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Short Stories

November 25th

25c

A man in a fur parka and red tunic is climbing a snowy mountain slope. He is holding a large net. In the background, a train is visible on a track. The scene is set in a snowy, mountainous area.

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by

JAMES B. HENDRYX

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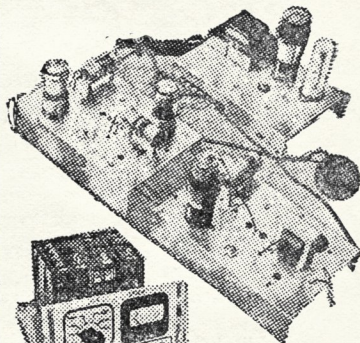
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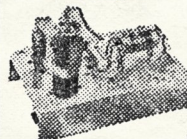
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November 25th, 1946

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of
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SHORT STORIES readers, we are sure, enjoy a good adventure story and no less because it happens to be true. One of the best has been circulating lately, and you'll have to take our word for its truthfulness—or travel up to the mighty Fraser River in British Columbia to see for yourself.

There's your scene: a big, rough, dangerous, rock-sided river with a vicious punch born of 140 miles of swirling water. Your hero? The sockeye salmon. Yes, a fish; but what a fish! Powerful, lightning fast, with a warrior's heart and a homing instinct which would shame a carrier pigeon, he's born up in the headwaters of some creek or stream. Instinct drives him adventuring, sends him churning seaward. And then, four years later when he's in his prime, nature brings him home to spawn and to die.

Home to a sockeye salmon, no less than to a human, is the place where he was born. The same creek or stream or pool. To get there the salmon will fight all odds and withstand any agony.

Fraser River salmon, in particular, had a grueling, near impossible task. For they faced Hell's Gate, a fish Armageddon and Purgatory rolled into one. Hell's Gate-on-the-Fraser came about when the Canadian National Railroad, driving to the Coast, exploded a dynamite charge in the wrong place and tumbled an entire granite mountainside into half the river's width. This partially

damned the already rip-roaring Fraser, turning it into a churning, boiling death-trap in freshet season.

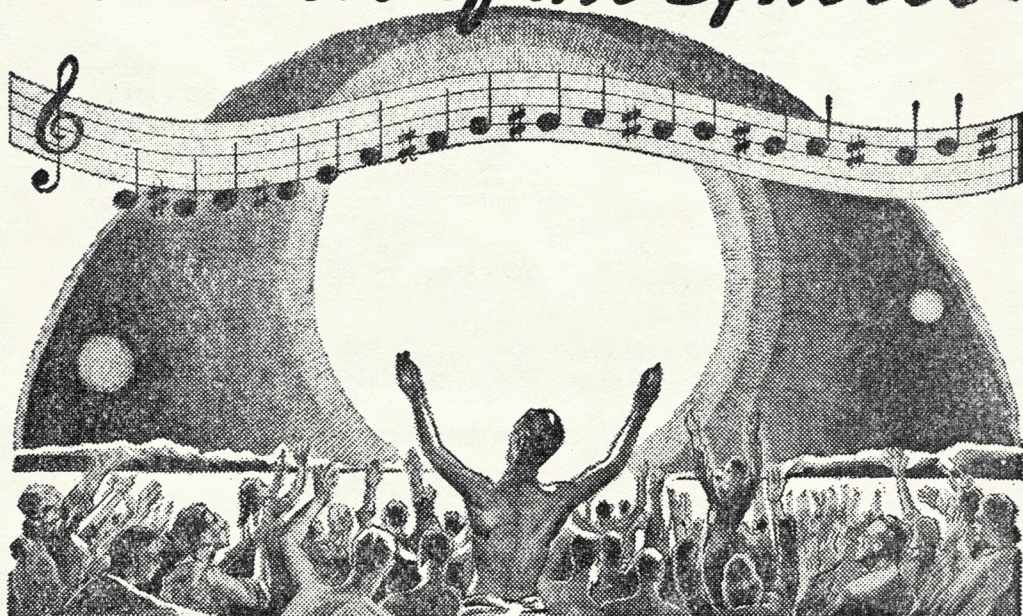
It was virtually impossible for any living creature to go against that cascading waterfall, but the sockeye salmon and his mate knew only one direction in the homeward journey. They would fight their way from pool to pool, wiggle and thresh upward and onward, finally leaping frantically against the granite, torrent-sheathed steps of the Gate until their strength failed them.

Only an extremely lucky and powerful fish ever made the climb to the quieter reaches above successfully. The rest milled around in the eddies below the Gate, a veritable silver-red dance of death. And because these fish were dying without first spawning, the salmon run four years later would be smaller, and so on progressively.

By 1942 salmon became a critical war item. And shortly afterward the sockeye salmon's concern became a war project. The job was as tough as the river to be conquered. There were various hair-raising accidents; once a 30-ton steam shovel slide off a crumbling shoulder into the Fraser. The operator went over with his machine, but luckily leaned out of his cab far enough at the last minute to grab a desperately thrown rope from the shore. He became the first human to emerge from Hell's Gate alive—a fact that probably equally startled humans and salmon alike!

This last spring the project, consisting of building elaborate fishways and an inclined tunnel, was finished. Already the payoff seems insured. Upstream backwaters and pools are getting that overcrowded look of the times again, and the local salmon industry is expecting its biggest years ahead. The fish aren't talking, but people who know claim that the Fraser River sockeye salmon is once again a sleek and satisfied critter.

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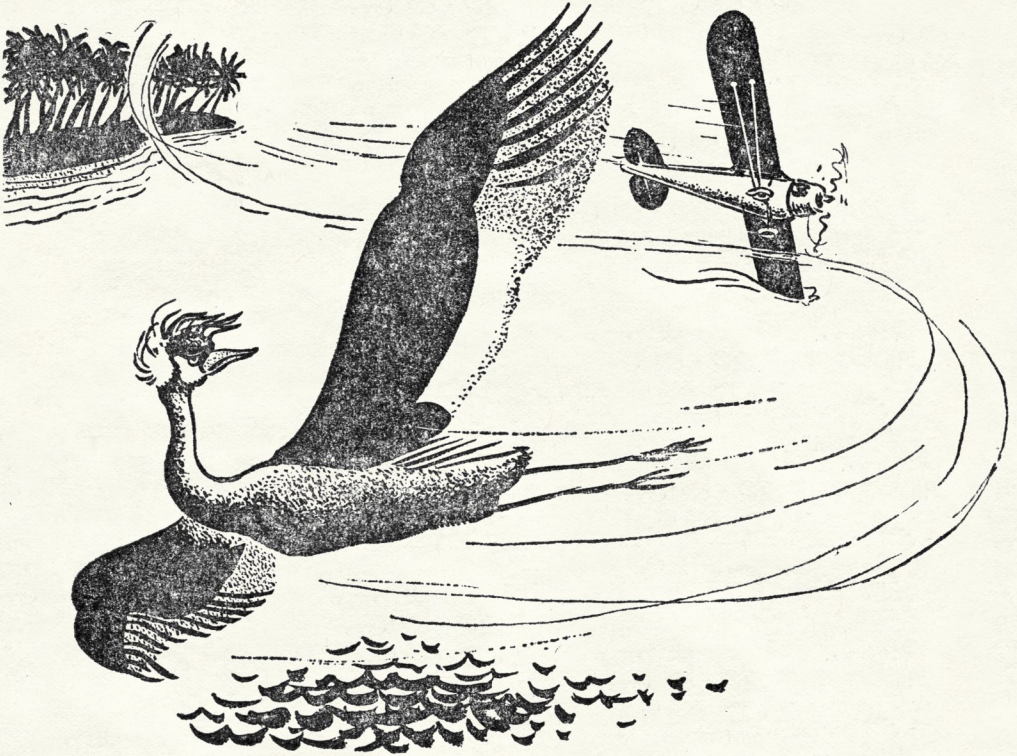
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SERVICE FOR KAKA AND KAKAPO

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY



I

FLYING Piper Cub grasshoppers down in New Zealand had never appealed to Lieutenant "Brolly" Goodenough as being a top-hole manner in which to fight a war. He had won that "Brolly" handle from the English, by piloting Spitfires in the Battle of London, so this thing of piloting 65-hp. Cubs was terrible stuff for him. But Uncle Sam and the Anzacs needed good pilots for small ships on the observation and liaison work which was going to be necessary if the Jap was to be pushed northward from the top approaches to the Down Under. And the Jap was, too, too close.

However, as Brolly saw it, even Cubs and

an out-of-this-world hideout in the heart of New Zealand's great North Island wasn't too bad just so long as a feller had a chance to make his own fun. Brolly Goodenough was a boy for fun. But the post C.O., that great, fat Colonel Kaka Kelly, didn't like Brolly's brand of fun. Neither did the post adjutant, that also-fat-and-forty-plus Major Wade, called Kakapo by the men of the cramped command. Together, the two top men had ganged up in an honest full-time effort to see to it that Brolly Goodenough and ilk didn't get away with any off-schedule fun.

High ranking among the Brolly-brand ilk was one Tex Cooper, close pal of the Goodenough and also a very good and willing boy in the air. Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade

liked him just slightly less than they hated Brolly. All told, there was a great weight of bad feeling standing between Headquarters and the boys who flew the not-too-hot air work. Hence, the boys who flew were very badly cheesed off. They had nothing to lose. So they could take a chance.

When the big party of Army Engineer Corps came in and set up shop on the western edge of the flying post—bringing in trucks, tractors, graders, bulldozers, etc.—things began to look up. Here were new guys, new types of mechanical equipment, plus new jobs of work to be watched. The engineers were going to scratch out a few emergency landing strips over near the east shore of great Lake Taupo. The personnel and equipment were to remain based right there on the post. The end hangar had been turned over to them for a garage; and half of the machine shop, too. And insofar as the ranking Engineer Corps man was only a lieutenant-colonel, this detachment would really be under Colonel Kaka Kelly's direct command. Let there be no doubt about that, for right away, Adjutant Kakapo Wade began getting in the hair of all those hard-bitten pushers of mountains.

"This," Brolly Goodenough told his barracks mates, "is going to add up to something then go 'Bang!'," right in old Kaka's face. These rambling wrecks from Engineers Corps won't just drill in close formation and like it. They'll pile up one devil of a pile of something—for Kaka and Kakapo—then push it over. Maybe we can help 'em. I like the engineers. I'd like to drive a dozer."

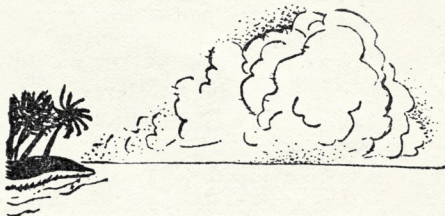
SO, like Brolly, the flying men fell in love with the big Engineers Corps' equipment; and the engineers, from the lieutenant-colonel in charge down to the humblest

shovel, fell hard for the air thing. They hadn't worked on or near flying fields before, so the Cub grasshoppers looked like flying forts to them. Needless to say, it was no time at all before guys like Brolly Goodenough and Tex Cooper were landing their Cubs out there on the pumice plateau and giving the engineers short hops out over and along the shores of Lake Taupo. And long before the second week had passed, some of the dozer and tractor boys could handle a plane pretty well. By the same token, some characters of the Air Force, such as Brolly and Tex Cooper, could cat a dozer with the best of them. And, strange to say, the flyers avowed that the ground-pushing was a lot more fun than was air work.

Now Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade were both ancient, down-from-that-other-war flyers who really did little aviating. In order to qualify for flying pay, they, of course, had to go into the air for a few hours each month. They did that—the last two days of the month—and that was all. So they didn't know what was going on away over there where certain pilots were bulldozing airstrips, while certain Army Engineers Corps men were learning to fly. And it's likely that nothing would have happened to put them wise were it not for the fact that happenstance, or a bum break, caused Brolly Goodenough and Tex Cooper to shoot the works. And, of course, when that pair went out of their way to meet up with happenstance or Mr. Bum Break, they really went whole-hog, never messing with the thing.

It happened on a day when both Brolly Goodenough's and Tex's training planes were marked out of commission and sent to the shop for engine change. And Operations told them, "Sorry, boys, but we can't assign other ships to you. You know as well as we

***New Zealand Seemed a Heck of
a Place to Fight Out the War;
and with Some of Those Flying
Boys So Good That Even the
Cranes in the Lagoon—No Mean
Wing Performers Themselves—
Stood One-Legged to Watch the
U. S. Airforce in Action***



do that this post is short on air equipment. Guess you two'll just have to sit it out while Engine Shop overhauls your clockworks."

"But you can't do this to me, Major Seater," Brolly told Operations' engineering officer, said Seater being the officer in charge of all mechanical work in both hangars and shops. "After all, as you know, I'm a high-powered flight leader. Take a look in the book—see if I'm not. You know me, Major: Lieutenant, first-class Goodenough, famed the world around, in two or three different air forces, and highly beloved by Colonel Kelly and Adjutant Wade, said gentlemen being known to the trade as Kaka and Kakapo, respectively. Might I suggest that you call the commanding officer's office and acquaint his highness of my request—or demand?"

"You might if you're crazy enough," Major Seater laughed. "But it's no soap, Goodenough. You and Cooper are on the ground, for the time being; and you should be danged thankful that it's a lack of engines—and not a Headquarters order—that has clipped your brave wings. You two boys do have brave wings, don't you?"

"Sir," Brolly Goodenough answered, "when we turn loose and kick 'em around, even the pukeko cranes quit the lagoon, stand off, and watch us fly. And you know that the pukeko does just about the nicest bit of air work seen down here where hardly any birds know how to fly—like the kiwi, the kakapo, not to mention the penguin."

"And you and me," Tex Cooper added.

"Too sad, and too bad," Major Seater agreed. "But you men leave the pukeko cranes alone, and that's an order!"

"Roger!" Brolly agreed. And he knew that it was an order, a standing order. Cranes, any type of the big long-legged, swell-flying rails, had been the cause of too many flyers' downfall, through the years, and all the way from Florida to the Down Under. No hot young pilot can overlook a crane's aerial combat abilities; for the crane is the one feathered bird who will stay and put on a contest with the non-feathered human bird. Of course, combat isn't exactly the crane's idea in sticking around. But the lagoon from which the human bird flushes him is his home. So, when flushed, he'll just make a quick zoom, and fly a quick turn, then dive back toward the home waters

again. And a good young pilot—full of hot blood and aerial appreciation—will dive and zoom with and after Mr. Crane. And after several dives and turns and zooms, chances are the exuberant human will tip a wing—hitting the lagoon's surface ever so lightly—but demolishing one airplane ever so completely. Oh, it has happened time and time again.

BROLLY GOODENOUGH had lost one Cub combatting a handsome, fine-flying pukeko crane over on the west shore of Taupo Lake. Then both Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade took turns bawling out the entire command for such action, warning all and sundry what would happen if any other pilot lost a combat—and a plane—to a crane on, over, or near Taupo. Well, it was a fair warning. The wild ones had sure been told. So Tex Cooper, the very next day, went way over to an inlet lagoon on Hawke Bay—and there lost another Cub to another pukeko crane that refused to be driven away from its own watery stronghold. Good Lord! Kaka and Kakapo almost took the post apart, and Tex Cooper put in two weeks on the ground, plus a damage-to-government-property fine. And both Brolly and Tex were chastened. They even told their mates that there should be a strict law against pukeko cranes. Cranes, they said, were things which tempted poor pilots. Cranes were things of the devil—but still a hell of a lot of nice clean fun.

Cranes, however, were far from the thoughts of either Brolly or Tex. They had learned their lesson. Honest air work was their only intent. True enough, as Brolly had argued, he was rated as a flight leader. Sort of an instructor. So he should be on the wing as much as possible. Then again, both he and Tex should be over there near Taupo, where the engineers were laboring. How were they to know that said engineers would be building that airstrip properly without their aid? What's more, some of their mates—guys like Bill Greer, Jack Mann and Outside-spin Murphy—would be driving those dozers and graders, and maybe even operating the drag-shovel on the big ditch-filling job. Oh, it was all wrong, all wrong!

From Operations and the utter failure therein, Brolly and Tex went down through

the hangars to see what they could see. Maybe they could locate a ship that had been made ready for flight during the last hour or so. And sure enough, down in Final Assembly hangar they came upon a brand-new Cub which, only that morning, had been taken from its shipping crate. Now it was fully assembled; and Staff Sergeant Lear, noncom in charge of the work, had just called a strong-back crew to take it out and give the engine a warming test on the ready apron. And those little units didn't call for much testing.

"Ah, just what the doctor ordered!" Brolly Goodenough enthused, reaching into a hip pocket and coming up with helmet and goggles. "Sergeant Lear, we'll take this little baby off your hands."

"Sez who, Lieutenant?" Staff Sergeant Lear mumbled, watching his crew pick up the light labor and start apron-ward with the little Cub. "This is a extra-special job. Students no can fly um. She's assigned to Headquarters hangar. Colonel Kelly gets it. It's a long time now that the Old Man hasn't had a private bus. Remember?"

Both Brolly and Tex were in a position to remember that. Truth was, both Brolly and Tex had done their part in wrecking the commanding officer's previous special Cub, a beautiful all-silver ship in which the fat pair used to do their monthly hops for flying pay. But that was water over the dam—or an all-silver ship that hadn't quite got over the high wire fence—and a happening all but forgotten. So this nice new job was to be sent down to sedate Headquarters hangar and there held in reserve for Kaka and Kakapo?

"But just a shake, Sergeant," Brolly said, being a boy who didn't give up without some kind of a fight. "This new job has to be flight tested, you know. . . . Lieutenant Cooper and I were sent down by Major Seater. . . . Just came from his office now."

"Let me have the flight order, Lieutenant," Staff Sergeant Lear said, still listless, but shoving out his hand for the Operations Office slip which should show that these two pilots had been assigned to fly the ship. Lear had to have such a written order.

Brolly glanced up and down the long apron. The big field seemed very dead. All other ships were in the air. Hundreds of mechanics were sleeping on dozens of long

workbenches. Scores of high noncoms were over in quarters goldbricking. Drove of non-flying officers were holed up and hiding out in lots of snug nooks. Really, as Brolly could see, nobody much was paying attention.

"Sergeant Lear," he said, "how would you like to take your hangar gang and go down to the PX for a coke and a smoke?"

"We could stand it," Lear agreed. "Yes, sir, Lieutenant Goodenough, we're run ragged here. Worked to death. Thanks for the five bucks. I'll keep the change. You keep your eye on this new Cub for me, and if anybody comes up from Operations with the official flight slip, you can tell him that she's ready to go—fuel and oil okay; and that she has Engineering Office's blessing for flight. . . . Be seeing you, and thanks again. We'll never forget what you did for us when we were thirsty—and when you were hungry for flight."

WHEN Staff Sergeant Lear and his eager-beaver Final Assembly crew disappeared between hangars, on their way over to the PX and refreshments, Lieutenant Brolly Goodenough climbed into the new Cub's front seat, said, "We'll test this ship, my good man," to Tex Cooper, then added, "Switch off! . . . Give it a throw . . . and you may climb aboard. . . . Switch on! Ah, she hits nice. Come on, get aboard. . . . What the heck are you waiting for—for somebody to come a-running down the line and tell us to get out of this bus? Man-oh-man, one must grasp opportunity by the short hairs, then get gone while the going is good."

While the new Cub taxied out to the head end of the east-west take-off strip, Tex Cooper leaned forward and talking above the feeble roar of 65 hp., asked, "I suppose you know this is grand larceny, Mr. Goodenough? And I suppose you know that I, being a mere student flyer, had no choice other than to climb aboard when you, a flight leader, gave the order? And, furthermore, I suppose that——"

"How would you like to suppose a punch in the nose, Tex?" Brolly spoke over his right shoulder, without glancing backward. "This little hop is strictly in order. Just a routine test flight." He swung the little ship around at the head of the runway, nosing into the light west wind, then said, "And

there's the green flash. Isn't that official? Isn't the Tower telling us to get under way? Have I got any right to sit out here on the strip and block traffic? Look behind you. See those two jobs coming in for landings? Sure they're coming. And we're going. Hold everything!"

Brolly, quitting the ground, was perfectly correct, for there were two Cubs coming up from the east. And not far behind those two, there were other ships. Truth was, the first morning flight period was ending; and those scattered ships were returning for fuel, service and change of students. Within a few minutes, all those hundreds of men and scores of noncoms and officers would quit their goldbricking, emerge from their many hideouts, and the hangar line would be a busy hive again.

Well, that should make it a nice set-up for the two test pilots, this in the event that their test hop took them over to where the engineers were putting in that airstrip on the shore of Taupo. And sure enough, strange to say, Test Pilot Brolly Goodenough carried on into the light west wind until he had an altitude of 5,000 on his altimeter, the big lake directly out front, and the great spread of mechanical activities right below. Then he kicked it into a tight spin and let 'er unravel groundward. The Army Engineers Corps, guessing that the master hand was overhead, stopped all work and gazed upward. Yes, sir, this would be that hotshot guy—the one they had learned to call Brolly. And could he put 'em in a spin, take hands and feet off, an' let 'em run! He could, and he did. And when Brolly put hands and feet back on those controls, then lifted the nose, his wheels were whishing through the high beech trees on Taupo's low shore; and when those same wheels kissed ground and rolled to a short stop, it was between two bulldozers and a water-tank truck—and not more than a hundred feet from any one of the three vehicles.

THERE were three other Cubs playing around there when Brolly landed. Pilot Ned Keets was driving a grader, and Max Hill was whipping a cat over on the east shoulder of the strip where the rank bracken cropped out of the gray pumice. But now these two said they'd have to be getting back to the post. Soon, the new Cub, Brolly

and Tex were the only pieces of air equipment left. The engineers said that it had been a big morning, plenty of hops put out by the airmen. What was more, the groundshovers were free to enjoy it. It seemed their lieutenant-colonel and his four officers—a major, a captain and two lieutenants—had gone up the lake for the day. That left crusty old Master Sergeant White and his half-dozen lesser noncoms in charge of the detail. Old White was a swell man to have in charge. Already he had made liaison with the nearest Maori natives, and whatever it was they were drinking, so was old White. So he had just crawled into a canvas hole and pulled the hole in after him, leaving the bossing to a few buck sergeants and three corporals. The buck sergeants and corporals had also, to a limited extent, partaken of potent firewater; so a good time was being had by all. Meantime, automatically, the mighty labors on the new airstrip went right along; and the bracken scrub and tussock grass gave way before the blades of progress. And a far poorer pilot than either Brolly Goodenough or Tex Cooper might have landed on that partly completed strip without too much trouble.

Fact was, a few of the hottest would-be pilots among the engineers put that argument up to Brolly and Tex as soon as the two had stepped down from the trim new Cub.

"How'y, Brolly-boy," Sergeant Longstreet, Master Sergeant White's next in command, drawled in greeting, coming alongside to put both hands on the monoplane wing—which was 6 feet 8 inches from the ground. What's more, King Size Longstreet sorta stooped to avoid hitting his fatigue hat's crown against that leading edge. He was some piece of man. "Been wonderin' where at y'all was," the lofty one went on. "Been a-hopin' maybe y'all'd get over here an' turn a boy loose like y'all said maybe y'all would. She'd be a right nice day for that, Brolly-boy. Y'all got the time?"

Brolly Goodenough took a good look at the long, well-roughed-out airstrip, such as it was, and, as before said, it wasn't too bad. That is to say, the work was far enough advanced to show just where said airstrip would be when the job was complete.

"Let's see," Brolly speculated—"you have more than an hour on the controls, eh,

Big Boy? I gave you some time, and Tex here did, too. . . . And you say some of the other boys did, eh?"

"Shucks, Brolly-boy, Ah've got me well nigh two hours on them levers," King-Size drawled. "Ah could bulldoze hell outa a cloudbank right now."

"Guess you could," Brolly admitted, and his eyes roved over to where Sergeant Heller—another would-be pilot—was stepping down from a swell bulldozer. "By the way, Big Boy," he went on, "is that dozer that the sergeant is quitting ready for a little more work?"

"Shore, Brolly-boy," King-Size Longstreet said. "You jus' climb aboard an' grade off that east shoulder. She's all yourn, flyin' man."

"Well, look, Big Boy," Brolly then decided, being in a great hurry, "we haven't got too much time. Got to get back to the post with this new plane. Can't take you up for a hop myself, but I'll tell you what to do—you just take this bus and fly a few turns of the strip. Hell's bells, anybody can fly one of these office fans. . . . Just keep the power on her. . . . Don't let your nose get too high on the turns. . . . Don't get too far out into the rough country. . . . Go ahead, climb aboard."

WHILE Sergeant Longstreet was bending his mighty length of man into the somewhat cramped front seat, a second giant bulldozer came up the grade—from down in the drainage ditch on the lake side—and pulled up to a stop. Sergeant Rance shut off its big roaring engine and jumped down. Rance, too, had swapped a lot of dozer time for flying hours.

"Hey, King-Size! Hold everything," he yelled. "Look, airmen. How's about me riding along with the sergeant? . . . Maybe one of you boys'd like to cat my bull for a spell, eh?"

"That's jake with us, Sergeant," Brolly agreed. "Sure, fit yourself in behind the long guy. Tex here can use your dozer. He's got the idea he can run me off the strip. Fat chance!"

Sergeant Rance pulled up, halfway aboard, then turned to a group of his fellow engineers. "How 'bout it?" he asked.

"What d'ya mean—how 'bout what?" a corporal asked.

"Where's the top kick—Sarg White?" Rance asked.

The corporal hooked a thumb in the general direction of a group of wall tents that were being used for noon mess, storage, field-office work, and such. "He's in the drafting tent, sleeping it off," the corporal said. "But what the hell, Sarg! If these guys wanna do a dozer combat, ol' Sarge White won't put the chill on 'em."

"Not if he was sober," Rance agreed. "But if they wake him up with the noise, they'll be hell to pay, an' I ain't kiddin'."

"Hey, some o' you Johns go down the line and get them two tank trucks an' that roller off the far end of the strip. Let these flyin' fellers go down there and settle their bet. . . . Ya'll go down there, eh, Lieutenant, and keep the noise away from Sarg White's tent? . . . Ya know how it is—they dozer blades clashin' sound like two skeletons wrasslin' on a tin roof when a man's got a head, like the old boy has today. . . . Hey, listen, King-Size. If you take 'er off and fly the first few turns, I get to land 'er, eh?"

"Huh?" Sergeant King-Size Longstreet huh-ed. "If y'all er big enough and strong enough to take these controls 'way from my hands and feet, y'all git to fly her. Otherwise, Bub—nuh-uh. She's ma hop. She's ma day to howl. . . . Hey, y'all boys down thar—shake it an' get them pieces o' quipment outa ma way!"

"Hey, you men," Brolly Goodenough warned—while Tex Cooper was climbing aboard Rance's bulldozer—"don't do any fighting for the controls until you have at least four or five hundred feet of altitude. We don't want any accidents. This ship belongs to the post C.O. It's his special joy job. And the C.O.'s a darling."

WHEN the strip-making equipment had been cleared from the roughed-out clearway, Pilot King-Size Longstreet began easing power to his engine. The handling of power came natural enough to him, for he was a man with pre-Pearl Harbor Army Engineers Corps years to his credit, and such men live, eat, drink and sleep motive power.

However, when the Cub got under way, Brolly Goodenough started for the bulldozer assigned to him—keeping his gaze diverted from the Cub—but said, "I can't watch that, Tex,"—as he hurried past—"but

if you can, well, just let me know when they get into the air."

Tex Cooper, now with his own dozer engine roaring, had time to watch, and he did. "Oh-o! Oh-o!" he wailed. "They're off. . . . Oh-o! They're back. . . . They're off again! They're back again! Oh-o! They're. . . they're. . . Oh, by hell, oh, they're in the air!"

A mighty cheer went up from the watching hundreds of engineers. The Cub was off the far end of the clearway, and it had used every foot of the grubbed out, leveled space. But just as Brolly Goodenough chanced one eye—and took a sort of a sneaking peek—the nose was high, as though King-Size had a thousand or two horsepower for the climb; and the tail dragged low, with the whole works just mushing ahead—like a pup dragging its butt across the living-room carpet.

"Wow!" Brolly yipped, "I can't look."

"Aw, they're all right," Tex said. "You should have seen the getaway. . . . Man-oh-man, that I should ever live to see a second like it! I wouldn't kid you, Brolly—they didn't take it off, King-Size just shoved his feet through the floorboards and pushed the ground away. . . . You thought that was an earthquake, eh?"

AT THE far end of the strip, Pilot King-Size managed to hove through a slight left turn; and then the new Cub was out over the lake—with the still-watching Tex Cooper doing some more of his—"Oh-o! They're up, they're down!" Finally, he said, "Well, he's got it headed right now, but I'll bet anybody dollars against doughnuts that that's a fish hanging to the tail wheel."

Going down-strip, the two Air Force-handled bulldozers ran side by side for a while, with their cat tracks glistening in the sharp sunlight, a goodly cloud of kicked dust waving hotly in their wake, and all the noise of a junk yard filling the piece of world wherein they moved. "I don't want anything to happen to that Cub," Brolly sang across to Tex. "You know how it is, Character; we can't afford to get in Dutch with Kaka and his heel—not with the Fourth of July layoff coming up. I understand the troops draw a full three-day leave. . . . Oh-o! Wow, see that turn he's flying! Oh, by hell, oh, m'gosh, making it flat as a

hat, and skidding! Hey, Character, did you teach King-Size to fly 'em that way?"

"Me—teach that longhorn!" Tex Cooper protested. "I was never in the air with him. He's your boy. . . . Sure, I heard him say that I had given him some DC, but he musta meant two other guys. . . .

"But get your mind off that ship, you poor unfortunate stiff, you. . . . Come on, here we are, so let's see you shove me hell'n'gone into the brush, like you bragged you would. . . . I'm coming at ya!"

Bulldozer jousting, as developed by the Seabees and Army Engineer Corps, has become a fine art. Of course, due to the very obvious objections to such doings, it is strictly prohibited in both branches. A driver can draw a fine for it, plus a bust for a noncom and weeks on end at K. P. and garbage detail for the lower ranks. It's every bit as exciting and many times more dangerous than was similar action when undertaken by tin-clad knights on iron-coated steeds; and even the 20th-century brand of dozer-jousting noise exceeds by far the clatter and clamor of yesteryear's lists. It's really something, costly too, and none but an Uncle Sam could afford to pay the bill. Of course, if the officers in charge happen to be away—far up Lake Taupo—you can say that that big blade was twisted or cracked because you tied into too-heavy a rock, or that leverage-carriage casting got sprung when a boulder rolled down the cut and clipped your dozer before you had time to get it out from under—and did you make tracks getting yourself off that hard seat and out of the way! You like to've got crushed to death! *Yes, sir, Colonel, she was one close call.*

So Brolly and Tex didn't start pushing dirt for Army Engineer Corps—not that those boys with the dirty necks had ever expected they would. Instead, both airmen squared off—way down near the north end of the long clearing—dropped their dozer blades close to the ground, took a manly grip on two handfuls of levers, yelled the Comanche yell, then charged. There was a crash of steel on steel, the whirr of track-blocks catting on pumice shale, the roar of abused, laboring engines, and the testy, vicious drum-fire of tin-panning exhaust blasts. For a full four or five minutes, both dozers held their own; and neither

driver tried—or dared—to raise his blade. Neither gained, neither gave. Each, now and again, voluntarily drew back a yard or two, then humped ahead again under full throttle. And the watching dirty necks cheered—cheered outside guys who could afford to take a chance and have some fun. After all, if any damage was done, these two airmen would be hard to find.

The big idea of dozer joust was the same as good football. Hit and lift. Get that blade under the other bull—anywhere under it—then give it the works! Throw all those levers. Drive ahead. Elevate the blade. Then, when the other dozer begins to give way, turn your bull either right or left, as the best case presents itself, and unload that other pile of clanking junk. Oh, it could be done, 'cause it had been done; so what's holding them up now!

Ability, maybe, was holding 'em up. Both Brolly and Tex were game guys; and such work, like good flying, called for guys with guts. What's more, a man had to be right, from the first charge, and every foot of the way thereafter, or, by gosh, he could be dead. And that, too, had happened on more than one Seabee and Army Engineers Corps job. Brolly and Tex realized that dozer jousting was big-league stuff. And it was wise to play the thing so's a man would be all in one piece and alive and arguing when it was all over, win or lose.

Had that win-or-lose angle depended wholly upon the jousting abilities of Brolly and Tex the end might have been not yet, but far more satisfactory than the sudden load delivered by Fate. And Fate came in the form of the new Cub, plus the plans of King-Size Longstreet and his rear-seat flying mate. It seems King-Size had plans to try landings. And, strange to say, neither Brolly or Tex thought of that.

So there they were, two bulldozers—blades low and a-gruntin' and a-growlin' like charging bulls—in the middle of the landing-strip clearing; and one airplane, in the hands of a guy who knew just so much about air, coming down for a first-solo landing. To say that the situation was fraught with danger is to understate to the point of foolishness.

Well, anyway, some of the watching engineers—dividing their attention between their mates in the sky and their visitors on

the strip—saw what was likely to happen, so began yelling and running and pointing, and, also, getting their own valuable G. I. carcasses as far as possible from the likely point of three-way collision. And when it came, it was a beaut!

Neither Brolly nor Tex had heard the yelling above the clank and roar of their mechanical chargers, nor had they time to notice and evaluate the hand-waving and pointing. And the only lucky break standing in their favor accrued from the fact that they were at the far north end of the clearing when King-Size Longstreet first put his wheels on the ground at a point about midway of the space. From that first landing, he made a series of a half-dozen other landings. It isn't fair to call them bounces. But whether landings or bounces, most of the Cub's steam was gone when it came down to where the two bulldozers stood cross-stream and ready to contest the right of way. Well, a frail Cub grasshopper can't do much real contesting with and against bulldozers, so the King-Size-piloted bouncer just shoved its nose between the blunt snouts of the two iron monsters. Its landing gear stayed right there with the dozer blades, while the rest of the Cub moved ahead. Moving ahead, the right wing swept Brolly Goodenough along with it; and the left wing accommodated Tex Cooper in like manner—and the two bulldozers just continued to churn pumice, kick dust, grunt, groan and devour what was left of two Cub wheels and a few landing-gear struts and fittings. Finally, the messy mass which had only a few seconds before been a fine flying thing of beautiful aerial life flopped to a stop at the rim of a drainage ditch which cut straight across the end of the proposed runway. Slowly, both King-Size Longstreet and his rear-seat passenger came up from some place and stepped out into the clear—clear of the wreckage, that is.

King-Size passed a slow hand back and forth across his face, as though brushing a cloud from his eyes. Soon he gazed back to where Brolly Goodenough was beginning to sit up and take notice, then over to where Tex Cooper was doing the same.

"Gentlemen," the tall one drawled, "ah reckon ah musta miscalculated. Yes, sir, ah jus' couldn't get the bounce outa this little ol' heller. Y'all think maybe she's salvage?"

"If she isn't, Big Boy, you'll never see one that is," Tex Cooper stated. "When you land, *you land*; and being a guy with a rich uncle, you just use 'em once then throw 'em away."

"And it was the C.O.'s own private Cub," Brolly said. "Oh, well, such is life," and, so lamenting, he began to climb back aboard his bulldozer. It was still locked blade to blade with that of Tex Cooper; and what was left of the Cub wheels and landing-gear no longer resembled any part of an airplane. Tex regained his dozer seat at about the same time, and then the once ferocious modern knights forgot all about that jousting business, disengaged their interlocked steeds and turned to the more pressing matter of what might be called "destroying the evidence."

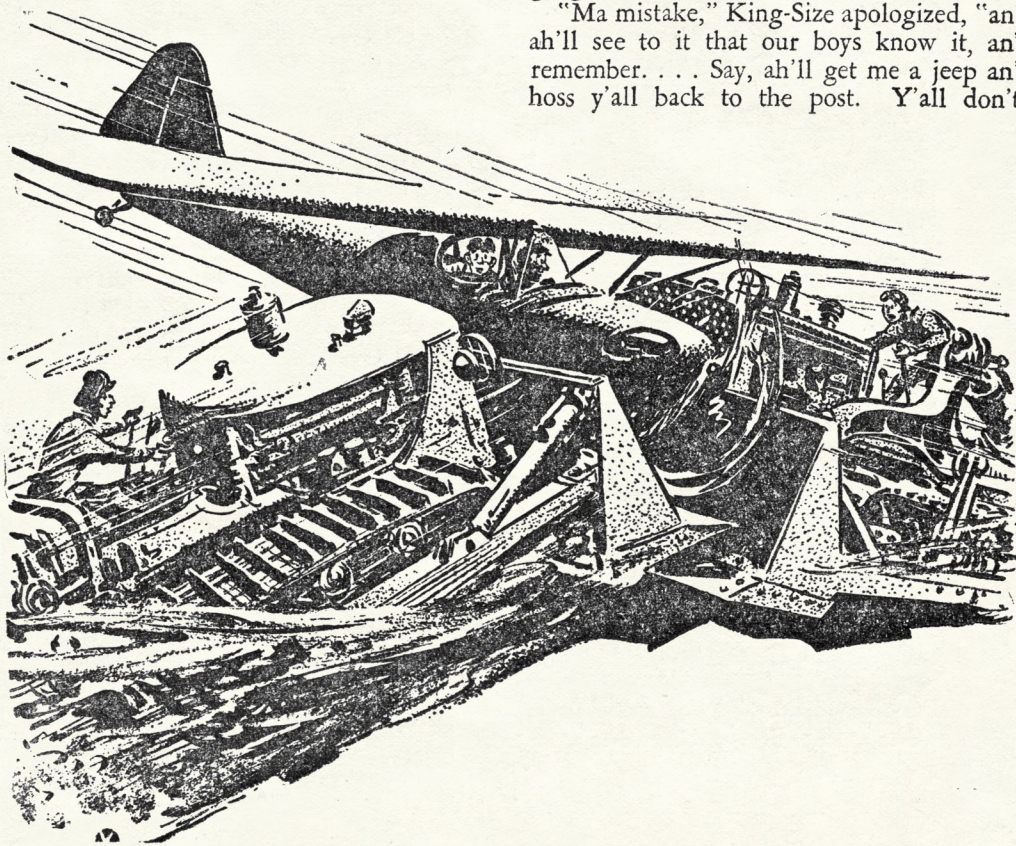
Both bulldozers began shagging one another around in a tight, fast circle; and each circle thus driven sent the brutal cat tracks over the wreckage of that Cub. Soon that wreckage was beaten flat-as-a-hat; and

the ex-engine and its tank and other metal adjuncts seemed little more than a greasy dark spot on the native pumice. Then the boys stopped circling, and, for the first time, began pushing stuff. Pushing that ex-Cub up into a neat heap. Next, Brolly Good-enough pushed it over the edge and down into the ditch. After that, both bulldozers moved a few hundred tons of handy dirt, shoved it into the ditch atop the wreckage; and soon no human eye could detect anything more than just another neat fill on the big grading job. After that, both men threw it out of gear, idled their engines and reached for a smoke.

"Brolly-boy," King-Size drawled, "how hard does she go with y'all for losin' a ship like this?"

"What do you mean?" Brolly asked. "Who lost a ship—what ship? Tex and myself couldn't get ships today. Our buses are in the shop for engine change. We just hiked over here, cross-country, to watch you boys work. You know that. Your whole gang knows that."

"Ma mistake," King-Size apologized, "an' ah'll see to it that our boys know it, an' remember. . . . Say, ah'll get me a jeep an' hoss y'all back to the post. Y'all don't



want to hike both ways. An' come again some time when y'all have a plane with ya."

"You should live so long," Tex said.

II

IT WAS well along toward mid-afternoon before anybody missed the special Cub which had been assembled for the C. O., then pushed out to the ready apron to await test. But when somebody did notice its absence, just about every department on the post seemed to tumble to the setup at one and the same time. Men from Final Assembly began to rush hither and yon. Officers from Colonel Wasp's Operations Office began to move up and down the apron in jeeps. The officer of the day and his sergeant of the guard were rushing near and far, pushing hangar doors back and forth—and even looking under the work benches and down the storm drains. And as for Colonel Kaka Kelly and Major Kakapo Wade—well, they were everywhere, questioning, seeking, peeking, cussing and fussing.

Final Assembly's Staff Sergeant Lear did not seem to know anything beyond the fact that he had pushed the job out to the ready apron, then—according to a slight untruth—he and his gang had knocked off for noon chow.

And—by gosh, come to think of it—the new Cub wasn't where they left it, after they'd come back to FA following recall to hangar duty.

Along toward recall from fatigue, the bugler sounded off with "Assembly," and every man on the post was told to fall out and line up down in front of Headquarters. They even turned out the cooks, K. P.'s, relief guards, other varieties of G. I.'s who hadn't stood a call in months, and the few dozen native New Zealanders on the civilian pay roll. Then Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade, swapping off from time to time, blew the bitter breeze for a full three-quarters of an hour. They threatened everything in the book—plus no Fourth of July leaves, or other passes, until the whereabouts of the Cub was made known.

"This entire command," the fat C. O. bellowed, "will be confined to the reservation until that plane is found! It didn't fly off of its own free will! It didn't atomize

and blow away with the wind! And it didn't disappear into the ground."

Through the side of his mouth, talking to Tex Cooper, Lieutenant Brolly Goodenough said, "Sez he. I'd like to get him and Kakapo on a little bet—that it didn't disappear into the ground."

"Lieutenant Goodenough!" Adjutant Kakapo Wade barked. "Goodenough, are you talking while at attention?"

"Oh, not I, sir. I was just trying to bite a gnat off my right ear, sir," Brolly answered.

Colonel Kaka Kelly had stopped talking. He was staring at Brolly. And now Kakapo Wade was silent, and he, too, was staring at Brolly. To themselves, no doubt, those two top men were saying:

It could be. Yes, siree, it could be Goodenough. He must be in this some place, somehow, and at least up to his chin.

"Lieutenant Goodenough, where were you between eleven this morning and recall from noon rest—or say one-thirty?" the C. O. asked, or rather demanded.

"Sir," Brolly answered. "Lieutenant Cooper and I were on the ground today, owing to our assigned ships being in the shop for engine change. We spent those hours over on the new airstrip, just watching the Engineers Corps bulldozers fill a ditch. . . . Sir, the officer of the day, and the sergeant of the guard, both were on the main gate when we returned. That was at one-fifteen, I believe."

"Officer of the day," Adjutant Kakapo sang out. "How about that, Officer of the Day?"

"Sir, the lieutenant is correct. Obviously, sir, he and Lieutenant Cooper had hiked, as they stated, for they were quite dusty and tired-looking."

"Hmmm," Kakapo grunted; and Kaka, too, made a queer flat noise, like air leaving a pricked balloon.

Anyway, both Kaka and Kakapo beat their gums a little more, then broke it up and turned the assembly loose to close shop for that day. And it was during supper, in Officers Club, that Lieutenant Brolly Goodenough expounded the theory that the gremlins must have got that newly-assembled Cub. Being a man late of the RAF—the recognized official habitat of the genus *gremlin Britannica*, 1939—Brolly Good-

enough was accepted as authority on the matter.

COLONEL KAKA KELLY, Major Kakapo Wade, and a few of the other more-stuffy high rankers, did not eat in the general dining room of Officers Club, but in a small alcove cubby just off the pantry, so they were not on hand to either hear or dispute Brolly's claims. "It's a fact, mates," he said, "back in Blighty, during the Battle of Britain, even Spits, Hurricanes and some two-engine jobs disappeared. They usually went A. W. O. L. during the times when it was too rainy for air work, during the times when the boys were cheesed off and wanted to get down to London. I'm not kidding, mates, they even found some of those missing planes in scattered hay-fields close to London. Right where those cloud-pushing, fog-shoving gremlins landed 'em. You can't trust gremlins. Say, I wonder if anybody's holding out—maybe somebody on this very post saw the gremlins that took our dear commanding officer's Cub."

Operations Office's Colonel Wasp and Major Seater were eating at the next table, each with his back to Brolly. But Major Seater said, "Come to think of it, there were two queer-looking automatons in my office just before Final Assembly phoned saying the Cub was ready. And, by gosh, these automatons did indicate that they were seeking ships."

"What did you do?" Colonel Wasp asked.

"I gave them the brush," Major Seater answered. "What could I do, sir? They didn't look like anything I had ever seen before, and their talk was nonintelligible. Gremlin talk, by hell."

"Well," Colonel Wasp said, "I understand they're tough people—these gremlins. What's more, I understand they like to move about, like to get away from dull places—like Cub fields in Darkest New Zealand. The Napier freightmaster just phoned over saying there was another Cub on the siding there. We'll truck the crates over tonight. First thing in the morning, you, Major Seater, will see to it that Final Assembly whips it into shape. Then Colonel Kelly will have a special ship. And this time—*this time, I say*—the gremlins better lay

off. Or by hell, we'll capture them, throw them in the guard jail, then see to it that they never get to leave this post. Gremlins won't like that, gentlemen."

"It shouldn't happen to even a gremlin, sir," Brolly Goodenough lamented. "Gosh, sir, back in Blighty we really liked the wee sma people. They were just like one of us."

"I'll bet. Which one?" Wasp asked.

That night, true to his threat, Colonel Kaka Kelly closed the post. Neither officer nor man was allowed pass or passage for or through Main Gate—and only the very bravest, and thirstiest, went over or under the fence and through the brush. However, it was Monday night; and no real soldiering man ever has a hankering for the outside on a Monday night. Brolly and Tex, of course, had a great weight on their manly consciences relating to that threat to close the post, and keep it closed. They didn't think it could be done. But if it could be done, and if Kaka and Kakapo had the brass to make it stick, then there'd be only one thing left for them: they'd have to turn themselves in and turn the command loose. Anyway, they'd wait and see. The big threat had been made before, and on many different posts, by many different brass hats; but none of them had made a go of it for more than a day or two. After all, when you close a post and keep two or three thousand men away from the flesh pots, the intown owners of said means of troop pleasures begin wiring Washington in behalf of "the poor boys confined in camp." And Washington listens to the owners, every time.

SURE enough, by noon of the next day the first cracks in the no-pass dike appeared. Some of the off-shift cooks and supernumeraries of the permanent guard got the usual slips telling the guard on the gate that these bearers had a right to be heading for Napier and other nearby towns. Brolly and Tex, with their own ships still on the out-of-commission list, had time to stand around and make note of that main-gate action.

"That's top-hole, ol' fruit," Brolly said to Tex. "Yes, sir, that takes a great load off my noble self. M'gosh, I was afraid we'd tie down the whole command. Me-thinks, young feller, that the entire matter has been handled in a mastery manner."

Thanks, no doubt, to the gremlins. They're great people. Now all we've got to do is sit tight, wait, watch, and, above all, see that we keep your big mouth shut. Don't even think out loud."

At that exact minute, to the minute, a Headquarters orderly came down the line and stopped his motorbike abreast of the guardhouse steps upon which Brolly and Texas were lounging, just checking the pass-bearing cooks and such through Main Gate.

"Lieutenant Goodenough? Lieutenant Cooper?" the orderly asked, glancing at a slip of paper on his handlebar clamp-board.

"Right," said Brolly. And "Chere," said Tex Cooper.

"The C.O. and the adjutant want to see you lieutenants, in the C.O.'s office," the orderly said. "An' right away."

"For six days He labored," Brolly said to Tex, "and on the seventh, He rested. . . . then the damned old world blew up right in our faces. . . . Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go."

In Colonel Kaka Kelly's office, besides the ever-present Kakapo, there were Colonel Wasp, Major Seater, Sergeant Lear, two men down from the control tower, and three or four others who were known to be active on the hangar-fronting apron while that now-famous Cub was out there on the ready strip. Obviously, Kaka and Kakapo had been doing some heavy thinking and careful research; and, at first glance, the set-up looked mighty nasty to Brolly and Tex. However, they were wise and went slow, almost resorting to a no-speaka-de-English line of retort. They seemed very dense, hardly intelligent. What's more, as the session went on, they became aware that Wasp, Seater and Lear were little better. In other words Kaka and Kakapo were really holding nothing. They were merely fishing. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as it looked.

But it was bad enough. Kaka Kelly closed the session by barking, "All you men, except Goodenough and Cooper, get back to your duties. . . . By the way, Sergeant Lear, how is my new ship coming along? Will it be ready for test today?"

"Yes, sir," Final Assembly Lear answered. "And it's a very good Cub, sir. It has some new, last-minute improvements."

"Good," said Kaka. "Tell you what to do—you see to it that it's delivered to Paint Shop. Tell them to do this Cub like my old one was painted—in an all-silver job. And you might have the shop paint my name on the side cowling, both sides. . . . And by hell, if anything happens to this ship, I'll—all right, all right, that's all, Sergeant Lear.

"Now look here, Mr. Goodenough. . . . and you too, Cooper. I'm going to confine you men to the post—no, I'll make it a confinement to quarters—pending further investigation. You don't sound right to me. Do they, Major Wade?"

"They don't, sir," Kakapo agreed. "I'll see to it that they are restricted to quarters. Meantime, Colonel Kelly, I'll leave no stone unturned in my efforts to run these men into the ground."

"That, sir," Brolly Goodenough snapped, "is a criminal statement, coming, as it does, from a superior officer. I demand a special court."

"Demand," Kakapo Wade said, "and be damned, Goodenough."

"Gentlemen," Tex Cooper cut in, "you're turning the brains of Air Forces against you. You can't win. You're pretty big, but the boys from Inspector General's Office can tear you down to size. Shall we dance? Fight? Or use reason?"

The mere mention of anything with the word "inspection" in it was poison to either Kaka or Kakapo. Inspections had a way of spoiling their days and ruining their nights. Inspections in the Army being like taxes and death in civilian life—things that are always with you—were things to be shunned. Avoided, if possible. And when anybody mentioned Inspector General's Office—good Lord, fat old Kaka Kelly lost all his manly brass.

"Just a minute. Just a minute," he begged. "Cooper is right, Major Wade. Your threat to 'run them into the ground' was in bad taste, out of order. 'Dammit, man, use your head!'"

"I apologize, Cooper," Kakapo said, perhaps fearing his master's wrath even more than Inspector-General-Office action.

"We'll accept the apology," Tex Cooper said, "but remember the threat—just in case."

"Lieutenant Cooper, you are bordering

on insubordination," Col. Kaka Kelly advised Tex. "But we'll have no more of this. And, as before stated, you two officers are confined—or restricted—to quarters. . . . And I mean to quarters. You may go."

ALL flight-training officers lived in barracks, three long frame jerry-built structures ranking side by side just south of Officers Club.

Captain Legg, another flyer down from that other war, was in charge—"House Mother"—of all such aviating students, both pilots and observers. Legg was waiting just inside the door when Brolly and Tex walked in—in to restriction to quarters.

"Ah!" Brolly Goodenough exclaimed, noting the gleam in Captain Legg's eye. "You've heard the news?"

"The kakapo bird just phoned over. Welcome, my poor erring charges. . . . You danged young lugs, you! You erred like hell when you didn't crash that pair of kiwis into the ground—that other time when you just forced them over the fence for a slight crash.

"But, as I say, welcome. You know, I get lonesome as the devil here. Just old Sergeant Sullivan and myself in this big house alone all day, alone with our sewing and crossword puzzles."

"To say nothing of your hard liquor and stiff poker," Tex Cooper added. "That you and old Sullivan should need company!"

"Now, now, my good man," Captain Legg chided, "let's not start breaking furniture. But settle down, gentlemen, and get used to the sedentary life. I have a hunch you're in for a stay. . . . And say, that gives me an idea. Yes, sir, the big idea. Well, well, well—Wellington! That's it. I've been trying to get a few days off for a long time. I've got some unfinished business in Wellington."

"And you think you can maybe detail us to take care of it for you, good Captain Legg?" Brolly asked, with enthusiasm.

"It's strictly personal," Legg said. "But with one of you fine fellows to act as my relief, well there's no reason why I shouldn't get the leave. . . . Yes, sir, I'll go right over and see that fine Major Wade right now . . . and don't let me hear any of you men

referring to him as 'Kakapo,' for that is very irreverent."

"But the post, my dear Captain, is closed," Tex Cooper jeered. "Closed to gents of both high and low degree. Remember?"

"Nuts!" said Captain Legg. "You couldn't close a post of this size with beriberi, dengue fever, typhus and smallpox all rolled into one, say nothing of just mistaking one lousy Cub. And anyway, don't Kaka and Kak—doesn't the fine Colonel Kelly and good Major Wade want to go to town, too? . . . Well, watch the house till I get back; and bless you, my little men, for volunteering."

"That's bad, Tex," Brolly mused, finding a comfortable position flat on his back atop his own bunk. "If Legg makes it, who knows, you might be tied down to his job from here right through the Fourth of July holidays."

"Me tied to his job! You're the senior scissor-bill here," Tex reminded Brolly. "Yes, sir, I can see you helping old Sullivan with his knitting and crossword puzzles from now till Gehenna freezes over and thaws out again. How are you on a six-letter word meaning a ratite-type New Zealand bird which does not fly?"

"How about the Cooper?" Brolly suggested. "C-o-o-p-e-r, that's six, and it ain't-a gonna do no aviatin' in a long time."

THEY heard the phone ring in the orderly room, at the front end of the long barracks. Then they heard old Master Sergeant Jerry Sullivan arising from his after-lunch siesta cot and cussing as he reached for the phone that, maybe, had disturbed his dreams about the joyous end of the thirty-year trail and a small vine-covered, Mex-kid-cluttered old soldier's home down in San Anton.

"Okay, sir. . . . Be right over, sir," the old long-timer growled; and, presently, they saw old Sullivan going along the walk that led to Officers Club, tucking in his OD shirt-tails as he ambled. About twenty minutes later, they saw him coming back.

Coming in, Master Sergeant Jerry Sullivan came by the side door, directly to where Brolly and Tex filled their respective bunks.

"Gentlemen, the bunk fatigue ends," Sullivan growled.

"Good. Now we can go Stateside. The war's over, eh?" Tex enthused and asked.

"I'll let ya know," said Sullivan. "Right now, though, you better start putting on your best Sunday-go-to-meeting duds, Lieutenant Cooper. I was just over to the Club, to talk with Captain Legg and Lieutenant Kosiski. They're packing for Wellington. You are listed to understudy for Lieutenant Kosiski as mess officer for the Club."

"Me—a mess officer! Why, hell's bells, Sarg, what do I know—Hey, what am I saying? I know everything about being a messy mess officer. He gets to go to town every day."

"Not this mess officer," said Sullivan. "Kosiski says that his head cook—that Australian hombre—will handle the intown buying while he's away and you're on duty. You're just a figurehead. But, anyway, get into your duds and go over and report to the guy with the brittle name."

"Well, well, well, what now, my little man?" Brolly Goodenough enthused, remaining flat on his back and laughing.

"You talking to me, Lieutenant?" Sullivan asked. "Well, if ya are, I'll tell it. You're my boss now. You're filling in as student flyer's C.O. while Cap Legg does right by hisself down in Wellington. I can't order ya around, but I'd suggest that you police the man and be on duty—the commanding officer and adjutant have a habit of dropping in now and again, about midafternoon."

Getting off the flats of their backs, the two so-wild airmen began to climb out of old duds and pull on the new. And Brolly Goodenough said, "Longhorn, this is absolutely bottoms in the Army, any man's Army—restriction to quarters, with duty."

"Right," Tex agreed, and all the joy was gone out of his voice, "you can't do worse than that."

Ambling back toward his comfy cot in the orderly room, old Jerry Sullivan growled. "Crime—she don't pay."

On Tuesday night, a few more men got passes through the gate; but said gate was not thrown wide-open at retreat and kept that way till taps, as in the past. Wednesday night was the same. Before Thursday had closed, things were pretty close to normal; the guard on the gate might challenge, but just a few words of snappy explanation

would get a man either in or out. Still and all, the search for the missing Cub had not been abandoned. Now and again, each day, certain guys stopped in to quiz Brolly and Tex about certain angles that might have thrown light on certain things that happened on that fatal Monday. And each day, at least once, they were hailed over to Headquarters to answer pointed questions that were shot across by none other than Kaka and Kakapo. So the heat was still on, and maybe their jobs as acting mess officer and acting commander of barracks weren't too severe.

MEANTIME, that Fourth of July holiday was due to start day after tomorrow—Saturday right after weekly inspection and through Monday. Three full days, but they wouldn't be any more than just three more days for Brolly and Tex. And as things stood when the sun went down Thursday, and as it came up Friday, just about everybody on the post was going to be turned loose. Also, according to the boys close to Headquarters, Colonel Kaka Kelly and Major Kakapo Wade were going to be absent from the post. Rumor said that the two big boys were going down to Nelson, on South Island; and that it was going to be their time to howl, for they had planned the trip for a long time. There was big money and officer-loving people in Nelson. Of course, no other passes were issued for South Island.

Friday turned out to be a strange day, however. It came in fully regulation, as per schedule, but before noon guys began to rush here and there; many of them coming into Officers Club kitchen and student barracks, getting in contact with Tex and Brolly, and advising that this and that be put in order. "Inspection" was the word most heard. But, at first, everybody took it for granted that just the regular, you-can't-miss-it Saturday-morning inspection was meant. However, when the Army Engineers began pulling all their rolling stock up from the airstrip, and back into the last hangar, it was easy to see that something big was in the wind. They even hauled in their cement mixers and outsize drag-shovel—every danged bit of mobile equipment. And it was a man-killing job. And when they got it all back into, or just outside, that assigned

hangar, every man-Jack of them fell to and began to knock off the mud and put on the high polish. There was a cloud of blue air above and around where those Army Engineers Corps dirty necks worked—and that blue haze was nothing more nor less than royal-American cussin'.

At the same time, all air work was washed out; and every mac in the hangars and shops—plus even the commissioned students—took mop, sponge, rag and swab in hand and made every plane and truck and personnel and staff car and jeep and wheelbarrow on the reservation look like brand-new. Never before had the field properties received such a policing; and never again, perhaps, will any Army command put out so much hard labor and honest sweat.

Watching from afar, Brolly and Tex said, "Well, we at least miss our share of that stuff. Even money—no, ten-to-one—these guys don't get off this post for the big holiday. Poor, poor guys, and it's not our fault, either. We could cry for them."

When retreat sounded that Friday afternoon, everything was set. Not a piece of equipment—ground or air—had been overlooked; and if there was a single smudge of dirt or grease on anything owning cat tracks or wheels, well that smudge was alone and lonesome.

So the word went out to stand by, and the different top kicks in the several orderly rooms reported that they had nothing to say about the holiday passes that should have, but hadn't come over from Headquarters before closing time. Maybe the post would be thrown open after inspection in the morning, and maybe she would not. Top kicks always seem to enjoy such situations.

AFTER mess that evening Sergeant King-Size Longstreet came in to renew acquaintances with the flying men. An enlisted man of Air Forces itself wouldn't have dared venture in there amongst the commissioned gents, but the Engineers Corps noncoms—like the very democratic Australians and Anzacs—were different.

"How y'all, Brolly-boy? . . . An' y'all, Tex? . . . Whar at y'all been these three-four days? . . . Haw-haw, hot doggity, yas, sir, the boys out in the hangar tell me all 'bout it. Y'all er hawg-tied an' 'stricted to

quarters, eh? Well, bless ma soul, y'all should-a been more careful o'—"

"Sh-h-h, Big Boy," Brolly warned, for now the long room was pretty well stocked with lounging or policing-up fellow pilots; and even little fellow pilots might have big ears—even what are known as Headquarters ears. "Let's talk about you. How come you boys pulled in all your equipment?"

"Why for!" King-Size exploded. "Ain't y'all heard who's loose here on North Island? Nobody but ol' Lieutenant-General "White-Glove" Fagan. Tha's all, brother."

"Old Fagan? Old White-Glove in person?" Brolly asked.

"As is, in person," King-Size emphasized. "An' y'all's commandin' officer, ol' Kaka-boy, like to have kittens when ma C.O. gets the word to him. Ma boss, an' them feller officers o' his that go up the lake with him last Monday, run into ol' White-Glove in Taupo town, up at the head o' the lake. Ol' White-Glove is stayin' in that there hot-springs place. That place where they have the big swell hotel for gents with gout an' such."

"Rotorua?" Brolly prompted.

"'At's a place—Rotorua. Ol' White-Glove he got the gout an' 'laria from way back," King-Size Longstreet said, "an ma boss says that the ol' boy is nasty as the devil now an' full o' hell. He comin' down this way on 'spection tour."

"Ye gods," Brolly mused. "No wonder Kaka and Kakapo're running around in small, tight circles. No use talking, this post won't see an open gate for the holiday."

"Don' know 'bout that," King-Size said. "They's nothin' certain 'bout ol' White-Glove's plan. He don't tell ma boss when the 'spection come off. Jus' sorta hint. Kaka-boy send ma boss back to Rotorua to spy on ol' White-Glove an' get the word back here so's y'all'll be tipped off ahead o' time."

"Ma boss's still up at Rotorua. But ma boss have a pretty nice skinful o' stuff, an' he likely t' slip up on the 'signment. . . . Look-e out, Kaka-boy!"

Saturday morning's reveille turned the units out to stand at attention in the chill dawn and hear words of nothing but lingering doubt. Each officer taking his unit's here-or-accounted-for report merely dis-

missed his men with the admonition that they hold themselves ready for the usual inspection, then remain in quarters until such time as Headquarters should see fit to issue the passes, push open that big main gate, and turn 'em loose.

So, in due course of time, Colonel Kaka Kelly and Adjutant Kakapo Wade, plus the ranking Medical Corps officer, passed up and down the line, through each barracks and mess-hall, then out through the shops and down along the hangar line. And everything was in such fine, fit-for-inspection shape that both Kaka and Kakapo were wearing broad happy smiles; and even kidding in a friendly manner with some of the lowly nephews of Uncle Sam met along the line of march. When it was all over, the two big boys, along with a group of lesser lights, stood out in the circle near the flag pole afront Headquarters and talked small talk, the while, every few minutes, Colonel Kaka Kelly glanced at his wrist-watch. And by then noon wasn't far away. Plain to see, Kaka was working against time. Perhaps he was expecting some word from the engineers Corps C.O., the lieutenant-colonel who had gone back to spy on old White Glove.

THE whistle atop the post's powerhouse smokestack sounded off with its single high-noon blast. Colonel Kaka Kelly made up his mind. He turned to his adjutant and said, "Issue those passes. Turn them loose. We'll take a chance. And I'll be in my quarters when you're ready to shove off."

By twelve-thirty the post was drained as dry of personnel as is a clip joint thirty seconds after the eye chirps "Cheesit, the cops!"

Army regulations require that at least 10 percent of the command be detained on the post at all times, but Kaka and Kakapo shaded that figure by more than a few percent; and they weren't noted for their big hearts. So few men remained rattling about loosely on that big layout, that all six enlisted messes had been shrunken down to just one; and in that one, only two cooks and three KPs were required to stand by and serve during the three vacant days to follow. As for flying-officers' barracks, not a soul remained, not even old Sullivan. Only Brolly and Tex. The Army Engineers

had gone whole-hog, vanishing to a man, this because old Master Sergeant White and the few commissioned officers of the unit figured that the required ten percent—if there be such—should come from the permanent party.

The last official act, by Kaka and Kakapo, was to drive over to flying-officers' barracks and look in on Brolly Goodenough and Tex Cooper—just to make certain the wild pair hadn't already flown the coop, jumped the fence and dusted for town.

"Just one last word to you officers," Kaka said. "Take my advice and keep your noses clean. You're not out of the woods yet. And let this be a lesson to you."

"One more thing," Adjutant Kakapo thought to add, "the officer-of-the-day will act in command, in the event any unforeseeable contingency arises. It just happens that none of the three assigned for these days is a flying officer, and you, Goodenough, may outrank one or more of these. However, the officer-of-the-day will handle anything arriving in Headquarters, either by phone, wire or courier, and he is to be obeyed. . . . You'll keep this in mind, too, Lieutenant Cooper."

"Yes, sir, Major Wade. Yes, sir, and may you two gentlemen have a nice holiday," Tex answered. "We'll make you proud of us."

KAKAPO glared at him, and so did Kaka, but then the fat pair waddled down the walk, got into their corporal-driven Cadillac and whirled away toward Main Gate, the highroad to Wellington, and the joyous water crossing to South Island and the pleasures of Nelson. After that, Time in its flight put on all the brakes and dropped all available anchors, and the slowest Saturday in the history of mankind tried its worst to keep sunset and evening from ever arriving—but when it did, and darkness came, two lone men watched the guard on Post No. 3 for a full twenty minutes, then went over the fence and down the dusty road to fair-sized Napier.

Any Sunday in any Army camp is dull to a point where, by comparison, a haunted house or ghost town would seem crowded, busy and congenial; but this Sunday was so empty and forlorn that Brolly and Tex regretted the fact that they had taken the

bother, and precaution, to sneak back into the post just before sun-up.

LATE Sunday afternoon, young Lieutenant Page, acting as officer-of-the-day, came into barracks and there found Brolly Goodenough and Tex Cooper trying to sleep the day away. Page, one of the high-browed instructors in the post ground-school, was in a bit of a dither. He said that a communications had just reached Headquarters saying that one Lieutenant-General Fagan would arrive this post on Monday, and the commanding officer was advised that a general inspection of mobile equipment of both land and air—was on his schedule for Tuesday morning. The general would brook no delay, this owing to the fact that he must depart North Island, via Wellington, no later than noon of Tuesday.

"Wow! What a foul blow," Brolly said. It shouldn't happen to even a Kaka and Kakapo. M'gosh, the troops won't even be half-sober, say nothing of being policed for inspection."

"But it's chiefly an inspection of equipment," Lieutenant Page said; "and we know the equipment is in order."

"Nuts on that," said Brolly. "They could be inspecting blue sky and green earth, Page, but if the troops standing to horse between that sky and ground weren't spit-and-polish, well there'd be hell to pay. You ever hear of, or meet, old White-Glove Fagan?"

"This General Fagan?" Page asked. "No. Why?"

"Oh, boy, that you should ask it, Page. He's the toughest oldtimer in the inspection business. He's been raising holy hell since long before there were either planes or trucks, tractors and bulldozers in the army. And they call him White-Glove because the old heller brought said white gloves down from his Infantry and Cavalry days. You've heard how those crusty old devils used to inspect rifles, field pieces, horses and harness with a white glove, then tear the roof off the command if any dirt showed up on the white mitts?"

"Yes, I think I recall hearing that. It was very unfair to say the least," Page decided. "But, surely, a man would not inspect present-day, fuel-burning, oil-throw-

ing equipment and expect to keep his gloves clean?"

"Oh, he wouldn't, eh!" said Brolly. "Listen, Page ol' boy, I saw old White-Glove inspect one of our Flying Tiger fields west of Chungking. And he inspected both flying equipment and a whole motor park of trucks, tractors and dozers that day, too. And he did it with the white gloves. They were white when he started, they were black before he was through, but a whole gang of high-brass faces were damned red before the old boy stopped turning the yellow Chinese air blue. He cusses, Page."

"A terrible character," Page said.

"Our C. O., and our Kakapo too, know that, Page. They've met up with him before, and you can bet your hat—the good one—on that. They've been in lots of places where old White-Glove did his stuff. Poor Kaka! Poor Kakapo! . . . Tex, will you proceed to break out a few crying towels? I feel like a good bawl."

"What should I do?" Lieutenant Page asked. "Let's don't kid."

"You better get in touch with the C. O." Brolly advised. "Go ahead, spoil their holiday. Did they say where they're camping?"

"At the Hotel Anzac, in Nelson," Page made known; and he was on his way out. "I'll phone the Anzac. Yes, sir, he should know."

Half an hour later, Page came back. He was feeling better, though he reported that Colonel Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade were feeling badly. "I talked with both of them," he said. "They sounded as if they'd been drinking. They were upset when I finally made them understand that General Fagan was due in tomorrow. . . . And you were right, Goodenough, Colonel Kelly referred to the general as that old white-gloved so-and-such. But anyway, they said they'd leave South Island on the next Wellington-bound boat, and be back here by daybreak. . . . Oh, and by the way, Lieutenant Cooper. The adjutant told me to tell you to get together with the cook and begin preparing a course of good meals for General Fagan's party. That communication from Rotorua ordered that we have transportation for twelve waiting at the Napier station."

Remaining flat on his back, Tex Cooper

said, "I'll take care of that some Wednesday morning, Page—maybe the same Wednesday morning as the Wednesday morning that our Navy sinks the Jap fleet."

"Fine food for the general?" Brolly mused and questioned. "Well, that's all right. If I was in old Kaka's spot I'd be greasing the old quill, too. Yes, sir, old Kaka and Kakapo will be busier than a dog trying to bury a bone on a tin roof, trying to think up ways and means to be nice to old White-Glove. And here's hoping they run out of luck."

Along toward ten o'clock that same Sunday night, Lieutenant Page came into quarters again. He said that Kakapo had given him a ring from Nelson. The big boys were still in that South Island city. They had missed the evening boat. The next chance at a passage was out of Blenheim; and they couldn't make it before morning. Hence, General White Glove and his party would be on the post long before Kaka and Kakapo could return. And that would be bad, very bad; for a commander—ranking only as colonel—should be at the main gate, bowing low, when a lieutenant-general rides in.

"Well," Brolly told Tex, after Officer-of-the-Day Page had hurried away, "that kills my last hope. I had an idea that maybe Kaka and the other heel would phone Page to have you and myself hop Cubs down there and fly them back. Wonder they didn't think of that, eh?"

"Naw, they're too wise. They know that we're the only flying guys on the post," Tex said, "and they know that we'd either force-land them in Cook Strait or sink them into the very-active craters of Ruapehu or Ngauruhoe. And, by hell, I would. Just give me a chance to get either one of those heels off the ground, and—"

"And you'll break your neck trying to treat them nice," Brolly cut in. "I've heard geese squawk before, Longhorn. But, anyway, forget it. They didn't call, and we're not going. And this is a Sunday night! And there's all day tomorrow! What a place for guys who wanted to go to war!"

It was along toward the chill gray dawn of Monday morning before they heard from Officer-of-the-Day Page again. He came in and shook Tex Cooper. Tex, awakening with a growl and certain snappy words,

woke Brolly Goodenough. The coming daylight was already bright enough to make Page recognizable. "That's right, Page," Brolly said, rout out the longhorn. Tell him to get t'hell over to his pots and pans. I want a stack of bucks for breakfast."

"It's the commanding officer again," Page said. "He just phoned."

"What! In the middle of the night?" the sleepy Tex yipped.

"Yes, he did," Page answered. "My word, you know, he must be very drunk. He sounded that way."

"It's the first good thing I've ever heard about him," Tex said. "Too bad we're not socko-drunk too. . . . Now go away, Page, and tiptoe on your way out. You're getting to be a hell of a second-string nuisance. What you trying to do—understudy for Kakapo?"

"But listen, Lieutenant," Page begged. "It was the C. O., and he gave me another message for you. About the meals for the general—Wake up, Lieutenant. Now listen! Are you listening?"

"Brolly," Tex said, "if we kill this Page guy and stuff him in the storm drain under the barracks, nobody will ever know it till the rainy season starts. What say, do we do it now and get a few hours' sleep? . . . All right, Page; what is it?"

"The C. O. told me to tell you to get plenty of seafood for General Fagan. He says that he was in both Florida and the Canal Zone with the general, and that he always demanded plenty of fish dishes. Colonel Kelly wants you to buy both fish and oysters."

"Me buy fish and oysters! Where does Kaka get that stuff? I'm not buying anything. I'm not even going near a town. The Kaka guy, and the mess officer, they both took care of that before they left here. They said the Australian cook—that Melbourne Dancing Matilda—would handle all the buying. Swell! He went to town Saturday night and hasn't come back yet. No fish, Page. No soap."

"But we've got to have fish! You've got to get fish!" poor young Officer-of-the-Day Page insisted. "Look, Cooper, I'll advance the required money, against the mess fund, and you go to town first thing in the morning."

"Go way, you're not talking to—or about

—me," Tex Cooper yelled. "I'm restricted to quarters, Page. You have no authority to issue a town pass. Every cockeyed M.P. in Napier, and every other nearby dump knows me. I'm not shoving out my chin just to get fish for old White-Glove, and to satisfy Kaka Kelly. Go way, man."

"The guy's correct as hell, Page," Brolly said, in a very flat voice. "I heard both the C.O. and adjutant warn him to stay put, right here in camp. He's a bad actor, you know. And if you should send him to town with money in his kick—well kiss him and the money good-bye. Anyway, he wouldn't know fish from fowl. Why don't you have him get the stuff the same way all the messes get it—both the fish and oysters?"

"How?" Lieutenant Page bit.

"Why just go over to the coast, over to Hawke Bay, up north of Napier, and drop in a line or two. And you can get all the oysters you want, too, either rock or mud, off the ledges or out on the flats. Nothing to it."

"How do you get there?" Page asked, showing interest. "Can you reach it by jeep?"

"Not so good," Brolly answered. "The cooks and mess-sergeants always get some of the boys to fly them over. There's no shore

road north of Napier, you know. But you can set down a Cub, or a couple of Cubs, almost any place in that neck of the woods. Now why don't you detail a couple of pilots to take a couple of ships and go over there, right after breakfast?"

"Have I the authority?" Page asked.

"You sure have," Tex cut in. "Kakapo told us that the O.D. had full authority. Headquarters command, in the event of any unforeseeable contingency; and this is sure one of them. You can send two pilots, and they've got to go. That's different from sending guys to town. In this case, you're just detailing guys in government planes on a job in line of duty. It's good to know all these angles, Page. You might get to be an adjutant some day."

"I'll do it," Page said. "But say, are there any pilots left on the post—that is, except you two?"

"Now you've got us," Tex answered. "Come to think of it, I don't think there are. Too bad. Well, that's out."

PAGE stared at Tex. Then he stared at Brolly. The two, still chins-deep in their covers, stared back. Something deep inside the officer-of-the-day warned him that he shouldn't, but a stronger fear of official ire, and what might happen if no fish and



oysters were forthcoming against Kaka's return to post, pushed the young, inexperienced officer toward desperations. He said, "Well, good Lord, I know that you two men are in the dog house, but that's none of my concern. So I'll detail you two to take ships and get the fish. I think you suggested two Cubs, Lieutenant Good-enough?"

"That would be about right, Page," Brolly agreed. "If old White-Glove and his party should arrive by noon today, then stick around for an early lunch after the inspection tomorrow, it will mean four meals.

"Chances are, he's the kind of a grub hound who likes a bit of fish for his breakfast. Those as like fish, love it all the way, you know. . . . Yes, I guess Longhorn and I will fly the ships for you. We'll each take one of the Maori boys with us. They know where the fish live. . . . Or have the boys jumped camp?"

"No. There were three of them in the kitchen at quitting time last night," Tex Cooper made known. "We'll take Tirua and Mokau. They're fishing fools. I've heard some of the flight cooks talk about the way they can induce fish to get out of the lagoon and into a rowboat or gunnysack. . . . Okay, Page. We'll get up, grab a cup of java and be on our way. We'll be back here with a ton of fish and four-five bushel of earsters before you have time to pronounce the name of that volcano just south of Taupo."

"Fair enough," Lieutenant Page enthused, and now he was all for it. His troubles were over. "And while you're rustling up a bite, and turning out the two boys, I'll have my guards open the hangar and put two Cubs on the ready apron. Make it fast, boys. We want to have everything in readiness, just in case the commanding officer gets in sooner than we now expect. I'll be seeing you."

III

HALF an hour later, Brolly and Tex quit Officers Club and started toward hangars. The two native kitchen boys, with both fish poles and spears in hand, followed close at heel. The sun wasn't above the horizon yet, and the landing field's necklace of red lights still gleamed sharply against

the morning mists that covered the back-country bush. Coming around the corner of Operations Office building, and catching sight of the two Cubs out on the ready apron, Brolly Goodenough said, "Well bless his little heart! Ye gods, Longhorn, see what Page had 'em push out for us. Now wouldn't you know a guy like him would do a thing like this for gents like us?"

Page's sleepy-eyed guard supernumeraries had, of course, taken the easiest way: opening Headquarters hangar, the first at hand, and shoving out Col. Kaka Kelly's new all-silver Cubs, plus, as a second ship, Colonel Wasp's special bus.

"Not ours to ask the reason why," quote Tex Cooper.

"Course not," Brolly agreed, "and not ours to shove it back into the hangar and lug out one of the older Cubs, either. But I'd better fly Kaka's new job, Longhorn. Hell's bells, man, we can't afford another mishap. Yes, sir, I'll mother this like a new-born second-lieutenant. . . . Well, climb aboard your bus and I'll wind the stick for you. Then you can take care of mine. Let's get off the ground before somebody tumbles to what the guards have done."

So the two Cubs warmed their engines, lifted their tails right there on the ready apron—against all field rules—and got under way, from that off-strip start; and the two wild men booted them off the ground in a manner that might have pleased the makers who promised quick, short take-offs, but would have grayed the hair of officials who still called for flying regulations.

It wasn't far over to Hawke Bay. They took on only a few hundred feet of altitude, this because there was some pretty wild country to be crossed, and a boy never knew what might show up down there on the bush that might require aerial shagging—such as red deer, mule-size jackrabbits by the thousand, wild dogs, pigs and cats. However, it was a dull morning along those lines; and the shore of Hawke Bay, a dozen miles above Napier, was soon handy enough for close observation. Needless to say, not a thing seemed to move, either on trails or in the bay, at that small hour of the dawning. Men sure had to like their air work to get up and go after it at such a time.

Brolly had Tirua in his rear seat; and the boy had promised to point out a beach

whereon were both oysters to be dug and fish to be hooked, gaffed or speared. Soon, Tirua was leaning over his pilot's shoulder pointing to a green field, just back from the beach, and not more than three or four miles to the north. So Brolly gave Tex a ship-wiggle, then pointed out the proposed landing spot. Tex—flying at four hundred elevation—flew a loop, just by way of acknowledging the ship-wiggle. So Brolly flew a roll—as good as 65 horsepower can slop a wide-winged drone through the maneuver. It took a hard dive, wide throttle, hard right rudder and a manly bit of poling on the joystick. Needless to say, Brolly was right down in the treetops before the cartwheeling and sickly sinking went out of the Cub, and the prop and controls began to bite solid air again. The treetops happened to be on the southern rim of a lagoon-like inlet of Hawke Bay. It was a lush, pine-studded, bushy morassed piece of shoreland, but with nary a landing spot close at hand in any direction. Brolly either hoped, wished or prayed his way between and past those high branches, then felt fine when clear lagoon showed just a few yards under his ship. So he shoved the nose a little lower, to gather some dive speed, then drew back on the stick for a zoom over the tree-covered bank on the north side of the water. And just as his nose went down—and he looked straight ahead over the blunt bow and through the whirling prop—his eyes fell upon a super-gorgeous pukeko crane. The pukeko had seen the oncoming man-bird. It was flushing, rising rapidly in all its wild splendor for a fast getaway. And it was coming up directly in front of the Brolly-flown Cub. Now, needless to say, Pilot Brolly Goodenough, having long since learned his lesson on combating pukeko cranes, wouldn't, for all the world, have considered going after this one now. But it wasn't his fault. He hadn't been out looking for it. He hadn't even thought of pukekos. But here was one, all set for action, and just asking for it. So what was a boy to do?

BROLLY zoomed. He had to zoom—to clear those northbank trees. Naturally, one turns either right or left at the top of a power push, so why not turn shoreward, left, just like the pukeko was doing? After

all, a Cub belongs inland, toward that proposed landing field, and not to the right and out over the wide bay.

So Brolly reached the top of his zoom, and started wheeling leftward, wing down, engine howling, and the control surfaces just beginning to lose their bite on the air. That is: his Cub was in that dead spot where, as they say in sailing, "all sails quiver," when he suddenly saw something else—just beyond his nose and the gay wheeling plumage of the pukeko. It was the belly of Tex Cooper's bus, and that bus and its OD belly weren't more than thirty or forty feet from the glistening whirling disc which was Brolly's full-power prop.

Right away, Brolly Goodenough cut that power. He had to, or else chew into Tex Cooper's belly or tail surface. And as he killed his engine, then glanced groundward, his best judgment warned him that he had not more than three hundred feet of altitude, and, perhaps, much less. As for where the all-silver Cub was going, there was no choice. It was going down, and into the lagoon. If luck was with Brolly, he'd manage to sink that nose and sail in for some sort of a belly-whopping wet landing. But if he didn't have time and enough altitude for the whipstall straightening out, then he was going to pile her in—and maybe tail first, with him and Tirua under the fuel tank and engine. So he fought controls, and maybe tried a bit of prayer. Tex Cooper's ship shadowed through his senses, overhead, and passed on. Then, for an age or two, the all-silver Cub just seemed to sink—like a very slow freight elevator—then, thank the good Lord for even small favors, the nose came down and a far horizon came up. She was horizontal! Brolly glanced at his lagoon. He still had a good hundred feet to go. He felt a bit of bite on his elevators. There was some glide control there! He tried to press that nose a little lower—tried doing it even by putting his own beef ahead to the instrument-panel. Then there was a splash, a devil of a splash, but no crunching and crashing. The sheaths of splashed water rained back into the lagoon. All went very quiet. The Cub was down, down till the water poured in around his feet, and going deeper. So Brolly sort of sat high on the back of his seat—waiting for that sinking to go out of the Cub—and his eyes went

ahead to the northern rim of the lagoon, and there was that darned pukeko, settling back on his home pool, then paddling around, beak south, so he could sit and watch that silly human fool who thought he was bird enough to drive a real flyer from its native haunts.

BROLLY pushed open the cabin door. "Tirua," he said "we better fish from the top of the wing. Follow me. There's more elbow room up there."

Tirua wasn't much disturbed. He, perhaps, didn't know enough to realize that the landing was a bit unconventional, but he did ask, "You feller always fish um this way? . . . Me two feller belong coconut hut." In other words, Tirua had an idea that somebody was nuts. But he followed Brolly atop the all-silver wing; and that thirty-five feet of silver plateau—with about six inches of air under it—was all that showed above the surface.

Meantime, Tex Cooper had landed in the field picked from the air, and pointed out by Tirua. Then he and Mokau hurried back to the lush, mud-flat shore of the lagoon. And from that dryer point of vantage, Tex sang out, "What now, my little man?"

"Had a little accident," Brolly sang back, busily baiting a hook, while Tirua took a stance at the left end of the wing, spear in hand. "Tell you what to do, son. You hop back to the post and get a jeep. Have one of the transportation men drive it over. We'll be getting the fish while you're gone. Your boy can dig some oysters till you get back. . . . Don't stand there, soldier."

"A jeep can't get you out," Tex argued. "This ground here, this stuff I'm standing on, is soft as shavin' cream and slick as oil. There's no traction for wheels."

"A jeep can do anything, Longhorn," Brolly said. "Now be a good fellow, and stop scaring the fish. . . . You sent me into this, you know. Do you want me to tell Kaka that you lost another ship for him?"

It was an hour and a half before Tex returned, set down, then came back once more to talk across water from his edge of the lagoon. What he said, at first, was all cuss words. He was sore.

"What you beefing about, Longhorn?" Brolly yelled. Then he held up a garland of

red- and white-bellied fish. "Them're fish, Acting Mess Officer. We're getting what you came after, aren't we? Where's your kick? And where's the jeep?"

"In the quicksand, at that cattle ford, about a half mile east of the post," Tex answered. "For the book, my fine-feathered friend, there're two jeeps in that hole."

"How come—you getting careless, son?" Brolly demanded.

"They're both Engineers Corps jeeps," Tex made known. "Our own transportation apes wouldn't give me a jeep out of the post garage. They wouldn't even give me a man. So I got a KP out of the squadron mess and took a jeep out of the dirty necks' park. Well, this KP came down to that cattle crossing, and instead of going through where the stock go, he picked what looked like a dryer spot. It was. Quicksand. And the guy unloaded and crawled out just as the floorboards were going under."

"Good for him," said Brolly. "Then what?"

"Well, luckily I was hanging back, circling, and sort of showing the way for him. So I landed in close, picked him up, then flew him back for another jeep."

"And where is it?"

"In the same quicksand. When the guy got back there to the crossing, all four wheels of the first jeep were under the sand, but the square box-body was still high enough to take the bumper of the second jeep. So the guy tried to butt the first one out of the sand. Then the second one began to go down. He jumped again, just in time. The tops of their steering wheels are still above ground."

"That's okay," Brolly enthused. "You can tell where they are, eh? It's always good to know exactly where you can find the old G. I. properties. . . . But how about a tow? Did you run out of jeeps?"

"Sure," Tex answered. "The dirty necks only have four. Old White and King-Size each took one for the holidays. They and some of our gang went up the coast, up north here, on a fishing-and-hunting drunk. Wish I was with them."

"Never mind crying in your beard, Bud," Brolly warned. "How about the tow? You've got to get this job back to the post. An acting mess officer can get a bust, too, you know."

"Nuts, big wind," Tex sang out. "Well, anyway, I flew the guy back again. He's bringing a personnel car. He got past the cattle crossing this time. Should be here in a few minutes. . . . What do you mean it's up to me to get this wreck back to camp?"

"It's your fishing party, Longhorn," Brolly said.

THERE was a crashing of bracken off to the west, then the long personnel car came through the high tussock grass and sort of oozed down to a soft-footed stop on the high west edge of the lagoon.

"Let me have that wheel," Tex sang out to the KP on the seat. "If this is my party, by hell, I'll do something about serving up some of the grief. . . . All right, Wrecker, how do you want this tow? . . . We've got a fifty-foot cable here."

"You can make it better on a shorter haul than that," Brolly said. "Come in, backwards, of course, as deep as she'll stand. Then we'll take a close-up bite with that cable, and—Whango—she'll walk right out of this water."

Tex Cooper swung the long car around, then began to back down the rather slick-and-slimy grade toward clear water. "How about your bottom?" he yelled.

"Itchy, brother, but never mind. Oh, the bottom of the lagoon, you mean? . . . This is all solid bottom, sand, Tex my boy. It's like down in Florida: You can drive a car any place. . . . Keep coming back. . . . Back. . . . Deeper than that. . . . Come on, she'll take it. You've got to be brave. . . . Back up. . . . Want me to swim in and handle that wheel?"

"It's all yours!" Tex Cooper yelled, making a hellish jump for safety, and the shore, just as the bottom went out from under the heavy personnel car and it went down to its seat tops.

"Well, I'll be—!" Brolly Goodenough exclaimed, put his fishpole aside, and shook with laughter. "You clumsy ox! You can't be trusted with anything delicate—like jeeps and personnel cars. O-boy-o-boy, I don't know how you're going to talk your way out of this. . . . Say, how about hopping back and getting that half-track, the one they use to haul the water tanks?"

Sitting on his heels, Tex Cooper began to light a cig. His eyes were on the spot

where that personnel's high point broke water, and angry, muttered words were on his lips. "Half-track, be damned! I'm through. Me—talk my way out of it! Hey, how about you hopping back for the half-track?"

"I'm fishing," Brolly said. "And they're biting for me. You don't want to break the spell, pal. Say, listen—don't forget to refuel your ship this time when you get back to the hangars. We don't want any forced landings. Another thing, see Page and find out if there's any signs of either White-Glove or our top heels. And while you're about it, Acting Mess Officer, step over to your establishment and get us some coffee and sandwiches. . . . I think that's all. I sure have to do all the thinking for this outfit."

"All the stinking for the outfit," Tex growled. "And do you smell! Okay. Okay, I'll go back this once, and that's all!"

Brolly glanced shoreward when he once more heard Tex Cooper's Cub engine start; and, being wise in his generation, he kept at least half an eye in that general direction. Soon, he heard the Cub growl through its rough-ground take-off, then purr as it went airborne—but it didn't appear above the high bracken and tall tree-line to the west. "Be on your toes, Tirua," Brolly warned. "Me two feller watchum. Feller him belong coconut hut come this way."

And sure enough, the cut-cut purr of the Cub's engine told Brolly that Tex was flying a seaward turn. Then that Cub came down across the treetops like a bat out of hell, put its nose right close to the water, and drilled across the surface on a beeline for the all-silver platform from which two men had been fishing—but were now diving. And when the Cub pulled up its nose and zoomed, its prop blast tossed water back across the vacated fishing platform.

Breaking surface again, Brolly tread water, hand-mopped the water from his face, and said, "Me two feller just make it, Tirua. House-sing-sing man, him bad mad."

"Him feller belong coconut hut," the Maori boy once more insisted. "Him feller give me feller puttim top wash wash."

MOKAU, dragging a gunnysack, came down the mud-flat beach and stopped just opposite the spot where the personnel

car rested. The Maori boy hunkered down atop his sack of oysters, grinned from ear to ear, then jabbered with Tirua, the while pointing from the sunken car to the almost-submerged Cub. Brolly, listening but gathering not a word, knew that Mokau, too, thought that one or more of the Yanks belonged in the coconut house. Plain to see, the native boys couldn't quite savvy the doings, though they'd seen some strange American customs paraded during their service on the post.

Having regained the all-silver fishing platform, Brolly explained that they must fish while the fishing was good, then work like the very devil on the tough job of getting this equipment out of the lagoon and back to the post.

"Number one feller, big bel bel feller, him raise hell? Him work feller grass belong face, cry nothing, talk talk, maybe shoot shoot?"—The commanding officer, the big fat man, he'll raise hell? Him work for Uncle Sam, Mr. Whiskers, get hysterical, hold meetings, maybe have Brolly and Tex shot at sunrise, and on a very clear morning?

"Him number one feller belong sky," Brolly agreed—Kaka's God himself—"and he sure will raise the very devil, Tirua."

Within the hour, there came another distant buzzing.

"On your toes again, Tirua," Brolly warned. Mokau got off his hams and began chicken-hopping in gay anticipation. He didn't have to hop long. Tex Cooper's busy Cub came down over the south-rim trees, once more drew a bead on that all-silver platform, and kept coming. And again Brolly Goodenough and Tirua went head-first into the lagoon. Tex snatched it out of the dive buzz, zoomed, made a few passes at that same ever-present pukeko crane, then went down for his landing.

"How'd you get all wet?" he asked Brolly, when once more he came down to the water's edge. "You sweating?"

"That you should mention sweating!" Brolly replied. "Well, have we got a half-track coming over?"

"It'll be over," Tex said, in his dullest flat voice, "and this time let's play off you've got good sense. I'll do the brain work, and you keep your trap closed. . . . It's a swell bottom, sez you! Just like down in Florida. You can drive any place in here!"

"It's all in the driver," Brolly belittled. "Didn't I offer to swim ashore and show you how it's done? I'm the man for a half-track, so maybe I'd better get in there and be ready."

"Stay right where you are," Tex warned. "Hold those fish up so's I can see them. Hell, you've got enough to feed a flight. Well, we can call off the fishing and take care of this equipment."

"Just the way I planned it," Brolly agreed. "Yes, sir, you took the thought right out of my head and put it in yours where thoughts are sure to feel lost. . . . Hey, is that the half-track I heard puffing?"

"It could be," Tex answered. "Yes, here he comes."

Again, when the KP driver came down to the shore, Tex Cooper ordered him out from behind the wheel. Once more, Tex climbed aboard a piece of Engineers Corps equipment and got set to do his stuff. All right, private," he said to the dismounted KP, "pull out that tow cable—run her out as far as she'll go—and hand the hook to Mokau. . . . You ketchum put um on personnel car front axle, Mokau? You gettum right in soda water, wash-wash."

MOKAU, being stripped down to the loin cloth and a friendly grin, took the hook end and started pulling the slack out of the cable as Tex backed toward the grassy crest of the lagoon's bank. He waded out, then stopped and called for more back-up when Tex stopped backing—with a half dozen yards still standing between his half-track's rear end and the snout of the submerged personnel car. Meantime, Brolly and Tirua were busy out around the Cub, the native boy doing something in the deep water while the Yank gave orders from his breast-deep point of command on the plane's right wheel.

"Hey, where's that other tow cable?" Tex yelled. "The one we had on this so-and-so personnel car? You got it out there, Brolly? Take it off that ship. Take it off, one thing at a time."

"Don't be that way, Longhorn. Tirua's got it hooked to our landing-gear now. You can pull both of these wrecks out together. I'm going to put the other end of this cable on your draw-bar hook."

"Sez who? Nuts on that," Tex yelled.

"My cable won't reach this personnel's axle. We'll play it safe, one at a time."

"Don't be a snook," Brolly advised, picking up the cable, quitting his wheel, then starting a swim toward the shore. "Be a man, Tex. Come back, way back, these half-tracks can go anywhere. My gosh, man, they can even walk on water. Come on back and I'll get both of these culls hooked up. Don't be a coward."

Tex Cooper hung over the side and took a good look at the ground under his cat tracks. It looked solid enough, and he was no coward. So he eased back—just a few feet—and the ground still looked okay. "Come on! Come on!" Brolly urged. "I'll watch your ground. Come on, right down the grade. She's solid as Gibraltar."

When the entire length of the half-track was on the mudflat beach, Tex stopped once more—and something deep within told him to start being a coward. Again, he hung out overside and took a good look at that beach. There was a little water oozing up between the track blocks, but still it looked good. "A

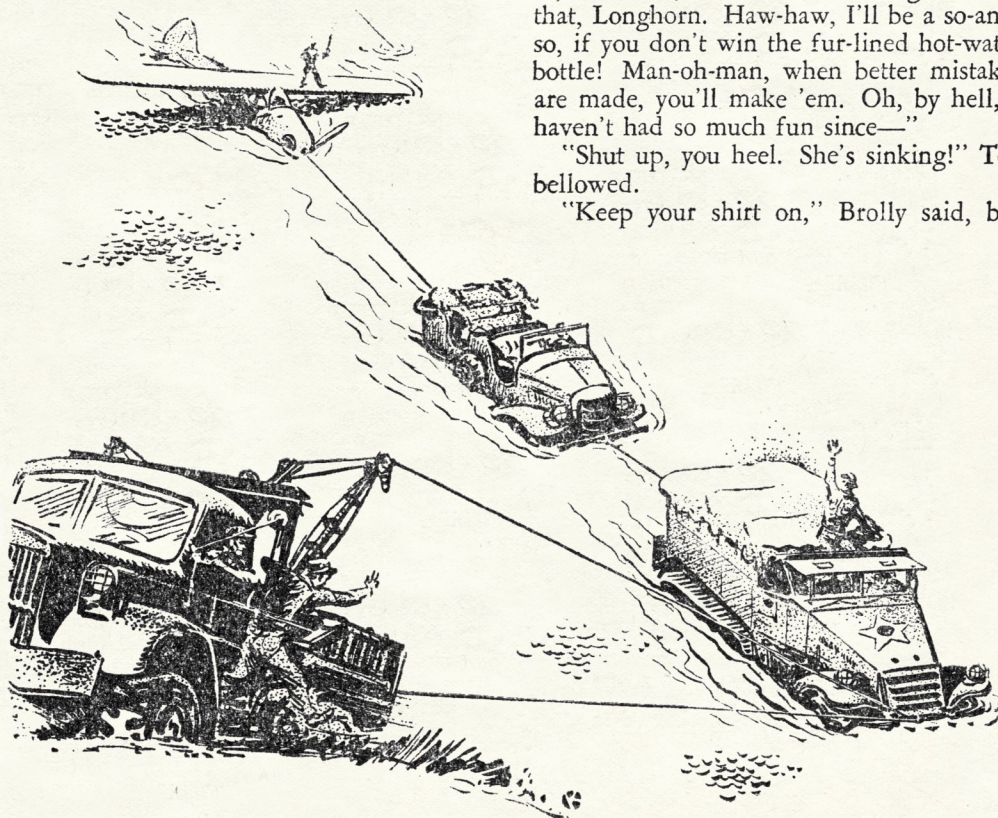
few more feet, Longhorn, and you're on," Brolly urged. And a few more feet Tex backed, and Brolly slipped the eye of his cable over the hook of the half-track's drawbar, while Mokau took his cable hook under water and made it fast to the axle of the personnel car. Then the Maori boy came back to the surface and said, "Hokay! you feller go-go-go, walkabout strong, no talk talk," and he began pointing to the water oozing up through those track blocks. He meant *step on it!*

"The boys right, Tex—take it away!" Brolly sang out; and Tex Cooper stepped on his throttle. The half-track moved ahead a yard, took all the slack out of both tow cables, then—Whoof-blop-shu-r-r—stalled and went dead.

"What the hell!" Tex yelled to high heaven, then stepped on his starter. The engine ground its starting gears, whurred its flywheel, barked out a few ignition shots, then went—Whoof-blop-shu-r-r—and stopped again. Out of gas!" Tex wailed. Brolly spun the cap off the fuel tank, glanced in, then said, "You'll never be righter than that, Longhorn. Haw-haw, I'll be a so-and-so, if you don't win the fur-lined hot-water bottle! Man-oh-man, when better mistakes are made, you'll make 'em. Oh, by hell, I haven't had so much fun since—"

"Shut up, you heel. She's sinking!" Tex bellowed.

"Keep your shirt on," Brolly said, but



continued to laugh. "You're all right, sitting pretty, it's just the tide coming in. All this equipment is holding its own—on good solid bottom. Tell you what to do, Tex—hop back to the post and get the crane truck."

"Listen, my superior officer, one more suggestion out of you," Tex Cooper belatedly, "an' by—Aw, for the love of Pete, Brolly, have a heart. I'm washed up. How about you hopping back for the crane truck? We'll need it. Just fuel won't do any good now."

"I'll have it here before you can say that long Greek name," Brolly agreed, starting up the bank and toward the inshore field which held Tex Cooper's Cub. "But say," he stopped to ask, "what did you learn at the post—anybody back yet?"

"Not a sign of either Kaka or Kakapo, or of old White-Glove Fagan's party," Tex said, continuing to sit his mired mount, tail low and spirits down. "And hey, Brolly, have Page—or the new officer of the day—open that emergency gate in the east-side fence. We don't want to drag this mess in past the guardhouse and up the main company street."

"Good suggestion. Now you're doing the heavy thinking," Brolly enthused. "Come on, Private, let's get aboard and back to the post. Now you'll really see some workman-like action. . . . And say, Longhorn, you forgot the grub, so if the boys get hungry, toss 'em a fish apiece. And if you get hungry while I'm gone, have them toss you a few. . . . *Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go. I'll get that crane, and use my brain, then give you gents a tow. Hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho!*"

It was a little after eleven when Brolly set down and rolled to a stop down near the last hangar—where a few Engineers Corps' vehicles still stood spick-and-span in the noon sunlight. Page had been relieved by the new officer of the day, and now he hurried up the apron to ask questions and learn the worst. So Brolly told him, ending by saying, "Yes, sir, you'd laugh your head off at o' Coop—seeing that half-track conk out at the very last second."

"But if it's just out of fuel," Page argued, "why do you need this heavy crane?"

"Ah, Page old man, it *was* just out of fuel," Brolly told the young Page. "But by

now that incoming tide will be up over its carburetor, and we can't wait to dry that engine out. Same goes for the personnel and Cub. So we'll take this crane over, yank 'em all out, load the Cub on top the personnel car, then tow the whole damn works back to where the two jeeps are in the quicksand. I saw them as I flew back here. So we'll lift them out as we come along, then drag the entire shootin'-match back through that east gate. Come on, climb aboard and give us a hand. . . . Move over, Private, and make room for the lieutenant."

WHEN they passed out through that east gate, then began humping and bumping eastward across the pumice plateau toward the bush, Page said, "We just got word in Headquarters that both the commanding officer and this General Fagan's party will be in Napier on the night train, so that's something."

"Everything's swell. Working out fine," Brolly said. "Just give us a few hours, Page, and we'll have all that equipment back on the post . . . by dark, maybe . . . if we get a few more breaks. . . . And talk about fish and oysters!"

"Let's don't," Page begged. "Fish—ye gods."

When Tuesday's reveille split the dawn and advised the ex-vacationists to rise and shine, top kicks and unit commanders hurried through all barracks and kept bawling: "That means everybody. . . . Everybody fall out."

And when they fell out, then fell in and came to attention, each C. O. talked to his unit. And each quoted from a Headquarters memo held in hand. The memo reminded all hands that a very important inspection was scheduled. Each memo also emphasized that in view of the fact that all equipment was in tiptop condition, the entire after-breakfast effort would be expanded with the sole purpose of putting the barracks, kitchens, mess halls and personal attire in spit-and-polish condition. And no man was to leave quarters between return from breakfast and first call for inspection!

Both Kaka Kelly and Kakapo Wade, looking pretty darned rough, were out there in the dawn, waddling from unit to unit, warning each C. O. that everything had to be up to par, and above.

So old Man Time, in that endless march of his, came down toward ten o'clock. First call for assembly sounded, and the units fell out once more. Then they marched out and lined up on the long hangar-fronting main apron. All hangar doors were pushed open; then all planes were shoved out and ranged wing-to-wing on the ready apron. The post was ready.

Old White-Glove Fagan, full of gout and fury, was a man to be on time. He didn't keep them waiting. Precisely at ten, on the dot, his group of cars whirled over from the Officers Club, stopped on the apron before Operations Office, and the big boy and his staff stepped down.

The command was snapped to attention. White-Glove, with the low-bowing Col. Kaka Kelly at his left, and Kakapo Wade not too far behind, started down the line. And the white gloves were as advertised. Yes, sir, the old heller had 'em on. Now and then, he placed a white glove on the tip of a propeller or on the end of a wing. Then all at attention eyes saw him glance at the white fingers. But he wasn't overly interested in planes, nor even in troops, for his leg-limp was pretty noticeable, and the gout must have been very bad. So he went on and on, down the long hangar line, northward. And as he passed, the units were ordered back to "at ease," but the assembled eyes still followed the fabled man of iron, guts, gall and white-clad mitts.

OLD White-Glove was really in a hurry, in a great hurry to get off those old sick legs, aboard his car once more, then hell and gone out of camp. So it's very likely that the inspection might have gone off in fine style were it not for the fact that White-Glove never neglected a single unit on a post, nor never favored himself by failing to walk the last few hundred feet on any line of inspection.

So he came down to where that Army Engineers Corps dirty-neck unit was at attention. And, staggering past, he just glanced at the men, then took a closer look at all that fine, clean equipment out front—there on the apron's end: the bulldozers, the cement mixers, the water and fuel tank-trailers, and the . . .

Old White-Glove Fagan's eyes fell on

those items that were not out front: those two sand-covered, battered jeeps, that mud-incased personnel car, that goo-caked heavy-duty crane, and, above all, that half-track just behind the crane, that half-track with the once-all-silver airplane still atop its rear box.

Old White-Glove hit the ceiling. He forgot his gout. He yelled for his clerk, a master sergeant of old vintage, and that worthy stepped forward, pencil and writing board in hand. And what White-Glove dictated for his report was awful.

"What about this, Kelly?" he finally bellowed.

Kaka Kelly was nearly out on his feet. "Sir," he said, "I've been away. . . . We'll find out. . . . Oh, Page! Somebody get Lieutenant Page!"

Kakapo and a few others started down the long line looking for ex-Officer of the Day Page. Also, swinging on his heel, old White-Glove started down the line; and he was so mad that he no longer limped. He was on his way.

About midway of the hangar line, poor Page came up, and both Kaka and Kakapo stopped and put the questions to him. White-Glove Fagan and his party kept walking, toward those cars down near Operations. Finally, Kaka and Kakapo came running down the apron, calling, "Oh, General Fagan. . . . Just a moment, sir."

Directly in front of where Brolly and Tex stood at ease with flying-officers unit, Kaka and Kakapo caught up with White-Glove; and the big boy stopped to listen.

"Sir, we can explain," Kaka said. "It was all an accident. That equipment got that way, only yesterday, while out for the fish, over on Hawke Bay."

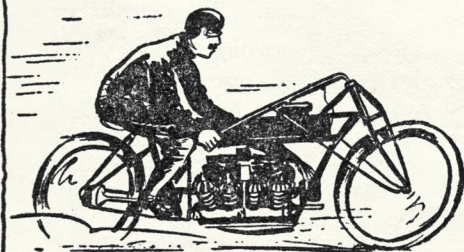
"Fish! Fish! Why fish?" White-Glove yelled.

"For you, sir. I ordered it for you, sir," Kaka said. "I knew how much you like fish, sir."

"Me—loaded with gout—like fish! Damn your stupid soul, Kelly, I haven't eaten fish in years. Dam' dumb mess officer down in the Canal Zone like to've killed me with ptomaine, fed me oysters in May. You'll hear from G. H. Q. Get out of my way. . . . Driver, get going. Napier. Get me away from this madhouse."

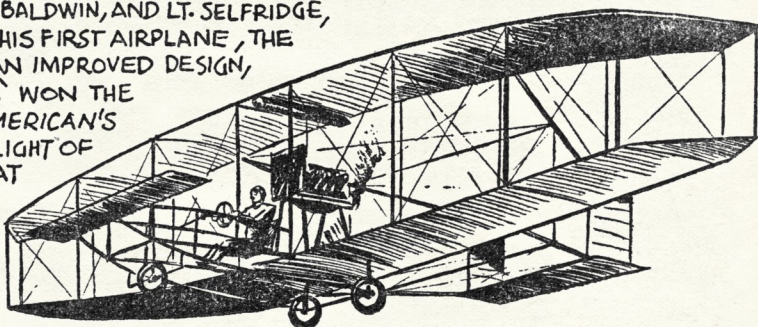
FLYING TINTYPES

BY JIM RAY

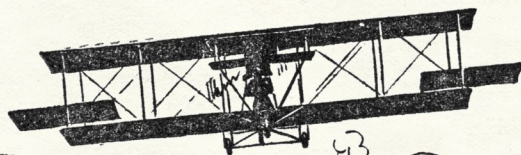


GLENN CURTISS BEGAN HIS CAREER AS A BICYCLE MANUFACTURER IN HAMMONDSPORT, N.Y. IN 1906 TOM BALDWIN, NOTED BALLOONIST, ASKED CURTISS TO DESIGN A MOTOR FOR HIS NEW AIRSHIP. THEREAFTER HE BUILT SEVERAL. MOUNTING ONE OF HIS V-8 ENGINES IN A MOTORCYCLE FRAME, HE BROKE THE WORLD'S SPEED RECORD AT ORMOND BEACH, FLA.—127 MILES AN HOUR.

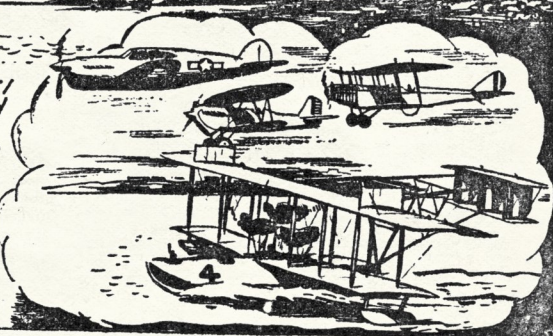
IN 1907, IN ASSOCIATION WITH ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL, BALDWIN, AND LT. SELFRIDGE, CURTISS BUILT HIS FIRST AIRPLANE, THE 'RED WING'. AN IMPROVED DESIGN, THE 'JUNE BUG' WON THE 'SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN'S' PRIZE FOR A FLIGHT OF 2000 YARDS AT 39 MILES PER HOUR, AT HAMMONDSPORT.



ON MAY 29, 1910, CURTISS MADE HIS NOW-FAMOUS FLIGHT FROM ALBANY TO NEW YORK. COMPARE HIS TIME OF OVER TWO HOURS WITH THE RECENT FLIGHT OF A JET PURSUIT OVER THE SAME COURSE IN TWENTY MINUTES!



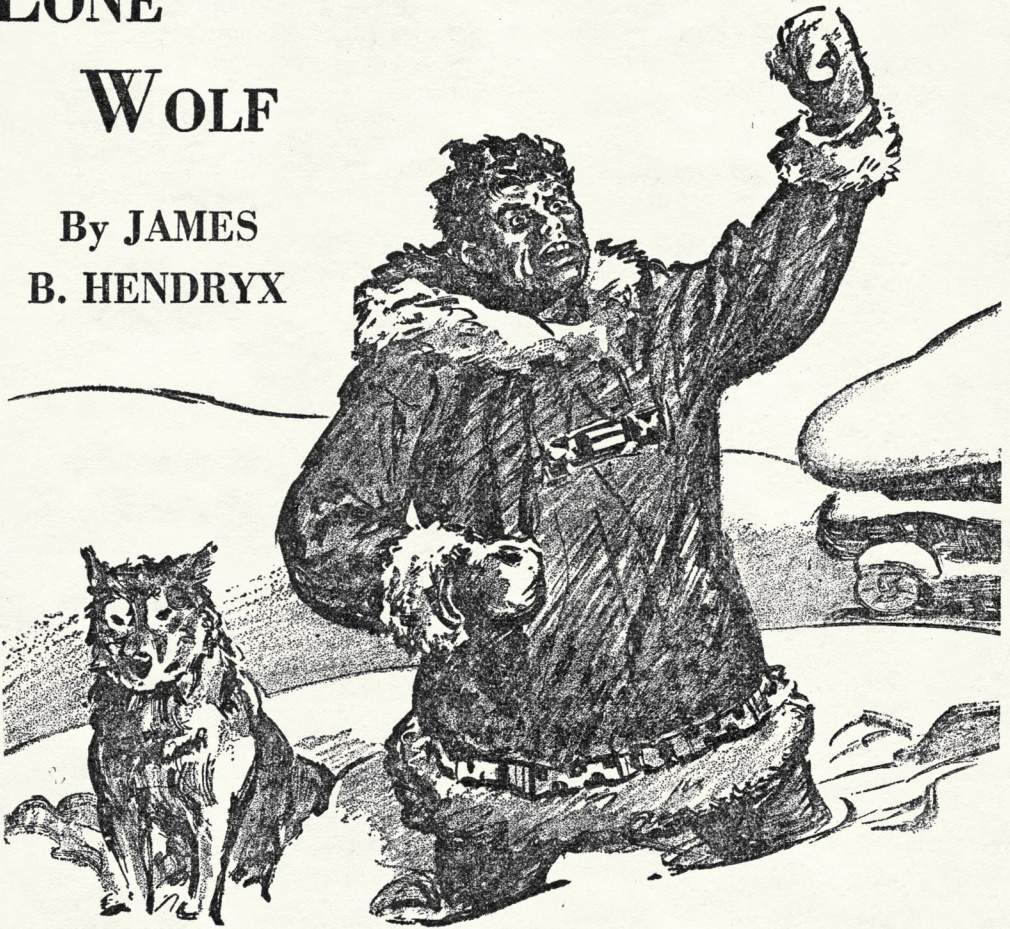
WITH THE ADVENT OF WORLD WAR I, CURTISS BEGAN TO DESIGN MILITARY TRAINERS AND SEAPLANES, INCLUDING THE FAMOUS 'JENNY' AND THE 'NC-4', THE FIRST TO FLY THE ATLANTIC. THE 'P-40' PURSUIT, LATEST OF THE CURTISS HAWK FAMILY, WAS THE FIRST U.S. PLANE IN ACTIVE SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II.



*Could the Spirits Bring Him a
Thousand Ounces of Gold?*

LONE WOLF

By JAMES
B. HENDRYX



I

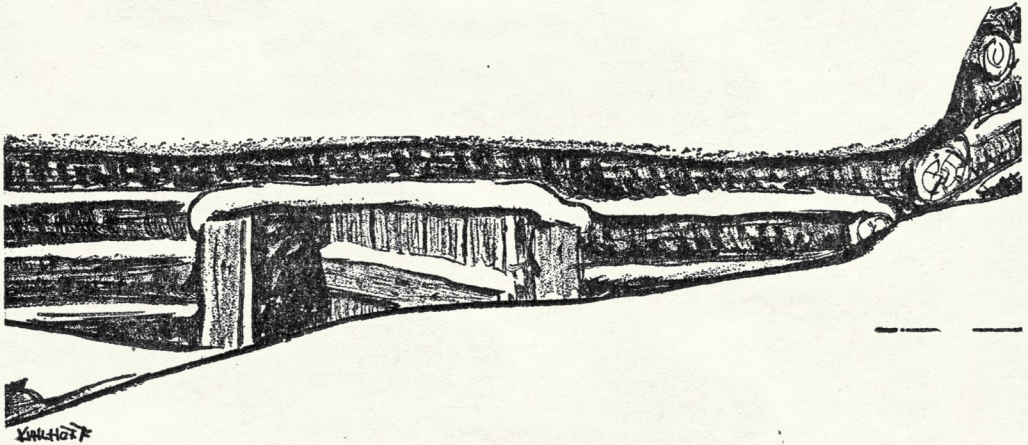
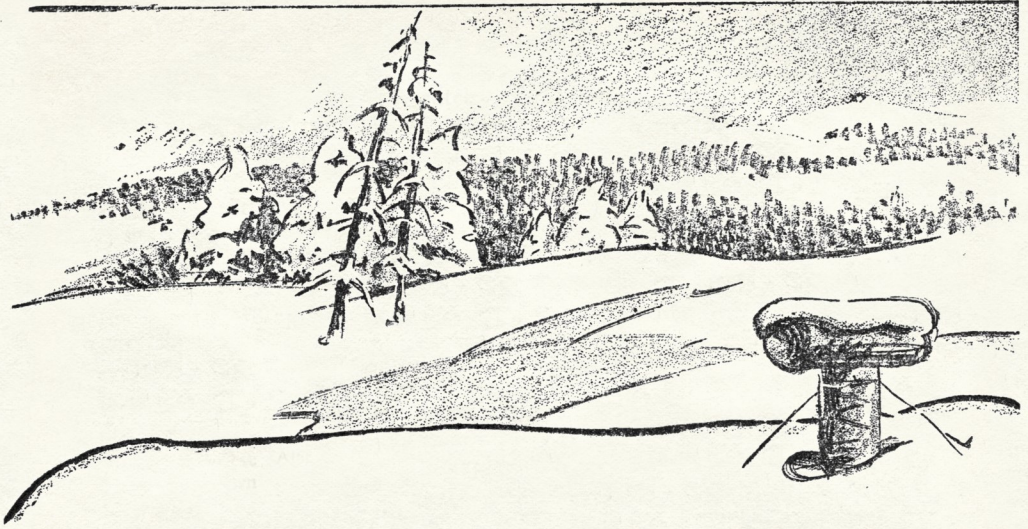
THE Indian cringed and vainly sought to shield his face with his arms as, in a paroxysm of rage, Jim Gilbert struck again and again, his huge fists landing with an impact that drew blood from nose and lips. When he fell to the ground Gilbert kicked him viciously. "Take that, damn you! An' if you don't locate that crick tomorrow you'll git some more of the same medicine! An' you'll git a dost of it every

night till you do find it! Git up now an' feed them dogs!"

The Indian regained his feet, wiped the blood from his chin with his sleeve, and proceeded to cut portions of caribou meat which he tossed to the six big husky dogs.

Jim Gilbert slipped between his blankets. When he awoke in the morning the Indian was gone. "Good reddenne," he growled, as he hung his tea pail over the fire. "I've mistrusted fer a week he was lost."

It was Jim Gilbert's oft repeated boast that he was a lone wolf. He had wintered



alone on the upper Macmillan with disappointing results. With the break-up came the Indian with the tale of a creek to the northward where gold lay thick in the rifles behind the rocks of a rapid. When Gilbert accused him of lying he showed gold—not dust, but coarse gold—irregular-shaped nuggets that he carried loose in his pocket. Whereupon Gilbert hired him to guide him to this creek which he vaguely described as lying many sleeps to the northward. An ounce a day Gilbert promised him, if he found the creek. Nothing if he failed.

With the six big dogs packed to the limit, and heavy packs on their own backs, the two had headed northward into the mountains. It was hard, gruelling work, following up creeks, cat-climbing over steep divides, following down other creeks, rafting across rivers, unloading the dogs each

night, rubbing grease into their fly-tortured ears. As the days lengthened Jim Gilbert's temper shortened, until that night, a month out, when the Indian admitted he was lost, it had burst all bounds.

Gilbert now slapped a steak into the frying pan and nested it among the coals. He knew that the general trend of the thirty-day journey had been northward, maybe a little east. But how far east they had drifted he couldn't say, what with the twistings and turnings of the creeks, and the slanting across the divides. He knew that somewhere to the westward lay the Yukon—maybe two hundred miles—maybe three hundred. And far, very far to the eastward the mighty MacKenzie flowed northward to the frozen sea. To the northward, a hundred miles, two hundred, three hundred maybe lay the Peel, and the Porcupine, and beyond them the

Arctic. He wondered whether or not he had crossed the height of land. It was a rough country. A country few men had ever traversed, and no man really knew. Besides his little breakfast fire he talked to himself as is the wont of lone men.

"Might's well keep driftin' north fer a spell. We shore as hell ain't run acrost no crick like he told about. Gee—coarse gold right in the top gravel! It might be jest over the next divide. It's in here somewheres. By God, he found that gold—he shore as hell never made it. Anyways, I kin always turn west to the Yukon."

Breakfast over, he packed his dogs and pushed on. Game was plentiful. There was no need to hurry. He paused often to pan the gravel of likely looking creeks.

ON THE tenth day after the disappearance of the Indian, he squatted beside the shallow rapids of a creek and clawed the coarse gravel from his pan. His eyes widened as they caught a flick of yellow, and his heavy fingers burrowed into the smaller stuff in the bottom of the pan and came out grasping an irregular, flattish nugget, rough and dull on one side, smooth and bright on the other. "Three dollars, if she's a dime!" he gloated, and proceeded to rotate the pan in his two hands. When he flirited the last of the sand and gravel from the pan he stared down at a half-dozen yellow grains the size of kernals of wheat, and a thin scattering of flour gold.

He laid the pan aside and stared down into the riffles. Suddenly he reached down and withdrew from behind a stone another irregular nugget. "Half an ounce!" he breathed, his voice hoarse with excitement. "By God, this might be the crick!" Dropping to his knees, he leaned out over the water, his eyes greedily searching the bottom behind the innumerable stones. "It ain't like he claimed it was," he admitted, as his eyes probed the gravel, "but she's plenty good. An' mebbe there's a better rapids up, er down."

For several days he explored the creek, finding more nuggets and considerable dust. On the morning of the fourth day he selected a spot in a grove of tall slim spruce beside a rapid and proceeded to build a cabin. It was a box of a thing, eight feet by ten, windowless and floorless, with

a door of split puncheons. A mere den. But it would serve to keep out the rain, and the snow, and the cold. In all his prospecting this was the most likely creek he had found, and he decided to winter here.

The fact that he was alone bothered him not at all. In the big camps he drank and gambled. But not for the reason that other men drink and gamble—for recreation and for the pleasure of associating with their kind. Jim Gilbert gambled solely to win. And he drank because he liked to get drunk.

As he worked on his cabin he planned the future. He would chop wood for his fires and burn into the frozen gravel this winter until his shaft got shoulder-deep, then he would sink another shaft. In the spring he would sluice out his dumps, go to Dawson for supplies and a big drunk, record his claim, hire a Siwash, and next winter he'd go down to bedrock. No pardner for him! What this crick paid was going to be his—and his alone, except for grub, and the wages of his helper. Siwash help was better than white. You can bully a Siwash, and cheat him. And if he squawks you can run him off—an' he can't do a damn thing about it. "I'm a lone wolf." He repeated the boast aloud. The words sounded self-sufficient, and ruthless, and hard. The thought gave him satisfaction and pride.

When he had pushed on up the Macmillan the previous autumn men had warned against wintering alone. But he'd done it, hadn't he? And he'd do it again—two winters, hand running. To hell with 'em! He'd show 'em!

Caribou were plentiful. He and the dogs lived well. When the cabin was finished he built a meat cache and a dog shelter. Then he put in long days chopping wood for the fires that would burn into the gravel, piling it loosely so it would dry. He split out planks for a sluice and a set of riffles. He had time now, in the winter he would be too busy burning in. And in the spring he would be in a hurry to get at the sluicing.

Autumn came, and using his fish net and some brush, he built a trap and caught geese and ducks in a small marshy lake. These he hung from the platform of his meat cache out of reach of the dogs and prowling wolves.

The little lakes and the sluggish stretches of the creek froze. He built a sled, fash-

ioned a harness out of green caribou hide, and when the ground whitened he hunted caribou, hauling the meat in and storing it on the cache.

He would have to go easy on the beans, and the tea, and the dried peas. And there was only a little flour left in the sack. But he'd winter through, all right. A man can winter through on meat. You've got to eat the fat along with the lean, an' eat some of it raw—that's what the old-timers claim—an' you won't get scurvy. He had a bottle of pain killer and a pint of whiskey, in case his guts went back on him. Yes, he'd winter through. What a man has done once he can do again. And in the spring, if this crick was as good as she looks, he'd be blowing dust in the saloons like Swiftwater Bill and Jimmie the Rough, and the other high binders of Dawson. Maybe next winter he'd fetch a woman out. He'd build a bigger shack and put in a window, and his helper could winter in this one.

When the ground froze hard enough to hold out the seepage he cleared the snow from a space a short distance back from the rapids and started a shaft. It was slow work, hauling the wood from the spruce grove, burning in, digging out the thawed gravel and throwing it onto the dump. Each day he took a test pan, or two. It was pay dirt all right—a damn sight better than wages. And this was only top gravel! Wait till he got into the real stuff! You bet, he'd show 'em!

The strong cold came and a column of vapor, steam Gilbert called it, rose high in the air above the rapids. When the fast water froze over he chopped through the thickening ice to get water for his cooking and test panning.

TOWARD noon, one day in early December, he noticed a peculiar feel to the motionless air. It seemed heavy—pressing in on him—smothering him. He paused frequently in the shaping of a sluice timber to catch his breath. He drew the air deep into his lungs, but it seemed dead—lacking, somehow, in the life-giving quality that should send the blood coursing through his veins.

"Must be gittin' short-winded," he grunted. "Guess I'll knock off." Sinking his ax into the timber, he stepped from the

grove and glanced at the sun low-hung above the rim of the world to the southward. It had a peculiar lopsided appearance, emitting a pale sickly light in which was no suggestion of warmth. A million needle points danced before his eyes, and from the mountain peaks to the westward, long banners of snow-dust streamed toward the south.

Jim Gilbert shuddered uneasily and glanced at the dogs huddled beneath their brush shelter. "Funny that snow should be flyin' off'n them mountains when there ain't no wind," he muttered, his eyes on the streaming banners. "The damn air feels heavy—so heavy the wind can't shove it. He tossed some wood onto the fire in his shaft and, stepping into the cabin, kindled a fire in his collapsible sheetiron stove. It was dark as night in there, and he lay down on his bunk.

He awoke chilled to the bone. The fire had burned out, and for several minutes he lay there in the blackness listening to the dull roar that seemed a sound, yet not a sound—rather like a condition that emanated from within his brain, rather than a sound from without. He swung his legs stiffly from the bunk and sat for a moment staring into the blackness. "God," he mumbled, as he recalled the dead air, the weak lopsided sun, and the long pennants of snow that had streamed from the mountain peaks when there was no wind, "am I goin' nuts—er what?"

Crossing to the door he threw it open, to be greeted by stygian blackness and a blast of fine snow-powder that sent him reeling backward. No doubt now about that low steady roar. It was wind—wind sweeping down the valley, full-freighted with snow particles, fine as fog, that bit and seared the flesh like myriads of white-hot needle points. Gasping, he forced the door shut against the blast. He felt better, knowing that the roar was real—not a phantasy of his brain. He lighted a candle, kindled his fire, and fried a caribou steak he cut from a haunch he drew from beneath his bunk.

For four days the blizzard raged with unabated fury. Jim Gilbert had only three candles left, so he sat in darkness, staring by the hour at the little row of air holes that glowed red along the front of the stove. Toward evening of the first day he fought

his way to the meat cache and rolled off half a caribou carcass for the dogs. During the next three days he remained in the cabin, opening the door only to get snow for cooking water. His firewood was running low, but he dared not go for his ax. In that opaque white smother he could scarcely see his mittened hand held at arm's length before his face. He hoped that his wood would outlast the storm.

On the morning of the fifth day he stepped from the shack into a world of dazzling whiteness. Snow lay three feet deep against the door—hard, wind-packed snow that his feet scarcely dented. A ten-foot drift covered the mouth of his shaft, and a long drift slanted upward from the creek to the meat cache, the pole platform of which had been a good twelve feet in the clear. The dog shelter on the opposite side of the cabin was completely buried.

Jim Gilbert squinted his eyes against the snow glare and a curse escaped him as his glance centered upon the tracks—hundreds of tracks that scarred the surface of the up-slanting drift. He lunged toward the cache, slipping back, digging his toes into the wind-packed snow in the ascent of the track-scarred white ramp that slanted upward to the platform. When he gained the top he stood there too stunned to curse—too stunned to do anything but stare down at the havoc that had been wrought while the storm raged. Of the dozen geeze and thirty-odd ducks all that remained were the caribou hide thongs that had suspended them by the necks from the platform. And of the four caribou carcasses that had rested on the platform he could see only a few silvery tendons and innumerable tooth-scarred bones scattered about on the snow.

Numbed by the catastrophe, his brain sought to translate it into terms of stark existence. All of his food—the meat that was to have kept life in his body and in the bodies of his dogs until well into the spring, was gone. In the cabin were a few beans and peas, and possibly twenty pounds of meat under his bunk. And the nearest trading post a hundred—two hundred—maybe three hundred miles away. There was scarcely food enough to take him fifty miles—and none at all for the dogs. Going was slow and hard in the mountains. With no snowshoes, and a backpack, and all this new

snow—he'd be lucky to make fifty miles. So, hitting for a trading post was out. Even if he should make it he had only a few ounces of dust. He'd have to put in the winter working for wages. Damned if he'd work for wages! Not while he had a good proposition here on this crick!

His only chance was to stay where he was. He must hunt—must kill more caribou. He was conscious of a sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach at the thought that he had seen no caribou since October—no tracks even. There had been a couple of weeks in October when he had seen them every day, hundreds of them, on the hills and in the creek bottom, all heading to the eastward. It was then he had procured the meat for the cache—procured it with little effort. Two of the animals he had shot within a hundred yards of the cabin.

He might manage to snare some rabbits on the willow flat down the creek. But even if he were lucky, rabbit snaring would take practically all his time. The days were short, and he must work his shaft. He could kill the dogs. He had heard of men who had staved off starvation with dog meat. But with no food, the dogs would get thinner and thinner. They might dress out forty or fifty pounds apiece if he killed them now—nearly three hundred pounds. He might winter through on that. He made a wry face—the meat would be tough and stringy, and it would probably taste like hell. He would hunt caribou first. Only as a last resort would he kill the dogs.

Jim Gilbert was in a tough spot. A wave of self-pity swept over him, followed by a surge of insensate rage. As he stood there atop the huge drift that covered the platform of his cache he shook a mittened fist toward the hillside where the trail of the marauding wolf pack disappeared in the sparse timber. He cursed aloud in a voice trembling with fury—a voice that sounded shrill, and thin, and futile as the squeak of a rat in a trap amid the profound silence of the surrounding peaks.

A slight sound attracted his attention and he whirled to see a dog emerge from the drift that covered the shelter. The other five followed, running about on the snow, sniffing the wolf tracks, and the remnants of gnawed bone.

Jim Gilbert walked down the snow ramp

and, stepping into the cabin, picked up his rifle. If he expected to do any hunting that day he had better be getting at it. The sun would be down in an hour.

Crossing the creek, he proceeded to the spruce grove where he had left his ax. The walking was good on the wind-packed snow, but a dozen steps within the timber found him wallowing in snow up to his middle—soft snow that gripped his legs like quicksand. Fifty feet farther on he paused for breath. A man couldn't keep this up—couldn't make a mile an hour. And if he should kill a caribou he could never pack the meat to the cabin, and in snow like this the dogs couldn't pull an empty sled, much less a load of meat.

Retrieving his ax, he returned to the cabin, put up his rifle, dug one of the sluice planks from under the snow, and proceeded to fashion a pair of snowshoes. It was dark when he finished. They were clumsy affairs, at best, but he fastened them on with strips of caribou hide and tried them out, walking into the timber by the light of the glittering stars. They weren't so bad when he got the hang of them, sinking only five or six inches into the soft snow. A man could stand that. He could break trail, now, for the dog-sled. Tomorrow he would hunt.

II

JIM GILBERT smelled smoke as he topped the divide—the bitter, acrid smoke of a spruce fire. He had travelled some six miles up the creek in the direction the migrating caribou had taken in the fall, and now stood gazing out over another valley. "Smoke, all right," he muttered, "but where the hell is it comin' from?"

In vain his eyes searched the sparsely timbered hillsides, then shifted to an open flat a mile or more to the eastward, and centered upon a tiny dark figure. Another figure appeared and seemed to be moving about. Then an elongated figure emerged from a grove of timber and moved toward the others. This, he decided, must be a dog-team. It looked at that distance like a team of bugs, followed by another bug that walked upright.

He had covered half the distance that separated him from the figures before he saw the smoke—three thin plumes that seemed

to rise directly out of the snow. "Must be burnin' into the gravel," he muttered. "God, I wonder if this is the crick that damn Siwash was tellin' me about—an' I missed it by jest one divide!" He redoubled his pace, but not until he had approached to within a few hundred yards did he make



out the three snow houses from the domed roofs of which the smoke was rising. The figures, one seated, and two standing awaited his approach.

Jim Gilbert halted and scrutinized the three. Neither in dress nor looks were they like any Indians he had ever seen. They were clad in fur parkas with tails hanging down the back, and their feet and legs were encased in sealskin boots with the hair outside. He advanced closer. "You guys must be Eskimos, ain't you?" he asked, by way of greeting.

"Kigirktarugmuit," one of the young men answered. The other young man grinned, exposing strong irregular teeth. Gilbert noticed that all had wide, flat faces, and that their eyes seemed narrow, as though perpetually squinted against snow-glare. The third person, a very old man, was seated upon a snow block arranging and rearranging some rib bones spread on the snow before him. He had a scraggly mustache. The younger men were smooth faced save for a few straggling hairs on chins and upper lips.

"That might be what you call it," Gilbert said, "but yer Eskimos all the same. By God,

them snow houses is jest like the pitchers in the g'ography—snow tunnels to crawl in, an' all. Now what do you know about that! Does any of you savvy English?"

The one who had answered first, nodded and launched into a jumble of disconnected words from which Gilbert was able to make out that he had worked one summer on a whaler.

Hearing voices, three young children and several puppies crawled from the tunnel of one of the houses and stood shyly eying the stranger.

"You must be quite a ways from home, ain't you?" Gilbert asked, pointing to the northward.

The man nodded. "Ver' far. Many sleeps."

"A bunch of wolves robbed my cache when the storm was on an' et all my meat," Gilbert explained. "I'm huntin' caribou. But I ain't saw none—not even no tracks."

The man shook his head and explained that it was the wrong time of year for caribou. In the spring they would come back.

"Well, I can't wait till spring! I gotta eat. I gotta have meat now. Ain't you got no meat?"

Yes, the man said, they had meat. He pointed to the oldster who, apparently oblivious to the conversation, continued to arrange the rib bones into various patterns on the snow. Atpek, he explained, was a very great *angakut*, or shaman. The spirits he commanded were very powerful. He could make caribou appear where no caribou were. Yesterday he had made three caribou come and they had killed them because they were out of meat.

"Will you sell a couple of 'em?"

The man shook his head. He explained that if they should sell any of the meat the spirits would be angry, and would send no more caribou.

Gilbert frowned. "That's all damn poppy-cock—about spirits, an' all that stuff. The caribou was here er you couldn't of killed 'em."

If the *kabluna* is hungry, the young man said, they would give him one-quarter. But they would not sell any meat.

The white man scowled at the oldster. "What's he doin' with them there bones?" he asked. "Playin some kind of a game."

For answer the spokesman pointed to the

other young man, and then to the snow house before which he stood, and explained that the man's wife was inside having a baby, and that they wanted a man child, so Atpek was arranging it thus with the spirits.

JIM GILBERT laughed derisively. "You fellas believe all that damn nonsense, eh? Hell—if it's goin' to be a boy it'll be one—er a girl, either. There ain't nothin' them bones kin do about it."

The man pointed to the three children. The older two were boys, he explained, because that's what he and his wife wanted, and thus Atpek had arranged it with the spirits. But next time they had wanted a girl—and Atpek arranged that, also. The bones were powerful, being ribs of the mountain sheep from far to the northwestward.

"Hell," scoffed Gilbert, "it jest happened like that! Any damn fool would know them bones didn't have nothin' to do with it. He had a fifty-fifty chanct of bein' right every time, an' he was lucky—that's all. Tell you what I'll do—I'll bet my rifle again' what meat you got that he'll miss this time. No one can't keep on winnin' all the time."

The man refused to bet. He didn't know how the spirits would like betting on their efficiency. It might anger them. While he was speaking a woman wriggled from the tunnel of the igloo, threw back the folds of a robe of soft fox skin and momentarily exposed a tiny red squirming infant. Gilbert stared. It was beyond doubt a man child. "Well, I'll be damned!" he uttered, slanting a sidewise glance toward the oldster who was gathering up his bones and placing them in a sealskin pouch. "An' the woman up an' around a'ready!"

The young man explained that the woman who held the baby was his wife, who had been in attendance on the other woman who was having the baby.

An idea struck Jim Gilbert. "Say—if old what's-his-name's so damn good, ask him what he'll take to conjure a couple of caribou over onto my crick. It's the next crick from here—five, six mile beyond the divide."

The young man spoke to the oldster in the native tongue, the conversation lasting for several minutes. Finally he turned to

Gilbert and pointed to his belt-ax. Atepek, he explained, would cause two caribou to appear on the creek at the specified place in return for the *kablund's* belt-ax.

Gilbert laughed. "Tell him it's a deal. I'm goin' home now. Tell him if them caribou shows up I'll come back an' pay him. I ain't puttin' out nothin' in advance on no proposition like that. If they show up, he'll git paid. If they don't, I'll be back tomorrow after that there hindquarter you offered to give me. So long."

Jim Gilbert paused, and from the top of the divide glanced back over the valley. "Them snow houses," he muttered, "you can't see 'em till yer right on top of 'em. Them wimmin must sure be tough—havin' a kid in a place like that. An' that old guy—Popcock, er whatever his name is—foolin' around with them bones so it would be a boy. It beats hell what them furrigners kin think up to believe in. But by God—it *was* a boy, at that. But, hell, he had a fifty-fifty chanct. It had to be one er the other. But these here caribou now, is different. What with not seein' no tracks sence fall, he ain't got no fifty-fifty chanct on them—by a damn sight. It's a thousan' to one shot they won't show up. Them three caribou the guy claimed they killed yesterday—they jest happened along—got lost outa the herd, er somethin'—an' the old cuss claims he fetched 'em. "But," he admitted, "if a couple of 'em *should* show up on the crick tomorrow, a man wouldn't know *what* to think." He turned and descended onto his own creek, following his back-trail by the light of the stars.

It was broad daylight when he stepped from his cabin the following morning. He would harness the dogs and go after that quarter of meat before the Eskimos pulled out. Damn cusses like them—they're here today, an' gone tomorrow. What if they'd already pulled out to save that caribou quarter? The old guy know'd damn well he couldn't make no caribou show up. He jest said that to git shet of me.

HE WAS about to reach onto the roof for the harness when a movement across the creek caught his eye. He glanced toward the grove of timber from which a caribou had just stepped into the open. Even as he looked, the animal was joined by another.

Eyes fairly bulging from their sockets, Jim Gilbert took a backward step, reached inside the door, and grasped his rifle. The two animals stood there, scarce a hundred yards away, looking at him. He raised the rifle, and cursed under his breath. His hands trembling so violently that he couldn't line his sights. Dropping to one knee, he rested his elbow on the other. The gun steadied, and he pressed the trigger. One of the animals leaped into the air, lunged forward and collapsed on the snow. The other ran a short distance, turned, and stood looking at its stricken mate. Again Gilbert pressed the trigger, and the second animal sank slowly to the snow and lay still.

Jim Gilbert ejected the empty shell and stood staring at the two carcasses. His forehead felt suddenly cold and he wiped tiny beads of sweat from his brow with a shaking hand, "I'll be damned," he mumbled incredulously.

All during the short hours of daylight, and far into the dark he worked, skinning and dressing out the animals, clearing the snow from the cache, and storing the meat. Late that night as he ate his solitary supper by the light of his guttering candle he muttered to himself:

"He couldn't of done it. It don't stand to reason. Them caribou jest come here. How in hell *could* he fetch 'em? But still an' all—them damn Eskimos—livin' way up there where there ain't nothin' but snow—you don't never hear tell of 'em starvin' to death, at that.

The thought occurred to him to keep his belt-ax, and try to winter through on the two carcasses. He had the meat now—and, after all, a belt-ax is a handy thing to have. "Not by a damn sight," he growled, with a furtive glance that swept the gloomy corners of the tiny room. "No tellin' what might happen. If he kin do that, he kin do anythin'. By God, I ain't takin no chances!"

In the morning he rummaged in his pack, slipped a sheath knife into his pocket, fastened on his snowshoes, and struck off up the creek. "I'll trade him this here knife the damn Siwash left when he pulled out on me fer a couple more caribou. Then I'll be settin' right where I was, barrin' the ducks and geese. Wish I'd et them first. But I was savin' 'em fer a kind of a change, like."

He found the old shaman seated on his

snow block working on a shank bone with a file. Without a word he stepped up to him, removed the belt-ax, sheath and all, and handed it to him. The oldster took it, laid it aside, and went on with his filing.

Gilbert turned to the interpreter who was hacking at a stick of wood with an ax. "How's the kid?"

The man looked puzzled.

"The baby. The one that was borned yesterday. How's he gittin' along?"

"Good baby."

"Tell the old man I'll give him a damn good belt knife fer two more caribou."

"Atpek say no more caribou," the man replied, after a short conversation in the native tongue.

"The hell he does! Ask him what he wants to boot."

Another conversation ensued. "Atpek say no want boots. Say no more caribou."

Gilbert frowned. Evidently the old man was determined to produce no more caribou. Well he could winter through on what he had if he didn't have to feed the dogs. He wouldn't need the dogs during the winter, nor in the spring when he hit for Dawson. He'd kill them off. A sudden thought flashed into his brain, and he eyed the interpreter. Say—if the old guy's as good as he claims he is, why couldn't he make gold be where he wanted it?"

"Gold?" The man repeated the word as though he had never heard it before.

"Shore—like this." Gilbert drew a pouch from his pocket and shook a few nuggets into the palm of his hand. The man picked up a nugget, examined it, and carried it to the shaman. Gilbert stepped closer. "Ask him kin he fetch gold like he kin fetch caribou."

As the younger man ceased speaking, the oldster glanced at the metal, nodded and grunted a few unintelligible words.

"Atpek say 'yes,'" the younger man reported.

"What'll he take to make some show up on my crick?"

A short conversation followed. "Atpek say how much gold you want?"

Gilbert laughed. "Well, a thousan' ounces would do fer a starter." The man seemed not to comprehend, and Gilbert made a lifting motion with his hands. "Heavy—like a hind quarter of caribou."

"Atpek say give him knife."

"Okay. Tell him it's a deal. Jest as quick as I git them ounces I'll come over an' pay him. So long."

III

THE stranger appeared the next day. He came from the eastward—from the no man's land to the eastward. He was tall and gaunt, and he carried a pack. The pack was heavy, but small in bulk, for the man had little food. He ate ravenously and when the meal was finished he picked up the little pouch that Gilbert had left lying on the rude table, opened it, and peered inside. He drew out a nugget—the half-ounce nugget that Gilbert had picked from behind the stone in the rapid, and devoured it with glittering eyes.

"Gold. Coarse gold. I'm stayin' here."

Gilbert scowled. "Like hell you be! This is my crick! I found it, an' I'm goin' to work it!"

"You can't claim the hull crick."

"The hell I can't! Who's goin' to stop me? An' besides, there ain't no grub fer two. An' the caribou's all gone. There ain't no more."

The man laughed, a peculiar shrill peal of laughter that caused a chill to creep up and down Gilbert's spine as he stared into the flickering eyes. "Ha, ha, ha! The caribou! I know where they are. I lived with 'em—hundreds of 'em—thousands—a long ways from here—where the lakes are—and the long salt marshes!"

"Why'n hell didn't you stay there?"

The glittering eyes fixed upon Gilbert's face. "I must find gold—much gold," he replied, in a deep, sepulchral tone.

"Well, by heck, you ain't agoin' to find it here! Like I said this is my crick—an' there ain't no grub."

"You are lyin'. You killed two caribou across the crick only yesterday. There is fresh meat on yer cache—an' I seen the guts."

"Them didn't belong here. An old man conjured 'em in. He's an Eskimo. He works with bones. He made the sperits fetch them caribou. An' they won't fetch no more."

The glittering eyes flickered even more intensely. "The sperits—the sperits fetched me, too. So I could dig gold—coarse gold—big nuggets like this one. They told me I'd

find it—if I kept goin' on—an' on—an' on." The man paused abruptly and passed a bony hand across his brow. When he withdrew the hand the flickering glitter was gone from the eyes, and he stared at Gilbert as though he had only just seen him. "But," he asked, in a puzzled tone, "why are you here?"

"By God, I'm here, all right! An' I'm stayin' here!"

Again the peculiar intense glitter was in the flickering eyes, and again the room rang with the horrible mirthless laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! Only one will stay. They come and they go in the night-time. That's when men die—in the dark. An' no one knows where they go."

Stark terror gripped Jim Gilbert. The glittering eyes were upon him—appraising him—mocking him—eyes that gleamed fever-bright in the dim candlelight.

It was all over in a few minutes. Jim Gilbert vaguely realized that he was striking again and again at the head of the man who lay there on the floor between the table and the little sheet-iron stove. A billet of firewood was in his hand—a heavy billet of round green spruce. He was cursing shrilly, and the sound fell upon his own ears as from afar. There was blood on the floor, and the man's forehead was caved in, so that nothing showed above his eyes. The eyes were wide open—but they didn't glitter now.

The curses ceased, and for a long time Jim Gilbert stood there staring down at the thing that lay at his feet. The candle flared wildly and went out, as the wick end fell from the bottle neck. Groping blindly in the darkness the man found and lighted another. He opened the door and dragged the dead man out. Slamming it shut he stood bracing it with his shoulder. Then he sat down abruptly and stared at the

guttering candle. "I had to do it," he mumbled. "It was him er me. I seen it in his eyes. By God, I had to do it! But—the police—they'll call it—murder."

For a long time he sat there striving to coordinate his wildly racing thoughts. "I killed him, an' they'll hang me. I had to do it. He was nuts—nuts, I tell you! But—I can't prove it. They'll say I murdered him fer his dust." His dust! Jim Gilbert's brain suddenly focused. His eyes fixed on the packsack lying there where the stranger had dropped it against the wall beside the doorway—the packsack that bulked small, but had thudded heavily upon the floor.

He got up and lifted it to the table. Coolly, methodically, he loosened the straps and began to remove its contents—a shirt, unbelievably ragged and dirty, two pairs of socks with toes and heels entirely worn away, a small canvas shelter tarp burned along one edge, a tin plate, and cup, and tea pail, a frying pan, an ounce of salt in an old tobacco sack, and a five-pound chunk of meat—tough and leathery looking, as though it had been carried far. From the bottom of the pack he removed several little caribou hide sacks—heavy sacks that bulged like sausages—and laid them in a row on the table. "Gold," he gloated, staring in fascination at the row of little sacks. "An' it's mine, now. He won't be needin' it no more."

The last words of the dead man flashed into his brain: That's when men die—in the dark. An' no one knows where they go." Jim Gilbert nodded his head. "An no one knows where they go," he repeated aloud. Drawing his sheath-knife from his belt, he cut the buttons from the ragged shirt, and the buckles and rivets from the packsack. He cut the sack and the shelter tarp into strips, and crossing to the stove, fed them to the flames, a strip at a time,



watching each burn to an ash before adding another. He tore the shirt apart and burned it, and the socks followed. The buttons, buckles and rivets, together with the man's dishes he made into a small bundle and placed it beside the man's rifle that stood against the wall.

Then, one by one, he opened the little sacks, pouring their contents into his water bucket. Ripping the seams open, he shook the last tiny speck of dust into the bucket. Then he burned the sacks. Lifting his scales from their shelf he placed them on the table and filled the tray with dust from the bucket. Again and again he repeated the performance, setting down each weight with the stub of a lead pencil. When the task was finished he totaled the amount—one thousand ounces. He stared for a moment at the figure. Then, suddenly, he grew cold and the hair at the base of his skull tingled. "A thousan' ounces," he breathed. Then aloud, in a voice that was scarcely more than a croak: "*A thousan' ounces!* Oh! my God!"

Tiny beads of sweat broke out on his brow, as he mumbled, "It's—it's what the old man promised. An'—an' him that fetched it—out there dead, with his head smashed in. What was it he said—he lived with the caribou—somewheres a long ways off where there was lakes an' salt marshes. An' he claimed the sperits fetched him! That old Eskimo—he know'd where he was—an' fetched him—him an' his damn sperits! How I wisht I'd never saw him! I'd—I'd rather starved! I can't winter here. I can't. I'd go nuts—like him. That old man'll know I killed him. Mebbe he was one of them sperits, an' he'll be mad because I killed him. My God—if he was mad at a man there ain't nothin' he couldn't do to him! I'm pullin' out! I'm hittin' fer Dawson. I've got grub enough to make it. An' now I've got dust enough to winter on. I'll come back in the spring. Them damn Eskimos'll be gone by then. I'll slip away without them knowin'. But the old man'll want his pay—that knife I promised him fer a thousan' ounces of gold. I'll take it to him. Mebbe he won't be mad if he gits his pay." On and on he rambled, mumbling to himself. The candle guttered and flared, throwing weird shadows on the walls, and burned again with a clear steady

flame. Jim Gilbert was afraid to blow it out—afraid to be left in the dark—with that *thing* out there in front of his door. And so he sat until morning.

AT DAYLIGHT he opened the door, stepped over the sprawling corpse, its frozen face white as the snow it lay upon, and harnessed the dogs. He loaded the body onto the sled, and taking the bundle and the man's rifle, headed down the creek. Some two miles from the cabin he rolled the corpse onto the snow-covered ice of the creek. "The wolves'll take care of him," he muttered. "There won't be nothin' left but mebbe some gnawed pieces of bone." The rifle and bundle he cached at the base of the rimwall.

Returning to the cabin, he cooked and ate a hearty breakfast, loaded a caribou carcass, added his personal effects, including the stranger's dust to the load and struck off up the creek. Crossing the divide, he headed for the three igloos.

When he arrived the two young men were working with the strips of spruce, evidently intended for sled runners. "Where's the old guy?" Gilbert asked, with a show of indifference.

The one who acted as interpreter pointed to an igloo. "In dere. Talk wit' de spirit. Say de sperits mad."

"Mad, eh?" Jim Gilbert scarcely knew what he was saying. "What—did—he—did he say what they was mad at?"

The other shook his head. "S'pose som'wan die. De sperits git mad." He seemed little concerned about the matter, and went on with his work.

Gilbert stood for some moments in silence, not daring to trust his voice. Finally he spoke. "You know where the Yukon is? Big river—off there somewheres?" He pointed toward the west.

The man nodded. "Yes."

"Ever be'n there?"

"Yes."

"How fer is it?"

"Mebbe-so ten sleep."

"What'll you take to guide me there?"

The man considered. Finally he pointed to the rifle that lay beneath the lashing of the loaded sled.

"It's a deal!" Gilbert exclaimed. "She's yourn the minute we hit the Yukon."

The man laid aside the knife with which he had been working, crawled into his igloo, emerged a few minutes later, walked to the oldster's igloo, and crawled in. Presently he came out, followed by the shaman. "Atpek go, too," he announced.

"Swell," grunted Gilbert, slanting the oldster a glance. Inwardly he was gripped by a nameless terror. Why was the old man going along? Did he know about the gold? And the dead man sprawled back there on the snow? He decided not to open the subject. There would be time to turn over the knife later.

The young man added a couple of robes to the load on the sled and struck off, with the old man following. Gilbert swung the dogs onto their trail and brought up the rear.

When he noticed that the course bore to the northwestward he questioned the guide who told him he was heading for the Porcupine River, down which he had gone several years before to Fort Yukon, located at the big bend where the Yukon turns westward to the sea.

Gilbert would rather have been traveling due west and so come out on the upper Yukon somewhere in the vicinity of Dawson. He even considered dismissing the guide and striking westward on his own. But scrutiny of the jumbled mass of peaks and high divides deterred him.

As he mushed on gloomily, his eyes upon the back of the old shaman with the uncanny power, terror gripped at his heart. And the camp, that night, in a grove of stunted spruce in no wise tempered that terror. The oldster, scorning the fried meat eaten by the other two, devoured his portion raw, after thawing it out in the flame of the little fire. Finishing it, he sat in silence, his narrow dark eyes fixed on Gilbert in what seemed a gaze of gloating malevolence.

The routine was repeated for five successive days and nights. The ordeal keyed Gilbert's taut nerves to the snapping point, and on the evening of the sixth day, after an hour of stolid scrutiny, the old man drew from his pouch certain fragments of bone and began to arrange them in a pattern on the snow, Gilbert asked the interpreter what it meant. A few words passed between the natives and the man replied:

"Atpek say man die. Wolves eat um. P'lice come. S'pose git um."

"Git who?" The words ripped from Gilbert's lips in a frenzy of terror. "What the hell's he got to do with the police?"

The other shrugged and pointed to the frozen river upon the bank of which they were camped. "Porcupine River. Atpek t'ink mebbe-so p'lice come. Mebbe-so spirits tell um."

So that was it! The damned old helion had known all the time that he had killed the man who brought the gold! And had deliberately planned to deliver him to the police! He remembered that the guide had gone into Atpek's igloo and when he came out had announced that the oldster would go along. The old shaman had sent the sperits to notify the police—and in Gilbert's mind now, there was no doubt that he could do just that. A surge of blinding rage engulfed him. He leaped to his feet cursing like a madman—leaped straight at the old shaman, lashing out with both fists. The sudden attack sent both rolling into the snow. Gilbert's heavy parka weakened the force of his blows, and hampered his movement, so that the oldster succeeded in eluding him. Gaining his feet he bolted away along the back-trail as fast as his legs could carry him, leaving his pouch and pieces of bone upon the snow.

Jim Gilbert stood up and faced the other. "Damn him, he can't prove nothin'! He never seen nothin'. An' you don't know nothin'. I'd of killed him—that's what I'd of done! By God, if he hadn't got away, I'd of killed him!" The pouch and fragments of bone caught his eye and stooping he gathered them up, tossed them into the fire, and watched the flames engulf them. "There! There goes his bag of tricks! Damn him—let him try to git the police now!"

The young Eskimo merely shrugged and sat in silence. And Jim Gilbert, his paroxysm of rage spent, resumed his seat beside the fire. Shortly thereafter, he slipped beneath his robes and went to sleep. When he awoke in the morning the young Eskimo was gone. So was the rifle. The guide had collected his pay.

"Let him go," Gilbert growled as he kindled his fire and set the tea pail aboil. "Damn good reddance. I kin make it alone from here. I've got grub enough, an' all I've got to do is foller down the Porcupine.

God, it gives a man the creeps—that old devil settin' there night after night, lookin' at me like he know'd all about what I done—an' all the time workin' on them sperits to fetch the police. But—how could he? What do the police know about sperits? No one believes in them things. No one that's got any sense. There ain't no sech thing as sperits. An yet—by God," the voice trailed off into silence, and he added another stick of wood to the fire, sending a little cloud of smoke and sparks upward.

A SLIGHT sound attracted his attention and he glanced toward the river. A six-dog team stood on the snow-covered ice, and a man was ascending the bank—a man in the uniform of the Northwest Mounted Police.

Jim Gilbert collapsed. When Corporal Downey reached his side he was grovelling in the snow beside his fire, a torrent of half intelligible words pouring from his lips. "I done it! I killed him! He was nuts! He was nuts, I tell you! It was me er him! He'd of killed me there in the shack—in the dark—so no one would know where I went!"

Downey stood staring down at the gibbering man. He nodded agreement, and spoke soothingly. "Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Who was he—your pardner?"

"No. Not my pardner. I'm a lone wolf. I'm Jim Gilbert! A lone wolf, I tell you! The sperits fetched him. He lived with the caribou. An' the sperits fetched him—him an' his thousan' ounces of gold. They fetched him jest like they fetched you. I'll take you back there. By God, I'll show him to you. Then you kin tell he was nuts. They can't hang me if he was nuts, kin they?"

"Probably not," the officer answered reassuringly. "Go ahead an' eat your breakfast. Then we'll go to the shack and look him over. Quiet down now. You're a little excited. Of course, you're under arrest, an' if you don't want to talk you don't have to, because you understand that anything you say may be used against you."

"You know all about it!" Gilbert interrupted. "The sperits told you, er else you wouldn't of come. So why the hell shouldn't I talk? But he was nuts—anyone that would live with the caribou is nuts. Ain't that so? I'll leave it to you. Am I right—er wrong?"

As the man talked Corporal Downey's eyes were taking in the details of the camp—the sled, the tethered dogs, and the numerous tracks in the snow. "Where's the others that was here? An' where's your rifle?" he asked.

"They pulled out on me, an' he stole it—the Eskimo."

"Eskimo!" The word cracked sharply from Downey's lips.

"Yeah, the young one. Mebbe not really stole it. I offered it to him to guide me to the Yukon. But he pulled out on me last night after fetchin' me this fer—so he stole it, partly!"

"I see. Well, go ahead an' eat while I get my outfit up here, an' then we'll be startin'. Don't try to make a break. You couldn't get away with it."

Wonder what it is about this country that drives men nuts, mused Corporal Downey as he descended the bank to the river. This bird's crazy as a bedbug. Maybe the other was, too—but the chances is this one went crazy and killed him. I've got to keep my eye on him. Sometimes these lunatics are crafty as the devil.

When Downey returned to the fire he eyed the tethered dogs. "We've got a hell of a lot of dogs to feed," he said. "How far is it back to this shack of yours?"

"Six days."

"You got any meat back there?"

"Shore—a hull caribou on my cache. The sperits fetched two of 'em."

Downey handcuffed his prisoner, cached his sled and most of his outfit, and with his dogs running free, they took the back-trail. Ten miles from the camp they came upon the body of a man. He was an old man—an Eskimo. He lay prone upon the snow, his face pillowed on the sleeve of his fur parka. He did not look as though he had met a violent death. It was as though he had frozen to death as he lay sleeping.

Downey glanced at Gilbert. "Know him?" he asked casually.

"Shore I know him! It was him started the hull business. Him an' his damn' sperits. He made the kid come a boy, an' he made the sperits fetch the caribou, an' he made 'em fetch the guy with the thousan' ounces of dust. I wisht to God I never seen him! I'm glad he's dead—damn him! I run him outa camp, last night. I wisht I'd done it

before—before he sent the sperits to fetch you. I'd of be'n safe, then."

Reaching down, Downey turned the body over. He gave a slight start as he viewed the lower half of the man's face. Drawing his belt-knife, he slit the parka sleeve to the elbow and turned it back to disclose the picture of a whale tatooed on the lean forearm. Then he turned down the sleeve.

IV

ON THE sixth day they came upon the three snow igloos, evidently recently abandoned. A fresh trail led away toward the northeastward. Gilbert explained that the Eskimo were living there when he first saw them.

Crossing the divide, they proceeded down the creek to the pole shack. For several days his prisoner had seemed perfectly normal. But Corporal Downey was on his guard.

"This here's my shack," Gilbert explained. "I killed him in there, an' then hauled his body down the crick a couple of miles. Pushing the door open, Downey stepped inside, lighted a candle, and stared down at the pool of frozen blood, and the blood-smeared billet of wood. He blew out the candle and rejoined Gilbert. "Come on," he said. "We'll go find the body."

A half hour later, Gilbert paused and pointed to the snow, trampled by the feet of many wolves. "I rolled him off here," he explained. "The wolves has et him—jest like I figgered they would."

Downey carefully salvaged all that was left of the body—a tooth-scored skull with the frontal bones smashed in, a couple of tooth-marked long bones, a small section of vertebra, and a few bits of cloth.

Gilbert led the way to the rimwall, kicked the snow aside, and pointed to the rifle and the bundle. "There's his gun, dishes, the buttons off'n his shirt, an' the buckles and rivets off'n his packsack. I burnt the stuff in the stove, and I didn't aim to leave nothin' fer the police to sift outa the ashes."

"You figgered the police would be up to investigate?"

"I didn't figger nothin'—till after I'd brained him. Then I done some thinkin'. I wasn't takin' no chances."

"You killed him in the shack with a stick of stovewood, then burned his packsack an' extra clothing, an' then hauled the

body down here an' dumped it in the snow for the wolves to eat. Is that right?"

"That's the way of it. I grabbed up the stovewood an' brained him before he could kill me."

"Did he threaten to kill you?"

"No. But he was goin' to, all right. I kin tell. He had a look in his eye. He was nuts, I tell you! He was goin' to kill me there in the dark—so no one would know where I went."

"Had he been livin' with you—there in the shack?"

"No. He jest come there. The sperits fetched him from the land where the caribou lives—him an' his thousan' ounces of dust. He claimed he was goin' to stay there an' dig gold. But it was my crick—an' there weren't enough grub."



Downey nodded. "Okay. We'll go back to the shack an' get that stick of wood. I guess that's all the evidence there is."

"Yeah, I guess that's about all," Gilbert agreed indifferently. "It's self-defense, er somethin'. ain't it?"

Downey eyed him coldly. "That thousand ounces of dust make it look more like a cold-blooded murder."

"But it worn't no murder! It was him er me. He was nuts—er else how could the sperits fetch im?"

Downey smiled bleakly. "You said the sperits fetched me, too. Do you think I'm nuts?"

Gilbert stared for a moment into the officer's face. His jaw dropped, and he wetted his lips with his tongue. "God—that's right," he admitted, in a low, dull voice. "Well—you've got me. But—tell me one thing, Corporal—how does it work—I mean about them sperits? How do you know they're fetchin' you?"

"I don't. The fact is, sperits had nothin' whatever to do with it. You, yourself, told me all I know, or ever did know about this case. I was patrollin' the Porcupine to head off an Eskimo murderer. Atpek, his name was. He was a medicine man, or shaman—an' a bad actor. He's be'n suspected of murder before. This is the first time we've ever had the goods on him. He killed another native and left him out on the ice for the bears, an' the wolves, an' the foxes to devour. Some other Eskimos retrieved the body an' took it to the police at Fort McPherson. When Atpek found out about it he skipped out, forcin' the families of his two nephews to go with him. Our information was that they hit southwest, an' we figured they'd circle around an' hit the Porcupine an' try to get over into Alaska, out of our jurisdiction. I was patrollin' the river to head 'em off.

"Atpek is the old man we found dead, back there on the trail. A sailor tatooed that whale on his arm ten years ago. No one believes in sperits but these damn fool natives." The officer paused to let the information sink home. "Fear an' a guilty conscience trapped you, Gilbert—not sperits. Come on, we'll be hittin' back to the shack. I want to pick up that club, and that meat off the cache."

JIM GILBERT walked ahead, following the back-trail. Downey followed behind the sled, a hand gripping the tail-rope. By the time they reached the point where the trail left the river and ascended to the rim

to avoid a deep canyon and an ice-encrusted waterfall, the prisoner was muttering and mumbling to himself. Suddenly he halted on the very edge of the rimwall, full seventy feet above the snow-covered ice of the creek, and turned to face Downey. "The hell no one believes in 'em!" he cried shrilly. "They'll git me hung—you an' them both! I seen what they kin do—an' I know!"

The dogs had halted, and Corporal Downey started around the sled. "Take it easy, Gilbert," he said soothingly.

A blood-curdling peal of wild laughter issued from between the man's lips. "They'll never hang me! By God, I'll fool you all—the old Eskimo an' his damn sperits—an' you, too! It's comin' dark. An' they won't know where I've gone!"

Downey leaped forward, but just as his mittened hand was about to close on the man's sleeve, he launched out into space.

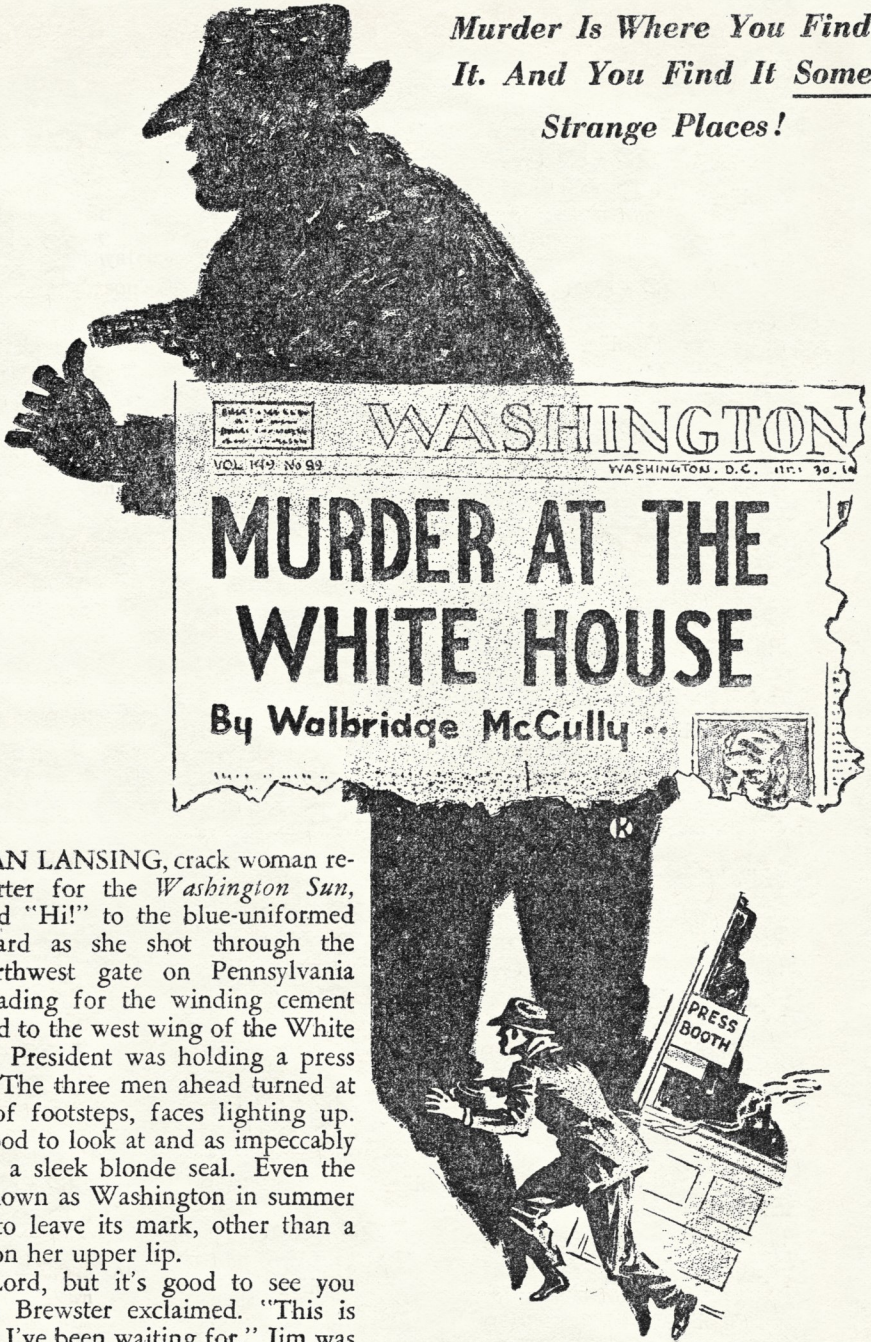
Dropping to his knees, the officer peered intently down into the canyon. In the slowly gathering dusk he could see nothing. Hastily he toggled the dogs and, retracing his steps to the river, struck up into the canyon. "Maybe," he muttered, as he hurried over the wind-packed crust between the gloomy rockwalls, "if he lit in a deep drift, he won't be hurt much."

At a point directly below where the man had leaped he halted and searched the snow. A dark object showed a few feet away and he stepped hurriedly toward it and stood staring down at a pair of manacled hands thrusting upward through the shattered crust, as though in defiance of the sperits that lurked among the stars.

Swiftly removing a snowshoe and using it as a shovel, Downey dug frantically into the hard snow. A few minutes later he reached down and dragged the body of the man from the hole. One glance at the head, grotesquely doubled back against the spine told him the man was dead. From the silence, far beyond the rims, came the long howl of a wolf. Downey fastened on his snowshoe, stood up, and glanced down at the limp form on the snow. Then his eyes sought the narrow strip of star-dotted sky, high above him.

"A lone wolf," he claimed he was, "I wonder if that could have been him howlin' beyond the rims?"

*Murder Is Where You Find
It. And You Find It Some
Strange Places!*



FRAN LANSING, crack woman reporter for the *Washington Sun*, said "Hi!" to the blue-uniformed guard as she shot through the northwest gate on Pennsylvania Avenue, heading for the winding cement walk that led to the west wing of the White House. The President was holding a press conference. The three men ahead turned at the sound of footsteps, faces lighting up. Fran was good to look at and as impeccably groomed as a sleek blonde seal. Even the Gehenna known as Washington in summer had failed to leave its mark, other than a slight dew on her upper lip.

"Fran! Lord, but it's good to see you again!" Jim Brewster exclaimed. "This is the moment I've been waiting for." Jim was with *United Press*, a lean Texan with a drawl and a homespun-face that Fran considered better than handsome. He was showing, however, the effects of months in a Jap prison.

Fran stole a surreptitious glance at her fiance, Andy Anderton of the *Washington Home-Herald*. Damn and blast! Why did

he have to be on hand when she first met Jim? It was distinctly a break, however, that she'd had some warning of Jim's return. Unfortunate, though, that Andy knew exactly how she'd felt about Jim—how she felt now—which made the meeting harder. And Andy was jealous! No doubt, he was

already wondering how soon the blow would fall, how soon she'd be saying, "Sorry, Andy, but with Jack back, naturally I'll be marrying *him*." Fran's heart turned a complete flip-flop at the thought. She wished her mind wasn't so chaotic—hoped her eyes didn't reflect her thoughts. Andy was frowning, jaw squared pugnaciously, and his somber black eyes on her were inquiring, enigmatic.

Fran pulled herself together. "It's swell seeing you back at the old stand, Jim. Out of khaki and into . . ." Fran looked him over, trying to be casual, "into seersucker. It was reported, you know, that your parachute failed to open. It's going to be like old times now we four are together again." Looking at Andy's veiled eyes, however, she knew it was merely a hope. "We've missed you at the White House."

Fran was the only one of the gang who had sweated out the war in Washington. Andy had recently been in ETO and Charlie Rinehart of *Weekly*, the other member of the old crowd, a rubber-faced bilikin in a wrinkled, loose-fitting palm beach suit, had been in Okinawa with Jim Brewster.

"'Ace war correspondent dies over Tokyo' was the way they put it," Charlie Rinehart commented. "I was just leaving Okinawa for Washington when word came back."

Jim winced. "That was poor Bellows. I had all the luck, though Shinagawa wasn't exactly a bed of roses. However, remember the old adage, lucky in games—and war is a game, though grim—unlucky in love." He was looking directly at Fran so she knew he'd heard of her engagement. But, of course, Jim must realize, as Andy must, that everything would be just the same—that he came first.

"Oh, *you* do all right," Charlie said, and his tone was bitter, brooding.

Fran glanced at him, frowning. So that was Charlie's trouble—girls and frustration! She was remembering back through the years she'd known Charlie. He'd fallen hard for a girl or two and they'd laughed at him, cruelly, and after that he'd crossed girls off his list, had taken to drinking spasmodically. Of course, Charlie did have the kind of face only a mother could fancy, impossible to associate with romance—messy, with loose lips. Still, old Charlie was a good scout, but, though doing his best work while

slightly teed up, the Charlie that emerged from a bottle like a fattish genie was an ugly customer, looking for a fight—hating the world. Fran was wondering which was the real Charlie—the amiable good egg or the surly, bad-tempered genie of the bottle. She was also wondering whether he'd been at it that early in the morning.

"Let's go," Andy suggested shortly. They had stopped to talk. "We'll be late for the conference," He took Fran firmly by the arm in a show of possessiveness, starting up the path.

GENIAL Ben Bowles of the White House police inspected their passes at the door, his gold badge of office flashing from a spotless white shirt that, with black tie and blue trousers, was a concession to Washington's summer climate. Across the vast entrance hall, Bill Simmons, white-haired, well-fed and impressive, waved a special greeting to Jim from behind the little American flag that decorated the front of the reception desk. Already, Treasury Secret Service men were checking milling newspapermen in line at the left, while at the right, visitors were being questioned separately.

Fran, being hatless, stepped into line, while the men flung their hats on the massive carved Philippine mahogany table standing in the center of the room, to join the litter of assorted hats and late press releases already there.

"Washington is exactly the same," Jim stated, following Fran into line, "and hotter than hell." The room was a blast furnace that sapped all vitality in its sullen, depressing heat.

"Nothing is changed at all," Charlie agreed, mopping his brow, "And I even arrived for the usual Washington murder—still unsolved."

"And that, too, is exactly according to Hoyle," Jim said.

"Nothing changed, but plenty has happened," Andy protested. "You've heard about Charlie, of course."

Jim shook his head, frowning and turning to Charlie. There were so many loose ends to catch up on. "No. What about him?"

Andy, fresh from ETO, didn't show Jim' fatigue, his look of strain. His black eye

were alert and bright. Too bright, Fran thought, worrying feverishly. *When shall I tell him?*

"Good old Charlie's hit the jackpot!" Andy said.

Fran, gesticulating with the long, slender amber cigarette holder that matched her eyes, said, "Damned if he hasn't written a novel—war and things, he says. It's out next week and already an amazing success. Hollywood and all the trimmings. Book-of-the-Month Club, too. Isn't that a helluva note!" Fran punctuated her conversation with salty words that brought a faint sense of shock, coming from so sensuously feminine a mouth.

"Stout fella," Jim said, "and don't forget you knew us when, Charlie. I've a book on the way myself. . . ." Jim grinned, turning to Fran, "as what correspondent hasn't—but not likely to make much of a splash. I expect it with my things from Okinawa which haven't turned up yet. My mother has them in Texas."

FRAN smiled proudly. "And you never said a word in your letters! It's sure to be a knockout, Jim. I hope you'll let me have a look. Charlie never would. He wanted his book to burst on the world all at once."

Charlie murmured something deprecating, then added, "But Fran's a knockout herself, isn't she, boys? And the best damned woman reporter in Washington," He threw her an approving glance from small piglike eyes in a layer of fat.

"Check," Jim agreed, hoping nobody would notice his trembling hands as he lit a cigarette. "But what about the murder. Anybody we knew?"

"Sure," Charlie said. "Remember Stephen Haverford, the lawyer, the one who threw the parties? Somebody drilled a neat little hole through the back of his head. Got him in his library. It looks the perfect crime—no clues."

"I have a theory," Fran murmured, breaking in, "that the well-planned murders are pulled off by people who are mature. Hot-headed youth murders on impulse—and gets caught—but it's the carefully thought-out murders by the middle-aged babies that get by—more often than we suspect, I believe. Take some of the famous unsolved cases—the Hall-Mills murders, the Elwood murder, and the shooting of that headmaster of

a school in Massachusetts. I'd be willing to wager they were all the products of minds over forty."

"The dangerous forties," Andy suggested lightly.

A SECRET SERVICE man moved them along in the line and then the conversation was resumed.

"Rot," Charlie said belligerently. "Easy enough to say, but impossible to prove. And what have you to say, Fran, about that Nassau case? Is that another example of your thoughtful and elderly murderer?"

"Not by a damn sight," Fran retorted with spirit, "and that, I think, exactly proves my point. Sir Harry Oakes was murdered on impulse probably—in the heat of red-hot anger—and a devilish poor job."

Andy, amused, said, "And yet the murderer got by."

"And why not! There never yet has been a conviction for murder in Nassau—that is, of a white person. And what a wretched farce of a trial!" Scorn rang in Fran's voice. "A fantastic parody of justice, shunting the chief witness for the prosecution out of the country so he couldn't testify."

"Of course, all murderers are mentally unbalanced, whether twenty-four or forty," Jim Brewster said categorically. "Emotionally unbalanced, with murder as the result of overweening hate, love, or some other equally strong emotion unleashed—out of whack."

"I presume we're not discussing the professional criminal, then," Andy inquired.

"Certainly not," Jim agreed, "only incidental murder."

"And how in hell did we get started on this subject, anyway?" Fran said, flipping open the leather case of her pass for a Secret Service man, "You'd think we were crime reporters."

Once more the line started moving toward their objective—the President's conference room, and this time they made it, with two hundred-odd press and visitors finally squeezed into the formally appointed circular room.

"Good God, I'd forgotten the jam!" Jim said to Andy—Fran had been swept outside their ken and they were fitted in like fish in a tin near the back of the room. Jim's hands were wedged shoulder-high, with

barely room to scribble momentous news items.

Andy moaned as an elbow caught him. He was remembering vividly the room. The same gold velvet draperies with tassels were at the windows, the same dull red rug on the floor. There was the large mahogany desk in front of the windows, with the American flag and the President's flag on standards on either side. At the right a small statue of Andrew Jackson was close to a table made from the old *Constitution*, and there was plenty of gold braid, as usual, on the brass hats attending the President. Everything was just the same with one exception. Behind the mahogany desk sat President Truman, forthright and sincere, instead of the suavely smiling Roosevelt who had once fenced urbanely with the press.

The conference was short, but packing a punch, and there was the usual stampede to the press room and telephones. The moth-eaten deer, cadged by the press from the hotel where they'd hung out in Poughkeepsie during the Roosevelt reign, leered cynically over the press room doorway as frenzied newspapermen below buttonholed each other for fill-ins or to check on questions asked the President. The din was terrific.

Fran, parted from the others during the conference, was swept along with the mad rush, two hundred people making for the press room, with fifty or so scrambling for twenty-five telephones. She efficiently speared her own desk telephone, however, sending in her story. As she perched on the desk, slim legs swinging, Fran caught a glimpse of Jim Brewster talking to Charlie Rinehart across the room—Charlie appearing excited and worried—then Jim turned into the UP booth.

After struggling for bits of information in the press room, a hell-hole of heat, Fran drifted out to the entrance hall to get the latest press release from the table. She found Charlie on the same errand, looking for the messenger. Fran noted the press release in his hand and the scrawled "lead" in the margin, pointing to the underlined words in the script. *Charlie must be slipping*, she thought. There was a better lead.

Andy interrupted her train of thought. "Seen Jim?" he inquired. "I thought we all might lunch together."

"Sorry. I have a date but meet Jim tonight for dinner," Charlie said, frowning.

"Jim was telephoning from the UP booth five minutes ago," Fran volunteered, "and perhaps he's still there."

"I'll go see," Andy said.

Fran watched him go with no premonition of trouble. The look on Andy's face, however, as he reappeared in the press room doorway a few minutes later, frightened her. His eyebrows were a straight black line across a ghastly mask, handsome but meaningless. She knew at once something was wrong, even before Andy shot across the room toward big Ben Bowles, entirely ignoring her.

Spurred by fear, plus her instinctive nose for news, Fran quietly started for the press room, pointedly casual. Charlie, fortunately had become involved in an argument with the *Tass* correspondent—didn't notice. She was a homing pigeon, making for the place she'd last seen Jim, anxiety clutching at her throat, peering into the booth first, her nose pressed against the glass and seeing nothing. Her next move was to open the door cautiously. Around her jostling, sweaty newspapermen clamored vociferously. Fran took a long look inside the booth, gasped and closed the door abruptly. She moved—a dazed, frozen figure—silently across the room to take over the telephone on her desk. There was just time to make the evening edition.

JIM had been shot through the back of the head and was slumped on the floor of the telephone booth, quite dead. Fran had hardly told the bare bones of the story over the phone—all she knew—when Ben Bowles and Andy came into the press room. Ben was shouting, trying to make himself heard above the noise and confusion but it took actual physical force to get people to listen. He shouldered his way through the crowd, spreading the news of the murder. Finally, there was an ominous quiet.

"Nobody has left the west wing," Ben informed the appalled newspapermen, speaking in more subdued tones now that he had their attention, "which means the murderer is still in the White House. Any member of the press, or the two visitors to the President's news conference, therefore, had ample opportunity to commit this crime."

One of you has murder on his soul and nobody will be allowed to leave until Lieutenant Wingo of the homicide squad arrives and takes over. After that, it's up to him."

"Where was Jim killed?" somebody shouted from the back of the room.

Ben told them, adding grimly, "A bullet from a government issue gun with a silencer through the back of the head."

"Of course it's all right to use the phones, Ben," Charlie Rinehart said anxiously.

Ben hesitated. "Well, I don't see why not, but not the UP booth. The body mustn't be disturbed." He glanced across the room. A Secret Service man had already taken over, was guarding the booth.

Charlie recoiled visibly. "Hell, no!"

"I'll notify the UP," Andy said, carefully avoiding Fran's eye. "It's what Jim would want. They'll have to have coverage for the story—send another man."

Fran, having done her duty as a newspaperman, was feeling hollow and gone inside. Her emotion broke through. "Poor Mrs. Brewster," she murmured, distress puckering her brow.

Ben glanced at her sharply. "So you know his mother. It wouldn't hurt, then, if you broke the news to her—better than reading of the murder in the papers or being notified by the police."

"I'd already thought of that," Fran admitted. "Perhaps a telegram. No, it would be better to phone." She glanced across at the row of booths. "Well, here goes." She'd spotted Cliff Foster of the *Associated Press* and knew she could get permission to use the AP booth for the call. A booth would be preferable.

"I'll take you to lunch when you get back," Andy called after her. A good stiff drink would do them both good. "And tell Mrs. Brewster I'll handle Jim's book for her."

Fran looked back and nodded. Andy was a darling, even if he did have that nasty black streak of jealousy in his make-up. She thought grimly, *There's no need for jealousy now!*

Lieutenant Wingo arrived while Fran was telephoning Mrs. Brewster. She could see him through the glass of the door, a gray-ing, baldish harassed man in plainclothes, taken in tow by a deferential Sergeant

Bowles. Fran sickened, knowing Lieutenant Wingo was looking over Jim's body in the UP booth on the other side of the partition. She wiped a tear away defiantly, wanting to scream "damn, damn, damn," to do something violent.

Instead, Fran said steadily, "Mrs. Brewster? This is Fran Lansing, I'm afraid I've very bad news for you. Jim is dead—murdered!"

THE long silence on the other end of the phone frightened Fran. Finally, Mrs. Brewster said in a controlled voice, "Thank you, my dear, for calling. Will—will you make all arrangements—send Jim's body back to me in Texas?" Her voice faltered at the end—broke.

Fran agreed quickly, mentioning Andy's offer about the book; was amazed at the result.

Mrs. Brewster was saying, "It's awfully nice of Mr. Anderton, my dear, but there isn't any manuscript. Nothing came with Jim's things from Okinawa but clothes."

"But Jim's letters, Mrs. Brewster! Surely, he mentioned his book!"

She hesitated. "Perhaps he did. I'll have a look again."

Fran said feverishly, "I wish you could send the letters on—all you can find. Would you mind? It's really rather important."

Already an idea—horrible, monstrous—had shot into Fran's mind, arriving from the subconscious with the speed of a diver coming to the surface of the water and just as smoothly. *Charlie! Charlie could have stolen Jim's book—could have murdered him!* She was listening through a haze as Mrs. Brewster promised to send on the letters. Feeling battered in body and soul, Fran said "good-bye" and hung up.

Outside the booth a photographer's flash went off as the police took shots of the body. Fran stayed in the comparative peace of the booth, trying to pull herself together, make plans. Actually, there was nothing to prove she was right about Charlie. Suppose she told the police what she thought. What did she have to back it up? Charlie was publishing a book—a howling success—and Jim's manuscript was missing. Well, what of it? Just a coincidence, of course. The police would laugh at her. She bit her lip, considering. But, even if they didn't

believe her, they might question Charlie and he'd be forewarned. No, she'd stay on her own.

But Charlie could have done it, she told herself defiantly, and I'm following through. There was a week's leave coming to her and she made the decision. She'd take the leave and follow her hunch. One Washington murder wouldn't go unsolved—not if she had anything to say about it! Fran's eyes gleamed, amber icicles.

SHE opened the door of the booth, head buzzing with plans, and joined the group around Lieutenant Wingo. Any routine information the police gathered would help and she intended keeping in touch with them.

Already, she had ideas for a quick plane trip to New York—to Charlie's publisher's for a look at the manuscript of *Red Flames and Embers*. Fran caught a glimpse of Charlie at a telephone—an amiable, rolypoly little man—or was he? Her heart contracted painfully.

"And the gun that killed Brewster," Lieutenant Wingo was saying, "the murderer conveniently left on the floor of the telephone booth, and much good that will do us. All fingertips had been removed—an army gun and no chance of tracing it." Lieutenant Wingo was still smarting from his razzing by the press over the Haverford murder. He glared around the room defiantly, his feeling being that he'd drawn another murder that would be tough, a conspiracy against him for which the press was directly responsible. However, if he could hang a murder rap on a newspaperman—Lieutenant Wingo's eye glistened hopefully.

Fran edged closer. "I guess I was the last person to see Jim Brewster alive, Lieutenant," she said fishing. Her words got Lieutenant Wingo's attention.

"Hmnm," he said, "You were? And who are you?" He was slightly mollified by Fran's slim curves. *Nice honey-bunny blonde*, he thought.

"Fran Lansing, *Washington Sun*."

Lieutenant Wingo became alert. "Ah," he said, "Engaged to Jim Brewster, weren't you?"

Fran was in the maw of a giant crane, was about to be dropped a quivering mass, into a bottomless pit from which there was

no return. She looked quickly at Andy. "I—I was before he was reported dead."

"Ah, and now?" Lieutenant Wingo pressed.

"I'm engaged to Andy Anderton," Fran said faintly.

She could see suspicion welling in Lieutenant Wingo's eyes. He turned towards Andy. "Of course," he said, "the man who found Brewster's body." He might as well have yelled his suspicions to the housetops and the seed found sudden root in Fran's mind, an icy chill running up and down her spine, *Andy, too, could have murdered Jim!*

She was remembering with growing horror the smell of smoke in the air as she opened the door of the telephone booth, smoke, perhaps, from a gun recently fired. Fran took another look at Andy—seeing him with the eyes of a stranger. Andy had a dark, secretive face that told her nothing. *But Andy is kind*, Fran told herself in a panic. *He loves me far too much to hurt me so. Impossible for Andy to be a murderer!* She was so disturbed, however, that it increased her determination to solve the murder, come hell or high water.

From a long way off, Lieutenant Wingo was saying, "Well, Miss Lansing, tell us all about it. How long have you known Brewster? When did you last see him and had he any known enemies?"

"I've known Jim about four or five years. Saw him today for the first time since his return. Four of us, Charlie Rinehart, Andy Anderton, Jim Brewster and I met just inside the gate, walked up to the White House together. Later, I was telephoning in my story when I noticed Jim going into the UP booth. That, of course, must have been the last anyone saw of him." *But Charlie had seen him go, too*, she remembered, heart beating faster.

"Except the murderer," Lieutenant Wingo agreed. "And what about enemies? Know of any?"

Fran felt her face grow rigid. She moistened stiff lips with the top of her tongue. "No," she said.

"People liked Jim," Andy explained grimly, "which makes the murder all the more unbelievable."

"Well, we'll check on everybody in the building for a tie-in with Brewster. Bowles

is getting me a list. I know about the two visitors to the news conference already. They were Frank Moore, executive of Lane and Jones, New York publishers, and an Iranian journalist, Sultan Sadegh."

"Doesn't look as though you had anything there," Fran said.

"You never can tell." Lieutenant Wingo consulted a small notebook. "I see Brewster's address is given as 2222 I Street, N.W. Might pick up something there and not a bad idea to run around while my men are covering the usual routine. Ah, here comes Bowles with the list." Lieutenant Wingo put the typewritten pages in an inside pocket, then turned to Fran.

"Care to come along to I Street, Miss Lansing? Since you knew Brewster so well, you might help."

FRAN concealed her satisfaction. "I'll be glad to, Lieutenant," she said conservatively.

"Good," Lieutenant Wingo said.

"But what about our lunch date, Fran?" Andy insisted, not to be brushed off.

"The Lieutenant, no doubt, will be glad to have you along. We can go to lunch from there." Fran had resolutely tied any doubts of Andy in a weighted sack and thrown them overboard. She was only hoping now he hadn't been a mind reader.

"Of course, Anderton," Lieutenant Wingo conceded reluctantly.

"But what about all these people?" Sergeant Bowles asked, brow furrowed. "We can't hold them indefinitely." He looked around the crowded room. There were others, too, outside in the entrance hall.

"Let 'em go," Lieutenant Wingo said brusquely. "Good God!" Two hundred and five people who had an opportunity to kill Brewster! We can't interview them all here. I'll detail men to cover the list quickly—get everything we can. Coming, Miss Lansing?"

Fran suddenly became conscious she was still clutching the press release she'd picked up in the hall. "I have to find the messenger first," she said, "send this to my paper."

"That's easily done," Andy assured her. "He's outside now. Charlie and I just handed him ours. Come on."

Jim's one-room apartment in I Street was 411. They took the self-service ele-

vator to the fourth floor and got out. Lieutenant Wingo had Jim's key and opened the door. Fran was shivering as she followed him in, with Andy close behind. Her reaction was purely involuntary as there was nothing in the room of Jim. It was a room without soul and as characterless as the ordinary hotel room. Recent purchases were on a table, some of them open but still in their wrappings. On the floor by the table was a leather bag, also new.

Lieutenant Wingo grunted as he stood in the middle of the room and looked the place over. "Not much here, I'm afraid."

"Shinagawa is a damned poor place to pick up possessions," Fran reminded him wryly.

"Oh, that's where Brewster was. I'd forgotten." Lieutenant Wingo was bending over the bag, stirring the contents with practiced hands. "Ah, this looks better," he said, bringing to light a moldy-looking envelope. Lieutenant Wingo inspected the contents of the envelope, with Andy brazenly looking over his shoulder. There was a prolonged whistle from Andy.

"Some houri!" he announced, raptly.

Lieutenant Wingo was holding a small faded snapshot of a dark-eyed beauty in native costume. He turned the snap over. On the back was written in faded ink, Jamela Sadegh—Iran.

"You don't happen to know anything about this, do you, Miss Lansing?" he asked.

Fran narrowed her eyes, thinking. "Only that Jim was in Iran early in the war, went from the European theater to the Pacific. I've never heard of the girl."

LIEUTENANT WINGO held on to the small photograph, studying it. "Jamela Sadegh—Jamela Sadegh," he muttered, savoring the words on his tongue as though the taste was familiar. "I have it—the Iranian journalist! Sadegh was his name, too."

"We—ll, this may prove interesting," Andy exclaimed.

Fran looked at her wrist-watch. Her plans included a hasty lunch with Andy and the hope she could pick up a plane to get her to New York in time to visit Charlie's publisher.

"It must be more than coincidence that an Iranian journalist turns up in that crowd

in the press room and a picture of an Iranian girl, having the same name, also turns up in Brewster's apartment," Lieutenant Wingo said firmly. "I'll get right after this Sadegh, have him brought in for questioning." He put the girl's picture carefully away in his pocket.

Lieutenant Wingo was as transparent as a glass fish bowl—ideas like fish swimming through his mind and their travels followed as easily. Fran could trace his hackneyed thought from its inception—predatory correspondent meets journalist's wife, irate husband follows seducer across the sea, to murder correspondent in the White House press room. Very glib, and in true movie form, only Fran didn't believe a word of it. She knew Jim.

"What about lunch?" Fran inquired, stirring Andy up. She was anxious to be on her way.

"Er—why not hang around, Fran? See Sadegh."

"I'm hot, hungry, and have things to do. Besides, even the police must eat some time. Isn't that right, Lieutenant?" Fran knew lunch would choke her but if she were to follow her hunch, she'd have to keep up her strength.

Lieutenant Wingo agreed. "And it may take an hour or so to round up Sadegh. I'll have him brought to headquarters about two."

Fran and Andy parted from Lieutenant Wingo in front of the apartment house, ending up at the Statler in air-conditioned luxury. Fran took time out to powder her nose and make telephone calls to the airport and her paper, then joined Andy at the secluded table acquired by some miraculous sleight-of-hand. But Andy was like that. He got what he wanted. Fran felt a lessening of her tension as she looked over the menu. She liked her men to know their way about, what they wanted, and how to get it even against overwhelming odds. She was almost in the mood to give Andy the tip about Charlie but decided against it. It wouldn't hurt, she decided, to let him tag along with Lieutenant Wingo on the Sadegh lead.

Fran left the airport at two o'clock, arrived in New York promptly and made her way to the publisher's by taxi. She sent in her name to the head—always flying

high—and was pleasantly surprised to be received at once. In her handbag was a sample of typing from Charlie Rinehart's typewriter, picked up at her apartment on the way to the airport. One of the letters—an e—was out of alignment and very distinctive.

Mr. Fowler had great respect for the press, besides Fran wasn't hard to take, but he hesitated. "I'm sorry, Miss Lansing," he said, "but I don't see how I can let you see the manuscript of *Red Flames and Embers* without, at least, a request from Mr. Rinehart."

Fran did some quick thinking and acting. She was scrabbling through her handbag. "But, of course, Mr. Fowler, I did have a note but must have left it at my hotel. I'll run right over and get it."

SHE taxied to the office of *Weekly*, picked up some paper, borrowed a typewriter from a man she knew there, and wrote out a request to give Fran Lansing a look at the manuscript of *Red Flames and Embers*, signing it with Charlie's name in the taxi on the way back to the publisher's office. She committed the forgery calmly and without a qualm. This time she was successful.

Mr. Fowler pushed a buzzer on his desk, gave instructions to the secretary who answered.

"Er—er—would you mind answering a question?" he asked, curious. "Just why are you interested in *Red Flames and Embers*?"

Fran's mind fluttered, squirming. She could hardly tell Mr. Fowler her suspicions of his pet author—that she suspected him of being a thief and a murderer. "Oh, it's for an article I'm writing," she said lightly, hoping it wouldn't sound as silly to him as it did to her.

Mr. Fowler let it go. "Ah, here comes the manuscript now," he said, as the secretary arrived with it under her arm.

Fran wanted to snatch at *Red Flames and Embers*, riffle hurriedly through the pages. She forced herself to take it more easily, left the package on the desk while she lit a cigarette. Then she opened the envelope and took out the manuscript. Even a cursory inspection showed the pages had undoubtedly been typed by Charlie. There was the same distinctive "e" and other ec-

centricities of his typing with which she was familiar. It was a disappointment because, while it didn't mean Charlie might not have re-typed Jim's manuscript, it was a purely negative finding. Her trip to New York had drawn a blank.

There was still Jim's letters to Mrs. Brewster, however, which she should receive by airmail in the morning. They might tell her something. With this faint hope still remaining, Fran took her leave of Mr. Fowler, after being presented with a copy of *Red Flames and Embers*. She took a bus to the airport, had dinner while waiting for a plane, and returned to Washington in time to get a good night's sleep.

The morning's mail brought Jim's letters. Fran opened the thick manila envelope eagerly.

Mr. Brewster had sent six letters; the first two had nothing to say about the book, but the third did. In that letter Jim mentioned working hard on a novel and, though still untitled, it was practically finished. Fran looked at the date. It was written about a month before the flight on which Jim had been shot down. She attacked the three remaining letters with renewed zeal, only to throw them disconsolately on the breakfast table at the end.

Fran lit a cigarette and got up, to pace restlessly up and down the small modernistic amber and green living room that mirrored so perfectly her personality; decorative and pleasing to the eye, yet still practical and cozy. The surroundings were charming but still Fran frowned. She was getting nowhere fast.

She finished her cigarette and picked *Red Flames and Embers* from the table where she'd tossed it the night before on her arrival from New York. Fran sat down and commenced reading. Skimming through the book on the plane hadn't given her its full flavor. Now that she was reading more carefully, however, no doubt remained in her mind. Jim had written the book. She could see him in the turn of a phrase, in the selection of words, in its philosophy. Besides, *Red Flames and Embers* was tops and it would take a better man than Charlie to have written it. Charles didn't have the caliber. The ratio of possibility of his having written *Red Flames and Embers* was about comparable to the possibility of killing

an elephant with BB shot. She flung the book aside.

But I can't prove it, Fran told herself disconsolately. *I'll have to go at this thing differently; first prove Charlie murdered Jim and take up motive later.* Her crooked smile as she thought of herself in the role of detective was mocking but determined.

THAT line of reasoning brought Lieutenant and Wingo and Sultan Sadegh to her mind. Fran took to the davenport. Her lounging pajamas were maize and she lay on her back with knees comfortably crossed and balancing a mule on the tip of toes with carmined toenails. Fran reached for the telephone on a nearby table, called Lieutenant Wingo at police headquarters.

"Hello, Lieutenant," she said. "This is Fran Lansing. What's happening in the Brewster murder? Did anything come of your questioning Sadegh?"

Lieutenant Wingo was smug and jubilant over the phone. "I'll admit I had doubts of Anderton, Miss Lansing," he said, "but now I think we have our man. Sultan Sadegh turns out to be a brother of Jamela and admits having known Brewster in Iran. Of course, he denies any part in the murder but I've cabled for more information both on Sultan and Jamela, particularly on her relations with Brewster. Too bad we couldn't have brought Sultan in before he had a chance to wash his hands."

"Before he washed his hands?" Fran said, perplexed. "What good would that have done?"

Lieutenant Wingo snorted. "We might have caught him red-handed. You see, we have means of proving whether a man has used a gun or not. With a hot day like yesterday, it would probably have showed up even more than usual if he had—sweaty, you know."

"Oh," Fran said, preoccupied, "now I call that interesting."

Her thoughts were far away—back in the entrance hall of the west wing of the White House. She could see Charlie holding the press release, the underlined words in the script giving his lead. Jim had already been murdered. Suppose—just suppose, Charlie *had* murdered Jim. Was there a chance he might have had traces of gunpowder on his hands? Was there also a chance it might

have been transferred on that hot, sticky day to the press release? In other words, would Charlie have been a careful murderer—one that would take into account every eventuality. Would Charlie have had the sense to wash his hands?

Fran said "good-bye" absently, cutting Lieutenant Wingo's pleasantries short. Her one idea, now, was to hurry down to the office of *Weekly* and find yesterday's press release from the White House. Fran dressed hurriedly, found a taxi outside and drove to the *Weekly* office. She paid the taxi driver and rushed inside, finding, providentially, Charlie had gone to lunch. The stenographer in charge burrowed in a pile of papers on her desk to turn up the desired press release.

"You're sure you won't need this any more, Miss White?" Fran asked, putting the paper carefully in an envelope and speciously making her eagerness to get away.

"Sure. Mr. Rinehart would want you to have it, I know."

And I'm not so sure! Fran said to herself. Aloud, she continued, "Thanks a lot, Miss White."

Fran had luck in finding a taxi waiting at the curb outside. She climbed in hurriedly.

"Police headquarters, driver," Fran said briskly, sitting back in the seat, relaxed. She'd done her part and the answer was now on the laps of the gods.

Lieutenant Wingo looked up, surprised, as she opened the door of his office on the second floor of police headquarters some ten minutes later.

"We—ll," he said, getting up. "Come in, Miss Lansing. I wasn't expecting a visit." Something in Fran's face must have stirred his curiosity as he added, keenly, "What's up? Anything new?"

Fran didn't know exactly how to begin—how much to tell. "You see," she started slowly. "I can't see Sultan Sadagh as Jim Brewster's murderer—can't imagine he'd actually have a motive."

"Is that so?" Lieutenant Wingo said, piqued and on his dignity, "and why not?"

"Oh, because . . ." Fran hesitated.

"Perhaps you have another murderer in mind." His sarcastic emphasis was on the "you."

"You're damned right, Lieutenant," Fran

said crisply. "I have, and it's up to you to prove whether I'm right or wrong."

"And just who is your suspected murderer?" Lieutenant Wingo asked dryly.

"Charlie Rinehart of *Weekly*."

"What!" Lieutenant Wingo said in a strangled voice.

FRAN had the queerest feeling now that she'd at last voiced her suspicions of Charlie. Also, she wasn't much surprised at Lieutenant Wingo's reaction.

"I have a press release here," she said, holding it out, "and I want you to put it through whatever process it is you use to detect gunpowder on hands. This press release was handled by Charlie Rinehart just before the murder of Jim Brewster was discovered. If you find traces of gunpowder, it should prove something."

"Well, I'll be damned! You're really serious!"

"Damn-it-to-hell, why else should I come running down to headquarters!"

"Have you any objection to telling what reason Rinehart would have for murdering Brewster?"

"I'll tell you what I *think* was the reason," Fran said slowly, "but I can't prove it."

"I see, and I suppose the police are to do that," Lieutenant Wingo was tart. "We—ll, let's have it."

"Charlie is just publishing a book. I think he stole it from Jim Brewster in Okinawa and when Jim turned up from the dead. . . ." Fran shrugged, "Charlie *had* to do something."

"Hmmm, motive enough," Lieutenant Wingo admitted, "if true."

"It would have ruined Charlie—absolutely ruined him. Besides, the book's a big success. Charlie could, no doubt, use the money."

"A lot of money, you say?"

"At least a couple of hundred thousand before the government got its cut," Fran said.

Lieutenant Wingo was impressed. "I'll have the press release processed—see what turns up." He pressed the buzzer on his desk.

"Swell, and if you do find traces of gunpowder, Lieutenant, let me know. I have an idea Charlie will crack if he thinks you

have the goods on him about *Red Flames and Embers*. He's a steady drinker and jittery."

"Thanks for the tip. However, Sadegh is the man for my money, though I have an open mind. Call me later in the afternoon. That will be better than my calling you." Lieutenant Wingo handed the envelope Fran had given him to the man who answered the buzzer, gave him instructions, then turned to Fran when the detective left the room. "About three would be a good time to call. I'll have the answer then."

"Okay, three it is," Fran said, and breezed out of the room.

She was so confident over the result of the test that she went straight back to her apartment to execute another spot of forgery—just in case. It was intended for Charlie Rinehart and, again, the question of ethics didn't bother her. The forgery consisted of carefully copying Jim's signature on a new letter Fran typed out, following exactly that sent Mrs. Brewster by Jim and in which he mentioned his book, but inserting a paragraph or two giving a resumé of *Red Flames and Embers* as the plot of his story. When she had finished, the result was good; flowed in easily with the rest of Jim's letter, and the signature was a nice copying job. Fran put the letter in the original envelope that had been posted in Okinawa. The whole thing had an authentic air and Fran regarded her work with satisfaction.

All's fair in love, war and murder, Fran murmured, glancing at the French ormolu clock on the desk. It struck the half-hour cheerily and she decided to raid the refrigerator. The time was half-past two and still a half-hour to go before she could get returns from Lieutenant Wingo. While she ate lunch she had the eerie sensation that Jim was with her in the room, that he was actually directing her efforts. She was tense and quivering as the clock chimed three. It had hardly ceased when she was dialing Lieutenant Wingo.

"Fran Lansing," she said, trying to keep her voice from sounding as hectic as she felt. "Any news?"

"Well, —er," Lieutenant Wingo said, nearly driving her frantic with his deliberation, "your hunch seems to have been good. There were definite traces of gunpowder on that press release."

"Damn and blast! That's wonderful!"

"Rinehart will be here shortly," Lieutenant Wingo continued. "Want to be in on it?"

"Do I! And, Lieutenant, I've a letter I'll bring along that might help—might get a confession. It sort of confirms my theory that Charlie stole Jim Brewster's manuscript—his book."

"Hm, but I thought you said you had nothing to prove that."

"Something new turned up," Fran announced glibly. *Damned new!* she said to herself, smiling wryly.

"Okay, lady, bring it along. Better step on it."

Fran took time to call the Washington *Home-Herald*, finding Andy at his desk. "Better hurry down to police headquarters, Andy," she said breathlessly, "Something doing on Jim's murder. I'll meet you there." Fran slammed up the receiver, feeling virtuous. She might have left Andy in the lurch. She didn't bother with lunch dishes but flew out of the apartment like a bat-out-of-hell.

CHARLIE was ascending the steps as Fran drove up to police headquarters. For the first time, she felt a twinge of compunction, seeing the familiar plump figure climbing the long ascent—old Charlie who'd palled around with her and the other newspapermen for years. Good old Charlie whose salt she'd eaten many a time.

Don't be a damned fool! she told herself savagely. *Don't go soft because you know the man. Good old Charlie's a murderer!*

Lieutenant Wingo had the press release in his hand when Fran opened the door of his office and went in. The envelope was lying on the desk and Charlie's face was puckered into a puzzled expression.

"Why, yes," he said, "that's mine all right. It's yesterday's press release from the White House. The messenger took it over to my office."

"That's all I want to know," Lieutenant Wingo said smoothly, looking bland. "Now, Rinehart . . ."

Fran interrupted. "You may be interested in seeing this, Lieutenant." She handed over the letter with the forged signature, with its added paragraphs. "You see what Jim

Brewster says about his book. I've read the book supposedly written by Charlie and it's exactly the same plot."

Charlie's face seemed to disintegrate—go soft and sag. His lips were pale and dry and he moistened them with his tongue. "I—I . . . Well, there's just nothing to say. I planned to explain to Jim, make restitution, of course—had a date for dinner and expected to throw myself on his mercy. Then, he was murdered," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, yeah," Lieutenant Wingo said, and his tone was cynical. "You bet he was murdered and by you. We'll use this letter as exhibit B, a beautiful motive."

Charlie was eying him wildly. "Good God!" he exclaimed, his voice rising hysterically, "You can't think I murdered Jim!"

Lieutenant Wingo looked grim. "You signed your death warrant when you admitted that was yours," he said, pointing to the press release on his desk. "There are definite indications that the hands that handled the release had been messing around with a gun. Since there was only one gun used in the White House yesterday, you must be the man who murdered Jim Brewster."

"A thief, yes, but not that—not a murderer," Charlie cried shrilly. "There's another answer." He gulped, stricken, then looked wildly around as though seeking help. "There may have been only one gun used in the White House yesterday but that doesn't mean only one pair of hands handled my press release. Look at my first lead—the one crossed out." Charlie grabbed for the paper, pointed dramatically. "Can't you see it was changed? For God's sake, get Andy Anderton!"

"Get Andy Anderton for what, Charlie," Andy asked easily, coming in the door.

There was a crying silence. Lieutenant Wingo coughed uneasily. He wasn't quite sure what it was all about but his eyes were on Charlie's anguished, pleading eyes. It couldn't be—anyway, he'd proceed with caution.

"Charlie was trying to explain how come he changed his lead on yesterday's press release from the White House," Lieutenant Wingo said casually. "You were with him at the time, weren't you, Anderton?"

"I don't see . . ." Andy said. Fran could see his mind working, wondering what the

hell it was all about—a bit contemptuous of all the fuss. "Where's Sadeh? I thought you had something on him in the Brewster murder."

"First, let's get this straightened out," Lieutenant Wingo said. "What about it, Anderton? What about Rinehart changing his lead?"

Andy laughed. "It was Charlie's off day, I guess. He had a bum lead and I fixed it up, crossed it out and underlined the right one. Why?"

"Because there were traces of gunpowder on it—on that White House release, meaning either you or Charlie murdered Jim Brewster," Lieutenant Wingo explained phlegmatically. "Now we'll check on the release you sent *your* paper. Don't worry, we'll find out which one is the murderer."

But Fran already knew. She could see it in Andy's too bright eyes, his quickly indrawn gasp, from a new knowledge of what made Andy tick, and Andy who couldn't bear being frustrated, who had to win and who had wanted her too much. She put her hand over her eyes to blot out his face. "Oh, my God!" she moaned, "Andy!"

FRAN was having a late breakfast at Allies Inn the next morning, haggard of face. The morning paper was propped up in front of her and screaming headlines told of the arrest of Andrew Anderton for the murder of Jim Brewster. The White House press release found in Andy's office at the *Home-Herald* carried more traces of gunpowder than Charlie's release and it had been handled only by Andy, himself. Charlie Rinehart joined Fran, eyes red-rimmed and not quite sure of his welcome.

"Sit down," Fran said gently.

"You can see how it was," Charlie said. "I was always an also-ran—wanted success and the things that go with it." Fran thought of the girls who had laughed. "The temptation was too much for me when Jim's manuscript practically fell into my pocket. But I'd never have killed Jim, never. I haven't the guts," he admitted candidly. "Of course, Jim will get public credit for *Red Flames and Embers*, and his mother all the profits and that's that—a belated gesture."

"But it doesn't bring Jim back," Fran said bitterly, "and the thing that bothers me now is, what is my own responsibility for his

death. You remember, of course, our conversation in the White House that morning—my remarks about the possibility of murdering safely after forty. Perhaps it spurred Andy on."

"Rubbish! Andy must have planned the thing in advance, knew the routine and that one could murder with impunity in the bedlam of the press room. You couldn't help being you and that he would go to the length of murder to get you. Besides, you

haven't read the paper carefully." Charlie reached for it, pointing halfway down the page. "'Andrew Anderton, age thirty-nine,'" he quoted. "You see, Fran, you actually warned Andy not to take murder on."

Fran grimaced forlornly. "Damn and blast! Then I *was* right, after all. One more year and Andy would have got away with it, would have known enough to wash his hands of powder traces after committing murder!"

ALL IN OUR NEXT ISSUE



Ex-Chief Gunner, U. S. Navy—there was a guy for a diving job

"Give a Man Air"

**JOHN SCOTT
DOUGLAS**

Hashknife and Sleepy on the Prod!

SIX-GUN LAW IN LAZY MOON

(A Complete Novel)

W. C. TUTTLE



Oh, yes, the U. S. Army was out of Burma—but how about one girl?

"Abandoned"

**GORDON
MacCREAGH**

FRANK GRUBER

Tough game the detective business, and tough fellows at it.

**"The Dime
Novel"**

PART III

**"Pilgrim Father
McGee"**

**FRANK
RICHARDSON
PIERCE**

All No-Shirt McGee wanted was to turn from musing to bush-piloting!

SHORT STORIES for December 10th

*If You've Faced Shell Fire,
Football's Easy — Should
Be, That Is!*



COWARD IN THE GAME

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

IT ALL happened in the famous, fabulous college football season in the fall of nineteen forty-six. . . the year that had the old boys dreaming up memories of nineteen-nineteen and nineteen-twenty, when, as in forty-six, a big bunch of hard-bronzed men hit the grid-irons all over the country and hung up records for all to see. Maybe a kid who hasn't done very much living can get pretty impressed with the idea of diving low into a flock of cleats coming around left end. I don't know about that. I do know that a

joe who has wormed his way under a bunch of small arms fire isn't going to do a lot of gasping at the horrors of the so-called "physical contact" sports. And that's the way it was in forty-six. It's a year for the books.

As soon as I got out of the service, I tried to get into any college or university with a decent journalism course. I only had one year to go, plus a lot of experience on army sheets. They sent me their regrets. At last a little eastern outfit called Chemung University in the small city of Chemung, New York, wrote me that they might have

room in the fall term. I looked them up and their journalism course rated fair. It had to do. Naturally the name of Chemung University wasn't as well known before the fall of forty-six as it is now.

The idea of existing on the education allowance in the G.I. Bill didn't look like a very good deal to me. Also, I don't like small towns. But I went.

The city of Chemung is in a steep-sided valley. The university sits up on the top of the hill south of town. I registered a few days late, and the only place they had left for me was half of a room in a condemned dormitory that they were using for the football boys. I growled at the gent in charge of living quarters, but there was nothing I could do to change it.

I lugged my gear over to the first room at the top of the stairs in a frame dormitory. I crowded through the door and a husky kid jumped up from one of the two beds.

I stuck out my hand and said, "Sorry to move in on you like this. My name's Tom Western."

He grinned. "That's okay. They told me somebody would be moving in with me. Glad it isn't one of these little kids I see walking around this place. I'm Sven Stockwitz. Don't let the name stop you. I'm half Swedish and half Polish."

I liked his looks. He was about five eleven and I guessed him at a hundred and ninety or so. Square face with good solid bones in it. Pale blue eyes, quite small. Hair so blond it was almost white. A grin that hiked one side of his mouth halfway up to his eye and made a million wrinkles around his eyes. He had a good heavy handshake.

After I got my stuff settled and spent some time looking out our two double windows down toward the town, we sat around and smoked and talked. We found out that we'd both spent four years working for Uncle Sugar. He'd been with the Seabees in the Pacific. I'd spent my time overseas as a combat correspondent in the Italy affair.

Then he told me that he was going to lay off smoking pretty soon. Said he was going to play football.

"Doesn't that seem like kid stuff?" I asked him.

"Sure it does. But what the hell. They give me a snap job of looking after a couple

of furnaces, oil-burning jobs, and pay me sixty bucks a month for it. I need the dough and I did well enough as an end before the war so that they want to pay me to play. I need the dough. Mary Anne and I talked it over."

"Mary Anne?"

"Yeah. My wife. Little old girl named Mary Anne McCarthy before I married her. Just like the name of the gal that went to gather clams. She's living with her folks now, but I've lined up a house here so that she can come out and join me in the spring."

"Then dear old Chemung U is going into the football racket?" I asked.

"Why not? With things the way they are, they got a chance to pick up a bunch of guys like they'd never get in normal times. So they're laying it on the line. They ought to have about two hundred turn out for it, and I bet there'll be forty top guys on the payroll. Nearly all of them service joes. And I've really seen a few rough boys around this town already. Rough!"

So that was it. I could see their point. A chance to make a great big name without too much expense involved. With a hot coach, and they'd hired Marty Dorrence, there wasn't much excuse for little Chemung not tripping up some of the giants. Then the new kids coming up would be interested, and they ought to be able to go along for years on the momentum.

YOU remember Marty Dorrence. When he came off a Kansas farm back in the late twenties—I got a new bicycle the year he first made All American—he was a gangling black-headed kid with vacant eyes and a loose mouth. He looked fat and sloppy around the waist, even then, but he could snap into full speed in a step and a half. He'd run with his knees rising as high as his chin. After the first ten minutes or any game, he'd be making his own holes in the line. Psychological warfare. He'd come in like a freight train, all knees, elbows and shoulders. One good man could stop him dead about three or four times before they took that good man off the field and got out the wide adhesive.

I picked Marty out in those years as a sort of hero. I followed him after he got out of school, just like a hundred thousand other Americans . . . followed him through

the four years of pro ball when he drove big cars and played it high and wide. I was disappointed when he got too soft to play, and then excited again when he landed the coaching job with Murnane Tech.

You remember what happened then. The story made all the papers. The practice session where Marty, for the hell of it, took the ball and rammed through the line of kids he had coached. Apparently he drove at the weakest sister of the lot. He went through into the backfield where they nailed him. Everybody got up but the kid in the line. Broken neck. Died an hour or so later. Remember those headlines? Brutality in College Football. Sadistic Coach Kills College Student. What Is Happening to College Football?

Those things happen, but Marty was through in college ball. Finally he angled a job as a backfield coach for the Plumbers, that rough old New Jersey pro outfit that has been mauling them for fifteen years.

That was when I met Marty. The school where I took my first three years of journalism had the idea that you try to work up an exclusive yarn in any field in which you are interested. I liked football, and after I dug around for a while, I decided to see if I could get some facts for a feature on the way members of pro teams make money on the side bets. I hoped to get a good grade out of it, and get away without getting my head punched in.

I didn't realize the dynamite in that yarn. When I got my facts together, the hottest angle was about Marty Dorrence. He and two other guys were rigging a pro pool and cleaning up. I turned it in. It was printed and reprinted all over the country. Actually the set-up was not dishonest but looked it. Marty got the pink slip and he was out of football for good . . . so everybody thought. I was sick about it. He looked me up and asked me what the hell I'd done it for. He wasn't mad—just hurt. I couldn't even answer him. I can still see the way his back and shoulders looked when he walked out of my room.

But old Marty fooled them all. Right after the story broke, he enlisted in the Marines. He got his field commission after a patrol on Tulagi. He got the Navy Cross on Guadal, and his majority after Tarawa. He earned his way up there; no politics.

They made him a Lieutenant-Colonel just before he got his discharge. That's what cleared him. That's what sweetened the name of Marty Dorrence up so that Chemung was glad to take him on as coach.

Stockwitz and I talked some more. Then we went out and ate and came back with some bottled beer. We talked until three, when he got off onto the sterling qualities of his Mary Anne. I yawned my way out of it and went to bed. When he stripped down to climb in the other bed, I sat up to get a better look at that build. He had the neck, chest and shoulders of a guy that ought to weigh two and a quarter. The slimmness of his hips and ankles brought him down to around one ninety something. He had a tropical tan burned well down into the fair skin. The muscles were smooth, not bunched. I counted four places on which he carried the distinctive puckered scars of mortar fragments.

I dropped back onto the pillow and said, "Purple heart kid, hey?"

"Yeah. The medal for not ducking." That's all I ever heard him say about the scars or about the war.

The next day, while I signed up for classes, I did a little thinking about the probable football history of Chemung—the golden future—and wondered where I could fit Tom Western into the picture. During the afternoon I went into town and had a long talk with a soft old gentleman who was full of quiet sarcasm and contempt for his own job—managing editor of the daily paper, the *Chemung Message*. I haggled him out of thirty bucks a month for detailed coverage of all football games. I wasn't worth it. I figure that he felt sorry for me.

THEN I went to see Marty. It was a bit tense when he recognized my name. I told him that it had happened a long time ago and that I was plugging for him. I told him about the sports writing. Then I listened while he told of the football deeds, past and future, of the great Dorrence. After a half hour he loved me as only a thorough bore can love an eager listener. I knew that I could sit with my fingers on the great man's pulse for the rest of the season.

In a couple of weeks my routine was set and I liked it. Classes, food, sleep and

games. I located a little wench named Hilda with a blue Buick which matched her eyes. She didn't insist on dancing, she didn't talk much and she could make a big evening out of one cup of coffee. A good gal.

Every day I'd be at the practice field watching wise old Marty shape the boys up. He had it down to a hundred by the time scrimmages started. He made the line coach and the backfield coach tell the eager but inept characters when to stop coming out to play. After two afternoons of practice plays, I could see what he wanted. Pure power. He had simple plays that picked up all the power of the backfield and sent it crashing through holes dug the hard way by the guards and tackles. No razzle-dazzle. Just plain brute power with enough impact at the point of contact to bash in the front end of a truck. It was the smart way with the material he had. And it was the kind of football the big coach knew best. I personally counted twenty boys that were over six-two and over two-ten. They were ex-paratroopers, combat engineers, infantry, Seabees—in fact, almost every tough, dirty branch of the service. It isn't necessary to say that there were a sprinkling of Marines—big Marines.

Every day I would go down and file some stuff with the *Message*, and every day they printed it. Marty thought I was a wonderful guy. Sven and I got along wonderfully. I never had a roommate I liked better—but of course he kept wishing out loud that he could trade me in for Mary Anne. I got so I felt that I knew her. He kept four pictures of her in the room. He was gay and happy and working hard at his two trades—learning to be an engineer and playing end for Marty.

The other slots filled up quicker than the end slots. There was some fine, stiff competition for the end positions. I watched them all work out, and I guessed that Sven was one of the two best. He was fast and had a good eye. He could climb higher in the air than many a lad several inches taller. He just about had the right end position cinched when another one of the lads, a boy named Carson, made a beautiful play in a scrimmage. He was playing defense against a power play around his end. Three men running interference. The ball carrier was too close to his interference. They were bunched. Carson spread out and floated

through the air, parallel to the ground and about six inches above it. He clipped the whole four at ankle level and piled them up in a heap. That night Marty posted the first string team. Sven wasn't on it. The two ends were Carson and a slim kid named Pogoni who was as good as they come—maybe better than Sven. Maybe.

Sven didn't seem to care. He wanted to be number one man, but as long as he got his dough, he was content to play good ball and try to work his way up in there. I knew that he'd be able to do it.

It was about three days later that I found out that there was a little group on the first team who were friendlier than they should have been. It's always nice to have the boys work together, but when you get three guys who are working for three guys instead of for the team, you have trouble. By coincidence, it turned out that the three dear, dear friends were all on the right side of the line. Carson, the swarthy end who had lucked into a first-team position, Sleegal, a stolid beefy right guard, and Kelly, a red-faced, sullen Irish tackle. I heard them talking in the locker room.

The only important thing I heard was Kelly saying softly, "Now, if you guys stay on your toes and we work together, we can break off any bum who tries to take the first-team job away from any one of the three of us."

I didn't like the sound of it and I wanted to tell Marty, but I didn't want to be a stooge. Besides, I figured that he probably would think I was trying to teach him his business. If he did, I could kiss thirty bucks a month good-bye.

That night I told Sven about it. He fingered his square chin and said, "Well, I'll be damned! So they got a club. Now I got to get Carson's job. Besides, if I stay second string, they may cut my pay and then I can't buy Mary Anne so many pork chops."

The worst threats to Carson's peace of mind as the training went further along were Sven and a smiling kid named Billy Jenner, who, strangely enough, was the only non-service kid left within shooting distance of the big time. Sven had it over Jenner like a tent, but I figured that with Jenner's natural ability, he might be able to crowd Sven a little by next season.

It happened on a Thursday practice ses-

sion. Jenner was playing right end on the substitute team. He was on offense. He had managed to cut inside of Carson and block him out of a couple of plays that started wide and then cut in. He was making Carson look bad, and I knew that Marty knew it. I was grinning and pulling for Jenner. There was something about Carson that I didn't like.

SO I was watching Jenner on the next play. I couldn't figure the play out. Evidently Jenner was supposed to cut inside of Carson and run back through flat center as a decoy. He didn't get far. I saw Sleegal hit him gently and stop him without knocking him down. I thought I saw Sleegal's elbow hooked around Jenner's knee. Then Carson came over and blocked Jenner high and hard, knocking him over the crouching Sleegal. There was a ringing crack that you could hear all over the field. Everybody ran over and stood in a tight circle around Jenner. Marty bulled his way through the circle and I followed him. The play had snapped Jenner's thigh midway between his knee and his hip. The big muscles of the thigh had contracted and pulled his knee halfway up to his hip. He lay on his back, his eyes shut, his face gray. Knots of muscle stood out on his jaw. He had guts but he was through for the season.

The docs came out and stuck field splints on him. Before they lifted him into the ambulance, he looked up at Carson and said, "When I'm back in shape, I'm going to bust your face in." Carson was still grinning when the ambulance was out of sight.

Marty called the two teams together and said, "You guys are making trouble for me. Somebody's going to holler about that. Save that kind of play for the opposition. I like to see you guys play good hard ball, but leave me with some ball players. Now get back in there and run through the same series again. I'll send Stockwitz in for Jenner. Don't sissy up on me, but don't make it too tough, either."

He sent Sven in and Marty and I squatted out where the linesmen would normally be. We both chewed hunks of grass. I knew from the first play that there'd be more trouble. Sven had added what I'd told him to what happened to Jenner. On the first play he left the ground about eight feet in

front of Carson. It turned into a rolling block. He bounded up first and Carson had a funny expression on his face.

Marty saw it. I glanced at him and he met my eye and grunted. He spat out the piece of grass and said, "Now I get to find out which is the best man."

"And if Stockwitz gets what Jenner got?"

"Then Carson's the best man. Simple."

He pulled another grass heart and we watched the next play. Sven cut way inside his normal position and hit Kelly in another rolling block which filled Sleegal's face with heels. I wouldn't have wanted to be any one of the three. Sven had the gift of hitting full speed in about two steps. We could hear him hit. I knew it must feel to Sleegal, Kelly and Carson like trying to catch a burlap bag full of bricks dropped out of a fourth-story window.

I noticed on the next play that Sleegal, Kelly and Carson had a few mumbled words to say to each other before lining up. They glanced guiltily over toward us. I found out afterward that Sven didn't have a chance to try to rough them up on the next play, as he was supposed to cut wide and go deep for one of the few pass plays in the Dorrence book. As soon as he pulled out and started wide, the unholy three started after him. He was faster, but when he heard them coming he stopped and they closed in on him. Marty didn't move. He just watched. Sven stood for a second and they were only feet away from him. He wavered and then when it looked as though they could touch him, he turned and ran as fast as he could. He ran off the field.

I heard Marty breathe. "Yellow! I'll be damned."

Sleegal, Carson and Kelly came swaggering back to the line. Sven walked a couple of dozen feet behind them. He looked pale. He didn't glance at Marty. Marty didn't stop him. On the next play, Sven dropped the second Carson touched him. Carson looked for a second as though he would pile on. Then he put his hands on his hips and looked down at Sven. He spat on the ground near Sven's feet and ambled back to his own spot.

Marty said, "Stockwitz! Go over and run around the track six times. Then take a shower and knock off for the day." Sven walked away with his head lowered. No one

spoke to him. I felt sick. Marty sent an eager, clumsy kid named Wallace in at right end. The scrimmage continued, but there wasn't any more rough stuff.

I went from the *Message* office to dinner and then I went back to the room. I knew somehow that Sven had had his head in his hands. He looked up and nodded at me. I said, "Hi, Sven," and went over to my own desk. They were arranged so that we sat back to back. I turned around and stared at him. I stared for a long time. He had his head bent over a book, but in fifteen minutes he didn't turn a page. I turned around and went to work on my books. I've seen too many guys yellow out to be foolish enough to try to talk with them when they're going through that period of hating themselves.

THE world didn't seem like such a good place after that. I couldn't figure why Marty kept Sven on, why he didn't tell him he was through, he could turn in his shoes. Instead he kept Sven circling that track every night. I would look up from the field and see his white head going doggedly around the cinder track. It was refined torture. I knew that if it hadn't been for the dough and Mary Anne, Sven would have quit. He usually waited until the showers were empty before he went in. He didn't speak at all in the room. Maybe I should have tried to help him out. I felt bad, but I didn't know what to do.

The team was shaping up. They plunged through the first two teams they met. You remember the scores. They made headlines all over the country. Seventy-seven to six, and an eighty-three to nothing. Marty had no mercy. He didn't put in the third, fourth and fifth string boys. He kept the best in there, and rolled up a score. They left a string of broken bones and torn cartilage—on the other teams. Sven still plodded around the track. I began to wonder if Marty had forgotten him.

It was in the early part of October that some local gyp outfit began to send out the fancy discharge buttons to the ex-servicemen in the school. Somehow, they had gotten hold of our military records as transcribed on the school records. They made up discharge buttons with little rows of service ribbons below them, the same service rib-

bons we had been handed by Uncle Sugar. The little row also included decorations. Some kids were handling it in the school for the outfit in town. I got back to the room and saw the two little boxes on the desks. I found mine on Sven's desk. I went over and unwrapped it. It had my ribbons on it and they wanted three bucks for it. It looked worth about fifty cents. Besides, I don't like to wear the discharge button.

They told me in a short letter that I could either send them the three bucks or the button back. I tossed the whole works in the basket, and then decided that was sort of small change. I fished it out and stuffed it in my pocket. I planned to return it to the gyp outfit the next time I hit town.

Then I picked the box for Sven off my desk and started to carry it over to his. The seal had broken and the button fell out. I fished it out from under his bed and started to put it on his desk. And then I saw something. I looked closer. Stockwitz had won himself a Navy Cross.

I know about that Cross. They don't give that out for eating your K-ration or shining your shoes or because you've stayed out of the stockade. It's not one of those "you cite me and I'll cite you" decorations. It's the McCoy. You've got to have a record of being one hell of a rough kid and then you've got to pull something that is a display of pure guts, outside of what they normally expect of you. It's the nearest thing to the Congressional. Some navy guys say it's often better than the Congressional.

I laid it gently on Sven's desk just as he walked in. He walked over and looked down at the pin. He picked it up and shoved it in his pants' pockets.

"So they give you the Cross?" I said.

"So what if they did?"

"It kind of changes my mind."

"How?"

"I figured after that Carson deal that you were yellow."

"Do you figure that's going to bother me?"

"Doesn't it?"

He stared at me and his eyes looked smaller than ever. "How would you feel, Western, if you had waited four years to get that engineering degree—if you had it all set so that your wife could move here with you—if you stood on a field and saw three

guys running right at you—three guys who could bust enough bones in four seconds to make everything impossible—the degree, living here with your wife? Suppose in the last two seconds you remembered that you weren't a wild kid any more—that you were risking too much for a bunch of kid stuff?"

"You're nuts, Sven. I'm going to tell the guys about that Cross. I'm going to tell Marty."

He grabbed me by the throat and slammed me up against the wall. His nose was an inch from mine and my throat felt like he was crushing it. "I like it this way. I'd rather run around the track than play ball. I don't need any help and I don't need any sympathy. You tell anybody on that squad, and, so help me, I'll fix you so that little dish with the blue car won't know you."

He let go. I straightened my collar and said, "You don't get cooperation out of the Western clan with that kind of stuff, Stockwitz. I won't tell them because you don't want me to, not for any other reason."

He stared at me and gradually a slow grin took over his face. "Cocky little guy, aren't you?"

We were friends again. We spent hours talking about everything but football. It was then that he told me that Mary Anne was coming in three days for a visit. As he said it, his face looked softer and his eyes were warm.

The only thing that happened in the three days before Mary Anne showed up was that we won another game. As usual, Sven sat on the end of the bench, a blanket draped over his head like Joe Louis' towel. Marty left the number one boys in for all but the last three minutes of play. The papers were beginning to notice little old Chemung more every Saturday. We won by a criminal score again. I counted the kids carried off the field—kids from the other school. I knew there wouldn't be any more heart in their game that year.

SVEN got Mary Anne a big room in the Walner Hotel and had me in for a drink before dinner. I took Hilda. I liked Sven's choice—a tall, Irish gal with blue-black hair, good shoulders and brave, straight eyes. We sat around and talked about the town and the school and screwball classroom scenes

where the seventeen-year-olds were being forced to compete scholastically with guys of twenty-five who were digging in with dogged determination.

Then Mary Anne said, "And how is the All-American Swede making out with his ball game?"

"Cut it, honey!" he said sharply.

She had a puzzled frown on her face. She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it slowly. Her eyes looked angry. Then she saw how the happy lines in Sven's face had sagged away, saw the bleak look in his eyes. I knew she'd have some things to say after we left. I polished off my drink and left with Hilda as soon as I could.

Sven stopped at the room later in the evening to pick up his toothbrush. His jaw was set in a hard, firm line. He didn't look easy to talk to, but I said, "Did you tell her about it?"

"I told her that I couldn't get along with the coach."

"That's not the truth."

"It is the truth." He slammed the door as he left.

When I was certain he was gone, I ran down the stairs and phoned Mary Anne at the hotel. I said, "Hello. This is Western the guy who was up in the room. I want to talk to you without Sven knowing about it. How about it?"

Her voice was warm, and yet uncertain "I guess I'd like to."

"Is he going to classes tomorrow?"

"As far as I know?"

"See you in the hotel coffee shop at nine-thirty."

She agreed and I walked slowly back up to the room. I still didn't know what to say to her. It was just that she had something in her eyes, something in the way her head was set on those good shoulders that made me feel she'd know the answers.

I found her sitting on one of the benches along the wall. There was a fresh cup of coffee in front of her on the maple table. I told the waitress to bring me one, and then made light conversation until she had brought it and gone away. I noticed that Mary Anne had some new little wrinkles between her eyes. They had grown there overnight.

I told her the whole story, as I had seen

it; told her about the pin and finding out about the Cross; told her what he had said. As I talked, she looked squarely at me and I still liked her eyes.

When I stopped talking, she looked down at the coffee and stirred it slowly. She took some tentative sips. "I don't know what to say, Tom. I know why he did it. I can understand why he did it. They might have . . . hurt him badly. And he couldn't take a chance on losing everything we've planned on." She smiled at me and said, "You know, a wife is supposed to be a hostage to fortune."

"But it's wrong. The guy's got guts. You know that. He tries to act as though he doesn't care, but it's feeding on his insides."

"I know," she said softly, "his letters have been . . . odd . . ." She paused and looked over my shoulder, her eyes widening.

Something grabbed me by the back of the neck and practically lifted me out of the chair. I twisted around. It was Sven. His face was dead white, and his eyes were gray slits. His bunched fist looked as big as a bushel basket.

"Thought I'd find you two together. Thought you'd stick your big nose in my business," he said, without unclenching his teeth.

He started to slip the big fist back a notch before unwinding on me and Mary Anne snapped, "Sven! Sit down!"

I GUESSED from the way it stopped him in midair that it was the first time in their short married life that she had used that tone on him. He stopped as though someone had stuck a gun in his back. We sat on either side of her. Her eyes blazed.

"Stop and think why he's meddling in your business. Stop being so stupid." He opened his mouth to answer, but she cut in on him. "He's apparently the only friend you've got here. He told me what happened. You're wrong, Sven. Now don't interrupt me. I married a man, and if he's going to stop being a man just because I married him, then I don't want him. If you start hedging the risks just on account of me, you'll do it all your life and life will be dull. I can take anything the world dishes out to us—everything except being wrapped in cotton. Now please go up to the room.

I want to talk to Tom a few minutes. I'll be right up."

THEY stared at each other and I saw every atom of stubborn resistance given him by his Polish and Swedish ancestors swim up into his eyes. His face was like a rock. She stared at him, and I couldn't see her face, but I guessed that there was love and fury in her dark eyes.

I saw him waver and then saw the slow grin crack his face into a maze of wrinkles. He stuck out a big hand and ruffled her black hair. "Okay, boss," he said, and walked out of the coffee shop, toward the lobby.

"Mary Anne," I gasped, "wouldn't it have been kinder to slug him with a club?"

"He's my boy," she said, with a nice grin. "He's just got rocks in his head. He'll be okay now, but you have to give him the chance."

It took me about thirty seconds to figure out the way to do it. I didn't want to handle it that way, but it was all there was. I walked off, remembering the small glow in her eyes that said, "Thanks." It made me feel less badly about the job that had to be done.

I found Marty playing gin rummy with Moe, the bandage and rubdown man. I kibitzed the game silently until I made Marty nervous. He couldn't cheat so easily with me watching.

Finally he said, "That's enough for me, Moe." He stood up and stretched his big frame. Moe gave him eighty cents and walked away.

He sounded irritated as he said, "And what cooks with the boy reporter?"

I sat on the bench where it was still warm from Moe, and Marty sat down near me. I gave him a cigarette. "You've heard of the power of the press, haven't you, Marty?"

"Hope to tell you. You busted me out of my last ball job with it."

"I got a little favor to ask, Marty. I want you to put Stockwitz in as a first-string end. Next game."

"You're nuts, Western. The guy's yellow."

"I don't think so."

"And who the hell are you?" he demanded belligerently.

"Just a jerk newspaper guy with a story home in my desk. A great big old football

history of the great Marty Dorrence. I'm calling it, 'The Butcher Comes Back to College.' It tells all about that kid you killed, and it tells about the pro pool racket and then it has a lot of comments about the boys you've put in the hospital so far this year with your big score mania. And it tells about that end with the busted leg that you ignored. I'll get it into some big sheets and I bet they don't even let you finish out the year. You won't be able to land on the cheapest team of any kind in the whole country. I can't vouch for Russia or the Argentine."

I leaned back and took a cool drag on my cigarette. I didn't feel so cool inside. It was dirty and I knew it. He stared at me for a time, and his eyes looked hurt, older. He tried to sound mad, but his heart wasn't in it. I let him pop off for about five minutes before I interrupted him.

"Look, Marty. This is a university. Football's a nice game. You're supposed to keep it clean. You've been crumbing it up and I got a hundred bucks to your one that even if I don't publish the article, you'll get busted out of here after the season's over. There's some damn fine gentlemen coaching ball in this country, and I'll bet you that more than half of them don't like the name of Marty Dorrence."

It wasn't pretty to watch. He'd built his self-esteem and I was ripping it down. He cursed me and then he cursed the system. He unraveled at the edges and he was scared. He saw Fate getting ready to bog him again. I pushed my advantage.

"Marty, you put Sven Stockwitz in and you clean up your brand of ball. Keep that first team of yours from playing sixty minutes. When you get a lead, yank 'em out. Don't give the boys the idea they got to bust legs to earn their keep. Okay?"

That started him off again. I had to sit and listen to him bluster until I got tired of it. I stood up and yawned. "Okay, Marty. Have it your way. Tomorrow I send out the article. Maybe I ought to change the name to 'Let Dorrence Kill Your Kids.'"

I walked toward the door. Slowly. He caught me by the arm as I went out the door. "Wait a minute, Tom. This is one hell of a spot to put me in. I got my strategy all laid out. Besides, that Stockwitz is yellow."

I shoved his hand off and walked away along the path. He caught me after I'd gone fifteen feet. He spun me around roughly, and said, "Okay." His voice was tired. He added a few choice terms about my probable ancestry. I don't insult easily. I walked back toward the room wondering if I could really sell the article—if I sat down and wrote it.

THE fourth game was also a home game. But it was the first really rough game on the schedule, Worker Tech. That's the school that claims to take the boys that Minnesota doesn't have uniforms big enough for. And they've always had a rep for playing smart and very heavy football. They, like Chemung, were undefeated, as you will remember, and had no intention of letting us bust up their string. In spite of the fact that I consider the do-or-die-for-old-Chemung attitude to be a lot of kid stuff, I couldn't help feeling excited about the game. I had only seen Sven for a few minutes and we'd both been a little shy with each other. He'd told me that Mary Anne was staying over for the game. I told him that a bird had told me he might get in the game. He liked that. Marty had stopped the track running stuff and had had Sven working out with the fourth team.

The afternoon was perfect—clear, bright and chilly. I sat in my usual spot on the bench next to Marty and watched the big boys from Worker warm up on the field. I wondered about Sven. The first team from Chemung was pounding around out there. I didn't want to remind Marty because I didn't want to make him mad again. At the last minute, just before the kickoff, he hollered down the bench, "Stockwitz! Get in there for Carson!"

Sven jumped up and tossed off the blanket. He grabbed a helmet and ran out. I heard the guys on the bench mutter, and I noticed that Marty looked a little grim. Carson came walking off the field. He slung his helmet down so hard that it bounced almost into Marty's lap. He said, "You gone nuts, Coach?"

"Shut up and sit down!" Carson muttered something and wedged himself in on the other side of me.

Worker Tech kicked off, a high end over end that carried well down. Bates took it

on our ten and started up. He made back up to the twenty-six before they clipped him down. Those men from Tech were big, fast and hard-hitting. They looked good on the field.

The first play was a delayed buck through center. We made two yards. The next play was a fancy one. I recognized it as soon as it started. It was a play where the left wingback comes around right end with a lot of power. Sven, playing right end, has to drift back for a slow count and then cut out wide and fast, giving the ball carrier a chance to cut inside of him with the interference. The idea is, the right end is then available for a lateral when it gets too tight for the man with the ball.

But they didn't do it that way. While there was still open ground in front of the ball carrier, before Sven had a chance to get into motion, the wingback flipped him the ball.

He was a sitting duck. The opposition end came in fast and rolled him back about four yards. I began to understand what the boys were going to do.

The quarter, Negreno, called one more line buck for no gain and then kicked well out of danger. Sven nailed the safety man on the Tech thirty-two.

The Chemung team worked the same deal on defense. It was a dangerous way to play, but they rigged it so that they knifed in and funneled every play they could right into Sven's lap. They always had him backed up, but they didn't help him. What was worse, the Tech team caught on and began to run every other play right over the top of Stockwitz.

It's bad enough when the opposition concentrates on one man in the line, but when both teams are going out of their way to make it rough, the man in question is in a very bad spot. In a certain sense I didn't blame the Chemung boys. They'd figured him as yellow. They didn't want to play with him. So they were taking the smart way to show him up quick and get rid of him. The only trouble was, they might lose the ball game while trying to bust one man out. I began to ache every time Sven was hit. I wondered how Mary Anne was taking it. I knew that she was just as lonesome up in those stands as Sven was out on that unfriendly field.

IN THE last few minutes of the first quarter, Tech shook a man loose around Sven's end. He danced across the payoff line without a hand anywhere near him. Sven didn't get up. The funny thing was, the guys didn't gather around like they usually do with an injury. They walked away from him. The fixers started out from the bench, but he got slowly to his feet as they got near him. He brushed them off and ran jerkily after the team. I looked at Marty. His jaw was shut tight. I couldn't read anything in his face.

The second quarter was like the first. They dished everything out to Sven. I didn't see how one man could absorb it all. They didn't help him a bit. He got up slower after every play, and yet he made fantastic time getting down the field under punts. He played hard ball. He was playing over his head—but no man can take that sort of thing forever. The Chemung team ran him into every tough spot they could think of on offense, and gave him no cover at all. They sent him out and let Tech shoot him down. Once, on a flat pass, he wiggled loose and made twenty-five yards before they smothered him.

The Tech center was injured and had to be taken out. Marty took our center out and put in the second team boy. He glared at me after he did it. Sven began to limp between plays, but he kept his speed up during the plays. Just before the half ended, the Tech fullback got a bad knee out of a line plunge. They had to take him out. Marty sent in a second string fullback for Chemung. I began to understand what he was doing.

At the half, I drifted back to the locker room with the team. He had a red and purple bruise on one cheek that had nearly closed his eye. Somebody had come down on his left hand with a foot full of cleats. Three of his fingers looked like nothing human. They were cut and so badly swollen that they bulged out above and below the knuckles. A front tooth was chipped. When Moe pried his right shoe off, the ankle puffed up to the size of his calf. He lay on one of the benches with his eyes shut while Moe worked on the ankle.

Marty strolled around and looked them all over. I noticed that all the guys who had been in the game avoided each other's eyes.

Sven was still breathing hard, his big naked chest rising and falling rapidly.

Marty stopped in the middle of the room. I composed myself for another roaring session. When he spoke softly I nearly fell off the folding chair. "All you guys know what's going on, just like I do. Frankly, I don't think I give a damn whether you win this game or not. But if any of you got any sense, you're learning something from what's been going on. I am."

At that point, Sven propped himself up on one elbow. He grinned and said, "They're teaching me some stuff, too." He dropped back down and shut his eyes. The room was very silent.

Sleegal got up and walked over to Stockwitz. He said, "Hey, you!" Sven opened his eyes again. Sleegal stuck out his fat hand and Sven took it. "In the last half, boy, I give you all the cover I can."

"Let the yellow son of a gun make his own cover," Kelly snarled.

Sven rolled off the bench and stood up. He winced as he stepped on the bad ankle. He limped over to Kelly. Kelly jumped up, tense and ready.

Sven stopped in front of him and said gently, "This is kid stuff, Kelly. A game I used to play long ago, but I want you to try it with me. Now. See, I'll keep my hands down at my sides and you take a slug at me. Hit me anywhere and just as hard as you want to. The only thing is, after I get up off the floor, and I'm going to get up, I get one bang at you. Okay?"

Kelly looked uncertain. Sven stood quietly in front of him. Kelly closed his big fist slowly, and then opened it up again. Sven smiled at him. "What's the matter, Kelly? Come on! Let me have it! I'm the guy with no guts, remember?"

Kelly looked down at the cement floor. He shuffled his big feet. "Nuts, Stockwitz. That's kid stuff." He sat down on the bench without looking up. Sven walked back to the table and stretched out so that Moe could continue working on him.

Marty walked to the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned his head so that he faced the room. "Bowen goes in for Kelly after the half." He walked out. I stuck around. As the minutes went by, the atmosphere gradually changed. All of the strain was gone. When the time was short,

the boys climbed back into the suits, laughing and kidding. All but Kelly. Nobody missed the chance to cuff Sven or beat on his shoulder or stick an elbow lightly into his ribs. He was in.

I STOOD at the door and watched them go back out onto the field. They didn't look like a team that had played thirty minutes of rough ball. They ran out on their toes—all but Sven. He was saving it. He ran as if his legs were canvas tubes stuffed with putty.

Worker kicked off and Negreno, the quarter, took it back about twenty-two yards to the Chemung thirty. The backfield pranced and the line boys bounced up and down until the last three seconds before the ball snapped back. Negreno took it, faked to the left wing and slipped it to the full-back who slammed in between left guard and tackle for a fat seven.

It was a setup for a couple of solid yard and a half bucks to carry it to a first down. I could see the Worker backfield pull in. Negreno did the smart thing. He called one of the few razzle jobs. The right wing took it and faded back, giving the left end time to run wide and then cut sharply back into the flat. The left guard bulled through in time to wham a beautiful block into the Worker left wing. The Chemung left wing circled wide and delayed so that he was pounding along a little behind and to the left of the end. The pass was a beauty. When the safety man came in on the left end, he lateraled back to the left wing. He did it a little too soon. He should have waited until he felt the hands on his legs. The safety man kept his feet and took off after the left wing. He nailed him on the Worker nine.

I suddenly realized that I had been holding my breath until my ears were buzzing. The crowd sounded like a hundred fire engines in the middle of a thunder storm. I looked down at Marty's hands. His fingers were knotted together. I couldn't see a scrap of expression on Marty's face.

The Worker gang missed their chance to hold the line because they half expected a play or two to be run over Stockwitz. They were still handing him the business. Negreno called three wicked smashes into the left side of the line . . . one inside tackle, one

outside tackle, one inside tackle. The boys with the poles ran out part way and then ran back. You don't need the poles when you started less than ten yards from the payoff line. Guess they got excited—linesmen are human too.

Once again Negreno handed it to the full, so I thought. It would have been a good idea because he banged two yards across the line with six men hanging onto him. But his arms were empty. Negreno slanted across with it himself, banging diagonally across the huge hole that had been torn in the line. It was a play that wasn't in the books. I heard Marty gasp. But it had been smart ball. Negreno figured that if the full had been stopped cold, he still had a chance of sliding down left end. If the full went through, then he could too.

The point was missed and it stood six all. The two teams settled down to hard, brutal ball. Worker Tech had wised up, and they played it close to the vest. I began to wonder why Marty didn't haul Sven out of there. There were a few short passes that didn't connect. They'd kick to us and we'd battle our way from our twenty-five down to around our forty and then kick back. They'd do the same. The boys were tiring, but neither coach ran in many substitutions.

When they shifted at the quarter, Worker had the ball on their own thirty-eight, fourth down and four to go. The kick was good and we battled it up to our own forty-five before we kicked out. Neither team could get the edge. When Chemung would take it beyond the fifty before kicking, the kick would be a fearful wabbling thing. When we kept them bottled up behind their own thirty, their kick would soar like a rocket. The breaks of the game were coming out even.

The last quarter ticked slowly on and at last the hand of the big clock touched the black line that said three minutes to play. Chemung had the ball on our own forty. Negreno faked a buck and wiggled loose around left end for eleven yards. It was the biggest gain in twenty minutes of ball. The crowd yelled like it had been a touchdown.

I felt Marty jump when the next play started. "Watch Stockwitz," he hissed.

Sven had picked up his tired bones and flashed off like a spooked horse. He ran with his head down, and I knew that the smooth muscles of those thick calves were paying off. I glanced back toward the backfield. Our left end had the ball, and he was dancing back, in serious danger of being trapped. Our blocking was bad. He waited a long time. Finally he wiggled loose and ran back a few more yards. He wound up and put his heart, his back and his prayers into a high spiral pass.

I glanced toward Sven. He had his head up, his eyes on the ball, and he was running along the goal line. He stopped and stood perfectly still, his knees flexed. The safety man was coming in on him fast. Sven went high in the air and the ball thumped against his chest.

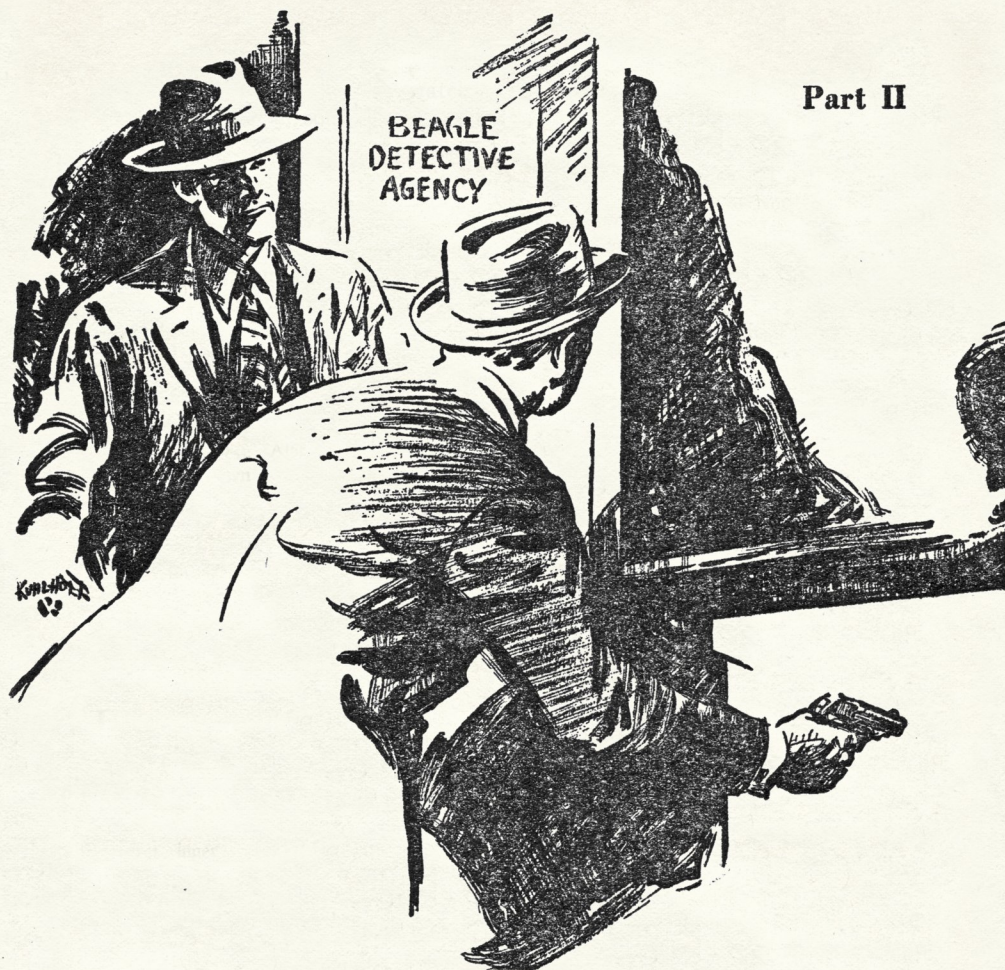
Accomplishment can wear a false face, the idiot grin of a clown. In front of thirty thousand people, Stockwitz jumped high in the air, forcing himself backward. His legs went out from in under him and he made the most spectacular pratt-fall in the history of organized sport. He hit with a thud that jarred every set of teeth in the cramped stadium. But he hung onto the ball and he landed in pay dirt. Several grown men with burbling briars and blue stubble on their chins had respectable cases of hysteria. Marty sent Carson in for Stockwitz. We made the point and two plays later the game ended thirteen to six.

Marty shared the headlines with Stockwitz and the rest of the team. "Dorrence Shows New Sportsmanship." "New Ethics on Substitutions." "May be New Unwritten Law of Football."

I'm due to go back to Chemung tomorrow as a house guest. It's probably the last chance I'll get to visit Sven and Mary Anne before they become a family of three.

I saw a little piece in the paper the other day. Marty Dorrence is using his between seasons' time making lecture tours now. He talks at high schools. His subject is "Teamwork and Sportsmanship."

I wonder if he still cheats at gin rummy!



Part II

THE DIME NOVEL

By FRANK GRUBER

Author of "The French Key," "The Silver Tombstone," etc.

THE STORY SO FAR

OTIS BEAGLE was a private detective, Joe Peel was his strong-arm man—but business was poor. So they drummed up some by assuming that a former client of theirs, Wilbur Jolliffe, would be in trouble again—dame trouble.

By pure guess-work they figured out that the girl is named Wilma, that Mrs. Jolliffe was objecting, that Wilma and Jolliffe both seemed to have a penchant for lurid paper-

backed dime novels with titles like "Deadwood Dick's Big Deal" and "Malaeska, the Indian Wife of a White Trapper"—and then Jolliffe is found dead. It looks like suicide, but a note in a typewriter by the dead man's side says that his death is due to the machinations of one Otis Beagle. That brings in the police who are pretty sour on Beagle and Peel, anyway. But Joe manages to elude them to pay a visit to Jolliffe's so-called duplication business. Just as it seems as if he might get some information from

*People Don't Offer You a Thousand Bucks and a Vacation For
Nothing—Even Murderers*



the dead man's secretary—Mary Lou Tanner—a big guy arrives who announces that he's Mrs. Jolliffe's brother and is taking over the business.

VII

IN THE offices of the Beagle Detective Agency, Otis Beagle champed on a cold cigar and dialed a phone number. He had been making telephone calls all morning.

"I'd like to talk to Judge McGinnis," he said when he got his number. "Tell him it's Otis Beagle. . . ." He waited a moment, then: "Judge McGinnis? Look, Judge, I'd like to ask your opinion about something. You know I operate a private investigation agency. . . . Well, I'd like to ask you just how responsible I am for the actions of my employees . . . an operator. . . ." He frowned as he listened a moment. "It's not that, Judge . . . nothing financial; it—it might be a matter of well, ah, a prison sentence. . . . I see . . . but suppose the operator did something in direct violation of my instructions.

. . . No, I don't think it could be construed as blackmail. . . ." The perspiration began to come out on Beagle's face. "To put it bluntly, the client committed suicide. He left a note blaming it on the agency . . . something to the effect that we, ah, the agency, had caused him to take such a step. . . ." He was silent for a long moment.

While he listened the office door opened and a man came in. He was about forty-five, of medium height and inclined to plumpness. He was dressed in a blue-serge suit and his vest actually had the piping you used to see on the vests of bankers and merchant chiefs. He also wore a Homburg hat and carried a thick cane.

Otis Beagle sized him up and cleared his throat. "Yes, Judge, I see . . . I see. . . ." he said into the phone. "I understand all that. I'd like to think it over. Would it be all right if I called you back? Thanks. Good-bye." He hung up, cleared his throat again and looked at the man who was standing in front of the desk.

"Yes, sir, anything I can do for you?"

The man pulled out Joe Peel's swivel

chair and seated himself carefully. "My name is Marcy Holt," he announced. "And you are Mr. Beagle?"

"Yes." Beagle's mind was still on his recent telephone conversation so he did not follow up with his customary sales talk for himself.

Mr. Holt reached into his breast pocket and drew out a fat wallet. "Mr. Beagle," he said, "I'd like to show you something interesting."

He rifled through some bills in the wallet and skimmed out a crisp one, which he placed on the desk and skidded toward Beagle with a forefinger.

BEAGLE looked at the bill as it started toward him. His eyes widened, then when the figure on the bill came into focus he let out a gasp.

"A thousand-dollar bill!"

"A very handsome one, too," said Mr. Holt smoothly. "Look it over—feel it."

Beagle took the bill in his hands and examined it on both sides. "Counterfeit?"

"Genuine."

Beagle looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"You can become the possessor of that bill, Mr. Beagle," said Holt.

Beagle examined the bill with increased interest. "How?"

Holt smiled and leaned back in Joe Peel's chair. "By performing a service for me."

"Name it," exclaimed Beagle. "It so happens that I am quite busy at the moment, but in view of such a fee . . ." He held up the thousand-dollar bill, ". . . perhaps I can put off some of my other work. . . ."

"I was hoping you could. As a matter of fact, this job would require you to take a trip—to New York. . . ."

"Out of this?"

"No, your expenses would be paid in addition."

"Sounds interesting, Mr. Holt. Now, just what do I have to do to earn this money?"

"Nothing. You are to go to New York and remain there one month."

Beagle stared at his visitor. "I don't get it."

"You don't have to get it. That's all there's to it. This thousand dollars is yours if you go to New York and stay there for a

month. Your hotel and train fare will be paid in addition; the thousand dollars is yours, clear."

Otis Beagle looked at the thousand-dollar bill once more and sighed wearily. "Mr. Holt," he said, "I wasn't born yesterday. There's more to this. . . ."

"Of course, there is," snapped Marcy Holt. "But I'm not going to tell you. The question is—do you accept?"

"You want to get me out of town," Beagle said, wearily.

"Precisely."

"The answer is . . ." Beagle drew a deep breath. "No!"

Mr. Holt smiled. He laid his wallet down on the desk, reached to his breast pocket once more . . . and produced a .32 automatic.

"I was afraid you would say that, Mr. Beagle."

VIII

OTIS BEAGLE stared at the automatic in Marcy Holt's hand and a slow flush started from his throat and moved up into his face.

"Now, look here, Holt . . ." he began.

"Yes or no?"

"But why should you want me to leave town? You never saw me before now and . . ."

Holt gestured Beagle to silence. "I'm not going to argue the matter, Beagle. You can take this thousand-dollar bill and leave town, or . . ." He tapped the muzzle of the gun on the edge of the desk. ". . . or you can take the consequences."

Joe Peel pushed open the door. Otis Beagle had never been so glad to see him.

"Joe!" he cried.

Marcy Holt swiveled the gun so it pointed at Joe Peel. Then he caught himself and swung the gun back toward Beagle. That left Peel uncovered. Holt was an amateur about such things. He sprang to his feet and started to back away so he would have both Peel and Beagle covered.

Joe Peel moved toward him and Holt bleated, "Stand back! Stand back or I'll shoot!"

Joe Peel stepped to the filing cabinet and hooked his elbow over the top of it. Leaning his weight against the files he looked thoughtfully at Marcy Holt.

"Make up your mind," he said.

Holt came to a quick decision. Peel's retreat had cleared the door. He sprang for it, whipped it open and darted out. Joe Peel headed for the door to follow, but Beagle called him back.

"Hold it, Joe—look!"

He waved the thousand-dollar bill, that Marcy Holt had deserted in his precipitate flight.

Joe Peel took one look at the bill, then whirled and sprang toward the door. He shot the bolt.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked as he turned back. He took the bill from Beagle's hand and examined it closely. "I wouldn't know, never having had a piece of lettuce like this, but it *looks* genuine."

"It is."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's what Holt wanted to give me . . . if I left town."

"Why should you leave town?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

PEEL handed the bill back to Beagle and going to his chair seated himself. "He offered you a thousand bucks—just like that—to leave town? Then how come you aren't down at the depot now?"

Beagle scowled. "What do you think I am?"

"I sometimes wonder."

"Could I leave town, with what's hanging over my head?"

"Do you suppose this has something to do with . . . Wilbur Jolliffe?"

"Figure it out for yourself, Joe. We haven't had a case or a client in weeks. Until yesterday. Then today this happens. It's *got* to tie in."

"What was the gun for?"

"That was the alternative—if I didn't take the thousand."

Peel snickered. "You mean a guy pulled a gun to make you take a thousand dollars?" He shook his head. "There's something screwy about this."

"It's the truth. My reputation's worth more than a thousand dollars. . . ."

"Is it?"

"Cut it out, Joe. We haven't got time for comedy. This business is serious. What did you find out?"

Joe Peel took the dime novel from his

pocket and tossed it on the desk. "Jolliffe read dime novels."

Beagle made an impatient gesture. "How'd he and his wife get along?"

"They didn't. She knew that he chased, but didn't care a lot. She's an iceberg; just as big and just as cold. But I gather she held the purse-strings because Wilbur didn't even break even on his business and she said something about giving him an allowance."

"What did you find out about Wilbur personally? Did he have any enemies—I mean outside of the dames he toyed around with?"

"Aren't those enough?"

"Yes, but they're all old stuff. Except this Wilma. *Could* she have done it?"

"I don't know. I didn't find any evidence at his house. But then I only had a few minutes before Sergeant Feddersen showed up."

Beagle groaned. "What'd he want?"

"We made a deal; he didn't tell me anything and I didn't tell him anything. . . . I also went down to Wilbur's office and had a talk with the redhead. Mrs. Jolliffe's brother interrupted that."

"Where did he come from?"

Peel shrugged. "For all I know he's been around all the time. He's taking over Wilbur's business."

"His wife's brother," said Beagle thoughtfully. "Do you suppose. . . ?"

"Wronged wife's brother shoots husband? Maybe yes, maybe no. He's a likely looking suspect, *if* it was murder."

"It's got to be murder, Joe. If it isn't you're in an awful spot. . . ."

"Me, Otis?"

Beagle winced at the slip. "I mean the agency."

"Your the agency, Otis. I'm only an employee. . . ." Peel looked sharply at Beagle.

"Are you up to something. . . ?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . something like throwing me to the wolves?"

"How could I do that? . . . Even if I wanted to."

"I don't know, but I wouldn't put anything past you, Otis."

Beagle came over to Peel and standing in front of him smiled down. "Now, let's don't you and I get suspicious of each other,

Joe." He dropped his hand on Peel's shoulder. "We've been friends too long."

Peel shrugged off Beagle's fat hand and got to his feet. "I don't like that look in your eye—or that tone in your voice, Otis. . . ."

"Why, Joe," said Beagle reproachfully, "you just saved my life, didn't you? That man was all set to shoot me."

"Maybe I should have come in a few minutes later."

"Don't say that!"

Joe Peel drew in a deep breath. "All right, I won't say it. But I'm warning you, Otis, you try anything funny. . . ."

"I won't. You have my word. Now, let's get to work again. I think you ought to have a showdown with Wilma Huston. . . ."

"I don't know if I can get her before evening. She may be a working girl. But I'll run over and see what I can find out around the Lehigh Apartments."

"Go ahead."

Joe Peel picked up the dime novel and stuck it in his pocket. He started for the door, then turned. "If I were you, I wouldn't flash that thousand-dollar bill around. And if you're going to stay in the office lock the door from the inside."

Beagle nodded.

JOE PEEL wasn't awfully happy about his mission as he walked down Hollywood Boulevard. True, the prospect of going a round or two with Wilma Huston—either one of them—appealed to him, provided the big bruiser was not in the apartment. But he was just as likely to be there as not. A repetition of last night's debacle would do Peel no good.

He reached Cherokee and was about to turn off, when a bookshop on the opposite corner caught his eye. He crossed to it and entered.

It was a second-hand bookshop and in addition to books had a large stock of old magazines in the rear. Peel sought out the proprietor.

"You buy old books here, don't you?" he asked.

"I sure do. How many've you got?"

"Just this one." Peel drew the dime novel from his pocket. "What'll you give me for it?"

The book dealer shook his head. "I don't

do much in dime novels, although if you had a bunch of them I might take them off your hands."

"Then you wouldn't be interested in buying this one?"

"Oh, I'll give you a quarter for it."

That was at least twenty-three cents more than Peel had expected since the paperback book had only cost ten cents originally. Peel knew less about books than he did about atomic energy.

"You couldn't make it a buck, could you?"

"No," said the bookman, "I don't know if its rare or not. Why don't you try Eisenschiml in the next block? That's his specialty."

"Thanks, I will."

Peel put the book back in his pocket and left the store. In the next block he came to a store, with a sign in the window:

OSCAR EISENSCHIML

Rare Books, Autographs, Americana

The store was empty of customers. Eisenschiml himself, a bald man in his early sixties, was reading a pamphlet at a roll-top desk in the rear of the store.

"I understand you're interested in rare dime novels," Peel said as he handed the book to the dealer.

Eisenschiml scowled. "What do you want to fold it like this for?" He tried to smooth out the crease. "*Deadwood Dick's Big Deal*. You call this rare?"

"Isn't it?"

"Bah. Bragin in Brooklyn'll sell you fifty copies for three dollars apiece."

"It's worth three dollars?"

"Not to me it ain't; if it was a Beadle or a Tousy now, I might give you three dollars, but not for this. What else you got at home."

"*Malaeska*."

Eisenschiml wrinkled up his face in disgust. "First he wants to sell me *Deadwood Dick's Big Deal*, then he says he's got a copy of *Malaeska* at home."

"Well, I have."

"Yah, sure."

"Look," said Peel, "this *Malaeska* is something? It's only a little book about this size."

"Of course." Eisenschiml's eyes showed

a spark of interest. "You really got such a book?"

"If I did have, how much would it be worth?"

"Two—three hundred dollars, if you had it. Depends on the condition. Bring it in and I'll make you an offer."

"I may do that," said Peel. He retrieved *Deadwood Dick's Big Deal*. Eisenschiml winced as Peel refolded it.

TEN minutes later, Peel entered the Lehigh Apartments and rode in the automatic elevator up to the fifth floor. He approached the door of No. 504 and placed his hand on the door buzzer, for the benefit of any tenant on the floor who might come along. He placed his ear to the door and listened carefully. For a moment or two he heard nothing, but then thought he heard muffled footsteps.

He drew a deep breath and pressed the door buzzer. Footsteps slithered over the rug inside. A voice demanded: "Yes?"

"It's me," said Peel.

"Who's me?"

Peel made no reply. The door chain rattled and the face of the first Wilma Huston appeared in the opening. She reacted at sight of Peel.

"You've got a nerve coming back here."

"Haven't I though?"

She slammed the door in his face. Peel waited a moment then pressed the buzzer again.

"Go away," the girl inside cried. "Go away or I'll call the police."

"Go ahead," said Peel. "I'll come in with them."

There was a moment's silence inside the apartment, then the door chain was removed. Peel turned the doorknob and pushed against the door. The girl put her weight against it for a moment, then yielded.

Peel entered the apartment and closed the door. He gave the girl a sharp look and headed for the bathroom. He assured himself that it was empty, then went toward the kitchen.

As he had guessed, in describing it to Otis Beagle, the kitchen ran the entire length of the apartment and was about six feet in width. Unless they were hiding in the refrigerator there was no one in the kitchen.

He returned to the living room.

"Satisfied?" asked the girl.

Peel nodded. "Can you blame me, after last night?"

"You had it coming to you."

Peel seated himself in the same chair he had occupied the night before.

"Let's begin with your name," he said.

"Why?"

"Because you're not Wilma Huston."

"I never said I was."

"That's right, you didn't. But there's only the one name on the mailbox."

"I'm visiting Wilma." She hesitated. "I don't see that it matters. My name is Helen Gray."

"Pleasetameetcha, Helen. Now, if you'll tell me the name of the stumblebum who was here last night. . . ."

"Stumblebum, eh? He laid you out with one punch."

"He hit me when I wasn't looking."

"Keep your eyes on him the next time and see if it'll be any different. He's looking for you, by the way."

"Who's looking for me?"

"Who're we talking about?"

"I don't know."

"My brother—Bill Gray."

"Your brother?" Peel sent a quick glance toward the kitchen. Helen got it.

"So that's what you were thinking!"

"Well, it did throw me off guard." Casually, Peel got to his feet. "You've heard about Wilbur Jolliffe. . . ?"

"What about him?"

PEEL made an impatient gesture. "We're not going to get anywhere, Helen, if you keep on with that who, what, when and why routine. I'm talking about Wilbur Jolliffe, the old boy who was here last night. He was Wilma's boy-friend and he went home last night and shot himself through the head. Those are facts. Let's go on from there."

"Let's not."

Peel seated himself on the couch beside Helen and picked up one of her hands. "Look, baby," he said, "you're a nice kid. . . ."

"Am I?"

Helen smiled at him and with that hauled off and smacked Joe Peel with her free hand. She closed the hand just before it landed on his jaw.

The blow was so unexpected and there was so much power behind it that Joe's head went back and bumped the wall over the couch. He let out a bellow of pain and rage and lunged for the girl. But she eluded his grasp and springing to her feet crossed to the table, standing beside the armchair. She whipped open a small drawer in the end of it and her fingers were closing about the butt of a .32 automatic, when Peel, making a desperate dive caught her about the waist and pinned her arms to her sides.

She struggled furiously in his grip. "Let me go!" she cried.

Joe Peel fell back into the armchair, the girl in his lap. The fall jarred the gun from her hand and it fell to the carpet. He kicked it away with his foot.

He was tempted then to hold on to Helen, but she continued to struggle and he released her. She went for the gun, but he sprang up and kicked it away again, then retrieved it.

"I have more trouble in this place," he said, finally.

"What you've had isn't a fraction of what you're going to get," Helen Gray said, furiously. Her face was flushed and Peel, looking at her thought: this is a helluva way to make a living.

HE SAID: "Baby, me and my boss are in a spot. Wilbur Jolliffe left a note for the cops, blaming us for his trouble. We stand a good chance of winding up in the clink, unless we clear ourselves."

"If I can do anything to help put you in jail, you can count on me doing it," Helen Gray declared.

Peel shook his head sadly. "And yet you're the kind of a dame I could go for—if I didn't have this trouble to worry about." He slipped the cartridge slip out of the automatic and saw that it was full. He put the clip in his pocket and tossed the gun to the couch. "I suppose you've got a permit for that. If you haven't you're going to get in trouble with the cops."

"The gun isn't mine."

"Wilma's? Which reminds me—I really came here to see her."

"I wish she'd been here, last night as well as today. If you don't mind my saying so, I'm awfully fed up with you."

"I'll make a deal with you, then. Tell me where Wilma works and I'll get out."

Helen hesitated only a moment. "All right, she works at the Halsey-Wilshire."

"What department?"

"The glove counter."

Peel picked up the telephone directory and turned to the H's. Helen let him start to dial the number before she exclaimed: "All right, she works for a talent agency on the Strip—the Horatio Oliver Agency."

Peel grinned. "This time I think you're telling the truth."

"You'd find it out, anyway."

"That I would." Peel picked up his thin parcel. "Thanks for the workout."

He went to the door and gripped the doorknob. Then he turned. "You wouldn't care to split a hamburger sandwich and a bottle of beer with me this evening?"

"I have a date—at the Mocambo," Helen Gray replied coldly.

"I was afraid of that," Peel said and went out.

He walked down the five flights of stairs and was so wrapped in thought that he didn't see the man who was leaning against an apartment house on the opposite corner, reading a newspaper. Nor did he see the man fold the newspaper and follow him down toward Hollywood Boulevard.

IX

ON Hollywood Boulevard Peel stopped for a moment, undetermined as to whether to go to his hotel on Ivar and have a short nap, or go and call on Wilma Huston at her place of employment. Duty finally won and he cut down Las Palmas to Sunset where he stepped aboard a bus. The man who had followed him from the Lehigh Apartments had to run to catch the same bus.

After the bus passed La Cienega, Peel watched the buildings as they whizzed by; almost every one bore the signs of Hollywood agents. The signs were big; their owners intended them to be seen.

The Horatio Oliver Agency sign sprawled across a two-story building in the last block of the Strip, just before Sunset Boulevard turned into Beverly Hills.

Peel swung off the bus at the next stop and walked back. He entered the Oliver Building and climbed the stairs to the second floor, entering a modernistically fur-

nished reception room. A switchboard was behind a glass partition.

Wilma Huston was at the switchboard.

A frightened look came to her face as she recognized Peel.

"Hello," he said, quietly.

"I told you I'd get in touch with you."

"I know," Peel replied, "but I thought you'd be glad to know that that little job's taken care of already. Jolliffe won't bother you any more. . . ."

She stared at him in amazement. "But he—he's dead."

"That's why he won't bother you any more."

"I—I saw it in the paper after I called at your office." A shudder ran through her body. "It's horrible."

"Ain't it?"

The switchboard whirled and Wilma plugged in a connection.

"Horatio Oliver Agency," she said into a mouthpiece. "Just a moment, please." She made another connection and spoke again. "Dorothy Lamour calling you, Mr. Oliver. . . ."

"No kidding!" said Joe Peel.

Wilma put down the telephone mouthpiece. The interruption had steadied her. "I'm sorry, Mr. Peel, I can't talk to you here. . . ."

"It's almost lunch time," Peel suggested. "How about then?"

"I don't go until one. . . ."

"Good," said Peel, "I'll meet you downstairs at one. . . ." As Wilma frowned, "There're some things I've got to tell you . . . about Jolliffe. . . ."

She nodded. "All right."

It was twenty minutes to twelve by the clock in the reception room. Peel made a note of it and left the agency offices.

Standing in front of the building he saw the sign, across the street, of *Ole's Swedish Baths* and was reminded of the aching muscles in his body, mementoes of last night's outing on Mulholland Drive. He crossed the street and descended a flight of stairs into the Baths.

An attendant led him to a booth, containing a cot and some coat hangers. He gave Peel a towel and a pair of crepe-paper slippers.

Peel stripped and, completely nude, carried the towel with him into the hot-air

chamber, a narrow room containing three tiers of unpainted wooden benches. The temperature in the room, according to a thermometer on the wall, read 182.

BEING mid-day, Peel was the only occupant of the room, but after he had been seated in the chamber for a few moments another man came in. He was a tanned, well-muscled man of about thirty and he brought with him a magazine. He climbed to the top tier and seated himself.

Peel, seated on the lowest bench, shook his head. The higher you got the hotter it was in the chamber and he could scarcely breathe down where he was. The man above was apparently a Swedish bath "regular."

Five minutes in the room and Peel could stand it no longer. He got up, opened the door and stepped into the shower room. He drew great lungfuls of the comparatively cooler air.

A short, amazingly well-muscled attendant in white-duck trousers and singlet, came into the room.

"You're hardly wet," he commented.

"I think I've got enough," said Peel.

"Take five minutes more," the attendant urged.

Peel went back into the hot-air room. The man on the top tier was reading placidly. Peel gave him a sharp look, started to seat himself on the lowest tier, then looked up at the other man again.

"Don't I know you?" Peel asked.

The man looked down at Peel. "I get around, maybe." He went back to his reading.

Peel sat down and leaped up instantly. The bare plank was so hot that it had scorched him. He paced up and down on the tiled floor as perspiration poured from his body.

Then he could stand it no longer and burst from the room. In the shower room the muscular attendant looked condescendingly at him.

"That ain't hardly enough; why'n't you go into the steam room for ten minutes?" He nodded toward a heavy wooden door, which had a glass panel in the top of it, but was so clouded from steam inside the room that it might just as well not have been there.

Muttering under his breath, Peel headed for the steam room.

"Ten minutes in there, a nice shower and then I'll give you a good rub-down," the attendant said, cheerfully.

Peel pulled open the steam-room door and stepped into steam so thick he couldn't see two inches in front of his eyes. He reached out with his hand.

"Anybody in here?"

THERE was no reply and Peel concluded that he was the sole occupant. He inhaled steam, choked and cleared his throat and inhaled more lungfuls of steam. Ahead was a dim light and he groped toward it.

His fingers touched hot wet tile and he stopped.

Behind him the steam-room door opened, banged shut. Peel turned.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," said another voice.

Then suddenly Peel remembered where he had seen the man in the hot-air chamber. He was the man who had come out of Wilbur Jolliffe's office the day before, the furtive man with his coat collar turned up.

And just as he remembered that, a fist swished through the thick steam and almost drove Peel's Adam's-apple through his spinal cord. Peel went back against the tile wall, bounced off it and into a fist that bent him double.

Gasping in anguish, Peel's arms flailed out and encountered hot, wet flesh. He clawed for it, secured a slippery arm and endeavored to wrap his other arm about a torso.

A powerful arm circled his head, pulled Peel to the other man's body.

"Teach you to mind your own business," a voice gritted in Peel's ear. It was followed by a fist in Peel's face.

"Lemme go," Peel choked.

"Get out of town," exclaimed the other man. "Get out of town and stay out, if you know what's good for you."

Peel tried to wrestle with the other man, but could obtain no grip on the slippery body. He dropped to one knee and a hard fist smashed down on the back of his neck. Peel's chin hit the floor.

And that was all that he knew until the masseur-attendant dragged him out of the steam room and under a cold shower. Peel revived with a gasp.

"Can't take it, eh?" said the masseur.

"Where's the fellow who hit me?" Peel demanded.

The masseur held him steady under the shower. "What fellow? You passed out in the steam room."

"I passed out, because somebody smacked me," Peel retorted.

The masseur looked closely at Peel. "You got a kinda bruise on your chin, but that musta been where you fell. . . ."

"What about this eye?" Peel snarled, touching his right optic.

The masseur exclaimed. "Say . . . that is somethin'!"

"I got that by falling, too," Peel snapped. He stepped out from under the shower and strode into the dressing rooms. The masseur followed.

"If you mean the other guy, he just left. He didn't want no massage. . . ."

"He gave me one," said Peel. He glowered at the attendant. "D'you know him? He looked like a regular. . . ."

"He's been in once or twice, but I never got to know his name. He paid cash. . . ." He threw a rough bath towel over Peel and began to rub him dry.

"He followed me here," said Peel. "I remember now seein' him on the bus. . . ."

The masseur looked suspiciously at Peel. "What'd he wanna follow you for?"

"Because he didn't like me."

The masseur fanned Peel with the towel. "How about the rubdown, now? You need it, after what happened to you. . . ."

Peel was quite willing to agree. What he had just suffered after the night before was enough to make any man want a rubdown. He went into a booth and climbed upon the rubbing table. The masseur poured olive oil on his hands and began to knead the muscles of Peel's arms.

"You're in pretty bad shape," he observed. "I don't mean on accounta what just happened, but in general. You oughta come here for a few weeks and I'll get you in condition."

"I'm in good enough condition," Peel said crossly.

"Yeah? That guy who banged you up wasn't so big. I couldda tied him in knots myself. Look. . . ." He flexed his biceps. They were very nice to look at, but Joe Peel wasn't in the mood.

"He took me by surprise," he said.

"Nobody could surprise me," the masseur said. "Why I was reading a story in a magazine where this sailor went into a dive in Panama and four natives jumped him. The sailor picked up the first guy and used him as a club to knock out the other three. . . ."

"That was in a story."

"Yeah, but I could do the same thing. I had a little scrap myself down on Olvera Street a coupla months ago. A big Mex pulls a knife on me and I take it away from him and knock out four of his teeth and I hardly hit him at all."

"Pretty strong, are you?"

The masseur began to work on Peel's stomach. "Oh, I do all right," he said, modestly. "I don't smoke or drink and I take a swim in the ocean every mornin' of the year—even in winter. And this work keeps me in trim. By the way, what's your line?"

"I'm a detective!"

THE masseur stopped kneading. "A detective! Well, whaddya know? I wouldn't a-guessed it. I always thought I'd like to be a dick myself. I was readin' a piece in *Clever Crime Cases* on'y last week where it says there's a lot more murders committed in this country than people realize."

"Some of the suicides, this piece says, ain't suicides at all—they're clever murders, but the cops don't know it. There was a case in the paper this morning—a suicide the cops say, but it looked to me like murder. . . ."

"What case was that?"

"Some guy right over here in Beverly Hills. I forget his name, Wilmer Jolley or something like that."

"Jolliffe."

"Yeah, that's it—Wilbur Jolliffe. According to the paper the guy knocked himself off, blaming Otis Beagle for some trouble he was supposed to be in. I remember the case on account of Beagle. He's a client of mine. . . ."

"Oh, is he?" asked Peel, suddenly interested. "What sort of a fellow is he?"

"A big-shot. He ain't been in lately, but he usta come in every week, sometimes two—three times and he never tipped less'n two bucks. Knows everybody. Solved some of the best cases in this town. He's told me

about a lot of them. Remember the Onthank Affair last year? He broke that."

Peel remembered the case only too well. He had never worked harder on anything in his life. Beagle hadn't lifted a finger toward helping him.

"I'm glad to hear that about Beagle," he said to the masseur. "Then I guess he hasn't got anything to worry about in this Jolliffe affair."

"Not a thing. Somebody's trying to do him dirt, but you watch, in a day or two, maybe four—five days, Beagle's gonna prove that Jolliffe didn't commit suicide at all. It was murder and he'll have the guy that done it in the clink."

"You may be right. What's your own theory about it?"

"A dame," said the masseur promptly. "This Jolliffe was married to an old dame with dough. He was doing a little chasing on the side and he probably told the dame he'd divorce his wife and marry her. But he couldn't divorce the old lady on account of she had the money. The dame finds this out and she knows she ain't gonna get any big pile of dough. So what does she do? She goes up to Wilbur's house at night and they have a big row and she plugs Wilbur see. . . ."

"Then she writes the suicide note?"

"Yeah, sure. . . ."

"And all this while she's having a fight with Wilbur, shooting him and writing on the typewriter, Wilbur's wife is quietly sleeping. . . ."

"Naw, naw, she's in on it. Don't you see—she knows Wilbur's a two-timing no-good. If the other dame'll knock him off, that's fine, but the old lady's society, see—she don't want the stuff spread all over the papers. A suicide, y'understand, don't get the notice that a murder does and in a day or two people forget it. But not murder."

"I see," said Peel, "but if this, uh, dame wrote the suicide note after knocking off Wilbur, how come she mentioned Otis Beagle in it? How come she even knew Beagle?"

"I ain't figured out that angle yet."

"Neither have I," said Peel.

"Huh? You interested in the case yourself?"

"Kinda. On account of I happen to be Otis Beagle's partner."

"Hub?"

"Peel's the name—Joe Peel. And the next time Beagle comes in here, tell him he's a big stuffed shirt and it's Peel who solves the cases and not Beagle. Tell him that for me, will you?"

"Quit your kiddin'!"

"I'm not kidding. That Onthank Case you mentioned—it was me solved it, not Beagle."

"That ain't the way I heard it. I know Beagle; he's class with a capital K. He never tips less'n two bucks." The masseur dug his fingers into Peel's stomach, causing him to emit a sudden groan. "Now, turn over."

PEEL turned over onto his stomach and the masseur gave his spinal cord a savage massaging. In this position Peel could not defend himself and the masseur spent ten minutes extolling the virtues of Otis Beagle.

Finally he slapped Peel's shoulder and exclaimed, "There you are!"

Peel went into the main room and saw the clock on the wall. He gasped. "Hey—it's ten after one. I had a lunch date at one o'clock."

"You didn't tell me," said the masseur.

Peel jumped into his clothes and whipped out some money. "How much?"

"Four bucks."

Peel handed the masseur a five-dollar bill and waited. The masseur scowled. "I'll see if I got some change." He went into the other room, finally came back with a half, a quarter and a quarter's worth of small change.

He dumped it into Peel's hand. Peel handed him back a quarter.

"What's that for?" exclaimed the masseur.

"A tip."

The masseur looked Peel squarely in the eye. "Give Mr. Beagle my best regards."

"I'll do that." Peel turned for the door. Behind him the masseur took the quarter and hurled it to the floor.

It was twenty minutes after one when Peel reached the Horatio Oliver Building. As he had expected, Wilma Huston was not there.

She wasn't the type who would wait twenty minutes for a man . . . especially a man she did not want to see.

X

PEEL looked across the street at the drug store; they served lunches there and it was convenient for a switchboard operator who worked across the street. Yet Peel did not believe that Wilma Huston was the sort of girl who ate her lunches in drug stores.

A half-block up the street was a sign: *Little Finland*. Peel strolled to it and peered through the windows. He could see into all the booths with the exception of two or three in the rear. Accordingly he entered the restaurant and walked to the rear. Wilma Huston was not among the diners. He left the place and walking another block, tried *The Bull Dog and Pussy Cat*, a very snazzy eating joint.

Peel went in and found Wilma in the first booth. Opposite her was a dark, sullen-faced young man of about thirty. Wilma gave a slight start when she saw Peel.

Peel smiled coldly. "Why, hello, Wilma!"

"Hello." She shot a quick glance at her companion and a little frown appeared on her forehead. "Aleck, this is Mr. Peel. Mr. Peel, Mr. Chambers."

"How're you?" Peel said.

Aleck Chambers put his hands under the table. "Hello," he said shortly.

"Mind if I join you?" Peel asked.

"Yes," Chambers snapped. "I mind it very much."

"Good," said Peel, sliding into the booth on Wilma's side. "You can throw me out."

Chambers half rose, ready to try it, but Wilma exclaimed, "Aleck—please! Mr. Peel is a—a detective. . . ."

"Him?" There was disdain in Chambers' tone.

Peel gestured at Chambers. "The boyfriend?"

"Mr. Chambers is a client of the office," Wilma replied.

"Oh, yeah?" Peel looked at Chambers with interest. "What is he—a movie director?"

"I'm an actor," Chambers growled.

"Stage?"

"Pictures," said Wilma hurriedly. "Aleck played the second lead in *Hidden Witness*."

Peel frowned thoughtfully. "I saw the picture, but you don't look much like the fellow who played the prosecuting attorney. . . ."

"I was Cheyney, the detective," Aleck Chambers snarled.

"The detective's name was Peters," Peel said. Then he snapped his fingers. "Oh, you mean Peters' stooge, who only appeared in one or two scenes. . . ."

"I had fourteen lines," Chambers said through his teeth.

"Please," Wilma said. "Aleck, I was supposed to have lunch with Mr. Peel. . . ."

"Then why wasn't he on time?"

"I'm sorry about that," Peel said to Wilma. "I got tied up on an important matter." He looked suggestively at Aleck Chambers. "I *would* like to talk to you, though."

"Well, let him talk," Chambers snapped. "What's he got that's such a secret? If it's about this Jolliffe gink. . . ."

"It is," said Peel.

"Wilma didn't even know the man. He kept bothering her and she never even met him. If she'd told me about him sooner, I'd have taken care of him. . . ."

"Aleck!" exclaimed Wilma, in alarm.

"Well, I would have. I'd've beaten the damn daylight's out of him."

"Maybe you did."

"Huh?" Chambers blinked at Peel. "He was shot . . . uh, wasn't he?"

"Was he?"

"Mr. Peel," Wilma said. "Please. . . . Mr. Chambers didn't even know about Jolliffe until last night. . . ."

"You mean you've, ah, that is, you and Jolliffe were, ah, all this time and he didn't. . . ."

WILMA flared. "Jolliffe and . . . I . . . ? What're you talking about?"

"Well?"

"Look here, you," snarled Chambers. "Detective or not, you can't. . . ."

"Aleck!" exclaimed Wilma. Then she turned wide eyes on Peel. "Your insinuation is ridiculous. I told you I had never met this man Jolliffe."

Peel looked at Wilma, then at Chambers, then back at Wilma. "You never even met Jolliffe?"

"Of course not. That's why I came to you this morning . . . he had been sending me flowers—and candy—and was calling me on the phone continuously and I'd never even met him."

Peel just continued to stare at her. And Aleck's rage kept mounting. "Don't you believe her?"

"Yes," said Peel. "But it's a little hard."

"Why?" Aleck's meaning was plain enough; why should Wilma consider Wilbur Jolliffe when she had a man like Aleck Chambers.

"I only came to you to keep Aleck from going there," Wilma said. "They'd have gotten into a fight and it would have got into the papers. At this stage of his career. . . ."

"Yeah," said Joe thoughtfully. "I see what you mean." He got to his feet. "Been nice meeting you, Mr. Chambers. . . ."

"I wish I could say the same," Chambers retorted.

Peel winked at Wilma, made a clucking sound with his tongue and walked off, leaving young Aleck Chambers fit to choke.

On Sunset Boulevard, Peel walked to the corner and waited for a bus. None came for five minutes and he crossed the street to the drug store.

Entering, he went to the telephone booths in the rear. He thumbed through a ragged telephone directory, then finding the number he sought, went into the booth and dialed it.

A voice said gruffly into his ear: "Eisenschiml!"

"Mr. Eisenschiml," said Peel, "this is the man who talked to you a while ago about *Malaeska*, the dime novel. . . ."

"You haven't got it," Eisenschiml's voice snapped.

"Oh, yes, I have, but a funny thing's happened in regard to it . . . a man's offered me a hundred and fifty dollars for it and—"

"Reisinger, eh?"

"Why, yes," said Peel.

"Then it's no use for me to make you an offer. Reisinger'd only go higher. . . ."

"That's what I wanted to ask you, Mr. Eisenschiml. 'Just *how* much is this book worth. . . .?'"

"As much as you can get. If it's Reisinger—ask him three hundred. He can afford it."

PEEL thanked the book dealer and hung up. Thoughtfully, he consulted the directory once more. There were four Reis-

ingers listed; one had a Bel-Air address. Peel re-entered the phone booth and called the number of the Bel-Air Reisinger.

A drawling voice from Dixie answered. "Mr. Reisinger's residence."

"Like to talk to John," Peel said.

"Who is this calling?"

"Joe Peel."

"Hol' the wire a second." There was silence for a moment or two, then the Southland voice came on again. "Mr. Reisinger say he don' know no Joe Peel."

Joe Peel groaned. "Tell Mr. Reisinger that's his loss. I wanted to talk to him about dime novels . . ."

"Dime novels? Just a momen'—I ask him again."

Ten seconds later another voice came on the phone. "This is John Reisinger; what's this about dime novels?"

"I wanted to talk to you about them. . . ."

". . . Then why not run out to my place. . . ?"

Joe Peel blinked at the telephone. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Actually it was twenty, for it took him ten minutes to get a taxicab. John Reisinger appeared to be very well fixed; his home on top of a knoll just a few blocks off Sunset Boulevard was worth more than a hundred thousand dollars. There were two acres of grounds, a tennis court and a swimming pool.

MR. REISINGER turned out to be a smooth-looking man crowding fifty. A little on the heavy side. A colored butler led Peel into a huge library, that was literally plastered with dime novels, hundreds and hundreds of them tacked to the walls and additional thousands crammed into bookshelves.

Reisinger gave a plump hand to Joe Peel. "Always glad to meet a fellow collector."

"Thanks," Peel replied. He looked at the walls. "You've got more dime novels than I have."

"How many have you got?"

Joe Peel took the book from his pocket. "This one—and one other."

Reisinger looked curiously at the book in Peel's hand. "I thought you said you were a collector. . . ."

Peel shook his head. "I said I wanted to talk to you about dime novels."

Reisinger frowned.

Peel said quietly, "My other dime novel is called . . . *Malaeska*. . . ."

Reisinger looked at him curiously. "Are you the man who telephoned about a month ago . . . offering to sell me *Malaeska*?"

"Why, no."

"You're here to sell?"

Peel shook his head. "I don't want to sell anything. I called because I'm *interested* in dime novels."

Reisinger brightened. He crossed to his desk and, pulling open a drawer, took out a black binder. "I've got as good a copy of *Malaeska* here as you'll ever see. It's the prize of my entire collection."

He opened the binder and exposed a dime novel—between celluloid sheets—that was a twin of the one Peel had at his hotel. Peel scrutinized it closely.

"Mine is in as good condition."

Reisinger frowned a little. "I find that hard to believe. I've never seen another copy of *Malaeska* in as good condition. This is virtually mint. . . ."

"So's mine."

"Then you've got a treasure." Reisinger scowled. "I wish you'd brought your copy along."

"I was afraid of damaging it."

"I should think you would be." Reisinger took back the binder containing *Malaeska* and put it away. He turned back to Peel, his attitude indicating that as far as he was concerned the interview was over.

Peel smiled, putting a little schmalz into it. "This is a real treat to me, Mr. Reisinger. I'm so interested in dime novels, yet know so little about them. I'd heard that you had the greatest collection in existence. . . ."

REISINGER'S enthusiasm returned. "I've got a complete set of Beadles, the Frank Starrs from Number One on, the Munros and even the rare 'Ten Cent Novellettes' put out by Elliott, Thomes and Thompson of Boston. Besides a complete set of 850 Tip Top Weeklies. Name me a man who's got more than that."

"Charles Bragin of Brooklyn."

"Bragin's a dealer—THE dealer in dime novels. He helped me get my collection together." The frown came back to Mr. Reisinger.

inger's face. "About this *Malaeska* you have . . ."

"Yeah . . . great story, isn't it?"

"Are you kidding? *Malaeska* is the worst bilge that ever found its way into print."

"Then why's it worth so much money?"

"Because it's the first dime novel ever published and there are only a few in existence. . . ."

"How many would you say?"

Reisinger shrugged. "Not more than a half-dozen. And most of those only in fair condition. I would have sworn that mine was the only one in mint. . . ." He came to a sudden decision. "How much do you want for your copy?"

"Why, I'd rather not sell. . . ."

"I'll give you three hundred dollars for it . . . provided it's in as good shape as the one I already have."

"Well, perhaps it isn't in quite as good condition. . . ."

Reisinger exhaled heavily. "Ah, now we're getting down to cases. Well, suppose we say two hundred. . . ."

"How much did the man who phoned you a while ago ask?"

"Five hundred. But that's why I didn't buy it. Mind you, I *would* have paid five hundred for it if I hadn't already had a copy—a mint copy. But since I did have one. . . ."

Peel nodded. "The trick then is to find a collector who hasn't already got a copy of *Malaeska*. . . ."

"That's right. You're *sure* your copy isn't as good as mine?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, the edges are kinda frayed. But, uh, if you didn't have a copy of *Malaeska* already, how much would you offer me for mine?"

"Oh, six-seven hundred. Maybe even a thousand." Reisinger chuckled. "Naturally, I'd pay more for a book I didn't have than for one I already owned."

"I can see that. Take you quite a while to catch up on your reading as it is."

"Oh, I don't read these books. Drive a man crazy. But once in a while I look at one. . . ." He walked to a shelf and, searching for a moment, brought out a large pamphlet. "*Frank Reade*—printed in 1892. He had airships, armored tanks, submarines—years before they were actually invented. He tossed atomic bombs at Indians."

"Is that so? I never read him. I was a Frank Merriwell fan when I was a kid. . . ."

NOSTALGIA came into Reisinger's eyes. "So was I. I followed Frank all through college, and then his brother Dick, and finally Frank, Jr. . . ." He shook his head. "But try reading one of the stories today!"

"Ever read Old Cap Collier? Or Nick Carter?"

"Did I!" Reisinger chuckled. "And both Young and Old King Brady. Wonderful stories—but utterly ridiculous. You know I've often wondered what a real modern detective would say about those old-timers."

"Be interesting to know. I read Nick Carter when I was a kid and that's what I wanted to be . . . a detective. . . ."

Reisinger smiled fondly. "And what *did* you become?"

"A detective."

"Eh?" The mellowness faded from John Reisinger's face. "You're a detective . . . *now*?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Come again."

"A man was killed yesterday. He collected dime novels."

Reisinger was no longer the genial bibliophile.

His eyes had narrowed to slits and his facial muscles drooped sullenly.

"Who was it?"

"Man named Wilbur Jolliffe."

"Never heard of him. He couldn't have been much of a collector."

"He owned a copy of *Malaeska*."

"The one you were talking about—that you claimed *you* owned?"

Peel nodded. "And it's in just as good shape as yours."

"I don't get it!" Reisinger scowled and picked up the binder containing his own treasured dime novel. "I thought I knew every prominent collector in the country."

"You're sure you never heard of Wilbur Jolliffe?"

"Quite sure."

"His picture was in the papers this morning."

"I never read newspapers."

". . . Ever hear of a man named Oscar Eisenschiml?"

"Of course. He's a rare book dealer, down on Hollywood Boulevard."

"Ever hear of Marcy Holt?" Reisinger shook his head. "William Gray?" Peel tried.

"Who are they?"

"I don't know. They're mixed up in Jolliffe's murder. But how I don't know."

Reisinger exhaled. "Sorry I can't help you."

"Oh, it's all right. I was just taking a shot in the dark."

"Well, you shot wrong. I don't know any of the people you mentioned. With the exception of Eisenschiml. And I think you'll find that he'll vouch for me."

Peel nodded thoughtfully. "What business are you in, Mr. Reisinger—aside from collecting dime novels?"

"I'm not in any business. I sold out ten years ago. Reisinger Products Company. Dairy products. That was back in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I moved out here after I retired."

He walked to the door with Peel. "If, ah, you *should* happen to want to sell that *Malaska*. . . ."

"Can't—not until this case is cleaned up."

"That's what I meant. I'd appreciate if you'd give me first chance at it. . . ."

Peel promised to do that little thing and took his departure.

XI

AT TEN minutes to twelve the phone rang in Otis Beagle's office.

"Otis," said a voice on the wire. "This is Pinky Devol. I want you to come over to the club at once."

"Lunch, Pinky?"

"Maybe, but come over right away. Understand?"

"Yes."

Beagle hung up and looked thoughtfully at the telephone. Had he just imagined that Devol's voice had not been as cordial as usual.

He shook his head and rising from his desk, got his Homburg hat and cane. He started for the door, then reached into his pocket and brought out the thousand-dollar bill. He looked around the office, searching for a safe hiding place, but finally decided against leaving the bill in the office.

He folded the bill lengthwise, took off his hat and slipped it under the sweatband. Then he remembered that he would have to check the hat at the club, so he took the bill out of the hat.

He finally took off his right shoe and sock and put the bill in the sock. Replacing it and the shoe he left the office, locking the door behind him and putting the key on the ledge by the transom.

Ten minutes later, he strolled up to the Sunset Athletic Club. "Fine day," he said to the doorman then entered the grill room where he spied Douglas Devol seated in a booth in the far corner. With him was a man with iron-gray hair.

"Hi, Pink, old boy!" Beagle shouted from across the room.

Devol was a stout man in his early thirties, with the reddest face a human could have; it accounted for his nickname. Just what Devol's vocation was it would be hard to say. He held no public office, but he was intimate with many public officials. He was a member of the State Bar Association, but did not practice law.

"Hello, Otis," he said as Beagle came up. "Like you to meet Al Sparbuck."

"D. A.'s office, eh?" Beagle took Sparbuck's hand in a mighty grip and pumped it. "Glad to know you, Al."

"How are you, Mr. Beagle," said Sparbuck with considerable reserve.

"I'm fine, Al. And, Pink, you're looking great. What're you drinking?"

"Just a whiskey sour; what'll you have, Otis?"

"A double Scotch, straight!" He signaled to a waiter. "Jules, set 'em up all around."

Then he seated himself in the booth, opposite Devol and placed his elbows on the table. "Anything I can do for you, Pink, old man? Just say the word. . . ."

Devol looked unhappy. "It's about this Jolliffe suicide, Otis. . . ."

"Oh, that!" Beagle's tone indicated that it wasn't even worth thinking about, much less discussing.

"I'd like to hear your version, Mr. Beagle, if you don't mind," said Starbuck.

DEVOL nodded. "All thought we ought to talk about it."

"Well, why not?" Beagle said, heartily. The waiter brought the drinks on a tray.

Otis picked up his double Scotch. "Here's to you, gentlemen." He tossed the liquor down his throat in a single gulp and smacked his lips. "That hit the spot." He looked at Sparbuck, then at Devol. "Is this serious?"

"Al thinks it is," said Devol.

"Lieutenant Becker laid some rather disturbing facts before the office," said Sparbuck.

"This is just between the three of us?" Beagle asked.

Sparbuck hesitated. "I'm afraid not. . . ."

"I told Al that I was sure you could explain things to his satisfaction," Devol said.

"Of course, I can." Beagle drew a deep breath. "All right, I hate to do this, but I see that I must. In a way it's my own fault, because I trusted the man."

"Who?" asked Sparbuck. "Wilbur Jolliffe?"

"No, an employee of mine. A man named Joe Peel. I felt sorry for him and kept him on even though I knew I shouldn't. He's a sort of helpless chap—at least he seemed so to me." He sighed. "About six months ago, Wilbur Jolliffe came to me, with a small matter. I was busy at the time and turned the case over to this man Peel. He handled the whole thing. How, I didn't know. I had no reason to doubt his report, I was too involved in my own case—one involving some very important people—to go over the report. So I accepted Peel's story."

"What was the case about?" asked Sparbuck.

"Blackmail. Jolliffe had become, indiscreet, shall we say? with a young lady, who threatened to inform Mrs. Jolliffe unless she received a large sum of money. Well, sir, blackmail is something I do not like and I told—I mean, Peel went to the young lady and pointed out to her the error of her ways. Mind you, all this I learned later. Peel's report was merely to the effect that he had eased the lady's palpitating heart by a settlement of one thousand dollars. Actually, he had given her a hundred dollars and had pocketed the difference." Beagle leaned back in his chair. "There you have it—the whole story, as I learned it only recently."

Pinky Devol looked at the assistant district attorney. The latter's forehead

was creased in thought. Finally he shook his head.

"Jolliffe took his life only yesterday and the affair you related took place six months ago."

"But don't you see!" Beagle exclaimed. "The blackmailer came back—Jolliffe learned how he had been hoodwinked. He saw there was no end to the blackmail; there never is, you know. He took his life."

"That sounds like it, eh, Al?" exclaimed Pinky Devol.

Sparbuck shrugged. "Well, yes, but if you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Beagle, you acted very unwisely in the matter of this Peel person. You should never have given him authority to act for you."

"Oh, come, Al, I can't do everything, can I? Giannini doesn't work as a teller at his banks, does he? And if one of his tellers should happen to turn out to be a crook, you wouldn't hold Giannini responsible, would you?"

"Financially, yes."

"But not criminally." Beagle smiled broadly. "Jolliffe wasn't robbed last night, was he? Then, you have nothing against me—personally."

"Of course not!" cried Pinky Devol. He signaled to a waiter. "Waiter, another one all around."

Sparbuck was still frowning. "Of course, you know we shall have to take this man Peel into custody."

"Why? He didn't hold the gun to Jolliffe's head, did he?"

"There's still the matter of the, ah, deal he made six months ago."

"That might be difficult to prove against him, now that Jolliffe's dead. He's the only one who could testify against him."

"You could."

"How? It'd be my word against his."

Pinky Devol leaned forward. "The least you can do, though, is to fire the man."

Beagle looked at Sparbuck. The latter nodded. "Lieutenant Becker said something about trying to get your license revoked, Mr. Beagle. But if this operator is no longer in your employ. . . ."

"I see," said Beagle. "I'll discharge him at once." He brightened. "Now, how about some lunch?"



BRUTON'S BONANZA

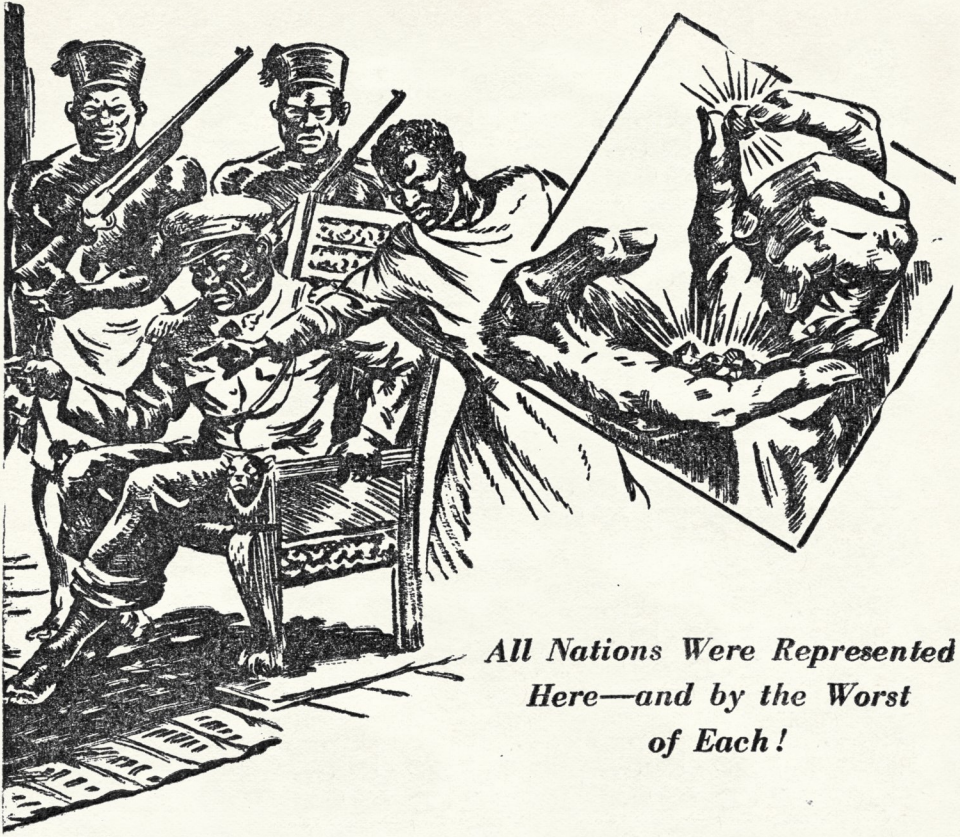
By ALEXANDER WALLACE

DIAMONDS had ruined Damara Land. It had never been more than a poverty-stricken country of slatternly villages; shanty towns of corrugated iron; thinly populated by trek Boers, nomad farmers who drove their starving sheep from vlei to vlei across its sandy plains. No white man could love it unless he knew its hidden oases; heard music in the croaking of the grecho lizard and felt and cherished its loneliness. Then it had beckoned only to the explorer, the trader and the oppressed in search of freedom. But now in any roadside shebeen drinking den, was gathered a motley gang of adventurers and cut-throats, Levantines, Cockneys from London, Americans,

Greeks—all nations were represented and often by the worst of each—come to plunder, even to kill in a mad scramble for the wealth beneath the burning purity of its sands.

Van Rhynsdorp, a dirty village on the coast below Walvis Bay, was a clearing-house for illicit diamond dealing. At Ben Davies' pub you could drink with a dozen soft-voiced crooks known as I. D. B. Boys—illicit diamond buyers.

Inside the sweltering pub Don Bruton sipped his beer, watching a group of I. D. B. Boys standing at the bar. They were drinking champagne. One was a chubby little man who must have paid a stiff price in London for the suit he was wearing, and



*All Nations Were Represented
Here—and by the Worst
of Each!*

not long ago. A Greek with bulging eyes and jeweled fingers, was talking volubly to him. The other was a lanky skeleton of a fellow with a shrill Cockney accent.

Bruton smiled quizzically under the shadow of his sombrero. Champagne for crooks; beer for honest men. Was there a country anywhere in which this wasn't the rule? He was a youngster of no more than thirty years, with a big frame. He wore an armless shirt and an exceedingly brief pair of shorts that showed his brawny thighs, burned almost black. Although he was well-known throughout the country, no one gave him more than a casual nod. His horse and mules were tethered outside. He worked for his living and was of no consequence on that account. Rather than turn a dishonest dollar, he preferred to roam the burning wastelands; to suffer hunger and thirst; to sleep in the open with the lions moaning all around him, or in a lousy Damara hut. The croaking lizard was music to his ears. He was a good fellow, men said, but a little queer—or perhaps it was just force of habit; he'd

started prospecting in Arizona almost as soon as he could walk.

Bruton looked up in surprise as a sudden silence fell upon the room. Four constables of the South African police had come in. The group at the bar had dispersed. While two constables guarded the door a systematic search of the pub's inmates was begun. No resistance was offered and nothing was found. Bruton smiled sardonically. Some day the diamond dicks would get wise to themselves; they'd look— His smile changed to a frown as one of the constables—an old pal, advanced upon him.

"Any stones, Don?" he asked after he'd given the official warning without which an illicit dealer may not be searched.

"You know damn well I haven't!" said Bruton.

"I don't reckon you're one of the I. D. B. Boys," the constable grinned. "But when the Chief says everyone, he means everyone."

"Something big, eh?" said Bruton, as the constable patted his shirt and hips.

"You bet! About thirty thousand pounds' worth—what the devil!" He had fished a yellow raw-hide bag out of Bruton's knapsack. Bruton stared at it with his mouth open as the constable loosened the thong about the neck of the bag. Several stones rolled into the palm of his hand. Dull-looking, rhombic lumps of glass that occasionally flashed inward fire when the dim light struck upon a facet.

"Damn," swore the constable. "You, Don!"

BRUTON licked his dry lips. His eyes swept around the circle of faces that began to press in upon him. Greedy eyes seemed to catch the glint of the stones.

"Never seen 'em before," said he. "Somebody in this room planted them on me. I was sitting . . ." He stopped speaking. His lips tightened. What was the use? His voice sounded flat, unconvincing, even in his own ears.

"You've spent quite a bit of time in the sperrebiet lately, Don." The constable's tone was cold and accusing.

Bruton shrugged. "Not more than usual. I passed through the Forbidden Country on my way in. I've been doing some prospecting. . . ."

Laughter, mocking and grating, cut him short. He could feel the cold sweat trickling from under his arm-pits. The room was pressing in on him. Stifling! He felt the fear and rage of the beast entangled in the hunter's net. The blood pounded at his temples. Almost before he knew, he had driven his fist into the constable's grinning face. Then he was charging the circle of men, his fists sticking out to right and left. A constable ran at him. Bruton stopped him with a sledge-hammer punch; then, with red in his eyes, lunged forward, looking for policemen.

The room was a mass of cursing, slugging men. Bottles were beginning to fly. The way to the door was clear and Bruton realized that the I. D. B. Boys were playing interference for him. A Cockney voice shrilled in his ear:

"'Ere, matey! 'Ere's yer poke. 'Op it!"

He felt the strap of his knapsack fall across his shoulders. He was pushed towards the door. After a moment of bewildered hesitation, he ran for his horse.

When finally the constables fought their way outside, the dust was settling on the road. Bruton was out of sight.

"No use trying to follow him," observed one of the constables. "He knows the country like I know my back yard."

"Right," agreed another, wiping a bloody mouth with the sleeve of his tunic. "I hope he breaks his crooked neck! Let's have a beer."

BY SUNSET Bruton rode over the edge of the plain beyond Walvis Bay. An elevated flat destitute of everything stretched before him. Even the scanty tamarak, ganna and maras, closely stripped of their fruit by the natives, were left behind. He was headed for the valley of the Swakop, a dry river bed, but for a small spring that struggled for about a mile before it was absorbed again by the hot sand.

He passed through a small break in the hills and entered the valley, enclosed by barren pyramids and cones of fantastic shape, arid and dry in color; its dominant yellow and gray relieved only by pink-streaked quartz.

But further up the valley mimosa and kameel-dorn grew among the reeds that fringed the stream-bed. A tree called wild-tobacco with cool, glazed, green leaves and yellow tubular flowers, made a flare of color against the drab landscape.

Bruton off-saddled under the trees. Food was his first thought. There was a Rhenish missionary further up the valley. Eckardt and his wife would give him food and shelter. Then he recalled that he was wanted by the police. He'd have to tell Eckardt. He decided to take himself and his trouble to less scrupulous parts; not that it would have made any difference to Eckardt's hospitality, but it would be a burden on the good man's conscience, especially if he were questioned by the police. Twenty miles northeast there was a Damara kraal. He knew the chief; and Sekeletu, Bruton recalled, had the conscience of a despot, and a truly Oriental conception of "squeeze." But otherwise he was a good-natured fellow with a round face and a flashing smile. He was loyal to his white overlords and kept peace among the tribes over which he was paramount chief; no small virtue in the eyes of harassed officials. They were deaf to

reports of his extortions and dealings in livestock.

To avoid being spotted by a police plane, Bruton decided to trek for Sekeletu's kraal after dark. Meanwhile there should be a snack in his knapsack. The first thing his hand came in contact with was the yellow skin bag. He examined the diamonds in the palm of his hands and whistled softly. Thirty thousand pounds! He forgot his hunger. The stones held his eyes as if by fascination. There was a seductive warmth in them; the suggestion of silk, perfume and beauty—all the things a man saw in the dying embers of his lonely camp fire; they were all there in the hollow of his hand. Someone had planted the stones on him, to avoid detection and he had got clean away with a fortune! Had the lanky Cockney made the plant? It was likely. He must have recovered the stones during the melee at the pub, and put them back in the knapsack.

Bruton saw that he had been used both as a means of getting rid of suspicion and of getting the stones beyond reach of the police. If so, the Cockney would be looking for him. Bruton's eyes narrowed; so would the I. D. B. Boys. There was a price on his head. They'd put a bullet in a man's back for a lot less than thirty thousand pounds. So long as he held the stones his life wasn't worth two cents—the obverse of the coin, he thought grimly. But he couldn't see any way of getting a public quittance of them; the I. D. B. Boys would get to him before he got to the police. Trek fast and far was the safer course, he decided; at least until he'd had time to figure something out.

Bruton rode up to Ukana, Sekeletu's capital, a little before sun-up. In the misty light of dawn it looked like a town. A rampart of mud surrounded its conical huts. A hundred yards to the north of the walls the Swakop trickled between sandy banks six feet high. Beyond great strips of golden sand were pieced together at long intervals by stretches of prairie—the pasture land of the hippopotamus and the buffalo when the river was strong after rain. Kameel-dorn, mimosa and spiked bushes were scattered sparsely over the plain and a kind of acacia with flowers hanging in golden catkins straggled along the moss bank.

BY THE time Bruton came within a few hundred yards of the rampart the cocks were crowing. A herd of goats was being driven out onto the plain; a dozen yellow dogs, yapping at their heels. A file of Grigua women in full striped skirts, but naked to the waist, moved gracefully toward the river with earthen pots balanced on their heads. Four horsemen detached themselves from the throng and came charging at Bruton, their spears pointed like lances. They drew rein in a cloud of dust a few feet from Bruton. He recognized one of Sekeletu's head men. After the customary sticky panegyric, Bruton was conducted to the gate of the town.

In front of the rampart there was a straight wall with a single black hole in it. Through this—preceded by the head man, Bruton passed into mysterious gloom pervaded by smells that seemed to crawl. He followed his guides between fairly high walls. The street was like a passage with frequent breaks in it. Now and then he caught sight of a figure effacing itself in the shadow of a doorway, or gliding noiselessly along the wall. Soon the street widened and he came to an open place. There was a sort of bandstand roofed with woven grass under which sat a number of white-robed men, officials of the court. Beyond this was the entrance to the palace—a fair-sized structure with its sides out of plumb.

Sekeletu received him in a room with pink-washed walls of mud. Civilization had left its mark on Sekeletu but it went no deeper than his dark satin skin. It seemed to Bruton, as he took his seat on a three-legged stool, that the best commentary upon the fripperies of his own kind was savage taste; the trinkets and gewgaws his untutored mind invariably fixed upon. In place of the traditional headdress and karoos, that he might have worn with manly grace, Sekeletu wore a faded blue uniform and a peaked cap. Sleeves, collar and trousers were liberally braided with gold and over his shoulder was slung a red riband with a tassel of gold. Behind his chair, stood his personal bodyguard with rifles and bandoliers, their heavy features immobile under discarded red fezzes of the Senegalese.

"It wounds me," said Sekeletu, after for-

mal greetings had been exchanged, "to learn that you have turned thief. Unless one is of the government it is great folly to steal from it."

Bruton was a little surprised. He knew that the police would be scouring the country for him, but he hadn't expected that the news would reach Ukana before him.

"Tidings come to you as the wind, Chief," said he.

Sekeletu shrugged. "I have many ears." He fixed solemn eyes on Bruton's face. "It is a pity that you came here. There is a reward. I must keep you for the police. Do not think it is because of the reward—a thousand pounds—pouff!"

He spat contemptuously. "You befriended me once when I was driven from my house. I have not forgotten. But trouble with the government—" He was interrupted by his white-robed vizier who had entered the room. The old fellow advanced salaaming almost with every step and whispered in his master's ear. Sekeletu frowned as he listened, his eyes fixed on Bruton's face. Then he mapped his fingers in a quick gesture. His bodyguard jumped forward and seized Bruton's arms:

"Search him!" commanded Sekeletu.

Bruton submitted without protest. There was an amused twinkle in his gray eyes. Evidently the vizier had searched his saddlebags and had drawn a blank.

Sekeletu's frown deepened as the contents of Bruton's pockets and knapsack were deposited at his feet.

"What have you done with the government's diamonds?" he demanded; then, as Bruton shook his head, he smiled winningly: "Confide in me. I am your friend. Perchance if I return the stones to the government and speak for you, they will hear me."

"No," said Bruton firmly. "The stones are hidden where no man can find them. While I keep the secret, I keep my life."

Sekeletu looked shocked. "Would I kill you?" asked he. "I see," he continued with a show of wounded virtue that would have deceived one who knew less of him than Bruton, "My friendship is a small thing in your sight."

"No," returned Bruton smoothly. "It is a big thing, Chief. I cherish it and would place no burden upon it, for if misfortune

fell upon me and the stones were lost, men would whisper evil of my friend. My life is safe in your hands; it is other men I fear."

"Hm-m," Sekeletu shot a sidelong look at Bruton's face. "The police do not kill for theft."

"True, Chief. But I am no thief. I stole no diamonds. A man put the stones in my knapsack. . . ."

Sekeletu sprang to his feet: "Am I an old woman to believe lies. . . ."

"Hear me, Chief," Bruton pleaded. "I will show you a way to find the thief and earn the reward. Think! If what I say is true, the police will hold me until they are sure of the truth, but they will pay no reward. The gold will slip through your fingers, Sekeletu."

THE chief sat down with his chin cupped in his hand. He looked puzzled.

Bruton leaned forward, speaking rapidly:

"I cannot tell who it is that put the stones in my bag, but this I know; he will be eager to get them back again. We will show him where to find his stones and he will show himself to us."

"He would smell a trap." Sekeletu shook his head.

"But the bait is strong," urged Bruton. "I will write a message; you will send a messenger with it to the house of Ben Davies'. Davies will know the man. He will see to it that my message reaches him. He has no love for the police."

"What will your writing say?"

"It will ask the man to meet me, Chief."

"Where?"

"We will leave him to choose the place. He will not think of a trap if we do so."

Sekeletu's white teeth flashed in a smile. "You are clever enough to be a thief," said he. "And when you catch this man how will you share the reward?"

"By right I can hold three parts, O Chief," said Bruton. Then as he saw Sekeletu's face harden, he added: "But because you are my friend, I will be content with half."

Sekeletu turned to his vizier, and for a time the pair held a whispered consultation. Presently the chief turned to Bruton:

"You have travelled much in many countries among many peoples. It is said you never broke a bargain. Because of this and

the love I bear you, I will do as you ask. You are free to come or go as you please. I have spoken."

He rose and moved toward the door with his bodyguard at his heels. But at the door he turned about suddenly to face Bruton: "But if you try to trick me—ah!" said he and stalked out.

A week passed before Bruton received a reply to his note. It was from Davies and it suggested that he ride into Van Rhymisdorp, bringing the diamonds with him. Bruton read the scrawled note again with a wry mouth. Evidently the I. D. B. man meant to keep under cover. Davies was to be the go-between. It wasn't what he'd hoped for and it shifted all the risks upon his own shoulders. Well, there was nothing else for it; he'd have to take his chances. Anyway, nothing could be much worse than Ukama; his hut was lousy and the whole place reeked.

TWO nights later, Bruton dismounted and tethered his horse to a clump of thornbush a few hundred yards from Davies' pub. The sky was overcast and the moon was a pale disc behind a thin vein of clouds. He had sent one of Sekeletu's runners to warn Davies of his coming, but no lights were showing from the windows of the shebeen. He left the road and circled, coming out of the scrub at the rear of the pub. He was making his way past an outbuilding of corrugated iron when a low whistle stopped him. He was about to take to his heels when he recognized Davies' plump figure coming out from behind the shed.

"All right," said Davies hoarsely. He led the way to the door of the shed. "Your party's in 'ere," he said. "If you hears me whistle, sharp-like, run for it! Now, in with you, quick!"

Bruton went in and stood blinking in the light that came from a lantern standing on a packing case in the center of the dirt floor. His eyes widened as they grew accustomed to the light and focused the room's other occupant.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said he. He was staring at a tall girl with fine blue eyes; red-gold hair curled and piled into a dazzling headdress.

She gave him a warm smile: "You are Mr. Bruton, of course," said she.

BRUTON was still staring. She wore high boots and riding breeches with a white lacey blouse. Where, he wondered, did she think she was going. For a ride in Hyde Park? His nostrils quivered—faint perfume. Her skin showed firm and creamy where the sun had not burned it red. A stranger to the tropics, Bruton concluded from the cut of her clothes and the sunburn.

"You should get yourself a good drill skirt," he observed. "And wear something under it. The sun will burn clean through that flimsy stuff."

The girl looked surprised but she smiled. "I'm afraid the damage is done," said she. "But I assure you I'm well oiled. I flew in a few days ago. It's winter where I came from. The change is rather sudden. Now, Mr. Bruton. . . ."

Bruton advanced a step toward her, sniffing. "That perfume—I've smelled it before somewhere in the jungle."

The girl stood her ground; she shook her head.

"You're making an awful ass of yourself, Bruton. You're no Lothario, and you smell like—God knows what!"

Bruton colored; he hadn't shaved or bathed for a couple of weeks and Ukama was a town that stayed with a man.

"Sorry," said he. "You were saying, Miss . . . ?"

"Eva Lane, for the moment, and I was about to say that my partners and I have agreed to offer you a small share in the venture."

Bruton kicked a box into place and sat on it, nursing his knee and watching the girl with an amused smile. There was a crisp worldliness about her that piqued his interest. Sophistication blended with such palpable femininity was new to Bruton whose knowledge of women had been confined to the good wives of the missionaries and weather-beaten Boer vrows who were often better men than their husbands. Instinct warned him away but there was something about her—intriguing, mysterious, as alluring and as dangerous perhaps as the depths of a jungle pool. He wanted to know more about her.

"Well," he said at length, as she became impatient under his scrutiny. "That's mighty generous of them. But since I have the

stones—should I be satisfied with a small share, Miss Lane?"

"You should," she smiled. "The police are searching for you, Mr. Bruton. Besides, you wouldn't know how to dispose of the stones."

"Not even for one-fourth of their value, Miss Lane?"

"No," said she, decisively. "We have reached an agreement with the other buyers here. . . ."

"Oh," Bruton grinned. "Honor among thieves!"

"These stones were not stolen," she retorted. "They were purchased, I'll admit, illegally. They represent an investment of a considerable sum to which you have contributed nothing other than to draw the attention of the police from my partners. We are grateful to the extent of two thousand pounds. And if you don't like the offer, Mr. Bruton, you can go play marbles with the stones in your desert!"

"Two thousand pounds!" Bruton pursed his lips. "Just a thousand pounds more than I could get for handing you over to the police."

"Of course we thought of that, Mr. Bruton. My partners know how to protect themselves," said she.

"I'll bet they do!" Bruton laughed. "How do you propose to get the stones out of the country, Miss Lane?"

"That's my affair," she replied.

"Sure it is! Your partners flew you in to do the job, eh? They're too smart to run the risk themselves. I see that. But I wonder if you know how jealously Africa guards her diamonds. Right now with the police all stirred up, no one will board a plane or a ship without an X-ray. And if you'd swallowed the stones, they'd operate. What's worse, the I. D. B. Boys know all about those stones. Sure, they'll play along till they know who's elected to smuggle the stones out; then they'll go to work on him or her, and somebody will get hurt."

The girl laughed shortly. "I know the risks," said she.

But Bruton saw worry lurking behind her smile, and he pressed his point:

"No, no, you don't! Maybe you think that buying stones from a guy that's got the nerve to go into the Forbidden Country and get 'em isn't a crime. Maybe you're

right but you can't tell whether or not stones have been stolen by looking at them. The stones I have weren't found; it's unlikely the police would have heard of them if they had been. Illicit diamond buying is the toughest racket in Africa. Leave it alone, Miss Lane."

"I suppose," she said caustically, "it's my girlish beauty. I remind you of your mother, or sister, perhaps."

MOMENTARY anger flashed in Bruton's eyes. He didn't answer.

"Well," said she, after a pause, "shall we talk sense? You haven't the stones with you, of course. But will you produce?"

"No," said Bruton decidedly. "I wouldn't give them to my worst enemy. Besides, you couldn't get 'em out of the country. The best you can do is take them 'in!'"

"In?" the girl looked puzzled.

"Sure! Trek inland and head for Angola, Portuguese territory."

"Is that a counter-proposition, Bruton?" She frowned.

Bruton's fingers drummed on the packing case. What was the matter with him, anyway? He didn't like smart women. If it wasn't for the deal he'd made with Sekeletu—no, it wasn't that. The girl piqued and charmed him at the same time; stirred some dominant madcap impulse. There must be some way of getting behind her case-hardened exterior. Sure there was. . . .

"A counter-proposition," said she. "I suppose you could call it that. The stones are out now, why bring them back in?"

The girl regarded him with narrowed eyes. "If heading for Portuguese territory is such a good idea, why haven't you started?"

Bruton grinned at her: "Look, Miss Lane, it will take three months to make that trip. I left my worldly goods behind me when I rode out of here. No rifle; no ammunition and no means of getting them, and we'd need more: a cape-cart and oxen. I can get the wagon from a native chief who can be damn obliging for a price. You've got what I want—the price. I've got what you want—the stones. We should get together, Miss Lane."

"I see," said she thoughtfully.

"Not quite," Bruton interposed. "We'd arrange to have the wagon get on to a point

about one hundred miles northeast of here. It is desert country between here and there. The police have aircraft. We'd travel by night until we reach the wagon."

The girl looked at him curiously: "You've got it all figured out," said she.

"To the last detail, lady. It came to me in a flash," said he, with more truth than Eva Lane could have suspected. He rose and started for the door. "Talk it over with your partners, and if you like it, contact me through Davies," said he.

AS HE approached the door it was thrust open. Two men stepped in, slamming the door behind them. Bruton was not surprised. He recognized one as the Cockney who had given him his knapsack during the fracas at the pub. The second man held his attention. He was stout, elderly and fastidiously dressed. The pleated crown of his hat reached to about the shoulders of his companion, the broad brim of which shaded a round pink face with bleary, alcoholic eyes. He looked hot and uncomfortable in his tight-fitting jacket.

Bruton was the first to speak. "Ha!" said he, "the senior partner. I thought you'd be snooping around somewhere."

The elder man passed Bruton without answering and went to the girl. Bruton heard them whispering behind his back. He started to turn but the Cockney tapped the bulging pocket of his coat significantly. Bruton shrugged and grinned. The Cockney showed yellow teeth. His head had the appearance of growing from narrow shoulders on a scrawny stem. He was smoking a cigarette with quick, nervous gestures.

"All right, Biles," said the other in a soft, cultivated voice. "I think Mr. Bruton understands the situation." As Bruton turned to face him, he smiled genially.

"I overheard your proposition, Mr. Bruton. Indeed, frankly, we were eavesdropping."

"Good," said Bruton. "It saves time. What do you think of it?"

"My dear fellow—it's absurd! Three months in the wilderness, traveling in a cart—preposterous!"

"I like Mr. Bruton's proposition," put in the girl. "He talks sense."

"But my dear child, have you thought of the danger—the discomfort!"

"I have," she retorted, "and I find Mr. Bruton's proposal less dangerous for me. You will have to do without your comforts, father; it will do you good to be where you can't buy brandy for a while. Let Mr. Bruton go to his friend and make his arrangements."

"No, yer don't!" The Cockney sprang forward. "'E'll go straight to the coppers, that's wot!"

The girl looked at Bruton, long lashes dropped over her eyes:

"No, he won't," said she.

Bruton allowed his eyes to travel over her slim frame.

"She's right," said he. "I won't."

Lane looked from Bruton to his daughter.

"Really," said he. "Have you reached some agreement? Has a sum been mentioned?"

"No," she replied with a sidelong look at Bruton: "Mr. Bruton has nothing—nothing but expectations."

Bruton gritted his teeth. Said he stiffly. "You'll be paying me to guide you to the Portuguese border. It's not my business to protect the State's property. I'll charge you the same as I would any hunter with no more on his conscience than a lion or two. When you've made up your minds contact me through Davies."

The girl's voice stopped him at the door. "Bruton," said she, "my partners never disagree with me. Make your arrangements and get yourself a clean shirt, like a good fellow."

HER soft laughter rang in Bruton's ears. It was foolish, he thought, to expect more from a girl with a father like Lane. What a team! If she'd been spanked more often when she was younger—a gleam came into Bruton's eyes. It was never too late! He'd sweat the brass out of her; by—he would! Let him get her into the desert—the jungle; away from the tinsel and foppery; he'd teach her to value, not cheapen the splendid womanhood that was hers.

The girl's laughter died as she saw the look in Bruton's eyes.

"All right," said he. "Be ready in three days. Meet me at Hykam Kop. Davies will take you there."

It had taken a good deal of subtle coloring and some downright lying on Bruton's

part to persuade Sekeletu and send a wagon and two boys on to Kurikop. But five hundred pounds delivered through Eva Lane had clinched the bargain. Bruton wondered about Eva Lane and more about himself as he rode under the brilliant stars toward Hykam Kop where he was to meet Lane and his daughter. Smart girl, he thought, and she played a bold hand. The five hundred pounds had been there when he'd asked for it. She gambled like a man. Had she read his mind, he wondered? Women's instincts were so damned acute. She knew what he'd been thinking when she'd twitted him three nights ago. She had said it, in fact. Expectations! The devil of it was she was right. Had she been ugly he probably would have gone to the police. Bruton shook his head and looked up at the stars. A few days ago he was an honest prospector, now he was lying like a diplomat, and matching wits with a trio of case-hardened crooks. Going from bad to worse and all because of a pretty face!

The moonlight glittered on the quartz cones and precipices of Hykam Kop as Bruton entered the valley. He rode, bending low over his saddle, searching the sand for the spoor of his newly acquired partners-in-crime. He knew he would find no hoof-prints in the yellow sand for a steady wind drove the sand eastward across the undulating plain until it reached the ocean and forced back the thundering breakers inch by inch. Bruton straightened in his saddle; he had seen a huge beetle on its back with its legs still kicking feebly; a little further on there was horse dung not yet covered by the sand. Davies, he knew, would lead them to the spot where he had first discovered that he was possessed of a poke full of diamonds. He rode to within fifty yards of the Lanes and the Cockney before his presence was detected. They were roineks all right; no one had thought to place a guard against a surprise visit from the police or others. Eva Lane was sitting with her back against the tree under which he had rested a week ago. He noted the pack mules tethered to a bush, with satisfaction. He could trust to Davies' judgment in the matter of equipment. No one spoke as he rode up but he felt all eyes upon him.

"We'll start right away," said he.

Lane groaned; his round eyes blinked at

Bruton. "Tonight! Impossible! I must have rest. I assure you I could not ride another foot."

"Nevertheless we will trek, Mr. Lane, and we'll keep at it till dawn."

Lane choked. "Do you hear that, Eva? Until dawn! he says." He turned and shook his finger in Bruton's face. "No, sir! It's absurd. We'll camp here for the night, I . . ."

"Let's get it straight," Bruton cut in coldly. "On this trip what I say goes. If you've any objections to that, you're on your own."

"Mr. Bruton is probably thinking of the police and their scouting planes, father," said the girl. "Am I right, Mr. Bruton?"

"Right. There's better cover further on. I want twenty miles between us and this spot before sunrise."

"Experience gives you authority," said she, sweetly. "We shall not question it further. Now, my partners are anxious to recover their property. The diamonds. Remember, Mr. Bruton?"

Bruton grinned at her: "You're sitting on them," said he.

The girl jumped up as if something had pricked her.

"Scoop a little sand from where you were sitting," directed Bruton.

THEY were down on their knees almost before he had got the words out of his mouth. He laughed as he watched them scoop out the sand like dogs after a rabbit.

When they got to their feet three pairs of eyes fixed on Bruton, glinting accusingly in the moonlight:

"We find only half the stones here," said the girl.

"Right," agreed Bruton. "Exactly half."

"What does that mean," she demanded.

"Well, let's call it a sort of guarantee—surety for my wages when we reach the Portuguese border, Miss Lane."

The Cockney took a step toward Bruton. "You're a damn thief!" His sunken eyes glowed; his face worked. "Hi'll spill yer bleedin' carcass."

"Shut up, Biles!" snapped the girl. "He wouldn't leave the stones behind! You see, Mr. Bruton," she added with a smile. "Biles is very highly strung. If the stones were lost before we reached our destination, you can guess what would happen."

Bruton mounted, then turned, looking

down at her with his hands resting on the pommel of his saddle:

"If I wanted anything that bad," said he, "it wouldn't be money."

The three mounted as Bruton swung his horse's head and led the way up the dry corner of the Swakop. Eva Lane rode behind him, her eyes fixed pensively on the broad, swaying shoulders. There was a fretful, uncertain drop at the corners of her rouged mouth.

They halted at three o'clock for a cold meal. By three-thirty they were in the saddle again. Biles jogged like a sack on his mount. Lane's groans were audible to Bruton fifty yards in advance. He turned speculative eyes on Eva Lane. The girl sat upright in her saddle. She was fagged—she must be, but determined not to admit it. Maybe there was better metal than brass in her system. How long could she stand it, he wondered. Much would depend on that.

On the third night Bruton decided it was safe to travel by day. He called a halt at midnight but roused his saddle-worn companions at dawn.

The rising sun showed them that the soil was now scantily clothed with narrow-leaved grass which, though nearly invisible when looked down upon, showed green, like a mirage, when the eyes swept over the dis-



tant plain. As the mist cleared they saw the bold outline of barren peaks but their sides were tinted by dwarf aloes and scattered bush lurking among the huge sandstone boulders. They rode on with the hills

on their left hand. As the country opened more, the landscape changed before their eyes. Patches of green became more frequent. The euphorbia with its stemlike leaves shooting up five or six feet; and there were patches of green grass and wild flowers like vivid blotches of color laid on a dim-colored canvas. Bruton saw the spoor of a lioness and two cubs. A few springboks were grazing on the plain and a solitary brace of ducks winged across the blue of the sky. The sun blazed down. The brown dust caked on Bruton's sweating skin; hot leather chafed his loins, but he rode steadily on.

HE DREW rein suddenly as he heard his name called. A grim smile turned the corners of his mouth as he swung around and cantered back. Lane had fallen from his saddle. His daughter was bending over him. Biles was looking down at Lane's prostrate form. His eyes were glazed, uncomprehending. Only the girl seemed to be wholly alive, but there was anguish in her face as she looked up at Bruton. He dismounted, a pang of remorse made him gentle as he helped Lane to his feet. The sun drove them to the shelter of the rocks, like lizards.

Biles flopped from his saddle and stretched out in the shade with a groan. Bruton watched the girl as she bathed her father's head with water from her bottle with an absurd lacy handkerchief. She showed little trace of fatigue and it annoyed Bruton. He was feeling the effects of the trek himself. How could a raw slip of a girl look so damn cool and trim?

"Use the water sparingly," said he. "We've got fifteen miles to do before sundown."

The girl turned on him, her eyes flashing. "Why? Why?" she demanded.

"You've got half the answer," said he.

"The diamonds?" She rose and came close to him. "But it's only half, Bruton. You haven't spoken a dozen words today and when you do, it's to drive us on. Ride! ride—trek you call it; all night, now, in the heat of day. . . ."

"This is lion country," Bruton interspersed. "It isn't safe to travel at night."

"Lions!" She clenched her hands. "I've not seen a living thing in this—this desolation. . . ."

Bruton's ear detected the slight catch in her voice:

"You will," said he. "You'll see plenty!"

Eva Lane looked at him searchingly. "That's the same tone you used before we started. Perhaps you're trying to make things as uncomfortable as possible. Maybe you think. . . ."

"I know," put in Bruton smoothly, "that we left with four days' rations. Our wagon is fifteen miles ahead, and there is no water between here and there."

She stood looking at him, her face showing the conflict of doubt and fear within her mind.

"You're either telling the truth," she summed up at last, "or you're the meanest, cheapest liar I've ever known. Give us two hours' rest. Father can't go on now."

"Right," said Bruton. "But I'll have to add to your discomfort. From now on you'll carry a loaded rifle for your own protection."

Before sunset Bruton had them into the shade of a kloof or hollow roofed with wild mimosa and hartekoal. Their cool green made a strong contrast with the purple distance behind them. A fine grassy vlei bubbled and mirrored patches of blue sky. When hunting it was Bruton's favorite camping ground. He called a halt and his companions slid from their horses and hobbled towards the stream. They were a sorry-looking trio, Bruton thought, watching them. The wagteen beetze—the wait-a-bit thorn, spiked outposts of the jungle had made rags of their fancy suits. There was a satisfied look on Bruton's face as he watched Eva Lane stretch herself out on the grass, exhausted, beside the vlei and careless of the revealing vents in her breeches and shirt. So ended the first lesson, thought Bruton, and went in search of the wagon. He found it a few hundred yards upstream in charge of two of Sekeletu's men. After some haggling, Bruton settled his account and secured their services for the remainder of the trip, as cook and driver. In Melesi, the driver, Bruton thought he recognized one of the legion of Sekeletu's sons. He was not surprised, therefore, when upon inspecting the stores, he found them intact. The chief had made a family affair of it. So much the better, concluded Bruton. When he returned, Eva Lane was busy with needle

and thread. Lane and the Cockney were snoring. Not even the fragrant odor of coffee and bacon sizzling over the fire the boys had started, aroused them.

"What brought you to Africa?" asked the girl suddenly.

"Oh," said Bruton, "what brings most of us. The get-rich-quick idea. I started looking for a gold mine, but I roamed over the country; well, I guess the gold kind of slipped my mind."

"H-m-m," said she as she bent her head to bite a thread with her white teeth. "Yes, it's a fascinating country—such contrasts."

"Right!" agreed Bruton warmly. "Take the highlands; they're different again. The air is like wine and the soil'll grow anything. If a man was willing to work he could live like a king. I've a notion I'd like to plant coffee in the highlands, but I don't suppose I ever will," he finished gloomily.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Hell, it takes money!"

"But you've got that *now*, Mr. Bruton."

"Huh!" Mr. Bruton was startled. "Oh, yes, of course," he said hastily. "That is, if this trip pays off," he added with a quick look at the girl's face.

But she only smiled and went on with her sewing.

THEY inspanned at sunrise, Malesi cracked his whip over the oxens' long horns. Biles and Lane were stretched on their bellies on top of the cases in the wagon, but Eva Lane rode by his side. The trail they followed had once been a road with rest stations at regular intervals. Now, with the coming of the railroad, it had fallen into desuetude and was known only to hunters and small traders. The jungle arched over it, shutting out the sky. It had reclaimed the clearings around the rest houses; had crept over the buildings themselves, bearing them down with its weight.

Bruton watched his companion surreptitiously. The purple shadows under her eyes showed strain and fatigue, but her carriage, the tilt of her head, told him that she was still a long way from admitting it. What a girl! Plenty of grit. It was going to take longer than he thought. She caught him looking at her and flashed him a friendly smile.

"With two more mouths to feed," said

he, "we'll have to shoot for the pot. Can you use a gun?"

"I've shot clay pigeons. I was good at it," she laughed.

"Good! Before dark we'll try our luck on a few birds, then."

They fell silent as Biles rode up, standing in his stirrups.

"How's Mr. Lane?" asked the girl.

Biles shook his head. "'E's bad, Miss. Better take a look at 'im." He touched Bruton's arm as he was about to follow the girl.

"There's ain't nothin' wrong with the old bloke, matey," said he. "I 'aven't 'ad a chance to talk wif yer—private like."

"How long have you worked for the Lanes?" asked Bruton curtly.

The Cockney gave him a yellow-toothed grin. "Awskin' questions fust, eh? Aw' right, cocky! I ain't never worked for 'em, but I 'ave worked wif 'em fer quite a spell."

"Smuggling, Biles?"

"Right the first time! Between Hamsterdam an' Lunn'on. And a right smart team we was, too! With Miss 'Igh and Mighty supplyin' the brains—or thinkin' she was. The gov'ner 'isself was a real agent afore his missus croaked. When 'e's flush 'e ain't ever sober. A pity it is! But he could get to plaices where you and me couldn't. See?"

"And where did you fit in, Biles?"

"Ho, me! There's allus a plaice for a bloke as is quick wif 'is hands. Maybe yer wants to pick something up, or maybe yer wants to get rid of it, like it was 'ot. I'm a handy bloke to 'ave around, cockey." He finished chuckling over his pun.

"I know what you mean," said Bruton with a smile. "Now what's on your mind, Biles?"

The Cockney leaned towards him: "When I fust saw yer, I says to meself: "'E's a smart one, I says—"

"Let's get to the point," Bruton cut in.

"That's 'ow I likes it, matey. Cards on the table, says I! Well, you've got the stones 'ide where I can't find 'em. And that means they are 'ide! Now, if you wus plannin' to get away wif your 'arf, I could—" He paused significantly.

"You'd undertake to get the other half and ditch the Lanes, eh, Biles?"

"You're smart like I said," approved Biles.

"I'll think about it," said Bruton coldly.

"Sure! Take yer time, matey." He screwed up his mouth, squinting into Bruton's face. "Take a tip from me. Don't yer go soft on 'er 'ighness. I've seen her make fools of smarter blokes than you."

THE hair bristled on Bruton's spine. He rode on without answering, but his mind was busy. A man, he concluded sagely but tardily, should never do anything on impulse. Because if impulse stimulated by a pretty face and a sharp tongue, he had concocted a wild plan, deluded himself with the hope of—reforming them. Yes, that was it. Sticky sentimentalism, as he saw it now. Not a chance. The Cockney was as poisonous as a cobra. The girl? Damn it! He thought too much about her. What he had just heard had shocked him a little. Perhaps he had hoped she was new to the game. Why hadn't he handed the whole crooked lot over to the police when he had the chance? His grandfather, he recalled, had been a missionary in China or somewhere. That would account for his proselytizing tendency—something in the blood. Whatever it was, he'd started something and he'd have to finish it. The thieves had fallen out and Biles was ripe for treachery. Somebody could get badly hurt if he wasn't careful.

They outspanned under a motjeerie tree, whose gnarled, distorted branches shaded an area of more than forty yards. Bruton was a little surprised when Eva Lane walked up to him with a small shotgun under her arm and reminded him of his promise to take her shooting.

"Well, all right," said he. "There's a marsh about a mile upstream. There should be duck. But it will be dark in two hours."

He got his rifle, then led the way upstream. Eva Lane followed him silently without the snapping of a twig. Hers was not the blundering noisy progress of the novice. More than once Bruton turned to see if she were there. They reached the marsh. Tall reeds covered the surface of the marsh, though there were a few patches of clear water. A papyrus-like reed with an orange-red flower the size of a football perfumed the glade. Eva Lane missed her

first shot but had bagged four or five birds within the next hour. Looking at her as she crouched behind the tall reeds, tense and eager, Bruton noticed that her skin had lost its fiery red and was a soft golden tan.

"Hunting," he observed, "is not a new experience for you, Miss Lane."

"Oh, I have done a little hunting in Scotland," said she.

Doubtless she had, thought Bruton, with a scowl. Hunting for fools to fleece.

"Biles had a long talk with you," said she. "I suppose he warned you?"

Bruton started. Was his face as easy to read as that?

"About what?" he asked, trying to look casual.

She laughed at him. "I think we'd better start for camp," said she.

He allowed her to take the lead back. Now and then she paused to pluck a flower, the crimson amaryllidae; one she fixed in her shining hair. Bruton liked the effect; nor were the graceful swaying hips lost upon him. Pretty womanly gestures—doubtless he was meant to like them. Man bait.

They had not gone far when the girl stopped suddenly. She pointed, with her eyes shining with excitement. There in a small clearing about fifty yards distant, stood the king of beasts, as motionless as his verisimilitude beside the gates of an imperial palace.

Before Bruton could stop her, Eva Lane threw up her shotgun: Bang! Bang! Both barrels blazed.

"For God's sake!" Bruton's hair stood on end.

The lion jumped sideways, snarling and snapping at his hind quarters. Then he charged. Bruton fired from his hip. The beast stumbled. He got his rifle to his shoulder, steadied himself and tried a head shot. The lion rolled over but came up with his tail lashing the ground, snarling and with his red, flaming eyes fixed on the girl who stood petrified a pace or two ahead of Bruton. Bruton's rifle choked. With a yell he jumped in front of the girl as the beast sprang, throwing his rifle up to fend off its razor claws.

A moment later Bruton wormed his way from under the lion's twitching body. Eva Lane was still staring with her mouth open.

Bruton looked at her. His lips moved,

but it was a moment before audible words came to him.

"You little fool!" he swore. "An infant, no, an imbecile wouldn't have done that! What do you think—" he choked.

The girl blinked at him; her lips quivered; color flooded back into her pallid cheeks.

"You're hurt!" said she, dropping to her knees beside him. Bruton's shirt was torn and his shoulder was bleeding.

"He damn near bit through the stock of my gun," he observed as the girl dabbed at his wound with a strip of his shirt.

"You saved my life," said she.

"God forbid!" snapped Bruton. "You'll be the death of a better man. Anyway, he was dead almost before he sprang."

"But you didn't know that."

"Sure I did. Couldn't miss at that range."

Her face was close to his; her eyes luminous. "You're an awful liar, Don, I . . ."

His arms closed about her. She slid across his knees. Perfume filled his nostrils; her lips were soft and warm. Time was no more.

IT WAS dark when they got back to camp. Biles and Lane were smoking by the fire. The pair eyed Bruton and the girl curiously as they came up. Eva Lane soon left them, her eyes flashing a good night to Bruton. Bruton felt uncomfortable; he didn't like the look in the Cockney's hollow eyes.

"What's the matter with your arm?" Lane wanted to know.

"Had a little trouble with a lion," said Bruton.

"Bless my soul! Did you kill the beast?"

Bruton nodded.

"After it was dark?" Biles squinted at him.

"Just about." Bruton felt himself coloring. "I think I'll turn in," he added. "Take a dose of quinine. I feel like fever."

"You'd be 'appier if you was to take poison, if you awks me," said Biles.

"I didn't ask," said Bruton with cold eyes.

"Awl right! Awl right. Don't get huffy!" retorted Biles. "It ain't as if you was the fust!"

Bruton opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it and strode away, heading for the tree under which the boys had spread his blankets. He sat with his back

to the tree until the chill of the African night air got into his bones, pondering on this mystery of Being; the witchery of moonlight; the thrill of yielding womanhood. And the weakness of man.

Bruton awoke a little before dawn. He was shivering; his mouth was dry. He sat up and was violently sick. He rolled over on his stomach, fumbling in his knapsack. He swallowed five grains of quinine. Soon his ears were ringing with the effects of the drug. His temples pounded. The trees, the wagon when he tried to focus his eyes upon them, receded, whirled, then rushed in upon him. He groaned and covered his eyes. Fever was like this he told himself. If it didn't kill a man the first time, it came and was gone in a few hours. Not a new experience for him. He pulled his blankets up to his chin and sweated and shivered, wandering among the incoherent fantasies that throng the borderland of delirium.

Once he opened his eyes to see Biles leering down at him. He slept fitfully. Later, voices sharp with anger, penetrated to the darkened chambers of his mind. The sun had climbed to meridian. He heard a familiar coaxing chant, the crack of the voorslag, the crunching sound of turning wheels. He struggled to his elbow. The wagon had gone! Biles must have worked something out. Of course it meant leaving him to die, or they thought it did. It added up to the same thing—she'd left him to worse than death—defenseless, at the mercy of the jungle. Bruton laughed harshly. She wasn't capable of love; no soul. Well, there was something she had to learn yet. She wouldn't get her precious diamonds far—a shadow passed over the ground. Cold fear swept over Bruton as he heard the flutter of wings. Vultures! Bruton could hear but not see them. They'd keep their distance; he wasn't carion yet. He groped for his rifle. Had they taken that? He tried to get up but fell back with his senses reeling. He fancied the sky was blackened with vultures. The beating of their wings was like thunder in his ears. They hovered over him—loathsome, evil. He fought them blindly.

BRUTON knew that he was over it as soon as he opened his eyes. Things were in proper perspective and they stayed there. Besides, he was hungry. He lay on his back

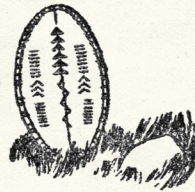
for a moment, savoring the keenest of joys, sudden release from pain. He filled his lungs with the evening air. His nostrils quivered—perfume! He sat bolt upright.

Eva Lane was trying to start a fire where the boys had had their cook stove. Evidently she was having trouble, for she was stretched full length on the grass blowing on a few smouldering embers. Bruton got up and walked over to her. The girl started up, her cheeks red with exertion as she heard him approach.

"You're ill," she said soothingly, with her hand on his arm. The concern in her eyes was real.

Bruton grinned at her. "I'm not delirious," said he. "The fever's like that. You're off your head for a spell, then it's all over. What happened to the wagon?" he asked as he started the fire.

"Biles forced father and the boys to leave. He's got all the firearms in the wagon. He threatened to shoot if we didn't go. He



plans to get to the railroad. Malesi agreed to guide him."

"And you?" asked Bruton with his eyes on the girl's face.

"Oh," said she casually. "I slipped away. Malesi helped me. I got a little food, but no gun."

"H-m-m," commented Bruton and was silent until he had coffee boiling.

"I can't figure out," said he over their second cup, "what brought you back."

The girl shot a swift look at his face. She did not answer.

"Now," he went on musingly, "if you'd thrown in with Biles you'd have had to divide one-half of the stones three ways. With me, they'll only be divided two ways. It could be that, couldn't it?" He looked up at her.

Her face went white. The hand she held her cup in shot forward. Bruton choked. The hot liquid swished over his head. For a moment they stood looking at each other across the fire. The tightness of the girl's

mouth relaxed, though the anger did not leave her eyes.

"Bruton," she said in her crisp way, "I wouldn't have left a dog to die in this—this wilderness. I didn't come back for diamonds. I've seen enough of this country to know we haven't much chance of getting out alive without food and guns. What you think of me—well, what does it matter? We'll probably die—starve, or be killed by some b-beast—and—at least you could be decent about it. You could forget. . . ."

"About the diamonds." The corners of Bruton's mouth quirked, then he laughed. He couldn't help himself. She looked so tragic; so ravishingly violent.

"Damn you!" She struck at him blindly. Damn the diamonds—you—you. . . ."

Bruton pinned her flailing arms to her side.

"That's not ladylike," said he, with his lips close to hers. "But I like it. Lord!" he said with a catch in his voice, "but I've wanted you to say that. I've dreamed of it—to know you were through with this or any other racket. I guess this was the real woman under your tough skin and I've wanted that woman since first I saw you."

The girl had ceased to struggle. "What's so—so damn funny about it?" Her voice sounded muffled.

BRUTON released her and turned her about so that she faced the hills.

"See those hills, my sweet?" said he. "Well, when you came in they were on your left hand, now the same hills are on your right hand and if you were headed for where you think you are, the sun's been rising in the west for the past two days."

It took a moment for the significance of his words to dawn on the girl. Then:

"Why, you double-crossing crook!" She faced Bruton with laughter in her eyes. "You've led us around in a circle!"

"Anyone but a roinek would have known it." Bruton grinned. "We're not more than forty miles north and east of Sekeletu's kraal. "And," he added, "there's a mission station about ten miles west of us. If you're willing, the good man will marry us and you can cuss me for the rest of your life."

Eva Lane looked at him with sober eyes. There was a proud tilt to her head.

"What Biles told you was true—the smuggling part," said she.

"How do you know what Biles told me?" Bruton demanded.

"When you were sick you talked. I'd never heard such names!"

Bruton colored. "It wouldn't have made any difference," said he. "But I'm glad it's the smuggling part that's true."

Later, she stirred in his arms.

"What will become of Biles and father?" she asked. "Father wouldn't have left you, but he was always afraid of Biles."

Bruton chuckled: "Malesi will head them straight into his father's arms. Sekeletu will hold 'em till we get there. . . ."

"And your half of the stones?"

"On the other side of the tree at Hykam Kop, my sweet."

Eva Lane sighed. "Darling," said she, "you'd have made a wonderful crook."

Bruton got up. "We've got things to do," said he, "or we'll spend our honeymoon in jail."

A week later Bruton sat facing Inspector Willoughby of the South African Police in his office at Walvis Bay.

"So," the Inspector was saying, "Biles and Lane headed south for parts unknown. Well, they are out of my territory. We've got what we were after—the diamonds, thanks to you. But there was a third party involved—a Miss Eva Lane. I don't recall your saying what happened to her, Mr. Bruton."

"She got married a week ago," said Bruton.

"Did she—well, well!" He gave Bruton a keen look. "I'll have to check into that, of course. It will take me a couple of days. Yes, I'm sure it will take all of forty-six hours."

Bruton licked his dry lips. "Mrs. Bruton is here," he said stiffly. "We thought it best to make a clean break. . . ."

"Of course you did!" the Inspector put in hastily. "This is no country to set up housekeeping in, and the airport makes travel so convenient. Shall I have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Bruton, or do you plan to travel soon?" he asked with peculiar emphasis.

Intelligence came into Bruton's eyes.

"Why, yes," he said smiling. "Yes, we do!"

Jim Peters Decided That Red Butte Was the Same Old Den of Iniquity That It Had Always Been—and Decided He Liked It



JIM PETERS, VISITOR

By GENE VAN

IT HAD been five years since Jim Peters left Red Butte. He tied his horse in front of a little restaurant and got stiffly onto the wooden sidewalk. Jim Peters was getting old. He looked across the street at the lights of the Eagle Saloon, where there was plenty

of noise, including a three-piece orchestra. The long hitch-rack was filled with saddied horses.

"Ain't changed none, I reckon," he said half-aloud. "Same old den of iniquity—but I like it."

With the trail-dust shaking off his clothes

he entered the little restaurant. There was not a diner in sight. Old Jim sat down, facing the door, and with his back against the wall. Years in the sheriff's office, more years as a deputy U. S. Marshal, had ingrained caution into Jim Peters. A small, gray-haired woman came to get his order. Jim's narrowed eyes studied her closely.

"Mary!" he exclaimed quietly. "Mary Evans—you?"

"Jim Peters—as I live and breathe!" she gasped. "Why, Jim, I never expected—where on earth did you come from?"

Jim Peters looked her over, his brow furrowed. Why, the last time he'd seen her—

"Mary," he said softly, "why are you in here?"

"I work here, Jim."

"You work—here, eh? What on earth went wrong, Mary?"

"We lost the ranch," she said slowly. "They busted me and Tom. Rustled our cows, poisoned the water-holes—and the rustlers finally killed Tom."

"My gawd!" he breathed. "I never knew it, Mary. For the last few years I've been buyin' cows for a Chicago firm—mostly up in the Northwest. I—I reckon I kinda got out of touch with folks. Mary, who do yuh mean, when yuh say 'they' killed Tom?"

"I don't know, Jim. Nobody knows. The sheriff tried to get 'em, but he failed. Maybe he didn't try too hard, I dunno. You remember Ase Marshall, don't yuh, Jim?"

"One of my best friends, Mary—I sure remember Ase."

"He had a boy," said the woman quietly.

"Named Henry. Everybody called him Tige. Grewed up awful quick. He's sheriff now."

"I heard that Ase died," nodded Jim Peters. "And now his kid is a peace officer. Can yuh imagine that? We're gettin' old, Mary Evans."

"Too old," she said wearily.

They both nodded, and Peters asked, "How's the kid makin' out as sheriff?"

"He's kinda sick of it, Jim. You see, he's in love with Jane Frost, and—"

"Hank Frost's daughter?" interrupted Jim. "I 'member her. She was a little, knock-kneed kid, with braids. How's Hank?"

"Hank is in jail, charged with murder, Jim."

"The Great Horn Spoon!" exclaimed Jim. "What's gone wrong with this country? Who'd he kill?"

"Ed Nelson."

"Well, cut me down for some jerky! Ed Nelson. Mary," Jim Peters leaned back in his chair and looked at her, "Let's not go any further. Next thing I know—well, there won't be anybody left."

"I was merely going to say that Tige had to arrest Hank Frost, and he's afraid Jane don't like him for it."

"Huh?" grunted Jim. "Got brains, ain't she? That why they elect peace officers. Women are funny. But never mind them, Mary—what about you? Didn't Tom leave yuh anythin'? The last time I was here—"

"I know, Jim; we were well-off, I suppose you'd say. Well, it seems that Tom borrowed ten thousand dollars. The ranch was worth more than twice that much, but I couldn't raise the money—so I lost it."

"I see," nodded Jim thoughtfully. "I heard somebody mention a feller named Jim Martin down here. Up in Cottonwood, it was. They said he was sort of a top buzzard down here. I don't remember him."

"He came after you left, Jim. They call him Bull. He's the man who held the note against the ranch. He runs the general store, and has his hand in a lot of things. Owns a lot of property, too. Says he was too generous in loanin' money—and got the ranches."

"Well, well, that's too bad. I allus thought that a cow-ranch in this neck of the woods was worth money. Mary, can yuh bring me about four eggs and some ham—oh, mebbe a half-ham? I'm awful hungry—and I've got some thinkin' to do."

"It's awful nice to see you back, Jim."

"Yuh know," he grinned slowly, "I'm glad I came back."

MORE people came into the place, but paid no attention to Jim Peters, who paid for his meal and went outside. He stabled his horse and went slowly up the street to the Eagle Saloon. He was rather colorless, in his faded overalls and faded shirt, a well-worn, black Stetson on his head, high-heel boots on his feet, and a wooden-handled Colt swung low on his thigh, and in a short holster. And how Jim Peters

knew how to play tunes with that old Colt forty-five!

The Eagle Saloon was crowded. Men drank at small tables, with the "girls," while the bar was crowded with drinkers. Roulette layouts and poker-tables lined one side of the room. The place was filled with wine, women and song—and smoke, as Jim Peters came slowly down the center of the room.

A man, sitting at a table, saw Jim Peters, and his jaw sagged for a moment, his right hand jerking below the top of the table. Jim Peters saw him, too—stopped short. A bystander between them went sideways out of his chair, as the man at the table suddenly jerked upright, a gun in his right hand. Several men saw the action and ducked aside, and a man yelled, "Stop that, you fool!"

"You blasted bloodhound!" yelled the man with the gun. "This is—"

He was pulling the trigger, but too late, because Jim Peters shaded him just enough to throw the man off balance and his bullet smashed into the frame-work of a spinning roulette wheel. The man went backwards against his own chair, fell over it, his boots in the air, spur-rowels spinning.

Old Jim stood there like a bronze statue, only his eyes moving, as he watched the crowd. The place was strangely still for a place which had been so noisy a moment ago. Then a voice said:

"All right, folks—it's all over. Mort started it. Somebody get the doctor—and keep away from him."

"I'll go, Tige," offered a man, and shoved his way outside.

Jim Peters holstered his old gun and stepped over near the man who had given the orders.

"Are you Tige Marshall, the sheriff?" he asked.

"I am," replied the young sheriff.

"I'm Jim Peters. Yore pa and me was bunks once."

"Jim Peters! Well, well! I remember you. I've always—but what was this all about, Mr. Peters? Why did Mort Haley want to shoot you?"

Jim Peters smiled slowly. "Yuh see, son, a few years ago I worked for the cattlemen's association—and this Haley gent is one bad boy I didn't get m' hands on. He's

wanted for gunnin' a deputy sheriff in Wyomin'. Awful nervous on the trigger, seems like. Almost got me, too. You saw it all, didn't yuh?"

"Yes, I saw it. Several others saw it, too. Just a plain case of self-defense, Mr. Peters."

"Thank uh, son. I hope his bullet didn't discommode anybody."

"It sure ruined a roulette-wheel," said someone.

Jim Peters smiled slowly. "It ain't often that a outlaw's bullet does the community any good," he said dryly. "I'll be over at the hotel, in case yuh need me for anythin', Sheriff. Kinda feel like a little case of shut-eye. Gettin' old, I reckon."

"I wish I was old enough to draw that fast," said the sheriff.

The doctor didn't need any complete examination to declare that Mort Haley had pulled his last gun, and men helped take the body away. Bull Martin came into the saloon and found the sheriff. Martin was a big man, solidly-built, hard-eyed, big-fisted. He wore expensive clothes, but in very bad taste, and reeked of perfume.

"What happened, Tige?" asked Martin roughly. "I didn't hear it all."

"A stranger walked in, Mort pulled his gun, started to make a war-speech, and cut loose at the stranger. But the stranger who turned out to be Jim Peters, shaded Mort by quite a lot—and Mort's body is down at the doctor's place."

"Jim Peters?" grunted Martin. "Uh-h-h—is that the Peters who was a deputy marshal—used to be around here, before I came?"

"The same one, Bull," replied Tige.

"Why did Mort jump him?"

"Guilty conscience, I reckon. Peters said he was wanted for gunnin' a deputy in Wyomin'."

"Hm-m-m-m! Didn't know that. Mort was workin' for me. Glad to find out his true character."

"A lot of good that'll do yuh now, Bull."

"Yeah, that's right. Peters must be fast with a gun."

"I wish I was as fast."

JIM PETERS attended the inquest over the body of Ed Nelson, who it was alleged, had been murdered by Hank Frost.

Frost was brought in by the sheriff, and his mouth sagged with surprise, when he saw Jim Peters. Jane Frost was there, seated near her father, and Peters looked her over approvingly. The knock-knees were gone, and there were no braids down her back. In fact, she was a very pretty young lady. He didn't blame the sheriff for paying little attention to the evidence in the case.

The banker, Ira Reed, was called to the stand, and told his story, fumbling nervously with his heavy watch-chain, which dangled across his ample bosom. He was inclined to talk very slowly, thinking over each word very carefully. He testified that he had advised Ed Nelson in a number of business matters.

At this particular time, only he and Nelson were in the bank, the cashier having gone for lunch.

He said that at the conclusion of their talk, Nelson had gone outside the bank. The banker said he heard the shot fired, but by the time he could get outside, quite a crowd had gathered, and the Sheriff had arrested Hank Frost.

Hank Frost was put on the stand, and admitted that he and Nelson had quarreled in the Eagle Saloon over a poker game, and that hard words had been exchanged. He said he left the saloon and went over to the general store. He admitted that he was pretty drunk, and resented the names that Nelson had called him.

He said he came out of the store, which was only a short distance from the bank, when he saw Nelson, facing him. A moment later he heard a shot fired, and he saw Nelson fall. Frost admitted that he had drawn his gun, thinking that Nelson had shot at him, but was confused over the fact that Nelson was down. Then the sheriff got him.

"But," protested the coroner, "one cartridge in your gun had been recently fired, Frost."

"I know it," nodded Hank Frost. "I've told 'em a dozen times that I had some old shells that I wasn't sure was all right, and that mornin' when I rode to town, I shot one of 'em at a rabbit, to see if they'd go off. I never reloaded my gun after shootin' it."

Evidently the six-man jury didn't believe

Hank Frost, and recommended that he be held on a charge of murder. Tige Marshall introduced Jane to Jim Peters after Hank Frost had been put back in his cell. Jane was worried, but tried to conceal it. She remembered Jim Peters and asked him what he thought of the case.

"Well, I dunno," he said thoughtfully. "That'll require quite a lot of ponderin', my dear. Off hand, I'd say that we're havin' very good weather." He patted her on the shoulder and went on.

JIM PETERS went down to the doctor's home, which he used as an office. Old Doctor Hilgret had been there many years. In fact, at one time he had attended Jim Peters. Just a matter of a bullet through the leg. He greeted Jim warmly.

"Saw you at the inquest, Peters. Glad to see you back."

"Thank yuh, Doc," drawled Peters. "It seems that I got here just in time to see action."

"Yes—about last night. Brash young man, I'd say."

"I wasn't thinkin' about Haley, Doc—but general conditions. Sorry to see what happened to Hank Frost. Ed Nelson, too. Knew 'em both."

"I'm afraid they'll hang Frost, Peters. Looks like a sure case."

Jim Peters nodded. "Does look bad. Forty-five bullet, Doc?"

The doctor nodded gravely. "Smashed his spine, just above the pelvis."

They talked over things in general, and Jim Peters went back to the hotel, where he met Bull Martin.

"You are Jim Peters, I presume," said Martin affably. "I'm Martin."

"Oh, yes," replied Jim Peters. "I've heard of you."

"I came here just after you left, Peters. Done mighty well, if I do say it myself."

"That's what I've heard. Picked up quite a lot of land."

"Oh, not too much. Land is a drug on the market now. I'm too good-hearted. Can't resist loanin' money to needy folks."

"I'm sure they appreciate it," said Peters dryly.

"That is a question. I wanted to speak to you about Mort Haley. He worked for me, you see. Sort of a ranch manager. I had

no idea he had a bad reputation. Wouldn't he have hired him, had I known, of course."

"I never gave that a thought. In fact, I didn't know he worked for you, Mr. Martin. It's all right—you can't know the past of every man who hits yuh for a job."

"Thank you, Peters; I'm glad you understand the situation."

"Perfectly, sir. You have nothing to regret."

Jim Peters went down to the sheriff's office and asked Tige if he could talk to Hank Frost.

"I don't see why not," said Tige. "No orders against it."

Hank Frost was glad to see Jim Peters, and they shook hands between the bars.

"Jim, I almost yelled at yuh in the courtroom," remarked Hank.

"I saw it comin'," grinned Jim. "How are yuh feelin'?"

"Well, not too happy, Jim. That jury kinda sunk me."

"Yea-a-ah. How far was you from Nelson, when he fell, Hank?"

"Oh, maybe seventy feet. Not any further, I'm sure."

"Yo're sure he was facin' yuh?"

"I sure am sure, Jim."

"He didn't have a gun in his hand, eh?"

"I don't know. They say he didn't—and they must be right. Doc said he probably didn't know what hit him; so he couldn't have put his gun back in his holster, where they found it. I heard that shot and I thought he shot at me—at first, I did."

"Well, I'll be in to see yuh later, Hank; I've got some awful hard thinkin' to do. Maybe take me hours. I'm not so fast, yuh know."

Later on that afternoon, Jim Peters was sprawled in a chair on the little hotel porch, when Tige Marshall came along. Tige looked rather weary.

"Yuh ain't lettin' yore job get yuh down, are yuh, son," queried Jim Peters.

The young sheriff sat down and tossed his hat on a bench.

"Other people's trouble—more'n my own, I reckon," he replied.

"No fresh murders?" asked Jim curiously.

"No, nothin' like that. They tell me that the bank holds a note for ten thousand against Nelson's Lazy N. It's worth more

than that, but nobody'd buy it; so I reckon they'll take it over. You know, Martin had a note against the Evans' Circle E—and got it all."

"Yea-a-ah, Mary Evans told me about that. I understand that the Circle E was worth twenty-five thousand."

"Yes, and the Lazy N is worth just as much."

"Son," said Jim Peters soberly, "me and you got into the wrong business. There ain't no money in correctin' crime and criminals."

"I guess not, Mr. Peters."

"I kinda like the looks of yore girl, son."

"Do yuh? That's fine. So do I. And now," Tige grimaced wearily, "she says she'll marry me when I can prove that her father didn't kill Ed Nelson."

"She did? Huh! These women shore hand yuh a chore. That's why I never got married—that and my looks. 'Course my disposition is a drawback, too. Nossir, love never got the drop on me. Too old now."

JIM PETERS spent most of the evening on the hotel porch, sitting alone, but later he put on his hat and went strolling around the town in the darkness. There were a few lights, but most of the illumination of Red Butte was at the Eagle Saloon. It was about ten o'clock, when he came back past the general store. There was a lamp burning near the partitioned back of the place, and Bull Martin was working on some books.

Jim Peters peered through the dusty window, watching Martin, when Martin suddenly lifted his head, as though listening. Then he got up, carried the lamp into the back room, started for a door, but went back and blew out the lamp. A moment later Jim heard the faint sound of a back door being opened.

"Kinda suspicious—bringin' yore guests into a dark room," muttered Jim, and hurried around to the back door of the store. Barrels and boxes were piled in confusion, and he had to go carefully, in order to reach the door without making a noise.

The two windows, well covered, were too high for any use; so Jim knelt on the steps and put his ear against the old door. He knew that one of the speakers was Bull Martin, but could not identify the other

one. At first the conversation was rather disconnected, because he couldn't hear all of it, but gradually it became clear. A voice said:

"You've got to do it, Bull. Mort was to do the job, but that blasted old rawhider spoiled that deal. You've got to do it, because it is our only chance."

There was a lot more information, in which the name of a place, Broken Clevis Wash, was mentioned, and a certain time. Jim Peters drew back from the door and dropped behind a pile of discarded boxes, as the visitor came out. It was too dark for him to identify the man, who stayed in the deep shadow and disappeared around behind the hotel.

It was a very thoughtful Jim Peters, who went back to the hotel porch, to sit down and plan his moves.

"In a case like this, a feller has got to be smart," he told himself. "No use pullin' up this bunch of skunk-cabbage and not get the root."

THE next morning Jim Peters went down to the sheriff's office, where he found Tige Marshall, who had just fed his prisoner, and was starting back to the restaurant with the tray and empty dishes.

"Set down and let's have a talk, son," said Jim Peters gravely.

Tige put the tray on his desk and sat down, looking curiously at the old rawhider.

"Son, I'm pullin' out today," announced Jim quietly. "You can tell anybody that I'm leavin' Red Butte. Had a nice time, too."

"But why are you leavin'?" asked the astonished sheriff. "Why, you just got here. I thought we'd have you—"

"Business," interrupted Jim. "But jist between me and you—I ain't quite gone away."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like this, my boy. See that big sycamore tree out there, jist out of the corner of main street?"

"Why yes, of course."

"Long about nine o'clock tonight, I'd like to have yuh there to meet me. I might be earlier—mebbe later. Mebbe I won't never get there. But I'd sure like to have yuh there—in case I do."

"Mr. Peters, I don't understand what you mean."

"It is kinda vague, son. Maybe I'm kinda shootin' at the moon. Time will tell. Will yuh be there?"

"At nine? Yes, I'll be there before that—in case you're early."

"Thank yuh a lot. It might mean nothin'—but it might mean a lot especially to you."

"Why to me?" asked Tige curiously.

"Remember what yore girl told yuh?"

"That she'd marry me—if I—you mean that?"

"Uh-huh. Well, so-long, Sheriff. If you have a chance, mebbe you'll grow up to be as good a man as yore pa was. I shore liked him."

"I know he liked you, too, Mr. Peters."

"I admire him for it—so few ever did. See yuh later."

The sheriff of Red Butte was completely puzzled. He watched Jim Peters ride out of Red Butte, his gray horse traveling at a slow dog-trot. It was a long day for the sheriff.

The troubles of Red Butte seemed remote. Jane came to town to see her father, and Tige told her that Jim Peters had left Red Butte.

"I wonder why he came here," she said. "He seemed such a lonely sort of a person. I don't know why, but he struck me as being the sort of a man who never had much pleasure in life. Those deep lines on his face, and his deep-set eyes. He seemed to look through you."

"He said he liked you, Jane."

"He did? Why he doesn't even know me."

"He knew you when you had knock-knees and two braids."

Jane laughed. "I guess he did."

"And," said Tige soberly, "I don't believe he has to know a person very long to either like or dislike them, Jane. He's like a dog—maybe his nose tells him."

"Maybe I smelled all right," she laughed.

"Honey," said Tige quietly, "do you still agree to marry me if I can prove your father innocent?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

"I hope I can make the grade," sighed Tige.

Later Tige went up to the general store to see Bull Martin, but the clerk told him

that Martin had gone out to the Lazy N to have a look at the place.

"He'll likely have to take it over for the bank," said the clerk.

"I suppose so," agreed Tige. "I don't reckon Ira Reed knows how to operate a cattle ranch."

AT half-past eight that night Tige Marshall was hunched in the deep shadow of the big sycamore. There were no lights in that end of the town. Tige wondered if Jim Peters would come; wondered what it was all about, and if he didn't come—why couldn't he? Only Jim Peters knew the answer, it seemed.

It was almost nine o'clock, when Jim Peters rode up to the old sycamore and dismounted. He merely nodded to Tige, as he untied a canvas sack from his saddle.

"I been watchin' the road and killin' time," he whispered, as he sat beside the sheriff. "We'll wait right here, until my man comes."

"Can yuh tell me what happened, Mr. Peters?"

"Son, I can tell yuh what has happened—but I can't tell yuh what will happen. Bull Martin is walkin' home."

"Bull Martin? Why, he's out at the Lazy N."

"Not unless he got off the road recently," chuckled Peters. "Yuh see, it jist happened that the pay roll of the Red Dog mine was bein' brought in by one man in a buckboard."

Mr. Martin stuck him up and took the pay roll, and made the man drive back toward Cottonwood City. I took the pay roll away from Mr. Martin, and he's walkin' home."

"Great Scott! You mean that Bull Martin turned bandit and—"

"Not so loud, son. The pay roll is in that sack, all safe and sound."

"If Bull Martin—why, I'll have him in jail the minute—"

"No, yuh won't my boy—not until he's done us a favor. Sh-h-h-h!"

There was enough starlight to show them the limping figure coming up the road. It was Bull Martin, and his feet were very sore. He came almost to the sycamore, turned left and limped away. Jim Peters touched Tige on the sleeve, and they got up

quietly. It was no job to trail the slow-going Martin.

"He's goin' to Ira Reed's house!" whispered Tige.

"I suspected that, but I had to prove it. C'mon, pardner."

They reached the corner of the fence, as Martin went up to the darkened house, and knocked sharply. After a few moments the door opened, and Bull Martin went inside the house. Jim Peters led the way to the door. It was unlocked. In fact, it wasn't even latched. Jim opened it easily. There was no light in the front room, but they could see a light being lit in a rear room. Swiftly they crossed the carpeted room to the half-open doorway.

"I tell you, he hijacked me!" wailed Bull Martin's voice. "I had to walk all the way back here."

"Listen, Bull," said the banker, his voice loaded with disbelief, "Jim Peter's don't hijack anybody—he isn't that kind."

"I tell you, he did, Ira. He stuck me up and took my horse and gun."

"You lie, Bull! I knew that the time would come when you'd lie to get more than your share. Well, you won't get another chance."

"No, no, Ira—don't! You can't—"

The thudding report of the banker's gun shook the windows. Tige started forward, but Peters pulled him back. The sound of a falling body, and then complete silence. Peters had a hand on Tige's arm, but he couldn't feel the young sheriff trembling. He had good stuff.

Something grated on the floor, and Peters flung the door open. Ira Reed, the banker, was trying to drag the body of Bull Martin.

"Bull Martin didn't lie, Reed," said Peters grimly.

Reed dropped his hold on the body and staggered back, his face white in the yellow lamplight.

"You!" he breathed.

"Yeah—me. We cash the chips, Reed—the game is over."

"You—you mean we split the—the money, Peters? Good! I'll make a good deal with you, Bull was a thief. I didn't trust him. I can make you rich in a few years. You play the game with me, eh?"

"The game I play is by my own rules, Reed," replied Peters. "Open that safe

over there and take out twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Twenty-five—you are crazy! Why, you thief, I'll—"

"The twenty-five thousand is for the theft of the Evans ranch, Reed. You and Bull Martin were both in on that deal—and you forged that note, just the same as you forged the note against Ed Nelson. Not only that, Reed, but you shot Ed Nelson in the back. It wasn't Hank Frost who done it."

Ira Reed grasped the table for support. "I haven't twenty-five thousand dollars," he said huskily. "I can't—"

"Open the safe, Reed."

"Oh, all right, I—don't know—"

He knelt in front of the safe and worked the combination, while Peters watched him. He dumped the money on the table, hands shaking.

"It's in packages—marked," he whispered. "You're foolish, Peters. We can make a fortune here. Just say the word—"

"It's all here," said Jim quietly. He shoved a sheet of paper across the desk with his gun-muzzle. "Write a confession, Reed," he said. "There's a pen and ink handy. Confess that you murdered Ed Nelson—the rest can take care of itself."

With a shaking hand, the banker wrote it and signed. As he handed it to Jim Peters, his right hand flashed to a half-open drawer, and his hand came up with a leveled gun, the same gun he had used to kill Bull Martin.

"All right, Peters," he snarled. "I killed Ed Nelson. I killed Old Tom Evans, too. I forged the notes. What good will that confession do you now?"

Jim Peters smiled. "You didn't suppose I'd come here alone, do you? Look behind me and you'll see the law!"

For a moment it took Reed's mind off the business at hand, and in that fraction of a second, Jim Peters drew and fired. The banker's gun thudded on the table-top and he went down in a heap. Tige came into the room, his face white. He didn't know who got that bullet.

"It's yore party now, son," said Jim Peters swiftly. "There's the twenty-five thousand for Mary Evans—and I know you'll give it to her. Remember, Reed gave it to yuh to give to her, before he died. There's the confession that clears Hank Frost, and the bank will have to cancel that note against the Lazy N."

"But you can't leave, Mr. Peters!"

"I left this mornin', son. Take all the credit. You're young and you'll make a good sheriff. Just remember, you heard them two frame up the deal last night in the back of Bull's store. Good luck to you and the girl. I've got to go fast, 'cause somebody must have heard the shots. You've got the pay roll

"Good, *Adios, Compadre.*"

And Jim Peters was gone.

IT WAS the next evening at the Frost ranch. Jane and Tige sat on the old sofa, and Hank Frost sat in his old rocker, smoking his pipe. Three might have been a crowd at some other time, but not now. Hank had given his blessing.

Jane said:

"Tige, you were wonderful. You figured this all out, but of course you didn't suspect that they'd quarrel over the money and shoot each other. And wasn't it wonderful that Ira Reed lived long enough to clear Dad. Everybody thinks you are the best sheriff we ever had."

"It sure is remarkable," said Tige, but without any jubilation.

"And the mine gave you a thousand to start housekeepin'," said Hank. "Mighty fine of 'em. Still you saved their pay roll, son. I wish Jim Peters had stayed to the finish. He'd have liked the way you done it, Tige."

"You were very smart, that's all," declared Jane.

"I ain't smart, Honey—just awful lucky."

"What was lucky about it?"

"Well, lucky in knowin' folks, I reckon. Yuh see, Jane, it ain't what yuh know—it's who yuh know."



*The Banana Game They Call It; To Some It's Tougher Than
Japs and Just As Deadly*



NOT A TYPICAL TROPICAL TRAMP

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

Author of "Saltwater Bride," etc.

WHEN the little banana pick-up boat chugged up to the quay, I noticed him leaning against the wheelhouse, his long, bony fingers idly plucking the strings of a guitar. A gaunt man and extraordinarily tall, everything but the polished butt of a pistol in his holster showed

neglect, from the battered Stetson shading his lean brown face to his scuffed riding boots.

A year on a Guatemalan banana *finca* hadn't entirely killed my curiosity about those footloose wanderers known as "typical tropical tramps," but other matters concerned me then. Seeing only the bewhisk-

ered captain in the wheelhouse, my heart fell.

"The *comandante* didn't come upriver with you?" I asked, when he stepped on deck.

"But no, *Don Alano*," the captain said. "I did not know—"

"You must have started before my call went through," I said, hiding my disappointment.

The captain's bright old eyes asked questions, but when I said nothing, he made sure my *mozos* had secured the mooring lines, and then shouted at his sleepy deck crew. "Even crippled tortoises would move more swiftly! Push off the gangplank. Find the cargo for Casita Palma."

The crew brightened at the insult, and while the boatmen argued with the captain, the tall man stepped to the quay. Though his long straight body had suppleness and grace, it was hard to judge his age. The fine lines around his light-blue eyes might be the result of squinting against glaring sunlight rather than of years. He looked native when he smiled because of his brownness.

"Alan MacLain?" he asked, giving his English a Latin inflection. "I'm Jim Brennon. You have trouble here and maybe you could use me, no?"

"Why do you say that?" I asked brusquely.

He glanced briefly at the *mozos*. "Tense—everyone is tense, *compadre*. Your face is worried, besides."

"And if you're right, what could you do, Brennon?"

HE MADE a barely perceptible motion toward his gun, changed his mind and grinned. "I've been around, MacLain. Coffee *fincas*, gold mines, Amazon rubber, a bit of everything." His restless glance traveled along the row of tall palms to the bungalow and beyond to the grove. "And I've been in the banana game, too," he added.

I needed a man, desperately. But not Brennon. I knew the typical tropical tramps by reputation. One day when every hand was needed because of heavy fruit cutting, a flood or a "blowdown," Brennon would appear with his old guitar slung negligently over a shoulder and a distant look in his

eyes as he asked for his pay. The T. T. T.'s were like that.

"Sorry," I said curtly.

"In Puerto Barrios they told me you kids have had it tough."

His voice was sympathetic, so I had no reason for bristling and snapping back except that I was cut up about what had happened. "The Japs didn't think us kids!"

Even to my ears it sounded boastful and boyish; I felt ashamed when Brennon's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Probably not," he said.

HIS reminder of our hard times sent my memory reaching back to the day Al Peters, Ed Farrell, Woody and I stood at the rail of the transport sailing out of Pearl Harbor. "Ambulatory wounded" we were, but nearly well, and we discussed starting a small business after our discharge. "Bananas are better than a business," Woody had said. "You sit on a porch with a frosted drink in your hand and the money rolls in." That sounded pretty good; but it hadn't worked out the way Woody said. The banana game had proved tougher than the Japs. Peters died of blackwater fever on a homebound ship, Farrell was buried in a little grave back in the grove, and now Woody. . . .

Maybe my face betrayed how badly I felt about him because Brennon watched me intently.

"I should have guessed when you asked about the *comandante*," he said quietly. "When did it happen?"

"I elevated a shoulder, unable to talk about it, then turned to direct the loading of boxes on the burros, and forgot Brennon. As the gangplank was pulled aboard, the captain called:

"How many count can I expect in the morning, *Don Alano*?"

I started to say four hundred, but remembering in time about Woody, I said faintly, "Only two hundred, *Señor el Capitán*."

The boat glided up the black Motagua. I passed the slow-moving burros, stepped onto the screened porch and then started. Brennon was tilted back in a chair, his high heels resting lightly on the floor as he rolled a brown-paper cigarette. My first swift sensation of relief lasted only a moment; then my muscles tightened in anger.

"I said I didn't need a man, Brennon!"

He licked the paper, struck a match on his thumbnail, and let smoke trickle from his thin nostrils before answering, "I missed the boat."

"I'll see you don't miss it tomorrow morning! If you're planning to move in on me—"

"I stopped making plans years ago, Mac-Lain. How long since you called the *comandante*?"

"Hours ago. Right after I . . . I found Ted Woodward's body. Late yesterday afternoon Woody went to meet the fruit company pay-car where our spur meets the main track. When he didn't return with the pay roll, I dismissed the workers and rode out to find him. Too dark then to see anything, but this morning I found the motor handcar in a drainage ditch and . . . and what was left of Woody. . . ."

"Something had been placed on the track to derail the car?"

"I—I think so. I found a block of wood in the ditch."

"And Woodward was hacked to death with a machete?"

"Or machetes. There were bare footprints . . . different sizes. Two men, I think."

"The body is still there?"

"The law forbids you to move it until the *comandante*—"

Brennon's nostrils flared slightly. "I've known of bodies to lie days in the sun because a *comandante* was in a *mañana* mood. Stay here; I'll go for your partner."

Relieved and grateful, I sent him off with Gayo, the houseboy, and then asked the fat old native cook, Matilde, to bring coffee out to the porch.

I TRIED to work on our books but the figures kept blurring and in their place were mental pictures of my three pals. The country had finished them. I had a hunch it might finish me, too. But I didn't want to sell Casita Palma farm at a sacrifice, after all our hard work. We four had agreed—not considering the possibility very seriously then—that if any of us died or quit, the remaining partners would share the farm to avoid selling it piecemeal. Now the *finca* was mine, and I wanted to make a success of it. Other banana planters had; Hodge

Kortlan, on the next farm upriver, had grown wealthy growing bananas. But something was wrong with our management; I didn't need the books to tell me that, so at length I closed them.

Rain was brewing in the low, sullen clouds, and the air, oppressively hot and dead-still, was corrupt with the humid stench of decaying jungle vegetation. Listlessly I watched an alligator slither from a sandbar into the river, only its eyesockets rippling the ebony surface as it moved against the current. On the opposite bank brush crackled and a deer appeared, camouflaged by the filtered light as it stood motionless for a while before descending the bank to drink. From the grove came the lazy *thwack* of machetes and the thrash of falling plants as *mozos* cut fruit for the morning delivery. Then at last wheels clicked on the tracks and the speeder stopped behind the house.

Jim Brennon came through the kitchen and dropped into a chair. His long brown fingers moved restlessly on the arms.

"Have you had trouble with anyone?" he asked abruptly.

"Occasionally a native is surly."

"I don't mean natives."

I glanced at him in surprise. "We had an argument with our neighbor Kortlan about boundaries after buying the farm. But the fruit company once owned this land and had kept the plats. Kortlan accepted the proof and apologized."

"No more trouble with him?"

I hesitated, wishing to be fair. "No; he's really been helpful."

The way Brennon's ice-blue eyes narrowed told me he doubted this.

"Personally, I never liked him," I added, after a moment. "I never entered his bungalow if I could avoid it. Peters used to ride over nights to ask his advice until he got blackwater fever. So did Farrell, before he came down with typhoid."

"Doesn't the Army inoculate for typhoid?"

"Yes; but in time the shots lose their effectiveness; Farrell was inoculated only once, and maybe that didn't take. What are you driving at?"

Without answering, he turned to stare toward the river, the hollows in his cheeks deepening as his lips tightened. After a

while he appeared to be listening. I heard the faint click of wheels, followed soon by the *put-put-put* of two motors. I walked to the end of the porch in time to see two fruit company speeders emerge between the flanking green walls of banana plants. On the leading car was an officer; displeasure was plainly written on his broad, flat face—a face that would have looked Indian but for his black mustache, that suggested some Spanish blood. Both cars were crowded with barefooted soldiers armed with old-style carbines. As the cars stopped out back, Brennon rose.

"Let me handle this."

I started to tell him it was my affair, but, deciding he knew Guatemalans better than I did, I let him go.

The *comandante's* voice was at first stiff and reproving, but Brennon's unruffled courtesy presently had its effect; the officer even laughed at something the tropical tramp said. Then Brennon called Gayo and there was some pounding and though I knew they were making Woody's coffin from the packing cases that had come that morning, I couldn't drive myself to go and help.

When the pounding ceased, Brennon came back. "It's all right. The *comandante* says we can bury your friend."

"He'd like to lie beside Farrell," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

So the soldiers carried Woody through the grove and we buried him beside Farrell. I said a few words about what a good comrade he'd been. The *comandante* must have understood some English because after I'd finished, he asked if Woody had been a soldier. When I nodded, he removed some cartridges from his belt and handed one to each soldier. Ammunition is doled out sparingly because native soldiers will shoot out lights from trains and fire like children at anything moving if they have cartridges.

The soldiers raised their rifles and gravely fired a salvo. I guess Woody would have liked that.

We walked back to the house and the *comandante* and his soldiers went off on their speeders to look for the murderers.

"Good trackers, these people," Brennon observed, as the second motor handcar disappeared. "They'll probably find the murderers. Their bodies, I mean."

Startled, I looked at Brennon, but he made no explanation.

I said, "I must start riding the farm."

He said he'd come along. I called to Gayo to saddle two mules and off we rode. The big mules sometimes stumbled in the spongy black loam, while we ducked under the great flimsy leaves. They made a roof over the grove and it was always like a green twilight, with here and there sun shafts breaking golden bright through rifts open to the sky.

AT THE first narrow-gauge track, cutters and burro drivers were unloading emerald stems from the special pack-saddles onto the fruit car. Farther on, a foreman supervised a cutting crew. He assured me the promised count would be ready for the pickup boat in the morning. We rode on, until Brennon drew rein where a crew had recently been cutting fruit.

"Your crew didn't prune as it went through here."

"Another crew does that."

His brows arched. "Good cutting crews prune as they cut fruit, McLain. And these clogged drainage ditches . . . plants standing in water, ready to rot . . . !"

"The foremen are touchy. Look what happened to Woody."

"Look what's happening to the grove! They see you're green—"

It angered me, this drifter telling me how to succeed. "Since you know so much—" I began; but he interrupted me.

"Mac, I once owned a successful banana *finca* on this river. But I let a glib talker persuade me there was more money in Honduras gold. I sold out to him, too cheap."

"And you found gold?" I suggested dryly.

"Plenty! And bandits, too. But you don't have to repeat my mistake."

"I won't," I said my anger cooling as I realized that Brennon meant well. "Kortlan would have bought this farm for nearly what we paid when we started. But his price drops each time something happens to one of my partners."

Brennon's face was thoughtful. After a moment, he rode on.

We found the *comandante* waiting on the Motagua levee, at a point where boughs from both banks overlapped to form a natu-

ral footbridge. But, not trusting his weight to these boughs, the officer had ordered all but two of his soldiers to cross, and these two were now upriver trying to borrow Kortlan's rowboat.

We talked for a while before leaving him. Brennon saw much to criticize as we rode the farm, and his remarks made sense. We returned to the bungalow in time to take showers before dinner. Afterward, we went out to the porch.

INDICATED the bottle of Scotch, but he shook his head, asking if I had a cigar. I brought out a box of native cigars, Brennon sniffed one, put it back, and drew out his sack of tobacco. Feeling his silent rebuke, I remembered Woody's humidor and got it.

Brennon took a Havana, lighted it, and settled back with a sigh. Through the blue haze of smoke, his face didn't look so angular, but his narrowed eyes were still alert and restless.

"We've got to call on Kortlan tonight," he decided suddenly.

"I never call on him, if I can help it."

"This time you can't. *You* may be next."

He chewed his cigar for a moment before saying slowly, "A white man engineered Woody's accident."

I started and in some strange way my senses sharpened. I grew aware of the bluish-green firefly paths the *cocuyos* wove in the darkness, of the splash of an alligator in the river, of the far-off cry of a jaguar. But most of all I became conscious of the rigidity of Brennon's lean jaw.

"But Woody was killed with a machete!" I cried hoarsely.

"I circled the place where his car jumped the tracks, until I found the marks of high-heeled riding boots under a nearby ceiba tree. A mule had been tethered there, too. Natives killed your partner, but a white man watched them do it."

My palms felt damp. "Did you tell the *comandante*?"

"He'd go slow about arresting a *gringo*, and I don't want to give the white man behind this a chance to prepare an alibi."

"But if that man is Kortlan, why would he kill Woody?"

"He wants your farm, doesn't he? Wants it cheap?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But he didn't kill Peters or Farrell."

"Tell me about their visits to Kortlan."

When he saw I couldn't tell him much, he rose. "Let's go see him."

Gayo brought the mules and we rode off along the tracks. The air was soft as silk after the hot day. The rain clouds had drifted away so that we sometimes had glimpses of the high *cordilleras* silhouetted against the star-powdered sky. The ride would have been pleasant but for the swarms of malarial mosquitoes.

We passed the spur switch and rode a short distance along the main track until we reached a yellow cottage set back from the raised roadbed. A hoarse voice called a houseboy to take our mules, and Kortlan came out, his voice booming as he lumbered toward us.

"One of my foremen told me Woody was killed. Damned sorry, Mac, damned sorry! . . ."

AND as he went on, I began to think he was saying too much. It sounded to me like an act. My flesh crawled as his big, damp hand gripped mine, but I couldn't let on I suspected him. I'd never like Hodge Kortlan. He was a heavy, wheezing man, with a fleshy face that always had a raw and blistered look. He had a hearty manner and smiled easily, but his smile gave his mouth an ugly twist, and his glassy, protruding eyes were as hard as black marbles.

His hand went out to Brennon, then dropped, and his heavy body sagged a little. The two men stared at each other as if their meeting wasn't exactly a pleasure.

"Jim Brennon!" Kortlan said, recovering his composure. "Never dreamed you were still alive!"

"No fault of yours," said Brennon dryly.

"Hope you had better luck than I did in Honduras."

"I had just the kind of luck you knew I'd have when you talked me into selling this *finca*. Bandits stole my gold."

Kortlan wiped his glistening face. "Nearly twenty years ago, wasn't it, Brennon?" he said with false heartiness. "Too long to carry a chip on your shoulder! Come up and have a drink."

I started to decline as he turned toward

the house, but one of Brennon's sharp elbows jabbed me. Kortlan shouted at the houseboy to bring a bottle and glasses.

We sat down. Kortlan wiped his face again as he turned to me.

"I was expecting you, Mac, after my foreman told me about Woody. Terrible thing! We *gringos* must watch our step until those murderers are caught."

The boy set a bottle, glasses and a water pitcher on the table. "All out of soda, so I'll have to give you water. Take mine straight." Kortlan poured out three drinks and handed glasses to Brennon and me.

Brennon stood up, set his glass on the table, and lifted the water pitcher. He peered at the water, then sniffed it.

"So you were expecting Mac?" Brennon asked bluntly.

"Yes. . . . What's the matter?"

"*This water!*"

Kortlan stood up, his flush telling me he understood what Brennon meant even if I didn't. His heavy body stiffened.

"What do you mean, Brennon?"

"*This is swamp water!*"

THE silence seemed to be charged with sound. From the strip of jungle beyond Kortlan's acres came the harsh rusty croaking of tropical bullfrogs; the air pulsed with the shrill chant of cicadas. Then the floor creaked under Kortlan and his breath came out with a gasp.

"That's a lie, Brennon!"

"You invited Peters to ride down here evenings and expose himself to malarial mosquitoes until he came down with malaria, then blackwater fever. Then you went to work on Farrell. He didn't get malaria, but he liked a social drink, so you mixed it with swamp water. Not enough Scotch in the drink to kill the typhoid germs. And typhoid was what Farrell died of. But Woodward didn't get malaria or typhoid, so you hired natives to murder him."

Kortlan's face was as wet as if he'd come from a shower, but he retained some composure. "Can you prove these ridiculous assertions, Brennon?" he asked blusteringly.

"No," said Brennon. "Nor can the natives you hired."

"If any of this is true, what do you intend to do about it?"

"Wait and see," said Brennon. "Mean-

while, if an attempt is made to kill either MacLain or me, I'll shoot you. And if you ever put foot on Mac's farm, I'll do the same thing. You don't get his *finca*, Kortlan."

You couldn't mistake the thing in Kortlan's eyes. It was hatred. Tempers grow explosive in the low country, so I expected him to draw his gun. But Brennon was a better judge of men, and must have realized the planter was a physical type.

Kortlan's surprisingly quick blow caught me unawares, but Brennon stepped back and was scarcely jarred. He didn't wait for Kortlan to think what he'd done wrong. His bony fist left four straight red lines on the side of the planter's jaw and then Brennon marked the other side to match. The floorboards creaked as Kortlan fell. The houseboy came running. He looked at Kortlan and started to grin, but checked himself and helped the big man to the swing.

Brennon opened the door without glancing back, and I followed him to the hitching rail. My back felt the way it does when you're coming down with malaria as we rode away. I expected to hear a bullet whining. Brennon said nothing until we'd rounded the first bend.

"I'm sure from the way he took it that I was right," he said then. "But it can't be proved. However, if I jolted him enough, it may frighten him and bring matters to a head."

"Why can't it be proved? If they catch the murderers—"

Brennon raised his shoulders slightly. "Would Kortlan let them live?"

When we reached the bungalow, soldiers were lolling on the lawn and the *comandante* was on the porch, enjoying one of Woody's cigars. He waved it toward a black bag on the table.

"We found the pay roll across the river," he announced.

Remembering Brennon's suspicions, I asked, "Were the men who killed my partner found dead?"

The *comandante's* brows lifted. "So you guessed? Yes, they fought for the money. And when men fight with machetes—" he shrugged.

My knees shaking, I sat down. I could imagine that Kortlan had paid the two na-

tives to derail Woody's speeder and had then rowed alone across the Motagua. After the natives killed my partner and took the pay roll, they had hurried to the nearest river crossing, the bridge formed by overhanging boughs, where Kortlan was hiding nearby in wait for them, with a machete!

On the point of voicing this suspicion, I saw how slim the evidence would seem to the *comandante*. Not only that, but Kortlan, if questioned, would know who had planted the idea. That might force him to take immediate and desperate measures. Would he attempt to kill us, or flee? Flight seemed unlikely, and the other alternative wasn't pleasant to think about. . . . Brennon had certainly brought matters to a head!

The *comandante* was beginning a too vivid description of the hacked-up bodies when he broke off suddenly, staring at me. I must have looked white, for he rose, ordered his men to find quarters in the workers' shacks, and asked Brennon if he could have a bed.

After they disappeared inside, I sat thinking of how the tropical tramp had maneuvered me into this tight corner. Was he callously using me to settle an old grudge with Kortlan? I didn't know. But if Kortlan were a murderer, I must have someone beside me who wouldn't wilt when the blow was struck. Brennon had Kortlan to thank for a wasted life, reason enough both to hate my neighbor and to stand by me.

So when my self-appointed employee came out again, I said, "You'd better stay for a while, Brennon."

A smile flickered across his face. "I'd planned to, MacLain."

That irked me, but what could I do?

KORTLAN took Brennon's warning seriously and for the next month we never saw him. But there were signs he hadn't forgotten us. Once my mule tripped over a hidden rope stretched between two banana plants, and one nearly severed plant crashed to earth, barely missing my mule. Another day a bullet whined over my head as I rode along the levee.

However, I wasn't certain Kortlan was behind either attempt on my life, for Brennon was antagonizing both foremen and workers.

The trouble went back to our inexperience.

My partners and I started knowing nothing of the banana game; and the fruit company officials and Kortlan had little time to instruct us. Our foremen and workers took advantage of our ignorance by giving half a day's work for a day's pay, except in fruit cutting, where we paid the standard sum for each stem delivered. But I didn't realize this until Brennon arbitrarily took charge.

INEVITABLY the man who corrected this slackness would be unpopular. Brennon was particularly so because he was tactless. He began paying on a piece-work basis, as the fruit company did to prevent workers from going to sleep the moment an overseer's back was turned. Clogged drainage ditches began to flow, new ditches were dug. As the land was drained, Brennon replanted rotting plants with fruit-bearing "sword suckers." He even cleared a strip of jungle along my eastern boundaries for future planting.

Perhaps I should have been grateful, but my men were growing so hostile that I felt uneasy when I rode the farm. Every time a man approached with a machete I had to plan on drawing my gun if he tried to turn its razor edge on me. I almost wished I'd never seen Brennon, though I began to see that without his experienced hand the farm could never have been made to pay.

Only after the day's work was done, and we sat on the porch, relaxed by showers and a good meal, did I enjoy his company. Then his driving energy ebbed away, and he strummed his guitar and sang songs of Mexico and Guatemala and the hot countries to the south. Sometimes, with a far-away look, he'd recall experiences on coffee *fincas* and in gold mines, or speak of parrot expeditions into the bush.

"I might have made good at a dozen jobs, Mac," he once said, "if I'd stayed pinned to the map. But not now. I'm burned out from living too hard, too long. After raising hell as long as I have, you can't raise much else."

I felt that he was weary of new experiences, new faces, new scenes, and longed to settle down. But not, I hoped, at Casita Palma. He'd already stirred up more bad feeling than I could handle without his help. That put me in the difficult position

of hoping he'd leave, but not daring to suggest it.

It was on payday, a month after Brennon came to the farm, that the natives flared up. Payday is always troublesome along the Montagua. Honduraneans slip across the river with "white-eye"—a raw type of rum made of sugar cane—and all efforts to prevent its sale to the natives have failed. I'm doubtful if "white-eye" lives up to its name by making native eyes roll back until the whites are exposed, but I do know that it sends their reason packing. After a few drinks, they quarrel; and quarrels are usually decided with machetes. Scarcely a payday passes without one to a dozen deaths in the district, and an even larger number of injured men.

On this payday, a Jamaican Negro foreman rode up on a burro shortly after the workers were paid. He said the men were drinking excessively, and one foreman, Manuel, boasted that he'd kill Brennon. Brennon overheard and came out on the porch to question Robert. The old Negro repeated his story, advising Brennon to remain at the house.

Brennon snorted, and told Gayo to saddle his mule. When unable to dissuade him, I decided to go along.

AS WE rode through the grove I expected to hear a shot, but we reached the workers' nipa shacks without being molested. In the clearing stood a group of natives, all with machetes. One man waved his blade and shouted. He was short and stockily built, with a round, flattened Indian face that bore numerous livid scars. It was Manuel, and he was describing what he would do to Brennon.

"Don't be a fool!" I cried in alarm, as Brennon swung from his mule. "They'll kill you."

Ignoring me, he strode toward the group, his knotted hands held rather rigidly at his sides. He made no motion to draw his gun.

Hearing my voice, the circle opened and I saw by the men's glazed eyes that they were very drunk. Reason could not reach such men. My stomach felt as if I'd swallowed too much ice water. The carefree laughter of a child in one of the shacks sounded an incongruous note in the silence.

The hands of several men tightened on their machetes but Brennon gave no sign that he noticed. Manuel's jaw was slack as he watched Brennon's swift approach. Brennon did not stop until he was within hand's reach of the foreman, and almost surrounded by hostile men.

"Manuel!" Brennon's voice fairly blazed. "You worthless, misbegotten offspring of a flea-infested burro—" But that was only the beginning. Spanish is replete with the type of profanity designed to drive a man into a fighting mood. In any icy fury that seemed to have some deliberate purpose behind it, Brennon heaped insults, scorn and contempt on the foreman. He was not much given to profanity, so I imagined he was offering Manuel the choice of appearing a braggart or fighting. I'd never thought to warn Brennon that Manuel was rumored to have killed two men in machete fights in Honduras.

The machete shook in Manuel's hand as Brennon went on to accuse him of cowardice, incompetence and stupidity. Twice the foreman's arm went rigid, but both times he wilted under Brennon's searing wrath. Too late, I realized that men standing between the foreman and myself would make it impossible for me to help Brennon if Manuel struck.

I started to move my mule, but at that moment Brennon cried sternly, "*Go!* And if I see you here tomorrow, your wife will be your widow!"

Plainly showing his contempt, he turned and strode back, without sign of haste or fear.

Maybe that saved him. Manuel stood rigid, his flat, broad face a sickly gray, and made no effort to raise his blade.

Brennon mounted and we rode away.

"You took stiff chances," I said, when we were beyond hearing.

He shrugged. "Threats can't go unchallenged."

"Shame a man like Manuel, Brennon, and you make a dangerous enemy."

"He's already that," said Brennon. "Yesterday, as I was making my rounds, I saw footprints at the approach of a drainage-ditch overpass. I dismounted and found that dirt cleverly concealed a broken plank. I followed the tracks to where Manuel's crew was working. They gave him odd

glances when he denied having left them at any time during the morning."

"But when Woody was killed, it was Kortlan who planned—"

"I'm betting Manuel is working for him!" was Brennon's dry comment.

BRENNON was quiet that evening. His restless fingers occasionally plucked the strings of his guitar, but he didn't sing and for long intervals he stared absently toward the river. He didn't hear me when I said good night.

I don't know what awakened me. But when I sat up, my body damp from the humid heat, I was as conscious of something wrong as if I'd heard a warning or seen something move in the bright moonlight. The nervous snorting and stomping of a mule in the barn confirmed this feeling.

Throwing back the sheet, I was placing my feet on the floor when I heard gravel rattle distinctly on the path. The bedroom door stood open, so I moved quietly across the living room. My heart seemed to skip a beat when a voice behind me whispered: "Don't show yourself."

Dimly visible in a chair facing the doorway was Brennon's gaunt figure. Fully dressed, he'd apparently remained on watch in expectation of trouble.

I looked out the window. Beyond the porch were five crouching men, each with a half-raised carbine.

Brennon moved silently to the doorway, his hand on his pistol. "What do you want, *mozos?*" he demanded, his voice making them freeze.

Four quick steps brought him to the screened door before they recovered. I was able to draw breath, feeling certain now the natives would abandon whatever plans they had.

The moonlight shone on the glistening and scarred face of the leading man. Manuel it was, and he appeared drunk. In a thickened voice, he shouted something I couldn't catch. Then, bringing up his carbine, he ran toward the porch, the four other men close in his wake.

The natives of the low country prefer machetes to guns because they're poor marksmen. Nevertheless I don't understand how Brennon escaped that first wild salvo.

Bullets twanged through the screen, struck the door frame with muffled plops, and one went through the roof.

With the unhurried sureness of a man making a long-familiar motion, Brennon drew his gun. It glinted with silvery flashes as he aimed.

Then a spurt of flame momentarily blinded me. Manuel made a sound that was half-gasp, half-groan, and fell. The natives stopped peering at the motionless body in confusion, until the befuddled mind of one man grasped what had happened. Screaming, he dropped his carbine, and fled toward the grove west of the palms. Behind him, likewise unencumbered by weapons, followed his three companions. To my astonishment, they stopped abruptly before reaching the first row of banana plants and talked in whispers, glancing fearfully the while toward the shadows. Suddenly they turned and ran past the palms again, to disappear into the grove to the east.



I must have been confused myself for I didn't remember my gun until all need of it appeared past; then, without thinking, I hurried to get it.

When I returned, Brennon was reloading. As his fingers pushed in the cartridges, he was staring intently toward the spot where the natives had started to enter the grove, before something changed their minds.

"A man usually leaves a burning house the way he entered," Brennon muttered. "Those natives started to do the instinctive thing, but they were more afraid of something there than of me." He motioned with his pistol. "Keep your eye on that spot!"

I knew what he meant.

Down the steps he went, and walked toward the grove, his pistol poised to fire. I thought one of the leaves moved. My hand shook as I aimed below it. My heart pounded almost painfully as if keeping pace with Brennon's long strides.

A flame flashed brightly where that leaf

had moved. My start was enough to make my taut finger jerk on the trigger. Something crashed and made a muffled sound in the loam; I thought there was a faint moan.

Brennon kept on walking.

HE STOOPED in the shadows and raised something in his arms. Unable to wait longer, I dashed out and when I reached him, saw that he was supporting Hodge Kortlan.

"My greed, Brennon—" Kortlan was whispering; but whatever he meant to say was never said. His lips moved once more without making a sound, then his mouth twisted grotesquely, his eyes closed, and his body went limp.

"Glad I fired that shot for Woody," I said, shakily. "It's what *you* came here to do, wasn't it, Brennon?"

He shook his head, and walked over to examine Manuel. He was dead.

As Brennon straightened, I asked, "If you didn't come back to kill Kortlan, why did you return?"

A distant look came into Brennon's eyes. "This was the only place where I'd known stability. It was—well, like home. . . . Oh, I intended to give Kortlan a tongue-lashing, but that didn't bring me back. I hoped to get a job as overseer of one of the fruit company farms along the Motagua."

"Then why did you stop off at my farm, Brennon?"

"Because of the stories I'd heard in Puerto Barrios. Knowing Kortlan, I wondered if he had something to do with the deaths of your partners. If he had, I wanted to prevent history from repeating itself."

"But why did you care what he did to four strangers?"

"I've asked myself that, Mac. I guess it was just a feeling that my own life might have been different if Kortlan hadn't lured me into following the mirage of a quick fortune. When I saw the mess you'd made of a good farm, I knew Kortlan would have it eventually unless I got it running right. I knew how I'd be hated for changing slack ways. But that bitterness is directed against me, Mac, not you. You know what should be done now, and the *mozos* will be so relieved to have me gone that they'll work for you."

The man-to-man way he spoke convinced me of his sincerity. I saw all at once that Jim Brennon was no typical tropical tramp. They had no purpose in their lives. But Brennon had risked his life to give me the chance Hodge Kortlan had taken from him.

"Listen, Brennon, you can't go! I need you. I'd miss you like the devil. If you'll be my partner—"

His smile, tolerant and a little sad, stopped me. "I shot Manuel. You know what that means in this country. All his relatives will be trying to get me. I'll either have to kill them or be killed. . . . Now about Kortlan, that's different—he's a *gringo*. Some of those four men who were with Manuel can be found to testify as to what he was here for."

He paused, then continued, his tone decisive. "I've got something coming, Mac. Could I buy a mule?"

"You can have one, and your pay, too."

"The mule will be plenty."

Now that danger had passed, Gayo was peering round-eyed from the doorway. "Go saddle a mule," I told him.

I couldn't think of anything to say as we waited. There was too much to say, and no words made to say it right. I didn't say anything more about money, either, because the things Brennon had done for me could not be paid for in coin. I tried to think of something I had that might do him some good. But it was only after he'd mounted the mule and had settled the strap of his battered guitar over a shoulder that an idea came to me.

"Wait, Brennon," I said, and ran back into the house.

His eyes crinkled with amusement when I reappeared with the last box of Woody's Havanas. I tied it behind his saddle with the blanket strap.

"*Adios, amigos*," he said.

Somehow, I couldn't make a sound. I just pressed his lean, hard hand.

Tall and straight in the saddle, he rode west toward the high *cordillera* country. His body swayed slightly to avoid the drooping leaves of a banana plant, and then there were only black shadows where he'd been. He might be a tropical tramp, I thought, but certainly not typical. Not Jim Brennon!

THE PEARL OF DEATH

*. . . . and Only the
Pearl Knew the Answer*



MR. CALKIN



MR. HURG



MR. JAMES

By **CHARLES YERKOW**

HE WAS a big man; under his thick black beard I could discern a strong, dark face. Through powerful glasses, which distorted the appearance of his searching eyes, he looked at me, then at the young clerk at the far showcase.

"My name is Edward Hurg," he said in a quiet voice.

"I'm James," I said. "Can I be of service?"

His eyes focused on the watches and rings displayed under the glass-topped showcase separating us. Seemingly not very interested, he pursed his lips and furrowed his brow as if he couldn't see the things he expected to see, he stood there silent.

"I would like to buy a pearl," he said at last.

His tone was strange. His name, Edward Hurg, meant nothing to me; I had never before seen him, yet there was this strange premonition inside me that he had an angle in coming to the jewelry firm of James & Calkin. If tone can infer inner thoughts, future plans, then I certainly was talking to a sinister man.

How was I to know murder was on his mind?

I brought up a tray and expected to see Hurg remove his suede gloves and inspect and handle the pearls, but he kept his gloves on and gave the creamy-white pearls but a casual glance, then shook his head as if he

had been through this same routine every hour of the day.

"I'm sorry," he half-whispered. "Have you something better to show me?"

AT THAT moment the office door opened and my partner Calkin came out. I noticed Edward Hurg stiffen and his eyes narrow behind those thick lenses. Calkin was looking for something in one of the wall cases, and Hurg kept staring at him.

"What price range have you in mind, Mr. Hurg?" I smiled politely. "These pearls are two hundred to four-fifty each," I pointed out pleasantly.

Then Calkin went back into the office and Hurg's eyes mellowed to their natural distorted blobs.

Hurg grinned at me from behind his black beard. "I'm sorry, but what was it you said?"

"I said these pearls are priced from two hundred dollars to four-fifty each."

By now I was sure there was a catch in this whole deal, but I was unable to figure the angle. Hurg looked as if he could afford a pearl, but his way of looking around and looking at me, and that steely stare at Calkin before, all whispered a warning.

"I'm interested in a very fine pearl, Mr. James. Nothing less will do. An oriental."

I was nervous. Our young clerk at the opposite showcase was watching us closely. I started for the rear, my eyes on the mirror above the clock, but Hurg didn't reach out for the trap I left in front of him. His gloved hands remained at his sides until I returned with a small tray containing four very fine pearls. Just a glance, and his soft voice, "Sorry, Mr. James. They're not at all what I have in mind."

"What, exactly, have you in mind?" I asked irritably and held up one of the pearls. Her luster was magnificent! "This pearl," I said coldly, "is priced at five thousand dollars."

But Mr. Hurg never batted an eye at the quoted price. His indifference was wearing me down, and I could see our young clerk frowning my way.

"This pearl," I tried to appear calm about it, "is the most valuable one we have at the moment."

Mr. Hurg shook his head. "Will it be all right if I return in a few days? Perhaps by

then you will come across something for which I might care."

Again I tried to figure his angle but could find no answers. Obviously, he wasn't interested in a cheap hold-up, nor had he shown a taste to steal any pearl from the tray with which I baited him before. And yet he said a five-thousand-dollar pearl didn't interest him! I was sure he was up to something, and that the something would cost James & Calkin a lot of money.

I watched Edward Hurg go out the door.

I counted the pearls, twice, just to make certain. They were all in their place—nothing missing.

"Strange man," remarked our young clerk.

"Keep your eyes open," I warned him, "and call me if he returns." Then I went into the office and told Calkin what happened. "Have you any ideas what he's up to?" I asked Calkin in the end.

CALKIN, for all his sensitivity and cleverness, couldn't see what possible angle Edward Hurg could have. "Let me check," suggested my partner, his yellowed teeth biting his thin lower lip and his gaunt face crinkling into a mass of deep lines. "Did this friend of yours, this Hurg, look as if he could afford better than a ten-thousand-dollar pearl?"

"He's no friend of mine," I snapped. "And I wouldn't know what his bank total is." I started for the door.

Calkin called to me, his forehead knotted, which meant he was nearing a sudden brilliant idea on how to make a good cash profit.

"Well?"

"I think," he said quickly, his eyes shifting and small dollar signs flickering inside them, "we ought to be prepared for your Mr. Hurg."

"You mean get a pearl for him?"

"Yes. After all, he might return. I think Lazar Brothers have a fine oriental for—"

"Yeah, but think of what I just told you."

"That's nonsense," Calkin assured me. "I'll check on Mr. Hurg; anyway, I doubt there's anything to it except that you were a little too excited, James."

He leered at me, and I knew his immediate consideration was not if Edward Hurg had any angles but if we could make a high profit in selling Hurg the right pearl.

I was not for it, but all I could say was "This better work out." Inside of my business bones I felt we were about to have trouble. Every time I visualized the distorted eyes of Hurg and his concealing black beard, I felt something crawl cold and slow up my back.

But Calkin, as tense and excited as he was, went through with the plan.

THE manager at Lazar Brothers showed me their pearl. "The cost to you is fifteen thousand dollars."

I shrugged and mumbled to myself.

"Beg pardon," smiled the manager.

"Never mind me," I waved my hand.

"Let's record her and get it over with."

The understanding was we could return the pearl if our own sale to Hurg did not go through, but nevertheless, I wrote out a check in full. The minutest detail about the pearl was now put on paper, each of us taking a copy.

Before leaving, I asked, "Why the high price?"

"Seems there's another pearl to match, but in the six months we had this one we never had the luck to come across her sister."

I understood. If the two pearls ever met, and were sold as a pair, their price would indeed be staggering!

Back in our office Calkin had been busy on the phone; he beamed pleasantly, triumphantly, as I entered.

"Good news?"

His smile grew wider. "I learned one important thing," he cackled at me. "Your friend Edward Hurg had not priced any pearls anywhere but with James & Calkin."

"Is that good?" I frowned probably, thinking that it was a clear sign Hurg had singled us out as victims for whatever scheme he had in mind. I placed the carefully wrapped box on Calkin's desk. "Here's the pearl," and told him the price I had paid.

Shrewd Calkin, an old hand in the pearl trade with his experience going back to his first start in Singapore, now began unwrapping the tissue paper. His eyes blazed. His one and only code had always been the dollar. His hands trembled when he placed the loop in the worn leathery spot in his right eye socket. His actions, his trembling fear that the pearl might be defective, made me angry.

"Relax," I suggested. "The pearl's all right."

"Must be sure," he muttered and went on with the inspection.

On some previous occasions, I had often wished for a more rational partner, one who would not place money above everything else in the world. Right then, I wished more than ever.

Yes, I liked the thought of a huge profit, but I surely would never lose my head over it.

Calkin now placed the beautifully shaped translucent globule on the sensitive scales. "Twenty-nine and a half grains," he gurgled. "Perfect."

"Aw, hell," I said and walked out.

LATER, we agreed twenty-four thousand dollars to be the price — if Edward Hurg came again.

Hurg came on a Saturday morning. He was wearing his suede gloves.

Calkin was inside the office and hadn't seen Hurg enter, so I felt safe in conducting a test for my own benefit. Politely assuring



Hurg that we had a fine pearl for his consideration, I brought out and displayed a fine imitation — only an expert could tell this fake from a genuine oriental.

Hurg leaned over to see better, then looked around. Not a word from him. He reached out with his gloved hand and picked up the fake pearl—in his gloved hand, mind you!—then replaced her into the velvet-lined container.

"You guarantee this pearl?" he asked, his tone cold, his eyes glaring at me from behind those thick distorting lenses.

Was he grinning under that black beard?

"Do you like her?" I asked, thus avoiding an incriminating answer.

Hurg sighed. "It's an old Chinese trick to first show an inferior gem before bringing out the real thing. You see, Mr. James, I know pearls, and I know this one is an excellent imitation, worth about five dollars."

I grinned back at him. "You're perfectly right. It will be a pleasure to show you a pearl of rare beauty. Please wait a second."

I went to the office and told Calkin I was through with Edward Hurg and this pearl deal. "I won't sell Hurg a brass chain," I stormed at Calkin. "I don't trust him! Anyone who can tell this fake from a real pearl is a clever man, but when he can tell it just by looking at it and holding it with gloved hands he's a genius to me. If you want to make the sale, do it yourself!"

"Nonsense," chuckled Calkin, the dollar signs flickering again in his shifty eyes. "You shouldn't have tried such an obvious trick on Mr. Hurg."

"Obvious nothing!"

Calkin rushed for the door. "I'll take over."

I followed him out, but remained at a discreet distance—close enough to see and hear. Calkin was talking: "I'm sorry, Mr. Hurg, but my partner, Mr. James, was merely—" A pause, then "Excuse me, but haven't I met you somewhere before?"

Now I glanced up; this seemed a new fact added to the many I couldn't already understand. True, I had only described Edward Hurg to Calkin; this was their first meeting.

"I'm sure I don't know you," Hurg said indifferently.

Calkin's brow knotted tightly. I could see he was in deep, troubled thought—he was now showing the pearl, but doing it as clumsily as the greenest clerk I'd ever watched.

"What is your price?" asked Hurg.

I hadn't seen Hurg so much as touch the pearl.

"Twenty-six thousand dollars," answered Calkin—quoting two thousand above our agreed figure. I could see Calkin was still puzzling where he could have seen Hurg; he tried again. "Have you ever been in Buenos Aires?"

"No, I haven't," said Hurg. Then he smiled. "Would you take a check?"

Calkin smiled, too, then shrugged defensively.

Hurg appeared to be angry. "My check is good," he said, "but very well. I'll be back in the afternoon." He went out without another glance at the pearl.

"Now what?" I asked. "Don't you see he's got some trick up his sleeve?"

No, Calkin didn't see. He was proud of his increased price by two thousand. "I'm convinced Mr. Hurg will return—with cash," he said, his face lighted delightedly. He forgot for the moment to puzzle out where it was he and Hurg had seen each other before.

I told him he was crazy, that there was a catch to the whole thing, and not to blame me if anything went wrong. "I warned you."

"Nonsense, James." Calkin became thoughtful for a moment. "Wonder where I saw Hurg—doesn't matter really, but—"

Three hours later I watched Edward Hurg pay Calkin twenty-six thousand dollars across the glass-topped showcase. All in cash!

It was the most amazing thing I had ever seen! Cash, in large and in small denominations, coming out of specially constructed leather folders! Cash! Cash! Twenty-six thousand dollars!

Calkin was back in his usual form, grinning owlishly, shrewdly squinting at the money to detect counterfeits.

Everything was, however, in order. Calkin snapped rubber bands around wads of cash and dropped these into a drawer of the showcase. He was visibly trembling.

Now Hurg pointed with his gloved hand at the pearl resting neglected in her container. "Please send the pearl over—I'm staying at the Square Towers."

With that Hurg left us—Calkin to wheel and flap his arms in excitement, myself to go on wondering what the game could be.

We delivered the pearl the same afternoon. Nothing happened. We got the cash to the bank. Nothing happened.

We made inquiries, quite diplomatically, the following week.

Mr. Hurg had been living at the Square Towers for a little over a year. He had a wife and a very young daughter, but they were seen very little; the three often went to the park, to the Main Library, or to one of the nearby museums. The one thing we couldn't learn about was Mr. Hurg's work—what did he do, how did he make his money. Nor the fact where he had come from.

All in all, our deal seemed to be finished, completed, and I for one was glad it was all over.

THEN one day, three months later, Mr. Hurg came in.

He came straight toward me, taking from his pocket a small package and laying this on the glass-topped showcase. He was still wearing gloves.

I looked closely at the original pearl we had sold him. After three months, would he claim the pearl was blemished or cracked? What was his angle? What was the trick, damn him?

But Hurg made no claims and there seemed to be no trick. He said calmly, "I hear there is a pearl to match mine. If this is true, I'd be interested in buying her—that is, if you think you could find her for me."

I was about to say James & Calkin were not in a position to locate such a pearl, but at that moment Calkin appeared at the office door. The devil himself must have tapped the man's shoulder and whispered. "There's a dollar to be made outside." He came toward us on the run.

Hurg repeated his desire to match the pearl, and Calkin grinned. "We'll try our best, Mr. Hurg. You understand, of course, it will take time."

"I can wait."

"It might take months, years," I put in quickly. "And we may never see one just like it." I said these things knowing full well the manager at Lazar Brothers had remarked there was such a pearl to match the one Hurg bought. But this was one time I just wasn't interested in making any profit.

Hurg was talking. "I'm authorizing you to buy a pearl to match this one. At any price."

"We'll try our best," leered Calkin and pushed me to one side.

Hurg touched the pearl with his gloved fingers. "Do you wish to keep my pearl here—to insure matching them?"

"That won't be necessary at all," Calkin hastened to assure him. I knew, Calkin knew, and evidently Hurg knew that the pearl could be matched by her singular description, her unusual and magnificent luster, her weird inner fire. So Mr. Hurg left us, and took his pearl with him.

Dollar signs were flickering in Calkin's eyes—a perfectly matching pearl will cost a fortune, a goodly part of which will be profit. It was Calkin's only way of looking at matters, and he lost no time in letting the trade know we were in the market for a *fine* oriental: twenty-nine and a half grains, of rosée tint and fine luster, exceptional translucency and the purity of lagoon water in soft moonlight. A fabulous pearl!

We wondered how long we'd wait to see the impossible happen.

"You still believe Hurg has a dishonest



angle or trick up his sleeve?" chuckled Calkin at my frowns.

"I do. More than ever."

Why else would Hurg buy so expensive a pearl? Why did he come to us when two other gem and jewel establishments were bigger and better known? Why would he return in three months and ask to have the

pearl matched, price no object? Why was he willing to wait any length of time to acquire the sister pearl, and was even willing to leave his pearl with us?

Looking at it, it all added well, but it was a strange and crazy sum total. I didn't like Edward Hurg's approach, but I could do nothing more than go along and see the final results.

FROM time to time, over a period of some two months, Hurg came in to see if we had come across a pearl worthy of the one he had. He was amiable and appeared resigned to wait. Again and again he suggested leaving his pearl with us in order to make sure she'd be matched correctly, but neither I nor Calkin would have it—knowing Hurg's pearl as well as we did, and having her exact description, we knew we could match sight unseen and not be wrong.

Then, one rainy day, when we least expected it to happen, our telephone rang and the manager at Lazar Brothers told us he had heard an out-of-town dealer was staying at the Palms Hotel and had with him an oriental weighing twenty-nine and a half grains.

"Have you seen the pearl?" Calkin asked eagerly.

"No, but the description seems to indicate a perfect match for the one you bought from us. Why not look into the possibilities?"

"Thank you."

I could see Calkin was thinking the same thing—it was too good to be true! But when two other dealers phoned in the afternoon, reporting similarly, we began feeling lucky. Calkin was grinning and rubbing his hands, pacing his office, formulating a plan by which to buy the pearl and sell to Hurg high.

We agreed Calkin would handle the buying. "Be careful," I warned, not meaning that Calkin could be swindled on pearls but that there might be a trick to the deal.

The following morning we telephoned the Palms Hotel and then Calkin went over to look at the pearl.

In a half-hour he was back, furious, angry!

"What's wrong?"

"The fool wants cash," growled Calkin.

"What's wrong with our check?"

"He wants cash!"

"What kind of a man is he? What about the pearl?"

"He's clever." Calkin was scratching his forehead, his eyes flashing. "He knows there's a pearl like the one he has, so he wants plenty to let us have her!"

"It's a trick," I said.

"Aw, shut up! The pearl is perfect."

"How much does he want?"

"Forty thousand dollars."

"I was left speechless—for a moment—then said, 'He is crazy!'"

"We can get fifty thousand from Hurg," said Calkin quickly.

"You're not sure. Forget the whole thing. I'm telling you the pearl is either a fake or there's some other trick in all this."

"The pearl is real, and that's all that matters."

Calkin was now raging, his one thought centered on the profit to be made, and this was too good an opportunity to miss out on. He knew Hurg would pay any price for a matching pearl—and this was the right one. Hurg would even expect the high price.

Anything I said had no effect on Calkin. He telephoned his bankers, then went out. About two in the afternoon he returned, a much calmer man, and showed me the pearl he had bought.

She was magnificent! Every part and shade of her was a mirror of the one we had sold Hurg. Perfect! The two pearls together would be worth a speculative hundred thousand, but we were looking forward for our certain ten thousand profit. We were all set.

"I'll deliver her in person," said Calkin. "And I'm taking no chances." He took the small .32 revolver from his desk drawer and slipped it into his hip pocket.

"Take a cab," I suggested. "You'll be at the Square Towers in ten minutes. Good luck."

Rain was falling. I watched him get into a cab and drive off.

WHEN Calkin didn't return several hours later, I became naturally worried. I waited till six, then phoned his home. No answer.

We often ate at Dorcas' Restaurant, so I called them on the phone. They said Calkin had been there, alone, at four-thirty, had two drinks, then left. They said he appeared

drunk when he came in. I retorted it was impossible—Calkin never touched liquor.

Something was wrong. But what? What could've happened when Calkin delivered the pearl to Hurg? Or did he deliver it? Did he ever reach the Square Towers? Find out, I told myself—go and see Edward Hurg.

I did, but now things became more complicated. I reached the Towers at seven and asked the desk clerk to announce me to Hurg.

"Mr. Edward Hurg checked out at three this afternoon, was the polite answer.

I was dumbfounded, but the clerk lifted his shoulder. "Sorry, sir. Mr. Hurg left an envelope for a Mr. Calkin. This gentleman called a little later and received the envelope. It's all I can tell you, sir."

"Thank you," I said lamely.

I struggled through a long, sleepless night, and the following morning still wasn't able to piece together any sort of coherent story to explain Calkin's disappearance.

Not until a steady-eyed man came into the office to see me. "I'm Barnett," he said, looking around him as his right hand showed me a badge. "Detective Bureau."

"Now what?"

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing for an instant, then said, "We have most of the story, but we must straighten out several facts we came across." He paused, then asked casually, "Were you at the Square Towers last evening?"

"Yes, I was," I answered promptly.

"Looking after your partner, Mr. Calkin?"

"That's right."

There was no pause this time. "Didn't you know he committed suicide?"

"What?" I must have said other things, then became aware of this Detective Barnett saying, "Better sit down again, Mr. James; the circumstances are somewhat unusual, we admit, and I must ask you some questions."

"When—how did it happen?" I mumbled.

"Calkin killed himself in his home. Around midnight."

When I calmed down, I said, "Go ahead. Ask. I'm sure I don't know why Calkin would kill himself."

"We can answer that one. He went to the Towers with the idea of selling a pearl to a Mr. Edward Hurg. Right?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Your clerk outside, and this letter we found in Calkin's pocket."

He handed me the sheet of paper, and I read the typewritten words:

I'm sorry to disappoint you, Tom, but I've changed my mind about buying the pearl. I'm leaving, on business—I'm sure you'll understand. Business often makes you leave unexpectedly. I might be back and look you up again.
E. H.

I looked up at the detective. "So? Did you find the pearl, too?"

HIS steady eyes on me, Barnett laid the small box on the desk. "That it? Look carefully now." He took out a pencil and notebook. "We opened the box, of course. That's how we figured Calkin went to see this fellow and sell him this pearl."

I examined the pearl carefully. "It's the same pearl," I said and watched him note this down.

"Seems to us," he said calmly, "that Calkin was a very nervous man. We checked with his doctor this morning."

"Yes, he was very nervous," I agreed, still not sure where this was all leading us.

"What's the price of that pearl?" asked Barnett suddenly and pointed his pencil at the soft luster of the oriental before us.

"Around forty thousand dollars."

"Would you say Calkin was so upset, and



being a nervous man, he killed himself when he realized he had lost such a good sale?"

"Sounds fantastic to me. I doubt he'd do it."

Barnett sighed, shook his head. "Nothing fantastic about it. Men do it all the time—for a far lesser thing. Things don't go right, so boom. By the way, Calkin used his .32—through the right temple."

"I still can't believe it," I said.

"Why would Calkin kill himself over a lost sale when the same pearl could be sold to another. *Sold to another?*"

Sold to another!

My brain heaved hard! Now I knew what had happened! Now I knew Edward Hurg's angle!

But say nothing, I warned myself, until you're sure. Check everything before you tell this detective what had really happened.

BARNETT was talking. "We'll leave the pearl with you. It's suicide, and as far as we're concerned the case is closed."

Tell him now? "Listen. This is—" I began to speak, trying to tell him Hurg's clever angle, but he cut me off.

"Now take it easy, Mr. James. We know the shock is great, but things will straighten out for you. Relax and take it easy." He was at the door. "Good day."

I sat there alone.

Before my eyes lay the fabulous pearl, warm with her inner fire, mockingly flaring, and in her luster I could see the satanic eyes of Edward Hurg.

There before me was the pearl of perfect shape, luster, and size. The trick of Hurg's was that there was only one such pearl!

Only one! Now I knew Calkin had bought back the same pearl which he had first sold to Hurg. When Hurg first bought her, he waited for the proper time to ask us to match her, then had an accomplice show up at the Palms Hotel and sell back to us the same pearl. In this way Edward Hurg cleared a good twenty-nine thousand!

Nevertheless, Calkin was a fool to kill himself over that—we could still get our fifteen thousand from Lazar Brothers, making our loss fourteen thousand. Or didn't Calkin have the sense to figure this out?

But there was more to it, far more reason for Calkin to blow his brains out.

On my desk was the morning mail. In the confusion I had not looked at it before, but now my eyes caught one of the envelopes. Calkin's handwriting, scrawly, as if written under great mental anguish. He must have dropped the letter into the mail before seven last night for me to receive it so soon. I tore open the envelope and raced down the short note:

"Dear James:

"Edward Hurg is really Carl Raeder, an old partner of mine from Singapore. He grew the beard, dyed it black, wore glasses and gloves to hide himself from me—I'd have recognized him from cuts on his hands.

"Long ago, I tricked him in a pearl deal, and came back to the States. He swore to even the score. This is his first step. You were right—it was all a trick—I bought back the same pearl.

"He'll never give me rest. He'll ruin me. He is a strange man. He's the honest one, I was the crook. Even the police would not be able to help me. Raeder will strike again—he'll always trick me until he ruins me completely. I'm helpless! This is all!"

It was signed "Calkin."

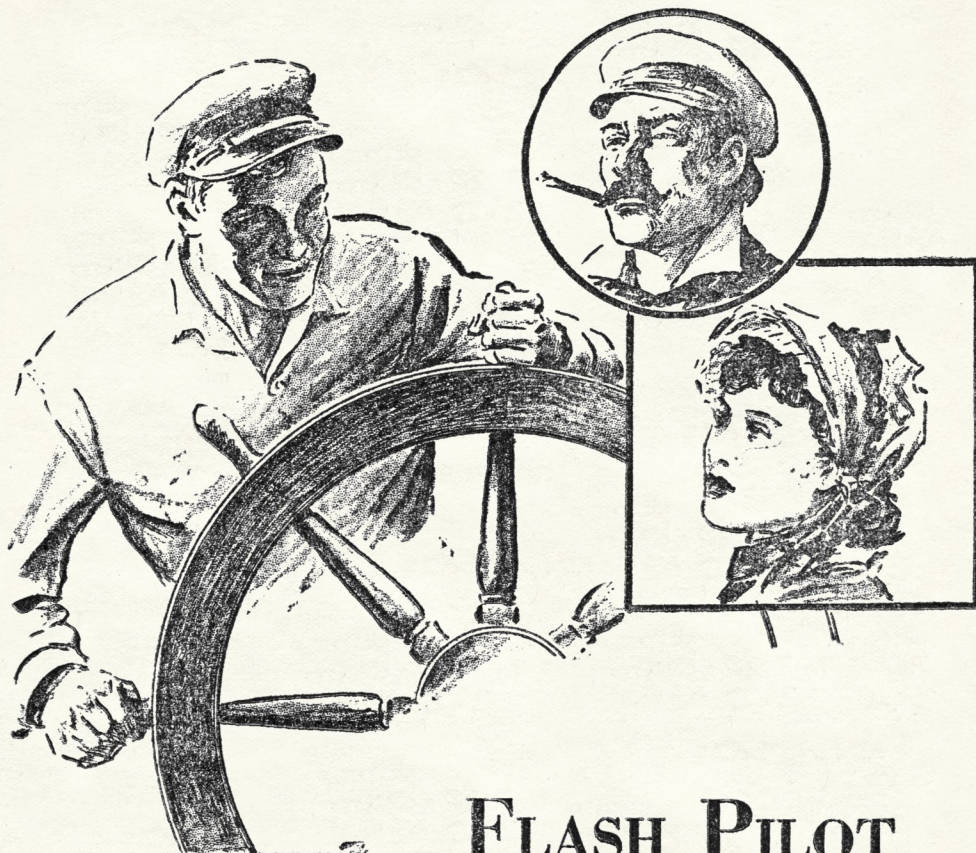
Strange justice—

Did Hurg, or Raeder, know about Calkin's high-strung mentality? Did Raeder spend a year insuring the stage upon which to play his game? Did he succeed in the business world for no other purpose but to haunt and ruin, and finally kill his cheating partner?

I struck a match and held it under Calkin's letter, then scraped the ashes around in the ashtray. I don't know why I did this. Was I helping in the murder of Calkin? Was it murder?

The fabulous pearl lay before me, silent, strangely aglow.

*An' Even a Flash Pilot Couldn't Produce a Preacher
at Will On the Rolling Columbia*



FLASH PILOT

By

GIFF CHESHIRE



IT WAS a hot day in late May, there on the upper Columbia, and the man on the landing pulled a red bandana handkerchief from under the tails of his dusty long-coat and mopped his palms carefully. The hip-shot saddled behind him was sweat-crusted, and it lifted its head as the steamboat hulled up, far

down the river, its patient chunking rocking ahead between the low but cliff-like banks.

"There'll be shade aboard her," the man told the mount. "I'll be as glad of it as you will."

Out in the channel, Ared Lambert had been worrying about Canoe Encampment ahead and the even worse stretch at Miller's

Drift, beyond that, when he sighted the figures far up on Castle landing. Uneasiness left him in a flare of interest, and he gave her three spokes to port, watching the bulky tow of sawed timbers snubbed ahead of the little stern-wheel *Chub* veer conversely to starboard and the Oregon shore.

It would be Parson Peel, he told himself; in Wallula he had heard that Rex Stanton had summoned the circuit rider to officiate at the wedding, come Sunday, which was the morrow. The preacher had been down in the John Day cow country, where Stanton's word must have reached him, and doubtless he was now waiting to be picked up by the big *Western Queen*. The *Queen*, with the flashy Rex Stanton at the wheel, was mainly a passenger boat and, regularly leaving the Deschutes at 10:30 in the morning on her up trips, she could not pass here for an hour yet, it now being half-past one. It was far too hot over there for the preacher to have to wait for her.

The young mate thought of these things even as he recalled that the Cap'n was now on the tail end of his after-dinner nap, back in the Texas. Ared lined inshore, packet and tow working supply, the freshet current, tawny and clouded, piling and swirling around the tow, pounding on the steamboat's beamy sides and chuckling on toward the Pacific. He belled the engine room softly, and as the *Chub's* old beam engine hushed down the surprised engineer, watching from the engine room windows, held her to the little landing with his throttle.

The headwind was light as a feather duster, cool through the dropped pilot house windows. On either shore bare brown hills rose above the sharp rock escarpments, the sandy desert soil on above blowing visibly and covered by thin, seered prairie grass studded thinly with clumps of sage brush.

THE preacher had gathered reins and led the horse to the landing's edge, but he was looking puzzled. Ared tilted his long, lean frame outward and called, "Come right aboard, sir."

The man hesitated. "Why, I figured it would be the *Queen* picking me up. Are you Captain Stanton?"

"I'm the man as means to marry the girl, sir," Ared told him, which was entirely so, though it omitted the girl's own inten-

tions. "It must have been hot for you, waiting so long in the sun."

Juba Cox, combined cook and deckhand, had moved out to the side rail to investigate the ringing and sudden loss of way. He stared up at Ared, the eyes in his brown and seamy face blinking in the bright sun.

"Here's the parson, Juba," Ared said. "Why don't you run out the gangplank?"

Biting his thumbnail first, the cook bent to do it. The parson still looked puzzled, but he came aboard, leading the horse. Juba yanked the plank inboard, and Ared got the *Chub* away, a tight feeling suddenly in his stomach. To this point he had been intent upon the capture, and now that he had the circuit rider he was not overly clear on his further intentions.

CAP'N MASTERS was apt to be a mite ruffled, even if there was a fair chance that he would see the point. Of a hundred or so river men on the Columbia who harbored no affection for the show-off, lady-killing Stanton, the Cap'n's name stood just below that of his young mate. Then a heavy tread beyond the door on the Texas side informed Ared that he would have precious little time to plan it out.

The door opened, and the Cap'n came in, a short and immensely wide figure, bald except for a band of frowsy red hair that clamped to his skull like a caterpillar clinging to a robin egg. Traces of his nap lurked in his eyes, and the galluses attached to his patched duck trousers had slid off his bulging, red-flanneled shoulders and now hung well below his knees. He yawned, but he was puzzled and in an inquiring frame of mind.

"What'd we stop for, Ared?"

"Picked up a passenger."

"What for?"

"Was one standing there."

The Cap'n sucked in a big breath. "And us running nip-an'-tuck to make Wallula before dark! Why—!"

A suddenly aroused sense of propriety forced Ared to stem the flow. "Careful, Cap'n. It was Parson Peel."

The captain's big mandible snapped shut, though his eyes still bulged. He was a devout man, and while the words he had been using were not swearing, his tone of voice was. Upon occasion, with his river

cronies in little Dalles City's twenty-odd saloons, Ared had seen the Cap'n stow away a quart of forty-rod in an evening's sitting. "It ain't likker but drunkenness as is sinful, Ared," he would be careful to explain afterward. Since he never walked a quarter-point off course, as a result, once again the Cap'n's strict sense of propriety was kept intact. Now he stroked his jaw, eyes on his young mate speculatively.

"Heading for the wedding, huh? Stanton's gonna blow a cylinder head. He'll figure the preacher ain't got there, yet."

"I allowed something like that," Ared admitted.

The Cap'n's red face didn't show much expression as he took the wheel and picked up the course, but Ared figured that he was less angry. A complex individual, the Cap'n had received his early training on the old Mississipp'. Long since he had brought one of the first steamboats around the Horn to the gold-flecked waters of San Francisco Bay. After years in the river trade there he had come on to the Columbia, this broad and violent stream that was the only avenue to the rich mines on the Clearwater, the Pend d'Oreille and down in the Boise basin, and to the sweeping and fertile farmlands newly opened to settlement. Here upon the upper reaches he had acquired the little *Chub* and entered the towing trade, and shortly thereafter he had gained his young mate and cub pilot.

It was partly over the Cap'n that Ared had quarreled with Miss Cindy Tyndale, of Wallula, Territory of Washington, who was now the promised Mrs. Rex Stanton. Like any good river man, Ared had done his courting when water transit matters allowed, yet Cindy Tyndale had held him personally accountable for the fact that he was more often at the Deschutes when the moon was waxing over Wallula, or again underfoot in Wallula when Miss Tyndale heartily wished him at the Deschutes. But the spark had come from the Cap'n's keeping chickens down in the little freight room, an enterprise designed to produce fresh eggs for the table but which also produced behind-the-hand levity on the upper Columbia.

"I don't know why you keep working for that old crackpot!" Cindy had stormed, one night when Ared was patently on the wrong end of the haul. "On a passenger boat

you'd have some regularity and, too, you could wear a uniform."

"Cap'n's a river man," Ared had told her. "That's what I'm aiming to be."

This argument was wasted upon Cindy, to whom the river was only some water that ran down through Wallula Gap. She failed to picture it as Ared saw it, tumbling out of the Canadian Rockies, whipping through hundreds of miles of desert, drilling through the vaulting Cascades, creeping tiredly across the Willamette Valley's upper end, mountaineering again through the wide Coast Range, tumbling and lost at last into the sea. Any river man could tell you that, like a voluptuous shrew, the Columbia could be cruel and mocking to the weaklings upon her, yet conquered by strong and daring men she was lush and yielding, though never faithful.

Easygoing until he was crowded, Ared had finally got his dander up, unfortunately only a short while before the arrival of Rex Stanton, owner and captain of the big new *Western Queen*, in the plush mining trade. And now the Tyndale parlor was festooned, and Parson Peel was on his way to do the honors.

AS HE turned down to the main deck, Ared grinned in mild wickedness. It would take but little to see the *Chub* tied up for the night somewhere short of her destination and to put a sour note in Captain Rex Stanton's wedding eve. Even a flash pilot could not produce a preacher at will on this upper Columbia of '66. And it was unlikely that Parson Peel could walk upon the waters, as some claimed, or put his ganted horse ashore and get more speed and endurance from it than Ared understood was resident in even the best of horse-flesh.

The preacher's black had been tied in the freight room, just forward of the chicken-wired space where the Cap'n's white layers clucked and scratched away in the straw for wheat, the captain's means of exercising them being to make them rustle so for their subsistence. Juba Cox seemed to have put the parson in one of the dusty, rarely occupied staterooms on the upper deck, for he was not in evidence, though Ared would have liked to talk with him again. A pious and ascetic man himself, the popular circuit

rider was wont to carry the gospel to the places where it logically seemed needed most, never haranguing and never condemning, and thus it was that in fleshpot, renegade camp or virtuous parlor there were many who would have come a-foggin' had they ever heard that he needed help.

Her big paddle chunking softly, her 'scape pipes alternately puffing white steam into the dark sausage of smoke from her single stack, the *Chub* and tow were now lining on Miller's Drift and its three mid-stream islands. Out on the sepian water the zinnia sun was a splintering downpour, but the dark fringe of shadow tacked along the Oregon shore was mysterious and deeply pleasant. Ared whistled softly as he moved along a cross-passage and turned down into the little galley.

Juba Cox was presently free of the exactions of both his berths. A mild and insignificant man by his own choice, Juba would, upon occasion, fool those who—unlike Ared Lambert—had not seen him hurl a kettle of hot potato soup at a swaggering freight roaster who had attempted to snitch a dried peach pie cooling on a shelf just inside a galley window. Now Juba took his solemn ease on a three-legged stool, reading a frayed copy of the *Oregonian*. Without looking up, he jerked a thumb toward the blackened coffee pot simmering on the galley range. Ared filled a mug, brought it to the scrub-topped table and lowered his lean haunches onto a bench.

"You sure took the preacher," Juba said, his thin voice a shade cantankerous. "It ain't hard to see what you're figuring on, but look here. I wanta get home for the week-end. The wife's having prime ribs and noodles, she told me. And you don't know how sick I get of my cooking."

Ared allowed that it did not take a painful stretch of the imagination. He sipped his coffee, thinking; not, strangely enough, of the pert Cindy Tyndale, nor particularly of Parson Peel, but of the Cap'n. He drained the mug and, refreshed, climbed to the hurricane roof again and stepped into the wheelhouse.

They had cleared Miller's Drift and were heading into the fairway again, with a couple of hours of untroubled running before they hit Devil's Bend and the even more dangerous Umatilla Rapids beyond.

The Cap'n had been in a stew since early morning about negotiating this pair and being safely tied up with the tow in little Wallula by nightfall. It would be a nip-and-tuck proposition, in any man's steam-boating.

NOW Ared glanced innocently at the rolling Washington bank, sun-struck and empty, glinting brown and broken and forbidding as it faded into the distance. "Fine black the preacher's riding, Cap'n. Blacker'n the devil himself."

The Cap'n swiveled his head. "Black horse? Preacher?" Ared waited. In addition to being a devout man, a strict Sabbatarian, the Cap'n was replete with river superstitions brought with him from the Mississippi. "White preacher. Well, now." He changed heading, giving her a spoke. "Damme, Ared, what does that mean? You take a nigger preacher or a white horse—I wouldn't have 'em on my boat. But this is turned wrong side out, kinda—and bother together. How'd you figure it, boy?"

The mate shook his yellow head, cuffing back his battered boat cap. "Why, come to think of it, Cap'n that sure is a funny one. Maybe I shouldn't ought to have picked him up."

The Cap'n's piloting lectures, never abridged, had dwelt considerably upon such matters. He nodded thoughtfully. "Well, we can't put him off now."

Ared went down to his own cabin on the Texas, momentarily satisfied. Ashore, like sleeping, gravid women, the bare hills lay in timeless lethargy. Aloft a stripe-winged camp robber, strayed far offshore, flitted down as if to alight and rest on one of the hog-posts. Ared turned through the door, thinking of Cindy Tyndale. Daughter of a growing stagecoach tycoon on hinterland lines, motherless and pampered, she ruled Wallula's limited society with a small, dainty hand. Though many men had aspired to the privilege of making her a lifelong study, perhaps Ared Lambert alone had glimpsed the real and tender girl behind the arch prettiness and beneath the whalebone and countless layers of scented ruffles. And resenting this involuntary psychological nudity, Cindy Tyndale had been wont to pick at him. Dwelling upon these matters, he began to rummage in the little chest of

drawers under the small, slatted window through which golden sunlight spilled to run out over the frayed carpet.

They were within spitting distance of Devil's Bend when Cap'n Masters let out a whoop that could have been heard ashore, had anyone been upon those lonely, wind-scoured wastes. "Ared! Juba!" Simultaneously he dinged the engine room to slack off, his big fist halting only an inch short of the whistle pull, as well. Strangely enough, Ared Lambert appeared at once on the fore-deck below, craning his head upward.

"I seen a rat!" the Cap'n yelled. "He run right across where you're standing!"

Ared merely stared. The Cap'n had already rung for headway again, and now he swung her hard for the Oregon shore, the tow scuttling like a chased cat. Tied up there above a little gravel bar, they searched the packet from stem to stern and from keelson to the main cabin monitor roof, with Parson Peel emerging inquiringly and joining in.

"We've got to find it!" the Cap'n kept insisting. "Dam-blamed if I'm going to run Umatille till he's put ashore!"

"Why's that?" the circuit rider inquired. A tall, thin man, he had a weathered, intelligent face, but now he looked a trifle worried.

For a moment the Cap'n regarded him as the complete heathen. "Why, a rat aboard, sir, is only a mite below a white horse or a nigger preach—!" He broke off, staring, then turned on his heel and stalked up the companionway and into his cabin.

Ared followed him. "You sure you seen that rat, Cap'n?"

There was a snort. "When I can see a bird blink a mile off? It's no good, boy. All week I've been having me this same dream—this fancy side-wheeler big as a battleship, and me runnin' and ownin' her, both. And I called her the *Miranda*, boy. Know what that means?"

Ared nodded, scenting a windfall. "Sure. The letter M's bad in a boat's name."

"It's worse than that," the Cap'n groaned. "It's plain asking for it to call a boat after a member of the owner's family. And I had a sister called *Miranda*."

At that moment the door pushed open, and Juba Cox walked in, holding a stuffed, black wool sock in his hand, to which a

short string was attached. "Now, I wonder if you could've mistook this for a rat, Cap'n?" he asked. "Funny thing, but I found it stuffed behind a case of dried prunes, just inside the for'd freight house door." And he nodded and beamed at Ared. "Maybe it got dragged across the deck."

The Cap'n was regarding Ared, also, but he did not speak. Presently he stomped forward to the pilothouse, grabbed the big wheel, and rang for full speed ahead.

A WHISTLE sounded astern, and the big *Western Queen* came prancing up the fairway, whistling again to warn the little *Chub* out of her way while she took the rapids. The *Chub* was already swinging out, clearly entitled to make her run first, yet with screaming whistle the *Queen* came on, steering a collision course.

Passengers lined the big packet's rails, red-shirted miners, other men in high hats and long coats, and a few women in hoops and frills. Impelled by the curious, yeasty and unleavened impulse that never failed to rouse a strong partisan interest in a steamboat's passengers, they began to laugh and jeer at the towboat.

The Cap'n held his course stubbornly, pointing into the channel and its swift and surging water. The big packet closed in, Rex Stanton at her wheel steering a close tangent ahead of the big tow, the wash lifting and shaking it. Then abruptly the Cap'n was ringing her down, clawing at the wheel and yelling into the speaking tube to the engineer.

"Slack her off!"

At his elbow, Ared Lambert grated angrily, "Don't let him scare you off, Cap'n!"

"Scare hell! Look up there!"

Ared saw then that some of the tow's forward lashings had snapped in the wild churn of water caused by the *Queen's* wash combining with the rapid's own boiling rush. Below decks the engineer performed miracles with Johnson bar and throttle and got her backing down faster than the current so that the fanning out up there ceased before the whole tow exploded. Grinding his teeth, the Cap'n swung her down to the gravel bar again and anchored.

When his anger at the flash pilot's recklessness with his passengers had subsided a

little, Ared reflected that Cindy Tyndale should have been aboard her. Cindy did not understand that Stanton afloat was a different man to Stanton in the parlor. Presently he took grim satisfaction in the reflection that Stanton himself had practically guaranteed that tomorrow's wedding would be replete with everything except the preacher. He stared thoughtfully into the sky where, clabbered and cumulose, giant white clouds domed against a depthless atmosphere from horizon to horizon.

It was nearly five, and the *Queen's* time indicated that Stanton had waited at Castle landing as long as schedule and impatient passengers would permit. Yet for all his taunting, he did not seem to suspect the *Chub*. The sun was well behind the distant Cascades when they had the tow rebuilt and jury-lashed well enough to limp on, and in view of the two bad stretches still ahead, the Cap'n decided to poke along until they found a good place, then tie up for the night. The afternoon's events at last had weighted him to the point of uncertainty.

Parson Peel did not learn of this decision immediately, having waited out the delay by napping in his cabin, but Juba Cox did. "Blast you, Ared," he told the mate down in the galley, where he was starting supper and where Ared had repaired for coffee. "If you hadn't pulled that danged rat trick, we'd've been to Cold Springs by now. You know how the Cap'n is about Sundays."

"Reckon so," Ared admitted, as casually as if he hadn't been thinking about it all afternoon. Come midnight on a Saturday and the *Chub* stood to, no matter where she happened to be, and nothing could compel the Cap'n to turn a wheel before midnight of the following day. "Too bad you're going to miss them prime ribs and noodles."

BUT Juba Cox, appetite and anger aroused simultaneously, was something to cope with. Having passed on through the rapids with no trouble from the weakened tow, the Cap'n decided to keep running until full dark, tying up somewhere short of the climactic Umatilla stretch and the lesser Mill Rock rapids still between them and Wallula. Juba took action at supper time, while Ared was at the wheel.

"Preacher, sir, that Lambert ain't the one getting married tomorrow, even if he would

like to. It's Stanton, on the *Queen*, and Lambert fooled you into coming aboard. I just don't figure that's right to the real lovin' couple." Ignoring the Cap'n's glare, Juba blew on his fingernails virtuously.

The circuit rider did not look surprised. "I had a feeling that I was being taken in. This girl—it seems to me she's passing up a real provider."

"And a real river man," the Cap'n said, and chuckled.

"But, of course, your cook is right, Captain," the preacher said, but not as though he relished it. "The boy has no right to interfere with somebody else's wedding plans."

"No—I reckon you're right, sir. Maybe if there's a good moon we can get you close enough to ride on horseback."

Juba Cox stirred the soup and grinned.

Having received a censored report on these developments from Juba, Ared was not happy at the wheel when he watched a bright moon emerge around 9:30, that night, with them only some twenty-five miles below Wallula.

Coming into the darkened pilothouse, the Cap'n said, "Damme, Ared, we ain't got any real excuse for not taking the preacher in. If we pound it and don't have no bad luck, we got a fair chance of making it before midnight." He sighed. "I reckon we gotta do it, boy, now that the preacher's come out with the right and wrong of it."

Ared nodded glumly.

They were still a half mile short of the dangerous Umatilla Rapids when a whistle screamed up-river. Slowly out of the darkness the hulk of the *Western Queen* emerged, standing down-stream and fast. Watching it, Ared decided that Stanton had got rid of his passengers and was running all the way back to Castle landing to try again to connect with Parson Peel.

Three lengths ahead of the towboat, the *Queen* veered hard to port, cutting so close before she swung off that, for an instant, it seemed inevitable that they would collide head on.

Watching this from the port rail on the lower deck, Juba Cox heaved a sigh of relief before he caught himself and groaned. "Damned if I ever did see a cuss so set on postponing his own honeymoon!"

And Juba was right, for the jury-rigged

bindings were sprung again, and the little *Chub* stood to for better than an hour making repairs. By the time he stood her up through Umatilla, the Cap'n was in a grim frame of mind. Steamboating from way back, he gripped the wheel, a broken gallus dangling, his skipper's cap pulled tight over his eyes.

Then, in the fairway above, he turned the wheel over to Ared and stomped away. By the watch fastened to the binnacle, Ared saw that it was now a little after ten. He could not slack her off, or even set a zig-zag course to stretch the distance, without the old water buffalo detecting it instantly. His eyes clung to the watch, by which the Cap'n swore and which had a big sweeping second hand to assist the compass when resort was made to dead reckoning. As if detached from him, his fingers reached for it. He set the hands ahead exactly one hour. Within a few minutes he drew abeam the entrance to Cold Springs and headed her in.

Footfalls sounded in several directions as he rang down the engine. The Cap'n burst in from the nearby texas. "What in blazes'd you turn in here for?"

Ared pointed to the watch under the red binnacle lamp. "Take a look. We can't run fifteen miles in forty-five minutes. You want to be caught out there some place come midnight?"

After a long moment, the Cap'n grinned. "I figured I'd taught you some steamboatin', when I gave you the wheel." He ironed out his face quickly and was looking stern again when Juba Cox galloped in.

Juba had his watch in his hand, and he was panting hard from the fast climb. "I knew he'd pull it!" he chortled. He jabbed a finger against the watch crystal. "Look, Cap'n! It's only a quarter after ten!"

The circuit rider stepped through the door. "What's the trouble now?"

"A—a little argument over the time, sir," the Cap'n told him. "You carry a watch?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, I don't."

The Cap'n stepped to the speaking tube. "Hey, Red, what time you got down there?"

Presently a hollow, tinny voice replied. "Eight o'clock. But it don't mean nothing. Looks like I forgot to wind it."

The Cap'n looked at the preacher with satisfaction. "Well, sir, would you say my

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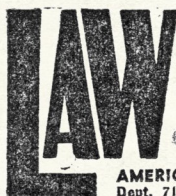
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expensive binnacle watch is right, or that turnip of Juba's?"

"I wouldn't think of doubting your navigating equipment, Captain," the preacher said, and grinned.

Ared was not asleep when, at 3:30 a.m., the panting *Queen* came ploughing back up the river, but rather had been sitting on the after deck realizing that there would be other days suitable to a wedding, that he had succeeded only in postponing something that he knew in the night's warm quietness was going to be painful to him privately. Now as he saw the *Queen* returning from her unsuccessful search, he climbed to his feet, aware from her veer that she had spotted the *Chub* in the moonlight and was turning in. Somebody down around Castle must have told Rex Stanton that the tugboat had picked up the circuit rider.

Ared raced through the texas, pounding on the doors of the Cap'n and Juba and the engineer. He galloped back out on deck just as the *Queen* hove up, dwarfing the *Chub* into insignificance. Men of her crew were coming overside almost before her big paddle had stopped turning, quiet but in a vicious mood. Then Stanton loomed before Ared, big and solid and patently ill-humored. "We'll take the preacher, fella! And you're gonna learn a lesson! Boys, get to work on that raft!"

The Cap'n thundered out on deck, Juba behind him. It was obvious that they could do nothing to stop this forage, and Ared admitted glumly that he had asked for it.

Then a girl's voice sang out from the *Queen's* high upperworks. "Rex Stanton, you promised me there'd be no rough stuff!"

It did not stop the *Queen's* crew which, carrying fire axes, were piling over the *Chub's* prow and racing out onto the timber raft. Then something tugged at Juba's sleeve, and he turned and saw the preacher. Parson Peel said nothing, but Ared followed his gaze and yelled, "Come on, Juba!"

He clambered onto the rail and scrambled on to the *Queen's* deck with Juba racing behind him. Up in the pilothouse he tromped on the newfangled whistle treadle, then dinged the engine room bell with barked urgency, swinging the wheel hard to port. Below decks, the *Queen's* engineer had no slightest idea of who was at the

controls, and he responded with the proper movements. The big packet peeled away from the towboat, then Ared headed her dead on down the slough. She was full ahead when she hit the mud bank, down there, so hard that pictures left her walls and china flew from her cupboards. Then, with modest aplomb, Ared rang down the engines.

He was trying to swing a skiff outboard when the girl came running along the deck.

"Ared—that was the cutest thing you did there!"

Juba galloped out of an opening, a granite pot in either hand. "Guess what they had left over from supper? Prime ribs and noodles!"

When the little skiff, with its three passengers, rowed back to the *Chub*, it was through a considerable spread of drifting timbers. They found the Cap'n standing in the prow of the *Chub*, his old horse pistol in his hands and the *Queen's* crew lined up meekly before him.

Cindy Tyndale marched straight to Rex Stanton. "I'm glad it happened! He out-smarted you every step of the way. You—your gold-braider!"

Yet something more practical seemed to dawn on Rex Stanton at that moment. He stared at the distant *Queen* and groaned. "My God!" he gulped suddenly. "Even if we can pull her off, how're we gonna get her through them timbers?"

"You won't, until you've rafted 'em," the Cap'n told him. "And you ain't doing that till Monday morning."

It was a good dinner they had aboard the little *Chub*, there in Cold Springs slough that Sunday. True, there was no snowy table linen or shining goblets, but nobody seemed to mind.

While everybody was talking to everybody else, Ared got a chance to whisper to the young lady on his left. "The parson's sure a nice fellow. Seems a shame he lost the business, kind of."

Cindy looked at him with rounding eyes. "It isn't right, Ared. Nor to put Papa to all the expense he's been to for nothing."

"Well, I reckon there's only one thing to do about it."

"Now that I think of it, Ared," said Cindy Tyndale. "I expect you're right."

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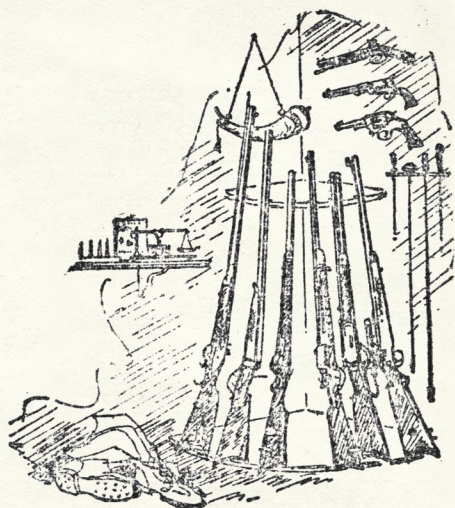
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Conducted by
PETE KUHLOFF
Ballistics and the Law

HOW many times have you read in your local newspaper, something similar to the following?—quite a number I'll betcha!

"In the trial of So-and-So for the murder of So-and-So, testimony was given by Detective So-and-So, identifying the fatal bullet as being fired by the weapon found in the possession of the defendant. Detective So-and-So is the well-known expert on forensic ballistics, etc., etc.

Now, just what the heck is "forensic ballistics?"

According to my dictionary "forensic" means pertaining to, or used in courts of justice or public debate. And "ballistics" means the science of the motion of projectiles.

Now I get it—a "forensic ballistics expert"—generally shortened to just plain

"ballistics expert" is a character who deals in the science of the motion of projectiles as used in the courts of justice. Any dope otta know that!

But come to think about it—what the ding ding has the science of the motion of projectiles got to do with identifying a slug dug out of the remains of an uncomplaining murder victim? Maybe the newspaper boys have this guy's title a mite wrong. It'd be more understandable, to me anyway, if he was called an "expert in identifying bullets and cartridge cases to a specific firearm" or to simplify matters, "expert in firearms identification." Which, as a matter of fact, really is his title.

As practiced in the United States this business of firearms identification is an exacting science, and has become one in a comparatively few years—since World War One to be more or less exact.

Not so many years ago almost anyone with a lot of crust and a little stage presence could learn a few mysterious sounding terms relating to firearms, and then get up and put one over on the average court and jury. There are many instances on record to prove this to be a fact.

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Shortly after World War I a group consisting of Judge C. E. Waite, Lieut. Col. C. H. Goddard, well-known firearms expert; P. O. Gravelle, famous expert microscopist and photographer, and J. H. Fisher, an authority on precision measurements, got together and established the "Bureau of Forensic Ballistics" in New York City. These men, together with Capt. E. C. Crossman, by their untiring efforts brought the science of bullet identification a very long way toward its present state of precision.

Colonel Goddard continued with the bureau (after Judge Waite died in 1926) until 1930, when the records and instruments were taken by him to the Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory of Northwestern University at Chicago.

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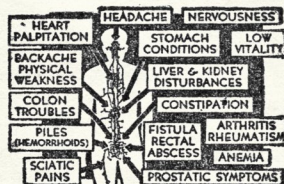
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should know and have an understanding of all guns, including foreign and obsolete as well as late models. As far as gun knowledge is concerned, a dyed-in-the-wool gun-crank is ideal for such a job. But more important is training in the use of the scientific instruments of great precision which are used in such work.

Primarily the "firearms identification expert" is concerned with the identification of a bullet or a fixed cartridge case to the arm which fired it.

The identification of fired bullets depends first on tool marks (or rust pits or other irregularities) in the bore of the gun. Even the best guns have tool marks in the bore which leave marks on fired bullets that can be observed under the microscope. Jacketed bullets are in most cases easier to identify than lead ones. The most difficult of all are lead ones fired from a much-used target arm. These guns usually have a smoother bore to

PRECISION
INSTRUMENTS



begin with and the continuous passage of lead bullets acts as a lap which in time gives an absolutely smooth mirror-like surface to the bore.

In identifying cartridge cases, the primer, being made of comparatively soft metal, generally has the most pronounced marks for this purpose. These irregularities are the imprint of tool marks or injuries on the face of the recoil plate in revolvers or the face of the bolt or breech block in rifles and automatics. Firing-pin imprints on the primer and marks of ejectors and extractors on cases are also observed.

The comparison microscope is the mainstay in the identification of fired bullets. Actually, it is merely two matched microscopes with matched objectives and eyepieces, affixed to a base at a fixed distance apart, and connected at the top by a comparison eyepiece. The latter is a set of prisms in a cross-tube which picks up half of the field of each microscope and presents

it in a single eyepiece as a round field with a thin hair-line down the center, dividing the half-fields of the two microscopes.

In use the bullets or shells are placed in rotating holders which are mounted on standard mechanical stages.

Low power magnification being used, half of one bullet is presented lined up perfectly with half of the other. When a section of one bullet is apparently matched against the adjacent section of the other, a higher power is used for identification.

The rotators permit each bullet to be rotated and kept in focus and the mechanical stages permit horizontal motion crosswise and parallel with the bullet.

When correctly arranged, the fatal bullet on the left continues on to the adjacent section of the test bullet apparently as one bullet. This gives a sketchy idea of some of the work of the firearms identification expert. Perhaps, later, we can take up other phases of this interesting professional.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of **SHORT STORIES**, published twice-a-month at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1946. State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared William J. Delaney, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the President-Treasurer of **SHORT STORIES**, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: **Publisher**, **SHORT STORIES, INC.**, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; **Editor**, D. McIlwraith, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; **Managing Editor**, None; **Business Manager**, William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: **SHORT STORIES, INC.**, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities, are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

(Signed) WILLIAM J. DELANEY, President.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of September, 1946.

[SEAL] (Signed) HENRY J. PAUROWSKI.

Notary Public, State of New York. Residing in Bronx Co., No. 23, Reg. No. 51-P-7. Cert. filed in N. Y. Co., No. 243, Reg. No. 130-P-7.

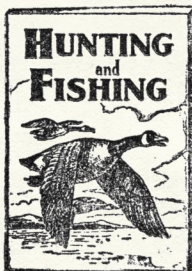
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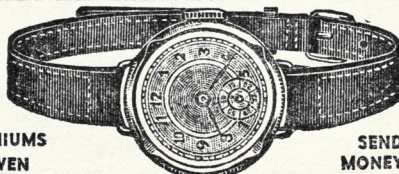


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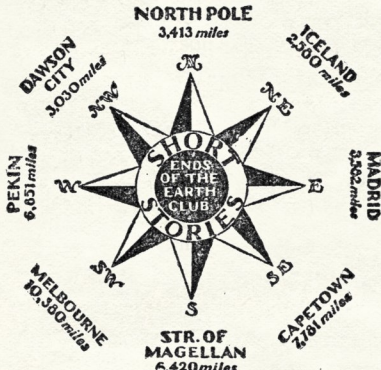
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Now I am employed with the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad.

Yours truly,

Errol L. Kennedy

Camp. No. 512,
Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad Co.,
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Dear Secretary:

Will you please register my name and address with your club and send me your membership card? I would be ever so glad to have pen pals in America. Would it be possible to send me a list of the members of

your club and put a few lines in the Pen Pal column so that old members, who would like to correspond with a Greek, 23 years old, may read it?

During the war I served as Sub. Lieut. V. R. with the R. H. Navy and I have travelled a lot in the Middle East countries and the Eastern Mediterranean. Now that I have been demobilized, I would like to renew my old friendship with young men of the New World.

I am a graduate of the Athens High School of Economic and Commercial Sciences. I have no special hobby and I would like to discuss in general and put questions in order to learn the way of living over there.

Well, dear Secretary, this will be all for this time. I hope to receive very soon your answer and I would be obliged if you could send me particulars of the activities of your club (rather my club, from now on).

Till your next issue of SHORT STORIES.

Sincerely yours,

T. Hadji-Constantis

60, Saint Meletisu Street,
Athens 8, Greece

He Likes Fishing and Hunting

Dear Sir:

Here's another hombre that would like to join your club.

Would like to correspond with members who like out-of-the-way places, fishing, hunting and travelling.

Have just been reading SHORT STORIES for two months and it's tops with me.

Adios,

Marvin Davenport

311 Alabama Street,
Amarillo, Texas

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Dear Secretary:

Will you kindly enroll me as a member of the "Ends of the Earth Club." I would like to correspond with anyone in the Coast Guard, Navy or Merchant Marine.

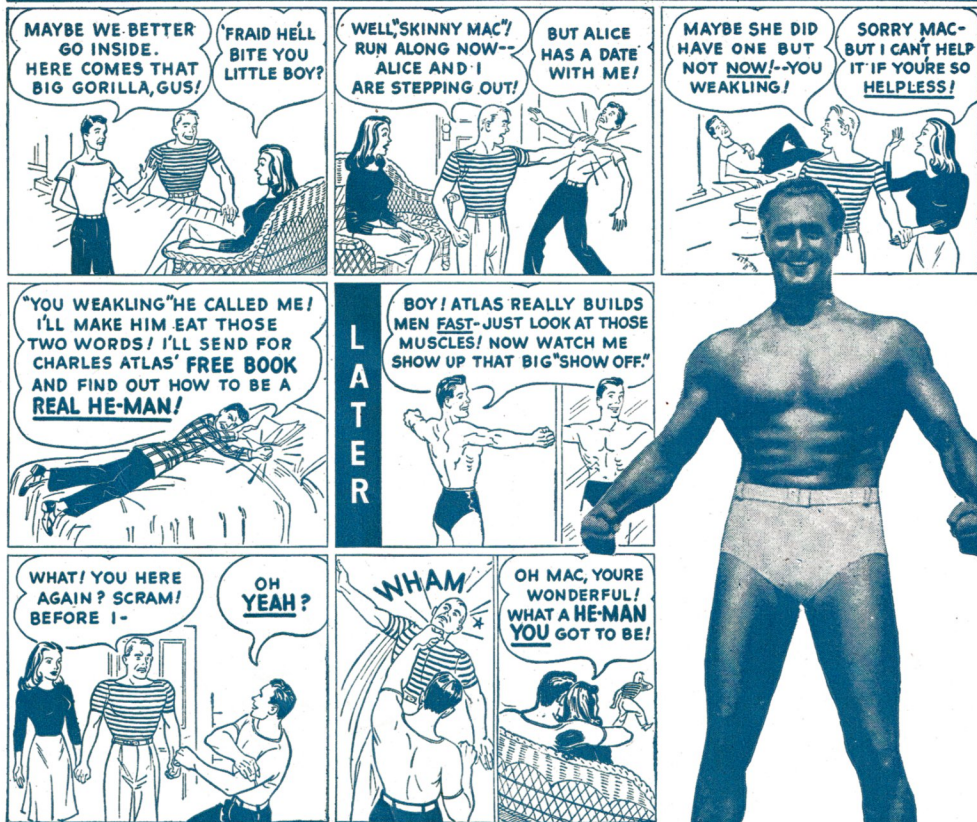
I never read SHORT STORIES until recently when a friend gave me a copy. I like Berton Cook's stories very much.

Very sincerely yours,

George Morris

17 Hobson Street,
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