the green boughs."

Bradley comes up to me, breathing hard with emotion. "I'll never forget this, McGee," he says. "It's what we needed—organization." He gives me an even look. "Of course you're playing some kind of a deep game, but we'll skip that. As long as you're helping Marie I'm for you."

The play is in my hands from that moment. My job is to never let it get away until the whole business can be straightened out. I watch the boys get organized. Some of the Davis veteran faction join the other parties that are forming. "Maybe if I can get 'em pulling together again," I tell Bulldozer, "they'll stay together. Now you check on each bunch and tell 'em what they should take along. The mountain climbers will need ropes."

"What about stretchers?"

"Tell 'em to take canvas or tarps along. They can cut poles and make their own stretchers if needed," I answer. "Jack Jefford, or someone, is sure to fly in a dog team if anyone has to be brought out by sled. The first aid men will take along whatever they need. They won't have to be told. Now break out a map and we'll assign each party to an area."

"After this—what?" Bulldozer asks. "I've never seen two factions so suspicious of each other."

"I've a Christmas idear," I answer. "I haven't forgotten Marie brought Christmas stuff along. I'm going on the theory that she's still alive."

"I've looked around for reindeer or caribou," Bulldozer says. "We might train 'em to pull a sled, but the only things I've seen so far are a couple of moth-eaten caribou that somehow was left behind by the band."

"Get 'em as soon as you've found Marie," I answer. "We'll call 'em Comet and Cupid. I once tried to train a bunch of reindeer, and my headache lasted until the spring break-up. Now hightail it out of here. I'm busy."

Most of us tried to sleep that night know-

ing our strength would be needed in the days to come, but how're you going to sleep when you dream of wrecks; people wandering around out of their heads, or trying to reach safe spots?

WELL, it's three days before there's a break in the weather. Before our ceiling lifts we can hear planes roaring overhead searching the higher ridges. The boys don't wait, they hit for the back country.

By noon I find myself alone in camp. There's a lazy breeze blowing the fine snow about, but the visibility is good—scattered clouds moving slowly at three thousand feet. It looks like a good time to inspect Bob Bradley's mine.

I walk up-creek over the ice and stop at three or four claims. Each one has a small dump near a shaft that goes down to bedrock. I can tell inexperienced miners have put down the shafts, because the cribbing is poorly done. If a long hot spell comes and the ground thaws 'way below normal depth, there'll be cave-ins. A lot of the frozen sub-soil runs a high percent to water. Cave-ins mean death. I go down the ladders and look around. All the indications point to an ancient channel that was bringing down gold from the mother lode long before Columbus was high pressuring a queen into staking him to a westward voyage.

Bob Bradley's claim has a bigger dump than the others. I walk over to the shaft. It is covered with planks nailed to heavy beams. Someone has sealed the cover to the cribbing by pouring water around it and forming ice from twelve to eighteen inches thick. It's going to take a little work to break into the mine. I prowls around, find a pick cached under a shack, and go to work. Naturally the water worked down between the cracks and froze. This ice is hard to get at. Snooping around other men's gold claims is out of my line. I have the nervous feeling a burglar must have when he finds six locked doors to break through instead of one.

It takes me a half hour to break the planks loose and get at the ladder. Again the cribbing shows inexperienced miners done the work. But the timbering in the drifts shows a miner who knows his business bossed the drifting. One drift went

fifty feet, and another went a hundred and stopped at a dike. I turn the flashlight on the dirt. It don't look good.

I take a look at the short drift. There's every sign of hurry here, and the timbering is careless. It's the work of men who can't wait to find out whether or not there's pay, so they gamble on a cave-in. I'm down on hands and knees sizing up the gravel when I hear a soft voice. "Come out of there McGee. I've got you covered. My chance at you has been long in comin', but it's here."

I crawl out slowly and when I turn my flashlight it shows Deacon Davis holding a six-gun and flashlight on me. "It looks like you're holding trump cards," I observe, wondering how I'm going to get out of this jam.

All he has to do is bump me off, cover the shaft entrance, break the creek ice, pack a few buckets of water up to the shaft and seal it again. It may be spring before anybody even looks into the shaft. And well I know it'll be spring if Davis is running the show.

"Drop the flashlight, McGee," he orders.

"Any special place?" I ask.

"Drop it," he snarls.

I hurl it into his face and then make a dive at his legs. I hear his gun blast once, then he goes down. We're below the shaft mouth where the long and short drifts branch. There is a little room for fighting but not much. His flashlight rolls against a mass of frozen muck and stops. It gives a eerie light to the scene. I knock his gun away with my elbow, then he tries to gouge my eye with his thumb. I get my eye away in the nick of time and we roll back and forth making free use of elbows, fists and knees. Suddenly he breaks clear and tries to reach the gun. I roll to my hands and knees and take off like a sprinter when the starter's gun's fired.

My head's low and I hit him in the stomach with it, and half carry him on my shoulders to the wall. I smash him against the wall hard, three or four times, then he goes limp and drops. It's a trick I learned in my early logging camp days. Well, I've licked the cuss in a rough and tumble fight and nobody saw it—not that I wanted a crowd around, but I'd like to see the expression on Bulldozer's face. But what am I

going to do with the cuss? I can't murder him, though he has that coming.

"Don't ram me again," he groans, "you blasted goat."

"It's nice to have met you," I tell him, then climb the ladder and head back to my cabin. I'm no claim jumper, and my snooping around another man's mine was in a good cause—but try and prove it. If Deacon Davis wants to report catching me on Bob Bradley's property, then I'm in a jackpot. And if he don't report me, then my wings ain't clipped. His is the next move.

I find a mirror in the cabin and look at my face. There're no signs of battle. We'd worked mostly on each other's body. I can't recall messing up Davis' face, either, so maybe the story of the fight won't get out.

About seven o'clock I wander around camp. None of the boys has come back from the hunt yet. A plane comes in and lands. It's Jefford with my dog team. "I thought you might need it," he says. "I saw several campfires, pretty well scattered, so the search must be mighty well organized. I'm taking off while the weather is good. Got to fly the King Chris to Barrow tomorrow."

Deacon Davis saunters up, as if nothing had happened. "Everybody's out but me and No-Shirt," he says, "and we're too old to drive ourselves day and night amongst the high mountains." When Jefford's gone, he says, "McGee you should've bumped me off. You're too soft for this game. Now—I'm alive, and I ain't quittin' this camp. I'm playin' my hand out, and I think it's good enough to beat anything you've got, even includin' the cards up your sleeve." With that he starts off, but he turns, and says over his shoulder, "The way I figger it, neither of us is goin' to mention what happened in the mine."

AT DAYBREAK I'm up, watching the mountains for smoke signals that'll indicate a sled is wanted. The day passes, and a couple more, then Bob Bradley and his bunch comes in. "Got a hot meal waitin' for you boys," Deacon Davis says.

The others slap him on the back and head for the table, but Bob says, "I can't eat. My stomach is tied up in knots." Deacon throws his arm across the big fel-

low's shoulder, and suddenly he breaks down and sobs.

"That's better," the old phony says. He never misses a chance to cash in on human emotion. "You've been drivin' yourself, and are about ready to crack. A few tears will keep you from goin' plumb out of your head. There's a limit to a man's endurance—don't care who he is."

They disappear into Deacon's cabin and I join the hungry mob, and watch the eating.

The pilots come in pairs, tired and worn from their strain aloft. Everybody has followed my plan, but nobody's spotted any wreckage. "There's a big hole in a snow bridge over a crevasse," one says. "The snow could have fallen of its own weight you know, but—"

He doesn't finish, but we get the idear. In a jam, or maybe in thick weather, the pilot had to set her down. The bridge looked like a snowfield until the skis touched.

"I flew as low as I dared," the pilot says, "looking for oil smears, or bits of wreckage. I found nothing."

Bulldozer comes in at midnight. He's all in. At such times a man is whipped by the thought that even minutes might make the difference between life and death. He won't take a short rest, even though he knows it's the sensible thing to do. He thinks, "Maybe the wreck is over the next ridge." Or, "If I can stay with it until I get up that peak, maybe I can spot broken tree tops or the wreckage."

"I think they're done for," Bulldozer says. "They must be down in a big crevasse." He pulls off his moccasins. "But I'm going out again first thing in the morning."

I wake him at four o'clock, because someone has spotted two fires close together—the signal for help. "It's no plane job," I tell him. "It's good old dog team this time."

We're off without waking the camp. The crust is heavy enough so that dogs, team and men can stay on top most of the time. We get there at daybreak, and find Zale. "Two miners are down in the gulch," he says, "each with a broken foot. I'm okay, except for some scratches."

"We'll get the miners over the ridge and down to the sled," I tell Zale, "but

what about Sam Kennan and Marie Douglas?"

"My God!" he says. "Didn't they get in?" I shake my head. "They started out for help. I set the plane down on the glacier. She cracked up. Sam and the girl got us out, with sleeping bags and grub. They said they'd go for help, and I showed 'em the direction to take to get off the glacier. The snow gave way next morning, and the plane went into a crevasse. As it was no longer a landmark, I helped the two men go over bridges to solid ground. We moved at night when it was coldest and the snow bridges the strongest. I built two fires last night, but it began snowing and I knew they weren't noticed. Tried again tonight. Kennan said he knew the country. He was limping slightly but was sure he could make it to the headwaters of Jackpot Creek. He figured if he played out, the girl could go it alone because if she followed the frozen stream she'd reach the forks of Jackpot and Chow Line and would spot either light or smoke from a cabin."

We got the miners down to the sled and headed for Chow Line. Bob Bradley showed up seven miles from the camp, and he was coming like a bat out of hell. I shook my head as he came up and saw the hope leave his eyes, and misery fill them.

"Let's have the story, Zale," he said wearily. His lungs were sobbing for air.

"We'll rest until you catch your breath, Bradley," I tell him. "You're liable to frost your lungs breathing that hard in this cold air."

"If she's gone, I don't give a damn," he answers. "Okay, Zale, let's have it." It's the old sergeant barking orders again.

ZALE tells what he knows and Bradley lights a cigarette. His fingers shake and it's several seconds before the flame touches the tip. He takes several puffs. "Of all the guys she might've been with," he says, "it had to be Sam Kennan. Why'd he have to come back to the country on her plane? I thought he'd left for good." He finished the cigarette. "Okay, my mind's made up. She's in the glacier. I'm going to find her if I have to take the glacier apart." He looks slowly around. "Who's with me?"

A half dozen veterans who couldn't stand

Bradley's pace come up. "I'm with you, Bradley," one says. "That is, where the girl's concerned. But when it comes to pooling my claim in any deal of your making, I'm against you."

"The hell with the mining deal," he snaps. But deep within he ain't giving up on that. "Any damned fool can see a pooling of claims, and a single wide-scale operation means more dough for all of us." He gets up. "Let's go—whoever is with me."

"I'm with you," Bulldozer says. Several others join him. "No-Shirt, you get the injured men in," he adds, taking me to one side. "And carry out Marie's Christmas idear. I think the camp is going to need it worse than ever. Bradley's almost crazy with worry."

"I'll take care of that end of it," I agree, "and give you a free hand in the search."

"I looked at the two caribou hanging around. No respectable Santa Claus would be caught driving them. I think the moths have been working on their pelts. You've got to round up Panhandle Pete any way. Why not kill two birds with one stone—grab Pete, use him to haul a Christmas sleigh, then ship him south."

"Once in awhile, Bulldozer, your idears click. S'long."

I MUSH the injured men to Chow Line, help 'em aboard a plane, then fly with them to Anchorage. Jefford has finished the Barrow flying job and I make a deal to fly Panhandle Pete from Bronson Island to Chow Line. Then I buy Christmas stuff to replace that lost on Zale's plane. Me and Jack Jefford take off for Bronson Island the next morning.

"There's your deer!" he yells as we circle to land on the wet sand. "How're you going to catch that streak of lightning?"

"Oh I'll smoke," I answer lightly, "he'll smell burning tobacco and come up, then I'll grab him."

"That, I want to see," he says, "particularly what immediately follows the grabbing."

Well, we land, and I light up. It ain't long until the gentle breeze wafts, as the poet's say, the odor of burning tobacco to Pete. He comes mincing up. I have to admit living on an Alaskan island hasn't hurt him none. His spread of antlers would

knock your eye out and that ain't no pun. White vapor comes out of his nostrils with each breath, which gives you the idear that he's smoking hot.

I hold out a-package of cigarettes. He looks at the cigarettes, then at the rope I have in my hand. He snorts and moves a hundred feet in four or five jumps. Jack Jefford is squinting at him with one eye a slit and the other closed. "What's the matter with you?" I ask.

"I'm wondering if we can get those antlers through the plane door," he answers. "Of course we *could* saw them off."

"Saw them off!" I scream, my voice slipping from base to soprano and back again like a teen age kid's. "What kind of a Santa Claus deer would *that* be? Folks would think we'd rounded up an aged doe."

"I thought that would get a rise out of you," Jack says, "but it's a problem just the same."

A HALF hour passes, but Pete keeps his distance, then Jack comes through with an idear. "He raided my coat once didn't he? Okay, he'll do it again. I'll leave it just below that little ledge, and when he comes up and tries to get the cigarettes out of the pocket, I'll jump down and grab him by the horns and bulldog him."

"That *I've* got to see," I answer, mimicking his voice.

"You'll see it, because you'll be securing his legs while I'm holding him down," he says.

I pretend to close in on Pete and he races down the beach a half mile. Jefford caches his coat and gets on the ledge. I pretend to be interested in digging clams. Pete is a grand sight as he comes up the beach, snorting and taking mincing steps.

I can see Jack's shoulders shake. He's having a hard time to keep from busting out laughing over how surprised Pete is going to be. Pete gingerly approaches the coat, sniffs a couple of times, then tries to work his way to the pocket, tearing at the cloth with his teeth.

Jack rolls off the ledge. He's a strong man with big hands and he clamps them onto Pete's horns. Just when it looks as if Jack will throw the buck, Pete digs a front hoof into the ground. The leg looks like

a prop against a falling wall. It's a prop against a falling deer. Jack relaxes a moment, then Pete explodes and Jack's feet leave the ground.

"This isn't a private fight, McGee," he yells, "get into it!"

I'm already rushing in, but the two pass me like a breeze. Pete makes a bee line for the water. Jack's legs whip around like a surf board and he lets out a whoop as the icy water sluices up his back. I almost pass out as I jump into the drink. The water slows down Pete's movements and



I get a rope around a left hind leg, and a bight around the right front one. Jack let's go, and we spill him, keeping his head clear.

"A man of my age shouldn't get into water as cold as this," I chatter.

"There's a can of gas in the plane," he says. "Pour it onto that pile of driftwood and toss in a match. I'll handle Pete."

He tows him through the water to a point opposite the plane, then strands him. By the time the tide goes out and leaves the buck high and dry, we're pretty well dried out.

"We've got to work fast," Jack says.

And we do! We push the plane down to Pete. It's slightly downgrade on the bar, and he puts up a A-frame with block and tackle and lifts him clear. I handle his horns, gently twisting them this way and that until I get the right spread through the door. It takes another five minutes to get the left spread of horns through the door. Together we push the buck into the plane and secure him.

"This will make the Rainier Park folks mighty happy," I tell Jack. "I'll be happy if I don't catch my death of cold. And you should be happy because you have solved

another cargo-loading problem in the wilds of Alaska."

I look at Pete. He doesn't seem to give a damn. My guess is that he's a buck who likes new experiences. He doesn't seem to regret leaving an island alive with wild cattle. On the other hand he seems to be taking a plane deal in stride.

Of course he tries to stab Jack when he tries to get up forward to start the motors. And he takes a nip at me a few minutes later, but I toss a pack of cigarettes within reach and he chews away. I get into the co-pilot's seat and relax. "Just to play safe," Jack says, "we should stop at Seward and transfer this critter to a southbound steamer. As long as we have him on our hands most anything can happen and probably will."

"But he's needed at Chow Line for Christmas atmosphere," I argue, "and I think that when he gets amongst civilized people again, and is spoiled and petted, he'll say, the hell with this Call of the Wild business."

"From what you tell me, the Chow Line crowd is shaking off civilization's refinements and returning to tooth and claw life," he says.

It's late when we arrive at Anchorage, but as Panhandle Pete ain't like a dog that can be taken off and exercised, we gas up and go on to Chow Line.

Jack sets her down on the rough field, guns her and finally stops, hub deep in snow, in front of a small hangar the army has built. "End of the line," he says.

"Aren't you going to take a few days off and see what happens?" I ask. "You've been predicting the worst."

"Nope," he answers. "It's an old CAA custom to fly Christmas presents and packages to the personnel at remote stations, and that's my next job."

We open the hangar, set up the A-frame and managed to get Pete out and into the hangar. He limps around a little, like a person whose leg has gone to sleep, then he gallops around the hangar, looking for a way out. I leave feed and a pack of cigarettes for him, lock the hangar and watch Jack take off.

When I start for my cabin, Deacon Davis and a pair of his hatchet men are waiting. "What're you up to now, McGee?" he asks.

"Bringing fresh meat in to sell to the boys?"

"Hell no," I answer, shocked at the very thought of eating Pete. "You're still around, Davis, so you haven't given up your evil plans. What about Sam Kennan and Marie Douglas? Any trace?"

"No, but try and make that fool Bradley believe there's still no hope. They didn't pack grub enough to survive in this kind of weather," he says. "And his old buddies are just as stubborn. When I try to make 'em listen to reason, they always answer, 'As long as Bradley isn't giving up, neither are we'."

A COUPLE of days later Bulldozer comes in. He's convinced that Sam and Marie weren't lost on the glacier. He figgers they'd be inclined to work their way down, instead of up, and that they couldn't have fallen in the upper crevasses. It took almost a week to convince Bradley that Marie's remains weren't in the glacier.

For several days he broods, and during that time I can see some of the boys lining up against each other. Nor does mail from home seem to help any. It only reminds them of how long they've been away and they resent the fact their claims might be jumped if they turn their backs on the ground.

"It works this way," I tell some of the Bradley faction, "you can prove it is your ground, but it'll take court action if your ground is jumped. That means money. And Deacon Davis' crowd has money enough to wear you out."

They get sullen at that. One says, "Look here, McGee, Davis is on our side. It's the Sam Kennan crowd that you're so strong for that's out to do the dirty work."

"Just give me time," I answer, "and I'll prove my point. Ask anyone in Alaska, except a few like Davis, and they'll tell you I haven't any axe to grind in this deal. I don't want a cent profit. All I want is, that you two factions throw in together, and develop this ground for your mutual profit. The country needs you. My generation that's done so much in the past is dying out. I can't hit the trail like I used to. I can only cash in on my experience, or pass it along to young bucks like you. That's what I'm trying to do."

It has its effect. They figger I'm sincere, but a Davis man tells 'em I'm one of the slickest crooks that ever operated in Alaska; that many a cuss has lost his shirt because he believed in McGee's supposed sincerity. It's enough to make a man quit cold. But I've been through it before.

Early one morning a man yells, "Here they come! Here they come!" It takes about two minutes for everybody to wake up, get into some clothes and rush outside. Sure enough, Marie and Sam are coming down Jackpot Creek.

I see Deacon Davis' eyes narrow. The old devil is trying to turn the situation to his advantage. As Bob Bradley starts running toward them, Davis grabs his arm. "Don't be a sucker, Bob," he says in a low tone. I take a couple of steps nearer so I won't miss a word. "They're in good health. No sign of injury. No sign of starvation and weakness. They've been holin' up somewhere while you've been goin' crazy. Or, maybe, Kennan has held her a sorta prisoner tryin' to get on her good side. And I think he's done it. See how she takes his arm—like she liked him."

I jump in and flatten Davis with a blow. That's the wrong move at a time when I should've tried to smooth things over until we can hear Kennan's story. "Wheel!" Bulldozer yells. "I've been waiting to see you do that, No-Shirt."

Bradley, deathly white with rage, charges. Marie opens her arms and cries, "Bob! Bob!" But he brushes her aside and swings at Sam's jaw. Sam goes down, but he gets up, fighting mad. The girl is yelling, "Bob! Bob! Stop it!"

"Don't let 'em make a sucker out of you, Bob," Davis yells. I try to get at him again, but an ex-sergeant swings his arm like a club and knocks me flat.

Now Sam moves in. Bob Bradley hasn't a chance. The constant driving day and night without sleep has drained too much strength. All he has is anger and a fighting heart and it ain't enough. I can see Sam hesitate, then finally drive in a punch. Bob goes down, and he doesn't get up.

Marie's face is a conflict of emotions. She looks at Sam. And Sam gives her a tired, helpless smile and half shrugs his shoulders. Then she drops to his knees beside Bob.

"It looks to me like this is a private af-

fair," Bulldozer says, "and the rest of us should get out."

"A private affair," Davis yelps, "after the days we've put in huntin' for you two."

"We left the wreckage for help," Sam says evenly. "We got into a blinding snow storm. We kept going and got lost. Marie fell, struck her head on a rock, and got a concussion. Out of her head. Sometimes I carried her, sometimes led her. We climbed a ridge when it cleared. Visibility was probably two miles. I couldn't pick up a landmark. We'd been wandering three days then. I saw a game trail in a deep canyon. Figured it would be easier going there, and that it might lead to a creek feeding into Jackpot Creek. We followed it, and that night I found a cabin. It wasn't much, but there was a wood pile, rice, beans and flour in big tin cans. A shelf of canned stuff. Marie was raving by that time. I didn't sleep for seventy-two hours—watching her, keeping a fire going. I heard planes and thought they might spot smoke, but the overcast was low, but broken; and there was some valley fog at times, so perhaps the odds were against it."

Bob Bradley gets slowly to his feet, then stands there, his eyes burning with a savage light. "Better make it a good story, Sam," he says evenly.

Sam flushes. He turns on the others. "You've heard enough to pay for the trouble you've gone to. I'm willing that you hear the rest of it, but it's boiling down to a personal affair. The decent thing is for outsider to—drift."

"Come on," Bulldozer says. "He's right."

"You stick, Davis," Bob says. "I can use a witness."

"You stick, McGee," Sam says.

Us four men and Marie stay there. The others drift, dividing into factions, as usual. "Getting back to your crack about *making* the story good, Bob," Sam says, "It is good, without any *making* on my part. Marie, what's the first thing you remember clearly?"

"Finding myself on a bunk, with you sitting near a stove, staring at me," she answers. "Then I asked you what had happened, and you outlined the adventure. It was all news to me. I remember leaving the plane, crossing glacier ice, and that's all."

"You don't remember falling?" Bob asks.

"People often can't remember things immediately before a concussion," I say.

Bob ignores the comment, and Marie says, "I don't remember falling. I only know I was *out* for several days, and that Sam was afraid to leave me at any time for fear I might become confused and start wandering. But, Bob, I don't understand your attitude toward Sam."

"He's in love with you," Bob says evenly. "Anybody can see that. But he'll deny that, too."

"I'll deny nothing of the kind," Sam says. "I am in love with Marie. But I've never mentioned it to her. Mostly because I think she's pretty much in love with you, Bob. Now I've tried to be decent about this, Bob. I've given it to you straight. I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not. Come on, No-Shirt, my nerves are on edge from too much strain." He smiles at Marie, glances at Bob, then turns on his heel. I follow.

He doesn't say a word until we get to the cabin. "I could handle a good, stiff drink about now," he says.

"And I'm the cuss who can find it for you," I answer, opening up a bag. "How about a shot of Jack Pedestrian?"

"Swell." He downs a couple of drinks, then relaxes a little.

"What're your plans?" I ask.

"To show up Bob for the crook that he is," he says. "Him with his hungry ground trying to make a consolidation deal. Things are pretty hot hereabouts. It looks like there'd be a swell brawl."

"You don't want a brawl with guys you soldiered with all these months. It'll be a nasty affair—like brothers fighting."

"Brothers fight each other harder, when they do fight, than others," he admits. "Okay, they're asking for it. If they want to line up with Bob, they've got it coming. They should have better sense."

"You forget Deacon Davis pulling wires," I remind him.

"Then they're damned fools to fall for the old crook, and deserve a beating," he says.

Bulldozer comes in in time to catch the last remark. "Them's my sentiments," he says.

"Will you do this for me, Sam—" I ask,

though you'll really be doing yourself a favor and not me? Will you hold off your brawl until after Christmas? I'm planning a special celebration."

"Yes. We'll begin the new year with a finish fight."

"Swell!" I exclaim.

I make a bee line for Bob Bradley's cabin. "I don't trust you," he says when I outline my peace plan.

"Okay. I'll admit I'm crooked. I'm out to do you dirt. I'll bear watching. But—you've nothing to lose by waiting until January first for the brawl. It'll give you time to get your boys organized. You might even win. Of course, if you haven't confidence in yourself, let's forget the truce," I suggest.

"It's a deal. Marie wants a peaceful Christmas, naturally," he says.

"Then don't let Deacon Davis talk you out of it," I warn. "I'll take care of details."

The next morning there's a fight in front of the old mess hall. Marie stops it, which is just as well because Deacon Davis is needling his men to make trouble. She's flushed with excitement as she comes up to me. "I asked you to come to Chow Line Creek," she says, "but I never dreamed it would be like this. Everyone is so bitter, so

If there's going to be factional competition the camp might as well benefit by it."

I take a look in about seven o'clock that evening, and it's easy to see that they just about busted their necks to beat each other. They've carted stuff from the forests, and made tin stars and all that from cans. The hall is really primped up like a Dawson fancy lady.

At eight o'clock a plane with mail and gifts from Outside, dumps its cargo in the snow, and takes off like a bat out of hell.

As I get into the Santa Claus suit, Bulldozer stows the mail and presents on a sled we've made, then he hitches up Panhandle Pete and the two moth-eaten caribou. "I've blindfolded the caribou," Bulldozer says. "When I laid out your Santa Claus suit they looked scared. Funny, they live up near the North Pole, Santa Claus' headquarters, but they've never seen him. They're used to being blindfolded. That's the only way I could train 'em to pull a sled. Panhandle Pete is different. I told him what a magnificent buck he is, and he done what he was told. He's a sucker for compliments."

"I guess we're ready," I say. "I hope I can instill enough Christmas spirit in these buzzards so that they'll take the chips off their shoulders."

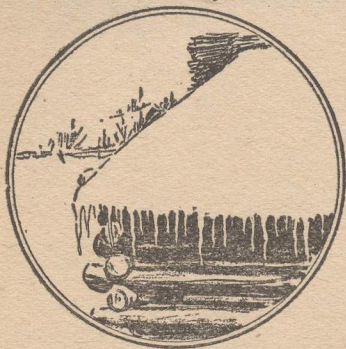
BULLDOZER hurries over to the mess hall, and opens the doors. "Santa Claus is coming," he says.

Panhandle Pete, seeing a crowd, and figuring to be the center of attraction, starts taking mincing steps, and heads for the door without any guiding. I yell, "On Comet! On Cupid! On Panhandle Pete!" And them caribous go plugging along, with their toes clicking at each step.

Into the hall we go, and there's a cheer which makes the caribou nervous, but which Pete takes without batting an eye. A soldier is smoking a cigarette and Pete takes it out of his hand with a flip of a lip.

I give a merry laugh, like Santas do in department stores, and empty my pack on the floor. I pick up packages and call off names. The fellows come up one by one. When we're almost finished I yell, "Deacon Davis."

Everybody's surprised. I give him a envelope. "In the old days, Deacon," I whisper, "as you well know, they gave a man a



savage and resentful. They're *looking* for trouble. And you can't reason with them."

"Go to each ex-service man and ask him as a personal favor to behave himself until New Year's. It's you against Deacon Davis' sly tricks," I tell her.

The day before Christmas me and Bulldozer put in the morning getting the mess hall into shape. Then we line up the two factions. "Now you Bradley guys take over decorating the right hand side. You Kennan guys decorate the left hand side," I tell them. "And no wise cracks back and forth.

blue ticket when they wanted him to quit camp. And he went. You're getting a blue ticket from Santa Claus."

"Thank you, Santa Claus," he sneers, then whispers, "but I ain't going. You quieted 'em with Christmas, but all hell will break loose before the week's out."

"Bob Bradley! Sam Kennan!" I yell.

The two come up, tense and breathing hard. "Bob," I say, "here's mail and packages for you. Merry Christmas. Now, one thing. Why did you want to consolidate all your claims, including your own?"

"It was the sensible thing to do. The boys did a good job of soldiering up here. I figured we could do as good a job at mining if we stuck together," he answers.

"Why didn't you want such a deal, Sam?"

"Because," Sam answers, "his claim was worthless, and he knew it. He was trying to take us for a ride."

"I didn't believe it was worthless, and I don't yet," Bob says evenly. I can feel the air grow tense. Marie is almost in tears. She fingers I'm spoiling everything.

"Fellow," I yell, "think hard, it's important. Who told you Bradley's claim was worthless? I know that one man told another, but we're all here, and it can be settled."

There's quite an uproar, and finally one man says, "I got it from Hank Belmont."

Hank Belmont is a Davis man. "Who told you, Hank? Come clean because a lot of veterans are waiting for the answer," I warn.

Hank hesitates, then he says, "Deacon Davis."

"And I know what I'm talking about," Davis says. "I helped Bob drive his drifts."

"My guess is," I suggest, "Bob was working on a short drift and was about to strike pay. You wanted to put him in wrong with the others and start one of your old time fights, so you had him turn to another drift, which went a hundred and fifty feet without striking pay. In the meantime your men were circulating the report that Bradley's claim was worthless. When, as a matter of fact, if Bob had stayed with the short drift he'd have struck it. I know, because I sneaked in several times after Davis caught me snooping there, thawed and panned some dirt. Merry Christmas Bob."

I hand him a package and he opens it slowly. There're a half dozen small nuggets in the box. "From my claim?" he asks.

"From your claim," I answer.

I figger he'll turn to Marie who is waiting, bright eyed at his side, but he looks at Sam Kennan. "Can you forgive a guy who went off half cocked, Sam, but who was sure he was playing square with himself all the way through?"

"A guy who'll drive himself as you did when he thought his girl was in a glacier or lost, is a right guy," Sam answered. "You can be a good winner. And where Marie is concerned, I'm going to be a good loser. For my dough, this is one hell of a swell Christmas. It does seem, though, we should clean up on Deacon Davis and his gang. They don't belong with our kind of folks."

I'm about to warn, no rough stuff, when Deacon Davis, who thinks fast when things are going against him, yanks the blindfold from a caribou's eyes. Bulldozer was right. He had never seen Santa Claus before. And he hadn't seen a Christmas tree, covered with lights, either. He snorts, and starts kicking. Now, a caribou's leg can turn a bullet, and human flesh can't do much against it.

We commence to scatter. The blindfold comes off the second caribou, and we have twice as much trouble as before. I'll never know why the first caribou went through the window instead of the door. Maybe he saw a star shining and knew what *that* was. He soars, and goes through, his horns taking sash, glass and a few splinters. His pardner is right behind his heels, then Panhandle Pete, not to be outdone by any caribou, follows. I rush out with a carton of cigarettes in my hand.

"Hey, Pete!" I yell. "You didn't get your Christmas present! Hey, Pete!"

I stand there listening to the crunch of snow. "I think he went this way," someone says.

"No, that's Deacon Davis and his gang getting out of camp," I answer, "Pete and the caribou went the other way. And it's going to be sad news for the Rainier Park folks."

"But sadder news for you," Bulldozer says cheerfully, "They'll expect you to catch him. Merry Christmas."

DRIFTER'S

. . . and a Man Earned
What He Caught!

LUCK

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

I

OLD Mississipp' was running black with drift, in chunks and pieces, in rafts and floating islands, and the tide was still rising. Drifting Sam Hayden was sure busy, driving out along the edge of that gliding flotsam, chain dogs, handy-line and towline ready to lay hold of salvage. Luck was with him. Working there at the foot of Plum Point Reach he had taken 300 logs in ones, twos, string of twenty, good for \$3 per, three assorted motorboats, nine skiffs, and a small towbarge. If the boat owners claimed the boats, he'd get better than \$1000. If they never redeemed, he'd pocket twice that, or more. This was big time driftin' for just one headrise!

A man earned what he caught. Any minute, any second, that old scoundrel river was likely to trick a man. No telling what would happen. A sawyer might jounce the heavy duty launch high into the air, smashing the bottom. A squeeze might crush in its sides, and a snag was likely to ram right through a boat, in one side out the other. A drifter took his chances, but what Sam expected never did get to happen. He felt satisfied commercially. According to the Weather Bureau, the top of the flood would come in two days, and might run level three weeks, depending on the run-off be-

hind it. Flotsam would get scattering, not much account, but worth picking over, of course.

The wind had favored Drifting Sam several times, blowing the black flotsam scattering into reverse eddies along where he was. A \$40 skiff, in fact, had been brought to his raft, gun'ales deep, but when he baled it out, he found a new boat with hardly a scratch on its paint! He had caught two good outboard motors on skiffs that were buoyed up by airtanks, though the boats were crushed beyond repair in squeezes.

He lived in a 26-foot scow-hull cabinboat. He worked with a 28-foot heavy duty, potbelly inboard launch—using a 20-horse power motor. He was out at first dawn and quit when he couldn't see. He had even snatched a strand of 60 logs into the lower end of Yankee Bar reverse eddy after dark, just making it. In five minutes more he would have been obliged to let go, or risk the Ft. Pillow bluffs caving on him, or being smashed into the high slide-bank.

He ate in the dark of the morning and again in the dark of night. He slept real good, too. But just before the crest came along he awakened, suddenly, soon after getting to sleep. Two shots stirred him up, and he listened to the echoes, *Boom—Boom*, striking back in pairs from woods of points, shores, islands. He tried to believe it was fire-hunters violating after wild geese,



deer, or shooting a 'coon to roast off yonder. He knew better—those shots were up the line along where the Curlew sisters, Autumn and Spring, had tied in for the high water. Spring had gone up to accommodate the wife of a cabinboater; Autumn was alone and looking after a big stern wheel gasoline boat two boys had caught adrift at the head of Plum Point Reach.

"I wonder who's getting killed up now?" Hayden asked himself, and went out on his stern deck, looking and shivering.

The night was solemn, quiet, clear—for a wonder; stars shone, the miles-wide water shimmered, a gang of wild geese going by high overhead—fooled by the flood into thinking spring had come—sure were talking about those shots. The drift running was thudding, squeezing, groaning; the waters were all whispering, and the overflow across the Point roared and growled, rumbling, too. Ground swells heaved the drifter's take.

"Huh, there's a shantyboat!" Hayden exclaimed, staring through his night glasses, "A scow-cabin, all dark—nobody at the sweeps! Better look out or he'll suck into the timber—git in under Ft. Pillow slips. Liable to git all tore up, snagged er crushed—huh!"

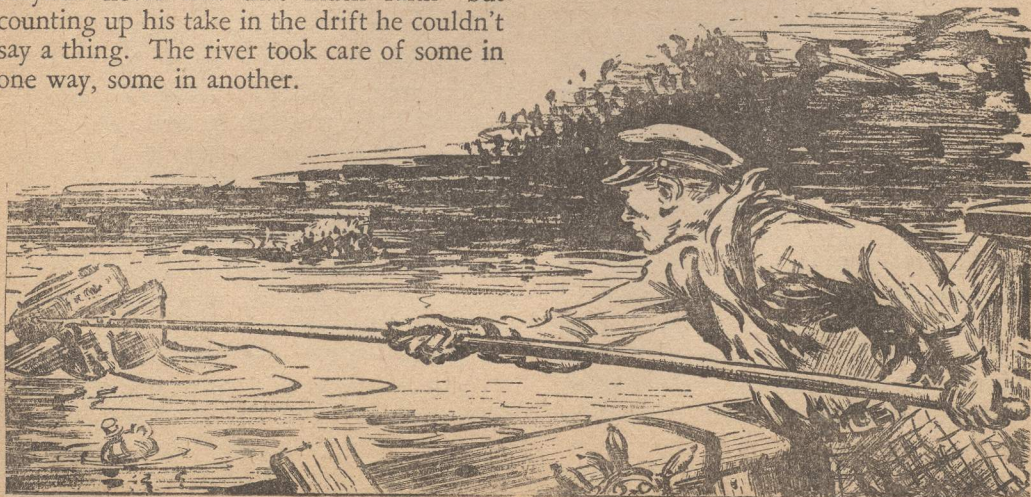
DRIFTING Sam Hayden had a notion to yell a warning, but something made him mind his own business. If this fellow wasn't an ignorant and foolish softpaw, plumb no account, he was an old timer, who knew what to expect. An old river rat would cut loose, put out his lights, and go to bed, trusting Old Mississipp' to take care of him. Hayden never had that much faith—but counting up his take in the drift he couldn't say a thing. The river took care of some in one way, some in another.

The drifter watched the shantyboat fade into the thin blue haze and night gloom. Shivering with something more than the chill, he took a sharp look around, listening for a motor pounding, oars thumping, signs of humans abroad. Sure enough, far away he caught the faint, purring throb of a small, high-power outboard motor driving, he reckoned, a fast skiff-boat or model launch. Somebody was getting away, heading up the flood—one of those night-prowlers who never show by day. Hayden licked his closed lips—not even talking to himself. Two shots—an all-dark shantyboat drifting by, a river rat heading away. Course, that wasn't any of Sam Hayden's business, that he could see!

Then a walloon laughed through the night; a ghost couldn't have been more startling than that bird hell-whooping that-away, answering the shotgun echoes. Hayden's teeth clicked—he was surprised. He knew river sounds—he had the feeling he knew that outboard motor, having heard it before. Probably it was better, considering, if he forgot all about it. Sometime he might hear the rest of it, or the truth of it—unless the river covered up.

"I don't like that shooting a bit!" Drifting Sam decided, when he drank a cup of coffee always hot on the kitchen coal stove and ate a big hardtack biscuit. He went to bed—pitched and tossed uneasily till it was time to pour sourdough buckwheat batter on the pan and start frying razorback sage-sausage for breakfast.

Assembling his flotsam take, that dawn, he dropped around Plum Point, swinging



wide of the spiles heading down to Yankee Bar and then cut across the long eddy to where he had his logs chaindogged and cable-tied to the point trees. All he had to do was cut the three 100-log strands loose and they would float out into the Yankee Bar reverse current. He strung his boats alongside, and made fast with three hundred yards or so of handyline and cable, all ready to hit out into the main current, on his way down to market.

Then, down Forked Deer Island chute he met that shantyboat he had seen the night before. It had slid out of the main current away down below, come up along the point and circled around and around. Hayden looked at it suspiciously. A nice shanty-boat, white cabin, red hull, long overhangs under bow and stern, deep and riding light—both sweeps over the bow carpinés. On the stern was a pair of fine outboards, 6-horse or so. A thousand-dollar outfit, sure enough. And then the craft turned so Hayden could see the bowdeck with the light of the sun on it right. He stood squinting and blinking, and scowled, hesitatingly. Reluctantly he reached for his glasses again and took a good look.

"Sure got 'im!" he sighed. "That man's dead, sure as hell!"

A human figure lay on the bowdeck, one knee resting on the other, and his head hanging over the far-side, arms out front; one bowsweep held high by the weight on it. Drifting Sam Hayden shrugged impatiently. The victim of midnight shotgun shooting—if that was the idea—was none of his business. At the same time, no one else was in sight. The bright morning sun shone on the tragedy and cast a purple shadow of the cabin on the yellow water. Bluejays, orioles, yellow-winged flickers were sure calling far that morning. A bald eagle was flying by, screaming once in a while, just to hear himself apparently. The river, miles and miles wide, poured by in a current hardly a mile wide above the channel. In that vast loneliness a dead human lay.

"Nobody else to do anything—I cain't leave him!" Hayden spoke resentfully. "If I don't, prob'ly when I'm done in nobody 'll be around to cyar a damn what comes o' me, either."

Just there the eddy was practically dead. Drifting Sam made sure and then ran

a handyline to a big gum tree to hold his salvage flood-tide loot while he went over to the shantyboat and circled around it, looking things over. Two charges of shot had done their evil duty, sure enough, heavy shot close up, one in the right shoulder and the other in the left chest. A line dangling over the bow from the stern bumpercleat hinted the boat had been landing in.

Man sprawled on the deck wore golf breeches, grey silk shirt, laced boots, and a jaunty felt hat. A tall, skinny, grey-head, with a bald spot on top of his scalp, a long, horse-face, wrinkling and grinning, his white teeth showed a lot of gold. Drifting Sam wondered about him a lot. Taking the line in, he made it fast to his towing bitts and headed over to the raft he had shaped up, making it fast. Then he went aboard at the stern to look things over.

He'd never seen a prettier inside on a shantyboat, all fancy wood varnish finish, kerosene cook stove, aluminum cooking utensils, 36-piece chinaware set, an oil-burner cold box! The living room had enough books to last a reader ten years. The bed was folded up. A desk, mission chairs. Lamps screwed fast, showed foresight or experience.

Yet there the owner lay on the bow deck overtaken by coarse shot!

"A devil of a note!" reflected Drifting Sam as he looked close, trying to figure how and why that murder had been done in the dark of the flood-tide night, another river killing!

No one was in sight. Nobody had ransacked the cabin. "They jus' wanted to kill 'im!" The flood was just a vacancy of rushing, glimmering yellow water dotted with drift, a snag, a belated floating island. Sam considered things which he could do, all of them likely to involve him in difficulties with up-the-bankers, sheriffs, courts, no telling what coroners' actions, what court proceedings. A man was plumb foolish mixing up with legalities—and yet what could he do? A river man would better keep out of law messes.

Of course there was one way to get rid of what a man didn't want, like this case on the bow deck of the varnished shantyboat. Old Mississipp' takes care of lots of things. Drifting Sam Hayden could see many miles up, down and across the flood.

Little swirls of grey fog appeared on the glimmering river surface, and these early ones were three feet or so high. They grew larger, like little grey dancers whirling on their toes, growing taller and taller and more and more numerous, till a thousand were in sight at once, one vanishing while two others appeared at the edges of the slicks when jets of water from the river bottom spread over an acre or two of river surface.

The stepping Harpies rose like magic over the great eddy submerging Yankee Bar, and watching them, Drifting Sam Hayden shivered, for it was like seeing spirits of the river dead veiling the details of the flood on its way to the deep blue gulf. When those tall slow swirls of fog surrounded the raft, boats and disturbing elements of Drifting Sam, he grinned. Old Mississipp' was like that. He took a hint as easy as any one in the world. In the grey and chill obscurity created by the columns of fog, he stooped over the victim of the two shots he had heard during the previous night. He made sure there was no money-belt around his waist, no quilted chest protector of paper currency, gems or gold in pads on chest and back. Finding only a few pocket trinkets, he folded the body in a tarpaulin, lashed it securely, and then chained to it a 150-lb safe door, which he had junked up the river. He slid the body and sinker onto the bow of the heavy duty launch, drove forth out over deep water in the current and gave a quick flip of the steering wheel, hard over. The launch careened sharply and on the instant the iron chunk slid overboard and, splitting the waters, went to the bottom. Thus the horse-faced victim of a river killing, without being pirated—showing he needed killing—vanished.

TWO minutes later, Drifting Sam Hayden cursed, for on looking around, the rising swirls of fog had blanketed him in midstream, where he couldn't tell which direction was which. He yelped sharply, and an echo returned in about two seconds; another came—from the left—in five or six seconds.

Then Drifting Sam chuckled, and threw in his gears, headed toward the left and a few minutes later ran into a long, narrow line of swirls—the edge of Yankee Bar re-

verse eddy. Keeping his bearings by the echoes returning from the forest brake wall along Plum Point, he followed it to where he had left his raft of logs, his salvaged craft and the varnished cabinboat.

All were there, just as he had left them. The bow deck of the murdered man's boat was varnished, in fancy natural woods, and all Sam had to do was swash buckets full of water over the red stain and then scrub it off with a broom, the deck becoming as clean as glass. No doubt about it, this was a thousand-dollar outfit. But the late owner hadn't been talked about, as he would have been if river folks had seen him.

Sam searched lockers, desk drawers, through clothing pockets—sure fine clothes! The lockers had lots of tools and repair parts, usefulls, and Sam figured \$1500 of this stuff—sport stuff. A wrist watch on a stand must have set somebody back \$200 or so—all in the works, too. The weapons in their canvas, non-rust cases were tops—a 16-gauge automatic, a 36-410 double barrel, a 25-35 carbine, a 22-special and revolvers for fun, target, business and emergencies, 22s, 32s, and 45s.

"Sure some sport!" Drifting Sam reflected, studying the works, "Must be some cash-money around some'rs, supporting all this!"

All he needed was the money and he began looking in the space under the bow, where he found air tank floats, the same as under the stern deck, against sinking. A big copper tank under the kitchen held a barrel or so of gasoline, using an air pressure faucet for filling stove and outboards. Under the living room floor traps revealed canned stuff, and galley lockers and bins held enough flour, cornmeal, buckwheat, ham, bacon, and so on to last for months. In a fancy cooler fed by a tiny gasoline flame, was fresh meat—a wild goose and three canvasback ducks, showing the old boy hadn't been squeamish about game laws.

Then at last he found the suitcase full of two-quart fruit jars—moisture proof. In one was a wide horsehide belt with three rows of small pockets containing card envelopes, not gummed on the flaps. The other glass jars were stuffed with full length bricks of currency, \$10, \$20, \$50, and \$100 denominations.

The belt envelopes each held several diamonds, ranging in size from less than

half a carat up to sparklers like little suns shining in the lamplight the coming of night had made necessary.

Sweat gathered on the brow of Drifting Sam Hayden. The rest of the evening he sat there, trembling, gulping like a fish in water from which the oxygen is exhausted.

"That old horse-faced scoundrel!" he whispered. "Who was he? I bet somebody's going to miss him—miss him ter-ble bad!"

II

LOTS of people don't believe in Old Mississipp' but they pay considerable attention to it. Rev. Mr. Clevis Curlew of the Stop Sinning Mission Boat had come to the River People, several years before when he felt discouraged and as if he wasn't of much account. He had built with his own hands a scow 60 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 5 feet deep. Every stick of timber in it he had fished out of the eddy at the foot of Linger Point, above the mouth of the Cumberland River. He had laid tight decks and erected a cabin, with movable partitions, so he could have one large auditorium or a large number of little staterooms, living quarters, and a fine galley kitchen.

A day came when the spring tide floated *The Ark* off its ways and Mr. Curlew, his wife and two daughters, Spring and Autumn, had swung on an anchor line. A 28-foot heavy duty motor launch had been among the other things that drifted into Linger Point eddy and became Mr. Curlew's charge. In view of all the different things the Ohio current brought him, Rev. Mr. Curlew claimed ownership of none of them. God had loaned him, a servant, these many things, bounty that was unmistakable, and thus he knew he was doing right leaving the meagreness of Up-the-Banks for the rich variety of Down-the Rivers.

Thereafter the Curlews had floated along the Ohio and Mississippi and up the White, St. Francis, Old Mouth Arkansaw, into The Mud Hole at Red River, and up at the Yazoo, O'Bion, and down island chutes. Rev. Mr. Curlew had meetings, Sunday and Revival, whenever occasion offered. His wife and daughters ministered with him to the fishermen, froggers, drifters, trappers, trippers, hunters, pirates, bootleggers, basketmakers, loggers, islanders and all kinds of river peo-

ple, swamp angels and humans of low degree. Sometimes the mission boat was down to corn and bacon. Generally they had plenty of fish, game, razorback, cane-beef, raccoons, fresh water terrapin and in season nuts, berries, wildgrapes, and trade-in grub and other necessities. And whoever came to the bank where they landed in, and asked for a snack, received it—even as the Curlews received in gratitude and dispensed in generous measure.

They went through the Flood of 1927, back in the Swamps of Arkansaw. Their boat was an Ark of safety for nobody ever counted how many. On the Poor Man's Levee was a kind of settlement during the highwater. To it came many people. The cooking was done mostly on the mission boat, but some of it was done up the bank on Crowley's Ridge. Cows, razorbacks, goats, some deer and right smart of small game came as provender for the refugees. Somebody built a raised hearth or fire-stand of cribbed sticks and filled with sandy clay loam. Folks gathered around this on fair days, and built a fire there. The choice chunks of meat, fat hens, other things were broiled on the coals—after which Rev. Mr. Curlew would talk in terms of peace, good will and satisfaction. Snacks of the victuals were handed around among the listeners, with salt and pepper shakers and every one ate, as the parson said, "unto the Lord from whom all blessings flow."

"Maybe these great overflows are blessings," Mr. Curlew would say, and cold unsmiling eyes would gaze at him. He was going pretty far thataway but of course he meant all right. Nobody from the Jumping Off Place to the oyster beds of Louisiana would agree unreservedly with the river missionary—of course he had a right to his own opinion, and he more than made up for any of his mistakes, if any.

Mrs. Curlew died at Big Island one evening, as the sun was going down, in the late autumn. Just three or four shantyboat women and Doc' Patton were there at the moment. No place down the Lower Mississippi was lonelier or more remote. Rev. Mr. Curlew, slumped in his chair, surged over onto his knees beside the old black walnut four-post bedstead, and wept.

"I'm not complainin', Lord!" he choked. "Thy will be done! But—but I'm going to

be terrible lonesome, now—unless You comfort me—”

And Doc' Patton who had laid off morphine for a week, clearing his mind to fight for Mrs. Curlew, went back to the stuff, and then somehow the word spread. The news went up White River, up Old Mouth and through the Cut-Off—it crossed to Rose-dale and dropped down to Arkansaw City. And the boats began to come puttering and throbbing in—boats that junked, fished, transported, light-towed and traded up and down. Came fishermen, bootleggers, hunters—honorable, feather and violators—the jump-line, hoop-net and seine fishermen, the tripping oddjobbers and trappers, professional wildcrafters of all kinds. They came and landed along the shore of Big Island, and moored two and three wide handy by. The white-whiskered old man who had stood by, comforting and helpful in the need of others, who had never failed the river rats, the river pirates, the honorable river people was not left alone in his need and desolation.

“Course, we cain't he'p him, like he come to us!” they said, “We ain't neveh had the practice, hit not bein' ouh business, that-away.”

But they brought in what they could and left smoke meat and jugs and bags full of grain and roots, bottles and demijohns—expressions and tokens of sympathy and affection beyond their words to tell. And they buried Mrs. Curlew down in Mozart Bend in the farthest back corner of the cemetery, where her grave would be the last to go if the bank ever stopped caving along there. And from beginning to end the river women wouldn't let Spring or Autumn Curlew lift their fingers to do anything. All they had to do was weep till they could weep no more.

And so Rev. Mr. Clevis Curlew and his two daughters carried on, campaigning against trouble, ignorance, hard-feelings, dissipation, misery, and all those unfortunate and difficult things that afflict the humans and mar the records. The little girls grew to be right big girls, and they were sure pretty, like twins, though they weren't.

Blue eyed, buoyant, graceful, what they didn't know about scandalous Old Mississipp' just wasn't thinkable. Muddy and treacherous, mean and queer, those two girls mocked

while they loved him—never lost their fear for him, always watched and dreaded him, yet trusted, too, the strange vagaries and unexpectedness of that running, despicable, lovable flood, come high or low water. The old man, too, loved Old Man River.

THEN one night word had come from Centennial Islands that there had been another difficulty among the scamps hanging around 35, 36, and 37.

“One feller that got cut up purty bad kind-a wants to see yo', Mist' Curlew!” a voice called to the mission boat.

“Jes' a minute, I'll be with yo'!” the old missionary declared.

So Spring and Autumn bundled their father all up for the dark, chill night ride out of Lost Chute over into the troublesome islands, with their moonshine stills, des-reputable tents, bum-boat trippers and all those sorry, shiftless, no 'count people.

The old, white whiskered man went down the side of the bowdeck of the big boat, hesitated and came back up to the two girls.

“You'll be all right?” he asked, adding, “Sure?”

“Sure!” they exclaimed, staring at him as his clear blue eyes turned toward them in the light of the jackstaff anchor lantern.

Nodding, satisfied apparently, he went away with the stranger in the open launch. He went over to the man who had been stabbed. He sat by him, holding the wounded man's hand—talking to him, till he died. Another murder had been done—course, they would do it—and the Rev. Mr. Curlew sat there a while, then he went out to the lunch room—just a shack. He refused the best Ozark 30-70 honey-white corn liquor, but took coffee.

Then he told the man who had summoned him—he was a stranger, nobody knew him—that he was ready to go. The crowd went over to the landing, appreciating the old river parson who always came—no matter who sent for him, no matter who steered the boat, pulled the oars or ran the motor.

Women and men stood there. They saw that white-whiskered old man, with serene eyes as the boatman hesitated before calling to have the line cast off. He looked around, as if realizing that these islanders—who were sure an ornery crowd, bad, mean,

rough and showing it—had, when murder had been done, paused in their dancing, drinking, and carousing to summon him.

"All right—let go!" the stranger said, and Mr. Curlew coiled the bowline as he sat in the thwart. The motor speeded up, the gears let in the propeller and the launch, heeling over, curved across the eddy and headed back for Lost Chute.

THE boat, the steersman and the missionary were never seen again, not a splinter or a hair of them. They ran out of the landing lights into the gloom of Old Mississippi, the throbbing echoes ceased. They vanished. The next day Autumn came over to the islands looking to see if her Pappy needed any help—what was keeping him.

She walked among the pirates and bootleggers, the rats and scamps, the scouters and grafters, and terrible women heard her questions, blinked and worried as they had not worried about anyone in years. They hesitated to tell the river missionary's daughter that her father had gone off in the gray night gloom with a stranger. Yet presently she heard the news—the truth—and rascals went looking up and down Old Mississippi. Word was sent to watch the sandbars—places where anything was likely to float or be thrown ashore, down below.

Perhaps the launch had sprung a leak, perhaps it had been run down by a whiskey transporter traveling dark, perhaps it was meanness—but would a missionary ever have anything worth killing him to get? As if a shadow had darkened the sun the word went up and down the line that Rev. Mr. Clevis Curlew had disappeared. Somehow, he had seemed to be a permanent institution, one of those inevitable, eternal men. But he had gone on, like all the others.

Spring and Autumn were alone on the mission boat, now. They felt suddenly trifling and puny. Excepting when they went to school up the bank, they always had lived on Old Mississippi, and its tributaries. There they had grown from girlhood into maturity. They knew they couldn't be missionaries, but they didn't know what to do. Always their father had planned and figured things out. Suddenly bereft of him, they were adrift, like wounded birds.

They cut loose and dropped down to Mendova. When they swung into Lost Hope

Bend twilight had come and there was the yellow light arched over the little front doorway far below, reading "PALURA'S." They knew that old milky-eyed, flat-faced, burly scoundrel—whose converted warehouse was up from the river and down from The Ridge, purveying amusements and food and drink to river trippers, highway tourists and local citizenry at their own risk.

The two girls had landed in against the Mud Bar and with an anchor line over the stern and two bow lines out, they were snug for the night. They had hardly more than made fast, though, than a voice hailed them and into the radius of their bowdeck light came Palura.

"Howdy, girls!" he hailed, "I heard yo' were drappin' down—somebody said yo'd landed in."

They heaved over the light landing plank and he came aboard.

"We—we were just coming in to see you, Mist' Palura!" Autumn said breathlessly. "Won't you—won't you come in by the fire an' warm?"

"I reckon!" he nodded, and there he sat opposite them across the living room stove—sat there for hours, talking about their father, about the watch kept clear to The Passes of the current, about themselves.

"I'll give yo' a job!" Palura had grinned. "Gracious!" the girls exclaimed; they work for Palura!

YET the upshot of it was, Palura got them \$2,000 for their boat—\$500 more than it was worth—and no questions asked. The two sisters also sold the heavy-duty launch used in towing and handling the mission boat, but kept a light runabout launch with a 6-horsepower outboard on the stern. For a little while they boarded up the bank, but they were river people, and went back afloat when Palura found a white-oak frame, pine hull and spruce cabin scow-cabinboat for them. It was a 28-foot, cozy craft which was small, after the big mission boat, but as easy to handle, it seemed, as a skiff, using long sweeps or driving with outboards hung on the stern.

Back on the river was like being at home again. In Mendova they had felt timid, almost afraid. Afloat things were natural and habitual. They knew the resources of the Bottoms and between the Levees for picking

up a living. The didn't need much—and they could catch catfish, croppie, carp, and lots of other fish on hook and line; they had a table-meat hoopnet; and need of game had made hunters of them, shotgun, .22-caliber rifle, and even pistols for rabbits, squirrels, any close up wildmeat. Using BB caps they could get a mess of bullfrogs any time, and they knew how to work bayous and shoal lakes for terrapin. Indians didn't know more about edible roots and plants than they did, probably. Shy as rabbits and mocking-birds, they settled down to spinster living in their little shantyboat, not sensing they weren't mission boat daughters any more, but just river girls. Palura tried to tell them they'd better look out, because it wouldn't be any time; scarcely, before the rats from up the bank would come down the river and, seeing them, not realize or care—much—that they were really mission folks.

"Hit's always a good idee for ladies, if they're pretty and real particular, to be prepared for business," Palura said. "Afteh yo've shot two-three fellers, yo'll be all right, I expect!"

"Why, *Mister Palura!*" they exclaimed, but naturally, after living so long on the river, they knew the consequences of misplaced confidence and generally kept weapons handy just in case somebody came along who didn't understand.

ACCORDINGLY, they lived along all right, minding their own business, till the January thaw mid-winter tide came along. They had dropped down out of the Missouri River, where they'd gone as high as Kansas City and crossed the Jump Off at the Ohio Mouth in late November. They had to eke out their income, catching a few furs, shooting birds, rabbits, squirrels, and gathering bushels of hickory and pecan nuts. They put down wildgrape jelly and a lot of wild berry preserves, early, and they were just having their boat loaded right down with enough to eat for all winter. They didn't mind the cold weather, and held back as soon as they were along by Tiptonville, Reelfoot, picking up enough every day to feed themselves, and fur enough for a sinking fund for clothes, a new boat and so on.

Lots of people don't realize that if they hustle every day and get three pounds of grub per person, and perhaps enough junk

or fur or trading stuff for two bits or so, they've nothing to worry about. The Curlew girls were like that—they tried to make their living every day, and a half day over for the next. That's the way they always had, and the result was they were fixed for five or ten years ahead—but they kept being foresighted, nevertheless.

Then the rains began. The first thing they knew, Old Mississipp' was in for a headrise in mid-winter. The river went out of its banks. They saw the ice coming down and the drift beginning to run. They hustled down the line, looking for a good place to tie in, and finally picked on the O'Bion below the Reelfoot Scatters to lie in during the high tide which everyone said was making.

The current carried them by so fast, though, that they swept down into Plum Point Reach—big, wide, islanded river, with a lot of wild country along the east side. They landed in against an island where they'd have good hunting, made fast with slack lines, so when the water rose they wouldn't be pulled apart, or tipped down, the way tight lines do sometimes. Then they settled down for a month or two, having plenty of grub—half a ton of stables—to live through a flood as long as it pleased.

Then along had come a pert, horse-faced, winter-tripper in a sure pretty shantyboat. It was varnished wood and select lumber outside. He had just about everything any shantyboater ever owned, and from the way he took his time along, hunting, loafing, lying, he didn't care where he went or what he did or how long it took.

As bad luck would have it, he landed in at the island where the two Curlew girls were tied in. It was big enough for several shantyboats to tie in, but he sure crowded it. He met Spring up at the head, where she was looking for a \$6 mink, and the look he gave her showed he figured she was just another shantyboat girl—pretty and not very particular. He was growing a grizzly mustache and a rabbit-tail grayish goatee, and he stepped around prancy and swagger, showing he knew he was getting kind of old and wasn't willing to admit it.

"Why, howdy!" He took off his felt hat and bowed.

"Howdy," Spring nodded her head a trifle.

And so he started a get-acquainted per-

formance. His name he said, was Carver, Cromwell Carver. He was a sportsman. He was tripping the Mississippi—having retired from business—before he got too old to enjoy living. Spring went on to the mink traps and found three dark ones—a good \$18 worth. This fancy river rat pranced along with her, and came down to the foot of the island, where he found Autumn looking him over, rifle in hand, wondering who on earth he thought he was, anyhow?

"Sisters!" he cried, "*Twin* sisters. Why—"

They listened. He spoke his best pieces, his friendliest words, his grandest ideas. Because they listened he figured he was making progress. He kept looking toward their boat, but they stayed at the top of the bank, and after a while he headed back up the island to where he had landed in. He knew from the washing on the line that there were only those two sisters. They were river girls—sporting down Old Mississippi'.

"That's fine!" was the last thing he said as he left them.

THE river kept rising, higher and higher. It flowed in over the low places of the island. It covered the towheads and sandbars. It spread wider and wider. It went out of the banks, even where it was three or four miles wide. Passersby told the Curlew girls it was raising hob all down the Ohio River, and it sure looked bad for the Lower Mississippi.

This fellow who called himself Cromwell Carver had floated in with the flotsam of the coming crest and the faster the flood came the closer down he dropped to their own eddy. An old river man would never have crowded in so close, not when he hadn't been invited in to dinner or been allowed to accommodate those two river girls buying supplies for them or helping them re-tie their lines.

A fellow who had killed a man up in Illinois was scouting over on Forked Deer chute. The girls had known him since before their father died—he stopped in for dinner one noon, happening along, and he asked if that scoundrel in the fancy shantyboat was bothering them.

"Not yet," they shook their heads.

"I notice he's kind-a hanging around," the fugitive said.

Then two drifters landed a 90-foot stern-wheel gasoline boat they'd salvaged, tying it to the outside of the island. They knew the Curlew girls, and asked them if they'd just as soon watch that boat while the two drifters went back up to their regular drifting eddy below Reelfoot. The sisters moved their boat around and earned the \$2 a day pay for serving as watchmen.

This fancy shantyboater saw passersby coming and going at the Curlew boat. Some of the river trippers stopped in at his boat and so he found out who the girls were—that they were all right, that everybody knew them. He heard that even whiskey runners stopped there sometimes for supper or to pass the time of day—even around midnight. But in spite of everything, he got the wrong idea.

The island was overflowed. The drifted gasoline sternwheeler was swinging in a deadwater under the trees. Old Mississippi was sure booming. And then nine miles up the reach a woman was sick and likely to be took bad any minute. Her husband was worried and bothered to death and he came down to ask the sisters if one of them wouldn't go stay with his woman, who was worrying about the flood and highwater.

"Sure we'll go!" the girls exclaimed, but one had to stay with the sternwheeler, and so Spring went up the line with Cypress Brake Endersly. Neither she nor Autumn thought anything special about it. Both were used to staying alone on board anywhere along the Mississippi on occasion. Of course, that was careless—but lots of people get that way when nothing special happens to them, taking chances.

So this scoundrel—Cromwell Carver, he called himself—saw Spring going up the flood with that strange man in a launch, and she had a suitcase. Carver knew about the trip—Endersly had stopped in on his way down, not knowing just where the girls were tied in.

This leaving Autumn alone in that lonesome river reach with the sternwheeler appeared to suit Carver. That night he cast off his lines and dropped down to the Curlew boat, which was about fifteen yards or so below the gasoliner in the deadwater. He didn't hail the shantyboat, or anything. He just pulled right up alongside and started to step over onto the girl's bow deck.

Then somebody on the sternwheeler let go two charges of shot with a double-barrel gun. They sure boomed big and loud in the river night, echoing around from brake to brake, back and forth. Miss Autumn jumped out of bed and ran out to see what on earth was going on. She had a gun in her hand, ready for business, of course. All she saw was Carver's shantyboat floating in the eddy close by her bow deck. Dark as it was she couldn't see much of anything else. The boat went on up the reverse current outside and swung into the main river and went on down the Mississippi.

She stood there, chilly and ignorant of what was going on—nervous and worried. Then she saw a skiff, a model hull with a dark hood over the bow, shove off from the sternwheeler and go plowing upstream, driven by a powerful outboard motor.

She thought someone must have been looting the big boat, taking brass fittings, loose stuff for junk, but in the morning not a thing was missing. Up in the bow were two empty 16-gauge shotgun shells. She couldn't make out what had happened till a rumor began to circulate off yonder that some friend of the Curlew sisters had knocked over one of those slick Smart Aleck river trippers trying to get aboard their shantyboat.

"That's all I know about it!" she told those who came along.

Of course, some thought probably she had taken good care of herself. Mostly everyone understood that some nice, modest man, or perhaps somebody who was scouting out, anyhow, had shot down this Cromwell Carver, as he called himself, just to accommodate her—or maybe pay back on account of what her father or the family had done for him.

The river echoed to a lot of talk. Anyhow, this was all there was to how come that fellow got killed up. It was just another one of those things, apparently as simple as ABC—but having complications, probably, if Old Mississipp' ever let on as to the right of it. Just a nice, friendly killing.

III

THE crest of the January thaw tide had gone by and the ebb was on. Drifting Sam Hayden was nonplussed, worried and

growing afraid. Old Mississipp' had played a big trick on him, perhaps a dirty one, and again perhaps a prank like winning a Central American or Cuban lottery prize with a pay-off in N'Orleans. Diamonds and cash money, all the diamonds in little envelopes each one marked, showing a sale price of \$35 or \$350, and on up for some whopper stones that might be hot rocks, stuff that would land a man right smack on his ear or in the pen.

Hayden was reasonably honest. Junking, he picked up anything lying around loose, of course. Once he had dismantled a distillery, which was closed down for good and sufficient reasons, the proprietor being in the pen, and the question of what to do with the copper stills being a puzzle for the attorneys and the court. The big mouths let out an awful squawk when they found every smitch of the copper gone, tons and tons of it. They had almost caught up with Drifting Sam, teaching him a lesson, and now he was always plumb careful, making sure.

A bootlegger stopped in with a lot of talk-talk which he peddled while Sam set up dinner. Pick Cane had heard the Curlew sisters, daughters of the late Rev. Clevis Curlew, river missionary, had stopped at an island up Plum Point Reach over the high-water crest. Autumn Curlew had like to have had a midnight visitor, but a bushwhacker had shot the scoundrel just to accommodate the girl. He had sneaked away, real modest, and Spring didn't know who it could be. Of course, she had lots of friends.

"That feller give his name along down as Carver, Cromwell Carver," Cane added. "'Tain't none of my business, but I see you got his boat. I got lots of paints—green, red, white, blue. You c'n daub it."

"Hit floated into Yankee Bar eddy that mornin'," Sam said. "The sunny day changed to swirl-fog dancin' maidens. When I yelled no answer came. Nobody on board. Mighty slick outfit, varnish an' oiled insides."

"Prob'ly the shot jes' blowed him to hell ovehboard," the bootlegger remarked. "Buckshot'll lift a man clean off'n his feet, they hit so hard. Nice pork, Sam?"

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed!" Drifting Sam said. "High water razorback. Hogs don't thin down so much on the ridges. How's business?"

"Wel-l-l—so-so. Trouble is the stills on the Bottoms is practically all overflowed. Hard to git stock. Take't on 35-36-37 now, along the in Centennial Cut-Off, or in that slough cross from Cairo, above Bird's P'int, theh's fifty thousand capacity out of business, right now.

"I'm takin' my stock right off'n trucks from back in the ridges. Sho' feel ridiculous, motorboat got to patronize up-the-bank transports—um-m. Well, turn 'bout's fair, I reckon."

Pick Cane went on his way. Drifting Sam thought he'd better run up the line to see the Curlew girls. They were real sensible, friendly and reliable; educated up the bank, they could advise a man, impersonally. Accordingly he cut across the point through the timber in a power launch to where the girls were acting as watchmen on the big gasoline sternwheeler.

IV

JUST before this a harum-scarum fellow had come down on the tail of the High Tide—called himself Berry Wainse. When the river lady—to whose assistance Spring Curlew had gone—had had her baby, Wainse had brought the doctor across from Carruthersville, and hung around a few days, in case of any more excitement. In that way he had become acquainted with Spring Curlew. He was inclined to be Smart Alecky, talking pretty much, and letting on that he didn't care what he did or who knew it.

"How did you get thataway?" Spring had asked him, when they were all eating a dinner on his boat. "You aren't naturally proud of being shiftless, no 'count, and plumb careless."

"What's the use of being honorable?" this Wainse demanded. "Somebody'll sure play you for a sucker. Better hook him first."

The girl looked at him, kinda sorry, kinda contemptuous, and cooling right down. If he was that kind, of course—she shrugged her shoulders.

"What happened to make you that way?" she demanded suddenly, and it was like turning on a faucet or starting a bung, the way he told her his story.

Starting out to be educated, college-bred and university-trained, the man who had advised him and whom he had trusted had

walked off with the money Wainse had saved up for his education. He couldn't graduate; he couldn't even start the new term; he was through. Well, now he was on the road—he himself would graft, steal, cheat and give as well as take it on the chin. He didn't mention the fact that he'd so far forgotten himself as to help some flood victims over on the Ohio.

"It was seven hundred and fifty dollars you lost?" Spring asked him. "This outfit you've got is worth fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars. You could sell out and go back now—"

He gazed at her, the impudent grin gone from his countenance and his eyes narrowing.

"No," he shook his head. "That John Scaller I told you about did something to me—inside. He knocked my faith in humanity in the head. I'm through. I'm a river pirate—"

"No, you're a river rat!" she retorted, shaking her head. "You prow around in the overflow, robbing people who aren't at home. You sneak in and out of pantries—"

So they had embarked on a hot and heavy argument.

"You're educated yourself!" he exclaimed suddenly. "What are you doing, pussy-cattling down Old Mississipp?"

"Father was Rev. Mr. Clévis Curlew—the river missionary," she answered, keeping her temper, for she wasn't used to explaining herself.

This conversation had taken place when Wainse was hanging around the shanty-boater's eddy till Spring Curlew was ready to go home down the Reach. When she asked him to take her down the flood, not a breath of air was stirring, the sun was shining on the golden slick of the waters and birds, whole vast flocks of birds, were singing in the trees—thinking this was the Spring Tide, the day was so gentle and balmy.

Dropping down in the flow of the miles-wide, driving runout, he turned to her and said:

"I don't believe I'll take you to your sister's; I think I'll take you right along down with me, clear to N'Orleans!"

"Do you mean it?" she asked, gravely.

"Sure I mean it—" then hesitated, adding, "I'd like to."

"Suppose you get the murder out of your heart, first."

"What!"

"You'd be a nice boy—only you want to kill this John Scaller you told me about," she said.

"Why—I never *said* so! Who told you that?"

"It's in your eyes. It crinkles your lips. It poisons your thoughts, day and night!" she told him, and a little breathlessly, she went on. "That's one thing down Old Mississipp'—if it's in you, he'll bring it out, sure 'nough!"

SHE had him. Just like that she read him. She had put him on the defensive—she always did. He didn't even wonder how she knew, now. So they swung in below the big gasoline boat and he met the other sister, Autumn Curlew. Autumn looked him up and down, doubtfully.

"Berry Wainse?" she repeated his name. "I saw your picture in the paper—up the Ohio. Then I've heard talk up and down the river. Whiskey boaters, pirates, river rats—you looked as well as saved many lives. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Berry Wainse!"

"The man he trusted—who used to advise him—stole his education money!" Spring spoke up in quick defense. "He saw him down this away in the flood—but couldn't get his gun on him—"

"What kind of a looking fellow?" Autumn asked, and shame-faced, Wainse described the man Scaller—horse-face, cat-green eyes, thin grizzled hair, and a smooth way with him.

"Honest John Scaller?" Autumn repeated thoughtfully. "What kind of a boat—?"

"I just saw it across the drift—shanty-boat riding light!"

"And you'd have murder on your soul for seven hundred and fifty dollars!"

"No—because my education, my career, the soul I had were destroyed when he broke faith with—everybody!" The boy was bitterly tense.

"Sure you didn't do murder?" Autumn demanded sharply.

"Sure I didn't?" he repeated. "You mean a man does murder if he just—just figures on it, wants to do it?"

"That's true, too," Autumn assented, "but—somebody did murder in this eddy one

night. A man called Cromwell Carver came down in the dark. He tried to tie to our boat when I was alone on board here. Somebody shot him—dead, I expect."

"Well!" Spring exclaimed. "I heard about it—Carver's boat is down at Yankee Bar. Drifting Sam Hayden caught it."

"Speak of the devil and here he comes!" Autumn smiled, for it was just then that a fast motorboat split the surface of the river, throwing a spurting bone from her jaws.

"Drifting Sam!" Autumn called as the boat came around and touched the Curlew stern bumper, without a jar. She gave the river man her hand, as if he needed steady-ing to come aboard. "How are you, Sam?"

"In trouble—up against it!" he exclaimed, gazing narrowly at Berry Wainse as he grasped the big suitcase he'd taken from Carver's boat.

"Berry Wainse, Sam Hayden," Autumn introduced the two. "Wainse just brought Spring home. She's been up't the head of the Reach ever since the crest came down. What's your trouble?"

"Wainse?" Hayden looked at him. "I know that face. Yo' be'n rewarded?"

"He came down the Ohio rise—followed the Overflow and brought folks in from their farms—"

"I remember—your pitcher was in all the papers! Knew I'd seen it." Hayden looked across the shimmering, glistening yellow flood, and then blurted out, "You know that varnished boat feller? Well, I got his boat. Swung into Yankee Bar eddy—came back up the reverse current and I caught it. I'm scairt to death of it—"

"Why are you afraid of it, Sam?" Autumn asked.

"I'll show you. Do you know anything about up-the-banks?" Sam asked Wainse. "I don't know what the hell to do—"

"Sam!" the two girls exclaimed.

"Well, I don't!" he self-defended, "I'll show you!"

He took the suitcase he'd been carrying through the galley and in the cabin of the girl's houseboat dumped it onto the table. There were thousands, tens of thousands of dollars in paper currency. There, too, was a perfect mess of diamonds—hundreds, perhaps a thousand of them.

"Why, Sam Hayden!" the girls exclaimed.

Wainse looked into the bag. On the pale

leather interior was printed in ink, *John Scaller*.

"Where's the man who owned this?" Wainse demanded.

"Why—do you know him?" Autumn asked.

"He's the guy ran away with my money. He looted the Welkin Trust, Thrift and Security Bank!"

"Old Mississip' got him!" Drifting Sam declared, shaking his head. "It gets a looter, sooner or later— He's done, gone for good—"

"Gone—dead? *You're sure?*" Wainse demanded. "Why—I felt I wanted to kill that man—"

"Well, some other friend of ours did it," Autumn said.

"This stuff worries the life out of me!" Drifting Sam went on. "Theh's such a gawd-awful wad of it! Cash-money—and those getaway rocks! That scoundrel had it all figured out—he could trade di'monds for money anywhere in the world. He sure must-a had a good graft!"

"He'd been looting a trust company for years—covering up!" Wainse said. "The expert accountants traced it all out, when they once began a real examination."

"I'm scairt of the stuff!" Drifting Sam shook his hand. "Why, they're liable to send a feller up ten years just for having it."

"You're innocent," Wainse said thoughtfully. "They'd give you a reward for returning it. It'll put the bank back on its feet—"

"Say, Mister, you take hit back—git the reward an' we'll split four ways, what do yo' say?"

"But it's yours—" Wainse exclaimed. "I couldn't—"

"That'd be fair," Autumn said.

"Where's the nearest big town?" Wainse said. "The Carcajou Detective Agency is handling the search for Scaller—*Honest John!* That's how I knew he'd taken to the river."

"The Cacajous—oh, my gawd!" Drifting Sam gasped.

"We can go down to Mendova," Autumn Curlew suggested. "I know Palura will help us out. Wainse can help you handle your logs and drift boats. Spring and I—well, we'll go along, soon's the gasoline stern-wheeler is off our hands—"

"Lawse! Yo'd—yo'd drap down with us, Autumn?" the drifter asked breathlessly.

Autumn flushed up, startled, looking at her sister, Spring, who in turn gazed thoughtfully at Berry Wainse.

"Why—Spring—I'm no good—I'm *bad*. You wouldn't—could you?" the boy began.

"Bad—course!" Spring nodded gravely. "We knew 'about you, Berry Wainse—riveh rattin', lootin', Smart Alecking down the Ohio and Mississippi. But, Shucks, you couldn't keep it up! You never took a thing the Ohio hadn't torn away first. And how many human lives do you reckon you caught and saved when that Winter Thaw tide was reaching for them?"

"How many?" Autumn insisted, smiling.

"Why, I don't know—I never kept track—" Wainse squirmed.

"And Old Mississip' even took murder out of your heart," Spring insisted.

BERRY WAINSE nodded thoughtfully. "You really believe he did?" he asked. "I wondered—I thought I had him once in the drift below the Jumping Off Place. I got my rifle down on him—and before I could shoot I couldn't see him—fog thickened—"

"Sorry?" Autumn asked sharply.

"Sorry?" Wainse frowned, shaking his head. "I'm not sorry for anything—now that the old home-folks'll get their money—and hope—back."

"Here comes a drifter's raft-take!" Drifting Sam spoke up. "They're waving—"

"Oh, good! It's the gasoline stern-wheeler they want," Autumn exclaimed.

"Come on—we'll swing it out!" Sam said. "Take yo're heavy-duty launch, there, hook onto the stern. I'll get the lines off!"

When the drifters came abreast the island their big catch was drifting alongside their raft and they took the lines.

"Awri, Sam!" the call came. "Yo' done good this flood?"

"Sho' did!" Drifting Sam answered. "Bes' damned tide eveh!"

"Heah, too!" sounded in return.

"Now, Sam," Autumn said seriously, "you've just got to stop using swear words! Can we cut loose now?"

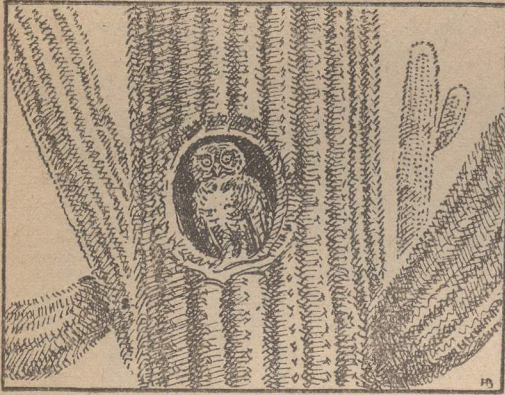
"I reckon!" Sam nodded, winking at Berry Wainse, who, oblivious, was gazing at Spring Curlew.

Western Nature Notes

By S. OMAR BARKER

THE GRIZZLY BEAR

THE grizzly, known as silver-tip,
Is short of tail and long of lip.
In wildwood politics this geezer
Is Precinct Boss—and no appeezer!

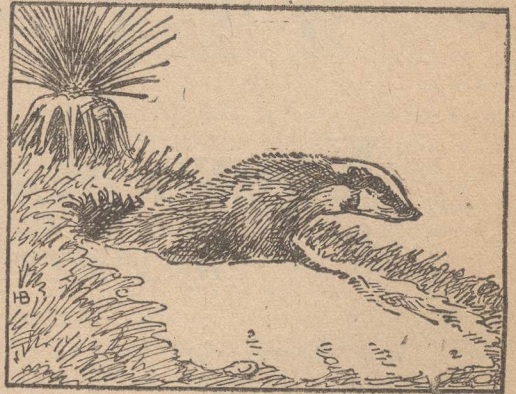


THE ELFIN OWL

THE elfin owl of Californ
Is very small when hatched or born;
And though well fed on bug and beetle,
He seems to grow up very leetle.

THE BADGER

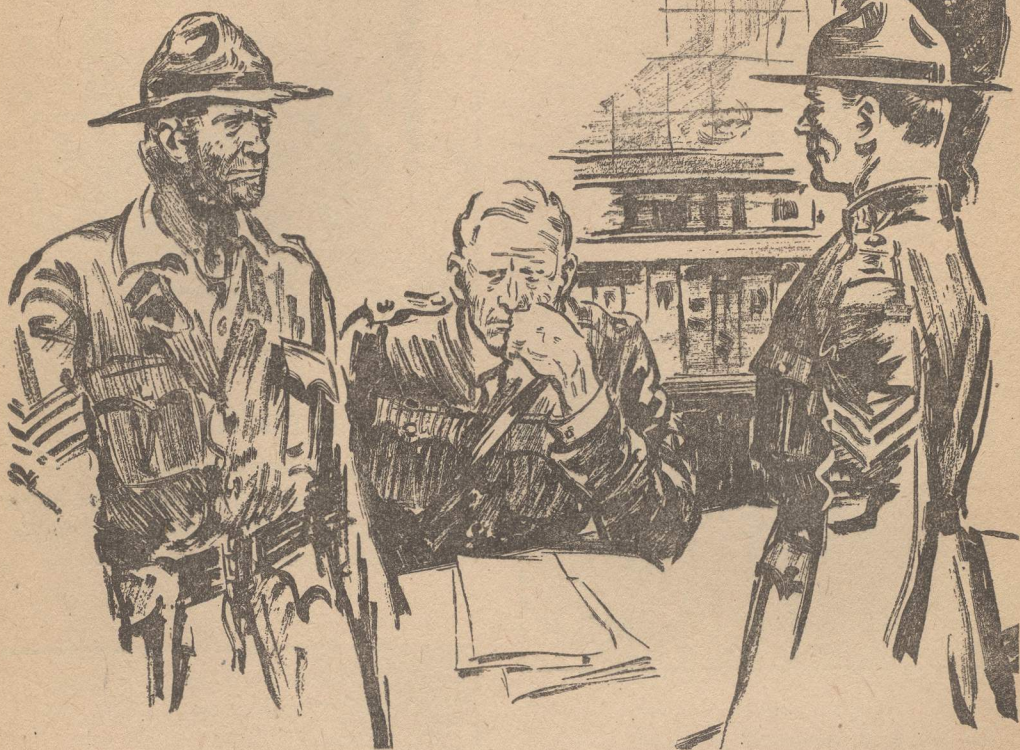
THE badger is a tough galoot
With padded feet and pointed snoot.
The holes he digs 'way out in Texas,
Make cowboys fall and bust their nexas.



THE RACCOON

THE raccoon washes what he eats
With hands that also serve for feet.
His five-toed track is neat and dainty—
He's quite a ring-tailed dandy, ain't he?

*"Policing Is a Young Man's Game;
What Do These Old Back Numbers
Know About Scientific Investigation?"*



YOUNG MAN'S COUNTRY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Conclusion

CHAPTER XXII

ON TO THE HOARFROST

TOM BUCKNER slept that night handcuffed in his bunk. Constable Larue made his bed on the floor beside him. For hours he lay there staring up into the dark, listening to the heavy breathing of the officer, as his brain struggled vainly to correlate the killing of Shultz with McTavish's astounding announcement that he had found Shultz's gold hidden under

the rubbish in the fur loft. Helen certainly could not have returned to the post on Artillery Lake with the gold, after shooting Shultz, and then reached the lake where she had cached the shotgun, before he got there.

Was it possible that someone else had killed Shultz, struck across and cached the gold in McTavish's loft? But—no. It was evident, as the Indian had said, that Shultz had been killed with a shotgun—the condition of the body with half its head blown off confirmed that—and Helen had headed for Shultz's carrying the only shotgun in the country. Again, if anyone else had killed Shultz, why would they cache his gold in McTavish's loft?

Once again the words of old Tana flashed into his mind—"you tak' de gon. Dat damn good t'ing you shoot um dead. Den you mar' Tom." Good Lord! Had Tana really expected the girl to shoot Shultz? Had she struck across to the Hoarfrost after his departure for his rendezvous with Helen on the third lake, removed the gold from Shultz's cache, and hidden it in the loft? "She could have made it and got back here before I did," he mused. "She could even have started before I left the post. I slipped away without seeing her that morning."

But why would she have taken the gold—for herself? Or for Helen? And why had Helen passed him, tight lipped, and without a word there at the top of the bank? Was it possible that she thought *he* had stolen Shultz's gold? But—no. McTavish hadn't found the gold until later.

And so it went on through the hours—facts, speculation, wild conjecture that reached no conclusion until at last sleep claimed him.

He awoke with Larue shaking his shoulder, and blinked sleepily in the dim light of the candle that flared on the rude shelf that held his few personal effects.

"Come on! Roll out!" the officer was saying. "We're getting an early start for Shultz's. Stick out your hands and I'll unlock the cuffs."

Tom dressed with Larue standing by. In the trading room McTavish was waiting, and without a word they passed on into the dining room where the table was set for three. Old Tana padded in bearing three bowls of steaming gruel.

"Where's Helen?" Tom asked, glancing into the bearded face of McTavish. "I'd like to see her before I go."

"Ye'll na be seein' her, lad," the old Scot said as he doused his gruel with milk from a tin. "'Tis orders."

"Whose orders?"

"My orders," Larue snapped. "Don't play me for a fool, Buckner. I'm not giving you two a chance to hatch up some cock-and-bull story that might stand in court. I threatened Miss McTavish with arrest for interfering with an officer if she so much as spoke a word to you."

Tom's heart felt suddenly light. So that was the reason for Helen's passing him without a word. He grinned into the face

of the constable. "Afraid we might put a crack in your iron-clad case, eh?"

"I'm not taking any chances. I'll know all about what happened at Shultz's when I look the ground over."

The smile lingered on Tom's lips as he reached for the milk tin. He was thinking that the stage he had set for Helen's self defense plea would now redound to his own benefit. He felt no compunction of conscience in the thought. He hadn't killed Shultz. If Larue chose to believe he had, the evidence would be plain that Shultz had held a loaded pistol in his hand when he was shot. He was glad that McTavish was going along—that there would be a disinterested witness to the finding of that pistol. The smile suddenly died on his lips at Larue's next words. "Get that gold down out of the loft, McTavish," he said. "I'm taking it along for evidence."

The gold! In picturing the scene Larue would find at Shultz's cabin he had completely forgotten that McTavish had found Shultz's gold cache under the rubbish in the loft. That logically, he was the only person who could have cached it there. That so glaring was the evidence of his guilt that even the old Scot believed he had placed it there. He realized that even though evidence should point to self defense and clear him of the murder charge, there was no chance in the world of explaining how Shultz's gold came to be in McTavish's loft. Somehow, Tom felt that he had almost rather be convicted of murder than of robbery.

"Aye," McTavish was saying. "I'll nail the cover back on the box. 'Tis too bad—too bad, lad, thot ye took his gold. I could ha' forgived ye, mayhap, fer shootin' Shultz—but na fer robbin' him."

OLD Tana was passing behind the chairs, filling the cups with hot black tea. At mention of the gold Tom glanced into her face as she filled McTavish's cup. The face was impassive as a mask. Then she paused behind his own chair and as she reached forward to pour his tea, Tom was conscious that her other hand touched his shoulder. Somehow it didn't feel like an inadvertent touch—rather it was a deliberate jab of the thumb. Again he glanced into the dark face—and again he found it impassive as a mask.

As she turned toward the kitchen, Larue called to her, "Hey—you! You've been here at the post all the time, haven't you?"

The old woman nodded.

"How long was Buckner away from the post while the McTavish's were at Reliance?"

Old Tana scowled, and answered nothing.

McTavish spoke to her. "Answer the mon, Tana. He's a policemon. Ye've got to answer."

"Three day. Two night."

"Okay. And when he came back did he have a box with him? Did he take anything into the loft?"

"I'm in the kitchen. I'm no see w'en he come back. I ain' see no box."

The old woman padded on into the kitchen and Larue growled, "These damn dumb natives—they'll tell you just what they want to tell you. You never know when they're lying."

McTavish nodded. "Aye. But ye never know when a smart white mon's lyin' either. Er, did they learn ye how to tell thot—down to Regina?"

BREAKFAST over, McTavish climbed into the loft and returned down the ladder with the heavy box of gold. Larue and Tom stared down at the yellow hoard as the old Scot set it on the floor and proceeded to nail the lid fast.

"Where's your shotgun?" Larue asked. "I'm taking that along too. Hold on! Stand back there!" he commanded sharply, as Tom stepped toward the counter. "Tell me where it is. I'll get it. Damned if you'll get the chance to blow my head off, like you did Shultz's!"

Tom grinned. "Wouldn't like that, eh? Okay. Get it yourself, then. It's over there in the corner behind the desk."

The officer passed behind the counter, picked up the gun, threw it open and drawing out the two shells, placed them in his pocket. "Just as I thought. Had it all loaded and ready, didn't you? It's a good thing I surprised you out there by the lake yesterday where you couldn't get hold of this gun, or I might be where Shultz is, right now."

Tom laughed. "Hell, Larue, I saw you coming long before you saw me. If I'd wanted to shoot you I could have carried the gun to the corner of the icehouse and blown

you in two when you came over the bank."

The hard snow made good going in the crisp, cold air of early morning, and the three made fast time. McTavish, with his own dog outfit, led the way, swinging from the lake up the draw down which Shultz had come on his trip to the Artillery Lake post, and across the sand hills and the ridges of sandstone conglomerate in a short-cut to the Hoarfrost.

Tom followed behind McTavish's sled, with Larue and the police team bringing up the rear. "I'm not handcuffing you, Buckner," the officer had said, as they pulled out of the post, "but don't forget for a minute that I'll be right at your tail. One crooked move on your part, and out goes your lights. Try to make a getaway and I'll drill you before you take ten steps."

Toward mid-day the snow softened under the rays of the bright sun, and McTavish halted on the summit of a bare rockridge. "We'll camp fer a couple of hours," he said, "an' gi' the snaw a chanct to stiffen. 'Tis hard on the dogs, wi' the sleds cuttin' through to the sand. We'll eat hearty here, an' then travel clean into the dark. We can go to bed on a light snack. 'Twill save time."

"We won't make Shultz's tonight?" Larue asked.

"Na, we'll camp the night, an' make Shultz's 'gin the snaw softens tomorrow."

That night as Tom lay handcuffed in his sleeping bag, between Larue and McTavish, he wondered what old Tana had sought to convey to his mind by that light thumb jab. Conceivably it might have been an accidental slip of the hand, but knowing old Tana, he dismissed the thought with a grin. In vain he had glanced up into that inscrutable dark face for some hint of a meaning, and again in vain, he had sought a chance to slip into the kitchen before starting, but Larue had never for a moment allowed him out of his sight.

The grin broadened as he drew the hood of his sleeping bag closer about his face. The presence of Shultz's gold in McTavish's loft was no mystery to McTavish and to Larue—they both thought they knew the answer. Had McTavish told Helen of finding the gold? And if so, did she, too, believe that he had cached it there? She had been at Reliance when the Indian reported the find-

ing of Shultz dead on his floor. She had heard him report coming upon the white man with a shotgun on the third lake, and telling him of his grizzly find. Did she believe that he had hit for the Hoarfrost, removed the gold from Shultz's cache, and hidden it in the loft? "Good God," he muttered to himself, "does she, too, think I'm a thief? Or, was the presence of the gold in the loft as much a mystery to her as it is to me? Again his mind reverted to the light thumb jab at his shoulder as Larue and McTavish were talking about the gold. "She wanted to tell me something," he mused, "and it was something about that gold." But—what? Try as he would he couldn't figure out the answer. But somehow there was vast reassurance in that significant thumb jab. He closed his eyes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

LARUE GATHERS HIS EVIDENCE

AS MCTAVISH had predicted they reached Shultz's cabin just as the snow was softening on the following day. The door still stood open as Tom had left it. Fresh snow had swirled in and drifted about the body, half covering it. Just within the doorway the frozen toe sticking out through the hole in the sock protruded from the drift, and beyond, from out the shattered head, the single frozen eye stared glassily toward the ceiling.

"Shotgun, all right," Larue said, as the three stood staring in at the unlovely sight. "No rifle bullet ever knocked half a man's head off." He paused a moment, then pointed to the Luger that lay close to the frozen, outflung hand beyond the edge of the drift. "Damn it, Buckner," he said, "if you shot him in self-defense, why the hell can't you say so? That would clear up the murder angle, and leave nothing but the robbery charge against you."

Tom scowled. "Listen here, Larue. I didn't rob Shultz. I don't know any more about how that gold got into McTavish's loft than you do."

"Then you admit the shooting, but deny the robbery? Is that it?"

"I don't admit a damned thing. There's your case. Make what you can of it."

Reaching into his pocket, the constable

withdrew the handcuffs and snapped them onto Tom's wrists. He turned to McTavish. "Keep an eye on him while I look around a bit."

Advancing into the room he took the broom from its corner and proceeded to sweep the snow from the floor. Stepping around the corpse, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket, picked up the pistol by the end of the barrel, carried it out into the open where he examined it closely with a magnifying glass he drew from his pocket, turning it this way and that to catch the play of the bright sunlight on the blue-black metal.

Glancing into Tom's eyes, he pointed to the holster hanging on the wall directly across from the doorway. "If Shultz grabbed for his gun when he saw you standing here in front of his door, he'd have grabbed it by the butt. But there are fingerprints all over this gun—on the barrel and on the magazine—and damn good ones, too. They're recorded in just about the best medium in the world for recording fingerprints—blood! So, it wasn't self-defense, Buckner? You just tried to make it look like self-defense. With blood all over the place after you'd shot Shultz, you get some smeared on your hands, and then you take the pistol out of the holster, and handle it, probably placing it this way and that on the floor to make it look as though it had slipped out of his hand when he dropped. It was a smart play, at that, Buckner. You'd probably have got away with it nine times out of ten." He turned to McTavish. "You bet—if some old foggy like Mayfair had investigated this case, he'd have called it self-defense, sure—what with the gun lying where it was. This fingerprint stuff has come in since his time. Why, even Corporal Weems has been kidding me for packing my fingerprint outfit along on patrols! It's just like I told you back there at Reliance, McTavish—policing is a young man's game. What do these old back numbers know about scientific investigation?"

McTavish shook his head. "I'm gettin' auld mysel', lad. I do na ken what ye're pratin' about, wi' ye're talk o' fingerprints, an' the like. But I'm still wishin' 'twas Mayfair had the handlin' o' this matter, instead o' ye. Theer was a good many murders cleared up by the Mounted befoor ye was born. Maybe Sergeant Mayfair kens little o' this scientific investigatin'—but whene'er he

started out after a murderer in the bush country, he got his mon. An' he di'na fetch in the wrong man, neither."

"He wouldn't have got Buckner!" Larue snapped. "At least, not on the murder charge. He'd have called it self-defense, and let it go at that. Any damned fool could have picked him up on the robbery charge—catching him red-handed, with the gold in his possession." As the constable talked he unslung the lashing of his load, opened a duffel bag and withdrew from it a camera, and numerous small pans, boxes, and bottles. "I'll show you something in the way of police work that you never heard of before. In the first place, no two people in the world have the same fingerprints."

"Ha ye looked at the fingerprints o' every person i' the world?"

"No, of course not!" Larue frowned. "But with millions of fingerprints on record, no two have ever been found alike. Take this gun, here—I'm going to photograph those prints. Then I'll take Buckner's prints—and if they coincide, there's no chance in the world that it wasn't Buckner who handled that gun—placed it there on the floor to make it look as though Shultz had been armed when he shot him."

As the constable talked, Tom stood tight-lipped, staring at the pistol that Larue had laid carefully aside. Why hadn't he thought of fingerprints? Why hadn't he handled the gun with his mittens on? Or used his handkerchief. And the blood! He remembered shooting and gutting the rabbit right there before the door. Why hadn't he noticed that there was blood on his hands? He knew about the infallibility of fingerprint identification, if McTavish didn't. He had done this thing for Helen. But so clumsily had he done it that he had succeeded only in tightening the noose about his own neck. To hell with it! To hell with it all! Let 'em go ahead and hang him—at least, they'd never convict Helen of the murder. Even if she should confess to shooting Shultz at the last moment, to save him, he'd tell 'em she was lying. He would swear then, that it was he who had killed Shultz. But until that time came, he would never admit it. Let 'em prove it on him if they could. He would neither admit, nor deny the killing.

Larue had propped the gun at the proper angle and was focusing his camera. "You

can save yourself the trouble, Larue," he said. "I put the Luger there. Those are my fingerprints, all right."

The constable looked up. "Then you admit killing Shultz? Admit shooting him here in his own cabin when he was unarmed?"

"I don't admit a damned thing—except that I took the gun from its holster, handled it, and placed it there on the floor where you found it."

"That's practically admitting the murder," the officer said, and turned to McTavish. "You're a witness to that statement. We'll want that testimony at the trial."

The old Scot nodded, his eyes on Tom's face.

Larue dusted some powder onto the pistol. "I'll go ahead and make these exposures," he said, "just in case something happened that would smear these prints before I get this gun into court. Buckner's confession to handling it will save the trouble of developing the film till I get back to detachment."

"Mind ye, he has na confessed to the shootin'," McTavish reminded the officer, "only to puttin' yon pistol wheer ye found it."

Larue smiled. "That's right. But he might as well have confessed to the murder and the robbery, too, as to confess that. It puts him here on the spot at the time of Shultz's death—the fresh blood on his hands when he handled the gun, show that. But I'm not through yet. I'm going to hunt for an empty shell—the shell that killed Shultz. It should be out here in front somewhere under the snow. When I find that shell, I'll have an iron-clad case, if ever there was one."

"You can probably find a shell all right, if you look for it. I shot a rabbit here in the clearing and threw out the empty just before I stood my gun up against the wall. That's how I got the blood on my hands. I stopped to gut the rabbit before I handled that Luger."

Larue laughed derisively. "So that's your story, eh? Well, let me tell you, Buckner, it won't take a jury two minutes to laugh that one off."

STEPPING into the cabin Larue returned with the broom, and after twenty minutes of sweeping away the new snow, he

reached down and picked up the shell. Reaching into his pocket, he compared it with the two he had withdrawn from Tom's gun. Slipping one of the shells into the gun, he fired it, drew the magnifying glass from his pocket and examined the dents made in the two primer caps. "They're identical," he announced. "Both these shells were fired from the same gun." He paused, staring down at the ground where certain footprints showed in the old snow. Picking up the broom, he carefully dusted out several of the tracks. "Let's see the soles of your pacs, Buckner." When Tom complied, he pointed to the impressions in the old snow. "It was thawing when you were here, and you left plenty of good plain footprints. You'll notice, McTavish, that these tracks coincide exactly with the soles of Buckner's pacs—those three transverse bars, and the circle are unmistakable. Do you sell pacs of that make at the post?"

McTavish shook his head. "Na."

"Does Cameron sell them at Reliance?"

"I do na think so. Theer na Company goods. Yon pacs come from the ootside."

"No chance of their being anyone else's tracks, then. I guess that's about all I'll need in the way of evidence," Larue said.

Tom grinned. "You don't overlook any bets, do you?"

"Not by a damn sight, I don't," the constable answered, and pointed to an oval mark close to the wall near the door. "And there's something else I'm not overlooking, either. That mark there in the snow—the print of the butt-plate of your gun, with its criss-cross pattern, where you stood it up against the wall. I'll take a cast of that, too. It was slushy the day you killed Shultz, Buckner, and when that slush froze it recorded your visit beyond any possibility of your denying it."

"I haven't denied coming here," Tom said. "I just got through telling you that I placed the Luger where you found it, and that I shot a rabbit here in the clearing."

"People have been known to repudiate statements made during an investigation," Larue replied. "If you didn't come here to kill Shultz, what did you come for?"

Tom grinned. "People have been known to call on a man for other purposes than killing him. Did that ever occur to you?"

"But when the man is found dead right

after the visit, it sure puts the visitor on the spot." Larue produced plaster of Paris from his duffel bag, mixed it with water, and poured it into several of the footprints, and the depression made by the gun-butt. When the mixture had set, he removed the casts, wrapped them up, and placed them in the duffel bag along with the camera and developing supplies. He turned to McTavish. "That's about all I need to do around here," he said. "If they can't convict Buckner on the evidence I've got, they'll never convict him. I hope you're satisfied that I haven't manufactured any evidence," he added with a trace of a sneer in his voice.

The old Scot nodded. "I'm satisfied."

"Oh yes—one thing more." He pointed to an aperture beside the two displaced puncheons. "That, I suppose, is where Shultz cached his gold? You mentioned that he had once showed it to you."

"Aye."

Larue closed the cabin door. "All right, then we'll be pulling out. I'm taking Buckner down to Reliance, and we'll hit for Resolution from there. The police are supposed to bury all bodies found on patrol, but with the ground frozen it would take a week to dig a grave. If you'll slip over later and bury him, I'll put in a requisition for your time the next time you're at Resolution."

McTavish nodded, and held out his hand to Tom. "Gude bye, lad—an' gude luck to ye. Ye've be'n a gude clark, an' I've liked ye fine. I can na' doobt that ye kilt Shultz. E'en so, the way matters stood, I'd na be condemmin' ye fer it, had ye na robbed his cache after ye kilt him. I'll be seein' ye at the trial, lad. 'Twill irk me sore to be testifyin' agin ye. But a mon must tell the truth."

Tom shook the proffered hand. "Good-bye, McTavish. I've liked you, too. You've taught me many things. And I want you to know that I'll not be holding it against you—when you tell them the truth on the witness stand. And—say good-bye to Helen for me. Tell her I'll be thinking of her every day. I—I may never see her again."

"She'll be at the trial," McTavish replied. "Larue said he'd be needin' her testimony, too. An' yonder, on Artillery Lake, we'll be thinkin' o' ye, too."

The constable glanced about him. "You did a lot of fool things, Buckner," he said.

"Leaving your empty shell here where it could be found. Handling that pistol barehanded, with your hands all smeared with blood. Failing to obliterate your tracks in the slush. And killing Shultz with a shotgun in a country where there are no other shotguns."

Tom grinned a bit ruefully. "It looks as though Shultz knew what he was talking about back there at Resolution the first time I ever saw him when he told me that no one but a damn fool would bring a shotgun into the North."

"All criminals make mistakes," Larue pontificated, "If they didn't the police would have a much harder job than they have. You made plenty of 'em. But your worst mistake was in allowing that Indian, Pete Moo-fas, to get to Reliance with his story of finding Shultz dead in his cabin with half his head blown off with a shotgun. If you'd have knocked him off there on that lake, you might have got away with this thing."

"You figure that two wrongs would make a right, eh?" Tom grinned.

"It wouldn't have made a right. But it very well might have prevented your getting into this jam—given you time to do away with Shultz's body, and a few warm days time to obliterate those tracks in the frozen slush."

"The worst mistake ye made, lad—according to my thinkin', was in leapin' into yon ice water that time an' fetchin' Shultz oot. An' ye'd stood by an' let matters be as they was, a' this would ne'er ha' happened."

CHAPTER XXIV

SPRING COMES TO THE NORTHLAND

APRIL passed with its shifting winds, its freezing nights, its days of blustering snow flurries, alternating with days of soft warm sunshine that melted the snow from the crests of the ridges. And with May Spring came with a rush to the north country. Aspen and willow buds swelled and sent forth tiny green leaves.

The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens. Creeks and tiny rivulets of snow water poured into the rivers whose ice weakened, let go, and came roaring down through rock-ribbed gorges, jamming—damning up the water behind it—letting go

with a roar of a thousand thunders and spewing its huge slabs and tiny fragments onto the sullen black ice of the lakes, which rotting at the edges, showed open leads, and ever widening bands of open water along the shorelines. And in the leads, and the open water along the shores, waterfowl appeared. At first, a few geese, a stray swan or two, then thousands upon thousands of geese and ducks and waxies, noisy and gay in their bright breeding plumage. Huge northern pike swarmed in the shallow spawning grounds, swimming about with black fins cleaving the surface of the water.

Grass shoots greened the south slopes. Great barren ground grizzlies came out of their dens, fat and sleek after their long winter sleep, to roam the hillsides, and grow gaunt and thin in their attempt to dig in the frozen ground for masu roots, and in hunting for the marmots, spermophiles, and lemmings that had not yet heard the call of Spring.

Caribou, already beginning to take on the moth-eaten, patchy look that accompanies the shedding of their winter hair, herded together and started their long northward trek to the Arctic calving grounds.

Wolves paired off and divided their attention between picking off stragglers from the caribou herds, and roaming the ridges in search of suitable dens in which to whelp their pups.

The heart of the North was stirring after its long winter coma.

At the post on Artillery Lake Helen McTavish noted these signs of spring, and realized that for the first time in her life, they produced no quickening of her own heart—no answering feel of well-being and elation. Each day, each walking hour of each day, her thoughts were of Tom Buckner. Everything she touched, every place she went or looked reminded her of Tom. Together they had hunted ptarmagin there on the hillside. On the point was the remnant of the blind from which they had shot ducks on the day of his arrival at the post. When she visited the meat cache, it was to remember that it was Tom who had hoisted up that cut of meat for her to stow under the covering of hides. Across the lake she could see the hills among which they had hunted caribou—where he had reiterated his undying love for her—where he had

threatened to kill Shultz, before he would allow him to marry her. Well—he had killed Shultz. In her heart burned a fierce loyalty that precluded any thought of blame for the killing. Of these two, she realized, that it was almost inevitable that one should kill the other. With her own eyes she had seen male animals fight to the death for the possession of a mate. And since the world began, have not men killed each other for the love of women? Tom had killed Shultz. She accepted that as a matter of fact. But he never murdered him! And he never robbed Shultz's cache. Stubbornly, fiercely she maintained this belief in the face of her father's oft reiterated statement of the fact that Shultz's gold was hidden here in the loft—and Shultz's cache was empty—of the facts that Tom's foot tracks were in front of Shultz's door, his empty shell there under the new snow. And of the fact that Tom himself, had admitted placing Shultz's pistol where it would appear to have slipped from his hand when he fell.

She did not attempt to deny these facts—she simply ignored them. Tom Buckner was no murderer and no thief—and nothing that her father could say, nor that Constable Larue could turn up could convince her that he was. For hours she would lie dry-eyed in her bunk and picture Tom, sitting hour after hour, day after day behind the iron bars of a cell, waiting—waiting for what? Waiting to hear a jury pronounce the verdict that would place a rope about his neck, after listening to the evidence presented on the witness stand by Larue and by her father. She hated Constable Larue—almost she hated her father for his dour, uncompromising adherence to the truth.

One noon, he looked up from his plate and broke the habitual silence that pervaded their meals. "I ha' got the motor runnin'," he said. "'Twas less trouble than most years. Tom greased her gude when he pulled her oot, last fall. He e'en took the carbureter apart an' cleant it, an' filed the p'int, an' o'erhauled the timer. He was handy wi' a motor. A gude mon ony place ye put him. 'Tis too bad—too bad."

"Where are you going with the boat?" Helen asked indifferently, without raising her eyes from her plate.

"I'll run doon the lake an' go on doon to Reliance. Cameron will be pullin' oot fer

Resolution wi' the fur agin' the big lake opens up, an' I ha' need o' some supplies I left off the list when I took the fur doon. Then I'll swing up to the Hoarfrost an' bury Shultz. I promised Larue I'd do it agin the ground thawed. 'Tis too bad Tom di'na' leave him i' the water hole, the time he had the chanct. Had he done thot, he'd be here the noo, an' the fish would ha' saved me the buryin'."

"Tom Buckner was too much of a man to stand by and see a man drown even though he hated him."

"'Twere far better he should watch him drown than to murder him i' his cabin an' rob his cache."

"Tom never murdered Shultz—and he never robbed him!" the girl retorted angrily.

"I wish I could believe as ye do, lass," McTavish said. "But a' the evidence tells a different story. Wi' my ain eyes I saw——"

"I don't care what you saw! There's no use going all over that again. All the finger prints, and footprints, and empty shells, in the world could never convince me that Tom murdered Shultz! I don't care if he did admit placing Shultz's pistol where you found it! If he did, he had a good reason—and it wasn't an underhanded one either. And the finding of Shultz's gold in the loft don't prove Tom put it there, either. Tom Buckner is no murderer, and no thief. And all the evidence under heaven can't make him one. But, if you and Larue have your way, they'll hang him, just the same."

"Losh, lassie, ye talk like I wanted to see the lad hanged. I'm tellin' ye I'd as soon testify agin my ain son, as yon Tom. I liked him fine. But, when a's said an' done, a mon must tell the truth."

The girl's face flushed, and she rose from her chair, tears flooding her checks. "I don't give a damn for the truth!" she cried, angrily. "If the truth can send an innocent man to the gallows, then it's worse than a lie." And before McTavish could reply, she had fled from the room, banging the door behind her.

With June came the long warm days—came also the Indians bringing in their fur for the spring trading.

Helen McTavish welcomed the trading time. It broke the monotony of living through a seemingly endless succession of

days during which she read all her books through—and through again, seeking escape from the drab fact of living. For her life held no interest in the present—no hope for the future. For hours on end she would sit, with a book in her lap, never turning a page, staring out over the lake, reliving each hour she had spent with Tom Buckner, striving to remember each word he had ever spoken to her, each fond embrace, each touch of the hand. Wondering what he was doing at this moment—there in his prison cell. Would he be reading? Thinking of her? A thousand times she wished she had defied Larue's order not to speak to him—wished she had told him she knew he was no murderer—no thief. "If he could only know that I believe in him, maybe it would help," she muttered, one day as she sat with her open book. "Ah, well—Larue said he would be tried at the Autumn Assizes. She would see him then—once more. And then—and then—?" "While there's life there's hope," she murmured the old platitude. "But, if they—if he had to go, then I'll go too. I'll go when he goes. Maybe somewhere—far up there beyond the blue—we can be together—always."

Even the busy days of the trading brought their moments of pain, as she remembered the zest with which Tom had plunged into the work. During the trading Corporal Weems appeared and handed her and McTavish each a legal paper, a subpoena that commanded them to appear at the Assizes beginning in Edmonton the week of September twenty-third.

"The Territory is administered from Ottawa," he said, "but the trial will be held in Edmonton, to save time and expense of travel.

"Constable Larue took his prisoner there, and was transferred to Edmonton detachmen for preparation of evidence. These papers came up on the *Wrigley*. She got to Resolution two weeks ago. From the report I got, I guess Larue made out a good case," he added. "He's kind of cocky—but he must be smarter than what I thought he was. They made him a corporal."

"He's a horrible person!" Helen snapped. And turning on her heel, she walked out of the tradingroom.

Weems grinned at McTavish. "Kind of

spunky, ain't she? Larue sure didn't make a hit with her."

"She's does na believe Tom Buckner is guilty o' the murder nor the robbery, neither," the old Scot said.

The corporal shook his head slowly. "Maybe not. But with the evidence Larue's got it sure looks bad for him—damn bad."

CHAPTER XXV

SERGEANT MAYFAIR

ON a warm evening in early July, Sergeant Mayfair, veteran officer of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, drew his canoe from the water and ascended the steep bank at McTavish's post. Lean and leathery, with a face tanned by the suns of many summers, and tempered by the frosts of many winters, he crossed the flat, and paused in the open doorway of the trading-room, to be greeted cordially by McTavish, who rose from his desk behind the counter, shoved the steel-bowed spectacles from nose to forehead, and advanced with outstretched hand.

"'Pon my soul, 'tis gude to see ye back i' God's country, Mayfair! 'Tis a gude five year—or is it six since ye've come this road? They said ye'd be'n transferred to Ottawa."

"It's seven years," Mayfair corrected.

"Seven! Losh, mon—how time flies!" He wrung the officer's outstretched hand. "Come, we'll set on the bench outside, an' watch the sun go doon. 'Tis many an' many a day since we've chawed the fat together."

The officer grinned. "And you don't look a damn day older than you did the last time I saw you, Mac. How old would you be, now—ninety-nine, or a hundred and two?"

"Foosh, lad! I'll be sixty-seven, come August the third. An' ye're na spring chicken yersel'. Though I'll admit ye carry ye're years weel. Ye look the same—save the frost has touched ye're hair aboot the temples."

"By God, if it hasn't, it ought to. I wintered on Dubwant."

"On Dubwant! An' here I figured you was takin' it easy, back theer 'i Ottawa, wi' a big flat desk an' an easy chair, wrackin' ye're brain to keep folks from spittin' on the

sidewalk an' peepin' i' each other's windows." He paused and turned in the doorway as Mayfair seated himself on the bench beside the doorway. "Helen!" he called. "Helen, lass! Tell Tana to fetch the jug an' a couple o' glasses. Sergeant Mayfair's here!"

The shuffling of moccasined feet sounded from the tradingroom, and a moment later the old Indian woman appeared carrying a jug, two glasses, and a pitcher of water. The officer smiled up into the dark, mask-like face:

"Hello, Tana! By Gosh, you've got fat like all the rest of 'em! McTavish must feed you good, eh?"

The old woman smiled. "Long time, no see. You ain' git fat. Ba gos', dat better you eat more. Mebbe-so you git fat, too."

She disappeared, and Mayfair turned to McTavish. "Where is Helen? I don't believe I'd know her if I'd see her. Them younguns change a lot in a few years."

"Aye. They change. She's a grow'd up woman, the noo. She'll be oot directly. Belike she's riggin' oot i' a clean frock. But what was ye doin' on Bubwant, Mayfair? 'Tis a God-forsaken place fer a mon to be winterin'."

"There was an Injun murder up there, about a year back. They sent a constable up on the case, but he didn't get nowheres. So when he got back, the Commissioner sent me."

"Did ye get ye're mon?"

"Not yet. But I will. It was a damn dirty murder. A young buck name of Sammy Long Bear knocked an older man on the head, chucked him under the ice, and took over his traps and his young wife, lock, stock, and barrel. A couple of other Injuns saw the whole thing from the shore, and reported it at Churchill. They sent this constable over, but the two witnesses were afraid to talk, an' not knowin' nothin' about how to handle Injuns, he was stopped. So I went in last fall an' patched up an old cabin that belonged to a trapper name of Sim Brandt, who died five, six years ago, an' wintered there. The woman was mixed up in it, too—but I'd never be able to prove that. One of these witnesses had left the country, but I located the other one, an' along towards spring, he come out with the story. This Sammy Long Bear skipped out

sometime durin' the winter, an' this spring I got word that he's somewheres over on the Mackenzie. So after the break-up I started acrost after him."

"But—losh, mon, couldn't ye made better time goin' back up the Bubwant River, or time goin' oot by way o' Churchill, an' then around an' down the rivers?"

Mayfair grinned. "Yeah, I expect I could. But you know how it is, Mac. I'd never seen the country between here an' Dubwant. I have now, an' I'm tellin' you there's a hell of a lot of country—an' not much to see. Plenty of fast water, an' plenty of long portages, though. A tough country, if I ever saw one. But it was worth the trip."

McTavish grinned. "Aye, it was worth the trip. What ails us old timers, Mayfair? Theer must be summat the matter wi' our head. We pass up an easy trip to make a hard one, just to see what the country looks like. We'll work like the devil, an' git half froze, an' half starved, an' half eat up by the bugs, to look at a country that ain't worth lookin' at when we git theer. An' no matter how much punishment we take, 'tis always worth the trip."

MAYFAIR returned the grin, and refilled his glass from the jug. "Guess that's right, Mac. This North country—it's somethin' that gets into our blood." He turned at a slight sound to glance in undisguised admiration into the face of the girl who stood framed in the doorway. "It can't be that you're little Helen McTavish?" he exclaimed. "An' yet, come to look you over, you couldn't be no one else. I do believe I'd know'd you on sight if I'd seen you walkin' down the street in Ottawa. You're your mother, all over again. Well I rec'lect the first time I ever saw your mother. I though she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen—an' she was." He turned to McTavish, who sat beside him on the bench, glass in hand. "You remember, Mac. I was a rooky, then—stationed at McMurray when you brought her into the country. A lot of water has run down the rivers since them days Mac. It was a long time ago."

The old Scot nodded slowly. "Aye. A lang, lang time ago."

Mayfair smiled up into the face of the

girl. "An' I rec'lect the time you stole Duncan's dogs an' hit out over the ice in the middle of winter so's to get home fer Christmas. You sure give me a headache, that time. I was a corporal, then, in command of the Resolution detachment, an' Father Giroux come stompin' in that mornin' to report that you was missin' from the Mission, an' that someone had raided the pantry. An' no more'n he'd got through when in come Duncan to tell about six of his dogs an' a sled bein' gone. An' on top of that an Injun name of Joe Hatchet, put up a squawk about someone slippin' into his shack an' stealin' a rabbit robe off'n his bunk. I put one an' two, an' three together an' lit out on your trail. But them six dogs of Duncan's was better than my police team, an' when I hit Reliance, Cameron told me you'd pulled out for Artillery Lake the day before—an' you only twelve years old! I shore took plenty of kiddin' about that patrol—gettin' beat out by a twelve-year-old girl."

Helen laughed. "But you got your man, Sergeant. I remember that you came on to the post, here and stayed over for Christmas, and we had a grand time for a whole week, and then you took me back with you to the Mission."

"That's right, Helen—we shore did have a grand time. We fetched in a tree an' your ma decorated it all up with candles an' whatnot, an' she sure done herself proud with the cookin'. Gosh, I believe we et roast goose every day for a week! But it was a good thing fer you," he added, with a twinkle in his eye, "that Father Giroux, an' Duncan, an' Joe Hatchet withdrewed their charges agin you, or I'd had to take you clean on down to Edmonton an' lock you up. An' it's a good thing fer McTavish that an old badger, like me, made this patrol. If it was some good lookin' young rooky, now—"

"I hate good looking young rookies!" the girl exclaimed, so emphatically that Mayfair glanced up in surprise.

McTavish swallowed his liquor and cleared his throat roughly. "Fact is, Mayfair, we had a murder here this spring."

"No!" The word cracked like a pistol shot from the lips of the girl. "It was not a murder."

The grizzled Sergeant glanced from one

to the other. "Here! You mean—here at the post?"

"Weel, 'twas na right here, just. 'Twas Johan Shultz got kilt. My clerk shot him."

"Johan Shultz? You mean that fellow that come into the country a few years back an' went to prospectin' on the Hoarfrost?"

"Aye, he's the mon."

"What did he kill him for?"

McTAVISH shifted uneasily, and refilled his glass from the jug. "Ye see Mayfair, this Shultz was a gude prospector—a mon o' property. He paid his debts, an' he had gold i' his cache—a gude fourteen stone o' it, hid under the floor o' his shack when he was kilt. He wanted to marry Helen, an' bein' as I saw na chanct o' the lass doin' better, I gi' him my word he could have her."

"What!" Mayfair cried, "Good God, Mac, you didn't promise Helen to that damn Dutchman! Why, he was old enough to be her father! An' a damn lunatic besides. When he flew into a rage, there was no tellin' what he'd do. I saw him kill a good lead dog with an ax, one time, because the dog wouldn't come when he called him."

"The mon was na crazy," McTavish replied. "Na crazy mon could ha' took oot the gold he did. He'd a bit o' a temper, 'tis true."

"I'll say he had! I knocked hell out of him once for abusin' an Injun. He run one prospector off the Hoarfrost, an' there was talk of another one that refused to leave the river—an' was never heard of agin. That was after I'd left Resolution."

"Aye, 'tis a common tale hereabout. But na one can say Shultz kilt him. The police investigated the matter, but they could na find the mon's body, an' they ne're proved nothin' on Shultz. If a mon is na liked theer's plenty o' folks 'twill seek to vilify him. The prospector might ha' gone back to the provinces wi'oot lettin' anyone know—or he might ha' moved on into the back country an' met up wi' some misfortune. Ye know ye'resel', Mayfair, thot anything can happen to a mon travellin' alone—an' none e'er the wiser."

"Yeah. An' I damn well know that if a man's warned out of the country by a man like Shultz, an' then turns up missin', the chances are he never left the country—

north, or south. But you said your clerk killed Shultz. A good job, I'd say. What did he kill him for?"

"Weel, ye see, this clark, Tom Buckner, was a lad Don Campbell sent up here. He was as likely a lad as I ever seen. He was smart, an' he was willin'. Na work was too hard, an' na hours too lang. An' he took to the tradin' like a duck takes to water. He's a rare judge o' men, is Don Campbell. He was through here last summer an' stayed o'er wi' me fer three days. 'Twas many a gude drink we had, an' many a talk aboot the auld days. Mind ye, I'd asked fer na clerk. But i' the fall, Don sent young Buckner in."

"You say Don stayed three days. Did he know Shultz—know that Helen was promised to him?"

"Aye. Shultz happened in here at the post whilst Don was here. He come fer some supplies thot Cameron didn't have on hand, an' when he found I di'na ha' em, neither, he flew into a rage, an' damned off Cameron, an' me, an' the Company, an' e'en Don, himsel'. When Don found oot I'd promised Helen to him, he gi' me hell. But I told him I'd gi' my word to Shultz—an' I'd ne'er go back on my word. But why did ye ask thot, Mayfair—aboot Don's knowin' Shultz, an' knowin' Helen was promised to him?"

The sergeant smiled. "I'm a policeman, Mac. You know the police ask lots of questions. I was just thinkin' that Don's a damn smart man. I always knew he had a good head on him. The Company knows it, too. That's why they put him where he is."

"Aye. No doobt 'tis a grand job Don's got. But d'ye know, Mayfair, deep doon i' his heart, he'd ruther still be i' the ootlands. He's a Northman, Don is. 'Tis only duty holds him i' Winnipeg."

THE old sergeant nodded. "Sure, I know. It was duty held me in Ottawa for damn near six years. But thank God, I'm back—back where I belong. But—go on. You got to where Don sent you this clerk. Let's get on with the killin'."

"Weel—ye see, the lad—an' Helen—what wi' both bein' young—an' workin' together, an' goin' on the fall hunt, an' winterin' here, an' a'—they fell i' love wi' one

anither. I warned 'em 'twas onseemly—an' her promised to Shultz. But they paid me na heed. Tom swore he'd kill Shultz befoor Helen would e'er marry him. An' Helen defied me to my face when I told her to ha' naught to do wi' Tom. The lass e'en said she might kill Shultz hersel', some day.

"Then, just befoor the break-up, I took the fur to Reliance, an' sent Helen around by the Hoarfrost to deliver an order o' goods to Shultz. He was na i' his cabin when she got theer, so she set the goods inside, an' come away, jinin' me at Reliance.

"The next night an Injun come to Reliance wi' ten fox pelts an' a tale o' a carcajou raidin' his camp, an' how he hit fer Reliance fer supplies stoppin' at Shultz's, hopin' to trade him one o' the pelts fer grub enough to take him to Reliance, an' o' findin' Shultz layin' dead on his floor wi' half his head blow'd off wi' a shotgun fired at close range.

"He lit oot on the run, an' next mornin' he come on a white mon huntin' ptarmagin wi' a shotgun on the third lake o' the portage. He told the mon what he'd found at Shultz's, an' hinted that mebbe it was him thot shot Shultz. Accordin' to his tell, the mon neither admitted or denied the killin', but he gi' the Injun a couple o' the birds he was eatin', an' bid him go on to Reliance an' report what he'd found. It was thawin' heavy thot day, an' the goin' was bad, an' that night it snowed.

"A young rooky name o' Constable Larue, had got theer the day befoor, on patrol from Resolution. He's a mon thot knows everything except how to git aboot the country wi'oot a guide. He can tell ye how hot the sun is, an' why it rises i' the east an' sets i' the west. But he thinks peacocks lay eggs, an' he bragged aboot makin' Reliance i' nine days from Resolution, wi' the weather fine fer travellin'.

"So Larue took o'er, askin' a lot o' questions o' the Injun an' Helen, an' Cameron, an' me. He learnt thot the mon he found on the lake wi' a shotgun was my clerk, Tom Buckner. He learnt from me an' Cameron thot Tom owned the only shotgun i' the country. An' when he wanted to know why he'd be huntin' ptarmagin so far from the post, Helen told him how Tom, knowin' she was to deliver the gudes to Shultz, an' bein' afraid thot Shultz might harm her, on

account o' him suspectin' how matters stood at Artillery Lake—"

"You mean," Mayfair interrupted, "that Shultz suspected that Helen an' this Buckner was in love? Why would he suspect that?"

"Weel, 'twould na be so hard to suspect. Shultz was at Resolution fer supplies when Tom come in last Fall on the last trip o' the *Wrigley*. When he learnt thot Tom was headed fer Artillery Lake to be my clerk, an' seein' how he was young, an' gude lookin', an' well set up, he suspected what might happen, an' he flew into a rage, an' said I needed na clerk, an' warned Tom not to come on to me, threatenin' thot if he went up the lake, he'd ne'er come back. Then, to make matters worse, Tom knocked him doon fer abusin' an Injun, wi' Duncan, an' Father Giroux, an' 'a lot of natives lookin' on.

"Duncan sent Tom on wi' a couple o' Injuns an' the fish boat, an' later, i' the lee o' an island on Christie Bay, when they was havin' trouble wi' the motor, Shultz, who had run his sailboat in fer shelter, too, come onto the fish boat an' offered to help wi' the motor. Tom ordered him off, an' when Shultz refused to go, Tom knocked him off into the lake. The Injuns was fer leavin' him theer, but Tom pulled him oot an' put him i' his canoe. That night i' a gale, Shultz slipped o'er an' cut the anchor rope, settin' the fish boat adrift, an' if they hadn't got the motor runnin' i' the nick o' time, they'd crashed on the rocks. Later, Tom gi' Shultz a tow when his sailboat couldn't make it around a p'int, an' then cut him loose to drift onto a sand island.

"Then along this spring Shultz come here fer supplies whilst we was puttin' up ice. 'Twas plain he come to kill Tom, fer he carried a loaded pistol wi' him. Tom an' Helen was standin' togither at the foot o' the ice skid, an' when she seen Shultz comin' toward her Helen draw'd closter to Tom, an' Shultz seen it an', when he reached fer the lass, Tom raised his ax an' told him to stand back. 'Twas what Shultz wanted, to make it look like self-defense, an' he pulled his pistol but before he could fire, an ice cake let loose from near the top o' the skid an' knocked Shultz clean into the middle o' the water hole. He come up gaspin' an' chokin' an' then he sunk, an' Tom jerked off his parka, an' dove in an' fetched him.

oot. 'Twas a brave act—but a foolish one. Had he left matters stand as they was, he'd na be in jail the noo, charged wi' murderin' Shultz."

"Tom never murdered him!" cried Helen, who, standing in the doorway, had been a silent listener. "Constable Larue is a fool!"

"This ice cake that let loose jest at the right time? That was mighty lucky for Buckner, wasn't it?" Mayfair asked, a slight twitching at the corners of his lips.

"Aye, 'twas a rare combination o' luck.

"'Twas lucky Shultz was standin' at the foot o' the skid, an' lucky the ice cake was just wheer it was, an' lucky thot Tana, who was crankin' the win'lass, had to let go the handle to spit on her hands just when she did," McTavish replied a twinkle in his eye.

"After we'd got to work next mornin', Shultz came rampin' doon wheer we was an' accused Tana o' lettin' go the crank a-purpose. He laid hand on her, an' was aboot to hit her wi' his fist, when Tom stepped in an' knocked him flat. Shultz got up an' come at Tom wi' his fists swingin'. 'Twas then I seen the prettiest bit o' fightin' I e'er looked on. I've seen many a fight i' my day—but ne'er a fight like thot. 'Twould done yer heart good to ha' seen it, Mayfair—Shultz puffin' an' blowin', an' swingin' his fists i' blows that would o' knocked an ox doon had they landed. But ne'er a one o' them landed—not one. Tom stood up to him, hittin' him at will—tellin' him wheer he would hit next—then doin' it. Talkin' to him a' the time, goadin' him into a blind fury, whilst he cut him to bits wi' his fists, bendin' his body this way an' that, guardin' so Shultz's blows slipped off his arms an' shoulders wi'oot e'en jarrin' him. An' when Shultz, wi' his face a bloody mess, dropped to the snaw an' wouldn't git up, Tom wasn't e'en breathin' hard. 'Twas a fight ye might read aboot—but ne'er would see. 'Twas unbelievable."

"I'd like to seen it," Mayfair said. "But go on. What was it Helen told this Larue about Buckner bein' afraid Shultz might harm her?"

"Aye, he was afraid. So he made Helen take his shotgun wi' her an' keep it loaded, agreein' to meet her on the third lake aboot noon on the second day after, an' they'd shoot a few birds on the willow flats, an' the lass would go on to Reliance, an' he'd fetch

the gun back here. He was sure wasteful o' powder an' shot, what wi' shootin' at ducks, an' geese, an' ptarmagin whilst they was flyin', instead o' waitin' till they lit. He could hit 'em, too. 'Twas pretty to see. But mostly only one to a shot. But, 'twas his own ammunition he was wastin', an' na the Company's, so I could na forbid him. 'Tis plain the lad was na raised i' the ways o' frugality. Though I'll say fer him, i' Company matters I could find na fault wi' him.

"But owin' to the thaw makin' hard goin', Tom di'na git to the lake by noon, an' Helen waited a while, then cached the gun wheer she'd told him she'd cached it i' case he di'na git theer, an' she come on to Reliance. An' thot's how Tom come to be on the third lake wheer the Injun found him.

"So Larue says how it must ha' be'n Tom that murdered Shultz, an' the lass denied it, an' then he says mebbe it was her thot done it, an' she says she'd as soon believe she murdered him as Tom. That if Tom shot him, it was in self-defense, or some such matter.

"An' Larue said he'd soon find thot oot, when he'd looked things o'er up to Shultz's. He e'en said 'twas a gude thing he happened to be theer at Reliance, or the matter would doubtless be'n hushed up an' Shultz buried, an' na one the wiser. He said us auld Company men was i' the habit o' runnin' the country aboot as we liked, but thot noo he was here, things would be different. Cameron called him an ass, an' when I said I wished some aulder head was on this job—like you, he got mad, an' said he'd got tired o' hearin' aboot how Sergeant Mayfair had done this, an' done that, an' solved this case, an' that one. He claimed if he was the Commissioner, he'd git rid o' a' the auld men on the force, an' replace 'em wi' up-an'-comin' young men, like him."

Sergeant Mayfair grinned. "Guess I'd better be huntin' around fer a new job. How would I do fer a clerk, Mac—seein' you've lost the one you had?"

"Theer'll be na hurry, Mayfair. Larue ain't the Commissioner, yet. As Cameron said, Larue's an ass, but ne'ertheless, he done his duty. He come on here wi' us an' arrested Tom fer murderin' Shultz."

"He's a fool to think that Tom would murder anyone—even that horrible Shultz!" Helen cried.

McTAVISH shook his head, sadly. "Up to then, I had na thought that the lad had murdered him. I figured he might ha' kilt him—but not murdered him. Then, goin' up into the loft to see if the lad had took in any fur whilst I was gone, I found Shultz's gold cached theer under a bit o' canvas in a pile o' rubbish. 'Twas Shultz's gold, a'right, i' Shultz's box—he'd showed it to me wheer he had it cached under his floor, the day he told me he wanted to marry Helen. Fifty thousan' dollars, he said was i' the box—an' when I hefted it i' the loft, it would go a gude fourteen stone. I was sore at heart aboot findin' the gold theer where na one but Tom could ha' cached it. I was tempted to say naught aboot it to Larue—but 'twould na ha' be'n honest. It put a new light on the killin'. I had thought weel o' the lad, up to then. But killin' a mon i' self-defense is one thing—killin' for robbery is murder."

"He never murdered him, and he never robbed him!" Helen cut in.

"Did he admit caching the gold there?" Mayfair asked.

"Na, he denied it. He said he'd ne'er seen the box, nor the gold. Said he di'na know how it got i' the loft."

"Did he deny killing Shultz?"

"Na. He'd ne'er denied, nor admitted it, up to the minute I bid him good-bye, theer i' Shultz's cabin."

"What did Larue find at Shultz's?"

"He found plenty. Shultz laid like the Injun said, on his floor wi' half his head blow'd off. 'Twas plain to see 'twas ne'er done wi' a rifle. 'Twas done wi' a shotgun fired by someone who stood i' the doorway. He was dressed only i' his underclothes. Beyond him, clost to his open hand laid his pistol—like it had slipped from his hand when he fell. Larue swep' oot the snaw that had drifted theer, and picked up the pistol an' seen some bloody fingerprints on it. He got oot his camera an' some more gear an' claimed he'd soon know who handled the pistol last. An' when he done thot, Tom told him to save himsel' the trouble—thot he had put the pistol wheer it was. When Larue accused him o' handlin' it wi' his hands wet wi' Shultz's blood, he claimed 'twas na Shultz's blood, but blood from a rabbit he'd shot an' gutted theer before the door. When Larue swep' away the new

snaw, an' found the empty shell, Tom said 'twas the shell that kilt the rabbit. Then Larue made plaster casts o' Tom's footprints i' the frozen slush, an' o' the print o' the butt o' his shotgun wheer he stud it agin the wall beside the door."

"Did he explain why he'd handled the pistol—an' laid it there to make it look like Shultz had be'n armed when he was shot?" Mayfair asked.

"Larue asked him thot—but he refused to explain."

"I don't care whether he refused to explain, or not," Helen said. "And I don't care whether Larue found a thousand fingerprints and footprints—or a million. I *know* that Tom Buckner never murdered Shultz, and never robbed him, either."

"Looks like Larue's got a pretty strong case," Mayfair observed, his eyes on the face of the girl.

"I don't care how strong a case he's got! Tom Buckner is no murderer—and no robber!" With which dictum, the girl turned on her heel and disappeared into the trading room.

CHAPTER XXVI

"CHAWIN' THE FAT"

THE two oldsters sat late that night, sipping their whiskey and water, reminding each other of incidents and events of a time long past, recounting wilderness tragedies, chuckling over humorous misadventures.

"Ye'll rec'lect the widow McLarty, her thot lost her mon i' the big ice jam an' lived alone on the river fer twenty year, trappin' an' fishin' an' cuttin' wood fer the Company boats—she died last summer."

Mayfair grinned. "Someone ought to write an' tell Lord Seymore about it. You remember the time he come from London to inspect the Company posts along the river. Ownin' stock in the Company, he thought it would be a fine trip to come an' see fer himself how things was run."

"I mind him weel. I was at Fort McMurray. A pompous auld coot, poppin' his monocle in his eye, an' lettin' it fa' oot an' diddle around on a black ribbon, pokin' his nose i' the Company books, wantin' to know the why an' the wheerfor o' this, an' thot.

Ye was a constable, then. I rec'lect they sent ye along to wet nurse him."

"An' a hell of a job it was. At Fort Smith he got tired of barge travel, an' nothin' would do but he must go on by canoe. Five canoes we had, two of 'em loaded with whiskey—some special brand he fetched along from London. Two more carried the outfit, an' he sat amidships of the other one with a bottle in his lap and a glass in his hand, with the two Lapierre boys paddlin', fore an' aft. They was good rivermen, those two breeds, when they was sober. I warned Lord Seymore not to give 'em any liquor, but he paid me no heed.

"That detail sure was a headache. By good luck we got to Chipewyan an' put up for a few days while him an' Hodgedon got drunk together. The mornin' we left, he got in his canoe an' started on ahead, leavin' us to patch one of the canoes, an' load the outfit.

"He must have give the Lapierre boys some good stiff jolts of liquor, 'cause by the time they hit the long rapids, they thought it would be fine to show his lordship how to run the whitewater. They'd done it before—but they was sober when they done it. They hit a rock, an' it was only by the grace of God they wasn't all drowned.

"The Lapierre boys got scairt an' took to the bush, an' that's the last we seen of 'em. His lordship got ashore, an' havin' a waterproof matchbox on him, he built a roarin' fire an' hung his clothes up to dry. But somehow his britches fell in the fire an' got burnt up. He put on the rest of his clothes an' hit back up the river on the track-line trail, an' at the head of the rapids he come to the widow McLarty's cabin.

"We was just about to start out from Chipewyan, with Hodgedon, an' the two priests from the mission, an' a couple dozen natives collected on the bank to wish us good luck, when up the trail come his lordship. He'd lost his hat, an' was doin' his damndest to look dignified an' pompous, rigged out in his coat an' shirt an' monocle—an' a pair of the widow McLarty's pants! No one could help laughin', an' it was a sore jolt to his pride. But he'd got a bellyful of canoein'. He got drunk an' stayed drunk till the brigade came along, an' we went on downriver in a barge."

"Speakin' o' London—word reached us

thot they found John Hornby's body in a shack on the Thelon."

MAYFAIR nodded. "Yeah, his an' the two young fellows he took along with him on a trip acrost the barren lands."

"He was a gude mon, John Hornby. Lived fer nineteen year on Great Bear Lake. 'Twas his second trip acrost the barrens. I rec'lect the time him an' an Englishmon name o' Critchton-Bullock headed acrost. They stopped here goin' in. They made it through to the Bay, a'right. But they say the Englishmon was damn near dead when they got there. Then John went on to London to visit his folks. Tough as a piece o' leather, John was. He could live off a country 'twould starve a wolf. Some disease must o' ketched 'em."

"Nope. They starved to death. One of 'em was John's nephew he fetched back from London with him. He was the last to die, an' they found his diary. John was the first to go, then the other lad, then him."

"'Tis hard to believe John starved to death. He know'd the country as few men know it."

"That's the rock he crashed on. He know'd too much about the country. It's the only case I ever heard of where knowin' too much cost a man his life. If he'd know'd less, he'd packed more grub along. For nineteen years he'd watched the migration of the caribou herds, an' he timed his arrival on the Thelon so's to lay in his meat when the caribou went by. But that year, fer the first time in the knowledge even of the Eskimos, the migration didn't go through. A lot of Eskimo died on the coast, that year, havin' depended on the caribou that never came. Them three on the Thelon built a shack an' waited. They had nets, but a freshet swep' 'em away. They had plenty of ammunition—but nothin' to shoot. It was an off year fer the ptarmagin, an' there was no rabbits. They was down to eatin' snow-birds—but it takes a hell of a lot of snow-birds to keep three men alive in winter—an' there wasn't many snowbirds."

"Ah, weel, John was a gude mon, an' 'tis too bad he's gone. But, he died doin' what he liked to do. Take you an' me both. Mayfair—we'd ruther starve to death i' the oot-lands, than die of a disease in some damn town."

"That's right," the old sergeant agreed. "I wouldn't give a damn if I never seen another town. Guess it's time to turn in. I'll have to be movin' along in the mornin'."

"Ye'll na be movin' on, the morrow," McTavish said. "Any mon thot's wintered on Dubwant, an' then crossed the barrens is entitled to a gude week to ketch up wi' his rest, an' his eatin'. If ye're Injun's on the Mackenzie, he'll na be leavin' theer."

"I didn't eat so bad, comin' acrost. I had a net, an' my rifle an' there was plenty of berries. But I don't mind layin' over fer a day or so. It's be'n quite a while since I've seen any white folks."

CHAPTER XXVII

BREAKFAST

SERGEANT MAYFAIR slept late. When he stepped from his room the following morning Helen McTavish greeted him with a smile. "How did you rest, Sergeant?"

The grizzled officer returned the smile. "Not so bad—after I got used to the sheets. First time I've slep' between sheets since I left Ottawa, last fall. When I lit my candle I seen where Mac had set my pack in the room, but I couldn't find my sleepin' bag, so I crawled right in between them nice clean sheets—an' the next thing I know'd the sun was shinin' through the window."

The girl laughed. "You couldn't have slept in your bag if you'd found it. Tana got hold of it while you two were talking, last night and gave it a good scrubbing. It's hanging out there on the line, now."

"Guess it needed scrubbin', all right. I've be'n sleepin' in its since October. Where's Mac?"

"He went out with the Indians to set some nets. Come on—breakfast's ready. I waited to eat with you. We don't have many visitors. And since Tom—went away, it's been worse than ever. My father believes he's guilty, and I *know* he isn't. And it's built up a—a kind of barrier between us. My father never did talk very much—and since Tom's gone he's more silent than ever. In a way, I believe he feels almost as badly about it as I do. He really liked Tom. I know he is terribly disappointed in him."

As the girl spoke Mayfair glanced into her face from beneath shaggy eyebrows. He

noted the look of infinite sadness in the violet eyes, and the pathetic droop at the corners of the lips. He nodded, slowly. "Mac spoke well of him," he said. "An' I've known him long enough to know that when he speaks well of a man, that man's got to be good. What gets me is why he'd promise you to a man like Shultz?"

"To my father's way of thinking there is one cardinal virtue—the making and saving of money. And there are two mortal sins—to squander money, or waste property—and to break a promise. The fact that Shultz showed him the gold in his cache, far outweighed in his mind any faults he might have. Then, too, as he told you, he saw little chance of my doing better."

"An' no chanct at all of yer doin' worse," Mayfair growled. "But when this Tom come along an' wanted to marry you, an' you wanted him—"

"It was too late, then," the girl interrupted. "My father had given his promise—and nothing in the world could make him break it."

"Guess that's right. Mac's stubborn as hell when he sets his mind to a thing. But this here Tom, now? From what Mac told me last night things look pretty bad for him."

"I don't care how bad they look—I know he never murdered Shultz—and he never robbed him!"

"Everyone that seen Shultz claimed he was killed with a shotgun—that Injun, an' Larue, an' Mac. An' they found Tom's tracks there in front of Shultz's door, an' the print of his gun butt, and the empty shell he throw'd out of his gun."

"He said he shot a rabbit there. That would account for the shell. As for his tracks—I don't say Tom didn't kill Shultz. I say he never murdered him, and he never robbed him."

"How do you account for Shultz's gold bein' here in the loft, then?"

"I can't account for it. I have no more idea than you have how it got there. I know that Tom never put it there. He didn't even know it was there, till my father found it."

OLD Tana padded in with two bowls of steaming gruel. As she passed behind Helen's chair across the table from him,

Mayfair glanced into the expressionless face. Something seemed suddenly to tighten within him. Was it possible? Was it imagination? Or a trick of the sunlight that streamed in through the window? Or did the lid of the old woman's left eye twitch significantly as she returned his casual glance? Then she was beside him, setting his gruel on the table and the sergeant greeted her with a smile.

"Mornin', Tana! I hear you scrubbed up my sleepin' bag for me. Much obliged. Guess it needed it."

The old woman frowned. "You shame' you sleep in dat bag. She stink."

She retreated to the kitchen, and Mayfair glanced at the girl.

"This Tom—Mac said he ain't never denied killin' Shultz."

"He's never admitted it, either," the girl flashed back at him. "There's one thing I can't figure—one thing that seems inconsistent. Why did Tom place Shultz's pistol on the floor to make it look as though it had slipped from his hand? I know he did that, because he admitted it. But why did he do it?"

"He done it so it would look like a case of self-defense—like Shultz was armed when he was shot."

"But if that's so, why didn't he admit shooting Shultz, and plead self-defense? It just don't make sense. Can you see any reason for it?"

Sergeant Mayfair was silent for several moments, his attention apparently riveted on dousing his gruel with condensed milk. Then he nodded, slowly. "Yeah, I think, mebbe, I can see a reason."

"What is it?"

The old sergeant smiled. "If I told you, I'd only be guessin'. An' the police ain't s'posed to guess. We ain't s'posed to talk about a case that ain't closed, neither."

"That horrible Constable Larue seems to think it's closed. He said it was an open and shut case."

"Yeah. That's the kind of a case them rookies has always got."

"Oh, if you had only been here to handle it, I know you'd have found the real answer! Why do they send men like Larue on patrol?"

"Well," Mayfair grinned, "they've got to be doin' somethin' to earn their pay."

"I know Tom is innocent. And I know that if you'd been here you could have proved he is innocent. And—and we—we could have been married, by now." The girl's voice broke, and two big tears welled from her eyes and coursed down her cheeks.

"Hold on now, Helen," the old sergeant said. "S'pose you jest put off any cryin' you've got to do, till I sort of look around a bit."

THE girl's eyes suddenly widened, and she dashed away the tears, with her hand. "Oh—do you mean—that you will—will—?"

"Yeah. I'll slip up there on the Hoarfrost an' look around a bit. 'Coarse, Larue's prob'ly hogged all the evidence on me, an' the trail's mighty cold, an' it might be too late. So don't go gittin' yer hopes up. But it's jest possible there might be somethin' that this here Larue overlooked. I ain't got no more eyes than he has—but I've be'n usin' mine longer. I might see somethin' he didn't."

"Like Mac said, that Injun murderer of mine will prob'ly hang out somewheres along the Mackenzie, if that's where he went. I can pick him up later. I'll take a couple days off, an' slip down to Reliance an' say hello to Cameron, an' go on up to the Hoarfrost, an' come back here. You'll have to loan me a sleepin' bag or a pair of blankets, though. Mine'll likely be dry by the time I git back. Mac claimed he went down this spring and buried Shultz. I s'pose I can find his grave—might want to look him over."

"You can find it easy enough. He said he buried him in the clearing in front of his cabin. He put up a wooden cross. But won't you wait till my father comes back? He'll be in by noon."

"No use waitin'. Tell him I'll see him later. The days are long, an' I can make Reliance by dark, if I have good luck."

"Oh—how can I ever thank you!" cried the girl. "I just know that everything will be all right, now."

"Don't be too sure. Mind—I ain't promisin' nothin'. An' as fer thankin' me—I ain't never had the chanct to pay you back fer the good time I had that Christmas. If you hadn't stole Duncan's dog outfit an' lit out, I'd never have got in on it."

CHAPTER XXVIII

SERGEANT MAYFAIR LOOKS AROUND

AT RELIANCE Cameron greeted the veteran officer heartily, as he produced a jug and a couple of glasses. "Weel, weel, Mayfair! It's gude to see ye back i' the country ye belong in! The word was that they'd chained ye to a desk back i' Ottaway."

"Yeah. They did. But last fall I broke my chain an' got away on 'em."

"'Tis queer ye could slipped up on me unbeknownst. Not five minutes ago I was lookin' oot o'er the lake, an' I di'na see no canoe."

"I come in the other way."

"The other way! You meen from Artillery Lake?"

"Um-hum. Spent last night with McTavish. He was tellin' me about this Shultz murder."

"Aye. 'Tis too bad. This Tom Buckner was a likely lad. Mac liked him fine. An' Helen—the poor lass is a' broke up o'er it. The way things was, I would na blamed him fer killin' Shultz, had he na robbed him."

"So you think he's guilty, eh?"

"Aye. He done it, a'right. Larue, he got the evidence 'twill hang him sure. Larue's an ass. But 'twas no great job o' policin' he had to do—what wi' findin' Buckner's tracks in front o' Shultz's door, an' his fingermarks on Shultz's pistol wheer he laid it to look like self-defense, an' his empty shell, wheer he'd throw'd it when he shot him, an' Shultz's gold i' Mac's loft."

"Couldn't no one else shot him, eh?"

"Shultz was shot wi' a shotgun—an' Buckner had the only shotgun i' the country. Mac admitted Buckner had threatened to kill him. An' no one else could left Buckner's tracks theer."

"Guess that's right," Mayfair grinned.

"An' Buckner would be the one to want Shultz oot the way—him wantin' to marry Helen McTavish, an' her promised to Shultz."

"Didn't Shultz have no other enemies that you know of, besides this here Buckner?"

"Oh, he had enemies enough, what wi' a' the Injuns he's run off the Hoarfrost. But they was afraid o' him."

"Any of 'em have a particular grudge agin him, fer any reason?"

"Weel—theer's Johnny Zero. When Shultz's boat went aground on an island, last fa', he hired Johnny Zero to haul his stuff to the Hoarfrost. Johnny told him the ice was weak yet, an' wanted to make two trips, but Shultz, not wantin' to pay fer two trips, bid him make it i' one. So him an' Wolf Jaw o'er-loaded the sled an' it busted through an' they lost a gude part o' the load. When they got to the Hoarfrost wi' what was left, Shultz refused to pay him the hundred dollars he'd promised, but accused him an' Wolf Jaw o' stealin' the missin' supplies, an' he knocked Wolf Jaw down, an' run Johnny Zero off wi' a dog whip.

"Later when Johnny had bad luck wi' his traps, I sent him to Shultz wi' a note, sayin' if he did nā pay him, I'd report him to the police. Shultz flew into a rage and threatened to shoot Johnny—who got away when Shultz went i' the cabin fer his rifle. Wolf Jaw skipped oot on him, too."

"This Wolf Jaw—he's that kind of dull-witted Injun that used to work for Duncan at Resolution, ain't he?"

"He's the one. Shultz hired him a couple o' years ago, an' he's be'n cheatin' him, an' workin' him, an' abusin' him ever since."

"Where are they now—Wolf Jaw and Johnny Zero?"

"The two o' 'em stopped here a couple o' days after Larue hit oot fer Resolution an' got debt fer a trappin' trip on Walmsley Lake at the head o' the Hoarfrost. They figure that now Shultz is dead they can trap the Hoarfrost agin."

"The Hoarfrost ain't a long river. It can't be very far acrost from Walmsley Lake to Mac's post on Artillery."

"I would say 'twould be a matter o' fifty or sixty mile."

"Looks like Shultz got what was comin' to him, all right."

"Aye. But at that, Mayfair, after he was dead he had a right not to git robbed."

"Guess there's somethin' in that," the sergeant grinned, emptying his glass and returning it to the counter. He held up a protesting hand as Cameron was about to refill the glass. "No more tonight. I'll be back through here in a few days—on my way to the Mackenzie to pick up a Dubwant native for murder. I told Helen I'd slip up

to Shultz's an' sort of look around a bit. Poor kid—she's all broke up over this mess. I come through from Mac's today, an' I'll be hittin' for Shultz's in the mornin', so I want to ketch me some sleep."

THE sun hung low in the west as Sergeant Mayfair paused on a low rock ledge at the edge of the tiny clearing and surveyed the dismal scene—the empty cabin, the wooden cross, rising white and gaunt from the weed-choked clearing, the wooden sluice beside the dump that flanked the open mouth of the shaft. For long moments he stood there, his shrewd gray eyes taking in every detail. He made a wry face, and involuntarily he shuddered. There was something unutterably foul and loathsome in the very feel of the place, with its deserted workings, the wooden cross, and the dead man lying under the weeds.

Crossing the clearing, he pushed open the door of the cabin. The dark stain there on the floor was unmistakably a blood stain. On the opposite wall hung an empty holster. The table was cluttered with unwashed dishes, and from nails driven into the wall near the stove hung a few pots and pans, and a meat saw. A couple of floor puncheons lay where they had been tossed, and stepping across the floor, Mayfair stared down into the empty hole that had been Shultz's cache.

The light was dim, and swinging his pack from his shoulder, he produced a flashlight, and played its beam on the wall opposite the doorway. Suddenly the beam halted, and bending closer, he stared at a hole in a log, some six and a half feet above the floor. A grim smile twitched the corners of his lips, as further playing of the beam disclosed four more such holes. "This here Larue, now," he muttered, "he prob'ly knows all the wrinkles about takin' pictures of fingerprints, an' then studyin' out all them little whorls, an' curves, an' islands with a magnifyin' glass. But he can't see a bunch of holes half an inch acrost that was starin' him right in the face when he come in the door. Guess I'll step outside an' dig Shultz up while the light holds. He might be able to help, ought to be good for somethin'. I shore hope Mac didn't waste no hell of a lot of time burin' him."

Stepping around behind the cabin, he found a spade, and set to work. He gave a

grunt of satisfaction as, at a depth of two and a half feet the spade struck against a yielding object. A few moments later, an expression of extreme disgust on his face, he drew the blanket-wrapped body from the grave. "Diggin' up dead folks is a hell of a job anyways you look at it," he grumbled. "If it's in the winter, the ground's froze. An' if it's summer, they stink."

Probing about in the decomposing brain matter that still remained in the shattered skull, he fished out two misshapen lead slugs, and partially embedded in the occipital bone, he found another. Stepping into the cabin, he took the meat saw from its nail, and sawed out the portion of skull in which the slug was imbedded. He rolled the body back into the grave and covered it. Wrapping the two slugs and the piece of bone in his handkerchief, he placed them in his packsack, and reentering the cabin, proceeded to dig out the five slugs imbedded in the wall. These, also he wrapped up and placed in the pack. Then, just as the sun sank behind the sandhills to the westward, he stepped out and closed the cabin door. "This here Tom Buckner now," he muttered as his eyes swept the clearing, "I'm shore goin' to be proud to shake his hand." An hour later, he camped on a small creek some four miles to the eastward.

HELEN MCTAVISH leaped from the bench beside the trading room door where she had been sitting beside her father the following evening, as the old officer rounded the corner of the building.

"We were just talking about you!"

Mayfair grinned. "Speak of the devil, an' up he pops, eh?"

"We were figuring that you wouldn't get back before tomorrow or the next day, if you were going around by Reliance and then up the Hoarfrost and look things over at Shultz's."

"I didn't waste no time at Cameron's—jest stopped over night, an' went on. The investigatin' up to Shultz' didn't take long."

"But how did you slip in on us? We surely would have seen your canoe on the lake."

The officer grinned. "Because I left here in a canoe, ain't no sign I had to come back in one. I left my canoe at Reliance, hit

acrost to the Hoarfrost, an' then over here a-foot. Mac's got to loan me a canoe to get back to Cameron's in. You an' this here Larue figgers about alike. He figgered Shultz was killed with a shotgun, an' because Buckner had the only shotgun in the country, it was him that shot him."

"Losh, mon—he was right aboot Shultz bein' kilt wi' a shotgun!"

"Who says so?"

"Why, first that Injun, Pete Moofas, that found him, said so. Then when me an' Larue got theer, an' seen Shultz, we both know'd he was right."

The grin widened on the old sergeant's face. "Injuns ain't s'posed to know much, an' neither is rookies. But you, Mac—an old Company man—I'm kind of ashamed of you."

"A hoot fer ye, Bill Mayfair!" the old Scot frowningly exclaimed. "Ye do na need to be ashamed o' me! Had ye seen Shultz layin' theer on his floor wi' half his head blow'd off, ye'd know'd 'twas a shotgun that kilt him!"

"Well, of course, I didn't see him layin' on his floor. But I dug him up, an' sort of looked him over."

"An' still ye don't believe 'twas a shotgun that done it?"

"Nope."

"Mon, ye're daft! Did ye e'er see a mon's head blow'd half off him wi' a rifle?"

"No, I can't say as I have. But I never seen any heads blow'd off with a shotgun, neither."

McTavish rose from the bench and eyed the speaker keenly. "Set doon, the noo, Mayfair, 'til I fetch ye a noggin' o' whusky. The day has be'n hot. An' crossin' them sandhills clean from the Hoarfrost has gi' ye a touch o' the sun. A couple o' gude drinks, an' a gude sleep, an' ye'll be feelin' fine, i' the mornin'."

He disappeared within the building, and Helen peered anxiously into the officer's face. "Did you—did you find out anything? Anything important, I mean? Anything that Larue didn't find?"

"Oh, shore. Them rookies don't see everything. An' what do they see——"

"Do na bother him the noo, lass," McTavish interrupted, as he stepped from the doorway, a water glass half filled with whiskey in his hand. "Drink this, mon. 'Twill

do ye gude. I' the mornin' ye can tell us what ye found."

Mayfair took the glass and winked at Helen. "Wait till I git my medicine down. I'm a bit tired, an' like old Doc Mac there says, it'll do me good. He ain't diagnosed my case right—but the medicine hits the spot." Draining the glass he returned it to McTavish. "About one more dose like that, an' I won't be wantin' to go to bed. Anyways that one will keep me goin' fer a while. Like I said, the investigation didn't take long. 'Course, I wasn't bothered, like Larue was, with tracks in the slush, an' empty shells, an' fingerprints. But I seen enough to know that this here Tom Buckner never shot Shultz."

"What!" The word tore itself from between Helen's lips, as she laid a hand on the old officer's arm and peered into his eyes. "Oh, Sergeant Mayfair—can you prove it?"

"Oh, shore. I expect I can—when the time comes."

"But, mon!" McTavish exclaimed. "Wi' my ain eyes I seen Tom's footprints befront Shultz's door. What was Tom doin' theer, if he di'na shoot him?"

"Well—you was there, Mac. An' so was I. But we didn't shoot him."

"Shultz was dead when I got theer—an' when you got theer, too."

"Not a damn bit deader'n he was when Tom got there," Mayfair retorted. "He'd be'n dead longer—that's all."

"But the gold! Shultz's gold that I found here i' the loft! How do ye account fer that?"

"Oh, yeah—the gold. I wouldn't worry too much about that, Mac, if I was you." He turned to Helen. "An' if I was you, I'd have this here Tom look into the location of Shultz's, when they turn him loose. I don't believe it was ever recorded proper. I looked over his dump—an' it's good."

McTavish shook his head with an air of resignation. "Yon Larue is an upstart, an' a conceited ass wi'a'. Yet the lad gathered evidence, 'twould hang ten men. When I said, doon to Reliance, 'twas a job fer an aulder head, an' I wished you was here, he longed fer a chanct to show ye up, sometime. I said at the time I hoped the gude Lord would let me be theer at the showin'. But fer auld friendship's sake, Mayfair—I'd hate to see him do it."

"Yeah," grinned the officer, "me, too. Guess I'll be turnin' in, now. I've got to get goin' in the mornin'. This here Sammy Long Bear I'm after fer that murder on Dubwant, I've got to locate him somewheres over on the Mackenzie. This here murderin' amongst the Injuns an' Eskimos has got to be put a stop to. I'll step out back an' tell Tana to git my breakfast early. I'll prob'ly be gone when you git up. So I'll say so long. See you down to Edmonton at the Fall Assizes. An' if I ain't theer when you get there, leave word with Buck Ordway at headquarters. Buck, he's Assistant Commissioner, commandin' K Division."

When he had disappeared into the trading room, Helen glanced into her father's face. "Oh, do you think he can prove it—that Tom didn't shoot Shultz?" she asked in a low, tense voice.

McTavish shook his head slowly. "I do na think so, lass," he replied. "The evidence is plain as the nose on a mon's face—an' 'tis a' agin' Tom. Auld Bill Mayfair has be'n a grand gude mon, i' his day—none better. But I fear his day is past. What wi' winterin' on Dubwant, an' crossin' the barrens, an' gittin' a touch o' the sun, I'm feared the bush has got him, at last. This will be his last patrol—an' he lives to finish it. When they see how it is wi' him, they'll be retirin' him on a pension—an' in a' the force, no mon's better earnt one."

CHAPTER XXIX

SERGEANT MAYFAIR REPORTS

IN a cheap rooming house on a street of modest homes, in Edmonton, Helen McTavish tossed the magazine, whose pages she had been turning without reading a line, onto the table. She rose abruptly from her chair and nervously crossed the room to draw aside the curtains and peer up and down the street. The shadows of the houses were lengthening, and the late afternoon sunlight slanted obliquely across the green carpet. A score of times since morning she had repeated the performance, and each time she had turned from the window with a lump in her throat and despair in her heart. Half a dozen children were playing ball in the street. A man carrying a suitcase passed on the sidewalk and turned the cor-

ner. A laundry wagon stopped before the house next door, and the driver delivered a package. Two women, their arms laden with bundles paused before a house across the street and chatted for a few minutes. Then one entered the house, and the other passed on.

Helen turned from the window with a glance toward the stern-faced man who, seated in a straight-backed chair, his celluloid collar white and shiny above the suit of funereal black, was reading a newspaper.

"Oh, why doesn't Sergeant Mayfair come?" she cried, in a despairing voice. "The trial opens tomorrow, and—and he'll be too late!"

McTavish laid the paper aside and nodded slowly. "Aye, lass. But he'd done na gude, had he got here. Ye've read the papers, lass. Ye've read how the Crown Prosecutor says he's got an iron-clad case. It's like I've be'n tellin' ye, lass—Mayfair's be'n a gude mon i' his day, but he's auld, the noo—an' gone a bit fey. Ye'll rec'lect he said Shultz wasn't shot wi' a shotgun, when any mon i' his right senses would know he was. He goes up there better than two months after Shultz is kilt an' putters around a bit, an' digs Shultz up, an' then he comes away an' says, kind o' vague an' casual like, he seen enough to know Tom di'na shoot Shultz. Then, when I asks him how aboot me findin' Shultz's gold i' my loft, wheer na one else but Tom could ha' cached it, he grins kind o' daft like, an' says he wouldn't worry aboot the gold.

"My heart is heavy, lass, fer I liked Tom fine. But e'en though he was innocent, I'm feared he'll na be gettin' a fair jury, what wi' a' the newspapers from Montreal to Vancouver printin' aboot him bein' a rich mon's son, an' demandin' that he be hung. An' on top o' that, they're callin' him a hardened criminal on account o' him gettin' in a bit o' trouble now an' agin wi' the Winnipeg police—when the worst they printed aboot him was na more than a prank thot any young lad wi' red blood i' his veins might get mixed up in.

"An' a-top o' a' that, the preachers is a' harpin' on his horrible crime, an' demandin' he be hung as an example to ither young men, an' to show that money canna buy a mon oot o' a murder."

"I hate the newspapers—and the preach-

ers, too," the girl cried. "They are savage, and cruel and full of lies! They are calling Tom hard, and sullen, and defiant. Of course he can't get a fair jury—with everyone reading what they say about him. They've convicted him before the trial has even started. I'm going down and telephone Headquarters. Maybe Sergeant Mayfair has reported there."

"Do na be pesterin' 'em lass. Ye've telephoned 'em a dozen times a'ready, the day. They've told ye they'll tell him wheer to find ye, if he comes in. Ye'd better slip around to the restaurant an' get a bite to eat. Ye'd na leave the room at dinner time, lest Mayfair would come whilst ye was gone."

"I'm not hungry. I'm going to the corner and telephone. You stay here in case he'd come while I'm out."

AND at that very moment, only a few blocks away, in Bradford Buckner's suite in a palatial hotel, a half dozen of the best legal minds in all Canada, had foregathered with Tom's parents for a last forlorn conference before the opening of the trial on the morrow.

Despite the anguished entreaty of his mother and his father, and the advice of Donald Campbell, and his attorneys, Tom had refused to either deny or to admit the killing of Shultz.

Walmsley, of Montreal, spoke for his colleagues: "The Crown boasts a perfect case, and upon the evidence, as submitted, we are forced to agree. It is clear that a serious enmity existed between our client and the man, Shultz. Aside from the robbery, the Crown has established a motive—young Buckner's love for Miss McTavish, who considered herself bound by the promise of her father to marry Shultz. Clearly the death of Shultz would release her from this obligation, which, as she has admitted was as distasteful to her as it was to our client. The robbery, doubtless, was an afterthought. It is plain to see that young Buckner might easily convince himself that, since the gold could be of no further use to its former owner, he might as well appropriate it." He turned to the elder Buckner: "If your son would only cooperate with us—either deny or admit the killing of Shultz, we could then plan our defense. But he remains stubbornly silent.

"Even the two witnesses who are most friendly to him, Miss McTavish and her father, must testify that they heard him threaten to kill Shultz before he would ever marry the girl. About the only evidence we can produce in his favor is the testimony of the two Indians, Joe Crutch and Jack Big Man, that he twice saved Shultz's life, and the testimony of the McTavishs' that he performed a similar service at a later time."

"So, under the circumstances, if your son continues to maintain his stubborn and unreasonable silence, and with the Crown clamoring for the rope, I fear that the best we can hope for is a sentence of life imprisonment."

Bradford Buckner nodded. "Both his mother and I have pleaded with him ever since his incarceration to tell us the truth about what happened. But he has consistently refused. I confess I cannot understand his attitude. We will visit him once more, this evening, and make a last appeal. But, frankly, I have no hope of success."

AS Helen McTavish was about to enter the door of the corner drug store, she paused and stared at a figure that was approaching along the street, pausing now and then to scan the house numbers. It was an uncouth figure, clad in flannel shirt, and well-worn brown denim trousers, a black slouch hat with a torn brim, and moccasins. He was unshaven, and his uncut hair brushed the collar of his shirt that gaped open at the throat.

It was the firm swing of his step, the erect carriage, and the square set of the man's shoulders that held her attention. The next instant, she was rushing toward him with a glad cry: "Sergeant Mayfair! Oh, you came! You came, at last!"

A broad smile widened the lips half concealed by a month's growth of beard. "Why, shore I came, Helen. I told you I would. Gosh, you look fine, rigged out in them store clothes! Prettiest woman I've seen sence I hit town. Ain't be'n here long, though," he added, teasingly. "Jest got in an hour ago. They told me up to Headquarters you'd be'n phonin' 'em, an' give me yer house number. How's Mac standin' city life? Duncan said you come through Resolution ten days before I got there."

"Oh, father's all right." He's waiting in

our rooms for me to come back. I was just about to telephone again, when I saw you. Come on, we'll go there, now.

"Do you know that Tom's trial starts tomorrow morning?" she asked anxiously as they proceeded down the street.

"Yeah, they told me over to Headquarters. Buck Ordway wasn't in, but some young rookie told me. He was all polished up, an' he looked at me like I was somethin' the cat dragged in. He claimed Buck would be back in an hour er so, so I come on down heer to git you folks. I'd like fer you an' Mac to meet Buck. Him an' I's be'n through some mighty interestin' times together, take it first an' last. We come into the Service the same year. Buck, he went on up. But, after my wife died, I didn't want no more promotion. 'Druther be pokin' around in the outlands, I like to sort of be on the move—ain't got the education fer a desk job, anyways. They found that out in Ottawa," he added with a grin. "Took half a dozen of them stenographers to keep my spellin' straight. But, what I claim, if they can figger out what a word means, what the hell's the difference how you spell it? It's the word that counts—not the spellin'."

"Here's the house," Helen said, leading the way in.

McTAVISH, who had stepped to the window and seen them coming, opened the door: "Hello, Mayfair!" he greeted. "Come on in. We feared ye'd na made it. The trial starts tomorrow. Sit doon, mon, an' I'll fetch the bottle."

"Still prescribin' liquor, eh?" grinned the sergeant. "Well, it ain't bad medicine, at that. Yeah, a young fella down to Headquarters, told me about the trial startin' tomorrow. But, shucks, that goes to show what them rookies knows about it."

McTavish paused, bottle and glass in hand, and eyed the other sharply. "But, he was right, mon. It does start i' the mornin'."

"Hell, Mac, there ain't goin' to be no trial—not fer Tom Buckner, there ain't—not tomorrow, nor no other day. That is, onless he steps out an' commits some crime."

"Mon, ha ye taken leave o' yer senses?" McTavish cried. Setting down bottle and glass he picked up a newspaper from the table and thrust it into the sergeant's hands. "Look theer! Look at them headlines:

BUCKNER TRIAL GETS UNDER WAY
TOMORROW

First Case on the Calendar
Rich Man's Son Maintains Stubborn Silence

Mayfair glanced at the paper. "You don't want to believe everything you see in a newspaper, Mac. Cripes, they don't know no more about it than that rookie does."

"But, mon—his lawyers is a' here—the best lawyers i' Canada, the paper says. It says in theer that the best they can hope fer is to get him life imprisonment—to save him from the rope."

Mayfair chuckled. "He can fire all them lawyers after supper. He'd ort to had enough imprisonment a' ready to satisfy him, without hirin' a bunch of lawyers to git him in fer life."

Helen was staring into the face of the old officer. "Do you mean," she asked, half fearfully, "that—that——"

"I mean that if you folks will get on yer hats, we'll slip over to Headquarters an' tell Buck Ordway to turn this here Tom loose." He rose from his chair, tossed off the drink McTavish had poured, and headed for the door. Behind his back, McTavish met Helen's glance, and shook his head sadly, as he touched his forehead significantly with a forefinger. Then, they followed him out the door.

At Headquarters Mayfair, closely followed by the two, paused before the telephone desk presided over by a constable. "Buck got back yet?" he asked.

The constable regarded him with a frown. "Buck? Do you mean the Assistant Commissioner?"

"Hell, yes! Who'd you think I mean? How many Buck's you got around here? If he's got back, tell him I want to see him. If he ain't we'll wait."

"Who are you?"

"Mayfair's the name. If that ain't specific enough fer you; it's Staff Sergeant William F. Mayfair, Reg. No. 0683, Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

The constable stared in wide-eyed incredulity, as his glance swept the unkempt figure from top to toe. "You mean that you're a member of the Force? A staff sergeant?"

"I am, onlest I've got fired er pensioned sence I last heard."

The constable inserted a plug and spoke into the receiver: "Sir, there's a—a person here who says his name is Mayfair. He says he's a— How's that? Very well, sir. Just a moment."

The constable rose, and in a voice in which respect had replaced the sneer, he said: "This way, please," and led the way down a short hall. A door opened suddenly and the Assistant Commissioner, himself, stepped into the hallway and thrust out his hand: "Bill Mayfair! What in thunder you doing here? The last time I was in Ottawa the Commissioner told me he'd sent you up into the Dubwant country to clean up an Injun murder. How'd you make out?"

"Okay." Mayfair wrung the proffered hand, poked a lean forefinger into the other's midriff. "An' by cripes, Buck, it wouldn't hurt you none to get out an' move around a little. This here desk job is puttin' a belly on you."

The constable's eyes widened in holy horror. The Assistant Commissioner chuckled. "God knows I'd like to, Bill. But it's not in the cards."

"Better shuffle the deck, then, an' call fer a new deal before it's too late."

"Come on in," the other invited, his glance shifting to the two who had paused a few paces in the rear.

"Yeah, we will. I want you should meet a couple of friends of mine, Colin McTavish, and his daughter, Helen."

The officer acknowledged the introduction. "McTavish—ah, yes. Glad to meet you. And you, too, Miss McTavish. I remember, McTavish, you used to be at McMurray, years ago. And later at Simpson."

"Aye. Ye've a gude mem'ry. I must confess I do na rec'lect ye."

"No occasion to. I didn't stay on the rivers long. Got shifted to the Arctic, then over into the Yukon country. You're on Artillery Lake, now, I understand—up for the Shultz murder case. I've just been checking over the list of witnesses. Have chairs, please," he added seating himself behind a huge flat-topped desk.

"Yeah," Mayfair corroborated. "It's about that case we come to see you."

"Young Larue did a good job. He's got an iron-clad case there. I made him a corporal for his work on that case, after checking his evidence."

"Did, eh?"

"Yes. Rather surprising, too. I must confess I had certain misgivings when I sent him to Resolution, last fall. Weems was short a man, and Larue seemed the only one available at the moment. And he sure made good. But—you said you came to see me about that case. What's on your mind?"

"You see, my man—the one that done the killin' over on Dubwant, hit out fer the Mackenzie, an' come spring, I took out after him. I stopped at Mac's post on Artillery Lake, an' they told me about this here Shultz murder. Mac told me what him an' Larue found over on the Hoarfrost, an' about findin' Shultz's gold cached in his own fur loft. But, Helen, here—she was so shore Tom Buckner never murdered Shultz, an' robbed him, that I swung around to Shultz's an' sort of looked the ground over. I've got some additional evidence that—"

"Good Lord, Bill! Larue gathered evidence enough up there to hang Buckner, as it is. The Crown's case is complete without any additional evidence."

Mayfair nodded. "Yeah, I expect you're right, Buck. But, it's the defense's case, I was thinkin' about."

A tap sounded on the door, and the Assistant Commissioner called: "Come on!"

A spick-and-span young officer with a corporal's stripes on his sleeve, entered, nodded tersely to the McTavishes, stepping to the desk, laid a dossier before his superior.

Ordway picked up the document, glanced at it, and handed it to Mayfair. "This is the evidence in the Buckner case. I had Larue prepare a couple of copies of it to send down to the school at Regina. It will be a good thing for the youngsters in training to see what a really well-prepared case looks like—and to realize that even a rooky can do good work if he uses his head. Larue, here, was only a rooky himself when he handled the case."

"Yeah," agreed Mayfair, "that's what I figured—after lookin' things over, down there."

Ordway glanced at the younger man. "Larue, meet Sergeant Mayfair."

The young officer nodded. "Ah, yes—glad to meet you. Seem to have heard the name mentioned, somewhere. Stationed here, once or something—wasn't it?" There

was a note of condescension in the voice, and ill-disguised disdain in the glance that took in the slouchy, nondescript attire.

The old sergeant's eyes dropped to the papers on his lap. "Yeah," he replied, vaguely, "here, an' there—or somewhere—it was." Wetting his thumb, he began turning the neatly typewritten sheets slowly, pausing, now and then, to read the words. While Larue, with obvious annoyance, scowled at the smudges left by the none-too-clean thumb.

Presently Mayfair glanced up. "Yeah, Buck—might be a good idea to send these papers down to Regina. They look like they're prepared nice an' neat—no blots an' smudges on 'em—except what come off'n my thumb. The words is spelt right, too. I wouldn't know about that. Down to Ottawa, when we want to go get out a set of papers, like these here, we hire a girl out of the business college to typewrite 'em. Costs around three, four dollars—but I s'pose it's worth it—if you like tidy lookin' reports."

"Take my reports, now—they don't look nothin' like this here set of papers. They're mostly wrote down in my notebook with the stub of a lead pencil, an' agin I've carried 'em around in my pocket a while, an' they've got wet a few times, you can't hardly make out what I set down. They ain't nice an' tidy, like these papers, no more'n what my clothes is nice an' tidy like Larue's. I jest got in off the rivers. Ain't shaved fer a month—ain't got no part of my uniform left. Had a pretty good one when I left Ottawa, last fall. But I kep' snaggin' my pants an' coat in the bush, an' wore out my shoes, an' lost my hat."

McTavish shifted uneasily in his chair and stared at the floor in embarrassment. It was painful to sit and listen to this old friend, who in his day had been one of the keenest officers in the service, babbling on about reports and clothing, the real object of his visit apparently entirely forgotten.

Mayfair rattled on: "Yeah, Buck—you got somethin' there—learnin' them rookies typewritin'. It keeps 'em out of the bush, an' saves hirin' them girls."

The Assistant Commissioner was known among the younger officers as something of a martinet, a strict disciplinarian, and Larue waited in eager anticipation for the explosion that would burst about the head of this

unkempt sergeant who addressed him as "Buck" to his face.

But, the explosion did not come. Instead, the top officer sat there smiling quizzically into the face of this old comrade of many trails. "What's on your mind, Bill? What the hell are you driving at?"

"Oh, yeah—this here Buckner business. That's what we come to see you about." He paused and thumbed the papers. "Let's see, what's the charge? Oh, yeah—murder. Did he admit killin' Shultz? I ain't got that fer."

"He won't admit anything," Larue snapped. "But, with the evidence I dug up we don't need a confession."

"Mebbe not. Confessions is a good thing to have, though—when you can get 'em. Saves a lot of trouble, sometimes. Take this here case, now. There ain't no chanct, I s'pose, that you've made some triflin' mistake—like fetchin' in the wrong man?"

"The wrong man!" Larue sneered. "Not a chance in the world. The Crown Prosecutor admitted that it is one of the best-prepared cases he has ever handled."

"Oh, the preparin's all right. Nice neat job. I was thinkin' about the murder. What Buck had ort to do is save you fer the type-writin' jobs, an' let someone else handle the murders. Fact is, this here Tom Buckner never killed Shultz. I know'd that two minutes after I stepped in Shultz's door. Not only Buckner never killed him—he wasn't even killed with a shotgun—like the paper here says."

"Nonsense!" Larue cried. "He laid there on the floor with half his head blown off, and you say it wasn't done with a shotgun. What did the murderer use—a sling-shot?"

"No. He used an old smooth-bore trade gun. You don't see many of 'em, no more. Young rooky like you prob'ly never seen one.

"Most of the Injuns has got rifles, now. But there's a few of them old guns left, here an' there in the bush country." Mayfair reached into his pocket, and laid several misshapen lead slugs on the desk. "There's what killed Shultz. I dug 'em out of the wall back of where he stood. They stuck in the logs after tearin' through Shultz's head. Some of 'em didn't go through. I dug Shultz up, an' prospected around in his brains, an' got a couple more o' 'em—an' here's one that stuck in his skull bone." He

placed the bit of bone with the embedded slug on the table.

All eyes were riveted on the objects on the desk top. Helen McTavish's alight with new hope. McTavish, leaning forward in his chair, staring in open-mouthed astonishment. The Assistant Commissioner, with shrewd gray eyes narrowed speculatively. Larue in wide-eyed incredulity. He was the first to speak.

"How about the empty shotgun shell I found in front of Shultz's door? And Buckner's tracks there in the frozen slush? And Buckner's bloody fingerprints on Shultz's Luger, where he had placed it to make it look like self-defense? And the fact that Buckner was gone two nights from the post, and that Shultz's gold was found in McTavish's fur loft—right where Buckner put it?"

"Well," Mayfair grinned. "You can't hang a man fer trompin' around in the snow, nor yet fer throwin' away an' empty shotgun shell, nor neither fer stayin' away from a post fer a couple of nights, nor fer handlin' another man's pistol, as long as he don't shoot someone with it. But takin' up yer p'int one to a time—the shotgun shell was there because that's where Buckner throw'd it after shootin' a rabbit, like he claimed. You can see fer yerself, that even if there wasn't no powder in the shell, you couldn't cram them slugs into it if you tried. An' besides shotgun ammunition ain't loaded with slugs hammered out of fish-net sinkers.

"About Buckner's bloody fingerprints on the Luger—they was there because Buckner handled the gun after guttin' the rabbit. Shultz's blood was froze when Buckner got there. The precipitatin' test will tell whether it's human blood, er not—not that it makes any difference, in this case.

"An' Buckner was gone two nights from the post, because he couldn't get back no quicker, after goin' to the lake to meet Helen McTavish, an' then on up to Shultz's.

"An' Shultz's gold was in McTavish's loft because that's where the murderer cached it."

The Assistant Commissioner eyed the old sergeant. "But—why would Buckner try to make it look like a case of self-defense—and then not admit the killing? I confess, I can't see the point in that."

Mayfair grinned. "I can. Trouble is, you've all be'n jumpin' at conclusions. Buckner had a shotgun—so you all had shotgun on the brain. It was plain Shultz wasn't shot with a pistol or a rifle—so it must have be'n a shotgun. Then you all—all of you, that is, except Helen McTavish—believed Buckner was guilty of murder, so you figured that whatever he done was done to clear himself. He put that Luger where it was, not to clear himself—but to clear Helen McTavish."

"Helen McTavish!" Ordway exclaimed. "Surely you don't believe that Helen McTavish killed Shultz!"

"No. I don't. But I'd bet every cent I've got that Buckner does. Put yerself in his place—he knows she loves him, an' hates Shultz. The girl knows the only thing that stands between her an' Buckner marryin' is Shultz. She goes up there with a loaded shotgun. Shultz is found dead on his floor with his head blow'd half off, apparently with a shotgun. Buckner figgers that the girl had a sudden brainstorm an' shot the man who stood in the way of her happiness. He saw she wouldn't have a good case of self-defense with Shultz unarmed when she shot him—so he fixed it up to look like he had be'n armed."

Helen McTavish leaped to her feet, her violet eyes glowing like twin stars. "You mean—you mean," she cried, "that Tom did that to save me? That he deliberately ran the risk of being hanged—for—for me?"

Mayfair nodded. "That's what I figger. An' I'm bettin' that if you had shot Shultz, an' confessed, he'd swore you was lyin'—that he shot him himself."

"I'll still stake my reputation on Buckner's guilt!" Larue cried.

"Not with me, you won't," Mayfair grinned. "I'd hate like hell to win it. It shore wouldn't do me no good." He turned to Ordway. "So, now, Buck, if you'll turn this here Buckner loose, we'll be gittin' along. Father Giroux come on upriver with me a-purpose to marry them two."

"Turn him loose! Hell, Mayfair—I can't do that! You may be right about his not being guilty—but, until we can produce the actual murderer, we'll have to hold Buckner."

"Well, cripes, Buck, we've got the murderers—there's two of 'em. They're in cells right here in Edmonton. I fetched 'em along with me—a couple of Injuns, name of Johnny Zero, an' Wolf Jaw, that had it in fer Shultz. Shultz had refused to pay Johnny Zero a hundred dollars he owed him fer some haulin' he done, an' then run him off the Hoarfrost with a rifle, threatenin' to kill him if he ever come back. An' Wolf Jaw got in on it because Shultz had be'n abusin' him an' cheatin' him fer a couple of years. After Zero shot him, Wolf Jaw showed him where the gold was cached, and they lifted it, an' took it acrost to McTavish's an' cached it in the loft, figgerin' to pick it up next tradin' time."

"But, losh, mon!" cried McTavish. "How'd ye find oot about them Injuns cachin' the gold theer?"

"Why, Tana told me, first. The Injuns admitted it, later. The same time they admitted shootin' Shultz an' robbin' his cache. Tana she thinks a good deal of Helen, an' this here Tom Buckner. She wasn't goin' to see him convicted fer somethin' he never done."

"But—why the lyin' jade! She told me she di'na know how the gold got i' the loft!"

Mayfair laughed. "She told me, about it, though—that morning I got up early. I know'd she had somethin' to tell me. She give me the wink that mornin' Helen an' I was eatin' breakfast. Tana she sort of likes me, too. I've know'd her a good many years—saved her whole family from a forest fire, one time, way back. An' she never fergot."

"But, why should them Injuns cache the gold in my loft?" cried McTavish.

"They figgered that Tana would sort of keep an eye on it fer 'em. You see, Johnny Zero is her half-brother."

"So now, Buck, if you'll quit stallin' around, an' turn Buckner loose, them two young folks can go ahead an' git married. An' while Buckner's firin' them lawyers that's tryin' to git him in fer life, Larue here can be tellin' the Crown Prosecutor what happened to his iron-clad case."

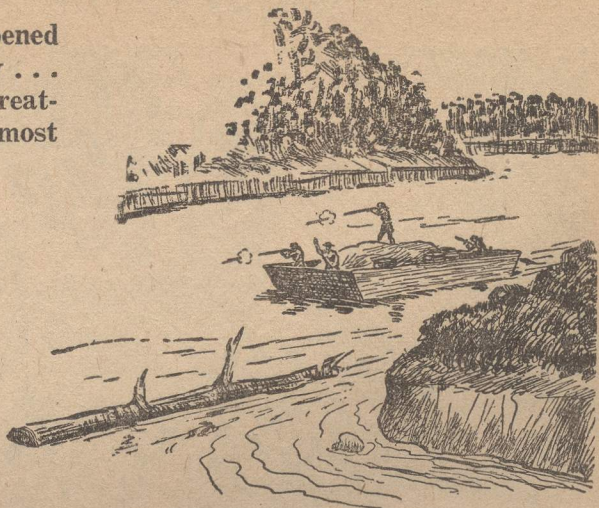
"An' besides all that, I want the chanct to shake this here Buckner's hand. By God, there's a man!"

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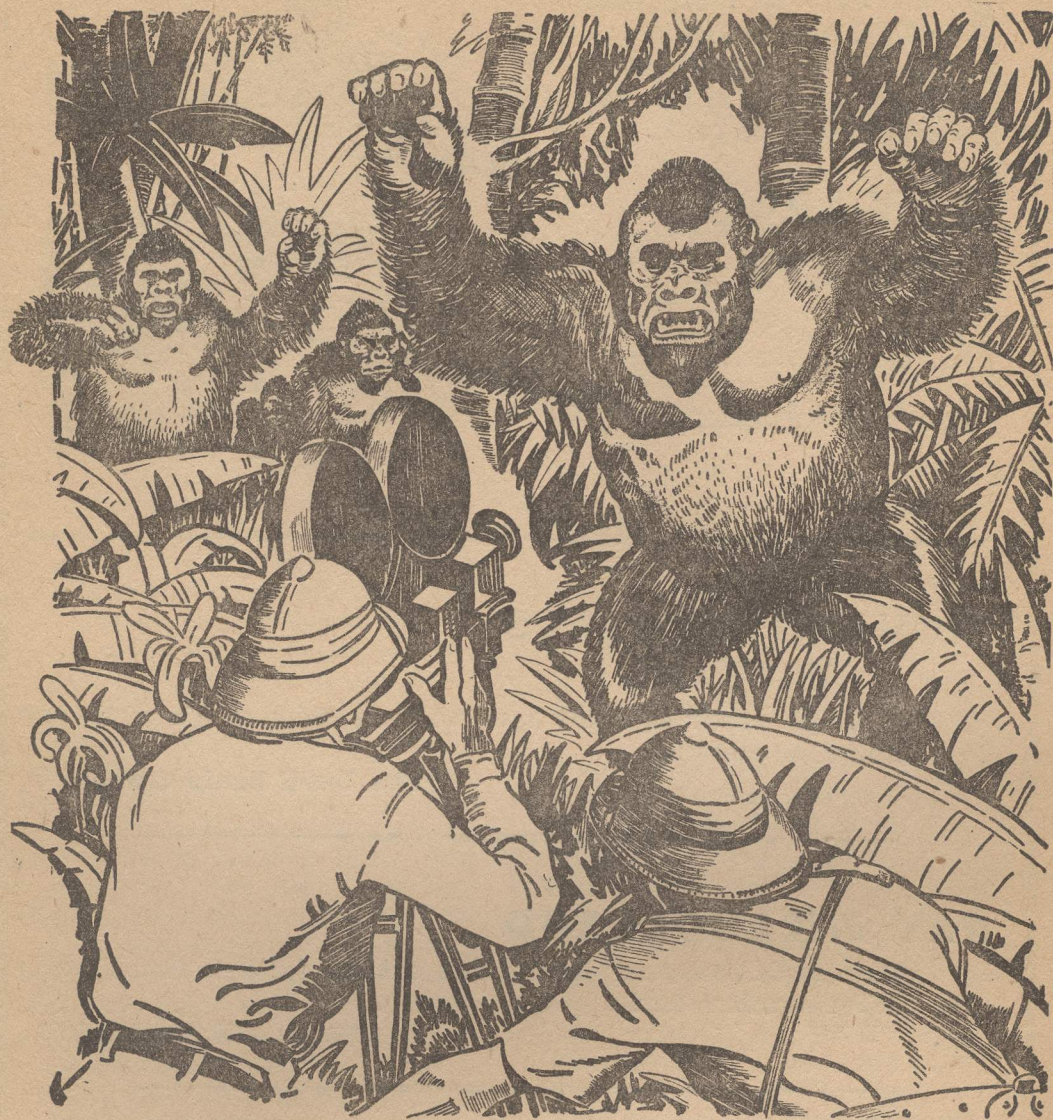
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CAGE IN THE JUNGLE

By PAUL ANNIXTER

THE first thing Seldes knew, Jack Beaumont had begun to wind film. He must have dropped off for a minute, for now at the edge of a sea of ten-foot bamboo two hundreds yards below the camera blind, there was stealthy move-

ment. A dark shape took form there. It looked at first like a black door opening into the green foliage, then a mighty man-shaped beast stood slowly turning round and round, as if it were part of the process of extrication from the jungle shade. It was a male gorilla of gigantic proportions, standing

erect, horny black hands grasping the cane stalks.

He was not alone. Others came out of the cane behind him; three low females, bowed and squat, more simian than he, two carrying young in their arms; behind these a graying, wrinkled granny, gaunt and bent, her eyes but a sunken squint, her flat, leathery features untellably repulsive. Last of all another younger male, a black pillar of a beast, slimmer and more upstanding than the others. Plainly all were members of a single clan.

Cautiously they moved up the slope, bent upon examining the hunters' camp. They were suspicious, ready for instant flight, yet gripped by a strange fascination. The females knuckled the ground with long arms like crutches, advancing with a peculiar scooter motion. The vast males with their leathery black faces and truncated torsos resembled the harrowing fetishes set up by African tribes to frighten away devils. They squatted in a circle about the camp, long arms reaching out to finger this and that—a tin plate, a knife, a metal pot. In the nearby tree Beaumont's camera clicked dryly like an insect in the stillness.

Object after object was picked up and turned over in black hands with wonder. The younger male took the lid off the coffee pot, dipped a finger within and drew it out to lick with satisfaction. He raised the pot to his mouth with a gesture ludicrous and completely human. Some of the cold coffee ran into his mouth. Over his black negroid face spread an idiotic grin of pleasure.

Meantime the grizzled leader advanced upon the weathered khaki tent. Squatting he turned his head far to one side and peered within. Finally he rose to his full height of nearly six feet, supporting himself upon the tent pole. With a jerk he plucked the pole out of the ground and the tent collapsed.

At the same moment one of the females, poking in the ashes of the recent fire, plucked out a pretty red coal in her fingers. As she leaped back with a chattering cry, every beast in the company came erect and sprang apart. The old one whirled, a havoc of jealous rage in his reddish eyes. With a bellow like close thunder he flung himself at the younger male, arms raised like flails.

The granite coffee pot was seen to col-

lapse like so much cardboard in the black hands of the younger brute. They bounced together in a gust of sheer physical passion, their bellowing voices raised in almost human cries of fury. There was a grappling and wrestling of mighty bodies; blows rained upon flesh with the hollow sound of a wet drum; sticks and earth flew. Then as quickly as it had begun, the struggle was over; the old gorilla stood drumming his hands upon his barrel chest and the younger beast went circling back toward the cane-jungle, pausing now and then to drum back an answer.

Presently the old one took up the tent pole and, carrying it as a man would a staff, he moved away toward the bamboo, the females following close. When all had disappeared, a tired voice sounded from the tree overlooking the camp "God, what a stretch!"

MARTIN SELDES, English big game hunter, stood upright on the cane platform on which he had been crouching, stretching arms and legs with a subdued groan.

Beaumont, his partner, grinned. "Great to get the kinks out, eh, Mart?" He moistened his heat-parched lips with tepid water and passed the canteen to Seldes. "Four and a half hours, this time, but it's been a big morning and the camera caught it all."

"I'll be seeing that little wrestling match at night to my dying day. I'm holding it against them for staging it under our tree."

"That will be the making of our picture, man," Beaumont chuckled. "There's bad blood between those two boys and it's working up to a showdown—the big fight to see who's boss of the district. If we're lucky enough to catch that, we're made. And the old boy going off with that tent pole will pull a laugh from any audience."

"Pretty little stick," Seldes grimaced. "He's going to keep it. We ought to have had it painted for him."

The partners descended from their blind and stood surveying the camp. No trace of tension on Beaumont's gaunt bronzed features. Seldes had learned from long experience afield that his partner was different from other men. He seemed to thrive on danger, suspense, hardship and monotony—things that broke down most men in the tropics. Seldes' own cheeks and temples

showed gray sags of nervous fatigue today. He was sitting on a rock examining the flattened coffee pot in a kind of fascination when he looked up to find Beaumont standing over him.

"What's the matter, man? You're not getting on," Beaumont said. "You're getting all pale and peaked watching for pictures back of that camera screen."

"I know what you imply," Seldes drew in from his gray abstraction. "Good of you not to say it all. I didn't know I was delicate like this a couple of months back, Jack. It took gorillas to bring it out, I guess. It began when those natives bolted on us the first afternoon up here, and it's been growing ever since.

He referred to their *askaris*, eight black carriers who had packed their equipment up Mount Nebu, but who had refused to remain even a night in gorilla country, asserting that the spirits of demons and evil magicians dwelt in the great man-apes. Since then, Seldes had dwelt constantly with a secret psychological funk that had taken all the power he had to cope with.

Seldes couldn't in equity call himself a timid man. Dangers of the big game hunt in tiger, lion and rhino country, even the haunt of ghostly visitation, had not found him wanting, but this was different. It wasn't that he feared death. But some sub-human horror connected with the great jungle apes, filled him with a revulsion similar to most men's reaction to snakes. Beaumont hadn't missed the fact that his partner was wearing close to the quick of late.

"Not to get personal or anything, just how much longer do you want to hang out in this spook-haunted neck of the woods?"

"We've been doing well up here, Mart. We get a few camera shots every day. We'll soon have that box-full we came in after. What were you thinking of, a trek out, or deeper in?"

"To tell the truth, I've been thinking that our young lives are wearing away watching and prowling the bush after these booger-men. It's just an idea, but it strikes me the gods may not like such persistence, it being a sin to revoke ourselves this way. To get right down to it, I suggest a nice pastoral lion or rhino hunt for a week or two to soothe the nerves."

"But there's a gold mine in here for us,

man; a whole colony of gorillas living close by. If we wait long enough we'll get everything we came in after.

"Right; and a lot more, dear old top," said Seldes. "I should say offhand, that a centipede is apt to get a man if he stays long enough in one spot. We've been through all the danger a generous dose of luck will stand, right now. Suppose the stem of that match had broken so you couldn't light the flashlight cartridge just as that lion sprang at our camera? Suppose you'd missed dropping that old rhino as he came for me? And suppose those gorillas had charged us awhile back? An enraged gorilla is almost impossible to down if he's bent on getting a man. He can carry more lead than a wild boar."

"It isn't healthy, those supposes. A man could fill his head with that stuff till his hand shook and he saw double," Beaumont said.

"Don't you ever surmise like that."

"No."

Seldes was silent. That was the whole story about Beaumont. He didn't think about danger; a zeal and fire about the younger man which Seldes would have followed anywhere.

"You're a good old bounder for one who isn't human," Seldes grinned at last. "You need me, though. If I didn't do all the worrying, you'd have to. I say, it's flirting with chance, hanging around too long in this cane jungle. Call me nervous—call me Phyllis if you like—but I've had some direct hunches lately—"

"I'm listening, Mart. Trouble is, I've an equally strong hunch that in spite of setbacks we'll have a roomer in a day or so for that new cage of ours."

"You're right there, coming and going," Seldes grimaced. "For if the gorillas insist on keeping to the woods, it's time we occupied the cage ourselves. Personally, I'd feel a lot easier behind some good strong bars."

"Let's compromise," Beaumont smiled at the coals. "I figured on sticking till we got everything we came for, including a live specimen. But give me one week more and I'll pull out, win or lose."

The rest of that day both men suffered a recurrence of the fever that had smouldered in their blood since leaving the Congo lowlands. Even the chill winds of the heights did not cool the heat that raged within them.

Seldes felt a sick man's irritation at such times toward Africa in general, every stick and stone of her. He lost hope entirely of ever making it back to the coast where ships waited to carry him north.

NEXT morning the partners went forth with camera and rifle. Somewhere in the cane-brush nearby was the stronghold of the colony of gorillas. Along the game trail they followed through the cane the heat was stifling, heavy and suffused, seeming to drain the very pith and will out of a man, cell by cell, thought by thought. Yet not far away, seen through breaks in the jungle, they could glimpse the eternal snows on Mount Nebu's cone.

In a clearing in the bush was the big steel cage they had packed in laboriously, and in which Beaumont hoped to capture a mature gorilla. It was a massive contraption six feet high and seven feet square, its bars three-quarters of an inch thick and set in heavy teak. Its spring-trap door stood invitingly open and in the damp earth all about were fresh tracks of the big apes.

"They're getting warmer every day," Beaumont said. "Some morning we'll find one of them has set up housekeeping inside."

About noon they came upon a party of gorillas on a high ridge, nine or ten shaggy forms squatting in a clearing, three males visible in the group, one well to the fore, standing out above the others, incredibly vast of bulk, gray hair showing on his vast shoulders.

"It's our old one of the tent pole," Beaumont whispered. "Evidently he's big boss of the district. This may be our big picture! You be taking in the ensemble. I'm going to circle left and try for some close-ups. Don't start shooting. I'll signal if I need help."

As Seldes watched, the grizzled old male moved out ahead of his party, making fierce sweeping gestures with his arms to his following. He began to wind film just as Beaumont appeared, moving into the open with his tripod camera screwed on, actually bent on driving the apes out of the shade which was too dense for pictures.

Always before, at the appearance of the white men, the gorillas would make for cover. But today the grizzled Old One

swung round and started toward Beaumont, giving himself sweeping pushes with his great hands upon the ground.

Beaumont had set up his tripod by now and was winding it in. Seldes was winding in Beaumont as well as the gorillas. Twenty feet away the old male straightened suddenly, flung his arms over his head as if waving a blanket, and lunged forward to finish off the intruder. Behind, the rest of the band, like spooks of venomous fury, sidled and shuffled on obscene bowed legs, shrilling, lashing and grimacing.

A thrill went through Seldes at the way Beaumont held his ground, winding it all in. A great bit of nerve there; he might have known Beaumont would not rest till he'd had a hand-to-hand encounter with the brutes. Seldes' rifle covered the Old One. He waited to the very last second before he fired, bringing the old man to a stop with a huddled lurch.

He fired again and most of the watching apes disappeared. Neither shot had any telling effect. The Old One stopped only for a moment, then went on, long arms reaching with a queer swimming motion. Beaumont was staving the creature off with the out-thrust legs of the tripod when he tripped and fell. Instantly the gorilla was upon him. Seldes rushed forward. He saw Beaumont lifted as if he had been a figure of straw, the ape bending over him a moment, as if untying a bundle. Then he flung the body from him and made off. Seldes was about to put a bullet into the low flat head when the beast turned to look over his shoulder with such a startlingly human expression that he was unable to pull the trigger.

Beaumont was helpless as Seldes bent over him. There was no marks on him yet, no bones broken, yet he couldn't move. Some deep organic injury seemed to have paralyzed him.

"I'll be all right in a few minutes," he said gamely, but he wasn't, and Seldes had to pack him bodily into camp.

"It was like being caught in a steam press," Beaumont said later. "I've never felt anything to compare with the power of those hands. I'm bruised clear in to the core."

He lay on his bunk, eyes glazed. An hour later he was unconscious with fever and Seldes was learning more about the mean-

ing of those premonitory hunches of his. He seemed to have known this would happen from the first.

For two days Beaumont was scarcely conscious. His body blackened mysteriously, and Seldes was bound to camp by the burdens of Sinbad.

On the third day Beaumont rallied; his unhurt constitution winning over shock and fever. Movement began to return and his mind and spirits were undampened. He talked incessantly of gorillas, and it was to quiet his friend that Seldes went forth to reconnoiter that afternoon, and met the grimmest tableau of his life.

His object was to see if the steel cage yet held a captive. Always he had experienced a crawling sensation of the nerves on traversing the damp path through the cane. He was too familiar with the feeling to give it particular thought today, so he failed to notice faint rustlings amid the bamboo until he reached the clearing where the cage stood. There he stopped short, straining his eyes and ears, while a queer tight feeling drew a pucker around his heart.

It was a minute or more before he glimpsed bent stealthy forms in the cane, looming through the screen of green like figures in a tapestry. The sight brought a clutch of real terror for he recognized the members of the same band of three days before—a furtive malignance in their silent talking.

Like some hideous jungle fetish, one of the great males, the young one, broke into the open, sunken eyes glowing in his black leathery face with a demoniac light. Straight for the man he came, hissing, clucking, mowing with his lips, the others close behind, not even remotely gun-shy now. Last of all came the grizzled Old One, dragging his stolen tent pole, a startling spectacle, his wounds like a proof of an evil about to be avenged.

This was it, Seldes thought, the incredible thing of which he had sometimes dreamed, yet sought to discredit in unuttered prayers. He held ground until the leading male was fifty feet away before firing twice with his automatic. The creature merely clapped a hand to his side and came on, yammering.

Outwardly Seldes remain calm; though the network of nerves and memory that leaps and quails in every man at the im-

minence of death was a-clamor. He could not hope to down more than one of the brutes in a concerted attack. And there was grim purposefulness in every mien and movement of the creatures.

Abruptly the idea of the steel cage flashed to mind. Slowly he began backing toward it, weighing his chances coolly. The gorillas advanced as he backed. The cage door still stood open. Through it, like frightened animal to its burrow, he ducked, and the spring door clanged shut behind him.

The slamming of the door dumfounded the apes for a space. Even the two males stopped short. All squatted in a semi-circle, watching.

Seldes settled himself to wait, but he could not settle his body. He remained standing in the exact center of the cage, every nerve alert for any sudden development. He knew the strange quirks of simian nature. Any undue movement might start something that could not be stopped. On the other hand the apes might take themselves off. So he refrained from moving even a muscle.

IT WAS frightfully hot. Sweat stood out on him and he expelled his breath silently to free his face of swarming gnats and mosquitoes. For the first time, now that he was facing the worst, he seemed to have faint leverage on the funk that had weighed him down so long. For now he could cope with the fear that had been such an involving part of him. Though his nerves were screaming, he was finding a certain center of stability within.

A flare of murder, red-lit, showed in the lidless lacquered eyes of the younger male, a glow like an electric bulb struggling against a supercharge. He edged close to the cage, a malign sagacity in his attitude as if a plot were evolving beneath that low bestial forehead. The creature bulked huge beyond belief. His black lips furled above his huge dog teeth. This beast was different from the old patriarch, an evil debauched look about him that filled Seldes with loathing and terror. The circle of squatting apes answered to this one's every emotion. How hideous and disgusting they were! Evidently there had been a shift of leadership since the wounding of the grizzled Old One. Now

the balance of power was with the younger brute.

His face was sunk between great hunched shoulders like a hideous mask of death over which black skin had been stretched. Gingerly one black hand went out to feel the cage bars. The bars were too close together for those great hairy arms to reach far between them. But the strength of the creature was limitless. Suddenly he rose, face contorted with bafflement and fury, and the entire cage moved and shook.

WHAT gameness Seldes had began to slip against all the force of his mind—virtue evaporating from his bones. For abruptly the creature drew away with mincing gait, that in its movements which could not be mistaken. With a lunge it came in at the bars and the cage rocked. He drew off to do it again, the throng behind following his every movement with fascination, bouncing up and down, beating their chests.

Suddenly he issued a harsh command that carried a threat like a trainer's lash: "Back! Damn you, back!"

The words had instant effect. A quiver of awe swept the semi-circle. But only for a minute. Another fiendish scheme began turning over in the brain of the big male. He circled the cage at a hunched ungainly gamble, turning his head sidewise to peer between the bars. Then he came in again with a skittering bounce, almost knocking the cage over.

Three bullets still remained in Seldes' automatic, but the calm judgment bade him save them to the last. He shouted, and again the ring of apes drew back, eyes fixed upon him, faces screwed up in horrid mimicry, held by some fascination, some familiarity of the human voice. It was obnoxious, yet it was wonderful to have found some means of arresting them. This time he renewed his shouting from minute to minute, interspersing it with sweeping gestures of the arms. The creatures watched him with a mesmeric fascination, but no sooner did he stop than the evil-visaged male initiated some new show of hostility.

More than an hour passed thus. Each time the focalization of the apes on the cage became critical, he would distract them by a new display of shouting and gesturing. He recited the Lord's Prayer, the ABC's, Lin-

coln's Gettysburg speech. It was like trying to dissuade a lynching mob from carrying out its purpose, only it didn't matter what he shouted.

Beneath all horror and tension he was studying the situation, weighing his chances. Mentally, he had given himself up at the outset; now revolt and anger jarred his will to its foundations, his brain shuttled desperately for ways and means. Useless to hope for aid from Beaumont who would not be able to move for a couple of days. He could hold out for a time, perhaps till darkness fell, but what would happen then? Doubtless the creatures would press in closer and closer as night came on; his voice and gestures would have no effect then, and finally they would wrench the cage bars apart and pluck him forth. But even if that did not happen, he could only prolong matters for a time. Heat and strain, growing fatigue—Africa herself—would soon lay him low. Still, he must not crack; he must carry on to the very end. There was always some breath of hope while life remained, that proverbial ninth part of the hair of chance.

TIME dragged on. The sun was beginning to dip below the jungle wall. His ability to hold the attention of the apes was weakening, their periods of curiosity growing shorter, particularly in the case of the leading male whose yellow teeth were bared now even as the man was shouting. Again and again he circled the cage, seeking some means of reaching the puny human within. All eyes followed his every move with expectation.

Nothing further might have happened for an interminable period had not a new idea entered the skull of the younger male. His eye fell upon the stolen tent pole which the Old One had laid down and he plucked it up and thrust the end between the bars with the idea of prodding the man within.

Abruptly a bellowing roar shook the still air. Arms waving like flails, jaws agape, the Old One lurched forward to retrieve his treasure, the scepter of his might, voice risen in an almost human cry of reprimand, sunken eyes red as fanned coals.

Conflict was instant between them, and such a conflict as Seldes had never dreamed of. The tent pole, seized by two pairs of great ebony hands, snapped in two like matchwood. Black lips lifted above his

teeth, the younger beast beat his portion upon the Old One's shoulders in staccato motions of fury. With roarings and the stamping of bowed legs, they came to a clinch with a shock and wrench that brought file-like whistles of breath through their anger-parched throats. Two seven-hundred-pound giants had assembled their true strength at last for a clash that had long been hanging fire.

Gorilla against gorilla!

A nervous sweat bathed Seldes' face, his body palpitated from the sheer reflex of the thing, staged as it was within a dozen feet of him. Instinctively he fell silent, knowing this interruption was the leeway that might save him. Momentarily the battle waxed fiercer. They were frightfully like human wrestlers, these jungle men, as they fended, struck and parried, dealing tremendous blows upon shoulders, chest and neck. Heavy canines gaped and buried themselves in flesh until the carmine of veins intermingled.

The Old One had the greater bulk. A few days before, he might have finished off his antagonist; now he was weakened from his unhealed wounds, and bellowed with pain at every blow. Again and again they clinched and broke, only to lunge in with still fiercer fury, black hands ripping and prying in dark diablery. They locked and fell to the ground at last, rolled to the very cage bars, silent now save the blasting of indrawn breaths and the thud and scrape of hairy hides together.

It was the younger beast that secured the telling hold. One black arm locked about the Old One's neck, a massive hand gripping his head, twisting and wrenching backward. The Old Man voiced a racking cry of pain; his eyes began to roll and bulge, his tongue hung loose. The ring of watching apes drew closer now, for the end was close. Then Seldes did a strange thing. The queerest, most friendly feeling came over him for the Old One. His hand went to his

automatic. Come what might, his last act would be to send a bullet through the head of the evil-visaged male. He fired twice at a distance of four feet, and backed off, saving his final bullet.

The cluster of watchers sprang asunder, but it is doubtful if the Old One even heard it in the heat of the conflict. It was more than a minute before he seemed to realize that the battle was over, that the form he grappled was merely twitching in its death agonies. He flung it aside and rose to drum fierce thunder on his great chest.

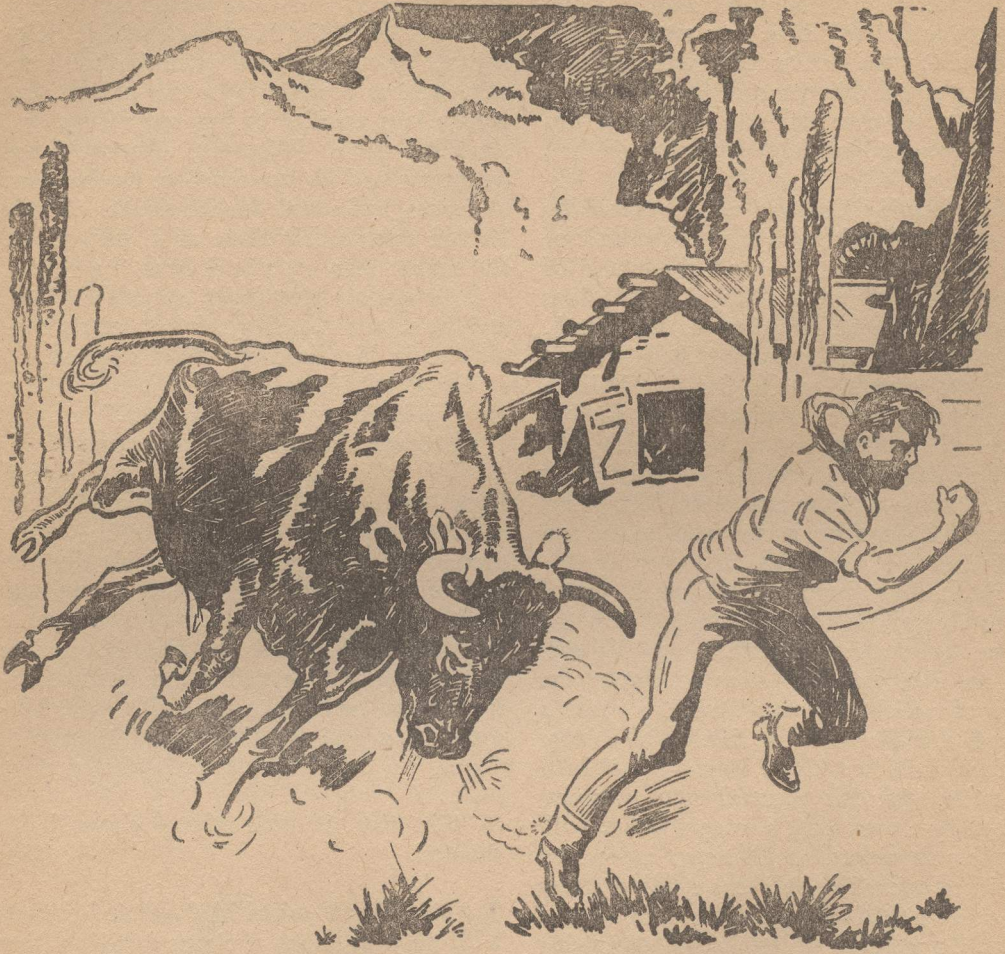
Now was the crucial moment. Seldes stood waiting in breathless suspense; and the very breeze seemed to cease. Sunken eyes red-lit from battle, more hideously human than ever, the close-up of the Old One's face burned itself indelibly into the man's brain as he waited for what was to come.

A stir in the ranks caught the Old Man's eye—two or three of the younger bolder spirits pressing forward to the cage again, bent on finishing off the man within. But that splendid game had been the idea of the fallen rival. The Old One would have none of it. Rebellion flared and with an idea of disciplining the band, he flung himself forward, driving them away before him. Following up the hot flush of his victory, he harried them away with grimacing and flailing arms. Another minute and all had disappeared in the dense cane.

This was the chance Seldes had prayed for, and as the last shaggy form disappeared, he quietly opened the cage door and turned campward along the way he had come. Twice he tried to run, but stumbled and fell from the sheer weakness of reaction. It was providential that Beaumont was so far along the road to recovery, for only now did Seldes quite realize how close to breaking he had been. In his mind, as he hurried along the shadowy trail, was but a single burning thought: What if he had obeyed his first impulse three days before, and shot the Old One as he fled?



*Ranch Owner of the Orneriest Shorthorn Bull in All
Wyoming—and That Was All*



BILLY DANCER'S BULL

By JIM KJELGAARD

BILLY DANCER was counting his money. He put the worn five dollar bill in the top drawer of his battered desk; that would buy grub for the next two weeks. The two dollar bill was ceremoniously deposited in the second drawer, and for a moment Billy ceased tallying his wealth to dream. As soon as he got only nine hundred and ninety-eight dollars to add to the two he would be able to buy a nice herd

of cows and then— Then he would show everybody including that smart Two-Stitch Brown and Old Man Caraday. Billy looked wistfully at the single two-bit piece and the Indian-head nickel that remained of his wealth, and slid both coins into his pocket. A man couldn't go around broke.

Billy put his feet on the desk and leaned back in the swivel chair while his long black hair fell about his young face and his scarcely-bearded jaw thrust defiantly out-

ward. A big cattleman and ranch-owner had a lot to think about, especially when he was in love with an angel named Molly Caraday and didn't have any cattle. Well, maybe that wasn't quite right. He did have one head, probably the orneriest Shorthorn bull that had ever stripped its mother dry and then butted her udders because she had no more milk for him. He—

The morning's silence was shattered by the snarl of breaking wires, the screech of forcibly pulled staples, and the crack of snapping fence posts. Billy hit the floor running, while he swore under his breath. Only yesterday afternoon he had finished the new grazing patch for his bull, a wooden rail fence surrounded by another fence of deep-set posts upon which was strung a triple strand of barbed wire. And this morning— Billy ran to the door of his pleasant little four room ranchhouse and looked out.

The rolling acres of his ranch, green fields that at the far end blended into the deeper green of pine forests, met his eye. To one side was fifty acres of clover, the seed of which was worth sixteen cents a pound and the proceeds from which were to furnish Billy with at least a small herd of cattle. But this peaceful scene was disturbed by a roan bull, a huge creature with rippling shoulders, needle-sharp horns, and a wicked eye. The bull was striding across the green fields towards the clover, and when he reached it he began devouring the expensive shoots in great mouthfuls. Billy groaned. The bull had the disposition of a wildcat with a toothache, the appetite of an elephant, and an apparent immunity to all the diseases and illnesses normal cattle got.

For a minute more Billy stood in the doorway, volubly expressing his opinion of the ranch, the bull, and Aunt Agatha. Aunt Agatha had willed him the ranch, a modern and well set-up place, on condition that he live there, seek no outside employment, and take good care of Minotaur, the bull's hifalutin' name. It had all looked pretty good to a wandering cow-poke who owned nothing except his horse, the saddle and bridle that bedecked his horse, and the clothes on his back. But Billy had swiftly found out about white elephants.

Minotaur was the only stock on the

ranch, the clover the only paying crop. Aunt Agatha had expressly provided that unkindness to Minotaur would result in a speedy shift of the ranch's ownership. Going out to work would have the same result, and a cowboy with no money was hardly in a position to buy some cows and stock his ranch. Minotaur, who could not be imprisoned by any fence or combination of fences, had a taste for the clover. Already he had eaten a fair share of it, and before the season was over he'd have the rest.

Billy walked pleadingly towards the bull, and Minotaur ceased grazing to cast a rancid eye in his direction. Billy stopped.

"Now take it easy," he abjured. "Be a good bull an' come in the barn."

Minotaur, for all his bulk, turned with cat-like agility and took three stiff-legged hops towards Billy. Billy whirled, even more agilely, and ran. When he turned around Minotaur had resumed his destruction of the clover. Billy thought longingly of Deuce, his horse, and a bull whip where it would do Minotaur the most good. But that, of course, violated Aunt Agatha's injunction to be kind to the bull. And, having made a bargain, Billy wanted to keep it. Again he advanced towards the grazing bull.

"Git out of that there clover!" he shouted.

MINOTAUR raised his head, and chewed the long stalks of clover dangling from his mouth. A threatening rumble gurgled from his chest, and Billy got mad. He picked up a rock the size of a baseball and bounced it off Minotaur's rump. The bull roared and plunged after him. Billy's legs worked like pistons as he headed for the open door of the barn. He flashed into a half box stall, and one of Minotaur's horns caught and neatly sliced the seat of his pants as he scrambled over the other side. Billy raced around to slam and lock the stall's door while Minotaur bellowed what he was going to do when he caught him. Billy wiped the sweat from his forehead and shook his fist.

"There dang ye!" he shouted. "Push your way through them two by sixes!"

Billy filled the watering trough in the stall, put on his other pair of pants, and saddled Deuce. He was definitely in the

dumps, and the only person on earth who could cure them was Molly Caraday.

BILLY took the short road. That was eight miles, but Deuce had a very easy pace. Deuce also knew the way to Old Man Caraday's—of course he was Colonel Caraday to his face—and it was hardly any time at all before Billy saw the Caraday Ranch spread before him. He reined in Deuce, and for a moment sat wistfully regarding it. As a ranch it was not much better than his own. But the horses that snorted in the Caraday corral, the chunky cattle that ranged the knolls around it, the air of prosperity that proclaimed this a successful ranch—Billy sighed heavily. Old Man Caraday had everything Billy would like to have.

Well—not quite everything. Two-Stitch Brown's palomino was hitched to the corral, and Billy reckoned that his ranch could get along very well without such visitors. Two-Stitch, to the best of anyone's knowledge, never worked. But he always had a pocket full of money and everything else that went with it. He also, Billy was dismally aware, had the vast respect of Old Man Caraday, who considered him a man of affairs. Two-Stitch had been away, up north on some business of his own, for the past two weeks.



Deuce shouldered his way in beside the palomino, snatched a wisp of hay that the other horse was chewing, and looked at him as though daring him to do something about it. Billy dismounted, walked towards the ranch's shaded porch. Two-Stitch's lean and cat-like profile was visible, and Billy's heart skipped two beats as he caught sight of Molly's adored face. She was sitting across from Two-Stitch, on a divan, and goateed Old Man Caraday lounged in a chair with a mint-julep in his hand. Billy snorted. Old Man Caraday, who had never been south of Wyoming, still considered himself an old southern colonel and affected

all the airs that he thought belonged to such.

Billy came to the porch steps and Two-Stitch smirked at him. "Hi-ya, Junior."

"Hello, Molly," Billy greeted. "How are you, Colonel Caraday?" As though it was an afterthought, he added, "Hi, Two-Stitch. What's the matter? Couldn't they use an assistant cook wherever you went to hunt a job? Or did you go on account you thought somebody was goin' to offer you one hereabouts?"

Two-Stitch, who liked to be called Mr. Brown and bluffed some people into calling him that, flashed angrily. Old Man Caraday, who considered his old southern hospitality violated by such crass remarks addressed to one of his guests, ruffled his goatee. But Molly laughed, and patted the divan beside her.

"Billy Dancer, it's time you got around here! Come on right up and sit beside me!"

Billy's heart turned over nine times. He floated up the steps to sit beside Molly. But he did glare back at Two-Stitch, who was still glaring at him. Old Man Caraday drained his mint julep and a moment later his ruffled beard wilted. A look that was almost friendly came into his eyes.

"How's the ranch, Billy?" he asked.

"Fine, Colonel Caraday," Billy said expansively. "I just don't know how things could be better."

There was more than the suggestion of a sneer on Two-Stitch's face. "How many calves are you going to sell this year off that bull you've got up there?"

"Now, Marvin!" Molly snapped. "That was uncalled for!"

BILLY dismissed Two-Stitch with a grandiose gesture of his right hand. "Oh don't mind him, Molly. Don't mind him at all. He ain't the first person ever shot off his mouth without knowin' what he's talkin' about."

Old Man Caraday leaned forward. "You mean, suh, that things ah lookin' up fo' you? Do you mean that you now have cattle?"

"Well—" Billy drew a deep breath. But hardly anybody ever rode up to his ranch. "Well— I'm not in the cattle business to the extent you are. But I wasn't entirely

shiftless when I was ridin' for other outfits. I—Well—you know."

"Tho'breeds, suh?" Colonel Caraday persisted.

"Well uh— Good grade, good grade."

"Gad suh!" Colonel Caraday thumped the arm of his chair with his hand. "Theah's simply nothing so proud as to know a man able to get along, lifting himself by his boot-straps, so to speak. And to have him modest about it is all the mo' to his credit. Do you not think so, Mistah Brown?"

"Well uh— Yes," Two-Stitch admitted.

"How many cattle do you have, suh?"

Old Man Caraday pursued.

"Uh— That is— You know— Not exactly a big herd."

"Twenty?" Old Man Caraday followed up.

"I— Somewhere around that number," Billy blurted.

Molly's eyes were glowing with pride, and even Two-Stitch was leaning forward drinking in every word. Molly's hand stole forth to touch Billy's arm, and Billy's heart did double somersaults.

"Gad suh!" Colonel Caraday beamed. "Next to the gentility of a plantation, theah's nothing like a cattle ranch. Young man, you have my esteem."

"Thank you, Colonel Caraday," Billy said modestly.

Molly pinched his arm, and winked at him as he turned around.

"Will you please excuse us?" Molly asked the other two. "Billy and I'd like to take a walk."

Colonel Caraday rose to bow. Two-Stitch grunted, and Molly led Billy down the steps. Billy floated beside her, not touching the earth at all. Molly looked proudly up at him.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you!" she said. "Don't you know that this is—? Well—?"

"Huh?" he gulped.

"Billy Dancer!" she scolded. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you're as addle-pated as that bull of yours! Come on! We're going home!"

They went back to the house, and Molly slipped inside to speak softly to her father. Two-Stitch, dark as a thunder-cloud, mounted his palomino and rode off. Billy, sitting beside Molly Caraday, could not bring himself out of the happy heights into

which the fact that he was now a cattlemen had tossed him. Well, maybe he wasn't a cattlemen. But if he could keep Minotaur from eating up the rest of the clover he could sell that when the seed was ripe, and buy some cattle then. They dined, and Billy walked out on the porch with Molly Caraday.

The moon was high when they came in. Old Man Caraday beamed at them.

"Billy," he said, "I'd esteem it a favo', suh, if you could come back heah tomorrow. I have something that I think will be impawtant to discuss with you."

"Yes, Colonel Caraday," Billy heard himself saying.

In a half daze he stumbled out to mount Deuce. It was that subconscious portion of his mind which through long years had been trained to notice all little things that had noted the off front foot of Two-Stitch's palomino was a little bit crooked.

THE yellow moon was lowering when Deuce padded the last weary mile back to the ranch. He stood pawing the ground, impatient to have his saddle off. But for a full ten minutes Billy stood looking at the moon.

He had worshipped Molly Caraday for many months, always without too much hope of spectacular success. It just wasn't conceivable that Molly should have time for an old cow-poke who had inherited a ranch. But she had taken a walk in the moonlight with him and even that impregnable fortress, Old Man Caraday, was breaking down. Billy grinned happily. Old Man Caraday respected only men of substance, and Billy's one regret was that he had not thought of verbally owning a herd of cattle before. It wasn't exactly a lie because just as soon as he sold his clover seed he would own a herd.

Billy led Deuce into the barn and stopped to gape. The box stall in which he had imprisoned Minotaur was empty as a last year's bird nest.

Deuce nudged his arm, and nickered softly as he requested admission to his own stall. Billy groaned as he let Deuce in, fed him a measure of grain, and rubbed him down. That bull—! When it was impossible for him to go through an enclosure he went over it. Anything so big— Deuce

contentedly buried his nose in the feed box, and Billy left the barn.

The waning moon cast its light over the fields, and Billy stalked dully to his clover patch. Minotaur, a huge, stuffed bulk in the center of it, swung his head and emitted a contented, belching gurgle. Billy put his hands on his hips and surveyed the havoc wrought. Another great portion of clover was eaten, and three quarters of the rest was trampled. Minotaur, left to his own devices, had an epicure's taste. He had wandered all about the clover, selecting the best and tenderest shoots, and trampling what he did not want. Billy walked up to and put his hand on the neck of the bull, who was always tractable as a baby after he had what he wanted.

"Dang ya," he muttered. "For two cents I'd eat me some bull beef and to heck with Aunt Agatha."

He grasped the ring in the end of Minotaur's nose, led him back to the barn, and left him happily burping on the floor of the box stall while he wandered disconsolately back to the house. Not all the clover was gone, even Minotaur couldn't eat fifty acres of it. But a great deal of it was spoiled, and the cattle he was supposed to buy when he sold the seed—

"Oh dang it!" he growled. "Wish I had a jail cell to keep that critter in."

But he didn't have, or anything better than the box stall. He left Minotaur in it the next morning while again he mounted Deuce and took the short road. The bull would probably be back in the clover when he returned but—Billy thought of Molly Caraday and his heart began to sing. He could stand anything, even Minotaur, if Molly was at his side.

She was, within five seconds of the time he tied Deuce to the corral and dismounted. Molly gripped his arm, squeezed it tight, and whispered in his ear.

"Humor Dad, Billy. Fall in with what he says."

"Why—Uh—I—"

"Billy Dancer!" she said fiercely. "If you don't, I'm coming up to your ranch and shoot you dead with your own gun!"

"I—What—?"

But he had no chance to say anything more because Molly swept him around the house and up on the porch to where Colonel

Caraday was sitting with a long, thin cheroot in his fingers. Molly took a stance behind her father and Colonel Caraday cleared his throat. He sounded, Billy thought, a lot like Minotaur. Colonel Caraday began to speak.

"Billy, I have discussed this with my daughter and both of us agree that it is the thing to do. We Ca'adays have a position to maintain, suh."

STANDING behind her father, Molly was grimacing and bobbing her head violently up and down. Billy looked wonderingly at her.

"Position," Colonel Caraday continued, "is a quality that only a man of position can prope'ly esteem. You seem to be achieving it, suh. I called you down heah to tell you that you have my pe'mission to cou't my daughter. I asked you to come today because I wanted time to mull it ovah."

Billy swallowed his Adam's apple, while Molly gripped her left wrist with her right hand and shook it over her head. Billy's eyes popped.

"Uh—Colonel Caraday!" he blurted.

"Now wait a minute! Wait a minute, young man!" Colonel Caraday waved his hand. "Theah ah' restrictions. You have proven that you can make youah way in the world. I have no reason to doubt that. But I have not seen youah ranch since youah Aunt Agatha passed away. I wish to come up theah with Molly tomorrow, see what you have done with the place, and feast my old eyes, suh, on the cattle that youah enterprise has provided."

Billy took two steps backwards. Molly winked both eyes, smiled dazzlingly, and danced silently up and down. Billy reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Tomorrow?" he gulped.

"Tomorrow," Colonel Caraday beamed. "Do not be so disconce'ted, young man. I just want you to know that Molly is very receptive to the idea of you cou'tin'—"

"Dad!" Molly ejaculated sharply.

"Well, you said so," Colonel Caraday snapped. "So we'll be theah tomorrow morning, Billy."

"Ulp—Yes sir," Billy agreed.

Late that night he rode back home. During the day, while Molly was with him, it had seemed that nothing was impossible.

But at night, with his heart dragging along in the dust behind Deuce's hoofs, it seemed that nothing was possible. He had pulled a big bluff, and was being called on it. Even a man with plenty of money could not manage a herd of cattle by tomorrow.

Billy shuffled into the barn and glanced sourly at Minotaur's stall. It was empty, as he had thought it would be. Billy stabled and fed Deuce, and trudged out to the clover patch to herd Minotaur back into the barn. But the bull wasn't there either. Billy stared.

Then something that he had not noticed before caught his eye. It was the tassel of a hat, such as might adorn a sombrero, caught on a stalk of clover. Billy picked it up and studied it. He got down on his hands and knees and patiently worked out the trail Minotaur had left from the clover patch. It led to the road, and in one of his fields joined the tracks of at least thirty more cattle. A man on a horse was driving them.

Billy's jaw snapped shut. Purposefully he strode into the house for his carbine. He looked wistfully at the barn. But Deuce was tired, he'd have to go on foot. Billy swung away, through the night, following the trail. Three hours later it led him to the granite-hard floor of Rock Canyon, and Billy turned wearily back. No tracker, even in daylight, could follow anything through or beyond Rock Canyon. Its floor didn't hold prints.

There was nothing left to do but sleep. Tomorrow, when Old Man Caraday and Molly rode up, he wouldn't even have Minotaur to show them.

BILLY opened his eyes the next morning and stared dully at the white ceiling over his bed. He closed his eyes tightly and pulled the covers over his head, as though so doing would shut out everything he had to face today. But, try as he would, he couldn't shut it out. He groaned, got out of bed, and stared resentfully at the face that looked back from his shaving mirror. That man with the dark stubble of whiskers and the miserable brown eyes was Billy Dancer, the biggest fool east or west of the Mississippi.

Viciously he swiped the lather-laden shaving brush across his chin. Deliberately

he slapped a dab of shaving soap squarely in the center of his mouth and wished glumly that he had done the same thing, with a pot of glue, before he had ever sounded off about his herd of cattle. His big mouth had got him into trouble, and today the Caradays would find out for themselves that he was the measliest, two-stripe, four-flusher, who had ever thrown a leg over a saddle. After that—Billy groaned again. Probably he was the rottenest small-time liar in the United States, and after Molly found that out she would probably haul off and marry Two-Stitch Brown.

Billy wandered disconsolately into the kitchen and nibbled at the cold leg of a jack-rabbit, which had been his meat staple for the past two months. He drifted outside and sat down on the bench in front of the door with his chin buried in his hands. He jerked suddenly erect, his eyes not quite so dead. Maybe he could tell Old Man Caraday and Molly that rustlers—Billy grinned sourly. In the first place they wouldn't believe it and in the second place even superficial investigation would disclose that the only herd of cattle about his ranch was the one that had passed through. Besides he had already told enough lies.

Billy trudged to the barn and looked speculatively at Deuce. There was still time to saddle him and, by the time the Caradays arrived, be so far away that it wouldn't make any difference what they thought or did. Billy snapped his jaws grimly shut. Nope. He was a four-flusher. But he wasn't a yellow dog that ran from a whipping with his tail between his legs. He would be enough of a man to stay and take whatever the Caradays handed out. No matter what that might be, he deserved it. Afterwards—

Billy shrugged hopelessly. There just wasn't any afterwards. He might try to find the rustler who had added Minotaur to his stolen herd, and take the whole herd away from him. He might go somewhere, hold up banks, and the sooner he got shot the better. He might even shoot himself.

Down the road a crow cawed, and noisily alarmed, took wing. Old Man Caraday and Molly were coming, they'd passed the bend in the short road and would be here in twenty minutes. Billy's knees turned to jelly. He ran around to the back of the

house and sat on the chopping block, his fingers crossed and his knees trembling. He closed his eyes, wishing there was some swift and painless way of dying.

There was a thud of hoofs in the front yard. Billy heard Molly's voice, golden music, and Colonel Caraday's old southern accents.

"Wheah is the boy?"

Billy closed his eyes tighter, but opened them to stand with his back against the house. There was a shuffle of feet. Colonel Caraday came around the house, his eyes beaming and his carefully combed goatee outthrust.

"Billy!" Colonel Caraday chuckled, and slapped him on the shoulder. "Element of surprise, eh? Well, theah's nothing like imagination. I understand, suh, that you wanted us to look on all this ou'selves. Good enough, boy. Good enough. I nevah could tole'ate a bragga't. Why, suh, that's thi'ty fo' of the finest Sho'thorns and He'e-fords I evah cast my eye ovah. Theyah bettah than my own."

"Huh?" Billy gulped.

Colonel Caraday put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Come around, boy. Come around. Molly's waiting."

Billy walked around the house to come face to face with Molly, standing proudly before the tethered horses and beaming at him. He looked down at the clover patch to see Minotaur, with thirty-four Shorthorn and Hereford heifers, looking a little travel-worn but otherwise sound. None, so far as he could see, was either branded or ear-marked.

Just then Two-Stitch Brown rode out of the forest on his palomino, and most of the missing pieces of this puzzle fell into place. The crooked foot on the horse tracks Billy had followed last night—until now had he connected that with Two-Stitch.

"Tell me, Colonel Caraday," Billy said, "did Two-Stitch know I was coming down yesterday when you—? When you—?"

"When Molly asked me—? When I gave you pe'mission to cou't my daughter? He did, suh. I told him."

"Oh," Billy said.

Everything was very clear now. There were great herds of Herefords and Short-horns to the north and Two-Stitch's business up there, obviously, had been to steal



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some of them. Being Two-Stitch, and playing things on the safe side, he had either known or found out where there were some unmarked cattle. But he had heard Billy remark about his own herd, and decided to add it to his rustled cattle when he took them to wherever he was going. He knew that he would be safe in so doing because he could not be tracked past Rock Canyon. Finding no herd, he had taken Minotaur anyway. But he had reckoned without Aunt Agatha's bull.

No fence, no box stall, and no man on horseback could for long keep him away from his clover patch. And when, after an extended celibacy, Minotaur had at last found a harem, it would have taken more than Two-Stitch to prevent his bringing that along with him. Of course, Billy promised himself, he would try to find out who owned the heifers. But there wasn't one chance in ten of doing it. At the very least it would take a long while to find their owner, and by that time he'd have a crop of calves. Two-Stitch rode up, and sat silently on his palomino.

"Howdy, Two-Stitch," Billy greeted him. "How do you like my herd?"

Two-Stitch dripped poison from his eyes. Billy waved a genial hand.

"Did you hear about the rustler who's been operatin' up north?" he asked. "They say he's hidin' in these parts. They say likewise that he'll have a bullet through him if he don't leave before mornin'."

Two-Stitch wheeled his palomino and rode away. Colonel Caraday gazed after him, and his goatee ruffled.

"Crass!" he snorted. "Rude, suh. He hasn't the quality of a Southeneh."

"I'm part Southerner," Billy said truthfully. "My mother was from Alabama."

Colonel Caraday beamed, and was about to make some remark suitable to the occasion when Molly intervened. She threw both arms around Billy Dancer's neck and, right in front of her father, kissed him smack on the lips. She leaned back, her fine mouth quivering and a suspicion of tears in her soft eyes.

"Billy Dancer," she said tremulously, "don't make a shameless woman of me now."

He didn't.

The Ends of the Earth Club

(Concluded from page 8)

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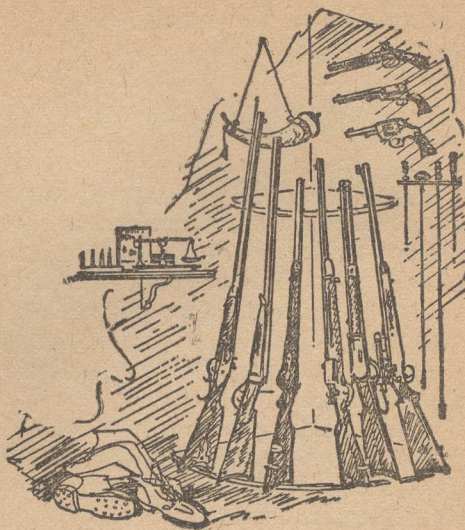
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Wants a Pest Rifle

QUESTION: *I would like you to give me some advice on a good varmint rifle if you would.*

I'm an Ensign in the U. S. Coast Guard and expect a discharge sometime this winter, and intend to return to a farm where there are many pests, such as crows, hawks, owls, woodchucks, coyotes and fox, though not many coyotes and fox.

I don't know very much about appropriate rifles for pest shooting and that is where I'd like your assistance.

When rifles again can be obtained I'd like to get a rifle to use for target practice and

varmint shooting. Something that I can get out and enjoy myself with without too much expense. Though expensive enough to be satisfactory for pest shooting with flat trajectory, good accuracy. One which best stands up under the heavy powder charges which produce the good accuracy and high velocity.

I saw and handled one of Winchester's .218 Bee repeating rifles and liked it very much. Would you consider this a good pest rifle for a person in low income bracket?

What make and power scope would you recommend for this gun?

The .257 Roberts and the .270 Winchester I hear are good combination guns for deer hunting and pest shooting. I'd like such a combination gun but don't think I could afford the cost of ammunition for target and pest shooting. So feel that I must stay in the .22 rifle class.

Which would you consider the better gun for my position? The .218 Bee, the .219 Zipper, .22 Hornet, .220 Swift or .25-20?

What type and size of scope would you recommend for rifle you suggest?

Would the accuracy be any different in the single-shot and repeating rifles?

Would appreciate any help you might offer on the better pest rifle. Ens. J. D. S.

ANSWER: Generally speaking, the lever action type of repeating rifle doesn't give as good accuracy as the bolt action. So, for super-fine accuracy I'd suggest the latter.

This puts the .218 Bee out of the picture (it is commercially made in lever action only) unless you want to have a special job made up in bolt or single-shot action for this caliber.

So, for inexpensive shooting the .22 Hornet is the only suitable varmint caliber left. The .219 Zipper and .220 Swift ammunition cost twice as much or more.

The Hornet gives great accuracy up to around 175 yards on woodchucks and around 100 yards on crows if the wind isn't blowing too strongly.

Personally I prefer to reach out a little further so I use the .22-3000 Lovell 2-R cartridge or the .218 Mashburn Bee. These two cartridges are wildcats and so are strictly handloading propositions.

If you intend to do a lot of shooting it would certainly pay you to take up hand-

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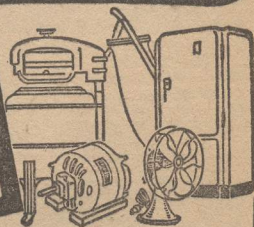
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loading. Many shooters enjoy this phase almost as much as the actual shooting. I would suggest that you obtain a copy of the *Ideal Hand Book, Reloading Ammunition*, published by the Lyman Gun Sight Corporation, Middlefield, Conn., and also a copy of the *Belding and Mull Hand Book*, published by Belding and Mull, Philipsburg, Penn. (fifty cents each). Even if you don't intend to reload they are both well worth reading.

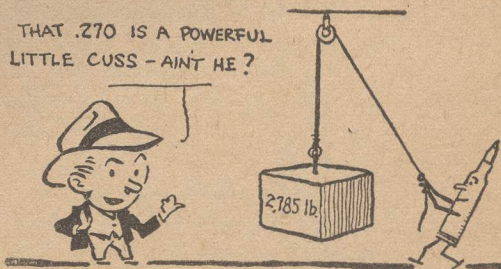
For a combination deer and varmint gun the .257 Roberts is hard to beat, using the 87- or 100-grain bullet for varmint and the 117-grain bullet for deer. But here again, the ammunition costs \$1.82 for a box of twenty as against \$1.69 for a box of fifty Hornet cartridges.

The least expensive outfit that gives satisfactory results is the Savage Model .219 Single-Shot Rifle in .22 Hornet caliber selling for under \$20. (It can be had with interchangeable shotgun barrel at around \$25.)

A number of years ago I bought one of these outfits and the accuracy was so good (after I'd worked the trigger pull down a bit) that I thought I'd gotten an extra good gun, so I bought two more rifles just to see. And darn if they weren't all good. Incidentally this rifle comes tapped for the Weaver T type telescope sight mount.

For general shooting, I like the Lyman Alaskan 2½ power All-Weather, and the Weaver Model 330 Telescope sights. These scopes cost quite a hunk of green, but are well worth it. While for pest shooting only, the 8- or 10-power target type scope sight gives the shooter a better break.

THAT .270 IS A POWERFUL
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If you really enjoy shooting and take pleasure in keeping your shooting equipment in fine condition, I believe you would be better off with one of the more expensive rifles such as the Winchester Model 70 or the Remington Model 720.

The Winchester standard grade rifle is normally manufactured in eleven calibers, including the .22 Hornet, .220 Swift, .257 Roberts and .270 Winchester which make good varmint guns; while the Remington is produced in only three calibers, namely the .30-06, .270 and the .257 Roberts.

Now let's see what this adds up to: If you want a good little outfit for the least outlay of dough the .219 Savage single-shot in .22 Hornet caliber with a Weaver 29-S 3-power scope sight is the best bet. The Weaver 29-S scope which is the best of the inexpensive hunting glasses has not been manufactured during the war, but before 1941 it sold for between ten and fourteen dollars.

Now if you want a super-fine outfit you most certainly can't go wrong by buying one of the bolt action rifles chambered for the .257 Roberts cartridge. This cartridge was especially designed for woodchuck and other pest shooting, but lo and behold! it turned out also to be a fine deer gun!

As far as accuracy is concerned, I have never been able to detect much difference between a fine single-shot drop block action rifle and a fine bolt action job.

—O—

Ammo for Jap Rifles

QUESTION: *A few of us fellas, since we have been in Japan, have acquired Japanese rifles, both the 303 cal. and the long 25 cal. We have had numerous arguments as to what type of American ammunition these rifles will fire.*

We have heard from various sources that .25-30 caliber or the .25-35 caliber will fire in our Jap 25s. But we doubt this and wish to have the matter cleared up, and explained.

Please send this information directly to our A.P.O. Pfc. R. J. M., U. S. Army

ANSWER: There is no American ammunition that can be safely fired in either of the Jap Army rifles and I'm certain that none will be manufactured in the United States.

Quite a bit of mail has come in from fellows who want to convert these rifles to sporters with the idea of having a good deer gun. Well, I certainly wouldn't rec-

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commend doing this. Besides the ammunition problem there are others. The Japanese Arisaka rifle is no doubt a good military weapon for the cartridge for which it was designed, but converting it for use with an American sporting load is a horse of a different color.

As a matter of fact I had the same idea, even went so far as drawing up a design and figuring specifications for a slick-looking sporter stock.

But, fortunately for my aching back, I picked up a couple of these guns and tried 'em out before doing any actual work. I had a gunny-sack full of ammunition (both calibers) and did a lot of shooting, and I wouldn't do it again as I have since lost all faith, not only in Japanese manufacturing

ability, but also in their ideas of metallurgy.

It all simmers down to the fact that Japanese arms were not made under the careful manufacturing control and standards which govern American, British and German manufacture. Some Jap guns might hold up, but I wouldn't advise anyone to take such a chance, for these guns are mostly clucks chopped out under bad wartime manufacturing conditions.

A captured Arisaka rifle should be hung on the wall, as a decoration, and left there.

Also I wouldn't take a chance on a captured European arm, unless I had it checked by a competent gunsmith, and I mean competent!

—O—

Wants to Shoot Deer and Antelope

QUESTION: I just read your article "The Shooter's Corner" in SHORT STORIES and was very interested.

Just wondering if you could give me some information. As soon as they are available, I am going to buy a new rifle, my choice lies between the .220 Swift and the .270 Winchester.

The rifle will be used for hunting deer and antelope. Would you please tell me any advantage one would have over the other and oblige.

J. R. D. Oregon

ANSWER: First of all, the .220 Swift was designed for pest shooting (woodchuck and such). Of course a lot of shooters could hardly wait to try it out on big game—with bad results in most instances. As far as I'm concerned, and I say it emphatically, it's a damn dirty trick to use this caliber on big game.

The .270 100-grain bullet starts off with the same trajectory curves up to about 300 yards at which point the .220 falls off quite rapidly.

This doesn't look too badly but the real shock comes when you compare the bullet energies at muzzle and at so short a distance as 100 yards.

The .257 100-grain bullet starts off with a muzzle energy of 2,785 foot pounds (one foot pound is the amount of energy required to raise one pound through a space of one foot) and at 100 yards has dropped to 2,290

foot pounds. While the .220 46-grain Swift bullet leaves the muzzle developing 1,750 foot pounds with only 1,160 foot pounds left. And believe me the further out the bullet goes the worse it gets.

The energy developed by a bullet is not always a definite indication of its killing power—but it gives a pretty good idea.

By all means, get the .270!



Norwegian Krangs

QUESTION: *Things are a little slow reaching us over here so it was just recently that I found a December, '44 SHORT STORIES. Your cover looked good and you may be able to help me out a little. You spoke of our Krag .30-40 in the article.*

While we were in Germany, I picked up two Norwegian rifles and if the action isn't exactly the same as our Krag, I'll eat 'em.

As you mentioned in your article they're slick actions. These two guns are .25 caliber.

What I've been wondering is whether being foreign guns they'd have the stuff in them to be suitable for converting to our .250-3000 Savage. Or would they take that hot a load? Of course, I'd add a sporter stock and I'd like to hang a scope on it if it could be rebarrelled to that caliber.

I figure they're regular Norwegian Army guns because they have the 30-inch barrels most foreign countries hang on issue rifles. They have military sights, the leaf sight similar to our Springfield '03.

Sure hope you can tell me they'll do.

Sgt. L. R. P., U. S. Army

ANSWER: You are very fortunate to have acquired two Norwegian Krangs. In my estimation that is one of the finest actions for use in a sporting rifle in existence today.

The Norwegian Krag action (not to be confused with the weaker American Krag) will take the pressure of the .250-3000 or the .257 Roberts cartridge which is the hotter of the two.

If I had one of these actions I would have it made up for the Roberts cartridge as I believe it to have the edge on the .250-3000 cartridge in every respect. Good luck!

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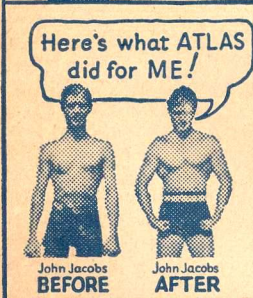
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