Short Stories
August 1917

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the Whip, to the Carousel, to the Garden of
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COVER—Pete Kuhlhoff

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.
By THEODORE ROSCOE

LAKELAND. The place had a pretty name.

But it was a dump. I knew the smell the minute I stepped off the bus.

Boats for rent. Bait. Popcorn. Get 'em While They're Hot. Play Bingo. Al's Tavern. Jumbo Cones. Shore Dinner. They all smell the same—especially at the tag end of the season. Dead fish and weedy water slopping up under the timbers of jerry-built cottages that rimmed the lake like a fringe of decayed teeth. There's nothing as sour as a summer resort that's gone to seed.

"You'll find the hotel over there," the driver called.

"Thanks, bud."

The door sighed shut, and the big Pathfinder droned around a bend in the highway. I was left by myself at the bus stop.

Lights glimmered dimly in damp darkness, and I squinted through cold mist at inky lake-front where an arch of electric bulbs—red, yellow and blue—lit up a rickety dock with a half-submerged launch at its end. Beyond the dock was a shabby pavilion—The Happiness Dance Garden—a couple of girls in sweaters and blue jeans doing trick steps to a juke box rendition of "Rum and Coke." There weren't many people around. Fog was blowing in from the lake, making the night unseasonably chilly. I was glad of it.

I made out the Lakeland Hotel, a ramshackle joint jammed in between a Penny Arcade and a bathhouse. A long row of tipsy rocking chairs lined the veranda, and half of the neon sign was dark. I wasn't going there, anyway. That had been a gag for the bus driver. I turned up my collar, downed my hatbrim, picked up my suitcase. Wanting information, I cut over to the village post office on the other side of the road.

The guy at the stamp window was just closing up.
"I'm looking for a carnival that's somewhere around here," I queried. "The Greater Lester T. Gillis Shows."

"Uh huh. They're about a mile up the lake. Crescent Beach Park. Take it right on the dirt road and keep goin'."

I might have been a face on a postage stamp, and he yawned as he shut the window.

TURNING to go out, I saw a face that wasn't on a postage stamp. I stalled to light a cigarette and look at it. It was on the wall near the letter-drop—a sinister countenance photographed front and profile, under the headline:

**WANTED BY THE FBI**
*Charles Forrest, alias Charles Bryan, Escaped Convict and Murderer—*

Height, weight, fingerprints, prison-record were detailed with the information; "He is thought to be armed. This man is dangerous. If recognized, please notify local police or the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C."

The picture's bitter eyes glared at me—the eyes of a felon who looked as if he'd shoot as quick as he'd spit. A vicious hombre. Portrait of a killer.

The photo's steely stare made my stomach muscles tighten, and I realized that throughout the long bus ride. I'd been holding in my nerves with a mental truss. I ought to eat something, but I didn't dare risk the time.

"You look tough tonight, Charlie," I told the photograph, grimly. "Tomorrow that mug of yours may wear a different expression."

Outside, the mist had thickened to a drizzle, as though the night, beginning with the snuffles, had developed a running nose. I
made a right turn, and set out along the shore road in the direction I’d been given. Beyond the boat-landing and the dance pavilion, I passed a rookery of cottages and lake-side shacks, places down at heel with unkempt porches and rusty screening. Farther on, the road, patrolled by willows, trailed along the edge of the lake. The lights of the cottage colony pattered out. In the drizzling fog I could hardly make out the roadway, and I staggered along, depressed by the lonesome sound of slapping water, dripping trees and bullfrogs.

The mile lengthened into what must have been two. My suitcase began to get heavy and bump against my knee, and I thought of discarding it, but didn’t, as it was part of the act. I should have eaten, though—sinkers and coffee for breakfast weren’t sticking to my ribs. The muddy road and the night’s drizzle were getting me down, and my stomach-nerves were putting on a wrestling match, and I began to see the eyes of that post office portrait in front of me, when at last I located the carnies.

My ears picked it up first. A tinkle of music coming a roundelay in the dark mists somewhere up ahead. Like someone playing a hurdy-gurdy on the lake shore—someone who didn’t have sense enough to come in out of the rain.

Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree, With Anyone Else But Me—

Anyone Else But Me—

That number. Coming out of the black drizzle in circles of thin, tin-canny sound.

Then I saw the pin-pricks of light wheeling in the mist beyond faintly silhouetted trees. The merry-go-round. It brought a good, hot word up the length of my throat, filling me with a quick surge of anger. What goons would be sap-headed enough to be riding wooden horses and catching brass rings on a lousy night like this? People were nuts. Riding dummy horses in an endless circle of honky-tonk noise. A past-time typical of a brainless world!

I took it out on humanity, although the real reason for my anger, I suppose, was disappointment that the midway was still open. I’d hoped to find the show-lot folded up for the night. Anyway the anger was a bracer, like a shot of coffee. I changed hands on the suitcase, and hit a forward stride.

The carnival. Just a replica of all of them. Only a little cheaper, perhaps. A little shabbier. The red and blue wagons and trailer vans unpainted—doubtless because of war-time shortage. The trucks sloughed in mud. The tents threadbare and patched. Gear and canvas strewn around like a miniature of Omaha Beach, or Dijeppe, or some other helter-skelter battlefield. But nothing of a battlefield’s purpose. Just a lot of tawdry, dime-pinch punk.

Skirting around a couple of parked trailers, I found the midway. To my relief, most of the booths and concessions were boarded up, the sideshow was closed, and most of the rides were dark. The upper end of the midway had gone to bed.

I walked past the Garden of Allah, the Airplane Whirl, the Caterpillar. In front of the freak tent I paused to stare up at dim paintings—Nellie Nelson, the Half Man, Half Woman—Spidoria, the Spider Girl—Bordo, the Armless Wonder—Mrs. Alp, the Lady Giantess. There were some more rides wrapped up in tarpaulin, and then there was a hot-dog stand ahead, with a shooting gallery opposite. The merry-go-round and some silhouettes were further on.

Only the hot-dog booth and the merry-go-round beyond it were doing business. Not much business, by the look. I couldn’t see any customers on the carousel. The lot seemed deserted entirely, but for a farmer in rubber boots standing at the frankfurter booth, and the greasy character behind the counter. As I approached the lighted stand, I heard the guy in boots say, "Another cup of coffee, Sicily."

Sicily. The name struck home. I had to be careful, now. I could feel the tension in my legs.

I walked up to the booth, and put down my suitcase. Took off my hat, and shook water from the brim. Made it casual.

"A hot dog and a cup of Joe."

The farmer turned around and looked at me. He wore a yellow, corduroy coat, frayed at the elbows, and a shapeless felt hat with a lot of fish-hooks and spinners stuck in the brim. His face was moon-round and sunburnt-red above a neck, thick and creased. He didn’t have cold, steely eyes that looked ready to shoot. In the crotch
of his left arm he carried a metal fishing rod done up in a canvas case. My heart, which had missed a couple of ticks, began to beat again. I had thought, at first glimpse, the fishing rod a rifle.

The farmer looked at me incuriously, and returned to his coffee. The grease behind the counter had wheeled toward a stove. I watched his back as he poked at three half-charred weiners with a greasy fork. He speared a frank, slapped it into a bun. Poured coffee from a smoke-stained pot into a cracked mug. A dumpy, unsanitary figure in shirtsleeves and dirty apron, he turned around and shoveled the food across fly-specked oilcloth.

"Twenty cents."

I'd been standing like a man on a spring-board, flexing the cramped fingers of my right hand. But the grease scarcely glanced at me. I dug the coins out of my pocket and put them on the counter.

I said, "Nice weather for ducks."

I had to clear my throat to say it, but the farmer didn't notice, and the greaseball behind the counter only grunted, "Yeah," and wheeled back at the stove.

The smell of frying sausage sickened me a little, but I managed to munch the frank and swallow the gray coffee. It gave my clinching stomach-muscles something to close on.

"Another coffee."

The greaseball wiped his hands on his apron, and refilled the mug. While I was gulping that, the farmer in boots said, "Well, I guess I'll get along." He tossed a quarter on the oilcloth, and walked off in the misty darkness, cross-lots, heading, I judged, for the lake. That left the counter-man and me by ourselves in a little pool of light, and the merry-go-round, not far off, in a big pool of light. There didn't seem to be anybody on the merry-go-round. The music had shut off, but the machinery was still running—I could see the painted ponies going by in an arc, galloping up and down on their brass poles. That meant the operator was still around somewhere.

It was kind of uncanny—the wheeling lights—the riderless horses circling in silence. The glow sent shadows through the mist—foggy shadows that traveled through the mist and moved in a queer, ghostly parade across the boarded-up front of the shooting gallery on the other side of the midway, opposite the hot-dog booth.

I didn't like that shadow-play across the front of the dark shooting gallery.

My stomach made a fist.

I faced around to the hot-dog counter.

I STOOD with the coffee mug to my mouth and watched the counter-man clear away some scummy ketchup bottles and mustard jars. As far as he was concerned, I might not have been there. He turned to wind a tin alarm clock on the side-counter. Seven minutes after nine. The show-lot was quieter than 4:00 a.m. I thought, "Zero hour."

"How's show business?" I asked.

"Lousy."

"Bad season?"

"Lousy."

Deliberately I leaned on the counter.

"Where," I asked "could I find the owner? This Lester T. Gillis—?"

That got some attention from the greaseball—four gold teeth in a staring sneer.

"You're in the wrong lot, bud."

"What lot do I want?"

"A cemetery lot."

"You mean he's dead?" I met the man's leer squarely.

"Dead as a last season Annie Oakley. Deader." He stuck a thumb into his mouth and picked at a back molar with an inquisitive nail. While this dental work was going on, I understood him to say that Mister Gillis had been laid away six years ago. So I couldn't see him.

"Well, who's the boss around here? Who's running the carnival now?"

"Boss?" He withdrew his thumb and licked the knuckle. "You'll find him down there past the merry-go-round. End of the lot. Big red van. Name's painted on the side. That's his name," the greaseball chuckled. "Mr. Boss."

I stared across the rim of the coffee mug.

"Mr. Boss?"

"That's right. Michael Boss. He's the boss, and his name is Boss." The greaseball laughed as though he thought the play on words was pretty funny.

"Thanks," I said, and put down the coffee mug, and picked up my bag.

My stomach was hard as a knot, and I was sweating—sweating it out. But the
greaseball hadn’t noticed. I was doing all right—so far. As I left the hot-dog stand, the greaseball was leaning on the counter, scratching at a tattoo on his hairy arm.

I walked toward the merry-go-round, wondering where its operator was. Nobody in the ticket booth. Nobody on the horses. Then, just as I was passing the carousel, the music box let off a blare of sound. Whanging cymbals, tooting horns and a racket of mechanical snare-drums. Roll Out the Barrel—Waah-waah-bang-wbangwah!

The blurt of music under the bright lights stopped me cold. That tune! For a second I was in panic, on the point of diving into darkness, taking cover. The music hit me in the face, and I felt as if a dozen search-lights were on me. The painted horses galloped around me like a cavalry charge. Then they swerved on their fixed course in a silly circuit of gilt and tinsel. I spied the operator in overalls working over the center platform’s machinery—doubtless engaged in taking some bug out of the gear. He didn’t see me, and I walked on.

But my hands were sweating, cold. My stomach was in a cramp. The nerves in me were all strung up, like they are when you’re getting close to a showdown—like they are when you’re moving up toward the front. Roll Out the Barrel. The band was playing, and I was marching forward. I’d passed the enemy’s picket-line. I was bypassing a dangerous sector. Alert, now. Take it easy. Keep going. I was almost there.

Then I saw the Whip. I’d known it was coming. Had its location all mapped out in my mind. In imagination, I’d scouted around it on a hundred forays. But it was a shock to come on it, even according to plan. First the shooting gallery on the right—the hot-dog stand on the left—the merry-go-round just below the hot-dog stand—then, at midway’s end, the Whip.

The Whip—that mechanical razzle-dazzle with a pack of little chariot-like cars that go jerking and slewing and skidding around a platform. Every carnival has one. A masterpiece of crack-potted machinery. A delight for the suckers. Something to make anybody sick.

Lucky the contraption was dark and covered with tarpaulin. The ticket booth was closed. Or my nerves might have run out on me, then and there. But I set my teeth, and went on walking. Out of the area of light from the merry-go-round. On past the dark blur of the Whip. On toward the silhouette of a big trailer van parked off by itself at the end of the lot—a big, dark van with light gleaming through the curtains of a back-door window.

An oil flare, set at the van’s rear step, smoked and guttered dimly, its flame squashed down by the drizzle. Grass swished wetly around my ankles as I moved forward. My neck was tingling. It was like going into battle—approaching a dangerous objective—sweating it out.

Then suddenly the nerves in me relaxed—the apprehension broke. I was facing the actuality; going into action. The door with the lighted window loomed in front of me. In the wash of foggy light, I could read the name on the door.

The Greater Lester T. Gillis Shows
Michael Boss, Mgr.
Private

“This is it!” I said, and knocked on the door.

An impatient voice beyond called, “Come in.”

I OPENED the door and stepped up in. A gust of stuffy air and electric light dimmed by cigar-smoke washed into my face, and I was staring into the van’s interior.

It was roomy enough, with folding bunks flattened against the right wall, cupboards tucked into the corners, a sink and a cozy oil stove flanking the door. At the same time, it seemed as crowded as a laundry basket. The floor untidy with litter. Circus posters and lady-photographs covering every spare fraction of wall. A couple of kitchen chairs, an iron safe, a brass spittoon mingling with clothes, unwashed dishes and bottles in a Gypsy clutter.

By the left-hand window a runty little guy sat at a card table with his back to me, winding a big roll of yellow circus tickets. At the front of the van, and facing the door, there was a varnished office desk—on the desk a jumble of papers, a cigar box, an empty whiskey glass, a dish of candied popcorn, a copy of Variety, a field telephone.
Behind the desk sat a man who looked as if he was made of pale beef. A man with strong, thick-fingered hands, the arms and shoulders of a wrestler who was getting fat but could still take it, and a sly, well-fed, porkish face. He wore a pink-striped shirt with an open sport’s collar, a soiled camel’s hair jacket, a big gold finger-ring, and on his thick wrist a heavy, silver slave-bracelet. He was writing in a ledger, and chewing a dead cigar as he wrote, and I stood there.

Then he put down the pencil, put down the cigar, and, keeping his eye on the ledger, palmed a handful of pink popcorn and fed it into his mouth. Chewing noisily, he went on writing. The runt with his back to me continued to roll tickets. The only notice I got was from the eyes of a large portrait which dominated the side wall—a lithograph circus-poster portrait of a guy with a high collar, a pompous puss, and a handlebar mustache. He looked like a barber-shop quartet at the time of Grover Cleveland. Wreathed around the picture was the name—Lester T. Gillis.

The beefy man made another reach for the popcorn. His movement was automatic, his hand going to the dish and back to his mouth, delivering its load like one of those toy steam-shovels you try to pick up prizes with in a Penny Arcade. Concentrating on the ledger, he munched.

The dish of pink popcorn was making me a little sick, and I was tired of being regarded by nothing but a wall poster. I cleared my throat.

He looked up and stared at me with cold, no-expression eyes.

The undersized character at the card table screwed around and looked at me. That made me realize what I’d walked into.

Two of them!

I might have expected there’d be two men in the van, but I hadn’t planned for it. I felt as if I’d tangled on unseen wires—stepped on a mine. But I couldn’t back out now. I could only stand there in the door-frame with the drizzle-wet night and the merry-go-round music behind me, and return the double stare.

“Yeah?” the runt at the card table inquired. He wore a green eyeshade which tinted his face. He had a peculiar face, tight-skinned and cracked with a thousand wrinkles as if it had been baked too long.

His dirty collar was too big for him, and his shirt cuffs slopped over his knuckles. He made me think of an over-age, out-at-the-elbows jockey.

“Yeah?” he repeated in an unpleasant voice.

I said, “I’m looking for the manager. Are you Mr. Boss?” I knew he wasn’t, but I wanted an extra minute to think up a stall.

The runt shook his head, keeping his stare fixed on me.

The beefy man behind the desk continued to stare at me. After what seemed five minutes, he took the cigar away from his lips and said bluntly, “I’m Mike Boss.”

“Out on the lot they told me I’d find you here,” I said.

He waited.

I asked, “Are you the owner of the carny?”

He said, “I might be. What do you want?”

I countered with the only thing I could think of—still stalling for time—wondering how I could get rid of the little guy.

“I thought maybe there’d be a job—”

“No job!” he said flatly, jamming the cigar back into his lips which were thick-spread and sandy-colored like the rest of his face. His eyes dropped me out of existence, and he picked up his pencil and began to write.

“Close the door as you go out,” the runt under the eyeshade said. Turning his back on me, he became busy with the roll of tickets. I closed the door, but remained on the inside.

“Look,” I said. “I don’t want to bother you, Mr. Boss, but I can run a grift—the buckets game, or skillo—”

He frowned, not bothering to look up.

“We don’t need nobody on the lot. Even if you had your own concession. We’re full up.”

I put down my suitcase, and opened my raincoat to expose the ruptured duck in my lapel. I made it sound wheeling.

“I’m a good mechanic, Mr. Boss. Worked on the rides with the Robinson Brothers Shows. I can double in brass if you’ve got a band. If you could squeeze in a war veteran on your books—”

His frown knitted to an impatient scowl. He said, keeping his eyes on the ledger, and writing as he spoke, “War veteran! What
do I care if you're a veteran? They're a dime a dozen around here. There's no job open in this carny."

"Nothing at all? Truck driver? Candy butcher? I can do a grind for a kid show."

He raised his eyes in an angry glance at the runt with the tickets. The little guy put down the roll of tickets, tilted his green eyeshade, and screwed around to face me.

"You've warmed your hands in here long enough," he said in a flat-keyed, whiskey-hardened voice. "Beat it."

"Wait," I said. "There was nothing I could do about this joker—I couldn't see any way of avoiding him—and I had to get on with the hand. Time was ticking. I couldn't stall any longer. "Wait a minute," I said. "I want to talk to Mr. Boss."

The sleazy runt snapped to his feet like a bantam boxer. He was a nasty customer for all his shrivelled-up, under-fed size. A shrimp, under five feet tall, but cocky and sharp as a jackknife.

"Blow!" he snarled at me. "Travel! Get outa here! Can't you see we're busy? Scram!"

"Keep your shirt on!" I ordered back at him. "Sit down, punk! And stay down!" I gave him the hardest glare I could manage, and thrusting my hands into the side-pockets of my raincoat, I took two steps toward the show-owner's desk.

"Mr. Boss," I said sharply, "did you ever see a Department of Justice badge?"

That got a glance from the big guy. His head came up with a snap, and there was beefy surprise in the expression behind the cigar.

"Huh?"

"Did you ever see a Department of Justice badge?"

For just a flicker his eyes were worried. Then, pulling the cigar from his mouth, he scowled at me, "Say, what is this?"

"FBI," I said, taking a shiny badge from my pocket and flashing it on my palm. I had to work to keep my hand from quivering, and to keep a quiver out of my voice. I wondered at the time if all the Federal Men were as nervous on their first jobs as I was, right then.

I had a bad case of stage fright at that showdown, but the badge did the trick. The runt in the eyeshade sat down in a way that told me I'd knocked the chip off his shoulder. Boss, the big-shot, started to puff himself up defensively, ready to think up alibis and make evasive answers. When I returned the badge to my pocket, I had my second wind and knew I could hold the floor. All I needed, now, was time.

Mike Boss was scowling again, but in a different, less truculent way. "A Fed, eh?" he looked at me. "What's the G-men snooping around here for?"

I LET him wait this time. I pulled up a chair, and opened my coat, and sat down, facing the beefy man and the runt. I put my hands in my pockets, and tilted the chair back until it wedged against the door. We were snug in that warm, little carny headquarters—the three of us. My stomach was easing up, too.

"It's nice in here," I observed. "It's kind of like an Army mobile headquarters. Pin-up girls and everything, eh, Boss?"

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"All right," I said. "I'll tell you boys what I'm here for. I want some information on a guy named Charles Forrest. Charles Adam Forrest."

Boss squinted through a drift of cigar-smoke; sent his runty companion an inquiring glance; then shook his head.

"Never heard of him."

"Me, neither," said the runt. "Okay," I nodded. "Outside, the merry-go-round was playing faint background music, and the night closed in with a spatter of rain. "Okay, I'll tell you about him."

"This man, Forrest," I said, talking directly to the big man, "this man, Forrest, has quite a record. You'll see why the Department of Justice is interested. The man is originally from Oklahoma—Commerce, Oklahoma—the sort of dusty, one-horse, southwestern town where kids are weaned on hunting rifles, and go out and hitch freights when they're ten. The sort of dull, dirty place that spawns Dillingers and Pretty Boy Floyds."

I paused, watching Mike Boss's eyes to see if the words meant anything. Apparently not. His stare had frozen over—a level blank, no reflections.

"All right," I went on. "The guy was a sucker for pool rooms and that sort of thing. His family wanted him to go to school, but like so many kids, he didn't ap-
preciate a chance at a good education. At that, he went to college and played a year of football. Brains enough, but didn't want to use them. When he was seventeen, he and some other goons stole a jalopy. That's where his record begins. A year and a day in Reform School."

Still no reaction from Boss. Poker-face from the runt on the sidelines.

I took a pack of cigarettes from my pocket; lit one; flipped the match at the spittoon, and put my hands back into my pockets. The cigarette kept my lips from vibrating.

"I'm not exactly for Reform Schools," I said. "Usually they do just the opposite. You take a bird with a taste for guns—a guy who's seen a lot of adventure movies, and wants to get out and clip around—and shut him up for a year. Well, Forrest's year didn't cure him. Next thing he did was go to Europe as a deckhand and join up with the French Foreign Legion."

It didn't mean anything to the big man, or the little one, either. They kept watching me like a couple of poker players waiting for a bid.

"You got that?" I went on. "The French Foreign Legion. An outfit a whole lot tougher than any Oklahoma Reform School. Forrest was sent to North Africa—to Sidi-bel-Abbes—and from there he went to a post in central Morocco. This doesn't lead up to anything, except that the guy hardened up like a keg of nails, and picked up a marksman's medal his first year in the service. They made him a sniper."

I picked the cigarette off my lower lip; crushed it out on the heel of my shoe. The smoke in the van was making my eyes water. Not the eyes of Mike Boss or the ticket-hawker, though. They might have been waxworks staring at me. They didn't even blink.

"That was in 1938," I said. "In 1939 the war broke out. When the Heinies started fighting, Forrest's regiment was moved up to France. They were in the line around Luxembourg the winter of the phony war. As far as the reports show, Forrest had a good enough service record. The phony war wasn't so phony around there, and the Legion saw some action. Forrest even won a citation. His job was to take an advance post on a rooftop or steeple, and snipe at German officers. A pretty good indoctrination course when it comes to killing men."

"Whatcha say his full name was?" Boss asked as I paused.

"Charles Adam Forrest."

The beefy man shook his head. "Don't know him."

"Let's see," I said, pretending to reflect. "1940 was the spring the Nazis jumped into Norway. That English fat-head with the umbrella said Hitler had missed the bus. Yeah. Adolph missed the bus and caught an airplane. Within a month the Nazis were all the way up to Narvik. It's not important, except the French Foreign Legion was shipped up there to get into the fighting, and this man, Forrest, went with the Legion up to Norway."

"It was up there around Narvik somewhere that he copped it. Hit in the foot. And what they later came to call battle-fatigue. Or maybe he was just sick of the army discipline, and wanted to get back to the States where the going was easier. One of the French reports seems to indicate he was trying to pull a bluff. They recommended him for a court-martial. Then the Germans swept over the country, and this Legion regiment was knocked out. Forrest escaped with a hospital crew; got over to England, and then came back to the States. He slipped off a freighter, without a passport, in Miami, Florida, late in the summer of 1940."

BOSS took the cold cigar out of his lips and looked at it. He turned it thoughtfully in his fingers. Then he put it back into a corner of his mouth.

"Florida?" he said.

"That's right," I said. "Without a passport. Government offense, of course. But Forrest wasn't the kind to bother with a little detail like that. You can see he was a plenty hard customer. The Legion doesn't turn out Sunday School boys. He was all hopped up from the war, as you might expect, and he was broke. On the bum. Just the kind to go riding the rails up to Jacksonville, and end up hanging around with a second-class carnival outfit. He joined this carny in Jacksonville."

I heard the runt in the eyeshade shift his shoes under his chair.
Mike Boss’s stare had narrowed. He asked in a sandy voice, "What was the name of this carny?"

I said, "The Greater Lester T. Gillis Shows."

Boss’s hand, on the desk in front of him, made a reflex jerk. "What?"

"Come on," I challenged. "You remember him. He went by the name of Bryan. Charlie Bryan. Does that bring him to mind? He was a sharpshooter."

"Why didn’t you say so before?" Boss complained at me. "Yeah, I remember a grifter named Bryan. Dark-haired guy. Limp. Weighed about one-eighty. Dark-skinned like a Mex. He was with that carny that autumn. Six years ago. He ran the shooting gallery. Then he got a life sentence for murder."

"So you do remember him?" I said.

Boss frowned, "I’d of told you so if you’d give me his name at the start. Why shouldn’t I remember him? As a matter of fact, I was boss at the time. I hired the guy. Of course," he thumbed an off-hand gesture, "we hire an’ fire a lot of punks in a carny like this. Most of these grifters come and go under freight trains. They’re all bums. We got no way of checking up if they’re criminals."

"I suppose not," I agreed.

"You can’t keep track of half of these birds," he said. "We take on new ones every season. I wouldn’t be liable to forget this Bryan guy, though. Not after he went up for murder. Not after all that stink. I was at his trial."

Boss pushed back from his desk; stood up. "Trixie," he pointed his pink thumb at the monkey with the eyeshade. "Go to that cupboard back there. You’ll find a big envelope full of news clippings. Old yellow clippings. I got the whole story on that murder case. The copper might like to see the press account."

"Never mind, Trixie," I said. "Stay put. It’s all right," I waved Boss down into his chair. "I know the case history. They’ve got it all down in black and white in the files. What I’m looking for isn’t in the newspapers or the official records."

Boss sat down, frowning. His eyes were puzzled. I could see he didn’t know what to make of my visit. Didn’t know whether to be loud and bluff, or play his cards close to his vest. Carnies and tent shows are usually crummy with hop-heads, confidence men and racketeers—outfits on the edge of the law. And a lug of Boss’s type usually has things on his conscience. Official calls are about as welcome as smallpox.

But this Bryan business had been an open and shut case. It was six years cold. Officially, Boss’s hands were clean—he was out of it. Why was it coming up again? Why would a Fed be snooping around at this late date? Sitting here in this carny van with a chair tilted against the door? Asking questions and giving off talk? I could see Boss wondering, a little worried.

"To begin with," I said, "when Charles Forrest, or Bryan—let’s call him Bryan—joined up with this carnival in Jacksonville, it was owned by Lester T. Gillis. Isn’t that right?"

"Gillis," Boss nodded. "That’s right."

"With a third of the ownership vested in you," I tacked on, just to let him know I was up on the carny’s business. "It’s only file that you were one-third owner of the show. Gillis had owed you some money, and he paid you off with a piece of the carny. Although the truck carried his name, you and him were joint owners of the outfit."

"He was manager," Boss reminded. He twisted the big gold ring on his finger in a puzzled way, looking at me. He couldn’t see what I was getting at, or what the dodge was. He said defensively, "Gillis was responsible for the show at that time."

"I know," I said. "You were the lot boss. Do you remember a girl named Alberta Alberts with the carnival back then? Blonde? Kind of pretty? Got a job as a dancer in the Garden of Allah?"

"Huh? We’ve had a string of babes dancin’ in the—Wait! She was the number—the thigh-grinder who was mixed up in the murder. Bryan’s girl. Sure, I remember her."

I nudged his memory, "She’d been a waitress at one of those curb-service places at Miami. She had the dancing bug, wanted to go on the stage. Gillis saw her and hired her for the tent show. Not a bad looking girl."

"Not bad—not good," Boss balanced the palms of his hands. "She wasn’t a very hot dancer, but you don’t get Broadway talent in tent shows."

"No. She wasn’t Broadway. She was just another girl. Sick of being a waitress. Out of money. Wanted to get north. Thought she could do it dancing. Miami’s full of such girls. Anyway," I pointed out, "this Alberta Alberts was dancing in your carny there at Jacksonville. Bryan wandered into the midway and saw her dancing. According to the story, he tried to put over later, that’s why he joined the carny.

"He fell for this blonde. Hung around a couple of nights and dated her up. Then he went to the straw boss and asked if he could join the show—said he was a trick marksman and could do a sharpshooting act. There wasn’t room for such an act, but he was given a job running the shooting gallery. Is that correct?"

Mike Boss nodded. "The guy had a way with guns. He could take ‘em apart and put ‘em together like a jeweler handles watches. We needed a grifter who could take care of pump-guns. So we give him the job."

"According to Bryan, too, he wanted to travel north, and the carny was slated on a circuit up to Maryland. But he admitted his main reason for joining the show—he was crazy about this dancing girl."

"Uh huh," Boss scowled in memory. "They were together all the time. Either he was hangin’ around her dressing tent, or she was at the shooting gallery. From the first, I didn’t think much of the guy. There was something funny about his eyes. He never talked—never said where he come from. The tight-lipped kind. I had a hunch there might be trouble from the guy."

"And your carny started up through Georgia."

"That’s right. Playin’ the sticks. One-week stands. First week on the road, this Bryan pulled a fight. There’s a hot-dog butcher—a Wop named Sicily. All the Wop did was make a pass at Bryan’s dancing babe—just kidding. Wham! Bryan takes a jump at him, and beats him half to death. Knocked his front teeth out. He’s still with the carny. If you want, I’ll call him up here. He can tell you about this Bryan."

I said, "Later, maybe. His testimony’s already on file. Now how about Gillis, the show-owner. He have any trouble with Bryan?"

"Not trouble, exactly." Boss frowned at his thumb-knuckle, choosing words. "Not at first, anyway. Bryan handled the graft all right. I mean, he was all right on the shooting gallery—kept the guns in shape—he didn’t short-change the cashbox. I don’t think Gillis liked him much. He told me he didn’t like the way the guy stared. Didn’t like his eyes. I think Gillis thought he was creepy. You know. A user."

"Did you take Bryan for a drug addict?"

"Boss’s shoulders made a shrug. "I didn’t pay him much notice. We got users on the lot. All kinds of guys in this racket. I wouldn’t have said he was a snow-bird. Maybe he was."

My glance went over to the runt in the green eyeshade. He just sat there, listening. No expression. I’d forgotten him there on the side-lines. I’d warmed up to the point where I didn’t care if there was an audience or not, but mention of dopes had reminded me of this one.

He ignored my glance, and I sent it back to the big man behind the desk. "So Gillis and Bryan got along all right?"

"I wouldn’t say that," Boss denied. "Gillis just didn’t give him much time. Bawled him out for the fight in the midway, but no more than that. Nobody had much to do with Bryan, as I recall. The other grifters steered clear of him, especially after the way he beat up Sicily. Figured he was a baby to leave alone. And then he was all tied up with that broad."

"He didn’t make any friends in the carnival crew? Besides the girl, I mean."

"Well, he wasn’t exactly popular. He was an outsider, see?" Boss nodded his chin. "The others knew he didn’t train in show business. You know how that is. Performers all kind of stick together in the same family. Ain’t that right, Trixie?"

The mouth under the green eyeshade cracked open in a sidewhise grin. "That’s right."

"We didn’t get to know him very well," Boss sharpened the point. "After all, he was only with the carny a couple of months."

"And he didn’t make pals with anybody on the lot?" I pressed.

"Well, just one," Boss remembered. "Funny, now I think of it."

"Yes? Who was that?"

"There was a midget," Boss said. "A midget in the freak show we had then.
Colonel Inch. He was only about two and a half feet tall. We billed him as thirty inches—Colonel Inch, the Human Gnome. The Alberts girl took a shine to him, and he used to sit on her knee. Then when this Bryan came along, he used to horse around with this midget. I guess you’d say him and the midget was friends.”

"Is that a picture of your midget on the wall up there?" My glance had picked up a glimpse of some photo postcards set fanwise in a mirror-frame.

"Yeh. That’s him on the card."

I leaned up out of my chair to examine the photograph. It was dog-eared, and had what looked like a coffee-stain across one corner. But the picture was clear enough. A midget in a dress suit. One of those half-pint little freaks with a big head like a kewpie’s. I reached up, and picked the card out of the frame, and studied it a minute.

"So this midget, Colonel Inch, was friendly to Bryan and the dancing girl?"

"Well, they sat alongside in the mess tent, and as I say, Bryan used to joke around with him. The Colonel used to go over to the shooting gallery after hours, and take pot-shots. He and Bryan would clown around and show off to the girl. This guy Bryan was a hell of a shot, you know."

"I know," I said. "A crack marksman."

"A wizard," Boss insisted. "Clay pigeons? He could knock ’em off from the hip. And lighted candles—swinging bull’s-eyes—clay pipes moving on the belt—he could hit ’em every time. He used to speed up the machinery so the targets would go by in a blur. Bang-bang-bang! I never saw him miss."

"You saw him shoot, then?"

"Me? Everybody did. The whole show would get around and watch. He did it for the girl’s benefit, I guess—put on four or five exhibitions. He could pump a .22 so fast, the shells would fly out like popcorn. He boasted he had a medal. Colonel Inch wasn’t a bad shot, either, but he said he never saw anybody hit the targets like that guy, Bryan."

I looked at the midget’s photograph. The baby face. Then I stood up to fix it back in the mirror-frame. In the speckled glass I caught a glimpse of my own face—bleak and circled under the eyes and as gray-looking as the hair that needed cutting around my ears. I was getting tired. I had to hurry this up.

"Okay," I said, resuming my seat and tilting back. "So Bryan was a sharpshooter. He was nuts about the girl in the Garden of Allah. He didn’t make friends with anybody else but the midget. Lester T. Gillis didn’t like him, but there wasn’t any trouble out in the open."

Boss made a head-toss, shaking off a fact as if it was an annoying fly. "Of course everybody figured Gillis was sore underneath. Everybody knew Bryan had cut in on his girl."

"Oh," I said. "Gillis was interested in the dancer, too."

"I’d say that was the story," Boss nodded. "Didn’t it come out in the trial? The girl admitted that the Old Man had made a couple of passes at her. When she first joined the merry, before Bryan showed up. Gillis didn’t hire hootchy-coochy girls to play Dutch Uncle. He had his eye on this Alberts blonde."

"Did she go for Daddy Gillis?"

Mike Boss grunted. "Cold turkey. Especially after Bryan came on the lot. If you’re trying to establish that Old Man Gillis had a yen for the babe, and was burned up at Bryan for cutting in, those facts went down on the police blotter. It was also established that Bryan got sore at Gillis when he walked into the girl’s tent and found Gillis trying to paw her."

"Bryan threatened to kill the show-owner if he touched the girl again. Wasn’t that it?"

"I’ll say he threatened. I heard the row, myself. Passing the tent. So did a half dozen of the grifters. Old Man Gillis just laughed and told Bryan not to be a damn fool. Said he didn’t want the girl. Walked out of the tent. He was scared, though. I could tell from his face. Afterwards, I asked him why he hadn’t fired Bryan and thrown him off the lot."

"What did he say?"

"He said he didn’t want to lose a good hand on the shooting gallery. Nuts! He was scared to fire the guy for fear Bryan would beat him up, or knock him off."

Boss’ tone was edged with contempt. It implied that he, himself, would have tossed
Bryan out on his neck—and that Old Man Gillis got paid off for lack of guts.

"Maybe," I suggested, "Gillis didn't fire the tough guy because he was afraid the girl would quit. He wanted more time to make a play for the girl."

"Maybe," Boss shrugged.

"So the carny moved up to a town near Athens, Georgia," I reviewed. "Now we got the picture. Bryan—his real name Forrest—a sharpshooter who'd been in the French Foreign Legion—a dangerous bird—running the shooting gallery. His girl, Alberta Alberts, a second-class midway dancer. Bryan won't talk, and makes friends with nobody on the lot except this midget, the Human Gnome—Colonel Inch. Gillis, the carny owner, has a sugar-daddy yen for the Garden of Allah girl. Bryan threatens to kill him if he doesn't lay off. Old Man Gillis swallows the threat. The show goes on. Have I got the story?"

"You've got what I know," Boss spread his hands. "Is there any more?"

"Well," I tilted forward in my chair, "there's the murder."

MY EYES couldn't help doing a left oblique to that picture of Old Man Gillis on the wall. Lester T. Gillis, with his old-fashioned collar and barbershop-baritone mustache. You can't judge a face from a lithographic print, but a cheap lithograph seemed to characterize the guy. A cheapskate owner of a cheap little road carnival. A cheap career of peanuts, popcorn and chewing gum. Picking the public pocket with crafty, little chance-games. A dealer in morbid thrills and shoddy freaks. A huckster of cheap sleigh-rides for suckers on the Ferris Wheel and the Whip. Pinching the knees of his under-paid dancing girls. A ten-cent collector of dimes. And his life was cheap.

The murder? That was cheap, too. The kind of sordid, run-of-the-mill crime that would ordinarily get a couple of half-columns on a city newspaper's third page. Of course, the small-town local blew it up into headlines, and what got it extra coverage was the circus angle. The tent-show background. Midway glamor. The dancing girl. The freaks.

The homicide was simple enough. Bang! Bang! and the victim fell dead. For the country cops it was a pianola. Motive was hand-made for the bright, young D.A.—love affair—quarrel with jealous rival—bingo!—as simple as throwing a baseball at a barrel, and winning a Baby Doll. The clues were as big as elephants' footprints all over the lot. The detectives had only to ask a couple of questions, and they had their man.

The trial was routine. The jury stayed out fifteen minutes. The Judge dished out the sentence. The case was open—and shut.

After that, it was good for a quick feature in the Sunday Supplements. The Press had pictures—"Alberta Alberts, Garden of Allah Queen," weeping in her "Dance of the Seven Veils" costume. A State Trooper holding Colonel Inch, the Human Gnome, "The World's Tiniest Witness," on his shoulder. A grim flashlight photo of Bryan, unshaved and glaring. And a drawing, "X Marks the Spot." Only enough for one issue. The Press that season was devoting its sensational crime space to Adolph Hitler.

BUT there was more to this sordid carny murder than that. A freak angle the Press cameras didn't get. A couple of clues the country coppers missed, and a fact that escaped the bright, young D.A. entirely.

Somewhere behind that homicide there were motives which weren't so simple. Involved in the killing was a red hand quicker than the eye. On the midway of the Greater Lester T. Gillis Shows there was a sinister mystery which had never been cleared up.

I'd gone over the case history a thousand times. Reviewed the evidence again and again. Studied the thing until I could reconstruct the crime with my eyes shut, and see it take place like a movie on a screen. To me it was like a melodrama—a murder mystery which I'd sat through until I knew it by heart. Yet after a thousand performances, I was still baffled by the thing.

I could see it now as I sat there in that trailer van, facing Michael Boss and the sharpie in the green eyeshade. This same carny parked on the edge of a town in Georgia. About this time of year. The evening would be cool, and you'd smell the trees which drooped Spanish moss. And that night was dark, too, with no moon and a heavy mist.

The carny was down at heel after a bad
season, and Lester T. Gillis—what with one thing and another—was in a crabby mood. He'd spent the afternoon in town wrangling over an unpaid gasoline bill, and now, about ten o'clock, he came stomping into the show lot. There weren't a score of customers on the midway—a half dozen yokels, a few kids and a couple of Negroes—and they were going home. Already most of the rides were shut down, and the grifters were closing up their stands.

The Garden of Allah was doing a final "free show" with the grinder spilling through a megaphone and the dancing girls going through a weary routine on the platform.

"Hy-ah! Hy-ah! Hy-ah! Hey, look! These little Oriental dancers—Georgia peaches from the harem of Haroun al Raschid—!

The Alberts girl was out there, shivering like the others in scanty costume, with a coat thrown over her bare shoulders. But Gillis went by without looking at her. He seemed in an ugly humor.

The freak show down the line was folding up, and Gillis stopped to needle the ticket-hawker about the receipts. "A rotten take," he crabbed, "and a rotten show." Professor Pic the Tattooed Man, and Tonna the Fat Woman, and Glinda the Alligator Girl came out and wanted to know when they were going to get paid. "Half of you cripples ain't worth your space in a tent," Gillis bawled at them. "But I'll pay you tomorrow." He went on across the midway to bawl out the grifter who ran the buckets game for giving away too many prizes.

The Caterpillar ride had broken down, and Gillis stopped to tongue-lash the mechanic who was trying to fix it. By the time he reached Sicily's hot-dog booth, he was cursing everybody. But it was nothing unusual—a typical evening in the carnny business—except the Old Man was meaner.

He didn't bawl out Sicily, who was his pet dirty-worker. And he didn't bawl out Mike Boss, who was having a cup of coffee at Sicily's booth. He went over to the shooting gallery, opposite.

Bryan was there—a figure in slouch cap and shirt-sleeves. Leaning on the counter. Poking shells into a .22. Preoccupied. He glanced up at Old Man Gillis, and then went on loading the rifle as if he hadn't seen him. The rifle was one of six which were chained to the counter of the shooting gallery to keep rowdies from stealing them. On good nights the guns would all be firing away, but tonight there was only Bryan—loading up. In the background, clay pigeons were rattling up across a moving belt and mechanical targets were swinging.

Gillis sounded off. Not too loud, but loud enough to make a ten-cent show of authority for the benefit of Sicily and Mike Boss.

"Look, Bryan. Why don't you close up? Save electricity."

"It's a slow night," Bryan agreed. "But I'm staying open because Colonel Inch said he'd be over after his show folded. I promised the kid a little shooting match."

"Okay, as long as you pay for the shots," Gillis snapped.

"Don't worry," Bryan told him. "I'll pay for them."

Gillis walked on down to the merry-go-round. As usual, it was tooting—staying open to catch the last stray nickel. There was only one rider aboard—a kid in kneepants, trying to catch the brass ring. Gillis yelled at the engineer to close up as soon as this kid went home, and then crossed over to the Whip.

The Whip was new that season—bright red, green and gold under a mess of lights. But it wasn't catching any customers. At least, not yet that night. Gillis told the op in the ticket-box to shut down the contraption and go to bed. He was still cussing as he walked off cross-lots to his trailer-

He wasn't gone five minutes before he was back. Standing there by the ticket-box to the Whip. Mike Boss hadn't finished his coffee at Sicily's hot-dog stand—both Boss and Sicily saw the Old Man there. The Whip was shut down, and the ticket-box was dark. Boss said later he supposed the Old Man had come back to make sure the Whip was closed down.

Bryan saw the Old Man standing there by the Whip entry. The lights on the Whip were out, and the operator had gone to join a crap game at the other end of the midway. It was the swim of light from the merry-go-round that showed Old Man Gillis standing there in front of the Whip's ticket-
booth. Bryan said he didn’t pay him any attention.

That was the set-up. Mike Boss and Sicily at the hot-dog stand. Bryan in the shooting gallery opposite. The merry-go-round farther down. And Old Man Gillis beyond, standing there alone at the ticket-box of the Whip. Then it happened.

The music box on the merry-go-round let go with a blare. Roll Out the Barrel—horns, bells and drums. And suddenly Old Man Gillis pitched forward on his face—shot twice through the head by a Winchester .22!

“HOW about it?” I said to Mike Boss at this point of my review. "Are the details all right so far?"

“You’ve got it down pat,” he nodded, chewing the fresh cigar he’d planted in his face. “That’s just the way it was. The merry-go-round was playin’ Roll Out the Barrel. It was playin’ it a little while ago tonight. There’s a lot of drums and cymbals in the tune, and that’s why we didn’t hear the gun go off when Gillis was shot.”

“Did you see him fall?”

“Well, I seen him after he was down. I seen him standing there, see, and the next thing I looked, and he was down. Me and Sicily were talkin’ at the hot-dog booth, and I had a dog in my hand. Sicily was pourin’ me a fresh cup. Sicily said ‘What became of the Old Man?’ I looked—the Whip was about a hundred yards away—and there he was flat on the ground.”

“You ran to him then?”

“I yelled, ‘Hey, Gillis!’ and he didn’t answer. Then I ran.”

“And he was dead when you got there,” I supposed.

Boss grunted. “Dead as a log. I turned him over. His mouth was open and bleeding. He’d been hit smack in the left eye, and another bullet in his puss just beside his nose. It was the slug in the eye that got him.”

“Then what did you do, Boss?”

“I hollered for Sicily. He seen somethin’ was wrong, and was already coming. I yelled for somebody to go get a cop. I hollered over at the merry-go-round. The blasted thing was still bangin’ out that tune, and I yelled at the operator to shut her off. I remember he jammed the brakes, and it scared the kid who was ridin’, and the kid went up the midway on a run. And Sicily was hollering around like a fool, wanting to know what had happened. I told him the Old Man had been shot. Sicily didn’t say anything. He just turned and stared pop-eyed at the shooting gallery—at this guy, Bryan.”

“Do you remember what Bryan was doing?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Boss thrust his jaw. “He was just standing there inside the counter. Looking. Everybody was coming on a run down the midway, but Bryan was just standing there.”

“His shooting gallery was about a hundred yards from the Whip, wasn’t it?” I checked. “And Old Man Gillis had been facing in that general direction. And the shots that killed Gillis hit him in the face. The bullets were .22 longs.”

“That’s right,” Boss nodded. “And on the counter in front of Bryan were six Winchester .22’s. Pump guns.”

“And two and two sometimes makes four,” I said.

IT HAD BEEN an open and shut case. Boss and Sicily were out of it. At least nine people farther up the midway saw them chatin’ there at the hot-dog stand, Boss eating an innocent frankfurter and Sicily pouring coffee. These same witnesses saw Bryan lounging on the counter of the shooting gallery—saw the kid in knee-pants come racing from the merry-go-round—saw Old Man Gillis sprawled, there, in front of the Whip.

There was nobody else at that end of the midway except the merry-go-round operator. A drunk, half-blind, with one arm, he worked in a cockpit behind the carousel—he was out of it. No small boy on the merry-go-round could have done it. It was a job of marksmanship that needed a sharpshooter’s eye, and the finger of a sniper who could trigger two fast shots at a moment when cymbals were whanging.

“There he is, boys! And he’s the only guy around who’s got a gun!”

“Gun? Holy murder! He’s got six guns!”

A one-eyed detective would have made the pinch. What more did two sharp-eyed State Troopers want? When they came galloping on motorcycles down the midway,
they found Bryan with the rest of the carny mob crowding around the Whip. Bryan’s
girl was with him. She was weeping, and he had his arm around her. “I tell you,”
he was trying to tell her, “I didn’t do it.”
But the evidence was as plain to everybody as the bullet-holes in Gillis’s face.

Then one of the Troopers, searching the body, found the mash note. That settled it.
"Dear Daddy Gillis, I have changed my mind and want to see you. Wait for me at
the Whip ticket-box at ten-thirty. I will come by and give you a message. Your Garden of Allah Girl." Bryan fought like a wildman when he saw that note. It was
duck soup for the bright, young D.A.!

Warming it up for the Prosecution, he put Alberta Alberts on the witness stand as
one of the stars of the trial. The dingy little Southern court-room sat forward expect-
antly. The twelve good men and true nudged and smirked. But the girl, looking
white and thin, and wearing plain black, didn’t come through with the anticipated
cheese cake. Carney girls work for a living. They aren’t Hollywood queens or Reno
widows.

CONFRONTED by the bright, young D.A., the girl faced his mocking politeness with a quiet dignity that was almost pathetic. She even won a little sympathy from some of the Press. She was crazy about Bryan, you could see that. Trying to protect
him. What was more pathetic, trying to believe in him. Only when the D.A. produced
that sleazy mash note, she broke down.

“I never wrote it!” she sobbed. “I never wrote such a note to—to Mr. Gillis. Can’t
you see that isn’t my handwriting?”

“Of course that isn’t your handwriting,” the D.A. smiled. “Of course you didn’t
write it. It’s a phoney scrawl—disguised—!"

That was the trap.
The girl didn’t write the note, but some-
body did. Somebody who left it in Gillis’s
quarters while the Old Man was away from the
show-lot. Somebody who wanted to lure
Gillis to that spot in front of the Whip—
that spot which is marked by crime reporters
with an “X.”

The D.A. had it all chalked out on a big
blackboard. The lay-out of the midway. The
set-up of tents and booths. The location of
the hot-dog stand in respect to the shooting
gallery—the shooting gallery in respect to
the merry-go-round—the merry-go-round in
respect to the Whip. It was easy enough to
map out, for the carny always made its pitch
on the same general pattern. And “X”
marked the spot.

“There it is,” the D.A. pointed it out to
the jury. “The spot where the victim fell.
As you see, he was looking up the midway.
Looking past the merry-go-round. Past the
shooting gallery. To ward the distant Gar-
den of Allah tent. Hopefully waiting for
the supposed writer of the note to keep the
appointed rendezvous. And now—!”

In ominous, red chalk, the D.A. drew a
line from the “X” in front of the Whip.
An ominous, red chalk-line that crossed the
midway on an oblique and ended up at a
point behind the counter of the shooting
gallery.

Glaring at the blackboard, Bryan jumped
to his feet.

“I didn’t shoot him!”
The D.A. smiled. He put Michael Boss
on the stand.

“Well, I didn’t actually see it,” Boss ad-
mitted. “Me and Sicily were talking, as wit-
tnesses have said. My back was toward the
shooting gallery; I was watchin’ Sicily pour
coffee. But Bryan was over there, loadin’
up the guns—!”

“I didn’t shoot him!” Bryan shouted out.
The D.A. smiled, and put Colonel Inch
on the stand.

Flashlights. Laughter. The midget took
a bow.

“Did you see the shooting, Colonel?”

“No, I was in my dressing tent, changing
from my costume into street clothes. The
sideshow had closed, and I—”

“What were you going to do?”
The midget paused, and looked unhap-
pily at the defendant.

“I’d made a date with Bryan to do some
shooting. He’d arranged to keep the gallery
open until we had our match.”

“Did you ever hear Bryan threaten to kill
Mr. Gillis?”

“I’m afraid I did,” the midget piped. “It
was about three weeks before the shooting.
Gillis was in Miss Alberts’ dressing tent.
Bryan walked in and shouted, ‘You half-
baked Barnum, I’ll kill you if you ever an-
noy this girl again!’ We in the freak tent
heard him. But I didn’t think he’d do it,”
the midget added sadly. "I still can't believe he did."

Of course this aside was stricken from the record. Such whitewash for Bryan fell flat, especially when it was pointed out the Human Gnome had been his friend.

The girl's efforts for Bryan were equally biased and futile. And the Defense lawyer's were empty flimflam. Curly-haired, with a curly nose, this small-town barrister couldn't have counseled a chicken thief. He didn't have a chance to begin with, and knew it. He might as well have tried to rig a defense for Dillinger.

He worked at it, though. Mopping his forehead, and objecting all over the place. Mainly he rested his defense on the fact that nobody had seen Bryan do the shooting. Evidence was circumstantial.

"Circumstantial!" the D.A. scathed. "It's been proved the shots—on a misty night like that—couldn't have come from the upper end of the midway. If the shots came from the lower end, some person had to fire them. Some person on the midway, facing toward and within range of the victim. Witnesses have testified, and detectives gone over the ground and checked the fact that only four men were on the scene. And of these, all save the defendant have been eliminated."

The Defense tried to bring up the kid on the merry-go-round. Maybe he had witnessed the crime.

The D.A. made hay of that. What could a child, bobbing up and down on carousel horse have seen? What good was the testimony of some frightened brat? And the Defense couldn't locate the kid, anyway.

"He would have us believe some small boy in breeches—some sooty-faced nipper galloping around in circles on a wooden horse—busy the while at catching rings and throwing them into a canvas bag—this nipper, who was frightened away, could add some new light to the evidence! The Defense must do better than produce a small boy who can't be found," the D.A. jibed. "I offer in evidence the very weapon by which the murder was committed! One of the Winchester .22 pump-guns found chained to the counter of the shooting gallery!"

"I didn't shoot him!" Bryan yelled. But everyone could see the gallows in his eyes as he stared at that shabby pump-gun. It still dangled a length of brass chain which had tethered it to a padlock on the shooting gallery counter—where the cops had found it.

Had he ever seen this Winchester before? Yes, it belonged to the shooting gallery. Had he ever handled it? Yes, many times (and his fingerprints were all over it).

Was there any way of removing it from the shooting gallery counter? No, it was chained to a padlock; couldn't be removed unless the chain were broken or the lock opened. And who had the key to this padlock? He did. So it must have been chained to the counter of the shooting gallery at the time the carnival-owner was shot?

"It was there!" Bryan glared at the gun. "All six rifles were on the counter in a row. I'd just finished loading them when I heard Boss yell, and—"

"You admit you were there, alone, at the shooting gallery."

"But I tell you, I didn't do it!" Bryan panted. "I didn't touch that gun. Nobody did!"

Nobody? He looked bad—when a ballistics expert from Atlanta proved the fatal bullets were from that shooting gallery rifle. Haggard. Furtive. Beaten. Like a rat in an iron trap.

"The girl admits she didn't write the note that decoyed Lester T. Gillis to his doom," the D.A. argued in conclusion. "Who did? Who struck down a former rival for the romantic affections of this dancer? Who threatened to kill Gillis? Who had the necessary sniper's skill—the time, the place, the range carefully calculated—the weapon handy? The Prosecution contends that this man, Bryan, with his former criminal record—this roustabout traveling under an alias—this vagabond soldier-of-fortune—this expert marksman—this jealous lover planned to kill Gillis."

"He planned carefully. He chose an evening when the midway would be practically deserted. He arranged to keep the shooting gallery open. He planted a note which would lure the show-owner to an exposed place within gun-range. Waiting for a moment when two men at the hot-dog stand had their backs turned—timing the shots to a din of music from the merry-go-round—he seized this gun, which was chained to the shooting gallery counter stepped back
CIRCUMSTANTIALITY saved his neck.

He didn’t hang. But Charles Adam Forrest, or Bryan, went up for life at hard labor.

“Hard labor,” I repeated the sentence, looking across ten feet of cigar-smoke at Mike Boss. “In Georgia that meant a prison factory in winter, and in summer the chain gang. Life! That’s a tough rap even for a murderer. It was a cold-blooded crime, though.

Mike Boss licked his cigar from left to right. “He was a cold-blooded guy,” he observed.

“And a fool,” I said. I looked over at the sharpie with the green eyeshade, and he nodded as though in agreement with the proverb that crime doesn’t pay.

I leaned back in my chair and studied the victim’s portrait. The mustache-cup countenance of Lester T. Gillis. He didn’t seem worth it.

After a moment, Boss leaned forward on his elbows, earnest.

“Now, do you mind coming through with what this is all about? You come in here—F.B.I.—and go over a case that’s six years in the grave. Ain’t it settled on the books, and over?”

I gave him a minute to wonder. Outside, the merry-go-round music had stopped, and a night wind was blowing. The van was getting cold.

Then I said, “It’s not quite over. If you carry men ever read anything besides Variety, you might have seen the news. Two months ago a bunch of lifers broke prison down in Georgia. Bryan crushed out.”

Eyebrows arched, Boss said, “Whaddya know? So that’s why the Feds are around!”

He gave a short laugh. He seemed relieved.

“I thought maybe I’d made a mistake on my income tax.”

I laughed.

The runty ticket-handler laughed.

Boss twirled his cigar between thumb and forefinger contentedly. “Uh huh. You G-boys figure Bryan might for some reason come back to the canny. You’re making a routine check.” Then, holding a match to the cigar, he resumed a frown. “But you don’t think that con would come loping back to this canny, do you? For what?”

“We have to cover all the possibilities,” I said. “It’s an old Spanish custom for the police to check on a killer’s former stamping grounds. In this particular case, there’s reason to think Bryan might show up here.”

“Eh?” Mike Boss glanced across the match flame. “Reason?”

“There’s a mystery to the case that was never solved,” I said.

“A mystery?”

“A couple of them,” I said. “One of them concerns that Garden of Allah dancer, Alberta Alberts. Ordinarily after a man is convicted of a crime and sent to prison, the girl in the case—especially if she’s a nice girl, innocently involved—drops him like a hot cake. Not this Alberts girl. Do you know what became of her after the trial?”

Boss shook his head. “I never saw her after the trial.”

“She stuck by the guy,” I said. “When Bryan was lugged off to prison, she moved to a near-by town. After a lot of effort, she got through to the prison warden. Got permission to visit Bryan. Every visiting day, she’d be there, talking to him through the grating. Telling him to keep up his courage. Telling him she still believed in him.”

“Yeah?” Boss stared. “He must’ve had some kind of hold on her.”

“He didn’t give her much time,” I said.

“The guards reported he used to cuss her out. Snarl at her, and tell her to go home. But she kept on coming. She got a job in the town so she could stand by. In summer she’d be there at the gate to watch the chain-gang wagons go out with that con in there like a monkey in a circus cage. She got to be a familiar figure there by the prison wall. The warden was a tough Cracker with a soul of reinforced concrete, but even he took a sort of pity on the girl. At least he told her to go out of there—clear out and go somewhere and make a life for herself, and forget this lifer. Finally, when the girl wouldn’t go, he gave her permission to write letters and bring little gifts to the prisoner.”

“So she smuggled in a few saws,” Boss sneered.

“Everything she brought to the prison was
examined," I explained. "Mostly it was books. You can't hide anything in a book. Not when the warden examines the binding and every page. But there's the first mystery."

"Yeah?" Boss's eyes expressed curiosity.

I nodded, "The books. Bryan had been in a year before the girl got permission. Then she started bringing him these puzzle books. Books of riddles. Trick problems you have to solve. Brain-teasers. Full of puzzle diagrams, and bafflers like, 'Which is more valuable, a full carload of five-dollar gold pieces, or half a carload of ten-dollar gold pieces?'

"It sounds nutty."

"If you think so, Mr. Boss, imagine that Cracker warden. Puzzle books. He couldn't figure out the puzzles in them, and right off the bat he was suspicious. But the girl argued him into letting them through. Told him they were a quiet pastime, and even got him cracking his brain on a few. Bryan, who'd been a sullen convict, ate them up. He wasn't what you'd call a model prisoner after that, but his conduct was a lot better. He began to draw puzzle diagrams every spare chance he got. Instead of marking off the days on the wall of his cell, he covered it with lines and triangles and circles. The books gave him something to think about besides life-imprisonment."

"Such as how to escape, eh?"

"Maybe," I said. "But the mystery takes another turn. One day the girl visited the prison, had a chat with Bryan, and went right out and left town. After that it was mail. Letters from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, the west coast. The warden read the letters before giving them to Bryan, of course. They baffled him more than those puzzle books ever had. In all of them, the girl mentioned 'the Colonel.' 'I can't find the Colonel anywhere,' she'd write. Or, 'No trace of the Colonel here.' Or, 'The Agency hasn't seen the Colonel this season.' The warden didn't know what to make of it.

"And after getting such a letter, Bryan would be as sullen as an Indian. Then he'd write to whatever address she last had, 'You've got to find him. It ought to be easy. Everything depends on the Colonel.'"

I gazed at Mike Boss, who was playing with his cigar. "That was a couple of years ago, and the war was on," I reminded. "America was as full of colonels as a dog of fleas. Who was it Bryan wanted to find, and the girl, traveling all over the country couldn't locate? Who was this Colonel?"

"Can't the Feds find out?" Boss asked.

"They've got a pretty good idea," I said. "One of the last books the girl sent Bryan—she mailed it to him—was a book he wrote and asked for. A book about midgets. Shortly after that she sent him two more—a medical text with a chapter underlined about midgets, and Von Cram's Lives of Famous Midgets."

Boss exclaimed, "You don't think it was Colonel Inch—?" and broke off to stare at me.

"The Human Gnome," I said flatly. "That little pint-sized freak who'd been Bryan's friend. Now why would Bryan, down there in that Georgia prison, have the girl put up all that effort to find this midget?"

Boss's expression was peculiar. He laid his cigar carefully on the edge of his desk—so carefully the ash didn't break off—and wiped his chin thoughtfully, regarding nothing ahead of him.

"If you don't know the answer to that one," I suggested, "perhaps you can tell me where Colonel Inch can be found?"

Boss moved his head slowly in a wig-wag negative. "Inch quit the show directly after the trial. Six years ago. He went up to some museum in New York. We hired a new freak show the following season."

"We found Colonel Inch went to New York, all right," I said. "But he didn't go to any museum. He seems to have quit show business and dropped out of sight. Why would a midget quit the show business? Where else would he go? It's a funny thing, a midget dropping out of sight."

"I should think so," Boss agreed.

"And that's what Bryan thought," I said. "A midget doesn't get an ordinary job. He doesn't get drafted into the Army. He doesn't disappear in a crowd—he stands out like a sore thumb. But Inch did disappear. Coney Island—Revere Beach—Palisades Park—Ripley's show—the girl looked everywhere. She canvassed theatrical agencies, fair grounds, circuses, carnivals, Hollywood. She had a desperate time of it, traveling on jammed busses, sleeping in tourist camps, riding on overcrowded trains.
You know what it was like in war-time."

Boss reached over and crammed a handful of candy popcorn into his mouth. He mumbled, "Probably they figured the midget had some money, and would help them out. Get a lawyer. Appeal." He brushed his sticky hands together, and chewed, "Cons are always hopin' to get sprung."

"She kept on trying to find Inch," I said. "In one way, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. In another, it was like tracking a celebrity. A dwarf is as outstanding as a giant. This midget wasn't as tiny as he was billed—thirty inches. Actually, his height was three feet. But he was well known to the circus agents, and nobody knew where he was. The girl couldn't find him."

Boss daintily picked a sticky crumb from his lapel, and put it into his mouth. "If the show agents can't put their finger on a midget nobody can."

"So they told the girl. Finally, after months of hunting, she gave up. That was last year. She wrote to Bryan saying the midget must be dead. Bryan wrote a savage letter back, telling her he'd known it was hopeless all along—that she'd let him down like everybody else—he was a fool to ever think she could do anything for him—she could go to the devil, and he didn't want to hear from her. Even that didn't stop her. She wrote back a couple of times—wonderful letters—but Bryan refused to take them from the warden. Then last spring she wrote him good-bye. She was in Boston. Going to marry a landscape gardener. But she'd always keep a corner of her heart for him. Huh!" I cleared my throat. "That was the time Bryan determined to crush out."

**BOSS** smiled wisely. "To get the girl, eh?"

"No. To find Colonel Inch. He had to find Colonel Inch."

Once again there was sand in Boss's voice. "Why?"

"Because Bryan had figured out a puzzle," I said. "That's why the girl gave him all those puzzle books. Not just to occupy his mind in prison. But to sharpen his wits. Start him thinking. Get his brain looking around corners. Give him practice solving riddles. That girl got him to use his brains. She had faith in him. She was a wonderful girl! When a girl believes in a man like that, a man can do anything. This lug, Bryan, who'd never used his head before, began to work it harder than he worked his muscles cracking rock. He became an expert at working out puzzles. And finally, when he'd gone through all those puzzle books, he solved a Jim dandy. But he needed Colonel Inch to help him prove it."

Boss's mouth was still ajar. His gaze was fixed on my necktie. He didn't seem to be listening to me.

I growled, "The Legion kicking around didn't do Forrest any good. But you could look at it another way, and call him a war
hero. He used the name Bryan—not as an alias, but because he'd read in fiction stories that Legionnaires never gave their right names. After he was wounded and reached England, another jam, France was collapsed. His citizenship was a mess. Tramp-shipping back to the States without a passport, he ducked ashore in Miami. He kept the name Bryan—just so much bravado.

"You know how he joined the carny. The girl. He asked her to marry him on their first date. They decided to stick with the show, make what money they could, and travel north. This isn't the story of a murderer. It's the story of a fool who walked into a trap, and was framed."

Whatever Boss saw on my necktie, it seemed to fascinate him. Either that, or he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open. But I knew he was listening.

I SAID, "Bryan was framed. He took the rap for a murder he didn't commit. Someone else rigged up that homicide. Someone else lured Gillis to that spot in front of the Whip. Someone else shot the carny-owner."

Bryan woke up, and blurted, "With that gun on the shooting-gallery counter? With Bryan the only one there? Who did it—the Invisible Man?"

"The Invisible Man," I nodded. "Only he wasn't invisible. He was there all the time. But he was hidden. Like the answer to a puzzle."

"You mean someone was hidden there by the counter of the shooting gallery? Someone who grabbed up a chained gun and fired two shots, with Bryan right there, not seeing?"

"All right," I cut in. "Begin with the gun, as Bryan did, working out the puzzle. That was the crux of it, the thing that finally convicted him. That gun chained there to the counter. There was no one but Bryan there, at the shooting gallery, and if there had been, nobody could've snatched up the rifle and fired twice without him seeing it. Yet the bullets in Old Man Gillis had come from that shooting-gallery rifle, one of six laid out on the counter. And me standing right there," Bryan recalled. "I'd just finished loading a gun. I was wiping my hands on a piece of waste. The guns were all laid out in a row. Then I heard Boss give a yell. Now how had that rifle been fired? That was the key to the whole puzzle, you might say."

Boss said, "I'll say you might."

"And that's what Bryan did say," I told him. "The very word that came to his mind. The key! Everything hinged on the fact that the murder weapon was there on the shooting-gallery counter. It was there because it was chained there. By a chain looped through a padlock, and only Bryan had the key. But suppose someone else had a key, Mr. Boss."

"Huh?"

"Easy enough for someone to get one," I said. "A wax impression when Bryan wasn't around, or when he was at the back of the gallery. Any small-town key-maker could make one."

"So what?"

"So Bryan had a key to the puzzle about the gun," I said. "Someone had a key made. The key opened the padlock. The padlock released the chain, so the murder weapon wasn't there on the counter at the time Old Man Gillis was shot. A substitute rifle was there. Probably a second-hand twenty-two also picked up in a small town."

"I don't get it," Boss said.

"This substitute rifle was put on the counter probably while Bryan was in the mess tent that evening," I said. "Those used Winchester's look as alike as peas. Bryan would hardly notice the exchange. Then after Gillis was shot, there was another fast exchange. The killer ducks back to the gallery—while everyone on the midway, including Bryan, crowded down to the Whip—sneaks in through the rear, and leaves the murder weapon in place of the unused one. Of course, he was careful to wipe off his fingerprints, knowing the cops would find plenty of Bryan's when they examined the gun. And that's how Bryan figured out the puzzle of the rifle."

Boss said in a sandy voice, "That's smart. Awful smart. And it don't prove a thing."

"It proves somebody took a gun from the shooting gallery, killed Gillis, and put it back," I corrected. "That solved the little puzzle of bow. The big puzzle, the real brain-teaser was who. Bryan sweated his brain on that one. Besides Bryan there were only three other men within gun range of Gillis at that end of the midway. Three apparent possibilities. The bum who ran the carousel. Sicily. And you."

SHADOW
Boss recoiled. Then shoved his face toward me in a pug. "Sure. I did it. I had the rifle hid behind a frankfurter." His eyes sneered. "Unless Sicily opened fire from behind his coffee pot."

I shook my head. "No, Mr. Boss, it wasn't you. And it wasn't Sicily. Somebody else did the dirty work."

His hand, reaching for the popcorn, hesitated, then went on and scooped. Stuffing his face, he sneered, "Yuh. That leaves the one-armed goon who run the merry-go-round. Bryan figured him, huh?"

"Not quite," I shook my head. "But he did figure something. He figured this."

I took a folded piece of paper from my pocket, unfolded it, and held it up for Mike Boss's stare. It was a diagram of the carnies midway, showing the layout as the D.A. had chalked it. The tent shows. The rides. The booths. The shooting gallery on the right. The hot-dog stand opposite. The merry-go-round below the shooting gallery. The Whip beyond the merry-go-round.

"Here's the puzzle as Bryan worked it out in his cell," I said. "An exact copy of the D.A.'s diagram. Except in this one you'll notice a little arrow showing the merry-go-round going counter-clockwise. You'll also notice the red line isn't drawn from the shooting gallery to X. It's drawn from the inside rim of the merry-go-round to X."

STARING at the diagram, Boss reached for another handful of caramel corn. He missed the dish and had to grope. He crammed his mouth, and chewed noisily. When he'd chewed enough to be able to speak, he said, "Sho Bryan figursh the shot came fromh the merry-go-round? Shum gurnan was on the merry-go-round, huh?"

"You're getting warm," I said.

He swallowed. Leered. "So that brings us back to the Invisible Man. Since the only rider seen on the merry-go-round was a little kid."

"You're getting hot," I said.

He drew his hand across sticky lips. "Nyeah. And I suppose Bryan figured this kid in knee-britches gallopin' around on a wooden horse seen this invisible sniper who picked off Old Man Gillis?" Sneering, he grabbed another load of popcorn and palmed it into his face.

"Wrong," I said. "Bryan figured the nippin' in knee britches shot the Old Man."

Boss cleared his pouched cheeks with a cough that sprayed popcorn across the desk. He gagged out, "What?"

I said steadily, "Suppose this nipper was a good shot. Suppose he'd had that shooting gallery rifle planted aboard the carousel—somewhere underneath the platform, let's say. Up he comes in knee-pants around ten o'clock and busy a string of tickets for a bunch of rides. The boozey operator goes out back. For half an hour the nipper catches rings. Then he gets the hidden rifle and comes gallopin' around with the gun in his left hand, concealed behind the inside flank of his horse. It's ten-thirty. Out comes Old Man Gillis, to stand in front of the Whip. Around come the horses in a din of music. Bang! Bang!"

Boss complained, wiping pink crumbs from his chin, "Who's ever going to believe all that about a little kid?"

"Nobody!" I snapped. "No little kid would be a good enough shot. No little kid would have a motive. But a man might have a motive. He might be a carny man. Carney men are always going broke—just as Lester T. Gillis was going broke. Suppose this carny man was going broke, then, and another carny man comes up with an offer. 'Look, bozo, you're going broke. Here's a chance to make real dough. I got a third interest in this carny, and the Old Man is busted and owes me plenty. If you dies, I'll collect the carny. Knock him off for me, and I'll fix you up for life. Now if you were dressed up as a little kid—'"

Boss lunged to his feet.

"Sit down!" I ordered.

He sat down, whispering, "You're crazy! If this guy Bryan thinks—"

"Shut up!" I ordered. "He thought it all out. The midget was the only solution. Wasn't Colonel Inch a pretty fair shot? Wasn't he always hanging around the shooting gallery? Didn't he rig up a match and get Bryan to keep the gallery open that evening? Bryan even figured out why Inch was going broke and needed money. His probable motive for the murder, and the reason he was able to disappear afterwards!"

My voice had climbed to a shout. I shouted, "Bryan learned it from a book on midgets—that midgets sometimes begin to grow! It's a medical fact; in middle
life some midgets begin to take on height. For a circus dwarf it's a tragedy. It means he'll lose his job. He's through as a freak. And that's what was happening to Colonel Inch. The little rat was growing. Getting too big for his boots. Another couple of years and he'd be too tall for a show job.

"That's why Alberta couldn't find him five years later," I shouted. "That's how he's disappeared. He isn't a midget any more! Five years would give him time to grow a lot taller than he was on the night he killed Gillis. Bad weather timed that job.

The freak show folded early. In his dressing tent he hopped into kiddie clothes. Then he scuttled down to the merry-go-round. After sniping the Old Man, maybe he tossed the gun into that canvas sack where he'd been throwing rings. When the carousel stopped, he ducked off. Later, he cut around behind the tents, and while the rest of us were crowding around the Whip—" I checked myself, and stalled.

"Boss was glaring at me, wide-eyed. "What do you mean, us?" he demanded. "The rest of us—?"

"The midget got the gun and sneaked it back to the shooting gallery," I trailed off.

Mike Boss said through his teeth, "You've sure changed a lot since you did time in the chain gang, Bryan. Gray hair. Got rid of your limp. Thin. I thought there was something familiar about you."

"Okay," I said. "Six years in a tough prison does things to a guy. It took me a long time to get back here, Boss—!"

His reach for the popcorn made a sudden skid past the dish, and his hand dived into a desk drawer.

I shouted, "Cut that!" and grabbed for my gun.

To make the grab, I had to drop the paper with the diagram. At the same time, I jumped forward. The gun snagged in the lining of my raincoat pocket, and before I could get it out, I hit the desk.

The collision slewed the desk around, jamming Boss against the front wall of the van with his hand caught in the drawer. I tore the gun free, and hit him, slashing the barrel across his face. Blood gushed like raspberry soda from his nose, and he squalled meaningless sound at me, fighting to wrench his hand from the drawer.

Leaning over the desk, I hit him criss-cross, slashing blows across the face—slash! slash! slash! slash! Six blows for the six years I'd spent in prison.

He sprawled back, ripping his hand loose, clutching a revolver. My automatic fired first. Blood sprang from his fat wrist, and I saw the bullet go through, taking with it a little shower of bone.

He screamed, "Get him, Trixie!" and fainted.

The rat with the green eyeshade climbed my back.

He rode me like a jockey, roweling me with his knees. Hooking his left arm around my neck, he toppled me backwards. We made a crazy waltz toward the rear door, floundering over chairs and knocking pictures from the walls. We caromed into the oil stove, and went down. He pressed my wrist against the hot metal door of the stove. I could smell the flesh burning before I had to drop the gun.

He kicked it before I could recover it, sending it on a slither to the front of the van. Leaping nimbly back, he was drawing a knife from his shirt as I rolled up on my knees.

"You blankety-blank!" he shrielled at me. "If you think you've changed in prison, I'll really change your face for you!"

As he threw himself forward, I tackled his knees and tossed him over my shoulder in a tumbling act. He laid open my left cheek in the process, but I didn't know it until afterwards. He bounced off the oil stove, hit the door headlong, and came back at me like a rabid orang-outang.

I grabbed the card table and spun it between us, and while he was tossing it aside I recovered the gun. He was on top of me when I shot him. The explosion pitched him in a backward sprawl, and he lay in a
tangle of admission tickets with his head under the card table.

When I kicked his legs, he didn’t move—and that took care of that one. I picked up the knife, and put it in my pocket. That was when I noticed the roll of tickets. The tickets were admissions for the Whip.

I stooped to tear one off for a souvenir—and so got another look at the knifer’s face. The shot had blown the eyeshade from his forehead, and the bullet had left a big gash across his temple. But it was the eyeshade which had masked him.

I pushed away the card table for a better look.

I whispered, “My God!”

I put my gun in my pocket, and rounded to Boss’s desk, and picked up the phone, and called Washington, D. C.—National 7117.

While I was waiting for the long-distance connection, the door to the van opened behind me, and a voice said, “Never mind, Bryan. Save the call.”

It was the farmer in the corduroy jacket—the man with the fishhooks and spinners in his hat-brim. Framed in the door, he pushed up his hat-brim, and grinned at me with blue eyes.

Then he looked at Boss and the rat on the floor, and grimaced.

“Bryan,” he said, “—or can I call you Forrest—you ought to operate a shooting gallery.” He stepped in and closed the door, eyeing me. “Or perhaps you should be a Government agent. You’ve done quite a clean-up job.”

“When I first saw you I was afraid you were from J. Edgar Hoover,” I said. “If I hadn’t been more worried about the hot-dog grifter recognizing me, I’d have known it.”

“Sure,” he said amiably. “We’ve been around. We figured you might head back here. Don’t worry, though. Just give me that toy badge you swiped in some dime store, and I won’t say anything about you impersonating an officer. Better give me that ruptured duck you picked up somewhere, too. Although from the look of this battlefield I’d say you were entitled to wear it.”

“It goes with the raincoat,” I said. “I took it from a waiting room in a bus station.

The owner’s name and address are sewed inside. And the pistol is from a pawn broker in Alexandria, Virginia.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’d better do something about that slash on your cheek. Here’s a clean handkerchief. I’ll fix you with a shot of anti-tetanus later. How about these clay pigeons of yours?”

He stepped by me to inspect Mike Boss.

“He’ll live, I’m afraid. I’ve already sent one of the grifters to phone for an ambulance. Who,” he turned and knelt down, “is this runt?”

I said, “That’s Colonel Inch.”

“The midget? Well, I’ll be dammed.”

“The former midget,” I said. “And so will I. I never recognized him until that eyeshade was torn off. He’s grown about a foot since I saw him last. And looks twenty years older.”

“Not as old as he’ll look when he goes back to Georgia for trial,” the Fed chuckled, showing me his badge. “You’ve worked up quite a case, Bryan—Forrest, I mean. I heard the whole brief. I saw you come in here, and I was under the van with an ear to the floor when you were telling your story. Boss pulling a gun on you, and this rat trying to kill you, makes good corroboration.”

“It was the only possible solution to the puzzle,” I said.

“Quite a stunt, your learning to do puzzles. Incidentally, what’s the answer to that one you mentioned about a full carload of five-dollar gold pieces, or a half carload of ten-dollar gold pieces?” He scratched under his hat. “Aren’t they worth the same?”

“If it was currency they would be,” I said. “But gold pieces are valued by the gold they contain. The full carload is worth more than the half.”

He sighed, “I’m no good at puzzles. But here’s something else.” His face brightened. “It might interest you to know we picked up Alberta Alberts in Boston. We covered her address in case you showed up there. She never married that landscape gardener. She’s been working in a defense plant.”

“Interest me to know?” I said. I began to laugh and shake. I had to sit down in a chair and hold my face in my hands to keep it from shaking off. “Interest me to know—!”
The Travelling Cowpoke
Apparently Packed No Gun
—Only a Guitar, a Bulky
Battered Instrument at That

DEATH MUSIC
By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

The stage from Tucson dropped
a single passenger at Loda, and
the sleepy little cow-town
roused itself from lethargy to
stare at the newcomer. He had
the watchers puzzled. The flatness of their
eyes acknowledged it.
He looked like a cowhand, saddle-sea-
soned, rangy, a down-and-out cow hand
with empty jeans, scuffed boots and weather-
beaten Stetson. But he had no horse, no
riding gear, and, what is more, no gun—
none visible, at any rate, which was a cause
for wonder. No one with proper sense
would board a stage without a gun. Apaches
were too numerous and frolicsome.
His only visible weapon of defense was a guitar, a bulky, battered instrument hanging from his neck by a rawhide thong. The citizens of Loda stared at it, and wondered what the hell. No one, however, voiced the thought as the stranger reached the ground on springy legs, steadying the guitar with one hand, his war bag in the other.

The small crowd was standing on the raised boardwalk in front of the Wells Fargo office. The men watched carefully, without expression, leaving the first move to the new arrival. He accepted the challenge with a quick, wide grin which carried a disarming force. He tossed his duffel bag upon the walk, then cocked a foot upon the knee-high boards, resting the guitar upon his legs. He said:

"You're starved for music, folks. That much is plain to see. So bend your ears and tap your feet."

His long brown fingers touched the strings, and the music leaped into the tumbling strain of "Whoopee-ti-yi-yo." He sang the words. His voice was strong and rollicking. The watchers' eyes relaxed, their feet began to tap. He had them grinning soon, and that is what he wanted. He brought the music to a close and asked, "What next?"

A big man elbowed his way forward. He was broad, red-faced and partly bald. His voice was friendly as it rumbled:

"I think a drink's the next thing on the program, friend. I own the place next door. Come in. I'm Terry Flynn."

The place next door was Flynn's Saloon. The stranger followed him inside and said, "I'm Blake. Pete Blake."

The room was big and odorous like a hundred others Blake had seen. It was empty; too early in the day for customers. Blake tilted his hat back, rubbed a sleeve across his sweating forehead, then shifted his guitar until it hung behind him. He leaned against the bar while Flynn moved in behind it. Flynn set a bottle and two glasses on the polished surface. They poured and drank. Blake said:

"The world needs more and better music."

"You sound a little loco," answered Flynn good-naturedly. "But you may be right, at that. If you need a job I'll hire you, just to bat out music for the customers at night."

"A deal," said Blake.

FLYNN looked surprised. He studied Blake more closely, as if trying to unearth something he had missed. He saw wide shoulders, well filled out, but supple. Blake's face was bony, amiable and homely. He looked younger than his actual age of twenty-four, but the softness which Flynn searched for wasn't there. Blake's eyes were gray, wide-set, assured, lacking the frustration of a man whose luck had petered out. Flynn said:

"I didn't think you'd take it."

"Why not?"

"You're not the type. I've seen enough top hands to know. This section needs good riders."

Blake laughed, and said, "Good music, too. Another drink? On me, this time."

Flynn shook his head. "Too early in the day."

"I guess so," Blake agreed. "Well, adios. I'll be back for work tonight."

He left the bar and pulled his hatbrim down against the outside glare. He moved slowly along the boardwalk of Loda's single street, staring about him as a stranger might.

He noted with surprise the town had not changed much in ten years' time. The street was longer, to be sure, a few more buildings, but not many. Most of the old business places were still there, Hack's General Store, Tony the barber, Lin See's laundry, and the Ranchers' Rest Hotel. Blake hoped that he himself had changed a lot more than the town.

His mind, in this respect, was promptly eased when he passed the General Store. Jake Hack was out in front, loafing beneath the wooden awning. He eyed Blake curiously, but showed no sign of connecting Blake with the gangling kid who had accompanied his uncle to the store so many times ten years ago. Blake let his breath out slowly. He went to the hotel and hired a room. He'd missed a lot of sleep, so he set about the pleasant job of catching up on it.

That night at eight o'clock he went to work. His guitar was dangling down his back as he entered the saloon. The place was fairly crowded. A dozen or so cow
hands lined the bar, and three stud games were already under way. The smoke was forming layers overhead.

Blake felt the flat impact of many eyes which worked him over carefully. Flynn obviously had spread the news, and the customers were studying a breed of cat they’d never seen before—a healthy man who chose to make a living as an entertainer.

Blake passed among them jauntily, meeting their blank stares with a grin. The grin, that is, was on his lips. His eyes were slightly narrowed with a challenge none accepted. The men were puzzled, just as Flynn had been.

Terry Flynn was the one who was embarrassed now. To cover it he yelled, “How about a tune, Pete? Give the boys a tune.”

Blake kicked a chair in place, sat down, tilted back against the wall and hooked his heels into the rungs. He went to work and let his music speak for him. It did. They liked it. He gave them “Oh Susannah,”

then swung into the mournful “Dying Cowboy.” There was an emotional shuffling of feet when he had ended. A few tough waddies downed quick slugs of rot-gut.

Flynn, with the instincts of a showman, yelled, “More later, boys! Step up, Pete. Wet your tonsils.”

Blake moved to the bar and found himself beside the gambler, Mart Kirby. Blake’s nerves went taut. He hadn’t dreamed that Kirby would still be here after all these years. Yet here he was, tall, quiet, handsome, dressed, as Blake remembered him, in somber black.

Mart Kirby, scrupulously honest, had been a close friend of Blake’s uncle, Bart Stevenson. As a lonesome, awkward kid, young Pete had found great pleasure in the gambler’s quiet understanding of a youngster’s problems. Blake was glad to see Mart Kirby now, but worried tense that Kirby might speak out his name.

It was a wasted worry. Kirby moved to make more room, then looked at Blake without a trace of recognition as he said in his quiet, precise way:

“My name is Kirby. I work here, too. You play extremely well. I hope you stay a while.”

Blake downed his drink and said, “I like to play. Excuse me now, I’ll get back on the job.”

He went back to his chair, his feelings mixed. He felt he should be grateful that Kirby had failed to recognize him, yet he was disappointed, too. It didn’t make much sense, but that’s the way it was.

He rolled a smoke and settled back to wait Flynn’s order for more music, but before it came all thought of music was blotted from Blake’s mind with the violence of an avalanche.

His first warning came from the sudden, unnatural silence of the room. Voices became muted, movement ceased, even the smoke layers in the air seemed temporarily motionless. Blake’s eyes, beneath the hat-brim, moved quickly toward the door. He saw the two men who had just come in. He recognized them both, Dutch Trogg and his ramrod, Patchy Creel.

For many years Pete Blake had wondered what would happen when he saw them, how he’d feel. He had wondered if his years of training would prove sound, or if the paralyzing fear he’d once known would return.

He had to wait until his heart quit hammering at his ribs. He slowed it down by force of will. It was then he knew he wasn’t scared, that only hatred, chill and wicked, ruled his thoughts. He calmed himself, still further with long drags upon his cigarette. The sheath of ice around his muscles melted slowly. He sat relaxed and steady-eyed.

His luck, he told himself, was good. He’d expected to find Trogg, but hadn’t based his hopes too high upon the fact he’d also find the half-breed Creel. Half white and half Apache, Creel possessed the lowest qualities of both. His lust to kill was always near the surface, and he had the skill, the swiftness of a lizard’s tongue, to satisfy his lust.

Dutch Trogg was worse because he masked his ruthlessness behind a stolid front. He was German, Prussian to the core. Blocky, flat-skulled, he watched the world through pale blue eyes, and plotted evil in
his crafty brain, a fact which none knew better than Pete Blake.

Men feared Trogg, but respected him. They also feared his killer, Patchy Creel, particularly when the breed was drunk. And Creel was drunk right now. The watchers knew it, and played safe. They took their eyes away from him, and kept their conversation low.

Creel wanted trouble, and his beady eyes played around the room in search of it. His nose was like a vulture's beak. His face was pock-marked, and his lips were thick. He was squat of build, but powerful.

His head stopped turning when his gaze encountered Blake. Creel's lips moved up to show his yellow teeth. He was amused. He roared at Blake:

"Let's have a tune!"

Blake didn't move, just looked at Creel and blew a swirl of smoke in his direction. Creel said:

"Play." His voice, thinned to a fine edge, sliced through the silence of the room.

Blake said, "Go to hell."

Creel's gun came out with a speed which Blake could scarcely follow. Blake had expected this, but knew instinctively that Creel would not shoot an unarmed man, not before so many witnesses.

"How brave are you without your hogleg?" Blake asked quietly.

Creel got the idea—seemed to like it. He turned and tossed his Colt to Trogg. Catching it smoothly, Trogg stuck it in his belt. Blake reached his feet unhurriedly, undraped his guitar and laid it carefully on the chair.

While his back was turned, Blake heard the swift rush of Creel's feet upon the floor. Timing himself, Blake whirled at the final instant, crouching low, feet braced. He caught Creel in the middle of the leap which Creel had thought would land him on Blake's back.

Instead, Blake's shoulder slammed into Creel's belly. Blake straightened his legs at the same instant, and gave a mighty heave. Creel's body hurtled through the air. It crashed upon an empty table, smashing it. Creel scrambled in the wreckage, rolled free and gained his feet. He was unhurt, and dangerous as a cornered cougar.

He came at Blake the second time with greater caution, his movements silky, carefully controlled. He balled his fists, made out as if to swing, then aimed a savage kick at Pete Blake's groin.

But Blake had that one figured too, knowing the breed was incapable of staging a clean fight. Blake's lean hips swerved, the kick went wild. For an instant Creel was teetering on one leg, and on that instant Blake's right fist came driving through with blasting force. It crashed against Creel's pock-marked cheek, laying the skin open in an ugly gash.

The blow spun Creel halfway about, but didn't knock him down. He would have hit the floor, but managed to catch himself upon a chair. His hands closed on its back. He lifted it like a club, and tried to bring it down upon Blake's head.

Blake went in under it, flashed in with a low hard dive. His shoulders hit Creel's knees. The chair flew free as they both slammed down upon the floor.

Blake moved like a streak of lightning. Creel tried to roll away, but Pete Blake was too fast for him. Blake swung his fist in a short clean arc. He exploded it against Creel's chin. The half-breed's head snapped back and banged against the floor. It dazed him long enough for Blake to climb astride of him, to pin his arms down with his knees.

Blake planted two sledge-hammer blows upon Creel's jaw. The breed went limp. Blake's big hands made an involuntary gesture toward Creel's throat, but checked in time as their owner fought off the almost overpowering urge to strangle Creel upon the spot. Blake had never had the crazy urge to kill before.

He came to his feet slowly, observed his handiwork and found it good. Sound broke out about him, but he stood there until Creel's eyes came open. They were blurred at first, but they cleared with amazing suddenness. There was a sharp, incredulous expression in them as they rested upon Blake. It was as if the breed had had a vision in his moments of unconsciousness, a vision which materialized before him when his conscious thoughts began to move again. It was weird, unbelievable, but Pete Blake knew that Patchy Creel had finally recognized him.
Blake turned away, knowing, then, it was too late. He was unaware of the wondering respectful looks from men around him. He turned back toward the chair he'd left. His guitar was no longer on it. Blake's breath jerked sharply through his teeth, then saw with quick relief that Kirby, the gambler, was standing nearby holding the unharmed instrument. When Blake came up to him, Mart Kirby said:

"Let's talk. Come on."

Blake followed Kirby to one of the empty gambling rooms at the back of the saloon. Kirby closed the door, placed the guitar carefully in a corner, then turned to Blake.

"That's a mighty heavy instrument you have," said the gambler.

"I had it built that way."

"I imagine you could floor a man with it."

"And he'd stay floored," Blake agreed.

Then Kirby said, "It's nice to have you back, Pete. Mighty nice."

Blake grinned. "You recognized me, then."

"Of course. Sit down. Let's talk it over. What happened, son?"

They took chairs at the table. Blake rolled a smoke and lighted it. Kirby waited calmly until Blake had inhaled several drags.

Without preamble, Pete Blake said, "I saw Dutch Trogg and Creel shoot Uncle Bart in cold blood."

Mart Kirby nodded, his face a mask. "I'm not surprised," he said. "A lot of us thought that, but had no proof. That's what you're after?"

Blake nodded. "I'm also after my uncle's ranch. It belongs to me. He made a will, which Trogg probably found out about later, after he killed my uncle and moved in on the land. He wanted that two hundred-acre valley of winter feed, and my uncle wouldn't sell."

Kirby nodded again, and Blake went on. "Uncle Bart went off one night to talk business with Trogg. They had a lot of deals together. Uncle thought Trogg was his friend. They usually met at one of Trogg's line shacks which was on the line between the two spreads. About that time I was all hopped up about being an Indian scout. Kid stuff, but I followed Uncle Bart for practice."

He tilted his head, blew smoke toward the ceiling, and continued. "They met at the shack. Creel was along. They'd covered the windows with gunny sacks but one of the sacks slipped off. They both shot Uncle Bart at the same time. I must have made a noise. They looked toward the window and saw me. Creel threw a shot, but missed. They hunted for me, but I got away."

"Why didn't you go to the sheriff—or to me?"

Blake shrugged. "Even as a fourteen-year-old kid, I knew it would be a waste of time. It would be my word against theirs. Then Trogg'd kill me. Besides I was scared to death."

"Are you still scared?"

"Yes," Blake answered simply. "That's why I finally had to come back. I couldn't live with it. I'm using my own name, because my uncle adopted me and everybody knew me here as Pete Stevenson."

"You can use a gun," Kirby reasoned shrewdly. "Or you wouldn't be here. Why aren't you wearing it?"

"If I'd had one on tonight, I might have used it. I might even have killed Trogg and Creel, which would have got me nowhere, because I want to prove Trogg killed my uncle."

"How do you intend to go about it?"

"Just by playing a wild hunch," admitted Blake. "I intended for Trogg to know who
I was after I'd looked around a bit. He's a German, and he has a one-track mind. I'm merely gambling he'll make the same play he did with my uncle. It worked then, and he'll figure it'll work again."

"A long chance," Kirby said.

"I'm takin' it—sooner than I expected. Creel recognized me."

"I noticed it," said Kirby soberly.

BLAKE stretched to his feet and grinned.

"Let's not forget we're working here. Let's get back to our customers."

When they got back to the main room, Trogg and his gunman had disappeared. The cowhands were still discussing the recent fight with much enthusiasm. Everybody wanted to buy Blake drinks, but Blake drank sparingly.

Most of the customers were gone by midnight. This was a week day, with another heavy day of work ahead for most of them. A desultory game of stud for small stakes broke up last. Blake slung his guitar behind him and started to leave. Kirby said:

"Hold on a minute, Pete. I'm living at the hotel, too. Wait'll I cash in. I'll go with you."

Blake waited, understanding Kirby's move. He'd be grateful for Kirby's company, even though the gambler never packed a gun. The story was, that Kirby, years ago back East, had killed a friend in a so-called duel of honor, and that Kirby had sworn never to fire a gun again. But he wouldn't need a gun in his walk to the hotel with Blake. His presence as a witness would be enough to hold back any move Dutch Trogg might want to make. Blake understood this. So did Kirby.

They said goodnight at the foot of the stairs. Kirby's room was on the first floor, Blake's on the second. Blake went up the creaking stairs, and down the dim corridor which was lighted by a small oil lamp with smoked-up chimney.

Pete Blake was tired, dog tired, more fagged out than he'd believed. Even his brain was weary, slightly dulled, a fact which may have accounted for his carelessness.

He reached his door and opened it, standing outlined in the light. But just as his sixth sense warned him there was someone in the room, he heard the soft command:

"Get 'em up, Pete Stevenson! Grab air!"

Pete Stevenson! Blake caught the significance as his hands went up. He'd been right in his guess that Creel had recognized him, and that the breed had promptly told his boss. Trogg's voice went on.

"Step in."

Pete Blake stepped in. A gun was jammed against his ribs. The door was gently closed behind him. A match scraped, flamed and was applied to the wick of the oil lamp on the dresser. The light revealed Creel's face, battered, venomous.

Trogg moved in front of Blake. He studied Blake's face carefully, and nodded.

"Yeh," he said with satisfaction. "It's young Pete all right. I'm glad to see ya, Pete." His pale blue eyes were greedy.

Blake kept his own mouth shut. He let Trogg stare his fill, then Trogg said, "Well, let's go. You can leave that gee-tar here. You won't need it any longer."

Creel pled, "Aw, let him bring it, Dutch. He ain't played me my music yet."

Trogg hesitated, then humiliating his gunman, said, "All right. Turn out the light."

They herded Blake carefully down the back stairway, and out the rear entrance of the building. Blake wondered how they'd find him transportation, but he soon found out. A buckboard waited at the back of the hotel. He could hear the restless shifting of the mustangs in their harness. When his eyes became accustomed to the dark he saw some bulky objects in the buckboard, obviously ranch supplies. Trogg had been lucky to have the buckboard in town at this time.

Blake sat beside Creel on the driver's seat. Trogg rode beside them on a horse, his gun still in his hand. They left the darkened town behind and headed for the open range, the mustangs fighting for their head, the buckboard rattling across the bumps, making too much noise for conversation. It suited Blake. He didn't want to talk.

But he had to think, and he had to ride close herd upon his thoughts for fear they'd get away from him. He knew Dutch Trogg was bent on killing him, but he also knew Trogg wouldn't risk it on the road, nor on the range itself. Dutch Trogg was too methodical. He wouldn't want to leave a body where someone might find it. No one had ever found Blake's uncle's body.

Blake knew the road they followed. They
were heading for Trogg’s ranch, the T-bar-T. So far, Blake told himself, his hunch was sound. Trogg was behaving as Blake had hoped he might, obeying the dictates of his one-track mind, following a line of action which had proved successful in the past.

All doubt was swept away when they came to a fork in the road. The well-used fork led directly to Trogg’s spread. The other fork, no more than two faint wagon ruts, led toward the line camp shack where Trogg had murdered Pete Blake’s uncle. Creel reined his mustangs toward the shack.

**BLAKE** soon would have the chance to give his hunch its final test. He wondered if his luck would hold, if he would learn the facts he sought, and would live to tell about them. The chances were against him, but he knew he’d have to draw his final card. He filled his lungs with crisp clean air. He looked at the stars and found them beautiful, more beautiful, it seemed, than he had ever known them.

They finally reached the shack. Creel picketed the mustangs with a bridle weight. Trogg stepped from his horse, leaving the ends of the reins upon the ground. He said to Creel: “Go in and make a light.”

Creel went inside the old log hut. Trogg herded Blake inside a moment later. As Pete Blake stepped across the threshold, memories ten years old arose to clamp cold hands about his throat.

The interior of the cabin was as he had seen it last, each detail of which had been stamped painfully in his memory. A lantern dangled from a rafter. Two built-in bunks with dirty bedding faced the door. A rusty stove was at the left end of the room. There was a table with a greasy top, three chairs. The rawhide chair was the one on which his Uncle Bart had sat when he’d been murdered.

“Take _that_ chair, Pete,” Trogg ordered, pointing the muzzle of his gun to the chair with the rawhide seat.

Blake did as he was ordered, but he felt as if a clammy snake was slithering along his spine. He sat down carefully, schooling his muscles to obedience. He slid his guitar around upon his knees. He rested his hands upon it, glad that they were steady.

Trogg shut the door and leaned against it with his heavy shoulders. Creel, significantly, assured himself that the burlap bags covering the two windows would not slip—this time.

Neither Trogg nor Creel was in a hurry. Both seemed willing to prolong the moment, to savor what it had to offer—Trogg because he was a Prussian, Creel because he was half Indian. Creel placed a chair six feet in front of Blake, and sat in it. He shook his gun and rested it upon his knee.

“Now play,” he growled. “Yer funeral march. Let’s hear it.”

Blake strummed a few exploratory chords. He was working for time, thinking hard. Still fingering the chords gently he asked Trogg:

“You figurin’ to shoot me pretty soon?”

The lantern light fell flat against Trogg’s pale blue eyes. He nodded. “Pretty soon.”

“Just like you shot my Uncle Bart, in the same chair?”

“You ought to know,” said Trogg. “You saw us do it, and you knew we saw you. You were a fool to come back, Pete. You knew what to expect.”

“I didn’t think you’d recognize me.”

Trogg took this as a compliment. “I spotted you before Patchy did. You ain’t changed much. Just a little older—as old as you’re goin’ to get.”

“I’ll disappear, huh? Just like my uncle did. Where did you hide his body, Dutch?”

The question amused Trogg. His thin lips raised a trifle at the corners. He said, “The same place we’ll hide you, Pete. In fact, you’re sittin’ right above your uncle now. He’s buried underneath the floor.”

Blake’s muscles jerked involuntarily. Trogg laughed at the effect his words had had, not knowing how completely wrong he was in believing Blake had twitched in horror.

Blake’s emotion had been far removed from that, and he broke his eyes away from Trogg’s to hide the savagery of his elation. The Prussian had run true to form. He’d had to brag. He’d given Blake the information which would send Trogg to the gallows—if Blake could stay alive to use the information.

“Too much talk,” the half-breed broke in pettishly. “Let’s have the music. Play, damn you! Pronto!”

Blake shrugged and said, “Just let me
think what tune I want to check me out.”

He stared hard at the ceiling, pretending gloomy concentration. The half-breed fell for it. Blake let his left hand stay upon the frets of the guitar. His right moved aimlessly to the base of the guitar, and rested casually upon the lower end, the side which was away from Trogg and Creel. When his hand was hidden, Blake’s long fingers went to work with smooth precision.

They opened a small door in the instrument, cleverly concealed. His hand slid gently in the opening. It closed about the cool firm handle of his Colt. The gun was bracketed in place, but cunningly adjusted for removal.

Blake had the six-gun in his hand, but had no chance to pull it from the opening. An animal instinct must have warned the breed, but he made the mistake of snorting his alarm before he lined his gun and fired.

The split-second warning was enough for Blake. His hand was still inside, but he snapped his first shot through the wall of the guitar. His bullet smashed into Creel’s heart, destroying his aim by the merest flicker of an eyelash, and toppling him backward off his chair.

Creel had managed to get a shot away, however, and it had slammed against the heavy handle of Blake’s instrument. The impact threw Blake off his balance, sent him toppling from the chair upon the floor, his gun hand temporarily jammed inside the splintered box of his guitar.

Things happened in a blur of motion then, things Blake didn’t understand till later. From the corner of his eye he saw Trogg taking careful aim. Then came the crashing sound of splintered glass. What caused it, Blake had no idea, but the diversion surely saved his life. The sound threw Dutch Trogg off his aim. His bullet slashed into the floor beside Blake’s head, driving splinters in his cheek.

Blake gave a final mighty jerk and freed the hand which held his gun. Trogg, showing panic, threw another slug at him, which missed. Blake’s wrist flipped up, and the .45 bucked hard against his palm. He didn’t need another shot. The first one went exactly where he’d aimed it, tearing an ugly hole in Dutch Trogg’s shoulder. Trogg’s six-gun clattered to the floor. His face went green. Heammered incoherently for mercy.

Blake climbed up off the floor and said, “Shut up! I wouldn’t waste another bullet on you. I’m savin’ you for the rope.”

“Exactly,” said a calm, collected voice. “An excellent idea.”

Blake whirled. He hadn’t heard the door come open. Mart Kirby stood unruffled in the entrance.

Blake gasped, “What the hell!”

Mart Kirby flashed an unaccustomed smile and said, “I heard them take you from the hotel. I got my horse and followed. It was easy. The buckboard made a lot of noise.”

“But why?” insisted Blake. “Why did you deal yourself a hand?”

Kirby shrugged. “Who knows? Anyway, it wasn’t a very big hand. I didn’t have time to bring someone who wore a gun, but I knew that you had one in your guitar. I guessed it from the weight. Also my fingers are quite sensitive. They felt the hidden panel.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said Blake.

“I was certain you’d get one of them, but I wasn’t sure you’d get them both. So when I heard the first shot, I smashed the window with a rock, hoping it might help.”

“It saved my life,” said Blake.

“I also heard Trogg’s full confession,” Kirby said. “It will be a pleasant hanging, Pete.”

“I wanted him to face the law.”

“Quite right. And when,” he asked, “are you taking over your own spread?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Fine. We’ll all be proud to have you, son,” said Kirby solemnly.
Jenny Lind, the famous Swedish singer, spent nearly two years in America. During this time she was engaged by P.T. Barnum to sing for 150 nights at $1,000 a night.

During the reign of terror of the French Revolution, it is believed that about 4,000 persons were guillotined.

A 25-pound turkey is estimated to have about 3,860 feathers.
WOMAN INTO LEOPARD

By SEABURY QUINN

Author of the Hijj Stories

IN THE old days when such things were S'raba, daughter of N'kumba the canoe maker and wife of Itaga the huntsman who had bought her for three bars of salt, a rod-long skein of copper wire and fifteen fine fat cooking-dogs, gave birth to a man-child, and on the fourteenth day thereafter the young Bomongo matron went to the river with her water-pot upon her head and the child straddled on her hip.

Now it happened that "the fish that walk" were more numerous and more than usually pestiferous that season, so when
she bent above the sluggish water to rinse out her jar and pour the customary libation to the river god before she helped herself to his fluid, a hungry crocodile seized her, and that was the end of S’raba, daughter of N’kumba and wife of Itaga the huntsman.

When S’raba failed to return Itaga was annoyed, for husbands in British West Central Africa, like husbands in Brighton, Brooklyn and Birmingham, dislike to be kept waiting for their dinner, and so he chose a likely-looking stick, fit for corrective purposes, and went looking for her.

He did not find her, but reclining in a viscid mud-puddle he found his first-born dabbling little fingers in the ooze and laughing as if he had not a care in all the world. Two long scores, deep as tire-tracks, in the murk that edged the stream, told how S’raba had lost her tug-of-war with the crocodile. Itaga was a huntsman by profession, and could read the signs. He was also a philosopher, and wasted no time in futile mourning. Instead he threw his stick away, for he would now have no use for it, set the child upon his shoulder and retraced his steps toward the village.

It was evening and the slippery shadows of dusk were creeping stealthily across the narrow trail; then suddenly the sun went down like a stone dropped into a pool and darkness seemed to gulp up everything. A shadow only one degree darker than the surrounding shadows dropped from the limb of a copal tree, claws scored Itaga’s back, fangs closed upon his spine just where it joined his skull, and Itaga’s first-born son was doubly orphaned, all within the space of three hours.

The people of the Upper Mendi read signs and portents in these happenings. A child who had been spared miraculously from crocodile and leopard twice in a single day must surely be the favorite of M’fini the God-Lizard to see whom in the embers of a dying fire is a sure sign of death. So the families of his village vied with one another to adopt the child who, with a host of volunteer wet-nurses and later with full rations of boiled dog and succulent baked manioc root, grew and waxed fat. Indeed, he grew to almost Falstaffian proportions, and because he was called M’sifi-M’longa, which is to say the fortunate son of unfortunate parents, he was pampered, indulged and deferred to till he was a thoroughly spoiled brat.

Then in his tenth—or perhaps his eleventh—year he revealed a gift that stamped him indelibly as the favored one of M’fini.

In the village lived one Lebili who because of his skill as a husbandman had much honor. His melons were the sweetest, his corn the highest, his peas the most prolific. Into the melon patch of Lebili came M’sifi to regale himself with fruit, which he did by simply taking up the melons, smashing them upon the ground and scooping out their softly-sweet insides, a very wasteful process. When Lebili caught the little thief red-handed he did what might have been expected, and when M’sifi ceased his outrages he stood rubbing his well-spanked posterior and, looking straight into the outraged gardener’s face, predicted in a voice that had an oddly droning quality, “O man, this night a tree shall fall on you and you shall cease to be.”

Sure enough, that night almost an hour after moonset when Lebili rushed from his hut because he thought he heard dogs in his garden a rotted tree crashed suddenly and for no apparent reason, dropped full athwart him and crushed him like a toad stepped on by an elephant.

A little later the boy had an altercation with M’loni, wife of N’gali, who had recently taken a lover, having grown a little tired of connubial rectitude, and M’loni, as is frequently the way of elders in such cases, boxed his ears soundly. “I see you, M’loni, wife of N’gali,” said M’sifi in the same odd sing-song he had used to prophesy Lebili’s misfortune, “but the time draws nigh when no man shall see you, neither you nor T’bili your lover.”

Two days later at the rising of the sun the village folk found M’loni and her lover lying face down in a little patch of grass, and when they sought to turn them over they had difficulty, for each was pinned to the ground by a broad-bladed elephant spear the haft of which was broken off flush with the backbone. N’gali, the wronged husband, had vanished.

Such powers of divination would have caused talk in more civilized communities, in the bush country the gossip spread like wildfire, nor did the tales shrink in their
repetition. It was inevitable that the story of M'sifi's gifts should reach the ears of Sanlulu who because he ruled a loosely-knit community of three villages and had a battered plug hat to wear on state occasions called himself a king and assumed regal qualities to which he was not lawfully entitled. "Dwell in the shadow of my house," said Sanlulu to M'sifi, "and prophesy great, pleasant things for me."

However great and pleasant the young prophet's prophecies might have been for Sanlulu, they certainly were not pleasant for his long-suffering subjects. In close association with the chief priest of the local deities and the witch-doctor, who combined the offices of chancellor and archbishop, he "smelt out" those accused of witchcraft and traffic with the dark powers, those who caused untimely deaths, and those who plotted treason against the king, especially the latter. So many men died the death and their property—for, curiously, they were always men of substance—was declared forfeit to the Throne, less, of course, a generous cumshaw to prophet, priest and witch-doctor.

SO THINGS went on until the time arrived for Sarubi the daughter of T'elei to be initiated into womanhood. Sarubi had just turned her twelfth year and would be of marriageable age in a short time. She was a tall girl, not lean and gangling, but harmoniously built, and her walk had all the gracefulness of jungle women. Even as an infant she had danced, not formally, but naturally as sunlight dappling on swiftrunning water, so that they said that at her dancing all the little monkeys in the trees stopped chattering. Her father was the headman of his village and rich as riches count in the jungle, having quantities of salt and cloth and copper wire—even a brass cooking pot the like of which was not to be found among the treasures of King Sanlulu.

The fetish-women had convoyed their charges to the stockade of the maidens where no man save the féticheur high priest alone might enter, and whence, after certain esoteric rites, the girls would emerge as full-fledged women. All went well for three nights, then things began to happen. Unpleasant things. In the dead of night a girl was heard to scream once, and no more. When her companions rushed into her hut, they found her rather horribly mangled, as if she had been mauled by a leopard.

The roll was straightway called, the girls paraded past the chief wise-woman, and—Sarubi's eyes were sleep-heavy, but on her lips there was a smear of blood, and blood was on her fingers.

The chief wise-woman ground her knuckles against her lips, which was a sign of consternation, and sent the girls back to their dormitories. Next day Sarubi was shunned by her companions, and the next day, and on the third night came another visitation from the leopard, and another girl was found dead. Dead and hideously mangled.

NOW leopards, like the other wild things of the jungle, kill only when they are hungry, and seldom trespass on the confines of a village. The leopard which had done these things made no attempt to eat or carry off its prey; it had attacked the sleeping girls in the midst of a walled village, and none had seen it come—or go. But there were tell-tale bloodstains on Sarubi's lips and hands each time. Que voulez-vous?

They held a formal trial, of course. The prophet, priest and witch-doctor sat as a combined prosecutors, court and jury. The priest recited magic formulæ, the witch-doctor went through the mumbo-jumbo of the smelling-out ceremony, the prophet prophesied that if the devil-leopard were allowed to live the whole community would be exterminated.

Furthermore, he divined that as parent of such hellish offspring, the girl's father must have been conversant with her witchcraft, and just as surely he would beget other witch-brats. So with all due ceremony the unfortunate father was "chopped," his wives, some eight in number, buried alive with him, all his goods and chattels forfeited to the crown and the devil-girl Sarubi handed over to the prophet, priest and witch-doctor for disposal. No ordinary execution would do for such as she; witches have a way of laughing at the confines of the grave; she had to be disposed of in such manner that her wicked body was no menace to the people and her even-more-to-be-feared spirit securely and permanently barred from returning.

They took her off into the forest, and
presently came back. "And hast thou done the needful?" asked King Sanlulu.

"Lord King," replied the Prophet M'sifi, "we did that which seemed good to us, but in the moment of her taking-off the body of the witch-girl changed. She became a true leopard and ran off into the bush."

Now King Sanlulu held his knuckles to his mouth. "O-ko?" he answered doubtfully. "And by what sign may this be known?"

"By this, O mighty king. The witch-leopard wore earrings of gold in which blue stones had been set cunningly. The leopard-thing that she became was like to any other leopard wore earrings of gold in which blue set with blue stones."

II

CAPTAIN Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham, more familiarly known throughout the Reserved Forest Area as Hiji, was excessively annoyed.

For two nights meteorological conditions had interfered with his favorite broadcast from the States, a seemingly endless serial detailing the exploits of one Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown, of Harlem, U.S.A. That morning just as reveille was sounding a half-grown lad named N'gotto came paddling from the Upper Mendi country, all but exhausted, weak from a spear wound in the shoulder, scared half out of his wits, but clinging to a lunatic story with the tenacity of a puppy to an old shoe. Finally, to make bad matters worse, the Honorable Basil Bascombe-Bacon had clumped into the station with a string of porters trailing behind him like the tail to a rotund comet, enough duffel to equip an expedition, and an air of outraged propriety.

To cap the stick there seemed some vague connection between N'gotto's utterly fantastic story and the Honorable Basil's gripe.

Witchcraft was rampant in the Upper Mendi country, swore N'gotto. Men and women had been chopped in constantly increasing numbers, but the plague increased rather than diminished. Like everybody else N'gotto had believed the charges of M'sifi the King's Prophet and the chief priest and witch-doctor until they had accused Sarubi his beloved.

Then doubt turned into disbelief and disbelief became suspicion, for at last he noted what his elders had not—all the condemned wizards and witches were people of property or of importance sufficient to make them dangerous to the king's triumvirate of witch-finders.

"They said she was a devil-leopard, O Hiji. She who never harmed a fly unless it bit her first they took into the forest that she might die the death, and when her ghost went forth they said she turned into a true leopard and ran off into the brush. They said that when she changed her shape she still wore the gold rings with blue stones in her ears, and that should be a sign to all people."

"Aye?" said Hiji grimly. It was against the law to chop a witch or even put a murderer to death in the back country. All such should be imprisoned and held for action by the Crown authorities, but sometimes popular excitement outran legal restraint, then Hiji had to dispense jungle justice of his own—flogging, sending miscreants down river to the prison camp, or even hanging in extreme cases. "What next, O bringer of bad tidings?"

"I loved the girl, my lord. She was as the breath of my nostrils—"

"Never mind the love interest. What happened?"

"I went into the forest seeking her, O Hiji. Girl or leopard, I loved her, and if I found her I knew she would do me no hurt,
for as she was to me, so was I to her. O Hiji—" N’goto’s eyes seemed suddenly all white—"I found her."

"Found her—changed into a leopard? My sainted Aunt Samantha’s Sunday bonnet!"

"By the fat of my heart, O Hiji. I hid beside the pathway which the wild things use to go down to the river, and there I found her. In her ears were rings set with blue stones."

Hiji had been long enough in Africa to know that almost anything could happen there, and sooner or later usually did, so instead of laughing he regarded his visitor gravely. "Whence came thy wound, O youth?"

"These matters are too great for my small understanding, Hiji, so I come to you with them, and since I had no boat to travel, I took one, and the owner threw a spear at me as I shoved off into the river—"

"O-ko! Knowest thou not that those who steal boats feel the sting of the lash?"

"A sore skin mends, my lord, but my heart will not mend. Sarubi is no more; I shall not have her for my wife when her initiation is passed. Besides, I had to tell these things to thee."

"All right, young feller. We’ll take your case up in due course. Go now to my cook man’s house and tell him that I bid him feed thee bread with treacle on it."

Hiji brushed his little black mustache with the knuckle of a bent forefinger. "You wouldn’t have that leopard’s pelt with you, by any chance?"

"Have it? ‘Course, I have! D’ye think I’ve been pullin’ your leg? I’ll have one of my boys fetch it."

"Thanks," murmured Hiji, paying less attention than seemed properly polite to the Honorable Basil. N’goto’s story—now this. What in blazin’ hell did it add up to?

It was an ordinary leopard pelt the Honorable Basil’s head bearer brought in. The skinners had stripped off the stippled hide in accordance with local practice, leaving head and claws intact, and in the tips of the beast’s ears were hung small hoops of gold encrusted with blue stones. "Well, I’ll be damned!" said Hiji, with conviction.

"Bid the lad N’goto to attend us," he told the orderly who answered his ring, then, to the Honorable Basil, "Would you mind spreadin’ that pelt on the floor?"

In a moment N’goto came to the veranda and stood with downcast eyes. Those who steal boats feel the bite of the lash, Hiji had told him. Was he about to be flogged?

"O youth," commanded Hiji, "look on this leopard skin and tell me—"

He was interrupted by a sharp, nickering cry, more like that of a hurt animal than anything human. The boy threw himself on the pelt, gathering it into his arms and rocking back and forth while he rubbed his cheeks against the beast’s head and muttered sobbing phrases of endearment into the ringed ears.

"What’s the blighter sayin’?" asked the Honorable Basil.

"He says the fire of love consumes the fat of his heart and that her spirit will sit with him until he dies—"

"My word! What sort o’ monkey-talk is this? What’s it all mean?"

"Unless I’m more mistaken than usual, it means a tidy bit o’ murderer’s been committed," answered Hiji grimly. "They’re a clever little threesome, but this time they overreached themselves. Puttin’ the girl’s rings into that leopard’s ears was just a little too artistic. We’re marchin’ in a half hour. Care to be in at the death?"
IV

The council fire was burning high, and at the borderline of light and shadow King Sanlulu's throne—a carved three-legged stool—had been set. Behind him massed his spearmen, about the limits of the clearing crouched his people, summoned from the four corners of his domain, even from the farthest village. At his right and a little to the rear squatted his women, and at his left elbow stood K'soka, chief priest of the fetish-gods, M'fela, the witch-doctor, and M'sifi, the soothsayer and prophet.

"Are your eyes keen, dreadful brethren?" asked Sanlulu of the three who stood at his left hand.

"Like the serpent's or the vulture's, O King."

"Are your ears sharp to hear the words that come not from the tongue?"

"Like the ears of the cat-people who can hear the growing of a blade of grass, O King."

"And are your nostrils open for the smell of blood? Can ye smell out evildoers, scent the spoor of sorcerers, and the wickedness of those who work wickedness against me?"

"We can scent the smell of evildoers, O Great King."

"Then go!"

All three of the witch-finders were in full regalia. Their faces were smeared with horizontal lines of alternating white and yellow, in their hair were small dried fish bladders, from their shoulders hung festoons of dried snake skins while at their waists were belts of woven hair from which depended rattling knots of human toe- and finger-bones. For good measure M'fela the witch-doctor bore a little hunting spear like that used for small game. At the king's command they marched about the fire three times, quickening their pace with each circuit, then as M'sifi and K'soka halted and began to do a sort of standing dance, stamping the fire-hardened earth till puffs of dust came from their feet, M'fela the witch-doctor whirled away toward the close-packed ranks of villagers, waving his spear round his head, turning, twisting, pausing for a moment to stamp viciously upon the ground, then spinning like a ballet dancer in a pirouette. Suddenly he halted in his tracks, turned uncertainly this way and that a moment, then slowly, stealthily, as if he sneaked up on an unsuspecting victim, he crept toward the circle of terrified men and women, came to a full stop and thrust forward with his spear, bringing its flat blade down on the shoulder of a tall man whose yellow cotton tunic and copper ornaments marked him as a person of importance.

Four spearmen rushed across the firelit square and seized the luckless victim by the arms, dragging him toward the throne. The brawny executioner stepped forward, cradling his sickle-shaped knife in the crook of his elbow.

"O man," King Sanlulu pronounced when they had dragged the prisoner to his throne, "I see you. You were a man of substance, having goats and dogs and women in abundance, also many precious things of metal and much salt and cloth. But because you have an evil heart and wished ill to your king this night you surely go to join the ghosts and all your treasures shall be mine. Where," he demanded oratorically, "where is the man who dares deny the King's justice? Who is there in all the world who dares deny my right to chop you? If there be any let him now stand forth—"

"I see you, little man who calls himself a king!"

The words were pronounced softly, but at their sound Sanlulu seemed to shrink into himself and thrust his knuckles hard against his mouth. Into the firelight, stepping softly on rubber-soled shoes and with his black cane tucked beneath his elbow, came Hiji, and to his right and left marched Houssa policemen with submachine guns at the ready. Behind him came a fat, blond Englishman in rumpled white ducks, and at the border of the firelight bayonets gleamed from leveled rifles. At the far end of the street another squad of Houssas halted and
set up a Browning gun on its tripod. Death, sure and terrible, ringed the village on all sides; a monkey caught in a snake’s coils had more chance of escape than any of San-
lulu’s subjects—or Sanlulu.

“Stand on your ugly feet, O misbegotten
offspring of a hyena and a deformed mon-
key!” Hijji prodded Sanlulu none too gen-
tly in the flabby stomach with the ferrule of
his cane. “Who told thee thou wert a king,
or had kingly powers?”

Somewhere in the darkness someone tittered. Whether in the schoolyards of
America or England or the jungles of West Central Africa, there is always elation when
the bully meets his match.

“You, there!” Hijji pointed to M’fela the
witch-doctor, K’soka the priest and M’si
the prophet. “Come here and stand beside
this monkey-face who dared to call himself
a king.

“You hast magic, hast thou not, O
man?” he asked the witch-doctor.

“Yea, lord, I have much magic,” tremu-
ously admitted M’fela.

“And thou, O priest, hast power with the
gods, even the gods of thy fathers?”

“Yea, lord, it is even as thou sayest,”
the priest returned.

“And thou, M’si, can’t foretell the
future?”

“Yea, lord.”

“It is well. Prophesy, then, for me,
M’si. Tell me what the future holds for
thee.”

“Lord,” the prophet’s teeth were chatter-
ing so that he could hardly form his words,
“I think I see a tall tree with the body of
a man suspended from it by the neck, and,
lord, I think that man is I.”

Hiji looked at him with grudging admira-
tion. “Thou hast wit, at any rate, O dog.”
Then to M’fela:

“And what will thy magic avail thee now,
O ju-ju man? Canst thou name one rea-
son why thou shouldst not hang beside the
prophet of the man who called himself
a king?”

“Lord, all my magic has run out like
water from a leaky pot. I am as nothing
in thy sight—”

“And in the sight of all people,”
prompted Hijji.

“—and in the sight of all people,” echoed
M’fela reluctantly.

“And thou, O priest, have thy gods the
power to save thee in this moment?”

The priest made no reply and Hijji did
not press him. After all, the people
had faith—of a sort—in their gods, and it
would be gratuitous insult to show their
impotence. “Hear me,” he ordered in a loud
voice. “Hear me, O man who called himself
a king, hear me, ye prophet, priest and ju-ju
man; hear me all ye people. The maiden
Sarubi was innocent of any wrong. This
man who called himself a king coveted her
father’s wealth and entered into a plot to
destroy him and her. In the darkness of
the night the priest, who was the only man
having access to the stockade of the maidens,
entered there and killed two of the girls,
then smeared their blood on Sarubi’s lips
and hands that she might be accused of be-
ing a devil-leopard. Is it not so O K’soka?”
He pointed with his stick to the priest.

“Lord, who shall say how thou hast
learned the truth?” the priest returned
through trembling lips.

“And to make your lies seem truth ye
took the maiden to the forest and stripped
off her earrings and set them in a leopard’s
ears, then threw her into the Mendi where
the ‘fish that walk’ ate her. Is it not so?”

“Lord, it is so,” the wretched three ad-
mitted.

“Why don’t you hang the blighters and
be done with it?” the Honorable Basil
asked. “If anybody ever deserved to have
his neck stretched—”

“Don’t be so ruddy bloodthirsty, young
feller me lad,” counseled Hijji. “I’m run-
nin’ this show.”

He turned to a trooper. “Man, strip the
heathen trappings from these three and
throw them into the fire,” he ordered.

“A-bee!” the congregation sighed in
frightened unison. These things were
magic garments—ju-ju ornaments. Yet
they burned like ordinary men’s adornment.

“Behold how weak their ju-ju was, O
people,” shouted Hijji then to the trooper.

“Wash the paint off their faces.” In a mo-
nent M’si, K’soka and M’fela stood de-
duced of the last vestige of regalia, three
very ordinary and very frightened-looking
men.

“Bid the women stand forward,” Hijji or-
dered, and when the women, greatly won-
dering, but with more of curiosity than fear in their faces, came near. "Behold these men, O women," he commanded. "Do they look terrible to you?"

There was a long moment's silence, then a young matron giggled. "Lord, they seem only ordinary men to me, except that one is fat and soft and two are old and skinny."

"Well said, O woman. They are but common men who wore the robes of greatness falsely, and for their sins I give them to you to drive forth from the village. Strike and spare not, O women, and if at daylight they are back again, drive them forth once more. Hereafter, when one of them dares show his face in any village let the women cease from grinding grain or weaving cloth or cooking food and take up anything that comes to hand and drive him forth with blows and curses. Thus shall ye keep your houses free of evil."

It was not often that the jungle women had a chance to vent repressed resentment on a man, and the tribeswomen were not slow to accept Hiji's invitation. With shrill squeals of excited glee they fell upon the hapless trio, kicking, beating, switching and pummeling them.

"I don’t think we’ll be bothered by those worthies again," Hiji chuckled to the Honorable Basil. "The women can be trusted to fulfill instructions literally. It’ll be as much as his life’s worth for any of ’em to show his face in a village. Then, too, they’ve lost face irreparably. After tonight’s disgrace they couldn’t scare up a corporal’s guard of followers."

"What about that king feller?" the Honorable Basil wanted to know. "You’re surely goin’ to hang him, ain’t you?"

Hiji fixed a fierce stare on the trembling Sanlulu. "O man, how long do you desire to live?" he asked.

A crafty gleam showed in the culprit’s eye. "Thou wilt permit me to name my own time, O Hiji?"

"Thou sayest it."

"Then I demand that I may live until old age has pulled me down like a lion pulling down a buck. Thou hast promised, Hiji, and a promise is a promise. I hold thee to thy word. O-ko, but I have tricked thee neatly!"

"Think so?" Hiji eyed him grimly.

"Then hear me, man. Thou hast named the length of thy sentence. Thou shalt be stripped of all thy ornaments, even of thy man’s attire, and habited as a woman. Thereafter thou shalt carry water and hew wood, grind meal and hoe crops amid the women of the man whom thou sought to slay tonight, and if thou workest not as well as any woman thy hide shall feel the stick. No one in all the land, neither the men, the women nor the little children, shall do thee honor, but all shall wag their heads at thee and say, ‘Behold the man who called himself a king. See how he wears a woman’s clothes and works among the women as the meanest of them!’"

"O Hiji," wailed Sanlulu as a trooper snatched away his battered top hat and leopard skin and a young girl came forward with a woman’s fiber apron, "I think that it would be much better if you hanged me now!"

Hiji grinned at him unpleasantly. "I thought you’d try to Welch on that bet, old feller; but it’s too late now. You asked for it, and you got it!"
Zack Morrow was fifteen years old when his mother died. It rained the day of the funeral and Zack stood there bareheaded in the cold drizzle and the sticky gumbo mud caked to his first pair of red-topped brass-toed boots. Swaddled in a man-sized yellow saddle slicker with the sleeves rolled up and the cold rain trickling down into the oversized collar and down his back to send chills along his spine. His eyes were rimmed and they stared, puckered, into the open grave where the water lay muddy and black-looking and cold and dismal. And the inside of the boy’s empty belly felt like it was shriveled inside. And he kept thinking how beautiful his mother had always looked and she had belonged in the sunlight and warmth and now she lay cold and dead in a pine-board box for a coffin and four cowpunchers from the Rolling M outfit lowered the coffin with slings made of their saddle ropes and the high heels of their tallowed boots dug into the muddy ground to keep them from slipping while they lowered Luke Morrow’s dead wife into her rain-sodden grave. And their faces were grim and their eyes squinted and they tried not to be awkward about it and not show outward signs of grief for the dead woman they had always called the Little Boss.

Luke Morrow stood there beside his small son. Grief stamped in deep lines on his leathery face, and glazing his hard gray eyes.
He had buttoned young Zack into his saddle slicker and so he stood there letting the rain soak his only suit of store clothes.

A lanky blue-nosed circuit rider held a black umbrella to keep the rain off his shabby leather-covered bible. His voice was nasal and he kept sniffing like he had a cold. And he talked on and on after he had closed his bible and his long blue nose had a big wart on the tip end and two hairs grew out of the black wart like they had been planted there. He got the dead woman's name wrong and he quoted bible verses. Teams hitched to buggies and buckboards and spring wagons got restless.

Young Zack Morrow stood it as long as he could. Then he looked up at his father and his boy's voice sounded clearly through the nasal droning of the circuit rider.

"Tell that blue-nosed old buzzard to shut up his croakin'. So's they kin cover my mother's grave from the rain. That blue-beaked sandhill crane with his Life Everlastin'—he's a liar."

Luke Morrow's big hand gripped his son's shoulder. It felt like he was breaking the bones. His voice a deep harsh growl.

"Hush, boy. That's no way to talk at your mother's funeral."

Young Zack winced from the pain in his shoulder, but he was sick with the deeper pain inside his boy's heart.

Luke Morrow was a stern, hard-bitten man, one of the best cowmen who had ever
survived the bitter hardships of the cattle business during the lean pioneer days to build up his Rolling M into one of the biggest outfits in Montana. The kind of a man who believed it was a sign of weakness to show any outward affection towards his son. Any outward demonstration of what love he had borne his good wife. Hidebound. Prideful. A staunch believer in hard work. He drove his ranch hands and cowpunchers to their limit and bragged he could do the work of any half-dozen men he paid good wages. He had fourteen-year-old Zack doing a man's work. Even as he had made his frail and once-beautiful wife cook for a crew of hungry ranch hands during haying season.

This was the first time in his life that young Zack had ever actually spoken up to his stern father. And this was the first time Luke Morrow had ever laid hand on his son Zack in anything like anger. If it could be called that now. Always, a sharp stern re-buke had been far more punishing than a rawhide quirt.

The long-necked, blue-nosed circuit rider took the hint. Wound up his windy graveyard talk. And it was then that tough, profane, hard-riding, hell-raising, cattle-rustling, quart a day Squawman Ike Logan made the gesture that forever branded him Luke Morrow's bitter enemy. And won the everlasting loyalty of young Zack Morrow.

Ike Logan, owner of the Bar L outfit, had fetched his Assiniboine squaw and their little six-year-old half-breed daughter Laura to the funeral. They had come in their brand new top buggy. And across the lap of the squaw and her small daughter lay a large laprobe of Indian tanned beaver skins.

Ike Logan took the soft, warm, expensive beaver laprobe. And he carried it to the open grave and got down on his knees in the sticky gumbo mud and while everybody stared, Ike Logan leaned far over and he spread the beautiful beaver laprobe over the pine-board coffin and when the coffin was completely covered and hidden by its soft fur, Ike Logan straightened up and got to his feet.

For a long moment Ike Logan stood there, his short, saddle-muscled, bowed legs planted wide and his best pants and shopmade boots mud plastered. A barrel-chested, heavy-shouldered man with wiry red hair and hard, bright puckered green eyes set under ragged red brows. His tanned skin reddened by the weather and whiskey he drank, a hard, mirthless grin spreading his wide mouth that was partly hidden by a drooping red mustache. A blunt-featured man, and blunt-spoken, Squawman Ike Logan who would not accept the Indian allotment of land and cattle to which his Assiniboine squaw was entitled. The Logan Bar L ranch joined the Fort Belknap Reservation at the Little Rockies end. And Ike Logan was a stout outspoken champion of that lost cause of Indian Rights. But he took nothing from the Indian Department that he claimed was robbing the Indians of far more than it gave them. And now Ike Logan faced big six-foot Luke Morrow with that same unflinching outspoken defiance with which he had stared down high officials of the Indian Department from the sub-agent at Lodge Pole to the white-collared politicians at Washington.

Luke Morrow's bloodshot eyes glared at the red-headed squawman. Ike Logan's green eyes stared back. Then he looked straight at the boy and his voice softened.

"She'll rest warm now, Zack."

Ike Logan walked back to his top buggy. Scraped some of the mud from his new boots and climbed in and took the lines from his squaw. And drove away from the little graveyard.

Other rigs followed. Cowpunchers mounted their horses, easing down into wet saddles or standing in their stirrups as they headed for town and the feed barn and the warmth of the saloon.

The Rolling M round-up was camped on Alkali, holding a beef herd for the first shipment.

Most of the cowpunchers were at camp on day herd. Half a dozen of them had come to town with Luke Morrow for the funeral of Morrow's good wife. Luke was his own wagon boss. Young Zack had been wrangling horses.

"Git back to your remuda," said Luke Morrow stiffly. "I'm sendin' them four pallbearers back to camp before they git drunk. Lemme know if they try to sneak a bottle back to the wagon. I gotta see the station agent about gittin' cars. Now git back to your remuda before that 'breed kid takin' your horse jingler job spills that cavvy all
over the country. Can’t afford to lay over huntin’ horses. Now rattle your hocks."

That was Luke Morrow’s way. Above all else he was a cowman, with a beef herd to ship and cattle cars to order and a round-up to ramrod. Hiding his grief under a callousness that seemed cold-blooded, first, last and all the way between Luke Morrow was a cattleman.

He was paying off that sniffing blue-nosed circuit rider as he would pay off a man contracted to put up a crop of hay.

"How much do I owe you, Preacher?" Pulling out the big old leather wallet. His hat slanted down across his bloodshot hard gray eyes.

Big, gray commencing to sprinkle his thick straight hair that was the color of rope, raw-boned, lean, hard muscled. With a jutting nose and jaw. A face that looked like it had been crudely chiseled from gray granite. A hard, ruthless man. He did not smoke and seldom took more than one drink of whiskey and then he drank alone from his own private bottle. Son of a circuit rider preacher of the same hell’s fire and brimstone teachings as this blue-nosed circuit rider, he had been raised God fearing. A hard-shelled belief that condemned such so-called Satanic pleasures as dancing and congenial saloon drinking as wicked. He never laughed or told a crude joke. His smile was thin lipped. He frowned on profanity. Cursing and dancing and smoking and whiskey drinking save when the booze was needed for medicine, were sinful and weak and pastimes and indulgences of the spawn of the Devil.

Yet Luke Morrow had run away from the Kansas home of his circuit rider father to go up the Chisholm Trail with one of the first big trail herds out of Texas. Not from any spirit of high adventure, but to make his fortune in the cattle business. That he threw in a small bunch of his father’s cattle with the trail herd, and took every saddle horse on the place, was typical of that God fearing young Luke Morrow who had grown into Luke Morrow, cowman.

Luke Morrow had wanted a son. A son to wear the Morrow name and continue the building up of the Rolling M brand. So he had taken himself a wife. That she had been beautiful had not mattered. She was a good cook and housekeeper. An Indian mas-
sacre had wiped out the wagon train emigrants and orphaned the girl he had found apprenticed out to this same blue-nosed circuit rider and his wife and brood of growing children. Preacher Luther had been willing to marry off the girl to the big cowman for a lucrative amount of hard cash. Driving a profitable bargain because the girl had been somewhat too frail to do the amount of work with which he had burdened her.

So the fair-haired girl Ruth had become the wife of Luke Morrow. She had fulfilled her purpose and duty when she bore him a son. Then she had gleaned some pitiful amount of pleasure from life in her mother love and devotion to her child. Until the boy became old enough and strong enough to be put to work. And then Luke Morrow had claimed his son. And it had taken this long before the frail Ruth had finally died of overwork and a broken heart. And now Preacher Luther had stood long legged and gaunt in his rusty black and his blue nose and droned and sniffled his graveside psalms and now Luke Morrow was driving a graveyard bargain. Even as he had once driven a marrage bargain with the blue-nosed circuit rider.

Young Zack Morrow shed the big slicker and handed it to his father in silence. He got on his horse and headed for camp with the Rolling M cowpunchers—the four Rolling M pallbearers and two reps who had ridden to the funeral without bothering to get permission from the wagon boss owner of the Rolling M.

One of the cowpunchers represented the Bear Paw Pool. The second rep was working with the Rolling M round-up in the interest of Ike Logan’s Bar L iron. He was Ike Logan’s half-breed son Rusty Logan. Rusty was no more than eighteen but a top cowhand and one of the best natural bronc riders in Montana. He had been baptized Rusty Patrick Logan, because Ike said the red-headed youngster would be called Rusty anyhow and they might as well make the name legal and binding.

Rusty Logan was short and husky with his father’s red hair and freckles and his Assiniboine mother’s opaque black eyes. He had a short nose and blunt jaw and high cheekbones. And he was as proud of his Indian blood as ever he was of his white-
man's half-breed strain. His nature an unpredictable mixture of both races.

Rusty Logan and young Zack Morrow rode on ahead. Rusty explained that the Bear Paw Pool rep had managed for a quart and the four Rolling M pallbearers looked like they needed a shot and what Zack didn't see he wouldn't have to lie about when his old man asked him if there had been a bottle pulled on the way to camp. And when they had ridden far enough ahead, Rusty told Zack to cut loose and bawl.

"Damn it, button, tears ain't to be ashamed of. You ever see Ike Logan fight? He bawls his eyes out while he's sluggin'. And you seen me bawl that time my horse broke a leg and I had to get somebody else to shoot 'im. A man that's ashamed of his tears is a damn' coward. Now cut loose, Zack, and you'll feel better—"

Zack had crawled off alone last night when the man from the home ranch brought word that his mother had died of quick consumption, and had choked down the aching lump in his throat and blinked away hot tears that scalded his eyes and then he had heard Luke Morrow calling his name and he had to show up and ride to town. And all day long his eyes had felt like they were blinded by hot sand and even the cold rain could not wash away the sitting dryness. And now he let go and leaned across his saddle horn and the tears came and terrible sobs racked his hard young body and Rusty Logan rode on a little ahead until Zack had done sobbing and caught up with him.

"I guess you're the only friend I got, Rusty. I—you—Ike Logan is the best man on earth."

"Aw, hell, we're pardners, Zack. Me'n you. But you're right about Ike. Ain't he a warthog? He'd climb Luke Morrow's big frame right now if that big cold-blooded son had give him an openin'. You staked your claim on Ike Logan's heart when you called Preacher Luther a blue-nosed buzzard and a blue-beaked sandhill crane and a damned liar. Ike can't hardly wait to git back to the Little Rockies to tell it. Ike Logan don't claim no brand of religion, unless it's Injun belief. Maw's a Mission Injun. And Ike had me'n little Laura baptized at St. Paul's Mission on the Reservation and one of the first things I recollect that wart-

hog daddy of mine tellin' me was that he'd quit the hell outa me if I didn't say my prayers. Maw says he's got more religion in him than most men, only he'll go to any length to hide it. If ever things git too tough, Zack, cut your string and ride to the Bar L ranch. Remember that, pardner."

Zack's blue eyes puckered in his rain-washed tanned face. And he managed a grin. He looked sodden and forlorn, Rusty Logan thought, in his soaked store clothes that Luke Morrow had bought a couple sizes large so's he wouldn't out-grow 'em too quick. Like a mammyless calf at a round-up. With his tow-colored hair plastered down by the rain.

"I'll remember, Rusty."

He remembered all right. Zack Morrow cut his string one year later when Luke Morrow married the Widow Watring.

II

THE WIDOW WATRING had been Lota Luther, daughter of Preacher Luther, and the only one of the circuit rider's brood who made a mark that people would remember.

She had run away when she was fifteen with a drifting tinhorn gambler and gun fighter called Ace Watring. Any kind of a life, Lota said, was preferable to cooking and keeping house for the Preacher and mothering the brood of kids left behind when the Preacher's wife died. Lota had looks. And brains. Even at the age of fifteen Lota Luther had been a woman with a woman's wisdom and a young girl's bold beauty.

Lota had the good looks to attract the handsome, swaggering, reckless Ace Watring. She had the brains to salt down the money Ace Watring brought home. Money and sacks of gold dust and nuggets and sometimes jewelry. And if she suspected that it was road agent bandit loot and not winnings from the gambling tables, Lota Watring never admitted her knowledge of her husband's road agent activities. The Vigilante Law hung Ace Watring along with others of the gang that had killed and robbed placer miners and held up stagecoaches to rifle the Wells Fargo strongboxes and the mail sacks and strip the passengers of money and jewels. It was rumored that the myste-
rious, heavily veiled woman in black who watched the hanging of Ace Watring was Lota.

Lota had a child by Ace Watring. A boy they called Ward. And Ward Watring, before he was of age, showed promise of being a true son of Ace Watring. Ward was about eighteen when his mother, now known as the Widow Watring, married herself and her son Ward to Luke Morrow and the big Rolling M outfit.

Preacher Luther had disowned his daughter Lota when she ran away with the tinhorn gambler and gun-slinger Ace Watring, leaving him to care for his brood of offspring as best he could. He reviled her in his hell’s fire and brimstone sermons, labeling her a Jezebel. Which bothered Lota not at all because she had traveled far beyond earshot of his nasal ranting.

Lota and her son vanished right after the Vigilante hanging of Ace Watring. And with her went the loot from countless robberies. The following dozen years of her trail was blotted out and covered with mystery.

Lota’s return was unobtrusive and therefore as mysterious as her disappearance. She appeared as if by some conjurer’s trick of black magic. She was there at the funeral of Luke Morrow’s wife. Alone, in a top buggy, with the side curtains buckled down against the rain, handling a team of well-matched black horses with strong, skilled, black-gloved hands. Dressed in black. Black veiled. Still there when all the other rigs had left the cemetery in the rain.

She lifted her veil. And shoved aside one of the curtains.

“How much?” Luke Morrow was pulling his thick wallet from his pocket when he caught sight of the black-clad woman in the top buggy.

“I had to come,” her voice was soft, husky, “to Ruth’s funeral. You don’t remember me, Luke. I’m Lota—Lota Luther. The Widow Watring now. Tie your horse alongside. And get in. You’re soaking wet.”

Lota had hair that was as smooth and black and shining as patent leather. A skin the color of thick cream. Long heavy black lashes, shadowed eyes the color of amber. Lips as red as the petals of a red rose and they parted to reveal strong white perfect teeth. Her musk perfume heavy in the gray drizzle as she handled her team so that the wheels of her top buggy almost scraped Preacher Luther’s gaunt black form and her face was so close to Luke Morrow’s as he stood rooted in his boot tracks that her perfumed breath filled his nostrils. And his hard gray eyes widened and he was breathing heavily as he stared at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. Her amber eyes, her perfume, the sound of her voice. Her laugh was almost soundless.


Luke Morrow’s big hands were unsteady as he tied his bridle reins to the same ring of the near horse. He scraped some of the mud from his boots and climbed into the top buggy and the side curtain dropped and they drove away from the rain-sodden graveyard without a backward glance.

Leaving Preacher Luther standing there under his rusty black umbrella. The tall, gaunt circuit rider tweaked his long blue nose. His pale eyes stared after the top buggy, Luke Morrow’s big Rolling M gelding trotting with its wet saddle alongside the matched black team. Preacher Luther’s pale eyes glinted and his long funereal face creased in a sly, crafty grin. Then he collapsed the big black umbrella and mounted his horse and rode slowly to town. He put his horse in the feed barn and strode long legged under his umbrella through the mud to a little log cabin across the railroad tracks at the edge of the little cow-town of Malta.

Not a word or look of recognition or greeting had passed between Preacher Luther and the daughter Lota whom he had disinherited seventeen years ago. Nor had Luke Morrow who made a point of paying cash on the spot for everything, paid for his dead wife’s funeral.

“How much?” Luke Morrow had asked. But had not waited for his answer. Nor paid his dead wife’s funeral bill. There was something of the prophetic about it—Ike Logan might have found the words for it he had witnessed it.

Instead of driving to the feed and livery barn Lota drove across the railroad tracks. And Luke Morrow was that dazed by the woman’s nearness to him there in the curtained top buggy that he did not realize where they were until she pulled up. Then
he saw the long sod-roofed white-painted log building that was called the White House and before he recovered from the jolt and shock of being that close to the notorious White House, the door opened and a tall handsome black-haired young cowboy- puncher stood in the doorway. A thin smile on his straight-lipped mouth and his eyes hard and greenish yellow under heavy black brows. He was about eighteen but looked several years older and he was dressed like a range dude with the legs of his buckskin foxted California pants shoved into the tops of his polished boots and an ivory-handled six-shooter in the holster fastened to the sagging filled cartridge-belt buckled around his lean flanks. A black hat tilted at a challenging angle on his thick black hair.


This was the first time Luke Morrow had ever set foot inside the notorious White House. It belonged now to Lota, the Widow Watring. It was deserted during the day. The piano closed. The dance floor empty. The windows were shuttered day and night. Gay and blatantly noisy by lamplight, it was as gray and desolate now as a tomb and there was only the faint clinging odor of stale tobacco smoke and booze and perfume. The bar deserted. Polished glasses and bottles lined the back bar. And before the big cowman could find his voice Lota was behind the bar. The black gloves peeled from ringless, well-kept beautiful long hands. Her hat off and her sleek hair parted in the middle and pulled down across her ears into a heavy bun at the nape of her white neck. Tiny sparks in her amber eyes when she filled two glasses. One with whiskey that was well aged and smooth as syrup, her own glass filled with tawny sherry that matched the color of her eyes. She put the glass of whiskey in his hand across the bar and touched the rim of her wide glass to it. And her eyes held his in a taunting, promising challenge.

“To our meeting, Luke.” Her voice husky. “To you and to me.”

Luke Morrow was lost when he downed that drink. He had that brief moment when he felt that he was selling his body and soul to the Devil in Hell. Then he gulped down the whiskey and his eyes never left hers and the color crept into his gray granite face and the haunted look died in his hard gray eyes and they lighted up with the glow of some inner fire that was burning in him and mounting like fever. And she filled his empty glass and her soft husky laugh was no louder than a rippling whisper.

For the first time in his life Luke Morrow got drunk. He did not go out to the Rolling M round-up camp on Alkali. Not that night. Nor the following day. And when he did show up he was a little drunk and his gray eyes glittered and he smelled of whiskey and tobacco smoke and some heavy musk perfume. And with him rode young Ward Watring.

There was something about big Luke Morrow that made him seem like a total stranger to his son Zack. Zack could not puzzle out just what it was. He laid it to the fact that it was the first time he had ever seen his father anything like tipsy. And there was a looseness about the cowman’s stern grim mouth. Luke Morrow seemed more human. And at the same time he was more dangerous to cross.

“This is Ward Watring. He’ll be with the outfit from now on—” A strange challenge in his hard gray eyes and he glared at Zack like the boy had done something wrong.

It was after the Rolling M shipped out the trainload of beef steers and the round-up pulled on back to the home ranch with one of the older cowhands straw-bossing the outfit and Luke Morrow still in town, that Zack got the first ugly hint of what was happening to his father.

“Keep your shirt on, Zack,” Rusty Pat Logan got the boy aside, “Take it easy and keep your trap shut.”

“That fancy spur jinglin’ Wart Watring—he acts like he owned the outfit, Rusty. He’s claimed the best string of horses in the Rolling M remuda.”

“And the hell of it is, pardner,” grinned the freckled Rusty, “this Wart Watring knows how to handle ’em. For all his fancy pants, he’s a top cowhand wherever he’s put. He ain’t underfoot. I’ll gamble that Ward Watring is ramroddin’ the Rollin’ M inside a year.”

“But I can’t savvy what’s happened to my father. He’s changed.”
"A little late in life, mebby," grinned Rusty Logan, "but Old Granite is sowin' one hell of a crop of wild oats."

Even Zack had got into the habit of calling Luke Morrow Old Granite. And the big cowman had always seemed to take a certain pride of being known as Old Granite Morrow. It had started over on the Fort Belknap Reservation where the Assiniboines and Gros Ventres had named him Stone Face. And Ike Logan had made it into Old Granite. Because Ike said that it wasn't only Luke Morrow's face but his heart and gizzard had turned to granite.

The cow country knew by now that the Widow Watring who had been Preacher Luther's runaway daughter Lota, had bought the White House and was running it herself. And that Old Granite Morrow was making the White House his Rolling M town headquarters at Malta. And young Zack had been the last one to find it out.

Zack had learned about it the hard way. When Ward Watring roped the top horse in Zack's string,

"You ketched the wrong horse, Ward."

Zack had protested.

"That's where you're wrong, button. I was told to pick my own string of ponies. I like this 'un."

"No man kin take one of my string!"

Zack had tried to jerk the rope from around the horse's neck.

Wart Watring did not hit Zack. He just shoved a long leg in behind Zack's legs and hooked his spur shank and gave Zack a hard swift push in the face. It sent the boy reeling backwards and flat in the thick dust of the rope corral.

Rusty Logan came no higher than Wart Watring's tall slim shoulder. But the redheaded half-breed son of Squawman Ike Logan was compactly built and moved swiftly and without the hint of a wasted motion.

Rusty grabbed the taller Ward by the back of his red flannel shirt collar and yanked. Jerking the tall slim Ward backwards. And Rusty's hard freckled fist hit Ward Watring's jaw just below the ear. And hit him again as he went down. Then Rusty kicked Ward Watring hard in the belly. And there was a flat grin on his freckled, dusty face as he picked up the rope and went down it to the horse's head and slipped off the noose.

"Leave my pardner Zack alone, Purty Britches," Rusty had spat down into Ward Watring's pain-twisted face. "Saddle one of his ponies and I'll double a wet rope and whip you outa the country."

"I'll kill you for this some day, you red-headed half-breed!"

"You kin try, Purty Britches, any time you feel that lucky."

"I'll ramrod this Rolling M outfit!"

"That's tippin' over the Widder Watring's hole card," Rusty's voice was low-pitched, his grin mirthless. "She wouldn't like to overhear that."

"Tend to your own half-breed business."

"I aim to. Bother the Zack kid and I'll make that my business."

Then Rusty Logan had led Zack Morrow out of the corral and they saddled their horses and rode off away and Rusty tried to break it as easy as he could to the boy Zack.

"If Ike was here," said Rusty, "he'd tell it to you so you'd savvy. I'm too much of a kid myself to know what I'm talkin' about. Nobody will miss us if we ride on to the Bar L ranch and have a medicine talk with Ike."

They found Ike Logan butchering a beef. The brand had been cut out of the hide and whittled to little chunks and fed to a pack of hungry wolfhounds.

"Them damned Rollin' M brands," complained the squawman, "is too big. He grinned and left the rest of the butchering to a couple of blanket Indians and their squaws.

When the butchering was done there would be only a patch of drying blood on the ground and a mound of partly digested grass from the paunch. To show where the stolen beef had been butchered. The Indians took good care of the hide, hoofs and horns.

"The missus' kinfolks," chuckled the squawman, "take a lot of feedin' to git the wrinkles outa their bellies. The Assiniboines was born starvin'. Now what fetches you two young cowhands away from the Rollin' M round-up? Ike Logan wiped beef blood from his hands and hauled a jug from behind the corral post and took a long pull at it.

"It's about Old Granite," said Rusty, "and the Widder Watring."
Ike Logan said he’d heard about it. He chuckled and tamped the corn cob stopper into the neck of the jug. He said something about a preacher’s son or a preacher’s daughter getting so much religion they foundered on it. And he’d never blamed that purty little Lota Luther from jumpin’ the bible fence.

“Luke Morrow was one of the Vigilantes that hung Ace Watring. And Preacher Luther was there. That tinhorn got down on his knees and crawled and slobbered and begged for his life. Old Granite, old Stone Heart, kicked Ace Watring back up onto his feet and set him straddle of the horse the Vigilante fellers led under the limb of a big cottonwood. With the rope around his neck, Watring knewed the stuff was off. Somebody poured likker down his throat to take the fear outa his yellers guts. And he straightened up. And when Preacher Luther walked up with his bible and asked Ace to say a last prayer, Ace Watring spit in that psalm singer’s face. And spurred his horse to jump out from under him and I heard a woman’s laugh and then Ace Watring was doin’ his strangler dance hangin’ from the tree limb.

“I was standin’ near the only woman in the crowd. It was her that laughed when that tinhorn gambler road agent spit in Preacher Luther’s face. Her face hid by the black veil, but it’d taken more than a black veil to hide the beauty of the face of Lota Luther that had run off with Ace Watring. And I’ll gamble she’s still easy on a man’s eyes. She’d be in her early thirties now—the Widder Watring—and she’s runnin’ the White House. I got a mind to shake the wrinkles outa my store clothes and taller my boots and take me a little trip to Malta. But don’t tell your ma, son, or I’ll have the Injuns tie you to the snubbins’ post and build a brush fire under yuh. But it’d be worth the rawhidin’ she’ll give me just to see Old Granite cuttin’ a pigeon wing at the White House.”

Ike Logan cocked his graying, wiry, red head sideways and gave way to song.

“It takes a long, tall, black-haired gal
To make a preacher lay his bible down—”

Rusty grinned admiringly at his ribald

father. Even Zack managed a weak smile. Rusty gave young Zack a quick wink.

“You went to Ace Watring’s hangin’, Ike?”

“I was fetched there. Guest of honor. Or dishonor. With my hands tied behind my back. Them fool Vigilantes had a notion I was mixed up with Ace Watring’s road agent gang. They stood there gawkin’ at Ace Watring kickin’ the air. Left me standin’ there with my hands tied behind my back. Then a sharp knife cut the rope that tied my wrists. The damned gawkin’ idiots never taken notice when I stepped up on the nearest horse and rode off. I was a long ways gone when them Vigilantes missed me. By the time I showed up again the stink had died down and I rode to the Rollin’ M ranch with all the damned proof even them boneheaded Vigilantes needed to prove I wasn’t one of Ace Watring’s road agents.”

“And who was it cut you free, Ike?” Rusty fed the question carelessly.

“It was Old Thunder. Your ma’s Assiniboine papa. There was a crowd of them Assiniboines and Gros Ventres there. No white man ever pays attention to them blanket Injuns standin’ around. I’d paid ten ponies for Old Thunder’s daughter. And stood him off for the balance of ten more I’d deliver as fast as I could steal ‘em. I still think Old Thunder cut me loose so’s I could pay the balance. But your Ma claims it was because Old Thunder and them other old treaty signers liked me fer a friend. Now what the hell was the three of us skalawags talkin’ about when you hazed me off the main subject?”

“Zack,” said Rusty, “is kinda worried about Luke Morrow. And this Ward Watring that’s hornin’ in like he was already ramroddin’ the Rollin’ M. I figgered you’d fix it.”

Rusty Logan was born with the firm conviction that his squawman father could fix anything.

IKE LOGAN said all there was for Zack to do was hang and rattle and somehow tough it out. For Rusty and Zack to ride back to the round-up and do their work and keep their traps shut and their eyes open and give nobody the chance to jump ‘em. On any count. Ike said he was farming
Rusty out to the Rolling M outfit as a rep for the Bar L interests. Till further notice. Not because young Rusty Pat was worth a tinker’s damn, but it would bother Old Stone Face Granite Heart. And Ike Logan said he liked to worry that big Luke Morrow more than anything. And Ike told Zack that a feller was never too young to commence taking his own part. But if he got the worst of it, Rusty Pat could step out from behind something with a wagon spoke and then if somebody cold-wedged Rusty, he, Ike Logan, would eventually hear about it and buy a stack of chips in the game and if he couldn’t get the job done he’d build a smoke signal and gather himself an Assiniboine war party and they’d lift a few whiteman scalps. Preacher Luther wore his hair long and it would please the hell out of his, Ike Logan’s daddy-in-law Old Thunder to mount Preacher Luther’s scalp on a round willow hoop and tan it and hang it up in his lodge.

Ike Logan took another pull at the jug. You never could tell when that tough little squawman was joshing or how much of it was in dead earnest and he had Zack and Rusty listening goggle eyed when Rusty’s Assiniboine mother showed up.

UNLIKE most squaws, Ike Logan’s wife did not get fat after her first child was born. Time had been when she was as slim and beautiful as a fawn, and she had retained much of her beauty, her slim lines rounded. Her skin smooth and no darker than a deep tan and her dark eyes alive and sparkling with Indian humor. She treated Ike Logan like he was a small boy who was always mixed up in some schoolboy prank. And she worshipped the ground he stood on with his widespread legs and high-heeled boots. Ike Logan was the stormy outspoken champion of the Indian. He spoke their sign language. In many ways Ike Logan was more Indian than his full blood Assiniboine squaw. His enemies called him Gut Eater.

Ike Logan was brandishing a curved-bladed skinning knife when his wife came up soundlessly on her beaded, moccasined feet. Her laugh was full-throated but soft. The tough, grizzled, red-headed cowman tried to hide the knife. Caught in the prancing step of a war dance, he halted, off balance. Reddening, sheepish as some boy caught in a harmless prank.

“I was just—”

“Just scalping Preacher Luther. Wash off the war paint and come to dinner.” Her English was far better than her whiteman husband’s.

Rusty gave his mother a bear hug and she shook hands with Zack and told them the Rolling M outfit had better get another round-up cook because the boys looked ga’nt. She mothered Zack like he was her own son.

Rusty looked around and then grinned and pointed. And they all turned their heads to watch a rider coming down the steep slant of a scrub pine butte. Bareback. On a spotted pony. Sliding the last twenty or thirty feet down a steep shale cutbank. Coming to an abrupt halt. It was Rusty’s thirteen-year-old sister and she dove from the pinto pony’s bare back and her arms wrapped around her brother’s neck. And he held her off the ground until her moccasined heels kicked the air. Then set her down. And she stood there, breathing fast. Slim and hard-muscled as a boy in faded Levi overalls and faded cotton shirt, bare-legged and her bare feet covered by plain moccasins that had no decorative beads or gay-colored stained porcupine quills. Her hair, black with reddish highlights, hung squaw fashion in two heavy braids that fell below the waistband of her faded overalls. Her skin was fairer than the skin of some white girl’s, with a sprinkling of freckles. Thick lashes fringed her warm brown eyes. In a few years she would be beautiful. Right now she was as pretty as some wild young thing that belonged here in the mountain country. Robin Logan looked at Zack and her tomboy exuberance shrank in behind a shyness that Ike and Rusty called her Injun way. Color flooded her tanned, freckled face.

“Hello, Zack.” Her voice small.

“Hello, Robin.” And Zack’s ears reddened.

“A fine lookout!” Ike Logan’s ragged brows pulled into a scowl that fooled nobody. “Here I am, butcherin’ one of Luke Morrow’s Rollin’ M steers. And she lets two horsebackers ride up on me without lightin’ the smoke signal upon the Signal Butte. Looks like she wants her old man
makin' her one of them fancy horsehair bridles the boys in the Deer Lodge pen make to while away the prison hours."

"Zack and Rusty don't count, Ike." Rusty and Robin called their father Ike. Ike Logan wanted it no other way.

"Not even when it's one of Zack's beef steers!"

Zack's one of the family."

Robin spoke now from behind and underneath the swarm of big half-grown wolfhound pups that threatened to knock her down with their playful attack. While the older hounds looked on. Huge paws slapping, big white teeth nipping at her faded overalls and shirt. There was the sound of ripping cloth as Robin mauled the big wolfhound pups. Then they got her down and she called for Rusty to help and he grinned and shook his head and shoved Zack into the melee, and it was a wild tangle, and finally Zack hauled Robin to her feet and slapped with his hat at the dust that powdered her torn clothes. And her shyness was gone. And they were laughing at the big overgrown pups.

Let a stranger touch Robin and that whole hound pack would tear that man to death. But Zack belonged to the family.

Then they all washed up and sat down to dinner. And Zack Morrow hated to leave when the time came for him and Rusty to ride back to the round-up camp.

III

IT TOOK the Widow Watring a whole year to accomplish the job she had set out to do on Luke Morrow. She could have done it in a month's time or less, but she purposely prolonged it. She said she did not want the cow country saying that she had grabbed Luke Morrow before his dead wife was cold in her grave.

Preacher Luther married them. And instead of a wedding trip, Lota had Luke Morrow drive her out to the Rolling M home ranch. The bride and groom drove out in her top buggy with the silver-painted wheels. While a six-horse team hauled out a big load of the new furniture Lota had selected from a mail order catalogue and had had shipped to Malta.

Zack Morrow had toughed out the year. Hung and rattled as Ike Logan told him to. Wintering at one of the Rolling M line camps that was not far from the Logan Bar L home ranch. And Rusty had spent a lot of the snowbound winter with Zack at the line camp. And Ward Watring had not ridden there through the high drifts to bother Zack.

But Ward Watring was at the Rolling M home ranch when the Chinook warm wind cut the snowdrifts that spring. Ward Watring had moved all of Zack's belongings out of the little log cabin that had been Zack's cabin since he was a small boy.

Zack had the feeling of somebody shoving a dull rusty knife in his back. He slid his tarp-covered bed from his pack horse and carried it into the long log bunkhouse and spread it on an empty bunk.

That night Zack got little sleep. Young Ward Watring was running a poker game in the bunkhouse. And there was a jug of booze. And this was the first time Zack had ever seen a deck of cards or a jug of whiskey at the Rolling M ranch. Because gambling and drinking at the home ranch or on the round-up had been strictly forbidden by Luke Morrow. Laid down like a law.

But Luke Morrow was not at the ranch. He had spent most of the winter in town. And Ward Watring had ramrodded the outfit. And had done a good job of it in spite of the fact that he had banked a poker game in the bunkhouse almost every night and kept a twenty-gallon keg of whiskey in the log cabin he had taken from Zack for his own sleeping quarters. And the news had spread that young Ward Watring had poked the Rolling M cowhands out of their winter's wages.

And Ward Watring ramrodded the calf round-up that spring. Despite his youth, he made a good wagon boss. He rode the best string of horses in the Rolling M remuda. And he gave Zack a string of jugheads. Spoiled horses. Broncs.

"You'll ride what I give you," said Ward Watring, "or ride the bed wagon. I'm ramroddin' this outfit. You'll take my orders or draw your time."

It was a gunshot. Zack sized up the tall slim Ward. Ward had grown. Filled out some. He was man-sized and could pass anywhere for over twenty-one. And he was swaggering tough.
He topped the younger Zack by a whole head. And his swaggering made Zack shrink in size and he felt puny and awkward and boish when Ward Watring looked down at him with a faint sneer on his too handsome face. Range dude Ward Watring was the living, spitting, swaggering image of the Ace Watring, tinhorn gambler, and road agent who had been hung by the Vigilantes.

He had grown into an early manhood, while Zack remained a kid who had not yet shaved the downy fuzz from his chin and upper lip.

But he might have tackled Ward Watring and taken the humiliating whipping Watring was itching to give him. Only Rusty Logan showed up.

Rusty rode up to the Rolling M round-up with a string of twenty head of top cows. Ike Logan raised the best Morgan horses in that part of the Northwest cow country. The Logan Morgans, the strain was called. Mostly bays, like the big high-priced Morgan stud. Mahogany bay color.

As a rule there were no more than ten head of horses in the string that a representative cowpuncher from other outfits would bring to throw in with the Rolling M remuda, and here were twenty head of top cowhorses in Rusty Pat Morgan’s Bar L rep string.

“Ike heard you was afoot, Zack,” Rusty Logan’s grin was wide, but flat-lipped as a snarl. And his opaque black eyes, Injun eyes, were looking straight at Ward Watring. “Take your pick of ten.”

Rusty Logan had packed a six-shooter since he was big enough to pull himself up on a pony by his saddle strings. It was a wooden-handled six-shooter that had been given him by the notorious outlaw, Kid Curry of the Wild Bunch, who sometimes used the name of Harvey Logan, though the Kid and his brothers were no relation to the red-headed Ike Logan. Rusty’s hand rested carelessly on the wooden butt of the six-shooter now as he sat his saddle with his weight in one stirrup.

It was a challenge. Every cowhand in the Rolling M outfit was there to witness it. And every man in the outfit knew that Rusty Logan was making himself the champion of young Zack Morrow. And right now was the time for wagon boss Ward Watring to take up that challenge. Or back down and leave Zack alone from there on.

Ward Watring’s face looked like the color was draining out of his tanned skin. And with it went some of his swagger. His hand was on his ivory-handled six-shooter, and he tensed like he was going to pull the gun. And those who were in the line of fire were backing away.

Then Ward Watring’s yellow eyes slid away from the opaque black Injun eyes of Rusty Pat Logan. He turned away with a twisted grin. And tried to put a spur-jingling swagger into his walk as he went into the mess tent.

Zack’s face was beaded with cold sweat. Rusty swung from his saddle and dropped the hackamore rope of his bed horse. There were some new men working now for the Rolling M, and Rusty Logan looked them over with swift appraisal.

They had been hired in town by the Widow Watring and Lota had sent them out to take orders from her son Ward and nobody else. So Lota had gradually replaced a lot of the old cowhands with these strangers who looked like so many tough renegades from down the Outlaw Trail. And they were eyeing young Rusty Logan narrowly as he looked them over.

Then Rusty turned his back on them and yanked at the rope that diamond-hitched his tarp-covered bed on the pack horse.

“I fetched a tepee, Zack. A two-pole outfit I seen advertised in a saddle catalogue. Big enough to hold your bed and mine. Could be the Injun in me wants a tepee. But most mebby it’ll make it harder for Ward Watring to knife a man while he’s asleep.”

The round-up moved over toward the Bar L range. And the first big gathering fetched in from all compass points by the riders Ward Watring had scattered on an early morning circle was a big one. And when Ward Watring rode into the round-up with one of his new cowhands to cut out the Rolling M cows with unbranded calves, he whitened with cold, raging fury.

There were plenty of Rolling M cows, but the calves following them had been recently branded. Not with Luke Morrow’s Rolling M brand that was on the cows, but a big fresh Four T. An open Four with the T
connected to the upright of the figure Open Four.

Ward and his team pardner cut half a dozen Rolling M cows with Four T calves. So stirred up with anger that he was drip-ping sweat and fighting his horse. He loped over to where Rusty Logan and Zack Morrow were holding the small cut of cows and calves. His sweaty face was white. He pointed a gloved hand at the Rolling M cows and Four T calves.

“What would you know about that Four T iron, Half-Breed?” Ward Watring’s voice was thick with anger. “The herd’s lousy with ‘em!”

“You’ll find that Four T iron in the new brand book, Putty Pants,” grinned Rusty Logan. “Registered under the name of Zack Morrow. It’s the old Kid Curry brand. Ike Logan swapped Kid Curry out of it and had it registered in Zack Morrow’s name.”

“The hell you say?”

“The hell I say, dude. And it looks like Ike Logan’s Bar L round-up, the one you call the Gut Wagon, has already worked this strip of range. And Ike put a few calves in the Four T iron to give Zack Morrow a start in the cattle business. Now Old Granite Luke Morrow might take it up from here, have Zack arrested and sent to the Deer Lodge pen for cattle rustlin’. But Ike fig-gered that even old Stone Heart wouldn’t send his own only son to prison. And there ain’t one damned thing you kin do about it, Putty Pants, but mark ‘em down in the tally book. To Zack Morrow’s profit and his daddy Luke Morrow’s loss. After all, you’re just a hired hand.”

The renegade with Ward Watring was scowling blackly, his hand on his gun. Rusty grinned. He slid the wooden-handled six-shooter from its holster with a smooth, un-broken little pull and his forefinger hooked in the trigger guard he began spinning the six-shooter. The sunlight caught and re-flected the spinning steel barrel and the sunlight reflected in the opaque black Injun eyes of Rusty Logan made them glitter like black agate.

Zack was packing the six-shooter Ike Logan had given him on his last birthday. His hand gripped its black butt and he took his cue from Rusty. This was the first he knew about his ownership of a brand. It came like a sudden shower of cold water and like the ice-cold shower it numbed him the first few seconds and then it gave him a warm and pleasant glow and he felt like letting out a wild cowboy yip. And he was almost hoping Ward Watring would make something of it.

But Ward Watring looked sick. Like the whiskey he’d used to spike his breakfast coffee had suddenly soured and poisoned his guts. His skin had a yellowish, jaundiced color. Then he reined his horse and jerked his head at the man with him and they rode back toward the herd.

“Ike woulda given up his jug,” chuckled Rusty, “to see the poisoned look on Ward Watring’s face. But it’s Stone Face Luke Morrow he wants to see take that gutshot. How’s it feel to own your own iron, pardner?”

“Feels scary, Rusty. But good.”

“It’ll feel better as we go along. Like gettin’ on a big jag. The Bar L wagon is workin’ about a week ahead of the Rollin’ M. And when Ike Logan takes a notion to make a clean work on a range, locusts can’t pick it more bare. He’ll have two-thirds of the Luke Morrow Rollin’ M calf crop in your Four T iron by the time Ward Watring’s new renegade cowhands has learned the range.”

Rusty said they’d sit back now and check the bet to Ward Watring. And that evening when Ward, using his wagon boss au-thority, fired Zack Morrow and told him to go to the home ranch, Zack shook his tow-head and said he reckoned not.

“I’m not workin’ for the Rollin’ M,” he took his own part like Ike Logan had told him to do, “I’m reppin’ for my own iron. The Four T. And I don’t cut my string till the round-up is over. And don’t try to put me on-day herd to git me outa the way. A rep has the right to be at every brandin’. And don’t bar out one of them Four T brands unless you want to go to the pen for alterin’ another man’s brand. From here on I’m the Four T rep.”

IV

WARD WATRING sent one of the new cowhands to town to take the news to the Widow Watring. He spent an hour or longer writing the letter he sent in a sealed
envelope to her. It was up to the Widow Watring now to build a fire under Luke Morrow.

But if Ward Watring expected Luke Morrow to come riding out to the round-up on the prod, he was sadly disappointed. And it showed in his sullen face as the days went past and Luke Morrow did not show up and the only word Ward got from town was a curt note from the Widow Watring by the same cowhand messenger.

That note was caustic. The Widow Watring wanted to know what he, Ward Watring, ramrod now of the big Rolling M, had been doing while that squawman Ike Logan and his Bar L gut cutter Injuns worked the whole country ahead of his Rolling M round-up. That he had better swap his deck of marked cards for a branding iron. And no more booze was going out to the Rolling M. It was time, she wrote her son, that he quit trying to ape the tinhorn ways of his father.

"The Law hung Ace Watring," she wrote in her closing paragraph.

LOTA LUTHER WATRING was playing for keeps. She held the whip. And she knew how to flick hunks of hide and flesh from even the handsome six-foot frame of her son Ward Watring.

Up until now she had managed to take the stone granite face of Luke Morrow in her two, slim, well-kept ringless hands and massage it into so much soft clay. But when she told him that young Zack Morrow was stealing calves from his own father’s Rolling M cows and that he had to do something to stop it and stop it right now, Luke Morrow turned to granite in her hands.

"I didn’t think the boy had it in him. I’m proud that Zack has the guts and the brains to git the job done."

"You fool!" Lota lost her temper. "Ike Logan did it. That whelp of yours never had the brains to think of it. Nor the guts to work it out. He’s as weak and spineless as his mother was when she—"

Luke Morrow’s big hand slapped her heavily across the mouth. His gray eyes steeled. His face gray granite.

"Never let the name of that good woman come again from your painted Jezebel lips. Or I’ll kill you with my two hands." And the voice of Old Granite Luke Morrow was as cold and heavy as icebound granite rocks falling across the silence.

Lota licked the trickle of blood from her bruised red lips. And there was murder glinting in the depths of her amber eyes. But she shrank away from him and got out of sight of his eyes and she did not come near him again until late that night when Luke Morrow was sodden drunk. And then she led and dragged and partly carried his big hulk to his bed in his private room in the cabin behind the White House. She pulled off his boots and put a cold wet towel saturated with musk perfume on his sweat-beaded forehead and bloodshot brooding eyes and sat by his bed holding one of his big hair-tufted hands in both of hers. And because the wet towel covered his eyes, he could not see the hard little lines etched around the corners of her bruised red mouth or the hatred in her eyes. Only her husky voice soothing his black brooding with soft words.

That was when Lota sent for Preacher Luther. And he married his widowed daughter to Luke Morrow. And the bride and groom drove out to the home ranch the day that the Rolling M round-up pulled into the ranch, the calf round-up finished.

It was the first time Zack Morrow had ever laid eyes on the woman he had heard so much about. Lota Luther, the Widow Watring. And he did not know his father had married her.

Zack saw the tall, slender, amber-eyed woman with the sleek blue-black hair standing beside his father on the big porch of the log ranchhouse. And she was the most beautiful woman he had ever looked at. He knew who she was, who she must be. The notorious Widow Watring.

Luke Morrow had on a tailored salt and pepper suit and clean white shirt and a black string tie. His hair was almost snow white and there was a dark flush to his granite-gray skin and a looseness around his hard mouth and his eyes were bloodshot.

He waved Zack to a halt when the boy would have ridden on. "Come here, son."

ZACK reined up at the hitchrack in front of the house. The freight wagon had pulled in and the ranchhands were unloading and carrying a lot of heavy red plush furniture into the house and the furniture
that had belonged to Zack’s mother lay piled in the yard like it had been thrown there.

Zack’s face was white and sick-looking under the sweat-streaked powdering of dust. And there was a stricken look in his puckered blue eyes. He reached up and pulled a battered hat from his uncut sweat-matted tow head.

“This is your new mother, Zack.” Luke Morrow’s voice sounded harsh. He stank of whiskey. “Shake hands with her.”

Zack stood rooted in his tracks. His new mother—his new mother.

“Damn it to hell! Don’t stand there like a slack-jawed idiot!”

And that was the first time Zack had ever heard his father curse. It jerked him out of his stunned silence.

“You killed the only mother I’ll ever have.”

Zack turned and walked away. He did not look back. He mounted the big bay Bar L gelding he had ridden here and rode off.

Luke Morrow stood there like a man who has been mortally wounded but still on his feet. The dark color that had stained his lean face had drained away to leave his skin a dull gray. Stone gray. With steel slits for eyes. Eyes that watched his son Zack turn away from him and ride off from the home ranch and his father without a backward glance.

Lota stood at his side. The top of her sleek black head on a level with the big cowboy’s shoulder. A ghost of a smile on her red-lipped mouth and her amber eyes glinting like the eyes of a cat, the pupils no bigger than black pinpoints.

Two sweating ranch hands were carrying a big red plush sofa from the freight wagon. Past the discarded furniture piled in the yard, some of it broken by rough handling and left to weather there.

Luke Morrow and his bride stood in the doorway and she motioned the two men with their heavy burden around towards the back door.

As they crossed his line of vision Luke Morrow stared at the red plush sofa.

“The furnishing,” Luke Morrow’s voice was harsh, bitter, “of a den of iniquity.”

But he made no motion to stop them from hugging it in. And Lota had learned the value of silence. Her upper lip curled back to show her white teeth. Her arm was linked through his and her long slim hand without the customary wedding ring on the third finger, was motionless on the sleeve of Luke Morrow’s tailored salt-and-pepper coat sleeve. Lota hated jewelry of any kind. She would wear no ring to remind her that she was bound to any man by wedding vows. She waited until Zack had ridden out of sight. Then without breaking the taut silence between them, she led her husband inside and closed the door.

V

SO YOUNG Zack Morrow had cut his string. The Rolling M ranch where he had been born and where his mother had died, was no longer his home. He shared a log cabin with Rusty at the Bar L ranch. And for the first time in his life young Zack Morrow felt free and happy and light-hearted.

He made no effort at all to fall into their careless way of living at the Bar L ranch. They made him feel like he had always belonged here as one of the family. Even the big wolfhounds that were savage towards all outsiders would trail at his heels like they followed Rusty or Ike or Robin.

Ike Logan’s Assiniboine squaw treated him with the same matter-of-fact mothering she gave her own son. Emptying his round-up was sack of dirty clothes which he found washed and ironed and laid out in the drawer of the old-fashioned dresser in the cabin that Rusty called his wolf den. And his place was marked at the table by a napkin ring made of buffalo horn with ZACK carved in the black horn.

Rusty had a dozen head of broncs to halter break and break to saddle and Zack helped him break them. While Robin sat on the corral or fooled around with the two-year-old bay gelding she had picked for her own out of the rough string.

Sundays they laid off. There had never been any lay-off days at the Rolling M ranch. Ike Logan said it was just another shiftless ‘breed outfit custom. And they made a picnic out of it. Berry picking for the women, while the menfolk went trout fishing. There were trout streams on the Rolling M range but Luke Morrow had never allowed
himself or Zack or any of his Rolling M outfit the time from their work to go fishing.

No fence riding. The Indians did that. Ike said he had to make jobs for his wife’s relatives. Jobs like building fences and mending the thatched roofs of cattle sheds and daubing and chinking log cabins and putting up hay. There were always half a dozen tepees camped along the creek below the ranch. The old men and squaws came and went. The younger men worked as ranch hands and cowpunchers. And there were a few half-breeds who worked the year around for the Bar L. Sons of squawmen like Ike Logan. Sons of pioneers who had married squaws when white women were still scarce in Montana Territory. Good hands wherever they were put. Their only fault was their inability to handle their whiskey like a white man.

There were some French-Canadian Cree ‘breeds scattered around the country but they did not mix too well with the Assiniboine and Gros Ventres half-breeds. But whenever the Cree ‘breeds “made a dance,” Ike Logan and his Assiniboine squaw would dress up and drive there in Ike’s buckboard and Ike would take along a jug of whiskey. He said it took no more than a fiddle and a jug to make a dance and the Cree ‘breeds had a fiddle.

Rusty and Zack and Robin would go on horseback. Robin would change when she got there into the dress her mother took along in the buckboard. And they would dance until daybreak and eat breakfast before they started home. Some of the ‘breeds would get a little drunk and there would be a fight or two, but the fights were never serious and Ike Logan would put a stop to anything like a gunplay or knife slashing. Ike could walk up to the toughest of them and take a gun out of the man’s hand. Or a knife. His word was law and for the most part they all respected that law. He seldom had to use force. When he did, he moved swiftly and hit first and he hit hard and that ended the argument. But mostly Ike Logan grinned. He was the life of the party. And so long as a man did not abuse the privilege he had free access to Ike’s jug.

White men were not barred at these ‘breed dances. The few who worked for the Bar L were welcome enough, as were the older hands from the Rolling M and other cow outfits in that part of the country. So long as they knew how to behave themselves. But there were some cowpunchers who had the mistaken idea that the ‘breed girls were loose-moraled and fair game and these cowpunchers would come in little bunches and they would be half-drunk and looking for trouble and their main idea was to break up the dance and scare the hell out of the ‘breeds and take the girls away from the young bucks. And it would be up to Ike Logan to put a quick stop to it before it became a bad ruckus. And when he could not bluff it out lone-handed, he had a hand-picked bunch of cool-headed squawmen and half-breeds to lend a hand. But as a rule the tough little squawman would handle it without any help.

He would spot the leader of the trouble-hunting cowhands and if talk wouldn’t do the trick, Ike Logan would knock him out cold with a gun barrel or a short wagon spoke. And Rusty would back his play with the six-shooter that had once belonged to Kid Curry.

Years ago Luke Morrow had laid down his law. He would fire any Rolling M cowpuncher who sneaked off to a ‘breed dance. And that was as final as black and white.

The big Fourth of July celebration was always held at the Bar L home ranch. There would be bronc riding and roping and horse races. Foot races. Sack races for the women and kids. Indian games. Ike would butcher a beef that he always said was one of Luke Morrow’s steers. The women would bake pies and cakes. There would be a keg on tap. And a barn dance that lasted over until breakfast time the following morning. While the full-blood Indians had their own grass dance and giveaway dance down the creek.

The cow country was welcome. It was a wide-open invitation. But the unwritten law forbade and barred the coming of any men, white man or ‘breed, who was bent on making trouble.

The calf round-up had wound up the last of June. Until the beef round-up started in September those cowhands who refused to do any work that can’t be done on horseback would idle unless they were breaking brons or riding fence or pulling cattle out of bog holes. These grubline riders drifted
when they had blown their wages in town, but some of them always showed up at the Bar L ranch for Ike Logan’s Fourth of July. Ike would meet them at the barn.

"Unsaddle, boys. And check your guns. I’d be drunk by now if I h’stied one with everybody that showed up. But yonder’s the keg and tin cups. Grub, if you got a wrinkle in your belly. Make yourselves welcome."

Ward Watring had spread the range rumor that this year he was coming to the Bar L Fourth of July. The way he grinned when he said it made it plain that he was coming to make trouble. And he would not be riding alone.

"I’ve heard," grinned the range dude ramrod of the Rolling M, "that Ike Logan has a half-breed daughter called Robin that’s as wild and purty as a spotted fawn."

"She’s only a kid, Ward. No older than fourteen."

"Them squaws ripen early. They’re married and got kids when they’s fifteen."

"Luke Morrow has a law ag’in it. He’ll fire the best cowhand on his Rollin’ M books if he rides to a ‘breed dance."

"Luke Morrow don’t keep them Rollin’ M books no more, mister. He’d play hell firin’ Lota Watring’s son, Ward. I’m ramroddin’ the Rollin’ M."

The story reached Rusty Pat Logan. By the time he heard it, gossip had colored the tale. Not a pretty color. Rusty’s grin was stiff-lipped, but he said nothing, made no threats.

Rusty was remembering what his father Ike had told him when he taught the boy to handle the wooden-handled six-shooter that had once been carried by Kid Curry.

"If ever there comes a time when you know you’ve got to kill somebody, keep your mouth shut. Let him make all the war talk. Then when the sign is right, shoot first, And don’t miss."

Rusty did not even tell Ike about it, or Zack, but on the morning of the Fourth, Rusty Pat Logan watched the skyline for the coming of Ward Watring and his little bunch of Rolling M tough cowhands.

Rusty told Zack to keep an eye on Robin. He grinned when he said it, and Zack grinned back. Keeping an eye on Robin was something of a quiet joke between them. Giving Robin the slip was a game they played. And it was like Zack trying to out-run his own shadow. Because Robin close-trailed Zack wherever he went. Not even Ike’s teasing could stop her from tagging after Zack. And trailing at her heels would be the hound pack. Once her shyness had been overcome Robin went along with Zack, and with her went the hounds. And after he got used to it Zack treated Robin much the same way Rusty treated his kid sister, big-brothering her, tolerating her, inwardly pleased and flattered by her open admiration. Covering it by pretending she was underfoot.

So keeping an eye on Robin sounded like a josh. Until Zack looked through Rusty’s freckled grin and caught the hard glint in his black eyes.

"Gosh sakes, Rusty. What’s up?"

"There’ll be a big crowd here, Zack. I don’t mean the Injuns. And the ‘breeds don’t count. But some of the white men got the notion they’ve got to start a ruckus because the Bar L is a squawman ‘breed outfit. We don’t take no notice of her, but Robin’s growin’ up. When she sheds her Levi’s and puts on a dress for the dance tonight, you’ll see what I mean. She’d pass for seventeen. My mother was sixteen when I was born. Girls grow up faster than boys. Some half-drunk cowpuncher might take a notion to make up to Robin."

Zack grinned and shook his head—Robin was just a kid. Rusty didn’t bother to argue it. All he had to do was wait until Robin blossomed out in the new red dress and slippers and real silk stockings she had got from that high-class woman’s mail-order outfit and had saved for this occasion. That would be tonight when the dance started in the big log barn.

UNTIL nightfall, Robin would go around in the crimson silk blouse and soft leather-divided skirt and new shop-made boots that Rusty had helped her select from the boot-and-saddle catalogue. A high-crowned Stetson on her head and her copper-tinted black braids coiled up out of the way. Riding around on a bay Morgan gelding that she had taken away from Rusty. Her full-stamped round-skirted three-quarter-rigged Miles City saddle with its horn rope marked to its steel core. Robin had entered herself in the calf-roping. That was why she had helped herself to the best rope.
horse in the Bar L remuda. But right now her job was to keep her pack of wolfhounds out of trouble. The older hounds did not welcome so many strangers. And the half-grown hound pups were whining and sniffing the air and wanting to pay a prowling visit to the big Indian camp down the creek to tangle with the motley gathering of mixed-breed Indian dogs.

ROBIN finally had to herd them into their high stockade with its huge kennel gouged out of the side hill.

Some Bear Paw Pool cowhands showed up with a couple of bucking horses and a black gelding they claimed was the fastest quarter horse in the country, and they had money to back their opinion. Ike bade them a hearty welcome and covered their bets. Ike was running a Logan Morgan three-year-old.

Old Thunder was entering a spotted gelding that wore the Indian Department G Dot brand on the right shoulder. But the paint was no ordinary Injun cayuse. And Ike Logan knew that the G Dot had not been burned on the pinto hide and haired over. It had been cunningly picked on with a pair of tweezers. Ike knew that. Because he had picked the brand himself.

So he was letting the Bear Paw Pool men bet on their black quarter horse against the field. He did not expect his Logan Morgan to win. But he was gambling on Old Thunder's paint whose Injun pony spots and unblemished mane and tail and uncurried coat did much to detract from its conformation. The almost perfect conformation of a fast quarter horse.

The morning was devoted mostly to the kid races. Pony races and foot races and strenuous games on horseback and on foot. To wear the kids out, Ike said, so they'd founder themselves on picnic grub at noon and bed down somewhere out from underfoot that afternoon when the bronc riding and roping began. And Ike was busier than a hive full of bees handling the kid games. And it was Rusty who was holding down the job at the barn to welcome the visitors and Zack was helping him unharness teams that drove up. They were both busy handling the visitors and their teams and saddle horses when Ward Watring rode up, and right behind him rode half a dozen of the tough cowhands Lota had hired and sent out to the Rolling M ranch to take their orders from her son Ward Watring.

Ward Watring was dressed up like he belonged to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He cut a handsome figure on horseback. He was an edge tipsy but far from being drunk.

His cowpunchers were leading three bucking horses and a sorrel gelding that was unbranded and showed a half-breed strain of thoroughbred. Like Ward, they were more sober than tipsy.

Rusty saw them coming and his genial grin stiffened. He cut a quick look around for Robin and caught sight of her below the ranch buildings at the little park in the box elders where she was helping Ike run off the kids' sack race.

Zack came out of the barn. He sighted Ward Watring and halted in his tracks, and then he saw Rusty buckling on his cartridge-belt with its holstered six-shooter.

Ward Watring, riding ahead of his Rolling M cowhands, saw what Rusty was doing. His white teeth flashed in a flat grin and he dropped his braided rawhide bridle reins over the horn of his silver-mounted California saddle and lifted both gloved hands to the level of his red flannel-shirted shoulders. His new high-crowned Stetson cocked at an angle.

"Don't shoot!" Ward Watring's grin twisted. "We're peaceful. Let's bury the tomahawk and smoke the peace pipe. I rode over to enter the jackpot bronc ridin' and ropin', and take away some Bar L money with this sorrel thing somebody sold my mother for a race horse. Where does a man leave his guns?"

Ward Watring reached down with his left hand and deftly unbuckled the cartridge-belt with its ivory-handled six-shooter in a Mexican-carved holster. Holding the belt and holstered gun dangling high.

There was a mocking challenge in Ward Watring's grin, in his yellow eyes, and the saddle swagger. Rusty Logan took it up with a flat-lipped grin, his black eyes wary.

"Leave your guns here at the barn. Put the broncs in the corral. Rope horses in the other feed yard. There's an empty stall for the race horse. Ike will take your jackpot entrance fees. And he'll cover any bets you want to make on the sorrel. Make yourselves welcome. Start a ruckus and your welcome's worn out."

Rusty did not offer Ward Watring and his Rolling M cowhands a drink from Ike’s jug. Ward let on not to notice the snub, though the jug was there in plain sight on a bench with a pail of water and dipper and tin cups. He grinned mirthlessly at Zack and asked him how he was getting along in his Four T cattle business. Zack said he reckoned he was doing all right, so far.

Ward Watring and his half-dozen cowhands put their Rolling M broncs in the big corral with the other animals. And loosened their saddle cinches and tied their saddled horses to the long feed rack in the feed corral. Ward put the sorrel race horse in an empty stall. He was coming out of the big log barn when Robin rode up. She did not notice Ward at first. Her face was flushed with excitement and she reined up alongside Zack.

"Get your horse, Zack. I need a partner for the necked-together stake race. It’s a new game. Ike necks the horses together with a three-foot string and the riders figure eight around the stakes and if the string busts your out."

"I gotta lend Rusty a hand here, Robin—"

"Would I do, lady?" Ward Watring’s hat was in his hand.

Robin saw him for the first time. He was tall and slim and in his fancy cowboy duds he must have looked mighty handsome and romantic to the girl. Her eyes brightened and her cheeks reddened and she stared at Ward Watring with frank, open admiration. He cut something of a heroic figure. And knew it.

"No. Rusty Logan’s voice was flat-toned and ugly. His black eyes watched Ward Watring as he spoke sharply to his young sister.

"Lope on back where you belong. With the rest of the kids."

It was the first time Rusty had ever used that tone of voice. It was as cruel and brutal as the slap of a rawhide quirt. Robin’s face whitened.

"We’re kinda busy, Robin." Zack made a try at easing the hurt. "But I’ll be along directly."

Robin tossed her head, the hurt and anger staining her tanned cheeks. Her usual shyness in front of strangers was gone. She looked almost grown-up when she gave Ward Watring a quick smile.

"It’s a kid game," she said, ignoring Rusty’s scowl and Zack’s clumsy efforts to get her away, "you’d be barred. But I’ll see you later." Robin whirled her horse and waved at Ward Watring and rode back to where Ike Logan was tying strings to the necks of ponies. Mostly Indian ponies.

Ward Watring’s yellow eyes watched Robin as she rode away. There was a faint grin on his face and he pulled his hat back on his head. And his silver-mounted spurs jingled as he walked away, swaggering, towards the little park in the box elders. His half-dozen cowhands right behind him.

Rusty’s freckles stood out like black warts as he fought down the hot anger that gripped him.

"Damn it, Zack," Rusty spoke in the same ugly tone he had used on Robin, "untrack yourself. I told you to ride herd on her. Keep that purty skunk away from her."

Zack nodded. And headed for the feed yard to get his horse, moving fast. It was about a quarter-mile to the park and he loped past Ward and his six cowpunchers who were on foot without giving them a look. Ward called something in a taunting voice but Zack did not hear. But when he got there Robin had necked her horse to the spotted pony of a proud and happy young Assiniboine they called Runner who was going to ride Old Thunder’s paint in the quarter-mile horse race, Robin ignored Zack, like he wasn’t there.

Then Zack saw Ike Logan standing on widespread bowed legs, thumbs hooked in the waistband of his new overalls, hat tilted back on his wiry, graying, red head. Ike was looking up at a man riding a big gray mule. And the man on the mule was Preacher Luther. Zack heard Ike’s voice. Flat-toned. Ugly.

"I never learned how to turn a grubline rider away. Even you. Put up your mule, Preacher."

VI

The afternoon went swiftly. The cowboy contests were run off smoothly and in rapid-fire order. Ward Watring had no time to out-maneuver Zack so that he could renew his brief acquaintance with Robin. The range dude ramrod of the Rolling M had entered the bronc riding and roping to win.
And he was content to grandstand for Robin’s benefit.

As for Zack, he spent a miserable afternoon. Robin was cold-shouldering him. High-chinned and very polite. Ladylike. It should have seemed comical but it wasn’t. It was Zack who trailed Robin, and Robin had her eyes on Ward Watring. And whenever she thought he was within earshot she would whisper and giggle with the other girls and let Zack overhear her saying that Ward Watring was the handsomest young cowboy she had ever seen.

Ward Watring won the bronc riding. He earned it when he rode the big Bear Paw Pool outlaw called Dynamite. A showy, spectacular ride. Rusty was thrown by the Rolling M bronc called Hard to Set. A bucking horse that he should have fanned and spurred from start to finish.

And Rusty Logan did no better in the calf and steer roping. He wasted a loop and caught with his second throw but his time was what Ike called day after tomorrow.

WARD WATRING lost the calf roping to a Bear Paw Pool man. And Zack got second money and Ward third.

But Ward won first money in the single steer roping. Rusty got too anxious and busted his steer. The Pool contestant broke his rope. But with the bronc riding and steer roping won, Ward Watring was in his glory. Nor did he hide his delight behind any cloak of modesty.

He was not offered a drink from Ike’s jug. He had fetched his own bottle. So had each of his tough cowhands, but none of them were getting drunk. No more than swag-gering tipsy.

The last event was the horse race. The Bear Paw Pool money was all down on their Pool quarter horse. Against the field. Ike had covered most of it. Ward Watring had a fistful of folding money he wanted to bet on his mother’s sorrel half-thoroughbred. One of his Rolling M men was a small, wiry, beady-eyed man with a hunched back. He had been a jockey once but ruled off the tracks for life for a rough ride that had resulted in a bad pile-up and three horses so badly crippled they had to be killed and one jockey killed outright. Now Humpy was going to ride Lota’s sorrel she called Ace.

“After any part of five thousand dollars,” Ward Watring waved his fistful of hundred-dollar bills, “on Lota’s Ace.”

“Old Thunder’s G Dot paint,” said Rusty Logan, “will daylight your sorrel.”

“Back that kind of talk with the long green,” taunted Ward Watring.

“I’m just a forty-a-month cowhand.”

“I’ll back Rusty’s talk,” said Zack, “with my Four T brand. And all the cattle in that iron. Cover that, Ward, with Rolling M livestock. We’ll go by the Four T calf tally you put down in your tally book on the round-up.”

“That’s a bet.” Ward Watring’s yellow eyes glittered. “I’ve still got five thousand—”

“You won’t have it after the dust settles,” wheezed a huge-paunched saloon keeper from the Little Rockies. “Old Thunder’s paint might not daylight your Lota’s Ace but that spotted pony will outrun your thoroughbred a quarter-mile. I’m coverin’ your bet. Preacher Luther kin hold the stakes.”

The big saloon man said he had fetched his missus and kids to the picnic and had come along to win the fat man’s race, but that he always made it a point to fetch along a little loose change to bet with Ike on the weather.

Preacher Luther had stalked around all day like some ghoul. Hoping, Ike Logan said, for somebody to die so he could preach that long-winded funeral sermon. But Ike watched the hungry greedy look in the Preacher’s pale eyes as he handled all that money with long, big-knuckled hands. Like some miser. Caressing and smoothing out the crumpled banknotes.

The Bear Paw Pool horse wrangler, a small-boned slim kid who had almost choked from bashfulness on every bite of picnic lunch he ate sitting alongside Robin, was riding the Pool quarter horse. He had won half a dozen matched races on the Bear Paw Pool black gelding. He was certain of winning this race. So certain that he had bet Robin a bottle of red soda pop.

Zack was supposed to ride the Logan Morgan bay three-year-old, and the Indian boy called Runner was supposed to ride Old Thunder’s paint, but when they led the horses out to the starting line Ward Watring voice a quick complaint.

Zack Morrow had to be barred, Set down. He had money bet on the Old Thunder
paint. It would be too easy for him to bump Lota’s Ace out of the running. Ike Logan nodded curiously. And looked around. He sighted Robin standing nearby.

“Shed that leather skirt, young ‘un. Skin down to shirt and Levi’s and swap them boots for moccasins. You bin beggin’ to ride this race. Now git!”

The Rolling M hunchback was the only rider using a saddle. His sorrel thoroughbred had a tiny professional jockey’s saddle cinched on. He rode in sock feet and stripped to overalls and thin undershirt. He rode a jockey’s short stirrup. A man had to hang onto the bits of the racing bridle. Lota’s Ace looked ready. High as a kite. Sleek, conditioned, trained. Ready to win.

The others were bareback, the Indian boy Runner stripped to a breech clot, the Pool horse wrangler looking like the almost shy ranch kid he actually was. And now Robin, in her faded denim overalls and old cotton shirt and moccasins came running up out of breath. They were three kids pitted against a tough rough-riding professional jockey. Two cowponies and an Injun pony matched with a thoroughbred race horse.

“Git your wind, young ‘un,” said Ike Logan. “Then fork your own pony. And if you don’t daylight Lota’s Ace at the finish line you might as well keep on over the hill.” He said it like he meant it.

Ike said something in Assiniboine to the boy Runner. Runner slid off the paint’s bare back. Rusty gave him a leg up on the Logan Morgan bay. Ike swung Robin up off the ground and onto the Old Thunder paint’s spotted back.

And Zack remembered now where he had seen that pinto before. It was the same paint Robin had ridden so recklessly down the slant of the scrub pine Signal Butte the day he and Rusty rode here to the Bar L ranch from the round-up.

The hunchback jockey and Ward Watring were protesting in earnest now. The wizened ex-jockey said he couldn’t ride a race with a damned girl. Bad enough to ride against a bald-faced kid and a young Injun, but a girl! The hell with it!

Ike Logan said he didn’t have to ride the race. He could scratch out. But scratching Lota’s Ace would forfeit all bets laid on the sorrel.

“You can’t stop the owner of the paint from ridin’ her own horse. Give to her by her Assiniboine grandfather.”

The Rolling M hunchback was leaning over along the sorrel’s sleek neck, whispering out of the side of his mouth to Ward Watring who was helping hold the rearing, lunging thoroughbred. There was a nasty look on the hunchback’s face and the look in his bloodshot beady eyes was ugly as sin. He stank of booze. He had to be half-drunk to ride a race ever since that death spell on the California track that had mashed his back and barred him from race riding on the big circuit.

Ward Watring was shaking his head, muttering some protest, but the hunchback won the argument.

“I ride my own race. Or you get yourself another boy—but you better not. I got my orders from Lota Watring. And that’s where you got yours. Along with the big dough. I ride my own race.”

Ward Watring let go the sorrel’s head. Beads of sweat glistened on his face as he backed away.

It was a wide straightaway. A measured quarter-mile. Lap and Tap. The Rolling M hunchback on the far right. He refused to start unless the Old Thunder paint was placed next. Then the Logan Morgan. The Bear Paw Pool black at the other end.

“I’m runnin’ at that spotted cayuse,” said the half-drunken hunchback. “Nothin’ else. To hell with them other two goats. You set a girl on the spotted cayuse. That’s your business. I’m runnin’ at that paint. I don’t aim to be bumped off by them other two goats.”

Robin put a silence on the hunchback’s beefing by riding up alongside him. Her braids tied around her neck. Freckles spotting her paled face.

“Quit bellyachin’.” Robin’s voice was gritty.

VII

LAP and tap start. The riders maneuvering their horses so as to be ready to go at the starting line when the gun went off. Back and forth across the starting line. Jockeying for any split-second advantage to be gained at the crack of the starting gun. Watching one another. Cutting swift glances
at the other horses and their riders. And from the tail of an eye always watching the grizzled cowman from the yonder side of the Little Rockies who had no bets down and was cold sober and had been given the starter’s pistol by unanimous vote because his only interest involved was his liking for an honest horse race.

Lota’s Ace was a bad starter. The sorrel thoroughbred was wet with sweat; rearing and lunging. Too ready. The hunchback had a snarl on his face and his eyes were slitted. He gripped his jockey’s bat till the knuckles of his hand showed bone-white. He was sweating as much as his mount.

The Logan Morgan and the Bear Paw Pool black and the paint were far better behaved. They were ready enough. Coiled springs ready to snap. But more used to the lap and tap start than the sorrel thoroughbred.

The hunchback was almost thrown. Then he walked Lota’s Ace to the starting line and the starter’s pistol cracked and they were off!

The start of a quarter-mile race is more often than not the winning of the race. The short horse race is most likely won at the starting line. And the short-coupled quarter horse with his compact hindquarters that give the powerful drive to the start, is favored over the leggier thoroughbred.

The four horses were bunched at the start. Side alongside and close together and the gun sent them off in as fair a start as anyone could want. And through the sharp crack of the starter’s pistol shrilled the Indian yell of young Runner. The high-pitched yip-yip of Robin. The cowboy yelp of the Bear Paw Pool horse wrangler.

The hunchback did not yell. His teeth were bared as his lips pulled back in a snarl. Lota’s Ace had lunged at the crack of the gun and it gave the sorrel an even break for the start. And the hunchback leaned along the sleek neck and his hunched back arched and his arms flailed as his slim hard rawhide bat rose and fell.

It happened swiftly. It could have been an accident but it wasn’t. That hunchback knew every dirty trick of the racing track and he worked at his jockey trade with the whiskey-fired ugly cunning that had set him down and ruled him off forever on the circuit.

Lota’s Ace bumped the paint. Hard. But the close-coupled pinto was not thrown off stride and it was the sorrel thoroughbred that came off second best in that bit of rough riding. And Robin, barebacked, was riding her race as she had ridden a hundred such horse races, clean and straight. And then the rawhide bat caught her across the face. She felt the thudding slash of it across her mouth. Again across her eyes. And the pain blinded her and her shrill Indian yelp thinned to a sharp cry of pain. She was blind. She grabbed her horse’s mane and hung on and she felt the black dizziness grip her and through the blackness came the thunder of pounding hoofs and the rush of air whipping her face and she screamed against the black pain and kept on screaming and her hold on the reins slackened and Robin Logan rode her race blind and from sheer instinct and grit and with the taste of blood in her mouth. The dizziness was gone. She blinked her eyes against the black pain and the black pain was changing to searing red like the blaze of fire and hoofs pounded and the roar of the cheering crowd dinned in her ears. And Robin did not know the race was won and over with until a Bear Paw Pool cowpuncher cut in from beyond the finish line and crowded his horse close to the running paint and lifted her off with the swift skill of a pick-up hazer at the finish of a bronc ride. And he rode back to the finish line with Robin under one strong arm. And he handed her to Ike Logan. Robin was limp and unconscious and blood trickling from her mouth and nose and an ugly welt across her eyes that were going to be black shiners.

The last Robin remembered was a horrible scream. A man’s scream. And she came awake with cold towels on her eyes and someone washing the blood and dirt from her face. Robin found her voice.

"Who won?"

"You and your paint daylighted the field." It was Ike Logan’s voice and it sounded grim. "Runner and the Bear Paw Pool kid waited till they crossed the finish line with the Pool horse second money. Then they pocketed Lota’s Ace. They slammed into that hunchback from both sides. They piled him up. He let out one horrible yell. And when the dust cleared the big sorrel thoroughbred that’s called
Lota’s Ace had an empty jock saddle when a couple of Rollin’ M men ketched the bridle reins. The rough-ridin’ hunchback has rode his last race. The horse that kicked his head in deserves pension on good grass. He got off easy. Nothin’ coulda stopped this crowd from lynchin’ that hunch-backed thing. Now let’s git this thick porterhouse steak laid acrost your face, young ‘un. We don’t want Ike Logan’s little Robin cuttin’ pigeon wings at the dance tonight with a pair of black eyes. You rode a race, young un’. A stop-watch would clock that time your paint made as almighty close to the world record. And why not? That paint’s daddy is the one and only famous Steedust stud. Now take it easy, baby. Here’s Zack.”

Ward Watring wanted to go to her. To tell her that he had nothing to do with the brutal treatment she’d taken from the hunchback. But young Zack had barred his way. He had the starter’s pistol in his hand.

“I’m goin’ to gut shoot you, Ward.”

Rusty had come up from behind and slapped the gun from Zack’s hand.

“Tuck in your shirt-tail, pardner. We’re savin’ Purty Britches for hangin’. But we won’t string him up till the dance is over. You lope over and ride herd on Robin. Tell Ike that I just sighted the Widder Watring and Luke Morrow drive up to the barn in her fancy top buggy. Ike Logan will want to be on hand to give ’em the proper welcome. I’ll ride herd on Purty Pants. Rattle your hocks, Zack. Robin needs you. Four T Zack.”

The big, fat saloon keeper from the Little Rockies wheezed up. Sweat running down his red face. He was cussing like a mule Skinner.

“That damned blue-nosed, psalm shoutier! He’s gone! He drug it! I shoulda known better than to let a damned scripture-shoutin’ preacher hold stakes. Preacher Luther’s run off with ten thousand dollars in long green legal tender. That circuit-ridin’ sidewinder!”

Ike Logan came up. He grinned at the big saloon man. He said he didn’t reckon Preacher Luther would get too far away. Old Thunder had had an eye on the circuit rider. The Injuns would fetch Preacher Luther back.

Then Ike Logan walked on to the barn. To where Luke Morrow stood on his long legs, thumbs hooked in his slanted cartridge-belt, his face grayish and his hard gray eyes bloodshot. Standing near the heads of Lota’s team of matched trottters.

“I took advantage, Ike,” Luke Morrow’s voice was hard bitten, “of your Bar L invitation, Lota wanted to come to the dance.”

“Hang onto my horses, Luke. Never mind the big palaver. They get spooked whenever they smell the stink of an Injun camp. Do we unhook the team, Squawman? Or turn turn around and go back to our Rolling M ranch?”

Lota sat holding the lines in her gloved hands. She looked sleek and beautiful and there was a challenge in her amber eyes.

Ike Logan grinned and began unhooking the tugs. “Make yourself welcome, Lota.”

VIII

THERE was the grand march, led by Ike Logan and his handsome squaw who wore her white woman’s clothes with lithe grace. She looked too young and slim to be the mother of the husky Rusty and Robin who looked nearer eighteen than fourteen in her first grown-up dress and high-heeled slippers.


Zack Morrow in his new pants and shirt and shop-made boots. With his hair trimmed and looking lean and hard and older than his years. His face a little flushed as he walked behind his father with Robin. Robin with her pair of black eyes.

Rusty was right behind him with the fat saloon keeper’s oldest daughter. She was seventeen and slim like her mother and her hair was a dark tawny gold color and she had laughing blue eyes. Her name was June Jones and she and Rusty were going to be married on her eighteenth birthday.

Ward Watring in his fancy cowboy duds stood in the doorway looking on. He was getting too drunk. His tough cowhands stood outside passing a bottle. Ward still felt the sting of the tongue-lashing Lota had given him. He had dropped five thousand dollars of her money on the horse race her Lota’s Ace should have won against what she called scrub cowponies. Lota knew little about the breeding of fast quarter horses. To
her a race horse must be a thoroughbred. And a thoroughbred can't help but win over a field of scrubs. And Ward had lost what amounted to next year’s Rolling M calf crop to Zack Morrow.

"You're a fancy dude," Lota had snarled at her son. "Like your father was. A finnhorn sport. They hung Ace Watring."

There were times when her fierce love for her handsome son turned into vitriolic contempt.

"I fetched Luke Morrow here," she whispered fiercely to her son Ward, "to kill Ike Logan. When the ruckus starts, you get Rusty Logan. And that tow-headed young Zack. Your tough cowhands will do the gun work. All you do is ramrod the job. Keep your own hands clean. You've got hired men to do the dirty chores. Keep yourself clean. I want this Bar L outfit, if I have to marry you to that Robin Logan half-breed girl. Stay sober. It's time the Preacher showed up."

"Preacher Luther hightailed it with the ten thousand dollars he was holdin' stakes. The loosed old fool, thinkin' he could git away with it!"

"The ten thousand is in under my buggy seat. I left Preacher Luther lyin' a few miles back on the road with a big lump on his head. The Injuns will find him if they half try. They'll fetch him in. He'll tell it scary how he was kidnapped away from here and hit over the head with a gun barrel. If you had half the wolf-brains of Preacher Luther instead of too much Ace Watring finnhorn blood, you'd do a better job. Now go to work on that Robin 'breed girl. Ace Watring got me when I was her age."

Ward Watring waited his chance. When Robin slipped away after the grand march, he followed her. It was moonlight. She went to the house. A few minutes later she came out the kitchen door carrying two big pails that looked too heavy for her. Ward stepped out from the shadows.

"Lemme carry the buckets, Robin. I have to talk to you. Convince you, somehow, that I had nothin' to do with that damn' dirty-ridin' hunchback's battin' you. I'da killed him if he hadn't been trampled to death. You've got to believe me, Robin. What's in the pails? Smells like mulligan stew."

"Dog food. The hounds' supper. I'll try to believe what you're telling me. I'd hate to think you had anything to do with it. The buckets are kinda heavy—"

The next dance had not yet started. Most of the men were outside. Smoking. Talking. Having a pull at the bottle. They heard a man's hoarse, terrified shout. Dogs snarling. Robin's scream. Then her voice, sharp, brittle. Cracking like a whip. Then the slamming of the heavy gate that led into the high stockade where the hounds were kept. And Robin Logan's voice. Gritty now with cold fury. Almost too far away to make out her words.

"Get up and dust yourself off, mister. I hope they tore the seat out of your purty britches. You paw me any more and Ike and Rusty will finish up where the hounds left off. Get your horse and go home."

"Your damned dogs are locked up. You might as well git used to me kissin' you because that's why I come. Ouch! You damned wildcat! I'll show you—"


Over near the high stockade where the hounds were kept came the roar of two six-shooters.

Young Zack Morrow had had a notion where Robin was going when she left the barn dance. He had claimed her for the grand march, but he had a notion she would rather it was the handsome Ward Watring by her side and said so. And Robin had tossed her head and laughed and given Ward Watring a meaning smile as they marched past where he stood lounging in the doorway. Then Zack had wandered off alone towards the stockade. He had got his six-shooter from the saddle room before the dance started. Shoved it in under his shirt into the waistband of his new pants and out of sight.

Now he stood there in the moonlight with the gun in his hand. And when Robin twisted and stumbled backwards away from Ward Watring's arms, Zack saw Ward jerk his gun and saw the gun spit flame and felt the stinging thud of a .45 slug grazing his ribs. And then he was pulling the trigger of his cocked gun and was thumbing back the gun hammer and pulling the gun trigger. Ward Watring was down on one knee and
the gun in Ward’s hand kept spewing flame and the bullets were whining and snarling past Zack’s head. He kept on shooting. He saw blood on Ward’s face. Gushing from his gaping mouth while he cursed. And then Ward Watring slumped over sideways onto the ground, rolled over onto his back and lay there with his eyes wide open and the blood trickling from his gaping mouth.

Robin had crouched there near the gate to the high stockade, wide-eyed, her face chalky white. Now she jumped to her feet and ran to where Zack stood with the empty gun in his hand, thin smoke drifting from its black muzzle.

Over at the barn dance men were moving, shouting back and forth. Then Lota’s voice, high-pitched, brittle.

“Stand where you are. You, Luke, get back inside. This shotgun’s loaded!”

“Not while Ace Watring’s murderin’ whelp is killin’ my boy! Stand aside with that gun, woman!”

“I’ve always wanted to blast your guts out, you big sucker!” Lota’s brittle voice cracked in a shrill laugh. “You hung my man. The only man I ever had. You damned Vigilante murderer. Ace Watring’s son, my son, is punching your tow-headed Zack’s one-way ticket to hell. I’ve got yours here. Come and get it.”

Ike Logan grabbed big Luke Morrow from behind and held him.

“She’ll do it, Luke. She’s playin’ for keeps. And so is that blue-nosed Preacher right behind her. Keep your shirt on, Luke. Or you’ll git us both murdered.”

Preacher Luther had come up out of the night. A lump on the back of his head, his story rehearsed. He had taken no chances on being tracked down and perhaps killed and scalped by tipsy Indians. He had slipped back to the ranch and hidden himself in the saddle and harness room where every man was supposed to have checked his gun. Preacher Luther stood there now in the doorway of the big log barn where the dance was being held, tall and gaunt and funereal in his rusty black clothes. A six-shooter in each long, bony, big-knuckled hand and his reddled pale eyes bloodshot and wicked as sin, while Lota herded Luke Morrow and Ike Logan and the Bear Paw Pool men and Fatty Jones, the saloon keeper, together with the half-breds, into the barn that was lighted by half a dozen lanterns. And now Preacher Luther and his daughter Lota stood side by side with their guns ready to blast death into the crowd of men bunched just inside the lighted barn. Preacher Luther with his two six-shooters, Lota with a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun. And the resemblance between father and daughter was there. Not in their looks. The long-geared, blue-nosed Preacher and his handsome, sleek, black-haired daughter contrasted in looks. It was in their ruthless, greedy, cold-blooded way and manner that close identity branded them. Preacher Luther snarled orders at the Rolling M tough cowhands.

“One of you git over yonder and lend Ward Watring a hand. See to it that young Zack Morrow is dead. Fetch Ward and the ‘breed brat Robin Logan. There’s goin’ to be a weddin’. Or Ike Logan and his son Rusty go to their own funerals. Along with Luke Morrow. You Rolling M curly wolves outside, be ready for anything. Got your guns?”

“They got the guns I fetched ’em in my buggy,” said Lota. “Ward got his. Luke never checked his but when he goes for it, I’ll kill him. Ike Logan and his tough Rusty both pack guns. The others aren’t heeled. Where’s that Rusty Logan?”

“He give us the slip, ma’am,” growled one of the Rolling M renegades.

“You clumsy fools!” Lota’s voice cracked like a whip.

Preacher Luther snarled like a gaunt old wolf. Ike Logan grinned.

“You and your Vigilantes hung the wrong man, Luke,” said Ike. “Ace Watring taken his road agent orders from Lota. Lota got hers from her Preacher Luther daddy. That blue-nosed circuit rider was the big ramrod of the road agent gang. Ace knowed it too late. The best he could do with a rope around his neck was spit in the Preacher’s face. You woke up to it now, Luke?”

“I woke up too late.” Luke Morrow’s voice was toneless and bitter. “Me and Ace Watring. That Jezebel. That blue-nosed psalm shoutin’!”

Luke Morrow, like Ike Logan beside him, stood with his hands up. He did not lower them. His long legs were bent a little at the knees and they stiffened like long steel springs and he flung himself straight at Lota and her sawed-off shotgun. The double bar-
rels spewed their loads of buckshot and the heavy double explosion was as loud as a cannon. The buckshot tore through Luke Morrow's thighs and guts and his big heavy buckshot-torn weight crashed heavily on top of Lota and knocked her over backwards and the dying cattleman landed on top of her. Luke Morrow's huge hands fastened like clamps on her white throat and throttled her shrill screams.

Ike Logan's six-shooter slid into sight so swiftly that nobody saw the fast gun draw. He shot from the hip and his .45 slug struck Preacher Luther under his long jaw and tore through his Adam's apple and smashed away the base of his skull and spinal column. Preacher Luther's head snapped back and then lobbed forward on its broken neck and his lanky black frame collapsed like an empty rusty black sack and his trigger fingers jerked in a death reflex. The guns went off; the two bullets going wild and the recoil kicked both guns from his big-knuckled hands and Preacher Luther was dead when he pitched forward on the barn floor.

OVER at the high stockade Rusty Logan grabbed his sister Robin and yanked open the gate and shoved her inside with her hound pack. And Rusty was grinning flatly when he yanked Zack's empty gun from his hand and shoved his own loaded six-shooter at Zack.

"Kid Curry never missed with it, pardner. Don't spoil a good gun." Rusty ejected the six empty shells from Zack's gun and reloaded. And then he yanked the somewhat-bewildered Zack into the black shadows of the high stockade, Just as the tough Rolling M renegade sent to fetch Ward Watring and Robin, loomed up.

"You, Ward! Grab your 'breed gal and—" His voice broke off suddenly. He had almost stumbled over the bullet-riddled dead body of Ward Watring.

"Shore purty, ain't he?" Rusty Logan stepped out of the shadow, his six-shooter spewing fire. He shot the man twice and the heavy .45 slugs doubled the renegade up and he dropped his gun and went down, dead in a few seconds.

Rusty and Zack stood side by side in the darkness, their backs to the heavy high stockade.

And they could hear and see everything that happened in the lighted doorway of the big log barn.

Rusty shoved two cartridges into the chambers of the six-shooter and traded back guns.

"A man likes his own gun. This is a tight, Zack. There's four of 'em. And they'll be headed for where their horses are saddled and waitin' in the feed yard behind us. They gotta pass us to git their horses. And here they come. Hold it till they git here. How you feelin', pardner?"

"All right, I reckon."

The four tough Rolling M cowhands were running. They had seen Lota go down under Luke Morrow's buckshot-riddled charge. They had seen Preacher Luther killed. It was time to make their getaway. And they ran for it.

Rusty Logan let them get within twenty feet. Then he commenced shooting. And he had shot down two of the four before Zack pulled his gun trigger. Zack shot three times at one of the running men before he dropped him. And Rusty had shot the remaining renegade before Zack's man pitched headlong.

Inside the high stockade the hound pack was making a racket and Robin was shouting them down. And over at the barn the men were swarming into the saddle room after their guns and the women and kids were huddled together at the far end of the big building.

Ike Logan was standing there with a gun in his hand, telling the other men to stay where they were. And Ike came on alone. Crouched as he ran towards the stockade.

"Don't trip over Purty Britches, Ike!" Rusty called out, trying to make his voice sound matter-of-fact.

Ike pulled up with a jerk. He let out a sort of shaky laugh. Rusty stepped out of the black shadow, ejecting the empty shells
from his wooden-handled six-shooter, Zack right behind him.

Ike Logan tried to say something but the words kept choking him. Robin’s voice sounded inside the stockade. Tense, brittle.

“Down, dogs! Down, fellows! Wait till we see who opens the gate. If it ain’t Zack or Rusty or Ike, I’ll let you play wolf with ’em.”

It was Zack who opened the stockade gate. He tried to make his voice sound as careless as Rusty’s.

“There’s two buckets of dog grub here, gittin’ cold. Don’t let them pups knock me down when I come in with it.”

Ike told Rusty he had better take Zack and Robin on to the house. He’d send his missus over. Robin was too young to see the mess there at the barn. Fatty Jones was herding all the women out the back way and over to the house and when they got there Rusty could fetch Zack over to the barn where the men were.

Luke Morrow was dead. It had taken him only a few seconds to die. Those few seconds had been long enough for the cowman’s huge hands to break the neck of Lota and throttle the life from her. They had to pry loose Luke Morrow’s death grip.

They had taken the dead bodies of Preacher Luther and Lota and Luke Morrow away. Preacher Luther and Lota and Ward would be buried side by side. Luke Morrow would be buried alongside the grave of his wife Ruth. The renegades would lie in slab-marked graves.

Ike Logan got rid of his Fourth of July crowd. Fatty Jones helping him speed the departing guests. And when they had all gone Ike Logan’s squaw and Fatty’s wife made coffee and it was getting daybreak when they all sat down to breakfast.

Ike’s squaw had bandaged Zack’s bullet-nicked ribs and Robin had helped her mother and they had fussed over Zack until Ike told them they were treating Zack like he was some bald-faced kid instead of a man with a couple of notches on his gun. And he took Zack outside where Fatty Jones and Rusty were waiting.

The big saloon keeper had the ten thousand dollars they had found under the seat of Lota’s top buggy. He said he was banking one-half for Rusty and his daughter June for a sort of wedding present, the other half for Robin and Zack.

“I’m no prophet, Ike, but I’ll gamble my saloon against a wind-bellied calf that Robin and Zack git married as quick as they come of age.”

Ike Logan said that was a bet nobody would take. “Zack’s bin one of the tribe since the day he was born. When the missus told the boy’s mother we’d always look after him.”

Old Thunder came up. The proud old Assiniboine shook hands gravely with Zack. And said something in Assiniboine Sioux. Zack understood the language and felt the warm glow inside his heart. Ike Logan and Rusty understood and grinned.

Ike gave Old Thunder the half-empty jug. When Old Thunder had gone, the fat saloon man’s eyes questioned them.

“Seems like you ain’t the only man set-tin’ himself up as a prophet,” said Ike, “Old Thunder just gave his granddaughter Robin to Zack Morrow.”

Ike Logan chuckled. He said Old Thunder was wise as a tree full of owls. He’d have Rolling M beef and Four T beef and Bar L beef a-plenty now to feed the Assiniboines and Gros Ventres relations.

Zack slipped away after awhile. He went to pay his last respects to his dead father whose buckshot-torn dead body lay wrapped in Zack’s bed tarp in the bunkhouse. He reached down and smoothed the hair back from the granite-gray face.

Robin’s moccasins made no noise. She came in quietly and stood there beside Zack and she was dressed once more in her faded denim and cotton. And her small tanned hand crept into Zack’s hand and he held it. And then they went out and closed the bunkhouse door on its dead. And they stood there and Zack’s arm was around her slim shoulders and the rising sun shone in their eyes. Then Zack put his arms around Robin and her face lifted to his and he kissed her. It was the first time he had ever kissed Robin. And it was only a kid kiss. But it sealed the prophecy of the white man and the Assiniboine.
IN THE short time before he had his postwar plan well started, Howdy Bill used to wonder about the folks here at home. Why so much bother over what fighting a war might have done to him? As far as he could see, it had made no difference at all. He’d always been an easy-going sort, minding his own business, and was still that same kind of a character, he supposed.

Tonight, though, he wasn’t even thinking about it. Because this was a moment, right now, that he had dreamed of as far back as he could remember. It was his prewar and postwar plans all rolled into one.

In the light of floodlamps around the truck freight yard, he backed his huge tractor-trailer expertly against the loading rack, cut the fuel valve of his Diesel and climbed down from the cab. He had already picked up most of his twenty-ton load. Now, while freight hustlers stowed the rest of it inside, he stood off a little, looking once more at the high and shining beauty of his truck. Its fresh paint was a brilliant red, with large lettering in black: INTERMOUNTAIN FREIGHT LINES. And under that: HOWARD J. BILL.

Of course, he wasn’t making any cross-country, inter-mountain hauls just yet. The run tonight, his first, was only down the coast, San Francisco to Los Angeles. But this was the beginning. You might as well have a name big enough to fit in with your future plans.

For a moment those future plans of Howdy Bill’s went spinning around happily in his head. He was thinking of a girl now, Mary Lane, who would be waiting for him two hundred miles to the south when he passed through her town. If it hadn’t been for Mary, he might not be doing what he was tonight.

When he first got out of the Army and was looking for a job, she’d said, “Howdy, why go to work for someone else? Why not do what you’ve always wanted... have a truck line of your own!”
He had started to argue, but she had stopped him: "I know it will take all your money. It only means we'll have to wait a little longer, to be married, and it's been your dream so long, Howdy. I know that, too."

She was right. Even when he was a tow-headed, moon-faced kid in overalls, hiking home from school along Highway 101, he knew what he was going to be when he grew up. He used to stand with eyes and mouth wide open as the huge truck and trailer outfits, looking bigger than railroad cars to him, came thundering past. The roar of their Diesel engines filled him with a nameless ecstasy, and the brown-faced drivers high up in their cabs were the mightiest men in the world.

Sometimes, if he waited at a certain filling station, one of them would pick him up and take him on as far as his home. He asked a million questions, those times, and the men would look at his serious round face and tell him all they knew. From then on he dreamed of nothing but compound gears—twelve speeds forward and three in reverse—and the way you handled air brakes and the skill it took to keep twenty or thirty tons rolling up a grade. He was going to have a freight line of his own some day. . . . And now, tonight, that dream was true.

He turned sharply as a voice behind him said, "Okay, Howdy. You can roll."

Mike Tanner was coming from the freight dock with the waybills for this trip.

Howdy grinned at him. "I'm all set, Mr. Tanner. This is the night I've been waiting for!"

"I know." Tanner nodded. He was a big man, with a brown, bony face, a gear jammer himself once, but a freight broker now who handled most of the business for independent trucks.

He paused, looking solemnly at Howdy Bill. In spite of his three years in the Army, Howdy's face beneath light curly hair was still round and boyish, with no sign of toughness in its good-natured grin.

"I guess you'll make out all right," Tanner said at last. "I hope so. If you run into any trouble, use your head. This is valuable stuff you're hauling. It's got to get through."

Half an hour later Howdy was beyond the city's traffic and began to roll, working up through his compound gears into high high. This was hotshot freight; it had to reach Los Angeles on a scheduled time. Well, it would. There had been troubles lately. Howdy knew that. But Mike Tanner needn't worry.

It was important that he please Mike Tanner. If he did, he'd get a contract for a big chunk of Mike's business. That would mean another truck, then another, and pretty soon Intermountain Freight Lines would be a fact. Howdy grinned a little in the darkness of his cab, his mind racing on ahead a couple of hours or so. He'd be seeing Mary then and he could say: "Honey, this is it! We won't need to wait now!"

Where the highway began to snake up into the foothills of the Coast Range, he made his first coffee stop. Half a dozen other trucks were pulled up in front of a little place beneath dark oaks. You could always tell good coffee by the number of stopped trucks.

He drew in at the head of the line, cut his lights, and then walked back in the sudden darkness of the night. When he entered the narrow room the loud, laughing talk of gear jammers flooded around him.

As he wedged himself onto a stool at the counter he saw that most of these men were drivers for big outfits, like Southern Pacific. He was the only independent, on his own.

The girl behind the counter slid a cup of coffee toward him without his having to ask for it, and from further along the row he heard a man say jokingly, "Red's got himself a machine-gun tonight. May need it. How about it, Red?"

Howdy leaned forward to catch the answer, and missed it in the loud babble, but he understood. The trouble that Red must have run into was not exactly a joke.

He drank his coffee quickly. There was no time to kill tonight. In the doorway he paused to light a cigarette before going on in the darkness to his truck. As he passed along beside it, he glanced at the tires. No flats. He reached the cab door and opened it, and suddenly froze with one foot on the step. A man was sitting in there on the right-hand side of the seat.

Howdy Bill felt his heart jump. But casually, he said, "Sorry. No riders."

A gun pointed at him from across the man's thigh jerked a little.
"Get in!"
"Okay," Howdy said agreeably. "Sure."

SLIDING in behind the wheel, he thought swiftly of a number of things that he might do. Stall for time... have trouble starting the engine.....

Sharply, the man said, "Get going! No tricks, kid... I can run this truck myself!"

When they were rolling, climbing the foothill grade, Howdy glanced at the flat, square-jawed face in the dim reflection from the instrument panel light.

Then he asked, "Why pick me out tonight? Because I'm an independent... no one to back me up if I lose a load? The big outfits must have your crowd scared off!"

He got no answer.

"Well," Howdy said, "I'm not hauling liquor, if that's what you think." It was the boys on the liquor runs, lately, who had been losing their loads.

The man turned his head to look at him. "We know what you've got. It's good enough." He looked again at the highway, saying, "All right. Take this fork to the left."

A dirt road branched off from the pavement, curving up into the oaks. Howdy turned in, and in a moment he saw the other truck. It was a van almost as big as his tractor-trailer, unlighted, stopped beside the road.

"Far enough," the man ordered. "Cut your lights and engine and get out."

As soon as they were standing out on the ground, two men came toward them from the dark trees. They stopped. Then one, short and thin, approached Howdy Bill.

Peering at Howdy's face, he said, "Well, hello, kid?" He stepped back. "Take care of him, Joe."

Howdy sensed what was coming. The odds were all against him here tonight, himself against these three. Once he might have thought that it was hopeless. But Howdy Bill had fought a war.

He was ready when the man who had remained beside him struck suddenly at his head, using the gun for a club. He threw up his right arm, not enough to ward off the blow, but enough to ease it. As a crushing pain shot through his skull, he dropped and lay still.

There was a brief silence. Then the man above him said, "Okay, he's out. Get busy. I'll keep watch of the road."

Through slitted eyelids as he lay dead-still, Howdy watched the man's feet close to his head, and there was a familiar quiet confidence in him. He heard the other truck engine start. Then the truck was backed slowly next to the far side of his own. At the same time he could hear the end doors of his tractor-trailer creaking open. He figured quickly... one man back there... one in the other truck cab... one still on guard above him.

But the guard's feet near his head had moved a little. They turned away from him, and took a step.

In that instant Howdy rose in one swift coordinated movement. He was up behind the man's back, one hand across his mouth, the other striking a soundless blow.

The man sagged limply. Howdy caught him, eased him to the ground and found his gun. No more than a few seconds had passed. The truck engine was still running as he rolled in the darkness beneath his own, then the other as far as the driver's side. With the gun thrust down inside his belt, he lay waiting.

The engine stopped. The driver's legs came down from the step within a foot of Howdy's head. He waited until they had passed him, then rose again with a raider's silent swiftness... and struck.

This time he didn't stop to catch the sagging body, but let it fall. He pulled the gun from inside his belt as he reached the rear end of the truck. So little time had passed that the third man was still at the tractor-trailer's doors, and started to say, "All right, Slim, get this stuff hustled..."

"Sorry," said Howdy Bill. "Not tonight!"

He moved the gun, "Keep your hands up where I can see them. And you needn't yell for the others. They're out."

With his hands raised, the man stared at him blankly. "How did you do this?"

"A little specialty of mine," Howdy said. "Three years in the Army, pal, and you're bound to come out with something. I came out knowing how to handle guys like you. That's all." He stepped closer. "Now do what I tell you, and don't fool around. I've got important business down the road!"
ME AND Bulldozer Craig are setting in the lobby of the Westward Hotel, in Anchorage, moodily watching the rain change to snow, then back to rain again. Spring ain't far off, but the weather can't seem to make up its mind. Nearby a miner says to his pardner, "I believe there's water enough in the Hungry River country to do a little mining this year. If I had a piece of ground there—"

"Besides the piece of ground," his pardner interrupts, "you'd need a dragline scraper outfit, and a lot of grub, plus some lumber for sluice boxes and flumes, plus—" He throws up his hands. "Why talk about it?"

I know why this cuss is talking about it. It's because he's a miner, and any piece of ground that has values is a challenge to a miner. Better men than I have said, "It isn't so much the gold, as it is licking the problem that stands between you and the gold." Of course you want to do a little better than break even. There's no sense in risking your stake and your neck just to take out as much as you put in. Leave hungry ground alone, and in a few years somebody invents a gadget that'll help you work the ground at a profit. I explain this to Bulldozer in a low tone of voice.

"Listen, No-Shirt," he answers, "I know for a fact that you've been waiting thirty years for a crack at Hungry River. They've improved the machinery, but before you can
Not a Feeling Like Somebody Tickling You
in the Ribs or a Pretty Girl Kissing You.
But One Just as Strong—the Tenseness in the
Atmosphere That’s Just Ahead of a Gold Stampede

get it to that country they’ll have to drive
tunnels through a few mountains.

"Jack Jefford flew a dragline outfit for
the CAA," I answer. "A mountain looks
pretty silly trying to stop a DC3 that’s clear-
ing it, with a load of mining machinery, by
a good two thousand feet."

"Jefford had a place to set her down,"
Bulldozer answers. "He told me about that
deal. "It’d take some doing to get a plane
into the Hungry River Valley. It’s narrow,
and full of up-drafts and down-drafts."
Bulldozer think awhile. "No-Shirt, there’s
something queer about all this sudden in-
terest in Hungry River. You haven’t men-
tioned it in three, four years. Nor has any-
body else. Now all of a sudden miners are
talking about it. What’s up?"

Now I know what I’ve been feeling for
the past three or four days. It isn’t a feel-
ing like somebody tickling you in the ribs,
or a pretty girl kissing you. But it’s just as
strong.

It’s the electric tenseness in the atmos-
phere that’s just ahead of a stampede. It’s
caused by a few miners knowing what’s
in the wind, and a flock of others who think
they know. Voices get lower, eyebrows jerk
significantly, and conversation is mostly in
sentences that aren’t ever finished for fear
somebody will catch on. The listener, in the
know, finishes the sentences his self.

Several cabs pull up in front of the hotel,
and people get out. The train that met the
boat at Seward has arrived. "Something’s
up!" I whisper to Bulldozer, "There’s Five-
Cent Gilligan. He's worth a barrel of money. Do you know how he got it?"

"From the look of him," Bulldozer answers, "he didn't get it the hard way."

"You're right. He's always skimming the cream after the other cuss has caught the wild cow and milked her," I answer. "Right now I've got to start matching wits with the buzzard."

Bulldozer looks at me in astonishment. "What are you matching wits with him over?" he asks.

"That ain't very good grammar," I tell him. "Whatever deal he's for, I'm against."

"Take your mind off'n Five-Cent Gilligan," Bulldozer urges, "and get a load of the lovelies coming in. The blonde is about the right age for me, No-Shirt, and the one with her, old enough to be her mother, would do for you."

I can tell by the way the ladies look around that they haven't been to Alaska before. They act as if they're expecting snow igloos and Eskimos running around with ivory-headed harpoons. They must've got a shock when they saw their first Anchorage traffic signal.

They register and disappear upstairs. All male heads are turned to watch two pairs of well-turned ankles—as they called 'em when I was young—sedately taking the steps. Everybody sighs and relaxes. They're sure going to decorate the lobby. Up comes more cabs, and out gets seven husky young lads, with ex-service written all over 'em.

Their packs are heavy, and each has a gold pan and shovel. I can tell some Seattle place has outfitted 'em. "I hope they strike it," an old sourdough says to me. "Alaska can use a few young bucks of the right type."

While we're talking, the ladies come down, stop at the desk, and the clerk points to me. They come over, and the youngest, who is a warm-hearted blonde if ever I saw one, "You are No-Shirt McGee," she says, presenting a hand which I press cordially. "I am Lana Lansing. I'm a writer looking for Alaska atmosphere and material. I am told you have had the most thrilling experiences."

"Cutting into Frank Pierce's racket?" I ask, grinning. "He's been buying groceries on my grief for years."

"Perhaps I can package your adventures a little more attractively," she suggests. I glow all over under her personality, and tell her that shouldn't be too hard to do. And all the while her hand is warm and firm in my big paw.

"The fellow who keeps nudging me, Miss Lansing," I tell her, "is my pardner, Bulldozer Craig."

IT IS now Bulldozer's turn to hold that warm, firm hand. At the same time she introduces me to her mother, Mrs. Martha Lansing. In three seconds' time I know where Lana got that warm, firm handshake.

"You ladies must be starving," Bulldozer says. "We were just going to have dinner. We'd feel honored if—"

"Oh, no!" Lana protests, without too much force. "We wouldn't think of it. You are having dinner on me."

"Oh no," Bulldozer says.

"I'll settle this," I say, tucking Martha's arm through mine. "You're all having dinner on me."

As I hold the door open and the ladies walk in ahead of me, Jerry Long, an old friend, grabs me by the arm and says, "No-Shirt, can you loan me five dollars? I came away without my poke."

The ladies beam, indicating they'll excuse me. I dig into my pants as the door closes. "Listen, No-Shirt," he warns, "watch your step. That Lana Lansing is no writer."

"How do you know?" I ask, starting to get mad.

"Because she hasn't got a pencil or notebook," he answers. "She had to borrow one on the train. I saw her."

"Writers never have pencils," I answer. "Another thing, Malemute Kelso was on the train. And he's atmosphere in all languages. Smells like a Siberian igloo, blended with a salmon drying rack. Somebody told her about Kelso. Did she try to shake him down for story material, as any true writer would? No, she glanced at him like he's part of the scenery passing by the train window. You know how you McGees are, No-Shirt—just plain suckers where a woman is concerned."

"I've got to admit I've made my mistakes, Jerry," I tell him, "but it's always been fun, even when they were making a sucker out of me. I'd sure like to believe this Lana
Lansing is a writer looking for material. Damned if I’m not going to believe it. Thanks for your good intentions, Jerry.”

“My hunch is,” Jerry says hanging to my sleeve, “the mother is a friend of Five-Cent Gilligan’s. He’s put ‘em up to keep your interest here while he lays the groundwork for whatever he’s up to. All he needs is a head start, and he’s as good as won out. You know that. Well, I’ve done my best. This fall, when you realize what a sucker you’ve been, it’s going to be mighty hard for me not to say, ‘I told you so.’”

As I join the ladies and Bulldozer I realize there’s a whale of a lot of logic behind Jerry’s words.

We’re just on the point of pitching in when Gilligan shows up. He glances around, then looks surprised when he sees me and Bulldozer. “Well! Well! Well! No-shirt McGee. And his shadow, Bulldozer Craig,” he says. “We have to shake hands with him, then he looks hopefully at the ladies. Do I see a faint glimmer of recognition pass between Martha Lansing and Five-Cent? Or is it just imagination?”

I introduce them. “Miss Lansing is a writer,” I explain. “Gilligan, take a couple of weeks off and tell her the story of your life. She needs atmosphere and material and you’ve got it.” And I think, “And some of your atmosphere smells to high heaven.”

“I’m heading for the Gilligan River country,” he says. “Named after me,” he adds for the ladies’ benefit. “I discovered it when I was a gay young colt galloping over Alaska. That was before time took its toll. No-Shirt and I aren’t the men we used to be.”

“I’m sure you are just as good men as ever you were,” Martha Lansing insists. “Mellowed by experience, and a little smarter.”

“You’re very kind,” Gilligan says.

I’m thinking, “So you’re going to Gilligan River, eh? That’s the opposite direction. Okay, I’ve followed your blind trail before and got the worst of the deal. You’re heading for Hungry River country sure as hell, but how’re you going to get a dragline scraper and all that gear in there? That ground can’t be worked profitably unless the machinery is brought in at a low figure.”

“Mr. McGee, your soup is getting cold,” Mrs. Lansing says, “and I think your mind is wool-gathering.” She laughs merrily.

“Not his mind,” Bulldozer starts to say and I give him a kick on the shins.

“I was just thinking what a gay bird Gilligan was in his younger days,” I answer. “All the girls had to keep their guard up against the gay deceiver.”

“I’m not so sure he is completely safe now,” Mrs. Lansing says with that merry laugh. “I detect a little of the Old Ned in his eyes.”

That did it! Right there Gilligan slipped. He didn’t act as pleased as he should have. His smile and bow was something staged for my benefit, and not the happy gesture of a cuss pleased because a pretty swell-looking lady has paid him a compliment.

Gilligan excuses himself and we start eating. From time to time Lana Lansing switches her charm from Bulldozer to me. “I know you’re terribly busy, but couldn’t you spare the next three or four days giving me some of your background? Of course, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell her. “This comes without warning. I’ll have to check on my schedule.”

We take our time with the meal and when we get into the lobby again, Gilligan is talking to those seven rugged-looking youngsters. They’re wearing honorable discharge buttons and here and there is a sweater or something you knew came from an Army clothing issue.

THE ladies excuse themselves, murmuring something about seeing us in the morning. “I can sure go for that Lana Lansing,” Bulldozer says. “And you can’t make me believe she isn’t on the level.”

“I won’t try to,” I answer. “Now here’s the play. Something big is up, and it has something to do with Hungry Creek. I haven’t figured the play, yet. Take nothing for granted. Don’t believe a thing you hear or see. Stay in that frame of mind and you’ll catch onto something you’d otherwise miss. Gilligan is a careful planner, but like everyone else up to no good, he slips somewhere along the line. Go over to the drug store and get a map of Alaska—the very latest.”

While he’s gone, three of Gilligan’s bright young men leave the lobby, and from
their conversation I've an idea they're going to promote a drink of firewater. I trail along, and when they're stepping off at a brisk pace I sing out in my best military voice, "Halt!"

They take a couple more steps, then come to an awkward halt. One fellows asks in a surly voice, "What's the gag?"

"Just a little joke of mine," I answer. Nothing annoys a discharged service man more than to instinctively obey a command shouted without warning."

"And we're good and sore about it," he snapped. "If you weren't an old fool I'd bust you one."

"Thanks for the consideration, Mack," I answer. I've a hunch I'll meet this bird again in the weeks to come.

When I get back to the hotel, Lana is sitting in the lobby, looking very fetching and listening to the radio. I never thought I'd see the day I'd duck a pretty girl, but I not only stayed out in the cold, but when Bulldozer shows up I grab the cuss and sneak him in the back way.

"You and your suspicious nature," he grumbles. "Now Gilligan's ex-soldiers will move in on her and bore her to death when she could have me." He gives me a dirty look. "Here's your map."

"Thanks." When I get him into the room and the door closed I motion for silence. A minute passes and I open the door suddenly. A man on his knees, ear to the keyhole, leaves on the run, head bent low so I can't see his face. He vanishes down the back stairs.

"See how things are shaping up?" I ask. "Another thing, Gilligan's ex-soldiers are phonies. I followed three, yelled 'Halt!' and instead of stopping in their tracks, as a real doughfoot would do without thinking, they came to a belated stop."

"By golly I'm going down and yank those discharge buttons off'n their coats." Bulldozer growls. "Such guys give the regular guys a bad name."

"Wait! Let's have a look at the map." We spread it out on the table. It has all the newest airstrips marked, along with big bomber strips that were hush hush during the war. I follow Skookum Chuck River with my finger and stop at the point where Hungry Creek comes in. The map shows mountains all around the area, and the map ain't foolin'. "I can't see anything on the map that gives reason for a stampede, Bulldozer."

"What about this little emergency airstrip at Cordwood Lake?" he asks. "Could stuff be flown in from there?"

"Nope," I answer. "Unless a pilot was crazy enough to follow a narrow, twisting canyon full of up-drafts and down-drafts, he'd still have to go over the mountains. Then he'd have to make a tight spiral and set down his load on a narrow river bar. He'd run out of bar almost before his wheels touched. Why, they had a hard enough time flying a dragline scraper into Cordwood Lake, and it has one hell of a lot more room than Hungry Creek."

At this precise instant, Bulldozer thinks I'm going to have a stroke or something. A strange, wild light comes into my eyes. "Bulldozer," I whisper with my mouth to his ear, like the grand mogul of a lodge giving a new brother the secret word, "I've got it. The govern'ment isn't going to fly a pound of stuff out of the Cordwood Lake country. It'd cost more'n it's worth. A plane climbing out with a load might hit a cliff, and you'd lose plane and crew. That dragline scraper is still in there. The govern'ment is going to declare the whole business surplus and Gilligan knows it."

"How's he going to get the scraper down-stream to Hungry Creek? Raft it down?"

"Not a chance. Too much white water," I explain. "But a man with a head full of holes, could make out his will, pay his debts, make his peace with God and take the dragline scraper over the ice. He might not break through and lose the scraper and his life."

Bulldozer grins. Driving big tractor stuff is right down his alley. "Nobody ever accused me of having brains and caution where tractors are concerned," he says. "Tell you what, No-Shirt, you learn to fly one of those cub planes—they claim any fool can learn to handle one so it shouldn't bother you—and I'll tool that scraper down to Hungry Creek."

"Where do I come in?" I ask.

"If I get stranded in the canyon—like the scraper breaking through the ice and me escaping—you can fly in and pick me up. We wouldn't want someone valuable like
Jack Jefford risking his life to save me. Don't that sound reasonable?"

"I can see a lot of points against the idea," I answer, "but I'm for it. Now—I'm going down the street, I'll be back in fifteen minutes, and we'll go into details." Then I wink and whisper, "Somebody's listening at the keyhole again."

"Let me bust him one," Bulldozer pleads.

"No, I got a better idea," I answer.

"That's why I'm going down the street."

My errand takes me about fifteen minutes and when I return I have one of these insect spray guns and a bottle of the cheapest perfume I can find. I sit opposite the key hole. I can see the dim light of the hall beyond. When I can no longer see light I'll know there's an ear over the key hole.

Five minutes passes and the key hole is suddenly dark. "Now as I figure it, Bulldozer," I say for the eavesdropper's benefit, "there's a new strike in the offing or Gilligan wouldn't show up so suddenly. The question is, where is it?" The answer is, keep an eye on Gilligan then move fast." Then I put the gun to the key hole and let go.

There's some fast scampering outside the door, and as some of the perfume backfires and comes into the room Bulldozer sniffs and growls, "Our place is going to smell like a Skid Road burly-que actress."

"Let's hit the hay," I suggest, "there'll be no more excitement tonight."

THE NEXT morning me and Bulldozer are at the coffee shop counter downing bacon and eggs along with sourdough flapjacks, when all of a sudden the hardy sourdoughs and the rugged citizens of Anchorage start sniffing.

"Where's the gal?" someone asks. "I can smell her, but I can't see her." He's young and full of horse play, so he starts sniffing like a bloodhound, and the nearer he gets to Five-Cent Gilligan, the redder in the face the cuss gets.

Gilligan looks like he'd practically scrubbed the hide and hair off his face and scalp, but the cheap perfume smell still lingers.

"Why, Gilligan," the smarty says, "I never thought you went in for perfume! Every man to his weakness."

Gilligan is so mad he scoops up three flapjacks, butter, sirup and all, and throws them. Not at the clown, but at me. I duck and hear something go "slap." Then a girl says in an icy voice, "Just what is the idea?"

One flapjack has nestled against her neck, and the other two have hit her fur coat and bounced. A little trickle of melted butter and sirup is stealing its way through the fur. Gilligan stamps out of the place, and the girl, eyes blazing, leaves for her room.

"If you'd been a gentleman, No-Shirt," Bulldozer says, "you wouldn't have ducked."

"We know who was listening at our key hole," I answer. "And we have a big day ahead of us."

The post office building is handy and as soon as govern'ment folks are on the job me and Bulldozer make a call. "Is there a surplus property sale at the Cordwood Lake strip?" I ask.

"There is. It was advertised in several papers, though we are not very hopeful. The material is worth little because of its isolation. Our man, with full power to act, will fly in Thursday. The sale will be held the following day, Friday. Here is an inventory if you are interested in bidding."

"Tell me one thing," I answer, "if I tell you that I'm bidding will you pass the word along to other possible bidders?"

"Oh no," he answers. "Interested parties merely show up when the time comes and bid in on what they want."

I keep a car at Anchorage. It isn't much for looks, but it's a car that is true to a man and the motor starts on the coldest mornings. Me and Bulldozer drive out to the airport in the evening and call on Mart Carney who will fly anything that can be squeezed into his planes. He specializes in out-of-the-way points that the larger outfits never touch. "Destinations are confidential I suppose?" I suggest.

"Yes," Mart answers. "We file a flight plan and take off, weather permitting."

"Me and Bulldozer want to be set down at Cordwood Lake," I explain, "and be picked up a few days later. Also, I want to learn to fly one of the little jobs. It can't be any tougher than mushing a dog team."

"It isn't anywhere near as tough," he answers. "When do you want to fly to Cordwood Lake?"

"Wednesday morning, if that's okay with you," he answers.
I'd give a good deal to know whether Gilligan's also chartered a plane for the Cordwood Lake trip, but I've better sense than to ask. We're driving home, at twenty-five miles an hour, making plans when someone cuts in ahead and an instant later I'm in the ditch. The other car skids and goes into the opposite ditch. Me and Bulldozer jump out, but he slips and sprawls on his face in the road. As I get near the other car, I can see the wheels are spinning. He's turning on too much power. He slacks up and the wheels take. The car crawls out of the ditch as I grab at the door. It opens, but a fist pounds on my hand. I can see—I'm going to lose out as the driver goes into second gear. I fish the perfume bottle out of my pocket, pull the cork with my teeth, and splash those inside with the contents, then for good measure, hurl the bottle at the rear window.

"Who are they?" Bulldozer asks. "Did you get a look?"

"No. Too dark inside, and they've taken their license off of the car."

"No doubt of it," he growls, "they tried to put us out of business. Their timing was off or they'd have hit us sooner, then we'd have turned upside down. How come you had that damned perfume?"

"Figgered they might jump me after dark in town," I answer, "and if I used perfume it wouldn't take a bloodhound to smell 'em out."

We hail a passing car and get a ride to town. I give a garage the job of getting the car out of the ditch, then I call Mart Carney. "How about flying us out first thing in the morning?"

"Okay," he says, "weather permitting."

I figger the sooner we get out of town the better. Too many things can happen to us and one of 'em might prove successful. Things in the lobby are quiet until I see Lana Lansing coming down the stairs. "Mr. McGee, where have you been? I've wanted to talk to you so much."

"Ask questions," I tell her, "and I'll do my best to answer."

During the next five minutes I fight off the charm she's turning on me. At the same time I check on Gilligan's seven ex-service men. Three of 'em are missing. Maybe I'm wrong, but I've a hunch they're trying to get rid of a perfume smell.

Then Lana is saying, "Begin at the beginning, and tell me your most exciting experience."

"It's hard to come through on short notice," I tell her. "You can't just turn ideas off and on like a faucet. Me and Bulldozer both got into the war, but plenty had more excitement than we did. Say! Get Gilligan to tell you about the time he licked me in a fight over a mining claim. Then I'll tell you about the time I licked him, and between the two yarns you should have one good one."

"Mr. Gilligan is like you, Mr. McGee, he's terribly busy. He's leaving Thursday for Gilligan Creek," she answered.

I feed her atmosphere as she calls it. I tell her what the different words mean like rifle, sluice box, Chechako, and explain there is no such thing as a Siwash Indian, as the word, Siwash, means Indian. Then I make a retreat.

ME AND Bulldozer show up at the airport a half hour ahead of time. Mart Carney has his little twin-motor ski job all warmed up. It'll hold five passengers nicely, but our outfits take up the room two others would occupy. "I guess we're ready, Mart," I tell him.

"One more passenger to arrive," he answers. "You didn't charter the entire plane for the flight, you know—just the number of pounds you and your outfit weigh. That leaves two hundred and twenty-five payload pounds left."

"Who is it?"

"Girl named Lana Lansing," he answers. "She's a writer, looking for atmosphere and wants to get a view of the country from the air. Here she comes now."

Me and Bulldozer exchange significant looks. "Gilligan's spy," I whisper. "I don't like the woman spy angle at all. You can bust a man on the snoot, but what're you going to do with a woman?"

"Disarm 'em by making 'em fall in love with you," Bulldozer answers. "No-Shirt, that's my job." Mart nearly breaks his neck getting out of the plane to help her aboard. He stows her gear then shuts the door. She says, "Why Mr. McGee, what a surprise! This is exciting, I never dreamed—"

"Miss Lansing," Mart is saying, "please
take the seat usually occupied by the copilot. You can see more there.

She straps herself in in a way that proves flying is old stuff for her. Then we’re off.

It’s an above-the-clouds trip with the sunlight so bright and hard it hurts your eyes, the mighty Alaskan peaks poking their tops above the cloud layer, and the scenery in every direction a mass of cotton balls that are slowly tumbling over one another. Up here it is hard to believe the weather below is vile.

Mart is flying contact, that is, using the peaks as ridges instead of relying on a compass course or radio beam. He goes out of the way and a network of nine peaks—four on one side and five on the other—stand like soldiers that have opened ranks. “No Shirt, those peaks are connected by ridges except where the Skookum Chuck River breaks through.”

One peak moves majestically past. It has a hanging glacier, which is blue and green in the sunlight. “Hungry Creek is below that peak,” Mart says. “Ice drops five hundred feet straight down in the summer time which is one reason why miners don’t like to go downriver in boats. If the white water doesn’t drench ’em, a hunck of ice is liable to sink ’em.”

“Don’t I know?” I tell him. “Didn’t I have the stern of a boat smashed by a piece of falling ice in my younger days?”

“Oh tell me about it!” Lana explains.

“There isn’t much to tell. I gambled on getting through and almost lost,” I answered. Then like every old fool, I cut loose with a lecture to the younger generation. “In Alaska you’ve gotta gamble if you expect to win out. What the country needs right now is more young fellows—rugged guys just out of the army. I don’t mean any rugged fellow. And he shouldn’t come up here, busted. He should have enough for a round trip because he might not like the country. He should either have a job lined up, or a little stake to keep him going until he finds something he likes.”

“You mean young fellows such as Gilligan introduced to us?” Lana asks.

“Fellows built like them, and about their age,” I answer, “but otherwise not that type. They’re around to skim the cream off the milk. The kind I mean is the type of young fellow who will build a fence, plant grass, so to speak, feed the cow and then skim the cream. It is a pretty special breed and the country needs ‘em. That kind of a fellow can get by on a shoe-string with any kind of break. But it’s better if he has a little stake.”

“Danged if I don’t take a shine to Lana right then and there. Instead of listening with a polite smile, she’s weighing what I say seriously. That pleases an old buzzard like me. Then I remember she’s playing Gilligan’s game, so I hand it to him for picking a smart one. She’s got a notebook now and tries to make like a real writer. She jots down what I’ve said, asks questions, and puts down the answers. Then she looks up, startled, and asks, “What’s that?”

“We’re in ice clouds,” Mart answers, “and ice forms on the props, then breaks off and rattles against the plane. It’s an old Alaskan sound, like a Malemute’s howl.”

Suddenly he puts the plane into a spiral that is also a steep dive—something like sliding down a corkscrew. Our ears pop, Lana loses a lot of color, and she hangs onto the arm rests so tight that the blood leaves her hands.

“Swallow or yawn,” I tell her, “and relieve the ear pressure.”

She gulps like a moonshiner downing a pint of cawn likker and starts breathing almost normally. “Is there any sense in such flying?” she demands as Mart levels out.

“Saw a hole in the clouds,” he said, “and figured it was my best chance to get under the ceiling. Sometimes you’re out of luck.”

We skimmed along above the Skookum Chuck River at a thousand feet above the ground, and a strip rolls toward us. The wind sock shows we’re heading into the wind, and he sets her down without circling the field.

Seven guys come out of barracks buildings that will house a couple of hundred. “Seven is my lucky number,” I tell Lana. “I like to see it show up. Gilligan had seven toughies helping him. Now we bump into seven more here.”

They’re wearing parkas and moccasins, but I notice their pants are army issue. I notice, too, one hell of a nest of fuel drums. That’s a common sight in Alaska—one of the first things you see from the air, because tankers don’t go up rivers and pump the cargoes into big storage tanks. The stuff comes in in drums. I’m wondering how
many are empties. A dragline scraper drinks a lot of fuel. Then I spot the scraper. It’s an awkward brute, with shovels, bulldozer blade and a long, extended beam carrying blocks, cable and other gear.

"That’ll be something to take downriver over the ice," Bulldozer says, "but I’ll tackle it."

I nudge him. He’s letting the cat out of the bag, and Lana is all ears. But before she can ask questions we’re making a rough landing, with the skis slapping the snow.

The seven lads are all smiles as I open the door, then they look disappointed. "We thought you were Colonel Grambs," one said. "He’s authorized to dispose of surplus property, you know."

"He’s due Thursday," I answer. "I’m No-Shirt McGee, and this is Bulldozer Craig, my mining partner."

The disappointment on their faces changed to one of resignation. "I’m Ted White," the evident leader of the group said. "I guess—you’re figuring on bidding on—the dragline scraper. We sort of figured we’d bid on it ourselves and try—working some ground that we had in mind."

Then his eyes brightened as Bulldozer swung Lana to the ground. "This is Lana Lansing, a writer," I said. "Lana, meet Ted White."

He yanked off his mitt as she extended a small, warm hand. The others nearly pulled their hands out of the wrist joint to get their own mitts off. It had been many a month since they had shaken hands with a girl.

"This sure is a pleasant surprise," Ted said. "Even during the war, visitors rarely landed here. The big shows played the larger camps, naturally. And since the war, about all we’ve seen is each others’ homely mugs."

Two boys immediately said, "We’ll fix up a place for you, Miss Lansing."

"Give her the cabin we fixed up for Colonel Grambs," Ted orders. "We’ll figure out other quarters for him. After all none of us are in the army—just a bunch of civilians. The Colonel shed his brass months ago."

Bulldozer takes me aside. "We can’t bid against these guys, No-Shirt," he says. "They’re the kind we want in Alaska. Not only that but they’ve had experience in the country. As I get it, they’ve found values around here and want to give mining a try."

"Okay," I tell him, "we won’t bid against them, but don’t tell them so. We’ll just set back and say nothing—maybe raise their bid a buck or two to show competition."

"I feel like a Boy Scout who did a hundred good deeds in a day. A regular hit-the-jackpot feeling," he says.

WE’RE setting around a heater that evening and suddenly Lana asks, "Mr. McGee, just how does one secure a title to mining ground?"

"Well, if it hasn’t been previously located, or if the location period has expired because the assessment work hasn’t been kept up to date, you mark the boundary of your claim. On each corner you put up a monument—a pile of rocks will do. You leave the location notice in the monument, then you make a beeline for the nearest recorder. He records the claim in your name."

Ted White and the others aren’t missing a word. "Suppose," Lana asks sweetly, "two miners file on the ground about the same time?"

"Then there’s a race to the recorder’s office," I answer. "In Alaska, the United States Commissioner records the claims. If you boys have any special ground in mind you’d better stake it pronto."

They exchange significant glances, but don’t say a word, finally Ted White says, "This is the plan we have in mind—"

"Wait!" I warn. "Don’t tell me a thing; I might double-cross you, or do you dirt. There’s something about the quest for gold that makes men play tricks on their fellow men—tricks they wouldn’t think of pulling in other lines of business. Besides, if I know what you’re up to, I may realize your plans interfere with mine. I’ll have to change mine or else go ahead with them. In that case what I do will hurt my conscience—if I have a conscience. You can see there are a lot of angles you must know in this game."

"What happens if you don’t know all of the angles?" Lana asks. "I’d like to put that in my story.""

"You either lose out at the start, or else a smooth cuss will skin you out of your claim after you’ve done all the hard work."
outfit, eh?” he asks, gloomily. I nod. “It was too much to hope that we could get it.”

“You see how complicated things can get, Ted,” I observe. “Lana and you are up to something, which you figger would give you an ace in the hole. While you’re happy over that, up jumps the devil in the form of Gilligan. In the meantime I sent out a mighty important letter with Mart Carney.”

“You did, eh?” he asks, interested and puzzled. “Something that’ll upset our plans?”

“A hole ace, son,” I answer, “a hole ace.” I nod toward Gilligan’s gang. “There’s a bunch that can do you dirt. Watch ‘em! Here’s a trick of the trade. If I can get you to mix with them, then I won’t have either side on my neck. Or, if you can get me tangled with Gilligan, which shouldn’t be hard, then we’re both off’n your neck.”

“It’s an endless chain,” he mutters. “It’s enough to make a guy quit the country and get into something with less crazy angles. But I’m going to see this through if I lose my shirt and get my damned head beat off.”

“Time will tell, Ted,” I genially observe. “You haven’t stacked up against anything tough yet.”

Nothing much happened the rest of the day. Ted’s bunch naturally took a dislike to the Gilligan outfit, and each group kept to itself and were as dignified as a couple of strange dogs looking over each other.

There was a puttering overhead the next morning, and as we rushed out, one of these little cub type planes landed. The pilot, Bruce Sheridan, climbs stiffly out. “Here’s your plane, No-Shirt,” he says. “Mart gave me your letter. And as per instructions I painted a name on it.”

Ted and the others looked at the name, then exchanged weary glances. I’d given it an appropriate name, I thought, “Claim Jumper.” It was a neat little job, with very light skis, and as soon as Sheridan rests and has himself some coffee he’s ready to give me my first lesson.

I’ve flown in ‘em before, and I was making my first landing when a transport plane comes in. The first person out is Lana Lansing, with a smug expression like a cat that’s just et the canary. Colonel Grambs and a couple of lesser officials follow.

We gather in the mess hall and the
Colonel opens a fat briefcase. "I'm ready to accept bids on the basis of as is and where is," he says. "Of course, ex-service men have first chance." He glances around, "McGee and Gilligan, of course, were too old for the war. I don't know about Craig and these other men."

"I wasn't in long, Colonel," I answer, "but while I was in I saw plenty of action. Here's my honorable discharge. Bulldozer has one too."

"Lied about your age, eh?" the Colonel suggests.

"An honorable lie," I answer, "but that wasn't the way I put it over. I just showed up on the Aleutians when we was in a jam, and they weren't too choosy about a man's age just so he could lend a hand."

"My men are all ex-service people," Gilligan says. "Unfortunately they left their discharge papers at home, with one exception—Ebb Cramm."

"Cramm qualifies," Grambs says after looking at the man's discharge paper. "And I know that White and his men qualify. Very well, what am I offered?"

"Two thousand dollars," White says. "I know it's worth a hell of a lot more, but if we didn't plan to use it in mining, the Army would have to leave it here."

"True," Grambs says.

"Twenty-five hundred," Cramm says. "Three thousand," White says, and I can see he's tense.

"Let's quit fooling around," Cramm says after whispering with Gilligan, "five thousand dollars."

"We're through," Ted White says. "We've pooled our savings but we haven't a chance against such competition. I guess the stuff goes to Gilligan or——" He looks at me.

"Seven thousand," I growl. "You're a coyote, Gilligan, or you'd have let the kids have it. Well, they're out of it so we're going to trade punches again. I'm going to bid you up to hell and gone, and leave you stuck with the stuff. How about it, Bulldozer, shall we rough up this buzzard?"

"Lick him if we go broke trying it."

"Eight thousand dollars," Cramm says after getting whispered instructions from Gilligan.

"A penny-ante raise," I jeer, "eleven thousand dollars."

The pilots look out the door, then pop back in again. "It's beginning to blow," one said, "some of you boys give us a hand with the planes. If we don't moor 'em securely there'll be trouble."

"Eleven thousand dollars," Grambs says. "Once! Twice!" He looks at Gilligan. The cuss wants to bid me up, but he knows I'm liable to stick him with the stuff. He licks his lips a couple of times, starts to say, "Twelve thousand" but the word's won't come out. Also I can tell by the narrowing of his eyes that he thinks he's got a better plan. "Eleven thousand three times. Sold to No-Shirt McGee and Bulldozer Craig."

"Mr. McGee," Ted White says, "you may not have noticed, but a motorcycle and sidecar are included. I'd like to rent the sidecar outfit for a few days. There are lots of places where we can drive over the ice. Miss Lansing wants to see something of the country."

"I'll give it to you," I offer.

"No, I'd rather buy it or rent it," he insists.

"Okay, sold for five bucks," I answer, "and that includes what fuel you need."

While we're helping secure the planes, I hear the motorcycle spluttering and backfiring, then it rolls down the strip. It has a shield in front to break the wind's force; and another on the sidecar. Lana looks mighty comfortable, Ted's tucked her in warmly.

Fine snow particles are in the air, and I'm about to warn him not to go too far when I remember he knows the country better than I do.

Bulldozer lends a hand with securing the planes then he checks over the dragline scraper. It's in fine shape. He goes down and bores a hole in the river ice. "How thick does it have to be to support all that weight, No-Shirt?" he asks.

"Darned if I know," I admit.

"I'll try it on a shallow spot first, and if the ice holds up I'll drive onto deeper areas," he says. "If the ice won't take the weight, then we'll have to strip her down and tow the parts behind on sleds. I've checked the fuel. There's plenty. But how're you going to get it all down to Hungry Creek?"

"Put half the fuel in full drums into empties and float 'em downstream. After
the break-up," I answer. "Say, it's blowing up quite a blizzard."

"I suppose Ted White will bring Lana back if it blows too hard," he says. "They seem to hit it off swell. That's the way it goes. I meet a girl who is just my style and she gets interested in some other guy. Maybe she needs somebody to champion her lost cause. I pitch in and win out, but who gets the maiden's fair hand? Some other guy."

He gets the scraper's motor to roaring, then lumbers down to the ice. It creaks and groans, but it stands up. "I've just thought of something, No-Shirt," he says, "we haven't staked that Hungry Creek ground. A scraper is no good without ground, and ground is no good without a scraper. What about it?"

"That's what I got the plane for," I answer.

"Just a minute!" he says. "I ain't going to fly with you."

"I don't plan to fly, I answer. "The plane is my hole ace. We don't take off, but we use the motor to pull us over the ice. On the straight stretches we make good time. On the bends we shut off and straighten out the plane if it looks like we'd hit the wall."

"What about the narrow places full of boulders?"

"I figure we'll find a way of getting through. Here's the play. Gilligan is boiling mad, and out for revenge. He figures to beat us to Hungry Creek. As he views it, it's eight Gilligans against us two racing down the canyon. He grabs the ground, then forces us to sell the scraper for a song."

"What about Ted White's gang?"

"Gilligan is sure White is sore at both outfits because we knocked him out of getting the scraper," I answer. "We slip by 'em in the canyon some night."

"Then what?"

"Why we've got the scraper and the ground," I answer. "We'll put on a crew. I wouldn't be surprised if Ted White's gang would work for us."

"No-Shirt," he accuses, "you're up to something."

Gilligan is up to something, too. That evening while everybody waits for Ted and Lana to show up he says to his pilot,

"We've lost out here. Wake us up tonight if the weather clears. The sooner we get back to Anchorage the better."

"Okay," the man answers.

The hours drag, and there's no sign of Ted and Lana. "The motorcycle probably broke down," someone says, "or the snow drifted so they couldn't drive it. They had plenty of fur robes that'll keep 'em warm, and Ted knows how to 'Siwash' it. That is, keep a fire going and get a little rest at the same time even if he hasn't a sleeping bag or tent. We might as well turn in. No need of searching. We don't know whether he went upriver or down, or out to Cordwood Lake. The way the snow is blowing tracks would be covered up as soon as made."

I turned in, but around midnight I heard Gilligan's pilot waking him up. There was grumbling, but finally the sound of motors warming up.

"I guess we don't have to worry about them beating us to Hungry Creek," Bulldozer says.

"He ain't running true to form," I mutter. "I wouldn't put it past him to parachute men onto the creek, but I know, he knows and the men know it would be dangerous in clear weather. This time of the year a man would be knocked against the cliffs by the drafts."

I get up and look out. The airstrip is clear and the ceiling is about a thousand feet. Once off the ground it won't matter. I watch them pile into the plane, then she taxis down the strip to the far end. I can't see the plane, but I hear the pilot revving the motors for quite a while, then she comes into sight, clears and disappears into the overcast.

I turn over and try to sleep, but I keep laughing. "Okay," Bulldozer snarls, "out with it! What's so funny this time of the night? Are you laughing because Gilligan quit cold?"

"No," I answer. "Gilligan doesn't quit that easy. Right now he's leading his gang down Skookum Chuck River to Hungry Creek. He's counting on two things to fool us—snow blowing over his tracks and the night departure of his plane. What he did was to tell the pilot when he taxied out for the take-off, 'This is where we leave you. Just fly to Anchorage and ask no questions.'"
Bulldozer whistles. "How do you know?"

"The eight of 'em, with their heavy clothes weighed over two hundred pounds apiece. Add their outfit, and you have a fair load. That plane made a short run and was in the air. She wasn't loaded, Bulldozer," I answer.

"It's snowing again," he says, "and it better stop or they'll have too big a start on us."

When we wake up, things were no better. It is blowing and snowing. During the morning I taxi up and down the strip, getting an idea of what has to be done to turn corners. I figure Bulldozer can get out and turn the tail right or left if I haven't enough speed, for the rudder to do the trick.

Bruce Sheridan spends the afternoon with me giving a few pointers, and the next day I put in five hours on the strip. It clears the fourth day and I warm up the motor while Bulldozer packs our outfit into the plane. Claim Jumper waddles down to the river ice and we start downstream.

"Keep a eye out for Ted and Lana," Bulldozer says. "They'll probably show up today. I told the boys they'd better start hunting, but they don't seem worried. They've sure got a lot of faith in Ted."

We get a straight stretch on the river and I do thirty miles an hour before a bend looms up. I throttle it down and the plane crawls around the bend. There's a boulder ahead and we have to get out and push her around it, then we hop aboard again. Seventeen miles from the airstrip we slide around a nice, easy bend, then Bulldozer lets out a yell.

Gilligan and his outfit have heard the motor. They figure some fool is flying down the canyon and they're looking up in the air. "Shut off the motor and back up," Bulldozer yells. "Their outfit is plumb in the middle of the canyon."

I can't stop, let alone back up, so I give her the gun. "Hey!" Bulldozer yells. "You're in the air!"

"Planes are made to fly," I answer. My jaw is set and I know I have a do-or-die gleam in my eyes. It's a case of do or die. The Gilligan outfit fall flat on their faces.

"You almost knocked off a couple of heads!" Bulldozer says. "Set her down quick! See that wall ahead?"

"But can we land on those boulders?" I ask. Now we're over the boulders and a wing tip has just missed an outcropping on the wall. Bulldozer moans, but I see a mile stretch ahead and decide to fly it. Sometimes the nose is down, and sometimes it is the tail, but I always managed to straighten things out. As the canyon narrows I set her down. We glide almost to a stop, then I see it widens a little so I take off.

"Lemme out!" Bulldozer yells. "I'm gonna walk! Flesh and blood can't stand such treatment. You've got one foot in the grave so it don't matter, but my golden years are ahead of me—look out! You almost scraped that wall."

"But I missed it. Ah! More boulders. Flying over 'em is easier on the constitution than pushing the plane through 'em," I brightly suggest.

"Damned if it is," Bulldozer says.

The last stretch of boulders slips under our wings, and I set her down. "Cut the motor," Bulldozer moans. "Let's get out and thank God we're safe. Also I need a smoke."

We get out and light up. "When they passed out brains, No-Shirt," he said, "they sure missed you. Brother, does the ice feel good to my feet." Then he drops down on his knees and kisses it.

A minute later I throw away my cigarette and sniff the air. "Bulldozer, do you smell wood smoke?"

"Sure. I figgared the tobacco in the cigarette was getting worse," he answers. "It's coming up the canyon. How far is Hungry Creek?"

"A couple of miles or so," I answer. "A down-draft must keep the odor in the canyon. But who got in here and how?"

"You might fly a little," Bulldozer says. "We'll find out, but keep clear of the walls."

We make it in one long hop and land on the ice where Hungry Creek enters the Skookum Chuck River.

"Smoke coming from two of the old cabins," Bulldozer says. "Look, there's a faded sign that says, 'Deputy United States Commissioner.'"

"There was a commissioner's office here during the stampede," I answer. "Until the boys decided it was hungry ground, they
figgered to make it a mining camp. A commissioner and deputy marshal came in, along with tons of grub freighted over the river ice. But that sign should have faded long ago. It's been kept inside and just put out.'

We make tracks for the commissioner's office, and out steps Lana Lansing. "Something I can do for you boys?" she asks. "Quite a number of claims have been staked, but there is a little open ground left."

"So that's why you made that quick trip to Anchorage?" I observed. "You got yourself appointed a deputy commissioner."

"Ted and I planned it together," she answers. "I picked up powers of attorney for him so that he could stake ground for a number of buddies, as well as the boys at the airstrip. I know it you'd call a shoe-string stampede, but we've managed to limp along so far. And I've picked up some of the grandest material to write about." She smiles. "Here comes Ted. We did a lot of hard work, but the motorcycle and sidecar got us here."

"That's why the boys didn't show much interest in organizing a searching party," I comment. "I might have guessed that, if I hadn't been so busy wondering what Gilligan's next move would be."

Ted comes in, grinning. We shake hands, and I ask him, "What're you going to do for a dragline scraper, son?"

"What you going to do for ground to work?" he counters, grinning.

"I'll find some," I hopefully answer. "Let's see what's been staked."

Lana spreads out a map, and I look it over. They look kind of concerned when I commence to grin. I take the map and say, "Come on, Bulldozer. We've got ground to stake."

"No-Shirt," Bulldozer says, "sometimes I wonder if I understand you. You've been tough with those kids right down the line."

"Nobody has a better chance to size me up than you," I answer. For the next three hours we stake ground and when we come back to record it, Lana and Ted can hardly wait to see what we've taken.

She looks at the map quite awhile, then checks our location notices. "Oh," she says, relieved, "you just took those little pieces of ground left over."

"Fractions is the mining term," I explain. "Often when miners stake claims they don't match up and the queer-shaped pieces left over are open ground. Ted, the man owning a fraction can shake down the adjoining property owner for quite a bit of money if he plays his cards right. The nuisance value can be worth a quarter or even a half of a full-sized claim. Let that be a lesson to you."

"No-Shirt, you're a dirty bum," Bulldozer growls. "You're taking advantage of the boys' ignorance. They're nice guys and—"

"If I don't take advantage of them someone else will," I answer.

"Okay, McGee," Ted White says, "we'll learn the hard way, but you aren't going to make us quit."

"You're going to face another problem, Ted," I cheerfully observe. "Me and Bulldozer have got to get the dragline scraper down here. The Gilligan outfit will try to stop us. They outnumber me and Bulldozer four to one."

"Worse than that," Bulldozer growls, "you ain't much better than Gilligan. That leaves me to handle the seven young guys he's got with him."

"Now, Ted, if you help us get the scraper through to Hungry Creek, you're helping a man who can make you a lot of trouble," I explain. "On the other hand, if that scraper don't get through, your ground can't be worked at a profit. Son, you're between the devil and the deep blue sea as the feller says."

"When are you going for the scraper?" Ted asks.

"I think we'll start now," I answer. "You didn't bring much grub with you, and neither did we. If it starts snowing hard again we'll be holed up eating your supply and our own. Suppose you take ours?"

"I'll send a note to the boys," Ted says, "and let them decide what to do. Personally I'm in favor of helping you lick Gilligan, then we can slag it out between us."

Then he turns to Bulldozer. "You're for us, I can see that. But your McGee's partner. No pulling your punches, because you're for us. We want to lick you fair and square in this deal."

"Okay," Bulldozer agrees. "I like you better than ever, but keep up your guard. But don't be surprised if neither of us are
around at the finish. No-Shirt's got the idear he's a pilot and nothing short of a bad crash will change his opinion."

While we're turning the plane around and warming up the motor, Ted writes a note to his partners at the airstrip. We skid over the surface awhile, then I take off, clear some boulders, and keep going until the walls are too close for sloppy flying, then I set her down. Bulldozer never says a word when we're in the air. "You got a single-track mind," he says, "and I was a chump to squawk the first time you took off. You might've wrecked us. In the future, I'm either going to learn to fly myself, or else get dead drunk when I'm your passenger."

WE CLEAR the Gilligan outfit by thirty feet, and I notice they're still going downstream. They're friggery to jump claims, or they'd make a stand at a narrow point in the river and wait for us to show up with the scraper.

I'm feeling pretty well pleased with myself as I set the plane down on the strip and taxi up to the hangar. John Selover, who is a sort of lieutenant to Ted White comes out to meet us. I hand him the letter. He grins. "Now you understand why we weren't out searching for them," he drawls.

He reads the letter through and goes into a huddle with the others. "McGee," he says, "we're agreed that we've got to be realistic about this deal, so we're helping you beat Gilligan, then we're going to work on you and Bulldozer. By the way, a plane flew over an hour ago and dropped mail. Here's a letter for you."

It was from a territorial official and I read:

Dear Mr. McGee:

Colonel Grambs has just advised me that under the provisions of the surplus property rule you have purchased the Cordwood Lake emergency airstrip and all buildings and equipment thereon. For the purpose of the records and taxation, the airstrip will be known as McGee Field. In the near future my representatives will arrive to fix a fair valuation on this property. We trust that we may have your fullest cooperation.

There is more to it, but that's the part that knocks me for a loop. "Bulldozer, did you know we were buying the works? Hell, I thought I was bidding on the scraper."

"The army has no use for the field, and no city or mining company wants it. You've been honored. Just think, an airstrip named after you. McGee Field." He shakes hands warmly and the others crowd around us, throwing congratulations from every angle.

"Just a minute! Just a minute!" I yell. "Do any of you birds know what the annual taxes will be?" They shake their heads. "Well neither do I, but I've a hunch I'm saddled with something that's going to make a dent in my poke. I mean our poke, Bulldozer. We're pards, you know." And that wipes the smirk off'n Bulldozer's face.

BRIGHT and early the next morning we start downstream, leaving McGee Field to itself. The scraper is dragging grub, fuel and spare parts on sleds. The weather has changed, and the way our luck is running, it wouldn't surprise me if a Chinook wind came along, without warning, and started the break-up. I follow the procession with Claim Jumper in case something goes wrong and the boys have to be flown back to McGee Field.

Here and there the boys have to chop away ice so that the treads can pass through. Mostly it is a matter of patience or taking a little gamble—like crossing a wide spot where the ice is thinner, and creaks and groans.

"No-Shirt," Bulldozer says when we're only ten miles from Hungry Creek, "hadn't you better pile into Claim Jumper and see what the enemy is up to? It's a cinch for them to stop us, you know—just blast a hole in the ice. The river water will naturally fill the hole, and it'll freeze over, but it won't freeze to depth this time of the year. Snow blows over it, covering the dirty work, and the first thing I know I'm up to my ears in ice water and the scraper is on the bottom of the Skookum Chuck."

He's right. On the other hand, if Gilligan thinks he can get control of the Hungry Creek claims, then he's going to want the scraper. Destruction will come only when he figures he's losing out for good.

I gamble and fly the canyon without set-
ting her down but once. At that point a man would have to bank sharp to get around the bend, and I notice that when I bank, I also take up a lot of air space. I fly over Hungry Creek and Ted White races out waving his arms, then he makes a motion with his thumb, like a man wanting a ride. The Gilligan gang come swarming from a couple of cabins and I can see them trying to catch Ted.

I set her down and open the door. He piles in and before he gets the door closed, I'm taking off. "They've jumped the ground, No-Shirt," he says. "They've torn the camp apart trying to find the record book which proves we staked the ground first and then you came along and located the fractions. Lana had it hidden. She asked me to get the book aboard your plane if you showed up. She wants the book flown to Anchorage, or kept in a safe place." He looks back. ".Set me down and I'll walk back. I don't want to leave her in the lurch."

"She's safe enough," I answer. "Lana and Gilligan are friends."

"That's where you're wrong, No-Shirt," he answers as I set the plane down. "She met Gilligan on the boat coming up. Lana and her mother were taking a trip for Mrs. Lansing's health. Lana has had writing ideas for some time. She's sold a few pieces to some of the lesser known magazines. Gilligan offered atmosphere and material and they talked a lot. Of course he had his eyes on Hungry Creek, and he knew that if you heard about the surplus property sale and the scraper that you'd get steamed up, too."

"He was righter'n hell there," I admit. "He knows you like to bask in a pretty girl's smiles, so he told Lana to shake you down for stormy material," Ted continues. "He figured that you'd get so interested in helping her you'd miss what was going on. When you caught on, you naturally figured Lana was working with him."

"I sure did," I admit, "and I'll apologize the next time I see her. For a Chechako girl, she caught on to Alaska life fast. Was it her idea that she be made commissioner?"

"Yes," he answered, full of pride. "She figured if the commissioner's office was at Hungry Creek there would be a race to the nearest town to record the claims. Thanks for the ride, No-Shirt. It's too bad we've got to lick a nice guy like you, but that's the fortunes of war and mining."

He jumps off, closes the door and starts downstream. I fly up the canyon to McGee Field. Maybe it isn't legal, but I buy myself some stamps at the post exchange and put 'em on the record book. I address it, then I put it in a mail pouch with some letters the boys have written. Finally I call Anchorage, and ask that the first plane passing that way, pick up the pouch. I load grub onto the Claim Jumper and fly back to the scraper.

The boys are camped on the ice. "We're just wondering whether to hold memorial services now, or wait until we found the body," Bulldozer says. "There's only one thing worse than an old fool like you flying around in a plane."

"What is it?"

"Marrying a girl in her twenties," Bulldozer answers. "In either case a crack-up is a cinch."

"Here's a hundred pounds of grub," I answer. "And while I don't think Jack Jefford need worry about me getting his job, just the same I'm doing okay in the Claim Jumper. Why? Because the little job will practically fly itself. Now here's a report on what's going on at Hungry Creek."

They listen quietly, then Bulldozer says, "As I get it, we needn't expect trouble in the canyon. The fireworks start when we show up at Hungry Creek. And didn't I tell you that Lana wasn't a Gilligan spy?"

TWICE in the next few days we see a Gilligan man far down the canyon sizing up our progress, then late one evening there's a blast, or is it? I look at Bulldozer, then shout, "That's ice falling from the hanging glacier! A fat chance we've got of getting through now."

We race through the gloom a quarter mile and stop a hundred yards from a low barrier of shattered ice. Hundred-pound chunks are still falling, with now and then a half ton piece that makes a noise after falling five hundred feet. The Gilligan outfit is coming upriver on the run.

One of the boys sniffs. "That was a blast, McGee," he says, "I can smell powder smoke. But how did anyone ever get up to that glacier?"

"They didn't," I answer. "Here's what happened. They climbed the cliff to a point
two hundred feet below, set off a charge there and the concussion shattered the ice which is under a heavy strain anyway. As pieces give away the pressure shifts and other weak points collapse. That’s why you can never tell when the next chunk is coming down.”

“When it hits it scatters like shrapnel,” one of them says. “It could kill a man.”

“It has, but not here,” I answer. “Well, let’s turn in.”

“The air has a warmish feeling,” Bulldozer says. “The break-up will be along before we know it. I wish the scraper was on solid ground.”

I wake ‘em up at midnight. “Here’s the play, boys. It looks as if Gilligan is up to something. For some reason he wants to slow us up—trying to force a deal on the threat of keeping ice falling. If we don’t agree, then the break-up catches the scraper in the canyon. Or it may be something else. He’s got me puzzled. I think he’s overplayed his hand.”

“What’ve you got in mind?” one asks.

“They’ve jumped our ground. Right now they’re probably thinking that we aren’t fools enough to risk passing the ice barrier,” I explain. “But if we are fools enough to take a chance, we’ll catch ‘em off guard.”

“What’re we waiting for?” John Selover asks.

A hunk of ice crashes with shattering force, and the silence amongst the men is so thick it would support a fat man on stilts.

“One at a time,” I say, “We don’t want the ice wiping out the bunch of us at one shot.” Then I lead off. It sure gives a man’s spine and head a funny feeling to expect a hunk of ice any second. There’s an urge to run, but you can’t do it because you’re liable to break a leg on the shattered stuff that’s on each side of the barrier. I’m breathing hard when I reach a safe point downstream.

ONE by one the others come. “What’s the deal?” Selover asks. “Do we go in for gunplay, or slug it out?”

“It’ll all depend on how they act,” I answer. “We’ll let ‘em make the rules. Gunplay, even in self-defense, means hearings and trials.”

“I’ll take the lead,” Bulldozer says as we turn up Hungry Creek. “I can sock harder than you can.”

He swings toward the commissioner’s cabin and softly taps on the window. “Lana! Lana! It’s Bulldozer. Which is Ted’s cabin? Also where’s the Gilligan crowd holed up.”

“Of all things!” she exclaims in an excited whisper. “How’d you get by the falling ice? Ted’s in the third cabin up. They chased him off of his claim. Gilligan and the others are in the old general store.”

“Good,” he answers. “That’ll save us breaking our necks trying to find ’em. The boys aren’t familiar with the country.”

Bulldozer leads the way to Ted White’s cabin. “Are you fightin’ mad?” he asks softly.

“Damned right,” Ted answers. “Oh, it’s you, Bulldozer.” His voice takes on hope. “Are the others with you? They are? I didn’t think they’d be crazy enough to risk that falling ice.”

“Gilligan doesn’t think so, either,” Bulldozer answers. “Get dressed and lead the way.”

As we sneak up on the old log store I notice sparks coming from the stone chimney. The boys have a fire going in the old oil drum heater, and they’re nice and comfortable. “It seems a dirty shame to disturb ‘em, Ted,” I whisper.

He snorts. “They’ve nailed boards up at the windows. The glass busted long ago when the building settled,” he whispers.

“Me and No-Shirt will bust through the door,” Bulldozer whispers. “When you hear it go down, you fellows go through the windows. Now don’t slug each other. They’ll be in their long-handled underwear or sleeping without their shirts. We’re fully dressed, so you shouldn’t swing on the wrong guy.”

He gives ’em time to get set, then he tries the door easy-like. It’s locked. He backs off and charges, with me right on his heels. The door flies off’n the ancient hinges and three or four voices ask, “What the hell’s that?”

“You’re just about to find out,” Bulldozer bellows. Then the boards over the windows fly off and in come the others.

Of all the hollerin’ and yellin’ you ever heard. The Gilligan outfit ain’t dumb, exactly. They figger anybody with outdoor clothes on must be an enemy, and start sluggin’. I hear Gilligan yelling, “Let ‘em
have it, boys. You got 'em licked right now.

He’s my meat!

He sees me coming in the gloom and says, “Hah! McGee! How’d you like that?” Something bounces off’n my head, and I almost go down. “Didn’t feel good, did it? Take that! And that!” I get something in the stomach that almost makes me sick, then I hit him with my shoulder and down he goes.

We roll over, slugging away, and out of the corner of my eye I see Ted White’s fist connect. A Gilligan man staggers backwards and hits the oil drum heater.

The way they make ’em is simple—cut a door in one end, cut a stove-pipe hole on top, and set the drum on a foundation. This foundation is rock slabs piled up, with a sort of nest for the drum. It rolls off as the groggy cuss hits it and down comes the pipe. Hot coals pour from the pipe hole, and in no time the building is on fire.

“McGee, you fool,” Gilligan yelps. “The place is afire.”

“Can’t let a little thing like a fire stop me,” I answer. “Me and you have had a showdown, rough and tumble fight coming a long time.” And I slug him. By the light I can see what he threw at me—these old-fashioned china coffee cups that are made for rough work and weigh a ton. It’s a wonder I wasn’t killed. “Why you dirty”—I begin, but the fire has made him desperate and he breaks loose and dashes out the door dragging his sleeping bag in one hand and his pack in the other.

I get him a hundred feet away and down we go again. “Throw their gear out,” Bulldozer yells, “or we’ll have to feed the buzzards.”

Out comes sleeping bags, packs and piles of grub, then the brawling starts again. I get a good clean sock at Gilligan’s jaw, but he beats me to it and dumps me onto the ground. As he rushes in to jump on me, I remember a trick I’d seen in a movie fight. I double up my knees, then drive my heels into him as he comes in. That does it. He’s out on his feet. He goes around with a cherubic smile on his face, like it is spring and the birds are singing all over the place.

“Father dear father come home with me now,” I say, taking him by the hand. I have to laugh. He comes along like a child. It won’t last so I tie him up.

It’s queer how hard a man can fight for his own ground. Ted White’s partners are skookum lads and in good condition, but they aren’t the best men in the world—just good, average American kids. On the other hand Gilligan had picked his men for claiming and other rough and tumble activities. By rights, they should have won most of the man-to-man fights that went on in the building, and that took place afterwards while the old store went up in flames. But they didn’t win a one.

Some were close, but in the end the weaker guy called on something deep inside and got a response. We tied ’em all up, then rested in the warmth of the fire.

Lana comes over and bandages up a few bad cuts and bruises, then says, “The coffee’s ready.”

We enjoy several cups all around, then give the Gilligans a ration. Gilligan is half through his cup, when he stops drinking and listens. “Water!” he says. “Running water! The break-up is here!” If he wasn’t tied, he’d have jumped up and down and yelled. “We all lose! There goes your scraper, McGee. The ice’ll take it out.” He yells again. “All this fighting, and nobody wins. Wait! I’ve won! I knocked you out of doing something you’ve wanted to do for years—work Hungry Creek at a profit.”

“Yeah,” I answer, “listen to it roar! Why did you trap the scraper upstream, anyway?”

“Figured to force you to make a deal. Figured to hold the scraper right there until you met my terms, then we’d all work together, move the ice barrier, and get the scraper onto solid ground,” he says, then he laughs.

“It’s going to be slim pickings around here so far as grub is concerned,” I say.

“Got you beat there. We brought down knock-down canvas boats,” he jeers. “Either you let us use ’em or you split your grub with us. You can’t go downriver for grub for a long time after the break-up, you know.”

“Yeah,” I answer, “I guess you’ve got us there, too. Do you figger you can get downstream before the ice goes out? She’s running fast over the surface now.”
"Warm air current upstream is thawing the snow. Mebbe it’s a warm rain, too," he says. "A canvas boat don’t draw much water. If it looks like ice is moving, too, we’ll haul out on one of the midstream islands further down." Suddenly he slaps his leg and laughs fit to kill. "McGee where’s your puddle jumper? Packed upstream with the scraper?"

"By golly it is!" I exclaim.

"What we should do," one of Ted’s partners says, "is take their boats and go downstream ourselves."

"No!" Ted answers. "We came here to stake ground and mine it, and that’s what we’re going to do. If we don’t make a dime, what the hell, we’ve stuck it out! If we fold now we build up what they call a defeatist complex. We stay!"

With the first streaks of daylight, the Gilligan outfit sets up their two knockdown canvas boats and heads for the river. Water three feet deep is racing over the ice. "If we never see you again it’ll be too soon," one of the boys tells Gilligan.

"Hey, Miss Lansing," Gilligan yells, holding the boat to the bank. "You’d better come with us. It’s going to be tough rafting downstream after the break-up."

"I’m here for story material," she answers. "I must stay and get the ending."

"You’re making a mistake. I’ll tell your mother I saw you," he yells as the boat starts moving. "End the story happily—have McGee fall into the river during the break-up and be ground up by the ice."

"Well, McGee," Ted says, "I guess we don’t have a finish fight after all. I’m kind of glad in a way."

"Oh, but we are, Son," I answer. "Let this be a lesson to you—never jump at conclusions, or overplay your hand like Gilligan just did."

The silence is so thick you can cut it with a knife. "No-Shirt," Lana says, "stop building up the boys’ hopes. It isn’t fair. The break-up is here. The scraper is gone. Look at that ice floating by."

"Glaciers are funny," I answer. "They freeze up even in the summer time. The cracks are all sealed, but there’s often springs under them, or emptying into some crevasse. That water backs up and in time you’ve a lake. When the pressure is great enough, or the ice moves, the water is released.

Years ago I was fooled into thinking the break-up was on when ice and water came by Hungry Creek. The water ran off and the main river ice was still there. I investigated and saw water dripping from the hanging glacier. I knew there were times it held a lake. When Gilligan shook things up with a blast I was sure water would start tumbling into the canyon. I was afraid it might break through before we could get downstream—that’s why I risked climbing over the barrier at night."

"You beat hell," Ted says. "Always some ace in the hole. You’ll put one over on us, now that Gilligan is out of the picture. But we aren’t quitting."

Sooner or later he always gets around to a defiant, we-aren’t-quitting.

AROUND noon the water has drained out of the glacier and we make our way up to the scraper and Claim Jumper. The barrier was washed out, and a test shows the puddles—where the river ice melted—aren’t very deep. Just the same when Bulldozer starts moving, the rest of us keep well back and mighty watchful. If the ice starts breaking, the big cuss is going to have to move fast to get clear, and he’s likely to need help. Ted White follows along with a line that runs into the cab. All Bulldozer has to do is grab it and be hauled clear—we hope.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble! The scraper crawls. It’s enough to turn a man into a nervous wreck, what with the ice cracking, yet never breaking up. It’s cold, but Bulldozer is sweating under the strain.

Even when he turns up Hungry Creek and stops on solid, frozen gravel we can hardly believe he’s made it safely.

"I don’t know how you feel about it, Mr. McGee," Ted White says, "but I can use a little rest before we start trading wallops. Suppose we call off all bets until tomorrow?"

"Okay," I answer, then I catch my breath and head upstream for Claim Jumper.

The next morning, after breakfast, Ted White and his outfit move in on me and Bulldozer. "As commissioner," Lana says, "I’m neutral, so I’ll keep out of the discussions. As a girl learning something of Alaskan life, I admire Mr. McGee, but I’m pulling for Ted."

Ted White, with a queer expression on
his face, asks, "You have the scraper, we have most of the ground, what kind of a deal will you give us?"

"Give me twenty thousand for the scraper and she's yours," I answer. "I'll throw in the airport."

"The hell you will! I want no airport. That's your headache," he answers. "And twenty thousand dollars is too much to pay for the scraper."

"I'll make you another proposition," I offer. "I'll throw in the scraper and the ground. By the ground I mean our fraction claims, of course. You throw in your ground and we'll split fifty-fifty on the profits."

Ted White gets good and mad then. It's a good thing I'm an older man or he'd have popped me. "I'll see you in hell, first," he yells.

"Okay," I reply. "We'll work our own ground with the scraper. When we're done we'll let the scraper rust if you won't listen to reason."

He walks back and forth, fighting mad. "We'll give you a sixth of the clean-up," he offers. "Lana found the old estimates on this ground. We know what it'll produce. They punched holes down to bedrock all over the place. The values are uniform, so there isn't much of a gamble. And we know what your damned scraper is worth, too."

"And I keep telling you," I yell, showing some heat, "that your ground isn't worth anything without the scraper."

"And the scraper is worthless without the ground," he answers. "We've gone over that again and again. What's the sense of us riding on a merry-go-round? Why can't we get together on something fair?"

"We should have made an agreement before we even started downstream with the scraper," I said. "Now we're both in a jackpot. The difference is, I hold the winning cards. I can take a loss and you can't." I pretend to figure awhile, then I make a counter offer. "Give me and Bulldozer one-fifth of the clean-up and it's a deal."

"No, that isn't a fair split," he says. "There's more than ground involved with us. It is getting off to a right start in Alaska. We've got to live with ourselves, you know. That's hard to do if you feel you've cheated the other fellow, and it is just as hard to do if you feel the other fellow has made a sucker out of you."

"You're not dealing with a man as fair as you are," I remind him. "You don't realize how much trouble those fraction claims can give you in unfriendly hands."

"I'm learning," he says hotly. "But I'm still not going to be clubbed into doing something that isn't sound business. That's my policy from here on in—win, lose or draw."

"Here's my last offer," I tell him. "You take the scraper, run the show to suit yourself, give me and Bulldozer whatever money you take out of our fraction claims and we'll call it square."

"Listen, Mr. McGee," he says, "don't kid us. We just can't take it, that's all."

"I'm not kidding you," I answer. "That kind of deal will suit me and Bulldozer. From the instant I saw you boys I figured you were the kind I hoped would stay in Alaska. But there are so many ways the smart cusses like Gilligan can take a Chechako to the cleaners. I could have warned you about 'em, but that wouldn't have worked. You'd have forgotten. The best way was to put you squarely up against it, then make you squirm and stick by your guns. That's what happened." Then I figure it is time to grin.

Somebody throws a mighty satisfactory pair of arms around my neck and kisses me squarely on the mouth. It is Lana, and it happens so sudden I'm caught off-guard and forget to kiss back. It's something I'll always regret.

"Listen," I keep saying, "I'm not giving you any break. It's a cold-blooded deal. After all, the scraper didn't cost me so very much. It was thrown in with the airstrip. And don't think I'm going to take a beating on that, either. I'll find some way of using McGee Field."

"No-Shirt, darling," Lana interrupts, "I've got material for my first big story. And it has a happy ending."

"Does the guy get the girl?" I ask.

"No," she answers, "the girl gets the guy." Then she puts her arms around Ted White and kisses him. It's much different than the kiss she gave me—it lasts longer and is much more special; very much more special.
THE cargo was in her, the hatches sealed, all set for the first decent wetting down in months. We were Argentina bound and I could smugly watch the Old Man while he fussled over delays and anticipate. For done we were now with the cautious, eelgrass routes, sneaking alongshore with an eye out for periscopes. The broad Atlantic presented its far reaches again and our old Edgemont, perky in fresh paint and minimum repairs to her worn innards, was ready for any cargo to any port.

By this hour tomorrow, the towering skyscrapers would be down over. Instead of their attendant din we'd have the slop of seas to her sides and that steady pulse of power, the smell of rubbish and exhaust pipes replaced by ocean wind, salty clean.

And this time no summons from Bayle. I'd be my own man, First on the Edgemont. Nothing else, by cripes.

Our new skipper was one of those Johnny-jump-ups, product of the recent shortage of mariners. True, I myself rated his braid, but going master would have hampered my work for Bayle. Nor did it matter; I don't need the money, so why assume the worry? Yes, the Edgemont was a headache for any

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cap'n and this youngster would need plenty of bucking up from an old hand like me.

While I'd been ashore this trip to dry-dock, her roster had changed a lot; only a couple of the old seadog type remained in her fo'castle—and of course myself. Now came Cap'n Lynn with a helpless shrug to complain, "No use, Mate, I can't possibly get her to sea till tomorrow noon. One thing after another. If this ancient tramp was that important I'd think someone deliberately put things in our way to hold us here."


Ah, but the laugh was actually on me; somebody was deliberately delaying us. Harden Bayle. He was senior partner among the owners of the fleet which included the Edgemont. Though some of these ships had gone down, the rest had paid high dividends like most of Bayle's investments. It might appear that he'd maneuvered to give the Edgemont special considerations, the oldest one of the fleet, but there was no sentiment in Bayle. She made less heroic runs because of her drab, inconspicuous appearance which made her a natural for his missions and the mate who carried them out.

He sent for me early in the evening when I was poised to go ashore and fix up my own evening. I found him waiting alone in his office and for once he did not stage that usual preamble.

"There's postage stamps in Argentina that I want," he said crisply.

Philatelist? Bayle? Butterflies'll probably come next!

"They came on a U-boat last summer," he went on, "soon after Germany surrendered. Just who brought them, I do not know, but I'm sure of who has them now—an small sheet of uncanceled stamps. They're the only ones in the world like them and there'll never be any more issued."

Aha, up to his old tricks, leading me on to make me ask. Okay. I did.

Reply: "They're German, designed by the famous paper-hanger himself, a universal postage stamp good for use from any conquered country."

"And no damned good now," said I, "but I can see what a collector's item they will be."

"Some have been used," he went on, ignoring my interruption. "From every conquered country two letters were mailed bearing these stamps. From Warsaw one was sent to a high English official, another went to a French leftist politician, another from Copenhagen to a New York banker, still another to a statesman in Australia. Yes, and from Paris one to a Roman Catholic bishop in Brazil—and from Athens, so they say, one went to Stalin. Get the picture?"

"What was that, psychological warfare or something?"

"Exactly," he replied. "Tons of paper was consumed for that purpose as we all know and most of it was turned over to experts for analysis. Naturally some of those stamps were thrown away or lost, but there are seven, possibly eight, in existence. The rumor that one went to Russia is unverified. Ere long will appear an article in a periodical of wide circulation telling the story of these stamps, who received them, when, and the message which went with each. All messages were about the same, saying in effect that another capital had fallen and in time these stamps would be carrying a letter from any capital in the world.

"So all this information has been dug up to be publicized. Do you recognize the setup?" he asked. "No sooner is that article published here in New York than the uncanceled stamps will go on sale—through a certain dealer here. Think of the price they'll bring! Only recently a stamp sold for ten thousand dollars merely because an error in the printing got the picture of a plane upside down. Then imagine the market price of Hitler's own universal stamp—a sheet of them! The only uncanceled ones in the world!"

Too many possibilities came to mind; resolutely I cast them aside until some still, monotonous watch at sea. Now I must be alert, for Bayle had no patience with bungling.

"Remember how the countries fell?" he continued. "Multiply them by two and you'll have the number Hitler used, and most of them accounted for. Now on that sheet in Argentina are ten stamps for use in the five countries Hitler felt must be subjugated to assure his conquest of the
world, Washington, Moscow—what others? Maybe Tokyo?"

I rose to leave. "So you want the stamps. Who's the man in Argentina?"

"Sit down, there's more to this. Somebody else may covet them too."

Aha. Enter the villain. "He'll have to be a smart one to out-villain a pair like you and me," said I.

"He is." Bayle handed me an envelope from a drawer. In it were ten stamps in waxed paper, the like of which I'd never seen, about the size of our special delivery issue but done in multiple colors and shades. I gave Bayle a frankly bewildered look.

"Counterfeits," he explained brazenly, "but very good copies by a master engraver from the stamp loaned me by a friend, the banker who received it from Hitler. Superficially they so closely resemble the genuine that an expert would go some to prove them false. Only the paper they're printed on could give the job away and even it is a splendid copy." He laughed maliciously to add, "But in time it will all come to light when the fakes are put on sale here in New York."

So, I concluded, it wasn't the stamps that mattered with Bayle; as usual he was laying for some one.

"Your assignment is to replace the real stamps with these. The real ones will go in my museum; these will go on sale in New York. Naturally it must be cleverly done to make suspicion impossible—"

"But the man who did the engraving job is what I want to discuss with you. Let's call him Smith. He was an exceptionally fine engraver until, one day, the law caught up with him. But for my helping hand, Smith would be serving time now."

Harden Bayle's helping hand! How well I'd come to know it and how brutally it could snap the whip. Then I wasn't the only man in Bayle's toils? Right there I felt a degree of sympathy for so-called Smith.

But he read my thoughts, as usual. "Don't waste sympathy," he sneered, "he happens to be the villain of this assignment, the one you've got to get the best of—together, of course, with that fellow in Argentina who has the real stamps. Smith, ah—disregarded my explicit orders by making more than the ten specified counterfeit stamps. How I caught him doesn't concern you, but it put me on my toes and I set a man to watch him. Smith delivered me the ten yesterday noon, in time for me to contact you before sailing; but after he left this office he vanished. I felt it necessary to know more about it before calling you in so I had supplies for the Edgemont held up."

"What did you find out?"

"Nothing, so I decided that you must be told about Mr. Smith. In some way or other, he is double-crossing me. As I said, he's a smart man. And that is all I can tell you except that the dealer's name, in Buenos Aires, is Jan Kreug. He seems to be a Hollander. Anything else?"

"Yes. Smith knew the stamps of which he was making copies. How much more? How much more did he know about them?"

"Not much. I've never mentioned the dealer in Argentina nor the one here in New York. But don't forget, he's smart."

"What does he look like?"

FROM his filing cabinet Bayle drew a paper showing front and side views and fingerprints. "Used when the law was after him. Good likenesses at the time but not as he looks today because a job of plastic surgery really made him over. His features are very regular, eyes brown, hair light brown, height five-ten and weights, say, one sixty-five. Nothing outstanding in his appearance now; that's how he could risk staying in New York. Wears glasses but doesn't need them. Of his personal habits I know little; I've seen the man only about half a dozen times. He's well educated and accustomed to work; he used to work for a firm which published best sellers."

"Why these counterfeits?" I asked. "Have you something against the Hollander you want to settle?"

"No; something against the dealer here in New York who is promoting the sale here, a top-grade dealer who wouldn't sell a glass sugar bowl if it were counterfeit—not from honesty but because once his reputation is smeared, he is done. That's why I want the counterfeits substituted for the genuine stamps. I want their sale to come about. Then, mister, a rumor will start that will blow the works. This dealer has seen the stamps in Argentina, knows they are the real thing and these copies are so excellent
that I doubt he’ll recheck on their genuineness. That is all.”

As usual, I left Harden Bayle with mixed emotions, with a resentment that he could order my life, and with an eagerness for the adventure ahead.

There was a certain stiffness in the skipper’s greeting when I found him up and prowling around at that late hour. I wondered what manner of man he was going to be. Was he censoring the private lives of his crew? If he expected us all to be lilies in port, he was in for disillusionment.

We got to sea before noon; by and by the stars and the sea were the Edgemont’s world. Thought I—one of these times I shall collect my savings just before leaving New York, jump ship in some foreign port and start living my own life.

Thus did routine affect me when only monotonous things mattered—the throb of the screw, the clumping of the helm, how she handled, what the steward would dish up, whether any bugs had come aboard with the new men, and the little idiosyncracies of one another—for a ship is a narrow but complete world in herself.

I sensed a hostility in Cap’n Lynn. He was a nervous, irritable, fretty number; from the way he went about his work, I doubted his ability. The ink was fresh on his license and probably none too seasoned on his papers as mate. What any man needs, I mused, is all kinds of experience before he attempts a skipper’s responsibilities and in all kinds of ships.

After some spit-and-polished new vessel, doubtless our old Edgemont looked worm eaten to this young fellow. I think the prospects of managing her on his own judgment scared him. True, I could help him because I knew the old tub in all weather with whatever crew, but my offer to do that got me a figurative slapdown.

“Okay,” says I, “if that’s how he wants it.” I had other matters, you know—I chuckled over that Smith getting the drop on Bayle, but what was his racket? Would he put his surreptitious fake stamps on the market or did he, too, know a promotion campaign was in prospect that would rouse greedy collectors?

How could he know anything about that angle? There was one possible answer: friends in his ink-splashing brotherhood with whom he might still maintain contacts. He might know the magazine article was to be published. If so, he’d be Johnnie-on-the-spot the day it came out and cash his stamps in, of course.

However, his fraud must come to light eventually.

Then the Dutchman in Argentina would be extra careful about his stamps and I might not be able to get hands on them—or if I did, every single one of that “universal stamp” issue would be under scrutiny so minute that Bayle’s game would be up. So I was timed again in a mission for Bayle; everything depended upon completing my work before the magazine article came out. When would that be? Bayle hadn’t said nor had I thought to ask. I must find out.

Soon as that watch ended I went below to word a cable to Bayle and it had to be right. Always I deal with him cautiously.

The instant I stepped inside my room I sensed that it had been disturbed. Many experiences had taught me to observe such matters. My pulse swelled in my throat—I had left my ten fake stamps in that room.

MY FEET seemed to drag me to that drawer in the little desk. My fingers felt huge and thick when I hauled it out and loosened the false bottom, but they were there and I laughed in utter relief. Doubtless our new cabin boy had merely pawed over my things in that curiosity some of his ilk have.

With my reading glass I examined the stamps closely. Intricate work, this, in two shades of red, blue, yellow, and possibly three shades of green. Hitler held the forefront with his belittling mustache and in the background was the almost unbelievable detail of mighty manufacturing plants and green fields framed in flowers at the sides and top. How characteristic of the man! No United States of Europe such as Briand and others had planned, no brotherhood of man the world over, but a superstate under a so-called master race.

And it might have come to pass. A nightmare of possibilities flooded my thoughts. What if his planes had concentrated on England’s public utilities instead of mistaken horror bombings? Or if Rommel had not found his match in eastern desert Africa? Or if Russia had collapsed and we’d faced
the enemy solo before we were ready? Aye, Hitler’s universal stamps might have been in use—including the ten I was after in Argentina.

Enough of imagining things. What of the stamps? Who had brought them to Argentina as passenger on a U-boat? Could it have been Hitler himself? That still was a possibility in some men’s minds. Had he escaped after all, despite the evidence in Berlin, to persist in his universal postage idea and the world plan behind it? Well, more likely some henchman got out of Germany before its collapse and, realizing the immense value of the stamps, had brought them along for personal profit.

MY runaway fancies were yanked back to the reality of a bug running across my desk. Damnation! So we did have bugs aboard—and the last trip I’d been in her we’d fumigated. Every port meant renewed vigilance, now some one had got careless. I smashed the thing with my fist and thought of all the splendid new ships and their reputed cleanliness, but deep inside me I realized I wouldn’t have traded this old Edgemont for the best of them. A man must have something he loves.

So I set myself to work on my prospective cable to Bayle, using the code I could resort to only in emergency, then burning what I’d composed. For any message I’d send must mean nothing to anybody except myself and Bayle.

I brushed off the dead insect and picked up my stamps. That smashing fist had only by the merest chance not smeared the stamps—or had it? The reading glass did reveal just the minutest mark on the right edge of one, scarcely visible to the naked eye. Well, after all it was quite reasonable to discover some sort of markings on any stamps which had been where the universal issue had been. Only a minute mark, but I lost a heartbeat to think what a really big smooth could have done to my commission. I returned them to their hiding place, reproving myself, I mustn’t let myself become a timid old fool.

I concocted a message designed to oblige Bayle to make Bayle do some good brainwork ere he’d figure it out, but he’d get the idea in time. Hang him, he had but few occasions to exert himself in most of these missions, simply say “go” and “do” and the grief was mine afterwards.

My message said only: “ADVISE TRENCHMAN’S PUBLICATION.” True, this man Trenchman had been dead ten years but he’d been editor of the magazine in the university we’d attended. Bayle would get the connection.

When I took the message to the radio op., he gave it an impish grin. Like myself, he was an old-timer and we always hit it off okay. “I was expecting this,” he said, “but I didn’t know who would send it.” While the sending machine got going he explained, “The skipper we’ve got now wants a copy of all messages sent.”

Was I hot? “It’s none of his damned business,” I objected and saw by his manner that he thought no better of the man than I did.

“Come on, Mate, let’s fix up some fast ones to keep him guessing. Make a phoney and an answer to it also and I’ll give it to him. That’ll serve him right for getting tough on his first trip along of us. What say?”

So we sent “CLOSE DEAL STOP NEW ROCHELLE STOP” and the reply should be, of course, “DEAL CLOSED STOP.” We let the skipper have that one. What he made of these versions of my radiograms I don’t know, but the reply I got to mine from Bayle was splendid—”PUBLICATION TWO MONTHS OR MORE STOP.”

Then for once I wasn’t crowded for time—or was I? What of the man called Smith? What if he, too, was on the trail of the genuine stamps? I’m sure Bayle must have considered this possibility else he wouldn’t have warned me.

Below Hatteras it came on to blow—and how! Right away I had a problem on my hands, as quick and as stiff as the southerly; the Edgemont was too old to be handled like a tanker or nifty fruit boat and her skipper was both green and rather young. When he got stubborn and held her to her course it was bad enough, but when he insisted on crossing the Gulf Stream despite the weather, I ran afoul of the Chief and he was fit to be tied.

No mate makes a practice of telling any skipper how to operate, but I was reduced to talking with Cap’n Lynn or leaving him to
the fury of the Chief and that gentleman aft could break the best youthful skipper afloat merely with his system of psychology and persistence. He never let up. So I got the skipper into the chart room when great seas were booming onto the decks, the frames complaining and the helm barely holding her up to it.

I expected hell from him; not, however, the torrent of abuse he poured on. It smacked of hysteria, I thought, so I made another attempt, concluding with something like this, "Cap’n, if you don’t at least slow down, she’ll take you to bottom. I know exactly what she’ll stand—"

No use. I could have swept the wheelhouse with him—I went aft instead. It’s an old dodge that many a stubborn skipper knows enough to listen to his Chief; maybe this one would but I must put the words into the Chief’s mouth.

Believe it or not, Lynn rang for half speed before I got there. Then maybe I could influence this fellow, even though it had to be so indirectly. Which was worth bearing in mind.

The southerly soon spent itself. Relieved of the concern for the safety of the Edgemont, I recalled some of that skipper’s ravings, especially one hot remark. Allowing something for anxiety and rage, he may not have realized the implications in saying, "I know your game aboard here. I’m onto it and don’t kid yourself; those cables haven’t fooled me!"

Meaning what? I was an open book except for my past and my mission for Bayle. Since my past couldn’t matter to this man, he must have had those stamps in his mind. Did he realize, then, that he’d given himself away? What was his part in the stamp matter? Was he Smith? Nah, he was too small and getting bald and Bayle would have mentioned anything so conspicuous as this.

Was he working for Smith? That could be; in fact, it looked quite possible the more I weighed it. Smith himself wouldn’t attempt the Argentina trip on one of Bayle’s ships; he might indeed work through another man on the same ship with Bayle’s agent. Maybe my usual good luck had tipped me off to this skipper. At any rate I’d certainly stand by, on the alert, for anything from now on.

Bugs! The storm worked them out of the woodwork. All hands groused about them. The skipper had to recognize it. Time was when bugs and roaches were accepted irritations aboard ship, but the war had brought to light some deadly dopes for vermin, so the skipper ordered the ship cleaned. He had been very short and stiff toward me since our scenes in the wheelhouse; now he came just this side of insult.

Never mind, says I, we all feel the same toward him. The helmsman jerked his head toward a seaman who’d tossed his lunch in the storm and still looked pea green about it. The skipper had held the kid up to ridicule but Marsh said, "Hell, plenty’s at sea today that heave up; some’re old-timers at that,"

"How’d the cap’n take that?" I asked Marsh.

He decked a direct reply. "You mean Waite," he said. "He made no back talk, he was ashamed to have made such a fool of himself, I guess."

But that skipper got so irritable and unreasonable and unfair about everything that I wondered what would happen if eventually he pushed somebody less meek than Waite too far. Which became something further for me to watch; I wanted no trouble aboard the Edgemont this trip, I had enough on my hands.

NEXT thing I knew, the mess boy was smearing under Lynn’s tongue lashings enough to tell me that he’d seen the skipper enter my room on several occasions when he was making up the skipper’s room and I was on watch above. I passed it off, but it fitted in with the evidence of things disturbed in that room.

Just how safe was the false bottom in that drawer? Nor could I think of any better hiding place. Certainly not on my person where sweat or sea water could ruin the stamps; or worse if something "accidentally" dropped on my skull in the dark! Yes, my room had been entered more than once but so far the stamps were still safe there. So I got on with the job of exterminating bugs and I made it thorough, flooding every seam and crack throughout the living quarters of that ship—and not one bug did I see!

But I got the surprise of my life—a small parcel in paper so carefully concealed that
curiosity made me undo it. Carefully folded in wax paper inside it was the ten universal stamps. Mister, you could have floored me with a feather. I'd have sworn they were safe in my room—the crafty devil! By obliging me myself instead of leaving it to the bosun, by ordering me to do the fumigating, he had given himself the opportunity to comb my room thoroughly, probably while I worked aft in the fo'c'sles and engineers' quarters; and here was the result. He had found my stamps and hidden them in this locker in the 'thwartships alley up in the bridge where we kept only emergency items such as a few fuses, an extension lamp and odd things almost never used. Why I opened the locker is to be explained only by the fact I was so cussed mad to be doing my bosun's work that I fumigated everything in sight.

Of course, I reasoned, the skipper couldn't hide them in his own cabin, at least not until I'd finished this job there; so now he was on the bridge, having his big laugh at me. To hell with him. I, too, could laugh, but only by reason of good luck and my temper. Henceforth, I'd have to keep these stamps on my person and that meant continuous super caution against sweating and getting wet down. We were not far from port, however, and I could stand the ceaseless tension of watching the skipper's tongue, handling myself dry and, incidentally, fulfilling my duties as mate.

I got done and climbed to the bridge in high spirits, knowing what was under my shirt. I found Skipper and Third red-faced and red-hot. The Third turned to me to unburden himself but I waved him no; I wanted no rows at this late stage of the voyage. Waite, waiting to take the wheel, stared at the cap'n with hate-filled eyes and that was something—an ally in the fo'castle if I should need one. And I remembered what the after gang thought of Lynn since the southerly. But I must keep up appearances because after all any cap'n's position has to be upheld.

After four hours to think, I went below to my room with regrets for that false-bottomed drawer. It was back into place and I looked at it, thinking: how could Lynn have discovered it? So snugly did it fit. Too bad, for it had served as concealment for many a false passport, for coded charts, certified checks. Now, for at least as long as Cap'n Lynn stayed aboard, it would be useless to me.

"Hell!" I grunted and pushed down on a spot—and the bottom fell out! I scarcely believed my own eyes, but there they were, the ten counterfeit stamps exactly as I had left them!

But I had them in my pocket or—oh, of course. These on my person must be the ten which Smith had made in defiance of Bayle's strict orders. Well then, Mr. Smith's stamps also were on their way to Argentina.

I pondered the new situation, trying to fit together the pieces of the puzzle. It didn't seem probable that some other man was along with a mission identical with mine, for Bayle coveted the original stamps to carry out a grudge. Nobody else could possibly want them for the same reason, then why were these other ten false stamps being brought along? Had Bayle leaked some inkling of his plan to Smith? Ah, no, Bayle wasn't the babbling kind. Nevertheless, Smith must have realized that Bayle had good reason for having the stamps made. He was smart, Bayle had emphasized that point.

Smart. Then was he out to steal the originals and market them himself? A daring venture for a "wanted" man. Another thought came to me: what if Bayle was behind all this? Would he pit Smith and me against each other? Why? Was he trying to put me in my place since I'd questioned him at length? Or because I'd had many a private laugh on him while carrying out these commissions? The case of the senorita's portrait, for instance, the god with the open mouth, the golden horse with unmatched eyes. Doubtless, I'd put his mission in temporary jeopardy while working out my own angle of each case, but he'd got what he'd coveted, hadn't he? And if now he was getting back at me, why had he tipped me off about Smith at all?

I concluded that I knew Bayle well enough not to credit him with the kindness to grant me a sporting chance. Bayle is tough on everybody.

Thinking all this through, it seemed best that I return the newly found stamps to their hiding place for awhile. So long as we were at sea, it could do no harm; on the
other hand, missing them, he’d be out for my scalp in a big way, and a cargo ship is too small for maneuvering. And although I hadn’t the slightest idea what he could use them for, I would reclaim them just before we entered port since they were important.

Waite, that abused sailor I’d pitied, was painting close by the locker, so I sent him aft on an invented errand. It was just by chance, then, that I saw Cap’n Lynn. He’d come up the midship stairway that silently; now he gave me a frankly suspicious eye.

“Just what were you and that Waite talking about? You should know what it leads to when a mate hobnobs with common sailors—or don’t you?” he growled.

I stared at the man. Was he insane? “Cap’n, don’t be a fool,” I replied. By then he was fighting so obviously for self control that I moved away to let him get it. The last thing I wanted was an open row with Cap’n Lynn. But Waite returned, resumed his painting and the skipper vented his fury on that hapless lad. I’d no estimate of how much the fellow would stand. I vowed I’d keep out of it regardless and hoped they’d take it to hell out of the alley and leave me the chance to put the stamps back into the locker.

Luck was not mine. A sudden ejaculation, and a sharp curse brought me around on my toes. The skipper was berating the paint-bedaubed, shame-faced sailor. He made a threatening move so quickly that Waite dropped his pail of paint and it flew over everything within a fathom—including the locker which spoiled my chance to return the stamps that hour. That day, in fact; so in late evening I turned in, determined to wake up half an hour before time to go on my Morning Watch. After three a.m. my chances would be easier.

It was broad daylight when I came to. I brushed something off my face. My head was foggy. A queer smell... hissing my head from the pillow I saw my duds scattered over the room. Even my shirt lay next to the door. No wonder I was chilly... I came out of a doze with a start. How come all this? I’d planned to get up about 3:15. Never before had I overslept and I’d laid those clothes carefully over my desk where I could get into them fast and return the other ten—

The stamps! Now I understood. Some-

one had doped me and rifled my clothes and it wasn’t hard to guess who. No use now to look in that inside pocket of the shirt; stamps were no longer there.

The Old Man o’ the Edgemont was on edge the rest of that voyage as we kept sharp, covert watch on each other. He did the poorest job at docking I have seen yet, evidently too eager to get her tied up. Well, of course, his other business ashore with stamps would be his uppermost concern right then.

I kept out of his way for the sake of discipline aboard us, but when he lit into Waite again I was there. Strange to say, the fuss was over a letter brought by messenger, air mail and special delivery sort. Boy, they’ll crack fists, thought I when the mess boy passed behind me and said, “Letter for you, sir, better snatch it ’fore they tear it.”

I walked into the row with hand reaching and the skipper yielded the envelope with poor grace, then stalked away. Said Waite rather ruefully, “Aw, I shouldn’t ’ave horned in on ‘im but I knew ’twas yours and I only offered to deliver it to you, sir.”

“Fine mess over somebody else’s affairs,” I told him.

“Well, somehow, from the way he grabbed for it I didn’t think you’d ever get to see that letter—and a special messenger brought it.”

No, Waite was nobody’s fool and he despised the skipper.

Bayle wrote: "Before delivering the stamps to me, Smith called on a person who happens to be a die-hard Nazi. Today they found Smith’s body down at the river. Skull fractured. No knowing what happened to the stamps."

It was getting dark when I tore that letter to bits, threw them into the wind and looked up. Cap’n Lynn was watching me from the bridge, me and the man Waite, and somehow that sailor gave me a warm sensation. Could I use him? I rarely work with another man, preferring my own ways, but from Bayle’s letter I knew I was up against something tough this time.

So the Nazis still were with us, still to be dealt with, still at it. Didn’t they realize they were licked or were they standing by as they’d stood before, letting us become occupied with our own affairs and our guard
down? So Smith had gone to them with his stamps? What he had hoped from that contact will never come to light, but the stamps were here, aboard the old Edgemont, and Smith’s corpse—why were those stamps being brought to Argentina anyway? Surely they would have sold at a better figure in New York.

I figured it out this way: they could serve as an identification card for the person bringing them—to the Dutchman Jan Kreug? And why would such identification be necessary? What the connection between Kreug in Argentina and that group in New York whither Smith had gone to peddle his stamps?

I knew I must be the first to get to that dealer; there’d be no dallying among opponents so ruthless. Doubtless Cap’n Lynn also would get there as soon as humanly possible. If only he could be delayed, even one hour; that was all I asked and if only I had an ally—Waite still leaned to the rail only fifteen feet away, looking at me.

I jerked my head toward my room.

His white teeth showed a rare smile.

"Okay, sir, I’m with you," he said.

SOMETHING happened to me during those few steps to my room inside the bridge, something which a landsman might find hard to comprehend. It could have been the way Waite said "Sir," but ’twas something deeper than that. Cap’n Lynn cheated though he might be and enemy of yours truly, was also the master of the Edgemont. He might even be a tool of unwhipped Nazis, yet he wore a sailing master’s braid and his license hung in the wheelhouse and something inside me could not connive with a fo’castle hand against the skipper.

Get me? I’d handle this matter alone.

Waite looked his surprise when I sent him on his way and I’ve since wondered how things would have turned out if I had asked him to delay the cap’n’s going ashore. Had I been reasonably certain of one hour, or even a dependable half hour, I might have been less hurried, less alert in getting to that Dutchman.

As it was, I forfeited supper and had the satisfaction of seeing the skipper in the wheelhouse when I went ashore. Whether he saw me go, I couldn’t tell, but my own ten stamps were tucked away inside my shirt and the usual weapon nestled in its usual pocket, in case.

Some time was lost in locating Jan Kreug’s shop—one against me since the person with the other stamps might know exactly where to go. But I have my own technique; a well-covered palm will effect miracles in any country. Which led me into a poor street with mean shops, just as I’d expected, where—in their proprietors live on the premises.

A light burned weakly behind closed shutters. The door was locked. I rapped and got no response. I pounded until a small window overhead went up cautiously and I stepped backward to look. A man said something in Spanish so garbled that my waterfront vocabulary made no sense of it. "Come down here. I want to see you."

Back came some English with a heavy foreign accent: “I do not open my shop no at night,” and he was shutting his window. “Hey, you,” I said roughly, “I’m from New York. I’ve got to see you about stamps—”

“Hush,” he interrupted sharply. “Somebody might und’rstand English—I come down.”

Wooden stairs creaked. The door opened quickly, was fastened behind me. He was old and thin and bent with years, but those eyes were keen and questioning in a manner of dignity which could be felt rather than seen. The shop cried poverty, its few articles being objects of art not valuable. To collect my wits, I looked at them; none of my preconceived notions fitted here. For a man handling priceless stamps, this setup obviously was a blind.

What else did it conceal? Was Kreug, too, a die-hard Nazi? And his place a spot in the worldwide organization at which Germans were so adept? If so, Jan Kreug was tough despite his looks and there’d be just one way to deal with him.

If I was clumsy fishing out my stamps it was because my right hand had gone where it would serve me best in case. “Look at these,” I said.

Dumbfounded, he examined the stamps under a light, then turned incredulous eyes upon me. “They cannot be,” he exclaimed. “Where did you get them? There are only ten—”

“And you’ve got them here,” I finished.
His eyes burned upon me. "Where? Where?"

"Maybe from the same place you got yours."

"Impossible!"

Which got me nowhere, wasting time. I itched to get the business over with. Should I trade or threaten? I'd trade first; if it failed, then threaten him. "I'm here to trade with you. My stamps are counterfeits but so good it'd take an expert to detect it. I'll swap you these for the genuine ones and give you something substantial for the accommodation. You can forward these to the fellow in New York; he won't know the difference, he's satisfied that you have the originals, he won't suspect. And what if he did find out? Long beforehand you'll have the money, it won't matter to you. How about it?"

Slowly he shook his old head. "I shall have to refuse," he said so softly that I scarcely heard it.

I pulled my gun. He viewed it without a trace of fear. "Maybe you don't understand, I'm offering a trade," I warned. "You can't help yourself, I can blink you out and search your place. I'm an old hand at this, I don't often miss." Which, of course, was bluff for, even so and I found the genuine stamps I'd not be carrying out Bayle's orders. The stamps would mean nothing to Bayle unless the New York dealer became humiliated. Aye, he always exacted his pound of you know—plus the blood that came with it.

Kreug never flinched. Almost he invited force and force would get me nowhere but perhaps he still didn't get the idea. "You lose nothing," I repeated. "You'll make more money this way. That's what you're in for, isn't it? Or are you working for that Nazi gang in New York?"

Fire flecked in the old eyes. "No, not that. And the money is not important; a month ago, yes, but not now."

"Hell, it's always important. Come on, out with your stamps."

He looked tired and spoke with an effort. "I try to make you understand. A long time my family were diamond merchants in Holland. Always we had the reputation for honesty, never we sell inferior stones for fine cuts. For that we were known the world over, and trusted. You ask am I Nazi; no longer I have to keep up the lie. When they came into Holland, every one of my family was killed, all but me and grandson Hans. They took everything we had, money, stones, everything. Me, too old to fight with our allies but there were other ways.

"To their shame, many helped the Germans; others appeared to. It helped the cause. I was one of these, hating the work because we have always been honest, but I served my Netherlands and Hans. You see, they took Hans for hostage. How I deceived them! But they trusted me completely. Strange people, Germans; kill my family, steal our property but because they have my Hans, they own me. So they send me here, I obey orders, they put great trust in me."

I suspected he was dragging out his tale to consume time. "Cut it short."

Sorrowfully he resumed: "You cannot understand, I see. Family pride, our honor. I knew the value of the stamps when they came. Knew where I could sell them; selling has been my business for years. With the money I would return to Holland, build the business again for Hans. Yes, a month ago I would have sold them to you—now I have word that Hans is dead, been dead for two years and they did not tell me. I am old and tired now; no use to build the business again. Shameful things I have done; before long I die. This is why I cannot deceive the dealer in New York with your counterfeits; for the little time left to me, I am an honest man again."

Fancy that. Honor and family pride after all he'd suffered? His words got under my skin, for my family had enjoyed its pride too and all its men had been honorable—all save myself. For the moment I was stumped; up against the intangible, I could not see my way out. Silence deepened between us and fortunate that it did or I'd not have heard a car stop outside, then go on—and somebody walking to the door! My time had run out.

Gun in hand, I hid quickly behind a long, cloth curtain hanging just off a wall and discovered that it concealed the stairway to the floor above. Fine. I always like a way out.

By pushing aside the curtain a bit I could keep an eye on Kreug, saying softly, "I've got you covered." Though he looked
straight ahead, I knew he heard me. Now a rap on the door, a splintering crash as it yielded to force. I couldn’t see the door, but the old man’s face turned ashen and a mean laugh was followed with: “Caught up with you, Jan Kreug. You knew we would. Hein?”

So Kreug understood German for he replied, “Yab wobl,” he knew.

But that German’s voice. Aboard ship Cap’n Lynn had talked in a high-pitched nervous manner. How savage it sounded now, in German. I heard him step forward, still out of my range of vision. Again that explosive laugh. Missing what he said, I concentrated on Kreug and he was still holding my fake stamps in his hand! And nary a show of resistance when a hand shot into view, snatched them and its owner jeered: “Had them all ready, hein? Expecting somebody? Not me. Yah, saves me the trouble of using my identification sheet, my own stamps.” Excitedly shifting to broken English: “Your som’body, he com’ too late; all he will find is your corpse, Herr Kreug.”

Though his eyes closed, Jan raised his head bravely to say, “Get it over with.”

I checked my spring only because the voice resumed taunting him. “These stamps will be used, all in good time. Von day our universal stamp it will mail a ledger in Washington as it was plan—und from odder capitals. We’re nott beaten there time ether aber you won’t be here to see it. You know yay I kill you, Kreug?”

“I know. It has been worth it.”

That brought a blood-curdling yell. Out from hiding I sprang—

Our shots sounded as one but mine must have tailed first because his bullet hole the ceiling. Lucky I fired instantly or utter astonishment might have unsteadied my hand, for the form curled up on the floor, trickling blood, was not Cap’n Lynn at all. It was Waite.

I was so shocked that I clean forgot Kreug until he plucked at my sleeve to say, “You can see. I am no Nazi. Now you must get away; the police will come.”

My head now clear and working fast as usual in crises. I decided that Kreug must not be caught here either. But that wouldn’t get me the stamps so I rushed him, trusting that in confusion he’d not resist. “I’ll set fire to your place,” I declared. “We’ll leave before the police come.”

I DIDN’T watch him get out the stamps; I was too busy over Waite’s body, reclaiming my stamps he’d pocketed and searching his wallet for the ten he must have brought to identify himself. I’ve often cursed the lethargy of the Spanish, but not that time because it saved our necks. We were out by back lots and several blocks distant when we did hear the tumult of arriving police and saw the flames shoot skyward from Kreug’s tumbledown shop. Its pinkish walls were turning black in soot.

The numbed old man followed along meekly until I found him a lodging nearer the waterfront. But, despite these considerations, I firmly smothered my regrets for having gypped him. Hadn’t I saved his life anyway?

Playing up geniality, I staged an act, telling him I didn’t need the stamps any longer since the shooting back there had wiped out my real quest. No, it was the man I’d been after and the gang he represented; I had to make sure they’d not get those stamps.

Since my tactics lowered his guard, what I mean, we joked about the stamps and at my suggestion he got out his genuine ones. We compared them with my fakes. “Here you judge them, then tear up mine,” I offered. “I’ll need them no more.”

Remember now, I had both my own and Waite’s sheet of ten stamps each. Old Kreug with his magnifying glass, pointed out this flaw, that irregularity that would give them away to an expert. Thereupon I worked a variety of the old shell game—thanks to P. T. Barnum—but of course there were still two sets of stamps before him when he’d finished inspecting.

Finally he tore up my fakes from Waite, see, and tucked what he supposed to be the ten genuine ones carefully into a pocket. He protested a bit when I offered him money but eventually accepted it as from a brother-in-arms.

In parting, I asked that man one question and his reply will intrigue me as long as I live. “Was it because you’d pulled the wool over his eyes so well that he came to kill you?” I asked.

He looked puzzled. “It has nothing to do with wool. It was because of one Ger-
man, the man who came in the U-boat bringing the stamps. I was expected to hide him away. I killed him."

Waite wasn't the only man who surprised me that night. Cap'n Lynn was pacing the deck, waiting for me when I went aboard. He led me into his cabin to say, "Mate, this game is up. I'm through. You win. Take over. I'll go north by plane. I've had my fill of this tension."

And what was back of all this? He let me have it. All the way from New York he'd carried the conviction that I was after his job, that I was watching him for some error big enough to put his license under a cloud. He thought some one higher up was backing me in this. My summons ashore before we left, my radio messages, my objections to driving her in the storm, it all added up. Some one had warned him that this was my build-up to supplant him.

Some one? Aye, that insidious bit of propaganda had originated in Waite. Cap'n Lynn came clean then; he'd come up fast during the war, too fast. He'd seen tough going that had left his nerves a bit twangy. He realized he lacked both experience and confidence; suspicion of my intentions therefore had warped his better judgment. Smart guy, that Waite, a dealer in such stuff, what?

"Cap'n, I could have had this old tub years ago. I don't want to go master of any vessel. But if now you can accept advice from an old hand and add it to your book learning, you'll bow to no other skipper given some time."

He offered his hand. We shook on it. The wine was an old vintage.

I read in the papers of the sale of those "universal stamps" and the price paid was a king's ransom, but all that was out of my hands by then. I knew Bayle had the genuine stamps in that room up the Hudson; knew too that the ones sold bore a small smear from the bedbug I'd crushed aboard ship. Bayle himself would finish the story when he got good and ready. But yes!

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**In the Next Issue of SHORT STORIES**

**"White Shikar"**

**by EDWARD DALY**

**White man's hate and the justice of the East.**

**MERLE CONSTINER**

**JIM KJELGAARD**

**SHOOTER'S CORNER**

**FRANCIS GOTT**

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**"By Request of Inspector Ferguson"**

**RAY MILLHOLLAND**

Why the retired postal inspector advised—and helped—the sheriff "get his man out of town in case of acquittal."

The jurisdiction of the Mounted covers a very large hunk of the fabulous North

**"On the Night of the Big Wind"**

**H. S. M. KEMP**
Just One of the Town's Citizens Was Described as a Handyman to Homicide

Death on a Party Line

By Merle Constiner
Author of "The Skull of Barnaby Shattuck," etc.

The Story So Far

It was a good old-fashioned down-to-grass roots murder, yet

Paul Saxby, who had come to Falksville on receipt of a letter from

Alicia Poynter, had a hunch there was the usual money motive, too. He arrived to find Alicia dead of poison; her aged grandmother, who had been alone in the house with her when she died, bluntly accuses

Cora Bob Wilkerson, a youngish widow of the town. Alicia's father

Vickery Poynter—when he returns to town from a sawmill inspection trip to the

hills—finds his desk and study have been rifled, but won't admit to Saxby that anything of importance has been taken. After Alicia's death Saxby had helped her aged grandmother to her own room, and found a revolver stuffed into the pillow of her wheelchair. This he takes and hides in the piano in the disused ladies' parlor of the town's ancient hotel where he has a room. It held five empty shells. Saxby feels that

Sheriff Masters must be looking for him yet he pursues a devious way to avoid him till he makes some investigations of his own. He interviews Mrs. Wilkerson, and shows her that with gasoline stolen from the Poynter's garage, there is to be an attempt to
burn her house, and in the storeroom over
the same garage he finds a very ancient
bicycle with a new scrape mark on its handle
bars. In all his investigation there stand out
two facts—one is that at the time of the
murder

GRANDMA POYNTER heard the telephone
call Mrs. Wilkerson’s number—two longs,
two shorts. It sounded only once, showing
that the phone was answered. This would
be an alibi for the widow, if she chose to
use it. The other fact about the case is that
there continually crops up the name of

HART KILLIGREW, a farmer of Yellowfoot
Landing. Rumor had it that he’d killed his
wife after she’d signed her name to a paper
selling some timber rights, but there never
was any proof. Saxby and the sheriff go to
Yellowfoot Landing to look up records of
the transaction, and though the clerk doesn’t
say much, Saxby gets his wife to admit that
he thinks Killigrew did kill his wife. Saxby
and the sheriff set out for the Killigrew
house.

BLACK ROCK ROAD was little
better than a logging trail. The
sheriff set the sedan’s wheels
into the two dry ruts, almost
hub-deep, and gave the car her
rein. Water oak and scrub cedar scraped the
windshield and lashed through the open
windows. The car jolted through a cluster
of ramshackle dwellings, set on three-foot
stilts, and came out into a spit of cleared
and fertile land. A quarter of a mile on,
they saw Killigrew’s large farmhouse and
the cabin which faced it across the road.

A half dozen contented mules lazed in
the sun in Killigrew’s mule lot. As the
sheriff slowed down at the mailbox lot
make the turn into the drive, Saxby alighted. He
said, “The place looks deserted but that’s a
cowshed back there, and those mules look
happy. That means if Killigrew isn’t home,
someone is doing his feeding and milking
for him. Chances are, it’s his neighbor
there, in that cabin. You go ahead and see if you can stir anyone up. I'll be with you in a minute."

The sheriff drove into the barn lot and Saxby approached the cabin across the road.

It was a tiny dog-run cabin; two small log rooms were joined by a connecting roof which formed an open run between them. Its shaggy, rotting shingles were warped and missing and each of its two small windowpanes had been repeatedly mended with paper and glue. Saxby crossed the lawn, carpeted by a minuscule forest of ten thousand ankle-high maple seedlings; ten feet from the dwelling he called, "Hello! Hello, the house!" It was a courtesy he was careful to observe. Cabinfolk don't much like strangers pounding on their doors.

After a wary instant of silence, a tremulous voice responded. "Who is it? I don't believe I know you!" An old, old man came through a doorway in the dog-run. He was barefooted and dressed in faded overalls. He had a chubby overalled infant under each arm, was dragging a couple of chairs, and a lean redbone hound wove in and out of his legs, making his progress almost impossible. He arranged the chairs in the meager shade, said, "Come up and sit." He seated himself, placing a child on either knobby kneecap; the hound curled up between his splayed feet. Saxby joined him.

**AFTER** an interval of polite silence, Saxby said, "They tell me you're hell on wheels with a revolver—and the best fiddle-player in this end of the county."

The old man looked immensely pleased.

He said affably, "I 'aint pistol-shot nothin' nor nobuddy sint they caught me and converted me in nineteen-o-one. I 'aint played nate fiddle sint I busted my eatin' hand fightin' a cross bull. I used to be common good at both. I miss the fiddle most. I do make up a song now and then out'n my head, though. I'm a-workin' on one now called The Wreck of Old Ohio M-3519."

"I don't believe I ever heard of Old Ohio M-3519." Saxby was intensely interested. He reached for his notebook.

"A long time ago some Yankees was passing through here, drunk, goin' duck huntin'. They smacked into a telephone pole down at the crossroads. That's their license number, Ohio M-3519. Here's the way she's goin' to start: "Oh, Ed Haverson was haulin' bogs, and yit they was plenty o' room, when Old M-3519 came poundin' by, a-headin' fer her doom! That's the first verse; then she goes on: I have to tell you right off, dear friends, they wasn't nobuddy kilt. But the axles was mighty bad bent, dear friends, an' a lot of blood was spilt. How do you like 'er? That's as far as I got. I'm takin' 'er slow and easy."

"I like it fine—and don't rush yourself."

Saxby wondered if this semantics racket was worth the price. Delicately, he steered the conversation back to the object of his visit. "Is Mr. Killigrew, your neighbor, at home?"

"No, suh. Not at present. He comes and goes and goes and comes. I'm feedin' his stock fer him. I like to help him out, o' course, but I'm too old to be feedin' stock. When a feller gits my age, he oughtja jist set and make up songs out of his head, like The Wreck of Old Ohio M-3519—"

"I know, I know."

"Hart's mighty lonesome sint his woman pulled out on him."

"That's not the way I heard it."

The oldster studied Saxby stonily. "Le's not have no idle talk, dear friend. Hit's agin the Book. I know what you mean, I've heered that story too—but I don't take no stock in it. I know Hart and I knew Mary. Besides, I got proof she's well an' happy."

The old man set the two infants carefully on the floor, went into the cabin, and returned with a postcard which he handed to Saxby. He said gruffly, "This should put a stop, once and for all, to them onhuman rumors."

The card was postmarked, Silverton, Florida, and dated four years previously. It said, \_Dear "Uncle" Mort, Will you run across the road and ask Hart to mail me those few clothes I left in my room when I separated from him. He won't be needing them. Ha-ba. Hope you and the neighbors are getting along okay. I am fine. My address is 309 Silver Avenue, Silverton, Florida. Sincerely, Mary K.\_

The old man took an ashtray from his pocket, one of those novelty things fashioned from seashells. "A week later she sent me this. It's a pretty little saucer, hain't it? She never sent the cup to go with it, though."

Saxby said, "I'd like to have this card."
He got to his feet. "I'll give you five dollars for it."

"You kin have the card and welcome," the old man said. "But I don't believe I'd care to part with this pretty little saucer. Good-bye, good-bye!"

**SHERIFF MASTERS** was standing on Hart Killigrew's front porch. When Saxby came up, he said, "We drew a blank, Paul. I been knocking until my knuckles is raw. Ain't no one home."

Saxby walked past him without speaking. He circled the house to the back door, flipped the bolt in the old mortise lock with a skeleton key, restored the key to his pocket and opened the door. He called, "Come here a minute." Sheriff Masters joined him, said reproachfully, "It's mighty funny, Paul. When I was around here, that door was locked."

Saxby said, "It's a mighty funny case."

He stepped inside.

Sheriff Masters flinched. "I'll wait here, Paul."

"Suit yourself."

The sheriff sweated nervously. Finally he entered. "Breaking into a man's home back in Vincent County is some kind of felony. I hope Dupre County ain't up to date on this point!"

Saxby said, "If they catch us, save a bullet in your gun for yourself."

Sheriff Masters whispered, "Quit talking that way!"

They started a meticulous search of the house, kitchen, dining room, parlor. Farmhouse style, everything was scrupulously clean, curtains starched and the mail order furniture gleaming in mail order wax. It was the dwelling of a prosperous farmer, and there was the faint smell in the cubic rooms, the almost indescribable smell of work clothes and routine meals, unused appointments, that implied that the occupant was a bachelor. Saxby said, "Observe this spotless and semi-expensive wallpaper. Observe the fairly new, untrodden rugs. And the gay vases of artificial flowers. They tell me that since that fateful evening when his wife left him, he has remodelled, redecorated, and pines for her eventual return!"

"It's a cozy little place," the sheriff decided. "He must be well-fixed."

They ascended the hall staircase to the garret-like upper floor. Here were two rooms, two bedrooms, about the same size, with sloping ceilings which followed the slant of the low roof. The front room, looking out upon the road, was Hart's. Tobacco and pipes were on a stand, there were cowhide brogans under the small iron bed. Work clothes and a hunting jacket hung in the closet.

After a cursory inspection, they came out again onto the stair landing and entered the back room.

This back room was quite a surprise. It was a woman's room with cretonne curtains at the dormers, with a frilled and ribboned coverlet across an exquisite rosewood bed. A potted, blooming geranium was on the window-sill. The clothes closet was empty, the drawers in the dresser were empty. Saxby drew his finger across the oval gilt-framed mirror and left a mark in the faint dust. Sheriff Masters asked in a hushed voice, "What do you make of it, Paul?"

"It makes my flesh crawl, Sheriff. There's something ghastly and eerie about this setup. See the flower in the window. He's apparently keeping everything in readiness for her return. But look at that bedspread, see those wrinkles and folds where it lays there. Those wrinkles are sun-faded. That means it's been in exactly that position for years! I've heard of people locking up death-rooms and keeping them this way, haven't you?"

**THE sheriff nodded.** He pointed to the flower pot. "That geranium takes attention. That means that Killigrew's been here recently."

"Not necessarily," Saxby corrected. "A geranium requires little water and actually thrives on dry soil. It may have been weeks since Killigrew's been home. Let's go now. I want to look through the barn and garage."

There was nothing of interest in the barn. They turned their attention to the garage.

Mr. Killigrew's garage was a trim gray building at the corner of the mule lot, between the house and the barn. Saxby swung open the wide doors and let in the sunlight. Like the house, it was scrubbed and clean. The cement floor was spick and span, the few packingboxes along the wall were neatly stacked, the tools on the workbench were orderly arranged. Sheriff Masters said, "He isn't a poor man, that's sure. Few back-
country houses has garages—and most o' them has dirt floors.

"I've heard about this floor. It's one of the many improvements he made when Mary left him."

"That's no time for a man to try to hold his wife, after she's left him. He should have put on the dog while she was still with him."

"I agree." Saxby rummaged around the packing boxes. "Well, well. Look here. Here's a cardboard box that was mailed to Silverton, Florida, and returned unclaimed. Mailed to Mary who evidently didn't want it after it reached her. It's empty now, I see." He showed the sheriff the cancelled postage stamps, the double postmark, and the purple stamp: **UNKNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS.**

Sheriff Masters asked, "Are you through here?"

Saxby nodded, stepped out. Sheriff Masters closed the doors. "Let's get gone from this place. I don't like it."

**SHERIFF MASTERS** tool ed the big sedan out on to the road. Saxby relaxed in the cool resiliency of the pneumatic cushions. Sheriff Masters said, "Now we stop at this sawmill on the way home. Right?"

"Right, Sheriff."

"What do you make of it all, Paul?"

"For one thing, Sheriff, I’m thinking about those two bedrooms. It’s a nice sentiment for a grieving husband to keep his wife's sleeping quarters ready for her instant return. But therein is a monstrous contradiction in fact. Look at it this way. He must love her profoundly to do such a loyal thing. But if they were such ideal companions, why did they sleep in separate rooms? Twin beds, maybe. But separate rooms!"

"Country people do strange things, Paul. And do city people, for that matter. Maybe he had nightmares and hollered in his sleep."

"Maybe. And maybe if he was going to live in one room, it was more convenient to keep up his monument to heartbeat in another."

"That's their personal business," Sheriff Masters said heavily. "That's something we'll never know. And hain't got no right to know. Ain't nothing sacred to you?"

"Almost everything," Saxby retorted bitterly. "It's quite a handicap."

**XIII**

**FAT** bronze clouds hung above the ridges, deflecting the final fire of the setting sun into the woodland hollow. The breathless air was fetid with an accumulation of stale, day-long heat. Steep hillsides ran almost straight upwards to a patch of turquoise sky and Saxby, standing at the edge of the tiny clearing, had the sensation of being imprisoned in a wild ascending cone of mountain brush and trumpet vines and tangled second-growth. Sheriff Masters said with restrained distaste, "Here's your sawmill, Paul." He added, "You can have it. I don't want it."

He spoke with forced good humor, as though he were addressing a pig-headed brat, age ten, who was due one day to inherit a vast fortune.

"Saxby, I don't want it either. But I have to take it. Let's get this over with, and get home."

The little clearing was flat and grassy and kidney shaped, with a laurel shrouded trail entering it at either end. Three rough pine sheds, in advanced stages of collapse, were built in a squared U around a sprawling heap of sawdust. There was a desolate, forgotten atmosphere about the place. The sawdust was weathered to a soft goose-gray. The planking was sprung from the small buildings and the tarpaper on their roofs was tattered and shredded from wind and rain and neglect. Saxby asked, "What do you know about this place, Sheriff?"

"Years ago they put a small mill in here and cut out the best stuff. When they got down to the cheap stuff, they just pulled out and let 'er go. It's worthless now, Paul. I wouldn't give you a dime for the whole layout. What we want here, anyway?"

"I hardly know. But I do know that this mill keeps popping up in Alicia Poynter's murder. For one thing, this place is Vickery Poynter's alibi. According to his story, he was out here the afternoon of his daughter's death. That's item-of-interest number one. Item number two: according to both Vickery and Les Caudry, this property isn't exactly valueless. If things go right in Vincent County, that is. There are nine hundred acres of good tie timber in the tract; if Vin-
cent County decides to repair a few back-roads the stuff can be gotten out cheaply and a nice profit turned. Killigrew sold it to Caudry. Caudry thought he was sticking Poynter with it and now Caudry wants it back. And somebody wants the deed, too."

"How's that? Did which?"

"According to Vickery's story, someone stole the deed from his study. I was there right after it happened."

"But you can't get possession of property by jest stealin' the deed!"

"Not generally, no. But there's many a trick in this game, Sheriff. There's a sly brain behind this deadly business."

They started across the spongy turf. Directly facing them was the main mill-building, the back-bar of the semi-circle of sheds; the door was a slant on its hinges, it was empty but for cobwebs and a colony of sleeping bats on its ridgepole. They came out again into the open and skirted the nearest end-shack. It was empty, too. But here they first picked up the tracks.

The heap of old sawdust spread in a weathered lip to the very edge of the building. It was old, and discolored, and rain-beaten through the years until it was almost furry in its smoothness. Where feet had compressed it recently, the tracks showed up plainly. There were two sets of footprints, rounding the mound of sawdust, sometimes interlacing each other, sometimes running sociably side by side.

One set of tracks was from a long, narrow pointed shoe. Saxby knew these shoes as Vickery Poynter's. He could close his eyes and visualize himself sitting in Poynter's bedroom. They had just found the girl's body, they were waiting for the arrival of the law. Across from him, whiskey glass in hand, sat Poynter, eyes black and glowing, cheeks lean and brown. Poynter was saying graciously, "Believe me, sir, I appreciate your support in a time like this!" He could see the tough, lean frame in his fine gray tweed, could see those calf-length canvas leggings and beneath them the quaint, narrow shoes. Poynter said, "Please excuse these leggings, sir. All afternoon I've been out in the country. I've been up in the hills looking over an old sawmill. This sawmill which I've just taken off Caudry's hands—"

"Those are Vick Poynter's tracks!" the sheriff said suddenly. "And these—" He pointed to their big cumbersome running mates. "These other's are hill brogans. They might belong to 'most anybody. Except for one thing. He bent over. "Plates on the heels. I'll know 'em if I see 'em."

"I doubt you'll ever see them," Saxby said.

SHERIFF Masters frowned. He followed the tracks around the sawdust mound, thrust his head into the open door of the further shack, he said quietly, "Yo're a pore prophet, Paul. I done found 'em d'ready!"

Emeric Fraley lay spread-eagled on his back, on the crusty earth, just inside the sagging shed, just beyond the threshold—the evening sun coating soles of his upturned cowhide brogans, gleaming on the metal toe-and-heel plates. His felt hat lay beneath his close-cropped head. And Emeric Fraley, double-run heillion from the hinterland, would never pass another forged letter. He would never again beat up his nearest and dearest with timber scantlings, nor smoke out a congregation with a sheet-iron sign over a church chimney. Saxby gazed, impressed. He would never shoot off roman candles at barbecues, or cuss and yell in public places. The back of his head was neatly split and a lathing hatchet lay by the elbow of his black-and-red plaid shirt. Sheriff Masters' deputies would never again arrest him, nor would Mr. Lester Caudry ever again find it necessary to intercede in his behalf.

Sheriff Masters' face twitched in alarm. "Well, I'll be jumped up and Joe Diddled!"

"It comes to all of us, Sheriff. Sooner or later. Calm yourself—"

"I ain't talkin' about that. This comes o' me lettin' myself be bell-ewed by you into not mindin' my own business! Leave me tell you something, Mr. Saxby—"

"From Paul, I've gone clear down to Mr. Saxby, eh?"

"Leave me tell you something. This here is over in Dupre County. That means I got to report it to the sheriff at Yellowfoot. He's goin' to sneer and scuff up the dirt with his fancy shoes and ask me a lot of polite questions about how is Mrs. Masters feeling these days and all the time he's goin' to be figgering how he can shame me in the eyes o' my constituents. He's goin' to find we just been in Yellowfoot Landing. He's goin' to light up a cigar for me and ask me embar-
rassin' questions. And hell, I don't even begin to know the answers!"

"How far are we from Vincent County?"
"Maybe a mile."
"And from Falksville?"
"Eight miles, I'd say."

"Okay. Forget it. Here's what we'll do. We'll go back to town. I'll send out the Falksville undertaker, tell him I discovered the body. You can keep clear out of the picture. The Falksville undertaker will know this is in Dupre—and he'll contact the Yellowfoot sheriff. He'll be proud to do it, you wait and see. Everybody will be happy. How does that sound?"

"All right, I guess. If you don't let me down, Paul."

"I won't. And you'll never regret it. We'll solve our Poynter girl's murder—and this one, too."

Sheriff Masters nodded uneasily. "Of course we will, Paul. They ain't no doubt about that! Or is they?"

Saxby didn't answer. He quartered the hollow like a hunter and began a painstaking search. Before long he found something of further interest and called the sheriff to him.

At the far side of the clearing, in the gathering shadows of twilight, was a mountain spring. A long time ago, when the sawmill was in operation, a two-inch pipe had been driven into a shaley ledge and a tiny stream of water trickled from it into a small brick-lined pool beneath. Now the pipe was rusty and the basin was littered with dead leaves. Dead leaves and a half dozen new beer bottle tops. There were footprints in the moist ground here, too. The same narrow shoes, Vickery's. And Emerick Fraley's big, blunt brogans.

Wordlessly, Saxby pointed. In a shoebox were the shells of hardboiled eggs, a half-eaten dill pickle, and a sodden ham sandwich. At the far entrance to the hollow, opposite to that by which they had arrived, they found where the forest floor had been disturbed by a car. There were no discernible tracks, however.

"Now," Saxby said, "we can be getting home."

The drive home was a silent, thoughtful one. Sheriff Masters took the winding goose-neck turns in the precarious ridge road like a half-blind, starving horse making for a kindy shelter and a trough of oats. They cleared the last bend, and began the final descent. Below them the road appeared here and there in the tall, waxy-green pines like a broken carmine thread.

Off in the distance lay Falksville, gentle and indescribably beautiful in the half world between day and night, here and there an orange spur in a kitchen window, the houses opalescent in the purple dusk, the criss-cross streets like pastel marks in black and silver and chalky red. Along the horizon the summer evening sky was a lifeless lavender in the honeyed, fragrant twilight. Sheriff Masters said, "Footprints don't lie. Them was new footprints, made within the week.

They say Vickery come out there yesterday afternoon, et himself a bit o' lunch. Emerick Fraley come out today and got himself kilt. But who kilt him? They wasn't no other tracks."

"Footprints don't lie, Sheriff. But sometimes they speak in double-talk. How's this.

Vickery came out yesterday alone. Fraley came out today and got himself eliminated?"

"Could be, I guess."

"But would Vickery bring out a basket of beer bottles for a business trip? That I doubt. The beer must have been Fraley's. Yet Fraley's and Vickery's footprints were together by the spring. Possibly Vickery met Fraley there, had a talk with him, and perhaps shared a hardboiled egg or two. Vickery Poynter would do that, he's a gentleman."

"That must be it. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"In that case, Emerick Fraley could have sworn to Vickery's alibi. Now Fraley's gone."

"Vickery Poynter's word is good enough for any Falksville jury." Sheriff Masters grunted in admiration. "Man, you sure have a knack for figgering things out."

" Didn't I thought! Here's another possibility. Vickery and Fraley came different days, by sheer accident, and never saw each other. That may be true but those tracks seem mighty friendly. Maybe Vickery and Fraley came out together yesterday, and Fraley and his killer came out today."

"I like that one best, Paul. But the killer didn't leave no tracks. How'd he do it?"
Saxby said gravely, "It's quite a problem, isn't it?"

Sheriff Masters said tranquilly, "I don't know. I wasn't thinkin'. I was jest listenin'.

SAXBY parted from the sheriff at courthouse and left his startling and cryptic message with Falksville's undertaker. He said simply that he'd discovered a body at the old sawmill and despite the fact that it was over the county line he felt somebody ought to bring it in before the dew got on it. Mr. Bewley, the undertaker, agreed heartily and a bit avariciously, said he'd bring it in, hold it, notify Dupre County—and since he hated to be idle, he might as well start to embalm it. Saxby concurred, suggested that Mr. Les Caudry might be willing to pay expenses.

Saxby further stated that as the murder, if it was murder, having occurred in Dupre County, maybe the Sheriff of Yellowfoot might like Mr. Bewley to keep the whole incident under his hat until notified otherwise.

Mr. Bewley agreed.

At the last minute, Mr. Bewley having asked and learned Mr. Saxby's name commented on Mr. Saxby's gift for discovering corpses, assured Mr. Saxby that this was truly a talent—and proffered M. Saxby a large pink card with rounded corners which said, P. W. BEWLEY, Undertaker—Mortician, Buryings—Interments.

Back at the Magnolia House Saxby found Nodie Pounds holding down the hotel desk. The lobby was deserted. Saxby sauntered up, asked, "Any luck?"

The bellboy grinned. "Plenty, Mr. Saxby. I waited around the post-office like you said. I got there early because sometimes they put up the local mail ahead o' time, you know, jest as it comes in. Well, at two o'clock sharp I seen yore big brown package."

"Fine! Who took it out?"

"Jessimer Boggess."

Saxby leaned wearily against an ornate Corinthian pillar. "You don't say so! And who is this Jessimer? You don't know what you're doing to me! I never heard of him."

"Oh, he's our rural mail carrier. He loads up his old Chevvice at two sharp for his afternoon run out to the county. Well, he come out the post-office door with his letters and such. Yore package was so big he hadda make a special trip. I borried a match from him and got a good look at the address. You remember how you taken a blue pencil an' wrote MR. HART KILLIGREW, FALKSVILLE? Durn if the postmaster hadn't taken his'n and wrote under it: Care, of Mr. Lester Caudry, Moonrise, R. F. D. 1. That's the way the postmaster does, you know, when some of the address is left off."

"Or when he has a forwarding address. I know. Thank you, Nodie."

The pimpled-faced bellboy seemed suddenly embarrassed. The network of starved capillaries on his sallow cheeks flushed lividly. "Mr. Saxby?"

Saxby headed for the door, stopped. "Yes?"

"Kin I ask you a favor? Kin I wear a necktie o' yore'n to a dance after I get off work tonight?"

Saxby considered. "It's a little unusual, isn't it? But I'm glad to comply. Was it any special tie you had in mind?"

"Yessir. The boy dug into his shirt blouse, came out with Saxby's best black crepe. "This'n."

Saxby closed his eyes, counted ten, opened them. "Never a dull moment. Yes, my boy. Wear it. Keep it. And have a good time!"

XIV

TWILIGHT hung over the locust grove in gray chiffon, clouding Dr. Mattison's chocolate and green hospital in a lonely nebulous veil. The lower floor of the rambling two-story residence was blazing with panelled lights and as Saxby approached it across the yard it seemed a mile away. Heat and moisture were blended until they were almost unbearable. He carried his coat over his arm and his wet shirt clung to his shoulder-blades in two steamy plasterers. Above his head owls in the hot trees discussed him in throaty whispers as he passed; as he ascended to the porch and stepped into the apron of light, three crazy bats swirled at him from the shadows, in and away—and then he saw they weren't bats at all but giant tobacco moths. The card on the door said DOCTOR IS OUT.
He twisted the big egg-shaped brass door-knob and entered the bare hall. The consulting room, he remembered, was on the left. Voices came to him from an open door on the right. He took off his hat and investigated.

The doctor was very much in. In fact he was entertaining. Saxby stood on the threshold of Dr. Mattison’s personal parlor and if the doctor’s hall and consulting room were bare, his parlor was as elegant and stuffy as Dr. Mattison’s grandfa ther could make it. All it needed was a dapple-gray horse named Traveller in the center of the turkey-red rug, and the booming of a park of cannon in the background, to give it the proper overtones. The furniture, in rose satin and plush, was priceless and exquisite and had come up from New Orleans a century ago by boat and wagon-train. The heavy coral drapes at the windows were held back by tasseled cords and along the walls were rows of smoky portraits, doctors all, from the time of Keats and earlier, down to the battle of Shiloh.

Dr. Mattison, in his rumpled alpaca suit, was pouring port from a decanter into goblets. Mother Poynter, in her wheelchair, was sitting graciously straight. Cora Bob Wilkerson, supple and buxom and keenly alert, was paying the old lady careful attention. Vickery, long and gaunt and toughly lean, rested his elbows against the mantelpiece and surveyed the room with a grave smile, his coal-black eyes half comforting, half bantering. None of them were forgetting they’d come from a funeral, but they were doing the same and proper thing. They were enacting a lesson learned the hard way, through generations of catastrophe and tragedy. Vickery said, “Why it’s Saxby! Come in, man, come in!”

Cora Bob nodded vigorously. Dr. Mattison said, “How do you do, sir? Join us, by all means. Permit me to pour you a bit of this mediocre port.” Mother Poynter said amiably, “I see, Doctor, that you have just the proper number of glasses—five. Were you by any chance expecting Mr. Saxby?”

Dr. Mattison said easily, “As a matter of fact, I was. Mr. Saxby is subject to what is known as a vesperal headache. Every evening, you know. Comes in cycles, like the theory of reincarnation. I’ll get him an aspirin.” Mother Poynter asked primly, “Don’t they have aspirins at the drugstore?” Dr. Mattison looked startled. “Is that so? Then I’m bankrupt! When did that start? I’ll have to put in a soda fountain!”

Cora Bob laughed heartily. No one else smiled. Cora Bob explained, “I liked that part where you said Mr. Saxby was a vesperal headache.”

Saxby sipped his port, placed the half empty glass on a claw-and-ball table. He said affably, “You have a charming place here, Doctor. Is this where you operate?”

“No,” the doctor answered enthusiastically. “Though I imagine, before my day, many an emergency gunshot wound has been dressed on that mahogany table there. When my father died, I fixed things up a bit. Without undue boasting I think I can affirm that my hospital is really quite a nice place. The living quarters I left as they were. Two rooms on the other side of the hall, behind the dispensary, are for heart and other serious cases. There are beds on the upper floor for anyone that can make the stairs. Would you like me to show you around?”

Saxby said courteously, “I would indeed.”

Vickery beamed. “He has more space than he has patients. He won’t take you in unless you make a noise like an injured cow. He considers human beings a very low grade of animals.”

Dr. Mattison said, “Now, sir, if these very fine people will excuse us—? This way, please.”

He led Saxby out into the hall, down the length of the hall into the kitchen. He took rye bread from the tin bread box, produced lettuce and chicken breast and mayonnaise from the refrigerator, and built two enormous and succulent sandwiches. He angled the kitchen table slightly, pulled up a couple of cane-bottomed chairs so that he had a clear vista through the open door into the main hall; he sat down, said, “Well, what luck?”

Saxby picked up his sandwich, said, “Plenty of luck—both good and bad. Our killer’s struck again. This time it was your friend Emerick Fraley.” In careful detail Saxby recounted the incident at the sawmill.

Dr. Mattison listened placidly. He said, “Death is no novelty to me. I can’t see that the world has lost much in Mr. Fraley. Why was he killed?”
"Because he's been a handyman to homicide all along. Tell me about the funeral. Who was there, and so on."

"Just about everyone was there. The whole town."

"Notice any strangers. A small, thin man with a high-pitched voice and big speckled hands, for instance?"

"Not that I recall. Why?"

"Was Lester Caudry there?"

"Yes, through the entire service. He didn't try to rush the family group, though. He and Vickery are on the outs, you know. He did come over at the cemetery and say a few words. Just formal condolences. Polite said and politely received."

Saxby frowned absenty. "Dr. Mattison, where is the Fern Springs Church?"

"It's a tiny church on North Road, about a mile beyond town. It hasn't a very savory reputation."

"That's a strange thing to say about a church."

"Isn't it, though?" Dr. Mattison shook his head. "But if you knew the fashion in country churches hereabouts you'd understand me. Daytime, they're perfect—but at night it's a different story. It's not true of all of them, of course, but most of them. They're secluded, and communal, and undisturbed, and offer ideal sites for bucko gambling and drinking and petting parties. If you're driving through the country at night and see several cars parked beneath the oaks by a peaceful church just keep right on. You can run into some mean trouble. Fern Springs, as close to town as it is, is one of the worst."

Saxby said mildly, "Thank you for the information. That's an angle in folklore I've been passing up." He paused, changed the subject. "I got you out here to ask a favor of you. Will you co-operate? I want you to break up that clique in your parlor."

Dr. Mattison grinned. "Anything to oblige."

"Splendid. Now I want Vickery separated from Cora Bob. The best way to manage that, I'd say, is to leave them alone."

Dr. Mattison stored a generous portion of chicken meat and bread in a sac-like cheek, said, "Will you run through that once more, please. It doesn't quite make sense."

"That's what you think!" Saxby chuckled. "You've treated so many hearts that you can't see romance for auricles and ventricles. They want to be in each other's company, and alone, but they flinch from advertising it—so they'll fall over backwards to disprove it. You'll see. Now here's my suggestion. Wheel Mrs. Poynter across the hall into your dispensary. And keep her there for ten minutes. Caught alone, Vick and Cora Bob will come pouring out into the open like your parlor's on fire! Then I'll corner Vickery. I've a question I'd like to ask him."

"I'll take a crack at it," Dr. Mattison said. "But the old lady's going to cut up. Let's see. I believe I'll tell her I want to give her a final checkup before I send her home tonight. It'll make her boiling mad but I've seen 'em mad before!"

He left the kitchen. Saxby heard the old lady's strident voice, curving up angrily, dropping away to silence. He saw the doctor guiding her wheelchair across the corridor, into the dispensary.

For an instant the hall was empty—and then Cora Bob appeared. Selfconsciously, she sauntered to the front door, stepped out onto the porch shutting the door behind her. Vickery Poynter appeared. He had his briar pipe between his fingers and seemed to be having great difficulty in lighting his lighter. He frowned in exaggerated annoyance, in an elaborate pantomime of gentlemanly frustration, and headed directly for Saxby and the kitchen. He came through the door genuinely startled, said, "Oh, hello. Excuse me. I was looking for a match. My lighter won't—"

Saxby said sociably, "You can't beat these old-fashioned kitchen matches, can you?"

Vickery said, "No, Saxby, you can't." He put his pipe away, dropped indolently into a chair. His benign, sensitive face was suddenly drawn and fatigued. He said, "God, I don't know how I'm going to stand it much longer." His luminous deep-set black eyes were on Saxby, paying him the courtesy of the remark, but his voice was metallic, impersonal, as though his lips were speaking without the knowledge of his brain.

Saxby asked politely, "Stand what, Mr. Poynter?"

"Everything. It's all mixed up together. I can't sift it out for you, I can't even sift it out for myself. Alicia and I were pretty
good friends. We hunted together, cut Christmas trees together, owned and rode the same saddle horse because she wanted it that way."

Saxby said, "I see." His mouth hardened. He wasn’t in a sympathetic mood. He was remembering yesterday and how, when the girl lay dead, Vickery appeared to be engrossed with timberlands and business deals. Now his grief seemed genuine enough—but for Saxby’s soul, it was a little too long delayed.

POYNTER struggled with his thoughts.

He appeared to be in a daze. He was a strong man, Saxby knew, tough and hard behind that gentle sensitive manner, but for a moment he seemed to be losing his grip on himself. From the dispensary came muted sounds of Mother Poynter arguing with the doctor.

Vickery said, "My mother tells me of the arrangement she worked out with you. You’re to find who killed my daughter and I’m to pay you the customary fee for services rendered. The idea is highly acceptable to me. Please get it over with as soon as possible. You’ll find me very generous."

Saxby nodded vaguely. Poynter asked, "How are things going? Would you care to take me into your confidence?"

"Do you consider this the proper time and place?"

"Perhaps you’re right," Vickery said dully. "I’m badly unstrung. I seem to have lost my sense of perspective." He hesitated. "I’m willing to sign a blank check, Saxby. Or, ahem, just about that, anyhow. But I’m primarily a businessman. Are you accomplishing anything? Would you care to give me a sample of your deductions and conclusions? I don’t mean to coerce you but—"

"I understand perfectly." Saxby pondered a moment. "Within certain limits, I can put myself in your position. I think I know how you feel. Yes, I’m glad to give you a token of my investigation up to date. I know why someone broke into your garage and rifled the plunder-room in the loft."

"Don’t tell me that petty burglary has anything to do with Alicia’s death!"

"I’m afraid so, Mr. Poynter." Saxby lowered his voice. "This is in the strictest confidence, I’ve mentioned it to no one else. That loft storeroom was entered that some-

one could steal the bell from that old bicycle."

Poynter looked confused. "By George, I remember. There is a bell on that old bicycle."

"Was, not is. It’s gone now."

"But why? When was it taken?"

"So someone could murder your daughter and loot your study in safety."

Poynter was shocked at the idea. "Alicia was killed so that my study could be robbed?"

"The two crimes are associated closely—but one is not the consequence of the other. Here’s how it was done. It’s pretty damn devilish. They must have known you were out in the country and the double crime was set for four o’clock. Alicia’s bouillon cubes were poisoned in advance, in preparation for tea-time. The slayer then secreted himself downstairs and waited. At that time of day there would be no one in your big home but the girl and her invalid grandmother upstairs. At four o’clock Alicia would die and the killer would search your private papers. The child died a few minutes after four—but that didn’t upset the murderer’s plans."

"I know, I know only too well! But what about the bell?"

"The killer took the bell along as a precaution—and it was fortunate for him if he did so or he would have been caught in your study in the act of trespass. Caught red-handed! That bicycle bell was to keep Alicia from interrupting him, to guard him against an unforeseen call on the telephone. Just about four o’clock Donelson, the butcher, called about some beef. Alicia and your mother heard it upstairs. The phone rang two longs, your number, and the killer deftly used his bell to add two shorts Bri-nng! Bri-nng! Brng, brng! The tone and quality of an old bicycle bell is very similar to these local type oldstyle telephone bells. Upstairs, it sounded just that way: two longs and two shorts."

"That’s Cora Bob’s!"

"You’re right. Alicia heard the ringing and said, ‘That’s Cora Bob’s.’ Then I came on the scene and while I was there Donelson called again. This time the murderer, to give variation, added a single long. Three longs is Moonrise, Mr. Caudry’s country home. All this was happening, sir, while you were on your way in from the sawmill."
Mrs. Poynter heard it and said, "No need to go down and answer it. That’s Lester Caudry’s. It’s a grisly thing to admit, but the killer was there before I came and stayed through much of my visit!"

"Ghastly! When did he leave?"

"That’s hard to say—and it’s not too important."

Vickery got to his feet. His eyes were brighter now, his mobile mouth almost merry. "You’re an extraordinary man, Saxby. You’re giving me hope. Keep up the good work, sir. Don’t fail me."

Vickery ambled moodily out into the hall, hesitated as though he were groggy, and turned into a room which, from Dr. Mattison’s outline of the hospital floor, Saxby decided was an empty ward.

XV

For perhaps thirty seconds Saxby sat alone. Mother Poynter was somewhere in the near distance, locked in muted argument with Dr. Mattison. Vickery was brooding in an empty ward, meditating upon the dark mysteries of the universe. The wooden kitchen door was swung inward and stopped at the floor with a flat iron; beyond the rusty mesh of the screen-door the hot night pressed to the doorstep, black and still and with the sensation of suddenly arrested motion. And then Saxby heard the sound—a slight metallic clink.

Someone was standing out there in the night, beyond the margin of light, watching him. He finished the crust of his chicken sandwich and thought it over. What made a clink like that? Before his mind came the image of Cora Bob Wilkerson. Tonight she was wearing a sheer navy blue frock, pleated and trim, just the thing to show off her plump arms and chubby white calves. A navy blue dress and navy blue sandals. And down the front of the dress was a row of big nickel buttons! Just the sort of buttons to give off that sort of a clink. Maybe she’d bent forward to peer at him, maybe she’d brushed them with her hand.

He wiped the crumbs from his fingers, wandered from the kitchen into the main hall. At the foot of the hall was the dark channel mouth of the staircases. He mounted softly to the landing and waited.

The screendoor opened on squeaking hinges, careful steps crossed the kitchen, and Cora Bob appeared below him in the hall.

It happened so quickly, and she moved with such decision, that she almost caught him. She appeared in the hall, turned at the stairs, and started up the steps—directly toward him.

Groping his way along the wall, he retreated upward. He wondered if she knew what she was doing. If she could see him. He came out on the upper floor, and with fingers still guiding him along the wall, made his way along the upper hallway toward the front of the house and the front stairs. The runner on the floor enabled him to move in silence; she was no longer interested in concealment and he could hear the sound of her firm, strong steps. The blackness was impenetrable.

He’d covered about half the distance to the front of the house when she spoke. She said, "Vickery? Are you there, Vickery?"

And almost instantly, about ten feet to his rear, Vickery answered her. He said nervously, "Yes, darling. I’m here."

Saxby’s neck broke out in a cold sweat. His fingertips located a doorknob. With steady wrists, he let himself inside. It was like moving from one plane of darkness into another. His nose caught smells of human occupancy, tobacco, licorice drops; he decided he’d entered Dr. Mattison’s bedroom. Afraid to close the door, he left it slightly ajar.

Vickery’s voice sounded relieved. "I wondered if you’d make it. Did you have any trouble?"

"Not a bit. I simply waited until he’d left the kitchen and came up the backstairs like you said. Where is he now?"

"I don’t know." Vickery sounded worried. "He’s a strange one. I have the uneasy feeling that somehow he engineered this."

"That’s silly." Cora Bob’s soft vibrant laugh pulsed through the darkness, caressing, fiercely tender. "Bless his heart if he did."

Vickery’s voice was so soft that his words were scarcely discernible. He said, "Come to me, dearest."

A great stillness came into the upper hall. Came and continued, and persisted. Saxby’s
muscles cramped from his rigid position, he scarcely dared to breathe. They were embracing out there, he knew, and because he had nothing better to do, he timed the tense silence by counting the pulse beats on his wrist. Three and a half minutes before Vickery spoke, it seemed an hour.

Vickery said, "When will you marry me, Cora Bob?"

HER voice was constricted, brimming with a torture of mixed emotion. "Tomorrow you'll change your mind!"

"No. No, I won't. Things are different now. I need you more than ever. Mother needs you."

"Your mother needs me? What in the world are you saying? Who am I marrying?"

"You're marrying all of us, Cora Bob. The Poynters. All the Poynters. The Poynters in the graveyard here, and those in North Carolina, and the fine, blooded Poynters, long, long dead, buried in chapel yards in medieval England!"

Her voice was hushed. "We seem to be looking in different directions. I was thinking of children, of things to come—"

"Of course, Cora Bob. And so am I. I'm just attempting to show you the splendid refuge I'm offering you. I don't mean it exactly that way. I mean I'm trying to indicate the shelter under which we'll live when we're joined, husband and wife, one person. It's no disgrace, you know, to be proud of your family. And you'll be my family then—"

She said quietly, "I love you, Vick. And you're old enough to know what you're saying. I accept. Maybe sometime I'll understand you."

Once again the dark hallway was breathless and silent.

Out front, there was the peremptory double honk of a car horn. A moment later the front door opened. Mr. Lester Caudry's cheery voice bellowed, "Vickery! Vickery! May I see you a moment?"

Cora Bob gave a little gasp. "It's Caudry. What does he want?"

"I don't know—but I'll soon find out!" Poynter's voice was indignant, puzzled. "We're barely on speaking terms, yet he comes here, at this time, and yells for me like—I'll go down the front and take him onto the porch. Give me a minute or so and go down the back. How does that sound?"

Cora Bob said, "Why answer him at all? It's nice up here. Why not just—"

"I'm going now," Vickery said. "Be careful."

When the dark upper hall had cleared of traffic, Saxby waited his interval too, and descended to the lower floor.

Mother Poynter was alone in the dispensary. Saxby thrust his head through the doorway, said, "Where's everybody?"

Mother Poynter gave her wheelchair a neat quarter turn so that she could face him. "They've completely deserted me, all of them. They're in the office with that Caudry man."

"But I thought this was Dr. Mattison's office!"

"It is. But I'm speaking of the old outside office. That little one room building back of the house. It was built by the doctor's father. In the old days every reputable gentleman had his outside office." She grinned. "It was a marvelous place to go, if you were a gentleman and wanted to take an extra drink or a little nap in privacy." Her tone became steele cold. "It's a very masculine place, with masculine traditions, and I wouldn't think a nice girl would go there with three men."

"Cora Bob is a nice girl, isn't she?"

"She's a little too plump for my taste, if you know what I mean."

"She's not plump. She's just strapping."

"You mean she needs strapping. Now go way and let me alone."

Paul Saxby stepped from the kitchen out into the back yard. The small frame building which Mother Poynter had described lay about thirty feet to the rear. Its one window and open door were yellow with lampion-light. As he approached he caught a medley of spontaneous laughter. He called out his presence and entered.

The room was perfectly square, with bare plaster walls; little had been added, or taken away, since the old doctor had relinquished it. There was a flat-topped desk, its drawers half open and filled with musty yellowed papers. A broken-down green velvet sofa, mildewed now, with spiral springs curling from its fabric like the antenna of giant insects, indicated the old doctor enjoyed his
comfort. A cherrywood liquor cabinet, with a long-ago forced lock, indicated the old doctor was passionate of thirst and short of temper. Saxby noticed these inanimate things first and instantly, with all their mellow association, for it was an unconscious obsession with him to reconstruct the whole from its known parts.

Vickery Poynter said, "Take a look at this, Saxby! Topnotch, isn't it?"

The four of them were standing around the desk. In a tight circle. Cora Bob had her hand on Vickery's elbow and Lester Caudry, in his immaculate white shantung and fine Panama, had his arm around Vickery's shoulders. Dr. Mattison, his eyes sparkling, was rubbing his palms together in sheer delight. Saxby was speechless. Not only was everyone good friends now, but they were mighty good friends. The best friends in the world.

Vickery said eagerly, "Take a look at him, Saxby. Right here, don't you see!"

Then Saxby saw the dog. It wasn't a dog, it was just a pup.

It took Saxby an instant to focus his attention. He'd been looking at the office window. The window was small, set in a crude boxlike sill. Two bright, new finishing nails had been driven into the top corners of the frame. From where he stood, Saxby could see out across the lawn, directly into the window of Dr. Mattison's dispensary. He could see Mother Poynter idly turning the pages of a magazine.

It took an instant for him to clear his mind of these interesting observations and devote his full attention to the dog.

An old woolen blanket was spread across the desktop and on the blanket was a snow white bull terrier. It was this dog that was the center of so much admiration. And rightly so, Saxby decided, for he'd rarely seen so handsome a beast. He was sitting at "stay," his cropped ears alert, his black eyes intelligent. Saxby knew a little about show dogs and he ran over his points and found them just about perfect: Head flat and long and broad between the ears, neck with a bit of an arch, legs and ribs strong and well proportioned.

Saxby said, "He's a beauty. What's his name? Where did he come from?"

Vickery said, "His name is Moonrise Blizzard the Second. He was bred and raised from champion stock in Lester's kennels. Lester has just made me a present of him—and I'm giving him to Miss Wilkerson. If she'll accept."

Cora Bob's face flushed. "Will I? I'm overcome."

Mr. Caudry said, "You don't know how happy I am that you folks like him. He's the best thing I have at Moonrise, of course, registered and all that. I'll have him transferred tomorrow. He'll make you a good show dog, Miss Wilkerson."

Poynter said, "Now don't misunderstand me, Lester, but what on earth prompted you to do this? After the way I've been, well, mauling you around!"

Caudry grinned. "I haven't been guiltless myself, I'm afraid." He became suddenly serious. "I felt sorry for you, Vick. You've had a mean blow. I said, 'Les, what do you prize most? Your eight dogs? Well, give Vickery Poynter the pick of the lot—Moonrise Blizzard the Second.' So I did. I want you to pay me for him, though."

**VICKERY** looked stunned. Caudry said, "I want you to shake this old hand, just once. Let's be friends."

Vickery Poynter smiled slowly, thrust out his strong, lean hand.

Saxby said, "I've heard a lot about Moonrise, Mr. Caudry. I'd like to see it."

Caudry wheeled on him expansively. "No sooner said than done. I'll drive you out tonight. Can you spend the night?"

"I'm afraid not—"

"When shall I pick you up?"

"Say nine thirty, at the hotel. I should be back by twelve, though. Is that okay?"

"It's swell." Caudry bowed. "Good night, folks."

Dr. Mattison said, "Don't forget your blanket, Mr. Caudry."

"That's not my blanket," Caudry said. "I just brought the dog."

"I've never owned a blanket like that," Dr. Mattison insisted.

Caudry waved his Panama. "Good night. Be good. I'll be seeing you." They heard his car start, heard him sluice down the gravelled driveway.

Dr. Mattison stared at the bull terrier in rapturous fascination. "That's without doubt the best dogflesh I've ever laid eyes on. You're a lucky girl, Miss Wilkerson."
May I put my hands on him and examine him?"

She nodded. "Please do."

Thumb and forefinger, the doctor pried open the dog's docile mouth, rolled down his lower lip. Abruptly, he released the animal, stepped back in irritation. "Teeth have been drawn," he said. "Dad-rat it!"

Vickery Poynter said suspiciously, "What do you mean?"

"He was a splendid dog, all right, except that he was a pig-jaw—and you couldn't show him at a county fair! He'll make a good pet but without doubt he's the dregs of his kennel. Caudry was no doubt glad to get rid of him. A bull terrier's jaw is his most important point. An under-shot jaw is bad but a pig-jaw will disqualify him in any match. The teeth in the lower jaw come out an an angle of 135 degrees. Those in the upper jaw should meet them at their base. Sometimes when a good dog, like this one, has a pig-jaw the owner will pull a couple of teeth to make the bite look good. It looks good all right, but it won't fool anyone who knows how to count teeth."

Vickery's taut face went pale in silent fury. He said gently, "I should have known it. Les, what do you prize the most—why old Moonrise Blizzard the Second, the pride of the kennels! So that's the way he tries to buy my friendship. With a pig-jawed terrier!" He turned on Saxby, said sardonically, "I hope you enjoy your visit with your new-found friend."

Saxby said, "Maybe I will. Who knows? I'm funny about people."

Moonrise Blizzard the Second felt the spotlight shifting from him. He beat the desktop with his tail, said joyfully, "Har-roop! Har-roop-har-roop!"

XVI

It was eight-forty when Saxby returned to Main Street and that thoroughfare was again reaching the peak of social activity. In twenty minutes the "poor man's clock" in the courthouse cupola would knock out its nine washboiler strokes and for all righteous intents and respectable purposes the night would be officially terminated. Again was the pleasant pageant of townfolk and hillfolk, mixed but not mixing, each enjoying himself to the full, boisterously or solidly, according to his personal sense of decorum and early childhood strictures. Again as Saxby wove along the thronged pavement the sultry night was cleansed and sweetened with the smells of starched frocks and fresh laundered denim, of tar soap, and dimestore castille, and the candylike, orchardlike fragrance of premium perfumes obtained by careful saving of coupons. It was the same pleasant festival of last night. But for one exception. Many nodded to him, and a few spoke. "Good evening, Mr. Saxby, suh. It's mighty warm, isn't it?" Last night he was a stranger and tonight, though he didn't know them—they certainly knew him. He couldn't describe his emotion but it was something like a homecoming.

Almost every shop had a big thermometer out front and they read all the way from eighty-nine to ninety-five. Next to the drug-store, he passed a wooden sign suspended overhead from the marquee which said, VICKERY POYNTER, Real Estate. A golden hand in a narrow entranceway pointed upwards, said, VICKERY POYNTER, Upstairs. Saxby continued on his way. Through the window of the barbershop he saw the barber sitting in his barber chair, flicking his trousers cuff with the face towel, arguing with a bored audience of children.

Mr. Bewley's undertaking parlor was dark. The window of the Falksville Examiner, with its exhibition of a freak potato in the shape of a brood sow, a fotilla of nine miniature Pintas and twelve Santa Marias fashioned by the Falksville Junior Hobby Club, and a pullet egg bearing the interesting and natural configuration of a Maltese Cross on its big end, indicated no sign of life beyond.

Barbershop, undertaking parlor, newspaper office, showed no particular activity. This told Saxby that the knowledge of Em- erick Fraley's death had not yet become public property.

Main Street thinned out into a residential district of sleepy little homes set in tiny yards. He passed Caudry's hulking, triangular store, dark now but for a single light in the back office. Miss Dina Dineen was getting the day's receipts in order. He left Main, took North Road, and soon found himself in the country.
He very nearly missed Fern Spring Church.

Sheltered by a roadside pawpaw thicket, it lay back a hundred yards or so in a clump of staghead oaks. He turned from the highway, crossed a primitive pole bridge, and took the lane into the shadowed trees. Saxby remembered Dr. Mattison’s warning and was relieved to see that there was no parked car, no sign of nocturnal occupation.

A moon was climbing the cobalt sky and the tiny one-room church gleamed whitely in the watery shadows. A few yards from the front door was an iron pump on a platform of rotted planking. Behind the pump was a hitching rack. Saxby’s watch said five minutes to nine. He flicked on his flashlight, hooded it with his palm, and took a look around. Small country churches fascinated him. He found the spring at the back, its outlet dammed to form a pool for baptism. He found the tiny graveyard with its strange, primitive hill graves; some with decorations of broken pottery and vases, some looking like storm cellars with low roofs of metal sheeting, to “keep the rain off,” some bordered with snuff bottles, some with tombstones bearing a photograph of the deceased under a celluloid shield. Burial to these people was harsh and material. He cut the beam of his torch, seated himself in the dark by the bole of a tree and waited.

At two minutes after nine, a car turned from the road, crossed the pole bridge, and rattled up the lane. From the spacing of the headlights and the clamor it made he knew it was a very old car indeed. It pulled up a few feet from the church door and stopped. A girl in white got out. From her slight, boyish figure Saxby knew it was Miss Dineen.

She put her fingers in her mouth and gave a soft whistle. It was a low, blues whistle that Saxby had learned from cotton pickers when he was a boy; he was strongly tempted to answer it.

She waited a moment, walked to the pump and bent over it. She appeared to be doing something with the platform. Saxby walked forward, turned on his flash.

It was Miss Dina Dineen, all right. She’d reversed one of the planks in the pump platform and on the underside, held by adhesive tape, were three keys on a small loop of fishline.

She stood, arm downthrust, rigid in the glare of the torch, her slender wiry figure tense as a bowstring. She was dressed as he’d seen her earlier in the day, in her extravagantly short white linen frock and her extravagantly high heels. Petals of light from the flash caught in her straight black Indian hair. Her face was as white as though it had been dusted with rice powder, her thin moist lips were half parted; her sable eyes met the blossom of blinding light angrily and unblinking. She said, “Who—? Oh, it’s you.” There was contempt in her voice. “What are you doing here? I’ve been finding out things about you. You’re no lawyer, and you’re not retained by Caudry. Where’s Emerick? Did he tell you—?”

Saxby peeled off the adhesive tape, held the keys thoughtfully in the cup of his hand. There was a big brass door key, a small desk key with an ornate handle, and an old fashioned nightlatch key. He asked slowly, “Did Emerick Fraley hide these here?”

“He must have. I never saw them before.” She was speaking the truth—but with obvious reservations.

“However you knew just where to look!”

“He’s my boyfriend, he meets me here sometimes. When he can’t make it, he leaves me a note under—”

“I can use these,” Saxby declared. “I certainly can. They’ll come in handy.”

She was on him before he realized it. She stepped lithely behind him, threw a muscular arm around his neck, drew him backwards to her, off balance, and locked him into position with a sinewy leg twisted around his thigh. Her right hand snaked under his armpit, caught his wrist, gave it a quick, inverted wrench. The keys jumped from his hand and dropped through the gap in the open planking. He heard a faint splash as they hit the water far below.

She released him, stepped back and grinned. It was all over in a split second. She said, “They’re gone now, aren’t they? That’s too bad.”

“Gone but not forgotten, Wow.” He straightened his tie, studied her through half-lowered eyelids. “I’m surely glad you don’t carry a razor!”

She was panting from the exertion. She composed herself, said frigidly, “Only trash carry razors. I’m a lady and a lady never—”

He said gently, “Dina, let’s sit in your
car a minute. I've got some pretty bad news for you.

Underneath the oaks, beside her on the front seat of the old automobile, he told her of Emerick Fraley's death.

As he talked, his impression was that she hadn't heard him, that she wasn't listening. He left out the sheriff but told her about finding the body, about the footprints. When he'd finished, she said something rapidly under her breath. He wondered if it was a prayer or an oath—and knew he'd never know. She turned on the dashlight, angled herself about on the seat so she could face him. She was all hillgirl now, her face was carefully expressionless, her rimmed eyes were proudly blank. She asked quietly, "Who killed him?"

"He was killed with a hatchet, Dina."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, Dina, I didn't. But I know who did. That'll come later. At the proper time and in the proper way. We won't have any night-riding or any public shootings."

"His people out at Snake Run aren't going to like it much."

"I don't like it much either. That's why I came to you. I need help. Can you talk?"

"Of course I can talk." Her voice chilled him; he was on the edge of a world of passion and violence that he could hardly comprehend. She asked dully, "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know everything, every little thing. First I want to tell you about those keys. Yesterday, when Alicia Poynter was slain, someone burglarized Vickery Poynter's desk. The lock had not been forced, the prowler had had the key. That desk key, I'm certain, was the desk key we just tossed down the well. The other keys, I'll wager, were the keys to Poynter's front door and the key to his downtown office. Who gave Emerick those keys and what was he to do with them?"

"I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea. I do know, though, that he was up to something."

"Did he have a lot of money?"

"No, he didn't. I think he was going to collect later."

"Did you ever see Emerick with a bicycle bell?"

"Yes. He bought a bicycle bell to me this morning at Caudry's store. He asked me to put it in the safe. He said it was his life insurance."

"Among other things, it was his death warrant. What happened today?"

"Well, the law picked him up and jailed him. I sent him a note asking him to meet me here tonight. He sent word back he couldn't make it. I went to the parking lot behind the jail and talked to him through the window. He acted funny, said he didn't know when he'd get out. I had a strange feeling that he didn't want to get out. That he was perfectly happy there in that hot cell. That wasn't like Emerick so I went back to the store and called Mr. Caudry. I heard later that Caudry got him out but that Emerick didn't want to leave. The deputies had to wrestle him out onto the street. So I came here tonight to meet him. That's all I know."

"Tell me, Dina, was Emerick really mean—or was he just a hellion?"

"He was meaner than a boar in a canebrake. That was the way he was brought up. He stayed half drunk on rye whiskey and rye whiskey perishes the Beatitude in a man. But he was good to me."

Saxby said, "Dina, control yourself while I ask you this. Do you know a man named Hart Killigrew, from Yellowfoot Landing?"

"No, Mr. Saxby. I never heard of him. What did you say the name was?"

"Hart Killigrew—and this is no time to start lying."

"I thought you were trying to help me. I'm going home."

"This is his car, isn't it, Dina?"

She was speechless. After a moment, she said brazenly, "Yes, it is. What of it?" She pulled down the corners of her lips, said scornfully, "It's not much of a car."

"Not to you. But to Farmer Killigrew it's a goldplated limousine. Did Killigrew lend it to you?"

"No, Emerick did."

"Then how do you know it's Killigrew's?"

She said warily, "I've seen it around."

"I should say you have! According to the story I heard over at Yellowfoot this afternoon, you've been seen driving in it, or rather parked in it. And with Killigrew, out behind the cotton gin. If Caudry should find out you're running around with other older men the skin game you've been work-
DEATH ON A PARTY LINE

"Ah, these years," Saxby murmured philosophically. "How do they do telescope on us if we don’t watch them. Yes, indeedy. And did you tell this to Emerick?"

"Of course. The whole thing. That’s all there was to tell."

Saxby reached forward, flipped on the ignition. "How about driving me back to the hotel. I’ve an appointment with Mr. Caudry."

"Okay, you’re the boss. Name your own poison." She started the car. "So you’re really playing around with Lester Caudry?"

"Not playing around with him, no. Nothing so frivolous. I’ve a date with him to see Moonrise and I don’t want to miss it."

MAYOR Doxie Nuckles and Sheriff Belknap Childress Masters were seated side by side on the raspberry mohair couch in the parlor of Mayor Nuckles thumbnail, neo-Georgian dwelling.

The mayor was a little man, fat, and bald-headed. There were lands and furrows of bristles on his chin that he’d missed in shaving; when he spoke the room was volatile with the aroma of oil of cloves. He said boisterously, "Sheriff Trezevant! Welcome to Vincent County, welcome to Falksville, welcome to my humble home, sir. Sheriff Masters, meet Sheriff Trezevant of Dupre County. A colleague of yours, sir, who—"

"I know him," Sheriff Masters said uneasily. "I’ve met him dozens of times, thank you."

Sheriff Trezevant said nothing. He made quite a show of keeping silent. He was a big brawny man dressed in expensive hunting clothes, fine flannel shirt with open collar, whipcord riding breeches, glossy mocassin-toed boots. Being the head of county law to Sheriff Trezevant was serious business, like participating in a socially select sport; he believed in dressing the part.

Mayor Doxie Nuckles vaporized the air with clove oil, said, "Belknap, Sheriff Trezevant is madder than a hornets nest. On one hand I don’t blame him, and on the other hand there are two sides to every story. That’s why I summoned you here. Mr. Bewley, our undertaker called the Dupre sheriff about an hour ago and said a man named Saxby had reported a murder, one Emerick Fraley, out at a sawmill just over the county
line. Bewley brought the body here and when Sheriff Trezevant arrived it was already partially embalmed. Such a mix-up!"

Sheriff Masters said generously, "He can have the body if he wants it. He can take it back to Yellowfoot with him—"

"Dupre doesn’t want the body," Sheriff Trezevant said ominously. "It should never have been touched. Where’s this man Saxby?"

"I don’t know."

"You don’t know?" Sheriff Trezevant spread his palms, looked helplessly at the ceiling. "He sits there, showing his adnoids, and says blithely that he doesn’t know." He closed one eye, arched his eyebrow in furious concentration. "Well, I’ll know my suspect when I see him."

Mayor Nuckles gaped in admiration. "Is that so, Sheriff Trezevant? I’ve got to hand it to you boys over in Dupre. You’re high-class. Already you got your man lined up. Who is it?"

"It’s a matter of footprints. I’ve been all over that sawmill hollow with a floodlight. There are four sets of tracks there. Long narrow shoes, but those are by the spring and there’s a water soaked cardboard picnic box beside them. That means the man that left them came out before the rain last night. Therefore I eliminate him! There’s Fraley’s prints. He didn’t kill himself with that hatchet. So we eliminate him. There are Mr. Saxby’s prints, I found out what kind of shoes he was wearing from the bellboy at his hotel. Saxby didn’t kill Fraley or he wouldn’t have called attention to himself by reporting it. Thus, we eliminate him."

Sheriff Masters cleared his throat. "But that’s all, ain’t it?"

"All but our killer. All but one set. This last set was big and clumsy, like an elephant. They were comfort-ease shoes, much like Sheriff Masters’, there, and were patched on the bottom in a crude homemade job of half-soling. Yes, sir, I’ll know them when I see them."

Sheriff Masters flattened his shoe soles deep into the shoddy nap of the parlor carpet. His breath became labored; he said politely, "You fellers in Dupre are shore foxy."

Sheriff Trezevant nodded absenty. "We’ve had the advantages of a good school system and rich, fertile ground. That’s called environment and hereditary, that’s evolution. Evolution seems to be quite a touchy subject, by the way. How do you gentlemen feel about it?"

Mayor Nuckles looked cornered. He said at last, "I can take it or leave it alone."

Sheriff Trezevant got to his feet. He whipped his fine felt hat sportily against his tailored breeches, said sternly, "Here’s what I want done. When Saxby shows up, I want him arrested as a witness and held incommunicado. I want your undertaker, Bewley, fined twenty-five dollars and costs and the sum remitted to the Yellowfoot Charity Bazaar which will be held next week on the lawn of Lodge Hall. I want Sheriff Masters, here, to write a brief note of apology and explanation to the Dupre County Eagle so that my friends and fellow voters may understand—"

Mayor Nuckles nodded sagely. "That sounds reasonable enough. You can count on us, Sheriff Trezevant. We’ll make every effort to—"

A great rage had been devouring the heart of Sheriff Masters. He raised a trembling finger, pointed at the door. "Git out o’ here," he said hoarsely. "An’ I mean right now! The boys at the courthouse will give you five gallons of gas to get home on—and I want Dupre County to send me a receipt. Git out o’ here before I—"

Sheriff Trezevant smiled sadly, shook his head in wonderment, and left.

Mayor Nuckles said reproachfully, "That wasn’t very neighborly of you, Belknap. It doesn’t hurt to keep on good terms with—"

"You keep out of my affairs," Sheriff Masters shouted. "Who the hell do you think you are? The Governor?"

XVII

L ESTER CAUDRY eelid his powerful car from the river-road into the lane and Saxby could see Moonrise through the beeches, shimmering and luminous in the blue night, supine in the shadows, like a huge white cow with a broken back. White buildings at night, and white gardens too, Saxby decided, always looked as though they’d been heavily tumbled. Mr. Caudry said, "I designed this house myself, suh. It’s what I call eclectic Southern. I’ve retained the best features of the old Dixie
architecture and discarded the less attractive. Those features I liked, I accented. Observe the pillars, for instance." The pillars, a dozen of them, paraded across the face of the house like a two-story picket fence; Saxby said politely, "You live like a bird in a gilded cage."

Mr. Caudry said with pride, "I do, I do indeed. But I've earned it. Man and boy, I've worked hard." They left the car and climbed the wide steps to the high porch. Mr. Caudry opened the door, said, "After you, suh!"

Saxby asked, "How much acreage do you have here?"

Mr. Caudry gestured carelessly northward, in the direction of Hudson Bay. "I've never been over it all. They tell me it goes back to yonder."

"To the North Pole? Well, think of that!"

Caudry said negligently, "Now this is just the entrance hall." Floored with floral mosaic and gleaming in glass and gilt it was about the size of a small skating rink.

Saxby had asked to see the house. And that was exactly what he got. The pilgrimage took them forty-five minutes and covered everything from the air-conditioned vegetable bin in the basement to the last nook and cranny of the attic. There were five bedrooms on the second floor and all of them showed signs of occupancy; Mr. Caudry explained to Saxby that it was his practice to use them in rotation. Mr. Caudry saved the pièce d'occasion, the main floor, until last and the gleam and glitter of drawing room, of morning room and trophy room and music room and solarium, were almost more than the human eye could withstand. When they settled in the cardroom, Scotch and soda at their elbows, Saxby's mind reeled with velvet curtains and mounted cougars, with sterling silver chandeliers and intricate oil-burning furnaces and lavender bathrooms. He said pitifully, "This has been an experience I'll never forget, sir." And his hand quivered as he reached thirstily for his drink.

Mr. Caudry tilted the bridge lamp so that the light missed his face and cascaded down his shirt front; he leaned back in his overstuffed chair and beamed. His big head, with its shock of white, schoolboy hair and shiny, gold-rimmed glasses registered contention. He said, "It takes dough to put together a joint like this."

"And ingenuity. Money alone couldn't assemble such—"

"Well, I'll admit, Mr. Saxby, I do have ingenuity. It's a kind of curse with me. Here I'm retired from the Caudry Burial Brotherhood but my mind won't let me rest. I got ideas, dozens of them, all money-makers! If I lost every cent I have tomorrow, I could start from scratch and make it up in a year. The average man just sits around on his garlands and takes it easy. I sit around and think. I think about death—because that used to be my business. Mr. Saxby, death's a gold mine. The surface hasn't hardly been panned. There's big money in death, sir!"

"Really?"

"Soon I'd bring out my plastic coffin. You just seal the lid on and it lasts forever. Comes in all colors, beautiful, wears like iron—" Mr. Caudry warmed to his subject. "There's been no real progress in the business of death and burial for a thousand years. Take grave digging; it's all done by hand, slow, expensive, crude. I've invented a kind of a machine that digs graves. A sort of a rectangular box, that drops like a die, works on the principle of a cooky-cutter. There's a fortune in it if I ever get around to it. And take my seeds and bulbs."

"Seeds and bulbs?"

"That's right. I'll call it Caudry's Memento Mori, or maybe The Gates-of-pearl Packet. For farmfolk in the hinterlands. It's a little packet of funeral seeds and bulbs, and cuttings, lilies, tuberoses, carnations, all the stuff you need during sepulture—"

Saxby changed the subject. "Mr. Caudry, I've done you a favor. I've gotten that girl, Dina Dineen, off your neck. I had a talk with her at the store this morning and she practically admitted that she was running a pin-money blackmail game on you. I think that's all over now. If she makes any further demands on you, you just shake your finger and say, 'No, no!'—that ought to quiet her down."

Caudry took off his glasses, wiped them with a scrap of pink cloth, put them back on. He said slowly, "You do get around, don't you? Do you think I can make it stick?"

"I don't think she'll trouble you any more,
Don’t fire her. Give her a chance to re-form."

"If you say so, Saxby. But she’s bad medicine. She had me scared. She and that renegade named Fraley that she runs with."

"Fraley, too, has reformed."

"That, I can hardly believe."

Saxby said carefully, "I’ve done you a small favor, will you do me one in return?"

Caudry opened his meaty mouth. "Will I? Anything in the world! Just name it. Man, you don’t know what this means to me. Here I’ve been living in a state of—"

"Tell me why you took that pig-jawed bull terrier around to Dr. Mattison’s tonight and so graciously presented it to Vickery Poynter?"

Caudry looked annoyed. "Who told you it was pig-jawed. Damn! I bet Mattison let the business out! He was the only one there that would have enough sense to count teeth. I’d be frank with you, Paul. I wanted Vickery’s friendship, he can help me in various ways. So I presented him with Moonrise Blizzard the Second. The cull of my litter. I’d have been screwy to give him a topnotch dog when he couldn’t tell the difference. That’s only common sense."

"But why at Dr. Mattison’s hospital?"

"I knew I could catch them there."

"Them?"

"Yes, Vickery and the rest, I knew Vickery would be with his mother."

"And that’s the best you can do?"

"That’s all there was to it. Was he sore when he found out that—?"

"Moonrise Blizzard the Second needed dentures? Not at all. He took it as a huge joke. Choked up and said that you could always count on Les Caudry for a big laugh."

Caudry seemed relieved. He said, "That’s fine. I wouldn’t want to make him too damned mad. He swings a lot of local weight—"

Saxby asked carelessly, "What did you and Hart Killigrew talk about a week or so ago when you were in his hotel room with him?"

"You’ve got it a little twisted, haven’t you, Paul?" Caudry smiled paternal. "Remember when we were talking about it last night, about the note on his door and all, I said he came to my room. He only stayed a few minutes—"

"We’ll get to that in just a moment. I’m talking about when you were in his room. You went to his room, opened his suitcase and saw it contained a dress and other garments of feminine disguise. You told this to Emerick Fraley—"

"I don’t recall anything like that, Paul."

"Later, you left a note for him on his door. Why? And what did you talk about?"

"I asked him to have a drink with me because I was lonesome. I don’t remember what we talked about. Probably the weather and crops. We’re both farmers and—"

Saxby said gravely, "I want to find Hart Killigrew."

"They say he lives over in Dupre County. I’ll be glad to drive you over tomorrow—"

"I want to find him tonight."

"I don’t like night driving, Paul. But if you insist—!"

"He’s here in Falksville," Saxby said amably. "I’m sure of it. Furthermore, I’m sure he’s dead."

Caudry looked interested. "Is that so? I hadn’t heard. What did he die of?"

"Five bullets from a short-barrrelled thirty-eight."

"I’m sorry to hear it."

"And before he disappeared, he left your home here, Moonrise, as his final forwarding address. I bet you’re sorry to hear that, too."

Caudry got to his feet, walked across the room to tall French windows, opened them, and stood for a long moment, staring into the night. After an interval of obvious indecision he turned, rejoined Saxby. He said, "Maybe the time is come for me to tell all. Do you want to take this down?"

Saxby said nothing. He sipped his drink, holding the glass in both hands to get the coolness from its beaded surface.

"I’m going to place myself in jeopardy to you by making a confession," Caudry said levelly. "I’ve suspected for some time that Hart Killigrew is dead. I had a hunch about a week ago that he was due for slaughter. A few days passed. He appeared to have vanished. This confirmed my suspicions—and I decided to take matters into my own hands. I needed facts. A little, not much—but a little, to go on. If he was dead, he wouldn’t be reading any more mail."
But he might be receiving it. I wanted to know everything possible about his background, about his correspondence. I therefore gave my home to the postmaster as his forwarding address. As his local forwarding address. I was only interested in any mail he might receive here at Falksville. It was my intention to open this mail and—"

"You expected his murderer to write him a note of condolence?"

"No. I reasoned that any mail he might receive through the local post office might have local significance. No mail has come through, by the way, except a very puzzling package this afternoon. A huge box with a lamp shade. I haven't figured it out yet but this definitely confirms my position."

"Sheriff Masters, to say nothing of the postmaster, is certainly going to be interested in this."

"I see no necessity in letting it go any further. What I'm about to tell you now, I hope you will treat as a confidence—but I'm willing to leave the entire matter up to your sense of discretion. Please try to realize, however, that my motives have been completely humanitarian."

"Okay. I'll try to. Shoot."

"It all goes back to a week or so ago. I was sitting in the lobby of the Magnolia House one evening about suppertime and Mr. Imes came over. He said, 'What do you know, Mr. Caudry, we got a real genuine wife-killer as a guest. Hart Killigrew. He just registered and went up to two-o-two.' More out of curiosity than anything else, that and boredom, I went up and knocked on his door. He opened up and I introduced myself—"

"Introduced yourself? But you knew each other, didn’t you? You bought that timberland and the old sawmill from him, didn’t you?"

"Of course we knew each other, in a business way. That’s what I’m saying. I started to introduce myself and he invited me in. Mr. Saxby, you’ve picked up a hell of a lot in thirty-some hours! You make me nervous. Please don’t keep butting in! There was an open suitcase on the bed and all it had in it was a woman’s dress and high-heeled shoes and a female hat."

"No revolver?"

"I didn’t see one. He must have had it on him. I made some kind of a wisecrack about the feminine clothes. He just shut the suitcase and tried to stare me out of countenance, telling me I was seeing things. He was kind of riled so I asked him to supper with me but he refused. I left and about eight o’clock I went back. He wasn’t in, so I left a note pinned to his door. As I recall, it was about nine when he dropped by my door. I set out drinks."

"What did you talk about—and don’t tell me weather and crops."

"You’re not going to believe this but he said a certain party had brought him to town to do a job. And that there was big money in it for him. He got drunk on my hands, and kind of savage. I can’t explain it, it’s hard to put in words, but he scared me—and I don’t scare easy. The first chance I got I eased him out. He was drunk, Paul, but even then he was smarter than you and me put together. If he’s dead, I’m glad to hear it."

"Did he mention any names?"

"Only Mother Poynter. He asked all about her."

"Got any theory, Mr. Caudry?"

"Yes, Paul, but I don’t like to think about it. What was this job someone had for him? Remember he had a reputation back in Dupre County as a killer. Was it Alicia on his list? And how come he got eliminated before he got into action?"

"Did you tell all this to Emerick Fraley?"

Caudry nodded. "Yes, I did."

"Did you set Fraley to tailing him?"

"Yes, I did. I was curious about—"

"One more question," Saxby said, "and then I’ll be getting back to town. Did you tell Fraley to utilize Dina Dineen in this Killigrew business?"

"Hell, no. It was supposed to be secret."

"Dina told me tonight that at Fraley’s suggestion, and under a third party’s orders, she contacted Killigrew and—"

Caudry said soberly, "Well, Paul, that third party wasn’t me. This is the first I’ve heard of such shenanigans. I don’t believe it. You can’t believe a word that girl says, suh!"

(To be concluded in the next Short Stories)
If the First Pale Strangers Actually Were Cattlemen, Thought the Young Sheriff, He Was a Jackrabbit's Uncle

THE THIRD PALE STRANGER
By HAPSBURG LIEBE

The Southwest had bred few more capable lawmen than Pete Wilson. He had known when to use his head, and when to use his gun, which was really something in the hell-roaring cow town that called itself Ironwood City. Pete tamed the place and kept it tame, until age took a hand and dealt him out. The sheriff job still held fascination for him—he knew nothing else—and the loss made him bitter.

So he disliked his successor, two-fisted range rider Burn Kelly, and he went back to the old office now and then to have a
little sly fun with the new young sheriff. Kelly was conscientious and doing his best; Ironwood City was tame again; but this had not made any difference to Wilson.

The cowboy lawman looked around from his desk to see the tall and lean, white-mustached, white-goateed, familiar figure standing in the street doorway.

"Howdy, Pete," Burn said. "Come in and have a chair."

"Howdy, Burnham," Wilson said. "How's tricks?"

He walked to a chair and sank into it. Kelly took up a pencil, threw it down, grinned, became sober again and answered:

"Tricks, as you say, Pete, are sorta thick-enin' up on me. I wonder if you saw what dropped off the southbound stage coach, hour or so ago?"

"Yeah, I saw," drawled old Wilson. "Another stranger. Pale, like the one that dropped off here yesterday. Done time in prison, both of 'em, probably. You should have figured that already, Burnham."

"I had, Pete," Burn Kelly said. "Ac-cordin' to the hotel register, the one yes-ter-day is named T. Hampton Grady, and the one today is Rutherford Arn. Sounds like fake names to me. I've had no man-wanted circulars to fit 'em, so I figure they're plain ex-convicts. Odd, their comin' in a day apart this way. Wondered if Arn could be on Grady's trail."

"Possible," Wilson admitted, with little enthusiasm.

Kelly pursued, "Both dressed in black, but somehow they don't quite stack up as gamblers, nor yet as lawyers, certainly not as preachers. Pete, you got any advice about deep stuff which you wouldn't mind passin' along to a pore ignorant range rider sheriff?"

He grinned broadly. Here was a bid for friendship. But Pete wasn't ready for that. His eyes twinkled as he said:

"Queer set-up, Burnham. 'Most anything could come out of it. Use your head, cow-buck."

"I'm tryin' to, Pete. I've already got couple deputies watchin' the bank, just in case, you know. I'm green, old-timer, awful green, when it comes to slick work. Friends put me into this job. I didn't much want it but now that I've got it, I aim to make good or bust a hamstring. Is there any-

thing particular you feel like advisin' me on, old-timer?"

"Maybe not," Wilson said, and he scowled at the toes of his boots, "but I can give you something else to figure out. I got it from the snoopy hotel clerk. T. Hampton Grady left his room last night, was gone for hours and hours, and wasn't seen in any of the stores or saloons."

"But where could he go?"

The eyes of the old ex-sheriff were still twinkling. He rose suddenly, went to the street doorway, half turned there and told Burn Kelly this:

"Another pale stranger will likely crop up here, and in case he does he is the one you'll have a perfect hell of a time beatin' down."

"Shucks, Pete, I—"

Wilson was gone.

K E L L Y got up from his deck-chair, buckled on a gun-belt and ambled over to Ironwood City's combination hotel and saloon. Neither of the two newcomers was in the lobby, or at the bar. The clerk volunteered information to the effect that T. Hampton Grady's room was upstairs at the front and on the right, Rutherford Arn's at the other end of the hall and on the left.

The young sheriff climbed the stairway. The door to Gray's room stood ajar; nobody was inside. Kelly walked without sound down the hall, stopped at the closed door of Arn's room, listened and heard nothing, and bent an eye to the keyhole.

Instantly the door was jerked open. There before him stood both Arn and Grady.

"So it's the law dog," Grady said, voice sour. "Anything we can do for you, Sher-i-f?"

"Sure there is," Arn said in favor-curry-ing tones. "He wants to know all about us, Hamp. Sheriff, Hamp and I had Rocky Mountain spotted fever up in another state, and as soon as we got able we high-tailed out of there. You thought it was prison pallor. Sure you did! We're in the market for a cow outfit. You happen to know of one that's for sale?"

Burn Kelly did not answer the question. He looked the two over closely. They were much alike, tall, almost thin, keen of eye
and level of gaze, men of iron nerve beyond a doubt. Their black clothing was old and a good deal frayed.

“When you expectin’ the other jigger?” narrowly inquired the lawman.

“What other jigger?” asked Grady.

“The other pale stranger,” Burn Kelly said.

Rutherford Arn laughed. “We sure don’t know what you’re talking about, Sheriff.”

“How come you two got in here a day apart?”

T. Hampton Grady answered quickly, “Ruther stopped off to look at ranch prospects up the country a ways.”

“Where did you go last night?”

For the time of one second, Grady looked startled.

Then he grinned. “Oh, that. Hot in my room last night, and I took a walk, and got tired, and sat down on somebody’s porch and went to sleep. It was nearly daylight when I woke up.”

Too smooth, thought Kelly. Without another word he turned and went downstairs, out to the street and back to his office.

He was just a little surprised to see old Pete Wilson there again.

“What did you find out, Burnham?” Pete asked.

BURN told him everything. Wilson laughed as though he were very greatly amused. “You’re green, Burnham, all right. Talked your head off. Now they know you’re suspicious and will be twice as hard to catch at their devilment, whatever it may be.”

“Hell,” flared the Irish in Kelly, “I told you I was green when it came to slick stuff, didn’t I? Look, Pete. I did the best I knew, and I aim to keep right on doing it. If only the thing will come to a shoot-out—that’s where I shine—both of ’em are heeled; guns in armpit holsters, and they tried to stand so that I wouldn’t notice. This seems to be fine sport for you, Pete. Well, just go right on having yourself a good time!”

Wilson, apparently, was more amused than ever. “Something else I can tell you, Burnham. Hamp Grady went to the liveryman’s this morning, and bought the two fastest horses and the best pair of saddles the liveryman had. Might be that’s another one for you to figure out.”

“Offhand,” muttered Kelly. “I’d say it’s part of a plan for a quick getaway. My guess is that they told at the livery stable that they meant to ride out lookin’ for a ranch to buy. Pete, I’ve worked for a lot o’ cattlemen, and seen a lot more, and if Arn and Grady are cattlemen I’m a jackrabbit’s uncle.”

Wilson’s brows lifted. “Quick getaway from what?”

“Well,” Kelly said, “the bank’s new vault is crammed with cash, for one possibility. If they aim to stick it up, likely they’ll find an excuse for goin’ in there to sorta get the lie of the place beforehand. Up to now they haven’t been in, or my two watchin’ deputies woulda reported it.”

Wilson straightened the broad Stetson on his white head and walked to the door. “There’s such things as strong boxes on stage coaches, remember,” he said, and walked out.

Later, Burn Kelly went to the livery stable. He asked the liveryman to let him know when the strangers had come for their horses. The reply was disconcerting:

“That pair saddled up and rode off half an hour ago, Burn. They had grubsacks. Grady said they was goin’ to look at some mine prospects, and wouldn’t be back until late tomorrow night, maybe not until the day after. They rode east.”

Kelly bit an oath in two. Mine prospects, eh? So far as he knew, there was no such thing within a radius of a hundred miles.

“Probably circled the town and rode west.” This to himself. To the liveryman, “How was the two horses shod?”

“New shoes on the hind feet of both. Too late in the day to do much trackin’, Burn, if that’s what you had in mind.”

The cowboy sheriff squinted at the low sun and nodded. “If a third pale jigger happens in here on horseback, let me know quick, will you?”

“Sure, Burn.”

Kelly went up the street and to the hotel. He found that Rutherford Arn had told the clerk exactly what T. Hampton Grady had told the liveryman.

“Any odd thing about ’em catch your
notice?" inquired the young lawman. "Anything at all? The least thing?"

The clerk thought backward. After a minute, "No," he said, "believe not. But—here's somethin', Burn, which I told Pete Wilson when he quizzed me, and which Pete didn't seem to think was important. Late last night or early this morning, some jigger walked up the stairs there who had been walking in dirty flour. Flour you make bread out of, you know. I wiped it up. Could that mean anything?"

Kelly hadn't forgotten the ex-sheriff's telling him, "Use your head, cowbuck." Well, he was using it now. After a brief period of hard thinking, he turned back to the clerk.

"I never did like snooping, but looks like I'll hafta snoop some on this. I want keys that'll let me into both the pale strangers' rooms. And keep your mouth shut about it."

In Arn's room he found nothing that interested him. In Grady's he saw, on the floor, the merest vestige of a dirty-white, powdery stuff. So it had been Grady who'd left the whitish prints on the stairs.

"And he was out somewhere most of last night," Burn Kelly muttered. "But where the devil did he step in that stuff, whatever it is?"

He took the keys back to the clerk. "I want to know it quick if another pale hombre bobs up here," he said in a low voice, and went to his office.

For long he sat at his desk thinking, and saw no ray of light. Much of the night following he wrestled with his problem. He had breakfast at dawn, and when good daylight came he was riding a county road westward looking for the hoofprints of a pair of horses freshly shod behind.

TWO miles from town he found them. They were not plain. But he was at home in this, and he picked them up readily. Another mile, and the trail vanished—in a shallow creek that flowed across the road.

"Slick," said Kelly to himself. He kept a ready gun hand as he rode up the stream and down the stream trying in vain to find the trail again. "Sure is slick."

Because he wished to be in town when the southbound stage arrived, he made no very extended search. But he needn't have bothered. No other pale stranger was in evidence when the stage had come and gone.

Kelly left his horse at the livery stable and was headed up the street when he met Pete Wilson.

"How's tricks, cowbuck?" asked old Pete.

"So-so," Burn Kelly said. Wilson would probably hoot if he told him much of anything. He remarked casually, "Pete, I reckon you wasn't stringin' me when you advised me to look out for a third pale jigger."

Wilson replied, "I didn't say that I was certain he'd come, Burnham. But there's a big chance he will. And if he does, he is the one you'll have a hell of a time with, like I told you before."

"Who is he, Pete?"

Wilson only grinned. It was a superior sort of grin. He was enjoying this.

"Somebody's a little loco," Kelly said, and walked on.

"And it might be you," old Pete threw after him.

The cowboy sheriff went to the bank, saw that the two deputies he had watching were strictly on the job, went to the post office and found no mail worth more than a glance, then turned in at the hotel and had dinner.

Half an hour afterward, he was in his saddle again and riding for the creek that had swallowed the trail of the Arn and Grady horses.

Those horses had left the stream somewhere, of course. Kelly had more time at his disposal now, and was therefore more diligent in the search. At that, more than half the afternoon was past when he found the spot he'd been looking for. He had over-ridden it twice; the banks here were gravelly, and did not register hoofprints. He picked up the trail rods from the creek—and it pointed back toward Ironwood City!

It lay straight as a gun-barrel eastward for a good two hundred yards. Then it turned sharply, squarely southward.

"What the hell kind o' doin's is this, anyhow?" ripped out young Sheriff Burnham Kelly.

Five minutes then, and his exasperation
increased and he was even madder. For he had lost the hoofprints altogether in a vast spread of cow-country grass and had to give up hope of finding them again. He was bucking a pair of clever men, and certainly he knew it now. Perhaps Grady and Arn were sticking up the bank, or robbing the southbound stagecoach somewhere below, while he was mooning around out here?

Kelly went galloping back to Ironwood City.

He was relieved when he learned that there had been no bank stickup. If the stage had been robbed, news of it had not reached town. Burn left his horse with the liveryman and a few minutes later was sinking wearily into his desk-chair.

Again he set his head to work on the whitish-powder clue. This had struck him as being a really worthwhile clue, and the more he thought of it the more important it seemed. That old Pete Wilson hadn't regarded it seriously made no difference to Burn Kelly now.

When the sun went down the cowboy sheriff was as much puzzled as ever. At midnight he was in the same deep mental hole. He slept at last, and dreamed of a horde of strangers with white faces, and once he woke in a cold sweat.

At daybreak he was at the hotel with a question. The clerk ran upstairs, ran back with the answer:

"Grady and Arn haven't come in, Burn."

"Let me know quick when they do come in," ordered Kelly. "I'll be at the office day and night if I'm in town."

The strangers hadn't shown up at sunset. Early in the day, Kelly had started men out riding the county in all directions, making inquiries everywhere, and these returned at dusk to tell him that nobody had seen Arn or Grady. It was almost as though the pair had been snatched off the earth by some gigantic, invisible hand.

On this night, too, Burn found sleep difficult. He had piled down on a blanket in a corner of his office, with his broad stetson over his eyes to shut out the light of the lamp on his desk. Still again the clue of T. Hampton Grady's whitish footprints haunted him, nagged him. Clean to the marrow of his bones he felt that this was the key to everything.

Burn Kelly never knew how the solution came, was quite sure he hadn't dreamed it, would have laughed at any suggestion to the effect that his subconscious mind had worked it out. He knew only that he woke suddenly at the break of dawn with the mystery vanishing like cavernous gloom before a flash of lightning. It was as quick as that.

Springing to his feet with his left hand clamping his hat on, he ran to the back door of his office buckling on his gun-belt, then stole rapidly up the alleyway in the dim, gray light.

Two indistinct, tall dark figures were just leaving the rear of the brick bank building. One of them carried a burlap bag that was bulky enough to be discernible—it contained only a little under sixty thousand dollars in cold cash! Had Kelly been a single minute later, all would have been lost for him.

They saw him. He dropped to one knee in order to make a smaller target of himself. His heavy old range six-shooter was out of its leather and ready. He spat:

"Drop that and reach high with the jaws, you two, or I'll blast—"

A double-action hookbill in Rutherford Arn's right hand flamed and barked. The bullet grazed the new young sheriff's scalp an inch above his left ear. It addled him a little, spoiled his aim when he shot back. Arn was talking in a voice so low that Kelly barely caught these words:

"... kill the nosey law dog—then catch up with you—high-tail!"

Already T. Hampton Grady was running with the loot, heading for a pair of saddled horses that stood almost hidden under a liveoak in the middle of a vacant lot directly behind the bank building. Kelly now lay flat. He shot at Grady and again missed, was still a little addled. Dimly he remembered telling old Pete Wilson: "If only it will come to a shootout, that's where I shine." Well, this was it! Again he fired at the running Grady and missed.

Arn shot at the flash and bullet-holed Burn Kelly's hat. Kelly rolled over to change position, shook his head to clear it, took a more careful but quick aim at the dark hump that was Arn and let the gunhammer go.

Arn grasped half an oath and wilted, limp as a boiled rag.
There was silence then, except for a fast beat of hoofs westward and an excited, inquiring voice from over on the main street somewhere.

Kelly got to his feet and ran to Arn’s horse. A moment, and he had forked the animal and was kicking it into a gallop after the fleeing Grady. Because of the insufficient light he couldn’t see his man. At the edge of town he reined almost to a halt and bent an ear, and heard the fading sounds of hoofbeats off southwestward. He followed on then, as fast as the Arn horse could run.

But Grady’s mount was the faster. More than a mile lay between pursuer and pursued when fair daylight came. The robber, ignorant as to his partner’s fate, could not have been sure of the identity of the man behind. He kept riding as though the devil had a pitchfork at his back.

The painful throbbing of his head wound notwithstanding, Burn Kelly’s eyes carried a hard light. It was a good bet that Grady, with all the bank loot, was bent upon giving Arn as well as the law the slip! So Kelly resorted to a trick, since he could not hope to overtake his man in an open race. He stopped, sat the panting horse for some minutes, and turned back toward town. When he was out of the robber’s range of vision, he cut rapidly westward under cover of a long, low ridge.

T. Hampton Grady was not immediately deceived. But after considerable time had passed with no further sign of pursuit, he slowed his foam-flecked mount. He’d been leaving a plain trail, which was not so good.

A creek lay ahead. He turned right and into it. Then he turned left down the bed of the stream and kept going, hidden by bank scrub, until the west bank became rocky terrain that led to a wide stretch of badlands.

Grady rode out of the creek and into the rocky, barren wasteland, leaving a trail so dim that it would have puzzled an Indian.

Early in the afternoon he came upon the deserted patchwork shanty of some long gone prospector. Beside it there was a seep spring and enough water for his fagged horse and himself. He felt entirely safe here, and soon was stretched out on his back in the shanty to catch a little of the sleep he had lost the night before.

A quiet voice woke him. He sat up, reaching toward the weapon he carried holstered in his left armpit.

“Ruther?” he mouthed sleepily—“Ruther?”

“It’s not Rutherford, T. Hampton,” the quiet voice said. “Take your hand off that gun!”

Grady realized suddenly that he was looking into the muzzle of Burn Kelly’s six-shooter. Burn stood in the doorway. Fully awake now, Grady began making sly talk:

“How’d you find me, Sheriff?” forcing half a smile.

“Watched you from the tops of ridges and pinnacles. Take your ju-claw off that gun!”

It was a fast double-action .41 hookbill, a mate to Arn’s. As Grady snatched it out he fell backward in order to be under the line of Kelly’s gunsights—both weapons blazed in the same infinitesimal part of a second—both drew blood.

Shortly after sundown of that day, young Sheriff Burn Kelly rode into Ironwood City’s main street leading a horse. Tied across the saddle on this horse was that which had been the villainous, murderous pale stranger who had called himself T. Hampton Grady. A crowd gathered. Foremost in the crowd was the tall and lean, white-mustached and white-goateed ex-sheriff, Pete Wilson.

“Here, Pete—” Kelly began, one hand falling to a burlap bag tied to his saddlehorn—“look after this—”

He was deathly pale under his sunburn. He slumped and would have fallen if Wilson hadn’t caught him.

Hours later he came back to himself to find that he was in bed in the Wilson company bedroom. He was in bandages that smelled like a drugstore. He blinked at the oil lamp, then saw that old Pete and the Ironwood City doctor sat near by. Remembering, Kelly grinned. The ex-sheriff grinned too, and he spoke:

“Everything’s fine, cowpork. The doc got the bullet out and sewed up your head, and you’ll make it, but better let me do what talking is necessary at the present. First
thing, I owe you apologies, and you've sure got 'em. Burnham, all the cash I'd saved was in that bank!

"All right:

"I made a big mistake in passing up the dirty-white powder sign. But you sure didn't. Yeah, it was lime, lime out of mortar. The jiggers had been keeping themselves and their horses hid in the daytime and working nights under the bank, digging into the brick vault with long chisels—slow, making no noise. Slick way to rob a bank, and one on me. I'm out of date, Burnham. I'm an old fool—"

"Shut up, Pete," said Kelly. "You're one grand jigger, that's what you are. I'm still bad stuck on one thing, Pete. Who was the third pale stranger you kept warnin' me to look out for?"

Wilson went a little red. "I'm sorry about that, Burnham. But there was a heap of truth in it, even if I did mean it as a sort of pestiferous riddle for you. Well—er, the third pale stranger is now at the undertaker's with Grady and Arn. He got that pair. Thank goodness he didn't get you, though he did come close to it. He was Death, Burnham."

IN THE next issue of SHORT STORIES you will find a story of Wild Horse Valley—where the "Shame of Arizona" was sheriff and the very roosters perched precariously on grindstones to sharpen their spurs for the next fight.

"When Peace Came to Tonto Town"

W. C. TUTTLE

FIRST WIRELESS SERVICE IN ALASKA

ALASKA was raw frontier country after the 1898 gold strike, but sourdoughs soon had some things more modern than had the States. One was the world's first commercial wireless service, opened in 1904 by the U. S. Signal Corps between Nome and St. Michaels. Today the government's radio, telephone and telegraph services cover the Territory and each year hundreds of new enlisted men are trained to operate them in the peacetime Regular Army.
Poets on Wheels
By DAN CUSHMAN

THE WAGON was ancient. It creaked along the alkali-white road in the scorching Montana sun. It was loaded high with tubs, wooden chairs, quilts, shovels and just plain junk. A boy rode ahead on a pinto pony, a woman and two small girls sat with their legs dangling over the endgate, and on the high springseat sat a gaunt, ragged man. The man was a poet, for scrawled across the bleached side of the wagon were these words:

Forty miles from water
Forty miles from wood,
I'm leaving old Montana
And I'm leaving her for good.

It was the dry August of 1921, and many homesteaders were leaving old Montana for good. Some of them drove silently along the dusty road through Big Sandy with resignation or hatred in their eyes. Others could not resist a final word, a last malediction, a jest at their own unfortunate condition, and so they lettered a few words on the sides of their wagons,

In God we trust
In Montana we bust

or something more original.

Five to ten years before these people had arrived in the luxury of Jim Hill's tourist sleepers at homeseeker's rates, their pockets overflowing with railroad and chamber of commerce literature extolling the fertile plains of Montana which needed only a touch of the plow.

From Minnesota, Michigan and New York State they came — school teachers, clerks, barbers, and even a few farmers. They filed on the last of the free range, chopped it up into barbed wire 160-acre plots, built tar-paper-covered shacks, and turned the sod grass side under.

At first the fickle country played along with them. Rain fell, yields of wheat were forty to sixty bushels to the acre. The
little town of Big Sandy became the largest primary wheat shipping point on earth. But in 1920 things hit the skids. Rain did not fall. Hot winds swept the prairie, shriveling the wheat against the baked, gumbo soil. Russian thistles and "Jim Hill" mustard, the tumbleweeds of the West, piled deeply in fence corners, and families of wandering skunks found refuge beneath the floors of ten thousand abandoned shacks.

The dry land farmer had gathered his bleached and tattered belongings, loaded them in his wagon or his flivver, and set out for whatever he had called "the old home."

He was licked, but with paint brush he had a final word:

Ashes to ashes and dust to dust,
If the cutworms don't get you
The grasshoppers must.

Another, dealing with Montana's most abundant fauna:

Jackrabbits on the hillside,
Rattlesnakes in the draw,
Against a state like this one
There ought to be a law.

The ubiquitous mortgage came in for a few words, too.
The most memorable was across the canvas top of a prairie schooner:

We plowed up the sagebrush,
We plowed up the cactus,
But all that we raised
Was a mortgage and taxes.

Not all the signs were humorous or poetic. This one is recalled for its bitterness, not only for Montana, but in memory of the old home as well:

Headed for Kansas. Even hell is better than this country.

Occasionally an outfit rolled through with such a one as this:

I am a dry land farmer
John Wilkenson by name,
And if you ask where I'm going,
It's back from where I came.
Eastern and central Montana gets about fifteen inches of rainfall on the average year. However, there's no telling how or when this fifteen inches will come. Years of deluge may follow one after the other, and then an interminable period of drought. Temperature is uncertain, too. The summer sun may beat down at 105 in the shade, or worse, and winter lows of fifty and sixty below have repeatedly been set. So it is natural that drought and temperature would be preferred subjects.

A favorite story of the period told of an "Iowa John" Parker who lost his place to the mortgage company. When the sheriff of Chouteau County drove out to tack up the familiar notice, he found Iowa John packed and ready to depart.

"Mind if I catch a ride into town?" John asked. "Had an auction Saturday and raised train fare back to Iowa."

"Sure," answered the sheriff, "hop in."

John tossed his war-box into the rear of the sheriff's Overland, and was about ready to climb in himself; then he hesitated and stood looking at his shack. He asked the sheriff to wait, went to the cistern, scooped out a bucket of water, and tossed it over the shack's bent-board roof. He stood back and watched the precious liquid run down the eaves, looked inside, grunted satisfaction, and climbed into the car.

After they'd traveled a mile or two down the road, the sheriff's curiosity mastered him:

"John, what was your idea of tossing that bucket of water on the roof?"

"Why, it was just silly curiosity. You see, I put that roof on three years ago, and I just got to wondering whether or not it leaked."

Of the departing vehicle which versified on Montana weather, the most memorable was a high-sided Studebaker wagon whose available space was covered with this:

Montana, there's never a cloud in your sky,
Your roads are all dusty
Your creeks are all dry
Your blizzards will freeze you
Your summers will fry
And your wells are all bitter with white alkali.
THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
Pete Kuhlhoff

Civil War Carbine

Question: I have recently come into possession of a smoke pole of seemingly ancient age. It lay around the former owner's basement for some time and was quite fouled and rusted up. I have managed to get a lot of the accumulation cleaned off and the piece seems to be in pretty good shape.

Now, I would like to know what I've got. There is no name or caliber stamped anywhere on it, except for the letter "H" stamped just back of the leaf sight and on the hammer assembly plate. It has a twenty inch barrel and the bore is slightly smaller than my twenty gauge, with five lands and grooves. The breech block is of the drop type such as you have described in the SHORT STORIES, except it has a cap nipple on it. The leaf sight is about 3/4" long by 1/2" wide with the figures 1 on the sight when it is down and 5 on the bottom and 5 on the upper parts of the sight when it is raised. The trigger is on the piece but the hammer and trigger mechanism is missing. The barrel is round and has Cast Steel stamped on it just ahead of the sight. There is a sliding ring on the left side of the receiver which I am told was for a sling, although the rear sling swivel does not seem to be around.

To get to the point of my story, I would like to know the history, if any, of this arm, such as the make, approximate year made and if it is possible to replace the hammer and lock innards. I would also appreciate any advice as to literature on it.

I have also tried to make a tracing of the breech block which I am enclosing to aid you if possible in helping me.

I know you have written several times in SHORT STORIES of the old time smoke poles, but for the life of me, I cannot find any of the back articles and you can imagine my surprise when you mentioned in this issue just when I had decided to write this request.

Thank you for your patience in reading this far and I hope you can help me. See you every month in SHORT STORIES.

H. H. K., New York

Answer: From your description and drawing I would say that the rifle—or rather carbine—is a Burnside.

These breech-loading carbines were used in the Civil War, 55,567 being manufactured, and 21,819,200 cartridges were purchased by the government.

There is an off-chance that parts may be procured from Francis Bannerman Sons, 501 Broadway, N. Y. C. 12, N. Y.

I believe they also have carbines which they sold for 10 cents apiece the last time I was down there.

Gen. A. E. Burnside's patent 14491 was issued in 1856 on March 25. Several other patents are represented in the gun I believe you own. But it is generally known as the "Burnside Carbine."

Chuck Rifle

Question: Re: the rifles recommended
in your article of Short Stories March 25th issue.

Not being familiar with the present day rifles and equipment I would appreciate your recommendation as to where the .22 Hornet fitted with an 8-power telescope sight may best be purchased?

As New York City is within 35 miles of my home, I thought there would probably be some reliable dealer of whom I could have further information as to just what is best for woodchucks, etc., in a thickly populated section of the country.

Any information or advice will be much appreciated. E. H. S., New York

Answer: The piece you mention was written in the first part of January and at that time it seemed fairly certain that a good supply of sporting guns of most all types would be on the market by now.

Unfortunately, this is not true—as a matter of fact, I haven’t found one retail store in this section that has received a .22 Hornet rifle of any standard make.

Yesterday (June 3rd) one dealer told me that he expected to receive a shipment of rifles in July which would include some in Hornet caliber. But who can tell?

Many of the dealers have back orders that will have to be filled before over-the-counter-sales can be made.

So, I believe your best bet would be to place an order with a local dealer, as I understand that distribution, when the guns are available, will be general throughout the country.

Although many dyed-in-the-wool chuck shooters consider the .22 Hornet as more or less obsolete, I find that the more I shoot this caliber rifle, the better I like it. For my money, the Hornet is just about the most useful little cartridge that has been developed. It is especially good for use in thickly settled counties as the report is mild and the bullet tends to break up on contact with the ground at reasonable distances. As for recoil, there is practically none.

Also, the Hornet cartridge is cheap. A box of 50 sells for well under two bucks.

I own six or seven so-called varmint rifles in various calibers, both standard and wildcat, yet most of the time, I find myself using a little Hornet single shot that I bought several years before the war.

The Savage Model 23-D Hornet is a good gun for the money. Of course, the Winchester Model 70 in this caliber is better, but costs almost twice as much.

I believe a person gets his money’s worth no matter what commercial gun he buys today. It all depends on what the pocketbook will stand.

A mighty fine combination for chuck shooting is the Winchester Model 70 .22 Hornet with the Lyman Junior Target spot scope sight in 6 or 8 power.

Remodeling Made Easy

I got a couple of chuckles and a good belly laugh out of the following, perhaps you will too!

Dear Mr. Kuhlhoff:

Enclosed is an item that may prove interesting or amusing to you.

Having worked at and around gunsmithing a bit, naturally my brother wrote to me in regards to a Mauser Model ’98 he acquired. I gave him the usual "dope" on changing it to a sporter and converting it for hunting use. Just the usual stuff—stock, turned-down bolt, sights and possibly a different caliber barrel. Of course, this spells money in anyone’s language. That’s the “rub.” Later, I advised peddling the thing, saving the money till a more propitious time when firearms prices are near normal and investing the money with a few more dollars and getting an American-made weapon. However, seems I’ve wandered from the subject...

I was never so mortified in my life—He shot at me with a plain old "as issued" rifle!

So many of the rifles are being brought back, I thought it might be a timely subject for one of your forthcoming articles, (which incidentally, are one of the main selling points of S.S.); to say nothing of your covers and cartoons.

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granted by the author of the letter. However, if, in your busy day you find time for a short note to my brother (AI) I’m sure he’d be flattered and happy to hear from you.

Thanks for writing your very much appreciated and widely read column.

D. W. G., Illinois

Dear David and Beverly:

I will start with David’s reply to my request for assistance in locating 2 stocks for the Mauser ’98.

Now, my plump friend, I read your letter carefully, and here’s what I did: I studied paragraph 1 carefully, took your advice, removed the crumby issue stock, and threw it in the furnace.

After reading paragraph 2, I removed the barrel, fitted it with a nice, round handle, and made a stove poker out of it—which I have no use for.

After Paragraph 3, I took the sights, and, finding no practical use for them, threw them away.

Acting on recommendations in paragraph 4, I removed the bolt, which as you pointed out, stuck out at an awkward angle. This piece I sawed in two, making an extra head for my ball-peen hammer (two heads are better than one.)

When I sawed the bolt off, the lock mechanism inadvertently fell into a bucket of acid, which I keep around for disciplinary purposes in the proper rearing of honorable Number One son, and instantly dissolved.

I then found myself in possession of two short, and one long screws, none of which appear sufficiently lethal to warrant carrying them on a deer hunt. Nevertheless, according to your learned and august epistle, I now have the makings (with a few additions) of a very fine rifle, which should be adequately powerful to subdue the most infuriated moose at reasonable ranges—up to a mile and a quarter. I have scoured the market (a black one, needing cleaning very badly) for the components required to convert the model ’98 in addition to the parts now on hand. I find that, with AAA 3 priorities, special import arrangements (to be handled by the State Department), a small corps of highly skilled mechanics, and a not unreasonable outlay of approximately $1185.32, I can complete this conversion,
and come up with a Mauser Model '98, which on a machine rest, will give me the groupings originally specified for this piece. I am sending to the Krupp and Mauser people a copy of this letter, along with your original recommendations.

In the meantime, I am making inquiries of the War Department, and forwarding above information, in order to scotch the incredible rumor that a number of Allied soldiers were killed by fire from this impossible rifle, with which the German Army was equipped. You and I, my dear fusillier, know that this contention of the War Department is incredible. It must certainly be propaganda.

Now, seriously, what do I want to do all the things you suggest for? All I want is a rifle of fairly tough calibre which will kill a large hunk of game, if I ever shoot one. I have never yet heard a deer complain because the rifle that killed him was not equipped with mother-of-pearl ram-rods, dual-carburetion, gold plated knee-action trigger guards, and the latest bell-mouthed, dehydrated, collapsible Scratchini barrel. All I want to do is kill 'em; not dazzle 'em to death. The deer in this country are a rugged and unsophisticated lot; to them, luxury is practically unknown.

Now, can you help me buy a decent finished stock at a reasonable figure—less than $25.00? Just call me Huckleberry Finn, if you like; if I can't make up a rifle at a reasonable price, I'll go back to snaring animals with a loop of raw-hide. So far as the slickers are concerned, I'm a member of the great unwashed.

Don't get sore, fatso . . . I'm just a killer at heart, and not too interested in the refinements of the methods employed.

Have some real news to offer now: I will be discharged about the end of April and expect to be on my way home about May 1. We will probably come through Chicago.

We are all well here, and anticipating, with some pleasure, our return to Ohio. Traveling is not going to be too easy with the cat and baby, but we will make it.

Guess that's about the works for now. You have my permission to reprint or offer for sale any parts of this letter which you think will be of value to a benighted public.

Regards.

"Al"
The Story Tellers' Circle

The Side-Show World

JUST as we do, author Theodore Roscoe thinks there are lots of ideas hanging around at a circus. In this little world all-of-its-own all the human emotions, good and bad, are magnified.

The results—well, murder is just one of them!

Says Mr. Roscoe:

"The idea behind my yarn, 'Side-Show Shadow,' came to me pretty much on locale—or, rather, three locales. The first was a circus lot (Rochester, N. Y.) where, a number of years back, I spent a day hanging around the freak tent in search of a news story. The tattooed lady, whom I recall as Miss Pictures, handed me a fiction-story plot on a platter. She told me the midget was worried because he was ------. The word begins with 'G.' To fill it in would mean giving away the answer to 'Side-Show Shadow!' But that's where the story began.

"Some of the carnival background was picked up on the old boardwalk at Long Beach, Long Island, where the grifters used to circulate, and perhaps still do. They were sharp boys. One, who operated a shooting gallery, told me he was always scared that sometime somebody would knock him off with one of the gallery .22's. The germ of another story idea.

"The carny in 'Side-Show Shadow' is a fairly faithful copy of one I saw on the outskirts of a small Virginia town not long ago. It was a tough outfit, beat up and worn out. 'Mr. Boss' was on the lot, along with 'Sicily' and 'Alberta.' It reminded me of the freak show plot I'd put away on the shelf, and the yarn just knitted itself together—half truth, half imagination. I hope the readers won't think I dropped a stitch on the outcome."

Theodore Roscoe

"Were, or Wasn't?"

No lesser authority than Seabury Quinn undertakes to deliver a few words on whether "were-creatures" is or ain't.

Confides the author of "Woman into Leopard":

"In his work on werewolves Montague
Summers makes the statement that all over Africa wizards and witches can and do assume bestial form at will, but as the Rev. Dr. Summers has a regrettable tendency to swallow old wives’ tales uncritically, I doubt that we could safely call his statement fact. In his narrative of his Expedition to the Zambezi Livingstone says that certain witches are believed to have the power of shape-shifting. Now we’re on firmer ground.

“The payoff, however, is a case reported by William Seabrook from French West Africa in which the daughter of a native king was framed as a werewhena in much the same manner as the unfortunate girl in my story was framed as a werelopardess. This is no fiction, no second-hand narrative reported on hearsay, but the calm, objective, firsthand report by a trained observer of what he saw himself.

“Accordingly, while the rather lurid incidents of my story may seem better fitted to a magazine of weird fiction than to SHORT STORIES, I can say on the authority of a recognized and wholly reliable reporter that there are such things!”

Seabury Quinn

West Our Greatest Tradition

“Strictly speaking, ‘The Third Pale Stranger’ had no foundation in fact. Speaking not so strictly, it did have. Old lawmen, who gave the best of their lives to enforcing law, keeping order; risking their lives over and over again; always on call, day or night, year in and year out; with pay never too good; then to be let out because of age, with meagre savings or none at all—it is inevitable, and it is tragic—that was the idea upon which the story was built. To me, the old sheriff was more important than the young one.

“My first published story came out in SHORT STORIES close to forty years ago. That, too, had a Western setting. Through the years most of my fiction has been in this field. The West is our greatest tradition, and, I think, one of our finest, certainly our boldest. There was, and is, no end to the ‘legitimate’ plots, just as there was, and is, no end to characters—good, bad, strong, picturesque—to figure in those plots. So I keep writing Westerns.”

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THE SHOOTER’S CORNER

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