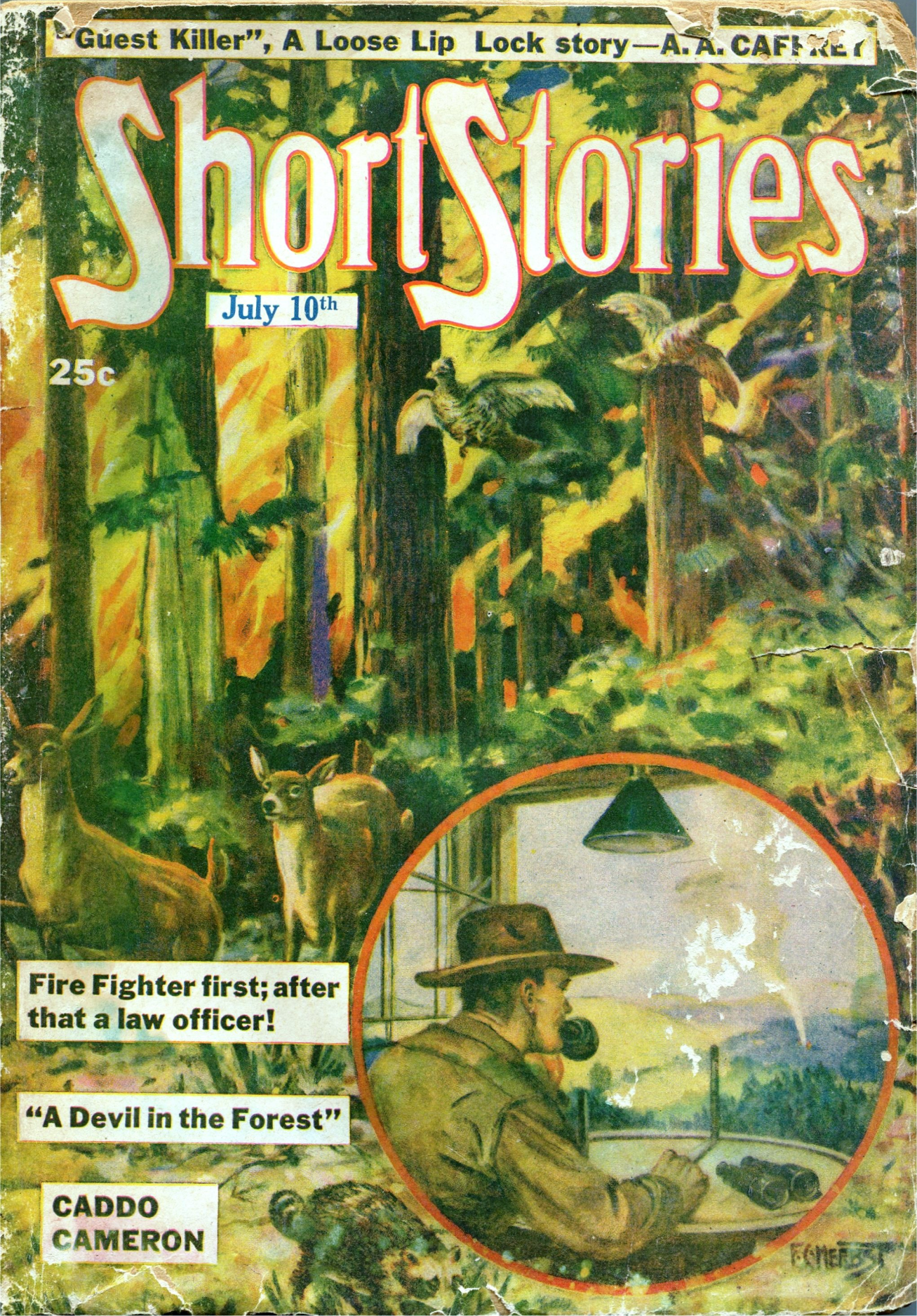


Guest Killer", A Loose Lip Lock story—A.A. CAFE RE

Short Stories

July 10th

25c



Fire Fighter first; after that a law officer!

"A Devil in the Forest"

CADDO CAMERON

LOVE GOT ON AT BUFFALO

by Gordon Kay



THE MOMENT she sank into the seat beside him in the crowded Club car Jackson's heart skipped a beat.

As the miles flew by, jeweled bits of information fell from her lips . . . she was an artist . . . she had been visiting her father in Buffalo. Yes, she was on her way back to her home in New York.

"One girl in a million," thought Jackson, remembering Manhattan's vastness. He hoped she wasn't married. When she confessed she wasn't, he sighed with relief.

"Not even engaged!" she laughed. "Not even 'going steady' with anyone."

As the train sped Eastward, Jackson found himself completely fascinated. He had always scoffed at the idea of love at first sight, but that was exactly what was happening to him! He felt that into his life had surged a new and wonderful force that he must cling to forever.

As he babbled on about himself, she drew back sharply now and then, with an air of annoyance as though she were bored. Perhaps he was too eager or was talking too much. Nevertheless, when he suggested dinner, she accepted and excused herself to freshen up.

"Over two hours with her before we reach New York," he thought happily as the train began to pull into Albany.

But a telegram poured ice-water on that little dream. The message read:

"Peterson flying Rio tomorrow. Stop off Albany today and contact him."

Stewart.

He silently cursed his luck. There was no way out; Peterson was too important. Crumpling the telegram in his hand, he scrambled for his things. There were only seconds to act.

Suddenly it flashed on him that he had learned neither the name nor address of this lovely girl

who had swept him off his feet. Desperately he hurried through the aisles looking for her . . . in vain.

At last, as he raced along the platform, he had a glimpse of her thru the window, headed for the observation car. And there he caught up with her.

"Darling!" he blurted . . . then checked himself. "Your name! Your address! Your telephone number! You can't go out of my life like this!"

As the train started to move, she hastily plucked a card from her handbag, scribbled upon it, and, smiling quizzically, handed it to him. His eyes followed her figure in the twilight as long as they could, then looked down at the card. It read:

Mary Jones
New York City

* * *

Jackson never knew why she banished him so adroitly—and so completely—from her life. One could scarcely blame her. After all, there are few things more offensive than halitosis (unpleasant breath). Regardless of your other good points, it can stamp you as a person to be avoided.

Isn't it foolish to run such risks when Listerine Antiseptic is such a delightful precaution? Almost instantly Listerine Antiseptic makes the breath much fresher, less likely to offend. Never, never, omit it.

While some cases of halitosis are of systemic origin, most cases, say some authorities, are due to the bacterial fermentation of tiny food particles clinging to mouth surfaces. Listerine Antiseptic quickly halts such fermentation, then overcomes the odors fermentation causes.

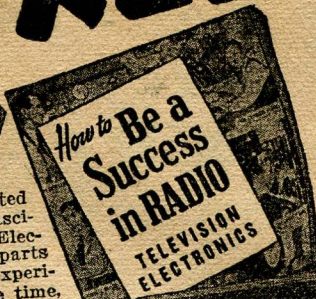
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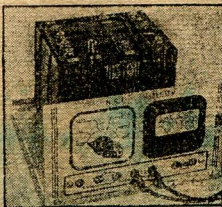
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Short Stories

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THE

BEST

OF

AMERICA'S

ACTION

ADVENTURE

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THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

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(A Long Novelette)

Caddo Cameron

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second-class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, \$5.00 per year; to Canada, \$6.50; and to all other countries, \$6.60. Price Payable in advance. July 10, 1947. Vol. CCI, No. 1. Whole Number 996.

EDITOR
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ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

July 10th, 1947

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EVERY
AUTHOR'S
FINEST
AND
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STORIES
NO
REPRINTS

The Story Tellers' Circle

What You Meet in the Brush!

“**A** DEVIL IN THE FOREST” is told from the viewpoint of a U. S. Forest Guard, the man the public most frequently meets in a Southern California brush forest,” writes author Caddo Cameron.

“The Forest Guard,” Cameron continues, “has just about the best job in this or any other outfit. Of course, it all depends on what you consider a good job. A man will never get rich on a Guard’s salary. He’ll become intimately acquainted with work that’s plain drudgery, he’ll do hard physical labor at all hours of the day and night, and he’ll learn to eat and sleep if and when. And that isn’t the worst of it. If he holds his job he’ll have to train himself to handle the public when it isn’t at its best—that is, when it goes on vacation and lets its hair down and dunks its inhibitions into the nearest swimming hole.

“On the other side of the ledger, he will have a comfortable place to live, usually in a picturesque setting like Whiteoak Canyon where I have accurately described a Guard Station. A portion of his time will be spent patrolling in the solitude of the mountains where he’ll study the trees, flowers and chaparral that clothe them and get to be on intimate terms with the wild life that inhabits them. He will learn to regard birds and animals as friends and neighbors, rather than game. If he is studious he will find at his disposal a comprehensive literature on forestry and related subjects, prepared by officials of the Service and told in language that anyone can understand. His contact with the public will teach him self discipline. His contact with fire will teach him to hate this arch destroyer, and his conflict with it will develop and bring out moral and physical qualities of which any man may be justly proud. He won’t develop expensive tastes. Therefore, his salary will support a family and he’ll have a dollar left for fun and another dollar for the old sock. Comes time to quit work, he’ll be sitting

pretty on his retirement pay for the balance of his days. By then he’ll probably have a cabin of his own in the mountains with a garden patch and a goat, he’ll watch the horizon for smoke and roll to the big fires without a call from the dispatcher and the boys will welcome him there and the Fire Boss will give him a soft job in camp, and he’ll be happy then.

“I’m not recruiting for the Forest Service. The foregoing is offered as an excuse for Smoky Jones when he refused a better job, just as I would have done in his place and at his age—twenty-eight instead of fifty-eight!”

Caddo Cameron

One Noisy Heap of Man

MR. LOOSE LIP LOCK, Federal Prov-ing Ground’s star A & E mac, has been noising his way through SHORT STORIES’ pages for a long time, come the appearance of “Guest Killer.” “As a general thing,” preaches Andrew A. Caffrey who always knows where Loose Lip hangs his hat, “the characters in fiction magazines are guaranteed to be something short of actual persons. Not so our Mr. Lock. He is three or four persons, all rolled into one noisy heap of man. In other words (before Loose Lip uses up all the other words) he is what you might call a composite man. In my time with Army Air Force, the first U. S. Airmail, and as a civilian mac on government fields, I worked and lived with these other Loose Lips. These other Loose Lips seemed to have two or three things in common. They were all big men. They were all fast-talking, loud-bragging happy guys. Each loved grease and tools. Each got along fine with his fellow man. They were always swell outfit men.

“The first Loose Lip was on a combat-training field at Issoudun, France, during that first world war. This guy, holding a top noncom rank, was supposed to be a top mac. He really knew nothing about either planes or engines. But the guy was loud

and game. Once when a Nieuport pre-ignited and started a snappy fire under its nose, we of the crew started running around in circles, yelling for fire-extinguishers. While we yelled and ran, this big Loose Lip just walked in, picked up the ship, then dragged it out of the fire. Simple, eh?

"In these Federal Proving Ground stories the squirts of the field—the orderlies, roustabouts and such—play no small part, this, simply, because such squirts actually do play no small part in their daily doings. Those kids get around. They can usually tell you who is in line for a promotion, or who is due for the boot. They can always tell you when the F. B. I. boys are in for a snoop, or when the Inspector General's official smellers are on the lot. You can't disregard their status, and an ordinary mac, such as Loose Lip Lock, would be a big dope were he to neglect the careful cultivation and education of the squirts.

"The anti-American infiltration on our Federal Proving Ground really needs no explaining by me. Story Tellers' Circle readers also read the daily press; so we all know what's happening. From time to time, we have noticed that Loose Lip Lock and the other ex-servicemen have a hard time being Americans—on an American post. It would be very nice if Loose Lip Lock could break out a new deck of cards and give the World War II vets a new deal on such posts, a new deal wherein they would have a chance to

compete for the top jobs. But that would be too much to ask. After all, this is just America; and heroes are heroes only when you need them badly."

Andrew A. Caffrey

Keeping Characters Apart

GENE VAN says that he doesn't want to do too much talking about Slim McGee (of "Fool's Gold") for fear Red Harris, Little Pardner, Smoky Smith and Dug Evans might go on strike. Apparently these friends of his, yours, and ours are jealous hombies among themselves!

"This much, though," says Gene, "shouldn't cause any hard feelings. The theme for 'Fool's Gold' isn't anything new today because so many persons are doing all they can to obtain the GOLD of life, either the honest or dishonest way. It gave me an idea which I twisted about into this yarn. As for good old Slim McGee, he is a true character, although McGee isn't his real name. I first met Slim during the filming of a western picture in which he was an extra. Slim never was a law officer, in fact, he never saw the open range except during the filming of westerns, but Slim is full of thrilling tales. I enjoyed writing this story and I hope that Slim reads this because it'll give him another tale to add to his large repertoire."

Gene Van

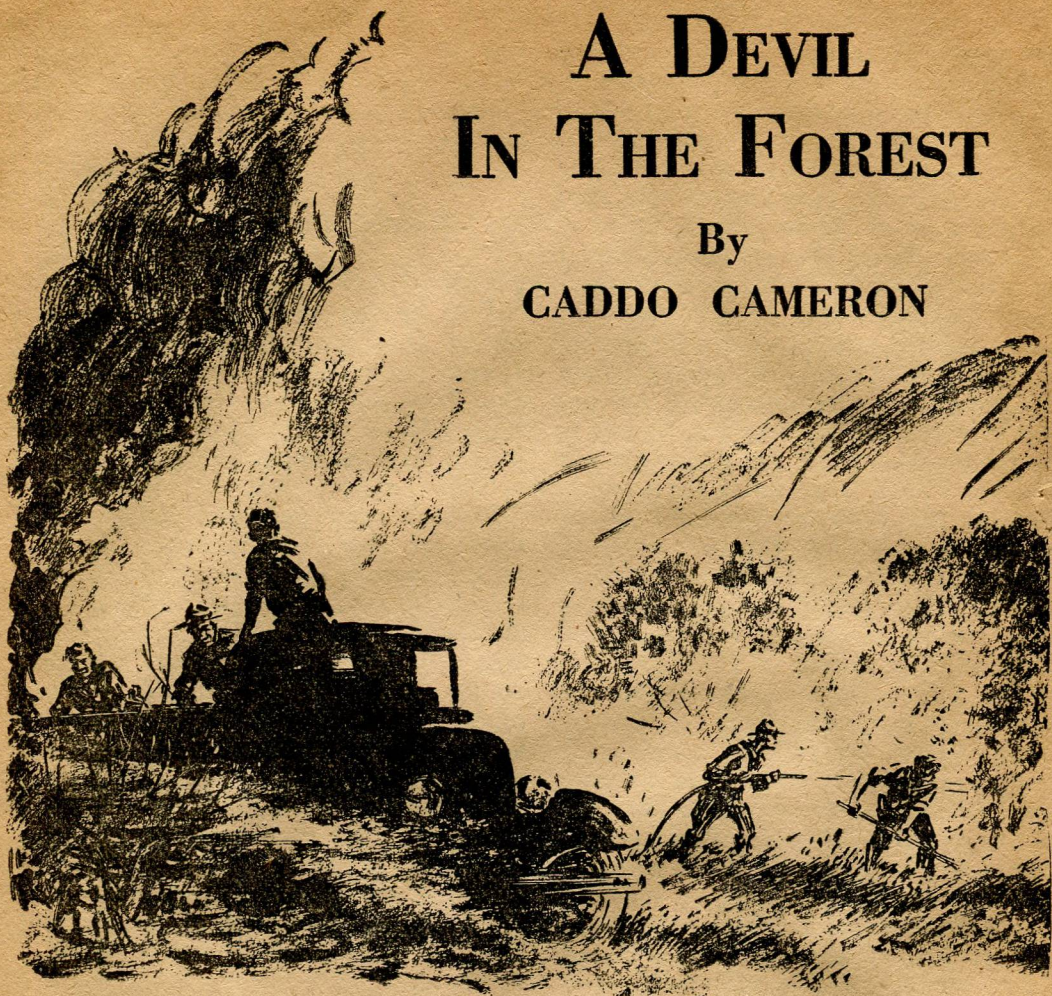
FIRST IN A LIFETIME

THIS ORDINARILY would be our June 25th issue, but for the first time in our 56-year history we have had to skip an issue, so it carries the July 10th date line. The cause is the paper shortage. The publishers of SHORT STORIES are a small concern and the paper mill which has supplied us over the years has been bought by a large one to supply its own needs—the Hearst interests. So we are having to shop around for paper in a market where pulp paper—the sort on which we are printed—is in very short supply. There is talk of pulp from Alaska, from Newfoundland, from Finland, but very little actually from anywhere to feed the presses that print SHORT STORIES.

We can only say how sorry we are that we have had to resort to the expedient of skipping an issue and to assure you that we shall do everything in our power so that it will not happen again. This July 10th number contains the entire contents originally scheduled for June 25th. Subscriptions, of course, will be extended to cover the situation.

A DEVIL IN THE FOREST

By
CADDO CAMERON



MIX dust with sweat and you get mud and an evil temper. Smoky Jones, guard in the Placerita District of the San Fernando National Forest, had a coating of the stuff on his tanned face from the line of his yellow hair to his open collar and the balance of his six-foot frame leaked sweat like an old fire hose under pressure.

His temper—it was bad. Standing practically on one leg on a steep slope Smoky swung his heavy brush hook as if it were as light as a ladies' niblick and he mowed down Southern California chemise and mountain mahogany as though the chaparral were wild rye. He stopped work for a moment, mopped his face with a sleeve and cussed—nothing in particular, merely cussing on general principles. In the

back of his mind, however, he was no doubt damping the "One Hundred Percent Stand-by" order that had tied him down at headquarters day and night for a solid week because of fire danger when he wanted to be out patrolling his division—just staying at home waiting for trouble that was sure to pop but maliciously kept putting it off. Inactivity got Smoky Jones on the prod quicker than almost anything else.

The big guard looked down with pride at the Whiteoak Canyon Guard Station over which he presided—looked at the commodious redwood house fronting on a paved State Highway, at the double garage, gas pump, steel flagpole, drinking fountain in the yard, weather station—a small louvered cab on four legs, painted white in contrast to the other buildings—flower beds, lawn, shrubbery, cement walks and drive-

way, all surrounded by a rustic lock fence, everything painted, pruned and shipshape. The garage doors were open. There sat his green pickup backed in, washed, polished, greased, gassed, tuned up and ready to roll at an instant's notice, fire tools, fire clothes, emergency rations, canteens and sleeping bag in place. Smoky Jones wouldn't swap that Guard Station for a suite at the Bilt-

*Trouble That Kept Maliciously
Putting Itself Off Got Smoky
Jones on the Prod Quicker
Than Almost Anything Else.
Cop He Had Been, Fire Fighter
He Was*



more and he hoped they'd let him stay there the balance of his life.

The war did something to Smoky. He came out of it hoping that he'd never again have to live in a city and get shoved around by people in droves. He wanted to live away off in the mountains like this, live with trees and wild things and hard work, and he wasn't bothered at all by the fact that as Forest Guard he was making little more than half his salary as Detective Sergeant John J. Jones, Los Angeles Police Department. He'd never go back to police work. Johnny grinned at a mental picture of how

he left it. That was the day he bopped a captain in the presence of the chief, then resigned thirty seconds before they fired him. Next day came Pearl Harbor. Next day he joined the Marines.

SMOKY brushed sweat from his eyes and dug a gnat out of his ear. Maybe sweat and gnats carried his thoughts back to the South Pacific. Anyhow, after his outfit's first action he got to be a corporal. Then he bopped a sergeant and got to be a private again. Next time the outfit tangled with the Japs it lasted long enough for him to

go all the way up to sergeant. Then back for a good rest. Things were slow. He couldn't take the inactivity, so he sort of blew up and bopped the Top Kick and got to be a private again. And that's where he was when the Japs quit, just Private No-Class John J. Jones. Smoky grinned again and turned to with his brush hook.

HE WAS enlarging beyond Regulation requirements the cleared area surrounding his headquarters; man-killing work in the July heat and he didn't *have* to do it, but it did provide an outlet for his bottled-up energy and he sort of cooled down his temper by giving the brush hell. Of course, he wasn't doing any harm by brushing out this way. From a point thirty feet behind the station the steep and densely covered north slope of Sawtooth Ridge swept upward to a height of six thousand feet, every square rod of it as explosive as gunpowder in this period of drought and hot winds, and you never could tell when some careless cookie on the highway down there would toss out a match and set the mountain afire. It wouldn't look good if the Guard Station burned down. Moreover—should that happen Rawhide Reagan, the District Ranger, might have things to say to Johnny Jones and if *he* didn't, Big Mike Moran, his Fire Control Assistant and second in command *certainly* would. In fact, Big Mike often said things with less provocation than that.

Momentarily forgetting his training in how to work dangerous vegetation Smoky Jones took a healthy cut at a wicked old buckthorn, a limb flipped down and stabbed him viciously with a one-inch barb that drove through clothing and into the flesh of his shoulder like nothing at all, drawing blood. The big guard now had good reason to cuss and *he did*, all of which put him in a fine frame of mind for events that followed.

Before he could finish what he had to say, there came a bellowing voice from the road, "Hey, bud! Come here! I want to talk to you!"

A new and expensive sedan had stopped in front of the station. Smoky answered the summons with a wave of his hand. Might as well take his tools down to sharpen them, so he picked up and shouldered brush hook, Pulaski and McLeod.

"Shake a leg!" roared the voice from the car. "It's hot down here!"

Johnny Jones thought a lot of things he'd like to say, but didn't say 'em. Except when necessary for its own good, a man doesn't get tough with the tax-paying public if he wants to stay in Uncle Sam's Forest Service very long. He climbed down to the garage, left his tools and went out to the car.

The girls decorating the red upholstery were just two of the million or so pretty women in Los Angeles as far as Smoky was concerned, but the two men were food for fast and furious thinking. Sports, but not sportsmen. Money, but not used to it. Fine clothes, but didn't know how to wear 'em. Guys who'd be perfectly at home in prison greys. Out of his police experience with such men, that was the way he sized them up.

JOHNNY grinned through dust and sweat, and asked, "What can I do for you, folks?"

The driver—a bulky, dark-complexioned man with hard eyes—wanted to know, "Are you the Ranger here?"

"Yes, sir, I'm a Forest Officer."

Meantime, all four of the strangers were looking him over good. They weren't drunk, but they were in high and headed in that direction and they had probably smoked a reefer on the way. Police work in Los Angeles had taught him always to look for *marijuana's* danger signals. Johnny was certain that he had seen the small, slender man in the rear seat and there was something definitely familiar about the big man at the wheel.

"Deer season opens pretty soon, doesn't it?" asked the driver. "When?"

"Yes, sir, next week—August First."

"Will we get to hunt in the forest this year?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Smoky. "Too much danger of fire. Turn hunters loose in the woods in this kind of weather and they'll burn us out—burn the deer out, too."

The burly fellow lighted a match with his thumb nail, touched it to his cigarette and growled through smoke, "What in hell's eating you forestry guys? The woods are lousy with deer. Keeping 'em for yourselves and your pals? Betcha you have all the venison *you* want to eat!"

Everything considered, the way he felt and everything, Smoky Jones was right proud of hanging onto his temper. He even managed to grin, when he said, "You're dead wrong about the venison, mister. We Forest Officers are mighty careful to obey the law. But you *have* got a right to kick about the forest being closed to hunters. That isn't the fault of the Service, though. Blame in on the State. Whenever the Fish and Game Commission insists upon opening the season right in the middle of our most dangerous fire weather we simply have to close the forest to protect it. That makes our jobs a lot tougher, too. If they'd wait until we have a good rain—three inches or more, the Service would throw the forest wide open to you and we'd be glad to have you take out some of the deer. We've got too many of 'em now. They're raising Cain with orchards."

The big fellow smiled with one side of his mouth, and said sarcastically, "Nice speech, Ranger. Do they make you learn it by heart?"

Smoky was still hanging onto his temper, but his hold was slipping fast. "It's the truth, mister. Anything else I can do for you? If you aren't in a hurry come up to the shade and cool off. We've got some mighty fine spring water in that fountain."

"Never drink the stuff," said the stranger. "For your information, Ranger, I'll be eating venison from now until this time next year and I'll take it wherever I find it. Understand?"

The girls giggled. The dapper fellow in the back seat smiled loftily. The four of them were smoking. The driver stepped on the starter and the engine purred.

Smoky Jones passed up the crack about eating venison but he did say firmly, "I'll have to ask you to put out your cigarettes before you leave. It's all right to smoke here and you'll find other places along the road where smoking is permitted. They're marked by signs 'Smoking Area'. Please don't light up anywhere else in the forest and I'd advise you to look out for Los Angeles County 'No Smoking' signs, too."

The man in the back seat spoke up. His voice was startling—very low, soft and effeminate—"What if we tell you to go to hell, Ranger, and say that we'll smoke whenever and wherever we damned please?"

The big guard caught that old temper in the nick of time. He didn't have more than a three-finger grip on it, though, and it was pulling his nails out by the roots. "We Forest Officers try mighty hard to get along with people, mister," he said quietly. "It isn't what you *tell* us, it's what you *do* that counts."

The little man subsided sullenly.

The driver meshed his gears. "Well, so 'long, Ranger. You can go back to grubbing stumps."

"Just a moment, please," said the officer calmly. "Put out your cigarettes before you leave here."

"Slug! To hell with him!" snapped the girl in the front seat. "Let's go! I need a drink."

"Good idea, Babe," growled Slug. "You heard what the lady said, Ranger. So 'long."

After her first word Johnny Jones had scarcely heard anything she said—Slug. Slug Jarvis! A Los Angeles crook, a strong-arm guy who used to sell his services as a slugger. But Jarvis was just a punk then. Evidently he's bigtime now. Hot stuff, too, damned hot.

Smoky Jones laid a big hand on the door of the car. His voice was low, level and hard, "You're too smart to do that—Mister Jarvis. Put out your cigarettes before you go."

That wiped the smirk off the thin fellow's face and it opened Slug's eyes. "Huh? What the—!" he grunted. Then his lids drooped slightly, and he asked softly, "Who in hell are you and how does it happen that you know me?"

Smoky grinned good-naturedly. "I'm just a brush ape working for a living, Mister Jarvis, but you're a well-known man. *Very well known in some circles.*"

For the space of five seconds the big crook stared at Johnny in a way that made him think of his thirty-eight back there in the house. In a moment, Jarvis rasped out, "Okay, Ranger. Dunk your smokes, pals. Dunk it, Babe, I said! This hill-billy is Uncle Sam in person and we don't want trouble with *him*. I'll be seeing you, Ranger, seeing you."

SMOKY Jones frowned after the big car as it burned rubber down the highway. Something screwy about this whole deal.

Sure Slug Jarvis and his sidekick were bad babies, but them getting tough with a Ranger for no reason at all simply didn't make sense. Nowadays, crooks in the bigtime don't work that way. So what was the angle? Why did they stop here and give *him* the business? Those questions Slug asked about the deer season and hunting in the forest were phonies. He already knew the answers. Los Angeles papers had been talking it up for days and hunters were griping all over Southern California. Going back to the house the guard paused to brush some pine needles off the walk with his foot, meanwhile mentally repeating Slug's license number to keep it from getting away from him. *Once a cop, always a cop*, thought Smoky.

He went in and cranked the Service phone on the wall.

"Forest Service," came the answer in a lazy voice.

"Look, Tex!" growled the guard as a matter of course. "When in hell are you going to lift this Hundred Percent. So I can get out and patrol my—?"

"Now, hold your hosses, fella," drawled Tex Mather, Placerita District Dispatcher. "You know doggoned well that the situation is getting worse powerful fast. We're hotter'n a firecracker and liable to explode any minute. Wouldn't be surprised if you're on a Hundred and Ten before long."

"A Hundred Ten Percent. Standby? Huh! There ain't no such thing."

Tex had an effortless voice, even when packing a three-man load of worry and responsibility during this dangerous fire weather. "Maybe there ain't no such thing now, but there soon will be if I have my way."

That extra Ten Percent will make you sleep in fire clothes, hat and boots and everything, so's you can get going quicker when I roll you. Regulations now allow you two minutes getaway time. That's too much. I want it cut to one minute, even if we have to make you sleep in your clothes a-settin' up in your pickup. How d'you like that, mistah?"

"Nuts to you!"

Mather laughed softly. Smoky could see him at the other end of the wire, laughing around the pipe stem that had long ago taken root in his thin dark face. "So you see, Smoky me lad, you don't know how

well off you are. Better be satisfied with a Hundred Percent and stop your beefing."

JOHNNY JONES discovered that he was grinning when he didn't feel like grinning.

Damn Old Tex! Burn the world down around him and he'd stay cool as a frog in a mountain spring. An important part of his work was to lower the blood pressure of hotheads in the district who more or less blew their tops under the strain of inactive waiting for something to happen during these hot, dry and often windy periods when most of the forest personnel were held on the alert at their respective headquarters, fidgeting like race horses at the starting line. This lanky and drawling Dispatcher did a first-rate job of it.

"Tex, old boy," replied Smoky, "when I stop beefing it'll be because they planted me too deep and tamped the ground too hard. Looky here. You ain't got a damned thing to do. Get me the lowdown on a late Cad sedan, California License Five H Thirty-five Thirty-two. The Registrar at Three Points must have caught 'em. When he reports in, ask him for the names and addresses of the two men in the car, will you?"

"Was that a gray car?"

"Yus, but how did you guess it?"

"Mmmm-huh," grunted Tex. "Three Points called in a little while ago. While he was registering a string of cars, that one got by. He didn't catch its number. What's cookin', Smoky?"

"Nothing much, Tex, only there's a devil running loose in the forest."

"Huh-oh!" said the dispatcher. "Me—I'd sure like to set in a game with a devil for a change, but I can't spare the time now. Tell Mike about it. He's prowling the district and ought to show up there sometime today. Meanwhile, Smoky, you can slip me a two o'clock special."

"Wha-at?" fumed Jones. "Another weather report? Damned if I haven't had my head in that weather station half the time since—!"

"So that's what became of your head," drawled Tex. "Been sorta wonderin' where you'd lost the dadblamed thing. So 'long, Smoky."

The big guard left the phone laughing

to himself. *Old Tex sure snaps a guy out of it.*

He lost no time in taking readings and turning in the special weather report, and it was bad: Temperature 105 Deg. Humidity 4 Percent. (Anything below 30 Percent isn't good.) Fuel Moisture 3 Percent. (It ought to be at least 15 Percent.) No wonder the nerves of the forest were as tight as fiddle strings.

Smoky Jones was in the garage grinding tools when the large bell on the wall outside set up a clatter—his phone. He hurried to a field phone extension that he had hooked up in there.

"Whiteoak Canyon."

Tex Mather's voice was as calm and lazy as usual. "Yeah-h, Smoky. Cold Springs is picking up something suspicious in Molly Canyon near the Baker Ranch headquarters. Heavy haze in there and the lookout isn't sure that he's got a smoke. It's just movement and discoloration now. Straddle your mule, boy."

"Much obliged, Tex. I'm on my way!"

The ring of enthusiasm in his voice must have made the dispatcher smile. Smoky glanced at his watch as he stepped on the starter, thinking, *Hot damn! Something doing at last!*

The green pickup sped down the highway with its siren screaming. Six minutes later it rounded a shoulder in Molly Canyon, Baker Ranch headquarters a mile ahead. Thin smoke was rising from somewhere beyond the house. It filtered up through shade trees in the yard to where it was caught by the up-canyon wind and whipped away into the haze. As Johnny swung into the driveway his siren was still sounding and when passing the house he saw faces at windows, but paid no particular attention to them. George Simpson, manager of the ranch, was burning dead leaves in the backyard—a large pile and throwing more onto it. He nodded to the guard and dumped another forkful.

Smoky walked over there, and said, "Howdy, Mister Simpson. Nice fire you've got. Put it out, will you?"

Simpson, a middle-aged farmer, shook his head. "Missus Baker's orders, Ranger. Tell her about it."

This ranch had recently changed hands. Jones had not met the new owners. They

were never at home when he called and his business had been transacted with the manager.

"But you yourself know better than to do any burning now, Mr. Simpson," said Jones. "You told me that you've always lived in the back country out here."

"Sure, I know," admitted the manager. "But I just work here, Ranger. Take orders from the folks that pay me wages. Here comes Missus Baker. Tell your troubles to her."

A WOMAN strolled leisurely down the path from the house. With a huge sun hat on her auburn head and a flowered sun suit covering a small area of her total surface, she herself was enough to start a fire in any weather in any type of fuel. After a quick glance, Smoky somehow pulled his eyes away from her and back to the manager.

He now spoke loud enough for the woman to hear. "Sorry, Mister Simpson, but you are personally responsible. You'll simply have to refuse to obey such orders. Now, please put out this fire. Spray it with your hose first so as not to scatter burning leaves, then give it a good soaking and spread it out to make certain that there isn't any fire left. Go ahead. Put it out."

"Says which?" It was a husky, throaty voice and it came from behind Smoky, since he had purposely turned his back. "Who are you going to soak and spread out—big, bad mans?"

Smoky Jones turned with his fingers at his forest green hat, then his hands dropped and so did his chin. "Teddy! Ted Ray! What are you doing away up here in the sticks?"

She was even more surprised than he, but it didn't take her long to get over it. Putting out her hand, she smiled with the off two-thirds of a mighty pretty mouth, and said, "To tell you the truth, Ranger, I buried myself up here in the bonduks to get away from hard-boiled coppers like Detective Johnny Jones used to be. But I'm glad to see you, Johnny. What are you doing behind that tin badge?"

"Before I answer any questions—" said the Guard, turning to Simpson, "I'm not kidding, Mister. Douse that smudge! Come a little twist of wind down here to scatter

those leaves and you'll burn out this place and set fire to the mountains. Look! Sawtooth on one side of you and Coyote on the other and they're so hot and dry they're ready to blow up without any help. Smell the brush? That's a danger signal."

Simpson picked up a hose, looked at the woman.

She tilted her chin becomingly, lifted one eyebrow, and told him, "Didn't you hear the man, George? Always do what he says. I *know* the man. He's sweet, but he's a so-and-so. Come over here and sit close to me on this bench, Johnny. I want to talk to you."

"Can't talk long, Ted. Wish I could. Where's your phone?"

"There's an extension in the kitchen," she answered, starting away. "Follow me, honey, and the cops will never catch you."

"Don't I know it," dryly remarked the guard. "Sorry to trouble you, Ted. Got company, haven't you?"

"Oh, just some pants and petticoats that you don't know," she replied carelessly. "You *used* to trouble me, Johnny, but you can't do it now."

They were passing a three-car garage. One of the overhead doors had not been pulled all the way down. Smoky caught a glimpse of gray fenders and a license plate—5H3532!

"Make you a little bet, Teddy, dear."

"It ain't ever safe to bet with you, honey, but I'll take it. What's the bet?"

"I know one of those pants you've got for company."

"Let's hike the bet," she said. "Game?"

"Slug Jarvis."

The girl stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. "I hate a man with more brains than I've got. I don't love you, Johnny."

"Sorry. Where's that phone?"

She went ahead and closed one of the inside doors to the kitchen. The other opened into a pantry.

Smoky got Tex and made a quick report, adding, "Back to headquarters soon as I've had a little talk with the owner."

"Is she a good-lookin' gal?"

"Tex, listen! Ain't you sorry you're a dispatcher and all tied down to a phone and a radio and a wife and kids?"

Mather chuckled. "Oookay, fella. Have

a nice long talk with the rancher—say, two minutes at the outside. Then hurry home. Want you where I can get you quick."

Teddy was standing a yard away, looking innocent. "That man's drawl sends me. Is he handsome?"

"Yep, and he's smart," replied Smoky. "Let's go out and have that talk."

"Then I don't like him. Smart men are a pain."

Simpson had the leaves wet down and spread out. He grinned in friendly fashion, and asked, "How's that, Ranger?"

"Fine! Thanks a lot, Mister Simpson."

"Will you give us a burning permit?" asked the manager. "We've got a lot of it to do."

"Sorry, sir. No BP's until the rains come."

THEY went out to Smoky's pickup and she climbed in with him. "Where's Snuffy?" he asked. "In the house?"

"Snuffy? Who's he?"

"Don't clown, Ted," said Smoky. "I'm in a hurry."

With a forefinger she traced thoughtful lines on her naked brown thigh. "About a year ago Snuffy Baker took a powder. Frederick R. Baker owns this ranch. He's a country gentleman, retired. I'm his wife, Teddy Baker. Got a paper that says so, Johnny, and shekles in the bank to prove it."

"Which is worth the most to you, Ted, paper or shekles?"

"Do I look dumb?"

Smoky laughed. "How did Snuffy—er, I should say, Frederick R. Baker make his money?"

"Gasoline—high-test stuff."

"You mean hot gas, don't you?"

"I can't lie to you, Johnny, dear."

"So he has retired," mused Smoky. "I wonder. Retired from everything, or just gasoline now that we can get all we want?"

"From everything," said the girl. "Honey, do you remember that time down in LA when I told Detective Johnny Jones that he'd be able to retire in a couple of years if he'd be reasonable and take my advice? Remember?"

"Of course."

"Well, Snuffy *always* took my advice, so

he's a country gentleman now and you, Johnny, you're a—"

"Sure, I'm a brush ape," said Smoky with a grin. "I always knew that you were the brains of that combo. We'd have had Snuffy sniffing the gas a long time ago if you hadn't been doing his thinking for him. And, Ted, you got me kicked off the Force. Did you know that?"

"No, Johnny!" she exclaimed. "I tried hard enough to get something on you, but—"

Smoky interrupted, "Not that way. I wanted to put you on ice for a year so that Snuffy would have to do his own thinking. A certain captain said I was crazy. We had words. I slapped him down. So I'm off the Force, just like that."

Teddy Baker regarded him thoughtfully for a long moment. "So you wanted to put me away for a year. Why, sweetheart, you *never* had anything on *me*."

"So what?"

"Oh! I see-e-e. A frame." She laughed softly. "You were a tough cop, Johnny, but I always loved you."

Smoky glanced at his watch. "My two minutes are up. Gotta roll. Sorry I can't take you along, Ted, but it isn't allowed in a government vehicle. Get out, sister. And, by the way, I sure do hope that Snuffy has *really* retired. You're living in my division. The older a man gets, the tougher he gets."

BACK at headquarters, having checked in to the dispatcher, Jones was making notes for his Daily Report—times of departure, arrival, return and other details—when his phone rang insistently.

Tex Mather again. "Yea-h, Smoky. Cold Springs reports two hikers on Sawtooth. He only got a short glimpse of 'em and took a reading which places them on the west slope of The Saddle. They disappeared in the brush there. Nobody else spotted 'em. That area is blind to all the other lookouts. Take a run up there. You'll be blacked out until you get to the top of the ridge, then go on the air. All lookouts are on continuous radio standby now. Contact one of them as soon as you can. I want to keep in close touch with you. If you leave your car and go to sore-footing it, report exactly where you're taking to the brush and which way you're going,

before you sign off. Better buckle on your hardware, too. We have reason to believe there are some characters in the forest. Go and bring 'em back alive, fella."

"Sure will, Tex. But why all the precautions and stuff?"

"You're mighty precious, Smoky," drawled Tex. "We'd shore hate to lose you and if we ever do, we want to know where to start looking for the body. So long, boy, and good hunting."

Smoky Jones took it on the run to the garage. This was more like it. This was living. Old Tex knew something that he wouldn't talk about on the phone. What was it? Forest Officers all have arms, but they don't carry them and rarely are they told to do so. This must be something extra special. Were Teddy and Snuffy Baker mixed up in it? He wondered.

It was four miles by a winding truck trail to the top of Sawtooth Ridge. At its lower end the trail was closed by a wire cable stretched across the road between two iron pipes set in concrete, a gate that could be opened only by a key that fitted the Forest Service lock. All officers carried this key. With it they could enter any Forest Service building, open any tool cache, gate or gasoline pump. Smoky made certain that the gate was locked behind him. All the way up the trail he was out of sight of a lookout tower and consequently out of radio communication, since his portable S Set was one of those ultra-high-frequency affairs that would not "bend" a signal over an obstacle—required a visual path. He topped out on the ridge at what was known as The Saddle, a sag one-half mile in width where the lookout had spotted the trespassers. Smoky immediately made radio contact with Cold Springs. No messages for him and nothing more had been seen of the hikers.

Another truck trail traversed the backbone of Sawtooth Ridge from its eastern end at Molly Canyon to Sawtooth Mountain and beyond, all of which was in Smoky's Division. This trail was closed by gates at each end. Having been held on standby at headquarters for a week Jones had not patrolled the trail in that time, yet within the last two days a car had come over it from the east, turned around in The Saddle and gone back the way it came. Of course,

it might have been another Service car. Unlikely, though, since no one did much running around when a One Hundred Percent Standby was on.

Police work, the Marines and the Forest Service had taught Johnny Jones a lot about tracking and that knowledge came in handy now. A big wind funneled through The Saddle most of the time. Where not covered by short grass the ground in there was blowy, with the result that any track was soon filled by dust and sand, three days usually being enough to do the job. In addition to shifting soil, cattle often bedded down in The Saddle—a few ranchers having grazing permits in this area—and it was a playground for deer. Accordingly, Smoky had to work the sign pretty hard before he finally determined that the car had stopped and unloaded two men and although he found where they had started for the brush, he lost their tracks before they got there. They were, however, heading toward an animal trail that entered the chaparral a short distance south. By patiently blowing out dust that had sifted into the tracks he was able to sketch them in his notebook with pretty fair accuracy, a least good enough to identify them should he find them elsewhere.

Along the backbone of Sawtooth extended a firebreak—a cleared strip sixty feet wide, and Smoky walked it up the west slope of The Saddle. Presently he discovered footprints at the point where the look out had seen the hikers. He checked them against his sketches. No doubt about it, these were the men the car had unloaded yesterday or the day before which meant that they had camped in the forest at least one night—maybe two. What was their racket? Were they deer hunters coming in ahead of the season and establishing a camp so as to save time, or maybe beat the gun? That was often done when the forest was open to hunting, but it was closed now and everybody knew it. And how did their car get through the east gate? Ranchers who owned land inside the limits of the forest or had grazing permits were allowed to put their own locks on such gates and there were three or four on the one in question, but each of those owners was a thoroughly reliable man who wouldn't violate a closure order or loan his key to any

one else. Smoky figured he had a lot of things to learn about this deal, but first he had to find the trespassers.

AFTER studying the sign he knew that the men had come from the chaparral onto the firebreak, stood there a few moments, then went straight back into the brush at a point where the ground was rocky and tracking difficult. Smoky pulled his hat lower over his eyes and scowled out across the wilderness that swept southward before him. South from The Saddle rolled and tumbled miles of rugged country, ridges running in all directions, great canyons and ravines floored by liveoak, pine and other timber, all slopes and summits clothed in chaparral traversed only by animal trails. Here and there a small woodland park or open meadow broke the dark green monotony of the brush. There were occasional springs in these ravines known only to wild life, cattle and a few men who were intimately acquainted with the country, but a man afoot or on horseback could usually find water if he followed an animal path far enough. Also, a man could successfully lose himself in there if he were a woodsman. Smoky figured that he'd be here a week if he undertook to track those cookies through the brush, unless they were following trails and evidently they weren't. He shrugged and headed back to his car. Instead of trying to track them down he'd go and look for their camp somewhere on the animal trail they took when they first came here.

Before taking off, Jones called Cold Springs Lookout. "Calling O One Nine. S Seven Three calling O One Nine. Come in, please."

"O One Nine back. Go ahead, Smoky."

"Can you see my pickup, George?"

"I've had my glass on you. Over."

"I'm going into the brush afoot now, taking an animal trail down the mountain from a point just south of where my car is sitting. Tell Tex, will you, George, and tell him I'm not making this hike for the exercise, either. He'll understand. Over."

"R-r-roger, Smoky. Good luck."

"Thanks, George. S Seven Three clear with O One Nine and off the air."

Had there ever been any footprints in the soft soil of the trail, cattle and deer

would have long since obliterated them. This was a very heavily traveled path which convinced Smoky that it would eventually lead him to a spring, his best bet to find the camp of men who expected to stay here for a while. Once into the brush, the big guard halted to adjust the shoulder holster under his shirt. Circumstances being what they were, that clip holster felt right comfortable there notwithstanding the heat and weight of the thirty-eight automatic it carried.

These two strangers were packing loads. Smoky hadn't gone far before coming to that conclusion because they often lost their balance, though the trail wasn't steep, and stepped out of the path leaving the only footprints he saw. Inside of half a mile they had sat down to rest. Leaning back against their packs or knapsacks, they had laid their rifles down and smoked cigarettes. He found butts, no match sticks and figured they had lighters. One was carrying a full five-gallon can of something, perhaps gasoline for their stove. It left its mark where he sat it down. Smoky's long legs took him down the trail at a lively clip, now that he was positive his men had gone this way. The further they went, the more often they stopped to rest and smoke. The damned fools! They didn't know these Southern California mountains and the brush that covered them. No man who did would crush out a cigarette in dead grass under ten-foot chaparral when he himself was buried in it and confronted by a long run to a place of safety should it catch fire. These were city men—no doubt about it.

About two miles from the summit the trail tipped over the north slope of a small, lateral ravine. A short way down a spring bubbled from the side of the mountain into a little pool. Vegetation that would have betrayed the existence of the spring and its branch was hidden by the two shoulders forming the ravine. A perfect hideout. There wasn't a lookout in the district who could see into this place and as far as Smoky could tell, no truck trail would afford a patrolman a view of it. But, where was the camp? He cut for sign around the spring and presently discovered footprints on one of several animal trails that converged on this watering. The trail carried him to a tiny meadow on the far side of

the south shoulder of the ravine and there he found the camp, well hidden in the fringe of the brush—a two-man shelter tent and other equipment, all brand new. In the tent were two army knapsacks and two rifles. *What the hell? thought Smoky. Why did they leave their Winchesters in camp?* Just one of several questions for which he had no answer.

Smoky Jones didn't tarry long out in plain sight that way. He went into the brush, sat down where he could see without being seen and did some mighty hard thinking while waiting for his men. They ought to be coming back pretty soon; it was getting along. Of course, they camped out here so as not to frighten animals away from watering places for that's where they'd do most of their killing at night. They'd apparently walked straight to his place. If they *were* city men, and their camp equipment was additional evidence that they were, how did they happen to know about this hideout? Had a local guide was the answer to that one. How did they expect to get their meat out of here? It would spoil quickly in this weather. Maybe with the car that brought them in, but it would have to move at night without lights, a round trip of twenty miles on a truck trail—risky business. Horses would be their best bet. They could walk around most locked gates and travel these animal trails at night.

Little black gnats were swarming in the chaparral, billions of them, and they insisted upon going to watery graves in the rivers of sweat on Smoky's face and exploring the caverns of his eyes, ears and nose. He cursed and mopped his face and wished to hell these guys would show. Also, he remembered that he was mighty hungry. What he wouldn't give for a big steak, if he knew where anybody could get a big steak nowadays. . . . Huh? Wait a minute! . . . Steak! Venison! Meat! Plenty gasoline now, so Snuffy Baker retires. But meat! Meat is still short and there are lots of big shots in LA who can and will pay anything to get their meat. Just the other day Smoky had heard that out-of-season venison was bringing as high as five dollars a pound. So Teddy Baker, smart little crook, catches the scent of big money in big-time poaching and cattle-rustling. Snuffy buys a ranch in the back country and goes

into the meat business. She gets the ideas and he carries them out. He's a fine organizer of a big operation. Snuffy has already got a mob of tough babies who are right for anything and he can handle 'em. They're afraid of him—rightly so. He got that name Snuffy from a saying of his, "If the guy gets in our hair we'll snuff him out."

SMOKY JONES knew that his idea might be just a pipe dream, but it had him hopped up anyhow. He imagined the Snuffy Baker organization throughout the mountains in the Los Angeles area wherever deer were plentiful and especially where beef cattle ranged. Snuffy passes out a little dough to local poachers, the back country having plenty of 'em who know every rabbit-run in the woods, and he gets the lowdown and arranges for packhorse pickups to bring out his meat. Smoky, the cop, was going to town now. One thought led to another. If Snuffy could find a Forest Guard who would listen to money-talk, that find would be a gold mine, so Slug Jarvis is sent out to look for weak spots. Best way to test a man is to start a quarrel with him. That will tell you whether he's got the guts to take a bribe if he's a crook, or to slap you down or turn you in if he's an honest man. Johnny Jones thought he had the picture now. Thought he saw how—*Knew he saw two men coming!*

They were walking in from the west, out in the brush a little ways on one of three trails that crossed the meadow. Big fellows and bending under heavy loads, they were making slow work of the climb up an easy slope and evidently too nearly out of breath to do much talking. When they came into the Meadow Smoky cursed under his breath. Each was carrying parts of deer—front and hindquarters, saddles, unskinned but trimmed down to lighten them without wasting meat. Neither said a word as they staggered to the camp and dropped their loads.

The guard wished they'd talk. From where he was hidden he could hear a whisper.

Finally the big redhead took off his hat, fanned himself, and growled, "It ain't worth it!"

The other—a burly dark-complexioned man, mopped his face. "Damned if it is!

I'll tell you, Red—these sticks ain't no place for us. I'm going to—"

Smoky Jones had already stopped two sneezes. A gnat up his nose. Felt like a hive of gnats. He stopped a third sneeze. Then he sneezed!

A split second later he walked out of the brush less than thirty feet from the strangers. "Damn these gnats!" he said casually. "Sorry to interrupt your conversation, fellas. Go ahead, will you?"

Taken completely by surprise neither man made a move when the guard first showed up, but before he finished talking their hands were cautiously groping toward their holsters.

"Stop it!" barked Smoky. "No Wild West stuff, please."

"A Ranger!" grunted Red.

"Got a heater under his shirt!" growled the other.

"Yes, boys," said Jones with a grin, "I'm a Ranger and I pack a rod under my shirt. But I don't want to use it and I haven't got enough on you guys for you to make me *have* to use it."

Then he tried something, "Besides, you've got orders not to tangle with Uncle Sam's men."

Red was a dumb sort of fellow. "Huh?" he grunted. "How did you—?"

The other man cut him short. "Orders? I don't get it."

"My mistake," said the guard dryly. "Turn your backs to me, boys. I don't like to do this, but I'd be a hell of an officer if I didn't."

A touch of iron came into his voice, "Turn around!"

After a quick exchange of glances during which the dark man nodded to Red, they turned their backs and held their arms shoulder high without being told to do so.

Johnny grinned at that. "It's easy to see that this ain't the first time you torpedoes have had a frisking."

"Yeah," growled the black-headed one, "and if you ain't done time as a big-town copper, I'm a private dick."

Smoky Jones chuckled. "I think we three are going to get along fine. . . . Mmmm, two nice forty-five revolvers. Good guns. What's this? Threaded for mufflers! So-o-o, and here are the silencers. The County Sheriff would be interested in these cutters.

This explains why you left your rifles in camp when you went deer hunting. Looks like that's about all. Not a damned thing to identify you. Smart work, boys. Relax, now. Sit down and rest. You're winded."

They dropped to the ground and the big redhead brought out his cigarettes.

"Don't smoke here," the guard told them. "This grass will explode like powder and if you set it afire we'll have fun getting out of here. What's your names?"

"I'm Red Smith."

"Tom Jones is my name."

Smoky grinned and shook his head at Tom. "You'll have to pick a better one, Mister. Jones is my name and I won't let you use it."

Red laughed. Tom grinned and narrowed his sharp eyes at the same time. "Could it be," he said softly, "that you're Johnny Jones?"

"Could be."

Tom looked quickly at Red, and told him, "This copper is tough and tricky. From now on I do the talking to him."

Johnny wished that he hadn't made that crack about names. "Were you in LA when I was on the Force?"

"No, but news travels far and fast out here."

While the crooks rested there, Smoky went and looked at their kill. "So you got a buck, a doe and a fawn with those muffled forty-fives. Sorry I didn't see you kill 'em. Now, all the State will have on you is Possession. It'll cost you two C's, or maybe Two Fifty. Of course, it means going into court and other little inconveniences like that, maybe fingerprints and records and stuff."

Tom was quick on the pickup. "You said the State. You meant Uncle Sam, didn't you, Ranger?"

Johnny was intentionally playing these crooks along easy. He knew the breed. You couldn't bluff 'em, but you could sometimes lead them into getting cocky and a cocky crook often spilled things when a scared one wouldn't. "Nope," he answered, "Uncle Sam doesn't prosecute State Games Law violations in this country. We just turn you over to the State Game Wardens. If it hasn't spoiled, they'll send your meat to a prison farm and give the boys a feed on you. Of course now, I *could* turn you loose. You

haven't started any fires, so I could haul you and your stuff out of the forest and turn you loose just like that."

Tom regarded him craftily. "Well, why don't you?"

Johnny ambled back toward them. "I will, for a price."

The crooks' glances met for a moment, then Tom turned to the guard, and said, "We haven't got much jack on us, but maybe we know where to get more. What's your price, copper?"

"Not so fast," said Jones cautiously. "Are you guys independents, or are you working with a syndicate?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Simply this," said Smoky. "I doubt whether you can make it worth my while to let you go if you're just two-bit poachers and cattle thieves. If you've got an organization, though—well, frankly, I—"

"Oh, sure, copper!" snapped Tom. "Then you can shake us down for important dough. Well, we ain't talking—see?"

"But, Tom!" objected Red. "This rap will—"

"Save it!" growled Tom. "Didn't I tell you this copper is slick? But he ain't soft. We couldn't buy him for a million bucks, and if we try—huh!"

Smoky hid his disappointment with a grin. "I didn't think you'd sing. That being the case, boys, we'll take a little walk. I know you're tired. Sorry I can't bring the wagon down here. It's up in The Saddle. But you won't have much of a load—just the hindquarters of the buck and doe. I'll carry the fawn meat for you."

"What about our rifles and camp junk?" asked Red.

"Leave it right where it is," said the guard. "It'll be perfectly safe here, unless you don't trust the guy who's coming tonight to pack out your meat."

Red opened his mouth to speak, Tom snapped, "Clam it! What guy, Ranger?"

"My mistake again. Seems like I'm always making mistakes."

WHEN they reached The Saddle Smoky loaded the meat into the pickup, locked their revolvers in a tool box and had the prisoners get into the cab, roll up its windows and shut the doors. Afterwards, he took his radio aside, tossed its short

antenna over a bush and called Cold Springs Lookout.

"O One Nine back to S Seven Three," came the answer. "Glad to hear from you again Smoky." Tex has been asking about you every ten minutes. Over."

"Thanks, George. Tell him I got what he sent me after, two deerslayers with meat. No identification on 'em and they're super-charged liars. Had no trouble. Ask him whether I should shoot 'em or take 'em down. Over."



After a short delay, the earphones said, "O One Nine back. Tex says turn them over to the County to hold. He'll phone Chuck and notify a Game Warden. Give 'em a Notice of Violation for Trespass and anything else you've got on them. Then you return to headquarters. Tex and Charley Reagan say, 'Good work.' Over."

"Okay, George. S Seven Three clear and off."

The "County" to which the dispatcher referred was a fire station of the Los Angeles County Forestry Department where a tanker and Suppression Crew was maintained under Captain Chuck Harder, situated at

Maple Lake—a resort settlement at the junction of Molly and Whiteoak Canyons, about four miles below Smoky's Guard Station. Deputy Game Wardens patrolling this area often made the County Station their headquarters.

Back at the pickup, Smoky told his prisoners, "Boys, I just got orders not to shoot you so long as you're polite to me. Can either of you thugs drive an honest automobile?"

Red spoke up, "I'm a truck driver by trade, Ranger. I can drive anything."

"Good," said the Guard. "Slide under the wheel and don't either of you get ideas. If anything happens to me the whole damned country, including the FBI, will have your descriptions inside of an hour. Move over, Tom. I'll sit on the outside. Now, turn around, Red, and backtrack the trail you came in over the other day. Let's go."

Although Smoky made them that talk, he wasn't really afraid that they'd try anything more serious than giving him the slip if they got a chance. They weren't hopheads who'd do anything for no reason at all and they no doubt had an organization behind them to take care of legal angles. A smart boy like Tom wouldn't flirt with a murder rap except as a last resort.

By the time they had covered the ten miles to Molly Canyon, Smoky had another idea. Instead of turning left to Maple Lake, he turned right down canyon and when they reached the entrance to the Baker Ranch he told Red to swing in there. Watching them closely he thought both crooks showed a flash of surprise.

"Drive past the front of the house," he ordered, "then turn left and stop at the kitchen door. It's on the south side."

Dust on the windshield made it difficult to see through from the outside. Being a large man, Red kind of hunched over the wheel and Tom was leaning forward so as to look around him at the house. Smoky sat well back with his hat brim low over his face. Red stopped the car as ordered. The screen door swung open quickly and out came Teddy Baker. Red sat there with his mouth half open, but Tom was vigorously shaking his head.

"Why, Red and Tom!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here in *that* car?"

"That's when Smoky stepped out on the other side, looking as innocent as he could under the circumstances. He pretended that he hadn't heard what she said.

"Hi, Teddy!" he called out. "I'm in a hurry. Do me a favor, will you?"

The girl's smoldering green eyes weren't at all pretty now. "No, I won't!" she said in her husky contralto. "Who are those dumb-looking goons you've got with you?"

Smoky cocked a humorous eye at his prisoners. "Those? Oh, they're just a couple of deerslayers who made a mistake. Not bad guys when you get to know 'em."

Teddy Baker had let her temper slip for a moment, but she throttled it down in a hurry. "What did you want me to do, Johnny?"

"Just a little favor," he answered. "I know that you lately finished a big home freezer or cold room in the bank behind the house there. I've got some evidence for the Game Warden—three hunks of illegal deer. Let me put it in there where it'll keep, won't you?"

Her eyes never left his face. She frowned doubtfully, and said very softly, "Now, I wonder. I know you, Johnny Jones. You'd frame God to make a case against the devil."

"And I used to think you were such a sweet girl," said Smoky sorrowfully. "Okay, Ted, but you'll be sorry."

Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe I would, at that," she declared slowly. "We've sunk a pile of dough in this ranch and you *could* make trouble for us. Of course, sweetheart, I'll be glad to keep your exhibits for you. You're such a *deah* boy, damn your eyes!"

As they were leaving the ranch, Tom looked curiously at Smoky, and said, "Now I'm ready to believe all the things I've heard about Johnny Jones."

Smoky grinned. "Ain't you sorry you didn't sing?"

"Hell, no!"

"I still like music," said the guard. "I'll bet that you and Red could sing me a duet that would make me take you down to LA right now and turn you loose at Fifth and Broadway."

"Uh-huh, and a week later they'd fish us out of the drink at San Pedro."

"I see," said Johnny. "So that's where Snuffy Baker dumps his garbage."

IT WAS after sundown when Smoky got back to headquarters and phoned the District Ranger's Office at Placerita.

Tex Mather was still there. "Yeah, Smoky. Nice work, boy, nice work."

"But it ain't finished yet," said Jones. "Can't talk much over the phone, Tex, but take my word for it—I ought to patrol Sawtooth tonight. I'll drive dark to the summit, hide my car and go it afoot from there. Big business, Tex, *big* business."

"I know enough about it to know that you're dead right, Smoky," declared the dispatcher, "but no can do a night patrol while this Hundred Percent is on. You've got to recollect that we're firemen first, then law officers. I'd try to get the Forest Law Enforcement Officer for you, but I happen to know that he's tied up on an important case. Everybody else is wearing his fire clothes and waiting for it to pop. The way the humidity is staying down at night when it ought to go up, we've practically got a twenty-four hour burning period. I'm liable to roll you any time day or night."

"But, Tex!" argued Smoky. "I think I can close this case if—"

"Yowsah, man, I know just how you feel," drawled Tex, "for I've been a cop, too. But catching and stomping crooks isn't nearly as important to the Service as catching and stomping fires. Mike is going to spend the night with you. Talk it over with him. Meanwhile, get yourself something to eat and snatch a little shuteye if you can. You'll be needing your strength, fella, and I ain't talking."

Smoky Jones slammed the receiver onto the hook. Then he stepped back, looked the phone in the eye and gave it one hell of a cussing. Afterwards, he stomped into the kitchen and went to frying Spam and hashed brown potatoes to which he'd add a setting of eggs at the proper time—he was that hungry. Also, he fixed a pot of powerful black coffee—a big pot. Mike Moran was coming. The husky Fire Control Assistant liked his coffee big and black.

The longer things fried, the better they smelled and the hungrier Smoky got. He could hardly wait. At the risk of burning the stuff, he turned his bottled gas fire higher and watched the skillet like a starving hawk. Momentarily, he forgot the night patrol that they wouldn't let him make.

Canned meat wasn't half bad when a fella knew how to slice it and fry it. There wasn't a female in California who could turn out better looking hashed browns—lots of grease the way a hungry man liked 'em. And those eggs—big, brown babies right off the hen's lap, over easy and not one of 'em broke. Somehow he got all of it onto one plate, sat down at the table, squared off and took his stance with eatin' tools. Then the phone rang!

"Yea-ah, Smoky," lazily drawled Tex Mather. "Maple Lake dump is afire. Let's roll 'em, boy!"

"On my way, Tex!"

Hot damn! This is the life. Something doing all the time. Get out of the way old men and young women, for here comes the fire wagon! Two brush rabbits and one possum tried to get out of the way and failed to make it. But a big, old horned owl mighty near wrecked the screaming fire wagon. Miscalculating its speed, he swooped like a ghost into its lights. The left windshield post caught The Tiger of the Forest, Smoky ducked and swerved and almost turned out for a bridge.

Maple Lake dump was a rubbish and garbage disposal area set aside in the forest for the accommodation of the Maple Lake settlement. The ground had been cleared to mineral earth and a large depression scooped out by a bulldozer on a natural shelf above the town on the east slope of Molly Canyon. The dump was surrounded by heavy and inflammable brush cover. At this hour of the evening the normal draft was down canyon and a stiff northeast to southwest breeze was blowing when Smoky Jones got there. The Maple Lake U. S. pumper and Suppression Crew—Foreman and five men—had pulled in just ahead of him. In addition to the force now on the fire, the Los Angeles County crew under Captain Chuck Harder would be available should the U. S. Forest Service ask for their assistance.

Although the dump was making more smoke than fire, there was grave danger that blazing paper or trash would be whipped off by the wind and fall in the canyon below, whereupon it would surely catch in the brush and boil up the rugged east slope resulting in a major disaster. Dan Halliday, Suppression Foreman, was

fully aware of the danger. He had sent out two spotters—men carrying backpack pumps and shovels, to points where they could quickly locate spot fires in the canyon or anywhere else in the brush. Meanwhile, the pump on the big Green Hornet was roaring in full voice and two nozzles from the live reels were in action. The first attack on this fire was made with spray so as to wet the surface and reduce the danger of spots into the brush. Afterwards, the dump would be attacked with solid water from the high-pressure nozzles which would tear the pile of rubbish apart and root out the fire.

Smoky Jones reported to the foreman. "Is this the best you can do in the way of a fire, Dan? A smudge in a dump! Put me to work."

Dan Halliday chuckled, and said, "Afraid I can't use you, Smoky. This is a dangerous fire. No place for green men."

The big guard laughed. "Suits me, Mister. I'm going to take a look around, then I'll radio Tex if I can pick up a look-out. Call me if you need any help in extinguishing a dead cat, or something."

SMOKY knew that next to kids with matches, spontaneous combustion was the most common cause of fires in dumps—oily rags, damp moss, grass, tules and similar rubbish. This fire evidently started in the northeast corner. He found no evidence of such deposits in the unburned trash remaining over there and was about to call it quits on this routine investigation required by Regulations, when his flashlight picked up some new footprints in loose soil that had blown against an old mattress lying at the edge of the dump. Looking closer he saw where the owner of the footprints had hunkered down on his toes there. Now, the ex-cop was really interested. Someone had recently lifted the mattress and apparently propped one corner of it on a rock. Where thus raised from the ground its lowered side was charred, but hadn't caught fire. Back under the mattress a half-burned match-stick caught Smoky's eye, also unburned portions of small dead twigs. What the devil did this mean? He sat there frowning at this evidence and trying to make some sense out of it. A fire lighted under there would be exposed to an up-

canyon draft, protected from a down-canyon wind. When so protected it would burn slowly until it had eaten its way from beneath the mattress and caught the breeze, which this fire obviously did, and that would give the incendiary plenty of time to get away from there. Of course! He should have thought of that a lot quicker.

Smoky followed the footprints a few yards to the dump road where they disappeared in a maze of tracks, then hurried back to his pickup. While getting out his radio he was hoping that Tex had alerted the Cold Springs Lookout, who would have gone off duty before the fire broke. He called and got a quick answer.

"O One Nine back to S Seven Three. Tex said I'd probably hear from you. Go ahead. Smoky."

"Thanks, George. Tell him that Dan knocked it down quick and the danger is over now. Just a long mopping up job left. And, George, tell him that it was definitely incendiary. I got the dope, all right, but we've still got the guilty guy to get. Over."

"Okay. Stand by." And a few minutes later, "Tex says, 'You're on the beam, man.' Tell Dan to check in when he goes down for a refill. You return to headquarters. Tex says we're hot tonight and getting hotter. He has pulled all lookouts out of their sacks and put 'em on duty. We go off at two a. m. if there ain't no fires by then. He says that The Eyes of The Forest don't need sleep. Over."

"Goodnight, George, and pleasant dreams. S Seven Three clear and off."

Smoky Jones stood for a moment with earphones dangling in his hand, gazing down canyon. Lights from the Baker Ranch winked slyly through trees as if they were poking fun at him, just as Teddy Baker might do after having put something over on the law. He had no logical reason to blame that outfit for this fire. Just a hunch, a feeble one at that. However, he wished that he might run that hunch down and make it put up or shut up. He'd do it, too, if he were a policeman instead of a Forest Guard. Then his eyes swept the brush-covered slopes upon either hand, towering in massive grandeur under the silvery light of a friendly moon, looking silent and deserted while actually teeming with the wildlife that made its home beneath the roof

of the chaparral; and again as always, Smoky Jones was proud to be a guardian of those mighty hills and their little people. No, he didn't want to be a cop again.

A green pickup was parked at the garage and Big Mike Moran himself was in the kitchen when Smoky got there. What's more—Mike was at the table eating with both hands.

He waved a fork at Smoky, swallowed, and said, "Hi, Ranger! Mighty nice of you to cook my supper and leave it for me. It was a little cold when I got here, but I warmed it up in the oven and it sure went down smooth and easy. Have a cup of Java with me, huh?"

Standing in the door with fists clenched on his hips, Smoky scowled down at Moran, and said, "Have a cup of Java, he says! He scoffs my food and he says to me, 'Have a cup of Java.' Of all the snide tricks I ever—!"

"Pipe down!" growled Big Mike with a grin. "You ain't hungry nohow. How's that dump fire going? Tex told me about it when I got here a little while ago. He said it was down and no sense in me going on it, so I just stayed here and kept your grub from spoiling."

Smoky laughed. "Dan knocked it down in a hurry, but he'll be rooting for fire in the garbage the balance of the night. I've got things on my mind, Mike, but wait until I check in."

After reporting to Tex, the Guard got busy cooking himself another supper, meanwhile recounting in detail all that had happened since he learned that the Baker Ranch belonged to his old acquaintances Ted and Snuffy, and he also gave Moran a brief history of the operations of that pair in the Los Angeles underworld. Big Mike helped with the cooking, listened and asked an occasional question. They were the best of friends, these big, tough men of the forest, and they had been that way ever since the time when the FCA was instructing Smoky and Dan Halliday's crew in the use of fire tools, and Smoky and Mike had words and Smoky bopped Mike. There followed a fight that promised to become a tradition in the Placerita District. Johnny Jones—six feet, one hundred ninety, and Mike Moran—five ten, two and a quarter and mostly bone and red meat, put on what Dan

called the best bare-knuckle scrap since the days of John L. Sullivan and Jake Kilraine. After they brought Johnny to with a hose and fixed Mike so he could talk, the boys shook hands and tied a knot of friendship that time had drawn tighter.

While Smoky was cracking eggs into the skillet, Mike asked, "You've got suspicions. What d'you think is cookin'?"

"Understand, Mike," answered Jones, "this may all be a pipe dream, but I think Snuffy Baker and that smart jane of his are in the meat business. I wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't got an organization with trucks and everything, operating all through the mountains within easy distance of LA. They won't fool with a two-bit racket, and if they're in it at all, they're in big. What d'you know about the meat racket in this country?"

"Plenty," said Moran. "It's going strong. We've been keeping mum, but the Forest Law Enforcement Officer together with Game Wardens and other lawmen have been working on it for quite a while. I think maybe you've got something, Smoky. You know Scotty and Bill O'Keefe who've got grazing permits on Sawtooth and Rabbit? Well, they're losing cattle and both of 'em have reported finding where beeves have been killed and gutted. We know for a fact that lots of venison has gone out of the forest and into the Los Angeles market. It's a mess, all right, but in this kind of weather our big headache—yours and mine—is fire."

"Sure," agreed Smoky, "and when these mobsters go to starting fires *they're* our headache, too, ain't they?"

"You're damned right! What are you driving at?"

Johnny flipped hot grease over his eggs. "Maybe this is another dream, but suppose Snuffy Baker has hunters spotted on Sawtooth and Rabbit and they make a big killing and want to move their meat out before daylight, so he has fires set east of here—not too far, just far enough to pull me and other Guards out of the Sawtooth-Rabbit area where his men are working. Short-handed the way we are, Tex has to roll up and leave our divisions wide open. Does that make sense to you?"

Mike's big face showed a deep frown and his teeth clenched on his pipe stem. "I'll

say it does. Looky here! A little after dusk I was over on Pine Ridge where I could look across Whiteoak Canyon here and see the Sawtooth Trail from the gate up for a mile or so. A pickup came down dark, let himself through the gate, then switched on his lights at the highway and took off. At the time I thought it was you and figured you didn't have sense enough to turn your lights on in the dark. Now, I wonder?"

"So do I. That dump fire would've been timed just right to get me away from here. I'll betcha they've just got Forest Service keys, too."

"Could be," said Moran. "It has happened before."

Smoky dished up his supper and sat down at the table. "Godamighty, this is going to taste good! I haven't been so hungry since Guadalcanal."

Mike refilled his pipe and poured himself another cup of coffee.

The phone rang!

Moran answered and listened, and, "The hell you say! . . . Mmmm . . . Huh! . . . Okay, Tex. Nice work, fella Log Smoky on Molly Canyon and me on Santiago, and we're rolling NOW!"

Smoky had gulped a cup of scalding coffee while Mike was talking, checked the gas jets on his cook stove to make sure that all were off, picked up his waterproof canvas kit bag in which Guards carried government forms and papers they were required to use, grabbed his hat and was ready to go by the time the FCA hung up. He looked longingly at the big feed he was leaving, then resolutely turned his head away.

"Two fires discovered a few minutes apart," growled Moran. "One by Coyote at the upper end of Santiago, the other by Cold Springs in lower Molly near the mouth of Pipe. I'll take Santiago. Joe Walters was taken sick half an hour ago and the relief Guard hasn't got there, so you'll have to cover the Molly fire for him. Tex says you can see it from the highway."

While heading for the garage, Mike added, "I'm thinking you're a hell of a good dreamer, Smoky. If we didn't have to go on these damned fires, I betcha we'd find good hunting on Sawtooth and Rabbit trails tonight. The way I'm feeling now, wouldn't I like for you and me to land in the middle of that meat mob!"

"Hope we live to do that little thing, Mike," said Smoky. He climbed in and kicked the starter. "Good luck, boss."

"Same to you," answered the FCA. "And remember this—you fire-happy nut. You ain't made of asbestos!"

"You should talk—you of all people!"

THE mouth of Pipe Canyon was seven miles down Molly Canyon, a wide but crooked pavement all the way and not heavily traveled. With red light on and siren screaming, Smoky gave his pickup its head. Flying past the Baker Ranch he saw that the house was dark and wondered whether Teddy and Snuffy Baker were in there, awake, listening and laughing at the way they were putting it over on him and the law. Then his thoughts turned to the fire. Ordinarily a fire that breaks at night is not difficult to control if discovery and first attack are made in time. In normal weather there is a pronounced rise in humidity after four or five o'clock in the afternoon and forest fuels don't dry out before nine or ten in the morning, consequently the so-called burning period in Southern California brush forests is from ten to four or thereabouts. However, it had been different during the past ten days. Humidity had stayed down at night and wind velocities had not dropped as they should. Tex had taken precautions accordingly with the approval, of course, of the District Ranger; and it was a good thing that he had, too, thought Smoky. With no lookouts on duty prompt discovery of these two fires would have been pure luck—reports from passing motorists or local residents, and whether by night or day no fire will loaf on the job if given time to sink its teeth into this brush cover.

Jones saw the glow on the south slope of Pipe Canyon before he rounded a curve and saw the fire itself. That was where he narrowly escaped collision with a north-bound pickup racing wide open and cutting corners at the turn in the road. While tooling his own car out of danger, he caught a glimpse of the other driver. Could that have been Slug Jarvis? It could have been—*might* have been.

Creek beds formed the bottom of both Pipe and Molly Canyons. Pipe was merely a dry wash during summer months and Molly had now been reduced to stagnant

pools at infrequent intervals up and down canyon. During flood stages a bar had formed at the junction of the two. Local residents hauled sand and gravel from there and a road pronged off from the highway, across Molly Creek and over a stretch of sand to the bar. Smoky whirled onto this road. The fire was burning to the base of the south slope of Pipe Canyon, on the far side of both creeks and he could drive to a point near it.

WHILE crossing Molly Creek bed his lights picked up something interesting and he stopped. Another car, turning around there, had missed the road and bogged in wet sand and mud near a pool. To have done that the driver must have been moving without lights or looking somewhere else. The ruts were new. Smoky quickly got out with his flashlight. Water had seeped into the ruts. He didn't have time to wait and see if it was still running, so he drew a line at water level and hurried on to the fire.

The big Guard now moved with a precision resulting from thorough training and much practice. Unbuckling the straps that held his backpack pump in its rack on the running board he squatted with his back to it, slipped his arms through its shoulder straps and arose with it in a series of quick and certain movements. Next, he snatched his long-handled shovel from its brackets on the side of the car, lifted a brush hook from the tool box and thought of a head-lamp. Wouldn't need one. Tonight the fire and the moon would give him all the light he needed.

Smoky Jones halted near the heel of the fire and took about sixty seconds to size it up. It was already too well established to be regarded as a one-man fire, consequently he had no hopes of controlling it by himself and his plan of attack was based upon the certain knowledge that he'd have the support of a follow-up very soon. No doubt Tex Mather already had something else rolling—if not a pumper and Suppression Crew, at least another Guard. The forces available for this fire would be governed by the demands of the Santiago fire which would take precedence because of the fact that it threatened an area of much higher value than this one—homes, ranches,

power lines and plants supplying Los Angeles, and a valuable watershed.

This fire had started near the dry wash in dead grass, flash fuel. From there it had spread rapidly and made a quick run to low and somewhat scattered brush on the floor of the canyon where it had slowed to a walk, since the shoulder of the north slope extended out far enough to break the force of the down-canyon wind and more or less convert it into eddies at the burning area. The steep slope above and beyond the head of the fire was the danger point. Dense brush cover from eight to twelve feet high blanketed the ridge almost without a break from there to its summit more than a mile distant and two thousand feet up. Smoky's job was to keep the fire out of that brush, off the slope until he got enough help to knock it down. Already a finger had thrust itself ahead of the line of fire and was groping for the brush, snapping, hissing, growling and rapidly building enough pressure to spot onto the slope. The tall Guard now moved around the head, a hot and dangerous place, and attacked that finger with everything he had.

At the tip of the finger a clump of six-foot brush had taken off. Flames leaped high, sucking the balance of the head and the flanks into greater activity and threatening to throw fragments of burning fuel into the heavy cover on the up-slope and start new fires that would certainly catch the wind, create winds of their own and run wild to the summit. Thus a small five-man fire might easily become a two thousand-man conflagration. Smoky aimed his initial attack at the blazing brush to cool it down, reduce the danger of spotting and enable him to move into close quarters with hand tools. He hit the flames at their base with a small stream from his backpack, then briefly sprayed fuel in the path of the fire. Water was precious, since he had only five gallons on his back and one refill in the pickup. Afterwards, he moved in as close as the intense heat would permit and went to throwing dirt with his shovel—fast, grueling work, loose soil and sand thrown with force and accuracy, sometimes aimed at a distant hot spot and thrown with an over-hand motion so that a shovelful was concentrated on a small area striking down flame and knocking it loose from its fuel

by force of impact, again thrown with a side-arm sweep that spread dirt on a wider front and knocked down less vigorous flames before they got their growth. Continuous, man-killing work, for fire won't stop to rest and the man dare not. In order to be an effective weapon dirt must be thrown fast—one shovel after another as rapidly as possible, each flung with every ounce of strength at the firefighter's command. Smoky Jones was a master shovel man. His long, heavily muscled arms, big shoulders, powerful legs and magnificent stamina made of a shovel a mighty weapon in this deadly in-fighting with fire.

THE clump of brush cooled down. Though the fire wasn't dead, it had sustained a knockdown and would need time to get to its feet again; but, while the flames were taking a count, Smoky Jones dare not go to a neutral corner for a breath of air and a sip of water. Instead, he went to work with his brush hook. This cutting tool was like a single-bitted ax with an elongated blade tapering to a dull point at its forward end and curved downward like a hawk's beak, a heavy and effective fire weapon in the hands of a strong man. Just ahead of the burning clump of brush stood a big buckthorn. Armed by vicious thorns its long branches reached out and down as if to catch the fire and lift it up the slope, while six feet above the buckthorn grew a bulky chemise—a species of greasewood, highly inflammable, dangerous fuel. Fire in that chemise would mean fire all over the mountain.

The big Guard stepped in where his clothes went to smoking. With a few quick upward strokes he lopped off the buckthorn branches whose barbs kept him from reaching its base, then drove the blade into the trunks of the bush as if it were his mortal enemy. A few perfectly timed strokes and it was down. He flung the thing over his head of fire and far back into the burn. Smoky wanted to rest now, needed fresh air and a cooling breeze, needed it bad. A breath of wind eddied through the fire. Ashes, smoke and heat rolled over him and up the slope. He jerked his red and streaming eyes to the brush above, looking for spots. Then he slapped out a burning hole on the sleeve of his shirt and went to work

on the chemise. A moment later it, too, was thrown back into the burn where it could do no harm. The clump of brush at the tip of the finger could burn itself out now. Nothing within reach of it. He sprayed it with a little water to keep it from burning with sufficient force to throw spots, then switched his attention to the balance of the head.

No rest for Smoky Jones, but he could take it and his readiness and ability to do so had earned him his nickname. This little fire was fingering badly. Hot-spotting similar to what he had just gone through kept him running up and down the line, a slug-ging match with fire in which there was no referee and no timekeeper. From his nose and mouth to the bottom of his lungs he was afire. His eyebrows were scorched off. His lips were raw and blistered. Chills raced along his spine, caused by overheating. Muscles twitched and knotted in his legs and from time to time he staggered, but Smoky Jones stayed on his feet and violated all the Service Safety Regulations as he slugged it out with the fire.

The husky Guard somehow held the line until Dan Halliday got there with his pumper and crew. Dan was delayed because Tex had to send a messenger from the County Station to pull him off the dump, then he had to go down for a refill before making his run to the fire.

While his boys were running out two lines of hose, Dan hollered at Smoky above the roar of the pump, "You're a mess, boy! Go and lie down. We don't need you now. After you kept it out of the big stuff the way you did, this little smudge is a push-over for us. We'll be mopping up in ten minutes."

"If Tex releases me, Dan," asked Smoky, "will you get all the dope for the Fire Report?"

"Sure will! You go home and hit the hay."

Smoky Jones had no intention of doing that, but he didn't say so. Instead, he went and got his radio and carried it out onto the bar to a point where he could see the lighted windows of the lookout tower on Cold Springs Mountain.

When the lookout answered his call, he said, "Tell Tex that Dan is here and says he'll be mopping up in ten minutes. Dan

will get the stuff for the Fire Report. Says he doesn't need me. Ask Tex for my release. I've got important business that I can't talk about on the air. Tell him that it won't take me long, then back to headquarters. Over."

A few moments later the lookout came back, "Tex says that judging by my reports, and I had my glass on you, it strikes him that you made a mighty fine fight to hold that fire. Congratulations, he says. Tex wants me to tell you that he orders you to wrap up that business of yours quick and go home and go to bed. Over."

Smoky Jones smiled grimly to himself. "Tell Tex that if I'm able to wrap up this business at all, it will be done quick and complete. How's things on Santiago? Over."

"Not so good. Coyote told me that it's mighty hot and stubborn and Mike has been ordering up more stuff. They'll be lucky to hold it to first period."

THE big Guard moistened his burning lips with his tongue, sat there holding the mike, thinking hard . . . Food, dope for his burns, bed. He sure needed 'em! But Old Santiago was burning and the boys over there needed help . . . Hell's bells! What're we waiting for?

"S Seven Three back to O One Nine. Look, George. Ask Tex if he don't think I'd better finish my business, then go and report to Mike on Santiago. Over."

Pretty soon, "O One Nine back. Tex says tell you that orders is orders and he ain't got time to repeat 'em. Over."

Smoky signed off and climbed into his pickup with his jaw set. *This damned outfit!* he thought. *Keep a guy tied down at headquarters until he gets as stale as a goat. Nuts!*

He stopped where that car had bogged and got out with his flashlight. The ruts were three-fourths filled with water now, proving that they were made shortly before he discovered them. He picked up a handful of mud and sand from the point where the car's differential had dragged and took it with him.

Smoky Jones was aware that what he now intended to do might easily cost him his job. He knew that a lowly Guard in the U. S. Forest Service was a fool to throw his weight around. The higher-ups were mighty

cautious in their dealings with public, expert diplomats—had to be as a result of antagonism toward most Federal agencies, and they'd look with dangerous disapproval upon a tough cop's tough way of handling a tough situation. They themselves might want to do it that way, but they'd have more sense than to try it. He didn't.

Smoky knew what was expected of him. Unless he caught a man committing a crime and arrested him on the spot he was supposed to turn his facts and suspicious over to Mike Moran, who would give the dope to the District Ranger, who would hand it to the Supervisor's office, whereupon they'd slip it to the Forest Law Enforcement Officer and that over-worked official would handle it in the order of its importance, and since he had to cover so much territory this case might land pretty well down the list of important things demanding his attention. Moreover, the Federal legal machinery available to the Forest Service was ponderous, slow-moving and overloaded. Johnny Jones' experience with crooks like Snuffy Baker and his mob had taught him that they required a special treatment—direct, quick and not *too* legal. Their money could buy legal talent fit to lick the law itself.

A mighty good man, this Forest Law Officer, but he couldn't get away with the things that a city policeman could pull when in pursuit of criminals. He had to be strictly legal and proper and on the up-and-up about everything he did. True—most crimes committed in a National Forest were punishable by some County Ordinance or State Law and the Forest Law Officer could take his offenders before local courts to save time. Usually that's all he'd accomplish, too. Uncle Sam doesn't vote in local elections and the offender probably does. The voters who elect State and County officials are glad to have the old guy with the whiskers establish and maintain vast facilities for their pleasure, convenience and protection—they'll squawk until he does—but when one of their number gives the old boy a kick in the pants and a Federal Officer presents the kicker to a local judge, the crime against Uncle Sam's property is too often brushed off with a two-bit fine, and the implied admonition, "Go and sin some more."

Smoky Jones figured that this deal was strictly his headache. By the time the For-

est Law Officer could get the deadwood on these crooks and pry up some action, Snuffy Baker would've died a natural death or been rubbed out and Teddy would have gotten herself another man and another racket. Somebody had to stop the setting of fires in the forest—*now, tonight*—regardless of whether he had definite clues or legal rights to back him up, and Johnny Jones was the patsy elected to do that little thing or try to do it and get fired for trying. But what the hell! A man has got to do his job, even if he loses his job while doing it.

He'd ought to have help, though. Ordinarily he wouldn't think of barging into a situation like this without it, for Johnny neither thought himself a superman nor had any ambition to be one. However, with two fires going and others likely to break at any moment, he wouldn't ask Tex for help. But there was one thing he simply had to have—a witness. Police work had taught him the value of reliable witnesses, since the hardest battles against crime are usually fought in court, and it would be plain foolish for him to tangle with the Baker bunch tonight without an honest man on the scene who later would tell the truth about what was said and done. Driving up the highway he noticed that lights were on at the Herrick place and wondered why, at this time of night. Billy Herrick would make a fine witness, a man who had lived in the community all his life, known to be honest and not afraid to speak his piece.

SMOKY stopped there. Herrick was awakened by the sirens, saw the glow down canyon, got dressed and was waiting to see whether it showed signs of getting worse before going to offer his services on the fire.

"We're sure much obliged to you, Billy," said the Guard, "but they've got all they need on that fire. You can do me a big favor, though."

A stocky, middle-aged man with a rugged face, Herrick had a sense of humor. "You want I should work you over with a brush and a bar of strong soap, lard and horse linament. You need all that and more."

Smoky grinned. "What I need most is a witness. I'm about to boil down on one of your neighbors and I want an honest man there to see and hear what goes on. It may

not be pleasant. Will you go with me and hide in my tool box until the fracas is over?"

"Who is this neighbor?"

"Baker."

"Huh!" snorted Herrick. "Wouldn't mind boiling over on that outfit myself and I've heard others in the canyon say the same, or worse. I ain't afraid of Baker. Why d'you want me to hide in your tool box?"

"They're smart, bigtime city crooks," answered Jones, "and they won't talk if I have a witness with me, but they may let something slip if you're not in sight."

"What have they done that *you* know about?"

Johnny laughed. "The way you said that, Billy, would indicate that they've done things that I *don't* know about, and I'll bet they have—plenty. Tonight I'm accusing them of setting fires in the forest."

"What? Why the dirty—!"

"On top of that, I think they're poaching and stealing cattle," said the Guard. "In plain English—I think they're operating a meat racket on a big scale. But, Billy, I can't prove a damned thing yet, and you may hear or see something that will help me."

"Why in hell don't we get started, Ranger?" growled Herrick. "Wait a minute."

He hurried into another room and came back with a long-barreled Frontier Model Colt. "Here's an old hogleg that my dad always said could talk mighty strong language when it was riled. Mind if I take it along for luck?"

"Wish you would," said Smoky grimly. "That's the kind of luck I like to have with me when I'm messing with Snuffy Baker's mob."

WHEN they came in sight of the Baker Ranch its windows were dark. Still almost a mile away, Smoky switched off his lights and drove slowly by the light of a full moon until he came to a small parking space on the outside shoulder, marked "Smoking Area." Ranch headquarters buildings were down in the canyon less than three hundred yards ahead. Where he stopped the road was a dug-away and his car was so high above the house as to render it unlikely that anyone down there would spot it.

"We'll stop here for a while just to see

what we can see," said the Guard. "You'll remember that the Sawtooth Truck Trail gate is a little ways up this road beyond the house. I'm sure they've got Forest Service keys and I think these fires tonight were intended to pull us away from the Sawtooth-Rabbit area so they'd be taking no chances when they trucked out meat. Maybe they've already come down, but let's wait a little while and see."

"Suits me," said Herrick. "The longer you let me stay out of that two-by-six tool box, the better I'll like it."

They had a smoke and waited. Meanwhile, Jones kept an eye on the Baker place and twice saw people moving around down there in the moonlight. He was getting discouraged and about to give it up when a truck rolled down to the gate and stopped.

"Looky yonder!" exclaimed Herrick. "No lights. He's coming through and he stopped to close the gate behind him. Got a key, sure enough."

"Yeah," said Smoky, "and he has driven that truck trail ten or fifteen miles without lights. Otherwise some lookout would have picked him up. I'll betcha the driver is a fella who knows that narrow and crooked road like the palm of his hand. Well, we'll soon see. He's coasting down to the Baker driveway. We'll give him time to get home, then we'll go and call on that mob. Better climb into the tool box, Billy, and make yourself comfortable."

It was a tight fit, but Herrick made it and closed the tool box lid. Then Johnny took an old shirt, cut eyeholes in it and had Billy pull it over his head to hide the white of his face when he raised the lid enough to look out.

"Now, hang on because I'm going in there fast," said Smoky. "Want to catch 'em flatfooted if we can."

The driveway into Baker Ranch headquarters was a semi-circular affair that left the main highway north of the house and returned to it at a point south. Johnny started his motor, switched on his lights and took off like any other car speeding up the highway. He sped down the ranch entrance, his headlamps lighting up the place, and slammed on his brakes in the yard thirty feet from the house. A pickup was parked on his left. On his right, backed up to the cold room doors, stood a large stake-side

truck—the one that came down Sawtooth and through the gate. Two men were removing the endgate from the truck—Slug Jarvis and George Simpson, the ranch manager!

A third man stood nearby—Snuffy Baker, a tall, slender, distinguished appearing man in his thirties, smooth shaven, wavy blond hair and the coldest blue eyes in California—so Johnny had always thought. Baker's thin face didn't show any symptoms of unusual intelligence, but it did show an almost total absence of feeling for man or beast. He was dressed in a twenty-dollar sport shirt, forty-dollar slacks, and sandals protected the soles of his silk-clad feet. He didn't show any particular concern, but the other men did and instantly stopped what they were doing. Simpson hastily tossed a canvas cover back into place where it had been removed from the read end of the load.

Smoky had just stepped out of his car when Teddy Baker emerged from the kitchen door, dressed in ravishing Chinese pajamas with slippers to match. "Why, Johnny!" she exclaimed. What-ever has happened to you?"

"It ain't a circumstance to what's going to happen to some other people," snapped Smoky. "Turn on your floodlight."

"Why?"

"Turn it on!"

"Ok-kay, hard guy." She reached inside the door and snapped a switch, flooding the premises with light. "Oh, I know. You like this outfit and you want to get a better look at me—huh?"

"Nuts!"

Meanwhile, Snuffy Baker ambled over to meet the Guard, accompanied by Slug Jarvis. George Simpson climbed into the truck cab and sat there with the door open and his feet hanging out.

"Jones, I don't like the way you're ordering my wife around," said Baker in his hard, quiet voice. "Watch your lip!"

"Save it, Snuffy!" said Johnny sharply. "Where's that pantywaist torpedo of yours who was with Slug in the Cad this morning—inside?"

"Yes."

"Call him out here."

A faintly startled expression had flashed briefly in Baker's hard eyes. Johnny Jones

scarcely noticed it, though. Something more important than that had suddenly struck him. Having remembered the effeminate voice and appearance of Slug's companion, without thinking he had called the fellow a pantywaist. That word jostled old memories. Before the war he had seen this man in the LA Police lineup—Panty Wilson, a gunnie, a killer, and although he had never personally tangled with the crook he did know a lot about the man's record. He was dangerous—suspected of being a hophead. When Wilson presently joined the group he was wearing a sportcoat, although the night was too warm for a coat, and the right skirt of the camel's hair garment hung lower than its left. Of course, a padded pocket hid the outlines of the gun. They were now gathered where Herrick could see and hear everything that went on, and a glance told Smoky that the tool box lid was cracked open and his witness on the job.

"Now, I've got business with you folks," the Guard told them. "I'm not armed. I'm here in the performance of my duties as a Forest Officer. In case any of you get ideas—I notified the District Ranger's Office that I was coming here and they know why. If I don't go away from here under my own power there'll be hell to pay and Uncle Sam will know who to collect from. For your information, resisting or interfering with me carries a fine of Five Thousand and three years or both, and if a dangerous weapon is used it's Ten Grand and a ten-year rap. I wanted you to know that, just in case."

With a sneer faintly visible on his thin face, Baker said quietly, "You could have saved your breath. Before we came here I had my lawyer look up all that stuff. He told me—"

Teddy took him by the arm, "Let the Ranger do the talking, honey. He ain't pretty to look at tonight and he smells like smoked meat and he's getting tough with us, but I do love to listen to him. Of course, if he accuses us of crimes that he can't pin on us, I'll get him fired. We're big taxpayers, you know. Please go on, Johnny boy."

"Stay where you are, all of you," ordered Smoky. "Want to show you something."

He walked quickly to the pickup belong-

ing to Baker. Lying down, he reached underneath and took off some of the mud and sand that he found on the differential and driveshaft housings where they had obviously dragged. It had happened recently, too, for the stuff was still soft. There was similar material on the rear wheels and fenders. Smoky went to his car and got the mud he had taken at the creek. With a specimen in each hand, he examined them briefly under the light.

Afterwards, he went back to the group, and asked, "Does that pickup belong to you, Snuffy?"

"Yes," answered Baker. "Simpson uses it all the time here on the ranch."

"He wasn't using it tonight," declared the Guard. "He's a skinny little guy and the man who was driving it a short time ago was big and dark like Slug. I saw him and I think it *was* Slug. Look here."

OPENING his right hand, he said, "This dirt came from the differential of your pickup, and this in my other hand came from where a car was stuck near where a fire broke out a little while ago."

Smoky held his hands together, the better to compare the two specimens.

"So what?" grunted Jarvis.

"Just this," answered Jones curtly. "With the help of a police chemist, I can prove that Baker's car was on the scene at, or near, the time a brush fire broke, even though I couldn't make anything out of the tread in that soft sand. This evidence won't convict anybody in court, but it will be a big help when I drag in a lot of other things to go with it."

Baker's face showed no emotion whatever. A tricky little smile tormented the corners of Teddy's pretty mouth. Panty Wilson's lids had drawn down as if he were falling asleep. Slug's hairy fists were clenched on his hips. Obviously he was hoping for trouble.

Teddy spoke up sweetly, "I presume, dearest, that you'll drag in things which you manufactured yourself."

Using himself as bait, so to speak, Smoky Jones hoped to prod one or more of these crooks into an explosion so as to get something on them other than the meat racket, which might or might not send them to jail and get them out of the forest. He was

pretty sure that the contents of the truck would cinch the meat business, unless money talked too loud as it so often did in these racket cases. He could well imagine them going down, making bail, coming back and continuing as if nothing had happened. Fires were the unsolved problem and he had to get the solution tonight, *somehow*.

"Yes, I'll manufacture things if I need 'em to get a conviction," admitted the Guard, "for I know that you've been setting fires. You're guilty as hell, all of you, and ought to be sent up. If I can't do it *one* way, I *can* do it another. I'll fight you with your own crooked weapons."

Snuffy Baker spoke up then, his cold, hard voice heavy with scorn, and although Teddy jerked his arm and told him to be quiet, he said what he had to say, "Look, Jones. You used to be a hard copper and you caused me a lot of trouble, but you can't do it now. You've slipped until you're just a sagebrush dick. In fact, you ain't even a dick, for you spend most of your time at common labor and the dough you get for doing it wouldn't buy my custom-made cigarettes. Take a look at yourself. Crummy! Get tough with me and I'll snuff you out and beat the rap in court. I've got the jack to do it."

While watching this immaculate crook and listening to him, Smoky Jones *did* mentally take a look at himself—shirt in tatters and the skin beneath it jabbed, scratched and blistered, and his face streaked and smudged by sweat, ashes and smoke—sunken cheeks, eyebrows burned off, lips puffed and raw, hungry, dog-tired and dirty; and he thought of the men working the Santiago fire, some in a worse plight than himself, perhaps, and his anger flamed like a flareback on the fire line. He held it in check for the moment, however.

No doubt encouraged by Baker's attitude, Slug Jarvis demanded, "Let's see that stuff again."

Smoky opened his hands, held them out.

"Huh! Evidence—hell!" With a quick upward slap, Jarvis struck the Guard's hands. The specimens flew in all directions, hopelessly mixed, of no further value as evidence even if he had wanted to use them.

The bottled-up rage within Smoky Jones exploded in a blow that knocked Slug flat, followed a split-second later by another

that seemed likely to tear Panty Wilson's head from his thin neck—in the nick of time, too, for a palm-size automatic slipped from the mobster's hand as he fell. Jones stepped over there quickly and kicked it away, glad that Billy Herrick had no doubt seen it.

Teddy was whispering eagerly to Snuffy Baker. He folded his arms and they moved back a few steps.

Smoky turned his bloodshot eyes on them. "Smart girl, Teddy. You're keeping him out of this. I wish he was in it. Now watch what I'm going to do to the dirty crook who's setting fires for you, Baker."

Snuffy's thin lips moved slightly in a sardonic grin. "I'll get a kick out of this. You won't prove anything and it'll get you fired."

In her smoky contralto, Teddy Baker said, "I think you're blowing your top, Johnny, dear. You've already killed Panty Wilson."

"Hope so," muttered the Guard.

He moved ahead to meet Slug Jarvis' rush. Smoky Jones was giving away twenty pounds, but Slug had in effect given away more than that by years of fast living. There was nothing clean and no sportsmanship about the fight that followed. The crook knew and employed the dirty tricks of underworld fighting, while Smoky knew and put to use these and others that the Marines and Japs had taught him, together with some of his own invention. It was a ripping, crunching, grisly thing—this fight, and it raged five minutes without a pause. At the end of that time Slug Jarvis was on the ground, arms hugging his middle, moaning and twisting and gurgling, his face literally beaten until it no longer resembled a face.

Smoky Jones mopped blood from his nose and mouth with a handkerchief. He turned on the Bakers. Snuffy's impassive features looked to be frozen that way. He had no feeling for his men. It was well known but never proven, that he'd shoot one down without a second thought. Teddy Baker was plain shocked, speechless, her eyes wide and staring and her lips ajar.

Smoky's shirt had been ripped off. His big arms and chest were smeared with his own blood and that of his antagonist. His ribs rose and fell as he gulped air, then he said hoarsely, "From now on, that's what

happens to men who start fires in this forest. With your money and slick lawyers you can dodge the pen, Baker, but you can't dodge a beating. You'd better pray that no more fires break in this part of the forest. Unless it's known for certain that something or somebody else started the fire, I'll run you down and beat you to death. The licking Slug is taking would *kill* you!"

The girl cried out, "Johnny Jones, you're a beast! Look at Slug! I'd rather see a man shot! Damn your soul, get to hell away from here!"

BAKER spoke up then, his voice as calm and unruffled as his appearance, "I'll remember your threats, Jones. Any jury will say that your fists are dangerous weapons. I'll protect myself with other weapons that are maybe a little more dangerous. You've done enough damage for one night. Get out!"

"I'm not through here yet," grimly said the Guard, "not by a damned sight!"

Slug Jarvis had staggered to his feet. When Smoky turned he was opening the long, pointed blade of a pocket knife. Jones whipped over a vicious left that flung the crook back against the truck, then forward onto his face. Johnny twisted the knife out of his hand, lifted him to his feet and leaned him against the stakeside.

"Had enough, Jarvis?"

Slug gasped, "You—you're killing me!"

"Come clean then!" growled Smoky.

"You set that fire tonight, didn't you? Talk!"

The big crook's head wobbled at the end of his neck. He fixed his one useable eye on Baker. "Are you . . . going to stand there . . . and let him—?"

"Of course he is!" snapped Johnny. "You know Snuffy Baker. You know that he doesn't give a damn for anybody but himself. Far as he's concerned, you're just shark bait. What about that fire? Talk!"

Smoky cocked his big, bloody fist. "Guess you haven't had enough, so I'll just—"

"Wait!" coughed Jarvis. "Baker's orders! Damn him, he—!"

Johnny didn't hear the balance of it. He whirled swinging as he turned. From the side of his eye he had seen Baker tugging at his hip pocket while Teddy struggled desperately to hold onto his arm. His blow



caught the mobster in the chest. It drove him backward with the girl hanging to his arm. Smoky was right on top of him, but he had struck Teddy in the face with his left fist and got his gun free. The Guard lashed downward at his gun-hand. The automatic exploded a yard from Johnny's knees, its bullet plowed gravel between his feet. A short, jolting right flung Snuffy Baker to the ground. He rolled over and sat up groggily.

"Thanks, Teddy," panted Jones. "You sure saved my bacon."

Apparently she didn't hear him. Holding a tissue to her cheek where his fist landed, she glared scornfully down at Baker. After allowing a moment for his head to clear, she told him in a soft contralto, "All right, big shot! You wouldn't listen to me, so this sagebrush dick—as you called him, has out-smarted you. He has pinned your beautiful ears back. He had a witness planted in the tool box on his car. I tumbled just before you got tough and tried to tell you, but you—wise guy!—you won't listen. So I'm through, washed up with you. It's all yours, sweetheart. Take it away!"

Baker got up shakily. "Why, you—I'll!"

"No you won't!" snapped Smoky. "I'm arresting you on so many different charges it will take time to make a list of 'em. You're my prisoner, Baker. Behave yourself!"

Then he called out, "Come here, Billy, will you?"

First a long-barreled Forty-five, then Billy Herrick came out of the pickup tool box. Walking stiffly, he grinned, and said, "Nice work, Ranger. For a little while there, though, I sure thought my dad's old hogleg would get a chance to do some kicking."

The Guard placed Slug Jarvis and George Simpson under arrest, turned a hose on Panty Wilson and woke him up—not badly injured, and arrested him also. Afterwards, he and Herrick inspected the loaded truck and cold room. Each contained beef and venison, all skinned out so that ownership of the beeves could not be established.

When pinned down, George Simpson talked his head off, giving as an excuse for his crimes the fact that he was only taking



orders from the man who paid his wages. Having lived in these mountains all his life, it was he who planted Baker's hunters and arranged for pack animals to carry their kills to truck trails where cars could pick up the meat.

Johnny loaded Jarvis and Baker in the truck cab, which he himself would drive, and put Wilson and Simpson into his pickup with Herrick. Standing near the kitchen door and still holding a handkerchief to her bruised cheek, Teddy Baker watched all this without comment.

When ready to leave, Smoky went over there. "Well, so long, Teddy. Hate to carry off all your men folks this way."

She smiled, put her hand on his arm, and said very softly, "Know something, Johnny? I think I'm glad to get rid of them. But, ain't you going to take me, too?"

"No, Ted," said Smoky dryly, "I'm mighty sorry, but, as usual, I know you're a she-devil who ought to be hung and I haven't got a damned thing on you. Good night."

"I love you, Johnny Jones, *I do!*"

AFTER lodging his prisoners and evidence in the Placerita jail, filing charges and making a full report to the District Ranger, Smoky Jones returned to his Whiteoak Canyon headquarters. Rawhide Reagan and Tex Mather had given him orders to pull the switch on his phone and sleep until he woke up.

A hot bath was a big help to both his muscles and his spirits. Nevertheless, he climbed out of the tub feeling that he had lost his best friend—his job. That damned Teddy Baker would get him fired. If his charges failed to stand up in court, and well they might when attacked by some of the slickest lawyers in the business, she'd have all the ammunition she needed. More than once while he was on the Police Force this smart dame almost framed him into a serious jam when she didn't have nearly as much on him as she'd have now. Oh, well, so he had stuck his neck out. So what? Maybe he had to put a stop to setting fires for a while, anyhow. Smoky was too tired to eat more than a cold snack. Afterwards, he switched off his phone so as not to be disturbed by rings for other stations on this Forest party line, then fell

into bed, mentally and physically exhausted.

Eventually he awoke and glanced at his watch. . . . Four o'clock. . . . Groggy with sleep, he rolled his head on the pillow and looked through a bedroom window. . . . The sun beating down on the garage. Iris and petunias and other flowers that he had planted and cared for wilting in the heat. In shade on the rock wall behind the garage a brilliant bluejay with wings drooping and beak open. A gorgeous gray squirrel hanging head-downward on the trunk of a nearby pine cussing the jay in a voice that was listless for him. Must be mighty hot out there. They were old friends of Smoky's, these two, and he knew them by name. The jay was Captain Henry Morgan because he loved flashy clothes and was a pirate who shamelessly stole from other birds. The squirrel was Daniel Boone because he was forever exploring the woods for no particular reason, and never went out of his way to dodge a cuss fight.

Three bluebirds fluttered to Smoky's windowsill, cocked their heads inquiringly and looked in. Curious little devils—they were Tom, Dick and Harry, probably wondering what had happened to the bread crumbs that he usually put out for them. He had known them since they first tried their wings in his yard. In fact, he had helped to build the nest in which they were hatched, for he hung pieces of string on a convenient limb so that their mother might carry them off for use in her building operations. Cute little cusses, those birds.

As he lay there looking out through heavy lids, Dinny ran across the yard. Dinny was an out-sized horned toad with a row of huge spines from neck to tail and some purple on him, so named because a dinosaur was the ugliest thing Smoky could think of. Dinny would run like a fool until you caught him. Once captured he'd lay blissfully in your palm and lift and roll his head and open his toothless mouth when you scratched his back, and he'd tilt up onto his side so you could tickle his ribs and belly. One day a while back, Smoky watched Dinny get out of a mighty tight spot. A visiting tomcat caught him, tried to bite him and bit down on a sharp spine, then went to batting him around here and yonder with its paw. The situation looked bad for Dinny. Smoky was about to interfere when

the tomcat sent the horned toad rolling over and over into a little pile of small rocks, whereupon Dinny shut his eyes and froze and looked exactly like a rock. The tomcat looked everywhere, actually touched him without discovering that he wasn't a rock. Dinny sure had nerve to be able to stay perfectly still with a tomcat breathing down his neck like that.

These little things and many others were Smoky's friends and neighbors, for this was home. Home! That word snapped him out of his stupor. Home, hell! It wouldn't be home much longer. Soon he getting fired. Teddy Baker would get him fired.

The big Guard rolled out of bed. It hurt him like hell to move, but he made it to the phone in the living room.

He called the Dispatcher. "Awake at headquarters, Tex. Thanks for the shut-eye."

"Yeah, Smoky. How're you feeling now?"

"Never felt better in my life," lied the Guard. "How's Santiago?"

"We were lucky on that one," answered Mather. "Held it to twenty acres. Mike just got home and hit the sack."

"Any dope on how it started?"

"Not a thing," replied Tex. "It broke at the road. A match tossed out of a car or a dozen other things might have touched it off. No tracks or clues."

"The old story, eh?"

"Yep," continued the Dispatcher. "Oh, by the way—Dan Halliday had a long pow-wow with the boss on the phone and Rawhide told me that Dan said, in all his twen-

ty-five years in the Service he had never seen a one-man fight that could tie what you did on that Pipe Canyon fire. Dan told the boss that if it hadn't been for you we might have lost ten thousand acres. As it was, we lost one—just one measly acre. That ought to perk you up a little, fella."

"Uh-huh, it does, but—"

"Oh, shore," drawled Tex Mather. "You're a-feelin' mighty low-w-w. Well, maybe this will give you a lift. The boss just got back from LA and the Supervisor's Office."

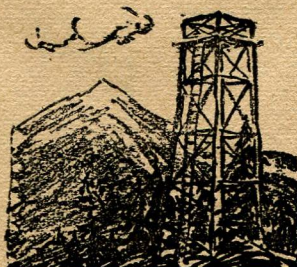
"I can't talk much now, but—man, you done pried up something powerful big. It was spreading all over San Berdoo and Pacific Forests, but they think you've handed it a knockout wallop and they're fixing to fight it from hell to breakfast. The Supervisor and the boss will be up to see you tomorrow. I think, Smoky me lad—I ain't noways shore, understand, but I'm thinkin' we'll lose you."

"Huh? What say? Well—I expected to get fired."

Smoky heard Tex chuckle around his pipe stem. "Fired, fiddlesticks! You're be getting a bigger job—law enforcement somewhere or other."

Smoky Jones needed about five seconds to catch his breath. Then he beefed, "Won't take it. Want to stay here. But look, Tex! When in hell are you going to lift this Hundred Percent so a man can get out and patrol his—"

A chuckle and a click spoiled a perfectly good beef.



*When the Pro Gunsels Are After
You, You Don't See It Or Hear
It—You Just Get It!*

THREE DEAD SCRIBBLERS

By
ANDREW HOLT

AT THE last moment, just inside the door of Leo's Steak and Chop House, the Hat wished he hadn't come. He didn't want a drink and he didn't want to talk. But it was too late. Max had already swiveled on his barstool and beckoned.

And when an editor beckons, a reporter answers. He picked his way across the room, slid wearily onto the stool next to Max's and gestured to the bartender for the usual.

"What's new?" he asked without interest. Max shrugged.

"A couple more cops have gone crazy. For once, I don't blame them. The biggest jailbreak in years and a sensational triple murder in the same week is even a little too much for me. Did you go down to see Joe Barnard's body?"

"Yeah." And then, because Max seemed to expect something more. "He was dead. Like Fuller and McEvoy . . . and everybody else in the morgue." His drink arrived. He picked it up and gulped at it.

"He was a nice kid."

"Yeah."

There was a silence.

"Oh," said Max, "I forgot. There's a dame to see you. I brought her down here from the office."

The Hat watched him warily. Max never forgot anything unless it was intentional.

"She's waiting in the last booth, in back,"



Max continued blandly. "Go ahead. She looks like more fun than anything that ever comes to see me."

SHE was a very pretty girl. Flamboyantly pretty, the way the Hat liked them—with bright, blonde hair and loud, blue eyes and a figure with the frank femininity of a Varga drawing. But now, after she had talked uninterruptedly for five minutes, he surveyed her without admiration.

"What I am supposed to do?" he demanded.

The girl said nothing, continued to look at him. He squirmed under her eyes and cast a glare of indignation across the restaurant to the bar where his city editor sat, smug, safe from this useless pity, this uncomfortable frustration in the face of an appeal. Damn Max, anyway.

"But why *me*?"

"I read about you," she told him. "You have caught murderers before when the police couldn't."

"You read too much." He took a swallow of his drink. "Sure you won't have one?"

She shook her head. He saw the disappointment in her face and wished that he was as cynical as reporters were supposed to be, wished that it was Max sitting here, telling her, sure, her boy friend had been murdered, but that was that, nothing could be done about it.

"Look," he said, "I know what you expected me to be. One of those miraculous movie amateurs who step in, squelch the moronic cops with a few well-chosen wisecracks and clear everything up with a flash of brilliant deduction. I'm not like that. I've never taken a gun away from a gunsel or listened to a master criminal confess just to while away the time before he shot me. I'm a reporter. Once or twice, I've stumbled on a piece of information that nobody else happened to fall over, that's all. This is different. This is the kind of thing that will be solved by police routine—if it is solved."

"If?" She refused to let herself think it. "The police are incompetent, your own paper said so this morning, in the editorial."

He grinned at her and patted her hand, then reassuringly: "I told you, you read too much. We have to fill up the paper some-

how and it's always a red-letter day when we can lynch a cop. But this time they're not to blame. They're doing what they can. It isn't their fault it isn't much."

He wondered why telling her the simple truth made him feel like such a heel.

"Look," he said, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound cynical. If there was anything I could do, I'd do it, even without your asking me. I'm a reporter and that ties me up with other reporters. When three of them get bumped, I feel it the way a cop feels it when a cop gets killed and, I guess, the way a milkman would feel if a milkman got his. But there isn't anything I can do."

There was only disbelief in her eyes. He flushed under it, damned Max again for shoving her onto him, and tried to explain.

"In most murders, it's the motive that hangs the killer," he told her. "The police find it and go on from there. But in this case, there isn't any. Three men were killed—except for the fact that they were all reporters, they had absolutely nothing in common. One of them was a political expert, one of them was on the night shift in the pressroom behind police headquarters and one of them was the rawest kind of a cub. They didn't even work for the same paper. Fuller was middle-aged, respectable, married; McEvoy was a well-known drunk; and your friend Joe Barnard was fresh out of school with the dew still on his crew cut and his saddle shoes. Unless somebody just doesn't like reporters. . . ."

"You don't believe that," she said flatly. "It's like something in a picture. It's too . . ."

He finished it for her. "Corny. I'm with you. I don't believe it. But where does that get us? Individual motives are no good, because we have to account for three killings. If they had only been working on the same story . . ." He shrugged.

"There must be something," she insisted.

HE SHOOK his head. "There's nothing else but the actual shootings and they make the cutest blind alley you ever ran into. Three guys shot down in the early hours of the morning, three nights in a row. One on Riverside Drive in front of his girl's apartment house, one across the street from his own hotel, and one in Morningside Park.

No witnesses, not even an old lady who thinks she heard a shot. All of them dead when found so they couldn't tell anybody anything." He took a deep breath and sat staring into his glass.

"The gun," she said at last, "I thought the police could trace a gun from the bullets."

"Oh, sure," said the Hat. "I forgot about modern science. They were all shot by a 9-mm Luger. So what? If the cops found the gun they could prove the bullets were fired from it—maybe. But the killer has been smart enough not to ditch it, so they won't find it."

It rolled right off her mind. "You mean nobody's doing *anything*?" she demanded bitterly.

"Oh, sure," said the Hat again. "The cops are searching sewers, dragging in hoods and asking questions, and stirring up the stool pigeons. . . ." He let it trail off and took a gulp of his drink. There was a long silence. Then she touched his arm gently.

"Listen," she said. Under the bright lipstick, her mouth was soft and vulnerable. "Joe Barnard wasn't my boy friend . . . not the way you meant, anyway. If he was, maybe I wouldn't have nerve enough to pester you like this because it would be asking a personal favor. He was just a kid I liked. I can't make any speeches about justice and stuff. I never thought about it until now. But if they don't catch that gangster who escaped from Sing Sing last week, it's all right with me. If Mortimer K. Jones comes home and finds Mrs. Mortimer K. with the iceman and lets them have it with an axe, it won't keep me awake nights. But nobody can kill a kid like Joe and get away with it. If you knew how thrilled he was to be a reporter, and all the plans he had, and how . . ."

"You're a nice girl," the Hat said.

She brushed his hand from her arm impatiently. "I am *not*," she told him, "it's just . . ."

It was the tears that did it.

"All right, all right," he said. "I'll see what I can do. But I can't promise anything."

AFTER she had gone, he sat for a few minutes, staring at the piece of paper she had given him. Miss Timothy Martin,

it said, and her address on the Drive. He wondered why the chorus kids all had boy's names these days and if he'd have been such a sap if she hadn't been so pretty.

Then he finished the fresh drink the waiter brought him, decided that legs had nothing to do with it, and walked over to Max.

"Tell me, Machiavelli," he inquired, "did you shoo her onto me because you're too old for that sort of thing, or did you want her to sell me?"

Max's only reply was an irritating grin. The Hat had noticed before how getting to be an editor made a louse out of a decent guy.

"I'm off," he continued, "and you have only yourself to blame."

Max opened his mouth.

The Hat beat him to it. "I know," he intoned, "no drinking, no expense accounts, and exclusives every fifteen minutes."

He walked down the block to the coffee pot, stepped into the aroma of the hamburgers grilling for the printers, and sat down in the phone booth. When he got onto police headquarters, he asked for the detective who was his private source of information.

"Listen, Gil," he began, "this is Sleeper of the *Transfer*. Find something out for me, will you? I'll call you back. McEvoy was drunk the night he was killed, wasn't he? Yup. Well, find out where he got it."

Gil said he would. The Hat moved to the counter and drank a cup of coffee he didn't want. Then he went back to the phone.

"Got a pencil?" asked Gil. "Here goes. He started out at a place called Monahan's on Columbus. Then he went to Tim Kelly's. He ordered a steak but he was too far gone to eat it, so he gave it to the newsie who camps there. Then he walked over to Broadway and stopped along the line. Tip-Toe, the Music Bar, and on 93rd, he turned off and went into the Newkirk bar."

"The Hotel Newkirk?" yelled the Hat.

"Yeah. So what?"

"So what!" demanded the Hat. "Only that Fuller lived there and McEvoy was there the night he got his, and Barnard covered a meeting of canvas manufacturers there the afternoon before *he* got bumped. So what!"

"Take it easy, sonny," said the detective. "You're going off half-cocked. It just so happens that in our dumb way, we thought of that, too. There's nothing in it."

"There must be." The Hat unconsciously echoed Miss Timothy Martin.

"There ain't. Ever been there?"

"No. Why?"

"Because if you had, you wouldn't be so excitable. It's a family hotel, full of women, nice old ladies, spinsters, widows—not the fun kind but the ones who've given it up—a few of those guys who are fifty-five and still live with their mothers, and a couple of henpecked husbands. If any one of them even knows what a Luger is, let alone how to use one, I'll eat 9-mm slugs tomorrow for breakfast. Just to give you an idea what you're up against, they're all mad at the management because they put in a bar."

"O. K., O. K. What about the bar? Did McEvoy meet anyone there?"

"Nah. It was empty practically all night. It always is. The residents don't drink and the transients get depressed. Anyway, the barkeep remembers him. Says he sat there for about three-quarters of an hour, at a table, alone, and he didn't speak to anybody but the waiter."

"And what did he talk to him about?"

"Rye and a beer chaser."

"Oh, said the Hat cheerfully. "Well, when I get something, I'll send it down to you."

"Huh!" snorted Gil, and hung up.

On the way uptown, in a taxi, the Hat was thoughtful. But with no place to start, his circling thoughts had nowhere to go. He pulled his snap-brim lower on his forehead and wondered if Miss Martin had any incurable objection to baldness. It was beginning to be a little boring, explaining to girls how he had caught tropical fever on an ill-advised voyage when he was seventeen. It was unquestionably more romantic than losing your hair the usual way, but it didn't change the essential fact.

AT THE hotel, he made straight for the bar. Gil had not been wrong. It was the most moribund ginmill he had ever seen. Outside of the hired help—one bartender and one waiter—and two ladylike customers, it was empty.

He watched the ladies finish their pink

cocktails in polite sips and waited for the big one to tell the little one that another would make her dizzy. She did. He awoke the waiter and ordered Canadian Club and water. Then, when the man returned with the drink:

"Are you on at night?"

"Gawd, no. I'd get the screaming meemies."

"How about the sleeping beauty at the bar?"

"They kiss him and wake him up at five."

It was three. Unless he sat there until the shift changed, drinking, and wondering if anything could ever happen here to lead to death—or life, either, for that matter. . . . He downed the drink and went out to the house phone booth in the lobby. The girl at the switchboard got him Fuller's apartment and Fuller's widow.

He gave it to her fast, feeling like a heel for the second time in the same day. She told him to come up. Apartment 1201. He crossed the lobby again, rang for the elevator, and watched the indicators. One of them was stopped, apparently permanently, as elevators always are in small hotels—on twelve. The second car climbed up to the top and came down for him. There were no other passengers.

"What's he got on twelve?" The Hat jerked his head toward the other shaft. "I didn't think this was that kind of a joint."

The man grinned at him. "It won't last," he said, "so he might as well make the most of it."

It was quiet on twelve and the carpet was thick and soft. The Hat walked down the long hall, past the second elevator with its lights out and its door held open a single inch by some kind of brace, grinned at this seam on the underside of respectability and knocked on Mrs. Fuller's door.

"I called the manager. He's coming up," she said as she led him into the living room. "But I don't think he can help. He was most cooperative with the police and they didn't find anything."

She was just what he had expected. Quiet, cultured, a little faded, with her eyes red from weeping and her shaking hands folded in her lap because she controlled herself before strangers and hated scenes. He regretted the liquor on his breath.

"Lots of times," he began gently, "there are little things, insignificant trifles that turn out to be important. There might even be something like that, that you yourself know and haven't . . ."

She shook her head wearily before he could finish. "I've been over the past week in my head a hundred times. There was nothing." Her hands had begun to shake again and she clasped them tighter. "Nothing. I . . ."

The scream was long and thin and hollow, falling away like a shout down a well. Mrs. Fuller rose from her chair and then fell back again. The blood rushed into her face and ebbed away, leaving it white and drained.

"What . . . ?" she began.

"I don't know," said the Hat mechanically.

But then, quite suddenly, he did. He ran out to the hall, pounded down the stretch of thick carpet, stopped at the elevator door, clawed at it. It was closed now. The indicator read fourteen, the next floor up, because there was no thirteen.

He found the right doorway and raced up the stairs. The elevator gate was closed up here, too, and the indicator still read fourteen. He hammered on the door but there was no answer. Then he walked slowly down the flight again, sat on the bottom step and tried to think.

He ought to have about ten minutes. A couple for them to rush down to the basement and find the elevator man crumpled at the bottom of the shaft. A couple for quieting old ladies, calling doctors and dithering. Two or three of hard thinking on how to keep the hotel out of the papers. Then the other operator would talk about that interesting pause for refreshment on the twelfth floor and they would all be up here, followed sooner or later by the cops and the rest of the parade. In those ten minutes, he ought to be able to do something.

He went back to Mrs. Fuller's living room and put his hands on her thin shoulders.

"I know I'm psychic, but I like to check," he told her. "Call the switchboard and find out what happened."

She obeyed automatically. When she had asked her question, he took the receiver from her hand and listened. It was garbled but

it contained the words, fall, shaft, and elevator boy. He hung up.

"There's been another murder." He spread his hands apologetically. "I'm sorry there's no time to be tactful. You've got to stand up under this. Because I think we're going to do it. We're going to find out who murdered your husband and why. Just hold onto that and if anybody asks you about me, I haven't been here and you know nothing. Got it? O. K. Now think. The elevator man used to stop his car on this floor and duck in to see somebody. Who would it be?"

Behind her dazed eyes, he could see her effort.

"Start at one end of the hall and stop at each apartment in turn," he told her. "Then make your best guess. Come on, now—fast."

"I can't. I can't . . . unless it's Mrs. Warner in 1203. Oh, I shouldn't say it, but she's the only one. She looks as if she might be mixed up with the elevator man."

"Good girl!" He was halfway out the door. "What's the manager's name?"

"Quinlan."

ACROSS the hall, he knocked loudly. There was no sound from behind the door. He knocked again. This time there was a shuffling, a faint movement of fabric against fabric.

"Open up," he said.

"Who is it?" The voice was thick, throaty.

"Mr. Quinlan."

"Just a minute." More shufflings and swishings, then footsteps padding toward the door and the knob turning.

"You're not Mr. Quinlan."

His foot was in the opening and his shoulder thrust inward.

"What do you want? You can't . . ."

He was inside now and he had had a good look at her.

"Shut up," he said and closed the door.

She retreated from him step by step, her bright pink negligee clutched protectively around her full figure and her handsome, hard face sagged with fear.

"It must have happened right after he left here," he said without preliminary. "How come you weren't even curious to find out what the screaming was about?"

"Who? What screams?"

"Stop it, dearie," said the Hat. "It was loud enough to scare a banshee. Don't tell me you didn't hear it."

"I . . . I was asleep. That must've been what woke me. Something did. I was just dozing off again when you knocked."

He looked at her carefully. She had a rumpled look and so did the unmade bed he could see through the doorway. But that was not direct evidence that she had been sleeping.

The color had come back into her face now and some of her confidence with it. She brushed a lock of brassy hair from her forehead and faced him aggressively.

"What is this? Who are you? Who screamed and what do you mean right after he left here?"

"Your boy friend," the Hat told her, "the elevator man. Somebody just murdered him. Very neatly, too. While he was in here, they moved the car upstairs. When he stepped into it, it wasn't there."

She had fallen back against the radio cabinet. Now she stared at him opaquely, her hand tight over her own mouth to stifle her own scream.

"Carl's dead," she said. It was not a question.

"Very," said the Hat.

She moved the hand up over her eyes. When she took it away, the dazed look was still there.

"He wasn't here." Her voice was toneless. "What do you mean while he was here?"

"He was when I came up. It was about five minutes after that he screamed."

She put her hands down behind her on the cabinet to steady herself. The negligee slid open. She ignored it.

"He wasn't here," she said again. "I was asleep."

"It's too late for that. The other boy told me he was in here and if you think that sort of thing gets by the kind of old lady who lives here, you're crazy."

She shook her head as if to clear it and spoke almost abstractly.

"I can't believe he's dead . . . he used to stop in once in a while to have a drink with me. I drink alone if I have to, but it's no fun. I knew the old cats were talking but I didn't care. . . . I haven't got any reputation

left to lose. But he wasn't here today. Last night was a big night," she sneered at herself a little as she said it, "and I didn't get home until after nine this morning. I had breakfast sent up and I've been asleep every since."

She sat down in a chair and indicated another for him. "You're not a cop."

"No."

"I suppose you're a reporter." It didn't seem to interest her much. "How do you know it was murder? Maybe he just fell . . . he was half tight most of the time."

"The car was moved. Maybe he moved it himself and then came down again to jump."

Mrs. Wagner frowned. Her eyes were shrewd. "Not him," she said at last. "He never bought a friend a drink in his life, that kind don't jump." She caught his smile. "Don't grin at me. I *didn't* like him, if that's what's funny. He wasn't much but I'm not particular any more." She was struck by an idea.

"You gonna put me in your paper?"

"Why? Do you mind?"



"No. Not for me. But he had a wife and a kid on Washington Heights. The way it would look, they might."

"You're the second nice girl I've met today." He meant it. "You're shivering. Go pour yourself a slug and then come back and answer me some questions before the cops get here."

She opened a little cabinet and brought out a quart of Seagram's.

"How about you?"

"Out of the bottle. This is no time for you to have two glasses around. Thanks. After you."

SHE tilted her head back and let it roll. It was quite impressive and it made her look much better. He took the bottle from her hand, swallowed quickly, and gave it back.

"Put it away," he told her. "He was on this floor, somewhere. Where?"

She shrugged, found the cigarette box and lit one. "Somebody coulda called him for an errand or something."

"Uh-huh. Somebody could. But if they did, they'll probably say so. Let's talk about the ones who wouldn't talk about it."

"There aren't any. I'm the only tramp on the floor."

He grinned at her. "Tell me about the gentry."

"Well, 1201 is Mrs. Fuller. It couldn't be her."

"I know—you can skip Mrs. Fuller."

"Twelve-o-two's Mr. Meyer. He's at the office all day—the old goat."

"Hu-um. Like that, huh? O. K., he's out."

"Uh-huh. I'm three. Four is Madame Brunet."

"A-ah, *now* we're surely getting somewhere."

"You've been looking at those postcards. Madame Brunet is sixty-five and she wears a mustache. Anyhow, she teaches at a girl's school and she's never home in the daytime. Five is old lady Bryson. Her son's chauffeur comes every afternoon, on the dot at two and rides her around the park at fifteen miles an hour. When he gets her home at four-thirty, he's ready to blow his top."

"You *do* get around."

"I'm terrific." Her voice was bitter.

"And that's all?"

"All. Except Mrs. Gibson, but she's out."

"What's with her?"

"Well, for one thing, she's over ninety, and she hasn't been out of bed since her husband died five years ago." There was disgust in her voice.

"I've never seen her. . . . I just think they ought to let the poor old thing die if she wants to."

"And they won't?"

"No. Every time she burps, they send for a doctor. They keep her so quiet that the chambermaid doesn't even go in there to clean—the nurse does it."

"How about the nurse? I mean, maybe

she got tired of being the Lady with the Lamp and gave Carl the eye."

Mrs. Warner shook her head. "She's the old family retainer type—white cotton stockings, her meals sent up, doesn't get any time off, and never sees anybody except the doctor."

He stood up. "Better get dressed. You're bound to have company any minute."

Outside, in the center of the hall, he hesitated. All around him were the closed, numbered doors. It was quiet. No one spoke or moved in the surrounding rooms. His own footsteps were silent on the padded floor. He lit a cigarette and looked at his watch.

If Mrs. Warner was telling the truth, the only member of the fascinating company she had outlined on whom he could lay an immediate hand was the nurse. He walked the last few steps to 1206 and raised his hand to rap.

The voice sounded close behind his ear.

"Turn around," it ordered softly.

The small of the Hat's back shrank from the thrust of the gun barrel even before he felt it. He turned. The owner of the voice wheeled with him. He was still behind when the Hat faced down the long hall toward the stairway at the opposite end.

"Move," said the soft voice.

They walked noiselessly down the corridor. At the stairway door, the gun prodded again, viciously, against his spinal column and the Hat knew what it meant without being told. Obediently, he walked through the doorway to the landing.

In the bowels of the building a motor whined and an elevator rose toward them. If I could only stall, thought the Hat. The steel door closed behind them.

"Up," purred the voice.

They climbed, to fourteen and on to fifteen. Here, the door was ajar, and the Hat could see a long, narrow strip of the outside world, blue sky and sunlight at the top and, at the bottom, the tarred cinders of the roof. The voice behind him was almost a whisper.

"Now listen," it sighed and its breath stirred past the Hat's ear. "You made all the friends you're gonna make. Understand?" It permitted itself the thin shadow of a chuckle. "You boys keep snooping and there's gonna be a critical shortage of reporters—get me?"

It was coming. Relax, the Hat told himself in the attenuated, shuddering seconds of anticipation. But it was no use. His muscles, the bones of his spine, and his very nerve ends stiffened and waited.

Then the inevitable blow pushing the plates of his skull apart, the pain, the sudden, sickening upward lurch of the floor, and, through the shimmering, settling blanket of fog, the sound of feet running down and away on the concrete stairs.

* * * * *

THE blue strip of sunlit sky was still there when he came to. It surprised him, somehow. He had expected it to be dark—his aching body felt as if it had lain for hours on the cold, hard floor. He stood up. The last shreds of fog floated from behind his eyes and he walked, weakly and sheepishly, down the stairs.

To his own wonder, fear and anger played no part in his emotions. Instead, he felt only relief—relief because he recognized the tap on the head for what it was, an attempt to scare him. Someone who could not kill him here because of the embarrassing possibilities of yet another corpse, had been made nervous enough by the presence of an enquiring reporter to try to frighten him off. He was getting somewhere.

The calm emptiness of the twelfth floor was sullied only by an alien uniform. There was no eager knot of onlookers, no curious heads thrust out of half-open doors. The Hat unveiled his presscard and waited while the cop went in Mrs. Warner's door. Then, he followed the jerk of a thumb inside.

Nobody seemed pleased to see him. Mrs. Warner, alone, ignored him. All the others—the two detectives, a second uniformed cop, a nondescript female, and a nervous little man with the somber elegance of a mortician whom the Hat identified as Mr. Quinlan the manager, the elevator man who had brought him upstairs in the first place—all the others, stared at him as if his entrance was a piece of monstrous, indiscreet impertinence.

"What do you want?" growled the larger of the two detectives finally.

"A story," the Hat told him mildly.

"This man says he brought you up here half an hour ago. Where were you?"

The words were out of his mouth before

the Hat realized that he had made a decision. "Phoning my paper."

"Without even asking any questions, you knew enough to phone your paper?"

The Hat looked puzzled and a little apologetic. "I told them that an elevator boy had fallen down a shaft and that as long as I was here paying a condolence call, I'd stick around to see if there was a story."

"And that took you twenty minutes?"

"That and walking up and down twelve flights of stairs. What's all the excitement?" he asked maliciously. "Wasn't it an accident?"

The detective looked at him reproachfully, as an animal must look when it has been lured into a trap. Mr. Quinlan straightened his tie and prepared to watch over the fate of the nation. Mrs. Warner laughed. The second detective removed his mournful eyes from a print of Gainsborough's Blue Boy and came to the rescue.

"Oh, sure," he said tonelessly. "We just don't want you boys dreaming up mysteries, that's all. The guy used to stop in here for a drink. He was here today."

Mrs. Warner started to protest, then winked at the Hat instead. The other detective took the ball just a trifle too eagerly.

"But he knew that Mr. Quinlan, here, would be sore if he caught him. So he moved the car up a flight. Only, after he got tight, he forgot that the car wasn't there and stepped into the empty shaft."

The Hat surveyed him with smiling admiration. He flushed. Even the uniformed cop looked unhappy.

"All right," he said at last. "The *Transfer* will keep your little secret. I can see why you want it this way for a while but if you plan to tell that story around, you better wipe some of the blood off it first. I was up here five minutes before it happened and the car was here then." He started toward the door.

"Also," he told them over his shoulder, "somebody might remember that you can't open a shaft door unless the car is on the same floor."

HE LEFT silence behind him. After a few seconds the elevator man came out and took him downstairs. Outside, he grinned at the black Plymouths and the familiar figures from Homicide which

emerged. It was a good thing to remember that the cops were never quite as dumb as they looked.

In the booth in the corner drug store, he got Max, and told it to him from the beginning. Not until he had reached the agony on the landing, did Max interrupt.

"We'll take it for granted that you've suffered," he growled, "get on with it."

"Brute!" said the Hat. When he had finished there was a long pause. Across the wire, he could hear Max breathing hard.

"So you promised the cops that the *Transfer* would cooperate." Max's voice dripped honey and venom, mixed. "That's just fine. There's only one little thing wrong with it. . . . I'm not being paid to hold the Commissioner's hand—I'm supposed to get out a front page and a front page is supposed to carry headlines, remember?" It was pure venom now. "Two of the biggest news stories that ever hit the town in the same week—Steve Lowden busting out of Sing-Sing, and three reporters shot down in cold blood on the streets of New York—and what does my star reporter bring me? A hot story about how a character nobody ever heard of faw down. You cluck! *Bring me something I can print on the front page.*"

The Hat held the receiver away from his ear until the blast stopped echoing against the booth walls.

"You'll get it," he threw into Max's first pause. "When I stop that 9mm bullet, I'll make sure I'm in a phone booth, talking to you. You can smear it across six columns with my picture." He hung up, grinning. Max was always very tough when he was worried.

Now it was a toss-up between Miss Timothy Martin and McEvoy's roommate. Miss Martin won easily, too easily. The Hat made excuses to himself as he fished her address out of his pocket and turned toward Riverside Drive.

He was so busy telling himself that if the guy knew anything he'd have spilled it by now that it wasn't until he had crossed West End and started down the last, steep empty street to the Drive, that he realized that this was no time for him to be wandering around without a crowd of witnesses.

Looking back over his shoulder, he could see no one following but he felt no reassurance. In spite of himself, he walked faster.

And there was a magnet pulling his head around to watch the empty street behind. By the time he reached the corner, he was almost running.

It was a brownstone, one of those that have been remodeled into cheap, one-room apartments with kitchenettes in the closets, and dubious-looking daybeds. He pushed hard at the bell and waited, watching the glass panel of the heavy front door. The little vestibule had been made to order for murder and if it came, he wanted to see it coming. Then the buzzer clicked and he was inside, feeling foolish.

She had been crying. That surprised him. He believed in abstract justice, too, but not to cry over. Maybe she had been lying when she said there was nothing between her and Joe.

He sat down in her armchair and pulled his line about taking his hat off gradually so that her disillusionment would come to her slowly but she was not listening.

"Have you found out anything?" she asked.

"I've got a lead," he told her, "but I want to ask you some questions before I talk about it. Did he come here straight from the Newkirk?"

"I guess so."

"You're not sure?"

"No—I mean, he didn't say, one way or the other. He just told me how dull the speeches were and how he'd show the desk he was good enough to do something beside fall asleep at a press table."

"What time did he leave?"

"About ten of three. Some kids I know dropped in and we sat around talking."

"The cops bother you much?"

"No—no. He was the third one; they saw it didn't have anything to do with me."

"Yeah." He pushed the hat back on his head. It was funny how she looked—almost worried. Come to think of it, there was something behind her manner this morning, too. He'd have to take the gloves off and the hell with it. Anyhow, how much time could he make with a dame who was crying herself to sleep. "So, he just walked downstairs and got it?"

It shocked her. "Y-yes." She selected a long, rosy nail and stared at it.

"Well," he told her, "it's a cute story and you tell it very well. Only, I've heard it be-

fore." He pulled the hat down again and stood up. "Call me when you have some new material."

Her eyes were blank with astonishment—too blank, and too big, and too blue. She stopped him in the doorway.

"Don't go. I don't know what's wrong, but honestly, I . . ."

He avoided the eyes and pushed her aside.

"Save it. When I want to be lied to, I can always interview a celebrity."

SHE was crying again but not to impress him. "Wait," she said and darted into the bathroom. He waited. When she came back, she had a gun. He followed it bitterly with his eyes as it came toward him.

"Sucker!" he told himself.

Then she handed it to him, sat down, and cried some more. Feeling like a heel is getting to be a habit with me, he thought.

"It was my fault," she said at last. "It was all my fault. And I should have given it to the police, or I should have told you. But he was such a kid—and I knew he never did anything wrong and I thought everybody would assume . . ." She accepted his handkerchief, blew her nose into it. He patted her shoulder.

"Take it slow. What do you mean it was your fault?"

"I took the gun away from him. Maybe if he had it, he wouldn't be dead now, maybe he could have shot first, maybe . . ."

"Forget it. He was up against professionals. When that kind are after you, a gun is no good at all. You can't be quick on the draw when you don't know when it's coming or where it's coming from. You don't see it or hear it, you just get it. Why did you take the gun?"

"He was so excited—I thought he'd get hurt or get himself in trouble. He wouldn't tell me anything—just showed it to me and

said he could take care of himself. I could see it was like cops and robbers to him. I thought I was doing the right thing. And then, when the police came, I didn't tell them because they'd have jumped to the wrong conclusion. Afterward, when I had time to think, I was afraid to change my story and I felt so guilty because it was all my fault."

She used the handkerchief again. He moved onto the arm of her chair and was comforting. After a while, he tightened the comforting arm.

"I told you to forget it. It wasn't your fault and we have things to do. Dry your tears and I'll buy you a chop."

When she was gone into the bathroom again, he looked at the gun. It didn't mean a thing to him and it made him nervous. He put it down on the end-table, and lit a cigarette. There was a knock on the door. Timothy had the water running.

"Who is it?" asked the Hat.

"Guess."

"Nuts," murmured the Hat, then aloud. "Who is it?"

"Me."

Oh, good, he thought, a boy friend. Then, a cornball like that deserves a surprise.

He remembered to slip the gun down behind the cushion of his chair before he opened the door. There were two of them. They pushed him back into the room. One of them had his hand in his pocket but the other didn't even bother.

"Look in the bathroom, Ernie," ordered the first.

Ernie walked over and opened the bathroom door.

"It's customary to knock," the Hat told him.

"Shaddup," said the man with the gun in his pocket.



"Come on out, dear," said Ernie, "company's here."

Timothy came out. Her blonde hair was disordered as if she had been brushing it and her tidy little nose had a nice soap and water shine.

"Hubba-hubba," said Ernie.

"Shaddup," said the man with the gun in his pocket.

"Doesn't he let anybody talk?" the Hat asked Ernie.

"Shaddup," said the man.

"Your conversation appears to be limited," the Hat told him. "Take my advice and invest in Dr. Eliot's Five Foot Shelf."

He contemplated his own recklessness with astonishment. He wondered if he was crazy or whether it was because Timothy was there, so scared, and trying so hard not to show it.

The man with the gun opened his mouth.

"I know," said the Hat, "shaddup."

It was a mistake. The man took the hand from the pocket and shoved. The Hat fell back into the chair.

Ernie flicked an imaginary spect of dust from the sofa.

"Sit down," he told Timothy. "We've got nothing but time on our hands until it gets later and darker."

Five minutes passed. They all sat; no one spoke. The Hat smiled reassuringly at Timothy and tried to think. It was no good—useless to tell himself that he was a first-class idiot, useless to be certain again that neither of these two was the man who had hit him over the head on the rooftop.

Ernie moved closer to Timothy and subjected her to a leisurely inspection. Timothy flushed and tugged at her skirt. Ernie grinned and moved closer.

Inside the Hat, the smouldering burst into flame. They were so contemptuous, so sure of themselves with this girl, and this negligible little reporter. It was insulting. He looked at the other man, sprawled opposite, with his eyes half-closed and his cigarette smoke drifting lazily past his sneering face and watched the two on the sofa as Ernie inched closer and the girl squirmed away. He was not going to sit here and take it. He reached into his pocket for his matches. The man opposite sat erect and then sank back again. The Hat addressed Ernie.

"Tell me, when it gets later, what happens then?"

"Your snooping days will be over, Pal."

"And Miss Martin?"

Ernie looked at Miss Martin, clucked his tongue. "What a waste," he said.

FOR a single instant, inspired by the girl's terrified face, the Hat was moved to action. Then he recovered himself. What he had to do was simple: move his hand ten inches or so beneath the cushion behind him, pull out the gun and, taking the two men by surprise, disarm them. Very simple and very dangerous. And failure would mean that they were through, completely, forever.

He would have to wait his chance.

Time moved slowly. Once Ernie put his big paw on Timothy's knee and removed it at a glance from his silent partner. In the bathroom, a faucet dripped Chinese torture. Below, on the wide street, the traffic moved past remotely. Overhead, a radio moaned.

Hours, days, or perhaps forty minutes afterward, the big man on the sofa stirred.

"You wanna bring the car around the corner?" he asked his partner.

"O. K.," said the other. "Keep 'em here until I get back, we'll take them down together."

When he had gone, Ernie leaned over the girl.

"It's too bad about you, kid," he said. "Maybe, if I could talk to the boss. . . ."

It wasn't a long speech but it was long enough. When Ernie turned back to the Hat, he looked into the barrel of Joe Barnard's gun.

"I don't think it's done any more," the Hat told him breathlessly, "but put them up anyway."

Ernie raised his hands and took a step forward.

"Stand still. Get something to tie him with, Timothy."

She rummaged in a drawer and came back with a handful of brightly-colored belts. He eyed them dubiously. They might not be strong enough and anyway he wasn't sure exactly how you tied a man and held a gun on him at the same time. He had another idea.

"Don't move," he warned. Then he walked around the big man, lifted the gun

and brought the butt down smartly. Ernie fell forward, on his face.

It took quite a while to truss him, stuff a washcloth into his mouth and roll him across the floor to the closet. They had barely locked him in when they heard the footsteps on the stairs. The Hat knew the answer to that one right away, having seen it often enough in the movies. He moved softly to the doorway, flattened himself against the wall and waited until the other man had taken an incautious step into the room. Then he raised and lowered his gun butt again. They put him in the closet, too. "Now," he told Timothy, "that chop."

IT WAS late when they walked up Broadway toward the Newkirk. Going there was the Hat's notion. Once before, his attempt to see old lady Gibson and her nurse had caused an interesting reaction. It might do so again and it ought to be fairly safe, too. Ernie and his anonymous partner were in no position to send out a warning. He would be taking the offensive in the best military manner with the advantage of surprise.

Timothy was against it. She was all for calling the police but, also, she was determined not to be left out. She had been in it from the beginning, she told him, and she was staying for the end. She was amazingly formidable in an argument.

As for the Hat, his astonishment with himself continued. To all the reasonable statements made by his brain, some other part of him, hitherto silent, answered. It's better to die on your feet, said this new part, than to live on your knees. And, no son of a so-and-so can send gunsels after me. And, always, underneath, there was Joe Barnard, and McEvoy, the harmless drunk, and Mrs. Fuller, alone, controlled and ladylike.

So here he was, at eleven-thirty, on the night of a day that had started out to be an ordinary, reasonable day, at the service entrance of the Newkirk, waving five-dollar bills. The old man spat through his missing teeth, looked around twice for ears on the walls, held out a dirty palm, and started his elevator.

Then they were on the twelfth floor and on their own. No cops and the tenantry, as always, refined and invisible behind their doors. They knocked at 1206.

It seemed a long time before the door was opened a niggardly two inches and they could see a wary eye and the corner of a starched cap.

"Yes?"

"We want to see Mrs. Gibson."

The eye surveyed him with horror. "She's asleep," said the hushed, shocked voice.

"Well, wake her up," said Timothy.

"Yeah," said the Hat, leaning on the door and remembering Mrs. Warner. "Go ahead, it will do her good."

There was a pause. The Hat shoved impatiently at the door. "Come on," he said, "open up."

Then, again, behind him, the soft voice spoke.

"Quiet," it said and there was infinite authority in its voice. "Take your hand off that gun."

The Hat drew his hand reluctantly from his pocket and stood still.

"All right, Miss Sproat," said the voice, "open the door."

On the threshold, Timothy hesitated.

"Go ahead," the Hat whispered, "I've met this character before and he isn't kidding."

They went inside, into the big living room. The Hat allowed Joe Barnard's gun to be taken from him. They sat down as ordered. The nurse disappeared into the bedroom. The owner of the voice leaned against the mantelpiece and stared with a weariness that was almost boredom at the Hat and Timothy. The hand with the Luger in it hung down at his side. He held it carelessly, with no more self-consciousness than another man might feel about holding a pipe.

"It was stupid of you to come here," he said. "I've been expecting you. You should learn to tie better knots."

THE Hat did not answer. One of the best ways to keep a man talking, he knew, was not to ask questions and not to accept the conversational opportunities he offered.

He looked around the room.

It was a strange setting for the slim, almost elegant figure opposite with its well-tailored clothes and its handsome, cruel face. He had never seen that particular face before but he had seen many others like it, in

sleek modern apartments, in the glitter of expensive nightclubs, and in the smoke-hung rooms of gambling haunts. Here, against the polite anonymity of the hotel furnishings and old lady Gibson's sentimental decorations, the old photographs, the dark oil paintings in their ornate frames, the bronze statuettes, and the Tiffany glass lamps, the face was out of place, its cruelty, its arrogance, and the iron tightness of its control, were all wrong. He reached out and took Timothy's hand.

A thin smile crossed the handsome face, the dark eyes regarded Timothy as if she were a horse at auction.

"I see," said the tired voice, "I wondered how you managed Ernie and Joe. They're usually more efficient, but I understand now, it was Miss Martin's charm."

Again the Hat did not answer. He was watching Miss Sproat re-enter the room, leaving the bedroom door open, watching the stiff, fear-held body under the starched uniform and the high, empty hospital bed in the room behind it. And it came to him that this was no new, sudden spurt of terror but a fear with which this woman had lived long enough to have the chill of it in her bones.

"What have you done with Mrs. Gibson?" he asked.

A spasm shook the white-clad shoulders. "I took care of her," she said tonelessly. "I watched over her. For five years, she was never alone for a single second, and now she's gone."

Gone, thought the Hat, a polite word for death, like passed away, a word that nobody used when they meant murdered.

"Shut your mouth," ordered the man.

She shut her mouth, closed it in a thin line as if she had to lock it tight against a flood of speech. The Hat noticed the shape of her nose, lovely in the spinsterish thinness of her face, and the same pure line in the corruptness of the other's face.

"Steve," she begged, "please, Steve, let me . . ."

Steve's hand flicked across her cheek, left a red print and silenced her. In the same instant a sudden flash of knowledge blinded the Hat. He sprang to his feet.

"Sit down," said Steve.

Timothy tugged at his hand. "Please," she almost whispered, "do what he says."

"Nonsense," said the Hat warmly. "I'm only going to tell a story, a story I just made up."

HE REACHED boldly into his pocket for a cigarette, lit it. "It begins last week. A guy named Steve Lowden, a very well known gent, whose face is familiar to everybody in the city of New York except one dumb bunny of a reporter who has led a sheltered life, busts out of Sing Sing."

Steve Lowden smiled. It was not an encouraging smile but the Hat refused to let it get him.

"It's a little rough around here but we can fill in later. He has to hide somewhere and the usual hideouts are no good—the cops will go over them with a fine toothcomb. For the same reason, he can't trust most of the people who used to be his friends. So he thinks of his sister."

Miss Sproat gasped.

"Thanks," said the Hat. "To continue, he thinks of his nice, respectable sister who still uses the name he's almost forgotten, who hasn't been connected with him in any way for years. So he goes to her and finds himself a sweeter set-up than he had ever dreamed of. It was perfect. An old woman who has to be kept so quiet that no one ever comes to see her, not even a chambermaid. Except, of course, her doctor, but a little ingenuity can take care of that. Two quiet rooms in a quiet, respectable hotel, and a dining room to send up food. What if his sister has to eat a little less, what if the old lady is so frightened that she drops dead before he can thank her for the use of the hall?"

It was a good place for a pause. He stopped, let the silence grow, and watched Miss Sproat's frightened eyes slide to the closet door and slide away again.

"Finished?" asked Steve Lowden.

"Oh, no," the Hat told him cheerfully. "I've hardly begun. As I was saying, they shoved the old lady in the closet and carried on."

Miss Sproat was crying now, brokenly, holding onto the doorway with both hands, all the starch and stiffness gone.

"Carrying on," continued the Hat calmly, "because a little complicated. Fuller got onto something—what exactly I admit I don't know—maybe he saw some of the

boys and thought them odd visitors for old lady Gibson. Anyway, Fuller had to be removed. After that, Carl, the elevator man, began to snoop—I imagine it was he who gave McEvoy and Joe Barnard the information that made them candidates for assassination. No rest for the weary. This morning, somebody bought Carl a drink—in here, I suppose—he can't have been a very bright boy or maybe he had a little black-mail in his heart—anyway, while he was imbibing, somebody moved his elevator up, fixed the door the way he had left it, and let him fall down or perhaps even gave him a helpful shove."

He stopped because he had come to the end. The moment rose and fell into an anti-climax. Timothy's hand tightened convulsively on his, sobs shook Miss Sproat, Steve Lowden smiled.

"So what?" he asked.

"So," the Hat told him, "you're in a spot. Your program is not the kind that can be continued indefinitely. Piles of corpses sort of irritate the police. Sooner or later, my city editor will be moved to action if he doesn't hear from me."

Steve Lowden's smile broadened.

"As I said before, so what? When the boys get back from their chores, I'll be leaving here and I won't come back. Neither, of course, will you or Miss Martin."

There was another pause—this time distinctly not anti-climactical. The Hat chose his words carefully, what he was trying to do would not be easy. He looked at Miss Sproat when he spoke.

"And your sister?" he asked. "Won't it be cozy for her, explaining about how she absent-mindedly let the old lady lie around for four or five days before she mentioned that she pooped off? Or are you going to take her along, too, and see that she doesn't come back?"

Steve Lowden did not answer. Her sister tottered to a chair and sat there with her face buried in her hands. There was more silence.

"I'm scared," whispered Timothy, "I'm awfully scared."

The Hat put his arm around her. He felt a little scared himself. Viewed in retrospect, his performance seemed a bit silly. It had accomplished nothing. But, try as he would, he could think of nothing else to do. The minutes stretched interminably.

HE SQUIRMED under Lowden's sardonic eyes, looked at the nurse, looked away again suffused with an intolerable pity, and held Timothy closer. In a way it would be better if the boys returned quickly.

There was a knock, evidently not the knock Steve Lowden was expecting because he stiffened momentarily, and then relaxed again.

"Over there," he ordered softly, indicating the divan in the corner shielded from the door by the foyer wall. His grasp on his gun was no longer casual.

"Now," he whispered, "not a sound out of you. If anyone comes in here to investigate, I've got nothing to lose—understand? I'll shoot first and worry afterward."

The knocking sounded again, more sharply, its politeness wearing thin. Steve Lowden turned his brotherly attention to the nurse.

"Wipe your face," he commanded coldly.

Automatically, as if he pulled the strings her muscles obeyed, she reached into a pocket for a handkerchief and dabbed at her tear-swollen face.

"Now open the door—and don't let anybody in."

Obediently, she rose, then stood still and swayed.

"Please, Steve. I can't," she whispered.

His push sent her staggering toward the door.

"I can't," she whispered once again as she turned the knob. Then, "M-Mr. Quinlan."

"Good evening," said the little man, professionally cheerfully. "I hope I'm not disturbing you? I know you're usually up late with your patient."

Pause. Then, solicitude dissolving the cheer. "You're not ill, Miss Sproat, I hope?"

Still the woman did not answer. The Hat saw Steve Lowden's frown deepen and the instinctive gesture that raised his gun.

"I've been so busy," chirped the little man at the door, all bewildered tact, "I haven't had a chance to come up and inquire after Mrs. Gibson. I hope she was not too distressed by the disturbance this afternoon—I assure you it will never happen again."

There was another pause. Then somewhere inside Miss Sproat, something animal moaned.

"I can't stand it," she whispered. "I can't

stand it. He put her in the closet. He tied her up like a bundle of wash and put her in the closet. On the cold floor."

Steve Lowden looked around the living room as if there must be a door where there had never been a door before, then he turned and aimed deliberately at his sister's back. In the same instant, the Hat was on his feet and had thrown himself forward.

He was too late. The shot rang out, shattered the quiet. Around the hole in the starched muslin, irregular red stains spread. Miss Sproat pulled herself erect.

"Get the police, Mr. Quinlan," she spoke calmly. "There must be no more killing."

THEN she let herself fall. In the kaleidoscopic seconds, as he struggled with Lowden for the gun, the Hat saw Quinlan's comic, frightened face, saw Timothy kneel beside the still, white figure on the floor, heard the manager's feet running on the hallway carpet.

Then he got his two hands around Lowden's wrist and twisted. The gun clattered on the parquet. He kicked it under the shallow sofa. Lowden swore, a thin constant stream of words, used his knee and both his fists.

The Hat's head crashed against the wall, driven back by a blow to the jaw. Two separate waves of pain swept up from the jawbone and down from his skull, and met.

Through the haze, he saw the gangster hurdle the two women in the doorway. He staggered after him. Halfway down the hall, with the Hat in hot pursuit, Steve stopped, turned, and put everything he had into one murderous body punch. It forced the air from the Hat's lungs and divorced him from his legs.

With astonishment, he found that he could still stand upright, that his arms and fists went on, hammering at the dark, rage-filled face, smashing at the sneering mouth and the nose that was so much like the sister's.

It was not he who forced strength into his tired arms, gulped air to fill his sobbing lungs, but this cold, strange anger that he had never felt before.

Twice, again, he hit him neatly, efficiently, and Steve Lowden's body thudded against the elevator door. Under his weight, the wooden panels shivered and the latch clicked in its slot.

He's finished, the Hat thought exultantly, stepping in through the gangster's wild punches. Scientifically now; two solid blows to the midriff and a third to the jaw.

He stepped back and watched Steve Lowden fall, hard, backward, against the paneled door, then slowly sideways. The door slid with him.

There was, suddenly, a gulf of yawning blackness, then desperately flailing arms and legs and another single scream, like Carl's. Then silence, a distant thud, and an empty elevator shaft.

Help was what he had called as he fell. But there was no help. The indicator still read fourteen. The car was still up there, where Steve had put it and the cops had left it. That was as close to justice as you could expect to come, the Hat thought.

He was very tired and it was a long way back, past open doors and curious faces to where Timothy still knelt beside Miss Sproat. He helped her up and looked a question.

"She's dead," she told him tonelessly and he realized that she was trying not to cry.

MECHANICALLY, they walked inside and sat down on the sofa. His breathing slowed but there were minutes before he felt the urge to talk.

"It's all right," he said then. "It's O. K. Quinlan will bring the cops. I'm sorry. Bringing you here was the dumbest thing I've ever done in my life."

"It wasn't," she told him indignantly. "Anyway, it was my fault, I made you. And think of all the stupid things I've done since the beginning of this." Her tone became almost cheerful. "I really am dumb," she said.

He found that he could also manage a grin.

"But you're so pretty," he told her, taking her hand.

A Lead Slug in a Log Pirate's Belly Will Crack Some Jams



LOG PIRATE PENALTY

By STEVE HAIL

Author of "Second Chance," etc.

THE glow of the pot-bellied stove had long since faded into the pre-dawn blackness of the bunkhouse when Andy Driscoll pushed himself away from the makeshift desk that served No. 1 camp as an office.

The timber owner sighed wearily, but the hot, futile anger that had been his when he had sat down to the figures before him close after sundown had cooled. Now there was a gleam of satisfaction behind his dark, unwinking eyes at the result of his labor. Andy Driscoll knew now who was robbing

the Wheelspoke logging show into bankruptcy.

He stretched his cramped muscles and stepped over to the wedged-open door that overlooked the slash. The thin moon had passed beyond the stand of Douglas Fir that framed the clearing, but down the tree-canyoned length of the skidroad to the east he could still make out their week's turn of logs chained to brow pilings along the shore of the inlet. This time, Driscoll promised himself grimly, his timber was going to the mill. All of it.

He pared shavings from a hard twist of tobacco and rubbed them absently in the palm of his hand, thinking back to his father's day a few years past, when a logger had only to bull his logs to tidewater and tow them to one of the mills that were mushrooming along the sprawling Seattle waterfront, twenty odd miles up the Sound.

There had been log pirates in those days, too, he remembered, but they had been more of a nuisance than a menace. Lone beach-combers for the most part, content to gather strays from passing rafts, or at worst pilfering an occasional log from an unwatched boom.

Lately it had grown into big business, and judging from the results of his night's figuring, it would be Burr Jorglum of the Wineglass show, ten miles farther down the inlet, who could stand some pointed questioning.

Driscoll stuffed tobacco into a blackened pipe and touched it off with a sulphur match. He puffed thoughtfully, thinking of the truculent, red-bearded owner of the Wineglass who had lately been too . . .

He paused, listening, the broken match still in his hand, as the muffled chunking of a steam launch, distant but unmistakable in the still night air, drifted across the water. Driscoll snapped open the ponderous silver watch that had belonged to his father before him, but now bore his own initials as a symbol of the passing of the timber claim from father to son. He saw that it lacked less than an hour until dawn. It would be slack water down at the landing. The beginning of the ebb. A state of tide, he recalled, that was favored by timber thieves.

Andy Driscoll sighed again and plucked a Winchester from its wall pegs. He

snuffed out the kerosene lamp and shuffled out into the slumbering camp.

HE WAITED for his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, then began picking his way cautiously down the fore'n'ast road toward the landing. Although the only light was the dim star-shine reflected from the shadowed waters of the inlet, he was careful to keep to the edge of the timber, out of sight of any hostile eyes that might be watching from the water.

It was time, Driscoll told himself savagely, that this thieving ended, before every small operator on the Sound went under. And if the sheriff and his deputies couldn't stop it—or wouldn't—well, a lead slug in a pirate's belly should settle the issue, quick and certain.

He halted at the edge of cover where it joined the narrow ribbon of beach, his eyes searching out the log raft groaning restlessly in the first rips of the changing tide. The blubbing exhaust of the launch was louder now, but the boat itself was still unseen behind the point of land that separated them from the Wheelspoke's No. 2 camp.

Andy cocked the lever action and dropped back into the blacker shadows of the overhanging branches. The boat shot out of the shelter of the headland and cut the point short. The flawed emerald of its starboard running light flashed into view as the operator straightened out for the landing.

Driscoll expelled his held breath in a sigh of relief and eased the hammer down to half cock. No log rustler would come in at full throttle, lights blazing.

A moment later he identified it as the launch from No. 2. And judging from the margin of clearance the helmsman had allowed at the point it would be blond Pete Hanlon at the wheel. Driscoll's broad mouth widened still further at the memories of his foreman's notoriously careless navigation.

The grin was still crinkling the corners of his eyes as Hanlon brought the boat alongside with a last minute clashing of reverse gears that barely checked its way in time.

Andy's mouth opened to offer caustic comment on the foreman's maneuver. Then

he caught the hard shine in Hanlon's eyes. At the same time he saw the blanket-covered bundle on the bottom boards that even the gloom of the false dawn couldn't disguise.

Driscoll's grin died. "Who is it, Pete?" he asked quietly.

Hanlon threw a splice over a fender log and throttled down the engine. His voice was as brittle as his eyes. "Pop Simpson," he said shortly.

"Hurt bad?"

"Hurt?" the other said bitterly. "He's dead!"

SOMETHING inside Andy Driscoll turned over slowing, eating into the tough core of callousness that had to be a part of a logger's make-up. Sudden death in the camps was common enough. A man got hardened to it. But Simpson had been with the Wheelspoke since the first tree had fallen. He had . . .

Driscoll was aware of wetness soaking through the blanket and spreading in a pool on the bottom of the boat.

"Drowned?" he asked.

Hanlon pulled himself up onto the landing. "Call it that," he said. "But he stopped a .38-55 slug in his chest first. I had him on night guard. We've lost so much timber down at No. 2 this last month I can't even meet the pay roll. 'Bout an hour ago I heard a shot. Pop evidently jumped somebody tampering with our cut. I—I, well, it's a quarter of a mile from the bunkhouse to the landing. I got there in time to see Pop's head stickin' out of the water. Nothin' or nobody else. His feet were weighted down with a boom chain. I—I . . ."

The night was cool, but Hanlon ran a red-shirted sleeve across the beaded sweat on his upper lip. "I guess whoever killed him was in too much of a hurry. If it'd been deeper water I'd've never found him."

Driscoll reached mechanically for his twist of tobacco. "I was planning on another talk with the sheriff today," he said finally in a tight voice, "but this kind of changes my mind. Thieving is one thing. Murder is something else. I'll do my talking direct."

He gave up trying to find his forgotten pipe and bit off a corner of the twist instead. He chewed thoughtfully for awhile,

staring soberly at the covered body. "That boom chain, Pete," he said at last. "The law says it's got to be branded, as well as logs. Any mark on the toggle?"

Hanlon laughed without mirth. "No, there's no brand on the chain," he said scornfully. "Law in the camps don't bother the sheriff none. He's too busy with town politics to worry about lumbermen's troubles."

Driscoll nodded. "I know," he said. "And evidently Burr Jorglum knows it, too." Suddenly the hot anger of the day before was choking in his throat. "Give me a hand with Pop, here," he growled, "and we'll get busy."

By the time they had carried the old logger's body up to the camp, daylight was washing in over the Sound to the east. Driscoll saw that the cook's gut hammer already had the camp astir. The men came running when they saw the cloaked burden between Andy and Pete Hanlon.

Driscoll singled out a dour, swart-skinned Canuck from the bunched men crowding around the dead lumberjack.

"Take the No. 1 launch, Frenchy," he told the Canuck, "and round up all the owners and camp bosses you can reach. Tell 'em to be at the Wineglass as soon as they can get there. We're having a little meeting. It's important, tell 'em, and they're to come ready for trouble. Then make knots for Seattle and get the sheriff down to Jorglum's."

"He no come," Frenchy said glumly. "I know heem from long time."

"He'll come," Driscoll said grimly, "when he finds out this isn't just another logger's fight over stolen timber. I know him, too. This is murder. That'll get him off his fat backside quick enough. He wouldn't miss out on the publicity for anything with elections coming up."

The Canuck scowled. "The publeecity he like," he admitted, "but I theenk heem afraid of Jorglum."

"That," said Andy Driscoll, "is where I come in. All the sheriff'll need is handcuffs by the time he gets there." He turned away and started purposefully for the bunkhouse. "Maybe not even those!" he added over his shoulder.

Frenchy scratched at the black stubble on his cheek and allowed himself a broken-

toothed grin. He pointed his calks down the skidroad toward the launch.

WHEN Andy came out of the bunkhouse he was buckling a gun belt around his wool-trousered thighs. He thumbed a cartridge into the empty chamber of the .45 and his eyes searched out the tow-headed figure of his foreman waiting against the cookshack door.

"Come on, Pete," he called. "We're taking a cruise up to the Wineglass. You've heard of them miner's courts down California way? Well, we're starting a little law enforcing of our own." He grinned. "A logger's court, I guess you'd call it. It'll make a good jury to listen to the sheriff's prosecution, just in case he's timid about returning Jorglum to Seattle."

Hanlon's pale eyebrows lifted questioningly as he regarded Driscoll's hand gun. He whistled softly. "What kind of enforcin'?" he asked.

The Wheelspoke boss smiled bleakly. "There's a chance it may have to be," he admitted. "I'm no gunfighter but I don't expect Jorglum to take to bein' called a log pirate and a murderer. Got to equalize things some way."

Hanlon fingered a pinch of snooze into his lower lip. "Got proof of all this, Andy?"

"Of the thieving, yes." He tapped a sheet of foolscap in his shirt pocket. "Of the killing, no. But the two tie together, you can bet on that."

The foreman glanced once more at his boss's six-gun, then his eyes flicked over to a cant dog leaning against the bunkhouse wall. He picked it up, weighing it calculatingly. "Never was much of a man for gunsmoke either," he said gently. "But I've always been a fair hand with a peavey. Let's go!"

THE No. 2 launch covered the tree-shadowed miles separating the two camps in less than an hour. Hanlon rounded up to Jorglum's landing, bringing the boat in alongside the Wineglass launch tied to the dock. He tossed a bight of line to a cleat on the other boat and the two men climbed over the adjacent deck and onto the narrow dock. Driscoll passed a casual but inquiring hand over the engine compartment as he went by.

The owner of the Wineglass had watched their approach. He was waiting for them as they stepped out onto the landing. He was squat and square built, with shoulders as wide as a trimmer's axe. They gave him the appearance of an overfed bear, Andy thought. And just as powerful.

Jorglum's red beard parted in a stained-toothed smile. One horny hand rested lazily on the butt of a walnut-handled Colt.

Andy Driscoll congratulated himself on his own forethought. His fingers brushed the holster at his side reassuringly.

"Mornin', gents," Jorglum greeted his visitors easily. "Little early for a social call, but I guess the cookee can rustle some biscuits an' tea."

Driscoll let the amenities pass with a grunt and he and Pete Hanlon fell in beside the other as he started up the skids.

"See you're wearing hardware, too," Jorglum went on. He spat amiably. "Log thieves are getting plumb annoyin' lately."

Driscoll stepped aside to let a bellowing ox team with its trailing load of logs rumble by. When he could make himself heard again he fixed his eyes on the Wineglass owner in a level stare. "Yeah," he said pointedly. "It looks like somebody hereabouts is making a business of it. Big business. Any ideas, Jorglum?"

The bearded man guffawed, his small eyes almost disappearing in his growth of whiskers. "Hell, I been losing as much as the next man. Found a couple of my logs t'other day with the branded ends sawed plumb off. That's goin' pretty far. Usually they're satisfied with mangling the marks so's they can't be read."

"Yeah," Driscoll agreed again. "But it looks to me as if it would be too much of a job for a lone beachcomber to tackle. An' too dangerous. He might get caught in the act. That's why I figure somebody with a tee outfit is doing the pirating. Some show that can disguise their loot fast."

They had stopped in front of the blacksmith shanty. Jorglum waited for the iron burner's sledge to ease its clamor. His eyes were beads in his bearded face.

"Meanin'?" he asked harshly.

Driscoll spread his feet and sighed. "Meaning you," he said flatly. "The Wineglass."

Jorglum's throat flushed hot above the

open collar of his wool shirt. The fingers of his right hand twitched nervously over his gun. Behind them, the smithy let the boom chains he'd been working on slide to the earthen floor with a crash. He turned toward the three men, carelessly, off-handedly, but with the heavy hammer still clasped in his fist.

Jorglum's humorless chuckle broke the tension. He spat noisily through his brown teeth.

"Kind of early in the day for them sort of jokes," he sneered. "They'd be shooting words to anybody but an innocent man like me." His eyelids lowered menacingly. "Even as it is, I don't like 'em. I've changed my mind about bacon and beans. Get out!"

Driscoll didn't move except for an almost imperceptible forward motion of his shoulders. He shook his head. "No," he said coolly. "I'm not leaving till you answer a few questions for the operators I've invited down here. Either that, or go peaceably to Seattle for trial. Take your choice."

A flicker of cold amusement showed in Andy's eyes. "Knowing the lumbermen in these parts, I'd suggest Seattle! You see, we've caught up with you finally. I've spent the last several days talking with mill owners around this section. I got copies of their milling records. It took a little argument, but . . ." A smile ghosted across his mouth and he patted the holstered gun at his thigh. ". . . but I was downright stubborn."

DRISCOLL paused and fumbled with his left hand for the sheet of paper in his pocket. "The figures show," he went on easily, "that you're the only operator around here who's showed a profit since this big-time pirating started. A hiyu profit at that. Way too big, considering the size of your outfit. And you've been pushing through fresh sawn stuff, and some with mangled brands. Lots of 'em." He shook his head. "Two'n two don't add up to five with my arithmetic, Jorglum. I've sent word for the sheriff, too. He ought to be on his way by now."

Burr Jorglum let his weight settle back on his heels. His scowl faded, leaving a relieved smile. "The lawman ain't interested in your troubles," he scoffed. "He's got worries enough in town."

"You're partly right," Andy agreed

coldly. "And a few of his chores there will be to find out why the millers accepted your stolen stuff. But you're wrong in thinking he isn't interested in the Wineglass. He's comin' down here to pick up a killer. One of my jacks on night guard was shot dead this morning. I've a hunch it was you—or one of your brand."

Jorglum's beard bristled over his curling lip. He winked broadly at the blacksmith. "Smart, ain't he, Smitty?" His eyes swung back to Driscoll. "This'll all take some proving. More than you can pin on me or any one here. Nobody was out of camp last night."

"The boiler on that boat of yours is still hot," Andy reminded him, "and the cylinder head. That don't happen laying alongside a landing."

Jorglum's heavy shoulders lifted in a shrug. "That still don't prove nothin' about the killing," he said smugly.

"No," Driscoll admitted, "it doesn't. But a lot of things'll add up, to my way of thinking. That warm motor, and the slug that killed Simpson—and maybe some log butts in the slash back there that you haven't had time to get rid of. Maybe even some of your jacks will want to talk when they find out the charge that's facing 'em. So we'll wait for the law to get here." He fished the old heirloom watch out of his shirt pocket. "It shouldn't be long."

He stopped then in slow wonder, staring at the timepiece, and his mind raced back over the events of the night, remembering something that he had all but forgotten. Something that . . .

He swung around to Pete Hanlon, sharp excitement stirring his voice. "That boom chain, Pete! The one in the boat that was shackled to poor Pop Simpson when you picked him up. Fetch it up here quick. I got a hunch."

The foreman stared at him. "You crazy, Andy?" he asked hotly. "You can't prove nothin' that the spike of this here peavey in Jorglum's ribs won't bring out. Lemme . . ."

The command in Driscoll's eyes stopped him. "All right," he said grudgingly, "but I don't get it. You're wasting time." He shot a black look at the Wineglass owner, then started down the skids.

It was only minutes before he came

trudging back up the road with the heavy chain hanging over his shoulder. It was minutes in which Jorglum eyed Driscoll in complacent, contemptuous silence.

"Take it into the blacksmith shanty, Pete," Andy said shortly. "Start grinding that toggle."

PETE shook his head in perplexity. "Andy . . .," he started in. Driscoll's look stopped him again. He sighed, mumbling to himself at all this foolishness, but his booted foot began pumping obediently on the grindstone treadle. Sparks flew as he touched the iron to the stone. After a moment he turned a skeptical eye on his work. Then it was his turn to stare in open-mouthed disbelief at what he held in his hand.

There, etched in the polished iron-like jet on silver, was the unmistakable mark of the Wineglass brand.

In the stunned silence a muttered curse broke from Jorglum's lips. He took a purposeful step toward the blacksmith. "You fool!" he snarled. "I thought you hammered the brand out of that chain. Why, I'll . . ."

"Stay put, Jorglum!" Driscoll barked. He made a threatening motion toward his gun.

"Evidently your iron burner tried," Andy went on quietly, "but it just didn't work. He didn't know you can't remove a brand from the grain of metal by heating and hammering. It disappears from the surface all right, but it goes deeper than that. I'd forgotten all about it myself till I looked at the case on my watch. The tramp jeweler that changed my father's initials on it when he passed it on to me, told us the old engraving would show through sooner or later as it wore down. It did all right, but I never thought much about it up till now."

He drew a long breath. "And that just about solves the killing, I'd say. Somebody from the Wineglass did the job. Between the logger's court and the sheriff we ought to bring out who it was."

Jorglum's breath was coming slow and labored. His eyes lowered on Andy with sudden vengeful decision. "I'm not talking to any logger's jury," he snapped. "And

there ain't men enough in the woods to hold me for trial!"

He half turned. "Get the blond guy, Smitty!" he cried. His hand dipped for his gun and the Colt bucked and exploded in his hand. Driscoll heard the lead flatten on the anvil beside him even as he twisted and leaped for the red-bearded killer.

Jorglum's gun thundered once more, but the shot was only flame scorching his thigh as Andy clubbed the barrel downward. He was on the squat man then, both fists flailing like pieces of swung cordwood.

Jorglum grunted and dropped the smoking steel. His calked boot raced upward in a vicious kick at Andy's groin. The Wheel-spoke owner spun and nearly fell. The boot grazed the point of his hip, and his hand shot out, clutching at Jorglum's ankle.

Caught off balance, the Wineglass boss hopped forward on his other foot, clawing at Andy's upper body for support. Driscoll stepped back, straightening the held leg, then with one hand on the ankle, the other on the toe of Jorglum's boot, he put his full weight into a short, savage twist.

The crack of splintering bone was one with Jorglum's scream of pain. Andy let go and the bearded man sank moaning to the ground.

It wasn't until then that Andy Driscoll remembered his gun—and the blacksmith. He plucked at the holstered Colt and swung around. He was too late. The iron burner lay where he had been struck down, his hammer beside him and a thin red stream pooling the dirt beside his head. He was breathing heavily, but not caring. Pete Hannon was wiping the blood-stained handle of his peavey.

"Well," the foreman said to Andy, "I guess that finishes our chores for the day. The sheriff and your logger's convention should be able to take over from here."

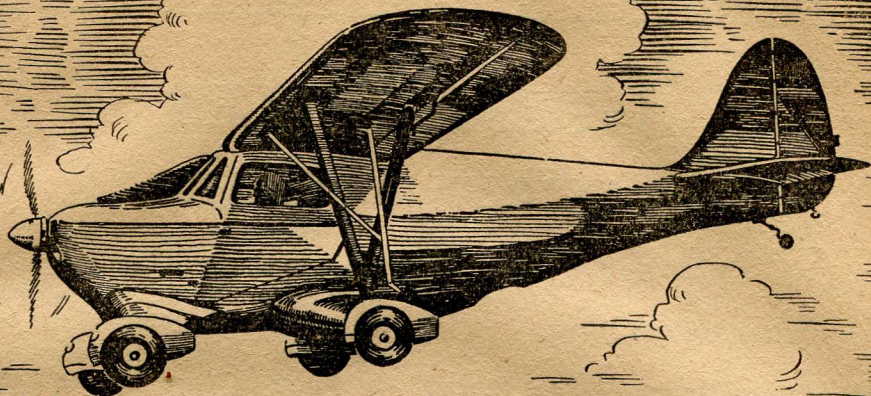
Andy Driscoll glanced ruefully at the unfired gun hanging lax in his hand. "Maybe it's just as well," he answered sadly. "Doesn't look like I'm much good at enforcin' the law."

Pete looked at Burr Jorglum lying helpless and groaning at their feet. He rubbed an affectionate hand along the polished hickory of the peavey. "Oh, I dunno," he said, grinning. "I think we did all right."

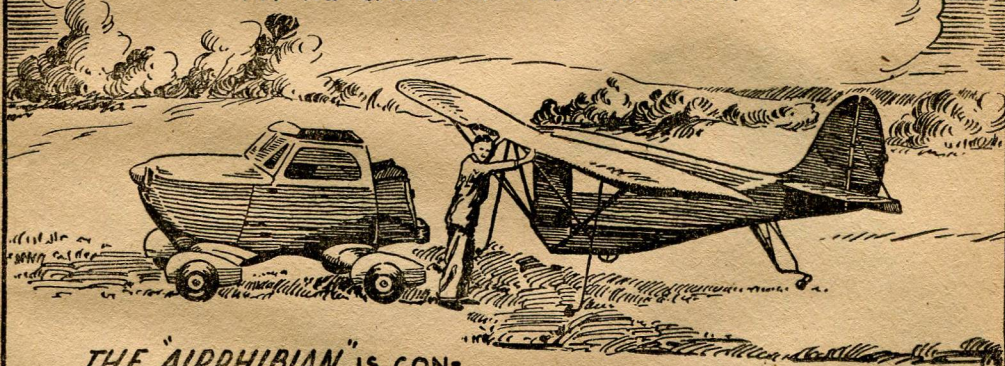
PLANE FACTS

BY

Jim May



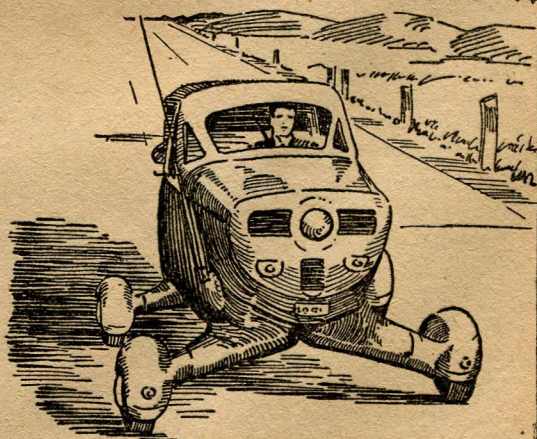
MANY INVENTORS HAVE TOYED WITH THE IDEA OF "A CAR THAT FLIES" OR "A PLANE THAT RUNS ON THE GROUND," BUT A YOUNG CHAP WITH THE HISTORIC NAME OF ROBERT FULTON IS MAKING THE CAR-PLANE A REALITY. HE CALLS IT THE "AIRPHIBIAN."



THE "AIRPHIBIAN" IS CONSTRUCTED IN TWO SECTIONS. EACH SECTION IS COMPLETE IN ITSELF. THE CAR AND THE PLANE UNIT CAN BE JOINED TOGETHER EASILY AND QUICKLY TO FORM A PLANE THAT FLIES.

AFTER A FLIGHT THE PLANE UNIT CAN BE SPEEDILY DETACHED AND THE SLEEK, ALL-METAL CONVERTIBLE COUPE IS READY FOR THE HIGHWAY.

INCIDENTLY THE MIDDLE NAME OF THE "AIRPHIBIAN'S" INVENTOR, ROBERT E. FULTON JR. IS EDISON.



*"How About Washing Out Reports an' Just Hitting the Ball?"
Groaned Loose Lip Lock, Self Termed Private Eye on Federal
Proving Ground Where Strange Events Were Going on*

GUEST KILLER

By **ANDREW A. CAFFREY**

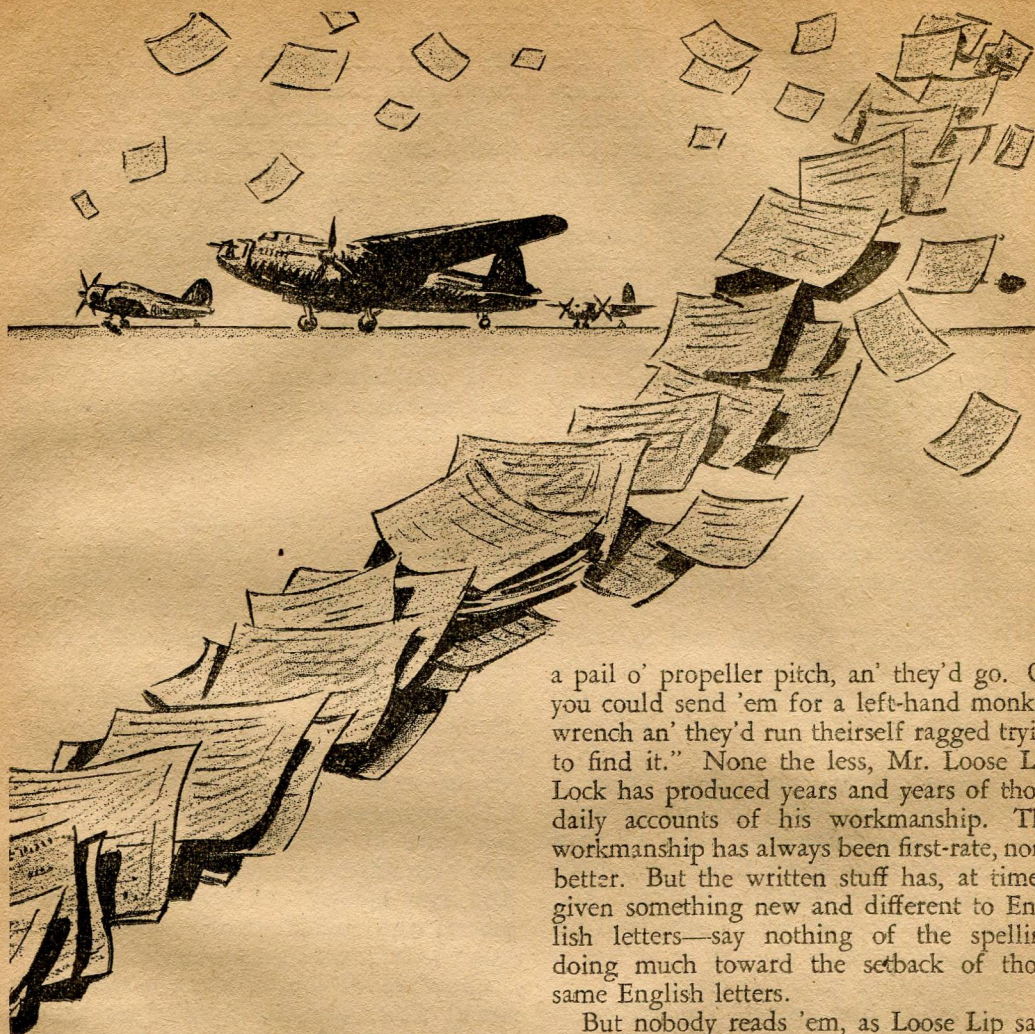
CHAPTER I

TRUMP'S BACK AGAIN

IN Aviation Section, Federal Proving Ground, there has always been a certain amount of required composition by and from the civilian mechanics in shops and hangars; and they're all civvies in those extensive mammoth caves. The

idea is to obtain an itemized check on actual work performed, this as a safeguard against too much goldbricking on the job. It isn't enough to jot down "Worked eight hours on ship P-35," or "Rode as flight engineer aboard P-23." No, sir. The mac has to build it up and spread 'er out, telling exactly, step by step, what was accomplished during those eight hours around P-35, or what observations or doctoring steps were





made or taken aboard P-23. What's more, the mechanic's daily writings go into the files up there in Colonel "Cap" Call's loft office—in there behind the glass partition with all the good-looking file clerks, gender female. You'd like to have your handwriting in there in such nice company.

All but Mr. Loose Lip Lock, Aviation Section's long-time, loud tiptop, all-around mechanic. Loose Lip, from the start, and the start was way back there when World War I released him from enlisted status, has never liked the penmanship. He's always argued that guys with no eddication shouldn't otter have to do no bookkeepin'. "What's the use?" he asked a thousand times. "Nobody ever reads 'em, an' if they did they wouldn't unnerstan'. Hell's hinges, ya could still tell them brass hats to take a bucket and go down to the engine room for

a pail o' propeller pitch, an' they'd go. Or you could send 'em for a left-hand monkey wrench an' they'd run theirselves ragged tryin' to find it." None the less, Mr. Loose Lip Lock has produced years and years of those daily accounts of his workmanship. The workmanship has always been first-rate, none better. But the written stuff has, at times, given something new and different to English letters—say nothing of the spelling doing much toward the setback of those same English letters.

But nobody reads 'em, as Loose Lip said—till General Trump arrived back on Federal, to act as commanding officer. Right away, and without warning, General Trump began to spend long hours back there among the files—no, it wasn't the good-looking girls, it was the macs' reports. The dope therein. Trump was that sort of an exacting, technical gent.

General Trump wasn't new to Federal. First, back in the middle 30's, he had arrived fresh from the Point. It isn't trite to use the word "fresh" here, for young Lieutenant Trump was all of that, being a young fellow with his eye on the ball. Maybe he had been warned of a war to come, of an aviation era in the cards, of a time when airmen could do much for themselves and their country. At any rate, Trump had arrived, taken his look, then left as a conqueror.

LOOSE LIP LOCK hadn't liked the young Trump. The young Trump hadn't cared a damn for Call's old star mac, that loud fair-haired boy of Test. Cap Call usually liked or disliked the things of aviation either liked or disliked by Loose Lip, so the chief of test didn't go for young Lieutenant Trump either. But, working together, the rough edges went off both Trump and the big mac; and because the young Pointer really loved air, and the old mac really knew air, they began to respect one another. All of a sudden, after a few tough test trips in very rough experimental planes, the pair found itself getting along. Cap Call realized he had a test pilot—in young Trump—who really ate test work. Gradually, perhaps with all three holding crossed fingers, the partnership took on the smooth flow of a going concern.

"The general," Cap Call said to Loose Lip, during one of the mac's frequent visits to the loft, "thinks that you could bear down harder on your daily work report, Lockie ol' top."

"Trump?" Loose Lip asked. "Gee, it ain't that he wants his ol' sidekick to write him mash notes? He knows that ol' man Lock knows more about these jet hotpots than even the guys that invented 'em. An', by hell, he knows old man Lock'll roll his kit and do a Moscow walkout if he has to spend all his time in lit'rary effort."

"You might have to roll that kit," Call said, trying to keep a straight face and appear businesslike. "I don't need to remind you that the general means write it out when he says write it out. You and I are old stiffs here on Federal, we've worked with the Trump man before."

"He's a hard guy—in his way," Loose Lip said, adding the "in his way" as an afterthought, but in no light manner.

"And his way," Call said, "comes damned close to being right. He's a good airman, Lockie. You and I should go all-out for good airmen. We've labored in this vineyard under so many phonies."

"The guy's jake," Loose Lip agreed. "But this writin' stuff! . . . Look, Cap, it's all wasted motion. Hell, I've seen guys down here in the hangar add in their cafeteria lunch, from split-pea zoop to jello, an' even jot down the prices like they was bolt measurements er rev readin's. You remember

Joe Hallet, the guy that joined up an' got burnt down over Italy? Well, he used t' put in his phone number every dam' day, an' he finally caught a redhead behind this here partition." Loose Lip nodded toward the file room. "You remember her—the little redhead that had the test hoppers running round in tight circles. She quit when Joe went overseas. Anyway, what I mean, Uncle Sam ain't payin' a top-flight mac like me fer writin' notes—not even to Trump."

"I wouldn't know," Cap Call said, "but the Uncle must be paying you for something other than brains, so you'd better hump to it."

SO ALONG toward quitting time each day, Chief Mac Slim Rand became as one old hen worrying over her wayward brood, in that Slim began putting the whip on his test-hangar macs, reminding them that they must—for the time being—write out those so-and-so work reports in full. The whole trouble was that Trump, as a commanding officer, was too much of a surprise for one gulp. Hitherto, Aviation Section's C.O. might have his seat on Federal, but his feet were in Washington. No C.O. had ever been anything more than a figurehead. And now, suddenly, to have a commanding general who wanted actually to read a work report—oh, it was just too much.

Cap Call, of course, knew it wasn't too much, Truth was, the chief of test agreed with Trump. Trump, after his first hard journey into and through a batch of so-called work reports, had said, "Either these work reports should be kept or they shouldn't. As I find the setup, headquarters engineering orders say that they should. Guess I'm the goat. I'm the mouthpiece of headquarters, for the time being."

"I understand your position," Cap Call said. "Only trouble is, of course, it's so damned difficult to convince a practical mechanic that records are either necessary or important. I wonder if they are."

"They are," Trump said. "At least, they could be the way this aviation business is hitting it. Call, I don't have to tell you we've got to hang on like hell or we'll be lost on the turns. It's a fast game, and getting faster. I'm serious about the written records on what mechanics do. They must be made, smartened up, itemized, made

things of beauty and historic value. You'll keep after the working force, Colonel?"

"I will," Cap Call kidded, "but after two or three days of this pressure, our friend Lock is going to be all fagged out. Perhaps rendered speechless."

"I know Lock from away back and could say something about that possibility," Trump laughed, "but I won't. After all, we're not cutting him off just above the larynx."

CHAPTER II

A KITCHEN TABLE

NEEDLESS to say, the quitting-time pencil-pushers passed by the time clock more slowly. Also, some of them began to miss busses for Liberty and other residential suburbs. And they blamed it all on that stiff-necked, so-and-so of a brass hat, Trump. How come a guy like him has to come onto Federal and replace a C.O. who had been so easy and obscure that half the help had never even seen him, say nothing of knowing his name? Who did this Trump think he was or is?

"He was," Loose Lip told the test hangar gang, "one of the hottest young test pilots I ever trained. That was back afore the war, back when most o' you squirts wuz still wet behind the ears. An' he *is* the C.O. Ya don't have to love a C.O., but, by hell, ya call him 'uncle' while you're workin' here, an' while I'm in charge of everything just under him. . . . Like he sez to me onny today. 'Mr. Lock,' Trump sez, 'put the whip on the hired help an' show 'em how to write out them dam' work reports. An' if you can learn 'em to do that, I'll make you assistant chief when I get to be chief of air forces.' . . . Yes, sir, this man Trump is gonna be chief one o' these days. He's so big in air that ginks like you can't 'preciate his size. Not even that slim guy standin' there in his glass house. Hey, Slim ol' drone, you better write out a work report, too, jus' to see if you can remember doin' anything since you punched the clock this mornin'."

Chief Mac Slim Rand said he was class, and that class didn't punch time clocks or make out work reports. "I tell you guys to do stuff," he said. "I'm clean. I don't do those things myself. But tomorrow, you

wahoo you, you'll have something to write home about. The Kellet Company's flying wing is due in from that California desert where they've been doing test for the last year and a half."

"So what?" engine mechanic Jack Fay asked. "I saw the Northrup flyin' wing out there on the same desert. When you've seen one wing you've seen 'em all, and I don't mean turkey."

"An' ya don't talk turkey either," Loose Lip Lock said. "That Northrup wing was jus' a scale mock-up for the real thing. They's some talk about puttin' davits on this Kellet job and usin' the Northrup for a lifeboat. That's on the right side, what we ocean guys calls the starboard. On the left side they're gonna sling that little job Howard Hughes is puttin' together out there in San Pedro. Fay, them little crates'll look cute as hell hangin' on the trailin' edge of a real ship."

"Just turn the Lock gadget on, like this, and it'll run off at the mouth by the hour," Jack Fay remarked, to nobody in particular. "Him and Kilroy! They were both *here*, but neither one of them were *there* when the brains were passed out. Loose Lip, me fine bucko, you should live long enough to see a flying wing bigger and better than the Northrup."

"Bigger an' better!" repeated Loose Lip, and with the best of his fine derision. "Look, Fay. They'll be separate flight engineers in both wings o' this Kellet job. I seen the specification prints down in Engineerin'. I wouldn't kid ya. Anyway, them flight macs that live in the left wing, say, will be with the thing for weeks, maybe months, afore they get to know the guys livin' over on the next block—the johns in the right wing's tunnel. And the control crew on the bridge'll never get to know any of them poor gophers livin' in them wings. I tell ya she's big. This is where aviation starts. Up till now us guys've been flyin' kites. Hell's bells, a Indian with a fire an' a blanket has done more things in the sky than we have—up till now. But now watch our smoke. And the poor ol' dam' Indian won't know how come that heap big cloud is goin' acrost the sky. Like Slim sez; wait till you see this here cockeyed Kellet job. An' am I gonna make you guys get the rag out an' hump. I want all good work reports, too, startin' when I

put you greaseballs into them engine nacelles. An' any guy that gets lost in there does it on his own time. They'll be none of this portal-to-portal stuff, either. Maybe you guys better bring your bindle an' mulligan pot an' live right on the job. Hey, will you birds pipe down—" so exclaiming, Loose Lip suddenly balled up his work report and tossed it in the trash can at the end of the workbench—"ya got me conversin' so interestedly on the Kellet flyin' wing that I was writin' it all into the dam' report. Now shut up!"

IN THE past, Aviation Section had always declared a gymkahana whenever a new-type ship of its own design and build was due to take the air. Of late, with the manufacturers furnishing most of the eye-opening jobs, the time-out-from-work period has been declared whenever a worthwhile product has arrived on Federal via air. So, shortly after noon next day, the thousands of Aviation Section employees, male and opposite, from hangars, offices and shops, were out on the front apron to await the arrival of the Kellet flying wing. The big job was scheduled to do a turn over Washington—just to show the DC boys what they were buying—then come down on Federal for its delivery landing. Needless to say, there was a gala spirit rampant on a field of Portland cement out there where the wide apron stretches its full mile of gray ribbon.

Then somebody said, "There she be!" and the gala noise quit the crowd. To say they were hushed to silence may be poetic, but it doesn't fill the bill—they were knocked back on their heels with surprise. Ye gods, Kellet Aircraft had sure concealed a mole hill while it was building a mountain out there in the California desert. And as for Loose Lip Lock's big talk, his boast of having seen Engineering's prints; well he must have just got a peek at a reduced-scale drawing of the real article. And the real article was sky-filling, even when the mighty job was half-hidden by Atlantic mists and fully seven miles from the hangars. It looked like a bat-shaped cloud separating itself from other, smaller clouds. Then its eight props were flashing in the sunshine; and those props looked like Dutch windmills on a company front. Yes, this was the time and the place where modern man stopped playing with

five-and-ten airplanes and started to go big league. This was the junction where old-line stiffes such as Cap Call, Slim Rand and Loose Lip—and even the younger Trump—had better hang on lest they be brushed off and rolled under by the big train. And to think that Kellet Aircraft had done this! The Kellet people? An outfit which, in the past, had dumped more phony jobs on Federal than all other aircraft builders combined.

Brigadier General Trump, of course, was out on the apron. He was with Cap Call and the test-hangar personnel, and when the latter recovered and regained vocal control, they, needless to say, were very vocal—"Oh, look at that big son!" "Well, I'll be a dirty what-you-used-to-call-Japs if I ain't seen it all now!" "So help me, I left home 'cause the place was too small, an' by hell I'll leave here now 'cause this is too big for a small-town Joe." But the loudest of all was Loose Lip, and he said—in a voice slightly lower than a wind tunnel's roar, "Jus' like I told Engineerin'. I sez, this baby'll knock the yakles kickin' when we trot er out for inspection. Now all you guys stand back when this wing comes down for a landin'. She calls for a man. Lucky for Federal that Ol' Man Lock's bright uneddicated son is here to grab er afore she has a chance to destroy the whole dam' plant. Hey, Cap, will we put er in a hangar or put the hangars in her? Make up your mind!"

"One problem at a time," Cap Call begged. "As I was just saying to Slim here—I wish we had an engine mechanic big enough to handle these power units. What a powerhouse! Eight 5,000-h.p. jobs. Maybe we'll have to hire on the designers, eh, Slim?"

THE Kellet flying wing had long since broken herself loose from the other Atlantic clouds. Now she was a very definite thing putting a shadow on the Navy's shore-side hangars, and only a few short miles east of the big reviewing stand. Another minute or so and she was bringing the big shadow across Aviation Section's own east fence. Then she was suddenly close enough for ground observers to note all the riders behind all her many portholes and leading-edge windows, the faces of waving men, men who knew they had bets on something

big. Next, she was broadside to the great gallery, and the gallery was crushed by the weight of its passing, awed till there wasn't a peep out of even the dizziest dame or loudest duffer in the mob. As for the men with the minds, guys who had come up through the years with Aviation Section and kindred flying plants, they suddenly realized that the Old Man was riding their backs. It didn't take a Loose Lip Lock to tell them that an era was passing. Suddenly they knew that those two brothers flea-hopping a mock-up of sticks and linen, back there at Kitty Hawk, were hundreds of years away, and gone forever. This wasn't a plane at all. It didn't have anything that looked like a wing curve. It was just so much tonnage passing through the air by the grace of God and the crust and thrust of 40,000 horsepower. And maybe the old hands, with the old eyes on the sky, recalled that Glen Curtiss had said: "Give me power enough and I'll fly the kitchen table." And here it was, a wedge-shaped kitchen table cruising past—and crowding the whole damned industry into the past.

CHAPTER III

A LADY SCREAMS

ON THAT first sightseeing pass, the Kellet wing was just dragging Federal for a look-see, to see and to be seen. The slight Atlantic breeze was on its Manx end, and said aft section lacked even the least rudimentary of tails. So the intention, of course, was to cruise west, make a big, safe turn-about hell'n'gone downcountry, then come upwind for a landing. Needless to say, she had received clearance for landing long before her misty snout had first pushed those Atlantic clouds aside.

She was at about one thousand elevation—when she had come over the east fence and passed the assembled thousands—and her throttles were advanced to a nice cruising speed. Not too fast, nothing to excite the boys from the supersonic lab. Fact was, the Kellet job had nothing much to do with high speed. She was a bomber, pure but by no means simple; and her future in air would depend upon power, long-range operation, and smart outside defensive agencies designed to keep her, and the likes of

her, aloft and beyond enemy interception. Anyway, you'd say she was easing along; her great size giving the impression of slowness. So you could watch her every move, almost count the revs of those outsize props, and even detect the slight movements on rudders and elevators and aileron tabs. And you did watch, then when she was just beyond the middle of the two-mile main runway, you saw her wheel wells begin unfolding their streamlined doors—and the main gear was coming down. That main gear was a mammoth affair, a four-wheel truck in itself. It was just aft the control bay, under the bulge which answered as a fuselage. More than one watcher said, "Well, I'll be damned!" reverently, lowly, when he saw the size of those four tires. Akron had sure busted her buttons taking them out of the mold. No doubt, all that rubber and cord accounted in no small way for the general tire shortage. But the main gear was only part of the show. The two lesser wheel assemblies were coming down. They were slightly smaller, mere tricycle groups of three wheels each. They came down out of each wing section, out of wells between the second and third engine nacelles on either side, and——

Something else was coming down!

A stenog screamed. She cried, "It's a man!"

That seemed downright superfluous. It was a man. What is more to the point, it was a dead man. He was dead when he came out of that well—down with the wheels—and you could tell by the way the dark object was falling. It was a tight ball of man, no loose movement of arms or legs, no whipping in the breeze. The thud on the concrete was solid, sickening.

There were other things falling. Small sheets of paper, sheets that twisted and turned and scaled and drifted, with the sunshine splashing on their slick whiteness. Some of them, now caught in the slipstream from eight powerful engines, whipped far downfield, then sort of eddied with other crosswinds, to float in toward the astonished thousands. And several of the ladies present were no longer astonished, for the well-known faint had quickly taken them out of their watching misery—including that little blonde stenog from Personnel, the one who had first cried out that it was a man. The

man had hit the main runway just inside the west fence.

Even before he hit, an ambulance had quit its ready stand at the base of the observation tower. Somehow or other, the gala spirit of gymkahana had departed Aviation Section; and Death had taken that holiday-hour crowd for a fall. The big ship could fly her turn now and make the landing, but it would be just another bomber coming in for just one more setdown.

Silently, while the Kellet wing began to fly its downcountry turnabout, the joyless throng watched the ambulance crew place the corpse on a stretcher, then hurry to get it aboard and the vehicle clear of the runway. The more keen-eyed in the crowd noticed—and knew—that a second car, out there on the main runway with the ambulance, carried two of the several F. B. I. men assigned to Federal.

They, of course, were men who covered all bets, fast-thinking fellows who wouldn't see a sparrow fall without questioning the why of the tumble.

Also out on the field, as usual, were two of the kids employed as headquarters orderlies.

They were out there scrambling for those falling papers. They were breaking field regulations by being abroad on the flight space, but, kidlike, curiosity had overshadowed discipline. No doubt the two kids guessed that it was some sort of throw-away advertising matter. Perhaps leaflets boosting Kellet Aircraft Company's other products. Anyway, the kids began picking up the slips of paper, glancing at them, then tossing them away. They were disgusted. Apparently nobody was giving anything away. However, one of the two rolled up one of the leaflets, put it in his mouth like a cigarette holder, then began strolling in-field toward the control tower.

FOR some reason or other—perhaps because of the latent kid in him—Loose Lip Lock paced afiel for ten or twenty yards, then yelled, "Hey, Squirt!" Headquarters orderlies, down through the years, had always answered to "Squirt" by Mr. Loose Lip Lock.

"Yeah, you want me, big boy?" the kid asked, then turned toward Loose Lip. The big mac was Mr. Big to all the kids.

"Let me see that paper," Loose Lip demanded.

"It ain't nothin'," the kid shouted. "Just an old work slip—a work-report slip."

Both Cap Call and General Trump heard that, and, no doubt, they must have wondered. Their eyes were glued to Loose Lip when he came back to where they stood, reading the familiar work-report slip.

"What is it?" Call asked.

"Like Squirt sez, it ain't nothin'," the big mac answered. "Just a Form: 3745-D work-report slip— Hey, how come anybody aboard that job'd have one of our work slips?"

"Now you're asking something," Call mused, reaching for the slip. The "D" designation was for work-report slips filled out and sent back to Engineering when a mechanic was away on detached service. "We didn't have anybody out on this wing job. . . . H'm'm," Call hmm-ed, "it's a real mechanic's report, all right—nothing that makes any sense. You could have filled this out yourself."

"General," he said to Trump, "would you like to look at it. I think you'll agree."

TRUMP took the slip. He said, "It does look, and read, like the usual thing, Call. But just a moment! Say, this could be code. This—Oh, Lock—flag down that coupé."

Loose Lip ran out and gave the incoming coupé a wave, the coupé occupied by those two on-the-job F. B. I. men. The coupé turned in and braked to a stop where the C.O. waited. "Take a look at this, gentlemen," he said. "Maybe you can make something of it."

The F. B. I. men studied the paper for a half minute, then both turned their eyes fieldward, and downfield, to where the last few slipstream-borne leaflets were drifting to earth.

Then both F. B. I. men were out of that coupé. One of them hailed the captain of post guards. The captain happened to be standing with three of his off-shift men. "Those papers—those leaflets that fell from the bomber—don't let anybody touch them," the F. B. I. man ordered. "And could you turn out your men and have them policed up? Keep everybody else off the flying space. It's important, Captain. Damned important."

CHAPTER IV

THAT OLD PRIVATE EYE

ON THE ground, the Kellet flying wing was fully mobile. All ten wheels of that combined three-unit landing-gear assembly were fully steerable; and the main truck of four taxied on its own power. So, an hour or so after landing, she went into Hangar J sidewise, wingtip first, and on her own power. Hangar J, built originally for the blimp age that blew up with the other dirigibles, is four hundred feet long, so the Kellet baby's left wingtip hung out in the weather by only about one hundred feet when the right tip was within a few feet of the back wall. Needless to say, a heavy guard went on all doors. Then the post securities boys and the F. B. I. went to work trying to learn why a strange man, plus some two hundred forty-seven not-so-strange Form: 3745-D work-report slips should fall from the starboard wheel well.

There were twenty-nine Kellet Aircraft men aboard. Each had taken a look at the corpse down in the post morgue, and each had stated that the man had not been in any way attached to either the factory or desert-base activities attending the readying of the big job. No, the wing had made no service stops between the California takeoff and its landing on Federal. Could a man get into the wheel wells from within the ship proper?

He could, but nobody had done so. There had been no stowaways, absolutely not, for the desert base was under too heavy a guard. Anyway, that dead man hadn't done any moving since the wheels had made their retraction. You could see that he had made a bad guess, and died as a result. He had guessed that that little shelf—that bloody little shelf above the valve and gadget panel—was a free space, a lost space, a place where a man might hide out and ride unseen. What he didn't know was that an eccentric folding of the landing-gear arms sent a short-arm member horizontally into the space above that shelf. And it did so with a four-ton pressure behind the thrust. No, that man hadn't done any moving—no downward traveling through hatches—since those tricycle wheels came up and pressed him against the bulkhead.

Obviously, desperation had caused the fellow to seek quick refuge in that well on that shelf. Anybody familiar with flying-field behavior would know that, as soon as a ship lands, either service macs, control officials or mere hangers-on begin immediately to walk around big landing wheels. What's more, the control inspectors start their duties there. And everybody and anybody looks upward into those caverns to see where the wheels hide when the hydraulics fold 'em in and shut the doors. So a man knowing his air stuff would never plan to stow away there and hope to avoid detection. And there was enough seeping out from both F. B. I. and field-security sources to suggest that the man now dead had cause to desire anonymity and protection against discovery. Judging from the sudden F. B. I. interest in work-report slips, and the research work being done in files and right there among the macs in test hangar, you'd know that something worthwhile had shown up on those forms dropped from the Kellet wing.

"Hey, Pierce," Loose Lip finally asked one of the F. B. I. men, "why you G-guys so tight with your info? Why don't ya bend jus' a bit? Maybe guys like us could give you dudes a lift."

"Maybe you could tell us why anybody should resort to the use of a government form, for, say unauthorized observations, when there's so much free hotel stationery in this world," Pierce kidded.

"That's easy," Loose Lip said. "After all, o' course, I know you, Pierce, an' I know your biz. So I ain't dumb enough to think ya ain't hot on a lead, o' some sort. So I'm talkin' as one big-shot to another, like one private eye to another. Hell's bells, feller, I read all them pint-size who-done-its. I know my stuff."

"So all right. You want to know why a guy'll use our work-report slip. Look, them report slips is like this here Congres'nal Record—nobody ever reads 'em. Any guy familiar with the layout'd know that you could put stuff on them forms an' they'd stay secret from now out. Maybe this dead guy worked right here on this field, maybe back durin' the war when everybody was punchin' the clock here. These forms have been used for years."

Pierce said, "That's an angle, private eye. I've heard some talk, just recently, about

laxity in these work-report slips. Isn't the new C.O. on your tail, or something?"

"Sure. He's got the whip on the gang," Loose Lip said. "An' Trump's right. Like Cap Call sez to me, 'Lockie,' he sez, 'we want you to write 'em out pretty. Tell everything you know 'bout aircraft maintenance. A hunnerd years from now guys'll be goin' to the libraries an' readin' the stuff you put down.' Hey, Pierce, wouldn't it be hell if I got to be one o' these best-seller ginks a hunnerd years from now?"

"Take a tip from me," Pierce advised, "and settle for coffee-and right now. Well, keep your eyes open. So long."

"Don't go away, Pierce. Let's do a little more work on this case," Loose Lip suggested. "Ya see, I take my crew aboard that big Kellet job tomorrow, so I'm int'rested in the ol' crock. I wanna know how come that monkey was ridin' that well. How do I know some sab'tage won't show up after my boys've relieved the Kellet Aircraft crew?"

"So what?" Pierce kidded. "You'll be big enough to handle 'em as they come, or play 'em as they fall. I know you, Lock."

"Right you are," Loose Lip agreed. "Now how about the dead guy?"

"He's dead—all over," Pierce stated.

"Before he was dead—who was he? Ain't you big Gs got no ideas? First thing us private eyes do is look for the clues. An' the ol' fingerprints. You guys been through all the Aviation Section fingerprints?"

"No soap," Pierce said. "He has no fingerprints."

"Gotta have fingerprints, Pierce. What d'ya mean the corpus delect-ee don't have prints?"

"The pads on all fingers and both thumbs were surgically destroyed," Pierce made known, this in view of the fact that he appreciated Loose Lip's high standing with Colonel Call and so many others of the command. "The grafting was recent, and a smart job."

"That makes the guy look important, eh? He wasn't no flyin'-field tramp jus' hangin' round ships for the hell of it. That guy wanted something, Pierce. What was on them work forms?"

F. B. I.-man Pierce just stood there studying the overhang of a nearby wing. He wasn't saying. Maybe he'd gassed too much.

"Don't be that way," Loose Lip said.

"After all, Pierce, it was my hunch that put them fallin' leaves in your hands. Hell, right away, ol' Private Eye Lock knew that them forms had somethin' to do with that ol' corpus delect-ee that you an' the ambulance crew was scrapin' up off the runway. Come on, swing, hinge, swing."

"The forms were code," Pierce said.

"They all are, even mine," Loose Lip said. "What was the dope in the code? You guys know how to break down that stuff."

"There was plenty in it," Pierce admitted. "This delecti was smart. No doubt, an engineer in his own right. No dumb-john mac. Everything worth knowing about the Kellet wing—engines, all the new control devices, gun positions, bomb-load possibilities, the fact that she was designed to carry a certain number of atom bombs, radio and radar equipment, everything—it was all on the slips."

"Lucky for the ol' F. B. I. they had somebody with his eyes open on Federal," Loose Lip said. "It makes me laugh. You an' your sidekick Lake takin' care of a dead one while ol' Private Eye Lock handles the live stuff. I sure rate a ten-cent see-gar, an' it's on your office, Pierce. Now how about identification marks on the corpus. We allus look for laundry marks an' maker's trademarks."

"Not a mark," said Pierce. "Not even on his shoes, and nothing in his pockets. No billfold, nor anything else. I tell you this guy was rigged for espionage, and he didn't just happen."

"It arouses the bloodhound in me," Loose Lip said. "Where you G-guys stop an' yell 'uncle!' that's where I begin. Yes, sir, I gotta get me crew lined up for this Kellet takeover, an' then I'll organize me sleuthin' service. Long time no use that service."

"And who, might I ask, is the service?" Pierce asked.

"Usually them squirts that run messages for headquarters," Loose Lip said. "Me an' the kids've busted some of the biggest cases that ever happened here on Federal."

"Cases of what? You're not contributing to the delinquency of minors, are you, Mr. Lock?"

"Spy cases," said Loose Lip. "An' some o' the toughest you ever saw, Pierce. Look. You guys always go at it the hard way. You

don't pick up the marbles where they are—in the ring. Oh no, you birds want to smother the whole dam' works with mystery, then ball up each other tryin' to guess ya way out. That's no way."

F. B. I.-man Pierce wasn't sore, just intrigued, ready to learn, so he asked, "And you, Private Eye?"

"Go to the guys that know everything, them dam' little key-hole snoops down in headquarters. You ast Ryder about me an' them kids. Hey, how come the boss ain't in on this case?"

"It's just one of those things," Pierce answered, meaning that Special Agent Ryder, an old Federal friend of Loose Lip's, was absent from the big reservation.

"Anyway," Loose Lip continued, "the nosiest punk on the bench, down there at headquarters, is Squirt Hall. He's the kid I got that first work-report slip from. This squirt is a young cousin of another Squirt Hall that used to hold down one o' the orderly jobs back afore the war. You should-a seen me an' that other Squirt Hall get the dope an' bust cases for Ryder. Take it from me, these Hall punks've sure got snouts for news. Hell, ya'll find 'em every place—drawin' picters on latrine walls, listenin' in close up to the winders of them headquarters conference rooms, sittin' close to the special tables down in the cafeteria, actin' dopey over in the labs, an' getting past 'Private' signs on doors just because they can't read. Them punks know what goes in your office, too."

PIERCE wanted to laugh. He felt the need of a good laugh. But he didn't do it. He said, "Some kids. Cute kids."

"Don't belittle my helpers," Loose Lip Lock warned.

"But your helpers were about 2,400 airline miles from the California base when this happened," the F. B. I. man said.

"Yeah. But it's like the farmer sez: What's time to a hawg? What's distance or problems to me an' me staff? Us hawgs don't care how big ya make the problem, Pierce.

"Jus' don't gum up the works on us. Don't litter up the dam' ol' workbench with tools we don't know how to use. Well, be seein' you, an' if ya see smoke, ya'll know it's ourn—I an' the squirt's."

CHAPTER V

THE BIG G ARRIVES

AS PER flight-test schedule, Call's office assumed future responsibility for the Kellet flying wing. Slim Rand turned the service and maintenance over to Loose Lip's crew, and through force of habit that loud gentleman began to fill out like a newly made second lieutenant. Aside from the brass on the bridge, there were seven Kellet Aircraft factory men of importance—four flight engineers, a radio and radar man, an hydraulics expert and a good general A & E mac whom Loose Lip had known—and brawled with—for years. He was Jack Glynn. He knew everything. He even knew more about some things than did Loose Lip, but those things weren't planes or engines. The other twenty-two Kellet Aircraft riders, including the bridge officers and a nice crowd of officials and near-officials who had just come along for the ride, moved out of the ship but remained on the post. They had been politely requested to do so. Quarters had been provided for them, and though they had other ideas, they stayed. Of course, the fact that F. B. I.-man Pierce made the request was the thing that made the request appear very practical if not entirely inviting. A dead body falling from a wheel well could certainly inconvenience twenty-nine other men no end.

Needless to say, the Kellet twenty-nine were never far from the F. B. I. reach; and then, as though from a clear sky, Special Agent Ryder was back on the post. He was all over the post. Even Loose Lip Lock complained that Ryder's fast motions bothered him. So he flagged Ryder down. Ryder had a couple of the medical whizzes from Washington with him. They were on stepladders in that starboard wheel well taking samples of what still remained undisturbed on the bloody shelf. What remained was blood and brains.

"Long time no see, Ryder," Loose Lip chirped, coming up over the big tricycle tires and shoving his expert snout in among the other expert noses. "What goes here?"

"Oh, hello, Lock," Ryder said. Then to the experts, "This, gentlemen, is Mr. Lock. If there's anything you don't know about blood, or anything else, just ask Mr. Lock."

"Not everything," Loose Lip objected, being modest. "Take this adam stuff, this fision thing, they's some angles there even I don't know. But this blood thing—now ya're in my alley. It's human blood. Guy got hisself crushed to death here. Don't know why. Don't know how come he was so dumb—seein' as how he was a smart ape—but I'm workin' on it. Anyway, soap an' water an' a good strong arm'll get it off that shelf an' off that bulkhead; so if you visitin' gents'll give the word, then get t'hell outa here, I'll put a maintenance broom to work at the cleanup."

"Not so fast," Agent Ryder said. "She stays as is, Mr. Lock. And now will you kindly return to the end of that workbench and catch up with the nap you started twenty-odd years ago."

"I'll go. I know when I've been insulted," Loose Lip said. "But it's no way to treat a feller dick, Ryder. Maybe I won't let you an' Pierce an' Lake in on it when I bust the case."

"That's our Mr. Lock," Ryder said to his Washington experts. "My office is tickled to death if it's able to break a case, even crack a case, but Mr. Lock must bust 'em. You'd wonder where he buries his dead."

"Not in wheel wells," said the slowly departing Loose Lip.

THE seven still-active flight crew men had a certain amount of useful information to offer Loose Lip's assigned handling crew. Therefore, the seven had no opposition to the few days they must remain on the post. They had expected to serve this extra time. But the twenty-two others were something else again. Along toward the end of the third day of inactivity most of them were demanding the why and wherefore. Also, they were wiring and phoning the Kellet main office demanding action. They were prisoners, they said. Who the hell did this Ryder think he was—John L. Lewis or Little Caesar?

The old gripe is usually far-reaching. Pretty soon there were just two factions on Aviation Section: the Kellet Aircraft internees and the regular old-line help. Friction was mounting by the hour. Even General Trump seemed to move among Kellet men with a chip on his shoulder. Trump, of course, had no interest in a dead man of

no known status, but it behooved him to play ball with all other federal agencies. Especially did this bear upon the news releases which weren't being made through Aviation Section's public relations office. F. B. I. had advised Trump's office to see to it that public relations screened all news and photographic records of the Kellet flying wing's arrival; and, so doing, that hard-pressed publicity outlet had used a very fine mesh in its screening. The still camera boys had had all pictures impounded where said snaps showed something falling from the passing bomber. And the newsreel cameramen were forced to leave their best man-falling footage on the cutting-room floor, right there in Aviation Section's own photographic lab. As for the written word—most of it was either rewritten or washed out entirely. Needless to say, General Trump's office was under fire, not only from all the leading press services, but through the high offices of big-shot Washington men who never lost a bet when it came to a chance to do something nice for the publicity boys who, in turn, could do so many nice jobs for them. And again, the end product was Trump; and he bridled under the growing pressure.

Trump was an airman, not a politician. He desired only air action for that big Kellet job, not frictional reaction by the Washington mob which lived and thrived on petty bickerings. So time went on, with four days passing, and everybody seemed to be getting nowhere fast.

As for the big ship itself, Loose Lip and his crew had everything under control. There was no indication that the presence of the man in the wheel well had reached its danger potential upward throughout the mighty craft. So, for all practical purpose, you'd say the affair should be written off as just one more of those things, to forget the whole damned works and go ahead with the highly important business of putting the big job through her test runs. After all, that was the only reason for maintaining a big test establishment, and paying wages to guys like Call, Slim Rand and Loose Lip Lock. However, Ryder & Co. were tough people; and toughies don't push easily. That ship was to remain as is, in Hangar J until such time as formally released by field-security order.

Cap Call has assigned Colonel Oldfield as project pilot, with Captain Landsdown filling the right-side seat. Test-flight Observer Joe Faber, senior in that important instrument-reading department, had all his queer installations aboard. Of course, old Streeter, head of parachute shop, had been in and out—of both the ship and Loose Lip's hair—during the past few days. It was up to old Street' to see to it that the ship had chutes, and he'd do it. Radar, radio, armament, navigation, etc., each was under the orders of its own shop or lab; and when the word came to heave-ho and take the air, well, the necessary experts would be aboard.

AS A rule, Joe Faber and old Streeter were the men who bothered Mr. Loose Lip Lock; and whether they bothered him like brothers or enemies was hard to tell. All you could say was that there was one hell of a noise whenever the big mac and either one, or both, were in the same ship—or on the same piece of Federal Proving Ground. And now that Flight-test Observer Joe Faber's setup were made, and waiting, he wasn't. Joe as a rule didn't wait on any man. "So how come, you loud lug," he demanded of Loose Lip, "you don't snail this massive mistake out on the apron and into the air? What're we waitin' for now?"

"Why you little loft louse," Loose Lip said. "*You* talkin' to a superior like that! You an' ol' Silk Worm Street! Big shots in a hurry, eh? No regard for the ol' wheels o' progress an' us F. B. I. guys, er are ya jus' ig'rent? Didn't you dopes know we're still workin' on the case? That reminds me, I was gonna run down to headquarters an' see my dumb dick helper. Ah, here he comes now! What d'ya know, Squirt ol' kid?"

Orderly Squirt Hall appeared surprised. As a rule, Loose Lip spent most of his time trying to drive the headquarters kids away from important jobs in work. Now, as it appeared, he was glad to greet a pest, and the pest, for a moment, stood there wordless.

"Huh?" Squirt Hall finally huh-ed. "I know plenty."

"See what I mean?" Loose Lip said to Joe Faber. "Squirt here's bright as a neon

in fog. He knows plenty. He's hot. He's what we can use around here. See you later, Joe."

CHAPTER VI

THERE'S A RIDDLE

LOOSE LIP was sitting on the lower step of the portable stairway leading aloft to the innards of the Kellet monster's control-bay space. The post guard was standing by wishing that his trick on duty were up. Squirt Hall said, "I guess I'll take a look," and started up the stairs. Loose Lip stretched out his right arm as a barrier and said, "Sez who, ya crusty punk, you? No soap."

"Huh, why not?" the kid asked. "I ain't seen the inside of this ship yet. Ain't us headquarters guys gotta right to see 'em?"

"Us headquarters guys!" Loose Lip repeated. "Nobody gets aboard this bus but friends o' General Trump an' meself. What have you ever done for me? Gee, when I think of the way your cousin Chuck used to work that headquarters racket, I'm ashamed of you. M'gosh, kid, you don't deserve to 'herit the good ol' title 'Squirt,' an' I'll take it away from ya if I don't see some quick action. What do you do with ya spare time—sleep down there on the hard bench?"

"I get around," the kid boasted. "I bet I see more'n you do on this post. Hey, I bet you didn't get to see the dead guy."

"You mean the guy that fell outa this job?"

"Naw. I seen him too, down in the morgue. He's still down there. I went in with the undertaker guy that's keepin' him fresh. But I mean the broom that they found dead over in the wood shop this mornin'. Boy, was he a mess! He got hisself all tangled up with the belt and pulley on that big saw."

"Poor stiff," Loose Lip lamented. "One of the brooms, eh? What was he doin' with the saw?"

"Don't know," Squirt Hall answered. "Them brooms is supposed to have all that stuff cleaned up an' ready to go by the time the wood-shop fellers clock in. Guess maybe he just got to monkeyin' with the power, eh?"

"Could be," Loose Lip agreed. He was

willing to let it go at that. After all, a maintenance department broom was a more or less obscure worker on Federal, and like all men they had to die at one time or another.

"I knew that guy," Squirt Hall added. "He was a Pollock, er a Check'slavak, er a Heinie er something. His name was Zilkie.

"Hey, he told me a good riddle the other day. Want to guess it?"

"Shoot," said Loose Lip, being a man for his riddles.

"All right. What is it that goes to town like a man, goes to work like a woman, goes to . . . just a minute. I got it here on a paper. . . . Zilkie writ it out for me. . . . Yeah, here it is. What is it goes—"

"Hey, let me see that paper!" Loose Lip snapped, and, so snapping, he reached up and snapped the riddle paper from the kid's hand. It was another mechanic's work-report slip, that good old Form: 3745-D. "How come this squarehead Zilkie was usin' a work slip fer his dirty stories?"

"It ain't no dirty story," the kid said. "Zilkie was a nice guy, an' he always liked to talk with me. He was no dumb square-head. He was sure interested in planes an' stuff. But look. What is it goes—"

"Where did he get this slip?" Loose Lip again demanded. "The brooms don't fill out on macs' forms. Come on, ya dizzy little buggar before I rub ya nose in the oil pan!"

"Why, cripes, Loose—I mean Lockie, the guy had it in his pocket, I guess. Yeah, I remember now; he had a little block of these forms in his jumper pocket. He just tore off one and writ this for me. What's the harm in that? Eh, what's wrong with a broom usin' just a couple government forms now an' then? Nobody cares."

"By hell," Loose Lip said, "somebody might care. Did you say they took him down to the post morgue?"

"I didn't say," said the kid. "But they done it. Yeah, I seen the ambulance goin' away from the wood shop onny a few minutes ago. Boy, oh boy, was Zilkie all beat up! It made me sick just to look at him. But how about it, can you guess this riddle? What is it goes—"

"I do. Get out of me way," Loose Lip Lock said, and went away from there and out of the hangar, never learning what it was that went to town like a man, etc.

TOUGH Johnnie Manton is maintenance super for all Aviation Section buildings and grounds. He has his corrugated-iron hideout down alongside the post's power-plant. Johnnie was busy at the workbench replacing the worn brushes of a vacuum cleaner when he glanced up and caught Loose Lip's approach in the cracked wash-room mirror which happened to be standing on the bench against the wall. And, being so warned, Johnnie Manton swung around and took a poke at the outsize test-hangar mac—just simply because Loose Lip and Johnnie had been saying hello in that fashion for years. Naturally enough, Loose Lip, though surprised and off-guard, poked back. Anyway, after tools had clattered to the floor, and a nearby stand of push-brooms had tangled in the greeters' legs, the pair puffed down to a fatigued standoff, and Loose Lip wheezed, "I hear tell ya lost a broom this mornin', Irish."

"So they say," Johnnie Manton admitted. "Damned if she ain't gettin' to be some layout, Drip Lip—with guys hatchin' outa jobs in flight, an' now one of my brooms layin' down an' callin' it a day at eight-thirty in the a.m. Even before the day begins."

"Did the F. B. I. guys jump aboard?" Loose Lip asked.

"Hell, no. Why should they?" Johnnie asked. "The guy jus' has an' argument with a power belt and a pulley an' does a die. He ain't the first one. I lost a boy the same way over in the powerhouse three-four years back. You remember that."

"Sure," Loose Lip said. "But why was this guy monkeyin' with power?"

"Listen, Wagon-tongue, why do you put a mitt on every surface where my boys hang a WET PAINT sign? Why do you shove your nose into jet engines when ya don't even know a Model T? It's jus' human nature. Ya want to see what the men see, an' ya want to do what the men do. Same for Zilkie. He wasn't no dumb-john broom, an' I'm the guy that knows it. He was a smart sort of a son. Damned if he didn't know more than some of the engineers on this post. You remember when you dubs was runnin' tests on them German and Wop planes that the force sent back just before V-E Day?"

"Do I? 'Course, I do. The commanding officer sez to me, Mr. Lock—"

"T'hell with that ol' line o' hogwah," Johnnie cut in. "Well, anyway, this Zilkie guy could sit here, right under this roof, listen to them foreign ships fly over an' tell me jus' what they was. An' what kinda engine they had, an' how many engines. Damned if I usen't step out an' check the guy. He was never wrong."

"Till this mornin'," Loose Lip said. "Then he musta made a mistake. Seems funny a wise egg should get hisself scrambled in a plain ol' drive belt an' pulley."

"You should spout," said Johnnie Manton. "You—an egg that's been scrambled ever since Miss Fortune, er some other dizzy dame, busted you outa the shell. Hey, lay off! Lay off! I've got work to do. Get away, or by—let me answer that phone."

Chief Broom Johnnie Manton took the receiver off the hook and answered the ring. He said, "Okay, auditing, I'll be right over."

Hanging up, he asked Loose Lip, "Did you want anything, Chief Bawls Like-a-Bull, or are you just goldbrickin'? I gotta run over to auditing for a shake."

"Shake it," Loose Lip said. "I'll be here when you come back—if I can stand the punishment." He picked up a comic paper and cleared a sitting spot atop the bench, then said to Johnnie's departing back, "Close the door as you go out, my man. An' if ya see Slim Rand or Cap Call keep ya lip buttoned. I'm jus' whiling away a little spare time. I'm days ahead on me work."

AS SOON as the door had closed, Loose Lip dropped the comics and stopped whiling away spare time. He went over to the long row of lockers which banked the blind side of the long room. Each locker had its user's name on the door. He found the one which bore the rather euphonious moniker: Zelotes Zilkie. "Well, I'll be a dirty name myself!" Loose Lip said half-aloud. "Ya'd have to see it to believe it, Mr. Ripley. Hell, a guy might jus' as well be dead, he could never be anythin' but that—or last in the telephone book. Ze-lot-es Zilkie?"

The metal door was locked. Loose Lip stepped over to the bench and found a small cold chisel and ball peen, then suddenly the door was open. Zelotes Zilkie's street clothes were still hanging in the locker, including a topcoat somewhat above the cut and state

you'd associate with a lowly broom. Loose Lip, though hardly clothes conscious, flipped it open in search of a clothier's mark. There was no mark. He tried the suit—it, too, was a nice piece of goods—and there was no maker's name there. The pockets of all garments were empty, except for an ordinary picture postcard. It was in color, a desert scene; and Loose Lip's G-man intuition advised him that this could be something, for the picture thereon was the good old oft-posed Joshua tree. That camera-nutty hunk of flora that yells: Palm Springs, San Berdoo, Victorville—Cal-i-for-ni-a! And, by hell, there was the postmark—Barstow, Cal. The reading matter in the provided space was very casual and very limited. It said: Enjoyed fine stay on desert. Wish you were here. Am bringing back good specimens.

Loose Lip studied that Barstow post-office cancellation stamp closely for date. Of course, being regulation and official, it was blurred. But he could make it out. Then he glanced at Johnnie's calendar and counted backwards on his fingers. She added up and came out just about even. The Kellet job was on its fifth day in Hangar J, give it one day for the California-Federal hop, and call it six. And the cancellation date was just seven days gone; so if the guy who'd dropped from the wheel well had mailed this card, then he must have done so at the last minute, perhaps on the evening before the scheduled take-off. It was a 10 p.m. cancellation.

Praying, "Thank the good Lord for dizzy squirts," Loose Lip slipped the postcard in his pocket, closed Zelotes Zilkie's locker, pushed over another stand of brooms, reached up and advanced the wall clock two hours, spread a little light-grade grease on Johnnie's favorite chair, pulled the hinge-pins out of the Jakes' door, backed up all the fuses in a nearby fuse-box, then went out singing "I'm an Old Cowhand."

CHAPTER VII

THE FINGER'S ON LOCK

WHEN Loose Lip arrived back at test, Slim Rand met him down near the apron end. He thumbed upward toward the loft. "Ah, the wandering boy!" he said. "Cap wants to see you."

Loose Lip sensed a strain in Slim, and also a tension on the hangar. The macs seemed to be working with their feet on the job but their minds and eyes elsewhere—on the back of the big hangar. About halfway up the steep stairs he came to a halt and gazed that way, too. There was a post guard on duty back there where the macs' lockers lined the rear wall. There were other guys there, both field-security and F. B. I. men. Many lockers stood open.

"What goes?" Loose Lip asked, turning and facing Rand.

"The fine comb," Slim said. "Looks like some of you kids're going to lose your marbles, bubble gum and yo-yos. Step on it, Cap's waiting. Wonder you don't stay home now and then just to see what we workers do for Uncle Sam."

Cap Call, long of face and thoughtfully dragging on a cig, was sitting behind his desk trying to make a pencil stand on end. Special Agent Ryder, also appearing troubled, sat at the west end of the big desk. Spread thereon were some squares of paper—just another fine collection of those seemingly all-purpose work-report slips. Ryder's troubled eyes were on them. The third man in the waiting group was Agent Pierce. He was standing near one of the big hangar-view windows, just standing, with some sort of a briefcase under his left arm.

"Hello, Lock," Ryder said. And Cap Call added, "Take a seat, big boy."

Pierce asked, "Been busy bustin', Mr. Lock?"

"You'd be surprised," Loose Lip answered.

Loose Lip's eyes fell afoul the work-report slips spread out in front of Ryder. Right away, he recognized the fine chicken-tracks penmanship on those upturned slips. It was all his.

"I surrender, Ryder," he said. "I'd like to face the squad without a blindfold. An' I'd like to say a few well-spaced words for me feller countrymen—an' even fer guys in the cities—afore I go."

"Will you pipe down," Ryder suggested. "I just want to ask you about these slips. You know where we got them—under that mess of crap in your locker. It's only a matter of form, Lock. You understand that? No hard feelings."

"Course not. I'd do the same for a

enemy," Loose Lip Lock said, and Colonel Cap Call winced. The thing was hurting him far more than it was Loose Lip.

"Some of these slips are out of your locker. Some of them are out of Colonel Call's files. The ones from the files were sent in, from time to time, when you were away on detached service. You even sent some from the Muroc Dry Lake base, out in the California desert."

"Damned if I didn't," Loose Lip admitted. "I'd forgot all about that, Ryder. Sure. I had certain stuff I wanted to send to Cap, an' I just took the handiest piece of paper."

Pierce said, "I think you're the Private Eye who told me a man would do that if he never wanted the stuff read."

"My very words," Loose Lip admitted. "An' I'll bet you five to one that Cap here never read half of it." Call went right ahead trying to make that pencil stand on end, and said nothing.

"I'd like to have you explain some of the expressions used on these slips, Lock," Ryder said.

"You think maybe it's code?" the big mac asked, laughing.

"I don't know," Ryder answered, and he was serious. "Take this one, for example," and he handed one of the work-report slips across the desk. "It bewilders me, no less, it could be code."

LOOSE LIP studied the writing thereon with no less bewilderment than Ryder had displayed. "It's me own han'writin', an' no dam'foolin'," he said. "Oh, now I know what this was. This was las' winter when they was runnin' out at Santa Anita. They was a new guy workin' here in test, a smart lug, an' he was bettin' somebody he could pick winners in all eight starts that day. These jus' the names o' eight nags. Here's B-u-s—Busher. And er—"

"Okay," Ryder said, without a smile, "how about this one?"

The second slip presented offered neither bewilderment nor pause to Mr. Loose Lip Lock.

"It's a laundry slip," he said. "A helluva lot o' old jumpers, shirts an' pants I been pilin' up here on the job for months—3 ju, 4 shts, 3 ps, 5 ohs. . . . That last is overalls. . . . Now look here, Ryder. Let's

you an' me level. Let's get together. Ain't I an' you always got along together?"

"Like clockwork," Agent Ryder agreed. "So let's have it."

"You get a squint," Loose Lip agreed, then handed over the picture postcard.

"Zelotes Zilkie?" Ryder questioned, and Agent Pierce came across the room, leaned over his chief's shoulder, and took a look. "Postmarked Barstow, California. Cancellation 10 p.m. of the— Say, what is this? That was the night before the Kellet wing left the desert base."

"And who's Zelotes Zilkie?" Pierce wanted to know.

"That you should esk," Loose Lip said. "How 'bout it, do I get me Junior G-man badge if I tell?"

"You do," Ryder promised.

"You gents're gonna be all tore up," Loose Lip warned. "Like I told Pierce here; you boys play around the edges too much an' miss the meat in the middle. Of course, you people ain't got the in's an' connections I got here on Federal. After all—"

"Never mind that. You get the junior badge," Ryder again promised. "Now who's this guy who sounds like a brother of Jack Benny's waitress girl friend?"

"First off, before I tell ya," Loose Lip said, "how 'bout you people comparin' the writin' on this card with the writin' on them work slips that fluttered down from the Kellet job?"

Ryder glanced up at Pierce. He said, "He's got us over a barrel. Go ahead." Agent Pierce opened his briefcase on the desk.

He drew out the Kellet-flying-wing work-report slips, also a glass. He went to work on the desert-scene postcard. Then he said, "Same hand."

RYDER sucked in air. He was surprised and pleased. He asked, "How about prints?"

"Prints on prints, too many of them," Pierce said. "Guess most of them are Lock's. You make a hell of a fine postman, Lock—reading everybody's cards."

"Dam' lucky fer you I can read cards!" said Loose Lip.

"All right. All right," Ryder cut in. "Who's Zilkie?"

"The maintenance broom that was found

dead in the wood shop first thing this mornin'," Loose Lip answered.

"Never heard of him," Ryder growled. "Man killed, you say?"

"Oh, jus' an ordinary run-o'-post accident," the big mac stated. "Nobody cared 'cept ol' Private Eye Lock. They find Zilkie all mixed up with a power belt an' pulley."

"Mr. Hoover," Ryder said humbly, "I'm proud to be working for you. Now tell me, how did you happen upon this Zilkie lead?"

"Happen!" said Loose Lip. "My good man, us private eyes don' jus' happen on anything. Like J. Edgar sez to me one—"

"All right. All right. We'll have all that later," Ryder agreed, "but for now, let's have the facts."

"Well, like I told Pierce—an' like I've told you a hunnerd times—go to the top when ya want to know what's comin' off here on Aviation Section. I mean the headquarters squirts. This mornin', my dumb-john second smeller, young Squirt Hall, comes into the hangar. He wants to riddle me a riddle. He has it all writ out on a paper." Loose Lip began to fish through his pockets. He came up with Squirt Hall's "What is it that goes—" work-report slip. "Here it is," and he tossed it on top the desk. "Right away, I'm hot on the job when the kid tells me that a maintenance broom, name o' Zilkie, writ it out for him, an' on a mac's report slip. 'What,' sez I to meself, 'is a broom doin' with that slip?' So I goes down to maintenance an' finds this postcard in Zilkie's locker."

"Nice work," Ryder enthused. "Just one more work-report slip. Slips everywhere. Say, tell me something, Lock, would it be common to find these Aviation Section slips at almost any detached base, such as out there in the California desert?"

"Common! Ye gods, Ryder, ol' top, wherever us macs've been sent these slip blocks go with us. Hell, I've even seen 'em doin' noble service in place o' Sears-Roebuck catalogues."

CHAPTER VIII

MIXED GUEST-LIST

SPECIAL AGENT RYDER and his crew had two dead men side by side in the post morgue. The crew, aside from his ac-

tual legwork men, included the post flight surgeon and two of the best post-mortem examiners within reach of Uncle Sam's folding money and the F. B. I.'s request for a quick guest performance. Even the callous autopsy experts were astounded by the findings.

"It's astounding," Dr. Wolf stated. "These two men could be identical twins. Height, weight, hair—color and texture—eyes, teeth—even to the number still remaining in either man—ears—note this foreshortening of the left lobe, on each, evidently an hereditary defect. Feet are the same. And the hands—even to the eradication of all pads."

"What's that?" Ryder exclaimed. "Are Zilkie's finger pads doctored, too?"

Dr. Wolf turned one of the hands upward. He said, "Smooth as a well-worn hip." So saying, he once more fell to a closer inspection of the Zilkie cadaver's hips. And on the right rump he located the area from which the skin had been taken. "There it is," he said. "And a nice piece of workmanship, too."

"How about this other corpse?" Ryder asked.

Dr. Wolf went directly to the right hip of the man who had tumbled from the wheel well. "Here it is. Same area, and, I'd wager, same workmanship."

"When were these jobs performed, Doctor?" Ryder asked. "You see, we knew that this first dead man had no fingerprints."

Dr. Wolf studied the fresher corpse, Zelotes Zilkie, then stated, "I'd say within the year. . . . Maybe not longer than seven or eight months ago. Would you agree with me, gentlemen?" The last question was for his fellow medical men. All experts, having taken their own close squint, agreed. Each agreed on the workmanship, too; but none would even guess who the skin artist might be. After all, jobs like those, as a rule, were underground and just a bit outside the law.

"I'll be damned! I'll be damned! I'll be damned! Three times, in a row," Ryder mumbled. "Once for each corpse and the third one for somebody still possessed of life, liberty and possibilities."

"Oh, Pierce. Give Personnel Office a ring and ask Mr. Butzinn to come down here. Tell him to bring his record of all persons hired on during the past year. This man Zilkie would have had fingerprints when he

was screened through the employment office.

"Oh, Dr. Wolf. Is it likely that identical twins also had identical fingerprints?"

"Perhaps it would happen once in several million of such births," the doctor said. "But in the case of these two peas, you couldn't surprise me at all."

When Personnel Office's Mr. Butzinn arrived he had with him a small office boy carrying a large file case. At the sight of two cadavers, Mr. Butzinn was a bit flustered. Ryder asked him to identify Zilkie. Mr. Butzinn was at a total loss.

"Good Lord, Mr. Ryder, we were still taking them on by the hundreds each day—a year ago, that is. Zilkie? Zilkie?" and he began to riffle through his file cards, way down at the "Z" end of the back row. "Ah, here it is—Zelotes Zilkie. . . . Common labor. Sent down by a Philadelphia agency. You see, back during the rush of the emergency, we were glad to get our rough help from just about any source. We even received bohunk labor from Pittsburgh and the coal towns. . . . Zilkie. Let's see—he's been here eleven months."

"Have you this man's fingerprints?" Ryder asked.

"Right here," said Mr. Butzinn, and he produced the card.

"Good," Ryder enthused, taking the card. "Now do you mind if my men examine all other cards made during that period, say within a few weeks on either side of this date?"

Mr. Butzinn, of course, had no objection; so Pierce and his sidekick, Agent Lake, went to work, comparing all other fingerprint cards with that of Zilkie. The medical men pitched in and helped with the job. It was slow work. Now and again, one or another cussed softly and exclaimed that he had it, but, each time, it was a false alarm. And there'd be just a little difference between the near-miss and the Zilkie prints.

"Hold it. Just a moment," Ryder thought to ask. "If the man we're looking for had quit here on Federal, Mr. Butzinn, would his fingerprints be in these files?"

"They would," the employment chief answered. "This is the permanent file, Mr. Ryder. We keep this for future reference, as a safeguard against undesirables returning to other Federal positions after being discharged for cause. If this man"—and Mr.

Butzinn chanced a small glance at the Kellet-hatched cadaver—"has ever been processed by my office, either in or out, his fingerprints are here. But good Lord, it would help if you could give me his name."

"You took the words—and the wish—right out of my very soul, Mr. Butzinn," Ryder said. "It's his name we're after."

"I've got it!" Agent Pierce sang out. "Look at this. The only difference is on the right thumbs—and that's a scar on the unknown's."

"Wycliff Wundt," Ryder read from the fingerprint card. "What have you got on him, Mr. Butzinn? Ye gods! what crackling names these birds sported."

"Wundt, Wycliff? . . . Let's see. Yes, he was hired on in the same batch with Zilkie. I remember them now. There was a lot of kidding in the office about those names. As I said before, they came through that Philadelphia agency."

"Kidding, eh?" Ryder questioned. "What was wrong, did the office force question the batch's bohunk background?"

"They did," Mr. Butzinn said. "You see, we were supposed to accept only the Slavs of friendly origin. But my office thought that some of these hunkies were, shall we say? leaning a bit too far toward the ambitious side. . . . How do, General Trump."

ALL eyes swung doorward. The C.O. stood on the white room's threshold. "Go right along with your work," Trump said. "I'm just a supernumerary here."

Ryder repeated the employment chief's last words: ". . . the ambitious side? You mean your people guessed they were maybe Nazi or Fascist?"

"Good Lord, no!" Mr. Butzinn said. "Russian, or, shall we say? Russian-influenced elements. As for the German, need I remind you that this command, and Wright Field, have always been at least sixty-five percent Teutonic?"

"But the Russian hasn't been getting in so easy?" Ryder asked.

"He's been doing pretty good," Mr. Butzinn said. "With the proper influences, you know. After all, gentlemen, as with the German element, my office receives exceptional recommendations on these newer, stranger, more-Slav elements."

"But hell, man," Special Agent Ryder ex-

ploded, "you are supposed to screen these applicants!"

"Applicants? They're hardly that, Mr. Ryder," Mr. Butzinn said. "I'd call them plants."

Trump had begun to do a slow boil. He said, "Your office, Mr. Butzinn, should be beyond outside influence. You should crack down on anything that appears questionable. By hell, I'm in command here now, and I'll give you permission—I'll make it an order—to rescreen the entire personnel."

"General Trump!" Mr. Butzinn exclaimed, and there was real surprise in his voice and, no doubt, genuine fear in his soul. "We can't do that, sir. Not now. Not now with hundreds of so-called German experts on our pay roll. I need not remind you, General, that this country—especially the ex-service folks—are already in high dudgeon over our Air Forces' perpetuation of the Nazi air arm. And if we expose ourselves now, if we spread this family linen in public . . . oh, good Lord, General, it would mean my job."

"Job be damned!" said Trump. "How many Nazi *scientists* have we here in Aviation Section?"

"More than two hundred, General. In all departments, from planning board down to maintenance," Mr. Butzinn stated.

"Process them, every damned one!" Trump barked. "Set up a benzene board, comprised of your own office people, and go through them one by one. Cut hell out of them, chop away, and let the chips fall where they will. Let 'em fall on me. I'll be right behind you."

General Trump swung on his heel and left the morgue.

Special Agent Ryder waited about thirty seconds till the general's feet no longer sounded in the long corridor, then he said, "You heard the man, Mr. Butzinn. Now about this Wundt. What do your files give on his separation from Federal?"

Mr. Butzinn, still somewhat shaken by the prospects—and dangers—of offending the Nazi experts and their sponsors, fumbled his files but finally produced the required information. "No cause is recorded for Wycliff Wundt's separation from the service," he said. "He worked in radar . . . then in stress lab . . . then in armaments . . . then—"

"He got around, didn't he?" Ryder asked. "And without a post guide," Pierce added.

"Yes, he seems to have," Mr. Butzinn agreed. "Anyway, gentlemen, according to this report, Wundt just failed to show up for work one day. See here—he still has a pay coming."

"Good. Now for his badge photo."

Mr. Butzinn unclipped a rogues' gallery snapshot from the back of the Wundt file and passed it to Ryder. Ryder, in turn, gave it to Dr. Wolf. "Is this our man, Doctor?" he asked.

The autopsy whiz glanced at the photo, studied the corpse's face from all angles, gave some more thought to the picture, then said, "It is. Beyond reasonable doubt. Note the ear lobe again."

"All right, Mr. Wundt, or Herr Wundt, or Comrade Wundt," Ryder said, addressing the corpse, "you're back on the job, home again on Federal, and you don't draw that pay you overlooked when you stepped out. "When did he step out, Mr. Butzinn?"

"Let me see"—and the employment-office chief was back in his files—"August 3rd was his last day on the job. That's just eight months ago yesterday."

"And that," Ryder said, "was just about the time the Kellet flying wing reached the desert base for assembly and shakedown tests. Also, as you medical gentlemen estimate, it was about the time fingerprints began to give way to grafting science. Well, at least, we're holding our own."

Mr. Butzinn, still stewing under the pressure caused by that Trump decision, asked to be excused. "Sure, guess you can run along now," Ryder agreed. "Better leave the Zilkie and Wundt files with Mr. Pierce. We'll want to study them a bit closer . . . let's see, ah yes, here's their home addresses. They weren't living at the same address. Cagey boys! Zilkie lived here in Liberty. Wundt was a commuter, no less, and all the way to Baltimore. H'm'm'm."

Mr. Butzinn went out. Then the autopsy experts said their job was complete and that they'd be in the flight surgeon's office in case Ryder needed additional information. So that left Ryder and his two helpers alone with their dead. They were beginning to figure the Zilkie-Wundt twosome very much

their dead, something they were stuck with.

"Well," Ryder suggested, "you men better jump on your horses and check those Liberty and Baltimore leads. For my own part, I feel like going back to test hangar and asking that Loose Lip guy what comes next."

Pierce laughed. "Damned if it doesn't sound like a good idea, Chief," he said. "A stiff dose of humility is hard to take, but heap big medicine. And old Doctor Lock is the man to hold your beezer and shove it down your throat. Maybe you won't like it, but by hell it'll be good for you. Nevertheless, be warned."

"You don't need to warn me," Special Agent Ryder said. "I've known the big duffer for a long time. Let's hump, gentlemen."

CHAPTER IX

JEEPS FOR JOY

BY THE time the Kellet wing was on Federal for a full week, there was open rebellion among the interned. You could hardly blame those Kellet Aircraft men. It was an intolerable condition. They argued that twenty-nine men couldn't be wrong, that twenty-nine couldn't be held suspect, and—by hell!—some of those twenty-nine were not going to serve time, there on Federal, until legally indicted, adjudged guilty, and sentenced by a federal court. Ryder be damned!

Ah, but the Ryder man was tough. He had the crust, plus the guts, added to a post-security guard with guns in hand and the power to act now and let somebody else ask questions later on.

The seven active crew members continued to hold themselves available for any information or instruction needed by Loose Lip and his crew. Most available of these was that old hand, Jack Glynn. Maybe it was due to nostalgia. Glynn had worked right there in test half a dozen years ago. He'd also fought in test. Jack Glynn had been just a wee bit hard to get along with. That's why he had left Federal. Loose Lip had always liked the guy. He liked any John who would stand up on his hind legs and take a poke at another guy in defense of his principles. Jack Glynn had 'em—principles.

But Glynn was a little guy, wide enough, but a stub. And like other willing little gents, Jack Glynn had never absorbed and acknowledged that ancient truth, to wit and to be remembered: A good little man is never as good as a good big man.

Jack Glynn was chief flight engineer for Kellet Aircraft. That is, he was Mr. Big on the mechanical end when a new Kellet job took the air. And, as he stood there on Federal, he had these other three flight engineers under him—Haskins, Land and a big guy named Strummer. From the very first, the keen-eyed Mr. Loose Lip Lock had noticed that Jack Glynn and Strummer weren't trying to sit in each other's lap. There was friction there. They sparked when they came in contact. Somehow or other, they seemed always in contact.

Strummer, after about the fourth day of restraint, had talked about going to town. Jack Glynn had warned him to stay put. "This ship comes first," the little guy had said, "an' you don't even run a good second. This man Ryder'll tell us when we can jump the fence, an' I'll tell you. You better keep your snout clean. As a mac, Strummer, you're not so hot. This Kellet thing's the best you'll ever hold. Don't kick it away."

Hearing that, Loose Lip had asked, "Did you guys have any words afore ya fell out, Jack?"

"That damn big swazinka!" Jack Glynn had snarled.

"Swazinka—him a Swede?" Loose Lip asked.

"Yeah, Strum's some sorta skowhegan," Glynn said. "He does a pretty good job of coverin' it up, but now an' then when he gets excited, he balls up his wes-an'-wubblews. He's another one of the Lend-Lease lice, if you ask me. Ain't it hell, Lip, how these wes-an'-wubblews guys can walk in on a job that a good ex-service Yank can't even approach? Damned if I don't do a boil when I see these squareheads pullin' down good old U. S. jack!"

"The guy's got your nanny, Jack," Loose Lip said.

"Yeah? Maybe you're right. I've had lots of trouble with him, 'specially on this delivery hop. The big lug went bad on me even before we hopped off—just because I took him out of the starboard wing and

shifted him over to help Land, in the port wing."

"What's that?" Loose Lip asked, and his ears were up. "You an' Haskins, then, handled the starboard engines?"

"Yeah. This Strummer lug was beginning to get the idea he could set up house-keeping any place in the ship and make it stick.

"He even had one of the off-walk bays walled off with a motor tarp, said he was going to sleep there between engines an' have privacy."

"How about this Haskins?" Loose Lip then asked.

"Oh, we get along," Jack Glynn said. "But he's pretty thick with Strummer. They buddy around together out at the factory. Haskins knows I'll take him down if he gets too ripe. He's just one of those shifty guys."

LOOSE LIP and Jack Glynn, during this talk, had been standing in the bomb bay, idly watching two armor lab specialists take certain measurements for a special gadget installation. "This way, Jack, me boy," Loose Lip suggested, starting into the big tunnel which passed through that cavernous starboard wing section. "Show me where this Strummer heel had his tarp draped."

They walked out to No. 6 engine's position—which, of course, was the second out from the ship's fuselage section—then Jack Glynn pointed to that great emptiness between top and bottom skin, and said, "Right here he had it."

"The hell you tell!" said Loose Lip. "Right over the hatch leadin' into the wheel well, eh? Hey, Jack, ain't you no good at 'rithmetic?"

"What do you mean—arithmetic?" Glynn asked.

"Can't you add things up?"

"All right. All right. I can't add it up. What?"

"If Strummer had this hatch behind a tarp—like he sez, for privacy—nobody could get in or outa that wheel well without him knowin' it. An', as a guy might say, somebody might get in or out of that wheel well with Strummer knowin' it, eh? Come on, run that up on your ol', rusty, mental com-tometer."

"Yeah. I see what you mean. But she don't add up, Lock," Glynn objected.

"Why didn't ya tell the G guys 'bout this tarp when they was askin' for all items o' the flight, an' stuff like that?"

"Listen, big guy, this Strummer is my dish," Jack Glynn said. "I'm just waitin' for the right opening. I'll take that big swazinka apart at the right time."

"Little man," Loose Lip said, "I'll be tellin' the gang around here that I knowed ol' Jack Glynn 'way back when he was all in one piece. Why don't you little guys ever learn to leave us big, full-growed gents alone?"

Jack Glynn wasn't paying much attention to Loose Lip. He seemed to be doing some heavy thinking, just standing there gazing at the above-hatch space where Strummer had set up his security housekeeping behind that tarp.

"Say, Loud Guy," Glynn finally said, "you know, you might have something. This big Strummer lug, come to think of it, was acting damned cagey before we quit the desert."

"Think hard, Jack; an' make it big," Loose Lip suggested. "Say, how was the security guard on that desert base—as tight as back durin' the war?"

"Yes an' no," Glynn answered. "There are just as many guys on the job, and you've got to flash the usual badge. But she's all loused up with these visitin' firemen—these damned Allies that're horning in on all our experiment jobs. Say nothing of the good old ex-Nazi enemy, an' some of them that ain't any too ex, if you get what I mean."

"I've had what you mean durin' the past twenty-six years, right here on Federal an' whenever I've been on Wright," Loose Lip stated. "Me an' Cap've cried salty tears over that there good-fer-not-a-dam' good-neighbor bollixy, an' I do mean bollixy. Ya say these ex-Nazi experts're runnin' loose out there—frat'nizin' with the white help, eh?"

"Doing us favors," Glynn said. "Hell, feller, they can't do too much for us. They have the ready transportation, you know; jeeps and other government cars. U. S. stuff that guys like you and I can never borrow. Hey, Lip, how do you like being an American?"

"None too good," Loose Lip said. "It

sure strains a guy's patriotism—this thing o' bein' a American. But say, d'ju guys get to go to Barstow much—from the desert?"

"Barstow was out for us. We could make Mojave or Kramer, on a security-office pass."

"I get it pretty straight some of the gang was runnin' into Barstow," Loose Lip said.

Jack Glynn said, "Sure. The noble Allies an' the able ex-enemies—the Roosians an' the Hun experts—the guys with our U. S. transportation, but . . . come to think of it, that was one of the spots where we had trouble with Strummer. I think it was the night before we hopped off the desert. Yeah, it was. I remember the blow-off that mornin'. The guard wanted us to lay off Strummer, but, bein' a first-class dam' fool, I argued that we didn't have time to get another flight engineer out from the factory."

"What was the blow-off over?" Loose Lip asked.

"Why, this big Strummer lug went into Barstow with two jeeploads of the Nazi experts. The M. P.'s in there checked 'em up for passes, then reported back to the base that Strummer was out of bounds."

"Well, I'll be seein' ya, Jack," Loose Lip said, starting for the outer world beyond the confines of that cavernous wing, "an' you try to keep ya brain clear an' do a lot o' thinkin'. I gotta idea you got brains ya've never used, an' now's the time for brains. An' another thing, feller—don't try to tear this Strummer down to your size till ya slip a couple layers o' paper in ya shoes."

CHAPTER X

LOCK DOES A DICKER

BEFORE telling Special Agent Ryder about Strummer, the tarp obscuring the wheel-well hatch, the association with ex-Nazis out in the desert, and the trip to Barstow, Loose Lip, of course, did a dicker. Ryder had to bring him up to date on all late doings.

"At Zilkie's rooming house in Liberty," Ryder said, "we located a few worthwhile odds and ends. Most important, we found an old tintype of identical twin boys. It had a Lwow, Poland, photographer's stamp on it, and the date was 1903. The same tintype was dug up in Wundt's room at Baltimore. The only marking on the tintype

folders, aside from that maker's name, was the names of the kids, in pencil—Ivan and Serge. By the way, the medics decided that the two dead ones were identical twins."

"But they're Zelotes an' Wycliff," Loose Lip said.

"Ah, but these boys changed jobs, fingerprints and names to suit the mood," Ryder made known. "That's right—the Wundt corpse is without fingerprints, too."

"The dirty so-an'-sos," Loose Lip exploded. "Makin' it hard for us, eh?"

"But writing matter found in both rooming houses proves that Wycliff Wundt wrote that desert postcard," Ryder said. "That, at least, ties him in solid."

"An' that's where my new stuff comes in," the big test Mac said, "an' are you gonna turn round an' sink your own fangs into ya own butt when I show ya that you an' the Gs have missed another bet? I don't know what you an' Washington'd do without me. Like when ol' J. Edgar sent me out on this case, he sez, "Extra-Special Agent Lock, I want you—""

"Extra-Special Agent Pain-in-the-Neck," Ryder cut in, "I won't let you talk at all unless you start right now. Let's have it."

When Loose Lip had explained Strummer, Ryder admitted that his high-pressure boys had been caught with their pants at half staff. "Don't let it bother ya, Ryder," the kind-hearted Mr. Loose Lip Lock then said. "After all, you guy's all tied down by old-fashion' policin' methods, but a private eye like me can go ahead an' use the ol' bean. Boy, do I know me stuff! I read all these who-the-hell-done-it back-pocket books, an' by hell, Ryder, I never have to cheat an' look in the back o' the book to find out who done it."

"Ah, it's a gift," Ryder flattered. "But you're right about us being tied down by old-fashioned ways. Yes, sir, they don't just fall for us."

"Fall hell!" Loose Lip objected. "Tha's an insult, Ryder. Do you think I don't have to work for this stuff? 'Fall,' sez you! Say, I think I'll knock off, call it a day, an' let you sweat this one out alone. An' you can have ya dam' ol' Junior G-man badge back."

"Oh, now, come, come, Mr. Private Eye Lock," Agent Ryder begged. "You can't do this to the F. B. I. You can't leave us

out on a limb with two dead bodies—and another guy who might die if your friend Jack Glynn decides to take him apart without warning.

"Say, is there any danger of Glynn running this Strummer off the reservation, and beyond easy reach?"

"I don't know," Loose Lip said, getting serious. "You can never tell what a little guy might do, Ryder. You know how it is with them good little men—a hoss looks at a man an' thinks he's a giant, but a good little man looks at a big guy an' his eyes er like a telescope used backward. You get what I mean, eh?"

"You mean little guys are nuts," Ryder said.

"Sure. They're timed to fire at least fifteen degrees afore top-dead center, an' that's too early for the power they pack. They can't carry through. And speaking of tough breaks," Loose Lip went on, "I'll tell you something else that's plenty tough—this thing of having the Kellet job tied to the ground."

Ryder appeared surprised. "How do you mean?" he asked.

"You know what I mean. Look, Ryder. Cap Call an' Trump can't ast you to get off ya high hoss an' turn the big job loose for test runs. 'Course, they can't. They're afraid o' inter-office friction. But it's different with me. Now look here, big boy; this thing of having a big job ready to roll, an' no roll, is bad fer the whole dam' test layout."

"But necessary," Ryder objected.

"Nuts," said Mr. Lock.

"Listen, Lock. If the ship is in the air, then the Kellet contingent will argue that there's no longer any excuse of holding the twenty-nine to this post."

"They'll argue that anyhow," Loose Lip reminded Ryder. "What the hell, man, you ain't got nothin' against the ship. You don't even think that they's any danger of sabotage aboard her. So why slow up Call an' Trump an', most important, me? Gee, I'm the guy that has to see that ships get through their test runs. Look, Ryder, you've heard o' me—Mr. Lock, Washington's right-hand man on Federal, the Chief o' Air's white-haired boy, an' the pride o' all the cute kids threw-out most o' these offices on Aviation Section."

"*Thrown out* is right," Ryder agreed.

"And if you've had your say, I think I'll toss you out of here. Say, how do you get in here so easily?"

"That you should esk!" Loose Lip belated. "The day I can't come in this G office'll be a sad day for ol' J. Edgar, an' you, too, ya big stiff. Now how about a release for flight on the Kellet wing?"

"I'll think it over," Ryder promised. "Fact is, I think I'll give on this point. After all, this office can't afford to antagonize Mr. Private Eye Lock, Esq."

CHAPTER XI

IT'S CALLED MURDER

CAP CALL'S loft gave Slim Rand's hangar office a ring and told him to send Loose Lip up the stairs. The big mac came up and in, asking, "What's the problem now? What do ya want me to solve?"

"Ah, my good man, we have no more problems," Cap Call said. "We rise and fly. We've got security-office clearance on the Kellet wing. Hope to hell this ends all the monkey business. If I was ever sick and tired of anything, Lockie, it's this mess. Well, anyway, as soon as Colonel Oldfield and Captain Landsdown get back from lunch we'll get her under way. I've buzzed Joe Faber and the labs. Is your crew all set?"

"Is my crew all set! Hell, Cap, they've been all set so long that they've hatched out more eggs than all the bum comedians on the three main networks."

"How many Kellet men are you going to carry?" Call asked.

"Not too many. Do we need them scissor-bills to show us how to fly a kite? Guess I'll let Jack Glynn ride along. After all, ol' Jack's like one o' the gang. An' he's been helpin' me on the case I'm tryin' to bust."

"You still busting cases, Mr. Bloodhound?" Call kidded.

"Oh, sure. I pract'illy got this one down an' yellin' for help. All's I got to work out now is a motive, an' did them guys fall or was they pushed."

"And a good question, Mr. Lock," a voice said from the head of the steep stairs. Loose Lip and Cap Call glanced toward the voice. It was Special Agent Ryder.

"That's the question of the day, Mr. Private eye—did this Zilkie man fall into that

belt and pulley or was he pushed—maybe held in."

"You got somethin' new, Ryder?" Loose Lip asked.

"We have," Ryder said. "Our West Coast men have uncovered a strange state of affairs. You'll hardly believe this, gentlemen, but the privileged guests are quarreling among themselves, and picking over Uncle Sam's bones at one and the same time."

"Pull up a chair, Mr. Ryder," Call invited; "and close those doors, Lockie. Let's have some privacy."

"Ya mean the big-shot experts er showin' their hands?" Loose Lip asked, after he had closed the doors leading from the stairway and into the test-flight observers' room and the files.

"That's it," Ryder said. "The Coast had the leads before this Kellet job left the desert."

"But they weren't quite ready to shoot. Anyway, it seems the Slavs are infiltrating on the honest ex-Nazi experts all over that western map, both at the New Mexico atomic base and on the special desert air fields. Hell, what a mess! They're out to get Uncle Sam and each other, and all at the same time. This man Strummer"—and Ryder was talking directly to Loose Lip—"is one of the top rollers. It seems he's a Hun fanatic. Got a record as long as an arm. The Coast had Wycliff Wundt under the eye, too, under that and other names. He was a Russian."

"Where d'ja get all the new dope?" Loose Lip asked.

"Direct from the Coast, just after you left me. Some of the Coast men were already on their way here, by air. Army's flying them East in that new XY-39 jet-job transport. They'll be here before we know it."

"Strummer?" Loose Lip mused. "So it looks like that big heel might be a enemy o' them dead guys, an' not a pal, eh? But she don' add up if he was in Barstow with that party when the postcard musta been mailed out."

"That adds up all right," Ryder said. "You're not slowing up, are you, Mr. Private Eye? Of course, those boys play around together. They pal together. They eat and sleep together. They plan against the U. S. like lodge brothers. Then they cut one another's throat. After all, you know, it's the

end product they're after; and the end justifies the means. Any means."

"And the means can be death," said Cap Call.

"And this Strummer, according to the men on the Coast, is the man of means—a killer," Ryder said.

"The hell you tell?" Loose Lip grunted. "Tough guy, eh?"

"That's what they say," said Ryder. "He's a new one on me, but the record seems to show that he blasted his way out of Berlin, after the fall, then murdered his way into the good graces of our occupation authorities. That wouldn't be too difficult. Well, anyway, they visaed him out through Austria and into Air Forces' ample lap. He worked on the jet research at Wright for a time, then jumped the contract and went out to Kellet Aircraft. Seems as though he tipped his own apple-cart by getting too active with the ex-bund outfits in the Los Angeles area. Anyway, old Private Eye, you pointed to the man for me. Thanks. I'll never be able to repay you."

"I'll bet that's got you worried to death," Loose Lip said. "But it's all right, Ryder. You O.K.'d the big job for flight."

"Didn't I agree to?"

"What's this?" Cap Call asked.

Ryder nodded toward the big mac. Speaking to Call, he said, "His nibs bent me over a barrel and extracted the promise."

"Here, Mr. Fixit Lock," Cap Call said, getting to his feet, "you sit here. I'm going to shag along with the F. B. I., and we'll all get off this post. Ye gods, and to think of the high-class brand of begging General Trump and I have been doing for a week!"

"Ya jus' don' have the right connections, Cap. Ya jus' don't swing enough lead. But I gotta get goin'. This case ain't busted yet."

"Hey, Ryder. What happens to the Kellet gang now? Do they get to quit the post?"

"Not quite," Ryder said. "We were all set to turn them loose but this Strummer angle fences them in for a little longer. We can't put a hand on Strummer's shoulder till that XY-39 gets in from the Coast. So it's up to us to entertain the entire group for just a little longer. Don't say anything about this."

"Dumb's the word," Loose Lip promised. "I'll get Jack Glynn to assign Strummer aboard the ship on this first test hop, then

we'll be sure you know where he is. That won't be hard, 'cause the big squarehead's under foot all the time. For a fac', that guy ain't even moved his tool-roll outa the cat-walk locker. Guess maybe he thinks the big job's gonna go back to Kellet, eh?"

The phone rang. Cap Call picked it up and said, "Call speaking. . . . Oh, hello, General Trump. . . . Mr. Ryder? Yes, he's right here. Do you wis— You'll be over? Okay I'll hold him."

Call hung up and said, "You heard. The C.O. is on his way over."

WHEN Trump arrived in the loft he had Personnel Office's Mr. Butzinn in tow. Mr. Butzinn, who had gone directly to work setting up a benzene board, produced quick results. The quick result Number One was a very taciturn Slav who had followed Trump and Mr. Butzinn into the loft.

"This, gentlemen," Mr. Butzinn said, "is Nicoli Brunkin. He's the maintenance man who found Zelotes Zilkie in the wood shop. They both worked on that night shift. Brunkin reports that he does not think the killing was an accident."

"Let's have it. What's he got?" Ryder invited.

"That morning," Mr. Butzinn went on, "Brunkin here was cleaning up the metal shop—directly across the back row—and he saw a man go in the wood shop, then, after a few minutes, come out. That was a little after seven. Along toward seven-thirty, according to routine, Brunkin finished the metal shop and started through the wood shop for stress lab. He found Zilkie."

"We haven't had much dope on this killing," Ryder said. "Why didn't this man report seeing this other fellow entering and leaving wood shop?"

"That was a bad break," Mr. Butzinn said. "Brunkin here ran for the guardhouse and notified the man on post. At almost the same minute, the guardhouse was taking a phone call from Liberty, calling for Brunkin. His wife was having a baby. The guard sent him home in a post car. Complications set in—they lost the baby—and the wife had to be sent to Baltimore. Well, anyway, the man had too many troubles of his own to do much thinking about Zilkie. He got back on the job only last night."

"Could he recognize the man he saw

going into and leaving the wood shop?" Ryder asked. And, all the time, Nicoli Brunkin just stood there, dead pan, as though he were no part of the doings.

Mr. Butzinn said, "He says he could. He's pretty sure. He says he saw the man coming out of the cafeteria first thing this morning, with that Kellet group that's restricted to the post. He's a big fellow, Brunkin says."

"Strummer, by hell," Loose Lip said. "It could be."

"Sthrum-mer, tha's the man," Nicoli Brunkin said. "Ah hear them other fella call him 'Strum' when they go py where Ah workin'. Sthrum-mer! Der big Bosh shwine! Dot man kill Zelotes Zilkie. Der fool Sthrum-mer mak wan bad mistake—the power it was shut off when I find Zelotes."

"That was a mistake," Ryder agreed. "Ye gods, why doesn't somebody tell somebody these things before a case goes cold?"

Loose Lip started for the door. He turned toward Ryder for just a second. "Want Strummer in here, Ryder?"

Ryder hesitated. Then he said, "No. I'll tell you what to do. If you find him in Hangar J, with the wing, tell him to report to your boss, Rand, down there in the office. We'll have this man look him over as he walks in. But I'm going to keep hands off just a little longer. That ship should be in from the Coast any minute now. . . . Nicoli, why would this Strummer fellow kill Zelotes Zilkie?"

"Why for? Sthrum-mer Boche, Nazi. There is no other kind man in dot Reich. Zelotes Zilkie iss smart fella. Iss Russ. Maybe too smart. I do not know. But he iss Ally. Sthrum-mer iss enemy."

"H'm'm," said Ryder. "Here we are again—back on that old merry-go-round. Dog eat dog. Or am I being too hard on regular dogs?"

CHAPTER XII

A MATTER OF LAW

THE Kellet flying wing was crabbing out of Hangar J sidewise and, of course, on her own power; and the tow-cat drivers were watching—maybe cussin' a bit—and wondering if that spelled the end of their soft jobs. A second period of gymkahana hadn't been declared, but a sight like that is bound

to bring any working force to a full stop. At first it looked as though Hangar J was extending like a telescope. Flight Engineers Mr. Loose Lip Lock and Jack Glynn were out on the tip of the left wing, fieldward, hand-waving directions to the bridge—pretty much the same as brakemen hand-signaling the engineer on the throttle. Finally, she was on the main lead-out apron; then Loose Lip and Jack Glynn came inboard and prepared to check things off and seal 'er up for take-off.

Loose Lip, with Jack Fay, was going to handle the starboard power units. Jack Glynn, suffering the presence of Strummer, was to stand by in the port wing-section. Another of Loose Lip's crew, Hal Gore, was along with Glynn. After all, Strummer was really more than a supernumerary, a guy who had been identified by Nicoli Brunkin, and now to be detained until such time as and when Ryder saw fit to make the pinch.

For a little longer, out there on the lead-out strip, the big job was to pose for pictures. Loose Lip had lowered the automatic stairway, for General Trump and Cap Call intended to climb aboard for the ride. Maybe other big-wigs of the command—and especially of the engineering force—might decide to egg in on the first trip. After all, the mighty Kellet flying wing had put in more than a full month of test hops, over the California desert, and, strictly speaking, she was no longer rated as either experimental or questionable. Her Federal test runs, though official and important, would be little more than routine.

Loose Lip was standing at the head of the automatic stairway when he heard Jack Glynn demand, "Hey, where d'ya think you're going?"

"She's turned over to the Federal people," Strummer said. "You think I'm going to joyride this bus while all our gang goes to town? You're nuts, Glynn. Outa my way."

"Nobody's going to town," Glynn said. "None of our outfit has been turned loose yet, and they won't be until the F. B. I. and the field-security office gives the order. Get back on those engines."

Loose Lip had turned inward, left through the main fuselage and into the portside wing-section tunnel. Squat and broad Jack Glynn was on the main catwalk, blocking Strummer's way. Strummer, looming high

toward the section's top skin, was standing just beyond Glynn. In either hand, Strummer toted his tool-kit and suitcase.

"I said stay!" Jack Glynn said; and Loose Lip sucked in air at the sound of the little guy's voice. It sounded like fight.

STRUMMER had his suitcase in his left hand. He dropped it to the catwalk, then reached out and sort of brushed Glynn out of his way, thudding his big left mitt flat-hand against the small man's neck. But Glynn wasn't being brushed. He was too willing. He put everything he had into the lightning of his good right and landed on Strummer's button. Strummer, with the heavy tool-kit dangling at arm's length, right side, was off guard; and he went off that catwalk, head over heels, clattering on the wing-section's lower skin like the well-known skeleton on the tin roof.

Then, scrambling for handholds on the catwalk's rim, big Strummer reverted, scrambled his we's-an-wubblows, and growled, "Vell! Un fight yah vant, ha? Werry vell!"—then he pulled himself together, and got the language under control again—"I'll give you all the fight you want, Glynn."

Loose Lip said, "Not here, you guys! Not now. What the hell, the C.O. an' Cap Call are on the apron. They're coming aboard."

But big Strummer was back on the walk, and smaller Jack Glynn was waiting for the monster to get set. And little Flight-Test Observer Joe Faber, having smelled fight, was right behind Loose Lip saying, "Let 'em go, you big wahoo, let 'em fight. Come on, little guy, don't let that big bohunk get set. Take him!"

Jack Glynn was surprising. He was actually backing big Strummer outward, out past engine No. 4, then past No. 3, and then they were flailing away at each other at about mid-distance in the long tunnel. Out there, though, the thinning down of the wing's thickness was beginning to bend tall Strummer. The big guy noticed the disadvantage, for the fighting crouch was bringing his jaw right down to where Glynn could reach it handily. And Glynn was reaching.

Joe Faber stepped aft and glanced down the automatic stairway. It was clear. He threw the electric lever and the stairway jackknifed and folded in. That should guarantee privacy for fighting.

But again Loose Lip was saying, "Come on, Jack, cut it. Save it till we get back. What the hell, break it up!"

Hal Gore—Glynn's extra flight engineer in that port-side wing—had been standing forward near one of the leading-edge sight blisters, between engines No. 3 and 4. He sang out, "Hey, Lock, here comes that XY-39 jet-job transport that you said was due in from the Coast. Hear her? She's setting down. Hey, what's she carrying?"

"Guys," Loose Lip yelled back. Then again, "Come on, Jack. An' you, too, Strummer. Break it up. By hell, this will keep."

The smaller man was giving ground. But he puffed, "Keep, hell! . . . I said I'd take this hunka down, so stay clear! Come on, you big lug Strummer."

Strummer came. He was coming too steadily. Again, that age-old law of fisticuffs, that ancient law of brawl, was proving out as it always has and always will, and a good little man was being backed inward through the tunnel, toward the main body, by a good big man. Strummer was all that. He was set and grooved, and his mitts were pistons with the full head of steam behind them. Then Jack Glynn went down. His head hit No. 4 engine's bearer truss.

But Jack Glynn came up again. And he went down again, too. Strummer never hesitated with the machine-like piston action, not even when Glynn was half-dazed and on his knees.

"Hold that, you big heel!" Joe Faber warned. "You're in America now. Let him up. Oh, ya're askin' for it, eh?"

Strummer had gone dirty, and very foreign. He had brought a knee up under Glynn's chin while the little guy was trying for a foothold. And Joe Faber had reached across and landed a solid right on the big guy's nose. Joe, like Glynn, has always been one of Aviation Section's most-willing mixers.

So it was, and Jack Glynn wasn't getting up. The Stemmer knee had bogged him down for keeps, so he just rolled out of the way and tried to clear that catwalk for another little guy who seemed able to carry the action. And Joe Faber was carrying that fight. Strummer even gave ground—for that first right ram to the face had carried both steam and surprise. And the follow-up

sally found Strummer in a shower of fast fives. So the big Kellet mac gave, then the law began to work again, and little Joe Faber began to take.

Captain Landsdown, the co-pilot, had come down from the bridge. He was at Loose Lip's back, yelling, "This has got to stop, men! Break it up! The commanding officer is on the apron!"

"T'hal mit der commanding—!" Strummer started to say, and, once more, Joe Faber called on an old reserve and crashed the good right into the speaker's mouth. Then Strummer really did see red. He came inward on that catwalk like a giant cat ready for the kill. Joe Faber went down under the charge—and big Stemmer made the fatal mistake of putting the boot to Joe while the little guy was still rolling.

That did it! Among the good big men on Federal there have been few—during the past quarter century—who could top Mr. Loose Lip Lock. Now his eyes were on Strummer's. His right hand was reaching down and easing Joe Faber's inert body over toward No. 4's bearers, out of the way. Then he was coming back to the upright again—his eyes still on Strummer—and moving out through the tunnel.

Strummer was getting set and giving just a few steps, out toward engine No. 3, and a little beyond. Loose Lip came on and said never a word.

Captain Landsdown said, "No, no! Cut it, Lock. Hell, man, Call and the C.O. are out there—waiting for that stairway."

Loose Lip was still shuffling, sorta pushing that big left shoe along the catwalk toward Strummer. Then he made a wide slow pass with his big left mitt. Strummer's eyes went to that moving hand, and he, in turn, slapped out his right to guard against it.

That was all Loose Lip wanted. There was something like two-hundred-forty pounds of Lock behind the battering-ram which momentarily separated itself entirely from the catwalk, and Strummer never saw the ham-like head of that ram when it arrived. The mighty hulk called Strummer went backwards—all in one piece—without even bending, described a perfect swan dive in reverse, then clanked down to a heels-against-metal stop hard up against the port-side wheel-well bulkhead. For the time being, the big guy was nicely stowed.

"Okay, Cap," Loose Lip then said to Landsdown. "Let's unwind that stairway. . . . What the hell we doin'—holdin' up the C.O. an' Cap Call!"

To Loose Lip's passing feet, little Joe Faber said, "Ya big wahoo, you, who the hell invited you into this party? That big yellow-belly was mine. The dirty so—"

"On ya feet, little guy," Loose Lip sang back over his shoulder. "What ya sittin' there for? We gonna fly."

CHAPTER XIII

RIDDLE'S END

WHEN the automatic stairway went down to the apron again, the first one to start up was neither General Trump nor Cap Call, but that old eager beaver, Special Agent Ryder. At Ryder's hurrying heels were Pierce, the latter's sidekick, Agent Lake, then three more G-looking guys who, no doubt, had just arrived aboard that incoming jet transport job from the Coast. Also among the stair-climbers was Jack Glynn's flight engineer Haskins, the fellow whom Glynn had tabbed as being "pretty thick with Strummer—just one of those shifty guys."

But, coming up that stairs and arriving in the bomb-bay, Haskins was as full of business as any of those F. B. I. men. Fact is, he acted like one of the group.

Ryder barked, "Where's Strummer, Lock?"

"Where *was* Strummer, when the lights went out, is what you mean," Loose Lip said, and he hooked a thumb inward toward the port-side tunnel. "He was the boy that tried to stand on the burnin' deck, er like Horatio Algiers at the bridge, er something, Ryder; an', by hell, Jack Glynn an' Joe, here, they cool him down."

"One at a time, gents. Ya'll find the body in near the wheel-well bulkhead."

Ryder and his entourage single-filed past Loose Lip and went into the tunnel. But it was Haskins who, disdaining a sight of his defunct flightmate, went directly to where Strummer had dropped his very ordinary-looking, grease-stained canvas tool-kit.

Down on his knees, Haskins was unstrapping that canvas kit. And when he said, "Well, there it is," Ryder & Co., to a man, forgot all about Strummer. They gazed at

the spread displayed on the open canvas. They were looking at a few tons of blueprints. That is, a few tons that had been reduced photographically in the manner of V-mail reduction.

"There she is," Haskins repeated. "Blueprints not only of this Kellet job, but, no doubt, every important job that's been turned out on the Coast during the past year."

Loose Lip said, "I don't get it. Who the hell you been ridin' with, Haskins? You workin' both sides o' the street?"

Ryder gave Loose Lip a friendly poke in the ribs. "This is tough on you, old Private Eye," he said. "But it's just as tough on me. He had me fooled. Never heard of Strummer. Never heard of Haskins here."

"Haskins," Jack Glynn, now sitting up and beginning to take notice, said, "you're a louse as a double for a good air mac. But if you were working on this dam' Strummer lug, then you're all right with me. Hey, did you know we had that dead guy in the well?"

"No," Haskins answered. "That is, I wasn't sure. I knew the Wundt guy had sneaked aboard the night before take-off. And I knew that Strummer was planning to hide him out either behind that tarp or in one of the catwalk toolboxes"—and Haskins beat a foot on the walk to indicate to the other agents where those toolboxes were. "But when you shifted Strummer and me over to this wing, at the last minute, I had an idea that maybe Wundt had gone ashore."

"Why was he aboard in the first place? Why did he want to make the hop East?" Glynn asked. "Wasn't that askin' for it?"

"Ah, no," Agent Haskins said. "These guests of Uncle Sam's—both ex-enemy and near-enemy—appreciate the kindly coverage extended by the good old American eagle's wing. They like federal ground, Lock. They are fully protected cutting American throats while they remain under federal immunity. Strummer, of course, is a good Nazi, and let's not kid ourselves about affixing the "ex," for it isn't there. He was working with the boys who are going to bring back 1939 in, say, 1950. Anyway, Strummer had infiltrated the Red camp. Wycliff Wundt was the handy boy in that group. Strummer knew that Wundt had all these prints. More

than that, he knew that Wundt could get them back, coast-to-coast, clear this Federal Proving Ground setup, then deliver the goods to the right boys in Baltimore. Strummer has a lot of bluejay in him—he's a nest robber."

"How 'bout the broom in the wood shop?" Loose Lip asked.

"Strummer, of course, knew all about him. No doubt, Wundt had explained that this Zilkie, like any maintenance man, could get bundles of old paper past the gate. A broom can. You see them going past the guards with this and that under their arms every day."

"So ya figure Strummer goes over an' kills off Zilkie so's he won't be astin' questions or spreadin' the warnin', eh?"

"Just that," said Haskins. "Meantime, Strummer kept all this valuable espionage take right here aboard the wing, here in his assigned tool-chest"—and again Haskins rapped a foot to indicate the under-catwalk location of the concealment—"Simply because he knew it was safe. Why, even my friend Ryder was slow about offending any of the guest 'scientists' until General Trump gave the word to comb 'em over. I've lost lots of sleep watching this locker and Strummer."

Loose Lip gazed at Strummer. That hulk of man was just beginning to move. "The big, dirty lug—say, I'll bet he told Wundt to hide out in that well. I bet he counted on the retraction to kill off the guy."

"Could be," Ryder said. "It might be. We'll know more about that after we have a nice, long talk with Mr. Strummer."

"Oh, Pierce. Better put the cuffs on Mr. Strummer. And let's be on the move. This ship is scheduled for a hop."

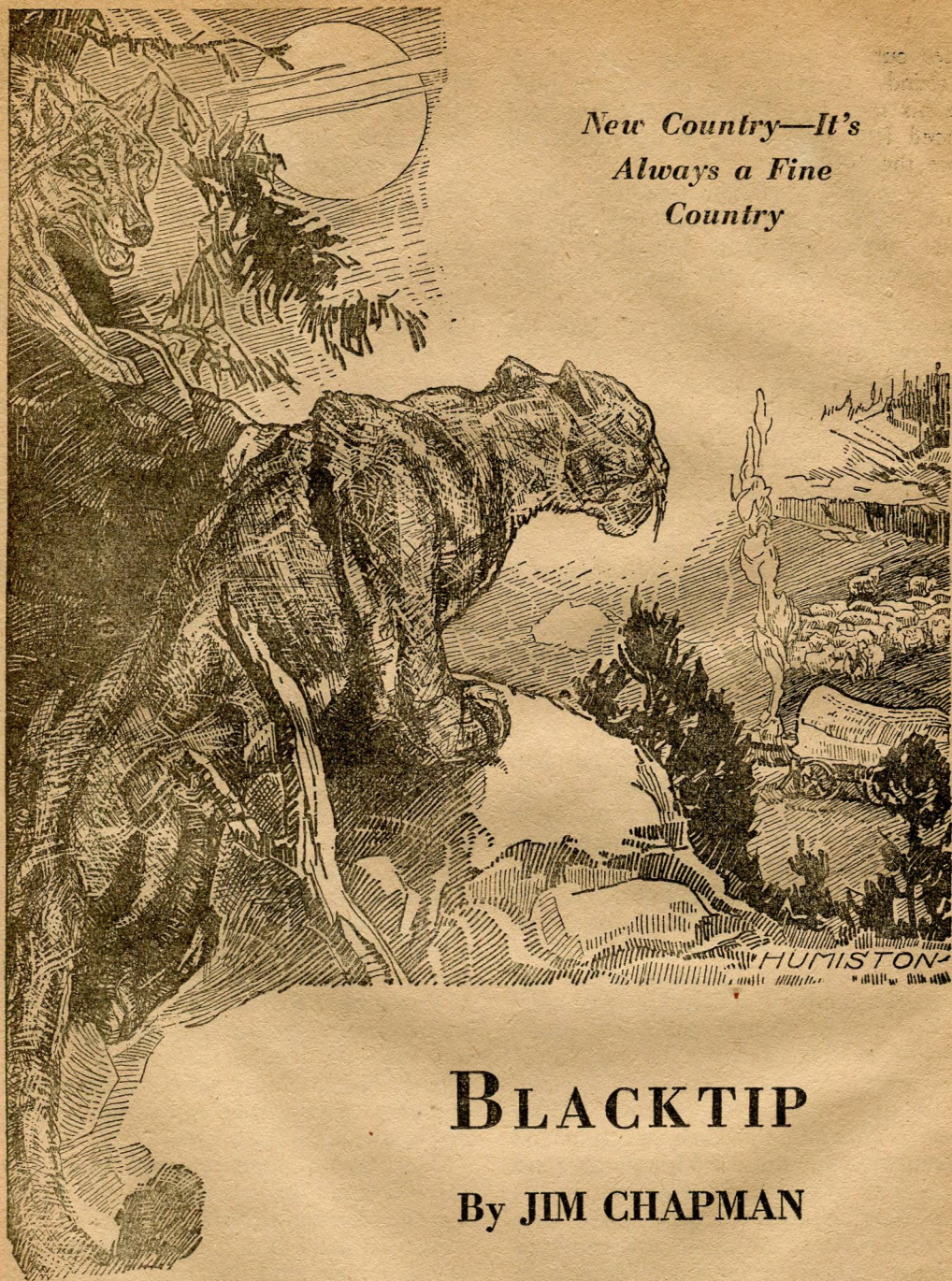
"Hey, just a shake, Pierce," Loose Lip said. "Where's that work-report slip I give you—the one Squirt Hall give me?"

"It's in the office," Agent Pierce said. "What do you want that for, Lock?"

"It had that riddle on it," Loose Lip said. "I never did get to know 'What goes to town like a man, goes to—'"

"It could be the Russian bear, the bear that walks like a man," Ryder said. "Only they didn't go to town. They went to the morgue. I love morgues. They're so full of wrong people."

*New Country—It's
Always a Fine
Country*



BLACKTIP

By JIM CHAPMAN

THE air was heavy. Clouds hung low, filling the night with blackness and brushing the rusty chimney which jutted from one corner of the sheep wagon's tattered canvas roof.

Beneath the wagon's rickety steps Blacktip was sleeping, curled like a fox with his

nose in his bushy tail. He was a huge gray animal, more wolf than dog. The part collie in his blood showed in his wide-set intelligent eyes and long sensitive snout.

Suddenly Blacktip uncurled and moved from under the wagon. He stood quivering, his sharp ears cupped forward. Never before had he heard the ringing call which

rolled out of the distance; a wild crescendo of sound. It was a lonesome cry which stirred his instincts to their depths. The cry echoed from hill to hill, faded, and once more the night became thick with silence. He raised his muzzle to answer. But the sound died in his throat; drifting on the damp night breeze had come an unpleasant scent.

Blacktip wrinkled his nose and his lips curled back to show long white fangs. His ruff bristled and every hair of his body stood out like a brush. A loud growl poured from his throat and the sound was like the rumble of an angry bear. The scent was so strong that it stung Blacktip's nostrils. It blotted out the odor of fifty sheep in their fold, and the smell of alkali from the lake below camp.

Then he heard the first bleat of a terrified sheep. Something was inside the fold!

With a howl of warning to the man in the wagon, Blacktip leaped forward. Fifty yards away he stopped where the crude five-wire fence loomed above him through the blackness. Sheep were milling in confusion and there was the sound of some creature striking repeated blows. The dog gathered himself to leap over the barrier. Then the sheep wagon door creaked open.

A man thumped down the steps, boot laces swishing. In one hand he carried a lantern and in the other a rifle. Sandy Trevors wore wrinkled blue denim overalls. One shoulder strap was undone and the bib hung dejectedly, as though tired from constant use. His boots were cracked, with the soles parting from the dry curling uppers.

Blacktip saw the long cat-like body explode from among the sheep. It arched gracefully upward, tipped over the fence and dropped like a spent arrow on the outside. The dog snarled and plunged toward it, but already the cat was gone. Hot scent poured into Blacktip's nostrils as he bayed and began to follow.

"Here boy!" commanded Trevors, breathing heavily as he ran.

Reluctantly Blacktip turned back and trotted into the circle of light cast by the lantern. Trevors was holding it up to look at the sheep. By the lantern light his wrinkled face stood out sharply because of its unnatural pallor. His pale blue eyes were

tired, as though he had faced the weather too often and too long. A few whisks of gray hair fell forward and he brushed them back, then shook his head.

Four sheep lay dead and as many more were injured. The man looked at the cougar's tracks and muttered to himself while he filled his pipe.

Blacktip sniffed at the tracks, whined, and looked out into the inky darkness.

"Nuthin' we can do, boy," said Trevors. "It's just like our luck to get tangled with a killer cat!"

The dog whined again and trotted back to his master. He wagged his tail and looked up. The man patted his head.

"Leave it be," ordered Trevors. "It's a mile into the sandhills by now." After puffing on his pipe for a few minutes he put it away, daubed the injured sheep with disinfectant, piled the dead ones in a corner of the fold and went back to bed.

Blacktip didn't question the wisdom of his master's decision. He returned to his old rag mat under the wagon steps and lay down. But he couldn't relax. The sharp cattish scent of the cougar hung in the damp air like smoke in a hollow. He remembered the strange cry he had heard and waited impatiently for it to come. Through it all he felt a strange uneasiness.

PEOPLE had shaken their heads six years before. It was just like Trevors to take the chance, they said. It was bad enough for his sheep dog to go wild and come home to bear a litter of wolf pups—let alone try to tame one of the young! But Trevors had done it, and Blacktip became famous as one of the best dogs in the Canadian sheep country.

The young dog enjoyed the life, for Trevors was a drifter. He moved from place to place, always seeking a better place to graze the sheep. "Itchy foot!" people would hiss behind Trevor's back, and Blacktip would bristle, sensing their scorn.

As the years passed Blacktip grew wise and heavily muscled while Trevors grew old and decrepit. The man still bragged about the money he was going to make, but slowly his outfit fell into disrepair. His flock dwindled to a bare fifty head; half of them toothless old gummerns which did well to keep themselves alive, much less raise lambs.

It was on a tip from a Government trapper that they'd left the little settlement of Twin Buttes three days before. "Lots of grass around Treacherous Lake," he told Trevors, "but no good for cattle and horses. They got into the alkali bog holes and can't get out. Ought to be okay for sheep though."

Trevors seized upon the idea. "Flock ain't been doin' good lately," he explained. "Reckon I'll move out there for three-four weeks and come back 'fore the snow flies. By then the lambs'll be fat and I'll sell 'em for a good price."

The trapper grinned behind his hand and wondered whether he should have had this fun at Trevor's expense. He didn't mention the fact that he'd failed in his attempt to trap the calf-killing cougar which roamed the region.

On the trip in, Blacktip had done most of the work. Trevors sat in the doorway of the wagon, holding the reins while the two old crowbait horses dozed along behind the herd. The man's eyes roved over the country, noting the rabbits, grouse and antelope; following the lazy circles of a soaring eagle.

BLACKTIP ranged back and forth, keeping the stragglers in place and the herd in motion. On the first day they camped at a little reed-grown slough and on the second arrived at the Lake. It was cradled in the rolling hills; a jewel in the brown prairie—even if the shores were chalked with alkali.

A spring rose a hundred yards from the southern shore and sent a little crystal stream trickling through the roots of the willows which grew near the water. Level ground lay at one side, flanked by a long ridge. In this sheltered spot, between the ridge and the willows, Trevors made camp and put up a crude fold.

The man skinned and dressed a young jackrabbit which he'd shot with his old 30-30. He set it to stew on the little square stove. Then he made bannocks, stoking the fire from a woodbox full of gnarled ground-cedar roots and sticks of willow. At dusk he lit the kerosene lamp and its flickering light shone from the wall bracket.

Later he heaped two big tin plates with the dark savory meat. Blacktip ate his inside the open doorway and licked the plate. The man sat at the table which was hinged to the wall. He washed down his meal with

a huge mug of black tea, then leaned back on the rickety chair.

"It's a good country, boy," he said aloud, "lots of grass, lots of game, and fine water."

A new country had always been a fine one to Trevors.

Blacktip thumped his bushy tail on the floor and his yellow eyes glistened. He crept to the man's side and pressed against his leg. Trevors smiled down at him and patted his head.

That night the cougar struck.

It was early the following morning when Blacktip blundered upon Tonka, the she-wolf. He'd been chasing a rabbit half a mile from camp and saw her downwind, hunting mice in a grassy draw. For a long moment they gazed at one another, then with a bay of excitement Blacktip attacked. He didn't associate her with the cry he had heard in the night. To him she was a large coyote to be chased and killed.

Tonka fled before him, but when Blacktip reached the draw and caught the first breath of her scent he skidded to a stop. What manner of animal was this? It was like the cry he had heard, for she stirred new instincts in his blood. He no longer wished to drive her off. His ruff settled and he raised his tail and wagged it. Tonka paused on a distant ridge, looked back curiously, and disappeared. After watching for a time Blacktip went back to where his master was herding the sheep.

That night Tonka returned. Blacktip saw her slim muscular body silhouetted on the sandy ridge above camp. She was watchful and nervous, but when Blacktip stepped into the open she trotted coquettishly away, inviting him to follow. At first he was suspicious but when her scent settled into the hollow his doubts vanished. He whined and started up the slope. Then he remembered Trevors and his tail dropped. He stole guiltily back to his place beneath the steps of the rickety wagon, knowing that it was his duty to guard the sheep.

Tonka came every night; a silent gray figure which haunted the ridge. She was the last of the lobos in the great sandhills, and lonely. In Blacktip she sensed the kinship of one of her kind.

As the nights passed Blacktip weakened. The call of his blood was strong. There came a time when he allowed himself to

be lured to the top of the ridge. They met and touched noses.

From that night forward the wildness within him grew. He felt a restlessness such as he had never known. It was like a fire which once kindled burned higher and higher until it threatened to break out of control. One noonday while out with Trevors and the sheep he saw Tonka far off on a hill. He leapt to his feet and stood with nerves and muscles tingling.

"What is it boy?" exclaimed Trevors, gazing at him in amazement.

Blacktip sank back and thumped his tail on the ground. He bellied to the man and licked his hand to show his affection and loyalty. But soon his eyes had returned to their search of the ranges, watching for Tonka to reappear.

Frosts became sharp and the nights filled with the cries of migrating fowl and the flutter of their wings. Ducks, grebes, loons and wading birds used the lake for a resting place. One evening a flock of wary gray geese dropped onto the lake and Blacktip watched Trevors stalk and kill two of them.

AT LAST came the night when Blacktip found himself on the ridge, gazing back at the sheep wagon. Tonka was waiting and the call was strong. The invisible bonds which had held him to man were growing thin. He sat on his haunches and listened to the wilderness which called to him from beyond the hills. Crickets chirped their cheerful songs in the grass about him. A cool breeze whispered through his fur, carrying the scent of dry leaves, grass and sage. He rose to go.

Then a stronger breeze sighed over the lake. It flapped a tatter of canvas on the sheep wagon's roof and Blacktip paused. The sound reminded him of the man he loved and he could not leave.

At that moment there came a roar of terrified bleats from the sheep fold. The cougar! Blacktip tensed, then whirled and raced down the slope. He shot past the wagon like a puff of gray smoke and skidded to a stop beside the fence. He tipped up his muzzle and added his howls to the bedlam of sound.

The sheep wagon door banged open and Trevor's old 30-30 belched fire and thunder into the night.

The cougar leapt out of the fold and this time Blacktip was quicker. He reached the killer when it struck the ground and leapt at its throat. His savage snarl and the cat's yowl of pain blended into one wild shriek of sound.

Hurried steps were approaching. "Blacktip," panted Trevors, "leave it alone. You'll get killed!"

The big tawny cat was on its back, spitting, raking up at Blacktip with unsheathed claws. Its muscular body was like a mass of steel springs as it writhed and twisted in its hide. At his master's command the dog leapt back. Like a tongue of rust-colored flame the cat vanished into the night.

Trevors was panting and held one hand over his heart. He gasped with relief when Blacktip emerged from the shadows. "I thought you'd be killed, boy," he said and dropped to his knees. "You're worth more than all the sheep," he cried, hugging the dog and patting his head.

Blacktip licked the man's face while quivers of excitement shook his body. He gazed out into the dusk, pulled away, ran to where the scent was strong on the ground. His fur bristled and he growled.

The cougar's attack made the dog freshly aware of his master's need. It strengthened the bonds between them. On the other hand Tonka had been badly frightened by the rifle shot. She never had trusted Blacktip's strange friendship with man. That night she didn't return to the ridge, although the dog waited for her eagerly.

The next morning Trevors made preparations to leave Treacherous Lake, but the work tired him unduly. "Don't feel right," he told Blacktip. "We'll stay one more day."

That evening, after bringing in the sheep, Trevors went to the head of the spring for a pail of water. Blacktip held the sheep together while they drank. It was a complete surprise when the cougar streaked out of the willows and landed on a sheep's back. Blacktip howled and attacked. He heard Trevor's shouted reply.

The cougar, unaware that the sheep were being guarded, whirled and fled when it saw the dog. It almost collided with the man as he rounded a clump of willows. Trevors swung at the cougar with his empty

pail. The cat spat, struck back, and fled. Trevors fell heavily. He clutched at his heart, then relaxed.

Blacktip was close on the cat's heels and he almost fell over his master's form. He stopped and his tail dropped. Then he sniffed Trevor's face and backed up. For a moment he stood bewildered, sensing that the man was dead. Then a great loneliness seized him and he howled mournfully into the dusk.

It was a few minutes later that his love for Trevors turned into a savage hate of the cougar. Somehow the sheep-killer was to blame for his master's silence. Blacktip dropped his nose to the cougar's tracks and gathered speed. There was no voice to stop him now. Above his shoulders his ruff came up and there was a killing glint in his yellow eyes.

The cougar's trail led out of the basin of Treacherous Lake, straight toward the sandhills. Blacktip was a vengeful gray phantom as he ran silently through the early night. The moon, three nights from full, began to cast its silvery light over the brown prairie. Two miles from camp he caught sight of the cougar looking back from the tip of a rounded dune a hundred yards ahead. Blacktip bayed. The cougar twitched its long tail, turned, and loped away.

After another mile Blacktip overtook the cougar. The animal was running in long rubbery bounds, like a huge weasel. It looked over its shoulder and increased its pace.

Suddenly a big boulder loomed ahead. The cat turned toward it, leapt, and landed on top. She turned, and Blacktip saw that it was a big female. She spat and coughed and the sounds were exactly like those of a huge frightened tomcat. Her mouth was open in a savage snarl which looked like the mirthless grin of a skeleton.

Cautiously Blacktip circled the boulder and the cat pivoted with him. She continued to spit and twitch her tail, yowling now and then to give strength to her anger. Echoes came back from the moonlit slopes.

A killing hate was in the dog's heart but he held it in check. On the uphill side, twenty feet from the boulder, he sat down to wait. His mouth dropped open and he panted.

Although she was safe on the peak of

rock which rose five feet above the ground, the cat wasn't comfortable. She was forced to stand with all four feet bunched together and it hurt her pride. After a few minutes she began to look about restlessly and her eyes fastened upon a patch of bushes in a hollow fifty yards away.

BLACKTIP stood up and a new storm of threats poured from the cat's throat. She crouched tensely and the moonlight glistened on her coat. Suddenly she turned and left the boulder in a long graceful leap. She landed far down the slope, running at the incredible speed which a cougar can reach for a short distance. Blacktip followed.

The cougar crashed into the bushes and near the center she faced about with her back against a patch of hawthorns. Ten feet away Blacktip paused. The surroundings were not to his liking. The patch of open ground in front of the cougar was ringed with rose bushes which grew higher than his back. The place was too confined; too much like a trap. There wasn't room for the swift rushing tactics which formed the base for most of his fighting. But Blacktip was in no mood to be swerved from his purpose. He would kill or be killed in the attempt.

The cougar yowled and turned her face into a mask of sharp fangs and narrowed eyes. He snarled back, darted forward and slashed at her throat. She drew back, then struck with a front paw. Blacktip leapt away but in an instant he was back, snapping, ducking, snarling, watching for an opening which might give him a clear thrust at her throat.

Five minutes passed. They ripped and slashed at one another. Blacktip's gray coat became tinged with red. The cougar's neck and chest were bleeding freely. Then in a careless moment Blacktip was knocked sprawling across the clearing. As he scrambled to his feet he saw the cat. She was dropping upon him, jaws wide and claws reaching out to seize him. He threw himself backward but the confining ring was too small and he crashed into the bushes. In his eagerness he had risked too much and lost.

Then another form took shape behind the cougar. It was Tonka who rushed into

the moonlit clearing, her body close to the ground. Without warning she seized the cat by one of its hamstrings and ripped savagely.

The cougar was taken completely by surprise. She forgot Blacktip and spun with a scream of rage to face her new attacker.

Blacktip was filled with a new feeling of strength. Never in his life had he practiced the fine skill of helping another to outwit and kill, but the instinct was strong within him. He played his part as though he had done it a thousand times.

At exactly the right moment he flung himself forward. His fangs reached out for the cat's exposed throat and for the

first time that night his grip was deep and sure. His head twisted, then ripped free with jaws still closed. He leapt back to join Tonka who had also sprung to safety.

The cougar gurgled horribly in her throat and staggered a few steps. Then she sank slowly to the sod.

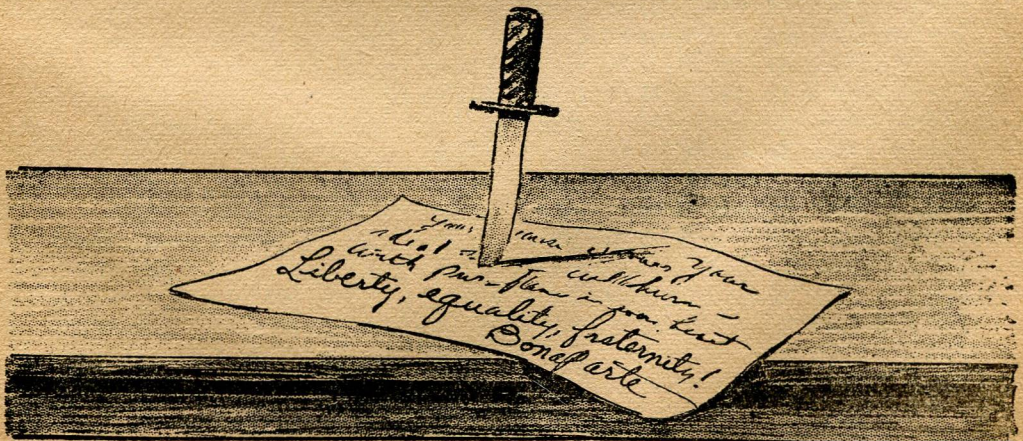
A weight seemed to lift from Blacktip. His debt had been paid and he was free. He touched Tonka's nose and side by side they trotted out of the bushes and up the hill. On the top, where the moonlight was bright and the autumn breeze ruffled their fur, they lay down to rest. Blacktip licked his wounds and Tonka crept close to help him.

THE story of Napoleon's essay at power in the New World is almost unknown today. Hispaniola that had been; San Domingo that was; Haiti that was soon to be. In the year 1802 it was the nerve center of the gigantic shadowy grip whose claws had stretched from the Old World, the grip of the Corsican. Here the old Army of the Rhine had firmly planted the Tricolor in the Americas. Secret orders—a young American with a strange mission—drama—conspiracy—old hates and tropic vengeance.

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FREEDOM HAS A PRICE

By H. Bedford-Jones



*Rolling Fortress Enters Civilian Life—
If You Can Call It Life!*



HOMICIDE ON BITTER ROOT PASS

By LYNDON RIPLEY

IN THE rugged mountains back of Ledgeford, in Northern California, a traveler, looking for the unusual, will most certainly find it. That I can guarantee. I ought to know. It was there that I nearly lost my life.

It all happened in the fall of last year, in September. I had gone to Big Horse Springs for a story on a sure cure for baldness and its human interest angle. Since Cy Buran, Sunday editor of the *Advocate-News* in San Francisco, didn't expect me back for two days more, I used my time for a letdown holiday, soaking up local color. I had no idea how local and how colorful it would prove to be.

I visited antiquated Eltonville, with its strange reminders of Chinese slaves and early gold stampede. I lingered at Ingot

Hill's mystery spot, where natural phenomena are even today a tourist lure. I talked with a hill billy sort of girl, along with her gangly parents. They wore no shoes. These mountain oddities said they had few neighbors on what they called Mitchems Mountain.

I suppose this is hard to believe, here in town. But get set down in the middle of those God-forsaken back country wilds, and it is something else again.

I had the city guy's attitude at first. On Wednesday, September 11th, when I thought these overalled specimens were slyly giving me a run-around, I left in none too good a humor. I doubted this barefooted business, even the malarkey they gave me about having never seen a streetcar.

The more I thought about it, the more I

kicked myself for a fool. I even doubted that the story and pictures I had obtained about an old prospector growing a beard four feet long in six weeks was more bush-wah. I wanted to get out of this nutty country, but fast.

That is mainly the reason why I took the old mountain cutoff through Bitter Root Pass, in driving back to the coast. I was taking a chance, I realized, but in no mood to argue with myself. I'd accepted the word of those illiterate pine gum natives that the roughly graveled road was passable on the steep switchbacks. I should have known better, should have remembered that they rode horseback or on mules, for I saw no signs of a car. By rights I should have headed directly south on the well-paved route through Copland and Wayneton, for I was in no particular hurry.

Well, it was cloudy and dark on this particular mid-morning when I left the renovated ghost town of Eltonville. When I passed through Cosito my old Chevie coupé was suddenly bombarded with a deluge of rain and hail I've never seen the likes of. No doubt you read the news accounts about that freak storm? I could hardly see, in spite of the furiously working windshield wiper. I don't know to this day how I deliberately left the rocky road of my own free will. At least, I didn't drop a thousand feet into the conveniently close Cosito Canyon to my left. I remember the rutty roadway was a solid sheet of water and I merely took the curve to the right.

Inside of a dozen feet I brought up slamming in a mess of submerged boulders and scrubby fir trees. The old motor that seldom quit on account of water, coughed and died for sure when rain machine-gunned in through the lambasted louvers.

For two full hours I sat there while a gurgling freshet grew and crept up to the muddy running-boards. Around two o'clock the slate sky started to lighten. The hail abruptly called off the bombardment and the rain lessened. By the middle of the afternoon blue sky started to show fleetingly in the west, over a thicket of acacias, backed up by what I took to be fire-shagged cedars and pines.

Finally getting tired of just sitting, I grabbed my trench coat, regretfully eased my polished brogans into the settling chocolate

flood, locked the car and struck out uphill. I stumbled out on what now appeared to be a fairly well-used roadway through alders and stunted firs. It was a hundred yards before I reached ground free of draining water. It was slippery with ooze for a way and I skidded twice, tearing my bedford cords and barking my shins both times.

THE farther I got the less I liked my surroundings. There was an almost sinister aspect about this part of the rugged terrain under the spotty, fast moving clouds that I had previously ignored in my angry haste. I was soon convinced that my idea of getting someone to pull me out of the sink hole was all wrong.

I was grumbling, on the verge of turning back, when I topped a rocky rise and saw the dilapidated buildings in front of a multi-ledged stone cliff. There was a pitch-roofed main office, backed up by several openwork structures. They looked, to my unfamiliar eyes, like a crusher plant and pear-shaped kilns in front of a stone quarry.

Since the weed-grown road headed directly through the apparently deserted place, I trudged on, somewhat hesitant in spite of myself. The clouds had meanwhile come over and the sky had grown darker again.

I followed old rusted iron tracks, passed two overturned stone carts, stepped across the hollow-sounding base of a broken-down weighing scale. Stopping near the office building, I finally saw the splintered sign under the tar-papered caves—"Mitchell Cement."

There had been someone about, however, and recently, for I saw footprints and hoof-marks in the mud. A gray pall still clung to barrels, chutes, hoists and bins under cover. Up overhead a slack cableway sagged and swung slowly in the south wind that even now was trying to stir up more rain.

Then I turned around and peered into a dirty office window. There were still dusty desks, files and tables in the interior. Farther back in a wing appeared what looked like a chemical analysis department, with plenty of equipment still on shelves and benches. Shifting my attention to the door, I found it securely padlocked and braced with a large two-by-eight spiked on at an angle.

Just as I was skirting a coal and slag pile near a rather new-looking bulldozer, the lat-

ter quite out of place with its surroundings, I heard shots off to my right. The sharp "powpowee" came from the east, reverberating against the cliff to the west. And then, as if to reassure me that I was going in the right direction, I smelled the faint pungence of cedar smoke.

The tracks of a caterpillar tractor showed on the rock-strewn aisle up which I strode. Then I remembered the bulldozer. It would make such marks as these. This more-frequented roadway had come in from the north through thick-set firs. Again I heard shots, nearer this time, and at each report the tumbling of a tin can.

I picked up a few fragments of rock and tossed them at a large, flat area of drifted leaves as I went by. The first stone splashed water. Others determined that it was a leaf-covered pond. Then a rock, instead of splashing and sinking, bounced into the air.

CURIOUS as to this occurrence, for the pool seemed rather deep, I tossed still more stones. I discovered then that a large log lay the length of the storm-made pond of water, almost flush with the surface and deceptively covered with the layer of leaves. I had merely stumbled on this oddity that would likely disappear as seepage carried the storm-water away.

Presently, as I rounded a promontory on the grade, I caught sight of the log cabin. It was a snug affair, built against a back drop of upland forest, with a small green meadow near the low front doorstep. But what drew my attention the most was the young fellow who was using the handgun.

He was stocky and short, about twenty-six, wearing a black-and-white checked wool shirt and tan jodhpurs, and was loading a clip of his automatic pistol. My approach on the wet ground had been unintentionally noiseless. I was within twenty feet of him when his black-haired head jerked up and he swung like a cat. His heavy, blue-jowled face contorted with rage and small dark eyes, under craggy brows, stabbed a glance first at me, then down the pathway up which I'd come.

"What's the big idea of sneakin' up like that?" he snarled, deep-voiced, savagely slamming home the loaded clip of the forty-five. "What business you got here?"

"Just looking for someone to pull my car

out of the ditch," I explained, trying to keep my temper. "I was on the mountain grade some ways back and the sudden rain-storm—"

"Why didn't you say so?" The snapping eyes, cold gray I could see now, gave me a quick, thorough appraisal. "What's your business? You a private eye?"

I laughed with effort, trying to appear unconcerned. "No. Just a newspaper reporter. Heading back to Frisco with a story I got at Big Horse Springs."

"What story? What's it about?"

"Just an old prospector who supposedly can cure baldness. Why?"

The thick lips were sullenly cynical. "Anything for a laugh. You kill me. Well, can the chatter. Now that you've arrived, you stay. Into the cabin."

"But I haven't—"

"Shut up. I said can the chatter. If you don't—" He cut loose with the Colt. The bullet-riddled container jumped and rolled all three times. "See for yourself. You're a lot bigger, Mack, an' no tomato in a can. Now move."

I saw only too clearly. Whatever I'd blundered into had its serious side. As this was no time or place to argue, I walked over to the deep, rustic porch, stepped up and into the cabin and into a mess of trouble.

THE place was comfortable looking with the usual Indian rugs, rock fireplace, heavy furniture and several shelves of books on a near wall. Whoever had built and equipped the hideaway had taste and liked the soft tones of brown, tan and green. I couldn't connect the place with Beetle Brow behind me, as he prodded me in.

"Hands over your head," he commanded roughly, nudging me viciously in the small of the back. "Put 'em on the rocks, over the mantel, an' lean over. This is inspection as well as visitors' day."

I did as ordered. I was thoroughly punched and patted. My trench coat was snatched away, as well as my lightweight crusher hat.

"All right, Mack. Mitts behind the nice broad back. I'll have to wrinkle that lovely gabardine lounge jacket of yours. If you weren't so big I'd requisition it. I mean your size."

"But see here," I protested, thoroughly

disgusted at the proceedings. "I haven't done anything—"

"That's just it, Mack, that's just it. Don't want you to—"

A rope whistled and slashed around my head, across my face. I started to swing then, when something crashed the right side of my head, over the ear, sounding like the explosion of a cannon. I went down, my forehead scraping fireplace stones, into a deadened, black void.

I don't know how long I was out. A half-hour possibly. When I regained painful consciousness, my noggin felt like an inching lob-sided squash. I tasted blood that had run down my face from my skinned forehead. My hands were trussed behind my back, ankles tightly bound with the same long rope. I was on the mahogany floor near a back door that presumably led to the kitchen. An amber floor lamp was on now, near an overstuffed leather chair. The fireplace fire was burning briskly.

THE fellow I had mentally tabbed Beetle Brow was out in back, talking to somebody. It was raining again, pouring in fact, by the sounds on the shake roof. Something was frying on a stove for I heard sizzling and the crackling of mountain wood. Presently I smelled bacon, realized it was late afternoon.

The conversation grew louder beyond the rough-hewn, dark-stained door. In spite of the drumming downpour, I could hear fairly well.

"But Dad won't pay a dime," a young man complained in a nasal tenor that had a trace of hair lip. "This is the third day. Be reasonable, Scholl. Use your one-cell brain. I'm not worth fifty thousand. And my wrists are killing me."

"Heh! Heh! The Mitchell heir speaks the truth for once. You ain't worth a slab of bacon for that matter, but we're goin' to bring it home." There was a light belch and a frying pan scraped on metal. "If there's any moola available, Kappino'll get it."

"Your partner is an imbecile," young Mitchell's voice cut in rashly. "You know he has no mind of his own. It's a wonder if he finds his way back up through our cement plant."

"Nuts, high-brow!" Scholl grated irritably. "Talk won't get you nowwhere. An' lay off

the brain business. Make too much fuss an' I'll konk you proper an' collect besides."

"You wouldn't dare," flared Mitchell, "if I was free of this damned rope!"

"The rope is savin' you disgrace," said Scholl's heavy voice threateningly. "You know, Junior, that you rightfully ain't got no country. Don't try to pull this amnesia stuff on me. You went abroad to get out of military service durin' the war. Then you sneaked back here an' holed up. You're a damned alien. America ain't got no citizenship now for rats like you."

"Nor you," Mitchell spat. "You small-time, scummy extortionist!"

"You can't do a thing, Mitch old egg," Bettie Brow Scholl groated harshly, "even if you got free. Know why? I posted up on you an' your old-goat father before I decided to snatch you. Your lousy cement plant was a Jonah long before you used it as a front for your electro magnetic alloy research. There's enough proof in the lab down there to hang you. Why? You were on call from Berlin."

"Try and prove it!" was the surly, hissed comeback.

"Don't have to," Scholl went on. "Think I don't know why that ready-to-go bulldozer is down there? To push cement rock around? That's a laugh. Just to prove what I'm talkin' about, I know the machine has its uses. An' I know too there's plenty of iron, nickel, chromium an' silicon steel ore around. Do you think anybody with half a brain would believe a cement plant could operate up here, so far away from a shippin' spur?"

"How did the bright little boy," Mitchell said sarcastically in womanish falsetto, "figure it all out for himself?"

"Easy as pickin' your nose, traitor," Scholl said loudly, now apparently thoroughly irked. "You can dry up. You could yell your fool head off here an' nobody important'd know. But I'm tired of hearin' you yammer. One more slimy word an', so help me, I'll blast you like a tomato can. That's final. Just one more word!"

"If this guy in the other room," shouted Mitchell, defying the warning, "could help me, we'd—"

The frying pan scraped on metal again. "I said you wasn't worth a slab of bacon, an' you ain't. But, yellow belly, here's the grease!"

There was a quick, piercing scream, a stuttered oath. A chair overturned and a heavy body hit the floor only to squirm and kick, by the sounds of it. "Oh God!" Mitchell yelled piteously. "My eyes! My face! You son of a leprous jackal! If I ever—"

"You'll never," Scholl promised coldly. "I should let you suffer but—"

In the confined space beyond the door the two shots sounded like grenades. Feet kicked a tattoo on the wall, there was a gurgling moan, then the brief spasmodic scratching of a shoe dragged on boards. A small stream of glistening blood began to ease under the door, collected on a low plank on my sides of the partition. The frying pan clanked back on the stove and presently more bacon was sizzling.

The kitchen occupant was apparently just beginning his meal when somebody called from the porch and gave a three-one-two series of knocks. Scholl kicked open the kitchen door, came out chewing on bacon rind. In passing, he booted my bound feet out of the way. He reached under his half-open wool shirt to the left armpit, plunged a muscled hand past black breast hair, brought out his ivory-handled automatic. He unlocked the heavy oak door, opened it a crack and peered out into the drizzling dusk. Then he flung it wide.

"'Bout time you're gettin' back," he remarked grudgingly, as he admitted a thin young man, closed the door behind the limping newcomer.

Mitchell had apparently tabbed this Kappino individual correctly. From his yellow rain hat down his black slicker to brown, rubber-booted feet, he looked like a wet, emaciated weasel. Little, yellow eyes peered out of whitish bags at Scholl in the amber light. Scrawny hands wiped the running beak nose, then unclasped the collar catch, exposing the weak, receding chin.

"Well?" snapped Scholl, giving his flunky a malignant stare.

"I—ah—got it here," Kappino said thickly, as though his throat was full of phlegm. He fumbled under his saggy, dirty brown tweed coat as he favored his right foot, drew forth a wet manila package.

Scholl snatched the packet, broke the red string and tore it open. Under his large, black-nailed thumb hundreds of twenty-dollar bills fanned like a miniature windmill.

"Boy! Ain't that somethin'!" he chuckled, a wide, evil grin on his swarthy face. Then his countenance hardened and eyes slitted. One hand dropped from the torn bundle, grabbed the wet arm of his companion in a vise-like grip. "Where was this boodle put? The place I said?"

Kappino nodded vacuously. A large Adam's apple made a round trip as he swallowed, looked Scholl fleetingly in the eye. "Yah. Behind the rock by the old dead fir, it was, like you said in the note."

"Well, that's that then," was the pleased rejoinder. "We're finished here. But there's no reason why we should head down the canyon in this storm. We'll start early in the mornin', after I get rid of this scandal chaser." Turning to me he kicked my thigh viciously. "I've figured it all out. Maybe I'll tell you, Mack, since you live on news. Come on, Kappy. Let's eat. But first you put a coupla logs on the fire."

THE two men stayed in the kitchen for a considerable while. By the sounds of it they dragged Mitchell's body out on a back porch, mixed pancakes, fried more bacon, opened a couple of tin cans. When they finally emerged, Beetle Brow led the way, a bottle of beer in one beefy hand. Kappino, behind him and now out of raincoat and hat, was picking the stubs of his black teeth, narrow face grinning foolishly.

"Want something to eat, Mack?" my captor inquired of me with mock solicitude, as he flopped heavily into a leather chair near the fireplace glow. He finished his beer, tossed the empty bottle into the fire, drew out a pack of cigarettes.

"Not hungry," I said, clipping the words in spite of myself.

"Aw now, Mack, you gotta eat. Kappy, bring him bacon. If he ain't quite ready, try the shirt-tail treatment."

I should have welcomed the raw, fatty slab to chew on. As penalty for not doing so, I was slapped unmercifully on both sides of the face, top of my head, up under my jaw. Kappino kept repeating the routine until he was puffing, until Scholl told him to quit.

As consequence, my head became a mass of grease. My neck felt as though it was broken. I grudgingly wondered how this heister with so thin a body could whip a

side of pork with so much force. Fear, most likely, I decided smothering a groan, gave strength that muscles did not normally provide.

That started a crazy evening I'll never forget. Kappino, still following orders, mopped up the pool of blood on the floor, brought more logs for the fireplace, lugged in a half-finished case of beer. Then he sat down beside the fire on a stool, began to suck on one of two bottles he had been allotted.

Scholl sprawled in his chair like a sultan. He idly fingered the package of greenbacks, consumed one beer after another, chain smoked cigarettes. When the malt beverage was gone and empties littered the scatter-rugged floor, he had Kappino bring in a quart of hard liquor from the kitchen.

It was nearly one in the morning, the nearest I could figure, when Scholl got up and leered at me. He seemed to control his drinks well enough. "Well, gotta hit the hay if it's an early start. I told you I had it all figured out, far's you're concerned. Wanta know?"

"Does it really matter?" I countered resignedly.

"Not specially." He scratched the back of his boil-scarred neck, thinking, staring down. "Ever hear about the duke in Africa who hunted big game?"

I shook my head, and winced.

"Can't remember his name, now, or where I read about him. But I'm goin' to go this damned royal liar one better. I'm goin' huntin' before we leave, but it won't be for no lion or tiger. I'm goin' to go huntin' smarter game, I hope—you."

I tensed, knowing full well that the fellow meant it. He was pronouncing my fate and, in spite of myself, I wanted to listen. I suppose you would call it morbid curiosity.

"I'm turnin' you out, Scholl pursued, relishing my discomfort, "when it's light enough to see. You'll be able to take steps a foot apart. I know how to make a hobble. Your hands will stay where they are. I'll give you two minutes start, then come after you with my forty-five. I seldom miss. This time it's up to you to use your feet, not your brain. I like to give a guy a chance."

The words, "Looks like it, the way you treated Mitchell," started to come out of my mouth. Then I bit my tongue, keeping

it in place. It would do no good. *Bide your time, Durwood*, I told myself. *Bide your time*. Not that it would do very much good now.

"You don't seem much concerned about your life," Scholl remarked then, turning toward a side door which presumably led to a bedroom. "I really hate to take it." Appearing to forget something, he stepped back, kicked me savagely in the side, then went on out of the room and slammed the door.

In a moment it was jerked open again. "Kappy, guard this guy," was the peremptory order. "Sit in my chair an' see he don't pull anythin'. Take the old rifle from over the fireplace but save him for me. I'm sorta lookin' forward to try a movin' target for a change."

Kappino did as told. He settled his long, thin frame in the leather chair, gun across his lap, trying to look forceful and efficient which, in his case, was most difficult. He attempted to give me a baleful, yellow stare, pulled at a boot top, scratched the knee of his shiny, serge trousers. He hiccupped a couple of times, fiddled with the pump lever of his weapon, then relaxed in the warmth of the crackling fire. Presently he was nodding. Occasionally he would catch himself, glance down at me through reddened slits, then start nodding again.

Time passed. Heavy snores began to come from beyond the bedroom door. Then Kappino was dozing too. His thin, saggy cheeks puffed at every breath, as if he were blowing a feather away from his petulant, blue lips.

I cudgled my brain for something to do, anything, that could be of help in this emergency. Now was the time for action, if I was ever going to grow any older.

THE first thing to accomplish, I decided, was to get my hands free. Knowing that would take a bit of doing, I bided my time, keeping my eyes on the bedroom door, on the scapegoat, scarecrow Kappino.

Finally I rolled, elbowed slowly across the floor on my back, the heavy Navajo rugs deadening any scraping sounds I made. It was the most painful thing I'd ever done in my life. Ribs on one side seemed broken, for they kept jabbing me like needles.

Then I was in front of the fireplace, rubbing the tight wrist rope against a border stone set in cement on a corner of the hearth. It wasn't very sharp but it was rough, like chipped granite. I have no idea of the time it took but it seemed hours. I was intensely nervous and fearful of the outcome should I be discovered.

Finally my hands were free. I lay there, exercising my skinned, numbed wrists, waiting, listening. Then I freed my ankles. Cautiously, ever so slowly, I crawled to the kitchen door, eased it open. In the back room I got stiffly to my knees, then to my feet, feeling dizzy and sick to my stomach.

Away from the dying glow of the fireplace, I noticed through a side window that the sky was growing a lighter slate color, that the rain had stopped. Dawn was coming up over the ridge. It was at dawn that Scholl was going to start hunting me!

The thought spurred me to action. In my stiff awkwardness I bumped against the cold stove, hit the frying-pan handle. It whirled around a couple of times, then skittered off a griddle and landed on the floor with a loud bang.

It was too late now for caution. I was out the back porch door like a greased shadow. In my haste in the dim light, my foot collided with Mitchell's stiff body on the lip of the steps. I sprawled headlong, skidded on hands and knees into needle-covered mud under the eaves.

I was up in a flash, heading into the firs beside the house. Then I was out on the cleared pathway, running downhill, running for my life. Behind me I heard somebody clump out on the cabin porch, then run, yelling, after me.

There was no time to look behind. I ducked around gnarled cedars, more fir trees, between time-eroded rocks. Then I was nearing the catch-basin pool of water that was covered with alder and acacia leaves. It was the pond across which the large log lay.

Behind me I heard the limping clump-clump of running, hollow-sounding rubber boots. In a flash I reasoned things out. Of course! It was Kappino chasing me, perhaps as deathly afraid as I and for the same reason.

This new knowledge gave me strength. I

slackened speed but slightly. Then I was running at the pond, hoping frantically that my previous observations would pay off in my moment of need.

They paid. Instead of sinking, I sped across on the uneven log as if the pond were frozen solid beneath the surface water and leaves. Then I was on the other side, dashing downgrade toward the cement plant.

Behind me I heard a mighty splash. "Help! Hey!" yelled Kappino in a frightened voice. There was a pause, then gurgles. "Help!" again came his garbled scream. "It's water. I can't swim!"

I turned in spite of myself. A bony hand and wrist clawed out, disappeared slowly in the floating, undulating leaves.

With difficulty I restrained my impulse to run back, dive in and save the fool. It was him or myself, and things right now were much too personal to try being a hero. I had little enough time as it was to find some sort of weapon with which to combat a sharpshooting killer.

MOMENTARILY I expected to hear Beetle Brow Scholl on the pathway, hear the crash of his Colt, feel the slam of metal in my back. Then I was past a rock-strewn turntable—a shale pit—behind the office building. My mind raced, searching for a way in which to stop my self-styled big game hunter of men.

The only thing I could think of was to break into the building where tools of one sort or another might be stored. Recklessly I crashed my fist through a pane of dirty glass, jerked aside the locking wooden slat, disturbed clouds of dust. In a matter of seconds I was through the window.

In spite of what Scholl had said that the place was merely a front for a contraband electro-magnetic project, it appeared to me that it was a thoroughly good front. There was still plenty of equipment in the place. I dashed into the laboratory, then back into the central office.

I was coughing, having kicked up a lot of rock dust, when I saw the shovels, picks, mauls and sledges in a corner. They were stacked near a tier of metal lockers that still contained old curl-toed workshoes and ragged khaki clothes. Quickly I picked up a sledge, hefted it, then threw it down. What good would a hand weapon like that do?

I'd never get within ten yards of Scholl, let alone be alive long enough to use it.

Then I noticed the barrel of a shotgun sticking out, on top of one of the lockers. I made a quick grab for it and hauled it down. A I did so I dislodged two shells that had been tossed up beside it. They fell to the floor, clunking heavily on the dried, warped boards.

I BLEW the dust off what looked to me like an old-fashioned blunderbuss. It was a rusted, single-shot gun. The wooden stock was slightly wormeaten and a cocoon web was around the trigger. I was about to chuck this aside when I glanced down at the shells that had fallen.

I'll have to admit that, in the strengthening light they looked as big as a policeman's club. I picked one up, curiously. It was eight-gauge, true enough, but it held no shot, as far as I could see. Instead of a cardboard wad in the front end, a lead slug protruded in its place. A lead slug, mind you, as big as a walnut, or so it seemed to me then!

Mumbling to myself, yes, praying a little too, I broke the gun open, forcing it a little, due to rust. I cocked the hammer with difficulty, brushed aside the cocoon and pulled the trigger for an empty test. The hammer eased down at first, then slammed home. A second try did better. It clicked down smartly.

Then I inserted the jumbo shell, snapped the gun closed. Picking up and sticking the other shell in a jacket pocket, I peered out of a window. Scholl still was not in sight on the upgrade path! I still had time to meet him halfway! Cautiously I crawled out the open window, tiptoed around the building.

I was eying the overturned stone carts that had probably lain there for years, considering them as a possible protection from gunfire, when I remembered something I had read about cement kilns. Before I had gone into the Army I had once been assigned to write an article about a plant accident, had boned up a little on details. I recalled having read about a gun such as I now held in my hands. A powerful shotgun that used a solid lead slug. It was employed by cement workmen to crack through a hard-baked wall fill-in, after a kiln had

been loaded with layers of stone and coal and fired for hours.

The knowledge that, if the gun was not too rusty, I had a real weapon in my fists, gave me a lift of spirit that is difficult to describe. Crazy, all at once, I knew how I would use it—if only this jumbo would cooperate! I'd use it from a rolling fortress, copy a little trick of my buddies, that we'd used in Iwo! That is, if I could get the fortress rolling!

Cautiously I crept out into the open, then made a wild dash for the bulldozer. I skidded in the mud behind it, banged the gun barrel against the tractor tread, climbing into the seat. Then I was fiddling with the switch, levers, foot pedals. I'd operated one of these behemoths once on a vacation, but now I was as rusty as the shotgun that was sandwiched between my knees.

I don't know just how I managed it, but suddenly, much too suddenly, the bulky machine coughed, backfired, then roared into life. I tried things out. I started it in low and was almost thrown off as it reversed instead of jerking ahead. Finally I found the right lever, raised the heavy steel scoop in front until it acted as a thick shield ahead of the radiator and a wide protection for my soft, easily punctured body.

By that time I had the feel of the juggernaut. I swung it to the right, then to the left, and was straightening out for the second time when movement up the mountain grade caught my eye. Beetle Brow Scholl was stalking down the path stiff-legged like a checker-jacketed leopard on the prod!

The moving bulldozer caught his eye then, I could see. He saw me swing the heavy machine so that the ponderous scoop was between us like a movable bullet-proof wall. Slowly, carefully, I headed up toward him, knowing full well that the slightest wrong pull of a control bar would now cook the goose of little Durward.

"Whang-ee!" ricocheted a .45 bullet off one of the flat caterpillar treads. "Pow-powee!" came another shot, the slug this time taking a ski slide on the steel scoop up and over my head, but a few scant inches away.

"Keep trying!" I called insultingly, gunning the Diesel. "Keep trying, you illegitimate leech of a rotgut sewer!"

Scholl opened wide then, just as I had hoped he would. He cursed, spat his cigarette to one side, emptied the Colt in a wild blaze of fire, searching for my vulnerable flesh behind the erstwhile armor.

Suddenly his automatic was empty, the slide hooked open, waiting for a reload!

Mightily he damned his gun, meanwhile savagely trying to push bullets into his extracted magazine. This gave me a chance to peek over my barricade. I souped the motor, rumbled up the grade toward him. When within a few scant yards, with Scholl beginning to back slowly away toward the leaf-covered pond beyond, I slammed the lever into neutral. The bulldozer drew up to an earth-shaking halt, at idling speed. Carefully I brought the cement gun to my shoulder, wincing under stabbing ribs. Biting my lip under the pain, I raised myself off the seat in a half-crouch.

"Now, you black-headed, kidnaping maggot!" I yelled. "Drop your gun! Drop it quick or I'll give you a taste of what you planned for me, only five times as strong!"

FRANKLY, there was no confidence back of my words but I'll always remember the look that Scholl gave me. Maybe he didn't believe me either. A guy like him wouldn't. Bestial fury mixed with burning hate on his square, dark puss as he jerked and stabbed his thumb at the magazine, trying to slam bullets home in a rush. Finally he threw down loose cartridges, whammed the magazine into the grip half filled.

I had his black-and-white-shirted chest full in the rusted sights as he jerked his Colt up. Then I pulled the trigger, hoping against hope that this old kiln plug buster would do its stuff.

There was a gawd-awful roar. I was bowled over backward. My foot hit a lever and the bulldozer started with a jerk. Then I was picking myself up from the mucky, rocky ground, still gripping the shotgun, groping in my pocket for the other shell that wasn't there. I made a frantic leap for the

slowly waddling machine, reaching for its mobile protection that at this moment was vital. I swore as I slipped and slid behind it.

Then I realized that I didn't need the roaring machine any longer. I saw, all at once, that Scholl lay on the boulder-strewn pathway as dead as one of his discarded tin-can targets. His chest wound was the most terrible I've ever seen. I'm not exaggerating when I say I could have stuck my fist into the bloody hole.

I couldn't reach the bulldozer in time. It advanced, rumbling, with a mechanized, inexorable purpose of its own. It clanked up and over Scholl's crumbled body, crunching bones like celery. Without stopping the mighty contraption went on, rolled into the pond with a churning of leaves and muddy water.

Then it toppled forward. The motor choked coughed and died as it slid down out of sight. A little plume of steam eddied up briefly through the carpet of cast-off foliage—

BY NOON I was back on the ridge route, having left the Mitchell-Scholl kidnaping affair to the proper authorities. I was thankful that there were yokels like the simple mountain folk who contended that they had never seen a streetcar. I even liked the looks of their flop-eared mules that had pulled my Chevvie out of the storm-filled dip. The barefooted, hillbilly girl became, for a fleeting few minutes; a rural pin-up movie star.

I decided then and there that never again would I blindly take an assignment into mountain country without proper equipment for self-protection. That equipment would most certainly include a darned good pistol and plenty of shells.

But, on second thought, maybe Cy Buran would have something to say about that, too. I can hardly think a thought but what that doggoned old editorial Simon Legree jumps the gun.

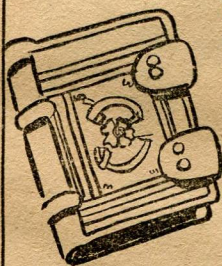
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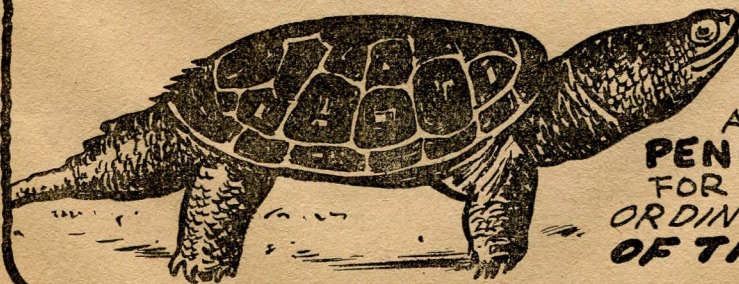
HOMING PIGEONS ARE ABLE
TO FLY AT A SPEED OF OVER
10 MILES AN HOUR ?
THEY ARE ALSO CAPABLE OF
CARRYING MESSAGES
DAY OR NIGHT FOR
A DISTANCE OF
500 MILES !



THE WATER SPIDER
IS ABLE TO STAY
UNDER WATER FOR
DAYS ! IT SPINS A
BROAD AIRPROOF WEB
UNDER THE SURFACE
AND FILLS IT WITH FRESH
AIR FROM ABOVE ?



IN THIRTEENTH
CENTURY
ENGLAND, A
BOOK COST
AS MUCH AS
A COUPLE
OF **COTTAGES** !



SNAPPING
TURTLES ARE
ABLE TO **SUS-
PEND** BREATHING
FOR AN EXTRA-
ORDINARY LENGTH
OF **TIME** !

*'Course a Game Warden's Not Supposed to Worry About
People Killin' Each Other . . .*



THE BUSHWHACKER

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

Author of "The Silver Knife," etc.

THE country was like something seen in a dream, Joe Fall thought. It lay vast and flat beneath the blue-hot sky, and a man's vision was blocked only here and there by scrub pine and cabbage palm and by an occasional hammock of moss-hung oaks, and finally by the curve of the sky itself. Through the endless stretches of high grass, brown now under

the glare of the sun, Bullfrog Creek wound its slow, shallow way toward the Everglades.

There was no road and Joe Fall, the game warden, drove his car across the open prairie, twisting past the palmetto thickets, the hammocks, keeping the creek in sight. He had no actual expectation of finding any fishermen this far from a highway, and it would have been difficult for him to explain

just why he was here. The truth was he liked the country, the almost eerie loneliness of it that was like something out of a prehistoric age, a land untouched and forgotten by time. But anyone telling Joe Fall this would have met with brassy-laughter: the game warden was a small redheaded man who was determined to forget his smallness by fancying himself as too tough to like anything: he was a man with a sentimental core, and an almost pathological horror of sentimentality.

A large bass jumped in the creek—"A ten pounder!" Fall said to himself, and two minutes later he was knee deep in water and thick grass along the creek's edge, rod in hand. Forty feet away a cabbage palm, pushed by some past September's hurricane, leaned far out over the water, its fronds almost touching, and behind the palm there was a small hammock where water oaks hung a curtain of Spanish moss. The big bass jumped again, close to the trailing fronds of the palm. Joe Fall cast his plug just beyond, began to reel, and felt the sudden convulsive shudder of his rod as the bass struck.

The bass ripped off line; he came clear of the water shaking his head, gills flared. And it was at this instant that something wasp-whined past Joe Fall's head. Two hundred yards away a flock of white herons went into the sky, wheeling downwind like a thin, blown cloud. Then, quite clearly, he heard the crack of the rifle.

"Some damn fool!" Fall said. He was still fighting his fish. It was trying to make a bunch of lily pads and he broke its run, turned it. Then the second bullet struck the water a foot to one side of Fall and he knew this was no accident. Somebody was shooting at him!

He went over backwards and under water, almost in the same instant the bullet struck. The water was shallow and he floundered in it, cursing, half strangling, until he was in water deep enough for swimming. Seconds later he came up beneath the overhanging fronds of the palm.

He saw the bass jump up-stream, shake free the plug, and vanish again; he saw the herons flying, the empty sweep of the prairie. There was nothing else.

Joe Fall moved backward, keeping the palm fronds in front of him, until he was

out of the creek and in the shelter of the oaks and hanging moss. Then he turned and ran for his car. There was a holstered pistol in the dash compartment. He got it and headed back the way he had come.

CROUCHING behind a clump of palmettos, Joe Fall saw a horse and rider cross the creek about a hundred yards away and come toward him. He could see the rifle across the saddle horn, and he began to grin now as he always grinned when there was trouble and a fight in prospect, his blue eyes ice hard and bright in his red-skinned face, his hair like a red banner. He had no idea who the rider was, or why the shots had been fired, and, characteristically, he was not worrying about that. The answer would come later.

Part of it came unexpectedly and a frown replaced the grin on Joe Fall's face. For the rider was a girl! He could see the small oval face beneath the wide-brimmed hat, the blonde hair blowing back from her cheeks. She stopped her horse close to the palmettos behind which Joe Fall waited, swung down from the saddle.

Joe Fall said, "Drop the rifle, Babe, before you turn around. This close you might not miss."

She stood motionless, one hand still touching the horse, the other holding the rifle.

Fall said, "Drop it, Sister."

The gun slid from her fingers and into the grass. She turned slowly. Her eyes were wide and her lips parted as she stared at Fall. Her face was without makeup, a rich sunbrown, but pale beneath the burn now. "Who—?"

"I'm the guy you tried to kill."

"I didn't! I—"

"Go ahead," he said. "Make it good." He stepped forward and lifted her rifle, smelled the barrel. "Maybe it was rabbits," he said.

Her eyes steadied on his with a look that might have been anger or desperation or relief, or perhaps all of them combined. "It wasn't rabbits," she said. "I thought you were someone else." And then quickly, "Only I didn't mean to hit him, not really. At least I—I don't think I did."

"You are mixed up," Fall said. "You don't know who you are shooting at, and

you don't know if you really meant to hit him."

"I didn't hit you?" Her voice was taut with anxiety.

"Not quite."

"I'm glad! I was so afraid. . . ." As if the strength had gone out of her she sat down in the grass and put her face in her hands.

The game warden looked at her with a kind of baffled anger. A few moments ago he had been crouching back of the palmettos, a gun in his hand, a good fight coming up. And now . . . He said, "You don't make sense. Why the devil would you shoot at a guy if you didn't mean to hit him?"

"I meant to kill him," she said. "And then, just before I shot, I—I knew I couldn't. I wanted to, but I couldn't. And I thought I would frighten him, wound him. It was all mixed up in my mind. Then after I shot and he—you—fell in the water, I was afraid. I was so horribly afraid that I had killed him!"

"Who is the guy?"

She did not look up.

"Dave Clark," she said. "He murdered my father."

Fall knew the story then. He had read it in the Bradenton paper, heard it discussed in the juke joints. Dave Clark was a well-to-do young cattleman who had spread his holdings into a new county, buying up open range and fencing it, and trouble had followed. Fence trouble was an old story in the Florida cattle country where cows and razorback hogs still have the right of way over automobiles on state highways; where the big expensive cars roll past on their way to Miami, through a land which, a hundred yards off the narrow strip of concrete, is unchanged since the ancestors of the Seminoles hunted there.

"Your father was Buck Peterson?" Fall said.

"Yes."

Peterson was the native cowman who had cut Clark's fences as fast as Dave Clark and his hired cowhands could build them. He had been accused of stealing Clark's cattle, and in return had accused Clark of stealing his. Most of the other small ranchers had settled their differences with Dave

Clark one way or another, but Peterson had continued his fight.

THEN one afternoon Peterson's horse had come home with Buck Peterson still in the saddle, dead, a bullet hole through his chest.

"They murdered him," the girl said, "because he wouldn't give in like the others. But Dad had to run his stock on part of that range." She looked up at Fall her face twisted with emotion. "Dad wasn't rich," she said. "He didn't own land like Dave Clark. Maybe there was a time when he could have bought it, but the land had always been there for everybody to use. Dad grazed cattle on it all his life, and Granddaddy too. Now—"

"Now you plan to even things up by murdering Clark," Fall said. "You better leave that to the sheriff."

Her voice was hopeless rather than bitter. "What can the sheriff do? He's honest, but he has no proof that would be good in court. He doesn't even know where Dad was killed."

"Do you?"

"No." She stood up, small, slender, but with an innate strength that showed in the way she held her head and the line of her throat above the open shirt. "But I know that Dave Clark killed him," she said, "or had him killed. And I'll never forget. I'll never give in or quit fighting him any more than Dad did. And sometime, somehow—"

"Maybe you are about to have your chance," Fall said, nodding toward where, a quarter mile away, two men on horseback were coming toward them along the edge of Bullfrog Creek.

The girl looked, squinting her eyes against the sun's glare. "I think that's Sam Harris. He was helping me look for some steers that are missing. And that must be Bud Johnson with him."

"They work for you?"

"Sam's a neighbor, that's all." But her eyes were on one of the men riding toward them. "I don't know what I would have done without him recently." About the second man, Bud Johnson, she volunteered no information at all.

A few minutes later the men rode up, Sam Harris in front. He was a big, dark-skinned man with high cheekbones; his nar-

row eyes watched Fall even as he spoke to the girl. "I thought I heard shots, Ann."

"If you are expecting bodies," Fall said, "You'll be disappointed. She missed."

"Too bad," Harris said. His dark eyes moved to the girl. "Who is this fellow, Ann?"

Joe Fall was about to give his own answer, but the girl moved quickly between them, saying, "There's no trouble, Sam. Did you find the steers?"

"All I found was Bud." He jerked his thumb toward the slender, cotton-blond man who sat his horse a half length behind, saying nothing but watching them out of blue, quick eyes.

"It looks like these steers are some more than Clark's got," Harris said.

There was a slight tremor to the girl's lips. "A few more and he will have them all," she whispered, saying it to herself rather than to either of the men, and in her voice there was the ghost of fear, of a terror greater than that of poverty—the fear of failing her father. Then she squared her shoulders and catching her horse swung up into the saddle.

To Joe Fall she said, "May I have my rifle now?"

He gave it to her. "Remember, Babe, game wardens are out of season."

"I'll not use the rifle that way again."

He realized, quite suddenly, that she was pretty. And very small and fragile, despite the way she sat the horse, and without a chance of winning. And instantly he told himself that he didn't give a damn what happened to her anyway, because it was none of his business.

ABOUT dusk the highway showed up ahead of Fall and he drove onto it, turned westward. He was still thinking about Ann Peterson, and still trying not to. "Damn Crackers," he told himself. "They'll kill a man over a stolen pig quicker than over a million bucks." But he remembered the girl saying, "I wanted to kill him, and I couldn't. When you fell I was so horribly afraid. . . ." And he remembered the sound of her voice when she said, "A few more cattle and he will have them all," and the way she had looked when she said, "I know Dave Clark killed my father, or had him killed. And I'll

never forget. I'll never give in or quit fighting him any more than Dad did."

But there wasn't a thing she could do, Fall thought, unless she used the method that had been used on her father. Because the free range was gone, or fast going, and what could a girl with a few head of cattle do to stop men like Dave Clark? It was like trying to stop time itself. It was hopeless.

"Her old man was cantankerous and stupid from what I've heard," Fall thought. And he thought too that this gave Dave Clark no excuse for murder, for stealing from a person already faced with poverty. "I'd like to meet this Dave Clark," he said.

It was inevitable that they should meet. It happened two nights later.

Fall was standing at the bar of the Lone Steer juke joint and felt a touch on his shoulder and turned and a man said, "You are Joe Fall?"

"Yes."

"My name's Dave Clark."

He wasn't a big man and yet he gave the appearance of bigness. His features were well formed but heavy and thoughtful. And his hair was as red as Fall's. (That's the reason the girl mistook us, Fall thought. Hair that color would be visible a long way in the sunshine.)

Fall said, "So you're the guy that murdered Buck Peterson."

Clark looked back at him without anger. "No," he said. "A lot of people think I did. But I didn't."

"And you steal cattle off a girl," Fall said. "I hear you are rich. Is that the way you made your money, Pal?"

"I haven't stolen any cattle either," Clark said. He said it slowly, thoughtfully. "I've lost some."

Fall stood there with his hands on his hips, his redhead cocked to one side. There was always something animalish about the man and he looked now like a bull-terrier trying to force some larger dog into a fight. He said, "You're getting credit for murder and stealing, Pal. Maybe you'll reap the reward one of these days, I hope."

"That's what I want to talk to you about. I hear you were mistaken for me and shot at."

"Yeah. And I don't find the mistake flattering."

"Was it Ann—Miss Peterson—who shot at you?"

"Are you planning to have somebody bushwhack her?" Fall said. "Because if you are—"

"No." He had to move a half step back from Fall and he took time to get out his pipe and light it. "You think I'm a murderer and a thief, and I reckon I can't blame you for that. But I'm not. And I don't want to be killed from ambush."

"Getting scared?"

"Yes," Dave Clark said, "I am. I was shot at over by Little Ben Bayou two weeks ago, looking for some missing cattle. At least a bullet popped into a tree in front of me."

"And you?"

"I got out of there. I didn't know then who was shooting." A slow smile spread over his features. "You know, I like that girl. She's pretty and she's got courage."

"And carries a rifle."

"I'm beginning to learn. That's why I spoke to you tonight. I thought since you are mixed up in this, you might take her a message. She won't see me." The smile left his face and his teeth clamped hard on the pipestem. "The land is mine," he said. "I bought it and I'm going to fence and put my cattle on it. I've offered to buy her few head at a fair price; I offered to lease her a few acres. I—"

"Don't tell me," Fall said, "I'm a game warden, not a cattleman. All I know is the girl doesn't seem to care for you."

He looked squarely at Fall. "Tell her to work out what she thinks is a fair deal, any fair deal, and come to me with it. But if she insists on calling my land open range and cutting the fences"—Clark shrugged. "She doesn't have a chance. And you and she know it." He turned and went out into the night.

Fall stood staring after him. He felt angry and no longer sure of the cause of his anger. "Either that man's honest," Fall said, "or he's the slimiest crook in the state of Florida."

"BUT I never shot at him over by Little Ben Bayou," Ann Peterson said. "I haven't been over there in years."

Fall said, "You never searched that way for the steers you've missed?"

"No. But Johnson went over once. But he didn't find anything."

"Who is this Johnson fellow?"

"A second cousin. He was living with us when Dad was—killed."

Fall shrugged. "Well," he said, "I've told you Clark's story, and his offer." He went down the steps of the small frame house and across the yard where the big, seedling orange trees were growing heavy with fruit. He was at the gate when the girl stopped him.

"Where are you going now, Mr. Fall?"

"Work. I ride around looking for guys catching undersize bass and shooting egrets and things like that."

"Over toward Little Ben Bayou?"

"I was thinking I hadn't been that way in a long time," Fall said.

"Wait a minute."

In less time than that she was back, carrying a rifle. "Now you wait," Joe Fall said. "I can't—"

"You can't put me out of your car," she said, climbing into it. "I've got a rifle and you haven't."

He looked at her. A good looking babe, he thought, and determined. And without a chance of winning.

They drove toward that section where the Everglades proper and the vast prairie lands to the north of it merged together. Pine islands towered out of the sea of level grass. The lakes, the shallow ponds, were like drops of water lying on the earth's surface, without depth and without banks, and in them the herons and egrets stood motionless as blue and white flowers. Ahead of them a long dark wall of cypress shadowed the sky, and coiled through the cypress lay Little Ben Bayou.

THEY came on a lake that stretched out of sight to right and left, but the tops of grass and of small, yellow flowers showed above the water. "We used to ride across it on horses," Ann Peterson said. Fall pointed to the flowers. "A sand bottom," he said. "You'll always find that with those yellow flowers. Let's have a go at it."

He drove slowly. The water came half way up the wheels. Waves washed out from them, bending the grass and sandflowers. The car rolled on, steadily, slowly. Finally

the ground lifted again, the water gave way, and there were oak and palm trees about them.

"There have been cattle here," Joe Fall said. The tracks were plain in the soft earth.

"Yes," the girl said. Her face was beginning to grow taut with excitement. "A lot of cattle." And then her voice sharp and wild she cried, "Wait! Wait!" And was out of the car before he could stop.

He looked back to see her kneeling beneath a blackjack bush, and holding in both hands a fide-brimmed hat. "What's that?" Fall asked. But he knew even before she answered.

"It's Dad's. He didn't have it on that day when—when the horse brought him home." There were no tears in her eyes but the skin about them had grown tight and her lips were pale. "It must have happened somewhere about here," she said in a half whisper.

Fall said, "If you'll take the car back, Miss Peterson, I'll look around here awhile. You can send the sheriff for me."

"No. I want to be sure."

He said, "Now look, Babe—" But she did not even hear him. Silently cursing women and cursing himself for having brought her, he took his gun-belt out of the dash compartment and strapped it around his waist.

The underbrush was too thick for them to drive much farther. They left the car and went on foot. The swamp closed in. The water was ankle and knee deep, the gnarled roots of cypress writhing like snakes above and below the surface. And then, where the land was high and firm again, they found the corral and the slaughter pen, and beyond that a small dock over dark, cypress covered water. "Nobody could see this place from Little Ben Bayou itself," Fall said. "But a boat can get in, load with beef, and a few hours later be in Fort Myers. That's where your missing cattle have been going."

"Yes."

It was a profitable business these days, Fall thought. But a dangerous one. Florida cattlemen had a reputation for dealing with rustlers. More than once buzzards flapping into the sky had left behind bits of cloth, buttons, and boots as the only evidence that

a man had gone cattle stealing and never returned. So when a man went out to steal cattle he went armed and ready to kill if necessary.

They made their way back through the swamp to the car again. Fall said, "You take the car and I'll wait here in case our man comes before you can notify the sheriff. I don't want him to see our tracks and get away without us knowing who he is."

The girl looked at him. "I know," she said.

"What?" Fall said.

"I know the shoes on his horse. I've seen their tracks often enough. And I've seen them here."

"Who?"

"Sam Harris." She said it wearily, as though a little sick at the words, and turned and put her rifle in the car.

It was then, when she had one foot on the runningboard and Joe Fall was about to walk around the car, that the bushes rustled and the big man with the high, slanting cheekbones and the dark eyes stepped through. He held a rifle with the stock against his side, a finger curled on the trigger, the muzzle pointing at Joe Fall. And though it was Fall he watched it was the girl he spoke to.

"Why did you have to come here, Ann? Why did you?"

She turned slowly. Her face was drawn, her lips parted. She stared at him for what seemed a long while, and Sam Harris said again, "Why did you have to come, Ann?"

"I didn't know it was you," she said. "How could I know?"

Joe Fall said, "Put down that rifle, Pal. You've got in enough trouble with it already." He took a step forward and saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger, and stopped. He was very near death, and knew it.

But still Harris hesitated, still speaking to the girl. "I had to kill him, Ann. He found me here. He—he would have killed me. You know how he was."

THE girl's lips moved, but there was no sound from them. Fall was leaning forward, his weight on the balls of his feet, shoulders sloping. He knew he couldn't reach the gun in time but he'd rather try than be shot standing here, without fight-

ing. And he could see the shadow of death in Sam Harris' eyes; Harris was a cornered animal that meant to kill.

Fall said, "Put down the gun, Pal." His mouth was dry. He said, "Am I going to have to take it away from you?"

The instant seemed frozen; it seemed to last forever. And in the utter stillness of it the girl was saying, "We could go away, Sam. No one would know."

"I would," Fall said. His heart was hurting, his chest swollen with the long breath, ready to lunge.

"Sam," the girl said. "Darling!"

Then the clock of life ticked out and Fall's shoulders were going down and forward and in the back of his mind he was thinking, *The rotter! Her father's murderer.* And the girl cried, "Sam!" going forward fast, in the same instant that Joe Fall, charging, finally understood. Because at the girl's cry Sam Harris had looked toward her for a split moment. And in that moment Fall's flailing hand caught the rifle barrel and pushed it upward. Then his body was crashing into Harris, the rifle between them, and the sound of the shot was half muffled, the powder blast burning Joe Fall's neck.

It seemed a long time before he was conscious of how still the man was inside his arms, the lack of struggle. Then he stepped back, breathing hard, with the pain

sharper in his chest than ever, and watched Sam Harris crumple on the ground. The bullet had taken him just beneath the chin.

The girl was leaning against the automobile when Fall went to her. He himself was feeling a little sick with relief and hid it by making his voice more harsh than usual. "Thanks, Babe. He'd probably got me if you hadn't got him to look at you."

She didn't answer. Fall said, "For a moment there I thought you were turning into quite a doublecrosser."

"He was always kind to me," the girl said.

"Yeah. Like stealing your cattle. Get in the car."

She half turned, but didn't. "Sam . . .?"

"We'll send the sheriff. It won't hurt Sam to wait."

They drove in silence, through the long, shallow lake, across the prairie where herons fished in the ponds as they had always done. Finally Joe Fall said, "You are going to owe Clark an apology."

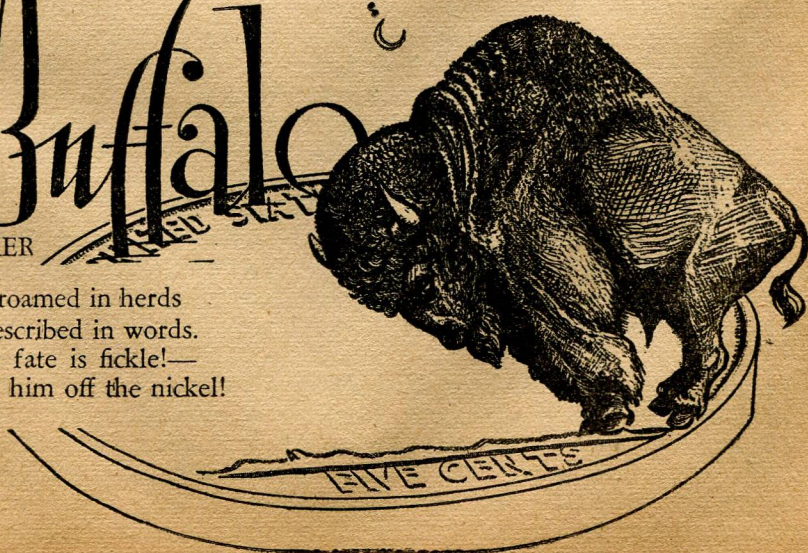
"Yes," the girl said.

"It shouldn't be difficult," Fall said. "He seemed like a pretty decent chap. And he thinks you aren't bad looking." She looked up at him then and Joe Fall spat out the side of the car and said, "There's an old saying that if you can't lick 'em, join 'em. But I'm a hell of a man to be giving advice."

The Buffalo

By S. OMAR BARKER

THE buffalo once roamed in herds
Too vast to be described in words.
But now—alas, how fate is fickle!—
We've even bumped him off the nickel!





Conclusion

GUEST OF ALLAH

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

XX

THE prisoners were taken to a dobe walled jail with a stout wooden door. It had no ventilation except what sneaked in through the spaces at the eaves; there was no glaze to bother the eyes.

Neilsen paid the jailer to bring food

from the bazaar. Garrett, who sat in the reeking gloom of one corner, had lost his appetite. "I've not lived right," he grumbled, when he got used to the dimness, and could see the litter and filth of the floor. "Or should I have put on a mask so that tax collectors couldn't see who cold conked them? Axel, when do we say *good-morning, jedge?*"

"The *amban* is out of town, they told me," Neilsen answered. "His father's birthday. In Khotan."

"When'll he be back?"

"They expect him in two-three days, maybe four."

"How about the bribery and corruption department?"

"How much have you?"

Garrett answered, "Hell's fire, I got rid of all my Chinese currency dealing with Mahmud yesterday, save exchanging the stuff. How about that silver?"

"It's all with Tanya, except this bit for eating."

Garrett groaned. "It'd take a sockful, squaring a mess like this. See what *he's* got."

Neilsen turned to Jamal. The hoodoo swore that he had hardly enough to keep him from starving between now and their hearing. After searching him, they found that he'd been telling the truth. Garrett cursed bitterly and said, "A good jackknife'd break us out, but teeth and fingers haven't got a look-in, not even at the roof. What'll we get?"

Neilsen shrugged. "A flogging we might possibly outlive."

Garrett was going to suggest prayer and fasting, but he had lost his taste for whimsy, so he settled down to meditation. Jamal stretched out and went to sleep. Neilsen began to creep the width of the room, his nose close to the litter, and his fingers combing and sifting it.

"Lose something?" Garrett asked, ironically.

"Might find something."

"Such as?"

"Couldn't tell till I saw it. A buckle, a nail, even a bone chopstick."

Since the Swede didn't think it was time for prayer, Garrett set to work. Jamal woke up, and regarded them. Finally he asked a question. When Neilsen answered, Jamal looked amused and superior.

"What'd you tell the hoodoo?"

"That we're hunting treasure. I don't think he believed me."

Presently Garrett found some rawhide thongs, and pieces of wood which were probably what remained of a pack saddle. There was also a cylindrical bottle perhaps an inch and a half in diameter. Its neck was

little smaller than the shoulder. "*Major Grey's Chutney*," he read from the scarred label. "Eat well in this hoosegow."

As he continued his methodical search in straw and rags, his mind was on the bottle which had come over the mountains from India. Perhaps some touring British Consul General, or a *sabib* of lower degree, had eaten the spicy relish, after which the bottle, refilled with local food, had been sent to a prisoner. Perhaps a servant of the visiting Britisher had stolen the *sabib's* chutney to give to a friend in jail. It was an old bottle, pre-war by some years, for there was heavy lead foil on the neck. Later, Garrett came on the stopper, not of cork, but of wood, testifying that this had indeed contained the original "*Major Grey*," too spicy for export.

Garrett pondered on more than British tastes. He was thinking of one of the men who had helped him out of the mountains on his way to discover Kashgar. This man was a specialist of a kind not known in the Occident. He was a craftsman who made a career of boring loopholes through earthen walls, so that musketeers could cover whatever field of fire their commander deemed necessary. This was especially useful when defending a *serai*, dwelling, or other structure not originally designed as a fort.

"And Allah blacken me," the old man had said, proudly, "if, in all the ninety years—yea, I am ninety-seven, I started too old really to learn the craft as it should be learned—if ever there was a wall through which, Allah willing, I could not drill more quickly than a hot iron goes through a snowbank. If God please, I could drill loopholes through Mount Kaf, which surrounds the world!"

"Garrett now wished he had the old codger locked up with him. This would be a good test for his skill.

FINALLY the jailer brought pilau and dumplings from the bazaar. Neilson, counting the change, remarked that inflation had come to the most remote corner of Sinkiang. The pock-marked jailer gave him a contemptuous answer. Jamal grinned. He was pleased, and he dipped into the rice and the dumplings without being invited.

Garrett's blood pressure went up many points. Later, he said to Neilson, "That

dirty buzzard's rubbing it in. I begin to believe that what I heard about the Dulani people around Merket must be true."

"What did you hear?"

"That they're so cussed and spiteful they'll kill themselves 'against' an enemy, to get him in bad with the Chinese magistrate. The chap who's had someone killed 'against' him gets the works, the Chinaman figuring he must've been a prime heel to drive someone to suicide."

Neilsen nodded. "You're about right. What made you think of it?"

"He's enjoying this jug because it'll hurt us worse than it will him."

Neilsen didn't answer. Garrett went back to meditating on the chutney bottle. The jailer had left an earthenware bowl of water. Garrett poured a bit of this into the *pilan* dish, and laid the pieces of rawhide into it to soak.

Jamal, well fed, stretched out to sleep.

Garrett knocked the bottom from the bottle. Next he got a piece of pack saddle and with the softened rawhide, fixed the wood to the neck into which he had thrust it. This crude drill, which would penetrate a dobe wall, he hid under the straw, until the rawhide would dry.

"I didn't think of that," Neilsen said. "With enough holes, we can push a piece out of the wall."

Garrett's glance shifted to Jamal. "Tie and gag him."

The Swede nodded. There was nothing more to say. They were both too busy hoping that the *amban* would not return ahead of schedule. This lengthened the day beyond endurance. Despite the thickness of walls and roof, the temperature rose, and so did the odors. The only visible evidence of time's passage was the shift of the thin blades of light reaching in at the eaves. Garrett's watch, after ticking through a sandstorm, had finally stopped.

The sleeping enemy infuriated Garrett. Neilsen finally said, "He's a philosopher. We're showing occidental weakness."

Garrett tried the rawhide binding. It held the handle firmly in the bottle neck.

Jamal let out a frightful yell. Catlike, he came to his feet.

"Water!" he screamed. "O True Believers, water! In the name of Allah, water!"

He blinked, grinned, looked foolish and

then regarded his startled companions with a sneer. He told Neilsen that he'd been dreaming of the terrors of the Takla Makan, which was easy to believe. Garrett's sleep was similarly haunted with desert memories.

The heavy lock clashed and clicked. The jailer, followed by a soldier, opened the door. "O Man, what is it now?"

"He wants water," Neilsen answered.

But Jamal, speaking for himself, pointed at the spot where Garrett had hidden the drill. This was confiscated. When the jailer left, Jamal said, maliciously, "O thou pig and son of many pigs, thou infidel son of a lewd mother, we wait for the *amban*, and may he hate thee! May God curse the grandfather of him who does not curse thy grandfather!"

Garrett took this sitting down, and in silence, even after Neilsen had translated the fine shadings, the full significance of cursing someone's grandfather.

"Dulanis are *spiteful*," Neilsen concluded, mildly.

Jamal felt important. He dared them to lay a hand on him, now that he had won the jailer's friendship.

From the nearby minaret, the *mezzin* called, "*Allahu akbar . . . allahu akbar . . .* God is great . . . come to prayer. . . ."

Jamal dipped his dirty paws into the drinking bowl, and made pretense of ceremonial ablution. Then he prayed, droning it loudly. The man on watch outside chimed in, at the end, with a long drawn "Amin!"

Then Neilsen went into a corner and knelt. Garrett could barely hear the murmur of prayer. Jamal made derisive sounds, and spat. The Swede, head still bowed, continued his petition.

It was almost dark. A thin red streak of light made a spot on the eastern wall. Then gloom, stirred by the unbroken mutter. Garrett's spine began to tingle. His throat tightened. He knew something would soon happen. Something had to happen. He remembered how Neilsen had prayed behind the tamarisk scrub, and he wondered whether in this extremity Neilsen would again oppose him when he turned to kill Jamal. For there was good use for a corpse—a way of escape which Garrett had abandoned, once he found the bottle.

Neilsen's voice became louder. The words

became more distinct. Swedish, all right. At least, not English. There was a cadence.

"He's read my thought," Garrett told himself, "and he's honing up his nerve to buck me. But he can't—won't let him!"

The voice in the darkness became hypnotic, and louder. Jamal had tired of jeering. It was too dark to jeer. Garrett's opposition wavered. He was too tired to continue his fight against Neilsen's will. He was a little frightened at the idea that the missionary's son had read his mind.

The voice seemed to come from a different quarter, though there had been no sound of motion. Illusion, Garrett guessed. He began to become drowsy. Go to sleep, like Jamal . . . maybe everything'll come out all right. . . .

There was a furtive stirring, the tiny sounds of straw and rags, a sighing; and then, something almost like a cough. These were small sounds, yet distinct from the unwavering beat of the prayer. This ended abruptly. To Garrett the silence was shocking.

Neilsen whispered, "Give me a hand." And when they were shoulder to shoulder, "Not a mark on him."

In the gloom, Garrett touched the jacket which wadded about Jamal's face, had smothered him gently, surely as a pillow ever smothered an infant.

"I was going to do that," Garrett said. "How—did you—"

"Dulanis kill themselves 'against' an enemy. You told me, yourself. Now there's nothing but our flogging for beating the tax collectors."

"I was figuring we'd use him to get out."

"How?"

"Fill two boots with dirt crumbled from the walls. Tie strips of cloth to them," Garrett explained. "Hand him from the rafter so he'll face the door. Then yell our heads off. When the guard comes, he'll go goggled-eyed for a second. We'll konk him and run for it."

They set to work in the dark, tearing strips from Jamal's pants and shirt. They were ready to hang him when the lock warned them.

"To hell with the dummy, try it without!"

Neilsen caught his arm. "Wait!"

A man spoke. Neilsen answered. The

hinge squealed a little. Neilsen nudged Garrett, who was by now nearly as dazed as the dead treasure hunter. They stepped into the courtyard. A splash of light leaked past the muffling of a lantern. It played on the wall and reflected on the jailer's face, and on the face of the woman beside him.

It was Tanya. She pointed, and spoke a word of assent.

He accepted the money which Tanya handed him, and at once locked the door.

She said to Garrett, "The horses are in the *serai*, the old fellow's still watching them. It's a wonder Jamal didn't wake up."

Neither answered. She went on, "Two Kirghiz riders bound for Polu told me you'd got into trouble, so I came to town and used some of Dad's gold roubles. The tax collectors are awfully happy about it all, they'd like to be beaten up every day. I think I overpaid them, and won't it be a joke if they try to collect from Jamal, too?"

Neither answered. But Tanya was not discouraged. She knew how a freshly liberated prisoner feels. Her late father had told her, many a time. So she did not speak again until they had the town well behind them. Then she said, brightly, "Oh, I forgot, I've been so worried about you and Axel. Captain Ling rode into town with a troop of cavalry, but he couldn't've been looking for us."

All Garrett could say was, "If Jamal had only know *that*!"

The praying Swede still said nothing. He dropped the reins at times, to look at his strong hands, which had left no marks. Garrett didn't know whether to envy the man, or be sorry for him.

XXI

BY DAWN it was clear that Captain Ling had learned enough in Keriya to convince him that he could, by hard riding, make General Shin Chu Jen very happy. Looking back Garrett said, "He doesn't need speed to ambush Dmitri. He needs anything but speed for that."

Far below the fugitives, a cavalry column poured over a summit. There was just that glimpse, and then the trio, riding into a dip, lost sight of the pursuit. Later, an ox-bow loop in the trail put Ling's troops within rifle shot of the three who had upset Kash-

gar. Happily, the next curve was so near at hand that the cavalry had no time to dismount and fire across the gorge.

"Jim," Tanya said, "you told me that a small party can outride a larger one, and they've been gaining."

"Write Washington that the Field Service Regulations are all wrong, honey baby."

"But you did say that, and we—"

"We proved it crossing the Takla Makan. This is different. Ling is riding over the not-bad start of the trail, we are riding over the bad-and-getting-worse part. We're traveling with pack animals we can't get along without, he's riding hell bent, letting his pack animals follow as best they can."

THE next time that a looping of the trail brought pursuer and pursued within view of each other, the final half-dozen troopers dismounted, to blaze away while the others pressed on.

Looking across the draw was what warned Garrett. "Get going," he yelled, "they'll shoot, and there's no cover, keep 'em going!"

The sudden spurt helped cancel the "lead" which the soldiers took on their game, but they were erratic marksmen. A slug smashed to bits against the rocks a few yards ahead of Neilsen, while flakes of metal stung Garrett, who brought up the rear. "Boot 'em along, boot 'em along!" he shouted.

While the range was much too great for accuracy with carbines, volume of fire could do the trick. A pack horse crumpled, went over the side, to drop to the rocks, a thousand feet below. The succeeding volley splattered the cliff above and below the trail. Then foreshortening narrowed the target: and because of the increased range, the soldiers could not use the momentary chance to enfilade the little column and finish it with a volley. The attempt, nevertheless, made the rocky abutment just ahead a welcome shelter.

However, what Garrett saw before him was anything but encouraging; barren *massifs*, and towering snowcaps, looming over a saddle toward which the trail rose, narrow, ragged, and strewn with debris of avalanches.

A pony slipped. It screamed in terror. The edge gave away, and fell with the ani-

mal. Seconds later, the sound of impact came from the bottom.

"No use racing," Neilsen said, pulling up.

Garrett agreed. He pointed uptrail. "Boulders, and a lot of scree on the way. Here's where we can hold them. Maybe."

"Give me Dad's pistol," Tanya demanded, as the other two broke out Enfields.

"You get going and keep going."

"Idiot! With all this shooting, how can he surprise Dmitri?"

"All right! Find Dmitri and tell him we need a lift."

"I thought you and Axel said you could hold those blockheads till—till—" She smiled dazzlingly. "Now I remember, *till hell froze in.*"

"Pu-lease! Get going or I'll spank you till your nose bleeds!"

"That'll take both hands, and how'll you shoot? Give me that pistol, we'll all shoot, and they'll run."

The simultaneous impact of a dozen bullets broke up the argument. The horses bolted. None fell. Neilsen, looking across the gorge, spotted the party which had taken a trail fork which commanded the caravan way to Polu. "Can't stay here, soldier!" Garrett said, as they hustled after the horses.

The main body, meanwhile, was coming nearer; the sounds were plain. Ahead of Garrett, the cover was none too good. The ledge was wider. Once momentarily behind shelter, he said to Tanya, "Get to India, radio everything, the whole story, give the consul at Urumchi the works."

"Won't do you any good here."

"I'll surrender. I'm too valuable to bump off, I'm the brains of the Kashgar oil business, and Garrett never loses. Get a move on or I'll—I'll—"

"You'll kiss the daylights out of me, first, Jim," she said, and caught him with both arms. "I'll do everything right."

WHEN she was hidden by the next rocky buttress, Garrett asked Neilsen, "What do you think of our chances here?"

He looked up, and he looked over the side. Though steep, neither slope was sheer, for the draw was ever more shallow as it tapered up to a saddle. There were scrawny junipers, here and there, rooted in the earth which carpeted the rocky shelves.

"Those that fired on us from the other side might be able to work along to the saddle, and come down and take us from the rear."

"Some on this side could climb up from the trail and crawl along the ridge. We had a sweet spot, down there."

They got the horses wedged into an angle so that ricochet bullets would not stampede them. The approach to the position was a stretch of shelf whose overlay of earth had been largely washed away. It was dotted by boulders left by a snowslide. Garrett, listening, decided that there was not enough time to make for the saddle. Standing fast to cover Tanya's retreat promised to be hard enough, if Captain Ling could drive his men to make a determined rush.

"Axel, you damn squarehead, this last ditch stuff makes no sense at all. What are we fighting for, anyway?"

Neilsen cocked his head to note the hoofbeats downtrail. "To give Tanya a chance, somewhat."

"They don't know but what she fell over the side with one of the animals. They don't even know she's with us. The tax collectors, talked, or the people in the *serai* talked about you and me and Jamal, she was never in town. It's me they want. You get out of here."

"Well, you are waiting for them."

"But you can't help me, I don't need help."

"I am staying anyway."

THE Swede went dumb and stolid. Garrett explained, "Suppose you get knocked off or captured. It will be tough on your old man back in Kashgar. And listen, Axel. I am going to surrender, I am not chump enough for hero stuff, not for any tea kettle refinery. Or the psychiatrists will be dead right about me."

Neilsen was busy looking downtrail, and listening. He had covered his fingers with potblack and grease, and was smudging his eyelids. He said, "You better put a dab on your front sight. There is still bad glare."

Garrett, though he took the hint, didn't do as dainty a job of it as Neilsen. "I'm shaking too much for good shooting, Axel, I'm pooped out and I'm calling it a day. I'm too valuable for them to bump off, and when they know, Tanya got through, Shin

Chu Jen will throw a banquet for me and claim no one did anything to anyone."

"That goes for me, too," the crafty Swede answered, after pondering on the argument. "Anyway—"

"They're pretty close. Aren't you going to pray?"

"Don't need guidance. I know what I am doing."

The sound of hooves was silenced as at a command. There was a sing-song jabber. The enemy, still not visible, had apparently sighted the pony which had gone over the side.

"What's he saying?"

"I can't get any of it," Neilsen answered.

Several slugs peppered the rocks behind him. They came from the left. Garrett said, "Someone across the draw signalled Ling and now he's marking us. Clever chap, that Captain Ling."

Neilsen shifted, supported his rifle, and carefully squeezed a shot. Seconds later, they heard the far off whine of the ricochet. "Someone moved then," Garrett told him. "You must've come close."

A stick reached beyond the buttress, downtrail. On it was a white flag. Neilsen sang out in Chinese, and said to Garrett, "Don't shoot."

A troop of dismounted cavalry could advance in rushes, heave grenades, and without too many casualties clear the two-man road block. But Captain Ling believed in conserving men.

Adjusting his glasses as he came from cover, the little captain, unarmed except for his pistol, stepped up beside the soldier, who was without visible weapons.

Captain Ling halted with his man. He took a document from his pocket. "Please give attention to rescript issued by His Excellency, General Shin Chu Jen, Prefect of Kashgar."

"Hold my gun, Axel," Garrett said, and then, coming from cover, "Make it loud and funny, Captain. Mind if I sit down?"

"If you so desire."

Ling, out of respect to Shin Chu Jen, remained standing.

"By the way, Captain, there's a gun behind me, pointed your way. Don't go for your pistol while you're reading."

The officer smiled amiably. "Clearly understood. No, please, attention to rescript."

He cleared his throat. Garrett was thinking, "Shin Chu Jen's the guy with delusions of grandeur, *issuing rescripts!*" when the truce was broken, though neither by Neilsen, nor by the Chinese.

Without warning, the draw echoed from a volley. Bullets whistled and screeched and popped. These noises however were little more than orchestration for the shouting which shocked cliff and mountainside. Vultures, Garrett noted, as he flung himself down to roll from cover, were wheeling in great circles. Something had within the past few minutes brought them from their watchtowers.

Neilsen had not yet fired. He still respected the truce, though the soldier had dropped his white rag, and Captain Ling, rescript in one hand, clawed for his absurd little pistol as he ran back to his men.

"Keep you head down, but gimme that gun!" Garrett shouted.

The fighting behind the buttress came surging out into the wide stretch to envelop Captain Ling, whose orderly had dropped.

Horses were stampeding. They screamed. They darted over the edge. Tall men, bearded men, were bounding down the steep slope. Big men wearing turbans, burly men wearing karakul caps, came scrambling up like pirates boarding a ship. Some were shooting from the hip, others were slashing with scimitar and yataghan. Garrett flattened, and lowered his rifle.

Afghans and Kirghiz, Sikhs and Gurkhas, were now hopelessly entangled with the troops they had caught flat-footed from awaiting the result of a parley. Where Garrett had seen only rocks and junipers dotting a steep slope, there were now men pouring down to head off the soldiers who had come toward Captain Ling.

It was now plain to Garrett: mountaineers, lying in ambush, had been expecting the Chinese cavalry; but, seeing the fugitives, they had waited, perhaps changed sufficient details to let them take full advantage of the polite little captain who tried so valiantly to use a cavalry sledge-hammer to drive a tack.

When it was over, Garrett had not fired a shot, because enemy and unknown ally had been so fatally entangled. He had scarcely come to the thought that he and Neilsen would do well to find a hiding

place from gun-hungry renegades when he heard hooves behind him and yelled a warning.

Neilsen exclaimed, "It's Tanya coming back!"

Garrett, turning, saw Tanya sliding from her pony. As she came toward him, and he toward her, she said, "It's Dmitri's men, I saw them from up there, I knew everything'd be all right. He must've got word from Kashgar in time."

"Just for guessing, Salim?"

"There he is now, with the red-bearded fellow, that's Dmitri!"

Neilsen caught her arm. "They're still busy, finishing off the wounded. Better wait."

"Oh." Then, "Was Captain Ling—"

"I saw him go down," Garrett said. "And then over the side. It was like a football game played with swords, pistols and rifles. He was a nice little guy, too."

And, seeing that it was all over, they went to meet Dmitri Karimov.

XXII

WHEN Garrett saw Dmitri's camp, he realized that he and Tanya had been worried without good cause. The party encamped in the upland meadow had contributed only a little of its strength to bush-whack Captain Ling's cavalry. Looking over the dome shaped *yurts*, and the shelters of brush and stones, Garrett concluded that Tanya's brother, instead of being merely a gun runner, had been recruiting hard-cases from all along the Northwest Frontier of India. A vest pocket army was assembled.

Garrett and Neilsen squatted in an angle of the wall, to wait while Tanya and Dmitri spoke of their father. Meanwhile, the ambushing detachment straggled down the difficult trail, leading captured horses which had been loaded with turbines and cartridges taken from the exterminated soldiers. There were stolid fellows from the Punjab, and lanky Pathans from the Peshawar district. When Garrett saw several hatchet-faced Baluchis with long curls trailing down their cheeks, he said, "God help Kashgar! If those devils aren't murder-minded and plunder-bent, then nobody ever was."

Neilsen agreed. "Unless the Turki prince has a rugged bodyguard of his own people,

someone in this crowd will finish him as soon as Shin Chu Jen's army is disposed of."

"That won't be too good for the refinery business." Garrett frowned at the rock dotted turf. "You know, the day before I went to Shin Chu Jen's banquet, Basil told me—no, it was before I tried to sneak to Urumchi to see the governor that he told me it'd be better to give the old buzzard all the *kumshaw* he wanted, and wait for the Central Government to finish him. No matter how much hell the Chinese Communists are raising, "Shin Chu Jen'd finally be paid off."

"Whatever you did or didn't do, there'd still be this march on Kashgar." Neilsen pointed to heaped up cases of cartridges, and chests of arms. "See, that one? The stencilling hasn't been planed off clean."

Garrett nodded. "Mmmm . . . I've been wondering, ever since we got those new British rifles from old Hashim. But that doesn't prove the Empire is backing the show. India's been in such a hoo-raw, this stuff could be stolen goods. With rioting and all sorts of upsets, there's bound to be a let-down on border inspections, so these roughnecks could come across easy enough."

"If the British are silent partners, they'll keep this band of ruffians in hand, so the new Turki prince of Kashgar will stay on his throne. This may turn out all right."

"What'd they care how it goes, and why'd they back this?"

"Whether India's a dominion, or absolutely free, or British controlled," Neilsen explained, "she's Britain's biggest market. Trading with India's far more valuable than merely owning India. But a free India is one thing, and a Communist India is something entirely different. Suppose the Hindus and the Moslems get at each other's throats and there is a civil war?"

"That would be something!"

Neilsen went on, "When people are desperate and hungry and hopeless, Communism becomes attractive. The Afghans are quaking in their boots, they are working day and night to modernize their country before the British entirely relax their grip on India."

"You mean, with India going Red, Afghanistan would be squeezed from north and south?"

Neilsen nodded. "But if Afghanistan is

modernized for defense, and if Kashgar is strongly held by a British controlled Turki prince, there'd not be such a good chance for Communist penetration."

"Where the devil do you get all the answers?"

"My father had spent twenty years in Kashgar. His predecessor lived there thirty years, and made two converts. But that's not quite the point, Jim. We Europeans may become muddled, but we do try to think beyond our own small countries. You Americans have so much of your own country on all sides of you that you can't realize that the rest of the earth, all totalled up, is worth thinking of."

"Huh! You sound like a Britisher talking to a colonial!"

"Am I wrong?"

GARRETT grimaced wryly. "You're right, Axel. They warned us and warned us about the Skibbies, but right up to Pearl Harbor, we figured the Jap was a funny little cuss who went out for flower arrangements, wore buck teeth and thick lensed glasses. Believe it or not, a big time political commentator had an article in a magazine, on the stands that December, proving that the tin-can Jap navy was praying the U. S. wouldn't get tough."

Neilsen couldn't believe that, but Garrett said, "I read it myself, and next month, the editor printed a big blurb saying that his face was *not* red, and neither was the commentator's, the little yellow belly was a false alarm with nothing but a sneak punch! Oh, to hell with that, but I guess you're right about us. Anyway, it leaves me not knowing where I stand. Look here, the British Consul General hasn't left Kashgar, he golfs around and shoots snipe and goes out to take mountain photos, that might mean—"

"It means nothing," Neilsen cut in. "He did the same thing when Ma Chung Ying's Tungans took the city, a dozen years ago. He didn't even stop drinking tea when a Kashgar mob captured a prefect who was much worse than Shin Chu Jen. Shot him full of holes, tied the corpse to a stake in the *maidan*, and chopped off both hands. He didn't even compose a slogan."

"That's a dirty dig, Axel! I know already that the Britisher isn't hysterical. Here come

Tanya and Dmitri. He's taking his dad's death without batting an eyelash."

"That is a sign that it will be all the worse for Shin Chu Jen when the day arrives. And Frank Erdman should leave in a hurry."

Like his father, Dmitri Karimov had a round head and short, strong neck; he was deep-chested and broad. But while there was a family resemblance, green eyes and his cheekbones showed that in at least many cases, there was truth in the old saying, "*Scratch a Russian, and find a Tatar.*" Though his nose was big and high-bridged, there was a certain Mongol flatness of face.

As he accepted Dmitri's hand, Garrett said, "After the mess you pulled me out of, I hate to come with bad news. I didn't know your father very long, but—well—"

"I know what you mean." Dmitri Karimov's glance shifted for a moment, then flicked back into line. "Until right now, I never did know him very well. Your father is living?"

"Yes."

"Then you wouldn't know quite what I mean."

"Maybe half way. He and I didn't ever get acquainted till I went home on furlough. Funny, isn't it, maybe it's always that way. Anyway, I'm sorry—"

"Thanks." He glanced at the sun. "Time to eat."

Garrett cocked an ear, then exclaimed, "Sounds like there's enough mutton." He turned to face the trail. "That's efficiency, but I'm damned if I ever heard of sheep carrying packs."

Garrett began to understand why so many of the cases of cartridges were smaller than standard. Dmitri said, "Each one carries thirty-five pounds. They stand the elevation even better than yaks."

"How about the horses?"

Dmitri smiled broadly. "Oh, they went over the regular caravan route. The woolies went over uncharted trails."

"All those guns and stuff went on sheep's back?"

"Not all, no. But everything going over the caravan trail costs a lot of *kumshaw* for the frontier guards and customs officials."

"Why not pay General Shin Chu Jen enough and he'd surrender without firing a shot?"

Dmitri made the cliff rimmed meadow echo with laughter so like his father's that Garrett caught his breath. "We would," he finally gasped, between subsiding outbursts, "but bullets are cheaper. And you can't stir up Turki patriotism or wipe out Turki grudges with cash. Would you rather have cash than Frank Erdman's hide?"

The long shadows of the peaks were already bringing twilight to camp. Fires began to crackle; pots bubbled, and the scent of wood smoke and spices blended with the reek of sheep and the pungent scent of horses. Before the mutton stew and rice left the fires, Tanya was already wrapped up in a shaggy sheepskin jacket, and Garrett was drawing his coat tighter.

"Oh, you're shivering! Softy, what'll you do when you cross the pass, it's a mile or so higher than this place?"

"Borrow Dmitri's coat, it's big enough for the two of us to huddle up in, we'll keep each other warm."

DMITRI guffawed and said, "So that's how cozy you two are?" And his face tightened. He demanded tensely, "Hey, what's that? *What pass?*"

"Jim and I are going on to India."

"You'd be wasting time, going over the mountains to radio the American Consul about Shin Chu Jen's tricks."

Garrett nailed her with a bitter look. She flared up, "I didn't tell him! Did I, Dmitri?"

"She didn't, so don't look at her that way. Wouldn't I keep in touch with Kashgar?"

"She certainly thought you didn't!" Garrett got up. "Why the hell do you suppose we just about killed ourselves crossing the Takla Makan to warn you? I guess you knew way ahead of time that troops would be laying for you?"

Dmitri's face squared off. "No, I did not. My lookouts saw them from a long way off. I admit they might not have noticed them. But there was plenty of time for me to hear about your refinery and the troubles you were having. Now you've no reason for going to India. Before you could go over the Polu Pass, Kashgar will be Turki territory again. The American consul and the Governor of Sinkiang won't have a thing to say—" He grinned and

winked. "Unless they're promoted to be ambassadors to Kashgar!"

"Dmitri, don't be a monomaniac, *please!* I was trying to tell you Jim and I are going on to India to—"

"The devil you are going to India!"

"The devil we are not! We are going—you *shut up!*—to India to get married, and try and stop us!"

Dmitri blinked, and deliberately exaggerated the grimace. "Oh! Oh, I see. Well, now, that is different."

She flung both arms about him. "Now you're my sweet brother again! Going to get me a nice yak to ride over the pass?"

He thrust her well away from him, cocked his head, and said, grimly, "Like I was saying, *that* is different. You can marry Jim in Kashgar. Axel's father will do it Christian style, or there's a grand old Moslem *mullah*—say, we'll have two ceremonies!"

"You got something there!" Garrett applauded.

Dmitri eyed him. "You're all right, Jim, I like you. Because you did right by the old man, and the kid, here, she thinks you're all right. But don't try to sneak out of camp." He gestured. "Even if I told them not to, would these woolly devils cut your throat or wouldn't they? Look 'em over, Jim."

"I've looked enough already. But what's wrong," Garrett demanded earnestly, "what's wrong with our going to India?"

Dmitri jabbed his finger, pistol-wise, against Garrett's chest. He answered in a booming, roaring whisper, "Because you're worried about your oil refinery! You'd send radio messages. The Governor would send troops, lots of them, to settle Shin Chu Jen. Kashgar would be too contented to revolt, and what'd I do with these guns?"

"Guns aren't ever exactly a drug on the market. Not in this country."

"Someone's depending on me, and I'd lose plenty if I had to smuggle them back and to another market. You listen to me, Jim. Do you think you're man enough to tell these fellows there'll be no revolt in Kashgar?" He laughed grimly. "Maybe there wouldn't be, but there'd be one right here in camp. I want none of that."

"You've got me all wrong—" Garrett began.

"Anyone stubborn enough to cross the Takla Makan doesn't get rid of ideas in a minute," Dmitri retorted. "You can't get out of camp. Even if you could, you're not fitted out for crossing the pass. You'd freeze or starve or both, if you weren't robbed first and murdered. You bailed out on the safe side, and you came back with a caravan. You stick with me, you understand? You're not fooling with a hop-head army this time, Jim. Look at these fellows, and be smart."

Garrett looked, and he decided to stay out of India.

XXIII

AT DAWN, the camp was in an uproar. Daoud Khan, the Afghan "chief of men," commanding the adventurers gathered to spearhead the sacking of Kashgar, rode about on his long-legged Ferghana stallion. His red beard streamed in the wind; his cursing and shouting drowned the babble of Punjabi and Pukhtu, Baluchi and Persian, Hindi and Turki and all the other tongues which competed with the snorting of horses and the bleating of sheep. Dmitri, squatting on a flat rock, watched the bobbing of turbans as packs were made and slung.

Garrett asked, "What's the sudden rush? I thought you were waiting for another flock of sheep with cartridges in the fleece?"

"Wiping out that troop of cavalry helped keep the boys in good spirits, sure enough. Fine for their morale. But that monkey face in Kashghar gets an advantage."

"Huh? Losing the best troop, the only troop of cavalry that's worth its fodder, and you tell me it's a break for Shin Chu Jen?"

Dmitri scratched his head. "Sometimes I think you are not as bright as that fool sister of mine says you are. Listen, brother. You'll never have a chance with that girl if you're so thick-headed. When those troops don't come back, what's Shin Chu Jen going to think? Maybe that they deserted, or went to India to get married? This Captain Ling you're halfway sorry was wiped out is a good officer, and how will it look in Kashgar when he doesn't report?"

"I didn't think of that."

Dmitri went on, "Shin Chu Jen will settle down to thinking. He can sober up

in a hurry, which you may remember. If it gets to the worst, he'll radio Urumchi to ask the Governor for bombers and some fighters to strafe us, and we haven't any air force."

Garrett nodded. "Better kowtow to his big boss in Urumchi than get busted wide open by a Turki revolt? Well, then it has to be a race."

And race it was. Men and munitions moved along obscure and dangerous trails which, snaking through the mountains, paralleled the level road that skirted the desert. Daoud Khan, the "Chief of Men," drove them by day and drove them by night. Men dozing in the saddle fell with horses which slipped, to drop into black gulfs; men plodding in their sleep stepped off into vacancy. But the nightmare march never lagged.

Daoud Kahn's eyes became red as his beard. Dmitri's eyes went glassy. Looking at Tanya made Garrett call it the march of the zombies. Dmitri heard, and demanded an explanation. Hearing it, he flung his head back, shook it to clear it, and said, "This is only the so-called indolent Asiatic when he has a purpose. Ever hear of Tamerlane?"

"Uh—well, a little, but never back home."

Dmitri snorted. "Trouble with you Americans, you can't see beyond Bunker Hill! Barring Genghis Khan, Tamerlane was the greatest soldier who ever walked or rode. He succeeded in everything he started, and when he was seventy, he planted himself in the saddle for one more campaign."

"But died of pneumonia before the show started."

Dmitri slapped him a crushing wallop on the shoulder. "Right! You're not as ignorant as I thought. Well, then. When he tackled a walled city, he gave it a chance to surrender. If they didn't open the door, he rolled up the siege engines and batted away. After just so long, if the walls didn't fall apart, he hung out a red flag, meaning, when we take the town, it's heads off for all the leading citizens, and a total looting, but the Common Man keeps his hide. And if the engines didn't break the walls down within a certain time after that, out came the black flag."

"That meant immediate surrender, or else?"

"Everything that rode, walked or crawled, it got the sword. The drums sounded round the clock, and the attack went on, day and night, until the dead made a heap high enough for the others to scramble up and over the top of the wall. When he besieged a city, that city fell. He was a Tatar, a Turk, a cousin to these fellows here. See what I mean?"

"Plenty, for a sleep walker going through mountains faster than a troop of cavalry would move on the level."

Dmitri laughed. "If there were any cavalry to be moving! *You, there, look where you're going!*"

Garrett quit worrying about toppling from the saddle, or being too groggy to throw himself clear if his mount slipped on the treacherous trail; he was worried rather by the chance that he might talk in his sleep and betray the plan he had shaped to keep Kashgar fit for his tea-kettle refinery.

If there ever had been undercover British support for the revolt, which Garrett began to doubt after Dmitri's refusal to let him go over the mountains to India, the enterprise had got out of hand; and in the same sense that while Dmitri was driving, he was also driven by what he drove. If Kashgar fell, this horde of cutthroats, and not any Turki prince, would take over the lovely oasis.

"What do you say, how do you figure it'll turn out, Axel?" he asked the lanky Swede, who looked as if ready to fold up, yet always had something in reserve.

"I think we crossed the Takla Makan to save a tiger from a goat. It will be worse than what Shin Chu Jen has been doing, unless the Turki prince gets his allies by the throat before they think it's time to cut his throat."

"Let's not talk in our sleep, Axel," Garrett mumbled, and wondered if he'd live to get out of the mountains. "Maybe later I'll tell you the answer I've got doped out."

But Axel Neilsen was now sound asleep, neither talking nor hearing.

When the raiders and caravan men finally came out of the mountains, some miles west of Kashgar oasis, they bivouacked in the foothills. Then, though far from

rested, they skirted the Mountains of the Gods, to march by night into the Artush Hills, almost due north of the city. As far as Garrett could learn, there were no encounters with hunters or herdsmen or traders who would carry warning or rumor into the city. He said to Neilsen, "Anyway, I hope they didn't meet anyone, or it'd been a quick finish for the unlucky chaps."

"It was, in one case," Neilsen answered. "A couple hours ago, while I was with the head of the column."

"I didn't hear any shots."

"Naturally not, none was fired. They want guns, they've heard of A-bombs, but for these people, the final decision comes from the sword, which hasn't been turned into a figure of speech."

"You going to try to warn your father?"

Neilsen shook his head. "He'd simply smile and look to his instruments and black bag. Almost impossible for a doctor to make enemies or get into trouble. During the Ma Chung Ying disturbances, we had Chinese and Turki and Tungan, all hating each other, but lying shoulder to shoulder. The house was a little hospital. No wrangles. They promised each other a throat-cutting when the doctor had patched them up, and then they smiled. Played games, those who could, and enjoyed the truce."

After a pause, Neilsen went on, "Don't tell me what you're going to do. Unless there is some way I could help you."

"How do you know I'm planning anything?"

Neilsen merely smiled. "You've begun to grasp the difference between revolt for freedom, and a general sacking by adventurers. But you're not risking your neck again for a tea-kettle refinery. It is something else."

"A matter of principle, maybe."

"No, Jim. Kashgar has got under your skin. You don't want to see her butchered. But don't worry. This Kashgar has outlived so many of such things. Stay here with Tanya. When the smoke clears away, take her to the States."

"Yes, on her sockful of her dad's roubles."

The Swede started to say one thing, and ended by saying something entirely different. "Shin Chu Jen may take your head before

you can explain why you've come back. You may not be so valuable in this latest reckoning."

He left Garrett sitting there to think out again what he had been pondering, all the way from Polu.

WHEN Garrett finally moved, he wondered why he had spent so much time doubting what to do, and whether he could do it. He walked out of camp and kept walking till he hired a horse. It was as simple as all that; because no one could imagine him silly enough to go alone into Kashgar, where his head was a valuable commodity.

Let Dmitri peddle his munitions; he'd certainly not release them before he got his cash. The thing to do was to block the revolt, block the inevitable years of anarchy and destruction, and find a way to outlast Shin Chu Jen. Garrett's first move, after he passed the sentries dozing at the city gate, was to get the one thing one had to have when bargaining with any Chinaman—a go-between. For lack of better candidate, Garrett had nominated Frank Erdman, spy, double-dealer, and Shin Chu Jen's own stooge.

The porter at Erdman's house knew only that a ragged, grimy, and haggard person of no consequence wanted to see the boss, so he first said that Erdman was not in. Next, he asked Garrett's business.

Garrett answered in Turki, neither faultless or even fluent, but it smoked. He'd learned a lot in the mountains.

"Never mind my business, you eater of dung, you son of five fathers! I am going to see him, and now."

The abashed porter knew then and there that only a dignitary could be so high-handed. He admitted Garrett, and quit his post to announce him.

Indignantly, Erdman got out of his chair, grimaced from pain, for his wounded leg still bothered him, and then sat down. He cursed the porter and Garrett until, recognizing the apparition, he stopped short. He couldn't believe what he saw.

Garrett said, "Get your man out of here. Talk slowly, so I can understand. My coat's so ragged I can shoot through my pocket."

Erdman's eyes became more prominent than ever. After dismissing the porter, he

said, "One of us is crazy. How'd you get this way, and why? Never mind the gun. You didn't use it the last time we tangled. Sit down, I'll give *you* a break, this time." He reached for a decanter. "Drink?"

"I need one, and so will you."

The brandy helped. It came from the same atomic still that had supplied Basil Karimov. Garrett said, "We are both sunk unless we team up. You know what I think of you, and I'm not interested in what you think of me. But you are interested in what happened to Captain Ling. So is Shin Chu Jen. Right?"

"Plenty. And then what?"

"If you two dopes had seen what happened to Ling and every man of his troop, you'd both be high tailing out of Kashgar. He tangled with a lot more than a munitions caravan."

He told Erdman enough about the "army" to convince him; and he went on, "Your job and graft are finished right along with my tea-kettle refinery unless this thing is blocked in time."

Erdman was worried. "Blocked with what? A local Turki revolt is one thing, a swarm of hard-cases is something else. If you're telling the truth, Shin Chu Jen's troops wouldn't last ten minutes."

"If you think I'm crapping you, just keep smiling and waiting. You think I came here for my health?"

"Well, hardly. But how stop it?"

"Get me into the *yamen*. You're Shin Chu Jen's buddy. We'll get at the radio and talk to the governor at Urumchi. Have the old louse yanked quick, and some troops flown in, some regulars to stand in for the scarecrows."

"That'd be a pure double-cross," Erdman protested.

"Oh, hell! Don't act as if you weren't an expert at that! Either way it goes, Shin Chu Jen is through. Play it my way, and you're the white-haired boy who put the governor wise that the Six Point Plan hasn't had any point in this corner of Sinkiang. And with my refinery going, we can bill the government for two gallons every time a gallon is delivered."

Erdman brightened. "It took you a while to learn." He limped toward the side door. "Let's have at it, Jim."

"One thing I forgot," Garrett reminded

him. "Don't try to knife me. You can't play it alone. The Governor and consul will wonder why you didn't get wise sooner, and they'll not believe you. It's up to me to give you the Honest John build up."

XXIV

INSTEAD of taking his own horse holder, Erdman let Garrett act as *sats*, a deception which night and native dress should readily conceal. Half an hour after they rode out of his courtyard, they were approaching the sentry at the gate of the Chinese City. The challenge was no more than a matter of form. The man presented arms on recognizing Erdman.

"Your leg is still bothering you," Garrett said, on the way to the *yamen*. "When I help you dismount, I'll keep on helping you, so build up the limp."

"I'd thought of that, and I won't have to build up very much."

When the two were in the first court, a lieutenant, trim yet somewhat the worse for liquor, came from the front office to see what Erdman wanted. He listened, then said, "His Excellency is—ah—indisposed. He will see you within an hour. Be pleased to wait in the inner office."

"If you please, Lieutenant," Erdman suggested, "I'll go into the *hsien*. I don't feel any too well myself. The air will help."

"The pavilion, and the garden as well," the lieutenant agreed, "are at your service."

Garrett made a good show of Turki solicitude in assisting his limping master, instead of remaining with the horses. The lieutenant went a few steps with them toward the formal garden, then bowed, and withdrew. Had Erdman been more important, the young officer would have been obliged to go all the way, and to remain awhile, making a courteous nuisance of himself.

Erdman let out a sigh of unfeigned relief. "For once it pays dividends to be unimportant."

"We'd better keep on getting dividends, or we're liquidated."

The pavilion was dark. Presently, an orderly came in to set out lamps. He also brought brandy and wafers and fruit.

Garrett noted the tightening of Erdman's face. The man wasn't faking uneasiness. While Garrett was far from at ease, he felt

better after this unconsciously offered assurance that the superintendent of transportation intended to go through with double-crossing Shin Chu Jen.

Erdman dismissed the orderly. He picked up an apricot. It was fragrant, and fully ripe, yet he ate as though trying to swallow sawdust. The grimace and throat-twitch made this plain to Garrett, who squatted on the floor, as though respectfully awaiting orders.

"The converter of that radio will whine to skin hell," Erdman muttered. He grabbed the earthenware jug. "Try some of this. We've got to talk and talk fast and make it stick the first time."

"*Ng ka pay*. Nuh-uh. Rather drink my own gasoline."

But Garrett did gag down two tiny teacups of the stuff. It was at least a hundred proof, and must have had anaesthetic qualities since the second was not as bad as the first; and the aftertaste seemed almost pleasant. Along with the brandy at Erdman's house, Garrett was sufficiently bucked up to realize for the first time how dangerously exhausted he had been, and still was. However, his own crushing fatigue was an ally, because he had come by it the same way that had worn them. Those men of iron who lurked in the Artush Hills were mortally weary, and, with a sure thing waiting to be grabbed, would be relaxing as Garrett dared not relax.

During the necessary wait in the pavilion, to get the sounds of the *yamen*, Garrett's wits first sharpened, and then went blank, to come again to a keen edge. He had not shaken off the moment by moment alternation of dozing and waking of that destructive march from Polu. When Erdman offered him a third drink of rice brandy, Garrett shook his head.

"Either I could drink a jug of it and be all the better, or one more would knock me out. I don't know which. How does it all sound and size up?"

"Never be any safer," said Erdman, and led the way, on Garrett's arm, toward the radio room.

Once inside, the synthetic *sais* got to work with the dials and switches. The converter's note was a thin, high pitched whine, well muffled; but it made Garrett think of the gurgling of a bottle of liquor

he'd shipped one Christmas to a friend in a dry state, back home. No matter how he buried the bottle in sawdust, one could hear the unmistakable seductive *glug-glug*. Yet the memory encouraged him, for the bottle had reached its destination.



Erdman spoke into the microphone. His voice was sharp, metallic, mechanical. "Urgent message from Kashgar. For the Governor General." He spoke some words in Chinese; and as the meaning depended on the "tones," there was no telling how the sense would be changed by the distortion of the radio. "Over!"

Though there was a reply, the headset kept Garrett from understanding. Erdman was sweating, and not from *ng ka pay*. Garrett shivered. Whether this chill came from exhaustion or from tension, he couldn't be sure. He was at the same time ready to fold up, and to blow his top. Erdman thumbed the transmitter button at the other's "Over!" and resumed.

"Shin Chu Jen has declared martial law. Revolt beginning. This is Frank Erdman speaking from the *yamen*. I am a prisoner. So is James Garrett."

"I sent messages by courier. If you did not get them, they were waylaid."

Garrett took over: "Message for Mr. Fogg, American Consul. Shin Chu Jen has

seized Kashgar Petroleum Company's refinery. He has an army coming from India. He is taking over. He is declaring himself king of Kashgar. All communications are blocked except—"

There was a *spat* and a flash. Garrett barely kept from yelling. Erdman's voice cracked as he began to curse and then stopped.

Garrett caught his arm. "Stand fast, you chump! That was just a condenser blowing out. Kashgar is off the air till a repairman gets on the job. From now on, it's up to Urumchi."

They hurried across the garden. At the main gate, Garrett held Erdman's horse and helped him mount up. Had they left a few moments earlier, they would have missed the rider who approached the *yamen*. Garrett was not yet in the saddle when the horse, blowing and snorting, rounded the "spirit wall" which screened the *yamen* gate. The pounding of hooves had brought soldiers on the run with lanterns.

THE animal spattered Garrett's face with foam and sweat. Lanterns flooded him with light. He was blocked by the men who crowded past to assist the exhausted courier. The old tradition still lived; a rider bearing messages took precedence even over a high mandarin.

Swinging into the saddle brought Garrett face to face with the newcomer. Neither should have recognized the other, yet while recognition was not immediate, it came quickly, and before Garrett could avoid it. The ragged and battered man was Captain Ling, wearing bandages, and whatever he had been able to buy in some Thieves' Bazaar.

Garrett drew his pistol and clipped Ling, just as the amiable little captain, trying at once to cry out and draw a weapon, did neither. As Ling crumpled to fall over the horse's withers and slide to the ground, Garrett booted his own mount. There was still so much confusion that the men with lanterns seemed to have missed the quick blow. Belatedly, someone understood what he had seen, and shouted. Others yelled. But there was no rifle fire. To most of those who had crowded about Captain Ling, the event had no meaning.

"You damn fool, why'd you do that?"

Erdman demanded. "They knew me, and took you for my servant."

"They won't know him till they get a good look, or until a soldier who knows him comes up. Right now, he's just a fellow who got in the way, and your servant conked him to win face for you."

"He recognized you, did he?"

"Sure he did. And he's a lucky guy, having been passed up when the Afghans who polished off his troop of cavalry made the rounds for stripping and throat cutting. All he lost was his uniform."

"I didn't recognize you when you came in, not for a second. How could he have, he's not seen you often."

"Ling and I have met oftener than you think, and if you'd been in his boots the time before this one, you'd not forget it either. Now skip it, it's done, and with Ling back alive, there's one hell of a lot more to be doing. Shin Chu Jen won't be wondering any more, he'll know what's been going on."

Once back in Erdman's house, Erdman groaned. "Now you've gone and done it, you conniving louse! Shin Chu Jen is warned, and we've warned the governor. But Shin Chu Jen will keep things in hand and before he's called to account, he'll have gained face. And my name will be mentioned during the accounting."

"So will mine, pal."

"So will yours?" Erdman laughed crazily. "You've got nothing to lose but your skin and you can save that! I'm sunk if Shin Chu Jen keeps himself in the saddle."

Garrett now felt good enough to grin broadly and mean it.

"That's what I call grand. All you've got to do is pray for your buddy's quick finish. When he is finished, look me up, I'll see that you're treated right, I'll see that you're the white-haired boy with the New Order in Kashgar, whoever the new order may be."

Erdman scowled. Garrett slapped him on the shoulder. "Well, damn it, what else could I do for you? Look how you went to bat for trying to get me in right with Shin Chu Jen, and you were going to make me a right guy with the governor and everyone in Urumchi. Well, I got to get moving. See a man about a camel. Good luck, Frank."

WITHOUT waiting for an answer, Garrett left his enemy and rival. Right now, Erdman was shocked, and crammed with more thoughts than he could digest. Having used him as a key to the *yamen*, Garrett had done his best to sell Erdman a bill of goods; but if Erdman had long enough to think it out, he might strike back, and do his best to disavow what had gone over the air to Urumchi. Even though Erdman could not do anything, Garrett nevertheless had to assume that the double-crosser still pulled his own weight in Kashgar.

For the moment, the safest place for Garrett was the streets, or any shelter picked at random.

That blown condenser haunted him.* He could not guess how much of Erdman's closing remarks, or of his own speech had got on the air, since there had been no pause for an answer before Garrett stepped to the mike. When Erdman pulled himself together, he might think of that detail, and try to make use of it.

Though it was late, Kashgar was talking in her sleep. As he went down the narrow street, Garrett caught the wail of a flute, and the notes of a *rebek*. Turki mirth, however, was checked by Shin Chu Jen's spies. There were no lights except occasional thin threads which strayed from closely battened shutters.

He decided to risk seeing Yusuf, who was a friend of Salim, the Guest of Allah. Salim, knowing that Shin Chu Jen and also the Governor had been warned, might be able to keep hostilities from breaking out. If the city made a good show of defense, the raiders in the Artush Hills would not attempt to take the walled city by storm; they lacked the equipment. Surprise, small arms, and steel, these were their only weapons.

No one answered Garrett's knocking at Yusuf's door. There was a secretive stirring behind the heavy panel, but not even a question. The master, he concluded, must be away. Naturally enough, the women and servants would take no chances.

To keep off the street and so avoid the night watch, he stepped into the nearest tea house, one which adjoined a *serai*. Gar-

rett stamped in, saluted the bearded merchants and the camel pullers who muttered over tea and pipes, and called for food.

Behind a dirty blue curtain, someone was smoking opium. One of the guests in the public room snickered and giggled, then coughed as though knives tore his lungs; the hasheesh addict's cough, a blend of pain and laughter and idiocy. Yet the company was profitable enough to Garrett, whose ears had become sufficiently sharpened, during his long trip with Dmitri's men, to catch the point of the gossip.

Salim, had been arrested by Shin Chu Jen.

One of the backgammon players, rearranging the pieces, said that he had his doubts. "*Ya khoda!* Then why isn't his head spiked to the gate, with a hand nailed to each side?"

"Wisdom is with Allah," another said. "But verily, they did arrest him, and who will bring him alive from the *yamen*?"

Garrett finished his tea, and made for the door. Though he felt eyes probing his back, he was not worried for everyone now regarded everyone else with suspicion. Also he was quite too busy wondering what effect Salim's arrest would have on the revolt.

XXV

AS HE retraced his steps to Yusuf's house, determined to get in and without regard to how much disturbance he made, Garrett became increasingly sure that someone was following him. He cut through a network of courtyards linked by alleys, and looped back, hoping finally to come up on the rear of the one who trailed him; by doing so he had greatly disconcerted Toda Bai, the servant-spy sent to his house by Shin Chu Jen. But this time he failed, even after stealing into the mosque, as though to pray and rest for a while.

When he was again at Yusuf's door, the old *yuzbashi* himself answered Garrett's tapping. He said, "Yea, he comes back to collect the price on his own head!"

"You can collect it before I am your guest. Or shall I go on?"

"No, no, come in. Nothing matters now. Everything is with Allah."

When the bolts clunked home, Garrett

*—Transmission might have been bad for some seconds preceding the failure of the insulation.

asked, "Is it true what I heard about Salim, in the tea shops?"

"It is true. Maybe someone sold him to his enemy. Maybe someone thought that this man who acted the beggar and the darvish had helped you get out of Kashgar. Most likely someone who was jealous."

"Because Salim was so close to the King-Who-Will-Be?"

Yusuf groaned. "God curse every Turki and all his grandfathers! When haven't we been sold out by our own people! How else could the Chinaman have kept us under his thumb for all these centuries? We are the forgotten of Allah, and we deserve it! How did you come back, and what hell did you leave to come to this Jehannum?"

"That is a long story, but first out of kindness, tell me why Salim's head isn't hanging from the *yamen* gatepost?"

"If he lives for a while, it is because he knows who will be king, tomorrow's king, in Kashgar. And as long as he lives, that king will not be proclaimed."

More than ever, Garrett had come to a dead end. With Salim a hostage, and the raiders in the Artush Hills compelled to good behavior—but would they be? Those who had come for loot, they would loot, being sons of the sword, and born to plunder even though it killed them. So that Garrett knew less than ever where he did stand, though it seemed all too likely that Shin Chu Jen, having such a captive, would gain face aplenty, sufficient face to hold his own against the Governor in Urumchi.

If the message Garrett and Erdman had put on the air was finally quoted in the accounting between Shin Chu Jen and the governor, Garrett would then have no doubts as to his status. Neither American Consul nor central government could possibly protect him against an "accident." For a moment, Garrett could see only one move—a ride to the nearest pass leading from Kashgar, risking even the dangerous flight through the corridor opening into Afghanistan. But quickly, and with Tanya.

"Why do you come back, and from where?" Yusuf persisted.

Garrett told him. He concluded, "And Captain Ling came back an hour ago to tell how his men had been wiped out."

"There is no God but the One True God! And when the raiders come to town,

who can stop such fellows? They won't leave to save Salim's head."

A knocking at the door broke the circular debate. Yusuf said, "Someone must have followed you."

Garrett drew his pistol. "This time I'll get out, I won't hide with you, and whoever it is, he won't get far with his story." He shook off the *yuzbashi's* hand, and began slowly easing the bolt out of its socket. "Get away," he whispered, "they'll never know what hit them."

"I'll make sure with you," Yusuf said, and went to a wall niche to get an ancient sword. "If we work fast, we can drag them into an alley before anyone comes out to look."

"Open up!" a familiar voice commanded. "I want to see Garrett Akhun."

Garrett bounded back to meet Yusuf. "It's Erdman."

Yusuf got up on a bench and looked through a high loophole in the wall. "Only one man. See what he wants. Tell him I'm gone, but I'll be back soon."

When Yusuf had left the room, Garrett opened the door.

Erdman was not alone. Yusuf had missed the Turki *sais* who had stood well back, with Erdman's horse.

"Come in," Garrett said. "And bring your man."

Erdman hesitated. "To hell with your horse!" Garrett told him. "Come in, both of you, or you're both cold meat."

Erdman spoke to his man, who followed him in.

"What's the idea?" Garrett demanded. "Coming here?"

"I'd like to ask you the same."

"Answer me first. You and I have made our play, this is something new."

"That's what I mean. I teamed up with you, all on the level. You're knifing me, you're playing both ends against the middle. Yusuf's a friend of Salim, and you must be, or you'd not be here. I see now where I am, and I bet you had it figured from the first."

"Well, what's the answer?"

"Whichever way this business goes, I'm sunk for having taken you to the *yamen*. Captain Ling is still blacked out, but they've identified him, and now the heat is on because my so-called *sais* slugged him.

"There'll be hell to pay, you'd better get out, I came to warn you."

"Thanks, you're getting bigger hearted right along. You're afraid if I'm nailed, I'll give the facts about who sent that radio message, so you won't be able to crawfish and claim someone impersonated you. And so—"

But now he knew that Erdman had quit listening. Erdman craned his neck, and seemed to look beyond the room. "What's that?" the man asked. "That noise—get it?"

"Horses! Men. That's—"

Without warning, the mutter swelled to open uproar. Rifles whacked. The shouts were clear. Hooves clattered over the *maidan*. The city, awakened, began to screech and scream. Yusuf came running from the rear. "They've shot down the sentries, they're making for the mayor's palace." He whirled his curved sword as though about to do a mountaineer's dance. "Praise be to God, Lord of Both Worlds! Salim is safe—with this surprise. That father of many pigs won't have time to kill him, and may pigs root up his grave!"

The old man meant that an attack, two-pronged, simultaneously enveloping Old Kashgar and the Chinese City, should be such a shock that the demands of defense and the whip of panic would leave no thought for anything as formal as putting a prisoner to death; there'd be no point, indeed, in wasting a hostage who could later be used to advantage, if there were any negotiations.

As he heard the noise from the street, Garrett could read what happened. It was as clear as though he saw, for the voices made him think of the triumphant howling which had blotted out whatever sounds Captain Ling's men had made as the ambush overwhelmed them in the mountains. All Kashgar was turning out with whatever weapons came to hand. Revolting citizens were joining the raiders.

Garrett had understood this before Yusuf's words had poured out. Erdman, however, had been alarmed by the old man's sudden appearance with a blade that hissed and bickered. Erdman and his servant believed that Garrett had baited them into ambush.

The master drew a gun. The Turki *sais*,

afraid of being hewn down because of Erdman, lunged at Garrett, catching him from the flank before he could go for his own pistol. From not having been startled by Yusuf's warlike popping into view, Garrett was caught flat-footed.

Erdman fired. Yusuf made a half turn, and staggered against the wall. His blade clanged against the floor. His shock paralyzed right side kept him from regaining it. Garrett, grappling with the panicky *sais*, shouted at Erdman, "Don't shoot again, he wasn't going for you!"

From the rear came the scream of women, and the rush of servants. Erdman, who had started for the door, turned about rather than risk having his back to them while he handled the bolt.

Garrett meanwhile had the *sais* by the wrist. He backheeled him, but the fellow clawed for and got a hold as he fell. The two thumped to the floor together. Garrett's pistol, jarred by the fall, cut loose a shot. Erdman, facing the servants, jerked sidewise, shifted his drawn weapon, and yelled wildly.

Garrett doubled the *sais* with his knee. The move carried him clear of the shot which followed Erdman's furious cry. The blast still echoed when Garrett, now free, clawed for his pistol.

Both guns blazed. Both men missed, since fear made one tremble, while fury shook the other. The simultaneous blast was followed by the boom of a muzzle loader. Erdman dropped, clawing at his chest. Garrett's ear drums felt as though the concussion had shattered them.

Then came Yusuf, sword in his left hand, to get into the bloody tangle. "Thou son of pigs and father of many pigs!" he croaked, and twirled the sword to finish Erdman before Erdman could die of his bullet wound.

A woman's voice shrilled from the hall. The compelling sound checked Yusuf. He turned, and with Garrett, saw Tanya coming into the room. She had a flint lock rifle from whose muzzle black powder fumes still poured. She flung the weapon aside and ran toward Garrett. "Did he hurt you, are you hit?"

She clung to him, trembling from head to foot as she raised her chalky face and quavered, "Is he—is he dead—did I—"

"Finish," he told her. "I felt that way, the first time."

Yusuf smiled happily. "Tanya *Khanoum*, I am glad I didn't get at him to cut his last three breaths to one breath. He was yours, for your father's sake, though your brother will be jealous—yea, this was the one life he wanted."

OUTSIDE, the voices had subsided. It was as though the city had emptied itself, to carry its wrath where wrath could do the most damage. But from across the six mile gap between the Chinese City and Old Kashgar came a rumbling and a bawling and a confusion. If they were not actually looting Shin Chu Jen's *yamen*, that fortress within a fortress, they were skipping nothing else that belonged to the Chinese overlords.

Tanya, finally composed, said to Garrett, "When we missed you, I sneaked out to look for you. To put you on guard. I figured you'd come to Yusuf. They were afraid you'd gone to tell Shin Chu Jen that trouble was on the way, so instead of resting as they would have, they hurried right on, to hit before Shin Chu Jen could get ready."

"Heck, I did them a good turn."

"Of course you did, but they'll want your head anyway, they'll figure that if they hadn't found out in time, you'd've upset everything. Dmitri would know better, but those wild men, those fanatics—Jim, we've got to get out of here, no matter where, but out!"

"We? You and me?"

"You don't think you can get rid of me that way, do you? Anyway, they, those savages, they'd have me strangled for helping you get ahead of them."

"I'm tired of leaving towns," he said, wearily, and sat down on the stone bench. "This time, it'll be a long move. There'll be a couple of years of fighting. If I'd stayed put, there'd been no raid at all, because Captain Ling did come back to warn Shin Chu Jen. Only, no one imagined Dmitri would hit an hour or two after Ling rode in."

Tanya's eyes widened. "You mean, you came to warn Shin Chu Jen?"

"What if I did? Can I, could I do business with wild men taking everything to pieces? They'll be working from town to

town, a town at a time, keeping all this corner of Sinkiang messed up. Since your brother's crown is out for my head, I'll tell you—sure I came to warn the Chinese! Any objections?"

"No, darling, I don't care—I wasn't thinking of dad when I fired—I was afraid Frank was going to hurt you—I don't care what you did. Let's get out, while we can. You'll make a fresh start, somewhere, somehow."

"Sure we will. And until we do, we'll be Guests of Allah."

XXVI

WHERE once it had been so difficult to go to Urunchi, now it would be easy, for Shin Chu Jen's power had been broken at one stroke so that there was only panic in the oasis, with no patrols to ask for travel permits. As Garrett and Tanya rode out of the old city with Yusuf, who had furnished them with horses, they saw that there was no need for the old man to give them the protection of his position as a Moslem elder. The looters were all in the New City, sacking it. The plain swarmed with terrified Chinese who fled with whatever possessions they could carry.

Yusuf, having recovered from the shock of his wound, was able both to ride and to flourish his curved sword. The old man was so happy that he seemed drunk as from wine or opium. He babbled, he shouted, he intoned from the Koran, he cursed Shin Chu Jen.

"Salim, now he is free, they've taken the *yamen*, they've turned him loose. Come this way, with me, whatever is your trouble, Salim will fix it. This is his day of days, the slayer is slain and the infidel's mouth, it is stuffed with dust!"

But he nearly threw his horse, to avoid riding over an old Chinaman who had fallen, exhausted by flight.

Garrett said to Tanya, "Salim can't do anything for us, and he may not be alive. Let Yusuf enjoy himself."

They reined in. The old fellow raced on, sword flickering in the sunrise. Smoke rose from the citadel. A new voice reached into the noise of pillage and house breaking. Garrett looked up and caught Tanya by the arm. "Government planes—bombers—the

message did get through—the governor believed it!”

When they were over the target, the eggs were released. The planes circled for a second pass. A tall column of black smoke rose from the Chinese City. Debris mushroomed, a rumbling blast muffled the shouts of looters who scrambled in panic. The concussion wave made Garrett jerk back in the saddle.

Another stick of bombs. Raiders now trampled Chinese refugees in the rush to get out of the citadel. Yusuf reappeared riding back through his own dust. “I betake me to Allah for refuge from Satan!” He didn’t see his companions of a few moments ago. He raced after the screaming Chinese.

Garrett said to Tanya, “None of Dmitri’s men know Salim is a prisoner in the *yamen*.”

“Maybe they stumbled across him.”

“I wish I could believe that. But they were loot crazy, kill crazy, trigger happy. Those bombs’ll start fires, and that rat’s nest will burn like dry grass.”

Tanya’s color changed for the worse. “Jim, you couldn’t find him.”

Shattered tiles, pieces of wood, chunks of brick rained about them as another blast shook the citadel. “Honey, I don’t like it a bit,” he said, “but the old guy got us a shotgun when we needed one. He went to bat with your dad. Damn it, I can’t turn my back on that mess. And there’s a chance. Everyone running hog wild, who’ll even give me a second look? I’m going, and you suit yourself.”

Tanya followed him to the city gate, and into the city. Once inside the walls, Garrett learned what he had not thus far suspected—the bombers had laid their eggs on the *yamen*, to finish General Shin Chu Jen. They had not come to destroy, with Chinese impartiality, their own citizens and the Turki rebels, rather than risk that any of the latter got away alive.

To strike the *yamen* so soon after the surprise attack by the rebels meant that the seven hundred mile flight had started at least three hours before Dmitri’s raiders came into the open. Garrett could not guess, and never could know whether or not his message had caused this move to finish General Shin Chu Jen. It might however have touched off the fuse of something which had

been in preparation against the oppressor for a long time. The truth may have leaked out of Kashgar, a bit at a time, despite the rigid blockade, until the Governor of Sinkiang had to act.

This thought flashed through Garrett’s mind: “Arresting Shin Chu Jen for all the racketeering he’s done would make a big stink. It’d give Chinese government in general a black eye. But if you send bombers to plaster a gang of rebels, and accidentally finish Shin Chu Jen, the government saves face, because it’s easy to build the old devil up as a hero who stuck to his post, through hell and high water.”

Which of these guesses was right made no difference to Garrett; they came to him as he moved on into increasing danger. There might be duds which the spreading flames would touch off. To drive himself ahead, he had to divide himself in halves: the Garrett who acted, and the one who dealt only with thoughts, ideas, commands to the body which served him. And this invisible half could do a lot of things at once; it had always been that way when Garrett was shocked and frightened into sharp wittedness.

“Salim can give us a safe conduct,” he said to Tanya, by way of making his act seem sensible.

“They’re leaving,” she exclaimed, looking up.

The bombers, wheeling like monstrous vultures, headed north.

“That makes it better. You wait here, with the horses, but watch close.”

He ran through black smoke and billowing dust. He scrambled over the wreckage of the “spirit wall,” and of the splintered gate, and of the pagoda roofed towers which flanked the entrance of the *yamen*. Salim, he now was sure, could not have been freed, for the bombing had begun before the raiders had been able to break into the *yamen*.

Wounded soldiers crawled out through breaches in the wall. They moved like zombies. Concussion had peeled the uniforms from some. Flying stucco and splinters had peppered others. Garrett stumbled over a windrow of men who must have fallen in a sortie they made a moment before the first bomb fell. Shin Chu Jen’s guard, not realizing how many raiders had come into the city, had gone out, only to fall back.

Flame reached up, here and there, from among the ruined buildings. Unless Salim suffocated, he would roast. Garrett caught a groggy soldier by the shoulder and hoisted him to his feet. "Where is the jail—the jail—you understand, jail," he repeated, hoping to make the fellow remember a few words of Turki.

Then Tanya joined Garrett. "Of course I'll not stay outside, it's safer here. Let me try."

She spoke to the soldier in Turki, and she used a few words of Chinese. He began to understand. He answered, and pointed. He wanted then to get out. Garrett's pistol set him back on his heels, staggering toward tumbled walls and tangles of roofing beams. Women, screaming and babbling, came out of their quarters. They swept between Garrett and the stunned soldier. They ran crazily across the debris-laden garden. Some carried bundles, others had cosmetics and trinkets, or clutched a spare garment. Most of them were dressed.

"There goes our guide, and where he belongs!" Garrett said. "But it's this way." He crawled down a snaking passageway, and took with him a salvaged rifle. Tanya followed, bringing an officer's sword; poor substitute for an axe, but it might help.

The smoke now choked and blinded the searchers. They crawled in a thickening dusk. Finally they stopped, to huddle together hopelessly. "Be bad enough even if we knew where we're going," he muttered. "Listen to that blaze, it's popping like a grass fire, and once it's roaring, we'll be lucky to get out ourselves."

"It's still in front of us, we're not cut off."

"May be pretty soon. Oh, damn it, let's think. He pointed—" Garrett shut his eyes to recapture the memory of the many turnings. "So it's got to be to the right."

"Listen—I heard something—do you get it?"

She caught his hand. The bite of her nails compelled his attention.

"What?" he croaked.

She sighed, let go his hand. "I lost it."

"What?"

"A man calling. Salim calling."

He coughed, and feared that he might have missed the voice. The shattered building was now filled with sounds. Then he

heard, for the wind shifted, and the voice of the fire changed, so that it became an accompaniment for the great music of a man who chanted the language of Allah, who speaks all tongues and understand them all, yet holds one of them as His own: Arabic, set forth in *That-Which-Is-To-Be-Recited*, the Holy and Exalted Koran.

Garrett could not understand a word, yet he recognized what came to him, for he had once passed by a mosque while a learned imam recited the Prophet's message.

Later, the sense of it was given to Garrett:

"By the noonday brightness, and by the night when it darkeneth, Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee, neither hath he been displeased . . . Verily, the future shall be better for thee than the past . . . and thy Lord will be gracious, and thou, satisfied. . . ."

Chains tinkled, a small, evil sound reaching through the sonorous Arabic of the Sura of the Brightness. Since he could not break the shackles, Salim did not try. Instead, he spoke to Allah, not complaining because instead of setting up a Turki prince to rule the Turki people, he now faced the flames which he had prophesied as Shin Chu Jen's end.

THE broken door made it easy for Garrett to reach the captive. As he set to work with the rifle barrel, prying the eye-bolt, Garrett asked, "Explosion hurt you any?"

"No, praise God! That overhead beam saved me. Were you locked in?"

"No—uh!" The quick yielding of the bolt threw Garrett off balance. "Dmitri's men didn't know you were here. Yusuf thought you were, and then thought they must have turned you loose."

"But who told you?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was remembering that gun you brought me when I needed one, at Karimov's."

The advance of the fire drove captive and rescuers down the cluttered passageway. Twice they seemed trapped by the settling of the ruins. When a dud let go, they believed themselves to be buried beyond hope, but rifle barrel and sword blade pried a narrow clearance. At last they clawed and

crawled their way into the open, to stagger across the wreckage of the Great Gate.

They saw horsemen coming from cover to which the explosion had driven them. Dmitri and red-bearded Daoud Khan rode among them. Yusuf, somewhat more collected, had stopped waving his curved sword, now that his wound began to make itself felt. They rode through dust and smoke toward the *yamen*, and Salim knew that these men had come to find him.

"They would have been too late," he said quietly, and fingered his white beard.

Dmitri dismounted on the gallop. Seeing Tanya and Garrett and Salim, he understood. His face changed, sudden worry leaving it as quickly as it had come. "You idiot, you scatter brain," he said to his sister, and to Garrett, "You're lucky, having *him* here. If they caught you—what could I have done—maybe I could have—"

Salim, smiling a little, took a step forward, and pointed to tall flames of the *yamen*. The raiders, who had now come up around Dmitri, blinked the smoke tears from their eyes; they saw, and they understood Salim's gesture.

Yusuf and Daoud Khan knelt at the old man's feet, and kissed his hands.

A shout came from the side-line. The king-makers had found the body of General Shin Chu Jen, prefect of Kashgar. A scimitar flashed, and a hand lifted the oppressor's head so that the puckered face could fill the eyes of all who had helped finish him.

Salim beckoned to Garrett. "Stay at my right hand today."

For an instant, Garrett saw himself as he faced a board of officers; he saw Major Crane waiting, and he knew that the major was saying, "*Hmmm . . . delusions of grandeur . . . fraternizing with notables . . .*"

Then Garrett, realizing that Salim's invitation was more than a courtesy, made the most of the chance, while the old man still smelled the smoke and saw the flames he had so narrowly escaped. Garrett said, "Forget that I went to find you in there. Let me tell you what you could do for the new king's people. You are the only one who knows where the Turki prince is waiting."

"That is true, Friend of God. None of these know. They knelt because I know. What is your message for him?"

"Tell him to stay where he is, and not to take the throne. For the good of the Turki people, have him stay where he is . . ."

"That is an odd saying. I beg pardon of God, but it sounds crazy. Why do you say this?"

"The Governor of Sinkiang must have known that something is wrong in Kashgar. The bombers came to depose Shin Chu Jen, and went back. But won't the roads be packed with regular troops?"

When the sense of this was passed along to those who waited on Salim, Daoud Khan said, "We'll settle any army they can send from Urumchi."

"Do you think we can't?" Salim asked Garrett. "Bombing or no, we've done well this morning."

"Of course you can," Garrett admitted. "And you'll bring several years of war to the Turki people. Whoever wins, they lose. Just like it was when the Tungans were brought to liberate Kashgar. The people ended by praying for a Chinese army to drive them out, they were a Moslem cure worse than the Chinese disease."

There was frowning and muttered cursing on all sides. Garrett felt wrath concentrated on him. Dmitri alone was quite calm, for he had delivered his munitions. It was nothing to him what the outcome was to be. But Garrett persisted; there would never again be a better moment, bad though this one was becoming.

"To have a Turki king," he declared, "every town from here to Keriya will be looted and burned and gutted. Half the Turki people will be killed or starved in a drive to finish the handful of Chinese who run the show. Remember the fire, Salim? You weren't thinking of the king you were going to set up. You weren't even thinking of yourself. You were more than half way to Allah, and a throne for some other man wasn't important. You talked to Allah because you didn't want to have the blood of all this corner of Sinkiang on your head."

SALIM'S shoulders sagged. His eyes became as coals veiled in ash; there was no wind to brighten them. Garrett struck again: "If you set up a Turki king, you'll have too much blood on your hands and it'll stay there till the day you talk once more to Allah."

"Take me to see your king. Let me talk to him. You tell him what a few planes did, and that thousands of his people will face fires like the one that nearly roasted you."

Garrett pointed at the *yamen*. It was entirely ablaze.

"I owe you that," Salim admitted.

"You owe *me* nothing. You never owed *me* anything. The debt is to your king and to your people."

"You are talking for your refinery."

"Yes. Live men, working for me, instead of dead men fertilizing fields no one will be here to plough. I've seen more war than you have."

"When will you talk to the king?"

"There's my horse. I'm ready right now!"

Salim smiled; he had become a new man. He knew again what he wanted. His eyes were all alive. He beckoned and spoke to Yusuf, to Dmitri and to Daoud Khan as one. "What guns I bought and you gave out, they are now my present to those who carry them. But take them home, each man his share. Go in peace, and may there be a way!"

Yusuf was the first to speak. "Salim, can you give away a throne? Can you speak for the king?"

The Guest of Allah answered, "*Yes, because it is my throne.* I am the brother of Maqsoud Shah who was driven out of Qomul, and killed. To be safe against trickery, I made you all believe that I was only agent for Maqsoud Shah's brother." He laid a hand on Garrett's shoulder. "What this man says is true. I have lived among you, I have begged my bread among you, in the streets, in the mosques, in the bazaars and tea shops. Go to your house, Yusuf, dig up tiles in the court, near the fountain. There you will find the proofs I buried there, one of the nights when I was your guest."

Daoud Khan and many of the others began to regard their rifles and their bandoliers of cartridges. They thought of the feuds

they had left unsettled in their own territories. They considered that coming home with ammunition, and with the loot they had already taken in the New City, would be at least as good as remaining. Satan take a king who didn't want to be king!

As he stood there, Salim looked at once like prince and prophet. Yusuf said, "I will not dig as you say, I believe from hearing. But come with me, my house is yours, my Lord."

Salim answered, "There is no room any more, and no need for a king in Kashgar. It is written that a king is next to God; and what I heard in the fire was truth which I did not know for truth until a man spoke it a second time. So I go now, to be the Guest of Allah."

He turned his back on the blazing *yamen* and went toward the city gate. The men stood looking at him until the wind whipped smoke from other fires to hide him. When the smoke thinned, Salim had gone from sight.

Dmitri came and laid a hand on Garrett and Tanya, drawing them to each other. "You couldn't have done it, no one could have done it. The old boy must have heard something while he waited for the fire. But on the face of it, you're the fellow who convinced another fellow that he didn't want to be king. So I don't worry too much about you any more, Jim."

"That's OK, but I have plenty from now on to worry me."

"I wasn't talking about your refinery, though you'll earn everything you can sweat out of it."

"He means," Tanya explained, brightly, "that now you'll have at least an even chance in our own house. You might even get away with calling it *your* house."

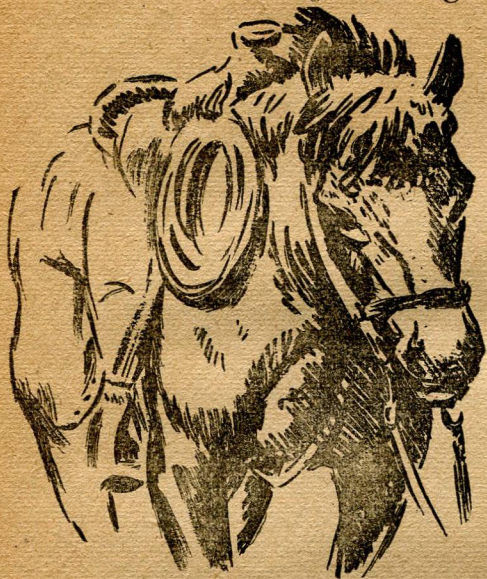
"Honey, I'll hold you to that idea," Garrett told her. "That's one they do not have in the States! By the way, do you want the job done Swedish Lutheran, or Moslem?"

"Both," she answered. "And see what your psychiatrists think of *that*!"

THE END



*Lost Broncs and Dropped Bombs
Don't Usually Go Together*



FOOL'S GOLD

By GENE VAN

SLIM MCGEE never seemed to be in a hurry, and today was no exception, as he rode along the dusty road to El Rio. It was hot along those desert hills, and he rode with his sombrero pulled low over his eyes. Slim McGee, unlike Sam McGee of Robert Service fame, was not born in Tennessee, but in New Mexico. Slim was six-feet-three, slender as a "willer-wand," tough as a mesquite-root, slightly bowlegged, and more at home on a pitching bronc than on a chair.

A black-handled Colt swung in a homemade holster along his thigh as the tall roan swung into a mile-eating walk. Slim's complexion matched his saddle, due to sun and wind; his nose was crooked and his cheekbones prominent, his mouth wide. In every respect, Slim McGee was typical of the West.

Right now Slim was on the trail of Bart Bishop, as ornery an outlaw as ever drewed a gun, who had pistol-whipped a sheriff,



broke jail and had stolen Slim's favorite horse—and incidentally he had an idea of collecting the combined rewards for Bart Bishop, whom he had never seen.

Slim rode cautiously, his gray eyes searching ahead. He was a stranger in that part of the country, and caution in a strange country often pays dividends. As he came to a bend in the road, he slowed down his roan. Just ahead of him he could hear someone talking very loud. He rode slowly around the bend.

Just ahead of him, in front of an arched gateway stood a wagon, drawn by two horses. Standing up in the wagon, hands on

hips, stood a girl, telling the team just what she thought of them. Just then the team lurched several steps forward, throwing the girl to the floor of the wagon. As she slowly climbed back to her feet, her sombrero down over one eye, she yelled wildly at the team. They stood still as she started to climb over the side of the wagon, but before her feet could touch the ground, they lurched forward, throwing her into the dust.

Slim McGee rode in close and grabbed the lines on the team and pulled them to a halt, then he turned toward the girl and looked down at her. She shoved her sombrero back on her head and glared at the team, ignoring Slim. After a few choice words, she got gingerly to her feet and felt herself over. Slim swung down to the ground and moved over to where she was standing. She was very attractive. She wore overalls and a silk blue shirt which fitted her slender figure very well indeed. The Arizona sun had given her a perfect coat of tan. Her wavy hair encased her face. Her nose was well-shaped, her eyes were large and brown, and her lips very attractive.

"These horses aren't broke," drawled Slim.

"I know that!" snapped the girl as she grabbed the lines. "I'm tryin' to break 'em."

"You'd better be careful, or they'll break yuh," drawled Slim slowly. "That isn't a woman's job, anyway."

"It's my job," said the girl, "and I intend to do it. No horse is goin' to throw me around."

Slim happened to turn and look across the horses' backs. Just beyond the arched gateway, he noticed a man coming through the brush, a rifle gripped in both hands. Slim stepped in beside the wagon, his right hand going down to his holster. The girl saw the move and glanced toward the gateway.

"Dad!" she snapped. "Don't shoot!"

Slim glanced down at the girl, then over the top of the wagon. The elderly man had lowered his rifle and was coming toward them. The girl met her father at the front of the team. He was short and wiry, with a lean, tanned face, small beady eyes, a crooked nose and a narrow mouth. He walked with a slight limp in his right leg. His clothes were dusty and wrinkled, showing that he had been working hard. His shapeless sombrero covered his gray hair.

"Who were you goin' to shoot, Dad?" asked the girl.

The man looked closely at Slim, then shook his head. "I thought it was Jud Hansen," he replied. "Golly, I nearly got me a stranger."

"He helped me with the team," said the girl.

"I saw 'em actin' up, Jane," smiled the old man. "I warned yuh against takin' 'em to town, but a Walsh never will give in."

Jane Walsh threw back her slim shoulders, climbed upon the driver's seat of the wagon and drove on through the gateway. The old man shook his head and sighed.

"Stubborn — just like me," he sighed. "I'm Andy Walsh, stranger."

Slim introduced himself, then said, "From what I just gathered, this here Jud Hansen's a bad hombre."

"Dumb!" snorted Andy. "I can't get it through his thick head that Jane doesn't want him around here. He wants to make love to her."

"After seein' yore daughter, yuh couldn't blame him for that," drawled Slim. "Hell, if I was only fifteen years younger."

"Yuh'd make a mighty thin target," remarked Andy and patted his rifle meaningly.

"Yeah," grinned Slim as he rubbed his chin. "Just turn sideways an' let it fly past — that's all I have to do."

"Do yuh aim to stay around here very long, McGee?"

"Well," drawled Slim, "if I find the polecat that stole my bronc, I might spend a few days here. Otherwise, I'm ridin' on until I get my hands on him."

"If yuh stay, drop in for supper," grunted Andy as he turned and limped through the arched gateway. Slim smiled as he walked over to his horse and swung up into the saddle.

IF IT was hot along the El Rio road, it was several degrees hotter in El Rio. Not even a breath of air seemed to stir along the dusty streets. El Rio was an outfitting point for both mines and cattle ranches, but at this time of day, as far as action was concerned, it was ghost-like.

About mid-way of the main street was a sand-scoured sign, announcing to the world that Albert Woods was an assayer, and dealt in mines. Woods was forty-five, looked

sixty-five, and just now he felt eighty-five. He hated the heat, hated El Rio, and had love for no man. Some day, he hoped, he would strike it rich, leave El Rio and spend the rest of his life, trying to get cooled off. Woods was a small man, lean as a coyote, hawk-nosed, and with what might be described as predatory eyes. He had a helper, one Jud Hansen, lean and lanky, lantern-jawed and explosively ignorant. Jud was thirty.

Woods hunched at his desk, while flies buzzed drearily up and down the dusty windows. His forefinger poked at some dusty papers on the littered desk-top. There was a copy of an assay certificate, made out for Andrew Walsh. It said, "Gold—no trace." Woods smiled grimly. There was gold on Walsh's prospect. Not a great deal, but enough for Woods to try and discourage the old man. It might be developed. There had been other assay certificates paid for by Walsh, and they all told the same story. But that old fool of a Walsh kept digging just the same.

The clump of boot heels on the wooden sidewalk caused Woods to look up, as the door was flung open and Jud Hansen stumbled in. Jud was not a beautiful sight at any time, but now he looked worse.

There was a smear of blood down the left side of his head, and he had wiped some of it across his nose and cheek. In one hand he carried a rock about the size of a goose-egg.

Woods merely made a wry face and reached for his empty pipe, while Jud sat down, breathing heavily, his fist still clenched around the rock.

"Well, what happened to you?" asked Woods, sucking the flame of a match into his empty pipe-bowl.

"That damn ol' Andy Walsh!" wailed Jud. "Look at me, will yuh?"

"I've been looking at you," said Woods. "Didn't I tell you to keep away from Jane Walsh? Didn't I? That old man will salivate you. All the time I say for you to keep away from her. She don't want you, Jud."

"She don't, huh?" queried Jud. His hand relaxed around the rock.

"What have you got there?" asked Woods curiously.

"This here," replied Jud painfully, "is the rock he hit me with."

Woods lit another match and sucked at the empty bowl again.

"Keeping it for a souvenir, eh?" he remarked.

"Am, huh?" retorted Jud thickly. "Take a look at it an' you'll see why I kept it."

He tossed the rock on the desk-top, where Woods picked it up. For several moments he eyed it closely, hardly breathing. Carefully, he placed it in the top desk drawer, as though it was something doubly perishable, and he looked up at Jud.

"He—he hit you with this—this rock?" he asked in a whisper.

Jud nodded and rubbed his sore head.

"My God!" whispered Woods. "It—it's jewelry ore, Jud! Why, you can see the free gold. That'll run—why, millions! And he threw it at *you*!"

"At me? Hell, he hit me with it! Look at that cut, will yuh?"

Woods carefully put the drawer closed, then he found a small can of tobacco and began filling his pipe.

"Too bad," muttered Woods as he settled back in his chair, his eyes half-closed, his mind busy trying to figure out some way to get possession of the Walsh property. Woods was a shrewd man. He didn't want to do anything that might put him at odds with the law, yet he wanted the Walsh mine—more now than ever before. Carefully, he lit his pipe and looked at Jud through the smoke that curled up from the bowl of the pipe.

"Huh?" grunted Jud as he shifted nervously in his chair. "Whatcha goin' to do with my rock? Can't I have it, Boss?"

"I'll keep it for a while," said Woods softly, "then, perhaps I'll give it back to you."

Jud relaxed in his chair, his eyes watching Albert Woods. He admired Woods' ability to solve problems, and as far as Jud Hansen was concerned, Albert Woods was the smartest man in the world—and they were friends. Jud sighed, a half smile on his face.

"About Jane Walsh—" started Jud, but Woods stopped him by holding up his right hand.

"Forget her," snapped Woods as he took the pipe from his mouth. "We've got more important things to think about right now."

Jud nodded. "Yeah," he drawled. "More important things." His eyes watched Woods,

his twisted mind trying to figure out what was more important, but he was willing to take Woods' word for it. He sat there in silence, waiting for Woods to make the first move.

"Don't you think it would be best if you went down to the doctor's house and had that cut looked after?" suggested Woods.

"Cut fixed, eh?" grunted Jud. "Yeah, mebbe I'd better do that, Boss." He got to his feet and lumbered out of the office. Woods sighed as he glanced about the place. If he could get his hands on the Walsh mine, he could leave this office forever.

SLIM MCGEE rode slowly along the dusty road, wondering how much further it was to El Rio. The heat didn't bother him too much, as he was used to it after years of riding the range. He patted his roan horse on the shoulder.

They were going *poco-poco* down across a dry wash when they came to a fork in the road. Slim drew rein and glanced about, but there was no signpost to indicate which way to go. He shoved back his sombrero and scratched his head.

"Kinda got us guessin', bronc," he said to his horse. "But when in doubt, keep to the right."

As they swung to the right, Slim's eyes noticed something white in the center of the road, partly covered with dust. He halted his horse and dismounted. It was an envelope. He dusted it off and looked at the address. It read:

ALBERT WOODS, Assayer
El Rio, Arizona

"Somebody lost their letter," he said as he moved back to his horse. "No stamp on it, either. Well, the least I can do is to deliver it to Mr. Woods."

Slim mounted and continued on down the right-hand fork of the road. He shoved the letter in his shirt pocket, then relaxed, letting his horse continue their mile-eating walk. They had traveled several miles when they came over a ridge and dropped down into El Rio.

Slim rode into the main street of the town and looked about, but there was no one in sight. Just as he started down the street he saw a man emerging from the doctor's office,

his head swathed in white bandages. Slim reined his horse over to the high boardwalk and stopped as the man, who was Jud Hansen, came along, muttering to himself.

"Howdy," greeted Slim as he eyed Jud. "Looks like yuh ran into somethin' mighty powerful."

"Huh?" grunted Jud as he felt of his head, then he looked up at Slim. "What's it to yuh, anyway!"

Slim grinned as he drew out the dirty envelope and glanced at it, then he looked at Jud again.

"Do you know a feller named Albert Woods?"

"Yeah, I work for him," replied Jud. "Why?"

"Got a letter for him," replied Slim as he handed the letter toward Jud. "Mebbe yuh'll see that he gets it."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, shore I will," nodded Jud as he took the letter and glanced at it.

"Much obliged," remarked Slim as he turned his horse away from the sidewalk and rode down the deserted main street of El Rio.

Jud watched Slim McGee until he entered the livery-stable, then he glanced down at the letter again. Jud's education was sadly in neglect, but he could read. He shrugged his shoulders as he lumbered down the street to Woods' office.

Albert Woods glanced up at Jud as he entered. The big cowboy moved over to the desk and tossed the letter in front of Woods, who glanced at it, then up at Jud.

"Where did you get this?" he asked.

"A stranger handed it to me. Asked me if I knew yuh, an' I said I did. He gave it to me."

"Oh," murmured Woods as he slowly tore open the envelope and pulled out a white sheet of paper. Jud moved in behind Woods to a position where he could read the letter over the assayer's shoulder.

Woods glanced up at Jud, then turned back to the letter. "I think this is personal," he said, but his remark failed to bother Jud as he read on.

"Who's Tex Martin?" asked the cowboy. "I don't know him."

"He's an old friend of mine," replied Woods as he continued reading the letter. "This sounds interesting."

"Uh-huh," nodded Jud as he rubbed his

nose thoughtfully. "Who in hell is Bart Bishop? I don't know him, either."

"Neither do I," snapped Woods disgustedly. "He's coming out here to hide from the law. Say, that fellow that gave you the letter—he must be Bart Bishop, the outlaw!"

"Is, huh?"

"You dumbbell!" snorted Woods. He carefully folded the letter and replaced it in the soiled envelope, then he put it in the top desk drawer. Jud, slightly bewildered, wandered around the desk and slumped down in a chair. He looked across the desk at Woods, who was smiling as he took a match from his pocket and lighted his pipe.

"What's funny?" queried Jud.

"I'm not just sure—yet," replied Woods as he puffed on his pipe, "but I have an idea. If it works out, I'll be rich."

"What about me?"

"We'll both be rich," said Woods. "I'll sure leave this damn town in a hurry."

Jud nodded as he leaned back and looked at Woods. He couldn't get anything straight in his mind, but he decided to let his boss do all the figuring. Jud smiled as he lighted a cigarette. It was some time before Albert Woods showed any signs of life other than puffing on his pipe.

"Get this Bishop," he snapped as he took the pipe from his mouth. "Bring him here to me because the sheriff might be looking for him."

"Huh? Why, shore," grunted Jud as he got to his feet and lumbered out of the office.

AFTER stabling his horse, Slim McGee walked up one side of the main street and down the other, eyeing all the horses at the hitch-racks, just in case he should see his stolen bronc, but it wasn't about. He ended up in the Ace High Saloon, where he quenched his thirst, then found an empty chair against the wall. He balanced himself in the chair and watched the people through half-closed eyes.

Slim's mind turned to Bart Bishop, and he wondered if he had gone through El Rio, or if he had stopped and was hiding out until darkness cloaked the town before making his appearance. Slim knew that Bart would never pass up a saloon, no matter where he rode, as that was his weakness—and every law officer knew it. But the one

catch in it was that Bart never took more than two drinks. He was wise enough to know that a couple more might land him in jail.

Slim was nearly asleep when Jud Hansen lumbered into the saloon and stopped near the swinging doors. He looked about, then when he saw Slim, he moved over toward him, carefully, aware that he was approaching an outlaw who was fast on the trigger.

Jud cleared his throat as he stopped in front of Slim, who opened his right eye and squinted at the big cowboy.

"Well?" queried Slim as he opened both eyes and his hands went to the arms of the chair.

Jud stepped back, his eyes wide with fright as he thought Slim was going for his six-shooter. When the hands rested on the arms of the chair, Jud swallowed hard, and in a bare whisper, said:

"Er-r-r-r, Woods would like to see yuh."

"Woods?" queried Slim, then he remembered the name on the letter. "Oh, he would, eh? Why doesn't he come here an' see me?"

"He—he wants yuh to come to his office," replied Jud nervously.

Slim thought it over. Perhaps that letter was valuable and Woods wanted to reward him for finding it. He got quickly to his feet and faced Jud. The move was so sudden that Jud fell backward, tripping over a chair, and fell to the floor. Slim laughed as Jud got slowly to his feet.

"C'mon," grunted Jud, his face red as a beet, as he whirled and lumbered out of the saloon with Slim following him, an amused expression on his tanned face.

Albert Woods was puffing on his pipe when they entered the office. He looked Slim over, then got to his feet and held out his hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you," smiled Woods.

"Mutual," grunted Slim as he shook hands.

Woods turned around and went to the rear of the office, where he opened a door. He picked up a lantern off a small table next to the door and lighted it.

"This way," he said as he went through the doorway. Slim rounded the desk and went to the doorway. It led down a flight of rickety stairs. Slim watched Woods' bobbing head in the lantern light as he started

down the stairs with Jud behind him. What was this all about, he wondered. Below the office was a small cellar, with several chairs and a table.

Woods set the lantern on the table, then he turned to face Slim, a smile on his face.

"This is much safer, and the sheriff won't see you," he said.

Slim rubbed his nose. It was getting crazier each minute. Why would the sheriff be looking for him? Was Woods crazy? He stood there in silence, deciding that it was up to them to talk. Jud sat down and looked at Slim.

"All right, we know all about you," said Woods. "That letter from Tex Martin explained who you were, Bart."

Slim's fists balled at his sides, and he started to move forward when something within him stopped him. Did they think he was Bart Bishop? Bishop, the outlaw who broke jail and stole his bronc? Was he headed this way? Slim relaxed as thoughts flashed through his mind. Perhaps he was on the right trail.

"Yeah, we know yuh," added Jud thickly.

"Oh," sighed Slim as he glanced at Jud.

"Not a bad hideout," smiled Woods as he puffed slowly on his pipe and watched Slim through the curling smoke before him. "You stay here. Jud will bring you food, and after supper I'll return. I have a little business proposition to offer you."

Slim nodded as he watched them move to the stairs. He decided that the less he said, the better. After they had disappeared up the stairs and shut the door, he sat down. He wanted to laugh out loud, but he kept it within him.

"I wonder if Bart Bishop looks anything like me," mused Slim as he shoved back his sombrero on his forehead and began to roll a cigarette. He realized that Bart Bishop must have dropped the letter he had found.

It was some time later when Jud returned with a tray of food which he set on the table. Drawing up a chair, he watched as Slim attacked the food.

"Live here long?" asked Slim as he ate.

"Uh-huh," nodded Jud. "All my life."

"Probably die here, too."

Jud swallowed hard and tried to grin. "Mebbe," he muttered weakly. They lapsed into silence. Slim finished his meal and Jud took the tray away. Slim felt sorry for

Jud, as he realized that the dumb cowboy was afraid of Bart Bishop because of the tales he had heard. Slim had just settled down for another smoke when the door opened and down the stairs came Albert Woods once more, accompanied by Jud.

Woods was still filling his pipe as he came up to the table, nodded to Slim, and sat down. Slim watched Woods light the pipe, waiting for the small man to do the talking. Jud sat down in a chair against the wall and watched them.

"We're here on business, Bart," said Woods, "and I'm coming direct to the point. Jud, toss him the rock!"

Slim turned toward Jud just in time to see the big cowboy tossing a rock toward him. Slim made a grab at it, caught it, and looked at it.

"What about it?" asked Slim as he looked at it. "Do I throw it at someone?"

"He ain't no miner," grunted Jud.

"Well, what about it?" asked Slim.

"That rock—it's rich, very rich," replied Woods. "There's a small mine north of town that's owned by a very stubborn old man who won't sell it to me. I've tried to get it, but he told me to go to hell—and I won't go. I've got to have that ranch!"

Slim McGee's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything. Woods waited a moment, then continued, "That's where you fit into the picture, Bart. I need someone to do the dirty work so that I'll be in the clear. No one around here cares about the ranch—so no one will want the place but me. I've got a simple plan."

Woods stopped, expecting Slim to say something, but he remained silent. It was very interesting to him so far. "All right, if you won't talk," grunted Woods disgustedly. "I've got a plan, and you fit into it like a kid glove. All you have to do is set a time bomb that I made—and boom! The old man works the mine every day—it'll be a cinch."

Slim sat there, his face straight. He preferred to let Woods spill everything. Jud Hansen was uneasy, and shifted nervously in his chair. Woods puffed slowly on his pipe for several moments, then he said:

"The tunnel is over two hundred feet long, and there's a curve about halfway in, which will prevent him from seeing anybody who comes in after him. All you

have to do is go in about thirty feet, shove the bomb into the corner of the old timbering, where it'll blow down enough to allow a cave-in. It'll seal the old man in, and I don't see how anybody will figure that it was done on purpose.

"They'll think one of the old man's blasts caused it. I made the bomb myself, and I know it'll work. The bottle of nitro-glycerine is pretty well packed, so ordinary handling won't set it off. Do you get the idea, Bart?"

Slim nodded slowly, thoughtfully. Finally he said, "Why don't yuh do it yoreself?"

Woods shook his head. "I—I wasn't cut out for that sort of thing—and I couldn't trust Jud—he's too blasted dumb."

"Aw-w-w-w!" snorted Jud.

"Go upstairs and get that bomb from my desk, Jud," ordered Woods.

Jud lumbered across the floor and up the stairs. He was only gone a moment, then he came back with a square, boxlike affair with an alarm clock attached to it. He set it on top of the table, then returned to his chair.

"Here it is," said Woods proudly. "I made it. We'll catch him in the tunnel and blow it in on him."

"The boss's smart," said Jud.

"We'll set the clock for ten tomorrow morning," said Woods as he leaned back and puffed on his pipe, watching Slim through the smoke. Finally he took the pipe from his mouth and added, "I'll pay you a thousand dollars."

Slim McGee looked at Woods, but he didn't say a word. Woods smiled and looked over at Jud, who was leaning forward in his chair.

"Fifteen hundred!" snapped Jud.

"You keep out of this!" snapped Woods. "This is my money."

Slim remained silent, enjoying the entire affair and at times he could hardly refrain from bursting out in laughter as he watched their strained faces. These men were desperate.

Woods rubbed his chin nervously and swallowed hard. "Two—two thousand," he said weakly. He knocked the ashes from his pipe to the floor.

Jud Hansen started to open his mouth, but Woods once more snapped, "Keep out of this, Jud!"

"But I only want to—"

"Shut up!" shouted Woods. "I'll raise with my money and you keep still!" He glanced at Slim, who merely smiled at them. "Twenty-five hundred," Woods said weakly. Slim McGee got slowly to his feet and paced about the room while they watched him. He stretched, adjusted his holster, sighed deeply and sat down.

"Three thousand," muttered Woods in a half whisper. His hand shook as he took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. Jud Hansen squirmed in his chair.

SLIM MCGEE knew both men were afraid of him, and they had gone ahead and spilled their plans before consulting him about money. He had them over a barrel, and they knew it. Woods rubbed his nose nervously, glanced helplessly at Jud, then he looked back at Slim.

"Fo-fo-four thousand," he said in a whisper. Woods' eyes watched the expression on Slim's face. When Slim failed to say anything, Woods groaned and adjusted himself in his chair. "My God, I ain't the mint," he wailed. "Money doesn't grow on trees."

Slim merely smiled and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his legs and clamped his hands about his right knee, then he tilted the chair back. He watched both men in amusement.

Woods turned and looked longingly at Jud, who merely shook his head. Woods picked up the bomb and looked at it, then he set it down and looked desperately at Slim.

"Five thousand!" he said in a cracked voice.

"In cash?" queried Slim.

Woods sighed deeply and tried to smile. "A thousand now and the rest when the job's done," he replied weakly.

"Thirty-five hundred now!" said Slim firmly as he adjusted his holster on his thigh and rubbed the palm of his right hand across the butt of his Colt .45.

"I've only got a thousand here," said Woods. "You take it and—"

"Thirty-five hundred!"

Woods swallowed hard and loosened his collar and tie. He looked over at Jud, who merely shrugged his shoulders. "I've got two-bits," he grunted.

"Well, perhaps I could find another thousand," sighed Woods.

"Yuh better find twenty-five hundred more!" snapped Slim. "I'm tired of all this foolishness. You've got the money, Woods—so fork it over."

"My God, man, where would a poor as-sayer like me get all that money?" he asked.

"If yuh can't get it now, how do yuh expect to pay me five thousand later?" demanded Slim.

Woods shifted nervously in his chair. "I—I'll raise the money."

"Yuh'd better raise thirty-five hundred pronto!" snapped Slim.

Woods cleared his throat. "Twenty-five hundred," he offered.

"Hard of hearin', eh?" grunted Slim. "I said—thirty-five hundred now!"

Woods sighed as he got slowly to his feet. He crossed the room and moved in under the stairs. Back in the corner, he fumbled about for several minutes, then he returned to the light carrying a dust-covered cigar box. He blew the dust off, then set it down on the table. He sank back into his chair and started to say something, when he noticed Slim's right hand resting on the butt of his six-shooter.

Slowly Woods opened the box, keeping the lid toward Slim so that he couldn't see what was in the box. Woods looked up and offered, "Three thousand."

"Thirty-five hundred—for the last time!" growled Slim McGee as his fingers tightened about the handle of his Colt.

Slim could hear the soft rustle of currency as Woods' fingers nervously counted out the thirty-five hundred. He took the money, then closed the lid of the box.

"Here it is," he said weakly. His hand shook as he handed it across the table to Slim McGee, who took it and carefully counted it. He then slipped it into his over-all pocket.

"When do I go out to the mine?" asked Slim.

"Jud'll take you out there right away," replied Woods as he got to his feet and picked up the cigar-box. "Jud, get Bishop's horse and bring it to the rear door so that the sheriff won't see him."

Jud hurried up the stairs. Woods halted at the bottom of the stairs and looked across the room at Slim. He shook his head and sighed as he mounted the stairs, the cigar-box clenched in his left hand.

THE moon was bright, lighting the side of the hill behind the Walsh ranch, showing Jud Hansen and Slim McGee the way to the small mine tunnel. Jud was in the lead with Slim right behind him, holding the home-made bomb in his left hand. Presently Jud pulled up on his reins. Slim rode in beside him and halted, looking the country over.

"Thar she is," grunted Jud as he pointed to a small, black spot down the side of the hill.

"Tunnel entrance, eh?" queried Slim. "Can yuh see the ranchhouse from here."

"Uh-huh."

"What about the old man an' his daughter?" asked Slim. "Aren't they good folks?"

"Stubborn," growled Jud. "The gal's beautiful—but the world's full of beautiful gals."

"Yeah," agreed Slim. "Well, I reckon I'll be ridin' on."

"Ridin' on? Why, yuh—yuh can't do that."

"Can't, eh?" snorted Slim as he leaned toward Jud and quickly flipped Jud's six-shooter free from its holster. The move took Jud by surprise.

"Hey, yuh—"

"Can't, eh?" repeated Slim with a chuckle. "Here, take this infernal machine back to yore boss. I haven't any use for it."

"But you can't do this to us," protested Jud.

"What do yuh aim to do about it?" queried Slim and when Jud didn't answer, Slim added, "I'm writin' Woods a little note of thanks."

Slim took out a piece of paper and a pencil from his shirt pocket. In the moonlight, he slowly wrote something on the paper, then he carefully folded it and handed it to Jud.

"Give this to Woods as soon as yuh get back," he ordered as he replaced the pencil in his pocket. "Now get goin' before I start unloadin' some of this here lead in yore gun!"

Jud spurred his horse around and back down the hill the way they had come. Slim watched until Jud was out of sight, then he shoved Jud's six-shooter inside the waistband of his overalls and laughed.

Jud Hansen lost little time in returning to El Rio. He left his horse at the hitch-

rack in front of the saloon and crossed the street to Woods' office, which was dark. He knocked loudly.

"Who—who's there?" asked Woods.

"Me—Jud."

"Just a minute," groaned Woods. Jud leaned against the wall and watched a lone cowboy ride up the street in the dark. As he dismounted in front of the saloon, Woods opened the door and Jud slipped inside.

"Well?" queried Woods as he lighted an oil lamp. "What do you want?"

"Bart Bishop sent yuh a note—an' this here bomb," replied Jud as he set the bomb on the desk, then he took the paper from his pocket and handed it to the bewildered Woods. "He—he's gone!"

Woods glanced at the bomb, then quickly unfolded the paper and held it next to the light, where he read it. "Ouch!" he snapped as he let the paper fall from his fingers.

"Burn yoreself?"

"Yes, but not the way you're thinking," snapped Woods. "You fool, you! Why didn't you watch that fellow?"

"I did. He's pullin' out with yore money an' yuh'll never catch him. Even if yuh did, yuh can't sue him. An' he's got my gun," grunted Jud.

"Pulling out is right!" snapped Woods as he picked up the paper and read it loud, "Much obliged for the donation. Next time get the right man. I'm on my way. Adios, *Mofeta*."

"He—he wasn't Bart Bishop then, huh?" grunted Jud as he looked down into the pain-twisted face of Albert Woods.

Woods reached up and grabbed Jud by the collar and started to shake him, but Jud knocked his arms aside. "What's the matter with yuh, boss?" he snapped. "You made the deal—not me."

"My thirty-five hundred!" groaned Woods as he sank down in his chair and looked at the note. "What does *mofeta* mean?"

"That's Mexican for skunk," replied Jud.

MEANWHILE across the street in the Ace High Saloon stood a stranger at the bar. He had just arrived in El Rio, and was busy quenching his thirst. His face was tanned, heavily whiskered, with blood-shot eyes, a crooked nose, and a narrow mouth. His clothes were dusty and well worn in spots.

After two drinks, the stranger left the bar and walked out on the high boardwalk, where he stopped and looked about. It was too dark for him to be able to see the signs on the street. A man came up the walk toward him, and the stranger beckoned him. As the man came into the light from the saloon door, the stranger sucked in his breath. There was a five-pointed star hanging on the man's vest.

"Howdy, stranger?" greeted Sheriff Prince as he eyed the short, thin cowboy. "Can I help yuh?"

"Yeah," drawled the stranger. "I'm lookin' fer an Albert Woods. Know him?"

"Why, shore, he lives in his office," replied Prince. "It's just over there." He pointed toward Woods' office across the street.

"Thanks," grunted the stranger as he stepped off the walk and started across the street.

Sheriff Prince rubbed his chin thoughtfully, turned on his high heels and hurried back to his office, where he dug out a stack of old reward notices and started thumbing his way through them. That stranger's face was familiar, but he couldn't place him.

A knock at the door caused Albert Woods and Jud Hansen to exchange glances. Jud's right hand dropped to his empty holster, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Mebbe he's come back fer more money," suggested Jud in a hoarse whisper.

"Open the door," ordered Woods, as he slid open the desk drawer and secured a Colt .45. He watched as Jud opened the door, then stepped back and the stranger entered. He stood just inside the door and let Jud close it behind him.

"I had a letter for Albert Woods," said the stranger. "I reckon I lost it somewhere."

"A—a letter?" gasped Woods as he leaned forward across the desk. "Are you Bart Bishop?"

"That's me. Are yuh Woods?"

"I'm Woods," smiled the assayer crookedly. "Where have you been all this time?"

"I took the wrong road out at them forks," replied Bart, "an' I wound up in Cactus Flats. Had t' come all the way back."

Woods nodded as he got to his feet. "Let's go down in the cellar to talk. It's safer. Someone might have seen you."

"I talked with yore sheriff," grinned Bart as he and Jud followed Woods down the stairs to the cellar.

"You fool!" snapped Woods. "Prince is a smart fellow."

"'Mebbeso, but he can die of lead poison-in' just as well as the other feller," grunted Bart. "I hate nosey sheriffs."

Woods sat down, then he told Bart what had happened. Bishop listened, a blank expression on his face. Woods omitted mentioning how much money Slim McGee had got away with.

"Don't know that feller," grunted Bart, "but he must be pretty damn smart to fool yuh that way." He paused as he looked at the two men, then added, "So yuh want me to do the job—blow up that little mine fer yuh, huh? All right, I'll do it. How much do I get?"

"A thousand dollars," replied Woods.

Bart smiled slightly. "Where's the money?"

Woods produced the sum and handed it to Bishop, who glanced at it, then shoved it in his overall pocket.

"Gimme your bomb, an' show me the mine," he said.

Just then there was a loud knock on the front door of the office. The three men glanced at each other.

"Bet it's the sheriff," said Woods. "He's likely looking for you, Bart."

Just then the sheriff's voice could be heard calling for Albert Woods, but no one answered. After several minutes, the knocking and calling stopped.

"He's smart," said Woods. "Probably looking for you. You'd better stay down here tonight, and the first thing tomorrow morning we'll ride out to the mine."

BEFORE the break of dawn, Slim McGee awoke. He rolled out of his blankets, stretched and pulled on his boots. From his position on the side of the hill, he could see the Walsh ranchhouse. There was a thin whisp of smoke arising from the stovepipe, so Slim knew that they were already up. He quickly rolled his blanket and fastened it on the rear of his saddle, then he mounted and rode down through the brush toward the ranchhouse.

Slim wondered if Bart Bishop had shown up in El Rio, and if he would contact Albert

Woods. Perhaps he would, and Slim knew that Woods was so determined to obtain that mine and he would go far in desperate efforts to secure it. If Bart Bishop came out there, Slim would be able to regain his stolen horse; that was one side of the picture.

He could hear the rattle of pans in the kitchen as he drew up near the rear door of the house. He slipped from the saddle and started toward the door, when it swung open and Andy Walsh stepped out, his rifle gripped tightly in both hands.

"What do yuh want around here?" he growled.

"Don'tcha remember me?" asked Slim as he came in full sight of the old man.

"Oh, it's you!" exclaimed Walsh as he lowered his rifle. "I thought it was Jud Hansen tryin' to sneak in here. C'mon in an' get somethin' to eat. Jane's fixin' breakfast, an' one more won't hurt her none."

Slim followed Walsh into the kitchen where Jane was busy working over the wood stove. She smiled at Slim as he drew up a chair and sat down next to Walsh at the table.

"Ridin' kinda early, aren't yuh?" she asked.

"'Mebbeso," replied Slim. "That depends upon a few things that I know, an' I think yuh'd like to know." He went ahead and told them about Albert Woods' plan to get the ranch and the mine. Walsh and Jane listened intently. When he finished, Walsh got to his feet.

"I'm goin' to kill those two skunks," he declared. "They can't get their dirty hands on my ranch."

"Wait a minute," said Slim. "I have a plan, an' if it works out, they might play right into yore hands. If yo're willin' to take a chance, it'll keep yore hands clean, so the law won't have a thing against yuh."

"That's the way I want it," said Jane. "Dad, don't go off an' do somethin' that we'll both be sorry for."

Andy Walsh sat down. Slim quickly explained to them his plan. They listened, and when he finished, Jane agreed with Slim, but the old man wasn't so sure.

"But, Dad," protested Jane, "I'm sure it will work. Why don't you let him try it, anyway? If it doesn't work, then there's time enough to go ahead an' try something else."

"If Jud comes out to plant the bomb, it's

goin' to be a cinch," grinned Slim. "He hasn't brains enough to get away before it goes off."

"Well," drawled Andy, "it might work, but how do we know that they'll even come out here?"

"Curiosity," grinned Slim. "It's a great thing. Woods an' Hansen are plumb full of it. They won't let the grass grow under their feet. They want this ranch bad enough to blow up the mine themselves."

"Mebbe yore right," agreed Andy. "I'll take that chance."

"Good," grunted Slim. "Let's hurry, 'cause they'll be comin' pretty soon. Miss Jane, you hide in the hay loft an' watch the show. Walsh, yuh better head for the mine in about ten minutes. I'm goin' now, an' get myself located. Miss Jane, please put my bronc in yore stable, will yuh?"

SLIM cut through the brush, not using the trail for fear that someone might see him. He went in close to the entrance of the mine, where he paused and looked about. Sure that no one was around, he dropped down to the tunnel and examined it. Satisfied that everything was all right, he climbed back through the brush a short distance where he sat down and waited.

Slim had been there only a few minutes when he saw three riders coming along the opposite hill toward the mine. They were too far away for him to recognize them, but he was certain that two of the three were Woods and Hansen—but who was the third member? Perhaps they had found Bart Bishop. Slim grinned. He knew how determined they were. He strained his eyes, trying to get a better view of them, and to see if one of them rode his stolen horse.

Presently they disappeared from sight in the brush. Slim sat erect, trying to locate them, but they didn't put in an appearance again. Just then Andy Walsh came limping from the ranchhouse, his rifle held across the crook of his left arm. He made his way up the trail to the mine and entered. Slim watched, then turned his eyes to the opposite hill, trying to spot the three men. He was sure that they could see Walsh enter the mine, too.

A movement down at the ranchhouse attracted Slim's attention for a moment. A lone rider came in view on the further side

of the house, dismounted, and walked up on the porch. Who was this uninvited guest, Slim wondered. He again turned his attention to the hills.

Meanwhile, Albert Woods and Jud Hansen squatted behind some heavy mesquite, their eyes watching the entrance to the mine, Bart Bishop having left them to carry out his share of the deal. They had been there several minutes, when Jud took out his battered old watch and looked at it.

"It's past time fer that bomb to go off," he complained, "an' where's Bart?"

"I wonder what happened to him?" muttered Woods. "He should be back at the entrance by now."

"I wonder if he pulled out, too," said Jud.

"Oh-h-h-h, Jud, don't talk that way. If this deal don't work—I'm broke!" panted Woods. "Perhaps we can find him. We'll go up closer to the tunnel."

They stumbled along through the brush, looking for Bart Bishop. Suddenly they came upon him, sitting on a rock only a few feet away from the mine tunnel, but hidden by heavy brush. He was fumbling with the clock on the bomb.

"My God!" said Woods when he saw the bomb still in Bishop's hands. "What's the matter?"

"This damn clock stopped an' I didn't have no watch to set it," growled Bart as he shook the clock. "I'm scared of nitroglycerin."

Woods sagged a little and tried to smile. "We're in time, after all," he sighed. "Bart, I'll set the clock for you."

As he held out his hands toward the outlaw to take the clock, his eyes snapped wide and his mouth dropped open. Bishop and Jud looked at him in amazement, then they realized that he was looking at something behind them. They turned.

Standing in the brush just beyond them was Slim McGee, his six-shooter gripped tightly in his right hand. The men seemed to be paralyzed.

"Drop that bomb, Bishop!" snapped Slim.

Bart Bishop, without thinking, did just that. The bomb landed on a large rock, and then the entire world seemed to explode. Slim was knocked backward, but he kept his feet as dust whirled into the air. He could hear cries, then the air began to settle.

Slim heard someone running up the trail, and he turned to see Jane Walsh and the sheriff. From inside the mine came Andy Walsh, his rifle ready for any trouble. They all stopped and looked at the ghastly scene.

Albert Woods was sitting in a mesquite bush, his legs kicking in an effort to free himself while Jud Hansen was sitting on the ground, feeling of his body. Bart Bishop was sprawled on the ground, dead from the explosion.

"What's this all about?" demanded the sheriff as they stopped behind Slim.

"That damn bomb did work, didn't it?" grinned Slim foolishly. "Too bad that feller had to get killed. Was that Bart Bishop, Woods?"

"Yes, it's Bishop," sighed Woods as he freed himself from the mesquite bush.

"The game's up," said Slim as he turned to the sheriff. "How come yo're up here, Sheriff?"

"I thought I recognized Bart Bishop last night when I saw him," replied Sheriff Prince. "He was lookin' for Woods. I found his reward notice, so I watched Woods' office. When they rode away this mornin', I decided to follow and see what they were up to. Reckon yuh get the reward, feller."

Andy Walsh quickly told the sheriff what Slim had told them. Woods stood tight-lipped and listened. Jud Hansen got slowly to his feet and rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Why on earth did yuh try a crazy scheme like that, Woods?" asked the sheriff.

WOODS refused to answer, but Jud spoke up, "That rock yuh hit me with,

Walsh, is as rich as any piece of ore on earth. Woods wanted that mine."

"The—the piece of rock I—I don't reckon I understand," stammered Walsh.

"That piece of rock we used for a door-stop," explained Jane. "You remember it, Dad. It was a sample from a Mother Lode—the one we've had for years."

"Oh, that! Yea-a-a-ah, that sure is a rich piece."

"I'm a son-of-a-gun!" breathed Slim. "It didn't come from yore mine, Walsh?"

"I wished it had," grinned Walsh. "I'd be a millionaire. Mine's a silver prospect, an' Woods knew it—or ort to."

Woods' face was drained of any color it ever had. His knees felt weak, and he looked about like a man who had awakened from a lovely dream.

"I've got three thousand dollars of Woods' money," said Slim. "I'll turn it over to the sheriff."

"What do yuh get out of this deal?" asked Walsh.

"He gets the reward," reminded Sheriff Prince.

Slim turned to Jud. "What color horse was Bart ridin'?"

"A gray," replied Jud. "Branded with a Circle C on the right shoulder."

"I get my bronc back," grinned Slim. "I'm far ahead."

"Will you come down an' have something to eat with us, Slim?" asked Jane. "We'd love to have yuh."

"Love!" snorted Jud. "Look what it got me!"

"I'll take a chance, Miss Jane," grinned Slim. "I'm hungry, too."

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This is only natural when we consider the several reasons for this boom in the custom gun field. During the war there were no sporting rifles manufactured and used ones were hard to come by and big game rifles are not too plentiful at the present time.

Thousands of foreign military rifles suitable for conversion to sporting arms were lugged home by returning soldiers who in many instances found that no ammunition of the correct caliber could be procured in the United States.

The War Department of the United States has sold many Springfield and Enfield military rifles to civilians who have found that they can be made over into excellent sporting rifles.

And there are many shooters who have always wanted a rifle built to their specifications and now find themselves in a position to realize their dream.

If Shooter's Corner mail is any indication, the most popular rifles used and available for converting are the Enfield (1917 U. S.) the Springfield and the German Mauser. The actions of these rifles are excellent for conversion to sporters taking the various modern game cartridges.

The number one big game and varmint cartridge in popularity seems to be the .30-'06. This caliber is good for an all-around rifle as a large variety of ammunition is available. It can be used with success on anything from woodchuck to grizzly bear, with the proper load of course.

The .270 is also a very popular caliber, and can be used as an all-around rifle, especially so when used by a shooter who loads his own ammo.

The .257 Roberts cartridge is gaining in popularity and it wouldn't surprise me to find it our "most used" for sporting purposes within the next four or five years.

The three above-mentioned cartridges are the ones receiving the most attention as far as this conversion business is concerned.

Let's take a look at the .257 Roberts Cartridge.

It was developed through the efforts of N. H. Roberts, author of that excellent book, "The Muzzle-Loading Cap Lock Rifle," firearms editor, and experimenter par excellence. His hunting and shooting

career began in the days before the muzzle loader passed out of the picture as a practical rifle. He has used nearly all types and models of American-made firearms as well as the best of foreign bolt action rifles.

Being an enthusiastic long range woodchuck hunter Mr. Roberts wanted a super-accurate .25 caliber rifle and cartridge which when fired would give the bullet a very high velocity and flat trajectory. A great deal of effort was expended before the .257 cartridge, as we know it today, came into being.

It went through various stages until sometime in 1927 when Mr. Roberts decided that the 7-mm cartridge case could be reshaped to have just about the powder capacity required for the cartridge he had in mind. Sketches and drawings of the proposed cartridge were made and sent to Mr. A. O. Niedner of the Niedner Rifle Corporation who eventually made the first rifle chambered for this new cartridge which was known as the .25 Roberts.

THE Remington people finally took a hand in the deal and in 1934 the cartridge was standardized and brought out commercially.

At the suggestion of the late Captain E. C. Crossman the name was changed to the groove diameter and has been known ever since as the .257 Roberts cartridge.

It is very accurate, develops a mild recoil (less than the .30-30) and the report is far from ear-splitting. The handloader can successfully duplicate most any .25 caliber cartridge from the .25 Stevens rimfire to the .250-3000 Savage by using various weights of powders and bullets in the .257 case. Also this case can be loaded to duplicate the old .256 Newton cartridge which is almost in the class of the powerful .270 cartridge.

Due to the fact that the bore of the .257 barrel is of standard .25 caliber, any standard .25 caliber bullet can be loaded into .257 cases, with proper powders and primers and used in the .257 rifle—which means inexpensive ammunition.

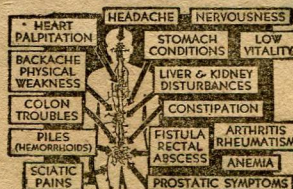
For best results when using spitzor type (pointed) bullets the handloader will load his maximum power cartridges to have an overall length greater than that of the regu-

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lar commercial ones. This necessitates the removal of the magazine block in the factory-made .257 rifles. The magazines were made to take the shorter blunt pointed cartridges as regularly produced at the factories. Why the manufacturers use these poorly designed bullets in such a fine cartridge I don't know. But I understand that steps will be taken in the near future to remedy this condition.

Factory ammunition loaded with the 87-grain bullet at 3220 feet per second muzzle velocity, the 100-grain bullet at 2900 F. S. and the 117-grain bullet at 2630 F. S. may be purchased over the counter. As intimated before, the handloader can improve these figures quite a bit, and with such ammunition the .257 rifle may be used with confidence on game up to and including the mule deer.

The .257 is a fine gun for the person who enjoys woodchuck and crow hunting in the summer, deer hunting in the fall and target shooting the year round. It is particularly good for the shooter who is bothered by heavy recoil.

Also lightweight .257's, that generally turn out to be quite accurate, may be made up. Usually these skinny jobs are made up on the short Mauser action to weigh no more than 7½ pounds with hunting scope mounted.

Using issue Mauser, Springfield and Enfield actions, the Johnson Automatic Manufacturing Co. of Providence, Rhode Island, regularly make up lightweight .257 rifles that weigh approximately 7 pounds. This is fine for the slightly-built person who tires carrying a heavy rifle in the field. But for my money I'll take their Target Sporter which weighs around 8½ pounds, as to my way of thinking, there is no question but what the accuracy is bound to be better with the heavier barrel.

Although the .257 is definitely not the medicine for our heavier game, it is sure fire on the medium weights and inasmuch as the shooter who can afford the expense of a hunt for the heavy weights, can also afford more than one rifle—it seems logical that this fine caliber arm is our Number One candidate for the mythical all-around rifle for Mr. Average Shooter. What do you think?

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